



Cities to be tamed? Standards and alternatives
in the transformation of the urban South
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Checkered Urbanism. A Case Study on the Dualities of Culture and Economy in the Muddled Urbanization of Amman (Jordan): As-Sahel

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This paper analyzes the dynamics between the local cultural processes and economic transformations that form these sprawl patterns in the peripheries of the city of Amman, the capital of Jordan. The rapid shock-wave urban growth of Amman never allowed for the smooth transition of the city's peripheries from rural to urban spatially and demographically. This culminated in a morphology where pre-existing agriculture is juxtaposed to urban residential apartment buildings. The city was never able to perform formal territorial restructuring. It rather appropriated the existing rural structures as a base for development. Thus, urbanization was influenced by imbedded cultural values of land ownership that stretch beyond its economic value. Through a detailed analysis of one peripheral neighbourhood in Amman, the paper emphasizes the importance of understanding these complex dynamics not only to support planning decisions, but also to help identify their goals in the first place.

Keywords: Amman, Land Ownership, Sprawl, Urbanization

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Introduction

No matter how different the postmodern city looks today, they all share the same characteristics governed mostly by global forces of the economy: blurred distinction between the urban and the rural, ever-expanding infrastructure for cars, the appearance of the box building typologies hosting multiplicities of functions, suburban monotony, etc. However, looking at the local perspectives, one can identify specificities to the urban form, that spring from the interaction between local cultural history and identity and generic global development forces. Amman is no exception to this rule. The city's sprawl has spread to interlock with other cities, the infrastructure for the car has consumed large percentages of the city's area, and the private car has become almost the sole means of transportation. At the same time, when observing the patterns of the city's growth, one can realize that the city's enormous spread across the landscape has substantially surpassed the population's needs. The result is a fragmented urbanized landscape that is labelled checkered in this paper. The label checkered, describes the situation where 40 percent of the land available for the development in Amman remains open - according to a recent study of the city's density (GAM, 2008, Annex 12). However this percentage of open land cannot be categorized as edge locations, or even in-between spaces, or derelict areas, they are rather distributed throughout the city and its neighbourhoods.

At the first glance it is difficult to understand the rationale behind this diffused morphology. Moreover, given their fragmented nature, it is not obvious to perceive these spaces collectively either. However, systematic mapping and analysis allows the revealing of the interplay of forces that in the end shape this specific morphology of Amman. These forces stretch from political and economical circumstances in the region, to legal and procedural aspects that steer the city's development, to local social and cultural values that interconnect people with space.

This paper attempts to unravel the complex and dynamic interplay between these forces and demonstrate how they coproduce this morphology. The paper focuses on one representative neighbourhood in Amman.

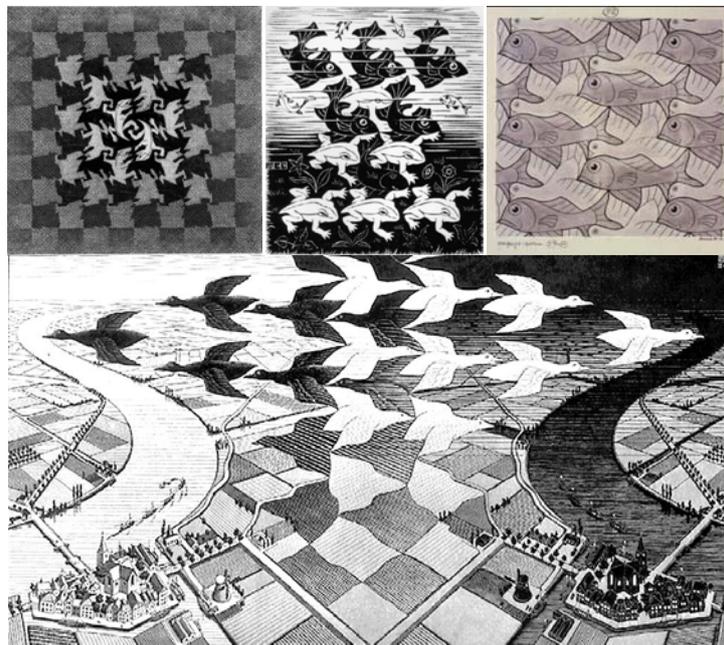


Figure 1. Examples of Escher drawings inspired by the checkered field. (Source: www.mcescher.com/, visited Sep. 25, 2012).

Checkered Urbanism – Coexisting Multiple Realities: Urban and Anti-Urban

In its simplest form, a checkered field is a representation of the distribution of two opposite but equally strong entities. It is a mishmash of the world, the dynamic between opposites; night and day, black and white, good and evil, etc. Many of these oppositions were depicted in the designs of the graphic artist M.C. Escher, who was inspired by the checkered field (Figure 1).

This paper talks about two opposites in the city of Amman that have a comparable importance: one the one hand there is the developed, urbanized, and built, and on the other there is the open, rural, and undeveloped. They coexist together side by side. The influence of each one on the other varies from positive to negative depending on the specific situation.

Although being equal in their strength, Escher shows the ability of each opposite to dominate by putting the other opposite to the background of the perspective. In this sense, the checkerboard is in a certain way also functioning as a hologram. Depending on the perspective, one can only see the figure created by one side. Changing the perspective, one sees the other.

In the case of Amman, the mentioned equal strength of the opposites is perhaps less obvious. Local governments tend to push urbanization by means of zoning plans, laying infrastructural networks, neglecting the provision of open spaces, and catering solely for the car. As urbanization is conventionally seen as development, it is seldom prevented. On the contrary, the mindset of authorities is usually rather focusing on ‘attracting’ investment. However, this paper will show how the interplay of local cultural values of the place with the speculative process of urbanization itself generates a (temporal) balance. It slows the urbanization process in an area by replacing it elsewhere.

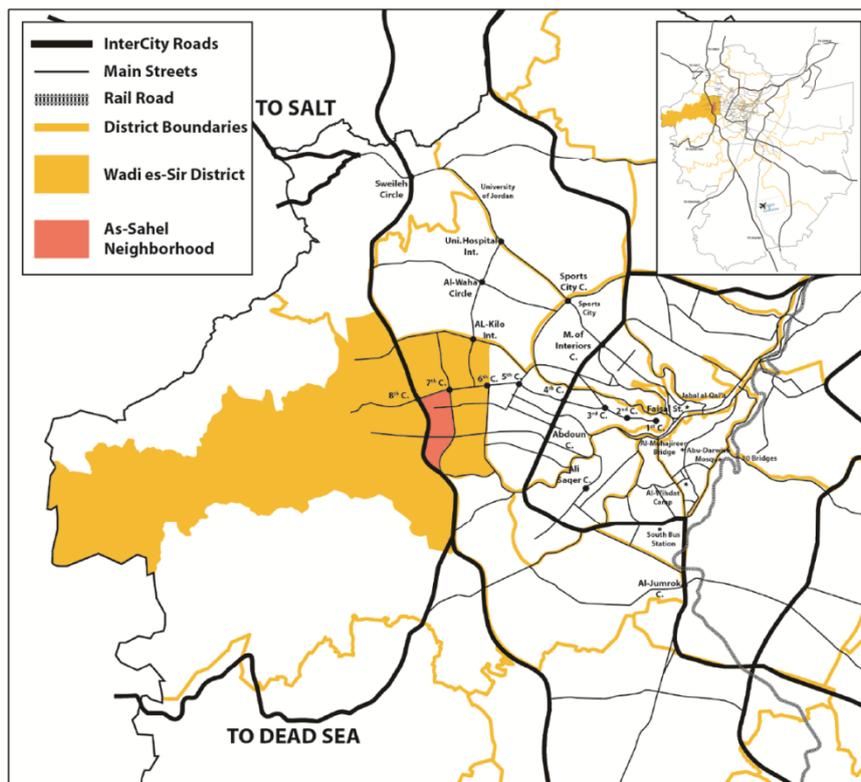


Figure 2. Map of Amman – showing Wādī es-Sīr District and as-Sahel neighbourhood within it. (Source: Author, based on maps of GAM, 2008)

The Case of As-Sahel Neighbourhood

As-Sahel is one of the neighbourhoods of Western Amman in the district of Wādī es-Sīr, (one of the 27 districts of Greater Amman) (figure 2). It is wedged by the convergence of the Queen Alia Airport Road and the King Abdullah II Road. A main road (Queen Zain al-Sharaf St.) crosses as-Sahel dividing it in daily practice into two neighbourhoods - although officially it remains one neighbourhood. Discussion of as-Sahel in this paper is only concerned with the northern neighbourhood.

The district of Wādī es-Sīr consisted originally of the agricultural fields that surrounded the town/village (figure 3) of Wādī es-Sīr. Just like Amman, this town was one of several towns inhabited by Circassian immigrants (from the Caucasus Mountains) who settled in Jordan around the end of the 19th century. The Circassians were settled by the Ottoman state and were given land near water resources that had agricultural potential. The flat fields of Wādī es-Sīr were suitable for grain crops³.



Figure 3. Aerial photo of Wādī es-Sīr – showing the town and the grain fields in 1953. (Source: Royal Geographical Centre, Jordan)

As-Sahel was part of these fields through which a perennial water stream passed. At times the stream cut through the land deep enough and created a characteristic steep topography. Land distribution that is very recognizable through the plot lines (see figure 4) illustrates the strong relationship of dependency between plots and stream. The plots were organized perpendicularly to ensure the largest number of plots have a direct access to the water.

This agricultural origin of the neighbourhood persists explicitly within the sprawling urbanization of Amman. Agricultural activities exist side by side with the built up, making As-Sahel emblematic for Amman's checkered urbanism. The total built area is 41% of the land available for development. Although not all of the open land is still used as agricultural, a large percentage is (see figure 5).

³ Today the area of the city that is located on top of these fields is called Bayāder Wādī es-Sīr (literally meaning the grain fields of Wādī es-Sīr)

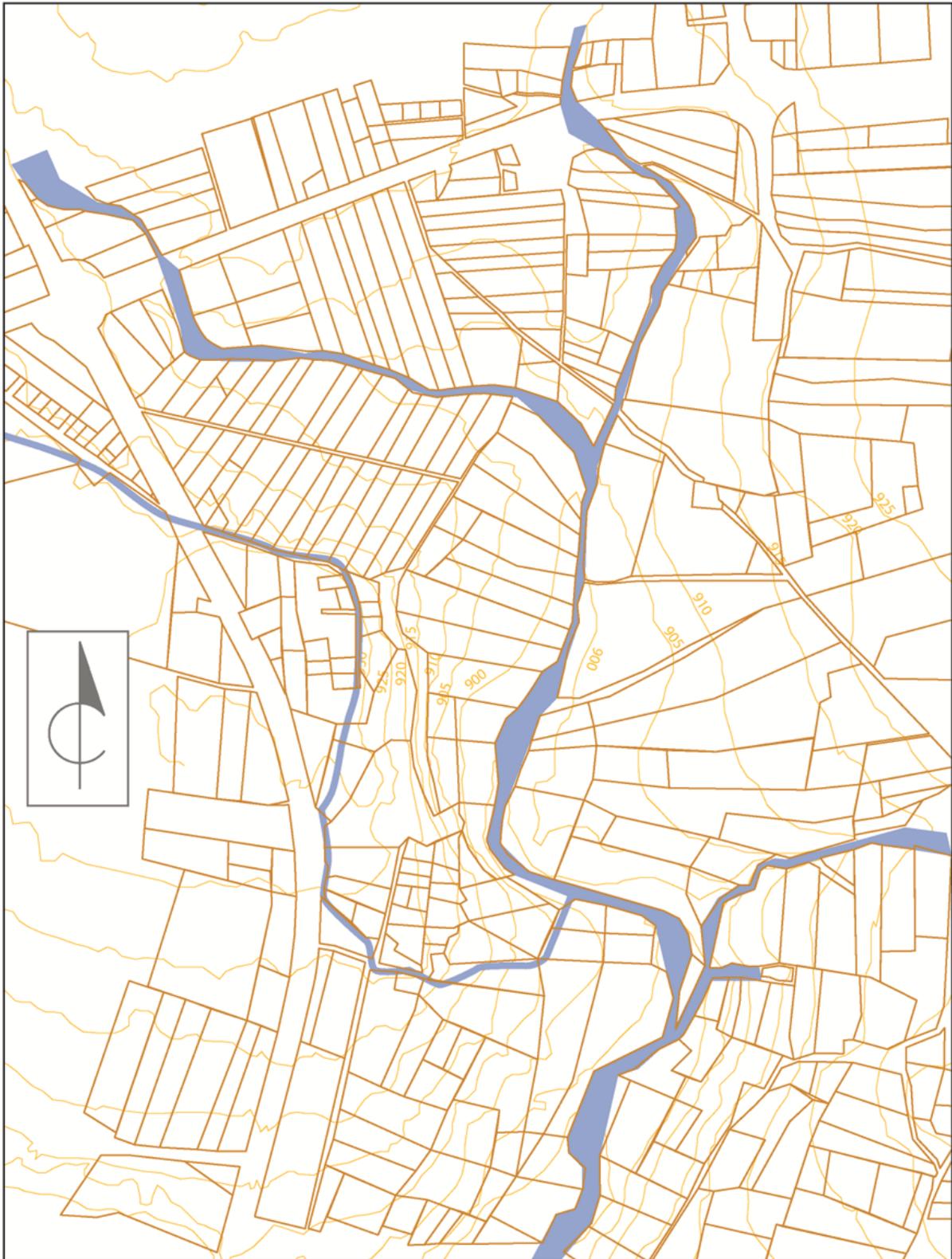


Figure 4. Agricultural plot lines – based on an aerial photo of 1978. (Source: author, based on aerial photo)

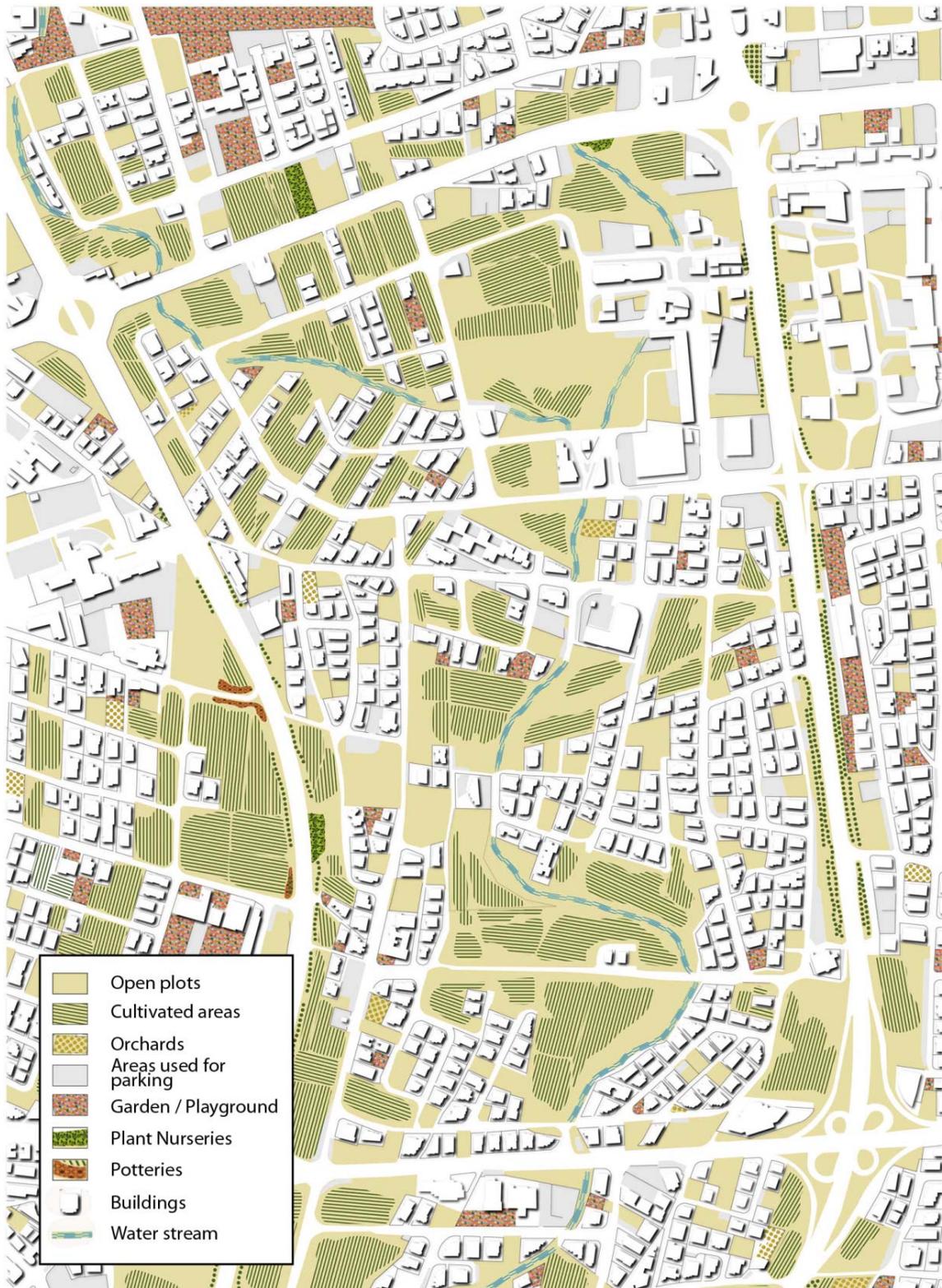


Figure 5. As-Sahel map – showing different uses of open plots. (Source: author, based on fieldwork)

Although the water stream still exists, it is no longer the datum line for the new urbanization. The new datum is the street. Driving along the street one experiences urban development and sprawl with intermittent open plots that often are still in use for agricultural purposes. However, behind these streets, on which developments turn its back lays an almost forgotten opposite landscape. Here, the path of the stream is considered the main path that runs across this landscape.

This double reality that coexist within as-Sahel can in many ways be considered complementary if we look at it from an urbanizing perspective; open land is considered a breathing space, an opportunity for seasonal markets, holding funerals and weddings, parking space, etc. (see figures 6-11). However interaction between the two is sometimes merely circumstantial and rarely even encouraged.



Figure 6-11. Examples of appropriations of open plots by the communities: election campaign post (top-left), watermelon seasonal market (top-right), funeral tent (middle row-left), pottery market (middle row-right), wedding (bottom-left), and children playground (bottom-right). (Source: author)

At hindsight it might be more interesting and challenging to exchange the unilateral urban perspective on this double reality for a dual look. The systematic presence (of fragments) of open land still constitutes a cultivated - and yes, damaged - landscape. Perhaps it is more correct to look to Amman as a hologram, looking urban from the one side, being landscape from the other perspective, modern and traditional, artificial and natural. Both forces are present, intermixed, side by side, in complement here and in contradiction there, the one dominating the other and vice versa or here and there, in balance.

Could checkered urbanism then be, in a certain way, a specific articulation of the city-landscape/city nature relationship - Nothing more, nothing less? City-nature relationship is evidently a classic team in urbanism. Ever since the 17th century, in cities like Versailles, Karlsruhe (both forest-park/city), Washington, and St. Petersburg (river system/city plane), the city is realized, in a certain way, while constructing (artificially or while domesticating) the nature in which it embeds itself (De Meulder, 2010). Le Corbusier did it still with a warp and woof manoeuvre in the notorious plan for Chandigarh. C. Doxiadis did it for Islamabad with the integration of a national park in his megalomaniac plan and consecutively in all the oversized master plans he unrolled all over the world. Is the Amman version of this city-nature relation a new kind of patchwork that is stitching at random the basically two main components of the city? A city that is predominantly composed out low rise (mostly 4 floors, mostly white/cream) relatively high density built fabric on the one hand and open spaces, natural space, fallow spaces on the other side. Their interplay defines the figure ground and counter figure of the city. It looks like both, co-present realities represent two very different modalities, two very different perspectives on land and space. One could argue that it is the modern versus the traditional perspective. Or is it more correct to characterize it as the urban look versus the countryside perspective: for example land to consume, land as market commodity versus land(-scape) as a collective heritage to cultivate, domesticate; consumption versus production, commodity versus patrimony. Land to be either private or public (also in the legal sense of property) as in the city versus land(-scape) as a collective, accessible space where the right of way is the evidence itself. It is only the base right on which can be layered the right to stay, to hold activities, to deploy installations. The opposition between both co-present modalities is quit fundamental in Amman: the built versus the open, mineral versus natural, fixed versus fluid, the stable versus the temporal. These oppositions might sometimes look contradictory; they nevertheless seem to compose the true character of contemporary Amman. And, in the end, isn't it nice to find cattle grazing behind the corner of a forceful fragment of urbanity, to complement the sterile malls with temporary, moving markets on vacant spaces, witness weddings in the smoky lobbies of hotels versus weddings in the open air. Isn't this multiplication of opposing options, characters, qualities, in the end, not enriching the city? It is for the moment still hard to imagine how the (development) policy of Amman could take into account, exploit, and take benefit from this duality (instead of denying it as it does until today).

Forces for Urbanization

The next two sections discuss the forces that shape this checkered reality of as-Sahel; the first section discusses forces for urbanization, and the second section will talk about the counter forces that maintain the openness in the neighbourhood. Many of the forces that will be discussed can be generalized to many of Amman's peripheral neighbourhoods. Non-the-less, as-Sahel has also local and contextual specificities, that maximize the effect of its checkered situation.

The district of Wādī es-Sīr including as-Sahel was incorporated into Amman municipality in 1986. Following this amalgamation, a zoning plan was produced, loosely based on a preliminary structural plan prepared in 1963 by Vernon Z. Newcombe - a U.N. advisor who was asked at the time to prepare an expansion plan for Amman. Newcombe suggested a linear expansion of Amman towards the town of Wādī es-Sīr (figure 12). He allocated a central economic zone, an administrative centre, and an industrial area. He also devised locations for different residential neighbourhoods that suit various economical backgrounds with green recreational strips running through them dotted with public and service facilities. To achieve this plan, Newcombe suggested a land pooling and redistribution system for the residential area, and public acquisition of land for the central commercial and administrative areas.



This was to replace the ongoing practice of using existing agricultural allotments as a base for urban subdivisions. In his opinion, shared in general by most of the professional planners worldwide, this causes irregular plots, inefficient infrastructure, and insufficient and uneven distribution of services and recreation areas. (Newcombe, 1963, p. 36)

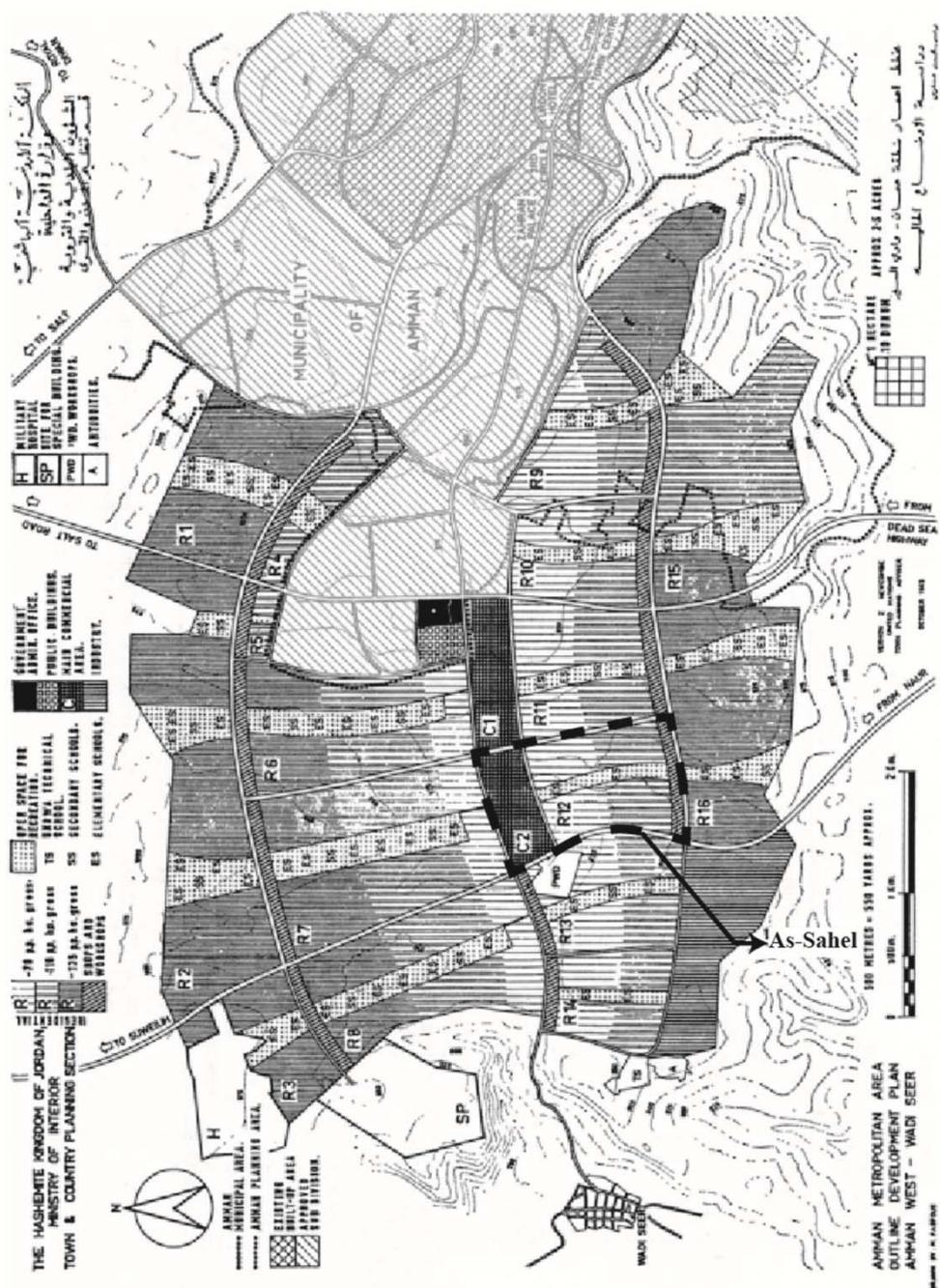


Fig. 7—The Amman Metropolitan Area

Figure 13. Newcombe’s 1963 scheme for Amman - Wādī es-Sīr: the scheme defines residential areas with different densities (R), central commercial areas (C), an industrial area to the southwest, a public and governmental buildings area, and several recreational strips that host schools and services running through a north south axis. (Source: Newcombe, 1964, edited to show as-Sahel area)

However, by the time the zoning plan was being devised, these recommendations could not be applied since urban sprawl has already gone a long way and land pooling became very complicated. Land prices had also risen much higher than the government's ability for land acquisition. This meant that the conventional practice (of converting agricultural allotments for these urban uses while maintaining their ownership status) persisted.

Once an area becomes officially zoned into the city (as in the case of as-Sahel in 1986), the subdivision of agricultural plots (to smaller areas) become allowed, and that the city authorities are obliged to gradually deliver infrastructure to the zoned areas. This by default raises land prices exponentially. Additionally, having a central commercial zone allocated in as-Sweifiyeh (adjacent to as-Sahel) and partly in as-Sahel, made the neighbourhood a lucrative urban space for speculation both residentially and commercially.

The execution of three major roads surrounding as-Sahel speeded up a lot of the sprawl in the neighbourhood. However, since the agglomeration of Greater Amman included many new neighbourhoods, the priority for providing internal infrastructure was given for the amalgamated areas closest to the city centre. Since as-Sahel is near the periphery of Amman today, its internal development was therefore comparatively slower and more gradual. Often a street would be constructed incrementally in sections (where a new building was being constructed) rather than as a whole. This of course required that the speculators had the ability and connections to convince the municipality to provide it with the necessary infrastructure.

Less than five years after the zoning plans were completed, around 300,000 Jordanian expatriates returned to Amman in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Many of those have lived all their lives in the Gulf and were accustomed to a consumerist lifestyle never equalled before in Jordan. Many of these returnees had sufficient means to reproduce that consumerist lifestyle (Beal, 2001). Consequently building and sprawl reached a peak in Amman. This is when the commercial area (Sweifiyeh) grew to become a vital commercial zone for the entire city, and started to spill over towards as-Sahel itself.

The massive and instant housing demand and the higher land prices caused a shift towards an almost generalized use of the apartment building typology in Western Amman. This was maximized later towards the end of 1990's, with the rise of new professional class with largely improved purchase ability. This class appeared with the newly established international and private sector companies that found an opportunity in the open economy as Jordan signed the world trade agreement, and privatized most of its services and other industries. Private companies responsible for the mass construction of the apartment building type allowed for faster urbanization in Amman. This economic boom in the early 2000s was reinforced in 2006 and 2007 as Amman became the headquarters for the many international companies racing for business in the new Iraq, and regional capital raced to invest in Jordan instead of Lebanon (after the Israeli invasion of 2007). At the same time, Amman received over half a million affluent Iraqis running away from the insecure situation in Iraq after the US invasion. (Marfleet & Chatty, 2009)

All these dramatic events with drastic impacts that surrounded the growth of Amman in the last quarter of a century added strong pressures for urbanization, causing many of the agglomerated areas (in 1986 and 2008 as well) to develop fast and at once. All these events can be traced in as-Sahel too following the sprawl patterns of the neighbourhood (Figure 14).

The (repetitive) urbanization processes that were adopted over and over to cope with the massive, unpredicted and sudden influx of people by the local authorities and the housing real estate sector and by people themselves were rather elementary. It is hard to qualify them as important contributions to the qualitative place making in Amman. The dominant role of the private real estate sector and the sequence of fast and instant real estate development waves, culminated in an industrial, mass produced urbanity.



It lacks the identity that is necessary for shaping the new urbanizing landscape of the rapidly developing city. As-Sahel, therefore, has (or lacks) as same urban qualities that the rest of Amman’s neighbourhoods, regardless of the socio-economic statuses of these neighbourhoods (Figures 15-20). In fact, the only identity as-Sahel may represent lies not in its urbanity but rather in its pre-urban agricultural landscape that can still be seen in the scattered patches of open spaces large and small between buildings and building blocks.



Figure 14. Urbanization process in as-Sahel at five different stages - showing the effect of population influxes post 1992, and post 2006. (Source: Source: Author, based on field work, aerial photos of 1992, 1978 from the Royal Geographic Centre, and Amman 2005 GIS)

However, it is not enough to consider the dramatic political and other shocks and waves that continue to shake the region as catalysts, of this fast and massive, be it fragmented, development. This urbanization induces in a certain way a chain reaction. Hence, urbanization catalyses other urbanizations; it always has been a driving force for the urbanizing of yet other new areas. When an existing area becomes denser, the wealthier leave for new, still spacious, neighbourhoods that instantly become more fashionable for living. This double mechanism -of sudden influxes and the chain reaction of urbanization- causes the city to ever and ever expand without the real necessity to. Urbanization becomes a consumer of pre-urban identity without the need to establish a new one. This is a force that functions as a drive for urbanization and for maintaining openness at the same time.



Figure 15 - 20. Images of residential neighbourhoods across Amman: Umm al-Summāq (top-left), Khaldā (top-right), Kamāliyyah (middle row-left), as-Sahel (middle row-right), Deir al-Ghbār (bottom-left), Dāhyet al-Yāsmīne (bottom-right). (Source: Author)

Forces Maintaining Openness

When discussing an issue of slow urbanization, the first reason that comes to mind is slow economy. Because Amman's development has always been linked to turbulent regional events, the periods in between these events can be described with slower economy resulting in slower urbanization period. Since there is abundance in plots available for development throughout the city, higher land prices drives development away to further peripheral locations during these slower periods. This means that although as-Sahel's position and zoning plans make it a lucrative neighbourhood for investments and development, this very characteristic can slow urbanization there.

The forces that confine urbanization are not only economical they are also physical and social or cultural. However these forces are extremely intermingled and tied in complex economical relationships. Most of these forces are directly linked to cultural meanings imbedded within land ownership. We already hinted to a duality in the concepts of land and landscape in tradition versus modernity, countryside versus city, etc.

The concept of land ownership in its modern sense was only introduced in Jordan during the second half of the nineteenth century with the *Tanzīmāt* law⁴. Prior to this law land ownership was a much more relaxed concept. Ownership issues were governed by Islamic regulations and local traditions, and the state did little to interfere with these systems unless disputes arose. In these traditions, land was not owned by default; it was an open resource just like water in a river; a small portion can be claimed if the '*need*' and the '*ability*' to serve (cultivate or build) were available. (Akbar, 1998, pg. 53) Traditions in Jordan can be divided into two based on very different lifestyles, the settled and the nomadic.

The settled lifestyle mainly stationed in rural villages on the north western parts of Jordan. Land here was based on residential clusters of the village surrounded by agricultural fields. Residential quarters in each village were appropriated based on the Islamic concept of *ihyā'*⁵. The village thus was able to grow densely and organically as need for expansion arose. As for the agricultural land, in many Jordanian villages, it was considered as a communal resource for the village people (a land ownership system known as *mushā*). Land was thus distributed among villagers' households based on their ability of cultivation. Larger household were assigned larger plots, while small households were given smaller plots to cultivate (Fischbach, 1992, pg. 67-74). This meant that land was not owned but rather distributed/made available. Therefore, the value of agricultural land was related to its agricultural productivity and not on size or area, while private ownership only related to private residences and in some cases shops.

The economy of the nomadic tradition, mostly based in the *Badia*⁶ (the steppe), is based mainly on animal farming. Here, land is abundant and with little value, and since the people are nomadic they had little need to own land; even not for private residences.

⁴ Before the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state treated the whole South-Syrian with peripheral neglect, until it started to lose some of its territories in the western parts of the empire to Russia. At that point, the state started to take more interest in its peripheral areas. This interest took form in the redistribution of its provincial administrative system (referred to as the '*Tanzīmāt*' (regulation) era) in an effort to gain more control over the land. One of the main purposes of this action was the need to employ the fertile lands to make produce, and impose a taxation system on agricultural land. (Rogan, 1994, p. 33)

⁵ *Ihyā'* is a principle that allows any person to own *dead* (un-appropriated) land by "enlivening" it (cultivating or building). Since land originally is not owned, *Ihyā'* is one source of ownership and is brought about when there is a new NEED to own a property (mostly a land plot). (Akbar, 1998, pg. 55)

⁶ The *Badia* is a classical Arabic word used to describe arid to semi-arid regions of the Middle East where rainfall averages less than 200 mm but not as dry as a desert. Today the *Badia* makes up about 80% of Jordan's total area. (<http://www.badia.gov.jo/land.html>, accessed January 2, 2012).



The value of land here is largely influenced by areas for grazing and the availability of water, which are both not individual needs but rather needs for the tribal community. This is a condition where owning a property is not very relevant and consequently not very important. What is fundamental though is the control over (resources of) the tribal territory (water, graze land, etc.). As in many contexts, the control over the territory was the cause of continuous feuds between neighbouring tribes.

Since Amman is located on the edge of the Badia, the Bedouin lifestyle dominated the area prior to the Tanzimāt period. In those times, the number of villages in Jordan was rather limited because of the unsafe hostile Bedouin tribes who were always securing new territories for themselves. (Rogan, 1994, pg. 33)

The Tanzimāt had little interest in the regulation of Bedouin lifestyles. The focus of the state at that time was indeed to increase agricultural produce (what gave a basis for taxation). The state consequently focused on regulating villages and towns that had agricultural potential, and settled immigrant groups from the Caucasus (Circassians and Chechnyans) in unexploited fertile areas with potential. This turned out to be mostly along the western edge of the Bādīa. The displaced Circassians were very loyal to the Ottoman state, and were able to defend their villages against Bedouin raids. The north-south cluster of Circassian villages thus formed a safe route later on for the construction of the Hijaz railway that was intended to secure Hajj routes from Istanbul to Mecca, and spreading Ottoman control over its peripheries.

The Tanzimāt included a redistribution of the administrative system, and the installation of a land registry, and a taxation system upon agricultural land (Fischbach, 1992, pg. 87). Of course, the local population tried hard to resist these changes that accompanied the Tanzimāt; especially taxes were contested. However the (potentially expanding) Circassian settlements forced many of the Bedouin tribes surrounding them to register their land in order to secure their title to it. (Rogan, 1994, pg. 46) However, further Bedouin tribes were never forced to do that. When the British mandate created the emirate of Transjordan headed by the Amir (later King) Abdullah I, one of the main political focuses of the government was to unify the tribes under the Amir. To accomplish this mission, the emirate had to solve the territorial struggles between the different tribes, and set the boundaries of each tribe's domain. This however conflicted with the new state land policy that was imposed by the British mandate. The land settlement program changed some of the land categories put by the Ottoman Tanzimat laws such as communal lands and 'dead' lands (that were available for *ihyā'*) to publicly owned land within the national treasury. This obviously was a means to deliver the nation some capital (Fischbach, 1992, pg. 330). This legitimation is the classic colonial viewpoint that property of land is actually a right of use and that this can only be claimed in so far that the land is exploited. When not occupied or domesticated, the land is not in use, hence is not owned. This meant that all previously unregistered land (including tribal territories) was transferred to the Jordanian government. Nonetheless, the governments over the years maintained their recognition of tribal territories orally, while on paper they had the legal authority over them. This issue has always been the hardest hanging issue between the governments and the tribes in Jordan. In 1954 some tribes were able to secure some documents guaranteeing their rights to the land; however, these rights were never defined (Al-Zou'bi, 2012). The issue is constantly under debate in Jordan, especially when urbanization knocks on the doors of these contested territories. On the one hand, the large areas of lands were only necessary for Bedouin lifestyles when they were nomadic and needed large areas for grazing. Now however, they are settled and are either employed or work in agriculture or other private initiatives. On the other hand, the relationship between the Bedouins and these lands are not merely speculative, it is deeply embedded within their culture with deep connections of patrimony and belonging.



Instances of such contested lands are recurrent in the north and south of the Greater Amman Municipality Boundaries, and there are several instances of what is officially called ‘illegal encroachments’ on state land by the tribes who consider themselves as the rightful owners of the land (Razzaz, 1996 & Ammon News, 2011). Inner tribal lands, do not pose the same challenges, since the tribes were able to feel the threat of losing their title to land as early as the settlement of the Circassian immigrants, they felt the need to change their lifestyle into an agricultural one, and register their territories privately in their names.

Amman’s continuous absorption of refugees and returnees who run away from any political disruption in the region never made it easier for the tribes in Amman to maintain their identity in the city. The only means that was available for those tribes to assert their identity and belonging was by preserving the ownership of the land they already have. This manifested itself in the largely undeveloped areas. Interviews with real-estate brokers revealed that in as-Sahel around 50% of the total land plots are owned by tribesmen and Circassian owners who refuse to sell for this reason. However, only in times of need for cash, these land owners tend to sell the smallest possible plot for the highest possible price. In as-Sahel, this means higher ground plots as well as ‘commercial’ and ‘residential A⁷’ zoned plots. Since the tribesmen and Circassians own plot that run in strips perpendicular to the water stream (as previously mentioned) and thus across topography, each land owner therefore own a spectrum of plot physical and zoning conditions, which in turn allow for this selectivity in selling options. The patterns of urbanization in as-Sahel clearly supports this argument (see figure 21) as higher grounds are more urbanized than lower ones leaving lower more agriculturally fertile lands open for agriculture.



Figure 21. East-west section across as-Sahel – showing how urbanization follows higher elevations keeping lower grounds available for agriculture (heights are doubled). (Source: Author)

With Jordan’s reputation as regional refuge and hence continuous reception of massive population influxes, land has gained, not without reason, the reputation of always being on demand. The fact that land owners generally refuse to sell creates on one hand a shortage of offer for land for development regardless of its physical abundance. On the other hand it makes that the developers go and look further and further from the existing urbanized areas for land. Amman, in the meantime, competes with Beijing for the amount of highways and ring roads, regardless of the relatively low urban density. This complex and paradoxical ongoing situation causes land to be abundant and simultaneously land prices to rise continuously and not vary proportionally with the economy fluctuations. This has therefore labelled lands with high speculative value that insures safe investment.

⁷ ‘Residential A’ zoning represents the least dense zoning for housing in an urban context. The zoning corresponds to a set of regulations for building inside the plot such as 5m front and side setbacks, 7m rear setbacks and 39% building footprint to plot area ratio (FAR), this can be compared to 3m front setbacks, 2.5 rear and side setbacks and 55% FAR for the ‘D’ zoning which is the densest type.

Especially in an economically and politically unstable region not only for Jordanians but also for the many Arabs in the region as well, land has a guaranteed speculative value.

According to the real-estate brokers, the remaining 50% of the undeveloped plots belong to individuals who no longer reside in the country. Over and over again, many of the refugees who landed in Jordan after an upset in their own country used Amman as a stepping stone for building a better future for themselves and their families. Between the years of 2005 and 2006 for example, Jordan received over 500,000 Iraqis fleeing the seemingly unsettling situations in Iraq regardless of the US promise after removing Saddam. Land prices in Amman at this point doubled and tripled in an instant. However the numbers of Iraqis in the year after was reduced to 300,000 and has been fluctuating ever since, and became impossible to assess. Many of those Iraqis indeed applied for immigration, once they were in Jordan, mostly to the US and other European countries. Yet, as these families proceeded into an unknown future, they still tried to secure a place for them in Amman, should things not work out.

Finally, the checkered urbanism of Amman, this multi-scalar and omnipresent co-presence of built and un-built, of city and nature, of closed and open, has to be understood within the neoliberal economic regime that is characterizing Jordan. As a country with limited resources and adhering to the free market, urbanization is anyways not the result of strong planning processes and strictly enforced regulations. Urbanization is rather the result of a bottom up process, whereby individual landowners bring plots of land to the building market. This is by definition an incremental and bottom up process. Public authorities in the neoliberal era limit themselves mainly to facilitation of this process by making very broad zoning plans (allowing building), approving individual applications for allotments, delivering building permits and, finally, also by providing the infrastructure. No wonder that the patterns of urbanization are scattered.

The housing policy is in other words one of providing of building land (broad zoning, easy approval of allotments, etc.). This politics of providing -typical for quite some neoliberal regimes- do lead in the case of Jordan to an overprovision. This overprovision doesn't intend to oversupply the market. As explained earlier, prices remain rather high. The overprovision is rather guaranteeing that the offer on the real estate market is always sufficient, and this taking into account that the land market is private and depending on the individual decisions of land owners to bring land to the market, taking into account -given the residues of tradition- that a substantial part of the land owners will not bring their land to the market and taking into account that there has to be an offer on the market at any moment, also when a new crisis in the volatile region generates a new flow of (rich) refugees, hence a new wave of land transactions, a new boom in the construction industry. Because also that is part of the policy of provision in countries with a relative open economy: always being ready to secure for the country a part of the 'unexpected' refugee economy. The country does not want to miss these opportunities that come with shocks and waves, shocks and waves that ultimately resonate in the amplifying spatial patterns of open and closed that are so characteristic for Amman.

Conclusion: Concurrent Production of Checkered Urbanism of Amman

The paper revealed the many forces at play that simultaneously produce the double checkered reality of Amman. Although the paper separated the forces for urbanization from those that limit them, it is clear that these forces are not easily separable. They are largely interconnected and cause each other.

One of the main examples of this interconnection is the fluidity of Amman's residents. The temporary state of refugees and seekers of immigration outside the country is continuously confronted with their ambitions for a secure future. This in turn renders urbanization absent from its people and in no need for place making.



While external financial resources make a high speculative commodity of Amman's land, which consequently makes it un-amenable to most of its long-term inhabitants who in turn find themselves moving outwards.

A directly relative issue here is identity. The slow production of meaningful place in Amman causes urbanization to search for the pre-urban identity. Yet, this is exactly the reason why pre-urban owners refuse to give up these places for urbanization, and insist on maintaining their relationship to the place.

All these forces regularly contribute to the shaping of the city both in morphological and in social terms as have been seen in the case of as-Sahel. These forces are imbedded in the value of land and lay beyond the simple speculative value assumed by the zoning plans. Every day the checkered reality of the city tells its story of accepting and defense.



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