



Intercultural Cities Study visit on PUBLIC SPACES, ART AND CULTURE AS A DRIVING FORCE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION AND MEDIATION

**Haifa, 23-24 October 2019
Summary report by Ms Kath Davies**

Background

Study visits represent the key learning pillar of the Intercultural Cities (ICC) programme. They contribute to the transfer of good practices and innovation among member cities and expose a range of policy-makers, practitioners and inclusion advocates to reflections and discussions with peers from across the world.

Haifa, home of Jewish new immigrants (coming mainly from the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia), local Jewish (residents of Israel for more than 20 years), Arabs both of Muslim and Christian faith, as well as a new growing group of “non-Jewish non-Arabs immigrants” is considered the Israel’s most ethnically mixed city. All along recent history the city has also been the home of Protestant migrants from Germany, Jews from Romania, Bahá í and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, a reformist movement founded in India. The complexity of the picture is increased by the presence of Muslim Sunni, Christian Catholics and Orthodox, as well as Druze. Haifa is therefore a city with an active tradition of diversity, migration and ethnic co-existence which makes it a multi-ethnic and ‘shared’ Israeli city. The climate of deteriorating security and the political context in the region are challenges that the city strives to face to protect its unique nature.

The Study visit presented Haifa’s intercultural practices considering its wider historical and geographical setting, as well as history, geography and politics of the region. It showed how an open management of public space can promote participation, interreligious dialogue and intercultural interaction, as well as the potential that a shared vision of arts and culture can have with regards to living together peacefully in diversity.

Main lessons from the Study visit

The top three lessons taken from the two days programme :

1. Leadership

The necessity of leadership at every level, from the top of the municipality, officers, community organisations and their staff, to individuals as social agents of change and residents.

2. Collaboration

The need for genuine and authentic collaboration. By this it is meant that the inherent behaviours, expectations and values are embedded at every level:

- active listening and hearing other perspectives
- having a safe space to be able to contribute and have your voice heard
- conversations and processes that recognise the needs and requirements of participants

- shared vision, goal or objective – it can be on a macro or micro level, depending on those ‘in the room’ or how big a step is possible within your context and environment
- to have a flat hierarchy and that all stakeholders have equal voice, relevance and importance – working with each other and in partnership

3. Story

The importance to understand that everyone has their own story and experience, and that this needs to be respected and nurtured, whilst also enabling a future narrative to develop.

To not ignore the conflicting, divergent or challenging aspects of ‘the story’ but also to find space to open up a new narrative and dialogue. To create a new shared story that fosters a commonality and a positive lens to establish new territories and dialogue.

These were demonstrated through the following:

- The Mayor of Haifa, Dr. Einat Kalisch Rotem, welcomed everyone to the study trip, gave space out of her limited time for everyone to introduce themselves, then described her approach to ensuring inclusive approaches that included maintaining the Haifa history of a Deputy Mayor being an Arab (if the Mayor is a Jew and vice versa), her commitment to all children having the same experience and opportunities. Further to this, Mayor Rotem, rejected pressure from the national Government on calls to change the deputy Mayor, and how she wants to maintain and build Haifa’s reputation as a city of co-existence and inter-culturalism.
- Asaf Ron, CEO, Beit Ha’Gefen, Arab Jewish Culture Centre, who leads a programme of cultural activity from theatre, contemporary art, a library to public engagement activity. He leads an organisation that strives to give equality and parity to the voices of Arabs and Jews in Haifa. This is not without challenge, however, their shared vision and commitment to promote and create the conditions for co-existence are inherent throughout all the activity.
- Ada Riemon and Alhan Jeries-Ashqar art tour leaders for the ‘Museum without Walls’ project that promotes co-existence through contemporary public art practice, who as a Jew and an Arab, are acknowledging the history and heritage and how their familial story is one that could still be rooted and cause conflict today, but through courage and aspiration are determining their own story for the future.
- Yael Messer, Curator, Beit Ha’Gefen, whose approach to curation ensured active contemporary art conversation and questioning. The current exhibition ‘Out of Context’ by Arab artist Nardeen Srouji, explores the relationship with space, demarcation, recognising the inherent and hidden histories always present even if not visible, and the human relationship with space and its impact on experience.
- Kamil Sari, Archaeologist and Resident, and Guy Malal, the Ein Hayam Neighbourhood social project initiator, whose joint work led to two local projects: a community garden and archaeological tour with signage to inform visitors about key sites. As community based action, driving social change within their neighbourhood they are making steps to support community cohesion at a grass roots level. The community garden is a simple project of providing small allotment plots to residents within the community, to share skills, expertise and produce. The project also has involved the planting of a community orchard for all to enjoy the fruits – literally. An archeological heritage project was developed and delivered to uncover and document the neighbourhood’s history with local digs uncovering ancient mosaics, burial chambers etc. The project has resulted in a book that was given

to every household within the community, creating an acknowledgement of the ever-changing and evolving narrative of their geographical location that now resembles the neighbourhood in which they live.

Inspiring practices

Beit Ha’Gefen is Arab – Jewish Cultural Centre that promotes a shared society in Haifa and Israel, by organising intercultural and dialogue activities. Beit Ha’Gefen plays a central role in the assimilation of an intercultural outlook and leading social and communal processes in the spirit of democracy. The centres main fields of activity are the art, education and tourism, providing tools for coping with complex issues in a multicultural society.

Takwin Labs Business Lab

Itzhack Farid, CEO, Takwin, an Arab / Jewish joint high-tech venture, actively seeking and investing in Arab high-tech start-ups. The rationale is clear, Arab ventures find it more difficult to gain the support to explore and develop their ideas. They not only need the financial support and commitment, but also need mentoring support to learn the skills of controlled failure, experimentation and to overcome the cultural barriers that prevent Arabs from being able to move from idea to start-up to a growth business.

The barriers to engagement are the same for people in deprived areas of other European countries, or who lack the wider cultural capacity, social network or have not gained the experience of public speaking, presentation or even how to approach mechanisms to gain the support from a Business Hub or a private VC.

Haifa Street Art

The use of street art is supporting the development of vibrant areas that used to be run down. These areas now have bars, restaurants and are seen as places to be seen in. Landlords are also adopting a meanwhile use approach, allowing artists to use space for a year or two for nil cost, in order for the perception of the place to change, to create interest in their property with the long term ambition for them to be rented commercially.

Museum without Walls

Ada Riomon and Alhan Jeries-Ashqar gave a tour of a long standing project, where artists are commissioned to develop works that are installed in various locations in the Waddi Nissnas neighbourhood, which is predominantly an Arab neighbourhood. The project is in collaboration with the residents who agree to have works installed on the side of their homes.

Some works ask politically and historically sensitive questions around identity, history and the future. One particular work placed a door on the side of a house, with the image of the previous owners, who were displaced in 1948.

This opened a dialogue between Ada and Alhan, who both talked from what could have been seen to be opposing sides. Their relationship and navigation of the subject showed a consideration and sensitivity to the subject matter, without placing the other in a position of negativity or needing to defend their viewpoint.

A concept that can be embedded in other cultural activities addressing the wider public, to encourage dialogue between communities through our priority cultural programmes.

Jigsaw engagement tool

A simple tool to engage residents on a conversation about the macro, and to lift perspectives beyond the micro and specific localised community issues. The jigsaw is a simple yet effective tool for participants to build Haifa and to discuss what each area means to them, to draw out their stories and to gain wider appreciation for the whole and the city’s intercultural narrative.

‘City for All’

A project presented by Adv. Ela Alon, whose approach in adopting round tables to developing a women focussed policies for social justice, demonstrated wider ambitions for Haifa to have equality embedded within its future, built on the foundation of intercultural and inter-religious developments.