KABUL PEACE PARK

Afghanistan
International House at the University of Chicago
Zaid Al-Farisi, Iraq, International House at the University of Chicago

Section I

The project involved the development of a peace park in Kabul, Afghanistan. The park would be a safe area where children could play, make friends and enjoy their childhood, and where families could spend time together.

Work on the project began this summer, and the park was officially opened on 29 August 2008. The main attraction of the large park is a playground, where children from the apartment buildings surrounding the park, *kuchi* (nomadic) children, children from a nearby IDP (internally displaced persons) camp giving shelter to families from the conflict-ridden southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, and other children from the neighborhood play. A walkway has been laid around the park, and 100 pine trees have been planted. There is a spacious area where football, volleyball, cricket and other sports or games can be played. A large section of the park has also been leveled and covered with fertile soil. The community will be able to plant this area after the winter season.

The park provides hundreds of children with a safe play area, an area where children can be children and enjoy their childhood. The park also stands as a powerful symbol of transformation and hope for the future of Afghanistan.

Section II

Meetings and Consultations: The first step we took towards building the park was meeting and consulting with the *wakil* and community leaders on their vision for the project. Notwithstanding the limited budget, they asked that as much of the available land be developed and included in the park, rather than focusing work on a smaller part. This placed a strain on the budget, as the land is more than 85 yards long, and 70 yards wide. Another request was to not include a football pitch in the park since, due to the lack of these playing areas in Kabul, this would invite a large number of youths from other neighborhoods and could lead to conflict. Accordingly, as a compromise, we did not place any football goals or mark an official playing area, but we did ensure there was ample space set aside where children could play football.

Security: During the development of the park, a bomb was placed and detonated between the border of the park and one of the surrounding apartment buildings. The bomb was targeting an army commander living in the building. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured. Since the bombing, soldiers of the ANA (Afghan National Army) have been permanently stationed at the foot of the park. The community leaders did not anticipate that these incidents would compromise the park as a safe place where children could play football.

Community Involvement: One of the main targets of the project was to involve the community in building the park, not simply with ideas but also labor, in order to create bonds between the community members, and develop a sense of ownership with respect to the park, and accomplishment, demonstrating what is possible when people work together towards one goal. Unfortunately, the level of community involvement was not as desired, and it become clear as the project proceeded that some of the enthusiasm and strong support expressed by certain community leaders for the park was driven by expectations that the project may lead to personal benefits, or advance some personal agendas. The level of the children’s involvement, however, was very positive, with many children assisting in the development of the park. During the opening
ceremony, I stressed that one of the things the park represented is what is possible when people work
together and the positive change that can be accomplished.

**Trees, Flowers and Plants:** The original plan was to have the park being a green area. After
taking into account various considerations, including the large size of the park, access to water,
sustainability, the seasonal weather, and the community leaders’ wishes, it was decided to only plant
100 trees (the trees are of Russian origin, and are quite durable; after a few months of watering, they
require minimal attention) and to cover two sections of the park with fertile soil so that the
community can plant what they wish in these areas at the beginning of next year’s planting season.

**Naming of the Park:** I consulted with the community leaders on whether they would be
amenable to naming the park, The Baghdad Peace Park, and they enthusiastically agreed. On the
personal level, this name is very important for me. Baghdad is the city of my birth and,
unfortunately, most of the time one hears the name Baghdad these days it is in connection with
horrific violence and tragedies. A peace park that is named after the city counters this negativity,
associating the city with peace, and serving as a reminder of the better days Baghdad has seen and a
prayer that the city will see peace soon. For Afghans, also, the name resonates given the historical
role of Baghdad in the Islamic world and the similar recent experiences Kabul and Baghdad have
endured.

**Opening Ceremony:** The opening ceremony was held on 29 August 2008. The ceremony was
attended by the wakil, community leaders and children from the neighborhood. I purchased 100
children’s school book-bags and filled them with coloring pencils, notebooks and sharpeners, and
intended to distribute these, together with sweets and drinks, to the children at the opening
ceremony. Unfortunately, due to the large numbers of children present in the park at the time and
the anticipated difficulty in managing the distribution of the bags (we confirmed this by attempting
to distribute some of the sweets and drinks – we had to the land on ANA soldiers for assistance with
the process!) we had no choice but to hold on to the book bags and remaining sweets and drinks, and
to distribute these at a later point. The community leaders agreed to come up with a plan to carry out
the distribution to families living in the apartment buildings in an equitable way.

**Sustainability:** Sustainability was one of the main considerations in all of the choices we
made in developing the park. For this reason, we did not plant any grass, plants or flowers, but
rather provided fertile soil for the community to be able to grow what they wish in the future, and to
invite them to collectively work on, and invest, in their environment. The only trees we planted were
durable ones that would require minimal attention after a few months. To ensure that these trees
would be taken care of for the next three months, we hired a gardener, and deposited his salary with
one of the community leaders. Each month, provided that the gardener is satisfactorily carrying out
his responsibilities, he would get paid his salary. Additionally, while we had originally intended to
install benches in the park, we decided against this because of the concern that they might be easily
removed or destroyed.

**Seeds for Peace:** In addition to trees, we also “planted” some seeds for peace in the park;
various objects I received from friends from different parts of the world representing prayers for
peace. These included objects from Iraq, Columbia, and the Navajo Nation, together with origami
crianes from Hiroshima.

**Children’s Joy:** It is not possible to put in words the children’s joy in having the playground.
Seeing the children playing there, it is obvious how starved the children are for such facilities, and the
important void the park is filling.

**Overall Evaluation of the Project:** The park has been completed and is surrounded by
apartment buildings that still exhibit bullet holes and other scars from the years of conflict that have
plagued Afghanistan. There are also now ANA soldiers permanently stationed at the foot of the
park. The park stands as a symbol of defiance, transformation and ultimately hope. Several years
ago, a playground once existed on this land, but it was mostly destroyed during the time of the Taliban. Now there is a new playground, and a new life filling the land.