

Rahat

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING FOR A BEDOUIN CITY



Rahat, Israel

The Rahat project is a radical, award-winning plan for the largest Bedouin city in the world. The city – formerly planned along tribal lines – was reorganised as a unified city in a planning and implementation process that has spanned 13 years so far. A highly participatory process enabled city planners to respond to the needs and aspirations of the residents, resulting in a city where indigenous people of different tribes, in transition from a nomadic lifestyle to permanent settlement, have a sense of ownership.



The Challenge

Today, some 200,000 Muslim Bedouins live in southern Israel's Negev Desert. As the historically nomadic people began settling, seven permanent settlements were developed in the 1970s. One of them, Rahat, is probably the largest Bedouin city in the world with 55,000 residents. Its population is estimated to double by 2025.

Rahat's original urban planning was a product of its time. The city was divided into 33 neighbourhoods – one for each tribe – making it difficult to develop common services and social integration. This led to a situation



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where some neighbourhoods faced a shortage of land for development, while others had underused pockets of land. In the absence of available land, some residents built illegally in public spaces, which affected the quality of life, while others erected temporary dwellings outside the city boundaries, obstructing future developments. For example, 400 families settled in Rahat South, where we were planning, and arrangements had to be made to resettle them before development could begin.

The city had not seen any major development in decades. The growing strain on Rahat, together with the development of modern

Jewish communities in the area, among other factors, led to increased tensions and a sense of deprivation among the Bedouins. When Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was elected in 2001, he approved the investment of substantial public funds towards Rahat's development. As a resident of the Negev, he understood the distress of residents and also saw the importance of developing Rahat in a way that promoted co-existence among the Jews and Muslims in the area. This was the basis for the development of our urban plans for the city.

01 Temporary dwellings outside Rahat, 2004.

02 Temporary structures in front of older city buildings.



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The Solution

The Rahat project is a rare case of a large-scale plan, with an ongoing and continuous process, from planning to implementation and construction.

When I first met members of the Bedouin community at Rahat, I was asked, “What did you plan for us?” I answered, “I haven’t started to plan. I propose two alternatives: that I will study the place and the community and sit in my office and plan what I think is suitable for you, or that we work together and make this plan in full collaboration.” A community leader said: “This is the first time we were ever asked how we want our children to live. We can’t let this opportunity go.” He implored the community to collaborate fully with us. This meeting set the direction of how we would work with the Bedouins for the 13 years since then. A participative process helped us to gain their trust and gave them a sense of ownership. To understand

their needs and aspirations, we met public representatives, tribes, families and students. As we couldn’t meet women because of religious reasons, we arranged to meet local students (boys and girls aged 17 to 18) to hear the views of the younger generation, including women. In fact these young people were the prime audience of the Rahat project as they will live in the new neighbourhoods.

Since 1999, a methodic and integrative planning process with the collaboration of dozens of stakeholders, was carried out, from coming up with the structural urban plan for the city’s extension by 12,000 housing units, developed at the scale of 1:10,000, through outline schemes for 7,000 housing units at the scale of 1:1,250, up to detailed construction plans (scale 1:10), the completion of public infrastructure and the construction of houses on the ground.

01 Then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (with microphone) at a cornerstone laying event, 2004.

02 Reviewing plans with members of the Bedouin community.

03 South Rahat plan, with “green fingers” extending into residential areas.



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01 Planning workshops with local residents and professionals.

02 Members of the Bedouin community building their own homes, 2012.



While previous plans were tribal-based, the new plans emphasised the creation of one unified city, that had general public facilities at its core, and “green fingers” that extend outwards to the residential fabric.

As a result of our extensive dialogues, we found significant gaps between the desires of the older and younger generations, the men and the women, and among the different tribes – there was a scale ranging from conservative to modern views. Therefore we had to plan a huge variety of urban patterns and housing models that would allow a suitable solution for each tribe and family.

Hence, for the first time in a Bedouin settlement, new typologies of housing were introduced. Nine different housing models were designed, to meet the different desires, family sizes, housing mix range and economic capabilities, while meeting the average density that was given in the master plan. The models include special single family units with a “Shig” (men’s social club) or a guest unit, single unit lots, semi-detached, row housing, and shared apartment houses of three to four floors, and up to six floors, with or without a commercial front. Residents who purchased the plots were responsible for the construction.

The Rahat plan is sensitive to the unique cultural and social values of the Bedouins. For instance, particularly large residential units were also planned to accommodate large family sizes due to the phenomenon of polygamy in the Bedouin community. We also addressed the need to maintain women’s modesty by creating distance between housing and commercial, religious and educational spaces. High fences were permitted to be built to separate residential apartments from streets and neighbouring lots.

Following a successful process of collaboration with the community and stakeholders, the plans were approved in a record time, in full consensus.



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The Outcome

The Bedouins began building the first houses in the new neighbourhoods in 2011, and hundreds of families have already moved into their new homes. Over 95% of the plots are already purchased and new neighbourhoods are being planned.

The most important outcome of this project was for us to see, during our recent site visits, thrilled Bedouins who love the place, are proud of their new neighbourhoods and feel ownership of the project.

The project is considered a success story and has been studied widely by government agencies, municipalities and planners. Rahat serves as a model for other Bedouin town plans in Israel with regard to its planning process, the plans created and the implementation. In fact, a new town we recently planned for 20,000 inhabitants was modelled partly after Rahat.



The project received international recognition of the highest level when we won the ISOCARP (International Society of City and Regional Planners) Award for Excellence in 2011. The project, which was relatively unknown in Israel, received a lot of publicity following the prize. I was also personally invited to meet President Shimon Peres where I told him more about the project and its future challenges. He was enthusiastic and suggested ideas and ways to further develop Rahat.

The Rahat project demonstrates how powerful planning can become a tool to promote co-existence of communities while working in mutual trust and collaboration with indigenous people to develop hope and a better life for them.

Global lessons can be learned, as many aspects of the plan, including trust building, people's participation, equal planning standards for minorities and dealing with large and very complex projects, are relevant for many other parts of the world.

⁰¹ Newly built homes in the planned extension to Rahat, 2011.



Amos Brandeis is an architect and urban planner. He is the owner and manager of a planning practice since 1994 (www.restorationplanning.com) and former Chairman of Israel Planners Association (2006–2012). He has been engaged as a consultant, speaker and workshop leader in many countries over five continents. Mr Brandeis has been awarded over 15 prizes in the course of his career and studies including the “2003 International Riverprize” for the Alexander River Restoration Project, a unique collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians, to restore a polluted cross-border river.