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Reviving Territorial Identity Through Heritage and Community: A Multi-Scalar Study in Northwest Tunisia (El Kef and Tabarka Cities)

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Abstract

Tunisia's northwestern region offers a rich and diverse civilization heritage and cultural potential. However, it has been socially and economically marginalised since the 70s. This study explores the link between urban cultural heritage and the construction of collective identity, emphasising the potential of built heritage to foster sustainable community-based development. In addition to physical attributes, the literature highlights the importance of social interactions in shaping territorial identity. Identity, in this context, is not static but a dynamic territorial construction that integrates architectural, urban, and social dimensions. The cities of El Kef and Tabarka serve as case studies of spatially and culturally marginalised areas, facing significant challenges to both tangible and intangible heritage. With a negative population growth rate (−0.36% between 2004 and 2014) and the lowest economic development indicator nationally (0.3% in 2012), these cities reflect the urgent need for an alternative approach. Through spatial diagnosis, interviews, and stakeholder engagement, the research demonstrates that a renewed territorial model—grounded in heritage valorization and local identity—can support inclusive and adaptive development. Key findings reveal a generational gap in the perception and representation of heritage between younger and older residents. This indicates that cultural identity is not a static inheritance but a dynamic process requiring active community investment. Ultimately, the study concludes that urban identity assets critically influence the capacity of a community to build a shared vision for the enhancement of its territorial identity. This reconnection between territory, memory, and planning enables a collective reappropriation of space, proposing a long-term vision for heritage-integrated urban regeneration.

Keywords: territorial identity; heritage; community resilience; Northwest Tunisia



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1. Introduction

The dynamic interaction between geographical contexts and social environments is intrinsically shaped by the formation of urban identities. In contemporary urban studies, increasing attention is being paid to the notion of territorial identity, understood as a complex, a multi-scalar construct that emerges from the experiences of communities within a space [1]. Far from being a fixed or static attribute, territorial identity evolves through

processes of cultural interaction, social cohesion and spatial representation [2]. It is deeply rooted in the historical layers and symbolic meanings attributed to place and it functions as a powerful driver of collective action [3], particularly in contexts marked by marginalisation [4] or cultural erosion. This study adopts a Hegelian perspective by interpreting identity as a historically contingent and collective project and changes, expressed through the symbolic and material articulation of space [5]. In this framework, identity is not only linked to individual or collective consciousness [6], but also manifests itself through spatial practices and forms' representations [7]. Territory thus takes a dual role, serving as both the instrument and the product of homogenising experiences and social [8]. Following this paradigm, the study positions identity as a 'dynamic project'—shaped by time, space, and memory—rather than as a cultural essence. Other theoretical ideas are drawn from the work of Henri Bergson and Antoine Bailly, who conceptualise identity as a polymorphous and memory-based construct [1]. These researchers argue that territorial identity emerges from intangible relationships between individuals, their spatial environment and their habitual practices [3]. It is not only the result of physical proximity or a shared culture, but a lived phenomenon that stems from appropriation, memory and symbolic investment in a place. From this perspective, cultural heritage plays an essential role in anchoring identity, acting both as a repository of collective memory and as a vehicle for its renewal. Heritage preservation is therefore not simply the act of conserving historical artefacts or architectural forms; it is an active process [9] of meaning-making, rooted in contemporary societal needs and future aspirations [10]. Sherry Arnstein advocates the concept of the ladder of citizen participation, which is fundamental to understanding the different levels of citizen involvement, ranging from manipulation to genuine co-decision-making. In his book *Leprojeturbainparticipatif* (The Participatory Urban Project) [11], Verdier emphasises how residents can be integrated into urban design while addressing the complexity of neighbourhood construction, which truly takes into account in-depth social demand. According to Di Mao, urban space is perceived as a place of expression and belonging for one's community. The social and cultural construction of identity is an evolving psycho-social process [12]. This conceptual approach is particularly relevant in the case of marginalised territories, where heritage is often neglected or undervalued, despite its potential to serve as a catalyst for social regeneration and territorial revitalisation. This study explores how urban identities are shaped by geographic and social contexts. It emphasises its complexity and indicates that territorial identity is influenced by community cohesion, social development and urban dynamics. It drives collective actions and cultural restitution efforts among communities. Overall, the interplay between Territories and Identity is crucial for understanding urban community dynamics for local heritage considering and valorisation.

Tunisia is a North African country with a strategic location in the Mediterranean Sea and is home to history's major civilizations and their rich cultural mix. At the former crossroads of the Numid, Carthaginian, Roman, Ottoman, Islamic dynasties, and French colonialism, Tunisia hosts important archaeological sites, historic buildings, diverse cultural landscapes and social interpretations on urban spaces [13,14]. Despite this rich history, the intrinsic values of its historical and cultural diversity have not been recognised nor has it promoted the north-west region as a global heritage asset. Moreover, sites have suffered from abandonment [15]; and claims of degradation and marginalisation have been particularly evident since 2011 [16]. Regional inequalities in terms of access to resources and development schemes [17,18] have dominated the country's geography where 56% of its population and 92% of all businesses are in coastal cities. Income disparities between regions remain extreme where nearly 80% of investments in the first post-independence decade (1962–1971) were dedicated to the coast [19]. Indeed, the northwestern part of

Tunisia is characterised by a dichotomous situation that combines natural, historical and urban wealth with a precarious economic future [19,20].

The study contends that revitalising heritage in this context requires a reconnection to territorial values, with a specific emphasis on collective identity reconstruction. Through geographical exploration of El Kef and Tabarka as case studies, the research aims to present a multi-scalar analysis that not only addresses the fragile territorial potential but also fosters a productive relationship between marginalised communities vision, and the enhancement of local collective identity. Heritage preservation practices might focus more on establishing a modern identity than simply maintaining an authentic past [21].

This study is based on the following fundamental assumptions: Territorial identity in marginalised regions is a dynamic, multi-scale construct that can be revitalised through the strategic enhancement of cultural heritage. A multi-scale analytical approach enables effective diagnosis of fragile territorial potential and promotes the development of productive relationships between resilient communities and their cultural assets. Integrating community perspectives into heritage preservation processes is essential for restoring a sense of belonging and pride, thereby enhancing the long-term sustainability of conservation efforts. Based on the theoretical framework and assumptions presented above, this study aims to achieve the following objectives: to conduct a multi-scale geographical analysis of territorial identity in the case studies of El Kef and Tabarka, exploring the socio-spatial dimensions that shape collective belonging. It also aims to diagnose the challenges and potential related to heritage enhancement in these two marginalised cities in north-western Tunisia, with a focus on historical, cultural and urban factors. It aims to propose a conceptual and operational framework for the reconstruction of collective urban identity, integrating the renovation of material heritage with socio-cultural and community dimensions. As a dynamic process shaped by social interactions and emotions [1–3], collective identity has to be studied through a mixed approach. The multi-scalar lens helps understanding connections between groups and their spatial and historical environment. Hence, the research questions aim to unravel the complex pattern of territorial identity development in marginalised regions of Tunisia. The objectives directly address a rebuilding process for a collective urban identity by referring to the renewal of tangible heritage and socio-cultural considerations.

2. Context as a Basis for Local Collective Identity Interpretation

Scientific and technical Tunisian institutions are responsible for establishing the inventory of cultural heritage (archaeological, historical, and intangible), of studies, safeguard working and development projects [22,23]. These institutions undertake conservation and restoration work on selected sites for its special architectural character and its social and cultural features such as the amphitheatre of El Jem with UNESCO approval and the eastern gate of the medina of Tunis, known as the *PortedeFrance* the French gate, *AvenueHabibBourguiba* Habib Bourguiba Avenue [24,25]. Since it has always been the venue for the religious ceremonies of Sidi Mehrez and has benefited from a rehabilitation action plan, the Bab Souika-Halfaouine district (Commune of Tunis, 1984–1989) and Hafsia project as social housing heritage [25,26] (Aga Khan prices 1983–1995) remain the landmark projects for the enhancement of socio-urban heritage. However, work on the north-western region of Tunisia remains virtually non-existent, resulting in studies that focus particularly on historical developments limited to the medieval periods. This justifies the choice of El Kef and Tabarka territories as examples for investigation due to the richness of their built and intangible heritage [23,24]. El Kef and Tabarka are two medium-sized cities (population less than 100,000) in their respective governorates of El Kef and Jendouba [17,18]. The fundamental features of similarity are the richness of their natural environment and their eminent historical city centres (El Kef's medina, Tabarka's French/Italian centre). Moreover,

in both, modern mechanisms of urban production have created similar social and spatial variations that affected historical heritage [18,19]. It is worth comparing how the sense of identity and urban heritage affect local territorial dynamics and representations (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The conservatory work on the city’s memory reflects the ‘traditional’ social organisation: based on the communities living together and multifunctionality. From a spatial point of view, integration is reflected through urban continuity and respect for the old building patterns and road layouts (<http://www.commune-tunis.gov.tn/publish/content/article.asp?id=199> (accessed on 15 October 2025)) [26].

2.1. El Kef’s Heritage

Stretching 100 km along the southwestern flank of the Tunisian Algerian border, with an area of approximately 44.6% of the total area of northwestern Tunisia [18,27], El Kef governorate is located 165 km from the capital Tunis and 200 km from Tabarka International Airport. It is in the Tell Atlas Mountains, which extend over the whole of North Africa, and is home to the Mellègue tributary of the Medjerda River. Located at about 620 m altitude (the mountain: “Jebel Dyr”), an ancient Numidian city (202–40 BC), then a Roman and Byzantine colony, then later an Arab-Islamic medieval centre, possesses a multitude of layered classified and unclassified heritage sites. One influential factor here has been the long-term interreligious coexistence among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, which has resulted in a variety of types of religious structures across the urban landscape. When Sufism spread throughout North Africa in the 16th century, El Kef became known as a holy city because of its famous saint Sidi Bou Makhoulouf. In that tradition, several mausoleums, marabouts, and mosques continue to strengthen local pride and sense of belonging. El Kef’s history, combined with its hilly topography, created a unique urban configuration. The medina of El Kef is perceptible from a distance only by its enclosure wall and rocky cliff-like substructure. The city is laid out in a concentric distribution with the hierarchical organisation determined by altitude. At the top is the earliest urbanised area, which constitutes a medieval historical nucleus, distinguished by a central node and a pastoral zone of oak forests. In stark contrast, at the bottom, is an urban area dating back to the 1980s, characterised by a grid layout with parallel streets that run at right angles to each other. Because of its diverse history, El Kef displays a variety of building typologies, architectural styles, and ornaments: the Mediterranean style or patio houses, the classical Roman and Byzantine baths, the Arab/Islamic architecture, and even the seventh-century African ornamentation in the basilica. European influences may also be seen in housing units with distinctive orange tiled roofing. The combination of diverse architectural styles and striking natural landscapes adds to El Kef’s urban potential. In the popular imagination, El Kef is considered the seat of Tunisian theatrical and popular arts and is famous for its agriculture, mountainous terrain, and (morning or evening) breeze (*Ennesmaelkaffia*) [18,27,28].

2.2. Tabarka’s Heritage

Like El Kef, Tabarka is known for its nature and diverse architectural and cultural heritage. Surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea, mountains, and the forest, Tabarka

is envied for its seaside touristic potential (Figure 2). Tabarka's distinctive historical layers make architectural heritage an important component in the revival of local identity. Originally an ancient fishing village occupied by the Berber Khémir tribes, Tabarka was eventually settled by the Genoese coral traders in the 14th century, thus starting a period of cultural intermixing and socio-urban evolution [29]. Examples of architectural heritage include the distinctive Latin cross form of the Roman basilica, the military architecture of the Genoese fort, and its colonial and post-colonial architecture. The grid layout of the modern period (1970–1980) and the typical architectural character of the houses with orange tiled roofs is also one of the significant assets of the region [14,17,28]. The city's maritime activities are keys to its economic survival. Till today, scuba diving and coral culture are the most popular activities in the region, and tourism is Tabarka's driving economic force. In addition to its marine culture, Tabarka is also known for its international jazz festival, major archaeological sites in its surroundings (Bellarigia, Chemtou), craft production (wood and coral carving), and other forms of intangible heritage (wild boar hunting and the unique artisanal pipe *la Bruyère*). All of these cultural forms reflect a strong local identity that should be preserved and promoted. Nevertheless, cultural industries and heritage inclusion take the lowest share in economic development as the last carrier sector in 2004 [17,29].



Figure 2. Context of Tunisia's Northwestern States; El Kef and Tabarka cities' urban heritage. Source: Authors 2024–2025.

3. Materials and Methods

Cultural identities appear as dynamic and non-homogeneous processes that are constantly evolving and that are defined as much by their mutual relations as by their own characteristics [30]. The depth and complexity of studying collective identity suggests the need for a multiscale approach. This translates into interpretations on different levels that are complementary or interlinked (social, geographical, and urban). Thus, it is essential to recognise that collective identity is not static; rather, it evolves through ongoing social interactions as an appeal to emotions [31]. This dynamic process reflects the interplay between individual and collective experiences, shaping how groups perceive their rela-

tionship to their spatial environment, with a focus on historical values. The complexity of the given situation justifies choosing territorial diagnosis as an exploratory tool. It is an assessment that identifies, within a given territory, the problems, strengths, weaknesses, expectations of communities, economic, environmental and social issues (Figure 3). It provides explanations of past developments and assessments of future developments. It is a tool to aid territorial planning that embodies a multi-scale dimension and refers to a dynamic and participatory process on a spatial entity, the living space of a group searching for its still-unclear identity [32]. Hence, it aims to provide an explanation of the past evolution and assessment of future development. This work evaluates the extent, weaknesses, and challenges of tangible urban heritage integration in northwest Tunisia through the specific case studies of El Kef and Tabarka. The primary goal is to identify the relevant issues, understand their causes, and propose a series of recommendations to address current and future territorial identity shaping through heritage integration. El Kef and Tabarka have been chosen as case studies because they face similar issues of heritage interpretation and management. This paper is organised into three main sections. First, it introduces the geographical and historical characteristics. The second section uses Territorial Diagnosis (TD), listing strengths and issues while considering the diversity of stakeholders and communities. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews [33] with local stakeholders, building and urban codes, and participatory insights.

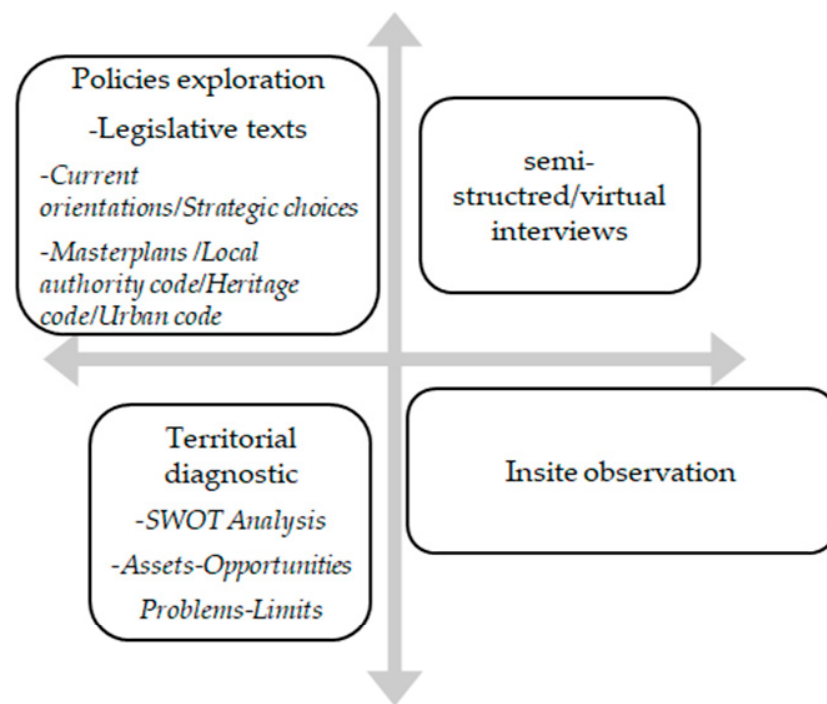


Figure 3. Mixed method. Source: Authors.

The interviews were mostly conducted in-person and online between March 2022 and August 2022. Interviews, lasting 30–45 min, were held in public spaces or via online platforms and involved 300 citizens from both cities. Participants included five heritage experts (regional heritage curators for the north-west region; secretary generals of the two municipalities; chairman of the youth and culture committee in the municipality of El Kef; head of municipal planning; and a former minister of tourism). The age distribution of participants was as follows: 22% aged 18–24 students, 41% aged 25–44, and 37% aged 45+. Interview questions explored the role of heritage in local identity, communication, and its integration into the economic process among stakeholders and decision-makers. They

also inquired about collective identity interpretations and urban development challenges in El Kef and Tabarka. Participant narratives were transcribed and manually analysed. Additionally, participants were asked about challenges hindering the enhancement of heritage in addition to their willingness to participate in. In the third section, inquiries covered strategies for enhancing the historic centre, the efficacy of initiatives aimed at establishing the cities as prominent tourist destinations, awareness of archaeological sites, and the preservation of local cultural and architectural identity (Appendix A).

4. Results

4.1. Challenges of Cultural Heritage in City Centres of El Kef and Tabarka

To better understand the situation of local identity considerations, a territorial diagnosis was carried out in situ for a period of three months between March 2022 and July 2022. The diagnosis included on-site observations documenting the heritage state. The two cities display significant similarities and some important differences. According to article 7 of the Urban Planning Code, cultural and archaeological sites are considered sensitive areas that are in need of special care [34]. However, the main problem is the degradation of the historic centres and their heritage sites, caused by uncontrolled urban sprawl, dysfunction in architectural and urban planning policies, and a lack of local investment to maintain the historic character through social dynamics. The degradation of the historic core gradually occurred, leading to abandonment, destruction of historical structures, and disfiguration of the landscape. Disparate architectural languages, uncontrolled gentrification, and mass tourism do not benefit the local population. The disinterest of residents is the first visible outcome, as supported by interviews (articles 24–29). The issue of cultural heritage is largely unknown to 88% of youth aged 18 to 25, who associate the concept primarily with archaeological remains that possess historical characteristics. Despite residing in the area and appreciating it, they do not understand the definition of cultural heritage beyond its simple historical vocation and are not prepared to engage in its promotion. In contrast, those aged 25 to 44 are enthusiastic about recognising the cultural value of heritage as an economic driver to be strengthened. However, they perceive local authorities as confused or even incapable of managing this heritage effectively. Meanwhile, individuals over the age of 45 believe that cultural heritage can have added economic value and are willing to contribute to its preservation and promotion.

In both cities, to counteract the growing need for urban expansion, the communal perimeter of the city has been enlarged to include rural localities. As urban centres expand, expansion across agricultural lands is an alarming fact. The conversion of rural and agricultural zones into municipal perimeters has led to a proliferation of spontaneous urbanisation. This phenomenon is characterised by the rapid transformation of previously agricultural land into urban areas, often driven by economic pressures and population growth. The historic centres are also impacted; while El Kef is seeing its historic centre deserted, Tabarka is facing increased densification. In summary, new urban settlement patterns have resulted in a lack of focus on the historical core and its built heritage, as well as threats to the surrounding landscape. Urban flight has reduced economic and social interest in the city centre, and thus support for the local built heritage is lacking. The cities' surrounding landscapes, historical landmarks, and cultural image face total marginalisation. Nevertheless, major animation activities take place in both centres' sides either next to the sea *lacorniche*, or in the medina. Interviewees expressed in 74% their attachment to those places in particular. 27% of individuals aged between 20 and 35 report that they enjoy walking in the area because it is open, spacious, and distinct; however, they do not perceive any cultural or economic value that could be effectively leveraged. This observation highlights a discrepancy between the aesthetic appreciation of space, its social

interpretation, and the recognition of its potential as an artefact for territorial development. But 53%, especially those aged more than 40, believe that cultural projects align with an economic sector that should be developed.

4.1.1. El Kef: Abandonment and Desertion of the Centre

In El Kef, the original historical core of the city, which includes its historical perimeter, has been destroyed by uncontrolled expansion. The demographic growth that has led to urban sprawl towards the city's outskirts has weakened the historic medieval perimeter. As a result, the existing core is threatened with abandonment and desertion. The new urban poles are attractive for the inhabitants, given their complex topography and a slope of 12% [14,18]. In contrast, the core is increasingly subject to widespread demolition and renovation in favour of new architectural typologies and styles, such as boutique hotels and guest houses. The construction of new buildings in place of old traditional residences located in historic centres leads to aesthetic dissonance. Old houses often make up the character of the centre, and tearing them down means losing part of the cultural fabric. Instead of using local techniques and materials (stone, lime, etc.), construction now uses beam and post technology, bricks, and concrete slabs, which do not fit in with the medina and hurt its image. The use of non-traditional materials disrupts the visual harmony and authenticity of the medina. The prevalence of utilitarianism and the increase in land values mean that old neighbourhoods are losing their original character to tourist projects that benefit investors and estate agents. The erasure of the historical core through disfigured structures and disparate architectural languages can potentially lead to the loss of the city's identity. People are also abandoning and selling their homes, given that some houses are even squatted. Mrs. B.R (71, retiree) stated that as a native and inheritor of an ancestral residence in the heart of the medina, and considering that their family home is currently squatted, all the heirs are eager to sell their family property to obtain a substantial financial sum (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Urban decay and spontaneous squatting or abandonment in El Kef's medina. Source: Authors.

4.1.2. Tabarka: Densification of the Centre on the Seafront

Unlike El Kef, Tabarka's seafront has undergone successive densification operations involving demolition, renovation or vertical expansion. 35% of respondents expressed their intention to undertake transformation projects, with 47% citing financial reasons for obtaining additional income, particularly for "temporary visitors" (M. A, 53 from the medina). As a result, its historic centre has become a "sort of ghetto" and an obstacle to the marina and its surroundings. The prevalence of service buildings, which increase land values at this urban level, means that old neighbourhoods are losing their original economic function and that high-rise multifunctional buildings are taking over. This process is accompanied by the emergence of disparate architectural languages and disfigured landscape elements, leading

to a historic city potentially threatened with erasure and abandonment. The locals express their desire to revive the architectural, urban and socio-economic character (reflecting the old image of fishing boats, bars, restaurants, cafés, in addition to diverse accommodation establishments); rather than ensuring greater profitability such as through the establishment of charming residences which is emphasised (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Tabarka's Old Fishing Port and territorial evolution in front of the sea. Source: Authors 2025. (a) As mentioned in the urban plan, the city shows a semi-radial organisation oriented towards the sea (the Tabarka 2030 development report) [17]. (b) Architectural, urban assets and human practices.

4.2. Dysfunction in Architectural and Urban Planning Policy

All of the above conditions point to a lack of vision in terms of urban development in north-western Tunisia. The historical layers of El Kef and Tabarka are no longer preserved or visible in urban planning. The mechanisms of new urban development, which focus on real estate projects, have led to a weakening of urban identity. The unique character of the historic centre, surrounded by urban chaos and confusion, is barely discernible. Urban governance is limited to ad hoc interventions aimed at managing daily life. Furthermore, due to a lack of budget and long-term planning process, current urban choices are inherently and irreversibly threatening the architectural identity of the city, ultimately leading to a collective amnesia of the past and its practices. In contrast, historical medinas had a unified urban layout and a clear appreciation for the subtleties in vision. For example, in Tabarka, the main urban components of the town hall, square, and old marina featured views onto historical buildings, such as old hotels, the old fishing port, the basilica, and the promenade. However, current urban and landscaping projects in the city are creating a

lack of harmony between the scale of the city's intersections, alleys and monuments and that of the urban façade, which has also lost its classic character with its sloping roofs and red tiles. These sloping roofs are designed to allow water and snow to drain easily during the winter. However, this unique heritage has been replaced by reinforced concrete slab roofs, a current construction option. The lack of adequate infrastructure threatens urban unity and heritage appreciation. Although the state is attempting to promote heritage tourism, its actions are limited to temporary cultural activities such as music festivals (jazz festivals in both regions, short film festival in El Kef) and summer coastal tourism. This analysis proposes, however, that both cities have the potential to strengthen the local economy through alternative tourism that incorporates built heritage as identity artefacts. Indeed, their tangible (architectural and urban) and intangible heritage (El Kef: culinary arts/theatre/legends; Tabarka: coral crafts/diving) would naturally flourish with alternative forms of use. There remains a discrepancy between what exists on the ground and what the vision of both cities would be about, as mentioned officers (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6. Social practices; Confusion of urban landscape, and abundance of locations during the winter seasons in Tabarka; Urban Decay in Tabarka (densification), Source: Authors (2024–2025).

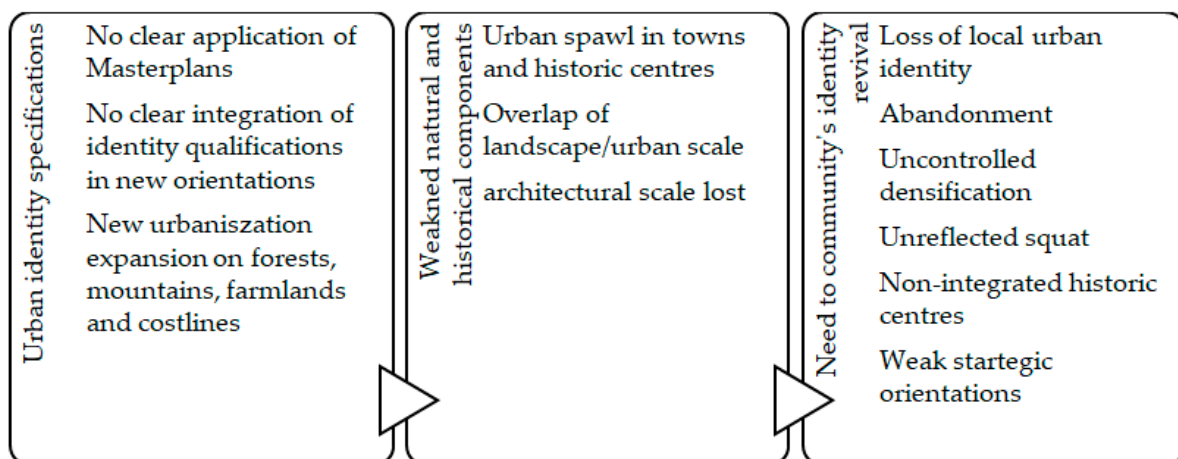


Figure 7. Limits of the current management situation (lack of awareness, financial and technical sources, some monuments are closed to the public). Source: Authors.

5. Discussion

For a long time, identity defined the character of ‘that which is the same’ (even though it may be perceived, represented or named in different ways). Considering that the human fact cannot be understood external to history, this paradigm evolves as transcription of ideas and meanings of human facts. This is what Hegel [5] describes as the propensity to relate all phenomena to historical development from two perspectives: the laws of succession that give history direction and meaning; and their changes, which expresses human situations [35]. Thus, this work assumes that Identity is visible because it is collective, and reflects spatial representations [36,37] of social community dynamics. From now on, this acquires a territorial dimension which stipulates the study of identity as dynamic project linked to space at different scales [18]. The interest in examining collective identity as both representative and federative of a community changing territory has already been argued based on Henri Bergson’s theory of memory. Bailly discusses that the latter relies on an individuation closely related to the memorial appropriation of the territory while suggesting a polymorphous and dynamic local identity [1].

The construction of territorial identity suggests the invisible relationships among users, space, and their habits [38]. This leads to the emergence of the concept of cultural heritage as a postulate for territorial valorization and identity anchoring. Today, attempts to valorise cultural and historical aspects reflect an architectural and urban understanding that prominently considers the historical significance of the place. This return to roots reveals a desire to reconstruct collective identity by referencing specific territorial properties. Hence, the idea of Identity as a paradigm unravels a recurrent questioning that focuses on its dual ideal and effective dimensions related to territoriality. The main challenges related to the issue of territorial identity include in this work two aspects:

- Complexity and Diversity: Territorial identity is multifaceted, influenced by cultural, historical, and social factors.
- Methodological Issues: Developing effective methodologies for assessing territorial identity requires balancing qualitative and quantitative approaches, often necessitating extensive fieldwork and community engagement. Cultural landscapes and heritage help people connect physically and emotionally, as people often feel tied to a place through its unique qualities that symbolise how they define themselves.

As Creswell and Rose have argued, heritage and cultural landscapes strengthen the sense of place both physically and emotionally. Historical centres, laden with memories, habits, and emotional layers, reflect how people define themselves and their communities, offering a means to express shared history and identity. Neglecting or destroying these places risks disconnecting communities from their cultural and social heritage. At the urban scale, several factors have contributed to the marginalisation of heritage in northwestern Tunisia. These include a denial of historical identity, limited knowledge and investment in traditional building techniques, and poor heritage governance and funding. Our interviews also revealed an additional factor: the failure of the state to promote heritage locally and internationally. The results highlight a significant gap in awareness and engagement with cultural heritage, especially among youth. This generational disparity underscores the need for targeted educational initiatives and more adaptive governance to foster engagement across age groups.

5.1. Denial of Historical Identity

In El Kef and Tabarka, heritage is often neglected not only by state policies but also by local stakeholders—including residents, architects, and builders. Our study found that this neglect stems from a dominant preference for modernity—interpreted as progress and Westernisation—over tradition. When asked how they define their territory, 58% of

respondents associated it with economic factors, followed by historical landmarks and, in Tabarka's case, the seafront. This reveals that memory plays a central role in shaping territorial identity. 66% of respondents expressed a preference for living in modern structures and urban environments rather than historic ones. Under the influence of globalisation, expressions of local identity—especially those linked to tangible and intangible heritage—are often rejected in favour of perceived modernization. Alarming, 23% of young people aged 18–30 stated that they see no value in preserving historic buildings, claiming they hold no relevance to their identity. In contrast, 42% of respondents over 45 believe in the value of heritage and are willing to act to safeguard it. Furthermore, 78% consider current conservation efforts insufficient, while 64% support using cultural and urban heritage as a driver for sustainable development and implementing cultural projects at the local level.

5.2. Lack of Knowledge and Investment in Traditional Building Techniques

Another major challenge is the lack of knowledge about the value of tangible heritage and the traditional techniques needed to preserve it. In our study, 95% of respondents indicated that the skills to construct using traditional methods no longer exist. Only 16% of stakeholders acknowledged the importance of heritage-based inclusive economies that support crafts and trades such as coral work, stone carving, woodwork, and traditional textiles. Half of the technical experts interviewed cited obstacles like inadequate training, unclear administrative priorities, and a lack of funding as barriers to reviving traditional techniques, emphasising the importance of foreign funding to address these gaps [38,39]. There is a widespread preference for modern construction methods. For example, 95% of respondents preferred new building techniques, citing their ease and speed. As a 32-year-old resident of Tabarka remarked: "Building with solid slab is easier in terms of cost, time and execution than pitched tiled roof." Unfortunately, such views often ignore the local climate and material suitability. Our study also found widespread reluctance to use traditional architectural typologies and materials for renovations or extensions, often due to prejudice, misinformation, or a lack of skilled labour. Today, Tunisia relies heavily on a single construction system—concrete post and beam, flat roofs, red brick, and cement rendering—while largely abandoning vernacular techniques like vaulting, lime rendering, and stone construction. Skilled traditional labour is increasingly rare, and no state or private initiatives currently exist to promote traditional craftsmanship among architects, masons, or artisans.

5.3. Inclusive Governance as a Strategic Challenge

Our interviewees, including municipal council members, INP staff, and architects—argued that no comprehensive action plan exists to integrate heritage into building practices or local awareness except technical issues. Our analysis of local policy frameworks supports this, showing outdated economic models that do not integrate natural or heritage assets with contemporary tourist expectations. Despite some cultural events aimed at promoting heritage, their impact remains limited. Visitors to El Kef often find abandoned monuments closed to the public, while in Tabarka the historic urban fabric is disfigured and unrecognisable. 95% of interviewees said that current development strategies do not enhance the city's potential as a cultural or tourist destination. Local archaeological sites are also underappreciated: 63% of citizens surveyed were unaware of the nearby archaeological significance. Most residents are more familiar with the historic city centres than the surrounding context. However, some citizens, like Ons in El Kef, expressed frustration: "There is no development or effort to promote our heritage. . . our city is full of history; why do they want to promote the city only through one-off events? They don't say anything about our history."

Various actors have attempted to engage the state in improving heritage awareness, but interventions remain limited to basic services like lighting, sanitation, and permits. The local authority code *CodedesCollectivitésLocales*, part of the local authority code, illustrates the problem [40]. While the development guidelines in the SDA focus on demographics, economic activities, and natural heritage, they ignore built heritage. Heritage remains unexploited in regional planning documents. Furthermore, legal codes are often theoretical, with limited input from architects or stakeholders. For instance, Article 243 of the local authority code (May 2025) mentions preserving and enhancing local cultural heritage, yet actual urban interventions are utilitarian and fail to integrate local identity. Mrs. A, a resident from a nearby rural area, explained that the historic city holds no personal meaning to her. Similarly, 80% of young respondents (aged 18–24) saw the medina as “just ruins,” irrelevant to their future and devoid of economic value. Nonetheless, the code also offers opportunities. Article 105 introduces the local development plan as a participatory planning tool, designed with state support, to guide future local authority action. It emphasises resilient development and community participation. This plan could serve as the foundation for more inclusive territorial development strategies (Figure 8).

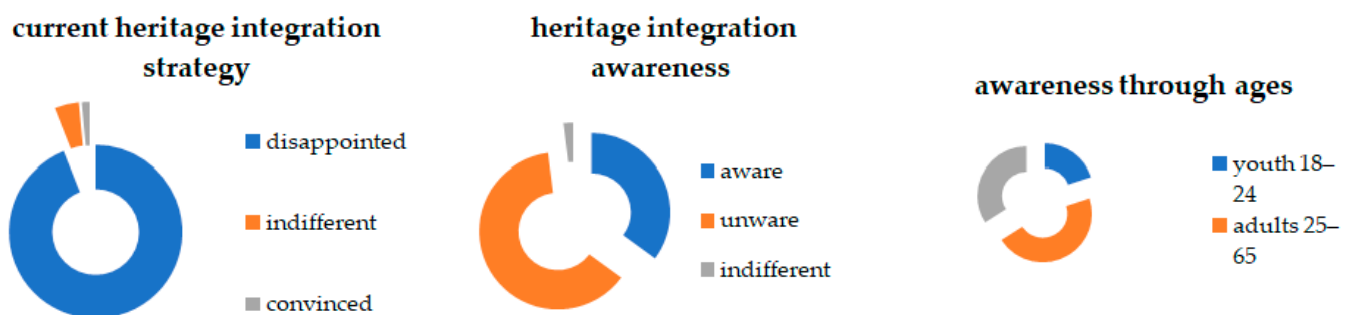


Figure 8. Heritage representations and age disparities; social and strategic issues in both cities. Source: Authors.

5.4. Recommendations for the Revival of Northwest’s Territorial Identity

Based on the study outlined above, recommendations dealing with the challenges of local heritage include the development of alternative and sustainable forms of heritage tourism, the restructuring of the existing urban layouts, and the revision of state policy and implementation practices toward adaptive governance. Choosing cultural heritage as a collective identity artefact supports a revision of strategic choices. Residents are calling for the need to reassess their cultural identity, which has been highlighted and reconstructed based on historical and cultural references that have been neglected over the years. This demand reflects a desire to reconnect with their heritage and to revitalise the values and traditions that have shaped their community. By revisiting these abandoned references, the community aims to foster a stronger sense of identity and belonging in an increasingly globalised world. 66% of stakeholders supported the improvement of cultural and alternative tourism in El Kef and Tabarka. Such a revision might take time due to the widespread lack of interest and actions on the part of the local heritage authorities. 78% of interviewees aged between 20 and 40 expressed, unfortunately, their disinterest in local identity promotion; the region, in their view, would be better served by promoting industry and agriculture and working towards the creation of new jobs rather than excavating its historical artefacts. This emphasises the need to focus on employment opportunities as priorities for regional growth.

Most respondents (94%) expressed their disappointment with the current state strategy. For example, Mr. H (65, active citizen) describes Tabarka factors due to a limited or even absent political and social will, linked to the inhabitants’ lack of awareness of the value

of their spatial and cultural heritage. A region-specific model is needed. In such a model, local heritage would be considered a main territorial artefact that combines local identity's interpretation and preservation. The historic centres could be opened more to tourism and linked by thematic circuits (agricultural, ecological, etc.) to their surrounding seaside and other hinterland areas, making them all destinations that bring together history and diversified cultural events—in other words, heritage tourism. It is essential to integrate the preservation of historical cores into urban evaluation processes as a distinct branch. This integration not only ensures their protection but also guarantees their longevity. By recognising the significance of these areas, urban planning can foster a sustainable approach that values cultural heritage alongside contemporary development needs.

5.4.1. Development of a New Proximity Heritage Artefact

Cultural heritage has become fragile in Tunisia's northwest due to the devaluation of the region's historical and cultural values. Cultural and archaeological sites are often underestimated in their significance and potential impact. Many of these sites, despite their historical and cultural importance, do not receive the recognition or resources necessary for their preservation and promotion. This underestimation can lead to a lack of investment in conservation efforts, diminishing the opportunities for education and cultural enrichment that these sites can provide. Moreover, the neglect of such sites can result in missed opportunities for local communities to leverage their heritage for economic development through tourism. By failing to appreciate the intrinsic value of cultural and archaeological sites, societies risk losing connections to their history and identity. Therefore, it is crucial to advocate for greater awareness and appreciation of these sites, recognising their role in fostering cultural continuity and community satisfaction.

To promote heritage, this study proposes the development of a territorial artefact connecting geographical, social and cultural elements starting from a new form of community built heritage via geographical proximity. Following a new territorial-regional model for urban planning, each regional capital should be more connected to its communes, such as El Kef and Tabarka, thereby reducing the divisions between delegations and overall increasing regional collectivities' part. The city and the region, in general, are called upon to work towards collective awareness and local valorisation. This promotes local cultural identity and opens new fields of investment. They proposed alternatives that embody a territorial marketing strategy oriented towards artefacts of local identity: built heritage, intangible culture, and the natural landscape. In addition to arts and natural landscape—including forests, mountains, and the sea—a unifying component is the historical centres and archaeological sites. This broad approach allows for greater funding opportunities and cultural activities that promote all territorial potentialities (natural, cultural/historical and urban).

Tabarka currently welcomes group and family tourism despite its limited spring–summer season. Here, a new strategy may be based on several current actions. A recent partnership with the INP (National Institute of Heritage) has advanced the project to restore the Genoese fort and open it to the public, integrating an urban park with a walking circuit and a city museum. Several organisations support such initiatives and reduce heritage marginalisation. It is important that local inhabitants are aware of the agendas of private investors. For example, a group of private investors has launched a mega-project 'Tabarka Med' [41,42], focused on cruise tourism (175hc). At first glance, this project seems beneficial for the city as it improves access to the coastline (through viewpoints, promenades and exhibition spaces). However, this proposal hides their desire to prioritise functionality by creating housing developments with poor connection to the natural identity (mountains, cliffs, and seafront), local architecture and urban model. Furthermore, this

project will increase land costs and create urban land use disruptions. Thus, the overall strategic orientation of urban heritage should be rethought by focusing on the unique character of the city and its community's participation. Instead, it would combine landscape assets, the identity potential from the local community requirements and economic growth that would directly adapt to the needs of the city and the region in a global prism. A reorientation of the current urban legal policies is particularly urgent to support such a resilient territorial promotion.

5.4.2. Restructuring Urban Development

This study promotes a two-fold approach to restructuring the urban landscape in these two cities: supporting and integrating the old historical centre as well as the peripheries. The restructuring of the existing urban fabric can happen through the redefinition of landmarks and the revaluation of significant routes. These routes (from the centre to the outskirts) strongly correlate with the coastline, the medina and the mountains. It is necessary to ensure the protection of agricultural land and forests to reduce the urban sprawl. This would contribute to the appropriation of the territory by what it possesses in terms of spatial and geographical qualifications of its local identity. In El Kef, this approach will subsequently allow the rehabilitation of agricultural tracks to ensure the opening of remote rural centres. As they have become uncontrolled urbanisation centres, this undermines the identity of the historic centre. In Tabarka, urban chaos caused by the lack of coordination and management affected the urban image of its heritage sites. It is important to assess the city's potential and the urban issues caused by its old facades, new landscaping, in addition to facilities/infrastructure, and redefine the priority goals to promote the city and its surrounding. Legal codes can support such efforts by promoting private investment and the establishment of human activity zones to meet communities' expectations (promenades and walkways, parks, controlled waste treatment centres, etc.). New architectural typologies should be strongly unified with an aesthetic code.

5.4.3. Revised Policy: Towards Adaptive Governance

To represent the territory effectively, public decision-makers must be fully aware of all urban and territorial complexities. Therefore, local governance must take a three-step approach: identifying priorities, developing a global vision, and implementing specifications in line with the local identity. Identifying local needs, for example, involves assessing and taking charge of green spaces and social spaces, including esplanades for pedestrians, cultural venues, promenades, and parking. It also means maintaining the local architectural character and techniques as well as cultural know-how, such as clothing styles, culinary skills, and popular arts. While awareness and action on the level of local governance is essential, it must also be a national initiative. Governance requires the regeneration of a global vision to extend beyond the design offices, so that the needs and expectations of inhabitants and visitors may be considered.

As the SDAs attest, this region could be marked by a utilisation of the cultural and natural heritage to shape a brand image for local development. This could be reflected in an agreement to reposition northwestern Tunisia as a generator of a cultural economy that draws on its natural, cultural, urban, and architectural potential. The key component to developing regional identity combines architectural regeneration and urban regulations based on human and geographic assets. If there is no collective sense of belonging to an urban identity, then citizens will lack an awareness of their heritage and will not take measures to preserve it. As Mr.T (74, former president of the youth and culture council in the municipality of El Kef) stated, "The state would retain a local architectural, urban, and territorial identity that reflects the historical architecture and social interactions." Such

an initiative would favour an integrated, homogeneous landscape, and would reinforce cultural tourism in all its forms. A rigorous application of urban regulations with clear guidelines would encourage the inhabitants to respect the law and participate in conserving their heritage. Certain problems need to be remedied, such as public lighting, cleanliness, access to public toilets, and neglected garden spaces. Ultimately, the solution is to raise collective awareness and voice about local conditions and the means necessary to address them. Local stakeholders are invited to support programmes which include young people in decision-making, to become accustomed to new practices. This would ideally encourage their participation in heritage generation (Figure 9).

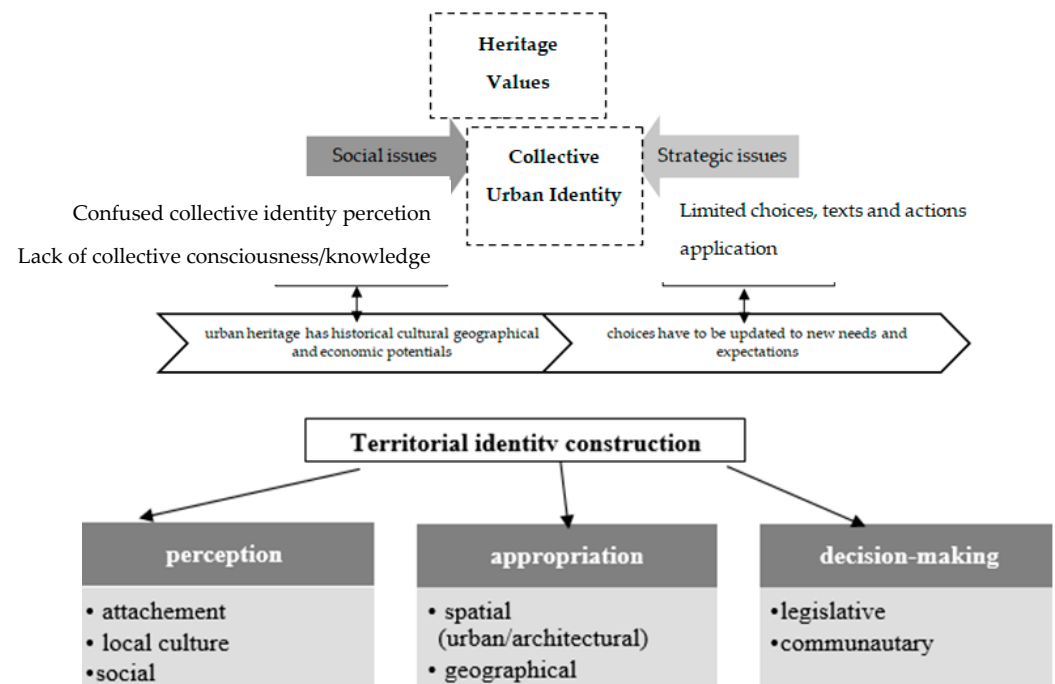


Figure 9. Territorial identity's community components. Source: Authors.

6. Conclusions

The territorial representation constitutes the body of knowledge, practices and beliefs that enable a population to use its environment and structure its social relations. This representation is further defined by a system of values and norms that guides collective action and facilitates projections into the future [30]. Nevertheless, major challenges hinder this dynamic, including the denial of local historical and cultural identity, particularly among younger generations, combined with a lack of expertise in traditional construction techniques and inadequate local governance. To address these issues, an obvious link must be established between the enhancement of collective urban cultural heritage and the construction strengthening of shared identity. Socio-urban heritage transcends its status as a historical artefact; it is a living testimony to the cultural human and political foundations of a community. The study has been conducted to place particular emphasis on the social and strategic aspects of promoting and integrating urban cultural heritage in order to create a brand image. This is closely linked to its territory's identity. Hence, it focuses primarily on diagnosing the problem related to perceived urban heritage. It questions the role of the local community in finding an appropriate solution. Indeed, the renewal of an existing territorial identity calls for community integration as a key tool in the understanding of socio-cultural considerations (uses, forms produced, expectations, and actions).

The aims of UNESCO Convention are the safeguarding of tangible cultural heritage; respect for the tangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals con-

cerned; raising awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of intangible cultural heritage and its mutual appreciation; and developing international cooperation and assistance. The work has assessed the current state of preservation of built cultural heritage. Through observations, surveys and questionnaires, the discussion is around urban areas' safeguarding and enhancement model to preserve local identity. This confirms the interdependence between social reality and urban fact in a perspective of urban heritage integration. It has identified the weakness of certain existing intervention or implementation mechanisms (legal, technical, financial, etc.). Hence the need to develop them into an appropriate strategy and to convince decision-makers to continue with projects to promote cultural and urban heritage. Considering the profound intricacy between safeguarding tangible cultural heritage and the need to a renewed dialogue between communities, it is crucial to raise awareness, particularly among younger generations. Failure to establish a strong link between urban heritage preservation and community characteristics can lead to the undermining of the community's cultural and policy roots. Socio-urban heritage transcends its status as a historical artefact; it is a living testimony to the cultural, human and political foundations of a community. Failure to establish a strong link between heritage preservation and identity compromises the potential of these sites to foster a deep sense of belonging and civic pride. This study has delved into the marginalisation of two heritage sites in Tunisia's northwest—El Kef and Tabarka—proposing significant solutions for revitalising their heritage assets. The representation of collective identity calls into question memories through voluntary memory and the information it provides about the past [34]. It is the expression of both visible and invisible cultural forms. This recognition leads us to consider collective cultural identity as a unifying issue within a global territorial vision for development, one based on the valorisation of cultural heritage. The promotion of marginalised heritage demands an awareness of local assets and a comprehensive revitalisation plan. The physical and conceptual gap between historic centres and modern urban landscapes in both cities hinders the promotion of cultural heritage. Cultural routes and designated zones are essential for uniting stakeholders, and revisions to local building codes can help restore traditional architectural character. To conclude, an integrated approach can support heritage conservation beyond its value as a commodity or an aesthetic asset. Urban expansion should support and reflect the specific historical identities of El Kef and Tabarka. Therefore, stakeholders are encouraged to develop a new vision for heritage integration emphasising —social inclusion and community participation. Such a process would facilitate the integration of the local population into a dynamic social system capable of reshaping a 'forgotten' collective identity, and accent particular cultural specificities. In a holistic approach, natural, built, and cultural heritage should be treated as integral components of territorial vision focusing identity confirmation and enhancement. A restructuring of current urban development practices is necessary—one that considers the individual character of each site while addressing natural, architectural, urban, and cultural challenges. Finally, the study advocates a revision of state policy to include adaptive governance practices. Collaborative meetings between inhabitants and civil society actors may lead to the emergence of a new spatial history. Architects and urbanists should advocate for a revision of the spatial infrastructure, and local inhabitants from all walks of life must gain greater knowledge of and commitment to an architectural landscape that is socially, environmentally, and culturally beneficial. Without a shared community vision, the cultural heritage of this region may continue to struggle against the pressures of global development. Ultimately, these cities could maintain competitiveness in their regional role as local economic engines, which can be achieved through marketing a regional brand image that emphasises architecture and local culture as unifying pillars.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SDA Master Plan for the Planning and Development *SchémaDirecteur d'Aménagement*

Appendix A

Interview Questions

- Did you know that the El Kef and Tabarka regions contain important archaeological sites?
- If so, do you know the distance between the historic centre and the surrounding archaeological sites?
- What are the problems blocking our enhancement of the city's cultural and built heritage?
- Does the city preserve its cultural and architectural identity?
- If so, how? If not, why?
- Do you have any suggestions about how to strengthen the promotion of the city's social, urban, and cultural development?
- If you could choose the type of construction of your house, would you prefer the solid slab or the red-tiled roofs?
- Do you suggest a strategy for enhancing the city and its historic centre?
- Are past and current initiatives sufficient to promote the image of the cities of El Kef and Tabarka as distinguished tourist and cultural destinations?

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