

# Casablanca Between Land Speculation and Heritage Preservation: Issues of an Urbanization Under Tension

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the interplay between land speculation and heritage preservation in Casablanca, Morocco's economic capital, where urbanisation has long been driven by speculative logics. From the colonial period to the present, rising land values, regulatory loopholes, and real estate-led redevelopment have profoundly reshaped the city's central districts, notably Sidi Belyout and Anfa. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach—ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, spatial and archival analysis, and land price data from 2015–2024—the study reveals how speculative practices exert increasing pressure on built heritage. Anchored in critical urban theory (Harvey, Lefebvre, Smith), the research highlights that patrimonial mechanisms (Davallon, 2023), while formally acknowledged, are often fragmented, selectively applied, and subordinated to short-term market interests. As a result, heritage is less a safeguard of architectural memory than a vehicle for capital accumulation and symbolic revalorisation. The findings underscore a structural tension between urban development and preservation, questioning the capacity of regulatory frameworks to mediate between economic imperatives and cultural values. The article calls for stronger institutional coordination and renewed reflection on the political economy of heritage in rapidly transforming cities of the Global South.

JOURNAL OF MEDITERRANEAN CITIES. (2025), 5(1), 17-33

[https://doi.org/10.38027/mediterranean-cities\\_vol5no1\\_2](https://doi.org/10.38027/mediterranean-cities_vol5no1_2)

## ARTICLE INFO:

*Article history:*

*Received: 12 February 2025*

*Revised: 8 August 2025*

*Accepted: 10 August 2025*

*Available online: 15 August 2025*

**Keywords:**

*Casablanca, heritage, speculation, historical legacy, patrimonial mechanisms.*

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## 1. Introduction

Casablanca, Morocco's largest city with around 4 million inhabitants, is the economic heart of the country. Situated within the Casa-Rabat duopoly, it dominates the national metropolitan landscape thanks to its port, airport, industrial and commercial infrastructures. A veritable engine of national growth, the Casablanca-Settat region contributes approximately 32% of Morocco's GDP<sup>12</sup> Its

<sup>1</sup> Source: According to 2024 General Census of Population and Housing. High Commission for Planning (Morocco)

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## How to cite this article:

Aljem, S., & Segtan, M. (2025). Casablanca between land speculation and heritage preservation: Issues of an urbanization under tension. *Journal of Mediterranean Cities*, 5(1), 17–33. [https://doi.org/10.38027/mediterranean-cities\\_vol5no1\\_2](https://doi.org/10.38027/mediterranean-cities_vol5no1_2)

attractiveness is undeniable: it accounts for 48%<sup>3</sup> of investments in Morocco, attracting both domestic and foreign companies and capital. Its role in international trade is just as crucial: its port, one of the busiest in Africa, consolidates its position as a strategic platform for Morocco's imports and exports.



**Figure 1.** Casablanca, Morocco (Source: google earth Pro)

Casablanca's economic weight is the result of a long trajectory of growth. From a modest port in the mid-19th century, exporting wool and grain, it quickly became a hub of foreign trade. By the late 1800s, it handled over a quarter of Morocco's international commerce, attracting traders from across the country (Dernouny et Leonard, 1987).

The French Protectorate (1912–1956) marked a decisive turning point: the construction of the major port and modern infrastructures propelled Casablanca into its role as Morocco's economic engine. The city also became an urban laboratory, blending architectural innovation with rapid expansion.

This growth, however, was fueled by aggressive land speculation, already present before colonization and intensified by settler privileges. After independence, speculative dynamics persisted, driven by population pressure, industrial needs, and land scarcity. Today, real estate profitability continues to dominate, often at the expense of planning and heritage.

As Casablanca continues to densify and expand, speculative dynamics, understood as the range of practices aimed at maximizing land rent through the anticipation of urban value increases, play a central role in the reconfiguration of its urban fabric. This pressure is particularly acute in the city's central districts, which are rich in architectural heritage inherited from the colonial period and Moroccan modernism. Yet, the patrimonial mechanisms for safeguarding and enhancing this heritage (legal tools, inventory systems, classifications, public interventions) are struggling to regulate these transformations.

This gives rise to a structural tension: how do land valorization logics reshape the priorities of urban action? To what extent can patrimonial mechanisms (Davallon, J., 2023) resist, or adapt to, economic dynamics that tend to instrumentalize space and marginalize memory? The case of Casablanca thus invites a broader reflection on the actual capacity of public regulation to mediate between economic interests, preservation imperatives, and the right to the city.

This article posits that land speculation has become a structuring force in Casablanca's urban development. It operates through spatial differentiation, unregulated densification, and increasing pressure on the built heritage. We hypothesize that this speculative dynamic overrides the mechanisms intended to regulate urban growth and protect architectural heritage, which remain fragmented, weakly enforced, and often subordinated to short-term economic priorities. In this context, patrimonial mechanisms struggle to assert their role. This imbalance fosters an urban transformation where land

<sup>2</sup> Source: High Commission for Planning (Morocco)

<sup>3</sup> Figures for 2024. Source: Casablanca Regional Investment Center. [www.casainvest.ma](http://www.casainvest.ma).

value takes precedence over historical and cultural values, producing tensions that reshape the urban landscape and question the capacity of public action to mediate between economic and heritage logics.

## 2. Methodological approach

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic observation, qualitative interviews, spatial and archival analysis, and a review of land price data. The aim is not to produce an exhaustive account of Casablanca's heritage dynamics, but to interrogate the structural mechanisms through which land speculation reshapes the governance of architectural heritage. Methodologically, the study is anchored in a long-term engagement with urban development issues in Casablanca, drawing on critical urban theory (Lefebvre, Harvey) to examine how space is produced, contested, and commodified.

The first author's doctoral research (Aljem, 2018) on urban megaprojects revealed early on how 20th-century colonial and modernist heritage was systematically marginalized in planning policies. This foundation was complemented by a decade of informal documentation, interviews, and media monitoring, providing a historical depth to the present investigation. In 2024, the second author conducted an independent field study focused on deteriorating heritage buildings, combining photographic surveys and site assessments. These findings significantly contributed to the research design and empirical foundation of the current study. These findings led to a more structured investigation, conducted jointly between 2024 and 2025.

The empirical component consisted of three main strands: (1) ethnographic observations in central districts to document material transformations and everyday appropriations of contested heritage; (2) around ten semi-structured interviews with key actors in planning and heritage, selected for their role in decision-making or mobilization processes; and (3) a spatial and documentary analysis of planning instruments, regulatory gaps, and transformations of emblematic sites. These materials were analyzed thematically, focusing on how actors negotiate legitimacy and how heritage value is constructed or undermined in speculative contexts.

To contextualize the intensity of speculative dynamics, the study also reviewed land price trends from 2015 to 2024, based on listings, agency reports, and professional interviews. Given the opacity of the market, these figures were treated as indicative and triangulated with qualitative observations. The sharp price increase observed (42% in key areas) serves not as statistical proof but as an indicator of the scale of disconnection between market values and preservation frameworks.

Ultimately, this methodological strategy seeks to illuminate how fragmented governance, market incentives, and institutional loopholes converge to redefine both heritage value and urban space.

## 3. Theoretical framework

The analysis of land dynamics in Casablanca draws on a critical urban theory approach, at the intersection of urban political economy, the right to the city, and heritage studies. It starts from the premise that heritage is not a neutral object of conservation, but a field of conflict where actors negotiate meanings, legitimacy, and uses. This conflict is particularly visible in the tension between speculative dynamics and heritage mechanisms, two key notions that structure this study.

By *speculative dynamics*, we refer to the set of strategies and anticipatory behaviors aimed at capturing land value gains through retention, rezoning, or strategic demolition, often disconnected from actual use or need. This notion is grounded in David Harvey's work on the urbanization of capital (1985; 2012), which shows how urban space becomes a vehicle for capital accumulation. In contrast, *heritage mechanisms* refer to the formal and informal tools used to identify, classify, and preserve heritage elements. Following Davallon (2023), these mechanisms include inventories, safeguard plans, expert commissions, and institutional designations.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space (1974) provides an essential lens to understand this dynamic. Urban space is not a passive backdrop, but a social product shaped by power relations. Heritage, in this sense, becomes a contested representation of collective memory, subject to selection, erasure, and commodification. Laurajane Smith (2006) deepens this critical perspective by arguing that heritage is always a process of authorization, often aligned with dominant economic interests. In the context of Casablanca, symbolic enhancement through rehabilitation coexists with the silent

destruction of less profitable buildings, reinforcing a heritage landscape shaped by rent-seeking rather than collective memory.

This framework allows us to interpret the observed gap between urban planning documents and actual land practices, not as administrative incoherence, but as the symptom of a broader structural contradiction between value creation and spatial justice.

#### 4. Land speculation: a dynamic intrinsic to the city's history :

Casablanca's urban history is related to the speculative dynamic that accompanied its development, long before the official establishment of the French Protectorate in 1912. From the end of the XIX<sup>e</sup> century, the still modest city attracted growing attention from Europeans, particularly the French, seduced by its strategic position on the Atlantic and its economic potential<sup>4</sup>. This process of capitalist acceleration was rooted in a local reality: an emerging city in contact with the global economy, with an expanding port and cheap labor.



**Figure 2.** First advertising billboards for housing subdivisions, Casablanca. (source: Cohen, J.-L., & Eleb, M. (1998). *Casablanca: Myths and figures of an urban adventure*.)

On the eve of the formal establishment of the protectorate, the city was already invaded by a population from all over Europe: "Officers, engineers, businessmen, small traders, capitalists who go to 'see', workers, cocottes: it's a swarm of our humanity from Europe that crosses the sea to land on the west coast of Morocco."<sup>5</sup>. This migratory flow is explained by the anticipation of rapid enrichment, fuelled by demographic growth and the prospects of land development. "The population of this city was growing by two thousand souls a month"<sup>6</sup>, which stimulated demand for urban land and unbridled speculation, long before the regulatory foundations of colonial urban planning were laid.

In this context, land speculation became one of the visible signs of economic colonization in progress. Casablanca became a veritable laboratory for colonial urban rent, where land became a commodity, freely exchanged in an unregulated market. The city's cafés served as informal exchanges where prices soared: "Such and such a plot of land on the road to Rabat, bought for 400,000 francs last Saturday, resold for 500,000 yesterday evening"<sup>7</sup>. This phenomenon is not marginal: it structures the city, guides investment and accelerates spatial segregation.

<sup>4</sup> Académie d'Architecture (ed.). *L'Œuvre de Henri Prost: Architecture et Urbanisme*. Paris : Académie d'Architecture, 1960. 243 p.

<sup>5</sup> Lavaud, A. (2003). *Casablanca: Années 20: récits de voyages*. Casablanca: La Croisée des chemins, page 18.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, page 22.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, page 36.

This speculation is underpinned by two major dynamics: the first is economic. Casablanca became a major export port, linked to a fertile hinterland<sup>8</sup>. The modern infrastructure attracted capital, while the large, low-paid local workforce guaranteed high returns for European investors<sup>9</sup>. The second dynamic was political and ideological: on the eve of the Protectorate, France was preparing to integrate Casablanca into its colonial system. Land ownership thus became an anticipated sovereignty issue. Buying land meant gaining a foothold in the future colonized territory. What's more, it's crucial to note that Casablanca was bombed and occupied by France in 1907, five years before the Protectorate was signed in Fez in 1912. This military occupation can be interpreted as a major political and strategic action by France to establish its hold on the city<sup>10</sup>.

The Medina itself is no exception to this commercial logic. Although described as a dilapidated area, it is also perceived as a "reservoir of labor" and an "exceptionally dynamic commercial space"<sup>11</sup>. Europeans see it as a strategic commercial hub, but also as a reservoir to be urbanized. This duality, between economic enhancement and social relegation, contributes to making the Medina a transitional area, gradually encircled by modern projects.

Colonial history only amplified this trend. The Prost plan (1917) and then the Ecochard plan (1952) aimed to channel this growth and organize the city's expansion through hierarchical urban planning<sup>12</sup>. But they never succeeded in completely containing the speculative logic. The first plan covered only a small portion of the urban territory, giving free rein to a multitude of unregulated peripheral housing estates. Indeed, Prost himself points to the inability of the French urban planner and administration to contain the maneuvers of speculators, who "took control of the city"<sup>13</sup> as soon as the first settlers arrived. On his arrival in Morocco, Mr. Ecochard was confronted with an "urban landscape" marked by two major dynamics: speculative pressure on land and the uncontrolled expansion of shantytowns<sup>14</sup>. His development plan, although more comprehensive, still had to come to terms with the realities of the land market: "major purchases by the Domaines services had made it possible to build large housing estates for the Moroccan population", but often in areas "built outside the urban perimeter without control"<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Scientific Mission of Morocco. Cities and tribes of Morocco: Casablanca and its region. Tome II : Châouïa. Paris: Éditions Ernest Leroux, Casablanca: Éditions Frontispice, 1915, 338 p.

<sup>9</sup> Idem.

<sup>10</sup> Adam, A. (1968a). Casablanca: essai sur la transformation de la société marocaine au contact de l'Occident (Tome 1). Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.

<sup>11</sup> Dernouny, M., & Léonard, G. (Date unknown). Casablanca: La parole & la trace, Casablanca, p.76.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, J.-L., & Eleb, M. (1998). *Casablanca: myths and figures of an urban adventure*. Hazan.

<sup>13</sup> Urbanisme, n. 88, 1955, quoted by J. Dethier, 1970, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Aljem, S., Bkiri, I. (2019). Limitations of the 'Plan' as a Public Policy Instrument in the 'Urban Fabric' of Major Moroccan Cities: The Case of Casablanca and Rabat. *African and Mediterranean Journal of Architecture and Urbanism*, [S.l.], n. 1, pp. 35-45, ISSN 2665-7953.

<sup>15</sup> Dernouny, M., & Léonard, G. (Date unknown). Casablanca: La parole & la trace, Casablanca, p.56.





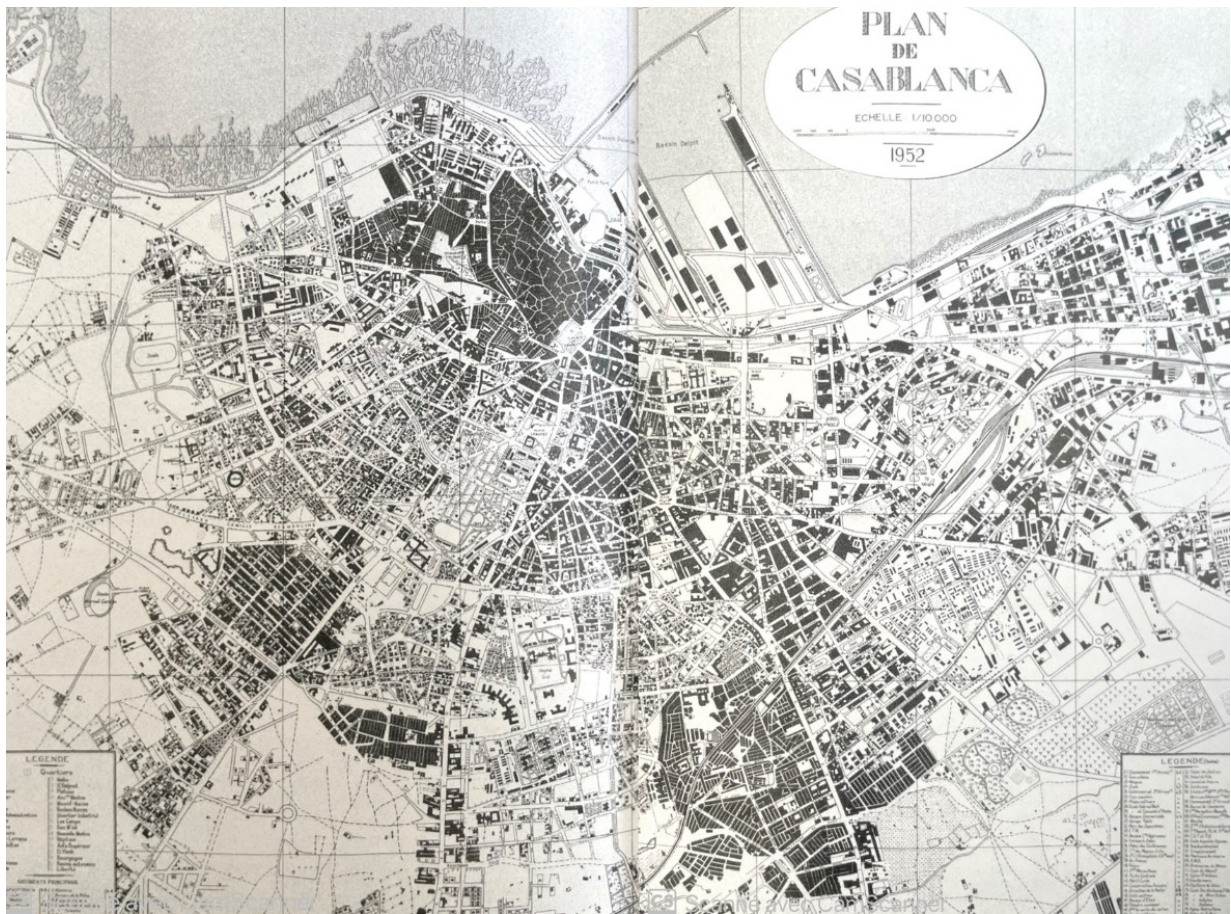
**Figure 3.** The Prost plan (1917), Casablanca. (source: Cohen, J.-L., & Eleb, M. (1998). *Casablanca: Myths and figures of an urban adventure.*)

Many authors point out that the legislative and regulatory arsenal introduced by Ecochard in Casablanca, based on a system of permits, authorizations and bans, was primarily aimed at curbing land speculation and containing the expansion of shantytowns. The stakes were as much sanitary as urban planning. Ecochard himself makes no secret of the radical nature of his observation: *"In Casablanca, after the war, speculators were indeed running the streets (...) It's a poor disguise to use the law of supply and demand to hide speculation, to use freedom to undermine the health of inhabitants, to use individual security to confine 2/3 of a population to slums!"*<sup>16</sup>

However, another interpretation is proposed, according to which *"the fact of calling on H. Prost (1917), then M. Ecochard (1946), to draw up urban planning instruments, was carried out primarily to prepare the various spaces for an extroverted capitalist economy; then to adapt this space and reorganize it to accommodate the massive arrival of capital (Ecochard's development of industrial zones)"* (Rachik, 1995, p. 129). This reading reveals an essential shift: colonial urbanism goes beyond the simple logic of planning or sanitation to become a tool for spatial organization in the service of economic profitability and investment attractiveness.

The turn of the 1940s-1950s marked the emergence of a new urban logic, driven by the growth of the modern European city of La Villeneuve. This dynamic ushered in a profound change in our relationship with space: it was no longer seen primarily as a living environment or symbolic support, but as an economic resource to be valued. The function of use recedes in favor of exchange value, in a context where urban planning becomes a lever for accumulation. Jacques Berque sums up this evolution when he states that *"the mobilization of space becomes a value of exchange and, even more, a speculative investment"* (Berque, 1958, p. 23). The city then becomes an object of speculation, structured by the logic of profit and segregation, rather than by objectives of social justice or territorial equity.

<sup>16</sup> Écochard, M. (1955). *Casablanca: le roman d'une ville*. Éditions de Paris, P. 109.



**Figure 4.** The Ecochard plan (1952), Casablanca. (source: Cohen, J.-L., & Eleb, M. (1998). *Casablanca: Myths and figures of an urban adventure.*)

From the outset, therefore, Casablanca was shaped by a double movement: on the one hand, a logic of land capture by European elites, attracted by a "new", open, profitable city; on the other, the gradual sidelining of local populations, who nevertheless fed the economic dynamic<sup>17</sup>. The city becomes a space of colonial contradictions: between planned order and speculative disorder, urban modernity and social misery, economic centrality.

#### **Post-Protectorate: Casablanca, an identity in search of legitimacy**

Far from disappearing after independence, land speculation in Casablanca intensified under the combined effect of high housing demand, limited land supply and the growing economic attractiveness of the city<sup>18</sup>. Despite a demographic slowdown<sup>19</sup>, the artificially maintained scarcity of land through retention strategies continues to fuel sustained price inflation<sup>20</sup>. The State, by gradually ceding its land reserves, has seen its ability to regulate eroded. As early as 1984, the SDAU warned of the absence of a coherent land policy, leaving the field open to speculative logics.

This gradual disengagement has fostered a dynamic in which urbanization is driven less by the general interest than by rent-seeking strategies. A growing number of speculators are capitalizing on land

<sup>17</sup> Dernouny, M., & Leonard, G. (1987). *Casablanca: la parole et la trace*. Afrique-Orient.

<sup>18</sup> Kaioua, A. (1998). *Casablanca, le sol urbain entre usage industriel et spéculation immobilière*. *Études rurales*, (246), 109-126.

<sup>19</sup> The population of the Casablanca urban area rose from one million in 1960 to 1,500,000 in 1971. This represents an average annual growth rate of 4.2%. At the September 1982 census, it reached 2,263,470 inhabitants, with an intercensal annual growth rate of 3.3%.

<sup>20</sup> Zyani, B. (1986). *Habitat, land constraints and urban development in Casablanca*. Éditions du CNRS, *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, Tome XXV.



pressure resulting from urban and industrial growth. Peripheral urbanization, which is often informal or poorly supervised, has been tolerated or even instrumentalized by the state, which has seen it as a means of containing social tensions, channelling middle-class savings and strengthening its local clientèles, as shown by the surveys carried out by numerous Moroccan researchers between the 1980s and 1990s<sup>21</sup>. Speculation led to the spread of illegal housing estates, the consolidation of shantytowns, and the multiplication of zoning changes, often anticipated for speculative purposes, without any mechanism for the public capture of capital gains.

Against this backdrop, land became both a safe haven and a medium for speculative appreciation, accentuated by rising construction costs and insufficient public housing supply. The rise in prices was continuous and widespread: moderate until the 1960s, it began to spiral in 1973, under the influence of several factors - ex-colonial land being put on the market, demographic growth, a revival in construction, and accelerated inflation<sup>22</sup>. It was at this point that major retailers, industrialists and real-estate companies began to invest massively in agricultural land on the outskirts of the city, anticipating a change in use. Market-garden land was then converted into economic housing estates or industrial zones, revealing the extent of the functional mutations affecting Casablanca's suburbs.

Land valuation also relies on zoning changes, often anticipated by investors, which cause prices to soar without any public capture of capital gains. Added to this is the perception of land as a haven, reinforced by rising construction costs. As a result, Casablanca has long suffered from an insufficient public housing supply, accentuating the dominance of the private sector and directing production towards the most profitable segments. This imbalance feeds disorderly urban sprawl and socio-spatial segregation, to the detriment of a mixed, accessible city.

Contemporary Casablanca has a clear ambition: to become an international city, with a world-class financial center, the Casablanca Finance City (CFC). This project embodies the city's desire to become part of the global economy, to attract investors, to capture flows, talents, and capital. But this ambition is part of a marked neoliberal logic: competition between territories, priority given to major showcase projects, and aggressive urban marketing<sup>23</sup>. Cities are shaped according to the needs of economic elites, land prices soar, and spatial disparities and social gaps are glaringly apparent. Behind the smooth façade of international competitiveness, a fragmented city is emerging, riven by inequalities and tensions.

### **Colonial architecture: a controversial legacy**

Unlike Morocco's imperial cities - Fez, Marrakech, Meknes or Salé - where heritage is evident in the presence of medinas and historic monuments, Casablanca struggles to claim a clear heritage legitimacy. A city whose development stemmed from the colonial boom, its architectural identity is largely based on its development under the Protectorate. Long perceived as a city without history or culture<sup>24</sup>, marked by industry and social tensions, Casablanca has sought to forge a new image for itself by emphasizing the heritage value of its modern architecture.

*"Casablanca resists the styles it reduces to mere expression. It ends up integrating them into its new culture, a dynamic expression of Modern Morocco"*<sup>25</sup> (Ahmed Hariri). This phrase captures the very essence of the city's architectural history: a place where imported styles are absorbed, reformulated and surpassed. Casablanca doesn't just imitate, it filters, simplifies and transforms. It digests codes to make something else of it.

Rather than speak of a single "colonial style", it's more accurate to evoke the diversity of styles that permeated Casablanca during the Protectorate and beyond. Eclecticism, very much in evidence in the 1920s, imposed a classical, symmetrical composition directly derived from the Beaux-Arts. But other influences were already seeping in. The Neo-Moroccan style, for its part, draws on traditional textures

<sup>21</sup> Naciri, 1980 ; Ameur and Naciri, 1985 ; Ameur 1988 ; Abouhane, 1988, Lehzam 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Cattedra, R. (2001). *La mosquée et la cité: La reconversion symbolique du projet urbain à Casablanca (Maroc)* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Tours). Université François Rabelais.

<sup>23</sup> Aljem, S., & Strava, C. (2020). Casablanca's megaprojects: Neoliberal urban planning and socio-spatial transformations. *TRIALOG. A Journal for Planning and Building in the Third World*, 135(4), 12-19.

<sup>24</sup> Cattedra, R. (2001). *La mosquée et la cité: La reconversion symbolique du projet urbain à Casablanca (Maroc)* (Doctoral thesis, University of Tours).

<sup>25</sup> Zurfluh, J.-M. (1985). Casablanca. SODEN.



and decorative vocabulary without reproducing their structures. An almost diplomatic translation of local heritage into modern syntax.

Then Art Deco took hold, particularly in the new town. Geometric facades, friezes, bow-windows, zelliges on the facade, stained-glass windows and ironwork intertwine. This is undoubtedly the style most associated with Casablanca. And yet, here again, it is never pure: it hybridizes, it adapts, it flirts with Neo-Moroccan or Premier Moderne.



**Figure 5.** Architectural diversity of Casablanca (Source: Alexandre, N., & Neiger, E. (2019). *Reading Casablanca: A grammar of urbanism and architecture*. Zurich : Park Books).

The boundaries between styles are porous. Architecture in Casablanca is fluid, shifting, difficult to confine to rigid categories. It's a city of stylistic overlaps, where buildings tell the story of passages and aesthetic negotiations.

After independence, the momentum continued unabated. The Second Moderne, sometimes lyrical, sometimes sculptural, made its mark in a number of major projects. Then came more banal forms, postmodernism and contemporary writing. What Casablanca doesn't invent, it transforms. It doesn't freeze anything; it continues to advance, absorb and recompose.

#### **A belated and disputed patrimonialization :**

In Casablanca, recognition of the heritage inherited from the Protectorate has been slow, conflictual and marked by unresolved historical tensions. From the outset, colonial urban policy was characterized by a contradiction: valorizing the Moroccan past while imposing foreign modernity. By separating European cities and medinas, Lyautey established a spatial duality that reflected an implicit hierarchy between two visions of the city - one modern and hygienic, the other traditional and symbolic. This logic of separation gave lasting structure to urban space and influenced the way in which heritage was perceived.

As early as 1912, measures to protect historic monuments were adopted<sup>26</sup>, modelled on foreign models, but adapted to the local context. Medinas were recognized as having a certain value,

<sup>26</sup> The Dahir of November 26, 1912, published in the Bulletin Officiel on November 29, marks the first legal initiative in Morocco for the protection of built heritage. It placed historical monuments, whether religious or secular, ancient or Islamic, under the

provided they were part of an As early as 1912, measures to protect historic monuments were adopted<sup>27</sup>, modelled on foreign models, but adapted to the local context. Medinas were recognized as having a certain value, provided they were part of an acceptable urban aesthetic. This colonial view of heritage has left its mark: even today, the very idea of preserving the architecture of the Protectorate remains controversial.

Indeed, the recognition of heritage, particularly architectural and urban heritage, depends primarily on a semantic reading of legislation and institutional practices. The use of terms such as 'monument' or 'historic monument'<sup>28</sup> determines not only how this heritage is perceived, but also the concrete actions taken by the authorities to protect and enhance it.

Law no. 22-80, promulgated by dahir no. 1-80-341 of December 25, 1980, is the reference text for the conservation of cultural property. However, at no point does this text mention the generic term "heritage". It is limited to a series of restricted legal categories: *historic monuments, sites, protected areas, and objects of art or antiquity*. This semantic limitation has a direct impact on the official non-recognition of certain "immovable" properties, notably those of the 20th century, whether modern, vernacular or ordinary.

This conceptual narrowing poses a fundamental problem: any protection initiative relies on being included in the lexical field defined by the law. Thus, a modernist building from the early 20th century, rich in social, historical and artistic values, can only be protected if it is recognized as a "historic monument", a notion that is legally framed and historically associated with ancient or prestigious buildings.

This shift in terminology is part and parcel of a certain "insensitivity" - or rather, structural disinterest - on the part of the relevant authorities towards more recent forms of heritage. This lack of interest is not necessarily voluntary, but stems from the absence of a suitable legal framework.

This discrepancy between the legal lexicon and the practices of heritage enhancement creates a void into which speculative dynamics engulf. A building may be recognized in a development plan as an element to be preserved, yet be legally demolished for lack of support in national legislation. It is therefore the words themselves, or rather their absence from the law, that render protection ineffective. This is precisely where the need for far-reaching reform arises, as embodied in the draft law 33-22 on heritage protection. Unlike Law 22-80, Law 33-22 uses the term "heritage" right from its title, signalling a major conceptual reorientation. This new law aims to integrate all forms of heritage - whether tangible or intangible, ancient or modern - into a broader framework of protection. It introduces not only an overhaul of vocabulary, but also coercive provisions against damage to heritage, whatever its period of construction.

Thus, the transition from Law 22-80 to Law 33-22<sup>29</sup> is more than just an administrative update: it represents a semantic, and therefore legal, revolution that would finally bridge the gap between symbolic recognition and effective protection of heritage in Morocco. Law 33-22 represents a serious attempt to consolidate Morocco's heritage protection system, by broadening its scope, clarifying its vocabulary and consolidating its means of implementation.

### **Coveted heritage, contested memory: between the commodification of land and the mobilization of heritage :**

In Casablanca, growing land pressure is combined with persistent institutional fragility. The former European neighborhoods of the early 20th century, now very central, are a magnet for property

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supervision of the Makhzen, emphasizing their historical and artistic value. Driven by Marshal Lyautey's determination, this seminal text, although not immediately applied, laid the foundations for heritage preservation in Morocco.

<sup>27</sup> The dahir of November 26, 1912, published in the Bulletin Officiel on November 29, marks the first legal initiative in Morocco for the protection of built heritage. It placed historical monuments, whether religious or secular, ancient or Islamic, under the supervision of the Makhzen, emphasizing their historical and artistic value. Driven by Marshal Lyautey's determination, this seminal text, although not immediately applied, laid the foundations for heritage preservation in Morocco.

<sup>28</sup> The concept of the historic monument has been shaped progressively since antiquity, and developed in humanist circles during the Italian Renaissance, then institutionalized in 19th-century France with the first safeguarding measures.

<sup>29</sup> Draft Law 33-22 on heritage protection, in the process of promulgation. This law establishes general rules for the protection of natural and geological cultural heritage, its preservation, maintenance and enhancement.

developers. These densely built-up but poorly protected areas represent considerable speculative potential. Architectural heritage is seen as a land resource to be released, not as a collective memory to be preserved.

In this logic, heritage is instrumentalized, just as Laurajane Smith has shown: it becomes a selective tool, shaped by power relationships, where certain narratives and built forms are promoted while others are ignored or erased. In the absence of a binding legal framework, clear political will and sufficiently structured citizen mobilization, damage to heritage is frequent. Emblematic buildings in Casablanca, Rabat and Fez have been destroyed, despite their value being recognized by international bodies such as UNESCO and ICOMOS.

In Casablanca, the first decades after independence were marked by almost total indifference to the disappearance of these buildings, such as the Vox cinema in 1970 or the Hôtel d'Anfa in 1972<sup>30</sup>. These losses moved neither the authorities nor public opinion. It wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that a turning point was reached, spurred on by the publication of fundamental works (Zurfluh, Eleb, Cohen and Ghislaine Gallenga), which legitimized a new view of modern architecture. By documenting and valorizing these buildings, these scientific productions gave modern heritage a status, a value and a history.

The emergence of CasaMémoire in 1995 marked a phase of militant appropriation of this memory<sup>31</sup>. Mainly made up of architects trained in France, the association asserts a Casablanca identity attached to the modernist heritage. It acts through description (fact sheets), media coverage (press, guided tours), but also through informal influence on decision-making processes. This role of mediator between expert knowledge and institutional action underlines the importance of civil society in the construction of heritage policies.

However, as Bernard Toulhier reminds us<sup>32</sup>, this mobilization is marked by certain biases. The focus on twentieth-century European architecture reveals a neo-colonial memory bias, sometimes to the detriment of the medina and working-class districts. *"It was a question of prolonging a form of neo-colonial memory, tinged with nostalgia for the "white" modernist city, often to the detriment of the medina and working-class districts"*<sup>33</sup>. We are witnessing a social production of selective memory, in line with Lefebvre's observations: space and heritage are not neutral entities, but products of dominant social relations.

Since the 2000s, a number of institutional advances have been made: inclusion in the national inventory, heritage mapping, safeguard plans. In 2013, the Agence Urbaine de Casablanca initiated a clearer structuring of its action tools: atlases, fact sheets, inventories, architectural recommendations. These measures reflect a shift towards the formalization of heritage policy.

But this structuring remains largely formal. In the field, destruction continues. Protection tools are not very restrictive, trade-offs are not very transparent, and economic logic predominates. *"In practice, many buildings identified as heritage continue to be threatened or transformed, for lack of a sufficiently restrictive legal framework"*<sup>34</sup>. As Harvey notes in *Spaces of Hope* (2000), the urbanization of capital consists precisely in transforming use values into exchange values. In Casablanca, heritage becomes an exchange value, a source of profit, often emptied of its social use and its memorial value.

Heritage associations, though dynamic, struggle to make a real impact. They are neither representative of all residents, nor do they have a strong institutional status. The authorities do not systematically consult them, even in sensitive cases such as demolitions<sup>35</sup>. This lack of public dialogue reinforces an opacity

<sup>30</sup> Article Casablanca's historic center: A renaissance underway - LesEco.ma.

<sup>31</sup> [www.casamemoire.org](http://www.casamemoire.org) official Casamémoire website, Created in 1995, Casamémoire is a Moroccan non-profit association dedicated to safeguarding the country's 20th-century architectural heritage. Its members share common values: preservation of Casablanca's unique character, promotion of architectural heritage, cultural tourism and collective memory.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard Toulhier Archaeologist and architectural historian, Honorary General Curator of French Heritage, UNESCO expert.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Bernard Toulhier on March 8, 2025.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with representatives of the Casablanca Urban Agency conducted on April 23, 2025.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Bernard Toulhier on March 8, 2025.



conducive to speculation. Scientific criteria for heritage selection, although available, are applied in variable ways, or even bypassed.<sup>36</sup>

In the end, heritage is caught in a permanent tension: between a desire for symbolic recognition, still-weak protection tools, and aggressive land-ownership logics. This imbalance reflects a broader reality: that of a city in transformation, where urban space is the scene of a confrontation between memory, market and power.

### **The city center and speculation: a heritage under pressure**

In Casablanca, land dynamics cannot be understood solely through technical or legal frameworks. Their analysis requires an intersection of urban political economy, the right to the city, and conflicting approaches to heritage-making (Harvey, Lefebvre, Tornatore). Heritage here is not simply a matter of preservation: it is a site of confrontation between market logics, institutional policies, and social uses. These tensions expose the deep contradictions of Casablanca's urban development.

The Master Plan for Development and Urbanism (SDAU) from the 1980s already acknowledged the heritage value of the medina and certain parts of the colonial city. But this recognition remained largely symbolic. No binding regulatory tool followed. On the contrary, the former zoning plan for the Sidi Belyout district permitted increased building heights, thereby encouraging demolition and reconstruction dynamics. Colonial-era buildings were acquired for the sole purpose of being demolished and replaced with more profitable real estate developments<sup>37</sup>.

The contradictions between strategic planning documents (such as the SDAU) and regulatory instruments (like zoning plans) have opened the door to opportunistic land strategies. This is not merely a market drift but the result of administrative arrangements that make speculation both possible and legitimate. For example, a 1950s Art Deco building housing the national police headquarters partially collapsed. Instead of restoring it, the administration chose to rebuild, motivated not only by functional needs but also by the development opportunities made possible by the new zoning plan (higher floor-area ratios). Another common strategy is the use of technical assessments to have buildings declared as "structurally unsafe," making them easier to demolish. These procedures, ostensibly about safety, become tools of land pressure<sup>38</sup>.

Meanwhile, revitalization projects have multiplied (building conversions, heritage trails, facade improvements), but despite their role in raising awareness, they remain insufficient to prevent demolition. The gap between official ambitions and actual transformation is striking.



**Figure 5:** The Lincoln Hotel Rehabilitation Project in Casablanca<sup>39</sup>. A Case of Heritage Enhancement and Real Estate Revalorization. (source of the images: Urban Agency of Casablanca)

In an already saturated city center, where available land is limited to old structures, pressure is mounting. By analysing real estate transaction data over nearly a decade, the average price per

<sup>36</sup> Idem.

<sup>37</sup> Interview conducted with H.B., Urban Agency, April 15, 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Interview conducted with M.S, Ministry of Interior, 2022

<sup>39</sup> The rehabilitation project of the Lincoln Hotel, led by the Moroccan investment fund OCP and the French group Realites, aims to preserve the Art Deco façade while converting the building into a high-end hotel complex. Located opposite the central market and along the tramway line, the project exemplifies how heritage valorization can intersect with speculative real estate dynamics in central Casablanca.

square meter in Sidi Belyout rose from 13,000 to 18,500 dirhams between 2015 and 2024<sup>40</sup>, an increase of over 42%. This inflation is driven by well-known speculative practices: land hoarding, anticipatory value extraction, zoning change rumors, and leaked information about urban plan revisions<sup>41</sup>.

Speculation does more than distort land values; it reshapes the urban fabric. It turns heritage into a financial lever rather than a preservation tool (Smith, 2006). High-profile rehabilitations like the Lincoln Hotel or the Central Market enhance the symbolic image of the city center, but without strong land regulation, they fuel rising prices and intensify real estate pressures<sup>42</sup>. Laurajane Smith, in *Uses of Heritage* (2006), warns of how heritage is mobilized for economic and political ends. Far from being neutral, heritage becomes a tool for legitimizing urban neoliberalism, disguising the logic of demolition-reconstruction under the guise of rehabilitation. Several emblematic cases reflect these distortions: the demolition of Villa Mauvillier for a 14-story development; an Art Deco building on Hassan II Avenue replaced by a hotel; or uncontrolled vertical extensions in the Rachidi and Gauthier neighborhoods.



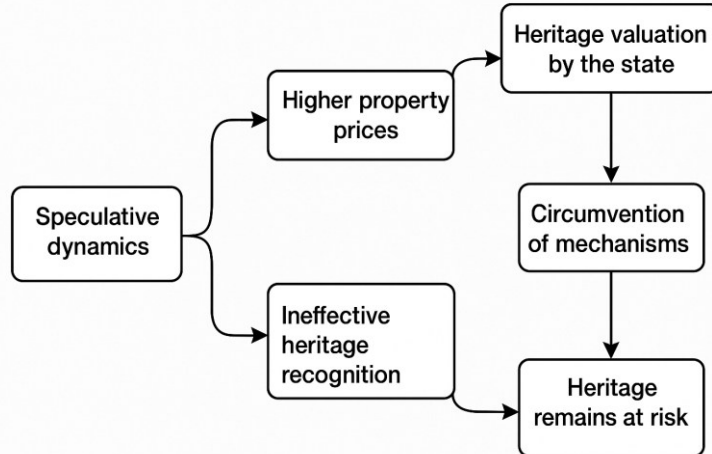
**Figure 6.** Land pressure on colonial buildings of high architectural value, in a context of land-use reclassification. (Source: photograph by the author.)

Thus, financial logic prevails over historical memory. Speculation acts like a brutal filter: only buildings that can be monetized survive. The others, even if inventoried, even if historically significant, disappear in silence or institutional complacency.

<sup>40</sup> The 2015 data comes from official statistics published in 2016 by the General Directorate of Taxes, while the 2024 data was collected through field observations and validated by publications from the Yakeey real estate website ([www.yakeey.com](http://www.yakeey.com)) as well as other websites dedicated to real estate investment in Casablanca

<sup>41</sup> Several local newspaper articles have reported on this phenomenon. An investigation conducted by a local outlet revealed that land prices have increased fivefold in certain neighborhoods of the city: "This frenzy is fueled by leaked information regarding the new urban plans, driving land prices to record highs." Source: Hespress article — Casablanca/New Urban Plans: Land Value Multiplied by 5, published on 01/08/2024.

<sup>42</sup> According to Asmae Abdelaoui, a real estate agent quoted in an article by the magazine *Telquel* "in Casablanca, new property prices always soar along the tramway route, particularly in the months following the announcement of the construction project." Source: "Real estate: should you invest in Casablanca before 2030, and where?" – *Telquel.ma*, 20/12/2014.



**Figure 7.** The impact of speculative dynamics on heritage recognition and vulnerability in Casablanca.  
(source: produced by the authors)

Heritage governance in Casablanca mobilizes numerous experts, arbitration commissions, and a range of institutions. This configuration may appear to guarantee methodological rigor, but it suffers from a serious lack of coordination and a dilution of responsibilities. In the absence of sanctions, decisions lose their impact.

The episode of Casablanca's withdrawn candidacy for UNESCO World Heritage status in February 2020 is a clear symptom of this dysfunction. The withdrawal occurred on the very day of the submission, after years of preparation, funding, and mobilization. The project, supported by Casamémoire, was ultimately halted by a chain of institutional breakdowns.

Nevertheless, since 2024, a noticeable semantic shift has emerged in official heritage discourse: the term "colonial heritage" is gradually being replaced by "shared heritage." This new terminology reflects a desire for openness, recognizing that this legacy does not stem from a single narrative but from an entanglement of stories, circulations, and co-productions<sup>43</sup>. While still fragile, this symbolic shift signals an attempt to move beyond memory-based divides and toward a more inclusive approach to heritage-making.

### Conclusion:

The case of Casablanca shows that heritage development cannot be understood outside the speculative dynamics shaping the city's urban transformation. Rather than acting as a neutral or stabilizing force, patrimonialization intersects with logics of land valorization, real estate investment, and institutional fragmentation. Drawing on a mixed-method approach that combined field observations, interviews, and a longitudinal analysis of land price data, this study shows how heritage is increasingly mobilized as a financial asset. The rise in land values, notably the 42% increase in Sidi Belyout between 2015 and 2024, reflects not only market anticipation but also institutional permissiveness and planning contradictions. These mechanisms foster unregulated densification and the erosion of built heritage in strategic central areas.

The analysis reveals that heritage-led development in Casablanca often operates within a context of weak legal protections and conflicting planning instruments. While the Urban Agency has made efforts to systematize heritage recognition through inventories and safeguard plans, these tools lack enforceability. As a result, they coexist with urban policies that authorize demolitions or incentivize densification, especially in strategic central areas. This contradiction weakens the preservation agenda and reinforces selective processes of recognition, where only the most profitable buildings are protected or rehabilitated.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with R.E., Directorate of Heritage, Ministry of Culture of Morocco, 2025



The study's mixed-method approach—combining transaction data, urban observations, and expert interviews—helped capture both the material and symbolic effects of speculation. However, limitations remain: the quantitative sample is partial, and some spatial data rely on secondary sources. Further research could expand the empirical base, particularly by examining the role of financial actors in land transactions and the informal negotiations surrounding zoning exceptions.

These findings open up avenues for further inquiry into the political economy of heritage in fast-growing cities of the Global South. In particular, they call for critical engagement with the normative assumptions behind heritage as a development tool. Future research might explore under what conditions heritage policies can escape instrumentalization, and how public institutions can recover a strategic capacity to arbitrate between economic and cultural priorities.

In the absence of robust legal and fiscal tools to curb speculation and redistribute land value gains, patrimonial strategies risk reinforcing spatial inequalities. Protecting the architectural legacy of Casablanca will require more than technical inventories or symbolic designations. It demands political commitment, institutional coordination, and a redefinition of urban heritage as a public good rather than a market asset.

### Acknowledgements

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 8th International Conference on Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism in the form of an oral presentation.

### Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

### Ethics statements

Studies involving animal subjects: No animal studies are presented in this manuscript.

Studies involving human subjects: No human studies are presented in this manuscript.

Inclusion of identifiable human data: No potentially identifiable human images or data is presented in this study.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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