

The Evolving Arab City

Tradition, Modernity & Urban Development

Edited by Yasser Elsheshtawy



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Chapter 3

Amman: Disguised Genealogy and Recent Urban Restructuring and Neoliberal Threats

Rami Farouk Daher

Whenever I open one of the local newspapers in Amman I am astonished by the huge number of advertisements (mostly a whole page) promoting new ‘urban’ projects – office towers, gated communities or even mega developments such as Abdali¹ in the middle of the city. Furthermore, one cannot help but notice the abundance of new real-estate and business magazines in both Arabic and English, such as *Jordan Business*, *Jordan Property* and *Jordan Land*. They all promote real-estate ventures in the city, on the Airport Highway and in other Jordanian cities as well as providing information on similar ventures in other Arab countries. It is evident that Amman is embarking on a new era of urban/spatial restructuring which is also affecting Middle Eastern cities at large.

In this chapter, I set out to analyse the current urban condition of Amman in particular, and the rest of the Middle East in general. In so doing, I attempt to understand the current neoliberal urban phenomenon and locate it within a regional and global context. My concern is with the politics of place and the different narratives that exist in which the city is realized and understood as a contested reality. Furthermore, I am concerned with urban transformation and change *vis-à-vis* cultural, socio-economic, and territorial changes within the city.

In the first part of the chapter, I present Amman’s urban beginnings and past as a marginalized reality that has not been celebrated and recognized by formal State practices and was even excluded from Orientalist/academic definitions of the Islamic Arab cities of the region. My intention is to provide some insight into whether or not Amman suffers from a crisis of identity and also to explain why the State had not until very recently incorporated the urban reality and heritage of the city into its formal definition of the country of Jordan or as a subject of interest for nation building or urban projects in the city.

In the second part of the chapter I address the current transformations in the city in terms of neoliberal urban restructuring and the circulation of surplus global capital. These are exemplified by the Abdali development, described as Amman's new downtown, and by other projects appearing in the city as local and municipal initiatives strive to create a vision for the future of the city.

The chapter will demonstrate that, contrary to the formal rhetoric which promotes the idea that there is no State involvement in such privately-funded urban restructuring, the reality is that the State is subsidizing large-scale real-estate investments, enabling the business elite and transnational corporations to develop mega-projects. Furthermore, important questions are raised not just about Amman, but other cities in the region:

- ♦ Where is this surplus capital coming from? And why now in Amman?
- ♦ What is this 'moment' of neoliberalism we are part of today? What does it mean? And what are its effects on cities of the Middle East?
- ♦ What are the consequences of circulating global capital, urban models and images within the region?
- ♦ What are the consequences of the notion of the privatization of planning and empowerment of private transnational capitalist actors in public-private partnerships?

By examining the different urban projects in Amman and elsewhere in the region, we can form a better understanding of current transformations in the production, manufacture and consumption of urban space. These transformations are leading to a new way of visioning and acting on the city, in which the issues of accountability, transparency, democracy, inclusion/exclusion and private/public become highly contested in the midst of continuously changing formal (State and other) practices and emerging 'new actors'.

Part I. Amman: Disguised Genealogy and Swift Transformation

For some people Amman is no more than a new city that offers a comfortable way of life (figure 3.1). But for others it represents a rich reservoir of personal and



Figure 3.1. Panoramic view of the city of Amman showing the relationship between the downtown (Wast al Balad) and the emerging residential hills.

collective memories, where the social memory of place, represented in its streets, alleys, steps and courtyards, is more than a topic of discussion at gatherings and becomes, instead, a 'lived' experience and a true anchor to place, providing symbols of belonging. Yet, for many, Amman is also a city which suffers from a lack of urban identity and a place to which some residents have a weak sense of belonging. As one who was born, and had lived most of his life, in Amman I was, like many others, confronted with the question: 'Where are you from?' And my immediate answer was always: 'I am from Amman'. But my simple answer was seldom satisfactory and was frequently followed by: 'No, really, where are you from?' This used to bother me as a child and teenager and I always wondered why if my answer were that I was from Salt, or Irbid, or any other Jordanian city it would have been satisfactory; and I used to wonder why Amman was not acknowledged as a city which people could claim as their origin. Jawad Anani (1992, p. 4) explained in one of the local Jordanian newspapers that if one asked a student in any local school in the city about his or her origin, the majority would answer that they were from a city or a town other than Amman even if they were born in Amman and had spent their whole lives in the city. Seteney Shami (2005, p. 2), in questioning why the overall consciousness, the set of meanings, and the hegemonic urban discourse concerning Amman is one that negates its identity as a city, suggested that 'the answer partly lies in the ways that Amman's inhabitants construct their identities through references to a multiplicity of cities as well as to alternative identities that work against consolidating an Ammani identity'. Furthermore, Shami goes on to suggest certain justifications or reasons for what she terms the Ammani laments:

It would appear at first that there are quite easy answers to Ammani laments, and these are readily offered up by many of its inhabitants. First of all, Amman is a recent city. It was re-founded, after some centuries of de-population, as a frontier settlement of the Ottoman state in the late 19th century. Secondly, its population has been formed by numerous waves of displacement and refugee movements. Thirdly, its economy is largely dependent on the fortunes of a rentier state rather than on industry or global financial flows. Finally, Amman has experienced continuous and rapid physical expansion, such that its urban fabric is 'more of a construction site than a city', (*Ibid.*, p. 8)

One of Shami's explanations is that Amman had been too inclusive, its population had developed from numerous waves of displacement and migration starting with Circassian immigrants from the Caucasus as early as the 1870s. They were followed by urban merchants from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, especially after the establishment of the Hijaz Railroad Line which reached Amman in 1903; Arab nationalists from Damascus seeking refuge from French mandate suppression; a massive wave of Palestinian refugees in 1948 after the Israeli occupation of Palestine and later, in 1967, after the occupation of the West Bank. Later waves of migration and displacement have included Lebanese bourgeoisie after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, Palestinian and Jordanian

returnees from the Gulf after the 1990/1991 Gulf crises, and most recently Iraqis flocking to Amman and other Jordanian cities with their millions causing major crises due to increases in property prices and other commodities. Below, I will attempt to answer the complicated question of the existence (or not) of a crisis of identity in the case of Amman.

Amman: The City (in) Between

To answer the previous question, I seek to understand why Amman's urban beginnings and past existed as a marginalized reality, unrecognized and uncelebrated in both formal State practices and in Orientalist/academic definitions of Islamic-Arab cities. My aim is not only to reveal the latent nature of domination, but also to show the extent to which power mechanisms and relations are present in institutions, regulations and discursive practices. In order to understand the genealogy of such a city, one needs to consider the transformations that the Middle East witnessed over the past two centuries, such as the destruction and replacement of the dynastic religious realm (represented by the Ottoman Empire) by the various post-mandate nation states of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt, during the first half of the twentieth century, and the consequences of such transformations on the definition and practice of nationhood, citizenship, and heritage (Anderson, 1983).

In general, the definition of the region's heritage, through which the newly emerging states were defining themselves, were confined to the classical, religious and ancient monuments (for example, Pharaonic in Egypt, Nabatean in Jordan, Phoenician in Lebanon). Meanwhile, according to Maffi (2002, pp. 210–211) and Schriwer (2002) who have worked extensively on Jordan, the heritage of the recent past (manifested by its rural, urban traditions) was marginalized by official State discourses which attempted to dissociate from the recent Ottoman past and local realities and instead to construct legitimacy for the newly emerging state systems by constructing links with distant origins. Maffi (2000, p. 7) highlights the example of the Jordanian/Hashemite fascination and obsession with ancient Nabatean civilizations which occupied a territory similar to today's modern Jordan.

Official Narrative Discourse. Amman's urban heritage (with some iconic exceptions such as the Roman Amphitheatre) was kept outside the country's official definition of national heritage which was grounded in a dissociation from the recent past and a constructed definition of what Jordan is. Natural sites such as Wadi Rum or the Steppe (*Badiya*) and archaeological sites which link the country to an imagined point of departure (the Nabataean site of Petra) were key 'sites' in constructing a formal Jordanian identity. Urban realities such as that of Amman fell outside this formal definition. Kassay (2006) describes how official Jordanian identity is antithetical to Amman and to its urban reality and how instead 'tribalization' dominated national Jordanian identity.

In addition, the Jordanian State, which had neither major natural resources nor great wealth at the beginning, created its legitimacy through events and spectacles (for example, the public speeches and parades which used to take place in Faisal Plaza in the 1920s and early 1930s) in public spaces rather than through association with certain existing places or a formal programme of public buildings. Rogan (1996, p. 103) stated that:

beyond the handful of functional buildings commissioned by the British authorities, and the three landmarks of the 'Umari Mosque, Raghadan Palace, and the Residency, or Dar al Mu'tamid, neither the Hashemites nor the British enjoyed the resources to impose their authority on Amman through building projects – no elaborate house of parliament, court of justice, or institution of higher education. Rather than seeking to project the state's power through architecture, the ruling authorities used Amman as a stage on which they enacted elaborate spectacles of ceremonial intended to reaffirm both elements of the colonial state: British trusteeship and Hashemite rule.

Orientalist/Academic Discourses. The urban heritage of Amman dating to the first half of the twentieth century was discredited by several practices which rendered it insignificant and marginal. First, Amman as a city in general, and its urban heritage in particular, had to conform to the stereotypical models of what an 'Islamic' or 'Arab' city should look like.

The Orientalist discourse constructed models and typologies of the 'Islamic' or 'Arab' city, which were adopted and perpetuated by some contemporary academic discourses. Such stereotypes work to discredit a reality which does not fit the criteria and models. Consequently, the application of such models to a city like Amman becomes very problematic. Compared with cities such as Damascus, Cairo or Jerusalem, which do more or less fit the stereotypical model, not only has Amman been little studied but, as explained above, it is a city of a more recent origin whose population developed through different waves of immigration. One of the first to criticize the stereotypical model, which was based on a body of literature produced by Western Orientalists, was the renowned scholar Janet Abu-Lughod (1987, p. 155). According to Abu-Lughod, such generalizations were built on limited examples, mainly Fez in North Africa and Damascus and Aleppo in Bilad al Sham:

In short, just as we find the first *isnad* to be based chiefly on French North African sources/studies, particularly focusing on the city of Fez, so we find a second *isnad* based upon the Syrian cities of Aleppo and Damascus, as studied physically by Sauvaget and socio-politically by Lapidus. In each case, a very tentative set of place-specific comments and descriptions appears. These enter the literature and take on the quality of abstractions. With each telling, the tale of authority grows broader in its application. Forgotten is the fact that only a handful of cities are actually described. Forgotten is the fact that only certain legal codes – on which the Islamic form of city is presumed to be based – have been studied. Forgotten is the fact that Islamic cities

have evolved over time and that the socio-political system in Damascus and Aleppo in the 14th century under Mamluk rule cannot possibly provide a convincing description of how Islamic cities *sui generis* were governed. (*Ibid.*, p. 160)

What is very valuable in Abu-Lughod's attempt to deconstruct Orientalist thinking about the Islamic city is that she illustrates 'not only that the idea itself was "created" on the basis of too few cases but, even worse, was a model of outcomes rather than one of process' (*Ibid.*, p. 172). Dieterich (2002) details how this model of outcomes – the stereotypical Islamic and Arab urban features such as the congressional mosque, covered bazaars, public paths, numerous *Waqfs*, and homogeneous organic residential neighbourhoods to which Amman was compared – worked to subjugate and marginalize Amman's distinctive urban features such as its Hussein Mosque, specialty bazaars such as Souq al Bukhariah, the cemetery at Ras al Ain, water *sabils* such as the Hamidian Sabil which was in front of the Hussein Mosque, and coffee houses such as those around the main congressional mosque and in Faisal Street. Many such features were demolished in the name of 'modernity' and 'progress' or because of their uncritical evaluation as obsolete and insignificant.

Qualifying Amman: The City of Many Hats

The fact that Amman did not have a distant origin or homogeneous ethnic composition disqualified the city from being a stereotypical Islamic city and may have led to the crisis of identity to which many of its residents subscribed. I believe that this crisis of identity is gradually diminishing (as will be explained at the end of this section) and that the distinctiveness of Amman and its urban cultural heritage need to be revealed and reactivated. Amman does not have to conform to a discourse that constantly attempts to compare it to cities like Damascus, Jerusalem or Cairo with a distant past and a perceived homogeneous beginning and point of origin. By emphasizing 'homogeneity' such discourses eliminate local difference and, in the process, the distinctive reality, that is Amman.

By enforcing a unified and stereotypical style for Amman's architecture, borrowed from other traditional urban realities, such discourses are degrading the multiplicity and distinctiveness of the city's urban experiences. Amman's multi-ethnic and heterogeneous beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century were very inclusive.² The city was considered a refuge place, a city that welcomed visitors of diverse origins. A common scene in the downtown during the 1930s would be men with different head-dresses – the Circassian *kalbaq*, the Lebanese and Syrian *tarboosh*, the Palestinian and Jordanian *hatta* or *kofiah* – climbing Amman's steps to reach the residences on the slopes of the seven hills flanking the downtown.

As intimated above, the multi-layered beginnings of the city have not yet been fully, or even partially, narrated. Furthermore, the inherent uniqueness of Amman's urban heritage has only been recently explored and incorporated into formal State

projects of nation building. The city's distinctive urban qualities are present in places like the Hawoz² in the residential hills, the urban experience of Faisal Street, the detached single-family dwelling of the 1920s and 1930s, the elegant (yet unpretentious) villas of the 1940s and 1950s with their brilliant modernist logic, aesthetics, and dynamism, the pedestrian steps which connect the downtown area to the surrounding residential hills (figure 3.2) with their distinctive ambiance and experience, or the Ammani public meeting places such as the coffee houses.

In *Shahbandar*, his recent novel set in Amman, Hashem Gharaybeh (2003, pp. 51, 120) says that the essence of the city is that it protects people coming to it from different locations; it is a city which delivers justice to strangers no matter what their origin. He goes on to sketch the urban scene in Amman in the early 1920s by describing how the residents of the city enjoy a continuous celebration of diverse costume and head-dress; costumes from the East or the West mingle with the Syrian and Lebanese *tarboosh*, Circassian *kalbaq*, Iraqi *faisaleiah*, and traditional Arabian *kofiah*, not to mention Western hats and suits with beautiful waistcoats and vibrant designs (*Ibid.*, p. 161). I strongly believe that the significance of this novel is not simply that it celebrates these multi-layered beginnings of the city with its diverse migrants, but that the author chose Amman as his focus. This is a phenomenon which is worth further analysis. For the first time the city of



Figure 3.2. Amman, the city of steps: the Ammani steps of Jabal Amman in Khirfan Street Area.

Amman is the centre of inquiry for Jordanian writers and novelists. Are we finally witnessing a major shift and transformation in this crisis of identity?

This is too large a question to be answered solely on the basis of a series of novels where Amman is the main subject, even though this is not to be discredited if we consider that the writers and novelists of any nation are supposed to reflect the beating heart of society. I strongly argue that we in Amman are gradually witnessing the emergence of a generation/class of Ammanis which is very much interested in the specific characteristics of the city and is even a little nostalgic where the object of this nostalgia is the city of Amman with its downtown, residential hills and the various steps that connect them. But this class is also nostalgic about Amman's urban and social history and its multi-layered beginnings. This interest/nostalgia is manifested in several ways which I will briefly sketch below.

Firstly, one cannot help but notice that a lot of Ammanis from different backgrounds are developing an interest in the city's historic neighbourhoods such as the downtown area (Wast al Balad) and the older parts of Jabal Amman, Jabal al Weibdeh and Jabal al Ashrafieh. This is evident in a return of families who had left earlier, in the proliferation of studies of these urban spaces, and in the formation of residents associations such as JARA (Jabal Amman Residents Association) and Jabal al Weibdeh Residents Association. Furthermore, a lot of cultural bodies and organizations (for example, Darat al Funun, Makan, Dar al Anda, the Association of Jordanian Writers, the Centre for the Study of the Built Environment, the Royal Film Commission, Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature) are choosing to locate in these areas rather than in newer parts of the city. For the first time, the social and urban heritage of the city is being celebrated and recognized for its uniqueness.

Secondly, the urban heritage of Amman and of other Jordanian cities is becoming the focus of several donor agencies projects. I have described elsewhere (Daher, 2005, p. 291) the emergence of urban regeneration/heritage tourism developments in places such as Amman, Salt and Kerak, orchestrated and funded by international donor agencies (for example, the World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ)). These donor agencies emphasized that Jordan should invest in, develop, and promote its tourism sector and cultural heritage; for the first time the urban heritage of Jordanian cities was identified as one of the main assets for the generation of such developments (*Ibid.*, pp. 292–293).

Thirdly, Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) is attempting to reinvent itself and redefine its relationship *vis-à-vis* the city by envisioning its role beyond services and utility provision. This is, perhaps, not the first time that GAM has re-evaluated its mission as it had earlier started to address its role as a patron and facilitator of culture, hence the publication of a special magazine devoted entirely to the city (Saqr, 2003). However this time around the redefinition of roles will have major consequences for the city. Recently GAM initiated several projects addressing

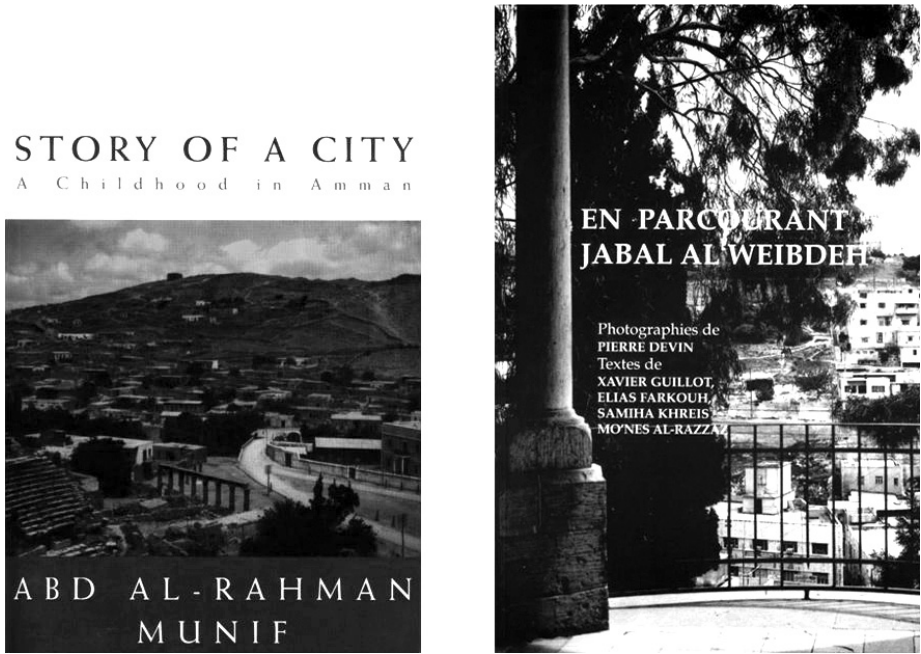


Figure 3.3. The emergence of novels and studies about urban life and living in Amman since the late 1990s. To the right is the cover of a study of urban memory and architecture of Al Weibdeh neighbourhood. To the left is the cover of an autobiographical essay/novel on the city covering the early years up to the middle of the twentieth century.

urban regeneration in locations such as Rainbow Street in historic Jabal Amman, Jabal al Ashrafiah near Darwish Mosque, and in the downtown area of Faisal Street. GAM is also currently involved in putting forward to new vision where heritage protection and the provision of more green and open spaces for Ammani residents are a top priority.

Fourthly, as mentioned above, since the early 1990s there is the proliferation of novels by Jordanian authors, such those by Ziad Qasem, Hasham Gharaybeh, Elias Farkouh, Abd Al-Rahman Munif, and Samiha Khreis (figure 3.3), which focus on Amman. Before this, the settings for Jordanian novels were either mythical spaces or generic Arab-Islamic towns, or even in cities with no specific identity at all, but according to Razzaz (1996, p. 357), Jordanian writers have recently started to acknowledge Amman as a subject for their novels.

This increasing interest in Amman's urban and social history is taking place against a background of neoliberal urban transformations and restructuring which are having a major impact on the people of the city – an impact which will be very different as between rich and poor.

Part II. Neoliberalism at Work: Circulating Global Capital, Images, and Planning Models

Here I seek to understand the current urban phenomena of the circulation of

global capital in search of high-yield, secure investments, of excessive privatization, and urban flagship projects in Amman. The focus will be on contemporary urban transformations in Amman, taking into consideration that such neoliberal urban restructuring could not be understood in isolation from similar transformations within the region at large. Elsheshtawy (2004, p. 6) demonstrates how the literature is filled with work examining the impact of colonialism on the spatial structure of Middle Eastern cities, yet there exists a gap when it comes to the influence of contemporary trends – namely globalization.

Emerging islands of excessive consumption for the elite together with the internationalization of real-estate companies and construction consultancies capable of providing high-quality services signify this neoliberal urban restructuring in places such as downtown Beirut, Abdali in Amman (Summer, 2005; Daher, 2007a), Dreamland in Cairo (Adham, 2004), Financial Harbour in Manama (see chapter 8) and even in the heart of the Holy City of Mecca through the Jabal Omar Project.⁴ Cities are obliged to create the right milieu, a competitive business climate, and first-class tourist attractions in order to lure people to live, invest, and be entertained in them. Developments in Dubai and the Solidere's reconstruction of Beirut's downtown (see chapter 4) are becoming the models to follow in such developments. Adham (2005) noted that circulating images of such neoliberal urban restructuring mimic developments in the West and represent as such an 'Oriental vision of the Occident'.

In 2002 the Gulf Cooperation Council declared the availability of US\$80 billion liquidity awaiting investment (Sadiq, 2005). The United Arab Emirates alone enjoys US\$26.3 billion in trade surplus, and in 2003 Dubai declared a growth in GDP of 16 per cent per annum. This circulating global capital is searching all over the Middle East for places to invest in real-estate development, in places like Dubai, Doha, Manama, Kuwait, but also in Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Tunis, and Amman. This will have considerable consequences on the nature of the urban environment as not only is each of these cities competing for international business and tourism, but also for more consumer-oriented services such as themed shopping malls, recreation centres, business towers, and theme parks.⁵

Global Economic Restructuring: Introducing Neoliberalism

Here I believe it is important to introduce the moment of neoliberalism⁶ of which we are all part, and affected by, today. Over the past century First and Third world countries have moved from modernity, to postmodernity, to globalization. Under the rationale of economic liberalization and privatization of State enterprises and investments, the world is now part of a neoliberal moment anchored by more conservative politics (Daher 2007b, p. 270). The central tenet of neoliberalism is the notion of competition (competition between nations, regions, firms, multi-national corporations, and even cities). Ley (2004, p. 151) sketches the consequences of this moment for the states of the developing world:

The unexpected collapse of the Soviet empire at the end of the decade seemed to many to consolidate and legitimate these innovations and propelled them with fresh momentum into the 1990s, even as the guard changed at the White House and Downing Street. Privatization, deregulation, partnerships with the private sector, cutbacks to the welfare state, a disciplinary relationship with labour, and promises to downsize government were all part of a new lexicon that seemingly liberated the spirit of free enterprise. This ideology was exported through American political and economic power and punitive action of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to debtor nations in the developing world.

Neoliberalism led to excessive privatization, the withdrawal of the State from welfare programmes,⁷ the dominance of multinational corporations and, as far as the Third world is concerned, a change from project-oriented international aid to aid in the form of structural adjustments and policy. This was accompanied by the emergence of several agents which assisted neoliberal transformation such as 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 other similar global organizations and instruments (Daher 2007b, p. 270).

Needless to say, this transformation has a substantial impact not only on cities as a whole, but also on how and for whom urban investment projects are developed. In many cases, the outcome has intensified issues of social equity, inclusion-exclusion, and accountability. Furthermore, with increasing competition between cities, they are gradually becoming places of play and commodities themselves. Fainstein and Judd (1999a, p. 261) illustrate how urban culture is gradually becoming a commodity within the move from modernity to postmodernity, and from internationalism to globalism with considerable effects on cities today.

Middle Eastern Cities Compete for International Business and Investment

Cities across the Middle East are currently competing with one another to attract international investment, and business and tourism development. Cities are 'obliged' to create the right milieu, a competitive business climate, and first-class tourism facilities in order to attract people to come and live, invest, and be entertained. Developments in Dubai and the current urban reconstruction of Beirut's downtown are becoming the models to follow.

As stated earlier, the Gulf Cooperation Council has some US\$80 billion in liquidity (surplus capital from oil revenues) which is expected to be spent on real estate, international business, and tourism investments within the next 5 years, especially in countries like the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. This vast sum of money, which prior to September 11 was primarily invested in the US and Europe, will seek new markets in the region; some had already found its way into Lebanese, Syrian, and Jordanian⁸ markets through multinational hotel and real-estate investments (Sadiq, 2005; Daher 2007b).

Gradually, cities in the Middle East are depending on high-increased rate of mobility within the region where cities are, for the first time, putting their different urban amenities on the market as a tourist commodity to be explored, invested in, and used to entertain tourists, businessmen and, most important of all, affluent clientele from all over the region. As Fainstein and Judd (1999a, p. 261) suggest:

there does seem to be a degree of consensus that the present epoch involves a different, more flexible organization of production, higher mobility of both capital and people, heightened competition among places, and greater social and cultural fragmentation. Within the city the unity previously imposed by a manufacturing-driven economy has disappeared, and urban culture itself has become a commodity.

Hall (1996, p. 155) explores how cities are being packaged and introduced as products for marketing in an age of 'new urban tourism'. He shows how 'although urban centres have long served to attract tourists, it is only in recent years that cities have consciously sought to develop, image and promote themselves in order to increase the influx of tourists'. Within the context of the Middle East, one observes how, whether it is Beirut or Amman, Dubai or Manama, Cairo or Tunis, cities all over the region are competing for inward business and tourism investment with considerable consequences not only on how these cities are being transformed, or how heritage and urban regeneration is being conceived, but also the way in which tourism and tourist products and experiences are taking a central role in this overall transformation (Daher, 2007b, p. 272).

Observers of the current transformations of the urban scene in the region are likely to conclude that cities are gradually becoming business and tourism spectacles. For example, Reiker (2005) explains how, over the last decade, there has been considerable research examining neoliberal urban projects and tourism ventures in a metropolitan context in the West, but that 'much less attention has been given to these developments in the region'.

In order to understand current urban transformations in the region, one has to reflect on the present urban restructuring, and the role of different actors and agents *vis-à-vis* these transformations. Actors and agents range from multinational corporations to regional investors (for example, from Saudi and the Gulf), to local Jordanian investors who are also playing a significant role in such urban transformations. It is fascinating to examine the effect of the circulation of global capital, excessive privatization, the rise of a new Arab elite, and circulating urban/tourism flagship projects in Jordan and throughout the Arab region.

The Abdali Project and the Solidere Phenomenon: Conspicuous State Subsidies and the Privatization of Planning in Amman

Here I focus on formal shifts in the creation of 'public' urban space in Amman, which is orchestrated by partnerships between multinational corporations and the State through the establishment of new regulating bodies, such as the National

Resources Investment and Development Corporation (MAWARED).⁹ Several of these neoliberal corporate visions, reinforced by the State's concentration on economic prosperity and encouragement of international investment in the country, are leading to urban geographies of inequality and exclusion and spatial and social displacement of second-class citizens, functions, histories, in favour of first-class tourism developments and real-estate ventures.

Solidere's Beirut downtown reconstruction (see chapter 4), which was presented to the public as the main post-war reconstruction effort, has been criticised as being simply a real-estate development project where history and heritage are merely themes incorporated through Disneyfied pastiche representations. It is true that the project also includes the preservation of older buildings and urban spaces from the traditional Lebanese and French Mandate periods (Summer, 2005), but it is important to note that the final outcome is a very exclusive urban setting where the whole notion of urban memory and property ownership has disintegrated. This reconstruction is creating a collaged urban morphology designed for consumption by tourists and the Lebanese people alike.

The Solidere model of urban restructuring became the adopted approach within the region. Not only was it copied in Amman in the Abdali Project, but there are plans to apply it elsewhere within the region. This neoliberalization in the creation of public urban space circulates urban images, spectacles, and models and is leading to the dilution of local differences and the circulation of 'corporate' urban forms and images.

In Jordan, State policies are gradually moving away from 'regional politics' (for example, an emphasis on Arab nationalism and unity) and social agendas (for example, in agriculture, health, or education) towards neoliberal agendas of privatization and a situation where most vital assets and sectors are rented or sold to the outside (for example, water, telecommunication, power). The Solidere phenomenon in the shape of the Abdali Project is just one realization of the change in State policy in the Kingdom which are symbolized by the socio-economic transformation programme centred on alleviating poverty, creating job opportunities and partnerships with the private sector.

According to Bank and Schlumberger (2004), this new approach is made possible by a new economic team around the King and by the regime's one-sided discourse: economic and technological development. A shift in Jordan's policy priorities has been evident from the first days of King Abdallah's reign: from regional politics and the effects of the peace process to far reaching reform of Jordan's economy, widespread privatization, and economic competitiveness and activism. The emergence of the new guard – the Economic Consultative Council (ECC) – facilitated the structural adjustment programme, Jordan's accession to the World Trade Organization, the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, and paid lip service to privatization (for example, telecommunication, power, water, tourism, and planning). Bank and Schlumberger (2004, pp. 40–41) added that during November 1999, the King had invited more than:

150 leading representatives of the private and public sectors to the Dead Sea Retreat, a two-day seminar. In December, he created the Economic Consultative Council as an advisory body for economic policy planning. The ECC has 20 members, and the King presides over it. For an economy in which the State has been the main employer and most powerful economic agent for decades, it is remarkable that the ECC was in its initial composition dominated by 14 representatives of the private sector.

It is interesting to note the common traits between these appointees in terms of their educational and professional background and work views. According to Bank and Schlumberger (*Ibid.*), they include individuals like Ghassan Nuqul (Vice Chairman of the Nuqul Group), Fadi Ghandour (co-founder and CEO of Aramex), Suhair al Ali Dabbas (General Manager of City Bank in Jordan) and international lawyer, Salah al Bashir. They are all aged between 35 and 45, almost all hold a degree in business or economics from universities abroad, primarily from the US or the UK, and speak English fluently. Furthermore, they are all successful business people oriented towards the international market.

They represent Jordanian economic (success stories) symbolizing young, self-dash confident 'winners' in globalization and have internalized the currently fashionable neoliberal jargon. Their agenda is thus primarily economic – the far-reaching economic and technological transformation of Jordan and its integration into the globalized world economy. (*Ibid.*)

The Abdali project represents a clear realization of neoliberal urban restructuring and is facilitated by the State's socio-economic transformation programme. The project, boosted by the State's concentration on economic prosperity and encouragement of international investment and turning its back on Amman's original downtown just 1.5 km away, is likely to lead to urban geographies of inequality and exclusion and spatial and social displacement. The remodelled area, previously the site of the General Jordan Armed Forces Headquarters, consists of 350,000 m² in the heart of Amman and will contain a built-up area of approximately 1,000,000 m². In order for this project to succeed, the investors together with the State realized that it could not be facilitated through regular governmental bodies and that a new organization had to be established. Thus MAWARED was created by the King and is similar to other neoliberal institutions in the region such as Solidere in Beirut and ASEZA (Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority). These organizations are replacing older governmental bodies such as municipalities and governorates which have either been disbanded entirely or have taken on a more technical role such as service and infrastructure provision, permits and land appropriation, and traffic and transportation management. Nina Robertson in an interview for *Jordan Business* (one of the new leading venture capital and real-estate magazines in Jordan), attempts to understand this newly constructed entity which is neither private nor public but actually both:

Behind arguably the most ambitious of these projects is the state-owned National Resources

Investment and Development Cooperation (MAWARED). Established in 2000, the company's original mandate was to redevelop several inner-city military plots and turn them into income-generating mix-use sites as well as to relocate the military out of densely populated areas with investment potentials to new facilities. Just 5 years after its inception, MAWARED has become Jordan's leading urban regeneration entity and its largest real-estate developer. It has several affiliates, including the Development and Investment Projects (DIP) Fund, essentially the investment arm to the military; The Urban Workshop, a non-profit independent urban studies center; and the newly-established Amman Real-Estate Management & Services (AREMS), specializing in real-estate consultancy and management. (Robertson, 2007, p. 45)

In an exclusive interview for *Jordan Property Magazine*, Baha Hariri (son of the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, Chairman and CEO of Saudi Oger and Chairman of the Abdali Investment and Development PSC) explained how the project would 'endeavor to create out of Amman's new downtown, Abdali, which will redefine urban living in the city' (Al-Hindi, 2007b, p. 19). Al-Hindi had also interviewed Jamal Itani who is the CEO of the private shareholder company Abdali Investment and Development. He explained that:

the Project is a plan to create a new center for the City by coordinating between investors in order to execute around 45 unique development designs resulting in a number of harmonious buildings which maintain a high level of quality for both developers and investors. (*Ibid.*, p. 20)

In the case of Amman and the Abdali project, it is obvious that there is a tendency for this neoliberal investment to turn its back on the city's existing downtown (which is in need of major urban and economic regeneration). It is obvious too that the project is declaring itself as the 'new downtown' for the city, and this is evident not only through the pronouncements of the chairmen and CEOs of the main developers but also through MAWARED's interface with the general public, which is restricted to smart graphics on billboards around the construction site, and through its brochures and website (figure 3.4). These all enjoy slick marketing slogans that tap into the property consumers' mindset. Al-Masri (2007, p. 180) commented on how the project is being announced as the new downtown for Amman by stating that today the development of such new areas in the Middle East is paralleled in most cases by neglect of the historic urban quarters within the same cities. The Arab world is currently notorious for letting historic city centres deteriorate, while in other parts of the developed world attention has been given to the historic parts of cities through area conservation and revitalization, transforming derelict downtowns into places where people wish to live and work.

Analysing the details of the investments in the Abdali project, one 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 projects of urban restructuring. Contrary to the State's declarations and propaganda which advocate an absent State



Figure 3.4. A stretch of billboard about the Abdali urban regeneration project as the only source of information for the community at large about this major neoliberal urban restructuring project in the city.

in such projects, it is very clear that it is not absent, but is ‘there’, heavily involved, and there to stay. The financial contribution of the State is considerable. Prime urban land made available for investment forms the greater part of the subsidy, but other subsidies include tax exemption, infrastructure provision, elimination of all barriers and red tape, and special building regulations making the development possible.

It is also important to shed light on the nature of the shareholding of this neoliberal investment. The privately owned (private shareholder) Abdali Investment Company (AIC) was created in 2004 to develop and manage this mixed-use urban development with just two investors: MAWARED and Saudi Oger (Summer, 2005).¹⁰ As a private real-estate developer, it is responsible for implementing the project, and is in charge of its management and master planning. This is similar to Solidere in Beirut, but the shareholder setup in Abdali is very different.¹¹ Initially, AIC was set up with a capital JD39 million on a 50/50 partnership basis between MAWARED and Oger Jordan (the Jordanian subsidiary of real-estate giant Saudi Oger Ltd). The Saudi based Oger group is owned by the family of Rafiq al-Hariri. This joint venture was altered in 2005, however, when the United Real Estate Company, under the Kuwait Projects Company (KIPCO) group, joined as partners. KIPCO bought 12.5 per cent of Abdali Psc shares which left MAWARED and Saudi Oger with 43.75 per cent each (Al-Hindi, 2007a, p. 20).

It is interesting to note that regardless of the similarities between the different neoliberal urban restructuring projects in diverse contexts in the Arab world, each takes shape within a completely different local context and is consequently reshaped by it. Elsheshtawy (2004, pp. 18–19) confirms that while certain processes in globalization may seem to come from outside (for example, multinational corporations setting up regional headquarters), these processes are in fact activated from the inside by local actors. Furthermore, Swyngedouw *et al.* (2002, p. 545) explain how such neoliberal urban restructuring projects are incorporated in localized settings, hence the term ‘glocalization.’

In the case of Amman, beneath the rhetoric of MAWARED lies a public (State) subsidy for private real-estate development for very selective urban business regional elites from Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gulf. Robertson (2007, p. 46) states that:

Unsurprisingly, investors (mainly from the region) have been scrambling to get a piece of the pie. As a state-owned, financially independent company, MAWARED is able to offer them unique advantages that other corporations cannot: access to huge tracks of land in prime locations with the infrastructure in place. Being state-owned also makes MAWARED an attractive partner for the private sector, offering fast and smooth processing of official dealings with relevant authorities.

This conservative liberalism, according to Swyngedouw *et al.* (2002, p. 547):

seeks to reorient state interventions away from monopoly market regulation and towards marshaling state resources into the social, physical, and geographical infra- and superstructures that support, finance, subsidize, or otherwise promote new forms of capital accumulation by providing the relatively fixed territorial structures that permit the accelerated circulation of capital and the relatively unhindered operation of market forces. At the same time, the state withdraws to a greater or lesser extent from socially inclusive blanket distribution-based policies and from Keynesian demand-led interventions and replaces them with spatially targeted social policies and indirect promotion of entrepreneurship, particularly via selective deregulation, stripping away red tape, and investment partnership.

Al-Sayyad (2001, p. 14) refers to the ‘transfer of design and political control from local governments and citizens to large corporations and the design professionals they hire’. Based on interviews conducted at the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM), it appears that MAWARED has been created to take on the role formerly played by GAM in such sensitive projects. Interviews and fieldwork clearly show that in Jordan, and in the Abdali project in particular, the boundary between regulator and investor and even public and private are becoming very blurred. In short, in Jordan’s neoliberal urban restructuring, the boundary between ‘State’ and ‘civil society’ is very blurred, transparency is non-existent, and public information about the Abdali project is minimal.

Abdali, modelled after Solidere and with some of the same investors, is

promoted by MAWARED's brochures, website, short video, and other promotional materials as the 'New Downtown for Amman'. However what is clear is that the project will intensify the socio-economic and spatial polarization not only between east and west Amman but between a new 'elitist urban island' and the rest of the city. The Abdali development will result in the displacement of the nearby Abdali transport terminal, together with its drivers, informal vendors and occupants, to the outskirts of the city. An IT park, luxury offices and also some residential space will be introduced in addition to a newly created civic 'secular' plaza bounded by the State Mosque, the Parliament, and the Law Courts. This will present fierce competition to the existing downtown which is gradually decaying and suffering from a lack of economic vitality. This is reinforced through a combination of physical, social, and cultural boundary formation processes. Hall (1996, p. 159) describes how 'the creation of a "bourgeois playground" in the name of economic progress may create considerable tension in the urban policy-making environment', while Shami (1996, p. 45) suggests that 'relocation frequently accompanies urban modernization and is linked in many ways with the idea of mobility as a valued characteristic of urbanness. However, while mobility may mean freedom and new opportunities for some, for others it may mean the very opposite'.

Another contested dimension of this neoliberal investment is the forced gentrification and selling out of private property for private development because part of the land acquired by the investors is owned by private people. Furthermore, in a part of the proposed development area, known locally as the Za'amta neighbourhood, there are residential apartments. Here, residents are being asked to sell to the investor and leave their properties. One of these properties at the edge of the development area is the Talal Abu Ghazaleh Organization (TAGorg) headquarters. Indeed TAGorg has publicly announced that the Greater Amman Municipality is acting as a mediator to convince the organization to sell its land while threatening to expropriate it if it refuses. In general they are all being asked to sell to the developer, but obviously through the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) which is left to deal with the difficult work of MAWARED and Saudi Oger (appropriation of private land for private development) and is being put in the position of regulator and infrastructure provider without actually being part of these neoliberal projects or even benefiting from them financially. For the average Ammani citizen, whose only source of information about the project is the billboards around the construction site, it is GAM which is at the forefront and is blamed for the relocation of the Abdali transportation hub (which caused major problems for those using public transport). Interviews in the former transport hub suggest that these ordinary Ammani citizens are not even aware of the existence of MAWARED or Saudi Oger.

It is interesting to research how these new autocratic bodies are created, how they function, who is employed and how they are supported by a very powerful and chic image, promotion campaign, graphics, and the whole paraphernalia that centres on image and late capitalist consumerism advertising.

The Creation of Gated Communities, the Malling of the City, and the Quartering of Urban Space

The Abdali project is not a unique phenomenon in Amman; there are several projects either being built or proposed for the capital. Some of these are exclusive high-rise offices, others are well-protected gated communities along the Airport Highway catering for the wealthy and the upper middle class. Table 3.1 below presents a critical analysis of these different projects in terms of the nature of their real-estate company; the origin of their capital; project type and associated lifestyle; in addition to targeted clientele.

In the late 1990s the city was plagued with a series of shopping malls, some even in the eastern, less affluent part of the city. This accentuated a growing consumer society with adverse effects on smaller businesses, neighbourhood corner shops and local grocery stores. One mall, Mecca Mall, located in the western part of the city, has been labelled the ‘most popular public Ammani space’ by Jordanian critics in local newspapers (figure 3.5). These malls are very selective in the way they choose their clientele. Not only do they have rigid security with multiple sensors, CCTV and check points, but they exercise a no entry policy for those they claim to be unwelcome participants in the mall space – predominantly young Ammani males who feel excluded from this gated consumerist community.

In Amman, the effect of such socio-economic transformation on the creation of new public urban space produces ‘a privatized public space’ based on a highly



Figure 3.5. Interior of Mecca Mall showing the sales centre for GREENLAND Project (The Shrine of Neoliberalism where ‘property’ is the new consumer good par-excellence in the Arab world).

Table 3.1. Real-estate developers' discourse in and around Amman.

Name of Real-Estate Company	Origin of Circulating Capital and Transitional Capitalists' Class	Location of Real-Estate Project	Project Type, Lifestyle and Architectural Style	Name of Project and Marketing Slogans	Targeted Clientele (Catering for Closed/Open Community)
Discourse I: Selling 'Paradise' on the Ground					
TAAMEER Jordan/Jordan Company for Real- Estate Development (PLC)/ www.taameerjordan.com	UAE and Jordan CEO: Ahmed Dahleh Amman, Airport Highway		Villas Cost/m ² : 600 JD Facilities and lifestyle: centralized underfloor heating; maid's room with laundry; interior customization; 24 hour security and maintenance; indoor and outdoor swimming pool, spas and health clubs.	ANDALUCIA 'The grass is greener at ANDALUCIA'	Upper class Gated closed community
Kurdi Group www.greenland.jo	Jordan CEO: Obaidah al Kurdi	Marj al Hamman, near Amman, close to the Airport Highway	Mostly villas, but also apartments Architects: Kurdi & Ashdak Cost/m ² : apartments: 657–796JD; villas: 700–784JD Sales centre: Open area in Mecca Mall	Green Land 'The joy of living'	Middle- and high- income Open community
AMAAAR Properties in partnership with Triad Investments www.amaaar.net	Jordan and UAE	Al Hummar, Amman	Villas Architectural style: modern smart home system; centralized AC and heating system; centralized satellite and internet; 24 hour security and maintenance; health clubs	Al-Hummar Hills 'A new oasis for dwelling in Amman' 'Provides distinctive homes that will redefine everyday life' 'Elite Products for the Elite Community' 'Al Hummar Hills is an ingeniously fresh approach to gated communities compound living' www.hummarhills.com	Upper middle-class and high Gated community; compound living

Bayan Holding (developer); Gulf Finance House (financing); Al Hamad Construction & Development Co (construction)	UAE	Near Airport Highway on the way to Marj al Hamman, Amman	Villas and apartments Architectural style: modern/contemporary Facilities: cable TV; central gas distribution; central irrigation system; VRV system Architects: Consolidated Consultants Sales centre: under construction	Royal Village ‘The Royal Village, the joy of living in the City away from life worries and noise’ ‘The Royal Village, the address of contemporary life’	Middle and high Closed gated community
Discourse II: ‘Living above the City in the Clouds’					
Abdali Investment & Development PSC (a private shareholder company). A public-private-partnership between the State-owned investment corporation MAWARED and Saudi Oger as the main developer and contractor, plus the Kuwaiti investment group KIPCO	Saudi Arabia and Jordan Chairman Bahaa Hariri/ Chairman and President of Saudi Oger: Sheikh Sa’ad Hariri Director General of MAWARED: Akram Abu Hamdan Prominent Board Member: Ali Kolaghassi US\$1.5 billion investment	Abdali, in the heart of the city of Amman A 3.5 million foot ² development	The Towers sector of the project is a mix of high- and mid-rise developments designed to accommodate corporate offices and offer integrated building management systems to ensure state-of-the-art services for corporate tenants. The residential area will be mixed-use space with luxury apartments	Abdali Urban Regeneration Project ‘A new downtown for Amman’ ‘The planting of a heart for an old City is the essence of the Abdali Project’	Corporate businesses; upper middle-class residents and expatriates Closed community
EMMAR partnered with the Bin Suidan Group of Saudi Arabia	Jordan and Saudi Arabia	Amman, 5th Circle area, Zahran Street 40,000 m ² development	The commercial towers; high end corporate offices	EMMAR Towers ‘Best place to practise commercial activity’ ‘A comprehensive security system’	Closed community
Bayan Holding (developer) / Gulf Finance House (financing); Al Hamad Construction & Development Co (construction)	UAE	Amman, 6th Circle area	Two Towers (commercial and hotel) Architects: Consolidated Consultants Sales centre: under construction	Jordan Gate ‘Share the vision, embrace the future’ ‘Energizing Jordan and beyond’ www.jordan-gate.com	High end

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Dubai Properties DDC; Dubai Development Cooperation (project managers)	UAE GEO: Jordan Branelis	Abdali, in the heart of the city of Amman	Residential and mixed-use offices Architects: Cladio Nardi Lifestyle: underground parking; wireless internet; under floor heating; voice over IP based security; shops; cafes; gym; library; private cinema	Two Towers: 1. Vertex Towers and Residence www.vertexjordan.com 2. Commerce-One ‘A unique jewel in a special site ‘Enjoy an urban and prestigious life style in Amman’ ‘The most glamorous and luxurious address for living in Amman	Upper middle and high Closed community
DAMAC Properties	UAE Main shareholder: Mr. Sijwani of the UAE CEO: Peter Riddoch Regional (Jordan) Office Director: Wisam Atqi	Abdali, in the heart of the city of Amman	<i>The Heights</i> Studios and one-bedroom apartments Cost per m ² : 1400–2500JD <i>The Lofts</i> Studios and apartments. Cost per m ² : 1400–1600JD <i>The Courtyard</i> Residential and commercial tower 22 floors with four offices on each. Cost per m ² : 2200 JD for residential space and 3100JD for commercial space In general: serene landscape; gateway to the Abdali Master Plan; over- looking malls, offices, and the new downtown Amman; ample parking on three levels; video phone entry; advanced cabling system for telephone internet lines; 24 hour concierge and help desk facilities; standby power generator; water storage tanks and garbage rooms; exotic sauna/jacuzzi; state-of-the-art gym; temperature- controlled swimming pool; a variety of high class retail outlets and specialty restaurants.	Three main towers: <i>The Heights</i> (35-storey offices) <i>The Lofts</i> (8-storey residential) <i>The Courtyard</i> ‘Lofty views, open terraces, and deluxe living in the city center’ ‘Luxury lifestyle providers’	Upper class Gated community

Sources: This table was constructed based on field work conducted by the author in Amman between 2006 and 2007 by visiting different project locations, real-estate investors sales centres, exhibitions, and by consulting different local business and real-estate magazines such as *Jordan Business*, *Jordan Property*, and *Jordan Land*.

selective definition of the public (Crawford, 1995) and triggers a new meaning of public/private and inclusion/exclusion. It is important to understand local/global relationships *vis-à-vis* the processes of urban inclusion/exclusion and the power mechanisms embedded in such ‘urban restructuring’ projects and corporate visions.

This notion of ‘island planning’, where certain urban development projects turn their back on adjoining districts and areas or even create a privatized, controlled, and protected environment, becomes a contested reality which deserves further attention. Referred to by Sassen (cited in Elsheshtawy, 2004, p. 18) as the ‘quartering of urban space’, the same problem is expected in Abdali; the result will be a ‘fragmented city’, a ‘patchwork of discrete spaces with increasingly sharp boundaries (gated business centres, leisure, tourism and community spaces)’. According to Elsheshtawy (2004, p. 8), these ‘protected enclaves of the rich’ will also increase the gap between the rich and the poor within the same city. Fainstein and Judd (1999b, p. 9) claim that:

carefully bounded districts have been set aside as ‘tourist bubbles’ isolated from surrounding areas of decay. Within these districts, historic and architecturally significant structures are integrated with the new generation of tourist facilities that, instead of evoking images of an urban golden age, are quite contemporary.

Gated communities and privileged shopping malls are invading the urban landscape of several Middle Eastern cities today, and unfortunately:

many places are being put into play due to the increasingly global character of these contemporary mobilities. The 1990s have seen remarkable ‘time-space compression’, as people across the globe have been brought ‘closer’ through various technologies. There is an apparent ‘death of distance’ in what is sometimes described as a fluid and speeded-up ‘liquid modernity’. (Sheller and Urry, 2004, p. 3).

Sheller and Urry elaborate on the concepts and lifestyles associated with these ‘places to play’. They believe that tourism is not only transforming the materiality of many ‘real’ places, but is also having a deep impact on the creation of virtual realities and fantasized places. ‘These are enormously powerful and ubiquitous global brands or logos that increasingly feature tourist sites/sights as key components of the global culture that their brand speaks to and enhances’ (*Ibid.*). These brand companies include many in ‘travel and in leisure: Disney, Hilton, Nike, Gap, Easyjet, Body Shop, Virgin, Club Med, Starbucks, Coca Cola, and so on. These brands produce “concepts” or “lifestyles”: liberated from the real-world burdens of stores and products manufacturing’ (*Ibid.*), and these lifestyle concepts revolve around generic types of places to play: the hotel pool, the waterside café/restaurant, the cosmopolitan city, the hotel buffet, the theme park, the club, the airport lounge, and the shopping mall.

An important question emerges from this: within these places of play of intense mobility, who gets the opportunity to be mobile? And what is the relationship between the local and global within this mobility? It is only global money and a chosen few who are granted this privilege. The rest of the world cannot join ‘the play’; entry to these global places of play is restricted for the majority and is only permitted through their involvement in the provision of services and infrastructure (for example, Indian and Pakistani workers in Dubai hotels and resorts; domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines in Beirut and Amman) (Daher, 2007a). Junemo’s (2004, p. 181) work on Dubai is informative as it describes the socio-economic, spatial and demographic transformation taking place in this extraordinary place of constant ‘play’.

Yet these ‘playscapes’ whether in Dubai, Amman, Cairo or Beirut are simply gated communities with practices of inclusion and exclusion. They are usually guarded and are closed off for many to ensure the type of people allowed to participate in these places of leisure and consumption. Junemo (2004, p. 190) illustrates how these places maintain and enforce a symbolic distinction between those with access to the networks and those without. This distinction is crucial for the formation of a distinct social identity for the upper middle class where monetary capital is turned into some accepted form of social capital in order to gain access to such upmarket social networks.

The Transnational Capitalist Class and Their Real-Estate Development Discourse: Selling Paradise on the Ground; or Living above the City in the Clouds

Between 2005 and 2007 I researched current real-estate ventures by visiting different project locations, sales centres of main real-estate companies and exhibitions, interviewing the CEOs and deputy managers of such companies, and consulting a huge variety of literature published in magazines such as *Jordan Business*, *Jordan Property*, and *Jordan Land*. One of the outcomes of this research is table 3.1 which presents a critical analysis of the different projects in terms of the nature of their real-estate company; the origin of capital and the transnational capitalist class; project type and associated lifestyle; marketing slogans; and targeted clientele and cost. I suggest that the real-estate projects can be divided into two main categories: Type 1. Gated communities in the form of residential compounds; and Type 2. Exclusive office space in the form of high-rise towers. The following is a discussion of the these two types of neoliberal investment in Amman.

Type 1, such as Andalusia, Greenland, Hummar Hills and the Royal Village, represents gated communities and housing enclaves for the very rich, which I dub ‘selling paradise on the ground’, because a quick glance across the different marketing slogans and discourses of the developers (for example, ‘The Joy of Living’, ‘Provide distinctive homes that will redefine everyday life’) suggests that the projects are promising a utopian existence and a completely transformed

individual once he or she becomes part of this exclusive community. The architecture attempts to offer a traditional envelope for these villas and apartments by the use of traditional materials and colours and certain historicized elements (for example, wooden pergolas, *mashrabiya*s and so on). The architectural style represents, in most cases, a poor and unsophisticated understanding of a mythical Orient. But once one attempts to reveal and peel off this Disney-like and superficial layer, it is very obvious that these projects represent an oriental vision of the Occident, where the Occident is American-style suburban living with its single-family house, front yard, garage, and basketball ring.

Type 2 projects like the towers sector of the Abdali project (including the Vertex, the Heights and the Lofts), Jordan Gate, and many others constitute exclusive office space and luxury apartments which I call 'Living above the City in the Clouds'. The wealthy residents strive to be part of the city, but in reality they are living in a privileged position above the city. In their marketing slogans these projects promise a distinctively luxurious lifestyle and a protected and safe environment (for example, 'Lofty Views, Open Terraces, and Deluxe Living in the City Centre'; 'Luxury Life Style Providers'; 'A Comprehensive Security System'). As Sklair (2001, p. 6) says:

global capitalism thrives by persuading us that the meaning and value of our lives are to be found principally in what we possess, that we can never be totally satisfied with our positions (the imperative of ever changing fashion style), and that the goods and services we consume are best provided by the free market, the generator of private profit that lies at the heart of capitalism.

It is obvious that the new service good of neoliberalism today is property.

Table 3.1 reveals the different actors and agents behind these neoliberal projects, they include people like Bahaa al-Hariri (Chairman and President of Saudi Oger), Akram Abu Hamdan (General Director of MAWARED), Jordan Branel (CEO of Dubai Properties), and Mr. Sijwani (major shareholder in DAMAC Properties) to mention a few. These people play a crucial role in the politics and dynamics of these investments and also in the direction of capital flow within the region, let alone the lifestyles prevailing within the projects.

I suggest that further research on neoliberal urban restructuring should focus more on the human agent behind global capital flow and ethnographies which target these transnational capitalist individuals so as better to understand the nature and future of these investments. Ley (2004, p. 152) pinpoints the importance of studying the different discourses of these transnational capitalists while attempting to bring the issue of human agency to a globalizing discourse which 'has frequently been satisfied with speaking of a space of networks and flows devoid of knowledgeable human agents'. Sklair (2001, p. 4) suggests that this 'new class is the transnational capitalist class, composed of corporate executives, globalizing bureaucrats and politicians, globalizing professionals, and consumerist elites'.

Local/Municipal Initiatives in the Midst of Neoliberal Transformation in the City

Shami (2005, p. 16) recognizes the city as a product of people 'who make space and place, discursively and materially; negotiating macro-level forces in culturally specific ways'. I also believe that the city is a complicated organism of different power mechanisms and contested narratives. Thus while gated communities are being built on the Airport Highway and luxurious apartments and office towers in Abdali, the city is, and will continue to be, the stage for different agents or actors such as the municipality, a local community group, a philanthropist, an NGO, or even a private investor with an alternative vision or approach.

A particularly important actor in the city is the Greater Amman Municipality which is changing how it sees itself, especially in terms of its role in the city. GAM today considers its role to be more than services and infrastructure provision and attempts to address the future of the city through a vision which 'seeks, in partnership with Amman's citizenship, to provide exceptional municipal services that far exceed the expectation of service-recipients, while keeping up with modern conveniences and preserving the city's heritage and spirit'.¹² The new mayor of Amman, Omar Al-Maani, explained how GAM is looking for Amman to be a modern, efficient, green city and one that is pedestrian-friendly and has a lot of activities. During a 2006 lecture to the International Affairs Association entitled 'Amman Present and Future', Al-Maani emphasized that GAM went beyond the traditional role of municipal administration in serving the city, and that it plays an effective role in developing society and achieving sustainable development.¹³ Yet, as mentioned above, GAM is also being put in a difficult position by being asked to be the regulator (or better, the rationalizer) for the neoliberal urban restructuring in the city. As a regulator of future developments, GAM's role, so far, centres on envisioning the new master plan for the city in addition to researching appropriate locations for new high-rise developments, and drafting guidelines for future growth.

GAM is also undertaking different heritage management projects and addressing the creation of public spaces within the city. One of these projects is the urban regeneration of Rainbow Street located in a historic part of the city, close to the downtown area. The project aims to create more spaces for the public (in the form of small urban gardens and panoramic lookouts) in addition to 'giving voice' to this distinctive Ammani urban reality. At the same time as GAM's project started at Rainbow Street in 2005, transnational capitalists were buying historic properties in the area, which they saw as a golden opportunity for real-estate investment as it is becoming popular with the thirty-something crowd of Ammanis.

The project designers (TURATH Consultants) saw a chance to counter current neoliberal threats to the area and to foster a successful public space which is more inclusive. They were seeking to present a model to counteract the fact that public spaces today are part of a neoliberal strategy of gentrification and late

capitalist investment. Their main objective was to maintain the healthy character and socio-economic make-up of the area which is composed of small and medium size businesses, middle and upper middle class residents, and different public amenities such as cultural and research centres, mosques, churches, schools and a vibrant mix of other functions such as retail and restaurants. Shop owners were striving to stay in business in an area with continuous pressures of increased property values and rapid transformation. It was very evident that different narratives were operating simultaneously at Rainbow Street.

Wakalat Street, in the new shopping district of Sweifieh, is the focus of another GAM project and represents an attempt to reinvent public life in the city. The project is part of a wider public space strategy put forward by GAM to address the reality of existing public spaces and the quality of urban life in Amman. The main design objective is to produce an 'anti-Mall space' by creating a 'walkable street', and a recreational promenade which encourages pedestrian life in Amman. The aim is to create a street that is inclusive, welcoming people from all parts of Amman and, at the same time, is a vibrant urban space which will win back public life from shopping malls to the 'real' streets of the city. It is hoped that Wakalat Street will become a demonstration project for other areas to follow. Other GAM projects proposed for the city include the urban regeneration of Faisal Street in the downtown area, the revitalization of Darwish Mosque Plaza in the historic



Figure 3.6. The new JARA (Jabal Amman Residents Association) Flea Market where Ammanis are flocking to historic urban quarters of the city for a touch of urban history and a different Ammani experience.

neighbourhood of Ashrafieh, and collaboration with different newly-emerging neighbourhood associations such as JARA (Jabal Amman Residents Association) and Jabal Al Weibdeh Residents Association to improve the urban quality of life in their respective environments (figure 3.6).

Concluding Remarks: Resistance in a One-Dimensional Society

It is interesting to attempt to understand the nature and scope of public debate over the neoliberal urban transformations in Amman. In the city, critical debates are more sporadic, concentrating on ‘technical’ matters of investment (for example, traffic congestion, spatial considerations in terms of where to locate high-rise buildings). In addition, and in many contexts, there is a huge overlap between the State and the public sphere represented by its various civil institutions and NGOs (which might form communication structures facilitating critical public debate). In Jordan, the borderlines between the State and civil society are very blurred. For example, many NGOs receive State funding or engage in State-run projects while others are linked to the Royal Family who patronize such civic institutions which are seen as extensions of the State and where the possibility of critical resistance is impossible or very difficult. There is hardly any scholarly or even popular writing on such transformations.

Swarbrooke (2000, p. 275) describes how in certain developed countries such as the United Kingdom one can find public protest against the use of public resources (funds, subsidies) to support flagship projects and tourism developments. Protest is made because it is thought ‘wrong for poor communities to, in effect, offer subsidies, to wealthy private companies’ and that the money invested in such mega urban projects should be devoted to more worthy causes. It is often suggested that in depressed urban areas, social infrastructure – health, education, and housing – should be the priority for the allocation of public funds.

In the Middle East, questions of politics of place, urban development, and heritage definition have predominantly remained outside the domains of political and public consciousness. In general, politics and matters subject to public debate (and open for public scrutiny) are confined to a *traditional* conception of the term (for example, matters of the *Shari’a*, and the Palestinian issue; in other words, politics with a big ‘P’). Meanwhile, questions of politics of place, identity construction, contested pasts, and appropriate development modes (politics with a small ‘p’) have predominantly remained outside the domains of politics and critical debate. In the different Middle Eastern contexts discussed, critical public debates by different actors and agents (regardless of their nature and different concerns, mechanisms of contestation, and areas of emphasis) do not culminate in any action on the ground, they remain at the level of the discourse leading to further frustrations. Discourse emancipation should perhaps concentrate on different sub-cultures of residence at the level of the ‘individual’ (initiating resistance at the individual level through continuous networking).

The issue of resistance at the level of the individual maybe one of very few solutions where the self is considered an active particle of resistance capable of networking and contestation in an age of neoliberalism, State and monopoly organized late capitalism, media and the dominance of the image, and the increasingly powerful positions of large-scale transnational corporations and big businesses in public life in Jordan and maybe elsewhere in the region. Sklair (2001, p. 297) believes that ‘capitalism can only be successfully challenged through social movements that target global capitalism through its three main institutional supports, the TNCs, the transnational capitalists class, and the culture-ideology of consumerism’.

My purpose in this research is not so much to critique as to contribute to the understanding of this new phenomenon of ‘neoliberal urban restructuring’ and to elevate the level and essence of the discourse and public debate about key crucial transformations in my city, Amman. I realize that this ‘neoliberal’ urban phenomenon is very difficult to challenge. I simply want to lobby for a public request, on behalf of the city, to the transnational capitalist class, who are the beneficiaries of this phenomenon, to pump at least a small fraction of profit and ‘royalties’ into the real downtown of Amman. This could be considered as overdue taxes or charity, or even as a reversal subsidy.

Such neoliberal urban transformations in Middle Eastern cities will definitely lead to adverse effects on the urban realities of these cities and also on the gap between the different socio-economic groups which make up the urban setting. For Amman, and since most of these projects not only target a high end clientele but are also located in western Amman, it is evident that these neoliberal endeavours will increase the divide between the poorer east and the more affluent west of the city. Our relationship with the city has always been, and will always be, a contestation 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 to place is very transient in nature. We think that we live in the city as our craving for urbanity increases; but rather, we live ‘above’ the city in gated realities.

Notes

1. The *Abdali* Project is a new large urban development project being constructed on former army land (most of which was empty) in the middle of Amman. Funding for the project is made available through partnerships between the State and transnational real-estate development companies. The Towers Sector of the Project is a mix of high- and mid-rise buildings designed to accommodate corporate offices and offer integrated building management systems to ensure state-of-the-art services for corporate tenants. The residential area will be mixed-use space with luxury apartments.
2. Public lecture by Seteney Shami, entitled ‘Amman is not a City’, presented at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. The lecture, part of the Center’s Spring Lecture Series, was held in March 2001.
3. *Hawooz*: is originally a main source of water (e.g., well, spring, other) and gradually, formulated a

nucleus in the form of an urban node (*green* circle in certain cases) in Amman's residential hills.

4. www.jabalomar.com. Accessed 7 September 2007.
5. The circulation of Gulf and Saudi capital into cities such as Amman or Beirut was amplified mainly after the incidents of 11 September when that Arab surplus capital was no longer welcomed in the United States or Europe, and the only places left for investment were cities of the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent.
6. According to Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoliberalism>. Accessed 9 September 2007), the term neoliberalism is used to describe a political-economic philosophy which has had major implications for government policies from the 1970s, and has become increasingly prominent since 1980. This philosophy de-emphasizes or rejects positive government intervention in the economy (which complements private initiatives), and focuses instead on achieving progress and even social justice by encouraging free market methods and fewer restrictions on business operations and economic 'development'. Its supporters argue that the net gains for all under free trade, free market, and capitalism outweigh the costs in all or almost all cases.
7. The boundary between the 'State' and 'public' is becoming very blurred with major consequences where the State is pulling out of support for vital sectors (for example, education, agriculture and health) and is becoming simply just like another corporation or institution amongst many, making issues such as accountability very problematic.
8. Saraya project in Aqaba. *Al-Rai'* Newspaper, No. 12659, 19 May 2005, p. 13. New projects in Amman. *Al-Rai'* Newspaper, No. 12661, 21 May 2005, p. 17.
9. MAWARED: National Resources Investment and Development Corporation.
10. Saudi Oger (Oger Jordan) is an international developer. Saudi Oger entered the partnership as the main investor and also brought the expertise of its foreign master planners (Millennium Development & Laccoco).
11. In Beirut, for example, Solidere's capital initially valued at \$1.82 billion consisted of two different types of shares: type A shares issued to holders of expropriated property in the city's downtown relative to the value of the expropriated property; and type B shares (with an initial stock offer of US\$100 per share) issued to external investors. Solidere's own rhetoric sugars the type A shares and rationalizes their facilitation by stating that 'most lots in the Beirut Central District are owned by tens, hundreds and in some instances (the *Souq* areas) thousands of people'. Therefore, the type A shares are being presented as the only 'just' solution for such a dilemma.
12. <http://www.ammancity.gov.jo/English/vision/v1.asp>. Accessed 27 April 2007.
13. http://www.ammancity.gov.jo/english/news/n.asp?news_id=727. Accessed 27 April 2007.

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