Emerging trends in urbanizing Palestine: Neglected city-builders beyond the occupation

Abstract

In this article, we draw attention to trends in land transformation in the West Bank since the Second Intifada, after which a surge of investment from Gulf countries entered Palestine, almost exclusively in the West Bank. The occupied Palestinian territories have attracted a great deal of attention from media and academics, yet the vast majority of scholarship has focused on the conflict and the variety of social, economic, and political repercussions of the on-going Israeli occupation. While the occupation has undeniably serious impacts on every aspect of life for Palestinians, the near-exclusive focus on the conflict means that significant new trends that have emerged over the past decade in Palestine, such as urban mega-developments and emerging market-based urbanisation processes, have been largely overlooked. This article provides a preliminary overview of urban changes underway in the West Bank, with a particular focus on urban mega-developments and major projects in Area A, the only territory controlled exclusively by the Palestinian Authority. We outline three directions for future research: the assemblage of local and international "neglected city-builders" shaping current urbanization processes in Palestine; the domestic and international ideas, policies, and norms circulating in the West Bank; and the social, spatial, economic, and other impacts of these new urban developments.

Key words: urban development; West Bank; mega-development; Palestine; policy circulation; globalisation

Land transformation in Palestine: Shaped by, and in spite of, the occupation

Palestine's presence in the media is as a conflict-ridden, open-air prison under a seven-decade long occupation, as well as a playground for international diplomacy and the development-aid industry. A large and growing body of research examines the varied impacts of the conflict and military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza on territorial transformations. After the 1967 Six-Day War, the expansion of networks of settlements, by-pass roads, natural protection areas, and no-go military zones has played a fundamental part in configuring and reinforcing a long-lasting "civilian" occupation over Gaza and the West Bank, jeopardising the possibility of a future Palestinian state (Segal, Tartakover, & Weizman, 2003; Weizman, 2012). Planning tools and gray zones in legislation and treaties have been used deliberately by the occupiers as a tool for control

and geo-political maneuvers (Jabareen, 2010; Yiftachel, 2009), while leaving a marginal space for resistance and an extremely limited capacity for counter-planning in areas B and C (Allegra, 2016; Zeid & Thawaba, 2018).

The vast majority of urban academic papers about Palestine published over the past decade focus on the conflict, particularly on how it has impacted Palestinians' health and access to health services (Ahmad *et al.*, 2018), security and surveillance (Zureik, Lyon, and Abu-Laban, 2010), im/mobility and public space (Aouragh, 2011; Tawil-Souri, 2011; Boussauw and Vanin, 2018), and how the conflict has exacerbated social and spatial inequalities and fragmentation (Fenster, 2018) and perpetuated colonial legacies (Hanafi, 2009). While it is necessary to acknowledge the profound injustices, violence, and systematic undermining of basic human rights that Palestinians experience under the Israeli occupation, emerging new urban phenomena are left underexamined through the exclusive focus on the conflict. In particular, recent scholarship provides little insight into current trends in urbanisation that are shaping the unprecedented urban development in the main Palestinian cities in the West Bank, most notably around the de-facto capital of Ramallah and the main economic centers of Nablus and Hebron, but also in more provincial towns like Jericho and Jenin. Thus, despite being in the academic spotlight for decades, Palestine is a relatively unknown place when it comes to the comprehension of "ordinary" processes of urban transformation. There is a growing body of evidence on the ground[1] that demonstrates a variety of emerging trends at the intersection of wider phenomena of globalisation, modernisation, and social changes in developing countries and the Arab world in particular, and movements originating locally. Drawing on several recent strands of current urban studies scholarship, we argue that more attention must be paid to neglected city-builders in Palestine and to how urban transformations in the West Bank, while shaped by the occupation, are occurring in spite of it.

A closer observation of new processes of urbanisation in Palestine is necessary not only to understand the specific trends emerging in the West Bank despite the occupation, but, in a broader sense, to better appreciate the effects of globalisation and the related spread of city-building practices to the "periphery" of the developing world. Since Saskia Sassen's (1991) seminal work on the "global city", scholarly attention has

concentrated on the effects of globalisation in large metropolitan centers, primarily in developed countries and secondarily in emerging economies, privileging a "metrocentric" perspective that tends to focus on the core of first-class global centers (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010). Minor urban centers, regional capitals, and economically peripheral countries continue to be overlooked, being implicitly relegated to the role of marginal areas, "failed" global centers, or residual remnants of a prior world, minimally touched by the forces of expanding globalisation. In response, a growing body of scholarship emphasizes the necessity of looking "off the map" (Robinson, 2002) to less-traveled regions outside of global centers, as exemplified in essays in Roy and Ong's book (2011) on "worlding cities" in Asia. This scholarship urges us to re-focus our attention from the core to the periphery to examine overshadowed phenomena and places in order to understand the wide variety of urban practices that develop on the fringes of the global world-core, the "ordinary" urbanity where the majority of people live.

In this paper, we argue that analyses of urban change in the West Bank can productively extend beyond colonial and postcolonial perspectives, which focus on the conflict and occupation within a classic critique of western imperialism. We provide a brief overview of current urban trends in the West Bank and outline three possible directions for future research on urban Palestine beyond the occupation: the assemblage of "neglected city-builders" who are actively transforming the West Bank under the radar of researchers; the ideas, policies, and norms circulating domestically and transnationally that are shaping recent urban development; and the social, spatial, economic, and other impacts of these new urban developments.

Between global and local: An overview of current urban trends in the West Bank

The end of the Second Intifada in 2008 marked a major turning point in urban transformation trends in Palestine. Before that, apart from a failed large real estate development following the 1993 Oslo agreement in Area A, land transformation around the larger cities consisted mainly of small-scale development. The typical process involved the subdivision of small tracts of land in periurban areas into 10-20 plots according to basic building regulations dating back to the 1921 and 1936 Town Planning Ordinances crafted under the British Mandate (El-Eini, 2004). Those plots were

subsequently sold to private owners for independent construction or to small developers who build small apartment buildings for a predominantly local market.

Following the Second Intifada, this rather simple process of urban transformation started to change when capital began to pour into Palestine from Gulf countries, particularly Qatar (Wildeman and Tartir, 2014). At the same time, a large influx of money from international donors led to the emergence of a growing Palestinian middle class, who, after the instability of the Second Intifada, craved a sense of normalcy. Unlike Israel, Palestine is not a "start-up" country with a booming tech sector, and there is little local industrial production. The economy in the West Bank is based largely on tourism (particularly to Bethlehem and Jericho), agriculture, small retail businesses, and the construction sector. Construction is less subject to restrictions on import/export from Israelis because it relies on local labor (many unskilled, seasonal workers) and local materials (the West Bank is a net exporter of construction materials such as white limestone and concrete). Gulf investment targeted primarily real estate construction, resulting in a construction boom in and around Ramallah. Starting in the early 2010s, speculation, increasingly limited land, and ballooning prices have resulted in an oversupply of middle- to upper-income apartments[2] and a shortage of affordable housing.

In this context, various trends in the urban transformation process are emerging on the ground, especially around large urban areas (Ramallah but also Nablus and Jericho, for tourism and leisure), promoted by international investors with local partners, or as an evolution of traditional city-building practices by local established actors. These urban developments are occurring at three main scales (Figure 1) : 1) internationally-backed private urban mega-projects with international capital such as Rawabi, the first master-planned city in Palestine (Khalidi and Samour, 2011), and Jericho Gate, a luxury real estate and leisure destination underway near the Dead Sea; 2) medium-size projects with local/regional developers, such as the new Ramallah neighbourhood of Al-Reehan; Moon City, a housing development on the outskirts of Jericho for 20,000 residents; and Al-Ersal Center, a mixed-use development in central Ramallah with a shopping mall and housing; 3) the continued evolution of traditional small-scale developments in major urban areas and medium-size centers, which are producing new typologies and styles that reflect the changing tastes of the emerging middle-class.
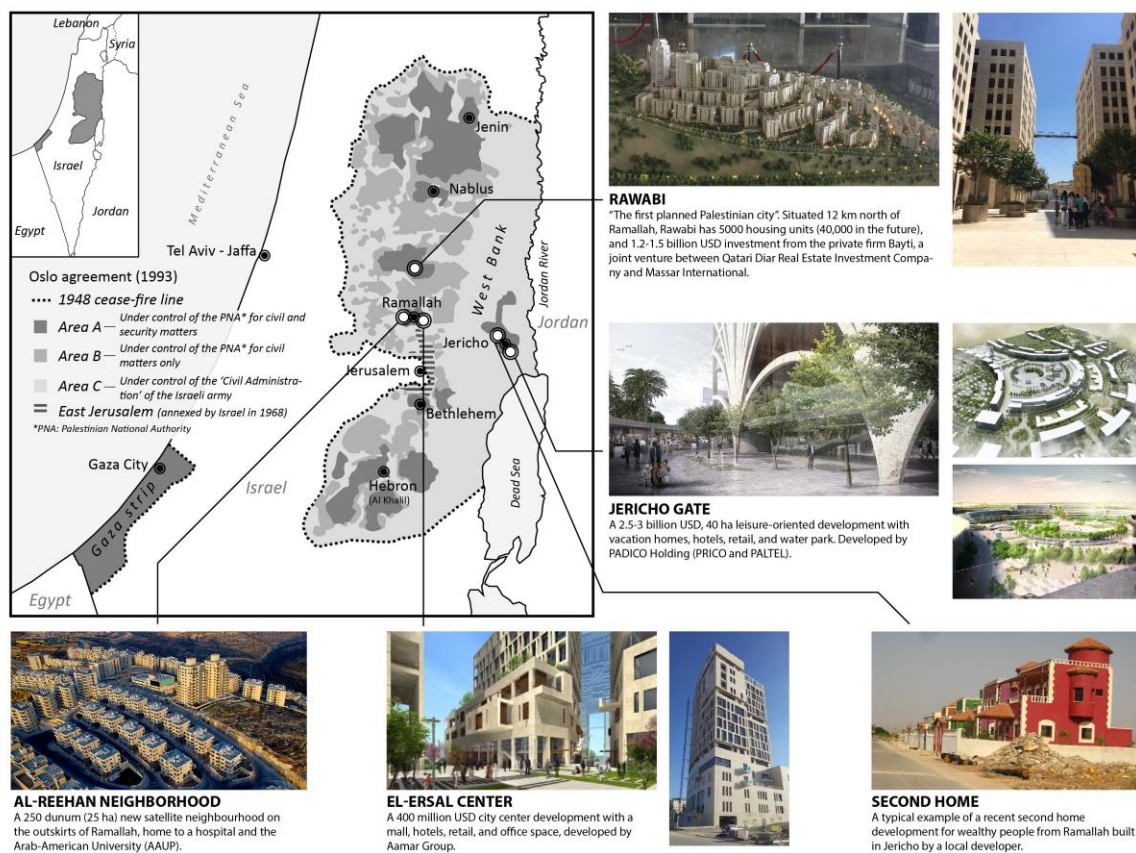
Figure 1: Some recent urban developments in Palestine around Ramallah and Jericho.

"Neglected city builders", networks of influence, and "indigenous modernity"

Conventional critical postcolonial approaches posit that capital flows, macro-economics, and geopolitical factors shape the way cities are built in contexts of inequal power relations. While such approaches shed light on the macro perspective and the growing impact of the financialization of city development processes, they overlook the fact that cities are actually built somewhere, by an assemblage of major and minor actors who actively engage in complex processes taking place in a particular social, juridical, economic, and political environment. If we want to gain an understanding of the current urban trends and complex city-making processes beyond the occupation, more research is needed, particularly in three main directions.

First, further research into the variety of actors involved in the city-building process would reveal the complex assemblages of foreign and domestic city-builders and their various motivations for involvement. In the Palestinian context, more research is needed on the "neglected city-builders" (Haila, 1997)—contractors, developers, design consultants, policy-makers, planners, tenants, homebuyers, landowners, and more—who, through their own strategic positioning, preferences, and priorities, contribute to the shaping and structuring of urbanisation in Palestine and elsewhere. Whatever their motivations (profit, "modernisation" and "development" goals, geopolitical positioning), city-builders are innovating the way Palestinian cities are conceived, designed, built, and marketed.

Second, recent urban development in Palestine needs to be situated within the broader transnational circulations of ideas, urban policies, and norms (McCann, 2011; Nasr and Volait, 2003; Healey, 2010), and attention needs to be paid to the ongoing changes within Palestinian society, particularly the actors and institutions through which global trends are reinterpreted and adapted locally. Urbanisation is not only a matter of economics and capital flows, but a set of processes that mobilize ideas, imaginaries, models drawn from a set of references and previous experiences (Lieto, 2015). What urban "success stories" (Bunnell, 2015) or imaginaries are being promoted in Palestine and by whom? How do recent urban projects in Palestine connect to global and regional trends in real estate investment (Rogers, 2016; Shatkin, 2017), land grabbing, and the foreignization of space (Zoomers, *et al*., 2017)? Understanding how new practices are adopted and developed within a complex network of reciprocal influences among groups of local and international city-builders is fundamental to appreciate the multiple factors that advance or normalize particular visions of modernity and development found in current urban trends. Mobilizing "foreign models" of housing, urban design, and urban planning is not just an act of surrendering to market-based neoliberal imperatives or a capitalist ethos (Grandinetti, 2015) but is also an expression of the "will to improve" through modernisation and innovation in city-building practices (Li, 2007).

Researchers must situate recent developments in Palestine not only in relation to global trends such as the financialization of real estate (Moser, 2018) and its effect on urban planning policies in the North as well as in the Global South (Savini & Aalbers,

2016), the privatization of urban space in new urban developments (Moser, *et al*., 2015), the proliferation of urban spectacles (Elsheshtawy, 2009) and "world class" aspirations (Ghertner, 2015), the rise of entrepreneurial and "predatory" cities (Datta and Shaban, 2016; Rizzo, 2018) and the transnational circulation of urban ideas, but also as a continuous part of the historically-rooted local genealogy of evolving practices. Changes in practices among a wide body of actors does not necessarily come overnight solely from outside, but are always shaped by local forces and innovations in a changing political, social, and economic environment. The paradigm of a "traditional" immutable society corrupted by a westernized, neo-liberal, profit-driven modernity overlook complex "indigenous local modernities" (Hosagrahar, 2005) situated at the intersection of local and global trends that are shaping not only Palestine but many contemporary Arab cities (Elsheshtawy, 2008). In this regard, efforts to understand recent urban trends must be framed at the intersection of a multifaced landscape of local and global factors: the intricate political situation of Palestine with its bifurcated leadership and its complicated relationship with Israel, the unstable and complex community of international donors, the influx of foreign capital and expertise (Author, 2019), the constant changes within local society, and the emergence of a dynamic local entrepreneurial class.

Third, attention needs to be paid to the social, spatial, economic, and other impacts of these new urban developments and how large-scale land investments are taking shape on the ground (Zoomers and Otsuki, 2017), with a focus on "specificity, context, and process" (Kanna 2017: 45). What new socio-spatial fragmentation practices are being created (Bunnell and Das, 2010), and to what extent are they purposefully left out of seductive urban visioning processes (Côté-Roy and Moser, 2018) in the West Bank? To what extent are recent urban developments addressing urgent problems in Palestine, including housing shortages, high housing costs, and unemployment, and to what extent are they exacerbating these problems? Future research needs to explore how the influx of Gulf investment in Palestinian real estate is producing winners and losers through new geographies of exclusion, how projects are being interpreted and adapted locally, and how people from different socio-economic classes in Palestinian society are responding to these projects.

Conclusion

The three directions for future research outlined above are intended to provide a starting place for researchers who aim to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary urban development in Palestine as a complex, contradictory, evolving place that is connected to global phenomena. While current urban development is shaped by the conflict in important ways, some changes are occurring in parallel to and in spite of the conflict and can be productively investigated beyond postcolonial frameworks. Examining these changes, particularly the impacts of urban investment from the Gulf, potentially complicates the occupier / occupied dichotomy, itself a form of Orientalism that treats Palestine as a fixed, mono-dimensional vision of the "East" (Said, 1995), while unsettling assumptions that Israel is the sole external actor shaping the Palestinian territories.

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[1] This article draws on half a dozen fieldwork visits the authors made to the West Bank over the past several years, as well as a recent 18-month period in which one of the authors worked in a planning office in Jericho. Some of this research is published or forthcoming (author, 2019).

[2] Over 25,000 units are estimated to be unsold in a city of around 150,000 inhabitants (Official Palestinian Authority TV, 2016).