

CASE STUDY

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# The neoliberal real estate model and the fantasy of hyperreality: the case of Rawabi City, Palestine

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## Abstract

The establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) after the 1993 Oslo Accords opened doors for private local, and international, investments, mainly in real estate sector. This paper focuses on the case study of the city of Rawabi (hereafter, Rawabi), in the Ramallah and Al-Bireh governorate (R-AG). In such context, the urban boom has been influenced by the neoliberal market and new global realities, cultural fascinations, and technological advances. As argued by Jean Baudrillard, the engagement of the technology in the architecture industry not only enabled the emergence of new architectural typologies and meanings to market alternative models of “dream designs” but also has affected the boundaries between the real and the imagined. Following a qualitative ethnographic socio-spatial methodological approach, this study examines the city model of Rawabi, in reference to neoliberal policies, the investors’ vision, emerging architectural typology, promoted readymade lifestyle, and residents’ everyday lived reality. The study involves theories of selected literature on neoliberal policies and profit-driven urban development, hyperreality, and architectural industry to discuss the evolution of the commodified urban landscape in the Occupied Palestine and its impacts on the quality of living, accessibility and social inclusion.

**Keywords** Neoliberalism, Profit-driven urban development, Hyperreality, Architectural industry, Rawabi, Ramallah and Al-Bireh Governorate, Palestine

## Introduction

The recent urban boom in Palestine is perceived as the outcome of the adopted neoliberal market policies during the former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad’s government (2007–2013). In this context, this study investigates the emerging profit-driven urban development in the aftermath of post-Oslo major neoliberal urban restructuring and transformation. It considers the

impact of neoliberal real estate model on the commodification of urban space and the architectural typologies. It also investigates the engagement of technology in simulating reality and producing marketed dream designs and lifestyle packages in which what is real and what is fiction are seamlessly blended, referring to the concept of hyperreality or “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard 1994, P.1). Focusing on the governorate of Ramallah and Al-Bireh (R-AG), being the base for the Palestinian Authority (PA), the research offers analytical perspective on the case study of Rawabi city (hereafter, Rawabi).

According to Taraki, the establishment of the PA after the Oslo Accords in 1993 marks another watershed in the transformation of Ramallah/Al-Bireh<sup>1</sup>—the R-AG central

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<sup>1</sup> Ramallah and Al-Bireh are connected, and there is no clear boundary between the two cities. Therefore, this paper refers to them as Ramallah/Al-Bireh (R-AG).



**Fig. 1** Rawabi City under construction (Source: Researchers 2013)

city- from small villages to a central city (Taraki 2008). The PA encouraged strategies of the commodification of the urban space. “The arrival of the PA had important consequences for the physical appearance of the city, as property laws and zoning regulations were changed to allow for the ownership of individual units in apartment buildings and the construction of multi-story buildings” (Taraki 2008: 15). Apparently, Ramallah/Al-Bireh “shares certain critical features with these much larger Arab metropolises, most notably the increasing social heterogeneity of the population; the growing social disparities and their normalization; and the globalized, modernist urban ethos articulated by a new middle class” (Taraki 2008: 7). Consequently, Ramallah/Al-Bireh’s seclusion from its local context was emphasized and this “five stars prison” as described by Taraki, has become a gilded-neoliberal ghetto (Taraki 2008).

Notably, Ramallah/Al-Bireh represents a case of new readymade lifestyles. As such new profit-driven urban developments in the R-AG, mainly Rawabi is marketing a readymade lifestyle package as shown in (Figs. 1, 2). Rawabi does not only reflect luxury architectural design but also display major political and ideological practices of neoliberal approach. These practices are manifested through spatially engineered realities that operationalize technology to market the produced lifestyle package as the new reality with no connection to any previous origin, thus creating “hyperreality” (Baudrillard 1994). Based on the marketed digital images, Rawabi city development is rendered a combination of the reality and the imagined that evocatively, and artificially, altered the mountainous landscape, as shown in (Fig. 1). The visual presentation of Rawabi evoked a sense of luxurious, glamorous new neighborhoods that market the “dream lifestyle” within the dreamscape, as displayed on many large billboards in Ramallah/Al-Bireh and the nearby regional streets in R-AG (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2** Billboard of Rawabi City displayed along Birzeit-Ramallah Street (translation of advertisement: the most beautiful flat in the most beautiful neighborhood) (Source: Researchers 2015)

Taraki (2008) argues that the emerging neoliberal transformations could lead to social inequality, exclusion, and social disparities, since the new urban development represents profit-driven approach with less, or no, consideration to the public and local needs. According to Camerian (2021: 521), profit-driven based urban redevelopment won’t usually prioritize the needs of local residents in any projects. Many scholars emphasized “the limits of profit based forms of urbanism in the contemporary geoeconomic context, mainly by the critics of neoliberal models of urban development (Harvey 1989; Smith 1996; Brenner and Theodore 2003; Keil 2009; Brenner et al. 2009: 177).

This study explores the role of neoliberal forces in shaping and producing profit-driven urban models, where “marketed” architecture plays a significant role in selling lifestyle package, as the one represented in Rawabi. Apparently, architectural profession has been shaped by the PA strategies of urban commodification, in which the architectural industry becomes the focus to achieve more profit rather than the reality of local citizens’ needs. The study considers such conceptualization and its impacts on the residents’ everyday lived reality.

Rawabi, the singled out case study (Fig. 3), is a city located 9.0 km north of Ramallah/Al-Bireh and 3.5 km north of Birzeit. Its municipal boundaries encompass 6,300,000 m<sup>2</sup> of land on the hills between the villages of Ajjul, Attara, and Abwayn, approximately 1.0 km from the Israeli settlement of Ateret. The project was announced in the Palestine Investment Conference that was held in Bethlehem in 2008. The project developer is Bayti Real Estate Investment Company, owned by Mas-sar international and Qatari Diar, and initially planned by the North American based planning firm Aecom. As



**Fig. 3** Street view of Rawabi (Source: Birzeit University AE undergraduate students 2019)

published on the Rawabi official website, it was initially supposed to house 25,000 residents. It also features additional residential and commercial units reserved for subsequent construction phases, to ultimately accommodate more than 40,000 inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> Currently, only 6 neighborhoods out of 22 were built. In 2021, the number of residents counted 767 inhabitants, according to the mid-year projected population by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS 2021).

According to the mayor of Atara municipality, the land for Rawabi was purchased from the villagers of Atara, Abwain, and Ajoul for JD 1000–3000 per donum,<sup>3</sup> (Mayor of Atara Municipality 2019). The remaining land was purchased by applying the Palestinian acquisition law that allows the State to use up to 33% of private land for public use. According to Rabie, “Rawabi is considered the manifestation, visible indication, and precedent for a whole suite of changes to the legal, economic, and built environments in the West Bank” (Rabie 2021: 39). He further stated, “Rawabi is a private, for-profit development project conducted under the rubric of national politics” (Rabie 2021: 39). Lawrence (2012), analyzes Shuruq Harb<sup>4</sup> description of Rawabi as “a city modeled after a housing complex, like a settlement; thus, it’s a really weird concept.” According to Harb, “Rawabi clearly represents neoliberal policies [...] in a way it’s like a privatized city” (Lawrence 2012). The PA adopted neoliberal doctrine is misleading due to masking the produced readymade hyper-consumerist lifestyle, and its impacts

on the Palestinian built environment, as the future development that many Palestinians are dreaming of, while the reality is that the majority cannot afford the high cost of living in such produced model. This connection between the developers’ vision and agenda and the State national politics is unique in the context of Palestine and is worth exploring.

### Real estate and the real city

As aforementioned, this study examines the neoliberal real estate model and profit-driven spaces in the Palestinian context, focusing on Rawabi as a case study. The literature review includes concepts on neoliberal practices and the role of architecture in marketing new readymade lifestyle. The former is engaged to discuss impacts on urban development how it relates to the unique situation within the Palestinian State’s building project, and the latter is to investigate the role of architectural industry in producing and promoting new city model and its impacts on the residents’ everyday lived reality. Theories of neoliberalism and profit-driven urban development (Larner 2003; Harvey 2005; Daher 2011), concepts of hyperreality and disneyfication (Baudrillard 1994; Zukin 1998), and the architectural industry (Sklair 2017) are applied to frame a new perception of the human-made, reproduced city of Rawabi, where the phenomenon of *the dwarf city* of Rawabi swings between the real and unreal.

### Neoliberalism and Profit-driven urban development

As argued by Harvey (2005), neoliberal economic theory and its political implementation emerged out of a critique of and backlash against the welfare state in the late 1970s. He stated, “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free market, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.” (Harvey 2005: 2).

According to Haddad, the driving notions of neoliberalism correlate significantly with Palestine’s case (Haddad 2012). He referred to Weizman’s notion of the Occupied Palestine (OP), which has become a “laboratory of technologies of control” where advanced military technologies along with technologies of governance, social engineering, and embedded institutionalization are tested and advanced by the highest-level practitioners of the military agenda. In this respect, “[t]he architecture of [the] Israeli occupation can thus be seen as an acceleration of other global political processes, as a worst-case scenario of capitalist globalization and its spatial fall-out” (Weizman 2007: 9–10). Accordingly, neoliberal urban

<sup>2</sup> Rawabi official website.

<sup>3</sup> Donum equals 1000 sqm.

<sup>4</sup> Palestinian visual artist and writer.



development in the Palestinian context is perceived as a singular and unique case due to the misleading prioritization of real estate development vs. state building.

In 2007, under the pretext of liberation and the “State” building project, Salam Fayyad’s government established a new neoliberal doctrine and opened the Palestinian market for international investment. According to Haddad, the Fayyad government’s Reform and Development Plan 2008–2010 (PRDP) and subsequent National Development Plan 2011–2013 became key policy tools through which a neoliberal approach to development was activated throughout the OP. The PRDP describes the Palestinian State as “creat[ing] an enabling environment for a free and open market economy,” (Haddad 2012: 16). Thus, the state should implement an institutional and regulatory framework to control the neoliberal free market; however, the irony here is that a state is not ultimately possible as control over natural resources, borders, and land is not applicable. Therefore, the illusion of a State of Statelessness is contradicting with the emerging politics of economic practices in the Palestinian market.

The neoliberal market’s effects on urban development in the Palestinian context must be understood as inseparable from the development in the larger global context. According to Daher, the literature on neoliberal urban development emphasizes two unfolding directions: neo-Marxist literature, wherein neoliberalism is a hegemonic class project generally resulting in the spatial re-ordering of a city and areas of poverty and inequality (Daher 2011; Harvey 2005), and poststructuralist literature, wherein neoliberalism is understood as a set of practices that shape or produce subjects, spaces, and new forms of knowledge (Larner 2003). The incorporation of these two approaches is important to understand the neoliberal profit-driven urban development in Palestine. Focusing on the hegemony of neoliberalism, documenting its impacts on the city and the urban entrepreneurial investment form along with considering neoliberalism as a discourse through understanding its practices and processes to create new reality are both vital to having an in-depth view. This leads to exploring the macro-level of the state’s political and economic regulations and their linkage to the city governance, vision, and representation, including how the micro-contexts of everyday routines modulate them.

### ***The hyperreal: real estate and consumerism***

Neoliberalism does not coercively impose itself; conversely, individuals are “subjectified” by neoliberalism, and architecture becomes a key instructor (Spencer 2016). The connection between neoliberal doctrine and the complexities of the reproduced profit-driven city model of Rawabi is well captured in Baudrillard’s

concepts of simulacra and the hyperreal theoretical framework to interpret the simulated lifestyle created by the urban entrepreneur (Baudrillard 1994). Also, Zukin (1998) explained that the attention to urban lifestyles and its connection to cultural capital and consumption, led to rise in strategies of visual consumption of urban space. He added that this attentiveness created new visible consumption spaces such as restaurants, coffee bars, boutiques, art galleries, and generated new complex retail strategies which combine advertising, real estate development, sales and entertainment (Zukin 1998: 825).

Baudrillard connected the loss of reality and emergence of the hyperreal to the point where neoliberalism takes root, as McLaverty-Robinson<sup>5</sup> explained (Baudrillard 1994; McLaverty-Robinson 2012). Unfortunately, simulated images have become the new norm through consumerist fantasies of, for example, natural reserves rather than nature, reality TV than reality, new real estate experiences than real city. As McLaverty-Robinson stated, “for Baudrillard, global cities have already become black holes, eating up past social phenomena and meanings. They are entirely functional zones, arranged around sites such as hypermarkets (massive supermarkets), shopping centers and transport networks.”<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard distinguished between the large cities that witnessed such birth in the (1850–1950), and the new cities satellitized by shopping centers and serviced by a programmed traffic network, describing that as “a new morphogenesis has appeared, which comes from the cybernetic type [...] and whose form is nuclear and satellitic. The hypermarket as nucleus” (Baudrillard 1994: 77).

Contemporary culture is led and powered by digital imaging technology, transforming how the world is visualized, observed, and represented. Baudrillard suggests that Disneyland is a perfect model of this phenomenon, where all simulacra orders interlock. For him, the simulated images are “no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (Baudrillard 1994: 12–13). The atmosphere of this virtual world offers people a great life, but when they step outside Disneyland to real air, sun, stars, and trees, they lose this aliveness instantly.

Likewise, in a context of emerging State in general, Rawabi can be viewed through this lens of Disneyfied experience. The inner part of the city differs from its surroundings; upon entering the city, individuals can feel the superficially produced atmosphere, separated from its contextual surroundings, local rural landscape, and

<sup>5</sup> <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-baudrillard-9/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-baudrillard-9/>.

colonial infrastructure. The images that real estate investors promote as an ideal model of lifestyle or dreamscape widely differ from the conditions of the real world and are mere simulations of lifestyle. Accordingly, the investigation of this reproduced, promoted ideal model based on what is being offered; mainly, its claims regarding quality of life, social infrastructure, social inclusion, and job provisions clarifies the actual discrepancies of the lived reality.

### ***The real: architectural industry and beneficiaries***

This section explores the real by focusing on the architectural industry and the users lived reality. Although few projects in Palestine were implemented by international developers, the produced architecture doesn't reflect human needs or deal with the user as its center of attention. The homes we live in were not designed to improve our lives; they were designed to be property assets that we happened to end up living in. Transforming the role of the architect from designer of inhabitable space to producer of financial assets.

The commodification of urban space and the profit-driven urban development combined by new technologies and marketed hyperrealities turned architecture from a profession to an industry. Ferrando (2016: 127) claims that the commodification of architecture, "has been prompted by at least three recent and interrelated factors: the financialisation of the real estate market, the deregulation of urban planning and the explosion of digital communication." Sklair (2017: 5) explains that "shopping malls, corporate headquarters, museums, performance spaces, sports stadia, transportation hubs, and gleaming megatowers become famous to everyone through the mass media. These buildings convey the message that the true life is in consumerism, the fuel that drives the global capitalist machine and provides profits for those who own and control the transnational corporations."

Obviously, Rawabi as a transnational profit-driven project—owned by Palestinian and Qatari developers and initially planned by international firm Aecom— with its architectural styling of uniform, almost garish high rises resembles satellite cities and townships in the global south and mainly the gulf (Fig. 3) (Roy 2016: 380). It reflects a unique case in which the public and democratic control on its planning and design is reduced in favor of the international developers (Camerin 2021; Ponzini 2020).

## **Theoretical framework and methodology**

### ***Theoretical framework***

This study provides a conceptual framework grounded in neoliberal profit-driven urban development theories

(Harvey 2005; Brenner et al. 2009; Camerin 2021) and the hyperreality and disneyfication of space represented by the architectural industry, (Baudrillard 1994; Zukin 1998; Sklair 2017). Accordingly, it combines the macro city with the micro individual to establish a relationship between produced and lived space. The macro-level analysis explores the developers' vision and city governance, mainly the implications of neoliberal practices in the producing of profit-driven city model, city spatial characteristics, city's reproduced image, and the role of architectural industry in promoting readymade lifestyle. The micro level explores individual's everyday reality between what is marketed and what is lived.

### ***Methodology***

By applying a qualitative, ethnographic case study approach, this study investigates the socio-spatial production of Rawabi. As part of graduation project seminar in 2019/2020 coursework, at the Department of Architectural Engineering at Birzeit University, a fieldwork was conducted to collect data about Rawabi City and residents. Tools of structured survey, interviews, field observations, and spatial mapping were applied to collect data on residents' reflections on their everyday lived reality in Rawabi. Additionally, this study considered disseminated second-source archived media and newspapers' advertising data (e.g., brochures, videos, other media material) on Rawabi. The collected data were analyzed based on the adopted conceptual framework to reveal the nature of the real estate of the project. The inclusion of the open-source data provides insights into the real estate vision, architectural identity, representations, and associated lifestyle as marketed in flashy, cliché slogans to attract targeted clientele. It also enables the investigation of the lived reality of residents' everyday lives in the context of consumerist culture and its imposed urbanity. The following subsections provide details on the tools used to collect data on the real estate vision, physical space, and residents' experiences of the space.

***Internet and media research (open-source data)*** Marketing for Rawabi occupied most of the public realm space. In analyzing such content, internet and media sources were beneficial. Most material was published on Rawabi's official website. The huge, unique development project was marketed in local, regional, and international press sources that competed to report on the investment opportunities offered by the Rawabi project. The open-source data provide insights into the city's spatial layout, investment model, governance, image, and lifestyle marketing

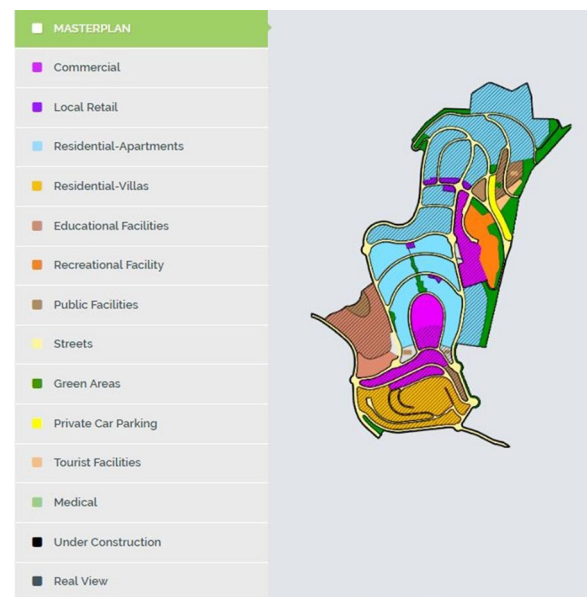
approach of dreamscape. Investigating role model images that the investors promote is essential in understanding how the conditions of model images and the real world differ, underlining that these images are merely simulations of a lifestyle.

**Interviews** To collect information on Rawabi residents' everyday lived reality and perceptions of their city and advertised residential units, open-ended interviews were administered to a sample of six Rawabi residents, which reflects a sample of testimonies that aimed to connect with the theoretical framework rather than quantifying the number of participants. Two of the interviews were interactive and conducted in the interviewees' apartments. The interviewee sample was diverse; participants were selected based on their lived experience in Rawabi, material status, sex, and age. In addition to basic questions obtaining demographic data, marital status, family size, education, and employment, the interviews included questions on the residents' reflections on Rawabi in regard to three main concepts:

- Hyperreality and marketed images, and the residents' motives to buy their "dream home" in Rawabi.
- Profit –driven urban development, the residents' evaluation of the city governance, the provided services, public spaces, and "dreamscape."
- Architectural industry, the residents' reflections on their city in regard to quality of living, accessibility and social inclusion.

The mayor and residents from the nearby villages were also interviewed to understand the process by which the developers had purchased the lands for the city project, and whether the residents had been provided any information on the development. The interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020.

**Observations** To investigate the residents' everyday experience in the public realm and residential neighborhoods. First, a general field survey in two main areas of Rawabi was conducted: residential neighborhoods—focusing on residential buildings, open spaces, and outdoor gardens, and the city center or Q Center (Figs. 4, 5). The observations were conducted on weekdays Sunday–Friday, at different times (e.g., morning, midday, evening), to record density, activities, and spatial behaviors. The data revealed residents' use of city spaces and their level of engagement within the site context in terms of residential buildings, streets, and outdoor gardens.



**Fig. 4** Master plan of Rawabi (Source: Rawabi official website)



**Fig. 5** An overlay of the master plan of Rawabi on a recent aerial photo (Source: Researchers based on the Rawabi official website and GeoMolg)

The fieldwork demonstrated that most residential units were unoccupied. Statistics on the occupancy rate were essential to this study. The two available sources for city population data are the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistic (PCBS) and Rawabi Municipality. According to the PCBS (2021) estimate, 767<sup>7</sup> persons are living in Rawabi in 2021; however, as per Rawabi Municipality's records, 4500 people currently reside in Rawabi. Despite the substantial difference between the two numbers, both are far from the developer estimated number of occupancy.

The applied tools facilitated data collection and provided a verification mechanism as well. The adopted conceptual framework connecting the hyperreal produced city to the everyday real lived city offers an analytical approach to compare the reality with relevant theories. Therefore, analyzing Rawabi's case highlights the intersectionality of the reproduced unreal city and real city based on the theoretical framework, under three main themes: Rawabi's vision and governance, the imagined and reproduced city and the residents lived reality.

#### **Rawabi: between the reproduced city and the real city** ***Vision and governance: entrepreneurship, accessibility and social inclusion***

Rawabi's main developer is Bayti Real Estate Investment Company; which was initially established by Massar international in 2007. To increase its capital, a partnership was established with Qatari Diar. Such coalition has enabled the launch of the construction of 5000 affordable housing units in the first Palestinian planned city of Rawabi in the Palestine Investment Conference in May 2008.<sup>8</sup> As published on its official website, Rawabi aims to establish "a new community for Palestinian families that will provide opportunities for affordable home ownership, employment, education, leisure, and an attractive environment in which to live, work, and grow" (Rawabi official website). According to the website, the city is expected to expand the local economy's linkages to the global economy and introduce new technologies to the Palestinian construction sector, encouraging international firms, particularly those in the high-tech, healthcare, and renewable energy sectors, to drive the bolstering current economic activities. By attracting investors and technology suppliers, Rawabi is expected to generate more than 5,000 permanent jobs, promote a good quality of life, and make a long-term,

sustainable contribution to national prosperity (Rawabi official website).

The claimed city vision focuses more on entrepreneurship and private investments than the social and communal aspects. The Rawabi project illustrates a new precedent for a paradigm of space production, with new subjects and experts involved in urban management. Rawabi also demonstrates outcomes regarding the privatization of spatial planning, creation of new types of public-private partnerships, and its inclusion of the international planning firm Aecom. Consequently, Rawabi represents a new profit-driven urban model that demonstrates the creation of a changing mode of governance through public-private partnership investment in cooperation with international investors and global architectural design firms.

According to Rawabi's official website, the city master plan was approved by the Palestinian Ministry of Local Governance in December 2009 and the construction of Rawabi started in January 2010.<sup>9</sup> The city's first Municipal Council was established in 2013 by a Palestinian Ministries Cabinet resolution, with 11 appointed council members. In 2015, Rawabi's Homeowners' Association (HOA) was formed. In 2017, a new Municipal Council was appointed, headed by Mr. Ibrahim Natour, and included 10 members: 5 Rawabi residents and members of Rawabi's HOA and 5 members representing various ministries of the PA. In 2019, Rawabi residents replaced PA Ministries' representatives in the Municipal Council (Rawabi official website). In 2021, the city held its first municipal elections, and city residents elected their representatives.

Analysis at the macro city level, mainly of the vision and governance in relation to the state political and economic regulations, shows how neoliberal doctrine is shaping the city as a subject, producing a new form of knowledge, and forming the urban spaces. The reproduced city model is a hyperreal, Disneyfied, profit-driven space that serves as an oasis for the privileged middle class, disconnected from the surrounding desolated rural landscape. As Taraki explained, it is a creation of a new enclave connected to international capital and investment and disconnected from its local context (Taraki 2008).

Rawabi comprises approximately 6000 housing units spread across 22 neighborhoods, with a city center offering a retail business district with hotels, cinemas, and a convention center. Rawabi also features educational and medical facilities, houses of worship, public green spaces, and recreation facilities, as shown in the master plan images in Figs. 4 and 5 (Rawabi official website). The city's recreational and entertainment area, colored in orange

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/statisticsIndicatorsTables.aspx?lang=en&table\\_id=701](https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/statisticsIndicatorsTables.aspx?lang=en&table_id=701).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.rawabi.ps/en/news/1523387444>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rawabi.ps/en/news/1523386475>.





**Fig. 6** Rawabi amphitheater (Source: Researcher 2015)

called WaDina (Our Valley), contains Rawabi's massive sports and recreation complex, including a Roman-style open-air amphitheater with the capacity of 15,000 seats (Figs. 4, 5, 6) (Rawabi official website). Notably, the hatched areas in Fig. 4 are not yet built. As mentioned, the only built-up area is the six neighborhoods, part of the city center, WaDina, private school, Qatar mosque, and the amphitheater.

This reproduced city model of Rawabi is nuclear and satellitic—as Baudrillard describes the new global cities (Baudrillard 1994). Rawabi is disconnected from its surrounding rural landscape and villages. It has a shopping center as its nucleus and is serviced by a programmed traffic network connecting it to Ramallah city. This traffic network could be blocked because of the political division of land into A, B, and C classifications<sup>10</sup> based on the Oslo Accords.

Additionally, most interviewed residents were not satisfied with the accessibility between the neighborhoods and the access to the Q Center which is, due to the long stairs, were not pedestrian friendly. The interview with AD clarified how he adapted to walking from his flat to the Q Center where he works by walking through buildings to use available elevators to reach the upper level of the street without passing through any public open space.

Thus, Rawabi is a dwarf city that is forming a neoliberal enclaved dreamscape disassociated from any reality. In this regard it is essential to differ between neoliberal profit-driven urban development in a liberal state and in occupied land, where state can't control land, infrastructure and economy.

### *The reproduced city: dreamscape and accessibility and social inclusion*

Rawabi's reproduced hyperreal image was examined to understand the investors' vision to incept in the public imagination. Data from Rawabi's official website, available plans, simulated images, and the media showed the developers' ambitions. Rawabi's developers aimed to connect with the area's history and roots, possibly as part of the marketing campaign to legitimize the newly produced city. This aim is recognizable in the replication of the Roman theater and the naming of the 22<sup>11</sup> neighborhoods with Canaanite<sup>12</sup> names, naming of the city business center the Q Center (Q stands for Qatar), and the building of an extravagant mosque, also named after Qatar. The visual representation of the project includes a mixture of historical, national, religious, and technological symbols (Figs. 6, 7), such as Arabic calligraphy, Islamic ornamentation, Roman architecture, photographs of Marilyn Monroe and Um Kulthum, and a glass dome.

The architectural style represents, in most cases, a poor, unsophisticated understanding of a mythical rigid Orient. However, underneath this Disney-like superficial layer, an oriental vision of the occident becomes evident in the architecture, wherein the occident is modern urbanization similar to the Israeli Colonies' style of building, such as in the Mode'in settlement.<sup>13</sup> As published in the Palestinian Press, Bashar Al Masri, the founder of Rawabi, announced that the Israeli architect Moshe Safadi, a consultant architect, designed the Mode'in settlement. He

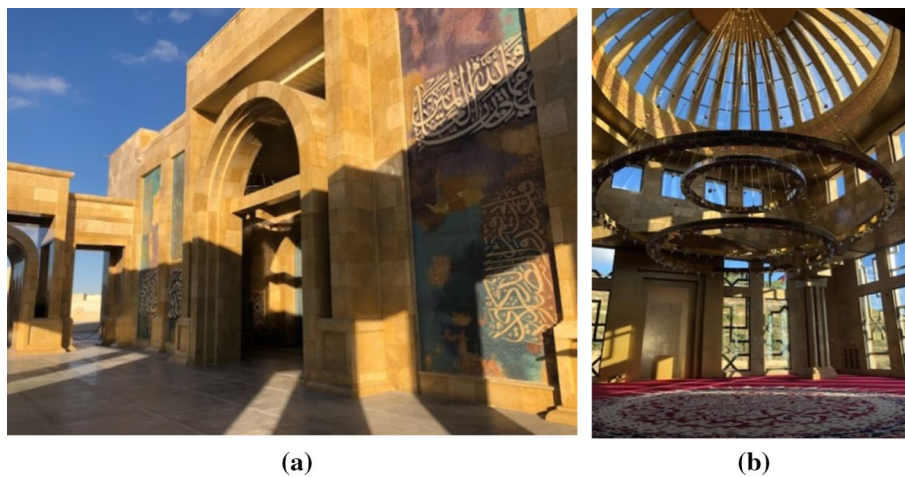
<sup>10</sup> Classification of Land in the West Bank according to the Oslo Accords. A: under Palestinian control, B: under joint control of Palestine and Israel, and C: under Israeli control.

<sup>11</sup> The city has 22 neighborhoods per the website.

<sup>12</sup> Canaan was, during the late 2nd millennium B.C., a region in the Ancient Near East that, as described in the Bible, roughly corresponds to the Levant, i.e., present-day Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, western Jordan, and southwestern Syria.

<sup>13</sup> Israeli settlement 30 km west of Jerusalem.





**Fig. 7** Mixture of cultural symbols in Qatar Mosque, Rawabi (Source: Researcher 2021)



**Fig. 8** Rawabi's skyline (Source: Researcher 2021)

accompanied Bashar Masri to a site visit in Mode'in as a reference case for the new city of Rawabi (Radio Bethlehem 2000). Nevertheless, Rawabi's city planning is perceived as a replica of the modern planning vision of the Israeli settlements (Jabri 2012). A comparison of Rawabi's architectural image and the image of Israeli residential architecture designed by Moshe Safadi in 1970 shows that both rely on modern architecture based on making connections between the traditional and modern colonial dogma. According to Jabri (2012), there are many similarities between Rawabi's planning and the principles of planning of the Israeli settlements developed by the Israeli Ministry of Housing in 1984.

City developers are branding the city as a fusion between the traditional and modern, as shown on Rawabi's Facebook page. For them, the traditional refers to using local masonry stones as the main construction material and the arches in the building facades (Jabri



**Fig. 9** A photo taken in the Rawabi visitors' center (Source: Birzeit University AE undergraduate students 2019)

2012). This architectural philosophy produces a façade disconnected from the internal space. The analogy between Rawabi's city complex, shown in Figs. 8 and 9, and nearby Palestinian villages confirms the contradiction of the new urban form in comparison with the local fabric in terms of form, size, scale, solid-void relations, hierarchy of space, interrelation, and harmony with nature and climate.

Moreover, the city plan shows a disconnect between the business center (Q Center) on the hilltop and the residential neighborhoods down the hill, such that the



**Fig. 10** Advertisement that depicts Rawabi's promise of an ideal view (translation of title: the best view from the hilltop) (Source: Rawabi's Facebook page, September, 2012). (<https://www.facebook.com/RawabiCity/photos/a.10151162143539581/10151162144454581/?type=3>)

business center is granted a hierarchal status (Figs. 4, 5). Rawabi's business center represents a glamorous, high-tech center of enterprise and consumption while forgoing communal public spaces. KG (male, 30's; personal communication, 2019), one of the residents of the first neighborhood, explained that residents do not use the Q Center and do not recognize it as their city center; instead, they meet and interact in front of the supermarket in their neighborhood.

Rawabi promises a distinctively luxurious lifestyle and a protected, safe environment, according to the marketing slogans (e.g., lofty views, open terraces), as shown in Figs. 10, 12, and 13. The developers thereby suggest that once clients become part of this exclusive community, they experience a utopian existence and become completely transformed individuals. Referring to Rawabi's official website, "working together through the homeowners association (HOAs), Rawabi residents model a cooperative community lifestyle that can be easily replicated in existing neighborhoods throughout Palestine."<sup>14</sup> In an interview, KA (male, 40's; personal communication, 2019) explained that he lives in the first neighborhood where 252 of 302 apartments have been sold. They were primarily purchased by Palestinians who lived in 1948 areas<sup>15</sup> and held Israeli identification; thus, most

apartments are empty except on weekends. According to the HOA, a decision was made that in each neighborhood; only 20% of the apartments should be sold to Palestinians who hold Israeli identification.

The digital image used in Rawabi's marketing campaigns show that the city promises homeowners an ideal family, life quality, and living space. The project slogans constitute distinctive homes that redefine everyday life. They also promise to deliver an ideal existence and a completely transformed individual character once a resident becomes part of this exclusive community (Rawabi



**Fig. 11** Photo of the city shows the blocked views and the empty streets and gardens (Source: Birzeit University AE undergraduate students, 2019)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.rawabi.ps/en/hoas>.

<sup>15</sup> This term is used to refer to the seized Palestinian lands at the end of Israeli war in 1948. Now these lands include the total area of Palestine excluding the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and they fall under full Israeli control.





**Fig. 12** Advertisement showing Rawabi's promotion of a rich, luxurious lifestyle (translation of title: rich life and luxurious living) () Source: Rawabi's Facebook page, September 2012). (<https://www.facebook.com/RawabiCity/photos/a.10151162143539581/10151162144209581/?type=3>)



**Fig. 13** Advertisement showing Rawabi's marketing campaign slogan promising new businesses and plenty of opportunities (translation of title: big jobs and numerous opportunities) () Source: Rawabi's Facebook page, September 2012). (<https://www.facebook.com/RawabiCity/photos/a.10151162143539581/10151162144519581/?type=3>)

city 2012a, b, c). However, according to ST (female, 40's; personal communication, 2019), the reality is different. Her perception is that she lives in a "graveyard" and not the vibrant city that the developers promised. She added that the view from her apartment is blocked, which

contradicts the images she saw in the promotions. For example, Fig. 10 shows a family enjoying an ideal view of the dreamscape, while Fig. 11 depicts the real view.

Similar to other gated communities, it thrives on promoting itself as an exclusive rather than inclusive



city. Figs. 12 and 13 propose that Rawabi offers a rich, luxurious lifestyle and promising business opportunities; meanwhile, its design and planning are neither inclusive nor responsive to diverse users, for example, elderly individuals, children, and people with disabilities. Moreover, in the advertisements, the targeted groups are young families and business professionals (Figs. 12, 13).

#### ***The everyday reality: the residents' reflections on Rawabi***

This section provides a detailed explanation of the residents' reflections on their lived reality in the city and their residential units. Despite the blurred boundaries between the aforementioned concepts: profit-driven urban development, hyperreality and architectural industry, the provided testimonies are meant to shed light on such interrelationships.

Considering the hyperreal marketed images and its connection to the lived reality, the participants were asked about their motivation behind choosing Rawabi. Consequently, two of the interviewed Rawabi's residents said, "The best thing about Rawabi is the clean, quiet environment." KA, an urban planner and one of the first residents, explained, "For me, it is better to live as far away as possible from work. When I get out of work and arrive home, no one will call me to go back for anything." ST, who lives in the second neighborhood, said, "I don't feel safe in Rawabi. There are almost no people on the streets, and the city is not well lit at night. In addition, there's low occupancy in my building and all of the city," she explained that in her apartment building, only four apartments were occupied during the week; thus, she is afraid to walk between the parking lot and her apartment. She continued, "I try not to return late to my home because the city is so scary at night, and I feel like I am entering a graveyard, not a city." ST stated, "I offered my flat for sale but haven't been able to sell it for more than two years."

AE (female, 40's; personal communication, 2019), one of the first residents, response is similar to that of ST. She stated, "there is no hospital or pharmacy here. I am scared that if one day my son gets sick, it would take so much time to drive to the closest pharmacy to buy him medicine or take him to the hospital." It is worth to mention that a private emergency clinic was opened in Rawabi in 2022; this private clinic doesn't receive any sick person without paying in advance.

AD (male, 20's; personal communication, 2019), a young man who lives and works in Rawabi, said that the view from his apartment is totally blocked, and the close distance between buildings makes him unable to open his windows due to visual intersection with the neighbors. He described the balcony in front of his room as a dead



**Fig. 14** Children playing in a cul-de-sac (Source: AE undergraduate students of Birzeit University, 2019)

place; since it overlooks other flats, he does not feel comfortable sitting there and uses it only for hanging clothes to dry.

Considering the profit-driven urban development and the commodification of urban space, ST and AE are unsatisfied because they pay a high monthly HOA fee per flat and for neighborhood services and amenities such as heat, internet, gardening, and public lighting, but only part of the city is lit at night.

The high cost of public space management and maintenance, ILS 80 (USD 23) fee per flat, resulted in most interviewed residents being unsatisfied with public spaces. Visitors to WaDina area pay ILS 20 (USD 6.50) to park their car, which supposed to be a public park for residents. During the field observations, a group of children was playing on the street, and when they were asked why they were not playing in any of the designated public spaces, they said no proper playgrounds were provided, and as such, they preferred to play on the street (Fig. 14). One of the residents of the first neighborhood, KG (Male, 30's, 2019), an architect, explained that the residents do not use the Q center and do not recognize it as their city center, while they meet and interact in front of the supermarket in their neighborhood.

#### **Conclusion**

This study explored the emerging neoliberal real estate model in R-AG after the Oslo Accords of 1993 focusing on the case of Rawabi. It demonstrates that the PA's neoliberal approach encourages the formation of

profit-driven spaces, such as urban islands of excessive consumption and exclusive residential neighborhoods, jeopardizing the dream of the “State” to provide a modern flat equipped with contemporary appliances, luxurious lifestyle, and materialistic richness. The new real estate developments reflect a consumerist lifestyle focusing on individual needs instead of the community, social space, and specific context of the Palestinian State, which is stuck in limbo between a colonial history and a post-colonial future. Architecture’s commodification becomes similar to buying any product and is marketed to offer a lifestyle only for those who can afford it.

Rawabi represents an example of a non-original consumerist hyperreality wherein the experience of home is disregarded and residents are mostly unsatisfied with their flat design or the promised dream lifestyle, having no relation to the city in general. The conducted field-work revealed that the profit-driven approach led the development of Rawabi. The city’s design approach intersects with Willis’ statement that despite Mies van der Rohe’s famous dictum “Form follows function,” the reality in the neorealism era and global cities is that “Form follows finance” (Willis 1995; Knox and Pain 2010).

The physical and materialistic aspects of Rawabi’s development, as exhibited in the analysis, reveal a gap between the readymade lifestyle as marketed by the investors and the lived experience of reality. The interviews and observations in this study show that Rawabi does not provide any main services that city residents need, for example, public schools, nurseries, grocery stores, pharmacies, and healthcare facilities. Living in a flat in any of its apartment buildings implies isolation from other buildings, public spaces, and services. Additionally, most public spaces are empty; for instance, the Q Center does not function as an active center or social hub for city residents.

Based on this discussion of the context of real estate development in the OP, as shown in Rawabi’s case, the neoliberal approach does not fulfill or respond to households’ ambitions of a promised “dream home,” nor achieve any “State” building. Neoliberalism considers architecture industry more to generate profits rather than to enhance the quality of life and well-being. The delivered housing as a commodity echoes the developers’ agenda rather than embracing community social sustainability principles. Keeping up with the reality of the living conditions, especially the high cost of maintaining them, becomes challenging for residents. A city such as Rawabi becomes an enclave of individuals who reside and work in the same place, widening the gap between a hyper versus real lifestyle. It is a specific case wherein the intersection between investors’ fantasy and the hyperreality created a reproduced city which invaded the rural landscape and

disconnected from its surrounding context. Accordingly, geographies of inequality manifest through the formation of an urban island of excessive consumption and exclusive users, contradicting the social and communal needs.

Moving forward, assessing such development based on residents’ lived experiences in the city is necessary to engage in the conceptualization of home meaning. Home, as confirmed by Bleibleh, “plays a key role in creating a sense of place and identity for both individuals and communities. It represents a place of being, not only as a dwelling but also as an everyday element of experience and an attachment to a particular setting” (Bleibleh 2021: 186). Thus, further research may be conducted on housing as physical production and the ways in which it jeopardizes the *homeness* quality.

Considering the colonial presence in the OP, and the reliance on neoliberal model of urban development in a state that lacks all the conditions of control on its borders and resources, a contextual approach to urban development is vital in harnessing the local city’s potential and incorporating a new responsive language in architecture based on community needs to reconnect urbanism to modern life while remaining sensitive to environmental challenges, identity, and cultural significance.

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#### Author contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

#### Notes

Interviewees’ names are referred to with initial pseudonyms for anonymity. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated to English by the researchers. The photographs that were taken by Birzeit University undergraduate students under the supervision of Dr. Shaden Awad and used with permission; credit is given to the owners. All internet images were cited.

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#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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