

The Industrial Heritage of Casablanca: Historical Development, Urban Transformations, and Preservation Challenges

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Abstract

Casablanca's industrial heritage, once the driving force of Morocco's modernization, has been profoundly transformed by urban expansion and shifting economic priorities. Iconic sites such as the Lafarge Cement Plant in Roches Noires, the Bata Shoe Factory, the Lincoln Hotel (Immeuble Bessonneau), and the Cinema Vox illustrate a broader trend of demolition, abandonment, or partial preservation. While some façades, like those of the Lincoln Hotel, have been granted heritage status, many industrial landmarks have disappeared, erasing material traces of the city's working class memory. These trajectories reveal a central tension between rapid urban development and the preservation of cultural identity, underscoring the urgent need for integrated strategies that combine heritage conservation, adaptive reuse, and sustainable urban planning.

Résumé :

Le patrimoine industriel de Casablanca, jadis moteur de la modernisation du Maroc, a été profondément bouleversé par l'expansion urbaine et l'évolution des priorités économiques. Des sites emblématiques tels que l'usine Lafarge de Roches Noires, l'usine Bata, l'Hôtel Lincoln (immeuble Bessonneau) et le Cinéma Vox illustrent une tendance générale de démolition, d'abandon ou de sauvegarde partielle. Si certaines façades, comme celles de l'Hôtel Lincoln, ont obtenu un statut patrimonial, de nombreux repères industriels ont disparu, effaçant une partie de la mémoire ouvrière de la ville. Ces trajectoires mettent en évidence la tension entre développement urbain rapide et préservation de l'identité culturelle, soulignant l'urgence de stratégies intégrées alliant conservation patrimoniale, réutilisation adaptative et planification urbaine durable.

Keywords: Industrial Heritage, Casablanca, Factories, Demolition, Neglect, Memory, Preservation, Urban Transformation, Adaptive Reuse, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

Casablanca, Morocco's economic capital, has long been recognized as the country's primary industrial hub. Since the early twentieth century, the city has attracted major industries in textiles, food processing¹, cement, and energy, largely due to its strategic coastal position and the development of its port. This industrial growth not only shaped the city's economy but also left behind a distinctive architectural and cultural legacy that continues to

define Casablanca's urban identity [1].

Yet, this industrial heritage is increasingly endangered. Rapid urban expansion, speculative real estate development, and the relocation of industries to suburban or offshore zones have resulted in the abandonment, transformation, or even demolition of historically significant industrial sites. As a result, a crucial question emerges: **how can Casablanca's industrial heritage be preserved amid**

rapid urban transformation?

To address this question, the article adopts a dual methodology. First, it provides a **historical review** of Casablanca's industrial development, highlighting the major phases of growth and decline. Second, it presents a **case study** of the Old Slaughterhouses of Casablanca, a site that illustrates both the challenges of heritage preservation and the potential for adaptive reuse through cultural revitalization. By combining historical analysis with a concrete example, this approach seeks to shed light on the broader issue of industrial heritage preservation in a rapidly changing urban environment.

2. Casablanca's Industrial Development: A Historical Perspective

The industrial trajectory of Casablanca is inseparable from the city's transformation into Morocco's economic capital. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the expansion of the **port of Casablanca (1907–1912)** provided the necessary infrastructure for large-scale trade and the inflow of foreign investment [2]. This infrastructure laid the foundation for the establishment of agro-industries (such

as flour mills, oil processing, and food canning) and later **textile production** and **cement manufacturing**, which became strategic pillars of Morocco's modernization. From the 1920s onward, Casablanca witnessed the growth of specialized **industrial neighborhoods**. **Roches Noires**, located near the port, hosted warehouses, energy facilities, and textile workshops.

By mid-century, **Aïn Sebaâ** and **Sidi Bernoussi** emerged as major industrial hubs, accommodating heavy industries, chemical plants, and large factories like COSUMAR (sugar), Lesieur (oils), and Lafarge (cement). These zones were directly connected to rail and maritime routes, reinforcing Casablanca's position as a regional manufacturing powerhouse. The social impact of this industrialization was profound. Thousands of rural migrants were drawn to Casablanca in search of employment, contributing to the city's explosive demographic growth [3]. The emergence of **workers' housing estates**, the rise of a new working-class identity, and the spread of trade unions reshaped the social fabric of the metropolis. However, industrialization also generated challenges², including overcrowding, the proliferation of informal settlements, and increased social tensions [7].

Period	Key Industrial Developments	Social and Urban Impact
1910s–1920s	'Expansion of the Port of Casablanca (1907–1912). 'Emergence of agro-industries: flour mills, oil refineries, canning factories. 'Early textile workshops established near Roches Noires.	' Beginning of rural migration toward the city. ' Creation of first workers' housing estates. ' Casablanca positioned as Morocco's industrial capital.
1930s–1940s	'Growth of heavy industries (cement, energy, metallurgy). 'Establishment of Lafarge cement plant. 'Expansion of textiles and food industries.	' Strong demographic growth linked to industrial jobs. ' Development of Roches Noires as a strategic industrial hub. ' Increased urban density around the port.
1950s	'Industrial diversification: chemicals, mechanical industries, sugar refining (COSUMAR). 'Rise of large-scale factories in Aïn Sebaâ.	' Acceleration of rural migration. ' Birth of trade unions and workers' movements. ' Expansion of social housing for workers.
1960s	' Growth of Sidi Bernoussi industrial zone. ' Expansion of petrochemicals, metallurgy, and textile export industries. ' Consolidation of multinational presence (Bata, Lesieur, etc.).	' Rapid urban sprawl, creation of new worker neighborhoods. ' Increased pressure on urban infrastructure. ' Casablanca as a regional industrial hub for North Africa.
1970s–1980s	' Industrial modernization programs (mechanization, large-scale production). ' Relocation of some industries to suburban areas. ' Decline of older industrial sites in city center.	' Growth of informal settlements (bidonvilles) near industrial zones. ' Social tensions linked to urban inequality. ' Beginning of industrial heritage abandonment.

Table 1: Chronology of Casablanca's Industrial Development (1910–1980)

Period	Key Developments
1910s–1920s	Port expansion; establishment of agro-industries (flour mills, oil pressing).
1930s–1940s	Growth of textiles, cement, and food processing industries; industrial clusters emerge.
1950s	Development of Roches Noires district; massive rural migration; workers' housing programs.
1960s	Heavy industry expansion (chemicals, mechanics); consolidation of Aïn Sebaâ and Sidi Bernoussi.
1970s–1980	Industrial diversification; extension of industrial belt towards Mohammedia; rise of labor movements.

Source: Cattedra, 2009

Table 2: Chronology of Casablanca's Industrial Development (1910–1980)

According to Cattedra (2009), Casablanca’s industrialization followed a **progressive eastward shift** from the port toward new industrial districts³, accompanied by **massive social change** through labor migration and the growth of working-class neighborhoods. By 1980, Casablanca had consolidated its role as Morocco’s **leading industrial and economic hub**, though at the cost of deepening urban inequalities and rising environmental pressures.

2.1. Map 1. Location of Casablanca’s Main Industrial Districts Description (to be represented visually):

- **Base map:** Casablanca metropolitan area (urban core + coastal line).
- **Reference points:** Port of Casablanca (central), city center (Medina, Maarif).
- **Highlighted industrial districts:**
 - i. **Roches Noires** – located directly east of the port, close to the city center. Historically linked to textiles, warehouses, and energy facilities.
 - ii. **Aïn Sebaâ** – northeast coastal belt, heavily industrialized since the 1950s (sugar, oils, cement, chemicals).
 - iii. **Sidi Bernoussi** – further northeast, extension of Aïn Sebaâ, became the main heavy industry zone in the 1960s–70s.
 - iv. **Hay Mohammadi** – inland, southeast of Roches Noires, associated with workers’ neighborhoods and proximity to the Old Slaughterhouses.
 - v. **Maârif / Central districts** – smaller industrial and artisanal units integrated into the urban fabric during early growth (1920s–40s).

2.1.1. Suggested Map Layout (if created in GIS/Illustrator):

- **Color coding:**
 - i. Roches Noires → Blue
 - ii. Aïn Sebaâ → Orange
 - iii. Sidi Bernoussi → Red
 - iv. Hay Mohammadi → Green
 - v. Maârif → Yellow
- **Icons:**
 - i. Factory icons to represent industrial zones.
 - ii. Port icon for Casablanca’s harbor.
- **Labels:** Each district name placed clearly, with arrows pointing to boundaries.

• **Legend:** “Industrial districts of Casablanca (1910–1980)”

3. The Case Study: The Old Slaughterhouses of Casablanca

The **slaughterhouses of Casablanca** represent one of the most emblematic examples of the city’s industrial heritage.

3.1. Construction and Early Development

The slaughterhouses were first built in **1912**, shortly after the French Protectorate was established in Morocco. In **1922**, they were modernized under the urban development plan of **Henri Prost**, the French architect and urban planner responsible for reshaping Casablanca.

3.2. Architectural Style

The design of the complex combined **neo’Moorish elements** (horseshoe arches, decorative motifs) with **Art Deco influences**, reflecting the hybrid aesthetics of colonial’era industrial architecture. The slaughterhouses thus embodied both **functional modernity** and **symbolic identity**, serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity. **Fonctions industrielles Pendant des décennies, le site a joué un rôle crucial dans l’économie de Casablanca, en tant que principal centre de transformation, de stockage et de distribution de la viande.** Il desservait non seulement la population en croissance rapide de Casablanca, mais aussi l’ensemble de la région, reflétant le statut de la ville en tant que principal centre industriel et commercial du Maroc.

3.3. Decline and Closure

By the late 20th century, rapid urban expansion and the decentralization of industrial functions led to the gradual decline of the slaughterhouses [4]. In **2002**, the facility was officially closed, leaving behind a vast and abandoned industrial site.

3.4. Cultural Reconversion

In **2009**, the site was reborn as the “**Fabrique Culturelle des Abattoirs**”⁴, a creative space for artists, performers, and cultural associations. This reconversion illustrates a new trend in heritage preservation: transforming obsolete industrial sites into **cultural and social hubs** [5]. Today, the former slaughterhouses host art exhibitions, concerts, theater performances, and community workshops, highlighting the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage in a rapidly changing urban environment.

Year	Event
1912	Construction of the slaughterhouses under the French Protectorate.
1922	Modernization and urban integration by Henri Prost; adoption of neo’Moorish and Art Deco styles.
1950s–1970s	Peak activity: meat processing, storage, and distribution for Casablanca’s growing population.
1980s–1990s	Gradual decline due to urban expansion, sanitary concerns, and aging infrastructure.
2002	Official closure of the slaughterhouses; site abandoned.
2009	Cultural reconversion into “La Fabrique Culturelle des Abattoirs,” hosting artistic and community events.
Casamémoire (2010). <i>Les Abattoirs de Casablanca: Patrimoine en devenir</i> . Casablanca Casamémoire.	

Table 3: Timeline of the Old Slaughterhouses of Casablanca (1912–2009)

Year	Event
1912	Construction of the Old Slaughterhouses in Hay Mohammadi.
1922	Modernization and expansion under Henri Prost's urban plan.
1930s	Consolidation as a major neo'Moorish / Art Deco industrial facility.
1980s	Decline in activity due to changing urban'industrial dynamics.
2002	Closure of the slaughterhouses and site abandonment.
2009	Cultural reversion into "La Fabrique Culturelle des Abattoirs."

Source: Casamémoire, 2010

Table 4: Timeline of the Old Slaughterhouses of Casablanca (1912–2009)

According to **Casamémoire (2010)**, the Old Slaughterhouses symbolize Casablanca's **industrial modernity of the early 20th century**, with their hybrid architecture (neo'Moorish and Art Deco) and central role in urban food supply. Their closure in 2002

reflected the **shift of industry and logistics outside the city core**, while their reversion in 2009 into a cultural hub marked an important **adaptive reuse model** for Moroccan industrial heritage [16].

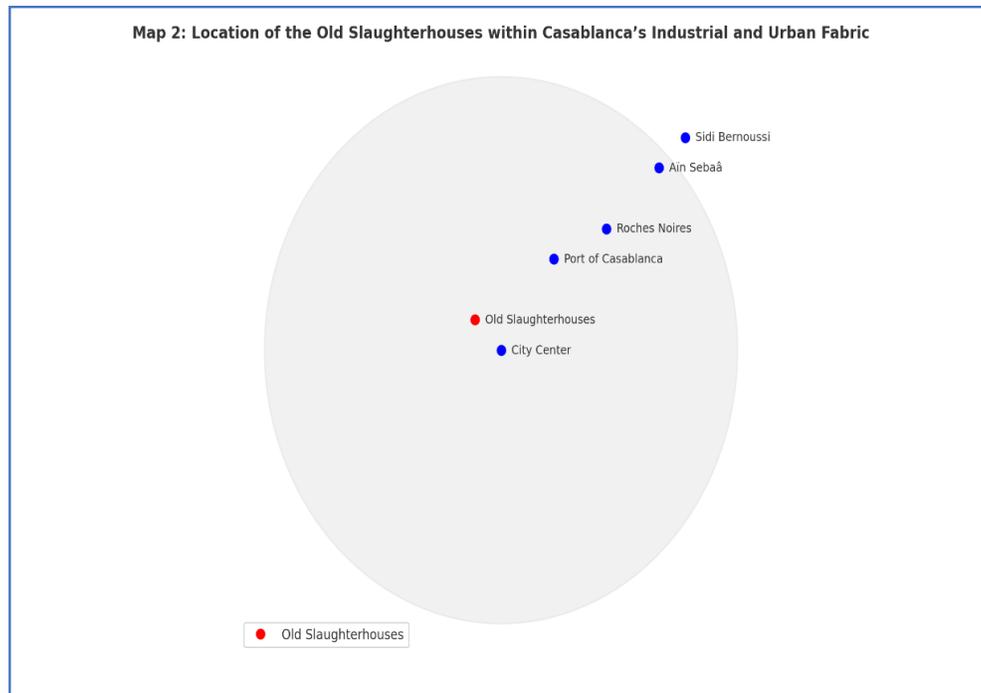


Figure 1: Spatial Location of the Old Slaughterhouses within Casablanca's Industrial and Urban Fabric

The map highlights the **strategic location** of Casablanca's Old Slaughterhouses (1912–2002) within the city's industrial and urban system:

- Central positioning:** Located between the **city center** and the **industrial'port zones (Roches Noires, Port, Ain Sebaâ, Sidi Bernoussi)**, the slaughterhouses served as a logistical hub for meat supply to the growing metropolis.
- Urban'industrial interface:** Their proximity to the port and main industrial zones illustrates the **integration of food industries** within the broader colonial industrial planning of Casablanca.
- Urban expansion and obsolescence:** As the city grew, the

slaughterhouses became surrounded by dense neighborhoods, making their industrial function increasingly incompatible with residential and urban uses.

- Heritage significance:** The map underscores how the site is now caught between **industrial memory and urban regeneration**, representing a symbolic anchor of Casablanca's industrial past within its modern metropolitan fabric.

4. Challenges in Preserving Industrial Heritage

The preservation of Casablanca's industrial heritage faces multiple obstacles, often linked to rapid urban transformation and speculative development [6]. One major challenge is the

demolition of emblematic industrial landmarks,⁵ such as the *Lafarge cement plant and Bata shoe factories*, which once stood as symbols of Morocco's early industrial modernity. Their disappearance illustrates the tension between economic growth and cultural memory [7].

Another pressing issue is **real estate speculation**, which prioritizes land profitability over historical continuity. Industrial sites are frequently replaced by residential or commercial complexes, erasing not only physical structures but also the social and cultural practices associated with them.

Moreover, Casablanca suffers from a **lack of robust legal frameworks** for industrial heritage protection. Unlike monuments of architectural or religious value, industrial buildings are rarely listed or safeguarded under heritage laws. This institutional gap leaves many sites vulnerable to neglect, abandonment, or redevelopment.

Finally, the **erosion of collective memory** presents an intangible challenge. As generations of workers retire or pass away, their lived experiences and knowledge risk being forgotten. Without active documentation and community involvement, the human dimension of industrial heritage may fade, leaving behind only fragmented traces of the past [8].

Site / Industry	Approximate Year of Change	Type of Change	New Function / Current Use
Lafarge Cement Plant (Roches Noires)	1987	Closure	Consolidated industrial activity moved elsewhere; original site deindustrialized (encyclopedia.homes)
Bata Shoe Factory	Mid-late 20th century	Industrial decline / transformation	No longer operational; site repurposed/abandoned (exact new function unspecified) (world.tomasbata.org)
Immeuble Lincoln (Hotel Lincoln)	2000	Partial demolition / heritage designation	Façade classified as heritage, building abandoned/ruinous
Cinema Vox	Mid'1970s	Demolition	Site cleared; replaced by urban redevelopment

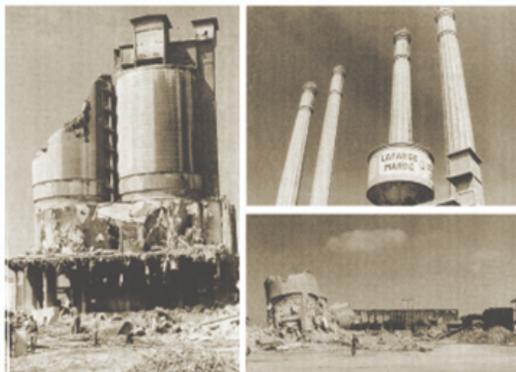
Naciri, M. (2009). *Casablanca: Mythes et figures d'une aventure urbaine*. Casablanca: Éditions La Croisée des Chemins.

Table 5: Major Industrial Sites in Casablanca — Demolition or Transformation (20th Century)

Notes :

- **Lafarge Cement Plant (Roches Noires):** Closed in **1987** after decades of operation. Its closure reflects the broader trend of relocating heavy industry away from the urban core.
- **Bata Shoe Factory:** Operated throughout the mid'20th century; declined later on. The factory reportedly ceased operations, with the site either reused or neglected.
- **Hotel Lincoln (Immeuble Bessonneau):** After structural failures, part of the building was demolished. However,⁶ its façades were later protected as heritage—though the rest was left to deteriorate.
- **Cinema Vox:** A cultural icon from the colonial era, demolished in the **mid'1970s**. Its footprint has since been absorbed by new urban changes

Demolition of the Lafarge Cement Plant in Roches Noires, Casablanca. The plant was established in 1920, "Chapeau"



The former Lafarge cement plant, a symbol of Casablanca's industrialization, was demolished in 1981. Located in the Roches Noires district, the cement factory was famous among the local populations for its bridge nicknamed "Chapeau" Demolition of the Lafarge Cement Plant in Roches Noires, Casablanca.

The plant was **established in 1920**, becoming one of the first major industrial complexes in the city. After decades of activity, it was **closed in 1987** and subsequently demolished, reflecting the broader trend of relocating heavy industries away from the urban core.

Les Roches Noires - les Cheminées Lafarge vue depuis les Carrières Centrales, le jour de l'inauguration. 1954.



(Source: Lafarge Maroc archives; Adam, 1968; Naciri, 2009).

These key dates in the industrial history of the city also raise the question of the fate of the buildings and industrial land left abandoned: from Aïn Sbaâ to Aïn Chock via districts such as Roches Noires, Derb Omar, Beauséjour, Maârif, La Gironde... Some have even become sources of nuisance for the neighborhood (garbage dumps, spaces squatted by the homeless, etc.). These important wastelands would benefit from being classified and inventoried before converting them.

Source: **Lafarge Cement Plant (Roches Noires)**: Rivet, D. (2012). *Le Maroc de*



In response to rising consumer demand, the company introduced granulated sugar production and constructed a new processing tower. By 1948, sugar loaf output had increased from 30,000 tons in 1933 to 115,000 tons per year.

Figure 2: View of the Cosumar refinery in Casablanca during its expansion phase (1940s).



Image 1 (Sugar Ingot Production Line – Consumer Transformation) Image 2 (Saint Louis Refineries – Industrial Modernization)

This image captures a decisive innovation in Morocco's sugar industry: the introduction of the **sugar ingot** (molded product), which progressively replaced the traditional **sugar loaf** (sucre en pain). Workers can be seen along the production line preparing the ingots, symbolizing the transition from artisanal methods to modern industrial production. This product was tailored to Moroccan consumption habits, especially tea preparation, and soon became a flagship of COSUMAR, marking both a cultural and industrial transformation in urban consumer

This photograph illustrates a turning point in **COSUMAR's** history, when the company came under the control of the French **Saint Louis Refineries**. During this period, a major industrial and technical modernization program was launched, upgrading refining equipment and introducing more advanced processes. The image reflects the industrial character of mid-20th-century sugar production, highlighting how European technology contributed to increased productivity and improved product quality at the Casablanca site.

Source: **Cosumar (Sugar Refining): Migration and Urban Growth in Morocco** [4].



This is a **photograph of the Old Slaughterhouses of Casablanca (Les Abattoirs de Casablanca)**, located in the Hay Mohammadi district. Built in **1912 under the French Protectorate**, the slaughterhouses are one of the city's most emblematic examples of industrial heritage. Designed by architect Georges-Ernest Desmarest, they functioned for almost a century before closing in **2002**. Since then, the site has been partly abandoned but also reused for cultural and artistic initiatives, symbolizing both **industrial memory** and **adaptive reuse potential**.

Source : **Casablanca: Colonial Myths and Architectural Ventures**. New York: Monacelli Press [8].



This photograph shows the **Central Laitière (Centrale Laitière) plant in Casablanca**, an emblematic food industry facility established in **1950** in the **Aïn Sebaâ industrial district**. The factory played a crucial role in the modernization of Morocco's dairy industry, ensuring the large-scale production and distribution of milk and dairy products for the Casablanca metropolitan area and beyond.

The Central Laitière factory tower in Aïn Sebaâ, Casablanca (1950). This plant marked a milestone in Morocco's food-processing sector, symbolizing the expansion of modern dairy production during the mid-20th century.



This is a **historical photograph of the Bata Shoe Factory in Casablanca**, one of the emblematic industrial sites established during the 20th century. Bata, a multinational footwear company of Czech origin, expanded into Morocco in the mid-20th century, setting up a large factory in Casablanca (notably in the Aïn Sebaâ–Hay Mohammadi industrial belt).

With Morocco's independence, Casablanca inherited a network of companies that were still in operation, employing nearly **60,000 workers**. However, from the 1980s onwards, ⁷many industries began to migrate toward the suburbs, leaving behind vast abandoned lands and empty buildings [9]. Some of these sites were absorbed into the city's urban expansion, while others were left vulnerable to real estate speculation [10]. Among the most emblematic symbols of Casablanca's industrialization are the **Lafarge cement factory in Roches Noires**, the **Bata shoe factory on Boulevard Ibn Tachfin**, the **Central Laitière dairy plant in Aïn Sebaâ**, the **Unified Printing Press**, and the monumental **Old Slaughterhouses of Casablanca**. These sites, captured in the archival photographs of demolished silos, factory towers, and abandoned warehouses, stand today as **silent witnesses of the city's industrial memory**.

While many of these brownfields now form the basis for urban regeneration projects, experts stress the urgent need to establish **a dedicated body to inventory this industrial heritage [11,12]**. Only through such systematic documentation can Casablanca develop **coherent strategies for rehabilitation and adaptive reuse**. Initiatives such as transforming the **Old Slaughterhouses into a cultural hub** demonstrate the potential of combining heritage preservation with cultural innovation, sustainable housing, and new manufacturing activities [13,14]. In this sense, safeguarding Casablanca's industrial heritage is not only about **protecting memory**, but also about **shaping the future of the urban fabric**.

5. General Summary

Casablanca's industrial heritage represents a central chapter in Morocco's economic and urban history [15-17]. Beginning with the expansion of the port in the early 20th century, the city rapidly evolved into the nation's primary industrial hub. Districts such as Roches Noires, Aïn Sebaâ, and Sidi Bernoussi became the engines of industrialization, hosting cement plants, textile workshops, oil refineries, sugar factories, and food-processing industries [18,19]. These activities attracted tens of thousands of rural migrants, reshaping Casablanca's demographic and social fabric while fostering the rise of trade unions and working-class neighborhoods.

By the 1950s and 1960s, heavy industries and multinational companies consolidated Casablanca's role as a manufacturing powerhouse in North Africa. However, this growth also generated challenges, including urban sprawl, informal settlements, environmental degradation, and the gradual neglect of older industrial sites in the city center [20]. The decline of emblematic sites—such as the Lafarge cement factory, the Bata shoe factory, and the old slaughterhouses—highlights the tension between urban expansion and heritage preservation [21].

Today, Casablanca's abandoned factories and warehouses are

increasingly recognized as valuable elements of industrial memory⁸ Scholars and urban planners argue that safeguarding this heritage requires systematic inventorying, expert oversight, and adaptive reuse strategies. Transforming wastelands into cultural, residential, or economic projects—such as the rehabilitation of the slaughterhouses into a cultural hub—offers an opportunity to reconcile the city's industrial past with its contemporary urban identity [22]. Preserving this heritage is thus not only about conserving buildings but also about protecting the collective memory and socio-economic trajectory of Morocco's largest metropolis.

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