

Camouflaged Power: Representation, Tradition, and Colonial Urbanism in Algiers and CapHaïtien

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Abstract

"Tradition" in colonial and postcolonial urbanism emerges less as a stable inheritance than as a representational achievement: a set of plans, drawings, captions, itineraries, and heritage scripts that make certain spaces appear legible, picturesque, and therefore governable.¹ By comparing French Algiers and northern Haiti, this paper treats representation as an architectural practice rather than a secondary interpretation added after the fact. In Algiers, mapping and preservation rhetoric helped transform the Casbah into a curated object whose authenticity was defined through visibility and controllability. In northern Haiti, plans and images first produced Cap-Français as a rational colonial grid, later translated revolutionary rupture into an intelligible spectacle, and eventually stabilized post-independence monuments as a global heritage display. Read together, these cases show how representational order can camouflage violence: domination comes to appear as stewardship when "tradition" is framed as something only colonial or heritage institutions can preserve. Just as importantly, these images did not merely circulate ideas about place; they shaped interventions on the ground, influencing what was demolished, restored, monumentalized, or protected, and teaching viewers to understand urban space through carefully staged relations between history, authority, and visual order.

1 - Timothy Mitchell, "Egypt at the Exhibition," in *Colonising Egypt*, new ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 8-10.

Introduction

The contemporary stakes are architectural. When students are asked to analyze a built project through drawings and diagrams, they inherit a long history in which representational media have shaped what authorities can do to buildings, streets, and inhabitants. This paper's thesis is that colonial power frequently camouflages itself through an ethics of "tradition": intervention is narrated as protection, cataloging as care, and tourism as education.² That camouflage

operates through recognizably architectural media—plans, photographs, postcards, inventories—whose authority often comes from their claim to neutrality. The paper therefore treats representation as a site of struggle over what can be seen, named, and acted upon.

To keep architecture central, the paper focuses on three representational techniques and their material consequences: mapping (plans and urban diagrams), mass images (postcards, engravings, and photographs), and heritage interpretation (committees, inventories, and

2 - Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1991), 74-80.

world-heritage language). The goal is an imaginative but disciplined reading that exposes how representational order becomes built into urban form, and how built form is used to teach viewers what counts as culture, modernity, and authority.

Methodologically, each case study is treated as an assemblage of artifacts rather than as a single “site.” The object is not only the Casbah, or SansSouci, but the chain of representational acts that surround them: a plan that inventories space; a postcard that publishes a canonical viewpoint; a guide or report that tells viewers what they are seeing; and a preservation program that translates that description into an intervention. Reading these artifacts together makes it possible to write an architectural history of “tradition” as something actively designed—drawn, captioned, and administered—rather than passively inherited.

Theoretical Frame

Timothy Mitchell’s analysis of the nineteenth-century “world-as-exhibition” supplies the paper’s core analytical lens. For Mitchell, the exhibition does not merely represent the world; it reorganizes experience so that representation appears to stand apart from an “external reality.” The result is that order feels like something seen—a neutral arrangement—rather than something made through coercion and contestation. This mechanism depends on enclosure, sequencing, and explanatory surfaces: maps, captions, panoramas, and curated paths that train viewers into a particular desire for legibility.³ Mitchell’s point matters for architecture because cities, like exhibitions, can be composed as pedagogical environments: streets and viewpoints teach what kind of order exists and who is entitled to manage it.

Gwendolyn Wright’s work on French colonial urbanism clarifies the colonial specificity of this representational logic. Wright identifies a recurring dilemma in French imperial governance: administrators sought to prove the superiority of French modernity while also claiming

to respect local societies. This did not produce a simple opposition between “modern” and “traditional.” Instead, it produced institutional practices that manufactured authenticity: selected “traditional” forms were codified and circulated in official drawings, in preservation campaigns, and in public buildings that staged respect for difference. In that process, “tradition” becomes an administrative category, a design problem, and a public performance, rather than a neutral cultural fact.⁴

Taken together, Mitchell and Wright allow the paper to treat colonial cities as curated experiences. The city becomes an outdoor exhibition: mapped into legible zones, framed by viewpoints, and narrated through images and texts that promise knowledge while managing political anxiety. The analytical task is therefore not to judge whether representations are accurate but to ask what political work they do: what they reveal, what they hide, and what kinds of spatial actions they authorize.

Case Study One: Algiers And The Representational Production Of The Casbah The French conquest of Algiers in 1830 turned an Ottoman port city into a colonial capital and a laboratory of military urbanism. Early mapping was foundational. The 1832 plan attributed to Pelet exemplifies how the Casbah was remade as a knowable object through abstracted surfaces: mosques, streets, and parcels become labeled elements. The city appears as a comprehensible diagram for administrators, engineers, and soldiers.⁵ In Mitchell’s terms, the plan “enframes” the city: it produces an image of order that stands in for the city’s lived complexity.

3 - Mitchell, “Egypt at the Exhibition,” 8-10.

4 - Wright, *Politics of Design*, 74-80.

5 - Wright, *Politics of Design*, 80-81, fig. 33.

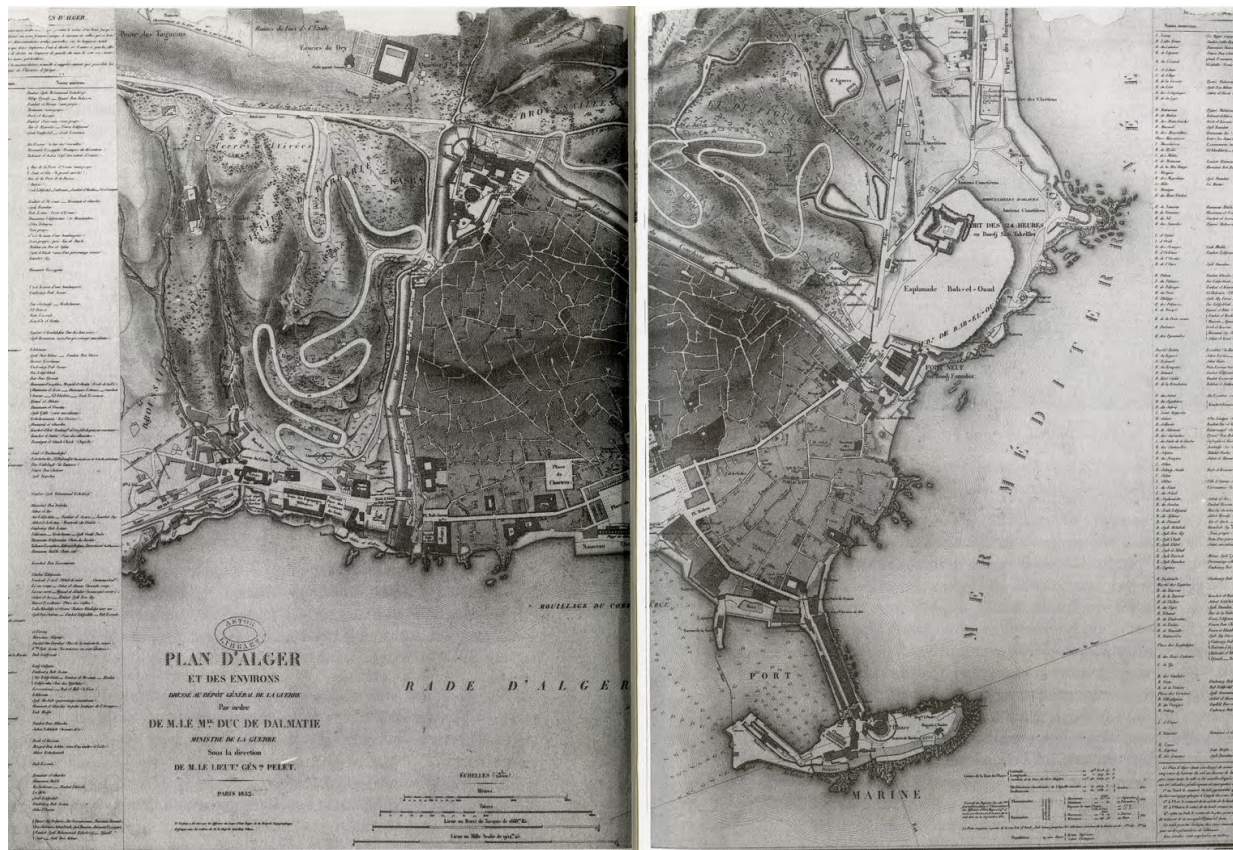


Fig.1 - Wright, Politics of Design, 80-81, fig. 33.

This mapping supported material transformations in the lower city and along the waterfront. The colonial seafront—boulevards, ports, and civic monuments—advertised French order, while the Casbah was cast as a residual zone: old, labyrinthine, and supposedly unhygienic. Yet the Casbah was not simply left behind. It was repositioned as a representational asset. Around 1900, photographs and postcards framed it as picturesque, an enclave of “native” life behind a Europeanized foreground. A postcard that pairs cathedral and Casbah compresses conquest into a single panorama, presenting the Christian monument and the “native” quarter as complementary attractions rather than antagonistic political orders.⁶

6 - “Algiers: The Cathedral and the Casbah,” postcard, Neurdein Frères, March 12, 1913, Cities and Sites Postcard Collection, Getty Research Institute, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gettyresearchinstitute/3362582721>

Just as importantly, the colonial “view” was not only visual but circulatory. By cutting streets and opening vistas, engineers restructured movement and perception at once. Straight alignments enabled access for soldiers and police, but they also produced staged viewpoints from the seafront up toward the Casbah’s slopes. Representation and circulation reinforced each other: the postcard teaches a vista that the boulevard makes possible, and the boulevard makes the vista seem inevitable. This matters because the colonial image was never detached from administration. The view was useful precisely because it translated political domination into spatial clarity. A street opening, a cleared edge, or a framed slope could be justified as hygiene, circulation, or improvement, while also making the Casbah available to surveillance and aesthetic consumption. In that sense, representation did not simply follow intervention; it prepared and legitimized it. The picturesque image of the Casbah depended on



Fig.2 - "Algiers: The Cathedral and the Casbah," postcard, Neurdein Frères, March 12, 1913, Cities and Sites Postcard Collection, Getty Research Institute, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gettyresearchinstitute/3362582721>

prior acts of demolition, alignment, and regulation, even as the final image concealed those acts behind the calm surface of an ordered colonial city.

The tension between destruction and preservation is explicit in the writings of Henri Klein, a journalist and preservation activist who helped promote the Comité du Vieil Alger. In 1910, Klein lamented that "our civilization" hurried to reduce the picturesque city to dust, recalling demolished quarters, overturned columns, faïences, and woodwork scattered on the ground. He names a specific episode: demolitions begun in 1891 that produced the rue Marengo.⁷ Yet he also described a program of rescue through representation: photographs and "views" would justify preservation; the committee would inventory and defend what could still be saved. Klein's preservation

rhetoric thus does not sit outside colonial power. It offers colonial culture a moral alibi: the same regime that destroys can present itself as caretaker.

Colonial codification also worked through style. In the early twentieth century, neoMoorish vocabularies—arches, domes, tilework, ornamental screens—were favored in certain public buildings. Scholarship on French North Africa describes how such vocabularies became quasi-official, associated with the administration of Governor General Jonnart and used to stage cultural difference as a state aesthetic.⁸ The effect is a familiar colonial gesture: the administration presents itself as respectful of tradition precisely when it defines what tradition looks like and where it belongs.

7 - Henri Klein, "Le Comité du Vieil Alger," *Les Feuilles d'El-Djezaïr* 1 (1910): 5-12, https://athar.persee.fr/doc/feldj_1112-0649_1910_num_1_1_859

8 - Seth Graebner, "Contains Preservatives: Architecture and Memory in Colonial Algiers," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 33, no. 2 (2007): 257-75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41299412>

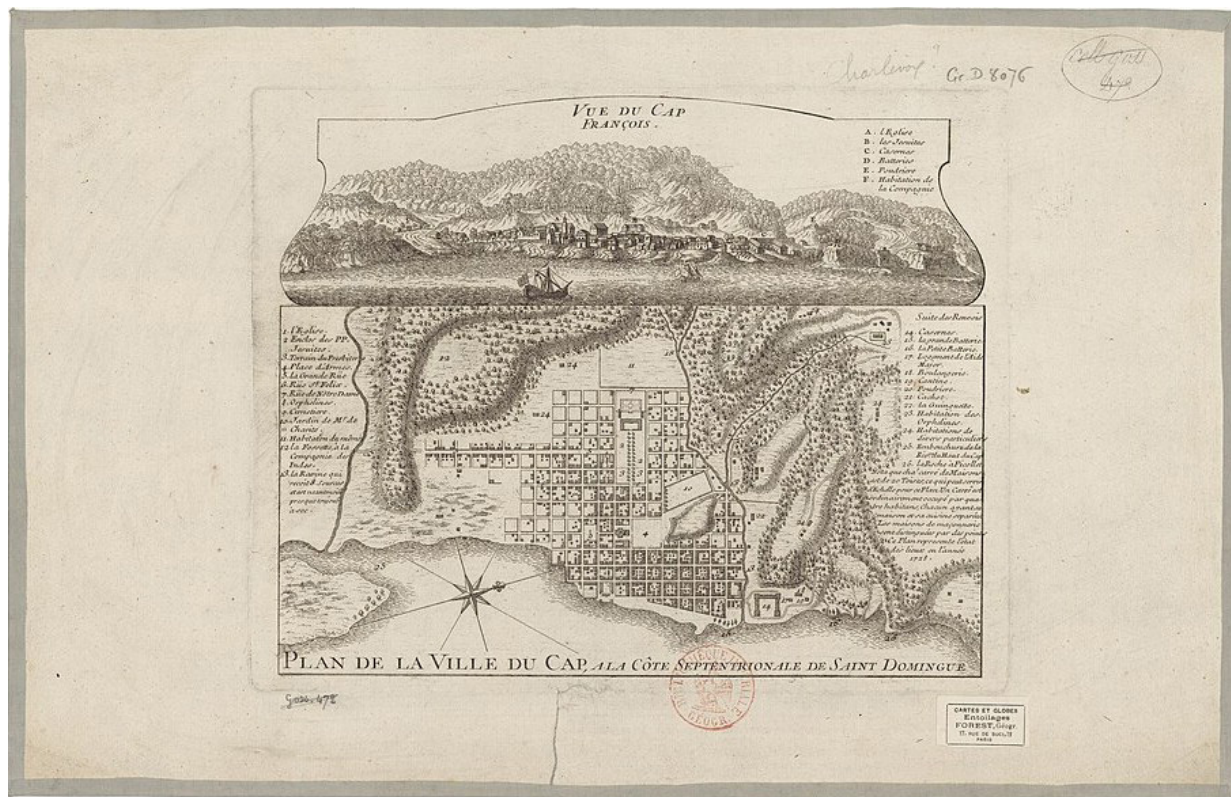


Fig.3 - "Plan de la ville du Cap, à la côte septentrionale de Saint-Domingue," 1728, digital image, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plan_de_la_ville_du_Cap,_%C3%A0_la_c%C3%B4te_septentrionale_de_Saint-Domingue_-_btv1b8458492.jpg

What matters for this analysis is not whether the Casbah was entirely demolished (it was not), but how it was made into an object of display. It became a bounded field—mapped, pictured, toured, and “saved”—whose value was increasingly defined by visibility to outsiders. Klein’s language is revealing here: old Algiers is cherished not only as a living city but as an “orientalism” that should be allowed to “smile” under a European sun.⁹ Tradition is trained to perform. The exhibitionary city thus appears: colonial modernity is staged on the waterfront; “tradition” is curated uphill.

Case Study Two: Caphaïtien, Sanssouci, And The Citadel As Devices Of Colonial And Postcolonial Display Northern Haiti offers a different genealogy of representational power, but it similarly moves through plans and viewing practices. As Cap Français expanded

in the eighteenth century, it was drawn as a rational port whose grid and monumental squares signaled order. A 1728 plan of the city and its defenses visualizes a legible urban form set against mountainous terrain, implying that civilization is a matter of geometry and alignment.¹⁰ Curatorial description from the John Carter Brown Library highlights how the sharply delineated grid, formal squares, and “Paris-like” trappings of Place Royale are emphasized as key features of the city’s visual identity. Legibility here is not only informational; it is ideological. The plan makes plantation-capital urbanism look like rational improvement.¹⁰

10 - “Plan de la ville du Cap, à la côte septentrionale de Saint-Domingue,” 1728, digital image, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plan_de_la_ville_du_Cap,_%C3%A0_la_c%C3%B4te_septentrionale_de_Saint-Domingue_-_btv1b8458492.jpg

9 - Klein, “Le Comité du Vieil Alger,” 5-12.

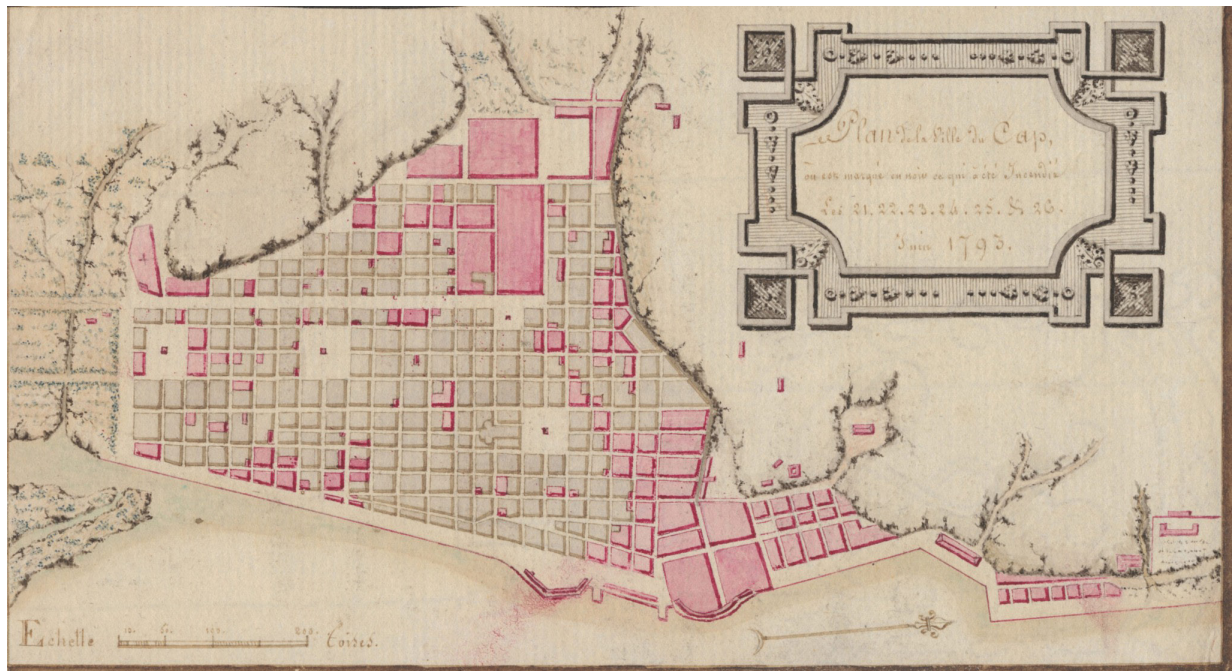


Fig. 4 - Clements Library, "Pair 7: The Grid, Large and Small," University of Michigan, accessed April 5, 2026, <https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/centennial-exhibit/centennial-pair-7/>

The Haitian Revolution shattered this colonial order, and representations of destruction became politically charged. Images related to the 1793 burning of Cap Français—engraved night scenes of flames across the harbor, and maps marking the city “in fire” for overseas viewers—turned the gridded colonial city into a didactic spectacle in the Atlantic world.¹¹ Representation works in two directions at once: the grid’s legibility makes catastrophe readable, and catastrophe retroactively reveals the violence hidden inside the apparent calm of colonial order.

After independence, representation changed authorship and purpose. Architecture was mobilized not to naturalize imperial governance but to deter its return. The Citadelle Laferrière was conceived as both military

installation and political manifesto, sited high in the interior as part of a strategy of refusal aimed at a feared French reconquest. UNESCO’s official description emphasizes this inversion, noting that the summit strategy differs from coastal defense inherited from French colonization, and it describes the Citadelle’s bastioned form, artillery capacity, and elaborate cistern systems designed for endurance.¹² In other words, the fortress is designed to command the landscape as both military infrastructure and political statement.

At the same time, SansSouci staged sovereignty through palace and administration.

UNESCO’s narrative describes an ensemble of administrative buildings (state council, ministries, mint, library), workshops, barracks, and gardens, and it notes looting after Christophe’s death and damage in the 1842

11 - Clements Library, “Pair 7: The Grid, Large and Small,” University of Michigan, accessed April 5, 2026, <https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/centennial-exhibit/centennial-pair-7/>

12 - UNESCO, “Periodic Reporting, Cycle 3, Section II,” <https://whc.unesco.org/document/216286>

earthquake.¹³The same UNESCO text emphasizes how the palace's later interpretive aura is produced through mixed references—Potsdam, Vienna, Versailles—turning the site into a kind of composite image of statehood.¹⁴ That mixture matters for representation: sovereignty is narrated as both an appropriation and a reworking of European imperial aesthetics.

But the archive of design decisions is fragmentary. Peter Minosh argues that the lack of construction records means that the Citadelle and SansSouci have often been understood through “mythic traces”: travel narratives, legends, and later nationalist and heritage scripts that fill archival absences with stories.¹⁵

This gap is not a problem to solve only through more facts; it is analytically revealing. It shows how authority over Haitian architecture has repeatedly been exercised through narrative and image when documentary archives are sparse. This dynamic is especially important in the Haitian case, where authority over architecture has often been exercised through narrative and image when documentary archives are sparse. Representation does not only preserve meaning here; it frequently substitutes for missing institutional records. When archives are fragmentary, later writers, heritage agencies, and foreign observers gain disproportionate power in defining what the buildings are understood to signify. Sans-Souci and the Citadelle therefore survive not only as masonry, ruins, or monumental forms, but also as interpretive constructions shaped by repetition. What circulates is not just the site itself, but a sequence of descriptions that stabilizes it as palace, fortress, ruin, symbol, and destination. The built work and the narrative frame become inseparable.

13 - UNESCO, “Periodic Reporting, Cycle 3, Section II.”

14 - *ibid.*

15 - Peter Minosh, “Architectural Remnants and Mythical Traces of the Haitian Revolution: Henri Christophe's Citadelle Laferrière and Sans-Souci Palace,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 77, no. 4 (2018): 410-27.

A key early representational act is Charles Mackenzie's 1830 travel account, which circulated engravings of SansSouci for foreign readers. Such engravings participate in Mitchell's exhibitionary logic: they render a distant political experiment into a readable scene, promising comprehension through a framed view.¹⁶

Yet their political meaning is unstable. The same representational form that once exoticized colonial “native quarters” can also translate postrevolutionary Haiti into a European visual language, returning a Black sovereignty project to the frame of foreign spectatorship. Twentiethcentury heritage institutions intensified this global display. UNESCO's inscription of the National History Park—Citadelle, SansSouci, Ramiers frames the monuments as “universal symbols of liberty,” emphasizing their status as monuments built by formerly enslaved people who gained freedom.¹⁷

That universalization can counter colonial silences, but it can also compress local histories of labor coercion, authoritarian governance, and contemporary inequality into a single uplifting script. Recent scholarship on Milot emphasizes precisely these tensions between official patrimony narratives and vernacular concerns, especially as tourism and instability shape daily life “in the shadow” of the monuments.¹⁸

16 - Charles Mackenzie, *Notes on Haiti: Made During a Residence in That Republic*, vol. 1 (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1830).<https://archive.org/details/notesonhaitimade01mack>

17 - UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “National History Park - Citadel, Sans Souci, Ramiers,” <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/180/>

18 - Pamela L. Geller and Louis Herns Marcelin, “In the Shadow of the Citadel: Haitian National Patrimony and Vernacular Concerns,” *Journal of Social Archaeology* 20, no. 1 (2020): 49-73.

Comparative Analysis: Camouflaged Power Across Colonial And Postcolonial Regimes

Placing Algiers beside northern Haiti clarifies that representation is not an afterthought to power; it is one of power's architectural media. In both contexts, the plan is a primary instrument. Pelet's 1832 mapping renders the Casbah as a diagram of governable elements; the 1728 Cap Français plan renders the plantation-capital port as a legible grid. Both produce what Mitchell would call a "view from nowhere," where intervention appears technical rather than political.¹⁹ These drawings distribute attention by selecting what must be named and what can remain background.

Mass images extend this work by producing distance. The 1913 postcard that pairs cathedral and Casbah normalizes the split colonial city as a harmonious panorama. The 1830 engraving of SansSouci stabilizes postrevolutionary Haiti as a readable scene for foreign spectators. In both cases, spectatorship is organized as consumption: difference is something to look at, not something to live through.²⁰ The graphic surface substitutes for political encounter, converting conflict into a view.

Heritage discourse is the most explicit camouflage. In Algiers, preservation rhetoric transforms colonial destruction into a moral narrative of rescue, enabling colonial elites to appear as stewards while benefiting from spatial reordering. In Haiti, UNESCO's liberty narrative transforms an architecture born from fear of recolonization into a universal emblem, sometimes compressing violence and labor into an abstract celebration.²¹ Across both cases, "tradition" functions as a screen. In Algiers, it is the curated Casbah: protected as image while transformed in practice. In Haiti, it

becomes the monumental script of revolutionary liberty: powerful, but vulnerable to being treated as a timeless moral display rather than a living and contested social landscape.

The comparison also reveals an asymmetry. In Algiers, codified tradition primarily served the colonial state, even when articulated through preservationist language. In Haiti, monumental representation initially served a project of Black sovereignty, even if sovereignty was unevenly distributed and enforced. Later, global heritage regimes can reframe that sovereignty within an international system of value that risks reproducing Eurocentric modes of display. Put differently, colonial tradition often masks domination; postcolonial tradition can be a weapon against domination, but it can also be disciplined by global interpretive frameworks.

For architectural research, the implication is methodological. To draw these sites today is to enter the history of their enframing. Plans and diagrams can reproduce the colonial desire for legibility, but they can also expose it by treating representation as contested ground: mapping absences, naming the labor and violence that plans omit, and juxtaposing official heritage scripts with vernacular narratives. The question, then, is not whether to represent, but how to represent without repeating the camouflage. This is also why the comparison between Algiers and northern Haiti is methodologically useful. It shows that representation cannot be reduced to a colonial instrument alone, because it can also serve projects of self-fashioning, survival, and postcolonial memory. At the same time, the comparison shows that even emancipatory architectures remain vulnerable once they enter broader regimes of display, tourism, and heritage management. The issue is not simply who produces the image, but how the image organizes authority afterward. Representation continues to matter because it shapes which histories become visible, which violences recede into background, and which futures a site is allowed to imagine.

19 - Mitchell, "Egypt at the Exhibition," 8-10.

20 - Ibid.

21 - Klein, "Le Comité du Vieil Alger," 5-12; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "National History Park - Citadel, Sans Souci, Ramiers," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/180/>

Conclusion

Representation is a built politics. The Algiers case shows how mapping, photography, and preservation discourse can render colonial intervention as cultural care, camouflaging expropriation and spatial control. The Haitian case shows how architecture and its images can also be instruments of anticolonial self-fashioning, while remaining vulnerable to exoticizing narratives and standardized heritage framings. Using Mitchell, these processes can be read as techniques of enframing: plans, postcards, and heritage texts are not neutral windows on reality; they are apparatuses that make certain futures possible. The paper's contemporary claim is that architects should not only produce new representations, but also make visible the representational regimes they inherit—drawing not just buildings, but the procedures through which buildings become seen, said, and done.

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