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"Itfannan": The Case For A Public Art Committee In The City Of Amman

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"Itfannan": The Case For A Public Art Committee In The City Of Amman

Abstract

Los seres humanos somos por naturaleza artistas, por ende, el origen del arte comienza con el origen de la humanidad. No cabe una duda que el arte es importante en la sociedad. Una sociedad privilegiada con una infraestructura de arte bien desarrollada – la cual le ofrece a la gente la oportunidad de visitar museos, galerías, exposiciones, instalaciones públicas (tanto permanentes como temporales), y participar en programas de arte – se ve más dispuesta a expresarse, y a exponerse a nuevas ideas y a escuchar las de los otros.

Sería un crimen negarles a los individuos de una sociedad la oportunidad de usar el arte como medio, forma y fuente de expresión. Por esta razón, y por los beneficios socioeconómicos que el arte proporciona a una comunidad, ha habido muchos esfuerzos por los gobiernos de los países desarrollados para integrar el arte como un pilar integral en las agendas gubernamentales para el desarrollo sociocultural.

Lamentablemente, esto no es el caso en el país de Jordania. Por servir como un medio de expresión libre, el arte y las comunidades de arte han sido muy controlados, vigilados y restringidos en el país. El arte todavía se ve como una herramienta potencialmente nihilista para la monarquía jordana. Por esta razón, la infraestructura de arte en Jordania nunca ha recibido apoyo tanto financiero como moral por el estado. El país carece de museos de arte histórico y contemporáneo, y aunque estén surgiendo galerías de arte privadas en la capital Amman, están dirigidos solamente a la elite poca. A la mayoría de la población, no le interesa el arte – simplemente por no enterrarse de su poder.

La tesis intenta solucionar este problema grave en Jordania, con proponer el establecimiento de un comité privado - "Itfannan" - que encarga el arte público en los lugares públicos. El arte público no sabe discriminar por las clases socioeconómicas como las galerías y museos pueden hacer. El arte público se instala en los espacios más abiertos y accesibles; y su efecto a los espectadores entonces, se lo siente todos.

Es solamente con bombardear a la población jordana con arte, que se puede sembrar una cultura de apreciación y amor por el arte. El arte instiga conversaciones entre la gente, y les abre los ojos a pensamientos distintos. El arte puede encender en una persona una pasión desconocida por el diseño y la creatividad, y quizá animarse a crear su propia arte. Jordania y los jordanos se merecen gozar de una escena de arte, y "Itfannan" puede comenzar a darles eso.

Keywords

jordan, art, public art, culture, community programs, percent for art, Humanities, Art History, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Visual Studies, Heather J. Sharkey, Sharkey, Heather J

Disciplines

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“ITFANNAN”: THE CASE FOR A PUBLIC ART COMMITTEE IN THE CITY OF AMMAN

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Executive Summary

Los seres humanos somos por naturaleza artistas, por ende, el origen del arte comienza con el origen de la humanidad. No cabe una duda que el arte es importante en la sociedad. Una sociedad privilegiada con una infraestructura de arte bien desarrollada – la cual le ofrece a la gente la oportunidad de visitar museos, galerías, exposiciones, instalaciones publicas (tanto permanentes como temporales), y participar en programas de arte – se ve más dispuesta a expresarse, y a exponerse a nuevas ideas y a escuchar las de los otros.

Seria un crimen negarles a los individuos de una sociedad la oportunidad de usar el arte como medio, forma y fuente de expresión. Por esta razón, y por los beneficios socioeconómicos que el arte proporciona a una comunidad, ha habido muchos esfuerzos por los gobiernos de los países desarrollados para integrar el arte como un pilar integral en las agendas gubernamentales para el desarrollo sociocultural.

Lamentablemente, esto no es el caso en el país de Jordania. Por servir como un medio de expresión libre, el arte y las comunidades de arte han sido muy controlados, vigilados y restringidos en el país. El arte todavía se ve como una herramienta potencialmente nihilista para la monarquía jordana. Por esta razón, la infraestructura de arte en Jordania nunca ha recibido apoyo tanto financiero como moral por el estado. El país carece de museos de arte histórico y contemporáneo, y aunque estén surgiendo galerías de arte privadas en la capital Amman, están dirigidos solamente a la elite poca. A la mayoría de la población, no le interesa el arte – simplemente por no enterrarse de su poder.

La tesis intenta solucionar este problema grave en Jordania, con proponer el establecimiento de un comité privado que encarga el arte publico en los lugares públicos. El arte publico no sabe discriminar por las clases socioeconómicas como las galerías y museos pueden hacer. El arte publico se instala en los espacios más abiertos y accesibles; y su efecto a los espectadores entonces, se lo siente todos.

Es solamente con bombardear a la población jordana con arte, que se puede sembrar una cultura de apreciación y amor por el arte. El arte instiga conversaciones entre la gente, y les abre los ojos a pensamientos distintos. El arte puede encender en una persona una pasión desconocida por el diseño y la creatividad, y quizá animarse a crear su propia arte. Jordania y los jordanos se merecen gozar de una escena de arte, y *Itfannan* puede comenzar a darles eso.

Introduction

“The Ministry of Culture destroys culture,” said Raed Asfour, director of Al-Balad Theatre in downtown Amman.¹ In six words, a soft-spoken middle-aged man had shattered my childhood dreams of establishing a Public Art Committee as a branch of the Municipality of Amman. I had flown in to Jordan a week earlier, in March 2018, excited to share with him and some others my undergraduate senior thesis proposal.

It only took seven interviews with individuals involved in the arts in Jordan, to realize that I had perhaps dreamt too much. “The street should remain free. No middle men!” exclaimed a street artist by the pseudonym Sardine.² Sardine works closely with Raed Asfour and co-heads the recently-launched Baladk (meaning “your country”) Street Art Project, an initiative that brings together artists and volunteers to paint graffiti on the streets of Jordan.

There again, all the literature I had read on government-led public art programs – and on which I based my thesis proposal – seemed inapplicable to Jordan. The artists were telling me that they wanted less, not more, government attention to what they were doing.

I had to change my entire approach. For once in my life, I put into practice a colloquial Jordanian saying that went: *Allah yis'idhom o yib'idhom*, or “May God make them happy but keep them afar”. In other words, in this case, may God make the Jordanian government content, but

¹ Conversation with Raed Asfour, Director of Al-Balad Theatre, Amman, [March 7 2018]

² Conversation with Sardine, Director of Fada 317 Galleries and Co-Head of Baladk Street Art Project, Amman, [March 9 2018]

keep it uninvolved in the emerging art scene in Amman. Meanwhile, I learnt that there were indeed private initiatives that had supported the art scene in Jordan over the past decade. This private sector has the means to back local artists and their art endeavors. This private sector has very little red-tape of the kind that comes with government bureaucracy. Most importantly, private sponsors can get away with commissioning ‘free art’; a privilege that a government-led initiative might not enjoy. In this thesis, “free art” broadly refers to any form of art that resists censorship imposed by state authorities. For reasons that I will discuss more fully later in this study, Punishment Law No. 16 of 1960 yields a lot of power to the Jordanian Government to remove images that may “lead to the corruption of morals” - a policy that, in practice, can thwart artistic expression.³ This private sector has more latitude to respect artist autonomy, something that forms one of the pillars for maintaining an art infrastructure in any community.

The various interviews that I conducted revealed to me, however, that this private sector was dispersed: it commissioned art on an irregular basis, and almost entirely focused on graffiti art and murals (most of which were on the walls of parking lots). Moreover, a majority of the art commissioned was often for a sponsoring company’s self-interested marketing purposes.

What this private sector needed, I began to conclude, was a united organizational body - comprised of Jordanian artists, architects, and university students - that could dedicate its time and efforts to commission all forms of permanent or temporary public art (from murals to sculptures to installations and performance pieces), with the intention of engaging the Jordanian public in the inception, creation, and obviously, too, enjoyment of artworks. Thus, came about my

³ Punishment Law and its Amendments, No. 16, Year 1960, Subject No. 476, Article No. 319

thesis' title "*Itfannan*": *A Case for a Public Art Commission in the City of Amman*. *Itfannan*, in spoken Arabic, means something like "be creative". Public art for the sake of art, for the sake of the Jordanian public.

Studies have shown that the presence of a strong art infrastructure in a community has beneficial impacts on the individuals within it – be they directly or indirectly involved in the art programs themselves. The impact of the arts can be divided into three parts: (1) they help build social capital and community cohesion; (2) they stimulate the economy and bring capital gains; and (3) they promote personal and psychological development for individuals engaged in arts programs, including children as well as adults.⁴

Given these important benefits, it is no surprise as to why the governments of many developed countries have heavily invested in their respective art infrastructures. More than half of the states in the United States of America follow a "Percent for Art Policy", a policy that requires one percent of the cost of federal buildings to go toward art and decoration.⁵ On a federal level, since 1963 the General Services Administration has maintained the Art in Architecture Program, which allocates one-half of one percent of construction costs for art projects.⁶ In Europe, government funding for the arts is even greater than that of the United States. Member states of

⁴ Guetzkow, Joshua. *How the Arts Impact Communities: An Introduction to the Literature on Arts Impact Studies*. Master's thesis, Princeton University, 2002. Princeton: Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies, 2002. 1-27.

⁵ "Percent for Art Policy Brief." NASAA. Accessed April 26, 2018. http://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/nasaapercentforartpolicybrief/.

⁶ "Art in Architecture Program." Home. August 13, 2017. Accessed April 26, 2018. <https://www.gsa.gov/real-estate/design-construction/art-in-architecture-fine-arts/art-in-architecture-program>.

the European Union spend an average of \$34.78 per capita public art spending, compared to only \$3.8 per capita spending in the United States.⁷

For various reasons, which I shall discuss in the pages to follow, the Jordanian Government has not treated art and art programs as a priority for the social development of the nation. Indeed, there have not been any programs to promote the arts as part of the agendas of government ministries related to social advancement, such as the Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Culture, and Ministry of Youth.⁸ “I can safely say that for the past seven years, art has not been a priority for the government,” exclaimed Hind Juqqa, a young Jordanian entrepreneur who has launched the nation’s first e-commerce website for the buying and selling of artwork, Artmejo.⁹

If the Government fails to recognize the importance of art and is unwilling to cultivate an arts appreciation culture within Jordanian society, the responsibility must fall on the shoulders of Jordanian citizens such as myself. The reason I am passionate about a public art commission is that this form of art is unquestionably the most accessible. Instead of focusing on ways to cultivate the expanding gallery scene in Jordan, which tends to benefit urban elites, I will use this study to examine more closely, and to advocate for, the form of art that does not, *and cannot* discriminate: it is for the eyes of everyone and anyone. The Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Association of Public Art (ApA) in Philadelphia – America’s oldest and most established private public arts commissioning organization – remarked that, “it’s [public art] free. There are no tickets.

⁷ Canada Council for the Arts. *Comparisons of Arts Funding in Selected Countries: Preliminary Findings*. Toronto: Canada Council for the Arts, 2005.

⁸ I thoroughly searched the websites and agendas of all three ministries, the promotion of the arts was nowhere to be found

⁹ Conversation with Hind Juqqa, Director of Artmejo and Co-Head of Art at the Park, Amman, [March 15 2018]

People don't have to dress up. You can view it alone or in groups. It's open to everyone."¹⁰ Indeed, in a country like Jordan that otherwise lacks a public art culture in the first place, only supporting the selective and exclusive gallery scene would serve to isolate the art scene further while making art appreciation as an "upper-class" or "bourgeois" activity. "A public collection is more vulnerable to its audience, both physically and philosophically, than a museum collection is, for the public's collection's audience is not restricted merely to people who are already interested in art."¹¹ It is only by exposing, perhaps even *bombarding*, every Jordanian individual – rich or poor, Muslim or Christian, indigenous Jordanian or naturalized Palestinian – with art on the streets that we can cultivate an appreciation of the arts for the generations to come.¹²

In the pages that follow, I will draw on a variety of primary and secondary sources to suggest how a public art committee could come to existence in Jordan. During my visit to Amman in March 2018, I was able to meet with various individuals involved in the art world. I visited the Al-Balad Theatre, a multi-purpose artistic community space that promotes theatre, dance, art and music. I also visited several galleries in Downtown Amman including The Khalid Shoman Foundation - Darat Al Funun Gallery and the Mohammad and Mahera Abu Ghazaleh Foundation (MMAG), where I attended two exhibition openings, and spoke to the galleries' directors. I also spoke to the directors of the newly-founded initiative, Art at the Park, which "aims to promote and encourage the local art scene in Amman by providing artists, musician and writers a space to

¹⁰ Green, Jared. "Why Public Art Is Important." THE DIRT. September 13, 2017. Accessed April 26, 2018. <https://dirt.asla.org/2012/10/15/why-public-art-is-important/>.

¹¹ Goldstein, Barbara. *Public Art by the Book*. Seattle: Americans for the Arts in Association with University of Washington Press, 2005, p 80.

¹² Presently, two thirds of the Jordanian population is of Palestinian origin. "Jordan Population 2018." Jordan Population 2018 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs). Accessed April 26, 2018. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/jordan-population/>.

unleash their creativity in an interactive and collaborative setting.”¹³ The visits I conducted allowed me to interact with art aficionados, all of whom were excited to share with me the development of the art scene in Jordan, their visions for art in the nation as well as the various obstacles they face on the path to achieving them.

I will be complementing this information with secondary sources that (1) survey existing scholarship on the political and socio-economic history of Jordan; (2) explain the theory of public art and its history over the past decades; and (3) study the community impact of public art. Prominent scholars who have written about Jordan include Joseph Massad, author of *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity In Jordan*,¹⁴ and Betty S. Anderson, who wrote *Nationalist Voices In Jordan: The Street and the State*.¹⁵ Prominent Public Art theorists and practitioners include Tom Finkelpearl, author of *Dialogues in Public Art*,¹⁶ as well as Barbara Goldstein who wrote what some call the ‘Public Art Bible’, so to speak, in her work *Public Art by the Book*.¹⁷ Lastly, there are many community impact studies, from university papers to studies published by Americans for the Arts that evaluate the effects of public art on community development, integration and growth.

This thesis will be divided into five sections. The first part will study the historical and present-day political and socio-economic context in Jordan in order to understand more clearly the

¹³ Art at the Park’s Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/artparkjo/about/>

¹⁴ Massad, Joseph A. *Colonial Effects The Making of National Identity in Jordan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

¹⁵ Anderson, Betty S. *Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005.

¹⁶ Finkelpearl, Tom, and Vito Acconci. *Dialogues in Public Art: Interviews with Vito Acconci, John Ahearn ...* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000.

¹⁷ Goldstein, *Public Art by the Book*

limitations that have restricted growth of the country's art scene. The second part will study the origins and purpose of the longstanding tradition of the Jordanian monarchy to display political public art in the form of photographs and other images of the royal family. This section will consider how this form of political portraiture has often stood in for public visual art within the nation. The third section will acknowledge that the contemporary art scene is beginning to change in the country and will look at the various efforts to promote the arts. These efforts are largely being led by private organizations such as Al-Balad Theatre, Art at the Park, Amman Design Week, Artmejo and galleries including MMAG and Darat Al Funun Gallery. This survey will also discuss the missing links within this art scene and how a public art commissioning body can serve to add to its growth and development. Part four will discuss the importance of public art in relation to the development and humanistic growth of the Jordanian community. I will be looking at the social impact, as well as the long-term economic impact of a vibrant art scene in the country. A vibrant art scene, I argue, will expose the public to different types of art movements that emerge internationally, and could even kick-start a new art movement that emerges within. Similarly, it has the potential to generate income for local artists, galleries and museums from locals and tourists alike. Finally, the conclusion will reinforce the argument that a public arts commission in Amman has long been overdue and will do wonders to enrich Jordanian society and culture, but that to be most effective, it should be an autonomous art venture supported by private individuals for public good. The conclusion will also recognize that an art scene cannot alone instill art appreciation within a generation, and that art education is very important, too, for fostering the kind of creativity necessary to sustain a local art scene. To this end, I will argue, the Jordanian educational system – including public and private institutions, ranging from elementary-school through university levels – can fruitfully develop a stronger fine arts and art theory orientation.

A public art committee that involves the general population in the inception and creation of artwork will undoubtedly sow the seeds of artistic creation and expression in a country whose deserves to enjoy the beauty and power of art.

A History of Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan emerged in the twentieth century in the aftermath of the political reconfigurations and dismantling of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I.¹⁸ Formed as an adjunct to the British mandate of Palestine, but excluded from Jewish settlement, “the emirate of Transjordan”, as it was called between 1921 and 1946, contained a small population estimated at 400,000 inhabitants in the year 1939.¹⁹ Eager to guarantee stability in the thinly settled lands between Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Palestine, and also eager perhaps to assuage a sense of guilt after having broken their agreement with Sharif Hussein of Mecca (to whom they had promised a large Arab kingdom in return for his support against the Ottomans during the war), the British installed one of Sharif Hussein’s sons, Abdullah, as the “emir” of this new territory east of the Jordan River from Palestine (hence the name Transjordan).²⁰

Recognized as an independent state and elevated from an emirate (principality) to a kingdom in year 1946, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan lacked oil wealth and claimed few natural resources aside from the wealth of its antiquities and arguably, too, archaeological riches in sites like Petra and Jerash. Under the firm, some would even say, tight leadership of the Hashemite family, and with the at times ambivalent support of outside powers like Britain and later the United States, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan persisted despite some major upheavals (notably wars with Israel and an influx of Palestinians refugees) which transformed the population of the country. Even today in 2018, Jordan remains stable but yet with a population in flux as it finds itself hosting refugee populations from civil wars in Iraq and Syria.

¹⁸ Massad, *Colonial Effects The Making of National Identity in Jordan*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Again, Jordan did not exist as the polity and territory that we know today until after World War I. One could argue further that Jordan, as a place extending back in history, lacked a clearly defined political and territorial identity going back to the age of earliest civilizations in the region.²¹ Its past was defined by the contending empires and kingdoms of which it often formed a part, and by its geographic location as a buffer zone between the desert tribes to the east (mainly settled in the Hijaz region) and the settled Mediterranean littoral to the west across the Jordan River. Nevertheless, the territory corresponding to Jordan found itself at the crossroads of ancient trade routes and ancient empires – for example, the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greco-Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic empires – which have left their marks in the archaeological record upon which the Jordanian economy is today able to build, to some degree, in attracting foreign tourism.

The Islamic empire, in particular, established cultural patterns and legacies that continue to shape Jordanian society today. By 632 A.D, the Arabian Peninsula and the communities it was home to had been united under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad who championed a new monotheistic faith – Islam.²² After the prophet's death in 632 A.D., Arab armies entered the Jordan region, initiating a campaign of conquest and conversion under the name of Islam that would ultimately extend over the majority of the Middle East and beyond.²³ The area corresponding to Jordan was integral to successive Islamic dynasties although it was never a major center of urban life. Through the centuries, a changing array of Islamic empires held sway in the region, chiefly the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Seljuk, Ayyubid and Mamluk Dynasties. Their remnants of

²¹ Massad, *Colonial Effects The Making of National Identity in Jordan*

²² Anderson, *Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State*.

²³ Ibid.

conquest remain in the form of castles and forts in present-day Jordan.²⁴ The defining characteristic of the Jordan region under most of these dynasties was a remoteness from the seat of power (which alternated between Damascus, Mecca Cairo and Istanbul); an Islamic population that was predominantly Sunni; a depopulation of the agricultural settlements; and an increasing reliance on the pilgrim caravan trade to Mecca.²⁵

The basic contours of this history explain two features of contemporary Jordanian society and economy which are relevant to this study.

First, Jordan has abundant archaeological riches but lacks natural resources like oil, gas and water.²⁶ Jordan is a relatively small, arid and almost-landlocked country with one of the smallest economies in the region: its GDP was \$39 billion in 2016, making it the fourth poorest country in the Middle East.²⁷ Insufficient natural resources have given the kingdom chronic government debt, unemployment and poverty which led to a continued dependence on foreign aid from its Western and Arab Gulf allies.²⁸ This has shaped the government's policy to cultivate tourism among foreigners especially from Europe and North America who are eager to visit dramatic sites like Petra, and also to witness the natural wonders of the Dead Sea and Wadi Rum.

²⁴ The present-day flag of Jordan consists of horizontal black, white and green bands that are connected by a red chevron. The colors symbolize Pan-Arab history and heritage, representing the Abbasid (black band), Umayyad (white band) and the Fatimid Caliphates (green band).

²⁵ Anderson, *Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State*.

²⁶ "The World Factbook: JORDAN." Central Intelligence Agency. April 12, 2018. Accessed April 26, 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/jo.html>.

²⁷ Chepkemoi, Joyce. "The Richest And Poorest Economies In The Middle East." WorldAtlas. May 25, 2017. Accessed April 26, 2018. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-richest-and-poorest-economies-in-the-middle-east.html>.

²⁸ Ibid.

Second, while Jordan has enjoyed political stability relative to its neighbors, it has nonetheless faced political upheavals and challenges since its emergence as an independent Kingdom in 1946. Such challenges have been in the form of continued interference from outside powers (particularly the United Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century and presently, the United States of America); the presence of a difficult neighbor, Israel, with which it nevertheless signed a peace treaty in 1993; and the presence of conflict-torn neighbors including Syria and Iraq. As a result, the government has maintained a very tight hold on its citizens, seeking to preserve stability by suppressing political expression in ways that has at times restrained what artists feel that they can do.

Jordanian law criminalizes speech deemed critical of the King, foreign countries, government officials and institutions, and Islam, as well as speech considered to defame others.²⁹ Such speech is deemed as “undermining the political regime,” a vague provision under the “Terrorism Act” of the constitution.³⁰ In 2017, authorities proposed amendments to the country’s 2015 Electronic Crimes Law to broaden the definition of “hate speech”, defining it vaguely as “any word or action that incites discord or religious, sectarian, ethnic, or regional strife or discrimination between individuals or groups.”³¹

On the one hand we find that many are discouraged to express themselves in ways that may be deemed sensitive to the monarchy, the country’s official religion, or even sensitive to the customs and traditions of the general population. On the other hand, we find that the government

²⁹ "World Report 2018: Rights Trends in Jordan." Human Rights Watch. January 30, 2018. Accessed April 26, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/jordan>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ World Report 2018: Rights Trends in Jordan." Human Rights Watch.

tries to limit expression of thoughts and opinions that may anger the general population and or cause members of a potentially restless public to point blame at the government for allowing such 'insensitive' expression.

The Politics of Art in Jordan

Public Portraiture

To directly and indirectly assert its power and legitimacy over the Jordanian population, political theorists have described Jordan's regime as one that has found itself "in need of self-presentation".³² Even in the Transjordan period before 1946, "the newly created colonial state ...assume[d] material form through recognizable signs displayed publicly that [were] "made to be seen.""³³ Today, this public imagery is indeed ubiquitous in Jordan "the fast food restaurant where she [an average Jordanian citizen] eats her burger and fries... the school where she sends her children – all of these locations have one thing in common: a picture of King Abdullah II hanging on the wall."³⁴ This visual manifestation of power allows for the "state ideological power [to be] experienced, instead of only discussed."³⁵

This type of political portraiture – usually photographs emblazoned on billboards or hanging in public places and in private businesses – serves many purposes and addresses different types of people as well. The King and members of his immediate family (particularly his wife, his son, the Crown Prince Hussein, and his remaining three other children) often appear pictured in different dress and occasions. When rendered in his formal business suit, the King embodies the role of the spokesmen of the Jordanian citizens – particularly the elite and educated class – in the global realm. In his Oxford shirt, he takes up the role of an average working-class male. In his

³² Endelman, Jonathan. *Displaying the State: Visual Signs and Colonial Construction in Jordan*. PhD diss., Yale University, 2015. Springer Science Business Media Dordrecht, 2015. p.200.

³³ Ibid, p.200

³⁴ Ibid, p.199

³⁵ Ibid, p.200

military fatigues he is the Head of the army, and *literally* the protector of the citizenry. In the *hatta* (traditional Jordanian headwrap), he is the chief of the indigenous Jordanian Bedouin population.



Figures 1 and 2: King Abdullah II of Jordan in Military Fatigues and the hatta, respectively^{36, 37}

All of these situations allow for the King to assume a father figure role for all of the Jordanian citizens. This fatherly figure is further amplified by widespread portraits of the King alongside his wife and four children – images that in many cases hang right beside the headshot portraits of the King. The message is explicit: I am the father and protector of Jordan just as I am a father and protector of my wife and children. It allows for any Jordanian individual; mother, sister, daughter, brother or father to identify with the royal family and remain loyalty, *rather indebted*, to it.

³⁶ Digital Image. Business Insider. Accessed May 4, 2018. www.businessinsider.com

³⁷ Digital Image. The Muslim 500. Accessed May 4, 2018. www.themuslim500.com

This political portraiture has assumed an almost iconographic role. It portrays the King as a patriarchal figure who deserves reverential treatment. In some instances, his images function almost like a ‘good luck’ charm: they have a talismanic quality. Many Jordanians, for instance, adorn their private belongings – particularly their vehicles – with images of the King to show loyalty to the monarchy and perhaps also to secure a sense of security.

Below are images of a municipality-run sports club in Downtown Amman. The left image shows a portrait of King Abdullah II in business attire, below him lies a banner with the phrase “Long Live Hussein’s Father” and two crowns referencing the Hashemite monarchy. The image on the right shows a widespread visual motif made popular by the government with the words “Kulluna” or “We are all” next to a map of Jordan. The expression is meant to read “Kulluna al-Urdun” or “We Are All Jordan”. All governmental buildings are endowed with similar visual symbolism, and most private businesses are required to display a portrait of the current King in their main spaces.³⁸

³⁸ Jonathan. *Displaying the State: Visual Signs and Colonial Construction in Jordan*.



Figures 3 and 4: Municipality Sports Facility in Jabal Lweibdeh ³⁹ , ⁴⁰

While this political tactic has given the Jordanian population a sense of identity and yielded them with a fatherly figure to look up to, this form of visual imagery has unfortunately been transformed into the *only* form of visual motif that is commissioned by governmental authorities, and the only one that is favored by a majority of the population. This political portraiture has completely replaced artistic decoration in public and private spaces. By dominating the visual

³⁹ Image taken by Zubi, Zein. *Municipality Sports Facility*, Jabal Lweibdeh, Amann, Jordan. March 2018

⁴⁰ Image taken by Zubi, Zein. *Municipality Sports Facility*, Jabal Lweibdeh, Amann, Jordan. March 2018

landscape so heavily, this political portraiture may be also unintentionally squeezing out space for other kinds of more artistic visual culture.

The Heritage Factor

We have established that the ubiquity of political portraiture in Jordan, and the overall climate of restricted public expression, has left local artists with very little opportunity to be summoned to create artwork. Artists also have little latitude in the ability to create ‘free’ or self-conceived, autonomous artwork.

Another limitation to the development of the Jordanian art scene is the fact that the Jordanian Government has found itself embarking on multiple campaigns that constantly allude to Jordan’s historical past. This is mainly driven by the fact that Jordan is home to rich historical places including Petra, Jerash, Um Qais, and Ajlun that are worthy of sharing with and publicizing to the international community. The promotion of these sites has the potential to attract tourists, and therefore, revenue.

The glorification of Jordan’s ancient past can be seen throughout the country. Even the first object one encounters when entering The Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, - the only contemporary art museum in Jordan and which receives funding from the state – are two duplicates of the Greco-Roman columns from the ancient city of Jerash. By solely housing and exhibiting artworks that are reminiscent of historical art practices, including pottery, mosaics and ceramics, this ‘national museum’ further concretizes the identity of Jordan with its cultural heritage. It is even more surprising to find a similar arrangement of Greco-Roman columns at the terraces of Darat Al Funun Gallery, Amman’s most popular privately-run contemporary art gallery.

By over-embracing their cultural heritage, the country and its people are still haunted by their ancient history. Any reference to the modern times – ones that exclude allusions to Jordan's past or accolades of the Hashemite monarchy – are not welcome in public venues. A lack of the “young and contemporary” has limited artists' scope for self-expression. For a Jordanian artist of any capacity (plastic artist, musician, dancer, actor), to be successful and receive means of tangible or intangible support, he or she must abide by these unspoken rules: to create artwork that is ostensibly apolitical and irrefutably Jordanian. Irrefutably Jordanian refers to artwork that portrays the Hashemite monarchy; refers to Jordanian customs and traditions; renders an ancient historical site such as Petra; or perhaps even makes reference to the nation's geographic wonders such as the Dead Sea and Wadi Rum. Sardine even coined a term for this type of tendency: “The Heritage Factor.”⁴¹

“People want to see ‘*Al Nashama*,’” the graffiti artist told me when referring to what type of art the Jordanians request to be commissioned.⁴² *Al Nashama* is the official name of the Jordanian national football team, but its use has been extended to signify “anything Jordanian”.⁴³ It follows logically here that I mention that the only mural on a Government-owned building in Amman – and, strategically placed on the busiest intersection in the city – is a drawing of a Jordanian Bedouin soldier and next to his camel.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Conversation with Sardine, [March 9 2018]

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Colloquial Jordanian terminology

⁴⁴ "8 Beautiful Walls In Jordan." Discover Jordan. March 22, 2017. Accessed April 27, 2018. <https://www.redbull.com/mea-en/discover-8-beautiful-walls-in-jordan>.



Figure 5: Mural of a Bedouin Soldier with his Camel on the Police Precinct ⁴⁵

The context above makes the call for a public art commissioning board in the city of Amman even more compelling. By providing Jordanian artists with public space and the resources to execute ‘free’ art, a public art committee can may be able to encourage artists to break free from the chains of Jordan’s historical past and to help re-define, *even add to*, what it means to be

⁴⁵ Image taken by Zubi, Zein. *Mural of a Bedouin Soldier with his Camel on the Police Precinct* 8th Circle, Amman, Jordan. March 2018

Jordanian. Similarly, this public art committee would seek to commission all forms of art – deviating away from the tendency in Jordan to commission murals and graffiti only – and introduce to Amman’s urban landscape art installations which I am certain will form part of the identity and attraction of such places.

By constantly showcasing and celebrating work of Jordanian artists, even acknowledging their value added to the society, this public art committee may be able help to make the country into a fertile ground for contemporary art, as well as the go-to destination for art in the Levant for art aficionados, collectors and gallerists. My hope is to install iconic public sculptures in Amman – Anish Kapoor *Cloud Gate* (Chicago, 2004) equivalents – that attract locals and tourists, ignite interest in art and architecture, kindle discussions among the local population (whether they like the installation, or are skeptical about it) and inspire young Jordanians to take up art and design as leisure activities and as potential career orientations. There is no reason why the past and present cannot coexist in Jordan. Contemporary Jordanian art is a legitimate category of its cultural heritage and should be collected and exhibited by Jordanian museums and galleries. There is no reason why these modern and contemporary public installations that I propose cannot become a part of Jordan’s identity and sense of pride as well.

Present Art Scene in Jordan

To say that Jordan needs a stronger and bigger public art commission is not to deny the substantial efforts of certain organizations and individuals in spearheading the beginnings of an artistic awakening in the country. Such organizations and individuals share my interest in the arts and passion for encouraging art creation and art appreciation within the nation's population. It is important to note that all of these organizations are private and receive all of their funding from out-of-pocket or from donations. I will discuss the functions and missions of the well-established organizations, most of which have been running for around six years or longer.

Furthermore, I will reference the interviews I conducted in my time in Jordan to discuss these organizations' relationships with the Jordanian Government (in most cases this is represented through a relationship with the Greater Amman Municipality). This will clarify to the reader the role, or lack of role, that the Government plays in promoting arts and culture in the country. I will conclude this section with a comment on how a public arts commission can bring together the efforts and expertise of these individual organizations and successfully install public art within the urban landscape of Amman.

Al-Balad Theater

Al-Balad Theater is a cultural space that aims to bring art, dance and music to the lives of the Jordanian population. It was established in 2005 and since then has worked to present and produce more than 1000 theatre, music and dance performances, to a total audience of 100,000 members.⁴⁶ A number of these projects were in collaboration with the Municipality of Greater Amman. Director Raed Asfour has confirmed to me that this collaboration has not been an easy process. He argues that the main issue is that the successes of collaborative endeavors with the Municipality are very much tied to the individuals working in the Municipality: “The problem is that once I establish a level of understanding with someone in the Government, and they leave, I have to start from scratch. I need to re-build a school within the Municipality every time someone I work with leaves.”⁴⁷ The root of the problem therefore lies within the very vision of the Greater Municipality of Amman which does not prioritize the promotion of the arts and the backing of grassroots organizations that do so, and which has an institutional culture that depends on the whims of individual authorities.

It is therefore not a surprise to find that those working in the Municipality, including those who are assigned to work with Al-Balad and similar organizations, are not necessarily passionate about the arts. In fact, many of them have ended up there by mere coincidence, or *wasta* – an Arabic term for intermediary that loosely but more accurately translates to mean nepotism, or “who you know”.⁴⁸ It refers to using one’s influence and connections to get things done or be placed in

⁴⁶ Al-Balad Theater’s Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/AlBaladTheatre/>

⁴⁷ Conversation with Raed Asfour, [March 7 2018]

⁴⁸ "Wasta." Wikipedia. April 10, 2018. Accessed April 27, 2018. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wasta>.

a certain position. Not only does this *wasta* place people in influential positions based on connections instead of on merit or expertise, but also arguably leads to a kind of arrogance on the part of those who feel superior for belonging to an important family or knowing a certain someone in the Government. “They are arrogant. They think that those who don’t work in the Government don’t know about culture.”⁴⁹ The relationship between the Government officials and private organizations thus becomes akin to one between a bully and his victim: “The Municipality wants us [arts organizations] to submit to their demands. There is very little give-and-take with the Government.”⁵⁰

More importantly, Raed Asfour also pointed to a phenomenon that has long been established about Arab authoritarian regimes such as Jordan. The Government and individuals that work within it have a certain ‘police mentality’: they are constantly on-guard, invigilating suspecting non-conformers and listening in on their conversations, in fear that they might threaten the regime.⁵¹ Unfortunately, cultural organizations known for their unconventional ways, have always been on the radar of the Government and have been made the scapegoats of many governmental shutdowns: “Art is unfortunately still seen [by the state] as potentially nihilistic” to its existence.⁵² Government officials thus find it almost necessary to disrupt the work of cultural organizations through bureaucratic red-tape and contradictory measures - one day approving a project, but shutting it down the very next day - as a means of hindering a project’s development and delaying its ‘potential threat’.

⁴⁹ Conversation with Raed Asfour, [March 7 2018]

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Jordan: Repressive Laws Still Used to Intimidate Critics." Human Rights Watch. April 17, 2015. Accessed April 27, 2018.

⁵² Pieprzak, Katarzyna. "Moroccan Art Museums and Memories of Modernity." In *Modern African Art*, 426-44. 1st ed. John Wiley & Sons, 2013. p.428

This may seem unthinkable to a non-Arab reader; however, it is very much a reality in the Middle East. Mr. Asfour told me of a comical, but unfortunately, very common instance he faced back in 2013. Al-Balad Theater's subsidiary, known as Baladk Art Project: *Reclaiming Our Streets*, collaborated with the Municipality to paint the stairs in the up-and-coming Jabal Al-Weibdeh area. The Municipality provided support by facilitating road closures and by deploying police personnel to the graffiti sites. Artists, student volunteers and Raed himself were excited about this project that would successfully turn "these big great walls of dull concrete into an expressive painting that is full of life."⁵³

This excitement was, however, very short-lived. The next day Raed Asfour woke up to find a ticket on Al-Balad's entrance door, fining him for public vandalism. That ticket was issued by the very same Municipality that had helped him close off the roads for his graffiti project a day earlier.

It took him 5 years to get that ticket annulled.

As I was writing this thesis in Spring 2018 I learned of Al-Balad's closure. Specifically, on March 27, 2018, the government refused to renew the theater's contract in favor of leasing the space to a café. Cafés in Jordan are the most abundant physical space in the nation, perhaps even topping the list before mosques and religious sites. Al-Balad's management cites this incident as

⁵³ Taha, Kamal. "Jordanian Graffiti Artists Brighten Ammans Drab Streets." Jordan Times. December 28, 2017. Accessed April 27, 2018. Jordan Times.

“a symptom of the battle waged against independent community initiatives that have been working over the years to reclaim the artistic and cultural scene in the city for its people.”⁵⁴

Once again, this situation reflects the Government’s failure to protect cultural spaces that allow the youth to be creative and proactive, though official government rhetoric vows to support such initiatives. Unfortunately, what is said by state officials and what actually happens are often very different things. In this case, government wishy-washiness has led to the closure of the nation’s most emblematic theatre and the opening of yet another café.

⁵⁴ Taken from Baladk’s Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/baladkProject/>

Baladk Art Project: *Reclaiming Our Streets*

Baladk is a street art project that was initiated by Al-Balad Theatre in 2013. It aims to bring together local and international artists to paint graffiti art in Jordan. Since its establishment, it has held five open call invitations for street art projects. There are three methods of artist selection, (1) open entry; (2) invitational competition and (3) roster-based artist selection. Open entry is the most accessible method, as it allows the opportunity for anyone – from an established artist to a novice – to submit their proposal, and then potentially head an art project. The Baladk management team reviews the applications and selects artists whose proposals they believe best embodies their vision and mission. Once the artists are selected, Baladk provides them with the necessary supplies and materials, which includes graffiti paint and if necessary cage systems if work is to be done on a tall wall. In addition, Baladk often brings in volunteers to help the selected artists carry out their large-scale graffiti pieces.

Perhaps the most challenging task for the Baladk management team as well as the graffiti artists that it commissions, is to strike a balance between allowing for complete artist autonomy and ensuring that what is commissioned does not offend traditional Jordanian culture. There is an understanding among artists that there are red lines that cannot be crossed in a society steeped in tradition where artistic creation can be curbed: “We paint nature, animals, portraits, but we don’t touch at all the subject connected to morality.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Kamal. "Jordanian Graffiti Artists Brighten Ammans Drab Streets."

Is it really art and are we actually allowing for artist autonomy, if the artists are limited to drawing butterflies, and flowers? How are we able to transcend into the next phase of artistic expression and creativity that aims to tackle contemporary issues, without receiving backlash from the community that this art surrounds?

The question posed reflects the fragility of the arts in Jordan. Not only does the art scene in the country suffer from a top-heavy government structure that exerts a lot of control, and a heavy and byzantine Municipality bureaucracy that has oversight of private organizations and the power over mundane things, but as mentioned above, artistic ventures must face the constant criticism and object of conservative groups. Such conservative groups take it upon themselves to be the guardians of public morality and the enforcers of *their* interpretation of Islam. Many conservatives, for instance, have protested Sardine's graffiti of a male face, claiming that Islam prohibits figurative portrayal - claims that reflect narrow views that the vast majority of the world's Muslims do not share. These protesters went so far as to vandalize and deface the image.

Contrary to common practice in developed countries, the Jordanian constitution does not grant protective rights to artists. In 1990 in the Congress of the United States, for example, the instituted the Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA), which exclusively grants authors of works that fall under the protection of the Act many rights, including: (1) right to claim authorship, (2) right to prevent the use of one's name on any work the author did not create, (3) right to prevent use of one's name on any work that has been distorted, (4) right to prevent distortion, mutilation or modification of artwork.⁵⁶ VARA thus prohibits any intentional or grossly negligent destruction

⁵⁶ "17 U.S. Code § 106A - Rights of Certain Authors to Attribution and Integrity." LII / Legal Information Institute. Accessed April 27, 2018. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/17/106A>.

of a work.⁵⁷ The protection that VARA has granted to artists working in the United States has undoubtedly allowed them to explore topics and express themselves in ways that they might have not done otherwise.

In contrast to this, the Jordanian Constitution entails Punishment Law No 16 of 1960, that either jails for 3 months or fines an individual for “displaying in a public place any image or anything else indecent that may lead to the corruption of morals.”⁵⁸ This equally allows for any government official unhappy with a public artwork to request to take it down, as it does for an ordinary citizen to protest it. The vagueness of this decree, moreover, allows for a lot of latitude in understanding what constitutes to be “moral” and “amoral”, a tendency that, in practice, tends to work to the disadvantage of the artists themselves. Though Sardine’s graffiti piece was in no way insensitive – for it was only a rendering of a man’s face – he was unable to prevent its vandalism nor penalize the vandalizer.

To continue pursuing his passion for graffiti art, Sardine has thus resorted to self-censorship; painting “paper boats and robots”. And although these paper boats and robots are comical, colorful, and most definitely add beauty to the Amman neighborhoods, they stray far away from the fundamental purpose of public art. Aside from its aesthetic value, public art is meant to ignite a general discussion of underlying political, social-cultural and economic motivations for a publically-sited artwork.⁵⁹ Public art sited in a specific neighborhood is commissioned for the

⁵⁷ Rights of Certain Authors to Attribution and Integrity

⁵⁸ Punishment Law and its Amendments, No. 16, Year 1960, Subject No. 476, Article No. 319

⁵⁹ Guetzkow. *How the Arts Impact Communities: An Introduction to the Literature on Arts Impact Studies*.

community members, by the community members. It can foster a sense of identity and belonging, rendering it indispensable to city life and urban landscape.

In another open call art project spearheaded by both Raed Asfour and Sardine, I learnt of an incident where the government authorities protested a mural of a lady that was painted on a private building front. Municipality officials complained that “she represented an Orthodox Christian nun”. In a country that prides itself on its religious moderation and protection of minorities, and in a country whose most popular visual motif is “Kulluna al-Urdun” (again, a slogan meaning “We are all Jordan”), how is it that we find government officials – the very spokesmen of “Kulluna” – protest an image that resembles a religious figure associated with Christianity, a religion which 5% of the Jordanian population shares?⁶⁰ Sardine confirmed to me that the woman painted was in fact intended to depict a native Bedouin – not a Christian nun at all. That the Jordanian government did not even attempt to consult the artist and discuss his plans for the mural speaks volumes to this byzantine bureaucratic model.

⁶⁰“Jordan Population 2018.” Jordan Population 2018 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs).



*Figure 6: Baladk Mural Project, Unknown by Suhaib Attar*⁶¹

Not only are the artworks of the artists in contention with the school of thought of mainstream conservatism, but so are the artists themselves. Female graffiti artist Suha Sultan experienced criticism and hostility for working on her mural alongside her male artist colleagues, “I was doing a large portrait of a tribal man and passers-by started questioning me, lecturing to me because I was up a ladder among a group of men.”⁶²

⁶¹ Attar, Suhaib. [Unknown], Digital Image. Baladk Art Project. Accessed March 23, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/baladkProject/>

⁶² Kamal. "Jordanian Graffiti Artists Brighten Ammans Drab Streets."

It is here where we need public art to fight against patriarchal traditions that remain common in a conservative society like Jordan. Public art should portray woman as equal to man, celebrating her power and beauty. It is also here where a privately-run public art committee such as the one I am proposing, can play a role in this fight against sexism by specifically commissioning women only artists for certain projects.

Fortunately, there have been indeed efforts to combat sexism in the country. A project led by the newly initiated Open Art Museum (OAM) painted a mural of three young girls with a soccer ball just before the FIFA Under 17 Women's World Cup was hosted in Jordan in the year 2016.⁶³ I must mention that this effort was spearheaded by the efforts of the Brazilian and American Embassies in Jordan; it was a foreign, not Jordanian, initiative.

Regardless of the limitations that artists may face, many have acknowledged to me that their endeavors make for an impressive change around the Jordanian capital. "Before there were only the names of football clubs, phone numbers or message from young guys to their friends scrawled on walls," Wissam Shadid, another female artist, said. Graffiti art is becoming more popular and is increasingly drawing admiration from the locals. All the interviewees mentioned that it is necessary we take "baby-steps" with art in Jordan, and that it is better to paint images that the public would like, rather than shock them with sensitive visual motifs. As Sardine put it: "there is no value in shock value. If I want to continue what I want to do and what I love, I'll have to be respectful of the culture."

⁶³ Goussous, Suzanna. "Artists Beautify Sweifieh to Celebrate U-17 Women's World Cup." Jordan Times. October 06, 2016. Accessed April 27, 2018. <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/artists-beautify-sweifieh-celebrate-u-17-women's-world-cup>.

Amman Design Week

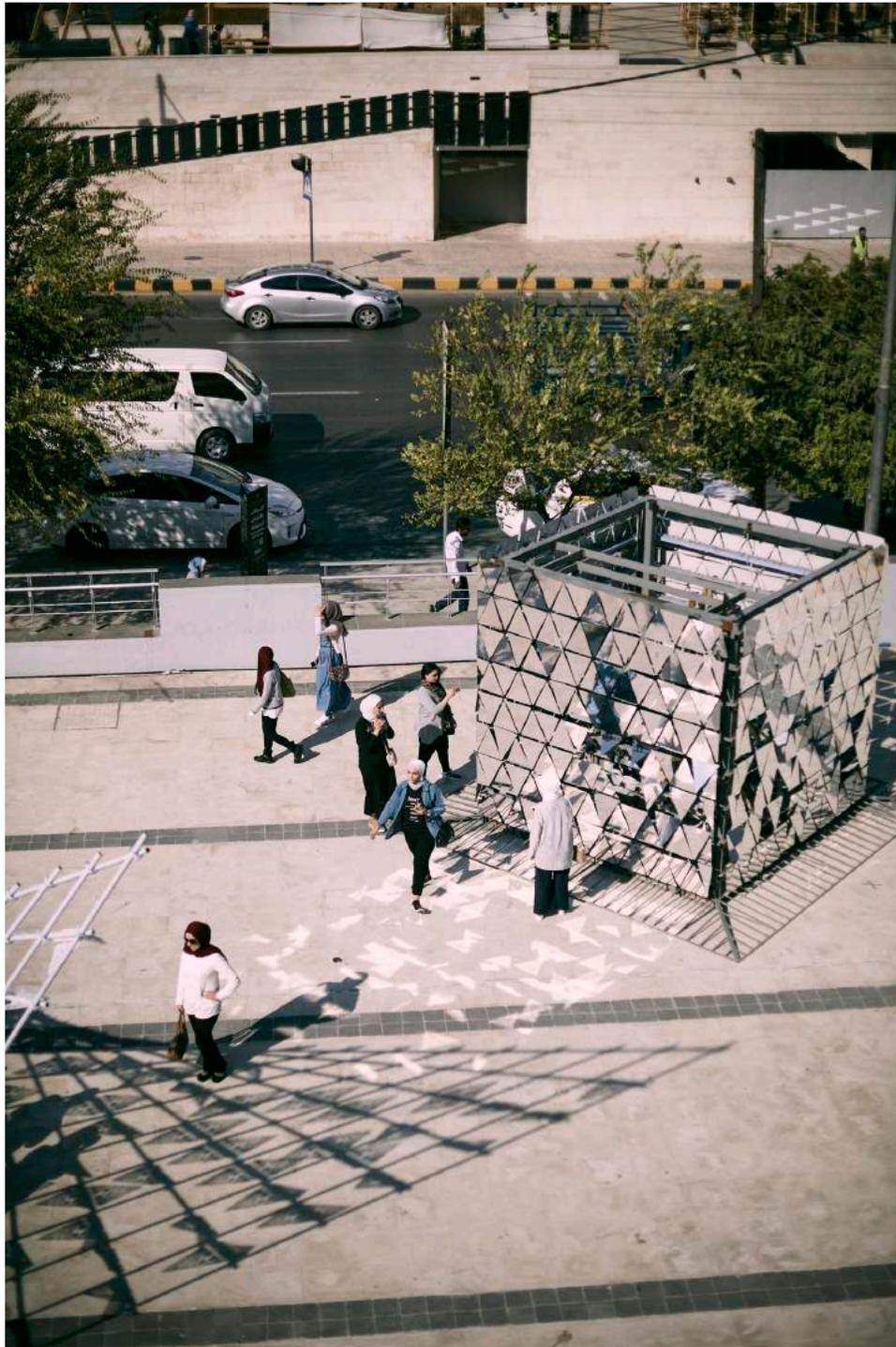
Amman Design Week is perhaps the closest thing to a public art commissioning body that Jordan has ever had. It is also one of the Jordanian art scene's most exciting ventures. Amman Design Week is a curatorial platform that began in 2016, dedicated to building connections between designers and innovators in the nation. It hosts a week-long exhibition biennially and aims to share with the citizens and immerse them in local and regional design culture.

Though I did not personally attend this exhibition, I was amazed by the creations of Jordan's most talented individuals, which I viewed on Amman Design Week's website.⁶⁴ There is undoubtedly a lot of potential in the Jordanian youth and they are deserving of opportunities to showcase their talents and passion for design and art.

Unfortunately, all of the Amman Design Week sculptures and installations were taken down once the temporary exhibition ended: "They threw everything away," Mu'ath from Al-Balad told me.⁶⁵ Planning in Jordan is always very short-term. There is no tendency to look beyond what could be of a project past its deadline. Both the public, and even the very few curatorial professionals in the nation, do not understand the potential of public art, and cannot see beyond the function of an artwork beyond its exhibition duration.

⁶⁴ Kamal. "Jordanian Graffiti Artists Brighten Amman's Drab Streets."

⁶⁵ Conversation with Mu'ath, Al-Balad Theatre, Amman, [March 7 2018]



*Figure 7: Amman Design Week Installation, X3 by Uraiqt Architects*⁶⁶

⁶⁶ X3 - Uraiqt Architects Amman Design Week Submission. Digital Image. Amman Design Week. Accessed March 23, 2018. www.ammandesignweek.com



Figure 8: Amman Design Week Installation, *Salt Pond* by Amal Ayoub ⁶⁷

By discussing the art initiatives in Jordan, we find the following: (1) there is very little government-funding for art endeavors, (2) there is no form of protecting ‘artistic heritage’, (3) artists pursue self-censorship so as not to receive backlash, (4) art is seen as temporary, and not as an integral part of Jordan’s urban landscape.

⁶⁷ Ayoub, Amal. *Salt Pond*, Amman Design Week Submission. Digital Image. Amman Design Week. Accessed March 23, 2018. www.ammandesignweek.com

Public Art is a Public Good

It is without question that an inhabitant's quality of life changes and shifts in both the physical and psychic realms that public art fills.⁶⁸ Artists and curators see public art as a tool to initiate an essential encounter between humankind and its creation – an encounter that would compel one to stop, observe, think, listen and respond.⁶⁹ William H. Whyte goes on to further argue that proper urban planning and design would stimulate “unofficial plans” between a person and their creation, but also between two individuals in a society.⁷⁰ Such “unofficial plans” are social interactions that occur in a public space when noted objects in this space – *like public art* – bring people together who may not know one another into a shared experience or conversation.⁷¹ Urban architects and city planners view public art as a shaper of space; an essential body of shapes, colors and textures that help define the spaces which they occupy while simultaneously enticing people into these very spaces. City officials may use public art to bring attention to the community and boost its touristic attraction. A community may see public art as self-identification, a tool to manifest cultural memory within their members, or a vehicle for sharing with the general public.⁷²

Many scholars (including, for example Teresa Dolan,⁷³ and Donal Joseph Costello⁷⁴ among many,) have studied the effects of community arts programs on the participants involved. A

⁶⁸ Landi, Pamela Jo, "Public Art - Purpose and Benefits: Exploring Strategy in the New England City of Pittsfield, Ma" (2012). Masters Theses 1911 - February 2014. 840.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Whyte, W.H, Municipal Art Society of New York, Street Life Project, Direct Cinema Ltd., & Bainbridge Brass Quintet. (1988). *The social life of small urban places: A film*. Santa Monica, CA: Direct Cinema Ltd.

⁷¹ Landi, "Public Art - Purpose and Benefits: Exploring Strategy in the New England City of Pittsfield, Ma"

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Dolan, Teresa. 1995. *Community Arts: Helping to Build Communities?* Taken from a Southern Ireland perspective. London: City University.

⁷⁴ Costello, Donal Joseph. 1998. "The Economic and Social Impact of the Arts on Urban and Community Development." Pp. 1333-A in *Dissertation Abstracts International, A: The Humanities and Social Sciences*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh.

community arts program is a grassroots organization that attempts to use the arts as a tool for human development.⁷⁵ Such programs almost universally involve “professional artists and community members in a collaborative creative process resulting in collective experience and public expression. It provides a way for communities to express themselves; enables artists, through financial or other supports, to engage in creative activity with communities; and is collaborative – the creative process is equally important as the artistic outcome.”⁷⁶ These programs often involve disadvantaged individuals, and are designed in the context of some larger goal: aesthetic neighborhood improvement, multiculturalism, raising awareness on women’s empowerment, etc. These programs are proven to build social capital by boosting individuals’ ability and motivation to be civically engaged.⁷⁷

Perhaps the most widely touted benefits of the arts are the positive economic impacts they bring to a community.⁷⁸ A strong arts infrastructure can prove to be a stable income source for artists and art establishments, but also serves as an ‘export’ industry, attracting national and international visitors alike.⁷⁹ Finally, the arts have been said to improve mental well-being, cognitive functioning, creative ability and academic performance.⁸⁰

Public art is therefore an unsung hero in our daily lives: we may even barely notice the artwork when it is around, but its removal results in an immediate void felt by those in the community. The relatively underdeveloped state of Jordan’s public art scene still surprises me, and

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Canada Council for the Arts. *Comparisons of Arts Funding in Selected Countries: Preliminary Findings*.

⁷⁷ Guetzkow. *How the Arts Impact Communities: An Introduction to the Literature on Arts Impact Studies*.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

yet the prospect for its development fill me with hope and excitement for what a public art commissioning body can do to the Jordanian society from nurturing an arts appreciation culture in the country, to bolstering the tourism industry, to kickstarting an artistic awakening among the local Jordanian art scene.

I suggest that the commissioning body for a Jordanian public art program – which I would call, again, *Itfannan* – should look as follows: it would be comprised of local artists, architects, urban planners and university students who are passionate about art and understand its value to society. Thus, from its very inception, *Itfannan*'s vision of promoting the arts would make up for the current lack of a vision within the framework of the Municipality of Greater Amman and to a larger extent, all of the nation's Ministries. *Itfannan*'s staff would be dedicated to commissioning public art on a regular basis, and given the staff's expertise and interests, would commission art that extends beyond graffiti or murals.

This would mean that local artists would not have to wait for an ordinary citizen to approach them to “make his parking lot appear nicer,” as is presently the case in Jordan, but that this commissioning body would continuously find spaces within which to install artwork - clearly a much more efficient and effective process.

The funding for a privately-run public arts commissioning body such as *Itfannan*, would not only play a vital role in allowing for its long-term sustainability, but also for allowing freedom of expression. Whereas the Jordanian state or Amman Municipality may not have the sufficient funds to support art initiatives at the cost of other social programs, private support for public art

endeavors can prove to be a more stable and a larger source of revenue for the arts committee. As I have seen in Jordan, large enterprises – particularly those in the telecommunication (Zain Group, Orange and Umniah) and banking sectors (Jordan Ahli Bank and Bank al Etihad) are excited about and willing to sponsor art initiatives. Presently, however, these efforts are dispersed, and many of the artists who receive financial funding find themselves lacking other means of support.

Itfannan would serve to unite all of these dispersed efforts and provide artists with the necessary expertise, supplies and even volunteers. As I have learnt throughout my research, there is indeed a tremendous amount of pre- and post-planning that is required to ensure that a public art is installed well in a certain space: How do we create a site-specific artwork? Is this artwork intended for the community members? How do we involve community members in the artwork's inception and creation? What is the artwork's relationship to the foot-traffic in this space? Is this a temporary piece or a permanent work? If it is temporary, what do we do with it afterwards? If it is a permanent artwork, who is in charge of maintenance? Who is in charge of the interpretative signage? Who is in charge of publicity, etc.?⁸¹

While private donors are willing to support endeavors, they most certainly do not have the necessary experience to be able to answer the questions posed above. It is thus the responsibility of *Itfannan* and its staff to provide the correct supportive setting for public art commissioning and installation.

⁸¹ Goldstein, *Public Art by the Book*

Furthermore, financial backing from private donors would grant *Itfannan* and the artists they commission, a lot of freedom in what they can create. Gone would be the red-tape measures so common in governmental initiatives and gone would be the restrictions placed on artistic creativity. In fact, Barbara Goldstein argues that it is in this setting where artistic experimentation and innovation is encouraged the most.⁸² Thus, while Ammani locals may still enjoy Sardine's paper boats and robots, they would be confronted with more thought-provoking artwork that is not afraid to tackle and question controversial issues. "Public art in a sense is vying for public opinion, an opinion that may run the gamut of approval to disapproval. Its presence is a form of 'Happening', regardless if permanent or temporary, drawing potentially on a wide body of artists known to not known, and meeting a not necessarily self-selected audience. In this way its role in the social sphere may be that of an animator."⁸³

This is not to say that all public art needs to ignite a heated debate amongst members of a society. In fact, most public art calls for compassion and unity amongst society members while still touching upon key issues of the contemporary world. A prominent example is Philadelphia's most-visited sculpture, *AMOR* (1998) by Robert Indiana.⁸⁴ This piece takes a twist on the artist's original and iconic *LOVE* image as it aimed to respond to "the changing demographics of the United States of America and his [Indiana's] desire to speak to his fellow citizens."⁸⁵ I don't see why a similar sculpture cannot be installed in Jordan with the word "Alhob" meaning, "love" to

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Landi, "Public Art - Purpose and Benefits: Exploring Strategy in the New England City of Pittsfield, Ma"

⁸⁴ Indiana, Robert. *AMOR*. 1998. Sister Cities Park, 18th Street and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

⁸⁵ "AMOR." Association for Public Art. Accessed May 04, 2018. <http://www.associationforpublicart.org/artwork/amor/>.

promote this feeling among the increasingly divided Jordanian society that is witnessing an influx of refugees from different parts of the Arab world.

Interestingly enough, Goldstein also argues that the very manner in which private organizations raise money – that is by approaching different donors and committees – also allows for widened support of such art initiatives: “because none of these organizations has a single dedicated funding system, each constantly seeks financial support from diverse resources. As a result, they all garner a broad base of support in the wider community.”⁸⁶ Thus, by seeking support from different sectors of the private industry, the public arts committee could raise awareness of the importance of art among those who may have not been involved in the art scene previously.

Perhaps one of the most much-needed benefits of *Itfannan* would be the physical and aesthetic value it would bring to the streets of Amman, and the country of Jordan to a larger extent. It is no secret that Amman’s streets are dull, dirty and identical to one another: every block is home to a four-story lime-stone apartment building that does not distinguish itself from the one right next to it. Indeed, as a relatively new city (reflecting the newness of Jordan as a nation-state itself), Amman has no famous architectural districts on a par with older cities like Jerusalem, Damascus, or Istanbul.

⁸⁶ Goldstein, *Public Art by the Book*, p. 52



Figure 9: Hay-al-Yasmeen Residential Area ⁸⁷

The dullness of the city’s topography has several implications for Amman’s society: on the one hand, it creates for an unstimulating living environment for the younger generation. It is rare to see average citizens spending time out in the public, for Jordan has not been planned with urban design in mind. Richard Florida even argues that the draw of a place, not jobs, is central to the making of an economy.⁸⁸ For this reason it is crucial “to capture the imagination, dreams and desires of young creative workers’ by designing public spaces that will encourage interactive street

⁸⁷ Image taken by Zubi, Zein. *Hay-al-Yasmeen Residential Area*, Amman, Jordan. March 2017

⁸⁸ Florida, R. (2005a). *Cities and the creative class*. New York, NY: Routledge.

life and establish vibrant venues, such as music or cafes, for experiences and encounter.”⁸⁹ Public art if anything adds to the aesthetics of a space and helps create a sense of place.

More importantly, a vibrant public art scene will bolster the tourism economy in Jordan and succeed in the areas where archaeological and natural sites including Petra, Jerash, the Dead Sea and Wadi Rum have failed. While these destinations have undoubtedly invited tourists from different parts of the globe and have successfully placed Jordan on the map of the world, they fail to retain tourists for more than 48 hours, nor encourage them to visit for a second time. In recent years, Jordan has been converted into a “transit country”, with Petra and Jerash serving as pit-stops for travelers in the Middle East, specifically for those visiting Jordan’s neighboring country Israel. In fact, the number of overnight visitors to Jordan in 2016 was around 4 million, a 2.6% increase from the year before.⁹⁰ Such tourists find it redundant to spend more time in Jordan and discover what other cities have to offer.

A public arts committee that installs artwork within the Amman urban setting, would modernize Jordan and make it attractive for both the younger generation and the tourists alike. Skeptics can look to Chicago’s Millennium Park – the city’s state-of-the-art collection of architecture, landscape design and art, as perhaps the most successful public art endeavor of the past decade.⁹¹ It is estimated that 12.9 million people have visited Chicago’s Millennium Park in the second half of 2016 alone. According to Mayor Emanuel’s office, the tourism generated by

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Emam, Dana El. "Despite Rise in Number of Visitors, Last Year's Tourism Revenues Similar to 2015'." Jordan Times. January 16, 2017. Accessed May 04, 2018. <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/despite-rise-number-visitors-last-year's-tourism-revenues-similar-2015>'.

⁹¹ "Cultural Affairs and Special Events." City of Chicago :: Chicago History. Accessed May 04, 2018. https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/millennium_park.html.

Millennium Park alone, added between 15,000 and 20,000 hospitality jobs in the downtown area, meaning that visitors are directly impacting and adding to the local economy.⁹² Given the vast amount of land in and around Amman, the possibilities to have colossal public art installations seem endless. Luckily, Jordan has many examples to follow in addition to Chicago, such as Marfa, Texas – an art oasis in a desert town, which started its artistic development, relatively recently, from scratch.⁹³ Marfa is thus a worthwhile comparison for what Amman and its local designers could achieve.

When community members and community organizations build their own cultural events such as concerts, or “placemaking expressions like decorative street amenities and public art programs,” Evans argues that the sum of these grassroots actions may influence a larger cultural regeneration process.⁹⁴ The younger generations in Jordan are taking it upon themselves to witness such a cultural regeneration, one that involves the modernization – yet maintenance – of Jordanian traditions and culture. A public art committee that demonstrates to the public the beauty and power of art, will only serve to provide the youth with the needed support to achieve their dreams. Currid and Connolly note the interdependence between the culture industry and the social; people give importance to culture, and cultural production extends from this.⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "Arts ★ Visit Marfa, Texas." Visit Marfa, Texas. Accessed May 04, 2018. <https://visitmarfa.com/arts/>.

⁹⁴ Landi, "Public Art - Purpose and Benefits: Exploring Strategy in the New England City of Pittsfield, Ma"

⁹⁵ Currid, E., & Connolly, J. (2008). Patterns of knowledge: The geography of advanced services and the case of art and culture. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, (2), 414-434.

Conclusion

As I write this thesis on the bank of Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, I have come to realize that the public works around me have been integral to defining the city, and fundamental in engaging with the various communities that they surround. They have also been integral to my own relationship with the city. How different would my daily commute to class be, if I did not pass by the Phillies Mural on Walnut Street Bridge, which cannot but capture one's attention with its bright red and green colors?⁹⁶ The mural is a daily reminder for myself to go and experience a Phillies game. If there's one thing I have learnt about Philadelphians over the course of my academic career here, it is that the fans go nuts for football (cheers to the Eagles who won the Superbowl in 2018!), baseball, basketball, and more. This particular mural captures that spirit of city loyalty so clearly.

There are many other examples, too. What would Philadelphia be without the sculptures surrounding me on the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial on Kelly Drive? This memorial not only houses seventeen sculptures across three terraces that attract the attention of locals and visitors alike, but also served as the site for the International Sculptures Exhibitions for the years 1933, 1940 and 1949.⁹⁷ The ApA and comparable commissioning organizations have directly contributed to making Philadelphia an art hub in the Northeast, which has undoubtedly had positive spillover effects upon the local art scene encompassing museums, galleries, artists residencies, and art schools.

⁹⁶ McShane, David. *The Phillies Mural*. 2015. Walnut Street Bridge, Philadelphia

⁹⁷ "Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial." Association for Public Art. Accessed May 04, 2018. <http://www.associationforpublicart.org/artwork/artwork/ellen-phillips-samuel-memorial/>.

It is my dream to learn from cities that have had successful private public art commissioning organizations and achieve the same in Amman. Philadelphia especially can be a role model for Amman – and not only because of the historic coincidence that Amman, in ancient times, was once known as Philadelphia!⁹⁸

Yet, while a public arts committee can install art within Amman, it cannot in and of itself sustain a public arts infrastructure and arts appreciation culture in the country. It is important that the private and public education systems in Jordan garner interest in the arts and provide students with positive environments for experimentation, self-expression and self-discovery. Barbara Goldstein argues that university settings are crucial for fostering creativity within an arts community.⁹⁹ Since universities encourage dialogue amongst its students, it is indeed the perfect breeding-ground for artists and non-artists to converse amongst themselves and discuss their opinions, hopes and visions.

It is no secret that art has existed since the beginning of civilization. Mankind is an artist by nature. It would be a crime to deny the Jordanian population of the wonders that art can bring. A public arts committee would brighten the streets of Amman, and with this, nourish the hopes and dreams of young Jordanians who aspire to be artists, designers and creators. *Itfannan*: Public art for the sake of art, for the sake of the Jordanian public.

⁹⁸ "Amman Was Once Philadelphia." The New York Times. January 04, 1964. Accessed May 07, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/01/04/amman-was-once-philadelphia.html>.

⁹⁹ Goldstein, *Public Art by the Book*

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