Orientalizing the Orient
Renovating Downtown Amman

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

The concern area around the Roman Amphi-Vetera and the Citadel including the old Amman palace, kiosk and a traditional market place and wants to redecorate the entrances of some shops in a traditional Arabesque motif. Accordingly, the flow of tourists will be channelled through three passageways lined with souvenir shops, guiding the visitors from the Citadel to the Amman market or vice versa. But the refurbishing of downtown Amman does not only aim at an 'orientalization' of the old city centre, but it is a reintroduction of Ottoman architecture, it contains an other major project: the new national museum, which will focus on the various aspects of Transjordanian history and culture. While the exhibition will include an amphitheatre, the section, the main focus will be on the recent Hashemite history.

Early development of Amman

Though Amman has a long tradition, there was no settlement continuity and the historical cœur had important consequences for the development of the city. Signs of human settlement in what is now modern Amman date back at least 6,000 years. Later on, the Roman and Greek empires made use of the city and in the 7th century, the whole region was incorporated into the newly established Islamic dominion. But after the disastrous Mongolian conquest in the 13th century, Amman's development stagnated, and only in 1878 that Circassian refugees who had been expelled from the Russian Empire were settled in the ruins of ancient Amman by the Ottoman administration. Remains of the German and Greek rule today form the most important tourist sites in Amman.

Typical features of a traditional Arab and Islamic city emerged during the formative years from 1876 to the end of the 1930s: the Huseini Mosque in the centre of the city, the surrounding markets, a cemetery some way up from the city centre in Ras Al-'Ain, and the palace of the ruler which was built from 1924 onwards in Raghadan. Unlike other cities in the Middle East, Amman never knew a clear residential separation of Muslims and Christians, but ethnic clusters did emerge in proximity to the market place and to the town while the lower income populations of Amman are detached from the economy always looking for cash money, desperately bolster tourism in the kingdom which has been negatively affected by Al-Aqsa Intifada and the 11 September attacks. For example, Amman is the Cultural Capital of the Arab World 2002 and will thus become an important destination for Arab tourists. The Jordanian economy, always looking for cash money, desperately needs the renovation of downtown Amman. It is therefore only logical that Jordan tries to meet the expectations of Western and Arab visitors as a means to improve the national balance sheet.

Downtown Amman also contains one of the city's biggest and most frequented parks: the Hashimiyya Square opposite the Roman Amphitheatre. The place, which adjoins Raghadan bus terminal, was originally planned as a major tourist area with shopping arcades, souvenir booths, restaurants and cafés. Nevertheless, it developed less into a place of consumption and more into a place of recreation and relaxation. The large open space, bordered by trees and decorative fountains, has become a centre point for the reinterpretation of downtown Amman does not only aim at an 'orientalization' of the old city centre, but it is a reintroduction of Ottoman architecture, it contains an other major project: the new national museum, which will focus on the various aspects of Transjordanian history and culture. While the exhibition will include an amphitheatre, the main focus will be on the recent Hashemite history.

Use of public space

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

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