



Neoliberalism as a site-specific process: The aesthetics and politics of architecture in Amman, Jordan

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism in Jordan provides the State with a measure of elasticity, and the ability to, under the premise of reform, reinvent its role and responsibility in the project of development and the political economy of urbanism in Amman. In this way, the State is an undiminished actor in development, and through its tenuous collaborations with private investors, has produced a series of failed neoliberal projects. Among them are the Jordan Gate Towers, Limitless Towers and the Royal Village, each in a varied state of incompleteness, part of a system of ruination in which incompleteness or failure can actually be financially successful for the State and its oligarchic network. I frame the critique within a political economy of wealth and power wherein the failed projects are made desirable and profitable through the State's appropriation of public and privately held lands as "state domain," in turn selling the properties to private developers at a premium.

My research method will focus more explicitly on the politics and aesthetics of architecture through a place-based, or what I call a site-specific study, where the buildings themselves are critiqued as agents, with the ability to impact a site, community, city or region. In this way, I invert the discursive critique of neoliberalism as a monolithic economic actor to rather untangle the complexities of this neoliberal moment in the Middle East and the architectural objects it has produced. My engagement with the built object and the site it occupies shifts the critique to the built environment, recognizing architecture as a significant actor in processes of urban transformation. Regardless of the failed projects, I argue that indeed profit is not in the realization of the various projects, but simply in the funds systematically syphoned away at the speculative stage. I will develop an exploration of the nuances of failure, adding to the discourse of neoliberal development in the Middle East.

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1. Introduction

A historical analysis of the Jordanian Monarchy and its system of rule reveals trends and similarities in the governance of the previous and current kings of Jordan. Each king partnered with private investors to pursue modernization: first producing architecture for the domestic audience in Hussein's reign, and then for a regional and global audience in Abdullah's reign. I make clear the significance of these trends, tying them closely to a legacy of neoliberal domination that has enabled the State to continuously deploy modernization projects funded by foreign aid and investments, in the name of advancement, but inevitably at the cost of public welfare.

In particular, the current and unique manifestation of neoliberalism in Jordan has provided the State with a measure of freedom and the ability to find a new foothold for itself in a historically ill-governed system of planning. Adherence to neoliberalism typically diminishes the role of the State, but as Jamie Peck argued, the "ideological shape of the State has not changed as much as neoliberal reformers would have us believe" (2003, p. 397). The Jordanian State, is indeed not diminished, but rather, enjoys a certain elasticity, and the ability to, under the premise of reform, reinvent its roles and responsibilities in the project of development and

the political economy of urbanism in Amman. In this way, the State is an undiminished actor in development, and through its collaborations with private investors, has produced a series of failed neoliberal projects. Among them are the Jordan Gate Towers, Limitless Towers and the Royal Village, each in a varied state of incompleteness, part of a system of ruination in which incompleteness or failure can actually be financially successful for the State and its oligarchic network. I frame the critique of these projects as part of a political economy of wealth and power wherein the failed projects are made desirable and profitable through the State's appropriation of public and privately held lands as "state domain," in turn selling the properties to private developers at a premium.

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projects, but rather on the funds systematically syphoned away at the speculative stage. Through three distinct projects—the Jordan Gate Towers, Limitless Towers and Royal Village—I will explore the nuances of failure, adding to the discourse of neoliberal development in the Middle East.

2. The political economy of neoliberalism

Keynesian-inspired big government and the model of the welfare state were widely adopted worldwide throughout the 1950s and 1960s. A series of events in the 1970s, however, began to threaten the stability of Import Substitution Industrialization and its protectionist economy. The Nixon shock, abolishment of capital controls, and finally the Volcker shock set off a world economic crisis and prompted the revival of Mont Pelerin economics, its foundations rooted in classic liberalism. Economists such as Frederik Von Hayek and his protégée Milton Friedman gathered in Switzerland in 1947 with a variety of historians and intellectuals to discuss the threat to civilization caused by the presence of a large government network. The threat, the conference decreed, was to freedom, both economic and political. As the title of Von Hayek's famous work states, the loss of these freedoms was most certainly *The Road to Serfdom*. The Mont Pelerin society, and later the works of Von Hayek and Milton Friedman, both couched in classic liberalism, laid the foundation for a world economic system called neoliberalism.

David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2007, p. 2). The adoption of neoliberalism in Jordan consisted primarily of privatizing public services, cutting back on government spending, downsizing the State, lowering tariffs, and eliminating subsidies—to promote trade on the now free market (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 381). Further, one of the central components of neoliberalism was the role of the individual, the political and economic freedom of that individual, and the disintegration of the notion of society. As Margaret Thatcher famously stated, there is no such thing as society: "There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first" (Keay, 1987). The 1980s thus ushered in restructured world economic policy and invasive Structural Adjustment Programs responsible for the systematic dismantling of the welfare state. The era promoted a free market, free trade and global capital exchange. In other words, there was no longer a *we*. Rather society was composed of individuals, each rewarded with newly minted economic and political rights in a world market.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Jordan received between \$550 million and \$1.3 billion in direct fund transfers from neighboring Gulf states; but that figure declined to \$393 million in 1990, and \$164 million in 1991. In addition to a decrease in financial remittances from Jordanians abroad—long a source of national earnings—the decline rendered the State incapable of addressing its persisting debts (Robinson, 1998, p. 390). The State thus turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for support.¹ The international agency subsequently provided the State with \$275 million in standby credit and help in devising a new schedule of debt repayments (Kassay, 2002, p. 50). Citizens were, however, less concerned with the need to repay the national debt than with the lapse in state spending and the effect of required austerity measures and associated subsidy cutback on basic foodstuffs.

IMF loans were contingent upon the adoption of a series of structural adjustment programs that stressed the need for participating countries to, in one manner or another, modernize their politics, infrastructures, and economies. The premise behind the programs was the notion of linear

advancement and the assumed ability of developing countries to transition from traditional to highly developed societies. Walter Rostow, for example, theorized five stages to development: from a traditional economy, to the preconditions for take-off, to the take-off stage, to the drive for maturity, to a final state of mass consumption (2008, p. 173–180). Developing nations that relied on the IMF—such as Jordan—were therefore required to make efforts to modernize their economies in order to qualify for IMF loans. The modernization strategies embedded within IMF regulations in turn transformed urban spaces into commodities for circulation on global markets.

3. Neoliberalism as a site-specific study

In their edited volume titled *Is there (Anti-) neoliberal Architecture?* Ana Jeinic and Anselm Wagner discuss the various ways in which, as contemporary scholars, we can critique the relationship between architecture and neoliberalism. In one particular example, they briefly touch on the notion of architecture as a form of agency within a larger neoliberal construct. They then explain that this approach—along with the others they posed—is "potentially problematic and tricky in its own way," and carry on to propose that, instead, the only way to pose the question of neoliberalism's relationship to architecture is to "examine it from a broad range of perspectives" (2013, p. 9). Certainly, a critique of the relationship through different "concepts, components, tendencies and niches of architecture" (Jenic & Wagner, 2013, p. 9) is sound and contributes significantly to the discussion, however, I propose to return to the study of architecture—in particular, the single architectural object—as a form of critique.

I propose this for several reasons. The first being that while Jeinic and Wagner thought it a difficult critique due to the built forms' intrinsic connection to larger architectural politics and strategies, I claim that it is for that very reason that the architectural built object is desperate for critique. Paradigmatic discussion of the iconic and spectacular form, so much a part of the discourse of privatized neoliberal development, is particularly needed. The second reason for this critique is related to governance structures and the power of the State as a neoliberal, institutional framework. This discussion is further problematized due to Jordan's current system of constitutional monarchy, the State's need for private capital investment, and, finally, the legacy of authoritarian governance begun in the 1950s by King Hussein that has manifest in Abdullah's reign as a system of coercive governance through various national campaigns and slogans.

The third reason I propose this form of critique is due to the particularities tied to the architectural object within its context. For example, I propose a critique of several neoliberal projects in Amman—the Jordan Gate, Limitless Towers, and The Royal Village—specifically to critique the projects not as icon or spectacle, but rather as *failure*. While the consequences of private neoliberal development have been well critiqued and articulated clearly as systems of inequality and exclusion, the notion of neoliberal architecture as failure has not been put to question. Each of these three projects is in a varied state of incompleteness, the result of a system of ruination in which incompleteness or project failure is not—as would otherwise be expected—directly linked to economic loss. The process of neoliberalization in Amman in fact ensures financial success for the State and its oligarchic network, regardless of their failure, deeming them desirable and profitable due to the State's appropriation of public and privately held lands as "domain," in turn selling the properties to private developers at a premium. Land on the outskirts of the city is continually appropriated as state domain, a dispossession of privately owned lands by the government, also sold for private development (Hourani, 2014, p. 654).

Neoliberal failures, such as these projects, are precisely why Najib Hourani argues that neoliberal market strategies—particularly market-driven urbanism—must be a context-specific evaluation. Broadly and loosely applied, the process of neoliberalization will likely, as is the case in Amman, fail. Rather than produce economic prosperity and urban

¹ The IMF promotes international monetary cooperation and exchange rate stability, facilitates the balanced growth of international trade, and provides resources to help members in balance of payments difficulties or to assist with poverty reduction.

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