

Royal Dream: City Branding and Saudi Arabia's NEOM

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In 2017, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia announced the new mega-city NEOM. The city is envisioned to be a “start-up the size of a country”, and it aims at attracting the “best talents”, offering them “technology with livability at its core.” The paper foregrounds city branding to understand what NEOM is all about: its imagined society and proposed governance. It further explores how city branding strategies position NEOM and the Kingdom

regionally and globally and reaffirm the Crown Prince's power. It also questions the conceptual nature of the branded object itself, as branding documents show that NEOM alternates between being a city, a start-up, a country, and the Crown Prince's legacy.

Keywords: New city, branding, creative, corporatization, urban development, Saudi Arabia, NEOM

Introduction

As we watch, something of a revolution is happening here in Saudi Arabia. As the kingdom looks to growth, let me introduce the vision behind that growth story [...]. Prince Muhammed bin Salman (“Day1 Coverage”)

Using these words, the new futuristic mega-city NEOM was introduced by the launch event. The Crown Prince announced the city. It is planned to cover an area of 26,500 km² by the Red Sea, making it just slightly smaller than Belgium. The futuristic city's name means new future: NEO is the Latin word for new, and M is the first letter of the word *mustaqbal* (future). NEOM will cost \$500 billion, invested by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund and local and international investors. The city aims to attract the “best talents” offering them “unmatched livability” (neom.com). It is envisioned not only to lead the future in technology, energy, and livability, as the website shows, but to also to diversify the Saudi economy, rebrand national identity, and, importantly, reaffirm the Crown Prince's power position.

As a branded image, NEOM emerged in a context in which “new cities” are booming regionally and globally. In the same region, the Dubai model has emerged,

and since then, it has been reproduced and replicated all around the world. Academically, urban development in Dubai has been analyzed as a model, as well as a process of Dubaification, a neo-liberal urban development trend and brand (Elsheshtawy; Hvidt; Adham). Some studies went further to analyze the “Dubai Effect” (Turan).¹ Within this competitive context, NEOM was portrayed as “not just one more new city”, or a new replica of Dubai, but rather as an exceptional futuristic city in which its offers go beyond the Dubai model, introducing a post-Dubai era to the world.

NEOM is not the first new city in Saudi Arabia; it was preceded by six new “economic cities”, which were not as ambitious in their promises, but also aiming at economic growth (SAGIA). Notably, the Kingdom is going through social, economic, and political instability, which it hopes to solve by diversifying the economy and shifting toward a knowledge economy. Social liberalization has been intensified since Muhammed bin Salman became the Crown Prince. Cinemas have been opened and women are now able to attend concerts and drive, but are still imprisoned if they demand greater freedoms. More importantly, the Crown Prince has affirmed his position by rearranging

the power balance, which has included sweeping arrests among the elite. NEOM is part of this process; it has been presented as the legacy of Prince bin Salman, which signifies rerouting the kingdom toward a knowledge economy, technology, tolerance, diversity, and liberalization. However, the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul has massively affected the project, as many companies, businessmen, and public figures do not want to be associated with the Crown Prince at this moment and pulled out of either the City Board or the Saudi Economic Conference in October 2018 (Perper).²

Given this conflicting context, by analyzing city-related branding documents such as the official website and launch event, the paper explores how NEOM's city branding has been utilized – not only to position the city within the global competition among places, but also to brand the Crown Prince and reaffirm his power. The paper analyzes the image and the discourse constructed around the city, with a particular interest in what the city in itself is all about, its imagined society, and proposed governance. Moreover, the study conceptualizes NEOM as a brand, employing the basic conception of city and place branding. It interlinks Harvey's entrepreneurial-

ism and Florida's creative class to focus on the complexity and the vagueness of the branded object.

City Branding between Florida's Utopia and Harvey's Dystopia

The rise of neoliberalism led to the emergence of various scholarly debates and concepts that deal with the shifting perceptions of the city and its role. Within the neoliberal turn, cities are perceived as rational actors that seek opportunities and growth and compete in the global competition of places. Therefore, attracting investments and developing a unique image and a brand became main functions of city governance.

The study analyzes the image created by NEOM's city branding. It is worth mentioning that the branded object in this case is not entirely clear, as it has been presented as a city, not a city, a startup, a country, and a legacy of the Crown Prince. For that reason, the conceptual framework engages with the vague and complex branded object, firstly, based on a basic conception of city and place branding evolving from corporate branding. Secondly, under the overarching concept of city branding, the study conceptualizes NEOM as neoliberal urban development using Florida's creative class and Harvey's conception of

entrepreneurialism as urban governance and its extreme realization in Moser's analysis of new cities ("New Cities").

City or place branding has emerged from corporate branding. It has been defined as creating an image that makes the city more competitive and attractive for investments, businesses, and tourists. This process has been strongly connected to the neoliberal urban agenda and the emergence of the entrepreneurial city. Studies of city branding can be divided into two groups; the first focuses on defining it and specifying how it should be done, such as the studies conducted by Ashworth and Voogd, Kavaratzis, and Dinnie. Second, critical studies by scholars such as Paddison, Savani and Bennett, and Anttiroiko have questioned the process of creating a brand, arguing that it is not democratic. This leads to the production of an image that is detached from the everyday life of its citizens and rather reflects the economic and political interests of investors and decision makers.

Harvey is one of the scholars who dealt critically and early with the strong interlinkage between urban development and economic growth. In the 1980s, he wrote on the shift in city governance from managerialism, which is based on local provi-

sion of services to the inhabitants, to entrepreneurialism, which rather focuses on fostering economic growth by appealing to market rationality. Harvey argued that this shift directs city resources toward having innovative, creative, and entrepreneurial city governance that is able to compete and attract more resources and capital (3-7). This turn, which Harvey pointed out in the 1980s, has since then grown as a global trend among cities, pushing more urban governments toward functioning like corporations in a highly competitive market.

A growing number of new emerging cities are an extreme case of what Harvey noted, as they often actually follow a corporate model. Moser, in a talk at McGill University, presented her study of the phenomena of the new cities in which she tracked 110-150 ongoing new cities in more than 40 mostly developing countries ("New Cities"). She noted that the vast majority of these cities, if not all, adapt a corporate model in which the city is headed by a CEO, not a mayor, in the complete absence of an elected city council. The driving factors behind the new cities are mainly economic and political; the cities are shifting toward a knowledge economy and rebranding the national image. Importantly, most of these cities have not reached the targeted pop-

ulation, and some of them exist only in PowerPoint presentations and websites – as what Moser calls the PowerPoint Cities.

Attracting human creativity has been utilized as an urban development strategy that aims at economic growth in the post-industrial era. This has generated a myriad of perspectives. Some argue that having firms in the creative industries leads to economic growth, while others argue that attracting creative people is the key driver. Florida belongs to the latter group. He has developed the concept of the creative class, which became instantly popular among city planners. The creative class and its critique are central to the analysis of NEOM, as its conception greatly relies on the attraction of creative people, or as the Crown Prince calls them, "the dreamers".

According to Florida, the creative class includes scientists, engineers, university professors, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, opinion makers such as writers, think-tank researchers, and "creative professionals who work for knowledge intensive industries such as the high-tech sectors, financial services, legal and healthcare professions, and business management." (8) The main line in Florida's argument and consultancy is that what attracts this class

to a place is not primarily job opportunities, but more importantly place characteristics such as tolerance, diversity, and a high quality of life. In short, the path for cities to economic growth is investing in the quality of the place, represented in what he called the 3Ts, talent, technology, and tolerance, aiming at attracting the creative class (10).³

The concept of the “creative class” has been criticized by various academics. Conceptually, criticism is directed at its universalism and the “one size fits all” prescription (Pratt 126). Additionally, the concept was criticized for the absence of a causal mechanism between attracting creative class and economic growth (Peck 757). Importantly, various scholars have considered the creative class to be a component of the neoliberal agenda that revolves around competition, consumption, and place marketing (Peck 740, Pratt 124). As the concept demonstrates, an embedded inequality and regressive distribution model that targets the few “creative people” offers them a better quality of life at the expenses of the whole (Pratt 125). Furthermore, it ignores the division of labor by leaving behind the working and service classes that cater to the creative class (Peck 754). Also criticized has been the assumption that the creative

THE FUTURE HAS BEGUN

The land of the future, where the greatest minds and best talents are empowered to embody pioneering ideas and exceed boundaries in a world inspired by imagination.

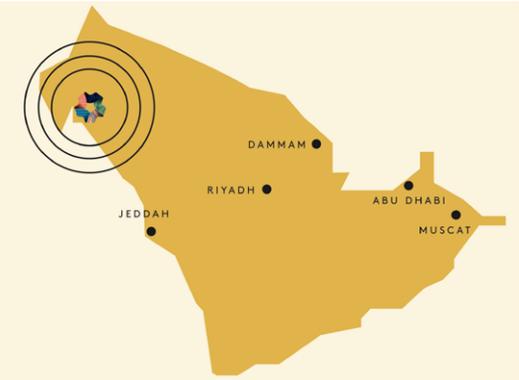


Figure 1: The Future has begun.

class is exceptionally spatially mobile and seeks soft factors like place quality rather than hard factors such as job opportunities (Martin-Brelot et al. 868).

Such debates and concepts have marked the centrality of the city within the rise of neo-liberal, just as Harvey's entrepreneurial dystopia has been intensely realized and Florida's utopian city for the creative class has proved to be extremely influential within policy circles all around the world. These concepts, which have evolved in the context of cities in the US and Europe, are being realized worldwide in versions even more extreme than their original place of provenance. The paper presents NEOM as an extreme realization of both Florida's utopia and Harvey's dystopia.

Constructing an Image Comes First

The new future is not only the name of the city, but also a crucial selling point. The website presents, NEOM is “where we live the future, as we create the future.” NEOM is planned to “pioneer the future” of the eleven sectors it is going to develop, including energy and water, biotech, etc. (figure 1). Technology that shapes the future, accompanied by an “idyllic life style paired with excellent economic opportunities” is what the city offers and importantly what the creative class or the dreamers are imagined to be seeking (neom.com). The next few paragraphs present the image constructed by NEOM's creators through branding.

Two main tools have been utilized in branding NEOM: the official website and

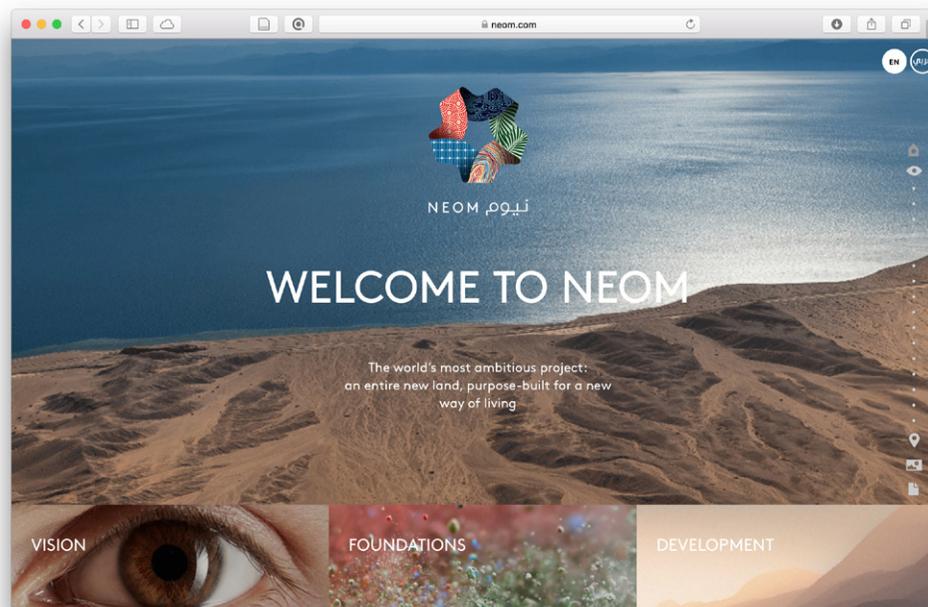


Figure 2: Welcome to NEOM

the launch event. neom.com is a well-designed website that presents a broad view of the city, the vision, the mission, the objectives, and the supporters (figure 2). At first sight, it looks like the webpage of a huge firm, but this is not uncommon among cities. The launch event was held at the Future Investment Initiative Conference in October 2017 and hosted by the Saudi Public Investment Fund. The session was composed of the Crown Prince and four more panelists, including

Masayoshi Son, the richest person in Japan, the Chairman and CEO of Softbank Group vision fund, which backed Alibaba.⁴ Stephen A. Schwarzman, ranked 35th in Forbes' list of the 400 wealthiest people in the US, was present as the CEO and co-founder of Blackstone. Marc Raibert attended as the founder and CEO of Boston Dynamics, one of the leading US companies in robot production and famous for the BigDog and WildCat robots that were funded by the US army. Last,

Klaus Kleinfeld, the former CEO of Siemens, Alcoa, and Arconic, and at the time, designated CEO of NEOM was on hand. Notably, they are all stars in the world of business, entrepreneurialism, and technology and control huge shares of the global market. However, none of them are city planners, nor do they have any kind of expertise on urban issues. The choice of the panelists signifies the nature of investment, the needed expertise, and the priorities of city planning.

In the case of NEOM, as with many other new cities, branding and constructing an image precedes any other construction processes. However, what is special about NEOM, in my opinion, is not that it is going to be a technology hub, or that it offers economic opportunities and is promising to lead the future. What I find striking is that the object that is being branded is not clear to those who brand NEOM. Although they sometimes call it a city, they also refer to it and partially fund it as a start-up and insist that it is on the scale of a country. One might think that this merely reflects the branding strategy, but the former CEO has confirmed otherwise:

It's twenty-six thousand five hundred km², so when we say city it's not giving a justice. [...] I'm not even using, per-

sonally, the word city, because it comes with so many garbage. You know I'd love it to be villages, communities, where people interact with each other. And to make tons of money [...]. ("Day1 Coverage")

As importantly, the image of the Crown Prince was also being constructed. During the launch event, he was referred to as the vision of an exceptional leadership, a pioneer, a visionary, etc. This image was systematically constructed throughout the event. Schwarzman started his words by telling the story of the first time he met the Crown Prince:

He was so passionate and so visionary, so unique, that I had never met anybody in the world who had a vision of this type and who I could tell by force of personality was going to make it happen. [...] Great leaders create great outcomes. ("Day1 Coverage")

According to Raibert, bin Salman is "a universal-scale big dreamer." ("Day1 Coverage") This demonstrates that NEOM is not only about the dream of the city, but more importantly, about the dreamer, the Crown Prince.

As the city remains in the imagination, or as Moser phrased it, a PowerPoint city

("New Cities"), it is interesting to contrast what is being branded with what is actually taking place on the ground. The interactive map on the website, which is supposed to reflect progress on the ground, has remained undeveloped since the launch of the website. There have been no reports of actual construction progress. More importantly, the plan, its details, and the planner were not mentioned during the launch event or afterward. Nevertheless, it has been reported that Saudi King Salman has spent his vacation in NEOM ("Saudi King Begins Holiday"). Having dreamers visit the imagined city, as if it actually exists, appears to be an attempt to reify the dream without actually starting its construction. Overall, imagination and reality remain starkly divided, while public information on the city is scarce. For now, it is impossible to say if NEOM will develop as dreamt or will remain a mere PowerPoint city.

On Society: Robot Dreams

The way NEOM is envisioned, the creative class, or as the Crown Prince calls them, the "dreamers", constitute the core of, if not the whole society. Bin Salman stated that:

We try to work only with the dreamers. This place is not the place for conven-

tional people or conventional companies. ("Day1 Coverage")

As he has clearly pointed out, the rest are not just unwelcome, they also should not take a position on the city:

Those who cannot dream should not negotiate with us should not come to NEOM. We only welcome the dreamers who want to reach to a new world. ("Day1 Coverage")

Accordingly, the branding documents have repeatedly claimed that the creators know what the dreamers actually want and need. NEOM's former CEO Kleinfeld mentioned that:

I have got two daughters [...] when I listen to them and their friends you know there is a different generation. There is a different view of how the future should look like. Sustainability plays a big role. Quality of life plays a big role. And they all want to be part of the technological revolution. ("Day1 Coverage")

NEOM's offer echoes Florida's prescribed 3Ts, tolerance, technology, and talent. First, guaranteeing tolerance and diversity is among the highlights of city branding strategy. NEOM's promotional video

shows a very diverse group of people, mixed genders, all happy, young, and free. This image was accompanied by affirmation that the city provides a “truly global culture from every place and background.” Notably, this image is detached from everyday life in the Kingdom. Two main issues were addressed as guarantees of tolerance and diversity. First, NEOM will be independent from the current governmental structures, as discussed below in more detail, and, second, the Crown Prince promotes the movement toward moderate Islam. He stated this clearly while introducing the city in the launch event and promised to eradicate extremism.

On technology, NEOM promises to be the future of biotech and technological and digital sciences. It offers its future residents fully automated public services, comprehensive Internet coverage, branded as “digital air”, the “next generation of healthy living and transport”, innovative construction, sustainability through renewable energy, and buildings with zero net carbon fingerprints, large-scale solar power generation, and next-generation advanced robots (neom.com; “Day1 Coverage”).

Last, regarding talent, the city is envisioned to be fertile soil for innovation and talent to flourish. The city offers unique education and a perfect business environment full of economic opportunities, materials, and methods for advanced manufacturing, etc. The promotional video defines the city as:

A part of the world set aside for those who want to change the world. [...] A place where pioneers and thinkers and doers can exchange ideas and get things done [...] No set ways of thinking no restrictions, no divisions, [...]! Just endless potential! (neom.com)

Adding to the 3Ts, the city offers entertainment, modern architecture, lush green spaces, cultural and art spaces, etc. Such elements were highlighted by Florida as essential attractions.

In line with Florida’s belief in the mobility of the creative class, NEOM’s creators and promoters bet on the mobility of the dreamers. This was mentioned several times during the conference, as expressed by Son:

We will create the largest solar power generation in the world in NEOM [...] the largest and most advanced robot

generation in the world. So all the engineers from all around the world [...] will come [...] and develop the technology together. (“Day1 Coverage”)

The question remains: who will cater to the “dreamers”? The answer is robots. Robots are meant to take over all the low-paid service jobs, even elderly care. As stated several times in the launch event, the city is going to have more robots than humans. On residents, NEOM’s official website states:

The population of NEOM will grow organically in line with its automation and robotics developments, set to reduce labor-intensive manual tasks. This will, in turn, ensure the growth of a highly skilled labor force that will fill creative and strategic positions. (neom.com)

NEOM transcends Florida’s idealized no-collar workspace city with creative class dominance to be a city with actually no working and service classes, exclusively made up of highly -skilled labor. NEOM is envisioned to be a city where the division of labor is only between the dreamers and the robots.

To conclude, NEOM’s branding targets the creative class. The city creators believe that they know exactly who the dreamers

are and how to influence their life decisions. This is accompanied by betting on the mobility of the dreamers, which can be risky, as this assumption has been refuted by earlier studies such as Eckert et al. Moreover, city vision disregards basic issues such as wealth distribution, inequality, etc. while being highly concerned about the wellbeing of the dreamers, as if they will be all equal in power, opportunity and wealth.

On Governance: Money Rules

NEOM's governance as presented by its creators transcends Harvey's shift toward entrepreneurialism and presents a full corporate model. It is also claimed to be an independent entity within the Kingdom's jurisdiction. However, it is not autonomous from the Crown Prince's authority. It is the Crown Prince's legacy, and it is his plan for the dreamers all around the world.

Like many other new cities, NEOM has a CEO, not a mayor. The first announced CEO was Kleinfeld, a key figures in the business world. During the NEOM conference, Schwarzman, one of the other panelists, said about him:

He doesn't stop, he is a very on top of it, effective, aggressive, executive [...] they picked a very good person who

has knowledge and connections all over the world. ("Day1 Coverage")

Although the city has not yet moved from the website to reality, Kleinfeld was named an advisor of the Crown Prince and replaced by Nazmi al-Nasr ("Klaus Kleinfeld named adviser"), a chemical engineer. The new CEO is a member of the founding board of NEOM and has held various prominent positions in Saudi Aramco, among them project manager of Ghawar, the largest known oil field in the world.

Apart from the city founding board's public announcement of the selection of the new CEO, the selection process was not public. This leaves a number of unanswered questions, such as what the selection criteria were, what the function of the CEO exactly is, what the role of the Crown Prince is, what the limits of his authority are, and if there is any hope that in the future the CEO or the "mayor" will be elected. Furthermore, according to the official website, the Kingdom has formed a "special authority to oversee NEOM, chaired by the Crown Prince", with no further details available on its role, authority, and members. Apparently, the city's independence from the Kingdom does not necessarily imply independence from the

Crown Prince. The power of the CEO in the city, once built, could prove to be substantial. According to the Crown Prince:

This is the first of such experience in the world that serves business people to formulate their own regulations and laws that serve them. ("Day1 Coverage")

Although this might sound attractive to businessmen and entrepreneurs, it does not offer much on how power relations and balances among actors in the competitive business world would reflect on this idealized view of the city in Florida's utopian sense, in which class and hierarchy diminish and differences merely produce and contribute to tolerance, not to conflict. In addition, it signals that business is the sole function of the city, and "business people" are the only residents who will exist in it or matter.

The question of governance is further complicated by the fact that NEOM is planned to extend for 1000 km² - into the Egyptian Sinai and to Aqaba in Jordan (neom.com; JT; Kalin). It is not entirely clear which regulations are going to apply on the non-Saudi parts of NEOM. Notably, the official website states that the project is entirely owned by the Saudi Public Investment Fund. There are no clarifications from the Egyptian and Jordanian

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leadership and government on how this will function.

To conclude, NEOM's proposed leadership, regulations, and funding do not look at all like those of a city and pose more questions than answers. Earlier, I discussed NEOM's imagined society, which is supposedly inclusive to all dreamers. However, the proposed governance indicates that it is at best accessible to an even smaller segment of the dreamers: the business people. Not all the dreamers are allowed to dream about governance. Moreover, the city is celebrated for being independent from the Kingdom's government structure. However, what makes it more independent from the Kingdom, might make it more dependent on the Crown Prince. More importantly, internationally, the Crown Prince's promises of tolerance and liberalization became even more shaky and unrealistic after the killing of the Saudi journalist Khashoqji in 2018.

Conclusion

By analyzing the branded image, the paper has shown that a city that functions as a company, welcoming only the creative class and replacing the working and service classes by robots, is an extreme realization of Harvey's dystopia and Florida's utopia. In this case, city branding

focused on portraying NEOM's leading role, its imagined society, and its governance. However, it did not make clear what NEOM actually is. This made it challenging to approach NEOM conceptually. In this paper, I decided to deal with NEOM as a city, a new version of neoliberal urban development. Even if its developers imagine it as an exceptional post-city entity, NEOM has its roots in the neoliberal urban agenda that has been continuously shaped and reshaped since the 1980s. The paper has presented NEOM as an end product of a branding process, rather than of a construction process. Therefore, whether its developers consider it a city or not and whether it is going to be realized or not, NEOM as an idea is one more layer of neoliberal urban development.

NEOM city branding has discussed the details of its techno-utopian fantasy, providing a good quality of life and economic opportunities. However, it has barely presented any concrete information on how this city will be planned, by whom, or even the targeted population size. This focus on the fantasy left the actual object out of the picture. Although constructing a fantasy is common in city branding, the stark ambiguity of the branded object is striking. As the launch event demonstrates, the core of NEOM's branding focuses on bin

Salman as a visionary and dreamer, rather than on the city as a dream. Taking this into consideration, it is apparent that keeping the city imaginary contributes more to the brand of the dreamer than to a city in reality. However, fantasy is not sufficient in itself if the city continues to develop. On the other hand, this strong association between the dream and the dreamer can in itself threaten the project, as the killing of Khashoqji shows.

Notes

¹ Inspired by the “Bilbao Effect”.

² Including a former US secretary, a former Vice President of the European Commission, the owner of Los Anglos Times, the co-founder of Blackstone, etc.

³ Although Florida later dealt more critically with his concept, it is still popular among city planners.

⁴ Alibaba is an e-commerce and retail Chinese multinational holding. It has been an unprecedented success story. Remarkably, Son mentioned it during NEOM’s launch event, assuring that his confidence in NEOM is great as well.

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ISSN: 2196-629X
<https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2019.12.7937>