

Jordan

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In September 2001, the Greater Amman Municipality started an extensive project for the renovation of downtown Amman, supported by a Japanese loan of \$58.8 million. One of the main goals of the project is to bolster tourism in the kingdom which has been negatively affected by Al-Aqsa Intifada and the 11 September attacks. Furthermore, Amman is the Cultural Capital of the Arab World 2002 and will thus become an important destination for Arab tourists. The Jordanian economy, always looking for cash money, desperately needs the revenues of a blossoming tourism industry. It is therefore only logical that Jordan tries to meet the expectations of Western and Arab visitors as a means to improve the national balance sheet.

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The Roman Amphitheatre and Hashimiyya Square.

The concerned area around the Roman Amphitheatre and the Citadel including the old Circassian Al-Muhajirin quarter will undergo a far-reaching programme of restructuring. This area, usually simply called 'downtown' by the Ammanites, lies in a *wadi* where once the Sail Amman (desert torrent) used to flow. It was the nucleus of the modern town of Amman which emerged after the foundation of the Emirate of Transjordan in the early 1920s. The development of the city in those days was hampered by the topography which is difficult in several respects and which complicated the extension of the built area. The narrow *wadi* is surrounded by hills which had to be made accessible by long staircases, one of them leading from the street opposite the Roman Amphitheatre to the Citadel, thus connecting the two main places of touristic interest.

According to the deputy mayor of Amman, the municipality now intends to erect 'oriental fountains [...], kiosks and a traditional market place' and wants 'to redecorate the entrances of some shops in a traditional Arabesque motif'.¹ Accordingly, the flow of tourists will be channelled through three passageways lined with souvenir shops, guiding the visitors from the Citadel to the Amphitheatre or vice versa. But the refurbishing of downtown Amman does not only aim at an 'orientalization' of the old city centre by means of architecture; it contains another major project: the new national museum, which will focus on the various aspects of (Trans-)Jordanian history and culture. While the exhibition will include an archaeological section, the main focus will be on the recent Hashemite history.²

Early development of Amman

Though Amman has a long tradition, there was no settlement continuity and the historical caesuras had important consequences for the development of the city. Signs of human settlement in what is now modern Amman date back at least 6,000 years. Later on, the Roman and Greek emperors made use of the city and in the 7th century, the whole region was incorporated into the newly established Islamic dominion. But after the disastrous Mongolian conquest in the 13th century, Amman increasingly lost its importance and was completely abandoned from the 14th century. It was only in 1878 that Circassian refugees were settled in the ruins of ancient Amman by the Ottoman administration. Remains of the Roman and Greek rule today form the most important tourist sites in Amman.

Typical features of a traditional Arab and Islamic city emerged during the formative years from 1876 to the end of the 1930s: Al-Husseini Mosque in the centre of the city, the surrounding markets, a cemetery some way up from the city centre in Ras Al-Ain, and the palace of the ruler which was built from 1924 onwards in Raghdan. Unlike other cities in the Middle East, Amman never knew a clear residential separation of Muslims and

Orientalizing the Orient Renovating Downtown Amman

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Christians, but ethnic clusters did emerge with regards to the Circassian immigrants according to the date of their arrival in the city. Al-Muhajirin quarter, which is now part of the renovation project, is an example of this. According to the needs of the state and its desire for public representation, streets in downtown Amman were widened from the late 1920s onwards and older houses were torn down to give way to places of public gathering, official parades and the easy passing of automobiles. Photographs of Amman from the mandate period show a very modest architecture with simple one- or two-storied houses and hardly any representative buildings.

The influx of the Palestinian refugees in 1948 again led to a dramatic change of the city. Many buildings from the formative years of the Emirate have been demolished since then. The emergence of a politically influential economic class during World War II initiated also the division into East and West Amman. From that time on, the better-off people were found in the western part of the town while the lower income population settled in the eastern parts. The old city centre has since then developed into a cheap shopping area for the poorer inhabitants of Amman. This division has become constantly and increasingly accentuated with each decade.

Use of public space

Apart from its function as a market place for low income earners and as a tourism spot, the old city centre represents one of the rare public spaces in Amman where social interaction takes place. Furthermore, the city centre regularly serves as a place for demonstrations and manifestations of public discontent. People have flocked to the streets after Friday prayers at Al-Husseini Mosque on several occasions during the last decade: to protest against the peace agreement with Israel in 1994, the sanctions against Iraq in 1998 and against the current Israeli aggression in the course of the second Intifada in Palestine.

Downtown Amman also contains one of the city's biggest and most frequented parks: the Hashimiyya Square opposite the Roman Amphitheatre. The place, which adjoins Raghdan bus terminal, was originally planned as a major tourist area with shopping arcades, souvenir booths, restaurants and cafés. Nevertheless, it developed less into a place of consumption and more into a place of recreation and relaxation. The large open space, bordered by trees and designed as a public garden, today attracts *shabab* (groups of young men), families and couples alike. While shop owners complain about the missing profits, the Ammanites have different ideas about their use of the square. They enjoy themselves strolling, gossiping and watching people. Hashimiyya Square thus returns to its traditional use from the Emirate days when it often witnessed small fairs and festivities during the Ramadan and national celebrations.

Tradition or innovation?

Downtown Amman is mainly a product of the 20th century and never resembled the 'traditional Arab city' as constructed by Western scholarship. The projected 'Arabesque motifs' to decorate buildings from the 1940s and 1950s, the 'oriental fountains' and the market place all reflect the municipality's visions of how Amman could have been – but not as it used to be. The attempts by the municipality to restructure the heart of the city therefore express the common imaginings of the 'Arab-Islamic city' guided by the typical clichés without any historical authenticity. Besides, the national culture and local heritage during such a process become commodified, i.e. they serve as goods 'for commercial consumption and excessive capital accumulation'³ and are detached from their original meaning. In fact, the planned renovation has nothing to do with the traditional structure of downtown Amman, the history of which comprises no more than 120 years.

Anyway, the official interest in the relics of the early Emirate days is rather new. For a long time, they had been completely ne-

glected: one of the main examples of early Transjordanian architecture, the Philadelphia Hotel, was demolished in 1984 when the Hashimiyya Square was remodeled,⁴ thus destroying one of the most important places of political, cultural and social activities during the years of the Emirate and the early years of independence.⁵ Another example is a large villa on Jabal al-Luweibdeh where Frederick Peake used to live. It was abandoned during the 1970s and saved only by a private initiative in 1993. Today it is the most inspiring art centre in the whole of Jordan, called *darat al-funun*.⁶

Current attempts to rescue the remnants of the past coincide with a new sense of the recent Jordanian history. Since the early 1990s, a steadily growing sense of proper historical background has emerged, as manifested in numerous books and articles, seminars and conferences on local history. This demonstrates a hitherto unknown interest in an authentic 20th-century Transjordanian history. Moreover, the sudden increase in research must also be seen within the context of the ongoing discussion in Jordan about the question of national identity. While all Arab states have their national founding myths, different explanations for their nationhood and varying exclusions and inclusions of certain societal groups, the Jordanian case is even more sensitive. In the face of the Palestine conflict, the question of national identity has yet to be sufficiently answered. The new national museum is therefore likely to become a centre point for the reinterpretation and redefinition of the Jordanian nationhood.

The 'face-lift' of old Amman and the projected museum can thus be read in three different ways: as a means to satisfy tourist expectations and to strengthen the economy; as an attempt to create tradition embodied in material culture; and as a contribution to the age-old discussion about national identity in Jordan.

Notes

1. 'Downtown Undergoing Renovations to Attract Tourists', *Jordan Times*, 29 October 2001.
2. See 'Amman's Old City to Get Face Lift', *Jordan Times*, 31 August 2001.
3. Rami Daher, 'Heritage Conservation in Jordan: The Myth of Equitable and Sustainable Development' (22f.), *Document du CERMOC*, no. 10 (2000): 17–42.
4. See Omar M. Amireh, 'Amman Experiencing Plazas and Parks: Adaption of Users to Space or Space to User', in Jean Hannoyer and Seteney Shami, *Amman. Ville et société* (Amman: Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur le Moyen Orient Contemporain (CERMOC), 1996), 149–170.
5. See 'A Face-lift Old Amman', *The Star*, 15 September 2001.
6. See *Old Houses of Jordan, 1920–1950* (Amman: TURATH, 1997), 84, 92.

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