# Transformation of Urban Identity: The Case of Amman since the Post-World War II

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**Abstract**

The urban landscape of traditional cites was the product of its culture representing its historical and socio-cultural characteristics. These diverse urban landscapes of cities around the world have been transformed over the past four decades into what is referred to as an international style for economic purpose. While this transformation increases the potential of the city entering into the world market, promoting economic growth, social development and modernization, at the same time it causes social polarization, inequality and in most cases losing its traditional urban character. The critical questions arise in this realization are: what are the influences of this transformation on the urban identity of cities? And, what impacts that would have on social life? The paper discusses the above questions through the case study of Amman City. It explores factors contributed to the historical formation of the urban identity of Amman, its transformation since the Post-World War II, and finally, presents a critique on the rapid transformation over the last three decades and its impact on the socio-cultural environment of the city.

**Keywords:** Urban identity, Capitalism, Social polarisation, Urban transformation, Localisation.

## 1. Introduction

The rapid development of cities over the past four decades has transformed the traditional cityscape, to a global one with no reference to its historical background. This has been due to the power of global capitalism, compelling local authorities to lean towards the capitalist approach to city planning and development for economic growth with minimum or no attention to its local characteristic.Under the influence of globalization the social dimension of the urban environment is often compromised or overlooked to increase the economic potential of the city, since, as Lin (2010) argues, the priority for urban development is mostly oriented towards the economy.

In this approach, there is a fix shopping list of urban development and architectural form and function which includes construction of urban highways, high-rise glass towers, shopping malls and copying styles and symbols. Consequently the historical characteristics of the city being replaced by a global identity, as Madanipour (1996) states, cities become homogenized to an extent that one of them can represent the whole urban character of the era. The impact of such a homogenization fosters 'entire communities uproot themselves from their social, historical and cultural context from one moment to the next' (Woodcraft, 2011: p13). In this process of transformation, some cities lose their identity, others manage to develop a new one.

The paper first, presents a short summary of the definition of identity and factors contribute to the formation and transformation of the city identity. It then examines these factors in the context of Amman city and finally discusses strategies, on how to preserve the urban identity of the city through a collaborative approach that would secure the historical character of the city and conserve its identity.

## 2. Identity:

The term identity was established in the late 16th century referring to the distinct character of an object or a being that stay the same over time.

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The fixed nature of identity was further used as a reference point for allowing the renovation of identity denoting its representation at the time. This view implies that representation of identity at the time includes certain historical pledge. In this sense, Cultural identity refers to the shared socio-cultural practices of a group of people with reference to their cultural tradition and place identity is formed by a combination of spatial, social, cultural and historical characteristics of its inhabitants that distinguishes them from the others (Aboutorabi, 2018). Identity, therefore, indicates the differences which in reference to the city it refers to the distinct images that serve to distinguish it from others enhancing the sense of belonging for its citizen. (Aboutorabi et al 2017; Woodcraf, 2011; Oktay, 2002).

## 2.1 City identity:

Historically, each city had its own distinct character representing through its architecture and urban form that Kostof (2009) considers them as the transparent medium of cultural expression. This cultural history of the city which is 'represented through its heritage, its traditional character, and urban qualities [...] signifies the artistic ability of its citizens throughout history' (Aboutorabi, 2018) forming the city identity.

Old Towns with their well-maintained physical and cultural heritage (monuments, traditional buildings, and historic sites) provide this distinct identity which serves to distinguish the city from others by creating a distinct image and attracting skilled people and investments. Citizens generally are proud of their local heritage, identifying themselves strongly with their town, which also leads to the development of a collective identity of the residents and a stronger identification with the place (Barreiro, 2009; Woodcraft, 2011). Charles Murray (2003) points out that those *elite cities* with distinct artistic and cultural background have a better opportunity to take new ideas and to develop new images while strengthening their historical identity. For these cities, identity is an anchor, providing continuity for development, without carrying away the essential qualities of the city (Barreiro, 2009). Other cities, however, struggle to develop a new image of their cities since they cannot easily cast away their various legacies and itineraries linked to the past that are no longer relevant, desirable, or practical. Consequently, they fall into the process of globalization motivated by economic growth, mass production and consumption joining the cultural homogenization.

## 3. The case study:

## 3.1 Urban form and Cityscape:

Zalloom (2015) in her reviewing of the historical development of Amman describe it as a city that its identity was based on its local socio-spatial character, including its natural resources 'Amman Stream, hilly topography' and its built environment, 'grand stairs, humble skyline, natural stone cladding, [...] the hospitality of the people', and its cityscape character dominated by one story houses built with natural stones.

The gradual expansion of the city from downtown in the valley along the Amman River to the surrounding hilly sites resulted in the construction of public stairs along the pedestrian routs contributed to its unique urban character. Amman city Islamic identity was also reflected by al-Husseini Mosque built in 1924, forming a focal point of the city centre surrounded by shops and public buildings. The socio-spatial character of the downtown of Amman was reflected through its public market, squares, plazas and the integration of its historical landmarks.

The fast expansion of the city since the late 1970s was due to the economic and regional political environment including the two Gulf Wars in 1990 and 2003 and the arrival of migrants. The immigrants supported by the mobility of capital generated an economic boost in Amman through buying properties, investing in the business and presenting new consumption patterns. The city rapidly reacted to the new increasing consumption pattern through the expansion of existing commercial enterprises and the development of new restaurants, cafes, supermarkets, and shopping malls to meet the market demands. Likewise, the increasing demand for residential and commercial properties raised a real - estate boom and investment in property development in the western parts of Amman (UN, 2005; Pilder, 2011; Peters & Moore, 2009). All these socio-political and economic changes affected the socioeconomic status of the old part where most of the commercial units and shops started to move from the old downtown to the new areas. The same relocation applied to most of the government buildings, corporate head offices and large commercial establishments. The State mosque of Jordan also moved from Al-Hussaini Mosque in downtown to the King Abdullah Mosque built in 2005 in the new Abdali district (UN 2005). Consequently, the Amman traditional character known as the city of hats and stairs turned to a large city dominated by a network of road, traffic circles and roundabouts (Al-Asad, 2013; Zalloom, 2018).

To address traffic congestion, the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) constructed the high-tech *Abdoun* Bridge in 2006, in the western part of Amman, which is considered as a contemporary landmark in Amman's cityscape (Potter, 2009). The expansion of the city since late 1970 includes many new developments in the shape of high-rise buildings and shopping malls with elegant services and excellent infrastructure for wealthy social class represents a clear example of urban restructuring and evolving of a new form of spatial ordering, (Al-Faouri 2011). These developments not only influenced the physical landscape of the city, but also its social and spatial polarization, since the increase in the price of land and property derived locals to the outskirts of the city (Zalloom, 2015).

Many of these high-density and high rise developments were built randomly around the city due to the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) lack of regulations. While these developments have contributed to the socioeconomic environment of the city, they, however, had changed the overall character of the urban form. Therefore, the emergence of a number of high-rise buildings replacing the traditional four story buildings cladded with local stones has changed the unified scale that had characterized Amman (Beauregard & Colomina 2011).

Shopping malls were another product contributing to the transformation of Amman's cityscape, taking away the social life that was spread at the public spaces of the city- the shopping street, the squares and the market places (UN, 2005; Abu-Ghazalah& Abu-Ghanimeh, 2006).

Although the old downtown lost its economic status due to the fast expansion of the city, nevertheless it has remained a busy and crowded part of the city. Its attraction is not because it has modern architectural images but due to its traditional places for everyday social life which attract people and tourists. So it is the social dimension of places in the old downtown that contributes to the social life of the city. Pilder, (2011) describes the contrasting experience of the old market at downtown Amman with one of the shopping malls in the contemporary parts of Amman. He describes the busy life of the downtown:

> "Beyond the car horn, sound pervades the city. The call to prayer happens five times a day, beginning at about 4:00 am in the summer. In the smoke-filled coffee houses, men chatter about news, politics, and football. Street vendors blast popular Arab and Western music. In the Souk, merchants call out the prices of vegetables and spices, while traders next door peddle tourist kitsch. Not far from the downtown, middle-class Ammani youth mingles with their foreign counterparts in the posh cafes of Jabal Amman….." (P.12)

He then describes how the integrated image has been removed from the landscape of the city and been placed in isolated environments:

> "… Further west, taxis converge on Amman's two largest Western malls, City Mall and Mecca Mall. Both have multiscreen movie theatres, food courts, gourmet grocery stores, and any retailer one could find in an American mall. At night, the bubbling sound of the Eagle (Hubble bubble) and the smell of apple-flavored tobacco hover over the cafes and restaurants, and waft out from the private courtyards of the street-lined up houses".

The above description indicates both places embodying spaces for similar social function and containing similar sensual experience - smell, sound and social interaction. However, the shopping mall is an imported commodity, whereas the traditional market is the local production embodying local history, cultural memory and representing the unique socio-spatial character of the place that contributed in forming its identity.
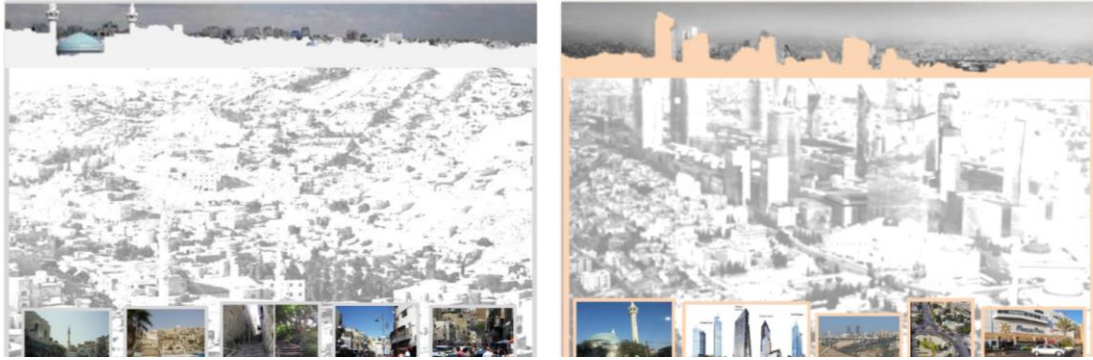
**Fig. 1: The changing of urban character of Amman**

### 3.2 Architectural style:

The architectural transformation of Amman started after the Second World War due to the development of two schools of thoughts. Those Jordanian architects who were studied in Europe tried to apply the contemporary architectural principles to develop a modern approach based on the international style (Al-Asad, 2005; Pilder,2011). However, those who were studied in Jordan universities linked the history of Jordan to a broader Arab-Islamic culture and used Islamic architecture as a reference for developing the local style (GAM, 2018).

The two school design approach mostly influenced the architectural styles of residential buildings where the external appearances were a mixture of styles and the planning of interior spaces generally followed the traditional concept of private/public spaces promoted by Islamic tradition. Their works provided an avenue to help to consolidate identity in the city by providing a degree of social cohesion and iconic forms that could become a source of pride for the community (Pilder, 2011).

In contrast, the architectural style of new developments, especially commercial buildings followed the Hi-Tech global styles, cubic irregular glass dominating the image of the city. This had a profound impact on shifting "the localized architectural identities to an attempt to fit within overall global development" (Potter, 2009: p28).



**Fig. 2: The transformation of architectural style in Amman over the last three decades**

The influence of the architectural style of new developments and the lack of conservation policy and building regulations transformed some of the neighborhood into an exhibition of eclectic style with no respect for urban spaces. For example, in a process to capture the wave of progress and reflect a modern style, many merchants and owners of the commercial public buildings covered the beautiful traditional stone facades with glass and aluminums. For them, covering the original stone facades with fashionable materials representing modernity was the sign of progress. (Zalloom, 2015). The lack of attention to conservation also resulted in a number of high-rise buildings replacing the four-story stone cladding traditional buildings changing the unified scale that had characterized Amman (Beauregard, et al, 2011

### 4. Conclusion:

The contemporary history of Amman demonstrates the increasing influence of the global capitalist ideology in shaping the city. It clearly showed that under the influence of global capitalism, the city authority paid more attention to the developers' interests than the citizens' desire in shaping their city.

It also demonstrates the lack of clear vision for the development of the city with reference to its historical context and contemporary life. The lack of policy was evident in the failure of the two groups of the modernists and regionalism architects in shaping the city. The question here is, could the new development of the city contribute to the progressive development of the traditional city identity? The answer could be yes if the city authority, planners and architects, as discussed above, not focus entirely on the economic aspect of development, planning for roads and borrowing images that have no relation to the place, but paying more attention to the social and environmental aspects of the city.

The case study demonstrates that preserving or regenerating urban identity is a complex task within the urban development planning that requires attention to the historical, cultural, physical, economic and the contemporary living environment of the city. The process of addressing these tasks includes investment in cultural heritage to improve its physical condition, reviving public spaces, and support the area's distinctive character and identity; increasing the local people knowledge of the historical values of the place; assigning functions to the historical heritage and cultural sites, allowing citizens to experience them in their daily life; Increasing the economic potential of the heritage by organising cultural events in the historic setting and attracting tourists; and marketing the distinctiveness and quality of life of the area to the outside world in order to attract enterprises, skilled workforce, inhabitants and tourists. The approach for implementing the above tasks should start with developing a vision for the city based on the assessment of the existing situation in collaboration with local people. The involvement of the local people according to EU 2011, broaden the vision for the development bringing unexpected possibilities to light.

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