SUREDIS CITIES

The supranational view: a discussion about urban spatial planning

Interviewer: Gareth Byatt – Principal Consultant, Risk Insight Consulting
Interviewee: Aya Hamad – Programme Officer at UN-Habitat

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The city of Amman, Jordan. Image credit: National Geographic

Aya,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about spatial planning and urban design. Could we begin this interview by summarising your background and experience, and the work you do for UN-Habitat in spatial planning?
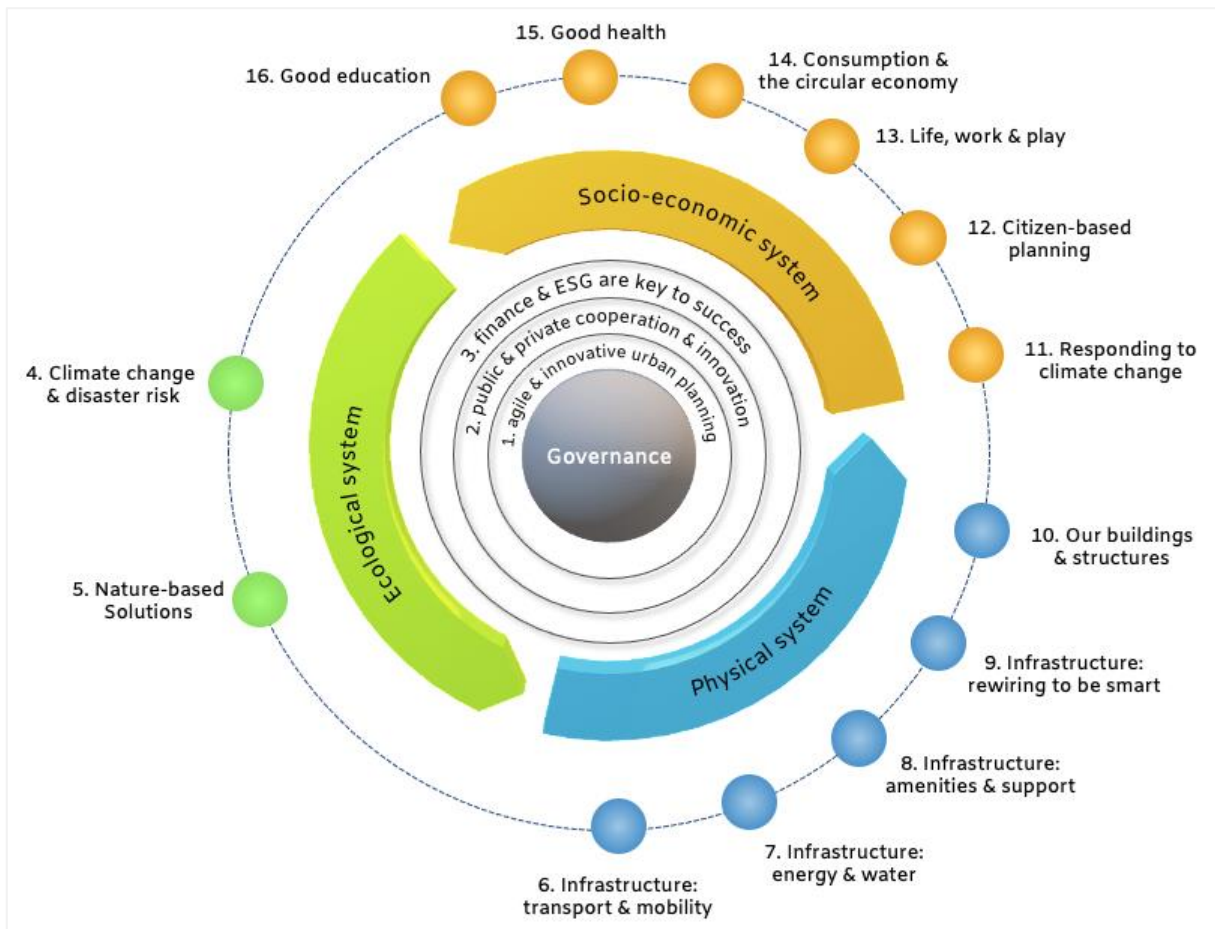
Aya: I am an architect and an urban planner with more than 12 years' experience in spatial planning in Jordan and the Middle East. My academic qualifications include a spatial planning Masters degree from the German Jordanian University, and a Bachelors degree for which I was ranked first in my class.

I am currently the project coordinator for the "Urban Planning and Infrastructure in Migration Contexts Programme (UPIMC) - Jordan", at UN-Habitat, a role I have held since 2021. I have also supported the development of the first Jordan National Urban Policy, the Voluntary National Review for Jordan, the First Arab Voluntary Local Review for Amman city, and the Jordan New Urban Agenda (NUA) reporting.

In addition, I am involved in several public space development projects in refugee camps.

Previously, whilst working with a private company I was the project manager for the "Regional Development Plan (RDP) for Al Dhulail and Al Khalidiya Subdistricts of Amman". This was a project in which I and my team developed a regional development for the Al Dhulail and Al Khalidiya Subdistricts – which was the first of such development to be approved by the higher planning council in Jordan for the last 11 years.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview, Aya. It's great to see the projects you have been and are involved in. I'd like to base our discussion about spatial planning and urban design with the help of an urban system (per the diagram below), which links to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. By stitching our discussion points to an urban system, I hope we can show the benefits of considering, to varying degrees and depending on context, aspects of governance, the ecological environment, the physical environment and the socio-economic environment in urban decision-making, and how knowledge can be effectively shared to ensure we can continuously improve urban areas around the world.

Urban system image by author

Gareth: What are some of the key points to your approach to spatial planning and urban design in the projects that you are involved with, and the most important matters that you seek to address? I appreciate that a key focus of your work is towards human settlements.

Aya: Essentially, our work aims to facilitate the achievement of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) in cities, urban and also rural areas. We typically find that SDG 11 impacts all other SDGs (the SDGs are of course designed as an interconnected set of goals). For example, when we plan for and are involved in projects that include health centres and hospitals, SDG 3 (Good Health & Wellbeing) is naturally a core focus. Our work regularly links closely with SDG 4 (Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG9 , and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Per your point about linking to the SDGs, we find that they are a valuable set of goals for us to use.

We took a layered approach in the "Urban Planning and Infrastructure in Migration Contexts Programme (UPIMC) project in Jordan. By this, I mean that we started by studying requirements at a national level, then the regional/state level, then at the city level, and then down to the most vulnerable neighbourhoods within the city that are impacted and have resilience vulnerabilities. Through this approach, we have been able to select a pilot neighbourhood, carry out a vision formulation and look at precisely what is needed in the locality. It's the localness that is key, whilst connecting it up to the bigger picture. When we have specific projects, we approach donors, financiers, companies with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and others to help us plan for outcomes based on an evidence-based approach and an agreed boundary (within a neighbourhood).

We focus on adopting a participatory approach with local communities in all our projects, to engage everyone in the decision-making process and to ensure we leave no one, and no place, behind. We aim to improve the quality of life for people in all urban and also rural areas.

Gareth: What would you say are the key things to ensuring that ecological considerations are embedded into spatial planning and urban design? Do you look to embed Nature-based Solutions (NbS) in your work?

Aya: Well, environment is considered throughout all phases of our urban projects, starting with the situational analysis (and the context to the local area). Ecological and environment challenges and opportunities are identified, with mitigation and required interventions to be planned.

We incorporate Nature-based solutions (NbS) into our work wherever applicable. One example I can give about this is a pilot project we have named The Al Zuhoor Green Triangle, a project in which bio retention and detention measures have been implemented to reduce the impact of flash flooding on the downtown area of Amman city, which is one of the key natural hazards that Amman faces.

According to the "Flood Risk Assessment and Flood Hazard Flood Hazards Mapping" study that was carried out by UN-Habitat Jordan country office in 2021, districts of Amman are vulnerable to flash floods due to, amongst other factors, a growing population, which exerts pressure on social services and infrastructure for water and sanitation (linked to SDG 6), drainage, and waste management. When heavy rains occur, one outcome can be flooding in low-lying areas of the city. Its elevation also exposes it to hazardous blizzards.

The study I have mentioned above identified 120 locations all over Amman city in which potential flood adaptation and mitigation measures can be implemented. The Al Zuhoor triangle site was identified among these hotspot areas in the city.

This webpage provides some information regarding the project.

Gareth: Thanks for this context and this example, Aya. It's great to see the usages of NbS in your projects. You mentioned the importance of citizen / community perspectives in urban planning. What key things do you focus on to ensure this is achieved? As an example, I recently held a discussion with UNDP Armenia about work they are undertaking in the City of Yerevan, in which they are using The Doughnut Model, a human-centric design approach.

Aya: As I mentioned earlier, we always aim to give a voice to everyone on our projects, and to make sure everyone's views reach the responsible authorities and are duly considered.

We start by identifying stakeholders, including public institutions, the private sector, and local community representatives including women, youth, refugees, and people with disabilities. Following this we typically undertake a mapping exercise do identify the importance and influence of different perspectives on the different phases of the project.

Gareth: What would you say are the key things to ensure the right kinds of **physical** urban system considerations are embedded into spatial planning and urban design? I'm wondering about aspects such as the 15-minute city, for example, and how it links together the physical aspects of an urban area and the socio-economic aspects.

Aya: We certainly consider the needs of the local community at the physical neighbourhood level. Enhancing walkability (for those who are physically able) and good mobility options for less mobile people is an example, which includes adopting 15-minute city concepts and considering climate change mitigation and adaptation measures wherever possible. Energy needs are linked to this, and the design of buildings including their efficiency is important.

Gareth: Linked to what you have just mentioned and as the third main part of the urban system that I use, what would you say are the key things you are important to take into account, to ensure **socio-economic** urban system considerations are embedded into spatial planning and urban design?

Aya: We must identify priority projects using an evidence-based approach and consider potential livelihood opportunities, such as new employment options that a new project can spur. Various socio-economic aspects are important and should be studied alongside and as part of spatial planning as a continuous loop so that everything is interlinked, and all impacts are properly considered.

Gareth: You mentioned the involvement of local community teams in spatial planning earlier. I have seen examples of this around the world, and I appreciate that context is always key, but maybe it is not always possible to do it in a full 360-degree way.

Aya: It is very important to engage local communities in an effective way. It's not always easy but it is key to effective planning. We have to listen to people – they live the challenges of their neighbourhoods every day, they see and hear and know what goes on, and with the experience of their daily lives they have good ideas of how to improve their neighbourhoods and city. Therefore, it is important to engage them in the decision-making process and throughout the whole process, in a way that shows them that their suggestions and comments are actively being considered and acted upon, in a 360-degree type of feedback. The urban planner's role is to identify what the most important needs are in a holistic way, and not everything that a local community wishes for is a priority need (recognising that resources are always limited). As part of the urban planning process, a technical assessment should follow a community consultation, with good engagement with the community to explain how things are moving forward, and to seek further views. Spatial planning achieves a lot at the national and regional levels, but it is how it is implemented at the local level that is the key.

Gareth: Do you have to deal with government change in your work? By this, I mean that urban design and planning is often long-term, and if / when there is political party / government change, projects can stall or require large amounts of rework due to "a new point of view" or the need to justify previously agreed matters / plans. I imagine that it's something that needs be discussed on a project case-by-case basis?

Aya: Yes, we do see this on a project case by case basis. Political change will always be a challenge in spatial planning. The impact of government change does occur, and it is a challenge we have to overcome, either by finding a way to convince the newly elected party of what we are doing (and taking them through the whole process that was used to reach a decision), or to adjust in an acceptable way that maintains the highest possible positive impact on ground.

Gareth: How can the private sector contribute, in all parts of the urban system, to spatial planning and urban development? I used to work for a property developer that has undertaken many successful urban development projects around the world, and I have seen and been involved in examples of projects that positively change places and improve them for local communities.

Aya: Well, for cities and authorities in general I would say we should focus on enhancing private, public and what I call "people" partnerships, as this allows us to utilise expertise from the private sector as part of obtaining the best results and outcomes.

Gareth: For my last question, what's the one thing you'd like to see focused on in spatial planning and urban design in the coming years up to 2030? I am also wondering if any team / organisation is working on a "city of the future", similar to one I have seen that Chatham House has produced for the centre of London.

Aya: I think that we need to focus more on linking spatial planning with financing. In particular, we need to quickly identify, secure and organise good governance of financing for specific identified projects so that they can be implemented on ground. As part of this, we need to clearly show the direct impact of planning at higher levels on the detailed local levels and the accompanying local projects, which is where people see tangible impact on ground (including of the feedback that they provide early in the consultation process).

Plus, we need to continue to focus on aligning projects for efficiency. I believe that it is working, and it is successful. I see the strong interest from lots of partners. To then achieve the city's vision. This links things together.

As for the city of future, I know that the development of Amman city is always being considered and thought about.

The Facebook page of UN-Habitat Jordan provides various details and information about our work, including a UPIMC project video, in Egypt and Jordan.

Gareth: Thank you very much for your thoughts and perspectives, Aya.

Aya: Thank you Gareth for inviting me to be part of this initiative.