
Proposal for Neighborhood Revitalization in Iraq

Snapshot Summary

- Concept:** A dynamic approach to community/neighborhood revitalization in Iraq that employs multiple activities concurrently to create dramatic and visible results. Individual cities and neighborhoods in Iraq may pick and choose from the variety of ideas mentioned as well as incorporate additional ideas. All of the proposed activities are designed to be inexpensive and et provide for maximum effect.
- Problem:** City streets, homes and neighborhood common areas are rapidly deteriorating; with no ownership and a sinking sense of community pride and vision for the future the continued spiral downward is increasing in velocity -- criminals taking over in the absence of a deterrent
- Actions:** Demolition of condemned structures, repair water/sewer systems, remove trash and debris, address broken windows, install awnings, paint walls and surfaces, install colorful banners, design concepts, provide shading, organize community/neighborhood activity/involvement at many levels
- Result:** A cohesive, involved community in which residents deter criminal or destructive activity, where pride of ownership prevails and streets are a bustling scene of local commercial activity. Residents feel safe walking through their neighborhoods and building facades are clean and free of graffiti, and no broken windows visible.

Background:

Countering the “broken glass theory”: This is the theory famously expounded by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in an article entitled Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety, which appeared in Atlantic Monthly in March 1982. It explains that the consequences of neglect in a community, even on a small-scale, can have a cumulatively significant impact that leads to wide-scale deterioration. Most neighborhoods in Baghdad, whether they were victim of insurgent attacks, neighborhood thugs, or simply a lack of municipal governance have begun to prove the theory, as it was first explained in the article. Personal responsibility for self and community are eroded and finally

abandoned allowing lawlessness to escalate and the physical surroundings to further deteriorate.

If simple neglect of one broken window can snowball into the total deterioration of a neighborhood, and the subsequent degeneration of the sense of personal responsibility for care and maintenance of a community, then perhaps the raindrop theory will work to reverse it. All it takes is one individual to stand up and make a difference. Once individuals begin to take responsibility and pride in their neighborhoods, more should follow suit. The concept of creating order from chaos begins small, perhaps with the renovation of a traffic circle or the building of a new playground for neighborhood children. All it takes is for a few people to regain the sense of pride, believe in the future and begin to evoke positive actions, demonstrating responsibility for maintaining their community before the word spreads.

A Way To Turn The Corner:

We can promote stability in the long-term by assisting in implementing those strategic projects that foster economic development, enable an area to be adequately secured by limiting venues in which terrorists can operate from, greatly improve the aesthetics of a local neighborhood, provide employment opportunities, and begin to reverse the effects of the broken glass theory by providing tangible examples of hope for a better future. The options presented for increasing community responsibility will also serve to provide much needed employment, renew individuals' stakes in maintaining their neighborhoods, and infuse cash back into the local economies.

The first step in establishing a more secure environment necessitates that condemned buildings be demolished to make way for new construction. Identify condemned buildings that have become safety hazards or eyesores with no functional purpose and demolish to make way for newer structures or community parks.

The scope of these community programs will include demolition activity that require that local vendors, preferably those residing in the community being revitalized, be hired to provide the labor, demolition and subsequent reconstruction of buildings (though this proposal does NOT include the longer term and capital intensive reconstruction), playground equipment, (re)construction materials, and any additional materials such as vendor carts for street vendors. Work will include on the job training and *could* include the separation and maintenance of reusable items as well as selling recovered materials or scrap that cannot be reused in the reconstruction projects that is generated by demolition of designated buildings.

There are several ideas for beautifying and revitalizing neighborhoods that are sustainable and generate a sense of pride in the community. They include renovating playgrounds, designing new traffic circles, demolishing unsightly buildings that have no utility to the community and have become an eyesore,

creating park areas, cleaning up streets and sidewalks, or simply painting a fence. These are low cost options that can reverse the effects of the broken glass theory if local Iraqis embrace them and understand the scope of its positive effects.

1. Homes in Neighborhood

Personal residences throughout Iraq have suffered the burden of neglect, vandalism, and in many neighborhoods have been damaged by bombings and gunfire. These homes often look dilapidated, public water and sewer connections are inoperable, some portions may be crumbling, and many homes are layered in dirt and grime. In many neighborhoods people have stopped making the effort to keep their homes maintained, and desire to blend in rather than stand out or draw attention to their properties. This pervasive mentality of neglect that permits the deterioration of homes and communities can be reversed. People once took pride in their homes, and they can again.

Exteriors of homes can be patched and repaired, holes filled in and smoothed, crumbling facades refurbished, broken windows removed and replaced, and a fresh coat of paint applied to the exterior. Of critical importance to Iraqis is their quality of life which has been dramatically affected by lack of electricity and access to public water and sewage facilities. Some homes may benefit from a simple repair to their water and sewer connections that enable them to access the public services again. Look at the front facing yards and sidewalks of the homes, and how well they have been maintained. If the entire street's front yards are in need of care and maintenance, put locals to work to make them all presentable – in this way no single house stands out and they are all significantly improved. Slowly perceptions will change and the sense of pride will generate a feeling of ownership and responsibility.

Women in the community can be organized to work on small craft type projects that have broad applicability, such as choosing tile or paint colors, painting murals or designing mosaics. These concepts can be applied to beautifying personal residences, businesses, or children's schools with all community residents involved.

2. Traffic Circle Monument

The revitalization of a significant monument is a powerful reminder that the new fully-representative government is making progress and committed to the betterment of Iraq as a whole. Although it is but a brief moment in which Iraqis will spend passing the large traffic circle, over time it becomes a statement and a visual representation of the new beginnings and future potential that can instill a sense of pride and even relief at the tangible evidence of progress. It can have a positive effect on the psyche.

The renovation process begins with simple trash removal, possibly demolition of any small structures currently present in the circle and the removal of all unnecessary debris. The center of the circle is recessed and can be filled with the rubble of the past and systematically covered with similar pieces of flat stone or concrete. If this is done carefully there will be no need for mortar and the flag poles can be set into a cast concrete base and then buried into the grade.

The central flagpole should fly above the rest and contain the Iraqi flag, and surrounding flags can be simply colorful to lift the spirit, one must be careful to insure that emblematic banners are not used. It is critical to ensure that these flagpoles do not become advertising for radical Islamists or illegally armed groups. In some cases it may not be practical to have multiple flagpoles if for instance, it becomes likely that banners for Moqtada al Sadr are likely to replace the Iraqi flag. This would clearly send the wrong message to the community.

Surrounding landscape beyond the flagpoles and center fixtures should meld with the local colors and textures such they represent a desert environment with muted colors that are organized, clean and simple. Colored stones can be used in place of grass because it requires much less maintenance and is not subject to browning during the summer months. Color can include deep browns, tans oranges and other shades of the desert, or green, white and red to represent the flag perhaps. See *accompanying poster*.

3. Community Park

The community park concept includes creating a safe area in which children and local residents can gather and begin to develop a cohesive sense of community. These parks may be of varying size and scope, and are a positive use of vacant property. There are many tracts of vacant land adjacent to residential communities that are perfect for this purpose.

It is recommend that excavation of large portions of any area selected to lower its grade by 2-3 meters, effectively a slightly sunken park. Excavated material can be used to berm and slope the sides of the area down into the recess where playground equipment, secured picnic tables, benches and other structures are erected. Along the sloped wall, have children put their handprints in drying cement or clay, perhaps with their first name underneath it. This creates a sense of ownership and pride. A portion of the community park could be left available for a small soccer field, running track or green area. Construction of such a park in the shape of a peninsula can allow parents to keep a watchful eye on their children as they play, and a large industrial tent covering placed overhead could provide shade from the intense sun, each community could perhaps

have their own color scheme to brighten the area and enhance the feeling of ownership and responsibility.

Recessing the play area makes it more secure for parents to ensure their children do not wander off, especially if there are only one or two designated points of entry and exit from within the recessed area. Parents could potentially sit on the embankments as well to gain a better view of the area, which could provide a secondary option for family gatherings or community events. Signage indicating children at play with bright coloring can be erected for additional safety measures.

Rubble from the chosen lot or from surrounding lots can be utilized to great effect by creating walkways or steps that are dry laid, with a small batter to the face of the wall. Steps can easily be constructed from the rubble if it is re-laid carefully and in an aesthetically pleasing pattern. See *accompanying poster*.

4. Street Park

The medians or islands located in between streets running in opposite directions represent a perfect opportunity to clean up and beautify neighborhoods. Most of the median islands are run down and look like a waste land, simple projects to clear, organize and beautify can dramatically change the landscape of a street scene. Center areas can be excavated up to 1 ½ meters, similar to the proposal for community parks and then decorated with a combination of colored stone, large colored tents, and possibly local foliage with the Iraqi flag standing aloft in a flag pole at the center of each island.

The work involved is simple, requires a limited amount of materials and even the neighborhood residents can assist if so desired. Neighborhood watches have already been initiated in most Baghdad neighborhoods, purely as a measure of safety and security. The sense of community and pride is there; it need only be cultivated and renewed for Iraqi's to take responsibility for their communities again. Tools required for the excavation and minor construction can easily be found on the local markets, and this clean up also serves as a form of temporary employment that can push cash back into the neighborhood and local economy.

A second option is that the larger islands may also be made into small playgrounds, just like the concept of a community park. This however, will be dependent upon the flow of traffic, how heavy it is in a particular area, the number of children and age in the community, as well as whether it is likely that the street crossings to and from the playground can be adequately identified. The playgrounds should have large and bright signage posted indicating "Children at Play", and wide CHILDREN

CROSSING with diagonal paint bands clearly marked on the street to show children where it is safe to cross, and to indicate to vehicles that they must take heed and slow down so children can safely cross the street. This option needs to be carefully reviewed to ensure that no children are endangered by constructing the playground in a median, however in many neighborhoods there is limited traffic and it could be a simple and innovative solution to utilizing dead space, while providing a venue for children and community members to gather. See *accompanying poster*.

5. Secondary Commercial Streets

The streets throughout Baghdad and surrounding communities today are in dire need of repair and revitalization; this will take some attention to detail and planning for the larger scope of the community. It is a good opportunity to provide more tangible evidence of progress. The return of a street to its previous vibrancy, including respect for the rule of law and full fledged commercial activity, can have significant benefits to the neighborhood that can spread across a wider region.

Creating a sense of order and calm from the run down, burnt out and trash-littered side streets is a fairly simple and quick process, but it will take the commitment of the community to keep it in good order. They must feel invested and want to maintain a sense of pride in their community. It is hoped that eventually other neighboring communities will desire the same signs of progress, and wish to work to make their own neighborhood just as clean and beautiful. Working together can help re-create a sense of purpose and renew hope.

Minor demolition, clean up and painting, and the removal of large debris such as broken down vehicles or overflowing trash receptacles are the majority of the work involved. A simple coat of paint on the walls facing the street can dramatically improve the perception of neighborhood inhabitants, while poster removal and scraping of burnt out streets can also create visible improvements. Broken windows need to be removed for safety purposes, and it is recommended they be replaced with some kind of a one-way view screen or else a fiber-reinforced concrete (FRC) panel so that criminals cannot use them to hide behind. These changes can make way for increased commercial activity and potentially increase the number of new micro-enterprises.

The special FRC panel is generally mounted slightly above the surface of the building to provide shadow and relief which makes it look more permanent as opposed to a temporary fix. Panels can be a bright color that represents colors of the Iraqi flag, or they can be a deep shade of brown to match the surrounding landscape. The benefit of this type of panel is that it is strong, will not deteriorate, and needs no special finish to

be practical. It can even work without paint or can double as sign board so that it does not appear that it is boarding something up. Sizes and shapes can be varied to create a feeling of artistic shapes and patterns.

Furthermore, murals or special artistic tile work could also be commissioned for a reasonable fee from local artists or completed by neighborhood residents. Artwork can be commissioned to add not only color, but to foster a deep sense of pride and encourage a commitment to maintaining the cleanliness and order of the venue. Mosaic tile work was a popular option for beautifying Iraqi neighborhoods. The work itself keeps artist(s) employed and creates an atmosphere to instill pride. This same concept may apply to more than just street scenes, but has great potential to be a centerpiece or a focal point in some of the larger traffic circles, artwork can represent local custom, religious tradition (though non-sectarian and without reference to militia leaders such as Muqtada al-Sadr). An Iraqi flag could be done in a mosaic or painted with paint that will withstand the dry heat and occasional rainy weather.

Once the clean up process has been completed and buildings repaired, it is suggested that the local entrepreneurs begin to set up mobile carts for individual businesses. In this way, the community can create positive cash flow, rebuild the economy, and also keep an eye out to ensure the streets remain in good condition and free of vandalism. A removable banner pole can be mounted atop each cart with a sign displaying the wares for purchase, and if made bright and clean also adds to the color of the streetscape. *See accompanying poster.*

Community Organization and Involvement

Educate, coordinate, and organize the community members to get involved in developing their own neighborhoods. This is a hallmark of this strategy, as much as part of the logistical efforts to complete selected activities. Encourage the local Iraqis to help design concepts, or provide recommendations for skilled labor, procurement of materials and assist in determining which activities to undertake. Once a single block is cleaned up, others will want their neighborhoods to look the same. The ideas and designs will catch on. Let the neighborhood residents make the decisions on where to invest the limited resources. Their agreement and support is critical to ensuring a high value is placed on results.

The concepts proposed here are not new however all (what ever aspects are undertaken) combined with considerable community involvement is as important as the actual physical changes that will be made. The involvement should include all community members; there is a place for all ages and each have an important role to play in this effort.

The individual activities proposed are mostly aesthetic rather than heavily weighted to physical infrastructure other than the demolition and subsequent removal of rubble; no new sewer systems are contemplated etc. Thus the cost should be relatively low and when executed with the community members should provide significant lasting positive results.

As part of this presentation there are visuals in the form of mock posters and a materials guide for reference that may be viewed upon request.