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## Hennebique reinforced concrete constructions in Eastern Algeria: patrons and contractors (1900-1930)

*Les constructions en béton armé Hennebique dans l'Est algérien: commanditaires et entrepreneurs (1900-1930)*

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# Hennebique reinforced concrete constructions in Eastern Algeria: patrons and contractors (1900-1930)

Assia Samai Bouadjaja



Hennebique did a thriving business in Algeria, building large structures for public investors as well as private commissions. The company's Algiers office, established in 1893, was the center,<sup>254</sup> but its network of licensee contractors, spread throughout the territory, underwent rapid growth in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eastern Algeria, the object of intensive agricultural colonization since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, especially under the leadership of the Compagnie Genevoise des Colonies Suisses de Sétif,<sup>255</sup> offered promising land for the company's development. Helped by the discovery of phosphate deposits on the high plateaus and by the arrival of the railway in 1879, the region enjoyed an unprecedented boom; at the time, 15,000 settlers were recorded in the high agricultural plains around Constantine.<sup>256</sup> As André Prenant has emphasized, profits were then invested in property speculation and in businesses.<sup>257</sup>

Hennebique slotted itself into the construction markets of the two Eastern Algerian cities of Constantine and Setif through public commissions and those of settlers who owned large agricultural estates. The construction of buildings connected with the cultivation of grains (mills and silos) and to a lesser extent viticulture (vats and "amphorae") represented between 1908 and 1930 a major proportion of the company's business<sup>258</sup> in the region. Other projects

for which the archives unfortunately provide little information were also directly related to agricultural colonization: a "model" farm at Biskra (1905) on the road to Constantine,<sup>259</sup> built by the entrepreneur Giovanelli, and in 1929, the "Agriculture House" of Constantine.<sup>260</sup> This structure, boasting Art Nouveau facades, is also called the "*Maison du Colon*" [Settler's House] in certain documents. Designed by the architect Ange Journeau whose name is inscribed on the façade, and built by the Société Algérienne des Établissements Louis Grasset, it was opened in 1930.

The names of several protagonists of this adventure (clients, contractors, and architects) emerge from Hennebique's archives. In Constantine, first, the Kaouki (sometimes spelled Kaouky) brothers were, from the beginning of the 1910s, the main customers behind construction schemes using Hennebique reinforced concrete. "The three colorful men, sons of Maltese immigrants, present themselves either as grain merchants, traders, millers, or industrialists."<sup>261</sup> They built up a huge portfolio of property between 1906 and 1935, both rural and urban, of several hundreds of hectares, by buying up in particular properties from indebted settlers. In 1913, the engineer and Hennebique agent for Tunis, Barthélemy Reymond, designed electrical poles for their



Farm and dwellings, Biskra, Algeria (1905),  
Giovanelli, cont.: General view

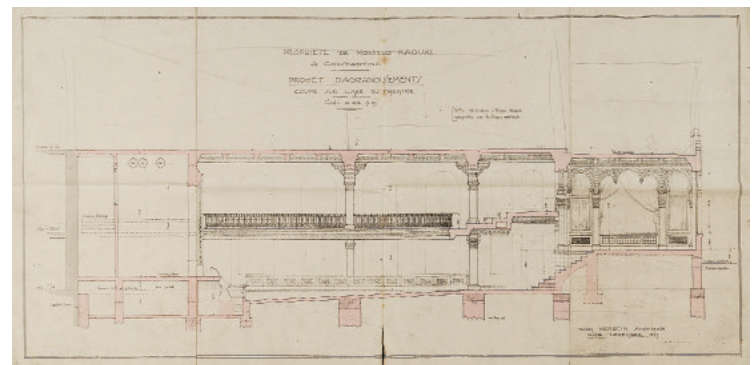
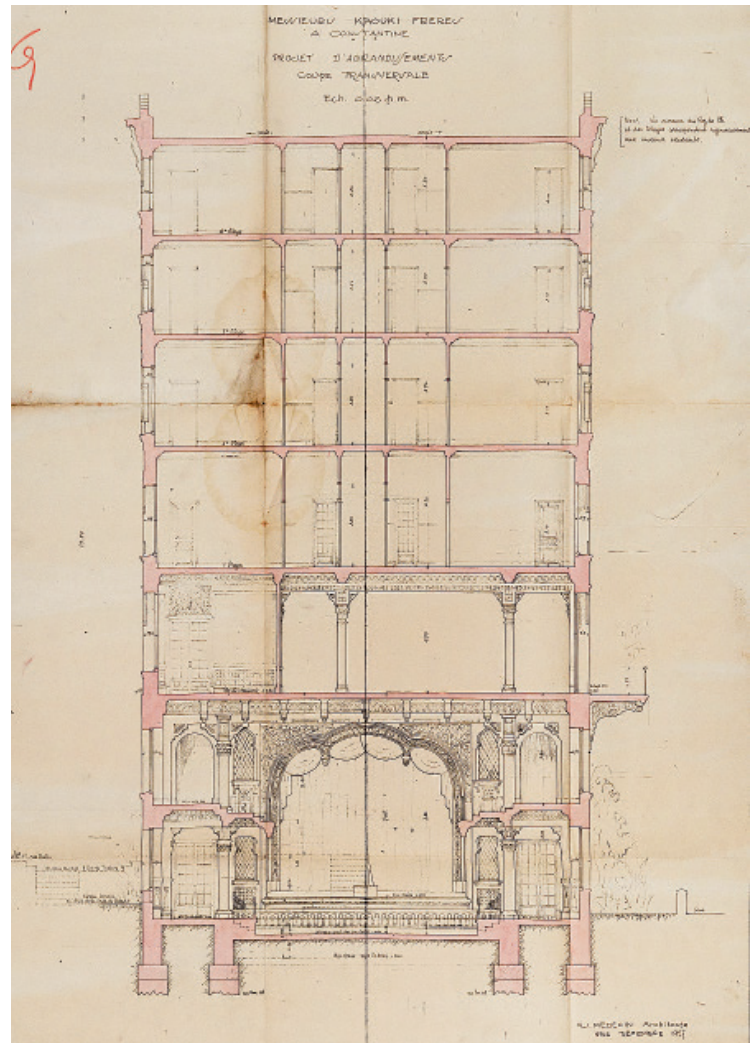
Maison de l'Agriculture, Constantine (1929),  
Ange Journeau, arch.; Louis Grasset, cont.:  
Main facade

Cirta Hotel, Constantine (1928-1929),  
Jean Médecin, arch.: Project for extension  
and theater construction, cross section  
and section on the axe of theater

mill at Constantine.<sup>262</sup> In 1926-1927, the Kaouki brothers asked the Hennebique design office in Algiers, managed by the engineer Charles Bonduelle, to design their projected brick and tile factory of Hamma (at Hamma Bouziane, near Constantine).<sup>263</sup> In 1928, Hennebique designed the structures for their silos at Ain Abid (east of Constantine) and their mills at Bône (now Annaba); in 1932, that of another building that adjoins the silos.<sup>264</sup> All these schemes were given to the Compagnie Louis Grasset. These industrial projects were followed by more prestigious commissions in the center of Constantine, still on behalf of the Kaouki brothers: in 1927-1928, the extension of the Cirta hotel and the construction of a theatre (Jean Médecin, architect from Nice)<sup>265</sup> on the ground floor, then in 1928 the erection, not far from the hotel, of an investment property by the same architect in the same Neo-Moorish style.

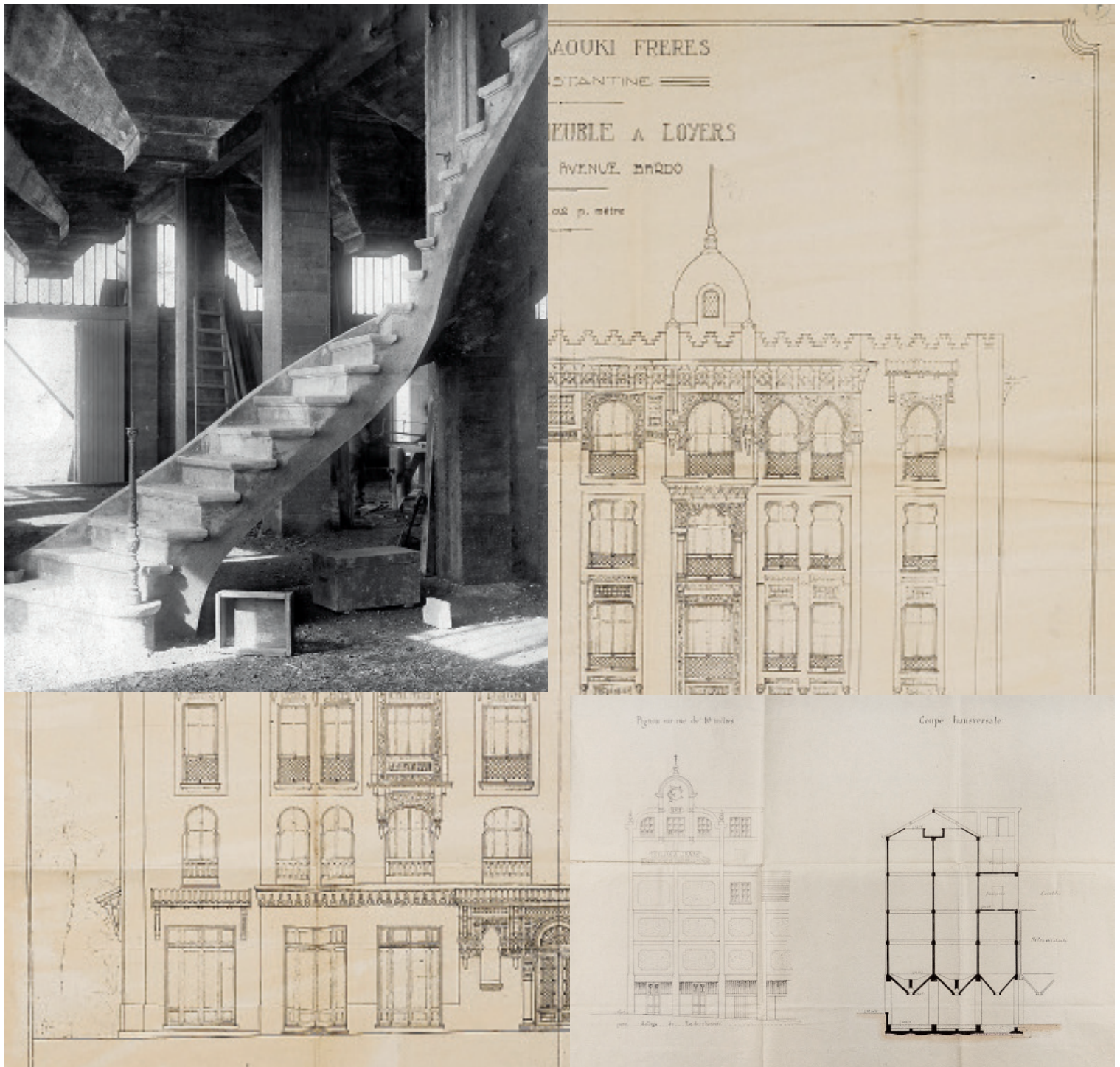
The correspondence between the engineer and the Paris office highlights the difficulties of the worksites, due in part to the personality of clients – “the client here is short-sighted, he has made no overall plan, and moreover does not wish to make one because he wants to build brick by brick without planning beyond what he can see from day to day”<sup>266</sup> – but also to the recurring problem of obtaining supplies of steel.

The major banks, like the Compagnie Algérienne and its rival, the Crédit Foncier d'Algérie et de Tunisie, were also important clients. The first acquired docks and warehouses throughout the Algerian territory (Blida, Bordj Bou Arreridj, Mascara, Saïda, Saint-Arnaud, Setif, Sidi Bel Abbès, Souk Ahras and Tiaret) during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because it could use stocks of commodities it controlled as collateral for loans: “the increase in grain production encouraged us to expand our warehousing operations.”<sup>267</sup> Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had also owned the vast Ain Regada property (76,000 hectares in 1951) located on the high plateaus of Constantine. In 1927, the architects La Chapelle and Du Merlin (who succeeded Pierre-Louis Bonnell, author of the scheme in 1906) commissioned Hennebique to design the reinforced concrete structure of the large central cash office of the



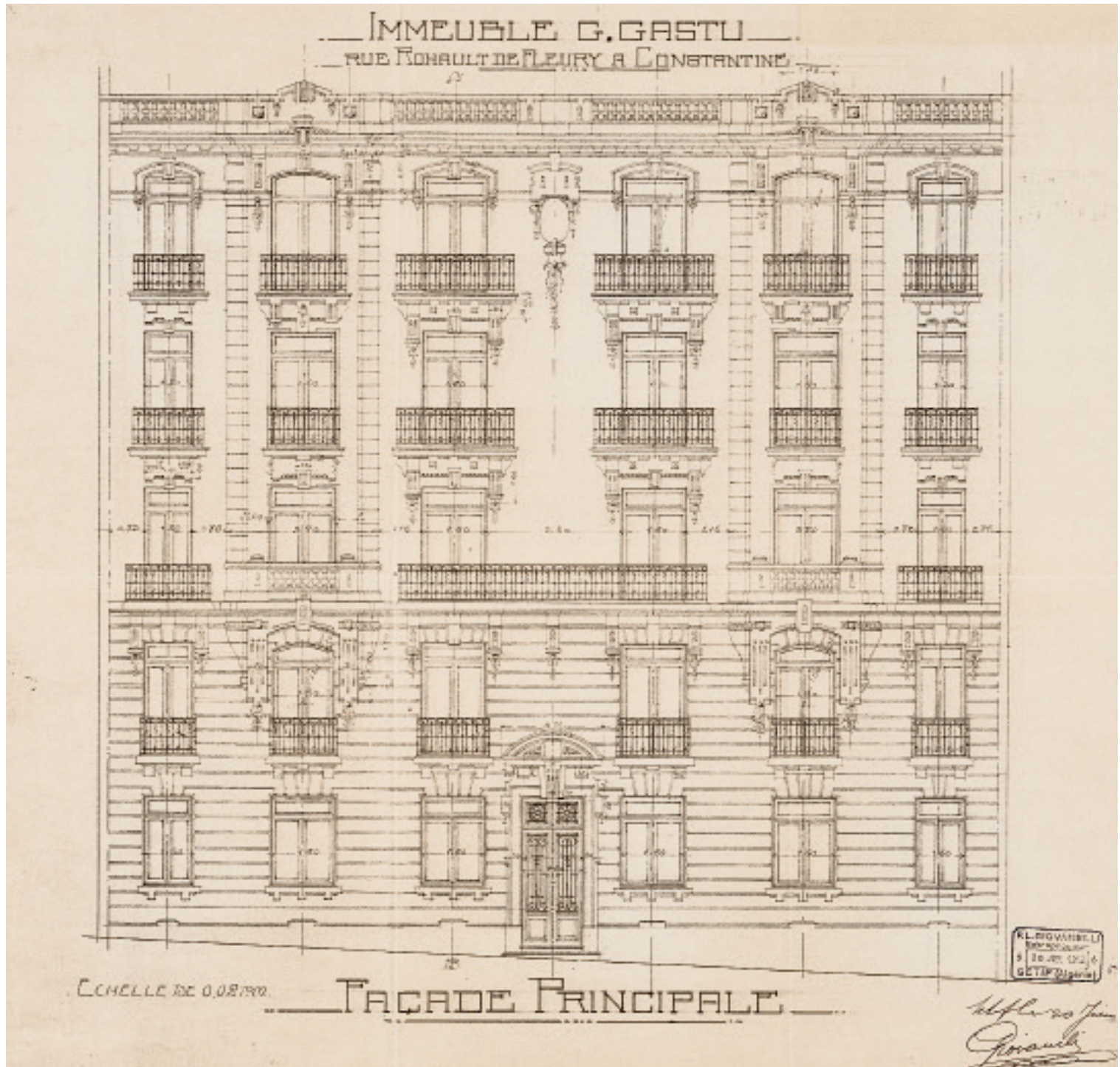


Kaouki Frères rental apartments,  
Constantine (1928), Jean Médecin, arch.:  
Front façade on avenue Bardo





Branch office for Crédit Foncier d'Algérie  
et de Tunisie, Setif (1914-1920), Ponsard,  
arch.; G. Charbonnières, eng.; Giovanelli,  
cont.: Front facade, 2<sup>nd</sup> project, 1920



Grain silos for Crédit Foncier d'Algérie et de Tunisie, Setif (1909), Reymond, eng.; Giovanelli, cont.: Interior stairway on completion and gable and cross-section



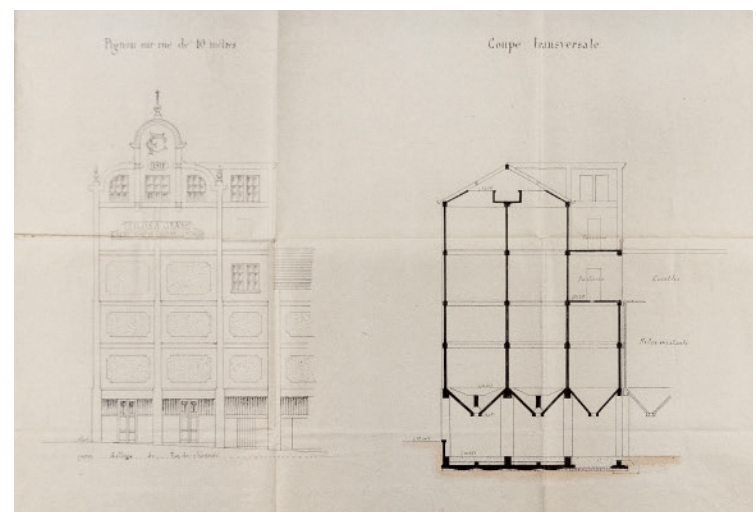
Setif branch of the Compagnie Algérienne, to be built by the Compagnie Louis Grasset.<sup>268</sup>

As for the Crédit Foncier d'Algérie et de Tunisie, it had square section wheat silos built in Setif in 1909-1910, then docks with cylindrical silos which were apparently a replica of those built at Dunston, Tyne and Wear in Great Britain.<sup>269</sup> In 1913, at Saint-Arnaud (now El-Eulma, Setif), it commissioned the largest silos on Algerian territory, each of which had a capacity of 11,000 tons.<sup>270</sup> The silos were erected by the contractor Giovanelli, on the basis of calculations by the engineer Barthélemy Reymond, and "under the high management of the architect-advisor of the Crédit Foncier, M. Ponsard."<sup>271</sup> Between 1914 and 1920, the bank erected

a prestigious reinforced-concrete building to house its Setif branch.<sup>272</sup> The plan is the work of the architect Ponsard, the construction was supervised by the agent-engineer G. Charbonnières, and it was erected by Giovanelli.

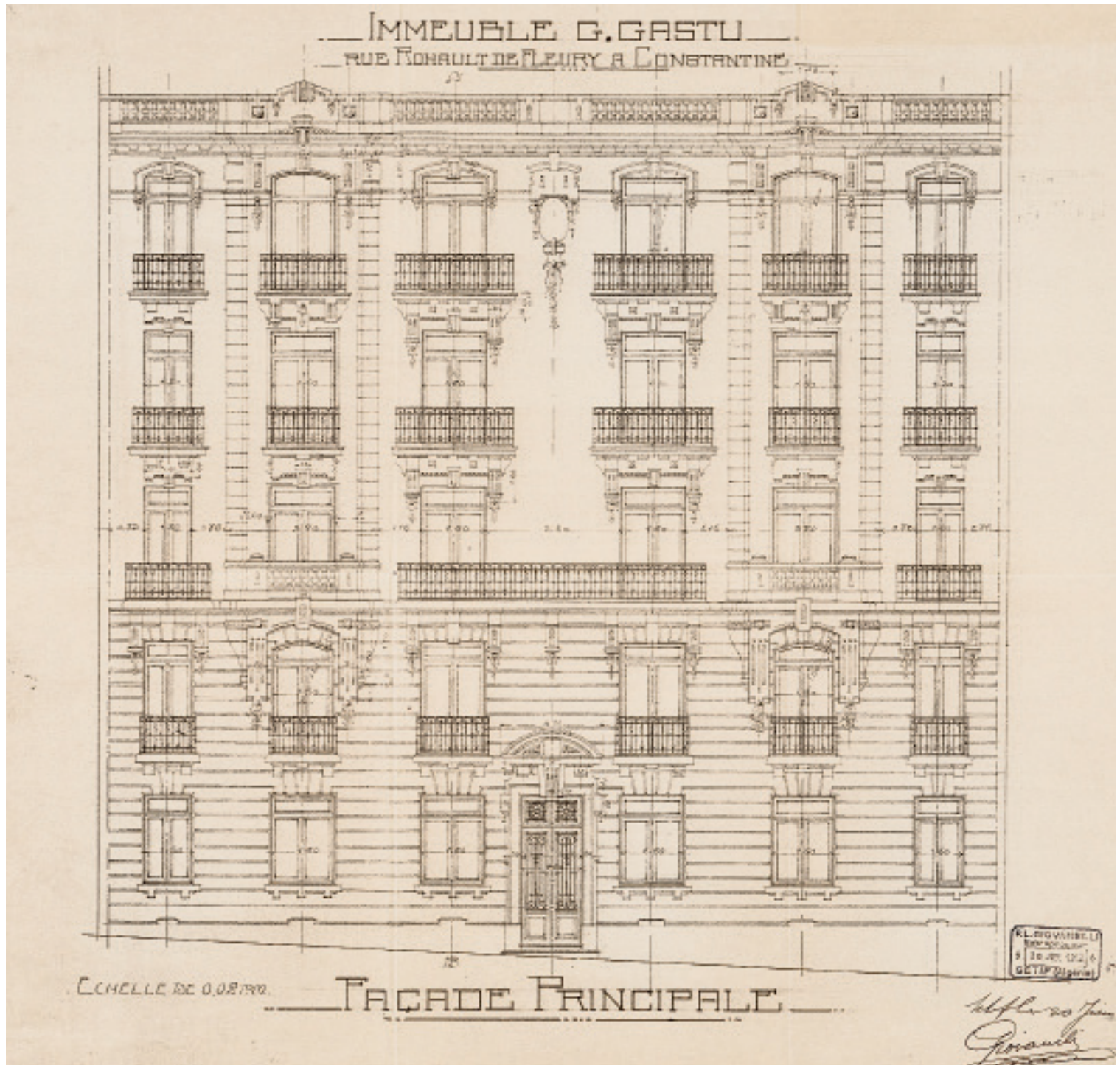
Public commission represented the second major market for Hennebique. Certain major constructions at Constantine can be mentioned as examples, some of which are spectacular due to the rugged topography of the site: in 1916, the cantilevered footpaths along the former boulevard Joly-de-Brésillon, a contract for which Hennebique was in competition with the Maison Considère<sup>273</sup>; the madrasah of Constantine in 1906, a beautiful building in the Neo-Moorish style, designed by the architect Albert Ballu and for which the Hennebique offices designed the dome's framework;<sup>274</sup> the people's university of the town in 1925-1929, by the architect-surveyor (E. Bel [reading unsure])<sup>275</sup> which required the completion of an imposing retaining wall.

In Setif the spread of the Hennebique reinforced concrete system was largely due to the personal investment of the masonry contractor Giovanelli. Pascal Louis Giovanelli, also called Louis Giovanelli<sup>276</sup> (Veccana [Italy] 1876 - Setif 1950) was, from 1905 and for nearly fifty years, the exclusive Hennebique licensee in the town of Setif. Giovanelli, whose company "counted 300 workers in a very modern and





Gastu Building, Constantine (1914),  
Giovannelli, cont: Main facade  
on rue Rohault-de-Fleury



Passeron Building, Setif (1910 modifications), Louve, arch.; Giovanelli, cont.: View after raising and creation of an street-level arcade





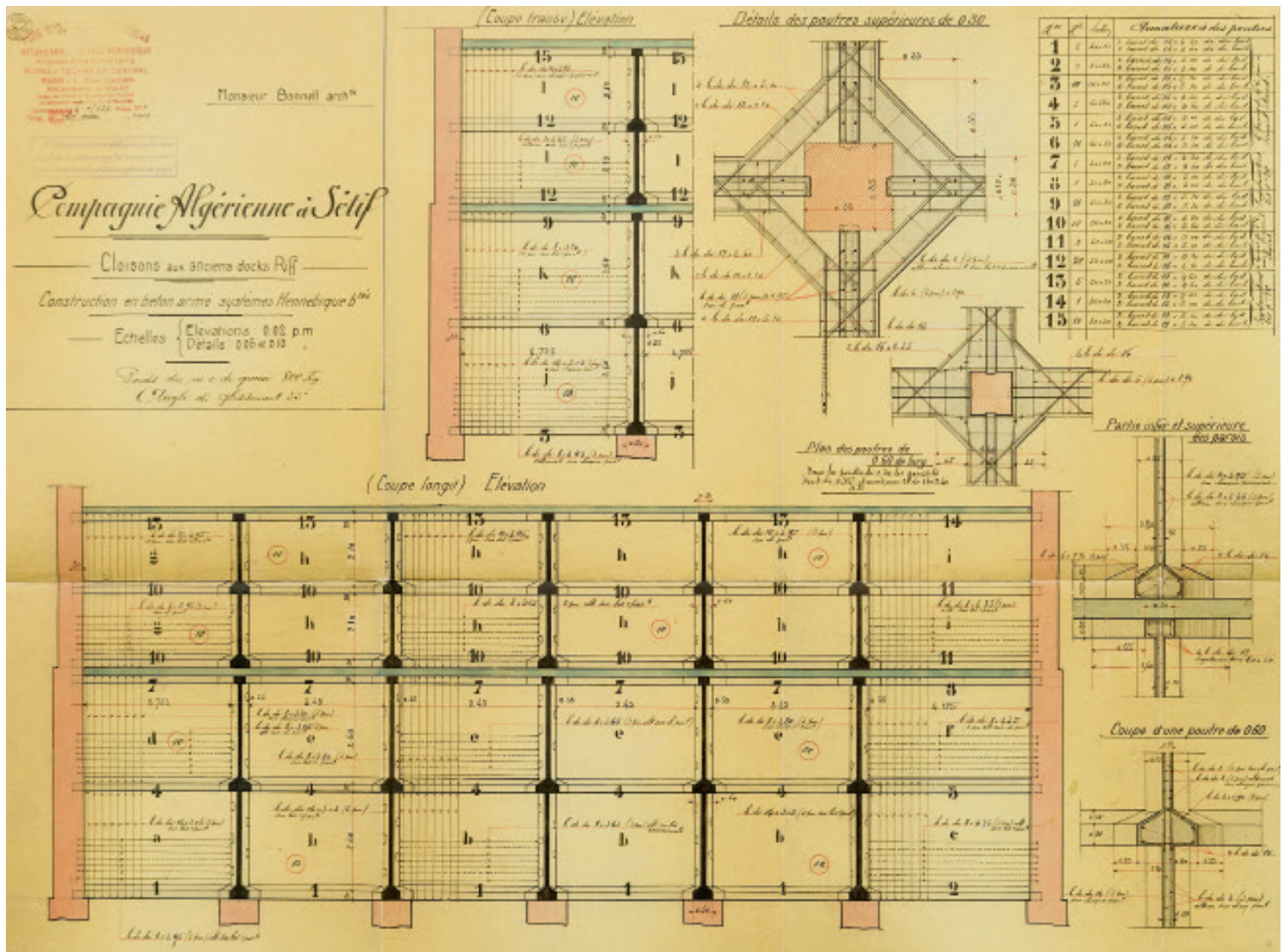
Garage Citroën, Constantine (1929),  
Maurice-Jacques Ravazé, arch.;  
Louis Grasset, cont.: The lateral facade  
in the 1930s (Photo by Lauffenburger)



Docks of La Compagnie Algérienne, formerly Riff, Setif (1908), Pierre-Louis Bonnell, arch.; Giovanelli, cont.: Reinforced concrete wall structure

complete material, is known by all those who are involved directly or indirectly in building throughout Algeria.”<sup>277</sup> Apparently he was also involved in the construction and development of Chrea (Wilaya of Blida), a summer and winter resort, created in 1911 (and which would become a town in 1956).<sup>278</sup> Until he was drafted for World War I, in June 1915,<sup>279</sup> he and A. Lisio, a contractor at Philippeville (currently Skikda),<sup>280</sup> were the only Hennebique licensees

in the entire *département* of Constantine, and as such built many structures. In 1909, he built his own house in reinforced concrete, the design of which had been by Barthélemy Reymond, who offered “to charge him a reduced fee, 2% for example, because he is doing this to attract other owners.”<sup>281</sup> However, his first reinforced concrete constructions were industrial buildings connected with agriculture, as we have seen for the silos commissioned by the Crédit





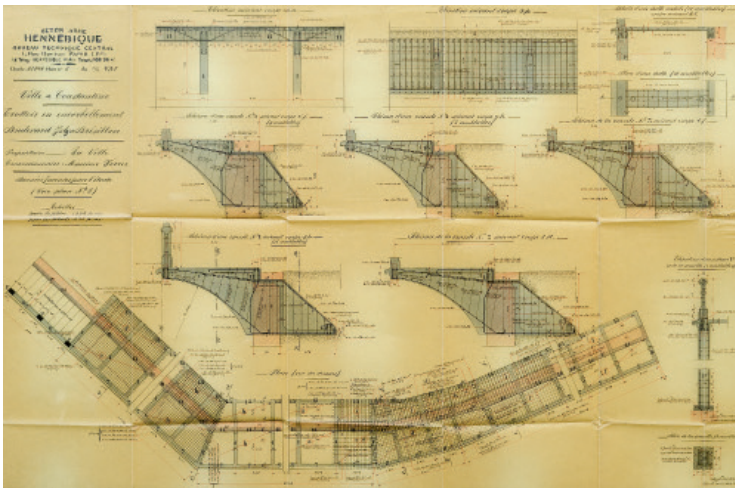
Docks of La Compagnie Algerienne, formerly Riff, Setif (1908), Pierre-Louis Bonnell, arch.; Giovanelli, cont.: General view during construction works

Creation of an overhanging pavement on boulevard Joly-de-Brésillon, Constantine (1916): Technical plan



Louis Grasset asserted itself as the most active licensee company, with the completion in Constantine of the Francini garage (Max Cherri arch., 1927), the Voiley building (Ange Journeau arch., 1929), the Citroen garage (Maurice-Jacques Ravazé arch., 1929), the Bergougnau building (Mr. Dumoulin and Mr. de La Chapelle arch.,<sup>283</sup> 1931), and the Wolf building and garage in 1932.

The heritage left by Hennebique in Eastern Algeria has withstood time perfectly. The majority of the constructions identified in the archives are still standing and in remarkable condition, such as the Cirta hotel. Others have changed identity, such as the Citroen garage of Constantine, but they all remain strong elements in the urban landscape.



Foncier d'Algérie et de Tunisie. In 1908, for the Compagnie Algérienne, he transformed the former docks of the Société des Colonies Suisses (also called the Riff Docks, from the name of the director, Gottlieb Ryf) into a granary. The trusses of the new frameworks are all in reinforced concrete.<sup>282</sup> Other Hennebique projects included several extensions to urban dwellings in Setif, such as the creation of arcades along the Timsit building and the raising of the Passeron house (M. Louve arch.), and some large apartment buildings such as the G. Gastu building created in 1914 at Constantine. Nevertheless, in the area of urban architecture, Compagnie

Salama Building, rue Michelet and rue Beauséjour, Algiers (1929), Charles Montaland, arch.; Bonduelle, eng.: Plan

Hennebique Building, 10 rue Berthezène, Algiers (1924-1927), Charles Montaland, arch.; Bonduelle, eng.: facade on rue Jean-Macé and second floor plan

Garcia Building, 21 rue de Constantine, Algiers (1928-1929), Paul Guion, arch.; Bonduelle, eng.; Louis Fernez, art.: Detail of bay decoration (photo by B. Aiche)

