Original Article
‘Send in the clown’: Re-inventing Jordan’s downtowns in space and time, case of Amman

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Abstract  Identity representation in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) cities remains an arena of contestation, influenced by two factors: the ancient and recent history of western colonialism, which fostered orientalism and demarcated the dialectical relations that exist between eastern and western cultures until recently, and the evolving waves of economic-driven neo-liberalism and globalization. For using on the downtown areas in Amman (old downtown – the Sahra and new downtown – the Abdali), the study argues that urban practices in these downtowns are rooted in the power structure of orientalism. The authors introduce the concept of ‘oriental urbanism’ on the basis of notions of colonialism, modernism and globalization. Orientalism in Amman’s downtowns acts on two levels: orchestration and normalization. Orchestration occurred in colonial and post-colonial periods where the language of oriental urbanism was framed, shaped and institutionalized. Normalization is empowered by the growing power of globalization to normalize orientalism in the minds of local and regional actors and make it the sole language for regenerating the identity of old and new Amman downtowns. This leaves Amman with a paradoxical identity: one is classical and the second is global. The two identities are denying the society any internal capacity for development and assuring that introduction of these societies into alternative modernity becomes the right and obligation of international powers. Continuous oriental urbanism triggers an East–West paradox with its implications of contested urbanism, social disparities and cultural desirability. The research stresses that urbanism in MENA should be liberated to allow politics of identity to be an essential part of urban design, thus allowing sovereignty of local populations, self-determination and the building of autonomous identity, that is, allow Liberal Urbanism.

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Introduction: Staging Urban Images of Collage Cities and the Challenge of Orientalism

As the spatial order of cities today reveals a layering of different cultures and civilizations that overlap in space and time, cities are increasingly approached as cultural-political entities (Marcus and Van Kempen, 2005, p. 266; Shechter and Yacobi, 2005). This is especially evident in the Eastern Mediterranean region which witnessed the presence of several ancient civilizations that originated outside the East, such as the Roman, Hellenistic and Byzantine civilizations. In the beginning of the twentieth century, this region experienced the emergence of new states within the Arab nation, established under the colonial mandate and upon the same archaeological urban places of ancient civilizations (Jacobs, 2010). In most cases, such layering generated collage urban spaces that are hardly connected, culturally or politically, with each other. Jordan is a distinguished example of this urban collage. Downtown areas of major cities and secondary provincial towns act as outdoor urban stages that display layers of ancient civilizations and the recently established Jordanian layer. This layer started to articulate itself at the turn of the twentieth century and during the British mandate. These layers overlap and interact, yet sometimes challenge each