

AMERICAN ACADEMY

IN JERUSALEM



Maya Horodenichano/December 23, 2011

The Holy Apple

David Karnovsky, General Counsel to the New York City Department of City Planning, is visiting Jerusalem and draws similarities between Jerusalem and the Big Apple



David Karnovsky

“I used to think that Jerusalem as a series of ethnic blocs, but I learned that Jerusalem is more a series of neighborhoods, with diverse groups of people in each ,” says David Karnovsky, General Counsel to the New York City Department of City Planning, in an interview this week. “The people who live in the neighborhoods are very attached to the neighborhood they live in and are ready to fight for it, defend it, and make sure that it grows in a way that suits them. In that sense, Jerusalem is similar to New York,” Karnovsky continues and explains. He adds that “New York is actually also a collection of small neighborhoods, and there are a lot of people in every neighborhood who care about the future of their neighborhood. I’m really impressed by that.”

Karnovsky has spent nine weeks in the city as a fellow of the American Academy in Jerusalem project, together with three artists who also came from the United States. During his stay he has been talking with planners, Jerusalem Municipality employees and architects about “how city planning can help promote arts and culture.” In an interview with Zman Yerushalayim, he relates that the impression he has received from the visit that “a lot of energy and creativity exist from a planning perspective, both on the part of the Municipality as well the local society.” Karnovsky says he was “very impressed by the level of activism and social involvement you see in parts of the city.”

What else is similar between Jerusalem and New York?

“The image that most people have of New York is Manhattan and its tall buildings. But New York’s principal trait is actually its low-scale construction, smaller homes, and buildings in a neighborhood setting. From that perspective, there are similarities. Furthermore, both cities are experiencing a growth in population. New York has grown considerably, and the main topic on the agenda is how to deal with this growth. When I lecture about New York, I like explaining to people that the key is knowing how to grow while maintaining the city as a stable environment. You want the city to expand in the right places, but what are the right places? They are the places that are close to public transportation, to the subway, to the main thoroughfares, and to the buses. We don’t want the city to grow in places that are far from public transportation or in

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areas where the population lacks the tools to live there. That's because we don't have the money to build infrastructure there and create it for them. So you have to think about where the growth is occurring."

"I believe that Jerusalem is coping with the same issue of how to adapt the city to its growing population – where should density be added, in which areas. I think there's a consensus here about the necessity to increase the density in existing neighborhoods as opposed to a large scale expansion of the city, particularly not into natural areas or to the forest that surrounds part of the city. It makes sense, but then you need to think about where to expand and how to increase the density. And this must be achieved in a balanced manner while addressing issues of neighborhood preservation and preservation of neighborhood characteristics."

"American cities have a lot more autonomy and more of a free hand to suggest solutions at the local level," Karnovsky explains. "In Israel, under your planning system, you have to obtain authorization for many things at higher levels – from the regional and national authorities – actually, just about for everything. Consequently, it's very difficult for the municipalities to develop local solutions and then go ahead with them because the national level is often unwilling to enable that to happen or is hesitant to do so. Examples of that are the affordable housing initiatives: several municipalities have a variety of ideas and are trying to do things in response to local problems. But meanwhile, at the national level, they're not allowing that to happen and they want to slow things down, examine the issues from their point of view, and not proceed until there is a policy in place at the national level. With these restrictions, what can the municipalities do?" he observes.

Karnovsky also referred to the budgets that are available, or to be more precise, are not available to the municipalities. "That's an additional element which is very different between Jerusalem and New York. The municipalities in Israel are highly dependent on the government supporting them with funding. If we compare the situation with New York, budgetary authority there is much stronger, and they make use of that money to fund public projects such as parks and schools without obtaining approval from higher level authorities. Here, the municipalities rely to a great degree on one thing – the betterment tax. But it's not very consistent or secure revenue, and for that reason it's very difficult for the municipalities to provide services."

In his view, this issue also has a direct impact on the matter of preservation. "In New York, when a structure is designated for preservation, even if the zoning ordinances in the area allow taller and larger buildings to be built, but the historic landmark itself is not as tall and is smaller than what is allowed – high rise construction will not be permitted and the owner will not be compensated for the difference," he explains. "In Israel, the municipalities have to find ways to ensure that the preservation doesn't infringe on building rights. In many instances, a decision is made to preserve a small historic building, but then a very large, tall and modern structure is built right next to it. The two don't go together. That's unfortunate because Jerusalem has a wealth of beautiful history and great buildings to preserve."

A Subway for Paupers

"I met people who told me they don't come to the city center because they can't stand the ride, whether by car or by bus. That's a serious matter that needs to be resolved," says Karnovsky.

“Clearly, with the introduction of the light rail, there will also be a redistribution of bus lines, and we’ll see how that works. But the question is how it will work and whether it will actually result in a more effective transit system.”

“As someone who comes from New York where the mass transit system is highly developed and people use it regularly, I was shocked by the differences. Here the transportation culture is one of using private cars, coupled with a less developed culture of using public transportation. Add to that the fact that the road system itself is complicated, and you can understand that there’s a huge problem here.” Karnovsky clarifies that it’s not simply a question of convenience, but rather a critical issue that impacts the city’s development and economy. “When people say they don’t want to go downtown due to the transportation ‘bottleneck’ – that’s a serious problem. I think everyone realizes that, and you don’t have to be an expert to grasp the problem.”

With regard to the light rail, Karnovsky adds that it’s obvious you cannot rely just on a single line to serve the entire city. “A lot of people told me that the light rail is not very useful because ‘it doesn’t connect me with the city, and my shopping habits don’t require me to use it.’ My answer to that is that one line cannot serve the entire city. That’s just not possible, and it should be considered the first stage in a network. The question is how to design this network.” He concludes by saying that “people must understand that what’s great about the light rail is that so many Jerusalem residents from different sectors are all together in a single space.”

A Multilevel Pedestrian Mall

During the weeks he has spent in the city, Karnovsky has studied Jaffa Road and examined an initiative to create new public spaces on roofs and terraces along the street. “The idea is that now, after Jaffa Road has been cleaned up, the light rail is up and running, and a new pedestrian mall has been paved, a totally different environment has emerged – an environment for pedestrians,” he explains. “I was working with the director of the Bezalel Gallery located in the post office building on 23 Jaffa Road, and we came up with an idea to create a new open space in the building – a small and intimate landscape space – where you can sit and relax, have a cup of coffee, look out on the street, the Old City, and all of Jerusalem, and experience the city in a totally different way and from a different height.”

Karnovsky explains that “the idea is that pedestrians, workers on a break, students, and all different kinds of people from the various sectors can come in through the building and make use of this space. There are other buildings on Jaffa Road where the same thing or something similar can also be done. We thought this would have the potential of becoming a green chain all along Jaffa Road - a unique chain of open spaces. It’s challenging because you need to persuade people to go upstairs and you have to think about it carefully. But one of the things you get is a unique view of Jaffa Road which no one has experienced until now.”

Another project that Karnovsky has been involved in during his stay pertains to a building in Talbieh that formerly served as the Hansen Leper’s Hospital, which the Jerusalem Municipality intends to convert into an arts center. “It’s an incredible place and a lot of opportunities exist there to do some wonderful things. It’s as if the building just sat there for a long time and waited for something to happen to it. I believe this is a great opportunity. You should probably do something there that’s related to the concept of using art, something that will draw people to the

space. It needs to be a space that's agreeable to the public and that people will enjoy because it has been one of the most eerie and enclosed places in the city for many years."

In an article he wrote about the Leper's Hospital project, Karnovsky noted that the Israeli way of doing things is "first you get it done, and sort out the problems later. In some ways, this is how Jerusalem's legendary mayor, Teddy Kollek, developed the city after the Six Day War – he was smart, but above all else, he was quick." He explains that the feeling is that there is this site which has been vacant and neglected for a long time, "and now there's an interest in doing something, and in doing it quickly. I believe that what you have here is a kind of improvisation and desire to experience, make quick progress, and see what happens, and that struck me as being something very Israeli. It's an approach that says 'let's do it and not waste time thinking about all the ramifications and the details – we'll just do something. We'll see whether it works or not, so let's move forward.' That's an interesting way of doing things which sometimes works, and sometimes doesn't. On the one hand, there's a lot of bureaucracy; and on the other hand, there are developers and people who think like entrepreneurs, and they are highly skilled in knowing how to circumvent this red tape. So when people really want something to get done, it frequently gets done while avoiding getting entangled in the process."

The conversation could not end before making a comparison with Tel Aviv. "Jerusalem doesn't have to compete with Tel Aviv," Karnovsky says emphatically. "In the field of art, for example, there are sophisticated institutions of art in Tel Aviv, many of which are of international caliber. In Jerusalem, the arts and culture are very active, but in a different way. The idea that Jerusalem has to compete according to Tel Aviv's standards doesn't make any sense in my mind. It should progress according to its own criteria and develop its own culture, and I believe that there are many young people here who want to do just that. There are young people in Musrara and in similar places who are doing very interesting things which you don't see in Tel Aviv, and that's what makes it interesting."