

## Restructuring la Petite Sicile (“Little Sicily”) Town Quarter of la Goulette in Tunisia

*Slaheddine Malouch*

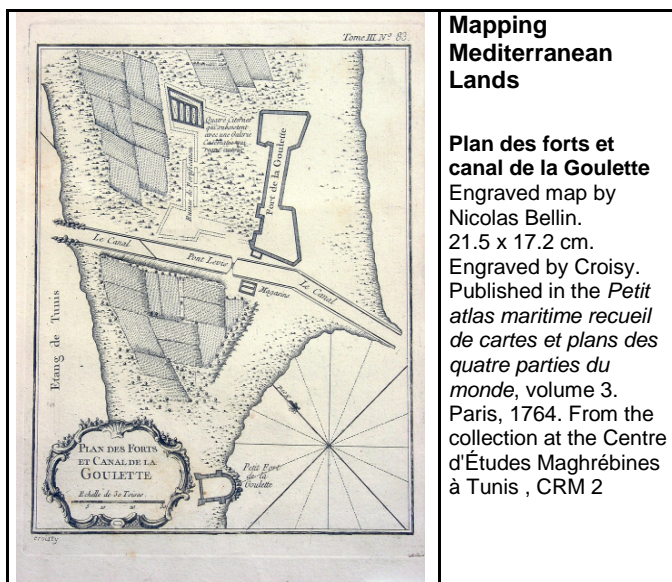
### CONTEXT OF INTERVENTION

For over 20 years Tunisia has been following an urban rehabilitation policy for rundown or poorly integrated town areas. Thus, different programs of a national scale have been studied, giving rise to different urban development projects. The state's intervention mainly focused on unplanned residential neighborhoods, as they were under-equipped from all viewpoints.

Some old town quarters are of particular historic interest but are in a state of significant dilapidation. The Arab-Muslim historic districts are known as *medinas*, but European-heritage areas also exist. It is the state's aim to better strengthen social cohesion within the various historic neighborhoods and at the same time improve the citizens' standard of living. This is the broader background for renovating la Goulette's Sicilian town quarter, commonly known as la Petite Sicile (“Little Sicily”).

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1886 explorer Victor Guerin—who had traveled through the region six years prior—related: “‘La Goulette’ or ‘Halq el oued’ is like a maritime suburb of Tunis from which it is separated by a lake known as el Bahirah in Arabic. This shallow lake communicates with a beautiful gulf through a probably man-made canal from the time of the Phoenician occupation and which had been repaired at different times. The point at which the canal meets the sea was given the name of ‘foum el oued’ by the Arabs, the mouth of the canal, literally of the river because of the current flowing there, or, even more commonly, Halk el Oued (the canal's throat), a term which the Italians translated as la Goletta and the French as la Goulette.”



About 10 kilometers from the city of Tunis, la Goulette is a port town with about 78,000 inhabitants. In antiquity it was considered a suburb of Carthage, but by the 15th century, only the “borj” remained—known as “Karraka”—and it was successively enlarged and reconstructed by Khairreddine—known as Barbarossa, admiral of Soliman’s fleet. Khairreddine was beaten in 1536 by Charles V who succeeded him and who established Spanish dominion over the region for about 40 years until the arrival of the Turks. It was not until the 19th century that inhabitants felt it necessary to develop a port. The favorable position of la Goulette’s port explains the rapid development of the neighboring agglomeration.



The town would become a point of convergence of road and railway networks through the present time, as new road systems are still being developed; the Rades-la Goulette axis, for example, will link the northern suburb of Tunis with its southern suburb with a 260 meter cable-stayed bridge—the first of its kind in Tunisia.

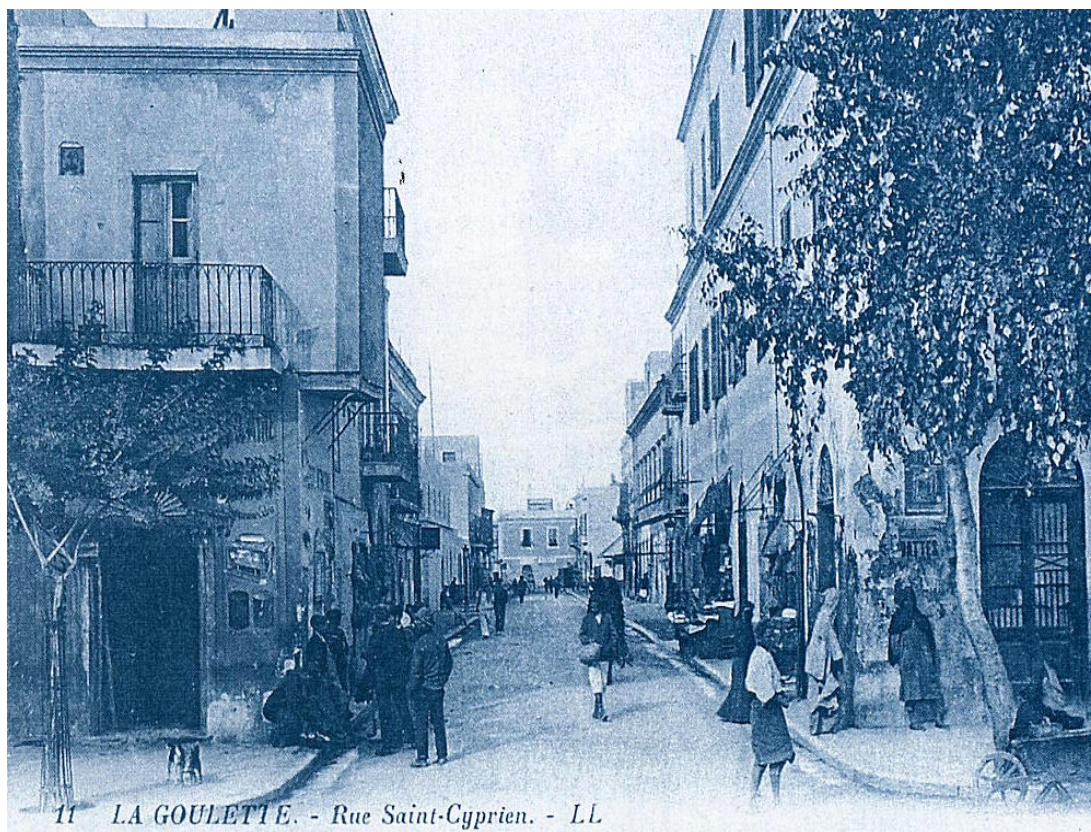
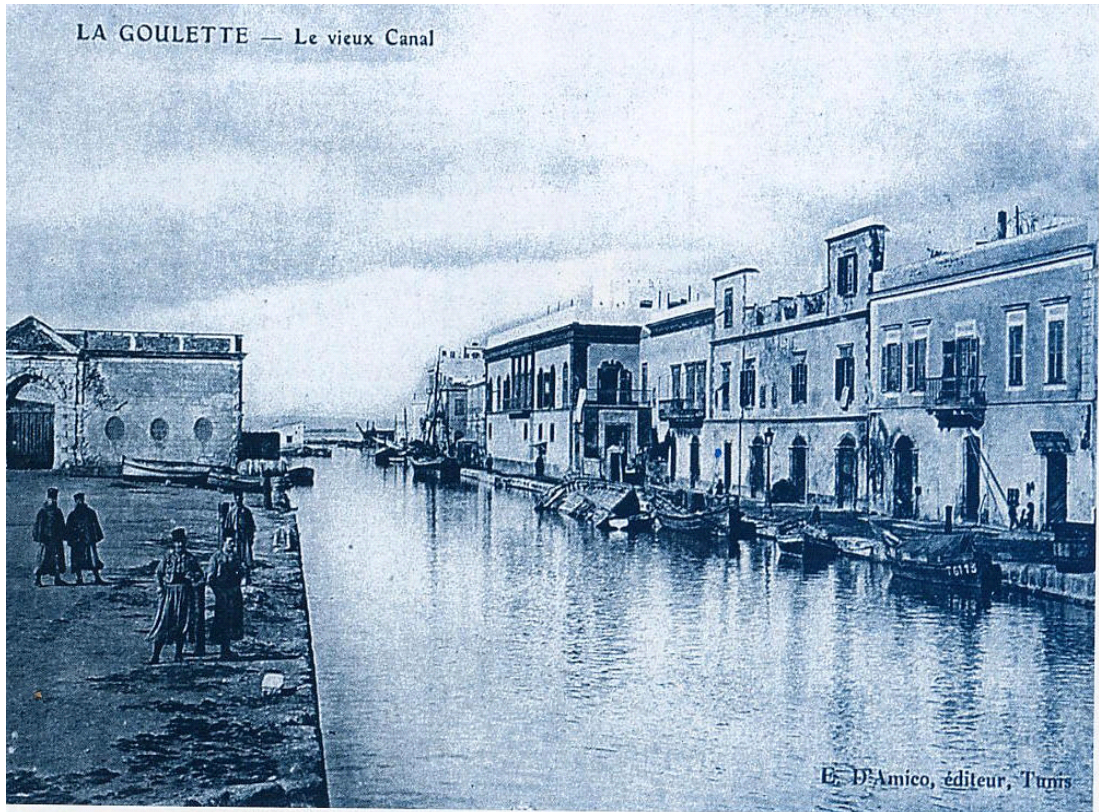
## **THE “PETITE SICILE” TOWN QUARTER**

According to R. Darmon, “it is in the VIIIth century that a new port was started with the building of a canal connecting Tunis—already an important urban center—to the sea. Much later, in the 18th century, under the reign of Hamouda Pacha, the old ‘harbor’ of la Goulette was dug and the quays and first warehouses of the Bey’s maritime arsenal were built.” With the protectorate in 1881, navigation companies advised building port installations in la Goulette. This is how the town quarter of la Petite Sicile came into being. It developed at the beginning of the last century, as reflected in the plan below:



It is thus a relatively recent town quarter initially populated by fishermen mostly of Sardo-Genoese origin. La Petite Sicile is the original core of the European town of the la Goulette community. The 10 meter-long canal divided the town into two sections. To the north stood the fortress and a collection of houses; to the south, the Sidi Chrif Zaouia, the Beylical palace, the former seraglio, and the arsenal, whose great door was to be restored and which still bears the coat of arms of the Husseinite dynasty. The canal has today been filled in order to make way for an access road linking Tunis with la Goulette starting from the lake. In the early 20th century, however, spacious houses with balconies and decorative moldings stood near the canal and bore witness to the presence of new art in Tunisia. The church in the area is richly decorated with frescoes and paintings in the Italian style. According again to V. Guerin, la Goulette's population in 1886 was mainly Italian, hence the architectural flavor of la Petite Sicile.





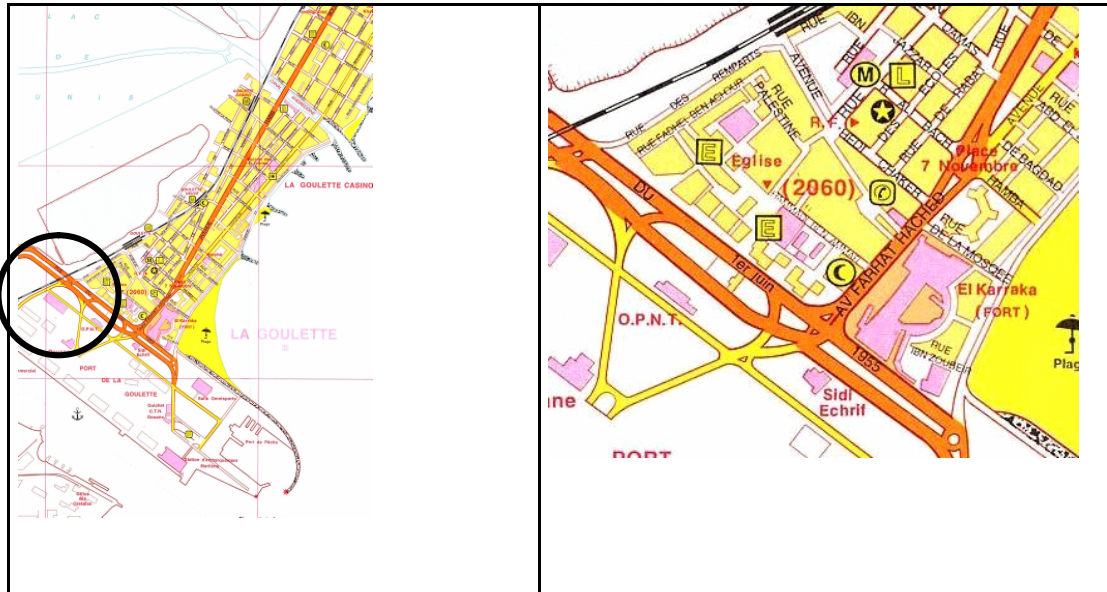


Today the town quarter covers a surface area of 8.7 hectares. There is very little left of the original buildings, and those still left need a great deal of rehabilitation.



## **NECESSITY FOR INTERVENTION**

The Petite Sicile town quarter of la Goulette, with its 8.7 hectares surface area, has 3.7 hectares reserved for public areas (roads and public squares) and 1 hectare for public and religious buildings (mosque, church, primary school, professional college, etc.). The town quarter is characterized by decaying buildings and congested corridors. It will thus require intervention from the public authorities, including the la Goulette Municipality and the Ministry of Housing and Land Development, known as MEHAT. The Agency for Renovation and Urban Rehabilitation, known as ARRU, was set up in 1981 under the authority of the Ministry of Housing and Land Development. ARRU is well equipped to do its job in view of 1) its experience with interventions in the urban environment and 2) its position as a public authority within the limits of designated land intervention areas.



Position of the town quarter

Different appraisal missions undertaken by ARRU and MEHAT took place between 1986 and 1988. The aim of intervention is to:

- assess the situation in terms of the state of the buildings and their form of occupation, with the goal of finding solutions for rehousing in line with the financial capacity of the households living in buildings threatened with collapse;
- improve the town quarter's image through good architectural and urban coherence;
- start restructuring the town quarter and overhauling all the road networks;
- develop vacant land with due respect to the existing architecture; and
- propose a well-balanced financial schema for the project.

## **PRESENT SITUATION**

The town quarter's decline stems from population flight. The creation of the port of Tunis drew away part of the administration and the population to the capital city, but above all, the road project, which led to the canal being filled up, drove away the fishermen and reduced economic activity for the area. The continued population loss to more recent city extensions and to the suburbs will lead to extensive social change, which may alter the broader character of the quarter.

According to the 1988 survey, 65% of the population of la Petite Sicile is familial households of modest income due to the precarious employment of the heads of households and low incomes. Thus 86% are tenants paying very low rents or de facto occupiers. The average family size is five persons. The 1988 survey made it clear that almost half of the households had two rooms, with an occupancy rate of up to five persons per room. The kitchens and bathrooms, when they do exist, suffer from poor sanitary conditions.



State of the buildings before intervention

The urban layout of la Petite Sicile is dense, with almost 80 housing units per hectare. The area has been partially renovated with the construction of new HLM buildings, which are social housing. A number of private interventions have also accentuated the changes taking place in the area.

When the survey started, a high proportion of the buildings were already demolished. Many were in such an advanced state of decay that over 50% were inevitably scheduled for demolition. Some buildings had been abandoned by their original owners and were divided up so as to provide more rental housing units. Most of the plots of land in the area are registered to Tunisian owners, but 30% of the plots belong to foreigners.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWNQUARTER

The area's restructuring is based on a detailed master plan to reorganize the area while respecting the prevailing architectural and urban character. A traffic circulation and parking plan had also been drawn up, as well as an area impact study.

The idea of the canal was retained, so as to partially regain its former image, which made the town quarter so original, and so as not to prevent its reopening someday, should it become feasible and desirable to do so. If one day this turns out to be the case, it would be possible—according to the survey—to envisage a marina in place of the ancient harbor.

Some roads have been widened to improve circulation; others are to cater to the needs inside the area, for example, Avenue de la Résistance). Finally, to respect the remaining fortification still extant in the area, new buildings will be constructed at a distance from the remains of the ancient wall.

### Relocation

Simultaneous with preparing the intervention, an identification survey of building conditions and the general architectural interest of the area established the priority households to be re-housed. Different solutions were envisaged. In view of the 1989 downpours, ARRU built, as an emergency measure, 54 housing units on the community's outskirts to provisionally shelter the households of la Petite Sicile who were living in accommodations threatened with collapse. This was a temporary situation while waiting for the households to be finally re-housed.



Other solutions were also envisaged, such as relocating displaced tenants to buildings in a better state of repair or offering compensation so displaced tenants could rent elsewhere until the completion of the project.

Apart from re-housing renters and de facto occupiers (86% of tenants), the project also made provisions for compensating the owners of buildings for land acquisition and for lost business.

### **Demolition**

On the basis of the appraisal, decaying buildings and those likely to collapse were demolished. Out of the 207 buildings in the intervention area, 143 buildings were scheduled for demolition and of those, 138 were pulled down.

### **Rehabilitation of Housing Units**

The project has planned the rehabilitation of buildings whose state has been deemed to be recoverable. These savable buildings cover a surface area of approximately 7450 m<sup>2</sup>, supplying a floor area of 13,700 m<sup>2</sup>. Technical surveys were carried out in order to find appropriate solutions for the different buildings.

## **RESTRUCTURING THE TOWNQUARTER**

The project has scheduled development and overhaul of the different public service networks, including thoroughfares, waste water treatment, drainage, drinking water, low voltage electricity, public lighting, and telecommunications. All the infrastructure works have been completed. Some plots have been provided with services within the scope of the operation, and they have been put up for sale.

ARRU has started a pilot construction operation with due regard to the architectural specifications and features linked to the Italian history of the area.



Renovation project

Building site



**Project Provisional Costs**

<b>Designation</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Land costs</b> - acquisitions and provisions for land acquisitions - compensation for re-housing - business compensation - re-housing costs	<b>4,486,380</b>
<b>Costs of development work</b> - demolition of building - infrastructure work - rehabilitation of building	<b>2,302,171</b>
<b>Costs of Surveys</b>	<b>41,431</b>
<b>Contingencies</b>	<b>301,632</b>
<b>Management costs</b>	<b>619,034</b>
<b>Financial charges</b>	<b>776,614</b>
<b>TOTAL *</b>	<b>8,527,261</b>

\* The total does not include the cost of the final re-housing operation undertaken outside the perimeter of la Petite Sicile, which would raise the total cost to over 11 million TND (i.e. 6.6 million Euros).

**Financing Scheme**

The initial financing scheme included a contribution from the state budget to finance the primary infrastructures. Municipal self-financing and a loan from the Fund for Loans and Support for Local Collectivities, together with a subsidy, will serve to finance the secondary infrastructure works. Rehabilitation costs are to be partly financed by the profit gained from the sale of developed vacant plots of land; the rest is at the expense of the citizens themselves. Land acquisition and development costs are to be taken over by ARR.U.

This plan, however, has not been completely followed, as ARR.U had to take over all the project costs except for the state's participation in providing primary infrastructures. As for the construction of temporary relocation housing, a special credit line from USAID was reserved to grant credits for 1) the acquisition of small plots of land with services and 2) the construction of 27-square-meter expanding cores of build up area on the very same plots of land.

**Planned Recovery**

The project is expected to cover all expenses pertaining to provisional re-housing operations. It is additionally to cover all financial charges generated by the construction of housing for final re-housing purposes. An "equalization" formula was applied to the sale of land to the neediest households, who paid only 19 TND/m<sup>2</sup> instead of 36 TND/m<sup>2</sup>. Another type of equalization formula will be applied to cheap plots of land at only 45 TND/m<sup>2</sup> instead of the 70 TND/m<sup>2</sup> applied to the wider public.

Rehabilitation expenses will be recovered from the sale of plots of land. They thus will constitute a partial contribution of the renovation project to the area's improvement. Expenses pertaining to land recovery and the area's development will also be recoverable from the sale of developed plots of land.

### **Project State of Progress**

Land tenure auditing (that is, acquisitions and compensation) is underway. Completion is estimated at 50%. Re-housing operations, on the other hand, have concluded.

All infrastructure works have been completed and demolition work is nearing completion (97% done). Rehabilitation of buildings has not yet been started, but renovation work—reconstruction of on-site buildings—is underway. Approximately 60% of the developed plots of land are in the process of reconstruction.

### **Assessment of the Situation**

The operation is underway and it is already possible to pick out some strong points:

- Relocated citizens benefit from improved sanitation and habitability, compared with their pre-project situations. Thanks to the project, these households will have access to ownership in the future.
- Physically opening the area lends security to the households that stayed behind, and it will encourage an inflow of new populations, leading to a social mix and improving the area's image.
- The area's increased land values have encouraged private promoters to undertake renovation operations. The project will certainly be completed when new activities emerge in line with the area's needs, activities that had hitherto only been seasonal.

Some difficulties, nevertheless, still need to be pointed out. Re-housing options in the area have been exhausted, for example. The land recovery process has been slow due to legal procedures.

### **Conclusion**

The restructuring of la Petite Sicile is a project to renovate the old urban layout. By creating better housing conditions, the project has considerably improved the standard of living for the population that still lives there and for future inhabitants. Ultimately, increased integration into the town will make it possible to create a more favorable economic environment for internal private investment dynamics.

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