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Palestinian firm builds cul-de-sac dream community

By Edmund Sanders

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Rawabi, the first master-planned project for Arabs in the West Bank, is audacious, risky and perhaps still part fantasy.

RAWABI, West Bank — Rising over some craggy hills north of Ramallah is the most audacious, expensive and risky experiment to date in Palestinian state-building: the West Bank's first master-planned community for Arabs.

Past the construction site of the new industrial park and beyond the half-built 8,000-seat amphitheater, dozens of mid-rise apartment buildings are nearly completed, as is a downtown space, slated to feature office towers, movie theaters, an open-air shopping mall and a grand outdoor staircase leading to neighborhoods on the hills below.

Already 600 mostly young, middle-class Palestinian families have purchased units, priced from \$60,000 to \$200,000, in the first phase of the \$1-billion development known as Rawabi, the Arabic word for "hills."

Upon its projected completion in 2020, the newly incorporated Palestinian city of Rawabi is to include 23 neighborhoods, 6,000 homes and 40,000 residents.

"We are creating history," said Amir Dajani, deputy managing director of Bayti Real Estate Investment Co., the firm backing the project.

But first Rawabi — which has been frequently held out as a model for future Palestinian independence — will need to overcome cost overruns, construction delays, lackluster government support and disputes with Israel over roads and water that still threaten to delay its opening.

"It's not the best place to do business," said Bashar Masri, chairman of Massar International, who dreamed up what has become the largest Palestinian real estate development.

Though it's a for-profit venture (two-thirds owned by the Qatari government's real estate investment arm), he said the impetus was social and political.

"Every Palestinian has a duty to participate in nation-building," said Masri, dressed in jeans and a polo shirt that attest to his years spent in the U.S. as a chemical engineering student at Virginia Tech.

In Bayti's state-of-the-art showroom, would-be buyers stroll through scaled-down models of Rawabi streets, watch a 3-D video and visit a design center to peruse options for bathroom fixtures, kitchen cabinets and the wood grain of the front door. Five competing mortgage lenders in glass cubicles vie for the chance to pre-qualify borrowers.

It's a far cry from the usual Palestinian home purchasing experience, where transactions are mostly cash and buyers often must install their own kitchens, electrical fixtures and sometimes even the windows.

Developers say the goal is to create a new kind of Palestinian city, without the overcrowding, traffic jams, illegal renovations and clashing architectural styles seen in major cities like nearby Ramallah.

It's part of a blossoming Palestinian middle-class and is drawing car dealers, international retailers and possibly even Swedish furniture retailer **Ikea**, which is rumored to be considering a West Bank store.

Rawabi is meant to look like a Western-style master-planned community, with parks, dead-end streets to reduce traffic noise, and separate business districts.

Electricity and phone lines are underground and the entire city is wired for high-speed Internet, a first in the West Bank. Unsightly

rooftop water tanks are banned. Some roads will be made of brick or tile to discourage speeding.

Developers say they drew inspiration from master-planned communities in the U.S., Dubai and — though they don't like to admit it — Israeli settlements built on West Bank territory that Palestinians hope to one day make part of their own state.

Developers bristle a bit at any comparison to the settlements, saying they've been careful to put a Palestinian stamp on the city. Architecture is Arab-inspired with plenty of archways, terraces and balconies that evoke downtown Beirut. There are even narrow, winding alleyways snaking behind the shopping arcade to recreate the feel of an Arab souk.

"But there are no red-tiled roofs and no gates," said Ramzi Jaber, commercial manager of the project, referring to common features of Jewish settlements. "Rawabi will be an open city." Well, mostly open.

www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/middleeast/la-fg-palestinian-community-20130808,0,1708207,print.story

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