



Muristan Square, the Christian Quarter. ©Rostislav Glinsky | Dreamstime.com

ISSUES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ACCESSIBILITY IN THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Naftali Levy

Jerusalem is Israel's largest hub for international and local tourism. One of the leading, if not the leading historical attraction, is the ancient city abundant in religious buildings and history of all religions and congregations, archeological sites and cultural institutions. Millions of tourists visit it every year. As part of the increase in tourism waves in recent years, the tourism wave of people with disabilities has also intensified. In the process, the Jerusalem Municipality has been called upon to carry out many accessibility activities in the public space and in the public buildings under its responsibility, which serve its visitors.

Naftali Levy. Professional advisor to the chairman of the local committee for planning and construction in Jerusalem. In his previous position he served as Assistant Director of Construction Licensing and Supervision. For many years he has been taking a significant part in promoting accessibility in Jerusalem.

Beyond annual work plans, it happens that accessibility demands come from outside and in which the municipality is also involved. At the beginning of 2011, a Vatican organization U.N.I.T.A.S.I (Unione Nazionale Italiana Trasporto Ammalati a Lourdes e Santuari Internazionali) addressed the Municipality with a request to promote the works required for the accessibility of the public restrooms in the Christian Quarter, next to Muristan.

U.N.I.T.A.S.I organization specialized in tourism of catholic pilgrims with disabilities to the holy places of Catholic Christianity. It attributes paramount importance to the existence of a pilgrimage that will suit the limitations and respond to the special needs of these pilgrims.

In recent years, the organization has been working to strengthen this activity in Israel in general and in Jerusalem in particular. After a series of professional meetings with all the relevant professional bodies, and with the approval of the municipal committees required for this in the process (Names Committee, Finance Committee, City Council), a plan was formulated, which included the implementation plan, work specifications, manner of implementation and schedules. In view of the importance of the project, the organization even offered to make a substantial contribution to its implementation. The municipality, on its part, budgeted the project in the same amount. The project, which was relatively small (making two toilet-cubicles accessible), required coordination and careful and sensitive work, which was successfully completed at the beginning of 2013. Following the success of this project, additional accessibility initiatives were promoted together with the organization, but the challenges posed by the Old City make their implementation difficult.

Naturally, mainly for strict conservation and architecture considerations, construction in the Old City is done sparingly and under strict control and rules. In fact, any change in a structure, even the smallest one, necessitates the preparation of a specific urban building scheme. The only works that are allowed without the preparation of a specific urban building scheme are in favor of "sanitary improvement" or in other words, minor renovations and strengthening of buildings for which there is concern for their stability.

In the Jewish Quarter, in part of which there is an approved urban building scheme that ostensibly constitutes statutory certainty, there is need, in addition to the approval of the planning institutions, to obtain also the approval of the Society for the Rehabilitation of the Jewish Quarter (government company), which in turn is very meticulous about everything that is being carried out within the boundaries of the Quarter.

The physical structure of the Old City and the various assets within it severely limit the construction options. Small, crowded buildings, side by side and one on top the other, narrow streets, steep slopes, ambiguity of property ownerships, rivalries and disputes between communities, religions, congregations, families and more, make it very difficult to begin orderly planning. The attempt to produce a general urban building scheme for the Old City, by virtue of which it would be possible to obtain building permits, has not yet succeeded, this in light of the planning complexity in this part of Jerusalem, with all the many subtleties and sensitivities that accompany it. There is no doubt that this is a complex and sensitive challenge, which certainly requires thinking of the future.