

EXPLORING URBAN MORPHOLOGY IN MOROCCO

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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the seminar *Exploring Urban Morphology in Morocco*. An academic event organized by Imane Saidi with the support of Forma Civitatis (The International Journal of Urban and Territorial Morphological Studies) and its editors, Alessandro Camiz, Martin Ebert, and Giorgio Verdiani. It outlines the seminar's objectives and key themes, offers an overview of the research presented, and details the activities undertaken. The report concludes with event outcomes and future perspectives.

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Introduction

The concept for this seminar originated from an analytical investigation of the urban form of Rabat's old town, commonly referred to as a complex labyrinth, which remains largely underexplored in local urban studies. Its intricate layout contrasts sharply with the surrounding urban fabric, highlighting the distinctive nature of the historical town. The seminar was designed to provide valuable insights into the significance of urban morphology in the study of historical towns such as the medina, while also exploring the relationship between these traditional urban forms and the subsequent patterns of urban expansion. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the overall structure of Rabat, as they represent the city's evolution and identity.

The seminar held in Rabat on the 14th of December 2024 featured a lecture followed by a tour of the historic medina, offering academic enrichment and cultural immersion. In introduction, the event began by introducing the global network of urban form, ISUF, the International Seminar on Urban Form, providing context for the broader network of urban morphology, accompanied by an overview of the series *Writing Urban Form: Talks on Islamic Cities*, organized by Alessandro Camiz, Ph.D., at Özyeğin University. This series emphasizes Camiz's role in advancing urban morphology education among students in Africa and the Middle East, particularly in historic towns.

After providing an overview of the general network, the lecture, entitled *From the Medina to Rabat Ville: Evolving Urban Forms*, began by providing an overview of the general urban network before delving into a detailed analysis of the city's growth. It specifically focused on the urban tissue of the medinas and traced its evolution through to Rabat Ville, highlighting key factors that have driven this transformation. Central to the analysis were essential concepts such as nodes, routes, and urban attractors—key elements in understanding



Figure 1. Image from the lecture 'From the Medina to Rabat Ville: Evolving Urban Forms'.

the dynamics of urban growth—explored by Camiz (2018). These concepts provide a framework for analysing the spatial and functional relationships within the city's evolving urban fabric.

Additionally, the role of mosques as pivotal urban elements in Islamic Maghreb towns, crucial for understanding how sacred spaces functioned as buildings with significant influence on urban form (Saidi, 2025). These concepts collectively provide a framework for analysing the spatial and functional relationships that shaped the city's evolving form.

The lecture delivered a brief analytical study that connected the old city with the later urban development designed during the French protectorate, highlighting the importance of urban morphological studies in understanding the old town as part of the larger city. A dedicated session following the seminar emphasized the importance of urban morphological studies for researchers in Morocco, positioning the field as a crucial tool for urban analysis. A prominent issue within the region's architectural discourse is the lack of focus on historical towns from an architectural and urban morphological perspective. The event sought to highlight the value of examining the past to gain a deeper understanding of both the present and the future by encouraging dialogue between researchers, students, and architects from diverse backgrounds engaging in substantive discussions.

Main Themes

Theoretical framework

The analytical investigation of the urban fabric is based upon principles of the Italian School of Urban Morphology, established by Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia. An approach emphasizes the implication of recognizing historical traces within the urban landscape to inform and guide solutions for contemporary architecture and urban planning (Malfroy, 2021). A framework that highlights historical continuity of cities through morphological layer, a significantly crucial tool in dealing with cases of the Maghreb cities.

Colonial urban expansion

The lecture examined the evolution of this coastal city, with particular emphasis on the transition from the fortified towns of Salé and Rabat to the urban expansions orchestrated by French planners. It critically examined the segregation between the "indigenous town"—a term commonly used by French colonial planners to describe the medina—and the French-designed "Ville Nouvelle," characterised by linear

developments (Morestin, 1950). Additionally, the lecture addressed the relationship between form and function within the Islamic medina and how this contrasts with the purpose-driven urban planning implemented during the colonial period.

The medina's urban layout with its focus on privacy, community, and social interactions, underline the rationale of organic urban forms. Its functionality follows principles described by Hakim (2008), where the town follows codes that have been historically developed through communal consensus, focusing on ensuring harmony between built environments, social interactions, and local culture. The irregular urban patterns indicate a history of social, religious, and commercial activity and human interaction, which are essential to understand in order to fully grasp the urban form. Thus, understanding urban growth involves interpreting both the physical structure and the social history of a city, connecting typological analysis and a study of geometric patterns with the social processes that shape urban development (Petrucchioli, 2007).

Conservation challenges

Given the medina's coastal nature and vulnerability to climate change, understanding its functionality and underlying logic becomes crucial for conservation. By understanding these aspects, the study contributes significantly to the broader effort of achieving balance between preserving Rabat's traditional character and accommodating future developments. This balance is becoming increasingly critical, particularly given the medina's central position within a densely populated tourist area, where pressures of modern growth and preservation must be carefully navigated. By the end of the seminar, an interactive session encouraged idea exchange and rethinking of how historical and current urban forms can coexist and inform one another, enriching the broader field of urban morphological studies.

Medina Tour

The medina tour began at Bab El-Had, at the point of the Marché Centrale. Attendees explored the walled town, gaining insights into concepts discussed during the seminar, through navigating the street network and commercial alleys, which define its historic social activity. Principal routes offer prominent views of the intersections with secondary routes and the boundaries of each compact urban block. These primary routes have historically served as the central corridors for commercial activity over the years (Figure 4). As we explored the medina, we paused at significant urban

Figure 2. Image from the Medina Tour at the Starting Point of Marché Central, Rabat.



block boundaries and the intersections of streets, which not only delineate the structure of the urban fabric but also provide rich insights into the various phases of urban growth, as discussed in the lecture and essential for evaluating the city's development. Finally, the tour provided an immersive experience that enhanced understanding of urban growth and deepened their perception of the organic urban fabric, and contributed to an enriching discussion and engagement on the dynamic relationship between built environments and community practices.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The gathering provided profound insights into the link between past and present using the lens of urban morphology. It served as a forum for networking and dialogue that fostered the exchange of research interests and topics. Bringing together a diverse group with a mix of experience levels and disciplines enriched the dialogue and fostered a collaborative atmosphere. Attendees affiliated with various schools locally and internationally have attended the program, including the School of Architecture, Planning and Design at University Mohammed 6 Polytechnique (UM6P), International University of Rabat (UIR), Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM), and L'École Nationale d'Architecture de Rabat (ENA).

Exploring Urban Morphology in Morocco underscores a positive milestone in expanding the network and fostering

Figure 3. Event announcement poster for the seminar *Exploring Urban Morphology in Morocco*. Created by the author, 2024.



communication between local and international scholars. Looking ahead, we hope to focus on cultivating a cohesive urban community in the Maghreb, emphasizing continuous dialogue and knowledge exchange across diverse practices and scholarly topics within the region. This initiative aims to expand connections with researchers from neighbouring countries further. In addition to fostering the growth and sustainability of the network, our objective is to advance the field through collaborative efforts and knowledge exchange in Maghreb countries.

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