



Lifta. (Photo by: Seth J. Frantzman)

Activists promise robust investigation of Lifta

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02/11/2012

Citizens' committee declares site will become an "open campus" for study.

Activists who fought over the past year and a half to save Lifta, the abandoned village at the entrance to Jerusalem, from development into luxury villas vowed on Friday to create an "open campus" at the site for in-depth research into the history and the preservation of the village.

Last Monday, the Jerusalem District Court ruled that the Israel Lands Authority (ILA) must cancel the tender for a construction plan for 212 luxury villas on the Lifta site, some of which would be built over existing stone structures. The court found that the ILA's plans to survey the area prior to construction to determine what areas needed preservation were not sufficient.

Activists were overjoyed by the announcement. Sami Ersheid, a lawyer who filed the petition to cancel the tender in March of last year, called it a "historic victory" last week.

On Friday, activists gathered to announce their plan to create a multi-disciplinary approach to researching Lifta. The Citizens' Committee to Save Lifta, an umbrella group of concerned activists and organizations, wants to involve experts from a variety of fields, such as ecology, zoology, archeology, architecture, oral history, sociology, and history. They hope academics will collaborate to create a multi-dimensional survey of Lifta, which will be more comprehensive than an archeological survey of the area.

Ilan Shtayer, the coordinator of the citizens' committee, explained that the goal is to learn more about the history of Lifta as a community rather than just a physical place. The scenic area is famous for the old stone buildings that are visible from the western entrance to Jerusalem, which were built into the steep hillside by Arab residents in the 19th century. The area also has buildings from the First Temple period and the Crusader period.

After the Arab families left due to heavy fighting in early 1948, the state moved Yemenite and Kurdish Jewish refugees into the homes in the 1950s. The Jewish families were evicted in the late 1960s, though 13 Kurdish families still live in upper Lifta and are facing eviction. Currently, the area is a beloved park for ultra-Orthodox from the Romema neighborhood, who have few open areas in their crowded neighborhoods and use the pool as a mikve.

The "open campus" approach will gather the stories of all of these communities – Arab and Jewish – to preserve the most important areas of the village that could be overlooked by a

straight archeological survey, Shtayer explained.

“The ruling gave us time, but it didn’t change the reality,” said Shtayer. “The project for [new construction] in Lifta still exists.”

Academics from the Bezalel Academy, the Technion, Tel Aviv University, and Beir Zeit University in Ramallah have already expressed interest in research in the area, said Shtayer.

“We’re not looking for a group of five students; we’re looking to examine every branch of academics,” said Shtayer. “We think we know how to do a better survey [than the ILA], one that is much more professional and in-depth,” he said.

According to the court’s decision, the site must undergo a comprehensive survey of the area with independent bodies, such as the Antiquities Authority, before the ILA can republish the tender and find a contractor to build the project. Originally, the ILA wanted the contractor to carry out the survey. This angered activists, who argued that the private contractors would not have the best interests of the site in mind and would be financially motivated to preserve less of the area.



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