

Exploring Suburbia

An Investigation of Suburbanization and Suburbanism in Amman

The Summary

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Research Problem and Objectives

Since the establishment of the Emirate, Amman has undergone rapid urban growth. The population of the city has exploded from only a few thousand at the beginning of the twentieth century (Al Rawashdeh, Saleh, 2006: 212; Almuhtadi 2021: 41) to more than 4.5 million inhabitants by the year 2020 (DoS 2022). These demographic growth transformations position Amman as one of the fastest-growing urban agglomerations in the region. Furthermore, projections indicate that by 2050, Jordan will be among the most urbanized populations of the Asian content (UN Population Division 2019: 37).

While previous urban studies concentrated primarily on central areas in Amman, this research shifts the focus to their geographical counterparts: peripheral areas. It provides an objective examination of the process and manifestations of suburbanization in Amman. The primary goal here is to emphasize the significance of the periphery, raise awareness, and initiate a serious discussion about the current and future challenges of suburbia—both locally and internationally. More concretely, the research tests the hypothesis that relates suburbanization and suburbanism in Amman to global dynamics and trends.¹ It delves into suburban governance, exploring the essential dynamics that shape the production and experience of contemporary suburban landscapes in the city, with a specific emphasis on habitable environments. In other words, it provides explanations for the causalities of suburban space-making and offers descriptions of its various social, cultural, and economic manifestations.

The capital of Jordan presents a distinctive case in the study of global suburbanisms for at least four reasons. Firstly, the city has undergone rapid rates of suburbanization, making it an “extreme case” (Creswell 2007: 127; Yin 2009: 47) of the phenomenon. Consequently, its outcomes and consequences hold significant value for scholarly reference. Secondly, the city's structures have been significantly influenced by various waves of refugees, rendering the context of suburbanization highly political. Such instances are often atypical and tend to remain nearly imperceptible within prevailing literature, which primarily focuses on politically stable regions and countries. Thirdly, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a constitutional monarchy where the king wields

¹ The hypothesis is supported by the theory on the universalization of suburbanization by M. Ekers et al. (2012).

legislative and executive authority. This system of governance distinguishes the context of Amman from other political frameworks and governance models. Last but not least, Jordan boasts a strong tribal culture in which large families and tribes still exert influence on the politics and dynamics of sub/urban space. Such a case study, encompassing all the above characteristics, is still missing in suburban studies to this day. Accordingly, this research adds new input to the growing body of knowledge on global suburbanisms.

Relevant Research

While the comprehensive concept of this book is a critique of the hegemonic North American stereotypes of suburbanisms and suburbanization, the region remains a good and necessary place to start from as it is relevant to the comprehension of the evolution of suburbanization and its theoretical implications. It would be insensible to overlook the aspects of North American suburbanization and how this phenomenon has spread so majorly and rapidly across the continent. Moreover, the majority of the literature on the suburban refers to the United States (Harris 2010: 17). For such reasons, one needs to consider and reflect on several noteworthy terms originally coined in the United States, including technoburb (Fishman 1987), edge cities (Garreau 1991), edgeless cities (Lang 2003), and boomburbs (Lang, LeFurgy, 2007).

An important reference on the other side of the Atlantic, and in the perspective of the European city in particular, was set in 1997 by Thomas Sieverts, a renowned German architect and city planner, with his introduction of the “Zwischenstadt.” The neologism has gained international attention, inspiring other regions around the world to adopt and adapt this way of reading new urban forms. Developed within a German context, the book brilliantly explains the evolution of the urban tissue and theorizes the formation of “in-between” spaces. Even though Sieverts reflects on some specific German case studies, the book remains on a theoretical level, especially in comparison to some dominant US-terminologies such as edge cities (Garreau 1991), and boomburbs (Lang, LeFurgy, 2007), which possess some definite features and attributes.

Arguably, the most extensive research project on suburbanization and suburbanism in a global context is *Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land and Infrastructure in the twenty-*

first Century.² The project had produced a significant amount of work on the periphery, encompassing both conceptual and empirical studies that reflect on various geographical regions around the world. It serves as a primary reference for research on the production of suburban space and suburban ways of life, particularly for studies examining geographical contexts beyond the Anglosphere. Undoubtedly, the project was a major reference point for my own research. Its theoretical postulations have made a substantial contribution to the development of my theoretical framework, and the multiple case studies from the Global South have played a vital role in exploring the periphery in Amman.

Methods

As the research is mainly concerned with “why” and “how” questions, a qualitative methodology is adopted. Such questions are more explanatory and are thus more likely to employ research methods of qualitative nature (Yin 2009). In short, the entire research is divided into two main parts: the historical study and the multiple-case study, both representing differentiated approaches in qualitative analysis.

The first part traces the history of suburbanization in Amman, beginning with the late nineteenth century, as the Amman region was sparsely populated before that (Hamarneh 1996; Almuhtadi 2021). It highlights some notable types and "moments" (Ekers et al., 2012) of peripheral development. The goal is to elucidate the context of contemporary suburbanism and suburbanization, recognizing that this contextual understanding is integral to a comprehensive grasp of the phenomenon (Mcmanus, Ethington, 2007; Hamel, Keil, 2015; Keil 2017).

The second part, which explores suburbanization in the twenty-first century, constitutes the bigger portion of the research. Here, the research adopts and adapts the conceptual framework on suburban governance developed by Ekers et al. (2012) and Ananya Roy

² This Major Collective Research Initiative, based at York University, received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and spanned eight years, concluding in 2018. Directed by Roger Keil, the project involved a team of fifty scholars from diverse backgrounds, employing various methodological and analytical approaches, including political economy, urban political ecology, and social and cultural geography. In broad terms, the project represents a collective effort to analyze recent forms of suburbanization and emerging suburbanisms in diverse global environments.

(2015), critically reviewing the modalities of the state, capital, informality, and distinction in the context of Amman. Simultaneously, the parallel lens of suburbanism reveals diverse manifestations of suburbanization and suburban ways of life.

The methods employed in both research parts rely on many of the same techniques. While histories mostly rely on primary and secondary sources, a multiple-case study makes use of two additional sources of evidence: direct observation and interviews, since it deals with contemporary realities and phenomena (Yin 2009: 11). Accordingly, the total research mainly draws upon documents, semi-structured interviews, and field observations.

Qualitative interviews have played an important role in the multiple-case study analysis. When deciding on the sample of interviewees, I chose to exclusively focus on the perspectives of suburbanites. This deliberate choice stems from the theory that understanding the experiences of suburban residents enriches the conceptualization of suburban landscapes (Harris 2010; Harris, Vorms, 2017; Harris 2018). Suburban narratives offer pertinent insights into suburbanism and suburbanization, providing explanations that other sources may not, particularly in an underexplored context like that of Amman.

Main Outcomes

The Ammani scenario exhibited many similarities to other urban regions worldwide. Its suburbanization aligned with global trends of peripheral self-built development, state-led development, and authoritarian forms of governance. By de-emphasizing the temporal factor, the universality of the Ammani case becomes more pronounced. Thus, one could easily argue that suburbanization in Amman follows global trends. Similarly, one could argue that North American and European urban ideologies are simply transferred to Amman after some delay. Examples include ideologies reflecting on sustainable development, neoliberal urbanism, and decentralization. However, it is very important to be cautious about such a conclusion to avoid over-generalization.

That being said, the Amman case is also not short of particularities. Four main characteristics come to the fore, reflecting on: (1) diversity, (2) tribal distinction, (3) state authoritarianism, and (4) royal governance. These particularities, elaborated upon in the conclusion chapter, highlight and distinguish suburbanization in Amman on a global scale.

Taking these particularities into consideration, it becomes crucial to reassess the applicability of the term “suburb” in Amman. Embracing a narrow yet widely held definition relating suburbs to upper- and middle-class groups deliberately seeking non-central spaces in lower-density environments (Jackson 1985; Fishman 1987; the early works of Harris), it can be easily argued that the term is questionable in the Ammani context. However, a crucial consensus has emerged in the blossoming field of suburban research: diversity is not an exception but the norm (Phelps, Wu, 2011; Keil 2013; Hamel, Keil, 2015; Keil 2017; Güney et al., 2019). The overarching idea is that suburbanization is universal, manifesting in many hybrid forms. By employing this broader definition of suburbanization as decentered growth,³ Amman’s suburbanization becomes the Jordanian manifestation of the phenomenon, with its suburbs representing just one color in the universal spectrum of suburbanisms. As Hirt (2017: 310) eloquently explains: “There is no single color red, for example, but a spectrum of shades that, through some social consensus formed at various times and various places, are regarded as sufficiently similar.”

Potential Further Research

The importance of peripheral spaces must be noted by urban researchers and planners alike, as it is there that major challenges of urban life and development will emerge in the future (Schönig 2015; Keil 2017). Neglecting the suburban phenomenon could lead to significant structural and environmental consequences. Consequently, further research is required on these spaces, not only in the Middle East – where suburban studies are limited– but also in all regions of the rapidly growing Global South. Furthermore, these spaces of the Global South, which are integral to global urban networks and theory-building, demand a new lens of analysis, one that moves beyond the dichotomy of First World “models” and Third World “problems” (Roy 2005). This perspective is slowly developing but still requires further work and theorization.

³ The research adopts the definition of suburbanization presented by Ekers et al., which characterizes the process as “the combination of non-central population and economic growth with urban spatial expansion” (2012: 407). This definition goes beyond the dominant Anglo-Saxon image of suburbia and celebrates the diversity of suburban forms in a global context.

In my dissertation, I argue that the urban transformations of Amman are best understood through the suburban lens. Suburbanization appears inevitable and highly desirable. The Amman case thus highlights a pertinent question (Angel et al., 2010: 2): “Could it be that urban containment and compact city strategies are now appropriate in some developed countries but inappropriate in many, if not most, developing countries?” If so, the practical challenge lies in establishing governance methods that minimize negative social, economic, and environmental effects. This area of research, which explores productive measures of suburban governance and planning, is undeniably interesting and deemed necessary for sustainable development in Amman and many other cities around the world.