Habib Bourguiba, the former President of Tunisia, used to work in an office located in the Bab Souika Halfaouine area. Many years after he became President he asked the Minister of Equipment and Housing to do something to improve that section of Tunis. The Minister was keen on the idea, especially since he wanted to help with rehabilitating and modernising the old medina.

Bab Souika dates to the eleventh century when commercial transactions with the nomads had increased to the extent that they overflowed through the walls of the old medina of Tunis. New areas were established in the open spaces outside the walls. By the thirteenth century two ribats had been formed, the northern one called Ribat Souk Souika and the southern one, Ribat Bab Djazira. These were complete communities with shops, work places and houses. The walls of these two ribats were linked in the sixteenth century to form the present day enclosure of the old medina of Tunis.

The Minister was enthusiastic about rehabilitating parts of the old medina by modernising them, and by setting up shopping malls, super markets and office buildings in them. The Association de la Sauvegarde de la Médina, established to protect and improve the old city, had different opinions about interventions that would change the values and the old fabric of the city. A compromise had to be found if the two parties were to be able to work harmoniously together to benefit the city.

The Minister appointed a Commission de Suivi which was to oversee the rehabilitation of the Bab Souika Halfaouine district. Over twenty projects were undertaken under the auspices of this Commission; Sidi el-Aloui was just one of them. The Commission designated the Association de la Sauvegarde de la Médina to design the school, providing that all decisions about the building, from the floor plans to the detailed specifications were first approved by the Commission. The architect chosen for the project, Samir Hamaici, was already employed by the Association. He faced difficulties not only with the Commission but also with the Société Nationale Immobilière de Tunisie (SNIT) which was the agency responsible for building all the schools in the country. SNIT followed a standard layout for all its schools, a linear building with a row of classrooms opening out on to a corridor. To convince SNIT and the Commission of the suitability of a new school design was an enormous challenge for the architect.
The school is located in a dense urban area, close to the mosque of Saheb Ettabaa. It replaced an old school for the area which had been inadequately housed in the dilapidated Khaznadad Palace. The site is surrounded by low rise courtyard houses and narrow streets on three sides, and a park in front which abuts a main street, Rue Bab Bou. It is an elongated, flat plot of land left vacant after some residential buildings were pulled down to make room for a road that was to connect Bab Saoudoun with Bab al Khadraa. Local objections saw to it that the road was never built. Instead, a third of the site was given to the (future) Sidi el-Aloui School, while the remaining two-thirds was landscaped, and turned into a public park known as Batha' Sidi el-Aloui.

The Ministry of Education, the members of the community, and the professionals represented in the Commission de Suivi had one main objective, and that was to build a school that could educate the maximum number of students. Quantity was given precedence over quality. The floor area for the school was so specifically given by the Commission that it curtailed the inclusion of many features considered (by Western standards) essential for a school. A library, gymnasium, diverse workshops, theatre and cafeteria are all missing from this school which has been designed solely for educational purposes and without any trimmings.

The architect, Samir Hamaici, who was born and raised in a traditional quarter of Tunis, is familiar with most details of traditional Tunisian architecture. As he was employed by the Association de la Sauvegarde de la Médina, which advocates the use of traditional forms, he proposed a courtyard building for the school. The design and drawings were completed in three months because the Commission wanted to complete the project quickly.

The design of the school respects the scale of the neighbouring houses. Even though it is more monumental it is not alien to its surroundings. In fact, the school’s front facade resembles that of a house located opposite it. Hamaici also derived architectural details from the traditional environment of the area; the masses and height of the building, its courtyards, openings, decorations and colours, all reflect this assimilation. The architect has made the maximum use of the small site by building two rows of classrooms separated by a sizeable courtyard. The school contains sixteen classrooms, each 49.8 square metres (there are eight of them per floor), a large meeting room, 45.6 square metres, four offices each 4.2 x 4 metres in size, a small clinic, an art workshop for the pupils and a staff room. A three-bedroom flat, measuring a hundred and thirty square metres, and situated on the second floor is for the use of the headmaster and his family; this is a customary practice in all Tunisian schools.

From the outside the building appears as two masses separated by staircases, inside it appears as one courtyard divided by a bridge. Classrooms are distributed symmetrically around the paved courtyard. The school occupies the ground and first floors, the headmaster’s flat taking up the second floor over the front gateway. Rectangular piers support the galleries that surround the courtyard. The main entrance is aligned with the principal axis of the public park, and is marked by a traditional masbrabiyya, an ornate wooden window, above the door.

Landscaping is practically non-existent in the school. The courtyard is bare of trees, and only a few potted plants and flowers are distributed along the edges of the galleries. There are no benches, or sand pits for the children to play in. According to the Headmaster, the noise of playing in the courtyards would make it virtually impossible to teach in the classrooms. The bare surface of the courtyard apparently also helps to keep the school clean-looking. Apart from three paintings decorating the walls facing the courtyard there is no art, and no one is allowed to draw or place any objects in the galleries. The Headmaster keeps a tight control on the school; it is very organised and appears to be efficiently run.

The school serves the district of Halfaouine which has about ten thousand inhabitants. The official monthly income of a family averages between TD 70-120 (US $75-129). In actuality it is probably higher because there is usually more than one bread earner per family. Halfaouine is considered to be an upper low-income group. One thousand pupils use the school. They are divided into thirty-one classes, each class having between thirty-six to forty-two pupils. They range in age from six to twelve, and the ratio between boys and girls appears to be about even. There are two teaching shifts, so that the school is used from 7:30am to 5:30pm. The first group comes in from 7:30 to 10:00am, the second from 10:00 to 12:30pm; the first group returns from 12:30 to 3pm, and the second group comes in again from 3 to 5:30pm.

Given the financial restraints and the limited budget for this project, Hamaici managed to blend remarkably well the users’ needs with the aesthetic qualities of the building. The architect, client and the community are all proud of the building. A reinforced concrete frame structure with hollow tile flooring and hollow brick infill was used for the school. All the facades were rendered with cement; other surfaces were finished with cement plastering and then painted with white plastic paint. Doors, windows, and masbrabiyyas were made of wood by skilled local craftsmen. Window grilles for the ground floor, and the hand rails for the galleries were cast of wrought iron. Low priced red marble tiles were used on the edges of the galleries, and to mark out and define the courtyard.

All the materials were produced in Tunisia including the steel, electric wires, lamps and wash basins. Almost all the work force, skilled and unskilled, the consultants, and the contractors were Tunisians, the sole exception being a French architect who worked for the Association.

The climate of Tunis is of the Mediterranean type, hot and dry in the summer and rainy and cold in the winter. Average temperatures in January, the coldest month, are between six to eight degrees centigrade in winter, and thirty-one to forty degrees centigrade (when the southerly winds blow) in summer. It rarely snows. There are no heating or cooling
devices present in the building. However, the ceilings in the classrooms are high enough to create enough space for hot air to be ventilated through the upper part of the windows, which keeps the rooms cool enough. Presumably body heat suffices to keep the temperature at a comfortable level during the winter months. Each classroom has five windows, three onto the courtyard and two onto the street. Sixteen fluorescent lamps in the classrooms help to improve the light for the students in the afternoons or during dark and wintry days.

The cost of a typical school built by the Ministry of Education is TD 220-230 (US $237-248) per square metre, whereas the cost of constructing an average quality housing unit is TD 350 (US $377). The cost of the Sidi el-Aloui School came out to be TD 241 (US $260) per square metre. The total cost of the school was TD 465,000 (US $501,078), with most of the funds coming from the Ministère de l’Equipement et de l’Habitat.

Although it cost more than the average Tunisian school, the quality of the workmanship involved is much higher. In fact the architect himself supervised the construction work, making sure that all his details and designs were executed properly.

The design for the project was started in March 1985 and ended in May 1985. Construction began immediately under the direction of the Ban Ayad and Jebali Construction Company. Once the foundation stone was laid in March 1985, the school building took one year to complete. It was inaugurated with a ceremony in October of that same year.

The building integrates well with its surroundings, and it has not yet shown any signs of ageing. The spaces are well articulated, and the circulation patterns are simple and effective. The courtyard idea is pleasant to look at, and the columns add an elegant air to that space. The sole problem with the building seems to be its acoustics. The classrooms, situated opposite each other across the courtyards, generate a lot of noise. This is augmented by the noise of the street outside. Closing the windows in the classrooms is one solution, but this cannot be done in summer. If it is, cross ventilation will be blocked and temperatures will soar inside. Acoustic tiles, carpets or at least curtains may help to reduce the noise level.

The innovation of this school building is that it is the first to be built using an original design. It does not follow the normal plan of schools in Tunisia. In respecting the constraints and limitations of the site and the budget, the architect took enough of a challenge upon himself. Add to that the preservation of the architectural integrity of that area of the old medina, and the challenge increases for the architect. Yet Hamaci managed to produce a landmark building that is traditional and modern at the same time, thus refuting the argument forwarded by those who are against using the past as a reference because it stands against progress. He has created a modern school that fulfils all the requirements of an educational establishment yet, at the same time, reflects the aesthetics of the architectural heritage of the old city of Tunis.