

Mideast cities compete for global inward investment

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Special to the Star

Whether it is *Solidere's* downtown Beirut, *Abdali* in Amman, *Dreamland* in Cairo, *The Financial District* in Manama, or even at the heart of the Holy City of Mecca through the *Jabal Omar* Project, cities all over the Middle East are reinventing themselves and competing for global inward investment and international business and tourism.

Cities are obliged to create the right milieu, competitive business climate, and first-class tourism attractions in order to lure people to come live, invest, and entertain. Developments in Dubai and the current urban reconstruction for the Beirut Downtown (the *Solidere* Project) are becoming the models to follow in such developments. Dubai had about 4.8 million visitors in 2003 in tourism through its entertainment, business and sport tourism, and is planning to add another 100 hotels within the next 5-7 years.

It is interesting to understand the effect of the circulation of global capital, excessive privatization, rise of new Arab elite, and circulating urban flagship projects in places like Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, all over the Arab Gulf States, and through out the Arab Region. New emerging urban islands of excessive consumption for the chosen elite signifies this neoliberal urban restructuring.

It has been estimated that the Gulf Cooperation Council has around \$80 billion in liquidity expected to be spent in real-estate, international business, and tourism investments within the next 5 years especially in countries like the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Such colossal amount of money, which used to be invested primarily in the US and Europe before September 11, will attempt to find new markets in the region; of course part of it had already found its way into Lebanese, Egyptian, and Jordanian markets through multinational hotel and real-estate investments.

In Amman's *Abdali*, which is considered an urban entrepreneurial project intended to create a modern and vibrant city center for Amman, the *Abdali* Investment Company (AIC) has been created and is composed of the main investors: *Mawared* and *Saudi Oger*. *Mawared* (National Resources Investment and Development Corporation) is a quasi-public entity, created in 2002, and is in charge of developing three former military areas in Jordan, one of which is the *Abdali* Area strategically located close to the downtown area and to western more affluent and



westernized Amman. *Saudi Oger* is an international developer which entered the partnership with *Mawared* as main investor (strategic partner) and also brought the expertise of its master planners (*Millennium Development, Luceco*). As a private real-estate developer, it is responsible to implement, manage and master plan the Project (similar to *Solidere* in Beirut).

In Amman's *Abdali* (which is promoted by *Mawared's* billboards, brochures, website, short video, and other promotional materials as the "New Downtown for Amman" which includes the American University of Amman, an IT Park, medical tourism, and different commercial activities, in addition to a newly created civic/state plaza bounded by the State Mosque, Parliament, and the Law Courts. This represents a symbolic replacement of the existing historic downtown, which is only about 1.5 kilometers away, and its current civic/urban symbols (such as the historic *Husseini* Mosque and specialty *Ammani* markets). The *Abdali* Project will most probably attract international investment and business, but will also definitely intensify the socio-economic and spatial polarization not only between East and West Amman, but also between this new "elitist urban island" and the rest of the city.

The "*Abdali*" Project will also culminate in the displacement of the existing *Abdali* transportation terminal (together with its drivers, informal vendors and occupants) to the outskirts of Amman away from the City Center. Furthermore,

the Project will definitely present fierce competition to the existing historic downtown which is gradually disintegrating and is already suffering from lack of economic vitality. Unfortunately, there is not enough attention given to the revitalization of Amman's downtown as there are almost no public or private funds allocated for its regeneration at the moment.

After a clear observation and critical analysis of the details of the investments in Amman's *Abdali*, one easily realizes that the bottom line is that the "state" is subsidizing large scale investment for the business elite of the region to create such flagship or mega projects of urban restructuring. Contrary to formal state discourse which advocates an absent state in such neo-liberal privatization efforts and investment partnerships, it is very clear that in urban restructuring projects, the "state" is not absent, but is "there" heavily involved and there to stay. In Amman, prime urban land made available for investment forms a greater part of this subsidy, but other forms of the subsidy also include taxes exemption, infrastructure provision, and elimination of all barriers and red tape in addition to special building regulations made possible for this particular development.

It is also important to attempt to understand the effects of such socio-economic transformation on the creation of new public urban space in such cities producing "a privatized public space" based on a highly selective definition of the public, thus triggering a new critical investigation of the meaning of pub-

lic/private and inclusion/exclusion. It is very obvious from different field visits to similar flagship urban projects, as the *Abdali* Project is still under construction, that such projects are producing "gated communities" that are isolated from the rest of the city participants facilitated by this privatization of planning.

Doris Summer, a graduate student in urban planning at the Department of Architecture & Design in the American University of Beirut, is working on a comparison between *Abdali* in Amman and the *Solidere* Project in Downtown Beirut. Summer believes that this "Neoliberalization" in the creation of public urban space circulates urban images, spectacles, and models and is gradually creating "generic" realities out of cities and lead to the dilution of local differences and the circulation of "corporate" urban realities and images.

Cities in the region are competing for inward business and tourism investments. *Mawared* and *Solidere* are producing millions of dollars worth of billboards, short videos, websites, TV and newspaper ads with high-quality graphics and design to market and sell the cities and their new projects. Various urban planners and theoreticians on cities today talk about the creation of the "Fantasy City" where the city turns into a "playful spectacle" and elaborates on city marketing where it is viewed as a reaction to economic change; it becomes a strategy for promoting inward investment by marketing, undertaking physical urban change and image recreation.

By focusing on *Abdali* but considering other similar projects in the region as well, one can form a better understanding of current transformations in the production, manufacturing and consumption of urban/public space and the circulation of different forms of "urban Projects" within the region. These transformations are leading to a very "generic" reality of both urban space and of heritage where not only that local differences disintegrate, but also we are witnessing a "new" system of visioning and acting on the city where issues of accountability, transparency, democracy, inclusion/exclusion and private/public become highly contested in the midst of continuously shifting formal (State and other) discursive practices and emerging "new actors" on the City.

Several, but very few, social activists in Amman are exerting humble attempts to simply push and lobby for a public request on behalf of the City "Amman" to the business elite who are making best use of this opportunity at *Abdali* to at least pump a small fraction of the expected profit and "royalties" of the *Abdali* Project into "the real downtown" Amman which is gradually turning into a derelict space and in need of urgent revitalization and public/private investment and philanthropy. Pumping a small fraction into the historic Downtown of Amman by such multinational corporations and business elite could be considered as overdue taxes, charity, or even as a reversal subsidy. ■