

## ***Transformation in Sociocultural Identity: Causes and Effects***

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### **Abstract**

We are living in a global world dominated by the capitalist ideology transforming the diverse urban landscape of cities around the world into a solitary imaginary setting for economic purpose. While this transformation increases the potential of the city entering into the world market, promoting economic growth, innovation and social development, at the same time it threatens social cohesion causing poverty, inequality and thrashing urban identity. Dreams of ideal societies and utopias realized through capitalist approach under the global umbrella, consider no respect for local. In this realization there is a fix shopping list of form and function which includes high-rise glass towers, shopping malls and copying styles and symbols -overlooking locality, staring at global. The crucial questions emerge here are: what are the consequences of such transformation on the future of cities; does it deconstruct identity of the city; and finally what impact that would have on the social life of the city?

The process of transformation of the sociocultural and physical environment of the city is based on development policies for physical and economic planning. The integration of policies and practices, therefore, play an important role to develop a concept for urban development, promoting economic opportunities and establishing the future identity of the city. Urban identity is a distinguished image of the city in the competitive global market. Thus, it is important to understand the logic of the dynamic processes and continuous changes in the cities, in order to transform these threats into opportunities.

The paper presents a critique of the transformation of the identity of Amman city in Jordan, discussing changes in sociocultural identity; its causes and effects. It first, presents various theories on the transformations in city identity, and its impact on sociocultural context, then analyzes the transformation of identity of Amman city since the post-World War II, and finally discusses strategies for progressive identity of the city.

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## 1. Definition of urban identity

Identity is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon, it embraces linkages between the physical and social characters; it has different scales: local, city, regional, and national; it can be seen from various perspectives: personal, collective, external; it develops in time, affected by the change, and influenced by many factors. Identity can be used for romantic and practical purposes, as a tool of social transformation and in branding, and focusing on the spirit of the place, and on collective memories (Scheffler 2009).

Urban identity, according to Antrobus 2009, includes social, economic, cultural, and physical aspects. It is regarded as an important factor with which cities can create a corporate feeling within their citizens and businesses through civic pride, strengthening the identification with the town and place (Scheffler 2009). Old Towns with their well-maintained physical, cultural heritage (monuments, groups of buildings and historic sites) provides this distinct identity. This identity is strongly related to the personal identity of citizens and that of the local community. 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 stronger identification with the place (Barreiro et al 2009). Urban identity is one of the essential goals for the future of a good environment that enhances the sense of belonging, individually and collectively (Oktay 2002). It serves to distinguish the city from others by creating a distinct image, and attracting skilled people and investments (Barreiro et al 2009).

Traditionally, identity was based on the cultural history of the place supporting the human creativity to produce the deep meaning of locality, in opposition, today the whole logic is replaced by urban branding where images reflecting power and prosperity, and adoring the surface rather than the roots. Each city had its own distinctive character representing the social culture of the society, its architecture and urban form, as Kostof 2009 remarks, were the transparent medium of cultural expression. This however has changed, or expressing it more carefully, is in the process of changing due to the impact of globalization transforming the world cultures into a single consumerism culture. The process of cultural homogenization promoted by global capitalism has weakened the urban identity, promoting the idea of sameness. Consequently, as Madanipour (1996) argues, 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 to uproot themselves from their social, historical and cultural context from one moment to the next” which is neither realistic nor sustainable (Woodcraft 2011:13).

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. The priority of urban regeneration and new development is mostly oriented towards economy (Lin 2010) accelerating the rates of change and transforming the image of the contemporary city. In this process of transformation some cities lose their identity, others manage to develop a new one. Charles Murray (2003) points out that those *elite cities* which develop with a better artistic and cultural atmosphere are more open to

new ideas and have a better opportunity to build an image of elite city. 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. They fall into the process of globalization motivated by economic growth, mass production and consumption joining the cultural homogenization. Barreiro et al (2009) also reminds us that for some cities, identity is an anchor, providing continuity for development, preserving the rich traditions of communities, and making sure that changes brought about by time do not carry away essential qualities of the city. In this sense, urban regeneration developments must respect and even build on the positive local identity as it provides a sense of home and security for the society.

As this indicates, Localizing the urban identity is a big challenge that faces the global cities, as *locality* can be conceptualized as comprising layers of different outcomes over time, it contains various surfaces, according to Madanipour et al 2001:54, which are landscape, facilities, institutions, culture, demography, and economy. Understanding the logic behind the urban regeneration projects and their role in re-branding the city identity gives a room for researchers to recognize the importance of localizing urban identity that unifies the city. And since urban identity is formed through the social process (Madanipour, 2001), all stakeholders are “in a position to invent new cultural patterns and new social philosophies, and then choose material conditions and community design to fit the desired cultural goals and philosophies” (Kostof 2009:206). Building contemporary urban identity on the basis of cultural heritage is not a detached process; it is integrated in the general urban development process. Various actions taken by different cities to strengthen their cultural heritage in order to support urban identity such as: Directly investing in cultural heritage to strengthen the area’s distinctive character and identity; marketing the distinctiveness and quality of life of the area to the outside world in order to attract enterprises, skilled workforce, inhabitants and tourists; communicating the particular cultural value of the place to inhabitants and tourists, reflecting the historic traditions and values; organizing cultural events in the historic setting, reviving public spaces offering qualified and specialized tour guides; assigning functions to the physical and cultural heritage, which citizens experience in their daily life (Barreiro et al 2009, Scheffler 2009). These actions, however, do not only concern the physical dimension, but also involve bringing new, sustainable uses to the built environment that are supported by local actors, professionals, and property owners.

## **2. Reshaping city identity under capitalism**

City shaped organically without intending plans thus the product is an unplanned city which reflect the political, social, and cultural features of urban life. However, as soon as it expanded, developed and attached to planned areas the whole identity starts to change (Kostof 2009). This transformation affects the sociocultural context of the city. Some city managers, those who are satisfied with the existing identity, try to localize its image through urban regeneration projects that preserve the local culture, while others, who are unsatisfied with the current urban identity, aim to transform its image to more globalized one that reflects power and prosperity (Scheffler 2009, Barreiro et al 2009). The created identity is mainly used in marketing the city worldwide and attracting investments as well as tourism, these contemporary

approaches to urban regeneration in most cities are promoting images rather than sustainable concepts and process.

As was discussed above, political and economic aspects play a critical role in transforming the urban identity and redefining the meaning of urban space. Major change happens in the beginning of the 21st century that accelerates the city transformation is the economic crisis. It “has already had serious consequences for employment and public budgets” (EU 2011:91), and affected the physical, social, cultural, and governmental aspects in different cities worldwide. The transnational mobility of capital has brought about specific forms of articulation among different geographic areas - including Jordan and the Middle East- “where investment is made in the built environment, creating a whole physical landscape for the purpose of production, circulation, exchange, and consumption” (Madanipour, 1996:17), and where the capitalist ideology has its own logic in remodelling the world; according to its own partial view (Summer 2005). This partial view increases the spatial segregation and the social polarization; thus affect the social sustainability.

The complex nature of identity involves a variety of factors, and building a new identity is not just about recovering the past or its heritage, but also to determine the city’s future. In the global world, the image of the city no longer reflects the identity of place since the same pattern of development, the same architecture of high rise buildings, and the same cityscape with no reference to locality is repeated worldwide (Madanipour 1996). This approach has contributed to dullness where most cities becoming an imported image with no identity. This sameness or placeless identity harms the social sustainability. Accordingly, the traditional culture of the city is subject to change and modification, and identity might be better understood through the changing role of the city. Cities should be reshaped to address the needs of the new economy, thus it can be seen from different perspectives as hubs for creative industries and business (Sassen 2006), or as spaces for consumption (Lin 2010), or as realms of play (Stevens 2007).

### **3. Transformation of Amman’s identity**

Reviewing the historical development of the Amman city since its formation as a small Circassian village in 1878, till its present character as a large city with over two million populations shows how Amman urban identity has been formed in relation to constantly changing, absorbing, and responding to social and spatial practices. The review also demonstrate how the position of Amman moved from being a city whose identity had reference to its socio-historical background to the one whose identity has been displaced by entering into the global economy

Amman has experienced periods of great confusion and transformation from the migrations that drastically affected the physical, sociocultural, and socioeconomic features of the city, especially with the arrival of migrant after the First Gulf War in 1990, and the Second Gulf War in 2003 (UN 2005). The newcomers generated an economic boost to Amman through buying properties, investing in the business, and introducing new consumption patterns. The city quickly responded to the new increasing consumption pattern through expansion of existing commercial enterprises and the development of new restaurants, supermarkets, and shopping malls to meet the new market demands (Pilder 2011). One of the impact of the economic boom was the increasing demand for residential and commercial properties fostering real-estate

boom and the opportunity for investment in property development in West of Amman (UN 2005; Peters & Moore 2009).

The power of the economy further increased the division between different income groups; this division is presented by high-income gated communities, luxury office towers, and modern shopping malls. Other factors such as; a growing population and increasing number of young people, availability of credit facilities, flourishing tourism market, favorable investment market, and the government's continuous efforts in promoting privatization; created the boom in the Jordanian real-estate sector (Al-Faouri 2011). While the majority of countries in the region were experiencing some level of instability, Jordan became the favorite destination for tourists. All these national and regional factors increased the demand for housing in Amman fostering the development of huge residential development, increasing the land and property values to levels no longer affordable by the average income Jordanian (Atiyat 2013; Al-Faouri 2011), driving local people to the outskirts of the city where prices stayed relatively lower than Amman city. This transformation affected the cityscape and architectural characteristics of the City

### 3.1 Urban form and Cityscape

Although downtown Amman remained a busy and crowded part of the city, it no longer played the central role it previously had in the urban life. Most of the governmental organizations, corporate head offices and upscale commercial establishments that used to be located in the downtown were relocated to the outskirts of Amman (Al-Asad 2013). Even the State mosque of Jordan moved from Al-Hussaini Mosque in the downtown to the King Abdullah Mosque in Abdali district (Fig. 1). This relocation affected the cityscape as the minarets and the dome of Al-Hussaini mosque would not reflect the center point of the City anymore (UN 2005).



Fig. 1 The State mosque of Jordan moved from Al-Hussaini Mosque in downtown (on left) to the King Abdullah Mosque in Abdali district (on right) (Source: the researcher)

Amman, the city of hats and stairs, would move on to become the city of Circles that demonstrate the evolution of major traffic circles or roundabouts series from the First circle in *Jabal Amman* area to the Eighth circle in *Wadi al-Sair* area, these circles cut through the City's western parts (Khalid 2013). Amman's Circles define the capital's timeline, the expansion of the capital, at least westwards, can be represented by a single journey from the First to the Eighth circle, passing through the city's major tunnels constructed largely throughout the late 1990's and early 2000's (GAM 2013b). Both commercial and residential districts quickly formed around each major

traffic circle, as the city's limits shifted through the decades. Landmarks took their place on each circle, including the International Hotels, various foreign embassies, and the Prime Minister's office.

Since the 1990s, with the emergence of the new developments, the increase of pressure on the infrastructure, particularly the road networks, which were already, subject to considerable traffic congestions (UN 2005). Congestion is a single word that characterizes the urban transport system of Amman, Al-Asad (2005; 2013) argues that since the 1990s Amman has become a more congested city making it increasingly difficult to drive, and almost impossible to walk through. The city suffers from considerable traffic congestion at peak hours, especially during the summer months when tourists from the Gulf region and Jordanian returnees flood into the City. The problem is further exacerbated due to the absence of an integrated public transport system- only 29% of Jordanians use public transport (DOS 2013). That means transportation in Amman is as socially polarized as the structure of the city itself. As a result, the City cannot keep up with an increasing number of cars on the roads, which has grown dramatically as a result of an increasing population, rising standards of living and lowered import prices on cars (Potter et al 2009). To minimize and control urban transport problem GAM constructed *Abdoun* Bridge in 2006, located in inner-urban west Amman, with a total reported cost of JD 10.8 million, having been undertaken by means of Japanese funding. The high-tech 45m in height and 425m in length bridge forms part of the Cityscape and is considered as contemporary landmark in Amman's skyline (Potter et al 2009:89) (Fig. 2).

The emergence of the new developments in the shape of high-rise buildings, and shopping malls represents a clear example of urban restructuring and evolving of a new form of spatial ordering, with elegant services and facilities and an excellent infrastructure for wealthy social class (Al-Faouri 2011). Many researchers, such as (Yaghmour 2013, Khalid 2013, Atiyat 2013) question the passion with real-estate development and point out the damage done on the human and social dimensions. They highlight that the strong demand on real-estate in Amman has led to social and spatial polarization, as the increase in the price of land and property driving locals to the outskirts of the city where prices remain affordable. It also caused the displacement of the existing neighborhood, as AL-Faouri 2011 and Daher 2010 note, new developments such as *Jordan Gate* high-rise towers have caused the displacement of *Amrah* residential park; *Limitless* high-rise towers have caused the displacement of the *Wadi Abdoun* village; *Abdali* developments have caused the dislocation of the *Za'amta* neighborhood and the *Abdali* transport hub to the outskirts of the city. Besides, the displacement of the *Raghadan* transport hub to make room for new tourism projects. These dislocations have serious impacts on cityscape and on the sense of belonging for residents who suddenly obliged to relocate, moreover, the new location of *Raghadan* transport hub in *al-Mahatta* away from the downtown is causing difficulties not only to transport users but also to various merchants who once benefitted from vibrant pedestrian activity.



Fig. 2 The contemporary cityscape of Amman dominated by Abdoun bridge and Jordan Gate towers (source: the researcher 2013)

Many high-density mixed use developments were being proposed, and because the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) lacked the regulations to control the location of these projects, they were built randomly around the city. Decision makers believed that high-rises are an essential solution to fulfilling peoples' needs for residential apartments, addresses the rapid increase of land value, and reduces the expenses of the horizontal expansion of the infrastructure. While the economic consideration is a valid point, however, no attention has been made to retain the overall characteristic of the urban form. Therefore, the emergence of a number of high-rise buildings replacing the four story buildings clad with local stones has changed the unified scale that had characterized Amman (Beauregard & Colomina 2011).

Shopping malls are another product of the continuous transformation that emerged to Amman, taking away the social life that was spread at the landscape of the city- the shopping street, the squares and the market places – and placing them in an isolated indoor building separated from the neighborhood by large parking spaces (Abu-Ghazalah & Abu-Ghanimeh 2006; UN 2005). A study by Abu-Ghazalah & Abu-Ghanimeh (2006) found that all the modern shopping malls which are mainly located in west Amman, were developed without any study of their impact on the social life of the city. Their study also found that despite the unaffordable prices of goods by the majority of lower-middle and low income groups, the new malls have become a new social places because they include multiple leisure places such as cinemas, restaurant, coffee shops, etc. where people can gather, sit, eat, talk, and entertain, and they also have a pleasant atmosphere during the whole days of the year because of its well air-conditioned during day and night that creates a pleasant environment for people to gather and socialize.

Moreover, they found that the high-income group consist the main visitors to shopping malls because they can afford high prices for brands. The middle-income group makes use of entertainment section mainly due to relatively reasonable prices of games if compared to other places at Amman. They also found that people in general prefer to buy their goods from a small shop rather shopping malls (Abu-Ghazalah and Abu-Ghanimeh 2006). Pilder (2011:12) portrays the contrasting experience of the current market at downtown Amman with the one of the shopping mall in west Amman. He starts with describing the busy life of the downtown and its



market portraying the traditional image of Amman, where social and physical elements of the city are integrated and writes:

“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.....”

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 theaters, food courts, gourmet grocery stores, and any retailer one could find in an American mall. At night, the bubbling sound of 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 highlights that both environments contain sensual experience - smell, sound, feelings, and vision- however, in the first case, the market, both the social behavior and the physical setting are local where as in the second case the physical setting is an imported commodity.

### **3.2 Architectural style**

The architecture of houses during the last decade follows the mixture of architectural styles in interior and exterior design. House plans include the same public/private spheres that identified the previous eras. The organization of interior spaces is inspired by the Islam regulation, but still, the level of implementing the privacy concerns is differ according to social tradition and lifestyle. In contrast, the commercial buildings started to follow the Hi-Tech style or what can be called the global style. Al-Asad (2008:28) argues that the globe is experiencing “a profound shift from the micro-scale of architecture to the macro urban scale; and from the localized architectural identities to an attempt to fit within overall global development”. In order to fit within the global context, cities are forced to compete in a world market in order to attract capital, thus, they become like the exhibition for various architectural languages. Buildings represent purely abstract, technical signifiers without context, expressing power and capitalism, and marketing the hyperspace that suits the consumer capital. Therefore, the culture of globalization is threatening the architectural scene of different parts of the globe as it is employed as a ready-made product that implemented everywhere with no reference to locality.

On the other hand, towers which are the product of private enterprise, have different Hi-Tech design similar to those of Dubai, cubic and irregular glass units that are going to dominate the image of the City. Showcase glass-unit and aluminum sheeted



architecture is reflecting the power and dominance of a new capital system praising technology and its cutting-edge accomplishments which is reflecting a standardized architecture (Fayyad 2009). Glass as a new material started to spread widely in Amman as the center of business. Al-Faqih (2009) argues that such transformation in transparency proportions is mainly due to new shifts in privacy. In contrast, Fayyad (2009) argues that the use of glass is not associated with its practical qualities of transparency, light, and flow between the inside and outside. It is rather becoming a symbol of progress and modernization.

Investors are planting shopping malls in the different areas in Amman, imitating Dubai's model. Amman is witnessing an establishment of huge shopping malls within an already exhausted urban realm that lacks appropriate infrastructure. The architectural characteristics for shopping malls follow international style, one can see in any large city around the world, a large size building with a blank facade facing the street covered by images and brand names (Fig. 3), unlike traditional architectural treatments those were used in traditional markets. Imitation of imported architecture and lifestyle of the upper classes, trusting the example they give was, according to Badran 2014, maybe due to the weak educational and cultural background of both the local architects and the clients.



Fig. 3 The architecture of shopping malls in Amman (Source: collected by the researcher)

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 educated in the west tried to apply modernist architectural principles to develop a modern Jordanian style of architecture (Fig. 4) (Potter et al 2009, Pilder 2011). While those who were educated in Jordan universities linked the history of Jordan to a broader Arab-Islamic culture and used the Islamic architecture as a source for developing a new Jordanian architectural style (Badran 2014). However, this conflict has minuses and pluses, although it benefits the city as diversity enriches the architectural language, reflects the continuous progress, and presents Amman as a center for original architectural innovation over the years, but still, it creates some

chaos and harm the traditional identity because there are no regulation to preserve aesthetic quality or control the architectural characteristics for each neighborhood thus some areas transform into exhibition for eclectic designs, moreover, architects focus on forms and images for the buildings and deny the spaces between them where the real social life embodied.



Fig. 4 Localizing architecture by returning to the logic of Islamic design (GAM 2013)

Although both schools of modernism and regionalism overlooked the traditional architecture of the city, nevertheless their architectural products contributed to the development of Amman, presenting the city as a center for original architectural innovation. 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). However 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 replaced the local natural stone that covered the building's facades with huge masses of black or blue glass, and sometimes with Alucobond (aluminum composite sheets) with a large variety of colors. For them, covering the original stone facades with fashionable materials is the best solution and the easiest way to represent modernism and become up-to-date (Zalloom 2010).

#### 4. Conclusion: Strategies to govern the city and its uniqueness

The contemporary history of Amman, as was discussed above, demonstrates the influence of the increasing power of capitalism in shaping the city. It also demonstrated the lack of clear policy/vision for the development of the city with references to the past and the contemporary life. The latter point, the lack of policy, was evident in the failure of the two groups of the modernists and regionalism architects and the influence of local enterprises in shaping the city. Amman case supports the current argument that under global capitalism, the power of control of the authority has been replaced by a fragmented organization which negatively affect the citizens' desire in shaping their city, thus, the "challenge for spatial planning has been to adjust to this change from government to governance, where political and economic power lies with not one powerful government but a multiplicity of agencies and interests" (Madanipour et al 2001:2). Antrobus argues that the fragmented responsibilities for administrative space and the changing nature of market relations call for a comprehensive method of governance the space. Therefore, new way of governance needs to be linked to new ways of thinking in urban space and urban life,

and benefit from the diversity of the city (Antrobus 2009). The impact of global capitalism on the sustainability of the European society has led policy makers to place social aspect of the city very high on the national agenda (Madanipour et al 2000).

Political economy ignores the importance of spatial relations (Madanipour, 1996), and successfully translated commercial interests into new urban form. In the global world, there is a risk of globalizing the identity, and therefore the loss of one's own identity. When promoting the city's identity, it is important to promote its uniqueness; that feature which makes it different (Antrobus 2009). It is also important to make sure that the city's true identity is addressed and all the citizens' voices are heard (Barreiro et al 2009). Many researchers (such as Antrobus 2009; Kostof 2009; Oktay 2002; Lin 2010) argue that the identity of any city depends on the connections it makes to the wider world. In the contemporary era of globalization, the identity of the city is also important in creating connections. City managers who seek to transform their cities, therefore, must understand how their place is seen in order to attract flows of resources (Antrobus 2009).

To turn urban threats into urban threads practical strategies to govern the city and its uniqueness should be applied. The first step is developing a citywide agenda by making an deep assessment of how existing public spaces are performing or underperforming. This assessment, according to EU 2011, should include every neighborhood and involve the people who live there as well as other key stakeholders. Such a district-by-district approach encourages residents and officials to look at their neighborhoods again and bring unexpected possibilities to light. Unused and underused spaces can be identified and improved in a systematic way (EU 2011). Social innovation offers an opportunity to widen the public space for civic engagement, creativity, innovation and cohesion, thus enhances the sense the identity of place. In cities where place-making has taken hold, local government is often not directly involved in implementation, but relies on community development organizations, business improvement districts, and neighborhood partnerships to take the lead in regenerating their communities (PPS 2012). This means that when it comes to public spaces, the community is the expert, and that local partnerships are essential to the process of creating dynamic, sustainable, and unique public spaces that truly serve a city's people.

These strategies are not limited to promoting the city's identity, but also include restructuring the social fabric by enhancing the social activities, inclusive designs that are affordable and accessible to all strata, inclusive governance for the projects and its facilities, and finally, public participation in planning and decision making. Communities everywhere are the best source of information; they can decide what exactly makes their public spaces a destination.

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## **B. Interviews with specialists in Jordan:**

Atiyat, M. 2013

Al-Asad, A. 2013

Badran, R. 2014

Khalid, M. 2013

Yagmour, F. 2013