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*Exclusive interview:*

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The Rainbow Street Project  
Building on the Fault Line

مخطط عمان الشمولي يربك الاسعار  
المسوقون والاعلام الرقمي

# *The Rainbow Street* Urban Regeneration Project

Rami F. Daher

For some people, Amman is no more than a new city that offers a comfortable way of life. But for many, it represents a rich reservoir of personal and collective memories, where the social narrative 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, also for many, Amman is a place that suffers from a lack of urban identity – a place to which some residents of the city have a weak sense of belonging

Amman's urban heritage (with some iconic exceptions such as the Roman Amphitheatre) was kept outside the official national definition of national heritage which was grounded in a disassociation from the recent past and a constructed definition of Jordan. Nature sites such as Wadi Rum or the Steppe (Badiya) and archaeological sites that link the country to an imagined point of departure (Nabataean Site of Petra) were key "sites" of constructing a formal Jordanian identity. Urban realities such as those of Amman fell out of this formal definition of Jordan.

Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) is embarking on a milestone project centred on developing a Metropolitan Growth Master Plan for the City. The aspirations of this Master Plan is to achieve an efficient, inclusive and multicultural city, a destination city for investment and visitors, a city of heritage and the arts, a green, sustainable city, and a city for pedestrians. The Rainbow Street Urban Regeneration Project is but one of many projects that correspond with GAM's new vision for a city that not only celebrates and grants voice to its distinctive urban and social heritage and places, but also one that aspires to create more public spaces for its citizens is more pedestrian friendly.

#### Rainbow Street in Spatial and Temporal Contexts

Abu Baker Al Siddiq Street, also known as Rainbow Street in reference to Rainbow Cinema which was one of the first up-scale cinemas in Amman located outside the downtown area. As you walk down the street, you savour the real Amman through the kindness of the people, the rich layers of history, the very early Ammani dwellings of the 1920s and 30s, the elegant (yet not pretentious) houses and villas of the modern period in the 1940s 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, and the Ammani public places of sociability such as different coffee houses. Not only does the street narrate the story of Amman, but, before your very eyes, a tale of a nation unfolds. The street enjoys a central location between east and west Amman and is well connected to the downtown area (Wast Al Balad) through a magnificent web of specialty Ammani Steps of memory.

The 1960s and 70s witnessed the emergence of an active public sphere in Rainbow Street, where urban growth in the city was affected by the influx of Palestinians to Jordan after 1967, and the oil boom also boosted the

emergence of new urban centres (other than Downtown Amman) at the residential hills flanking the downtown of which Rainbow Street was a major one. By the early 1970s, book shops, cinemas, banks, and cultural centres were opened in Rainbow Street which took its name after Rainbow Cinema. In the late 1960s, Rainbow Street development was very similar to Hamra's in Beirut (which started a decade earlier), specially with its Rainbow Cinema, Diplomat Café (mimicking the different café trottoire), upper middle class fashionable stores (e.g., Red Shoe, My Baby), but still with a twist of residential mixed-used activities (this is probably the main difference between the two contexts).

In fact, this residential twist and the vibrant mix-used activity in the street (encompassing residential, commercial, cultural, religious, retail and several other functions) is a very distinctive Ammani urban character that the Project very much thrives to sustain and maintain. Furthermore, Rainbow has witnessed several significant periods of evolution in Ammani architecture, from traditional to mandate to modern – architectural examples that are testimony to a society attempting to fully embrace modernity with all its baggage and social agendas.

During the 1980s and parts of the 90s decade, Rainbow Street and the surrounding area lost part of its symbolic and economic value due to competition from newer developed areas in the city such as Umm Uthaina, Abdoun, and Sweifiyh. Nevertheless, for the past 10 years or so, Rainbow Street is witnessing a subtle yet significant comeback, becoming popular again with the thirty-something clientele offering a booming café culture, craft shops, bookshops, and has fortunately kept its mixed-use (residential/commercial) character. Also, once the area had regained importance, it started to attract the interest of multinational cooperation with huge investments that began buying properties (historic houses) within the area of the First Circle for future investments into boutique hotels and high-end apartments, restaurants, and other functions and itineraries.

Hence, currently different narratives and realities are emerging in Rainbow Street. The first narrative is represented by existing residents and small- and medium-sized investments and shops in which the area has become a favourite "site" for the 30 something crowd and for urban "consumers" who enjoy urban living with a twist of history in the form of café society, arts and crafts and a more creative and informal use of the urban space such as flea markets and cultural events. Jabal Amman Residents Association (JARA) is a local NGO that has been actively attempting to highlight and preserve the distinctive makeup of the neighbourhood, and has successfully launched several neighbourhood activities such as the

Various shots of rainbow,



JARA Street weekly flea market.

The second narrative operating in the area is represented by the various large-scale investors and their neo-liberal urban restructuring. Seeing a golden investment opportunity in the street, they started buying properties in the area more than five years ago.

The third narrative in play in the street and its environs are the initiatives of GAM – the new vision to address the specificity of the city and to grant voice to its distinctive and urban heritage from which the Rainbow Street Urban Regeneration Project is a major manifestation. Finally, there is the narrative of the consultant urban designers (TURATH) which were hired by GAM who considered the project a golden opportunity not only to grant voice to Amman's distinctive urban and cultural heritage; but also to an opportunity to contribute to the creation of public spaces (urban gardens, panoramic lookouts, steps, sidewalk, café terroire, other) in the city that had been accused of having too few public spaces and being one of the world's worst pedestrian experiences.

**Rainbow Street Urban Regeneration Project in Context**

Rainbow Street Urban Regeneration Project was initiated by GAM and was one of several initiatives undertaken to address the quality of urban spaces and the conservation of the Ammani urban heritage in the city. The area is one of Amman's oldest residential neighbourhoods and is blessed with a variety of architectural resources representing a testimonial to the evolution of architecture in the city. Furthermore, the area has a diverse mixed-use urban neighbourhood with corner shops, retail, cultural centres, residential, religious buildings, cinemas, libraries and research centres, literary cafes, ethnic and local restaurants, and special environmentally conscious institutions. One of the main Project objectives was to grant voice and qualify Amman's distinctive urban and social heritage represented by the quaint residential hills, topography and city steps, and the journey from its different mountains to the downtown area, Rainbow Street in particular and First Circle in general – the myriad of archetypical city steps, alleys and distinctive Ammani flavour represents a manifestation of this "uniqueness" that we call Amman.

The project's objectives were to create more public spaces that are more pedestrian friendly in the area while enhancing, protecting and complementing Amman's distinctive urban heritage. The aim was also to create and diversify the area's public spaces to be more inclusive with nature and to encourage an active public life, allowing, hopefully, a public sphere to emerge. The Project was based on a careful design of eight urban nodes along the street, each with an idiosyncratic

quality and emerging from existing realities and dynamics. The urban intervention was minimal in nature and concentrated mainly on the public domain as the Project did not for the most part interfere with private properties – an exception to this was one parcel of land that was appropriated to serve as a general panoramic deck (panoramic lookout), where the house underneath was restored and rehabilitated as headquarters for JARA.

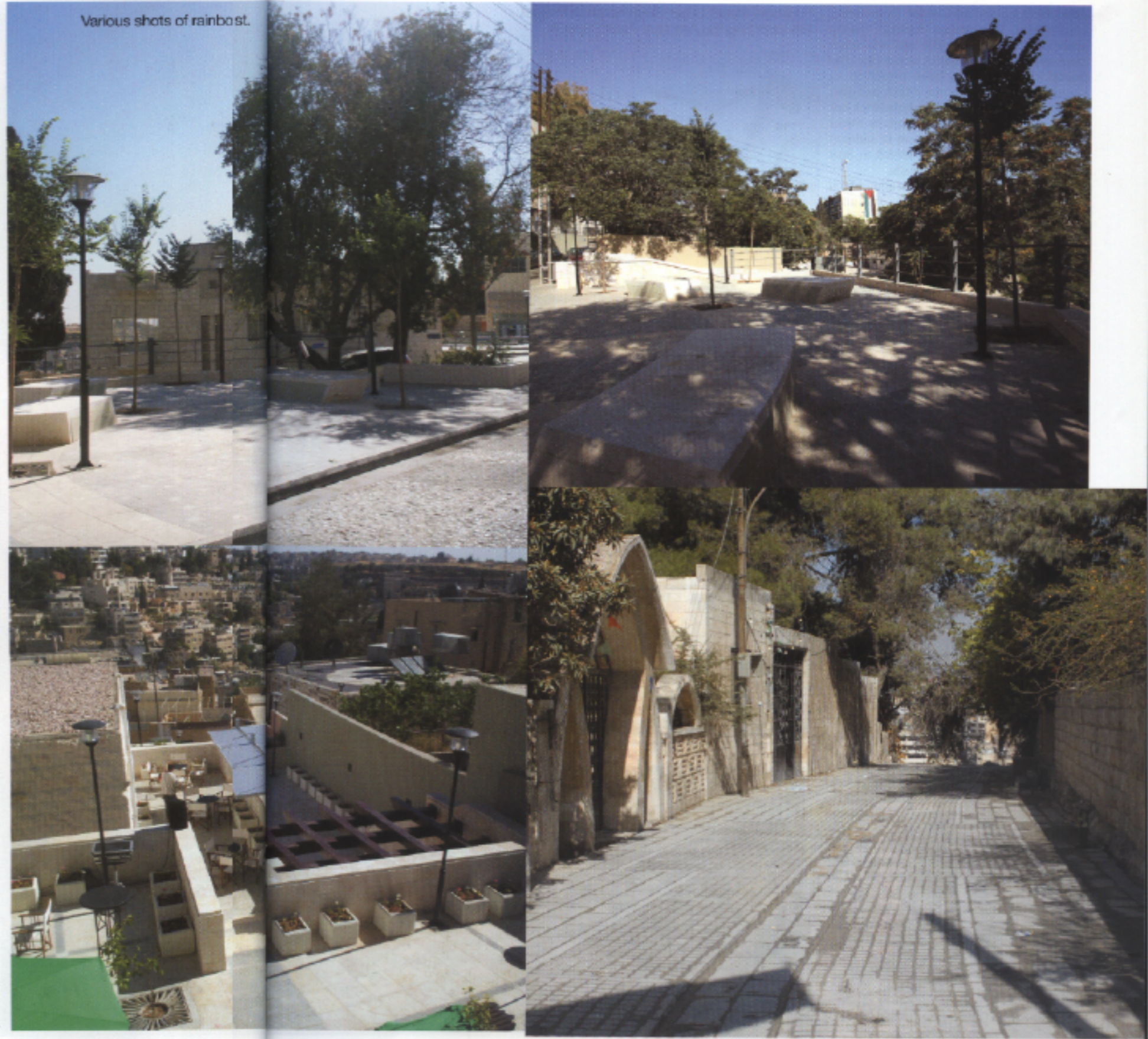
The following is a brief design description of the different urban nodes within the Street. A visitor to Rainbow Street starts with the First Circle Area Garden which serves as an introduction to branding the identity of Rainbow and is composed of different levels easily accessed from the side walk. The prism, an instrument for the materialisation and visualisation of rainbows, inspires the design and serves as a sculptural focal point for the lowest level of the garden. An inverted prism, acting as a water feature, is the main aspect of the second level, where seating and shade are accessible to the public. This new public garden, together with the existing Diplomat Restaurant and Café terroire adds significantly to the creation of more public spaces in the city.

The second urban node lies at the intersection of the street with Rainbow Cinema (a major cultural attraction that is being rehabilitated and conserved to serve as a main Cinematheque and cultural hub). At this "entertainment" urban node, Rainbow Cinema has been rehabilitated to its modernist art-deco style. The public space in front of "news café" is extended to the sidewalk with provision of more public seating, shaded devices. The corner of the cinema is celebrated with a bright red folly that accentuates the art-deco design and represents an interface with the public announcing films, plays and other cultural activities within.

The third node is located at Arwa Bint Al Hareth School where the school wall is exposed to celebrate and show more of the traditional Ammani early houses. At the opposite side more shaded outdoor seating is provided for the Jerusalem Falafel Cafe. The fourth node is nearby and represents another public garden (locally called "Sarvees"). The urban solution is simple and is based on creating a natural extension of the pavement into the garden which is divided into two main levels. Several of the existing significant features were preserved such as the steps that connect pedestrians to the lower street, stone parapet walls and the two sculptural trees at the corner.

Next to this small urban garden lies an interesting important urban node which is the main panoramic lookout located at mid-point between the First Circle and the end of Rainbow Street. This natural extension of the pavement creates an urban deck and a panoramic lookout with a unique view of

Various shots of rainboist.



**Local**

Jabal Weibdeh and the Citadel. Even during construction, this unique Ammani public space was very fashionable and was often frequented by many visitors to the city. The house underneath has been preserved to serve as a headquarters for JARA and also enjoys a quaint garden. The whole block has been adapted and connects Rainbow Street with Asfour Street below where in addition to JARA, the space will be rented to host second-hand bookshops and stalls. Further down, lies the significant alley which leads to distinctive Ammani steps. This alley (which is used by JARA as a flea market on Fridays) had been restored and basalt tiling had been provided. At the end of Rainbow Street, the project proposes a parking ramp and a terraced café (to be named Khirfan Street Café), but this part of the Project was not executed this year, though it will hopefully be implemented next year. The purpose of the parking ramp (which is hardly visible from Rainbow Street) is to help solve the problem of parking in the area. The project also included several non-physical interventions such as coming up with guidelines for commercial signs and awnings, designation of different historic buildings, spaces and vistas in the area, and coming up with a traffic solution for the street where it becomes mostly one way. Finally, and for the first time in Amman, the pedestrian or the flaneur in the city can enjoy walking on a continuous pavement that works with no pumps or high curb stones, and yet can also enjoy a distinctive urban experience with gardens, corner seating, panoramic lookouts and cafes.

**CLOSURE**

It is true that this project was concerned mainly with the public domain and did not cause major intervention in the area. But, literally this was the very purpose – the main objective was not so much to build new and inflict major changes to the area as much as it was to complement this distinctive Ammani character. With the absence of sufficient “state institutions” regarding public place projects in most cities of the Arab world, this significant urban initiative by GAM is considered a major landmark and demonstrational project not only for Amman, but for other cities in the region as well. One of the Project’s main objectives was to create a place that is more inclusive and to encourage an active public life with, hopefully, a public sphere emerging. The project delivered to the local community of the area an enjoyable pedestrian promenade along a 1.5 km stretch of the Rainbow Street with designed urban furniture, panoramic lookouts, urban decks and cultural landscapes that will be used and enjoyed by all Ammanis of different background and by visitors to this city that we all hold dearly: Amman. ■

**Rainbow Street Urban Regeneration Project  
Re-Inventing the Ammani Public Space**

