

Architectural Railway Heritage Protection in Algeria: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract:

The recognition of railway heritage on a global scale has only recently gained prominence. Simultaneously, the domain of railways remains relatively underrepresented, particularly within the context of Algeria, where protection and classification initiatives for railway infrastructure are sporadic, resembling those undertaken for historical monuments.

This research project is driven by the overarching objectives of knowledge dissemination, popularization, and the comprehensive assessment of Algerian railway heritage, with a specific focus on railway stations, while situating them within a global context.

Ultimately, this study examines the complex issue of identity concerning colonial heritage and underscores the inadequacy of heritage preservation efforts in this regard. These two facets of the study collectively strive to formulate feasible solutions and recommendations. Moreover, they endeavor to identify the essential values and arguments required for the preservation and enhancement of Algeria's railway heritage.

Keywords: *Railway heritage, classification, historical monument, railway stations, enhancement.*

Introduction

The notion of heritage was born with time, and took a number of years to become established in people's minds. Initially, heritage was defined in terms of temporality: the legitimacy of heritage came from its historical longevity. This notion contains both the inheritance and its transmission: it is what generations inherit from their predecessors, and what their predecessors decide to bequeath to them. Although heritage initially concerned mainly the built environment, the notion has gradually been broadened. But it is only since the 1950s that it has been used to describe all cultural policies for the conservation and enhancement of the vestiges and legacies of the past. Thus, heritage implies other notions. Preservation and conservation, Protection, which implies a set of legal provisions, Value, which implies an appreciation on the part of its users and public authorities.

According to the architect Marie-Françoise Laborde, industrial heritage represents a branch of cultural heritage and concerns all the tangible and intangible assets inherited from the 19th and 20th centuries that were created by industry (LABORDE, 2007). At the international level, industrial heritage is gaining its place within heritage through TICCIH (The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage). congress which brings together specialists every three years to study and promote the archaeology of industry and its heritage. Founded in 1978, it obtained in 1980 the recognition from ICOMOS (Council of Monuments and Sites) and today brings together 38 countries.

A second definition was added in 2011 by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage (TICCIH) in the ICOMOS-TICCIH Principles for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage Sites, Buildings, Areas and Landscapes, known as the Dublin Principles. *"Industrial heritage comprises sites, buildings, complexes, territories and landscapes, as well as equipment, objects or documents that bear witness to past or present industrial processes of production through the extraction and transformation of raw materials and to the associated energy or transport infrastructure. It expresses a close relationship between the cultural and natural environment since industrial processes - ancient or modern - depend on natural resources, energy and communication routes to produce and distribute goods to markets. This heritage includes intangible dimensions such as technical know-how, the organisation of work and workers or a complex legacy of social and cultural practices resulting from the influence of industry on the life of communities and on the transformation of societies and the world in general".* (ICOMOS , 2011)

Railway heritage, would therefore fall within the definition of industrial heritage given by TICCIH: it contains real estate that has been used for the economic development of societies (stations, engineering structures, rolling stock, etc.).

The Question of the colonial heritage

The notion of colonial heritage is not recent in the sense that archaeological heritage encompasses any ancient footprint that demonstrates human activity, but the heritage of buildings is part of a new approach applied by previously colonised countries, which depends mainly on the historical, political and economic context of the country. Despite its effectiveness and profitability, it has shortcomings at the social level, since it does not deal with the identity aspect of the people and only the elites are made aware of it. (NDJOCK NYOBE, 2021)

The apprehension of the notion of colonial heritage in the Maghreb and particularly in Algeria is qualified as fragile and precarious, according to (GHARBI, 2001) here is a difference between the notion "TURATH" and heritage, the first one designates a specific and exclusive legacy to a previous civilisation, the second one encompasses social, historical, economic, architectural, memorial,etc values, in order to justify its heritage recognition. In Algeria, only the use value is recognised for heritage objects dating from the colonial period, which partly explains the destruction of some colonial buildings, such as the flour mill Narbonne in Algiers which was recently demolished in April 2022. According to the author, the reasons for this discrimination lie in the aspect of identity because after Independence, a break was created with everything colonial by making it specific, the colonial heritage is then perceived with caution.



Figure 1: Demolition of the mill building NARBONNE, Algiers, April 2022
Source: (CHAOUÏ, 2022)

Historical overview of the railway in Algeria

In Algeria, the railway was introduced by the French colonization during the middle of the 19th century, its appearance is represented by the imperial decree of Napoleon III of 1857 (BEJUI & al, 1992), with the aim of facilitating transport and displacement given the difficulty of the existing geographical and topographical conditions, but also to evacuate the country's wealth towards the North thanks to a railway layout (South-North) inspired by the existing Roman road layout (MEYNIER, 1981), but beyond the economic aspects, at the time the colonizers were exploiting with a logic of domination and land ownership, and consequently, like any new country, Algeria was compared to the United States and its railway (DELAVIGNE & al, 1854). Faced with the worries of displacement, the lack of infrastructure, and the need to exploit the riches of Algeria, the French found themselves in front of a Roman route that had been erased and replaced by narrow Ottoman paths, so they opted to develop communication networks by integrating them into the existing road network (GODARD, 1996). The birth and evolution of the Algerian railway are defined by a process divided into several periods and railway programs. The choice of the type of communication network went through several studies, including the comparison of creation and circulation expenses between roads and railways,

where it turned out that the railway is the most affordable means considering maintenance, speed flows, and its impact (DELAUVIGNE & al, 1854).

The first railway program 1857-1879:

The imperial decree of Napoleon III constituted the legal framework of the Algerian railway, thus representing its birth on April 8, 1857, the latter cited the following proposals (BEJUI & al, 1992).

- A parallel line to the Mediterranean, linking the three provincial capitals, Constantine, Algiers, and Oran
- Perpendicular lines to the Mediterranean, linking the main ports with the interior of the country.

In order to execute the different railway programs, several railway companies were involved, such as the Algerian Railway Company CFA, which was the initiator of the Algiers - Blida line, the Paris Lyon Méditerranée Company PLM, the Western Company, the Eastern Company, the Bône-Guelma Company, and the Algerian State Railway Company CFAE.

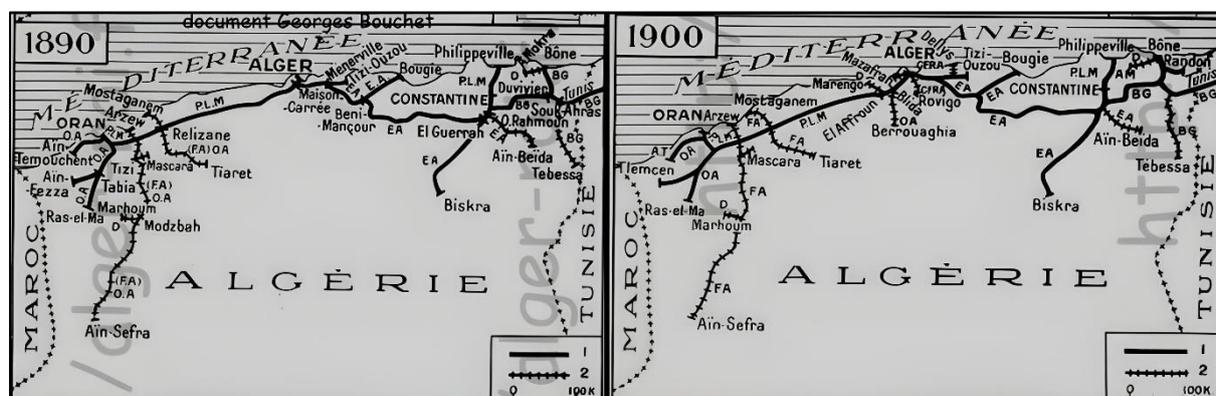


Figure 2: Map of the railway network in Algeria between 1870 and 1880

Source: (FOURNIOL, 2001)

The second railway program: 1879 – 1907 :

The second railway program was characterized by the classification of the existing lines of local interest towards the general interest, as well as the realisation of the branches in the North, the extension towards the Moroccan borders, and the creation of a network in the South of the departments Constantine, Algiers, and Oran (POGGI, 1931). During these years, the Algerian railway began to take shape, initially with a line parallel to the sea and north-south penetration routes.

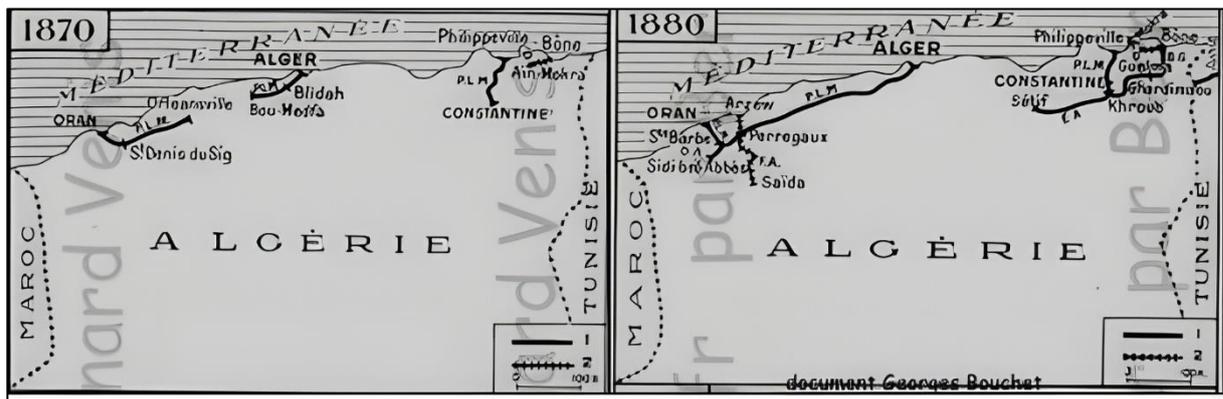


Figure 3: Map of the railway network in Algeria between 1890 and 1900
Source: (FOURNIOL, 2003)

Third railway program: 1907 - 1920

Characterised mainly by the consolidation of engineering structures and other repair works, as well as the realisation of new branch lines not executed during the 1879 programme (BEJUI & al, 1992): Tlemcen - Beni-Saf, Sidi-Bel-Abbès -Tizi -Mascara -Uzès-le-Duc, Relizane - Prévost-Paradol via Zemmora, Orléansville -Ténès and finally Bouïra -Aïn-Bessem –Aumale.

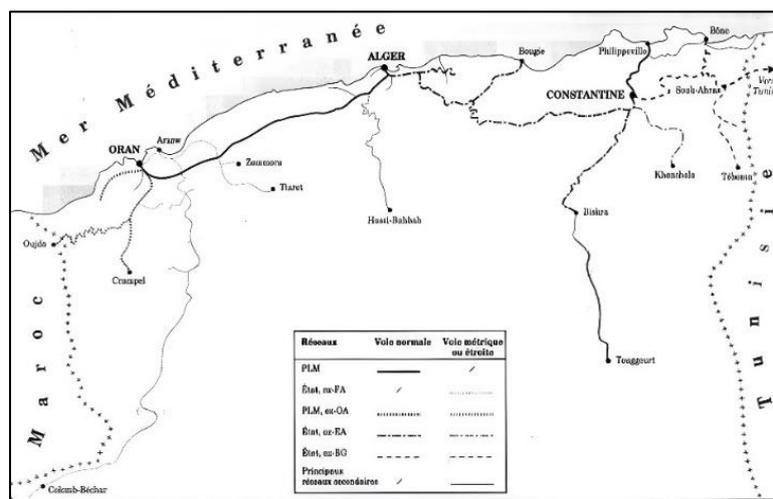


Figure 4: Structure map of the Algerian railway network in 1921
Source: (BEJUI & al, 1992)

Fourth railway program 1920 - 1960

The program was applied late in 1921, characterised by the homogeneity of the companies' lines, PLM in the West and CFAE in the East, as well as the modernisation of the networks (electrification of the Bône - Oued Kébérmit mining line).

Finally, the management was put in the hands of the National Society of French Railways in Algeria (SNCF), with a capital provided by the state and the SNCF métropolitaine (BEJUI & al, 1992).

The railway during the post-colonial period

Apart from the electrification, doubling, and creation of industrial tracks, the Algerian railway has kept the same colonial structure, which explains the will to industrialise the country. The railway is managed until today by the national railway company (SNTF). The twenty first century was marked by the creation of the ANSERIF, a national agency for the study and monitoring of railway investments in 2005, whose main mission is to develop the railway sector by building new stations and railway lines and acquiring new high-speed trains, although the old railway stations remain frozen in time, excluding them from the programs of adaptation, modernisation and preservation.

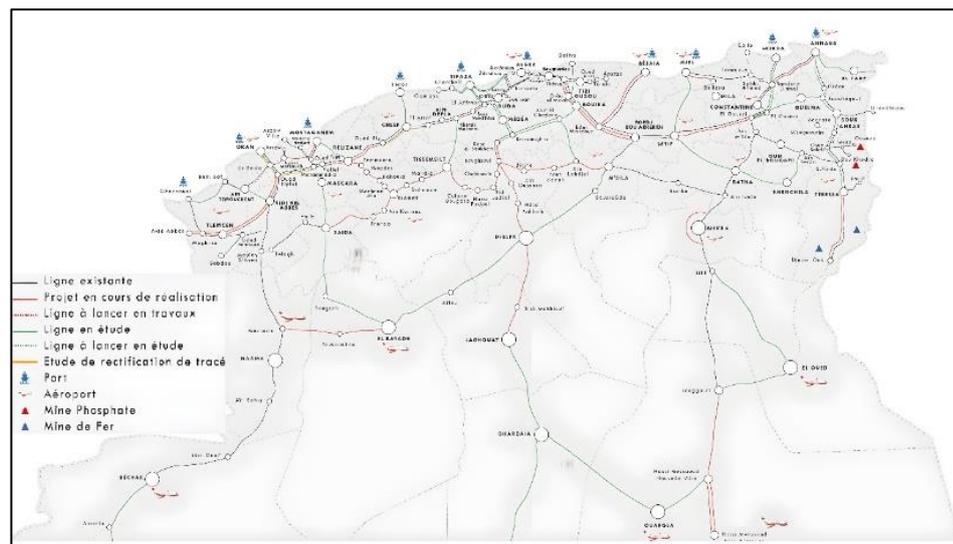


Figure 5: Map of the current rail network

Source: (ANESRIF, 2017)

The current situation of Algeria railway heritage :

The quantitative analysis of listed cultural properties in Algeria allows for an understanding and clarity of national cultural orientations, it allows for the study of the dynamics and evolution of heritage policies, in particular the listing of historical monuments and sites in Algeria (BENKARI, 2003) . Through the analysis of the graph we notice first of all a will to assert the cultural identity by correcting the colonial tendency in the post-Independence period based essentially on the medieval and modern period. The contemporary period shows the lowest percentage (6.81%) represented mainly by places of resistance related to the Independence War such as the Casbah.

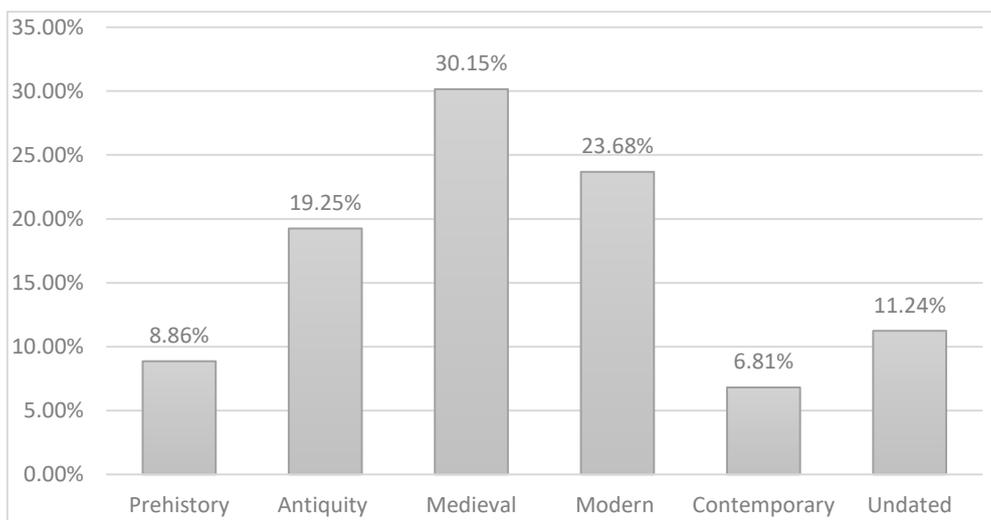


Figure 6: Classification of cultural property according to historical periods in Algeria
Source: (MINISTRY OF CULTURE, 2022), treated by authors

In Algeria, railway heritage is not considered as a specific heritage, it is classified in the same rank as other types of heritage, in addition to the lack of recognition and protection measures taken in its favour. Despite the heritage potential of the railway elements in Algeria, we constantly notice a position of indifference towards the railway heritage, yet, in addition to the specific architectural aspect, there is also the inestimable historical value reflected in these works, which are part of the period between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a historically controversial period which is hardly accepted by the Algerian cultural administration.

In the field of Algerian industrial heritage, the built railway heritage is hardly recognised, except for the protection measures applied to three architectural works of an industrial nature, which explains the marginalisation of this heritage.

- **The railway station of Skikda:** classified as a historic monument in June 2017, among its classification criteria, its aesthetic value which is manifested by the neo-Moorish style and its different architectural elements, and its economic and social value. (Arrêté du 22 Ramadhan 1438 correspondant au 17 juin 2017 portant classement de la « gare ferroviaire de Skikda », 2017, pp. 30-31)
- **The Laghouat diesel power plant:** classified as a historical monument in 1999, due to its historical value as one of the first power plants in Algeria. (Arrêté du 24 rajab 1420 correspondant au 3 novembre 1999 portant classement des monuments et sites historiques, 1999, p. 18)
- **The Hydro-electric power station of Boghni:** Inscribed on the general inventory of immovable cultural property by decree of 14/07/2007, after a favourable opinion of the national commission for cultural property held on 12/10/2006. (Minister de la culture, 2019)

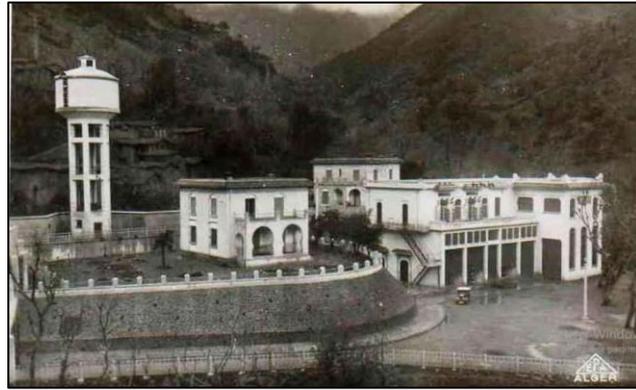


Figure 7: Old photo of the hydroelectric power station of Boghni
Source : (RAMBERT , 2019)



Figure 8: Main facade of Skikda railway station
Source: (taken by the author 24/09/2021)

The Canadian experience on railway heritage, the case of railway stations

Canada's railway stations are architecturally impressive and attractive, and without them the growth of the country would not have been the same. Most were built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the Canadian Pacific Railway was building a transcontinental railway and competing companies were laying their own tracks to carry passengers. There was a time when railway stations were the first stop for passengers arriving in a small town or large urban centre. The railway companies therefore designed stations that impressed passengers and, of course, potential customers. At the beginning of the 20th century, travellers could see, among other things, chateau-style buildings, which appeal to the fanciful and imposing aspects of 14th and 15th century French châteaux. Chateau-style stations are recognisable by their sloping, ornate rooflines punctuated by dormers, gables and turrets, their imposing continuous facades and the richness of the materials used in their construction, notably brick, stone and copper. (GELLY & MACFARLANE, 2014)

The Heritage Railway Stations Protection Act

In response to public concern, the federal government passed the Heritage Railway Stations Protection Act in 1990, through which many stations were designated by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (CLMHC) for protection.

The Act provides that railway companies are liable to fines of up to \$1 million if they remove, demolish, alter or dispose of a designated railway station without authorization. The Act also authorizes the CLMHC to recommend that specific stations be subject to ministerial designation. To be eligible, a station must be at least 40 years old, owned or operated by a railway company, and built or used for purposes associated with the transportation of passengers and goods. (Ministry of the Environment, 1991). Railway stations are assessed on criteria such as historical associations, architectural quality, relationship to surrounding buildings and value to the local population. Meticulous inventories have gathered information on railway stations and have resulted in detailed research reports entitled Railway Station Reports (also known as RSRs). Over the past 20 years, more than 300 stations have been evaluated, of which more than half have been designated. (Minister of Justice, 1985)

The purpose of the Act is to protect railway stations and related buildings so that the CLMHC can monitor and advise on their rehabilitation, if necessary. At present, the Act only protects the station buildings themselves. The Act has its limitations, but it does provide some controls to ensure that interventions will respect the heritage values and character of the site. The Act authorizes the CLMHC to advise a railway company on changes to a station, to review proposals for the sale of a station, and to play a major role in determining its subsequent use. Potential new owners must agree to obtain a provincial or municipal heritage designation prior to closing the deal to ensure the station's future protection. New owners are also encouraged to rehabilitate the building and give it a meaningful function. Finally, while title may change, the federal commemorative building designation remains, ensuring that railway stations remain important landmarks and identifiable cultural resources for Canadian communities. (Minister of Justice, 1985)



Figure 9: The historic train station of the Argenteuil MRC Québec

Source : nationaltrustcanada.ca

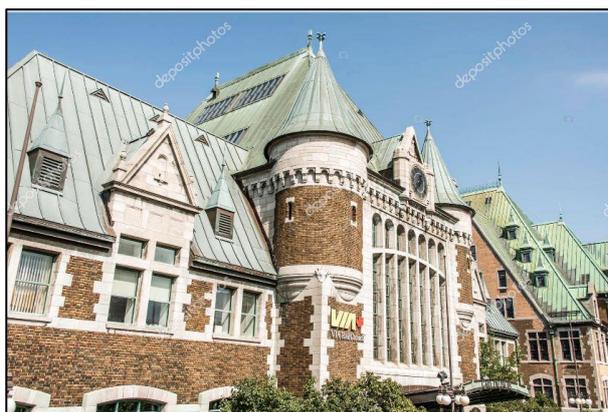


Figure 10: View of the Gare du Palais, Quebec Central Station.

Source : st3.depositphotos.com

Recommendations:

The Algerian railway heritage, which is in the process of disappearing, must be recognised as national heritage, because in addition to its industrial symbolism, it evokes a key period in the country's history. Moreover, its structures, particularly the stations, deserve to be preserved and enhanced by :

- The integration of railway stations in the development operations of the railway sector.
- The elaboration of a heritage process based on the historical and social aspect in the case of the recognition of stations.
- The implementation of specific legal tools for the protection of industrial heritage, particularly railway heritage.
- The involvement of associations, and their encouragement to contribute to the railway inventory.
- The generalisation of railway maintenance operations, lines, works of art and stations.

Conclusion

Algeria has not been spared the railway decadence that started after independence, which has been marked by abandonment, relocation, network contraction and lack of funding for new railway projects. In terms of wealth and size, the Algerian railway is among the best ranked in Africa, given its originality and historical context. This study has aimed to highlight the lack of heritage actions towards industrial heritage and particularly railway heritage and proposes furthermore the analysis of the Canadian example to come out with solutions and recommendations.

Finally, the recognition of the industrial railway heritage as national heritage must go through a process of patrimonialization. However, this recognition depends on various acts of a political nature, such as the creation of a legal framework for the specific management of such a heritage, of a social nature through its popularization and patrimonialization, and of an associative nature through the involvement in its preservation and valorization.

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