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Amman's Vanishing Legacy of Modernity

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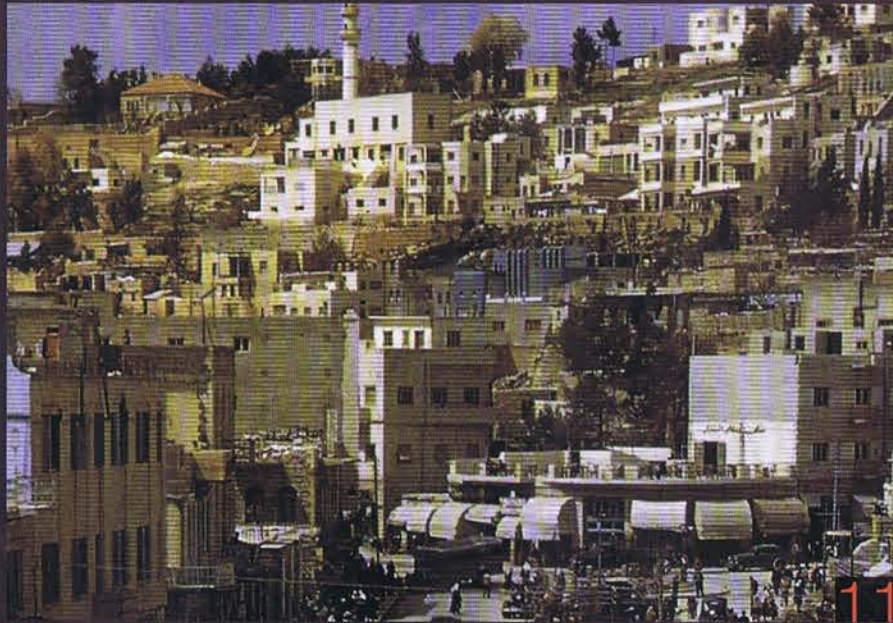
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Amman's Vanishing Legacy of Modernity

Is Amman's Modern architecture which thrived in the middle of the 20th century fading, and has Amman's growing uncritical consumer society paved the way for the destruction and disfigurement of valuable Ammani heritage?

Dr Rami Farouk Daher

Many accuse Amman of being a city with no "history" or "soul" mainly because of its re-emergence on the world scene only some 150 years ago. Yet, a more critical and exploratory look at the city and its different periods of change and transformation leads the passionate researcher to conclude that Amman, though young at heart, is a city with temporal depth that has gone through the motions of change from a small village to a town, and finally to becoming the capital of the nation. This study is concerned with Amman's vanishing heritage of Modernity that prevailed in the middle of the 20th century, manifested through Amman's Modernity: architecture, cinema houses, schools, hotels, social outings, boulevards, cafés and intellectual crowd.

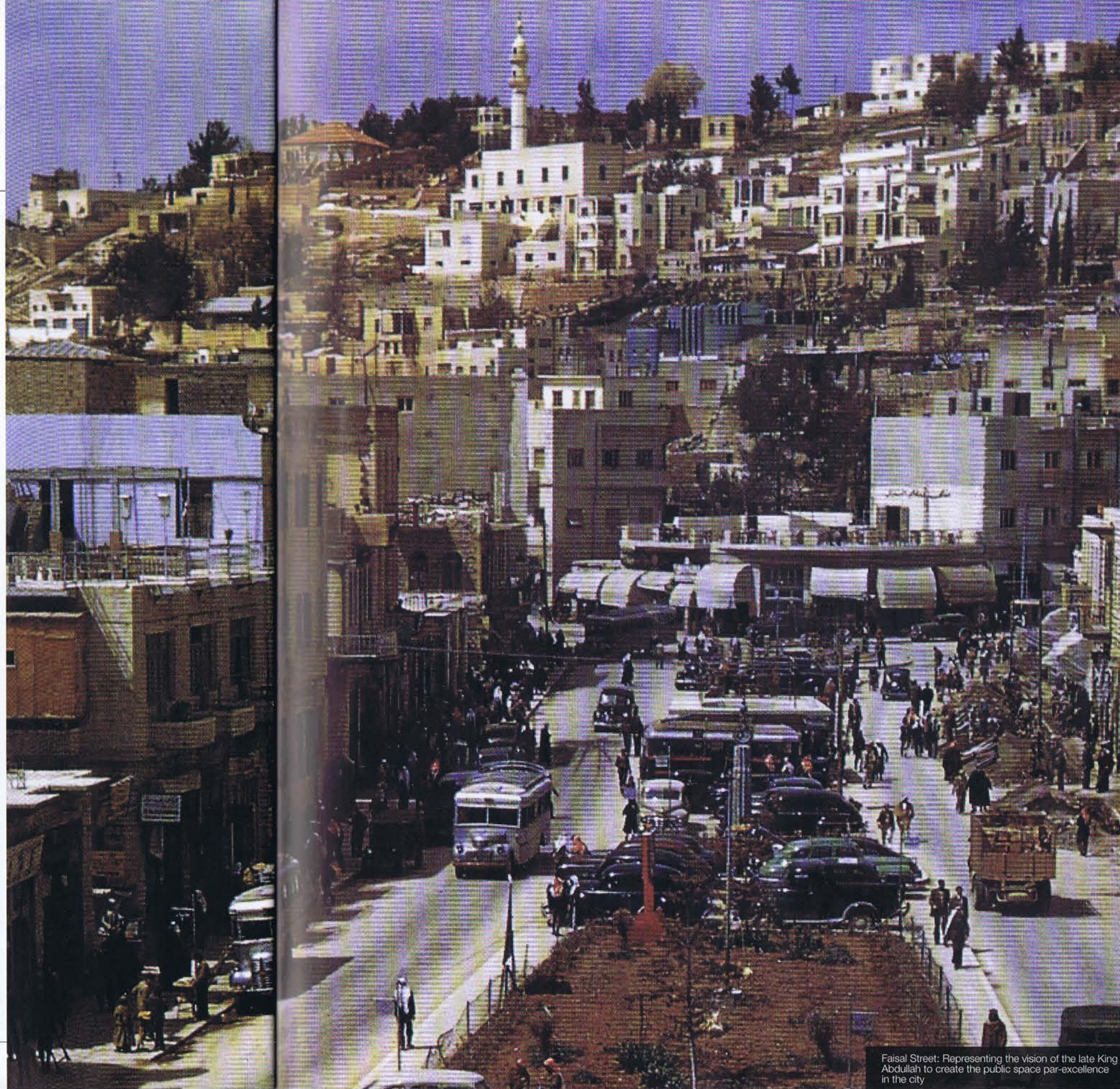
Unfortunately, Amman's growing uncritical consumer society lacks a genuine appreciation for the city's heritage of Modernity (1), due in certain cases to being unconscious of its value and significance, and in other cases to the dominance of the dollar on people's value systems. This is leading to the destruction and disfigurement of the valuable Ammani heritage which represents a true testimonial to its temporal depth, and to its many periods of transformation and change.

AMMAN ENTERING MODERNITY

During its early years of re-emergence, Amman was considered a refuge or a city of opportunities by many residents of Bilad Al Sham. This included Circassian immigrants from the Caucasus as early as 1870s, urban merchants from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine (especially after the establishment of the Hijaz Railroad Line which reached Amman in 1903), Arab nationalist from Damascus seeking refuge from French mandate suppression, and several officials and administrators from Lebanon and Syria who also flocked to Amman to be part of this new "Emirate of East Jordan" that was being established by the late King Abdullah.

King Abdullah the First visualised a modern city with a rich past. Faisal Square was a starting point as the city's public space par-excellence. As early as the 1930s, Faisal was bustling with modern affandiah, wearing the tarboush and frequenting Faisal's several hotels like King Ghazi, the Arab League, and Al Qahira, or even buying fabrics from its various merchants in Souq Mango. Faisal was one of Amman's early signs of a town gradually being transformed into a city, or better yet, a city entering its era of modernity.

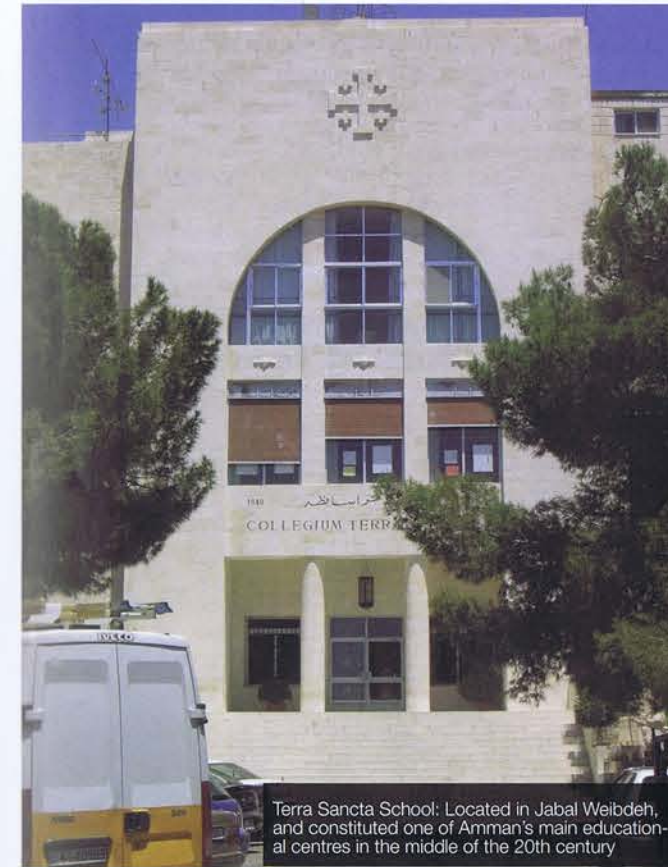
Faisal gradually became Amman's beating heart and intellectual hub, famous for its different cafés and political salons such as Al Maqha Al Dara (political salon) of Wasfi Merza Psha (now Balat Al Rashid Café) and later the Central or the Arab League Café. For Jordan, Faisal exemplified, in one single urban space, the process of city formation and State building. Not only was it a place of political interface where the "State", represented by its Emir, met with the different populace of the city, but also an arrival point, a terminus for travellers coming to Amman from Jerusalem, Beirut, or Damascus by car. Faisal was Amman's beating heart and its one-way ticket to Modernity.



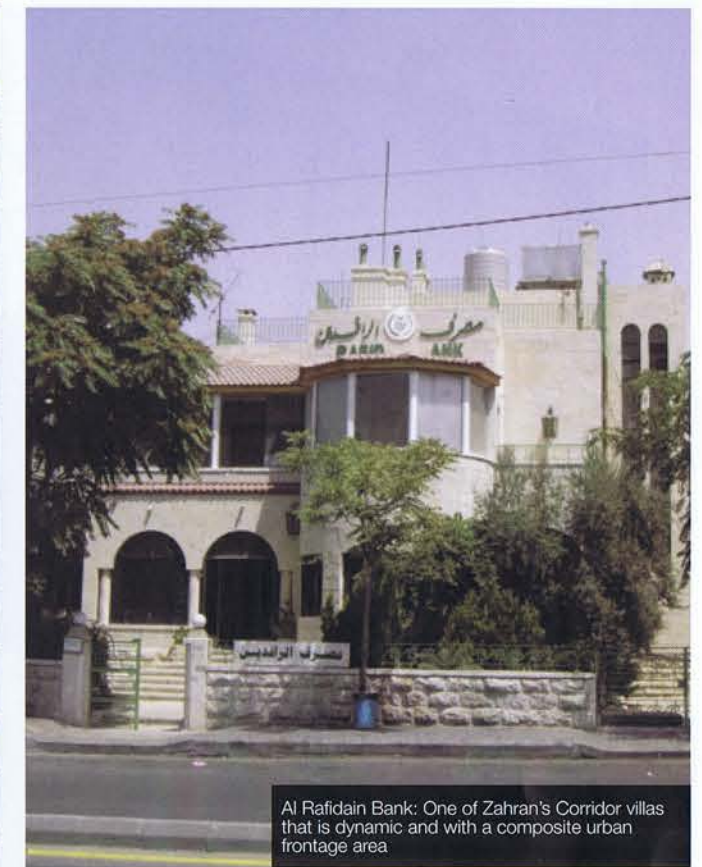
Faisal Street: Representing the vision of the late King Abdullah to create the public space par-excellence in the city



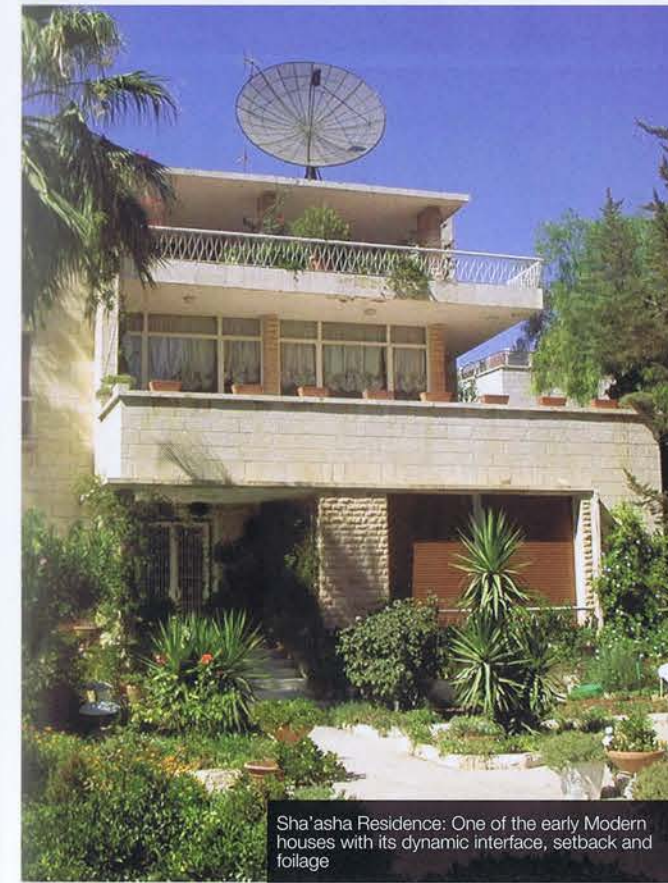
Insurance Building: One of Amman's early icons of Modernity architecture which, for many years, adorned the city skyline



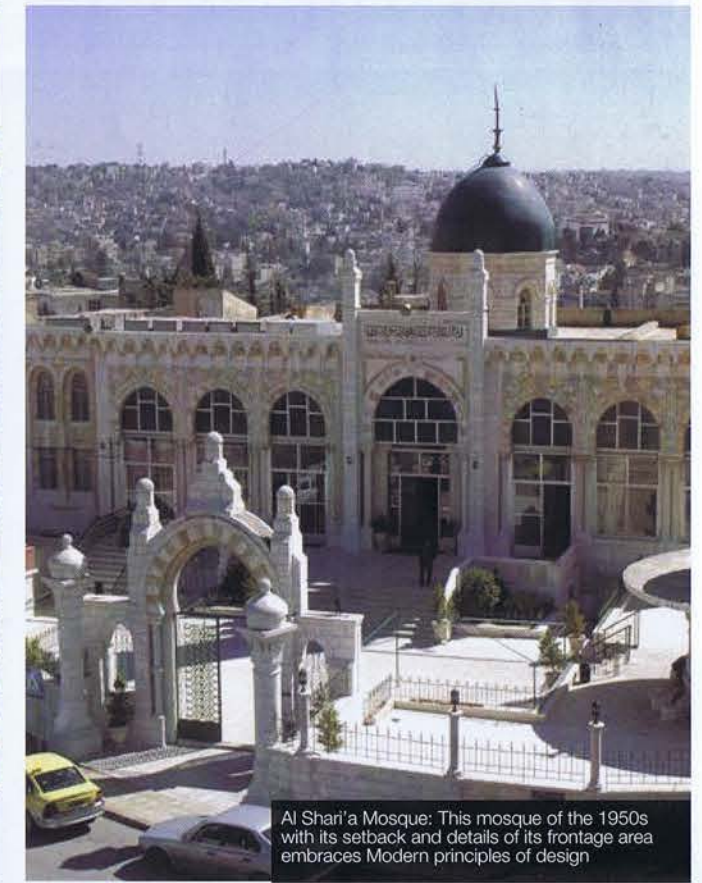
Terra Sancta School: Located in Jabal Weibdeh, and constituted one of Amman's main educational centres in the middle of the 20th century



Al Rafidain Bank: One of Zahran's Corridor villas that is dynamic and with a composite urban frontage area



Sha'asha Residence: One of the early Modern houses with its dynamic interface, setback and foliage



Al Shari'a Mosque: This mosque of the 1950s with its setback and details of its frontage area embraces Modern principles of design



Islamic Scientific College: Built on the outskirts of the city then (1940s), these schools are the only remaining pedestrian environments in the city



The outdoor swimming pool at the InterContinental Hotel, Amman

It is true that Amman is not your typical Arab/Islamic city, rather, it is one that has definitely gone through the motions. As early as the 1930s, Amman had its own Electricity Hanger by Ras Al Ain which began generating power to its street lamps, providing its homes with electricity and lighting the neon advertisement signs on top of its buildings along Faisal Street. Early on, Amman enjoyed several cinema houses such as Petra which hosted social events, famous Arab singers and politicians, and even its own special matinee shows for ladies. Later on and towards the second half of the 20th century, the downtown area was blessed with several other cinema houses such as Raghadan, Bassman and Al Hussein (2). Al Hussein Cinema and Theatre behind the Arab Bank adorned the city centre with its Art-Deco style and glamour.

Private and governmental schools emerged on each of the residential mountains in Amman. The Islamic Scientific College, Zain Al Sharaf on Jabal Amman, Al Hussain College on Jabal Hussein, and Terra Sancta on Jabal Weibdeh, to mention a few. The inspection of each of these schools is an enduring story of modernist vision, critical thinking and strong sense of belonging to this emerging new city in the region (3). Amman also enjoyed a splendid Sport City (Al Hussein Sport City) as early as the 1960s, with its modernist logic in design, challenging the plastic and aesthetic characteristics of concrete and symbolising one of the key pillars of Modernity in the city. Entertainment and social gatherings in Amman's early hotels, like the recently demolished Philadelphia Hotel (4) near the Roman Amphitheatre, is only a humble testimonial to an active public life. Furthermore, the various local magazines printed in the city as early as the mid 1930s such as Al Raed and Al Urdun Al Jadid, represent another testimonial of an active public sphere in this vibrant and vivacious, though unpretentious city.

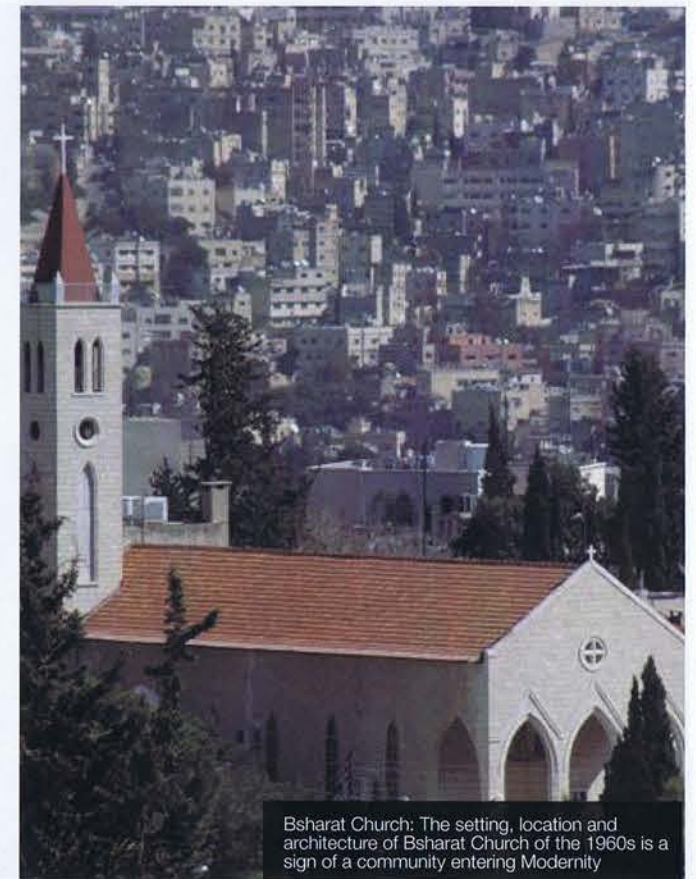
ARCHITECTS OF THE 1950S — BREAKING THE TRADITIONAL BOX

Towards the second half of the 20th century, Amman transformed the traditional three-bay system house into a dynamic composition that is asymmetrical and vibrant. The influence and the vision of returning architects from Europe and the US was merged with local traditions of masons and the art of building to produce a domesticated Modernity, Ammani style. Examples of such villas are numerous along Amman's modern arteries of expansion such as Zahran Corridor stretching northwest on Jabal Amman and on Sharia'a Street on Jabal Weibdeh. One remembers some of these elite merchant family villas such as Thubian, Shasha'a and Abu Al Ragheb in Jabal Amman, and Bisharat, Al Taher, Azizieh, Abu Jaber, and Abbadi in Jabal Weibdeh to mention a few.

Modernity was domesticated in Amman and the result was a special Ammani version of Modern Architecture. This Ammani architecture is very dynamic and asymmetrical and provides new ratios of solid and void. Also, this style brings more void in the building facades and demonstrates a vibrant and dynamic composition that is based on a volumetric interplay between horizontal and vertical volumes. Later on, the International Style came to Amman even as early as the 1960s — with a brilliant example that adorns the tip of the First Circle: the Insurance Building. This particular work of architecture, designed by the famous Lebanese architect Khalil Khouri, characterised the skyline of the city for a while and represented a genuine exemplar of how high-rise buildings meet the ground with an ever flowing urban space, challenging the topography, while contributing positively to the site. Unfortunately, many of the city's architects today, even with the advantage of new materials and design modes, have failed to produce such master pieces, and are creating an architecture that is de-voided of



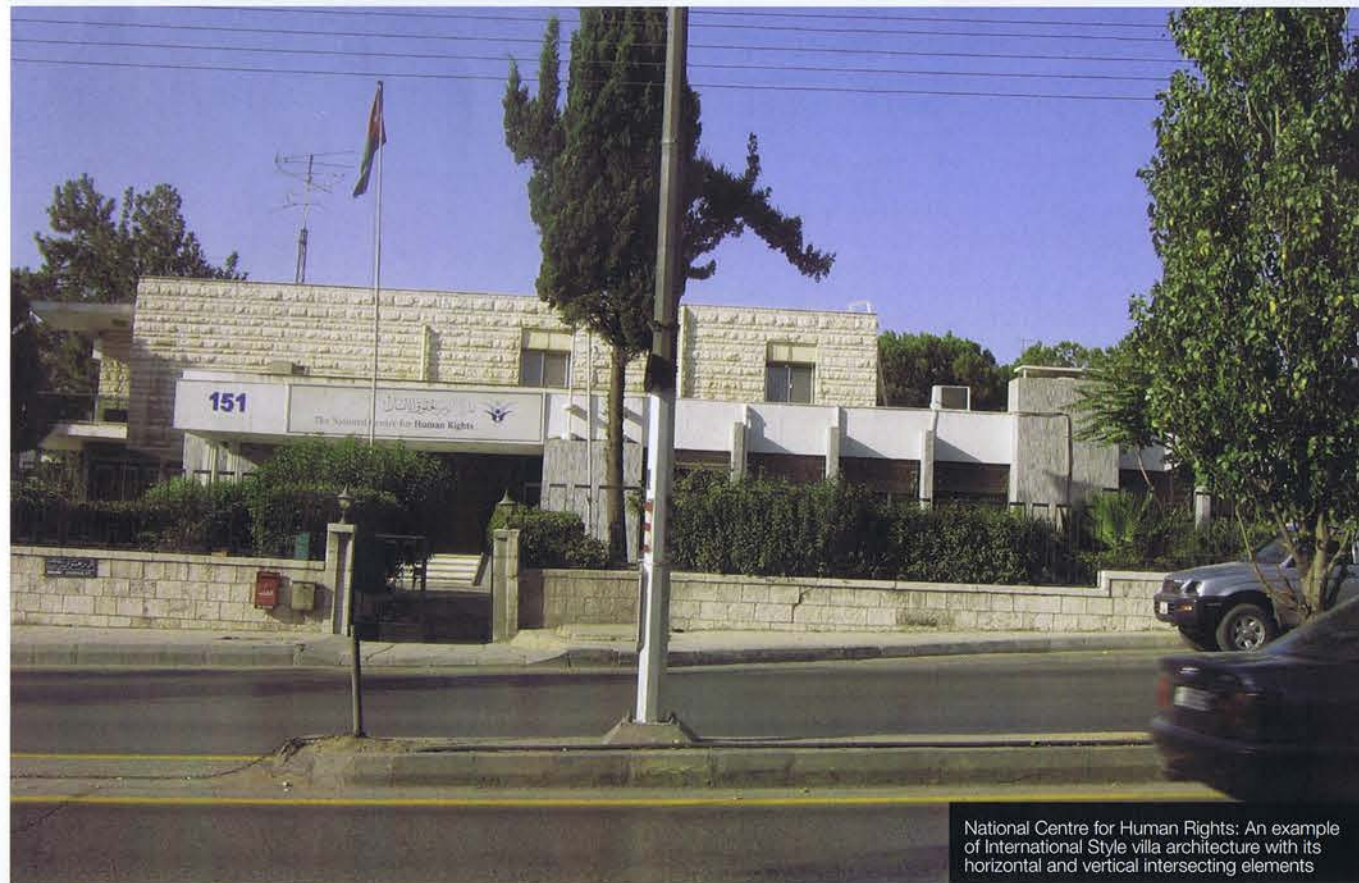
Arab Bank: The first branch to open in Amman in the heart of the downtown area



Bsharat Church: The setting, location and architecture of Bsharat Church of the 1960s is a sign of a community entering Modernity



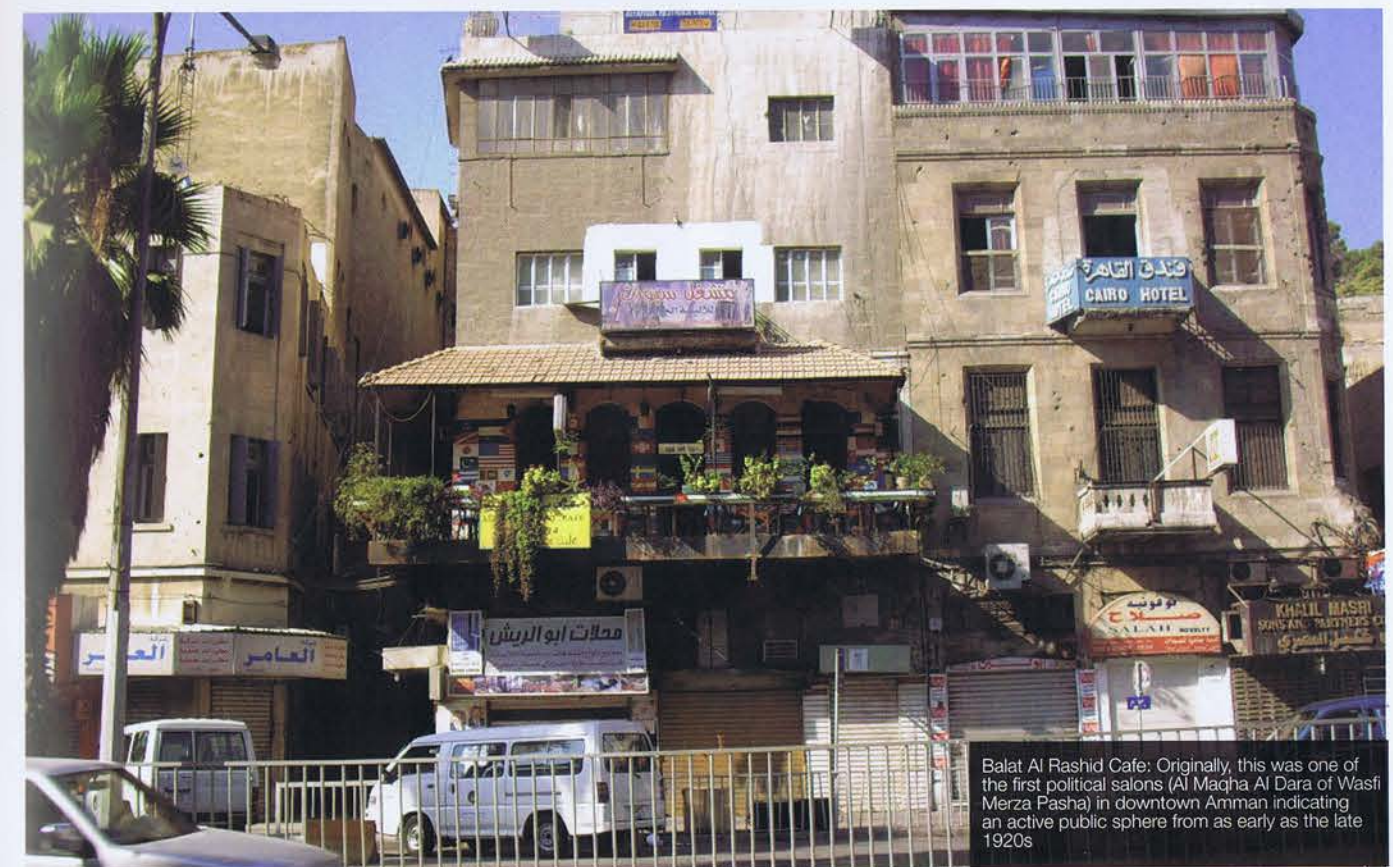
Al Hawoos Circle (now Paris Square): One of Amman's early public spaces hosting pedestrians and an active public sphere



National Centre for Human Rights: An example of International Style villa architecture with its horizontal and vertical intersecting elements



Souq Mango: Amman's specialty markets are very distinctive. Mango was, and is still, specialising in fabrics and garments



Balat Al Rashid Cafe: Originally, this was one of the first political salons (Al Maqha Al Dara of Wasfi Merza Pasha) in downtown Amman indicating an active public sphere from as early as the late 1920s

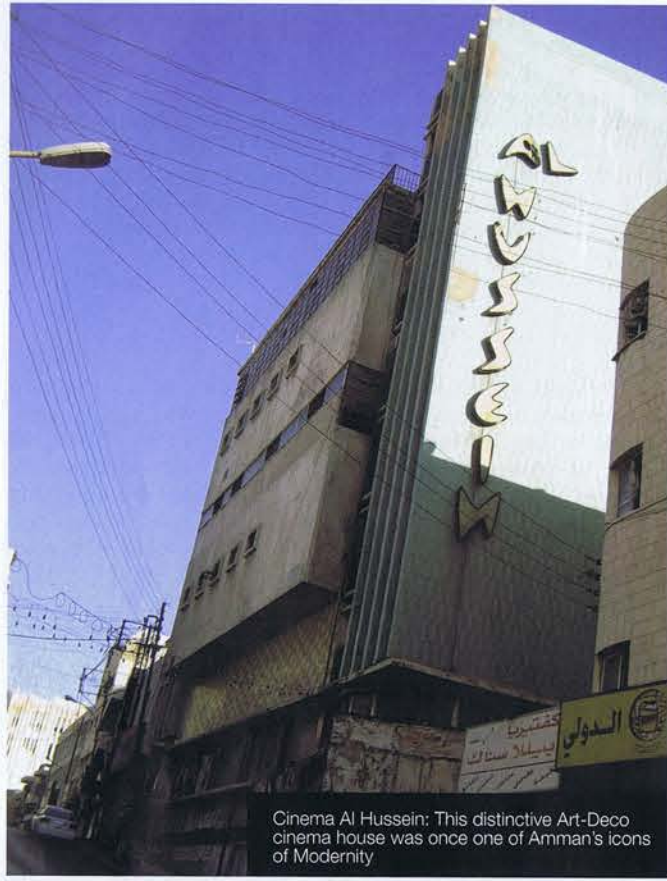
meaning, though still extravagant and unsophisticated.

AN APPEAL TO THE CITY'S CREATIVE CLASS

Fortunately, today we are witnessing the celebration of the city of Amman. This is evident in the works of its artists and architects (e.g. Ammar Khammash and Sahel Hiyari), novelists (e.g. Gharaibeh with his Shahbandar, the late Qasem and his brilliant piece of literature Abna Al Qal'a), emerging neighbourhood associations (e.g. Jabal Amman Residents Association, Friends of Jabal Weibdeh's Association), urban activists (e.g. Makan and Ruwad Al Tanmiyeh), philanthropists (e.g. Khalid Shoman Foundation, Mamdouh Bsharat, Aramex), and also the city's body of governance (e.g. Greater Amman Municipality).

Yet all this is not enough. An alarming reality is being missed by Amman's emerging urban creative class: the city's disappearing heritage of Modernity. The city is gradually losing its legacy of Modernity represented through buildings, houses, open spaces and lifestyle. This is due to several reasons among which are the lack of appreciation of the city's heritage, the lack of protective laws and regulations, the pressures of new developments, and most importantly, the lack of any critical reading of the evolution of the city, and a limited definition of what constitutes its legacy and heritage of significance.

We have already buried several realities of our heritage of the modern era starting with our Seil (small River) which was ignorantly covered because it was perceived to be a health hazard — alas, it could have become the nucleolus of a vibrant urban space in the city. Over the years, we uncritically succeeded in demolishing some very significant examples of our Ammani heritage of Modernity: the Philadelphia Hotel, the Islamic Sci



Cinema Al Hussein: This distinctive Art-Deco cinema house was once one of Amman's icons of Modernity



Cinema Al Khayyam: One of the early cinema houses on the slopes of Jabal Weibdeh

Amman's Vanishing Heritage of Modernity

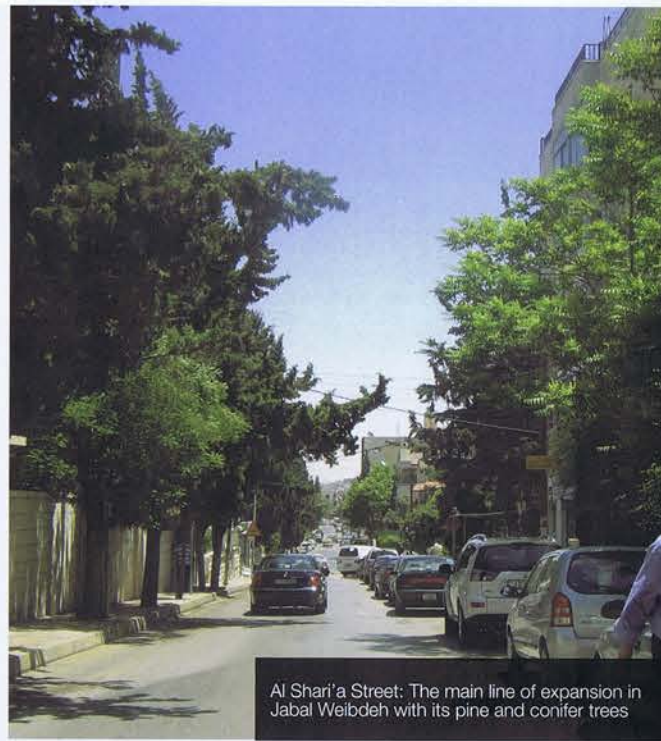
■ Departed
■ Disfigured

A residential villa
 Former British Embassy
 Moa'sher Hospital
 Market
 Jordan Intercontinental Hotel
 Gateway to the Iraqi Embassy
 Jordan Post Office
 Cafe' Central
 First Municipality Building
 Hussein Sport City
 Former Ministry of Information
 Form Emb
 Seil (River) Amman
 Islamic Scientific College
 Arab League Cafe'
 Sultan Abdelhamid II Water Sabeel
 Philadelphia Hotel

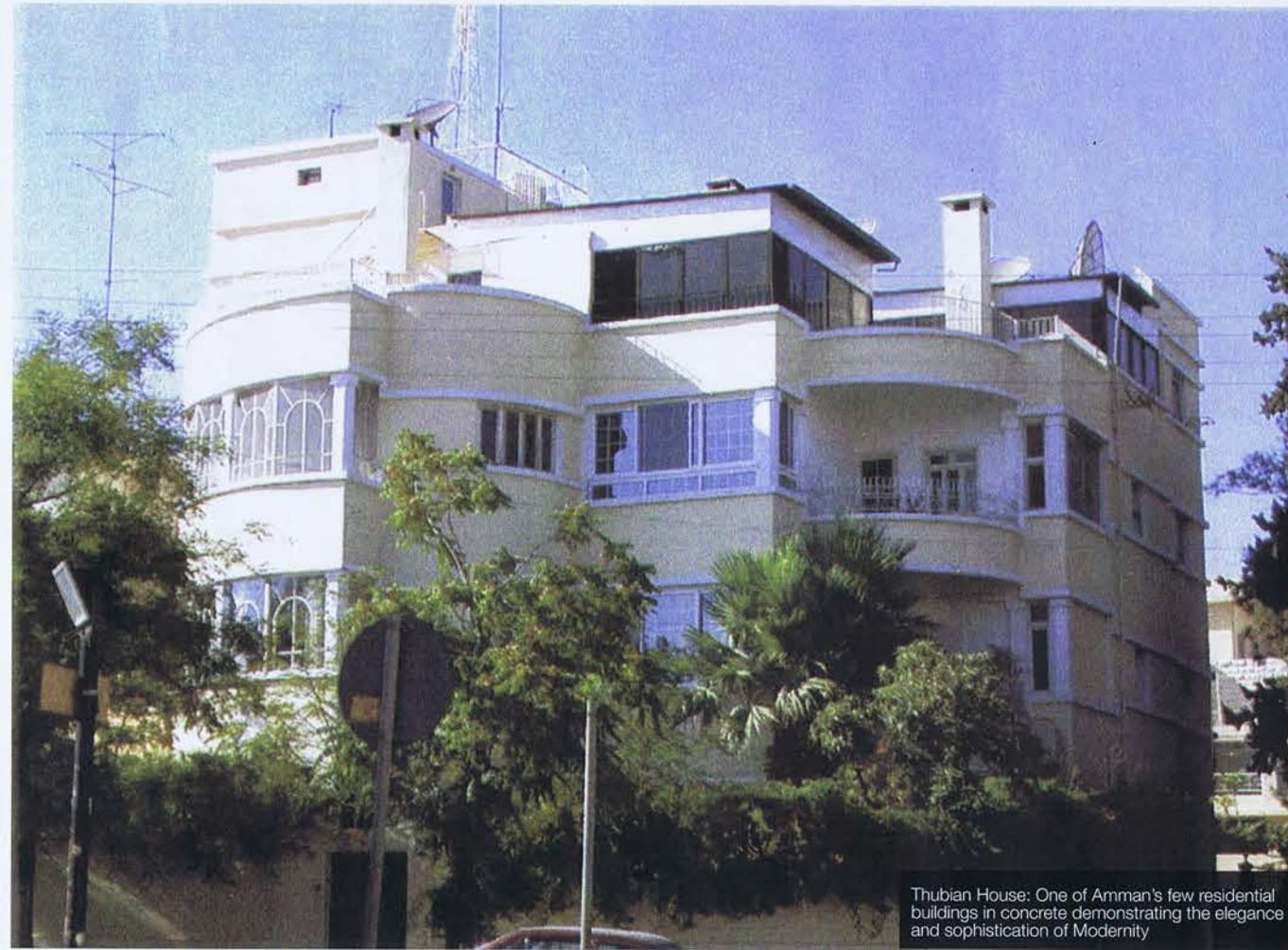
entific College's football stadium (the first in Amman) and Al Mo'asher's Hospital. What we have not torn down, we have disfigured such as Al Hussein Sport City in terms of insensitive additions in neo-classical design and other styles that failed to understand its modernist logic.

Our adverse effect has also reached significant urban areas such as Zahran Corridor (an icon of Amman's Modernity). Many thoughtless add-ons along the Corridor not only compromised the nature of the frontage area at Zahran (relationship between sidewalk, fence, setback and building), but also failed to understand the significance of the architecture of Modernity that characterises the Corridor. Examples of such negative consequences include disastrous additions such as Haboub Supermarket, the new addition to the Islamic Scientific College, Bellevue Hotel, new villas in neo-classical design around the Fourth Circle, and the replacement of conifer and pine trees (which had characterised Amman's arteries such as Zahran and Shari'a) with palm and Washingtonia trees, inflicted damage to the former building hosting the British embassy, and many more.

This issue should be considered an advocacy tool, a wake-up call, and a genuine appeal to first understand and then save this significant heritage of Modernity all over the city. This debate is supposed to entice, encourage, and push authorities to device planning models and urban laws to protect and enhance such a unique heritage.



Al Shari'a Street: The main line of expansion in Jabal Weibdeh with its pine and conifer trees



Thubian House: One of Amman's few residential buildings in concrete demonstrating the elegance and sophistication of Modernity



Zahran Corridor symbolises the expansion of the city to the northwest, and the "State" building during the Modern period



The outdoor swimming pool at Al Hussein Sport City after recent alterations and modifications that did not respect its heritage of Modernity

One needs to understand Amman and its heritage. It is different than any other in the region in the way that it is grand yet unstated, elegant yet unpretentious, and memorable yet non-monumental.

1) By Modernity, this article refers to a period of cultural change that affected Europe at the turn of the 20th century and induced a major cultural, technical and territorial transformation affecting architecture, the industries, people's value systems and lifestyle. This was a period that was based on science, socialist ideologies and social equity. As far as architecture is concerned, this period is called the Modern (with a capital M) heroic era of architecture where different schools of architectural thought and visionary architects and artists influenced the beginning of the 20th century (e.g. Le Corbusier in France, The Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus in Germany, Modernismo in Spain championed by pioneers such as Picasso and Gaudi, Russian Constructivists like Melnikov, and many others). Of course, Modernity as a major cultural change in the 20th century affected different parts of the world in various ways and at different times.

2) Al Hussein Cinema was designed by the renowned Egyptian architect Sayed Krayyem. This jewel of Modernity architecture with its Art Deco style, beautiful ceramics and exquisite spiral staircase is one of Amman's icons of Modernity that is very significant to its social and architectural memory.

3) Oral history reports documents the perseverance and persisting vision of the founders of the Islamic Scientific College in Amman as early as the 1940s. The Abu Qura family elders had to be very determined and demanding in convincing Amman Municipality at that time to pave the road leading to the site of the School from the First Circle (which was considered the edge of the City at that time).

4) A beauty pageant was held in Philadelphia Hotel before the middle of the 20th century. Now, if we put aside for a moment and disregarded the inhumane and unethical notion of parading human flesh on the catwalk; the fact that this beauty pageant took place is an indicator of an active and vibrant society. The different ladies that participated in the pageant represented Amman's rich human mosaic at that time (e.g., Circassians, Damascene, Palestinian, Bedouin, Lebanese, Armenians, and many others). It is one additional testimonial to Amman's message of tolerance and social inclusion at that time; testifying again in favour of a modern city preaching and practising social equity amongst its different ethnic, religious and social groups. ■