

Strategic Planning for bringing life to the Historic Center of Birzeit

Introduction:

Birzeit rehabilitation project aims at bringing life back to what is now mostly deserted historic center. Riwaq started working on the Rehabilitation of the Birzeit Historic Center Project in 2007 in partnership with the Municipality (the project's owner) and in collaboration with the Rozana Association and the Department of Architecture at Birzeit University. Since then, numerous studies were completed in order to understand the historic environment as a first step for its revitalization. Revitalization is a process that results in upgrading the living conditions for those who reside in the historic center, the development of its current activities and the reuse of abandoned buildings for the benefit of the local community (services, infrastructure, housing, socio-economic and cultural activities, etc.), all with clear guidelines for the protection of the traditional architectural fabric of the historic center.

The studies covered planning, architectural, social, economic, legal, cultural, and service related aspects of the historic center and were done by a multidisciplinary team of around 30 students and professionals. Riwaq's team has summarized the findings of these studies in order to come up with a scenario to revitalize the historic center with a clear vision and a strategic plan for the future.

In addition to the studies, Riwaq worked on numerous rehabilitation and conservation projects; such as the preventive conservation of at least 50 historic buildings (conservation from outside and cleaning), as well as the restoration of a historic building to be reused as the Municipal Service Center and another one to be reused as a hostel. Additionally, Riwaq and the Municipality were able to fundraise for the rehabilitation of part of the center's infrastructure and the tiling of many streets, alleys, and plazas, and soon we shall design and implement a public garden and a children's playground as well as redesign and improve new additions in historic buildings.

The goals of these interventions are mainly to upgrade the living conditions for those residing and using the historic center and to present public and attraction activities for those who live in Birzeit. These projects helped build a strong relationship between the project's team and the town residents based on mutual trust (they could see that the project was not all talk and no action but rather was directly affecting their lives). As the project progressed, we noticed an on going increase in the number of participants from the local community.

The main approach of the project was to involve the local community directly and effectively in all phases of the project, this is based on our conviction that cultural heritage should not be protected for the sake of protection but rather for it to be used as a tool for the socioeconomic and cultural development of the town and its surroundings. For we believe that development, in its simple form, is to increase people's choices through showing them the potentials of the historic center. Residents have been part of

the project studies through focus groups, interviews, public meetings, and questionnaires. Additionally, and in 2008, a stakeholder group was formed to involve the local community in preparing the future vision and strategic plan from the historic center. This group was made up from all of the residents and owners in the historic center as well as all of the local organizations in the town and relevant governmental organizations.

Strategic Plan for historic Area:

I. Future Vision for Historic Center

The future vision for the historic center of birzeit is:

“A vibrant, modern, and attractive center; fit for multiple uses, suitable for living, cultural, educational, and touristic activities and equipped with the needed public services and entertainment facilities; a center that respects and protects the identity of the space and its architectural and traditional environment; a center that is a vital and effective part of the town and its surroundings.”

The residential use of the historic center (for families and students) is the most important activity that keeps the historic center alive 24 hours a day, all year long. The center can be further developed and highlighted through attracting one or even some of the Birzeit University activities, as well as many other cultural activities and institutions. Additionally, the creation and development of public and recreational activities inside the historic center, needed in Birzeit, will form a series of attraction points unique to the historic center. All of this will attract people from the town and surrounding towns and villages, especially that Birzeit, traditionally, has always been a hospitable town open for cultural activities.

All of the above forms a basis for attracting more people to the historic center, which, would encourage commercial activities (small businesses and craft shops) and convince small shop owners to reopen their businesses. This would also form a basis for the development of a future market for alternative tourism (based on traditional architecture and culture) not only in Birzeit but also with surrounding towns and villages.

By improving the living conditions of local population and attracting more residents and users we hope to change the attitude and concept of historic centers being dilapidated and almost garbage dumps. Finding the right human and financial resources, solving the serious problems of divided ownership seems to be the main challenges.

How the future vision is articulated

The future vision for the historic center was arrived at by means of the following:

1 – Various studies of the historic environment and its relationship to the rest of Birzeit and to the surrounding towns and villages, showing the need to distinguish the historic district by featuring different activities and services in order to ensure that the residents

would be drawn to living there or to taking advantage of the different services and taking part in the multiple activities offered (the link with Birzeit University, various healthcare, cultural and leisure services, the improved physical environment and infrastructure).

2 – Working with the local community whereby participating residents and a local community based organizations through stakeholder group to arrive together at a future vision for the historic center. This was achieved after brainstorming the historic centers's strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, some of those elements were incorporated in the overall preliminary vision of the historic area in order to arrive at the future vision in its current form.

II: THE STRATEGIC PLAN

1. Objectives

1. Bring life back to the historic district
2. Sustain the current population in the historic center.
3. Increase the population of the historic area based on its absorption ability.
4. To revitalise the main commercial alley through activities compatible with the historic environment.
5. Upgrade the infrastructural condition of the historic center.
6. Initiate services and entertainment activities that distinguish the historic center from the rest of Birzeit's districts.
7. Make the historic centre a primary centre for cultural activities and organizations.
8. Create an effective presence for Birzeit University in the historic area and its environment.
9. Create tourist attractions in the historic district.
10. Transform the open spaces into an attractive element that distinguishes the historic area.
11. Protect the architectural heritage of the historic area (buildings and open spaces).
12. Active community participation in the various stages of the project.
13. Change the local community's negative stereotype about historic centres
14. Attract and regulate investment inside the historic center
15. Continuous development and revision for the rehabilitation project's objectives, strategies and implementation process. and to develop the capacity to implement them.

16. Regulate the administrative status/organise the management of the rehabilitation project.

17. Seek financial resources needed to carry out the rehabilitation projects (both material and nonmaterial projects).

18. Work on solving the issue of ownership fragmentation as an obstacle for rehabilitation processes.

2. The Strategy

A. General Strategies

- Dealing with historic buildings and spaces based on the use factor; Maintain and Develop existing activities and facilities within the historic center and its environs, while re-use abundant buildings and vacant lots to attract a variety of new commercial, educational, cultural, leisure and touristic activities. These would be for the benefit of the townspeople and those from nearby areas, making them featured attractions that lend distinction to the historic district of Birzeit.
- Promoting the principle of partnership among public, private and civil society organizations, in producing many of the projects and activities, especially commercial and residential initiatives.
 - Adhering to the principle of sustainability in the nature of the projects and activities proposed.
 - Carrying out some of the projects aimed at improving people's living conditions (e.g., repairing façades, infrastructure, and public services) during the study and planning phase so as to gain the confidence of the local community, thus increasing participation levels and confidence in the project.
 - Considering the strategic planning as an ongoing process that needs to be reviewed on a regular (annual) basis.

B. Sectorial Strategies:

1. Housing

- Improving living conditions for the inhabitants of the historic center by supporting the rehabilitation of buildings to bring them up to modern specifications, through an effort to offer financial incentives, and improving the surrounding environment, infrastructure, public services and amusements.
- Attracting a new population into the historic district (small families, young couples and students) by offering some models of historic building rehabilitation, fully equipped as residences, or by designing models of modern residential units that are in harmony with the character of the place, within clear conditions and regulations. This

has to be conducted in parallel with improving the surrounding environment, infrastructure, public services and entertainments.

- Offering financial or non-physical incentives for residential property development, by contributing to directly to rehabilitation process or by offering tax incentives or free architectural advice, etc.
- Promoting the principle of partnership among the different sectors (public, private and civil society) to encourage housing development and providing financial resources to back up initiatives such as the “Spend a *qursh* and we’ll save you a *qursh* in exchange”.

2. Commercial activities

- Encouraging commercial activities in the historic center by supporting small businesses and by offering modern infrastructure to make them more attractive by virtue of their location in a distinctive historic environment.
- Organizing training courses on project management, accounting and merchandising to the owners of existing commercial projects or those still in the planning or concept stage.
- Offering financial and other incentives to promote the development of small commercial initiatives inside the historic center, especially in its historic marketplace, by contributing to restoration works, by offering prizes or tax breaks as incentives or by waiving municipal fees.

3. Infrastructure

- Providing funds for the rehabilitation of streets and alleyways; designing a modern utilities network to include an electrical grid, sanitation, telephony and water for all the buildings and open spaces; resurfacing roads and alleyways and equipping them with lighting, seating, refuse collection and proper signposting; organizing traffic circulation (pedestrian and vehicular); and designating parking spaces for cars, public bus stops, taxi ranks, etc.
- Fostering a public/private partnership that will come up with proposals for some of the fund-raising activities in support of the idea: “Donate a stone (or a bench or a tree, etc.) for your town”.

4. Public services and amenities

- Enhancing the services that are already available in the historic district and surrounding area, so as to include educational (schools), healthcare and religious services, as well as proposing multiple activities to bring these organizations into partnership in restoring and developing the historic district.

- Creating new amenities such as gardens, public spaces, children’s playgrounds, restaurants and cafés that will become focal points and distinctive features of the historic district and thus attract the population of Birzeit and of the surrounding areas.
- Encourage the creation of artistic interventions, both permanent and temporary, in the open spaces as features that will contribute to developing and enriching these spaces.

5. Cultural activities

- Develop and promote performances and activities by Birzeit’s various cultural and social organizations and involve them as partners in the rehabilitation and development project, whereby they become part the plan.
- Developing and promoting Heritage Week as a seasonal activity unique to Birzeit by enhancing the festival activities and the ways and places that its different products and activities are showcased.
- Attracting new cultural activities and organizations to the historic district through the involvement of local and national organizations as partners in the rehabilitation process by bringing out and utilizing all the town’s existing potential, and perhaps launching the idea of working on a home for artists and writers, a centre for research, reflection and intellectual development that would offer a residency programme.

6. Birzeit University

- Providing spaces to attract none-educational activities from university campus towards the historic center such as the International Students’ Office or art & design exhibitions, etc.
- Negotiate the idea of rehabilitating the adjacent university old campus with the university administration; suggesting it to be occupied by academic department such as the architecture school or the archeology institute.
- Creating student housing in the historic district or in nearby areas, perhaps along the lines of a dormitory or separate student residential units.

7. Tourism

- Making use of different resources (cultural heritage, services, infrastructure, craft shops, small businesses, cultural activities, etc.) to build the basis for a future tourist market.
- Linking the city of Birzeit and its various resources to the surrounding villages, towns and historic landscape, with a view to creating an infrastructure for alternative

cultural tourism, one that does not rely on religious tourism only, but rather on cultural tourism and the distinctive nature of the local rural lifestyle.

- Working on providing some tourist services such as an information centre and hotels within the historic district and its environs.

8. Open spaces

- Developing the open spaces in the historic district as points of attraction, by redefining their identity as element of the historic spatial pattern that are suitable for contemporary use. This should be done by transforming the undefined open spaces into public spaces that contain public activities.
- Preserving the identity of the open spaces in terms of courtyards and their gates, and residential gardens, given their importance in preserving the traditional spatial composition of the historic center.
- Proposing new uses for public open spaces such as public parks, amusement parks and venues for cultural and seasonal activities, such that they form collectively a network of multifunctional open spaces.
- Restoring the lanes and alleys in the historic district so that most of them are pedestrianized, while taking into consideration the movement of emergency and delivery vehicles. Providing parking lots close to the different entrances to the historic district.
- Restoring the entrances to the historic district so that they become clear demarcation points linking the historic district and the surrounding districts (entries and exits for pedestrians and vehicles, parking spaces, signposting, etc.).

9. Heritage Protection

- Consciousness-raising in the local community about the importance of preserving our heritage as an essential resource for social, economic and cultural development, for this awareness is a requirement no less important than legal protection.
- Protecting the traditional architectural fabric and identity of the historic area by documenting these features and preparation protection plans for the conservation and protection (instructions, general recommendations and by-laws) of the historic area and the individual historic buildings surrounding it.
- The contemporary identity of the place is an expression of the continuous process that has resulted from the accumulation of different historical layers that bring together the past, the present and the future.

- Encouraging building use on the principle that using buildings is the best way to preserve them.
- The general principle is to allow the building of modern additions next to historic buildings (horizontal extension), since the old building is usually small and does not have room for the modern amenities that would make it fit for habitation, though the additions must be done according to specific criteria.
- Prohibiting uses that lead to damage to and destruction of our heritage.
- An area surrounding the historic district should be designated for the purpose of creating a district that is appropriately insulated from real estate development and construction regulations and to preserve the architectural environment, the overall landscape and the skyline formed by the historic district.

Encouraging and financing archaeological excavations in order to understand and document the archaeological history of Birzeit and its various layers, so that it becomes one of the factors that attracts people to and enhances the historic district.

10. Community involvement

- Increasing the involvement of the local community in all stages of the project (study, vision, strategic planning and project implementation) by setting up a stakeholder group comprised of landlords and tenants from the historic center, organizations and businesses from the town of Birzeit and government agencies.
- Developing activities for children and young people with a view to increasing the level of interest in preserving and making use of the town's heritage (activities with the schools and various clubs in the town).
- Developing an annual programme of volunteer fairs in Birzeit, so people can take part in the implementation of some of the projects in the historic district.
- Offering space for local associations within the historic center to operate with the aim of drawing their activities into the historic center.
- Offering prizes for the best practice in the historic environment through restoration, intervention in an open space, or the beautification of gardens, in order to encourage people to contribute to enhancing the ambient environment inside the historic area.

11. The media

- Constructing and promoting a new image of the historic center as an attractive place for living and investment, in order to break down the stereotype of the district as incompatible with modern life standards. This strategy should be pursued at every stage of project.

- Working to partner with local media outlets (newspapers, radio and television stations) to increase the publicity given to the importance, aims and strategy of the rehabilitation and development project.

12. Investment

- Setting up an investment committee to be run by the Municipality of Birzeit (Town Council members, for example), which would aim to contribute development ideas and attract investment to the historic district, through a public/private partnership that would include concerned local citizens. This committee would facilitate investment by offering financial or moral incentives.
- Encouraging regulated investment (that respects and preserves the historic environment), especially in the following areas:
 - Housing: residential projects within the historic district for young couples (cooperatives, for example) or students. This could be achieved either by rehabilitating the historic buildings or by building new housing in the vacant lots on the northeast side of the historic district.
 - Developing the historic center's single commercial alley.
 - Developing tourist services and amenities in the historic district and in the Municipality of Birzeit as the seeds of an eventual national tourist project linking the town of Birzeit with surrounding towns and villages (a project on 19th and 20th century architecture and the districts that link the two periods together, for example).

13. Project development

- Building Capacity needed to develop and implement all projects, especially those that deal with the development of activities and services, both existing and proposed, in the historic area (such as the tourist centre, Heritage Week, commercial activities and housing), as opposed to just the architectural environment.
- Partnering with the private sector to design and implement certain development projects, both physical and non-physical, in the historic district (such as architects' offices, tourism development agencies, tourist offices, economic enterprises and companies, etc.).
- Using competitions as a tool for arriving at optimum solutions for revitalizing and enhancing various activities, projects and services, both physical and non-physical, in the historic area (architectural and planning competitions, contests to develop a route and places for showcasing the products of Heritage Week, contests to develop tourist itineraries and footpaths or cultural activities, etc.).

- Focusing the work of Riwaq Think Net for the current year on the Birzeit Historic area rehabilitation and Development project (suggesting concepts and restoration projects).¹ This would be in addition to presenting examples of potential uses of the historic buildings and spaces such as artistic and cultural exhibitions and works, and for various cultural and leisure activities as part of the Third Riwaq Biennial 2009.
- Documenting the experience of restoring and developing the historic district.

14. Project management and funding

- Management of the restoration project will be shared between the Municipality (the stakeholder) and Riwaq , which will play a coordinating management and technical role by following up on the planning and implementation of the different stages of the rehabilitation project and ensuring that they are coordinated and in no way conflict with the project's goals and vision. This would be in addition to the initiative to develop and carry out the projects in coordination with the partners in the different sectors.
- Working towards gradual transferring for the technical tasks of project oversight and management to the municipal staff, such that the municipal staff will be able eventually to take charge of site management.
- Pursuing a strategy of decentralization in planning and implementation, whereby the rehabilitation process will be divided into different areas and projects according to the sectors (material and nonmaterial). This division will facilitate fundraising from multiple sources for different parts of the restoration plan as well as strengthen the partnership with relevant enterprises and individuals according to the proposed project.
- Developing a partnership with the private sector, especially with regard to commercial and tourist activities, and housing projects, in order to attract private capital, alongside other funding sources, for the development and implementation of parts of the rehabilitation and development project.
- Encouraging the principle of involving civil society in the implementation of projects, alongside other funding sources (both public and private), such as concept the historic buildings upgarding.
- Setting up a development fund for the historic center within Town Hall, and seek financial resources by implementing profitable projects, where the fund's profits reverting to the rehabilitation and development project.

¹ Riwaq Think Net refers to a group of specialists in different areas (architecture, planning, modern art, the private sector, social science, economics, anthropology, law, etc.). This group aims to bring together local and international scientific and intellectual knowledge about issues related to the restoration of historic districts in all its material and nonmaterial aspects.

15. Public and private ownership and the legal situation

- Working to solve the problem of ownership fragmentation (the absence of some owners or a large number of owners of a single property) so that it does not become an obstacle in the face of development and use of buildings and vacant lots in the historic center, with due respect for private ownership as far as possible.
- Resolving ownership issues within the historic district on a case-by-case basis as required by the proposed projects (partial solutions). The reason for this is the difficulty of dealing with , in a single stroke, the problem of ownership fragmentation at the historic center level. This solution will be achieved by relying on the Municipality and other local institutions that have well-established relationships with the tenants and landlords.
- Proposing the following measures as an general strategy for dealing with ownership fragmentation:
 - Direct long-term leasing.
 - (indirect) long-term Sub-leasing and tenancy through the Municipality or other local association.
 - Conversion of private ownership into shareholdings in development companies commensurate with the property value. This would be for large investment projects or those requiring multiple vacant properties in the historic area for multiple, large-scale activities.
 - Encouraging property owners to donate their property in the public interest with the retention of their names on said property or the naming of projects, streets or lanes after them.

16. Environmental issues

- Working to bring about environmental solutions for various issues such as sanitation, ventilation, and building techniques and materials.
- Encouraging the repair of wells and the use of their water.
- Encouraging the planting in the historic district and its environs of various trees and plants that do not conflict with and that indeed preserve heritage sites and historic buildings.