

Amman: Past and Future of a Modern Arab Capital

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Particularly since mid-1990's, successive governments in Jordan have been pursuing active economic policies aimed at liberalizing the Jordanian economy and securing Jordan's position in the regional and global economy. In due course, there has been a rise in the size and scale of public and private investment projects. Now, it has become clear that large areas of inexpensive land would be needed to accommodate both currently planned major public projects, and the anticipated large private-sector projects. Therefore, the prime-minister recently instructed the Municipality of Greater Amman to undertake steps towards the creation of a "development corridor" extending between the eastern and southeastern fringes of the city, partly within city limits, partly outside. These areas have historically received little attention from the city's administration, but today they are to be incorporated within the framework of a larger "City Development Strategy" (CDS). This new set of conditions is forcing a reprioritizing of planning objectives for the city of Amman and its metropolitan area and an adaptation or modification of past spatial planning practice. The historically long-standing concern for the provision of land for housing is now about to be superseded by the rising need for provision of large areas of inexpensive land for big public and private projects; and, judging by the spatial morphology of the city, the effect of this new prioritization will perhaps permanently alter the previously adopted model of the compact city with a surrounding greenbelt, if not obliterate it altogether. Therefore, the search is on for a new model of planning for the city of Amman, a model that could accommodate the emerging set of planning objectives. The resultant impact on planning practice, however, is yet to be seen.

Introduction

In 1989, Jordan entered into a period of economic crisis signalled by a serious deterioration of the balance-of-payments and pressure on reserves and the exchange rate. Yet in spite of that, the financial status of the then newly-formed administrative entity of Greater Amman, comprising the previous Municipality of Amman, 13 other adjoining municipalities, the new town of Abu Nuseir, 13 villages, councils and rural areas, all covering an area of 528 sq. km of both urban and rural land with a population of around 1 million, was embarking on a path of economic recovery from the past decade, the 1980's, that had been characterized by severe financial trouble, into the 1990's, a decade in which it was to accrue great economic riches.

A number of factors helped create this contradiction between the critical state of the economy in Jordan during the 1990's on one hand, and, on the other hand, the acquired administrative and economic strength of the large administrative entity that had become known since 1990 as the Municipality of Greater Amman. Two main factors can be immediately singled out: first, the increased tax revenues collected from a much larger area of coverage to which no previous financial commitment or investment had been done; second, the return of a large number of expatriots, as a result of the second-Gulf War in 1991, who had been for some time working in the oil-rich Gulf countries, estimated at around 300,000 a majority of whom settled in Amman and of whom only % 28.4 owned their own residence and only %22.6 owned their own land (DoS, 1993) leading to an increase in increase in housing demand estimated at around 30,000 housing units (MoP, 1993).

The corresponding increase in the number of new trade licences within Greater Amman in that decade, the 1990's, is indicative of the amount of investment resulting from those returnees as two-thirds of all currently listed trade license were given during the 1990's, numbering 47,640 licenses (68.8%) out of a total of 69,254.¹ Furthermore, the changing nature of industrial investment, is indicated by the fact that around 77% of the total of all industrial establishments located within the boundaries of Greater Amman have become jointly owned by combined local and foreign capital, a matter that indicates the extent of foreign investment in that sector.

This trend is expected to rise in view of the continuity of the liberalization and privatization policies that had led to this situation, starting from the Economic Reform Program agreed upon between the Government of Jordan and the IMF, begun in 1989, followed by the signing of a Peace Treaty with Israel in 1994 which resulted in ordinances regarding Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ), then by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995 which aimed at creating a zone of "shared peace, prosperity and stability" to quote the November 1995 Barcelona Declaration, and which resulted in the signing of a bilateral free trade area agreement with Europe.

The Municipality of Greater Amman has therefore to respond to the emerging set of economic conditions, and spatial planning practice has to adapt itself to a reprioritization of planning objectives. A major challenge is the rising need for large areas of inexpensive land to accommodate all sorts of development projects, both public and private, land which is to be found at the outer edge of the city. This may require in some cases extending the city boundaries while in other cases, among other things, it might need a new kind of administration or urban governance especially adapted for the target areas that lie outside the officially recognized city boundaries. It is also expected that the experience gained in Amman will be spread to other parts of the country.² Before moving to that discussion, however, a brief overview of previous planning practice is perhaps needed to orient the reader both historically and geographically.

Continuity and Adaptation in the Planning of Amman, 1955-2004

Contrary to what is often perceived as lack of planning, Amman has had a good share of physical plans since the declaration of independence in 1946. Both the earliest plan done in 1955-56 by Max Lock and Gerald King, and the latest one known as Greater Amman Comprehensive Development Plan (GACDP) completed in 1988 by Dar Al-Handasah, a private consultancy firm, in collaboration with the then Municipality of Amman, were the most ambitious in scope. The priorities and the rationale for these two main plans were, however, quite different. The 1955 Plan provided a grand conception aimed at articulating a new capital for a newly-born nation state, and contained much of the latest British innovations in town planning, architecture, and civic design. As described by its authors, it was based upon a conception of self-contained mountain neighborhoods, grouped around the valley, along which the original city has extended, and linked by a series of inter-mountain roads which also give access to the city center.

The plan is related to major British innovations of the 1940's such as: the adoption of the neighborhood unit principle, along with elaborate traffic planning which was one of main achievements of Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan of 1944; the idea of green "fingers" or "wedges" acting both as link and buffer between the various neighborhoods; the location of green open space between neighborhood units; the proposal for a "central park" located at the center of the town including town hall, library, theater, art gallery; and, the creation of a large government administrative complex at the citadel, a "Capitol," that would crown the whole area.

Over thirty years separate Lock's Plan from GACDP, which was completed in 1988. During that time, the town maintained its growth in its present locality without any dispersal of focus such that physical growth followed the town's own urban and rural morphology, a deliberate choice by Victor Lorenz, a Czech planner responsible for the subsequent 1968 Plan.

Consolidating the metropolitan area of the city of Amman under a single administrative apparatus, however, was the main achievement of GACDP. The amalgamation (consolidation) process brought the city of Amman enormous economic benefits allowing it to overcome its financial crisis and the long-standing budget deficit, and greatly improved its service delivery potential. It also made possible grand undertakings in the form of roads, civic amenities and public buildings and projects.

Furthermore, GACDP included recommendations for satellite communities towards the eastern and south-eastern outer edges of the city as the preferred long-term settlement pattern, a satellite town to the east and a limited satellite town immediately south of the International Airport at the southernmost edge of the city. The two settlements were to be connected, both to the adjacent town of Zarqa on one end and to the main airport on the other by a major circumferential highway.

In the course of the years, however, instead of implementing the proposals for these two satellite communities, the municipality of Greater Amman opted to expand the city boundaries towards the east making the proposed settlements part of the city itself; an additional 172 km² were thus added to the city area, making the total area equal to 700 km² with a population estimated today at around two million inhabitants.

The time horizon of GACDP was twenty years covering the period 1985-2005, and is therefore about to be superseded. Thus, today, the city administration is trying to forge a vision for the decades to come. This has recently been given urgency by the recent decision of the central government to create a "Development Corridor" along the previously planned circumferential highway connecting the northeastern and southeastern extremities of the city;

parts of this corridor lie within current city boundaries while other parts lie outside it and are thus within the planning jurisdiction of the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MMRA). The government instructed the Municipality of Greater Amman to prepare the terms of reference (TOR) for a planning job to be undertaken by a private consultant to cover the whole area. This is the work in progress today.

Looking Ahead

Today, a decade and a half after the publication of GACDP in 1988, the eastern and southeastern expansion of the city is about to be articulated. The exact nature of this development, however, is still uncertain. One of the key objectives of GACDP was the provision of land for urban development away from land speculation mechanisms. According to the prevalent opinion within the GACDP team, inflationary land prices had been the result of land speculation mechanisms resulting from inefficient and more often malicious planning practices by local municipal councils, dominated, as these councils often are, by elected council members pandering to their electoral constituencies by unnecessarily zoning large areas of land for development, a process known to enhance and inflate land value which in the end makes it out of reach for lower-income groups, particularly for housing purposes.

Currently, the Municipality of Greater Amman covers an area of (700 km²), with more than half (350 km²) already zoned for development, and only half of that (175 km²) occupied by buildings that are on average only two storeys high. The horizontal expansion alone, without any vertical expansion for more than the current average of two floors is enough to house around eight million inhabitants which is the estimated population of the city after forty years considering its current population of over two million inhabitants and an estimated yearly population growth rate of 4%. Therefore, on the basis of an anticipated need for land for housing the growing population there seems to be no rationale for expanding the city's zoned area as had been lately suggested for areas that have been recently included within city boundaries. Furthermore, such expansion runs counter to one of the main objectives of GACDP aimed, as it had been, at achieving a more compact form of the city. So why expand the areas zoned for development?

It has been argued that zoning more land would lower land prices. This, however, runs counter to the arguments marshaled in GACDP a decade and a half ago when the whole idea of metropolitan control was justified by the perceived malpractice of over-zoning undertaken by small local municipal councils which was signaled out in GACDP as the main reason for land speculation mechanisms leading, as it was then argued, to inflationary prices of land once it had become legally zoned for urban development.

On the other hand, under current planning laws and bylaws, and considering the administrative capabilities of the Municipality it is fairly impossible to enforce strict control over development in areas that have not been legally declared zoning areas, a matter that might justify expanding the zoned areas, thus expanding the city area, in order to facilitate control over development at the southern and eastern fringes of the city, areas that have so far been growing at relatively slow pace compared to other areas of the city and without much planning effort invested in them. This is particularly true for areas that are under the jurisdiction of small municipal councils that have little or no technical competence to shoulder the burden of planning mandated to them by the current planning laws.

Added to that is the growing need for large areas of land for major governmental projects such as the proposed new Land Transport Terminal, and new Customs Building Site, along with

the rising demand by the private-sector for large, relatively inexpensive areas of land for their development projects; a matter that has recently prompted the government to declare a large area on the eastern and southeastern outer and inner fringe of the city a "Development Corridor," an area that partly falls within the city limit, and partly outside it, creating further ambiguity about the future administration of the declared "Corridor" as it lies within different areas of planning jurisdiction: the Municipality of Greater Amman for areas within the city boundaries, and the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs for the outlying areas.

The proposed Development Corridor, however, would literally occupy what is today the eastern and southeastern green belt surrounding the city, a traditional element of continuity in previous plans that had recommended a more compact form for the city to be surrounded by a green belt, a British town planning idea long in practice at least since Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan of 1944.

Thus, the pressure for development in the form of grand projects is today making itself felt alongside the more traditional demand for land for housing purposes, and, consequently, the search for large areas of inexpensive land to accommodate the needs of a new wave of large, capital-intensive, public and private development projects, is directing attention to the fringes of the city, and forcing the city administration to adapt its planning practice. A new model of planning for the city of Amman will therefore be needed to accommodate the emerging prioritization of planning objectives.

A Legal and Administrative Perspective

Current physical planning practice is regulated by the provisions of a number of planning ordinances that have so far regulated planning practice since the advent of physical planning in Jordan in the 1950's and 1960's, foremost amongst them being the *Law of Planning of Cities, Villages, and Buildings, No. 79 for the year 1966*, and its various amendments. In areas outside the major cities, the main authority responsible for the various planning acts sanctioned by this law is the Ministry for Municipal and Rural Affairs (MMRA), originally formed as Ministry of the Interior for Municipal and Rural Affairs back in 1965.

According to the articles of this Law, there are three tiers of administration for the physical planning of towns, villages, and regions: local, district, and regional. Subsequently, there are three main official planning bodies: 1) local planning committee 2) district planning committee 3) the Central City and Village Planning Department (hereafter referred to as CCVPD) within MMRA itself.

Local village or municipal councils customarily act themselves as the local planning committees, and they normally are considered responsible for the preparation of "master plans," and "detailed master plans" which are in the end subject to the approval of the "district" planning committee. The district planning committee, however, assumes the responsibilities of the local planning committee in areas outside the boundaries of jurisdiction of the municipal council but that are still within the geographic area delimited as its district. In actual practice, however, and due to the lack of professional planning skill and experience, it is customary for local planning committees, and district committees, to seek help for the preparation of their master plans and detailed master plans from CCVPD.

Within the boundaries of the major cities such as the capital city of Greater Amman, however, physical planning is undertaken by the respective city planning authority within the city's own administration, that is, *Da'irat al-Tanthim* (Planning Department). These departments are on the whole better staffed than the local or district planning committees, and their staff

have considerable experience in planning, particularly the team in Amman. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the recent government decision to create the planned "Development Corridor," has been entrusted to the city itself since the city is better staffed with the needed professionally-trained and experienced planners than the adjacent local council area.

However, the fact that areas outside of city limits lie within the jurisdiction of MMRA not Greater Amman means that the government's decision to delegate authority for overseeing the physical planning studies regarding the Development Corridor wholly to the city of Greater Amman is without proper legal cover or mandate according to existing planning ordinances. An amendment of planning ordinances is therefore expected to be undertaken soon to allow for some kind of legal coverage that could provide legitimacy for planning acts outside officially designated city boundaries, if such development is to be eventually overseen and administered by a single authority, namely, the municipality of Greater Amman, as part of an expanded program of metropolitan administration or governance.

Planning the Metropolitan Expansion

Numerous efforts have recently been directed at finding conceptual categories in which to place those settlements that spread beyond the political or administrative bounds of the city itself. The simple classifications of "central city" and "suburb" seem to have become obsolete considering the emerging pattern of settlement taking the form of increasingly dispersed and decentralized centers of activity and residential zones.

Moreover, cities in both low- and high-income countries seem today to have more in common in this regard than with their own urban systems; for example, researchers have noted the convergence of Bangkok and Los Angeles, both being territorially vast, amorphous, multi-centered regions with populations residing up to 100 kms from the city core; furthermore, in itself, the urban form of the larger Bangkok Extended Metropolitan Region (EMR) is showing many similarities to other large mega-urban regions in the developing world.

Basically, the Bangkok EMR is divided into three zones according to the typical characteristics of each zone: the *core*, *suburbs*, and *exurbia*. While the suburbs are dominated by service industry and specialized agriculture in the form of gated suburbs, shopping malls, leisure, market gardens, squatters, and expressways, mainly financed by Thai property developers, *exurbia* is dominated by industry in the form of industrial estates, alongside in-situ agriculture, squatters, industrial housing, and ports, mainly financed by foreign direct investment (Montgomery et al, 2003).

Jordanian economy had historically been dependent on foreign aid, and particularly since the 1990's, the government has adopted an active policy aimed at enhancing Jordan's competitiveness in global markets through, among other strategies, the encouragement of foreign investment. Considering the weight of Amman's region in Jordan's economy (Abu-Jaber, 1976) it seems inevitable that Amman is expected to attract the largest share of foreign capital investment; hence the importance of the spatial planning policy for the outer fringes of the city represented today by the proposal for the aforementioned development corridor.

In general, four categories of mega-urban governance for managing large metropolitan regions have so far been witnessed in different parts of the world: a *fragmented* model, a *mixed* model, a *centralized* model, and a *comprehensive* model. (Montgomery, et al, 2003). The system historically adopted for spatial planning in Amman is the two-tier system, hence best fits the category of the *comprehensive* model although in reality there is very little coordination at the local level between different districts, and many of the functions performed by city administration elsewhere in the world such as traffic police, electricity supply, water supply, are

not carried out by the city of Amman; but the fact that most services had until recently been monopolized by the state (thus until recently largely considered *public services*), had so far maintained a certain comprehensiveness to the overall administration.

While the two-tier system has in principle been regarded internationally for many years as the most desirable system, it has both practical and political drawbacks. Among the practical problems are, the difficulties involved in keeping up with the *de facto* extension of the boundaries of the metropolitan area, the difficulty of reaching agreement on exactly where the regional government begins and local functions stop, and the distribution of revenue. At the local political level, those charged with coordinating area-wide structures would have great difficulty capturing the loyalties and attachment of the citizens due the high technical complexity of the task, and the attachments to one's own commune or municipality.

At the intergovernmental level, however, there is possibility for tension between a large and powerful local (metropolitan) government and a higher level of government that must allocate revenue to another unit with which it may be in political competition.

For different reasons having to do with the local political situation and which cannot be discussed here in detail, none or very little of these problems have so far been witnessed to affect the urban government of Greater Amman. Therefore, it seems certain that the two-tier system will continue to be the dominant model of urban government for Amman and its anticipated greater metropolitan area. However, with the trend towards privatization of many of what had for long been considered *public services* such as electricity and telecommunications, it is likely that the system will tend towards less comprehensiveness than had been the case before. Thus, on one hand, it might be expected that the task of coordinating area-wide activities is likely to become more complicated, but, on the other hand, it is likely to result in a higher level of efficiency and effectiveness as had been witnessed in some recent privatized public services. In any case, managing such ever-expanding area inevitably requires a new set of legal codes, and an improved system of urban governance which has become, in the minds of many, inevitably connected the development of Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

Therefore, improvement in planning practice is today understood to be inevitably linked to the development of GIS capabilities and proficiency, and as recently pointed out at a United Nations regional conference on good urban governance, the adopted GIS model must be adequately connected to an appropriate set of indicators (Hisham & Ismael, 2003). However, in a good number of documented cases worldwide, the use of GIS has not necessarily made successful transition from the technical staffs of engineering and planning departments to the broader and more powerful realms of government (Montgomery, et al, 2003); but clearly this is a development that bears watching.

Reinventing the City

Compared to the industrialized cities of the West, cities of the developing world are much more complex, spatially and socially (Balbo, 1993):

... the city of the Third World is a city of fragments, where urbanization takes place in leaps and bounds, creating a continuously discontinuous pattern. In the fragmented city, physical environment, services, income, cultural values and institutional systems can vary markedly from from neighborhood to neighborhood, often from street to street. An aerial view of the city shows a spatial structure made up of many different pieces drawn together in a rather accidental way. There are more of some kinds than others. Those in the periphery are

incomplete and more “fragile,” while older areas are well established with clearly defined boundaries.

This diversity, however, is not something to be brushed aside, as it is an essential ingredient of urban culture; however, amidst this diversity (or fragmentation) there is a need to reappraise the function of representation, and remember “that planning is an eidetic³ discipline, based on the generation of images;” images that can provide, “a symbolic grounding for our physical reality,” a *mundus imaginalis* (Frascari, 1990).

The urban agglomeration that today constitutes Greater Amman has form and a particular history of that form. The older parts of the city have clear boundaries and, more or less, a definite form; the outlying areas especially those towards the recent eastern expansion and the proposed southeastern expansion are more fragile and have yet to develop a clear identity. They are discussed today as being the areas destined to form the “New Amman,” being the eastern expansion beyond the belt road. Two cities are thus postulated, the current city and the new city.

In reality, however, the new city will not be a second city, rather a third one, because historically, Amman had always had its twin city, namely, Zarqa, a city around 20km northeast of Amman with a population of around one million inhabitants, home to an old large military camp, oil refinery, a major power plant, large phosphate mines, and a range of large and small industries. Therefore, in reality, the so-called new city of Amman is most likely to be mainly a bedroom community cornered between three main industrial areas at the edge of three localities, Amman itself from the west, Zarqa from the north, and small town of Sahab in the south.

The exact model for this new development is yet to be seen. Half a century of planning practice for Amman had shown a tendency towards certain continuity in planning practice (Malkawi, 1996), and, as elaborated earlier, in that minor history of planning, in the grand conception of the overall form of the city (King&Lock, 1955), in the recurrent attempts in the 1960’s and 1970’s at defining the urban agglomeration and its core, or the latest attempt at inventing the regional, i.e., metropolitan, extent of Greater Amman (GACDP, 1988), the role of the image, of representation, had been quite significant. Today, however, and in view of the changed economic context and priorities, a new or at least a revised model of planning seems to be needed. The great challenge that faced King & Lock back in 1955, seems therefore to present itself in revised form today, and, a grand conception, such as theirs, seems to be as much needed today. Whether the city will continue to reproduce itself in the form of its past, or whether the new set of circumstances will force a new conception or model, is yet to be seen.

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1 Figures about trade licences are from the database of the Municipality of Greater Amman Licensing Division.

2 As indicated in the recent application to Cities Alliance, a World Bank grant, submitted by the Municipality of Greater Amman.

3 The term "Eidetic" is generally understood to mean the use of "specific examples of behaviour, experience, and meaning to render descriptive generalizations about the world and human living" (Vernez Moudon, 1992), p.335.

