

Peace of Art-Building Hope in Tripoli, Lebanon
Tripoli, Lebanon
International House
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Davis Projects for Peace-Final Report

Section I:

Summary of the project goals

Peace of Art is a peace building and de-radicalization attempt in the warring neighborhoods of Tripoli, Lebanon. Young women and men (ages 16-32) of two opposing, rival religious groups, some of whom were former fighters with ISIS, collaborated together in revamping and remodeling a small, forgotten church in Tripoli and turn it into a theater allowing a safe space for expressing talents such as acting, singing, playing music, poetry and all sorts of art.

Other fund-raising efforts' contribution to the project

As part of my commute, the NGO's founder offered to cover transportation costs, thus channeling the money to other areas of the project. In addition, we were able to secure a discounted offer for paint and plastering supplies through a family and friend discount at a local supplier. Citizens within our networking circle and community donated furniture, a projector, and a screen used in the theater.

Details about the project

Change of Plan: A few changes to the initial proposal should be noted. Upon arrival, we were informed that we can no longer use the church for the project. Luckily, after excessive negotiations, we were offered an alternative, free and wider space. Initially, the plan was to involve both men and women in the physical remodeling of the space. However, after sensing a push back from women in being involved in the construction work, I decided to allocate their energy in the creative part of the project. This includes ideas for graffiti to be painted on the wall, the concept or theme of the theater, the performance, etc. A colleague and graphic designer was generous enough to offer design workshops during the two months of work to help guide the women in the process. In addition, in collaboration with the NGO, we thought it best to expand this theater into a coffee shop whereby people can gather around to eat and drink, without being limited to attend a show. This yielded a more casual atmosphere thus attracting more local residents, in addition to more job opportunities and higher revenues as a way of sustaining this space in the long term.

The project took three months to finalize instead of two. In the beginning, the progress was slower than anticipated. The engineer and architect took a longer time to finish the structural plan of the space. We had to shift from working on weekends to weekdays as it gave us more time to execute the project. In the meantime, I was able to supplement the budget strains with the discounted paint and electricity supplies thus allowing budget constraints to be minimal. Being from Lebanon myself, there were no language barriers. Cultural differences were prominent as I come from a different area. However, in this case, the differences were positive and constructive. We were not able to do the performance during the time frame due to religious holidays. It will be done in two weeks as part of the festivities in Tripoli.

Execution of project: Selection criterion of recruiting the men was contingent upon their level of extremism in joining ISIS and engaging in "the fight". Men who reported being more likely to engage in violence against the opposing group were given priority to take part in this project. Their level of extremism was assessed based on a small questionnaire that we developed asking them about previous experience in engaging in "the fight", reasons behind their involvement, intentions to join in the future, etc. At first, the

majority of men were reluctant to share their sincere intentions out of fear of being arrested. Fortunately, we were able to overcome this difficulty with the help of local volunteers in the NGO, who were able to foster a sense of comfort and trust between the men and us. Soon after that, we proceeded with the revamping and remodeling of the space from plastering, to painting, installing electricity and ventilation system (one extra cost that I had not accounted for), fixing the toilet, etc. Small interactive games were introduced during lunch breaks to bridge a sense of familiarity with the men of the opposite group. The more one engaged and interacted with one another, the more tolerant one became. I was humbled by their genuine willingness to peacefully interact with one another, abstaining from offensive behavior, and maintaining respect. Overall, the NGO was supportive and helpful, except for a few times where I was forestalled to work at a certain pace thus allowing room for more delays.

Approximately 100 individuals directly benefitted from the project, some of which now have permanent jobs. Participants collaborated, interacted and got familiar with “their enemies”. One can notice the difference in the vibe at the beginning of the project and at the end. The coffee shop/theater was created with a theme that fosters peace with one another. Thus, local residents of both villages (400) have also indirectly benefitted from it. They now have a safe space to perform and express their talents or interact with the “other” people in the place without fear of being stigmatized by the older generation.

Long-term goals and methods of sustainability

What I hope to achieve from this project is to create a space that offers youth from different neighborhoods the ability to have access to a safe, non-political space for constructive self-expression through art and talent by collaborating with one another. This encourages the establishment of peace amongst each other, challenges them to have a different view on the world by channeling their energy into something healthy and productive thus steering them away from engaging in violence and making them resilient to extremism. This coffee shop/theater will invoke a sense of responsibility in the younger generation by sustaining the place. They will generate revenues from the coffee shop and by charging for the performances that will take place in the space. The NGO is going to help provide sponsors for food and beverage. Hopefully, if all goes well, the next step would be to build a recording studio next to the theater.

Section II:

Defining Peace

Peace is that moment the world realizes that we were all born the same and will die the same and that no color, religion, gender, age, social status can change that fact. It is the ability to find kindness, tolerance, and familiarity with the “other”. It is accepting that different can also be beautiful. In the short term, my project will challenge these young individuals’ perceptions of their rival group. It will help them realize that when they choose to put aside their hatred and urge to engage in violence, and work hand in hand with the rest, they can collectively create something healthy, peaceful and beautiful (the theater). In the long term, I wish to create a ripple effect in the community, spreading the word to the rest of the new and old generation in other villages, by encouraging them to get involved in peaceful activities and steering them away from a violent lifestyle. This project was eye opening in many ways. It made me realize how privileged I am to be educated. These young individuals are uneducated and come from very low-income families. They need a sense of purpose and belonging and I can see why they would be easily brainwashed by ISIS. Although former ISIS fighters, they were kind people that have been forced to steer away due to the hardships of life. There is hope to regain peace even among terrorists.

Quotation:

“One way to create peace is to allow the unfamiliar to become familiar. Peace exists when we realize that our rivals are much more similar to us than different; they also have families, children, a mother, a father. Therefore, instead of fighting them, work with them to create something huge. That is what this project helped achieve.” Maram Barakat

