

## **Between Development and Marginalization: Relocating the Craftsmanship from the Old Medina of Fez to the Peripheral Neighborhood of *Ain Nokbi***

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Craftsmanship constitutes a key component of the Medina of Fez in Morocco, which is considered as the oldest and the largest Medina in the world. Supported by the American fund of Millennium Challenge Corporation, the Artisanat Fez Medina project was envisioned as a sustainable response to multiple challenges in the Medina of Fez : reducing pollution related to some handicraft activities such as brassware, improving working conditions for artisans, preserving the heritage and developing the attractivity of the Medina. The project aimed to renovate the *Lalla Yeddouna* Square as the heartbeat of the historic fabric of Fez, where brass craftsmen were working under unsanitary conditions and participating in the pollution of the main river of Fez, *Oued Boukhraieb*, by discharging heavy metals and toxins. Also, the project has relocated brass artisans far from the *Lalla Yeddouna* Square, to the peripheral and industrial zone *Ain Nokbi*. This paper analyses through semi-structured interviews how this new scheme has raised critical questions regarding the resilience of artisans, and the vulnerabilities produced in terms of spatial integration, economic precarity, and cultural displacement.**

**Keywords:** Craftsmanship, medina of Fez, artisans, relocation.

### **INTRODUCTION: FEZ AS A HISTORIC HUB FOR NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP**

The historical evolution of the city of Fez is characterized by three development phases. The establishment of “Fez El Bali”<sup>\*</sup> under Idriss I and Idriss II in the 8th century, followed by the creation of “Fez El Jdid”<sup>†</sup> in the 13th century, and the more recent development of the European city called “the modern city” under the French Protectorate since 1912. Also, the city of Fez stands as a historic hub of master craftsmanship and constitutes one of the main producers of traditional handicraft products in Morocco and beyond (Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Senegal) (Le Tourneau, 2009). However, the sector of craftsmanship is undergoing a multifaceted crisis, marked by difficulties to respond to the consumer demand, as well as the strong competition

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<sup>\*</sup> The term “Fez El Bali” is an arabic designation signifying “old Fez” or “ancient Fez” to denote the ancient or original sector of the medina of Fez.

<sup>†</sup> The term “Fez El Jdid” directly translates from arabic as “new Fez” to refer to the quarter established in the 13th century adjacent to “Fez El Bali”.

from imported goods -initially from Europe during the French colonial period and more recently from China (Ouazzani Touhami, Ferguene & Jaidi, 2015). This has generated an economic vulnerability despite the profound historic know-how of craftsmanship. Compounding this fragility, some artisanal activities are based on a highly polluting practices, presenting a great threat to public health and the environment.

To improve and modernize key sectors in Morocco, including handicrafts, a Compact of five years was signed between the Moroccan and the US governments in 2008. Funded by the American initiative Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), Artisanal Fez Medina (AFM) project was conducted to renovate the *Lalla Yeddouna* Square -that constitutes a hub of artisanal production and the heartbeat of the historic fabric of Fez. The project also aimed to improve working conditions for artisans and to bolster the economic appeal of craftsmanship. With an amount of \$43 million, AFM project has impacted over 1500 persons. Most of them – especially brassware artisans - were relocated to the industrial zone *Ain Nokbi*<sup>\*</sup>, designed few years before to contain the relocated polluting activities.

Metal activities, particularly brassware, hold the second position within Fez' craftsmanship sector, representing 23% (1859 units) of the total units, after leather and weaving crafts which account for 55% of the activities. Metal activities generate 3000 jobs, making up 29% of the global artisanal workforce. Furthermore, It's a significant component due to its capacity for export beyond Morocco.

The AFM project constituted a response to multiple challenges in the old Medina of Fez, primarily dilapidated buildings, environmental pollution and the declining artisanal economy in this historic urban fabric. However, the relocation of artisans raises critical questions regarding the inclusivity of such a development project. Moreover, some criticized the authenticity of certain artisanal productions, such as brassware, has been completely removed in the name of development imperatives.



**Illustration 1: Working conditions of brassware craftsmen at *Lalla Yeddouna* square before the relocation project**

Source: ADER-Fez

At *Ain Nokbi* neighbourhood, the artisanal production of brassware becomes an industrial process. At *Lalla Yeddouna* Square, the new urban design project has replaced productive brass

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<sup>\*</sup> In 2000, the Moroccan State has established a relocation policy for artisanal activities to new urban sites. This policy aimed to renew the ancestral craft activities and to help artisans deal with economic competition due to the imported products, to enhance the craftsmanship economy and improve social aspects of those activities.

workshops with marketable finished products, thereby transforming the place into a space of display rather than production (brass and silverware products, leather goods, traditional sewing, pottery, carpets, etc.). The central problem analysed in this paper is whether the relocation to *Ain Nokbi* truly responded to the deeper needs of craftsmen:

- **What were the driving forces and rationales behind the adoption of an urban project, such as the case of relocating craftsmanship beyond the medina of Fez, what key impacts have resulted from its implementation, and how is it perceived by craftsmen?**

To address this research problem, a descriptive and analytic methodology approach is adopted by combining both fieldwork and academic research. The theoretical component is based on a review of academic literature dealing with craftsmanship, heritage preservation and urban development in Morocco and beyond. The empiric component is based on semi-structured interviews with representatives from government departments and both brassware large- and small-scale artisans (producers and subcontractors) at *Ain Nokbi*. The corpus of the analysed data allows to understand artisans' everyday experience at *Ain Nokbi* and a to establish a critical reading of the structural forces that shape relocation policies in Fez.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW AND STUDY SITE: RELOCATING THE BRASSWARE ACTIVITIES OUT OF THE OLD MEDINA OF FEZ: HOW AND WHY?**

The case of Fez city is meaningful in this research, because it has been one of the most attractive tourist destinations in Morocco. However, "the flaws in managing its attractiveness have significantly reduced its performance, unlike other cities, notably Marrakech and Agadir" (Hmoui et al., 2017, pp. 139-140).

In response to that, many interventions were conducted, especially relocating polluting craftsmanship activities out of the Medina. This aimed to enhance attractiveness in the old part of Fez and upgrade its economic vitality throughout its rich and diversified craftsmanship.

The need to relocate polluting artisanal activities out of the Medina of Fez was recognized in the Master Plan for Urban Development in 1978. This decision was made to preserve the Medina from pollution and to reduce its density.

As Swyngedouw and Heynen (2023) argue, environmental urban actions are never neutral, they are generally conducted through a political approach and often reproduce existing power asymmetries. In this study case, all the stakeholders witnessed the environmental degradation at *Lalla Yeddouna* square due the artisanal production.

This has generated the pollution of the main river of Fez *Oued Boukhrareb* by discharging heavy metals and toxins. Also, the unpleasant odors was impacting local air quality and posing health concerns for residents and artisans.

Indeed, Loftus (2009) thinks that environmental actions often mask certain politic motivations such as the control and commodification of urban space. But the relocation based on a transfer of the problem rather than solving it at its root can be considered as the easiest solution for all the stakeholders.

Lefebvre's notion of *the Right to the City* (1968) is deeply adapted to the case of Fez, a city where artisans are attached to the old medina and its ancestral practices but requested to vacate it in the name of development and depollution.

Practically, traditional craftsmanship in Fez has faced new challenges in 2000, among them the rising cost of raw materials and the intense competition, not only from European imported product in the past years, but also from low-cost products imported from China, which despite their inferior quality, remain highly attractive for low-income clients due to their affordability. This dynamic has led to a significant decline in artisan's sales in both local and international markets (Ouazzani Touhami, Ferguene & Jaidi, 2015). Nevertheless, the creation of industrial zones like *Ain Nokbi*, with a 6.07 hectar site, has faced delays for decades because the cost of the lands was perceived unaffordable by artisans.

The project was revived with the involvement of the main decision-makers because of its promising opportunities, as well as the price of lands was reduced to encourage artisans to subscribe to the project and enhance and modernize their production. However, most concerned artisans like brass craftsmen of *Lalla Yeddouna* square remained in the medina. The brassware producers were unable to build their workshops at *Ain Nokbi* due to the significant financial resources required. Also, the brassware subcontractors remained at the *Lalla Yeddouna square* to be closed to the production units.

Despite these obstacles, the *Ain Nokbi* project stood as the ultimate solution for relocating polluting artisanal activities according to the Regional Development Plan for Handicrafts. This initiative remained crucial as the decision-makers tend to launch a bunch of renovation projects in the Medina of Fez, especially the rehabilitation of *Lalla Yeddouna* square.

In this case, the argument of "cleaning" the old centers can constitute a trend observed in cities of the Global South, where informal economies are displaced to the periphery under the name of sustainability (Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019). In 2007, a huge part of the project was funded by the MCC -result of a cooperation between the Moroccan and American government-aligning with the government's vision for handicrafts "Vision 2015": Preserving the heritage of Fez and relocating polluting activities away from the Medina.

As the *Lalla Yeddouna* square was called to become an important catalyst for economic and social craftsmanship growth, its rehabilitation project has introduced new features, including contemporary architectural structures, green spaces, public squares, and urban amenities. The primary objective of these new facilities is to accommodate workshops, showrooms, and an exhibition gallery dedicated to Fez craftsmanship.

The original brassware artisans of the square were relocated to *Ain Nokbi* neighbourhood to improve their daily life and working conditions, and a selected artisans from across the medina took place at *Lalla Yeddouna* square to showcase their finished crafts (leather goods, traditional sewing, carpets, brass and silverware, pottery, etc.). While the square became a space of display rather than artisanal production, a new tendency emerged at *Ain Nokbi* leading to an industrial process of craftsmanship (Fejjal, Guerraoui, 1988).



**Illustration 2: Pictures showing production units owned by brassware producers**

Source: Hanzaz / 2025



**Illustration 3: Pictures showing the artisanal complex dedicated to brassware subcontractors**

Source: Hanzaz / 2025

The MCC program support has enable more than 123 artisans to access to property by building factories for brassware producers and creating an artisanal centre for subcontractors. Each unit was adapted to high sanitary working conditions and a wastewater treatment plant was implemented in the neighbourhood to reduce pollution. Moreover, the American fund enable artisans to get compensation during the project's lifecycle. Despite its development objectives, the project represents a withdrawal of urban rights from the most vulnerable actors. This is even more pertinent in postcolonial cities, where spatial control is often exercised under development rationales that sometimes obscure systemic exclusion (Roy, 2005).

### **METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK**

The results showcased in this paper constitute a part of my PhD research. As a part of the renovation of *Lalla Yeddouna* square, one of the main questions posed concerns the relocation of brassware artisans out of the Medina. The present research adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach with a comprehensive literature review and an empirical case study of the relocation of brass craftsmen from the old Medina of Fez to *Ain Nokbi* neighbourhood.

On one hand, the conceptual framework concerns a review of scholar literature about development urban planning and its social outcomes. The main objective is to identify key theoretical gaps and to introduce this research within broader academic and policy debates.

On the other hand, the empirical investigation explores the new workplaces at *Ain Nokbi* neighbourhood and aim to capture key stakeholders' perspectives, through a semi-structured interviews with 11 persons, conducted during 7 days in January 2025 :

- Representatives from civil society of brassware craftsmen: 3 representatives from large-scale craftsmen (producers) and 4 representatives from small-scale craftsmen (subcontractors).
- Representatives from the main departments (decision-makers) : ADER-Fez, culture department, craftsmanship department, and tourism department.

10 interviews were conducted in-person, and one was remotely. They all lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. An interview guide has been used to explore the social and urban experiences of brass artisans in the new *Ain Nokbi* zone and to analyse their perception of their new workplaces and conditions.

With the help of Taguette, the data collected from the interviews is analysed through a thematic lens, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The themes concern before and after the project:

- Before the project: The consultation process during the project's lifecycle between institutional stakeholders and brassware artisans;
- After the project :
  - The perception of artisans of their current work conditions and urban experiences.
  - The perception of institutional representatives from the government departments of the post-project.

In line with ethical standards in qualitative research, all individuals interviewed were informed of the research's objective, assured of confidentiality, and offered the choice to remain anonymous. The interviews were conducted in languages comfortable for participants, such as French or Moroccan Darija.

The main limitation of this research relays to the limited time and space scope, focusing specifically on the case of Brass ware craftsmanship, while there are other handicrafts activities that has been displaced to *Ain Nokbi* such as the pottery.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: THE RELOCATION OF BRASSWARE ACTIVITY BETWEEN A DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AND SOCIAL INCLUSIVITY ISSUES**

The craftsmen relocation was justified on environmental<sup>§</sup> and working conditions<sup>\*\*</sup> grounds. Under MCC's compact, the project enabled financial compensation for all the impacted craftsmen during the project, the construction of new workshops for brassware producers, and the creation of "foundouks"<sup>††</sup> to accommodate their subcontractors (small scale craftsmen). The official documents related to *Ain Nokbi* project and the interviews with the official representatives of the concerned departments showcased that the relocation project was

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<sup>§</sup> The River *Oued El Jawaher*, that crossed the old Medina of Fez, was polluted by artisanal effluents.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Unsanitary workspaces and exposure to toxic materials.

<sup>††</sup> Building inspired by old hostels in the Medina, where the main function has shifted to artisanal activities during the past years, replacing their former role as hostels.

conducted with a set of key strategic actions designed to enhance and support its implementation. This was verified throughout the conducted interviews with craftsmen:

**Table 1: Perception of the project from official departments and craftsmen perspectives: Interview findings**

	Official department's perception of the project	Craftsmen's perception of the project
<b>Social and economic actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All the craftsmen concerned by the project were consulted prior the project's start.</li> <li>Dedicated unit assistance was mobilized during the relocating phase, including providing means of transport to ease the transfer of craftsmen's equipment.</li> <li>A financial compensation was given to the impacted artisans because of the suspension of their activity.</li> <li>Guarantee schemes and financing mechanisms were introduced to support the relocation process and assistance services were conducted to enhance consulting, maintenance and quality control.</li> </ul>	<p>Before the project, most craftsmen were convinced that their displacement was the right decision to get their working conditions improved and to enhance their productivity. Most of them expressed satisfaction with the social approach, based on consultation, both prior to and during the project. The compensation was well perceived by artisans, even that they manage to not directly mention it. However, the relocation has created a disrupted traditional production networks because some artisans remain at the medina while most of them were relocated. Unlike the old medina which benefited from incidental tourism traffic, <i>Ain nokbi</i> is disconnected from customer flows. This has led to the emergence of intermediaries, reducing sales and profit margins for craftsmen.</p>
<b>Environmental actions</b>	A wastewater treatment plant was implemented in the neighbourhood to reduce pollution by processing production residues and safeguarding the environment.	The establishment of a wastewater treatment station in Ain Nokbi is also a notable success. But toxic materials are still in use according to certain craftsmen.
<b>Working conditions actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All the new workspaces created provide highly sanitary working conditions.</li> <li>The compliance with the labor regulations is an obligation for all artisans to ensure the protection of workforce from systemic abuses that have been reported in past practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Artisans confirmed that ventilation, sunlight, and overall hygiene improved significantly in the new facilities. They confirm that their current workspace is way better than their prior working conditions in the old Medina. On the other hand, certain artisans pointed the illegal renting practices by some brassware producers (large-scale artisans) that subdivide their workspace into units and rent it to subcontractors.</li> <li>Almost all artisans pointed the lack of local amenities in the new zone. They also pointed sever transportation problems with no active bus lines, many rely on expensive taxis or long walks. This has reduced punctuality and productivity for multiple craftsmen. This has generated some inclusion issues, particularly for women and elderly workers.</li> </ul>
<b>Other actions</b>	Quality production of artisanal products was promoted and protected through the establishment of certification labels.	The brassware producers are completely advantageous thanks the label certification.







On the other hand, the empiric component of this research has shown the controversy of the project between its conception and its perception (Lefebvre, 1974). Some outcomes of the project underline some inclusivity's issues. The interviews conducted highlighted the gap between craftsmen's expectations and their daily real experiences at *Ain Nokbi*. The dreamed new workplace has rapidly become a struggle due to the lack of amenities and means of transport. This has generated the exclusion of some craftsmen, such as women and elderly workers who abandoned this activity. Nevertheless, those issues concerns the small-scale artisans (subcontractors) more than the large-scale craftsmen (producers). Those who has the financial means get rapidly adapted to the new site. Also, the project has transformed some artisanal activities, such as brassware craftsmanship, to an industrial process (Fejjal, Guerraoui, 1988). This raises critical questions regarding the eventual loss of authenticity. Despite this research highlights key challenges, further quantitative analyses could yield deeper understanding of social and economic effects of the relocation of brassware activity and craftsmen to *Ain Nokbi*.

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