Exploring the Hidden Dimension in the Islamic Architecture: The Medina of Tunis as a Study Case

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ABSTRACT

Over and above any document or written material, the mythological, the Sacred, the Ritual and the Legendary are instrumental in the production and occupancy of both spaces and places. Creative imagination is the point of conversion for such notions; it is going to directly shape up the inhabit. The present study is an attempt to fathom this hidden dimension which animates the Medina of Tunis, thereby allowing us to gauge an unsuspected facet of its practices and its living experiences.

The ideas we are developing here concern the relationship between the inhabit practices and the representation systems produced by and within a given (the process being auto-centric). For, throughout this work we will be focusing on how the cosmogonical system, the hidden dimension and the imaginary all impact the living spaces. The architectural and urban space will then act as the mirror reflecting a whole vision of the world while the Medina of Tunis has been chosen as our field survey.

Consequently, underlying this study is the hypothesis that the practices involved in life in the medina unfold within actual present locations. Such spaces are indeed the material support for the inhabit, i.e. the house, the door-step, the entrance, the sqifa, the patio, the street, the mosque…. But such practices (this is where our hypothesis comes in) are enacted quite as really through the doubling of these locations with a "referent", or a reference space. Such a referent may not be present materially and physically, but "it is there" all the same to inform the daily inhabit-related practices.

Examples and analyses will be provided to back up this hypothesis of the "hidden here" referent. But we can already say that, thanks to myths, the sacred, the fairy tales, the rituals and the belief in the Jens and the angels…, the inhabitant of the Medina of Tunis has learnt to apply a coating of invisibility to the visible, of inaudibility to the audible, and of muteness to the vocal expressions. Urbanism and architecture serve then as locations for practicing and developing the individual and the collective imaginary. Thanks to rituals, spaces, as threshold, the *sqifa* labyrinth, do transmute from chaos to the cosmogonic.

Keywords: Islamic Architecture, Sacred Space, Medina of Tunis, Rituals, Cosmogony, Symbolism

INTRODUCTION

It is historically and linguistically proven that in the Arabic language, there are ten variants of the word *love* (حب). Indeed, IbnHazm al-Andalusi, in his book *The Ring of the Dove* (994-1064) (*Tawq al-Hamama fi al-Ulfah wa al-Ullaf*, subtly reveals to us the various meanings and spiritual ranks of the *maqams* (stations) relating to both human love and divine and mystic one. Talking in this book about the roots-principles of love he comments: "*I have divided this treatise into thirty chapters. Of these, ten are concerned with the root-principles of Love[…].*"

In this sense, Romanticism—especially in Germany—owes much to the troubadours (Anglade, 1908), medieval poets and musicians who created lyrical poetry and songs about chivalry and courtly love. In his article Dahami mention that "*Julian Ribera has searched a lot in the topic of the influence of Mawashasha and Zajal on the troubadour lyrical songs until he reached a frank clear link between the troubadour songs and Mawashashah.*

Ribera has found the connection in more than one face." (Dahami, 2015). These troubadours had a considerable influence on Romanticism, primarily through their lyric (2015) poetry and themes of love.

Among the key figures of Romanticism influenced by them is the great German poet Goethe. The *West-Eastern Divan* (Goethe, 2019) of this great German poet masterfully testifies to his attachment to the mysticism of Islam, particularly to the great Persian poet Hafez[1]. In this sense, and recognizing the merit of the poet Hafiz, Goethe said:

"*To Háfiz,*

What all desire, you well have known , And aptly understand;

For longing holds, from dust to throne, All in an iron band.

So great the pain, then sudden cheer

Oppose it-who would dare? The first man breaks his neck? No fear:

Forward the next will fare.

Pardon mc, Master- don't demur-For my audacity. The eye cannot but follow her, Sweet wand'ring cypress tree."
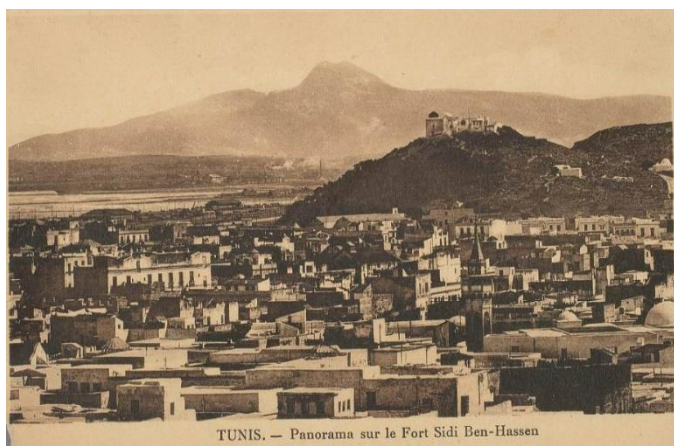

Figure 1: Historical view of the Medina

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is interdisciplinary, mixing qualitative analysis with historical, anthropological, and architectural approaches to explore the hidden dimension of Islamic architecture in the Medina of Tunis. The research relies on primary sources such as historical texts, religious scriptures (Qur'an and Hadith), and ethnographic observations, alongside secondary sources including works by scholars like Mircea Éliade, Henry Corbin, and Gilbert Durand.

The study employs a phenomenological lens to examine how sacred and profane spaces are perceived and experienced by inhabitants, emphasizing rituals, symbolism, and cosmogonic narratives.

Case studies of specific architectonic elements (e.g., thresholds, patios, labyrinths) are analyzed to reveal their symbolic and functional roles. Comparative analysis of other cultural and religious traditions will be given. To

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[1] Goethe's admiration for Hafez is symbolically expressed by the idea that he wanted to "kiss the feet of Hafez." This expression reflects the deep admiration and respect Goethe felt for the Persian poet. Though figurative, this image underscores Goethe's intense reverence for Hafez's mystical vision of love, in which he was, in a way, indirectly initiated.

highlight the imaginary daily life within the Medina of Tunis, empirical supports and visual documentations, like photographs and plans, will be offered.

Consequently, the methodology integrates theoretical frameworks with to uncover the relationship between physical spaces and the spiritual imaginary in Islamic urban design.

This paper aims to explore how this hidden vision and mystic love, as articulated by Goethe through his engagement with Hafez, can be embodied within the physical spaces of the Medina of Tunis. The Medina, with its intricate architecture, narrow alleys, patios, and sacred spaces, serves as a support of the journey toward spiritual and emotional enlightenment. In particular, we will examine how the urban fabric of the Medina—its mosques, bazars, doors, and private homes—is a metaphorical journey akin to the spiritual ascent described by both Goethe and Ibn Hazm. The spatial design of the Medina, with its intimate courtyards and larger communal spaces, mirrors the dual nature of love: both private and intimate, yet always connected to a greater, communal spiritual tradition.

By bridging the poetic and mystic love with the architectural and urban sphere of the Muslim world, this paper will try to show how these two realms—spirituality and physicality—are interconnected, with both serving as expressions of the same underlying truth: that love, in its many forms, is a path toward spiritual enlightenment, and that the spaces we inhabit reflect and shape this journey. A coherence will be founded between the esoteric and exoteric dimension within the Islamic urban and architecture.

But before that, we need to see if the notion of Islamic city does exist. And ask ourselves Is there any specificity of the Medina spaces[2]? The concept of the imaginary, as it's developed by Henry Corbin (L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn Arabi, 1958) and Gilbert Durand (Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire, 1960) will undoubtedly be invoked here to analyze the Medina of Tunis and to explore the profound meaning of mystical love and its impact on architecture and urban planning.

Figure 2: View on the streets of the Medina (Author)

The Notion of a Muslim City:

The first question to consider at the outset of this reflection is: does the notion of a Muslim city exist? And what makes it distinct?

To begin answering these questions, it's important to consider that each *Arab Medina* (old or ancient city) possesses its own unique character and specific features, and there is no single, uniform model for a Muslim city or house. It would be misleading to overlook the differences between one Muslim city and another, just as it would be equally unhelpful to ignore the commonalities shared by the cities across the Islamic world. From the

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[2] Many historians, anthropologists, sociologists will be mentioned in the follow pages to highlight the hidden dimensions of the Islamic urban and architectural spaces.

7th century onward, Islam spread across continents, from one country to another, and with it came widespread conversion to the religion of the Prophet Muhammad.

During this expansion, Arab conquerors encountered diverse cultural, architectural, and technical traditions in the regions they conquered, each with its own artistic production. They inherited the architectural and urban legacies of earlier empires—as Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Sassanian. This cultural encounter demonstrated a remarkable ability to assimilate the organizational principles of different cities and their architecture and urban planning.

These principles were adapted to serve a new world order of that epoch. Thus, Muslim cities are the product of a cross-pollination between the principles of Islam and the historical legacies of various civilizations that had previously settled in the conquered territories. Furthermore, we do believe, as Arnold Toynbee (An Hisorian's Approach to Religion, 1956) and Oswald Spengler (2021), that each Religion—whether Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—has been generative, influencing the arts, the sciences and all the paradigm of its time. Toynbee claims : "*Every past expression of religion has been in harmony with the intellectual orientation of the time and place where it was formulated. But the underlying essence of religion is undoubtedly as constant as the essence of human nature itself. Religion is, in fact, an intrinsic and distinctive characteristic of human nature.*" (La Grande Aventure de l'Humanité - 1994).

Each of the Religions has instigated a *new* worldview and a *new* order in its era (Buchrui, 2012) (Bushrui, 2010), simply a *new* system of life. Ibn Khaldûn highlighted in his famous book "*Prolegomena*" (De Slane, 1934) is cyclical perspective of the history of the dynasties and the civilizations.

Islam, therefore, is marked by a multiplicity of spatial configurations, architectural styles, functional solutions and technical approaches adopted across different cities. This diversity should not lead us to quickly conclude that Muslim architecture and urbanism are completely heterogeneous, nor should we dismiss the idea of the Muslim city. In this respect, we agree with S. Mouline's observation (La ville et la Maison Arabo-Musulmanes, 1981): "*It is indirectly through Islam, as a cohesive force implying a shared conception of the universe and the observance of certain obligations, that a common factor emerges in the production and use of architectural space.*"

However, the term "*Islamic city*" remains highly ambiguous, as evidenced by the various interpretations it has inspired throughout history. These interpretations, of course, vary depending on the cultural background of those describing a particular historical city or Medina. In his article "*Medina and Wandering*," Mohamed Kerrou (Médina et errance, 1990) notes that European visitors often highlighted the "*irrational and absurd*" nature of the Medina of Tunis, as well as the "*labyrinthine dread*" it evoked in visitors.

It must then be considered that any view of the architectural space is, implicitly or explicitly, knowingly or unconsciously, a function of the visitor's habitus and habits; that the latter will ultimately not be able to avoid projecting into the space to visit his own mode of representation and use of space.

Like any architectural space, the Medina possesses its own language and semantic code. Western visitors often find themselves without the necessary symbolic references or understanding of the coding required to interpret medieval urbanism. This lack of familiarity partly explains their sense of disorientation.

Islam, in its origins, was propagated by nomadic Arabs who faced a paradox: a deep-seated distrust of the city and, simultaneously, a fervent desire to establish urban centers as symbols of the new religion, embodying its order and values. Xavier De Planhol, in (Le monde islamique : essai de géographie religieuse, 1957), explains that the first cities—constructed during the initial wave of building activity known as *tamsir*—reflected this tension. These cities often embodied a compromise between the nomadic mentality of their founders and the demands of urban settlement, resulting in spaces that were part sedentary town, part transient camp, situated on the edges of the steppe and desert.

One significant type of urban creation from this period was the *ribat*—a term derived from the Arabic verb *rabata* (رابط), meaning "to watch." Ribats were fortified barracks for soldiers, established wherever the conquest

of jihad required a strategic presence. These structures served as both military outposts and religious symbols of vigilance and commitment to the Islamic mission.

Another category of city emerged during this phase of conquest: the princely city. These cities were manifestations of sovereign authority, marking the rise of dynasties and asserting their power. De Planhol notes that such urban creations have consistently signified the political and symbolic aspirations of ruling elites throughout Islamic history.

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Originally, Islam was propagated by nomadic Arabs who faced a paradox: a distrust of the city alongside an ardent desire to establish cities reflecting the new religion and its social order. Xavier De Planhol, in (Le monde islamique : essai de géographie religieuse, 1957), argues that the first cities, built during the initial urbanization wave known as tamsir, struggled with the nomadic mentality of their conquerors. These early cities were often semi-sedentary, functioning as half-settled, half-nomadic camps on the borders of the steppe and desert. In that meeting he said: "*The obstacles set up by society naturally continue in full force, since everything which reinforces the traditional society, the traditional mentality, is opposed to the development of a new religion.*" (The World of Islam – 1967 – P104.)

The apparent dilemma between nomadism and urbanity was ultimately resolved in favor of urban life, as Islam required cities to achieve its social and religious ideals. Many Qur'anic verses encourage the establishment of cities and the adoption of urban life over nomadism.

Prayer, particularly the communal Friday prayer, is a profoundly urban act, symbolizing the unity of the *Umma* (Community). The mosque, especially during Friday prayers, becomes a central symbol of the city, representing both spiritual and social cohesion.

According to Xavier De Planhol, a characteristic feature of Islamic cities is the lack of cohesion, attributed to the absence of municipal life. In his comparison of medieval European cities with Muslim cities, he noted the absence of similar organizational systems (agora, forum, cardo, decumanus, etc.) and hastily concluded that Muslim cities lack coherence. To be fair, this perspective may be somewhat excessive; in reality, we see another organization and underlying principle: zoning. In this system, commerce, housing, and places of worship are separated into specific activities. While it is true that administrative structures were lacking to manage the growing urban expansion of Muslim cities, this leads Xavier De Planhol to state that "*the price of the predominance of religious conceptions in social organization is the absence of political interest in the community. Nothing tempers the absolutism of the prince, whose power is the expression of divine power. In North Africa, the Berber democratic assemblies and councils sometimes survived, but only played a significant role as long as the princely power weakened.*"

Figure 3: Souk in the Medina (Author)

Two principles governed the Muslim city: the urban ideal of the Islamic religion and the absence of a municipal institution governing the urban. The dynamic balance of these principles shaped the organization of Muslim cities. As a result, the mosque occupied a central role in urban planning, supplanting the role of the agora in ancient cities. Social debates took place within and around this religious institution.

Near the mosque, madrasas, zawiyahs, and Quranic schools were erected. In a concentric and corporatist manner, souks were organized hierarchically—from the noblest (e.g., the perfume souk) to the most harmful (e.g., the blacksmiths' souk). Hammams for the ritual of major ablution, were adjacent to the mosque.

The absence of a municipal institution governing the urban resulted in residential areas proliferating somewhat disorderly. Even though the street network generally oriented itself towards the souks and the great mosque (as in the Medina of Tunis), a general framework existed that governed the streets. This framework often disappeared in favor of a tangle of streets, alleys, and cul-de-sacs. In the Medina of Tunis, the narrowness of these alleys is illustrated by the toponymy of a dead-end called "zanqat Anaqni" (meaning the alley "embrace me"). The causes of this state of affairs seem rooted in the religious conception of the urban, which did not favor ostentation, influencing both urban planning and domestic architecture.

Xavier De Planhol relates that to a hadith attributes to the Prophet Muhammad the requirement of a minimum width of 7 cubits (about 3.4 meters) for streets, designed for the passage of two heavily laden animals. Houses, on the other hand, should not symbolize luxury and ostentation. Low houses were characteristic of Muslim urban planning. In Istanbul, regulations limited the height of Muslim houses to 10 cubits (5 meters) and those of non-Muslims to 8 cubits.

The Concept of Space in the Arab-Muslim Culture:

Before delving into an analysis of the concept of "space" in Arab-Muslim culture, it is essential to note, as Mircea Éliade (Le sacré et le profane, 1965) aptly emphasizes, that humanity in general—and Tunisians in particular in their relationship to the Medina—become aware of the sacred because it manifests itself as something distinctly separate from the profane. This manifestation of the sacred is referred to as "*hierophany*." (Éliade, 2012) In this context, all religions—particularly Islam—serve as expressions of the sacred manifesting in people's daily lives. It's a kind of the phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) of the perception where the structures of consciousness -- shaped by the Islamic Religion-- are experienced In the daily life, by the inhabitants point of view.

Religions, from the most primitive to the most developed (including monotheistic ones), can be understood as accumulations of *hierophanies*. These represent the advent of something "other," a *hidden* reality distinct from our everyday world, emerging within objects and spaces that are otherwise part of our "profane" existence.

Consequently, in a paradoxical manner, for the user of the space, an object or space can manifest a sacred and higher status. It transforms into something else while still retaining its originel essence. For example, a door remains a door, and a threshold remains a threshold. Yet, for the inhabitant of the Medina, these spaces, when imbued with sacredness, undergo a transformation from profane reality into hierophanic reality. This transformation is evident in the rituals associated with crossing thresholds or doors, signifying the transition from profane space to sacred space.

From a secular perspective, this transmutation of places and objects is not externally visible. It occurs (in a highly complex phenomenon) within and through the consciousness of the *homo religiosus*—the religious person who inhabits the Medina. This inhabitant possesses an inherently religious consciousness, evident in even the smallest acts and practices of daily life. Their worldview is holistic rather than dichotomous, uniting their cosmogony, worldview, and lived experience into a coherent whole.

In this regard, Mircea Éliade observes that, in archaic societies, humans strive to live as much as possible within the sacred or in proximity to consecrated objects. To appreciate the sacred dimension of the Medina inhabitant's experience, it is useful to define "space" in terms drawn from the socio-cultural context of the region. The Medina of Tunis, for example, has been inspired by countless tales, myths, and fantastical stories, making it an ideal case study.

In Arab-Muslim culture, space is understood as a physical framework that is measured and experienced through reason, the senses, sensations, feelings, emotions, and the spirit. Once subjective and spiritual dimensions are introduced to measure, inhabit, and contemplate space, it ceases to have a singular, fixed perception. Instead, space—and by extension, the Medina—becomes a site of diverse readings, interpretations, and even ambiguous inscriptions reflecting the modes of being of those who inhabit and interpret it.

The Qur'an frequently mentions that everything—including space—worships God:

"وَإِن مِّن شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ"

("*There is nothing that does not glorify Him with praise*").

This implies that space is not an inanimate, lifeless entity but is instead imbued with the status of a subject capable of expression. Moreover, the Qur'an draws a distinction between profane and sacred spaces. In Arab-Muslim culture, spaces are often classified and hierarchized, with certain greater sacred significance than others.

For the inhabitant of the Medina, space is not homogeneous. This aligns with Joseph Chelhod's observation that the Islamic perception of space and time is discontinuous and heterogeneous, resulting in a hierarchy of certain places over others.

As the Lord said to Moses:
"*Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground* (Bible, 2024)."

Similarly, the Qur'an states:
"*Indeed, I am your Lord. So remove your sandals. Indeed, you are in the sacred valley of Tuwa.* (Qur'an, 2024)" - "اخلع نعليك إنّك في الوادي المقدّس طوى".

This distinction between sacred and profane space confirms the notion of spatial non-homogeneity. In the Medina, this translates into a lived and practical opposition between sacred and profane spaces. Consequently, two types of spaces emerge:

- Sacred ones, rich in meaning and significance,

- And profane spaces, unconsecrated and thus lacking structure or consistency, appearing amorphous.

As Mircea Éliade suggests, for the religious individual (such as the inhabitant of the Medina), this spatial non-homogeneity manifests as an opposition between sacred spaces—the only ones perceived as truly real—and the remaining profane spaces, which are seen as formless expanses surrounding the sacred.

However, it is not solely the religious concept of sacred versus profane that consecrates one space over another (Chebel, L'imaginaire arabo-musulman, 2015). Familiarity and repeated interaction with certain places also play a role. For the inhabitants, these spaces become points of reference and orientation, further reinforcing spatial non-homogeneity. Personal experiences—such as a native landscape, a childhood street, or a location tied to first love—imbue these places with emotional and affective significance, making them privileged and qualitatively distinct.

The appropriation of a place arises from an affinity between the individual and the space, creating a deep emotional resonance. For the homo religiosus of the Medina, this existential experience of space goes even further. It becomes the foundation of an originel act, a central axis for future orientation and meaning.

The sacralization of space in the Medina is deepened by rituals, such as those associated with crossing thresholds. These acts connect the space to a founding moment or a meta-historical origin, always tied to the inhabitant's worldview. Mircea Éliade (Le sacré et le profane, 1965) articulates the importance of this act of rupture—the sacralization of space—as follows:

"We can see, then, to what extent the discovery, that is, the revelation, of the sacred space has an existential value for the religious man: nothing can begin, be done, without a prior orientation, and any orientation implies the acquisition of a fixed point. For this reason, the religious man has striven to establish himself at the "center of the world." To live the world, it must be founded, and no world can be born in the "chaos" of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point—"the center"—is equivalent to the Creation of the World."

Indeed, the sacralization of space is seen as a rupture because it makes it the support of a hierophany (manifestation of the sacred) and detaches this piece of territory from the *surrounding profane* environment and plans to make it qualitatively different. To support our words, it is enough to recall the notion of the *House of God* "بيت الله" and how, thanks to a hierophany, a *cubic space* الكعبة becomes the holiest place in Islam. Consequently it becomes the object of orientation of the faithful in all their rituals and in particular during their prayers. It has become the gravitation center for Muslims.

Often, within the Medina, there is not even a need for a theophany or a hierophany as such to consecrate a space. Sometimes all it takes is a simple sign or symbol to mark the sacredness of the place. A Qur'anic verse on the front door or even inside a house will make this place as common, but rather a space charged with spiritual forces.

Another means has been used in the history of Islam to reveal to *homo religiosus* the sacredness of a place capable of accommodating both the house of the Prophet Mohammed and the first mosque of Islam. It was the camel, inspired as it was, that guided the faithful to this "blessed" place. We note with Mircéa Éliade that this practice of letting oneself be guided for the revelation of the sacred through animals is not specific to Islam. Indeed, in many other religions, men are not free to *choose* the sacred place: they only seek it and discover it with the help of mysterious signs.

Éliade believes that we should not believe that this is human work, or that it is thanks to his effort that Man succeeds in consecrating space. In reality, the ritual by which he builds a sacred space is efficient to the extent that it *reproduces* the work of the Gods and on this condition alone.

As an example, let us once again remember the example of the *House of God* " بيت الله" and how the inhabitant of the Medina (and elsewhere) continues to slaughter a sheep on the occasion of the foundation of the family home. This act certainly reminds us of the founding act of the Kaaba and the *originel sacrifice*, where the Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim) gave his son Ismail as a present to God. As a reward for being obedient to his will, God substituted a sheep as an alternative to the sacrificed son (i.e., Ismail). Since then, this *originel sacrifice* has become the foundation of all earthly construction, to raise it to the rank of spiritual construction.

It should be remembered that the sacralization of space is not only done through sacrifices, but also through anointings, lustrations, blessings. In this sense, in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim (Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse, 1912) teaches us that because of the barrier that separates the sacred from the profane, Man can only enter into intimate relations with sacred things (in this case spaces) on the condition that he strips himself of what is profane in him. Bye doing that, he overcomes a lower rank to higher one.

This would mean that sacralizing a space is equivalent to sacralizing oneself and stripping oneself in order to be worthy of access to the center of a consecrated world, namely a house or a shop in the Medina. Before, E. Durkheim explains, this user was a common being who, for this reason, was required to stay away from religious forces. The ritual completed, he is welcomed on the same level with them; for he has approached the sacred by the mere fact that he has distanced himself from the profane; he purified and sanctified himself by the mere fact that he detached himself from the base and trivial things that weighed down his physical nature toward his spiritual one.

The ritual then gives a higher rank to the inhabitant of the place, as well as to the consecrated space. The latter then becomes the *world* or more precisely *our world*, the cosmos will tell us Éliade, as opposed to the chaotic

territory. The *world or our world* becomes a universe in which the sacred is manifest, and where, as a result, a break with the chaotic world around is marked.

One conclusion seems to us to be obvious: thanks to ritual and consecration, a taking possession of the territory is made possible. Consequently, we are allowed to say that this taking possession of a space or a place is the fruit of the creation upstream of this *world*. This creation necessarily passes, as we have just demonstrated, through the connection with an " *originel creation* " or an " *exemplary pattern* ", in this case the House of God بيت الله . This is an *imago mundi*.

Inventory of "Imaginary" Practices in the Medinal Environment: Symbolism of Domestic Places:

The temple House of God / *horma*: the originel sacrifice

In this section, we will go back in time to examine the first ritual that inaugurates the construction of a house.

This crossing ritual, as sacrificing a sheep, confirms the perspective of considering the family home or house as a temple. It inaugurates all the subsequent rituals and precedes the construction of any housing, as it occurs during the laying of the first stone. Its origin is ancient and dates back, according to Muslim tradition, to the laying of the first stone-the black stone of the Ka'ba-by the Prophet Abraham. Islamic tradition holds that angels brought this black stone down to earth. Additionally, according to the same tradition, the Prophet Abraham dreamt of slaughtering his son Ismail. In his desire to fulfill the dream literally, without transgressing its initial meaning or delving into deeper understanding, God sent a sheep as a substitute sacrifice, thus sparing Ismail. This leads Ibn Arabi, in his book "*Fosus al-Hikam*" (1991) فصوص الحكم to state that the Prophet Abraham did not "cross the dream."

The story of Abraham is deeply ingrained in the imagination of the inhabitants of the Medina of Tunis, leading them to associate any construction, whether a house or a city, with the originel construction or "originel temple" represented by the construction of the Ka'ba. Thus, during each construction, every sacrifice traces its origins to the *archetypal* (YUNG, 1990) sacrifice made by the Prophet Abraham.

For the inhabitants of the Medina, constructing the originel temple or its image is a way to elevate the act of building a house from linear daily temporality to an "a-temporality," a mythical or even spiritual temporality. This ritual, preceding the construction, brings the house out of the *chaos* of everyday life and history, into an *imaginary* and *cosmogonic* realm rich in meanings and symbols. Therefore, the construction of the house (or any act) is duplicated, as if it is only through the ritual and the sacred that the act can endure, with the ritual serving as the sole guarantor of creation's permanence.

According to Mr. Éliade, this doubling of the building through mythical construction is not exclusive to Muslims. Similar practices are mentioned by the author in relation to the construction of Indian royal cities or cities from other cultures, such as celestial cities. Éliade, for example, refers to the Celestial Jerusalem as described in the Apocalypse (21:2): "*And I, John, saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*"[3]

We join Éliade in stating (Le Mythe de l'éternel retour : Archétype et répétition, 1969) that despite fundamental differences in worldviews and respective religions, the Tunisian living in the Medina, the Indian, or the Fijian are all united in reproducing their respective cosmogonies in their constructions.

Joseph Chelhod notes: "The Qur'an informs us that the Ka'ba (House of God) is the first temple founded by humans (Qur'an, 22:26-27). It is even the first building erected on earth, and its location is the first thing created by God and rebuilt by Abraham after the flood (Qur'an 3:96). Additionally, the time of pilgrimage, specifically the 10th of Dzul Hijja, is the day on which God created heaven and earth and marks the beginning of a new cycle" (Chelhod, Le sacrifice chez les Arabes, 1955).

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[3] The Apocalypse, the New Testament of the Bible. Revelation 21:2.

The sacrificer and the sacrifice then go back in time towards this originel act or sacrifice, made by the *instigator hero*, namely Abraham. It is then said that the act of sacrifice is carried out according to a projection into a mythical time; it frees the house and the building site from the profane, from chaos, and transcends them to the level of the sacred. Hence, the reproduction of the cosmogonic act of sacrifice that precedes any construction of the family home.

Gerardus Van Der Leeuw (Religion in Essence and Manifestation, 2021 (1890-1950)) (1972) also confirms this idea ; and classifies this sacrifice as the "*foundator sacrifice*." For the same author, the sacrifice of foundation removes the risks of construction: taking possession of the land; The expulsion of the alien and demoniac power attached to the soil is rendered harmless by the *communion* of sacrifice. The atoning sacrifice removes the sin that stands in the way of the river of life.

A strangled animal is declared carrion, *mayta*, and consequently cannot be sacrificed or even eaten. And on this point, Muslims as well as Hebrews consider that only *dzabh*, the release of the liquid soul (blood), makes consumption and sacrifice licit. This led Chelhod (La notion ambiguë du sacré chez les Arabes et dans l'islam, 1961) to say that what gives the victim its virtue among the Arabs is the quantity of blood, more or less great that it contains. The greater this quantity, the more powerful this virtue, the more effectively it is capable of provoking sacred action. It should also be noted that, in order to be sacrificed, the animal's head should be directed towards the Qibla (*Ka'ba*).

This sacrifice will then play the role of alliance and intermediary to cross the bridge that separates the profane from the sacred. It will guaranty, that the house is free of evil spirits. This leads us to say with M. Loisy, that sacrifice is a ritual action — the destruction of an object or a sentient being endowed with life or which is supposed to contain life by means of which it is believed that we are influencing the invisible forces in order to promote their work and to procure them satisfaction and homage, to enter into communication, even in communion with them.

This reproduction of the cosmogony made Man as contemporary of the mythical *moment of the beginning*. The ritual of the sacrifice of the sheep then plays, for the Tunisian, this same symbolic and eternal return to the originel construction, the Archetype, the Temple of God, or as we say in Arabic to the "*House of God*".

In this perspective, by performing the first ritual of crossing, first to cross the soil intended for construction (from chaos to the cosmos), and then to cross the construction itself, terrain and construction change, in the eyes of the users, their status. It is, as if through ritual, we are trying to conquer and bring the land and the house out of chaos. And, by the same token, unhealthy spirits were driven out of this place, reserved for the temple (or in the image of the temple); which amounts to saying, according to Éliade, a "*territorial conquest*". Which ritual is only a repetition of the primordial act, the act of creating the world (or the House of God).

The temple-house of God will be an image or a myth that will guide the design and perception, and even the construction of any building. It will also, and in a real way, be the Qibla, the Mecca, the orientation of the houses to be built. All the houses will try then to be oriented south-south-east; it is the direction of the house of God symbolized by the Ka'ba.

And in this sense, it would be interesting to note a whole symbolism of language, influenced by this conception of the house-temple of God, which will accompany the imagination of the inhabitant of the Medina of Tunis. For it is in this everyday language that we will find the scope of the symbols, myths and experiences of space, which will give the inhabitants of the Medina the specificity of their cosmogony. And this leads us to say that it is essential to know the vocabulary it has developed to qualify its spaces in order to know any society.

Hence, and as some anthropologists clearly note, it is imperative to associate human space with the question of symbolism in general, and in particular with the symbolism of language; A language that qualifies space, which every society develops to express its imagination and its vision of the world and the cosmos. This expanse, or this space, will become the support of all the practices of inhabiting it. Thus, it is this symbolic conception (developed over time) that particularizes any society and that particularizes any space — support or place of proliferation of practices.

It is interesting to note at the same time how Pierre Bourdieu (1974), speaking of the notion of orientation among the Kabyles, returns to the Arabic verb *qabel*. According to him, it means not only to face, but facing with honor and receiving with dignity, but also facing the south-southeast, which is the Qibla, the Mecca.

This conception of the world has been transmitted from generation to generation, through the conscious and/or unconscious transmission of gestures, words, rituals. The meaning of the latter is sometimes lost, but the inhabitants of the Medina of Tunis continue to perpetuate it all the same. It is no longer a question of "intelligible" understanding, but rather of feeling, of living these dimensions that are anchored in the depths of their imagination. The imagination is then the guarantor of this transmission from generation to generation of gestures, words and rituals.

As if, by updating the archetype or imitating it, the inhabitant was present at the first time (sacred time would say Éliade) of the construction of the temple or house of God. And by facing or orienting himself in front of Mecca, the inhabitant of the Medina would draw energy from it to regenerate himself.

The Threshold or Limit of the Two Worlds:

Crossing the threshold is the first contact we have with a house. It is the first physical obstacle to overcome, cross and step over in order to access the interior of the *horma*. The threshold symbolizes the first contact between an outside and an inside. It is also the first contact between an outside that is within everyone's reach, and an inside that is a gift and an offering made available to the privileged. These privileged people will be those who have been able to maintain a passionate and loving relationship with the house (a long-term relationship).

Speaking of a certain deontology that is practiced with regard to limits, such as the threshold in the Arab architectural space, J. C. Depaule (1985) says that when a separation is missing, risks not being respected or has been violated, the "non-seeing" (pretending not to see) is an accommodation that allows the system to have "ethical and imaginary" rules, that governs behavior and social relations, to keep its coherence in practice.

This way of crossing a threshold is generally accompanied by "crossing rituals" that only highlight this binary conception of space that exists in Muslim culture. That is to say, a distinction is made between profane space/sacred space, public space/private space, outside/inside. Or, as some anthropologists commonly say, cultures have defined two zones of space, one humanized and another wild. And between the two we see the birth of limits that are established (such as the threshold), which are sometimes frank and sometimes blurred. It is then in the direction of crossing from one zone to another that the passage must be considered. The transition from a sacred to a profane area or the reverse (from the profane to the sacred), can only be made through a set of rituals. The latter symbolize the ability required in the individual to be allowed to cross the threshold from one area to another. These rituals, which mark the passage from one area to another, are rituals of crossing.

In Arab-Muslim culture, these rituals or transitions accompany a whole series of acts, among other examples: entering a house, engaging in a sexual relationship, sleeping, as they accompany the act of eating, drinking, etc. etc. Through these rituals, which can be simple pronunciations of words, the "simplest" acts leave the profane status, which they may have at the beginning, towards another magical and/or cosmogonic status. The act or space that originally belonged to the profane world is now in the realm of the sacred. Like expressed by C. L. Strauss (La pensée Sauvage, 2012), the space considered at the beginning as "wild", "uncivilized", is uplifted, thanks to the magico-religious formulas of ritual, to a peaceful and civilized realm.

This conception is not unique to Arab-Muslim culture alone. Indeed, Marcel Granet in his book "Chinese Thought" considers that for Chinese it is a question, in order to qualify this binary conception of space (sacred/profane, outside/inside,...), to speak of civilized space as opposed to wild space. Granet also indicates in this same book that civilized space is entirely pure, entirely full, and therefore entirely civilized, only within the sacred precincts of federal meetings, that is to say, in its center.

This leads us to say that, in the case of a house, for example, it is in proportion to the distance from the center and the approach to the "wild" space, or the "limit" between the two (savage-civilized), that there will be a marking of the transition.

Figure 4: The threshold as distinction between profane and sacred space (Author)

To better understand this idea of the "limit" between the profane world and the sacred world, in Arab-Muslim culture, we will refer to the home in its immediate relationship with the "public" outdoor space. The family space (interior) is in this case considered to be the sacred space, and the public space (exterior) is considered to be the profane space. The boundary between the two is the "threshold," the *a'taba*. Depaule (1985) in his book "Through the Wall" remarks that, in the Arab world, leaving someone in the *a'taba* is not innocent, it is in fact an offense. Questioning the root of the word *a'tabe*, which means "to pass", "to cross" and "to reproach someone for something", Depaule notes that this zone (the threshold) is considered in Arab culture to be inferior. In this sense, A. Von Kremer recounts that in Damascus someone who did not go beyond this was said: do you feel insulted?

This limit that is the threshold, *a'taba*, is the first marking of the sacred domain, namely the *horma* or the house. Hence a whole ritualization of the crossing at the threshold and at the level of the front door. Ritualization expressed by a symbolic marking existing above the entrance doors, such as the hand of Fatima, a fish, a horseshoe or a Koranic verse. As if a call to order had been established, to remind any intruder belonging to the profane world that he is near a sacred domain, *horma*. The door then highlights this marking between the profane exterior and an intimate and sacred interior. Generally, in the Medina the gates are raised by a step from the level of the road. The gate is usually in two parts, a small door inside the big one, the small gate is nicknamed *khokha*. It is small, and when you take it, you have to bend over to get inside the house. As if the symbolization of a sacred interior were further accentuated by this bowing of the head that one is forced to make to enter the house.

So, to enter you have to know where you are putting your feet, and with which foot (right or left) you are going to approach this ceremony of accessing the *horma*. Indeed, it is important that you enter the house with your right or left foot. Doing it with the left foot is perceived as a vulgar and frowned upon act; The step that raises the front door will remind us of the ethics necessary to enter this house. Thus, the person who wants to enter will be required to be aware of where he puts his head and with what intentions (healthy or unhealthy) he approaches this space of transition, towards the sacred, which is the threshold. In any case, the *khokha*, because of its height which forces heads to bow and bow, will not fail to call us to order, and to have only good intentions. The craftsmen will strive to decorate this space of great symbolism to better enhance it.

For some large and wealthy residences, before arriving at the gate and the *khokha*, there is a whole covered path that connects the public/private (or privatized) cul-de-sac to the door. This path is called *driba*. It is interesting to note the Sufi parallel that is given to the word *darb* and which means: the path to the goal or to enlightenment.
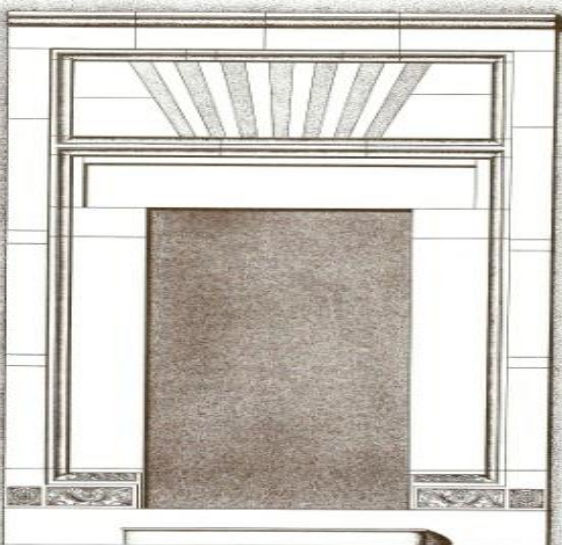
Some *driba* are also richly decorated, there are even *dokana* seats here guests can wait before being granted permission to access the interior of the *horma*.
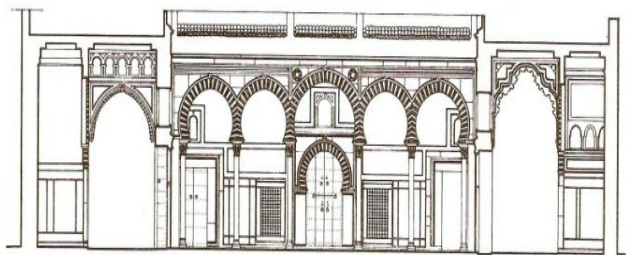
FACADE INTERIEURE AVEC GALERIE
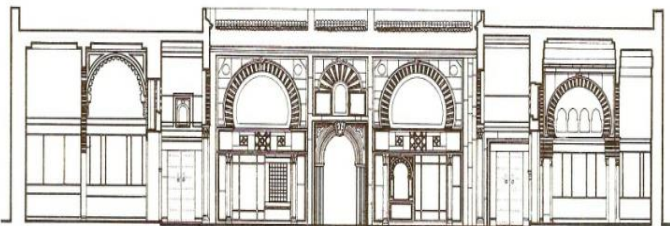
COUPE LONGITUDINALE AVEC ELEVATION SUR COUR

DAR EL MRABET
TUNIS
- RUE SIDI BEN AROUS -

PORTE DE LA SQIFA
SUR LA DRIBA

From The Sqifa to the Patio

It would be important, before embarking on the symbolism of the space of the *sqifa* (labyrinth) or the angled entrance, to see the origins of its appearance in the geographical space of the Maghreb in general and the Medina of Tunis in particular.

In this historical investigation, we call on Lucien Golvin (1958). This researcher tells us that, in Roman architecture of the Maghreb, the use of the angled entrance is uncommon. In the remains where its presence has been noted, he leans towards the hypothesis that this device could be a late addition and not used from the beginnings of Roman architecture. In any case, Lucien Golvin claims that traces of this labyrinthine device have only been found in architectural works of the Roman Empire bordering Tripolitania.

Golvin also assures us that, except in the countries of the Maghreb, remains expressing this architectural solution have not been found anywhere else in the cities of the Roman Empire.
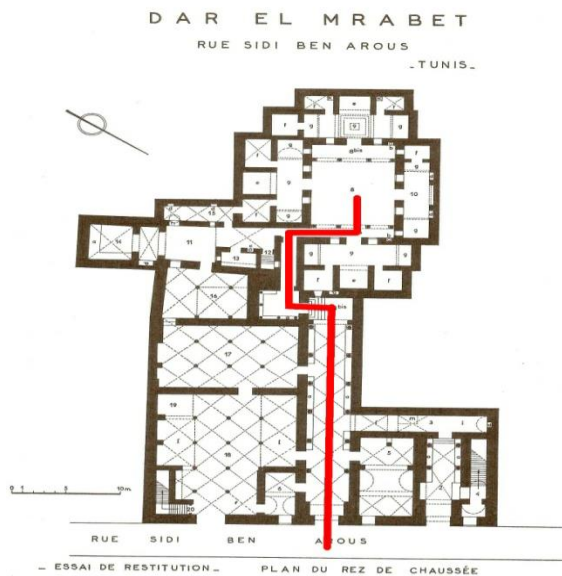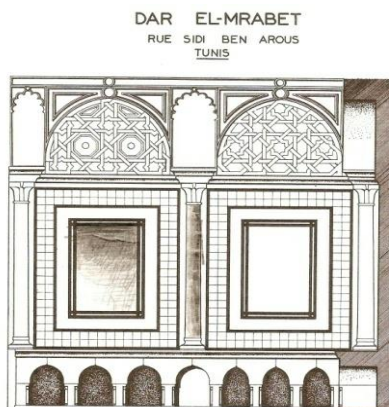
Figure 5: Plan of House Ek Mrabet – Source Jacques Revault

We are justified in believing that the origins of this technique lie elsewhere than in the Roman architectural space of the West; rather, it is necessary to turn to the cultural space of the East in all its diversity (Greek, Persian, Mesopotamian, etc.) to possibly find its origin.

In his same notes on the entrances in the forebody and chicane, Golvin reveals to us that the Roman houses of Italy do not offer this characteristic so widespread in the houses of the Maghreb and not only of Tunisia.
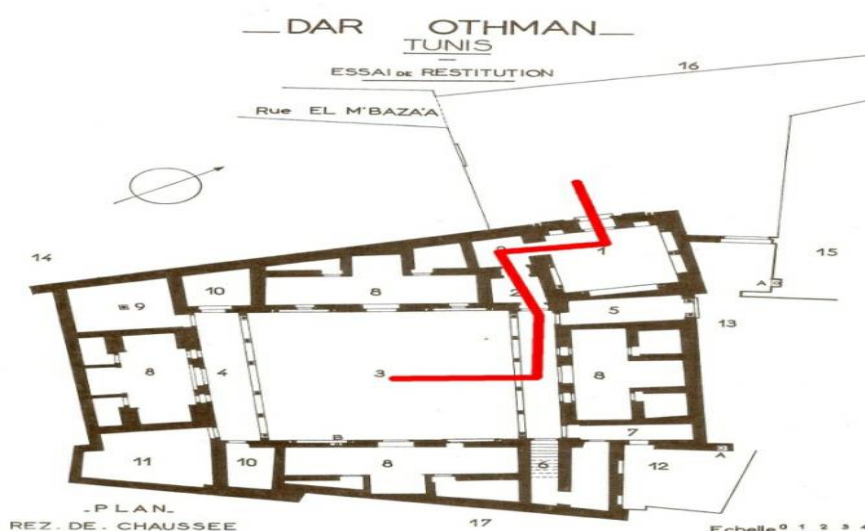

Figure 6: The labyrinth/Sqifa - Source Jacques Revault

On the other hand, like him, we have seen that traces of this chicanery device appear in Greek domestic architecture. However, we are still hungry for how, when, or by what means this architectural solution reached the countries of the Maghreb, and how it was able to become embedded in the architectural traditions of the Medina of Tunis, to be established and perpetuated so faithfully. The only thing that is certain is that the entrance in chicane or cubit has conquered such a right of citizenship in the Medina of Tunis that it appears in almost all houses and houses.

Let us now come to the symbolic aspect of the chicane or cubit entrance, commonly known in the Medina of Tunis as the *sqifa*. The first test, the *a'taba*, having passed, a second which is no less important remains to be accomplished. This is the *sqifa,* or two to three *sqifas* that follow one another. In his book "Treatise on the History of Religions", Eliade gives the labyrinth a protective and defender role of another space that follows it in the entrance route. In the case of the Medina house, the labyrinth certainly protects the center or patio of the house. Which leads us to say that the center, the courtyard, *the wist'eddar*, of the house is considered a treasure or a jewel to be defended against any visual or physical aggression.

The *sqifa* will then hide and protect the patio against any furtive or hazardous glance that seeks to interfere in the intimate life of the family and the *horma*. To describe the labyrinth, we have said earlier that it is tortuous and dark, and this is to confirm the idea of "ordeal", which the *sqifa* or the *sqifas* that follow one another (sometimes the *driba* reinforces this succession), force us to accomplish and overcome. A test, it is one, because a physical and psychological effort is invested to cross this magical-religious space. Its character, generally dark, tends to create in us a mixture of contemplation, anguish and impatience to free ourselves from this place that gives the impression of being seemingly hopeless by the tortuous form with which it presents itself. However, a light in the background is emerging. It indicates an escape that may be possible: it is the light of our fulfillment and of the fulfillment of an end. It is the light from the center of the house (patio), and from our center that springs forth.

This physical and mental effort will be rewarded at the end by the arrival at the patio, the place where the light of day shines. It was, therefore, a double movement, towards the center of the house, of the *horma*, and towards our interior, our center. The movement towards the "me" is nothing other than the fulfillment of being, or the "increase from without" that Jung develops.

For Eliade, the center could be the interior of the house, a city, a tomb or a sanctuary; but in all cases, the labyrinth defends a magical-religious space where only the initiates (the *mahram*) can access. It is also important to note that Depaule, by returning to the root of the word *horma*, finds the idea of "forbidden place". Thus, the p*atio must* be protected by this ritualization of crossing; the only guarantor for the mystery and permanence of this sacred world that is only visible and apprehended to those familiar with it.

Eliade defines the protective use of the center by the labyrinth by saying: "the military function of the labyrinth was only a variant of its essential function of defense against *evil*, hostile spirits and death in religious language, it barred the access to the city to spirits from outside". All these systems and codes established with regard to the *horma*, the house, are in fact nothing but a deontology and an ethic that have been established within the Medina. This is to allow conviviality between the different people who make up this community. This same system calls to order anyone who does not comply with this code of ethics.

All the tests having been passed: a step that raises the door, a threshold, *khokha*, chanting, *sqifa* (labyrinth), an accomplishment and a reward must be made and given to this person who will become *mahram*, and who will now be able to access the interior, the *west'eddar*. And what great joy he will experience when he emerges from the darkness, where he was, to this place illuminated by the light of day. Arriving at the patio, we rediscover the blue sky, the women busy doing their daily tasks; They look like " *houris* " coming straight from paradise, *Janneh*. We then witness, at the end of the journey, the unveiling of the hidden interior; Gift and reward given only to the inhabitants of the place and the *mahrams*.

Figure 7: Interior view on the patio (Author)

Figure 8: Interior views on the patio (Author)

The smells inside the *west'eddar*, patio, are simple and effective, in any case having nothing chemical (only natural smells); there will be jasmine, orange trees, or jars of mints, which can be used for after-lunch tea.

Around the patio, there are often galleries punctuated by marble columns surmounted by arches richly decorated with geometric and floral arabesques. These galleries, opening directly onto the different rooms, express the genius of the craftsmen who made them. Here again, rituals are necessary before being able to access these rooms, and thus, the cycle of crossing rituals is once again renewed. New thresholds are then to be crossed; this time they are located inside the house.

Figure 8: Patio of Dar Lasram (Author)

This explains how the threshold is an interface and at the same time a closure/opening that has a double reality: two faces. A concrete material and physical reality and an immaterial, spiritual and virtual reality. In this case, the imagination regulates and modulates this double interface.

CONCLUSION

We proposed in this paper the idea that the inhabited spaces of the Medina—such as the door, "*hanut*" (shop), "*bayt*" (room), "*dar*" (house), or "*souk*"—are all material and physical spaces that we perceive through our senses and represent reasonably and even rationally. However, they are also carriers of immaterial and symbolic "facts," spatiotemporal configurations where the spiritual representations of existence are spatialized.

This idea originates from the Islamic vision, characterized by a dual vision—or a double perspective: one of the sacrality, representing existence and being, and another empirical and rational, provided by the senses and reason. The creative imagination lies as the interface between two realms of sacrality and physical existence. This intermediary bridge gives entities their dual nature, allowing them to acquire identity and meaning.

The concept of "inhabitant" is proposed as a mediating instance between the acting subject, who practices space as a dweller, and the object, the physical space, which is inhabited and activated by the actors. The inhabitant is both subject-object and object-subject.

The "inhabiting imaginary" is thus a doubly intermediary instance akin to the imaginal world. This dialogical epistemic stance has been presented as an object of study. This allows to consider the Medina as a dynamic urban phenomenon and a system of values and beliefs attributed to it.

We also referred to prominent European scholars on the subject, such as Durand, Eliade, and Corbin, and compared their views with those of influential thinkers and mystics of Islamic spiritual philosophy. This revealed an intermediary instance between knowledge and understanding on one side and belief and meaning on the other.

As a perspective for our future work, we can reflect on the notion of the sacred among the inhabitants of the Medina and in Islam, exploring dualities such as *halal/haram* (permissible/forbidden) and *muqaddas/mudannas* (sacred-pure/impure) and how this religious notion can impact the daily life and the configuration of the spaces. Another historical dimension can be explored in future the Urban vision of the Islamic cities as thought by Ibn Khaldun.

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