

**Digital platforms, regulatory planning and heritisation:
Airbnb and discourses around courtyard houses in the medina of Tunis (2011 to 2024)**

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with historic houses in the old city or médina of Tunis as sites of memory. We take three case studies of courtyard houses (diyar, sing. dar) which were restored or adapted for use as guest accommodation in the 2010s. While the sample is small allows us to explore some of the main features of the discourses of belonging developed around the historic house in old Tunis. Such guest accommodation can now be seen across the world thanks to digital service platforms like AirBnB. Our interviews with guesthouse owners suggest a strong intellectual and emotional commitment is present in the restoration and reuse of a history property. While digital platforms are important as sites via which individuals can communicate ideas about the built heritage of a city, there are other important discourses underlying the veneer. The paper thus reveals how family pasts are important in a form of activist engagement with a particular city's past.

Key words: heritisation, urban conservation, guesthouses, urban memory, médina of Tunis

This paper is concerned with historic houses in the old city or médina of Tunis as sites of both memory and forgetting. We take three case studies of courtyard houses (diyar, sing. dar) which were restored or adapted for use as guest accommodation in the 2010s. The sample is small but in the short space of an oral conference paper, it allows us to suggest some of the main features of the discourses of belonging developed around the historic house in old Tunis. Such guest accommodation can now be seen across the world thanks to digital service platforms like AirBnB. We suggest that such platforms are growing in importance as sites on which individuals can communicate ideas about the built heritage of a city, to an extent competing with or even weakening the discourse of public institutions. While we believe that actors providing tourist services play an increasingly important role in the historic built environment, we are not sure how this might be measured. Its impact is certainly clear in numerous cities where residents are driven out by rising rents and the general decline in deep rooted urban ways of living which occurs as tourism expands.

In this short study on old Tunis, we hope to show something of the way in which houses are made appealing, displaying historic features and playing a part in narratives of the old city. Such narratives are developed – at least for the houses discussed here – by individuals with a strong sense of the value of Tunis' historic architecture and of their place in the scheme of the city's past.

Both the authors of this paper are concerned with questions of regarding the heritisation of urban space, housing and planning. Iman Batita is the author of a doctoral thesis on the different users who have restored houses in the médina of Tunis for different uses; Justin McGuinness, having originally worked on planning for precarious social groups in multi-occupancy housing is interested in the techniques used in the transformation of historic homes and in the planning frameworks for médinas in North Africa.

The old city of Tunis has been the focus of conservationist discourse since at least the 1920s when two central areas whose architecture was held to require special protection were defined (Ammar 2010, p.116). The details of the development of heritage planning from that decade onwards are well covered by Jellal Abd el-Kafi in his *La Médina de Tunis, espace historique*. Since the late 1960s, the historic urban fabric has had a place in Tunisia's national political discourse. The médina has also been the object of numerous professional interventions by

architects and urban planners, for the most part working for an unusual body, the Association de sauvegarde de la Médina de Tunis, established in 1967. The more distinctive spaces of the old city have also proved attractive to entrepreneurs in the tourism and hospitality industries, a turning point being the opening of a high-quality restaurant in 1989, the Dar el-Jeld. A further turning point in the old city's trajectory was the completion of a major public realm project in the north-west section of the Médina, one of the areas with a particularly high concentration of historic buildings, religious, residential and educational. Through a subtle series of interventions on façades and sometimes on whole buildings, this project, completed in 2010 and often referred to as le Circuit, rendered several kilometres of streetscape far more 'historic' – and certainly more attractive thanks to the careful selection of colours and materials. Arguably this project 'primed the pump' for private investment for tourist activity in the western médina. The route from the Zitouna Mosque through to the rue du Tribunal had become immensely more pleasing to both residents and visitors. Note that actors in the tourist industry comprise individuals and businesses ranging from the highly professional to the amateur.

Since the 1980s, the medina has been subject to a specific town planning code that the municipality was able to enforce fairly effectively until the Jasmine Revolution – as it was often dubbed in the media – of 2011. Façade improvement operations like le Circuit continued in the early 2010s while a municipal programme to improve owner-occupied private housing continued over the same period. However, the control by the municipality over building use and new build / restoration works weakened considerably after 2015. Notably, the wholesale trade in imported garments, footwear and accessories gained considerable ground in a large swathe of the south-eastern central médina. This phenomenon has yet to be studied in detail either by researchers or by the municipality's services. There are several reasons which may account for the lack of investigation here, the most important one being the instability of municipal government since the 2011 Revolution. For a long period, municipal councils across the country operated under a special régime; there being no municipal elections, caretaker city councils were put into place. Short of funds and without strong leadership, such councils were unable to undertake any major decisions on the future of the built environment.

Methodological framework: discovering discourses of the house as site of meaning

Indispensable to human survival in settled areas, the material forms of the house are strongly invested with meaning. This has been explored by numerous theorists and a reflection of the contemporary debates about the question of the house can be found in journals like *Home Cultures*. The present paper draws on the authors' work on houses in Tunis, and notably on Batita's doctoral thesis which was based on numerous direct interviews with the actors of the heritage and tourism sectors in Tunis. In order to build her knowledge of the functioning of guesthouses, Batita also undertook short stays in several of them, giving her work a particular level of nuance.

McGuinness worked on the trajectories of precarious, low-income households during his doctoral research in the early to mid-1990s. Between 1992 and 2000 he lived in a nineteenth century house in the Bab Menara district. Through his network of friends and acquaintances, he has been able to follow the changes in a number of historic homes, some of them which are now used as guest accommodation. He is also well aware of the challenges and unforeseen hurdles of historic house restoration, having undertaken ethnographic work in that area in Fès – where he also restored a house.

Such familiarity with this particular aspect of the médina's functioning is not easily acquired. Some informants are prolix, to say the least, in a discussion of the médina. Others whom one would have expected to have much to say are not interested in the researcher's themes. But it is an old truism of ethnography that good insights are not always to be found where one would expect them – and that a discussion with informants will necessarily take a hoped-for direction. But this is all part of generating insights into a world with which the researcher may only have limited familiarity.

Before moving on, the authors recognise that the business of researching other people's homes can be sensitive. The informants who provided material for our case studies are in a sense public figures, either by dint of their interventions on the Web or by their professional activity which is based on the provision of well run short-stay

accommodation.

Changes in residential patterns in the médina, 1960 to 2000

In terms of residential use, the Medina underwent major changes, starting in the 1950s. Fleeing the poverty of the countryside, large numbers of rural migrants settled in the old city. As of the 1960s, elite families began to move out of the old city to settle in neighborhoods vacated by departing French, Italian and Tunisian Jewish families. There was a change in meaning and ways of living apparent in the Medina. Old Tunisois (beldi) families whose jobs and aspirations were tied up with the country's drive to modernity longer no wanted to live as part of extended families in the labyrinthine courtyard houses.

It became difficult for such families to live alongside the rural folk who were living in historic houses where rooms were rented out to individual families. The beldia found the northern coastal suburbs to be more congenial for a middle-class 'modern' family and they began to live in their summer residences all year round. There was a definite mimicry here.

When a family moved out, the old courtyard houses faced two options: abandonment or rental through agents as rooming houses (oukala-s). Architecturally important houses like Dar Belhassen and Dar Hedri on rue du Trésor, just a few minutes' walk away from the central Zitouna Mosque, were left to crumble. As certain individualism took root in the extended families, it became impossible to finance the maintenance, generally costly and often complex, of a typical large médina dar. The rental of rooms to families desperate for somewhere to live in the city was a stop-gap solution which became permanent.

Nevertheless, in some neighborhoods, the old ways of life continued to an extent into the late 1990s. In that decade, a number of families – the Baccouches and the Bou Hajbas, along with members of the Bayram and Lakhoua families were still resident in the Bab Menara district. Even today there are old beldi families living on the rue Sidi Ben Arous. One such family, the Belhaouanes, were the very first to transform their home on this street into the médina's first guest house, the Dar el-Médina, which opened in 2005.

The 1990s also saw artistically minded artistically minded folk, both Tunisian and foreigners, acquiring historic properties in the central Medina. The Algerian artist Rachid Koreïchi restored a house. The restoration of a fine seventeenth century courtyard house, just off Rue de la Kasbah, was conceived by the London-based Minimalist architect John Pawson. This house has featured on several occasions in decoration magazines like Nest and Architectural Digest (Withers 2008, Tomasini 2024). By about 2000, the possibility of the médina becoming a place where a relatively wealthy person might have a tasteful retreat, restored so as to preserve and enhance its original architectural features, was circulating among a handful of architecturally minded Tunis residents. That the médina might become a place where old houses were upgraded to function as guest houses – as was the case in Marrakech from the mid-1990s – did not seem likely, however. (By 2000, that city had at least three agencies specialised in the purchase, restoration, rental and management of upgraded historic houses).

The development of the *maison d'hôte*: obstacles and opportunities

As just mentioned, the first fully functioning guesthouse was the Dar el-Médina on the Rue Sidi Ben Arous. We discuss this case in detail because it provides a base-line from which to discuss the factors enabling the phenomenon of individually owned guest houses to develop. (Not least of these was Web 2.0)

Originally the family home of a family close to the Tunisian nationalist movement, Dar el-Médina opened in 2005. All family members had agreed that a guesthouse was an appropriate use for the home. The restoration project saw a skilled architect with years of experience in working on historic buildings reinforce the house's character with the careful insertion of extra rooms and the judicious addition of decorative features.

Nevertheless, few other families in the early 2000s were ready to make the leap. The question of indivision (Muslim law lays down scrupulous rules for the division of an inheritance) can stymie a project should there be absent

part-owners or a family member unwilling to sell their share to the promoters of a project for a house. Then there is the question of cost. To put in the fluid and electric networks is a costly job, as is the construction of new rooms to give a house the number of rooms – generally considered to be seven – necessary for a guesthouse to be cost effective. The city planning regulations are stringent on security and on quality requirements for utility networks.

Despite a major delay due to a shortage of funds, Dar Belhaouane was opened as the city's first officially authorised guesthouse and continues to function as such today.

The Belhaouanes had seen a business opportunity. Familiar with developments in Morocco, they had realised the potential of their home. Because the other elements necessary (available loans, a good architect and suitable contractors) were present, they were able to move forward. Many other projects for guesthouses and small hotels remained at embryonic level, however, for reasons not always clear. Some of the most ambitious projects, launched by major business figures simply stalled, seemingly from lack of interest.

European buyers were also few – a major difference with Morocco and other Mediterranean countries. The Tunisian State requires that foreigners buying property outside designated tourist zones obtain an authorisation to purchase. The procedure for obtaining this document from the regional authorities (governorate) is slightly opaque in character and would seem to have discouraged individual foreigners from buying property and eventually moving into the guesthouse business.

The market for property with historic character and potential as tourist accommodation thus remained dominated by Tunisian buyers. So it was that when the digital travel platforms appeared in the 2010s, there was an opportunity for individuals and families with attractive houses to reach a global market for their newly created guest accommodation. The Revolution of 2011 saw people taking liberties with municipal regulations in a way which would have been unthinkable during the years of the Ben Ali regime (1987-2011), not least of which through the construction of new rooms on roof terraces or the transformation of street-facing rooms into shops or depots. While the Revolution may have not ushered in a new republic firmly based on respect for the rule of law, it did open up opportunities in various areas where regulations were unclear or had yet to be drafted on a new activity, i.e. the family-run guesthouse.

To return to our theme, in this short paper, we are exploring the discourse around three well-known maisons d'hôte, namely the Dar Jellouli, La Chambre bleue and Dar Ben Gacem. All are in the central médina, all are well known in one way or another. Located on Rue du Riche, the first-floor patio apartment of Dar Jellouli was occupied by one of the Médina's most emblematic figures, Si Ahmed Jellouli, a true dignitary of the city whose home was a point of call for many a diplomatic visitor. La Chambre bleue, situated on Rue du Divan, was established by a Tunisian couple, descendants of an old Tunis family, both of whom had studied abroad. One was a dancer and actress, the other a university lecturer. Located on the Rue du Pacha, our third example, Dar Ben Gacem, is run by a woman entrepreneur of a family of the same name. This family has no historic ties to the médina.

All these maisons d'hôte are centrally located. We take them each to be representative of a certain approach to presenting the life of the médina – and to making a narrative of the past and the city's culture available to the foreign visitor. In Dar Jellouli, the family once resident in the house is explained through references to a prestigious lineage. La Chambre bleue is a conversion with a strong contemporary aesthetic charge; at least one of the owners is always present. The owners of Dar Ben Gacem grew up abroad, and had restoration works conducted by an experienced architect. This is the most heavily promoted guesthouse of the three. Owner Leïla Ben Gacem's good works in the médina have been the subject of many a media article; she appears to be the main force in a private-sector initiative, Tunistoric, promoting the sale and restoration of historic houses.

We propose now to examine more closely the discourses produced around different elements in these restoration projects. How did their owners establish a relationship with their houses – and through them, with the city's past?

Motivations. What makes couples or families decide to set up a maison d'hôte?

As indicated earlier, the present authors are both well aware of the vicissitudes of historic house restoration. The process is rarely smooth. A building may have unforeseen defects; appropriate materials may be in short supply or extremely expensive; a suitable contractor can be unavailable without explanation. In the light of these factors, we should turn to our small selection of guest-houses, first providing brief descriptions of their character before turning to the thinking which led the owners to take on restoration projects.

All three guest houses are at least two and half centuries old. Dar Jellouli is mentioned in 'the Revault' (1978, p.140) on account of its striking main entrance framed in the dressed stone so typical of the Tunis streetscape. However, only a small part of the house is used – or was used in the early 2000s – for guest accommodation. The main patio, referred to in the family as Dar et-Talyana ('la Maison de l'Italienne') was in multi-occupancy until recently. Similarly, the Chambre bleue is in fact the guest quarters of the much larger Dar Bel-Cadhi (Revault 1978, pp.347-348). Dar Ben Gacem, on the other hand, is a full courtyard house which may go back as far at the seventeenth century. All these houses have the decorative features so typical of buildings in old Tunis: polychrome wall tiles, marble or cut-stone floor paving, painted ceilings and carved stucco.

To go into depth regarding Dar Jellouli, this house was the Tunis residence of a family originally from Sfax. The Jelloulis were involved in corsair activity, a form of legalised piracy practiced in the Mediterranean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As of the nineteenth century, the family provided administrators for the Beylicate of Tunis (see Binous 2001, pp.62-69). The last of these figures, Si Ahmed Jellouli, was a well-known figure in the Médina. After his death in 2011, his apartments on the first floor of Dar Jellouli were preserved as he left them. It was here that he would receive, in an unofficial capacity, important visitors to the city. Family members' respect for Si Ahmed had allowed him to continue to enjoy the use of the upstairs apartment; the question of indivision was not evoked.

Given the cost of maintaining the property, two of Si Ahmed's relatives started a small-scale guest room operation on AirBnB. One of the present writers (I.B.) stayed in the house and was struck by the extent to which a visitor was immersed in the family's story. At least in the first decade after Si Ahmed's death, members of the family felt invested by a mission to conserve the memory of the family and its place in Tunisia's history. But the revenue generated through the rental of a guest room was inadequate to cover the cost of maintaining the house. In 2025, it seemed that Dar Jellouli was for sale.

In the case of the Chambre bleue, the relationship with the house was different. Sondès and Marouan Ben Miled, the couple who acquired the property at the Rue de l'Aga end of Rue du Divan knew that they wanted to live in the Médina. They had the advantage that Marouane's father had restored a property and that an uncle, Tarik Ben Miled, is a highly respected architect in Tunis, aware of the difficulties of restoration. The motivation was more diffuse than in the case of the owners of Dar Jellouli. There was a strong attraction to the ways of life still present in the médina; Sondès felt a need to hand on the house to future generations. But as works proved expensive for the couple, medium term rentals became a way of generating some extra income to help cover costs. Eventually, this activity turned into short stay holiday rentals which Marouane Ben Miled manages extremely effectively – as is illustrated by comments on the Chambre bleue's AirBnB page. A will to transmit a feel for old Tunis to clients, both in the spaces and through the food prepared for guests, is strong in this guest house.

In contrast, in the case of Dar Ben Gacem, the motivation for restoring the house is more definitely commercial. Possibly because she is not from Tunis and does not actually live on the premises, the owner has had to put effort into developing a discourse which demonstrates her affective link with the house. This can be discerned in the promotional booklet, Dar Ben Gacem, the Story, where much is made of the 'noble' origins of the Anun family, the original owners of the house. (The connotations of the term 'noble' as used in European languages cannot be easily applied in a city like Tunis). Arguably, in the case of Dar Ben Gacem, the business of selling accommodation in a beautifully restored house is linked to a desire for recognition.

Thus our three guesthouses, partly through their striking décor and interesting locations, but also through their

owners' affection for the medina and their sense of responsibility, can be described through the metaphor of a deeply felt 'rootedness' in the city's long history. To move further theoretically, these owners, heritage activists as they are – without ever using that term about themselves – are people who have succeeded in creating places where certain qualities of old Tunis are presented and even enhanced. One cannot doubt their sincerity in this task. The récits of the city are an essential part of their practice. After all, anecdotes please; one cannot just say here is a stone-flagged courtyard with four rooms.

What does a guest house mean?

Through a small number of cases – to be expanded upon further in the future, this short paper illustrates the way in which the Tunisian courtyard house, that most intimate of dwellings, has shifted from being the living space of extended families to a place for receiving a regular flow of short-stay visitors. While similar mutations in the function of housing have taken place in thousands of historic neighbourhoods across the world, in the case of Tunis – and Arab-Muslim cities like it – the shift marks a major break with the deep-rooted cultural practices, in the meanings of place. While the owners of some houses work to generate income allowing the built fabric to survive, in other cases the house is very much a place to purvey commodified 'experiences' of an old way of living. Below the (extremely agreeable) veneer of the heavily restored courtyard house, the profit motive is at work. That said, there are different degrees with respect to this motive.

To return to our closing question, 'how do guest houses mean?', there is much more than immediately meets the eye on the Internet when discovering these Tunisian homes through images and the flow of comments on a digital platform. Both the Belhaouane and Ben Miled families had a deep-rooted commitment to the broader life of Tunis. The grandfather of the owner of the Chambre bleue was one of the city's first European-trained Tunisian doctors and a public figure, as was his grandmother. The uncle of the Belhaouane brothers who set up Dar el Médina in the early 2000s, Ali Belhaouane (d.1958) was a figure in the Tunisian independence movement. The nuances of such pasts are not easily explained to the short-stay visitor. But for those who are curious, further tales of the city are there.

The historic *dar*'s place in the processes of heritisation – and commercialisation

In this paper, we have attempted to bring out the discourses which are part of the general fabric of meaning offered by our three emblematic guesthouses. In future work, we would like to situate them firmly in the broader processes at work in residential life. The récits offered by the owner-promoters of these guest houses are lucky in a sense that their homes are both aesthetically pleasing and are part of strong traditions in public life.

Encouraged with technical advice provided by trained architects sensitive to the qualities of the Tunisian house, sometimes assisted financially by local government, these entrepreneurs are actually just a handful of people among the numerous actors at work buying, selling, transforming property in the médina. Praiseworthy as they are, central to the revitalization of the city's historic building trades, such initiatives are a small part of the broader pattern of urban change – the médina's population is declining, the residential function is being driven out by pressure from garment wholesale businesses, the centre of Tunis gravity has moved north-east to new suburbs.

But via digital platforms, the guesthouse owners – and the guests through their comments – offer a particular take on the historic house. In effect, the house is used to state who the owner is and above all what their attitude to the material traces of the past are.

But there are other 'house-stories' to be seen in historic Tunis: the early twentieth century apartment stone-built immeuble, entirely demolished, replaced by a concrete frame low-rise building. There are the houses which go back to the seventeenth century, completely abandoned; for those who knew them before the family left, they are still imbued with memories. And there are the shrines and mausolea, every year a little more decayed after the heavy September rains – and mostly far off the tourism industry entrepreneur's radar. And there are the fine houses on key streets – rue Sidi Ben Arous, rue des Andalouses, for example – where works were started on ambitious restoration projects, only to stall for years. To take a normative stance, these are worthy of the

researcher's gaze, given their place in the unique texture of the city. They will certainly need attention should stringent conservation plans be put into place.

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