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TO BE RELEASED FROM THE PRISON OF LONELINESS - PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE OLD CITY ACCESSIBILITY PROJECT

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It all began more than a decade ago when the Ministry of Jerusalem decided on investments in projects to upgrade the Old City's infrastructure through the Jerusalem Development Authority (JDA). The beginning of its activities on the

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subject was 2010. East Jerusalem Development Company (PAMI) began operating on the subject in 2014. In order to carry out the projects, it was necessary to contact the residents, merchants and church leaders in the east of the city and in the Old City in particular. I was asked by the various municipal authorities to help in the contact with the residents, due to the background of my acquaintance with the Old City from previous positions in the Ministry of Defense, and since I speak Arabic at a good level and know the city residents.

During the field tours, concrete blocks stood out, piled up on the stairs by the locals in order to facilitate the movement of device owners of various types: tractors, prams, walkers and wheelchairs, carts for transporting loads and more. The sight was ugly but it was clear that life was stronger and the residents' need for accessible ramps was real.

On the other hand, how does one make accessibility and ramps in a city built on a complex topography, a central wadi that crosses it from north to south and all the streets from east to west are steep?

A great difficulty arose already during the preliminary conversations with the residents, who found it difficult to believe that the authorities were carrying out projects in their favor after years of neglect. When presenting the projects, they looked for the hidden motive behind the sudden goodwill of the municipality to improve their living environment. Numerous individual conversations and conversations with the merchants' committees existing in every cluster of streets, have slowly thawed the hostility and suspicion. Knowledge of the Arabic language, and especially the subtleties of the customs of Arab society, were a necessary tool in the efforts of persuasion.

In order to help make the Old City accessible to people with disabilities, the National Social Security [Bituah Leumi] also embarked on the mission, seeing it as an important task within its goals.

In the first phase, the streets near the Jaffa Gate, in the area of the large churches, were handled. At the same time, the handling of the Saadia neighborhood was carried out, as part of the Development and Promotion of Entrepreneurship Unit in East Jerusalem. Saadia is a neighborhood in the Muslim Quarter near the Damascus Gate, with no tourist sites. We wanted to convey that the activity is not only aimed at tourists but at all residents and their needs. Many conversations with representatives of the neighborhood, which took place at the "Bnei Yerushalayim" club and at the residents' homes as well as with passers-by while working, taught us that people with disabilities, those who use a cane, prefer to go down the stairs rather than descent on the ramp. Even then, the insight was that it was incorrect to make ramps from side to side but rather to always leave room for a step. This insight continues to accompany us to this day on all the streets where we make accessibility ramps.

2014 was the year of setting the accessibility project in motion, and we underwent the learning process while rubbing shoulders with and talking to the residents. We also learned that many old people rarely left their homes because of their inability to get around on the terraced streets. Top priority was given to places where people with disabilities lived and great efforts were made to meet their needs. At the end of 2014, the Jerusalem Municipality received an application from a disabled woman living on Aqbat Shadad Street, an inner street at the Saadia neighborhood. In order to allow her to leave her home, ramps and handholds were built throughout the street she lives on although it is a small, side street in

this neighborhood. The residents were surprised by the level of investment for a single person.

In mid-2014, the flagship project of the Ministry of Jerusalem was conducted to restore Hagai Street, a central street from the Damascus Gate in the north to the Western Wall plaza. Many merchants feared that such a project would cause them an economic collapse because the Jerusalem municipality demanded day and night work in favor of shortening the duration of the project. The merchants said they would oppose and pile up difficulties but after many persuasive talks, agreed to night work. After a pilot, which proved that night work did not extend the project, the work was carried out including infrastructures and paving with the merchants' understanding. This street is of great importance as it is a major thoroughfare for people with disabilities as it descends with a gentle slope and allows passage to major commercial and tourist sites in the Old City.

From 2015 onwards, streets have been defined for the purpose of upgrading their maintenance and each year paving work was carried out that included, as an integral part already at the planning stage, the accessibility of the streets for people with disabilities.

During 2017, a request came from a man with disability from the Armenian Quarter, who was having difficulty leaving his home. After visiting the place and checking his needs, the authorities (JDA and PAMI) instructed to make accessibility ramps from his house to the street that connects it to Jaffa Gate.

Paving alteration work requires breaking stones and adjusting them on the spot, an activity that causes noise and dust. In a crowded and touristy city, such jobs shut down business and interfere with the families' rest. The balance between trading places, where only night work can be carried out and residential streets that allow daytime work so that the residents can sleep, was done only after the conversations and mapping the residents, door to door, names and telephones. In order to be attentive to the residents' needs during the works, the residents and merchants received my mobile phone number. Conversations with residents, even when we were not during work hours were important to show them that they had a "hot line" to the project, and they were a calming act that proved itself more than once.

Residents who saw the ramps, did not stop thanking us and asked to apply the project in their residential neighborhoods as well. At the PAMI's request I wrote, after many conversation meetings with residents of the various neighborhoods in the quarters, a position-paper that was accepted by the Jerusalem Ministry. To the residents' astonishment, the inner-neighborhood streets in the Christian Quarter (HaShlihim, HaKnesiyot, Al G'absha and al-Sayda)) and in the Muslim Quarter (Al-Kirmi, Al-Khari, Al-Khaladia and Al-Saray streets) underwent a face lift that included building ramps, handling infrastructures, lighting, handling facades and removing hazards.

During the works on Al- G'absha street in the Christian Quarter, the residents asked for a ramp to be built for them to the residential alley. Since this is a private area belonging to the Franciscan Church, we hesitated and I checked with the patriarchy for their position. The initial answer was hesitation, to say the least, due to internal relationships between them and the residents. After realizing that we were willing to fund the work, they agreed and the ramp was built to the residents' delight. Their reactions were moving.



Churches Street in the Christian Quarter –
Before and after the upgrade



The most moving reaction was that of Mrs. Claire Sabillia, a Christian woman who suffers from muscular dystrophy, moves around with an electric wheelchair, lives in a small apartment near the Lions Gate. Until our project, she rolled on improvised concrete blocks. After finding out that the concrete blocks in the alley were meant for her, we talked and I promised to make every effort to improve accessibility to her apartment. In November 2016, the road leading to her apartment was renovated and we soon received the following letter: “Hello Ami, I want to thank you and the entire team you have sent to make this amazing ramp. You cannot know how satisfied and happy I am with the work done by Sa’ed (the contractor) and his friends over the last few days. Well-done to you for all your efforts to make it easier for any person with difficulties and disabilities, to live once again. May God bless you in heaven for all your human deeds and thank you from the bottom of my heart. To be released from the prison of loneliness. Claire Sabilla”



Access road to Clair Sabilla's home – Before and after.

Residents who had been imprisoned in their homes have purchased scooters that now connect them to the outside world.

Public participation and building trust with the residents required many coffee hours, meetings in private homes and an understanding of true adversity. However, the entire project would not have been carried out without the full support of the people of PAMI, who saw it as a task of central and human importance and responded to almost every request made to them.

To complete the project, I prepared an accurate accessibility map and the PAMI has invested a lot of money in favor of an accessibility app (see pp.116) that has won many accolades as the only app for ancient cities in the world. How fortunate and privileged we are.