

Towards an exploratory approach to residential choices and social representations of domestic architecture. Case study: the town of El Eulma (north-central Algeria)

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Abstract:

This study investigates the factors influencing residential preferences for detached houses in North-Central Algeria, as well as the associated social and architectural representations, in order to forecast future housing developments and impose structure on the disorder arising from the proliferation of this model nationwide. The research also examines the conceptual representations and idealized frameworks of this architectural production through a qualitative methodology utilizing a semi-structured questionnaire survey conducted with its creators. NVivo text analysis software was employed to reconstruct recurring themes in residents' discourse, and word clouds were produced. The analysis results reveal that residential decisions are shaped by both rational and emotional factors – most notably by economic status – and by a “residential imaginary” characterized by frustration and perseverance. These findings highlight the complex interplay between socioeconomic realities and subjective aspirations in shaping housing preferences in North-Central Algeria.

Keywords:

domestic architecture, Individual house, social representations, El Eulma, Algeria

1. Introduction

The house serves as “a material, social and mental metaphor” [1] for societies, rendering it an essential instrument for comprehending their identity and operational dynamics. The house is constructed and utilized in accordance with the societal and ideal standards that inform the representations of the community that creates and employs it [2]. It serves as the pivotal component of our socialization, a crucial locus in the spatial, social organization, and its interaction with habitats, where familial and social group dynamics are negotiated, contested, and transformed. This location serves as the locus where social identity markers solidify [3], possess a crucial symbolic significance, and unveil the essence of its inhabitants. Henri Raymond's work, “L'habitat pavillonnaire” (suburban housing) [4], has emerged as a seminal reference in urban sociology, introducing novel perspectives on domestic space and reestablishing significance for the inhabitant that transcends basic biological functions, a dimension overlooked by modern architecture.

The single-family home transcends its role as merely a residence or a commodity. Every residence, be it a rural farmhouse, a villa, or a standalone house in a development, embodies a yearning for individuality, the aspiration to craft a personal creation, and the intention to produce a work of [5]. Residential choices are influenced by the interplay of various factors, each with differing degrees of significance. The latter manifests in various forms contingent upon each individual's financial resources and cultural context, rendering the prevalence of specific variables relative to the societies examined and the time frame considered [6]. An analysis of these factors is

expected to yield pertinent information regarding the identity of societies in relation to domestic architecture production.

Jean Claude Abric [7] argued that social representations function as interpretative filters for the represented objects, including both the product and the process of its creation. Abric, [8] posits that representation serves as both the product and the process of cognition, enabling an individual or group to reconstruct encountered reality and attribute specific meaning to it. This leads to a genuine formation or alteration of reality, fundamentally based on individual attitudes and communal values [9]. asserted that it is pertinent to investigate social representations when attempting to understand the meanings individuals attribute to particular aspects of their environment.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, recent studies on contemporary urbanization and spatial identity [10,11] highlight that rapid urban transformations reshape not only the physical environment but also the symbolic and social meanings attached to place. This perspective aligns closely with the theory of social representations [12,13], which explains how collective perceptions and shared meanings are constructed around spatial and architectural forms.

In the realm of residential architecture, these representations manifest through the ways inhabitants interpret, value, and reproduce spatial models – linking built form with identity construction. Urbanization processes influence these representations by transforming spatial references (neighbourhoods, materials, typologies), while residents reinterpret these changes through their social imaginaries and cultural memory. Consequently, examining residential choices through the lens of social representations provides insight into

how individuals symbolically negotiate the effects of urbanization on their dwelling environments.

This connection further resonates with recent works emphasizing the relational nature of identity, architecture, and everyday space [10,14].

From this theoretical and urban perspective, the meaning of home also evolves in relation to broader societal transformations. In the late 20th century, homeownership became entrenched in a wider societal project that sought to transform the economy and increase social inclusion [15]. Houmont [16] indicated that the predominant preference is for single-family residences over collective housing, satisfying a portion of the population's needs, yet individual housing continues to be the aspiration.

This architectural production experienced remarkable growth in Algerian cities from the 1990s, following the enactment of Law 90/25 on land orientation, which facilitated access to private property, and Law 90/29 on urban planning and development, which established the criteria for the right to construct and subdivide [17]. Consequently, the surge in commercial activities stemming from market liberalization, along with the substantial accumulation of goods that followed, manifested in urban environments and facilitated their transformation.

This mutation has resulted in subdivisions as a manifestation of urban expansion nationally, termed a "subdivision boom" by urban planners [18]. This form of housing is increasingly surpassing collective housing, although the latter continues to dominate in urban regions.

This study deals with domestic architectural production in Algeria, its stylistic and cultural references, and the social representations that derive from it. It focuses on the individual residence as an expression of identity and a mode of architectural creation from the 1990s onwards, when El Eulma became an emblematic site of transnational trade [19].

This fast-growing urban agglomeration shows an evolution in architectural typologies marked by a significant personalization of decor, creating a morphological diversity that reflects the financial capabilities of land buyers [20]. However, this borrowed architecture does not represent the identity of the society that produced it, and leads to heterogeneity in the urban landscape [21]. The proliferation of varied architectural models, at odds with the historical heritage, highlights a break in continuity.

A qualitative approach utilizing content analysis was conducted to elucidate the determinants and cognitive processes that have influenced this mode of built environment production, as well as to identify the representations associated with individual home architectural choices.

This study delineates its guiding objectives and research questions in order to establish a coherent analytical framework for understanding the investigation. The objectives are summarized as follows:

To identify the key factors that shape the interpretation of the architectural milieu, reinforce group cohesion and collective identity, and ultimately enable the reinvention of modified architectural typologies as a prospective vision for the future, while informing conceptual and design decisions.

Accordingly, the research seeks to address the following central question: What socio-cultural and cognitive factors have influenced the construction and perception of individual residences in El Eulma, and in what ways do these representations contribute to shaping the future trajectory of housing design in Algeria?

1.1. Study area presentation

El Eulma is the second-largest town in the wilaya of Sétif by both area and population. Located in the Setif highlands along Route Nationale N°05, the town is 25 km east of Sétif and 100 km west of Constantine (Fig. 1). El-Eulma is the second-largest economic center in the wilaya and is significantly influenced by a major city.

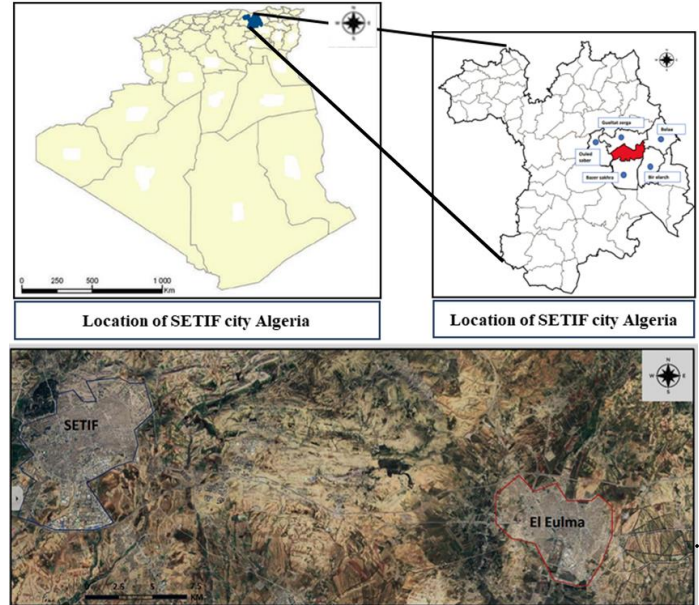


Fig. 1. Geographical location of the study area. Source: own study

Its geographic location and economic and demographic significance render it a center for inter-municipal collaboration. The town's urban transformation was expedited due to its thriving commercial activity and the migration of the rural populace during the black decade. Individual housing constituted a fundamental element of urban space, shaping, structuring, and organizing it. This fundamental urban function conveys information regarding the town's socio-spatial and economic structure.

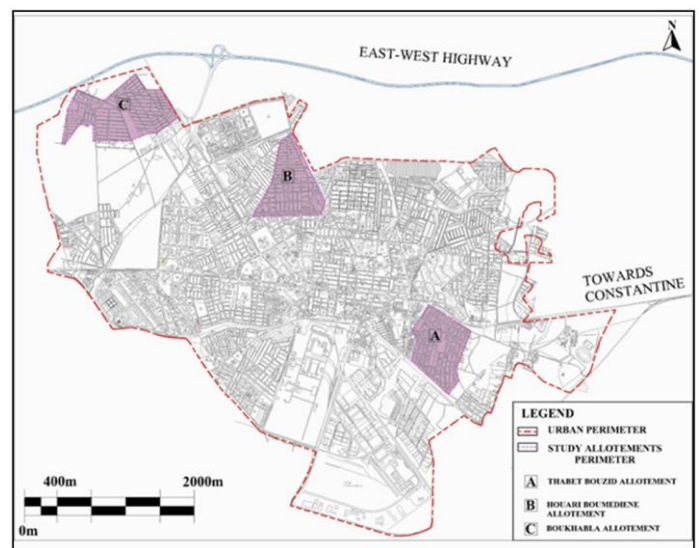


Fig. 2. The Study allotment's location. Source: own study via El Eulma PDAU

Currently, this housing stock constitutes 73.22% of the total housing inventory in the city of El Eulma [22], distributed across 80 locations, encompassing various types, including social housing developments, promotional housing projects, and private housing estates. For our survey, we selected a representative and selective sample based on three objective criteria: the period of allotment creation, the method of creation, and the residential nature of the allotment.

Allotments with significant commercial concentration were omitted from the study “due to their loss of residential character” [19]. The chosen allotments embody a synthesis of these three criteria, and three allotments were retained: Boukhabla allotment, Houari Boumediene allotment, and Thabet Bouzid allotment (Fig. 2).

2. Materials and methods

In recent years, many studies have looked at the single-family home and its social representations from a number of angles. The study by Bourdieu [23,24], Pierre Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot [25], analyze the dynamics of distinction, social domination and the reproduction of inequalities, adapting a qualitative approach. Other studies are based on social orientations and ownership aspirations Forêt and Hirayama [26], Conley and Gifford [27], Kurz and Blossfeld [28], were taken into consideration when making methodological choices.

The research is based on a comprehensive qualitative approach to elucidate the factors influencing residential choices and the perceptions surrounding them. According to Blanchet and Gotman [29], “the interview is the tool of choice for the exploratory phase of a survey insofar as [...] it is itself an exploratory process”. To access the content of social representations, Moliner et al. [30], considered that “one of the major sources of information on the social representations of a community remains the discourse of the individuals who make it up”. To acquire qualitative data, we employed a semi-structured interview.

This method was selected to liberate the interviewees’ discourse, maximize data extraction, and provide them with autonomy. The semi-structured interview primarily identifies the factors influencing residential choices and the structural components of social representations, specifically their central core [8].

2.1. Corpus

This exploratory study comprised a restricted number of interviewees, with the objective of encompassing typical scenarios [31] that could illustrate the diversity of architectural selections and their associated representations.

The participants were selected purposively according to the architectural typologies identified in the study area (Fig. 3), based on a pre-established typological classification that yielded four distinct types. Each typology was represented by several participants. The selection process was guided by the participants’ direct experience with residential dynamics in the city of El Eulma, ensuring the relevance of the perspectives collected in relation to the research objectives. The survey was conducted in French and Arabic with 35 heads of households across the intervention sites and the four typologies (Table 1).

Although the study was not intended to achieve statistical representativeness, the sample size was considered sufficient for an exploratory qualitative design. The sample encompassed a range of socio-economic categories and dwelling types, allowing for adequate diversity of discourses. Data collection continued

until thematic saturation was observed – when no new significant insights or codes emerged from additional interviews [32,33]. This ensured that the sample adequately captured the diversity of sociocultural contexts and architectural expressions relevant to the research objectives.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to architectural typologies and intervention allotments. Source: own study

Typology architectural	Intervention allotments			Number of respondents
	Boukhabla	Houari Boumediene	Thabet bouzid	
Family home	4	4	6	10
Current house	3	5	2	10
Urban palace (Singular)	3	3	2	8
Modern villa	2	3	2	7
Total				35



Fig. 3. Overview of the architectural typologies in the study area. Source: own study

2.2. Interview guide and survey execution

This study employed a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with residents of individual houses in El Eulma. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure diversity in socioeconomic status, educational background, and residential location, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural and cognitive factors shaping architectural choices. This methodological decision aimed to capture a heterogeneous yet representative sample of actors involved in domestic architectural production.

To ensure the coherence and depth of the interviews, a structured interview guide was developed to direct participants toward key themes identified as priorities for the research. The guide was organized into two main sections encompassing six thematic areas. The first section explored the determinants of residential choice through three themes: (1) interviewee biography, (2) the residential project, and (3) project implementation. The second section aimed to reconstruct the representations associated with single-family housing, addressing three additional themes: (4) design intentions, (5) symbolic values of the home, and (6) representations of the exterior appearance.

The interviews were conducted separately with heads of households and executed in three successive phases. First, the objectives and significance of the survey were clearly explained to participants. Second, each respondent completed a short questionnaire designed to collect contextual data such as age, occupation, educational level, household composition, and previous housing experience. Finally, participants were encouraged to elaborate freely, while follow-up questions were introduced to clarify or deepen certain responses in accordance with the thematic guide. The questions were asked as originally

formulated or reformulated when necessary to enhance clarity and understanding.

All interviews were conducted in the local dialect, then fully translated and transcribed for analytical purposes – a process that initially presented challenges due to linguistic nuances and idiomatic expressions.

2.3. Qualitative analysis methodology supported by NVivo

2.3.1. Nvivo-supported text analysis: an aid to interpretation

NVivo is a content analysis tool that facilitates the qualitative examination of a research corpus. It allows for the coordination, management, and analysis of research data while improving their interpretability. This software significantly reduces analysis time, especially when compared to manual coding of a corpus. Above all, it provides interpretative support, allowing for more accurate identification and representation of central themes in participants' discourse. As previous researchers have stated, "the responsibility of generating meaning lies with the researcher, significantly aided by the adaptability and accuracy of the instruments used" [34].

For this study, NVivo version Pf 1.0 was used to organize and structure the corpus of interviews, thereby optimizing its utilization, interpretation, and the production of analytical outputs. The software facilitated the generation of word clouds (initially created in French and translated into English) that visually represent the frequency and prominence of terms through variations in color and size. The stages of the analytical process are summarized in Fig. 4.

2.3.2. Data analysis and coding procedure

• Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with owners of single-family houses: The interview guide was organized around six main thematic axes: Interviewee's biographical background; Residential project initiation; Project implementation; Design intentions; Symbolic values of the house; Representations of the exterior appearance.

This semi-directive approach allowed participants to express their perceptions, motivations, and symbolic associations regarding their residential environments.

• Data Preparation and Import

All interviews were fully transcribed and imported into NVivo 12 for qualitative analysis. Each transcript was treated as a distinct source, which facilitated cross-case comparison and ensured accurate traceability of participants' statements throughout the analytical process.

• Coding Strategy

The coding process followed an inductive, reference-based approach. Two successive stages of coding were implemented:

Open Coding: Transcripts were reviewed line by line to identify recurring ideas, keywords, and representative expressions without imposing predefined categories.

Axial Coding: Conceptual relationships were established among initial codes. Related ideas were grouped into broader conceptual categories, resulting in a coherent analytical framework connecting empirical data to theoretical interpretation. Each meaningful textual segment (reference) was linked to a thematic node, allowing for a structured hierarchy of codes, sub-codes, and categories within NVivo.

• Thematic Coding Framework

Through this iterative process, five major thematic categories were identified. Each category contains inductively derived sub-codes and is illustrated below with sample participant statements.

Following the open and axial coding phases, a structured thematic framework was developed to synthesize the principal dimensions emerging from participants' narratives.

The analysis, supported by NVivo 12, allowed the identification of five overarching thematic categories, each encompassing several sub-codes that reflect specific aspects of homeowners' residential experiences.

Table 2 summarizes the resulting coding scheme, presenting the hierarchical organization of themes, corresponding sub-codes, and illustrative quotations that exemplify participants' perspectives.

As shown in Table 2, the thematic coding scheme captures both the material and symbolic dimensions of the residential experience, ranging from economic and practical constraints to identity expression and built environment perceptions.

This structured framework served as the analytical foundation for interpreting homeowners' discourses, enabling the integration of individual narratives into broader sociocultural and spatial patterns.

The combination of reference-based coding and NVivo-generated outputs (such as word frequency clouds) enhanced the transparency and traceability of the analytical process, ensuring consistency between empirical data and conceptual interpretation.

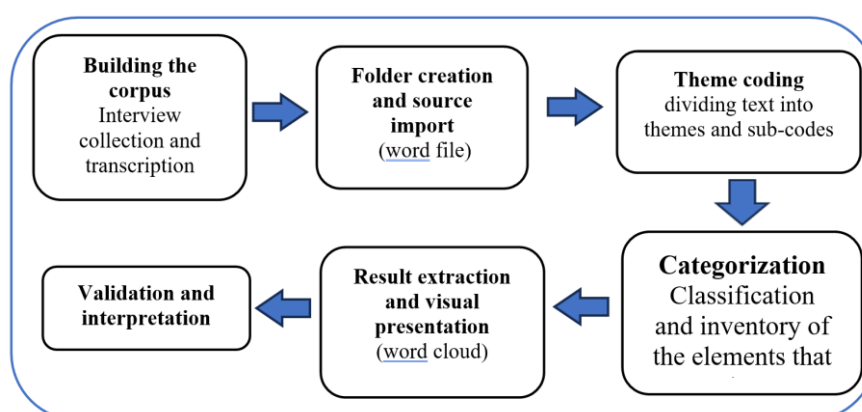


Fig. 4. Text analysis steps. Source: own study via NVivo software

paint is adequate and aesthetically pleasing (yet it is appearances that prevail). Conversely, the residents of the urban palace regard it as a crucial component and the embodiment of the owner's identity. "*The aesthetic dimension embodies my persona; it represents the homeowner's identity, as contemporary residences are no longer uniform and lacking in embellishment.*" (Survey respondent)

The terms *decorative, roofing, and balconies* pertain to distinct architectural components that affect the aesthetic of the residence. They embody collective codes that surpass the uniqueness of each individual. Balconies exemplify the quintessential decorative element despite lacking a functional role in most interviews due to the intimate dimension inherent in Eulmi society. Tiled roofs are the predominant preference among inhabitants, epitomizing the town's identity. The sole impediment to its extensive adoption is its elevated cost.

Distinctive characteristics can be discerned concerning the facade cladding and its hue, the railings employed, or the number of balconies. Roofs vary from simple to highly intricate designs, typically crafted by exceptionally skilled master carpenters from Djemila or Beni Fouda.

4. Conclusion

The examination of representations allows for a clearer understanding of their significance and function in shaping residential preferences, which are influenced by both tangible and intangible factors. These choices are evidently conditioned by economic status, revealing the disparities that define housing wealth and poverty. Residential mobility, often aligned with professional trajectories, influences both the location and the nature of residential selection. The home thus becomes more than a physical structure – it is a medium through which occupants express identity, social aspiration, and economic status. It serves simultaneously as an indicator of prosperity and a symbolic marker of modernity and social advancement.

The analysis of representations associated with the house's exterior demonstrates that the adoption of familiar architectural styles functions as a symbolic act of community belonging. The visual and stylistic choices embedded in the façade thus operate as cultural signifiers, transforming the dwelling into an identity-bearing artifact. However, the house's appearance also reveals profound contradictions within contemporary architectural production in Algeria. Facades featuring ornamental openings or balconies that remain unused or sealed reflect both aspiration and constraint—signs of a tension between symbolic modernity and material stagnation.

Within a context of significant economic and urban transformation, the single-family home has evolved into an instrument of dominant housing policy, mirroring the State's gradual withdrawal in favor of private-sector initiatives. The deterioration of regulatory frameworks and the diminished influence of architects have contributed to the proliferation of disparate, often incoherent, architectural forms across Algerian cities. This phenomenon has led to a visual fragmentation of the urban landscape and the erosion of local architectural identity.

At the policy level, spatial identity has become a critical dimension of urban competitiveness. Governance strategies increasingly emphasize the need to preserve symbolic landscapes and local memory while pursuing modernization. Such an approach fosters social cohesion and sustainable attractiveness, positioning identity not merely as cultural heritage but as an active component of urban resilience and planning.

To restore coherence and quality to the built environment, policy and design recommendations must be considered. First, urban planning authorities should reinforce aesthetic and architectural regulations, ensuring that construction projects reflect the spatial and cultural identity of their location. Second, architects must be reintegrated into the housing production process, reasserting their role as mediators between cultural heritage and contemporary needs. Third, public policies should promote architectural literacy, encouraging citizens to value design quality and contextual coherence. Finally, educational and professional institutions must foster research and innovation in housing design, linking tradition and modernity through sustainable and context-sensitive practices.

Addressing these challenges requires redefining architectural culture by reassessing its core values and overcoming the inertia of outdated models. Building design must no longer be driven solely by private initiative or economic expediency but should instead embody a conscious effort to reconcile identity, functionality, and aesthetics. Only through such an integrated approach can Algeria's residential architecture progress toward a renewed vision—one that harmonizes social meaning, cultural continuity, and architectural integrity.

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