

Mix, Move, Thrive: Mixed Land Use as Irbid's Path to Sustainable Urban Transformation

By Rawan Khattab

As Jordan's second-largest city, Irbid is at a critical crossroads in its urban development journey. The city faces mounting challenges driven by rapid population growth, internal migration, and a significant influx of refugees—factors that have exerted enormous pressure on its spatial form, infrastructure, and public services. These urban dynamics, however, present not only obstacles but a unique opportunity: to rethink how Irbid grows. At the heart of this transformation lies a powerful strategy—mixed land use.

Ground Realities: Listening to Communities

Some neighborhoods residents at Irbid have clearly articulated the need for more public facilities, community centers, green areas, and local markets. These aren't abstract urban ideals—they are daily necessities that mixed-use planning can directly address. Residents also emphasized priorities such as street lighting, improved drainage, and safer pedestrian routes—all of which are co-benefits of well-planned, human-scaled mixed-use zones.



Irbid's urban growth has followed a centralized and organic pattern, expanding outward along the existing street network. Mixed land use began as a standard in ancient through medieval cities, then set aside by car-oriented zoning during the Industrial and postwar eras, mixed land use reemerged in the 1960s and 1990s as a core strategy for creating sustainable, walkable neighborhoods. Mixed land use, as a sustainable urban development approach, is more than a zoning strategy; it is a pathway toward cities that are inclusive, efficient, resilient, and vibrant. It enables the integration of residential, commercial, recreational, and institutional functions within walkable neighborhoods, enhancing access, reducing emissions, and promoting economic opportunity. In Irbid, the adoption of mixed land use is essential. Insights from Irbid's spatial profile under the UN-Habitat's Urban Planning and Infrastructure Management for Cities (UPIMC) Programme reveal a city grappling with urban congestion, inadequate infrastructure, poor connectivity, and a monocentric structure heavily reliant on the city center.

Nearly 88% of Irbid’s planned urban areas are residential, leaving green spaces, commercial services, and public facilities significantly underrepresented. This imbalance has deepened visual and air pollution, congested transport networks, and disconnected communities. Rather than addressing these urban issues in isolation, mixed land use offers a holistic planning response. It reframes congestion, infrastructure gaps, and environmental degradation as symptoms of mono-functional, reactive urban design. This mixed-use strategy in Irbid decentralizes services from the congested city center, enhances walkability through integrated commercial and recreational spaces, revitalizes underutilized areas fostering human-centered growth, and advances social equity by improving access to jobs and amenities for marginalized populations.

From Reactive to Proactive Planning

Irbid’s current reactive planning model limits its ability to address growing challenges. Shifting to proactive, mixed-use planning can transform the city by creating compact, connected neighborhoods that enhance access to housing, services, and public spaces. This approach supports SDG 11 by fostering inclusive, safe, and resilient urban communities. It also drives SDG 9 through the integration of smart, sustainable infrastructure that encourages innovation and local economic growth. Importantly, mixed-use development strengthens SDG 13 by embedding climate resilience—reducing carbon footprints and helping Irbid adapt to climate risks with green spaces and efficient resource systems. Together, these goals create a practical framework that embeds sustainability and resilience at the core of Irbid’s urban development, enabling the city to better withstand environmental, social, and economic challenges while enhancing the urban quality of life for all its residents.



SDG Alignment: Most relevant SDG’s to mixed-land use

Conclusion: From Fragmentation to Integration

Mixed land use offers a transformational shift—from fragmented, vehicle-dependent sprawl to integrated, inclusive, and sustainable urbanism. It is not simply about mixing buildings; it is about connecting people, reducing inequality, and future-proofing Irbid's growth. To move from challenge to opportunity, Irbid must embrace this model as a core planning philosophy. By embedding mixed land use into municipal policy, engaging communities in shaping their neighborhoods, and aligning with the SDGs, Irbid can transition from reactive urban growth to a resilient, equitable, and thriving city.

To drive this shift, it is recommended that the municipality establish a cross-sectoral task force to integrate mixed-use principles into planning frameworks, initiate pilot projects in strategic districts, and foster public-private partnerships to support implementation. Strengthening local capacities and ensuring community participation at every stage will be essential to success.

The future of Irbid lies in how it mixes. Mix, move, thrive—this is the urban agenda Irbid should embed at the core of its future urban development strategy.

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