“Amman, Jordan: A 21st Century City”

Visitors and residents of Amman, Jordan, have frequently derided the city as capital of the “Hashemite Kingdom of Boring”. That title no longer fits the reality on the ground because Amman is in fact at the epicenter of Middle Eastern urban change. Over the last ten years, the Hashemite state, the Amman Municipality and private entrepreneurs have inaugurated neoliberal investment programs, expanded career options, increased private educational venues, built and rebuilt neighborhoods to facilitate the growth of artistic and entertainment venues, and shifted service provision from public to private institutions. The residents of the city have not been passive in this process but have taken advantage of the new opportunities to make the new spaces fit their own needs. At the same time, these initiatives have not come without disruption as opportunities have been unequally distributed and as Amman has become the destination for yet another wave of refugees, this time from Syria. Ammani society is being remade and refashioned in this constantly adapting urban space. We propose to analyze these changes to Amman while also contextualizing how they represent the larger process of urban transformation throughout the Middle East.

Betty S. Anderson: “Social Mapping a 21st Century Amman”
Aseel Sawalha: “Artists, Refugees and Women and the Remaking of Amman’s Public Sphere”
Victoria Kelberer-McKee: “Navigating the Refugee City: Urban Humanitarianism in Amman”
“Social Mapping a 21st Century Amman”
Betty S. Anderson
Boston University

Local and regional investment and infrastructure projects initiated by the Amman Municipality in the 21st century have transfigured old and new neighborhoods in the city to be locales of consumption, entertainment and socializing. Even though Jordanian citizens have little input into the neoliberal choices being made across the city, they are taking charge of how they use the new venues being established, enrolling in new private educational institutions, taking on new jobs in the private sector, taking advantage of new housing and transportation opportunities, and finding new means for advertising their choices on social media. Rainbow Street and parts of downtown read as tourist destinations; the Abdali project as a reimagined Beiruti Solidere. Abdoun Circle, Jabal Husayn, and neighborhoods in East Amman layer new consumer options onto streets still recognizable to long-term residents. Social media sites have enabled owners and customers to present their own images of these newly built and reconfigured spaces, images that embrace the country’s neoliberal direction but which also highlight the differences in class, society and gender that these changes have wrought. Amman, like any city, was never just one urban area, but a patchwork of residential neighborhoods and public- and private-sector employment zones. I propose to discuss how the changes to the city have enabled the creation of new socio-economic and geographical bridges across neighborhoods while also exacerbating long-term divisions.

Betty Anderson is the author of Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State (University of Texas Press, 2005), The American University of Beirut: Arab Nationalism and Liberal Education (University of Texas Press, 2011), and A History of the Modern Middle East: Rulers, Rebels and Rogues (Stanford University Press, Spring 2016), as well as a co-author with Carol Berkin of the History Handbook (Houghton-Mifflin 2003 and Cengage 2011). Dr. Anderson has published articles in Civil Wars, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Critique, and Jordanies, as well as chapters for a number of edited volumes. She has written about the themes covered by Islamic and history textbooks used in Jordan, the politicizing role of education in twentieth-century Middle East history, and the evolution of the American liberal education system at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Her latest project examines the economic, educational, political and social changes that have come to Beirut, Amman, and Ramallah over the last 25 years. Dr. Anderson has received Fulbright and American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR) grants to conduct research in Jordan and Lebanon. At Boston University, she is director of the Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations.
“Artists, Refugees and Women and the Remaking of Amman’s Public Sphere”  
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Women’s presence in the public sphere and participation in shaping the cultural landscape is striking in the context of Amman, Jordan. Given women’s traditionalist norms in the region, accompanied with the rise of conservative and radical Islam in the past years, one does not expect to see women playing a major role in reshaping the public sphere in an Arab capital.

Jordan continues to receive thousands of refugees (from Iraq and later Syria) including artists and intellectuals. The sudden presence of these artists and intellectuals in Jordan’s capital, alongside the government’s implementation of neoliberal policies enabled Amman to emerge as regional cultural hub for the circulation of art, culture, and people. This environment allowed middle- and upper-class Jordanian women to play a major role in the adaptation of global circulations of art and cultural discourses, including the value of the local and the art-world trend of repurposing old buildings and reshaping older neighborhoods in the city.

These women’s own discourses show heightened awareness of urban issues, including class privilege and gentrification. Yet while many address issues of gender in their personal lives—including their travels through public space—they put less emphasis on gender in relation to their own work in the cultural sphere.

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Interests and/or Activities: urban anthropology, art in urban areas, human rights, gender relations, anthropological theories.

I conducted fieldwork for my PhD dissertation in the city of Beirut, Lebanon. My research explored the ways in which various readings of the past informed and shaped debates over identity, ethnicity, culture and gender relations in the context of urban reconstruction and recovery in postwar Beirut. After Beirut, I carried out research about feminist arts collectives in New York City. Currently, I am exploring the ways Iraqi and Syrian refugee artists and intellectuals are reshaping the cultural landscape in Amman, Jordan.

Sample Publications


2010  Reconstructing Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar Arab City. University of Texas Press

“Navigating the Refugee City: Urban Humanitarianism in Amman”  
Victoria Kelberer-McKee  
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Amman, Jordan, is one of the world’s quintessential “refugee cities” (Ward 2014). A desert town of a few hundred families at the time of its official establishment as Jordan’s capital in 1921, Amman has been transformed into an urban hub in less than a century, in no small part due to the migration of refugees. First home to the Palestinians who fled beginning in 1948, Amman has subsequently become host to populations of Lebanese, Iraqis, Sudanese, and now, famously, Syrians, throughout its history. As refugee crises become protracted, they transform their urban environments in both highly visible and more discrete ways. Exploring how refugees navigate and make an impact on urban spaces (where 58 percent of refugees live) is crucial to better understanding the intersection of migration and urbanism. Examining the present impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on Amman’s urban infrastructure, economy, cultural landscape also illuminates opportunities to make positive interventions for the entire community - host and refugees. I propose a discussion of how refugees have impacted Amman’s urban landscape, and how the urban setting of Amman has shaped refugee responses historically in the city’s environs, through the lens of the ongoing, unique urban response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Amman today.

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Vicky Kelberer is an MA candidate in the International Affairs program at the Boston University Pardee School of Global Studies, where she serves as the Graduate Co-Chair of the Initiative on Forced Migration and Human Trafficking. She has served as a Board Member for the Boston Network for International Development since spring 2016. Vicky also is the co-founder and CEO of the app Urban Refuge, which acts as an aid locator for refugees living in Amman, Jordan. Vicky is a Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies (BCARS) Junior Scholar, and conducts research on the Syrian refugee crisis and urban refugee policy in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Switzerland. In March 2016, Vicky participated in a BCARS fact-finding mission to assess the effects of the London Donors’ Conference in Jordan. She conducted further fieldwork in May and June 2016 in Geneva, Istanbul, and Beirut. Her forthcoming policy report with UNHCR Jordan explores the rollout of the new work permit program for Syrian refugees, and its impact on livelihoods programming. Vicky holds a BA in International Relations (summa cum laude) from Boston University, and has published articles with the Middle East Research & Information Project, Huffington Post, Foreign Policy in Focus, Parabellum Report, and her own international affairs blog, The Global Atlas.