



2010 On Site Review Report

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by *Hassan Radoine*

Revitalization of Recent Heritage of Tunis

Tunis, Tunisia



Architect

Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina de Tunis

Client

Tunis Municipality

Design

1998 - ongoing

Completed

1998 - 2007 (and ongoing)

Revitalization of the Recent Heritage of Tunis

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I. Introduction

The 19th and early 20th century architectural heritage of North African cities embodies an important cultural exchange between the southern and northern Mediterranean. The revitalisation of this typical heritage, which is often adjacent to the *medinas*, is key to the improvement of the environment as well as to save the urban memory of these complex cities. Accordingly, the project under review, in Tunis, is a leading one in the region. Its area is known as the Hypercentre, which is located around Avenue Bourguiba and its environs. The project consists of an urban revitalisation plan, devised by the Association de Sauvegarde de la Medina de Tunis (ASM), to restructure all public spaces and make them chiefly pedestrian - with an area of 60,000 square meters. Key dilapidated monuments and facades were rehabilitated following leading architectural and urban technical guidelines. ASM actively guided the public and private sectors to undertake revitalisation works, assure an overall quality, and meet the established objectives by the different stakeholders in the city.

II. Contextual Information

A. *Brief Historical Background*

Tunis is a Mediterranean city that underwent major urban transformations when it was a French Protectorate in 1881. Moving from the historic walled medina's urban pattern to a grid plan changed its urban character. This new layout, which was applied in an adjacent zone next to the medina, formed the body of the *Ville Nouvelle*, also known as the Hypercentre or Bab B'Har (literally: the sea gate).

This *Ville Nouvelle* was erected on the eastern side of the medina. The southern, northern, and western surroundings of the medina consisted of fortifications, cemeteries and olive fields. The new town was planned around the strategic Avenue de la Marine, often referred to as 'Champs Elysées de Tunis'. It was an arena of outstanding architectural landmarks such as the French cathedral and Résidence Générale. The first was placed next to the site of a disappeared chapel of a sixteen-century bastion. The second, a sober neo-classical building, was situated in front of the first on the other side of this same avenue.

In terms of urbanism, the new town applied a rational and ordered pattern governed by the first *règlement de voirie* in February 1889, which pursued the urban focus on hygiene and commodity that was common at the end of the 19th century. Hygienic buildings with access to light, potable water, sewers and electricity formed the criteria of the *Ville Nouvelle*, which included several European facilities, including: two train stations, Belvédère park, a municipal market (Fondouk El Ghallah), a municipal slaughter house, and a *Régie des Tabacs*.

Towards the end of 19th century, Tunis became an important commercial and administrative centre. New monuments added to its already established cultural structures, including two

theatres, the Rossini Palace and Théâtre Municipal. All these urban transformations around Avenue de la Marine, (named Bourguiba after independence), formed an important reservoir of cultural encounters of the native and the colonial heritage. The city of Tunis has taken an unprecedented step toward the conservation of its colonial heritage, which is often destroyed in other North African countries such as Morocco and Algeria, as it represents memories of colonisation. However, this heritage, often described as recent vis-à-vis that of the local medina, is worthy of consideration and indeed is a vehicle of important artistic, architectural, and urban exchange between the north and south of the Mediterranean sea.

B. *Local Architectural Character*

The first European influence on local architecture in Tunis occurred before the French Protectorate, within the immediate periphery of the medina, where several funduqs (caravanserais) were used by foreign consulates. Next to these funduqs, new buildings were designed in a mostly Neo-classical architectural vocabulary, inspired by neighbouring Italy. They were mainly residential buildings with retail activities on the ground floor.

At the end of the 19th century, the model of a multiple-story building had taken root. The plot areas were very regular and ordered along the boulevards. This strict regulation introduced a homogeneous urban pattern that introduced the notion of the urban block through a series of well-designed facades of different architectural styles: Neo-classical, Arabic-Islamic, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco. The application of urban and architectural regulations generated a new urban context with different layout and purpose.

In 1870, the techniques of construction changed radically, with the inclusion of the first bearing wall of massive stone. As in the Mediterranean buildings, the roof was an accessible flat terrace in the opposite of French pitched roofs for climatic reasons.

C. *Climatic Conditions*

The climate in Tunis is Mediterranean and temperature varies throughout the year from 11°C in January and 26°C in July. The raining season starts in October and ends around April with intermittent precipitation. The weather is not severe which makes the outside life very dynamic throughout the year.

D. *Topography of the Project Site*

The hypercentre that covers the area of the project is located on flat terrain, which was created in large part by filling in marshes.

III. Programme

A. *History of the Inception of the Project*

The Municipality of Tunis solicited the ASM to do the study of the urban context of the most important axis in the Ville Nouvelle. The territory of this axis consists of Avenue Bourguiba

and Avenue de France. This project was considered vital to the changing of the city's image in an effort to attract more tourists and investors.

In addition, the decision makers and planners became more conscious about the extension of the notion of heritage outside the confines of the old medina. This decision was supported by the new legislation through the promulgation of the Law No. 94-35 of 24 February 1994 that is related to the Code of Heritage: it indicates the following in Article 3:

"Sont considérés comme ensembles historiques et traditionnels les biens immeubles, construits ou non, isolés ou reliés, tels que les villes, villages et quartiers qui, en raison de leur architecture, de leur unicité et de leur harmonie ou de leur intégration dans leur environnement, ont une valeur nationale ou universelle, quant à leur aspect historique, esthétique, artistique ou traditionnel".

This shows the pioneering step taken by Tunis in considering all sorts of architecture, whether native or colonial, as heritage. This occurred thanks to the efforts of ASM in making officials and the public aware of heritage matters, especially after its success, since 1980, in conserving the medina. As a result, the necessity of including 19th and 20th century recent heritage, neglected for decades, in preservation plans, increasingly became a preoccupation of specialists and politicians alike. In 1988, the Tunisian state launched the procedure of classification of historic monuments, which were visibly becoming dilapidated. The following monuments were listed:

- Palais d'Erlanger of Neo-Arabic-Moorish style built between 1912 and 1920 (listed 1989).
- Théâtre Municipal of Art Nouveau style (listed 1992).
- Collège Alaoui built in 1884 of Neo-Arabic-Moorish style (listed 1992).
- Poste Centrale (1891) of Neo-Classical style (listed 1992).
- Collège Sadiki (1897) of Neo-Arabic-Moorish style (listed 1992).

These five public buildings of major importance in the modern urban history of Tunis, as well as in the collective memory, were the first to be considered historic monuments since independence.

Following this growing concern, ASM launched a project entitled 'Projet d'Embellissement de l'Hypercentre de Tunis'. It used a holistic approach to underline the dysfunctions of this sensitive, high-value, recent heritage area and to deduce potential solutions. This study resulted in a formal document under the title, 'Tunis au XXI^{ème} siècle'. It proposed three key actions:

- The embellishment of the *Hypercentre* of Tunis as a pilot project to be duplicated in the whole city.
- The restoration and rehabilitation of dilapidated European buildings.
- The improvement of traffic and parking in and around the area of the project.

This study had also produced exhaustive surveys for the important European buildings and facades, which were recorded through detailed drawings.

B. *How were the Architects and Specialists chosen?*

As mentioned earlier, the municipality solicited the ASM to undertake the study and offer technical assistance for its implementation. ASM is an institution that has developed throughout four decades a valuable expertise in the conservation of historic sites as well as a practical and realistic approach of implementation of scenarios of heritage development. Being equipped with trained staff members and technical means, ASM was assessed as the ideal institution for these types of projects. This proves as well that ASM has extended its definition of heritage to encompass the colonial and recent heritage and capitalised its know-how acquired from the medina context.

C. *General Program Objectives*

- Boost the image of the capital city Tunis through finding continuity between the medina and the Ville Nouvelle.
- Establish a holistic approach for resolving the dysfunctions of this city through improving the daily life of inhabitants, preserving its environment, conserving its recent heritage, and developing its downtown.

D. *Functional Requirements*

This urban revitalisation project had to resolve the following issues:

- Organise vehicular and pedestrian movements in order to create a more social and cultural urban space.
- Arrange the use of public space by retails and coffee shops that invaded the walking spaces.
- Improve and rehabilitate the urban furniture to meet the newly re-established image of the urban facades.
- Preserve the authentic functions of some buildings such as the Marché Centrale and Théâtre Municipale.
- Replace lost functions in heritage buildings with contemporary suitable ones.

IV. *Description*

A. *Project Data*

The project of Revitalisation of Recent Heritage of Tunis consists primarily of the following parts:

- The Hypercentre is located around the axis that starts from the Place de la Victoire and ends at Gare TGM crossing the Avenue de France and Avenue Bourguiba. The length of this axis is 1,433m and 60m in average width. It forms an urban ensemble of great architectural value. Its revitalisation has generated quality urban spaces in downtown Tunis, a strategic hub for business, tourism and cultural development. This revitalisation

underlined the value of key buildings in the area of the project through their renovation and restoration, namely:

- Théâtre Municipale de Tunis is an Art Nouveau building designed by the architect Jean-Emile Resplandy and was opened to the public in 1902. Resplandy invited other artists and painters to embellish this important monument in the memory of Tunis. The painter Michele Corteggiani and the sculptor Belloc decorated the facade. Its splendid interior, in an Italian style, contained 1,200 seats as well as a majestic stage. The entrance is highly stylized with two marbles staircases decorated with iron-cast foliage balustrades and lampposts.
- Marché central known historically as Fondouk El Ghalla is located between the Charles de Gaulle, Espagne, Danemark and Allemagne streets. It covers an area of approximately 12,000 m². It has been totally renovated and revitalised in its function as a strategic element in the life of downtown Tunis.
- Banque Franco-Algerienne is a building of Beaux-arts style built in 1907. It was renovated in 1999 to host the Gouvernorat de Tunis. Its parcel area is 1,000 m² and built-area is 2,530 m².
- Rosini Palace is a Neo-classical building that was built in 1902. It was an Italian theatre that lost in 1950 its most prestigious top facade coronation. The facade is restored to its original state based on archival documents and photos.

B. Evolution of Design Concepts

The urban approach to solve architectural issues is pioneering in this project. With limited budget, a strategic design scenario was developed by ASM to intervene in key monuments as well as to undertake an urban upgrading for the public space of the Hypercentre of Tunis. The squares were given priority as nodal points that enhance the urban experience. These squares, Place de la Victoire and Place du 7 Novembre, were meticulously reorganised and renovated.

In terms of infrastructure, ASM has designed and implemented major pedestrian zones including the extension of the pedestrianised spaces at the expense of vehicular ones in order to recreate the old European ambience of Tunis. Therefore, retails and coffee shops owners were assisted in redesigning their facades and to use suitable public furniture to keep the visual harmony. To enhance the nightlife, ASM restored and redesigned all public lighting around the site of the project, which increased security tremendously, as well as public use of the Hypercentre.

As to monuments, the design concept consisted of two parts. The first was to rehabilitate the building from inside and outside by keeping the original functions such as in the case of the Theatre Municipale, Banque Franco-Algerienne, and Marche Centrale. The second was to focus on the facades that represent a high architectural value to the Hypercentre such as Rosini Palace and others.

To articulate all these actions, ASM redesigned the landscaping of the *Hypercentre*. In addition to planting more trees and increasing green areas, the whole landscape was thoroughly studied to engender a continuous and rhythmic walking experience with creation of more terraces, benches, itineraries, water fountains, lighting posts and so forth.

C. *Structure, Materials, Technology*

In the old districts of Tunis, the construction of buildings relied mainly on rough stone and a lime mortar. Roofs were constructed out of wood and in larger buildings were vaulted by using sun backed bricks or stone. As in traditional buildings of two or three levels, the bearing walls constituted the main structural system with light partitions within interior spaces. Since 1870, with a new monumental scale, the structure shifted to larger massive masonry walls with cement joints that enabled the increase of height of a building to foster several stories. This new building structural style that spread over Europe as the urban layout required more high density buildings, Tunis seemingly was in advance vis-à-vis other North African countries in having this typology first through the modernising influence of the Ottomans.

The historic buildings in the Hypercentre suffered from several problems of decay before rehabilitation began, such as:

- Structural horizontal cracks that were threatening the stability of buildings.
- Weakness of cement joints which jeopardised the solidity of the bearing walls.
- Capillary rise of water due to deteriorated infrastructure and humidity of the walls either because of drainage system decay inside the building or absorption of rainwater by unprotected walls and roofs.
- Decay of roofs with over usage or overload without maintenance works.
- Disappearance or decay of ornaments because of unskilful works of maintenance or neglect.
- The public facades were deficiently altered by adding new strange elements or simply could not resist climatic changes over the years.
- The pauperisation of public spaces and random use of awnings as well as showcases.

These issues and others were tackled through meticulous and dexterous works of rehabilitation mainly by local workmanship and craftsmanship. However, actions were different according to the value of a building, façade, or detail. In the Théâtre Municipale and Ex-Banque Franco-Algerienne, the rehabilitation works were too advanced in comparison with the Marche Centrale, which is rather a public intensive-use building.

D. *Origins of Technology, Materials, Labour Force, Professionals*

The Revitalisation of the Recent Heritage of Tunis project was exclusively conducted with local expertise. The ASM has been the major force driving of the whole project, after its long-standing conservation work in the medina. Except for the maintenance and restoration work on the chairs of the theatre that was done by an Italian firm based in Tunis, the whole project relied on local labour force and craftsmanship.

Local architects that were very involved in the process supervised the rehabilitation works. This has created a momentum after the implementation of the project because of these acquired skills. They are currently applied in other buildings and facades that were not part of the project.

The project of Tunis relied, exclusively, on local building materials and techniques. Some of these skills are brought by ASM through its work of restoration of the medina of Tunis. New skills were gained as well such as the decorative paintings on ceilings that were applied to the main lobby of the Theatre by a local artist and painter.

V. Construction Schedule and Costs

A. *History of Project Design and Implementation*

1998-2007

B. *Total Costs*

Global cost of the project: 29 million TND (USD 19,450,000)

VI. Technical Assessment

A. *Functional Assessment*

The functions of the whole project of revitalisation differ from building to building at the architectural and the urban level. These functions could be described as the following:

- The Hypercentre has generated quality urban spaces in downtown Tunis, a strategic hub for business, tourism and cultural development. It is becoming the main attraction for local people and tourists. The influx of people visiting the site around 11am and 4pm is remarkable. The extension of pedestrian zones as well as upgrading the urban furniture including coffee shops' terraces have made the users explore every corner of this vibrant centre.
- The Théâtre Municipale is currently running and I attended a performance of the National Music Band where almost all seats were occupied. It is managed by proper staff from the municipality and a local event organisation firm. This building has undoubtedly enhanced the cultural assets of the city of Tunis.
- The Marché central is a major destination of shoppers from all over the city of Tunis. It is well organised and supervised by proper staff from the municipality as well as the association of merchants who own the shops or rent them.

- The Banque Franco-Algerienne is used by the Gouvernorat de Tunis. It is a strategic building for it hosts the national elections, and it is currently the headquarters of the ruling party.
- The Rosini Palace is currently used as a cinema with retail activities in the ground floor. It has an active coffee shop in its main courtyard and its covered, clustered shops on the ground floor, dating from 1906, could be seen as similar to the layout of a new mall.

In addition to the successful functional program, the project of revitalisation of recent heritage of Tunis has increased the real estate value as well as the levels of business in downtown Tunis.

B. Response to, and Planning for, Emergency Situations

The project has addressed emergency in terms of accessibility as well as security. Before the project was implemented, the centre was threatened by crime and security issues. The upgrading of its spaces through appropriate landscaping and quality pedestrian pathways has increased visitation at all times of the day, especially in comparison with its deserted state prior to the project, especially in the evenings. All buildings and streets are equipped with fire safety measures connected to the public firemen stations.

C. Ageing and Maintenance

The revitalisation works have revived the skills relevant to these historic buildings. The private owners have started exploring whether the specialised labour used in the projects could be used to rehabilitate their old facades or buildings, which were not in the zone of the project. More awareness has been created by the project among municipality officials, who seem encouraged to carry out the maintenance of the rejuvenated buildings.

D. Design Features

As it is a revitalisation project, the only part of the whole project that could be seen as a new design component is the landscaping around the main avenue Hbib Bourguiba. It has enhanced the visibility of urban facades and created a balance between vehicular and pedestrian circuits. The green zones were designed to create more shade during summer time, and keep open vistas toward both sides of the avenue.

E. Impact of the Project on the Site

The project of the revitalisation of recent heritage in Tunis has generated a great impact on the centre of the city as well as shifted its image from neglected heritage to national, urban architectural landmark. The upgraded pedestrian areas have shifted the balance away from cars. The social, cultural, environmental and economic impact of the project is very noticeable on the site.

The gentrification concern is not posed in this project though few cases of transfer of families occurred especially in the buildings that were threatening to collapse due to ageing and decay.

In this regard, the project assisted the rehabilitation of approximately 130 decayed buildings in Bab B'har. For this purpose, a 1,240,000 TND loan was made available to owners with only a symbolic interest rate so they could undertake the consolidation and rehabilitation of their properties in the Hypercentre. ASM provided technical assistance to almost 20 owners, to ensure the buildings would meet the required standards.

Since its launch in 1998, the project has had an impact on decision makers to continue with the efforts of upgrading and revitalizing the whole site of Bab B'har (Hypercentre). This complexity and variety of stakeholders involved in the project made it a leading project.

The increase of the real estate value did not jeopardize the stability of families and occupants. However, the competition to acquire these historic European-style buildings did become noticeable among local investors. The example of the conversion of a historic bank to a reputed and successful hotel (Tunisia Hotel) has ignited the adaptive-use scenarios for these buildings that have undoubtedly a high architectural and artistic value in the most vibrant centre of Tunis.

F. Durability and Long-term Viability of the Project

This project has generated an unprecedented awareness about the purpose of safeguarding the colonial heritage in Islamic and Arabic countries - where any foreign architectural and urban intervention was seen as alien especially if it was created by colonial powers. However, the encounter of the native and the colonial is part of the enrichment of the actual urban landscapes. Therefore, this project could be considered as reconciling with the history of the place, and moving toward a future that shares all the components and historical layers of the city regardless of the political position that one may take. The place has a memory, and this could not be erased. This project has proven the potential of such colonial heritage as a cultural, touristic, and economic asset for the city.

The project has created a momentum for urban conservation of the existing fabric that is often threatened by the mega-projects that are invading North Africa, especially with the injection of the oil money of Gulf countries. It also shows a sustainable urban action that relies on local resources and guarantees the stability of local communities.

VII. Users

A. Description of those who use or Benefit from the Project

The project has covered several functions: residential, commercial, cultural and touristic. The first beneficiary is the citizen of Tunis who has been offered a quality urban space in the most strategic location of the city, with extended pedestrian zones. The residents in the Hypercentre have gained back security and landscape quality that had been lost after decades of neglect. The owners of businesses have witnessed the rise in value of their business. The tourists have discovered a new cultural destination in the city of Tunis in addition to its valuable medina, which unquestionably stretches their stay and directly benefits the economy of the city.

The cultural image of the city of Tunis has been augmented with this project and it is likely to increase the number of conferences that are hosted here every year by international organisations. The Théâtre, Marche, Rosini Palace, Ex-Banque Franco-Algerienne and so forth are only examples of how successful the rejuvenation of historic functions and the adaptation to new uses to render an obsolete heritage a dynamic one. The artists, actors, and musicians have found a new audience that is attracted by the environment of the theatre and its attractive environment. The politicians have gained the trust of their people through their support of this long term and visionary project that goes beyond ephemeral political slogans.

The works of rehabilitation generated by the project have created several jobs, and produced working and learning opportunities for several craftsmen and labourers. This know-how capital is not to be ignored. This sustainable asset for developing countries is very valuable especially when heritage is involved in local development.

B. Response to Project by Clients, Users, Community

Following several interviews on site of different groups and ages of people, the project has a positive impact on all. For the young generation, the Hypercentre is an attractive destination for gathering, learning, and entertaining. It is also giving Tunis an international cultural façade as an established modern city with a sense of urban planning and belonging. The revitalisation of public squares has created very attractive hubs for youth to do different activities. The consequent increase of security has made the centre frequented more by the young ladies, which has changed the gender perception among the passersby.

The users have witnessed the increase of quality restaurants and shopping areas around the Hypercentre. These activities and others attract more and more visitors from the periphery of Tunis and from all over Tunisia, from different income levels and socio-cultural profiles.

The architectural professionals have welcomed the project. Since private architects contributed widely through different small projects for owners carried out under the supervision of ASM, they are asking the government more projects of this scope. One architect said to me: 'It makes us learn again about architectural lessons provided by our own city.' However, one critique surfaced through an interview with a professional who said that it would be more beneficial if the associations of architects were to be involved, rather than just dealing with individual architects.

The neighbours in the immediate vicinity praise the project, but question why the decision makers limited its scope to the Hypercentre. Although it is a space of collective memory used by all, other zones in Tunis need further attention from the municipality in terms of urban upgrading. The project has not created any public reaction or resentment, and nothing negative about the project has been mentioned in the newspapers or other public news media.

VIII. Persons involved

Association de Sauvegarde de Tunis (ASM)

Team leader:

Madame Sémia AKROUT YAÏCHE, Architect-Planner and *Directrice Générale de l'ASM*

Team members:

Chief-Architects in charge of technical supervision

Zoubeir MOUHLI, Architect-Planner, *Directeur adjoint chargé de l'Architecture et de l'Urbanisme, ASM*

Faïka BEJAOUI, Architect-Planner, *Directeur adjoint chargé de la Réhabilitation et du Permis de Bâtir, ASM*

Architect in charge of implementation and supervision of craftsmen

Abdelkerim GAZZAH, Architect-Planner, *Directeur adjoint chargé des Travaux, ASM*

Architects collaborators

Khaled BOUZID

Mohsen AZAÏEZ

Soulef AOUIDIDI

Lassaâd BEN SLIMENE

Mourad GHANOUDI

Sadika GHOUMA

Amed MEDDEB BEN GHORBEL

Khaled AYED

Moez JÏED

Moez TABIB

Artisans

Safouane F'TOUHA, *peintre artisan*

Mongi HARBAOUI, *charpentier*

Representative Marché Central's merchants

Ali MATMATI

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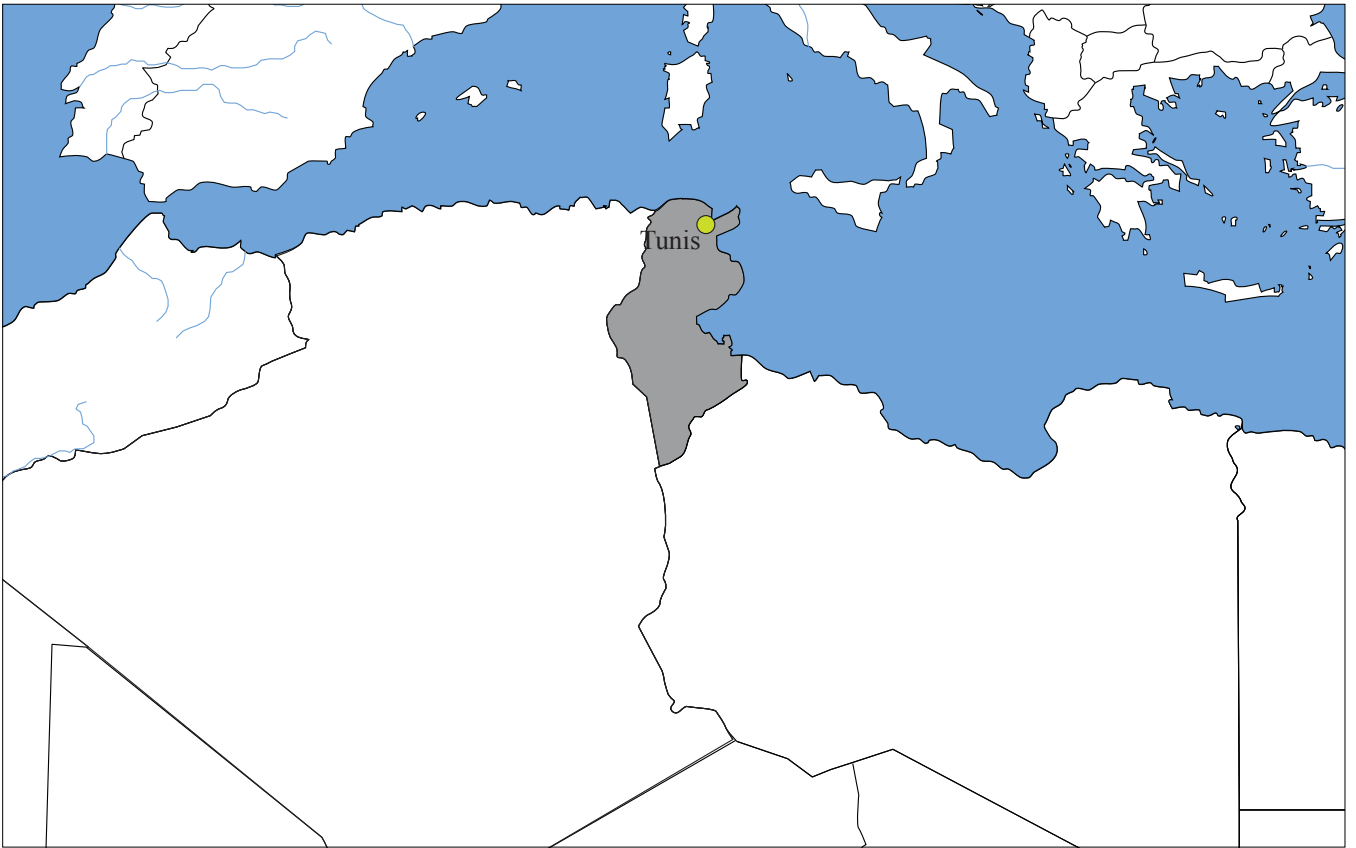
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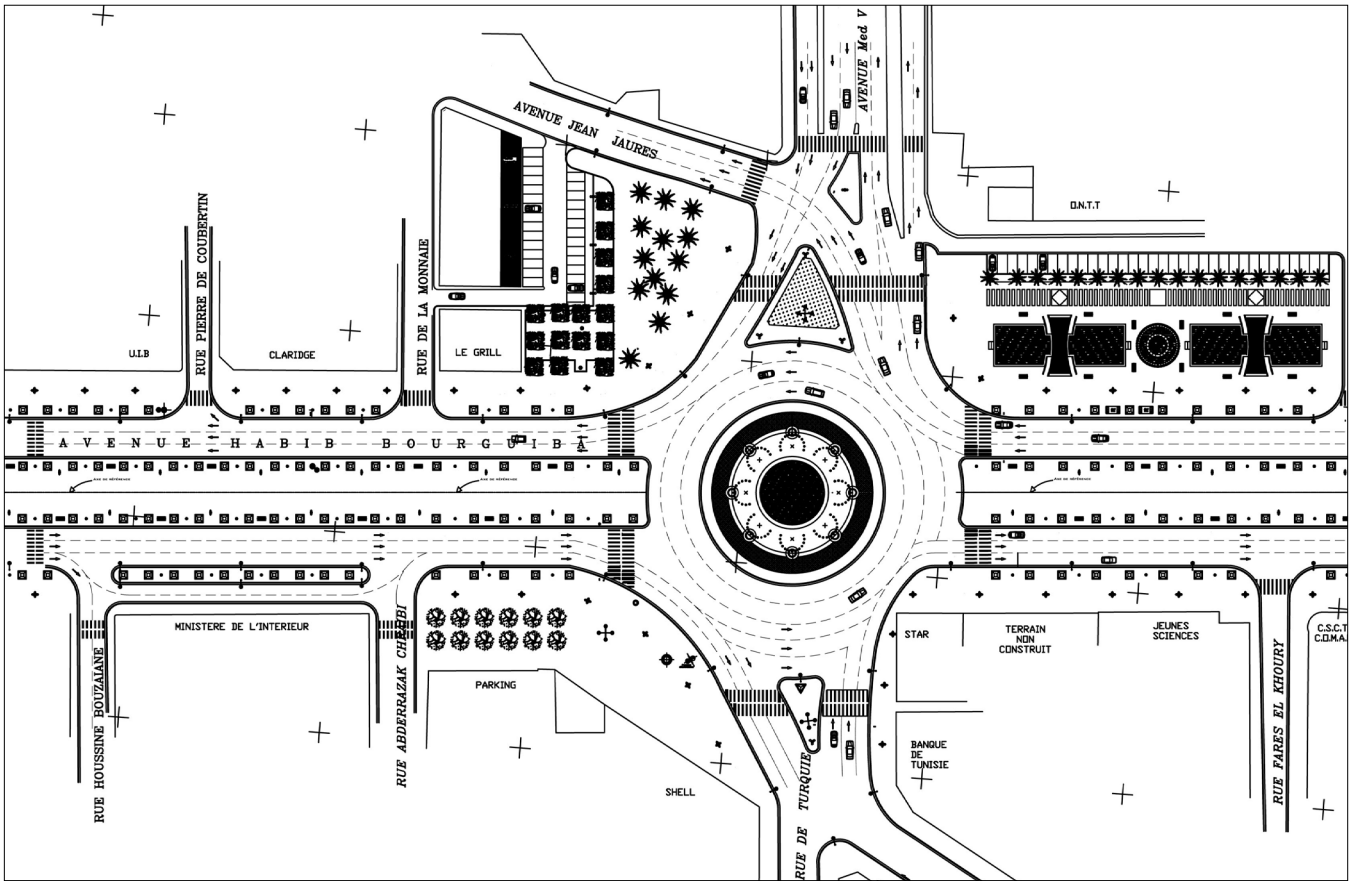
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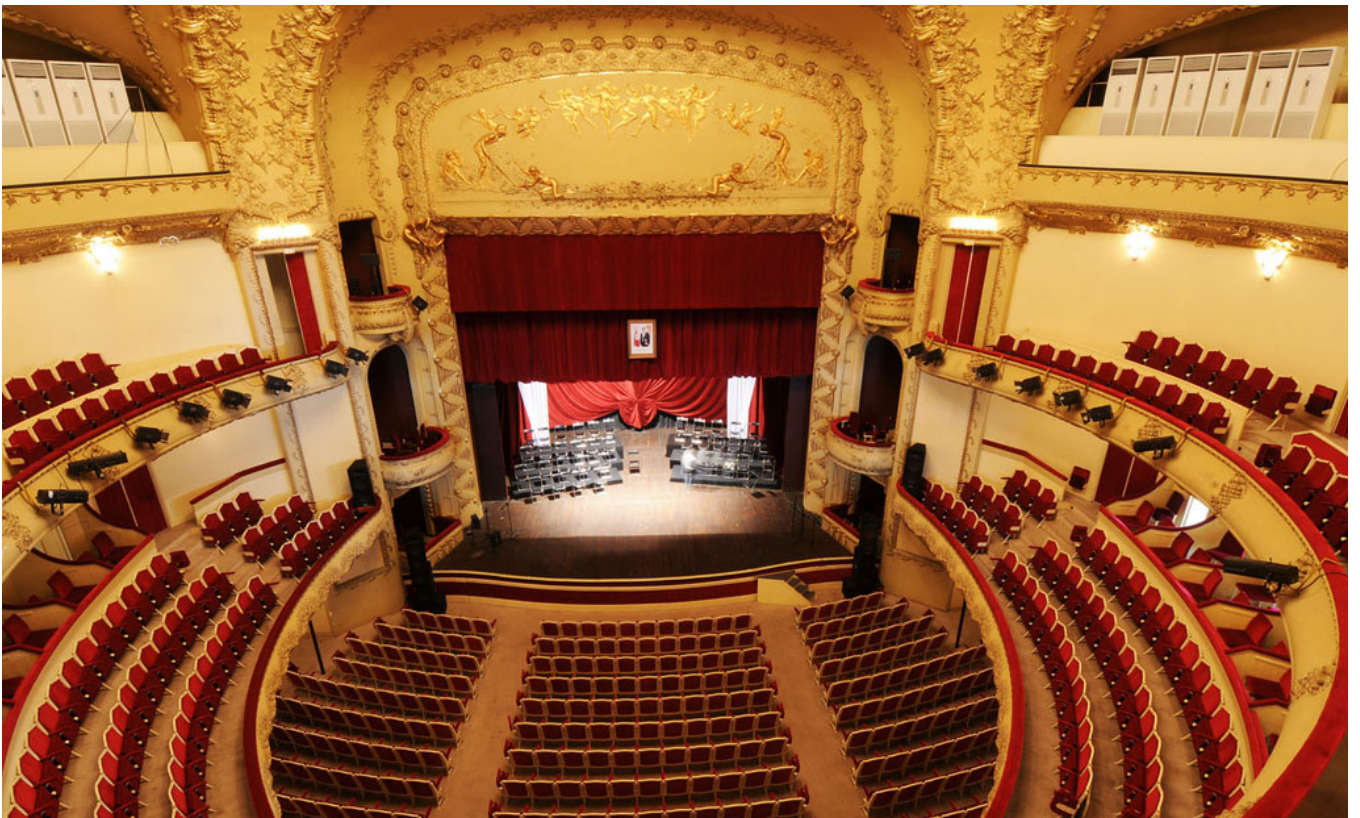
Avenue Habib Bourguiba, with a pedestrian area.





Art Nouveau façade of the Municipal Theatre, by Jean Emile Resplandy, 1902.

Interior view of the theatre from the balcony to the stage.





Rossini Palace, opened in 1902 and restored to its original state based on archival documents and photos.



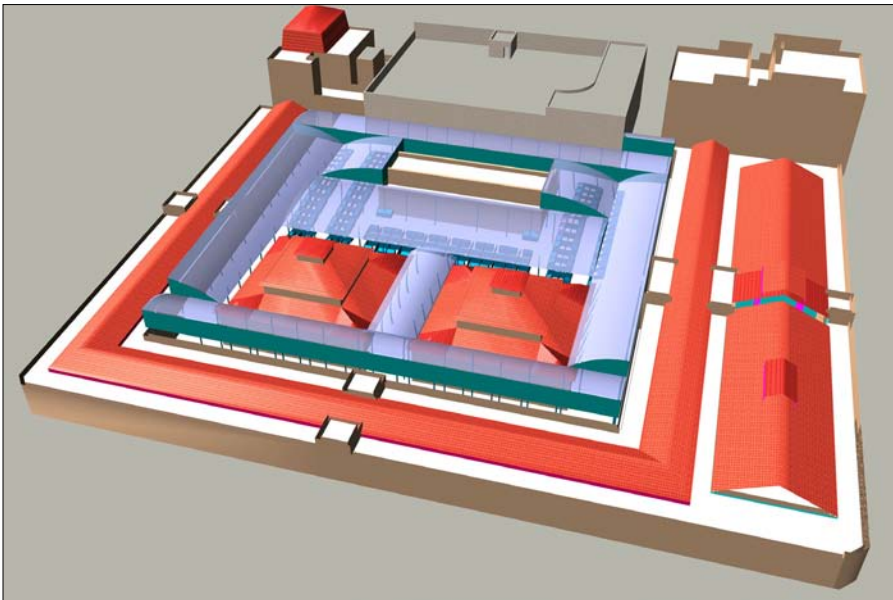
Saint Vincent de Paul Cathedral.



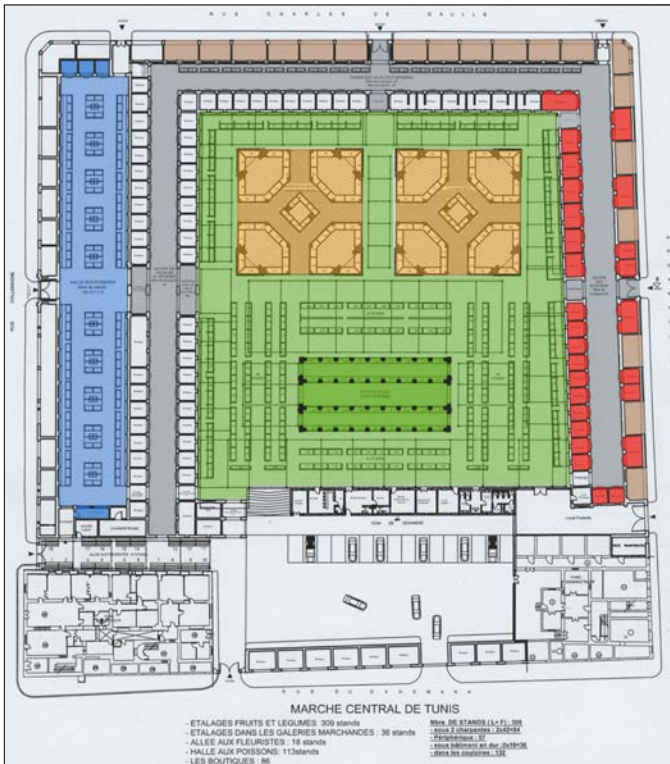
Retails and coffee shops owners were assisted to redesign their facades to keep visual harmony.

Arches of the Magasin Général.





3D model of the central market.



Distribution of shops in the central market.



The central market in 1884.



Exterior view of the central building before restoration.

Interior view of the central building after restoration.





View of the fish market before restoration.



Alley of the fish market after restoration.



Central wooden covered market before restoration.



View of the restored central wooden covered market.

