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## **Planning prostitution in colonial Morocco: Bousbir, Casablanca's *Quartier réservé***

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Brothels and colonies, here are two extreme types of heterotopia  
"Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" by Michel Foucault.  
*Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Edited by Neil Leach. NYC: Routledge. 1997.

### **Introduction**

This chapter is about Bousbir, a red-light district (*Quartier réservé*) established in Casablanca (Morocco) by French colonial authorities in 1923. Using a cultural geography lens, this research questions the material and symbolic geographies of Bousbir so as to facilitate an analysis of how and why this particular 'sexscape' (Brennan, 2004; Maginn and Steinmetz this volume) came into existence, and how it was understood by those who visited the district.

The analysis focuses on the imaginative geographies that Bousbir may have reflected and reproduced during its most dynamic years as a *Quartier réservé*. Imaginative geography is a concept coined by Said (1978) and subsequently developed by geographers such as Gregory (1995) to designate 'representations of other places—of peoples and landscapes, cultures and 'natures'—that articulate the desires, fantasies and fears of their authors and the grid of power between them and their 'Others'' (Gregory 2009, p.369-370). This focus on 'western' representations (and interpretations) of Bousbir as a space and place does not mean that the lived experiences of the people, mainly local women, who lived and worked in Bousbir when it was a *Quartier réservé* are rendered invisible or unimportant. Bousbir's sex workers are documented by a socio-ethnographic study, commissioned by the French administration and conducted by two medical doctors, J. Mathieu and P.H. Maury (1951). This study generated a wealth of in-depth information about many aspects of the lives of the sex workers: their identities, their professional activities and their bodies. Ultimately, however, this ethnographic study only reflected the voices of 'white' men as opposed to the women who worked in Bousbir.

There have been very few studies of Bousbir. The history of the district was nearly forgotten prior to 2003. However interest in Bousbir was reignited following the publication of Christelle Taraud's (2003) book on colonial prostitution in French North-Africa and Mathieu and Maury's study republished with an introduction by Abedmajid Arrif (2003). Taraud broke the silence surrounding France's colonial involvement in prostitution, and exposed how it was essential to and institutionalized by French colonial authorities. Arrif made Mathieu and Maury's study accessible and, moreover, inscribed it in the broader context of French colonial sociology. A few years later, Driss Maghraoui (2008), drawing on Mathieu and Maury, highlighted, from a town planning perspective, that Bousbir was a place of experimentation.

This chapter provides some new information<sup>1</sup> about Bousbir, but its main input relies on the analytical focus on the imaginative geographies embedded in the district by two different stakeholder groups: town planners and architects who imagined this enclosed city within a particular urban ideology, and those who visited Bousbir in hopes of 'realizing' their oriental fantasies. The chapter is structured in four parts. First, an overview of the ideological, historical and spatial contexts that underscore Bousbir's very existence is outlined. Next, drawing on Foucault's (2009, 1998, 1995, 1980) theories of bio-power and apparatus, the material geography of Bousbir is analyzed in order to understand the rationalities of this (sub)urban sexscape. Third, the imaginative geographies of Bousbir's urban landscape and architecture are explored via an orientalist lens (Said 1978) to demonstrate the exoticization and eroticization imposed on the space. The chapter concludes with an overall contemporary narrative of Bousbir today and reflections on relevant ethical issues tied to its history as a 'red-light' district.

### **Building a *Quartier réservé* in colonial Casablanca**

Most red-light districts around the world were or are located in neighborhoods whose original intent was not for the purpose of sex work. In many Western cities such as Amsterdam, Hamburg or Paris, red-light districts typically occupy a few blocks of a lower-socio-economic district in the city center, often conveniently located close to a train station or harbor that offers a ready supply of largely male clients (Hubbard et al. 2008; Hubbard and Whowell 2008; Ashworth et al. 1988). These (sub)urban sexscapes are the product of socio-economic forces as opposed to being 'planned' spaces.

There are some rare cases where red-light districts have been specifically planned and designed. The oldest and largest was Yoshiwara, built in the city of Edo (present day Tokyo) in 1652. This district was an enclosed city with a unique door and a grid-pattern layout, and is estimated to have had 3,000 female sex workers. Moreover it was a transient space, moving around the city following numerous destructions and reconstructions. The district was not outlawed until 1958 (Seigle 1993; De Becker 1899). It was known around the world in the nineteenth century for its exotic geishas and 'tea-houses', depicted by Japanese painters (including the famed Utamaro) and then in Western postcards.

Red-light districts were also purposefully planned in places such as Mexico. 'Boys towns' were built in Colina Dublan or El Valle during the US military occupation of Chihuahua (1916-1917). Providing US troops with local sex workers, these districts had a Mexican manager and an assigned US military physician (Curtis and Arreola 1991). Perhaps on the base of this model, compound zones or *Zonas de Tolerancia* were built during the 1950s in cities such as Nuevo Laredo or Reynosa to clean up the tourist areas of these border cities and confine prostitution to a walled district in the periphery of the town (*idem*, Kelly 2008). In 1949, Curaçao local authorities, concerned with the uncontrolled development of prostitution in the city center, granted a license to build a zone of 25 pavilions so as to keep sex workers out of town, on the road to the airport. This compound, named Campo Alegre, is today a well-known sex-resort for international tourists 'with more than sexy 120 girls'<sup>2</sup> (Martis 1999).

Bousbir contains elements of all these other planned sexscapes: it is similar to Yoshiwara in terms of its design; the role of imperialist armies resonates with the Mexican Boys towns; and, it was visited by tourists as a sex resort. Despite these similarities, Bousbir's historical, geographical and political-economy contexts differentiate it from these other places.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, British, French and Belgian colonial authorities were concerned with prostitution (Howell 2009, Lauro 2005; Levine 2003, Taraud 2003). On the one hand, it was accepted that European men had sexual 'needs' that should be fulfilled by indigenous (female) sex workers. Relationships with sex workers were considered a better solution than having local mistresses or *petites épouses* (little spouses); the former offered only temporary and circumscribed relationships whilst the latter were seen to involve deeper and riskier relationships. On the other hand, prostitution was 'known' to propagate venereal

diseases and thus could weaken colonial armies, and might lead to miscegenation, which in turn could threaten the white race. Moral and social contamination was also an issue: prostitution was believed to generate crime and disorder (Corbin 1996). Furthermore, colonial prostitution was not compatible with one of the official purposes of colonization: civilizing barbaric countries. The emancipation of local women (for instance, from the (in)famous harem) was part of the 'white man's burden'.

For all these reasons, colonial prostitution was thought as a 'necessary evil' that French local authorities shouldn't try to eradicate but rather regulate, and even organize. Police, judges and doctors were all engaged in the institutionalization of colonial prostitution and the regulation of risk. Such actions are a perfect illustration of the exercise of bio-power, a 'set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy' (Foucault 2007, p.1). The solution to the 'problem' of prostitution was first thought of in medical and legal terms: the registration of sex workers, their regular inspection, their sanitary detention and the licensing and inspection of brothels. Two additional features of regulation concerned urban policy: the zoning of vice districts and the control of public space (Howell 2000, p.323). Confining street prostitution within a special district away from the colonial part of the city was sometimes used to assist in controlling sex workers and their clients, avoiding sexual and moral contamination, and keeping this activity away from innocent or prying eyes.

Prostitution was carefully regulated in North Africa for several key reasons. First, this part of the French Empire contained a large, mainly male, European population, especially colonial soldiers. Next, the regulation of prostitution was more advanced and uncontested in France than in other European countries such as Britain (Levine 2003; Corbin 1996). Finally, coercive policies were easier to implement in colonies. In French North Africa, indigenous sex workers were registered and controlled, and more systematically contained in red-light districts, usually in or close to the *médina* (the pre-European Arabic city) or the *mellah* (the Jewish district) as in the Tunis Sidi Abdallah Guèche district (Kerrou and M'Halla 1991). But it was in Casablanca, when local authorities were developing the master plan for the new city at the end of the 1910s that they arrived at the novel idea of building a new and *ad hoc* district so they could exert greater socio-spatial control over street prostitution, and simultaneously provide clients with a safer environment and therefore a better experience.

This solution had popular appeal. By the 1930s, modern colonial red-light districts were being planned in cities such as Marrakech, Fédala (present day Mohammédia), Port-Lyautey (present day Kénitra), Tunis and Meknès—only the last was actually built and accommodated around 200 sex workers. Bousbir's model also spread beyond North Africa. In 1947, French Indochina military authorities suggested building a *Quartier réservé* in Saigon, 'patterned after that of Casablanca (Bouss-bir)' (Hardy 2004, p.179), and would later be known as the *Parc aux Buffles* and housed some 200 local female sex workers. A journalist reporting on the Bousbir model who proudly proclaimed that 'the example of Casablanca will be imitated' was indeed correct (*Afrique du Nord illustrée* 1931, p.17). The Bousbir model was also criticized in the media. A journalist from the *Singapore Free Press* (1932) expressed some (well-founded) doubts about the role of Bousbir in reducing venereal disease, and suggested that the Singapore plan for regulating prostitution was a more effective model.

It comes as no real surprise that a modern and 'rational' spatial solution to the problem of colonial prostitution was first conceived in Casablanca, this was after all a place of urban and social experimentation and a showcase for French Empire (Maghraoui 2008; Cohen and Eleb 2004).

Casablanca was a small Moroccan harbor on the Atlantic Ocean with 12,000 inhabitants before French colonization (French Protectorate in Morocco was officially established in 1912). By the end of the 1910s, Casablanca had experienced significant urban growth as the result of construction of a new railway, a modern port, and industrial expansion. It also became a major center for French colonial administration and economy, and was considered the main European urban center in this part of North Africa. By 1920, Casablanca's population had grown to 100,000, some 40,000 of these were Europeans. Europeans lived in the new city built by French authorities. In contrast, Moroccan workers, many of whom had migrated from the countryside, lived in specifically designed settlements—*ville indigène*—or in the spontaneous self-made *bidonvilles*—a term coined in the 1930s in Casablanca to designate local slums partly made out of metal cans—*bidons*—on the periphery of the city.

The French architect and town-planner Henri Prost (1874-1959) led the design of Casablanca's master plan (1917-1922). He was eager to build a rational city, modern and beautiful, and to segregate European and 'indigenous' populations and activities. Different architectural teams designed the European districts according to modern French planning and

design styles (*Art nouveau* and *Art déco*), but they also drew part of their inspiration for the Moroccan district from local architecture and urban morphology.

Prostitution developed in Casablanca, not only in response to growing demand from European males, but also as a result of local workers migrating from the countryside. Local female sex workers proffered their services around the harbor facilities and in a miserable and insalubrious district—Derb Bousbir—close to the walls of the old *médina*. At the end of the 1910s, a decision was made to ban street prostitution within the city and to build a new district out of town, where sex workers could be more easily confined and controlled. This spatial segregation of prostitution only applied to indigenous sex workers and street prostitution. Notably, European prostitutes could still live and work in secluded registered brothels within the city. The new district—Bousbir (named after Derb Bousbir)—opened to the public in 1924.

### **Bousbir: a hypermodern apparatus?**

The decision to purposefully build Bousbir was most likely taken or approved at the highest level of colonial administration by Maréchal Hubert Lyautey (1854-1934) who was the *Résident général* of the French protectorate in Morocco, from its establishment in 1912 to 1925. Unfortunately, archival data examined thus far has failed to reveal any information about the exact role of the hero of French colonization in that matter. Henri Prost and his team who led the development of Casablanca's master plan were the first to study the district (Meffre 2009) and thus responsible for choosing the location of Bousbir. In H. Prost's words, establishing Bousbir was about 'ending debauchery' or at least 'containing it and preventing it from corrupting the marginal parts of the city' (quoted in Meffre 2009, p.64).

The decision to build the *Quartier réservé* also coincided with a shift in policy in terms of how best to regulate prostitution. Before 1921, prostitution was regulated by the police. However as prostitution came to be increasingly seen as a public health issue, Casablanca's municipal health and hygiene services took charge of the prostitution 'problem' and proposed Bousbir as its 'solution'. As Bernard (1935) has noted, 'the police had to give way to doctors' (np.). This is not to say that the police played no role in regulating prostitution in the new district. The gate to enter Bousbir also doubled as a police station; hence the police controlled who entered the district and more importantly who should not exit.

The new Bousbir was located five kilometers from the city center, at the southern outer-limit of the agglomeration, on the road to Marrakech. Bousbir was just to the South of the new *médina* (the Habous district), but separated by railroad tracks. Photographs taken during the construction of the district show that it was not included in the urban space at the time. It is clear that the aim was to keep prostitution out of sight and out of the minds of the European population. As a result of Bousbir's remoteness from the city center a dedicated bus line for clients—between 1,000 to 1,500 clients a day (Bernard 1935)—was established so as to limit their contact with 'innocent' travelers.

Edmond Brion (1885-1973), a leading architect was put in charge of designing and building the new district. Brion, together with Auguste Cadet (1881-1956), led the main architecture agency in Casablanca, and had designed many public and private buildings in the city, including mosques, banks, post-offices, palaces, apartment buildings, and the Habous district (Meffre 2010).

Given that Bousbir was based on a grid pattern with a single gate entrance just like Yoshiwara, it would appear that Brion found his inspiration for the layout of Bousbir in the Japanese red-light district. Brion was a connoisseur of Japanese wood-block prints<sup>3</sup>, he couldn't have ignored those depicting this district. Furthermore, he could have seen Yoshiwara's plan in De Beckers' well-known monograph about the district (1899). Yoshiwara was indeed so famous and its layout so similar to Bousbir's that Hendrik De Leeuw, a popular author of travel narratives and adventure literature, did not fail to notice that Bousbir's gate was 'not unlike the gates of the old Japanese Yoshiwaras' (De Leeuw 1951, p.68).

The new district covered an area of 24,000 square meters or 160m x 150m (see Figures 1 and 2), was completely enclosed by 30 feet high blind walls and had one ornate door, which was closed to car traffic. The district comprised two neighborhoods that were formed as a result of the topography of the site. The larger and upper neighborhood included the entrance (Figure 3) and a corridor leading to the main square, and was organized around a grid of main and secondary streets. A slope (fig. 4) connected the upper neighborhood to the lower and smaller part, which was organized according to a similar spatial pattern. Twenty-one blocks of different sizes (from 2 to 52 apartments) and up to 3 levels were used either for housing or commercial services. Drainage was collected by a sewer. A dozen public fountains were distributed throughout the district giving ready access to fresh water. Most of the

facilities were gathered around or close to the square: a movie theater, a bath-house, a post office, a souk, shops, restaurants, cafés, cabarets, dance halls. Two police stations (one—with a jail— belonged to the municipality, the other to the army) monitored the gate. A medical dispensary was located on the southern edge of the district, somewhat out of sight.

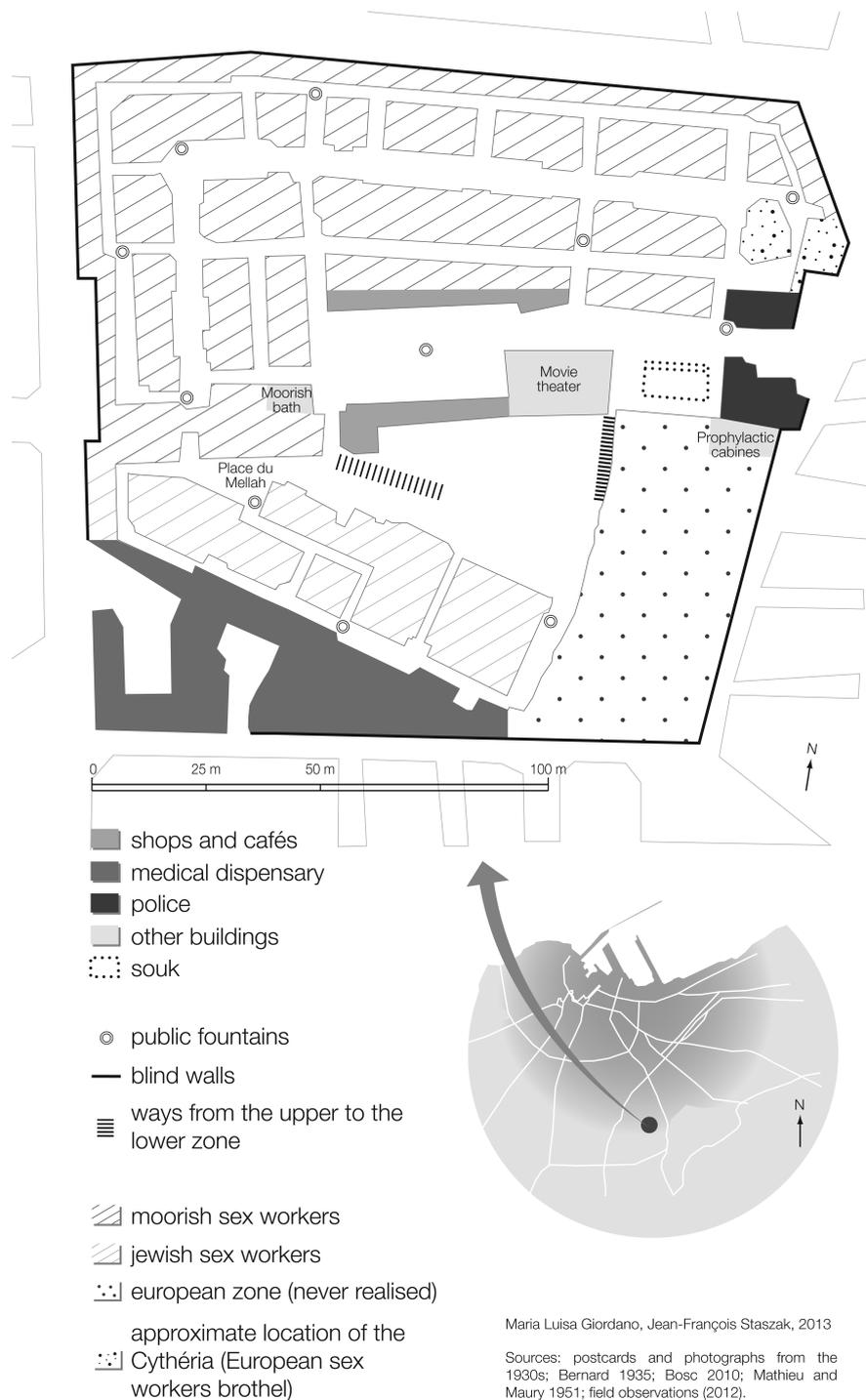


Fig. 1: Map of Bousbir in the 1930s.



Fig. 2: Postcard « Casablanca. Vue aérienne du quartier réservé dit ‘Bousbir’ » (Casablanca. Aerial view of the red-light district known as ‘Bousbir’), Flandrin (author’s collection).

Between 450 and 675 female sex workers<sup>4</sup>, with an average age of 21, lived and worked in the district. Some 63 per cent of them came from the Casablanca region. No less than 42 stores sold all manner of products including: food, beverage, tobacco, cloth, shoes, charcoal or entertainment to the visitors and the inhabitants. Put simply, Bousbir was indeed a secluded and self-contained city, ‘a city within the city’, ‘a true town’ (Grancher 1956 p.233)—a microcosm of the greater metropolitan area.

Bousbir was a regulated city. Visitors and sex workers were monitored by the police at the gate to the district. Sex workers were registered and not authorized to exit the compound, except twice a week after getting a special permit approved by both the police and a doctor. Each sex worker had to visit the doctor once a week, and go each morning to the dispensary to have her genitals checked and cleaned.

Bousbir was also a highly segregated city. It was envisioned to include three distinct sex workers neighborhoods: Moorish; Jewish; and European (Figure 1). The vast majority of sex workers in Bousbir were Moorish and just under five per cent were Jewish (Mathieu and

Maury 1951). The European neighborhood envisaged on the original plans was never built, and partly as a result of this there were few European sex workers in Bousbir<sup>5</sup>, most of them continued to work in registered brothels within the city of Casablanca. *The Cythéria* was an exception. Located at the entrance of Bousbir, this luxurious brothel, with its own private cinema, employed European sex workers and charged 20 Francs for sex services (Bertrand 1935). In comparison, local sex workers only charged five Francs for their services. *The Cythéria* faced bankruptcy in 1934 and eventually closed in the 1940s.

Whilst socio-spatial divisions and relations between clients and sex workers in Bousbir were to a large extent gender-based, there were also racial divisions. Although miscegenation was neither a taboo nor a crime, it remained a concern and as such there were 'rules' about inter-racial mixing between clients and sex workers. Moorish women were permitted to provide sexual services to any man (Moorish, Jewish, European); Jewish sex workers could have Jewish or European clients; but European women were only permitted to have clients of European origin. Furthermore, certain days were allocated to clients from different ethnic backgrounds. French and Senegalese soldiers, for example, were assigned even days (e.g. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and so on) whereas Moroccans were allocated odd days (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and so on (Bernard 1935). This tactic was basically used in an effort to limit contact between colonial and indigenous clients.

Bousbir's dispensary was also spatially organized so as to segregate sex workers according to their ethnicity. Bousbir's dispensary was not reserved just for local women working in the district: all legal sex workers in Casablanca had to come to the dispensary once a week to get medical check-ups. This included the European sex workers who worked in the brothels outside the district, and, if they were ill, they had to remain there until cured. It was considered inappropriate for European sex workers to walk across Bousbir to reach the dispensary, or that they intermingle with local sex workers during any visits to the dispensary. The dispensary, therefore, had two separate entrances with a door directly to the outside for European sex workers who came from the city. In addition, within the dispensary, local and European sex workers had separate rooms and refectories. This strict but complex socio-spatial regulation within Bousbir (between sex workers, between clients, and regulating their relations) merely echoed the spatial segregation that prevailed in most colonial cities in French North Africa.

Bousbir was a 'privatised' space in the sense that it had been built at the request of the Casablanca municipality by La Cressonnière, a private company created to run the district and whose office was located in the middle of the district. Being located at the center of Bousbir speaks to Foucault's notion of panopticism (Foucault 1995; also see Prior and Gorman-Murray this volume). La Cressonnière rented the land to the municipality, financed the construction, and managed the district, but not the sex businesses. Typically, a 'madam' was in charge of one or several buildings and responsible for collecting money from the sex workers (supposedly for the rent), and transferring part of it to La Cressonnière. Mathieu and Maury (1951) found that 48 per cent of sex workers were under the direct supervision of a madam who took care of their accommodation but confiscated their earnings; 24 per cent shared their earnings with the madam; and 28 per cent were 'independent' workers who retained all of their income.

To reiterate, Bousbir's physical design and layout was premised on Western rational town planning ideals and the desire to instill social order. As De Leeuw (1951) has noted, 'nothing seemed to have been overlooked by these French experts in their zeal and desire to metamorphose the erstwhile mess into a modern town' (p.69). The efforts to bring a planned orderliness to Bousbir are emblematic of the notion of 'great confinement' (Foucault 2009), a multi-faceted process through which modern European societies tried to produce and reproduce 'rational' social norms by segregating and marginalizing their outcasts (such as the mad, vagrants and prostitutes), confined in new dedicated coercive institutions. In short, the socio-spatial regulation of Bousbir was about controlling both the body and sexuality of women, reinforcing political and medical power, whilst working hand in hand within a capitalist economy so as to facilitate white male heterosexual domination and (s)exploitation. Ultimately, planning and social regulation were being used to create a 'sanitized' and 'rationalised' (sub)urban sexscape. According to some visitors, Bousbir was 'a velvet prison,' or a kind of 'prison camp for venal love' (Boulié 1947, p.6). McClusky (1957) was more critical describing it as 'a prison area of sex and other sin' (p.14).

Figuratively, Bousbir clearly exhibited signs of being a prison, or at least a space with a sense of imprisonment. The question of whether or not it was a prison in the literal sense is difficult to discern as far as the coercion actually imposed on the sex workers is difficult to evaluate. It is unclear, for example, just how strict the main gate to Bousbir was policed and whether the permits to leave the district were a formality or rarely awarded. The economic

coercion sex workers had to suffer should also be taken into account. Because of financial arrangements with brothel madams, most women were unable to accumulate wealth from their earnings, and some 70 per cent were heavily indebted to their madam (Mathieu and Maury 1951; Lépinay 1936). Hence, leaving Bousbir was not an option. If sex workers were physically confined to Bousbir, and received no reward for their work, then indeed Bousbir would appear to be nothing but a prison and a system of sex-slavery. However, since the extent of control cannot be accurately discerned caution must be taken in relation to the lack of agency expressed by sex workers. It seems plausible that some sex workers may have been exhibiting some form of (constrained) rational choice. Relatedly, it would appear that the sanitary and security conditions of sex workers in Bousbir were relatively better than those of the women who worked clandestinely on the streets of Casablanca, who could have been more exposed to the clients' and the pimps' violence, not to mention police repression. In short, it would appear that a 'polymorphous' sexscape (Weitzer 2010) may have prevailed in colonial Casablanca and Bousbir.

There is no clear evidence to support the proposition that a significant proportion of women engaged in sex work in Bousbir during the colonial era, unlike some women engaged in sex work today in liberal democratic nations, were there by free or rational 'choice'. Classical criminologists and neo-classical economists may have thought of prostitution as the logical result of free-market mechanisms and of sex-workers maximizing their utility, but it does not seem to have been the case in the colonial red-light district. A survey by Lépinay (1936), who was the doctor in charge of Bousbir's dispensary, found that 'of 139 resident prostitutes picked randomly from among 500, 93 [67 per cent] are satisfied and want nothing other than to work on their own account, instead of enriching a Madam [who] abuses them and feeds them badly' (p.205). Simultaneously, the remaining 46 (33 per cent) respondents were 'indignant women who would like to leave the *quartier réservé*' (p.205). It is difficult to ascertain the rigor of this survey therefore the results must be treated with a degree of caution. The fact that the doctor felt the need to inquire about satisfaction levels amongst sex workers would seem to suggest that workers were enduring problems. There were indeed sex workers who tried to escape Bousbir but such efforts were in vain, however. Those that fled were likely to be quickly 'rearrested on the streets and, after a few days in jail, returned to the district' (Lépinay 1936, p.204). Thirty-seven per cent of Bousbir's sex workers were indeed

forced to live there after having been arrested during police raids and convicted for illegal prostitution (Mathieu and Maury 1951).

In Bousbir itself, the police were more eager to control and convict sex workers rather than their clients who may have committed any crimes against sex workers. The police in Bousbir were far more likely to respond to complaints against sex workers from unsatisfied clients, and put drunk or insulting sex workers in Bousbir's jail. According to Lépinay (1936), 'if a prostitute has been beaten or robbed (which happens quite often), she has no recourse' against the clients (p.204). It is clear that for some sex workers Bousbir was a place of abuse and coercion and thus can be viewed as a 'true' prison for these women.

It is worth noting at this stage that Bousbir could be defined as an entangled assemblage of materiality and ideology exercising medical, social, racial and sexual control. Or what Foucault (1989) termed *dispositif* (apparatus) (also see Agamben 2009). But the actual efficiency of this apparatus is questionable. First, if Bousbir was about controlling prostitution it is clear, given that the huge majority (98 per cent according to Mathieu and Maury (1951))<sup>6</sup> of Casablanca sex workers did not live or work in Bousbir, that it was a failed model. Although Bousbir was envisioned to replace inner-city prostitution it simply never had the capacity to absorb and contain this dynamic, diverse and ever-growing sector of the economy, dominated by low-end illegal indigenous street sex workers. Second, if Bousbir was about containing venereal diseases, then this too was a counterproductive endeavor considering that the prevalence of these diseases among Bousbir's sex workers was higher than amongst the numerous clandestine street-based sex workers in Casablanca (Mathieu and Maury 1951). Third, if Bousbir was thought to keep prostitution hidden or out of sight, the district rather gave it more visibility—so much so, that Bousbir became a generic term in French for referring to any zone of prostitution. As an apparatus set up to exercise social, moral and medical control over prostitution, Bousbir only managed to give the illusion that this 'necessary evil' was under control. If anything, Bousbir unwittingly and unconsciously presented a more acceptable image of prostitution.

Despite this, Bousbir should not be considered a failure. Rather, the district came to fulfill a function that had relatively little to do with control, but more with imagination. Put simply, Bousbir succeeded in offering to Western visitors and tourists an exoticized and eroticized heterotopia (Foucault 1997) consistent with their orientalist fantasies (Said 1978). Hence, Bousbir might be more akin to a 'theme park' than an apparatus.

### **Bousbir: an orientalist fantasy?**

Understanding Bousbir as an apparatus for the colonial control of prostitution is consistent with its (official) purpose, its master design, and the way sex workers and clients were controlled. But this apparatus ideal does not fit with Bousbir's architecture, or with the expectations of many visitors. From an architectural perspective, rather than an urban planning one, and when viewed from the street rather than from above, Bousbir does not resemble a modern(ist) city. A naive Western visitor might perceive Bousbir to be a *médina*, the traditional old center of an Arabic town, completely walled, with its single door and narrow streets. Indeed, the courtyards, horseshoe arches, domes, decorative or glazed green tiles, ornamental pillars, public fountains and carved wood doors all suggest Moorish architecture. As is evident in the photographs below (see Figures 3 and 4), the buildings were deliberately designed to conform to the traditional urban landscapes of pre-colonial Moroccan cities. Visitors accordingly celebrated 'the exquisite architecture of this city of the *Thousand and One Nights*' (De Leeuw 1951, p.68).

So, what matters most here are the imaginative geographies of the architect and visitors, especially their orientalist fantasies (Said 1978) as opposed to the rationalities of control exerted by town planning rules and regulations.

Building new indigenous towns, such as Casablanca's new *médina*, French architects would draw inspiration from local architecture considered suitable for the local people. In Bousbir, however, a different approach was adopted. The urban landscape was not (only) designed to suit the local sex worker population, its design was intended to please European visitors first and foremost. Bousbir looks like a Moorish city because the architect thought this is what the clients were seeking. Believing that colonial prostitution had to be regulated and spatially planned, Brion designed the district according to modern Western rationality. Simultaneously, he thought that he had to provide the European clients of the sex workers with an exotic experience within a picturesque landscape. He thus designed Bousbir's architecture according to their orientalist fantasy. A synecdoche operates in Western imaginative geography, extending the eroticization of the exotic body (Said 1978) to the landscape where the encounter takes place (Staszak 2012). As the French writer P. Mac Orlan (1934) noted, in a *Quartier réservé*, 'the setting matters more than the actors' (p.7). This was exemplified in a series of telling postcards from Bousbir that give prominence to the built environment and its

neo-Moorish architecture. Intriguingly, despite Bousbir being an adult theme park less than half of the 88 postcards that have been retrieved through archival research depict images of sex workers identifiable as such. The exotic and erotic appeal of Bousbir then, appears to be embedded in the curvaceous and voluptuous form within neo-Moorish architecture.

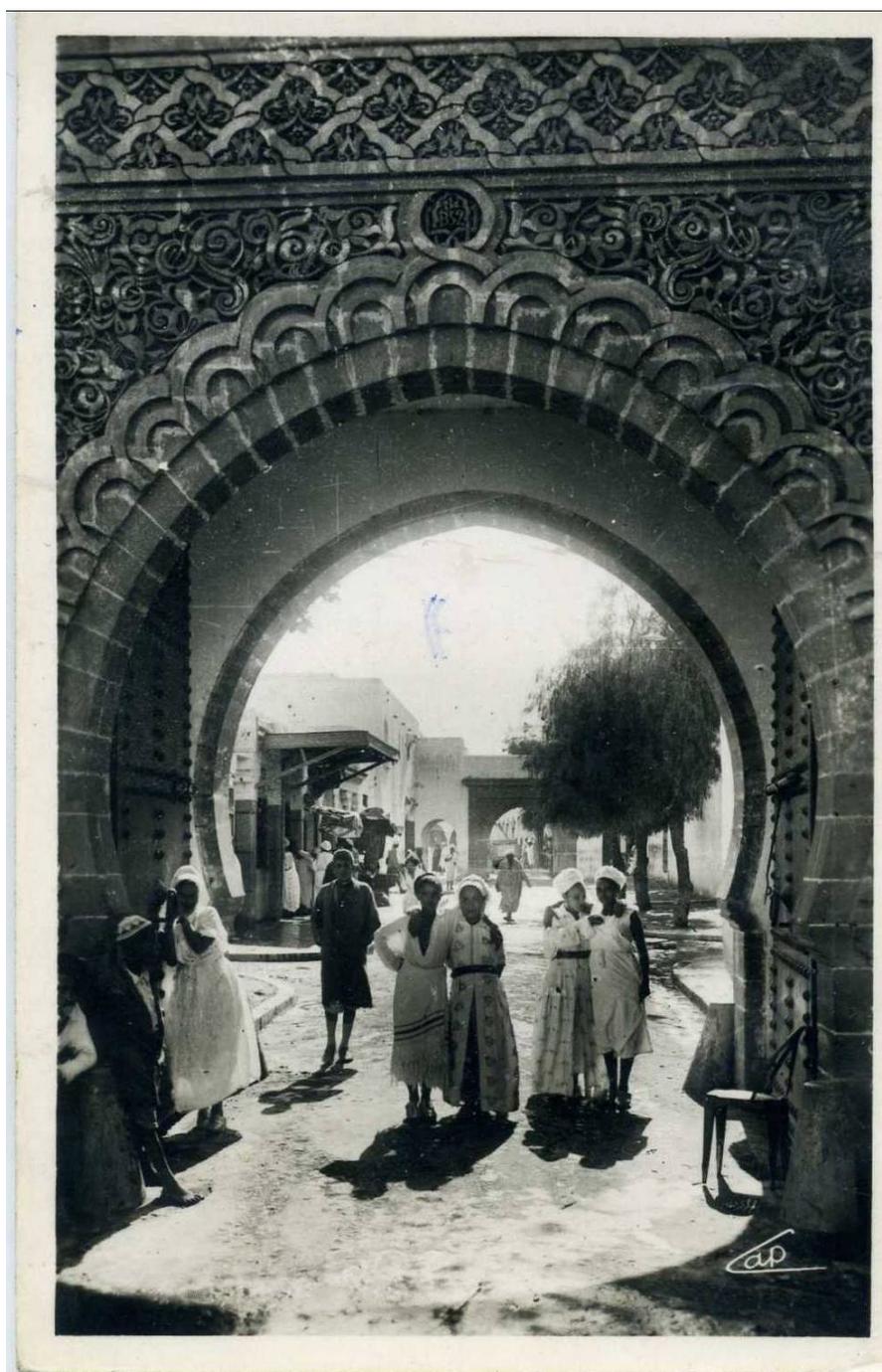


Fig. 3 : Postcard « Casablanca (Maroc). Entrée du Quartier réservé » (Casablanca – Morocco. Entrance of the red-light district), Edition Centrale Marocaine (author's collection).

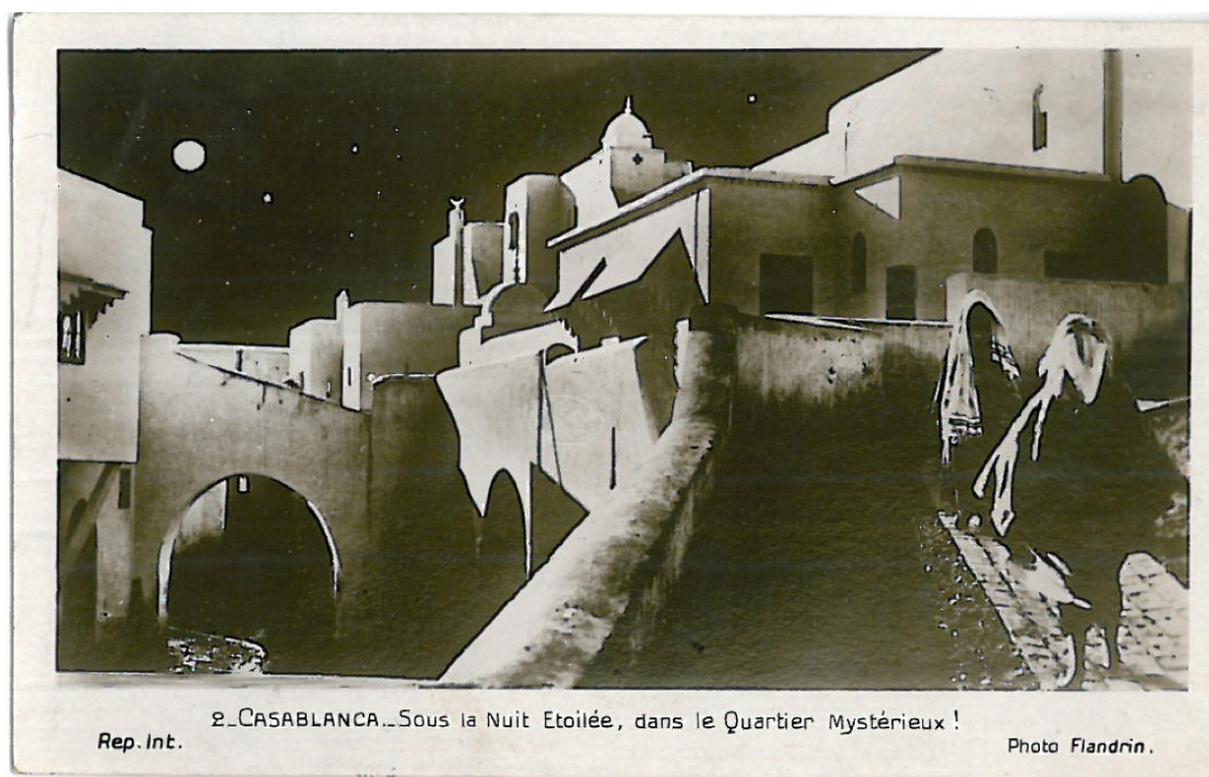


Fig. 4 : Postcard « Casablanca. Sous la Nuit Etoilée, dans le Quartier Mystérieux ! » (Casablanca. In the starry night, the mysterious district), Flandrin (author's collection). The photograph, actually shot in daylight, has been retouched to create a night-like atmosphere.

The district was not simply a modern urban solution to the problem of colonial prostitution; it may also be viewed as an 'oriental Disneyland' dedicated to adults. Bousbir is essentially about sexuality and desire. Its success came to be less about the control of prostitution and more about the incarnation of Western imaginative geographies and the satisfaction of the colonial gaze. As Mac Orlan (1934), for example, has noted 'Bousbir is magic city or a Luna park specializing in the rides of the popular Venus,' (p.44) and that 'it's to a degree a *Quartier réservé* for colonial exhibition' (p.47). And, he recalled the sight of 'some thirty nude young women, who rather nicely recreate a canvass of Ingres, Chassériau, or Delacroix [well-known orientalist painters]' (p.51). Mathieu and Maury (1951) also noted that, 'for the tourists, the crowd, the noise, the lights, the settings, the extras with too much make up, and forced cheerfulness, bring back to life the forgotten images of distant colonial exhibitions and stimulate memories of a literary Orient fantasied as mysterious' (p.73); it's 'an erotic legend' which takes up 'all the fables of the *One thousand and one nights*, and all the clichés of the Orient' (p.38) The visitor, they added, 'comes here like a provincial who

rents a seat in the theater and thus buys a few hours of forgetting' (p.73). Others have echoed Mathieu and Maury's perception of Bousbir as a space of and for adult fantasies. Gindraux (2004), a US Air Force pilot who visited Bousbir in the mid-1940s, noted: 'Inside was a Hollywood version of a Kasbah' (p.52), probably referring to the famous movie *Algiers* (J. Cromwell 1938, starring Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamarr). The French author M. E. Grancher (1956) said, 'the town, specially built, looks like a set' and lavishes 'an atmosphere of Arab tales' (p.238-240). For De Leuw (1951), Bousbir was 'something of a show and Coney Island combined' (p.69). Despite the 'authenticity' of Bousbir being questioned, this did not seem to be an issue of major concern for European visitors who nevertheless enjoyed the experience. Just as in a theme park, a theater or a zoo, the authenticity of the place was not something that Bousbir's visitors were expecting or looking for: they knew the place was fake and enjoyed it as such. To fulfill its purpose, Bousbir did not have to reflect Moroccan realities but exotic fantasies.

The exoticization of prostitution was not uncommon in Europe. In France, high-class brothels, such as the famous *Chabanais* in Paris, furnished their rooms with oriental items and decorated thematically according to specific exotic locales (e.g. Japan, China, North Africa) (Canet 2011). Others, such as the *Palais Oriental* (built in 1925) in Reims or *La Casbah* in Mailly-le-Camp (a military camp comprising 10,000 soldiers in northern France during the first decade of the twentieth century) carried the fantasy of the Orient in their names, and their buildings drew inspiration from Moorish architecture. The exotic was erotic because indigenous women in the colonies were viewed and treated as potential prostitutes. In a sense, the Empire itself was perceived as one enormous brothel. The eroticization of the exotic body and the appeal of inter-racial sex are by no way specific to Bousbir nor to French colonies. For instance, the attraction of *Storyville*, New Orleans (in)famous red-light district between 1897 and 1917, was much based on the eroticization of the female octoroon's body and on the promise of 'sex across the color line' (Landau 2013; Long 2004).

In essence, sex workers in Bousbir were performing an erotic role in an oriental setting. Their performance was not limited to sexual intercourse. At the entrance of the district, dressed in their oriental outfits or with eroticized European clothes, heavy make-up on the face and tattoos on their bodies, sex workers approached potential clients, holding their arm, revealing a leg or breast, telling obscene jokes, singing bawdy songs, and taunting prospective clients in front of their friends. This performance continued in the cabarets, where

sex workers performed belly dances and striptease. In more secluded places (forbidden to female visitors), some sex workers performed pornographic shows similar to those performed today for sex tourists in Patpong Road, Soi Cowboy and Nana (Bangkok's red-light districts) (Roux 2011; Manderson 1992). Titillating acts such as smoking or accepting a banknote and returning the change without using their mouth nor their hands to name a few.

Inevitably, Bousbir quickly became the main touristic attraction in Casablanca. According to A. Laprade, who worked as an architect and town planner with Prost, 'this charming and enclosed district became the place to stroll for every tourist setting foot in Morocco' (Meffre 2009, p.64). As a result of Casablanca being the main harbor of the Protectorate, Bousbir became an early and obligatory stop on the tourist trail to the city and the country. Roumy (1934) notes that 'during cruise season, buses bring floods of foreigners armed with Kodaks, and eminent guests, be they politicians, artists or athletes wishing to see this capital of prostitution' (p.11). According to an early guide-book, *Casablanca et sa région* (1943), 'tourists who are interested in studying human nature should go to the walled city of Bousbir, the new district for public women [...] Free entrance, all visitors authorized, not recommended for children and young girls.' The map of Casablanca in the famous *Guide Michelin* (1939) to Morocco includes Bousbir as a stop for tourists in the city.

Visitors to Bousbir included both local (European and Moroccan) clients and European tourists. Whereas the locals may have been seeking sexual services this did not appear to be the main purpose of tourists who visited the district. According to a sex worker quoted by Mathieu and Maury (1951: 144), tourists almost never had sex with the sex workers. Many of them came as couples or in a group with a guide. Just as with most of today's tourists in Amsterdam's red-light district, De Wallen, they did not travel to be participants, but rather observers. It is likely that even some locals, both European and indigenous, may have visited Bousbir to walk its streets, enjoy the scenery, have a drink, listen to music, watch a belly dance show, look at the girls, and enjoy the exciting and peculiar atmosphere—without the intention of engaging the services of a sex worker. For the modern male *flâneur*, 'the fact that her sexuality is on sale is itself an attraction' (Buck-Morss 1986, p.120).

There is something more in Bousbir than the exotic and the erotic. Bousbir was located just in front of Casablanca's famous Bidonville: a slum of 'a most picturesque appearance' (De Leeuw 1951, p.68), which was also reproduced on postcards and became a

tourist destination in its own right. Indeed, the two went together: the tourist 'will first have the unforgettable panorama of Bidonville, this incredible city swarming with hundreds of human beings living in more than primitive conditions. Just beside, his eyes will be attracted by a majestic door' (*Afrique du Nord illustrée* 1930, p.8). This door, of course, led to Bousbir, a 'modern delightful Babylonian cesspool' (De Leeuw 1951, p.69).

A visit to the *Quartier réservé* and Bidonville may be viewed as a form of 'slumming' whereby tourism is based on a voyeuristic curiosity about the spectacle of human misery or deviation (Heap 2010, Koven 2006). Bousbir was a spectacle. The show was about the architecture, the urban and social scenery, the animation, the music, as well as the transgressive performances of the sex workers. Indeed, in this regard, sex workers are part and parcel of Bousbir's oriental landscape (Figure 2). Bousbir should not only be viewed as a prison. It was also a theater, where actresses performed a scripted role on a stage set, and where spectators enjoyed the show.

Bousbir stood as a world apart. As one visitor noted, 'these high walls, this monumental door may seem ludicrous and unnecessary. I don't believe, however, that they are useless. They serve to isolate one world from another. It's not much, of course, but it certainly contributes to a particular kind of poetry that the name alone of Bousbir evokes' (Saint-Aignan and Laurent 1950, p.19). 'Passing through the entry gate, unique and solemn [...], one believes one has made an enormous leap in space and even in time' (*Hygiène...* 1937, p.77-78). The walls and the door (Figure 3) provided an ontological and symbolic rupture between Bousbir and the surrounding (real) world, so that visitors understood they were entering another kind of reality. This impression was reinforced by street names which referred to the sex workers who lived there and their supposed origin (e.g. Marrakchia, Fessia, and Meknassia). Hence, visitors walking through Bousbir were not merely experiencing a district of Casablanca, but all of Morocco, and all its imagined erotic delights.

If Said's (1978) *Orientalism* is a key reference for analyzing the imaginative geographies of which Bousbir is made, Foucault's (1997) concept of heterotopia defines the place perfectly. The district is one of those:

...real and effective places which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a kind of counter arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable.'

(Foucault 1997, p.332)

Thinking of Bousbir as an orientalist sexual heterotopia helps to understand the fundamental ambiguity of a place where racial and sexual order was established and transgressed altogether. In short, Bousbir is a site simultaneously located inside and outside of Casablanca; an urban landscape that acted as a signifier of socio-spatial regulation and control but also signified a space of sexual transgression for its colonial masters and tourists.

### **Conclusions: Bousbir today: heritage and memory**

In conclusion, Bousbir may be viewed as sex prison and an orientalized pornographic theme park. For sure, Bousbir did not succeed in protecting men and especially soldiers from venereal diseases, but it did succeed in fulfilling and realizing their fantasies. Despite the success of Bousbir on this front, the French authorities closed Bousbir as a *Quartier réservé* shortly prior to Moroccan independence (March 1956). In Casablanca, France and around the world, Bousbir was the subject of considerable criticism. 'The place is a world legend, and for good reason. But it is also a place to turn most stomachs—at least those of men who believe that women have a higher natural destiny than sex slavery and debasement' (McClusky 1957, p.57). Its existence challenged medical practitioners' fight against venereal diseases and feminists, socialists and anti-colonialists thought it was a moral and political disgrace. After all the image and reputation of France was at stake. Furthermore, the district was identified by French authorities as a source of violence. On 8 April 1947 French *Tirailleurs sénégalais*, when on leave, shot Moroccan troops and exacerbated nationalist contestation. On April 16, 1955, 675 women were expelled from Bousbir with most of them returned to their regions of origin. Bousbir ceased to be a red-light district.

The district was not destroyed, but was used to provide homes for Moroccan auxiliary forces (*Mokhazni*), including those soldiers returning from the French colonial war in Indochina (1946-1954). Some of them and their descendants still live in Bousbir. A school and a police station have been built, and a new gateway has been opened on the north side of the district. The architecture of the district has changed little, except for additional floors added to some buildings, and decay due to the passage of time and lack of maintenance. The lurid past of Bousbir has been slowly and gradually eradicated. Streets that were formerly named after sex workers are now named after flowers in what appears to be an attempt to erase this facet of Bousbir's history.

A new memory is being built, which, though unfounded, seems more appropriate. In 2012, during an interview with a well-educated person working in Bousbir about the origin of Damas Square, the new name given to the lower neighborhood's main square, he explained that the name was a tribute to the caravans which came to Bousbir from Syria prior to French colonization. He added, rather proudly, that Bousbir was the oldest part of Casablanca. Bousbir's inhabitants may believe that they live in an old Moorish district because the place was designed to look that way.

Ironically, Bousbir's neo-Moorish architecture, which in the past was meant to please the orientalist fantasies of Western visitors, now features as part of the contemporary discourse amongst current residents in their quest for identity and historical legitimation. The colonial script and theater that had long defined Bousbir are in the process of being rewritten and rebuilt.

Historical memory aside, Bousbir is on the verge of being recognized for its local architectural heritage. Casablanca lacks much in the way of touristic attractions when compared to Marrakech, Rabat, Fès or Meknès. The principal heritage and tourist value of Casablanca lies in its colonial *Art déco* and *Art nouveau* architecture, and the new *médina* built by Cadet and Brion. Bousbir's touristic potential has been recognised by the fact that it has been classified as an area of architectural significance that needs to be protected. There is no recognition, at present, of the embedded history of Bousbir as a '(sub)urban sexscape'. It is quite likely however that, sooner or later, Bousbir's *Quartier réservé* will find its place again in tourist guides<sup>7</sup> and be subjected to a 'new' voyeuristic gaze. This may pose difficult questions and challenges for local residents in the sense that they and Bousbir itself may be 'labelled' (Becker 1963) with a 'whore stigma' (Pheterson 1996). The new *médina*, a hundred meters from Bousbir, has been beautifully rehabilitated so its neo-Moorish architecture is now one of the main tourist attractions in Casablanca. The reason why Bousbir has not benefited from the same privileged treatment, despite its similar design, may be because rehabilitation runs the risk of exposing its sexual history.

To conclude, in exposing the sexual history of Bousbir this chapter may in fact provoke anxieties amongst some people who do not wish to know about this real or imagined past. This invariably raises potential ethical questions for which there are no easy answers. When Mathieu and Maury's study was re-published in 2003, photographs of sex workers had the faces blurred so as to make them unidentifiable. But in terms of the district itself, there is

no equivalent solution. Anonymizing the place could help protect its inhabitants, but how could we understand anything about Bousbir without knowing it is located in Casablanca? Geographic (and historic) context is vital in order to understand the socio-spatial and relational dynamics of place. Finally, who is to decide what the inhabitants of Bousbir should or should not know about the place where they live? The *aporia* is of course that there is no way to ask them if they do want to know this history without revealing it.

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<sup>1</sup> My principal sources of information on Bousbir have been Mathieu and Maury (1951) and Bernard (1935). Louis Bernard, who was then director of administrative services of Tunis city, had been commissioned to visit Algiers and Casablanca in order to study the possibility of building a red-light district in Tunis. His unpublished report provides valuable information on Bousbir. I particularly thank Gislhaine Meffre for introducing me to Casablanca and sharing her great knowledge of the work of her grandfather, Edmond Brion, the architect of Bousbir. I'm also most grateful to Jacqueline Alluchon for showing me her important documentation on Casablanca. My visit to Bousbir was facilitated by the association Casamémoire, which works for the preservation of architectural heritage in the city. Mustafa Benfaïda generously shared his impressive knowledge of Meknès, and organized my visit to El Mers, its former *Quartier réservé*. I am in debt to the inhabitants of Bousbir and El Mers who warmly welcomed me to their communities and kindly entertained my questions. I also want to thank the librarians of the *Archives Diplomatiques* in Nantes (France), where I had the opportunity to delve into the materials (*Archives de Souveraineté*) from the French Protectorate in Morocco. I am in debt to the editors of this book and to Daniel Hoffman for their critical readings of an early version of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> As specified on Campo Alegre website : <http://campoalegresex.com/start.php>.

<sup>3</sup> According to his granddaughter Gislhaine Meffre (personal communication).

<sup>4</sup> The exact number of sex workers in Bousbir varies according to the source and the period. It seems to have been at its lowest in the mid-1930s, because of the economic crisis (Bernard 1935). A few written testimonies mention ambiguously male or transvestite dancers in Bousbir, who may have been sex workers. But there appear to have been very few, if any.

<sup>5</sup> The number of European sex workers in Bousbir seems to have reached its peak in the mid-1930s, when they were more or less 25 (Bernard 1935). In the 1950s, there were almost none.

<sup>6</sup> Mathieu and Maury's estimation is based on the much questionable idea that 25% of the population of Casablanca Muslim female population which could, based on their age, work as prostitutes, actually did. This idea was consistent with the colonial prejudice toward indigenous women, by which they were all seen as potential prostitutes. On the other hand, it is true that the matrices of race, class and gender domination made Moroccan women easy preys for colonial men. Even if Mathieu and Maury's estimation is biased, and probably inaccurate, it appears that Bousbir did not gather more than a small proportion of Casablanca's sex workers.

<sup>7</sup> Bousbir is not mentioned in today's tourist guides. J. Mc Guinness' *Morocco* (Footprint Handbooks, 2009) is an exception. He mentions the district and its appeal but interestingly tries to dissuade the visitors: 'Another interwar building project was the Bousbir neighbourhood – rather less noble, but still with vernacular architectural motifs inspired by the médinas of Rabat and Salé. Bousbir [...] was Casablanca's red-light district. [...] Visitors to Bousbir may find themselves unwelcome in a poor residential neighbourhood with a past that most would prefer to forget'.