

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Beit Najmeddine

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Reem Joudi Arab Council for the Social Sciences

Beit Najmeddine¹ is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Irbid, Jordan, that was founded in 2013. Their work focuses on three main goals: strengthening the feeling of national belonging and raising cultural awareness among youth in Jordan; promoting literary, artistic, cultural, and social events; and protecting Jordanian cultural and architectural heritage. Irbid is to the north of Amman, home to the country's second largest metropolitan population that is composed of nationals and Palestinian and Syrian refugees. In addition to its social heterogeneity, Irbid is known for its archaeological and historical sites, with a mix of traditional heritage centers and newer neighborhoods.²

Beit Najmeddine organizes workshops on fine arts techniques, music, theater, singing, and traditional craftsmanship for the general public and youth in particular. They hold art exhibitions and cultural evenings that showcase Irbid's heritage. In 2017, Beit Najmeddine held an interactive exhibition titled *Photographs from Irbid's History*,³ which highlighted the work of 1960s photographer Farid Kalanjian in documenting city residents over the years. The NGO hoped to show how memory and technological transformations intersect and diverge over time.

The story of Beit Najmeddine is intimately tied to the personal history of its founders. The gallery and art space was the home of Najmeddine Nasser. His three daughters describe him as a lover of the arts. In honor of their father's memory, Nasser's daughters opened up their childhood home to the public, curating paintings from artists in Irbid, Jordan, and the Arab world. The space is a labor of love that connects personal memories with the field of arts and humanities more broadly.

A 2021 interview with the founders on Jordanian news channel Youm Jadeed gives a brief glimpse into this history.⁴ Noha Nasser, the middle daughter, describes her fond memories in Beit Najmeddine, expressing her hope to

¹ See <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064582696536>.

² Hikmat H. Ali, Yamen N. Al-Betawi, and Hadeel S. Al-Qudah, "Effects of Urban Form on Social Sustainability—A Case Study of Irbid, Jordan," *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* 11, no. 2 (2019): 208, 209.

³ Ahmad Al-Khatib, "Beit Najmeddine Prepares the Launch of a Photo Exhibition (Photographs from Irbid's History)," *Al Rai*, March 12, 2017, <http://alrai.com/article/10381041>.

⁴ Farah Al Jabbour, "Beit Najmeddine for Arts & Culture," Youm Jadeed, March 6, 2021, video, 5:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2AevkHP8PI>.

share what she learned there with the public. Her father had encouraged Nemat Nasser, the youngest of the daughters, to take up painting. He had noticed her talent from a young age.

In the World Humanities Report survey, they note that their “close observation of youth habits and interests”⁵ encouraged them to broaden their activities. Over the years, Beit Najmeddine evolved from a gallery to a cultural center that features training sessions, workshops, and art nights. Their latest initiatives focused on domestic agriculture and traditional agricultural methods.

They note that one of their biggest challenges centers around contesting commonly held binary distinctions between traditional values and modern approaches to arts and culture. Their aim is to encourage innovative methods for artistic production that bypass narrow debates and encourage youth engagement. In addition to these challenges, they note geopolitical shifts in the region since 2011 that have required them to rethink their vision—notably, the increase in Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, and Sudanese refugees in Jordan. Beit Najmeddine has worked to host events that speak to the needs and concerns of the different communities that now call Jordan home. These changes inspired a 2017 project that trained young musicians from Syria and Jordan who performed songs from both countries’ diverse heritages.

In the survey, they note the importance of collaborating with regional and international organizations for “intellectual and cultural exchange, as well as learning from inspiring and new methods.”⁶ Notably, they have an ongoing collaboration with the Aswan Arts Festival and Children’s Theater, where they have worked on exhibitions such as *Aswan . . . through Jordanian Eyes*, which debuted in 2017 and included the artistic works of Nemat Nasser. The founders consider the work that Beit Najmeddine undertakes as supplementary to university education, although they prefer to work directly with students in nonacademic settings.

Beit Najmeddine’s focus on developing the arts scene in Irbid is part of broader cultural and urban transformations in Jordan. Looking at the context of Amman, Aseel Sawalha notes how the city’s art landscape has been transformed since 2006, with “a sudden increase in the number of art galleries, the circulation of art objects, and the organization of art-related activities.” According to Sawalha, the emerging art scene produced visible effects on Amman’s urban fabric: the physical landscape changed “as cultural workers renovated old Ammani homes

⁵ Nemat Nasser, Beit Najmeddine, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

⁶ Nasser, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

into new art venues,”⁷ which renewed interest in and appreciation of older neighborhoods. We can read Beit Najmeddine’s mission in the cultural landscape that Sawalha maps out, reflecting not only a preservation of personal histories and architectural heritage in Irbid but also as an expansion of the cultural movement beyond the confines of the Jordanian capital.

⁷ Aseel Sawalha, “Gender, Art, and the Reshaping of the Urban in Amman, Jordan,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Anthropology and the City*, ed. Setha Lowe (London: Routledge, 2018), 451.

Reem Joudi is a media researcher and writer based in Lebanon, currently working as a researcher and project coordinator at the Arab Council for the Social Sciences. She earned her MA in media studies from the American University of Beirut and her BSFS in international economics from Georgetown University. Her research interests lie at the intersection of visual culture, digital technologies, and affect theory, with a particular focus on Lebanon and the Southwest Asia and North Africa region.