





IN GOOD ORDER

The St Augustine Church and Priory of Valletta is a major and exciting project that Recoop started this year and will finish in 2022. It's a project that is taking the restoration and conservation cooperative on a journey into the history of the old Augustinian Order, says conservator Connie Formosa.

The Augustinians were originally hermits and had first settled in Gozo. Later, they moved to the shrine of Our Lady of the Grotto in Mellieħa, and in 1429, the Hafsid Berbers from Tunisia, in an unsuccessful attempt to capture Malta, managed to depopulate the town, after which the Augustinians moved to Mdina, where they built their convent just outside the city walls.

During the Ottoman attack of 1551, the citizens dismantled the convent and church so the assailants could not use the building to attack the city. After the invasion, however, the Augustinians did not get their land back, but later got permission from the Grand Master to take over St Mark's Church in Rabat.

Once the Great Siege was over, they began to rebuild the church, and architect Girolamo Cassar was commissioned for the job, which was one of his first. He became resident engineer, was admitted into the Order in 1569, and took charge of the construction of Valletta after architect Francesco Laparelli left.

St Augustine in Valletta consists of a church, sacristy, oratory and priory. It occupies a whole block [insula] in the city, between Old Bakery, St John, Old Mint and St Mark streets. Forming part of the original plan of Valletta, it was built by Cassar, with works starting in 1571.

Due to the damage it had suffered in an earthquake, it was then rebuilt by Giuseppe Bonici in 1765, and was completed in 1794.

The current church replaced the earlier one, which was next to it and is facing the opposite direction. In fact, the remains of the earlier church can be seen in the underground spaces beneath the current Augustinian convent.

It was elevated to parish church in 1968, and the *Fondazzjoni Socio-Kulturali Ambjentali Augustina* has secured funding for the restoration of the priory and church on Old Bakery Street and the improvement of accessibility for visitors.

The first phase of work saw the restoration and conservation of the main cupola, bringing



BOTH THE STONEMWORK AND THE APERTURES WILL BE GIVEN A NEW LEASE OF LIFE, WHILE MAKING SURE THE SIGNS LEFT BY THE HISTORY OF THE PLACE REMAIN LEGIBLE

daylight to the centre of the Greek cross plan of the church. The second and main phase of works will see the introduction of a lift and stair tower. Located on the side of the courtyard, this will provide better access for the public to all areas of interest.

The project will also include the conservation of the façade and exterior walls to the courtyard and the streets. Both the stonework and the apertures will be given a new lease of life, while making sure the signs left by the history of the place remain legible.

These works will allow the foundation to improve access throughout the convent and upgrade the facility to further their mission to educate the community, conserve its heritage assets and promote research.

Recoop, after recently completing the works on the cupola and its crowning lantern, have been given the privilege to further their

involvement with the priory and the church and lead the main phase of works, which include the excavation around the archaeological remains of the old 16th-century church and the erection of a new steel and glass structure within the courtyard to shelter the new lift and stairs to all levels. This will also include a new atrium and connection bridge to the painting gallery.

Other works include the conservation and alteration of the stonework on the level opening on Old Mint Street; repairs and cleaning of the stonework of the façades; and the restoration of all apertures onto the façades, as well as the balconies and the iron works.

The project is lengthy and quite complex, and as with such big jobs, the co-operation of an interdisciplinary team of experts and competent people is of the essence. ■