



Five Projects That Are Leading Bethlehem Into a Brighter Future

By Natalie Morcos



The municipality of Bethlehem is an institution with a great history, one of the oldest in Palestine. It has conducted projects on various scales over time, starting under the Ottoman Occupation, to the British Mandate, Jordanian Rule, and then the Israeli Occupation. The municipality has been and remains steadfast in its dedication to the development of Bethlehem by aiming to preserve its rich heritage of more than two thousand years and its outstanding historical value as the birthplace of Jesus Christ. Its constant vision toward the city is to raise the level of wellbeing of the citizens through infrastructural, educational, cultural, and environmental interventions. The municipality has an ongoing cycle of projects that aspire to improve different sectors such as the road network, public buildings, historical architecture, and more.

The following are a few highlights of the ongoing projects of Bethlehem's municipality:

The Old Market, before and after restoration.




*Photo by Rami Rishmawi.
Photo courtesy of CCHP.
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1. Rehabilitation of the Old Market

The Old Market is the historical heart of Bethlehem. Located in the old core of the city, it represents Palestinian society: farmers, merchants, and a clientele from all social classes blend together here. Records of the market go back to the great earthquake of 1927 when the previously-existing shops that had been rendered uninhabitable by the quake and were demolished by the municipality in order to create a square in their place. The resulting market was officially inaugurated in May 1927.

The ongoing Rehabilitation Project started in October 2014 with a budget of two million Dollars and aims to reanimate the market by providing a safe environment for merchants and clients. The greatest challenge of this particular rehabilitation effort was how to preserve the authentic face of the area. To this end, the Bethlehem Municipality, in collaboration with the funding party, USAID via ANERA, contracted one of the most influential architects in Palestine, Nadia Habash, to come up with a creative design that would combine the past and the present. The resulting proposal is successfully easing the historical town of Bethlehem into the twenty-first century while maintaining its authentic spirit.



Since the beginning of the year 2015, Bethlehem Municipality has successfully completed eight projects for the benefit of city. These interventions included work in various fields such as infrastructure improvement, rehabilitation, historic town rehabilitation, urban requalification, awareness raising, and health sector improvements. Always driven by the desire to progress, the municipality is running nine ongoing projects and planning many more.

The Intervention is divided into four stages;

- First: Rehabilitation of the Lower Market (which included installation of canopies, cleaning of the façade surfaces, replacing blocks, and tiling). Status: complete
- Second: Rehabilitation of the Upper Market and construction of a garbage compactor. Status: work in progress.
- Third: Rehabilitation of Al-Najajreh Street. Status: work in progress.
- Fourth: Connecting the market with the infrastructure of adjacent streets. Status: work in progress.

2. Rehabilitation of the First Floor in the Old Municipality Building

The First Floor Rehabilitation Project aims to modernize the old municipality building, improve the flow of mobility, and create a stepping stone for future development. The project is based on contemporary aesthetics of design that incorporate smooth clean surfaces with a lush blend of beautiful earthy tones in a way that welcomes employees and visitors alike. Another objective is to bring the departments closer to each other. There are currently seven departments in the municipality, and while their duties complement each other, they are separated into two buildings. The specially designed space will provide an enhanced environment for the Municipal Court, the Geographic Information System (GIS) Unit, and the Health Department.



The hallway on the first floor of the old municipality building, before and after renovation.

This intervention is part of a bigger project titled Capacity and Institutional Building in Favour of Bethlehem Municipality that was funded by the Consulate General of Italy - a steadfast partner of the Bethlehem Municipality for decades - through the Palestinian Municipalities Support Program (PMSP) in a joint project with the Palestinian Ministry of Local Government. With a total budget of 63,000 Euro, it is designed by the Bethlehem Municipal Department of Engineering in collaboration with a pioneering design firm, the Architecture and Engineering Group (A.E.G).

3. Construction of a Municipal Slaughterhouse

The Municipal Slaughterhouse is one of most important priorities on the Strategic Plan of the Bethlehem Municipality. There are many unofficial, small slaughterhouses in the three cities of the Bethlehem governorate that includes Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour. These privately-run slaughterhouses have abysmal hygienic conditions with little or no control from the authorities, which puts the consumers at great risk. The proposed project, funded by the Kuwaiti Government through the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, has a budget of two hundred thousand Kuwaiti Dinars. Its main objective is to improve the capacity of the local authorities in controlling the quality of meat and to assure proper sanitation conditions. The intended location lies far away from urban concentrations in order

to safeguard public health and the environment. The early design stage of the slaughterhouse is currently underway.

4. Rehabilitation of Manger Square

Manger Square holds a universal value because of its direct connection to the Church of Nativity, the birthplace of Jesus Christ. It is also one of the very few public squares in Palestine. Manger Square sees much activity from both locals and tourists during the day and becomes a relaxing hangout in the evening. Thousands upon thousands of people visit the five-thousand-square-meter space daily, be it pilgrims headed toward the church or locals going about their business.

This project was born out of the wish of the late Said Khoury, a distinguished Palestinian business leader who wished to support Bethlehem. The family of late Said Khoury has generously funded the project in order to make Manger Square a suitable space leading to the Church

of Nativity. Due to the nature of the involved activities of rehabilitating and beautifying the space, this rehabilitation project was organically divided into two phases and implemented by the Bethlehem Development Foundation (BDF). The total budget is two million dollars.

The first phase of the rehabilitation tackled the interior spaces of the municipality buildings adjacent to the square, also cleaning the building facades and installing a water well. This stage was completed in early 2015. The second phase is currently underway and focuses more on external works such as tiling of the square, rehabilitation of an adjacent street, and installation of an electricity generator.

5. Rehabilitation of Al-Saff Street

Al-Saff, located in the southern west of the city, is a vital residential street running through one of the denser urban areas in Bethlehem. Seven-hundred-and-ten meters long, with an average width of ten meters, Al-Saff is





considered a main artery. Sadly, the street is in bad condition without proper infrastructure or safety measures, which negatively affects both residents and commuters.

The rehabilitation of Al-Saff Street aims to reduce congestion and pollution by improving the surface of the road network, installing an adequate lighting system, building retaining walls, and improving safety conditions. It also hopes to attract future investment by providing better services and an improved infrastructure. Thus, this project ensures not only an enhanced level of road safety but also the regulation of future growth in the south of the city. This improvement will benefit most of the estimated 31,000 residents

of the city of Bethlehem as well as visitors from the rural areas.

The project is funded by the Municipal Development and Lending Fund (MDLF). With a budget of 415,000 Euro, the new street will firmly take its place as one of the biggest and most used paths in the Bethlehem transportation network.

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