



The City on Display: Presentation of Amman in Jordan's State-Forging

Ashley Zhuge
Bryn Maur College

The Jordan Museum, located at the center of Amman, adopts a narrative progressing from the paleolithic to modern times. Despite what its name suggests, the museum primarily displays a history of human civilization rather than just a history of Jordan—its narrative strives to contextualize Jordan within the globe by fitting it into overarching civilizational progress. Reaching the end of the gallery, one sees an abrupt jump from potteries to the Hashemite dynasty and the Jordanian keffiyeh; there is little about the state-building process or the development of Amman. The capital city Amman is obscured in Jordan's national museums; despite almost all the photos being taken within it, Amman's history is hardly apparent.

Obscuring Amman, omitting history specific to Jordan, and adhering to a universal and progressive account of human development are narratives found in many museums, such as the Jordan Museum and the Royal Automobile Museum. Scenes captured in Amman were manipulated to present desirable images of Jordan to Western investors; as a result, they were severed from their places in the city just like fragmented developmental projects in the actual urban landscape. This presentation creates a versatile conception of Jordan without a fixed place, enabling the Hashemites to project Jordan onto various historical, geographical,

and developmental spans of time.

The motivation to obscure Amman comes from Jordan's state-building strategies. Internally, the Hashemites consolidated a class-identity division tightly associated with the territory where Amman is seen as alien and non-typical. As the regime's neoliberal reforms shift resources from its traditional rural and tribal allies to private sector elites, Amman's new urban centers invoke great bitterness among the alienated. Externally, Western Orientalist expectations and neoliberal economic policies shape Jordan's urban outlook, making Amman an artificial commodity crafted for Western demands; however, in reality, Amman's history and collective memory contradict what the state aims to present. Since Amman's history contradicts the city's artificial appearance and the lifestyle of its people contrasts that of the rest of Jordan, the state omits Amman from the national history constructed for both Jordanians and the world. Breaking down the sensitivity surrounding Amman, this article illuminates the Hashemite challenges and ingenuities in forging a nation-state on a recently defined territory and in a Western-dominated global environment; in this context, a flexible definition of Jordan has emerged from the Hashemites' domestic and international political expediency.

i. challenges from the territorial class/identity division

In Jordan, territory is closely associated with class-identity divisions, and Amman sits at the center of the tension. Hosting 80% of the country's economic activities, life in Amman is dramatically different from the rest of the country, which is predominantly rural and tribal.¹ The difference is also demographic, with most Ammanis being Palestinian and Syrian, many of whom moved to the city as refugees and retained their sense of origin, whereas people in the rest of the country identify as Jordanian. Moreover, demographic differences and class divisions overlap: migrants to Amman arrived with capital that allowed them to dominate Jordan's private sector today, while rural and tribal communities typically rely on state employment and dominate the security and infrastructure sector. The division between Amman and the rest of Jordan gives rise to the "East Bankers" identity, denoting the tribal, the rural, and above all, non-West Bank and non-Ammani. This domestic tension manifests around Amman in multiple ways: the demographic division, the stark differences in lifestyle, the competition for state resources between the public and private sectors—which has been intensified by neoliberal policies dating back to the 1990s—and the contrast between the center and the periphery of development. The decision to downplay Amman in Jordan's domestic identity reflects the state's priority of accommodating the East Bankers.

Alliance with the East Bankers has been and remains to be central to building and maintaining a Jordanian state. Transjordan's early state-making project consisted of automobiles enforcing borders

against local migration patterns and incorporating nomads into the state security forces. The state relied on the army drawn primarily from the East Bankers and expanded its authority into remote areas through tribal support. The rural and tribal communities gained their prominence in Jordan not only from employment but from being the first to call themselves Jordanians as early as 1923, in addition to saving the country from a civil war with Palestinian militias in 1970.^{1,2} Since then, the rural and tribal identity has occupied the center of Jordan's national identity, showcasing its prominence through songs and the kings' usual appearance in military uniform. The tribes felt entitled to the country and its resources, and the Hashemites recognized their entitlement by ensuring their employment in exclusive military ranks and municipal administration posts.

The need to co-opt the East Bankers and avoid sensitivity surrounding Amman became even more important in the context of Jordan's neoliberal policy shift, which began in the late 90s under Abdullah II. The reforms shrank the public sector and shifted resources away from the East Bankers to the private sector elites, causing intense disaffection among the former group.³ At the same time, however, the state increasingly collaborated with private sector elites, subsidizing, allocating, and coordinating lucrative urban construction projects.⁴ Since Amman's new urban centers reflected the shifting favors of the regime, the Hashemites purposefully overlooked Amman when constructing Jordan's national history.

ii. the city on display

Eager to attract tourists and investors, the state constructs landmarks in Amman according to Western expectations of what Jordan is and should be. To that end, the city is an advertisement for selling Jordan to the international market. Severed from Amman's actual history, the state's urban projects and museum presentations place a dichotomy between old and modern onto Amman's cityscape, portraying Jordan as "a land of innovation, continuity, and change," as indicated by the banner of the Jordan Museum as of July 2022.

The corridor in the automobile museum presents four photos of Amman in chronological order, connected by forward-facing automobiles driven by each king (see image on page 18). In creating such an image, the museum associates the wheels of kings with progress. The first picture is a zoomed-in shot of a street and its residents; the second is the Hussein Mosque, located in the old downtown of Amman, in what is today called "the country" (*al-Balad*). The third picture shifts to Weibdeh, an affluent neighborhood two miles west of the old downtown with the rooftop bars, private clubs, and art galleries. The fourth picture is the luxurious lifestyle complex called The Boulevard in the Abdali district, which, ironically, my local interlocutor thought to be the Gulf.

In this itinerary of progress, little is explained about the places except whose reign they fell under. Spatially, the photos move away from downtown Amman, increasingly westward, into the remote outskirts where luxury residences can come with a whole lifestyle complex. The Jordanian state's developmental trajectory is of time and location. Beginning with the desert patrol that symbolizes Abdullah I's consolidation of the state border and concluding with a birds-eye view of the Gulf-style Abdali project, the more it progresses, the further it shifts away from people's lives and towards the metropolitan globe.

The photos give an illusion that the entirety of Jordan has moved with the session of kings, automobiles, and rising architecture. The movement combines time, development, and location; in reality, the places captured in the second and

third photograph remain identical today, serving as another representation of Jordan without developing towards a fourth photograph. The state intends to present selective aspects of Amman as the general Jordanian experience to entertain global tourism and foreign investment.

The city, rather than being the civic base or source of Jordan's national history, is a commodity for the Jordanian state's financial and strategic interests. In travel journals, billboards, and museum banners, Jordan presents itself as a country of both modernism and tradition. With the architecture in Petra and Karak representing the medieval or non-pre-Islamic eras of time, the bedouin experience camps speaking the traditional Jordanian, the Roman ruins and various archaeological museums showcasing the history of human civilization, and downtown Amman exemplifying a rare peaceful Arab city in a region of instability. The movement away from the desert patrols (bedouins) into downtown Amman and then the departure from Amman for Abdali showcases the bedouin sites and downtown Amman as a landmark of the traditional, while the increasingly complexity of lifestyle as it moves westward denotes the modern.

Further orienting towards the globe, Jordan advertises a versatile "timeless cultural identity" that moves between the past and present, fitting a peaceful exemplar within an unstable Middle East into larger human civilization.² Easing the struggles and particularities in Amman's urban history, the state generalizes the Jordanian experience to represent the Middle East. The emphasis on the Romani past in various archaeological museums and the refurbishing of bazaar storefronts are part of this effort. Another typical strategy is presenting history according to stages of civilization. For example, the Jordan Museum strangely begins from the Stone Age, then jumps into Bedouin lifestyles and clothes, then jumps back to a medieval king, and finally to the Hashemite kingdom. Obscuring and remaking Amman, therefore, is an attempt to attract tourism by consciously molding the city according to the biased concept of (Western) civilization and Orientalism.

"Amman... is the Middle East for beginners. As one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, it now finds itself as a cross between traditional Arabic sensibilities and Western commercialism. Divided between western Amman, with its modern cafes, bars, and malls, and eastern Amman, where traditional Jordanian culture is still deeply rooted."

– World Travel Guide

This quote reflects the success of Jordan's strategy. To be "the Middle East for beginners," Amman is neither Ottoman, Islamic, or Arab; as such, Amman denotes an abstract conceptualization of the old and the modern, accommodating whatever its audience imagines for the term. The west and downtown division in Amman spurs an illusory contrast between heritage and progress, despite—unlike the slogan "old and modern" suggests—Amman being a recently developed city, having no notable existence as late as the early twentieth century. In other words, the real history of Amman contradicts the state's constructed self-definition, which necessitates obscuring Amman in Jordan's national museums.⁴

Similar to other Middle Eastern cities, Amman is shaped by and crafted for Western expectations: stable (continuous), Oriental (Islamic), and global (progressive). Building skyscrapers on the city outskirts despite an abundance of land, Amman's west Abdali is an attempt to create a Gulf-style cosmopolitan enclave and make the state attractive to global consumers. Jordan's city-making project in Amman—leaving the old parts as they are while creating luxury enclave projects inside and away from them—is a common practice in Middle Eastern cities such as Cairo, Beirut, and Rabat. Such a developmental strategy focuses not on local welfare or sustainable job creation but on attracting foreign capital.⁶ Development and capital fall unevenly, leaving some neighborhoods unrepaired while high-end commercial projects pop up nearby. The fragmented developmental style and the artificial urban appearance reflect the struggle to sell Amman to the Western-dominated world. The museum presentation of Amman mirrors such manipulations of the cityscape, extracting scenes as symbols of progress unattached to the city's true history.





PC: Ashley Zhuge

iii. the Hashemite state

While catering to Western expectations has shaped a versatile and timeless Jordanian identity, such an identity also suits the Hashemites' political expediency. The territorial border is not the boundary to Jordan, for not only can ideas and people easily cross it, but the Hashemite ambition also lies beyond it. In Abdullah I's first two decades of leadership, his political orientation leaned towards the pan-Arabists in Greater Syria. Using Amman as a launching point for Greater Syria, Abdullah I sought to project his legitimacy over Greater Syria, inviting Istiqlalists—who hoped to create a Greater Syrian nation encompassing Transjordan and Syria—into high ministerial posts and the early Jordanian army. As the Syrian ambition proved futile in the 1950s while the challenges of Arab socialists rose, Jordan shifted focus and formed a short-lived Hashemite Arab Federation with Iraq, expanding the national imagination to an international Hashemite dynasty. Simultaneously, however, Abdullah I and Hussein coveted the Palestinian territories. With the name "West Bank" that implied a natural unity, the Hashemites attempted to conflate Jordanians and Palestinians. Domestically, it reserved parliamentary seats for the West Bankers after annexing the West Bank in 1950. With Israel and the U.S., it advocated for the Jordanian option.⁷ Still, the state managed to maintain its affinity with the East Bankers through the national songs and royal public appearances catered towards their culture in

particular. The series of manipulation shows that the scope and focus of Jordan are flexible depending on its challenges and opportunities. In this context, the capital city Amman, rather than being the Hashemites' focus, is more akin to a launching point for the Hashemites' broader regional ambitions. Obscuring Amman as a Jordanian nation detached from one specific history better serves the Hashemites' political expediency. This strategy avoids confronting the contradictions within the fledgling nation, from the sensitivity of place names in the domestic context to Jordan's versatile historical and geographical range. With regards to the former, the existence of Amman attacks the Hashemites' tribal and rural support base by being contrastingly urban, nascent, and cosmopolitan; as for the latter, Amman's urban history and public memory contradict its "old and modern" appearance. Internationally, the Hashemites avoid Amman and its state-building period in general to present Western investors with a timeless Jordan that defies the limits of its actual history. Domestically, Jordan's diverse demography calls for an elaborate and subtle definition of Jordan to accommodate all groups. Amman sits at the center of tension; the embedded contradictions and obscured image in the Jordanian national narrative are reflective of the Hashemites' state-forging challenges and ingenuities.