

Jordan Business

JORDAN'S PREMIER CORPORATE MAGAZINE

www.jordan-business.net

OCTOBER 2010

JD 2.500



15
years

www.zain.com

A Wonderful World



Urban Landscapes Of Neoliberalism: Cranes, Craters And An Exclusive Urbanity

Massive urban projects have long been underway in the cityscapes of the region. **Rami Farouk Daher** questions our obsession with real estate development and points to the damage done at the human and social dimensions.

People across the Middle East are bombarded daily by the boom in real estate development. Local newspapers, emerging property magazines, TV advertisements and billboards all promote real estate development in the form of exclusive business towers and high-end gated residential communities. Property today is the new consumer good par excellence in the Middle East and real estate development is its new religion.

Cities throughout the Middle East are currently competing in order to attract international investments, businesses and tourism developments. At present, developments in Dubai, such as the world's two largest man-made islands, Palm Jumeirah and Palm Jebel Ali, and major skyscrapers and luxurious resorts on Sheikh Zayed Street, are becoming the models to follow. This reality stands in sheer contrast to a previous time in the 1960s, when cities like Cairo or Beirut presented cutting-edge urbanism for the rest of the Arab world. Then, unlike now, the term urbanism encompassed

planning for a variety of issues, from public health and the efficiency of transportation to emphasis on cultural issues like arts, music and publishing.

The effect of such developments is overwhelming. The circulation of global capital (surplus oil revenues) and huge reserves of money in search of high yielding and secure investments, excessive privatization and urban flagship projects throughout the Arab region have altered urban reality, property values and speculation, as well as the nature of public life. Indeed, it has been estimated that between 2005 and 2020, Arab Gulf states are likely to spend \$3,000 billion or so on investment within the Middle East and North Africa.

Urban Restructuring In Amman

Amman represents a clear example of this neoliberal urban restructuring and emerging forms of spatial ordering and engineering such as high-end and isolated urban development and regeneration, witnessed in projects like Abdali. In projects such as Green Land and

Andalusia, development represents upper-end residential gated communities. Following hot on the heels of these projects are business towers that offer an exclusive concept of refuge and consumption, while low-income residential cities, such as in Jizza and Zarqa, work to push the poorer segments of society to the outskirts of the city in newly zoned heterotopias.

In the past ten years, Amman has undergone an urban transformation witnessed through the creation of public space orchestrated by partnerships between multinational corporations and the state, and established by regulating bodies such as Mawared. The Solidere (Société Libanaise de Développement et de Reconstruction) model of neoliberal urban restructuring adopted in Beirut has become the adopted approach in Amman. In fact, the projects share similar global investors.

This neo-liberalism in the creation of public urban space circulates images of urbanity, of exhibits and mod- ▶▶

els, but is leading to the dilution of local flavors and to the diffusion of fabricated “corporate” urban identities. The creation of a privatized public space, based on a highly selective definition of “the public”, has further triggered a critical investigation into the meaning of public-private and inclusion-exclusion.

By turning its back on Amman’s original downtown, only 1.5 kilometers away from the construction site, the Abdali project is anticipated to lead to urban geographies of inequality and exclusion, as well as spatial and social dislocation. The remodeled area, previously the site of the General Jordan Armed Forces headquarters, consists of 350,000 square meters in the heart of Amman and will contain a built-up area of approximately 1,000,000 square meters.

A Neoliberal Experiment

As the details of the investments in Amman’s Abdali project reveal, the bottom line is that the state is subsidizing large-scale investment for the business elite of the region to create urban restructuring flagship projects or mega-projects. This is contrary to the state’s formal declarations and propaganda that advocate an absence in such neoliberal privatization efforts. However,

it is now very clear that the state is not absent but is heavily involved and firmly entrenched in what is taking place.

The financial contribution of the state is considerable; prime urban land made available for investment forms a greater part of the subsidy, though other forms of subsidy include tax exemptions, in-

frastructure provision and the elimination of all barriers and red tape, in addition to special building regulations made possible for particular developments.

The details of these “particular developments”, the shareholding setup of this neoliberal investment, are interesting in themselves. The privately owned Abdali Investment Company (AIC) was created in 2004 to develop and manage this mixed-use urban development and is composed, more or less, of two main investors: Mawared and Saudi Oger (international developer from Saudi Arabia).

As a private real estate developer, the AIC is responsible for implementation and is in charge of the manage-

ment and the master planning of the project (similar to Solidere in Beirut). Amman’s Abdali is promoted by Mawared’s brochures, website, short videos and other promotional materials as the “New Downtown for Amman”. More recently, due to public criticism, the slogan was changed to “The New Business District”.

The circulation of global capital (surplus oil revenues) and huge reserves of money in search of high yielding and secure investments...have altered...the nature of public life.

Newly introduced functions include exclusive office space, an IT park, as well as commercial and high-end residential space, in addition to a newly created civic “secular” plaza bounded by the state mosque, parliament and Amman’s largest courthouse. This represents a symbolic replacement of the existing historic downtown and the current civic-urban symbols (for example, the historic Husseini Mosque and specialty markets). This replacement is likely to intensify 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.

Inclusion And Exclusion

The Abdali project has seen the displacement of the nearby Abdali transport terminal, together with its motorists, informal vendors and office occupants, to the outskirts of Amman and away from the city center. The project will also present fierce competition to the existing downtown, which is gradually disintegrating and is already suffering from a lack of economic vitality.

While not a unique phenomenon in Amman, the Abdali project forces major urban and territorial transformations on the city. Meanwhile, there are other projects either being built or in the pipeline. Some of these are high-rises of exclusive office space; others are residential compounds catering for high and upper middle classes in the form of well-protected gated communities along the airport highway.



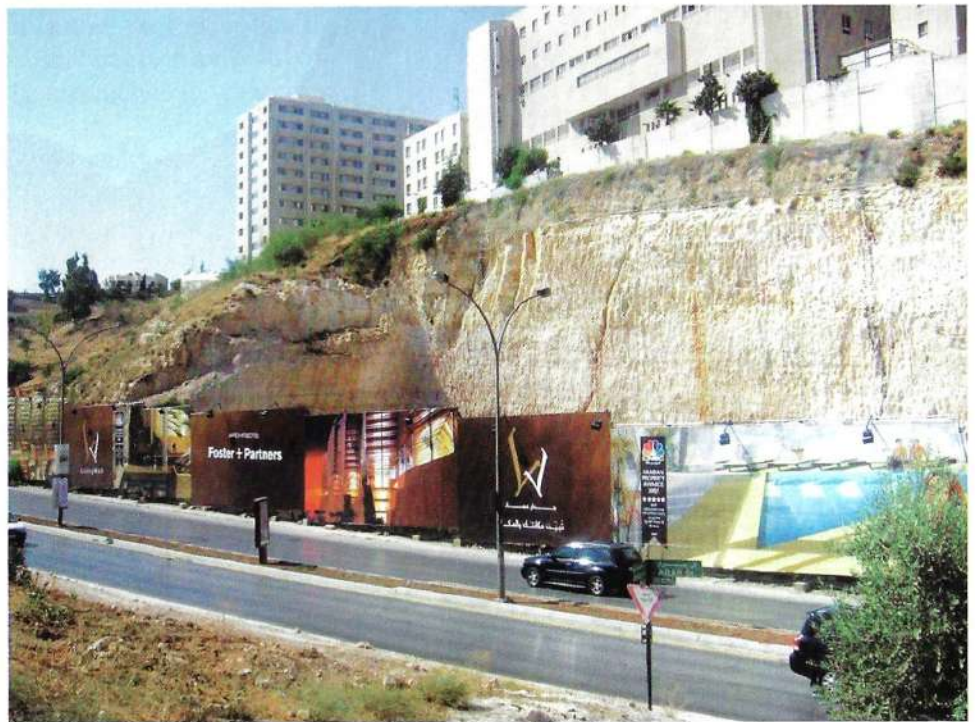
► Several of these newly emerging spaces of inclusion and exclusion are causing severe issues of gentrification alongside social and physical displacement. In addition to the relocation of the Abdali transport hub to the outskirts of the city in Tabarbour and the displacement of the Za'amta neighborhood, both due to the Abdali project, several other neoliberal projects have caused major dislocation. One is the Limitless high-rise towers that have caused the dislodgment of the Wadi Abdoun village, despite the interruption of the project. Another is the displacement of the Raghadan transport hub to make room for new tourism projects. The new location of Raghadan in Mahatta away from the city center is causing difficulties and financial burdens not only to transport users but also to the various downtown merchants who once benefitted from vibrant pedestrian activity.

A Vulnerable Landscape

In 1984, the Jordanian novelist Abdelrahman Munif published an inspiring novel, *Mudun al-Milh* (Cities of Salt). The novel is set in an unnamed Arab Gulf country in the 1930s, and describes the transformation that wrought havoc on this desert Bedouin community when oil was discovered. The result was the direct and indirect colonization of the country by the Americans who discovered the oil, and the radical impact of that discovery on the physical and human landscape.

Touring the city of Amman today, one cannot avoid noticing the unfinished projects with static cranes, rotting reinforcement and huge craters: major blemishes on the landscape.

Munif's epic unfolds over a large span of years and sketches in detail the rise of this fake urban civilization, its abundance of surplus capital from oil revenues and the fact that most of these monies were spent on real estate development and lavish banquets. The significance of this novel lies in the details of the transformation of this desert-bound Bedouin community when confronted with the discovery of oil. The novel also predicts, from as



early as the mid-1980s, the fragility and unaccountability of this oil-based economy and its related neoliberal real estate boom. That boom has today spread to other places in the Middle East, such as Amman, Beirut and Cairo, to mention a few examples.

The most recent financial crisis, which began in earnest in 2008, and the way it has hit cities like Dubai testify to the risks involved in building an economy around massive investments in real estate. As the last two years have shown, not only has this led to the termination of hundreds of thousands of

jobs but it has also added to the lack of socio-economic stability. The economic crisis has also encroached on Amman, with many of its current real estate projects being financed by major neoliberal transnational capitalist companies originating from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Cranes And Craters

Touring the city of Amman today, one cannot avoid noticing the unfinished

projects with static cranes, rotting reinforcement and huge craters: major blemishes on the landscape. This, then, is the legacy of several of these neoliberal real estate projects whose work has left the city's urban landscape with nothing less than potentially severe environmental problems.

In different parts of the Arab world, there is a need for more genuine research that goes beyond the classical analysis of the traditional Arab city. There is an urgent need to assess current urban transformations, the flow of global capital and its effect on the realities of cities, urban structures and polity. This research needs to cover the effects of urbanization processes and address issues of migration, slum formations and the realities of urban social lives and identities.

Our relationship with the city has always been and always will be a dialogue between social classes, different groups and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. More recently, this relationship has become ephemeral and superficial, and our sense of belonging has become transient in nature. We think that we live in the city as our grave for urbanity increases; but rather, we live "above" the city in gated realities. ■