

Urban Environment Quality Between Planning Tools and Users' Awareness (Exploratory Study, Case of Biskra City In Algeria)

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ABSTRACT

This present study focused on the role of the user (the citizen) as important actor in urban planning projects. It is nowadays well-established that the user opinion must be taken in consideration in any urban project. In Algeria, our context of study, as well, the urban law gave the citizens through the urban project process the right to participate legally.

This present study wants to evaluate the effective participations of the Algerian citizen into realized urban projects. The city of Biskra was chosen as case study where data were collected through a survey. The results of this study reveal a clear gap between the intended participatory framework of urban planning in Algeria and its practical implementation on the ground. Citizens show limited awareness of urban planning tools and a low sense of engagement in shaping their urban environment.

Keywords: URBAN ENVIRONMENT, USERS, CONSULTATIVE URBANISM, URBAN PLANNING PROCESS, BISKRA CITY

INTRODUCTION

The quality of the urban environment, which is currently a major concern of any urban planner, must be a common product of many scientific disciplines and of different practical and technical fields all contributing at the same time (Dehan, 2022). The interventions of these different specialties are often very overlapping. Among these disciplines that play a role in the creation and in the control of the urban environment quality are; architecture, urban planning, urban ecology, site planning, environmental psychology, various fields of engineering and city management, etc. To effectively combine the contributions of all actors, including the role of civil society and the user, the concept of the "Urban Project" has been developed as an optimal, global and simultaneous solution to the contemporary problems of the city (Berezowski Azzag E. , 2012; Hafidhi, 2022; MOUDJARI & DAHMANI, avril, 2016). In the Algerian context, and after the failure of a whole period of rational-global planning which lasted for two distinct eras - before and after independence - Algeria consequently tried since 1990 to lean towards neoliberal urbanism through the launch of urban planning law "90/29" (Hassani & Belimane, 2022). This failure of functional urban planning (rational-global) has manifested mainly in the poverty of the quality of the resulting urban space being devoid of any cultural and spatial or environmental identity by neglecting the context and urban heritage historically belongs to the Algerian city (Saidouni, 2016). The cited "90/29" law specifies, among other things, the Algerian urban planning tools devoted to this phase of strategic urban development, which are the PDAU and the POS. On the other hand, the problem persists in the achievement of these tools, which should normally be developed in four phases, each of which ends with a public inquiry to concretize the principle of consultation. But, till now and though what the law dictates, we note that the decision-makers throughout the process still always the same and the phases of public consultation -supposed insure the quality of the project- are only carried out in a very formal way (Saidouni, 2016).

Research question

Since the quality of the urban environment is the end result of the successive phases of the project process each of them must legally end with a public survey, how much is the citizen, in the context of Algerian cities, aware about the importance of these procedures?

METHODOLOGY

To give answers to this research question, in the practical part of the study, the city of Biskra was chosen as case study. The field study relied on the questionnaire to collect information.

Before that, in the theory part, we started by giving a definition of what we mean by urban quality and then presenting, in brief, urban planning tools and focusing on the process of the urban operations set by the mean of these tools.

URBAN QUALITY AND USERS NEEDS

According to many authors the concept of quality can be seen and evaluated differently and according to different parameters such as the objectives of the stakeholders in the sector, the culture, the time, the context..., etc (Dehan, 2016; Biau & Lautier, Avril 2004).

For this study, we consider environment quality as the degree of achievement and application of the standards (in terms of utility and aesthetics) which make the urban space meet the satisfaction of the citizen. And in order to realize this objective, the participative urbanism (or consultative urbanism) was developed as concept. It is an approach to urban planning and development that actively involves community members in the decision-making process all with other stockholders. The participation of the citizens and the of the urban project users in the urban planning projects by giving their opinions proved have very positive impact on the quality and, as result, on the user satisfaction (Nez, 2012; Blanco, 2001; Nagpal & Manchanda, 2025).

Consultative urbanism is, actually, well-established in the developed world countries. In France, for example, the consultation of the inhabitants of the urban project area is a primordial phase in which the inhabitant is not only supposed give his opinion but rather must be convinced of the benefits of the project via the consultation process (Belmer, 2011, pp. 131-132, 166-167). In the field of urban design the American urban planner Gary Hack sees that users and public who will be impacted by the planning decisions must have a seat at the table to voice their ideas for the plan and therefore they must be educated about the objectives and the constraints of the project (Hack, 2017).

The Algerian Urban Planning Project Process

In the Algerian urbanism law the Executive Decree n° 177/91 defines the urban planning tools and the steps of their execution.

The formal urban tools

It exists two principal urban planning tools and four Urban Acts (JOURNAL OFFICIEL , 1991). The “PDAU” is an official tool for urban planning and urban management. It determines the basic directions of the urban development of one or many municipalities (communes) concerned (i.e the whole city), taking into account the guidelines of the national, regional and local development plans, and sets references for the “Land uses plan” (POS)

Each “Master plan for urban initialization” is normally split into many “Land use plans”.

The land uses plan defines in detail (within of the directives of the Master plan for urban initialization and urbanism (PDAU)) the rights of land use and construction. It defines among others; zonings, urban forms, organization, building rights and land uses, sizes and types of buildings allowed and their uses, external appearance of buildings, public space, green spaces, and sites designated for public facilities, road layouts and traffic road features... etc

In the Algerian urban law and always aiming to realize and reserve urban quality, the Executive Decree n° 176/91 gives definitions to an urbanisation certificate, a building permit, demolition permit, and subdivision plan which are essential documents in the field of construction and building. A building permit authorizes the construction or modification of an existing building, a demolition permit authorizes the demolition of a building, while a subdivision plan specifies the division of land into smaller plots. And all of them must be elaborated by an approved architect and approved by the technical services of the local authority.

The urban project process in the Algerian law

1- Preparation phase; in that stage the members of the popular assembly (i.e. the elected) should approve the decision of the initiation of the project. Their deliberation should be based on guidelines of the intended territory local development plans. And it must define the way in which public administrations and associations as the representative of civil society participate in preparing the master plan/ land uses plan in order to insure the (required) urban quality

The deliberation is reported to the regionally competent governor and is published for a period of one month at the headquarters of the municipal people's council or the concerned municipal
These procedures concretize the principles of participation and consultation since the early phases of the planning urban projects

2- The consultation phase; before the technique study start at the urban study office (studio), and in order to concretize the principle of participation and consultation and aiming to raise the level and efficiency of these plans (PDAU/ POS) a mechanism of coordination have been established for broad consultation and intensive participation of all actors (stakeholders) including.

Chambers of Commerce, Chambers of Agriculture, professional organizations and local associations are consulted optionally, while the Directorate of Construction, the Directorate of Agriculture, the Directorate of Economic Organization, the Directorate of Irrigation, the Directorate of Transport, the Directorate of Public Works, the Directorate of Posts and Communications, the Directorate of the Environment, the Directorate of Urban Development and the Directorate of Tourism shall be consulted obligatory

3- The technique study phase of the “master plan” at a Design Office passes through three main stages, which are:

The first stage is diagnosing the site current state and setting planning options, and it will be implemented within 5 months.

The second stage includes the setting of preparation and construction rules, which will be implemented within 4 months.

The third stage: concern the preparation of final drawings and report which will also be implemented within one month

4- The public survey; the 177/91 Executive Decree states that before being approved “Master plan”/ “Land uses plan” must be subject to a public survey at duration of 45 days

In the following paragraphs, we will present the results of the field study meant on the participation of the citizens of Biskra to the urban project public surveys

Case Study And Survey

Since 1990s Algeria knew long period of (so-called) “neoliberal urbanism” experience, where many urban projects in the form of “PDAU” and “POS” have been fulfilled all over the different cities of the country. City of Biskra, our case study, was subject of two successive PDAU the first dated since 1994 and the second was approved in 2011. The 2st PDAU divides the whole urban surface of the city into 29 POS that has been elaborated successively since the approbation of the PDAU

Biskra, a city in southeastern Algeria, is located at 34.48° north latitude and 5.44° east longitude (see figure n°1). Historically, it evolved -like any desert city- from a fertile oasis and specifically as a meeting point for ancient trade routes. Its population is about of 279 264 inhabitants, estimated in 2023 (source DPAT Biskra1). 53,7% (149 964) of the population are aged 20 to 75 years old and supposed participate at the public surveys occurring during and after each urban planning process by submitting their opinions.



¹ DPAT; la direction de la planification et l'aménagement du territoire.

Figure 1: Situation of Biskra, source; Google earth image (treated)

In order to assess their effective contribution to the operations, we used questionnaire to collect data from citizens and we make interviews with owners of engineering offices that were assigned to study urban projects and with officials in the municipality.

The questionnaire was posted via Google-form platform. We received 100 valid responses. The questionnaire items cover three principal themes that are; the satisfaction of the respondents towards their urban environment, their awareness of the urban planning tools and if they, even, used to consult architects when they needed to build.

CASE STUDY RESULTS DISCUSSION

Data were collect through field investigations with citizens. We received answers from 47 men and 53 women aged between 17 and 66 years old, 58% of them are employees, and 88% have a university degree (see Table n°1).

Table 1: Participants profile

		Frequency	Percentage
sex	male	47	47.0
	female	53	53.0
function	employee	58	58.0
	daily Worker	5	5.0
	liberal or artisanal function	7	7.0
	Trader	6	6.0
	Student or trainee	14	14.0
	Unemployed	10	10.0
education level	Intermediate level or less	2	2.0
	Secondary level	9	9.0
	University level	55	55.0
	Postgraduate level	33	33.0
	professional training certificate	1	1.0
housing type	individual housing	59	59.0
	collective housing	41	41.0
The residential situation	owned house	72	72.0
	Rented house	14	14.0
	Residing with relatives	12	12.0
	Social housing	1	1.0
	precarious housing	1	1.0
total		100	100.0

We consider this sample, as it includes a large number of educated people, very suitable for assessing the level of awareness of the studied city's citizens regarding urban planning tools and methods.

1- What do citizens know about urban planning tools

Answering to the question about what do they know about the “Master plan for development and urban planning” (PDAU) and the “Land uses plan” (POS), 81% of the respondents said that they do not know what it is (see Table n°2).

Table 2: Frequency table of answers to; Do you know what is land uses plan"POS"?

		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage valide	Percentage cumulative
Valide	yes	18	18.0	18.2	18.2
	no	81	81.0	81.8	100.0
	Total	99	99.0	100.0	

Missing System	1	1.0		
Total	100	100.0		

19% of the participants tried to give different definitions to the “POS” each one according to his/her knowledge. In general, most definitions were very concise and clear as; “It is the plan than give orientations to how buildings must be organised” or “it is a planning of a part of the city”. While only 93% of the respondents affirm that they never participate at any POS or PDAU public survey (see Table n°3).

Table 3: Frequency table of answers to; did you ever participate at a public survey of the PDAU or of a POS ?

		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage valide	Percentage cumulative
Valide	yes	2	2.0	2.1	2.1
	no	93	93.0	96.9	99.0
	do not know	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	96	96.0	100.0	
Missing System	4	4.0			
Total	100	100.0			

These results show that the concept of participated urbanism is not well spread among the citizens, noting that the majority of the participants are high-level educated

While it is supposed that all members of society must be made aware of the importance of citizen participation which is a fundamental principle of urban planning tools in Algeria (Saidouni, 2016).

2- The role of neighbourhoods associations

The second item in questionnaire was about the role of the neighbourhoods associations. We asked the participants if there is a neighbourhoods association in their neighbourhood and if so, do they participate in the committees?. Only 29% of the respondents said that an association exists and only 2 respondents among them say they participate in the meetings (see Table n°4).

Table 4: Pivot table; Is there a neighbourhood association in your district? * if yes, do you participate in the committee meeting?

	if yes, do you participate in the committee meeting?		Total
	yes	no	
Is there a neighbourhood association in your district? yes	2	27	29
no	0	6	6
do not know	0	5	5
Total	2	38	40

The subjects addressed are, according to respondents participate in the meetings, mostly related to social issues.

This result confirms the first one by revealing the weak role played by neighbourhoods associations towards the urban planning. Same results were reached by a study on the role of the community participation to the development process in the Algerian context (Zerouel, 2022).

3- Citizen confidence in the role of the architect

According to the questionnaire answers, 59% of the respondents live in individual housing type (see Table n°1). And among this rate of individual house owners, 39 respondents say they retain an approved “building permit” (see Table n°5).

Table 5: Pivot table, do you live in individual housing type? * do you have a building permit?

	if yes, do you have a building permit?			Total
	yes	no	do not know	
do you live in individual housing or collective housing type?	39	8	11	58
Total	39	10	16	65

While table n°5 shows that only 30 houses fully comply with the building permit, and 6 houses have permits but are built differently. (the 3 remaining said that they do not know if their houses comply with the building permit)

Table 6: Pivot table, if you have a building permit? * if yes, does your house fully comply with the permit?

	if yes, does your house fully comply with the permit?			Total
	yes	no	do not know	
if you have a building permit?	30	6	3	39
	0	1	1	2
	0	0	4	4
Total	30	7	8	45

Also participants were asked whether they made any modifications on their houses during their stay there. A rate of 29% of them answers by yes (see Table n°7). These modifications were very various; it differs from the simple renovations to general restructuration.

Table 7: Frequency table; have you made any changes to your home's construction during your stay?

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage valide	Percentage cumulative
Valide yes	29	29.0	29.0	29.0
no	71	71.0	71.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

We find that while most cited changes are interior, still other some modifications reshape the exterior aspect and even the urban space (see Table n°8). This, in fact, should have been required an architect involvement.

Table 8: Various modifications participants said they made to their houses

Interior simple renovation	Interior spatial restructuration	Building appearance modifications	Exterior (road) modification
Enlarge the rooms	Add a balcony to the kitchen	Change the entrance orientation	add small sidewalk next-door
Change the toilet door orientation	Add balcony to the living-room	Add openings to the facade	Exploring adjacent public space
Renovate the kitchen and the bath	Add new bath-room and a terrace	Modify the facade design	
Enlarge the kitchen	Demolishing a wall separating the kitchen from the house		

A complete restore of the electric and sewage installations	Add a 2 nd floor and modify the garden		
	Transform the living room into a garage		

And in order to assess the extent of the citizen reliance on the architect when it comes to construction operations, we asked them whether they do consult an architect when they apply any modification to their homes.

Table 9: Frequency table; if so, have you consulted an architectural professional?

		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage valide	Percentage cumulative
Valide	yes	11	11.0	37.9	37.9
	no	16	16.0	55.2	93.1
	do not know	1	1.0	3.4	96.6
	do not remember	1	1.0	3.4	100.0
	Total	29	29.0	100.0	
Missing	System	71	71.0		
Total		100	100.0		

37,9 % of participants who made modifications to their homes reported consulting an architect and which we consider a moderate ratio (see Table n°9). The rest made the modifications themselves or under the direction of a builder.

The finding percentages reflect the reality that citizens' reliance on architects is relatively low, whether for building or modifying their homes.

These results reveal that although the law requires obtaining a building permit for each individual and self-built home, there is a percentage of citizens' homes do not have a building permit. And there is a percentage of homes that have a permit but were built in a manner that violates the permit plans.

Besides, the law requires, also, that any modification apply to constructions already having a building permit must happened trough certificate of conformity process and approved by an architect (Kamel, 2016).

In brief we conclude that the citizens' awareness about the formal role of the architect is, as well, not enough.

4 Sense of responsibility towards the environment

Answering to the question if they feel responsible for improving their surrounding urban quality 46% of the participants replied by they do not feel responsible. They justify their answer differently.

Table 10: Frequency table, do you feel somewhat responsible of improving the urban quality of your area?

		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage valide	Percentage cumulative
Valide	yes	54	54.0	54.0	54.0
	no	46	46.0	46.0	100.0
Total		100	100.0	100.0	

Their justification, respectively from the most repeated to the least, are as the following; "Because these are the municipality and the relevant authorities' task, Because it is out of our hands, Because lack of culture of participation among neighbourhood residents, Because it is not ma appropriation..."

While most of the participants (54%) said that they do feel responsible towards the quality of their urban physical environment. This positive attitude was justified in their responses by various reasons such as

“because we belong to our environment, because it is a moral duty, because the outdoor environment is extension to our houses...”

Comparing the reasons citizens gave for their positive and negative attitudes, we find that they are mostly personal reasons. That can be explained by their indifference to their important role as citizens, which is, in itself, due to the lack of community activities. The citizen is supposed to be the objective of each urban planning operation besides to be part of the operation. And that will not be realized without strong associations' work.

5- Actors the participants consider as responsible of physical urban quality

In the same context we asked the participants about who do they think is more responsible for the urban environment quality. We used a multiple responses question, we gave them choices.

Table 11: Who do the participants think is responsible for the quality of the physical urban environment

	residents citizens	municipal city	the urban designer	public works contractors	Constructio ns contractors	the architect	the neighbourho od association	other
N Valide	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moyenne	.73	.63	.44	.42	.38	.37	.36	.13

As first result, the most considered as responsible for the physical urban environment quality of the neighbourhood is the resident (or the citizen) (see table n°3), while the neighbourhood association was given the last rate (36%) considered least responsible. This, in fact, confirms the last finding revealed above. It proves that the citizens, in out context of study, lack the collective thinking and rather think in very individual (and egoist) way i.e. the answers suppose the citizen -as individual- a responsible while they neglect the role of the associations.

Also as result, the respondents gave to the architect a very low rate (36%) and consider him/her the less responsible for the physical urban quality (just before the associations), while in previous study on the role of architects in a deferent context, by interviewing architects themselves, the result was different (Jacobi & Bjørner, 2024). But in an Arabic county context, the study of “Alana” found that the role of the architect can be very effect if the participation of the society is activated as base indicator to be applied. The Author said that it “Depending on participatory approach, architects can easily ... meet community members needs” (Alana, Al-haglab, & Hasan, 2019)

The last choice of the multiple responses question was case of “other”. Some respondents add choices as “all together are responsible”, “urban police” and “administrative control”

The participants by giving these answers, they are describing the reality and not telling what is supposed to be. In fact, these findings do, largely, explain the causes of the actual urban quality of the study context

6- Design office (architect’s) point of view

Through interviews with three owners of engineering offices that were assigned to study urban projects in the city of Biskra, we concluded that urban studies take a purely technical path (Saidouni, 2016). Although we found that the engineers charged of the study have a good level of control over the technical and administrative standards of the project, the social, human and even cultural aspect remains unfulfilled. When we asked whether the architect relies on collecting information from citizens and users and learning about their opinions and desires regarding the urban design process, we found that citizens' opinions are not taken into consideration and that there is no meeting between the office and citizens. An engineer answered that the municipality is the link between the citizen and the engineering office and is the one that conveys the citizen's desires to the office.

While we have seen through the law that the first stage of the technical study is the field analysis stage, which is supposed to be based on a general field survey in which the citizen's opinion must be taken into account.

7- Municipality responsables point of view

Regarding the officials in the municipality Biskra, the biggest obstacles that most of the interviewees agreed upon were the lack of budget, which leads to the inability to meet all needs. On the other hand, the interviewees complained about the overcharge of responsibilities on the municipal services, with little or no coordination between the various directorates and technical services of the local authority. Very similar results were reached by other research in another context where it was proved that the participation approach is very effective unless that the lack of coordination may curbs the process (Fahmi, et al, 2023).

Also, the interviewees explained that the lack of deterrent laws and the absence of executive authorities - that must ensure the prevention of any disruption or transgression towards public areas- make the environment vulnerable to neglect and deterioration. The interviewees involve also the issue of civil society associations and their failure in playing their role in preserving the public area

CONCLUSION

This present study focused on the role of citizen (the user) as important actor in urban planning projects. It is nowadays well-established that the user view and opinion must be taken in consideration in any urban project. In Algeria, our context of study, as well, the urban law gave the citizens through the urban project process the right to participate legally.

This present study wants to evaluate the effective participations of the Algerian citizen to realized urban projects. The city of Biskra was chosen as case study where data were collected through a survey.

The results of this study reveal a clear gap between the intended participatory framework of urban planning in Algeria and its practical implementation on the ground. Citizens show limited awareness of urban planning tools and a low sense of engagement in shaping their urban environment. This detachment is reinforced by the weak role of neighbourhood associations, which are supposed to bridge the gap between the public and urban planning actors. Moreover, citizens demonstrate limited trust in architects and fail to fully recognize their formal role in ensuring compliance with building regulations and contributing to urban quality.

The prevailing attitude among residents remains largely individualistic, with minimal collective responsibility or community involvement especially regarding environmental and physical quality of urban spaces. This is compounded by findings from both the private sector (design offices) and public institutions (municipalities), which indicate that citizens' voices are often excluded from the planning process. Despite legal requirements for participatory field surveys, planning remains a largely technical and administrative process with minimal social input. Municipal officials, for their part, cite budget constraints, overlapping responsibilities, and weak enforcement mechanisms as barriers to effective governance and protection of public space.

Altogether, these findings highlight the urgent need to strengthen citizen participation, empower local associations, and promote a culture of shared urban responsibility, key elements for improving urban quality and fostering truly consultative urbanism.

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