

# The Most Beautiful Street

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## **Introduction: beauty contest**

Infrastructure Malta is usually associated with the provision of the necessities of mobility and connectivity; and maintaining and enhancing the road network in particular. However, perhaps to inject some colour into the annus horribilis that was 2020, the Agency organised a competition to determine “the most beautiful street” in Malta.

Sanctuary Street, Żabbar, came first: it is a long and straight street, with a mixed use of residential and small-scale commercial, professional and retail services and facilities, and connecting a square at its south end with the Żabbar Parish Church, dedicated to our Lady of Graces, at its north end (this being the Sanctuary after which it is named). Somehow, the street itself makes up for the absence of a church parvis: none is found in Żabbar.

Sanctuary Street has become the main thoroughfare of this bustling town in Malta’s southeast; that honour had belonged to Main Street, which crosses the town west to east, connecting the Cottonera via Żabbar to Żejtun. Triq is-Santwarju beat St Anne Street, Floriana; Anġlu Gatt Street, Żejtun; St Paul Street, Rabat; and Republic Street, Valletta, to secure first place in the 2020 version of this ‘beauty pageant’ (Magri, 2020).

The street, remarkably, still mainly consists of two-storey buildings, with facades boasting traditional stone work, wooden doors, and closed wooden balconies. It is a functional, busy and vibrant thoroughfare, the site of band marches and pilgrimages, with only one-way traffic and one-side parking allowed, given its rather narrow profile.



Street View of Sanctuary Street, Żabbar (Courtesy of Google Maps, 13 December 2020).

I doubt whether this is a coincidence: Sanctuary Street, along with the other top contenders for this unorthodox ‘beauty prize’, has been spared the “uglification” that has gripped various parts of the Maltese Islands (Sciocluna, 2000). At the same time, notice that there are no trees at all on this street: a shocking reminder of how conditioned we Maltese have now become not to expect greenery in our densely peopled and motorised urbanscapes.

I am reminded of another majestic road, one of my favourite choices for sociology fieldwork with my university students, and one that has seen its heyday in another century: I am referring to Victory Street, Senglea. This is a less busy road since, unlike Sanctuary Street, it does not lead to anywhere. It is on this street that Malta’s first ever consumer cooperative

opened its doors, thus reflecting the residential prestige of the locality in those days: the cooperative’s shop was run by the Società Operaia Cattolica on 200-202, Victory Street; in August 1919, it had over 400 consumers as members and employed 30 workers (Malta: Organo del Partito Nazionale, 1920). The topography here is more dramatic: the street is nestled between two hills, each of which is crowned by a church: the Parish Church, dedicated to Our Lady of Victories, close to its south end; and the Jesuit Church, dedicated to St Philip, at its north end. Here, at least, a few trees are to be found. I have counted less than one hundred trees in the whole of Senglea’s public spaces: thirteen of these lie alongside the Parish Church.





Street View of Victory Street, Senglea (Courtesy of Google Maps, 13 December 2020). Note post-war public housing on the right.

A common feature of both streets is that they illustrate the scars of tragedy; but they do so differently. In Senglea, some of the grand properties that housed the local middle class before the 1940s were destroyed by aerial bombardment during the Second World War. Functional but less auspicious and rapidly built buildings, often involving social housing projects launched by the state, have taken their place. In Żabbar, the tragedy that affected Sanctuary Street was the crash of a Royal Air Force Avro Vulcan bomber on October 14th 1975, killing five crew members and one civilian, Vincenzo Zammit. However, mercifully, the 15 houses

rebuilt after this event reflect the architectural form that dominates the streetscape.

### **Function over form; quality over quantity**

Functionality has often trumped form in local contemporary infrastructure design. Even historical monuments, like the Hompesch Arch, the last material legacy of the Knights of St John in Malta, ‘makes sense’ to contemporary Maltese essentially as a traffic island, guiding traffic through a busy junction connecting Fgura, Żabbar, Żejtun and Cottonera (Baldacchino, 2017). Old buildings, it seems, need to have a valid purpose, a

justifiable *raison d’être*: the mere fact that they are old, even if they are beautiful, seems not to suffice to assure their preservation. The economic temptations associated with knocking down the ancient and replacing it with modern apartment blocks are tantamount to irresistible. The unprecedented population growth seen in the Maltese Islands in recent decades is often heralded as the strongest explanatory factor for the ongoing construction activity; that it is an industry which is ‘too big to fail’, so significant is its contribution to the national economy, is another. Surely, taste, quality and aesthetics need not be thrown to the dogs in order to

ascertain more housing stock? Men and women do not live by bread alone; nor do they live only inside their home. A creeping awareness and appreciation of the quality of life, and not just the quantity of life, is a welcome signal of a post-materialist citizenry (after Inglehart, 1981) in the Maltese Islands. Evidence of this is the growing political relevance and clout of environmentalism, at both local and national level (Boissevain, 2004; Boissevain & Gatt, 2011).

Perhaps the competition for the most beautiful street, launched by Infrastructure Malta, taps into, and is part of, the same growing consciousness? The same could be said for the four works of art that are set to adorn the Marsa Flyover Junction (The Malta Independent, 2020). Moreover, a nod in the same direction is made for the 350-metre, vertical 'green wall', with 27,600 odd plants, installed along the Marsa-Hamrun bypass, now absorbing the toxic carbon of fuel gas emissions (Borg, 2020). One can always criticise these initiatives as eyewash – are they just a sop to the environment? That may very well be. And yet, I prefer to laud a good idea when I see one; and expect to see even more.

I am aware that concern for the quality of life is growing. The Maltese population has seen its purchasing power triple in real terms over the past 40 years or so: but, with so much liquidity finding its way into people's pockets so rapidly, the knee-jerk reaction has been conspicuous consumption, and the pursuit of ostentatious materiality: property, vehicles and, more recently, pleasure craft. The traditional parsimony and frugality of the Maltese, and their 'saving for a rainy day' (e.g. Zammit, 1984) has been largely frittered away. However, upcoming generations are more 'post materialist': concerned with the absence of open spaces and green lungs; and disgusted with waste in the guise of plastic bottles or aluminium cans that can be found almost everywhere.

The public sector has responded to this reorientation, with at least three out of twenty Ministries in December 2020 (acronyms: MECP, MESD, MISW) explicitly responsible for sustainable development, quality of life, climate change and environmental protection. These, in turn, are expected to drive initiatives that address this concern and consciousness. A virtuous loop should result.

Meanwhile, the other 17 Ministries can certainly chip in and support this exercise more explicitly. Just like MTIP has done, with considerable publicity, with its art works, green walls, and street beauty contests, even if these are mere sideshows to the main thrust of what this Ministry does (which is, largely, to build and maintain the road network). The justification for this stance is easy: quality of life, like quality control, is not a matter to be relegated and delegated to a specific Ministry or unit. It deserves to be mainstreamed. It is our collective responsibility.

## Here's the challenge

There is, of course, already an ongoing effort in Malta to coordinate actions in order to respond to the Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, set by the United Nations, and meant to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). A process to craft Malta's Sustainable Development Vision 2050 is underway (Ministry for the Environment, Sustainable Development and Climate Change, 2018). Agencies like the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) are deeply committed to pursuing a 'sustainable quality of life' agenda, as also expressed in ERA's mission statement (ERA, 2020).



## Articles by Academics

I am myself part of the Sustainable Development Network, set up under Act 10 of 2012, to “create a framework through which sustainable development is to be mainstreamed across Government”. And the Government of Malta itself, by virtue of being the government of an EU member state, is tasked to meet the targets of the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (Eur-Lex, 2020).

To these efforts, however, can be added a suite of others. Hence, the challenge is set: how can each Ministry, and its line departments, creatively engage in ongoing initiatives that also address the quality of life of the residents of these islands?

To each Ministry, thus, its own set of challenges. Here are a few suggestions, and using a

freewheeling way of thinking that is reminiscent of ‘green hat’ thinking (De Bono, 2017). Some challenges may require cross-Ministry collaboration to succeed. (The initials/acronym of the main relevant Ministry are in brackets: Government of Malta, 2020):

- How to protect Gozo and maintain its complementarity to Malta, putting more flesh and less rhetoric to the Eco Gozo label? (MGOZ).
- How to promote green finance and support the development of green jobs? How to support the growing realisation that one need not commute to work every day but can also work from home, in a hybrid mode? (MFE).
- How to encourage ‘distant viewing’ and ‘augmented reality’ in tourism; with less actual visitations to sensitive sites? Can consumers be more aware of how sustainably manufactured, built or grown are the things that they buy? (MTCP).
- How to look at the hot issue of undocumented migration not simply as a matter of border security and burden sharing; but also as an opportunity for involving local communities in integration initiatives? Would not such actions help reduce misrepresentations of identity, humanise migrants, and develop happier neighbourhoods? (MHSE).
- How to engender more impactful initiatives in favour of alternative means of connectivity? Car-free days or hours, rotating per locality? Reintroduce bus lanes where they already existed, and more to boot? Have walking paths and bicycle lanes that actually do not stop abruptly (forcing one to scratch one’s head and decide what is to be done



**create a framework through which sustainable development is to be mainstreamed across Government.**

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with one's bicycle at that point)? And will there be further incentives to transition to electric vehicles? (MTIP).

- Mainstream sustainable development in the school curriculum? Transform all schools into hotspots of sustainability, with benchmarks fostering some healthy competitive spirit amongst students and educators? (MFED).
- Invest in a more scientific farming sector? Encourage upgrades to crop production and crop cycles that can be supported by organic inputs? Promote drip irrigation and greater technological investment to protect and enhance crop yields? Diversify the seafood industry beyond the farming of tuna, sea bass, sea bream and meagre? (MAFA).
- Develop prototype housing that is energy efficient (and inclusive of rainwater capture mechanisms) and sustainably constructed? (MSA).
- Encourage active ageing, with health and wellness programmes organised at community level, in collaboration with local councils? (MSCA).
- Excluding residential homes and hospitals), which are the healthiest communities in the Maltese Islands? Which is the one with the largest proportion of residents aged 90 and over? Which is the one with the largest fertility rate? (MFH).
- Boost research and innovation in all the above? Encourage all the above by targeted research funding? Especially now that Malta, finally, has its first ever dedicated Ministry for research and innovation. (Let me pose this as a statement, rather than a question.) It is time to really pull up our socks here: in 2018, total expenditure on Research and Development amounted to €74.6 million, or just 0.6 per cent of GDP (National Statistics Office, 2020). (MRIC).

Let us remember also that Malta is a small state. Too many handicaps and deficiencies have been associated with small size, and far too many times. With small size, however, also come some clear advantages: policy measures are typically faster to enact, are national in scope by default, and are quick to show results.





## Conclusion

Beauty may be devilishly hard to define: but we all recognise a beautiful thing when we see one. Our small archipelago has a ridiculously high population density: this is, in itself, testimony to its resilient and diversified economy that has weathered many storms (including COVID-19) and now survives and thrives, thanks to inflows of additional imported labour. But the environmental cost is huge. Street beauty pageants are a gentle reminder that our townscapes are not just inevitable collateral damage to progress. They can and should multiply and recur, in myriad creative ways, across multiple Ministries and departments, and with suitable inducements and market signals to stimulate appropriate actions in the private sector, to protect and reward that which we hold dear. Before it is too late.



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