
Social perception of the built environment from the colonial period: a case study of the city center of Guelma

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Abstract

Independent Algeria found itself in possession of a significant colonial urban and architectural legacy. Comprised of a variety of architectural styles, this heritage has become today's landmarks in Algerian cities. The colonial city of Guelma is no exception. Established as a district capital during the colonial period, it was equipped to govern a territory extending to the Tunisian borders. Today, it stands at the heart of the current city. As an urban and architectural legacy of the colonial era, the original city center, due to its historical, symbolic, and heritage qualities, holds a unique position in shaping the image of the city of Guelma.

For this original core of the present city, we have tried to examine its relationship with the city's population. The examples we have studied are public buildings that have retained their original use up to the present day. To understand the population's perspective towards the public buildings of the colonial period, we used a methodology based on survey research and questionnaires as an investigative technique. This survey allowed us to highlight the strong link between the issue of heritage preservation and social representation, thus making it possible to inscribe this social representation into its heritage institution.

Keywords: *Colonial Architecture; Heritage Preservation; Social Representation; Public Facilities; Urban Structure*

Introduction

The built environment from the French colonial era in Algeria continues to be a subject of intense discussion, with issues related to heritage preservation and the relationships with inherited architecture attracting a wide audience. The process of attributing heritage status to a territory is a complex one, involving the intersection of various realities. Some pertain to legal, regulatory, and administrative management modes, while others relate to identity, temporal, and aesthetic references associated with heritage objects that society burdens (in both senses of the term) with conveying meaning (Arrif, 1994; Benaidja, 2018). Buildings inherited from the colonial period form part of the identity of many Algerian cities. Government offices, schools, theaters, businesses, stadiums... these structures are maintained and preserved, frequented often by the population who utilize them.

The population generally feels more comfortable in this inherited architecture than in the large complexes of Algeria (Cote, 1993). People appropriate the spaces of the colonial city in their social practices and attach themselves to this familiar urban landmark. A portion of the Algerian population displays a certain nostalgia for inherited colonial cities through internet sites and social networks. The social representation of an architectural product can be defined as an organized set of opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and information relating to an object or a situation

(Sinou, 2005; Chalabi, et al., 2021)

This work provides a quick overview of the general state of the urban and architectural colonial heritage, the uses made of it, and an analysis of some representations expressed by the inhabitants regarding this heritage. The aim of this study is to understand the relationship that the inhabitants of the city of Guelma have with the colonial city center and the public facilities that structure and define its image.

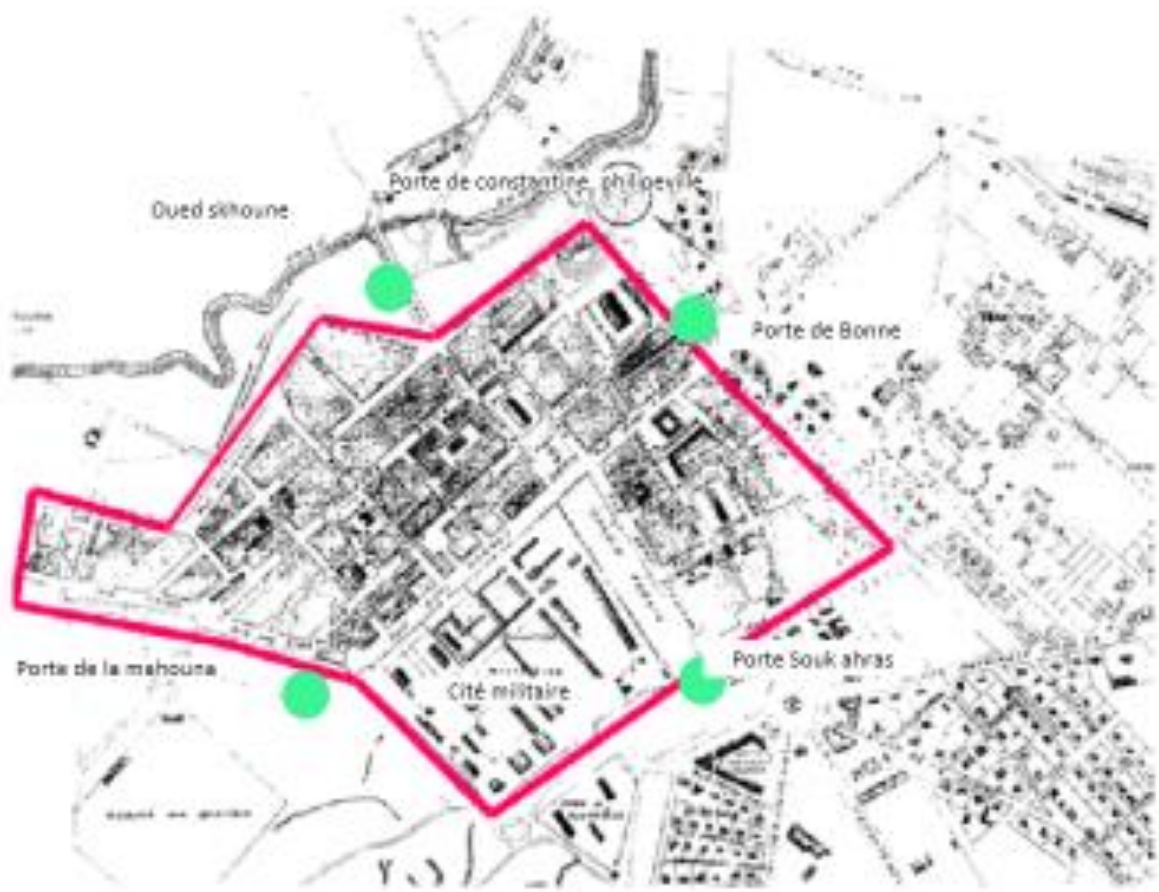
Literary and Historical Review

French colonization policy in Algeria resulted in the establishment of a network of strategic points, new centers, and even cities, strategically distributed across the territory to serve as bases for military operations.

Between 1848 and 1928, the official colonization services established 631 colonization zones. Within these zones, 475 colonization villages were built. (Cote, 1993)

The selection of their locations was at the discretion of the governor-general, who entrusted their urban layouts to the technical services of the army (Malvreti, et al., 1997; Almi, 2002; Boutabba, et al.).

Constructed by the Military Engineering corps, the city of Guelma was established near the ruins of the Byzantine city (the former military barracks) (Figure 1). In 1844, a plan related to the defense works and alignments of the future city was prepared. The engineers built a bridge over the Seybouse and laid out the route (Figures 2, 3). On January 20, 1845, a European center accommodating 250 families was created, annexed to the military camp (Arc). The civil administration of the city began in the early fifties.



*Figure 1. The Original Colonial Center of Guelma and its Gates.
(Source: Guelma Municipal Archives)*



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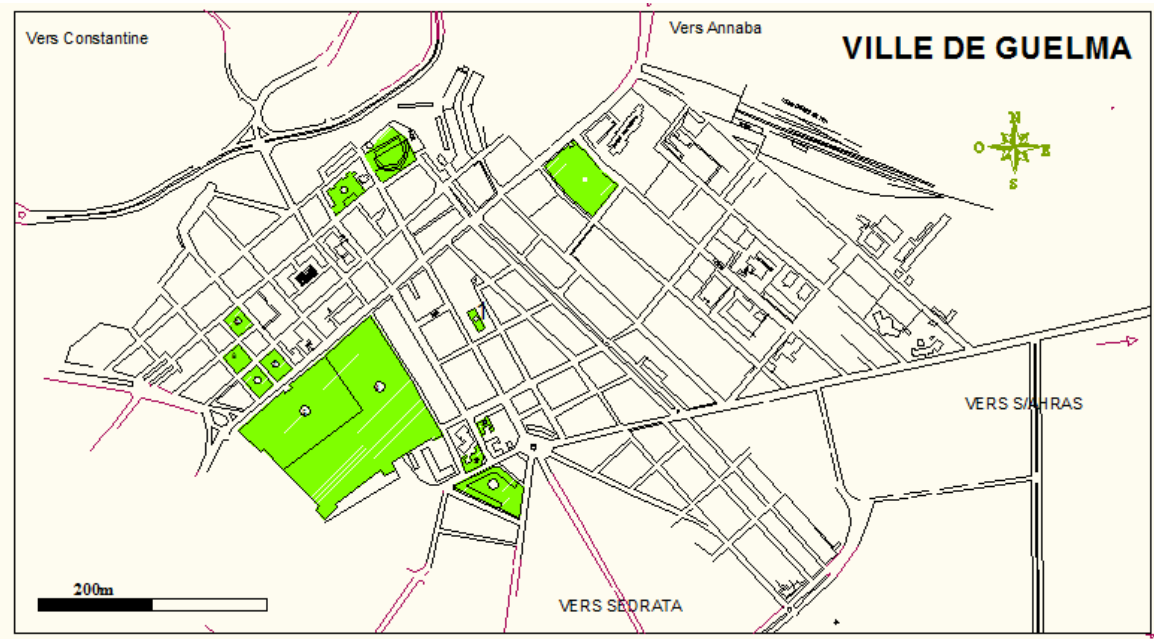
*Figure 2. One of the Gates of Guelma (Gate of Bone or Bab Annaba).
(Source: Guelma Municipal Archives)*



*Figure 3. General View of Guelma from the Road Leading to Constantine and Skikda.
(Source: Guelma Municipal Archives)*

Established as a mixed municipality in 1858, Guelma urbanized and rapidly developed as a command center up to the Tunisian borders. The creation of a potable water network and sewage disposal, along with the arrival of the railway, contributed to the growth of this emerging city.

The major features of the military city largely echoed those of the Roman city. Its plan, precisely drawn, boasted wide, straight, and long streets, from the center of which the view extends to the city walls and which intersect at strictly right angles (Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Representation of the City Center Checkerboard with Key Infrastructure.
(Source: Guelma Municipal Archives, modified by the authors)*

The colonial city is distinguished by regularity, proportion, symmetry, order, and plantations considered an indispensable tool for the hierarchy of road networks. This choice responded not only to a concern for efficiency and rationality in the organization of space but also to rigorous management and control of circulation.

In the colonized Maghreb, the city is the most striking symbol of French colonization, and Algeria serves as a true experimental laboratory for this purpose (MALKI-Allouani, 2000).

The colonial city split into two distinct entities, that of the Arabs and Jews (Mogador Street, Anouna Street, outskirts of the station), and that of the colonists (Sadi Carnot Boulevard, Leclerc Boulevard, garden cities, squares, small squares, public gardens) (Figures 5, 6).



*Figure 5. One of the City Gates, Arab and Jewish Quarters.
(Source: Guelma Municipal Archives)*



*Figure 6. Carnot Avenue, Airy, Spacious, and Lined with Greenery for Europeans.
(Source: Guelma Municipal Archives)*

The colonial administration marked its domination through the construction of a gendarmerie barracks, courthouse, prison, and sub-prefecture. The architecture of the new colonial city, through its housing, squares, and statues, was designed to appear as a symbol of supremacy, (Beguin, 1983).

The building plans followed neoclassical styles identical to those in other French African colonies. European designers, who oversaw architectural services and were in vogue in Algeria, found it natural and more rational to import urban forms from the metropolis (Bacha, 2011).

A hospital, three colonization physicians' offices, a telecommunications post office, a municipal theater, a hotel, a municipal stadium, an agricultural school, four European cafes, and two Moorish cafes represented civil buildings. The colonial city served as a small intellectual center with its two primary schools, one for boys and the other for girls. As for religious facilities, the city had a church, a mosque, and a synagogue (Figures 7, 8).



Figure 7. The Municipal Theater. (Source: Authors)



Figure 8. The Municipal Stadium. (Source: Authors)

The 20th century saw the birth of a modern movement characterized by the introduction of new materials such as reinforced concrete, new construction processes, and new architectural expressions such as the free facade and cantilevered structures. The international context favorable to the modern movement would have repercussions on what was to happen in terms of architectural production (Aiche, et al., 2006).

Several facilities dating from the mid-twentieth century, including the finance hotel, the post office, the agricultural school, the primary school of the station, the collective housing building of March 19, as well as a multitude of individual houses can be noted (Figures 9, 10).



*Figure 9. The Post Office, of Significant Importance to the City of Guelma.
(Source: Authors)*



Figure 10. The tax department. (Source: Authors)

Urban policies adopted after independence have resorted to an extension that either turns its back on colonial cities or revolves around them. The first two decades following the independence of Algeria are dominated, in the housing sector, by mass housing, always guided by the necessities of quantitative urgency rather than by the definition of a new policy or new approaches to the problem (Deluz, 1988). The development of the city of Guelma has taken place around its historical center. Indeed, the day after its promotion to the capital of the Wilaya, Guelma equipped itself with command facilities and New urban housing zone as well as industrial zones "(Guelma, 2013). The original center of the city of Guelma is one of the illustrations of a center that is, today, in the geographical middle of the current city. An urban and architectural legacy of the colonial period, the center starts from a social, economic reality and occupies, because of its historical, symbolic and heritage qualities, a unique position in the construction of the city's image.

Today, it enjoys a convergence of commercial activities and public services for the entire city. Public facilities from the colonial era are still in use and maintain their architectural and urban allure.

This work is interested in the relationship that the inhabitants of the city of Guelma have with the colonial city and the public facilities that structure it.

Several works have dealt with this social representation such as:

The works of Cyril Isnart on "ordinary patrimonializations" (Cyril, 2012), those of Valérie Desrochers, Jocelyne Ferraris, and Catherine Garnier on "social representations of a developed classified site" (Desrochers, et al.).

Methods

Description and objectives of the survey:

In the literature on the subject, the social representation of architecture is often defined as the process by which people perceive and interpret the built environment that surrounds them. To understand and evaluate the relationship that inhabitants have with these facilities, and this inherited colonial city, we relied on a survey by questionnaire. The indicators retained are derived from the notion of cultural significance of heritage: utilitarian, contemplative, identity, and administrative (Robert, 2010). This study will allow us to interpret the meanings of these architectural works and grasp the image they form among the inhabitants.

Sample identification

Our approach is one that aims to capture the respondent's point of view. A viewpoint deciphering the signs transmitted by this architecture and this urban structure of the city center. The goal is to capture the values transmitted by this heritage and the image that this architecture forms among the inhabitants. The questionnaire was distributed to 80 people encountered in the surveyed colonial city center and chosen at random; a sample composed of 12 to 30 respondents can provide 70% of the information to be collected (Griffin, et al., 1993)

Questionnaire Organization

We developed our questionnaire according to the following axes:

Axis 1: profile of respondents,

Axis 2: utility and possibilities of adaptations to uses, improvement,
Axis 3: appreciation and well-being,
Axis 4: effective appropriation, identification,
Axis 5: heritage preservation.

Results

Profile of respondents

The surveyed population is distributed almost equally between female and male, with 55% men and 45% women (Figure 11) over 55% of the population is young (Figure 12), the educational level is high (60% have a university degree) and 40% have levels ranging from elementary to secondary (Figure 13).

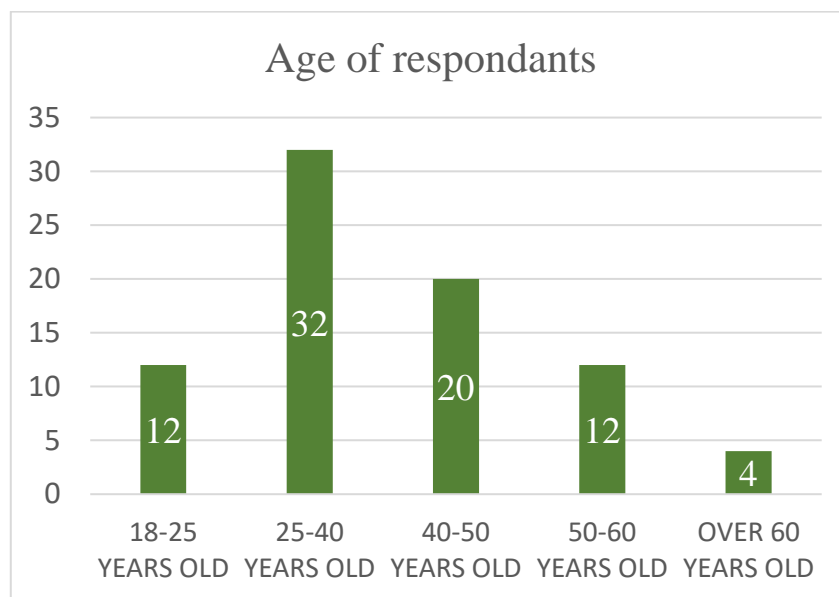


Figure 11. Diagram representing the age of respondents (Source: Authors)

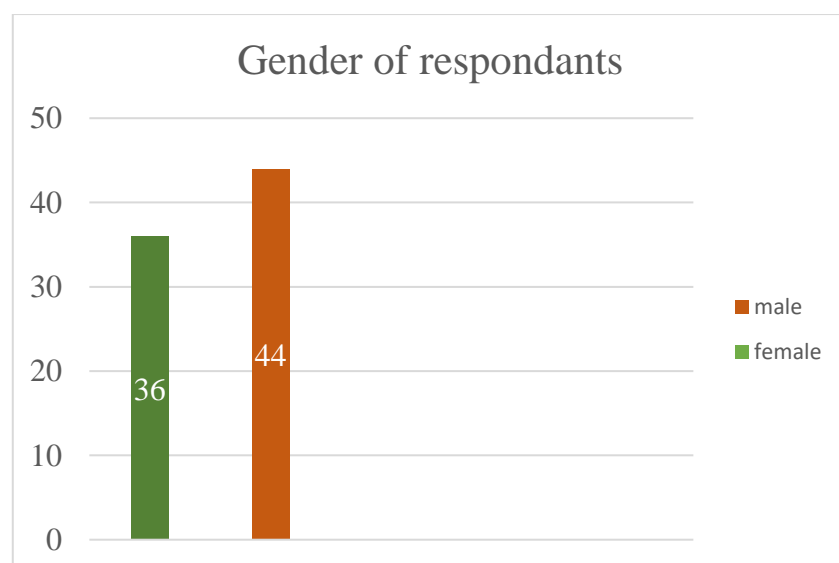


Figure 12. Diagram representing the gender of respondents (Source: Authors)

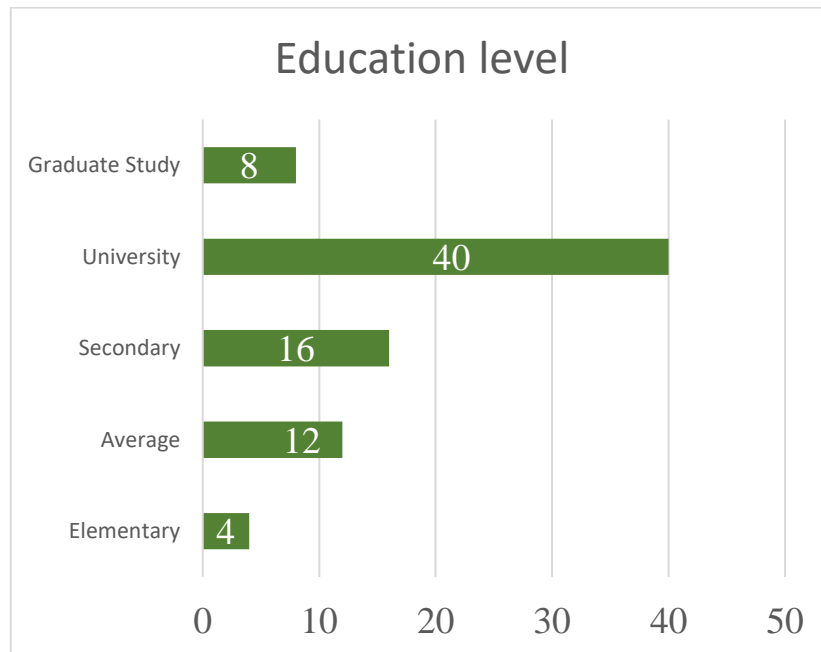


Figure 13. Diagram representing the level of education of respondents (Source: Authors)

Possibilities for adaptation to uses

The results show, in terms of uses, the utilitarian character of the colonial city center and the public facilities of great importance, such as the post office, the finance hotel, the theater, public gardens, arranged squares and schools (95%). For future adaptations or arrangements, the respondents see no drawback and consider the functional nature of the center and public facilities (70% of respondents) (Figures 14, 15).

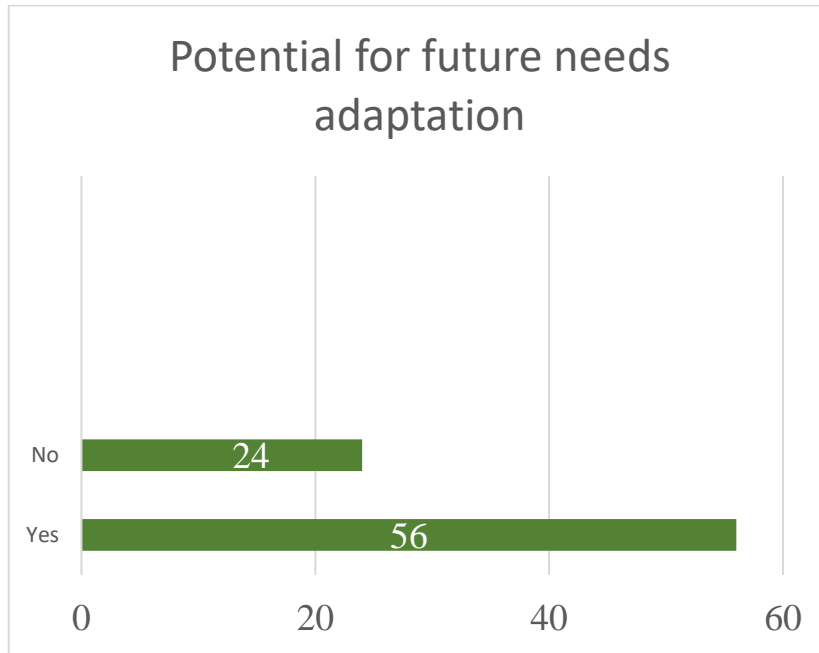


Figure 14. Diagram representing the potential for Future Needs Adaptation. (Source: Authors)

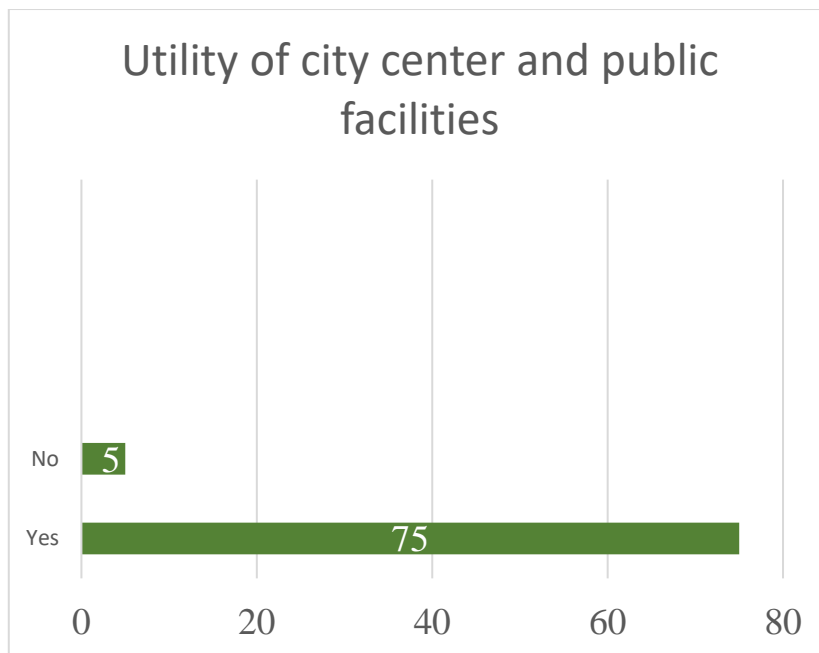


Figure 15. Diagram representing the utility of City Center and Public Facilities. (Source: Authors)

Well-being sensation

The results show that respondents experience a sense of well-being and a high satisfaction with the spatial arrangement of places and facilities, the layout of spaces, and spacious public facilities. They experience a certain satisfaction that is linked to the spatial and functional qualities of places and public facilities (70%). Some places and facilities evoke a feeling of discomfort for some respondents, a discomfort related to the events of colonization (30%) (Figure 16).

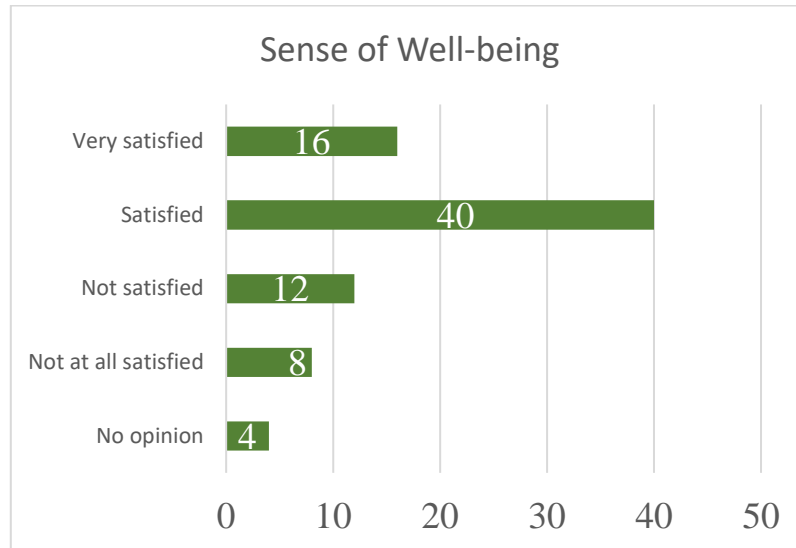


Figure 16. Diagram representing the sense of Well-being. (Source: Authors)

Identification with Places

More than 52% of respondents do not identify with colonial architecture and believe it belongs to a past that does not greatly interest them. These respondents are the youngest (post-independence generation). The results show that identification decreases with age. The oldest respondents identify with this colonial heritage (Figure 17).

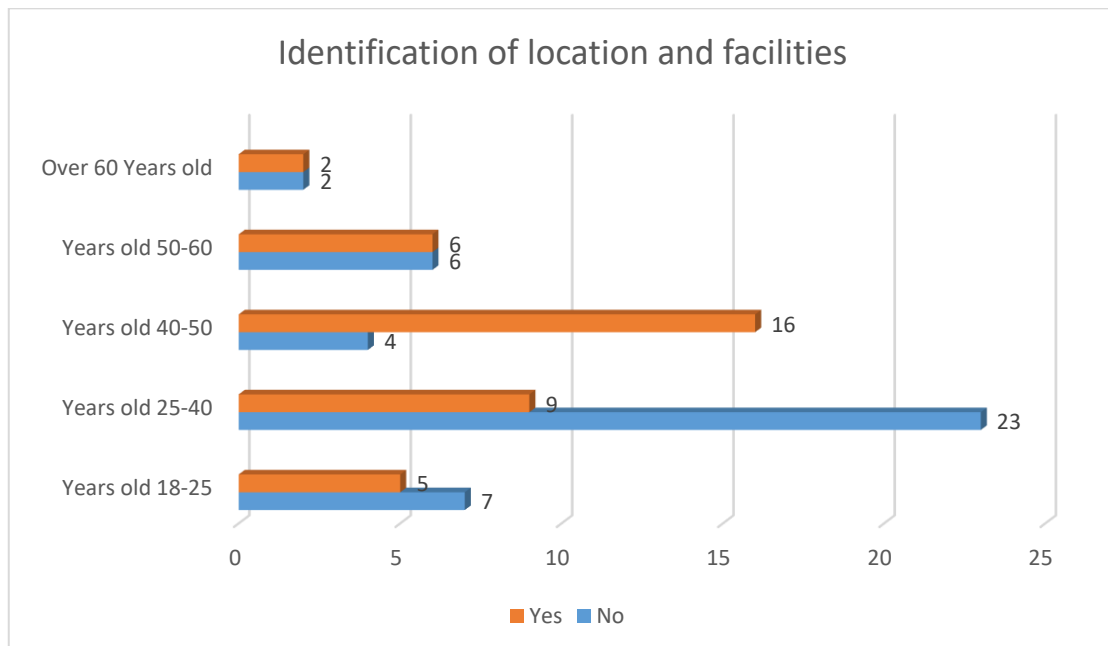


Figure 17. Diagram representing the identification of Locations and Facilities. (Source: Authors)

Heritage Preservation

Between 93.75% and 75% of respondents, agree with the preservation of selected public facilities in the colonial city center of Guelma. Through this questionnaire, the local population shows a high interest in the historic city center, viewing it as a place of nostalgia and collective memory that should be preserved (Figure 18).

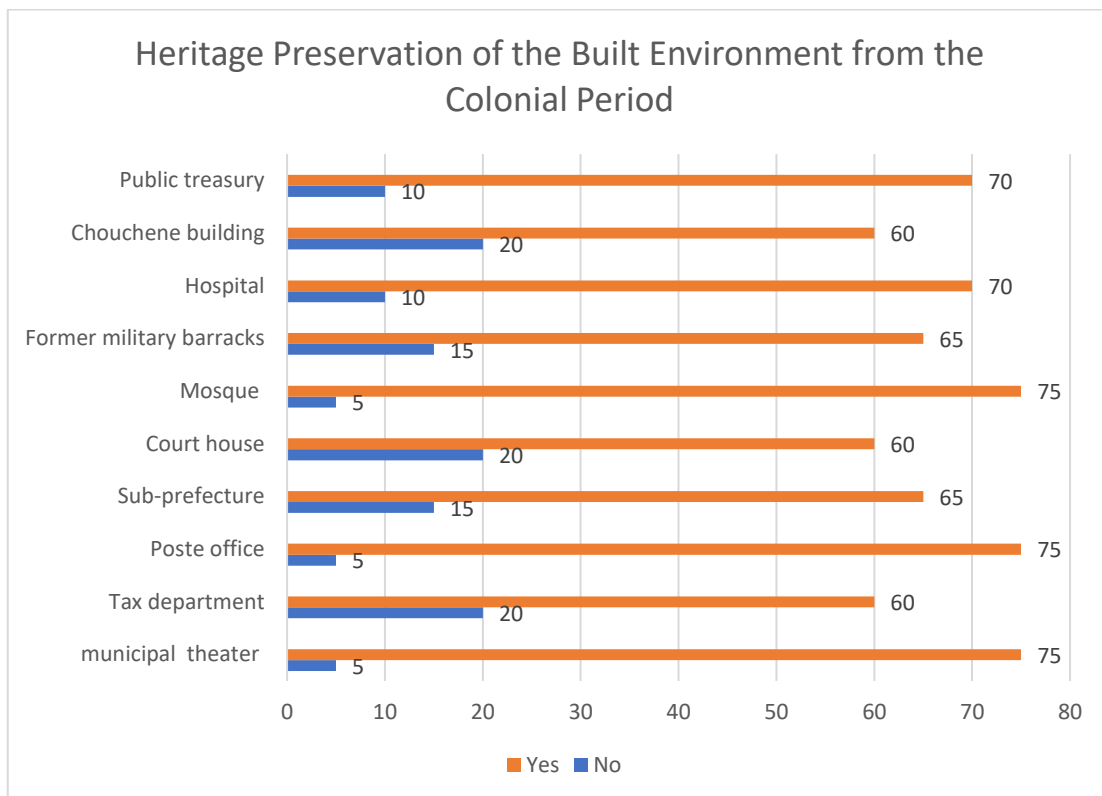


Figure 18. Diagram representing the Heritage Preservation of the Built Environment from the Colonial Period. (Source: Authors)

Discussions

The survey results have shown that the respondents have become familiar with the colonial city center and appreciate the great utility of the facilities and developed spaces. Public facilities such as the post office, the finance building, the municipal theater, the public treasury, gardens, and maintained and developed public squares, among others, create a highly appreciated image for the respondents.

In terms of the sensation of well-being, the qualitative approach of our survey allowed us to capture the respondents' perceived image in constant contact with the built environment and architecture of the colonial period. This feeling of well-being is primarily due to the functional character of the facilities and places, the heights of halls and receptions, and the developments.

Some respondents experience a certain discomfort in contact with some facilities from the colonial period (courthouse, finance building, etc.), this is a history that is ingrained due to a painful event. Respondents identify little with this colonial heritage. The survey showed that 52% of respondents are not very interested in this built environment of the colonial era (95% of respondents were born

after independence). The oldest respondents identify with these places. It was observed that it is the oldest population that identifies the most.

The responses to the survey questions showed the respondents' interest in preserving the built environment of the colonial period. For them, preservation should not be limited to certain public facilities. The results show a majority agreement for the conservation of the facilities that we selected for the survey.

Conclusions

This work allowed us to understand the relationship the population maintains with the built environment of the colonial period, as well as the current significance attributed by the population. Familiarity with this colonial built environment explains the fieldwork results in favor of preserving this heritage. The debate on social representation and heritage preservation is topical. The institutional framework is very complex.

This work, which focuses on the colonial city center of the city of Guelma, has led to some conclusions:

- Respondents' satisfaction with the functional character of the colonial built environment and the possibilities for adaptation to future needs.
- Diversified social representation.
- An attachment to this inherited built environment, justifying the respondents' willingness to preserve it.

The survey results show the population's connection with this built heritage, which may help preserve and institutionalize it.

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