

THE 'HORSH BEIRUT FOR ALL' CAMPAIGN

2010 - 2016



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INTRODUCTION

Public space is essential for urban life - it enables people from all social strata and backgrounds to meet, enjoy the space together, and form a harmonious identity. Yet, Beirut is notorious for its lack of such spaces.

It is said that Beirut comes from the Phoenician word Beriet, which translates to Sanawbar (Pine). In the early 17th century, Emir Fakhr al-Din II ordered the planting of a pine forest, Horsh Beirut, which spread over 1,250,000 meters squared to the southern edge of Beirut. Over the centuries, the trees were abused by the armies of the Crusaders, Mamluks, Ottomans, and the World War II allies. Each took turn in cutting down its timber to build ships and weapons.

Before the civil war, Horsh Beirut, was the only sizeable park of the city, and a place for gatherings, festivals, and traditions. However, in 1982 an Israeli raid destroyed most of it, decimating the number of trees. So following the

end of the war, the Municipality of Beirut signed a partnership agreement with the Regional Council of Ile-de-France to rehabilitate the park with the initial plan of reopening it to the public in 1995. This date was then pushed back to 2002 in order to allow the newly planted pine trees to grow bigger¹. However, the year 2002 came and yet the gates to the park remained shut to the public, and became only accessible to those who request a special permit from the Municipality. In practice, the vast majority of Beirut residents had become deprived of their right to enjoy the place, under the pretext that the municipality is inadequately equipped to manage it. This led NAHNOO, a youth non-governmental organization, to spearhead the "Horsh Beirut for All" advocacy campaign to challenge the situation in late 2010 which led to its reopening to the public 5 years later, in 2015.

This brochure tells the story of our journey.



A general view of Horsh Beirut.

¹ F. Shayya, At the edge of the city, 2009.



NAHNOO LAUNCHES THE CAMPAIGN

In 2009, a group of Lebanese youths established NAHNOO, a non-governmental organization that works towards a socially cohesive society and aims at becoming a platform for young people to engage in self-growth and the development of their communities through the use of creative and scientific tools and methods.

Initially, NAHNOO focused on urban planning. In 2010, workshop participants studied the role that the planning of a city and its urban fabric play in bringing a community together, and how social cohesion could be promoted through urban interventions. The participants conducted a survey in the neighborhoods surrounding the Shatila roundabout (Ain el-Remmaneh, Ghobeiry, Tarik el-Jdideh, and Chiyah) which revealed the isolated nature of the different neighborhoods and pointed to the pressing need of residents to have access to "a space": a space to meet up, to run, to play, and to relax... Through the workshop, a number of participants for the first time discovered the existence of Horsh Beirut. More so, they came to realize that it was meant to be a "public space", open to all².

Horsh Beirut thus embodied a solution for this need and a cause was born: Reopen Horsh Beirut to re-establish it as a public space for all and to reintegrate it into the city's daily life, thereby transforming it into a venue for fostering social interaction between individuals and communities. The two main objectives of the campaign encompassed both:

- Obtaining an official decision from the Municipality of Beirut to open the park to the public,
- Raising Lebanese citizens' awareness of the importance of and their right to public spaces.

To achieve these objectives, specialized teams of volunteers dedicated themselves to a distinct set of tasks: A research committee developed arguments for the reopening of the park taking into consideration legal, social, psychological and environmental aspects. In the meantime, the activities committee planned and coordinated advocacy activities, while the communication committee laid particular focus on outreach through social media.



Sign placed by the Beirut municipality saying that persons cannot enter if they do not have a permit.

² نشرة سيجما. عدد أول. صادرة عن «نحن». 2011



HORSH BEIRUT A PUBLIC SPACE FOR MEETING UP

In the 1960s, Prime Minister Sami al-Solh fenced in what remained of the forest for protection against abuse and declared it a “public park”. The modern park, “Horsh Beirut”, measures around 330,000 square meters and lies along the axis of the Old Airport Road, amidst the socially and religiously diverse areas of Mazraa, Tarik el-Jdideh, Qasqas, Sabra, Ghobeyri, Chiyah, Furn el-Shebak, and Badaro³. During and after the sectarian civil war, it separated the suburbs from each other, keeping Christian, Sunni, and Shia neighborhoods apart.

However, once integrated in a responsible policy, Horsh Beirut being the largest green area remaining in Beirut and due to its strategic location, could become the venue to strengthen

social bonds between citizens and between communities by bringing them together. And as a public space, it should be managed in a way that allows and encourages citizens of all social backgrounds, of all ages, and of all genders to use it as a recreational area.

In Lebanon, however, citizens are generally deprived from their right to public spaces, and many are not aware of their importance or their impact on the quality of life. Nor do they realize the potential of how they can build stronger communities by engaging members.

So the first step of the campaign was to devise strong valid arguments for the reopening of the park.



Horsh Beirut as it should be.

³ F. Shayya, *At the edge of the city*, 2009.

BUILDING PRESSURE TO APPLY THE LAW

Lebanese Law grants the right to public spaces – a central argument NAHNOO utilized against the municipality's practices which were discriminatory and illegal. Some of those practices were declared such as the requirement of obtaining a permit from the municipality to enter the park, and others were undeclared such as the ability of the park's guards to arbitrarily choose who to allow in based on the visitors' physical appearances. NAHNOO therefore studied why Horsh Beirut is a "public space" and not a private municipal property in the Lebanese legal framework, a distinction which challenges the municipality's entitlement to close it to the public for reasons other than the





EVOLUTION OF A STRATEGY

The team identified the main target stakeholders of the campaign: the mayor and members of the municipal council, who represent the legislative powers in the city; the governor of Beirut who holds the executive powers; and representatives of the Regional Council of Ile-de-France who had an ongoing partnership with the municipality and could therefore influence its decisions. It engaged with them in an escalatory fashion and relied mainly in that on the residents of Beirut, the youth, and the public at large, being the first to be affected, and due to their power to voice their support and thereby pressurize the municipality. At first, NAHNOO met with relevant stakeholders in order to discuss their respective concerns with the view of attending to them. Once the municipality showed persistent signs that it

was uncooperative and was not responsive to the campaign's solicitations, the team adopted a more confrontational strategy, relying on public and media mobilization through public activities and debates. Through this approach, the cause of Horsh Beirut grew to be a public cause and the municipality therefore had to publicly voice a clear stance on the matter and later issue an official decision to outsource the management of the park to ensure it is reopened to the public. However, the date of the reopening was continually pushed back. Sustained public pressure, the threat to file a lawsuit, and the appointment of a new governor who was willing to cooperate with the campaign finally led to the successful reopening of the park.



Various protests around town and a Town Hall meeting with the head of the Beirut municipality.

TIMELINE: TRACING THE CAMPAIGN'S FOOTSTEPS

2010

AN IDEA TAKES ROOT

- The campaign's team starts **raising awareness** about the cause and **drafts a proposal** for the re-opening of Horsh Beirut after receiving the appropriate trainings.



2011

NEGOTIATIONS, AWARENESS, AND MOBILIZATION

- NAHNOO presents its case for reopening of Horsh Beirut, the importance of the initiative, its risks and potential solutions to a number of municipality members and gains their support.
- The campaign also **spreads its message to the general public**, for instance by participating in the **Science Days Festival** in Beirut's hippodrome, attended by 25,000 people. NAHNOO organizes closed **guided tours for schools**, as a result of which a total of 1000 children discover Horsh Beirut. It gives **lectures** on the topic in major Beirut universities, and publishes an online, **short documentary** about it.
- A **poster design competition** is organized to help the campaign in spreading its message that Horsh Beirut is for all.



2012

GUERILLA PICNICS

- The team writes **stencils on the walls** of Beirut to raise awareness about the existence of Horsh Beirut and people's right to access it.
- It invites citizens and the media to a **public picnic in the closed park**, without the event being explicitly authorized by the municipality, a fact which increases the pressure on it.
- The campaign organizes a **Town Hall Meeting**, during which citizens and officials discuss the reopening, and the mayor of Beirut for the first time publicly promises to open the park. Experts from the Regional Council of Ile-De-France review the suggestion and conclude that the reopening of Horsh Beirut is safe to proceed with.
- NAHNOO forms a **coalition of 12 NGOs** who then organize a second picnic event all over Beirut: squares of green grass are laid out across the city, people bring chairs, food and games to make use of these patches as if they were an actual park.



2013

NO TURNING BACK

- In response to a **petition** demanding a clear date for the reopening of the park, Bilal Hamad, President of the Municipal Council, holds a press conference to announce the organization of a 2-week public festival in Horsh Beirut and declaring that NGOs are authorized to use the park to organize activities.
- The **municipality decrees the official decision** to outsource the management of the park in view of reopening it to the public, but does not announce a reopening date. The pressure continues as **the campaign spokesperson challenges the mayor** to publicly set a date for the reopening of Horsh Beirut during a televised show, but while the mayor renews the promise, he fails to give an exact date.



2014

A STRONG OUTCRY

- Beirut municipality prevents the media from accessing another **picnic** in Horsh Beirut which stirs a furious public outcry and soon after, several organizations join forces to **protest in front of the municipality** to reclaim access to the Horsh and other public spaces in Beirut.



2014 (Cont'd)



2015

HORSH BEIRUT REOPENS FOR ALL

- That campaign organizes a **Town Hall Meeting** during which the vice-president of the municipality refuses to give any clear deadlines and instead announces the plan to relocate the municipal stadium to Horsh Beirut. In response, **NAHNOO releases a statement** requesting to open the park on a partial basis at the soonest opportunity and defies plans to use the park as a space for another construction. As a result, the governor of Beirut requests a meeting in which a partial reopening is discussed.
- NAHNOO **officially warns it is prepared to file a lawsuit. It calls for a protest outside the park and protesters to wear blonde wigs** to denounce the park's discriminatory entry policy that allows guards to randomly refuse entry based on the appearance of visitors.
- A **Town Hall Meeting with the governor** later on elicits a confrontation between the audience and the governor, which compels him to **publicly announce the exact date of the reopening of Horsh Beirut. A municipal committee which includes members of the campaign is formed** to prepare for it.
- September 5 2015 sees the **opening of the park for one day a week.**



2016

SEVEN DAYS A WEEK

- Since September 2015, more than **one hundred youth taking turns to volunteer every week as park rangers**, monitoring the operations and engaging with the public to help enforce the park's rules. Their efforts and the public's embracing of the initiative were an indicator of the campaign's success and as of June 2016 **Horsh Beirut is open every day.**



IMPACT & THE WAY FORWARD

Our belief in our capacity determines what we can do. If we don't believe we can drive change then we will achieve nothing, and if we do believe then we can act upon it. When NAHNOO first started campaigning for the reopening of Horsh Beirut, many were skeptical that we would be able to achieve any impact. Five years later, we are happy to prove them wrong!

Our experience has taught us that constructive communication with those in power does advance things, especially when coupled with public pressure and rigorous preparation of the advocacy's technical file. The campaign owes its success to its ability to negotiate and partner with decision-makers while at the same time keeping a safe distance from them to still be able to criticize and mobilize people against their harmful decisions or inaction. Throughout the years, the campaign learnt to use creative means to mobilize people and reach out to more and more communities.

For the first time after the civil war, Horsh Beirut was reopened to thousands of individuals and families who have made it the destination of their weekly outing. It is now one of the main venues for organizations to arrange free festivals and sporting, music and painting activities, to name but a few. More importantly, it is accessible to people from all backgrounds, a fact visible to any observer to the diversity of the park's visitors.

The cause of public spaces, which initially was unheard-of and appreciated only in academic

circles, is now a popular cause with hundreds of media articles written on it every year and rallying thousands of citizens in its defense. This has led decision-makers to set it forth in their agendas as well as in their electoral campaigns.

The reopening of Horsh Beirut has set an important milestone in the fight for public spaces as well as in civic engagement. It has proven that people are able to drive change.

Of course, the campaign's mission has not been fulfilled yet. It is now working at three levels: In the immediate term we are pushing for the extension of the park's opening hours and improving its management by having the municipality hire more and better skilled staff. The second objective is to study who uses the park and which additional needs have to be considered to allow for everybody to benefit from the green space in the same way. We will look into the specific needs of men, women, elderly people and the youth. Having male and female guards, having more lights for dark hours and more benches might make it an even more livable venue and an even more inclusive space. In the long term, the team is working on reintegrating Horsh Beirut into its urban context and having it play a role in promoting social cohesion and development in the area.

The campaign is also one of several ongoing initiatives to reclaim Lebanon's public spaces. If you would like to be part of the change, join us, you are needed!






info@nahnoo.org

(+961) 1 280474

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