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## **Reshaping Space and Time in Morocco: The Agencification of Urban Government and its Effects in the Bouregreg Valley (Rabat/Salé)**

**Maryame Amarouche and Koenraad Bogaert**

“Battles are fought against the encroachments of a central authority and state pressure. But we know that the real problems lie elsewhere, that the most important decisions are made elsewhere”.

Henri Lefebvre – *The Urban Revolution*

From the terrace of Café Maure in the casbah of the Oudayas one can enjoy the panoramic view of the Bouregreg Valley. The 12<sup>th</sup> century citadel is built on the rocky shore where the Bouregreg river flows out into the Atlantic Ocean between the Moroccan capital Rabat and its neighboring city Salé. Especially during summer evenings the river banks look full of life. Jet-skiers are taking off, men are fishing, families are strolling along the quay, teenagers are diving in the water and ferrymen take you across the river from one side to the other.

The valley is surrounded by the remains of Morocco’s rich past: the casbah, the Hassan Tower, the Mohamed V mausoleum, the medinas of Salé and Rabat, and further into the valley, the Chellah, a fortified medieval necropolis. Each one of these sites have become important tourist attractions. Yet, the estuary is not only attracting tourists but also real estate investors. A whole new urban center is arising on the shore of Salé right across the casbah with 1,700 new residential units, a new marina, luxury hotels, retail facilities, bars and restaurants. La Marina Morocco, as it is called by its Abu Dhabi developer Eagle Hills, has to become a new luxury hub for living, leisure and entertainment. But that’s not all. A new bridge (Pont Moulay Hassan) now connects the two riverbanks. Together with two tramlines, a tunnel underneath the casbah and a brand-new belt highway further along the valley, these state-of-the-art infrastructures have to improve the mobility between two cities plagued by traffic congestion.

The most remarkable feature of the valley’s transformation so far is situated right behind the bridge. The ongoing construction of the Grand Theatre, designed by the late ‘starchitect’ Zaha Hadid, will become Rabat’s newest landmark. The fluid sculpture form of the theatre, inspired by the movement of the river itself, symbolizes the capital’s own aspiration for a “Guggenheim effect” (Rodríguez, Martínez, and Guenaga 2001). It is the cornerstone of an urban renaissance that has to turn a dull administrative city into a top-notch cultural destination. For now at least.

Only a few hundred meters from the construction site of the theater, billboards are announcing already another landmark endeavor: The Mohamed VI Tower, a 55-storey skyscraper. The deal to build Africa's tallest tower, which was announced in the summer of 2017, is a multimillion dollar partnership between the Moroccan real estate company Travaux Généraux de Construction de Casablanca (TGCC), headed by Othman Benjelloun, one of Morocco's most influential entrepreneurs, and China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC).

These future material icons of showcase urbanization are part of a long-term project that stretches fifteen kilometers inland along the Bouregreg river just until the barrage Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah. Launched in January 2006, the Bouregreg project encompasses a territory of six thousand hectares and will be developed in six different phases. The first two phases are currently underway.

The developments in the Bouregreg valley are a salient example of a broader process of economic and political transformation that embodies the reign of King Mohammed VI ever since his accession to the throne in 1999. Under his impulse, the launch of urban megaprojects and large-scale infrastructural works came to characterize a new development strategy, an "urbanism of projects" (Cattedra) or a "new culture of projects" (Barthel and Zaki), trying to link networks of investment capital in Europe, Africa and the Middle East and if possible Asia and the United States. This new development strategy should also be situated within larger entrepreneurial shifts in which megaprojects become the cornerstones of the current spatial re-organization of globalization (Brenner and Theodore; Harvey; Massey). Megaprojects are considered key to the commercial redevelopment of urban centers and the promotion of the city's 'unique selling position', both in the Global North (Flyvbjerg) as well as in the Global South (Ren and Weinstein) and the Arab region more specifically (Wippel et al.).

What matters here are not just the material changes in the urban landscape, but how these projects reveal new political practices and agency that materialize in the interplay between global capitalism and local places such as Rabat and Salé. Cities like Rabat, but also Casablanca and Tangiers, became the privileged vehicles of economic regeneration and capital accumulation as well as testing grounds for the re-invention of (authoritarian) politics and urban government (Bogaert 2018). In other words, the transformation of the Moroccan city tells a broader story about the transformation of politics, the state, and the economy within a context of globalization and neoliberal reform.

In this article, we question some of the promises and logics behind Morocco's urbanism of projects. On the one hand, they can be a site for the production of new political imaginaries,

future aspirations and expectations of social justice (Strava). But more often they produce new ways of social exclusion and feelings of marginalization. To do so, we first analyze the new institutional and governmental arrangements that emerged within the context of the Bouregreg project. Secondly, we want to draw attention to the expectations and concerns of some of the people who live in the valley and reflect on their relation with the project.

This article is based on joint ethnographic fieldwork and expert interviews with officials and other stakeholders conducted in April and July 2018. It also draws on findings from earlier fieldwork between 2007-2013 (Koenraad), 2014 and 2018 (Maryame).

### *New state spaces and ad hoc urbanism in the Moroccan capital*

To realize the Bouregreg megaproject, the Moroccan authorities created a new institutional model of state power: the Agency for the Development of the Bouregreg Valley. Law 16-04, which created the agency in November 2005, gives the agency exclusive authority over the project within its legally defined territorial boundaries (the six thousand hectares). Within that territory, local governmental entities such as the prefectures, the local municipalities and the Rabat-Salé Urban Planning Agency are effectively side-lined. The Bouregreg Agency is authorized to develop zoning plans, organize public inquiries, provide public infrastructure, allocate land for construction, deliver construction permits, regulate all deeds of sale and expropriate private land deemed necessary for the advancement of the project. All state-owned land was transferred to the agency free of charge. The agency functions as a quasi-state within a state.

This particular form of neoliberal statecraft is a salient example of what Neil Brenner has termed “new state spaces” (Brenner 2004). It implies not just a rescaling of state power (i.e. from the national to the urban scale), but a whole new assemblage of power by which foreign actors are integrated in the decision-making process. The Bouregreg agency operates as an intermediary between different investors from around the world and the Moroccan context. It not only attracts investors such as the Abu Dhabi investor Eagle Hills (first phase) or the sovereign wealth fund Wessal Capital (second phase), it also gives them decision-making power. As a semi-public entity, the Bouregreg Agency is allowed by law 16-04 to set up private enterprises and create joint ventures with private investors. Not surprisingly, plans, goals and strategies are adapted regularly within the institutional and legal framework of the project in order to better serve the interests of foreign investors.

Three examples can be given. First of all, before the official launch of the project, a Royal Commission assembling all kinds of experts and policy-makers, drafted a 165-page plan that can still be consulted on the official website of the Bouregreg project. Especially the first phase, now La Marina Morocco, was worked out in detail and the Commission anticipated the construction of a central, open and green public space in front of the medina of Salé where inhabitants of both cities could come together, stroll and picnic. It was important, the commission stated, that the new public place would be “planned with less density than the shore of Rabat to allow a larger variety of uses by the population of the city” (Royal Commission 2003, 40). Eventually, as an official of the Bouregreg Agency admitted, the whole plan was revised and the building site was densified in order to increase the profitability of the private investor (interview, September 2013). Where they once planned a public park, there is now a gated community.

Another example can be given with regard to the second phase. Originally, this phase was going to be developed by Sama Dubai before it defaulted in 2008 due to the financial crisis. Sama Dubai had planned a luxurious residential islet that was baptized Amwaj (the waves), subdivided – Venetian style – in smaller waterways. Residents would be able to reach their villas by boat. The Amwaj-story was eventually replaced by the Grand Theatre, financed by public money, while a new investment fund was contracted (Wessal Capital) to urbanize the zone around it. What is striking, however, is that several officials of the Agency confirmed us that the partnership with Sama Dubai was a mistake from the very beginning. They all agreed that Morocco did not need megalomaniac Dubai-style residential projects like The World or Palm Jumeirah. Some of them were relieved that it had failed. When we then asked one of them why the agency had accepted the deal with Sama Dubai in the first place, despite the seemingly general consensus that it was a bad idea, he answered: “well, what do you do when somebody comes with a check of two billion dirhams<sup>1b</sup>” (interview, April 2018).

A final example relates to the later phases which are still in their conceptual phase. Again, according to officials from the Agency, several factors (i.e. considerable delays in the first two phases, the saturation of the real estate market and the opposition of small landowners) played a role in the decision – for now – to plan the urbanization of these phases in the long term, in partnership with local inhabitants and with less density than originally planned. Nevertheless, a lot can change in the future, as an official stated: “In ten years we can always revise the urban development plan (*plan d’aménagement*). For example, because of the demographic pressure.

For now, it's the current plan that works for us. But you never know whether there will be new opportunities. It's the market actually who dictates the planning" (interview April 2018).

Urban planning and government are thus subject to fluctuations in the market and become more accountable to investors than to the citizens who actually live in the zones under development. Even if local governments in a country such as Morocco were to become more democratically accountable, democracy itself has been short-circuited by institutional arrangements like the Bouregreg agency. Authority in the Bouregreg valley, is thus the result of a particular relational configuration between local, regional and international actors (Allen). This does not mean that power and authority are slipping away from the traditional power center in Morocco (the regime, the monarchy, ...), only that central state power has been reconfigured and reassembled so that it is now entangled, negotiated and shared with other forces (e.g. Gulf capital) to pursue common interests within a rapidly changing global context.

As a result, urban planning in the valley seems to evolve quite *ad hoc*, answering to specific – but also contingent – market problems and solutions. In an interview with an official of the Urban Agency of Rabat-Salé, which is responsible for the coordination of urban planning in the whole metropolitan area, he lamented: “the Wilaya [the governorate] does it best to assure a coherent vision [on urban planning], but how do we reconcile this with the Bouregreg Agency which seems to escape from everything. It's really another country” (Interview, July 2018).

The Bouregreg Agency is not an exception. For each specific development problem there seems to be the need for the creation of a specific governmental entity or new state space. Over the past two decades we have seen the establishment of several similar kind of state agencies within the domains of urban planning, industrialization, tourism, etc. Some examples are the Marchica Med Agency in Nador, Casablanca Finance City Authority and Tanger Med Special Authority. There seems to be a general strategy to take all large development projects and government dossiers out of the hands of conventional and elected state government institutions in favor of an “agencification” of public policy (García and Collado ) and the increasing dominance of “technocratic structures” loyal to the palace (Hibou and Tozy 2002). This has been a trend not only in Morocco but in many different urban development settings all around the world (Ong 2006). Moreover, urban megaprojects such as in the Bouregreg valley also symbolize a fundamental shift in Moroccan authoritarianism. Whereas Hassan II ruled with an iron hand during the so-called “years of lead” (*les années de plomb*), Mohammed VI seems to rule via holdings, funds, and specialized state agencies (Bogaert ).

*Stuck in between different 'times': life in a valley under construction*

The following analysis of our field notes does not strive to be exhaustive, only to point out some aspects of the social impact of the project that are less obvious at first sight. While others have focused on those populations that were directly affected by La Marina Morocco, the first and most advanced phase of the Bouregreg project (Mouloudi ), we want to draw attention to those people living in areas which are not yet under development. More specifically, we focused on the small farmers, gardeners and other inhabitants of Oulja, a large agricultural plain and wetland integrated in phase three of the project and the people of Sidi Hmida in the district of Hssain located in phase five. Our goal is not to map the conditions of the entire population affected by the project, only to reframe the agency's own promoted values of citizenship (*citoyenneté*) and sustainable city-planning.

It's important to know that between the launch of the project in 2005 and the publication in 2009 of the *Plan d'Aménagement Spécial* (PAS), a complete zoning plan for the valley, the Bouregreg Agency suspended all private (land)transactions with the exception of those done by the agency itself. After the publication of the PAS, no land can be sold or bought without the permission of the agency. Legally, the agency also has the authority to expropriate any private land within its designated zone at a fixed price determined by the value of the land in 2005. This creates a particular situation. Those who still own private land in the valley cannot really bring that land into the market. Land prices are de facto locked by the Bouregreg Agency.

From the point of view of the agency this is explained as follows: as a financially autonomous semi-public entity, the agency's business model depends on revenue generated in the first phase to finance the second phase, and so on. In other words, the Bouregreg Agency depends on the surplus value created on public land and/or expropriated land in one phase in order to advance to the next phase. This revenue model is by its very character a gradual process. One cannot market all available land at once because that would create oversupply and possibly a rapid fall in land prices.

From the point of view of the inhabitants who live in those areas still 'under development' this produces an uncomfortable standstill. While the direct impact of the megaproject is clear-cut and visible for those people who live in the surroundings of La Marina Morocco (e.g. through expropriation, gentrification, the privatization of public space, etc.), it is much less so for those who live deeper in the valley. This doesn't mean, however, that they are less affected. All they seem to be able to do is wait for the project to arrive. In the meantime they cannot really get on

with their lives. Most of them don't know what will be in store for them. Many people we talked to, especially in Oulja, told us that they were completely left in limbo.

During one of our visits to Oulja, we met with the owner of a small tree nursery. He took over the business from his parents and had lived in the valley all his life. But since the launch of the project, he doesn't really know what the future will bring. Would he be able to stay? Will his tree nursery have a place in the project? Or will he have to leave? "I cannot even plant extra trees to expand my business because the agency wouldn't allow it and I wouldn't be compensated for the extra trees if the moment comes that they expropriate me". The price he would get for his land was fixed at 250 Moroccan dirhams per square meter. Less than 25 euros. "With that kind of money you cannot find something suitable in the city. Besides, I don't want to live in the city. I want to keep my tree nursery. But where else will I find a plot of land that close to the city and this fertile? Not for the price we get. There are no other lands in the proximity of Rabat where you can dig up water at five or six meters" (field notes, July 2018).

But not everybody living in that area is necessarily a private landowner. We also met with a family of peasants who cultivated Habous land in the valley.<sup>1</sup> They were there already for several generations. The head of the family had worked the land all his life and now he shared it with his seven sons and their families. "This is *Ard Jdidna* [land of our grandparents] and we don't want to leave this place" (field notes, July 2018). However, all Habous land was taken over by the Bouregreg Agency and the family did not know what was going to happen to them once their land would be subject to development. They told us that the Ministry of Habous even stopped accepting the families' rent for the usufruct of the land. Their fate was now in the hands of the agency, so they felt.

Power inequality and social hierarchy can be understood here through the different use and experience of time. The Bouregreg Agency has time. Time which many of the inhabitants of the valley do not necessarily have. As such, the agency and the inhabitants of the valley are operating in a kind of different time-frame, with one side dictating a particular time-schedule conform its own interests while the other side tries to cope with its effects of uncertainty and distorted temporality. It's logical that a megaproject of the magnitude of the one in the Bouregreg valley unfolds over a time-span of multiple years, even several decades. Moreover, given its revenue model, it is obliged to take the time necessary to anticipate (better) market opportunities and developments. In the meantime, the inhabitants might be – quite literally –

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<sup>1</sup> Habous is an Islamic legal institution of religious mortmain property. The property is administered by the Ministry of Habous. Usufruct can be granted to farmers, for example, often in return for a form of rent.



stuck there for another five years, maybe ten, who knows even fifteen before the project reaches their spot.

People like the owner of the tree nursery or the small peasant family feel like they cannot go somewhere else, but at the same time, they also feel they cannot really built a life in the valley either. On every issue, like for example building permits, renovation permits, electrification, access to water or sewerage, they have to deal with the agency. Actually, many inhabitants in that area lack access to drinking water and do not have connection to the sewage system. But given their ‘temporary status’ within the timeframe of the project, the agency does not seem to be willing to provide these people with what they need. Many inhabitants feel powerless. “When we address the *caid* or the *mqaddem* [the local authorities]<sup>2</sup>, they all say that we have to talk to the agency”, another one of our interlocutors told us. Many feel that there is not much they can do. “Fighting against the agency is like fighting the ocean. You cannot stop it” (field notes, July 2018).

Not everybody in the valley, however, resigns oneself to the omnipotence of the Bouregreg Agency. In Rabat and especially Salé, associations such as Sala Al Mustaqbal, Ribat Al Fath and Association Bouregreg have tried to negotiate with or put pressure on the Bouregreg Agency, albeit not always successful (for more details see Mouloudi ). This fits within a longer history a substantial growth of associational life in Morocco, more particularly in cities, and especially since the 1990s when the Monarchy allowed more political space for maneuvering and tried to reconfigure its relations with a growing urban middle class (Abouhani ).

Also in Sidi Hmida (integrated in phase five), a neighborhood which experienced an influx of urban middle class and even upper class residents in recent decades (Amarouche ), inhabitants have organized themselves to influence the direction of the project. At first sight, social class status and personal networks seem to make a difference here in comparison with the inhabitants of Oulja.<sup>3</sup> When people in Sidi Hmida heard about possible scenarios for their zone, some of them, mainly coming from a middle class background, founded an association. One of the members of the association, who used to work for the Ministry of Agriculture and now owns two tree nurseries, stated that they actually managed to convince the Bouregreg Agency to redraft a new masterplan for their specific zone. “It was thanks to this association which was founded mainly by public executives, physicians and army colonels that we managed to put

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<sup>2</sup> The *caid* and the *mqaddem* are representatives of the Ministry of Interior at the city and local neighborhood level. They are part of a parallel power structure in Morocco, loyal to the Monarchy, which exists alongside elected government bodies.

<sup>3</sup> This is our hypothesis based on preliminary fieldwork. More empirical work needs to be done.

pressure on the agency to change her plans” (Interview, July 2018). Moreover, despite the fact that his personal situation was in many ways similar to some of the people we met in Oulja (he could not sell his property and the agency could still always expropriate him), he seemed much less pessimistic about the future. “It’s true we are governed by the agency, the municipality has no business here. But that doesn’t bother me. The agency is better organized. It’s easier to talk to them than with a bureaucratic state apparatus (...). The agency exists of serious people. Much more competent than those at the municipality.”

### *Time, space and the broader political significance of urban planning in Morocco*

Urban planning can serve as an interesting lens to understand changing relations between citizens and political authority, amongst others through the production of different temporalities. A megaproject such as the Bouregreg project produces a particular temporality influenced by schedules, plans, market demand, delays, etc. and by expectations of (future) profit and value. But due to the particular legal situation created by law 16-04 and the specific characteristics of ad hoc urbanism, the project enforces a quite different experience of time upon the actual inhabitants of the valley who are, to be clear, not considered as part of the project. Their time-experience is reduced to a condition of waiting (for the advancement or delay of the project), often with limited possibilities for a way out. If the whole purpose of the Bouregreg project is to create a form of ‘progress’ – based on promises of economic growth, better infrastructure, environmental protection, even the protection of historic heritage – the particular situation in which the inhabitants of the valley are kept, actually precludes their very efforts to make progress in life.

This is closely related to a broader political significance. The changing nature of contemporary Moroccan politics is hidden within the relational complexes of power that produce urban megaprojects such as the Bouregreg project. In the process, the city itself is turned into a privileged vehicle for capital accumulation and speculation, while at the same time, decision-making processes are breaking loose from more conventional political entities. The process of agencification in Morocco entails that decisions about the future city, and hence, also about the future of millions of urban citizens, has been increasingly concentrated in exceptional governmental zones like the Bouregreg valley and entrusted to new state agencies where that power is shared with and made accountable to global capital, resulting in decisions made ‘elsewhere’, outside the scope and boundaries of the ‘national state’ or ‘the regime’.

The Bouregreg agency, as a new state space, concerns a deeply political move to dispossess both public and private land and bring the valley into the global circulation of capital in a way private investors could never do on their own. Massive public funds are mobilized for infrastructural improvements (the bridge, the tunnel, the tramway, etc.) and for the creation of new landmarks (the Grand Theatre), most likely to improve primarily the attractiveness and profitability of urban land and real estate projects.

Yet, will these efforts also benefit the majority of citizens in Rabat, Salé and its outskirts? The truth is that the Bouregreg megaproject is not just a wasteland being renovated, developed and/or preserved, as it is often presented in official communication. It represents the creation of a globalized space, one that opens up and reaches out to the rest of the world, i.e. to foreign investors, tourists and cosmopolitan consumers, while at the same time drawing new social, economic, political and spatial boundaries between those who can afford it and those who cannot.

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<sup>i</sup> One Euro corresponds to approximately 10 to 11 Moroccan dirhams.