

Public Space Redevelopment Policies in Algeria: When Local Implementation Makes the Difference

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Abstract :

In Algeria, a public space improvement strategy in ZHUNs, launched in 2000, aimed to revitalize degraded urban fabrics. This study, based on field surveys, evaluates the capacity of local administrations to implement the necessary tools to achieve this goal. The results show that while some areas experienced successful requalification, the quality of interventions varies significantly across territories. This disparity highlights the importance of tailoring local strategies to the specific needs of each neighborhood to ensure the sustainable improvement of public spaces.

Keywords: Urban Improvement; Local Policies; Urban Requalification; High-quality Public Spaces; New Urban Housing Zone.

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1. Introduction

In an ever-changing urban context, urban requalification is an essential lever for revitalizing run-down and aging areas¹. More than just a renovation operation, requalification involves a profound transformation, restoring meaning and value to neighborhoods and thereby contributing to the development of more sustainable, inclusive, and pleasant cities². In Algeria, this approach takes on particular importance as part of efforts to revitalize regions and improve citizens' quality of life.

Urban requalification goes beyond simple renovation; it embraces a comprehensive and ambitious vision aimed at transforming urban spaces as a whole, from the structure of buildings to the organization of public areas. It seeks to give neighborhoods a new identity by optimizing the use of space and creating more dynamic and harmonious urban environments^{3, 4}. Within Algeria's ZHUNs (Zones d'Habitat Urbain Nouvelles: New Urban Housing Zones), these operations aim not only to rehabilitate existing infrastructures but also to rethink public spaces as places for encounters, conviviality, and sustainable development.

This requalification process is also part of a sustainable development approach, limiting urban sprawl and rehabilitating existing neighborhoods. It preserves natural spaces and reduces the need for new construction⁵. In addition, the redevelopment promotes social and functional diversity by integrating housing, shops, offices and green spaces, thus contributing to diversity and inclusion. The improvement of public spaces, the encouragement of soft modes of transport and the creation of convivial spaces all contribute to enhancing the quality of life and well-being of residents. However, despite the significant advances made by the urban improvement policy launched in the 1980s, particularly in terms of housing and infrastructure rehabilitation, many challenges remain. The management of large-scale projects, often characterized by a centralized approach, poses problems in terms of financing and efficiency. What's more, the effective integration of citizens in redevelopment processes remains limited, despite the rhetoric about the importance of their participation⁶.

In this context, the aim of this study is to evaluate how local requalification strategies for ZHUNs in Algeria have been implemented, by

analyzing their impact on the quality of public spaces. This study seeks to understand how these strategies address the specific needs of the neighborhoods, while also examining the role of citizens in the transformation process. These observations raise several essential questions: How have local strategies been rethought to provide quality public spaces within the ZHUNs? And to what extent have citizens been involved in the implementation of these projects?

To answer these questions, a methodological approach was developed, structured around three main areas. First, information was collected from a variety of documentary sources, including academic research, Algerian press articles, and official statistics, in order to contextualize urban requalification in Algeria and to better understand the specific characteristics of the ZHUNs. Second, a conceptual framework was defined, based on three key notions: ZHUN, urban requalification, and urban improvement. This framework explores the conditions surrounding the creation, development, and realization of new urban housing zones, while analyzing the different methodological approaches and their outcomes.

The final stage was devoted to field surveys, carried out to gather primary data from the players involved in urban improvement operations. These surveys were based on two main techniques: visual observation, to assess the types of intervention and the quality of their execution in the Constantine and Annaba neighborhoods, and direct interviews with representatives of the DUAC (Direction de l'Urbanisme, de l'Architecture et de la Construction), to gain a better understanding of the strategies adopted and the challenges encountered. In addition, a guide drawn up by CNERIB (Centre National d'Etudes et Recherches Intégrées du Bâtiment)⁷ in 2007 was used as an analytical tool to assess the technical and normative aspects of requalification work, with particular emphasis on the rehabilitation of public spaces and built environments. This methodology makes it possible to accurately analyze the impact of local strategies on the quality of public spaces in ZHUNs and their ability to meet citizens' expectations.

2. Theoretical synthesis of urban development strategies in Algeria

In Algeria, the management of urbanization in the face of rapid demographic growth has led to the introduction of ambitious schemes aimed at structuring, transforming and improving urban spaces. Among these, the ZHUNs, inspired by the French Zones à Urbaniser en Priorité (ZUP) according to

**Public Space Redevelopment Policies in Algeria: When Local Implementation
Makes the Difference**

Mebirouk⁸, have established themselves as a central strategic tool. Designed to control urban expansion in line with the guidelines of the Urban Master Plan (PUD) and the Urban Modernization Plan (PMU), ZHUNs aim to increase the carrying capacity of urban centers by developing selected plots of land equipped with appropriate infrastructure. The aim is not simply to build, but to structure integrated living spaces, connected to the existing urban fabric, taking into account the specific socio-territorial characteristics. Their creation is based on a clear legal framework, notably Ministerial Circular n°335 of February 19, 1975, which requires the creation of a ZHUN for any project exceeding 1,000 housing units or, exceptionally, 400 housing units in the case of groupings, thus marking their role in short- and medium-term planning⁹.

The governance of the ZHUNs is based on institutional coordination: the OPGI (Office de Promotion et de Gestion Immobilière) manages the housing units, the APCs (Assemblées Populaires Communales) are responsible for educational facilities, and the Ministry of Health oversees health infrastructures, under the supervision of the DUAC. The process follows three phases: creation, development, and execution, each framed by technical documents ensuring rigorous planning¹⁰. In addition, land use standards, notably set by the CADAT (Caisse Algérienne d'Aménagement du Territoire), require the preservation of open spaces to ensure residents' quality of life.

However, beyond controlled urban expansion, urban requalification emerges as a key lever for the long-term restructuring of cities. By acting on housing, services, and public spaces, it aims to improve quality of life, promote social and functional diversity, enhance heritage, and integrate sustainable development principles¹¹. Experiences such as La Duchère in Lyon, the historic centers of Bologna and Naples, and Medellín in Colombia demonstrate that a sustainable approach, based on local governance and citizen participation, can strengthen attractiveness, security, and social cohesion.

In this perspective of continuous urban improvement, Algeria has undertaken a complementary strategy through urban enhancement programs. This strategy aims to restructure and beautify existing spaces to promote a high-quality living environment. Although no specific law directly governs it, it is supported by major legislative texts such as Law No. 06-06 of February 20, 2006,

concerning urban planning, and Law No. 07-06 of May 13, 2007, relating to the management of green spaces. The national urban improvement program has targeted over 938 neighborhoods across the country, focusing on interventions to improve safety, hygiene, comfort, and the overall attractiveness of living environments. Actions include the rehabilitation of roads, modernization of urban lighting, creation of green spaces, and enhancement of urban furniture, highlighting the importance placed on residents' immediate surroundings.

The management of these operations is ensured by the DUAC at the wilaya (provincial) level, with increasing citizen involvement in urban management, in line with the guidelines of the Urban Orientation Law. The OPGI supervises the restructuring of residential buildings, while new initiatives—such as the creation of public urban improvement companies, like the one established in Annaba in 2016, reflect a desire to systematize urban maintenance and foster multi-stakeholder collaborations, particularly with organizations such as Annaba's EPIC, GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), and neighborhood committees. These initiatives illustrate the emergence of more participatory and inclusive governance, mobilizing residents, public authorities, and international partners¹².

3. The ZHUNs of Algeria through the Lens of Urban Improvement

Built in Algeria from the 1970s onward, the New Urban Housing Zones, illustrate the limits of the functionalist model applied to large housing complexes. Designed to rationalize space and prioritize automobile traffic, they now exhibit fragmented urban structures marked by significant degradation of public spaces. The lack of convivial spaces adapted to residents' needs has exacerbated social isolation and contributed to a decline in quality of life¹³.

The qualitative and functional poverty of public spaces, often oversized, poorly maintained, and unsuitable for fostering social interaction, reveals the failure of the initial urban planning logic, which focused too heavily on spatial efficiency at the expense of human and social dynamics. In response to this situation, public authorities have launched urban improvement programs to revitalize these neighborhoods. According to Zahi¹⁴, these interventions are based on four strategic pillars: the creation of quality public spaces that foster

**Public Space Redevelopment Policies in Algeria: When Local Implementation
Makes the Difference**

sociability, the involvement of residents in the design of developments, the enhancement of safety to encourage appropriation of spaces, and support for local economic development to energize the neighborhoods.

However, the success of urban improvement efforts in the ZHUNs cannot be limited to isolated physical interventions. It requires a profound overhaul of planning approaches, systematically integrating residents' participation and adopting a long-term vision. The challenge is thus twofold: to repair the mistakes of the past while building neighborhoods that meet contemporary aspirations in terms of living environment, social interaction, and sustainability. Urban improvement thus emerges not only as a necessity for revitalization but also as an opportunity to fundamentally rethink the ways of living and designing the city.

4. Evaluation of Urban Improvement Efforts: A Focus on the Experiences of Constantine and Annaba

The national program for upgrading Algeria's urban fabric has impacted a total of 3,693 neighborhoods across the country, including 762 spontaneous settlements, 1,092 subdivisions, and 938 large housing complexes¹⁵. This large-scale initiative, planned over a four-year period, aimed to ensure the long-term viability of the national housing stock. Within this framework, priority was given to road infrastructure, utility networks, landscaping, and the creation of green spaces, interventions that primarily concern infrastructure rather than building structures.

While safety and hygiene remain fundamental objectives for utility and roadworks (VRD), equal importance must be placed on enhancing comfort and creating pleasant living environments. The impact of these projects varies according to the location of the areas concerned (urban, peri-urban, or rural), the topography (flat or uneven terrain), and the characteristics of the construction project¹⁶.

To achieve these objectives, several components must be considered: access roads and parking areas; sidewalks, pedestrian pathways, and walkways; urban lighting; masonry structures such as retaining walls and partitions; various facilities (technical and sanitary buildings); outdoor staircases, ramps, terraces,

and fences; green spaces, plantations, and playgrounds; as well as urban furniture and signage. Together, these elements contribute significantly to improving residents' quality of life while strengthening the overall urban infrastructure across the country.

In Constantine, public authorities have focused on improving urban living conditions and rehabilitating urbanized areas since 2005. The 2005–2009 five-year plan, with a budget of approximately 75,328,918.28 US dollars, encompassed around 100 projects mainly aimed at completing infrastructure works, as well as undertaking a large-scale program of sanitation, restoration, beautification, and refurbishment of neighborhoods. For the 2010–2014 program, a budget of 15 billion Algerian dinars was allocated to extend improvements to areas that had not yet been covered. In 2010 and 2011, additional funding—totaling 17,864,565.60 US dollars—was dedicated to various projects, particularly the upgrading of residential neighborhoods and ZHUNs. Urban improvement works in Constantine included: repairing damaged roads, curbs, and sidewalks; resurfacing pedestrian walkways and roadways; rehabilitating sewage and potable water supply networks; cleaning green spaces and gutters and resurfacing roads; installing and upgrading public lighting; developing outdoor spaces such as plazas, gardens, and children's playgrounds; and creating and managing green spaces and diverse plantings, including trees (ash, poplar, palm trees, etc.), shrubs (rosemary, spindle, privet, etc.), and lawns¹⁷.

In parallel, Annaba's urban improvement experience unfolded through several phases, marked by both notable successes and significant challenges. The first five-year plan (1999–2004) allocated a budget of 748.70 million Algerian dinars, primarily to address sanitation issues in the city center. During the second five-year plan (2005–2010), financial resources amounting to 11,795.935 million dinars were distributed across 272 sites in the 12 municipalities of the wilaya, aiming to improve living conditions and develop public works infrastructure. The projects of the third five-year plan (2010–2014) targeted the rehabilitation of major roadways and large neighborhoods in the municipality of El-Bouni, as well as the modernization of sewage and water supply networks to prevent flood risks in Annaba. However, the implementation of these projects drew criticism due to observed shortcomings in certain sites^{18, 19}.

**Public Space Redevelopment Policies in Algeria: When Local Implementation
Makes the Difference**

In many peripheral neighborhoods of Annaba, the wastewater networks have proven to be undersized, unable to meet the current and future expansion of urban areas. This has led to problems during heavy rainfall due to both a lack of maintenance and inadequate capacity. As a result, water stagnation has occurred in parking lots, on roadways, and even at the entrances of residential buildings. To address these challenges, a municipal program was implemented to better connect the various neighborhoods and improve the overall living environment. In addition, the ZHUNs of Annaba have benefited from the development of playgrounds for both collective and individual outdoor activities. Regarding green spaces, and in accordance with the guidelines provided by the CNERIB manual, these areas are deemed essential in urban settings, offering numerous benefits such as oxygen production and temperature regulation. The design of green spaces is closely linked to the characteristics of the soil and the local climate, which dictate the choice of appropriate plantings²⁰. Complementing the vegetation, amenities such as benches, lighting, water features, bus shelters, and other urban facilities have been installed in several collective housing neighborhoods, providing comfort, information, and services to residents.

Urban furniture, comprising utilitarian, decorative, and commercial elements, plays a vital role in guiding, informing, and orienting public space users in their movements. It is also crucial in shaping public spaces, contributing to the inhabitants' quality of life by ensuring pedestrian safety, comfort, beautification, cleanliness, and signage. Today, the design of urban furniture incorporates considerations of ergonomics, aesthetics, and sustainability, which are inseparable from its functionality²¹.

In the urban environment of ZHUNs, despite the progress made in installing urban furniture such as trash bins and dumpsters as part of sustainable development initiatives, their use remains insufficient. This highlights a pressing need to raise public awareness about the importance of environmental protection. Waste management remains a major challenge for Algerian cities, both environmentally and socially, requiring close cooperation among various stakeholders to achieve sustainable environmental protection and improved living conditions. The development of roadways also represents a major issue for the well-being of residents, combining safety, comfort, aesthetics, and sustainability

in the selection of materials and construction techniques to ensure the longevity of infrastructure.

Ultimately, although peripheral neighborhoods have made notable progress in improving their urban environment, challenges remain in ensuring the lasting quality of urban developments and in raising public awareness of the importance of environmental preservation.

5. Inconsistencies in the Management and Implementation of Urban Improvement Programs in Algeria

Algeria aspires to establish an urban policy that ensures its population a decent living environment, while integrating the principles of sustainable development and good urban governance. The restructuring and renewal of the existing urban fabric have become priorities in most Algerian cities, notably through the implementation of urban improvement programs. Nevertheless, the management of these programs is marred by significant inconsistencies that undermine their effectiveness and their potential to enhance residents' quality of life.

5.1. Centralized Management and Conflicts of Interest

The centralized management of urban improvement programs, operated at the level of the wilaya and its decentralized unit (DUAC), tends to exclude local actors, such as municipalities, neighborhood associations, and citizens, from the decision-making and project implementation processes. This exclusion results in a disconnect between the actual needs of the population and the actions undertaken, often culminating in projects that are poorly adapted and ineffective. Furthermore, the centralized and sectoral nature of decision-making fosters conflicts of interest among the various stakeholders, each advocating for their own priorities without regard for a coherent and integrated vision. Such fragmentation hinders the coordination of interventions and compromises the overall success of urban improvement initiatives²².

5.2. Quality of Intervention and Deficiencies in Project Execution

The outcomes of urban improvement programs frequently reveal significant shortcomings in the quality of project execution. Several indicators underscore this reality.

First, roadways are often poorly constructed, displaying major defects such as cracks, potholes, and irregular surfaces. These deficiencies not only detract from the urban aesthetic but also pose safety risks and diminish the comfort of users, whether they are pedestrians, cyclists, or motorists. Similarly, sidewalks are frequently substandard and ill-suited for diverse usages. Beyond their narrow dimensions, which restrict pedestrian flow, they often fail to meet accessibility standards for individuals with reduced mobility. Curbs are either excessively high or improperly installed, impeding access for strollers, wheelchairs, and the elderly.

Urban vegetation, a crucial component for enhancing citizens' well-being and mitigating urban heat islands, is often selected in an arbitrary manner. This practice leads to the planting of species that are ill-suited to the local climate, requiring disproportionate maintenance efforts or failing to acclimate, thereby diminishing their ecological and aesthetic contributions to the urban landscape.

Urban furniture is similarly insufficient or altogether absent in certain neighborhoods. Benches, bus shelters, waste bins, and other public amenities designed to improve daily life are scarce, poorly located, or of inferior quality, undermining the urban experience and accelerating the deterioration of the few facilities that do exist.

These deficiencies are largely attributable to a lack of technical, conceptual, and managerial expertise. Project implementation teams frequently lack specialized training and comprehensive knowledge in urban planning, architecture, and civil engineering. In addition, planning and project management processes are often deficient, with crucial stages either overlooked or executed inadequately. Insufficient coordination among stakeholders further exacerbates inconsistencies and delays in project delivery.

In order to enhance the quality of interventions and ensure the successful execution of urban projects, it is imperative to invest in continuous professional development, enforce strict technical standards, and strengthen project management and site supervision practices. Moreover, adopting a participatory approach that actively involves residents and experts could foster more satisfactory and sustainable outcomes.

5.3. Ineffective Participatory Process

Citizen participation in urban improvement programs is limited to the mere dissemination of general information. This approach, corresponding to Level 3 of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, does not grant citizens real influence over the decisions and actions undertaken. While informing citizens about their rights and responsibilities is certainly important, it is insufficient to ensure legitimate and effective participation. A truly participatory process should enable citizens to express themselves freely, to propose initiatives, and to negotiate solutions with authorities, thereby co-constructing projects that genuinely respond to their needs and expectations.

6. Recommendations for Improved Management of Urban Programs

In order to enhance the management of urban upgrading and redevelopment programs in Algeria, the following recommendations are proposed:

6.1. Inclusive and Participatory Governance

The involvement of local actors (municipalities, associations, citizens) in decision-making processes is crucial to ensure the alignment of urban projects with the actual needs of the population. The establishment of advisory committees and the promotion of transparency (public reports, open meetings) strengthen the accountability of authorities and foster a democratic form of governance that is better suited to addressing urban challenges.

6.2. Transparent and Collaborative Decision-Making Process

Making information related to urban projects (plans, budgets, progress updates) accessible allows citizens to engage in project monitoring and adjustment. Regular public consultations and the use of digital tools (surveys, online forums) broaden participation and lead to more informed and responsive decision-making.

6.3. Capacity Building for Urban Actors

Continuous training, developed in collaboration with academic institutions and international partners, is essential to enhance the technical, conceptual, and managerial skills of urban stakeholders. Practical internships and international exchange programs further enrich local expertise and promote innovation within projects.

6.4. Genuine Participatory Processes

Implementing regular feedback mechanisms and pilot projects that directly involve citizens ensures their engagement at every stage, from design to implementation. At the same time, awareness-raising campaigns aimed at informing citizens of their rights help to strengthen their involvement in urban decision-making.

Altogether, these recommendations highlight the necessity of adopting a collaborative and decentralized approach to better align urban projects with the needs of local communities. By reinforcing transparency, enhancing skills, and encouraging citizen participation, Algeria could not only improve the efficiency of its urban programs but also ensure their sustainability and local ownership, thus creating more inclusive and resilient cities.

7. Conclusion

At the end of this study, it is clear that urban requalification in Algeria, particularly through neighborhood renovation initiatives such as the ZHUN, requires a thoughtful approach adapted to local specificities. Although these programs aim to improve living conditions and revitalize urban spaces by creating

quality public areas, they face several challenges, notably the standardization of interventions and the lack of innovation in project design. These issues are particularly evident in the ZHUN, where actions taken to improve infrastructure, security, and urban hygiene have sometimes shown their limitations in terms of execution quality and resident involvement.

The urban improvement programs implemented have addressed immediate needs but often lack a long-term vision and innovative strategies to ensure sustainable development. To guarantee the success of future interventions, it is crucial to adopt a more tailored approach, taking into account the specificities of each neighborhood and strengthening citizen participation at all levels, from information sharing to co-decision-making. It is also essential to mobilize qualified companies capable of meeting technical requirements and integrating appropriate solutions.

In summary, although progress has been made through urban improvement initiatives, there remains a need to enhance project management and execution to ensure sustainable rehabilitation that respects the specific needs of each neighborhood. This requires stronger collaboration among local actors, continuous innovation, and better consideration of residents' aspirations in the decision-making processes.

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