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NEOLIBERAL URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE ARAB CITY Meta-narratives, urban disparities and the emergence of consumerist utopias and geographies of inequalities in Amman

Rami Farouk DAHER¹

RESUMÉ

Cette recherche représente une analyse discursive et comparative visant à comprendre l'actuel courant néolibéral urbain dans le monde arabe en termes de modes de circulation de la transformation urbaine. L'article introduit et suggère un cadre discursif dans lequel des projets néolibéraux pourraient être examinés et évalués par l'un ou plusieurs des indicateurs suivants : mode de vie urbain, émancipation du discours néolibéral, revendications à la durabilité sociale, politiques et dynamiques socio-spatiales, gouvernance, gestion des espaces, l'évolution du rôle de l'État, et la circulation des pratiques néolibérales. Cette recherche applique et bénéficie d'un rapprochement entre les théories néo-marxistes de la politique économique et les approches poststructuralistes associées à l'art de gouverner. Toutefois, elle repose essentiellement sur un ensemble de théories, à savoir, les théories néo-marxistes considérant le néolibéralisme comme un projet de classe de l'exclusion sociale. Le cadre d'analyse est appliqué aux trois études de cas suivantes à Amman: les tours d'affaires haut de gamme, les quartiers résidentiels fermés (gated communities) de la classe moyenne-haute, et les projets de logements sociaux. En général, ces projets, de leur rhétorique émancipatrice, ont conduit à une géographie inégale et aux disparités urbaines dans la ville de Amman.

MOTS-CLÉS ■ Courant urbain néolibéral, politiques socio-spatiales, durabilité sociale, gouvernance urbaine, villes arabes, Amman



ABSTRACT

This research represents a discursive-comparative analysis aiming to understand the current urban neoliberal condition in the Arab world in terms of the circulating patterns of urban transformation. The research introduces and suggests a discursive framework in which various neoliberal projects could be examined and evaluated against one or more of the following indicators: urban lifestyle, emancipatory neoliberal discourse, claims to social sustainability, socio-spatial politics and dynamics, governance and place management, changing role of the state, and circulation of neoliberal practices. The research applies and benefits from a reconciliation between neo-Marxist theories of political economy and poststructuralist approaches related to the art of governance. However, in doing so it relies mostly on one body of theory, namely, neo-Marxist theories considering neoliberalism as a class project of social exclusion. The framework of analysis is applied to the following three case studies in Amman: high-end business towers, gated upper-middle class communities, and low-income housing projects. In general, these projects, despite their emancipatory rhetoric, led to geographies of inequality and urban disparities within the city of Amman.

KEYWORDS ■ Urban neoliberal condition, socio-spatial politics, social sustainability, urban governance, Arab cities, Amman

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INTRODUCTION

This research investigates the current urban condition in the Arab world in the midst of major neoliberal urban restructuring and transformation during the past two decades. The research concentrates on the city of Amman yet will include regional comparisons in order to discuss similar patterns of urban change in other Arab cities including Beirut, Cairo, Dubai, Damascus, Aqaba, Tunis and Rabat.

The study is interested in understanding the effects of the circulation of global capital (Arab Gulf surplus oil revenues) and huge reserves of money in search for high-yielding and secure investments. In that context, it examines how excessive privatization and the circulation of urban flagship projects in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, the Arab Gulf States and the Arab region transform urban realities, property values, speculation as well as the nature of public life in these cities. Between 2003 and 2004, the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council enjoyed a surplus of about US\$50 billion, which then rose to US\$400 billion between 2007 and 2008. In 2009, it plummeted to an estimated US\$47.4 billion, rising again to US\$142.2 billion in 2010.² It has been estimated that between the years 2005 and 2020, the Arabian Gulf States invested some US\$3,000 billion in the Middle East and North Africa (El Sheshtawi, 2008a).

Middle Eastern cities are currently competing to attract international investments, businesses and tourism development. Currently, developments in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, such as the world's two largest man-made islands (Palm Jumeirah and Palm Jebel Ali) and major skyscrapers and luxury resorts on Sheikh Zayed Street, are setting precedents and are becoming models for other cities of the region. This stands in stark contrast to, say, the 1960s, when the Arab world looked only to cities like Cairo or Beirut for cutting-edge urbanism (Daher, 2011, p. 275-6).

The development of new urban islands that cater to a lifestyle of excessive consumption for the elite, together with the internationalization of commercial real estate companies and construction consulting firms capable of providing high-quality services, are the main indicators of this neoliberal urban restructuring that is occurring in places such as downtown Beirut (Summer, 2005), Abdali in Amman (Summer, 2005; Daher, 2008), Dreamland in Cairo (Adham, 2005), the financial district in Manama, the development of Bou

Regreg river in Rabbat,³ Pearl Island in Doha, and even the heart of the Holy City of Mecca through the Jabal Omar project.⁴ Cities are obliged to create a competitive business climate and first-class tourism attractions in order to lure people to live, invest and entertain themselves there. Barthel (2010, p. 5) has coined these real estate ventures as “Arab mega projects,” in reference to their scale, and considers them to be the main vectors in contemporary Arab town planning. Adham (2005) noted that circulating images of such neoliberal urban restructurings mimic developments in the West and as such represent an “Oriental vision of the Occident.”

Even through research and publications on the Arab city are numerous, not many have addressed the neoliberal transformations and urban restructurings that have taken place over the past decade. Among the few are the works of Elsheshtawy (2008b) on Abu Dhabi; Summer's comparative work (2005) on Amman and Beirut; Daher's work (2008, 2011) on Amman; Clerk and Hurault's work (2010) on Damascus; Barthel and Planel's work (2010) on Tangerang; Adham's work (2004) on Cairo; and Krijnen and Fawaz's work (2010) on Beirut as well.

Of interest is that, regardless of the similarities between the different neoliberal urban restructuring projects in the diverse contexts in the Arab world, each of the projects takes shape within a different local context and is, in turn, shaped by that context. El-Sheshtawy (2004, p. 18–19) moreover points out that while certain globalization processes appear to come from outside (e.g., multinational corporations and the setting up of regional headquarters), the influence consists mainly of processes that are activated from the inside by local actors. Furthermore, Swyngedouw *et al.* (2002, p. 545) elaborate how such neoliberal urban restructuring projects are incorporated in localized settings, hence the term “glocalization”.

Amman represents a clear example of neoliberal urban restructuring and emerging forms of spatial ordering and engineering such as high-end business towers that offer an exclusive concept of both refuge and consumption (e.g., Jordan Gate, Abdali), upper-end residential “gated” communities all over the city

² Based on a public lecture delivered by Basma Moumani on December 15, 2010 at the Greater Amman Municipality.

³ During a visit to Rabbat (October 2009), the author was astonished by the similarities in terms of investors, developers and even the rhetoric and discourse around development between neoliberal investors in Beirut, Amman and elsewhere in Mashreq and those in Rabbat. This global city is definitely circulating not only surplus capital from oil, but also images and models of neoliberal development.

⁴ www.jabalomar.com (visited on April 23, 2005)

(e.g., Green Land, Andalucia) and even low-income residential cities (e.g., Jizza, Marka, Sahab) that work to push the poorer segments of society to the outskirts of the city in newly zoned heterotopias. One prominent objective of this discursive mapping in Amman is to unpack and expose the rhetoric and deconstruct the emancipation discourse of these emerging landscapes of neoliberalism. These endeavours all reflect dominant political and ideological practices of power as regulated by neoliberal tropes and manifested through spatially-engineered realities. At present, several of these emerging neoliberal city projects are anticipated to lead to urban geographies of inequality and exclusion and to spatial/social displacement (Daher, 2011, p. 277).

This research adopts an ethnographic approach incorporating in-depth interviews with neighbourhood organizations, community advocacy groups, local residents, real estate developers and City of Amman officials and staff. In addition, discourse analysis was based on reviewing various archival resources such as newspaper articles and material publications by the promoters of such neoliberal projects (e.g., brochures, videos, other), in addition to blogs and various social media that address such spatial and socio-economic urban transformation within the city.

I. REVIEWING THE LITERATURE AND RECONCILING NEO-MARXIST AND POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACHES OF INVESTIGATING URBAN NEOLIBERALIZATION

The eminent Marxist geographer David Harvey, author of *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Harvey, 2005, p. 1-5), pointed out that neoliberal economic thought and its political implementation emerged out of a critique of and backlash against the welfare state. In that sense, politicians of the late 1970s, such as Margaret Thatcher, formed the new doctrine called “neoliberalism” that was to eventually become the central guiding principle of economic thought and management. According to Harvey, a distinguished scholar on globalization,

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free market and free trade. The role of the state is to create and

preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

As a consequence of neoliberal socio-economics, in countries like Jordan, the state finds itself gradually pulling out of its responsibilities from fragile sectors such as education, healthcare, social security and social housing, and instead becomes more involved in real estate development as a facilitator, regulator and provider of indirect subsidies for multinational corporations. Larner (2003, p. 509) sees neoliberalism as referring to the process of “opening up national economics to global actors such as multinational corporations and to global institutions such as the IMF the World Bank,” thus leading to more increased socio-spatial polarization. This *conservative liberalism*, according to Swyngedouw et al. (2002, p. 547):

seeks to reorient state interventions away from monopoly market regulation and towards marshaling state resources into the social, physical, and geographical infra-and superstructures that support, finance, subsidize, or otherwise promote new forms of capital accumulation by providing the relatively fixed territorial structures that permit the accelerated circulation of capital and the relatively unhindered operation of market forces. At the same time, the state withdraws to a greater or lesser extent from socially inclusive blanket distribution-based policies and from Keynesian demand-led interventions and replaces them with spatially targeted social policies and indirect promotion of entrepreneurship, particularly via selective deregulation, stripping away red tape, and investment partnership.

The urban neoliberalization literature could be divided into two main categories. The first is neo-Marxists in nature and is traced back to the political economy approach, which views neoliberalism as a hegemonic class project that works to reduce democracy and social support and generally results in the spatial re-ordering of the city and areas of poverty and inequality (e.g., Harvey, 2005; Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002). The second type of literature is poststructuralist in nature and is related to the art of governance, within the meaning of Foucault’s work on “governmentality” (e.g., Larner, 2003; Peck, 2004; Addie, 2008; Collier, 2009; Barthel, 2010; and Mayer and Kunkel, 2012). Here, neoliberalism is conceived to be a set of practices that shape or produce subjects, spaces and new forms of knowledge. Barnett’s (2005, p. 7) recent work on neoliberalism calls for the reconciliation of the “Marxist understanding of hegemony with

poststructuralist ideas of discourse and *governmentality* derived from Foucault.” Larner (2003, p. 511) argues that most geographical readings of neoliberalism remain embedded in neo-Marxist theoretical traditions that continue to focus on documenting what we have lost. An incorporation of a poststructuralist approach will also bring in the analysis of processes that produce spaces, states and subjects. Be it neo-Marxist or poststructuralist, both of these theoretical traditions have important things to say about neoliberalism.

Barnett (2005, p. 9) elaborates that it is helpful to think of neoliberalism as a “discourse,” where this is understood to refer to the “institutionally located and regulative usage of ideas and concepts to shape pictures of reality.” This notion also incorporates “governmentality” in order to explain how “broad macro-structural shifts from state regulation to market regulation are modulated with the micro-contexts of everyday routines.” Mayer and Künkel (2012, p. 3–5) as well attempt to enhance the dialogue between the dominant neo-Marxist political economist and the Foucault-inspired “governmentality” frameworks, which are viewed as complementary for the analysis of how the neoliberal project is continually reworked and contested in various spheres of life.

This research⁵ will enable the researcher to achieve two important objectives. The first is to reconcile the two perspectives with each other, thereby enabling the researcher not only to understand the role and involvement of newly created subjects such as the transnational capitalist class or the urban entrepreneurial investor, but also to research the emerging links and liaisons between state agencies and global agents and actors. The second objective is to emphasize the need for a third type of literature/research on urban neoliberalization that is more empirical in nature and that addresses the different issues and processes of urban restructuring. In that perspective, this research adopts a discursive framework for conducting such analysis based on empirical and in-depth ethnographic research addressing several projects in Amman. These projects are evaluated against relevant indicators including urban lifestyle, emancipation rhetoric of neoliberal tropes, claims to social sustainability, socio-spatial politics and dynamics, governance and place management, the changing role of the state, and the circulation of neoliberal practices. The following section of this paper will elaborate in detail on this

⁵ Even though this research relies mostly on neo-Marxist theories, it will attempt to incorporate a post- poststructuralist approach as well.

framework through the analysis of three cases of neoliberal urban transformation in Amman.

2. DISCURSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING AND UNDERSTANDING NEOLIBERAL URBAN RESTRUCTURING

For this study, the researcher selected three case studies from the city representing clear examples of neoliberal urban restructuring and emerging forms of urban spatial re-ordering and engineering. They included: 1) High-end and isolated business towers (Abdali⁶), which are anticipated to include exclusive office and residential space in addition to retail, commercial and other tourism activities; 2) High-end residential “gated” communities in selected spaces within and beyond the city such as Andalusia⁷ or Green Land; and 3) Low-income housing projects that work to push the poorer segments of society to the outskirts of the city into newly zoned heterotopias such as in Jizza⁸, Sahab, Marka or Abu Alanda. Table 1 illustrates the details of the discursive framework adopted by the author to attempt to analyze and understand the neoliberal urban restructuring taking place within each of these three cases. However, it is important to understand that even though these suggested seven indicators may not all be relevant to each of the three case studies, they do represent a model or a framework that could be useful for other researchers interested in urban neoliberalism in Arab cities in the future.

⁶ Abdali is the largest neoliberal real estate development project currently taking place in Amman. The project is promoted as “the new downtown” for Amman and is anticipated to include high-end office and residential spaces in addition to retail, commercial and other tourism activities. The remodeled area, previously the site of the General Jordan Armed Forces Headquarters, spans over 350,000 m² in the heart of Amman and will contain a built-up area of approximately 1,000,000 m².

⁷ Andalusia is a high-end gated community development outside Amman, located near the Airport Highway on the way to the City of Madaba. The main developers are TAAMEER Jordan/Jordan Company for Real Estate Development (PLC), and the majority of funding comes from the United Arab Emirates. The cost per square metre reaches around 800 JDs for villas that include centralized under-floor heating, maid room service with laundry, interior customization, 24 hour security & maintenance, indoor and outdoor swimming pool, and spas & health clubs.

⁸ Jizza is the name of an area that has recently been added and incorporated into the Greater Amman Municipality and is undergoing the construction of low-income housing near Queen Alia International Airport. The initiative, called *Decent Housing for Decent Living*, is part of a larger program launched by the King of Jordan and is managed by the General Cooperation of Housing & Urban Development. Critics assume that several of these low-income housing projects, ironically executed by the same developers and investors (e.g., TAAMEER) involved in the high-end gated communities, are targeting the poor who are then sometimes forced out of inner-city neighbourhoods.

Tableau I
Discursive Framework for the Analysis and Understanding of Neoliberal Urban Restructuring

Major indicator	Ramification and detailed indicators for further empirical research
1. Urban lifestyle	Clientele Slogans Imagery
2. Emancipation rhetoric	Rhetoric of utopia Utopia linked to consumerism Entertainment: cities as places to play
3. Claims to social sustainability	Provision of social infrastructure (e.g., public facilities, open spaces facilitating social gathering, accommodating different social groups (inclusivity)). Accessibility (to place) (live, work and participate in leisure without travelling too far) Job provision Townscape design (e.g., pedestrian-oriented streetscapes) Availability to fulfill psychological needs (e.g., security and sense of belonging). Preservation of local characteristics
4. Socio-spatial politics and dynamics	Social inclusion / exclusion Displacement Size and scale of projects Proliferation of iconic buildings Location with regard to the city
5. Governance and place management	Changing mode of government Emergence of new governing bodies in the city Production of new subjects and experts involved in urban management (e.g., special projects unit, transnational capitalist class, urban entrepreneurs) Privatization of planning and emergence of new types of partnerships Informalization of decision-making and building permit processes Changing conditions of urban production (e.g., use of 3D imagery)
6. Changing role of the state	Nature and level of state involvement Public subsidies The regulatory process
7. Circulation of neoliberal practices	Circulation of global capital Circulation of planning models Circulation of experts and subjects involved in urban management Internationalization of financial organizations

This discursive framework is based on the reconciliation of the neo-Marxist/political-economic with the poststructuralist approaches used to analyze urban neoliberalization, thereby allowing to go beyond the limitations and shortcomings of each, especially those of the neo-Marxist approaches. Prior to presenting the case studies in more detail, the author shall put forth two significant arguments:

I. The researcher argues that several of these projects demonstrate a search for a particular *contradictory utopia* (and in most cases, a consumerist utopia), promoted by the rhetoric of neoliberal developers through various mechanisms and in different places in and beyond the city. Examples of such rhetoric include “prestigious urban living” or “vertical corporate retreats,” as offered in high-end

exclusive towers like Abdali, which the author dubs “living above the city in the clouds.” Another example would be the slogan “Providing distinctive homes that will redefine everyday life,” which the author dubs “the selling of paradise on the ground,” found in various gated communities such as Andalucia⁹ or Green Land. Finally, there are the low-income residential housing projects, among them Jizza and Marka, which the state named “Sakan Kareem Le Aish Kareem,” which translates into “Decent Housing for Decent Living.”

2. The author argues that such neoliberal urban restructuring (be it as high-end business towers, gated communities or low-income housing projects) result in geographies of inequalities and spaces of social exclusion, of course to various degrees. In addition, such neoliberal utopias are contradictory in nature as they lead to major displacements of lower-income urban communities, as is the case with the Abdali development and the displacement of the Za’amtah neighbourhood as well as the Abdali transportation hub. Extremely exclusive, these projects are built at the expense of water resources and green patches (as is the case with the gated communities along the airport highway) and work to push the poor to the outskirts of the city, to deserted locations that are remote from commercial and social facilities and in need of infrastructure (as is the case with the low-income housing projects in Jizza, Sahab and other places outside of Amman).

In the following sub-sections, the author will demonstrate the ramifications of such urban neoliberalization, namely through a seven-teir analysis framework of selected indicators of urban change and transformation, taking into consideration that the suggested seven indicators may not all be relevant to each of the three case studies.

2.1 Urban lifestyle

The case studies will be analyzed through an examination of emerging urban lifestyles maintained by the clientele of these projects. In the Abdali project (Figure 1), and specifically in the towers sector of Abdali (such as in the *Vertex*, the *Heights* and the *Lofts*), the occupants and residents of exclusive corporate office space and luxury apartments yearn for their own type of utopia and a privileged position that is, in most cases quite literally, above the rest of the city.

⁹ The mere choice of the name for the gated community—Andalucia—is utopian in that it references a by-gone Arab presence in Spain in the Middle Ages.

Developers here offer integrated building management systems to ensure state-of-the-art services for their corporate tenants and upper-middle class residents.

These projects promise a distinctively luxurious lifestyle and a protected and safe environment (Daher, 2008, p. 61) throughout their marketing slogans (e.g., “Lofty views, open terraces and deluxe living in the city center,” “Luxury Life Style Providers,” “A Comprehensive Security System”). Sklair (2001, p. 6) describes this phenomenon as follows:

Global capitalism thrives by persuading us that the meaning and value of our lives are to be found principally in what we possess, that we can never be totally satisfied with our positions (the imperative of ever-changing fashion style), and that the goods and services we consume are best provided by the free market, the generator of private profit that lies at the heart of capitalism.

Projects like Andalucia, for example, offer gated communities and housing enclaves for the very rich and target a mostly high-end clientele with slogans such as “The Joy of Living” or “Providing distinctive homes that will redefine everyday life.” The developers are thereby suggesting that once a client becomes part of this exclusive community, they will have a utopian existence and become a completely transformed individual (Figure 2). For Andalucia, the developer is TAAMEER Jordan Holdings, whose financing originates mostly from the surplus oil capital of the United Arab Emirates.

Similar high-end neoliberal real estate developments are mushrooming in different parts of the Arab world, such as in Beirut (Krijnen & Fawaz, 2010) and in Damascus (Clerk & Hurault, 2010). In addition, shopping malls promoting a consumerist culture in the region are emerging in various cities of the Arab world, to the extent that they are becoming the public space par excellence in the region. This appears to have been particularly pronounced in Amman, where Mecca Mall, City Mall, Barakeh Mall and Abdoun Mall, to mention only a few, have been built in the past ten years alone. Parker (2009, p. 117) elaborates that such excessive spaces of consumption provide a model of “neoliberal spatiality” as they generate the illusion of access to the “world under one roof,” presenting global brands and identities within a “climate-controlled and securitized container removed from the city itself.” Clerk and Hurault (2010, p. 41) critique the emergence of neoliberal investment and large-scale developments in Damascus recently, viewing these to be the main culprits for urban sprawl of the metropolis. While malls had been



Fig. 1 - A stretch of billboards around the Abdali site during its early stages of construction some 4 years ago. (Photo Credit: Rami Daher)

a non-existent concept in the city until the 2000s, six malls have opened up in Damascus between 2001 and 2009 and 14 others have been announced.

2.2 Emancipation rhetoric

One prominent objective of this discursive mapping of urban neoliberalization in Amman is to unpack and expose the rhetoric and to deconstruct the emancipation discourse of these emerging landscapes of neoliberalism. In many of the projects, the rhetoric promotes a utopian existence even in its most humble forms, such as in the Decent Housing for Decent Living initiative, which promotes low-income housing at the eastern edge of Amman in Jizza, Sahab or Abu-Alanda. Exposing the neoliberal emancipation discourse in such projects reveals exclusionary and exploitative practices of spatial ordering that are

pushing the city's poor to the edges, far away from infrastructures such as transportation networks and social services such as schools, hospitals or even commercial activities.

A stretch of billboards about the Abdali investment project is the only source of information given to the community at large about this major neoliberal urban restructuring project. The slogans on these billboards (e.g., "Let us start the pleasure of shopping," "Let houses turn into homes," "Let the city beat with energy") seek to transform society into a consumerist mass where "property" is considered to be the new consumer good par excellence (Daher, 2011). This rhetoric of utopia is linked to a type of consumerism in which the city functions as a place of entertainment and play. Peck and Tickell (2002, p. 394) stated that "despite its language of innovation, learning, and openness, neoliberalism is associated

with an extremely narrow urban policy repertoire based on capital subsidies, place promotion, supply-side intervention, and central city makeovers.” Addie (2008, p. 2678) compared rhetoric with reality in analyzing key urban policies shaping built environment and social structures of Over-the-Rhine, a Cincinnati neighbourhood. Revealing the reality behind neoliberal urbanism, he showed how its rhetoric conceals its fundamentally exclusionary and exploitative way of interacting with the public that lead to the out-migration of low-income families and tenants.

2.3 Claims to social sustainability

The case studies will also be analyzed as to the extent to which they have lived up to the claims of the neoliberal developers in terms of improving social sustainability by providing social infrastructure. That latter includes public facilities; open spaces for social gathering; accommodation of different social groups (inclusivity); proximity to work, home and places where people spend their leisure time; availability of jobs; townscape design (e.g., pedestrian-oriented streets); and the meeting of psychological needs (e.g., security and sense of belonging, preservation of local characteristics). In general, research on sustainability

addresses a combination of the following three fundamentals: environmental, social and economic sustainability. Debates about sustainability in the urban context “no longer consider sustainability solely as an environmental concern, but also incorporate economic and social dimensions” (Dempsey *et al.*, 2011, p. 289). In this research, the author focuses primarily on issues related to social sustainability, as these are more relevant to the three case studies under investigation, such as accessibility to place and social inclusion in the urban landscape.

According to Chan and Lee (2008) (quoted in Mac & Peacock, 2011, p. 4–5), in order for urban developments to be socially sustainable, they must create a harmonious living environment, reduce social inequality and divides, and improve quality of life in general. Moreover, they identify six criteria for evaluating whether social sustainability has been achieved: provision of social infrastructure, accessibility, availability of jobs, possibility to meet psychological needs, townscape design, and preservation of local characteristics. In their study, the researchers conducted a questionnaire survey in Hong Kong through which they collected and evaluated the opinions of architects, planners, property development managers and local citizens. The responses confirmed



Fig. 2 - The gated community site of Andalusia on the Airport Highway. (Photo Credit: Rami Daher)



Fig. 3 - The low-income housing project at al Jizza. The building of the newly construction international airport are in the background. (Photo Credit: Rami Daher)

that the researchers' six criteria are indeed significant underlying factors for enhancing social sustainability of local urban development projects.

The Decent Housing for Decent Living low-income social housing initiative launched by the General Cooperation for Housing and Urban Development in Jizza, Abu-Alanda, Marka and Sahab (all located at the eastern edge of the city) represents a clear example of complete failure if evaluating social sustainability based on the indicators and criteria mentioned earlier. The project failed primarily in terms of accessibility to places and the provision of social infrastructure such as public facilities and social inclusiveness. Not only did this project push the city's poor residents to the margins but it is also located in deserted areas away from public transportation networks and social services such as schools, hospitals and commercial facilities.

Extensive fieldwork was conducted between 2011 and 2012 by tracing and reviewing the archival literature (newspapers) and social media and blogs

available on the different locations. Furthermore, ethnographic research in the form of open-ended interviews was conducted in two of the locations—Sahab and Jizza (Figure 3).

Interviews with local residents indicated that the projects lack basic services such as solid waste management, water infrastructure,¹⁰ good quality roads and accessibility to schooling and commercial areas in addition to faring poorly with regard to pricing and affordability.¹¹ Moreover, residents worry and caution about future environmental disasters due

¹⁰ Open-ended interviews with residents in the Sahab site indicated that water provision is very poor. For example, private water suppliers using water trucks refuse to deliver due to the distant location of the project. The national company for water provision (Mihahuna) is also reluctant to provide this basic necessity due to the distant location and the very low occupancy, so far, in these projects.

¹¹ The contractor TAAMEER priced the square metre at 375 Jordanian dinars. This rate is extremely expensive when considering that this is a state-driven initiative addressing low-income housing for the poor.

to the piling up of garbage, and several residents expressed that they were eager to sell their apartments after having been lured into buying by the promotion campaigns and rhetoric of the project organizers and investors. In many of the projects, only a small percentage (about 20%) of the apartments are occupied,¹² which represents a considerable drawback with regard to security, the quality of the built environment, and to developing a sense of belonging.

In addition, the more high-end projects of the gated communities along the airport highway (e.g., Andalusia) or the exclusive corporate business towers (e.g., Abdali) are a mockery when judged against principles of social sustainability such as social inclusion, accessibility and the fulfillment of psychological needs. The gated communities thrive on promoting themselves as exclusive rather than inclusive and consume exorbitant water resources for private swimming pools and lush landscaping with no consideration whatsoever to the scarcity of water in the country. Finally, Chairman and CEO of Saudi Oger Bahaa Hariri¹³ once declared in an open interview that the Abdali project, supposedly a public space par excellence, is targeting the “modern” high social classes of the city and added that once the other residents realize that a cup of coffee there costs 5 to 10 Jordanian dinars, they would never come back.

2.4 Socio-spatial politics and dynamics

The case studies will be also analyzed on the basis of their socio-spatial politics and dynamics with regard to issues of social inclusion/exclusion, displacement, location with regard to the city, size and scale of projects, and the prioritization to iconic buildings throughout these various neoliberal endeavours. In general, several of these projects are anticipated to lead to urban geographies of inequality and exclusion and to spatial/social displacement. For example, the Abdali project will intensify the socio-economic and spatial polarization not only between East and West Amman, but also between this new “elitist urban island” and the rest of the city. The Abdali project will culminate in the displacement of the nearby Abdali transportation terminal, together with its drivers, informal vendors and occupants, to the outskirts of Amman in Tabarbour, away from the centre. This will cause considerable disruption and financial burdens for commuters and lead to the dispersing of public

transportation in the city. In addition, the Abdali project also resulted in the displacement of the Za'amta neighbourhood, which was appropriated for this high-end development. Several other neoliberal projects that had caused major displacements in the city include Limitless High Rise Towers, which caused the displacement of residents of the Wadi Abdoun village, who are gradually being forced to sell out and leave in return for unfair compensations.

As mentioned earlier, the state's initiative of low-income housing projects in Jizza, Sahab, Marka and Abu-Alanda will eventually culminate in the relocation of larger segments of poorer city residents to the east of Amman. Both types of projects (i.e., those targeting privileged high-end users and those targeting marginalized low-income residents) will lead to a fragmented and socially segregated urbanity. These protected and controlled patches within the city will also lead to the privatization of public space, thereby calling for a critical investigation of the definition and meaning of public/private and inclusion/exclusion (Daher, 2008, p. 55, 59).

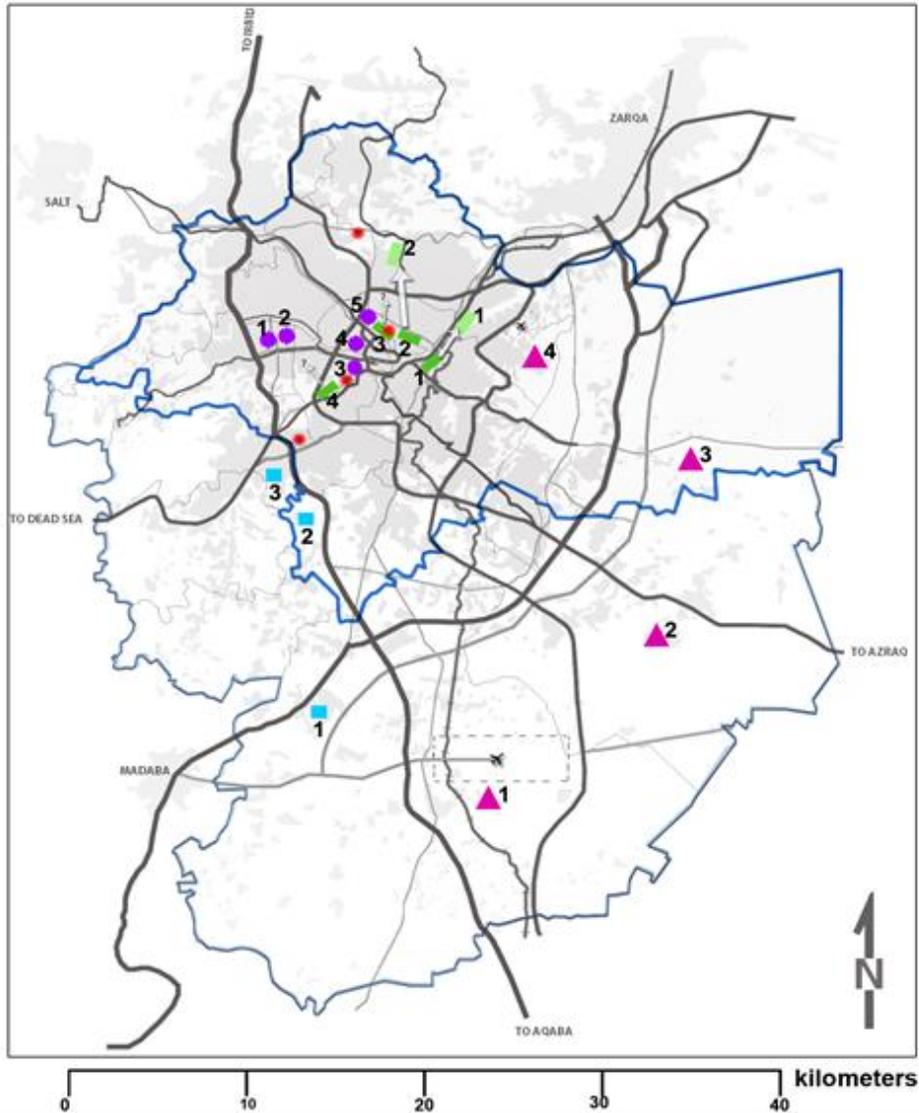
Geographic location within the city is also carefully calculated by the actors and agents of these projects. Figure 4—Discursive Mapping of Landscapes of Neoliberalism in Amman—illustrates the spatial distribution of these projects as follows. First, the location of exclusive business towers together with the gated communities is concentrated mainly in the more affluent western segment of the city, while the low-income housing projects are pushed not only to the east of Amman (the poorer segment of the city, considered to be an obstacle to development by high-ranking officials) but also to the edges of the city in abandoned locations next to industrial hubs and in some cases right next to airports. Second, the displacement caused by such neoliberal projects (e.g., displacement of the transportation hubs Abdali and Raghadan) is also happening in areas at the north and north-eastern edges. Parker (2009, p. 113) maintained that “taken together, these projects impact upon the city in ways that push the East further east, distancing popular elements of the downtown from the spaces being opened up for high-end investment in western Amman quarters of the city.” Several researchers, among them Barthel (2010, p. 6) and Clerk and Hurault (2010, p. 34), investigating urban neoliberalization in the Arab world had reiterated that such projects generate significant socio-spatial transformation, primarily the relocation of undesired populations to marginalized locations within cities. According to Clerk & Hurault (2010, p. 46) and Parker (2009, p. 117), both Amman and Damascus included social housing as part of their newly developed master

¹² *Al Rai* newspaper, page 8, Tuesday September 27, 2011.

¹³ Bahaa Hariri is one of the major developers of the site, channeling Saudi capital for real estate development not only to Amman's *Abdali* project but also to Beirut's downtown development.

plans targeting poorer segments of city residents who were relocated to the edges and pushed away from major high-end development areas.

Furthermore, the high-end developments (e.g., Abdali, Jordan Gate) are all based on the maxim that “bigger is better.” Influenced by developments in Dubai, they seek to emulate iconic buildings (such as



Discursive Mapping Of Landscapes Of Neoliberalism In Amman



Source: Rami Daher, 2013

Fig. 4 - Discursive Mapping of Landscapes of Neoliberalism in Amman

those designed by Sir Norman Foster) yet essentially have a negative impact not only on the city's skyline but also on the quaint residential neighbourhoods that Amman is famous for (such as Jordan Gate in the Umm Uthainah neighbourhood). The projects are also widely advertised by the media and on billboards all over the city. When several of these projects were stopped due to the financial crisis, the city was left with major eyesores in the form of huge craters in the ground (e.g., several business towers in Abdali, Limitless Tower in Abdoun and The Living Wall in Wadi Saqra) as well as cranes left dangling in the sky for years (e.g. for the Abdali and Jordan Gate projects), not to speak of the considerable adverse impacts on the environment. Barthel (2010, p. 6), in his research on mega-projects in the Arab world, identified the importance of "big" in such developments, "big" both in the sense of "widely staged and narrated by the media" and in reference to the scale of these urban realities and their implications for the urban socio-spatial organization. For Europe and the United States, Rosemann (2009, p. 3) examined the important role assumed by the so-called Large Urban Projects (LUP), which "are often located on central sites in the city and in particular those suitable for the development of new business activities."

2.5 Governance and place management

The poststructuralist approaches to governance are secondary in the analysis of the three case studies, which is based primarily on neo-Marxist theories, as mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, this study will attempt to make preliminary analyses of the case studies with regard to the following issues related to urban governance: the changing mode of government; the emergence of new governing bodies on the city; the production of new subjects and experts involved in urban management; the notion of privatization of planning and creation of new types of partnerships between the public and private sectors; the informalization of decision-making and building permit processes; and the changing conditions of urban production (such as the use of 3D imagery). These analyses should then be complemented by more extensive fieldwork in the future.

In general, most of the case studies the author analyzed testify to a clear trend in urban management in the Arab world today, namely that of the delegation of planning to the private sector. This private sector then operates in the midst of newly emerging

governing bodies of the city (e.g., MAWARED¹⁴ and the newly established Special Projects Unit within Greater Amman Municipality). In the case of the Abdali project, the investors together with the state concluded that regular governmental bodies alone would not suffice to bring the project to completion. Therefore, a new organization had to be established, which led to the creation of MAWARED by the King of Jordan, alongside other neoliberal institutions in the region such as SOLIDERE in Beirut and ASEZA (Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority) (Daher, 2011, p. 273-96). These newly formed governing bodies of the city are, in general, replacing older governmental bodies such as municipalities and governorates which had either been disintegrated entirely (as is the case in Aqaba) or had taken over a more technical role such as service and infrastructure provision.

Furthermore, new types of partnerships had evolved between the private and public sectors. Several examples come to mind such as partnerships between Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) and private developers (e.g., build-operate-transfer partnerships that GAM entered into with CHEDI, a transnational boutique-hotel developer¹⁵). Other types of partnerships centered on the privatization of significant sectors such as water and electricity (to be discussed in the next section), bringing in multinational corporations as new actors and agents in these fields of infrastructure provision. Barthel (2010, p. 8), in the case of Arab cities, put forth that the changing conditions of urban production have been associated with different effects, pointing to the "multiplication of partnerships, urban planning privatization (mainly in the development and management functions), and

¹⁴ MAWARED is the state-owned National Resources Investment and Development Cooperation. Established in 2000, the company's original mandate was to redevelop several inner-city military plots (resulting in the Abdali project) and to turn them into income-generating mixed-use sites as well as to relocate the military out of densely populated areas with investment potentials to new facilities. Only five years after its inception, MAWARED had become Jordan's leading urban regeneration entity and its largest real estate developer. Furthermore, the Abdali Investment Company (AIC) was created in 2004 to develop and manage this mixed-use urban development and is largely composed of the main investors MAWARED and Saudi Oger (international developer from Saudi Arabia).

¹⁵ Over the past five years, the author served as a consultant for the Heritage Technical Committee at GAM and has worked on reviewing development projects in terms of their effect on the urban heritage of the City. The Committee was very critical of such partnerships and of the idea of building boutique hotels in the middle of downtown of Amman. One such hotel is planned right next to the Roman Theater and is supposed to adapt an existing historic public library into part of the hotel facilities. Another one is planned in the former Raghadan Bus Terminal, now relocated to the Amman-Zarqa highway.

internationalization of financial organizations and enterprise.” He elaborated that these partnerships could take on several forms, such as the public company, the hybrid public and private company and the private company (which may result from a private-private partnership). In addition to the previously mentioned MAWARED (operating in Amman) and ASEZA (operating in Aqaba), several examples could be cited in the Arab world, such as the Société de Promotion du Lac de Tunis (involving the Tunisian government and the Saudi company Al Baraka in the development of the northern lagoon shores of the Tunisian capital (Barthel 2010, p. 8), and SOLIDERE (Société Libanaise de Développement et de Reconstruction), which spearheaded the neoliberal development and management of downtown Beirut where the local municipality’s role was extremely marginalized (Summers, 2005; Daher, 2008; Krijnen & Fawaz, 2010). The analyses of processes of neoliberal urban management discourse observe the production and emergence of not only spaces of neoliberal management within the city but also new subjects in the form of experts, CEOs of private multinational corporations, the transnational capitalist class, and also the urban entrepreneurs orchestrating urban management in the city.

One important observation is the flexibility granted to corporate capital through the informalization of public decision-making when it comes to approving large-scale and corporate neoliberal investment in the City. The Special Projects Unit of the Greater Amman Municipality recently became responsible for approving the applications of these high-end projects that are promoted by these “special” investors and urban entrepreneurs. Such a unit facilitated the informalization in the general regulatory process concerning decision-making, specifically for obtaining building permits for such “special” projects and zoning alterations where land with linear commercial land use is granted the privilege to be transformed into buildings with more height and increased floor area ratios.¹⁶ Krijnen and Fawaz (2010, p. 117) observe similar trends in urban governance in Beirut of late, further arguing “that additional flexibility is provided to capital through the informalization of public decision-making with regard to planning decisions, meaning more decisions are taken by mutual agreement, on ad-hoc basis, at multiple levels of the public hierarchies.”

The new master plan envisioned for Amman in 2007–2008 was conceived primarily to regulate the mega-projects (business towers and other corporate neoliberal urban ventures) facilitated by global capital (mainly Arab Gulf surplus capital from oil that found its way to Amman, among other Arab cities in the region after September 11, 2011, when it was no longer welcomed in the West). Parker (2009, p. 116) stated that the Master Plan uses different techniques to represent regulatory diversity within a scheme of unity. The Master Plan notably “scales up the various spaces of exemption and privilege by creating a ‘one-stop shop’ (single window approval process) that allows investors to browse and compare between investment opportunities in spaces under GAM jurisdiction.” This “one-stop shop” created by GAM constitutes another urban management practice that contributes to the informalization in the regulatory process mentioned earlier.

Part of this informalization is also explained by the changes taking place in the location of a given project with regard to the conditions of urban production. In cases of high-end and corporate projects, informalization is also precipitated by an increasing trend to favour visual communication, in the form of 3D images, models and videos of the proposed projects, in decision-making processes. For example, a decision-making process of a real estate project may then be based on a 3D visualization showing aesthetically pleasing elevation details yet lacking any consideration for social and physical sustainability concerns. According to Barthel (2010, p. 11), within such an approach to urban planning, projects are conceived of as finished products rather than participatory processes, with visuals employed to deflect from a need for urban strategies. In this way, the immediacy of visual language “serve[s] to screen, minimize, or hide unresolved issues in terms of metropolitan strategy, including organizational ‘design’ and urban governance.”

2.6 Changing role of the state: From rentierism to neoliberalism

The case studies will also be analyzed through the perceived changing role of the state, researching the nature and level of state involvement, state subsidies allocated for such neoliberal projects, and the changing nature of the regulatory process in general. Harvey (2005, p. 3) had elaborated that “deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” have been all too common during this neoliberal moment that we are all part of. In the case of Amman’s Abdali project, underneath

¹⁶ These observations are based on ethnographic research conducted at the Special Projects Unit at GAM between the years 2010 and 2011.

MAWARED's rhetoric to decrease state involvement lies a public (state) subsidy for private real estate development that benefits selective urban business elites from Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf. These subsidies take on different forms of urban managerial processes of filtration.

An analysis of the investments in the Abdali project, for example, reveal that the state provides large-scale subsidies for the business elite of the region to create such flagship or mega-projects of urban restructuring. Contrary to formal declarations and propaganda of the state essentially advocating its own disappearance, it is very clear that the state is still very present, heavily involved and there to stay (Daher, p. 2008). The financial contribution of the state is considerable, with prime urban land made available at very cheap prices forming a greater part of the subsidy. Other forms of subsidies include tax exemptions, infrastructure provisions and the elimination of all barriers and red tape in addition to the passing of favourable building regulations and zoning ordinances (e.g., greater building heights, increased floor area ratios and flexibility in zoning ordinances) (Summer, 2005; Daher, 2008). Of course, such subsidies are facilitated by the new urban management practices of individuals (e.g., high-ranking state officials or CEOs of MAWARED) as well as institutions (e.g., MAWARED, the one-stop shop or the Special Projects Unit created at GAM). Similar state practices are found in other parts of the Arab world. The investors of Beirut's downtown reconstruction project enjoyed subsidies similar to those given to Amman's Abdali project, which had essentially been modeled after the Beirut example (Summer, 2005; Daher, 2008). Barthel (2010, p. 10) elaborated, that in 2007, the Tunisian government officially "sold" 950 hectares of land along the recently sanitized Southern Lake in Tunis to the real estate company Sama Dubai for a token sum of one dinar. Krijnen and Fawaz (2010, p. 122) stated that in the case of Beirut, increasing the allowed built-up areas in such high-end developments and providing tax breaks on these developments and on land prices are both measures that constitute considerable public subsidies to the development sector. Peck (2004, p. 396) elaborated on the changing role of the state in channeling investment and financial resources to elite investors:

Beyond the clichés of more market/less state, the neoliberal script suggestively encompasses a wide range of proactive state strategies designed to refashion state economy relations around a new constellation of elite, managerial and financial

interests. The outcome is not one of simple convergence towards a neoliberal monoculture, comprising a series of unified and fully integrated market oriented polities, but rather a range of institutionally mediated local, national and glocal "neoliberalizations," between which there are telling interconnections and family resemblances. This has been associated with an historical wave of creative destruction in institutional and regulatory structures.

This shift in the nature of state involvement in Jordan is part of a larger privatization wave of vital sectors in the country, such as water and electricity, the withdrawal of the state from social services such as education and social housing, and the partnership of state institutions (and also state officials and ex-ministers) with multinational corporations in neoliberal real estate ventures such as the ones addressed in this paper. According to Bank and Schlumberger (2004), this new formal shift is also made possible by the new "Economic Team" around King Abdullah of Jordan. A shift in Jordan's policy priorities had been more than obvious since the first days of the King's reign, ranging from regional politics to a far-reaching reform of Jordan's economy, excessive privatization and economic competitiveness and activism. This new Economic Team, as the new politically-relevant elite, has been entitled to compose the Economic Consultative Council and was instrumental in facilitating the structural adjustment program, Jordan's accession to the World Trade Organization and the Free Trade Agreement with the United States in addition to paying lip service to the privatization of public infrastructure sectors.

Verdeil's (2009, p. 2) most valuable work on the privatization of the electricity sector presents a very significant example of empirical research addressing concrete cases of neoliberalization. Verdeil researched recent privatization processes in the electricity sector at both national and local levels, showing how "newcoming national and multinational corporate investors" are becoming dominant stakeholders. The privatization of the electricity sector can be taken as an example of the changing role of the state with regard to its role as a public service provider in general and urban infrastructure provider in particular. Verdeil (2009, p. 6) elaborated that the state's involvement in terms of the level of electricity supply to urban homes improved in dramatic proportions from 39% in 1961, to 78% in 1979 and to 99.7% by the end of the 1980s. However, the current privatization

scheme of the electricity sector,¹⁷ wherein the state is no longer subsidizing that sector (Verdeil, 2009, p. 3), stands in sheer contrast to the state's former involvement in infrastructure provision. Verdeil (2009, p. 7) also shows how privatization was accompanied with the end of subsidies to electricity, leading to increased prices in 2004 and in 2008 as well as to severe social impacts of rising urban poverty and strong inflation.

Jordan could be clearly classified as a rentier state where financial support to the government is derived from non-productive sources such as oil rent (which Jordan used to supply to other Arab oil producing countries at very discounted rates) and international aid; and where financial support to the private sector is derived primarily from remittances from mainly Jordanians working in the Gulf (Knowles, 2005, p. 9). Nowadays, and with decreasing rent made available (either due to rising oil prices or decreased remittances), it is very obvious that the state is shifting to a neoliberal economy where the formal state rhetoric advocates privatization and withdrawal from social services and infrastructure provision. The irony is that the state is at the same time subsidizing real estate development, benefitting the transnational capitalist class and multinational companies and agencies with which certain state agencies and high-ranking officials are entering into different types of partnerships.

2.7 Circulation of neoliberal practices

The case studies will ultimately be analyzed through a review of neoliberal practices addressing the circulation of global capital, planning models and the experts and subjects involved in urban management, in addition to the internationalization of financial organizations. A detailed review of many of the neoliberal high-end projects in Amman (e.g., Abdali, Jordan Gate, Andalucia, Limitless) in addition to the Decent Housing for Decent Living initiative addressing low-income housing in the city, demonstrates a massive circulation of global capital (primarily originating from Arab Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar).

¹⁷ According to Verdeil (2009), the Jordanian government justifies this privatization as necessary due to pressure, the "brutal end of the remittances from the Gulf after the second Gulf war," and to temporary decreases in international aid. "After one unsuccessful tender in 2005, Energy Arabia announced in 2007 the purchase of 51% of Central Electricity Generating Company (CEGCO). Energy Arabia (Enara) is a company established by Jordan Dubai Energy, the energy investment arm of Jordan Dubai Capital (which is owned by Dubai Holding, a giant Emirati financial firm)" (Verdeil 2009, 6-7).

Another observation concerns internationalization at a broader level. As such, the research examines financial organizations (e.g., Saudi Oger, Dubai Capital, Dubai Holding, TAAMEER, to mention a few) and their endeavours to create local companies out of global connections as well as the globalization of urban entrepreneurs and other newly produced subjects of the City. According to Parker (2009, p. 110), Amman "is being remade and presented to investors as a new city that conforms to globalized benchmarks of speed, efficiency and connectivity."

This neoliberalization in the creation of urban space also circulates urban images and planning models, which results in the dilution of local differences between cities. Nevertheless, an expanded presence of corporate urban realities and images simultaneously prevails. On the whole, the visual strategies and planning models of urban governance adopted in these projects is largely similar, despite the wide range of projects and project locations.

In order to understand the interplay and politics of these emerging models of urban governance, greater focus must be placed on the human agent behind the global capital flow orchestrated by the city's new *landlords*. The latter are the transnational capitalist class (Daher, 2008) represented through major shareholders of real estate companies, general managers/directors, corporate executives and globalizing bureaucrats. These *landlords* tend to play a crucial and significant role in the politics and dynamics of these investments as well as in the direction of capital flow within the region (Ley, 2004; Sklair, 2001). Ley (2004, p. 152) seeks to emphasize the importance of studying the different discourses of these transnational capitalists and of bringing the issue of human agency on the agenda of a globalization discourse he criticizes as having "frequently been satisfied with speaking of a space of networks and flows devoid of knowledgeable human agents."

3. REFLECTIONS

The city under neoliberal policies, despite their emancipation rhetoric, conceals exclusionary and exploitative social relations and spatial ordering that create new pockets of poverty in the inner city, cause major social and physical displacement of marginalized social groups, and remove local state authorities and replacing them by newly emerging neoliberal bodies of urban governance. There is thus a great disparity between the rhetoric of urban policies on the one hand and the resulting reality.

The common thread between the three case studies from Amman is that both types of neoliberal projects (either those targeting high-end clientele or those targeting poorer segments of society) lead to geographies of inequality in the city through the formation of urban islands of excessive consumption and exclusive residential neighborhoods and to the pushing away of poorer segments of society to the outskirts of the city, to new pockets of poverty away from social services and transportation networks.

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EUE • Neoliberal urban transformations • a-115

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