

Ikram Saidi

*PhD Student, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development,
University of Debrecen, Egyetem Tér 1, H-4032 Debrecen, Hungary
e-mail: ikram@mailbox.unideb.hu, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9665-0592>*

Feyrouz Ahlam Saidi

*PhD Student, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development,
University of Debrecen, Egyetem Tér 1, H-4032 Debrecen, Hungary
e-mail: saidiahlam04@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5165-3373>*

**URBAN MUTATION IN ALGERIA: THE FUNCTIONAL EVOLUTION
OF ALI MENDJELI**

The dominant function of a city plays a crucial role in shaping its identity, influencing how it is perceived and experienced, and ultimately guiding its growth. The new town of Ali Mendjeli, located in northeastern Algeria, was established as a strategic response to Constantine's urban saturation, housing shortages, and increasing vulnerability to natural hazards, particularly landslides. Selected for its geographic proximity to Constantine and its availability of low-yield land, the site was planned to accommodate 300,000 residents across 1,500 hectares, in line with national decentralization and balanced development policies.

This study adopts a multidisciplinary methodology, including literature review, analysis of urban master plans, field observations, and interviews, to explore the city's functional evolution. Initially conceived as a residential relocation zone, Ali Mendjeli has undergone a dynamic transformation. By 2020, its population reached 461,885 with over 73,000 housing units. It evolved into a major academic center, hosting two university poles and receiving more than 30,000 students daily surpassing Constantine in student influx. This educational shift has significantly reinforced its regional influence. In parallel, a growing commercial function has emerged, reflected in the development of seven operational malls and nine more in planning or construction. This shift is largely driven by the retail decline in Constantine's center, prompting traders to relocate. Ritaj Mall, for instance, illustrates this trend with a strong attraction rate of 2.59 and a commercial environment dominated by non-food stores (72.2%).

Ali Mendjeli's transformation from a residential extension to a vibrant academic and commercial hub highlights the importance of functional diversity in forging a city's identity. These evolving roles not only enhance urban resilience but also strengthen the city's capacity to serve as a self-sustaining and integrated urban pole within Algeria's national urban network, raising important questions about its next phase of transformation and future identity.

Keywords: *urban transformation, urban planning, functional identity, Ali Mendjeli, residential function, commercial function, university function.*

In cites: Saidi, I., Saidi, F.A. (2025). Urban mutation in Algeria: the functional evolution of Ali Mendjeli. *Human Geography Journal*, 38, 36-41. <https://doi.org/10.26565/2076-1333-2025-38-04>

1. Introduction

The creation of new cities is often envisioned as a strategic response to the complex challenges faced by existing urban centers. These cities are typically designed using the latest planning theories and aim to embody an ideal urban model, one that overcomes the limitations of older cities. Despite these ambitions, many new cities around the world, including those in Algeria, have not been immune to issues affecting the quality of urban life. This highlights the ongoing need to rethink urban planning approaches in order to meet evolving development goals. In Algeria, the establishment of new cities forms part of a broader strategy aimed at addressing the persistent urban pressures experienced since independence. Major cities like Algiers, Oran, Constantine, and Annaba continue to attract large populations due to their concentration of services and economic activities. However, these cities often struggle to absorb this growth, resulting in spatial and functional imbalances across the national territory (Ballout, 2014). To correct this, the Algerian government has promoted the creation of new urban poles as instruments of spatial

rebalancing and sustainable development. The case of Constantine is particularly emblematic. Several interrelated factors contributed to the decision to establish the new city of Ali Mendjeli. First, Constantine faces recurrent and severe landslide hazards due to unstable geological formations, a situation exacerbated by seismic activity and climate change. Approximately 12% of the built area, around 736 hectares, is classified as unstable, leading to repeated damage to housing and infrastructure (Machane et al., 2008). Second, the city has experienced urban saturation, with its land portfolio exhausted for over two decades, leaving little room for safe and sustainable expansion (Benidir, 2007). This spatial constraint coincided with overpopulation and a deepening housing crisis, driven by rapid urbanization, rural exodus, and continuous demographic growth. These pressures significantly strained the city's infrastructure and public services (Belguidoum, 2021).

Finally, this local context aligned with a broader national orientation toward a polarized urban policy, promoting decentralization and balanced regional development.

As part of this strategy, satellite towns like Ali Mendjeli were planned to reduce pressure on large urban centers while supporting a more equitable and sustainable urban network across the country.

In this context, the article focuses on the new city of Ali Mendjeli, with particular attention to the role of its primary function in shaping urban identity and guiding development. By examining how the city has evolved from a residential extension into an emerging academic and commercial hub, this study explores whether such functional mutations reinforce or compromise the city's founding objectives. How has the dominant function of Ali Mendjeli changed over time, and what does this evolution reveal about the formation of a new urban identity?

This article adopts an interdisciplinary methodology combining literature review, analysis of urban planning documents, field observations, and semi-structured interviews. In addition, the study draws on insights from a previous research project (survey) that examined the impact of shopping malls in Ali Mendjeli on economic, spatial, and social dynamics. That study employed questionnaires targeting both traders and clients, revealing that 75% of respondents identified “commercial purpose” as their main reason for being in the city. This unexpected finding inspired the core question of the current article: if Ali Mendjeli was initially planned as a residential extension to relieve pressure on Constantine, has it since undergone a functional shift toward com-

merce and what does this say about the city's evolving identity?

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. Residential Function as a Foundational Pillar of Ali Mendjeli

2.1.1. From Concept to Reality: Origins and Evolution of Ali Mendjeli

Establishing the new city of Ali Mendjeli emerged as a strategic response to Constantine's urban constraints, driven by two main factors: the need to contain the city's rapid urban expansion and to centralize reconstruction efforts within a unified, well-planned urban area. Located about 13–15 km south of Constantine on the Ain El Bey plateau, the site was selected for its large flat surface, good construction potential, and lack of prior urbanization. Originally overlooked due to its remoteness and low population density, the plateau's 1,500 hectares, out of a 6,000-hectare land reserve, proved ideal for a new city that could accommodate continuous development. The urban design was structured into 20 neighborhood units, with additional southern and western extensions, aiming to create a balanced city offering both housing and employment opportunities. Strategically positioned near major transport arteries, including the East-West highway, National Road 79, and the province Road 101, as well as proximity to Mohamed Boudiaf Airport, Ali Mendjeli was envisioned not only as a residential relief zone for Constantine's overcrowded center but also as a self-sufficient urban pole (Lakehal, 2020; Mazouz, 2013).

Table 1

Timeline of Planning and Implementation of Ali Mendjeli

Source: Kassah Laouar, 2007 based on the monograph of the province of Constantine

Year	Action
1974	Initial planning for the new city was assigned to the local study office CADAT (now URBACO), with Czech experts conducting the study under the Urban Master Plan.
1982	Proposal for constructing a new city was formalized; initial studies were completed and a site selected based on the Master Plan guidelines.
1983	The Council of Ministers decided on May 22 to resume and continue planning studies for the new city on the current site.
1988	Interministerial decree No. 16 (January 18) approved studies covering Constantine and its surroundings within a 20 km radius.
1990	URBACO was tasked by local authorities with launching operational studies to allocate land for developers.
1991	URBACO presented two options for city development (35,000 or 52,000 housing units). The province opted to launch construction in Neighborhood Unit 06.
1992	Multiple meetings led to decisions: adopting BNEDER's proposal, coordinating between PUD and BNEDER studies, launching a national seminar and urban design competition, forming a follow-up committee (March 28).
1993	On February 22, a management office for the new city was proposed, and provisional land reservation was enacted by decree No. 93/10910 (May 5). Housing and infrastructure development continued.
1994	The first Land Occupation Plan (POS) was released by the Urban Planning Directorate in November.
1995	On April 4, a meeting adapted the POS zoning and central layout to align with CW 101 road profile.
1998	Creation of the new city was officially approved by Interministerial Decree No. 16 (January 28).
1999	The first residents settled in Ali Mendjeli.
2000	Official inauguration and naming of the city as "Ali Mendjeli" by the President; coordination cell established in the city.
2001	National seminar titled "Why a New City?" held on May 22-23 by the Land Use Planning Lab, Faculty of Earth Sciences.
2002	New Cities Law enacted to define legal conditions for establishing and developing new cities in Algeria.

2.1.2. Distribution of Housing Program Types in Neighborhood Unit 06

The initial phase of the relocation process to the new city commenced in Neighborhood Unit 06, with priority given to residents affected by landslides. Within this unit, the social housing program comprises 1,701 units, accounting for 61.25% of the total housing units in the unit neighborhood. Social housing, in this context, refers to a government-subsidized housing initiative aimed at providing affordable homes for low-income families. The participatory social housing program includes 964 units, or 34.72% of the total, while the promotional housing program consists of 112 units, representing 4.03% of the overall housing in the unit (Kassah Laouar, 2007).

2.1.3. Population development of Ali Mendjeli

Between 1999 and 2003, a total of 7,618 socio-rental units were allocated in Ali Mendjeli for relocated

families. Of these, 3,500 units were provided to families from slums, 2,997 to those from the old city and Casbah, and 1,121 units to landslide victims from Saint-Jean. These relocations played a crucial role in addressing the housing crises faced by displaced populations in Constantine, particularly for those living in precarious conditions or affected by natural disasters. Between 2008 and 2012, Ali Mendjeli experienced significant population growth driven by waves of relocation. In 2008, the population stood at 61,075, but by 2012, it had surged to 211,360. This sharp increase can be attributed to planned relocations, particularly for residents of slums and areas prone to landslides in Constantine. The relocation efforts were intensified in 2012, with a focus on addressing the housing needs of vulnerable populations. These resettlements were a major factor in the rapid demographic growth of Ali Mendjeli, transforming the city into a central hub for displaced populations (URBACO 2020).

Table 2

Population development of Ali Mendjeli between 1998 and 2020

Source: URBACO 2020

Years	1998	1999	2001	2003	2008	2010	2012	2014	2018	2020
Population	0	7,505	25,115	31,425	61,075	68,546	211,360	369,510	431,726	461,885

Between 2008 and 2020, Ali Mendjeli saw remarkable growth, with its population rising from 61,075 to 461,885, an increase of approximately 656.3%. In contrast, Constantine experienced a population decline of around -9.6%, dropping from approximately 520,000 to 470,000 residents. This sharp contrast highlights the effectiveness of relocation policies and the strategic role of Ali Mendjeli in alleviating the pressure on the mother city, Constantine. The goal of addressing housing shortages and improving living conditions for the relocated victims and those at risk of landslide was clearly achieved, as the city's population growth reflected the success of these initiatives in meeting the needs of residents and reducing overcrowding in the urban core.

2.2. The University Function: Ali Mendjeli as an Academic Hub

Ali Mendjeli has established itself as a major university city in eastern Algeria, significantly influencing student mobility patterns at both regional and national levels. The city hosts two major institutions of higher education: University of Salah Bounider Constantine 3 (situated in the Northern extension of Ali Mendjeli) and University of Abdelhamid Mehri Constantine 2 (in Neighborhood Unit 03), each comprising numerous specialized faculties that cater to a wide range of academic disciplines. These universities encompass a broad spectrum of fields, with key faculties including the Faculty of Medicine, Architecture and Urbanism, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Information Sciences and Communication, Faculty of Political Science, and the Faculty of Economic, Commercial, and Management Sciences. The presence of institutes such as the Institute of Urban Techniques Management and the Institute of Physical Education and Sports Sciences further enriches the academic offering in Ali Mendjeli. Approximately 30,278 students travel to the city to pursue their studies daily.

Most of these students (56.69%) come from other provinces, reflecting Ali Mendjeli's status as a national academic destination (Acherard et al., 2020). Additionally, 37.73% originate from neighboring communes within the Constantine grouping and 5.11% from other communes in the province of Constantine. Although international students represent only 0.47%, their presence underscores the growing global relevance of Ali Mendjeli's educational institutions. In contrast, only 1,771 students leave Ali Mendjeli daily to attend universities in Constantine, highlighting the city's growing academic self-sufficiency. Internal mobility is also notable, with students commuting within Ali Mendjeli to attend various faculties, supported by a developing local transport infrastructure. These figures confirm Ali Mendjeli's evolution into a dominant university center, contributing substantially to regional development and academic advancement (Sidi Boumedine, 2017; Kassah Laouar, 2007).

2.3. The Rise of Ali Mendjeli as a Commercial Hub

As part of a field survey in order to understand the multifunctional role of the malls, conducted with 125 individuals in Ali Mendjeli, respondents were asked to identify their primary purpose for being in the area. The results reveal that while 35.4% indicated residential reasons and 26.1% educational, a notable 32.7% cited commercial activities as their primary motive. This substantial percentage underscores the growing role of Ali Mendjeli as a commercial hub within the region, highlighting the increasing centrality of commerce in shaping the city's urban dynamics and spatial practices (Figure 1). Ali Mendjeli demonstrates strong regional appeal, attracting 44.8% local visitors and 7.7% international ones (from Tunisia, Libya, and France). This is largely due to the dominance of non-food trade (72%), with an

attraction force of 2.59 confirming the mall's solid commercial pull (Figure 2).

Even though the functionality shifted from residential to university, it did not drastically affect Ali Mendjeli's urban structure. The emergence of the commercial function has significantly transformed the city, revealing a clear divergence between the original urban planning framework and the evolving reality (Yahi et al.,

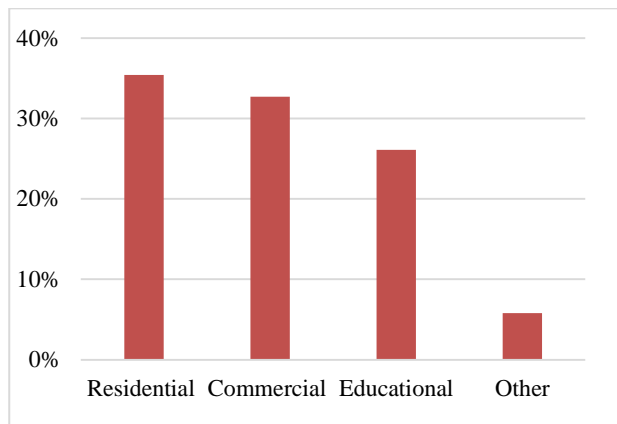


Figure 1. The place of residence of visitors
Source: edited by the authors based on the survey

Public transport infrastructure was also reinforced by introducing 15 urban bus lines operated by both public and private sectors. The nearby Ali Mendjeli land station, spanning 2,300 square meters, has become a major regional transport node, connecting the city to surrounding provinces through 63 bus lines and 385 buses, serving nearly one million passengers annually (Douichen et al., 2023). Though not originally planned, these commercial developments have driven substantial urban transformations, compelling the municipality to expand infrastructure and adapt spatial planning strategies. According to Zorgane et al. (2022), traders from the

2020). Initially planned with a focus on housing and academic institutions, the city's development trajectory changed with the rise of unplanned commercial hubs like Ritaj Mall and "Yes Mall." A key indicator of this shift is the expansion of the tramway line, which grew from 7.8 km in 2013 to 17.2 km by 2021, notably extending to the University of Abdelhamid-Mehri (urbanrail.net).

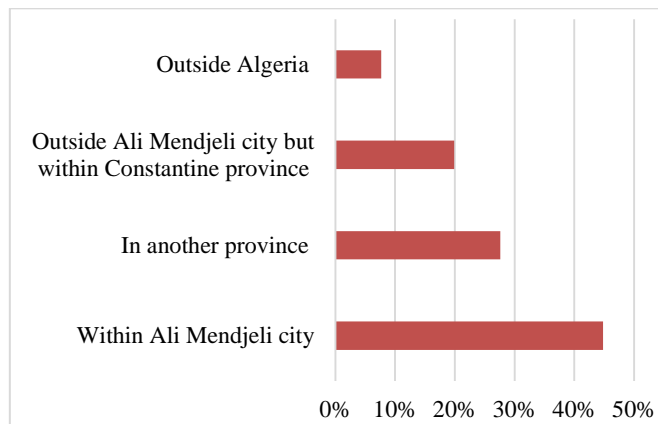


Figure 2. Reasons for being in Ali Mendjeli city
Source: edited by the authors based on the survey

historic center of Constantine began relocating their businesses to Ali Mendjeli, driven by changing consumer preferences and the growing appeal of the new malls. The success of these commercial centers has not only reoriented economic flows but also influenced consumer behavior, notably increasing nighttime shopping activity. The commercial function has thus become a core driver of Ali Mendjeli's economic and urban identity, requiring a more integrated and flexible approach to sustainable city planning. And table 3 shows how the success of the existing malls contributed to the emergence of additional shopping hubs.

Table 3

Status of Malls in Ali Mendjeli
Source: edited by the authors based on Interview 2

Mall Status	Name	Location
Existing Malls	1 – El-Ritaj	NU06
	2 – Ritaj Mall	NU02
	3 – Yes Mall	NU02
	4 – Sans Visa Mall	NU07
	5 – Salah Bey Mall	NU07
	6 – La Coupole Mall	NU07
	7 – Oscar Shopping Mall	West extension
	8 – Square Shopping (180 stores - open market)	NU20
Malls Under Construction	1 – Zekara Mall	NU18
	2 – Shahla Mall	NU10
	3 – 2bm Mall	NU15
Planned Malls	1 – El Medina shopping (300 stores-open market)	West extension
	2 – Not Named yet	West extension
	3 – Not Named yet	West extension
	4 – Not Named yet	South extension
	5 – Big Boss Mall	NU15
	6 – Not Named yet	NU10

3. Conclusion

Tracking functional shifts in urban planning is essential to understanding how cities evolve and respond to changing social, economic, and spatial dynamics. In the case of Ali Mendjeli, the city's trajectory from a primarily residential function, focused on relocation and housing relief to becoming a university city and later a commercial hub reveals how layered and dynamic urban identities can become. Each of these functions has reshaped the city's landscape: housing initiatives laid the demographic foundation, academic institutions attracted a young and mobile population, and the rise of commerce stimulated regional integration and economic

activity. These transitions not only reflect policy decisions and investment strategies but also reconfigure how residents and visitors experience the city. They affect everything from infrastructure demands to cultural patterns, ultimately defining Ali Mendjeli's identity as a multifunctional urban center. This raises a forward-looking question: What will be the next dominant function for Ali Mendjeli? Will it emerge as a healthcare hub, a tech center, or a cultural capital? Recognizing these evolving functions allows planners and policymakers to anticipate needs, design adaptive strategies, and ensure sustainable urban growth while preserving and enhancing the city's unique identity.

References:

1. Acherard, S., & Boubnider, S. (2020). La mobilité pour les études universitaires dans la ville nouvelle Ali Mendjeli: Lecture et analyse des flux de déplacements. *Revue de l'Université des Frères Mentouri Constantine 1*, 31(2), 565-581.
2. Ballout, J.-M. (2014). Territorialization through "new cities" in the Maghreb: A comparative view of the projects of Ali Mendjeli (Constantine, Algeria) and Tamansourt (Marrakech, Morocco) [Doctoral dissertation, Université Montpellier III]. HAL Archives. Retrieved from <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-03274284>
3. Belguidoum, S. (2021). Ali Mendjeli (Constantine), a new city in search of its identity: Commercial atmospheres and new urbanities. *Insaniyat. Algerian Journal of Anthropology and Social Sciences*, 1(91), 29-44. <https://doi.org/10.4000/insaniyat.24564>
4. Berkani, F. Z., & Benghadbane, F. (2023). The role of urban development strategy in achieving a strategic urban planning in new cities: Case study of the new city Ali Mendjeli (Algeria). *Civil Engineering and Architecture*, 11(5), 2840-2855. <https://doi.org/10.13189/cea.2023.110543>
5. Douichen, N., Madukali, H., & Kadri, T. (2023). The impact of the tramway on the urban dynamics of the eastern entrance (four-lane neighborhood) of the new city of Ali Mendjeli. Master's thesis, University of Larbi Ben M'hidi, Oum El Bouaghi. Retrieved from <http://dspace.univ-oeb.dz:8080/server/api/core/bitstreams/d2dd1256-c281-441f-ab78-d0b68d69c207/content>
6. Kassah Laouar, I. (2007). *The new city of Ali Mendjeli: Actors and governance in the building process*. Magister in Territorial Planning, Algeria.
7. Lakehal, A. (2020). La ville nouvelle d'Ali Mendjeli à l'épreuve des modes d'habiter. *Les Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, 73(280), 469-490. <https://doi.org/10.4000/com.12098>
8. Machane, D., Bouhadad, Y., Cheikhounis, G., Chatelain, J. L., Oubaiche, E. H., Abbes, K., Guillier, B., & Bensalem, R. (2008). Examples of geomorphologic and geological hazards in Algeria. *Natural Hazards*, 45(3), 295-308.
9. Master Plan for Urban Development and Planning. (2020, March). *Phase 1*.
10. Mazouz, S. (2013). Fabrique de la ville en Algérie et pérennisation d'un modèle : Le cas de la ville nouvelle Ali Mendjeli à Constantine. *Courrier du savoir*, 23-30.
11. Sidi Boumedine, R.P. (2017). Les villes nouvelles en Algérie: Une question apparemment réglée, mais une réalité complexe. *Les Cahiers d'EMAM*, 29.
12. UrbanRail.Net. (n.d.). Constantine light rail transit. Retrieved November 15, 2024, from <https://www.urbanrail.net/af/const/constantine.htm>
13. Yah, A., & Dekoumi, D. (2020). The public spaces of the new city Ali Mendjeli: between attendance and use. *Humain Sciences*, 31(03). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348522126_The_public_spaces_of_the_new_city_Ali_Mendjeli_between_attendance_and_use
14. Zorgane, Z., & Benidir, F. (2022). Classical Shopping VS Modern shopping malls: Complementarity or Rivalry Constantine's Case. <https://doi.org/10.20431/2456-4931.071205>

Authors Contribution: All authors have contributed equally to this work

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

Ікрам Саїді

кафедра суспільної географії та регіонального розвитку,

Університет Дебрецена, Дебрецен, Угорщина

e-mail: ikram@mailbox.unideb.hu, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9665-0592>

Фейруз Ахлам Саїді

кафедра суспільної географії та регіонального розвитку,

Університет Дебрецена, Дебрецен, Угорщина

e-mail: saidiahlam04@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5165-3373>

МІСЬКА МУТАЦІЯ В АЛЖИРІ: ФУНКЦІОНАЛЬНА ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ АЛІ МЕНДЖЕЛІ

Домінуюча функція міста відіграє вирішальну роль у формуванні його ідентичності, впливаючи на те, як його сприймають та переживають, і зрештою спрямовуючи його зростання. Нове місто Алі Менджелі, розташоване на північному сході Алжиру, було створено як стратегічну відповідь на перенасичення урбанізації міста Константіна, дефіцит житла та зростаючу вразливість до стихійних лих, зокрема зсувів. Обране через географічну близькість до Константіни та наявність низькопродуктивних земель, у цьому місці планувалося розмістити 300 000 жителів на 1500 гектарах, відповідно до національної політики децентралізації та збалансованого розвитку.

Це дослідження використовує міждисциплінарну методологію, включаючи огляд літератури, аналіз генеральних планів міст, польові спостереження та інтерв'ю для вивчення функціональної еволюції міста. Спочатку задумане як зона житлового переселення, Алі Менджелі зазнав динамічної трансформації. До 2020 року його населення досягло 461 885 осіб на понад 73 000 житлових одиниць. Воно перетворилося на великий академічний центр, де розташовані два університетські центри, та щодня приймає понад 30 000 студентів, перевищуючи Константіну за припливом студентів. Цей освітній зсув значно посилив його регіональний вплив. Паралельно з'явилася зростаюча комерційна функція, що відображається у розвитку семи діючих торговельних центрів та ще дев'яти, що перебувають у стадії планування або будівництва. Цей зсув значною мірою зумовлений спадом роздрібної торгівлі в центрі Константіни, що спонукає торговців до переїзду. Наприклад, торговий центр RitaJ Mall ілюструє цю тенденцію з високим коефіцієнтом привабливості 2,59 та комерційним середовищем, де домінують непродовольчі магазини (72,2%).

Трансформація Алі Менджелі з житлової функції на яскравий академічний та комерційний центр підкреслює важливість функціонального різноманіття у формуванні ідентичності міста. Ці ролі, що розвиваються, не лише підвищують стійкість міста, але й зміцнюють його здатність служити самодостатнім та інтегрованим міським полюсом у рамках національної міської мережі Алжиру, що порушує важливі питання щодо наступного етапу його трансформації та майбутньої ідентичності.

Ключові слова: міська трансформація, міське планування, функціональна ідентичність, Алі Менджелі, житлова функція, комерційна функція, університетська функція.

Внесок авторів: всі автори зробили рівний внесок у цю роботу

Конфлікт інтересів: автори повідомляють про відсутність конфлікту інтересів

Надійшла 23 березня 2025 р.

Прийнята 04 травня 2025 р.