

'Power of culture against culture of power'
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CULTURAL HERITAGE – EMPLOYMENT GENERATION AND SPECIAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH. A participatory workshop, Jericho May 28-29, 2007

1. Framework and background

Enclosed documents describe, respectively, the background of the workshop, its programme, and the participating organisations. These descriptions are assumed familiar to the reader, and, for the sake of concision, not repeated in this report. The same applies to presentations of the four heritage organisations and their work.

ASF-Sweden was invited, and financially supported, by Sida to take part in the workshop. ASF assigned its members, architects **Sara Hallström** and **Joanna Heilig**, Sweden, to maintain the task. A summary of our contribution, focusing on special needs of children and youth, is presented in the enclosed abstract. A more comprehensive version – a “handbook” - is available.

The aim of this report is to reflect main lines of discussions arising in course of the working sessions, and to sum up eventual conclusions and outcomes; both by necessity filtered by the personal perspective of the participating ASF members.

Following the task given us by Sida, the report is focusing on the first day of the workshop, and on the theme of special needs of children and youth in traditional urban environments. However, some of the discussion themes found their natural, and interesting, continuations in the following day's sessions on effectiveness and community outreach. We found it both necessary and rewarding to include them into this report in such cases.

Sida has not participated in the design of this report, or expressed any opinion on the points of view presented.

2. Themes of the morning session

Already in connection to the launch of the framework programme (Dr Daibes and Mr Eliasson), the signing of Agreements with Sida, and the presentation of the Swedish development co-operation in Palestine (Mr Öhrström), some of the main lines of future discussions came to light.

A massive consensus prevailed about the developmental, social and cultural value of work already done by the cultural heritage organisations, and the fact of its continuation in the joint programme launched.

Simultaneously, a discussion on possible conflicts between the long term objectives of the heritage projects, and their double task of satisfying more urgent needs of vulnerable population groups, started – to be continued throughout all the workshop.

The following impressive presentations (CCHP, HRC, Riwaq) of experiences, results and main challenges in accomplished and ongoing projects inspired further discussion on this basic theme, and added new subjects (moderator: Dr Qawasmi).

- A general sense of entering a new stage, implying reflection and reformulating of goals and objectives, prevailed. The differing profiles of the four organisations (including Welfare Association) are in this context to be seen as a source of mutual inspiration. An intensified exchange of experiences and an increasing degree of interaction in future projects were anticipated.
- Also in this context, the frame of the workshop itself, giving a platform - and a generous amount of time - to a non-formalised discussion, was highly appreciated.
- All the organisations work on a high gear, overwhelmed with a never-ending stream of urgent down-to-earth tasks and problem solutions. At the same time, they can not afford any greater amount of mistakes. There is, consequently, a great need of time, resources and a formal frame for analysis, evaluation, research, documentation and reflection on long term strategies. A special example is the need of research on the vernacular - suburban and rural – architecture, constituting a great part of the built environment - still out of sight, even among professionals.
- The high school education, deemed too theoretical to provide useful field contributions, caused an additional frustration.
- The need of a comprehensive, holistic and multidisciplinary approach, in space and in time, was underlined by several participants. All heritage work has to be connected to the society. The long term sustainability of the heritage projects heavily depends on a successful community outreach and a stable community involvement – and this is an ongoing, never “finished” process to maintain.
- The urgent needs of real estate- and protective legislation, capacity building, improving of tender procedures and insurance systems, and the importance of engaging the private sector, were pointed out by several participants.
- A more comprehensive geographical range of the heritage projects, an collaboration with the municipalities, should be on the agenda of the organisations. Nablus was hoped for soon, while possible ways of reaching out to northern parts of the West Bank, not to speak of Gaza, were subject of a frustrated discussion.
- The same ambition should apply to the cultivated and natural landscape, villages and other rural population centres.
- Since the birth of the heritage organisations, the general level of public awareness about the built heritage of Palestine has risen considerably. A lower frequency of demolitions and distortions, and an improved maintenance of historic buildings by private owners, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, are some of the outcomes. On the other hand, the difficulties in forwarding such an awareness, especially among the economically deprived inhabitants of historic city cores, were extensively and repeatedly discussed.
Could the Swedish experience of a participatory approach to children and youth be of any relevance in this respect?

The early morning´s issue of balancing long term goals against more urgent needs remained in focus of all debate. All representatives of the heritage organisations emphasised their primary task of safeguarding the cultural heritage of Palestine.

At its best, job creation will be a good complementary – not contradictory – spin off product of this work. Heritage projects carried out with professional skills, high quality handicraft and building materials, will produce sustainable physical and socio-economical results.

On the contrary, a short-sighted focus on job creation at any price, will run the risk of forwarding negligent practises to new generations of craftsmen and producing non-sustainable, low quality physical outcome – and thus ending up in ephemeral charity projects. At its worst, the strategy will contribute to, or even cause, a deterioration of valuable buildings and environments.

Consequently, a certain concern was later expressed about the lack of quality criteria among the evaluation methods presented (morning session of day no.2).

3. Themes of the afternoon session

The presentation by Welfare Association, focusing on participatory planning processes involving children and youth, was followed by a contribution of ASF-Sweden, describing Swedish experiences in the field. An animated debate took place afterwards (moderator: Mr Hashweh).

Which aspects of the Swedish experience, if any, are relevant in the Palestinian context? The mental traps, inherent in any attempt to present observations from a rich and peaceful European country, are obvious.

Keeping this in mind, the Swedish participants made an attempt, based on personal professional experience - Scandinavian as well as Mediterranean - to trace general spatial qualities, constituting good urban environments in differing cultural and material contexts.

- A recognition of the historic city cores of Palestine as an extraordinary resource for their children is an evident outcome of this approach. In practical terms, it could result in less object-oriented interventions. Focusing on preservation of the intricacy of scale and privacy sequences, entrance patterns etc, will request more professional skills, but probably less than ordinary expenses.

The strong position of child and childhood in Swedish society has produced experiences, institutional frames and practical methodologies designed to involve children and youth in different aspects of community life. Even in this case, their general relevance can be put in question, though not likely because of unequal material resources.

Why, at all, involve children and youth in planning processes? What impact does such an involvement have on architecture produced? The personal experiences of the ASF members indicate a more legible architectural language as a possible outcome – at, again, reduced expenses.

The affirmative impact of the involvement act in itself might be of much greater social and psychological importance.

- To achieve sustainable results in the fields of public awareness and community engagement, a participatory approach towards children and youth was agreed upon as a necessity - not a luxury.
- All participatory processes demand professional competence and social sensitivity. Addressing children will automatically affect the family structures.
- How shall we handle acts of destructive behaviour performed by some Palestinian children? Is the “Swedish” answer – inclusion through participation – adequate, given their vulnerable living conditions?

The final reflections from the day (Mr Fontana) revolved around questions of institutional frames, continuity, and interdisciplinary co-operation.

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