

Taking a closer look at Amman's distinctive urban heritage

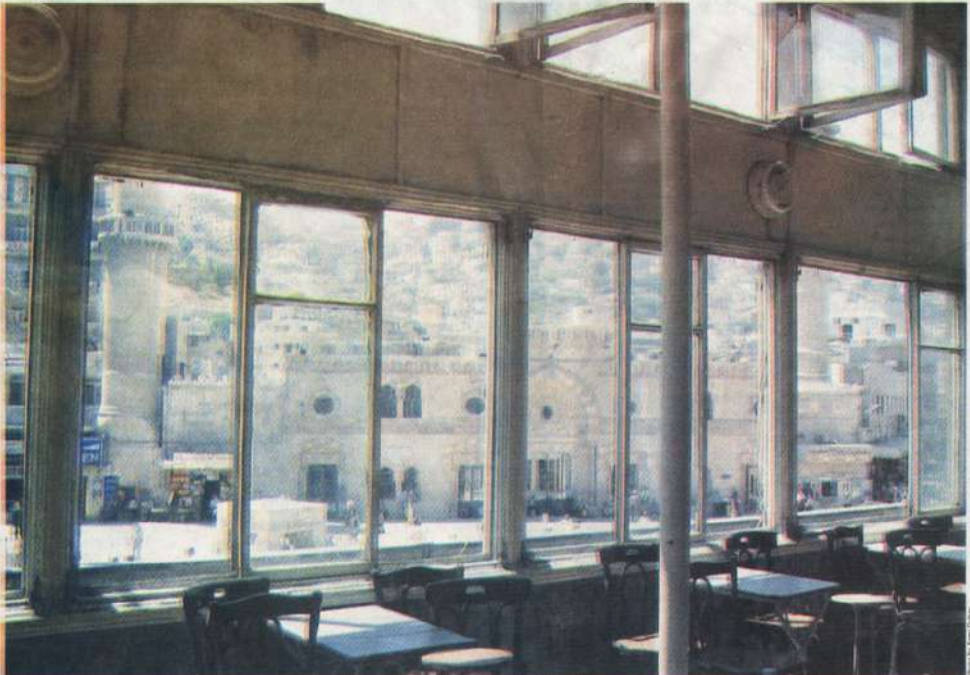
The closure of a famous coffee house has left more than just one writer unhappy

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Amman is a city that many of us cherish and have a very sincere and candid sense of belonging to. It is a place of refuge, yet also a place of aspiration for the future. For some, Amman is just a new city that offers a comfortable lifestyle and way of life. But for many, it tends to be the place for a rich reservoir of personal and collective memories where the social memory of place, represented in its streets, alleys, steps and courtyards, becomes not only the topic of discussions in social or scholarly gatherings, but a "lived" heritage. And for many as well (some visitors to the city or even ex-patriots), Amman is a new reality with its distinctive residential hills, unique downtown area and urban heritage.

The distinctive urban heritage of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century such as Amman's early residential hills, downtown alleys, shops, and coffee houses, or the early religious and public buildings; were marginalized and not incorporated into the realms of "heritage. This recent Ammani heritage did not conform to Orientalists' and academics stereotypical concepts and models of what an "Islamic" or an "Arab" city should look like. Amman was always compared to other cities like Cairo, Damascus, or Baghdad; consequently, Amman's young, distinctive urban heritage was disqualified and was rendered, until recently, insignificant by several official, scholarly and academic discourses and practices.

Such stereotypical models, uncritically, disregarded Amman's recent but distinctive urban features, such as the Hussein Mosque, specialty bazaars (*Souq al-Bukharani*), the Ras al-Ain Cemetery, Water Sabils (such as the Hamidian Sabil that existed in front of the Hussein Mosque), and the numerous coffee houses around the



This interior view of the coffee house was taken in June 2002 before the building's semi-closure

main congregational mosque and on Faisal Street. Many of these features were demolished in the name of modernity and progress. As a result, the city's urban heritage was kept outside the official/national definition, which was grounded in a disassociation from the recent past and centered on a glorification of the distant past and its archaeological sites.

It was only recently that the recent past and history was in-

corporated into the realm of official Ammani heritage.

One site facing destruction in the name of progress and development is an old coffee house, *Qahwat al-Jamia al-Arabiyyeh*, fronting the Hussein Mosque in downtown. It was inaugurated in the late 40s (hence the link between its name and the Arab League) by a well-known Damascene family who came to Amman at the beginning of the 20th century.

Even though the building might not be seen by specialists or architects as having significant architecture based on aesthetics alone, it is one of only several coffee houses remaining in the city. Such sites were significant in the middle of the 20th century as places where public political opinion was formed. Intellectuals, politicians, journalists, artists and writers were frequent clients, though few of them still go there.

The space of Al-Jamia al-Arabiyyeh is composed of two joined split-level spaces that open into each other. The lower one is blessed with a unique view of the Hussein Mosque and square, or *saha*, through a simple, yet authentic, wooden screen frame, and is located in the Rida Building which borders the square. The upper level of the coffee house overlooks the lower one and has visual connections with the busy

commercial streets of Basman and Al-Saada. It is located in the Asfour Building adjacent to the previous one.

After a recent eviction, the patron of the coffee house was forced to partially close it down because the owners of the Rida Building are intending to demolish it and instead erect a "new, modern" multi-story building to maximize profit. The owners are rationalizing their actions on the basis that

they have the right to invest in their property by erecting floor floors instead of the existing three, thus boosting use and financial gain from the investment. Although they were willing to consider another alternative by negotiating with the tenants regarding rent increases, some of the tenants were willing and favored the idea while others refused. Unfortunately, the building is scheduled for demolition.

One frequent visitor to the coffee house stated that, to him, this place represented a refuge from the worries of everyday life, adding that it might be true that the place is full of sounds and smells of different nature, yet it provides him with a place for contemplation where he can find tranquility and serenity. Another frequent visitor to Amman, a European who always visits the coffee house whenever he is in town, collapsed in tears once he was struck with the semi-closure of the place (which now no longer has a visual connection with the Hussein Mosque, and is only confined almost to half of its original size). He reiterated that Amman for him, is not only the Citadel and the Roman Amphitheater, but also the ordinary urban public spaces of the city, which carry a distinctive Ammani character - of which Qahwat al-Jamia al-Arabiyyeh is but one.

In Amman, owners and tenants, together with local authorities, have to come together to seek a compromise that insures the rights of both parties, but also the protection and continuity of such significant heritage sites of the city. In Amman, we sincerely need to arrive at a more comprehensive and genuine definition of what heritage is, grounded not only in architectural aesthetics, but also in local and social realities of the city and its numerous "lived spaces as well."

Only then can places like Qahwat al-Jamia al-Arabiyyeh continue to function as an Ammani coffee house.

Such places can also become incorporated as significant heritage sites appreciated for their social values associated with the collective memory of the recent past, as opposed to only acknowledging "sites" for their high-class architecture or for their association with the distant past.

Unfortunately, the inherent and distinctive qualities of Amman's urban heritage have not been fully explored or even understood yet. By emphasizing "homogeneity" and by insisting on enforcing a unified, stereotypical style for Amman's architecture - borrowed from other "traditional" urban realities. Such practices are eliminating local differences and complexities and, in the process, are discrediting the multiplicity and distinctiveness of urban experiences in the city.

Amman's distinctive urban realities are present in places like the *Hawoz* in the residential hills, the urban experience of Faisal Street, the central hallway Ammani detached single family dwelling of the 1920s and 30s, the elegant (yet not pretentious) houses and villas of the "modern" period in the 40s and 50s - with their brilliant modernist logic, aesthetics, and dynamism - the pedestrian steps that connect the downtown area to the surrounding residential mountains with their distinctive ambiance and experience, or the authentic Ammani socio-public places such as the coffee house.

All of these "urban realities constitute the uniqueness, distinctiveness and authenticity of the Amman that many of us grew to appreciate, understand and become very attached to. The "writing" of this article is by no means an attempt to create a reified concept of the past or of heritage; on the contrary, it is a continuous attempt to grant voice to a significant part of Amman's history and heritage like this coffee house in downtown Amman.