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Problems of Urbanization in Tunisia

Measures taken to solve them

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Problems of urbanization in Tunisia - Measures taken to solve them

There have been three key periods in the history of urbanization in Tunisia, namely from 1929 to 1943, from 1943 to 1955 and since 1956, i.e. since the proclamation of independence.

Until 1929, the basic factor governing construction was the alignment laid down by decree of the Public Works Department, and this determined the site of buildings, often in a very arbitrary way.

It was only in the communes that the sanitary regulations and the regulations relating to public thoroughfares provided rudimentary standards to which building operations had to conform.

Then a Decree of 25 January 1929 laid down a plan for the development, extension and reorganization of urban agglomerations. That Decree introduced the concept of allotment as an integral part of town planning.

But this Decree stipulated that unless it was extended the development plan would lapse twenty years after the date of its approval.

Despite its revolutionary nature and no doubt for lack of town planners, the 1929 Decree was only enforced half-heartedly, principally in some large towns, and in communes which had sufficient technical staff.

But after the Second World War two vital factors caused an imperative need for new urban development: one was the bombing of towns, in some of which whole districts had been destroyed, and the other an important exodus of rural populations to the towns, particularly the large ones, as a result of the shortages caused by a succession of poor harvests, accentuated by a marked increase in population.

At that juncture the Decree of 10 September 1943 on Architecture and Town Planning was promulgated; repealing the earlier decree, it gave greater flexibility to the development plan, the duration of which was no longer restricted, and responsibility for which was assigned to a single department (now the Department of Public Works and Housing).

The scope of the development plan was also broadened by the new regulations for the reassignment of land, as a result of which, either on the initiative of associations of the parties concerned or by order of the administration, vacant portions of certain lots could be regrouped.

Similarly, urban allotment was very clearly defined in the regulations, thus facilitating control over the utilization of the various zones and the creation of the urban thoroughfares provided for in the development plan.

The application of this text led subsequently to a revision of the legislation relating to building permits through the Decree of 13 October 1949 which, while altering and supplementing the Decree of 10 September 1943, laid down that in the absence of a development plan or while such a plan was being prepared, all building permits were subject to approval by the Government Department concerned (at that time the Department of Reconstruction and Housing, now the Department of Public Works and Housing).

This led between 1946 and independence to the creation of four main territorial regions subject to town-planning control, each under the direction of a senior official assisted by a town planning architect in the government service. This arrangement proved totally inadequate, since after the war the rate of population growth increased and the influx of population into the towns, particularly the large centres, caused a progressive increase in their population density. The poorest inhabitants created settlements on outskirts of towns and in the suburbs, where the situation was chaotic.

An attempt was made to speed up the process of urbanization by engaging private town planners to study development plans in particular areas.

The State even provided some public lands for the establishment of model cities where it constructed blocks of flats and nuclei where groups of separate houses were built by private contractors under its effective control.

But that was clearly not enough. Only a few communes had development plans which had been approved or were in process of approval; almost all the centres which had not acquired the status of communes had no development plans.

To bring home the necessity for allotment plans and building permits, there was a need, especially at the local authority level, for a comprehensive system of supervision conducted by qualified technicians, but these were unfortunately not available or at least not in sufficient numbers.

Thus, for lack of precise rules, enforced through building and allotment permits, buildings were put up regardless of the architectural plans submitted or even without plans or permits.

Nevertheless the Government exercised a degree of direct control which afforded the courts an opportunity to familiarize themselves with offences of this kind, and decisions imposing a fine or demolition orders were made in the most serious cases.

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Since independence, the Tunisian Government has faced a somewhat complicated situation in the building and town planning field. In the first place, a large section of the population had very limited or even no means, and were without shelter or were inadequately housed, so that an inventory of their needs had to be undertaken. Secondly, there were a considerable number of localities in which building control was impossible because of the absence of a responsible administrative nucleus.

Thirdly, the number of technicians was clearly inadequate for the simultaneous organization everywhere of a framework of a rational urbanization programme.

An inventory of the needs of the poor population was made after a long and painstaking survey conducted by the Public Works Department, and they were placed at 200,000 dwellings to be constructed as part of a ten-year plan of economic and social development recently drawn up for the Government.

The number of centres not having the status of communes has been considerably reduced by the creation since 1956 of approximately one hundred communes, each of which was at once provided with its mayor, assisted by a municipal council. These new municipalities immediately did everything in their power to improve the appearance of the area under their jurisdiction by enlisting the co-operation of the inhabitants and with the assistance of Government technicians.

As regards such technicians, the Public Works Department, which is responsible, inter alia, for housing and town planning, has, as a first step, mobilized its own staff of engineers, architects, technical assistants and so forth, and has instructed them both at the central and regional levels to assist the municipalities in carrying out their building projects and to supply them either with model plans or with documents, however concise, drawn up with direct reference to the problem raised. In this way, town halls, markets, dispensaries and schools have been built.

As a second stage, it set up two years ago six offices in different parts of the territory to conduct research in town planning. Each of these offices is under a qualified town-planning architect, and its staff consists principally of two architects, a surveyor and two draughtsmen.

For each of the five regions (Public Works Districts) a priority list is established in agreement with the Governors and a programme of work is laid down for five of these offices enabling them to initiate development schemes in several localities simultaneously. A sixth office is concerned solely with the capital and its suburbs within the framework of a comprehensive town planning project known as the "Greater Tunis Plan".

In addition to these teams, there is an architect attached to the headquarters of each administrative district (Tunis-Bizerta-Sousse-Sfax-Le Kef) who examines requests for building and allotment permits in conjunction with the town planning officers.

An architect responsible for preparing important or urgent building plans and supervising their implementation has been placed at the disposal of each of the thirteen Provincial Governors.

However, it is clear that certain schemes entail long-term work and constant attention (special urban development or development in vitally important tourist areas - construction of blocks of buildings for the State and so forth). Accordingly, various well-known research organizations have been asked to prepare plans for the following projects:

- development of the town of Mahdia, a fishing port and important tourist centre;
- general and detailed development of the island of Djerba, one of the chief touristic beauty spots of the Mediterranean;
- development of Sousse, a delightful coastal town known to foreigners as the "pearl of the Sahel";
- study and development of Monastir, a tourist centre and beauty spot very popular with foreigners; it is also a fishing port and the birthplace of the liberator of Tunisia, Habib BOURGUIBA, President of the Republic;
- study and development of the seaside resort of Skanès which lies in a magnificent situation some kilometres from Monastir. Here the summer residence of the President of the Republic and a number of bungalows for distinguished guests have been planned and built with the collaboration of landscape gardeners, interior decorators and many well-known artists;
- development of the holy city of Kairouan, the cradle of Islam in Tunisia, which possesses some extremely beautiful religious edifices.

A few further remarks are necessary on the problem of Tunis. Like every capital, Tunis needs action to be taken to enable it to fulfil its normal function as the focus of the intellectual faculties and creative functions of the entire country. Not only is it the political and administrative capital, but it is situated in the north of the country and at one of the points in the territory which is nearest to Europe, on the great Mediterranean sea route. Thus it has a natural attraction for the population of Tunisia as a trade and business centre. Therefore, apart from the study of its communications with its suburbs and hinterland, it has been the subject of one development plan after another. In 1959 an international competition was held for suggestions on a number of subjects, one of them being the development of the shores of the Lake of Tunis. This district has great possibilities both in its very large open spaces and in a promenade along the lake which was not properly made use of under the former protectorate. The plan which was considered to be most attractive was that of the Bulgarian Technoimpex group under Professor Luben Tonev.

Accordingly this group has just been commissioned by the Public Works Department to prepare detailed plans for the development of the shores of the Lake of Tunis on the basis of this plan.

This brief account of the speeding up of the rational urbanization of various towns, built-up areas and villages would not be complete without a reference to the revolutionary measure taken by the Government and already referred to in the report submitted by Tunisia to the Seminar on Low Cost Housing which was held at Tunis in October 1961, namely the mobilization of vacant land effected by Act No. 61-62 of 2 January 1961, on the expropriation of land situated within communal boundaries, regulations for the application of which were contained in Decree No. 61-77 of 30 January 1961.

This legislation is of vital importance as far as urban building is concerned, since it prevents owners of vacant land from withholding it from the market for speculative purposes, at a time when the bulk of the poorer inhabitants have to be assisted to find suitable housing instead of clinging to the old districts with their traditional types of building (the medina areas) or ensconcing themselves in hovels built clandestinely on the outskirts of cities.

According to the relevant texts, "to allot" means to subdivide a plot of land in order to sell the lots into which it is subdivided to those who need them. The law compels owners to do so at the present time under penalty of a large surtax and even expropriation. It shows the State's determination to assist in raising the

social level of the people by putting a definite stop to the schemes of those who place their own sordid interests before the public welfare and the material cleanliness upon which the moral uprightness of a people largely depends.

Of course there is still a great deal to be done but the results achieved in the past six years are encouraging. All the municipalities are vying with one another in breaking down the barriers erected by an obsolete regime which conceived of towns as consisting of two entirely separate districts: the modern town intended to house the occupying race and the traditional town given over to the Tunisians without any serious effort to keep it in good order. Thus, at the behest of the town planners more and more wide thoroughfares are being opened through the old quarters with their noisome alleys, with a view to letting in the air, opening them up to traffic and linking the new to the old. At Tunis itself a number of these thoroughfares are helping, inter alia, to improve the aesthetic character of the medina and to reveal its riches (mosques, old palaces and so forth).

At the present time close on one hundred development plans are being prepared and will be put into operation as soon as the main objectives are clearly defined.

Such dynamism is essential not only for Tunisia but also for every underdeveloped country since without it the country cannot follow the path of universal progress, and the Tunisian people cannot achieve what it desired beyond its freedom, namely the right and the possibility to live.