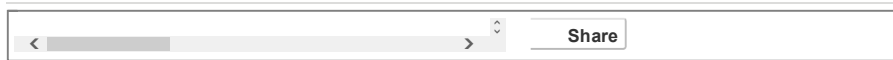


SANDRA HIARI

URBANIST & WRITER BASED IN THE MIDDLE EAST | AMMAN, JORDAN

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Open Letter to President of Columbia University from a Jordanian

[Sandra's Twitter Feed](#)

Dear President Lee Bollinger,

I am writing you tonight from a dusty Amman, as the flags of Jordan and the United States wave high in the streets acknowledging President Obama's visit to our country. As the world traces his footsteps east of the Jordan River following every diplomatic nod he makes, every word he utters, I would like to gear your attention towards the presence of your university in the Middle East. Given that your institution lies five minutes away from my home, I walk frequently around the university's center in Amman, the Columbia Middle East Research Center. Not only examining the center as a casual passerby, I frequent the various talks you organize as they offer valuable contributions.

As you well know, a university center is not merely about being present in a city; it is also about how it opens up to the local community. Have you noticed that your university's buildings lie in the King Hussein Park, Amman's version of New York's Central Park? I am asking because you may have not noticed, given the metal wall that you have in place cordoning off your campus from our city's main park. This wall is unpleasant to say the least. It has sharp metal studs synonymous with prison walls on its perimeters – in the event that someone decides to climb the slippery metal and perhaps jump into the yard of the university's center. It is unpleasant because the park is Jordan's largest urban park that many Jordanians, from within Amman and beyond come to. For some Jordanians, your center will be the closest they can get to an American education. Do you really want to turn your back on them with a metal wall?

I have been absorbing the values that American universities such as Columbia's hold from my alma mater, the City College of New York. From my alma mater I learnt what it means to keep a community's interest in mind. I learnt that the 137th Street station, the very subway station that I heavily used in my pursuit of an education was where Barack Obama, now Commander in Chief of the United States, [began his community organization efforts](#) to draw the MTA's attention. The American educational system is a universal, forward-thinking and non-discriminatory apparatus. For that, the ability of American universities in upholding universal values worldwide through their respective overseas campuses, or centers as in your case, is crucial. And from witnessing such values first-hand in your country, I believe Columbia University should seriously examine its physical presence in Amman and the metal wall that separates it from the park.

Columbia maybe perceived as a gentrifier in Harlem as it expands uptown.

But in the King Hussein Park, it is not being perceived at all.

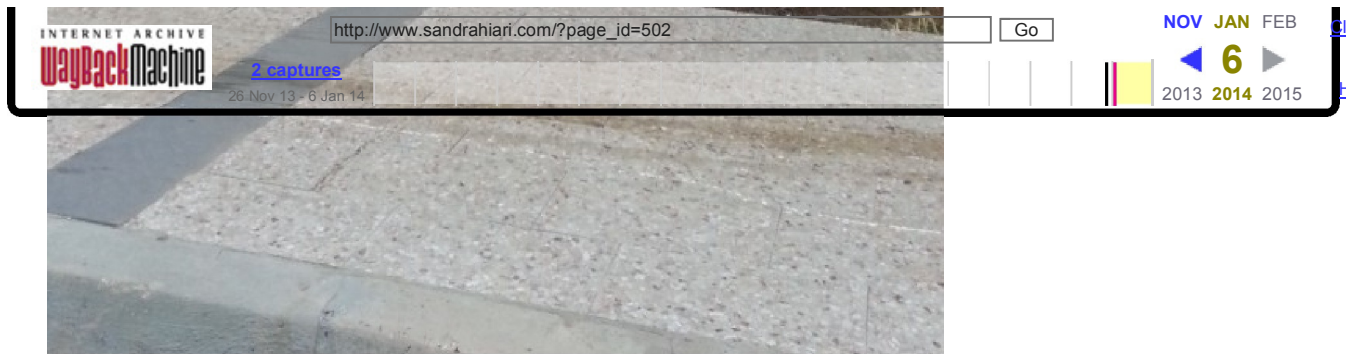
Mr. President,

Please take down the metal wall.

Sincerely,

Sandra Hiari





P.S. This letter was also sent via email on Friday March 22, 2013.

**The post was updated on Mar. 23 2013 with visuals.*