They usually arrive in the evenings,

one by one climbing the steps leading to the old office building facing the port. It probably used to hold some shipping company clerks in Mandate times, or insurance company representatives, and in the stores below – perhaps – bars which at night attracted sailors from distant countries. Today there's a computer sales company and, in the offices upstairs, a few NGOs. In the second-floor conference room, whose windows face other office buildings along endless Haatzmaut Street, they gather around the long table. At one side, goodies – stuffed vine leaves, rice with lentils, kubbeh. They take food, ask after one another's well-being. What's up? Did you go to that demonstration last week? How was the meeting at City Hall? What happened with your women's project? Did you get the money they promised you? Did you see what the newspaper said about that story we discussed?

They have different histories, different interests. Some lecture at the universities or the Technion, some run social organisations and are campaigners for the environment or women's rights. There are doctors and architects, managers and sociologists, social workers and attorneys. Some boast deep family roots in the city going back generations; others have just arrived. Christians, Muslims and Jews come together – some from local villages, some who were born in faraway lands like Ethiopia, the Soviet Union, Canada. There are old and young, women and men, gay and straight. But they have one thing in common: they are all Haifa people and they all have a dream.

"Haifa as a Joint City" is a group of Haifa residents who have set the goal of studying, in the words of their mission statement, "what it means to have Haifa as a joint city for different communities, and to lay out fundamentals and avenues of activity to promote cooperation and make it significant to city life". The statement continues: "Even if the group does not have formal representation

of each and every demographic element in the city, we bring with us our knowledge of the needs, troubles and the unique perspectives of urban communities. At the same time, while retaining our own identities, we act as citizens and residents: in our study of Haifa and its fundamentals we seek a shared, Haifa perspective benefiting city residents as a whole."

"The people in this group want to feel they belong to the city, but that belonging must include everyone. That's the challenge we face, the inspiration for all our work" says Shahira Shalabi, the project's director.

The idea was born after the Second Lebanon War in 2006. "The war, during which Haifa came under attack, showed just how fragile relations are between Arabs and Jews - in which the city generally prides itself" says Fat'hi Marshood, the director of Shatil Haifa who proposed the project. "On the one hand, Arabs and Jews both faced the same threats and fears that their city was under attack, that houses were being destroyed, people killed or wounded." On the other hand, he says, it was clear that interpretations of events and solidarity during the war differed starkly between Jews and Arabs:

"Many Jews saw themselves as the only victims, and blamed Hezbollah for everything that happened. The civilian casualties over the border in Lebanon were, in their eyes, completely justified. Most of the Arabs in Haifa, on the other hand, thought Israel should not have started the war, that she "brought it on herself". They saw on TV the air strikes in Lebanon, where they have relatives, and protested in public against the strikes. For many Jews, that was a sort of treason."

When the ceasefire agreement was signed, and life returned to "normal", it was clear to the heads of Shatil (an organisation which encourages community building) that the problems exposed by the war required deeper treatment. "We understood that we must study what it means to live together in the midst of ongoing violent conflict," says Marshood.

During 2007 the idea coalesced, funds were raised and a core of activists got together from different communities. They meet once a month as well as dividing into working groups.

"Our goal is to have Haifa as a tolerant city where Jews and Arabs normally conduct relationships based on trust and dialogue. Its institutions understand the importance of resource sharing, equal opportunities and working to reduce exploitation and deprivation. Its residents feel a mutual sense of belonging» their vision statement says.

"Ours is a complex mission, certainly, but it will be a long process, and it's important that we've started," says Shalabi. "It's not something that will happen in a year or two. But we must raise these issues publicly to talk and think about them in a structured way. It's not something that will happen by itself."

Shalabi, 41, a mother of two, came from the village of Iksal in Galilee during the mid-1980s, one of thousands of young Arabs for whom Haifa – provincial by Tel Aviv standards – offered a dream of urban life. "I grew up in the village, but didn't feel like I belonged there. I wanted a kind of personal privacy and freedom the village didn't allow me", she says. "I came to Haifa to build my own life right after high school."

Suad Diab-Nasser, from the village Tamra, came to Haifa as a young student with similar dreams. She found people with whom she shared a language. "It wasn't village talk, in which I had to behave according to certain rules. The city allows things that the village doesn't."

Ariella Vransky, an architect with a doctorate in urban planning who teaches at the Technion, came to Haifa as a ten-year-old. The daughter of Holocaust survivors from Roumania, she arrived in 1961. She remembers her first view of the city: "It was August, six in the morning, summertime; we stood on the deck of the ship. I saw the green Mount Carmel and the skyline. I said, 'How beautiful.' I fell in love with the city right away, and it became my home."

Galia Kulik, one of the 20 per cent of Haifa residents who came as part of the massive former Soviet Union immigration in the early 1990s, is from St Petersburg. If Shalabi and Diab see Haifa as a big city, Kulik admits that even now, almost 20 years later, "I have problems with Haifa's size – in other words, its smallness." After St Petersburg and its millions of inhabitants, its rich history and extraordinary buildings, Haifa seems to her a tiny provincial town.

Yuval Ionai, a sociology lecturer at the university and local gay rights activist, also found it difficult to connect to the city. He came in 1993 after completing a doctorate at the University of Chicago. "At first I'd say, 'I live in Haifa,' but I didn't feel like a Haifan. I'd work in Haifa all week, and each weekend I'd go to friends in Tel Aviv. In those days there weren't places for gays to hang out in Haifa; I didn't really have anything to do here," he recalls.

His sense of belonging developed gradually when he joined a newly-created gay and lesbian group, progressing to joint Jewish-Arab political activities at the university and elsewhere. He gradually grew to love Haifa "because it has Jerusalem's multiculturalism

without its zealotry; it has the tranquillity missing in Tel Aviv. It has something cosmopolitan that makes it unique – Ahmadis, Druze, Jews, Arabs, lots of Russians. It has something 'right', and I think it's possible to develop that quality; that's why I joined the project."

The activists share a dream. "People talk about Haifa as a city with a tradition of coexistence. It's not perfect, but it's the best in the country," says Edna Zaretsky, a Hadash party councillor. Zaretsky is a Haifa native, born to a family that came here after hundreds of years of Jewish-Arab communal life in Tiberias. Her father was a municipal worker during the Mandate; she remembers how his Arab co-workers came to their home after Passover with pita and scallions. She has been involved in building better relations in the city ever since she can remember. Haifa, she says, is already not a bad place. "There are areas with mixed populations in both poor and better-off neighbourhoods. Mixed places such as Ben Gurion Avenue and Massada Street have a different kind of relationship – it's not as if the Arabs only work there as waiters. They're owners and customers, like the Jews. The staff is mixed. In my view this is normal; but it doesn't reflect the usual Israeli power structure."

Zaretsky points to joint institutions and organisations, albeit small: for instance, the women's cooperative shelter, Woman to Woman, which has joint administration, joint staff, a completely different level of partnership. It's not under Jewish control; Woman to Woman has already had a Palestinian chairwoman. But when Palestinian women said they needed a separate organisation because they have special needs, they cleared a room and did everything to make that organisation come into being.

The municipal leadership has always been aware of the need for coexistence, even standing together with the Arab population under certain conditions. "After Baruch Goldstein's murderous rampage, Mitzna led the mourning procession and gave an address; Gurel opposed Kahanna; even the present mayor,Yonah Yahav, talks of coexistence," says Zaretsky. When he was mayor during the October disturbances, Mitzna stood between the demonstrators and police – there was leadership in Haifa that prevented the kind of rioting that took place recently in Acre. «It's not enough – there's still inequality – but it's a start that allows a new kind of thinking.»

The emphasis on Jewish-Arab relations, of course, dominates the group's work: "We are aware of the centrality of the Jewish-Palestinian conflict in which we work, and its effect on city life... It's clear to us that the deprivation of the Palestinian community stems from protracted discrimination, and is affected

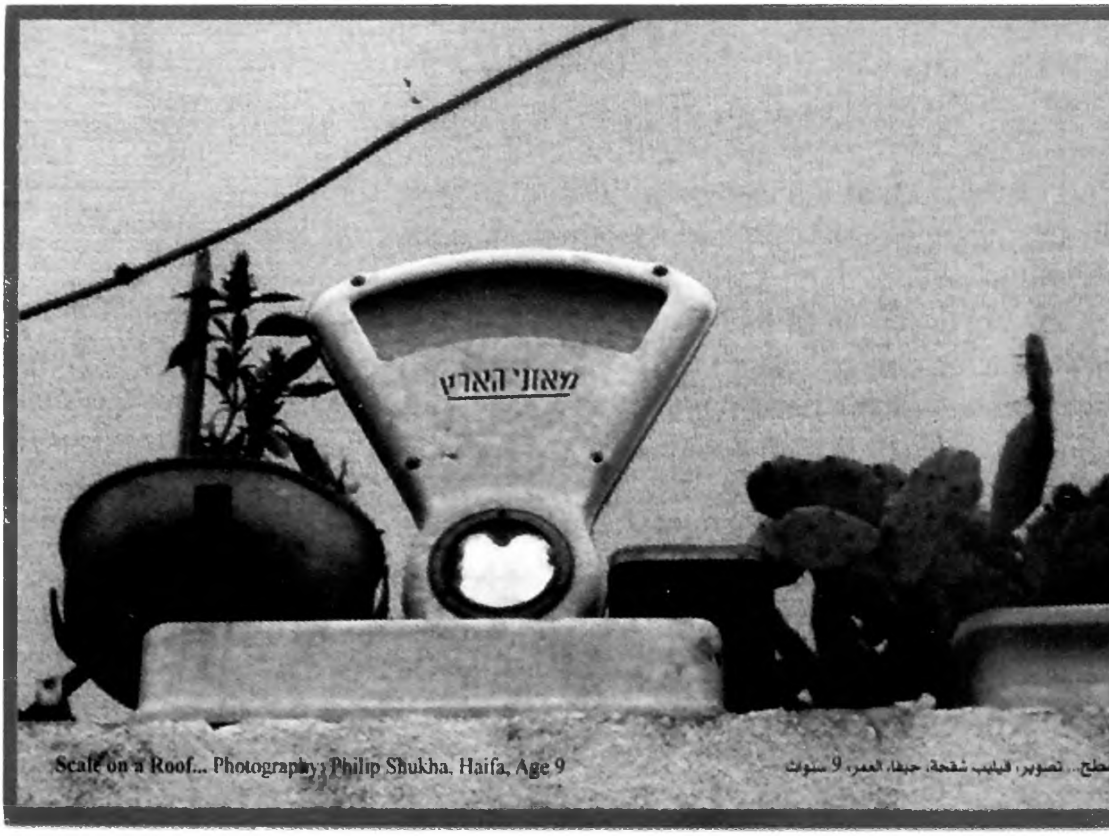
by the national conflict.... This consciousness accompanies us in our work and thinking on the city and its life," says the mission statement.

Nevertheless, they do not want to dwell on one aspect of life in this multicultural city: 20 per cent of city residents are from the former Soviet Union – high-tech engineers from Moscow; piano and violin teachers; Second World War veterans with medals and grandchildren; supermarket cashiers; shop owners selling food «from there» that one can find on almost every corner in certain neighbourhoods such as Hadar. Some of the immigrants, says Kulik, a PhD in art, are integrated into city life; others live in a bubble: «They close the door and speak only Russian, watch TV in Russian, read Russian-language books and newspapers, as if they don't live in this city.

What does that mean? "They don't need to learn Hebrew; they don't develop other social connections. It really sticks out in the Hadar area among seniors who have no connection with the outside world. When they meet a non-Russian speaker it really scares them. Families that succeed often move to mixed neighbourhoods, and the children go to schools where not everyone is Russian. But there are poor neighbourhoods where the entire population is Russian. There are entire grades at school that speak only Russian; you go to a parents' meeting and there are only immigrants. While the principal and teachers are talking, they whisper among themselves, saying, 'for us it was like this, and here it's like that.' It's a disconnection that worries me. People don't think the school is theirs; they don't feel at home."

Is integration always the solution? "We have to think how to do it. On the one hand it's proper to develop social frameworks for Russian immigrants; it gives them confidence. We need bridging mechanisms. There should be meeting opportunities for the elderly, classes, activities that will give them tools to integrate into Israeli society. If we leave things alone it will cause alienation and hate. In Hadar, for example, there are buildings that were cheap in the 1990s when Russian immigrants bought them. Now Arabs move in and the Russians flee, even to less central neighbourhoods. Sometimes it's a question of lifestyle – what is considered noisy or quiet, where to park the car, questions of that nature. In Russia people had all sorts of nationalities printed on their ID cars, but everyone was part of the Russian culture – speaking Russian, reading the same books. Here it's a different culture altogether, and it's not always easy to connect the two."

Difficulties for recent arrivals also concern Omer Taicho. An Ethiopian immigrant, he shares the dream of a joint city. Taicho



Reproduction of Postcard paintings from the Children's art exhibition and Creative Workshop.
Supervisor : Abed 'Abedi, Haifa, 2007.

arrived in 2000, a number of years after immigrating (at age 13). He attended boarding school, lived with his family in Tiberias and served in the army. At university in Haifa, he earned a master's degree in political science and public administration. He stayed, "both because it's the largest city in the north, and because I felt that there's a lot of work here," he says.

The city's Ethiopian Jewish community numbers some 12,500 who live primarily in the less-established areas – the lower city, Hadar, Hativat Carmeli. "The feeling is," says Taicho, "that there's a lack of integration. People live in quasi-ghettos and that brings negative consequences. Schools become Ethiopian schools; the city does not invest in them, or in their infrastructure." According to him, "the sense of not belonging leads to juvenile crime, to rebellion. People feel like they're living in Haifa's back yard."

The dream of a joint city, then, is not to blur differences, not to create a melting pot in which everyone speaks the same language and looks like everyone else, but to provide each community the opportunity to live its life and develop its culture in the most appropriate way. The dream seeks, however, to avoid ghettoes and to create shared public spaces.

Working groups address questions of education, urban planning and the environment, culture and employment opportunities for members of the various communities. In each area the group members work on mapping the current situation and formulating principles for change. Although work is still in its initial stages, it has already brought out significant issues.

The educational arena poses significant problems for Arabs, says Suad Diab-Nasser: More than two thirds of Arab students do not enter the municipal school system, but learn in private schools, usually run by the church. As a result, the municipal schools suffer from low academic achievement, violent incidents and neglect. The church-run schools will only take "acceptable" students; those who do not come from established Haifa families, or are non-Christian, lack the necessary connections; tuition is expensive; and the atmosphere is conservative.

Some of the city's middle-class Arab families send their children to Jewish schools; there the children face problems of integration, both because of language and because of the military-style education. "When I had children," says Diab-Nasser, "I began to feel the stress of daily life. Everything is a struggle: finding a job, finding a school for the kids. It wasn't easy at all. But not for a moment did I consider going back to the village."

Life in multicultural Haifa is complex at the best of times. Events like the Lebanon War or the January 2009 Gaza invasion fan the flames. «The issue gets even more difficult because we live in a state that defines itself as Jewish and democratic, and in the eyes of many people here Arabs are not seen as part of that democracy. Thoughts and views become poisoned and that's dangerous. The rise of Lieberman is a worrying example of 'acceptable' racism,» warns Zaretsky.

Violent outbreaks between Jews and Arabs in Acre last year on Yom Kippur certainly warrant concern, she says. "I don't know if that could happen here in Haifa; I very much hope not." To prevent it requires investing effort, building relations, deepening familiarity and searching for areas of agreement and shared activity. "These things do not happen by themselves," she adds.

All the same, she finds cause for optimism. The coalition agreement recently signed with the mayor, she believes, promises the establishment of an "equality authority" for the city that should improve the situation. Ionai, too, says he dreams of a truly integrated city. "I want a place in which official history accepts two narratives, with joint schools, equal investment, a city with much more respect for people and less for capital or special interests; a city with democratic involvement of citizens in the decision-making processes."

"There will be schools in which people learn together, signs in Arabic at the university, recognition of all identities. The mosque in the lower city will open, the Arab old city will get investment, Halisa and Wadi Salib will be renovated. The process shouldn't repel residents but include them."

"My vision is of a city that's not an island; a city connected to the sea, the mountain, the surrounding towns, a city for Jews and Arabs," says Vransky. Haifa, to her, can strive to be the capital of the north, providing services to the whole area. "Just as many people who go to work in Tel Aviv every day, or for leisure and cultural events, but don't live there. Haifa, too, can strengthen its metropolitan appeal."

Shalabi dreams of a city with a broad canvas. "I think what makes the group special is this vision, seeing Haifa as a city, and not just from the vantage point of each community. If we succeed in treating differences as promising, challenging and advantageous rather than threatening – that creates the real potential."

SHATIL is The New Israel Fund's Empowerment and Training Centre for Social Change Organizations in Israel. It was established in 1982 to strengthen civil society efforts and promote democracy, tolerance, and social justice.

PHILIP SIMPSON is a well-known translator of Hebrew literature who lives in Oxford.