

Post-Creative Urban Regeneration in the MENA Region: Adaptive Reuse of Industrial Sites

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Abstract

As deindustrialization and rapid urban transformation have left many industrial sites underutilized across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), this paper examines the adaptive reuse of abandoned structures as a culture-led strategy for urban regeneration. While culture-led regeneration, creative city and post-creative city paradigms have been widely studied in Western contexts, their application within the MENA region remains less explored. This study therefore asks: to what extent do adaptive reuse projects of former industrial spaces in the MENA region align with or diverge from post-creative urban regeneration principles? Through a qualitative and comparative case study approach, the research analyzes four prominent examples of culture-led industrial reuse in the MENA region: the JAX District in Riyadh, Alserkal Avenue in Dubai, the Electricity Hangar Gallery in Amman, and Les Anciens Abattoirs in Casablanca. An analytical framework derived from literature and theory consists of four dimensions that will guide the evaluation of each case: governance and development approach, cultural production versus cultural consumption, inclusion and reuse. The findings suggest that industrial adaptive reuse in the MENA region operates along a spectrum between creative and post-creative urban models, with a tendency for cases in Gulf cities remaining closely aligned with creative city paradigms, driven by state or private investment. In contrast, the Electricity Hangar in Amman and Casablanca slaughterhouses demonstrate stronger affinities with post-creative principles. The paper argues that future regeneration of industrial heritage in the MENA region may benefit from hybrid models of creative urbanism and calls for a more context-sensitive redefinition of post-creative urbanism.

Keywords: Adaptive reuse, Creative city, MENA cities, Post-creative city

Introduction

Since the late 1960s, the ripple effects of urbanization coupled with the global economy's drift into stagnation was felt all around the world, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Powers, 2024). This deindustrialization and infrastructural modernization have left behind an increasing number of abandoned or underutilized industrial structures, where former factories and production sites gradually lost their functions and sit as physical remnants of past economic systems within urbanizing regions (Alraouf, 2018). Abandoned industrial districts like Dekkarat in Fez, Morocco or the Lafarge Cement Factory in Amman, Jordan are just two of many examples of this phenomenon, semi-abandoned as a byproduct of industrial relocation and restructured economies within dense urban areas.

Viewing abandoned industrial buildings as untapped assets and resources for urban regeneration has also emerged as a key strategy, particularly among major cities in the Global North. New research illustrates how adaptive reuse must be a catalyst for urban sustainability in the context of industrial heritage as well (Wei et al., 2024; Mehan, 2025; Szopińska-Mularz et al., 2025). Liliane Wong (2023) presents a multitude of abandoned industrial typologies in the West that have re-emerged as new social, cultural, and economic hubs, all while preserving the intrinsic industrial heritage and legacy. Early examples of socio-cultural transformed industrial spaces include the lofts in New York, occupied by grassroots artists due to their affordability and spatial flexibility (Zukin, 1989). Over time, these bottom-up creative occupations became institutionalized and were pushed by private sectors as a culture-led urban regeneration (Evans, 2009). These processes were coined by Richard Florida (2002) as the "creative city", a concept that emphasizes cultural production as a key driver to urban development. However, this paradigm has also been widely criticized, as it produces gentrification and commodifies culture, exacerbating social inequalities as well according to scholars such as Jamie Peck (2005). As a result, the "post-creative city" concept shifted the attention towards community-driven forms of urban regeneration and rejected creativity as a policy slogan and questioned its role as an agent for productivity (Mould, 2018).

With a lot of extensive literature surrounding these concepts, their link to the context of the reuse of abandoned industrial districts as a means for urban regeneration in the MENA region remains underexplored. There is some literature that looks at creative city applicability in the MENA region, but primarily through a lens of power and discrimination. Mourad, et. al (2024) outline how creative city policies in Cairo have been implemented as neoliberal urban development strategies for soft control. While Alsayel et. al (2022) cite Dubai as a prime example of a city that systematically follows Florida's definition of the creative city, and underperforms when it comes to adopting policy that restricts discrimination in these contexts. By focusing on formerly abandoned industrial structures as the spatial mechanism, this paper hypothesizes that urban regeneration projects of deindustrialized sites in the MENA are closely associated with the Floridian-led creative-city paradigm. Given the lack of clarity as to whether or not post-creative urban regeneration can be meaningfully applied in the MENA, this paper investigates this by focusing on the following question: to what extent do adaptive reuse projects of former industrial spaces in the MENA region align with or diverge from post-creative urban regeneration principles?

Methodology

This article approaches this research question from a qualitative lens, looking at different case studies of former industrial spaces in cities across the MENA being reused as sites of cultural and creative regeneration. It is first important to explore what constitutes principles of a post-creative city, and what other adjacent concepts such as the "right to the city" can play in creating an analytical framework that can evaluate a set of case studies in the MENA region.

The case studies were chosen to represent various parts of the region, from North Africa to the Levant and to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), to acquire a broad scope of environments and contexts, which can provide deeper insights into how these spaces operate under different governance structures. This paper will be looking at the JAX District in Riyadh, Alserkal Avenue in Dubai, the Electricity Hangar Gallery in Amman, and the Les Abattoirs in Casablanca. These projects were selected on the basis of being prominent examples of culture-led industrial reuse in their respective cities. Each case study is examined qualitatively based on the available online information and descriptions in order to understand the processes through which these sites were developed. Each case will be evaluated based on an analytical framework and criteria developed based on theoretical paradigms, indicating the extent to which these case studies align with, or diverge from post-creative principles. A field visit to JAX in Riyadh and the Electricity Hangar in Amman was conducted and is considered an important method to witness and experience first-hand not only the spatial qualities but the broader urban and cultural impacts as well.

Analytical framework

To evaluate whether or not adaptive reuse projects of former industrial spaces in the MENA align or diverge from post-creative urban regeneration principles, four dimensions must be addressed. These dimensions are derived from debates in literature surrounding culture-led regeneration, creative city policy, spatial justice, and industrial urban reuse. Each tension may provide a lens through which the case studies in this paper can be assessed. The four dimensions include:

Governance and development approach

The first dimension looks at the processes behind cultural regeneration projects. The governance and development approach is the fundamental enabler and shaper for how the regenerated site unfolds with its consecutive impacts. The creative city concept highlights how urban cultural policies are often driven by top-down strategies, spearheaded by institutions ranging from private sector real estate developers to governments and development authorities. For Florida (2002), it was the act of providing the cultural infrastructure to attract the creative class of artists and designers that enhance the economic competitiveness of a city. As a result, the competition between cities for resources and investments was predicated on which city provided more cultural hubs that can maximize economic development.

The pushback on creative city development was partially rooted in anti-neoliberal political thought and anti-place-branding strategies. According to Peck (2005), such “fast urban policies” frequently supported real estate development interests coupled with middle-class consumption, contributing to a larger economic inequality. Instead, a post-creative perspective would emphasize bottom-up cultural production and community participation, suggesting that true creativity lies within the emergence of local ecosystems rather than top-down policies.

Within this criterion, governance becomes an essential factor in addressing the research question. Projects in the MENA region are frequently cited as state-initiated, sector driven or entrepreneurial, embedded within broader neoliberal national strategies. For example, the Doha Msheireb Downtown is cited as a robust top-down planning project, programming cultural activities with international partners and uses culture as a tool for urban transformation as a means for economic diversification (AlSuwaidi et. al, 2026).

Cultural production versus cultural consumption

The second dimension emerges as a reaction to the creative city paradigm's inclination to invest in galleries, cultural districts and creative hubs that attract creative professionals and visitors. Critics however argue that the emphasis in the creative city is on the culture of consumerism, constructed through elite consumption, prioritized ahead of artistic production. As a result, these spaces have become programmed and oriented toward tourism, leisure and high-end artistic consumption (Miles, 2013). In the context of former industrial buildings, their spatial flexibility makes them viable to be repurposed within this model, as hotspots for commercialized environments as opposed to spaces that organically produce art by unplanned occupation. By re-using derelict industrial buildings primarily as spaces for cultural consumption, the nature of the relationship between consumption and the city is fortified, contributing to a broader process of neoliberal commodification in post-industrial cities (Miles, 2020).

The extent to which a regeneration project supports local artistic production over cultural and lifestyle consumption provides insight into how post-creative a case is. This is particularly relevant in the MENA region, where cultural hubs are part of larger tourism and urban branding strategies.

Inclusion

Parallel to the global economic stagnation of the 1960s were the urban uprisings against injustice in the West. The “Right to the City”, coined by Henri Lefebvre (1968), was a pioneering concept that pushed for the rights of all groups to participate in the creation of the city. David Harvey (1973, 2008) built on this concept with social justice and the city, focusing more on how space itself impacts social conditions, reinforces inequalities, and when coupled with investment, can lead to a crisis of accumulation.

It is within a creative city where pockets of cultural investments are ubiquitous. Creative city agendas however contradict inclusive development, as Kotkin (2020) amply demonstrated. While creative cities would aim to regenerate abandoned buildings as assets to target the creative class, an inclusive city would aim to have all interests fairly represented, to eliminate obstacles for all people, including those who do not necessarily generate significant economic value in neoliberal terms (Fainstein, 2014; Alsayel, 2022).

Applying this criterion of inclusion in the MENA context involves asking who benefits from these places, and who is actively included and excluded from these developments? Looking at developments spatially is necessary as well. Evaluating whether places are physically and socially connected to surrounding neighborhoods or isolated cultural enclaves is pivotal in determining how much these places practice inclusion. In the context of the post-creative city, cultural spaces must reject being a tool that masks deeply flawed political facades of inclusivity (Miles, 2020).

Reuse

Many rapidly developing cities in the MENA region rely heavily on demolition-driven redevelopment, accounting for 6.2% of the global demolition market. Dubai's 2040 urban masterplan and Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision continue to involve extensive demolition of existing structures across development zones, some of which include industrial buildings (Emergen Research, 2025). This reflects a development model oriented toward new construction rather than reuse. In this dimension, this paper argues that the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage may indicate an alignment with post-creative thinking.

Since the creative city model typically aims for culture-led regeneration, producing cultural quarters and new creative districts, the paper argues that demolition fits this model, as it often occurs within the context of economic competitiveness and urban branding and image making. The establishment of new cultural districts and their gentrifying impact allows the authors to argue that post-creative city perspectives not only are context sensitive but inherently focus on local identity and signal a shift in development values. By preserving the authenticity and memory of old factories and warehouses, urban narratives are also preserved, acting as a resistance to speculative redevelopment. However, unlike the other dimensions, the authors are aware of the nuance presented in this dimension, because ironically, creative cities often reuse buildings too. However, the thin line lies in purpose and outcome. In creative cities, reuse is an instrument to attract the creative class and raise property values, whereas in post-creative cities, reuse prioritizes heritage first and foremost. Once again, the central question asks who benefits from the reuse and why.

Case studies

JAX District, Riyadh

As part of Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision, a cluster of late twentieth century industrial warehouses and storage facilities were repositioned as a cultural district, aiming to diversify the national economy through cultural hotspots, tourism and the creative sectors

(Truly Saudi, 2025). As the site gradually lost its original purposes due to industrial relocation, what emerged and stands today is a prominent example of adaptive reuse of industrial infrastructure in Riyadh.

The transformation of this district is a result of state-level planning and institutional programming, spearheaded by investments in cultural infrastructure and partnerships with cultural institutions. The result is a reorganization of these former warehouses into a network of common areas and exhibition venues. The district also provides rentable artist studios, galleries and hosts major international events such as the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale and Noor Riyadh. Available year round are padel courts and a café as well (ArchDaily, 2024; JAX District, n.d.). Although the district brands itself as a provider of cultural spaces and supporter of artistic activity, they are closely tied to cultural tourism and global art networks through partnerships and as a result of these events, demonstrating how this district is actually a curated cultural destination rather than an organically emerging creative ecosystem. Therefore, community-led governance and cultural production is restricted.

While visiting the JAX District in January 2026, one gets a strong impression of the preservation of the existing industrial architecture. Much of the architectural and structural integrity is preserved and highlighted, allowing the existing spatial typologies to shape the functions that occupy them. Although this can be interpreted as an attempt to prioritize industrial legacy and acknowledge its past, the developers use the reuse as a branding strategy, offering an alternative cultural district than other new-builds.

Overall, the JAX District is considered a successful neo-liberal and vibrant district, with visitors staying at cafes and young non-artisans using the other available facilities for sports and exercise. Given the district's location on the edges of the inner city of Riyadh, surrounding private-sector led developments of gated communities such as the Jawhara Residential Village less than 5 minutes away indicate the larger city strategies of retransforming the edges of cities. Given the governance structure, curated programming and flow of private investments, JAX District reflects a model more consistent with the creative city paradigm.



Figure 1. Aerial view of JAX.
(Laurian Ghinitoiu, via ArchDaily, 2024)



Figure 2. Adaptive Reuse of JAX Warehouse
(Taken by author, Yara Keyrouz, 2026)

Alserkal Avenue, Dubai

Another prominent industrial-turned-cultural district is Alserkal Avenue, located in Dubai's Al Quoz industrial district. Originally a manufacturing and logistics hub during the late twentieth century economic boom and industrial expansion in Dubai, the economic activity gradually shifted towards finance, tourism and the service sectors. As a result, many of the warehouses in Al Quoz decayed and were later seen as resources for development (Alsayer et al., 2022). During the 2000s, the Alserkal family - a UAE family-business dynasty with a 165-year legacy in real estate, finance and pearl diving - added this cluster of warehouses to its portfolio. Unlike many state-led cultural districts in the MENA region, the Alserkal Avenue was developed primarily through the private sector, transforming the warehouses not only into contemporary high-end art galleries with design studios, independent cinemas and performance spaces, but also plenty of cafes, restaurants and shops (Alserkal.online, n.d.). Despite this provision of cultural spaces, its programming is closely linked to cultural tourism and the global art market, hosting international exhibitions, art fairs and design festivals. As critics of the creative city paradigm note, such mirages of artistic showcasing are merely cultural consumption landscapes catering to high-end leisure and lifestyles (Miles, 2015). Although a publicly accessible district aiming to gather as many visitors and tourists as possible, the district is by no means a public space. The private governance structure not only centralizes decision-making, but the generated wealth is shared among shareholders and not the local artists with already limited participation.

Despite the preservation of the industrial structures, much like the JAX District, the transformation of the area has not only been a major branding strategy to attract consumers, but it has also contributed to the rising property values of single-family houses right across the Sheikh Zayed Road as well. As a result, Alserkal Avenue depicts how private-equity-led reuse can effectively create manufactured vibrant cultural districts from industrial infrastructure. However, the over-reliance on market-driven development and private governance is a direct reflection of entrepreneurial creative city models,

rather than a more participatory mechanism associated with post-creative principles. Given the fully private nature of this establishment, serious questions are also raised regarding the inclusion and exclusion onto the premises.



Figure 3. Alserkal Warehouse.
(Gulf Modern Contracting, n.d.)



Figure 4. Urban Market.
(Alserkal Avenue, via Jones, 2015)

Electricity Hangar Gallery, Amman

The Electricity Hangar Gallery in Amman is widely considered as a significant example of adaptive reuse in industrial infrastructure in Jordan. Located in Ras Al Ain, the hangar is a power plant and industrial heritage of modernity from the 1930s, symbolizing Amman’s transition into modernity through electrification of the country (Ali, 2021). As energy infrastructure was modernized further and relocated, the hangar slowly lost its usefulness.

The architecture firm “Turath” (meaning heritage in Arabic) was commissioned by the Greater Amman Municipality to transform this industrial heritage into a cultural event space for exhibitions and temporary installations. Contrasting with JAX District and Alserkal Avenue, the redevelopment of the hangar was an incremental process of partnerships with existing public cultural institutions, such as the Jordan Museum, which aimed to preserve the structure and activate it as a flexible cultural space. It is also located at the intersection between the modernized and wealthier West Amman, and the lower income East Amman, with the plot of land being classified and used fully as a public space, fully embedded within the urban fabric and surrounding neighborhoods. Despite its high level of inclusiveness, its programming remains largely organized by cultural institutions rather than community-led organizations. Although this limits deeper forms of participatory governance and decision making, recognizing the support it provides for local artists, designers and architects to experiment, innovate and exhibit is crucial. Amman Design Week (ADW), launched under Queen Rania’s patronage, provides a 9 day biennial showcasing local cultural production and innovation.

The reuse approach the architects took was one of minimal intervention, highlighting many of the building’s structural features and retains the physical memory of the city’s infrastructural history (Archnet, n.d.; Turath, n.d.). The adaptive reuse of the

structure was therefore a method that aimed to primarily preserve the industrial heritage, as opposed to a branding effort to attract visitors to private institutions. As a result, the Electricity Hangar Gallery does not diverge entirely from post-creative principles due to its emphasis on cultural production and its contextual sensitivities, even while still operating within public cultural governance frameworks.



Figure 5. Hangar before Repurposing.
(Dezzme, 2012)



Figure 6. Amman Design Week Exhibition.
(Turath, n.d.)

Les Anciens Abattoirs, Casablanca

Les Anciens Abattoirs (the old slaughterhouses) were built in 1912 during the French colonial period, and was Casablanca's main meat-processing facility for nearly a century (Casamémoire, 2009). Upon relocation in 2002, this large industrial complex in the Hay Mohammadi district was left abandoned, raising questions regarding the future of this once prominent industrial site (Strava, 2013). Unlike conventional redevelopment projects driven by top-down centralized private or public planning, the slaughterhouses were reactivated by civil society initiatives and cultural associations. The municipality allowed exhibitions, alternative underground music shows, concerts and festivals to emerge within the abandoned halls, giving the slaughterhouses the name of "fabrique culturelle" (cultural factory) (Casamémoire, 2009). The emergence of this new cultural factory, representing one of the most prominent examples of industrial heritage reuse in Morocco, as municipal authorities recognized the industrial heritage and its newly emerged cultural significance, yet the governance of the project remained unclear, as the buildings were publicly owned yet there was no long-term institutional framework to manage and maintain the structures.

Despite the artistic experimentation, underground art scenes and free performances bringing together different communities, the lack of a consistent and centralized governance structure and inconsistent funding threatened the sustainability of these cultural programs. Although the spatial proximity of the slaughterhouses with the surrounding working-class neighborhoods of Hay Mohammadi continued to attract diverse artists and maintained its cultural vibrancy, the city chose not to renew the contract with the public development company in 2015. Given the conflicts between the

city authorities and operators over control and financing, no major funds would allow for total comprehensive participative redevelopment, as domestic political circumstances changed and dropped funding entirely, resulting in the eviction of the artists. As a result, the slaughterhouse complex retained its significant identity and architectural heritage, but closed its gates again, despite its brief revival as one of the city’s most dynamic cultural venues (Riley & Terhune, 2019).



Figure 7. Old Slaughterhouse.
(Geneanet, n.d.)



Figure 8. Repurposed Slaughterhouse
(Cinéma-Maroc, via Strava, 2013.)

Conclusion

Dimension / Case Study	Governance	Production vs Consumption	Inclusion	Reuse	Alignment
JAX District, Riyadh	-State-led -Vision 2030 -Institutional planning	-Consumption driven -Varying facilities -Cultural tourism	-Curated participation -Global art networks	-Warehouse reuse -Cultural branding	Creative city
Alserkal Avenue, Dubai	-Private-led -Entrepreneurial -Market-driven	-High-end galleries -Festivals -Cultural tourism	-Creative professionals -Global art networks	-Warehouse reuse -Cultural branding	Creative city
Electricity Hangar, Amman	-Public cultural institution -Municipality owned	-Experimental production -Local innovation -Exhibitions	-Public access -Cultural corridor -Integrated in urban fabric	-Minimal intervention -Heritage driven	Hybrid / partial post-creative city
Les Abattoirs, Casablanca	-Civil society -Hybrid governance -Municipal involvement	-Alternative culture -Free events -Underground music scene	-Neighborhood integration -Local audiences -Diverse communities	-Minimal intervention -Reabandoned	Closer to post-creative city

Table 1. Overview of the case studies across the four dimensions (by authors)

The four case studies reveal a few tendencies and patterns that illustrate the degree to which a project aligns with creative and/or post-creative models. Firstly, although the adaptive reuse of underutilized industrial structures is an increasingly used strategy for cultural spaces across the region, some of the cases have closer connections to the creative city paradigm than others. The JAX District and Alserkal Avenue are the two obvious case studies that exemplify this, primarily due to their very centralized

vertical governance structure, often embedded within national or larger economic strategies aimed at economic diversification, tourism enhancement, and the strengthening of global cultural competitiveness. However, the emergence of such projects in Dubai or Riyadh does not necessarily need to be interpreted as failures to promote post-creative principles. In rapidly urbanizing Gulf cities, where large-scale cultural infrastructural development has historically been limited, state actors can play an important role in expanding opportunities for artistic production.

Cultural hubs like JAX District and Alserkal Avenue do provide studios for artists, designers and cultural institutions, especially in cities where such spatial infrastructure was not always very ubiquitous. Despite the abundance of criticism towards creative-city models, these projects nevertheless are attempts at contributing to the gradual development of cultural environments and creative industries. Although these projects function as curated or quasi-public spaces, occasionally dismissed as cultural “amusement parks”, their popularity suggests that there is a real demand for accessible cultural experiences and spaces of leisure and creativity. This also raises a broader question- if people actively enjoy engaging with these spaces, can they be dismissed as artificial? If there is a clear public demand for these kinds of spaces, cities should therefore respond by expanding genuinely public cultural environments, where civic participation and inclusive participatory methods can inform city shaping. Until then, the commodification of culture will remain as the paid price to these “public spaces”.

On the other hand, the electricity hangar in Amman and the Casablanca slaughterhouses interestingly display stronger affinities with post-creative principles. Not only do both projects emphasize and prioritize the preservation of the structures for the sake of cultural heritage, but these context-sensitive spaces act as platforms for local artists and designers to experiment and innovate with more agency. At least in the case of the electricity hangar, a more local/municipal form of governance suggests a viable pathway for post-industrial regeneration in the region, emphasizing and supporting the production of experimental art from local artists. Although limited forms of deeper participatory governance hinder further embodiment of post-creative principles, the project nevertheless is a good example of balancing conventional frameworks with spaces that prioritize authentic cultural production and true public space. The lack of a stable and clear governance framework is a major reason why the Casablanca slaughterhouses could not sustain its cultural production. Despite the slaughterhouses embodying post-creative principles through the early forms of grassroots initiatives and occupation of space, the analysis reveals that bottom-up cultural production alone cannot sustain industrial regeneration.

The findings additionally suggest that industrial adaptive reuse in the MENA region operates along a spectrum between creative and post-creative urban models, instead of fitting neatly in either framework. The tendency for cultural regeneration projects in the Gulf to align more with creative city strategies are a byproduct of city

economic competitiveness of course, as there tends to be a direct correlation between a city's economic output and the attraction of a creative class. On the other hand, relatively less economically competitive cities in the region such as Amman or Casablanca prioritize the preservation of heritage and production of art before the commodification of it. These hybrid models therefore offer promising directions for future regeneration of abandoned industrial sites. By combining institutional and municipal support funding with higher levels of civic participation, and considering social entrepreneurial frameworks as opposed to conventional entrepreneurial frameworks, these mixed funding structures may help bridge the gap between urban development and post-creative city paradigms.

While extensive literature covers creative and post-creative urbanism in the global North, this study aims to explore these phenomena in the MENA region. Further research is still required to study how such projects could evolve over time, particularly in relation to governance structures and shifts in regional economic policies. Developing a deeper understanding of these dynamics will be essential as cities across the region aim to transform their spatial assets into meaningful spaces. Equally important is the role of the art itself of course. In a post-creative model, art is the fundamental agent of social and political reflection or change. However, such practices across the MENA region might have repercussions. Rather than assuming a model of post-creativity from Western cities, what is "post-creative" might have different definitions across different environments. As a result, examining these paradigms in the MENA region may not only require a broader critical global perspective, but also challenge the assumption that post-creativity has a universally applicable definition.

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