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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural heritage tourism and urban regeneration: The case of Fez Medina in Morocco

Djamel Boussaa^{*}, Muhammed Madandola*Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, College of Engineering, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar*

Received 3 October 2023; received in revised form 5 April 2024; accepted 23 April 2024

KEYWORDSUrban regeneration;
Cultural heritage
tourism;
Adaptive reuse;
Tourism
accommodation;
Gentrification;
Social sustainability

Abstract After Morocco gained independence in 1956, the country's historic cities, including Fez, Marrakesh, and Meknes, experienced rapid urban growth, decay, and the destruction of their rich cultural and architectural heritage. The rise in urbanisation, redevelopment projects, and tourism has raised concerns related to the urban gentrification and social sustainability of local communities. In addition, the influx of large-scale foreign investments and the conversion of traditional Moroccan houses into *riad* hotels have sparked tensions over land use, economic shifts, and the ongoing exploitation of historic cities. This research presents a case study of the world heritage city of Fez in Morocco, where these dynamics are particularly significant, as efforts are made to balance conservation and modern needs. The main question to be addressed is how can the surviving historic centres be regenerated while ensuring social sustainability for their inhabitants? The primary objective of this study is to explore the multi-faceted urban regeneration strategies in Fez, focusing on urban planning, conservation efforts, economic revitalisation, and social development. Employing a mixed-method approach, this study draws on desk research, content analysis, fieldwork, observations, and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. The findings suggest that the previous strategies focused on physical development and *riad* hotels to boost cultural tourism and tourist accommodation, exacerbating the gentrification and socioeconomic stratification of the local community. This study emphasises the "Ziyarates Fez" project, which provides an innovative approach to rehabilitating and reusing traditional houses for tourism accommodation without displacing local occupants. Furthermore, this project represents a holistic strategy for balancing economic and social sustainability in urban regeneration. This paper contributes to the expanding body of research on sustainable urban regeneration in historic cities. These results are anticipated to benefit academic research and the implementation of regeneration strategies in historic cities in Morocco and worldwide.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: DjamelB60@qu.edu.qa (D. Boussaa).

Peer review under responsibility of Southeast University.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2024.04.008>

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Please cite this article as: D. Boussaa and M. Madandola, Cultural heritage tourism and urban regeneration: The case of Fez Medina in Morocco, *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2024.04.008>

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1. Introduction

Historic cities symbolise the past and testify to the lifestyle and culture of people, which form the essence of their local identities. They are vital markers of urban change, demonstrating cities' ongoing progress and evolution across many civilisations. According to Timothy (2023), historic cities and centres have "multidimensional, complex, and exceptionally inclusive" qualities that can foster regeneration, offer fresh experiences, and enhance the tourism industry. Cultural heritage tourism depends on the availability of tangible and intangible heritage assets, such as historic buildings and areas that can be rehabilitated and reused to create a symbiotic relationship with urban regeneration. Therefore, conserving historic buildings and introducing new activities according to their location, size, and capacity can help present and future generations understand and appreciate their past (Jimura, 2021; Yung and Chan, 2012).

However, there have been significant concerns about the destruction of cultural heritage and possible future scenarios for the residents of historic centres in Morocco, such as Fez, Marrakesh, and Meknes. In recent decades, the challenges faced by heritage cities have intensified, with many cities becoming abandoned, redundant, and obsolete. While these resilient historic cities contain mainly residential buildings, with few public facilities such as *souks*, mosques, *madrasas*, palaces, forts, and *hammams*, most are transforming into tourist accommodations, museums, and cultural centres. The remaining bulk of traditional houses have often been neglected and subjected to decay (Fig. 1). In addition, a multitude of sociocultural and economic factors exacerbate the increasingly difficult task of conserving the built environment and vibrant cultural legacy.

According to the World Bank (2022), "Fez is overall slightly below the average national equality and social equity policy". Recent studies have highlighted social issues such as poverty, unemployment, housing deterioration, social segregation, and the loss of traditional craft and knowledge (Guinand and Kanellopoulou, 2023; McGuinness and Mouhli, 2012). Most of Fez's contemporary residents are unable to maintain or restore their dilapidated houses because of financial constraints. Moreover, foreign urban settlers are gradually replacing low-income families by purchasing and rehabilitating traditional houses to create exotic riad hotels and tourist enclaves. While foreigners are profiting from the market's declining value, the original owners relocate to more laborious apartments and villas at the periphery of historic centres. Scholars have argued that this practice is relatively recent in Fez and other Moroccan cities (Istasse, 2019; Lamzah, 2020). A growing number of studies highlight that urban gentrification and social inequity hinder sustainable tourism in Morocco, especially in Casbah of Tangier (Ouassini and Ouassini, 2021), Medina in Marrakech (Spotorno, 2019), Casablanca (Edelman, 2023), Tangier, Rabat, and Essaouira (Bilteer, 2019). As a result, tourism-related business development in Fez has contributed to marginalisation and unintentionally encouraged the gentrification and commodification of Moroccan cultural images (Joly, 2022; Minca and Borghi, 2016).

The government and other financing organisations sponsored several pioneering regeneration strategies to preserve and rehabilitate Fez's historical residential and urban environments (UNESCO, 2014; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023). Despite their successes and failures, these experiments yielded valuable lessons for the Medina of Fez and other Moroccan historical towns. The government recently allocated MAD 670 million (\$70.3 million) for the Fez Medina development program, aiming



Fig. 1 Advanced state of deterioration in the Casbah of Algiers, Algeria, and Al Asmakh historic district in Doha, Qatar in search of immediate rescue.

to enhance residents' quality of life by restoring 1197 historic buildings (Kasraoui, 2020). With the goal of engaging in incremental revitalisation, there is a need for a holistic approach that incorporates social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Against this backdrop, this study poses the following questions: what type of urban regeneration strategy should be adopted for resilient traditional houses (*dyurs*) to improve tourism and social sustainability? While the *modus operandi* remains the neglect of traditional houses, the study explores whether heritage buildings will disappear or if tourism can extend their lives while ensuring additional income for their occupants.

This study examines the regeneration strategies implemented in Fez, focusing on the "Ziyarates Fez" project, a new approach to tourism accommodation that aims to generate additional income for low-income families while preventing displacement. Building on recent research on Fez, this study is unique in exploring, for the first time, an innovative approach to rehabilitating and reusing one part of a decayed house in Medina for tourism accommodation without displacing its occupants. It contributes to the debate on the ideal strategy for promoting cultural heritage and urban regeneration in historic centres. By delving into the intricacies of the project, this research supports a balance between economic and social sustainability. While the issue of poverty is critical in the crowded cities of the Arab world, this paper explores in depth the experience of "Ziyarates Fez" in reducing the poverty of low-income inhabitants. In addition, it discusses whether this approach can be implemented in other comparable contexts.

2. Theoretical context

2.1. Urban regeneration and sustainable development concepts

Urban regeneration and variant terms, such as revitalisation, renewal, and renaissance, are vital themes used interchangeably to denote the rebirth, revival, and reconstitution of a significant portion of a city or specific area. This multidisciplinary approach encompasses urban policy, legislative initiatives, political discussions, and social efforts to build and reconstruct cities and towns through urban land redevelopment and resource utilisation. Urban regeneration addresses diverse urban problems, including the decay of urban functions, the urban fabric, and residents' living conditions (Liu et al., 2023). It is becoming more closely aligned with sustainability principles to address the environmental, social, and economic challenges cities experience. The United Nations Brundtland Commission's "Our Common Future" report emphasises the importance of revitalising urban spaces to ensure the well-being of the present and future generations (Borowy, 2013; UN.ESCAP, 2016). Urban regeneration policies are integral to achieving broader urban sustainability schemes as strategic responses to address these challenges and transform cities into sustainable, liveable spaces.

To expand on this theme, it is crucial to understand the meaning of urban regeneration and how it relates to sustainable development. Urban regeneration by nature and implementation lacks a definitive definition or set of

guiding principles, with various scholars proposing different definitions, strategies, and modes based on their perspectives, policies, and practices worldwide (Tallon, 2010). A widely cited definition of urban regeneration denotes it as a "comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change" (Couch et al., 2013; Roberts and Sykes, 2000). By emphasising the triple bottom line of sustainable development, which includes economic, social, and environmental dimensions, urban regeneration highlights potential synergies in fostering resilient, inclusive, and environmentally responsible communities, particularly in deteriorating urban areas.

According to Lehmann (2019), "urban regeneration is an elastic term that has been widely used for urban renewal projects that transform a large part of a city or area of properties (e.g., privately or publicly owned neglected land) within a designated renewal area by developing and changing the use of the land". It is an "area-based intervention which is public sector initiated, funded, supported, or inspired, aimed at producing significant sustainable improvements in the conditions of local people, communities and places suffering from aspects of deprivation, often multiple in nature" (Leary and McCarthy, 2013). It involves deliberate planning and design processes for reconstructing urban landscapes, transforming appearance and living practices, and providing an opportunity to correct previous errors while establishing forward-thinking environments (Jones and Evans, 2008). In addition, it entails repurposing and managing financial, human, environmental, and physical resources to improve efficiency beyond the linear economy typified by the make, take, and waste culture (Ricciardelli and Raimo, 2023). Urban regeneration requires sustainable approaches, multidisciplinary support, and a focus on social inclusion, cohesion, resource-efficient exploitation, and environmental risk reduction to transition to fully regenerated city and circular economy practices.

Studies have identified four distinct approaches to urban regeneration: redevelopment, conservation, revitalisation, and restoration (Zheng et al., 2017). Urban renewal initiatives during the postwar period encompassed rapid large-scale slum clearance, city reconstruction, demolition, and comprehensive redevelopment of inner-city working-class districts to ensure economic competitiveness and sustainability (Couch et al., 2013). However, this strategy often involves demolition-oriented programs, destruction, and displacement, which cause urban culture deterioration, resource wastage, pollution, and social conflicts (Liu et al., 2023). Since the 1990s, integrated methodologies have evolved into urban regeneration, connecting economic activity with environmental enhancements while considering social, physical, quality of life, governance, and cultural aspects (Colantonio and Dixon, 2011). Contemporary urban regeneration has three primary focal points: improving physical and environmental conditions (urban renaissance), promoting social inclusion, and fostering economic competitiveness (Tallon, 2010). These goals are often complemented by a fourth dimension that emphasises the importance of area-based initiatives (place-based

approach) with socioeconomic and environmental aspects within a defined geographical limit (Leary and McCarthy, 2013). Several themes have emerged in area-based regeneration and renewal theories, including economic-driven, property-led, housing-led, health and well-being, community-centred, and culture-led regeneration.

While physical and economic considerations are essential for urban competitiveness, it is important to consider unique regeneration needs, physical characteristics, historical and cultural elements, and financial capabilities. A holistic and integrated approach is necessary to ensure the suitability and success of decision-making frameworks and urban regeneration. In addition, more studies have suggested prioritising the preservation of historical and cultural elements instead of large-scale demolition and rebuilding (Gharib, 2019). Scholars argue that urban culture and heritage represent the first strategy to be considered in any urban regeneration project (Lehmann, 2019). Preserving a city's urban fabric promotes the ongoing evolution of the dynamic cityscape, linking it to its history and unique sense of place. Culture-led and heritage-led regeneration theories emphasise the role of the arts, culture, and heritage in transforming urban areas beyond the outcomes of urban renewal and economic competitiveness (Paddison and Miles, 2020). Similar to culture-led urban regeneration, the newer "micro-regeneration" method emphasises small-scale cultural conservation and public engagement (Wang et al., 2022). Preserving historical landmarks, creating cultural districts, and incorporating art into public spaces can foster community identity and attract tourism.

2.2. Cultural heritage tourism and adaptive reuse of historic buildings

Tourism is used worldwide as a means of development, with the possibility of generating jobs, promoting entrepreneurial activity, improving infrastructure and recreational facilities, empowering inhabitants, and improving their living conditions (Kim et al., 2013). Travel has significantly influenced the growth and prosperity of many developing countries. This has resulted in the indirect and direct impacts of tourism activities, such as hospitality and services. The expansion of globalisation and advancements in transportation and communication have led to an increased focus on tourism as a critical driver of urban regeneration among government officials and stakeholders (Kim et al., 2006).

Tourism generates foreign revenue, which can contribute to the local economic development of cities. International records show that many countries generate a significant portion of their GDP from the tourist income of local and international visitors. Non-tourist areas can also indirectly benefit from tourism through an equitable distribution of assembled wealth. In 2019, Travel and Tourism (T&T) was responsible for 3.5% of GDP growth while generating USD 9170 billion and was third in the sector rank (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). As a result, each country has established policies based on tourism assets that are widely distributed among local communities.

Morocco's biggest tourist drivers are its vibrant cultural legacy, numerous sites, and heritage properties, particularly in Fez. Thus, cultural heritage tourism has the

potential to promote cultural attractions, preserve the built heritage of a city, rehabilitate old urban areas, and promote community pride, solidarity, and economic development (Lak et al., 2020; Boussaa, 2021; Madandola and Boussaa, 2023). This marks a transition from a traditional manufacturing sector to a more service-oriented economy, directly affecting the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism. To emphasise this, scholars argue: "For developing economies whose natural resource base is depleted, tourism would appear to provide a rather rapid way of generating hard currency and creating employment and finding a country's way out of economic decline and poverty" (Lak et al., 2020).

Although the tourism industry in Fez has long been a significant contributor to the region's economic growth, the city's primary cultural and historical core is extremely susceptible to deteriorating building conditions, a lack of services, and ageing infrastructure (World Bank, 2022). The adaptive reuse of historic buildings as a component of urban regeneration is vital for promoting cultural heritage tourism and sustainability. In addition, adaptive reuse requires a variety of scenarios and a balance between the value of the future economy and that of cultural heritage (Dogruyol et al., 2018; Yoon and Lee, 2019). In addition, success is possible only if, in addition to physical conditions, tourism management can reinforce local social life and cultural identity (Boussaa, 2014; Boussaa et al., 2021). Dempsey et al. (2011) define social sustainability as an essential part of sustainability through two main concepts: community sustainability and social equality. The latter encourages a society without any form of "exclusion" or "discrimination" economically, socially, and politically. Overall, social sustainability and adaptive reuse coincide with the ability to reproduce indigenous communities, maintain their social habits, and avoid the displacement of local inhabitants (Pongsermpol and Upala, 2017).

2.3. Gentrification and tourism accommodation

While the above has highlighted the benefits of urban regeneration and cultural heritage tourism, it is also worth mentioning their potential drawbacks and challenges. Several scholars have worked on the attitudes of host communities towards tourism, its impact on the perception of traffic, the tourist experience, and changes in the commercial landscape (García-Hernández et al., 2017; Jin et al., 2016; Pasquinelli and Trunfio, 2020). One of the most complex issues facing the regeneration of historic cities and centres is the phenomenon of gentrification or displacement, which has gained international attention in recent decades. Gentrification of a neighbourhood—a phrase that initially originated in the 1960s—is considered the negative outcome of regeneration (Appleyard, 1979; Orbaşlı, 2020). Drawing from the seminal concept of gentrification, Wyly (2023) defines it as:

"a transformation of 1) inner-city neighbourhoods, where 2) poor and working-class residents are replaced or displaced by middle- or upper-class residents, through 3) the combined effects of wider societal changes that alter the socio-cultural meanings of urban living, and the

land-market economics that can make reinvestment into “downgraded” inner-city districts extremely profitable”.

Gentrification is a global process and a *de facto* urban policy that involves the relocation of low-income local families from their neighbourhoods, as they cannot bear the escalating rent and cost of living to be replaced by middle- and high-income populations (Cocola-Gant, 2016; Lees, 2022; Sequera and Nofre, 2020). It involves a capital investment process that is more economically beneficial to the demands of tourism investors and the government (Lees et al., 2016; Smart Cities Dive). Urban regeneration strategies are being used to transform neighbourhoods and districts into venues for wealth accumulation. It entails territorial stigmatisation of neighbourhood as “blight” to justify the pretence of “regeneration” and extension of real estate projects, which leads to the *tabula rasa*, complete removal and redevelopment (Shin and López-Morales, 2023). According to Lees (2003) and Maharawal (2014), there are various forms of gentrification, ranging from unintentional and slow starts to deliberate, planned, and occasionally quick and forceful methods, which are now frequently called super- or hypergentrification. This phenomenon occurs across various spatiotemporal contexts in the Global North and Global South and is prioritised by governments, agencies, and private real estate companies.

Several theoretical and conceptual frameworks have been highlighted in the literature, focusing on global occurrences and their interplay with regeneration initiatives. In contemporary society, gentrification has transcended beyond the initial inner-city residential framework to encompass the suburbs, rural areas, commercial/retail spaces, and the construction of luxury condos on old waterfront, industrial, and railway lands (Lees et al., 2023). The notion of state-led gentrification posits that state institutions play a role in facilitating gentrification through targeted frameworks, investments, and regulation by influencing factors related to demand, supply, and institutional aspects (López-Morales et al., 2023; Ogrodowczyk, 2024). Studies have also emphasised what has been termed “add on gentrification” or “other geographies of gentrification”, which include tourism gentrification and green/environmental gentrification (Lees and Phillips, 2018).

Tourism gentrification or similar terms, tourism-induced gentrification and tourism-driven gentrification, are significant processes that cause direct and exclusionary displacement in both urban and nonurban spaces, particularly coastal and rural areas (Cocola-Gant, 2018). According to Ma and Su (2024), tourism-driven rural gentrification is an emerging form of state-led gentrification, where formerly neglected villages are revitalised into prosperous and exclusive regions due to the growth of the leisure and tourist sectors. Recent studies continue to explore the closely related socio-spatial impacts of tourism and gentrification that cause inequality in developed capitalist economies and peripheral economies (Du, 2022; Ma and Su, 2024). While gentrification transforms cities through cultural and material changes, the effect causes residential, commercial, and place-based displacement (Cocola-Gant, 2018). Residential and commercial displacement denotes

the typical increase in house prices and land values, which exacerbates economic deprivation, exclusion, and segregation. Debates about place-based displacement connote the phenomenological notion of ‘loss of place’ due to visitors’ consumption (Cocola-Gant, 2023).

While the character and identity of a place are the main aspects of a historic area, displacement is one of the negative aspects of regeneration projects. Unlike Disneyland and other places designed for tourism and recreation, historic cities and centres were not originally built for tourism but had to endure issues of displacement of their local inhabitants (Gotham, 2005). Historically, urban areas have been created mainly for residential use, including places of worship, shops, and workshops. People value and cherish their neighbourhoods because they have built intimate connections with them. However, touristification transforms houses, public spaces, and retail facilities into regions that cater primarily to tourists while neglecting the amenities required by permanent residents. Although regeneration primarily benefits the economy, social networks are often disrupted and sacrificed (Orbaşlı, 2020). As such, it is essential to consider factors such as affordability, accessibility to sources of living and jobs, a sense of place, cohesion, safety, and social support.

Holiday rentals influence tourism worldwide by converting housing into visitor accommodation and uprooting locals (Jover et al., 2023; Paiva, 2023; Skoll and Korstanje, 2014). The propagation of vacation rentals involves various methods of housing rehabilitation and conversion into tourism accommodation, which mainly provokes different forms of displacement. Gentrification gives owners the opportunity to sell their properties and buy cheaper ones outside their neighbourhoods. In addition, the new middle-class migrants are attracted to the area because they offer affordable property. According to Cocola-Gant (2016), “the growth of the phenomenon results in a vicious circle that solely enables the reproduction of further accommodation for visitors, rather than for long-term residential use. It is a snowball process in which the area loses residents and excludes potential ones from the possibility of moving in. It leads to a form of collective displacement never seen in classical gentrification, that is to say, to a substitution of residential life by tourism”. Moreover, newcomers cause daily disruptions and change local activities, such as stores and artisan bakeries, to international chains, such as McDonald’s restaurants and Starbucks cafes, which reflect cultural power as new activities replace old ones (Orbaşlı, 2020). As a result, such disruptions and the pressure of tourist investors force local dwellers to sell their properties to tourist investors, further intensifying gentrification forms and cycles.

The rehabilitation of historic areas for tourism creates a significant shift in the rudimentary character of housing, transforming it from shelter to housing for tourists. In recent years, such conversion has been associated with tourism accommodation and rentals (Cocola-Gant, 2018). For example, “In the case of Lisbon, for instance, where the growth of tourism was seen as a ‘fast policy’ solution towards overcoming the post-2008 crisis, and where the liberalisation of the housing market took place in 2012 as a condition of the European Union’s bid to ‘rescue’ Portuguese banks and the state, the result has been a wave of

housing rehabilitation in which local residents have been evicted in order to open new hotels and short-term leases” (Cocola-Gant, 2018).

2.4. Sense of place and revitalisation of historic cities

Scholars have highlighted the importance of sense of place and place-based theories in urban regeneration projects. Sense of place (SOP), including place attachment, place identity, and place meaning, are related concepts that broadly refer to the emotional and psychological connections individuals have with their geographical surroundings (Raymond et al., 2017, 2021; Shamai, 1991). This multidimensional and dynamic concept is often rooted in historical, economic, social, and personal experiences (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2006). The physical attributes of a location and an individual’s personal experience influence how humans understand and relate to the physical world in terms of mental, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Li et al., 2023). In addition, the concept influences the manner in which people and groups engage in a location and react to disruption or alteration (Duggan et al., 2024).

Urban regeneration and gentrification can create ambivalent situations; a positive sense of place can contribute to community cohesion, while a negative sense of place may lead to resistance and social tensions. Topophilia, coined by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, represents a strong love for or attachment to a specific place, encompassing its cultural, aesthetic, and social aspects (Tuan, 1974). In contrast, displacement and cultural erasure can influence topophobia, fear or aversion to a place. While urban regeneration projects can evoke variegated sentiments, such as place attachment, rootedness, nostalgia, love, and placelessness, multiple studies have shown that spatial dislocation and socio-spatial reconfiguration are the leading causes of post-renewal disconnection and a sense of alienation from their community (Shaw and Hagemans, 2015; Zhu and Ye, 2022). Moreover, there is substantial evidence indicating that urban regeneration leads to both physical and psychological displacement, resulting in the loss of “place” and “space” (Zhu and Ye, 2022). Several studies emphasise the breaking down of emotional and material connections with location, which impacts physical and mental health and the overall marginalisation of low-income people (Gillespie et al., 2021; Reades et al., 2023). According to Lindner and Sandoval (2021), urban transformations and gentrification commodify local culture and create inauthentic local narratives and neighbourhoods that lack uniqueness, an established history, or a sense of purpose and meaning. In addition, various regeneration projects exhibit “lack identity and originality, characterized by flashy architecture, pseudo-public spaces, predictable public art, corporate shopping chains, superficial greenwashing, restricted mobility, and a sense of affluence and placelessness” (Lindner and Sandoval, 2021).

While urban regeneration initiatives aim to rejuvenate deteriorating areas, their success can be contingent on preserving a community’s sense of place and avoiding gentrification. Considering cultural heritage in the urban regeneration process could serve as a safeguard against

these adverse effects. Heritage-based initiatives have the potential to promote attachment between people and places, as well as the development and sustainability of local culture, heritage, and socio-cultural value (Boussaa, 2018; Pepe and Schmitz, 2023; Zhu and González Martínez, 2022). While regenerated historic neighbourhoods, particularly World Heritage Sites, are attracting global tourism and prime real estate values, empirical data indicate that, rather than universal development, there are increasing racial and class disparities, as well as evictions and displacements (De Cesari and Dimova, 2019; Florida, 2017). In this context, the study explored the coexistence of urban regeneration, tourism accommodation, and gentrification in the Medina of Fez.

3. Research methods

3.1. Scope of investigation

This study employed a mixed-methods design, encompassing multiple sources of evidence, including desk research, content analysis, field investigations, observations, and semi-structured interviews. Similar to other place-based analyses, this study used an exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2018) to discover the key challenges and regeneration strategies in the Medina of Fez, with a particular focus on tourism accommodation. This study selected the Medina of Fez in Morocco as the primary case because of its significance in terms of cultural heritage, tourism potential, and historical relevance. In addition, Fez serves as a unique sample for the in-depth exploration of urban experiments, especially the Ziyarates Fez (homestay) program, cultural preservation, tourism development, and the emergence of gentrification. Using a mixed-methods approach and several data sources was crucial for nuanced insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and dynamics while juxtaposing the findings from multiple perspectives.

The authors initiated this research by conducting a qualitative bibliographic query of the theoretical themes on Google Scholar and Scopus in English and French, respectively. Since most historical and official documents in Morocco were written in French, it was essential to conduct a multilingual study. After sorting the various data sources into related research themes, a comprehensive review of books, reports, conference presentations, online news, and journal articles was conducted. This study examined the theoretical underpinnings of urban regeneration narratives, the adaptive reuse of historic buildings, sense of place, and gentrification.

Moreover, the researchers carried out content analyses of pertinent archival documents, including the city plan, tourism strategies, project narratives, and the dossier of Ziyarates Fez, to discern overarching themes, policy implications, historical trajectories, and the development of the pilot initiative over time. The authors collected digital copies of maps related to Fez urban conurbation, its historical division, and heritage assets. Simultaneously, a detailed analysis of the maps was conducted using Google Earth to visually depict the geographical distributions of Ziyarates Fez and their relationships, patterns of land use,

and environmental factors. The analysed maps provide valuable insights into urban morphology as well as the physical, cultural, and political settings, facilitating the interpretation of identity, power dynamics, and social interactions. Furthermore, the researchers analysed previous interviews and studies conducted by academics and scholars to complement the primary data collection.

In the next step, the authors conducted two fieldwork expeditions in Fez between November 2023 and December 2023 for contextual insights and documentation of cultural practices, tourism activities, and ongoing regeneration projects. The researchers conducted site visits and reconnaissance observations to gather visual data on architectural styles, urban layouts, and historical landmarks for some of the rehabilitation projects. These observations commenced at the Bab Boujloud gate and city wall, proceeding along the tourist circuit to the Qarawiyyin Mosque, tanneries, Al-Andalus Mosque, and *funduqs*. The data collected during these visits validated various literary sources and maps, confirming spatial distribution, unique features, and changes over time.

Simultaneously, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with ten key stakeholders (four city officials and urban planners, three residents, and three Ziyarates Fez host families). Interviewing diverse stakeholders allowed the authors to capture diverse perspectives on regeneration initiatives, cultural heritage preservation, and tourism impacts. More importantly, the interviews garnered community feedback, interests, concerns, and priorities, especially those influencing the adoption, implementation, and effects of urban regeneration initiatives. City officials and urban planners were pre-selected in advance through personal communications with Fassis at local, regional, and international conferences and workshops. The primary consideration in selecting participants was their active involvement and knowledge of local regeneration initiatives, as well as their efforts to preserve cultural heritage. Prior to the site visits, the authors scheduled interviews with two officials via email. Following that, the authors used snowball sampling through officials who recommended other people affiliated with Fez and the homestay program. All interviews lasted approximately 20–30 min in person at the respondents' offices or homes. The interviews were recorded using an audio device to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data.

Furthermore, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated if necessary to create written transcripts for analysis. The study utilised thematic and content analysis for the interviews, identifying recurring themes emerging from participants' responses and organising the data to facilitate interpretation and synthesis. The findings are presented using quotes and excerpts to support critical evidence. In their citations, interviewees 1–4 comprise professional stakeholders, while interviewees 4–7 are inhabitants of Fez al-Bali, interviewees 8–10 represent host families benefiting from the homestay initiative.

The professional respondents were asked the following questions:

- What are the main objectives of the conservation efforts, transformation, and regeneration activities in the

historic areas of Fez, and how do you prioritise urban development projects?

- Why has the city maintained its urban fabric even with the overbearing influence of modernity in nearby towns?
- What challenges do you face in balancing modernisation with the demands for conservation and urban development in Fez? Can you discuss successful examples of urban regeneration initiatives in Fez and their impact on the community?
- How do you integrate inclusivity, community participation, and sustainability principles into planning decisions in Fez? Can you tell us more about Ziyarates Fez?

Residents and host families were interviewed regarding several issues, including:

- How do you perceive the impact of urban regeneration efforts on your daily life in Fez? What changes have you observed in your neighbourhood as a result of urban regeneration initiatives?
- In what ways do you think the urban regeneration efforts, especially Ziyarates Fez, have impacted income generation and quality of life?
- Can you tell us your experience of the city, the sense of place, the place attachment, and the essence of Fez al-Bali as a cultural legacy, an open museum, and a World Heritage Site?
- How did you participate in Ziyarates Fez and other initiatives?

The analysis focused on the results of tourism accommodations, *riads*, and Ziyarates Fez. In addition, the study utilised various sources that focused on the performance and perceptions of the project from local inhabitants and other stakeholders. The synthesis of the results was categorised and analysed based on their relevance to the investigation of urban regeneration strategies, including UNESCO rehabilitation, riad fever, and Ziyarates Fez projects. [Figure 2](#) illustrates the research methodology.

3.2. Study area: the case of Medina of Fez in Morocco

Surrounded by two seas, the Mediterranean and Atlantic, and scattered mountain ranges, rivers, and the Sahara, Morocco has some significant geographical and historical characteristics that greatly influence its cultural heritage and tourism ([Fig. 3](#)). Morocco is a thousand-year-old monarchy unified by a change of dynasty and has a rich and varied cultural heritage, including 31 listed Medinas with rich tangible and intangible heritage. These Medinas represent a continuation of Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions in North Africa. Today, they also form the foundation for urban growth, contributing to the regional economy ([Bigio, 2012](#)). Cultural heritage tourism contributes to approximately 80% of tourism activities in Morocco ([Seyfi and Hall, 2020](#)).

The Medina of Fez, known locally as Fez al-Bali, is the city's oldest part and is home to many historic landmarks.

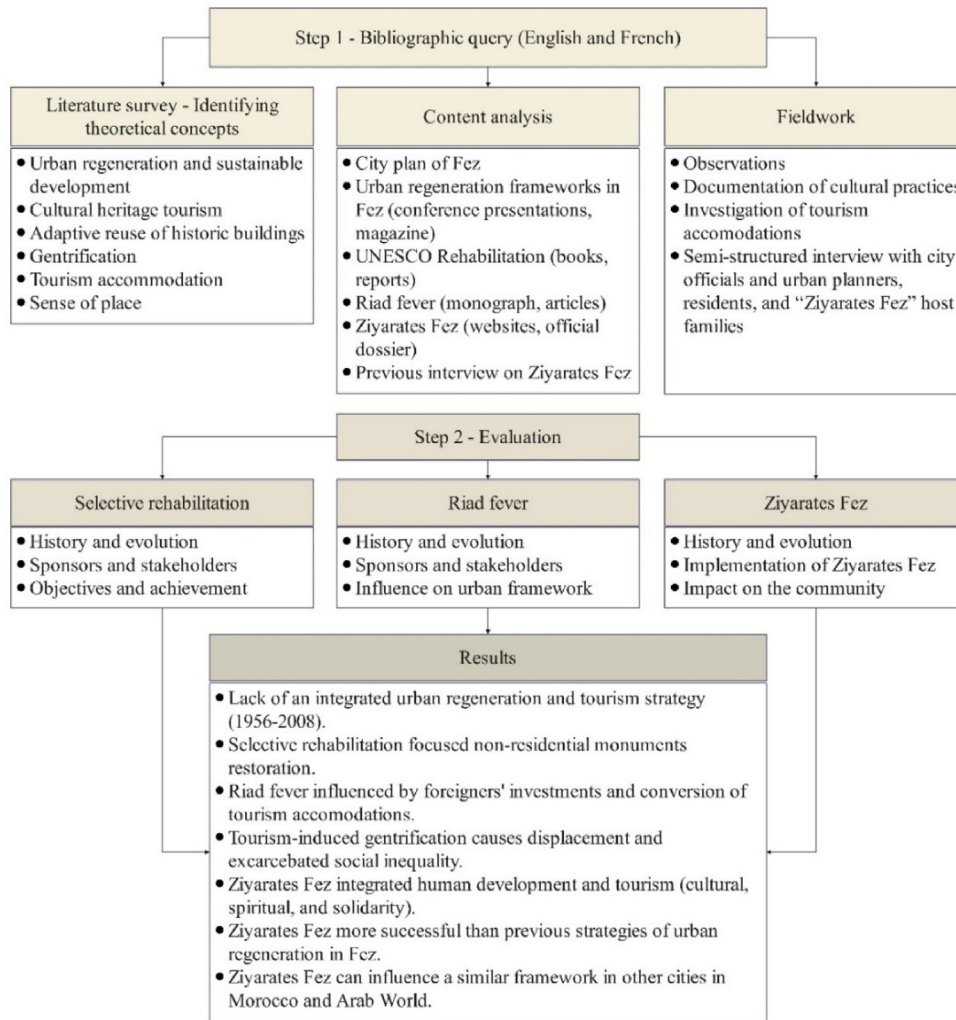


Fig. 2 The research methodology.

The historic area preserves the memory of the capital founded by the Idrissid dynasty between 789 and 808 AD (Fig. 4). The original town comprised two fortified quarters separated by the Fez wadi (river) into the banks of



Fig. 3 Map showing the location of the world heritage city of Fez in Morocco.

Andalusian (Al-Andalus) and Kairouanais (Qarawiyyin). In the 11th century, the Almoravids unified the city into a single enclosure, and by the time of the Almohad Dynasty (12th and 13th centuries), Fez al-Bali had already taken on its present size. Under the Merinids (13th–15th centuries), a new city (Fez Jdeed) was established in 1276 West of Fez al-Bali (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023). Similar to the earlier construction of the Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and University, one of the first universities in the Islamic world, the Merinids also established important public monuments, many of which still exist today (Fig. 5). These landmarks emphasise the typical Ibero-Moorish architectural style of the 9th and 10th centuries (Abdullah, 2015).

“The Medina exemplifies ancient Arab towns and is characterised by its compact spatial layout, organic morphology, and intricate narrow streets and alleys. In many ways, the Medina could be linked to the tripartite idea of a city in which knowledge, commerce, and water bodies are important attributes, such as the Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and University, popular local crafts, and the dividing river” (Interviewee 3).

The city of Fez is composed of three main parts: the Medina (Fez al-Bali), New Fez (Fez Jadeed) and the Ville

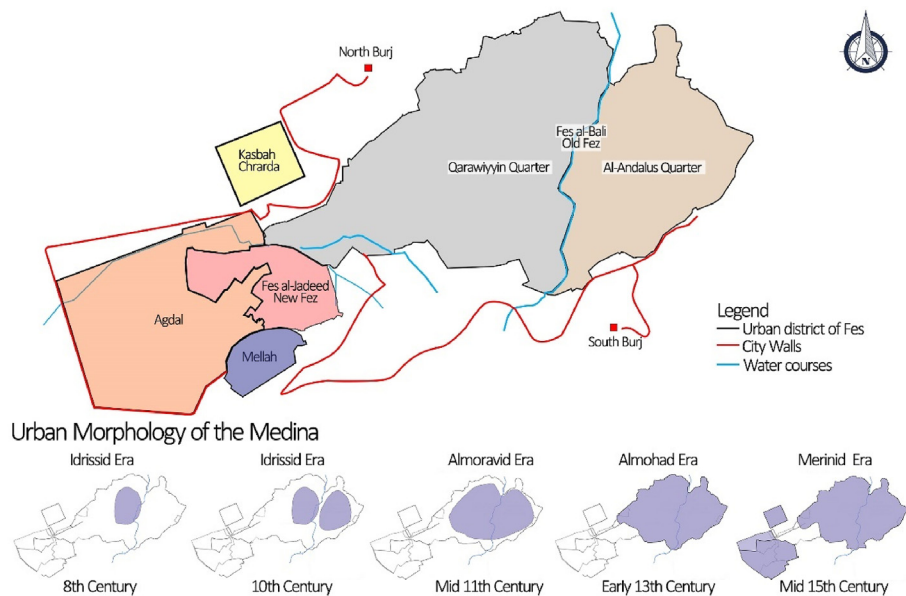


Fig. 4 Fez al-Bali is the largest quarter in Fez, with an area of 220 ha.



Fig. 5 Views of the World Heritage Site of Fez.

Nouvelle (Dar Dbibegh), which the French founded in 1916 (Fig. 6). The Medina offers a more authentic and historically immersive atmosphere and urban structure, while Ville Nouvelle follows a Western morphology, with large boulevards, buildings, sidewalks, parks, and squares (Girard, 2006). Fez is rich in architectural heritage, with an extensive network of mosques and ancient walkways that link hotels (*funduq*) and schools (*madrasa*) within its urban fabric. Unfortunately, these structures are currently under the threat of decay and collapse due to the pressure of urban expansion and the apathy of stakeholders. Before the French occupation in 1912, Fez was the capital city of Morocco. The city's decline began in the 19th century and accelerated during the French protectorate (1912–1956), causing the wealthy families to relocate from Fez al-Bali to the more affluent "Fez Dbibegh" neighbourhood (Istasse, 2013).

Under the French rule, a new capital was established in Rabat on the Atlantic coast. After gaining independence in 1956, most of Fez's elites relocated to Rabat and Casablanca. This caused Fez's early depopulation, leading to its early social and economic decline (Steenbruggen et al.,

2019). However, Fez regained its cultural environment and legacy, and tourism became a top priority for the country. After nearly 25 years of independence, there was a global interest in "preserving the old scene" and maintaining an "open air museum", which led to the inclusion of Fez on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1981. Following this inscription, the government restored several monuments with public funding while neglecting a large number of houses. In addition, the exaggerated importance given to a limited number of non-residential monuments, at the expense of humble local courtyard houses, quickly transfigures a unique local atmosphere to another superficial Disney resort town (Carboni and Perelli, 2018; Smith, 2010).

From the early 1990s, the Medina of Fez became the first port of call for many rural migrants seeking better living opportunities in the city, causing socio-spatial transformation. The extensive stock of large courtyard houses (*dyurs*) was subdivided into multiple dwellings to accommodate the increasing flows of rural migrants. Due to the growing influx of rural families, the original inhabitants' population decreased, especially during the decade spanning from 2004 to 2014. For instance, the total population

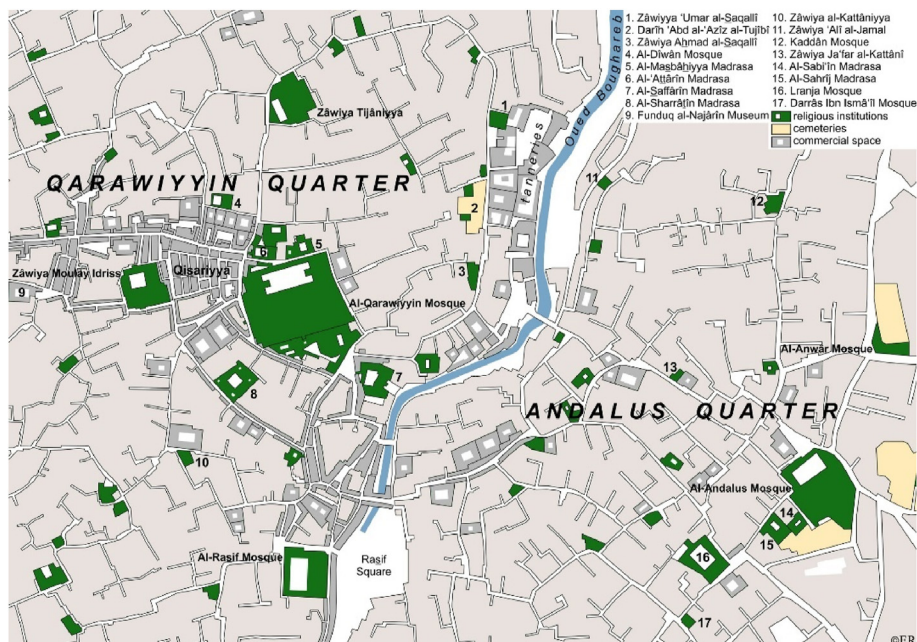


Fig. 7 Map showing the main heritage attractions in Fez al-Bali. Source: Ross (2013).

- The program focused on improving the built environment by restoring old traditional houses and demolishing ruins in a vulnerable state.
- The creation of active tourist circulation flows which would help to alleviate poverty among the young people through the regeneration of job opportunities (Radoine, 2003).

Despite the emphasis on poverty alleviation, the project's main achievement was attracting private foreign investment for real estate development. According to a 2006 report, the project was estimated to be ambitious, with a slight improvement in the overall health of residential units in the Medina, while 33 luxury homes were successfully converted into high-end boutique hotels (Lee, 2008). This initiative was implemented in accordance with a participatory approach involving relevant government departments and local actors.

Over 20 restoration and infrastructure rehabilitation projects have been undertaken, including restoring historic sites, gates, mansions, and fortifications (Guinand and Kanellopoulou, 2023). In addition, rehabilitation included public places, five *madrasas* (Quranic schools), four *borjs* (watchtowers), three *funduqs* (small hotels), three tanneries, two walls, two bridges, and eight monuments (Fig. 8). Similarly, polluting operations related to artisans and crafts were relocated outside city boundaries (Interviewee 4). These actions aimed to strengthen the tourist circuits inside Fez al-Bali, embellish the built environment, promote the socio-economic development of the city, and preserve the authentic character of this millennial city. Unfortunately, the living conditions of the inhabitants did not improve.

"Since the 1970s, efforts to safeguard the Fez medina and local resources have been patchwork and 'cosmetic



Fig. 8 The rehabilitated Fez al-Bali's Bab Boujloud and leather tannery.

in nature', which did not translate to direct benefits for the poor residents. Only focusing on renovating city gates and walls was redundant because they have little function in contemporary times" (Interviewee 9).

While the World Heritage status and subsequent rehabilitation projects have created more financial benefits by increasing tourism, the authorities emphasise the technical aspects of preserving monuments and the city's economic potential. The prevailing opinions on socioeconomic dynamics suggest that such regeneration initiatives tend to favour the Moroccan elites and foreign residents rather than the wider community (Interviewee 3).

Before the 2000s, there was no established correlation between preservation plans and tourism, and no national strategy was in place. Fez was able to regenerate itself because of the collective knowledge of the people, collective attachment, and spiritual attributes (Interviewee 2). However, the scope of heritage policies transformed with the integration of tourism since the 2000s—"as tourist demand in Morocco became more culturally oriented, tourism emerged as a tool for safeguarding the historic urban fabric and dilapidating houses" (Interviewee 1). The government's extraordinary efforts to attract tourists were aimed at generating income to fund restoration projects or secure foreign private investment (Alami et al., 2017). These strategies often align with the willingness to sell the territory to foreign investors (Lee, 2008). International tourism in Fez has increased in the last few decades, with some foreign visitors not only visiting the city annually but also being attracted to purchasing properties in Fez al-Bali. These properties, which often include dilapidated dwellings, were restored and reused as guesthouses with the assistance of local artisans.

4.2. The riad fever

From the second half of the 1990s to the early 2000s, foreigners purchased traditional houses in Medina and reused them for holiday residences or guesthouses. This movement—locally known as the "riad fever"—was initially supported by architects, which resulted in a significant change of ownership and usage patterns in the Medina of Fez (Kurzac-Souali, 2007). This epoch marked the discovery phase when local heritage became a catalyst for European

investments. The "charm" of the old city's traditional essence and the aesthetic appeal of its houses captivated many foreign buyers (Interviewee 4). It is important to mention that the Moroccan people, at least from the upper middle class, were also involved in this process of displacement or gentrification (Angelini and Godat, 2008; Joly, 2022; Ouassini and Ouassini, 2021). For example, out of the 54 official guesthouses in Fez, Moroccans owned 35. The goal was to transform Fez into a thriving tourist destination by enhancing the airport, providing lodging for visitors, revitalising the city's cultural scene, offering professional development opportunities, establishing organizational structures, and restoring the historic Medina (Istasse, n.d.).

Guesthouses, a recent phenomenon, offer the potential for developing new types of tourist accommodation away from the concept of hotels and resorts. In order to organise the private investors' initiative within a public rehabilitation project, the government issued a policy that defined two types of guesthouses: first and second classes. The geographical location and security parameters are the classification criteria for the first class, as these buildings are mainly located at peripheral sites. In contrast, second-class guesthouses are located in the deep heart of Fez al-Bali and have insufficient security measures (El Bouaichi, 2011).

The second phase began in 2004, marking the pinnacle of the "riad fever" when locals began to sell their courtyard houses and relocate to smaller apartments on the outskirts (Joly, 2021). Inspired by previous successful restoration projects and encouraged by low prices, foreigners purchased a significant number of *dyurs* during this period (Fig. 9). While this phenomenon helped many families gain quick revenue, it also exacted formidable social costs (Interviewee 1). Cultural heritage tourism influenced the establishment of 112 *riad* hotels between 1997 and 2016 (Alami et al., 2017) and more than 150 boutique hotels within Fez al-Bali (El Harrouni, 2017; Sutton, 2012). According to Bilter (2019), "Medina of Fez contains the largest number of *riads* at about 12,000, compared to an estimated 4000 in Marrakech and 2000 in Essaouira". A new community of foreigners emerged in Fez al-Bali (Lee, 2008). Selling prominent *dyurs* in the Medina has caused transnational gentrification, which, if not stopped, could force all Fassi families to move outside and sell their houses to foreigners,

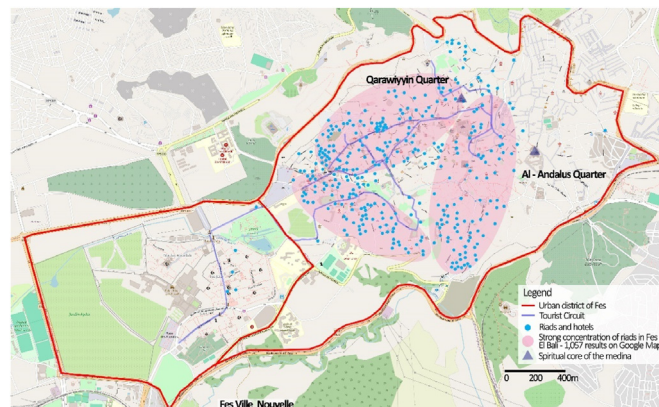


Fig. 9 Map showing the abundance of riads in Fez al-Bali. Source: The Authors, Base Map adapted from Open Street Map.

who will become Neo Fassis inhabitants (Bilter, 2019; McGuinness and Mouhli, 2012).

The government explored various solutions to maintain the city's rich heritage of architectural styles and cultures. As part of the initiative, the government created a territorial approach to conserving historic buildings, protecting decaying buildings, regulating the tourist economy, and reducing gentrification to make people stay in Fez al-Bali.

"The Tafilalet and Dades Rural Development Project (PDRT) was inaugurated in 2006 as the first regional tourism framework to promote visitor reception in the medina, guest rooms, or local residences to generate income for economically disadvantaged people" (Interviewee 4).

Since 2008, there has been a decrease in the prevalence of *riad* fever owing to initiatives aimed at mitigating its impact. Local inhabitants are actively involved in the rehabilitation processes to create tourist lodges and boutique hotels (Carboni and Idrissi Janati, 2016; Istasse, 2019). They play a significant role in maintaining social harmony and economic growth in Fez al-Bali. Nonetheless, it is crucial to implement a holistic rehabilitation plan which boosts the economy, restores cultural assets, and improves the physical environment. The next section provides an overview of the local solution to *riad* fever.

4.3. The Ziyarates Fez project

4.3.1. Implementation of Ziyarates Fez

The "Ziyarates Fez", also called "homestay accommodation", is a pilot hospitality initiative offering a more affordable alternative for low- and medium-income families residing in old Medina houses. This program was influenced by the 2006 PDRT framework, aiming to reduce socioeconomic disparities and assist families in the Tafilalet sector and Dades Valley, two of the most disadvantaged areas in the country (Interviewee 4). The initiative originated from the inaugural Fez Festival of Sufi Culture (FFCS) in 2007, when participants, who were mostly pilgrims, were provided with affordable accommodation in the El-Mokri castle in the Medina (Fauveaud et al., 2018). The overwhelming success of this initiative inspired hosts to extend the offer of homestay accommodation to foreign tourists. Although efforts to address the issue of *riad* fever and social problems have had limited results, the potential of cultural and intangible assets to help low-income residents in Fez al-Bali remains largely untapped.

Launched in 2008, this initiative was driven by the imperative to regenerate the Medina without displacing its local inhabitants. The owners of courtyard houses have the option of renting out a portion of their property, possibly one or two bedrooms, to visitors by converting it into a traditional Fassi bed and breakfast unit. This innovative idea involves sharing living rooms, courtyards, and downstairs spaces with tourists to learn about the traditions of Fassis and to enhance cultural understanding between different nations and religions (Interviewee 2). The revenue gained from rent can help current dwellers bear the costs of maintaining and renovating their houses (Ziyarates-Fès, 2023).

The implementation of the initiative can be classified into the emergence, experimentation, and appropriation phases (Debbagh and Yousfi, 2019). As part of the first two phases, several local stakeholders collaborated in the processes, including Conseil Regional du Tourism (CRT), Wilaya, the Social Development Agency (SDA), the Urban District of Fez Medina, and the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) (Interviewee 1). Although various stakeholders assumed different roles in the project, they were responsible for devising the legal framework and establishing objectives for the pilot project. The objectives highlighted include (1) strengthening the tourism infrastructure of Fez to achieve a leisure tourism system that allows indirect [benefits] for the local economy; (2) safeguarding local culture by encouraging residents from this culture to remain in Medina; and (3) associating tourism with human development and put in place income-generating activities that allow the involvement and integration of all citizens in the economic system. In addition, the purpose of this experiment is to (4) develop the capacities of local stakeholders in a way that produces the emergence of new and innovative sectors; (5) work towards gender [equity] by offering women who stay at home, young girls, and young unemployed female students the opportunity to enter the professional/work field; and (6) involve all local stakeholders in a coordinated manner to apply the principles of good governance (Kingdom of Morocco, 2007).

In the appropriation phase, the CRT participates in the selection and supervision of medium and low-income families to improve the physical condition of their traditional houses. Studies have highlighted that the selection criteria prioritise the commitment of participants, the quality of their accommodation, geographical location, and the reputation and reliability of the host family (Debbagh and Yousfi, 2019; Fauveaud et al., 2018). In addition, the CRT controls the implementation of management tools and the promotion of the initiative. Part of the process involves comprehensive training organised by the SDA on themes deemed essential to meet the expectations of foreign tourists. The tourism-based training focused on seven courses, including the history and heritage of Fez, financial management, project control, tourist tools—operation of the internet, hygiene, communication, security aspects, and support in tourist activities (Agence de Développement Social (ADS), 2007). With the financial assistance provided by the government and INDH, the selected houses were renovated as needed, including sanitary amenities that meet the required "Western" standards (Joly, 2022). Therefore, the local inhabitants received around 50% of aid from the government to cover the costs of rehabilitating part of their houses and furnishing tourism accommodation.

After this process, the stakeholders provide a quality certification materialised by a signage plaque, which distinguishes between "informal" homestay accommodations and those specifically chosen for the initiative (Berriane et al., 2010). Because of this local initiative, underprivileged families can now preserve and advance tangible and intangible cultural legacies (Interviewee 1). The initiative allows visitors to stay in the traditional house of a local host family and enjoy a unique hospitality experience without purchasing a dwelling. The family provides visitors with

comfortable spaces, allowing them to discover and understand the local culture and traditions (Conseil Regional du Tourisme Fès-Boulemane, 2023). This pilot project developed a network of 26 homestay rooms in Fez al-Bali, where tourists and guests shared spaces and interacted in local tourist accommodations. The hosts expressed unique hospitality by introducing tourists to the “local culture, traditions, and way of life as a way to create a mutual understanding between the local (hosts) and the global (tourists)” (Carboni and Idrissi Janati, 2016).

CRT selected another set of traditional homes in 2012 and 2017, which marked a progressive leap towards regeneration while preventing displacement and eviction (Interviewee 1). As of March 2023, the project includes 34 houses, 95 rooms, 11 restaurants, 15 suites, and nine terraces (Ziyarates-Fès, 2023). Most host families were located in the Qarawiyyin quarter of Medina, close to the Bab Boujloud Gate and car park (Fig. 10). Since the use of automobiles is restricted within the Medina, the location of the car park is a crucial consideration for tourist attraction around the periphery.

4.3.2. Impact of Ziyarates Fez

The impact of “Ziyarates Fez” is best understood through a multidimensional approach that evaluates the initiative’s economic, social, and cultural implications on the local community. Sustainable development in cultural heritage tourism is considered to preserve cultural heritage assets and promote economic growth without the over-exploitation of ecological resources, social inequity, or disruption of the community’s fabric (Loulanski and Loulanski, 2011; Mzembe et al., 2023). However, with climate change, there are critical concerns for the city, [which] in my opinion, is the best example of an Islamic City that exists today. I do not know of any other examples anywhere in the Muslim world that come close (Interviewee 3). This is a significant step toward maintaining the physiognomy of the cultural built environment.

This “bed and breakfast” concept integrates tourism and human development as a low-cost, social alternative to the ubiquitous boutique hotels. The regeneration process generated new jobs that helped low-income families achieve financial independence. Many local artisans engaged in cultural activities generate revenue from tourism. In addition, the project controls the sale of houses, the loss of original inhabitants, and the balance of social classes within the community. Scholars argue that the initiative is akin to an “integrated framework” encompassing various concepts, including cultural, spiritual, and solidarity tourism (Alabouch, 2019; Fauveaud et al., 2018; Joly, 2022). This is a noteworthy advancement in promoting sustainable tourism (Dao-Sabah, 2013). While one of the primary indicators of success lies in the economic empowerment of residents, it also generates a platform for the continuous regeneration of the Medina by training local participants in tourism hospitality. Numerous respondents from underprivileged families reported that the project improved their living conditions.

“There seems to have been renewed collective consciousness to maintain the city over the last few decades. People are becoming more engaged with the historic town, recognising it as their personal, economic, and cultural heritage rather than simply viewing it as a static World Heritage Site. Many new sustainable projects are underway; it is like a renaissance” (Interviewee 2).

Another dimension of impact assessment examines the debacles that warrant the initiatives in the first place—the proliferation of *riads*—and how the program is evolving. Scholars argue that a paradigm shift occurred in the conceptualisation of heritage and tourism in Fez when Europeans commenced the appropriation of historic houses and transformation into *riad* hotels (Alami et al., 2017; Kurzac-Souali, 2007; Radoine, 2008). According to Dris (2016), some Fassis expressed specific reactions to the *riad* fever,

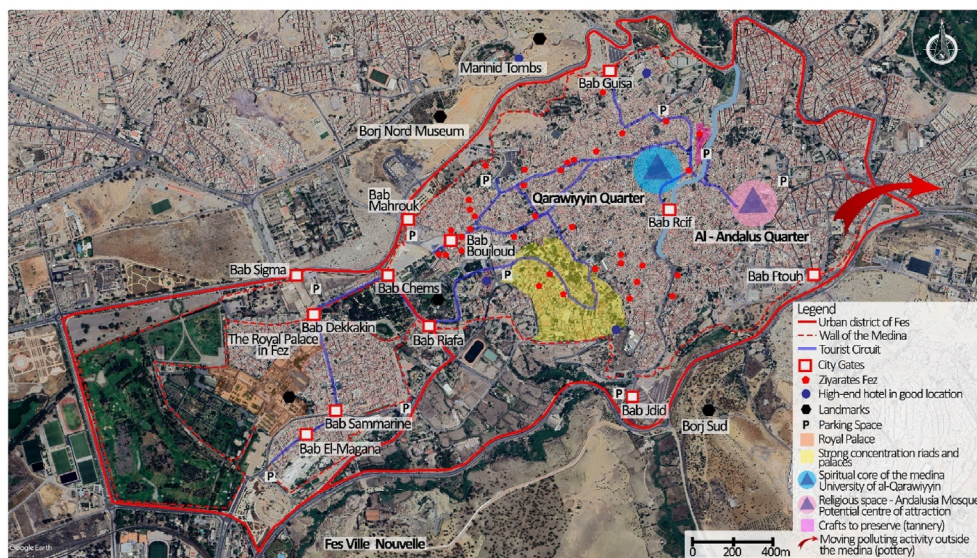


Fig. 10 The location of Ziyarates Fez in the Medina. Source: The Authors, Satellite Image adapted from Google Earth (2023), Maxar Technologies.

including a “feeling of oppression”, “sense of suffocation”, and “soon we will need a visa to enter the medina”. These reactions highlight the dire sociocultural consequences, topophobia, and concerns for cultural erasure.

“These houses are now seen as a very attractive formative investment by foreigners. With the dominance of foreigners, the social identity and the social sustainability of the Medina will be in danger. Of course, this has happened in Marrakech, you know, a lot” (Interviewee 8).

As a result, there was a need to adopt better practices that prevented local residents from alienation. Studies have classified “Ziyarates Fez” as a socially inclusive innovation in terms of its form and implementation process, stakeholders’ participation, and its objective of change (Debbagh and Yousfi, 2019). The project counterbalances the possible monopoly by the more affluent classes while avoiding the gentrification and exclusion of local inhabitants. By implementing more efficient, equitable, and sustainable solutions to complex societal issues, the project serves as an anti-displacement measure to ameliorate the exacerbating rate of gentrification (Guinand and Kanellopoulou, 2023).

According to Joly (2021), “extending from 2008 up to the present day, there has been a stagnation of the phenomenon of *riad* linked largely to the saturation of the property market and strong competition from the informal tourist accommodation sector”. Within the urban conurbation of Fez, over 400 tourist accommodations are available for reservation online, with only 100 owned by foreign investors, whether in classified or unclassified form. The initiative controls housing affordability through managed gentrification and displacement, benefiting society rather than just a few people. Furthermore, demographic changes have demonstrated a favourable effect, with an increase from 160,000 in 2007 to 181,000 in 2015, as opposed to the precipitous drop in community demographics experienced during the 1990s and the early 2000s (Carboni and Idrissi Janati, 2016; Guinand and Kanellopoulou, 2023).

In addition, another goal stipulates bottom-up negotiations and public participation in the tourist sector while ensuring proper monitoring. The program has monitoring implemented by the CRT, which allows adaptive strategies to ensure that the project remains responsive to the evolving needs of the community. For example, in cases where small independent business owners and proprietors, who the Ziyarates Fez often covered, could not meet specific program requirements and restrictions, the local authorities introduced a unique “ready-to-let house” permit. This permit provided ease of operating and opening authorization for these individuals. Since 2009, this “ready-to-let house” designation partly acknowledges out-of-category tourist accommodation, contributing to new socio-economic profiles among Moroccan tourist entrepreneurs. New legislation was enacted in 2015, specifically focusing on the changing landscape of tourist accommodation and various impediments. This new regulation has relaxed specific standards to consider a more diversified and less elitist offer. Flexibility in the approach increased the capacity of communities to act, which is crucial to

mitigating unforeseen challenges and reinforcing commitment to a sustainable, inclusive, and gentrification-resistant urban regeneration model.

The third goal is to foster intimate relationships and understanding between tourists and local culture. The project enabled hosts to cultivate enduring connections and friendships with many guests—“I still have friends among many families that stayed with us during their visits to Fez” (Interviewee 10). “People come here, and we still talk on the phone when they return to Paris” (Interviewee 8). Other studies have shown similar results in interviews with different families (Guinand and Kanellopoulou, 2023; Joly, 2022). On the one hand, the initiative managed to motivate the local population to preserve cultural heritage and historical structures through adaptive reuse and overall conservation of the heritage site. Several informants revealed how the program helped them rescind their decisions to sell their houses. Throughout all districts of the Fez al-Bali, many families proactively transformed their homes to accommodate visitors without relying on the Ziyarates Fez initiative (Interviewee 7). Local elites and those who relocated are more actively involved in initiatives to preserve Fassi culture and heritage (Interviewee 1). The project inspires inhabitants to take active steps to safeguard tangible and intangible heritage and intercultural dialogue.

Although selling their traditional houses to European customers may have been more profitable, individuals decided to stay in the city because of their emotional attachment and sense of belonging. Common opinions about the city include, “I experienced this city in a way that I had not experienced any other place. It has a kind of charm, charisma, [and] a sense of attachment. Nowadays, we talk about attachment to place; I think that is the best example” (Interviewee 4). Fez provides more than just services to clients, which is why even many foreigners have rhetoric nostalgia for the Medina (Interviewee 6). Tourists want to sense what it is to live in a traditional city; “they do not want things that they can find in New York, England, or Paris. Tourists want to experience things that are unique, an authentic ambience, and a special way of life. The food is one aspect, the aesthetics of the room, the courtyards, and the use of water and fountains is a big element” (Interviewee 8). I think part of the reasons why people are still attached to the Medina, despite modernity and French occupation, is because of this sort of historical and spiritual legacy that goes back to the founder of the city (Interviewee 3). The city is so fascinating; I always learn new things (Interviewee 6). Urban initiatives have maintained the city’s walkability, making “the city very comfortable, very relaxing, and very convenient” (Interviewee 5).

“People always walk because they cannot drive inside the city. You have to walk, so it is very healthy. Way-finding can be a challenge if one does not know the way around. But people here are very friendly; they will give you directions in case you get lost” (Interviewee 7).

On the other hand, the project provides an avenue for preserving and enhancing cultural identity and ancestral values. A major issue is the identity of the Medina because many foreigners are buying old houses and are restoring

them to become riad hotels (Interviewee 2). Empirical investigations provide evidence of contrasting cultural beliefs and values regarding *riad* fever among communities. While sentiments regarding changes in community and cultural practices are dynamic between residents and Europeans, there are apparent differences between the acculturation of Europeans in *riad* and local domestic architecture. Like other towns in North Africa, Fez suffers from the erosion of its architectural and urban character, which is a significant aspect of its cultural legacy and social conventions.

To distinguish themselves from the surrounding local domestic architecture, foreigners choose exoticism in the spatial configuration and embellishments of the facade, terrace, and entry doors, often evoking the opulent and fantastical atmosphere of Arabian Nights. This shift undermines the medina's symbolic framework of religious and cultural principles regarding privacy and values, leading to tension (Joly, 2021; Kurzac-Souali, 2007). It is well documented that the majority of buildings in old Islamic towns are oriented towards the inside and have "hidden" outer embellishments, using an interplay of the idea of *zahir* (outer dimension) and *batin* (inner) (Bianca, 2000; Kahera, 2011). Preserving the cultural identity against altering the modest design of traditional houses has become a critical success criterion. The success of the program indicates the ability to regenerate the site without eroding its intrinsic cultural richness.

5. Discussion

Gentrification has become a major global concern in metropolitan areas, including old and historic urban areas. In Morocco, studies have identified tourism-driven gentrification in the historic centres of the main cities, such as Fez, Marrakesh, Meknes, and Tangiers. This finding corroborates similar trends in China, Turkey, and other historic areas worldwide (Ma and Su, 2024; Zhu and González Martínez, 2022). In Europe and the United States, gentrification is a controversial issue that elicits mixed reactions. While some people view it as an attractive prospect, others find it difficult to swallow (Interviewee 3). The attraction of foreigners to authentic lifestyles and well-preserved traditional buildings was a catalyst for gentrification in Fez. According to Timothy (2023), unique cultural elements and landscapes attract diverse visitors and have become important sources of growth. The influence of foreign investors and intellectuals is even more remarkable as different values, behaviours, and social codes are introduced. This tendency intensified significantly during the 2000s as a wealthy European entrepreneur envisioned potential business potential in the tourism sector. By investing vast amounts of money, time, and interest, the new Medinas residents turned their properties into guesthouses, restaurants, galleries, cafes, or boutiques, making the Medinas their home. A common phenomenon has been reported in other historic cities in Morocco, such as Tangier and Marrakesh (Boussaa, 2012; Dris, 2016; Ouassini and Ouassini, 2021; Spotorno, 2019).

The strong demand for tourism accommodation and limited supply of houses and *riads* increased Medina's real

estate prices. Prices increased by 15% annually, peaking at 30% between 2001 and 2003, when they reached more than \$2000 per square meter for rehabilitated houses. De Cesari and Dimova (2019) reported similar increasing cases of gentrification in other heritage areas. However, the Medinas in Morocco encompass some of the highest rates of poverty found in urban areas, which makes the situation more precarious. Approximately one-third of the households live below the absolute poverty line. For numerous individuals, leaving the Medina was an opportunity to improve their living standards. Consequently, the motivation for profit encouraged many low-income families in the Medina to sell their properties and invest in new apartments on the outskirts (Smart Cities Dive).

As seen in the Medina of Fez, the *riad* fever, or the guesthouse movement, represents an opportunity to regenerate the Medina and develop weekends and seasonal tourism. Cocola-Gant (2018) recorded the impact of holiday rentals on Lisbon and several other communities in Spain. However, *riad* fever can potentially create a significant threat to Medina through the replacement of its original inhabitants by rich non-Fassi people and foreigners, which can be seen as a new form of "colonisation" (Dris, 2016). Due to rural migration, the local population of large historic cities has risen sharply. Urban poverty has been increasing, while *riad* fever has driven up property prices in the Medina. Ouassini and Ouassini (2021) extrapolate similar results in their study on Tangiers, criticising the Moroccan elites and the government for enacting gentrification measures without engaging any long-term inhabitants.

Since the inscription of Fez on the World Heritage List in 1981, three main initiatives have been launched: the UNESCO restoration project, the *riad* fever movement, and the Ziyarates Fez Project. UNESCO's first attempt was to restore a selected number of monuments at the expense of thousands of dilapidated houses. For example, monuments such as Funduq al-Najjariyyin, which functioned for commercial purposes, are now inaccessible to artisans and have been transformed into art and craft museums with little impact on the entire community (Istasse, 2019). Guinand and Kanellopoulou (2023) identified a trend of restoring monuments in other projects. The low-income inhabitants were displaced to more remote industrial areas to beautify the Medina. The *riad* fever was the second alternative, which boosted the economy of wealthy foreigners and locals who bought properties in Fez al-Bali and turned them into guesthouses. A similar pattern of progression exists, from demolition-based strategies to a more holistic urban regeneration approach. Many original inhabitants seized this opportunity by selling their houses. This trend has caused the acute national and transnational gentrification of Fez al-Bali.

Out of the three regeneration projects undertaken in the Medina of Fez, Ziyarates Fez or homestay accommodation seems to have learned from the inadequacies of the two other experiences. It aims to help low-income residents improve their lives without being forced to leave their homes. The government assisted underprivileged families in rehabilitating a portion of their homes and utilising them as accommodations for tourists, thereby alleviating the issue of displacement. Similarly, there is an opportunity for cohabitation and hospitality among global and local tourists. The adopted approach has proven to be more feasible

and cost-effective for the indigenous population, improving their living conditions without the need for relocation. Scholars have argued that a place-based approach to urban regeneration provides a better understanding of problems and solutions (Couch et al., 2013). Additionally, culture is a prime factor to consider in urban regeneration to reduce the impact of gentrification and social inequality.

While studies have highlighted that Fez has more *riad* hotels than other historic cities, Ziyarates Fez has created more sustainable conditions. Remarkably, many Fassis are returning to Fez, a phenomenon that is not present in Marrakech (Berriane and Idrissi-Janati, 2016; Bilter, 2019). The program provides an innovative way to reuse the surviving old houses. Rehabilitation work is undertaken in stages as low-income families generate income. This strategy allows the sustainable incremental regeneration of houses while preventing gentrification and displacement. As a result, the initiative has inspired comparable initiatives in other historic cities in Sefrou (Fès-Meknes region), Loudaya (Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region), and Sousse, Tunisia (Alabouch, 2019).

Compared to *riad* fever, Ziyarates Fez was more successful in improving local community living conditions. The assessment focuses on the initiative's long-term sustainability, examining trends over time to assess its adaptability to changing circumstances, community needs, and external factors (Joly, 2021). The project creates an authentic immersion experience for tourists and promotes economic growth through environmentally friendly and socially responsible practices. Although it did not make the host families wealthy, several respondents articulated that the project had improved their financial status compared with alternative strategies (Bilter, 2019; Dao-Sabah, 2013). Similar to other culture-led regenerations, this pioneering initiative supports the sense of place and place attachment embedded in the local residents.

While urban regeneration can have two sides, which can be beneficial or adverse if not managed, gentrification is a critical aspect that must be alleviated through continuous stringent policy checks. In line with the majority of urban renewal initiatives, an increase in the standard of living typically leads to a rise in property values within the surrounding neighbourhood. This might have contributed to the impoverishment of the population, forcing residents to suburbanise. In summary, "the project will allow visitors to learn about social practices, rituals, and traditions that are difficult to access. It also enables the assistance of a disadvantaged population by attracting tourists, improving their economic status and conveying 'authentic' local life in the spirit of intercultural exchange with 'their guests'. Sustainable tourism and homestay visit revenues are a significant social solidarity concept for the benefit of low-income families who want to save their homes" (Alami et al., 2017).

Asserting that the project has established a utopian condition would be improbable since approximately 13,600 historical buildings still need repair. Specific concerns remain regarding the coordination, political prerogative, power relations, and transparency of some stakeholders (Berriane et al., 2010; Fauveaud et al., 2018). The potential for the selection to be politicised is a significant concern; "the management of the project can favour some people and can sacrifice others, so there should be more

justice" (Interviewee 6). Ziyarates Fez sometimes prefers well-maintained houses and families of moderate income who can accommodate visitors when they join the project because the government has limited resources for restoring most deteriorated buildings (Interviewee 2). The distribution of "the program should be more equitable between the host families, with a primary emphasis on the underprivileged, since it is designed to benefit them" (Interviewee 9). While *riad* hotels are intended for those with more financial resources, regulating the most affluent households from attracting the greatest number of tourists is vital, particularly because they possess the financial, social, and cultural resources necessary to satisfy visitors' expectations.

The competition between the *riad* fever and Ziyarates Fez persists, much like the dichotomy between Ville Nouvelle and Fez al-Bali (Interviewee 3). Debates regarding authenticity, modernity, identical conservation, and innovation have continued to arise in the interplay between the Medina and adjoining cities. The importance of incorporating certain aspects of traditional Moroccan architecture, which serves as a representation of the nation's heritage and cultural identity, is widely recognised by local authorities. Preserving these architectural features is essential to maintain the historical essence of a building and protect the rich artistic legacy of the local community. However, there is a potential risk of encountering interventions that are not natural, indigenous, or compatible with the local culture and way of life (Interviewee 4). In some cases, *riads* and families compromise cultural practices to attract tourists. For example, there have been cases of families circumventing guidelines to create a swimming pool on the terrace of a traditional house, which is culturally offensive to the neighbourhood owing to their value of privacy.

Although host families are required to make some changes to the houses to accommodate visitors, such alterations include providing "Western" sanitary facilities, installing air conditioning, and increasing the size of windows surrounding the courtyard. While host families often do not use these facilities, they provide them for tourists (Interviewee 8). These changes may potentially influence deeply embedded cultural conventions. Authorities should enforce regulations and limitations on specific structures and acculturations while establishing rigorous inspection and supervision processes to guarantee adherence to culturally appropriate standards. Other suggested solutions have focused on the scope of tourism in the Medina.

"It may be better to focus on family tourism rather than single travellers, as this may create challenges for host families, particularly if they have daughters or other family members living in the house" (Interviewee 5).

The host families, primarily in the Qarawiyyin quarter, illustrated an uneven distribution of Ziyarates Fez between the two parts of Fez al-Bali. It is worth mentioning that the program needs to adequately represent the disadvantaged families residing on the Al-Andalus side. Within the Qarawiyyin quarter, where most host houses are located, there is also a disparity between the inner city and the periphery. Most of the host houses are close to the city gate and main

street (Bab Boujloud), offering convenient parking facilities (see Fig. 10). This area has undergone significant restoration compared to others, subjugating the city's central and spiritual core. Some foreigners experienced only the periphery without regular interactions with the substantial part of the city (Interviewee 10).

Ensuring adequate security is a significant challenge for Fez al-Bali (Istasse, n.d.). Owing to concerns regarding security, homestay families in the city centre received fewer paid guests than those at the periphery (Interviewee 8). In particular, it is common for women living in the Medina to feel apprehensive about venturing outside after 10 p.m. As a result, guesthouses are understandably focused on safeguarding their customers and are willing to employ security guards to accompany their guests. To ensure social sustainability in any regeneration initiative, equal opportunities for security and safety should be provided to everyone, whether they reside in the inner areas or outside. In addition, the limits of funds and resources curtailed the wholesale implementation of the initiative, which is a typical low and middle-income economy. Similar to societies across the globe, urban challenges are complex and influenced by the historical context, institutional logic, and socio-spatial dynamics. These issues typically require incremental resolutions such as those of Ziyarates Fez. The initiative responded to the lack of an adapted and realistic strategy for redevelopment, such as the first master plan for urban development (SDAU) in the late 1970s and other subsequent initiatives. Ziyarates Fez exemplifies these challenges and prompts the gradual social and urban demarginalisation of Fez medina. Impoverished families are becoming stakeholders in promoting tourism and cultural heritage without destroying the urban fabric.

6. Conclusion

A large number of historic centres in the Arab world are under the threat of completely vanishing due to decay and neglect. Notable examples in Morocco include the Fez, Marrakesh, and Tangiers, while other regional examples encompass the Casbah of Algiers in Algeria and the Old Tripoli in Libya. In addition, prominent World Heritage Cities such as Sanaa in Yemen and Aleppo in Syria have lost a large part of their cultural heritage due to internal and external military conflicts. In the Gulf region, numerous historic neighbourhoods have been transformed into dwellings for low-income workers as a result of overcrowding and inadequate maintenance (Al-Malki et al., 2024; Boussaa, 2015; Boussaa et al., 2023). Consequently, innumerable structures have deteriorated and evolved into urban slums.

In order to give a new heart to these dilapidated and decayed historic centres, the Ziyarates Fez project can be an inspiring model to regenerate the surviving heritage and cities in the Arab world. This initiative is an income-generating activity or pro-poor tourism that improves lifestyles without causing displacement (Interviewee 4). Ziyarates Fez offers an incremental approach to rehabilitating dilapidated houses while simultaneously accommodating tourists within a designated portion of the property. It fosters sustainable regeneration while strengthening the

mutual understanding of foreign cultures and maintaining a unique sense of place.

Although tourism relies on the traditional concepts of local identity, developing effective tourism strategies should not concentrate solely on primary cultural heritage attractions or monuments. Providing hospitality resources such as the tourist accommodation model in Fez can attract more visitors to stay for more than one night. However, urban regeneration must be a place-based strategy to capture the unique context and challenges while simultaneously considering the potential for gentrification and displacement of residents. If urban regeneration initiatives are based on the cliché that if we build it, they will come, it is essential to question, "but at what cost to the culture of the place?" (Interviewee 3). While tourism has become a significant source of income for some individuals in Fez, it is essential to restrict the "commodification" and "touristization" of heritage resources. It is unacceptable to violate the culture to invigorate the economy (Interviewee 3). This approach can be achieved by limiting the concentration on tourism at the expense of heritage preservation.

This proposal suggests a potential solution for sustaining numerous resilient courtyard houses in Fez and other historic cities in Morocco and the Arab world. Improving the living conditions of inhabitants can be achieved by generating additional revenue. Likewise, creating more job opportunities, particularly for youth, can encourage them to contribute to preserving their built heritage. Conserving the heritage will ensure "the continued transmission of the intergenerational expertise of the guild in various disciplines such as carpentry, copperwork, and leatherwork, which will be perpetual in perpetuity" (Interviewee 1). In particular, these products are useful not only in architecture but also for utilitarian products, which tourists would find attractive because they are not available elsewhere. The ultimate goal of these endeavours is to transform historic cities from obsolete to sustainable living heritage, allowing residents to live, work, and enjoy their leisure time. This transformation will not only preserve the unique cultural and architectural heritage of these cities but also ensure that the residents are not displaced from their Medinas.

Ethics statement

The authors declare that no ethical review was required for this study. Written informed consent for participation was not required because all participants' data was anonymized before the statistical analyses were done.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declares that they have no competing interests.

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