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Yusuf Mansur

Nothing brings more optimism today than the Greater Amman Municipality's drive and vision for the new Amman. In fact, and for good reason, it is the only optimism generator around.

In terms of leadership, design, partnership with all the stakeholders and implementation, the GAM Master Plan is a promise of a brighter tomorrow not only for Ammanites but for the whole country.

Few would know that Amman had only 2,000 occupants in 1900 and now it hosts two million people (almost one fifth are non-Jordanians) with an expected population of 6.5 million people within the next 20 years. On the other hand, we all know that it has grown without a map or vision to make it an immortal city and showcase the love it once espoused for its people, old houses and streets, and unique, successful milieu of human, cultural and natural landscapes and heritage that weaved over several decades its social contract.

Amman's seven hills, which were covered with houses and better merged with the stars at night than any man-made skyscraper, were bordered by green valleys, as Amman-grown architect Rasem Badran once said.

Amman was, until mid-1980s, a city where children played, people met as they ascended or descended stairs between houses, causing them to slow down and come to know each other, enmeshed its people in a thousand and one stories at every door. That Amman wove a gown of closeness between people and place, and a social fabric that became the cornerstone of a country. Like Paris and Rome, Amman was then a city of walks where man, woman and child enjoyed the streets where they would discover and revere difference.

That Amman, we all agree, has been lost for years amidst new buildings and rising towers that loom among houses of love, bonds of respect, closeness and age-old neighbourhoods. This randomly erected structures stand ominously, tower above and cut apart the houses of old Amman, pushing aside those that gave so generously of their youth at dawn, and settled at dusk to rest and watch with the grace, love and wisdom that only maturity can bring their trees and grandchildren blossom and grow.

The sporadic threats came with noise, pollution of air, soil, sight and sound, and an overburdened immediate environment, to then force people out, to move to farther lands that almost brought an end to the old Amman. Alas, where a grandfather once lovingly sat is now occupied by a misshaped office building with an 80 per cent occupation rate and draped in "To rent" signs.

The expanded Amman now has only 7 per cent of its families making more than JD12,000 per year, or JD185 per capita per month. Years of lack of planning has left almost 50 per cent of its fully serviced lands completely empty and too expensive to invest in to generate jobs for the Greater Amman's inhabitants.

A city that is also too expensive for those that have sophisticated or unique tastes. As Samar Dudin, a Jordanian artist and civil society activist, once said, "a city where the humanity of one has become separate from his surroundings". A city where fountains greeted us at Eid, where the green valley and spring of Ras Al Ein we used to play, a city where we walked to visit the sweet stores, to shop and discover and visit with loved ones.

But not all is lost. In fact, Amman is poised to gain and be ahead of many other cities in the region and beyond. With a vision that is entrenched in the dreams of those who love it, which preserves the old and brings the new, creates jobs and makes Amman the cultural and knowledge hub it should have become, the GAM is twinning the alleys and the skies and creating room for a social compact between rich and poor, rural and urban, village and metropolis.

The new Amman will make greater room for investments. It will have to deal with the serviced land that remains unused, freezing Jordanian capital into sand and dirt. In a country where unemployment has bordered 14 per cent for more than a decade, and where 36 per cent of households are very close to the poverty line, those who own lands serviced and upgraded with the resources of the whole community refuse to sell even at astronomical prices while our workforce, starved for work, awaits for those investments that will put this generation and the coming ones to work.

It has been estimated that JD20,000 invested in industry will create lifelong employment for a Jordanian. A dunum (1,000 sq.m.) in some areas has exceeded \$1 million. Each dunum, if sold and invested in industry, would have created 50 employment opportunities. A thousand of those dunums would have created jobs for 50,000 Jordanians and brought the unemployment rate to 9.5 per cent instead of the current 14.3 per cent.

With our wealth frozen in dirt, and with such high land prices, a vision that deals with all the issues surrounding the phenomenon of diverting capital into land instead of putting us to work should be forthcoming.

Other features of the Master Plan are the clustering of industry, commerce and agriculture. Safeguarding heritage, and creating multipurpose/multiuse buildings and clusters, such as the recent prestige zoning - a necessary condition for enabling knowledge clusters to flourish and create not only jobs but high-paying jobs, will prove an important element in the development of Jordan.

Connecting students, workers and executives to training and work places through sophisticated public transportation networks will help Jordanians access jobs and become mobile, while reducing a fuel bill we cannot afford and resurrecting an environment we so strained.

In GAM's Master Plan, the old will be preserved and made into a vibrant celebration of culture and commerce, with old cinemas and streets brimming again with life. A place where Al Huseini Mosque square, with its Bukhari bazaar, Amman's first shopping place, becomes once again a space where we walk and recall stories of our roots, and tell visitors and coming generations of how we came to be "Kulluna Al Urdun" (All of us Jordan).

Yes, Amman is in safe hands. To those who plan and consult with us all, and listen to voices that come from heart and mind, a word of thanks is not enough. Indeed, bigger thanks will come from the smiles of children in the City of children, Amman. For now, we are grateful for being made optimistic again.

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