

Strategic Planning for bringing life to the Historic Center of Birzeit

A Short Summary

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.

2. Strategies

In consultation with local community and based on the various spatial studies (architectural, planning, socio-economic, legal, etc.), Riwaq's team ended up with a

series of strategic approaches that translates the vision and aims at bringing life back to the historic center. Below is a summary of the main strategic approaches for the historic center:

a. General strategic approaches

- Developing existing uses and activities in parallel to attracting new uses and activities in abandoned spaces and buildings.
- Encourage partnerships between the public and private sectors.
- Look for sustainable projects and activities
- Data collection and research should be accompanied with the implementation of projects on the ground in order to gain the trust of local communities and increase their involvement.
- The consistent reevaluation of the Strategic Plan is essential.

b. Detailed strategies:

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1- Housing :

As the main traditional function for the historic buildings; the housing strategy focused mainly on the following two topics:

First, upgrade the living conditions for the **existing residence** by rehabilitating the housing units to adapt modern life standards, providing public services & infrastructure and providing diverse incentives.

Second, attract **more people** to live in the historic center area by encouraging mainly newly married couples and university students to move there.

Rehabilitating models for residential use in historic buildings, or proposing models for new housing project are two desirable strategic options.

2- Commercial Activities:

As an underdeveloped sector in the historic center activities; the commercial strategies focused mainly on the following two topics:

First, encourage small-scale commercial activities within the historic center, by providing necessary infrastructure and incentives, especially along the historic commercial road.

Second, provide the technical support and training for existing business and commercial activities within the historic center to develop their activities to be more competitive and attractive.

3- Cultural Activities:

Since cultural events are considered as an important catalysts for rehabilitation and attracting people & activities back to historic center; the cultural activities strategies focused on the following topics:

First, support and develop the existing local cultural institutions' activities and programs and highlight their key role in any rehabilitation process. Developing the scope, program and exhibition areas of "*The Culture Week*" is considered as successful challenge to tackle.

Second, attract local and national cultural institution to hold programs and activities by demonstrating the spatial potentials of the HC. Developing

artist/writers residency program in collaboration with local cultural institutions could be one of the options.

4- Birzeit university

The strategy towards the proximity of Birzeit university campus to the historic center focused mainly on the following topics:

First, provide space in the historic center to shift none-educational activities from university campus towards the historic center such as the International Students' Office or art & design exhibitions, etc.

Second, negotiate the idea of rehabilitating the adjacent university old campus with the university administration; suggesting to be occupied by academic department such as the architecture school or the archeology institute.

Third, develop the idea of proposing students' accommodation within the historic center area.

5- Community participation

Since community is considered as a key player in the rehabilitating process (as owners, tenants, users... etc) our strategy towards the community participation focused mainly on these topics:

First, Encourage community participation in all project stages: studies, strategic planning and implementation, through establishing "stakeholder group".

Second, develop voluntary activities that aim to raise awareness – especially among the young generation- and help implementing small scale projects in the historic center.

Third, Establish prize for Best Practice in upgrading life condition in the historic environment, this includes renovation projects, spatial interventions, garden designs, etc.

The following topics have also been examined in details:

6- Tourism

7- Protection of the cultural heritage

8- Investments

9- Public services and entertainment

10- Open spaces

11- Infrastructure

12- Advertisement and Publicity

13- Project development

14- Administration and Funding

15- Private/public Ownership and the legal frame work

16- Environmental issues

17- Detailed Proposed Scenario

Based on the above future vision and strategic approaches Riwaq team has proposed initial future scenario for the historic center and surrounding areas. The future step would be to identify projects of intervention and their priority in implementation (work plan).

After identifying main attraction points and activities, the historic center has been divided into 10 areas/sections based on their identity (spatial formations, usages, etc.). For each area the most important and distinctive characteristics is identified and a scenario is proposed with specific interventions to be implemented. The main aim of this scenario is to bring life back to the historic center as well as develop already existing uses and activities.