

# TRACING “ORIENTALISM” THROUGH ARCHITECTURE AND ART DURING THE FRENCH COLONISATION OF ALGERIA

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## **1. Introduction**

Algeria holds a prominent position as one of the key countries in North Africa. Its extensive territory, along with its ethnic and cultural mosaic, has provided fertile ground for the emergence of a diverse urban and architectural heritage. This heritage forms the basis for expressions of identity, serving as a background that vividly illustrates the nation's cultural diversity.

The French colonisation of Algeria (1830-1962) left a significant urban and architectural legacy that characterises most of its present-day cities. Initially, the French established themselves in the territory by creating military installations with fortifications and defensive structures based on the specific features of the traditional urban fabric of each region. Their main goal was to subdue the local population. Thus, over time, many colonial cities and public facilities were developed throughout Algeria [1-3].

During this historical period of colonisation, notable architectural styles emerged, including the “conqueror style” and the “protector style” [1-2, 4]. From 1830 until the end of the 19th century, the conqueror style dominated throughout the Algerian territory and encompassed three primary architectural tendencies: neoclassicism, post-revolution design, and eclecticism. As for the protector style, also known as “Arabisance,” “Jonart’s style,” or “neo-Moorish,” it unfolded during two distinct periods. The first is associated with the construction of official buildings between 1900 and 1930, while the second emerged after the Second World War (1945) [2]. The protector style embodies an Orientalist trend, the adoption of which varies in Algeria depending on factors such as local architecture (including building techniques and materials), the architect's sources

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of inspiration, and external influences. Orientalism is a movement that reflects Western fascination with the Orient [5]. When viewed from a Western standpoint, it refers to a way of looking at and representing the cultures, societies, and histories of the Eastern world, primarily the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. The term gained prominence through the work of Edward W. Said, a Palestinian-American literary theorist, in his influential book "Orientalism," published in 1978 [6]. In Said's analysis, Orientalism is not just an academic field or a set of scholarly practices, it is also a form of Western cultural and intellectual imperialism. He argued that Western scholars, writers, and artists often approached the East with preconceived notions, stereotypes, and biased perspectives, constructing a distorted image of the Orient that served to justify colonial and imperialist agendas.

While the Orient has been a source of inspiration for artists and writers for centuries, it was not until the 19th century that a true infatuation emerged. In the early 20th century, specifically between 1900 and 1930, French Algeria experienced a shift in policy that deviated from seventy years of conqueror-style austerity. This new policy in Algeria aimed to foster a distinct national identity by searching for design references from the Islamic heritage, particularly through the adoption of a regional architectural style that sought to reconcile Western and Eastern elements. Architects incorporated traditional elements and motifs extensively into their designs, resulting in the construction of numerous "modern" buildings across Algeria with an Oriental-inspired aesthetic. These structures, including railway stations, post offices, city halls (Figure 1), churches, and other facilities, responded to evolving needs and introduced new functions that did not exist in traditional heritage [7-9]. This period is significant historically, as it marked the establishment of an Arabising architectural tradition and facilitated an unprecedented fusion of modern programmes with traditional architectural styles, reviving Islamic aesthetic qualities.

The word "aesthetics" is originally Greek and means perception. The science of aesthetics, in the broadest sense of the word, examines the methods of feeling the environment and the position of the individual within it. Aesthetic in architecture refers to the branch of architectural design that prioritises and emphasises a structure's visual and sensory aspects. Thus, the focus extends beyond mere functionality to encompass beauty, harmony, and deliberate consideration of the emotional and perceptual experience of those interacting with the built environment. Historically, the topic of aesthetics has its roots in the art and architecture of different cultures around the world. The aesthetic of each nation has developed in line with its theoretical wisdom, tastes, ideals, and cultural beliefs, reflecting its identity and distinctive ethnic and national traits [10-11]. Therefore, the perception of beauty is a multidimensional phenomenon that can activate observers' internal and external senses, intellect, and intuition. The state of this colonial heritage, which has left a significant mark on today's urban landscape, is alarming. On the one hand, some colonial buildings have been preserved and restored, particularly in major urban centres. Some of them have become public institutions, museums, hotels, or cultural spaces. These buildings are valued for their historical and architectural value and contribute to Algeria's cultural identity.

On the other hand, many colonial buildings are in a poor state of conservation due to neglect, lack of maintenance, and deterioration. Certain buildings have undergone radical transformations that have altered their original appearance. Preserving colonial heritage is a complex challenge because of its controversial history and the feelings associated with colonisation. The Algerian government and heritage associations are working to preserve and restore some of these colonial buildings, but much remains to be done to ensure long-term protection for this architectural heritage and to strike a balance between heritage preservation and contemporary urban development needs.

## 2. Selection of case study, objective, and methodology

To better understand the subject of this paper, the city hall in Biskra city was selected as a case study (Figure 1). This historic edifice was designed in 1896 by the architect André Pierlot of Constantine and built under the supervision of the contractor Auguste Vigliano of Batna, as confirmed by an inscription on the building. With its monumental dome, porticos, arched openings, colonnettes, and wooden balconies, it is an appealing example of neo-Moorish style. Notably, it stands as the most splendid structure in the French colonial city of Biskra [13]. Despite being officially listed on the supplementary inventory<sup>1</sup> for protection and conservation in 2010 and 2023, with each designation spanning ten (10) years, the city hall is now in a lamentable condition. Over time, the building's conservation state has deteriorated, raising concerns about the potential fate of this historically significant structure. Certain distinctive features of the city hall have been transformed or have disappeared, such as the wooden balconies (Figure 2). Unfortunately, the city hall appears to be following a trajectory similar to that of other noteworthy monuments in Biskra city, with the Sahara Hotel standing as a poignant witness. In 2023, the Sahara Hotel was demolished by the local authorities. This significant event prompted a heartfelt and impassioned response from the citizens and civil society associations of the city of Biskra. They expressed their sentiments through an open letter addressed to the President of the Algerian Republic, dated April 4, 2023 (Figure 3). The demolition of this iconic hotel, with its historical and cultural significance<sup>2</sup>, raises questions about the rationale behind such a decision and the broader implications for the preservation of Biskra's architectural heritage. This event is visually documented in Figure 4. Using a historical approach, this article aims to highlight Algeria's significant contribution to the history of architecture by shedding light on a pivotal period: the period of French colonisation. It establishes the connections between Islamic aesthetics and French colonial architecture in order to critique the multiple references to colonial architecture in Algeria.

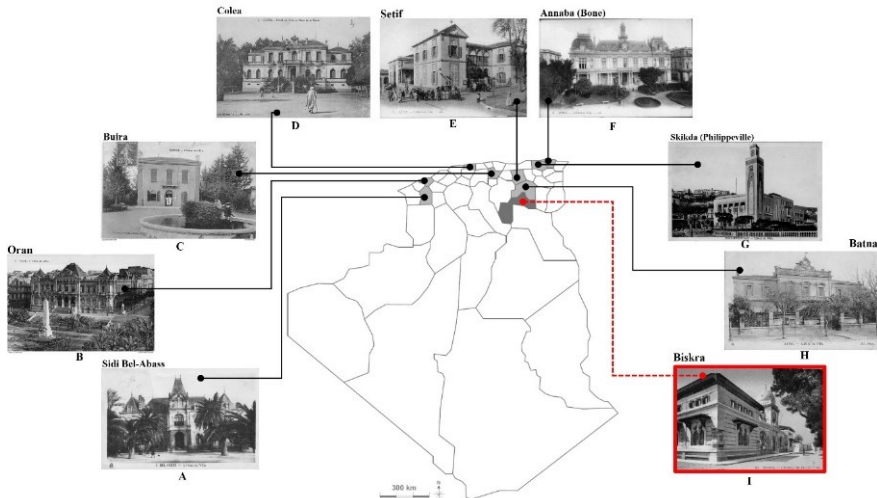


Figure 1. Old postcards of some city halls in Algeria with different colonial styles: A) Bel-Abass; B) Oran; C) Buirra; D) Colea; E) Setif; F) Annaba (Bone); G) Skikda (Philippeville); H) Batna; I) Biskra [12].



Figure 2. The rear façade of Biskra city hall: A) Old postcards showing the wooden balconies [14]; B) Current view showing the transformation of the wooden balconies.

**PUB**

**CITOYENS, ASSOCIATIONS  
DE LA SOCIÉTÉ CIVILE DE LA VILLE DE BISKRA**

**Lettre ouverte à Monsieur le Président de la République:**

Nous avons l'honneur de venir très respectueusement informer votre haute et bienveillante autorité de la tragédie que vivent les habitants de Biskra toutes catégories confondues, citoyens, associations, cultes et représentants de la société civile. Un massacre programmé qui touche divers monuments historiques, civilisationnels et culturels qui remontent de la préhistoire en passant par les différentes époques de notre histoire: peintures rupestres, vestiges phéniciens, grecques, romaines, islamiques, ottomanes etc... dont s'enorgueillit la wilaya de Biskra.

A cet effet nous vous lançons un appel de détresse pour intervenir d'urgence afin de protéger notre identité et notre histoire collective pour mettre fin à la série de démolitions visant l'effacement des témoins matériels et mémoriels de la ville de Biskra en commençant par "l'Hôtel Sahara" monument unique construit en adobe (toub) qui date de l'année 1852 qui était une destination et une résidence pour de nombreuses personnalités politiques, artistiques et littéraires. Malgré l'importance de sa valeur patrimoniale, architecturale et l'expertise technique réalisée en 2009 par des experts spécialisés dans les monuments historiques accrédités par le ministère de la culture et des arts (Professeurs Dali Abou Del Rachida et Dali Aomar) et la requête datée du 07/02/2008 et après autorisation du Wali et de l'OPGI de Biskra en date du 19/10/2008 sous le numéro 2812/2008 qui a conclu que se bâtiment peut-être restauré vu la solidité des fondations et la cohésion de ses murs porteurs malgré les fissures superficielles ne représentant aucun danger pour la sécurité publique. Malheureusement cette expertise et ses conclusions ont été ignorées. Les autorités locales ont décidé de la démolition de ce joyau architectural purement local et algérien en promulguant un arrêté de démolition sous le numéro 441/2023 du 21.03.2023; ce dernier est entaché d'irrégularités flagrantes en violation des lois de la république. Cette opération s'est réalisée d'une manière suspecte mains-militari mettant la société civile devant le fait accompli. Cet arrêté de démolition a été pris suite au rapport établi par le CTC le 02/04/2003, organisme non spécialisé dans les monuments et sites historiques faisant ainsi fi de l'expertise effectuée par les spécialistes mandatés par l'ex wali. De plus la décision de démolition fait référence à la décision à un arrêté en date du 19/11/2022 sous le numéro 1120 qui prévoyait la démolition partielle d'un mur qui menaçait de s'effondrer.

Monsieur le Président, nous appréhendons et nous craignons l'existence d'une intention malveillante selon un plan préalablement établi visant à démolir et à détruire tous les monuments et sites historiques qui abondent dans la wilaya de Biskra et à titre d'exemple:

- \* La gare ferroviaire (un des 5 sites visés par le déclenchement du premier Novembre 1954).
- \* Les «bâtures des jardins du 05 Juillet 1962 (Nname Beïla) et du jardin botanique Landon.
- \* **Le musée siège de la maïtra (monument classé qui est dans état de délabrement avancé).**
- \* La salle Atlas (ex Casino).
- \* Le siège de l'actuelle maison de la culture Rôdha Houhou (ex hôtel Palace).
- \* Le Palais Bengana (ex C.I.N.J).
- \* Le fortin Ottoman sis à Djebel Daliâ.
- \* Les foras Ottomans: celui d'El Ala (regroupement des moudjahadines à la veille du déclenchement du 1er Novembre 1954) et celui de la route de Batna.
- \* Le bain Ottoman situé dans l'école primaire Debache Abdallah.

\* La liste est longue ...  
Ces monuments sont proposés au classement depuis 2021.

Nous craignant toujours le spectre des démolitions surprise de sites mémoriels qui restent surtout après les déclarations de monsieur le wali publiées dans le journal "Al Khabar du 16-02-2023 par lesquelles il a affirmé son intention de démolir l'Hôtel Sahara ce qui a été déjà exécuté.

En outre concernant la résidence (Dar Eddiaf) de l'ex daïra nous avons constaté la disparition d'objets de valeur (boiserie, ferronnerie, ornements, marbre, meubles antiques etc ...) sans que les autorités ne diligente une enquête.

Nous informons votre honorable autorité que ce lieu historique a accueilli les défents Présidents Ben Bella et Houari Boumediene, le colonel Châabani, le général Giap, Che Guevara pour ne citer que ceux-là.

De plus nous vous informons qu'une enveloppe a été débloquée pour la restauration et l'entretien de ce lieu de mémoire par l'ex- wali.

Monsieur le Président nous vous prions d'intervenir en toute urgence pour mettre fin à l'effacement de notre histoire et de diligenter une enquête afin de faire la lumière sur ces graves dérives qui affectent notre patrimoine civilisationnel, historique et culturel et à identifier tous les responsables de ce massacre.

Monsieur le président de la République dans l'attente d'une réponse ferme et énergique, nous vous prions d'accepter l'expression de notre profond respect et de notre haute considération.

L'Est Republicain T031 - 04/04/2023

Figure 3. Open letter addressed to the President of the Algerian Republic regarding the preservation of the heritage of Biskra city. This letter was published in the independent daily newspaper "L'Est Republicain" [15].

Furthermore, the article encourages the local authorities to preserve this building, which attests to one of the styles that have marked the history of architecture in Algeria, specifically in the region of Biskra. The outcome of this endeavour will be an essay that meticulously unravels the heritage value inherent to Biskra city hall.



Figure 4. Demolition of the Sahara Hotel in 2023 [16].

### 3. The neo-Moorish style in Algeria: the revival of Islamic aesthetics

In the early 20th century, the French colonial administration in Algeria launched a series of significant architectural projects to forge a distinctive Algerian cultural and architectural identity through the reinterpretation and valorisation of pre-colonial architectural heritage [8]. French colonial structures integrated elements from Islamic architecture and art, such as minarets, domes, rooftop terraces, poly-lobed or horseshoe arches, intricate stucco decorations, stalactites, and zelliges, albeit in a whimsical and "decontextualised" manner. Inspirations were drawn from various regions including the Maghreb, the Middle East, Cairo, Cordoba, Constantinople, and Jerusalem [17]. Neo-Moorish architecture exhibited a range of forms and variations, from faithful reproductions of Islamic architectural elements to reinterpretations or conceptual recompositions guided by the rationality of refined geometry, which contributed to the first manifestations of Art Deco [18-19].

Initiated in the 1840s, a discourse emerged in Algeria about the need for an architectural approach that resonated with the local cultural ethos and, crucially, the climatic conditions. Figures such as Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) raised concerns over the importation of European architectural models ill-suited to Algeria's environmental context [17]. Even at the official level, there were advocates for "Arab" architecture characterised by features like terraces, patios, and courtyards. The aesthetic inclinations of the colonists reflected a degree of appreciation for this idea. However, it was not until the early 20th century, marked by economic growth and the official adoption of "Arab" architectural elements, that these notions became more widespread. This official endorsement was followed by the issuance of circulars, largely due to the efforts of Charles Jonnart (1857-1927), who aimed to introduce an oriental style to public buildings [17]. In 1905, he established an architectural department tasked with studying, managing, and overseeing the construction processes and restoration of public buildings. The architect Albert Ballu (1849-1939), who had been the chief architect of Historical Monuments in Algeria since 1889, was entrusted with the management of this department. His long-standing role had given him a deep appreciation for the local

heritage. The neo-Moorish style gradually left its imprint on private architecture and eventually became synonymous with the architecture of Algerian cities, often referred to as the "Jonnart style" [20].

Jonnart's policy, much like the subsequent policy of Lyautey, was strongly influenced by practical considerations, especially in response to economic needs. The impetus for the development of tourism and, more crucially, the drive to "revive" local arts, significantly shaped aesthetic policies [17]. In pursuing its new policy objectives, France sought to adopt an image that better suited its protective role (the idea of a protectorate), opting for a "paternalistic stance." The aim was to reflect a France respectful of traditions and capable of reconciling differences in the interests of all [21].

The reinterpretation of the architectural language of previous periods is commonplace in architecture and art history. Over centuries, architectural thinking has consistently oscillated between two distinct trends: consciously revisiting historical styles or deliberately deviating from them to endorse innovative design forms [22]. For example, Bacha [23] reported that in the 19th century, the architect-restorer and theorist Emmanuel Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879), considered Gothic architecture a foundation for modern architectural renewal, particularly for churches. This perspective stemmed from the belief that the Gothic style best suited French customs, climates, and habits. In the 19th-century European context, the local environment and historical influences played a significant role in architectural design. This period was marked by a historicist attitude, resulting in so-called "neo" architectures, such as neo-Romanesque, neo-Gothic, neo-Classical, and neo-Moorish. The prefix "neo" is synonymous with a revival within an ancient order. The term "Moorish" has a longstanding reference in Europe to Muslims from Mauritania to Spain [24]. The neo-Moorish style, thus, represents a revival of the "Moorish" style, which found its way to Algerian territory with the Andalusian influence from Spain. Zerrouki [25] noted that the Moorish style evolved into a "Turco-Moorish" aesthetic under Ottoman rule in Algeria before taking on a new expression following the French colonisation. Western architects like Benjamin Bucknall (1833–1895), Toudoire Denis Marius (1852–1922), Georges Guiauchain (1840–1912), and Albert Ballu (1849–1939) were instrumental in practicing architectural "Arabisation," later identified as neo-Moorish in 1905 and called "arabisations" by François Béguin [21] in his book, *Arabisations: décor architectural et tracé urbain en Afrique du Nord (1830-1950)*, published in 1983. In Algeria, Moorish architecture is the embodiment of an ancestral art that is almost omnipresent in historic cities such as Algiers, Constantine, and Tlemcen, which boast stunning examples of Moorish architecture, including mosques, palaces, and madrasas (Islamic schools). This architecture imbued with a rich history and diverse cultural influences, is distinguished by its unique aesthetic features, skillfully fusing Islamic, Berber, and Andalusian elements. Among the remarkable examples of Moorish architecture is the Great Mosque of Tlemcen.

French colonisation in Algeria stimulated visits by painters by providing a conducive environment for artistic exploration. The increased interest in exotic landscapes, supported by institutional backing and the promotion of colonial tourism, attracted French artists in search of new subjects. Colonial authorities often encouraged these visits by providing subsidies and organising artistic expeditions. Art exhibitions in France also helped generate interest in Algeria by showcasing works inspired by the country. As a result, Algeria became a coveted destination for artists seeking inspiration, thus shaping the visual representation of the country and its culture.

Orientalism played a significant role in the artistic representation of the country by painters. European Orientalist painters often travelled to Algeria to capture its landscapes, inhabitants, and culture, portraying them from an idealised European perspective. Their works helped shape the image of Algeria in the Western imagination, often

glorifying French colonisation and legitimising the colonial enterprise. However, it is worth noting that not all artistic representations of Algeria during colonisation necessarily followed this Orientalist trend; some artists also attempted to capture the everyday reality and cultural diversity of the country with more authenticity and nuance.

In 1886, the Swedish Fritz Ludwig von Dardel (1817-1901) painted the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Tlemcen, depicting its aesthetic and architectural elements in the late 19th century (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Watercolour by Fritz von Dardel, dated 1886, depicting the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Tlemcen, Algeria [26].

Using the watercolour painting technique, von Dardel's artwork captured the intricate details of arched apertures, doors, and ablution fountains, offering an interesting visual testament to Muslim culture, in which ablution remains an important practice. Ablution, known as "*wudu*" in Arabic, typically involves washing the hands, mouth, nose, face, arms, and feet with water in a prescribed manner. It is considered a symbolic cleansing of impurities, both physical and spiritual, in preparation for engaging in acts of worship. Although some architects, like Georges Guichain, critiqued Jonnart's policy, hybrid architectures in 19th-century Algeria predominantly comprised ornamental decor assembled from local references, with no specific logic, as evidenced in many buildings like the Algerian Dispatch (1906) or the Grande Poste (1910) [17] (Figure 6). Architects were at liberty to repurpose elements from the past, irrespective of their original function. This period was marked by eclecticism and historicism in architecture that gradually permeated throughout Algeria [7]. Eclecticism was initially introduced towards the end of the 19th century within the context of French colonisation and was part of the Western fascination with Islamic art, following an Orientalist trend. Hence, the neo-Moorish style is classified among the "historicist styles" and finds favour among Orientalists. It emerged in Algeria towards the late 19th century, reached its zenith in the early 20th century, and saw a decline in the 1930s with the advent of new forms aligned with the modern movement. It is a result of acculturation—a fusion of two cultures and their architectural languages, giving rise to a new stylistic expression.

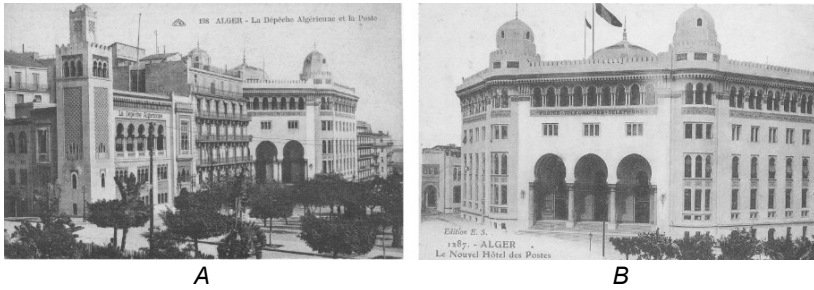


Figure 6. A) Old postcard showing the Algerian Dispatch (in front) and the Grande Poste (in back) [27]; B) Old postcard showing the Grande Poste [28].

#### 4. The neo-Moorish style in Biskra city: some benchmarks

Focusing specifically on the neo-Moorish style in Biskra city, its manifestation seems notably eclectic, drawing inspiration from a diverse array of sources in terms of ideas, style, and taste. This implies that the architectural language adopted was external to the context of Biskra. Indeed, the pre-colonial architecture in this city, whether residential or religious, was devoid of any decorative details and did not extensively use components that, together, shaped the neo-Moorish style. Notably, the traditional religious buildings, of which mosques are the main edifice, were mainly characterised by blind façades dominated by the minaret and the dome covering the mausoleum [9, 29-30]. Consequently, the local architectural language of Biskra was not a major source of inspiration for architects during the colonial period. The city's local minarets and domes seem to be the key elements reinterpreted by Western architects. Many architects involved in designing new projects in Biskra sought inspiration from the northern regions of Algeria, where Moorish architecture was prevalent, which may explain the exogenous stylistic aspect of many colonial buildings in the city.

Delving into old postcards from the French colonial period unveils distinctive characteristics of the neo-Moorish style in Biskra. One of its prominent hallmarks is its commitment to symmetry, creating a visually balanced and harmonious aesthetic. In addition, the neo-Moorish style is marked by the strategic incorporation of key elements, including minarets that punctuate the skyline, domes that add grandeur to the structures, arches that create an engaging visual rhythm, colonnettes contributing to the ornate detailing, and monumental entrances that serve as impressive focal points. This deliberate integration of architectural elements reflects meticulous attention to detail and an effort to evoke the intricate beauty associated with Moorish influences.

Among the most captivating examples exemplifying the neo-Moorish style in Biskra are the Casino-Hotel Palace complex (1893) and the Hammam Es-Salihine (1896-1897). These architectural landmarks were built on the initiative of the Compagnie de Biskra et de l'Oued Righ (CIBOR) [31], a financial power that contributed a lot to the construction of the new commercial and tourist establishments in the city of Biskra before 1900 [32]. Indeed, in the early 1890s, the influx of tourists to Biskra was so great that it necessitated the construction of new establishments to satisfy tourist requirements [33, 34]. The Hammam Es-Salihine (Bath of the Saints) was located 7 km north-west of the French colonial city of Biskra. It was built on thermal springs dating back to Roman times. Unlike the Casino-Palace Hotel complex, this hammam has now disappeared. The Casino-Hotel Palace complex (Figure 7A, B, and C) and Hammam Es-



Salihine (Figure 7D) were designed by the same architect, Albert Ballu, who, according to Encyclopædia Universali [35], was a French architect, and General Inspector of Muslim Buildings in Algeria for over thirty years.

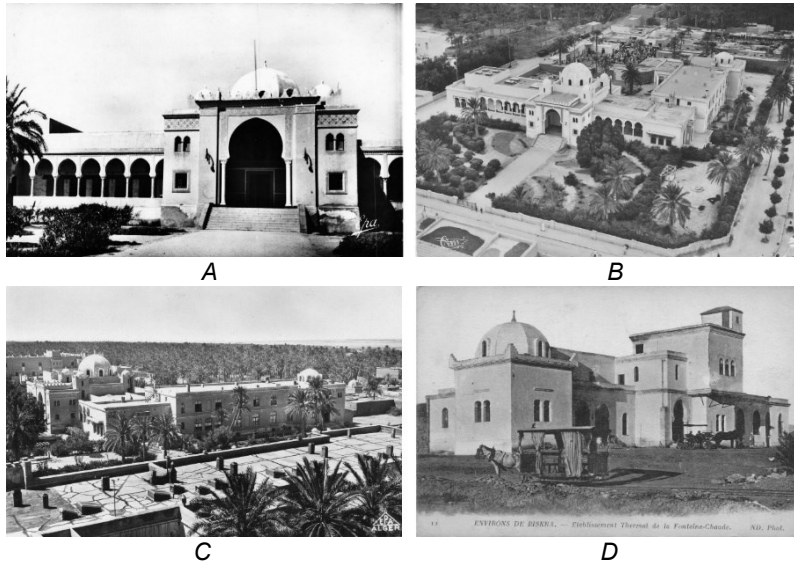


Figure 7. Old postcards showing projects drawn by Albert Ballu in Biskra city: A) the main entrance of the Casino of Biskra [37]; B) view of the Casino of Biskra [38]; C) the Palace Hotel [39]; D) the Hammam Es-Salihine [40].

He also studied the Arab and Roman historical monuments in Algeria. Albert Ballu entered the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1868 and was a student of Auguste Magne and his father, Théodore Ballu (1817-1885). For her part, Oulebsir [36] confirmed that Albert Ballu, whose inspiration from local architecture is one of the hallmarks of his works, adopted a didactic architectural principle to explore and promote local styles. Roger [32] added that around 1890, Ballu visited Biskra, sketching three of its traditional mosques in pencil and studying the ancient door of the Sidi Okba Mosque. The casino of Biskra holds the distinction of being the first casino established in Algeria [31]. Its architecture intentionally incorporates elements such as columns, capitals, doors, and arches, reminiscent of Ottoman Islamic art in Algeria. Albert Ballu drew inspiration from the ornate features found in the palatial structures of the Casbah of Algiers. Examples include the Aziza Palace, Hassan Pacha Palace (Figure 8), Mustapha Pacha Palace, Dar El Hamra, Dar Mami Amaout, and Khdaouedj El Amia. Additionally, Ballu was influenced by the domed architecture of the Ali Bitchine Mosque in designing the Casino. Neo-Moorish architecture often emphasises rhythm in its design, creating a harmonious and balanced composition. The Casino exhibits this principle, contributing to its architectural beauty. Moreover, a journalist reported in *L'Algérie hivernale* (September 25, 1896) that the casino of Biskra was reminiscent of certain parts of the palaces of Ahmed-bey in Constantine, and even the Alhambra in Granada, Spain [32]. In Algeria, alongside the Casino-Hotel Palace complex and Hammam Es-Salihine, Ballu also designed two other significant projects, the Medersa of Constantine (1909) and the railway station of Oran (1913). In addition to the arched openings, the madrasa, like the railway

station, features a monumental dome, a common feature of Ballu's design style in Algeria (Figure 9). The stylistic features of the Casino of Biskra exhibit similarities to Ballu's previous projects in France, such as the Algerian pavilion at the Universal Exhibition in Paris (1889) and also the Algerian pavilion at the Trocadero Palace (1900).

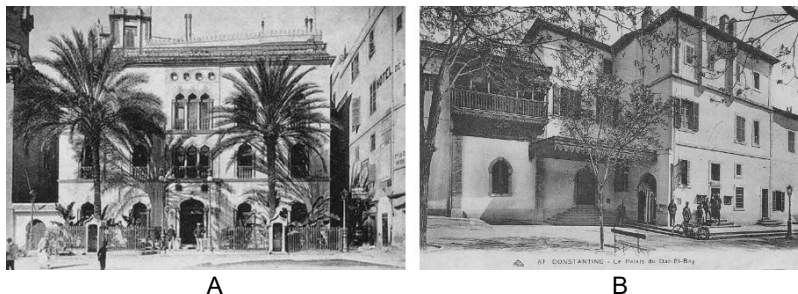


Figure 8. A) Postcard of Hassan Pacha's Palace in Algiers [41]; B) Postcard of Ahmed Bey's Palace in Constantine [42].

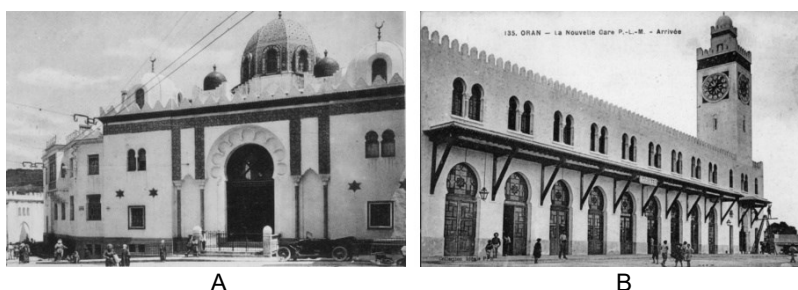


Figure 9. Old postcards showing projects designed by Albert Ballu in Algeria: A) general view of the Madrasa of Constantine [43]; B) the railway station of Oran [44].

The first pavilion was regarded at the time as a pastiche of various famous monuments in Algeria: the minaret of the pavilion was inspired by the Sidi Bou-Medine Mosque in Tlemcen, as well as the Sidi Abd-er-Rahman Mosque and Jamaa al-Jdid (or Pêcherie Mosque) in Algiers. In the same stylistic approach, Ballu designed a Moorish city for the Algerian pavilion at the Universal Exhibition in 1900 [32] (Figures 10 and 11). According to Boufassa [45], a simple comparative observation of these two great exhibition pavilions of 1889 and 1900, reveals a diversity of high architectural elements between towers, minarets, spires, and observatories.

At these exhibitions, the towers and minarets were landmarks and served as panoramic vantage points from which to appreciate the landscape. Recognising the minaret as an emblematic element of the mosque and Islam, it represents a mysterious and distant world for European audiences unfamiliar with the Islamic faith and culture, embodying the broader concept of Orientalism where the East is often viewed as exotic and inscrutable.

As such, the use of the minaret as an architectural element referring to a religious function in a secular building was certainly a source of curiosity for the organisers and visitors of the exhibition.



Figure 10. Views of the Algerian pavilion at the Universal Exhibitions in France: A) exhibition pavilion of 1889 [46]; B) exhibition pavilion of 1900 [47].

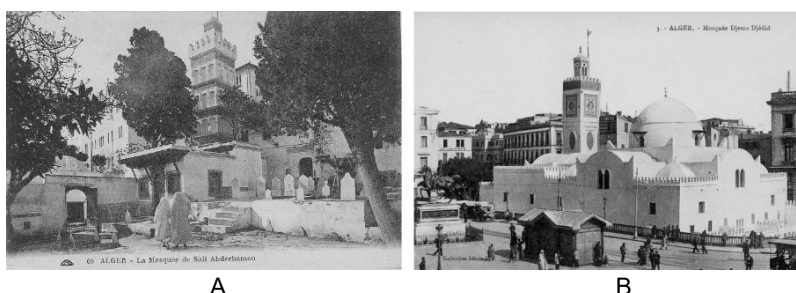


Figure 11. Old postcards showing mosques in Algiers: A) minaret of the Sidi Abd-er-Rahman Mosque [48]; B) Jamaa al-Jdid (or Pêcheurie Mosque) [49].

It is a mixture or confusion between two different antagonist cultures. Furthermore, the perception of the mosque as symbolising the "Otherness" of Islamic civilisation contributes to its allure and perceived inaccessibility for Europeans. It seems that the adoption of the neo-Moorish style predates Governor Charle Jonnart's cultural promotion policy in the early 20th century. This suggests that the inception of what was then called "neo-Moorish" can be traced back to earlier instances, as evidenced by the examples in Biskra. While some scholars, like Béguin [21], attribute its emergence to Jonnart's political decision, others argue that it evolved as a culmination of architectural experiments already underway in the 19th century [45].

## 5. Case study: the city hall in Biskra

The city hall (*Hôtel de ville* in French) occupies an entire urban rectangular-form island in the French colonial city of Biskra. Spanning an area of 1200 square meters, it measures 40 meters in length and 30 meters in width (Figure 12). Locally known as "Baladiat Souyda," meaning "the municipality of the lions," a reference to the statues of two lions on either side of the main entrance of the building.

These statues, reminiscent of the Atlas lions, have been shifted to inside the portico bordering the building's patio (Figure 13). At the beginning of 1879, Jules Béchu, the first mayor of Biskra, requested credits<sup>3</sup> for the construction of a city hall in Biskra.

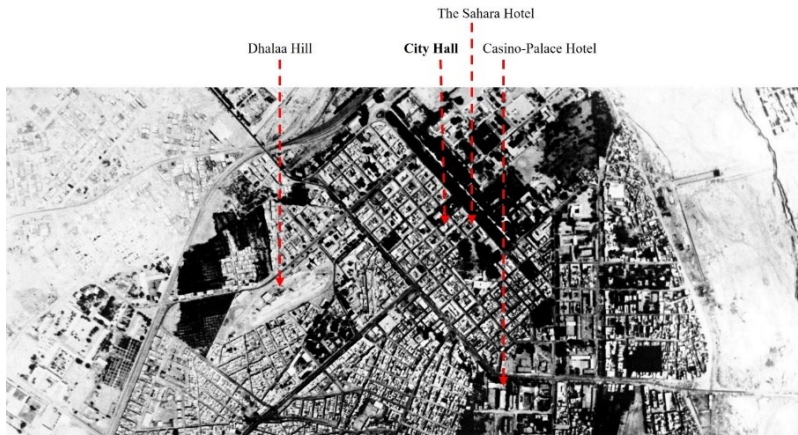


Figure 12. Aerial view taken in 1987 shows the French city of Biskra, and the location of the city hall, the Sahara Hotel, the Casino-Place Hotel complex, and Dhalaa Hill [51].



Figure 13. Old postcard showing the main façade of the city hall in the French city of Biskra. A) Two lion statues on either side of the main entrance [52]; B) After shifting the statues from the main façade [53].

Indeed, in 1896, the city hall in Biskra was erected by the Vigliano company of Batna based on a design by the architect André Pierlot from Constantine [50].

In Algeria, Pierlot was responsible for the design of various public buildings, including Souk Ahras city hall. He received a silver medal for his architectural contributions at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1889. In addition, Pierlot designed the civil hospital of Souk Ahras and the boys' school (*école des garçons*). André Pierlot's architectural style was influenced by the prevailing trends of the time, which often included a fusion of European and Moorish elements.

His designs aimed to merge French architectural traditions with local Algerian influences, resulting in buildings that reflected colonial aspirations while incorporating elements of the local culture and environment. The Musée d'Orsay archives provide invaluable insights into the art history, as well as the cultural and social landscape of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

According to some documents, the city hall of Biskra was the subject of an architectural competition, won by a French architect of Constantine, André Pierlot, who was renowned for his Baroque style [32]. The general design of Biskra's city hall was presented at the tenth Universal Exhibition in Paris, held from 5 May to 31 October 1889,

the theme of which was the French Revolution, to commemorate its centenary. Interestingly, the Eiffel Tower was also erected for this historic exhibition.

In 1893, the British politician Alfred Edward Pease described the city hall in his travelogue "Biskra and the oases and desert of the Zibans with Information for Travellers"; he wrote: "The hôtel de ville [city hall] is an almost extravagantly large and decorated pile. It is built in an exaggerated Eastern style, but the whole appearance of the building, with its court, its arcades, its columns, its façades, the whole surmounted by a great white cupola which rises above the town, and can be seen shining from afar amidst the dark green foliage around, is pleasing and effective.

Two large red marble lions guard each side of the entrance within finely ornamented iron screens and railings." [54].

A brief description of the city hall of Biskra is given below. It highlights its spatial layout and the stylistic features of the façades, which are perfectly representative of the neo-Moorish style (Figure 14).

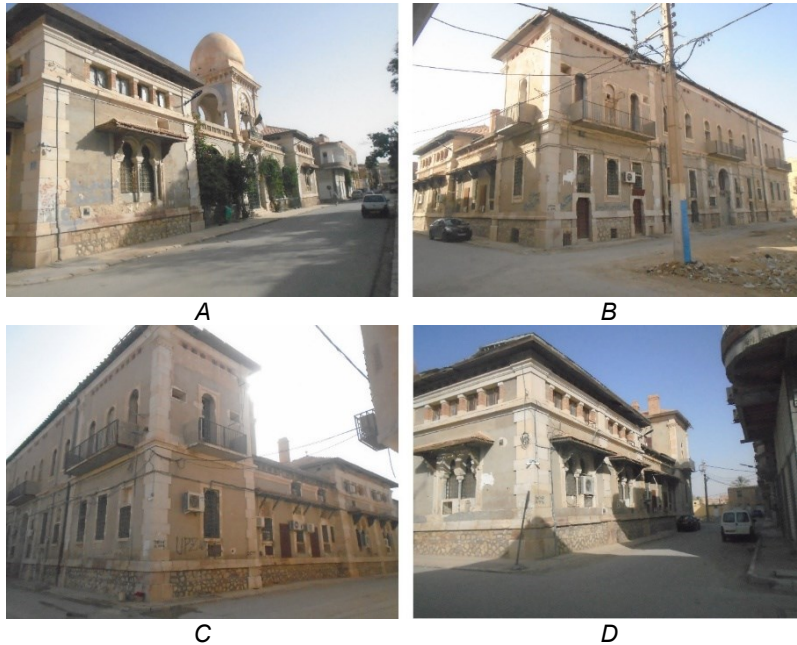


Figure 14. Current views of the city hall in Biskra: A) the main façade; B) the rear façade; C) and D) lateral façades.

### 5.1. Spatial organisation

The spatial layout of the city hall of Biskra was designed differently from the traditional French one, to align with local traditions [55]. It stood as a magnificent structure in a purely oriental style [50].

The city hall consists of two above-ground levels and one underground level. Access to the ground floor is provided through the north façade (the main façade). The entrance features a wrought iron double gate, leading into a spacious portico.

This portico, designed to accommodate up to a thousand people, protruded from the three elevations overlooking the patio and was covered with a sloping tiled roof (Figure 15.A).

The city hall's layout, symmetrical to an axis passing through the main entrance, encompassed three wings: the left wing housed all the administrative services, a council chamber, a security office, a mayor's office, an architect's office, and a registrar's office. In the right wing, there was a courtroom, a clerk's office, an interpreter's office, and a judicial office. The central wing included civil status offices, two archive rooms, and a police station with three offices.

There was also a garage and a service door, accessed from the rear façade. According to a note on the graphic document of this city hall: «Drawing inspiration from Arab style and customs, the architect placed its [referring to the city hall] services around a patio or inner courtyard opening onto all the building's doors [...]»<sup>4</sup> [56]. The underground level at the back of the building contained one cell and two gaols.

The first floor included three flats that shared a common circulation gallery and were reserved for the secretary-general, the architect, and the police commissioner [57]. These flats were directly accessible from the outside through the door on the south facade (rear facade), via a separate stair vestibule on the ground floor. They were also accessible from the door opening onto the patio (Figure 15.A).

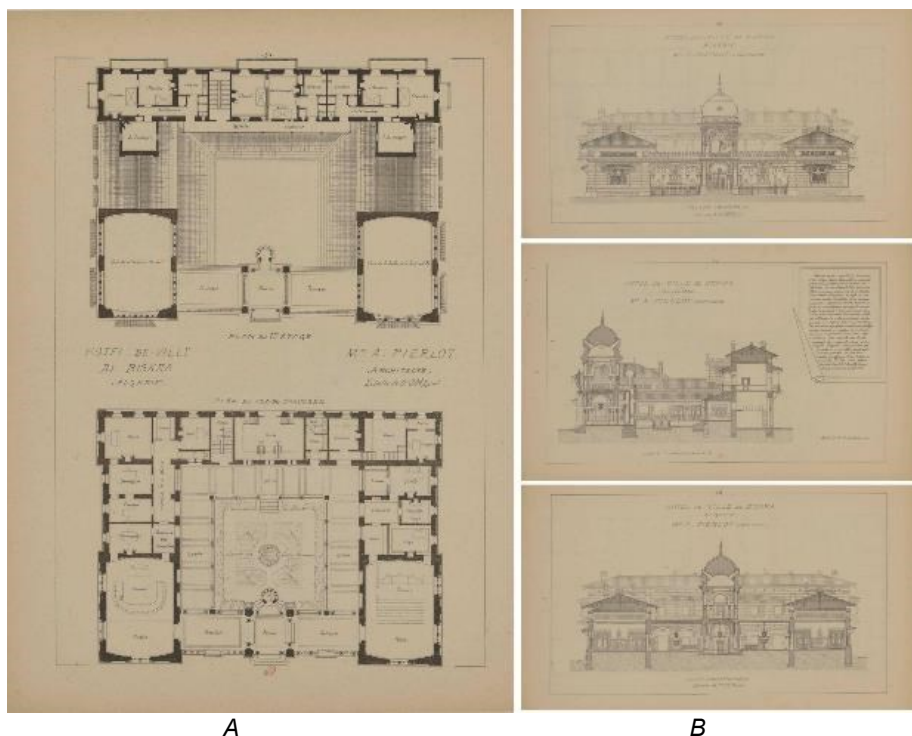


Figure 15. Graphic drawings of the city hall of Biskra: A) plans of the ground and first floor; B) above, the main façade, and below, two sections [56].

## 5.2. Façades and elevations

The position of the city hall, which occupied an entire urban island in the French city, meant it had four façades aligned with the streets (Figure 15.B): a main façade oriented to the north; a rear façade oriented to the south; and two lateral façades oriented to the east and west.

The main and rear façades followed axial symmetry. According to a note in the graphic document specific to this monument: "The external bays are topped by a canopy, while those that light up the main rooms have a covered balcony reminiscent of the Spanish miradors and Arab mouchrabiehs designed to prevent blinding light from penetrating directly into the interior. A very high dome, serving as a campanile, gives the [main] façade a monumental appearance befitting a municipal building."<sup>5</sup> [56].

The campanile is the most remarkable feature of this building.

It takes the form of a 10-meter-high dome with a clock manufactured in Paris. It crowns the main entrance to the city hall, giving it a monumental aspect. A lightning rod attached to the dome extends down to the subterranean level, where it is immersed in the running water of the "segua" (water canal) [50, 57]. Figure 16 shows details of the distinctive elements that compose the façades.

As for the construction of this municipal building, different systems were used. Its foundation is 1.50 metres by 0.8 metres up to ground level. For the superstructure, the contractor Vigliano used dressed stone extracted from Dhalaa Hill (southwest of the French colonial city of Biskra) for the base (Figure 12 and Figure 17). The façades are made of softer white stone extracted from quarries in the village of El-Kantara (52 km from the north of Biskra). The bricks from Batna (116 km from Biskra), and the tiles from Marseille. The first floor is made of adobe (mud bricks). The structural framework is made of timber from northern Algeria.

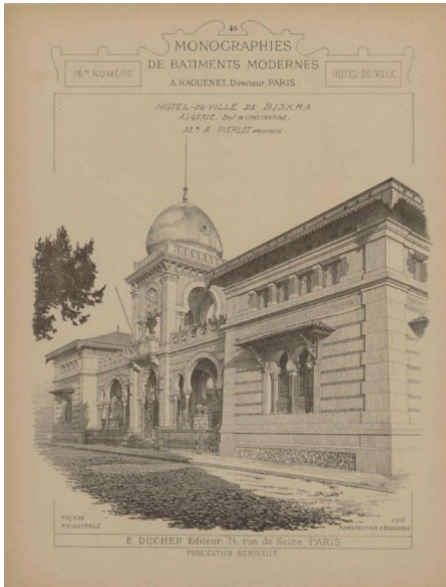
As reinforced concrete was not yet used at that time, iron tie rods were used in the building [50, 57]. The city hall has undergone a notable transformation. In the 1930s, restoration efforts were carried out, notably altering the appearance of the portico bordering the patio. This structure, which extended from the façades overlooking the patio, saw its original columns replaced with rectangular pillars. In addition, the sloping tiled roof was replaced with a flat roof, creating a rooftop terrace on the upper floor

## 6. Biskra city hall, a heritage treasure to be safeguarded and conserved

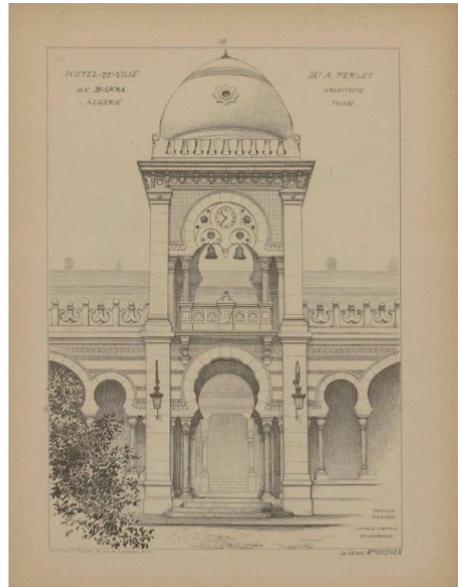
Biskra city hall, built in 1896 by the architect André Pierlot, stands today as a reference displaying a part of the French colonial period in Biskra, and Algeria in general. Far from being a mere administrative building, this building embodies an exceptionally rich architectural heritage, bearing witness to the evolution of styles and the harmonious fusion of Western and Eastern influences.

The city hall stands out for its imposing presence; the architectural elements such as the horseshoe arches, the monumental campanile, the arched openings, and the delicately worked wooden balconies, all contribute to making it a tangible witness to the oriental influence. The city hall has become a work of art in its own right, rooted in the very fabric of the region (Figure 18).

The building's aesthetic appeal echoes a complex and controversial time. As a witness to political, economic, and social change, the city hall of Biskra embodies the changing attitudes and architectural policies of the colonial period. Conserving this structure is crucial to safeguarding a unique heritage for future generations.



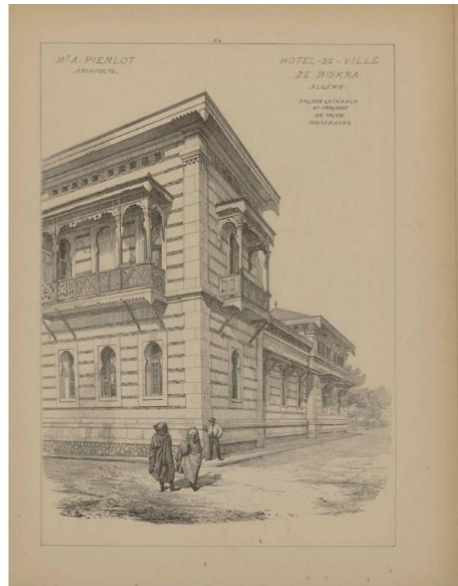
A



B



C



D

Figure 16. Graphic drawings showing details of the distinctive elements of the city hall of Biskra: A) main façade; B) details of the campanile; C) covered vestibule and lion statue; D) the wooden balconies [56].



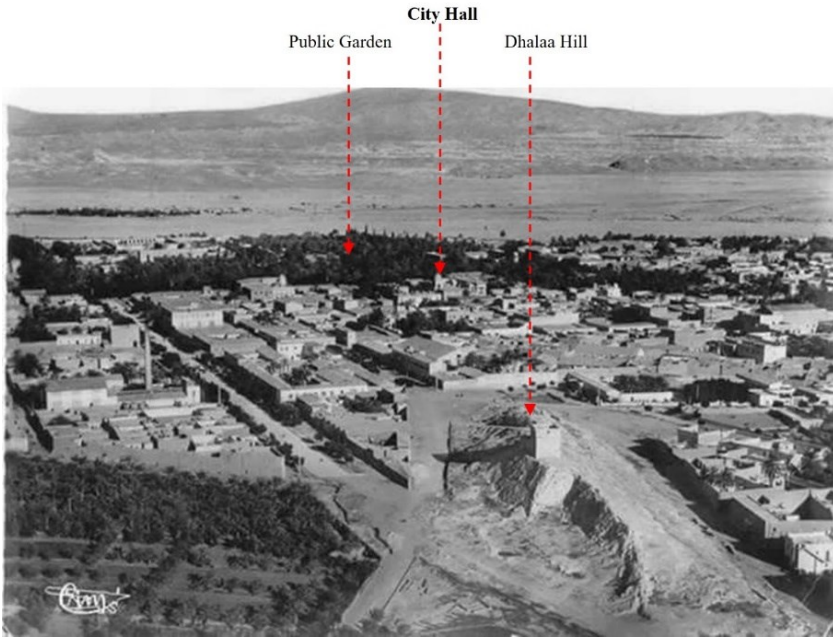


Figure 17. Old postcard showing Dhalaa Hill in Biskra, a source of building materials. In the background, the French colonial city, and the public garden [58].

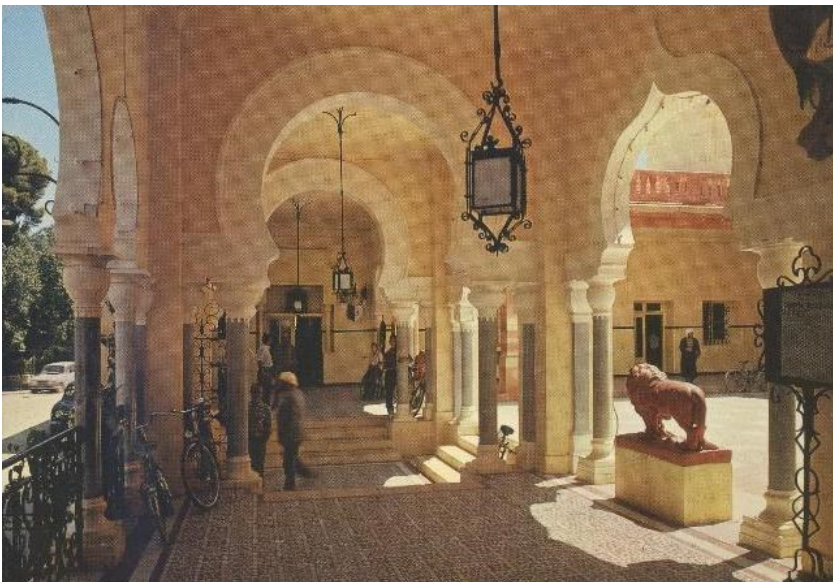


Figure 18. View of the entrance portico of Biskra city hall. On the right, the lion statues after shifting [59].

## 7. Conclusion

This article deals with Orientalism in architecture through the case study of the city hall in Biskra City (Southeastern Algeria). Adopting a historical approach, the findings revealed that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Algeria experienced an important period that marked the country's architectural history. The period was known for revisiting pre-colonial architectural language (often Moorish) to create a new stylistic expression, the neo-Moorish style. This style is classified among "historicist styles" and was appreciated by Orientalists. It takes up the features of Islamic architecture from the Maghreb, the Middle East, Cairo, Cordoba, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. It appeared in Algeria at the end of the 19th century and flourished in the early 20th century, as the result of a phenomenon of acculturation, in which two cultures and two architectural languages merged to produce a novel stylistic expression.

The examination of Biskra's city hall has revealed a distinct oriental aesthetic, characterised by architectural elements that stand apart from the traditional context of Biskra. Notably, the building's design reflects influences from the Moorish style, which was not prevalent in the pre-colonial architecture of Biskra, whether in residential or religious structures. This suggests that Biskra did not serve as a primary inspiration source for Western architects during the colonial period. Instead, the architect of the city hall, André Pierlot, reinterpreted the Moorish architectural heritage found in the northern regions of Algeria. Thus, the stylistic aspect of the town hall seems exogenous to the local context of Biskra.

The neo-Moorish style embodied in this city hall reflects the architectural choices of a colonial past and persists as a significant aspect of the local cultural identity. While Orientalism is often associated with negative stereotypes and biases, not all Western depictions of the East fall into this category. Contemporary scholars have continued to explore and critique the complex interactions between East and West, seeking a more nuanced understanding of cultural exchanges and influences.

The perspective of this article is promising, as it ultimately encourages local authorities to safeguard and preserve the city hall in Biskra, a building that attests to one of the styles that have marked Algeria's architectural history.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Art. 8 and Art. 10 of Law N° 98-04 of 20 Safar 1419 corresponding to June 15, 1998, on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, [Algeria](#), the immovable cultural property includes three (03) categories: 1) historic monuments; 2) archaeological sites; 3) urban or rural complexes. Immovable cultural property, whatever its legal status, may be subject to one of the protection regimes set out according to its nature and the category to which it belongs: 1) inclusion in the supplementary inventory; 2) classification; 3) creation of "protected sectors". Immovable cultural property that does not warrant immediate classification but which is of interest from the point of view of history, archaeology, science, ethnography, anthropology, art, or culture requiring preservation may be entered into the supplementary inventory. Immovable cultural property entered on the supplementary inventory list that is not definitively classified within ten (10) years is removed from the said inventory list. According to this law, the supplementary inventory serves as a temporary protection measure for ten (10) years. Any immovable cultural property listed in this inventory that has not been definitively classified within this timeframe is removed from the supplementary inventory list. To be reinstated, a new application must be prepared per the aforementioned law.

<sup>2</sup> The Sahara Hotel was built shortly after the arrival of the French colonisation in the city of Biskra, where a modern city was created. It was the first and oldest hotel in the city of Biskra and is thought to be the first hotel built in Algeria using adobe (mud brick). For more information on the architecture of the Sahara Hotel, consult: Dali A.I., Belakehal A. (2019). *Style architectural des monuments de l'époque coloniale: cas de l'Hôtel du Sahara à Biskra, Algérie*. In: D. Pittaluga, F. Fratini (eds.), *Conservation and promotion of architectural and landscape heritage of the Mediterranean coastal sites*, Genoa, 20-22 September 2017. Milano: FrancoAngeli s.r.l., pp.1343-1354. Available at: <https://series.francoangeli.it/index.php/oa/catalog/view/437/244/2113> [Accessed: 11/06/2023].

<sup>3</sup> During the French colonisation of Algeria, "credit" typically referred to the system of financial and economic arrangements established by the colonial authorities. This system involved providing financial resources, often in the form of loans or credit lines, to settlers, landowners, and businesses to support agricultural, industrial, and commercial activities in the colony. The allocation of credit was a crucial tool used by the French colonial administration to promote economic development, encourage European settlement, and exploit Algeria's natural resources for the benefit of France. Credit was often extended to European settlers to purchase land, establish farms, develop infrastructures such as roads and railways, and invest in various industries. However, the distribution of credit during this period was often discriminatory, favouring European settlers over the indigenous Algerian population. Indigenous Algerians were often marginalised

and excluded from accessing credit, contributing to their economic disenfranchisement and reinforcing colonial inequalities. For more information, consult: Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press; McDougall, J. (2006). *A History of Algeria*. Cambridge University Press; Ruedy, J. (1992). *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Stora, B. (2004). *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>4</sup> The original quotation in French is as follows: «*S'inspirant du style et des coutumes arabes l'architecte a placé ses services autour d'un patio ou cour intérieure sur lequel ouvrent toutes les portes de l'édifice [...]*».

<sup>5</sup> The original quotation in French is as follows: «*Les baies extérieures sont surmontées d'un auvent, celles qui éclairent les salles principales sont garnies d'un balcon couvert rappelant les miradors espagnols et les moucharabiés arabes destinés à empêcher l'aveuglante lumière de pénétrer directement dans l'intérieur. Une coupole très élevée servant de campanile donne à la façade [principale] l'aspect monumental qui convient à un édifice municipal*».

### Biographical notes

**Sami Zerari** is an architect specialising in the field of cultural heritage. He has a bachelor's degree in "Urbanism and Architecture", and a master's degree in "Urban and Architectural Heritage in the Sahara" from the University of Biskra, Algeria. In 2021, Zerari received his Ph.D. degree in architecture with honours from the same university. He has been admitted to a scholarship for a Ph.D. research course—37th cycle with administration headquarters at the University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", Aversa, Italy, in "Architecture, Industrial Design, and Cultural Heritage". Zerari has published extensively on the aspect of vernacular architecture in Algeria. He was the runner-up of the 2nd Professor Hasan-Uddin Khan Article Award, offered by the International Journal of Islamic Architecture (IJIA). His major research interests include the history of architecture, conservation of cultural heritage, historical building analysis, and cultural studies.

**Alessandra Cirafici** is an architect, Ph.D., and full professor at the University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", Aversa, Italy. She graduated as an architect in 1989 from the University of Naples—Federico II. In 1995, she obtained her Ph.D. degree in "Building Surveying and Representation", and in 1997, she was awarded a scholarship for postgraduate studies at the University of Palermo. Since 2016, Cirafici has been a member of several boards of the Ph.D. programme in Architecture, Design, and Cultural Heritage. Cirafici is currently involved in issues relating to the role of communication in the representation of cultural heritage. Her major research interests include geometry, configuration, and representation of space.

**Haroune Ben Charif** is an architect. He has a bachelor's degree in "Architecture" (2013) and a master's degree in "City and Architecture in the Sahara" (2018) from the University of Biskra, Algeria. In 2019, Ben Charif was admitted to a scholarship for a second master's degree in "European Territories-Heritage and Development" within the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree programme between the University of ELTE in Budapest, Hungary, and the University of Catania, Italy. Ben Charif is currently a Ph.D. candidate in "Architecture, Industrial Design, and Cultural Heritage" at the University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", Aversa, Italy. He is a member of the research group "Knowledge, Valorisation and Digital Communication of Cultural Heritage." His research

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**Leila Sriti** is an architect, Ph.D., and full professor at the University of Biskra, Algeria. From 1992 to 1998, she studied for her bachelor's degree in "Architecture and Urbanism" and her master's degree in "Architecture in Arid and Semi-Arid Environments" from the same University. In 2013, Sriti earned her Ph.D. degree in "Architecture in Arid and Semi-Arid Environments" from the University of Biskra. She is currently working as a full professor at the same university and is a supervisor on many Ph.D. projects. Her major research interests include architectural heritage in southern Algeria (hot and dry climate), energy efficiency in building, climatic adaptability of building envelopes, as well as sustainability strategies.

**Amdjed Islam Dali** is a conservation architect and earthen architecture specialist. He holds a bachelor's degree in "Urbanism and Architecture" (2013), and a master's degree in "Urban and Architectural Heritage in the Sahara" from the University of Biskra, Algeria (2015). In 2018, Amdjed Islam Dali was admitted to a scholarship for a second Master's degree in "European Territories-Heritage and Development" within the Erasmus Mundus Joint master's degree program between the University of ELTE in Budapest, Hungary, the University of Catania, Italy, and the EHESS of Paris, France. He was also a postgraduate from ENSAG in France in 2023 with a degree in "Earthen Architecture, Construction Cultures, and Sustainable Development". Dali is currently a Ph.D. candidate in "Architecture, environment, and heritage", at the University of Biskra. His major research interests include the colonial heritage, including hotels and thermal baths architecture in Biskra, Algeria.

## Summary

The reinterpretation of the architectural language of previous periods is commonplace in architecture and art history. Over the centuries, architectural thinking has consistently oscillated between two distinct trends: consciously revisiting architectural styles or deliberately deviating from them to endorse innovative design forms. In this particular context, the present article delves into the manifestation of the concept of "Orientalism" in both architecture and art during the French colonisation of Algeria, specifically spanning the late 19th century to the early 20th century. This historical period was characterised by a historicist approach, giving rise to what is commonly referred to as the neo-Moorish style. The city hall in Biskra (southeast of Algeria) was selected as a case study for an in-depth exploration of the subject of this article. Through a historical approach, this study has a twofold purpose. Firstly, it aims to highlight Algeria's significant contribution to the history of architecture by revealing one of its most important periods, that of French colonisation. Secondly, it seeks to establish a connection between Islamic aesthetics and French colonial architecture, shedding light on the multiple references to colonial architecture in Algeria.

## Riassunto

L'utilizzo di un linguaggio architettonico ispirato ad esperienze di epoche precedenti è una condizione ricorrente nell'intero arco della storia dell'architettura. Nel corso dei secoli, il pensiero architettonico ha sempre oscillato tra due differenti tendenze: quella



di attingere consapevolmente dalla tradizione o deliberatamente discostarsene per intraprendere inediti percorsi di invenzione progettuale. In questo particolare contesto, l'articolo analizza la manifestazione del concetto di "orientalismo" nell'architettura e nell'arte in Algeria durante la colonizzazione francese, in particolare tra la fine del XIX secolo e l'inizio del XX secolo. Quest'epoca storica è stata caratterizzata da un approccio storicista, che ha dato origine a quello che viene comunemente definito lo stile "neomoresco". Il municipio della città di Biskra (sud-est dell'Algeria) è stato scelto come caso di studio per esplorare approfonditamente questo tema. Questo studio ha un duplice obiettivo indagato attraverso uno approccio essenzialmente storico. In primo luogo, mira a mettere in luce il contributo significativo dell'esperienza algerina nel contesto dell'architettura internazionale, mettendo in luce uno dei suoi periodi più importanti, quello della colonizzazione francese. In secondo luogo, il tentativo è quello di individuare le possibili connessioni e le influenze tra il linguaggio autoctono della cultura islamica e quello dell'architettura coloniale francese, sottolineando gli aspetti evidenti di ispirazione presenti in tutta l'esperienza dell'architettura francese in Algeria.