



« Rabat, a Metropolitan City », Between Displayed Image, Reality of Image and Identity

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Abstract

Embodying for a long time the image of an administrative capital where the functionary dominate, where the urban setting is aging and where quality of life is declining, the city of Rabat has recently embarked on a frantic race to reinvent a new image: a modern, innovative and qualitative image.

In order to achieve this, several projects and programs of development, embellishment and construction, has been initiated with a common feature which is greatness (large theater, high towers, large stations, large arteries, new centralities, etc.). This greatness aspect is visible through the importance of the areas involved, the volumes and the shapes designed, the modes of transport developed, the means and resources deployed in add to the promotion of architectural signatures of the renowned architects, and the modes of governance and project management. Henceforth, Rabat shows its ambition as a city of culture, as a green city and as a “city of light”. The time of Rabat, as administrative city, is over.

However, the image displayed and publicized seems controversial compared to the reality of certain urban spaces, often with high heritage value, that develop on the margins of programs and projects initiated. Real deficits are observed in terms of basic equipment and services, in terms of transport network and in terms of urban coherence and social cohesion. Everything contributes to an urban image with two facets: one more qualitative, more modern and more elitist, while the other is more spontaneous, more vulnerable and more devalued.

Faced with this identity transition and this double temporality, what image and identity do we want for Rabat? What vocations do we claim for this city which aspires to become a national and international metropolis? What developments should be advocated for a capital with such a rich and diversified history? What relationship can be established between the local identity and the global identity of the city? How does the citizen apprehend his living spaces in the face of such universal urban model, where social connections as well as the spatial relationship mutate towards new practices?

These questions will be enlightened through the confrontation of major projects underway and urban realities, through the analysis of the new urban model which is universal, modern and generating a new image and a new urban identity, as well as through the impact of these major projects both on the urban landscape and quality of life. It's with these considerations in mind that this paper is drawn up: « Rabat, a metropolitan city », between displayed image and reality of image and identity.

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Keywords

Metropolisation; Urban Image; Local and Global Identity; Innovation; Urban Deficit; Urban Experience; Perception; Media Coverage; Social Connections.

1. Introduction

Faced with the challenges of national and global competitiveness guided by the neoliberalism issues, cities must assert themselves considering a context in which the trend toward metropolisation requires rapid and efficient economic development, a development that transforms urban complexes into permanent building sites and initiates a real urban revolution based on new operations.

New urban development strategies and new governance tools are used to serve the need for attractiveness and contemporary issues. Thus, planning principles based on project town planning and imported architectural models are used as way of media coverage attracting foreign investors and potential users.

A real paradigm shift is underway. Cities are deeply remodeled according to a universal urban model that generates a transition in the image of the city and in its identity, a model based on an operational planning called in french "urbanisme de projet" wich means an urbanisme based on urban projects instead of the principles of classic urbanism.

Moreover, and under the excessive effect of marketing campaigns, cities are made according to a logic of profitability often neglecting the identity and cultural language that makes their history and justify them but also and especially to depend on areas deemed unfit for development because precarious or without assets.

Moreover, these mutations, although of a physical nature, tend more and more to impact the social bonds as well as the relation of the user to his living spaces. Practices guided by a new perception of the urban environment reflect the advent of a new urban area where the sharing of space tends towards elitism and segregation.

Selected to make the international renown of the Kingdom alongside other cities with strong development potential, such as Casablanca, Tangier or Marrakech and Agadir, the city of Rabat has been trained in a race to reach the standards that will make it the "cultural metropolis" of a Morocco in search of a global and regional positioning.

Thus, by choosing the case of the metropolis of Rabat, this article will be an opportunity to unerstand how this change of vocation from an administrative capital to a capital of culture is happened, to understand the new paradigm that guides the development strategies wich transform the city on a national and international urban showcase and to highlight the impact of the selective new urban model on the urban landscape and the local identity of the city of Rabat in order to better understand the difference between its displayed image and the one that really characterizes it.

We will also try to apprehend the new spatial practices that result from this mode of development and to emphasize the relation that the user maintains with his living spaces in front of an urban model in break with the local context.

A dual spatio-temporal dimension is identified: two urban realities, two perceptions of space and two relationships to space structure the city and shape it.

2. «Rabat, capital of culture», or the manufactured image of a metropolis under construction

Subjetc of a vast development program focused on its seafront and parts of its hinterland, the city of Rabat became since the 2000s a large open-air building site. Having for aim supporting the enlarged regional policy, strengthening the socio-economic and sports structures as well as the road infrastructure, improving the human development indicators and promoting the tourist attractiveness of the region, this program embodies the advent of a new urban era.

From an administrative capital to a cultural one, all the efforts are invested to make Rabat a metropolis with international outreach. A new logic of urban planning characterized by universality and based on urban projects deeply impacts the urban structure of the city in add to its urban landscape.

Indeed, this new model draws its references in international concepts reproducing standardized urban forms (marina, Mall, technopoles, towers, etc.) and makes that the city develops according to a new organization of the territory, based on a multipolarity and on new centralities leading to new mobilities and new connectivities.

New urban landmarks symbolizing contemporary architectural trends, based on scenography and aesthetic research, replace the old ones and shape the image and identity of the city: the tower Moroc Telecom, the new hotel "The

View", the new mall "Rabat city center", the great theater of Zaha Hadid, the national library, the museum of contemporary art, the project of construction of the highest tower of Africa, etc. Many projects are underway and the rhythm of realization is going fast at a time when the country is seeking to position itself internationally.

The development project of the "Bouregreg valley" as well as the new business district "Hay Riad" are emblematic examples in this field. .

Indeed, it was through the development project of the Bouregreg valley, instituted as a major urban issue, that the culture of the urban project was introduced, surpassing the classic approach that the city experienced during its different historical periods, an approach based on planning.



Figure 1 : The Tower Maroc Télécom"-Hay Riad-Rabat

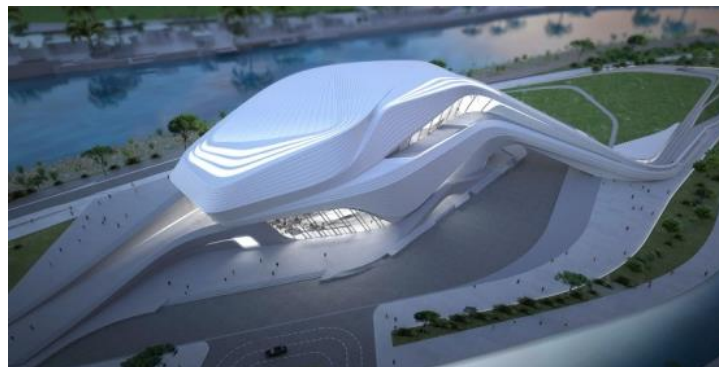


Figure 2: the theater of Zaha Hadid- Valley of Bouregreg - Rabat



Figure 3: The national bibliothèque-Rabat

Consisting of a large number of structuring projects often referred to as "mega projects", the Bouregreg valley was chosen because of its location in the heart of the city - but also on the seafront and along the Oued Bouregreg- and due to the importance of its landscape and heritage assets, in order to reflect the new image of Rabat, an image with strong advertising connotations whose role is to attract potential investors and drain foreign capital especially those from the Gulf countries.

Thus and thanks to colossal expenses, the Bouregreg valley has become more than emblematic, it embodies, since the launch of the urban development program, the new identity of the city as capital of the culture but especially as showcase urban at all scales. To the two former identities (historical center and colonial center) is added a third one which is "hybrid", uniformist and universal.

Also, and on the right bank of the valley, other projects come to be welded to the site as part of the "supposed" integrated development program of Rabat: the construction of the highest tower in Africa, the long-awaited theater of Zaha Hadid, the villa of arts and culture, the new cinema complex, the sculpture gallery, luxury residential complexes, etc. Lot of projects, or rather, architectural signatures, which further support the "marketing" approach Largely inspired by Western countries.

It must be admitted that all these operations benefited from a brand new governance model without which these projects would not have emerged. Indeed, a foreign mastery and a new system of actor enjoying autonomous decision-making were put in place to offer more efficiency and convenience to the realization of the development program of the Valley of the Bouregreg (derogations on an ecologically vulnerable site, expropriations for public utility, relocation of some local populations, etc.).

This new approach was accompanied by the implementation of new tools for framing the action such as autonomous development agencies, development companies, external subcontracting, investment agreements, international consultations, etc. This new approach was an opportunity to introduce new forms of action whose deeply impact the metropolis.

Indeed, it is a two-speed urbanism that marks the frame of the city. Between an operational urbanism that develops at the Valley and the maritime front of the city but also at the business district "Hay Riad" and a classic urbanism based on planing which frames the rest of the metropolis, the city develops in segments without real urban or social links.

The rhythms are different and the results in terms of development are even more so. The fact that the interest but also the efforts and the investments which accompany them are directed towards certain zones of the city without others, ended up creating a kind of social ghettoisation and a disruption of the urban framework (a deficient in transport infrastructure, ineffective relocation operations which stay unsuitable for the target populations, persistent insecurity in some remote areas of the metropolis, etc.).



Figure 4: Youssoufia district-Rabat



Figure 5: The transport problematic in Rabat

The image of a resilient, modern and equitable city whose slogan is "Rabat, City of Light" as a reminder of the vocation (or rather the etiquette) of the capital of culture, becomes controversial in the face of another reality.

3. From the " displayed Image " to the "Reality of the image": an urban paradox to catch

Thinking outside the usual uses, mobilities, residential paths and identity references which is very closely linked to the history of places, this new generation of projects is far from being shared by the entire community and often lacks territorial belonging. Also, the high cost of projects, some of which are non-priority, accentuate the gap that exists between the different neighborhoods of the city where some lack the infrastructure and amenities.

Regression of the identity role of the old centers (medina, colonial center), reconfiguration of the urban landscape according to architectural models lacking contextuality, progressive loss of urbanity and appearance of new relationships to space (multiplication of socially selective spaces), proliferation of unhealthy housing (especially the Youssoufia and Yaakoub Al Mansour districts), transformation of the landscape on the outskirts from rural habitat towards unhealthy social or economic housing (douar Lhajja, industrial district, Takaddoum district, Inbiaat neighborhood, etc.), new opening of new urbanization areas and fragmentation of land (the new area of Akrach, Guiche Oulad Mtaa, etc.), persistence of informal means of transport, the inefficiency of "resettlement" operations that have created more social precariousness, all of which attest to the fact that the back country of the metropolis proliferates on the sidelines of the so-called "integrated" development program of the city of Rabat, a program that in the end only affects areas with high media potential whose developmental assets are undeniable (seafont and banks of the river of Bouregreg, new residential and administrative districts of high standing chosen for co to establish a new urban centrality such as the "Hay Riad" business district, etc.).

A striking paradox between the image we want to give to the city, the controversial image of a modern, resilient and fair Rabat and the image of a Rabat overwhelmed by persistence of sub-integrated neighborhoods thriving there and the precariousness of the informal economic activities that are multiplying.



Figure 6: informal economic activities-marché central-Rabat



Figure 7: informal economic activities-the médina of Bab El Had-Rabat

Thus, and based on the example of the development project of the Bouregreg valley, the development program was done by omitting the role of such an intervention in the development of supra-municipal issues. Its relevance at the scale of the municipality should not compromise the major balances on the scale of the whole city, but rather should ensure urban continuity where intercommunality is essential.

Some questions must therefore be asked: are the new urban development programs carried out in continuity with the existing? Are connettivities taken into account? (public transport, networking, etc.), what is the impact of development projects on the natural area? (landscape, relief, sensitive environments), do these programs and opérations promote a social mix? Is privacy preserved? does the citizen adhere to the programs and transitions they involve or is he simply a spectator? Do projects value built heritage and surrounding natural heritage? what relationship can there be between local identity and fabricated identity? as many fundamental inter-actions that should precede any new development, and this, in favor of solidarity, equitable and balanced living areas.

4. Conclusion

Faced with the challenges of atractivity wich is strongly linked to the issues of compettivity, the image of the city has become a real tool for city branding. The promotion of cities is now done through the creation of advertising slogans assigned to various development programs such as "Rabat: ville lumière" or "Al-Hoceima, Manarat Al Moutawassit". In this sense, strengthening the brand image of the cities often involves urban and architectural projects likely to have a strong influence. So, the import of signatures or global architectural icons strongly contributes to make the city identifiable and attractive.

Thus, this approach of labeling serves to assert the status of the city and strengthen its attractiveness by giving it a vocation (capital of culture such as Rabat, capital of tourism and leisure such as Agadir or Marrakech, economic capital such as Casablanca, etc.).

However, this race for attractiveness can, as in the case of the city of Rabat, generate adverse effects that call into question the image of the city. Indeed, an imbalanced development within the city leads to a strong growth of social inequalities in terms of housing and access to infrastructures and equipment thus inducing perverse effects that affect the quality of life (discomfort, social tensions and insecurity). An unbalanced attractiveness is likely to engender repulsiveness.

Being selective, the attractiveness raises the question of maintaining the balances of the city (between its multiple functions and between its populations) and that of its harmonious development. The image of a city therefore depends on its ability to couple economic opportunities with social life (infrastructure, work, housing, leisure, etc.)

It must be highlighted that the image of the city is strongly linked to the social representations, to identities and to the strength of the feelings of belonging that these generate. A second image is designed by the dweller, other than the

one manufactured. This image refers to the perceptions and aspirations of people, and their belief that the city is likely to satisfy their aspirations. The success of the image of the city therefore depends on its ability to communicate with citizens by mobilizing appropriate cultural registers and highlighting assets that make sense to the public in their urban experience.

Thus, the construction of the image of a city must be characterized by a symbolic aspect based on the highlighting of specific local values, a singular history, the "personality" of the city, its dynamism, its aesthetic qualities but also its potential heritage. The goal is to put the image chosen for the city at the service of an equitable sharing of urban space.

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