

# The Impact of Neoliberal Economy on the Urban Morphology of Rafidia Neighborhood in Nablus City-Palestine

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**Abstract:** Rafidia, the today's modern neighborhood in the city of Nablus- Palestine was a small village before 1963 when it was annexed to the city of Nablus. The neighborhood's urban morphology has transformed since that time, however the major transformation in the urban morphology of the neighborhood was after the year 2009 when the Palestinian government adapted the neoliberal economy that changed the urban landscape in the whole Palestinian cities, however this paper is going to study this impact on the neighborhood of Rafidia. The aim of this paper is to prove (analyze and criticize) the role of economy and in particular the neo-liberal economy in producing and transforming the various urban forms/morphology in the neighborhood that through the impact of the socio economic conditions managed to realize the current form of the neighborhood.

In order to read and analyze the neighborhood of Rafidia an analysis of the morphological aspects will be done so as to understand. The implemented methodology includes direct observations via site visits, fieldwork, documentation of all existing streets and buildings, and surveys of the existing literature related to the subject. An analytical approach based on the Conzenian School has been applied to analyse the urban form, spatial layout and configuration of the Neighborhood.

## 1. Introduction

Nablus city urban fabric is consisted of a mix of different historical and architectural layers, including the roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods. The old center was founded during the Roman period and continued to be inhabited till now. The city went through several colonial and occupation powers since the defeat of the Ottoman empire and the start of the British mandate in 1917, followed by the Jordanian control of the part of Palestine including Nablus till 1967 when the Israeli occupation controlled the whole of Palestine including Nablus. The Israeli occupation lasted to 1994 when the Palestinian Authority was founded (Al-Nimr, 1938).

Administratively, the Palestinian lands have been subjected to a mixture of different laws and rules of different regimes such as the Turkish, the British, the Jordanian and the Israeli. During the British mandate the British city planning law including about 17 laws had been applied mainly in Jerusalem and Nablus. During the Jordanian period, however, some laws were

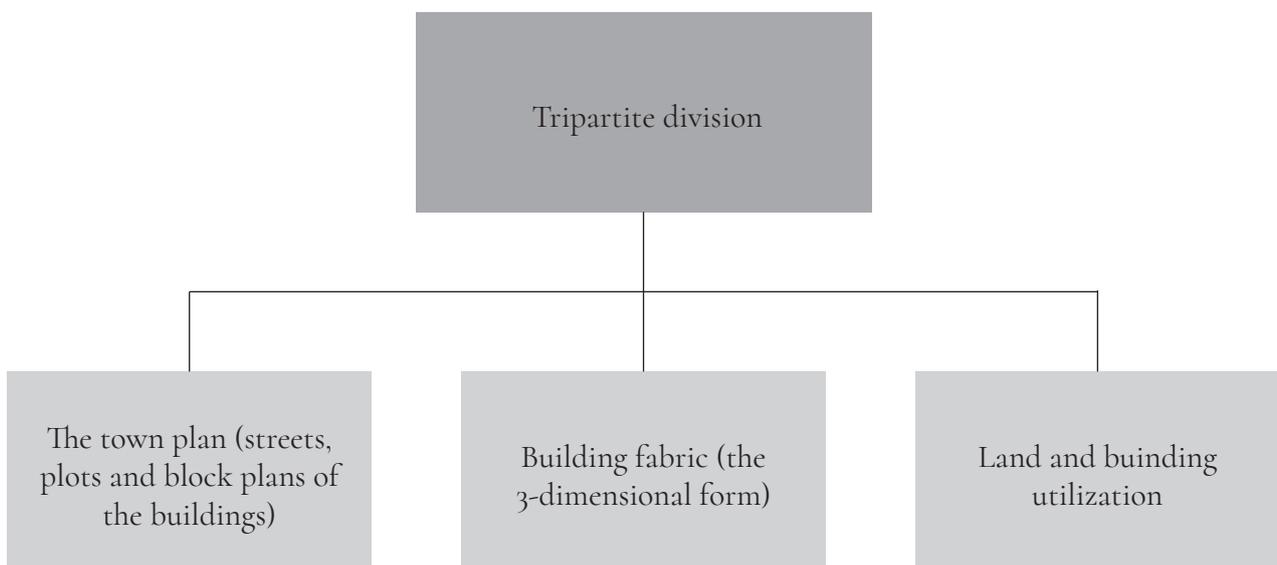
released such as the city planning law of 1933 and other laws pertaining to building planning in villages and cities. Other laws were introduced like the planning law of 1966, which is still used in West Bank with some modifications.

In 1963 during the Jordanian period, the master plan of Nablus was expanded to the east and west to include many rural areas including Rafidia village. The aim of this research paper is to investigate the urban transformations of Rafidia and its relation to the economic forces affecting the new city neighbourhood.

## 2. Research Methodology

The methodology for this study passed in three phases, the first phase includes a study of the urban development of Rafidia neighborhood, the second phase concentrates on morphological analysis of the neighborhood based on Conzenian morphogenetic school which put forward a tripartite division of urban morphology: the town plan (streets, plots and block plans of the buildings), building fabric and land and buildings utilization (Conzen, 1960), this phase includes analysis of the main components of the urban form (plot-street-building). The third phase discusses Rafidia morphology dialectics with context concentrating on the economic changes.

Conzen's morphological approach considers land uses, building structures and plot and street patterns to be the most important aspects and emphasises the differences in the persistence of these elements. Buildings, particularly the land uses they accommodate, are usually the least resilient elements. Whereas the street plan tends to be the most enduring element, the plot pattern changes over time, as individual plots are subdivided or amalgamated (Conzen, 1960; Carmona, 2001). In his theory Conzen developed a logical system of explanation, which can lead to an incisive and nuanced understanding of the relationship between urban communities and the physical fabric they create and recreate around them as social needs change over time (Conzen, 2009).



Graphic 1. Source: Conzen, 1960, p. 4.

Finally this paper aims to investigate the relation between the urban form and the economy, according to Oliveira (2016) most of research on the relationship between urban form and economy adopts macro scale of analysis. He refers to UN-Habitat recent report as a good example of study that offers a literature review on the economics of urban form (UN-Habitat, 2015). The report addresses two major characteristics of urban form at the macro scale, density and centrality. However, this paper will concentrate on reading the transformations of urban form at the micro level in the context of the economic changes.

### 3. Analysis and Findings

#### 3.1. Rafidia Urban Development and Urban Transformations

##### *Period between (1963- 1993)*

With Rafidia joining Nablus municipality boundaries, more attention has been given to the roads and infrastructure. The master plan of Nablus expanded in 1963 to the east and west to include many rural areas with area of 18400 dunum, such as Rafidia (figure 1). However, only some blocks (around 6) of Rafidia were joined, while the rest of 11 blocks that formed Rafidia were all included in municipality borders by 1966 (Dawoud, 2003). Later on, the development of streets network and infrastructure to the west contributed to the growth of building movement towards Rafidia (Khalil, 2005) and connected the area more to the urban fabric of Nablus. This growth caused the up rise of more varied uses like commercial buildings especially on the sides of main street, or mixed use buildings.

Moreover, this period was the beginning of vertical expansion and the rise of high buildings in the area without supervision and regulation, and the heights were unevenly combined with each other. But this did not have a significant impact on the urban composition by then, due to the relatively low density of the building compared to the current situation, where the population of Rafidia recorded by 1961 was 922 and the change was slight until 1982 with 1200 person (Abu Hajar, 2003).

In light of the political changes of this period and the absence of structural plans and appropriate planning laws, most of the expansion was random and unthought-of, contributing to the creation of a structured environment of an unorganized nature. There was no regulation of uses so that residential and commercial uses were mixed.

However, 80s witnessed the emergence of different type of buildings, where multistoried buildings have spread over the agricultural land. 15% of high buildings in Rafidia nowadays date back to the period between 60s and 80s. After that, between 80s and 90s was the beginning of urban boom in the area, where more houses, villas, and high buildings appeared, and 60% of high buildings were constructed (Dawoud, 2003).

##### *Period between (1994- 2009)*

By following the most important events of this period, the entry of the Palestinian Authority by signing Oslo accords is considered the most influential on the development of Palestinian cities as mentioned before. The impact was evident on the urban composition of Nablus city, where economic development has been accompanied by many urban and social changes. In addition to the political circumstances and division of land into A, B, and C that resulted of

limited access to land and land scarcity. The latter issue impeded a natural horizontal expansion of the city, which forced the vertical direction and helped the emergence of high buildings.

Moreover, topography was a natural barricade in the face of the expansion that was moving towards the mountains and high slopes on both sides of the Nablus plain, making it difficult to pave the ground for construction and excavation of the mountains to create areas suitable for construction. This limitation of topography made it more economically beneficial to go towards multistoried building type, where larger number of units produced on the small area of land that needs less excavation. During the second part of the 90s, building spread in most of Rafidia, particularly in the west, south and center, and along the main street.

Most of the development was in the residential sector due to the classification of land for residential use. As pressure on land increased due to large urbanization and high prices, vertical expansion increased and high buildings were overshadowed.

In 2006, the new campus of An Najah national university was opened close to Rafidia (on bait Wazan blocks) (figure 1), which had a significant role to attract people like employees and their families, students, and developers/investors to the area. This means higher demand on residential and commercial buildings, where developers started to pay more attention for investing there and establishing high buildings to keep up with population increase. The demand increased vastly on apartments in Rafidia; accordingly prices increased 106% in 2006 from 1980 (Omran, 2008). By 2015, buildings covered most parts of Rafidia and built up area density increased.

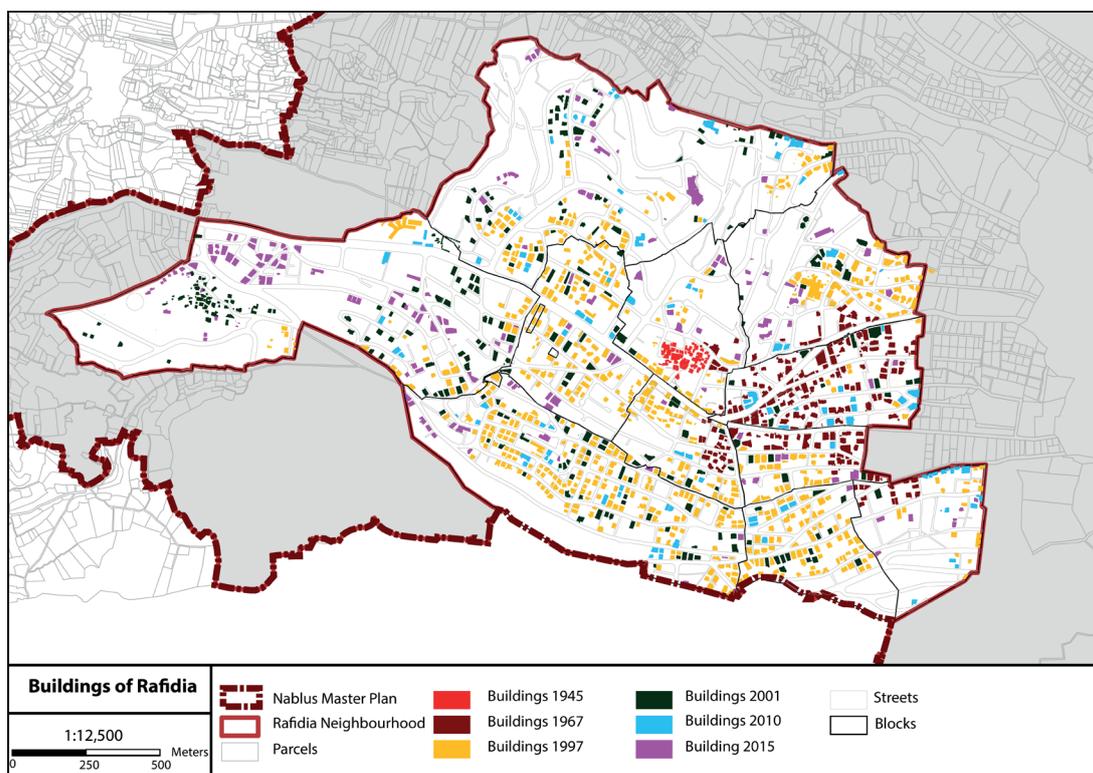


Figure 1. Rafidia buildings 1942-1967-1997-2010-2015. Source: authors based on master students filed work.

*Period between (2009-2018)*

In 2009, the Palestinian government adapted the Neoliberal economy; the increase of investments in the construction sector has been significant. Construction works spread everywhere in Nablus city and in particular in Rafidia Neighborhood, in an unprecedented manner and fueled a process of land speculation that affected the prices of Real Estate significantly. In the last decades of the twentieth century, real estate development in the occupied Palestinian cities was confined to individual investments when means were available to expand outside family houses on privately owned and inherited properties. Wealthy persons used to invest in buying plots of lands in central areas then construct small commercial buildings; prices of land were growing steadily but slowly. Rental housing market was quite limited due to the slow pace of urbanization and the limited influx of internal/external migration to the main Palestinian cities (Zawawi/Abu Hammad, 2019).

Small and big real estate agents started to appear in the neighborhood and worked as major transformers of urban landscape. The neighborhood lost many of its landscape features and underwent a process of socio-economic change. In this context, a speculative environment was a driving force behind a large increase in land prices. The empty plots of land became the best commodity in the city (Costa, 2009, 181), as reflected later on in the construction units' prices.

On the other hand, urban planning authorities in the Palestinian cities have had a long hand in facilitating this construction boom by easing issuing building permits without having a proper quality control or respect to the geomorphology of each city. In addition, buildings' codes and bylaws deal in the same level with all urban and rural contexts, such bylaws are derived from previous planning codes inherited from the successive different administrations (Ottoman, British, Jordanian, Israeli) knowing that these codes were mostly issued in a top down approach where the benefit of the authorities was put on top Zawawi/Abu Hammad, 2019). In addition, the successive various administrations have affected the current building and planning Palestinian system (Abdelhamid, 2006, 14) leading to create chaotic urban sprawl land areas that are accessed by specific rich groups of the society. In consequence, regulations allowed 7 floors buildings in this area after some changes in land use in 2013. This reflects the argument of Maclaran/Kelly concerning forging "a strategic alliance between urban planning authorities, the economic growth lobby and property development, reinventing both the image and reality of the city, helping to create an urban landscape which was iconographic of economic success, growth and change". (Maclaran/Kelly, 2014, 12).

The Palestinian Authority had also important contributions in shaping the physical appearance of the city of Nablus and Rafidia in particular, by changing property laws and zoning regulations to allow individual ownership of units in apartment buildings and construction of multi-story buildings (Zawawi/Abu Hammad, 2019). The skyline of Rafidia has changed dramatically in the decade following Neoliberal economy adaptation which transformed the urban morphology of the neighborhood in terms of its dimensions and plan unit. This will be discussed in the next section by discussing the transformation of urban morphology as a result of economy.

*3.2. Morphogenetic analysis*

The analysis of current town plan of Rafidia which is transformed as a result of neoliberal economic approach after 2009 requires to study Streets, plots and buildings as the main features of plan unit that Conzen have developed, where it deal with each element of plan unit and its relation to the same category, such as streets and their arrangement within street system, as well as other elements (Conzen, 1960).

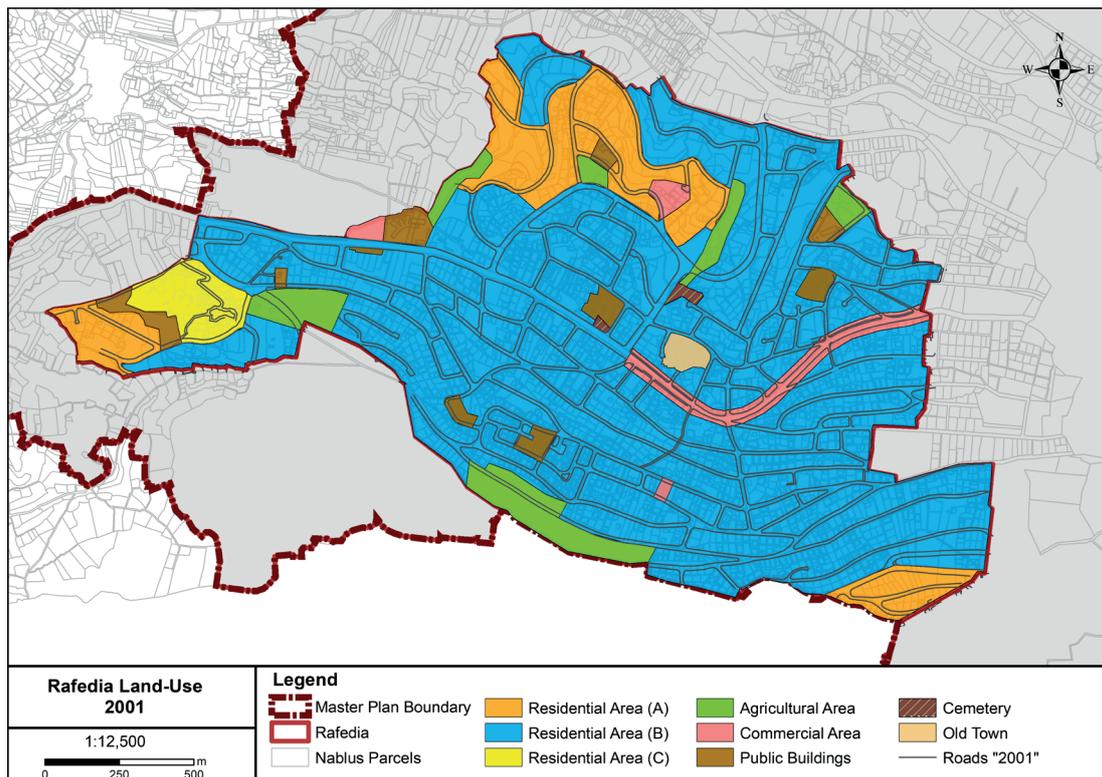


Figure 2. Rafidia land use plan 2001. Source: authors based on master students filed work.

### Land use

The change was noticed in the master plan of 2001 to 2011 (figure 2, 3), as some of the land transformed from residential B into local commercial that allows 7 floors and roof instead of 4, also residential A area declined (Qasrawi, 2017<sup>1</sup>). Nowadays, Rafidia consists of 11 blocks on area of 3,021,978 m<sup>2</sup>. The uses of land vary in Rafidia as the residential use dominates the uses with 48.72% of the total area based in 2015, and it's known for health and entertaining services, and the spread of commercial zones with 5.71% on the sides of Main Street particularly.

The Industrial use in Rafidia is very low and doesn't exceed 1.43%, which make Rafidia desirable for living purposes. While the agriculture use represents 28.20% of land, which is considered to be high despite the general shortage of agriculture use in the city with only 1.86% of the city total area. That refers to the origin of Rafidia as a village where people mainly worked in farming, availability of water from springs, and land fertility. In addition to the high use of land for tourism purposes that increased the area of open spaces up to 27.41% (Nablus master plan, 2013).

### Street pattern

As streets are the most stable and durable element, they are the least affected by urban transformations compared to other elements such as buildings or plots (Boeing, 2017), which in turn gives them more control over other elements. This is clear in the network of Rafidia Streets that evolved over the years, where the development was based on the main streets that cross the area all the way from east to west (figure 4). Road network have spread along with the expansion of

1. Interview with municipality engineer, Azzam Qasrawi, on 9 Sep 2017.

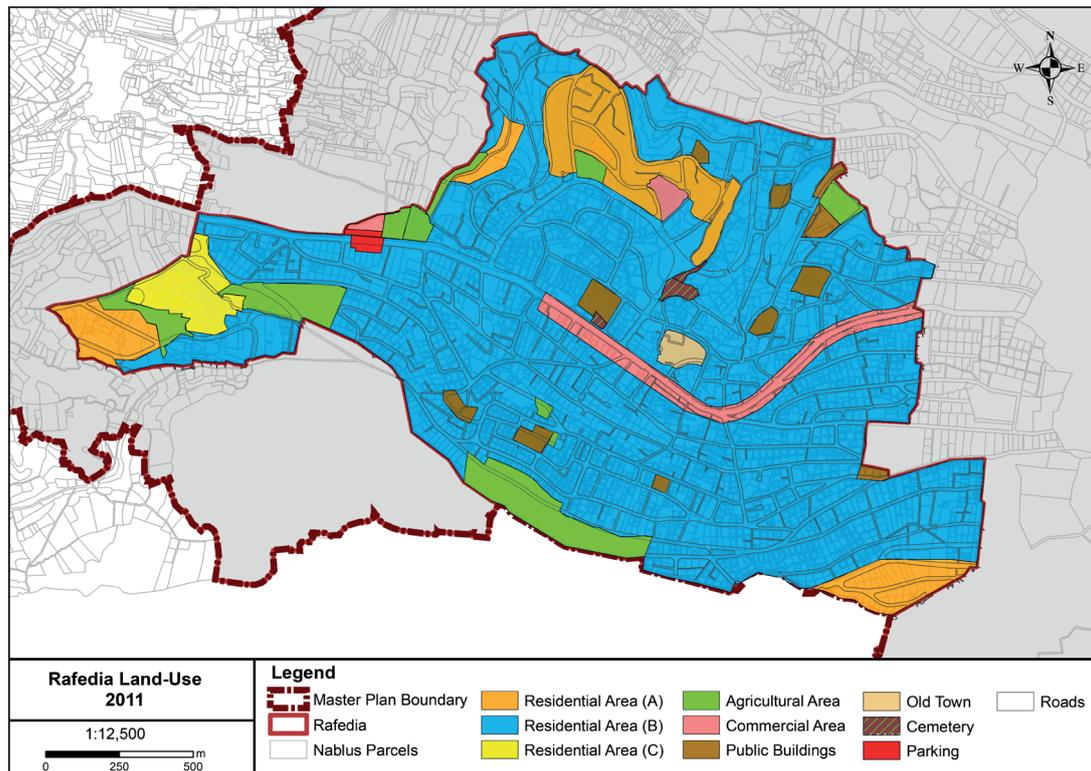


Figure 3. Rafidia land use plan 2011. Source: authors based on master students filed work.

the Rafidia boundaries to provide access to new blocks and buildings, and more types emerged as well as the change of streets hierarchy and improving accessibility.

Street system varies in the area and includes three different types based on change in plan unit. First, the old center of Rafidia, which has traditional plan unit characterized by narrow alleys, irregular shapes of streets and open spaces. This street system is known for small roads branches from the main road to provide access between buildings and blocks, and mostly it doesn't connect to other roads and has dead end (figure 4). Second, the areas along the main street and surround the old center represent transitional plan unit with more regular shapes of streets and organic road network that follows the mountain topography the most, the width of such streets increased comparing to traditional type and followed more gradual arrangement. Third, modern plan unit developed to the south and west of Rafidia, the streets in this area have a continuous and linked network of streets, with more unified widths and organized shapes. However, its continuity interrupts the buildings accumulation and creates smaller blocks separated by wide distances.

### Plot pattern

As the expansion of Rafidia continued out of old village, the pattern of plan unit has changed (figure 5). The development of the arterial main street of Rafidia and commercial uses produced new plots that are more rectangular and unified, aligned as a series of plots with the short rib towards the main street to achieve more economic benefit.

The plot size and shape started to be more unified and organized in the transitional plan units, but still it was a complex of plot pattern, as the difference is obvious between old parcels within the old center blocks of Rafidia and the new parcels that were included in the newly de-

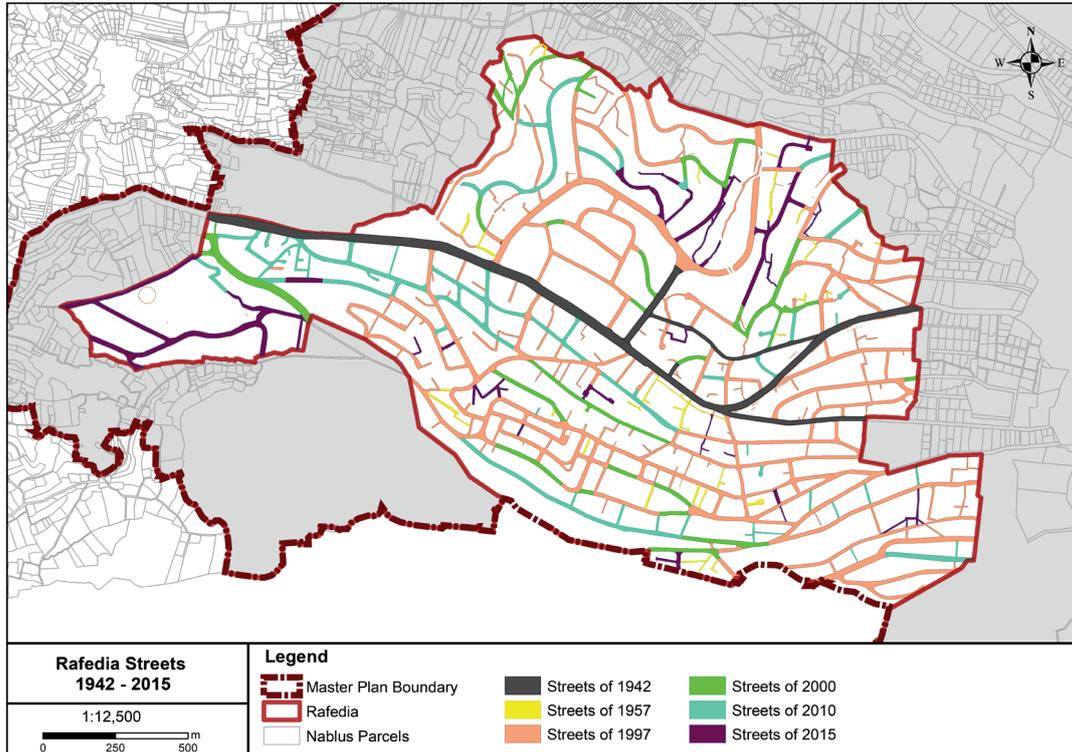


Figure 4. *Rafidia streets 1942-2015*. Source: authors based on master students filed work.

veloped blocks to the east and west. Hence that during the process of urban laws and building regulations development, some old parcels was incorporated in order to create regular forms and sizes and increase the viability of land.

#### *Blocks plan (buildings)*

The form of building in Rafidia is mostly irregular and follows different patterns of plan and architecture type, which can be referred to different factors such as change of typology (figure 6). Although it's noticed in the recent development of residential projects that building plans assume more regular shapes as well as it plots, but it's no longer an expression of a certain type. This reflects the modern orientation of individuality in building form and absence of typology.

The type of buildings in traditional plan unit in Old area of Rafidia formed in the traditional Housh system or a complex of many houses sharing some walls, where buildings are aligned close to each other randomly separated by small allays but as a whole they form a high dense unit of neighborhood. This continuity in the urban fabric slowly disappeared in transitional plan unit and buildings were scattered and not assembled or gathered. However, the form of buildings itself changed into less complex but more plain shapes away from the traditional forms and reached higher floors.

The recent development of building type is obvious in the modern plan unit as every series of high buildings aligned in a block, its boundaries distinct by wide streets. Each building stands separately in the center of plot and mostly each block contain double series of plots. It is clear that the creation of a network of wide, open, and mostly unfinished streets has helped to dismantle the continuity of the plot series or blocks, thus creating individual and isolated buildings on these plots.

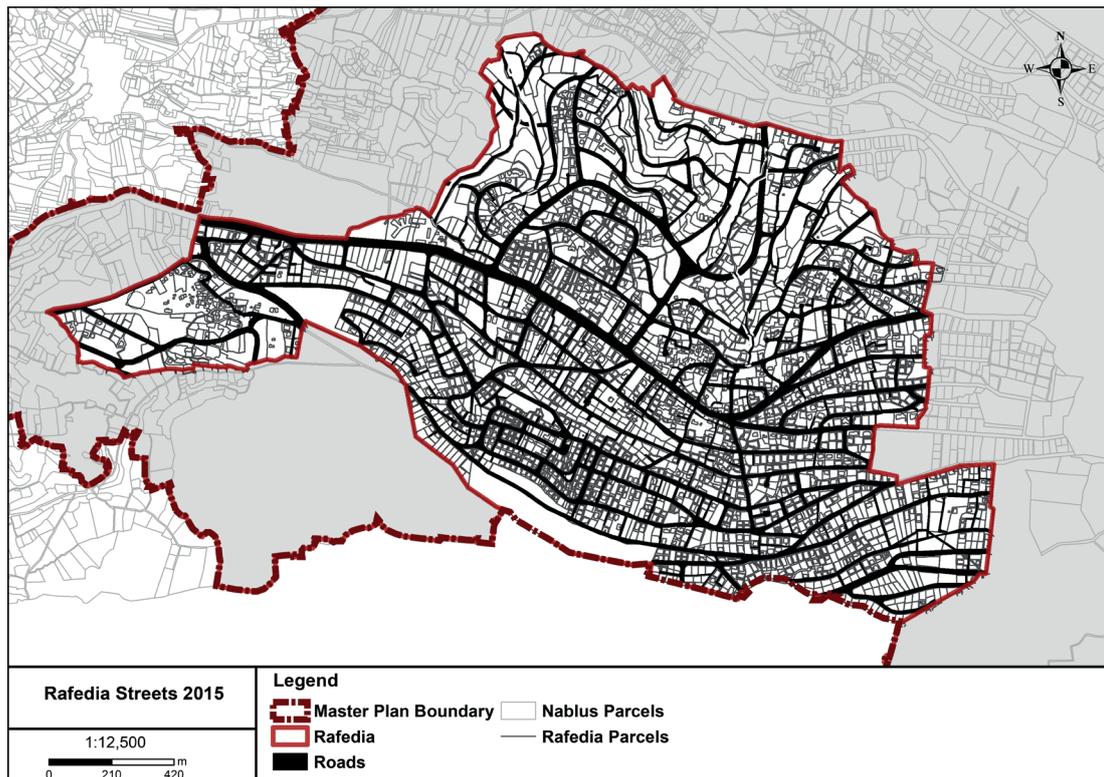


Figure 5. *Rafidia parcels 2015*. Source: authors based on master students filed work.

Despite the regular forms of plots and more organized block plans, where double lined plots are the most common form, the formation of buildings in the neighborhood or area no longer seeks to achieve harmony and balance between buildings, illustrates the different building types in the area that mostly are irregular and vary in shape. This singularity and irregularity can be observed in Rafidia through the new plan unit, which shows the relationship of the buildings to each other and with the surrounding space and the radical changes in the physical structure. The block plans are no longer responding to the plot shape and the relationship between them has weakened, where the continuity of plan in the traditional buildings transformed into point blocks.

These struggles of organizing the site features as streets, plots and buildings, or plan unit as for Conzen, and to relate it in an proper relationship are an evident of the absence of typology and its role in developing appropriate understanding of site elements (Gutman, 1966). The analysis of the neighborhood highlights the transition from the traditional urban fabric, which characterized by continuity, compactness and the integration of buildings with the space surrounding, to the modern fabric of scattered buildings without connection of other elements. Buildings in most of Rafidia stand as large blocks separated from each other by open spaces without any link between them, and suggesting the lack of continuity in the projected area. Moreover, mutual influence between streets, plots, or buildings provides important indicators in shaping form of plan unit and contributes to the identification of certain characteristics such as openness and enclosure (Oliveira, 2016). The sense of enclosure dominates the traditional type of fabric as buildings accumulation produce open spaces and defines its borders in comparison to the modern fabric that lacks enclosures and open spaces.

So, after defining the characteristics of Townscape of Rafidia and analyze its physical ele-

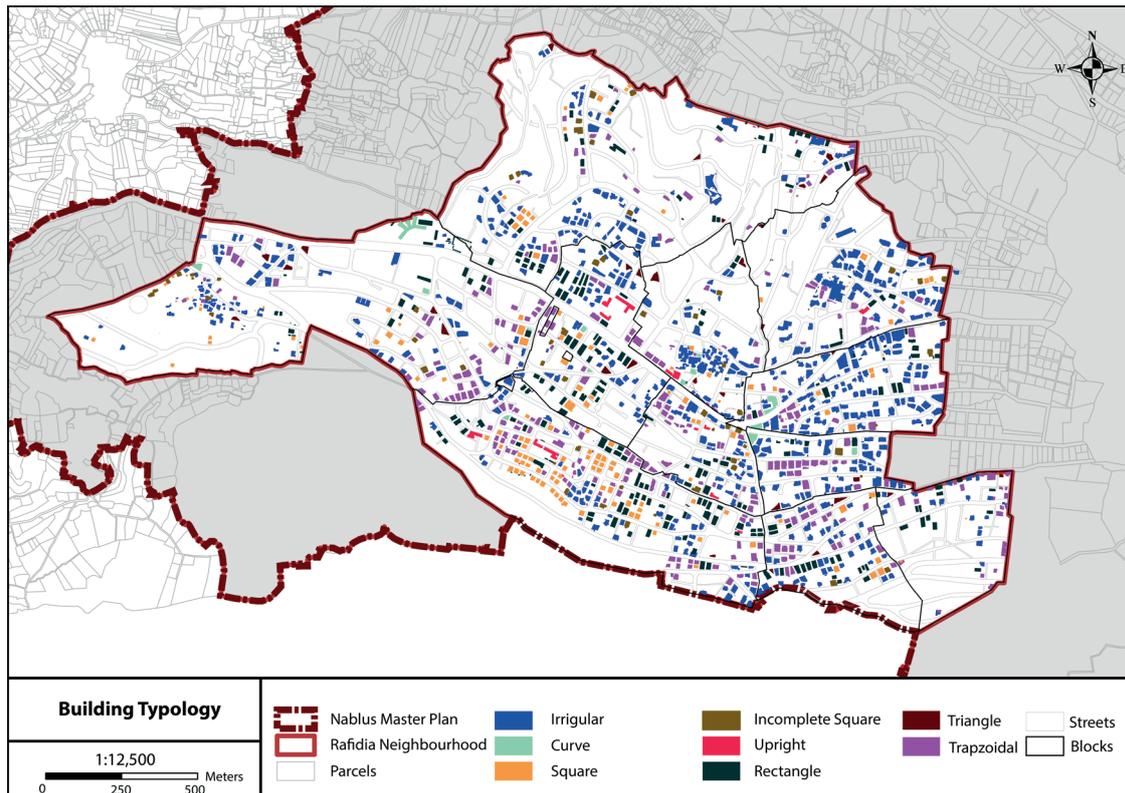


Figure 6. *Rafidia building typology*. Source: authors based on master students filed work.

ments and evaluate its performance, the next step is to reflect how these physical attributes are impacted by economy and transform the urban landscape of the neighborhood.

### 3.3. Determinants of physical environment in Rafidia in relation to economy

#### *Density*

Some researchers who advocate high density in cities defended their claim that increased density could support better and cheaper public transport, and more control over people. At the same time, high density also lead to more pedestrian injuries and the effects of urban thermal islands and waste; loss of privacy and direct sunlight. And reduce the level of physical and mental health. In case of Rafidia, the built up area density is still moderate and not considered high or highly compacted, with about 40% of its total area.

However, measuring density is not affected only by the ground floor occupancy, where vertical expansion is necessary to consider as Rafidia is characterized by high buildings. This means higher density of population in the same area of building. This has affected the area of public spaces where more people should share it, also public space portion per person is declining as Rafidia growing and building movement increasing.

Moreover, the increase in density was not combined with a mix of uses throughout Rafidia. Residential buildings are mostly existed there except for some areas such as the main street, where there are commercial and mixed use buildings. This situation creates less vibrant and active socially areas according to Jacobs (1961).

### *Spatial layout and physical distance*

Generally, the current urban fabric of Rafidia reflects the changes that have taken place in the city, where high rise residential and commercial buildings dominated the built up area. And the response of these buildings to urban changes is revealed in the way they are organized and aligned. Buildings are being isolated in the process of modern urban development, and ignore their relation to the urban fabric that includes open spaces, streets and other elements (Trancik, 1986).

The emergence of high buildings in the urban fabric and its inclusion in residential neighborhoods was accompanied with problems resulting from the incompatibility and harmony of elements of urban configuration with each other and lack of efficiency in the design of these elements, such as undefined and lost open spaces, high buildings fragmented and isolated, or even the absence of urban character and typology.

The hard topography of the area contributed to the small plot size, which affected the footprint of buildings as they stand as high but small sizes blocks with small setbacks in between, which could provide legibility and vitality to the area, but this pattern impedes the creation of well-designed open spaces. This issue was advocated by Leslie Martin (1972), where he examined different patterns such as small and large blocks of buildings and their relation to open spaces and proved mathematically that large blocks are more capable to produce balanced built environment. The large footprint of building would allow the continuity of open space which is essential to enrich the flow of people and encourage their interaction as they explained themselves. The importance of open spaces and their design is never less than the buildings, where good urban design consider these spaces as a group connected to each other, not as random spaces resulting from buildings.

The old cities relied in their composition on the open spaces to create urban character for buildings and define the boundaries of the place. But modern urban fabric, as shown in the case of Rafidia, produce urban spaces that are not limited or specific and do not have a vibrant relationship with the buildings or contribute to the enhancement of their composition. These resulted in lost spaces rather than open spaces, as the former defined by Trancik (1986) “the leftover unstructured landscape at the base of high-rise towers or the unseen sunken plaza away from the flow of pedestrian activity in the city”.

The lack of proper open spaces in Rafidia resulted from the disintegrated and fragmented urban fabric, where buildings located randomly without considering each other and other several factors, including building footprint and the difficult terrain of topography. Also these buildings lack of appropriate accumulation or grouping, “*Tall buildings can be equally appropriate grouped in clusters or located alone*” (Ibrahim, 2007). It is spreading as free standing masses without any connection or orientation. The placing of these buildings lack of gathering sense such as circulating around some space and define it as a common area for a group of buildings or clustering in a composition that would achieve enclosure and connectivity.

The weak enclosure and definition of open spaces in Rafidia results from certain arrangement of buildings as Booth (1983) illustrated the cases, such as the alignment of buildings in a long row or single building standing. On the opposite, higher enclosure could be accomplished through arranging buildings around some space or change the angle that buildings face each other. Also irregularity is a key factor of creating sense of mystery in the space, which encourages people to experience it more.

## Height

The increase of high residential buildings number in Rafidia was vast over the last decades, where most buildings have 7 floors or more (figure 7). This caused many problems; first, variety of height produced a lack of harmony in the urban image of the city and the skyline. buildings adjacent next to each other with different heights, where some high buildings of more than 7 floors stand right next to one or two floors buildings causing a gap in the landscape and imbalance in height. Also, distinguish of public and private buildings and uses has disappeared with the unlimited height of buildings, that it became hard to recognize the character of monumental buildings (Krier, 2009). This is due to several factors, including the mix of land use and the random changing of it, as well as the topography and its impact on the level of streets and buildings on either side, so that the building may rise to several floors, but all goes under the level of the street. Moreover, the effectiveness of the parcel is affected by additional factor, which is the plot ratio. In the old areas, the ratio is usually only 2:1, where the buildings were one or two floors surrounded by a public area or a garden or vice versa, such as the houses of the courtyard. This density is suitable for humans, unlike the change of the current ratio of more than 7:1, where high buildings that rise for more than 7 floors. This means less shared public space per person and more compacted buildings with large masses because of height.

In response, in 2007 the municipality created a system to limit the heights to a certain extent using the law of floor ratio (Qasrawi, 2017). As mentioned previously, most of Rafidia land is residential B, commercial, and some transformed into local commercial. The regulation allows raising for 4 to 7 floors in residential B, depends on street width. In case of 15m street, 7 floors is the maximum height and floor ratio should not exceed 320%, and with streets less than 8m, 4 floors allowed but floor ratio not to exceed 190%. And if the number of basements exceeds 3 floors, the vertical building line is moved to be with a depth of 12 m until reaching four floors above the level of the upper street (Nablus municipality, 2006).

Local commercial use allows a floor ratio of 300% at the maximum and height of 7 floors with a front setback of 4 m. And the commercial use in Rafidia Street allows 350% with a 3 m front setback. In the case of streets with a width of 20 meters and the area of the parcel is less than 2000 meters, it allows to rise to twenty floors and a floor ratio of 500%. These regulations have contributed to the reduction of building heights and thus reduce the size of the resulting problems to some extent, and forced investors and urban developers to reduce the number of floors to not exceed the floor ratio. But most of the high buildings in Rafidia existed before passing these laws, which makes it hard to change it<sup>2</sup>.

However, this development and acceleration of urban growth in Rafidia had consequences on the old buildings. In recent years, there has been a marked decline in the number of old buildings that were spread on both sides of the main street or in the surrounding areas. Rising land prices, coupled with increased demand for housing, have attracted investment and urban developers, stimulating many older residents to sell their homes to the private sector to replace it with high buildings.

2. Appendix 1: Nablus municipality setbacks and floor ratio regulations.

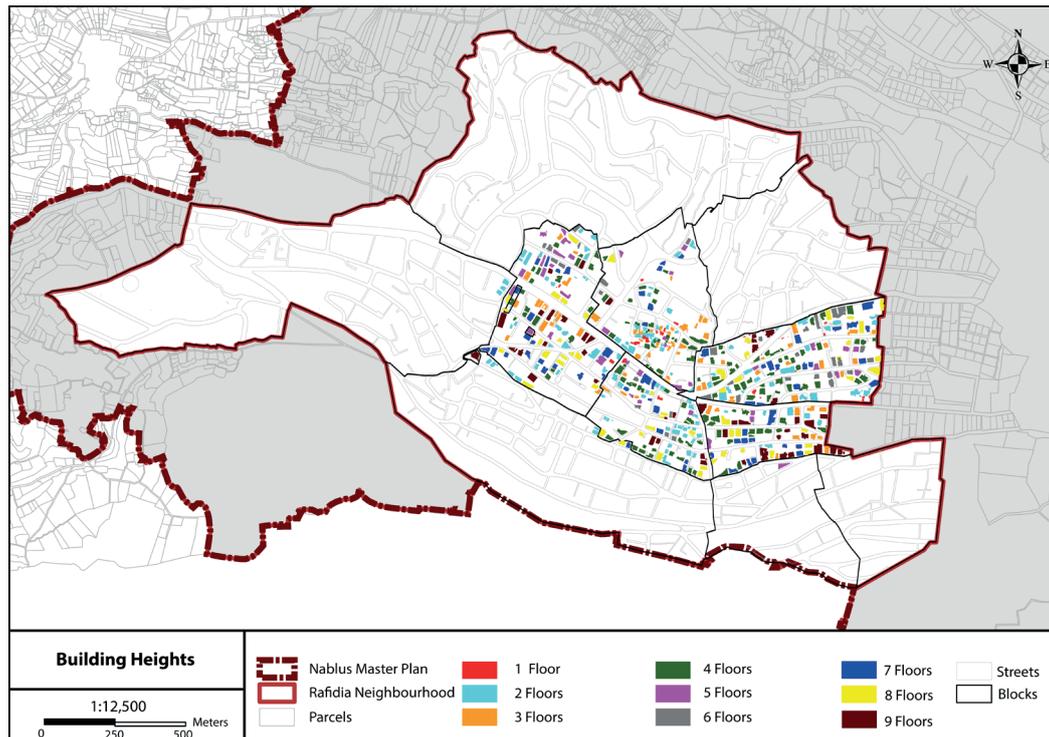


Figure 7. Rafidia building floor 2017. Source: authors based on master students filed work.

#### 4. Conclusion

In general, Rafidia has been in stages of growth and development but has produced a low quality physical environment, which is characterized by high density of people and buildings, lack of building typology, ignorance of buildings organization and their relationship to each other, creating scattered open spaces and lost spaces, and spread of high buildings that lack proper social spaces. In crises area the urban form is not dictated by the planning framework only. Political, economical and demographic forces are main players in the construction of urban form, they mainly lead the urban transformations.

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