

Sustainable Futures Begin with Memory: The Hidden Architectural Potential of Sousse and Kerkennah.

By Sana SMADAH SGHAIER

Sousse is a historic coastal city in eastern Tunisia, known for its ancient medina and layered urban heritage. Just offshore, the Kerkennah Islands form a quiet archipelago of fishing villages, where traditional architecture reflects centuries of adaptation to climate and local life.

Today, in Sousse, the once-iconic ABC cinema — a cultural landmark for generations — is facing demolition. For the anecdote, this cinema is just one example among many buildings from the 20th century that showcase a rich mix of architectural styles: **Art Deco, Art Nouveau, Arab-Islamic revival**, and more. These buildings, which once embodied modernity and identity, are now **neglected, unprotected, and in many cases falling into disrepair or threatening to collapse.**

In Kerkennah, modest courtyard houses built with local materials and ancestral know-how are also disappearing — not by force, but by abandonment and indifference.



ABC Cinema and surrounding neighborhood, Sousse, Tunisia. © Author



Traditional fisherman's house, Kerkennah, Tunisia. © Author

These are not isolated tragedies. They are symptoms of a broader, quiet crisis: the disappearance of our **ordinary built heritage**, met with widespread neglect and a lack of collective awareness.

We're not just losing buildings. We're losing a language, a memory, and a shared identity.

The Unseen Loss: What We Don't Understand, We Don't Protect

Much of Tunisia's architectural heritage is not officially classified or protected. These are not grand palaces or UNESCO-listed ruins — they are everyday homes, 20th-century buildings, fishermen's houses, old schools, neighborhood cinemas, and modest public spaces. They may seem ordinary, yet they carry deep historical significance. They reflect social transformations, architectural transitions, and local ways of life. They are the fabric of our collective memory — the places we inhabit, pass by, or grew up in, and which silently tell the story of who we are and where we belong.

And yet, this “ordinary” heritage is too often seen as outdated, irrelevant, or simply invisible.

In Kerkennah, traditional architecture—thick walls, open patios, natural ventilation—embodies a climate-adapted, sustainable lifestyle. But without awareness, it’s erased by speculation and unregulated development. In Sousse, the ABC cinema is reduced to “available land,” not a memory to preserve.

When we stop seeing something as heritage, it ceases to exist—even before the bulldozers arrive.

Preserving Our Heritage to Create Better (sustainable) Urban Futures

When we talk about the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals — or SDGs — we’re referring to a set of ideas that aim to make the world fairer, greener, and more livable by 2030. One of these goals, SDG 11, focuses on cities: it calls for making them safer, more inclusive, and better prepared for the future. Inside this goal, there’s a more specific target — 11.4 — which encourages countries to value and protect their cultural and natural heritage.

But how do we turn those big, global goals into real changes where we live?

It starts locally — in our neighborhoods, our streets, and even in the buildings we pass every day. In practice, this means including heritage — even the ordinary kind — in the way cities are planned and managed. Not just through laws, but through small, everyday decisions: What do we choose to renovate? What gets demolished? What do we pass on to the next generation? In Sousse, that might mean protecting a cinema full of memories rather than turning it into a parking lot. In Kerkennah, it could mean repairing a traditional home with local techniques, instead of replacing it with a concrete block that doesn’t fit the island’s spirit or climate.

For these changes to happen, many people have a role to play: local authorities, architects, urban planners, teachers, activists, and researchers. But the most important role belongs to you — the citizen.

You are the users of history. The streets you walk, the walls you pass, the spaces you remember—they carry meaning, identity, and potential. By learning about your city’s past, by sharing stories, by defending a local building, you’re already helping to make these global goals real.

Valuing and preserving our built environment is not nostalgia—it’s sustainable development.

Reusing existing buildings means less demolition, less waste, and more circular thinking. It supports local economies, tourism, and traditional skills, while strengthening social cohesion and identity—key foundations for resilient communities.

For that, giving new life to old neighborhoods and buildings is essential. It goes beyond simply renovating walls; it’s about rethinking how we use our cities today without erasing their memory. Many cities have shown that preserving built heritage can help improve daily life and strengthen the connection between people and place.

Not far from us, in **Essaouira, Morocco**, the historic medina was brought back to life through careful restoration projects that improved housing and public spaces, while supporting local crafts and services. The aim wasn't just tourism — it was to keep the city alive and livable for its residents.

In **Lyon, France**, former industrial and historic areas were transformed through projects that preserved the architectural identity of neighborhoods while adapting them to today's needs. These spaces became vibrant, mixed-use districts — not by erasing the past, but by building on it.

And farther away, in **Quito, Ecuador**, the historic center — once in decline — came back to life through a city-wide effort focused on restoring old buildings and supporting local life. Housing, cultural spaces, and small businesses returned, creating jobs and strengthening the city's social fabric.

These examples remind us that heritage is not about the past — it's a foundation for shaping better, more sustainable cities today.

Heritage as a Project for the Future!

Preserving built heritage is not about freezing the past. It's about **giving depth to the present** and building a richer, more rooted future. It's about understanding that a house in Kerkennah or a cinema in Sousse can teach us about resilience, creativity, and belonging.

We cannot build a sustainable future by erasing everything that shaped us.

So let's reconnect with our places. Let's learn their stories. Let's treat our heritage—no matter how modest—not as an obstacle, but as a powerful tool for imagining cities that are sustainable, inclusive, and alive.

References:

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