

Getting to the Old City of Jerusalem—by cable car?

The proposed project may be good for tourism, but it brings dangers.

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [September 9, 2020](#) issue



Simulation of a proposed cable car project in Jerusalem (simulation and photo by Israeli NGO Emek Shaveh)

The Old City of Jerusalem is a wonder to behold. It is also the scene of continuous conflicts, rooted in religion, history, economics, and politics—along with, in recent years, urban planning.

Little large-scale planning has been implemented in Jerusalem. Under British rule (1918–47), master plans were drawn up for the city. But even the most realistic of these, created by Henry Kendall in 1944, was never fully realized. After the Six-Day War in 1967, a new master plan was completed, along with special conservation plans for the Old City. But in neighborhoods around Jerusalem, a series of one-off

plans were applied. Since then, little has been done to update the master plan through the statutory process, leaving the city up to the will of developers and politicians. Instead of rational criteria for development, Jerusalem has power plays between interested parties.

Along with this general lack of direction related to urban planning, there is a lack of proper supervision for specific projects that come up. Even when there are laws in place, there are ways of circumventing them. Such is the situation in regard to the current plan to set up a cable car to transport people from outside the Old City to inside, near the Western Wall.

On the surface the cable car might seem like a good idea, a way to overcome the lack of infrastructure for cars to get in and out of the venerable but crowded Old City. But a closer look reveals the dangers such a project would bring.

The cable car project was first proposed by the Jerusalem Development Authority on behalf of Israel's Ministry of Tourism, after efforts to extend the local rail system to the Old City failed because the available space was too tight. For the cable car proposal, the government drafted a national infrastructure plan—defining a project as national can provide a shortcut through the delays and barriers of the bureaucratic process.

“Circumventing the statutory procedure means that the public is deprived of the opportunity to file formal objections,” says architect David Cassuto, one of the most critical voices against the project. “In the case of the Western Wall cable car, this was no accident; the project's sponsors understood that public opposition could sink the proposal. This evasion of the statutory process is an assault on democracy.”

The Israel Association of Architects and Urban Planners launched a blistering attack on the proposed plan. In an official meeting, sponsored by the municipality in October 2018, the IAAUP presented its case. A cable car in the Old City “would detract from its status as a world city, diminish its heritage value, and wound its residents and friends the world over.” Neither the project's statutory process nor its classification as “tourist infrastructure” was defensible. And “any procedure to build a cable car in this location displays contempt for the status of Jerusalem and its sites that are holy to the three religions. Scenic and cultural values that have been preserved for hundreds of years would be irrevocably damaged by gross technical elements: a series of gigantic pillars, stations and auxiliary infrastructure, adjacent

parking lots, and more.”

The cable car project might seem like a good idea, but a closer look reveals its dangers.

Similar words of condemnation came from Cassuto. After presenting a historical overview of the area, he detailed his objections. The project “would destroy irrevocably” the national park area designated to surround the walls of the Old City, which contains “a wealth of archaeological finds, sacred places of worship and holy places,” and much more. Though the park is meant to protect against development, 11 of the project’s 15 pylons—each five to eight stories high—would be built within it. “Pylon C would stand right next to David’s Tomb and the Coenaculum [the Upper Room],” said Cassuto—“a true eyesore.”

Cassuto also cited problems for tour guides (who also sent objectors to the meeting). Cable cars would split their groups into smaller units, making an integrated tour nearly impossible. “Guides will not be able to address their entire group,” he said.

He added that the Old City is best reached “by means of a physical effort that expresses the yearnings for this holy place. To descend as if on angel’s wings would contradict the essential Jewish concept of the ‘earthly Jerusalem’ and of pilgrimage as an ‘ascent by foot’—the need to exercise one’s limbs in order to reach the lofty goal.”

Historian Elchanan Reiner makes a similar point, arguing that the holiness that surrounds such a sacred space includes the journey to the place—not just the site itself. The cable car would destroy this aspect, lowering the site’s status to that of any other tourist destination. It would lose its spirituality.

At the meeting, Cassuto also made some more practical observations. “The cable car is highly unlikely to run on sabbaths and Jewish festivals . . . and if it did, it would produce no end of additional friction.” The current traffic bottleneck at the Old City wouldn’t be eliminated; it would be moved to wherever the cable car’s terminus point was located. Moreover, “the entire Western Wall Plaza can hold a maximum of 5,600 men and women. The cable car could bring 3,000 persons an hour—in addition to those who reach the plaza by other means.” Apart from the terrible crush that would be generated by these numbers, and the necessity of closing other access routes to keep the pressure from becoming intolerable, this would block off the Western Wall to religious Jews who come not as tourists but to pray.

One group that might benefit from the project is Elad, a private foundation that since 1986 has dominated the development of much of the Old City, especially the many archaeological digs. “Within the park boundaries,” Cassuto noted in his comments, “there are a number of tourist attractions that charge for admission, run by the Elad organization under contract from the nature reserves and national parks authority. These include the Siloam Tunnel and the City of David excavations.”

The cable car project would of necessity be made accessible only through Elad’s Kedem Center for tourists, a large facility that has not yet been built. “I wonder if the true aim of the cable car,” said Cassuto, “is not to facilitate access to the Western Wall, but rather to bring crowds to Elad’s disproportionate Kedem tourist center. With a total area of 16,000 square meters and rising to a height of seven stories, it is hard to imagine what the sponsors plan to do with all that floor space.”

Why erect a white elephant in the middle of one of the most iconic sites in the world?

I asked Elad to respond to these serious objections to the cable car project. Doron Spielman, its vice chairman, told me that Elad is not involved in “the fine details of this initiative,” calling it “solely a project” of the Israeli government. “We do realize,” Spielman continued, “that the issue of transportation to the area of the Old City and the City of David is a major challenge that needs to be addressed.” He encouraged me to talk to “the government agencies involved, city planners and architects.”

I approached the Ministry of Tourism, recently under a new head, Asaf Zamir, from the Blue and White party. The ministry, which has remained stalwart in its stand regarding this project initiated by the previous government, gave me this statement:

The Ministry of Tourism weighed the relevant aspects before coming to a decision that balanced the importance of the cable car as part of the national infrastructure that will help create a usefulness for the general public, against the claims raised against it. . . . The great importance of accessibility, and the generation of a development of tourism in the area of the Old City, the historic heart of Jerusalem, will create jobs for hundreds of thousands of people. The Ministry does not disregard the claims made by various bodies and understands the feelings that are raised, but however the public interest is greater. . . . Issues surrounding the project and the claims brought against it were brought before the high

court which will discuss it in detail in the future.

It would appear that the Ministry of Tourism has no interest in detailing what the objections have been or in addressing them, nor in substantiating the astonishing number of jobs it claims will be created by this cable car. Then there's the fact that the issue was taken up by the Ministry of Tourism, rather than the Ministry of Transport, in the first place. All of which suggests that this is another project for which the full impact has not been taken into consideration.

The issue has now been taken to Israel's high court, which may be able to save the day. So far it has put the plans on hold because the Ministry of Tourism did not follow official planning procedures.

One question seems to be unanswered. Why, with so much professional opinion against the project, does the minister of tourism feel the urge to erect a white elephant in the middle of one of the most iconic sites in the world? So much history, theology, and beauty would be wiped away for the sake of a bunch of tourist dollars, from people who are here today and gone tomorrow. The answer can only be provided by the few individuals and groups who seem to think this scheme could work to anyone's benefit. It is for them to come clean and show their hand before it is too late.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A cable car to the Old City?"