

Bottle-Bricks for Peace

Argentina

Northwestern University

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Section I:

Project Goals:

Our project aims to educate, engage, and empower the Buenos Aires community in how “waste” can construct community space. The city’s first bottle-brick bench serves as an ongoing educational space that exemplifies permaculture techniques and how to repurpose non-recyclable trash.

Other Fundraising:

No other fund-raising efforts contributed to this project. The generous funds provided by the Davis Projects for Peace Foundation covered all expenses.

Project Report:

Initially we hoped to fully engage the cartoneros in the construction of a community space built by and for the cartonero community (MTE). Upon arrival however, it became clear through discussions with the leader of the community that involvement from the cartoneros would be logistically difficult due to time limitations, and we were told that there would be no initial interest in the project from the cartoneros unless some form of payment was offered. Upon further discussion the leader of the community also suggested that the space be created with the intention of holding educational recycling tours for school children in the future. Thus thus we quickly redeveloped our project intentions and strategy, and searched for support outside of the MTE to build an educational space that would engage the wider Buenos Aires community.

In our search, the internet proved to be one of our greatest resources. By creating a facebook page and a blog, and discovering the various natural building workshops, eco-villages, and other permaculture hubs around the city, we publicized our project and invited everyone to our first workday. Our first workday attracted a large group of permaculture enthusiasts to help build the structure of the living roof that would protect the bench.

We were surprised by how receptive people were to the project and how knowledgeable people were about bottle-bricks and permaculture. In the United States we have found that the idea of a space created from non-recyclable material is interesting, but people are slow to actually get involved in the process of building such a space. In Argentina, people were already making and collecting bottle-bricks in their homes, searching for places to take their bottle-bricks to be used. Our facebook page quickly spread throughout the internet and soon many people contacted us, asking how they could get involved or where they could drop off their bottle-bricks. It was as if the people were looking for an opportunity to repurpose their trash. We soon realized our work was simply in how to connect and engage everyone. Everything that we needed for the project-- bottle-bricks, “trash” (building materials), and an interested community -- were already there; all that was missing was something to draw them all together.

Though initially the momentum was very strong, interest began to quickly decline due to unanticipated difficulties. Early on, our roofer was unable to continue to lead the workshops on the living roof and due to our own limited experience in roof-building our workshops began to lose direction as well as participants. Because much time was spent attempting to resolve the issue of the roof, the start of the bench was postponed. We were not able to begin working on the bench until a month into the project, which we mistakenly anticipated would be enough time. However, due to unexpected complications -- from heavy rainstorms to an ineffective foundation -- everything took more time than anticipated and we quickly fell far behind schedule. Having no previous experience building a bottle-brick bench it was difficult to accurately assess how long each stage would take, and we had to heavily depend on support and advice from those around us.

However, along with unexpected difficulties came unexpected support. We were finally able to engage the cartonero community in helping collect reclaimed materials from the streets, building materials necessary for the construction of our bench. The foundation of the bench was made from broken sidewalk tiles, the seat from reused vegetable bags, and the roof columns from old telephone poles. The cartoneros were happy to drive us around the city at night scavenging for building materials and helping us with a lot of heavy lifting. Throughout the rest of the project, we developed this relationship to bring the cartoneros closer to the project. In our adventures to collect materials together, we would explain how each material would be used to create the bench. As the site developed the project steadily gained more interest and support from the cartoneros. We would often be working as they started their evening shifts and they would watch and ask questions about every step of the process. Sometimes they were even willing to help make bottle-bricks or the natural cement mixture. In this way, the previously abstract idea of a bench made out of trash and mud suddenly became real as they saw the transformation of the city's trash into a new educational space.

In the final days of the project, we saw glimpses of how the space may be used and sustained in the future. Sergio Sanchez, the recycling center's on-site president, gave the first tour of the space to a group of government officials from Latin America. On the celebration of the Day of the Child, over 300 people, mostly the children of the cartoneros, visited the space helping to cob the structure of the bench. A small group of volunteers from outside the center has committed to sustaining and growing the space. News has already arrived to us of future work days on finishing the living roof. Though we were only able to plant a seed for the space's future use as an educational tool and communal space, the sprouting of that seed has already begun and we foresee more growth and progress on the horizon.

Section II:

Reflections on Peace:

Peace is bringing together people who would normally never interact or understand each other. Violence and unrest in the world is due to fear, fear from the unknown, the unknown neighbor or community that lives just a few miles away. The unknown is the invisible barrier to peace. Anything that enlightens and illuminates the unknown, the source of fear, is a path to peace.

Our project contributed to peace by bringing together several communities from the same city that rarely interact or take the time to truly know each other. In the Centro Verde, where the bench was built, we brought together three distinct communities that each contributed in their own way to the creation of a space that will ultimately help clean up a city plagued by trash. Permaculturists, who would never think or know how to work with the city's trash pickers, were joined with cartoneros, who are hesitant to branch out of their own community; and government officials, who are perceived as corrupt and outside of the community, got the chance to interact with the citizens they serve. The playing field was leveled here; everyone played an important role and was valued for their contribution. Mutual respect eased tensions and allowed more interaction and collaboration between the groups. Initially, we acted as mediators many times helping to bridge the groups together. By the time of our departure, we made an open request to the permaculturists and cartoneros to continue to work together in this project. In the future, we hope to see their relationship become more open and trusting as they continue to rely on each other for continued contribution.

We came into this project with many unrealistic and impractical ideals that were not based in experience. From this project however, we realized that small and practical steps do lead to visible transformations in a community and that the complex problems in our society can be conquered with simple community-based efforts.

Personal Statement

One eco-village put it this way: "No existe tirar la basura 'afuera' si el mundo es todo 'adentro' (There is no throwing trash 'outside' if the world is all 'inside')." Everything starts with a change of consciousness. - Krishna Metivier and Isabel Rodriguez-Vega



(From right to left) Isabel, Sergio (Permaculture Expert), and Leandro (Cartonero), working on the structure of the bench.



First workday on the living roof.



Isabel and children cobbing the bottle-brick bench on the Day of the Child.