



1989 Technical Review Summary  
by *Jamel Akbar*

0943.TUN

# Sidi El Aloui Primary School

Tunis, Tunisia



*Architect*

Samir Hamaici  
Tunis, Tunisia

*Client*

Ministère de l'Équipement & de l'Habitat (M.E.H.)  
Tunis, Tunisia

## *Table of Contents*

I.	Introduction	1
II.	Context	1
III.	Description	3
IV.	Construction schedule and costs	6
V.	Technical assessment	7
VI.	Users	9
VII.	Persons involved	9
VIII.	Project significance	11
IX.	Conclusion	12

## I. Introduction

Sidi El Aloui Primary School is the first school which does not follow the typical floor plan designed by the government after independence. In respecting the site constraints and being inspired by traditional Tunisian architecture it is therefore quite atypical in Tunisia! It is a victorious landmark for those (mostly artists and intellectuals) who argue for the possibility of using the past as a reference over the decision makers who reject any link with the past or present that stands against progress. Even though the building lacks such facilities as a cafeteria, a studio, and a gymnasium (which are considered a necessity according to certain standards), the school fulfils its primary educational function as those facilities are considered to be a luxury to education in Tunisia. Although the building has acoustic problems which seems inevitable in this type of project, given the various constraints, the users, community and decision makers are all satisfied and proud of their school. The building's functionalism lies in its simplicity motivated by traditional forms; the building's beauty lies in the wisdom of the architect who carefully utilised the limited resources.

## II. Context

### a. *Historical Background*

Habib Bourguiba, the former president of Tunisia, used to work in an office located very close to the site of the school. Long after he became President of the Republic of Tunisia, he asked the Minister of Equipment and Housing (Ministère de l'Équipement et de l'Habitat), Mr. Mohamed Sayah, to develop the area where he used to work. This is how the rehabilitation of the Bab Souika Halfaouine project was born. Apparently, the Minister was politically sensitive and was keen to please the President who wanted an international style complex on the site of Bab Souika. Moreover, the Minister wanted to build shopping malls, supermarkets and office buildings to replace the existing traditional, individually-owned shops and he had the power to do it. The Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina in the old town of the city of Tunis, as is indicated by its name, had a different opinion; they wanted to preserve the old city. According to them, any intervention should respect the existing fabric. The stage was set for a conflict in values.

A committee was set up (Commission de Suivi) and was headed by the Minister of Equipment and Housing. Sidi El Aloui School is one of twenty projects undertaken in 1983 to renovate the Bab Souika Halfaouine district. The renovation project of Bab Souika Halfaouine district tried to connect the two major monuments of the district, namely the mosques of Yussef Saheb Etabaa and Sidi Mîhriz (Fig. 1). The site of the school lies very close to the Mosque of Shabe Etabaa. Sidi El-Aloui School, the first project to be completed within the renovation programme, replaces an older school which was inadequately housed in the dilapidated Khaznadar Palace. The Khaznadar Palace (built in 1905 to accommodate ministers during the late Ottoman period) is now being restored and transformed into a cultural centre (Théâtre Tunisien). The Commission de Suivi designated the Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina to design the school providing that all decisions about the building, floor plans and specifications were approved by the Commission de Suivi; the latter was composed of governmental agencies that were planning for a modern environment, international style. The architect was at that time employed by the Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina. He faced many difficulties in trying to convince the authorities of the suitability of his design, especially Société Nationale Immobilière de Tunisie (SNIT), which was represented in the Commission de Suivi. SNIT has built all the schools in the country after independence. SNIT followed one standard layout which is outward-looking and basically composed of a linear building; the building is a row of classrooms that open onto one long corridor (fig. 2 is a floor plan of a typical school built by SNIT). It is customary to have the building in one corner of the site and the toilets on the other side. If a school is located in a dense urban area, the

toilets are walled or fenced, otherwise its boundaries are not marked. In some cases, depending on the site, the school is composed of more than one linear building, of the same plan type with classrooms opening onto the corridor. Sidi El Aloui School is the first school which does not follow the standard layout of SNIT (the Reviewer has visited two schools that were built by SNIT).

*b. Local Architectural Character*

The local architectural character is influenced by the many dynasties that ruled Tunis. The city was ruled by the Umayyads, Abbasids, Aghlabids (8th century), Fatimids (9th century), Zirids, Banu Hilal and Banu Sulaym (1060's) Almohades (1160), Hafids (1230) and the Ottomans (1574). The major aspects of the compact fabrics characteristic of the Muslim built environment can be found in the city of Tunis such as courtyard houses, labyrinth public thoroughfares and alleys, private dead-end streets, overpasses (*sabats*) and gates. (For a brief history of the city of Tunis see Appendix 1).

The use of wooden *mashrabiyya* on the façades, known as *barmakli* in Tunis, is quite common but not as extensive as in Cairo or Jeddah. *Gennariyyas*, or projecting spaces known as *rushan* in other parts of the Muslim world, decorated by wooden screens are not very common on street façades, though they are found on the interior façades of some houses, especially those of wealthy people.

*c. Climatic Conditions*

The climate of Tunis is typically Mediterranean, i.e. hot and dry in the summer and cold and rainy in the winter with some difference of temperature between the summer and winter. The average winter temperature is 6-8° in January, but it rarely snows or freezes. In summer, especially in July, afternoon winds from the Mediterranean reduce the temperature to an average of 31° C; however, occasionally, southern sandy winds raise the temperature to a little over 40° C. Rains usually fall between September and October with an annual average of 300-600 mm and humidity reaches 72%.

*d. Immediate Surroundings of the Site*

The school is located in a dense urban area. The district is architecturally characterised by a compact fabric of courtyard buildings, with a few buildings dating from the colonial period. The school is surrounded by low-rise buildings (1-2 storeys) and narrow streets (5-9 m) on three sides, and a park on the front elevation. The park is well kept and bound by a low fence that discourages users from stepping onto planted areas. The park abuts to a main street, Reu Bab Bou Saadoun, which is quite narrow but reaches 15 m in width near the Bab Souika Palace.

Most buildings are painted with light colour and display blue and green timber or steel windows and doors. Openings on the façades are quite scarce.

*e. Topography of the Project Site*

The site is almost flat. The school is built on an elongated site which was left vacant after some dilapidated residential buildings were pulled down in 1968 to make room for a road connecting Bab Saadoun with Bab al-Khadraa. The project was not executed because of the residents' and some officials' objections. One third of the site is now occupied by Sidi El Aloui School while the two thirds on the south-west are landscaped and constitute the public park known as Batha' Sidi El Aloui. The name of the school is derived from that of the park.

### III. Description

#### a. *Conditions Giving Rise to the Programme*

Because of the increasing number of pupils attending the old school in the Khaznadar Palace and because of the dilapidated condition of the palace, the building of Sidi El Aloui Primary School was given priority over the construction of other buildings in the Bab Souika Halfaouine project. The commission de Suivi formed a committee to develop the construction programme. The committee was composed of the architect, the headmaster of the school and representatives from the Ministry of Equipment and Housing and the Ministry of Education. The floor areas were specified and were subject to the approval of the Ministry of Education after design.

#### b. *General Objectives*

The Ministry of Education, the community and professionals from other institutions represented in the Commission de Suivi had one main objective which was to build a school that would educate as many pupils as possible. Quantity was given precedence over quality. The result is a school that lacks such important educational facilities, according to non-Tunisian standards, such as a library, laboratories, art workshops, a studio, a gymnasium, a theatre, a kitchen and a cafeteria. When the architect was asked about this, he answered that such facilities, even if they are important according to some standards, were unthinkable for this project because of the limitations of the site and the budget.

The architect's objectives were to respect the existing physical and cultural environment of the site. He wanted to respect the historical and cultural character of the old city in general, and that of the northern Rbat in particular (see Appendix 1). He explained that he derived the form of the building from the existing urban traditional fabric which defines the streets around the school to be in harmony with this fabric. He also derived architectural values from the traditional environment such as building heights and masses, courtyards, openings, decorations and colours. In fact, the school's front façade resembles that of a house located opposite the school.

#### c. *Functional Requirements*

The custom in Tunis is for the headmaster to reside in the school. Thus the school contains an apartment. The apartment is the only non educational space, otherwise the building is designed to fulfil its main function, i.e., teaching children between the ages of six and twelve.

#### d. *Building Data*

The school contains sixteen classrooms of 49.8 sq m (6x8.3 m), eight classrooms on each floor. It includes a meeting room (45.6 sq m), four offices (4.2x4 m) used by the headmaster, a small clinic, an art workshop for pupils and a staff room. It also contains a three- bedroom flat (130 sq m) for the headmaster on the second floor.

The major areas in sq m are:

classrooms including walls	917
administration and services including walls	175
toilets for pupils	62
circulation zones (lobbies, staircases and galleries)	566
the two courtyards	
courtyards	860.5
total floor	1'850
site area	1'354

e. *Evolution of Design Concepts*

The architect, who was born and raised in a traditional quarter of Tunis (Rbat Bab el-Jidid), claims that he is familiar with most details of the traditional Tunisian physical environment. According to him, his point of departure in all design concepts is simplicity, the major characteristic of traditional Tunisian houses. As he was employed by the Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina which advocates traditional forms he decided to propose a courtyard school.

All design stages and working drawings were done within the short period of three months. The reason is that the Minister of Equipment and Housing was rushing the project and thus they avoided administrative delays.

*Response to Physical Constraints*

The massing and height of the school respect the scale of neighbouring structures. Although the building is monumental because of its large size compared to surrounding structures, it interacts with the physical environment. One feels that the school is part of the existing environment and not alien to it.

The architect has maximised the use of the small site by building two rows of classrooms separated by a sizeable courtyard. The length of the site allowed him to accommodate all facilities including classrooms on both ends.

The location of the garden on the south-western side of the school determined the circulation pattern of the building. The architect was asked by the Municipality to place the main entrance on the façade facing the park. On the other hand, to respect fire regulations, an exit was needed. The exit was placed on the farthest point from the main entrance. Thus, the two gates of the school were placed on opposite façades. However, the smaller entrance, which is supposed to be used as a fire exit, is also used as an entrance as it provides a short cut for pupils coming from the north-eastern side.

*Response to User Requirements*

Given the financial constraints, the building responds quite well to users' needs. Nevertheless, the surface of the two courtyards is bare with no plants or sand for the children to play. It is unusual for a school where one would expect a central place for all kinds of activities. The explanation is that this space is not to be used as a play ground. The pupils are divided into two groups, each group attending the school twice a day. The first group comes from 7:30 to 10 am; the second from 10 to 12:30. The first group comes back from 12:30 to 3 pm, and the second group from 3 to 5:30 pm. In other words, the school is used for teaching from 7:30 to 5:30. The headmaster argues that having a playground would be a mistake for cleanliness reasons. Also sand or plants would need additional man power to keep the galleries and classrooms clean. The architect's explanation is that planting the courtyard would cost more in terms of insulating columns. Hence,

the courtyard is not fully utilised. A teacher explained, defending the bare surface of the courtyard, that teaching in the classrooms cannot take place while pupils are playing in the courtyard because of the noise.

The two courtyards can be considered as one that is divided by a bridge connecting the two main staircases. This organisation allowed the designer to satisfy fire regulations by providing the minimum required distance between any given spot in the building and an exit. It also created two sizeable courtyards for the pupils' morning pledge to the flag.

### *Formal Aspects*

The building may be viewed from the outside as two masses separated by the two staircases and the bridge connecting them. However, from the inside, it appears as one courtyard divided by a bridge.

Classrooms are distributed symmetrically around the paved courtyard. The school occupies the ground and first floors, while the headmaster's apartment is located on the partial second floor on the front elevation facing the park. The courtyard is surrounded on both floors by covered galleries supported by carefully decorated rectangular piers. The main entrance is aligned with the public park's principal axis and is marked by a *mashrabiyya (barmakli)* balcony on the first floor and the headmaster's living room on the second floor.

The staff meeting room is the only space that is not rectangular or square in plan. The T-shaped meeting space with a *mashrabiyya* facing the garden is derived from the T-shaped traditional Tunisian living spaces that open onto a courtyard; here the meeting room opens onto the outside park.

### *Landscaping*

Other than pots of small plants and flowers that are distributed on the edges of the galleries surrounding the courtyard, the school has no trees, courtyard seats or other landscaping elements. The garden facing the main entrance is the only place for the children to play. Apart from three paintings decorating the walls facing the courtyard, the building is very much controlled by the headmaster; no one is allowed to draw or place objects in the galleries. For a Western observer, the school may not seem lived in since it is very uniform; for some Middle Eastern observers, the school is both organised and well controlled, a sign of order which all schools should have.

## *f. Structure, Materials, Technology*

### *Structural System*

A reinforced concrete frame structure with hollow tile flooring and hollow brick infill, as well as cement rendering for façades have been used.

Spans between the columns which line the courtyard are small. The architect could have reduced the number of columns or eliminated them altogether by using cantilevers. The gallery columns are structurally not necessary. Still, for aesthetic reasons the architect decided to have them. He decided that two different spans between the columns of the courtyard would be most appropriate: a small and a large span; the large span (420 cm) is twice as wide as the small one. The corner-columns of the courtyard are always placed between two small spans; the rest are large spans. The location of the courtyard columns creates views that emphasise the symmetrical nature of the building. The windows giving onto the galleries are carefully placed between the columns and thus add to the simplicity and beauty of the galleries. This distribution of columns has helped the architect to create a diagonal grid for the tiling of the courtyard: each column is placed in the centre of a half-square, resulting in a simple pattern that brings together the court

with the galleries in one perspective. Although the architect could have reduced the cost by not using any columns, he has however succeeded in his use of the columns. The columns on the upper floor function as supports of the galleries' handrails.

### *Materials*

All surfaces are finished with cement plastering and painted with white plastic paint washable with water. Cement rendering is used for façades; doors, windows and *mashrabiyyas* are made of wood and window grilles on the ground floor and handrails on the first floor galleries are of wrought iron. Low price red marble tiles are used on the edges of the galleries to mark the courtyard.

### *Construction Technology*

All construction works were carried out by the contractor except for timber, electricity and plumbing works which were sub-contracted. Windows and doors were made by skilled craftsmen on the architect's request. The reason, according to the architect, is that the quality of products manufactured by small workshops is higher than that of goods produced by major manufacturers' or companies.

### *Building Services, Site Utilities*

The building is connected to the city's infrastructure. According to Tunisian law, rain-water from the roof terrace should be discharged into the street; however, rain-water from the courtyard is discharged into the city network.

#### *g. Origin of Technology, Materials and Labour Force*

All building materials including steel, electric wires, lamps and wash-basins were produced in Tunisia. With the exception of Mr. Denis Lesage, a French architect who works for the Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina de Tunis (see VII, persons involved), the consultants, contractor and labour force were Tunisian. The labour force ranged from twenty to one hundred and fifty persons on-site. Their daily wages ranged from TD 6 (US\$ 6.5) for an unskilled worker to 13 (US\$ 14) for a skilled worker including social security. According to the contractor, 20% of the labour force was skilled.

## **IV. Construction Schedule and Costs**

### *a. History of the Project*

The design of the project started in March 1985 and ended in May 1985. The building was constructed within nine months by Ben Ayed and Jebali Construction Company who bid second lowest as well as having a good reputation. The foundation stone was laid in March 1985; construction began three months later. The building was completed in March 1986 and the inauguration ceremony took place on 30 October 1986.

### *b. Total Cost and Main Source of Finance*

The total cost was TD 465'000 (US\$ 501'078) and the main funding body was the Ministère de l'Équipement et de l'Habitat, Tunis, Tunisia.



c. *Comparative Cost*

The cost of a typical school built by the Ministry of Education is TD 220-230 (US\$ 237 - 248) per sq m. The cost of constructing an average quality residential unit is TD 350 (US\$ 377) per sq. m. The cost of Sidi El Aloui Primary School was TD 241 (US\$ 260) per sq m.

d. *Qualitative Analysis of Costs*

Although Sidi El Aloui school cost more, its quality is much higher than that of other schools. This is due to the architect's constant supervision during construction. He made sure that all the details he proposed were executed. It is said that he used to visit the site so often that he almost resided there. According to Tunisian law, the architect has the right to supervise the construction of the building (Article 19 of Decree No. 78-71 dated 26 January 1978).

e. *Maintenance Costs (Heating, Cooling, etc.)*

Apart from one heater in the headmaster's kitchen there are no heating or cooling devices in the building.

**V. Technical Assessment**

a. *Functional Assessments (Use)*

If we accept the notion that the physical environment affects the performance of users but does not determine it, then we should not expect high educational performance from the pupils just because they study in a good building (see users, VI). Madrasat Nahj al-Hind is an old school (built in 1914, and visited by the Reviewer); it is located in an above-average income area. The school, built during the French occupation, is colonial in style. The Headmaster claims that the educational performance of his graduates is amongst the best in the city because of the parents' constant supervision of their childrens' education. Thus, he argued, the school building is not a major factor in achieving higher educational standards, although he would love to have such a building as Sidi El Aloui Primary School, but not located on the same site or in the same community.

The major difference between the Nahj al-Hind and Sidi El Aloui schools lies in the furniture and equipment. It appears that the rule in Tunis is the older the school the better the furniture and equipment because of the accumulation process; hence, Sidi El Aloui's lack of proper furnishing and other educational necessities may affect the pupils performance.

Circulation is simple and clear for all users. The headmaster's apartment has easy, direct access to the ground and first floor levels, yet this access is not open to pupils or teachers. The terrace of the headmaster's apartment overlooks the courtyard and classrooms.

Internal window panels in classrooms are used as display boards and add some colour. Office windows are often kept closed. When asked about this, the headmaster responded that passers-by, especially young people, would intrude if the windows were kept open. The exhibition room window was broken in this manner.

b. *Climatic Performance, Lighting, Ventilation and Acoustics*

Each classroom has sixteen fluorescent lamps that are used only in the late afternoon. In most spaces, day light is sufficient even when it is cloudy. Light floods the classrooms through five windows which are partially screened from the outside by wooden *mashrabiyyas*. In the interior, the five windows of each classroom (three giving onto the court and two onto the street) are composed of two parts. The lower, larger part is very easy to control with different combinations. One can let in light only, or light and air, or reduce the light and keep the air out. When the upper part is open, some air and little light come in. They even managed to show a film in one of the classrooms during the day. Although the classroom was filled with pupils, keeping the upper part open provided the necessary ventilation.

Ceilings are quite high, creating enough space for hot air to accumulate and to be ventilated through the upper part of windows (the height of all ground spaces is 385 cm, of first floor spaces 350 cm, and of second floor spaces - the headmaster's apartment - 340 cm). Since the ground floor has been raised (75 cm), the windows are above eye level of passers-by.

Acoustics are often a problem in a courtyard building which has no set-backs, especially within a dense urban district. This school is no exception. The major sources of noise in classrooms are the street or the opposite classroom located on the other side of the courtyard. Closing windows reduces noise but at the expense of ventilation which is needed in the summer. Acoustical tiles, carpets or at least curtains will help reduce the problem and eliminate echo.

c. *Choice of Materials; Level of Technology*

The budget was so limited that it affected the selection and distribution of finishing materials in the building. The aim of the Ministry of Equipment and Housing was to construct a good building and not necessarily a good school. This approach forced the architect to make unusual decisions. Anything educational was to be supplied by the Ministry of Education and thus was not included in the project's budget. For example, there were no panels to display illustrations in the classrooms. As those panels were to be supplied by the Ministry of Education, the architect was not authorised to place other panels on the walls. In general, materials are carefully selected by the architect; nothing is lavish or unusual. The charm of the building lies in the wisdom of using the limited budget. The glazed tiles cladding the capitals of the columns surrounding the courtyard are a good example.

d. *Ageing and Maintenance Problem*

The school has so far not shown any need for maintenance. However, the white walls should be repainted. White exterior walls, even if they are washable with water, constitute a tempting surface for the public to place posters on. On the other hand, the lower part of the walls facing the courtyard being subject to the constant use of pupils will need repainting.

e. *Design Features: Massing and Volume, Articulation of Spaces, Integration into Site*

From a professional viewpoint, the building integrates with the surrounding solid and massive environment; for users, however, the building may look too massive with its strong gate which is often kept closed; the building may not look welcoming. Some neighbours who live next to the school have never entered it (see Relation to Cultural Context, VIII, B).

Nevertheless, the spaces of the building are well articulated, circulation patterns are simple and clear for all users. The courtyard, although not landscaped, is pleasant to be in, the columns look strong, yet elegant.

## VI. Users

### a. *Description of Those Who Use or Benefit from the Project*

All users are of Tunisian nationality and Muslims. The school, along with another two, serves the district of Halfaouine which has approximately 10'000 inhabitants with an average of five persons per family. Officially, the average monthly income is TD 70-120 (US\$ 75-129) per family, which is considered to be among upper-low income groups. The real income of these families is not documented and is probably higher since several members of one family contribute with their earnings.

Sidi El-Aloui Primary School serves over 1'000 pupils who are divided into thirty-one classes. Each class has 36-42 pupils. The pupils are usually from six to twelve years old, and form an equal ratio of boys and girls.

The difficult economic situation affects the social structure of the district; for example, it is said that a high divorce rate is related to poor income levels. Most parents are not interested in following their children's school performance. There is little co-operation between the school and the parents. One of the major problems in this district is that residents spend a lot of time watching television, leaving little time for pupils to do their homework. All this has led to the development of evening classes for weaker pupils.

### b. *Response to Project*

In general, the users, client, community and above all, the architect, are proud of the building.

## VII. Persons Involved

**Samir Hamaici:** Architect.

**Raouf Chammari:** Chief engineer (civil engineer) and Director of Bab Souika-Halfaouine Project.) He is employed by the Ministère de l'Équipement et de l'Habitat. As the project of renovating Bab Souika Halfaouine included the construction of two vehicular tunnels constituting the largest part of the project's budget, he was appointed director of the project as a whole. His role is political. He supported the concept of building a school in the traditional style. Since the school constituted the first stage of the renovation project, he argued that it should be conceived as an example for other governmental agencies and private architectural firms to follow.

**Moufida Fakhri:** Chief architect, cellule de suivi du Projet Bab Souika-Halfaouine, participated in developing the programme. She worked towards convincing those who rejected traditional styles. Within the Commission de Suivi she supported the architect's ideas.

**Denis Lesage:** Chief architect, Atelier de l'Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina de Tunis, participated in convincing the Commission de Suivi, Commission Permanente des Bâtiments Civils and Commission Technique des Bâtiments Civils, of the suitability of the project. He gave the architect the necessary support to continue.

**Belgacem Zraïba:** site engineer, employed by the Ministère de l'Équipement et de l'Habitat. He was the person appointed by the Ministry to supervise site works. He is the person whom the architect trusted the most on the site. The quality of the building construction is due to his attention.

**Zeineb Mizouni:** architect who works at the Ministère de l'Équipement et de l'Habitat in the Direction Générale de la Construction, participated in developing the programme. As the architect had to travel to Italy when the Minister of Equipment decided to rush the project, Zeineb Mizouni was asked by the Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina to develop the project's Bill of Quantities and Specifications.

**Mohamed Jebali:** contractor and partner in Entreprise de Construction Ben Ayed et Jebali. This company is quite experienced and set up shortly after WWII. Mohamed Jebali is known as a contractor who seeks excellence and who has an honest reputation and who is very honest. He changed what the architect or Mr. Belgacem Zraibia did not like.

**The Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina:** the architect who was employed by the association to design the school, was much influenced by the Association in his approach to architecture.

**Younes Najar:** civil engineer responsible for all the structural calculations. He is employed by the Ministère de l'Équipement et de l'Habitat in the Direction Générale de la Construction.

*Jamel Akbar*

Dammam, 17 April 1989

## Appendix 1

The city of Tunis was founded in 732 at the same time as the Ezzaitouna (Zaytuna) Great Mosque. In the 13th century, Tunis became the capital of the region of Tunisia. Up to the 19th century, the city was limited to a small hill (50 m in height) located between two lakes (the Tunis and Sejuoumi lake). When the French colonised the walled city of Tunis in 1881, it had a population of 100'000 inhabitants and covered an area of 270 hectares. Today, the city of Tunis is the political, economic and cultural capital of the Republic of Tunisia. Its size is over 75'000 hectares and its population is over 1,4 million. It is divided into twenty local municipalities. Among professionals, the city of Tunis attracts those who are interested in Punic or Carthaginian cultures as well as Islamic architecture. Almost all traditional crafts are practised in the old city (fig. 3 gives an idea of the growth of the city of Tunis).

To the east of the old city lies modern Tunis built during the French occupation. Modern Tunis, the current economic capital of the city with its 4-5 storey buildings, is a mirror that reflects European styles, especially French, Italian and modern architectural movements. To the west of the old city lie most governmental buildings and public facilities. To the north and the south are new residential quarters featuring both low and high-rise buildings. Squatter settlements are adjacent to the Sedjoumi lake.

In the 11th century, most commercial transactions with the nomads took place in the open space near the two main gates, outside the city wall. In these two locations, shops, work places and houses were built, and gradually - by the 13th century - a whole community known as Rbat was developed around each gate. The northern Rbat is called Rbat Bab Souika and comprises the school of Sidi El Aloui. The architect of the school was born and raised in the southern Rbat, called Rbat Bab Djazira. The walls of the two *rbats* were linked in the 16th century to form the old city of Tunis as we know it today.

After the French occupation, the city walls were removed, some streets were widened, and new buildings were built in European style influenced by the Tunisian Islamic features. A good example of this is Reu Bab Bou Saadoun which runs near the site of the school.