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# MAKING THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM ACCESSIBLE - A PROFESSIONAL INTROSPECTION

Avi Ramot

Making the Old City of Jerusalem accessible has received much exposure during the recent year: articles in Israel and abroad, information on social media, letters to the editorial board and more.

The Old City is currently quite accessible and there are many people with disabilities who are touring it and of course live in it.

This may be the opportunity to stop for a moment, to think and practice a professional introspection regarding this challenging project.

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## The decision phase to set off

In 2007 I was summoned to a meeting by Reuven Pinsky, the Commissioner at the time of the Old City Basin at the Jerusalem Development Authority. The meeting topic was to examine the possibility of executing accessibility in the Old City, following a proposal by a senior member of the Government Tourism Company, Nurit Berman. I really did not know what to expect. Reuven presented to me the government resolution from 2006 regarding upgrading the infrastructure of the Old City and informed me that the project was out for immediate planning with a very impressive multi-professional team. He suggested that if I believed that the challenge of making the Old City accessible to people with disabilities could be tackled, I was invited to join the planning team.

I knew, on the one hand, that I and my colleagues had no knowledge how to make such an ancient city accessible. I assumed that it would also be difficult to receive any assistance from abroad. The fact that we are talking about a very complex city, with challenging infrastructures, and in addition - a holy place for the great religions, caused me real concerns. On the other hand, the idea of tackling with such a seemingly impossible challenge, so unique, so different from anything else, made me very excited and gave me a feeling of a rare professional challenge not easily found.

After a brief hesitation, I announced that I was in. I knew that the difference between courage and stupidity depended on the result. Success equals citation, failure - is on you.

## The concept formation phase

The first phase of forming the concept was conducted by the extended design team. Questions arose such as: Whom is the accessibility for? For all disabilities? Priority for tourism? Priority for local residents?

This issue was very complex. On the one hand, millions of tourists enter the Old City each year, both from Israel and from abroad. We have had quite a few inquiries about the possibility of pilgrims reaching the holy places of Christianity and especially the Via Dolorosa and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. There were questions about the possibility of Muslim tourists ascending to Al-Aqsa and reaching other holy places of Islam. Many Jewish tourists with disabilities wanted to get to the Western Wall. Religious organizations offered money in order to allow their members to reach the holy places.

On the other hand, there were the residents of the Old City. About 35,000 people live in the highest density, almost 120 people per dunam, eight times more than in any other neighborhood in Jerusalem. Beyond that, the Old City was in a process of change in the nature of the population, with middle-class and upper-class residents leaving the Old City and moving to more established neighborhoods in Jerusalem. In their place remained, and also entered, a relatively weak population - poor families, the elderly, people with disabilities.

Not with ease, but wholeheartedly, it was decided to give priority to the locals. Four theoretical demarcated areas have been defined, one in each quarter, where infrastructure work will be carried out, including accessibility. Our understanding was that in all the defined demarcated areas there were also suitable routes for tourism and therefore the work would serve it as well. In addition, it was clear to us that in order to allow a continuum of accessibility in the Old City, we would



have to make accessible the main routes, which are usually the popular tourist routes.

(As a footnote - many tour guides have heard of the Old City accessibility plan and have come to my office to lobby for the tourist routes where they lead their clients. Everyone told me how important it was to make it easier for tourists to walk and how important it was that people with disabilities could also participate. Some even told me that they should be trusted because they know the Old City like the back of their hand. I asked those who claimed this where Bab Huta street was. Most of them asked if it was real...)

It was a professional accessibility team, that included Dr. Judith Bendel, architect Yael Lahav and the undersigned, that mainly dealt with the second phase of



Children at Bab Huta street in the Muslim Quarter (Wikipedia)

forming the concept. We debated greatly about questions such as: Should we make it accessible to everyone already at this stage? Should we make it accessible for only vision and hearing impaired at the first stage? Should we focus on very specific disabilities? and more. After discussions and inner struggles, we brought to the extended planning team a proposal that said that in the first phase, access would be made for people with mobility disabilities. We knew that this was, in fact, the greatest challenge, in light of the challenging topography of the Old City. This recommendation was well in line with the operation of upgrading the infrastructure of the Old City, including the replacement of pipes, sewers, communications, paving and more. We have taken into account that while making it accessible for people with mobility disability, we can make it accessible, at least partly, also for people with visual impairments. Furthermore, we recommended to the planning team that the accessibility activity should not be limited to the four designated demarcated areas, but will also be planned and implemented in areas that are outside the complexes, this in order to create an appropriate accessibility sequence. The planning team, as well as the Jerusalem Development Authority, approved the recommendations of the accessibility team.

In the third phase of forming the concept the accessibility team discussed the question whether it was possible to make the Old City accessible for mobility disabled people in accordance with the existing accessibility regulations, which constitute part of the Equality Law for People with Disabilities – 1998.

For this purpose, it was decided to conduct a full accessibility survey in the Old City. To our surprise, there was no quality map of the streets of the Old City nor a clear and orderly list of streets. Therefore, we set out on the survey with what we had in hand.

The survey's task fell on the shoulders of Dr. Judith Bendel, accessibility licensee and expert in accessibility surveys. She enlisted to the task her husband, Dr. Jean-Pierre Bendel, a senior retired officer of the Israel Police, who served as an expert photographer.

The survey results were fascinating. Beyond the fact that it was found that the border between the public area and the private area is completely unclear in the Old City, it was further found that if we wanted to make it accessible in accordance with the existing regulations and standards, we would be in a state of absolute execution inability. As they say in Israeli slang - sheer waste of time...

Therefore, a very brave decision was made (remember what is the difference between courage and stupidity?) to examine existing standards in the world regarding ancient historic cities and to find out if there was knowledge abroad among senior professionals. We decided that if there were no results for locating the required knowledge, we would act on our own.

## The phase of finding existing knowledge in the world

The team began with two actions - one, an Internet search, and the other, turning to reputable experts in the field of accessibility in the world.

On the Internet we found three similar cities to the Old City of Jerusalem: Aley in Lebanon, Aleppo (Halab) in Syria and Medina, the ancient quarter of Tunis. It turned out that at Aley nothing had been done regarding accessibility, in Aleppo a huge infrastructure upgrade was carried out in 1993, but without regard to accessibility, and in Medina the Tunis government decided to enhance the quality of the wheelchairs.

We did not learn much from the world experts either. We wrote to fourteen experts, who were then considered the top accessibility experts in the world, and offered them to join the project. Eight did not answer at all and six wrote to me that it was an amazing project and wished me success, with a subtle hint that this was not really a practical project. Following this examination, we decided that without information, experience and any suitable accessibility standard, we would build on our own a suitable accessibility standard for ancient cities similar to the Old City of Jerusalem.

We particularly liked the hints from the experts about the feasibility of the project. It has certainly spurred us to do what has not yet been done. (And in this context: an economic philosopher named Walter Bagehot said: "The greatest pleasure in life is to do what others say you cannot do).

## The implementation phase

During the first years, the Jerusalem Development Authority was responsible for the implementation. Based on architectural plans, and closely accompanied by accessibility consultants, the various traffic routes in the Old City were addressed.



Where infrastructure needed to be replaced, we tried to ensure that a reasonable level of accessibility/passability was maintained. For example: the axis of Hagai Street, which leads from the Damascus Gate to the entrance to the Western Wall complex, was divided into five sections. Every few months, work was done on one section. This is because it is a relatively long street with a large number of shops and the merchants were very concerned that their livelihoods would be harmed during the works. Therefore, in addition to dividing the street into sections, we also tried to give temporary accessibility solutions to each store.

The implementation as a whole was slow. The installation of the handholds on the Via Dolorosa, a work that could normally and reasonably be done within a few days, took many weeks. Any drilling in a wall of a building or in a street paving was accompanied by a representative of the Antiquities Authority and sometimes there was a lengthy discussion about each drilling. There were quite a few professional compromises on this issue.

Another problem during the implementation was the involvement of religious bodies. Thus, for example, in the Armenian Quarter a handhold was installed with the close supervision of the Armenian Patriarch's representative. He made sure, inter alia, that the handholds would not disturb the important members of the community. Here too compromises were made.



The mobile ramp at the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. © Oleg Grdinic | Dreamstime.com

One example is the mobile ramp installed down the stairs in front of the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. It is a wooden ramp, reinforced with wooden strips. The slope of the ramp is very challenging on the descent and almost impossible on the ascent. We offered the church to fund a better- quality ramp in terms of accessibility.

The proposal was transferred to the Vatican and returned with a negative answer. We tried again after two years; the answer did not change. We tried through the

Muslim family that has been guarding the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for years, still with no success. The original ramp is still there.

Another thing that interfered with the pace of implementation was political issues. One day all the handholds at the Via Dolorosa disappeared. The merchants told us that apparently the Jordanian Waqf had given the order. We went to the Jordanian Waqf. There it turned out that although in fact we did coordinate the work with the VP of the Waqf, but not with the right VP. After a friendly discussion, 50% of the handholds returned the next day. A small tax for big politics.

That same strong Muslim organization demanded that we wait with the implementation of accessibility at Bab Huta Street until they saw the final plans. According to them, they have turned to the United Nations to complain about the Zionists who entered their neighborhood without permission. After several days they returned to us saying that they had turned to the UN with a complaint and that we could begin working. Moreover, they asked us to hurry because there were a lot of elderly people and children in wheelchairs living on the street.

The largest deviations during the implementation were precisely at the request of local residents. For example: We carried out a deviation of the small ramps on Ha'Ahim Street (the Brothers street), towards the Pilgrim Hotel Casa Nova, just so as not to interfere with a local "parliament" sitting on low stools in a very specific place, something which they have been doing for more than forty years.

About six years ago the responsibility for the implementation was transferred to the East Jerusalem Development Company (PAMI). The company has proven implementation ability and very close ties within the Old City, since it is in charge, inter alia, of routine maintenance of the place. PAMI's work was relatively very quick. More and more axes were made accessible at a rapid pace, sometimes at the expense of accuracy of the architectural design. For example: a ramp has been built on HaHasidot Trail Street, the safe use of which is rather doubtful. On the other hand, there is no other solution that will be really good.

In many cases, during our work, local residents approached us and made various requests. For example: To make the entrance to the yard (called "Hush") accessible because there is a woman there who gets around with a wheelchair; to make a small section of a very narrow street accessible because it will allow a resident traveling in a mobility scooter to place the scooter relatively close to the door of her home; to make accessible sections of some inaccessible roads, even if there will not be a sequence of accessibility, in order to facilitate at least in these sections.

We have tried to respond to most of the requests or at least to make it a little easier. The policy that was formed was to do the most for the residents, as decided in principle at the beginning of the project.

## The phase of credits (the honors)

Last year it was decided to launch a public relations campaign to advertise accessibility in the Old City. A public relations firm worked on the task with great vigor. Spokesmen sent articles to newspapers and the social networks, a meeting was held with the mayor at a restaurant in the Old City, CEOs of relevant bodies spoke, the director general of the Ministry of Tourism announced he would continue to support (??) and journalists filmed and interviewed the important persona.

The National Insurance Institute published a half-page article in a well-known newspaper stating that they were making the Old City accessible (in practice, they gave NIS 5 million. The full budget of the upgrade project, including accessibility, was almost NIS 900 million). The Jerusalem Post welfare reporter approached me and asked to interview me. After the interview she asked me why I was not invited to speak and why the accessibility staff members, who worked with me were not invited. I told her that everything was all right, and this for two reasons:

- As is well known, success has many fathers, failure is an orphan. If so many people attribute to themselves the success of the project, it is probably very successful, which is what matters.
- I told her a story about Napoleon. Napoleon Bonaparte, while still a young French officer, met a Prussian officer. The Prussian officer said to him: I do not understand you French. You fight for money, we fight for the honor! Napoleon answered him: You are right. Everyone fights for what he lacks.

## By-products

The work in the Old City had quite a few by-products:

- An accessibility map of the Old City had been prepared, whose distribution has been delayed due to copyright issues (Jerusalem Development Authority).
- A new app was launched (PAMI) of accessible routes in the Old City, available in several languages.
- Preparatory work was carried out for an international conference in Jerusalem on accessibility in ancient cities, an initiative that aroused considerable interest. Unfortunately, the conference did not take place due to demands from the funding body and organizational difficulties. However, the activity around this conference has created another system of international relations on this issue.
- An idea arose and was formed for an open-air museum in the Old City (architect Meirav Davish Ben Moshe. See on this issue, p. 101).
- A guide of making traffic routes accessible in the Old City (Architect Ofer Manor and Architect Davish Ben Moshe).
- A comprehensive article on the project was published in Universal Design Handbook, 2010, a very significant book in the field of accessibility in the world. The article was written by Dr. Judith Bendel, Architect Yael Lahav and the undersigned.
- Lectures on accessibility in the Old City in Israel and overseas.
- A mechanism has been set up for residents' complaints about accessibility problems in the Old City (PAMI)

The by-products were very good, except of course the canceled conference. This is probably proof that the project has a long-term impact.

## And what's next?

There are a number of options, which could and should be continued:

- Accessibility for visually impaired people: the integration of voice signage technology for people with visual impairments should be re-examined thoroughly. Voice signage may help not only people with visual impairments but also people with cognitive disabilities and possibly others as well.
- Improving orientation: although there is already a map and an app, the project of accessible signage in the Old City should be continued.



- A professional decision must be made on the issue of whether sections of traffic routes should also be accessible, without the sequence of accessibility along the entire axis. On the one hand, accessibility without continuity is not really accessibility. On the other hand, if this may help people with mobility disability in part of the route, why not?
- To develop the open-air museum project, with an emphasis on universal accessibility.
- To continue to disseminate the accumulated knowledge in Israel and around the world. A possible way to achieve this goal would be to establish a knowledge center for universal accessibility in historic cities.

## **An epilogue, which may also be a beginning**

With all the required modesty, this is a large-scale and extraordinary project, not only because of the intricate accessibility issues it has posed, but also because of the political and religious environment in which it has been planned and implemented.

This is a very impressive collaboration between entrepreneurs, planners, performers, organizers, and especially dreamers, who believed in the project. As is the way with good projects, it is not perfect. There are things to be added. Licensed accessibility consultants know that accessibility of a place, certainly a complex one, never ends. Improvement is always possible and new relevant technology is always found.

In a non-physical aspect, it seems to me that the great achievement of the project is in the change it has made in the locals regarding the issue of accessibility. In the course of the implementation, many understood the essence of the matter and wanted to enjoy the accessibility. They even developed a feeling of “I deserve accessibility” and more than once came to us with complaints.

### **The following story may sum up this point:**

A few months ago, I was called to the PAMI offices, where I was presented with a legal document from an East Jerusalem law office. The document discusses a claim of a woman, who moves around in a wheelchair and lives on the ninth station of the Via Dolorosa, near the Ethiopian church. She is suing PAMI for not arranging an accessible road for her from her place of residence to Beit HaBad Street. Between her house and the street there are height differences of about 4.5 meters, with the levels being connected by relatively steep stairs. It is clear that it is not possible to turn the stairs into an accessible road and also a solution of a wheelchair lift or an elevator turned out to be engineeringly inapplicable.

The PAMI people were really stressed out. Only I was happy. Finally, the locals demand accessibility by law, even if the specific case in question is not really a good example, and this because the location could not have been made accessible in a reasonable and mostly safe manner.