

Ecological City: Restoring and Transforming Amman City

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I view Amman as an organic city. It strives to grow and embrace the sun. Its vitality stems from its diversity. It is a city of charm and dignity that is challenged to minimize its ecological footprints and to live within its carrying capacity. Realizing all the current and increasing pressures from traffic, air and visual pollution, space for public domain and employment, I think we need to restore and transform Amman city for the 21st century. To do so we need to have a dream. I want to share my dream with you and envision Amman city in 2020 as an eco-city. Today is January 1, 2020.

The dream starts with the emergence of “organic leadership”. The Mayor is an elected urban planner and humanist. He is informal, energetic, practical, with the brain of a technocrat and the soul of a poet. He has truly ‘lit up’ his people’s lives.

What Amman City did in the last two decades was amazing. It was able to creating a public space and domain for all citizens to interact and immerse in nature. Parks have been renewed to revitalize the arts, culture and history of the urban core. The city’s rich ethnic heritage has been honoured and preserved, with a ceremonial gate. The urban core, relieved of commercial pressures, has been returned to pedestrian priority. In addition, the city has built schools, clinics, day-care centres, parks, food distribution centres, and cultural and sports facilities.

Environmental education, too, starts early in childhood and is not just taught in isolation but integrated across the core curriculum. At the same time libraries termed ‘Lighthouses of Knowledge’ have emerged with the aim of having one within walking distance of every child’s home. A ten-volume text on Arab civilization and civics has been developed that is fundamental to all primary schooling. Moreover, strengthening civil society is the focus of many other important programs in Jordan. The larger bus terminals contain ‘Citizenship Streets’, clusters of satellite municipal offices that bring City Hall to its constituents where they change bus lines. These Citizenship Streets also offer information on training, business loans, and job opportunities; the largest one is integrated with a street market.

The City Council followed policies that led to a flow of interconnected, interactive, evolving solutions, mostly devised and implemented by partnerships amongst private firms, non-governmental institutions, municipal agencies, utilities, community groups, neighbourhood associations and

individual citizens.

Amman's best-known innovations are in 'growing along the trail of memory and of public transport'. As the Mayor likes to put it 'memory is the identity of the city, and transport is the future'.

The Mayor relied on urbanists and architects, all of whom approached transportation and land use, hydrology and poverty, flows of nutrients and of wastes, health and education, jobs and income, culture and politics, as intertwined parts of a single integrated design problem. Amman's system for using buses for example was switched from manual routing and scheduling to homegrown software, later commercialized. The bus system, moreover, is entirely self financing.

Each lane of express buses carries 20,000 passengers per hour, as much as a subway, but costing 100 times less. Although Amman city has the highest rate of automobile ownership in Jordan, it has no traffic problem thanks to benign neglect of cars. Amman city now enjoys the country's cleanest urban air. Designing land-use, moreover, in conjunction with transport policies, has reduced congestion and smog, saved energy, revitalized neighbourhoods, and solidified civic spirit.

Before land speculators could move in, the city therefore bought, in 1975, sixteen square miles of land for its Industrial City. To ensure affordable housing near the jobs, it pre-installed low income dwellings, schools, cultural facilities, streets, bus links and protected open space. The city recruited 500 nonpolluting industries.

In Amman City, everything is recycled. A mansion was converted into a planning headquarters, an army headquarters into a cultural foundation, a foundry into a popular shopping mall, and the oldest house into a publications center. The old railway station became a railway museum, and a glue plant a Creativity Center where children make handicrafts. A quarry became a famous amphitheater, a garbage dump was converted into a Botanical garden that is home to 220,000 species, and another derelict quarry was transformed into the Free University of the Environment. These innovations owe much to the city's municipal departments. They're often led by women and heavily populated by architects, as professional problem solvers, rather than by more traditionally oriented bureaucrats.

Because health, moreover, depends critically on sanitation and nutrition, Amman found a creative way to fund both by turning garbage into value. Two thirds of the separately bagged recyclables are recovered and sold.

Sorting stations, built from secondhand parts, hire the homeless, the disabled, and recovering alcoholics.

The educators and media promote the notion of natural capitalism in a particularly inspiring way. Resources are used frugally. New technologies are adopted. Broken loops are closed. Toxicity is designed out, health in. Design works with nature, not against it. The scale of solutions matches the nature of the problems. A continuous flow of service and value rewards everyone involved in improving efficiency and efficacy.

As education rejoins nature and culture to life and work, myriad forms of action, learning, and attitude reinforce the healing of the natural world, and with it, the society and the politics. For Amman has discovered a way to transcend natural capitalism, supplementing its principles and practices with others that start to achieve what we may call human capitalism.

Amman Dream is not a miracle. Curitiba city in Brazil had achieved Amman's dream in 1990s.

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