The Social sustainability of Urban Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical approaches to urban studies since the late last century place stronger focus on social dimension of space. By referring to cultural environment as ‘the process’ and materialisation of space as ‘the product’ they reveal shortfalls of the conventional functionalist theory and its appeal for universal urbanisation model. In these approaches, space is interpreted as spatiality of human life constituted through social relation and material social products functioning by the way societies are organised spatially.

Previous studies for the cities discuss that cities have gradually been losing its legacy represented through its architectural and urban space characteristics and lifestyle. This is due to several reasons among which are the lack of appreciation of the culture of city, protective laws and regulations, the transformation in world economy, and the lack of any critical reading on the evolution of the city and its social sustainability (Pope 1988; Daher 2011; Hillier 2005; Sassen 2001).

This paper presents a discourse on the urban authenticity and its relation to the social subject of the city by focusing on a case study in the city of Amman.

KEYWORDS: Social sustainability, spatial, social, culture, authenticity, urban space.

1. INTRODUCTION

The city and its urban spaces should provide a desire setting for everyday urban life of all its inhabitancies. And since the social culture of the city is constantly changing over time due to changes and growth of cultural environment, the development of the city should provide an environment in response to these changes as well as fostering continuation of everyday life of all social classes of the society.

The interrelationship between social and physical environment boosted utopian thinking among urban theorists and designers in the past leading to the formation of visionary ideas such as ‘Garden City’. In modernist interpretation, utopia is viewed as the ideal environment for humans to inhabit, an idealistic vision that on several occasions attempts have been made to realise it. Le Corbusier’s Radiant City, introduced in 1923, was built upon Ebenezer Howards Garden City (Colman 1990: 8) with higher density to meet the demand of the modern world. His utopian vision that the higher density would enhance social interaction had an adverse result increasing anti-social behaviour promoting dystopian situation over a Utopian one.

As a result, it is very important to explore the impacts of the recent urban transformations on the city’s identity and sociability to enhance its social sustainability. However, the diversity of terminology and the variety of disciplines involved in social assessment makes it hard to present a comprehensive picture (Berkeley 2012). Each place, and each culture, is unique. What works for a European city might be completely inappropriate for one in the Middle East. Therefore, every culture needs to find the tools and approaches that work for them (PPS 2012). Places are always changing and social sustainability is widely acknowledged to be a dynamic concept. In other words, the concept of place could be only understood ‘through the lens of social and cultural conflict’ (Cresswell 2004: 29).
2. PARAMETRIC STUDY

2.1 Problem considered

Urban transformation (regeneration projects) refers to a physical modification of urban areas, previously used for other purposes (Arctander 2006). It also refers to the attempt to reinvigorate a rundown urban area, such as the inner city (Mayhew 2013).

The problem is that the recent transformations in the urban landscapes of Amman follow the concept of branding and includes a variety of exclusiveness projects such as office towers, gated communities and shopping malls which may have serious impacts on the social sustainability of the city. The paper first describes the continuity and changes in Amman’s urban landscape during the 20th century in order to explore the influences of urban regeneration projects on sociocultural environment of the city, and then proposed a “Comprehensive approach” to minimize these influences and assess social sustainability.

2.2 Cases analysed

The physical and social impacts of urban regeneration projects can be shown and summarized in the case study of Amman. In the old downtown of Amman (Figure 1), different religious and social backgrounds lived next to each other since 1921, formulating an integrated social relationship (Muneef 1994). The social landscape of the old city was dominated by the local people who have a strong affiliation to their existing living pattern, their social life and the way they used their environment, thus social life was more inclusive. But, as the city expanded, the hilly topography reinforces the disconnectedness of the city; as new neighborhoods populated the hills around the original settlement and commercial areas filled the valleys in between (Pilder 2011, Muneef 1994). After the Second World War, the natural topography of the area, and the absence of planning for the city expansion, helped Amman to grow randomly (Muneef 1994).

![Figure 1. The urban landscape of Amman’s Old downtown.](image)

During the first oil boom of the 1960s and 1970s in the Gulf, Amman was affected by the world economy transformation which divided the city along socio-economic lines of division, East Amman “old parts” and West Amman “modern parts”. This division affected the social sustainability of the city; however, the effect was not huge because the development involving local developers using a combination of traditional and modern architectural language and techniques (Figure 2). So, from an architectural standpoint these early buildings in Amman emphasized the direct and subconscious tradition of the people.
Figure 2. The transformation in the architectural language and techniques during the last decades

Since the end of 1990s, the city considered as a global metropolis, and it has been noticing the regeneration of a new urban landscape and exclusive urban environment (Summer 2005, Daher 2007) which may influence the social sustainability in the city and may lead to more divisions not only between East and West of Amman but within different parts of West Amman as well. Abdali Urban Regeneration Project (New downtown of Amman) is just an example of such developments that illustrate the recent transformation of the urban landscape (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The urban landscape of Abdali (New downtown of Amman).

In June 2003, Abdali Urban Regeneration Project was launched in partnership with Saudi Oger, a leading international developer. This partnership will lead the development of the 384000 m² site - with a total built up area of 1,800,000 m² - as a new downtown for Amman, with a budget of US$ 5 billion. The development of the site as a smart urban center will provide for the first time in Amman world-class infrastructure for an integrated business environment in one single package in a central location, in addition to the opportunity of promoting the concept of better urban living in Amman (abdali.jo 2013) (Figure 4).
In order to build up this project and create the new downtown of Amman, the government demolished the whole site of Za’amta neighborhood in Abdali district, and relocated its residents. The new development imposed serious problems for low income people and marginalized group to find decent housing at affordable price within the new development. Residents therefore had little options but to live either in distance green-field housing with affordable prices, or in the new (expensive) high-rise blocks. Public opinion against high-rise appeared barely to register with the planners, although they were meant to be planning on behalf of society.

The above impacts which affect the sociocultural environment can be summarized to physical and social impacts such as the transformation from one-story to skyscraper, from integrated neighborhoods to gated communities, from traditional souks to shopping Malls, and from inclusive community to exclusive urbanity. All these transformations will affect the social meaning of the urban landscape in Amman and may harm the social sustainability. Thus, it is urban transformation that sometimes weakens the traditions, conventions, rhythms and social structures which generally guide practical action.

3. ASSESSING SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

In order to preserve our architectural and social identity, this section suggests a practical tool that suits our culture to assist the social sustainability of new developments. This “Comprehensive approach” is proposed to assess social sustainability and minimise the impacts of urban transformation by understanding the social dynamic of urban spaces, using the international models such as “The Place Diagram” that is developed by UN-Habitat. This approach also calls for social innovation which can be reached by public participation, and for inclusive governance which can be reached by women involvement in decision making.

3.1 The social dynamic of urban spaces

There is increasing global interest in social sustainability, amongst policy makers, academics, governments and the various agencies involved in planning and urban regeneration. The term “social sustainability” originated in 1987 from the ‘three pillars’ of sustainable development; environmental, economic, and social (Figure 5). Social sustainability is about people’s quality of life, now and in the future. It describes the extent to which a neighborhood supports individual and collective well-being. It combines design of the physical environment with a focus on how the people who live in and use a space relate to each other and function as a community (Berkeley 2012). It is enhanced by development which provides the right infrastructure to support a strong social and cultural life,
opportunities for people to get involved, and scope for the place and the community to evolve. But, the term social sustainability is not yet widely used by developers or public agencies in the UK, although it has been an object of academic research for over a decade (Berkeley 2012:15). Therefore, the concept of social sustainability will support the concept of place-making – which developed by UN-HABITAT and Project for Public Spaces (PPS), they all will be used as a framework to create a “Comprehensive scheme” to be used as an assessment model for social sustainability.

Figure 5. The three pillars of sustainability

3.2 Social sustainability assessment

After evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, PPS (2013) has found that successful ones have four key qualities: they are accessible; dynamic; comfortable with a good image; and sociable places. It is clear that this definition is connected with the meaning of social sustainability which enhances people’s quality of life. It describes the extent to which a specific place supports individual and collective well-being. Besides, PPS addressed a number of questions to evaluate the four key qualities of place, and developed “The Place Diagram” as a tool to help people in judging the quality of life in any place (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The Place Diagram which is used in assessing the social sustainability of a place.
In order to apply the Place Diagram on the Abdali Urban Regeneration, we divided the surrounding areas into two zones, Area 1 (the south neighborhood), and area 2 (the north neighborhood) (Figure 7). Structural interviews were conducted with the citizens from both genders, asking them about their opinion of their current lifestyle and neighborhood to assess their understanding for the meaning of social sustainability, then they were asked about their opinion of Abdali development and its effects on Amman’s identity and social sustainability.

![Figure 7. Surrounding Areas of Abdali.](image)

Analyzing the citizens’ answers showed the following:

- Area (2) is affected negatively by the Abdali development more than Area (1), because the original residential zone in Area (1) was separated from the development by a line of existing commercial buildings and shops, so there is no direct contact with the project. While the residential zone in Area (2) is directly located next to Abdali development.

- Citizens (especially in Area 2) believe that this development harm the social life, they compare the social life in their neighborhood before and after establishing Abdali, now they don’t feel safe because the workforce in Abdali comes from different backgrounds, now they should lock the main doors before sunsets, moreover they cannot enjoy walking in the street as they used to, for the same reason.

- Today the neighborhood contains different people from different origins, the original residents left their houses and settle in other areas far from Abdali, some of them sold their houses to foreigners while others rent them. They also don’t feel stable because they feel that the government may replace their houses as a future extension for Abdali.

- According to them transportation become too bad because of Abdali, according to citizens “if you don’t have your private car, you will struggle to go to your work and come home again”… “Taxis refuse to come to our neighborhood because of the traffic jam”...

- Other problem is the pollution caused by the project, noise and dust.

- In general citizens are not satisfied with their current lifestyle, and they also not satisfied with the Abdali development, they believe that it is not built for them; it is for the investors and elites.
• Citizens believe that Abdali will increase the social polarization in Amman, harm the city attractiveness, decrease the sense of belonging and affect the city identity.

3.3 Social innovation by public participation

The dynamic-city approach builds on the ability of local institutions to create great community places that bring people together and reflect community values and needs. PPS (2012) finds that governments rarely focus on creating a successful public realm. The structure of departments and the processes they require in fact sometimes obstruct the creation of successful public spaces. There is not a comprehensive approach in planning and design, transportation departments view their mission as moving traffic; parks departments are there to create and manage green space; community development agencies are focused on development of projects, not the spaces in between them. However, local government deserve opportunities to learn and develop the skills to integrate citizen participation within all the elements of comprehensive planning, especially if they hope to make a real difference in giving ordinary people a voice in shaping the future of their communities (Grabow 2006). A comprehensive approach to developing, enhancing, and managing public space requires both “top-down” and “bottom-up” strategies. Leadership at the highest level of city is essential if transformation of public spaces is to occur on a large scale. A “bottom-up” grassroots organizing strategy is also integral to the strategy (PPS 2012). The involvement of city residents is crucial to the success of many policies, especially in a context of crisis and possible conflicts between the different stakeholders (EU 2011).

It is very important here to highlight that there was no citizens’ participation during different stages of Abdali’s planning and design, which negatively affect the sense of belonging for the city.

4. CONCLUSIONS

All theories have strengths and shortcomings and, because they are a matter of perspective, are always open to debate. Theorizing of cities shaping, the physical and social meaning of urban form, and the logic of a dynamic place, have the potential to shed light on some of the omissions in, and gaps between these spatial/social urban theories, and highlight some areas to understand the impacts of transformation projects on the social sustainability of urban landscape. Thus, a sustained attention is needed to the relation between social and physical dimensions of the conceptual scheme, to provide many fruitful opportunities for analyzing urban spaces in the city.

In this sense, space is not as a physical arena but is socially produced through a complex dialectics of the social relations, including cultural constraint and behaviour which may vary across different user’s groups in different places. This concern a call to a shift of focus away from City branding for urban regeneration of a traditional part of the city to explore how the introduction of new urban environment in a predominately traditional society affects people life. On the other hand, we believe the society is a dynamic phenomenon which is subject to change and adaptation to new ideas, new environment and new urban setting.

We therefore believe that consideration for cultural continuity, growth and future development as well as social benefit to the whole society, and environmental sustainability at the design stage would lead to the development of an urban landscape encouraging both continuity and change. Consideration of these socio-cultural factors would lead to a conceptual framework which would lead to an urban regeneration strategy catering for both the revitalization of traditional space as well as introduction of the new ones.

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