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L'agence Hennebique et les figures de la modernité algéroise

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The Hennebique agency and the figures of modernity in Algiers

Boussad Aiche

Towards the end of the 1920s, the Hennebique agency benefitted from the unprecedented expansion of the construction sector in Algeria. The exemption of land from tax, the end of the moratorium on rents, and a decrease in the value of securities allowed significant capital to be directed towards construction.²⁸⁴ According to René Lespès, this explains why “the construction of the largest and most expensive buildings was undertaken precisely between 1927 and 1930.”²⁸⁵

Moreover, the large number of building permits issued for the municipality of Algiers confirms this increase. It amounted to 543 for 1928 and reached the record number of 697 for 1929, on the eve of the Centenary of Colonization.²⁸⁶ Despite the Depression that year, ground was broken on many construction sites in Algiers.²⁸⁷

This context, favorable to the dissemination of the Hennebique construction system, encouraged Algiers property developers to create numerous projects in an expanding market. In view of the information in the printed sources and archives,²⁸⁸ these projects reveal close collaboration between the architects and Hennebique’s engineer-agents Charles Bonduelle and Henri Dop, both of whom were especially prolific.

Highlighting technical references from Europe provides perspective on their combined knowledge. This inevitably leads to a reflection on the architectural culture and formalization of projects subject to the interplay of various influences, especially in the specific context of the interwar years.

Modernity emerges

In 1927, Bonduelle collaborated with the architect Charles Montaland on a building at 10 rue Berthezène (now the rue du Docteur-Saadane),²⁸⁹ to house the offices of the Algiers subsidiary of Hennebique. The journal *Chantiers Nord-africains*²⁹⁰ presented it as the first building to be constructed entirely in reinforced concrete.²⁹¹ Of course, it was a showcase for the promotion of the Hennebique system, and the reliability and capabilities of this new material.



In the duplex apartment²⁹² of the first and second floors, Montaland laid out offices and the apartment around a central lobby with a mezzanine level, lit by an impressive Art Deco stained glass window facing the rue Berthezène.

Attentive to site integration, Bonduelle again worked with Montaland on the construction of the Salama building.²⁹³ Confined to a steep terrain at the intersection of the rue Michelet (now rue Didouche-Mourad) and rue Beauséjour (now rue Rabah-Maïdat), the building is integrated thanks to a play of levels on the 8m height difference separating the two streets. The underground spaces thus open onto the rue Beauséjour, and on the lowest level accommodate the garage, with the concierge’s lodgings on the first level. From the rue Michelet, the ground level occupies the entire plot with two distinct entrances, maintaining direct access to the owner’s office.

Bonduelle’s activity also extended to numerous projects by the architect Paul Guion, based in Algiers, for the

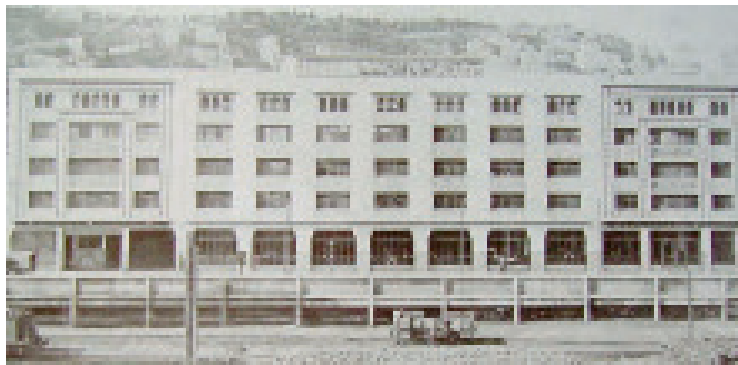
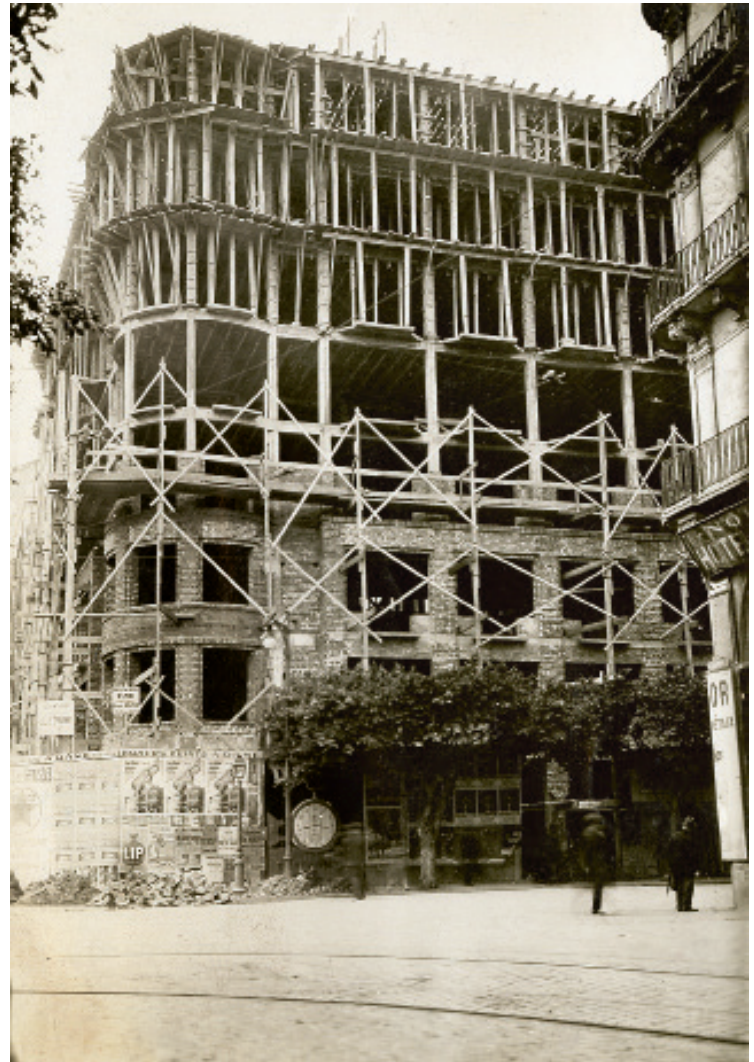
Garcia Building, 21 rue de Constantine, Algiers (1928-1929), Paul Guion, arch.; Bonduelle, eng.; Louis Fernez, art.: Under construction

Garage Vinson, Algiers (1929-1931), Paul Guion, arch.; Hennebique, eng.: Main facade on rue Sadi-Carnot

calculation of his structures (the Garcia building, the stores of the University of Algiers and the Bon-Accueil housing complex). Named for its former owner, the Garcia building, located at 21 rue de Constantine (today rue Colonel-Colonna-d'Ornano and rue Abane-Ramdane) close to the Aletti hotel, acts as an urban landmark due to its treatment of angles. Guion was especially fond of this type of urban staging, also expressed in his careful attention to façade décor and details, a hybrid of traditional Algerian art and Art Deco.

Designed by the artist Louis Fernez, the geometrical motifs used for the metalwork or the ceramics and mosaics were inspired by Berber art, while the arcades on the attic floor recall Neo-Moorish esthetics.

The wish to appropriate local models, specific to Guion's career,²⁹⁴ is also noticeable in the treatment of the facade of the Vinson garage²⁹⁵ at 140 rue Sadi-Carnot (now rue Hassiba Ben Bouali), built in 1931. The building, a car dealership and parking lot, offers perfect symmetry and introduces arched openings at the top level in the Neo-Moorish manner, while the verticality of the lateral elements is emphasized by a treatment in mosaic by the Tossut workshops of Algiers. This building combines workshops, accessory stores, and tiered parking areas with a capacity of 700 vehicles. Although it does not make the means by which the structure functions visible, its frame in reinforced concrete, designed by the engineer-agents Courtot and Dop, facilitates the layout of internal spaces.



Modernity as assumed by René Lugan

From a construction point of view, reinforced concrete also introduced significant changes in layouts and above all, allowed the expression of a new architectural language, referring to a modern and streamlined style. Free of the physical and structural constraints related to bearing walls, architects were now able to hollow out facades to suit projects, allowing them to create large windows as well as projecting volumes used as loggias or bow-windows. Space was uncoupled from

Petit, Thiedey & Delorme Building,
boulevard Victor-Hugo, Algiers (1932),
René Lugan, arch.; Bonduelle, eng.:
The corner rotunda



structure, and the concepts of “open plan” and of “architectural space,” abundantly used in avant-garde literature, also encouraged the new language of modernism²⁹⁶ beginning to appear on the architectural scene in Algiers.

Excluding all forms of decoration, René Lugan focused on enhancing volumes, thus approximating the Parisian moderns. Both engineer and architect, he designed the apartment building on boulevard Victor-Hugo²⁹⁷ for Petit, Thiedey & Delorme,²⁹⁸ in 1932, in collaboration with Bonduelle. Characterized by its rounded corner and the simplification of the proportions and

profile of the moldings, it is testimony to the spare language of the Modern Movement. The integration of balconies as compositional elements and living spaces, as well as the use of the color white and the starkness of the wrought iron balustrades, are also signs of modernism.

Commonly used in France during the 1930s, the cylindrical theme is also present in the apartment building erected in 1933 on the corner of the rue Denfert-Rochereau (now rue Khelifa-Boukhalifa) and rue Bourlon (now rue des Frères-Boulahdour)²⁹⁹ on behalf of Beldodere et Loup, with the collaboration of Henri Dop.

It is reinterpreted in larger proportions not far away, at the intersection of the rue Edgar-Quinet and rue Courbet³⁰⁰. Designed in collaboration with Charles Bonduelle, on behalf of Ms. Duhem, this apartment building adopts the principle of an open court, a new device derived from the hygienist movement. It is the reason for the gap between the cylindrical volume on the corner and the narrow lateral strip which accommodates lodgings on the landing. The upper stories were designed for apartments, while the ground and first floors are for shops and services.

The deliberate plainness of René Lugan’s language is also visible at 1-17 rue Michelet, on the luxury apartments he designed close to the University Tunnel in 1932, on behalf of the company Michelet Immobilière. The modern lines are emphasized by the treatment of the balconies and the awning of the top story, as well as by the wrought iron made by the Établissements Robert et C^{ie}.

Pinned to three staircases, the six levels, to which two attic stories are added, contain in all 45 apartments of 2 to 10 rooms. Here again, the integration of the balconies as both compositional elements and living spaces, as well as the use of the color white, refer to the modernist esthetic.

Architectural culture and technical culture

This style, which also derives its references from numerous industrial buildings, set the stage for the appearance of new architectural technologies using reinforced concrete.

Duhem Building, boulevard Edgar-Quinet,
Algiers (1932), René Lugan, arch.;
Bonduelle, eng.: The courtyard



Beldodere & Loup Building,
rues Denfert-Rochereau and Bourlon,
Algiers (1933), René Lugan, arch;
Dop, eng.: The corner rotunda
(photo by B. Aiche)

Because industrial buildings are usually designed by engineers, their construction obeys functional considerations. This gave architects perspective on a renewal that was esthetic as well as technical. Reinforced concrete made it possible to build structures with broad inner spans, a major technical innovation, so it was especially appropriate for industrial needs. Widely publicized by reports published in the Algiers trade journal *Chantiers Nord-africains*,³⁰¹ the structural and sculptural possibilities of the new material became issues in the legitimization of modernity. Architecture and civil engineering thus spawned a truly technical culture by generating new forms based on the rational use of materials.

For example, the design of workshops for the PLM³⁰² railway company of Algiers, in the Hamma area, moving away from from architectural or stylistic arguments, was essentially aimed at technical and economic efficiency.

Technical innovation influenced construction systems and reinforced concrete. In these years, it integrated the intellectual pathway of the architectural planning of a scheme, preceding the actually drafting process. These technical solutions, combined with the knowledge and skill of Hennebique's architects and engineers, fuelled architectural inventiveness, by emphasizing the importance of the structure as an element of architectural composition.

