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The Tabacoop Industrial Wastelands: Transformation and Informal Reappropriation of a Colonial Industrial Heritage in Annaba

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Abstract

Industrial wastelands resulting from the decline of industries from the colonial period are now an industrial heritage and a major challenge for urban renewal in Algerian cities. These wastelands are characterized by long transitional phases during which they were either abandoned or converted for light activities that are incompatible with the heritage value of the site, or even transformed for informal reappropriation. However, their transformation process remains under-researched in the Algerian context. Based on the case of the former industrial site of the Tabacoop in Annaba, this article analyses the factors that led to the site's transformation into a brownfield site and examines the role of informal reappropriations in its transformation. The study is based on a diachronic approach combining documentary and historical analysis, in situ observations, and field surveys, as well as interviews with relevant stakeholders to examine the site's transformations and the uses that have emerged there. The results showed that the informal reappropriations of the Tabacoop are not only a consequence of its abandonment, but also participate in the progressive redefinition of the functions of the site and reveal its ability to adapt to new uses. They thus emerge as indicators of the mutability of these industrial wastelands and highlight their potential for future conversion. By examining colonial industrial heritage through the processes of transformation and informal reappropriation, this research contributes to advancing knowledge on the transformation and future trajectories of industrial wastelands in the Algerian context and, more broadly, in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: industrial wastelands, colonial industrial heritage, Tabacoop site, transitional phase, informal reappropriation

Introduction

Algeria's industrial heritage from the 19th and 20th centuries is largely derived from the French colonial period between 1830 and 1962, during which industrial development mainly responded to the economic interests of the colonial power, through the exploitation of natural resources, the agri-food industries, and transport infrastructure. After independence, profound economic, industrial, and urban changes led to the gradual decline of the industry, leading to the decommissioning of many sites that have now become wastelands. Long situated at the margins of urban dynamics, these spaces can today be reinterpreted both as strategic land resources for the city's urbanization needs and as potential sites for urban regeneration that preserves and valorizes their industrial heritage. Furthermore, it is important to mention that some of these historical sites and industrial buildings are considered as part of Algeria's heritage, carrying historical, memorial, social, economic, and even architectural value. The city of Annaba illustrates this situation. A former industrial centre and major port in eastern Algeria, Annaba has an important industrial heritage from the colonial period, which is now in a state of wasteland. These industrial wastelands, far from being static, are undergoing gradual transformations driven by multiple forms of reappropriation, often informal in nature, which alter their original functions and their place in the contemporary city. In this perspective, this article focuses on the case of the Tabacoop site in Annaba, an emblematic agro-industrial complex dating from the colonial period. Through the analysis of the site's transformations and the informal reappropriation practices that have emerged within it, this study examines how these dynamics contribute to the transformation of a colonial industrial heritage wasteland and reveal its potential for future reuse in support of the city's urban development.

1 Industrial wastelands, international dynamics, and the Algerian context

The emergence of industrial wastelands is one of the main consequences of the economic and industrial changes since the 1970s, a period marked by deindustrialization, relocation, and the restructuring of production systems. (Andres and Ambrosino 2008; Janin and Andres 2008). The regeneration of industrial wastelands has gradually developed in the United States since the 1960s, notably through the redevelopment of waterfronts, former port areas rendered obsolete by changes in maritime transport (Real 2015). From the late 1980s onward, this model of urban regeneration gradually evolved in Europe with the emergence of a new perception of industrial remains, which increasingly came to be attributed historical, memorial, and heritage value (Preite 2014). Their integration into development policies was in line with the principles of compact cities, which aimed to limit urban sprawl and reclaim already urbanized areas, making these sites real land resources that could support urban projects (Janin and Andres 2008). Although research on industrial wastelands and brownfields is well established in European and North American contexts and is also growing significantly in Asian contexts (Ravaz et al. 2024; Jacek et al. 2022; De Sousa et al. 2023; Rizzo et al. 2015; Sessa et al. 2022; Morar et al. 2021), there is comparatively little research in African contexts, although some studies have addressed the issue of wasteland redevelopment in South Africa (Goosen and Fitchett 2020).

However, in postcolonial contexts, colonial industrial heritage wastelands often remain associated with sensitive memories. Some countries, such as Taiwan, have gradually integrated this heritage into strategies for territorial development, cultural enhancement, and the transmission of memory through appropriate public policies (Justin 2023). Conversely, in other countries, such as Senegal, industrial heritage remains largely unvalued, due to the lack of recognition of heritage and the absence of specific protection mechanisms (Gaye 2014). Algeria falls within

this second category; the recognition of its colonial architectural and urban heritage remains limited. Long associated with colonial memory, official heritage institutions are still slow to fully recognize this heritage. While a new generation is gradually redefining the relationship between colonial heritage and heritage, colonial industrial heritage remains largely unconsidered and continues to be mainly perceived as evidence of the economic exploitation of the colonial period. As Boussad points out, "The voluntary or involuntary omission of the heritage produced during the 19th and 20th centuries is surely the result of a tendency seeking to evacuate the memory of French domination" (Boussad 2005). Its reception thus remains marked by a memory that is in constant recomposition, according to political and economic developments (Righi 2020). Industrial heritage wastelands are thus often ignored or demolished without prior evaluation of their heritage value, history, or potential for conversion (Bouaziz 2011). In the absence of a national inventory of industrial heritage or industrial heritage wastelands, a recovery strategy for them, or a real protection policy, these sites are subject to sporadic and poorly planned interventions (Djellata 2006). This situation has resulted in industrial wastelands becoming undeveloped or underexploited land despite their extensive size and strategic location, with some situated in pericentral areas of the city. This consequently limits their contribution to the urban renewal of Algerian cities. Likewise, their value either as industrial heritage bearing witness to the industrial history of a city or as land reserves capable of supporting sustainable urban development remains unexploited. In Algeria, research on industrial wastelands has focused on their architectural and heritage value (Bouaziz 2011), as well as on issues related to their rehabilitation and reuse (Bouaziz and Guechi 2024). Moreover, Boudjadja and Sassi-Boudemegh (2020) examined urban wastelands in Algiers through an analysis of their representations, temporary uses, and transformation into new cultural spaces. Their research highlights the importance of taking into account the perceptions and practices of residents and users, as well as the perspectives of decision-makers and territorial managers, when addressing these changing spaces (Boudjadja and Sassi-Boudemegh 2020). However, despite these contributions, the processes of informal reappropriation of brownfield sites remain relatively underdocumented in the Algerian literature, although such processes may provide valuable insights into contemporary urban dynamics and the potential for the redevelopment of disused sites. It is in this perspective that this research takes place, taking as a case study the Tabacoop site in Annaba, a colonial-era industrial heritage site, now a wasteland. The main objective of this research is to analyse the site's transformations through an examination of the informal reappropriation practices that have emerged there. More specifically, the research seeks to identify the factors that led to the site's transformation into a wasteland, characterize the current forms of reappropriation, and analyse the effects of the site's functional transformations, as well as the strategies adopted by actors regarding the redevelopment of the site. The heritage dimension is addressed in order to contextualize and assess the potential and significance of the redevelopment and adaptive reuse of colonial industrial heritage. How does informal reappropriation contribute to the transformation of the Tabacoop's wastelands, and how do these dynamics constitute indicators for its future reconversion trajectory? That is the research question we are raising. The hypothesis adopted is that informal reappropriation constitutes an indicator of the site's mutability through new uses and new functions likely to guide future conversion strategies.

This article presents a qualitative, diachronic and empirical study of the industrial wasteland site of the Tabacoop in Annaba. The diachronic study consists of historical and documentary analysis of the evolution of the Tabacoop from the creation of the agri-food industry to its decline, culminating in the current use of the site as a wasteland. This analysis makes it possible to

identify the various factors that contributed to the gradual decline of the Tabacoop's agri-food industrial activity. The empirical study then aims to characterize the current transformations of wasteland sites. For this, in situ investigations were carried out between 2020 and 2026 through direct observations and field surveys to analyse the current uses and spatial-functional transformations of the site. These investigations were supplemented with semi-structured interviews with institutional actors such as: the Directorate of Domains (DD)[1], the Directorate of Urban Planning, Architecture and Construction (DUAC),[2] the Provincial Directorate of Culture and Arts (DCAW),[3] the Communal Popular Assembly (APC),[4] and the Algerian Investment Promotion Agency (AAPI).[5] These interviews aimed to identify the actions and strategies adopted by these actors in relation to the transformation and informal reappropriation of the Tabacoop site, as well as their intentions regarding its future redevelopment.

2 The Tabacoop in Annaba: From productive space to wasteland

Over the centuries, Annaba has been an agricultural and mining region, which became a trade centre due to the natural resources of its soil and subsoil. In 1881, 50.5% of the population made their living from industry and mines, and 29% from trade, transport, and fishing (Travers 1958). Since 1920, the city has experienced real economic prosperity thanks to mining, especially in the iron mines of Mokta El Hadid, as well as to the agri-food cooperative, the 'franco-musulmane Tabacoop cooperative' (Munck 1955). This was an unprecedented cooperative that brought together French settlers (cades and factory owners) and the indigenous Algerian population (farmers and workers) in an industry processing local agricultural products: tobacco, cotton, tomato, citrus fruits, and oil.

The Tabacoop was one of the main sites in Annaba's industrial history and in the development of industrial cultures in eastern Algeria during the colonial period. Its creation in 1921 resulted from the merger of cooperative docks with the company of tobacco planters of the region of Bône,[6] which gave rise to the largest industrial crops cooperative in Algeria, the 'Eastern Agricultural Union' (Munck 1955).[7] Initially specializing in the tobacco sector, a traditional crop of the region, the Tabacoop ensured control over the entire production chain, from cultivation to packaging and marketing on national and international markets, with the cooperation based on a marketing infrastructure (Tomas 1977). This cooperation was quickly strengthened by the creation of other specialized cooperatives: Tomacoop, in 1922, for the processing of industrial tomatoes; Cotocoop, in 1925, for the cotton industry; then Oléocoop in 1932 and Agrumocoop in 1933, dedicated respectively to olive cultivation and citrus fruit (Dahmani 2001). These structures formed a real agro-industrial conglomerate that shaped the regional economy at the time, as the Tabacoop's area of influence extended to the plains of Annaba, Guelma, and El-Tarf. The rise of these cooperatives was accompanied by the construction of a major industrial and logistics complex (Figure 1) located south of Annaba, near the remains of ancient Hippone. The choice of this location was driven by several considerations, most notably the availability of water, supplied by the river Boudjimah, proximity to transport infrastructure (roads, railway,

[1] Direction des domaines.
[2] Direction de l'Urbanisme, de l'Architecture et de la Construction.
[3] Direction de la Culture et des Arts de Wilaya.
[4] Assemblée Populaire Communale.
[5] Agence Algérienne de Promotion de l'Investissement.
[6] Former name of the city of Annaba during the colonial period.
[7] Union agricole de l'Est.

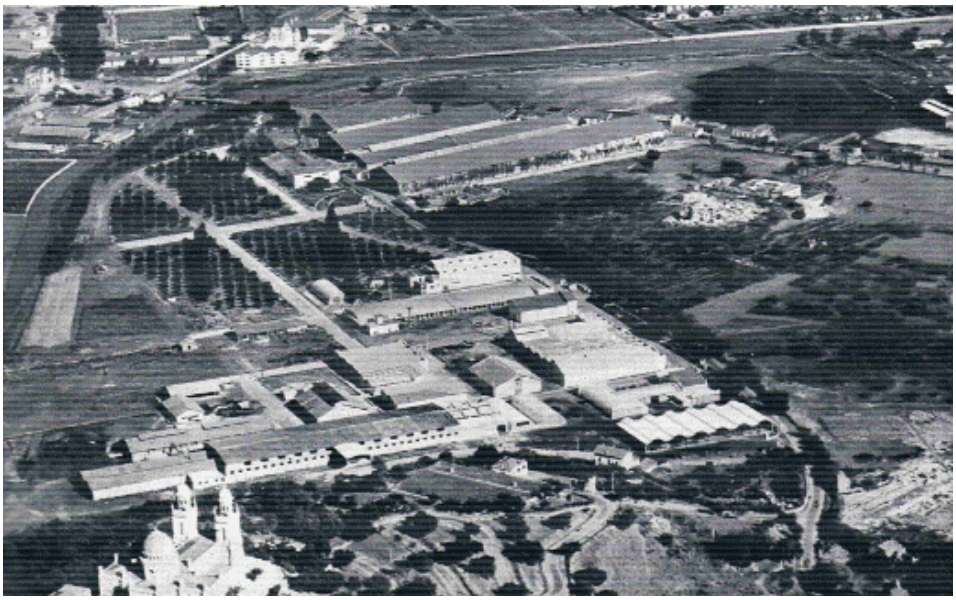


Figure 1: General view of the agricultural city of the Tabacoop of Annaba in 1950. Charles Munck, Lacité de l'agriculture 1950, vue générale de l'ensemble, 1955. Public Domain.'

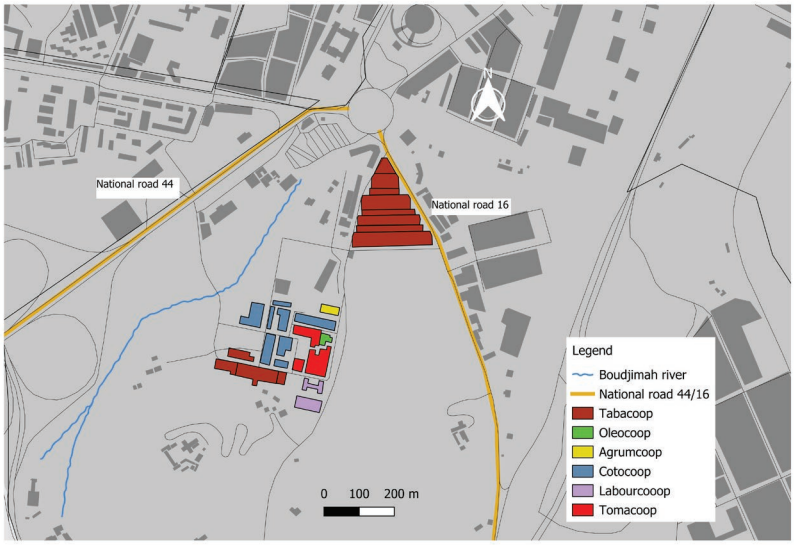


Figure 2: Location and composition of the Tabacoop industrial complex. Haouchet Dounia, 2025.

port), and the possibility of extension if needed (Figure 2). The industrial complex consisted of docks, warehouses, hangars, workshops, and factories. Today, it represents a testimony to a prosperous industrial past of the city of Annaba in the agri-food sector.

Beyond its historical value, the Tabacoop has a heritage value supported by its socio-economic, technical, and architectural dimensions. The socio-economic value of the Tabacoop cooperative lay in its strong contribution to regional development through its structuring of the main agricultural and agro-industrial sectors of eastern Algeria. At its peak, the cooperative mobilized more than 100,000 farmers, at a time when other industrial sectors were still underdeveloped (Gueroui 2014). Moreover, its activities went beyond the field of industrial production; it also contributed to the urban development of the city through the construction of

major public facilities such as workers' estates, a children's daycare centre, the Sainte-Thérèse clinic, the Bounamoussa dam, and a hydroelectric plant. The cooperative thus participated in the modernization of regional infrastructure and the promotion of Annaba as an economic metropolis of eastern Algeria (Munck 1955).

The heritage value of the Tabacoop also lies in the technical significance of its industrial complex, as its factories are distinguished by a high level of modernization through the use of efficient equipment in the tobacco, textiles, and agri-food sectors, such as pneumatic transport systems, sorting, refrigeration, and preservation equipment, considered a technical innovation at that time. From an architectural perspective, the Tabacoop has an interest and value through the functional architecture of its buildings, built mainly between 1920 and 1962, and designed to meet the requirements of industrial production (Gueroui 2014). The complex is distinguished by its considerable typological diversity, including sheds, metal structures, reinforced concrete constructions, and more traditional buildings, which reflect the evolution of construction techniques while maintaining a strong overall coherence. Through their scale, volume, and constructional qualities, the docks (Figure 3) and the Tabacoop buildings now constitute an industrial heritage that carries the collective memory and identity of the city of Annaba (Figure 4). In addition to the various heritage values embodied by the site, it also possesses a use value, understood as the Tabacoop site's capacity to retain its utility through new transformations and forms of reappropriation, which demonstrate its capacity to evolve toward new uses. Before analysing the current forms of reappropriation and transformation at the Tabacoop site, first let us examine the factors that contributed to its industrial decline and its transformation into a 7-hectare wasteland.

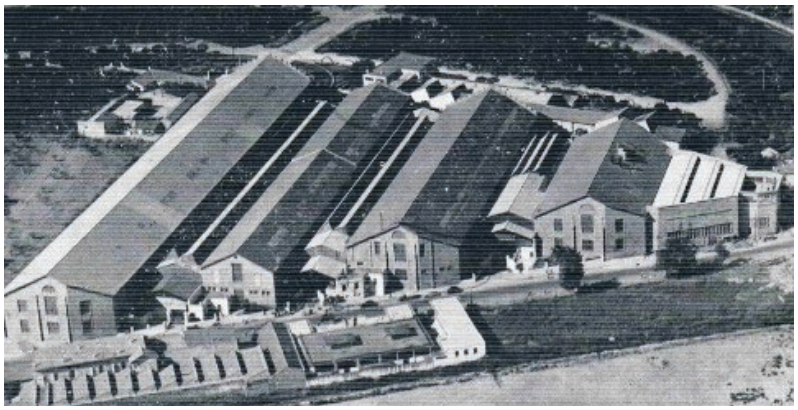


Figure 3: View of the Tabacoop docks in 1955. Charles Munck, Vue des docks en 1955, 1955. PublicDomain.



Figure 4: View of the Tabacoop docks in 2025. Haouchet Dounia, 2025.

The transformation of the Tabacoop into a wasteland resulted from the cumulative effect of several factors stemming from the profound political, economic, industrial, and territorial changes that accompanied Algeria's independence. A significant change occurred in 1962 with the massive departure of European industrialists, entrepreneurs, and executives, as a direct consequence of the war of liberation (1954–1962) (Talahite 2016). This led to the abandonment of many companies inherited from the colonial period, integrated by the state into the vacant property regime. In order to ensure the continuity of economic activity, a self-management[8] policy was established in 1963 before gradually being replaced by nationalizations and the integration of companies into the socialist public sector (Hélie 1969; Talahite 2016). Considered to be economically inefficient, this approach was quickly called into question (Zouache 2012). It is in this context that the assets of the Tabacoop were transferred to the state, marking a break in its management method.

After a period of stagnation between 1962 and 1966, a second phase began in 1967, during which the country adopted a strategy of self-centred industrialization, marking a clear break with the colonial economy (Sehab 2013). This strategy, based on the trilogy 'industrialization, integration and introversion' (Tamar 1983), was based in the 1970s on 'industrializing industries'[9] (Bekkour 2016), inspired by the theory of Gérard Destanne of Bernis[10] (Talahite 2016). This policy favoured large public complexes, particularly in the steel and hydrocarbon sectors, while pursuing certain projects initiated by the 1958 Constantine Plan[11] (Talahite 2016). Under this policy, Algeria experienced major industrial changes between 1967 and 1977: the nationalization of goods, the creation of large industrial complexes, and the implementation of development plans. In this context, the industrial companies inherited from the colonial period, including the Tabacoop, were nationalized and integrated into the public sector. Although the Tabacoop continued its activity until the 1990s within the national tobacco industry, the global economic crisis of the mid-1980s strongly influenced the Algerian economy. The decline in hydrocarbon prices exposed the limitations of this self-centred development model, leading to profound changes in the country's industrial organization. From 1990 onwards, Algerian industry was deeply influenced by globalization; its economic reforms were reinforced by the structural adjustment programme implemented in 1994. The structural adjustment programme promoted economic liberalization, the empowerment of public enterprises, industrial restructuring, and privatization (Bouyacoub 1997; Sehab 2013; Talahite 2016). These transformations

[8] Self-management was an attempt to save the Algerian economy and applied only to abandoned properties, vacant companies, and those whose activity was not considered sufficient, which were entrusted to workers directed by a management committee that they had elected=.

[9] Industrializing industry is considered as an explanatory theory of economic development (Benissad 1974). Professor Hocine Benissad defines industrializing industry as: "... a unit of production that exerts asymmetric and irreversible effects on the social and institutional environment as well as on upstream and downstream productive activities."

[10] Itself stemming from a tradition that can be traced back to Hirschman's theory of "unbalanced development", which was transmitted by François Perroux and incorporates principles from the Soviet model.

[11] Announced in 1958 by General de Gaulle, the Constantine Plan aimed to stimulate the economic and social development of Algeria, notably through an industrialization policy based on the creation of support organizations for investors. The main projects concerned basic industries, with the construction of steel and petrochemical complexes and a gas liquefaction plant, largely for export. However, the independence of Algeria in 1962 put an end to this programme, leading to the abandonment of the majority of ongoing projects and interrupting the industrial dynamic initiated at the end of the colonial period. It would be relaunched only from 1967 with the implementation of a new national development strategy.

accelerated a process of deindustrialization marked by the closure or dismantling of many public enterprises, leading to the abandonment of vast industrial estates (Sehab 2013; Arab and Faradji 2018). The Tabacoop was affected by these transformations, as were many other Algerian industries.

Alongside these economic changes, the territorial reorganization of industrial sites also contributed to the obsolescence of the Tabacoop site. Initially located on the outskirts of the city, according to the European industrial model of the late 19th century, which was characterized by proximity between production sites and residential areas (Brûlé and Mutin 1982), the Tabacoop was gradually being overtaken by urbanization. As part of the development policy initiated in the 1960s, the state now promotes the development of large specialized industrial areas on the outskirts of cities, such as Rouiba-Réghaïa in Algiers, Tlelat near Oran, and El-Hadjar in Annaba; these sites have infrastructures more adapted to the new production requirements (Sehab 2013). From that point on, the location of the Tabacoop became restrictive, reducing its ability to adapt to new industrial logics. However, the transformation of the Tabacoop into a wasteland did not result in the disappearance of all forms of site use. Although neglected by public institutions and economic actors, the Tabacoop continues to exist in the urban landscape through a process of transformation and informal reappropriation.

3 Transformation and informal reappropriation of the Tabacoop site

Following the country's independence, all the assets of the Tabacoop were transferred to the state as vacant properties pursuant to decree no. 63-388[12] of October 1, 1963, which declared agricultural holdings owned by certain natural or legal persons to be state property, as well as ordinance no. 66-102[13] of May 6, 1966 concerning the definitive transfer to the state of ownership of vacant properties, both immovable and movable, which had been abandoned or left without an owner following the departure of the French settlers at the country's independence. This change in land tenure status subsequently formed part of a broader process of agricultural sector reorganization undertaken by the Algerian state following independence. As part of this broader reorganization, the agricultural sector underwent profound restructuring within the framework of the agrarian revolution, implemented through ordinance no. 71-73[14] of November 8, 1971. This ordinance represented a major milestone in the transformation of Algeria's agricultural land tenure system, notably by providing for the reorganization of agricultural land and farming structures. Under this ordinance, the Tabacoop remained operational, from 1962 to 1974, with the Algerian State retaining the agricultural nature of the cooperative because it was still in working condition. It should be recalled that this cooperative had been a major agricultural institution in the east of the country since its creation in February 1921. From November 10, 1974, the cooperative was leased by a multi-service state agricultural cooperative under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture, becoming the regional agricultural cooperative

[12] Décret n° 63-388 du 1er octobre 1963 déclarant biens de l'État les exploitations agricoles appartenant à certaines personnes physiques ou morales. *Journal officiel de la République algérienne*, n° 73, 4 octobre 1963, p. 1015, eclaring agricultural holdings owned by certain natural or legal persons to be state property.

[13] Ordonnance n° 66-102 du 6 mai 1966 portant dévolution à l'État de la propriété des biens vacants. *Journal officiel de la République algérienne*, n° 36, 6 mai 1966, p. 344, concerning the transfer to the state of ownership of vacant properties, both movable and immovable.

[14] Ordonnance n° 71-73 du 8 novembre 1971 portant Révolution agraire. *Journal officiel de la République algérienne,* n° 97, 30 novembre 1971, pp. 1281–1300, on the Agrarian Revolution.

specializing in industrial crops (CARSCI)[15] in 1997. According to the head of the Disputes Department at the Directorate of Domains Annaba, the management of this colonial legacy by CARSCI experienced many difficulties and the site of the former Tabacoop ceased operations. Several properties belonging to the Tabacoop had been leased to individuals who had developed activities unrelated to the agricultural world, such as storage depots and craft workshops (mechanics, carpentry, welding, sheet metal work) (Hamid Boucharma, interview, March 9, 2020). A local newspaper stated that, "Due to the mismanagement of the CARSCI through the transfer and leasing of its assets, this cooperative is practically bankrupt after almost a century of existence."[16]

After several years of exploitation by CARSCI, the state's recovery of the Tabacoop properties was formalized through two orders issued by the Wali,[17] adopted in 2003 and 2005 respectively, providing for their incorporation into the state domains (Hamid Boucharma, interview, March 9, 2020). However, the former Tabacoop remains as it is, with commercial premises, warehouses, depots, and other activities belonging to private owners. After about 20 years of illicit exploitation by individuals who have made it their personal property, the courts ruled in favour of the domains of the state, which acquired the assets of the Tabaccop and became its legal owners at the end of May 2018. Reuses by individuals explain the disappearance of many industrial facilities that have now become part of this wasteland.

According to one of the former workers of the Tabacoop cooperative, the demise of the Tabacoop can be described as a gradual process of decline, experienced as a trauma by the former farmers of the cooperative (Lazher Mestiri, interview, November 10, 2019). The Tabacoop is part of the image of the city of Annaba, with visible traces of its industrial past. It is an old system of production, of organization of the economic life of the city that has not been able to adapt to economic changes. This evolution illustrates the transformation process of abandoned industrial spaces described by Lacour (1987), according to which workplaces and production areas lose their functional value to become unoccupied spaces, often perceived as ruptures in the urban fabric. The transformation of the Tabacoop into a wasteland not only altered the site's image, but also redefined its relationship with the city, by creating a spatial and functional discontinuity between the site and its immediate urban environment. The Tabacoop has transitioned from being a productive space integrated with local economic dynamics to being an industrial wasteland conducive to the informal reappropriation of the site.

Being a wasteland does not mean being in a simple state of abandonment, nor does it just mean being land that will be converted. More broadly, it is considered as a dynamic process, evolving throughout a trajectory of mutation (Andres 2008). The most critical phase is the period between the emergence of the wasteland and its incorporation into a planned redevelopment process. This transitional phase is referred to as 'in between' or 'transitional' (Janin and Andres 2008). Paying attention to the transitional phase of being a wasteland allows us to note the type of activities that can be developed there, which contribute to initiating the mutation of the wasteland by giving it a new use and especially a new image (Andres 2010).

[15] Coopérative agricole régionale spécialisée en cultures industrielles.

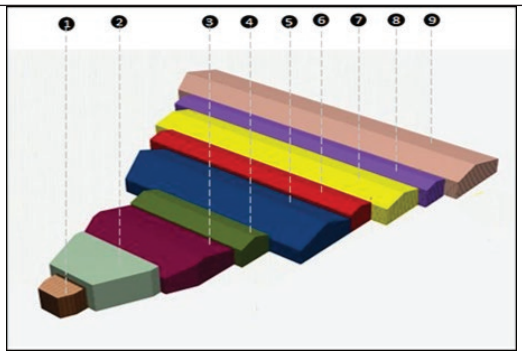
[16] Djabali A. 2006, April 12. *En raison de la mauvaise gestion de CARSCI par le transfert et la location de ses actifs, cette coopérative est pratiquement en faillite après presque un siècle d'existence.* El Watan newspaper.

[17] A Wali's order is an official and legally enforceable administrative act issued by the Wali, the state-appointed representative and chief executive at the level of an administrative province in Algeria. The Wali represents the state and the government within the province and oversees the activities of the state's decentralized administrative services.

Applied to the case of the former Tabacoop cooperative, this concept is reflected in a prolonged transitional phase during which the site was illegally exploited by private individuals and legal disputes for nearly 20 years. This situation created a phase conducive to the appropriation of wasteland spaces through alternative practices that counteract abandonment. These are often precarious, unplanned activities developed by different actors. Different terms have been used to refer to these actors, including 'informal actors' (Groth and Corijn 2005), 'space pioneers' (Oswalt 2005; Overmeyer 2007), and 'temporary users' (Haydn and Temel 2006). In the case of the Tabacoop's wastelands, the term 'informal actors' is most relevant to characterize its actors. The qualifier 'informal' is justified by the illegal nature of their situation, as it is small traders and craftspeople who illegally occupy the wastelands of the Tabacoop through rental contracts and transfers, often under illegal conditions. Beyond the interest of the site due to its large area and strategic location at the western entrance to the city, these informal actors are attracted by low rental and maintenance costs and by accessible and easily convertible premises, all the more so since the building managers give them almost complete freedom regarding the use or layout of buildings.

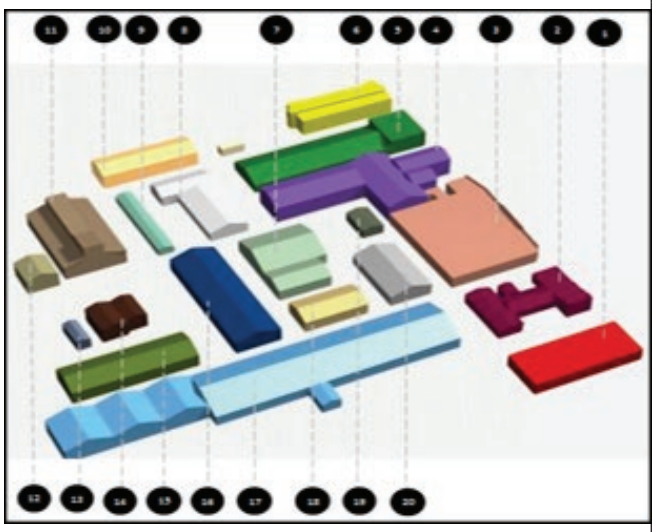
The direct field survey in September 2024 revealed that 82% of buildings are used for temporary occupancy: storage depots and artisanal activities are the most frequently recorded categories, occupying 30% and 26% of the buildings respectively. A further 15% are used for trade, 4% for services, and 7% for housing, with only 18% abandoned. Tables 1 and 2 below present in detail the existing activities currently taking place in the buildings on the site. Block 1 consists of docks, and block 2 of factories and hangars:

Table 1: Current occupations in the industrial wastelands on block 1

Block 1 (the docks)		
No.	Current occupations	**Illustration**
1	Chevrolet car parts sales	
2	Chevrolet car dealership	
3	Agricultural Bank	
4	Without function	
5	Without function	
6	Without function	
7	Without function	
8	Temporary fair	
9	Wine warehouse	

Source: Haouchet Dounia, 2025

Table 2: Current occupations in the industrial wastelands on block 2

Block 2		
N°	Current occupations	**Illustration**
1	Sheet metal worker	
2	Welding workshop	
3	Wine warehouse	
4	Wood warehouse	
5	Wood sale	
6	Cold room and living space	
7	Wine production	
8	Production of office furniture	
9	Without function	
10	Storage of beverages	
11	Sheet metal worker, mechanic	
12	Welding workshop	
13	Storage of equipment	
14	Storage of beverages	
15	Storage of general food supplies	
16	Storage of beverages	
17	Sheet metal worker, mechanics, residential	
18	Sewing workshop	
19	Without function	
20	Carpentry	

Source: Haouchet Dounia, 2025.

The analysis of informal forms of reappropriation observed in the industrial wasteland of the Tabacoop highlights an ambivalent phenomenon, characteristic of many abandoned industrial sites: spontaneous uses that contribute to a form of functional reactivation of abandoned spaces by assigning them new economic or service functions. This occupation helps to mitigate the effects of vacancy, reduce the image of the site being an urban enclave following the ceasing of industrial activity, and demonstrate the ability of these buildings to accommodate new uses. In some cases, notably those of commercial and service activities, reappropriation has led to a significant improvement in the image of the site and an enhancement of the built spaces. In other cases, the underutilization of large islands in the industrial complex promotes the gradual marginalization of buildings and their immediate surroundings, creating conditions conducive to the proliferation of illegal informal activities, insecurity, and an accelerated deterioration of built structures. Therefore, if certain occupations contribute to keeping the site in operation, they can simultaneously lead to changes in its architectural and heritage characteristics. This situation illustrates the paradox commonly observed in industrial wastelands, where temporary uses give these sites a second life while simultaneously constituting a potential source of degradation (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Views of the wastelands of Tabacoop. Haouchet Dounia, 2025.

4 Actors' strategies for the redevelopment of the Tabacoop industrial wasteland

The dynamics of informal reappropriation of the industrial wastelands of the Tabacoop can be seen as what some call "initiatives emanating from below" (Gravari-Barbas 2004). That is to say, they are forms of appropriation produced by the users themselves, independent of planning operations planned by urban planning instruments. However, in the case of the Tabacoop, this spontaneous reconquest is not totally independent from formal institutions. Faced with the absence of an operational rehabilitation project, the state, as the owner of the site, had gradually integrated these occupations into a pragmatic management logic based on contracting, as discussed during an interview with the head of the Disputes Department at the Directorate of Domains Annaba, conducted on October 12, 2020 (Hamid Boucharma, interview, October 12, 2020). Through rental contracts, and more recently through concession prospects, the institution supports certain economic initiatives likely to maintain the buildings in working order while limiting the costs of maintenance, monitoring, and site security. This strategy reflects a form of transitional management of the wasteland more oriented towards economic and land objectives than towards a real rehabilitation or reconversion operation that considers the land, architectural, and heritage opportunities of the site. If it makes it possible to slow down certain degradation processes in the short term, it remains insufficient to meet the challenge of the urban integration of this industrial heritage.

In this respect, 'the transitional phase' of the wasteland becomes a decisive stage in its transformation trajectory. The period between the abandonment of a site and its planned reuse is a privileged moment during which new actors and new forms of regulation emerge that can influence its future (Andres 2006). Others consider that these intermediate temporalities favour the emergence of unplanned urbanity, which allows the birth of participatory approaches on the part of the city's actors (Groth and Corijn 2005). This is the case of the Tabacoop, where the informal occupations observed on the site attest to the persistence of certain uses and the presence of social interests, despite its apparent state of abandonment. Rather than simply reflecting the absence of a function, these practices also reveal the site's capacity to generate forms of reappropriation and maintain relationships with its surrounding urban environment. However,

these initiatives remain largely spontaneous and temporary. The challenge, therefore, lies in the ability to transform these informal dynamics into a structured urban regeneration project capable of integrating the functional, heritage, architectural, and social dimensions of the site.

This potential is also reflected in the perspectives expressed by the institutional actors interviewed. The interview conducted with the secretary-general of Annaba's Municipal People's Assembly (APC) reveals a favourable perspective on the redevelopment of the former Tabacoop site. He highlights the strategic importance of its location within the urban area, as well as the combination of its land and heritage values. From his perspective, the redevelopment of the site could be supported by the implementation of strategic projects capable of contributing to the city's economic development, while also incorporating recreational spaces for the local population. The valorization of the site is thus viewed as a potential means of strengthening its integration into the urban fabric and, more broadly, contributing to Annaba's image and attractiveness (Kadour Rachedi, interview, May 15, 2024).

The perspective of the provincial Directorate of Culture and Arts complements this approach by placing greater emphasis on the historical and heritage significance of the complex and by advocating for a cultural function. An interview conducted with its representatives emphasized that the buildings and spaces of the former Tabacoop bear witness to Annaba's industrial history and contribute to the construction of its urban identity. However, this heritage value remains insufficiently recognized and valued. According to the interviewees, current heritage designation procedures prioritize cultural monuments, while industrial heritage complexes receive more limited recognition and protection (Rahima Merazguia and Samir Houamria, interview, May 15, 2024). According to these actors, this situation is also related to the outdated nature of Algeria's heritage legislation, which is insufficiently adapted to the specific characteristics and challenges associated with the preservation and redevelopment of industrial heritage.

The comparison of these two institutional perspectives thus highlights the plurality of values attributed to the former Tabacoop site. While the APC places greater emphasis on its land, economic, urban, and social potential, the Directorate of Culture emphasizes its historical, architectural, and identity-related values. This diversity of perspectives does not, in itself, constitute an obstacle to redevelopment; rather, it highlights the need to reconcile different dimensions of action and value. The regeneration of the wasteland therefore requires moving beyond an exclusively land- or function-oriented approach to jointly address the challenges of industrial heritage valorization, urban regeneration, local development, and social uses.

This plurality of values is complemented by another dimension of redevelopment: the recognition and mobilization of vacant land within institutional frameworks dedicated to investment. Law no. 23-17, establishing the conditions and procedures for granting economic land belonging to the state's private domain for the implementation of investment projects, introduces, within this framework, the concept of "residual real estate assets of dissolved public enterprises" intended for investment.[18] This development reflects an effort to better identify and mobilize certain vacant real estate assets as potential sites for investment projects.

Within this framework, the Algerian Investment Promotion Agency (AAPI) is responsible for maintaining and updating the register of economic land that may form part of the real estate supply available for investment, including information on the characteristics of the properties

[18] Loi n° 23-17 du 15 novembre 2023 fixant les conditions et les modalités d'octroi du foncier économique relevant du domaine privé de l'État destiné à la réalisation de projets d'investissement. *Journal officiel de la République algérienne*, n° 73, 16 novembre 2023, p. 5, setting the conditions and procedures for granting economic land under private state ownership for investment projects.

concerned. It is also responsible for making this information available to investors through the Investor Digital Platform. However, the results of the semi-structured interview conducted with the director of AAPI in Annaba highlight a gap between the provisions established by this new regulatory framework and their implementation at the local level. According to this actor, at the time of the interview, no residual real estate assets from dissolved public enterprises had been listed on the Investor Digital Platform for the municipality of Annaba (Rabeh Zennir, interview, September 7, 2026). This situation was said to be primarily related to the absence of a prior inventory of the properties concerned, a process that fell under the responsibility of the Directorate of State Domains. The case of the former Tabacoop thus highlights a challenge that extends beyond the issue of land availability: the effective mobilization of the wasteland depends on the capacity of institutions to develop, update, and share a common body of knowledge on its land and heritage characteristics. The existence of a regulatory and digital framework is therefore insufficient, in itself, to transform these industrial wastelands into land resources that can be effectively mobilized for investment.

This difficulty of mobilization is also found in the field of urban planning. The ex-Tabacoop has indeed been integrated into urban planning instruments, notably through the 2003 land use plan (POS),[19] which provided for a rehabilitation and conversion of the site into a cultural hub. Yet, more than two decades after the development of this plan, no concrete urban project consistent with this planning objective has been initiated. The observed delay is therefore not necessarily due to a lack of recognition of the site in the planning documents, but rather to difficulties related to the implementation of these guidelines.

An interview conducted with an official from the Directorate of Urban Planning, Architecture and Construction (DUAC) of Annaba Province confirms this interpretation. According to the head of the urban planning department of the DUAC, industrial wastelands are generally taken into account in urban planning instruments and can be subject to programming, as in the case of the Tabacoop. The main obstacles to their conversion are, rather, the lack of financial resources and the prioritization of investment. In the case of the Tabacoop, the cultural function designated in the POS therefore appears not to have been accorded sufficient priority to enable its transition to the implementation phase. In this context, the head of the urban planning department at the DUAC in Annaba emphasizes the need for strong financial support from the public authorities to facilitate the redevelopment of industrial wastelands (Zakaria Feddaoui, interview, May 28, 2024). This situation highlights a persistent gap between urban planning orientations and their effective implementation. Despite its inclusion in urban planning documents, the ex-Tabacoop thus remains in a prolonged transitional state, within which informal dynamics constitute, in the absence of structured intervention, one of the main forms of evolution of the site. The revision of the POS initiated in 2026 by the DUAC in Annaba, which maintains the cultural function established in the 2003 POS, demonstrates continuity in its planning orientation. However, it also underscores the persistence of the central challenge of moving from planning designation to concrete action.

Conclusion: The mutability of the Tabacoop, between informal reappropriation and prospects for conversion

This research shows that the transformation of the Tabacoop into a wasteland does not correspond to a fixed state of abandonment, but rather to a transitional phase characterized by a

[19] Plan d'occupation du sol.

continuous process of transformation and reappropriation. The informal occupations observed reveal that the site retains a capacity for adaptation and attractiveness despite the disappearance of its initial industrial function. These results are in line with the work of Andres (2008, 2010), according to whom the wasteland is on an evolutionary trajectory during which the 'transitional phase' represents a decisive stage of urban change. In the case of the Tabacoop, this intermediate temporality encouraged the emergence of new economic, artisanal, and commercial uses that reflect a partial reactivation of the site without any real conversion project having been undertaken.

The study also highlights the contested nature of these forms of reappropriation: on the one hand, they limit the effects of vacancy, sustain economic activity, and demonstrate the functional potential of existing buildings. On the other hand, they remain largely informal and contribute, in some cases, to the alteration of architectural and heritage characteristics of the buildings. This observation confirms the analyses of Groth and Corijn (2005), for whom spontaneous uses contribute to the production of an alternative urbanity while revealing the limits of public policies with regard to abandoned spaces.

This ambivalence in the observed dynamics is also reflected in findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with various institutional actors. These findings reveal that the former Tabacoop's transitional phase is characterized less by a lack of recognition of the brownfield site and its heritage value than by a fragmentation of the forms of recognition and institutional capacities for intervention. The ex-Tabacoop is simultaneously understood as a land resource, as having urban and economic development potential, and as industrial heritage. However, these different dimensions remain insufficiently articulated within a common operational framework. The result is a gap between the recognition of the site's potential and the actual ability of actors to undertake its recovery. The transformation of the former Tabacoop thus depends less on the mere identification of its resources than on the ability of the actors involved to integrate them into a shared and coordinated operational strategy for urban regeneration.

These results highlight the importance of addressing the mutability of industrial wasteland sites as a process of anticipation rather than as a mere a posteriori intervention in degraded areas. The identification of emerging uses, existing stakeholders, land-related constraints, and heritage values provides a basis for decision-making that can guide future conversion strategies. In this sense, the transitional phase is not only a period for the observation of urban dynamics, but also a privileged moment in which to build a shared vision for the future of the site.

At the scale of the city of Annaba, these results highlight the need to move beyond land-based management of industrial wastelands in favour of an integrated approach combining urban, heritage, economic, and social dimensions. The Tabacoop constitutes a strategic land, urban, architectural, and heritage resource whose conversion could contribute to the revitalization of the urban fabric and to broader urban renewal.

Finally, this study of the Tabacoop in Annaba demonstrates that industrial wastelands resulting from the decline of industries of the colonial period cannot be reduced to simple abandoned spaces. They constitute changing spaces where practices of informal reappropriation participate in the gradual transformation of uses and reveal the evolving potential of the site. Although such forms of occupation may contribute to the deterioration of the built heritage when left unmanaged, they provide valuable information on the new social and urban dynamics that develop during the waiting phase. Thus, informal reappropriation is an indicator of the mutability of industrial wastelands, which highlights their ability to adapt to new functions and the potential trajectories of their redevelopment. In the Algerian context, where the colonial industrial heritage is still insufficiently recognized in urban planning policies, this research highlights the need

to integrate these sites into urban renewal strategies based both on their heritage value, their land potential, and the uses that are being developed there. The recognition of these dynamics plays a decisive role in whether or not the wasteland transitions into a post-wasteland phase, in which these spaces can be real land and heritage resources for urban regeneration, serving both urban development and the preservation of industrial memory. Finally, the recovery of waste-land industrial heritage requires a concomitant evolution of legal, institutional, and operational frameworks to transform an industrial legacy that has fallen out of step with contemporary needs into a lever for urban renewal.

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