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Urban Design Beyond the Project:Territorial Processes and the Blind Spot in Urban Design Theory

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Abstract

Urban design theory has long defined its object through the scale of the project. Yet in much of the contemporary city, the decisive spatial structures of urban form are established long before any project begins. This paper argues that urban design has misidentified its primary object by focusing on designed interventions, while urbanisation itself is largely produced through territorial processes operating across infrastructure networks, land regimes, informal practices, and state-led housing systems.

Drawing on the case of the Oran metropolitan basin, the paper demonstrates how urban form emerges through sequences of subdivision, construction, and infrastructural extension that precede and condition formal design. These processes do not merely constrain urban design; they define the spatial logic within which it operates.

To address this mismatch, the paper introduces the concept of territorial urban design, shifting the object of the discipline from the project to the territorial production of urban form. It argues that pluralising urban design theory requires more than expanding its geographical scope: it requires recognising that, in many contexts, the city is largely structured before design intervention begins.

1. Introduction

Urban design has long defined itself through the scale of the project. Whether articulated through the design of public spaces, neighbourhoods, or masterplans, the discipline has consistently located its object of intervention in the bounded site and the designed scheme. Over time, this focus has been theoretically enriched drawing on social theory, political economy, and interdisciplinary perspectives yet its primary object has remained remarkably stable.

This paper argues that this stability is not neutral. By anchoring its object at the scale of the project, urban design has systematically overlooked the territorial processes through which much of the contemporary city is actually produced.

Across many rapidly urbanising contexts, urban form is not primarily generated through discrete design interventions. It emerges through the interaction of infrastructure development, land subdivision, informal practices, regulatory negotiation, and state-led housing programmes—processes that operate across extended spatial and temporal scales and often precede any formal act of design. By the time urban design intervenes, the fundamental spatial structure of urbanisation its alignments, divisions, and development logics is frequently already in place.

This reveals a structural misalignment between the object of urban design and the processes that produce urban space. While the discipline has developed increasingly sophisticated ways of analysing and designing urban form, it has remained comparatively under-equipped to engage with the territorial mechanisms that organise urbanisation before and beyond the project.

Drawing on the case of the Oran metropolitan basin, this paper demonstrates how urbanisation unfolds through sequences of subdivision, construction, and infrastructural extension that condition and constrain subsequent design interventions. The case is not presented as an exception, but as a lens through which to interrogate broader limitations within urban design theory.

In response, the paper proposes the concept of territorial urban design as a way of redefining the object of the discipline. Rather than taking the project as its primary unit of analysis, this approach focuses on the territorial production of urban form through the interaction of land, infrastructure, governance, and informal practices over time.

Pluralising urban design theory, therefore, is not only a matter of expanding its geographical scope. It requires a shift in what the discipline understands itself to be about.

2. Literature Review

The limitation described above can be understood as a territorial blind spot within urban design theory. While the discipline has developed sophisticated approaches to the design of public space, urban form, and neighbourhood structure, it has paid far less attention to the territorial systems that structure urbanisation at the metropolitan and peri-urban scale.

These territorial systems include land tenure regimes, cadastral frameworks, agricultural land division, hydraulic systems, transport infrastructure, and administrative boundaries. Such systems operate over long time periods and large spatial scales, often persisting across multiple political regimes and planning paradigms. They define property boundaries, structure accessibility, organise land subdivision, and channel urban expansion.

Within urban design, several approaches have attempted to move beyond the scale of the individual project, including landscape urbanism (Waldheim, 2006; Corner, 2006), infrastructure urbanism (Allen, 1999; Easterling, 2014), and territorial approaches to urbanism (Secchi, 2005; Viganò, 2010). However, these approaches have not fully redefined the object of urban design as the territorial production of urban form, and the project remains the primary analytical and operational focus of the discipline.

As a result, urban design theory often struggles to explain phenomena such as peri-urban fragmentation, infrastructure-led urbanisation, informal settlement patterns, and uneven metropolitan development. These are not marginal phenomena; they are among the dominant forms of urbanisation globally. Yet they remain theoretically peripheral within a discipline that continues to focus primarily on the design of projects within the formal city.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a territorial and morphological approach to urbanisation. The methodology combines spatial analysis, cartographic interpretation, and case study analysis of the Oran metropolitan basin. Historical cadastral structures, infrastructure corridors, and patterns of urban expansion were analysed through historical maps, planning documents, satellite imagery, and field observation. The research focuses on the spatial relationship between infrastructure development, land subdivision, informal urbanisation, and state-led housing programmes in order to understand how urban form is structured at the territorial scale.

Rather than analysing individual urban design projects, the methodology traces the territorial processes that structure urbanisation over time, including cadastral subdivision, infrastructure extension, land conversion, and incremental construction. The case study of Oran is therefore used not only as an empirical example but as a critical case through which to examine the territorial production of urban form and the limitations of project-based urban design theory.

4. Findings: Oran and Territorial Urbanisation

4.1 Urbanisation Beyond the Project

A central question guiding this research is whether contemporary metropolitan growth can occur in the absence of coherent urban design frameworks. The case of the Oran metropolitan basin suggests that not only can urban growth occur without comprehensive urban design plans, but that a significant portion of recent expansion has taken place through processes that operate largely outside project-based urban design.

While official planning instruments, masterplans, and urban design frameworks exist, much of Oran’s urban growth since independence has occurred through peri-urban expansion, informal subdivision of agricultural land, incremental construction, and large-scale state-led housing programmes located in peripheral areas. These processes do not correspond to the conventional model in which urban design precedes development through the preparation of plans and projects. Instead, urbanisation often unfolds through

a sequence in which land subdivision, construction, and settlement occur first, and planning and infrastructure provision follow later.

This sequence challenges one of the implicit assumptions of project-based urban design: that urban development is the result of prior design and planning decisions. In the Oran metropolitan basin, development frequently precedes planning, and planning becomes reactive rather than proactive. Urbanisation therefore cannot be understood solely through the analysis of urban design projects, because much of the city is produced outside the project framework.

4.2 Post-Colonial Urban Expansion and State-Led Housing

Since independence, urban expansion in the Oran metropolitan basin has been strongly shaped by successive state housing programmes, which have progressively directed urban growth toward the metropolitan periphery, particularly along the eastern and south-eastern corridors. Large-scale housing developments, including ZHUN estates and later AADL and LPP programmes, have played a decisive role in structuring the spatial expansion of the metropolitan region by concentrating new housing on peripheral land, often previously agricultural and located along major mobility axes.

Figure 1 illustrates the phases of urban expansion in the Oran metropolitan basin between 1972 and 2018, showing that metropolitan growth has not occurred through continuous planned expansion from the existing urban core, but through successive peripheral extensions along major infrastructure corridors, particularly toward Bir El Djir, Belgaid, and Es Sénia. This pattern corresponds closely with the location of large-scale state housing programmes. The map therefore suggests that metropolitan growth has been structured by state housing policy and infrastructure corridors operating at the territorial scale rather than by comprehensive urban design frameworks.

Importantly, these housing programmes are often implemented on land made available through prior processes of agricultural land conversion, informal subdivision, or infrastructure extension. In this sense, state-led housing programmes do not operate on an empty territory but rather intensify and formalise urbanisation processes that are already underway. State housing should therefore be understood not simply as planned urban expansion, but as one of the mechanisms through which territorial urbanisation is consolidated.

4.3 Informal Urbanisation and the Production of Urban Space

Alongside state-led housing programmes, informal subdivision and construction have played a major role in the expansion of the Oran metropolitan region, particularly in peri-urban agricultural areas located along major mobility corridors. Informal urbanisation often begins with the subdivision of agricultural parcels into smaller plots, followed by incremental construction of individual houses, workshops, and small commercial activities. These areas may initially lack full infrastructure and public services, but they gradually consolidate as residents negotiate connections to water, electricity, and road networks.

Importantly, informal urbanisation does not occur in isolation from the state. On the contrary, informal construction often precedes and triggers state intervention in the form of infrastructure provision, service extension, and the later implementation of formal housing programmes. Informal settlements create new concentrations of population and housing, which generate political and technical pressure for the extension of roads, water networks, electricity, schools, and transport services.

Urbanisation therefore often proceeds through a process in which construction precedes planning rather than following it. Informal actors are not marginal to the urbanisation process but are among its primary drivers, operating in a dynamic relationship with state institutions rather than in opposition to them.

Figure 2 illustrates the territorial structure of recent urban expansion in the Oran metropolitan basin. Large-scale state-led housing developments are predominantly located on the metropolitan periphery along major mobility corridors and on previously agricultural land, while agricultural parcels in peri-urban areas are incrementally subdivided into urban plots and some former industrial zones are progressively converted into commercial and residential areas. The spatial structure that emerges is characterised by multiple peripheral urban poles, corridor-based growth, and parcel-based subdivision, illustrating the territorial nature of urbanisation.

4.4 Inherited Territorial Structures and the Spatial Logic of Expansion

Urban expansion in the Oran metropolitan basin is strongly structured by inherited territorial systems, particularly cadastral divisions, agricultural land parcels, hydraulic systems, and mobility corridors. Peri-urban growth does not occur randomly across space but tends to follow existing roads, property boundaries, and infrastructural lines, which provide access, define plot divisions, and structure development opportunities.

Agricultural land historically organised through cadastral grids and irrigation systems is often incrementally subdivided and converted into urban land. As this process unfolds, historical parcel boundaries frequently become the basis for new urban plots, while rural paths and agricultural access roads are gradually transformed into urban streets. In this

way, inherited territorial systems remain legible in the spatial structure of new urban areas, even when their original agricultural function has disappeared.

These inherited systems constitute what this paper describes as infrastructural afterlives: spatial systems whose original purpose has changed but whose territorial logic continues to organise urban development over time.

4.5 The Blurred Boundary Between Formal and Informal Urbanisation

The distinction between formal and informal urbanisation in Oran cannot be understood purely as a spatial distinction between planned central areas and informal peripheral settlements. In central neighbourhoods, formerly composed of individual houses and large residential plots, the urban fabric has undergone rapid transformation through plot-by-plot redevelopment into multi-storey residential buildings. While these developments are often carried out by private developers operating within the formal real estate market, the process frequently involves regulatory flexibility, negotiated permissions, and ex-post regularisation.

As a result, contemporary urban development often operates within a grey zone between formal planning and informal practice. The boundary between formal and informal urbanisation is therefore not fixed but operates along a continuum of legality shaped by planning decisions, enforcement practices, and political priorities.

4.6 The Political Economy of Land and Peri-Urban Transformation

The conversion of agricultural land into urban land in the Oran metropolitan basin is not only a spatial process but also an economic and political one. Rising urban land values, housing demand, and state housing policies create strong incentives for the subdivision and sale of agricultural land. For many landowners in peri-urban areas, the subdivision and sale of land for urban development is significantly more profitable than maintaining agricultural production.

Peri-urban urbanisation is therefore driven not only by demographic growth but by the political economy of land, in which agricultural land becomes an urban asset. Land tenure systems, property boundaries, and access to infrastructure become key determinants of where and how urbanisation occurs, often more influential than urban design plans.

4.7 Urbanisation as Territorial Negotiation

The urban landscape that emerges from these processes is not the result of a single plan, actor, or design logic, but of ongoing negotiation between multiple actors and territorial

systems: state housing agencies, municipal authorities, informal developers, landowners, infrastructure providers, and residents. Each of these actors operates according to different temporalities, priorities, and spatial logics, and their actions intersect within the same territory.

Urbanisation in the Oran metropolitan basin can therefore be understood as a process of territorial negotiation, in which urban form emerges from the interaction between inherited cadastral systems, infrastructural corridors, informal subdivision practices, land markets, and state-led housing and infrastructure provision. The resulting urban form is often fragmented, heterogeneous, and discontinuous, produced through the interaction of multiple territorial logics rather than through a single project-based design framework.

5. Discussion

5.1 Rethinking Informality

Informal urbanisation is often framed as a condition external to formal planning systems, associated with peripheral settlements and unregulated development. This perspective assumes a clear boundary between formal and informal urbanisation, positioning planning as the primary mechanism through which urban space is organised.

However, the case of Oran suggests a different reading. Informal subdivision and construction do not simply occur outside planning frameworks but often unfold in anticipation of future infrastructure provision, regulatory adjustment, and integration into the formal city. Rather than representing a temporary or residual condition, informality operates as a mode of urbanisation through which urban expansion is initiated and structured.

In this sense, the distinction between formal and informal urbanisation is not absolute but operates along a continuum shaped by enforcement practices, regulatory flexibility, and political priorities. Informality is therefore not only a spatial condition but a regulatory and institutional one. It reflects how planning systems function in practice, rather than how they are formally defined.

Understanding informality in this way shifts it from a marginal phenomenon to a central mechanism in the production of urban space, particularly in rapidly urbanising contexts where territorial transformation precedes formal design intervention.

5.2 The State and the Production of Informality

The relationship between informality and the state is often described as oppositional, with informal urbanisation understood as occurring in the absence of planning. Yet the case of

Oran indicates a more complex dynamic in which informal development and state action are closely intertwined.

Informal subdivision and construction frequently precede formal intervention, but they also shape the conditions under which the state acts. The emergence of new settlements generates demand for infrastructure, services, and regulatory recognition, prompting subsequent state involvement through road construction, network extension, and legalisation processes. In this sequence, the state does not simply direct urbanisation but responds to spatial transformations already underway.

This suggests that informality is not external to urban governance but embedded within it. Planning operates not only through prior regulation but through adaptation, negotiation, and ex-post regularisation. The production of urban space therefore emerges from an ongoing interaction between informal practices and state intervention, rather than from a single, coordinated planning framework.

5.3 Planning as Negotiation

If informal urbanisation is not entirely outside the state, and if planning often follows rather than precedes development, then planning itself must be understood differently. Rather than functioning as a comprehensive system that determines urban form in advance, planning in many contexts operates as a process of negotiation between different actors, interests, and territorial conditions.

Developers, landowners, informal builders, municipal authorities, and state agencies all participate in shaping urban development, often through negotiated permissions, regulatory flexibility, and incremental adjustments to planning frameworks. The result is not the implementation of a single coherent plan but the gradual production of urban space through multiple decisions made over time.

In this context, urban form is not simply designed but negotiated. Infrastructure routes, land subdivision, housing development, and redevelopment projects are shaped by economic interests, political priorities, land ownership structures, and technical constraints. Planning becomes a tool for managing and regularising urbanisation rather than fully controlling it.

5.4 From Project-Based Design to Territorial Governance

These observations have important implications for urban design theory. If urbanisation is produced through the interaction of land regimes, infrastructure networks, informal practices, and state intervention, then the scale at which urban space is produced is not limited to the urban design project. Instead, urban space is produced at the territorial

scale through governance, regulation, infrastructure investment, and land development processes.

Urban design, in this context, cannot be understood solely as the design of public spaces, neighbourhoods, or masterplans. It must also be understood as operating within a broader territorial system in which many of the most significant decisions shaping urban form such as infrastructure routing, land subdivision, housing policy, and regularisation occur outside the traditional scope of urban design.

Urban design theory must therefore expand its analytical framework from the scale of the project to the scale of territory, governance, infrastructure, and land. Only by engaging with these territorial processes can urban design meaningfully interpret and influence the production of urban space.

This shift does not imply that urban design can fully control or precede these territorial processes. Many of the mechanisms that structure urbanisation—land markets, infrastructure investment, and regulatory systems—operate through actors and temporalities that exceed the scope of conventional design practice. However, recognising these processes as part of the object of urban design opens a different field of engagement. Rather than intervening only within spatial conditions already established, urban design can position itself in relation to the structuring logics of urbanisation informing infrastructure strategies, engaging with land subdivision frameworks, and contributing to the spatial articulation of regulatory systems. The question is therefore not whether urban design can act before urbanisation, but how it can operate within and upon the processes that produce it.

This may involve engaging with subdivision logics, anticipating infrastructure-induced growth, or contributing to the spatial framing of regulatory instruments through which urbanisation is channelled.

5.5 Toward a Territorial Approach to Urban Design

The analysis developed in this paper suggests that urban design cannot be understood solely through the scale of the project, as the spatial structure of urban form is often established through territorial processes that precede design intervention. In contexts such as the Oran metropolitan basin, infrastructure networks, land subdivision, informal practices, and state-led development interact to organise urbanisation over time, placing urban design in a position that is structurally conditioned by these prior transformations. This calls for a shift in perspective, from the design of individual projects to the territorial processes through which urban form is produced, a shift that is developed further in the conclusion.

6. Pluralising the Object of Urban Design

This paper has argued that urban design theory has historically defined its primary object at the scale of the project, focusing on the design of urban spaces, districts, and masterplans as the principal means through which urban form is produced. While this focus has generated important knowledge about urban form and spatial quality, it has also created a significant blind spot: the territorial processes that structure urbanisation before and beyond individual design interventions remain insufficiently theorised within urban design itself.

Through the case of the Oran metropolitan basin, this paper has shown that urban form is largely structured through territorial processes that operate across large spatial and temporal scales, including land subdivision, infrastructure development, informal urbanisation, and state-led housing and regulatory systems. These processes establish the spatial logic of urbanisation over time, often determining the basic structure of urban form before urban design projects are implemented. Urban design therefore frequently operates within spatial frameworks it did not produce and can only partially transform.

The paper has therefore proposed the concept of territorial urban design as an approach that shifts the object of urban design from the project to the territorial production of urban form. Territorial urban design does not abandon the project as a site of intervention, but repositions it within a broader understanding of how urbanisation is structured through the interaction of land, infrastructure, governance, and informal practices over time. This shift allows urban design to engage not only with the form of urban space, but with the processes that produce that form.

This argument contributes to ongoing discussions on the pluralisation of urban design theory. Pluralising theory does not simply require the inclusion of more case studies from different geographical contexts, but a reconsideration of the conceptual frameworks through which urbanisation is understood. If urban design continues to define its object primarily through the project and the formally designed city, it will remain aligned with only a limited set of urban conditions. Expanding the object of urban design to include the territorial production of urban form allows the discipline to engage more directly with the forms of urbanisation that characterise much of the contemporary world.

This shift also implies a methodological reorientation. Understanding urbanisation requires tracing the spatial effects of infrastructure investment, cadastral structures, land subdivision, and incremental development over time, rather than analysing only completed urban projects. For urban design practice, it suggests that the discipline must engage not only with the design of urban spaces but with the territorial systems—land, infrastructure, regulation, and housing—through which urbanisation is organised.

Ultimately, the question raised by this paper is not only how we design cities, but when and where urban form is actually determined. If urban form is largely structured through territorial processes that precede design intervention, then a discipline that defines itself primarily through the project risks intervening only after the most important spatial decisions have already been made. Urban design cannot continue to define its object at the scale of the project if projects intervene only after the city has already been spatially structured. Pluralising urban design theory therefore requires not only new sites of study, but a redefinition of its object.

This shift repositions urban design not as a discipline that simply intervenes earlier, but as one that must engage with the territorial processes that pre-structure urbanisation processes that operate beyond the traditional scope of design yet decisively shape the spatial conditions within which it acts, and which it has historically taken as given rather than as a site of design inquiry.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Author Contribution

A.B.B. conceived the research, developed the conceptual and theoretical framework, conducted the territorial and spatial analysis, prepared all figures and maps, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

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The author used AI-assisted language editing tools (Grammarly) for grammar and clarity. All intellectual content and analysis are the author’s own.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study consist of historical maps, planning documents, cadastral records, and spatial analyses produced by the author. Some data are publicly available from national planning documents and historical archives, while analytical drawings and maps produced for this research are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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Figures

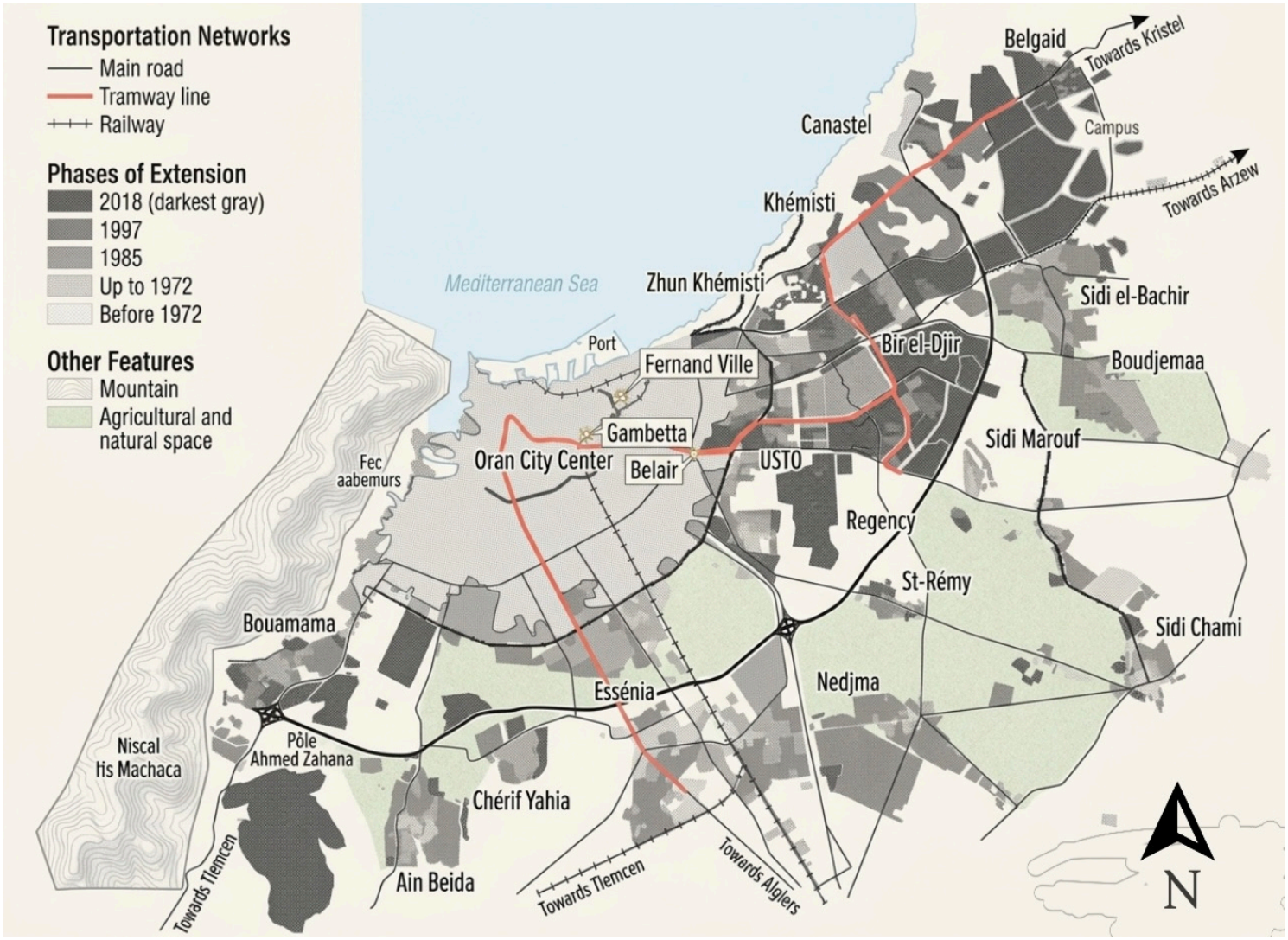

Figure 1

Phases of urban expansion in the Oran metropolitan basin (1972–2018), illustrating peri-urban growth corridors and agricultural land conversion.

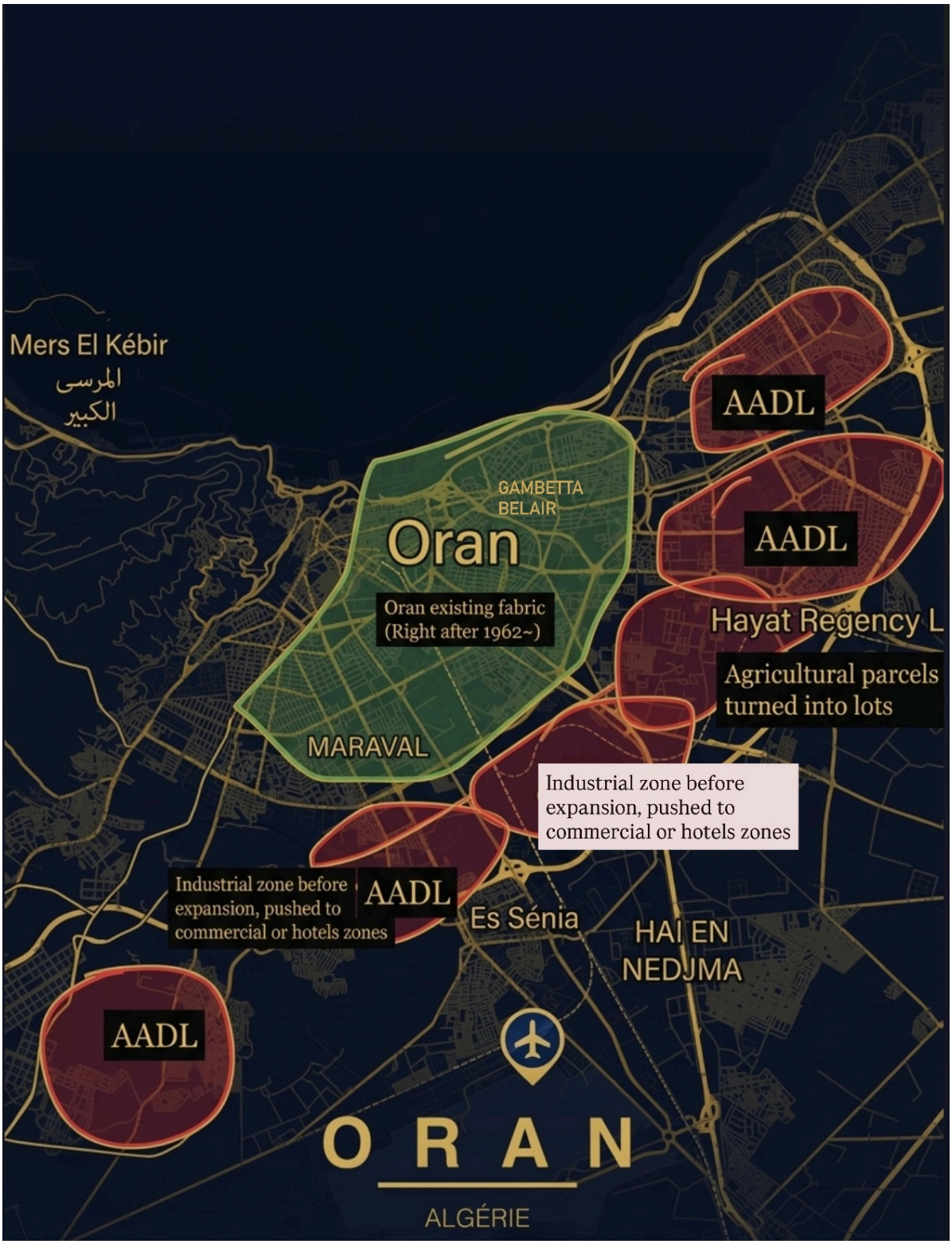

Figure 2

The spatial structure of recent urban expansion in the Oran metropolitan basin (2026), illustrating corridor-based and parcel-based urbanisation.