

# Islands of Land and Affect

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As a partner of Slash transition program, L'Art Rue gathered in 2025, its Local Hub, a transdisciplinary work group, to think and analyse the Medina of Tunis as a territory in transition and a potential place for an artistic residency.

# Islands of Land and Affect: A Companion Through Urban Transitions in the Medina of Tunis

A medina is a singular historical urban body filled with subtle traps into which even the most seasoned visitor may stumble. To wander in such space is to risk drifting into a gaze that romanticises or orientalisises the life of those who inhabit it. The visitor's mind can unconsciously be driven into realms where a community's dwellings, joys and struggles are turned into picturesque aesthetic objects. Historical cities can indeed seduce you into nostalgia and superficial appreciation, stripping what is inherently human from its humanity.

Medinas are also profoundly introverted urban forms. They feature all kinds of material and immaterial boundaries separating the public and the private spheres, which makes them hard to approach and understand.

In Tunis, thousands of brightly painted doors steal the streetscape. A visitor could walk through the city for days, encountering the enchanting beauty of its artifices but very little of the life that unfolds behind them. Indeed, the scenery never fails to satisfy the touristic appetite for exoticized images.

This exotism is one of the medina traps. It looks benign, but it may obstruct deeper engagement with the built environment and its inhabitants. It may also sabotage curiosity to understand its systems. It may even stimulate imaginaries of forms of mysterious otherness behind the ornamented screens.

Unescapably, whatever remains unseen is mentally shaped by biases. The proposed note and map aim to serve as introductory companions to navigate the complexities of the Medina of Tunis, a site of striking contrasts and rapid change, and help avoid some of its chuck holes. The Medina spans over 270,000 hectares; it is one of the largest and best-preserved medieval urban sites around the Mediterranean. Its Islamic foundation dates from the 7th century, it was formed as urban life regenerated after the conquest of the neighboring ancient metropolis of Carthage. The city has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979. Today, this historical site, which is over thirteen centuries old, is home to more than 100,000 people, the majority of whom come from lower-income and precarious social categories.

This document uses affect as primary material to understand a place. There is extensive documentation available on the history of the Medina and its monuments; but there is little (translated) literature on how the site is emotionally and sensorially lived and perceived. This text does not aspire to be holistic or synthetic; instead, it brings together a number of subjective impressions about changes -positive and negative- occurring in specific places in the city.

The aim of this approach is to provide clues to ease the initial encounter between an artist and a city, helping them strip their first gaze from all sorts of preconceptions and other distractive biases. This is an invitation to see more, to look beyond the obvious and the expected, and to learn about a city from those who love it.

# On Mapping Subjectivities through a Sensory Exploration of the Medina

This text and the map that illustrates it were produced without knowing the artist who would use them. The exercise consisted in creating a visual and mental capsule to help any artist who works with sound and the built environment decipher some of the urban codes they encounter as they take their first steps in the vertiginous historical center.

To create the map, we have asked six individuals who have strong connections to the Medina to tell us about the places of significant emotional value to them, and that they believe are most affected by urban transitions. The people we asked are: Aly (musician, DJ), Alia (musician, singer), Aziz (architect), Jamila (urban planner), Sihem (architect) and Yefa (project manager). Their respective bonds with the city differ in nature but are equal in intensity.

To our surprise, the first working sessions around the medina largely centred on contrasts and dualities. When asked about changes in the city, contributors often described a sense of being torn between contradictory aspects: the visible and the invisible, the public and the private, the mineral and the vegetal, the sacred and the secular, day and night, and between places that have been museified and sites that remain fully alive! Rather than retreating into an analysis of these contrasts – which might have offered a comfortable refuge from the layered complexities of such urban contexts and obscured their many shades of grey – we chose instead to map them, and to represent how these themes are embodied in material places and how they are perceived.

With the places picked, we have compiled an archipelago of urban “islands” emerging from the larger urban “sea” of the Medina. The archipelago forms a perceptual body of places that are meaningful to the individuals who chose them. They recount their sense of belonging to a place, but they also tell their frustration and fear of loss of the place.

This document offers the opportunity to explore the city through six other people’s senses. The proposed archipelago comprises a number of material locations that can be pinpointed on a map. It also evokes a panoply of affects, subjectivities, and sensorial experiences that draw the powerful connection between an individual to these places, and therefore to the land.

## Advice for Use:

The proposed map is not a set itinerary. It features places that can be visited in any order. The projected experience is comparable to reading short stories, rather than a novel. The visitor can start anywhere, visit a place more than once and get lost trying to walk between the islands.

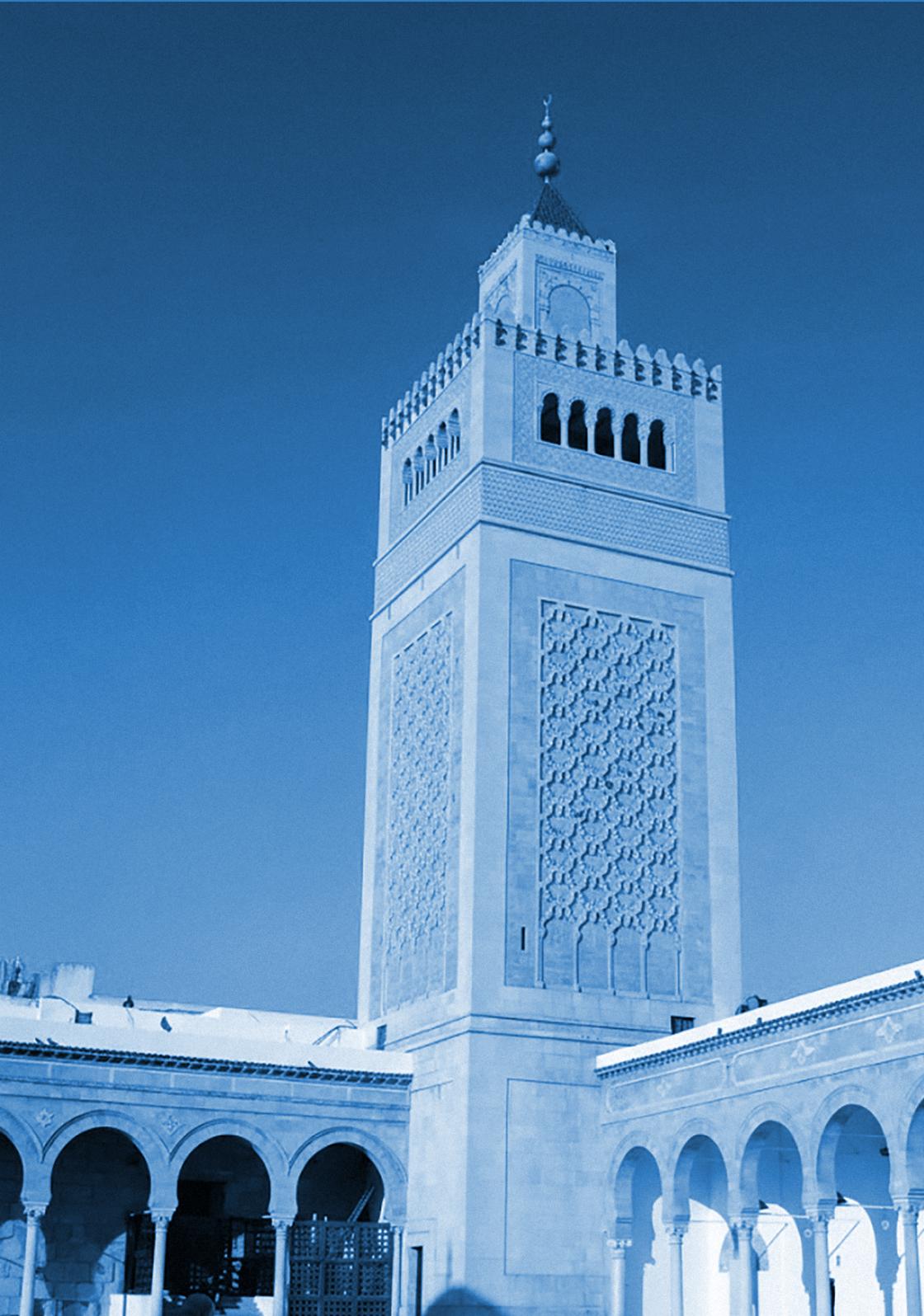
Unsurprisingly, the parts of the archipelago differ in form, function and meaning. Users of this archipelago are invited to take the islands as anchor points as they discover the rest of the urban landscape.

Navigating the medina compares to entering extremely cohesive urban environments, where all typologies may seem similar (houses look like schools, brothels look like barracks, etc.).

The experience is often perceived as an adventure in a maze where visitors get lost, physically,

# The Zaytuna Mosque

## The Beating Heart of the City



The Zaytuna Mosque is most probably as old as the city itself. The medina's urban fabric has been expanding around this urban seed, with no interruption, since the late 7th century, at the very least. For over 1,300 years, the monument has functioned as a major central node: as a sacred place, but also as place of education, justice, and sociability. And through all this time, with no interruption, it has existed as a shared heritage: a beacon of common memory.

The mosque is cast in middle of the dense commercial network of vaulted Suqs. Perfumers, textile makers, embroiderers, wedding items and incense sellers have grafted their shops in the walls of the monument. And around these very walls, in the immediate surroundings of the central mosque, the city knits its commercial fabric: jewelry, Chechia headgears, book markets. And it spans its cultural, intellectual and religious network of madrasas, masjids, hammams, mausoleums...

The place is seemingly untouched by time. The prayer hall dates from the 9th century; the dome overlooking the courtyard dates from the 10th century, the eastern arcade is from the 17th century; the marbles and stones come from dismantled antique buildings of neighboring Roman and Byzantine sites, the minaret is a piece added in the late 19th century...

Grounded and essential, the monument is an emblem of urban continuity and remarkable constancy. And yet, every major historical shift has left its mark; every ruler wanted their

power to be seen in this specific building. The monument has endured political, social, and even natural transformations. It bares additions, traces, and scars from times of prosperity and times of crises. The monument is repository of collective memory, an open book of the city's history: minor alterations leave its pages unmarked, but expansive and the brutal gestures do leave a trace.

Today, the Sahn (courtyard) of the Zaytuna constitutes a vibrant public realm, where people can pray, sit, wander and reflect. Visits take place in the afternoon, between 'Asr and Maghrib prayers; and everyone respecting the "dress code" is welcome.

From the Sahn, the contrast with the surrounding bustling souks and the rest of the urban environment is striking: Entering the mosque's courtyard is like being pulled from the narrow, noisy, crowded markets into a vast, bright, breezy and peaceful place. The sound experience follows recurring rituals: the timed call to prayer, flocks of birds, waves of worshippers coming and leaving, children playing around...

Behind its thick walls, this courtyard creates a sense of disconnection from the sounds of the city; it is as if no motorized engine, no sound amplifying device, or no shouting street seller have ever existed. In the city's womb, peaceful and intact despite all it has endured, time means little. Yet the resilience of such places to time is a quiet reminder of our own finitude as humans, mere transient passersby.

# Sidi Ben Arous Street

## Coffee Shops and Rooftops : A City Reinventing Itself

Sidi Ben Arous Street is a section of the main north-south axis of the Medina. It links the Great Mosque to the northern suburb through a series of small placettes. Having always been mainly commercial and residential, the street is rapidly transforming into a promenade lined with cafés, restaurants, ice-cream shops for tourists and locals alike. The street is emerging as a major attraction for groups who, until recently, would not have considered the Medina a destination for leisure or social gatherings outside the month of Ramadan. Today, throughout the year, visitors of all ages come to sit in the shaded, illuminated street, sip tea or coffee, pose for selfies against the Medina's backdrop... and leave.

Now on Sidi Ben Arous Street and around it, urban life is shifting—transforming the very nature of the built environment and inevitably intruding upon the long-established residential fabric.

The codes that once defined a clear relationship between public and private, between street and courtyard, between the main passage and smaller alleys are dissolving.

Large openings are being carved into the original Makhzens and Sqifas; large display vitrines are “gutting” houses from within; and rooftops converted into cafés and restaurants are opening new views onto the courtyards’ long-guarded privacy. From Sidi Ben Arous to Romdhane Bey Placette, ten coffee shops have appeared in the last

decade: Café Hammouda Pasha which used to be a printing house, has been restored and retained its aesthetic features and the printers’ stamps and other machines; Café Driba is located in what used to be the Dribat al-Daoulatli, a semi-public vaulted corridor leading to the historical courthouse where those who were to be judged the next day would spend the night waiting; Café al-Qubba (“the dome”) was once Turbet al-Khuja, a 18th-century mausoleum. Today, its dome shelters a tea shop rather than a tomb. Along the street, more coffee shops have appeared, bearing names like Yuma Café, Mariouma Queen, Ayyam Zamen, or the Yummy Corner, and post-modern signs with colorful lighting, and massive openings in facades that were originally blind.

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In parallel with the proliferation of cafés, rooftops are appearing here and there, offering seating, restaurants and even DJ parties around swimming pools and presenting a new way to experience the medina.

Fresher in the summer, warmer in the winter, and offering outstanding views over the landscape, the rooftops are becoming the new “product” for a gentrified villegiature Medina experience.



Because it gives a view over the neighbour's courtyard, the roof of a house was once part of the least accessible spaces of the residential urban system. Roofs were only visited occasionally and ritually to be cleaned and whitewashed, to dry couscous, red peppers and other provisions, or – for those who had stairs – to let washing dry.

The emergence of coffee shops and rooftop spaces – often as part of houses transformed into boutique hotel or short-rental guest houses constitutes the fastest and most radical urban change that the city has experienced and will continue to experience in the coming decade.

Spaces that were once hidden in the residential private domain are being redefined and exposed as they gradually transform to take part in the greater transformation affecting the city's commercial and social life. On and around Sidi Ben Arous Street, a quiet yet tense territorial negotiation unfolds between residents and gentrifiers, those who will remain and those who will leave as their homes transform, sometimes by their own personal will, and sometimes pushed away by the irreversible tide of gentrification.

# Sidi Mehrez Mausoleum

## The Medina's "Cour des Miracles"

In the northern reaches of the inner city, near Bab Souika, lies the tomb of Sidi Mehrez Ibn Khalaf, the revered 10th-century figure, venerated as the spiritual guardian of Tunis. The sanctity of his burial site radiates into the surrounding area, establishing a key node that brings together the Zawiya, its annexes, the Mosque of Mhamed Bey, and the Suq of Sidi Mehrez. It even extends to the Hafsia, formerly known as the Hara, which is believed to have been the area designated for the Jewish community by Sidi Mehrez himself.

This area marks the entrance to the Medina's second major north-south axis, linking Bab Souika with Bab al-Jazira. The Suq runs parallel to Sidi Ben Arous Street, the Medina's other principal thoroughfare. Both axes structure trajectories of intense urban activity. Yet unlike the Sidi Ben Arous spine, which has retained much of its continuity, today's Sidi Mehrez Street cuts through districts profoundly reshaped by large-scale demolitions, population displacements, and reconstruction.

Approaching the precincts of Sidi Mehrez, one steps from the city's busiest Suq into a vestibule where every footstep, whisper, and cry reverberates: the Sqifa of Sidi Mehrez. Traditionally, this vaulted alley offered shelter to abused or repudiated women and to others cast to the margins of society. To cross its threshold was to step under the saint's protection. In the Sqifa of Sidi Mehrez, the reach of the police and judiciary power system and patriarchal authority are suspended. Since the 11th century, seasonal celebrations, Eids, weddings and circumcisions have been

held under the brick vaults of the Sqifa. Every Friday, food offerings have been made here for the needy and the visitors. For centuries, pilgrims have come for the water from Sidi Mehrez's wells and his baraka (benediction). For centuries, this Sqifa has also carried the echoes of pain and supplication of those seeking help, voicing complaints, or grief. In the Sqifa, the visitor lingers in a space of passage: between Suq and sanctuary, noise and stillness, exposure and refuge.

The opulent domed structure we see today largely reflects the 19th-century expansions and embellishments of the existing shrine. Beneath this oblong dome, one of the largest domes in the city, visitors sit quietly around the tomb of Sidi Mehrez, praying, or speaking in whispers, words as faint as breath.

All are welcome. What unites those who enter the domed room is neither religion nor dress, but a longing for a moment of nearness to the unseen and the unheard, a chance, even if only for an instant, to approach the "benevolent power of the Saints," pray for healing, salvation, fertility, guidance, or fortune, and leave reassured and comforted. People still come to these corners of the city from far and near, regularly or occasionally, for a variety of reasons: religious belief, a sense of duty, a need for spirituality, tradition, or simply despair.

The shrine and the surrounding city have probably undergone transformations more often than we can imagine. What has not changed, however, is the ancestral need to believe that, under certain domes, miracles can still happen.



Island 4

# Turbet al-Bey

The Beylical Necropolis of the City

Turbet al-Bey is the historic royal burial site of the Husainid dynasty, which ruled Tunisia from 1705 to 1957. Built in the late 18th century, this royal necropolis features a series of domed funeral chambers containing over 165 tombs, including those of 14 beys, their spouses, heirs, and members of their courts.

Recent restorations have sealed the monument's fate as a museological object, fixed for perpetuity.

It has been configured to stand apart from the urban transformations unfolding around it, and remain untouchable, immutable. No change is permitted here: no growth, no reinvention, only stillness, a

curated silence, maintenance, and ticketed visits.

The architecture of this cemetery rivals that of royal residences, displaying some of the city's most refined constructive and ornamental traditions. Without their tombs, the lavish funerary chambers arranged around sunlit, planted courtyards could easily be mistaken for palatial dwellings. Here, memory takes monumental form, vivid and unexpectedly festive.

Visitors wander among gravestones adorned with sculpted Ottoman headgear, turbans and Turbush of various styles, reflecting the status of the deceased in the Beylical court.

The names of notable figures engraved on the headstones reveal the protagonists of well-known dynastic intrigues from the country's history.

This place of still marble and silence is located in a lively neighborhood of artisan workshops and houses undergoing transformation, just a stone's throw from the Suq Sabbaghine. Yet it has endured with a remarkable constancy.

The Turbe survived regime falls, invasions and state campaigns against royalty. Nevertheless, the graves were neither desecrated nor displaced.

Even figures deemed corrupt and malicious have had their resting place left

undisturbed. This site honors the deceased members of the dynasty that ruled Tunisia for three centuries.

The rise and fall of the Husseinids is even visible in the architectural quality of the funerary rooms and gravestones. By preserving the monument, the young Tunisian Republic, which replaced the monarchy in 1957, claimed ownership of the nation's historical narrative.

By appropriating the site, the Tunisian state positioned itself as the main guardian of the past: the one that determines what can be transformed, what should disappear, and what must remain unchanged.

# Bab al-Aqwas

## The Dance and Music Lane

Leaving the Medina for Bab Saadoun at day's end, you head west, following the line of the setting sun. The walk begins at Place Bab Souika, once the epicenter of Tunisia's artistic and intellectual life, and leads toward the Bardo, where the city once opened onto lush orchards and grand palatial estates.

Along the way lies the quarter of Bab al-Aqwas. Despite its name, the Arches' Door is not a gate of either the inner or outer fortifications of the Medina. Rather, it developed as a commercial, and artisanal lane of the northern suburb, lined on both sides with makers and sellers of musical instruments, a vibrant showcase of the musical culture and industry in the city. The Bab al-Aqwas quarter bears the visible scars of modern interventions in the Medina. In the 1980s, the construction of an underground tunnel led to the demolition of the historic Bab Souika. Today, the tunnel stands as a stark rupture in the urban fabric: It separates both sides of the street from each other and cuts off the remaining part of Bab al-Aqwas from Bab Souika. However, as you leave behind the blackened façades of their smiths' workshops lining along the concrete subterranean structure of the tunnel, more joyful vitrines come into view: the musical instruments makers.

Many of their façades are draped with the red, yellow, and black flags of the neighborhood's football team. Here and there, a standing poster appears, bearing a naïve portrait of a fanfare player in a scarlet ceremonial tunic. The street is a panorama of sound and craft: makers of bendir (frame drum), darbouka (earthenware hand drum), and other percussion instruments; brass ensembles for weddings and circumcision ceremonies; and impresario boutiques, sometimes tucked into

barber shops, offer the full spectrum of local musical genres : Musiza or Musiqa Nuhasiyya (brass fanfare), Sulamiyya (devotional chants), 'Isawiyya (Sufi music and dance), Mezwed (bagpipe and percussion groups), Tabbal (winds and drums), 'Awwada (oriental strings ensembles), pop dance and even Stambeli (black Tunisian music)...

The most animated vitrines are those of the brass ensembles, performing Hafala bel Musika, usually at the opening act of celebrations, mostly played outdoors, on the move, following the crowds that escort the celebrated figures: the bride, the groom, or the newly circumcised child. Tunisia's brass tradition traces its roots to military Ottoman music, Muzikat al-Bey. Ironically, this festive heritage was preserved after Independence and redirected to political ends, accompanying the ceremonial functions of party cells, celebrating officials' visits and inaugural events across the country!

However, the most iconic music shops in Bab al-Aqwas are those of the Mezwed players. Legendary figures such as the singer Ismail Hattab and his troupe, folk dancers like Hamadi Laghbabi and the Zina and Aziza sisters, all had boutiques along this street. Clients used to come from all around the country to reserve a performance. Bab al-Aqwas stands at the heart of music production in the northern Rbat suburb where the legacy of the music industry endures in the traces of former concert halls and the Cafishanta -Cafes Chantant-of Bab Souika and Halafouine. The southern suburb also nurtures its own musical milieu of troupes and impresarios of folk and pop music, all established around Bab Jedid and in the Bab Mnara quarters.



The repertoire and instruments are much the same; what sets them apart, however, is allegiance to rival football clubs, along with a few stadium anthems.

In both neighborhoods, these musical clusters seem to struggle to exist in their current form: as small, multi-purposed boutiques. Yet, the very presence of artists and craftsmen making and repairing musical instruments in marginal parts of the city constitutes a bulwark of cultural memory and place-making.



# Halfaouine & the Central Market

## Markets and “Food for Thought”

Of Tunis’s many vibrant markets, two stand out as epitomising the city’s daily life: Halfaouine in northern Rabat and the Marché Central just outside the medina in the 19th-20th century city. Although the two places have different settings and atmospheres, they both offer a postcard-view of the city’s culinary and olfactory landscapes. Halfaouine is intense, crowded, and layered with history. Its narrow market street culminates in a vast planted public placette, dominated by the imposing mosque of Youssef Saheb Ettabaa, the last Ottoman Mosque built in the city built in 1814, which today presides over a sea of informal street vendors. Unvarnished and alive, the market delivers a sensory immersion in the pulse of the medina’s everyday local life. Originally developed in the early 19th century as a lavish new urban center of the medina, Halfaouine integrates a mosque, hammam, madrasa, mausoleum, fondouk, cafes, and even palaces. Later, the French administration also took an interest in the neighborhood, enhancing the public placette as one of the few planted public spaces within the Medina. However, with the reconstruction of Bab Souika and the creation of the ring roads around the Medina, Halfaouine gradually became an urban enclave, transforming over time into one of the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods. The Marché Central, by contrast, was built in 1891 by the established French administration, modeled on the Halles markets of Paris. It resulted from the displacement and expansion of

the original Fondouq alGhalla, the Medina’s traditional food market, relocated from the Bab Bhar quarters to the new city. Today, the market is more orderly than Halfaouine, yet no less dense and vibrant. Stalls, carts and shops overflow with local products: fruits, vegetables, fish, meat, spices, cheeses, herbs, flowers and spices. The full spectrum of what the earth produces and what people consume season after season. The vivid display of colors is matched by the sound of vendors hawking their wares, creating an atmosphere as intense as it is authentic to olives and dates, then citrus fruits, orange blossoms and berries, and melons and watermelons, restarting the same cycle again. Finally, walking through a market offers insight into what is constant or slowchanging in a city: its most rooted culinary practices, how societies develop a gastronomy, how they invent a culture of their own, and how they sustain their bonds with the land.

These markets offer an immersion in people’s everyday lives. They offer a concrete illustration of the local economy’s ebb and flow, a glimpse into their daily routines, and an insight into their financial situation and, ultimately, their overall mood. Change is fast in markets. Fluctuations in the prices and availability of goods affect not only what people can and cannot buy. They also impact their health, energy and their posture while they move through the city streets. Of all the ways to explore a city, a walk through its food markets is probably the best way to understand its transformation: Rapid changes occur as inflation and supply levels vary, impacting the general mood of the streets. Recurrent changes take place seasonally as the dominant colors and aromas of the stalls change as we switch from pomegranates to olives and dates, then citrus fruits, orange blossoms and berries, and melons and watermelons, restarting the same cycle again. Finally, walking through a market offers insight into what is constant or slowchanging in a city: its most rooted culinary practices, how societies develop a gastronomy, how they invent a culture of their own, and how they sustain their bonds with the land.



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"El Msabb" by Atef Maatallah, L'Art Rue, Tunis 2018-2019

The proposed archipelago-map is a constellation of places compiled by individuals witnessing their change and evolution. The archipelago would have looked entirely different had others been asked to compile it, different in both its materiality and meaning.

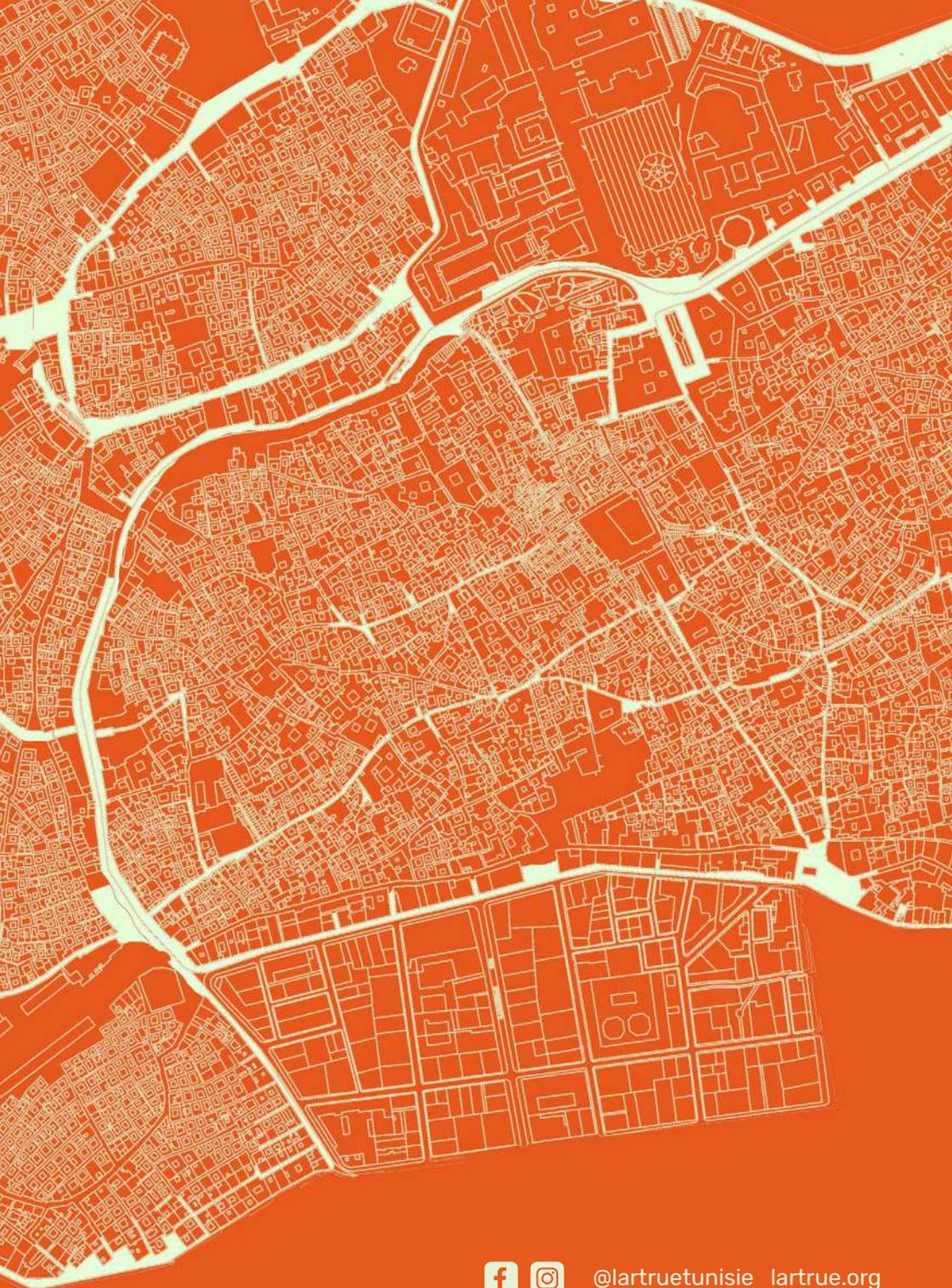
Countless other sites might deserve inclusion in a companion to the Medina: its dozens of sacred spaces, madrasas, suqs, funduqs, hammams, palaces and houses; its singular alleys, hidden gardens, untransformed rooftops, artists' workshops. Yet these are the places our group chose to highlight; the ones they picked when asked to reflect on transitions in their city.

While another version of this archipelago would have undoubtedly featured other places and impressions, what remains constant is a profound bond (that is often forgotten in the panoply of human emotions) that ties people to their cities, to certain landscapes and urban forms: a bond marked by sincerity, empathy, and rootedness.

This bond transcends changes, monumentality or imperfection, beauty or ugliness of the space. It exists beyond the oscillations between disillusion and hope, fear and resilience. Cities are extensions of who we are; they are expressions of their inhabitants' bodies, intellects and affects. They (re)shape us as we (re)shape them. Therefore, our aim is that this project serves as reminder of the strength and importance of that reciprocal relationship between people and their urban landscapes, between communities and the land.

Welcome to the Medina





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