REVITALISATION OF BIRZEIT HISTORIC CENTRE

2013 AWARD RECIPIENT

reVitalisation of Birzeit historic centre

Birzeit, Palestine
The Palestinian town of Birzeit in the central West Bank is located 11 kilometres north of Ramallah and 25 kilometres north of Jerusalem. Its historic centre covers about four hectares, extending approximately 290 metres from east to west. The town stands at 780 metres above sea level and is surrounded by hills, predominantly terraced for agricultural use and, in particular, for olive groves. In fact, the name of the town reflects the historical importance of olive cultivation and pressing since bir zeit refers to the olive-oil storage tanks dug into the ground, several of which are still in existence (although not in use). Birzeit dates back at least to the Byzantine era and seems to have been continuously inhabited. Several archaeological sites, dating to the Byzantine and Roman eras, have been excavated around the perimeter of the town, and many strata exist below the historic centre.

Economic, political and demographic transformations of early- to mid-20th-century Palestine had profound effects on Birzeit, with many residents joining the great waves of Levantine emigration, a process accelerated by international and local events: the world wars, the creation of Israel in 1948, and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, of the Jordan River and East Jerusalem in 1967. Traditional homes in the historic centre were left to crumble and decay as residents emigrated abroad or built new houses outside the old centre in less congested areas, more conducive to modern lifestyles, being provided with amenities and services lacking in the old town. The Israeli occupation curbed economic development, causing businesses to move out, and streets and public spaces were neglected. This situation was exacerbated in the early 1980s when the dynamic Birzeit University relocated to a site several kilometres to the south, draining a major source of life from the town, although churches and mosques continued to operate.

The 1993 Oslo Accords had profound impacts on Palestinian geography, society and economy, as well as on the built fabric, dramatically reducing the amount of land under Palestinian control and dividing land on the West Bank into areas A (urban, under Palestinian civil and military authority), B (most towns and villages, including Birzeit, under Palestinian civil authority) and C (controlled by Israel, constituting about 60% of land in the West Bank, where the majority of vacant land is located).

Riwaq, a highly respected Palestinian NGO, is one of the key actors lobbying for the protection of the cultural heritage of Palestine. Since its establishment in 1991, it has pursued a multi-tiered strategy that includes documentation, conservation, revitalisation, community participation and activism, legislative reform and lobbying, publicity, job training and public awareness programmes. Since 2007, the cornerstone and guiding strategy of its activities has been the “50 Villages” programme – an ambitious plan to save select villages where an estimated 50% of the surviving historic structures of Palestine are located: part of the group’s wide-ranging vision for a continuous Palestinian cultural landscape, against the fragmentation of the post-Oslo period. The vast majority of Palestinians live in the rural B areas, under very difficult economic circumstances. By focusing on villages, Riwaq realised that it could save much of Palestine’s remaining heritage, and at the same time have the greatest socio-economic impact. Conservation would create jobs, revitalise local workshops and, ultimately, spark interest and investment in historic village centres. The historic centre of Birzeit, largely intact though much degraded, was the pilot project for the “50 Villages” programme.

Community participation and focus groups were encouraged from the beginning, with local NGOs, residents and other local stakeholders working alongside an active municipality to draft a rehabilitation plan and identify individual projects. When work began in 2008, the population of the old town counted just 183 individuals, representing 36 families. Of these, 16 families owned their premises, and 20 rented. Three businesses were still located there: a mechanic’s shop, a grocery store and a bakery. Like other West Bank towns, traditional architecture in the old centre is one-storey high and made of local limestone and lime mortar; houses are one or more square modules, each covered by a dome (qubba), and used collectively by the extended family, with concrete, flat-roofed kitchens and bathrooms generally added to the rear.

Riwaq pursued a policy of preventive conservation to upgrade the public realm and restore select public/community buildings to accepted international standards, coupled with creative adaption to embrace modern needs or where the “old” was missing or not restorable, while preserving architectural coherence throughout. Job creation and the revival of affordable traditional techniques and local materials drove the conservation effort, so boosting economic regeneration. Five years of work yielded impressive results: streets have been paved, named and clearly signed; infrastructure upgraded (water) and added to (pipes laid for a future sewer system); facades have been conserved; public spaces have been created (playground) and rehabilitated (courtyards, gardens); and numerous historic buildings have been restored for a variety of uses (community cultural institutions, university residences, tourist accommodation, private businesses...), creating an active cultural hub that is once again coming to life. Cultural heritage conservation is increasingly seen as an important way to preserve collective memory of a historical Palestine for future generations. The successful social, cultural and economic revitalisation of Birzeit undoubtedly stands as an inspiring model for the other villages and rural areas in the “50 Villages” programme and beyond.
reVitalisation of Birzeit historic centre
JURY CITATION
The Revitalisation of Birzeit Historic Centre is a dynamic project in which the NGO of Riwaq succeeds in mobilising stakeholders and local craftsmen into a process of healing that is not merely physical but that is social, economic and political. By reversing a process of neglect and erasure within a complex and difficult political context, the project manages to transform not only a neglected historic core but also people’s lives, and restores not only buildings but the dignity of their users. The project offers an alternative to “museified” historic cores and it pioneers the regeneration of Birzeit’s historic centre into cultural infrastructure. It facilitates the reclamation of heritage by the people involved while also allowing them to achieve their self-expressed aspirations. The project is an exemplary dedication to rural heritage that can serve as a model for the 50 villages in which Riwaq is involved, particularly the strategic interventions designed to stimulate long-term development.
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Birzeit, Palestine

CLIENT
Birzeit Municipality, Palestine:
Yousef Nasser, former mayor
Hasib Al Keileh, mayor
Musa Al Hajj, former director

ARCHITECTS
Riwaq – Centre for Architectural Conservation, Ramallah, Palestine:
Khaldun Bshara, Fida Touma, co-directors
Suad Amiry, founder and former co-director
Nazmi Al Jubeh, former co-director
Farhat Muhawi, Birzeit project director
Iyad Issa, Shata Safi, architect planners
Ruba Saleem, Ghada Mubarak, Bilal Abu Faza’a, Khalil Rabah, Lana Judeh, Sahar Qawasmi,
Michel Salameh, Renad Shqeirat, Yousef Taha, architects
Tariq Dar Nasser, Nizam ‘Owaidat, civil engineers

Rozana Association, Birzeit, Palestine:
Raed Sa’adeh, director

Ministry of Local Government, Ramallah, Palestine:
Shuruq Jaber, architect

Birzeit Municipality, Palestine:
Noor Khdairi, Rana Shaka’a, architects

CONSULTANTS
Birzeit University, Palestine:
Yazid Anani, assistant professor
Samir Baidoon, chair of Business Administration College

In’am Obeidi, Media Studies Programme faculty member
Luna Shamah, assistant to the dean of Public Policy and Administration College

Nazmi Al Jubeh, professor

Golzari NG Architects, London, UK:
Nasser Golzari, founder and partner
Yara Sharif, partner

Ministry of Justice, Ramallah, Palestine:
Walid Badawi, director

Solution for Development Consulting, Ramallah, Palestine:
Joudsh Iyad, director

In’ash Al Usra Society, al Bireh, Palestine:
Najla Barakat, assistant director of community research

Dar Al-Tifel Al-Arabi Organisation, Jerusalem:
Baha Jubeh, curator of Palestine Heritage Museum

Friends Schools in Ramallah, Palestine:
Farhat Muhawi, chief architect/planner

Palestine Investment Fund, al Bireh, Palestine:
Maher Saleh Hamayel, CRS supervisor

FUNDING
Swedish International Development Agency, Stockholm, Sweden

Institut du Patrimoine Wallon, Namur, Belgium

Representative Office of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ramallah, Palestine

PROJECT DATA
Site area: 40,640 m²
Cost: 1,458,000 USD
Commission: June 2006
Design: January 2007 – November 2011
Construction: January 2008 – January 2012
Occupancy: January 2009 – ongoing

RIWAQ
Riwaq is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation established in 1991. Riwaq’s main aim is the documentation, rehabilitation and development of the architectural heritage of Palestine. This signifies the protection of all layers, styles and remains of all periods and civilisations that once existed in Palestine. The various strata tell us the story of the rich, varied and complex identity of Palestine; they also negate the “purity” of the politically charged one-layer identity. This approach signifies the protection of not only noble architectural and religious sites, but also the valuable and varied urban, peasant and nomad architecture. The main objective, challenge and dream of Riwaq, at this point, is to convince the public at large, and decision makers in particular, that historic buildings and historic centres can and should be seen as an important tool for socio-economic-political development rather than as a liability.

WEBSITE
www.riwaq.org

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