

Urban & Spatial Development in Glocal Palestine: The Case of Rawabi

Alessandra Terenzi¹

Abstract

The different settlement strategies of the late century and the violence of the ongoing conflicts are reflected on urban and rural landscapes, leading to situations where any previous identity of place seems to have been lost. This covers only the surface of territorial conformations: underneath the current urban sprawl lie ancient structures of the deep-rooted history of Palestine, lines of force for the present landscape. Even today the urban pattern mostly follows the ancient corridors of connection, today fragmented by several cuts. While, in about one century, no new towns were founded, during the last decades, with the significant population growth, more than five hundred small villages have spread spontaneously, but often without any primary services, while hundreds of new Israeli settlements, favouring the emergence of new global practices, further worsened the conditions of urban services and infrastructure networks. Since 1967 the absence of any Palestinian local plan highlighted the unbalanced planning with the Israeli side, a globalized context with a long urbanization process. Some existing crowded cities underwent uncontrolled expansion and urban sprawl, compromising the cultural heritage sites and the agricultural sector, strategic not only economically, but even for the identity and the cultural roots of the country. Over the last years, under the PNA government, housing and infrastructure projects witnessed major developments, focusing both on existing cities - for increasing the functional vocation of each one and the density within built-up areas - as well as on new towns. Rawabi, the first city planned under the Palestinian Authority, is an example where to investigate the hybrid character of "glocal" in today's Palestine, where the traditional relations of the village of origin, the strongest element of identity, merge together with a new sense of urban identity. By considering some cases of spatial and urban transformations, this paper would try to investigate the cultural impact of social and economic globalization on the Palestinian landscape, as well as the relation between local culture and a modern character that, framed in global urban dimensions and related to the Israeli occupation, is sometimes unable to meet the real local needs.

Keywords: Glocal dimension, urban history, cultural heritage, modernization, local tradition, occupation, globalization

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Since the Industrial Revolution human population has grown from 1 to 7 billion and the fastest growth rate was registered in urban environments. The diverse stylistic influences and intercultural dialogue that emerged, demonstrate that the huge population flows played a focal role in the progressive broadening of cultural horizons, by shaping urban and rural landscapes at the global level.

All these aspects are most evident in the Near Eastern cities, where the contradictory coexistence of several dualities, within a politically contested territory, results in spaces shared among different races, programs and ideologies.

¹Adjunct Professor, Politecnico di Milano, Faculty of Civil Architecture, ABC_Department of architecture, built environment and construction engineering. Researcher at UNIMED.

Today's Palestine is a paradigm of the last rapid changes that, with the intensifying of flows and new ways, of living, moving, consuming and communicate, whether real or virtual, have become integral parts of the global reality, going beyond the national boundaries and territorial limits of a fragmented sovereignty.

From the social point of view, the glocal dimension is thus related to understanding the plural realities that shape the city, while for the economical aspect it should concern the different ways in which new technological tools, means of production and consumption evolve along with the development of globalisation in each particular local contest. All these practices find their expression in cities and in the relationships between cities: the global network of cities, considered not any more as several nation states but as networks of polycentric metropolitan areas, is becoming the new form of governance, where the social and economic impact of globalization interacts, sometimes clashing, with the local culture.

Rawabi, the first new town planned under the Palestinian Authority and currently under construction, could be an opportunity to investigate the territorial and urban dimension of glocal in today's Palestine, whose character is directly influenced by political, social and economic evolutions. This town is located along the main north-south urbanized axis of Palestine, a few kilometers north of Ramallah. The official documents emphasize the highly innovative character of the project, breaking away from old urban traditions: a hi-tech city for 40.000 inhabitants, with cinemas, shopping malls, schools, landscaped walkways, office blocks, a conference centre, a roman-style amphitheater, a stadium, a water park and, in the town center, a piazza lined with arcades, restaurants and cafes.

The city center should become a hub of business and high tech, attracting services sector enterprises, stimulating the banking sector and generating several thousands employment opportunities for Palestinians. The opportunity for public-private cooperation, generated by the plan, as well as the possibility of mortgages, should revive the Palestinian economy, creating stability across society.

In the eyes of the promoters Rawabi should be the right answer, both for the chronic problem of housing shortage and for the increasing unemployment, also related to the high rates of poverty: while the total population grew by 30% in 1998-2005, the poverty rate increased by three times. In 2010 the unemployment rate in the West Bank reached 17,2% while in Israel it was just 6.6% (WDI)². Most workers are unskilled workers and the unemployment rate for higher education graduate has reached 23%, leading many young Palestinian professionals to emigrate to the Gulf States, EU or USA.

From the Israeli point of view, the project on Rawabi is very well accepted, as the potential economic development triggered by this new town in the region could even contribute to Israel's security. Nevertheless, obviously there are several serious obstacles caused by the Israeli occupation: a section of road connecting Rawabi to Ramallah runs through Israeli-controlled Area C, creating problem in agreements between the two parts; the Israeli military checkpoint existing between Rawabi and Ramallah, to protect the Hebrew settlement Ateret, is also a serious problem considering that, if closed, it could block access to the outside world. Water is another challenge depending from Israel, that controls almost all water supplies with a significant unbalanced distribution; according to The Guardian³, 600,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem consume almost six times as much water as 2.7 million Palestinians.

Rawabi has been the opportunity to open a debate among those geared to the founding of new suburban towns and those who promote a total absorption in existing cities, through specific plans for Metropolitan Development.

²See: Ramallah, Al-Bireh & Beitunya Metropolitan Area (RABMA), Final Report; Palestinian National Authority (PNA), Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Planning; 2009.

³Harriet Sherwood in Rawabi, The Guardian, 8 August 2013.

Interviews with Palestinian professionals and academics⁴ have often revealed critical opinions about the project: although it could help to block the development of the nearby Israeli settlement of Atarat, Rawabi is considered a purely commercial project, based on planning principles from 'above', strongly linked to the private sector and unable to meet the local needs. Moreover, Rawabi doesn't add any new productive economic development to the nation, because there are no factories in the city. Other critical issues would be that the professionals involved are mostly foreign people and the target of potential buyers, being mainly reserved to the wealthy/middle-class, would seriously increase the division into social classes, further worsening the already critical condition of the weaker ones. From the planning point of view Rawabi, alone, does not solve the issue of high rate of population growth and, considering that many of the future inhabitants will be commuters, it risks creating an additional satellite city dependent on Ramallah, further increasing urban sprawl in the area.

In *Occupation Diaries*⁵, R. Shehadeh brings out some profound contradictions related to the unbalanced distribution of inhabitants in the West Bank: the village of Bir Nabala was once a commercial center on the main road connecting Jerusalem to Ramallah. With the construction of the wall, this village was cut off from the city and made accessible just from Ramallah through a tunnel connecting just the Jewish settlements and forbidden to the Arabs. Bir Nabala today is full of empty apartments, while the nearby Ramallah is overcrowded. In Shehadeh's view, the Palestinian Authority should put pressure on the Israelis in order to abandon their plans for exploitation of the land, rather than build a new town to house just 40,000 Palestinian middle classes that could have easily found a home in the villages surrounding Ramallah. Another contrast, highlighted by Shehadeh, is between the 40,000 inhabitants of Rawabi, who will live in 6,800 dunams of land and Jalazone, the refugee camp north of Ramallah, where 13,000 people live in just 253 dunams.

According to Dr. Rami Nasrallah, founder and head of IPCC *The International Peace and Cooperation Center*, in the Palestinian culture the village of origin still represents the strongest element of identity: when its inhabitants move elsewhere, in another village or town, they always remain in the vicinity of the place of origin and tend to settle in parts of the city inhabited only by them.

In such cultural context, Rawabi should lay the foundations for a more open culture, where the traditional relations of the village of origin, could evolve into a sense of urban identity.

In my opinion, there are several innovative aspects in this project, aimed at the development of a *glocal-urban* dimension: more than half of those who have signed contracts have taken out long-term mortgages, still rare in the Arab world and particularly in Palestine; this fact could finally dispell apprehension of long-term loans, encouraging new investment. A high proportion of them are young nuclear families, not extended clans, in which the mother works outside. Seven percent of Rawabi homebuyers, so far, are single professional women who plan to live alone, unusual in Palestinian society; 11% are Christian (compared with 2% of the Palestinian population); a small proportion are also buying as investment for rental or future resale, while 4% of buyers are Palestinian expatriates⁶. Apart from the economic position, the future social structure seems therefore to be quite diversified. Besides, the significant presence of leisure structures would lead Palestinians to develop a new approach for which life is not anymore confined to the home.

⁴Among them: Ahmad Atrash (ARIJ), Jiad Ishac (ARIJ), Ahmad Saleh (MOP), Rami Nasrallah (IPCC). All interviews have been conducted by A. Terenzi.

⁵Raja Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries*, Profile Books, London 2012.

⁶Harriet Sherwood in Rawabi, *The Guardian*, 8 August 2013.

In its architectural design Rawabi features mainly a Western-style architecture defined by modern, streamlined and hi-tech apartments, built for Palestinian families who want to leave their chaotic and overcrowded West Bank cities. Many critics state that any promotion of the rich cultural heritage of Palestinian urban landscapes is completely absent. Rawabi is considered as a suburb with the hilltop-grabbing spiral city planning of an Israeli settlement, similar in terms of construction, including rowhouses and reliance on brick, also used for the Israeli settlements: "*The architecture of Rawabi represents the colonized imitating the colonizer*"⁷.

Shehadeh expresses a significant standpoint on the project: "There are already hundreds of villages around Ramallah and then, what is the need to found a new one? Why not expand existing ones, keeping the urban development in harmony with the contours of the hills?"

Confiscating lands to farmers, eroding the top of the hills and destroying the landscape, we are only imitating the Israeli actions, which for decades we criticize. (...) After seeing Rawabi, once a terraced hill planted with olive trees, I understood the ramifications of our defeat. (...) Rather than struggling to earn our space and affirm our lifestyle, we copy the colonizers and use the same destructive methods that ruin our land and its natural heritage. It looks like a race between those who can inflict the most damage in the shortest period of time. (...) How attractive was the old village of Ajoul, next to Rawabi and how strong was the contrast with that sterile monstrosity, erected on hills that were destroyed specially for this purpose."⁸

However, it is also useful to frame Rawabi in the broader scenario of planning experiences, affecting the today's Arab world, with different outcomes, between global and local dimension. As also stated by Attilio Peruccioli⁹, contemporary architectural culture is no longer based on that collective spontaneous subconscious and critical social conscience that had built city form for centuries. One experience, directly related to this architectural crisis, can be found in the Gulf cities that, having grew very fast from the sixties, developed on the British and American urban models, defined by extreme vertical buildings and anonymous containers for services and commercial activities: the resulting urban fabric, divided and segmented, has lost its identity and the organic nature of the traditional city, allowing the development of new images, totally decontextualized, like the Palm Islands of Dubai.

Other cases, with similar outcomes but different relation with the local heritage, could be found in the Egyptian village of Sharm el Sheik that, from Israeli military outpost has been converted into an exclusive tourist center; or in the Andromeda Hill complex, a gated community with a picturesque view on the port, aimed to express the symbolic and mythical vision of old legendary Jaffa. Its architectural structures, as well as many hotels in Sharm el Sheikh, try to recall a kind of Mediterranean-Arab style, but this reference to the local past heritage is just formal, empty of significance and not related to the identity of the different communities.

Another case is that of the old Muqata'a, a fortress built in Ramallah after the Revolt of 1936 and later used as the headquarters of Arafat; after his death, a mausoleum was built there in his honor but, according to many opinions, this project was realized by ignoring what this place, by then part of the local heritage, meant for the collective memory of the Palestinians.

On the opposite way, the British master plans for Jerusalem during the Mandate period were based on the preservation of local history that was just seen as the biblical, oriental, romantic nature of the old city. European concepts of architectural conservation played a decisive role, considering the romantic view of biblical Jerusalem, as a timeless Holy City, a large monument steeped in biblical meaning and far from its real nature of a living urban entity, part of a larger hinterland.

⁷Ahmad Melhem is a Palestinian journalist September 17, 2014 Al Monitor.

⁸Raja Shehadeh, op. cit.

⁹Professor of Landscape Architecture, specialized in investigations related to the study of the Arab world.

A better result was obtained in the regeneration of some ancient Arab villages, such as Ein Hod or Ein Karem, among others, merging traditional and modern architecture in significant results of glocal style, always based on strong preexistences with a clear identity. Despite this, going beyond the architectural aspects, such projects have tried to totally erase the collective memory of the local Arab culture, belonging to the previous inhabitants.

Even the Israeli new towns built in the Fifties could be a useful comparison: many of them had been filled with large flows of immigrants and inhabited only by returnees, creating serious social and economical problems, even today unsolved; some of these new towns became bedroom communities, lacking any first economic base for the new inhabitants.

Planning Experiences in Twentieth century Palestine

In light of these last considerations, how to act, combining global and local, in the design of a new town, both by improving the quality of life through a clever use of space, good connection between poles, modern facilities and technologies, and both by preserving the historical identity and the cultural heritage of Palestine.

Since the 19th century, urban development and planning in Palestine went through several phases, mostly characterized by the control of external forces, which seriously affected the present territorial structure. The rapid increase of the West Bank population and the territorial changes that followed the War of 1948 began to seriously affect the identity of the place.

While, in about one century, no new towns were founded, existing crowded cities and refugee camps underwent uncontrolled expansion and urban sprawl and more than five hundred small villages spread spontaneously without any kind of master plan or primary services, resulting in a widespread and random settlement structure; hundreds of new Israeli settlements further worsened the conditions of urban services and infrastructure networks.

Under the Jordanian control nothing was made to develop any urban plan and nothing changed since 1967, under the Israeli occupation, highlighting rather the unbalanced planning with the Israeli side, a globalized context with a long urbanization process, and compromising the cultural heritage sites together with the agricultural sector.

Since the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 1994, the built-up area of existing crowded cities has almost doubled, along with the significant population growth and the daily migration of the residents from the nearby villages. Today the total population in Palestine is 4.42 million people, while in 1990 it was just 2 million and it is expected to grow to 6 million in 2025¹⁰. Palestine is also one of the most densely populated places in the Arab world, at 713 persons/sq-km in 2012 (with 4.505 persons/sq-km in Gaza Strip and 468 persons/sq-km in West Bank)¹¹.

This high rate of growth would clearly represent a great asset to the Country, but in the absence of adequate policy, an excessive amount of people would clash with the reduced size and resources of the current Palestinian territory, fragmented by separation walls and checkpoints.

¹⁰See: AA.VV; *Beyond the Arab awakening. Policies and investments for poverty reduction and food security*; International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI); Washington, DC; 2012.

¹¹Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics; *On the Eve of the International Population Day, 11/07/2012*.

However, mainly due to the changing and unstable political situation, even this rapid urbanization of last decades under the PNA missed any sort of planning and management, leading to uncontrolled city expansions and diffusion of urban sprawls within and around the cities; this, also flanked by a significant increase of scattered villages and rural communities, further highlighted the inefficiency of public transport sector, as also proved by the prevalent use of private cars (67% of the total transport system) with consequent increase of congestion and environmental pollution¹². The Oslo Agreement, with the division of the West Bank into A, B and C areas, severely limited available land, mostly concentrated in area C, pushing cities to expand vertically and worsening the housing shortage problem, resulting with an average of 6,4 people per housing unit¹³.

The unchecked urban and industrial growth is even a threat to landscapes, cultural and archaeological heritage, agricultural lands and environment.

In addition to its important economic role, the agricultural sector also contributes to the identity and cultural roots of the Country. Since 1990 the percentage of rural population in Palestine has dropped from 32% to 25%; however, it is still among the highest levels compared to a global scenario. Currently its potential for development is also limited by the lack of water and land resources. Because of the hot climate and the little amount of rain in the Jordan valley, about 99% of the cultivated land is irrigated and parts of it are salted. This is also worsened by the general inadequacy of water, electricity and sewerage infrastructure: in many cases the villages depend mainly on cesspits and cesspools and most of the collected wastewater is disposed of in open areas, agricultural areas, and wadis.

Over the last years, under the PNA government, housing and infrastructure projects witnessed major developments, focusing on new towns and on existing cities, as well as on the improvement of the existent road network through the planning of new infrastructures. Nevertheless, the instability due to the occupation has prevented such development.

The Regional Plan of 1998 proposed to strengthen the three main longitudinal axis, focusing on the central ridge through the creation of administrative centers along it, while also increasing urban development along the two lateral axes defined by the east and west edges, for both political and environmental reasons. Their connection would be guaranteed by the improvement of two east-west roads, one as the natural extension of Jerusalem, while the other parallel to the north. The project also aimed to consolidate the strategic role of each area, as well as to develop tourist routes between Jerusalem, Petra and the Egyptian pyramids.

The historical central ridge, with its intense urban conurbation, became then the main issue with The *Arc Project*, a research begun in 2003 by the *RAND Corporation*¹⁴ for a future Palestinian State with more than 6 million people, focused on the creation of a high-speed transport infrastructure corridor made by a fast railroad track, connecting Gaza with Jenin in 90 minutes, flanked by a highway, a toll road for trucking, as well as water, electricity, gas and telecommunication lines. In correspondence of the cities there would be several central stations surrounded by modern district centers and secondary transport systems, as links between the stations, the historic cores and the western rural landscapes. The eastern barren and empty areas of the Jordan Valley would be revived with new residential areas and modern technological and industrial clusters; while the western part would be related to archaeological and cultural heritage, traditional agriculture and natural sites¹⁵.

¹²Cfr. Transport Sector Strategy 2011-13 (data referring to 2009). Op. cit.

¹³Cfr. Urban Development and Planning in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: Impacts on Urban Form; Dr. Ali Abdelhamid, Ali Shaban Samara, An-Najah National University; 2006.

¹⁴The RAND is an American nonprofit institution consisting of a think tank from several disciplines.

¹⁵Cfr. *Towards sensible planning and development in Palestine*; Khalid Hussein; 2010. Cfr. also AAVV; *The arc: a formal structure for a Palestinian state*; RAND Corporation; Santa Monica; 2005.

According to some opinions¹⁶, this project shows several weak points, considering that the infrastructural axis, creating a deep rift in landscape, promotes an unbalanced development just for the main cities along the central ridge; 50% of the population is dispersed in hundreds of villages and much of the region is left to geopolitical risk, without any plan for the development of existing cities or new settlements.

The Arc Project has been partly considered for the subsequent strategic plan of MOP, defined *The Leaf*, aimed at improving the central north-south urbanized route up to become, as a result, a continuing *Arc* from Gaza until Haifa, designed to accommodate a significant population increase in the long term (50 million inhabitants by 2100); also this model provides the creation of two secondary urban axes: in a future redistribution of water, the eastern axis would develop its agricultural vocation, while the western axis, along the border with Israel, should promote an intense urbanization. A network of regional centers, defined both by existing cities and by new towns, would be developed following a complete coverage of the national territory; all scattered villages could become suburbs within a range of 15 kilometers from the closest urban center and their fertile agricultural lands would be developed by enhancing rainwater collection and economizing water consumption. Each existing city would increase its density, preventing uncontrolled urban sprawl, as well as its functional vocation: for Jenin, Qualquilya and Tulkarm the main vocation could be agriculture and commerce; Nablus would improve its role as a commercial and educational center; the main activity of Hebron is related to industry and administrative center; while Betlehem and Jericho, with their archeological and cultural heritage, are mainly identified as touristic centers¹⁷. Congestioned cities such as Nablus would develop decentralization strategies creating smaller satellite centers.

Over the last years the PNA started a new phase of planning, leading to the *National Development Plan (NDP) 2011 - 2013*¹⁸, where the highest priority remains the independent State of Palestine, based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as capital. In this vision PNA developed a master plan for a national railroad linking historic cities to Jordan Valley and then to the railways of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as well as a light rail connecting Gaza and West Bank. Also, new neighborhoods are under construction in many cities, as well as housing programs with affordable mortgage financing.

In the last years some planning strategies were also developed, in relation with possible peace scenarios with Israel, considering shared needs and the integration between Palestinian and Israeli networks.

A recent project, following this approach, regards the plan for al-Lajun, a future Arab town to be developed in northern Israel, on the site where a village of the same name stood until 1948: the housing is planned to be Western-style, for serving modern requirements, but the town center is planned in the traditional Palestinian style, with low buildings, domes, stones and cobbles. What is significant is that the plan, embracing a future of coexistence, foresees an industrial zone developed as joint project with Jewish communities, in order to strenghten the local economy through the influence and interaction with a external economies for the building of a more global economical dimension.

The Longue Durée: Looking the Past for Building the Future Glocal Dimension

The different political and settlement strategies of the late century and the violence of the ongoing conflicts were reflected on urban and rural landscapes, leading to situations where any previous identity of place seemed to have been lost.

¹⁶Interview with Ahmad Saleh, Director of National Spatial Planning, MOP Ministry of Planning.

¹⁷Interview with Ahmad Saleh, Op. Cit.

¹⁸Cfr. *National Development Plan 2011-2013, Establishing the State, Building our Future*; PNA; Ministry of Planning and Administrative Development; April 2011.

However, this covers only the surface of territorial conformations: underneath the current urban sprawl lie ancient structures of the deep-rooted history of Palestine, paradigms of life, history and civilization, playing a key role in establishing a sense of belonging within a community.

The complexity and richness of these layered landscapes, reflecting an environment of great ecology, culture and history, requires then a sensitive territorial reading, based on the historical standpoint that, by investigating the changing settlements scenarios in their relation to physical geography, could bring back to life such structural characters and aspects of permanence, as strong lines of continuity for the present landscape. The multiethnic and multicultural nature of Palestine, centre of innumerable civilisations and crossed by major trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia, makes this land a cosmopolitan cornerstone of both Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern cultures, as well as the focus for several interests, being also Holy Land for Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Here tradition and historical memory, defining the urban structure in its historical construction, become primary aspects for defining a development model that, besides a global Western standard of forced modernization, could reevaluate the historic built heritage and traditional practices¹⁹.

This can clearly be observed in the ancient and consolidated relationship between infrastructure networks and urban structures: unlike the great rivers of Mesopotamia and Egypt, which centralised large territories under vast empires, the Jordan river favored a network of independent city-states along the main routes, based on agriculture and trade. Three main urbanised north-south axes define this structure: the first is characterized by the coastal city ports along the Via Maris; the second is defined by major cities along the Ridge Route, an ideal trade route on the watershed line of the central mountain chain; then the ground lowers suddenly, forming a depressed area that cuts vertically all Palestine, where two geological rifts meet in the Jordan river. Following to the east, the ancient Via Regia identifies the inner urbanized axis of the desert cityports. As seen with the latest planning strategies under PNA, even today the urban pattern mostly follows the ancient corridors of connection that still today, although fragmented by several cuts, characterize the backbone of the existing road networks.

Besides such infrastructural aspects, even rural landscapes characterize integral parts of the local identity of the place: until the beginning of XX century, travellers always mentioned the richness of the Jordan valley, for the abundance of commercial goods, the taste of the fruits, the soap and oil factories. With the advent of Islam new products were introduced in this land, as cotton, sugarcane and citrus fruits. In the 1850s and 1860s new immigrant communities introduced innovative agriculture techniques and farm machinery: the production of orange groves quadrupled, leading from a traditional agricultural economy, based on olive trees, to an intensive export economy. Oranges became the largest Palestinian export item. The situation today is very different. The words of Shehadeh are very significant in this regard: *"Most of our greengrocers come from the area of Hebron. This morning I noticed that fruits and vegetables now come from Israel. The Palestinian Authority does not help farmers, rather than charge them when the price of gasoline is so high that the cost of product transport from the farm to the nearest market has become prohibitive. While the security budget amounts to 35%, agriculture receives a mere 2%."*

The advent of Islam represents then a crucial moment for the territorial transformations, not only for agrarian landscapes but particularly for the urban ones, defined by the early development of great cities along major trade routes and often close to consolidated towns, forming integral part of an overall Islamic urban network, where the city becomes the place par excellence and the territory becomes the negation of space, plot of caravan routes connecting the various cities.

¹⁹Esempi di Architettura n°7 (magazine): Elisa Palazzo; Rehabilitation planning in the historical towns of the occupied Palestinian territory. Edited by Il Prato.

The urban layout of these ancient cities represents various historical moments: the roman traces of *cardo*, *decumanus*, theatres, hippodromes and gymnasiums, merge together with narrow lanes, stone houses, arches, mosques, shrines and hammams. Here, geography of religion and trade merge together in a mutual compenetration, as still well readeable through the presence of grinders, suks, soap factories, oil and wheat mills, orange warehouses, food industries, khans and fountains along the main urban routes, as well as cemeteries, belonging to different communities. Also the role of sunlight, a key element of Islamic architecture, is still well readeable in these old cities, as a guide to the hierarchy of spaces filtered from bright light to dark: from the squares, where light and heat prevent the associative life, passing through the bazaars, where the amount of light, coming from the overlying wells, is defined according to the importance and the section of every road, until reaching the blinds cul de sac that lead to the private sphere of the houses, where only the owner knows how to move.

The built environment of many of these ancient Islamic cities has a unique architectural quality, able to meet the social, cultural and economic needs of its inhabitants, integrating urban development with their lifestyle. In the light of such great rooted culture, planning for a future glocal dimension, both in existing and new towns, should then be led by an opposite approach which, unlike the globalized current trends, would find its design principles from a thorough understanding of the old urban fabric and its evolution, retrieving a layered structure that allowed the permanence of a certain architecture over time and finally wisely merging such rich and consolidate local culture with international and modern structures. Actually the project of Rawabi still presents many deficiencies under this point of view. Nonetheless, as stated by N. Feldman in his analysis, Rawabi has emotional resonance, because it draws on the tradition of realist utopia, a fact on the ground that contradicts the apparent impossibility of peace; in the absence of a peace agreement, it is being built as though peace has already arrived. In this sense then Rawabi is not a solution, but it is a start²⁰; of course it could be a long process, as often happens when actions depend also by external forces, in this case the Israeli occupation, but it's very important to start laying this groundwork.

Such process, to give the best results, should also develop in conjunction with the promotion of the greatest social wealth in Palestine, that is related to its Human Development Index (HDI): Palestinian HDI is 0.67 (the country's rank is 110 out of 187 countries), calculated with respect to three parameters, health, education and income. However, while income shows a very low value, health and education are quite higher. Moreover Palestine has an extremely young population: in 2011 people in the 0-14 year age group was 42% of the total population, while people over 65 years was just 2.9%. Also the annual average growth rate of population, compared with Europe for example, shows very good data, being in 2000-2011 +2.7²¹. Human capital in Palestine, with so many highly educated and underemployed young people, is then by far the greatest and most precious Palestine's socio-economic asset. Such richness, if well directed with appropriate investment in education and with incentives to keep young people in the country, could complete the picture outlined above, leading the Palestinian Territories towards a future social and urban development, built through an innovative knowledge-based economy.

²⁰What Pope Francis Missed in Palestine 1 MAY 27, 2014 Noah Feldman

²¹In the EU, people in 0-14 year age is 16%, people over 65 is 18% and the growth rate is +0,4 (WDI).