

Revitalization of the Historic Center of Beit Sahour



By Salaam Bannoura

In February 2018, under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of the Emirate of Sharjah, the ICCROM Regional Conservation Centre in Sharjah (ICCROM-Athar) announced the first round of the competition for the *Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation in the Arab Region*. The biennial award is designed to honor and reward remarkable works that contribute to the protection and vitality of tangible cultural heritage in the Arab world.

Following an examination of the large number of outstanding projects that were submitted from all regions of the Arab world and that aimed to preserve and protect cultural heritage in its various forms, fourteen projects were shortlisted for the second phase. Remarkably, five of the fourteen shortlisted projects were restoration and archiving projects from Palestine, submitted by a number of dedicated Palestinian institutions working in the field of cultural heritage preservation.

The winning project, entitled “Revitalization of the Historic Centre of Beit Sahour,” was submitted by the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP). The project included seven traditional buildings and a public square that had been rehabilitated during the past few years. The square and buildings are located in the historic center of Beit Sahour, and their selection was based on their architectural and cultural value, in addition to the fact that they had been abandoned



Architect Issam Juha receiving the ICCROM-ATHAR award.

The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) acknowledged the city of Beit Sahour in the conservation of its historic center, and in February 2018 granted it the award for best conservation practices in the Arab region.

for a long time and had started to deteriorate structurally and physically, thus creating health and environmental hazards. The rehabilitation of the targeted areas, in line with CCHP strategies, was intended to serve the local community.

To carry out the rehabilitation of these identified buildings, Beit Sahour Municipality and CCHP concluded agreements with the buildings’ owners that stipulated that the buildings were to be used for a period of 10 to 15 years free of charge. Accordingly, CCHP raised funds for rehabilitation and prepared the designs and the tendering documents. The rehabilitation works were implemented by CCHP following the international restoration standards in a manner that ensures the preservation of originality and integrity.

The works included, but were not limited to, consolidating and reinforcing the buildings, treating structural problems, cleaning the façades, restoring the ceilings, restoring original windows and doors or fixing new ones when needed, paving and tiling floors and surfaces, and creating the electrical and mechanical networks necessary for the new functions assigned to each of the rehabilitated buildings.

The result is noteworthy: Dar Awwad is now being used as the Peace by Piece Tourism Information Center; Dar Abu Sa’da is being managed by Beit Sahour Municipality and hosts the municipality departments of projects, public relations, and community service. Adjacent to Dar Abu Sa’da is Dar Hilal, which is now the headquarters of Siraj Center and also houses the Palestinian Centre for



Old Market of Beit Sahour, revitalized for community activities and festivals.

Once-abandoned buildings and neglected areas have been significantly transformed, creating a vibrant environment in the city and providing vital services to the town of Beit Sahour and its surroundings.

Rapprochement between People, both of which are involved in the cultural and alternative-tourism sectors. Next to Dar Hilal is Dar Qumsieh, which is being used as a restaurant and guesthouse.

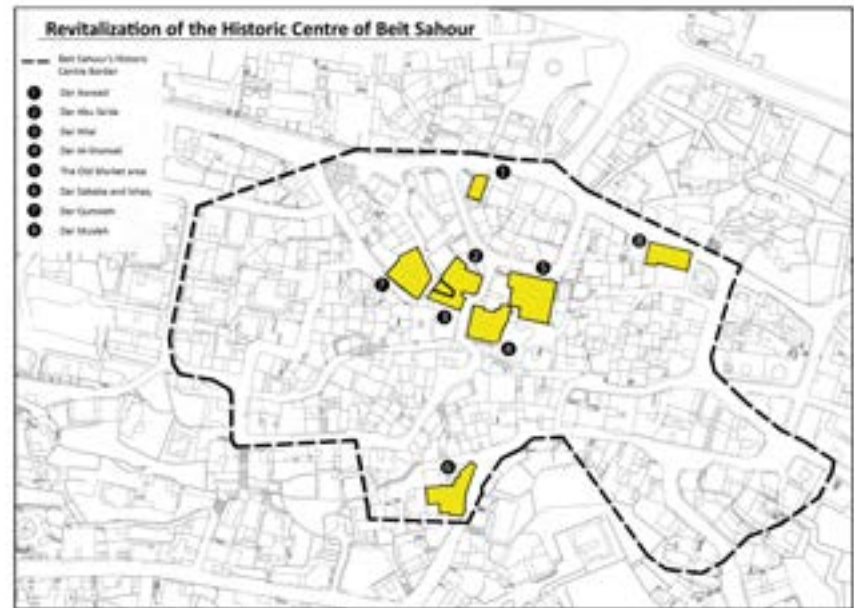
Dar Al-Shomali, located across the street from Dar Abu Sa'da and Dar Hilal, serves as a guesthouse. Right next to Dar Al-Shomali is the original location of Beit Sahour's old market, which had been abandoned, creating an unpleasant and unsafe environment. The market was razed,

and the area was transformed into a public square that now hosts most of the town's events, festivals, and public activities.

Taking a short stroll south of the square, one discovers Dar Sababa and Dar Ishaq. These two buildings share an internal courtyard and now serve as the Bethlehem Fair Trade Artisans (the Handcraft Village), a center that specializes in promoting



Dar Awwad used by the Peace by Piece tourism information center.



This map provides an overview of the location of the described projects.

traditional Palestinian handicrafts. The nearby structure, Dar Musleh, is run by the Arab Orthodox Charitable Society and is used as a training and empowerment center for youth.

The revitalization of the historic center of Beit Sahour has had an impact on various aspects of the city. On one hand, the end result of implementing the aforementioned projects in a relatively small area contributed to re-energizing the cultural, social, religious, economic, and tourism sectors through adopting traditional



Dar Hilal Building used after rehabilitation for the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between People.



Dar Al-Shomali Guest House.

trends in a contemporary manner to protect and develop the urban fabric and traditional buildings. On the other hand, the rehabilitation projects not only preserved the local built cultural heritage, they also utilized it as a tool for socio-economic development through adapting traditional buildings for the benefit of the community.

In addition, rehabilitation projects provide better mechanisms for protecting and managing cultural heritage given that they require the preparation of feasibility studies and



operational plans for each project to ensure sustainability and public benefit, which distinguishes CCHP from other centers. It is also worth mentioning that the rehabilitation process takes into consideration the surrounding landscape and environment alongside the traditional buildings, in order to create harmony between the building and its environment.

The projects provided temporary job opportunities for workers and craftspeople during the implementation of the projects (24,500 direct working days), in addition to making possible the creation of permanent jobs through providing the active organizations with headquarters, which will sequentially increase the number of staff (to date, more than 30 permanent jobs have been created).

Furthermore, the projects aimed to develop the capabilities of architects, engineers, and craftspeople through practical training courses and programs in parallel with implementing the rehabilitation work, which ensures applying high-quality preservation techniques in a manner that respects the authenticity of historic buildings.

Dar Musleh Building used by the Arab Orthodox Charitable Society.

Dar Sababa and Ishaq used as a handicraft village.

All in all, the projects resulted in the rehabilitation of a built-up area of approximately 3,120m², including 54 rooms, in the historic center of Beit Sahour. Notably, the successful adaptation of the traditional buildings to a variety of needs and new functions has had a positive effect and has encouraged interested individuals and the private sector to invest in the area. New investments in the historic center of Beit Sahour include the Citadel Restaurant, Al-Ghad Al-Jadid Center, the Seeds Library, several cafés, Dar Al-Musica, and others.

life in the historic center, redeveloping it as a commercial center, encouraging the tourism sector, and creating social events and activities to revitalize the city center.

The efforts of Beit Sahour Municipality and CCHP in protecting the historic center were first recognized by the Arab Towns Organization in its tenth session in Doha, Qatar, in 2010, where Beit Sahour was awarded first prize in the architectural heritage category. Since then, the rehabilitation projects have been gradually implemented, and



Dar Abu Sa'da Building used by Beit Sahour Municipality.

The joint efforts of CCHP and Beit Sahour Municipality noticeably go years back. Both parties realized the significant value of the historic center of Beit Sahour and hence developed an Emergency Plan for the Revitalization and Management of the Historic Center in 2009. The plan recommended the urgent and immediate intervention in the historic center of Beit Sahour in order to ensure the protection and management of this cultural heritage and to reduce the deterioration of the area's traditional buildings and urban fabric, aiming to improve the quality of

both parties remain keen on sustaining the local cultural heritage with the aim to offer an outstanding example for other local institutions and governance bodies to follow.

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