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# Israel's Last Remaining Abandoned Arab Village, Lifta, Gets Reprieve as Judge Voids Development Plans

Architects and planners view village as a cultural asset that preserves the way of life and the construction typical of Arab villages in the early 20th century.

Nir Hasson | Feb 07, 2012 1:08 AM

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Lifta, the only abandoned Arab village in Israel not to have been destroyed or repopulated since 1948, has received a reprieve after plans to build a luxury neighborhood in the western Jerusalem location were voided by a judge on Monday on technical grounds.

Judge Yigal Mersel made his decision in the context of an appeal filed by former Arab residents of the village and its descendants, together with left-wing activists. The appellants had claimed the plan would deprive the former residents - some of whom are still living in East Jerusalem - of their rights to properties they left behind when fleeing the area in 1948.



Yacoub Odeh, a leader of the community of former Lifta dwellers in Jerusalem Credit: Emil Salman

Mersel, however, did not address this claim. He canceled the tender on a technicality, saying changes made to it by the Israel Lands Administration were substantial enough to require its reissuance.

Lifta is the last Arab village abandoned during the War of Independence that is preserved in its entirety, and for many Palestinians it is a symbol of the Nakba ("catastrophe"). Architects and planners view it as a cultural asset that preserves the way of life and the construction typical of Arab villages in the early 20th century.

The urban building plan for the area, which was approved in 2004, called for constructing a luxury neighborhood in Lifta while preserving the old structures. The tender, issued a year ago, called for the village to be divided among 10 developers, each of whom would have to conduct a survey of his sector's old buildings and arrange for their preservation.

The plan had been widely criticized for not preserving the village in its entirety and effectively "privatizing" preservation by putting it in the hands of private developers.

But the political-historical argument was also made, and was to the fore in the appeal filed in Jerusalem District Court by former Lifta residents, Rabbis for Human Rights, and activists Dr. Dafna Golan and Ilan Shtayer; they were represented by attorney Sami Ershied.

"Given that Lifta is an abandoned village and its original owners live as refugees only a few hundred meters away, no construction should be done there, certainly not construction that will destroy the village and totally divest the original residents of their rights," the appellants argued.



A view of Lifta last year. It's the last Arab village abandoned during the War of Independence preserved in its entirety. Credit: Emil Salman

The appellants also submitted opinions opposing the plan from architects and preservationists, among them Shmuel Groag, who had been involved in preparing the plan a decade ago but has since repudiated it.

"My innovation was that preservation is not just of the external skin, but also of the people that lived there," Groag said.

During the hearings, officials of the Israel Antiquities Authority admitted they were not satisfied with the terms of the tender, and the ILA reported that it had made changes to the tender. For one thing, it had removed the core of the village - which includes its mosque and the famous spring - from the building plan, and it had also decided that the Antiquities Authority should do a preservation survey before the area was divided and allocated to the developers.

Mersel decided that these changes were significant enough to cancel the tender. Mersel also noted that, over the years, Israel has become much more sensitive to many preservation issues that the plan does not address.

While the appellants won on a technicality, they said it was a step in the right direction.

"This is a small step for our parents and grandparents, a small step toward protecting our history," said Yacoub Odeh, a leader of the community of former Lifta dwellers in Jerusalem. "No one has the right to destroy the memories of others," he said.

Ershied agreed. "Preservation isn't just preserving buildings, it's preserving a heritage," he said. "This is a historic opportunity because Lifta's history isn't just that of the Palestinians, it's the history of the State of Israel, for better or worse."

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