

'Sidi Soufi Mosque, Bejaia, Algeria' podcast

Sami Boufassa, lecturer-researcher at the Architecture Department, Technology Faculty at Abderrahmane Mira University, Bejaia.

There was a small mosque prior to colonisation, but it was also the seat of the Sidi Soufi marabout.

And what is specific to this beautiful mosque, this small beautiful mosque of the town of Bejaia, is that the main façade was the work of Soupireau, a leading Algerian ceramist from the early 20th century.

It is not an Algerian tradition at all. He covered nearly the whole of the main façade with floral designs reflecting an Ottoman influence, and I would say much more similar to the Bursa mosques, if I am not wrong.

It is a small mosque overlooking a delightful square at night. Unfortunately, the square is used as a car park by day.

Sami Boufassa's interview with Salah (in French)

- What do you think about this architecture? Do you like it?

- Yes, I think it is very beautiful. It seems to be in a Moorish Revival style.

I am no expert, but I think that this building is very similar to Muslim schools from the French colonial era.

The décor recalls the Maghreb style, the style of the Maghreb mosques with a single minaret. The floral decoration is slightly reminiscent of the style of the large mosques of the Maghreb and of southern Spain, Al-Andalus.

Passer-by speaking in French

The façade is my favourite part of this mosque.

The entrance, its doors, its windows, its zellige mosaics and its décor are very similar to the Moorish style, to the style of the mosques found in Spain.

Sami Boufassa

Was the seat of the Sidi Soufi marabout moved by the colonial power? Or not? Personally, I haven't found any documents.

Speech by Bulle Tuil Leonetti

What do we know about the history of the building of the Sidi Soufi Mosque?

In reality, very little. That leaves great room for heroic legends and tales of how it was founded.

Man of around sixty speaking in Classical Arabic.

A friend told me an anecdote.

A long, long time ago, an imam called Boulahbal preached in this mosque. And he was my friend's grandfather. He told me that the imam was behind the mosque extension, during the period under French rule. He wisely asked them to enlarge the mosque.

Why? Because the French wanted to build police barracks.

The imam, whom Allah granted his mercy, seized the opportunity and asked them to make the mosque larger: 'are you going to build your barracks on the ground where people pray?' They did not know how to answer and they therefore agreed to enlarge the mosque.

Sami Boufassa

At the end of the 19th century, the French authorities decided to offer the population – I am not sure whether as negotiating or peace-making --, a small mosque on the plain near the Algerian neighbourhood of Bab El-Louz.

The opening was covered in the local press in 1902.

I believe that the colonial policy was to revamp that neighbourhood. The proof is that there was no urban project, the only amenities were in that district.

Shops were then built that led to the marketplace, which was called the Sidi Soufi square in 1930.

The municipal authority wanted to create a specific urban centre for Algerians, as can be seen from the coherent aesthetics of all the buildings of this urban whole. The different buildings show a similar style, despite being built over several decades.

Speech by Bulle Tuil Leonetti

The residents of Bejaia are very fond of the Sidi Soufi Mosque, and its façade decorated with colourful engravings and inscriptions is considered as the flagship of the town's architecture.

Passer-by speaking in Kabyle and French

Why do I like the architecture?

Quite simply because it is unpretentious. It is simple. The decoration is a plus. The decoration adds something. But the building structure is simple.

The outside space and the way in which the outside space has been created is a different matter.

There is a plot down there. I think that the plot is an extension of the mosque space. If you step back, you can appreciate the quality and beauty of the decoration. So, I think it is fine.

Man of around sixty speaking in Classical Arabic.

What I like about this mosque are the places where you can sit outside the mosque. We can meet up with friends and talk about things that matter to us. For example, we talk about people that I have not seen for a long time; then we discuss subjects that cannot be mentioned inside the mosque, because there are decorum rules in the mosque.

Salah

This architecture is slightly reminiscent of the architecture of our forebears.

I like it a great deal and I would like architects to design new buildings inspired by this style.

Personally, I think it is beautiful, but I would prefer the style to be present in our towns, not only used for mosques, for schools, administrative and other buildings.