

Urban Rehabilitation in the Midst of Agencies, Actors, and Activists

Amman: The Unconventional Urban Heritage Tourism Destination

Rami Farouk Daher

First, the paper presents Amman's genealogy and urban heritage as "heritage in between" discursive practices (official, academic, and geopolitical) in an attempt to explain and explicate why the urban heritage of the City was understudied and marginalized. This section of the research also attempts to understand the details of the late re-discovery of that heritage and the City's specificity which only occurred recently through several phenomena of which was urban rehabilitation.

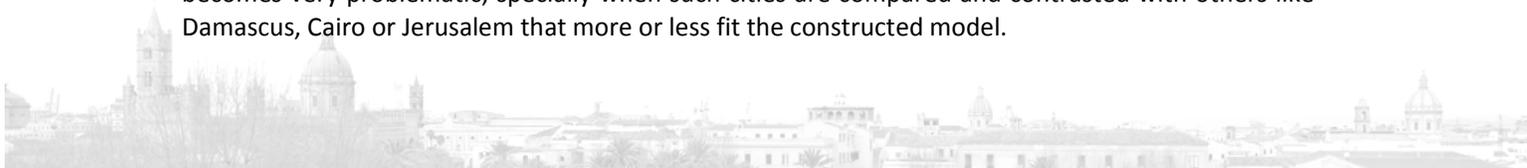
Amman: The City (in) Between Discursive Practices: Official/State & Orientalist/Academic

In attempting to answer the previous question; I thrive to understand why Amman's urban beginnings and past existed as a marginalized reality that has not been celebrated and recognized by formal State practices (definition of urban heritage, tourism, other) and was even excluded from the Orientalist/academic definitions of Islamic and Arab Cities of the Region (Daher, 2008).

As a post colonial reality, the heritage of the recent past (manifested by its rural, urban traditions) was marginalized by official state discourses that attempted to disassociate from the recent Ottoman past and local realities and instead to construct legitimacy for the different new emerging state systems by constructing links with distant origins (e.g., Phoenician in Egypt, Nabatean in Jordan, Phoenician in Lebanon). Maffi (2000, 7) highlights one example that explicates the Jordanian/Hashemite fascination and obsession with ancient Nabatean civilizations that operated in a geographic territory similar to today's Modern Jordan.

Amman's urban heritage in particular and the City as a totality in general (with some iconic exceptions such as the Roman Theatre or the Citadel) were kept outside the official national definition of national heritage which was grounded in a disassociation from the recent past and a constructed definition of what Jordan is. 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 that of Amman fell out of this formal definition of what Jordan is. Kassay (2006) had elaborated how official Jordanian identity is antithetical to Amman and to its urban realities and how instead "tribalization" dominated national Jordanian identity.

In addition, the urban heritage of Amman dating to the first half of the 20th century was discredited by Orientalist/academic discourses and practices that disqualified it and rendered it as 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. Such stereotypical and typological images work to discredit a certain reality that does not fit such criteria and models. Consequently, the application of such models on a more controversial city like Amman (which is understudied in the first place in comparison to other cities that more or less fit the stereotypical model), a city of a more recent origin grounded in multi-racial points of origins in the 19th century, becomes very problematic; specially when such cities are compared and contrasted with others like Damascus, Cairo or Jerusalem that more or less fit the constructed model.





Many years later after colonization was over, during the nation state period; it is ironic that the same Orientalists and colonial discourses perpetuate (Daher, 2007a). One only has to look at any tourism brochure or poster, or watch any promotional video that defines and promotes each of the countries within the *ancient Levant* to find out that practices of governments in the region through their ministries of tourism work to define the region mainly through its classical traditions marginalizing local regional realities of the recent past in particular. One example is Jordan Tourism Board's brochures where sites like *Petra* and *Jerash* are still the highlights of any tourism plan coming to Jordan; very little attention and only recently is directed to promoting Jordan's more recent heritage realities such as agricultural villages in the north, the vernacular, and urban and social heritage of various Jordanian towns such as *Salt* or *Amman*. Publications of the Jordan Tourism Board such as the *Map of Jordan* (JTB 1998), or the *Visitors' Guide: Welcome to Jordan* (JTB 2000) highlight primarily Jordan antiquities sites (such as *Petra*, *Jerash*, *Byzantine Churches of Madaba*, the *Umayyad Desert Castles*) and Jordan significant nature attractions (such as *Wadi Rum* and *Dana* nature reserves, *The Gulf of Aqaba*, and the *Dead Sea*). This perpetuation of Orientalist discourses still continues in the practices of even most recent museum designs in Amman. It is only surprising that after all of these years, and in 2009, still, the newly established Jordan Museum uses an emblem on its windows that depicts *Petra* and *Jerash*, one only wonders as to when will Amman and other cities in Jordan be the focus of such endeavors.

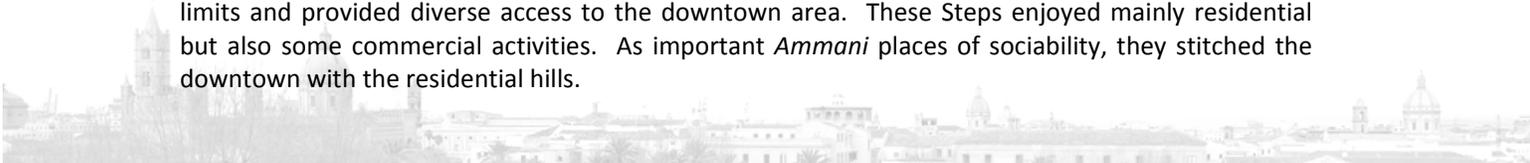
Amman: The City of Many Hats

Amman received through the years several waves of voluntary and compulsory migrations. Amman was conceived as a place that offered the new comers a new golden opportunity for resettlement, work, and progress. Amman constituted, literally, the City of new opportunities in the region. Some came as merchants, others as rebels fleeing occupation, others as administrative staff to work and be enrolled in this new system (Emirate of East Jordan), others came as refugees (such as the Palestinian refugees after the 1948 and 1967 wars and after the occupation of Palestine). They all saw in Amman a safe haven for settlement and resettlement.

This multi-layered beginning also granted Amman a special character where it emerged as a beacon of tolerance and peaceful co-existence between groups of different religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. A common scene in downtown Amman's *Faisal* Street during the 1930s would be diverse men with different head covers (e.g., The Circassian *Kalbaq*, the Lebanese & Syrian *Tarbooush*, the Palestinian and Jordanian *Hatta* or *Kofiah*) climbing Amman's steps to get to the residences on the slopes of the 7 mountains flanking the downtown.

Social Mixity and a more Inclusive Urbanity: A Distinctive Ammani Urban Heritage Understanding Amman's Specificity and Unique Spatiality

A distinctive *Ammani* modernity narrative was the proliferation of a more inclusive urban setting towards the middle of the 20th century. *Jabal al Weibdeh* is where different families of various religious and social backgrounds and ethnic origins lived next to each other and formulated social relationships. Furthermore, the urban setting and fabric facilitated the accommodating of various types of residences in terms of social status and affordability. Even the *Ammani* more elaborate houses had a certain economy, simplicity, and humility associated with them. This created a more inclusive urban environment in the City. The heart of the City was *Faisal Plaza (Sahet Faisal)*. The steps of Amman were the earlier communal urban spaces in the City, they defined neighborhood limits and provided diverse access to the downtown area. These Steps enjoyed mainly residential but also some commercial activities. As important *Ammani* places of sociability, they stitched the downtown with the residential hills.



Unfortunately, the multi-layered beginnings of the City had not been fully, or even partially, narrated yet. The City is definitely under studied and there is a crucial need for more critical analysis of its diverse and more intriguing evolution. Furthermore, the inherent and distinctive qualities of Amman's urban heritage have only been recently explored and incorporated into formal state projects of nation building and public space provision. Amman's distinctive urban realities are present in places like the Hawoos in the residential hills, the urban experience of Faisal Street, the Central Hallway (3-Bay System) Ammani detached single family dwelling 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, or the Ammani public places of sociability such as different coffee houses. One needs to understand Amman and its urban and social heritage. It is different than any other in the region in the way that it is grand yet understated; elegant, yet unpretentious; efficient & economic yet graceful; and memorable; yet non-monumental.

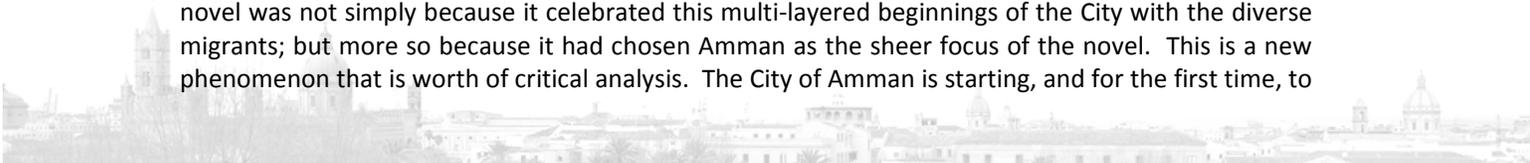
Second, the research attempts to discursively understand this new phenomenon of coming back to the City's historic urban quarters, the popularity of urban tourism and urban rehabilitation endeavors (e.g., novels on the City, urban regeneration projects in historic neighborhoods, emergence of neighborhood associations, emergence of urban tourist trails and maps, studies and research monograph on the City's urban heritage, activists involvement in their City, other).

An Appeal to the "urban creative class"

In the midst of major urban restructuring projects leading to a more exclusive urbanity in the City such as gated residential communities and exclusive office towers, arises diverse alternative endeavors championed by creative agents and actors such as urban designers and architects, local community groups, urban activists, philanthropists with a genuine social agenda, or even private investors with a different vision or approach that attempt to counteract such neoliberal urban policies and thrive to create instead a more inclusive urban landscapes in the city. More recently, urbanism research and literature addressed the rise of the creative class in cities that focuses on diversity and creativity as basic drivers of innovations and regional and national growth. The urban creative class includes architects, scientists, engineers, university professors, philosophers, artists, and novelists to mention a few (Florida, 2003). Amman is a place in the region where one notices the rise of a creative urban class who are trying to make a difference in a socially, economically, and spatially divided city.

Qualifying Amman: The City of Many Hats

In a more recent novel on Amman entitled "Shahbandar" by Gahraibeh (2003, 51, 120) he stated how the essence of the City centers on the fact that it protects people coming to the City from different locations, it is a City that delivers justice to strangers no matter from where they migrated from, Gahraibeh (2003, 161) goes on to sketching the urban scene in Amman in the early 1920s by describing how the residents of the City are enjoying a continuous celebration of various costumes and head covers, costumes from the east or the west are mixed with Syrian and Lebanese Tarabeesh and Circassian Kalbaks, Iraqi Faisaleiahs, and traditional Arabian head covers not to mention Western hats and suits with beautiful vests and vibrant designs. I strongly believe that the significance of this novel was not simply because it celebrated this multi-layered beginnings of the City with the diverse migrants; but more so because it had chosen Amman as the sheer focus of the novel. This is a new phenomenon that is worth of critical analysis. The City of Amman is starting, and for the first time, to





be the focus of inquiry of Jordanian writers and novelists. Are we finally witnessing a major shift and transformation in this crisis of identity?

This is too large of a question to be answered solely based on the publication of a series of novels where the City of Amman is the main objective; even through this phenomenon 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 residents in Amman, are gradually witnessing the emergence of a specific generation/class of *Ammanis* (and this class is growing in numbers) that is very much interested in the specific characteristics of the City and is, even, a bit nostalgic where the object of this nostalgia is the City of Amman with its downtown, residential hills and various steps that connect them together; but also this class is nostalgic about Amman's urban and social history and its multi-layered beginnings.

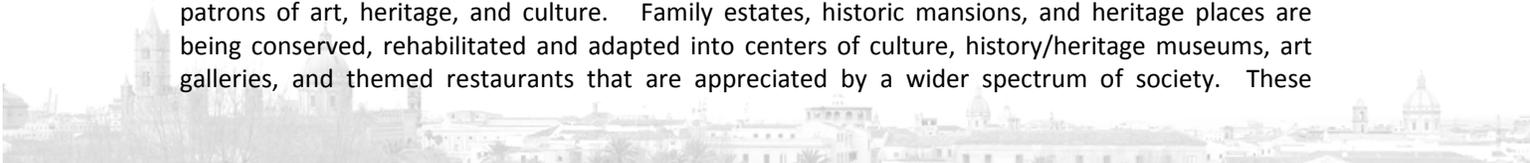
One cannot help but notice that a lot of *Ammanis* of different backgrounds have started to develop an interest in its historic neighborhoods such as the downtown area (*Wast al Balad*), and other neighborhoods such as older parts of *Jabal Amman*, *Jabal al Weibdeh* and *Jabal al Ashrafieh*. This is manifested in a come back of families who had left earlier, but is also manifested in the proliferation of different studies and monographs about these urban *Ammani* spaces in addition to the forming of new residents associations. Amman is witnessing the emergence of several historic urban adaptations into art galleries, community places, and film production centers (e.g., *Darat al Funun* funded by the *Khaled Shouman* Foundation, *Makan* (an alternative space for artists and activists), *Dar al Anda*, the Royal Film Commission, *Masrah al Balad* (a creative urban adaptation of an old derelict *Ammani* cinema into a public theatre), and several more). Furthermore, a lot of cultural bodies and organizations (e.g., *Makan*, *Dar al Anda*, *Association of Jordanian Writers*, *Center for the Study of the Built Environment*, Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature), are favoring to be located in such 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 and specificity and is becoming the focus of many of these urban rehabilitation and cultural endeavors.

Third, the paper also attempts to identify in more details these actors and agents behind such endeavors and to understand their different discourses and levels of attachment and engagement in the City within and beyond the 3 phenomena discussed earlier. These actors and agents include the creative urban class, urban activists, tourism entrepreneurs, the State represented by the Greater Amman Municipality, NGOs, families, foundations, university students, and other actors and agents. One of the main objectives of this research is to understand the nature and dynamics of the various types of publics, actors, and stakeholders involved in the re-invention, production, and consumption of urban heritage & tourism and their links to issues of identity construction, and community development.

Local Attempts for an Alternative Urban Vision: Actors, Agents, and Urban Activists

The following is a detailed description of the level and dynamics of civil society engagement in the City, its cultural heritage, its urban rehabilitation project and realities:

Families: Whether it is *Shouman*, *Abu Jaber* or *Bisharat* many of *Amman's* notable families and cultural and political elites are re-emerging and reintroducing themselves on the public scene as patrons of art, heritage, and culture. Family estates, historic mansions, and heritage places are being conserved, rehabilitated and adapted into centers of culture, history/heritage museums, art galleries, and themed restaurants that are appreciated by a wider spectrum of society. These



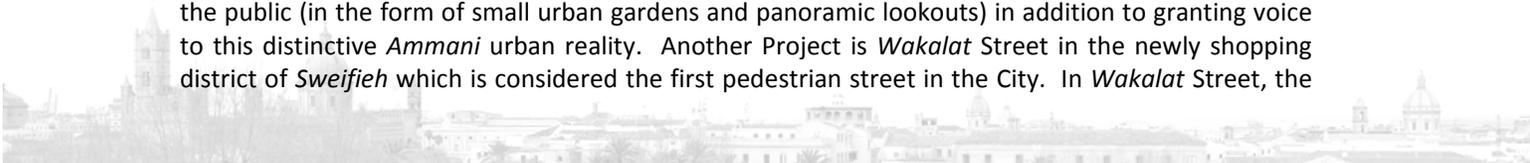


heritage patrons are reclaiming their position in different places in the City and in other places in Jordan through the appropriation of heritage and through an appeal to culture, art, and the intelligentsia. The *Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation*, established by the Arab Bank in Jordan, is another example of family/corporate philanthropy in the region that supported the change and transformation in contemporary Arab cultural discourse. The *Shoman Foundation*, and through its different cultural activities such as the *Shoman Forum* (a series of public lectures by local Arab social critics and critical thinkers) provided a different alternate voice for the sake of dialogue in a time of crises. The Khalid Shoman Foundation had been extensively involved in the conservation and protection of the architectural heritage of the City of Amman through the *Darat al Funun* Project: an old deserted house/complex built on ancient ruins and converted into a nexus of art and culture accessible to all groups of society and serving the Jordanian public. In 1993, the complex was adapted in a way that allowed a panoply of cultural events and historical layers (ancient Roman, Byzantine, and early 20th century Amman) to coexist. The Project had attempted to connect with the community both physically, through its architecture and overall layout within the neighborhood, and spiritually, through its transparency and accessibility.

Another example is the adaptive reuse of the Abu Jaber House in *Salt* into a local history museum. The objective is enabling memory and qualifying disguised and subjugated knowledge through concentrating on the “social urban” history of Salt in the 19th and 20th centuries. This era is almost never represented in Jordanian museums (which predominantly narrate the official discourse of the State). Critics argued that the Historic House Museum of Abu Jaber Represents a new Museographic, and perhaps even, Ideological trend in the Production of Heritage (in museum design) in Jordan and in the Region.

These family-patroned heritage projects work to, first redefine heritage by concentrating on marginalized local and regional realities that had been previously subjugated and disguised by the formal state discourse on heritage and history. Second, these project tend to concentrate on issues related to everyday life such as soap production, silk, commerce, madafas (architecture of hospitality), and urban social history. These projects present a completely new experience of the region for tourists and support the diversification of the tourism product facilitating the development of cultural tourism. Furthermore, and most important of all, these local family heritage projects produce an important opportunity and a new accessibility for the re-reading of history and memory of the recent past in *the region*.

GAM: 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. Recently GAM had initiated several urban projects addressing urban regeneration in locations such as Rainbow Street in historic *Jabal Amman*, *Jabal al Ashrafiah* near *Darweesh* Mosque, and in the downtown area in *Faisal* Street. GAM is also currently involved in putting forward to new vision where heritage protection and provision of more green spaces and open spaces for Ammani residents are a top priority. Amman, increasingly, is paying attention to its social and cultural needs, Amman is gradually becoming an attractive place to live; improved pedestrianization, increased green space, and multi-use districts have been most recently adopted by Greater Amman Municipality (GAM). One of these projects is the Urban Regeneration of Rainbow Street located in a historic section of the City which is 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 granting voice to this distinctive *Ammani* urban reality. Another Project is *Wakalat* Street in the newly shopping district of *Sweifieh* which is considered the first pedestrian street in the City. In *Wakalat* Street, the





main design objective was to produce the "Anti Mall Space" by creating a "Workable Street" and a recreational promenade that encourages pedestrian life in Amman. The objective was to create a street that is inclusive, welcoming people from different parts of Amman and at the same time, creating a vibrant urban space that wins back public life from shopping malls to the "real" Streets of the City.

Novelists: one important phenomenon is the proliferation since the early 1990s of novels on Amman by Jordanian authors such as novels by *Ziad Qasem*, *Hisham Gharaibeh*, *Ilyas Farkouh*, *Abdelrahman Munif*, and *Sameeha Khrais*. According to Razzaz (1996, 357), Jordanian writers are only recently starting to acknowledge Amman as the topic of their novels. Before the early 1990s, the places where the different events of Jordanian novels materialized took place in either mythical spaces or in a generic Arab-Islamic town, or even in cities with no specific identity at all.

Activists: In addition, the City is also witnessing the emergence of several urban activist groups who thrive to address the gap between east and west Amman (West being the most affluent) such as *Hamzet Wasel* which is a diverse community of *Ammanis* engaged in social activism, public space building, and authentic relationship building across the city. *Hamzet Wasel* works with individuals and communities to design and participate in activities and programs that tackle the city's complex challenges and explore its unique opportunities. Other urban activists (e.g., anthropologist *Ahmad Abu Khalil*) who is the Chief Editor of *Mastour*, a local magazine that addresses the conditions of the poor in the City and researches how they are affected by current neoliberal urban transformations and masterplanning in Amman.

Philanthropists and Foundations: Amman is witnessing the emergence of several local foundations dedicated to culture where the urban heritage of the City is the place of negotiation and pre-occupation. One example that comes to mind is the *Ali al Jabiri Foundation* which had adapted one of Amman's early houses into a place exhibiting the works of the late renowned artist Ali al Jabiri. Amman also enjoys individual philanthropists concerned with the cultural heritage of the City. One remembers *Mamdouh Bsharat* who had recently saved one of Amman's oldest buildings in *Faisal* Street and had opened it as an open *Diwan* for all visitors to the City.

Research Centers: Amman is also witnessing the emergence of several urban research centers and architectural offices (e.g., Center for the Study of the Built Environment (CSBE), or *Metropolis: Cities Research Council*, which is the research arm of *TURATH: Architecture and Urban Design Consultants*) where both attempt to engage in research that is more integrated into urban life. *CSBE*, for example, were involved in several research projects on public space, architecture, xeroscaping, and the development of a critical discourse on the City. *TURATH/Metropolis* worked on several projects that thrived to grant voice to the City such as *Narrating Amman* Exhibition, a comprehensive Study on the identification, management, and protection of the City's architectural and urban heritage, public space design (e.g., Urban rehabilitation at Fairal Street), and a project to promote urban tourism in the City through experiential travel through which different thematic itineraries (e.g., architecture & social history, archaeology, arts and crafts, contemporary art) were developed. This Project in particular thrives to promoting Amman as a entrepreneurial destination (putting Amman on the Tourist Map of Jordan) through the advocating of Amman's Urban Heritage and incorporating it into the Jordanian Tourism Market.

NGO's: Several old and emerging NGO's are contributing to the protection of the natural and cultural heritage of the City such as the *Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature* who usually are involved



in nature conservation & management in and around nature reserves all over Jordan; but had started recently to be involved in the interpretation and presentation of Amman's urban heritage.

Neighborhood Associations: One significant new phenomenon emerging in the City as well is the emergence of neighborhood associations such as JARA (*Jabal Amman Residents Association*) and Friends of *Jabal Al Weibdeh* Association who attempt to improve the urban quality of life in their respective neighborhoods and create a stronger sense of belonging to the City.

Academics and Students: For example, it is important to mention design studios focusing on urban rehabilitation in the City such as: *Engaging Urbanism: Appropriating Public Space in the Age of Ephemerality: "the Amman experiment"* during which students were involved in identifying certain areas (e.g., marginalized space, steps, traffic/pedestrian intersection, neglected public space or area, derelict building (or parts of), interstices between buildings, other) with problems or in need of different levels of interventions within their city Amman. These are places that were generally abandoned by the global capital. And also other projects on the City of Amman such as: *Downtown Adaptations (Architecture as Palimpsest: "the Amman experience")* which addresses the adaptation of derelict buildings in the historic core.

The Map on Screen illustrates spatially the distribution of the efforts of these agencies, actors, and activists on the City.

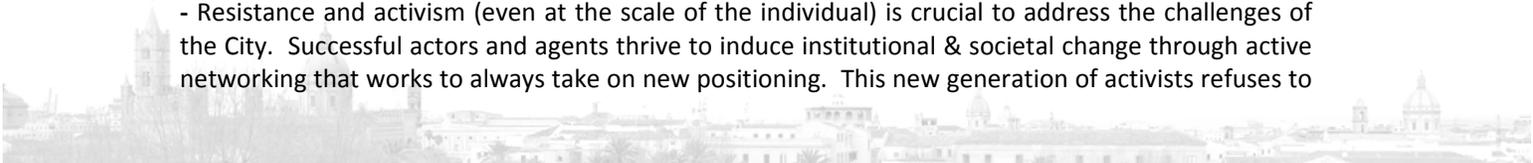
Critical Observations:

- The end of the concept of PUBLIC, and instead the significant role of agents and actors especially with the absence of national place/heritage projects during this neoliberal moment we are all part of. This generates different city imaginaries and various possibilities for the meaning of "public interest". Furthermore, and based on the possibilities of multiple public interests; research conducted about these different actors and agents and beyond helped to understand why and how these diverse "publics", as social, spatial, and ideological realities and entities, are formed and emerged out of discursive practices and how they continue to transform vis-à-vis national, global, and local interconnections and transformations. Contrary to Habermas's concept of public sphere that is unifying and monolithic; this research, develops an understanding of emerging actors and agents that could be intersecting, fragmentary, ephemeral, and or disconnected with different concerns & operating mechanisms. **Yet, one strongly notices that the urban heritage of the City, together with its neighborhoods realities & challenges, and urban and social history are becoming the terrain through which these actors and agents are maneuvering.**

- The demand of a different level of engagement on the City and its urban heritage, and urban tourism promotion especially in a time of extreme challenges of neoliberal urban restructuring which leads to more exclusive projects in the City. Here, the urban and cultural heritage of the City becomes a crucial space/concept of engagement with the City and forms a critical alternative leading to a more inclusive urban vision.

- While Corporate organizations and the transnational capitalist class describe the City as an abstract space and critique the City for its failure to provide urban infrastructure in order to support their large-scale investments; urban activists on the other hand view the City as a heterogeneous reality where different publics and counter publics dwell and civic culture and society operate. They critique the failure of the City (through its organizing bodies) to provide social equity and social services, and to identify and recognize marginalized realities and groups.

- Resistance and activism (even at the scale of the individual) is crucial to address the challenges of the City. Successful actors and agents thrive to induce institutional & societal change through active networking that works to always take on new positioning. This new generation of activists refuses to





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create unbreakable relationships of dependency with the local communities, and pragmatically recognizes the fact that margin lines in a heterogeneous society will always exist.

Conclusion: The City in the Age of Disengagement

Whenever we think we can reconcile with this reality that is Amman, sudden shifts always occur. Amman underwent recently, and during the past 2 decades, major urban restructuring and transformations in the form of exclusive business towers and high-end gated residential communities creating more challenges to achieving a more inclusive and socially-equitable City. This demands the emergence of a different level of engagement within the City. The emergence of the creative urban class in the City and proliferation of the engagement of diverse groups of civil society, actors, and agents are extremely crucial to counteract current challenges and threats. The challenge today is how will *Ammani's* cope with the increasing number of spaces of exclusion in the City? How will a City that was famous for its inclusive urbanity, healthy social mixed urban environment, and a down-to-earth; humble, and yet equally unique and distinctive urban heritage cope with the rise of isolated urban patches and territories of exclusiveness in the form of gates communities, office towers, shopping malls to mention a few? The 21 Century presents a major challenge for Amman where as a response achieving social equity should be the priority of its citizens and management bodies and where urban rehabilitation could be one of the means to achieving such an objective.

Several urban activists are emerging in Amman. Some are resisting such major neoliberal urban restructuring in the City; and others are attempting to resist the proliferation of a more consumer society; while others are attempting to grant voice to Amman and to celebrate the City at different levels. I have always been a believer in the power of individuals making a difference. Many of Amman's citizens and creative urban class are genuinely trying to make a difference either by researching the City which had been understudied for so long; or by granting voice to its multilayered beginnings and marginalized realities; or by putting Amman on the tourism map of the region and attempting to celebrate its distinctive urban heritage, or by contributing to the creation of more inclusive public spaces in the City; or even by resisting neoliberal visions and agendas that are fragmenting the City at different levels. This research is dedicated to all *Ammanis* and especially to those groups of dedicated individuals who are sincerely trying to make a difference.

