

Downtown Jerusalem

The Story of Jerusalem's City Center and Its Regeneration

Editors: Amnon Ramon • Aviel Yelinek • Asaf Vitman

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Amnon Ramon



[A beautiful arcade in the old Shmidt College (Hillel Street). Photo: Gustavo Sagrosky]

Downtown Jerusalem

The Story of Jerusalem's City Center and Its Regeneration

Jerusalem has been on the wane for a generation. This can be attributed to a variety of cause-and-effect perspectives: a declining socioeconomic status, negative migration, and the downbeat image of the city held by substantial sectors of Israeli society.

Jerusalem's troubled state can be seen with particular clarity in the decay that has come to characterize the city center. Residents have abandoned downtown Jerusalem and the inner city for new satellite towns and neighborhoods that have burgeoned since the Six Day War. Major offices and even public institutions have relocated from the city center as well: government ministries have moved to the government campus at Givat Ram, or to Sheikh Jarrah and Givat Shaul; competing commercial hubs have developed in Talpiot, Givat Shaul and Malha, while cultural and recreational institutions were established primarily to the southern part of the city.

During the 1980s-90s the Jerusalem Municipality made several efforts to halt this deterioration. Ben-Yehuda Street, the city's all-time thoroughfare, became a pedestrian mall;

the nearby Nahalat Shiv'a neighborhood was revitalized; and a newly refurbished municipality complex at Safra Square was dedicated in 1993. However, by the end of the 1990s it had become clear to the authorities that a much more concentrated and comprehensive organizational and budgetary effort would be needed to reverse existing trends; this awareness intensified in the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks perpetrated in Jerusalem during the Second Intifada (2000 - 03) – events that marred the city's attractiveness considerably.

Meaningful change occurred in 2001, when the Israeli government mobilized to support the municipal effort, and Eden, the Jerusalem Center Development Company (a subsidiary of the Jerusalem Development Authority) was established. This marked the beginning of the city center renewal process that continues today.

The city center renewal plan described in this book is an ambitious endeavor that represents a major financial investment on the part of the Israeli government and the Jerusalem Municipality. The plan constitutes an attempt

– unprecedented in Israel – to approach Jerusalem’s renewal and revitalization in a logical and considered manner – despite a prevailing sense that the city is a “lost cause.”

Behind the plan is the premise that downtown Jerusalem is the city’s “beating heart,” and that proper functioning of this heart is essential if the city as a whole is to thrive. Policymakers and planners look to city center rehabilitation as a key means of halting Jerusalem’s decline, stimulating its economy, and improving its image in the eyes of its residents and of the Israeli public at large.

According to this view, central Jerusalem exemplifies the city’s uniqueness, and its buildings tell the story of its historical development. Cities with declining downtowns generally suffer from decentralized land use, a phenomenon that impairs proper urban functioning. Consequences of urban decentralization include waste of land, corroding infrastructures (roads, electricity, water, sewage etc.), ineffectual public transportation (resulting in greater reliance on private vehicles), increased air pollution, and difficulty in maintaining open spaces.

The process of revitalizing Jerusalem’s core has been based, to a great extent, on world experience – particularly that of Europe and the US. The declining status of downtown areas and the rapid suburbanization that took place in the Western world decreased the attractiveness of cities; this in turn led to lower municipal incomes, reduced investment, and the physical decay of buildings and public spaces, particularly in city centers. Over the past generation these processes have brought about a new recognition of the importance of downtown areas, and greater investment in their renewal and revitalization.

Moreover, competition between cities – a phenomenon that has intensified over the last few decades due to global economic changes – has boosted awareness of urban renewal as a key means of highlighting a given city’s unique features and differentiating it from other locales. In many cases renewal efforts have focused primarily

on the city center – the historical core that embodies the city’s uniqueness and elicits pride on the part of its residents.

At the heart of Jerusalem’s renewal plan lies a conviction that the city’s dignity can indeed be restored, and that its downtown can be transformed into a lively, vital urban hub, as has been done in recent years with the historical cores of various European and American cities.

Jerusalem’s historic downtown lies at the city’s geographical center, and is still the natural meeting place for its diverse populations. It is adjacent to the Old City, an attraction of the first magnitude for most tourists in Israel. The Mamilla pedestrian mall, which opened in 2008 and links Jaffa Gate with the city center, is creating new opportunities to develop Jerusalem’s downtown as an attraction for tourists, both Israeli and foreign. Downtown Jerusalem’s architectural distinctiveness, which makes it a kind of living museum documenting the last 150 years of the city’s history, as well as its pedestrian-friendly urban fabric, are assets capable of distinguishing it from the competing commercial centers of Talpiot, Malha and Givat Shaul.

The city center renewal process is currently in full force; consequently, it is still too early to determine whether its planners succeeded at their task. The global economic crisis that erupted in late 2008 has added yet another dimension of uncertainty regarding both the public sector’s ability to sustain its extensive investment and the private sector’s ability to fund large projects downtown and in the vicinity of the city’s major entrance, to the west, destined to become Jerusalem’s “City.”

Within the framework of these constraints, and nine years after Eden’s establishment, we will now assess the degree to which the Jerusalem renewal project has succeeded, and the difficulties that it has encountered.

A. Regarding the need for a substantial increase of building area in the city center – to accommodate commercial activity, tourist accommodation and residential units required to ensure economic growth – one can already

see the beginnings of change. The Jerusalem Municipality, via Eden, is advancing urban construction plans that call for a denser downtown; parameters have been defined for preserving and augmenting building rights, leading to a projected doubling of the existing building area to 3 million sq. m. by 2020. Several projects (mainly residential ones) have been built in recent years, while others are in advanced planning stages.

One criticism that has been raised in this regard is that most construction taking place consists of residential projects for a wealthy clientele – mainly Jews from abroad who want their own place in Jerusalem but stay for only short periods during the year and contribute little to the city's social fabric and economic growth. The long periods of vacancy turn these projects into "ghost towns" and push up real estate prices.

In order to address this problem a policy has been adopted of making permits for new projects conditional on the provision of space for offices, commercial activity and tourist accommodation, in addition to residential units. A number of ideas have been taken up for encouraging the construction of smaller apartments for young people, students and middle-class residents; however, it is difficult to impose this kind of construction on the private sector.

In the commercial sphere, construction has begun on a new seven-storey commercial center on Jaffa Road (adjacent to Nahalat Shiv'a), while in the hotel sector construction has started on the Palace Hotel on Agron Street. Regarding office space (which also brings new jobs), no major breakthrough has been achieved. Office construction by the public sector would entail a government decision to concentrate district government offices in the city center, as has been done in several other Israeli district capitals. Particularly important for Jerusalem is the concentration of courtrooms in the Heichal Hamishpat complex planned for Hillel Street.

B. Improving the city center's accessibility is a major component of the renewal plan. The Municipality and the Ministry of Transport, via the Jerusalem Transportation Master Plan, have effected comprehensive changes to the city's entire public transportation system. The main aim has been to make the downtown more accessible. The plan's flagship project is the light rail system. The first line, now in its final stages of development, is expected to provide easy access to the center from Jerusalem's northern and western neighborhoods, and to make Jaffa Road (from Tsaahal Square to the Mahane Yehuda market) the city's main pedestrian mall, with the light rail running along its middle. Additionally, a dedicated public transit lane from southern Jerusalem to the city center has been completed. Major government budgets allocated to the light rail project made possible a major portion of the infrastructure work and the creation of the downtown pedestrian malls. The plan is also supposed to improve central Jerusalem's accessibility to the drivers of private automobiles, by expanding the roads leading to it and creating a "ring road" around the center with abundant parking along it. The aim, then, is to improve central Jerusalem's accessibility while minimizing the car traffic in it.

Most of the criticism in this area has been directed toward the light rail, whose infrastructural/track-laying work has taken much longer than planned. The delay has caused the public to lose faith not only in the light rail, but in the renewal plan as a whole. Critics contend that the launching of one light rail line from the northern neighborhoods to the city center and Mount Herzl will not contribute substantially to economic activity downtown, and that the most effective and appropriate solution to Jerusalem's transportation problems would be an improved and environmental-friendly bus system (BRT) running along dedicated lanes.

In the city center itself, the new traffic policy gives clear priority to pedestrians. This translates into a large investment in new pedestrian malls (first and foremost, Jaffa Road),

expanded sidewalks, narrowed roads, modernized access for people with disabilities, and new public squares on the model of the IDF, Davidka, Zion, Valero and Hillel Street squares.

“Restoring” the streets of downtown Jerusalem to the public should stimulate demand for residential units and for employment, commercial and hotel facilities. Overall investment in developing city center infrastructures is expected to amount to NIS 300 million (not including funds invested in the light rail), NIS 170 million of which will have been invested in new pedestrian malls, public squares, internal roads, the “ring road” circling the city center, and upgraded infrastructures.

One major problem visitors to Jerusalem’s center have to face is parking. Initially, the policy was to limit the number of downtown parking lots, as a means of encouraging the public to use mass transit. Recently, however, and due to public outcry, it was decided to try to increase the number of parking spaces along the ring road.

C. Economic growth based on long-term investment entails modern, high-capacity infrastructures. Most of downtown Jerusalem’s infrastructures date from the British Mandate, some even go back to the period of Ottoman rule. The city center renewal process has included replacement of all water, sewage, drainage, electrical and communication infrastructures by the Gihon municipal water company, Israel Electric Corporation, and Bezeq telephone company. Infrastructure replacement involves numerous conflicts and tensions due to the amount of time that it takes. These investments also greatly increases the cost of projects in the public space. However, they are essential for the city center’s economic prosperity; all in all, they are the price that the current generation is paying for those that follow. Upgraded infrastructures are supposed to make it possible to double the scope of city center construction, thereby avoiding the familiar scenario of periodic street disruptions due to infrastructure repairs.

D. Renewal of the city center entails strengthening its status vis-à-vis its major commercial competitors: Malha Mall and shopping centers in Talpiot. The city center operates in a competitive market, and has the disadvantages of poor accessibility, a negative image and longstanding neglect. In order to resolve these issues it was decided to adopt a multi-year plan that would include aspects such as public relations, marketing, advertising and special-event production in the city center. Intensive community work is being carried out by the Lev Ha’Ir Community Council, based on the Mahane Yehuda Market model, with the aim of involving merchants, property owners, residents and the downtown student population in the renewal process.

One major criticism in this regard is the failure to establish a city center management company (a joint municipal/commercial mechanism for managing the city center), as has been done in Europe and the US. Town center management companies (TCMs) or business improvements districts (BIDs) are widely known for their contribution to the regeneration of city centers. They provide services, such as cleaning streets, security, making capital improvements, and marketing the area. Such services are supplemental to those already provided by the municipality. The last decade saw a number of municipal programs claiming the importance of creating such a company in Jerusalem’s center. The absence of a city center management company harms the regeneration process. Today, only a few months after the completion of the works in some new pedestrian malls, ugly stains deface them. This can be addressed by making Eden the city center’s management company.

E. The center’s attractiveness depends directly on its appearance – on the beauty of its buildings, streets and squares. Jerusalem’s natural assets, including its Mandate-era buildings, are known to all, but they need to be relieved of their layers of soot and grime. Efforts to improve downtown Jerusalem’s aesthetic status include planting thousands of new trees, cleaning building facades, renovating display windows, upgrading street lighting,

and repaving sidewalks. Within this framework, local business owners have received incentives to upgrade their store windows and, to date, hundreds have responded. A project to clean the building facades has also begun with Eden funding up to half of the cost. The project's weak point is the lack of interest shown up to now by private-sector property owners – particularly in multi-owner buildings.

F. The center must preserve its status as one of the city's main employment hubs. While downtown Jerusalem's cultural activity and residential population maintain the area's vitality during the evening and nighttime hours, employment hubs generate economic and commercial activity during the day. In order to encourage employment activity in the city center, an effort is being made to create an infrastructure of new office buildings and to promote major employment hubs. Examples include the Heichal Hamishpat project that is expected to house all of the city's courtrooms on Hillel Street, and the district government offices' return to the city center. The Heichal Hamishpat project is particularly important for daytime economic activity, as it will encourage attorneys to base their firms in the area, increase the number of people employed downtown, and expand commercial activity overall. A design for Heichal Hamishpat was chosen a year ago in an architectural competition; implementation awaits government funding.

G. Jerusalem's Old City is the main attraction for tourists visiting the city. Some 90% of tourists who arrive in Israel come to Jerusalem, and most of them visit the Old City. Yet while the Old City is Jerusalem's main tourist attraction, the city center should be the commercial hub most relevant to the visitor. Hence the need to strengthen ties between the Old City and the city center – ties that will substantially increase downtown Jerusalem's economic activity. A closer physical link between the Old City and the city center can be achieved by means of the Mamilla pedestrian mall (in this context the connection to Shlomzion Hamalka Street is particularly important),

renovating IDF Square and upgrading Jaffa Road and Hanevi'im Street.

H. Revitalizing the inner city and the city center presupposes a thriving cultural life and an environment that is attractive to young people. In Jerusalem it was recently decided to undertake several projects aimed at achieving this objective. Projects include relocating Bezalel Academy to the city center (from the distant Mount Scopus university campus), building a Museum of Tolerance, constructing student dormitories, and significantly expanding the International Convention Center (Binyanei HaUma) while also connecting it to the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv future train line, the Jerusalem light rail and the Central Bus Station. Additional cultural initiatives include a major expansion of the Ma'aleh Film School complex, Jerusalem Print Workshop and Naggar ("Musrara") School of Photography, Media and New Music; additionally, three Jerusalem-based performance groups – Psik Theater, the Incubator, and the Jerusalem Theater group – will be served by an expanded structure that formerly housed the Even Sapir School. Students are encouraged to reside in the city center via a monthly rent subsidy of \$100, which has thus far brought many students to the downtown area. This assistance is funded by the State, which recognizes the importance of the student population to Jerusalem's downtown area, and to the city as a whole.

What makes city center cultural development difficult is that most of Jerusalem's cultural institutions are located in areas surrounding the center, rather than within it. Moreover, construction work on the Bezalel project has been delayed due to a lack of funding.

Yet another problem is that large cultural institutions are already established and functioning effectively, primarily in the city's southern part (Cinematheque, Jerusalem Theater, Khan Theater, etc.); in any case, the city center has no land available for the development of such institutions. Thus, any cultural development that takes place in the city center has to involve not the relocation of existing institutions to the downtown area, but rather the creation of "new"

culture downtown. The main emphasis is supposed to be on Jerusalem's "multicultural" character, embodied in small, localized initiatives that employ the city's human and cultural diversity as its main "drawing card."

The aforementioned difficulties notwithstanding, the glass is still half full. After a long period of neglect, recent years have witnessed a serious effort to rehabilitate downtown Jerusalem. The city center renewal plan is a comprehensive undertaking, with policy mechanisms that address both the physical and social dimensions – issues related to public space, transport, culture, and more. Jerusalem is the only city in Israel to benefit from a combined effort on the part of governmental, municipal and private entities – an effort organized and implemented via a company dedicated to the endeavor. Although difficulties have been encountered along the way, the first glimmers of success can be discerned: a construction boom downtown, the opening of new businesses (including brand-name stores), a rise in the number of visitors to the city center, a rising resident student population, exuberant night life, etc.

Nevertheless, the road to downtown Jerusalem's full rehabilitation remains a long one. It should be recalled that the philosophy behind the city center renewal plan is one of long-term investment, whose outcome must be judged from a historical perspective.

If the regeneration plan of Jerusalem's city center succeeds in its aim to stimulate demand for residential, commercial, office and recreational space, making it a vibrant and lively place, then we will witness meaningful change to the city's economic and socio-cultural status. It is our hope that this renewal effort, as a municipal and national undertaking, will be accompanied by an economic upswing and by a consolidation of Jerusalem's status as the nation's capital and as a world-class city.