

Chapter 1: Building Amman's Artworld:

Creative Space and Political Agency

When Fadi Amireh opened Jadal for Knowledge and Culture in an old building along Amman's historic al Kalha Stairs, the stairs were severely run down. Decades of urban flight by wealthy residents had left the stairs—and the rest of Amman's historic core—to decline. Most storefronts along the stairway were shuttered, and residences were often in disrepair. Amireh found an empty old building along the stairway with a beautiful courtyard and renovated it into Jadal, a multi-faceted cultural institution, combining an art gallery, a venue, a café, meeting spaces, a workshop space, and a study room. As an activist who had grown disillusioned with Jordan's institutional left, Amireh hoped to use Jadal to build and model his vision of an egalitarian future. To that end, Jadal is run as a collective, has experimented with sliding scale and fair pricing models, and frequently hosts radical programming. For instance, Jadal's programming has included a public debate comparing anarchist and socialist interpretations of the Arab Spring, classes on Marxist theory, lectures on Islamic feminism and so on.

When Amireh opened Jadal, residents of the al Kalha stairs included a number of Syrian refugees. These were young revolutionaries, among the first wave of displaced Syrians to arrive in Jordan as Syria's Arab Spring revolution collapsed into a disastrous civil war. While Amireh was renovating Jadal, he also worked to clean up the staircase in front of Jadal, and in the process made friends with several of these neighbors. Connecting over shared politics, the Syrians began to use Jadal and participate in its cooperative administration. Alongside other programming, Jadal acquired characteristics of a Syrian community center. It hosted bake sales to raise funds for refugees, screened classic Syrian movies, and organized a reading room of Syrian literature, poetry, and political pamphlets. They also organized educational programming for Syrian children unable to get into Jordanian schools and ran a program of art therapy for these youth.

At the same time, Jadal developed a growing reputation for its dynamic cultural programming, including concerts, art openings, a public lecture series, and a variety of classes (some taught in English, some in Arabic). Jadal was fairly unique in its success at drawing a mix of a popular Jordanian audience and European expats, particularly left-leaning expats from Jordan's rapidly growing NGO sector.⁴⁵ Especially successful were Jadal's monthly "International Dinners," a kind of potluck and performance, which aimed to celebrate the diverse backgrounds of Jadal's patrons

⁴⁵ In describing the Jordanian audience as "popular" here, I draw on Jordanian colloquial usage, to refer to the "popular classes," indicating that the Jordanian audience is not limited to the cosmopolitan elite which dominates much of Jordan's cultural scene. The term "popular neighborhood," which I use throughout the book, has a similar connotation.

and foster conversation between different groups. Within a year or so, this event had developed wide popularity, frequently exceeding Jadal's capacity.⁴⁶

While the Al Kalha stairs had been run down and out of the way when Amireh founded Jadal, Jadal quickly built up steady foot traffic, both as people attended events, and as people came to hang out in Jadal's relaxing courtyard café. Through this foot traffic, Jadal helped to anchor the development of several additional activist and cultural institutions along the al Kalha Stairs. The first of these was Azwati, a volunteer run sandwich shop in which half of the (still cheap) sandwich price is used to gift a second sandwich to a person in need. Some downtown panhandlers regularly come to Azwati to eat and also hang out in the stairs and at Jadal. Azwati also attracts college-aged youth, inspired by a recent boom in volunteerism, who sometimes come in large groups to hang out in the stairs, eat together, and sometimes tell stories or sing songs.

Subsequent sites to open on the stairs include two cultural cafés; the workshop of Beit al Nai, an organization which trains Jordanians to make and play traditional flutes in an attempt to revive this cultural heritage; and Alwan, a souvenir and handicraft shop run by Mhammad Trakhan, a young artist whose family owned some storefronts along the stairs. Since opening his shop, Trakhan has taken the lead in working to develop the cultural corridor along the al Kalha stairs, working with neighbors to clean up trash, feed the neighborhood cats, and install trash cans and planters. He has organized mural painting sessions, where a large group of his friends came to paint murals beautifying the stairway, and he frequently gives interviews to press outlets celebrating the rapid transformation of the stairway. As described in the the Jordanian daily, Al Rai, someone walking the "famous" al Kalha stairs,

would be amazed by the beautiful art and culture which decorates the stairs...the restaurants with an artistic atmosphere of drawings and music; and the meetups of young creatives...truly the stairs have become a permanent daily festival.⁴⁷

The development of the al Kalha Stairs highlights how art can be spatially productive. From individual institutions like Jadal to networked creative spaces (like the chain of institutions up the al Kalha Stairs) and beyond, as artists work to build up an institutional foundation for creative practice, they push into urban space, develop sites of practice, and transform the spaces around them. Intervening in the wider social geography of the city, this artistic spatial production has real

⁴⁶ Over the mid 2010s, as Jordan's growing aid sector became an increasingly important part of an otherwise stagnant economy, cosmopolitan competencies – an ability to interact comfortably with a group of European expats – became an increasingly valuable skill, which helped to facilitate aid-sector employment and thus class mobility. Young, aspirational Jordanians frequently sought out opportunities to socialize with expats, practice English, and otherwise build this skillset. That such interactions happened relatively naturally at Jadal helped raise Jadal's institutional profile.

⁴⁷ Suliman 2018

world political effects. Jadal's connection to the Syrian population on the al Kalha Stairs, for example, reshaped Jadal's mission and helped build a community space for Syrians, a group that often faces exclusion and discrimination in Amman. The further development of the al Kalha Stairs revitalized a declined historic area and also opened up a space marked by a clustering of left wing cultural institutions.

In 2015, I toured the stairs with Majed, a local activist who had helped renovate the building of Naqsh, a radical performance space and political café located at the top of the stairs. Majed spoke excitedly about the corridor of leftist cultural institutions which had opened along the stairway and the space that they opened for political organizing, conversation, and consciousness raising. Towards the end of our conversation, he gestured grandly down the stairway and made a bold (perhaps overzealous) claim about the political importance he saw in this emerging cultural corridor.

"I was not able to be in Egypt for its revolution," he said, "but this is my Arab Spring."



Mhammad Trakhan paints the Al Kalha Stairs in front of his storefront, Alwan, as part of a wider set of initiatives to beautify the stairway. In the background, a small crowd gathers outside the activist sandwich shop, Azwati.

Comparing this small corridor of cultural institutions with the massive protests which had toppled Egypt's long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak, Majed expressed the optimism of the time, when the proximity of revolution made it feel like positive change was possible and perhaps inevitable. At the same time, his comment describing the revival of the al Kalha Stairs as "my Arab Spring" highlights how artists and activists often invested their political hopes in the institutional development of Amman's artworld. Believing that art could be a force for positive change (although this meant different things to different people) artists often worked to build the art world outward.

While for Majed, the creative development of the al Kalha stairs connected to the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring, in other cases, artists spoke of the virtue of art and the art world as bringing joy to a dull city; as challenging urban decay and revitalizing heritage; as repairing Amman's massive social divides (particularly the divides between East and West Amman); as promoting a connection to the city and a sense of ownership (claimed to reduce social problems like littering and vandalism); as building civil society; as supporting youth culture, free expression, and economic development; as promoting tourism; as challenging neo-imperial power; and as promoting rights of gender and sexuality. (I discuss some of these in this chapter, others later in the book). As seen in this list, these expectations do not reflect a uniform vision and are not even entirely compatible, but rather reflect how a diverse group of artists, activists, and residents saw their interests expressed in the continued development of Amman's art world.

In this chapter, I explore how the spatial buildout of Amman's art world connected to wider political visions and I examine the consequences of artistic spatial production in Amman. Rather than treat artists' political aspirations as abstract ideals which they seek to apply in their work, I show how these aspirations develop through practical engagement with Amman's social landscape (much as Jadal's mission was shaped by Amireh's connection to Syrian refugees). As artists engage various spaces of the city, transforming these sites through artistic practice, these encounters reflexively shape artists' political vision. In my examination, I focus on three key moments. First, I look at early institution building in and around Darat al Funun, Amman's premiere art-museum-like institution. I highlight how the growth of the artworld in and around Darat al Funun shaped emerging ideas about heritage, status, and urban regeneration. Second, I look at how artists negotiated relationships to the city during early, first wave, artistic gentrification. As artists moved into new areas of the city, they frequently developed public art projects addressing what they perceived as failures of Amman's urban space. Third, I explore how artists' experience of the regional Arab Spring informed further experimentation with public and community based art, as artists increasingly saw art as a remedy for local political impasses. In all of these projects, artists viewed the spatial development of the art world as a crucial political task. As artists pushed out into the city, whether through institution building or through programs of public art, they contributed to wider urban changes, shaping public impressions that art was a powerful force of urban transformation.

1. A Home For The Arts

One particularly influential art institution Amman, which contributed in multiple ways to the buildup of Amman's art world, is Darat al Funun (trans. 'a home for the arts.'). Established in 1988 by Suha Shoman, the matriarch of a powerful banking family, Darat al Funun is an art museum-like institution which emphasizes an educational mission. Its programming aims to train the public to understand and appreciate art, provides support to researchers, and often contributes to the professional development of young artists. It focuses on Arab art specifically, and its programming has included a "tour" of regional art, with subsequent exhibitions showcasing leading artists from each of the Arab countries in the Middle East. It has a significant collection of Iraqi art, reflecting a period in the 1990s when Darat al Funun had been a hub of activity for Iraqi intelligentsia displaced to Amman by the first U.S. Gulf War. Its programming also frequently highlights Palestinian and Pan Arab themes, reflecting Shoman's Palestinian background and political commitments. Notable exhibitions include "The Wall and the Checkpoints," an immersive, multi-artist exploration of the violent construction of Israel's separation wall (aka apartheid wall), headlined by the work of Emily Jacir; a major retrospective on the work of leading Palestinian artist, Khaled Hourani; and DoIt Bil Arabi, a collaborative exhibition where dozens of artists curated participatory activities where visitors could make art of their own. As seen with this programming, the growth of Darat al Funun, like the wider art world, is, from the beginning embedded in wider political projects and histories, including the Iraq War, the Palestinian cause, and pan-Arabism.

Based since 1993 in a complex of historic buildings in Amman's urban core, Darat al Funun started out in 1988 as a small exhibition space in the headquarters of the Arab Bank, where founder Suha Shoman's husband was bank president. Shoman had moved to Jordan from Paris after marriage and describes finding Amman to be a dull and alienating city, "always pushing back," with no cultural life to speak of. She started organizing exhibitions and events at the bank in an effort to build the cultural energy she felt the city was lacking. She organized small exhibitions, lectures, and discussions about cultural topics. Especially of interest in Darat al Funun's early years was an effort to discuss and define Arab Art as a historically specific practice distinct from European aesthetic traditions.⁴⁸ These conversations explored how Arab art related to its postcolonial political context and often touched on sensitive political issues such as colonial partition or the occupation of Palestine, which brought unwanted political scrutiny to the bank. So, Ms. Shoman decided to find a place of her own, where she could host cultural events without drawing political pressure to her family's bank.

Shoman hired architect Ammar Khammash to help her find and develop a gallery site. Khammash quickly identified a building, the declined former home of colonial administrator Peake Pasha, located on the hillside of Jabal al Luweibde, adjacent to downtown. With a strong interest in heritage architecture and a dedication to exploring the ways that vernacular building practice reflects the specificities of place, Khammash had long been interested in this site. He relates that he often visited the building, both from an interest in its unique architectural style and because its

⁴⁸ Hassan al Said 1995, Rogers and van der Vlist 2013

position overlooking the downtown valley made it a convenient viewpoint from which to scope out other historic buildings in the area. Khammash had liked to sneak onto the property and use it as a vantage point to paint architectural studies of other historic buildings on nearby hillsides. However, when Khammash introduced Ms. Shoman to the location, the building was in a serious state of disrepair, reflecting the wider decline of Amman's urban core. Khammash relates that the building was run down, inhabited by squatters and drug addicts, its walls covered with obscene graffiti.

By describing the building as a site of drug use, Khammash gives particular moral weight to this story. In conversation, Ammanis frequently draw upon an imagined geography of drug use and drug users when discussing the morality of urban change. For instance, I once heard someone argue against putting in public seating on a busy street because it might encourage drug users to loiter. A disgruntled resident of a gentrifying neighborhood complained that it was becoming full of drug users who harass women. So, statements about sites of drug use present a rhetorical move that moralizes geography. Here, by referring to drug use, Khammash highlights the founding of Darat al Funun as an act which helped to rehabilitate the neighborhood, replacing drug use and decay with a beautiful art museum. This change was not contained to the museum itself. Artists and employees at Darat al Funun also frequently credit Darat al Funun with driving a revitalization of the surrounding area. As one employee put it, "Darat al Funun made this area artistic."

Khammash, who in his rehabilitative work aims to have a light hand that lets the original genius of the place shine through, renovated the building into a striking example of Ammani vernacular architecture, with beautiful stonework and a stunning double staircase entrance. Khammash also led the initial landscaping, shaping a garden that highlighted many native plants. With an opening event well attended by city notables, the founding of Darat al Funun helped to call attention to the neglected heritage architecture of Amman's urban core, while elevating the prestige associated with reinvigorating these heritage spaces. Darat al Funun further advanced this by quickly expanding into neighboring historic buildings, ultimately forming an institutional complex of eight historic buildings, including a childhood home of Jordan's late Queen Zein, the former home of a prime minister, and a range of architectural styles that reflect Amman's diverse ethnic makeup. Rana Beiruti, an administrator at Darat al Funun, argues that in the absence of official, government investment commemorating Amman's history, this architectural complex doubles as a museum of the city's history. Amman residents, who often struggle to identify with the city, can connect to the landscape of Darat al Funun as a tangible marker of a shared urban heritage.⁴⁹

As Darat al Funun built out into this complex of buildings, such expansions were vital to developing Darat al Funun's institutional capacity, making space to hold a larger collection, display more and varied shows, and to incorporate a range of activities within its institutional mission. Added buildings included a café, a museum headquarters, a residence space for artists and researchers, a memorial to Shoman's late husband, an experimental Lab which hosts public and collaborative art projects and workshops, often led by young up and coming artists, additional gallery space, a small "room" sometimes used for installations, and an archaeological site where

⁴⁹ McLaughlin-Alcock 2020

Darat al Funun often holds concerts and film screenings. Notably, not all of these activities are “artistic,” including running a café and a memorial, but they are made possible by the growth of this artistic space. As the art world grows, it forms a base of agency, facilitating art practice, but also making space for a wider range of activity.

At the same time as these expansions built up Darat al Funun’s institutional capacity, however, they also contributed to the re-construction and narration of place, elevating the neighborhood as a heritage site and celebrating the role of art (and philanthropy) in realizing that heritage value. In its promotional materials, Darat al Funun frequently takes credit for sparking a revived interest in the built heritage of Amman’s urban core and for leading a subsequent reverse migration of upper- and middle-class Amman residents back into these areas. While the catalysts of this reverse migration are complex, reflecting global economic trends, shifts in youth culture, a substantial rent gap, a crunched real estate market resulting from the Iraqi and Syrian refugee crises,⁵⁰ and municipal development strategies, among other factors, many artists and other Ammanis view cultural institutions as having played a leading role in revitalizing Amman’s urban core. The high visibility of institutions like Darat al Funun helped link art and urban revitalization in the public imagination. This is a powerful narrative through which the role of art in the city is widely understood.

Darat al Funun played an important role as a model of arts-led urban change, connecting artistic patronage and built heritage in an elite prestige project. Other wealthy Ammanis have since followed suit. In 2001, patrician Mamdouh Bisharat, a close friend of the Shomans, was inspired to acquire his own historic building and convert it into a cultural site. Bisharat chose a former post office and hotel built in 1924 which he claims is the oldest standing building in Amman’s downtown corridor⁵¹. Citing Darat al Funun as an inspiration, Bisharat redeveloped this building into an eclectic celebration of Amman’s heritage, a kind of living museum decorated with a mix of memorabilia and historical materials, art (often the work of local artists well known to Bisharat), and documentation/mementos of Bisharat’s own life history. The result is a kind of eccentric museum that celebrates Amman through a story of Bisharat’s life and friendships.

Bisharat, who often goes by the nickname “the Duke,” bestowed on him by his friend, the late King Hussein, calls this building “The Duke’s Diwan.” (A diwan is a traditional kind of receiving area, and visitors to the Diwan may find Bisharat holding court, sharing tea, conversation, and nostalgic stories of Amman’s past). The Diwan has become a fixture of Amman’s tourist circuit. Bisharat says that his goal with the Diwan is to revive interest in Amman’s heritage and to revitalize the downtown area. Like Darat al Funun, he frequently takes credit for attracting young Ammanis back into the urban core and describes the Diwan as an anchor for subsequent development. As he explained in conversation with me,

⁵⁰ As discussed in Sawalha 2018

⁵¹ This claim is sometimes disputed, as some small buildings in the downtown area may predate Amman’s incorporation. However, it is definitely one of the oldest buildings in Amman’s downtown.

[When Suha Shoman opened Darat al Funun, I was jealous of what she was doing.] It fulfilled a dream of mine because my great happiness are old buildings and traditional buildings, and she fulfilled that dream by restoring these houses and creating in them a sprit of culture and beauty...It has had a great impact on the city. ... I feel that I am contributing a small portion to what she is doing. ...What is important is the effect, and the effect, as a result of the Diwan there are about 5 cafes that opened afterward. There are 2 new hotels.... All the shops are now making facelift... So the ripple effect of Darat al Funun, again, you can see how many new establishments, how many art centers are there now. Both Darat al Funun and the Diwan have had a positive effect on the city... [I am] trying to revive life in the old city.

Bisharat takes pride in his role as an anchor of urban development, claiming that he and Shoman's artistic investments in heritage are leading a commercial and social revival of Amman's historic neighborhoods.

In 2016, Bisharat opened "The Duke's Design Center" in another downtown building a short walk away. The Design Center is part exhibition space, part workshop for Amman based designers and calligraphers. Bisharat says that he would like to develop a "cultural trail" linking the Diwan, the Design Center, and his home, which has an impressive collection of artwork and salvaged archaeological objects. (Bisharat's luxurious home, on the hillside of Jabal al Jofeh, adjacent to downtown, is a rare remnant of pre-urban flight Amman, as Bisharat stayed in an area today marked by refugees and poverty while many of his peers abandoned the urban core for the city's Western edge). The idea of a "cultural trail" highlights his intention to use art and culture to channel people's movement through the urban core, linking together currently separate sights into a common artistic geography.

Another institution inspired by Darat al Funun is the MMAG Foundation, established in 2017 by Mohammad and Mahera Abu Ghazaleh, a wealthy power couple, following Suha Shoman's model of using an art institution to build distinction through the display of wealth, taste, and beneficence. MMAG, like Darat al Funun, is a multi-faceted institution, including a display space as well as an arts education center in a complex of renovated historic buildings on the hillside of Jabal Amman, facing Darat al Funun.

The Abu Ghazalehs explicitly followed Darat al Funun's model in developing MMAG, consulting with several of Darat al Funun's employees when in the planning stages, and even hiring Khammash to lead the renovation. At its opening exhibition, MMAG contracted Raed Ibrahim, an artist closely associated with Darat al Funun, to develop new archival work exploring the museum site and its development. Ibrahim, in consultation with Khammash, peeled and framed graffiti from the buildings' walls, prior to their renovation, and also set up display cases of garbage and debris

found on the museum grounds. Such work, while acknowledging and paying tribute to the people displaced by the institution, simultaneously contributed to the projection of art (and the Abu Ghazaleh's patronage of art) as a rehabilitative force, calling attention to the ways that MMAG's institutional development was transforming the urban environment.

The downstream effects of this development were indirectly captured in a 2105 film, "Amman je t'aime"⁵², which profiles two old men living in one of the buildings which would later become MMAG. The film is a loving portrait of the men, who raise pigeons and take care of the neighborhood cats, spending lots of their own money to buy veterinary medications. They celebrate the neighborhood, bragging that "everyone knows us here" and "we are part of the neighborhood heritage," but complain that a big real estate developer has been buying up all of the historic properties in the neighborhood, including the building that they live in. Several neighbors have already been forced to leave and they will be evicted soon, leaving no one to care for the cats. "It isn't fair," they say, "they should leave it as it is." While MMAG did not directly displace these two men, they were forced out by a developer hoping to capitalize on the growing public interest in the heritage buildings of Amman's urban core. This space was not as empty as elites like the Ghazalehs, Shoman, and Bisharat sometimes imagine, but was inhabited by members of a different social class, with their own attachments to the neighborhood.

Beyond projects of upper crust distinction, Darat al Funun's influence could also be seen in the spread of several smaller artistic institutions, particularly in the opening of several other "Darat" or "homes" for art and culture in the immediate area. "Darat" is an uncommon feminization of the Arabic word "dar" (home). According to Suha Shoman, this naming is an inspiration of the late King Hussein, who, touring Darat al Funun's grounds prior to its opening remarked that "this is too beautiful to be a 'dar.' It should be a 'darat.'"

When Linda Khouri decided to open a place for photographers to get together, hold workshops, and do studio work, she chose to copy the feminization of "dar," naming her place Darat al Taswir (home of photography). Her naming expressed an admiration of Darat al Funun and its patron, Ms. Shoman. Khouri heard "darat" as an expression of a feminist politics, which reclaimed masculine words from a patriarchal language. In this way, her naming, and thus her institution, Darat al Taswir, indexed and brought forward a number of (potentially contradictory) influences. The name captured and brought forward the patriarchal influence of the late king and his fame. It also expressed the growing influence of Darat al Funun and its patron, Suha Shoman, and, through Khouri's naming, highlighted a general influence of Ammani women in the arts, expressing the way that successful women artists and their institutions can serve as inspiration for a younger generation of women artists. Her naming connected all of these influences and drew them forward in the further construction of Amman's art world.

The use of "darat" in naming artistic institutions has been repeated several times since, especially in the immediate neighborhood of Jabal al Luweibde around Darat al Funun, and may be a lexical innovation peculiar to Amman. This naming positions these institutions as part of a common

⁵² Amman je t'aime. 2015.

artworld, even when their activities might be quite different. Alfred Gell, discussing the historic development of art, describes how new artworks often refer to existing works and this reference helps make the new work intelligible as part of a cohesive movement or style.⁵³ Similarly, in referring to Darat al Funun, the spread of “darat” and elite heritage projects across Amman’s urban core, marks out these institutions as part of a shared artistic project. The activities of these institutions are not always similar. Darat al Fusaifiseh, for instance, is a pottery and mosaic workshop which makes and sells tourist crafts, but which marks itself through its naming as part of a wider artistic imaginary transforming the urban core.

Collectively, this loosely networked series of artistic sties built out into the urban core in ways that linked art, status, and ideals of urban regeneration in the foundations of an emerging art world.



A Pottery and Mosaic Workshop selling souvenirs in Amman's Jabal al Luweibde neighborhood advertises itself as a "darat." Since the founding of Darat al Funun, the use of “darat” instead of the more common “dar” has become increasingly common, marking diverse sites as part of a shared art world.

⁵³ Gell 1998

2. Artists in the City

Over the 2000s and mid 2010s, artists built up an extended artistic geography (or geographies) –a series of loosely interconnected artistic sites, linked by practice and semiotic index, spread across the wider city. Many of these newly opened artistic sites contributed to first wave gentrification. That is, artists, coming largely from the wealthy, sprawling neighborhoods of West Amman (which had been shaped by decades of urban flight), moved in to the dense and declined central neighborhoods of the city, where they set up studios and galleries, and sometimes homes.

In these central neighborhoods, which they often described as “far” from West Amman, artists enjoyed cheap rents on beautiful, historic buildings. Basing in these sites empowered artists to connect to and (re)narrate Amman’s urban history (a dynamic which I examine in greater detail in chapter 3). For instance, Amman’s Al Balad Theater, a civic-oriented performing arts and workshop space, based in one of downtown’s several historic, abandoned movie theaters. These theaters are landmarks, which for many Amman residents harken back to a lost period of civic cohesion and cultural vibrance. (Current tendencies to watch movies at home or in exclusive semi-suburban malls are frequently described as a symptom of the increased social atomization of Ammani society). By basing in this site, Al Balad Theater was able to celebrate its own connection to this civic past and present this nostalgic idea of a cohesive, vibrant Amman as a vision for the city’s future.

Artists often celebrated how basing in these central neighborhoods connected them to Amman’s built heritage and authentic urban culture. Residents of West Amman live cosmopolitan, internationally branded lifestyles, which often seem removed from the life of the wider city.⁵⁴ This contributes to widespread experiences of social alienation and a lack of identification between West Amman residents and their city.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Amman’s central neighborhoods and the poor neighborhoods of East Amman are often seen by West Ammanis as a more authentic base of local identity, sometimes dismissed as conservative and parochial, but at other times, celebrated as hubs of local culture.

As one arts organizer, Rawan Zeine, explained to me, describing how she built her own sense of local identity through meeting with East Amman activists in the centrally located art space, Muhtarraf al Rimal,

I didn't grow up in Jordan and I always came to Jordan feeling like a stranger. I didn't connect with people, and ... I saw this bigger

⁵⁴ Schwedler 2010, Shami 2007

⁵⁵ Shami 2007

space that I could not access... You know: everyone looks like me, everyone talks like me, but I'm not one of them... [but through attending and organizing events at the art space Muhtarraf al Rimal] I got introduced to [the music of] Sheikh Imam who is now one of my favorite artists, and Mahmood Darwish...and Ghassan Kanafanani -- Palestinian figures and leftist Palestinian artists...My family didn't come from that mindset. Like I don't think my mom even knows who Ghassan Kanafanani is. So I got introduced to this whole new world of politics and culture...[It was] my doorway to understanding Arab identity....so that's how it impacted me. It helped me make my own space in this very small country....

That is, by attending arts events in the city's urban core, she was able to connect to markers of Arab culture and identity, which helped her feel more like she belonged. In this way, the connection of Amman's central neighborhoods to discourses of authenticity was important for artists seeking local belonging and recognition.

Artists also benefitted from how “far” (conceptually if not in fact) these neighborhoods were from their West Amman home neighborhoods. Distant from familial supervision and the social constraints of West Amman society, these artists felt freed to build alternative social communities and to live freer, countercultural lives. It is often noted that the leadership of Amman's art scene over the 1990s and 2000s was dominated by upper and upper-middle-class women from West Amman. Women's leadership may reflect relative public disinterest in the arts over this time, which led men to seek careers in more prestigious sectors. Nevertheless, as explained by Aseel Sawalha, women's leadership in the arts empowered a select group of women to build influential networks, prestige, and connections to international flows of capital (including both the art market and programs of cultural diplomacy).⁵⁶ Many of these women were feminists, and some were queer activists. Distance from West Amman social controls made it easier for these artists to establish independence and build feminist and countercultural lifestyles.

At the same time, these central neighborhoods presented an unfamiliar social milieu which artists had to negotiate. These central neighborhoods are often understood by Amman residents to be more conservative than West Amman, with greater gender segregation and more social policing of women's behavior and dress. While artists did build connections to neighbors and vendors, they also faced pushback, ranging from street harassment to protest and threats. This contributed to a sense among artists that the wider city was alienating and hostile. Art institutions themselves, as bases of supportive community and liberal sociality, came to appear as comforting oases that stood apart from this wider urban environment.

⁵⁶ Sawalha 2016

Moving across the city exposed artists to the city's social fractures. Amman's disconnected and confusing geography, riddled with abandoned construction sites contributes to a widespread sense among Amman residents that the city is unworkable. Experiencing art institutions as exciting bases of positive sociality—spaces where the city seemed to work—artists often sought to build that sociality outwards in ways that challenged the wider failures of Amman's urban space.

The latest addition to Darat al Funun is an experimental space called The Lab. Unlike the institution's older buildings, The Lab faces outward, a large wall of windows connecting the gallery to the street. Designed as an experimental and instructional space for young artists within a prestige institution otherwise dedicated to presenting major exhibitions of established artists' work, the Lab invites up and coming artists to propose workshops and residency programs which make creative use of this outward facing space. Most accepted proposals either make use of the windows to invite people in for participatory projects, where they can actively take part in art-making, or they move outwards to stage artistic performances in the neighborhood streets. Artists have engaged in play with nearby shopkeepers, used dance to explore the structure of abandoned buildings in the neighborhood, and have used design to model small improvements for the street, such as public seating and benches. Through such activity, artists extend the artistic footprint of Darat al Funun out past the institution's physical boundaries, incorporating nearby people and places into the creative milieu. Projects like these help to turn the entire area into an artistic landmark, part of what Darat al Funun administrators refer to when they claim that Darat al Funun led a creative transformation of the wider urban core.

In 2010, as part of a public art workshop, Moroccan artist Mohamed el Baz installed a large poem on the wall of a parking garage across the street from Darat al Funun. The text of the poem towered over the downtown valley, quickly developing into a downtown landmark, sparking conversation, and serving as a point of inspiration for artists. The unclear message of the poem, which speaks of rivers burning in the distance, aroused wide speculation as to the poem's meaning. An alternative news vlog, Aramram, did a humorous series of man-in-the-street interviews, asking people what they thought it meant.⁵⁷ The poem's ambiguous message also caught the attention of the secret police, who worried it could be a call to revolt, and brought the artist in for questioning.⁵⁸

"Many Jordanians, or at least the ones I have on my Facebook feed... have been discussing the meaning of [this poem]" commented graffiti artist Mike V. Derderian on his blog, where he encouraged people to enjoy the poem's ambiguities.

⁵⁷ Aramram n.d.

⁵⁸ Hijawi 2015



Mohamed el Baz 's 2010 installation of a poem on the side of a parking garage overlooking downtown Amman sparked wide conversation and was an inspiration to artists. Some, like Mike V. Derderian, celebrated the poem's ability to make people look up, demonstrating the ways that public art can disrupt the drudgery of everyday urban life.

Poetry... is supposed to make us think. Poets want us to take a moment, whether short or long, and contemplate our existence. As a visual piece the poem is also an excuse for you to look up a little. Aren't you just tired of looking at your feet as they heavily shuffle on the pavement?⁵⁹

Highlighting the capacity of the visual presence of the poem to make people look up, Derderian celebrates the poem as a demonstration of the ways public art can disrupt the drudgery of everyday urban life. For Derderian, this experience of the poem helped inspire his own, later development of a graffiti practice, through which he similarly seeks to intervene in Amman's dull urban landscape, using art to create points of imagination and engagement.

For many artists, and for many residents of Amman generally, Amman's landscape is dull and depressing. A city which historically grew in spurts through repeat mass refugee settlement alongside chaotic patterns of urban flight and sprawl, Amman is a disorienting city that often seems incoherent and hostile, even to long term residents.⁶⁰ Visually, it is marked by informal refugee architecture, long stretches of boxy grey and brown concrete buildings, and seemingly pervasive unfinished and abandoned construction sites. Architect Jawad Dukhgan argues that the pervasive

⁵⁹ Derderian 2016

⁶⁰ Potter et al 2009, Shami 2007.

unfinished construction sites especially contribute to a wider sense that the city itself is unfinished and unworkable – evidence of wider systemic failures.⁶¹ Many describe Amman as ugly and vague: a hilly landscape of square, non-descript buildings which stretch into the distance. Over the course of my research, I heard artists refer to the city as “difficult,” “a mess” and “a void.” “Close your eyes and you can’t even picture it,” one artist complained of Amman.

“Most people here are depressed” another artist complained to me, connecting Amman’s fractured social landscape to a wider lack of motivation,

That’s how I see it at least. Its like a depressed city or a lost city, confused, also in terms of its identity. Have you noticed that? It still doesn’t even know if its a city even or a village, right?... I think it plays a lot into the way that people see their city and how involved in its life they are. That's why I feel it’s still not an active city, with its residents or its citizens feeling with their city and wanting to improve it and wanting to work for it.

Citing the city’s incoherence as a source of wider social problems, this artist argued that if more people felt a connection with their city, they would be willing to work for it and help build a better future. This is a common refrain in Amman. I often heard residents attribute wider social problems, such as widespread issues of littering and vandalism to the alientation that residents feel from the city. If residents felt like they belonged in, or owned, their urban space, the thinking goes, they would be more inclined to take care of it. And yet, the disorder of Amman’s urban space prevents this. Artists working on urban beautification projects often justified their work this way, arguing that if the city were more beautiful, more people would care for it, and so art has the potential to reduce littering, vandalism, depression, drug problems, violence...In these projects, art is claimed as a moral force, responding to urban malaise, enlivening the city and making its spaces meaningful.

An administrator at al Balad Theater highlighted these social impacts in conversation with me when discussing a set of murals artists had painted across the street from the theater during the first Baladk graffiti festival,

This street was very ugly. Those shutters were very grey and it was so depressing for me to come and see it. I mean, this was a cultural space. How was it so ugly? So I thought, how do people of the street who live around the street and our friends and our volunteers and

⁶¹ Studio-X 2016

everyone who attends all the activities, how do they change the view of the street... If you love the street where you live, you wouldn't throw garbage. You wouldn't erase anything that is drawn on the wall. It is the feeling of ownership that we have. And especially, if you notice, in Amman the huge major difference between Eastern and Western Amman. It is very confusing and it is not healthy. Because in five minutes you travel between two different worlds and the municipality seems to be very concerned about West Amman because all the guests and all the diplomatic people they are there, while Eastern Amman is totally neglected.... ok. this is ours. Although I live in West Amman, I work here, and it is not healthy this gap between East and West Amman. So we are trying to make artists and whatever collaborate [to make it beautiful].

Describing art as a tool to prevent littering and also to enliven neglected, unpleasant areas of East Amman, this artist makes a moral case for using art to beautify the city. She also claims the nearby streets as part of an artistic geography, declaring "this is ours" while admitting she is not from there, and emphasizing a need to make it nice. While such comments can have patronizing overtones, potentially implying that East Amman residents need to be trained in citizenship through art, they also present a powerful imaginary of art's capacity to improve life in the city. As a graffiti stencil seen widely around the city in the early 2010s proclaimed, "Amman wants colors."

El Baz installed his poem as part of a public art workshop held at Darat al Funun, which brought together 32 artists from Amman, the wider region, and abroad, and encouraged them to engage the city as part of their artistic process. Some artists, like el Baz, worked in the streets immediately around Darat al Funun. Participant artist James Webb, from South Africa, set up a neon sign reading, "there is a light which never goes out," in Arabic, facing out from the museum towards neighboring streets. Although this sign, ironically, appears to be turned off around 2 in the morning every night, it has become an important point of recognition for many in the art world. One young artist even had the phrase tattooed on her arm, a symbol of its importance to her artistic identity.

Pieces like these built out an artistic landscape around Darat al Funun, extending the institution's footprint into the neighborhood streets and helping to transform the area into a social space marked by creative activity. For artists, like the young woman with the tattoo of Webb's piece, these works were an important demonstration of the power of public art, shaping a wider understanding of art as a force which can intervene in the wider city.

Other artists participating in the workshop pushed farther afield. Samar Dudin staged a performance which moved through the nearby neighborhood and to other sites, reading passages from Amman novelist Mones Razzaz's book "Jumma al Qiffari" at sites referenced in the book or connected to the author's life history. Such activities extended an artistic ambiance out of the museum, moving art across the city and declaring these sites an important part of the city's artistic

geography. Other artists moved even further afield. Artist Hani Al-Qam installed a painting of sheep on the walls of a quarry in the conceptually distant, poor, refugee neighborhood Jabal al Nasr. Artists accompanying Dudin and Al-Qam on these excursions often spoke about the incongruence of public art projects in poorer areas of the city. Artists, for instance, described the residents of Jabal al Nasr as being mystified by artists' presence and as failing to understand al Qam's painting (intended as a celebration of local shepherds). Such commentary contributes to structuring a moral geography around art, wherein artists define a boundary between the art world and its outside and imagine themselves performing a transformative role when they venture outside of their artistic domain.

Down the street from Darat al Funun, the contemporary "art space," Makan, built a reputation for bold experiments in public art and site specific practice. As Diala Khasawnih, one of Makan's main artists and later a director of the space, bragged,

Makan did not stop at its physical boundaries, but went onto the street (Maha Abu Ayyash, Oraib Toukan, Lina Saoub), took performances to a café, a bar, and a vegetable market (Samah Hijawi), filled the National Gallery park with live music (electronic music festival-100 Live) and exhibited work in an abandoned pasta factory (Yasmin Ayyashi).⁶²

Bragging about Makan's expansiveness, Khasawnih highlights Makan's push into public space as part of the institution's virtue. As we will see, for Khasawnih and other artists at Makan, public art was often a means to extend artists' political aspirations and the unique sociality of the art world out into public space.

Makan was founded in 2003 by Ola El-Khalidi, a Palestinian woman who moved to Jordan via Kuwait and, like many others, found Amman to be a profoundly alienating, lonely city. She founded Makan partly to build the community that she found lacking in the wider city. Through her leadership, Makan grew into an exciting community hub, especially important to countercultural youth, feminists, queer youth, and others who struggled to find a place in Amman. For these young artists, Makan appeared as a uniquely welcoming and supportive space, which stood against the hostility of the wider city.

From its founding in 2003 until it closed in 2015 (when its directors, who had all moved abroad, decided Makan was too difficult to operate from a distance), Makan was Amman's leading contemporary art institution. Makan is largely responsible for popularizing several contemporary methodologies, such as video art, installation art, and performance art. These were, at the time, relatively uncommon in Amman, although as they gained credibility through Makan, they were incorporated into the programming of larger, more established institutions, such as Darat al Funun. Several artists who started out at Makan were able to move to greater prominence by subsequently

⁶² Khasawnih 2010

showing and/or receiving patronage from Darat al Funun. In this way, Makan's opening and Darat al Funun's interest in Makan's up and coming artists helped cultivate a channel of career mobility for young artists.

Drawing on wider trends in contemporary art, Makan developed approaches to artistic politics that set it apart from Amman's wider art world.⁶³ In contrast to the sometimes didactic nationalism of older artists or the a-political abstraction favored by the high end gallery sector,⁶⁴ artists at Makan located political stakes in the practice of art – in the ways that art work moved through urban space and provided an anchor for community construction. In part, this built on their own experience, finding community at Makan. It also connected to developing experiments in artistic practice in nearby Palestine, where artists, frustrated with the failures of artistic political messaging as a means to achieve change were increasingly attempting to achieve political ends through artistic practice itself. The major Palestinian art exhibition, the Riwaq Biennale, for instance, has been described as a parallel government, which invests in heritage architecture and the production of civil society.⁶⁵ Curator Tirdad Zolghadr writes that this emphasis on the structural power of art reflects a failure of the politics of representation. So artists' turn to structural politics over the aesthetic explores more immediate political horizons which can be realized through art.⁶⁶

Along these lines, one of Makan's early programs was its incubator project, where they used their gallery space to host startup activist projects. Operating as "resident artists," despite not always being artistic in orientation, these activists were able to use the gallery to host events and to build their administrative capacities. Developing their programming and administration over the course of the residency, the hope was that these activist projects would then move outward and establish their own institutions where they could operate independently.

One such project hosted at Makan was Taghmees, a "social kitchen" which organized a series of potluck dinners held both at Makan and in a variety of public spaces around the city, including stairways, parks, plazas, and sidewalks. Each dinner was organized around a topic of conversation, addressing social or political themes of interest, like "feminism," "solidarity," or "the environment." At these dinners, Taghmees invited passerby to join in, sharing both food and semi-structured conversation. Responding to a general lack of civic discussion in public space, participants at Taghmees saw themselves as rebuilding a deficient civil society. At the same time, they extended the unique social and political openness of Makan out into the wider space of the city. Taghmees later founded its own space, Darna, where they also hosted a variety of creative and activist initiatives (providing offices to a local storyteller, an educational initiative, and a skills-sharing initiative), in this way further building out the political capacities of the art world, which they had enjoyed at Makan.

⁶³ Such global trends include the Relational Aesthetics movement, where the community that comes together around art is defined as the artwork, sometimes in the absence of any actual aesthetic production. See Bourriaud 1998, Kester 2004

⁶⁴ See Hijawi 2015 for a discussion of political transformations in Jordanian art as it relates to shifts in Jordan's regional position and political economy.

⁶⁵ De Cesari 2010

⁶⁶ See Zolghadr 2015, deCesari 2010

In addition to its incubation program, Makan also promoted ambitious programs of site specific and exploratory art, where artists used spatial practice to intervene in the social geography of the city and to challenge wider exclusions. For her 2005 project, Princess Dyna, for example, Makan-based-artist Diala Khasawnih explored the colorfully-painted Dyna-brand trucks that can be found around Amman. These trucks are available for hire for tasks such as moving furniture, and are decorated partly to attract the attention of potential customers. The drivers and owners of these trucks are men who embody a local laborers' machismo, but Khasawnih found it interesting that the décor often seemed to have a feminine touch. By visiting, interviewing, and hanging around in these trucks, Khasawnih put herself in this male domain and reimagined it as a feminine space—ultimately decorating her own Dyna truck, which she displayed near the gallery. In this way, her project explored and challenged the gendered geography of Amman, both through aesthetic production and through the ways that the socio-spatial practice behind the artwork physically intervened in this gendered geography.

Artist Samah Hijawi's 2009 public performance piece, *Wen il-Arab* ('Where are the Arabs?') used art to confront the absence of public political forums in Amman and the ways that the secret police constrain political speech. For *Wen il-Arab*, Hijawi went into Amman's crowded downtown markets, set up a platform, and read excerpts from the Arab-Nationalist speeches of Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt's president from 1954 to 1970 and an influential leader of Pan-Arabism). Using the practical activity of the artwork to transform these markets into a site of political conversation, the artist put herself at risk of political reprisal. As she reflected in a writeup of this performance for *Ibraaz* magazine,

“Nothing akin to 'speakers corner' exists in Jordan, so critical debate or discussion around local or regional politics is avoided by people in the streets and public places, as it is also known that Jordan's intelligence system is very vigilant and intolerant. Additionally, at that time Jordanian law banned congregations in public space and any gatherings that symbolized a protest or a meeting needed permission from the municipality or state security...[I told Makan's founder Ola], “*if the police or the mukhabarat (intelligence) take me away, or try and stop me, first get photos, then come and get me out of the police station.*”⁶⁷

In Hijawi's framing, the work was provocative because it brought political speech and memory forcefully into social spaces largely closed to political agitation. While *Wen il Arab* involves an expressive/aesthetic component, through the text of Nasser's speeches, it also presents a practical challenge to the absence of politics from public space in Amman using the artwork to briefly

⁶⁷ Hijawi 2015b

transform these markets into sites of political conversation. Through projects like these, artists at Makan imagined art as a response to the failures of Amman's urban space, here confronting legacies of political repression and the lack of a public forum for political organizing.

Artists at this time often viewed Amman's fragmentation as one of its biggest problems. The lack of common referents left Amman residents feeling disconnected from one another and contributed to the sense that Amman was not a city. This fragmentation was also politically disempowering, as residents struggled to work together. How could artists contribute to building a more cohesive urban community and a greater sense of connection between residents and their city?

In 2010, artists at Makan organized a public art workshop, "The Utopian Airport Lounge," named on the premise that, like an airport lounge, the city of Amman was a "non-place." This idea that Amman is a 'non-place' is a frequent complaint among Amman artists, who often find the city so non-descript and alienating that it resists definition. Participants in the Utopian Airport Lounge workshop were challenged to explore how public art interventions could be used to cultivate a sense of place in this alienating city. Could public art "give one the space...to dream up the ideal situation ... as a collective city and society," the program asked.⁶⁸ Participants responded in varied ways. Dina Haddadin, for instance, identified the informal places where Amman residents gathered to hail passing busses (Amman's public transit is relatively underdeveloped), and built wooden structures at these locations – landmarks that seemed to solidify this ephemeral, informal geography. Architect Rami Daher, participating in the workshop, developed a multi-sited public art installation called Postcards, Stamps, and Steps, which he described as an effort to "stitch my city together." For Postcards, Stamps, and Steps, Daher installed billboard-sized "postcards" at 12 architectural landmarks around Amman, the text on each postcard narrating the architectural history of each site. Through this Daher aimed to build out meaning in the landscape, drawing on artistic placemaking techniques to open points of identification where Amman's residents could connect around a shared urban past, cultivating a political identity which resisted contemporary dynamics of fragmentation.⁶⁹ Some of Daher's narrations celebrated landmarks of a vanished civil society, such as the long vanished salons, which in the 1930s had hosted spirited civic debate on key issues like democracy, socialism, and Arab nationalism. Other billboards lamented contemporary developments, such as the gated communities which Daher decried as contributing to the neoliberal fracturing of his beloved city.

One particularly notable site in Daher's Postcards project was an old electricity generating station in Ras al Ain, near the source of the Amman River (now paved over) at the southern edge of the downtown valley. As Daher explained, this generator was built in the 1930s to resist the plans of proto-Israeli settler and electricity baron, Pinhas Rotenberg, who had offered to provide Amman with electricity in exchange for concessions of farmland in Jordan's fertile north. In Daher's retelling, local elites had banded together in civic pride to raise funds and build this generator so as not to give in to encroaching colonialism. "I was telling how there's a point in Amman's history

⁶⁸ Makan 2010

⁶⁹ McLaughlin-Alcock 2020



Rami Daher standing next to one of his "postcards" installed around the city of Amman. Still from his video tour of the postcards. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrMQYs1r7NU>

that was linked to resistance, but not anymore,” Daher explained, highlighting a political identity latent in the landscape which could potentially be a point of connection and mobilization for the city’s contemporary residents.

Daher’s interest in this site led him to approach the municipality and persuade municipal leaders to let him redevelop the site, transforming it into “The Gallery at Ras Al Ain,” a large exhibition gallery which has since hosted major creative sector events, including iterations of the #HashtagDebates, the Baladk Graffiti Festival, and Amman Design Week (all landmark events in the development of Amman’s artworld). This was an important extension of the art world’s capacity -- When an incubation project at Makan hosted a series of controversial debates which grew into a mobilization point for local Arab Spring protests, attendance overwhelmed Makan’s small gallery space and organizers were able to move these conversations into the Gallery at Ras al Ain. They were ultimately attended by politicians and members of the royal family who came to promise reforms in an effort to hold off further upheaval. When the mural art project Wow-Baladk struggled to get permissions to paint in public, The Gallery invited the project to paint the towering walls on the edge of the property.

In this way, Daher’s Postcards, Stamps, and Steps project did not just intervene in Amman’s fractured geography, but was actively spatially constructive, building out meaning in place and developing institutional hubs of practice through which the art world extended its influence into the wider city.

As Alfred Gell explains, art is a referential practice, in the sense that art work builds off of, refers to, and ultimately transforms a wider field of meaning – the structuring context within which art makes sense.⁷⁰ For Gell, this explained the development of artistic style, as new art work built upon aesthetic traditions which had come before. As Daher's work and the wider Utopian Airport Lounge project shows, the field of meaning within which art makes sense is not simply the inherited aesthetic dimensions of artistic practice, but also includes a spatial foundation. At least in Amman, new artwork refers and responds to, and ultimately extends the structuring tensions of the art world's spatial relation to the wider city. Responding to this context, new artwork often builds out spatially into the wider city and justifies itself on spatial terms. Intervening in public space, artists rework these spatial foundations, opening new grounds of urban and artistic possibility.

3. Art and the Arab Spring

Artists' view that art could remediate Amman's urban failures was further galvanized by artists' experiences of the Arab Spring. The arts played a major role in regional revolution, with high profile graffiti art and music helping to shape the revolutionary atmosphere of Egypt's Tahrir Square and other protest sites.⁷¹ Around the region, artists, inspired by the times, often developed new public and community-based practices, moving out of secluded gallery spaces to more directly engage the public through art intended to build revolutionary consciousness.⁷²

In Amman, many artists were inspired by these regional trends. Regional upheaval had sparked a widespread sense of political optimism. "It felt like you could just go for it and try things," one artist recalled a few years later. In addition to the regional upheaval, artists were also influenced by their own experience participating in local protests.

Amman's protests, which gathered at Duwwar il Dakhiliyyeh, a relatively central traffic circle, had been shut down after being attacked by nationalist mobs, angered by the false rumor that protestors were Palestinian infiltrators intent on destroying the kingdom.⁷³ The ensuing violence provided a pretext for police to come in and close off the square where these protests had taken place, effectively ending Amman's Arab Spring.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Gell 1998

⁷¹ Downey 2014, Levine and Reynolds 2003, Lennon 2022, Hamdy and Karl 2014

⁷² See for example, discussions on web platforms like Ibraaz and Art Territories, or in edited volumes like Downey 2014.

⁷³ Bustani 2011

⁷⁴ See Schwedeler 2022 for a more comprehensive discussion of these protests.

For artists, many of whom had participated in the protests, the failure Amman's Arab Spring highlighted the extent to which Amman's social fragmentation prevented mass politics and positive change. Further, the physical closure of Duwwar il Dakhliyyeh highlighted how this social fragmentation was enforced by spatial closure and by the wider spatial incoherence of Amman.

Responding to this experience, artists in Amman worked to develop new ways to use art to work around the social and spatial fragmentation that had stymied local activism. Many developed new public, site specific, and community based practices, in which artists left the comfortable middle class enclaves of their gallery spaces to develop artworks in popular-class East Amman neighborhoods. Organizers claimed that through these projects, artists connected with a new public, working across long standing social divides to negotiate new forms of political community. Artists in the T-Jassad project organized women's workshops in the poor, majority refugee neighborhood of Jabal al Nadhif, working with neighbors to explore issues of gender discrimination and to develop plays responding to the lived experience of gender in Amman. Artists in An Urban Reflection similarly set up a residency program in the working-class neighborhood of Jabal al Qala'a where artists worked with neighbors to develop public art interventions, explicitly as a means of building political community across long standing class boundaries. A new MFA-level artists' training program, The Spring Sessions, staged a series of performative interventions in popular-class areas of Amman's downtown, training artists in site specific techniques which engaged the downtown community.

Other projects developed at this time used the space of the art world to support developing regional solidarities. Graffiti artists sometimes collaborated with prominent regional artists, inviting artists from Tunis and Cairo who had had prominent roles in Arab Spring revolutions to paint murals in Amman. Shuruq Harb's curatorial project, Art Territories, used the gallery space of Makan to host revolutionary artists from around the region in exploration of emerging artistic solidarities.

In November 2012, a group of artists and entrepreneurs put on the "Creative Jordan" four day conference. The conference captured the spatial excitement of the moment, with several panels, workshops, and exhibitions focused on ideas of spatial intervention. At the conference, organizers put out a call for artists for "upcoming public interventions," which challenged artists to engage "public space and urban landscapes." Conference goers were invited to contribute to a "subjective atlas of Jordan." Architect Rami Daher led a panel addressing "short interventions addressing ideological and critical, spatial...and artistic endeavors and initiatives undertaken by the creative urban class...in the city Amman." Another major project of the program was a panel "Mapping the Creative Industries in Jordan," and the related production of a "Creative Trail" which aimed to connect creative spaces and guide both residents and tourists to them. These projects highlight the rapid and enthusiastic rise of spatial thinking among artists as a response to the regional Arab Spring.

Many of these spatial experiments, and particularly the residency programs discussed above moved decisively into East Amman: poorer, majority refugee neighborhoods, well beyond the outposts of first wave artistic gentrification, and well outside most artists' social circles.

East and West Amman are often described by Ammanis as separate social worlds. The divide between these two domains forms one of the defining features of Amman's social geography. Although East Amman residents form a large part of the service class that supports West Ammani consumer habits, their lives are otherwise often socially segregated.⁷⁵ As described by Raghda Butros, an activist who works to build social interaction between East and West Amman, Amman residents are often startlingly ignorant of life on the other side of the East-West divide,

It was sort of accepted de facto [that] these are two parts of the city that don't really engage with one another. And the most striking thing for me [when we started the initiative] in [the East Amman neighborhood of] Jabal al Nadhif was... how nobody [in my West Amman circles] had ever heard of it. Had never heard of 50-60 thousand people. Jabal al Nadhif is...right in the middle of town and there just was no concept of it.

So people would come for example to visit the project and they would show up an hour early and they would say 'oh, we thought it was really far.' They would show up literally dressed like they were going trekking; would come up carrying water bottles. It was literally like someone taking a trip to Petra or something.

As Butros explains, while East Amman may have been physically near to West Amman, it was conceptually far away, a different social world. West Ammanis often anticipated that they would have to travel a great distance to get there. For East Amman residents also, West Amman was another social world. As Butros continued,

This one boy [who lived in Jabal al Nadhif] told me [he was] really going to miss [his] friend Yasmine, and I said 'where is she going?', and he said "she emigrated to Abdoun [a rich neighborhood in West Amman]." Those were the words he used, that people emigrated to Abdoun. Literally Abdoun and Jabal al Nadhif are five minutes away by car, but for him that's it. Living in Abdoun, he's never going to see her again.

By crossing over this divide during the political excitement of the Arab Spring era, artists moved into new parts of the city, where they negotiated new relationships with populations previously far

⁷⁵ Schwedler 2010

outside their social circles. As artists argued, these projects could facilitate new solidarities across long standing class boundaries.

An influential residency program developed in the wake of the Arab Spring is An Urban Reflection, which brought seven young artists, predominantly from privileged West Amman backgrounds, into the working-class neighborhood of Jabal al Qala'a. Jabal al Qala'a is a central neighborhood, adjacent to downtown, but is conceptually distant from many artists' social worlds. When talking about An Urban Reflection, some artists jokingly described al Qala'a as "the hood" (in English), highlighting their social distance from this working-class area and displaying the sometimes patronizing attitudes that West Amman residents could take towards East Amman. The actual population of Jabal al Qala'a is class mixed, but clearly artists felt that they were entering a lower class area. Indeed this was part of the point, as one of the goals of An Urban Reflection was to explore how art could build connection across social boundaries.

An Urban Reflection was organized by Nahla Tabbaa, who curated the project as part of her completion requirements for an MFA she was pursuing in the UK. She described her motivation in terms familiar in the post Arab Spring period, explaining that she wanted to get away from the cloistered art world and use art to build connections to new communities in the city,

[In Amman] there often felt like a disconnect from the urban and public space. I had come back [from study in England] to a scene where galleries were beginning to establish themselves but had nothing to say that was provocative, or engaging, and seemed to only target a repetitive crowd - a universal problem. Emerging artists felt as frustrated as I was, what was our role in society? How could we engage? How could we exchange, when we were so removed from our environment?⁷⁶

Decrying the art world as insular and needing to reach out and connect with society if it were to have an impact, Tabbaa presented her political vision for art as one of engagement and exchange. By moving out into the city, she claims art as a tool for building a wider political community. Through the residency program in Jabal al Qala'a she challenged artists to engage East Amman society and build social and creative connections to the neighborhood.

Tabbaa partnered with Hamzet Wasel, a social initiative organized by Raghda Butros, the activist quoted earlier who works to facilitate cross cultural interaction between residents of East and West Amman. Hamzet Wasel had begun organizing an "exchange tourism" program where West

⁷⁶ Personal communication 2015

Amman residents visited the neighborhood to learn kite building and flying skills from neighborhood children. (Kite flying is a popular children's pastime in the neighborhood.) As Butros explains it, by positioning East Amman children as experts, this program aimed to undermine the patronizing expectations of many West Amman participants, who often came to the neighborhood expecting to "help" impoverished children, but wound up relying on these children's expertise instead.

Through this program, Hamzet Wasel had built up a good reputation in the neighborhood. It used its reputation to connect Tabbaa with a neighborhood representative, who gave her permission to use the neighborhood community center as a residency base and workshop. Hamzet Wasel also helped Tabbaa recruit local families to participate in community-based artworks. Tabbaa says that the presence of an organization like Hamzet Wasel, which could smooth her entry, was a vital support for her project. Her decision to intervene in Al-Qala'a (as opposed to somewhere else) was largely motivated by Hamzet Wasel's availability to act as a bridge to the community.

In the neighborhood, Tabbaa challenged participating artists to experiment with collaborative and community-based approaches to art production, designing art in consultation with neighbors, explicitly as an attempt to build connection between artists and the local community.

Participant artists took a variety of approaches to this call. Artist Shermine Sawalha, just back in Amman after living in Montreal, was excited by the opportunity to reconnect with Jordanian culture, in a neighborhood that she viewed as more authentic than her West Amman social circles. (As a plus, she noted that it was an area where she would be pressed to communicate in Arabic, rebuilding her language skills, whereas in cosmopolitan West Amman, she could easily get by in English). Sawalha visited every house in the neighborhood to collect drawings from children. She then used these drawings as models to build community "totem poles" doubling as neighborhood libraries and public toy chests, which she installed around the neighborhood. Raphique Nasserline and Alaa Samman held a series of workshops with neighborhood residents exploring gendered identity in the neighborhood, from which they produced a play "The Women of Al Qala'a" which was performed on a neighborhood plaza. Lutfi Zayed painted graffiti characters in ways intended to engage in conversation with the already-existing spray painted messages on neighborhood walls.

Yet artists did not completely control the agenda of the project. Their presence in the neighborhood, social mission, and especially the way that they had come into the neighborhood via Hamzet Wasel empowered neighborhood members to make demands on the artists. Neighborhood advocates pressured the artists to engage in neighborhood beautification alongside the artwork, painting neighborhood stairways and walls, which neighbors viewed as an important service despite artists feeling that this was outside the scope of the project. As Tabbaa described,

A few months in...there were increasing demands from the community to create mural "aesthetic" works and to beautify the area. I use this term because I had spent so much time defending the fact that An Urban Reflection was not a beautifying project at all. In

the end, there needs to be a balance between what you believe in as a curator and what the community actually wants ...sometimes they just want their doors painted. From the outside we may have looked like these elitist, English speaking artists, coming to 'fix' or 'beautify' a community, imposing ourselves. It was honestly the contrary.

As these comments highlight, artists' presence in the neighborhood was not a one-way relationship, where artists simply made their art with the neighborhood as a backdrop. Neighbors were able to make their own demands on the project and advance their interests through it. From Tabbaa's perspective, these neighborhood demands could be interpreted as evidence of the ways that an Urban Reflection cultivated new forms of community and collaboration. The residents were empowered to make demands upon the artists. Yet, at the same time, Tabbaa's comment also highlights the complex class dynamics of artists' presence in popular neighborhoods, a persistent tension in community-based work. In addition to the pressure put on her by the community to do beautification work and the challenges that arise in negotiating between artistic standards and neighborhood needs, she expresses concern that in meeting neighborhood needs, she will be dismissed (by other West Amman artists and critics) as a naïve and patronizing tourist who came into the neighborhood with ideas about how to improve it.

An Urban Reflection's presence in the neighborhood coincided with a fraught moment of municipal development. After decades of neglect, the municipality had begun investing in the development of the urban core. Planners felt that investing in the core could build a compelling urban identity rooted in a strong sense of place (contrasted to the disorienting disorganization of not-a-city Amman), which would make the city more competitive on the global stage, attract tourists, and help drive real estate development.⁷⁷ The city's efforts in this direction included the redevelopment of Rainbow Street, a gentrifying historic area which the city transformed into a walkable consumer district. The city also promoted a range of placemaking initiatives in the downtown corridor, adding historical markers and pedestrian streets, renovating a municipal plaza in front of the Roman Theater (a key archaeological site), and leading the multi-million dollar construction of the Jordan Museum, intended as an anchor for wider development. Alongside these investments, the city engaged in sometimes brutal efforts to clear the downtown area of visible poverty and disorder, using aggressive policing to make the area more visually appealing to tourists and wealthy Jordanians. Against big protests, the city relocated the sprawling, semi-formal weekend market from a highly visible, central location to an enclosed space on the edge of the city. It pushed the closure of several residential hotels (a longtime feature of Downtown Amman's working-class landscape) and staged regular raids targeting informal vendors in the Downtown corridor.

While artists often opposed these projects of gentrification, and sometimes even joined in popular protest against municipal development, the municipality often saw art as a tool which could help

⁷⁷ Beauregard and Marpillero-Colomina 2011

facilitate these changes. When the municipality closed the weekend market, they invited graffiti artists to help paint the new location, to make it appear more welcoming. The 2014 inaugural Spring Sessions program, based in the downtown corridor in an attempt to engage the working class culture of Amman's downtown, explored solidarity with downtown vendors, artists even joining in protest against aggressive policing. Yet at the same time, the program based in a former residential hotel, helping to develop that hotel from a working class home into an arts destination. The 2016 inaugural Amman Design Week program, sponsored by the monarchy, diplomats, and local business leaders, staged major exhibitions and pop-up programming across the downtown corridor, transforming downtown into a temporary creative district which drew masses of local and international tourists. Art was clearly being harnessed by the development machine.

For some artists this was a confusing and frustrating shift. "They're supporting us now. That's the crazy thing. I don't know what to make of it," complained one artist, who had been instrumental in developing public art programming during the Arab Spring period. Having learned to imagine art as a challenge to the government, she now saw her art enrolled in dispossessive projects of urban development.

Jabal al Qala'a was caught up in these changes. Contemporaneous with the organization of An Urban Reflection, Jabal al Qala'a was under threat from municipal plans for redevelopment. Al Qala'a sits between two of the most heavily touristed archaeological sites in Amman, a Roman Theater at the foot of the neighborhood, and a "Citadel" at its top, containing a large mix of Classical, Byzantine, and Umayyad ruins. Over the past few years, the municipality had fenced off the citadel in order to further develop it into a tourist site. Fought by neighbors and by Hamzet Wasel, this fencing had cut neighbors off from an important social space, a popular site where neighborhood children would go to play and fly kites. Then the municipality announced plans to build a tourist lift through the neighborhood, to connect the Roman Theater with the Citadel, a plan which would have required bulldozing several homes. Hamzet Wasel again played an important role supporting neighborhood organizing against this development. Neighbors were able to amplify their protest through Hamzet Wasel's strong West Amman connections, raising outrage towards the dispossessive development plans in powerful, influential circles which neighbors did not have access to on their own.

As artists came into the neighborhood through An Urban Reflection, they also got involved in neighborhood advocacy. When artists showcased their work on blogs, tv news interviews, and by presenting in art institutions, this presented an opportunity for neighbors to make their case to a wider public than they otherwise had access to. Neighborhood residents accompanied al Tabbaa, for instance, to present on the project at Darat al Funun, transforming the channels of the art world into a political instrument for neighborhood advocacy. West Amman interest in the art projects, and talks about the projects in influential art institutions helped showcase the neighborhood and raise awareness of its plight. As a result of spreading outrage in influential circles, the "tourist lift" plans were eventually shelved.

Yet ultimately the impacts of an Urban Reflection are difficult to parse. One other notable impact of an Urban Reflection was its role in establishing artistic infrastructure in the neighborhood and in building connections to the local community in ways that could continue to be used by other

artistic projects. Over the next few years, several other artists followed in Tabbaa's footsteps, setting up subsequent residency and mural projects in the neighborhood.

Shortly after the completion of *An Urban Reflection*, the British Council, which had been a key sponsor of *An Urban Reflection*, built on the program's success, by hiring Tabbaa to administer a diplomatic project in the neighborhood, "Outer Space in Al Qala'a." Following a standard model of cultural diplomacy, in which the sponsoring country brings in an expert artist to lead master classes for locals, the British Council sponsored notable British Graffiti Artist, Stik, to visit Amman and lead a group of local artists in designing and implementing a series of graffiti-style murals across the neighborhood. The program's goals included training Amman youth in values of free expression,



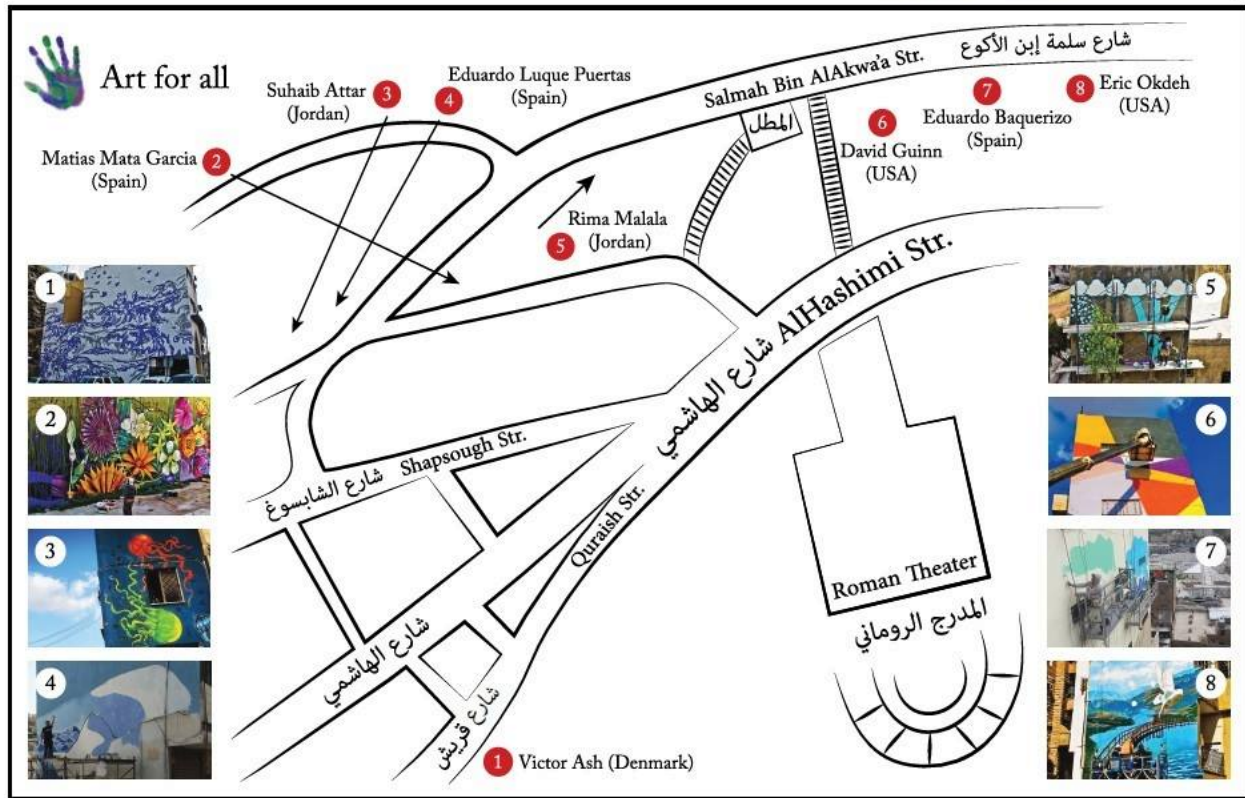
Mural by British graffiti artist Stik, produced as part of "Outer Space in Al Qala'a"

[Outer Space in Al Qala'a is an opportunity for] a group of young Jordanian graffiti artists to explore and express, through graffiti art in public spaces, different themes related to self-expression, identity, freedom, connection with society and vision for the future.⁷⁸

The individualistic vision of art in this statement is very different from the community focused goals of An Urban Reflection, highlighting how, as artists established in the neighborhood, the politics of their engagement could change. The statement also reflects the difference of vision between local artists like Tabbaa and international projects, like the British Council. For an Urban Reflection, Amman is a fractured space, riven by social divisions and power imbalances. Artists' practice is shaped by and responds to this uneven geography. From the perspective of the British Council, however, the local specificity of the neighborhood is effaced, refigured simply as a location for artists to come and paint. Amman itself appears as a single scale of intervention, a unitary canvass. By assuming a singular space of Amman, The British Council evades the political questions of whose public space do artists claim? and whose expression, identity, and freedom is being promoted by the project, at whose expense?

Over the next few years, Al Qala'a would be the base for several more artistic interventions, including the Art4All mural project, in which several international artists flew in to paint murals on the edge of the neighborhood (alongside two Jordan based artists). Promoters claimed that this would be an economic benefit to the neighborhood, as the murals would draw tourists into Al Qala'a enabling residents to profit off of Amman's growing tourist economy. (As far as I can tell, any impact in this direction has been negligible). Beyond that claim however, neighbors were not engaged in the design or implementation of the project.

⁷⁸ British Council 2014



A promotional graphic for the program "Art For All" shows how the program built on the artistic infrastructure established in the Jabal al Qala'a neighborhood, bringing international artists to paint large murals in the neighborhood. As the murals were prominently visible from downtown landmarks, program organizers claimed this would benefit the neighborhood by attracting tourists to local businesses.

As one critical observer described, the growth of these art projects seemed to take control of the neighborhood away from the neighbors,

...Slowly seeing the area [Jabal al Qala'a] transform into a sort of canvass for artists who were not from the neighborhood. It was a very interesting experience. Some things were more subtle, but there were certain examples that I just became so upset about... I remember that they painted the staircase, and the way they did it...I mean the intentions were great, so I'm not trying to take away from that, so they did the staircase, but I remember [talking to a] guy

living there, that you know they're painting a staircase, and he just didn't care. Which was so interesting...Like to him it was just a bunch of rich kids coming in, playing around, and then it was going to go back to normal, and he knew it.

Calling the artists a bunch of rich kids playing tourist, this artist highlighted a common concern around participatory art in this period. Was it truly doing something to make local lives better? Was there really a meaningful exchange? Or was it just for the fun of the artists, who were able to build their careers in poor neighborhoods, feel good about themselves, and then move on?

Attention to these impacts shows how community projects like an Urban Reflection mediate a complex political field, on the one hand enhancing the political capacities of the local community, including their ability to defend their neighborhood against dispossessive development, while on the other hand, advancing the development of the artworld into the neighborhood in ways that build on existing power imbalances and contributed to dispossessive impacts of their own.

The temporary definition of Jabal al Qala'a as an artistic space for the Urban Reflection project cultivated an infrastructure which facilitated subsequent artistic engagement with the neighborhood and continued to reincorporate the neighborhood into a larger artistic world. While neighbors were not powerless in this interaction and, indeed, strategically used the art projects to mobilize their own demands, the relation between artists and neighborhood was not power neutral. As relatively privileged artists came into a relatively marginal neighborhood and used that neighborhood as a space for advancing artistic careers and art-led political projects, this threatened to be an exploitative relationship. In an Urban Reflection, Tabbaa at least made overtures to including the neighborhood in the project design, workshopping the artwork with neighbors, and allowing neighbors to make demands on the project such as beautification and political advocacy. Other projects do not always do this. Having since made a career for herself at The Sharjah Foundation in the UAE, Tabbaa continues, when in Amman, to advocate for the neighborhood and to promote participatory art more generally, sometimes expressing frustration when neighborhood populations aren't appropriately accounted for in project design. "Several other mural painting/community projects [haven't been] entirely convincing," she explained. "I just wasn't satisfied with the amount of sensitivity they had towards their surroundings, the way we did."

However, as has been noted frequently in critiques of participatory art, such inclusion does not erase the problematic power relation between artist and community⁷⁹ and at the same time raises the artist's professional profile. Tabbaa's comments are both advocacy for neighborhood inclusion and for her own career, as her articulation of inclusive politics (and her project at Al Qala'a) helps to distinguish her work from the artistic field.

When I asked groups of artists about an Urban Reflection, this often generated debate as artists familiar with the project had varying opinions over whether or not it was done right. As other

⁷⁹ Kwon 2004 see also Foster 1995

artists established their own projects in the neighborhood, they further debated what sorts of engagement with the neighborhood were appropriate and politically constructive. The incorporation of the neighborhood into the art world creates this space of political contestation, where new artistic ideas can be developed and sorted out and new political relationships negotiated. As artists moved out into the city they continued to define a political practice, debating concerns about how to do social engagement right.

Conclusion: Art and Political Imagination in the 2010s

By the mid 2010s, artists in Amman had dramatically built up the institutional foundations of their artworld, establishing an archipelago of loosely interlinked sites of practice that extended across (and integrated into) the wider city. In contrast to the late 1980s, when Suha Shoman founded Darat al Funun, when Amman's creative sector had been relatively small and peripheral to most social life in the city, the arts were increasingly visible and prominent as a force of urban social change. As artists built this growing art world out into the city, they often invested their spatial projects with political aspirations, arguing that the extensions of art could improve social and political life in a city they viewed as deficient. Building art out into the city, artists could contribute to urban revitalization, celebrate heritage, promote better citizenship, build status, challenge the city's fragmentation, shape a healthier civil society, and build political alliances across boundaries of class and geography. Artists' political aspirations were especially prominent in the period immediately after the regional Arab Spring, when art captured regional excitement but also appeared as an answer to the social failings which had stymied mass mobilization in Jordan. Art in this period took on a resistant idiom, where public and community-based art was imagined as a pathway to overcome the oppressive structures of society. Yet the buildout of the art world itself sometimes contributed to dispossessive processes, such as gentrification. Artists' self-image as oppositional figures was sometimes undermined when municipal leaders embraced art as a tool which could further dispossessive development. In light of these tensions artists often debated what was the right way to build out into society and engage. Integrating into the wider city, the growing artworld formed a powerful vehicle of urban change and an important object of political imagination, through which artists and others understood, contested, and sought to intervene in the changing city.