



ICCAUA Proceedings Journal

Proceedings of the international conference of contemporary affairs in architecture and urbanism-ICCAUA
Volume 9 (December 2026), 2610106

ICCAUA
Proceedings *Journal*
<https://journal.iccaua.com/>

Journal homepage: <https://journal.iccaua.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38027/ICCAUA2026EN0106>

Revalorisation of Heritage Cultural Landscapes Through an Approach Based on Intangible Atmospheres

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Abstract

Received: 20.04.2026
Revised: 19.06.2026
Accepted: 01.07.2026
Available online: 10.07.2026

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This article has been selected and peer-reviewed for publication in this journal as part of the 9th International Conference of Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism, held on 7–8 May 2026 in Istanbul, Türkiye.

This research examines fragmented heritage approach, which often overlooks intangible dimensions and resident involvement. It introduces the theory of atmospheres as a conceptual framework to improve rehabilitation of historic urban fabrics by focusing on inhabitants. The empirical study, conducted in a fragment of the Casbah of Algiers, combines semi-structured interviews with 70 professionals and a qualitative investigation of 28 residents through guided walks, mental mapping, and photo-elicitation.

The findings highlight that heritage atmospheres are manifested through their appropriation by residents, which is conditioned by the dynamic interaction of four dimensions: social, symbolic, sensory, and spatial. A significant divergence is observed: while professionals emphasise the spatial dimension, residents place greater importance on the social and symbolic aspects. Historical richness promotes attachment, whereas significant spatial changes lead to disappropriation. This research validates the inclusion of a symbolic dimension in atmosphere theory and proposes innovative cartographic tools to guide inclusive rehabilitation efforts.

Keywords: Theory of atmospheres; Heritage atmospheres; Casbah of Algiers; Inclusive rehabilitation

1. Introduction

Contemporary urban rehabilitation worldwide is moving towards regeneration strategies that are no longer limited to the simple conservation of buildings, but aim to maintain the quality of living spaces in their human and cultural dimensions. As Foret and Porchet (2001) point out, this approach integrates human development to ensure the sustainability of the identity of old neighbourhoods. At the same time, the concept of heritage has undergone a major overhaul with the introduction of intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO (2003), creating new regimes of historicity (Lessault, 2004; Tornatore, 2007). This evolution has recently led scholars to call for participatory processes that place local communities at the centre of heritage identification and management (Nebot-Gómez de Salazar et al., 2023).

To bridge the divide between the material and immaterial spheres, the concepts of "Spirit of Place" (ICOMOS, 2008) and "Historic Urban Landscape" (UNESCO, 2011) have been proposed to understand heritage as an inseparable whole. These texts emphasise the need to involve users in the heritage preservation process, moving from an approach focused on material authenticity to one that values sensory experience and human value. Djabarouti (2024) reinforces this shift, arguing that prioritising the interface between tangible and intangible dimensions is essential for contemporary built heritage management.

Despite these international advances and a clear political will in Algeria – embodied in a dedicated legal arsenal, notably Decree No. 83-684 and Law No. 98-04 – their transposition into executive measures remains marked by a reductive vision of heritage. Management confines interventions to the physical framework, relegating the essential social and sensory components to the background. The main operational instrument, the Permanent Plan for the Safeguarding and Enhancement of Safeguarded Sectors (PPSMVSS), is limited to action on tangible material, obscuring the fundamental intangible dimension (UNESCO, 2003). In practice, rehabilitation operations often stop at the individual building level, without a unified methodological framework, leading to the loss of heritage values recognised by the inhabitants themselves (Djedi, 2012 ; Hadji et al., 2023).

A major divide remains between the 'expert designer', who considers space as functional, and the 'lay inhabitant', for whom space is imbued with emotional and social experience (Li et al, 2024). There is currently a lack of operational tools capable of integrating citizens' sensory perceptions into official preservation instruments. Research must therefore fill this gap by proposing a method for revealing perceptions of heritage environments and assessing the degree to which users appropriate them.

This research aims to co-construct the atmospheres of a historical fabric in collaboration with its inhabitants. The main objective is to implement a system for monitoring heritage atmospheres capable of assessing the impact of urban transformations on material and immaterial dimensions. Specific objectives include:

- Identifying the heritage value of the Casbah through the appropriation report of its residents.
- Identifying indicators for measuring heritage sensitivity through the concept of appropriation.
- Proposing a methodological framework for incorporating the theory of atmospheres into existing preservation instruments.

We support the hypothesis that sensory immersion of residents allows us to characterise ancient territories without a material/immaterial divide. Furthermore, the intersection between the fields of ambience and appropriation allows the sensory approach to become an operator of urban change, restoring residents to their role as "expert citizens".

This article is organised into six sections. Following this introduction, the second section presents a brief review of the literature on heritage atmospheres and their relationship to appropriation, while the third section focuses on the materials and methods used to extract the sensitive relationship to heritage. The fourth section presents the results of the characterisation of atmospheres and their hierarchisation. The fifth section discusses the interaction between atmospheres and appropriation, as well as factors contributing to disappropriation. Finally, the sixth section concludes with methodological contributions and recommendations for integrating atmospheres into the PPSMVSS.

2. Conceptual Framework of Heritage Atmospheres

The emergence of a theory of atmospheres applied to ancient contexts makes it possible to manage heritage in all its dimensions, by promoting sensory characteristics as shared objects of recognition (Belakehal, 2012; Saïd, 2014; Hassan & Elkhateeb, 2021 ; Aziz Amen & Ahmad NIA, 2021). The theory of ambiances, defined by Thibaud (2002) and Adolph (1998), provides an operational framework for understanding the sensory world. It is based on a cross-reading of physical forms and social practices. Amphoux (2004) emphasises that true expertise must include the "expert inhabitant" of their own daily life, as only they can grasp the lived depth of the place. This approach contrasts with Fischer's (1992) vision, which separates the functional space of the designer from the space invested by affective experience. In this regard, Xiao (2026) shows that multisensory trails designed through co-validation with community members constitute a promising operational bridge between expert knowledge and the lived sensory experience of inhabitants, opening new methodological perspectives for heritage practice.

Lesbet (1985) attributes the failure of many rehabilitation projects, particularly in the Casbah of Algiers, to a "social void" resulting from the exclusion of citizens from the decision-making process. This observation is reinforced by Sidi Boumedine (2020), who points to sectoral management that neglects the traumatic impact of collapses and prolonged shoring on the social dimension. Ke and Mustafa (2024) further demonstrate that active community involvement through participatory processes is essential for the success of heritage preservation, as it transforms passive bystanders into genuine co-producers of cultural meaning. For Saïd (2014), heritage must be understood as an "ambient palimpsest", where temporal strata overlap without being erased. Finally, Ripoll and Veschambre (2005) demonstrate that appropriation (cognitive and affective) is the essential driver of any heritage preservation. This dynamic is fostered by stylistic diversity which, according to Bayart and Bertrand (2006), allows cultures to meet and facilitates rooting. Recent research confirms that the revitalisation of heritage buildings strengthens residents' cultural identity and place attachment only when the social and collective memory dimensions are genuinely integrated (Chan et al., 2024). The conceptual framework of this research is based on the dynamic interaction between two major theoretical fields to ensure inclusive and sustainable urban regeneration:

1. The Heritage Atmosphere Mechanism:

- Material (spatial) dimension
- Immaterial Dimension:
 - Social;
 - Sensory;
 - Symbolic.

2. The Appropriation Process:

- Ideal Appropriation: Divided into cognitive (knowledge, attribution of meaning) and affective (attachment, sense of belonging) registers.
- Material Appropriation: Manifested through action (maintenance, marking, transformation of places).

3. Materials and Methods

This research adopts a qualitative approach based on methodological triangulation (Heale & Forbes, 2013) to capture the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage. The study focuses on a "mixed fragment" of the protected area of the Casbah of Algiers, chosen for its unique historical stratification combining Ottoman and colonial styles. This fragment, bounded by streets such as Rue Amar Ali and Rue Ahmed Bouzrina, offers a typological mix that is representative of the challenges of current rehabilitation.

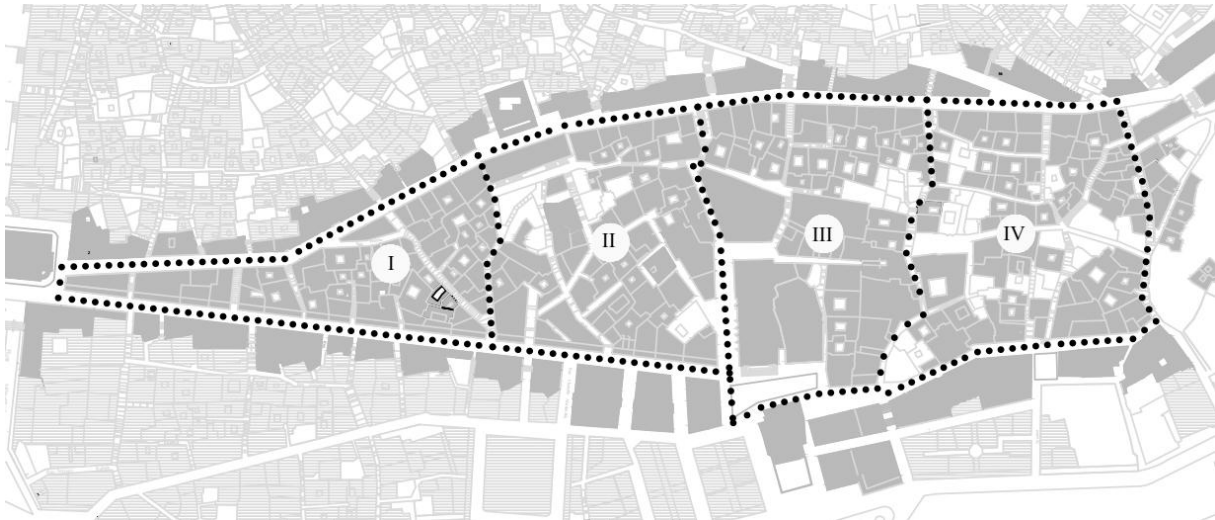


Figure 1. Location of fragments within the study area. Source: Adapted from authors, 2022.

The study is based on a comparison between "expert" and "lay" perspectives. The sample includes 70 heritage management professionals (ANSS, OGEBC, restoration architects) and 28 "long-term" residents (Djedi & Belakehal, 2022). In accordance with residential seniority criteria (Authier, 2007), the residents selected are natives of the Casbah who have lived there for more than 30 years, guaranteeing a deep knowledge of the local environment. The investigation protocol consists of four complementary tools to ensure scientific validity:

- **In situ observation:** Used according to the principles of Moser and Weiss (2003) to characterise physical devices and social practices (formalities).
- **Commented tours:** Defined as the pivotal tool (Thibaud, 2001), these consist of immersing the resident in their environment to gather multisensory discourse in motion. Each tour was recorded in audio and video to preserve a material trace of the experience.
- **Mind maps:** Created immediately after the tour using Lynch's method (1969), they enable the spatialisation of sensory memory and the identification of symbolic landmarks.
- **Photo elicitation:** This discursive reactivation tool (Du & Meyer, 2008) uses photographs taken during the tours to explore cultural meanings and feelings of attachment in greater depth.

Semi-structured interviews: aimed at experts in the field of heritage and managers of rehabilitation operations at the Casbah of Algiers.

The textual corpus derived from the transcripts underwent three levels of analysis:

1. **Lexical analysis:** Assisted by **Tropes V8.5** software, this analysis identified the reference universes and the frequencies of thematic occurrences.
2. **Thematic analysis by coding:** The data were classified according to the four dimensions of ambience (spatial, social, sensory, symbolic) and cross-referenced with indicators of appropriation (Chelkoff, 2001; Ripoll & Veschambre, 2005).
3. **Temporal-discursive analysis:** The assessment of appropriation was supplemented by quantitative indicators, such as the average duration of the journey and the density of discourse produced over a given distance.

4. Results

Lexical analysis of the narratives shows that perceptions of the Casbah are structured by a binary opposition between the origin of elements ("local and imported") and their temporality ("novelty and antiquity"). Participants perceive the urban fabric as a temporal palimpsest where pre-colonial and colonial strata coexist, as demonstrated by the prevalence of these themes in the inhabitants' frame of reference (Figure 2).

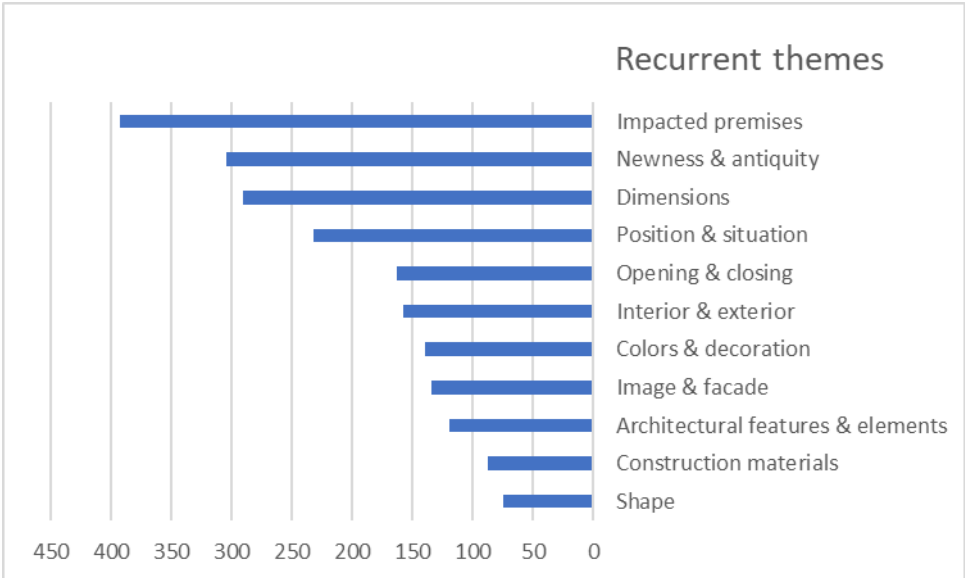


Figure 2. General characterisation of the perception of the study area. Source: Adapted from authors, 2022.

The perception of the built environment is dictated by historical affiliation. Figure 3 highlights the dominance of affiliation with the "old Casbah" at the heart of the fragments, perceived through the authenticity of traditional features. Although the streets are experienced as narrow and dense in the traditional centres, the colonial thoroughfares introduce a morphological break characterised by the width and flatness of the axes.

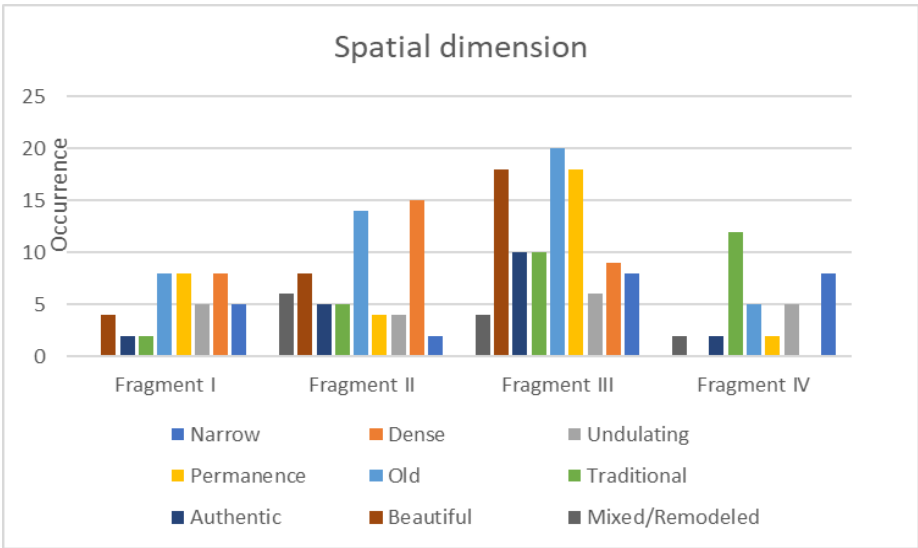


Figure 3. Spatial dimension: . Source: Adapted from authors, 2022.

The social dimension is based on the permanence of rituals (Hammams) and adult gatherings, which are particularly dense in Fragment II (Figure 4). On a sensory level, although sight predominates, the sound and olfactory continuum (spices, coffee, Chaabi music) is essential to the recognition of the place (Figure 5). Finally, the symbolic dimension (Figure 6) is based on a selective memory linked to Ottoman history and accounts of the Battle of Algiers, transforming the physical space into lived heritage.

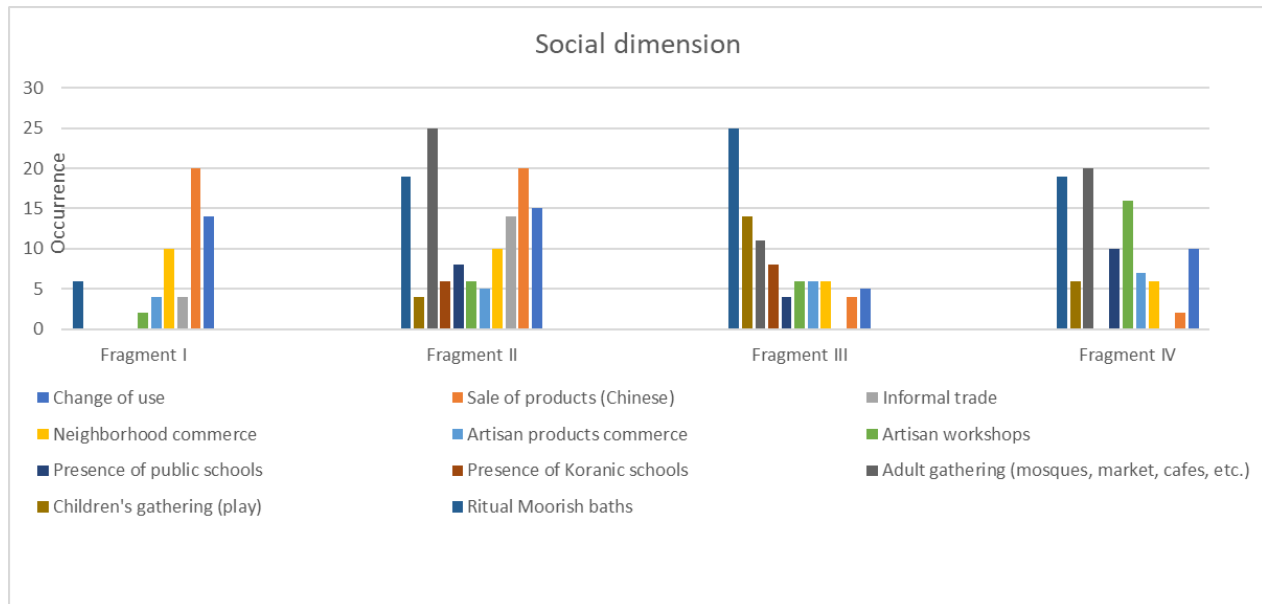


Figure 4. Social dimension. Source: Adapted from authors, 2022.

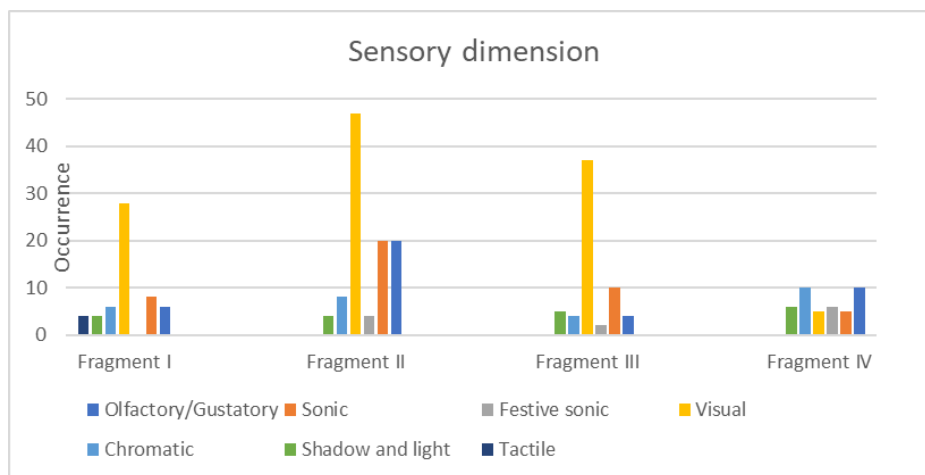


Figure 5. Sensory dimension. Source: Adapted from authors, 2022.

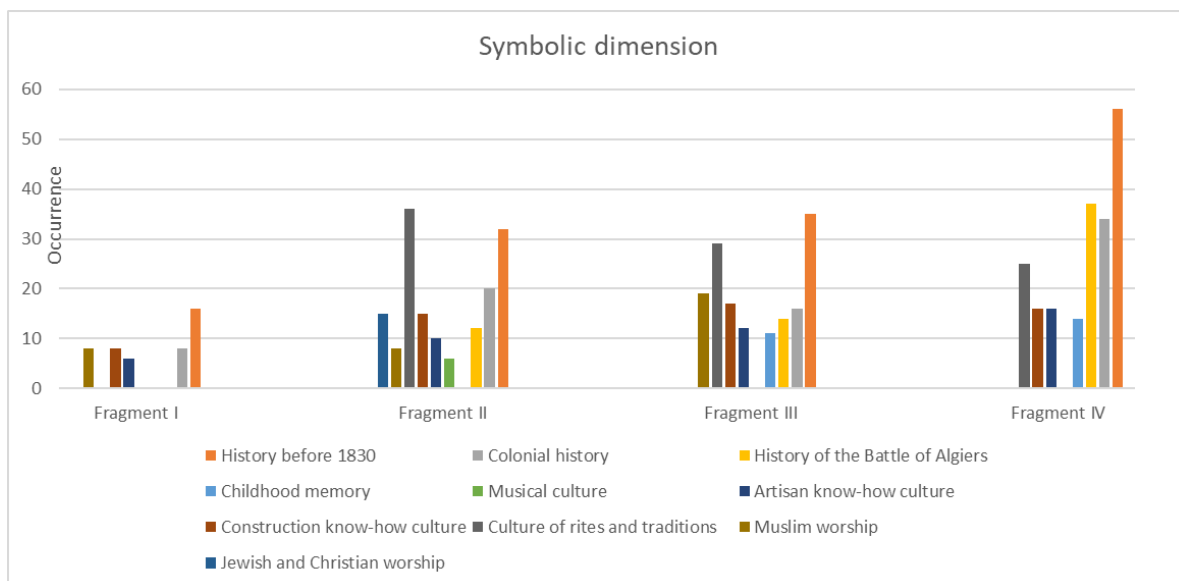


Figure 6. Symbolic dimension: symbolic relationships to the place. Source: Adapted from authors, 2022.

A comparative analysis reveals a major divergence between the actors: for residents, the social and symbolic dimensions take precedence over the spatial dimension. In contrast, professionals favour the spatial (typomorphological) dimension in their priorities for action, relegating the sensory dimension to last place (Figure 7).

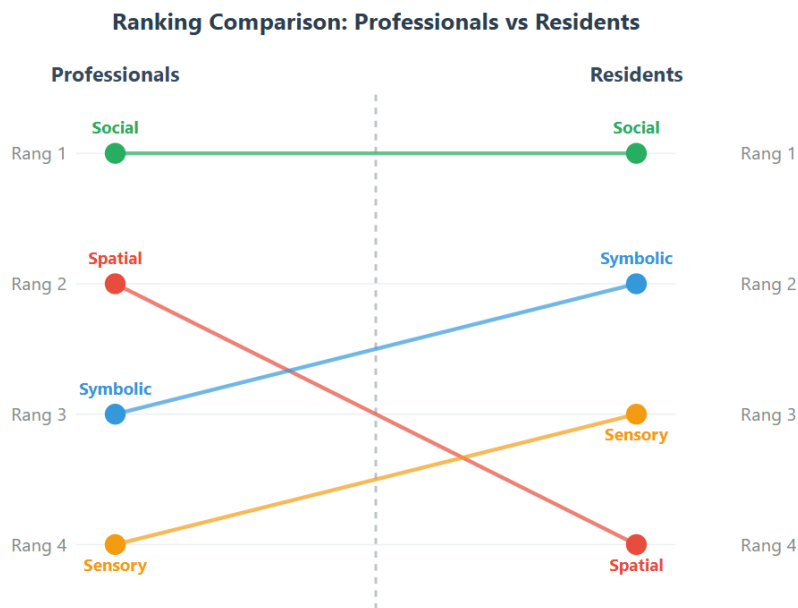


Figure 7. Ranking of the dimensions of heritage environments by residents vs. managers. Source: Authors.

The final assessment of appropriation shows that historical depth (permanence of stratification) and physical integrity are the major drivers of attachment to place. Figure 8 summarises these results spatially by distinguishing areas with high environmental permanence from those with a high degree of transformability, thus providing a control tool for future rehabilitation projects.

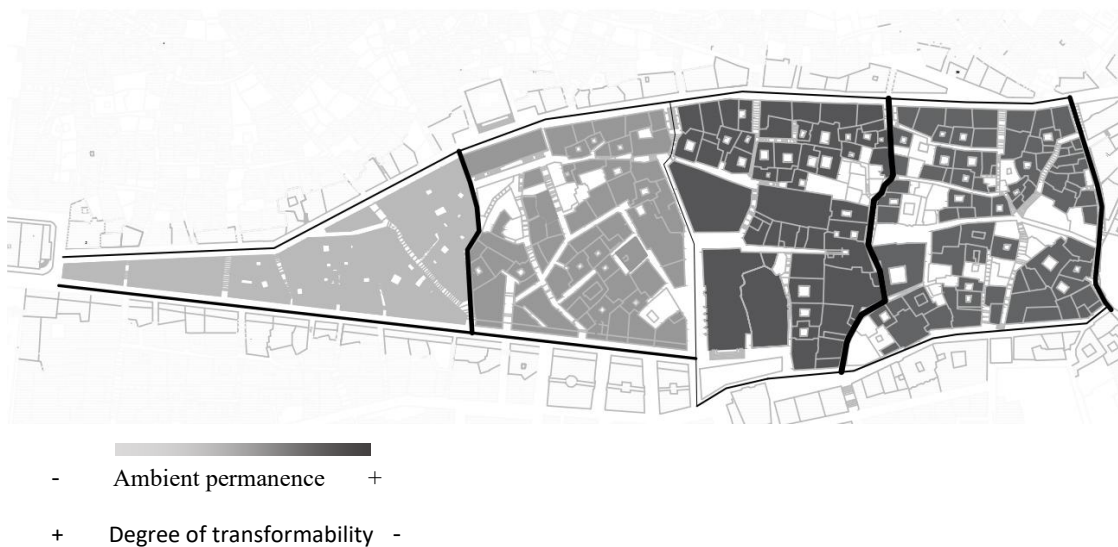


Figure 8. Summary maps of environmental permanence. Source: Djedi, 2023.

5. Discussions

Our results confirm that the perception of the Casbah functions as an environmental palimpsest. The binary identification between "old" and "new" (Figure 2) is consistent with Said's (2014) theses on the stratification of sensitive phenomena. Historical depth (Fragment III) acts as a lever for ideal appropriation, validating the hypothesis that perceived authenticity reinforces attachment to a place. Conversely, physical alteration (ruins, voids) generates disappropriation, corroborating Sidi Boumedine's (2020) observation on the traumatic impact of collapses and prolonged shoring.

The major divergence revealed between residents (priority given to the symbolic/social) and professionals (priority given to the spatial) (Figure 7) perfectly illustrates the conflict described by Rautenberg (2003) between "institutional" and "appropriation-based" heritage preservation. While current instruments such as the PPSMVSS are limited to a typomorphological reading, residents assess the value of their living environment through rituals and social cohesion, confirming the need for "resident expertise" advocated by Amphoux (2004). This gap is directly echoed in Xiao (2026), who shows that multisensory trails designed with community co-validation are an effective tool for bridging expert knowledge and lived experience in heritage contexts.

A novel contribution of our results is the positive appropriation of stylistic diversity (Ottoman/colonial). Contrary to strictly conservative approaches, residents do not reject the colonial layer when it supports commercial or sensory vitality. This phenomenon is in line with the work of Bayart and Bertrand (2006), suggesting that the superimposition of cultures promotes interpretation and rootedness. Ke and Mustafa (2024) lend further support to this finding, as their

work demonstrates that participatory engagement with diverse cultural layers actively reinforces community ownership and heritage meaning-making.

The integration of the symbolic dimension (Figure 5) into the theory of ambiances is a major theoretical contribution. By showing that appropriation is greatest where the memory load (Battle of Algiers) meets physical integrity, we validate the urgency of a structure of permanence for ambiances (Figure 8). This tool would make it possible to move beyond the "sectoral" management denounced by Sidi Boumediene (2020) and achieve truly inclusive rehabilitation. In this perspective, the findings of Chan et al. (2024), who demonstrate that heritage revitalisation reinforces cultural identity and place attachment when collective memory is genuinely integrated, confirm that our atmosphere-based approach constitutes a replicable and socially grounded model for heritage governance.

6. Conclusions

This research has demonstrated that heritage atmospheres are not mere decorations, but lived phenomena that manifest themselves through the appropriation of residents. The study reveals that this appropriation is conditioned by a dynamic interaction between four key dimensions: spatial, social, sensory and symbolic. A major finding is the divide in representations: while professionals favour technical action on the spatial dimension, residents evaluate the heritage value of their living environment through the prism of social ties and symbolic depth.

The study aimed to verify whether heritage management focused exclusively on physical substance led to the loss of the sensitive dimension of the place and the exclusion of users. The results validate this hypothesis by showing that the alteration of spatial integrity (urban voids, ruins) generates immediate disappropriation, while a preserved historical depth acts as a powerful lever for identity attachment.

On a theoretical level, this work contributes to the evolution of ambience theory by formally integrating the symbolic dimension. On a practical level, it proposes a paradigm shift for preservation policies in Algeria: a move from sectoral management to inclusive rehabilitation. The proposed cartographic tool, the "structure of permanence of ambiances", now makes it possible to spatialise residents' feelings in order to guide urban transformation projects.

Although the sample is saturated, the investigation focused on "anchored" inhabitants (long-term residents), leaving aside other users such as tourists or passing traders. Furthermore, due to operational constraints, the study area was reduced to a specific fragment, and the analysis remained essentially qualitative, without incorporating physical measurements (lighting, acoustics) of ambient signals.

It is recommended that this investigation protocol be extended to the entire Casbah area and that other stakeholder profiles be included to provide a more nuanced picture of appropriation. The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) is also recommended for the digital and dynamic spatialisation of sensitive data. Finally, the legislative inclusion of the concept of spirit of place in the PPSMVSS appears to be an urgent necessity in order to harmonise Algerian practice with international standards.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interests

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study involving human participants was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The anonymity of the 70 professionals and 28 residents interviewed was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process.

CRedit Author Statement

Hadjer DJEDI: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Investigation; Formal analysis; Writing – original draft.

Azeddine BELAKEHAL: Supervision; Validation.

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