

Rabat, a Cultural Capital: Assessing the City's Infrastructure for Cultural Vocation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 14 Dec 2024	The study examines the cultural infrastructure of Rabat, the capital of Morocco, focusing on assessing its adequacy in fulfilling its cultural objectives. Thanks to its diverse cultural heritage, the city of Rabat aspires to transform into a flourishing cultural hub reflecting its historical roots while embracing contemporary progress. However, the extent to which Rabat's cultural infrastructure fulfils its cultural aspirations remains to be determined. This study examines the diversity, availability, and dispersion of cultural facilities in Rabat. The research employs a quantitative approach to ascertain the accessibility of cultural amenities in proportion to the city's population by computing the ratio of inhabitants per equipment and comparing it to that of other cities known for their thriving cultural scenes in developing countries. This study demonstrates the efficacy and deficiencies of Rabat's cultural infrastructure, providing insights into its capacity to support its cultural aspiration to foster a vibrant cultural environment. The study's findings suggest that Rabat presents substantial room for enhancement of its cultural infrastructure to improve its attractiveness and competitiveness internationally as a cultural city. The findings are also expected to initiate fresh discussions on cultural policy, urban planning, and the conservation of Rabat's and other similar towns' abundant cultural heritage. Keywords: Cultural city, cultural hub, cultural infrastructure, the ratio of inhabitants per equipment.
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INTRODUCTION

Having a cultural vocation has become increasingly important in recent years since culture has become an agent for economic, social, and tourism development [1]. Being known as a city with a unique culture and heritage can help create wealth by attracting visitors worldwide [2]. Cultural heritage and physical infrastructure are the fundamental pillars of cities' appeal to visitors [3]. Timothy and Nyaupane [4] state that cultural and heritage tourism is now experiencing rapid growth and is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the global tourism industry, where there is a significant amount of rivalry. As a result, cities strive to differentiate themselves by developing unique identities that attract individuals seeking authentic cultural encounters [5]. The tourism industry is constantly changing to adjust to the demands of various places, as an increasing number of tourists are looking for experiences related to intangible and physical cultural heritage, including architecture, archaeology, religion, gastronomy, festivals, and museums. Individuals often go to foreign nations to pursue cultural experiences primarily to learn about the historical aspects of diverse civilizations, savor the local gastronomy, and ultimately engage themselves in the indigenous culture [6]. The popularity of cultural tourism is increasing due to the influence of digital technology and online self-organization. These factors contribute to the growing demand for tourist sites and the convenience of accessing information about them [7].

Alkhatib *et al.* [8] argue that Morocco has several notable advantages that enable it to compete effectively in the global tourism business. Plenković and Stanić [9] assert that the cultural diversity of this region is a fusion of Arab, Berber (an autochthonous African tribe), and other influences from Africa and Europe. The country's advantageous geographic location, distinctive tourist sites, and reasonable expenses have all played a role in attracting a significant

number of tourists to Morocco. According to Boum [10], Morocco is leading the way in sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean area by implementing an innovative approach that involves active participation of the local population, effective long-term management of the ecosystem, and unique visitor experiences.

As cities become more aware of the importance of cultural facilities in promoting economic and social well-being, Rabat is looking to position itself among internationally recognized cultural towns. Rabat is situated on the Atlantic Ocean coastline in northwest Morocco, and is strategically located on a natural site with natural boundaries: The Bouregreg valley to the north, the Akreuch cliff from the east, the Atlantic Ocean from the west, and the green belt (A forest dividing Rabat city from Temara city) from the south. Rabat embodies the characteristics of being Mediterranean, Arab, Muslim, and North African. Still, the Moroccan capital remains veiled compared to other cities despite its rich cultural heritage. Therefore, the city has strategically invested in culture to improve its urban landscape and built environment to enhance its brand image as a cultural city [11]. In recent years, Rabat has undergone significant transformations, particularly through large-scale projects aiming to reinforce its cultural infrastructure. Cultural infrastructure is the physical space where culture is produced and consumed, including museums, libraries, theaters, and multi-use venues [12]. These facilities play a vital role in allowing visitors to immerse themselves in culture through exhibitions, performances, and lectures [13]. Moreover, Rabat's cultural economy has experienced significant growth during the previous decade. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the Bouregreg Valley megaproject experienced a substantial change in its direction. Originally intended as a luxury residential complex, the project shifted its focus and transformed into a cultural district. This transformation highlights the importance of culture in the development of the city [14]. Hence, Rabat is trying to achieve its goal through constructing new cultural facilities, restoring existing ones, promoting its heritage, and organizing international festivals. These projects have been funded and sponsored by the royal family and are backed by emerging governmental structures. Cornwell & Atia [15] indicate that these structures, such as the National Foundation of Museums, established in 2011, aim to make culture more accessible, encourage discussion between different cultures, and supervise the growth of museums throughout Morocco, especially Rabat. According to Majdi [16], the notion of Rabat as a cultural hub is consistently broadened to highlight Morocco's interconnectedness with Europe, the Arab world, and Africa.

This paper aims to assess the city's cultural infrastructure and its capacity to absorb all the visitors it is trying to attract by promoting itself as a cultural city.

OBJECTIVES

The study focuses on Rabat, the administrative and political capital of the Kingdom of Morocco. Rabat is known as a city of exceptional cultural significance on a national scale. The question that this paper is trying to answer is the city's capacity to compete internationally with its cultural infrastructure by examining its availability, distribution, and reception capacity. The study seeks to highlight any disparities by providing a detailed inventory of existing cultural facilities and analyzing their geographic distribution across the five districts of the city: Agdal-Riyad, El Youssoufia, Hassan, Souissi, and Yaacoub El Mansour. Furthermore, this study aims to contextualize Rabat's cultural landscape and its potential for growth and improvement by comparing the inhabitants' ratio per cultural facility with other comparable cities: Tunis, Cusco, Colombo, and Tirana. To ensure a fair comparison, cities from developing and emerging countries were selected. These cities offer diverse cultural experiences and infrastructure, making them suitable comparators for Rabat. By focusing on emerging or developing cities, Rabat's cultural competitiveness can be assessed in a more relevant context, considering historical significance, cultural preservation, contemporary art scene, and international visibility. This comparative approach will provide a benchmark for assessing the adequacy of Rabat's cultural infrastructure relative to urban centers of similar size, economic status, or cultural significance.

By emphasizing these critical aspects of cultural infrastructure, the current study aims to provide valuable insights to urban planners, policymakers, and cultural institutions, potentially informing future decisions on cultural development, urban regeneration, and the enhancement of Rabat's cultural offerings. Moreover, this study offers a critical perspective on the effectiveness of cultural infrastructure as a driver of urban transformation and economic development.

This research documents the current state of Rabat's cultural facilities and provides a foundation for understanding the city's cultural ecosystem and its potential for growth and improvement.

METHODS

In order to comprehensively analyze Rabat's cultural infrastructure, the study focuses specifically on theaters, museums, libraries, and art galleries. Although cultural infrastructure includes many other institutions, such as music halls and community centers, the choice was based on practical and theoretical factors. First, these institutions serve as essential elements of cultural involvement in cities, providing various artistic, historical, and intellectual encounters. Typically, multiple towns extensively record these data sets, allowing for more comprehensive comparison research. This approach is consistent with influential publications in urban cultural studies, such as those authored by Zukin [17] and Florida [18], which highlight the significance of these institutions in defining the identities and economics of cities. The objective is to thoroughly examine essential elements in urban cultural landscapes by focusing on these four categories of cultural amenities.

To assess the cultural facilities of Rabat and their potential impact on society, the approach involves systematically gathering, evaluating, and interpreting data. The collected data on cultural facilities (museums, theaters, libraries, and art galleries) for the mentioned cities is sourced from several trustworthy and authoritative sources, including official urban websites, academic studies, cultural groups, and government databases. The data collection methods and timeframes are standardized to compare cities accurately. Subsequently, the ratio of persons per cultural equipment is obtained by dividing the population of each city by the number of equipment. Examining the obtained ratio can facilitate the assessment and analysis of cultural infrastructure across different locations, enabling the identification of trends in the evolution of culture. Furthermore, by analyzing numerical information, the study evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of Rabat's cultural infrastructure. The analysis identifies the areas in which Rabat demonstrates exceptional performance and highlights the areas where development is needed, offering significant insights into the city's cultural scene. Ultimately, this paper suggests prospective areas for future studies that further enhance our understanding of Rabat's cultural infrastructure.

RESULTS

Rabat, the Moroccan capital with its extensive historical background, varied cultural inheritance, and expanding urban population, can offer an intriguing opportunity to explore the convergence of culture, urban growth, and societal ambitions. This research examines the merits, shortcomings, and prospective implications of Rabat's cultural facilities on its artistic and cultural vocations by comparing them to other cities. The study will provide valuable information for strategic interventions and governmental efforts.

Geographical Distribution

Fig. 1 below shows the distribution of cultural facilities in Rabat. The map reveals an apparent spatial inequality, with a significant concentration in the northern and central parts of the city, particularly in the Hassan district and the northern portion of the Agdal Riyad district. This centralization reflects a pattern of urban development that has historically favored northern areas, likely due to their historical value and capacity to attract tourists.

The Hassan district, hosting more than half of the city's cultural facilities (18 out of 35), emerges as Rabat's cultural heart. The adjacent northern part of the Agdal Riyad district, with seven facilities, reinforces this cultural core, creating a contiguous zone of high cultural activity in the city center. Agdal Riyad hosts a total of 9 cultural facilities.

In contrast, the western and southern parts of Rabat experience a notable scarcity of cultural equipment. The Yaacoub El Mansour and Souissi districts have limited cultural facilities, with only 5 and 3, respectively.

Most outstanding is the complete absence of cultural equipment in the El Youssoufia district, which highlights a significant gap in cultural infrastructure in the eastern part of Rabat.

This map raises concerns about equitable access to cultural resources for all Rabat residents. Their geographical distribution across the city may reinforce existing disparities and impact its cultural inclusivity.

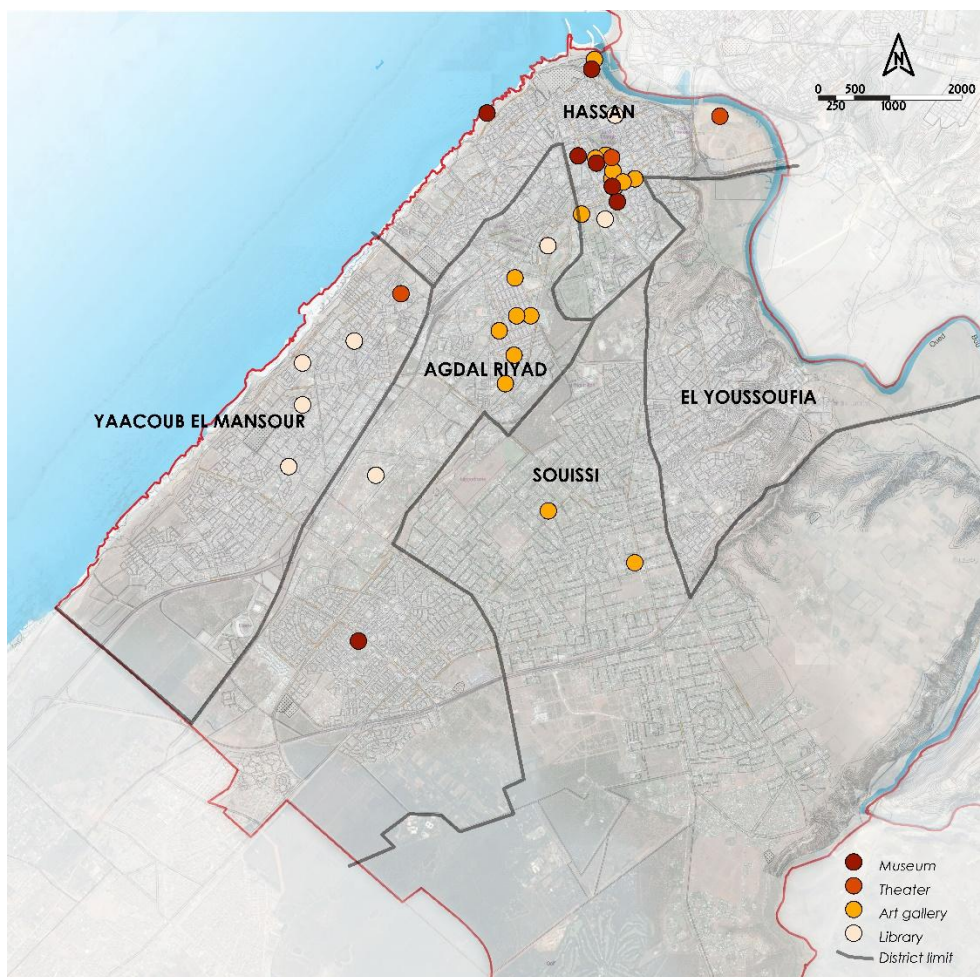


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of cultural facilities across Rabat city

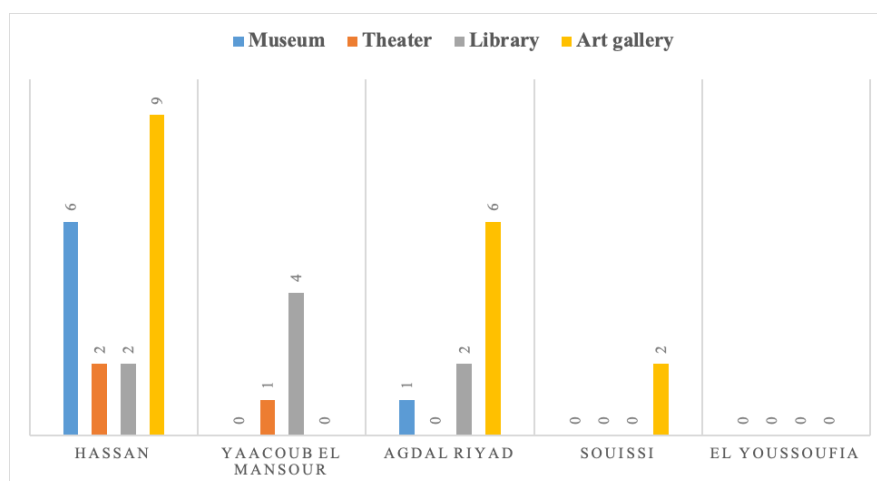


Figure 2. Comparative distribution of cultural facilities across Rabat's five districts

Fig. 2 above shows that Hassan district stands out as the cultural hub of Rabat, being the only district hosting all four types of cultural facilities:

- Two of the city's three theaters, the Grand Theater of Rabat, designed by the famous architect Zaha Hadid, have an extensive performance hall with a seating capacity of 1800 and an amphitheater of 520 seats. However, this theater

is not yet operational. So, the only working theater in this district is the Mohammed V Theater, which has a seating capacity of 1500.

- Six museums, each specializing in a distinct field (art, history, jewelry, photography, etc.), collectively offer a comprehensive cultural experience.
- Al Mechouar library.
- Nine art galleries, offering visitors a wider choice of exploring venues.

This concentration can be explained by the fact that Hassan is the historical center of Rabat, where significant urban and cultural development took place.

Agdal Riyad appears to be the second most culturally diverse district in Rabat with an offer of three types of cultural facilities:

- One museum, the Maroc Télécom Museum, which offers a comprehensive look at the history and the development of telecommunications in Morocco.
- Two libraries: The National Library of the Kingdom of Morocco, the most extensive library in the city, with a seating capacity of 248 and an amphitheater for 300 people, and the media library of Rabat, which has a seating capacity of 84.
- Six art galleries showcasing the work of local and international artists.

The Yaacoub El Mansour district comes next, offering two types of facilities. The district accommodates one theater with an 800-seat capacity. However, this facility is currently non-operational due to a problem with water and electricity supply. The district hosts also four neighborhood-level libraries, each with a capacity ranging from 60 to 100 seats.

The Souissi district comes fourth with only one type of cultural facility. It accommodates two art galleries known for hosting diverse contemporary art exhibitions.

The total absence of cultural facilities in the El Youssoufia district highlights a significant disparity in the distribution of cultural resources across the city, which results in unequal access to cultural experiences among residents.

Benchmarking of the Ratio of Inhabitants Per Facility

Analyzing and comparing the ratio of inhabitants per equipment is an effective method for gaining insight into various cities' cultural landscapes and priorities. Table 1 below presents the calculated ratio of inhabitants per cultural facility for the selected cities.

Table 1. Inhabitant per facility ratio

	Museums	Theater	Library	Art gallery
Rabat	73,659.85	171,873	64,452.37	30,330.52
Tunis	45,631.78	159,711.25	53,237.08	37,579.11
Colombo	56,161.40	140,403.50	46,801.16	40,115.28
Tirana	46,451.83	139,355.50	79,631.71	34,838.87
Cusco	23,802.77	214,225	42,845	32,957.69

Museums

Cusco ranked first in museums, with an astonishing ratio of 23,802.77 inhabitants per museum. This number reflects the city's commitment to preserving and advancing its unique culture and abundant history. Tunis and Tirana are notable cities, ranking second and third, respectively, with ratios of 45,631.78 and 46,451.83. These statistics indicate

a solid dedication to safeguarding these cities' cultural heritage and a significant financial contribution to cultural organizations. Colombo's inhabitant per museum ratio is 56,161.40 while Rabat ranked last with a ratio of 73,659.85 inhabitants per museum. The fact that Rabat has the fewest museums among the cities can explain its last ranking.

Theaters

Valuable information on cities' cultural vibrancy and commitment to the performing arts can be concluded from analyzing the inhabitant ratio per theatre. The results of this comparison are as follows:

Tirana holds the top position with an impressive ratio of around 139,355.50 people per theater. This significant ratio is evidence of the city's dedication to promoting the performing arts and allowing residents to enhance their cultural experiences. Secondly, Colombo closely trails behind with a ratio of around 140,403.50 inhabitants per theater. Colombo offers a diverse selection of theatrical events, establishing itself as a center for performing arts in Asia. Tunis ranked third with an average of almost 159,711.25 inhabitants per theater. Despite its commitment to enhancing culture through theatrical performances and shows, Rabat ranked fourth with an average of 171,873 inhabitants per theater. Cusco ranked last with a ratio of 214,225 inhabitants per theater despite its abundant cultural heritage and lively arts scene. This ratio can be explained by the fact that the number of theaters in Cusco is low compared to the other cities, even though it has the lowest population.

Libraries

Cusco stands out as a leader in promoting reading and education among its residents, with a resident-to-library ratio of 42,845. The city's high ratio emphasizes its dedication to providing its residents with access to knowledge and resources, enabling them to enhance their intellectual capabilities. Colombo ranked second with a ratio of 46,801.16. The city's commitment to promoting reading and continuous education is apparent from these statistics, which show a significant investment in library facilities. Tunis has a moderate library ratio of around 53,237.08 inhabitants per library. Rabat ranked fourth with a ratio of 64,452.37 inhabitants per library, and Tirana ranked last with the most minimal ratio with 79,631.71 inhabitants per library.

This data indicates a need for more libraries in comparison to other cities. This is regrettable, as libraries promote education and foster a reading culture. However, it also highlights the potential for improvement in this area.

Art galleries

Rabat demonstrates its commitment to providing versatile venues for art exhibitions, with 30,330.52 citizens per gallery. These venues are essential to the community since they provide spaces for artistic expression. Cusco places high importance on creating spaces where individuals can show and exhibit their creativity and artistry. That is why it ranked second with a ratio of 32,957.69 inhabitants per art gallery. Neighboring Cusco, Tirana ranked third with a ratio of 34,838.87 inhabitants per gallery. Tunis and Colombo ranked fourth and fifth with 37,579.11 and 40,115.28 ratios, respectively. These ratios demonstrate the cities' devotion, allowing artists to showcase their work and make it accessible to the public.

DISCUSSION

The presence of museums, libraries, theatres, and art galleries in Rabat, the capital of Morocco, proves the city's rich history and diverse cultural attractions. This paper evaluated Rabat's cultural infrastructure and its capacity to give the city a cultural vocation by comparing the inhabitants' ratio per facility with cities in emerging and developing countries to provide more information about the city's cultural infrastructure.

Rabat's results show the city's higher level of equipment in art galleries by providing one gallery for 30,330.52 inhabitants, which gave the city the first rank among its peers. Rabat's fourth rank in both theater and library lists, with ratios of 171,873 and 64,452.37 inhabitants, respectively, indicates a lower availability of both facilities than other cities. Sorely, as regards museums, Rabat ranked last with a ratio of more than 73,659.85 inhabitants per museum.

Rabat, with its current theater's seating capacity of 4,100 (1,500 for the Mohammed V theater, 1,800 for the Grand Theater (not yet operational), and 800 for the Al Mansour theater (on hold), translates to a ratio of 1 seat for every 126 residents. However, calculating this ratio with the only working theater (The Mohammed V theater) gives one seat for every 344 residents. This low seating capacity for the population suggests that Rabat may need help to accommodate significant cultural events and performances, which could limit the city's ability to attract diverse cultural programming and the cultural engagement of residents. This limited access is particularly in light of the uneven distribution of cultural facilities across the city, where the northern part is better served than the rest.

If the city's inhabitant per cultural facility ratio fails to meet its growing population's diverse demands and interests sufficiently, Rabat cannot fully achieve its cultural aspiration. The ranking of Rabat suggests that it could offer better access to cultural facilities. Despite having a moderate number of cultural equipment, Rabat provides fewer cultural experiences than other cities. The uneven geographical distribution of cultural equipment across the city further exacerbates this problem.

Difficulties concerning economic elements and the formulation of cultural policies likely affect Rabat's cultural infrastructure. Rabat may target more than just the cultural sector with its financing objectives and strategies for urban development. Furthermore, the city's historical and cultural context may affect its cultural infrastructure.

Based on the findings of this study, it seems reasonable to conclude that Rabat's cultural infrastructure could be better equipped to provide the cultural vocation that the city is looking for. The calculated ratios clearly demonstrate the city's need for more cultural facilities. Therefore, Rabat is obligated to increase the number of its cultural facilities to accommodate a more significant number of residents and tourists. Furthermore, Rabat has to address the geographical disparities by developing new cultural facilities in underserved areas. In such a case, more funds could be required to improve and expand the existing infrastructure. Moreover, there should be actions to provide additional resources for cultural programming, cultural exchange programs, and infrastructure upgrades to enhance the vibrancy and appeal of Rabat's culture.

While the study provides valuable insights into Rabat's cultural infrastructure, it solely examined its geographical and quantitative dimensions, focusing specifically on factors such as the quantity, variety of facilities, and their locations. The analysis did not include the qualitative elements, such as the programming, accessibility, and utilization of these facilities by the local community. In addition, the study evaluated only the physical cultural infrastructure and did not evaluate the soft infrastructure, such as art education, support for artists, and knowledge networks [19]. Future research on Rabat's cultural infrastructure should embrace a comprehensive and collaborative methodology, including qualitative evaluations, contextual examination, and a more extensive examination of hard and soft infrastructures. The results would enhance the comprehension of the city's cultural environment and facilitate more efficient policymaking and investment decisions.

CONCLUSION

Using cultural assets as a significant attraction has proven to be an effective way to draw tourists and boost economic development. Attracting more visitors helps cities in boosting their market reach and visitor numbers, therefore enhancing their global presence. By executing this strategy, the local culture may be effectively and enduringly promoted, historical assets can be conserved, and heritage sites can be rejuvenated. When cultural heritage and tourism are combined, they can rejuvenate historical sites and provide tourists with a diverse range of experiences [7].

According to Pizam and Mansfeld [20], tourists' satisfaction with their experiences is closely linked to the quality of a destination's tourism or cultural offerings. Assessing and analyzing tourists' levels of fulfillment is a valuable tool for comprehending their expectations and benchmarks for a satisfactory tourism experience. Locations may customize their offerings to meet the needs of their target audience, ensuring a visit that is both educational and fulfilling.

Based on the present research, it became apparent that Rabat's cultural infrastructure presents challenges in its quest to establish a vibrant cultural identity. The city would benefit from more cultural facilities and a more equitable

distribution across its districts. Calculating the inhabitants' ratio per cultural equipment and comparing it to four other cities for reference demonstrated that Rabat has a strong presence in art galleries. However, its lower ranks in museums, theaters, and libraries suggest that Rabat needs to be better equipped with these facilities. Moreover, the uneven distribution of these facilities across the city may restrict the citizens' ability to access and engage in cultural activities.

The results indicate the necessity of making strategic investments to improve Rabat's cultural infrastructure and programs. Expanding the number of museums, theaters, and public libraries will more effectively cater to the city's inhabitants and enhance Rabat's status as a dynamic cultural hub.

The cultural infrastructure of Rabat can safeguard history and include people, but it needs more diversity and the expansion of infrastructure. These limitations emphasize the necessity for continuous funding, ingenuity, and collaboration to achieve the city's cultural capacity and vocation. To realize its potential as a cultural hub, Rabat must prioritize operationalizing the Grand and Al Mansour Theater and developing new cultural spaces in underserved areas. By investing in its cultural infrastructure, Rabat can enhance its artistic offering and strengthen its image as a dynamic city that values and promotes cultural heritage.

Ultimately, a comprehensive approach that addresses both the geographical disparities and the seating capacity limitations of cultural facilities will be essential for Rabat to fully embrace its cultural vocation and leverage its rich heritage.

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