

# PACIFICATION BY CAPPUCCINO

## SCHIZOPHRENIA BETWEEN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL REALITIES

YAZID ANANI

*“Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

It all collapses to a cup of cappuccino at ZAMN Café in Ramallah, where there is a utopian sense of a Palestinian middle class society. Fathers push strollers and tend their children, and mothers dressed up in their best trendy clothes discuss yoga, fitness, parties and vacations. All gather and meet at the café that stretches to the sidewalk, drinking their cappuccinos and admiring the trendy new cars displayed on the street.

It is the ideal environment for the new urban middle class that strives to embody a “universal yearning for cappuccino culture” as expressed by Sharon Zukin in her book *Naked City*.<sup>2</sup> This is a universal neoliberal culture that has one narrow imagination for a ‘good life,’ distancing the middle class from their long restrained history under Israeli Occupation and allowing them to breathe, to be free; where it’s ‘finally possible to raise kids,’ as parents of young families often say.

It can always be argued that it is their right and personal choice; nevertheless, the rupture between the ‘cappuccino’ e drastic transformation of society fashioned by the neoliberal policy of the PA has somehow fallen into a discourse of rectifying the causes and effects of neoliberalism rather than imagining different options and alternative directions for the current crisis of the Palestinian liberation project. What the peace process imposed are middlemen managing a quasi-state apparatus, whose ultimate mission is to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation aimed at building the alleged future state. This has created a kind of schizophrenia in a nation that is tormented by the tension between the persistence of Israeli colonialism on one hand, and a hallucination of living in a postcolonial condition on the other.

This confusion can be read in the rapid transformation of cities like Ramallah. Architecture becomes particular to other forms

of cultural production, in a sense of reflecting in its physical manifestation the socio-economic conditions of society and its power structure. Ultimately, the daily visual urban experience gives architecture and urbanism important cultural values grounded in the everyday life of people. Hence, this perplexing ‘personality disorder’ of the current Palestinian conditions between the colonial and postcolonial can be read in the production of space, where cities like Ramallah are constantly engaged in a struggle to reconstruct a new urban image.

This paper is concerned with the visual material and representation of architecture as a barometer to understand the current urban transformation of Ramallah. The urban renewal of the city and the visual material consumed by the new middle class culture generate a considerable power to mobilize people’s passions and desires. The visual in architecture becomes a space of hallucination, amnesia and erasure, hence, a strategic site for obliterating the past and distancing history by means of the anesthetics of neoliberal aesthetic.<sup>3</sup> For the scope of this paper, the new Palestinian planned city ‘Rawabi’ will be taken as an exemplar to study the current spatial transformations and their repercussions.

### NEOLIBERALISM OF LIBERATION

Since the establishment of the PA, Ramallah has become a site of massive redevelopment, with bulldozers tearing down old buildings and neighborhoods. Craters are ready for new construction in every neighborhood, and cranes pop up like mushrooms in the city’s skyline.

So many landmarks have disappeared; in particular, those coined with social historic values (such as cinemas, hotels, and mansions) were replaced by concrete and glass towers. The feeling of neighborhoods has been shattered by business towers, which followed by a daily influx of unfamiliar clientele claiming the space. Neighborhoods have lost their small scale and local identity to commercial areas and the proliferation of restaurants, coffee shops, and bars.



*Fig. 1: Betunia, a sprawled suburb of Ramallah after the building boom of the 90s. Courtesy Yazid Anani, 2009.*

This physical transformation is strongly associated with the emergence of the new urban middle class that is engaged in operating in the businesses and financial industries, as well as in non-governmental organization (NGO) and donor organizations. Yet this new urban class becomes the main consumer of the neoliberal renewal project and its dynamo by means of easy credit and loans from banks.

Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian Prime Minister with whom the neoliberalism project is associated, has clearly understood that his mission was to help establish a broad base for investment and to solve the unemployment problem through urbanization. The project of building the foundation of a Palestinian State has evidently absorbed huge quantities of labor and investments; nevertheless, it was a primary vehicle of social stabilization. This has also been combined with suppressing the aspirations of popular resistance against the continuous Israeli colonialism in the West Bank. "This fight for democracy against the oppression of mankind will slowly leave the confusion of neo-liberal universalism to emerge, sometimes laboriously, as a claim to nationhood."<sup>14</sup> Fayyad's economic plan has operated based on the ongoing flux of donor aid money for some five years. It has involved not only a transformation of urban infrastructures, but also the construction of a new way of life and urban persona. Ramallah has become the 'liberal city,' the great center of consumption, tourism and pleasure, cafés, shopping malls, and cultural institutions. All this has induced changes in the urban experience and facilitated the absorption of vast fiscal surpluses through consumerism. This

urban liberal life is founded on an overextended and unsustainable economic system and credit structures that are about to crash without the instant and continuous flow of international and Arab aid money.

In an interview with the former Palestinian Prime Minister in March 2013, Fayyad asserted that "the Palestinian Authority now has reached the point of not being able to pay the salaries of about 150,000 government employees... The number of Palestinian poor is bound to quickly double to 50 percent of the population of roughly 4 million...The Palestinian Authority already owes local banks more than \$1.3 billion and can't get more loans. It also owes hundreds of millions of dollars to private businesses, including suppliers to hospitals, some of whom have stopped doing business with the government."<sup>15</sup>

The "freedoms" neoliberalism has introduced to Palestinians, on the margin of their current financial crisis, is very selective to those who have the money to enjoy its emancipatory privileges. Moreover, neoliberalism also privileges those who are exempted from the Israeli colonial constraints and advantaged with freedom of mobility in the geography between Israel and the West Bank—mainly PA officials, investors, businesses, transnational corporations, and those in the financial industry.

#### URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

The post-Oslo urban transformation is marked in three main folds where money, by means of urbanization, has found its way through different urban forms. The architecture of transformation can be marked in new governmental and security structures, commercial buildings and projects, and in the housing sector.

The PA embarked on erecting its governmental edifices from its inception in 1996. Ministries have been accommodated in residential apartment buildings scattered around the city. Through repartitioning schemes of merged residential flats, the experience of a visit to a ministry feels like a suffocating walk through a maze of corridors and offices with stacked files, papers, and plastic chairs.'

Unlike the 90s, the era of urban sprawls during the Peace Agreement, which were unplanned, locally funded, aesthetically atrocious and extremely commercial and utilitarian, the latest crusade of suburbanization in the West Bank is hurled forth by

public-private and transnational companies with major investment from the gulf.

The present era of planned suburbs and cities has caused radical transformation in lifestyles, pushing forward an aggressive consumption of new construction technologies and related products through perceived and planned obsolescence. The dream house depicted in billboards and bank advertisements comes with a tiled orange roof, a green lawn, and an interior image of a liberal family enjoying a smart TV and a satellite receiver, while sitting in a very stylish living room.

For the newly advertised housing projects, 3D rendered images show the buildings surrounded by a tropical paradise or a western European forest landscape. The bird's-eye view of the building depicts air-conditioning units and four wheelers, Mercedes and BMW cars in the parking lots. There is abundance of visual material in cities like Ramallah through which one can analyze the construction of people's passions, desires and aesthetics. "Quality of urban life has become a commodity, as has the



Fig. 2: A billboard advertising a new housing project 'Royal Villas' in Ramallah. Courtesy Yazid Anani, 2010.

city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy."<sup>6</sup>

Suburbanization has also altered the political landscape widespread home-ownership mortgages by the middle class changed the focus of popular action towards the fear of losing property and class consumer. This has managed to turn the Palestinian community, especially the leftists, to total obedience and servitude. Burdened homeowners are less likely to revolt against the PA's middlemen with their quasi-state liberation project.



Fig. 3: Image from the Diplomats' Housing Project, Ramallah. Courtesy Yazid Anani, 2010.

### RAWABI – A PROMISE OF PARADISE

The new city of Rawabi, unlike other projects, claims itself locally and internationally as the first palestinian planned city, and Rawabi claims to differ from other large scale real-estate projects in size, style of management, donors and marketing approaches. According to a press release issued by Bayti Real Estate Development Company, one of the companies of Bashar Al-Masri, the investor behind Rawabi, the new city will accommodate 4,000 affordable income housing units, with its infrastructure facilitated by the PA. In the press release, quotes from Bashar Al-Masri praise the public-private partnership with the PA: "We believe this is a great opportunity for a private-public partnership which will boost the Palestinian economy."<sup>7</sup>

The project, funded majorly by Qatar with a total estimate of \$200 million, hosts roughly 25,000 persons in up to 4,000 apartment

units, with a price range between \$37,500 and \$75,000 per unit. The project sounds ideal and genuinely fulfills the need of 'affordable' housing for the growing Palestinian population. However, there has been a shift in the reporting of the project since its inception 2007. The total cost of the project has elevated to \$700 million in 2012. Additional residential and commercial units were announced to raise the number of population to 40,000 people.<sup>9</sup> The word 'affordability' has eventually ceased to exist in later reporting and public statements; likewise, the prices of flats that once looked tempting have also managed to disappear from public view.

While the draft law for the conservation of cultural heritage has not been endorsed since 2004 by the Cabinet of Ministers nor by the Palestinian president, Rawabi managed in 2009—2 years after its inception—to endorse a decree by the president to expropriate 185.6 hectares from three surrounding villages for what they claimed as 'public use.'<sup>9</sup> The owners were forced involuntarily to give up their lands; moreover, they had to accept compensation by Rawabi based on the official estimation of land market prices. These lands were mainly reserved for the future expansion of Rawabi. The same historic policy of land expropriation for public use has been perpetually used by the Israeli Occupation to seize land for settlement expansion and infrastructures in the West Bank. Beyond the fusion of public and private interest that the unprecedented presidential decree has established, the analogy between Rawabi's land grab with that of Israeli settlements underlines a similar dilution of the meaning of 'public use.' Both cases ultimately signify the exclusive use of expropriated land for the benefit of a small group of elite separated from the surrounding communities either by hegemonic religious and ideological differences, as in the Israeli settlements, or by exclusive class and cultural difference in Rawabi.

The location of the new city was selected to be central to the West Bank and surrounded by the countryside, where all the peasants live. The sovereigns of the new urban class and those who are indispensable to the functioning of the PA and its liberal politics find Rawabi a promise of paradise. Rawabi is sought to be spatially central to the PA's reign and in proximity to Ramallah; otherwise, it would not be able to exercise all its necessary, foreseen functions. Ostensibly, there appears to be an aesthetic and symbolic relationship between Rawabi and the rest of the West Bank. Rawabi is planned as an ornament of the territory, the

utopia of a new Palestine.

In its construction of postcolonial aesthetic, the planning and architectural style of Rawabi becomes a reflection against the history of colonial attack on the Palestinian ego and its rendition of backwardness and not modern.<sup>10</sup> This reactionary aesthetic paradigm becomes not only important to assert the perpetual yearning for the colonized to become as powerful and as modern as the colonial, but it also pertains to the aspirations of the Palestinian Liberation Project since the 1970s to become part of the universal. The question of 'who am I?' becomes inevitable as Palestinians cast away visual traces of cultural backwardness, through disconnecting themselves from historical and geographical continuity. Rawabi with a masculine ego, a pioneering Palestinian national project, embraces the aesthetics of power imbedded in postwar suburban culture to compensate for its long colonial suppression. Harvey describes the post-war suburbanization crisis by asserting "the suburbs had been built, and the radical change in lifestyle that this betokened had many social consequences... the soulless qualities of suburban living also played a critical role in the dramatic events of 1968 in the US. Discontented white middle-class students went into a phase

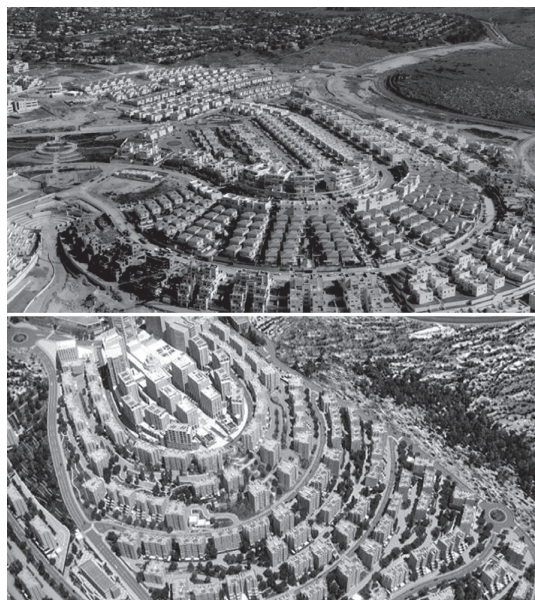


Fig. 4: Top: An aerial image of Modi'in Settlement in the West Bank (source: David Katz/The Israel Project [www.theisraelproject.org](http://www.theisraelproject.org)). Below: A computer generated image of Rawabi (source: [www.rawabi.ps](http://www.rawabi.ps))

of revolt, sought alliances with marginalized groups claiming civil rights and rallied against American imperialism to create a movement to build another kind of world—including a different kind of urban experience.”<sup>11</sup>

One can also acknowledge the monumental connotations of the city, as in the case of the Israeli settlement, saddling on the top of the mountain overlooking the surrounding villages and landscape. It is nonetheless a foundation of a self-sufficient exclusionary space for a cappuccino culture, projecting a division between the social exclusivity of the inhabitants and that of the history of the rest of the society and its spatial production. “Monumentality, for instance, always embodies and imposes a clearly intelligible message. It says what it wishes to say – yet it hides a good deal more: being political, military, and ultimately fascist in character, monumental building masks the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought. In the process, such signs and surfaces also manage to conjure away both possibility and time.”<sup>12</sup>

The monumental exclusivity of the location and architecture induces a political relationship such as the example of good citizenship and what a contemporary liberal Palestine means; this model can be implanted in the rest of the territory. It establishes itself as a dream to be attained by those unfortunates who did not fit in and become citizens of the city due to either social or financial conditions. “[I]t seems obvious that [Rawabi] is quite capable of becoming an idol in its own right—that is, a potent, ideological representation that serves to naturalize power relations and erase history and legibility.”<sup>13</sup>

Eventually, Rawabi becomes a moral example, and a reference for people with regard to their ‘Palestinianity’ and ways of conduct and lifestyle. It is a phenomenon of a total disconnection from the Palestinian colonial present and the suppressive backward history, which is required to be forgotten and replaced by the temptations of neoliberal urban culture.

The peril at this specific time of political and social crisis in Palestine is the normalization of a schizophrenia where the new liberal urban culture a rupture in time and history by inducing a utopia of sovereignty and liberation. It is a reality with a superimposed, fast-forwarded imaginary of a postcolonial sovereignty that is in denial



Fig. 5: A billboard image of an advertisement campaign of Rawabi in 2012. (source: www.rawabi.ps)

of history and the present reality of colonial conditions.

The promotion and marketing of Rawabi through different forms of advertisement become not only a target for the new urban middle class through promises of the universal cappuccino culture, but it also obliterates the contingency of the historic values of the meaning of home, land and culture. The rendition of the surrounding landscape seen from windows and balconies of the family houses in Rawabi selectively purges any sign of cultural evidence (villages and agriculture). The Palestinian landscape represented as empty lands without any indication of being historically populated.

#### THE PARALLEL

This gradual yet inevitable reinvention of cities like Ramallah is a determined, concentrated process of the PA's general manifestation of its political neoliberal ideology. It is striking that a historical parallel can be constructed between the building of the Jewish state on “A land without a people for a people without a land,”<sup>14</sup> and that of the PA's project of building a viable Palestinian State.

In his book *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama describes the Jewish National Fund's forestation project of the land of Palestine to realize the Zionist imagination and dream of the Promised Land: “The trees were our proxy immigrants, the forests our implantation. And while we assumed that a pinewood was more beautiful than a hill denuded by grazing flocks of goats and sheep, we were never exactly sure what all the trees were for. What we did know was that a rooted forest was the opposite landscape to a place of drifting sand, of exposed rock and red dirt blown by the winds.”<sup>15</sup>

The rationalization of forestation of the land, and hence the erasure of the existing cultural history, was not only a means of claiming a biblical right to a vacant land for rooting the Jewish diaspora. It was also a determined process of erasure of the existing cultural history and demolition of 418 Palestinian villages,<sup>16</sup> henceforth reinventing a new geography by juxtaposing the imagined pine forest landscape on the created tabula rasa.

Likewise, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) imagination of a liberated Palestine was incrementally created and built in exile. The base of this imaginary has originated from the PLO's militia governance in Jordan, Lebanon and Tunis vis-à-vis the personal and political relations with the national projects of Arab countries. Although there were always strong ties and strategic *modus operandi* with resistance and political leadership in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and inside Israel, the making of the Palestinian liberation project has been the creed of the PLO alone. This imaginary has manifested itself in the formation of the PA and its management of the archipelago of Areas A and B in the West Bank based on the impossible confines of the Oslo Interim Accords. With a careful examination of the peace negotiations and the transition to post-Oslo, it is obvious that the imaginary of the liberation project was not negotiated with other possible imaginaries by Palestinian leadership and intellectuals in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, exile or those living inside Israel. Parallel to the tabula rasa used for the foundation of the Jewish State, the PA's state building project and its' imaginary has established itself anew in the West Bank and Gaza without connection to the social history, culture and values of the place.

## CONCLUSIONS

The neoliberal conditions created by the PA to built their imaginary of the Liberation Project has drifted, as Fanon would place it, to the abyss where: "colonialism tries to disarm national demands by putting forward economic doctrines. As soon as the first demands are set out, colonialism pretends to consider them, recognizing with ostentatious humility that the territory is suffering from serious underdevelopment which necessitates a great economic and social effort."<sup>18</sup>

The critique of these conditions is not a yearning for any historical sociopolitical conditions that existed before, or a rejection of the global culture that has become dialectically as much as the colonial culture part of the identity of the colonized.

It is rather an attempt to realize the schizophrenic contention of living simultaneously a normalized mode of liberation while under a persistent occupation. It is exactly like reading a book about a utopia that describes Palestine after decades of its liberation from the Israeli Colonialism, and while you read you are thinking that this is a nice imaginary of a possibility of what might happen in the future after liberation. You recognize suddenly that the liberation didn't happen; however, the imaginary of what might have happened is actually happening. It is a time rupture and a collapse that exterminates the liberation project, yet at the same time eradicates any possible, diverse imagination of a different future.

## ENDNOTES

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