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KILLING THE CITY:
NEOLIBERAL URBANIZATION AND SOCIAL BELONGING IN A NEW
AMMAN

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I. INTRODUCTION

“It shows we’re not just sand and camels anymore, we’re a global city now.”¹

Before the 1990s, scholars viewed the Jordanian capital of Amman as an un-urban place lacking the impressive history and development of its neighbors. In 2007, urban development specialist Babar Mumtaz lamented that Amman “lacks most of the attributes of a downtown: The [sic] lights, shops, sights and attractions” that make a city recognizable as an urbanity.² Yet by March 2018, the *New York Times* heralded Amman, saying “the city’s openness has turned it into a growing, culturally diverse place where many young people want to establish themselves.”³ Far from the lightless, sightless town of the mid-2000s, Amman now boasts skyscrapers and aims to present itself as a global city on par with Beirut and Dubai.⁴ This ‘globalizing city’ is quickly re-centering around a “New Downtown” – The Abdali Development Project.

This paper argues that the Abdali Development Project is paradigmatic of transformations in Jordan’s built environment and its governance techniques. It is through these “new state spaces”⁵ that one sees both the realization of the modern neoliberal state in Jordan and the implications such a regime has for the production of public space. The modernization of the Jordanian state and the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms have reconfigured state authority and produced new state spaces at a variety of scales. In doing so, the state has advanced elite interests and facilitated capital penetration into Amman. The city now serves the market rather than its citizens. As such, Ammanis now find themselves increasingly excluded from the urban fabric, pressured to either conform to the new civic identity of these spaces or forfeit their

¹ Authors’ personal interview with Abdali Development Company representative, Amman, Jordan.

² Mumtaz, “Desperately Seeking Amman.”

³ Almukhtar, “The Designers Combining Work and Play in Amman.”

⁴ Wakalat Al-Nas, “Beltaji.”

⁵ Brenner, *New State Spaces*.

access to these new centers of power. This story of spatial transformation, redeployment and reconfiguration of state authority, and increasing socioeconomic polarization is paradigmatic of the global neoliberal project.

This analysis is divided into two primary sections and guided primarily by the question: *development for whom?* The first section outlines a Marxist framework; the theoretical works of Harvey, Lerner, and Brenner inform the case study of urban transformation in Amman and highlight the mechanisms by which the state transforms land into global capital flows, leading to the rise of ‘new state spaces.’ This is combined with Lefebvre’s conceptualization of the production of space to elucidate the highly uneven and illiberal process of urban development in Amman. In the second section, analysis of the Abdali Development Project is organized through Lefebvre’s triad of mental, physical, and social space. Development Project. This analysis demonstrates how the transformation of urban spaces into elite playgrounds has estranged Ammanis from their city.

Methodology

The field work for this research took place on the premises of the Abdali Development Project between 28 December 2017 and 15 January 2018. During this time, we observed and gathered notes about the built environment, the symbols employed on site, and the general behaviors exhibited by the space’s daily inhabitants.

Our analysis relies heavily on a set of approximately 40 interviews we conducted with customers, workers, and pedestrians at the Abdali Mall and Abdali Boulevard. These interviews took between 15 and 45 minutes, depending on the progression of the conversation. The interviews were unstructured, informal, anonymous, and designed to provide us with insights as to how the Abdali Project is socialized by the individuals that populate its shops, restaurants,

streets, benches, offices, and residences. We surveyed a wide demographic spectrum including Jordanians, non-Jordanians, youth, men, women, service workers, office workers, and others. As such, we believe our sample is indicative of the average crowd at Abdali. We also conducted interviews with workers from the General Amman Municipality (GAM) and representatives of the Abdali Private Shareholding Company (PSC). We complemented these interviews by conversing with academics who have studied neoliberal change in Jordan. These interviews, which helped frame our argument, took place in Washington DC, in Amman, Jordan, and over Skype after our initial field research.

In addition to these interviews, we analyzed various pamphlets, city plans, regulatory documents, and reports from both the PSC and the GAM Special Projects Division. These documents allow us to analyze how parties involved in Abdali's development conceptualize the project and how they view their own roles within the partnership. Our interactions with PSC staff also allowed us to experience firsthand how the project is marketed to both Jordanian and non-Jordanian audiences. The synthesis of these accounts produces a comprehensive image of the Abdali Development Project and the changes it spurred in Amman's built environment, its political economy, and social belonging in the city.

II. STATE SPACES AND LEFEBVRE'S TRIAD IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

*"Space is one of the 'privileged instruments' of state institutions as they are mobilized to regulate the social relations of capitalism."*⁶ – Henri Lefebvre

Space is often taken for granted in the social sciences. The common-sense notion of state, society, economy, culture, and community contained within a single, fixed, timeless geographic space (the nation) has led many to conclude that space is a container – a location where politics

⁶ Brenner, *New State Spaces*, 111.

takes place. Instead, space should be conceptualized as an active part of politics and social relations in the city. In Jordan, as elsewhere, the (re)production of space is central to the regime's security and its patrimonial networks of power.⁷ In this sense, "place does not simply indicate the arena of social struggle; it is a constituent stake in that struggle."⁸ The nature of space has changed over time; its politicization is historically path-dependent, and thus spatial production is a *process*. This process, in light of the construction of Abdali, "The New Downtown" must be interrogated further.

This section provides a theoretical framework, beginning with a discussion on neoliberalism and its effects on the city. The neoliberalization of space, and its commodification and circulation in the global economic network as real estate gave rise to "new state spaces" that complicate an understanding of fixed state scales and territories. It shows that far from passive in this process, state elites are at the center of it. They mediate and redirect capital into various state territories using multiple scales for the end-goal of capital accumulation. This process has resulted in a rescaling of governance and the production of uneven geographies. Finally, we elucidate the Lefebvrian triad of space and use it as an organizing principle to interrogate this form of urban development. This process of non-participatory planning and urban physical transformation has negative implications for social belonging.

Neoliberalism in Context

Neoliberalism has been discursively employed at various times to describe a set of political practices, a bundle of ideological tenets, and an encompassing method of governance. Larner identifies three distinct academic understandings of neoliberalism: neoliberalism as

⁷ Brenner, *New State Spaces*, 40.

⁸ Parker and Debruyne, "Reassembling the Political," 439.

policy, ideology, and governmentality. She emphasizes that descriptions of neoliberalism as agenda “run the risk of under-estimating the significance of contemporary transformations in governance.”⁹ Therefore, the modern phenomenon of neoliberalism should be conceptualized as the process by which states alter their technologies, logics, mechanisms, and presence itself.¹⁰

This process has been characterized by different shifts in state action at various phases. During the first phase of “roll-back” neoliberalism, states aimed to sever the linkages between the state and the economy. The state retreated from its presence in the economy by diminishing or eliminating corporatist planning regimes, state owned enterprise, labor market regulations, welfare policies, and other key characteristics of the Keynesian state.¹¹

These state transformations produced negative externalities for society and subjected newly atomized individuals to the forces of the market. By the 1990s, the neoliberal project widened, and in order to protect the project against rising and widespread resentment, “the frontier of active policymaking shifted” from the ideological software of neoliberalism to the installation of “institutional hardware” designed to ameliorate public dissent.¹² These institutions reanimated state interventionism, this time in the form of “aggressive deregulation, disciplining, and containment of those marginalized or dispossessed” during the roll-back phase.¹³ This “roll-out” phase became “increasingly technocratic in form and therefore superficially ‘depoliticized,’ acquiring the privileged status of a taken-for-granted or foundational policy orientation.”¹⁴

These transformations have the greatest impact on urban environments. Neoliberal

⁹ Warner, “Neo-liberalism,” 6.

¹⁰ Bourdieu and Wacquant, “NeoLiberalSpeak,” 2.

¹¹ Peck and Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space,” 388.

¹² *Ibid*, 389.

¹³ Peck and Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space,” 389.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 389.

economic restructuring forces cities to “scan the horizon for investment and promotion opportunities...lest they be left behind in this intensifying competitive struggle” for capital accumulation.¹⁵ As Asef Bayat succinctly explains:

The ‘neoliberal city,’ then, is a market-driven urbanity; it is a city shaped more by the logic of Market than the needs of its inhabitants; responding more to individual or corporate interests than public concerns. This means that the state and public officials...act on behalf of capitalist accumulation rather than the interests of urban residents...all with far reaching implications for configuring urban space and politics.¹⁶

Neoliberal urban restructuring has resulted in the funneling of funds away from traditional regulatory apparatuses and hierarchal state institutions towards the establishment of highly localized geographical, social, and physical infrastructure with the intent of accumulating capital in an increasingly competitive global market.

On Territory and Scales: Where *Exactly* is the State?

Neoliberalization has resulted in a rescaling of the state wherein the city has replaced the nation as “the most rudimentary geographical units of world capitalism.”¹⁷ Cities are now at the center of economic, political, and social production and its contestations. It is in these “new state spaces”, to use Brenner’s term, that one can most clearly analyze both the aspirations and implementation of neoliberalism as a political project. As Swyngedouw et al. state, “the urban arena became a key space in which political-economic and social changes were enacted.”¹⁸

The state transition away from a purely national economic outlook has done much to reconfigure state space and rescale political-economic processes. These new state spaces

¹⁵ Peck and Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space,” 394.

¹⁶ Bayat, “Politics in the City-Inside-Out,” 111.

¹⁷ Brenner, *New State Spaces*, 58.

¹⁸ Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez, “Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe,” 544.

complicate fixed notions of both *territory* (assumed as a spatial container for distinct social, culture, politics, and economy) and *scales* (an assumed hierarchy, like a Russian nesting doll metaphor), requiring a more nuanced understanding of the state. As Brenner states, “as capital strives to jump scale, it is forced to reconstitute or create anew viable sociospatial infrastructures...through the reorganization of existent scales or through the construction of qualitatively new ones.”¹⁹ This paper identifies the state as *polymorphic* and *multiscalar*; the emergent place-specific institutional and regulatory frameworks generated by neoliberalism do not overlap nicely with the ‘national’ and create multiple geographies that do not nest into a single scale or definition of territory.²⁰

Moreover, the move away from top-down, hierarchical government, and nation-wide state policies has blurred the lines between ‘private’ and ‘public.’ This is manifest in private-public partnerships, non-state state institutions, and an urban political economy defined by clientelism that elevates the roles of “lobbies, family ties, [and] business connections.”²¹ These rescaled state institutions “facilitate, manage, mediate, and redirect processes of geoeconomic restructuring,” thus intensifying socio-spatial and politico-economic polarization.²² State elites reshape the built environment by privileging various spaces and scales in pursuit of capital accumulation. Rather than being passive receptors of global policies, the state and its elites are at the center of this scalar reconfiguration of its territory. The emergence of these private-public partnerships both constitute the state itself and demonstrate the flexibility of “actually existing” neoliberalism as a governance technology.

¹⁹ Brenner, *New State Spaces*, 59.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 67.

²¹ Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez, “Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe,” 566.

²² Brenner, *New State Spaces*, 61.

These accumulation strategies center around regulatory regimes that fuel uneven geographical development across the state through “customized, place-specific regulatory arrangements designed to position particular subnational jurisdictions strategically within global and [regional] circuits of capital.”²³ These customized regulatory arrangements create nodes of neoliberal development in the form of global (or ‘globalizing’) cities, gated communities, and free trade zones. These economic enclaves and the processes that create them “are generally defined by the naturalized imperatives of growth-first, market-oriented urban economic policy and by approaches to urban governance in which corporate and property-development interests maintain hegemonic control over local land-use regimes.”²⁴ In this way, cities are planned, constructed, and optimized for investment rather than living.

Towards an Understanding of Lefebvrian Space

The concept of ‘new state spaces’ provides a grounding framework and vision of the state, demonstrating the importance of the urban production of space that serves to cement the regime’s rule over society. To better understand these technologies, it is important to recognize that ‘space’ and ‘spatiality’ can and do have many interpretations. The complexity of space and its disentanglement were first proposed by Henri Lefebvre in 1974, who theorized a schema of the representations of space (mental), unity between spatial practices (physical), and spaces of representation (social). These initial philosophical interpretations do not offer us a map, but rather “an appeal to study and reevaluate everyday life and examine how inequality shows its

²³ Brenner, *New State Spaces*, 16.

²⁴ Brenner, “Open City or the Right to the City?” 18-19.

face in many different ways.”²⁵ This is precisely what this case study endeavors to provide by reevaluating the production of space in the neoliberal era.

The Triad of Space

This paper refers to the triad of space as mental space, physical space, and social space. For Lefebvre, space is produced from these three “dialectically mutually co-constituting spheres.”²⁶ Thus, he highlights “the spatiality of the forces of capitalism and the ‘hypercomplexity’ of the interactions” between mental, physical, and social spaces and their productions.²⁷

Many of the political and economic structures that produce space have changed since Lefebvre published *The Production of Space* in 1974. Neoliberalism and its roll-out in the city have almost totally excluded citizens from participating in the production of space. Therefore, under urbanely-actualized neoliberalism, the restriction of citizens’ access to the mental space translates into very little civic influence on the physical construction of cities. They can access social space but face a binary between accepting these new state spaces or simply resigning themselves to disengage from them completely. Lefebvre originally conceived that citizens could shape this social space over time through symbolism and use. However, because the triad of space is co-produced, the domination of the mental and physical space by state elites has allowed them to use the city to forge new social identities.

Mental space (or ‘planned’ space) is solely in the domain of elite state actors who mobilize their ability to envision and plan the city. State elites translate the mental space into

²⁵ Merrifield, “Fifty Years On,” 17.

²⁶ Pierce and Martin, “Placing Lefebvre,” 1281-82; and Elden, “There is a Politics of Space because Space is Political.”

²⁷ Pierce and Martin, “Placing Lefebvre,” 1290.

physical space through the dissemination of maps and plans, the development of regulatory frameworks, the use of marketing and advertising teams, and the focus on ‘technocratic’ or ‘expert-led’ urban (re)development and regeneration. This exclusive access to mental space allows the state to monopolize the planning and development of the city, leaving little room for citizens to determine the physical spaces. Indeed, “these forms of urban governance show a significant deficit with respect to accountability, representation, and the presence of formal rules of inclusion or participation.”²⁸

Mental space is concretized as physical space through the construction and alteration of the built environment. The physical infrastructure that emerges from this construction process fundamentally restructures “relations between people, between people and the artifacts of their daily experience, and between people and the places they inhabited.”²⁹ This process socially and spatially polarizes the city between rich ‘cosmopolitans’ and their gated communities and poor ‘subalterns’ and their slums. These enclaves are “in line with the aspirations of the most powerful segment(s)” of society.³⁰

Social space most simply is how people experience space. In the neoliberal city, the social space is where state elites attempt to forge new social identities (and sense of citizenship) defined by consumerism and the “good life” that neoliberalism promises. However, because it incorporates the broader community, it is the site of the most obvious and vigorous contestation. For the community, the options are to use the space as the state designed or to resign oneself to living outside these new state spaces, further disenfranchising oneself from the new centers of economic and political power. There are, of course, certain situations where non-elites are able to

²⁸ Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez, “Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe,” 556.

²⁹ Parker and Debruyne, “Reassembling the Political,” 438.

³⁰ Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez, “Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe,” 563.

resist or slightly alter the implementation of development plans; however, this is the exception, certainly not the rule. The various institutional, regulatory, and scalar arrangements and the veil of ambiguity and secrecy that permeates these private-public partnerships preempts criticism of these projects. It is therefore not surprising that these projects face “relatively low resistance and conflict.”³¹ This should be seen as the *most* effective rationality, technique, and mentality to secure the state.

Whose Right to the City?

The mental space, which is then concretized as physical space, is a process where state elites deliberately chooses winners and losers in the city (or districts in cities), and where policies are concretized and then emanated outwards. In this sense, urban space becomes the central node of both power *production* and *disenfranchisement*. Indeed, the ‘right to the city’ is increasingly reserved for the elites. “Elites” in this paper refers to the transnational capitalist class (i.e. major shareholders in real estate and construction holding companies, general managers/directors, corporate executives, and well-placed bureaucrats that provide the vital link between capital and development).³² Meanwhile, non-elites are simply the broader community of informal sector workers, the poor, refugees, and other citizens deemed economically ‘unproductive’ or insufficiently representative of the image of citizens as conceived of in the mental space by planners, architects, and visionaries. Elites are accorded more political representation while non-elites are further disenfranchised, which then entrenches and reproduces the gains of the former over the later.

³¹ Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez, “Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe,” 562.

³² Daher, “Amman: Neoliberal Urban Management;” Mango, “The New Centre and the City Citizen;” and Ley, “Transnational Spaces and Everyday Lives.”

Relegated to merely accepting or rejecting the states physical development of space, citizens have lost the right to the city. This concept was also important for Lefebvre who stated, “the people should be at the heart of any decision-making process about the creation and management of the city; as well as having the common right to use and occupy the spaces of the city without restriction.”³⁴ The capture of the mental space by state elites has transformed the built environment of cities, constructing a city that is closed to most, open to a few, and constantly seeking to further entrench these power relations. This exclusion is in part due to the global proliferation of privately owned public spaces (POPS) that asphyxiate social space and further limit the areas where class, political orientation, and cultural mixing occurs. As sociologist Richard Sennett suggests, “private public spaces are ‘dead public spaces’ because the essence of conviviality, spontaneity, encounter and yes, that little sprinkle of chaos, have been stripped out.”³⁵ The right to the city, in short, has been lost. Whereas participation dramatized urban life, as Lefebvre wrote, its absence denotes a city’s death.³⁶ The following section illustrates this non-participatory process of neoliberal urbanization and its effects on state authority and social belonging.

III. THE ABDALI DEVELOPMENT PROJECT: A CASE STUDY

“We are a strange country...for when we plan any new project, the first thing we do before demolishing the buildings is demolish [our] memories.”³⁷

Jordan’s neoliberal history began in the 1980s and worsened during the Gulf War.

International Financial Institutions stepped in to offer aid conditioned on reforms that constituted

³⁴ Merrifield, “Fifty Years On,” 15.

³⁵ Garrett, “Squares for Sale!” 41.

³⁶ Merrifield, “Fifty Years On,” 12.

³⁷ Al-Majali, “The Abdali Project.”

political, economic, and legal ‘modernization.’ This process accelerated rapidly under the leadership of King Abdullah II. Less than a year into his rule, he established an Economic Consultative Council (ECC) staffed by Jordanians that represented “economic ‘success stories,’ ...young, self-confident ‘winners’ in globalization [that] have internalized the currently fashionable neoliberal jargon.”³⁸ This new council sought to enmesh neoliberalism in Jordan by creating the right institutions and social milieu to facilitate international business and investment. King Abdullah’s focus on the economy boosted Jordan’s international reputation and domestically signaled Abdullah’s desire to ‘modernize’ the state and its citizens.³⁹

Soon, Amman began to attract the attention of transnational capital. King Abdullah’s focus on neoliberal urbanization began showing dividends and the explosion of privatized development in Amman altered the city’s skyline. By 2005 there were over 350 plans for high-rise buildings in Amman, a city which contains less than 50.⁴⁰ The most ambitious of these projects – the Abdali Development Project – would transform Amman into a Global City and put Jordan on the map.

The Project

Prior to Abdali’s development, academics, city-planners, and visitors referred to Amman as a non-city and “complain[ed] endlessly of its dullness and lack of charm.”⁴¹ The Abdali Development Project was conceived at the turn of the century to re-center “the Jordanian capital upon an entirely new downtown within the Abdali district.”⁴² Abdali would serve as the new

³⁸ Bank and Schlumberger, “Jordan,” 40-41.

³⁹ Ibid, 50.

⁴⁰ Parker and Debruyne, “Reassembling the Political,” 440; See also: Abu-Ghazalah, “Skyscrapers as Tools of Economic Reform and Elements of Urban Skyline.”

⁴¹ Shami, “Amman Is Not a City,” 208.

⁴² Hourani, “Urbanism and Neoliberal Order,” 635.

center of economic and political gravity with a skyline to match. The skyscrapers would serve as an economic beacon to the world, signaling Amman's economic vitality and "open for business" character.⁴³

This new downtown looks (intentionally) nothing like the 'old' downtown with its bustling *souq*, popular Arab restaurants, Al-Husseini mosque, and Roman ruins. This traditional city center will now be a 'heritage district' for tourists, while Abdali will be the new face of Jordan with its luxury mall, office towers, 5-star hotels, and expensive restaurants and bars. At the heart of this project is "The Boulevard," a central pedestrian promenade offering "the first area in Amman developed under the local mixed-use planning codes, reflecting exceptional synergy of residential, commercial, medical, hospitality and retail outlets in one prestigious address."⁴⁴ Indeed, Abdali is the epitome of neoliberal urbanism in both its physical and its institutional architecture and design.⁴⁵

The following uses mental, physical, and social space to disentangle the project, demonstrate its logic, and interrogate its effects on state-society relations. Stratifying space into its various components demonstrates how the neoliberal transformation of the state has rendered urban planning and decision-making a non-participatory process. The construction of the physical space through the use of new arms of the state cut Abdali out of the social fabric and created a foreign skyline. The use of social space highlights the dissonance between the identity of this space as envisioned by elites from above and as perceived by the community.

⁴³ Hourani, "Urbanism and Neoliberal Order," 641; and Abu-Hamdi, "Neoliberalism as a Site-Specific Process," 5.

⁴⁴ Abdali PSC, *Boulevard*, 3.

⁴⁵ Hourani, "Urbanism and Neoliberal Order," 634.

Mental Space

Mental space is, in essence, how the city's planners see the future of the city. The push to create a capital in Jordan with a new economic center was the initial step in the formation of a mental space surrounding the project. The King and his ECC technocrats created laws and regulations that would funnel regional and international capital into Jordan. State elites brought in foreign 'expertise' to help develop the project's mental space as a burgeoning Global City. To keep the benefits of the project 'in the family' and to speed the project's transformation from mental into physical space, the regime created public-private partnerships, which would also exclude community input. Finally, they used consultants and marketing professionals to sell the project as a modern vision of the "good life." Crucial within this planning was the conception of the new center as a privately-owned public space; whereas a fully public center may prove susceptible to popular protests, the POPS allows for legalized expulsion and fosters self-policing.

Laws and Regulations

Jordan's stability within the region bolstered its attractiveness to potential investors. The state took advantage of this by transforming its territory (real estate) into an abstract asset that could then be circulated on the international market. This began in 1995 with the first Investment Promotion Law, which opened up Jordan to the global economy by lifting restrictions on foreign investments, providing protections against nationalization, allowing unhindered repatriation of profits, creating tax holidays, and removing import duties and fees. The laws also reduced taxes on banks and real estate transactions and profits. Two years later, the Law of Owners and Tenants solidified the right of owners to evict tenants in the name of redevelopment and removed tenants' right to return.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hourani, "Urbanism and Neoliberal Order," 642.

Perhaps most important among these institutional changes was the empowering of the General Amman Municipality (GAM) to act as a facilitator for transnational capitalists, rather than its historical role as a regulatory body. GAM was tasked with expanding the borders of Amman’s municipal boundaries, bringing more land under state control in the process.⁴⁷ GAM began to assert the “preeminence of its authority, claiming technical knowledge only it could offer.”⁴⁸ Ammanis were absent from the deliberation process; as one GAM official noted, “people of the street do not know what is good for them.”⁴⁹ In 2005, GAM created a Master Plan – funded by USAID and carried out by an international contractor – which further expanded the area under GAM’s control. Finally, in line with Harvey’s idea of accumulation by dispossession, this strategy of land accumulation follows the neoliberal logic wherein everything can be commoditized, in turn providing further opportunities for accumulation and neopatrimonial distribution of state goods to elites.⁵⁰

This new form of development via transnational capitalists – primarily real-estate accumulation and tower projects– incentivized large-scale privatized development while requiring governing institutions that “optimize[d] conditions for capital accumulation no matter what the consequences for employment or social well-being.”⁵¹ The GAM aimed to do this, but the Abdali project required more optimized forms of governance. From the very beginning, Abdali blurred the lines between public and private and excluded input from the local community.⁵² “Privatization” of state land provided the ruling regime with a ready excuse to

⁴⁷ Abu-Hamdi, “Bureaucratizing the City,” 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 32.

⁵⁰ Abu-Hamdi, “Neoliberalism as a Site-Specific Process,” 4.

⁵¹ Abu-Hamdi, “The Jordan Gate Towers of Amman,” 78.

⁵² Interview with Rami F. Daher, 21 March 2018.

absolve itself of demands for participatory planning while also allowing for intimate involvement in the land's subsequent development. This is most readily seen in the creation of the Abdali Private Shareholding Company (PSC).

State Entrepreneurship

Abdali PSC is the end result of a partnership between The National Resources Investment and Development Corporation (MAWARED) and Horizons International Development. MAWARED was formed in 2001 as an entrepreneurial arm of the Jordanian military and was soon tasked with selling military land to private companies.⁵³ The vast amounts of land under military control soon transformed MAWARED into Jordan's "leading urban regeneration entity and its largest real-estate developer."⁵⁴ By putting the military into business, the regime increased the military's stature in the new neoliberal governing structure. This was a sound strategy for attracting transnational capital because MAWARED, through its link to the military establishment and ultimately the Royal Court, could process deals with the private sector and relevant state authorities in a quicker and smoother fashion.⁵⁵

MAWARED immediately sold half of its shares to the Rafiq Hariri-owned Saudi Oger as a partner in the Abdali Regeneration Project to create a new, centralized downtown for work, play, and leisure.⁵⁶ This is not surprising; after all, Abdali is the result of backroom talks between Abdullah and Hariri in the early 2000s to establish a new Jordanian capital resembling the

⁵³ Parker, "Tunnel-Bypasses and Minarets of Capitalism," 115; and Hourani, "Urbanism and Neoliberal Order," 641.

⁵⁴ Daher, "Amman," 51.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 53.

⁵⁶ Parker, "Tunnel-Bypasses and Minarets of Capitalism," 116.

Hariri-rebuilt Beirut capital.⁵⁷ Rafiq transferred his ownership to Horizon International for Development, owned by his eldest son Baha'a.

In 2006, Abdali PSC formed a partnership with the Kuwaiti Royal Family, strengthening its ties to Gulf capital. Via the Kuwait Projects Holding Company (KIPCO), the Kuwaitis took on a 50% share of the project. Abdali PSC restructured, adding the subsidiaries: Abdali Boulevard Company (ABC) and Abdali Mall Company (AMC). ABC owns 60% of the Boulevard and KIPCO owns 40%, while AMC owns 40% of the mall and KIPCO owns 60%.⁵⁸ Kuwait is now the main Gulf investor in the project.⁵⁹

The Abdali PSC, then, is not so much a private company but a partnership between the Royal Families of Jordan and Kuwait and the Hariri family. On paper, however, they operate as 'private owners' and can develop the land as they wish. When faced with public pressure against such projects, GAM's Director of Special Projects would respond, "We don't own the building or the project...It's owned by the private sector, so we don't have the authority to say we're with it [or against it]."⁶⁰ Thus, Abdali PSC enabled the state to obfuscate responsibility and accountability under private ownership while still holding executive authority over land development.

The PSC benefitted greatly from its partnership with the state. It exploited its links with the regime to form site-specific regulations like tax holidays for investing partners and developers, eliminate 'red tape,' remove GAM-imposed height restrictions on buildings, and suspend duties and fees for imported material in the development process.⁶¹ Investors were not

⁵⁷ Khaberni, "A massive investment by Hariri in Jordan soon."

⁵⁸ Interview with Lama al-Khatib, 9 January 2018.

⁵⁹ Na'maat, "50 Percent Foreign Investment in Abdali Project in Central Amman."

⁶⁰ Staton, "One Small Step for Amman."

⁶¹ Hourani, "Urbanism and Neoliberal Order;" Interview with Rami F. Daher, 21 March 2018.

constrained by the GAM Master Plan; all that was required for private developers was to “purchase ‘development rights’” and provide the PSC with “flexible ‘planning guidelines.’”⁶² In interviews with both the Head of the GAM’s Special Projects Division and Abdali marketing representatives, it became clear that the GAM acted as a rubber stamp that approved whatever the PSC requested.⁶³ The PSC was able to bypass ordinary working procedures; for example, as opposed to working through the regular building permit bureaucracy, the PSC could receive immediate permission on a permit from the head of GAM.⁶⁴ This was no doubt aided by the fact that the head of PSC was former GAM Mayor Aqel Biltaji. In an interview with the PSC Marketing head, we mentioned this relationship may potentially be viewed as corruption (“*wasta*”). We were immediately rebuked, with Abdali PSC staff saying that this is a “very important project that everyone wants to get done” and “everyone is on the same page.”⁶⁵

Throughout the planning process, elements of the project that did not serve the wider interest of accruing capital were removed. The initial plans in 2006 devoted a large plot of land for the development of the American University of Amman. Jordanians “were optimistic about this development because an educational institution such as this could have benefitted the city and given its higher education institutions...an edge over other cities.”⁶⁶ By 2010, however, the university was no longer included in blueprints because “as more profitable options for development emerged, the university proposal was replaced with commercial buildings.”⁶⁷ This not only illustrates the primacy assigned to the interests of capital in planning, but also elucidates

⁶² Hourani, “Urbanism and Neoliberal Order,” 635.

⁶³ General Amman Municipality, “Special Regulatory Provisions for the Abdali Project Area.”

⁶⁴ Interview with Rami F. Daher, 21 March 2018.

⁶⁵ Interview with Lama al-Khatib, 9 January 2018.

⁶⁶ Musa, *Amman*, 37.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

that the capitalist class views the value of cities as dependent entirely on the immediate return on investment.

In short, the PSC operated unrestrained by the bureaucratic GAM and could move directives immediately to the king if necessary. The result was site-specific regulations that enabled the rapid “revitalization” of Amman. What is clear is that the ‘private’ Abdali PSC is not entirely private. It is, in an indirect sense, a publicly owned company with links to the military establishment, the Royal Court, GAM, the Hariris, the Kuwaitis, and the royal family. This represents an extremely fluid division between “public” and “private,” “state” and “economy,” and “local” and “global.” This non-participatory decision-making and planning is constitutive of Abdali’s mental space and characteristic of neoliberal shifts in governance.

Selling the New Downtown

The envisioning of Abdali as the new face of Jordan is evident from the dissemination of maps, models, and designs put forth by the PSC. This is especially true for what Abdali PSC claims is the “Heart of the New Downtown,” the Boulevard. Daher rightly points out that cities are “obliged to create the right milieu, a competitive business climate and first class tourism facilities in order to attract people to come and live, invest, and be entertained.”⁶⁸ Abdali PSC’s marketing materials repeatedly stress the modernity and state-of-the-art nature of the project where cosmopolitans and capitalists can “live, work, and play.” The “only master planned district” in Amman will place this globalizing city at the forefront of regional and international attention.⁶⁹ In Abdali’s promotion video the narrator describes Jordan as “the heart of the Middle East” and a “gateway to the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region,” which is now a

⁶⁸ Daher, “Amman,” 46.

⁶⁹ Abdali PSC, *The New Downtown of Amman*.

“safe-haven for international investment.” Then comes the sell: “Amman welcomes you to Jordan’s New Downtown, Abdali...where you can live, work, and play.”⁷⁰

Subsumed within this marketing campaign was an attempt to inculcate a space-specific identity supportive of the state’s newfound neoliberalism. This cosmopolitan class would buy into the neoliberal city by seeking out the ‘good life’ that Abdullah and his wife Rania embody.⁷¹ The chic, modern, and enlightened would counter the ‘traditional’ and ‘backwards’ in society – Abdullah has referred to these, literally, as dinosaurs.⁷² These cosmopolitans desire “spaces that remind them of their favorite places in cities like New York and London,”⁷³ providing justification for developers to mimic first world cities without incorporating any local culture or traditions.⁷⁴ Emulating the west also meant “the spread of consumer patterns within society at large.”⁷⁵ Therefore, these cosmopolitans would socially cement the project by reimagining “their relation to the more desirable dimensions of economic liberalization, that is, by providing them access to the new spaces of glittering global capital, cosmopolitanism, and consumption.”⁷⁶ Crafting such an identity was deemed fundamental to the project’s success.⁷⁷

Translating this mental project into a physical reality would concretize Amman’s ascendancy as a global city: “Abdali...will catapult the city into the 21st Century, placing it on par with other regional modern urban cities.” It will, in short, be “The Premium Central Business

⁷⁰ AbdaliJo, *Abdali*.

⁷¹ Wedeen, “Ideology and Humor in Dark Times,” 851.

⁷² Goldberg, “The Modern King in the Arab Spring,” Wedeen, “Ideology and Humor in Dark Times,” 851.

⁷³ Schwedler, “Amman Cosmopolitan,” 559.

⁷⁴ Abu-Hamdi, “The Jordan Gate Towers of Amman,” 80.

⁷⁵ Daher, “Neoliberalism at Work in Amman,” 29.

⁷⁶ Schwedler, “Amman Cosmopolitan,” 548.

⁷⁷ al-Derawi, “Abdali Project: Legitimate Questions.”

and Residential District of Amman.”⁷⁸ This was the ambition that Abdali was designed to achieve.

Physical Space

The privatized planning sanctioned by public institutions like GAM allowed for little public contribution to the physical development of Amman. The process of re-centering Amman for cosmopolitan overconsumption required the accumulation of land and the dispossession of others. The project also needed to be connected to other upper-class districts in Amman and to the airport, where foreign spenders enter the country. By doing so, the concretization of the mental space has physically cut Abdali out of the community’s social fabric and severed its historical connections to East Amman. This has dramatically altered the built environment, shifting and shaping the urban realities of daily life in Abdali.

Accumulation by Dispossession

The Abdali Friday Market began in the 1980s and expanded after GAM moved the northern bus terminal out of Abdali to the northern outskirts in Tarbarbour. In 2014, GAM decided to move the market outside of Abdali to provide parking spaces for the new project. Despite protests and vigils, with banners pronouncing loyalty to the King and pointing out the importance of the market to their livelihoods, the decision to clear the site went forward. On the night of 10 November, the Gendarmerie moved in and bulldozed the stalls, tear gassing those that tried to remain and arresting 28 on charges of terrorism under a recently expanded counter-terrorism law.⁷⁹ Many explanations were put forward, but it was clear that this was part of a larger, city-wide GAM strategy to eliminate sidewalk stands and informal markets to “beautify”

⁷⁸ Abdali PSC, *Abdali*, 51.

⁷⁹ Cozzens, “What is Behind the Abdali Market Move?”

the city.⁸⁰ As a vendor stated, Biltaji, Amman’s Mayor (and now head of Abdali PSC), “came in saying he wants to make Amman’s appearance ‘civilized’ ...He wants people – people from outside who don’t like our appearance – to come to Amman.”⁸¹

GAM was an equal opportunity dispossessor; they also took land away from the Talal Abu-Ghazaleh (TAG) Group, one of the wealthiest and well-known businesses in the country. In short, the Talal Abu-Ghazaleh (TAG) Group “[purchased] land just outside their HQ and on the borders of the Abdali project; the Abdali project [began] an expansion phase due to increased interest; GAM [told] land owners to sell their land to the project (with the private corp – Hariri investments – at the helm).”⁸² TAG refused and was the last hold out in the area, mainly due to its size. TAG initiated a public relations campaign, renting additional buildings in the area and hanging signs announcing GAM’s forced dispossession of their buildings. They also established a website and social media presence, publishing various revelations, like the fact that GAM “confiscated two pieces of land...only to resell them to the Abdali project in July.”⁸³ Eventually, the Supreme Court sided with GAM. One blogger bluntly commented, “It is obvious that the municipality is abusing its power for the benefit of the Abdali Project.”⁸⁴

Today, the land is fully developed as part of the Abdali Project, the website has disappeared, and the TAG debacle is not mentioned. Upon requests to TAG for an interview, we were told “the situation is closed and as a matter of principle we have refused since the beginning to talk about it to international press considering it’s an internal issue. Our commitment to this country and out of our special status does not allow us to make any

⁸⁰ Cozzens, “What is Behind the Abdali Market Move?”

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Tarawneh, “They Paved Paradise to Put Up the Abdali Project (and maybe a parking lot).”

⁸³ Khalaf, “Land Debacle in Abdali.”

⁸⁴ Ibid.

presentation on the subject.”⁸⁵ This “special status” was not defined, and a follow up email was ignored. In 2010, following the incident, King Abdullah II appointed Talal Abu-Ghazaleh by Royal Decree to the Upper House of Parliament. In short, GAM used its authority to appropriate land and disperse previous forms of socioeconomic behavior that populated Abdali. The coercive arms of the state were deployed to quell public outrage and to facilitate the empowerment of its “private” partner, the Abdali company, over tenants and occupants.

Connecting Amman’s Nodes of Neoliberal Urbanization

Re-centering Amman also required a new road system to connect the various work, residence, and leisure projects to each other. GAM therefore set about (re)constructing the road networks. This highly-spatialized practice focused on certain areas in West Amman and excluded East Amman. West Amman became crisscrossed with over-passes, under-passes, and new highways designed to facilitate traffic between cosmopolitan/transnational capitalist islands of urban development (like special economic zones, urban development projects, planning agencies and institutions, and gated communities) and the airport.⁸⁶

The construction of a new airport in 2007, the single entry-point for the transnational capitalists, was central to this project. The location of the new airport in south Amman was deliberately chosen in a newly developing area surrounded with villas. The area had direct highways leading to the Dead Sea (where international conferences are held), to *Abdoun* and *Dabouq* (the diplomatic and royal quarters of the city, respectively), and to *Zahran* Street where all the circles and various cosmopolitan centers are located. The highway also extends directly into Abdali, with a highway off-ramp leading into the Boulevard. If coming from East Amman,

⁸⁵ Interview (via email) with Roufan G. Nahhas.

⁸⁶ Parker, “Tunnel-Bypasses and Minarets of Capitalism.”

the route actually requires one to drive around the project and into West Amman to connect to the new road system. The goal of this placement and transportation system is, according to a government official, “to create an experience whereby the foreign businessperson ‘doesn’t feel like he is in the third world from the moment he gets off the airplane.’”⁸⁷ Through the removal of the bus station and the creation of new road systems, GAM physically cut Abdali out of the social fabric of the neighborhood and its historic connections to East Amman and *Wasat al-Balad*.

It was via these underpasses, overpasses, and wide-lane highways that the cosmopolitans could live in the city while not *really* living in the city – it was the city of their imagination without having to come in contact with the ‘other.’ This, of course, was to create the right milieu of social and mental space to live, work, and play.

An Elite Playground

The end result of this process is 384,000 square meters of living, working, and playing. The Boulevard alone boasts 120 storefronts, office spaces to accommodate 2,000 employees, and 400 hotel-serviced apartments.⁸⁸ Boulevard guidelines require these shops to have large windows to display products. These regulations even require “shutters...to be ‘transparent’ so that ‘display windows [were] always visible.’”⁸⁹ The top floors of the apartment complexes supposedly offer the best views of the city, as well as “swimming pools, sports clubs, spas, penthouses, lounges and restaurants.”⁹⁰ The 227,000 square meters (built-up) Abdali Mall offers additional opportunities for fine dining and entertainment, including a movie theater. After completion,

⁸⁷ Schwedler, “The Political Geography of Protest in Neoliberal Jordan,” 265.

⁸⁸ Abdali PSC, *Boulevard*.

⁸⁹ Musa, *Amman*, 63.

⁹⁰ Abdali PSC, *Boulevard*.

Phase I will add over 1 million square meters in the built-up area, providing office spaces for the Boulevard's banks, additional apartment complexes, supplementary hotel rooms, and more retail spaces to accommodate a larger audience. Phase II will be primarily comprised of high-end luxury residences, with additional retail and office spaces attached. This nearly 1 million square meter final phase will be anchored around a 30,000-square meter central park, providing the area's residents with a green "public" space.⁹¹

Abdali's towers are an imposing presence on Amman's skyline. Upon completion, the Clemenceau tower will serve as a consolidated medical facility. The DAMAC Tower will provide high-end residences, also with "ideal views of the surrounding area."⁹² The Rotana tower, owned by the Emirati Rotana Group, offers hotel and hospitality services to foreigners able to afford its luxurious rooms. As a brand with significant name recognition, the company is well placed to draw Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) citizens to the project.⁹³ These towers imbue the Boulevard with a distinctly modern character and architecture; the Rotana Tower is now the tallest building in Amman. The built environment of this space is designed as a consolidated place where individuals can find all the amenities they might need. According to the elites' vision, it is this consolidation of activity that will make Abdali the "New Downtown."

Abdali has entrenched the urban geographies of inclusion and exclusion and has constructed a town that is "antagonistic to people." The transnational capital class, "the new city's landlords," planned a city that is for them, and then constructed that city while making a profit off its construction.⁹⁴ Abdali is a private public space, available to some and off limits to

⁹¹ Abdali PSC, *Boulevard*.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Interview with Lama al-Khatib, 9 January 2018.

⁹⁴ Daher, "Amman: Neoliberal Urban Management."

most. While Amman has always had class divisions, Amman's new downtown and the transformation of West Amman at the expense of the East further spatialized and exacerbated existing inequalities. Instead of living in the city, the new landlords quite physically live above the city. The dispossession of shopkeepers, the removal of the bus station and flea market, and a physical road structure that turns its back on the actual heart of the city has altered the built environment, shifting and shaping the urban realities of daily life in Abdali district. The surrounding neighborhoods are plagued with increased traffic and depressed business. The middle-class nature of Abdali has given rise to an extremely wealthy enclaved surrounded by increasingly frustrated locals.

Social Space

The regime's regulatory reconfigurations and the PSC's marketing campaign are more than an announcement of the "New Downtown." They intimate the expectations the state has for civilian behavior within the new centers of political and economic power. The modern image put forward in the PSC's advertisements serves "as a medium through which the city residents would understand who they were and how they should live."⁹⁵ Moreover, it frames Abdali as the gateway to modernity not just for Jordan, but for individualized Jordanian citizens as well. Indeed, as Jordanian anthropologist and cultural critic Ahmad Abu Khalil states, "the administrator and planners of the 'Contemporary Amman' are searching for a special type of citizens who they believe are the only ones worthy of their 'ambitious' plans."⁹⁶ In this sense, the advertisements are constitutive of culture within the new center, rather than expressive, as they "help fashion the city residents into consumers of the megaprojects' upscale commodified space

⁹⁵ Musa, *Amman*, 88.

⁹⁶ Daher, "Amman: Neoliberal Urban Management."

to serve the interests of the developers.”⁹⁷ It is these lifestyles and mindsets that will be allowed entrance to Abdali, as they are seen as conducive to “the renaissance of [the] country’s cultural development.”⁹⁸

Abdali – Jordanian or Not?

The PSC contends that the Boulevard reflects Jordan, but in a modern way. The W hotel’s design was supposedly inspired by the rock carvings at Petra, and alongside luxury stores with global brand recognition, there are traditional “Jordanian” craft outlets. To interrogate this notion of urban belonging, we asked our Jordanian interlocutors if Abdali “fit” with the rest of the city and with Jordanian society writ large. The collective answer was a resounding no; two shop owners expressed that the towers were less landmarks for the enjoyment of Ammanis and more signals to the international community that Jordan “is not sand and camels anymore.”⁹⁹ Employees of the “traditional Jordanian” storefronts on the Boulevard revealed that their presence served less as a metric of Jordanian culture than as a crude display of “inclusivity” to an international audience.¹⁰⁰

Based on our interviews, it is apparent that the project was constructed not for the broader Jordanian community, but for foreigners and state elites. Interviewees repeatedly stressed that foreigners drove consumption.¹⁰¹ Whereas the average Jordanian cannot afford a cup of coffee on the Boulevard, let alone luxury goods, tourists on holiday from the GCC possess disposable income that drives consumption in the neoliberal enclave. An interview with two Qataris yielded a particularly interesting data point: when asked why they had come to the Boulevard, they

⁹⁷ Musa, *Amman*, 96.

⁹⁸ Khaberni, “The King Inaugurates the Abdali Boulevard.”

⁹⁹ Anonymized interview group #2, 10 January 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymized interview group #5, 11 January 2018.

¹⁰¹ Anonymized interview group #1 - #6, 7-13 January 2018.

unabashedly responded, “What are we doing? We’re spending!”¹⁰² The Jordanian presence on the Boulevard is more passive; apart from the occasional ‘splurge meal,’ most are either service workers or millennials that come to “take pictures for Instagram, look at the #LOVEJO statue, and hang out with friends on the benches.”¹⁰³ The same is true for the project’s luxury residences. Interviews with employees of Abdali PSC revealed that a vast majority of tenants were from the GCC or were Jordanians that reside in the GCC permanently. In fact, a top floor penthouse serves as the Saudi Ambassador’s residence in Amman.¹⁰⁴

Social Belonging in the New Downtown

The lack of major Jordanian interest in Abdali indicates that the project’s ascendancy as the New Downtown may not be a foregone conclusion. Despite promises that the Abdali project will “be a major catalyst for the economic process in Jordan,” the development has failed to increase profits for businesses on the project’s periphery, as business has not increased commensurately with rent prices.¹⁰⁵ The project has also made traffic much worse, with deleterious effects for both residents and business owners.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, a discussion with a prominent Jordanian businessman revealed that the project is desperate to fill its vacant offices and storefronts, as several major partnerships have fallen through.¹⁰⁷

If Jordanians are not socializing the Abdali project in the ways envisioned by the state, where do they choose to socialize? Many Jordanian youth expressed to us that they prefer to spend their free time in other areas of Amman such as *Weibdeh*, *Jabal Amman*, and *Wasat al-*

¹⁰² Anonymized interview group #6, 13 January 2018.

¹⁰³ Anonymized interview group #5, 11 January 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Lama al-Khatib, 9 January 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Sharq al-Awsat, “A Project for the Abdali Mall.”

¹⁰⁶ Anonymized interview group #4, 11 January 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Anonymous interview with businessman, 29 December 2018.

Balad.¹⁰⁸ While the regime has marked these areas as “traditional heritage centers” to emphasize the “modern” nature of Abdali, the Jordanian population largely prefer these locations to the hyper-consumerist locations like Abdali. In fact, the “New Downtown” marketing campaign has faced such backlash from the Jordanian public that the phrase no longer appears in domestically circulated advertisements. According to Abdali representatives they “only use that phrase now in English or in the Gulf.”¹⁰⁹ To quote one Jordanian blogger, “we already have a downtown Amman...and thank you very much, we don’t want a new one.”¹¹⁰ The contextually particular use of the phrase “the New Downtown” shows that it is not Jordanians who should be convinced, but foreign audiences who can provide this downtown with economic sustenance.

The “inclusive” nature of the project as a public space has also not been received by Jordanians. For individuals with cars, like most of the retail workers we spoke with, reaching the Boulevard is easy via the road system running throughout West Amman. For those who take public transportation, many of whom come from outside West Amman, commutes are often long and transit does not run directly to the site.¹¹¹ This is an impediment to cross-class accessibility to these elite spaces and represents a method of segregating economic and political centers of power from the rest of the Jordanian urbanity. The heavy security presence on the ground, operating under the auspices granted by the privately-owned public space management system, acts as an enforcement of the inclusive/exclusive dichotomy. On-site observation revealed groups of young Jordanian men being evicted from the Abdali mall without any discernible reason other than a perceived lack of belonging. On several instances, we also saw young

¹⁰⁸ Anonymized interview group #1 - #6, 7-13 January 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Lama al-Khatib, 9 January 2018.

¹¹⁰ Al-Assi, “Stop Yourself from Referring to the Abdali Project as ‘Downtown.’”

¹¹¹ Anonymized interview group #1 - #6, 7-13 January 2018.

Jordanian males be denied entrance to both the mall and Boulevard. This sense of exclusion permeates beyond the practices that compose it. One business owner in the area held a common misperception that the Boulevard had an entrance fee. Several interviewees outside the Boulevard also claimed there was a 2JD entrance fee. Daher held the same belief; while unsure, he believed the fee for entering the Boulevard ranged from 2-10 JD.¹¹² Even among populations that the government does not seek to bar from entrance outright perceive the area as a playground for the neoliberal elite.

Conclusion and Findings

Amman's new political and economic center was designed to attract capital and provide consumption zones for the cosmopolitan class. The actualization of this vision is decidedly non-participatory, with dissent quelled through new coercive arms of the state. The blurring of the private-public provided the regime a degree of cover in their management of this development, and an advertising blitz attempted to either inculcate Jordanians with nascent consumerism or move them towards acquiescence. Still, the site's primacy as the new downtown is marred by patterns of inclusion/exclusion that disconnect some of the population from this node of political and economic power. By and large, Ammanis prefer their 'traditional' neighborhoods over the new sterile Amman.

The physical aspects of the project are not meant to represent Jordanian cultural solidarity or continuity with Amman's social fabric. In fact, they represent a complete break from the past. They serve as signposting to the regional and international system of "the market" and its masters that Jordan has been primed for capital intake and has developed the luxury

¹¹² Interview with Rami F. Daher, 21 March 2018.

infrastructure needed to attract those who will bring this capital. The differences in patterns of consumption reveal who this development is supposed to serve: foreigners seem to enjoy the “living” and “playing” facets of life at Abdali, whereas Jordanians for the most part are confined to “working.”

IV: CONCLUSION

“What we build becomes who we are, and defines our society. By undermining the city’s physical heritage [Abdali] shook citizens’ memories and in turn their identity.”¹¹³

The neoliberal project now defines economic and political arrangements globally. The main site of contestation and implementation of this project is the city, especially the ‘global city,’ or ‘globalizing city.’ This has transformed land into financial assets that can be circulated on the global market, and their control converted into power.¹¹⁴ Not merely a container of politics, space *is* politics.

In contrast to the fixed, mappable, and contained entity, the state is multiscalar with multiple geographies that do not fit nicely within a fixed space or hierarchy. These new state spaces provide mechanisms for neoliberal political economic restructuring, reconfiguring urban state authority as a form of clientelism. The state and its elites are at the center of this process, facilitating, managing, and mediating the accumulation of global capital in the urban city. These customized islands of neoliberal development have further polarized the city’s socio-spatial make-up and has transformed cities into sites of investment, not sites of living.

Lefebvre believed citizen participation in the production of space is key. We argued that in a neoliberal system, the optimization of cities to suit the market and the rescaling of the state

¹¹³ Mango, “The New Centre and the City Citizen,” 164-65.

¹¹⁴ Brenner, *New State Spaces*, 61.

have allowed the state to lay claim to mental and physical space. Urban planning and construction are now conducted without any real constituent consultation. Social space is open to the broader community, yet even then they are faced with a poor binary: they may either socialize these spaces in accordance with the state's wishes, or isolate themselves from the newly emergent centers of power. As such, citizens have been denied the right to the city.

Abdali is paradigmatic of these changes. The state was deterritorialized and its land was divvied up and sold on the international market. State elites positioned themselves at the nexus of capital and state authority, in most instances profiting from their position. They facilitated place-specific regulations, eliminated fees and taxes, and repurposed public institutions, like GAM, and created new ones, like MAWARED, to develop a suitable milieu for the attraction of capital. State elites envisioned Amman joining the ranks of global Arab cities alongside Beirut, Rabat, and Dubai. The Abdali project was conceived as the flagship of this transformation, a vision of the city's future that would place it on the map. Indeed, the Rotana tower would signal to the transnational capitalist class that Amman was "open for business."

The enclosure of the city's mental space was paralleled by the enclosure of the physical landscape by state-sponsored development projects. The new state authority disallowed competing ideas of what Amman should look like. Acting under the guise of private enterprise and market forces, the state forced its vision of Amman upon the environment, concretizing this mental space in the form of massive skyscrapers and large-scale development projects. The mental and physical space fostered a new social space – one driven by hyper-consumption and a pursuit of the "good life." For some Jordanians, the project represents a choice: they may either embrace this space as the future of Jordan and occupy the space as a consumer, or they can recuse themselves of the privileges proximity to such a place may afford and socialize other

areas in accordance with other identities. For other Jordanians, such a decision has already been made for them. Their presence on the project won't be tolerated, independent of their views towards the lifestyle it represents.

In the face of so many other issues plaguing Jordan and the region in general, why does this matter? Civic participation in cities constitutes more than just architectural expression, and the “privatization of the most sacred of public spaces, the city [center]...is certainly not a negligible phenomenon.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, the ‘old’ city center *Wasat al-Balad*, historically served as a junction between the various lifestyles within the city containing “a mixed-use pattern of religious institutions, residential neighborhoods, government offices, and commercial establishments, sites for political gathering, as well as being a brief meeting point linking the East and West as common ground.”¹¹⁶ Abdali, on the other hand “was parachuted in and imposed on the area, with a stupor and surprise, as a forced authoritarian architecture” producing a “sterile upper-end property for a select audience...creating spatial exclusion and a new citizen identity.”¹¹⁷

By neglecting citizen input and discarding previous social behaviors that played out on its land, urban development in Amman “inevitably sacrificed heritage, identity, inclusion, and social cohesion, alienating and segregating the city citizens while developing real estate at the expense of memory, sense of place, and, ultimately, citizenship.”¹¹⁸ Naseem, a well-respected blogger/activist in Amman’s leftist circles reflected the general malaise felt by many Jordanians about the neoliberalization of their city: it’s a problem of the government’s mindset, “The same

¹¹⁵ Mango, “The New Centre and the City Citizen,” 175.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 161.

¹¹⁷ Mango, “The New Centre and the City Citizen,” 160; Jarraar, “Money is the Devil of the City.”

¹¹⁸ Mango, “The New Centre and the City Citizen,” 176.

mindset that makes the overwhelming suggestion that Jordanians, Jordanian land, Jordanian homes, forests, heritage and just about everything is expendable in the name of progress.”¹¹⁹ Of course, this progress is overconsumption. The commoditization of the city and the loss of access to the city center, which “historically represented the focus of politics and participation,” is equitable to the loss of active citizenship as it pertains to life within the urban environment. In short, technocrats have created “a dead city, an empty field open to the speculative ambitions of developers.”¹²⁰

Our case study of Abdali aims to offer an analytically rich, and organizationally adept way to interrogate “new state spaces” in the Middle Eastern milieu. Much of the present research has focused on the US and Western Europe. However, this process is wide-spread in the Arab World. As Daher says, “The same investors, the same trans-nationalist capitalist class, the same projects are being replicated across different Arab cities, causing major displacements of local communities to the outskirts of the city, creating exclusive and posh environments for the upper middle class.”¹²¹ More analysis needs to be placed on this transnational capitalist class as they fundamentally reshape cities and the relations between citizens and the spaces they inhabit. The opportunities this technique provides for authoritarian upgrading signify that this process will not change anytime soon. In a shrug of resignation, one of our interlocutors left us saying, “Abdali will be filled in a few years, there’s nothing we can do about it.”¹²² We are convinced much will be lost – far more than just a meeting place for cross cultural, ethnic, religious, and political thought – if Downtown Amman becomes synonymous with Abdali. We hope this paper can at

¹¹⁹ Tarawneh, “They Paved Paradise to Put Up the Abdali Project (and maybe a parking lot).”

¹²⁰ Mango, “The New Centre and the City Citizen,” 174.

¹²¹ Interview with Rami F. Daher, 21 March 2018.

¹²² Anonymized interview group #3, 10 January 2018.

the very least begin to focus attention on this often-overlooked issue of urban (re)development and (re)generation.

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VI. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interviews

Lama al-Khatib, Marketing Section Head for Abdali Investment & Development PSC. In English, 2 hours. 9 January 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Rami F. Daher, CEO of Turath and Professor at German Jordanian University. In English, 2 hours. 21 March 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Murad Awamleh, Head of General Amman Municipality Special Projects Division. In Arabic, 30 minutes. 10 January 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Roufan G. Nahhas, Representative of TAG organization. In English, via email. 9 August 2017.

Anonymous interview with prominent businessman. In English, 3 hours. 29 December 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Anonymized interviews group #1 – Boulevard patrons, Abdali Boulevard. In Arabic, 1330-1700. 7 January 2018: Amman Jordan.

Anonymized interview group #2 – Boulevard workers, Abdali Boulevard. In Arabic, 1400-1500. 10 January 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Anonymized interview group # 3 – Boulevard patrons, Abdali Boulevard. In Arabic, 1500-1900. 10 January 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Anonymized interview group #4 – Business owners surrounding project, Suliman al-Nabulsi Street. In Arabic, 1300-1500. 11 January 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Anonymized interview group #5 – “Local” retail workers on Abdali Boulevard. In Arabic, 1500-1600. 11 January 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Anonymized interview group #6 – Abdali Mall and Boulevard. In Arabic, 1500-2200. 13 January 2018: Amman, Jordan.

Appendix B: Images



Image 1: Jordanian artist Nidal al-Khairi's rendition of neoliberal development in Amman. The towers are symbolic of the transnational capitalist class that envisioned and developed them. They look down on the family, which cannot escape this urban paradigm as symbolized by the barbed wire. (Courtesy of Jarraar, "Money is the Devil of the City.")



Image 2: Abdali PSC's rendition of the New Amman. This is the Global City that Amman strives to be, with developments and towers reminiscent of Dubai, Beirut, Doha and other global or globalizing cities. (Courtesy of Abdali PSC, *Abdali*.)

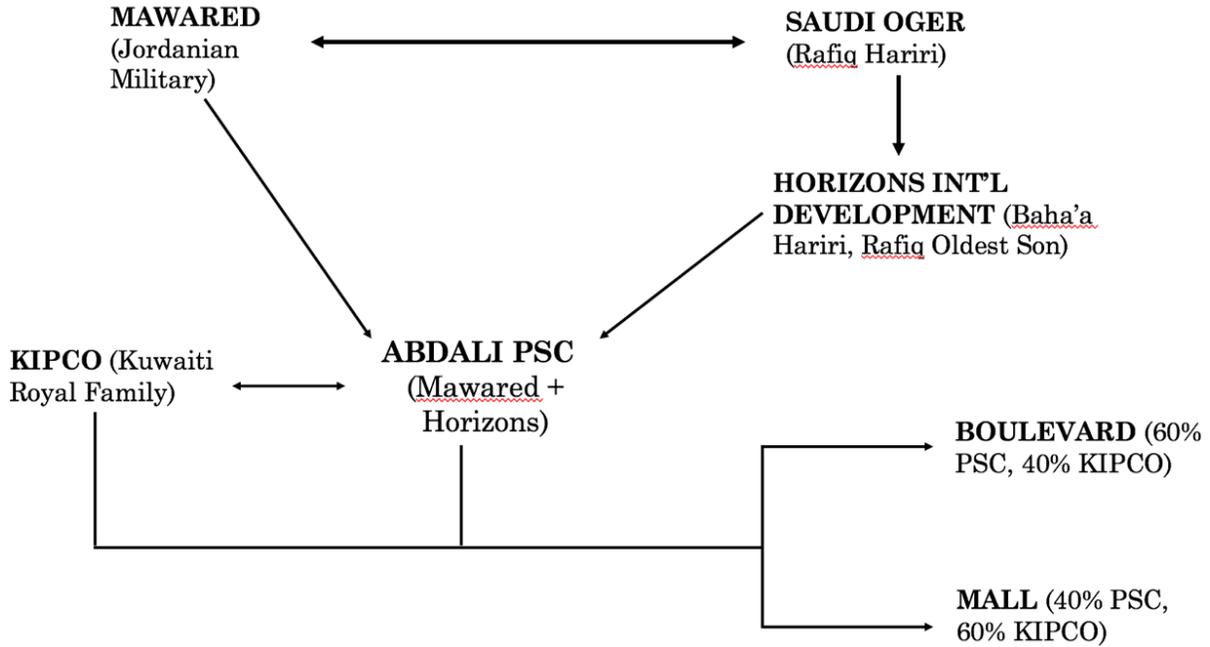


Image 3: Authors' organization of the Abdali PSC and its key stakeholders.

Land Use Plan



Image 4: Abdali PSC sketch of land usage for the project. By percentage: 49% residential, 20% retail/commercial, 17% offices, 11% hotels, and 3% medical. (Courtesy of Abdali PSC, *Abdali*.)



Image 5: Abdali Friday Market before its dispossession and ‘beautification’ in 2014. Note the construction of the towers in the background. (Courtesy of Muath Freij, *The Jordan Times*.)



Image 6: The construction of Abdali from 3rd circle. Daher has called these the “minarets to neoliberalism.” (Courtesy of Rami F. Daher.)



Image 7: Advertisement for Abdali in Amman. It reads, “A national project with a modern vision.” Advertisements like this one are plastered across Amman. (Image by Authors.)



Image 8: The actual use of such advertisements for Ammanis. Famous caricaturist Abu Mahjoob titled this cartoon “An apartment above the roof,” highlighting the obsessions with living in towers, while sarcastically demonstrating the inutility of these projects to most Ammanis, they cant even afford a home let alone luxury apartments. (Courtesy of Abu Mahjoob.)