



Adaptive Reuse of Archaeological Heritage as Museums: The Case of the National Public Museum of Art and History in Tlemcen.

إعادة توظيف التراث الأثري كمؤسسات متحفية: دراسة حالة المتحف الوطني العمومي للفن والتاريخ بتلمسان

Yebdri Othman¹

othman.yebdri@univ-tlemcen.dz
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7600-8314>

Labtar Qadda²

qadda.labtar@univ-tlemcen.dz
<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7370-3222>

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Article abstract:

Adaptive reuse of monuments as museums preserves heritage and supports tourism, but requires compliance with conservation standards and strategic planning. This study analyzes the Tlemcen National Public Museum of Art and History, assessing historical, architectural, and economic aspects. Results show success in preservation and cultural promotion but limited economic impact due to weak promotion, static displays, and low visitor engagement. Recommendations include digital innovation, dynamic programming, and integration into regional tourism strategies.

Key words: Adaptive reuse; Archaeological heritage; Museums; Sustainable tourism; Tlemcen.

ملخص المقال:

إعادة توظيف المعالم الأثرية كمتاحف تُسهم في حفظ التراث ودعم السياحة، غير أنّ نجاحها يستلزم الالتزام بمعايير الحفظ والتخطيط الاستراتيجي. يتناول هذا البحث المتحف الوطني العمومي للفن والتاريخ بتلمسان من خلال تحليل تاريخي ومعماري واقتصادي. أظهرت النتائج نجاح المشروع في صون المعلم وتعزيز إشعاعه الثقافي، مقابل محدودية أثره الاقتصادي نتيجة ضعف الترويج وجمود العرض وقلة تفاعل الزوار. ويقترح البحث اعتماد التحول الرقمي، والبرمجة الثقافية الديناميكية، وتعزيز اندماج المتاحف ضمن شبكات السياحة الإقليمية. **كلمات مفتاحية:** إعادة التوظيف؛ التراث الأثري؛ المتاحف؛ السياحة المستدامة؛ تلمسان.

1. Archaeological Heritage and Valorisation Laboratory - University of Abou Bakr Belkaid, Tlemcen, Algeria.
2. Archaeological Heritage and Valorisation Laboratory - University of Abou Bakr Belkaid, Tlemcen, Algeria.



Introduction

Archaeological and historical heritage constitutes a vital component of cultural identity and sustainable development. Beyond its symbolic and educational value, heritage contributes directly to economic growth, urban regeneration, and the reinforcement of national image through cultural tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). In recent decades, the concept of adaptive reuse - the process of giving new functions to historic buildings while preserving their heritage significance - has emerged as a key strategy in heritage management. Supported by international charters such as the Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964), the Lisbon Charter (1955), and the updated definition of the museum proposed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2022), adaptive reuse emphasizes the integration of preservation with modernization, ensuring that monuments continue to serve society rather than remain static relics of the past.

In Algeria, heritage preservation has been a national concern since independence, with a strong emphasis on rehabilitating monuments and integrating them into contemporary cultural life. The city of Tlemcen, one of the richest in architectural and archaeological heritage, provides a particularly significant example of this dynamic. Its numerous historical landmarks, including mosques, madrasas, and palaces, bear witness to a long tradition of urban sophistication. Among these, building currently housing the National Public Museum of Art and History offers a relevant case of adaptive reuse, illustrating both the opportunities and limitations of transforming a historical monument into a modern cultural institution.

The central problem addressed in this study concerns the extent to which adaptive reuse of heritage monuments as museums can reconcile the requirements of historical preservation with the demands of contemporary cultural and economic development. Despite the growing global trend of converting historical sites into museums, many such projects in developing contexts -including Algeria- struggle with limited funding, weak promotion, and modest visitor engagement. These factors raise questions about the real sustainability and efficiency of adaptive reuse in fulfilling both cultural and economic goals.

Accordingly, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How can archaeological and historical monuments be adapted into museum institutions without compromising their authenticity and integrity?
2. To what extent has the National Public Museum of Art and History in Tlemcen achieved its cultural and economic objectives since its establishment?
3. What strategic measures could enhance the sustainability and attractiveness of heritage-based museums within Algeria and the wider Mediterranean region?

By combining theoretical perspectives with empirical data on visitor numbers, revenues, and spatial organization, the study provides a critical evaluation of the museum's impact. The aim is to contribute to debates on the role of museums as active agents of heritage valorization, tourism development, and community engagement.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Archaeological Sites and Historical Monuments

Archaeological sites preserve remains of past human activities, often revealed through excavation (Law No. 04-98, 1998). Historical monuments, meanwhile, embody cultural, political, and social values across time (Feilden, 2003). The Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964) recognizes monuments as cultural witnesses of civilizations, whether monumental or vernacular.

1.2. Rehabilitation and Adaptive Reuse

Rehabilitation restores buildings to functional use while safeguarding authenticity (Lisbon Charter, 1955). Adaptive reuse goes further, assigning new functions aligned with community needs while preserving heritage values (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1994).

1.3. Integration of Heritage into Contemporary Life

Integration entails embedding heritage into social life. As Dahmani notes, successful integration requires compatibility with conservation standards, accessibility, and economic viability (Dahmani, 2012, pp. 174-184). Museums serve as intermediaries between past and present (ICOM, 2022).

1.4. Museums and Economic Development

Museums generate direct revenues, stimulate local economies, and enhance symbolic capital (Richards, 2021). Iconic cases such as the Louvre in Paris or the Bardo Museum in Tunis show how adaptive reuse can contribute to cultural tourism, though challenges persist in developing contexts (OECD, 2020) & (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

2. Basics of using heritage buildings as museum institutions

A group of architects and specialists has set several basic controls and principles that determine the type of use, headed by architect Roy Worskett, who imposed:

- The proposed new use must be compatible with the general principles of maintenance and restoration.
- The new use must not conflict with the historical and artistic value and classification of the historic building.
- Functional suitability is measured by the degree of minimal intervention in the original structure and by avoiding the removal of any historical elements.
- The new use is considered more successful when it is close to the building's original function and compatible with its architectural capacity, although it does not necessarily have to be its final use.

3. Contributions of museums to economic development

Converting historic buildings into museums can serve as a significant source of economic and touristic revenue for countries. Several global examples illustrate this, such as the Louvre Museum in France, which is considered the most visited museum in the world. Originally built as a castle built by Philip Augustus in 1190, it was reconstructed in the 16th century to serve as a royal residence known as the Louvre Palace. Today, the Louvre Museum covers a total area of more than 60,000 square meters, providing sufficient space to display its remarkable collection of around 460,000 artworks and antiquities (Documentary Research Sheet, The Louvre, 2025).

Figure (1) : Louvre Museum.



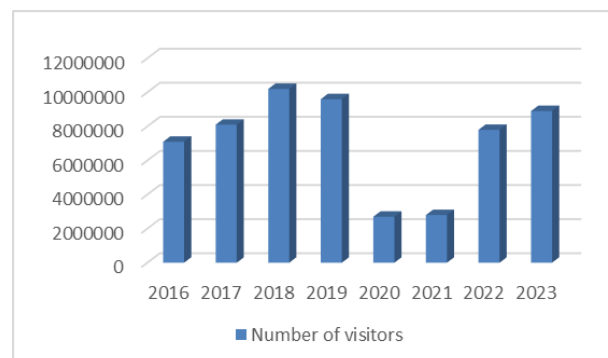
Source : Fiche de Recherche Documentaire, Le Louvre.

Table (1): Statistics of visitors to the Louvre Museum from 2016 to 2023.

Years	Number of visitors
2016	7.100.000
2017	8.100.000
2018	10.200.000
2019	9.600.000
2020	2.700.000
2021	2.800.000
2022	7.800.000
2023	8.900.000

Source: www.louvre.fr

Chart (1): Percentage of visitors to the Louvre Museum from 2016 to 2023



The Louvre Museum achieved its highest annual visitor numbers in 2018, exceeding 10 million visitors, and recorded its lowest figures in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the museum welcomed nearly 9 million visitors, thus regaining a level close to its pre-pandemic attendance. Its annual revenue is estimated at more than 100 million euros.

Figure (2): Bardo National Museum.



Source : <https://www.babnet.net/cadredetail-273202.asp>

Among the most visited museums in the Arab world is the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, considered the second most important museum in the world for Roman mosaic art after the Zeugma Mosaic Museum in Turkey. It is one of the most important museums in the Mediterranean basin and the second museum in Africa after the Egyptian Museum in Cairo due to the richness of its collections (Al-Zaabi, 2021).

Originally, the site was a palace for the harem of the Husseinite family known as the Small Palace. It was later converted into a museum called the Alawi Museum, in reference to Ali Bey, who ruled Tunisia from 1882 to 1902. After the country's independence from France, the institution was renamed the Bardo National Museum (History of the National Bardo Museum). In recent years, a new wing with a contemporary architectural design has been added behind the historical building, which itself underwent renovation (Amara, 2017).

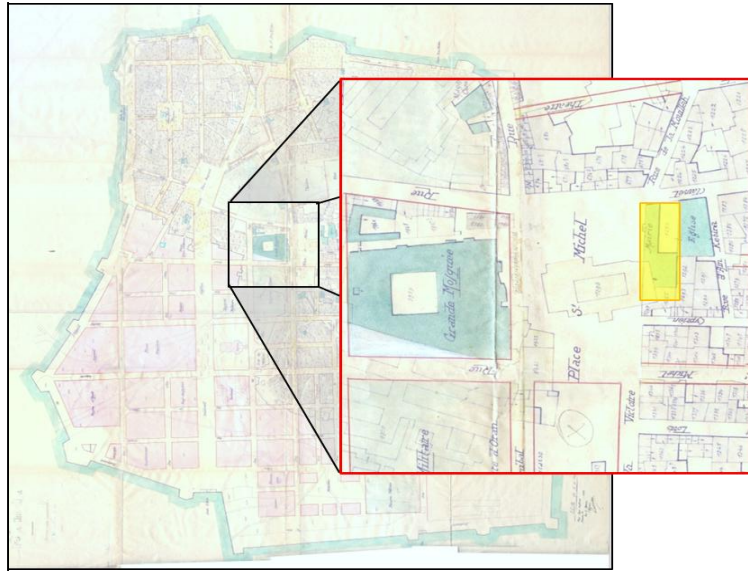
The number of visitors reached approximately 600,000 in 2005, but declined to about 100,000 in 2011 (Al Jazeera + French), and continued to fall to around 40,000 in 2015 (Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Republic of Tunisia), until the museum was closed in 2021 due to the outbreak of the political crisis, and reopened in September 2023 (Al Jazeera + Agencies).

4. Introduction to the National Public Museum of Art and History

4.1. Geographical location:

The National Public Museum of Art and History is located in the heart of Tlemcen, on the southeastern side of Emir Abdelkader Square, directly opposite the Great Mosque.

Plan (1): Location of the National Public Museum of Art and History.



Source: The French Archives.

4.2. Historical overview of the museum:

The building that currently houses the museum dates back to the Tashfiniya Madrasa (its rear section) which was constructed between 717 and 737 AH (1318–1337 CE) by order of the Zayyanid Sultan Abu Tashfin Abd al-Rahman I (Charpentier, 2018, p. 124), as Al-Tanasi referred to in his saying “... and all of this was made better by building the great and unparalleled madrasa which he built opposite the Great Mosque...” (El Tanasi , 2011, p. 141), which was a magnificent architectural masterpiece and one of the most important schools in the capital of the Zayyanid state.

After the French colonialists entered the city of Tlemcen, they was initially used as military barracks in 1873, then demolished as part of the city’s new urban plan of Tlemcen by building a public square and the town hall, the southeastern part of which was used as a museum, as the southeastern facade of the building still bears the name “MUSEE” to this day, and the building continued to function as a town hall even after independence.

Within the framework of the Tlemcen Capital of Islamic Culture event in 2011, the building hosted a temporary exhibition of a section of the archaeological museum collections, after preparation works for this purpose supervised by the Ministry of Culture. Pursuant to Executive Decree N° 12-196 dated 03 Jumada II 1433 AH corresponding to 25 April 2012, the National Public Museum of Art and History of the city of Tlemcen was officially established (Additional inventory file of the National Public Museum of Art and History and Abdelkader Square, 2022-2023; Lord, 2011).

Figure (3): Main facade of the town hall in the colonial period (currently the National Public Museum of Art and History).



Source: <http://kader133.centerblog.net/voir-photo?u=http://kader133.k.a.pic.centerblog.net/o/ff2aa7fd.jpg>

5. The general plan of the museum (town hall) before the rehabilitation process

The building has a rectangular layout with a total area of 1380 square meters. Its design is based on the principles of symmetry and perpendicularity, and it stands as one of the landmarks representing 19th-century French architecture. The main façade is 52 meters long and 10 meters high, featuring a central entrance surmounted by a large clock, and two secondary doors on either side, each topped with a prominent balcony.

Plan (2): Ground floor plan of the Town Hall, July 1958.



The plan is divided into two sections: the red section corresponds to the town hall and includes a series of offices, while the blue section is designated for the museum.

Plan (3): Town Hall Upper Floor Plan, July 1958.



Source: Researchers work.

6. Steps and procedures followed in the process of Converting the Building into a Museum Institution

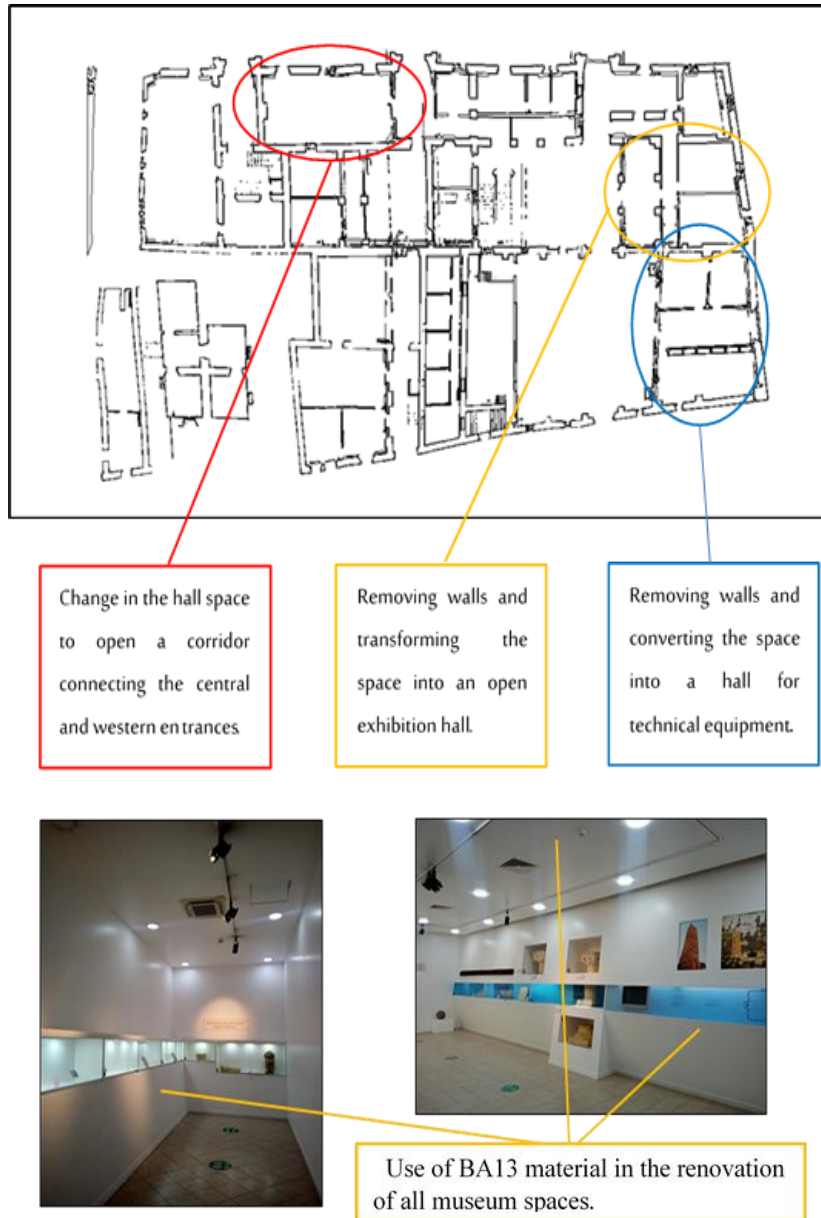
6.1. Conditions for preparing historical and archaeological buildings for Museum conversion:

The process of preparing old buildings is highly sensitive and complex, as these structures were originally designed for different functions. When preparing historical and archaeological landmarks for reuse as museums, several conditions must be taken into consideration (Shargui , 2014, p. 131):

- Maintaining a balance between preserving the historical character and meeting modern functional needs.
- Ensuring the safety and structural stability of the building.
- Ensuring that the internal layout can accommodate the greatest possible number of new functions.
- The cost of adapting the historical building should be significantly lower than that of constructing a new one
- It should be technically capable of accommodating various safety and prevention systems, as well as lighting, ventilation, security control and fire-fighting facilities.

6.2. Rehabilitation and Adaptive Reuse Process:

The rehabilitation of the building aimed to reconcile its historical value with the requirements of a modern museum. Key interventions included spatial reorganization, technical upgrades, and restorative works. However, reliance on basic materials and static displays has limited its experiential quality.

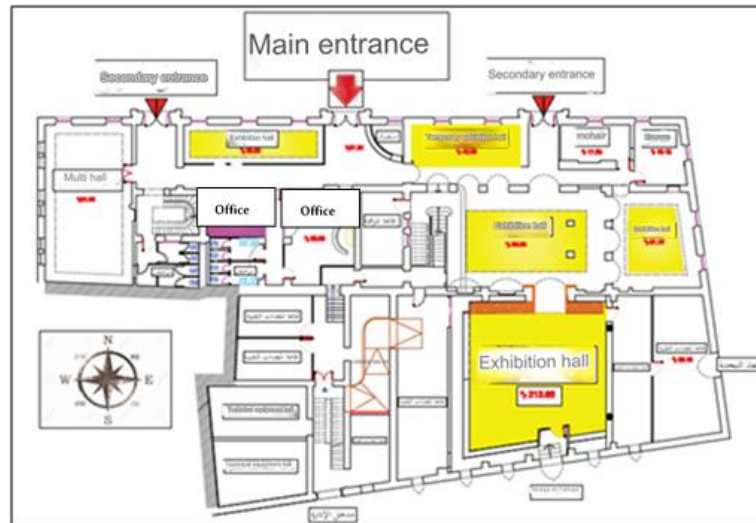


Source: Researchers work.

6.3. Museum Organization and Collections

The museum is organized into thematic halls that reflect Algeria's historical continuum- Prehistoric, Roman, Islamic, Zayyanid, Ottoman, and colonial periods. Although the collections are of great value, the museological approach remains largely static, relying heavily on descriptive panels rather than interactive experiences (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019).

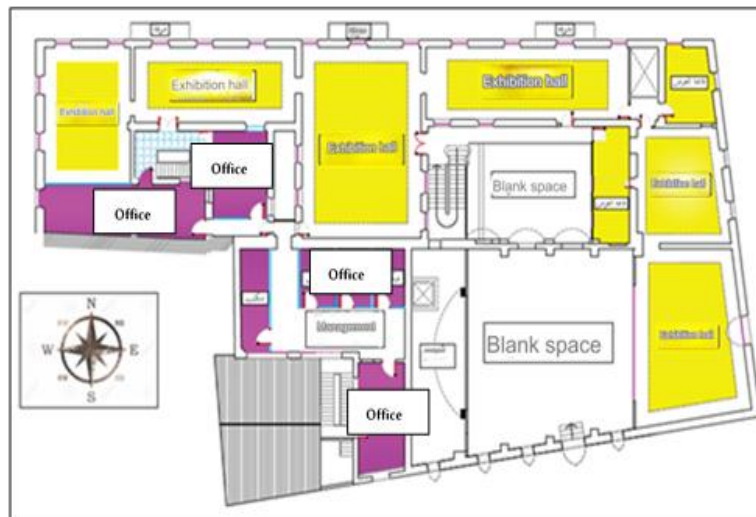
Plan (4): Ground floor of the National Public Museum of Art and History.



Source: Department of Management, the Museum of Art and History (2024).

Ground floor: During the colonial period, the building served as a town hall comprising several halls and offices, one of which—located in the southeastern section—was used as a city museum. At present, all the offices have been converted into exhibition halls, with offices allocated to manage the museum. Open spaces covered with glass were introduced to maximize natural lighting in the eastern part of the building, in contrast to the western side, which was designed as a more enclosed area.

Plan (5): Upper floor of the National Public Museum of Art and History.



Source: Department of Management, the Museum of Art and History (2024).

Upper floor: As an extension of the ground floor, it contains additional exhibition halls and offices housing the museum's management. The main mission of the museum's departments is to ensure the visitor comfort and to organize the collections in a way that highlights the significance of Algeria's heritage in general, and that of the city of Tlemcen in particular.

Department of inventory, preservation and restoration: This department is composed of two sub-departments:

- Department of inventory.
- Department of preservation and restoration.

Department of research and publication activities: This department also includes two complementary sub-departments:

- Department of research activities.
- Department of publications and documentation.

Department of animation, pedagogical workshops and communication: It has two departments responsible for animation and communication:

- Department of animation and pedagogical workshops.
- Department of communication.

Department of administration: The museum's administrative structure includes three sub-departments:

- Department of users and training.
- Department of finance and accounting.
- Department of general means, security and cleanliness.

6.4. Visitor Statistics and Economic Performance

Visitor data from 2012 to 2023 show a declining trend. Attendance peaked in the early years but later dropped, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Revenues between 2020–2023 (≈ 85 million DZD) were insufficient to cover operational costs (Directorate of Culture & Arts, 2023).

Table (2): Statistics of visitors to the National Public Museum of Art and History from 2012 to 2023

Years	Foreign visitors	Local visitors	Official delegations	Student category	Total
2012	261	3806	00	438	4505
2013	708	20041	02	750	21501
2014	693	15681	56	1384	17814
2015	200	5345	140	765	6450
2016	268	5101	06	465	5840
2017	163	4496	24	655	5338
2018	307	3320	04	1081	4712
2019	34	961	00	361	1356
2020	29	279	00	201	509
2021	05	1075	06	620	1706
2022	113	3007	32	185	3337
2023	82	1898	06	125	2111

Source: Department of Management, the Museum of Art and History (2024).

Table (3): Statistics of the revenues of the National Public Museum of Art and History from 2020 to 2023.

Years	First semester	Second semester	Total
2020	00	28.800	28.800 Da
2021	60.000	100.000	160.000 Da
2022	70.000	285.000	355.000 Da
2023	95.000	205.000	300.000 Da

Source: Department of Management, the Museum of Art and History (2024).

The revenues generated over the past four years did not exceed 85 million Algerian dinars, representing a very small proportion that does not even cover the periodic maintenance costs of the monument. **6.5.**

Challenges Identified

- Limited promotion and weak integration into national tourism circuits.
- Static exhibition model without interactive technologies.
- Low revenues insufficient to ensure financial sustainability.
- Lack of collaboration with Mediterranean heritage networks.

7. Results and Discussion

The adaptive reuse of the Tlemcen National Public Museum of Art and History presents a complex interplay between heritage conservation and socio-economic viability, offering clear answers to the research questions posed.

In response to the first research question regarding the adaptation of historical monuments into museums without compromising their integrity, the case demonstrates notable success. The rehabilitation process adhered to key conservation principles, including minimal intervention in the original structure and respect for the building's historical character. The spatial reorganization successfully transformed the former town hall into functional museum spaces while preserving significant architectural elements, such as the main façade and its distinctive clock. This aligns with established international standards for adaptive reuse (Worskett, 1982; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019), confirming that architectural integrity can be maintained through careful planning and execution.

Regarding the second question concerning the effectiveness in achieving cultural and economic objectives, the outcomes are decidedly mixed. Culturally, the project has succeeded in preserving a significant monument and providing a dedicated space for highlighting Tlemcen's rich heritage. The museum's thematic organization across historical periods offers a comprehensive narrative of regional history, fulfilling an important educational mission. However, economically, the project has significantly underperformed. The analysis of visitor data from 2012 to 2023 reveals a troubling declining trend, with attendance dropping from over 21,000 visitors in 2013 to approximately 2,000 by 2023. Financial records further indicate that revenues between 2020-2023 (≈ 85 million DZD) proved insufficient to cover even basic operational and maintenance costs.

This economic underperformance can be attributed to several interconnected factors identified through the study. The museum's reliance on static exhibition methods, described as "traditional museology" by Plevoets & Van Cleempoel (2019), has resulted in limited visitor engagement, particularly among younger

demographics accustomed to interactive experiences. Furthermore, inadequate marketing strategies and weak integration into regional tourism circuits have restricted the museum's visibility and accessibility to potential visitors. The absence of collaborative networks with Mediterranean heritage institutions has further isolated the museum from potential knowledge exchange and tourist flows (Timothy & Boyd, 2003) (Bullen & Love, 2011, pp. 411–421). The discussion must also acknowledge contextual challenges, including limited funding for technological upgrades and the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these factors alone cannot explain the persistent decline in visitor numbers, suggesting deeper structural issues in museum management and programming.

Answering the third research question, the lessons from Tlemcen provide valuable insights for sustainable heritage management in Algeria and similar contexts. The case clearly demonstrates that successful adaptive reuse requires moving beyond architectural conservation to embrace comprehensive strategic planning. This includes developing dynamic visitor engagement strategies, implementing robust digital transformation initiatives, and fostering stronger integration with cultural tourism networks. The findings reinforce Dahmani's (2012) emphasis on the necessity of economic viability alongside conservation standards for successful heritage integration.

While the Tlemcen museum has effectively preserved architectural heritage and provided cultural visibility, its limited economic impact and declining visitor engagement highlight the need for a more holistic approach to adaptive reuse—one that balances conservation with innovation, accessibility, and financial sustainability.

Beyond the descriptive assessment of visitor data and financial performance, a deeper analysis reveals structural factors affecting the museum's limited impact. The weak integration of the institution into regional tourism networks, combined with the absence of interactive technologies, restricts its ability to attract and retain visitors. Comparative cases from the Mediterranean region — such as the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha — demonstrate that adaptive reuse projects achieve long-term success when they adopt dynamic museological approaches, including audience-centered programs, digital storytelling, and cultural events that connect the museum to its urban environment (Amara, 2017; OECD, 2020; Richards, 2021).

In the case of Tlemcen, the adaptive reuse achieved remarkable success in architectural preservation but fell short in transforming the museum into a vibrant cultural hub. Strengthening partnerships with local universities, tourism agencies, and creative industries could generate sustainable engagement and diversify funding sources (Dahmani, 2012). Therefore, the real challenge lies not in the physical rehabilitation itself but in ensuring the social and economic vitality of the reused heritage site (Bullen & Love, 2011) (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

8. Recommendations

- Strengthen digital presence through virtual museums and online platforms (UNESCO, 2020).
- Diversify visitor experience with temporary exhibitions, multimedia storytelling, and educational workshops.
- Improve financial sustainability through partnerships, merchandising, and cultural events.
- Foster regional collaboration by joining Mediterranean heritage networks.
- Integrate museum planning within national cultural and tourism strategies.

Conclusion:

The adaptive reuse of the Tlemcen museum demonstrates that heritage preservation can succeed while economic goals remain unmet. For Algeria and similar contexts, sustainable success requires linking adaptive reuse with strategic planning, digital transformation, and dynamic museological practices.

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