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Off the beaten path

[IN JERUSALEM Edition]

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Author: OFER BARSADEH

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Town planners, political activists and conservationists lock horns over the city's most visible abandoned village. Box at end of text.

The village of Lifta is easy to miss. When you're entering Jerusalem, it's on the other side of the road, and when you're leaving, it's behind you. Nestled in the hills between Ramot and the Northern Begin expressway, this sleeping dog was abandoned by its Arab residents during the 1948 War of Independence.

It would contentedly lie, were it not for a plan to resettle the village, an urban plan drawing criticism by environmentalists, city planning purists and pro- Palestinian groups.

The plan envisions an upscale neighborhood of 212 homes averaging 180 square meters each, up to 400 hotel rooms, commercial and public facilities, a visitors' center, a museum and a synagogue. The aim - according to an Israel Lands Administration statement - is to maintain the unique character of the village in the face of its continuing destruction by "criminal elements."

Besides having become a haven for drug addicts and the homeless, construction workers have recently begun stealing materials from the site.

The plan has now been submitted to the municipal planning committee for approval. If it is realized, Jerusalemites will lose one of their most picturesque beauty spots and Israel could be criticized for destroying a historic landmark and implementing major construction on internationally disputed land.

According to historian Benny Morris, most Arab villages that were evacuated during the War of Independence were destroyed as a matter of policy, unless they were thought suitable for housing Jewish families. The latter was the case with Ein Kerem and Lifta, among others. Most of the houses in Lifta, though decaying and - in some places - collapsing, remain solid stone structures, their walls marked as confiscated property from absentee owners.

Why it wasn't immediately settled remains a mystery, but the steep terrain may hold the answer.

Nevertheless, six years ago the Israel Lands Administration decided it was time to conquer this bit of land.

A model of Jerusalem, used by city planners to determine the impact of construction projects on the city, is housed in the basement of the municipality building in Kikar Safra. The model shows a grandiose initiative with houses built on both sides of the valley. The Lifta plan calls for the renovation and enlargement of some 50 existing structures, and the construction of many more. Winding paths and narrow roads provide easy access, and much care will be taken to provide this urban haven with a "village" atmosphere.

Trees and shrubbery will be planted and carefully maintained, and the terraces, now mostly falling apart, will be reconstructed to add color and character - in short, a user-friendly village.

Project architect Gavriel Kertesz claims that archeological findings, aerial photographs from the early 1950s and the developing roads network all provide basic planning guidelines.

"My intention is to enable the neighborhood to develop along the same 'genetic code' that underlined the pre-existing village," says Kertesz. "On one side of the valley, the houses will be clustered together, as was the original village, while on the other side, that with the terraces, houses will be more spaced apart, to lend the area a more rural feel."

Residents on both sides of the valley will be able to gaze down at traffic speeding citywards along Route 9, now under construction, which begins at the Motza intersection and which will wind around and tunnel through Greater Jerusalem.

The ILA expects the project's residential makeup to be heterogeneous, based on its experience in other projects, and expects it to be financially feasible. Existing houses will have to be enlarged, and the prices of each unit will be quite high.

Kertesz admits that the number of houses planned has been slightly raised in order to recover the high cost of infrastructure development.

Thus, the enlargement of the plan becomes unavoidable, but also possible, thanks to the fact that the ILA, an authority originally charged with administering land, becomes an entrepreneur, which must financially justify its initiative.

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Now, the plan must overcome various objections, some esthetic, most political.

The words of former Northern Region police chief Alik Ron to the Or Commission in October 2000 following the Temple Mount riots still resonate. For Israeli Arabs over the years, he said, "the sense of tragedy, of the loss of homes and land, has not diminished. They experienced a tragedy [Some] stayed inside the state, and this sense of loss has not diminished, has not faded, and follows them to this day."

Zochrot is an organization devoted to promoting among Israelis recognition of Palestinian expulsions during the War of Independence. The group's primary activity is the documentation and commemoration of Palestinian villages that do not enjoy the protection of relevant Israeli institutions. According to organization chairman Eitan Voltan, the plan to renovate Lifta - "presented in the guise of a professional preservation project" - is, in fact, one more attempt to erase evidence of Palestinian existence within Israel's recognized borders. "The Or Commission specifically states that Israel must begin to take notice of the Palestinian heritage in this land," says Voltan. "Unless we begin to take heed of this warning, we are doomed to repeat history, and experience more so-called 'unexpected' eruptions, and more unnecessary violence."

He would like to see the village renovated, but for its original owners. "Some day, there will be an attempt to solve the refugee problem, and each unilateral act we undertake will only make finding that solution one bit more difficult."

Voltan realizes his vision is a fantasy; in the meantime, he would like to see an open-air museum or some kind of commemoration of Palestinian residence in the place.

Clearly, Zochrot's solution is mainly symbolic, but so are its aims. In its objection to the plan, it writes, "Recently, much attention has been paid to the initiative of Arabs in Israel to visit the extermination camps in Poland in order to better understand the roots of Jewish suffering and the impact of the trauma of the Holocaust in Europe on Israeli Jews.

"Building on the remains of the village of Lifta will demonstrate to the Arab public that Jews choose not to return the gesture of respect to Arab history and the Arab tragedy."

Bimkom, another organization that objects to the plan, is a group of architects and city planners whose aim is to focus on human rights within the framework of urban planning. The organization believes that a locale's historical nature contributes to a nation's self-identity, and that ignoring it undermines Jerusalem's cosmopolitan nature. Bimkom does not object in principle to the development of Lifta, but believes the plan must be revised in a manner that is more sensitive to the regional history of the place and those who lived there.

"Whereas the plan purports to preserve, it actively erases the past," says Bimkom activist Nili Baruch. "All around the world, places of worship are carefully preserved and entire neighborhoods maintain their historical character," she says. "Recognizing the historical aspects of Palestinian history does not necessarily threaten our national hegemony. Even the people who owned these houses realize by now that the right of return is irrelevant. They themselves understand that the land does not belong to them, according to Israeli law, and that they have little chance of returning to their homes.

"But when you have organizations like UNESCO declaring Tel Aviv Bauhaus [architecture] an international treasure," Baruch continues, "you can't just go around erasing historical facts."

Kertesz protests: "Our plans specify very strict guidelines regarding materials and tools. Huge expense is being devoted to retaining walls, maintaining steep slopes, streaming water through those agricultural terraces, and more. We're making our lives more difficult because we really want to create something as authentic as possible."

But Baruch also contests the plan's preservationist nature.

"If one's intention is preservation," she says, "you need to undertake extensive documentation. No surveying of this kind has been done, and the planners haven't even bothered to question the original inhabitants. This project is not about preservation at all, but about construction, pure and simple."

Kertesz answers that at present, field documentation would be a dangerous undertaking: "Lifta has been neglected for decades. It's simply dangerous to walk around there without falling through a roof or something. We've submitted our preliminary plans, and once these are okayed, we intend to go in there and see exactly what we've got."

Another objection to the plan relates to Muslim holy sites in the area. Jerusalem's new construction master plan defines parameters for preservation, these being religious, stylistic, ethnographical, environmental, folkloristic and archeological. The plan also provides tax breaks for preservation and restoration. However, these parameters, opponents charge, apparently apply only to the Jewish cultural-historical narrative. Israeli Arabs also have their version of history, they say, their religion, folklore and style. The organization charges that planners have allocated a former mosque as a future commercial building, and the local cemetery as a park.

City engineer Uri Sheerit does not see this as a problem. Lots of parks are built in Jerusalem around ancient cemeteries, he says, citing Independence Park and Sacher Park.

"Preservation in Jerusalem will always be fraught with emotions, folklore and politics. But we're primarily

fulfilling a proven need for high-end residential areas," he admits.

The ILA believes that the holiness of the cemetery will be maintained, and claims that the plan specifies the necessary steps to ensure this; appropriate steps will also be taken regarding the preservation of the mosque.

In response, the authority spokesman writes that since one of the lots is designated for the construction of a museum and visitors' center, they are willing to consider devoting it in part to the plight of the Arab population.

Jerusalem Architects' Association chairman Eyal Scher finds the political focus on Lifta suspect.

"At the end of the day, we have to do something with Lifta before it fades away," he says, agreeing that the environmental aspect of the place must be maintained. This is possible, he maintains, pointing to Ein Kerem and Jaffa as examples of "dynamic preservation."

In 2003, the state was officially charged with the preservation of Arab identity in a dignified manner, not so that this minority join the enemies of the state, but rather to strengthen their sense of belonging to the state.

Politics aside, Jerusalemites are about to lose another beauty spot, whether to building contractors or to sheer decay.

Kertesz, for one, believes that the Lifta project is a necessity - the only way to save the village from total decay and eventual disintegration.

"Besides erosion, people are actually plundering building blocks from the buildings. Some of the walls have been laid bare, and this contributes even more to the deterioration. If we don't do something, within a few years there will be nothing here but rubble."

(BOX) A municipal sanctuary

Over the years, Lifta has become one of the city's major nature retreats - a place where one can spend hours ambling among the deserted houses, along the paths and through the vegetation. Somehow, the nearby Begin expressway and the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway are forgotten, and the place seems silent. Thanks to the sloped terrain, in whatever direction you look, a picture-postcard scene beckons.

Lifta's centerpiece is the Lifta Spring, a trickle that has over the centuries been augmented by artificial tunneling and expansions. Eventually, its opening was roofed and its sides lined with rocks. The structure still stands, and the pool outside boasts crystal-clear water and bathers throughout the year. Many frequent visitors who threaten to demonstrate the loss of this beauty spot agree, however, that Lifta has been neglected by the authorities and should be more carefully maintained. Jerusalemites are experts at discovering every pool-like entity in their vicinity. Be it summer or winter, if it's a spring, there will always be a Jerusalemite in it.

Unfortunately, Lifta is slowly disappearing. The disintegrating village has seen attempts to establish an open school, alternative living communes, the comings and goings of drug addicts and messianic outcasts, and a television production about cooking in the days of Jesus.

The village gained brief prominence in 1984 when the Lifta Gang, one of four groups comprising the Jewish Underground (TNT), were found hiding there. The group had perpetrated several anti-Arab terror attempts and were planning to blow up al-Aksa Mosque on the Temple Mount. About a year ago, a group of youngsters from Tel Aviv attempted to establish a commune there. "Our basic food staples of water and fruit were readily available," Daniel, one of the project initiators, explained. However, the group fell apart, and the plan remains but a forgotten solicitation for food and blankets on the Web. This little gem of urban ostracism remains derelict but beautiful - a reminder of regional strife, personal tragedy and political vacillation.

Lifta ("corridor" in Aramaic) was first settled in the Canaanite period, and some houses show remnants of earlier cave dwellings. The biblical Mei Neftoah marked the border between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and Eretz magazine ascribes the name to a corruption of an Egyptian king's name, Merneptah, who conquered Canaan in the 13th century BCE.

The Arab village has existed for several centuries, numbering 2,500 residents in 1945 (according to a Mandate survey). Fighting for Lifta began in December 1947, when a suspected Arab informer was killed by the Hagana in retaliation for attacks on Jewish convoys to and from Jerusalem. Days later, the Lehi underground movement killed six locals at a coffee shop. More attacks followed and, according to historian Benny Morris, most villagers evacuated soon after, making Lifta one of the first villages to be abandoned during the War of Independence. Soon after, David Ben-Gurion reportedly told his colleagues that the entrance to Jerusalem, from Lifta all the way to the city center, was free of Arabs, making at least the entrance to the city safe.

Most of Lifta's residents, however, had not left for nearby Arab countries. Instead, they resettled in other sectors of the city, and legal battles continue to this day between former Lifta residents and Israel regarding their confiscated land.

Meanwhile, Lifta remains the nearest thing Israel has to a ghost town, silent testimony to those first few months of war, during which the struggling new state fought to retain a hold on its spiritual capital and break a blockade that was threatening to starve thousands. It also reminds us that a village, which once was home to thousands of others, is no more.