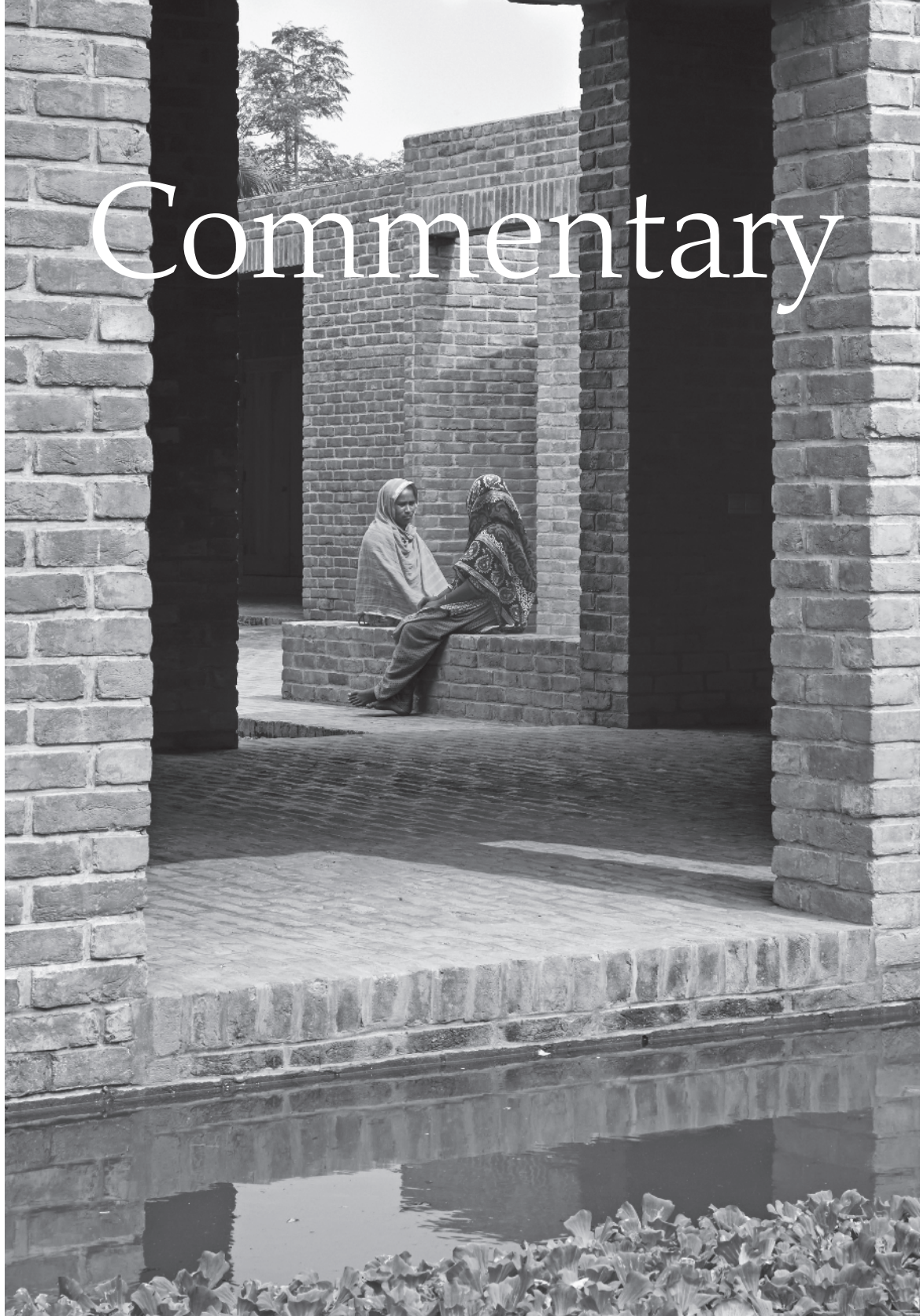


Commentary



RAMI F. DAHER

German Jordanian University

Uneven Geographies and Neoliberal Urban Transformation in Arab Cities Today

Architects, urban planners, and politicians have been observing the transformation of the Arab city over the past two decades vis-à-vis the emergence of a neoliberal urban restructuring and new order. The development of new urban islands that cater to the elite and their propensity for excessive consumption, coupled with the internationalization of commercial real estate companies and construction consulting firms capable of providing high-end services, is the main indicator of the neoliberal urban restructuring that is occurring in places such as downtown Beirut, Abdali in Amman, Dreamland in Cairo, the financial district in Manama, the Bou Regreg River Development in Rabat, Pearl Island in Doha, and even in the heart of the holy city of Mecca through the Jabal Omar Project. Indeed, most cities of the Arab world have been subject to such neoliberal transformations in one way or the other, from Rabat in Morocco to Amman in Jordan. Pierre-Arnaud Barthel recently dubbed these real estate ventures ‘Arab mega-projects’ in reference to their scale, and considers them to be the main vectors in contemporary Arab town planning.¹ While investors and municipal decision makers are obliged to create a competitive business climate and first-class tourist attractions in order to lure people to live, invest, and entertain themselves, such development efforts are raising questions about their longer-term impact on the spatial landscape and social fabric. Driven mostly by corporatization, these urban transformations are not only creating geographies of inequality in cities, but they are also adversely affecting the nature and quality of public space.²

This commentary seeks to explain how spatial dynamics reveal forces and transformations that are leading to a widening socio-economic inequality in various walks of life in Arab and Islamic communities today. With a focus on

Keywords

urban neoliberal
condition
socio-spatial politics
spatial inequality
urban governance
corporatization
Arab/Islamic cities

the increasing spatial and geographic inequalities in cities of the Arab world, my analysis attempts to position localized spatial ordering and restructuring in the Arab city today within broader global socio-economic and geopolitical transformations. Manifestations of this increasing spatial ordering and inequality include a substantial reduction in public space, withdrawal of the 'state' from a wide range of social and physical infrastructures (social housing, water, electricity, solid waste management, etc.) in favour of private (i.e., for-profit) service providers, increasing land speculation, proliferation of market-based development models, and a general corporatization of the public sector. While I have previously addressed these alarming shifts within the context of Amman, my focus here is on similar patterns of urban change in other Arab cities including Beirut, Cairo, Dubai, Damascus, Aqaba, Tunis, and Rabat.

David Harvey, a critic renowned for developing theories of socio-spatial analysis that builds on Lefebvre, pointed out that neoliberal economic thought and its political implementation emerged out of a critique of, and backlash against, the welfare state.³ Accordingly, politicians of the late 1970s (e.g., Margaret Thatcher) formed the new doctrine called 'neoliberalism' that was to eventually become the central guiding principle of economic thought and management.⁴ Neoliberalism led directly to excessive privatization, the withdrawal of the state from welfare programmes, the dominance of multinational corporations, and, as far as the so-called 'Third World' is concerned, a change from project-oriented international aid to aid in the form of structural adjustments and policy. In response, a number of forces emerged that would propel this neoliberal transformation, as exemplified by the dominance of the World Trade Organization (WTO), international gatherings such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and similar global organizations and instruments. As a direct consequence of neoliberal socio-economics, policy makers and planners across a widening swath of Arab countries – including Jordan, Egypt, and Tunis – find themselves gradually withdrawing from providing social services (most notably education, healthcare, social security, and social housing) and are instead becoming more involved in real estate development as a facilitator, regulator, and provider of indirect subsidies for multinational corporations.

This commentary resituates the current urban neoliberal condition in the Arab world in the context of circulating patterns of urban transformation. It introduces a discursive framework whereby various neoliberal projects can be examined and evaluated against one or more of the following indicators: urban lifestyle, emancipatory neoliberal discourse, claims to social sustainability, socio-spatial politics and dynamics, governance and place management, the changing role of the state, and circulation of neoliberal practices.

Manifestations of Neoliberal Urban Restructuring

Gulf investments (before and after the financial crisis of 2008) in neoliberal urban mega-projects in cities like Dubai, Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Rabat, and Tunis (to mention a few) are manifested through the circulation of the global Gulf capital (i.e., the revenue generated from Arab Gulf oil) and huge reserves of money in search of high-yield and secure investments. Between 2003 and 2004, the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council enjoyed a surplus of about \$50 billion, which then rose to \$400 billion between 2007 and 2008. In 2009, it plummeted to an estimated \$47.4 billion, rising again to \$142.2 billion in 2010. It has been estimated that between the years 2005 and 2020, the Gulf

States will have invested some \$3,000 billion in the Middle East and North Africa.⁵

In Amman, for example, one can clearly see evidence of neoliberal urban restructuring and emerging forms of spatial ordering and engineering in the form of high-end (and geographically isolated) business and residential towers that have been expressly designed to stress the concept of exclusivity and endorse specific consumption patterns associated with such luxury environments. Examples of new neoliberal urban transformations include exclusive office and residential spaces that also offer retail, commercial, and tourism activities (e.g., the Abdali real estate development)⁶; high-end residential 'gated' communities all over Amman (e.g., Green Land and Andalucia); and even lower-income residential housing projects that work to push the poorer segments of society to the outskirts of the city in newly zoned 'heterotopias' (e.g., social-housing developments in Jizza, Marka, and Sahab).⁷ These different forms of urban neoliberal transformation all reflect dominant political and ideological practices of power as regulated by neoliberal tropes and manifested through spatially engineered realities. More importantly, some of these emerging neoliberal city projects will certainly lead to urban geographies of inequality and exclusion, as well as to spatial and social displacement.

A similar case of neoliberal urban restructuring can be seen in Beirut. Solidere's (Société Libanaise de Développement et de Reconstruction) downtown Beirut reconstruction, which was presented to the public as a comprehensive post-war reconstruction effort that would serve the entire city, has been criticized as a mere for-profit real estate development project in which centuries of history and heritage are recreated through pastiche representations. While it is true that the project also included the preservation of older buildings and urban spaces from the traditional Lebanese and French Mandate periods, it is important to stress that the final outcome is an exclusive urban setting where the notion of urban memory and property ownership has disintegrated. Today, residents or shopkeepers no longer own their own property; instead, they are allocated shares within a company run by a few powerful majority shareholders. Moreover, the pastiche recreation of the city's long history and heritage caters to a 'boutiqueization' of once-vibrant areas of socio-economic exchange. This reconstruction has essentially created a collaged urban morphology designed for consumption by tourists and the Lebanese people alike.

The effect of global Gulf capital is evident in Palestinian cities as well. Rawabi, which has been advertised as the first planned city constructed by and for Palestinians, is a development project near Ramallah in the West Bank with a current investment level exceeding \$1 billion. It is considered the largest private-sector project ever to take place in Palestine, though unfortunately at the expense of rich and valuable agricultural land; the project has been heavily critiqued by urban activists and NGOs in Palestine and beyond.⁸

It would be interesting to analyse several of these projects in light of the emerging urban lifestyles evidenced by their clientele. In both Amman's Abdali project and Beirut's Solidere – and specifically as manifested by the residential/retail towers constructed in these areas – the occupants and residents of corporate office space and luxury apartments create their own type of utopia. Their 'privileged position' is, in most cases, quite detached from the rest of the city and its inhabitants. Indeed, the marketing materials for these projects promise, without any ambiguity, a distinctively luxurious lifestyle in a protected and safe environment.

Again, these projects will very likely lead to urban geographies of inequality and exclusion, as well as intensify both spatial and social displacement. For example, Amman's Abdali project will heighten 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. In fact, it has already led to the displacement of the Abdali transportation terminal, which has effectively distanced its drivers, informal vendors, and occupants to the outskirts of Amman. This shift has created considerable disruption and financial burden for commuters by complicating and dispersing public-transportation options in the city.

Furthermore, it is important to analyse these projects in terms of a number of important offshoot effects. These include (but are not limited to) changes in urban governance; the emergence of new governing bodies in the city; the production of new subjects and experts devoted to urban management; the notion of privatization of essential urban services; the creation of new types of partnerships between the public and private sectors; and the informalization of decision-making and building-permit processes when it comes to approving large-scale and corporate neoliberal investment in the city. Krijnen and Fawaz, for example, observe similar trends in urban governance in Beirut, arguing that additional flexibility is provided for capital investments through the informalization of public decision-making with regard to planning.⁹ In essence, more decisions are made by mutual agreement, on an ad-hoc basis, and at multiple levels of the public hierarchy. In cases of high-end residential and corporate projects, informalization is also precipitated by an increasing trend to favour visual communication in the form of 3D images, models, and videos, all of which work to 'glitzyfy' proposed projects and make them more attractive to investors. The problem with this approach is that it tends to lack any consideration for social and physical sustainability concerns in decision-making processes.¹⁰

Most of the examples discussed here testify to a clear trend in urban management in the Arab world today; namely, that planning processes are being delegated to the for-profit private sector. This private sector then operates in the midst of newly emerging governing bodies of the city, e.g., Mawared in Amman, Solidere in Beirut, ASEZA (Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority) in Aqaba, and in Tunis the Société de Promotion du Lac de Tunis (a collaboration between the Tunisian government and the Saudi company Al Baraka in the development of the northern lagoon shores of the Tunisian capital). These emerging governing bodies are replacing older governmental entities, most notably municipalities whose role in urban governance has been extremely marginalized.

From Real Estate Investments to City Infrastructure

More recently, one can observe an even more excessive post-neoliberal corporatization of state public institutions (e.g., electricity, solid waste management, water, and social housing), coupled with a period of deregulation. Jordan, for example, has witnessed a rapid decrease in state subsidies to fragile sectors such as water, electricity, and essential commodities (e.g., bread). Egypt, on the other hand, has experienced the continuation of structural adjustment programmes after the current regional recession, which has led to increased taxes on both essential and nonessential goods.

While Arab states are increasingly retreating from public works and welfare programmes, large state subsidies are being allocated to neoliberal

projects that favour exclusive real estate development projects. In the case of Amman's Abdali project, for instance, Mawared's rhetoric to decrease state involvement also includes a public (state) subsidy for private real estate development that benefits selective urban business elites from Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gulf. Moreover, the financial contribution from Jordan is considerable, with the greater portion of the subsidy devoted to making prime urban space available at very cheap prices to the 'right' buyer. Other forms of subsidies include tax exemptions, infrastructure provisions, the elimination of many barriers and red tape designed to uphold thoughtful zoning decisions, and the passage of favourable building regulations and zoning ordinances that make it easier for investors to cater to the wealthy. For example, the Tunisian government officially sold 950 hectares of land along the recently sanitized Southern Lake in Tunis to the real estate company Sama Dubai for a token sum of 1 dinar. Similarly, neoliberal urban transformation in Beirut is serving high-end developers by increasing the number of permitted built-up areas, providing tax breaks, and offering considerable public subsidies that favour the development sector. Most recently, newly emerging national and multinational corporate investors are becoming dominant stakeholders in this privatization process. This trend signifies a considerable shift from an interest primarily in investing in real estate development to becoming increasingly involved in urban infrastructure provision, which was previously undertaken by state institutions.

Conclusion

Increasing numbers of Arab cities are being subjected to newly emerging neoliberal bodies of urban governance, which, despite their rhetoric of emancipation, conceal exclusionary and exploitative social relations and spatial ordering that create new pockets of poverty in the inner city, cause major social and physical displacement of marginalized social groups, and decimate the power and influence of local state authorities. There is, therefore, a significant disparity between the rhetoric of urban policies on the one hand, and the resulting reality on the other. The common thread between the various case studies from Amman, Beirut, Tunis, Ramallah, and other places is that both types of neoliberal projects – whether those targeting high-end clientele or those targeting poorer segments of society – lead to geographies of inequality through the formation of urban islands of excessive consumption and exclusive residential neighbourhoods. The eventual outcome is that poorer segments of society are pushed to the outskirts of the city and into new pockets of poverty away from essential social services and transportation networks. I would argue that several of these projects even demonstrate a search for a particular *contradictory utopia* (and in most cases, a consumerist utopia), promoted by the rhetoric of neoliberal developers through various mechanisms both within and beyond the city.

In the Arab world, questions concerning the politics of place, urban development, and the environment (to name a few) have, for the most part, remained outside the domains of political and public consciousness and critical debate. My purpose in this commentary is not so much to critique this emerging reality, but to contribute to our understanding of this new phenomenon of 'neoliberal urban restructuring' in Arab cities today. A related goal is to raise the profile of the discourse and public debate about key transformations concerning the built environment. I hope that other researchers

will seek to critically investigate such neoliberal urban transformations and engage in comparative analyses of different case studies that will illuminate the nature and implications of the changing urban environment in the Arab world.

Contributor Details

Rami Daher is an associate professor of architecture at the German Jordanian University in Jordan and a practising architect and principal of TURATH: Architecture and Urban Design Consultants (1999–present). Daher has taught at the American University of Beirut, at Texas A&M University, and at the Jordan University of Science and Technology. Daher continues to work on projects related to urban design and public-space creation, heritage conservation, and the adaptation of historical buildings. His primary research interests include the politics and dynamics of public-space-making, urban transformation, critical theory, and landscape urbanism; he has published extensively on these topics and issues.

Suggested Citation

Daher, R. (2018), 'Uneven Geographies and Neoliberal Urban Transformation in Arab Cities Today', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 7:1, pp. 29–35, doi: 10.1386/ijia.7.1.29_1

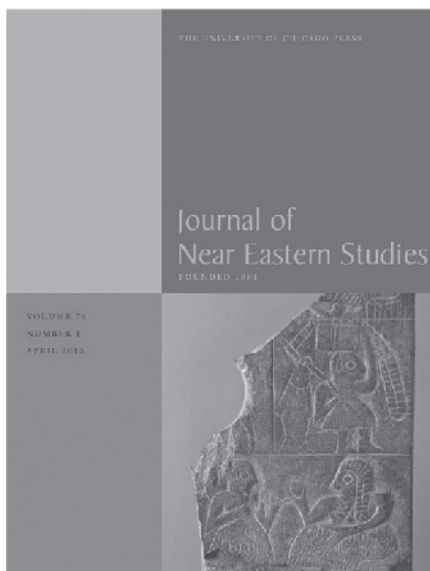
Endnotes

1. Pierre-Arnaud Barthel, 'Arab Mega-Projects: Between the Dubai Effect, Global Crisis, Social Mobilization, and a Sustainable Shift', *Built Environment* 36.2 (2013): 5–17.
2. Even though publications on the Arab city are numerous, not many have addressed the neoliberal transformations and urban restructurings that have taken place over the past decade. Among the few that have are Yasser Elsheshtawy, ed. *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); comparative work on Amman and Beirut in Doris Summer, 'Neo-Liberalizing the City: Transitional Investment Networks and the Circulation of Urban Images in Beirut and Amman', (MA thesis, American University of Beirut, 2005); varied works by Rami Daher on Amman such as 'Amman: Disguised Genealogy and Recent Urban Restructuring and Neoliberal Threats', in *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development*, ed. Yasser Elsheshtawy (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 37–68 and 'Discourses of Neoliberalism and Disparities in the City Landscape: Cranes, Craters and an Exclusive Urbanity', in *Cities, Urban Practices, and Nation Building in Jordan*, ed. Myriam Ababsa and Rami Daher (Beirut: Institut Français du Proche-Orient), 273–96; research on Damascus in Valérie Clerk and Armand Hurault's 'Property Investments and Prestige Projects in Damascus: Urban and Town Planning Metamorphosis', *Built Environment* 36.2 (2013): 34–47; focus on Tangier in Pierre-Arnaud Barthel and Sabine Planel, 'Tanger-Med and Casa-Marina, Prestige Projects in Morocco: New Capitalist Frameworks and Local Context', *Built Environment* 36.2 (2013):

48–63; discussion on Cairo in Khaled Adham's 'Cairo's urban déjà vu: Globalization and urban fantasies', in *Planning Middle Eastern Cities, An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalizing World*, ed. Y. Elsheshtawy (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 134–168; Éric Verdeil's work on energy transition and infrastructure in Jordanian and Lebanese cities in 'Energy transition in Jordanian and Lebanese cities: The Case of Electricity', presented at *In Cities and Energy Transitions: Past, Present, Future*, Autun, France, June, 2009, <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00424539/fr/>; Adam Haneih's work on Rawabi near Ramallah in Palestine in *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013); and Marieke Krijnen and Mona Fawaz's approach to Beirut in 'Exception as the Rule: High-End Developments in Neoliberal Beirut', *Urban Environment*, 36.2 (2010): 117–131.

3. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
4. Ibid.
5. Daher, 'Amman'.
6. Abdali is the largest neoliberal real estate development project currently underway in Amman. The project is promoted as 'the new downtown' for Amman and is anticipated to include high-end offices and residential spaces, in addition to retail, commercial, and other tourist-related attractions. The remodelled area, previously the site of the General Jordan Armed Forces Headquarters, spans over 350,000 square metres in the heart of Amman and will contain a built-up area of approximately 1,000,000 square metres.
7. Rami Daher, 'Neoliberal Urban Transformations in the Arab City: Meta Narratives and Urban Disparities – The Emergence of Consumerist Utopias and Geographies of Inequalities in Amman', *Environnement Urbain/Urban Environment* 7 (2013): a99–a115.
8. See Adam Haneih, *Lineages of Revolt*.
9. Marieke Krijnen and Mona Fawaz, 'Exception as the Rule'.
10. Ibid.

*Devoted to the study of
all aspects of civilization
in the ancient and
premodern Near East*



*Journal of Near Eastern
Studies*

Editor: Christopher Woods

Visit journals.uchicago.edu/jnes to
sample content, subscribe, and contribute.



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS JOURNALS