

Spanning the future

The new Abdoun Bridge is a major engineering achievement that not only provides an important piece of infrastructure, but also creates a visual focal point for Jordan's capital

Story and photos by Eddie Taylor

It's probably as much with relief as excitement that Amman's first landmark public structure since the Roman amphitheatre will be unveiled later this year. The spectacular suspension bridge across Wadi Abdoun links the 4th Circle on Jebel Amman and the affluent neighbourhoods of Abdoun and Deir Ghbar to the South. Its completion will be celebrated not only by the city planners, but also by the legions of commuters and local residents who have been struggling with disruption and detours for at least a year longer than expected. But all 425 metres will soon be finished, and whatever one's views of the cost and the purpose, it's undeniably magnificent.

The 'Y'-shaped struts have been in place for the better part of 18 months, with the linking concrete roadway, designed in a pleasing 'S' curve 40 metres above the Wadi Abdoun riverbed, gradually edging nearer to a unified whole since the spring. But now that the construction clutter has been cleared, the cranes dismantled and the scaffolding has all but gone, the full effect of the stunning lines and crisp angles can be fully appreciated. For a city that has precious few signature buildings – the Royale and the Zara Towers have probably polarised opinions too much to be considered iconic – the Abdoun Bridge will serve both as a vital piece of infrastructure and a genuine focal point.

The bridge has been a consistent talking point in Amman since the plans were first revealed in 2001 by the then Mayor of Amman, Nidal al-Hadid. The Greater Amman Municipality announced its proposed construction, as well as a tunnel to emerge beyond Abdoun Circle, as part of a wider scheme to construct an inner ringroad linking North Amman, via the 4th

Circle, with the Airport Road south via Abdoun. Everyone who had endured the interminable queues at the major intersections understood the need. 'It's an important part of the city's development as a functional, usable place,' says Zaid Goussous, a city planner on the Amman Municipality, and also a leading restaurateur. 'The project to complete an inner ringroad is essential to ease the entire flow of traffic around the centre of the city. It's the start of a modernising process that reflects where Amman now is as a regional centre.'

The bridge has been the responsibility of leading international engineering firm Dar Al-Handasah (Shair and Partners), whose other major projects in the region include the second Manama-Muharraq crossing in Bahrain, the Wadi Leban Bridge in Riyadh, and the second Sheikh Saad Bridge in Iraq.

In technical terms, the bridge is a 'free-balanced' cantilevered suspension bridge, supported by pre-stressed steel stay cables from three concrete support towers, the tallest of which is 71 metres, 26 metres of which are above the deck. That roadway deck is comprised of four main spans, two outer 63-metre sections that weigh 15 tons, and two central sections of 132 metres that each weigh 150 tons. Designed by Dar's Seshadri Srinivasan, the chatter in Amman is that it is about time something like this was added to the city's skyline. 'It's beautiful,' is a regular comment in Jordan's blogosphere and newspaper letters' pages, as are comparisons to the Eiffel Tower, Paris, which was initially regarded as a monstrosity before its elevation to national symbol.

Despite the congestion and inconvenience caused by the bridge's protracted construction – over a year behind schedule, and no one really offering meaningful explanations as to why – project management specialist at Method Corp, Ammar Mango, agrees. 'The Abdoun Bridge will be there long after people forget the delay,' he says. 'Legacy projects, if completed, and if they result in a quality product, produce benefits that

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Fact File on Abdoun Bridge

Length 417 metres (in spans of 63m, 2 x 132m, 63m, 27m)

Height 71 metres (highest point)

Consulting engineers Dar Al-Handasah Consultants

Designer Seshadri Srinivasan

prove to be worth all the troubles faced during the project construction, even if the project is delayed or over budget. Let us hope that Abdoun Bridge will be one of those products that will make us forget its project delays, and that brings great value for decades to come.'

Not that every comment has been positive. The nature of the two neighbourhoods the bridge links – home to many of the city's great and good – has led to pointed accusations of inappropriate use of public funding, with the bridge being dismissed as a shopping route. On the other side of the coin, some have even complained, and infamous local satirist Emad Hajjaj gleefully observed in a cartoon entitled 'Amman's Catapult', that it will promote the more elitist corners of town to the city's masses.

In reality, though, the bridge reflects the changing nature of the city. With a massive population influx in the last five years, and with people now seeking new homes south of the city along the airport road towards Madaba, providing a route around Jebel Amman is essential. Of course, there is always the theory that new roads don't ease congestion, they merely create more traffic. But whatever the logistical success, its architectural merit should stand the test of time. ■