

The First Top-Down Palestinian City

By Malkit Shoshan

What seems like the most improbable is proving possible deep inside the West Bank: a new Palestinian city is emerging. Unlike the vertically-extended refugee camps in Jordan, and the haphazard development in Gaza, major money is flowing into the West Bank to produce a high-tech city both by and for Palestinians. Malkit Shoshan gives us a snapshot of Rawabi, the town that promises to change the tide of development in the West Bank. But given the enduring conflict and violence in this region, a lingering feeling of doubt cannot be avoided. Is Rawabi too good to be true?

Rawabi, or the hills^{->1} in English: it is the first planned Palestinian city and is now under construction.

The idea of Rawabi was conceived at the Palestine Investment Conference, which took place in Bethlehem in 2008. Since then, Bashar Masri^{->2}, a Palestinian business man and the chairman of Massar International, is pursuing its realization. He managed to engage a Qatari billionaire and the owner of Qatari Diar Real Estate Company to invest about 850 millions dollars^{->3} in the production of Rawabi.

Rawabi's protagonists present an outstanding awareness of the political, cultural, spatial, social, and certainly financial context. They don't look back. They move forward at a great speed, maximizing local and global potential to boost the national uprise of Palestine.

The description of the city plans illustrates a strong partnership between business entrepreneurship and knowledge institutes.^{->4} But its much more than that. The city embodies a coalition of powerful actors^{->5} on all levels, from the political arena^{->6}, to the financial one, from the local context to the global professional.

This coalition is now aiming to create the biggest achievement Palestine has had in modern history: a great planned city.

The master plan for Rawabi is meticulous, ambitious, and visionary.^{->7} It encompasses and contextualizes Palestine's national aspirations in the production of a city. It is a city of the twenty-first century, as it takes into account not just the physical context, but it attempts to tap into the potential of what the local environment and the world could offer to Palestine, and the other way around. The city, like a business model, emerged from comprehensive marketing research; framing potential and opportunities in the most attractive and optimistic manner; seducing the world to believe.^{->8}

For the first time in Palestinian history, the water and electricity grid are buried underground.^{->9} The movement in the city takes into account typologies, which are not familiar to the contemporary Palestinian cities, or to an ordinary Palestinian, such as underground parking spaces, and open public spaces. The plan mentions it will not tolerate any form of visible barrier, like walls and fences.^{->10} The city is placed up on a hill and not in the valley. It doesn't practice agriculture and it surrounds itself with pines and IT. Rawabi doesn't look like an exclusively Palestinian dream; it has potential to attract ordinary (middle-class) Israelis as well.^{->11}

Rawabi^{->12} is beyond the twentieth century.^{->13} It overcomes the failures of the twentieth century city. It goes green and is oriented strongly towards research and development. It offers solutions for waste management, excavation, and water. It offers infrastructure for recycling the leftovers from construction sites, stones, and steel.

It offers infrastructure for businesses such that they can beat physical barriers and enclosure. It goes online. It offers all its inhabitants fiber-to-port connectivity.

It gives space for all the possible desires that a past city could offer, and more.

Rawabi surfs high not just in the landscape, but also in its infrastructure and in the business deals that are currently coming together with companies like Intel, Cisco, and Microsoft to develop local talents and participate in the making of Rawabi.

With all the important promoters on board^{->14}, Rawabi brings together a whole lot of optimism^{->15} toward a peaceful future.

- 1 There are a variety of Israeli typologies of settlements that are placed on hills and aim to guard the landscape; especially in mountain areas like the northern part of Israel and the West Bank. These typologies were conceived by Ariel Sharon, who had a strategic military background. When he left the army and started working for the government he implemented many military strategies on civic space. Since then it is well known that Israelis live on hilltops and Palestinians live in the valley. This is not the case in Rawabi.
- 2 “As a child he threw stones on the occupation and now he uses them to build cities.” from VPRO documentary ‘Rawabi: The Promised Palestinian City’.
- 3 One of the systems imported by Bashar and Mohammed bin Ali Al Hedfa (the Qatari billionaire) is an American (bubble) Fannie Mae-style mortgage that will turn the rising Palestinian middle-class into homeowners. An amount of 500 million dollars is allocated for this purpose in a form of home mortgage.
- 4 The whole project relates to the Palestinian Authority more as a knowledge institute, a partner to sort out the bureaucracy and supply some survey material.
- 5 Rumors are saying also Israeli officers visit the city to eat breakfast with its developers. The visits are frequent and include officers from the Israeli Civil Administration accompanied by army units and border guards and Palestinian villagers speak about soldiers in the Attara roadblock, allowing everyone related to the Rawabi project to pass through while barring the flow of regular Palestinians.
- 6 Some say Rawabi is the tangible materialization of the American mission civilisatrice in the West Bank.
- 7 It looks as if the Zionist project, which has built thousands of settlements and tens of new towns in the past half century, has been internalized by Bashar, and brought into the twenty-first century in Rawabi.
- 8 In Bili’in, a small village in the West Bank, located just next to the Separation Wall, a new resistance strategy was developed. Young boys and girls are reading poetry to soldiers and playing the violin at the checkpoint. They state that they will fight the occupation with culture.
- 9 (On land and water) The Rawabi development site was private land purchased by developers from the Bayti Real Estate Investment Company. The remainder, however, was sequestered by presidential decree. On November 15th 2009, Abbas signed the decree, taking approximately 1,537,000 square meters of land from the neighboring village of Ajjul, 122 dunum from Attara and 118 dunum from Abwin. Over the course of two years, the developers bought private property from 2,000 families living in Canada, Iraq, Spain, Kuwait, Britain, Portugal, and Italy. The source of the city’s water supply is not yet clear. One possibility is hooking up to *Mekorot*, the Israeli water utility, via Ateret.
- 10 Israel went to war against the old camps and towns that were immune to infiltration during the intifada. It sought to destroy spaces of resistance in Palestinian towns. It even rebuilt Jenin in an exposed and permeable manner, financed by the United Arab Emirates.
The architecture of Rawabi keeps the city completely exposed. The exposed nature of Rawabi is manifold: Broad streets, buildings aligned according to a strict plan, and a service center looking more like a control tower above the city. On the way to the largest investment project in Palestine and inside the city itself, countless cameras monitor everything in sight. Nobody knows exactly who sits behind the monitors and sees all that is displayed. The real estate firm, Bayti, will have an administrative and organizational function and will preserve the architectural style of the city and its neighborhoods. The exact scope of the private company’s authority is unknown. This will allow it to complete its spatial architecture with a social architecture consistent with neoliberalism, the socio-economic framework of General Dayton’s security plan.
- 11 See: social hedonism (At: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?215448>).
- 12 It is amazing to realize that in this century-old messy territorial conflict an urban product can emerge and hold within it an unexpected innovation: peace. It might be wishful thinking, but it is definitely a mind-blowing idea that should be explored. Can cities – more than peace negotiations, land trades, and prisoners; more than a comprehensive long treaty and complex legislation system – when planned well, like Rawabi, introduce to us the notion of territorial seamlessness and maybe even peace?
- 13 The past century was devastating to the Palestinian city typology. More than five hundred Palestinian villages and cities were destroyed. Their inhabitants were squeezed into the villages that were left, leaving them crowded and not organized. Some ended up in refugee camps and others enclosed in occupied enclaves under a military regime. Rawabi aims to bridge the century of catastrophes toward a prosperous future for 40,000 Palestinians.
- 14 See: George Mitchell, Madeline Albright, George Soros, Fannie Mae; see also: ‘The Corporate American Dream At Its Height: The History of Capitalism (At: <http://www.csrwire.com/blog/posts/517-the-corporate-american-dream-at-its-height-the-history-of-capitalism>).
- 15 “Contractors and financiers attached to the project want us to take out 30-year mortgages for the privilege of living in Rawabi. By all means, export the entire credit market system to Palestine. I’d be overjoyed to buy Rawabi mortgage-backed-securities – with an inflated risk-premium, of course. But tell me, what was the price of access? How did these men manage to curry favor with the Americans and Israelis to build this project? Who do they know; who knows whom? How is it that most Palestinians can barely secure permits to build on their own land, but the Jewish National Fund is donating trees to Rawabi? I’ll channel Hannah Arendt and say that the banality of profit-making knows no evil.” – Ahmed Moor, a Gaza born Palestinian-American freelance journalist living in Beirut.

More information on Rawabi can be found at www.tegenlicht.vpro.nl/dossiers/stad

