

The City Mall in Amman is not an example of a pedestrian-friendly environment.

Letter from [Amman](#)  
Text and photos [Sandra Hiari](#)

# DEAR MARK,

Walking in cities can be fun, but can Amman ever be a truly *walkable* city? Last year an article in *The New York Times*, ‘Sidewalks, and an Identity, Sprout in Jordan’s Capital’, painted a bright picture of our pedestrian environment by glorifying a non-representative example. It was

Rainbow Street has been revived as a commercial hub after years of abandonment.



surprising to see a newspaper that so rarely reports on urban Amman focus on our sidewalks.

With the exception of time spent in Cardiff, New York and London, I have lived in Amman most of my life. For me, mobility in this city represents a nearly lifelong struggle. When I turned 18 I got a Korean car, which my parents – who weren’t convinced of my driving abilities – thought would be cheaper to fix. In those days I had a 15-minute drive to the University of Jordan, the oldest public campus in Amman, located on what were once the outskirts of the city. A bird’s-eye view shows a substantial green expanse dotted with buildings, yet at ground level the Le Corbusier-aping architecture ages ungracefully. The campus was one of those rare places in Amman where walking wasn’t optional. As a student I parked my car on the fringe of the university, as students were not allowed to drive on campus.

Back then my university environment seemed like a mini city – both inside Amman and disconnected from it. Outside the campus, there was and is a painful reliance on the car. It wasn’t always this way. Modern Amman is a city that rose some 100 years ago from a mix of ancient ruins with many Roman elements. One of these is the Citadel, which stands on a plateau like a soldier keeping a watchful eye on the activity below. Perhaps that’s why Barack Obama chose this spot from which to deliver a speech during his pre-presidential visit to Amman. Close to the Roman amphitheatre, you’ll find an area with shops that have transformed the inner city into a vibrant commercial hub, not to mention a walkable one. When the city began to climb the surrounding hills, networks of concrete stairs were built to maintain pedestrian connectivity. Then came the car, and life changed for good.

I’ve been living in the same neighbourhood for a little more

The first Starbucks in Amman features a ‘drive thru’ – no need to leave your car to grab a cup of coffee.



‘As a kid, I believed we lived in the middle of the desert’



On the eastern hills of Amman, dwellings are stacked on top of one another.

than 25 years. It lies in the western part of the city and is less populated than many other areas. As a kid, I believed we were in the middle of the desert. There were a few houses scattered here and there, surrounded by sand and empty plots. The walk to the grocery shop seemed like a long journey. As our street became more crowded, we moved to a quieter one a block away. Fast forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and you find a landscape that’s completely transformed. Now I feel as though our house is in the middle of an eclectic urban experiment. Once solitary, it is now sandwiched between Amman’s two largest shopping centres: Mecca Mall and City Mall. The latter is next to a motorway that connects Amman with cities to the north and south. Across the motorway is King Hussein Park. Here, in the city’s main park, you can visit two museums, the largest mosque in Amman and buildings accommodating the Columbia University Middle East Research Center. Nearby are the headquarters of Central Intelligence and the King Hussein Medical Center.

Before crossing the street, however, let’s take another look at those shopping malls. It may seem ironic to name a mall, —>

## ‘It seems ironic to name a shopping mall, monument to capitalism, after a holy city’

monument to capitalism, after a holy city. In this particular case, there is an explanation. Mecca Mall is located one block off the main road, which has the same name. In fact, two of the city’s major arteries, Mecca Street and Al Madinah Al Munawara Street, are named after holy cities of Islam in Saudi Arabia. Mecca Street is fairly long and quite an experience for motorists. As you drive from east to west, the street widens and slopes downhill. At the end of the street, a large roundabout announces the entrance to a series of monumental stone-clad buildings. You have reached the King Hussein Business Park, a world-class hub for technology’s big players, including Microsoft and

The twin towers, a source of controversy in Amman.



HP. Initially, the complex was designed as the headquarters of the Jordanian Armed Forces. After it had been built, it was converted into a regional cluster for ICT, media, healthcare and security investors. Although the armed forces never moved in, the original military intent is written all over the park. At the entrance, a large stone fence with watchtowers greets you. At the gate, a soldier inquires about your destination.

When you’re finally allowed inside, rows and rows of identical buildings crowned with skylights stretch out before you.

The forces that shape my neighbourhood and its surroundings are a microcosm of the forces that shape urban Amman. Flipping government and military property into assets for public-private partnerships, for example, has become an economic trend in recent years. Projects earmarked for such sites are seen as GDP boosters. Wall Street’s not-so-robust capitalist engine has been humming here, and the buzz is getting louder. So far, the noise in my neighbourhood has been bearable, but other parts of the city are hearing it more clearly. A good example is the Living Wall, a mixed-use development co-designed by Norman Foster and a local architecture practice. They dramatically



The construction of Norman Foster’s Living Wall has come to a halt.

excavated a hill for the purpose of building a series of towers, whose construction appears to have halted. The domino effect of a lapsing global economy has resulted in a construction site that adds to Amman’s urban blight. A few concrete columns rise from the excavation, while corrugated metal sheets attempt to block the view from the main street. A scrawl of anti-corporate graffiti defaces the billboards.

Not far from the site is Abdali, a large area that once housed the Central Intelligence Office and a substantial military base. It is now the site of a second frustratingly capitalist intervention. All buildings were cleared away to create a huge canvas for what was to be the new heart of Amman. Many times we Ammanis have wondered what was wrong with the old city centre. The overall objective was to spice up what ‘may be’ considered a monotonous built environment. Many refer to Abdali as a replica of Solidere’s reconstruction of central Beirut. Investors involved in Solidere have been part of Abdali’s redevelopment, for which they apparently see Beirut as a model. The Abdali project got under way, moreover, at a time when the building boom in Dubai was spilling towards Jordan. Although Beirut is a much better model for Amman than Dubai in terms of urban development, the inner-city project has been criticized and questioned. After all, the economic principle of this and similar projects is to sell real estate to a limited and well-targeted group of wealthy citizens.

It is due to economic segregation that the early settlements of Amman eventually grew to become a city. If you take a 30-minute drive from the west to the east of Amman, you are sure to notice a dramatic change in neighbourhoods along the way. In the west, where I live, buildings are spaced at intervals, in a semi-suburban manner – far enough apart to explain why many people here don’t know the family next door. In the east, dwellings are stacked on top of one another. A view from a nearby hill reveals a cubic concrete jungle. The remarkable differences in density and built form are attributed to the current income-based zoning regime. Land-use planning in the eastern part of Amman imposes minimal setback regulations; consequently, buildings are very close to the street. —>

The King Hussein Business Park was designed as the headquarters of the Jordanian Armed Forces.

Visually, though, Amman is quite homogenous. Most buildings are beige or white and around four floors high. When Amman's first and only twin towers were under construction, they created a lot of controversy. From their vantage point on a hill in the Um Uthaina area, the glazed towers form a striking landmark. Having lived in and loved New York City, however, I find the towers totally off-base in Amman. The pedestrian environment that a skyscraper creates at ground level is as integral to the city as the building's contribution to the skyline. The twin towers in Amman manage to disturb both, creating nothing but a traffic nightmare on the ground. The misguided location of the towers led the municipality to abort high-rise development across the city and to limit its construction to



specifically designated areas.

Amman can be compared to New York in terms of attracting people from a broad range of origins. Bedouins, Palestinians, Jordanian migrants, Iraqis, Circassians, Armenians, Egyptians and Syrians make up large proportions of a population augmented by micro-minorities, such as Greeks, Romanians and Russians. Many of these people fled from war. The way in which their identities were formed gives the city a rich history and many stories to tell. The presence of these identities is political, whether we choose to deny it or not. A lot is inscribed on – and read into – one's identity here. Blending in is often a safe way to avoid confronting differences.

## ‘In Amman, standing out creates controversy, for glazed towers and people alike’

In Amman, standing out can lead to trouble, for glazed towers and people alike.

Many suburban lifestyles and attitudes surface in a city that doesn't encourage walking. For instance, if you want a quick cup of coffee, you drive to the coffee house rather than walk to it. To use the New York comparison again – in Manhattan, Starbucks is accessible by foot; you can find an outlet of the mega-chain on almost every block. Starbucks in Amman could not be more unlike its counterparts in NYC. The first café, which opened in a low-density area, was not integrated into an existing building; the outlet occupies a whole building and features a Starbucks 'drive thru' – no need to leave your car to grab a cup of coffee.

The city's pedestrian-friendly programme is progressing slowly. So far two streets have been rehabilitated for this purpose. One of these, Rainbow Street, has been revived as a commercial hub after years of abandonment. The other, Wakalat Street, has gone even further, completely sealing off car traffic despite strong objection from local merchants. The scheme was spearheaded by Jan Gehl, a Danish urban consultant, who has demonstrated how to convert an entire commercial district to a pedestrian haven. The adrenaline rush that the mayor of Amman, Omar Maani, injected into the city during the early days of his tenure has since died down. I do hope, however, that strategic planning decisions for Amman will be sustainable. We are reminded time and again that proactive change on an urban level often fails in this regard. It's sad to think that the future of the city may be in the hands of early-bird developers like those who built the malls in my part of town. <—

All my best,  
Sandra Hiari