



Electric Feel

AMMAN, JORDAN

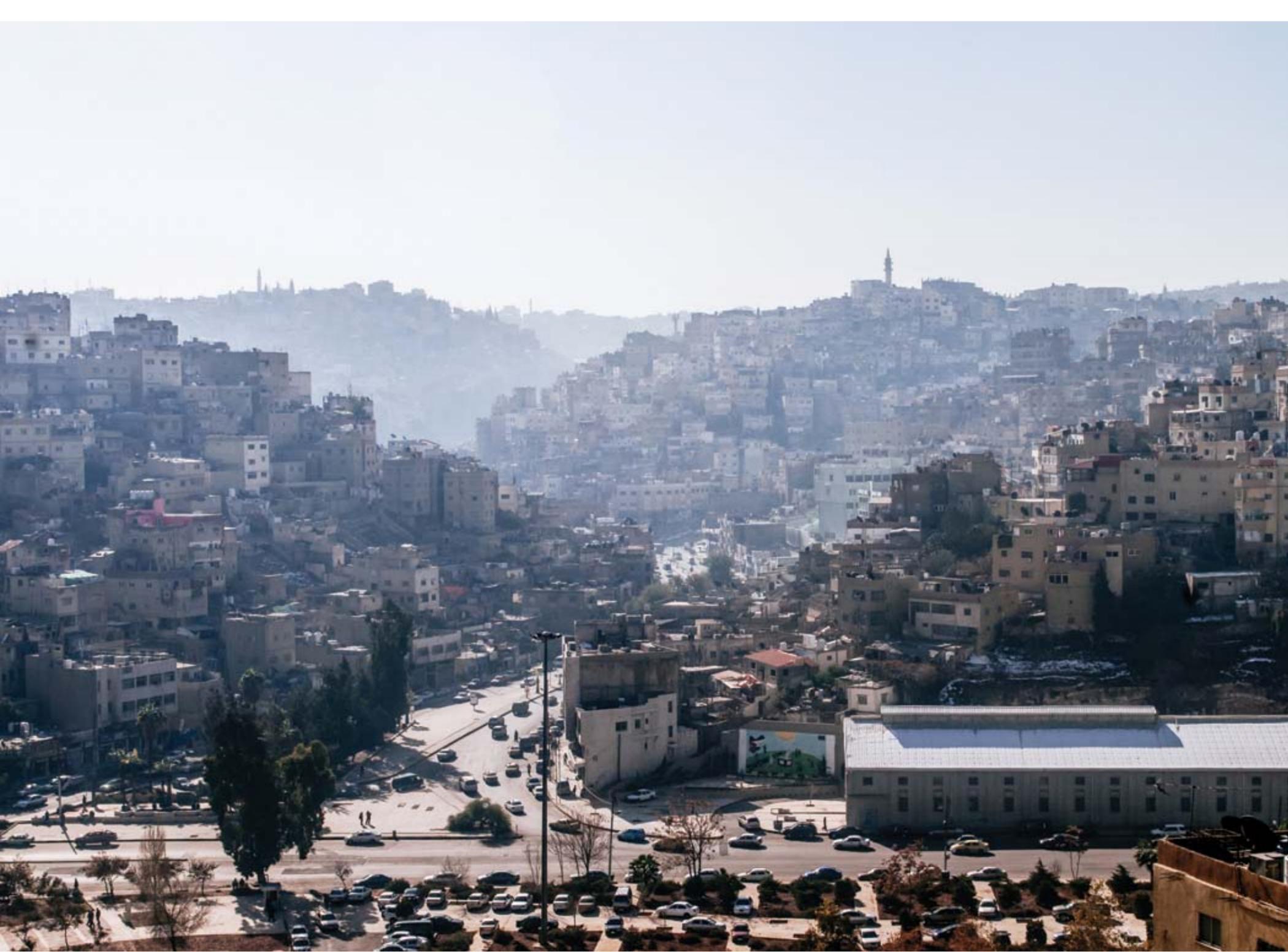
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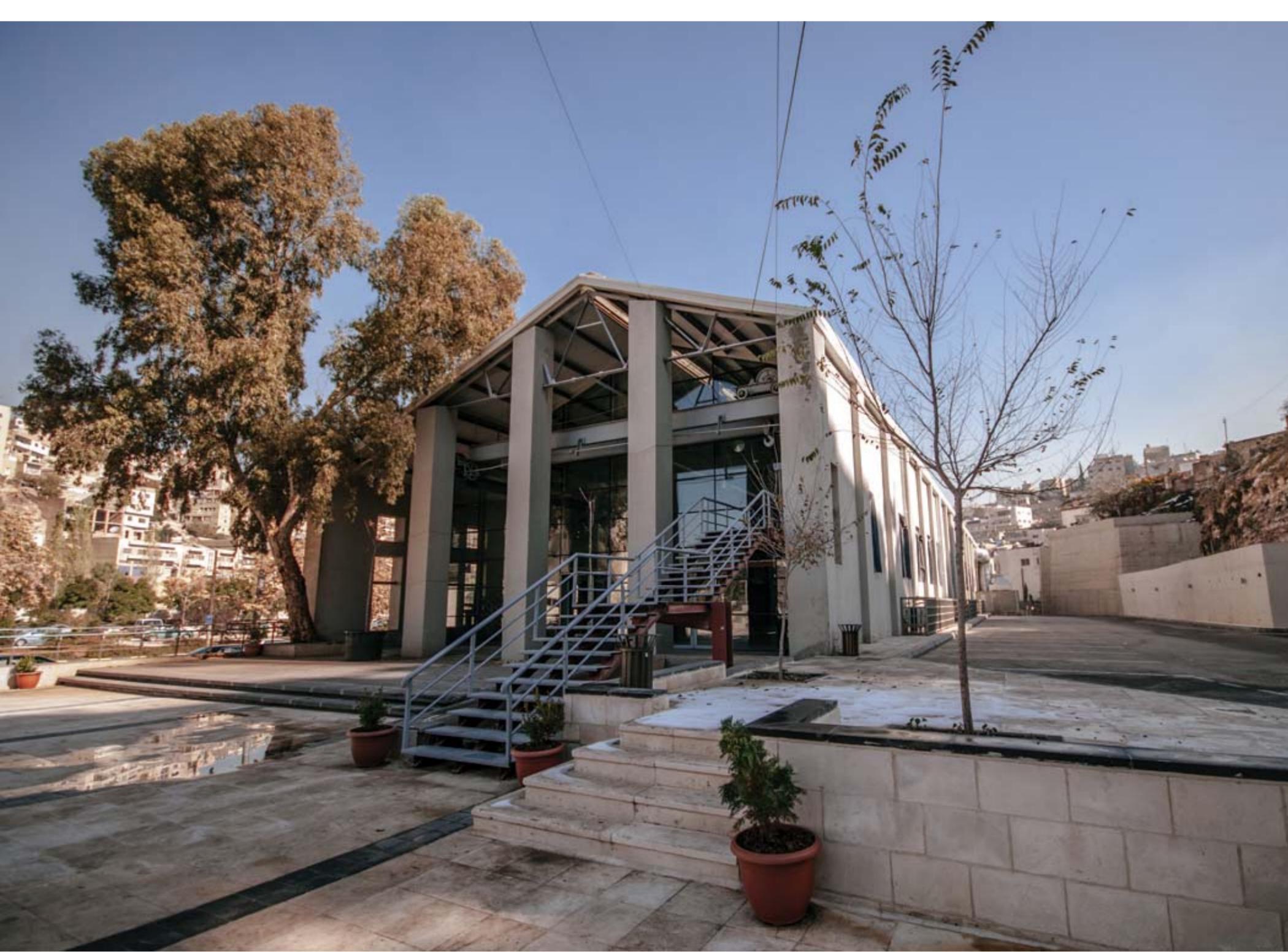
A 1930s electricity hangar in Amman is now generating excitement for the city's art crowd

King Faisal Street was the centre of a thriving yet small and humble downtown Amman in the late 1930s. The popular street attracted artists, intellectuals and residents alike, with its many cafés, political salons, hotels and cinemas – all lit by a nearby electricity hangar that generated power for the entire city and kept King Faisal Street alive at night. Amman's first electricity hangar stood in the Ras al Ain district, wedged in between the towering Jabal Amman and Jabal Al Natheef mountains, on what would later become the symbolic border in the city's east/west divide.



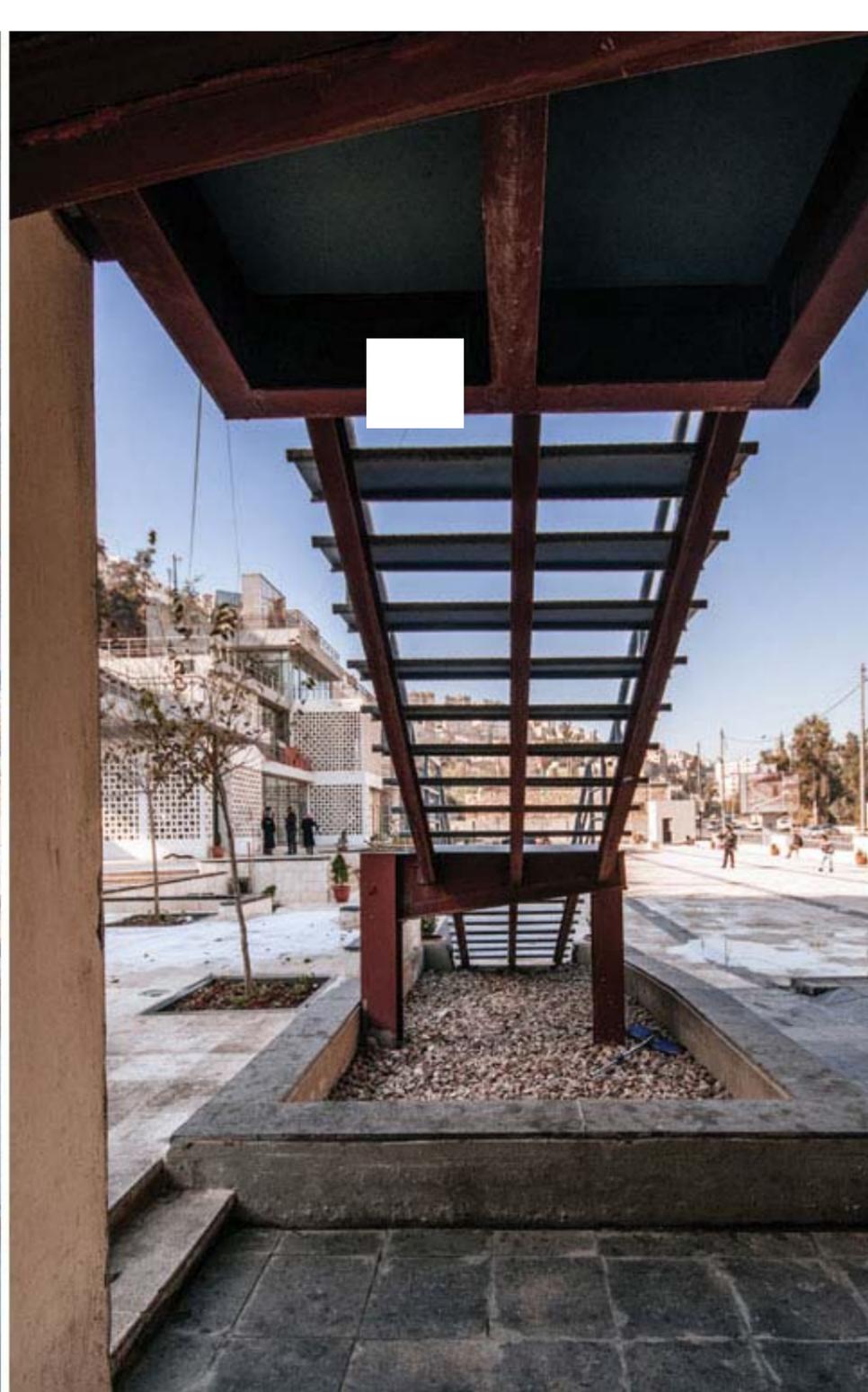
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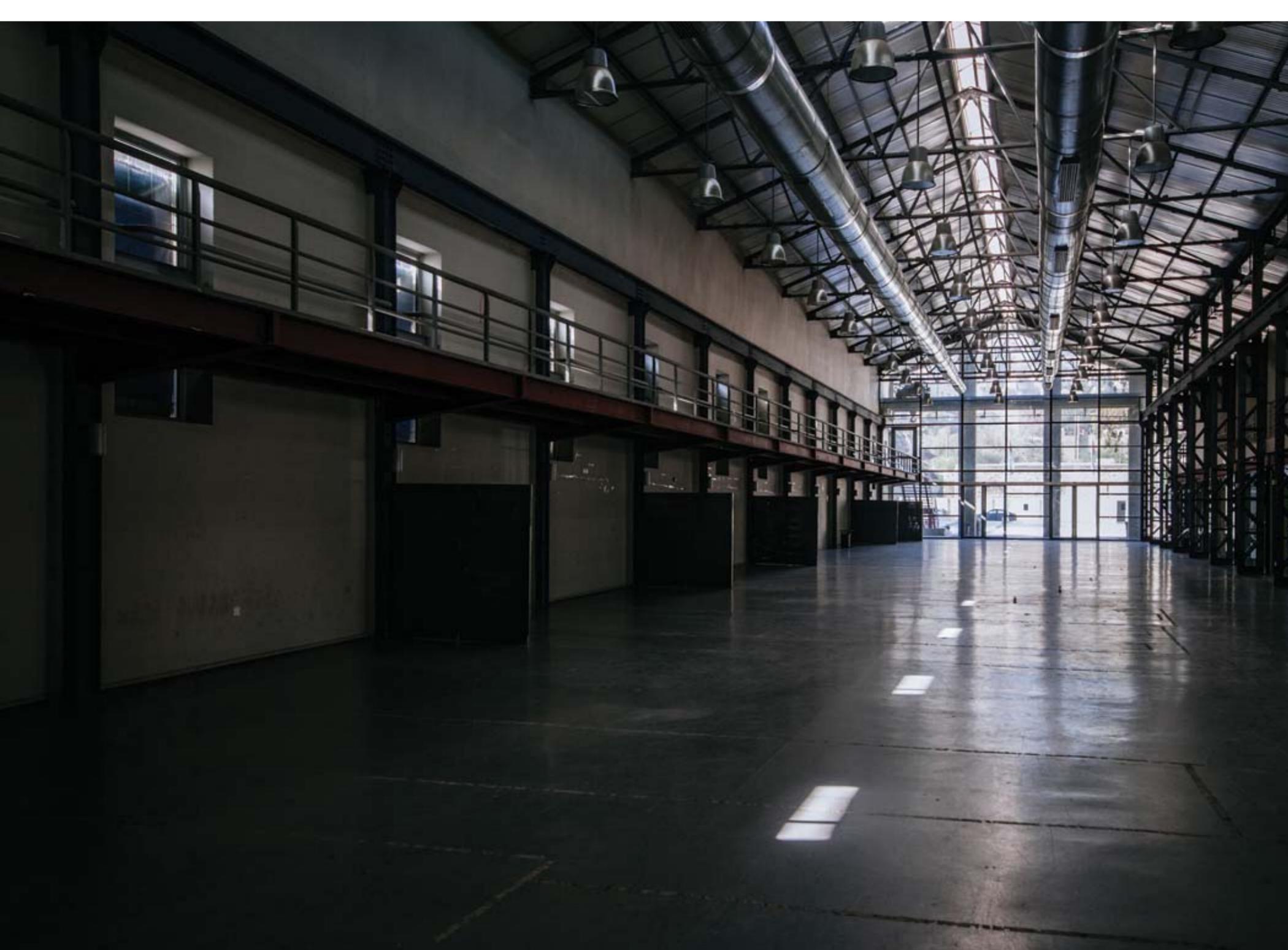


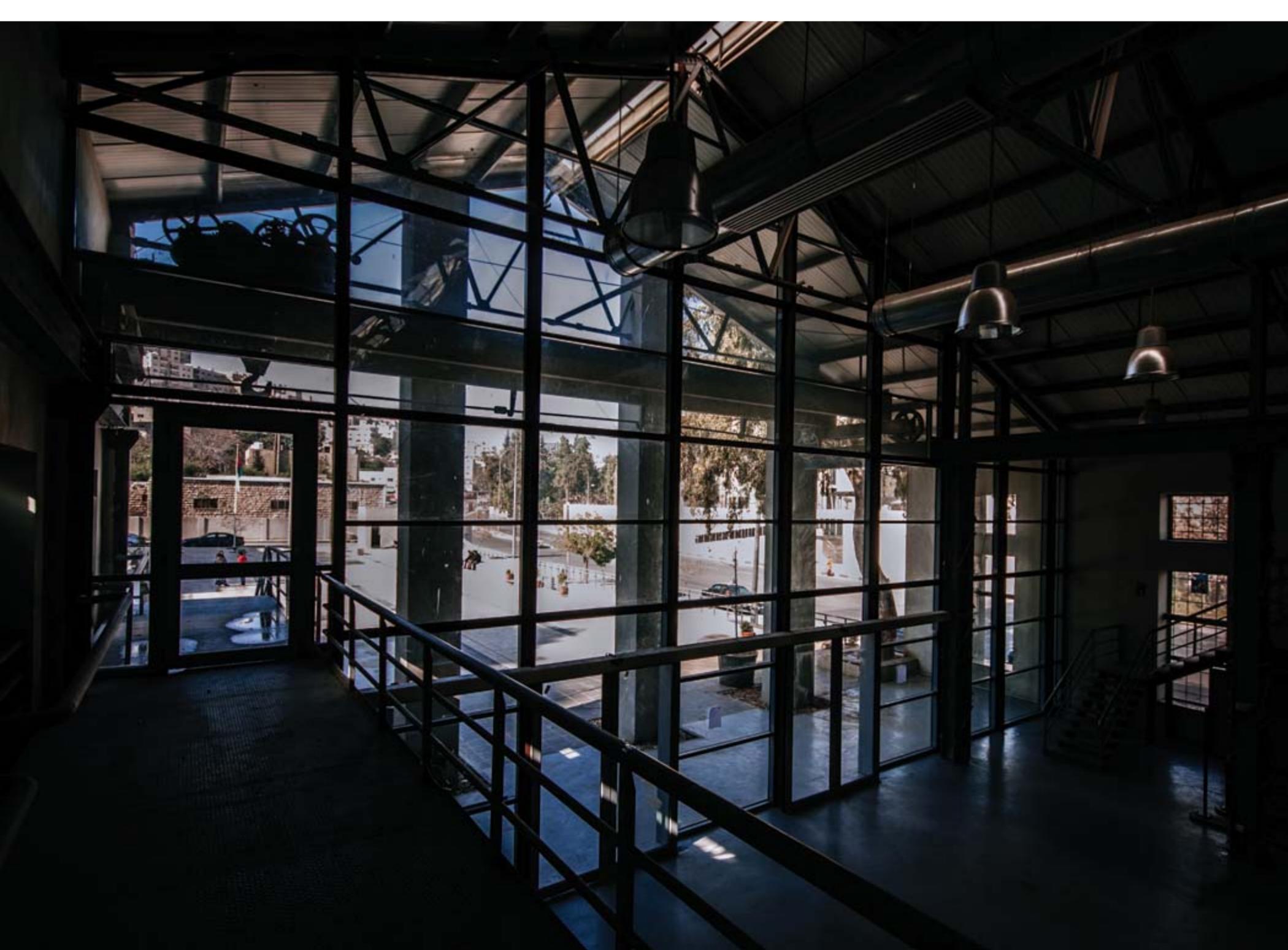


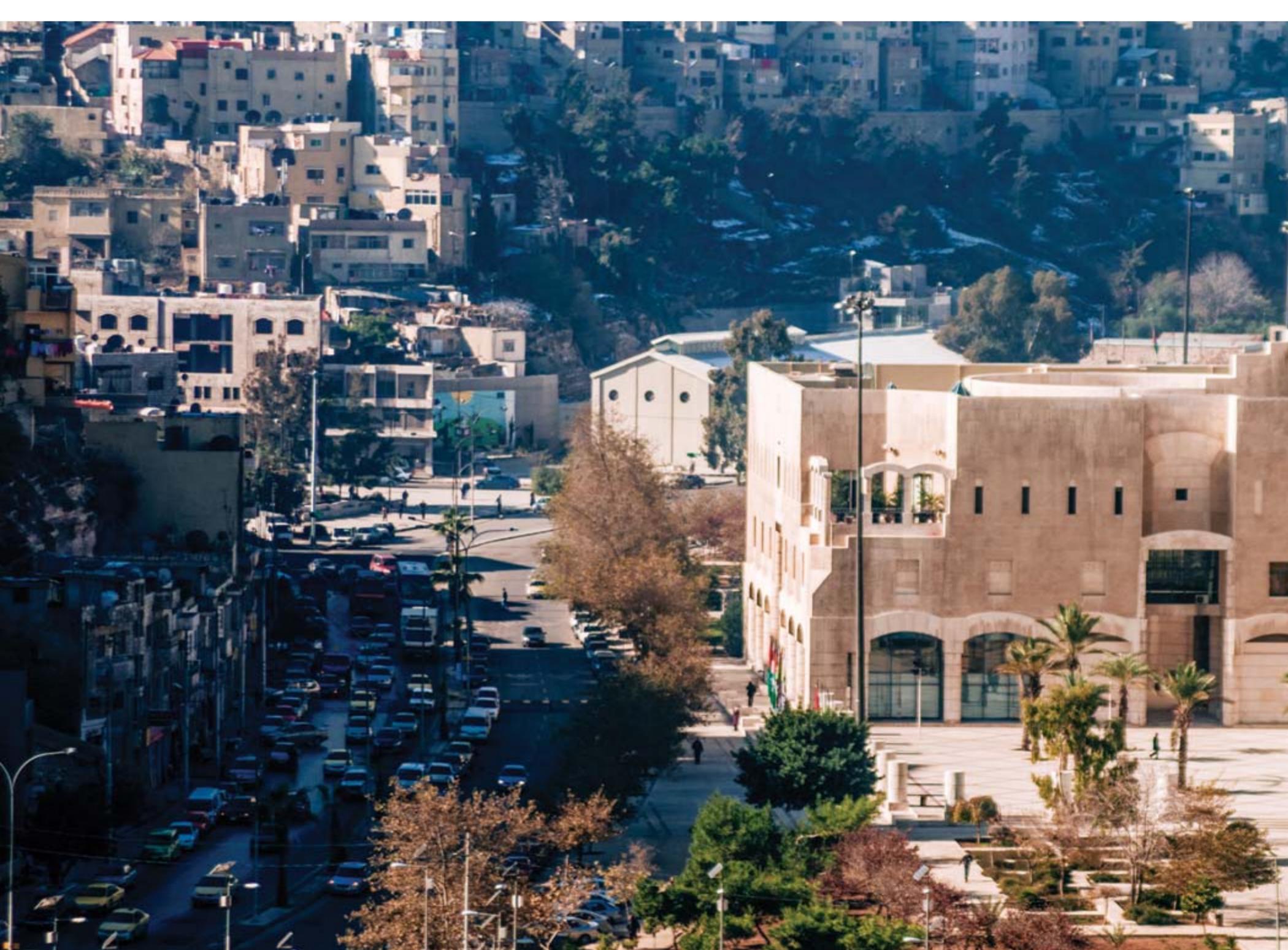














“The story of electricity is very important for Amman... It’s a story of how Amman became a modern city”

The rectangular-shaped structure made of steel and concrete stood out among Amman’s more conventional stone-façade buildings, resembling something more true to its function as a fixture in Amman’s story of industrialisation. By the late 1960s, new modes of generating electricity were introduced, rendering the electricity hangar obsolete. As the neighbouring downtown expanded, the electricity hangar remained abandoned and neglected, with the growing souks inching closer and closer, surrounding the once important building.

Today, decades later, the readapted Electricity Hangar houses diverse initiatives. From art exhibitions and musical performances to indoor markets and workshops, the high-ceilinged gable roofed building provides the perfect industrial space for the city’s many forms of artistic display or cultural engagement.

‘We use this place to present exhibits and activities from anywhere, about everything,’ says Eslam Beano, managing director of the Electricity Hangar and the adjacent newly-built Ras Al Ain Gallery. The multi-use space also utilises its central location to bridge together the prickly east/west Amman divide. Not only is the location’s proximity close to both residents, but the environment also fosters dialogue between artists from all over the city. ‘Whether it’s from the east or west, the place will accept it and give people access to it. Whether it’s small or big, we’ll give people from any walk of life the opportunity to see it,’ says Beano.

The idea to transform the Electricity Hangar into a multi-purpose space servable to



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the public was spearheaded by Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) in partnership with Jabal Amman Residents Association (JARA) and USAID, as part of a broader initiative to develop Amman as a cultural tourist destination. But as well as functioning as an open artists' space, the Electricity Hangar celebrates Amman's hidden history of industrialisation.

'I think that the story of electricity is very important for Amman,' says Dr. Rami Daher, the architect behind the re-adaptive Electricity Hangar and Ras Al Ain Gallery. 'It has never been talked about and it has never been celebrated. It's an ordinary story of everyday life. It's a story that is linked to industry. It's a story that is linked to philanthropy. It's a story of how Amman became a modern city.'

Before Amman's first electricity hangar, the city did not have a public source of electricity. Houses ran on individual generators and those that couldn't afford it, simply didn't have electricity. Jordan was then under the control of the British Mandate. The colonial power refused to subsidise electricity in Amman, out of fear that it would be used as resistance against them. A handful of Amman's wealthy families eventually came together to build a hangar, from which electricity could be distributed throughout the city.

'The late 1930s was the first time that electricity was running in the streets of Amman. For me, this is something very unique. It shows a different philanthropy and a different sense of belonging to one's city,' Daher explains about the building's significance. 'A lot of people accuse Amman of being a city that is not important compared to Damascus, Cairo and Istanbul. This particular building is a true testimonial to the fact that Amman went through the motions and Amman has its own temporal depth.'

Abandoned for decades and on the cusp of demolition, GAM purchased the building from the national electricity company in 2006 to preserve it as a heritage site. Initially, it was difficult to persuade GAM to recognise the hangar as a heritage site due to the industrial aesthetic and the lack of stone typical of traditional Jordanian architecture.

'When I looked at the I-beams and trusses,' says Daher, recalling his first impression of the hangar, 'I said, "Wow. Amman, this small dormant city of the 1930s was privileged to have such a magnificent structure at that time."' Daher, CEO of Turath Architecture & Urban Design Consultants, the design firm behind Amman's major urban revamps like Rainbow Street and Wakalat Street, began working on the project in 2007. After a year of conceptualisation and a year of construction, the Electricity Hangar opened in 2010.

Daher's design inspiration was rooted in his desire to retain the façade's original structural integrity in order to emphasise its historical relevance and preserve its link to the modernisation of that era. Documenting the history of the space was essential for Daher. He conducted research and interviewed former employees and others who were impacted by the building's presence in order to uncover the local story. 'In adaptive reuse, it's more difficult to actually decide how to interfere. So the issue is not to flex muscle and arms... but to make your intervention as minimal as possible and as suitable to the existing fabric,' he says.

Minimal additions such as contemporary lighting and exposed air conditioning and pipes were incorporated to complement the overall industrial feel. The openness of the interior and the cement flooring were retained to suit a public exhibition space. Other internal additions were made in rustic red to demark the changes from the pre-existing fabric. A large glass façade was added to the entrance to create a visible connection between the Electricity Hangar, its neighbouring Ras Al Ain Gallery and the main street.

With booking space filling up fast for 2014 and Souk Jara relocating to the Hangar during the winter season, what used to be a derelict building in Ras Al Ain is now a vibrant, readapted heritage site close by to the enduring King Faisal Street.