

Groups Battling to Save a Jerusalem Village That Time Forgot

A number of petitioners are looking to stymie the sale of land in the abandoned Arab village of Lifta, saying the move would destroy a gem at the entrance to the capital.

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Petitioners are hoping to block an auction of land over the site of an abandoned Arab village on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and are making headway with the courts.

Lifta, once a pastoral village at the entrance to the city, was abandoned after 1948.



The remains of the village of Lifta, which may soon hold 212 new housing units.
Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

The petitioners, who are hoping to foil the sale of the land entirely, include a number of nonprofit associations such as Rabbis for Human Rights, the Jafra Association, and a number of private individuals, some of whom lived in the village before 1948.

will go ahead with the tender, or give in to experts' recommendations and cancel the tender. An answer is due on May

Golan says they should at least postpone the tender, taking preservation of the site into account.

Lifta's buildings have stood empty since Israel's War of Independence, an untouched - if crumbling - time capsule of the era.

But preserving the unique site could diminish the value of the property. Therefore, as the petitioners point out, before the ILA even thinks of selling any of the land in Lifta, formal processes defining the extent and nature of preservation need to be completed.

Otherwise, they argue, the Israeli authorities could face lawsuits from the buyers of the land. If the state rushes to hawk the land, they say, it might eschew preserving this iconic site because of fear of lawsuits.

A developer who buys a plot of land in Lifta, before the formalization of preservation and planning for the area would expect to build on the site according to the master plan for the region. Should the buyer be told that preservation requires him to leave the original building as is, and add nothing, he could sue the state for his loss of theoretical income because of the changes.

Indeed, the master plan for the area states that before any land is auctioned off, preliminary procedures need to be carried out, including thorough documentation of the buildings in the village and its surroundings.

Meanwhile, until the land is sold by auction, the state remains the formal owner in Lifta, under the law governing abandoned property.

Passing on the problem

The petitioners appended an opinion signed by architects and professors, including Amnon Bar Or, Moshe Margalit, Rasem Khameyseh, Michal Firestone and Shmuel Groag.

"It is obvious why the ILA is hastening to hold the auction," they wrote, saying that the ILA is hoping to pass on the problem of preservation - and dealing with the Antiquities Authority - to the new owners. "We hope for the sake of the latter that they took these elements into consideration when bidding," the opinion continues.

Based on their experience, say the letter's authors, the moment a private owner gains hold of an asset marked for preservation, he will make use of it as he sees fit. If the state wants to preserve the asset for public use after its sale, it will usually face either heavy investment or some other cost.

They cite the example of Frumin House, the building that used to house the Knesset. The state had to enact a special law and regain

remain accessible to the public, and when they are, the buyers are clearly advised as to their preservation duties.

A master plan (No. 6036) including Lifta was finalized in 2006. The plan was formulated by the architectural offices of Shmuel Groag and Gabriel Kertesz. Their plan calls for the construction of 212 housing units and 2,000 square meters of commercial space. In late 2010 the ILA issued a tender for 10 sites in the village based on their recommendations, though both architects have backtracked on the plan.

Groag, who is active in the nonprofit association Bimkom, signed the opinion submitted together with the petition. Kertesz declined to be interviewed for this article, but said the plan was an old one and needed discussing with the ILA.

Neither would explain the change of heart.

When the master plan was submitted, groups, including the Zochrot association and Bimkom, filed objections: Lifta should be developed as a memorial of the Palestinian memory, they argued. Before 1948, the village had housed 2,500 people, some of whom now live in East Jerusalem. But their objections were overruled and the master plan was approved.

Beyond the political issue, Lifta is a unique attraction for visitors. It is within walking distance from Jerusalem, and has not only ruins from 1948 but a spring. If sold, the village would become another exclusive complex for the rich.

The plan calls for just 212 housing units, a very small number given the size of the village, and is not expected to take pressure off Jerusalem's squeezed housing market.

It could be argued that the tiny number of housing units is a deliberate attempt to preserve the site, but any intervention at all would irreversibly change its character.

Lifta's development would add nothing to the attraction of Jerusalem; it won't help the housing problem there; all it would achieve is to destroy a unique gem, argues Tel Aviv University Prof. Tovi Fenster, a co-founder of Bimkom.

Put on the brakes

Fenster thinks the site should be left as is. "It is charming," she says, and housing could be built in plenty of other areas. If the site is to be touched at all, it should be done so delicately, "almost surgically." Lifta is a village that could be used to show how people lived, she says.

Naomi Tsur, deputy mayor of Jerusalem for planning, environment and preservation, says that when the master plan for the site was approved, much effort had been put into preserving the natural elements of the area, such as water sources, and the historical character of the village. It begs investment for tourism purposes, she says.