

# **Conflicting Narratives and Communicative Dissonance**

## Conversations of Contested Space in Malta

Daniel Sammut

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty for the Built Environment, University of Malta in part  
fulfilment of the requirements for the attainment of the degree of Master of Architecture  
(Architectural Design)

June 2025



## **University of Malta Library – Electronic Thesis & Dissertations (ETD) Repository**

The copyright of this thesis/dissertation belongs to the author. The author's rights in respect of this work are as defined by the Copyright Act (Chapter 415) of the Laws of Malta or as modified by any successive legislation.

Users may access this full-text thesis/dissertation and can make use of the information contained in accordance with the Copyright Act provided that the author must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the prior permission of the copyright holder.



To my mother and father. My success is only a reflection of your unwavering support.





**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

**FACULTY/INSTITUTE/CENTRE/SCHOOL** Faculty for the Built Environment

## **DECLARATIONS BY POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS**

### **(a) Authenticity of Dissertation**

I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this Dissertation and that it is my original work.

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institution of higher education.

I hold the University of Malta harmless against any third party claims with regard to copyright violation, breach of confidentiality, defamation and any other third party right infringement.

### **(b) Research Code of Practice and Ethics Review Procedures**

I declare that I have abided by the University's Research Ethics Review Procedures. Research Ethics & Data Protection form code BEN-2025-00042.

As a Master's student, as per Regulation 77 of the General Regulations for University Postgraduate Awards 2021, I accept that should my dissertation be awarded a Grade A, it will be made publicly available on the University of Malta Institutional Repository.



# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Perit JingYao Xu, for his support, guidance, and patience throughout the process of this research. His passion and creativity have inspired me academically and beyond.

I would like to thank Dr. Paul Gauci for his informal interest and guidance in my research. His knowledge was invaluable in carving and polishing the scope of this research.

I am grateful for the support provided throughout my academic journey by the Faculty of the Built Environment.

A special thanks goes to the 5 anonymous participants who took part in this study. Without their honesty, this research would not have been possible.

Lastly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents and my partner, who have blessed me with their support, patience, and encouragement throughout this journey.

I take full responsibility for any short comings in this dissertation.



## Abstract

This dissertation seeks to observe the role of symbolic narratives in locally contested territories. The concept of architecture existing as a symbolic entity, being shaped by cultural, social, and political forces, while simultaneously shaping them, is a phenomenon which has been observed and unpacked by several spatial and political theorists. Building on this foundation, the research uses a case study example of Manoel island to examine how space becomes a vessel for conflicting symbolic aspirations, how language and narrative are mobilised to articulate these ambitions, and the effect these narratives have on the process of spatial negotiation itself.

The research employs methods of qualitative analysis to analyse data mainly collected through semi-structured interviews to observe these processes at the micro - scale.

Analysis revealed that, while stakeholders may share some symbolic concerns towards Manoel Island, diverging spatial aspirations arise depending on individual core values. These aspirations often seem incompatible. Because of these conflicting ideas of the future, stakeholders craft narratives, assigning symbolic roles to themselves and other actors within the conversation, which aim to legitimise their own position and delegitimise counter arguments. Here, narrative becomes a strategy for influence - whichever story is the most influential has the power to define the built environment. However, stakeholders recognise the mobilisation of strategic narratives in one another, creating distrust, hampering the potential for open dialogue and collaborative negotiation. This mutual suspicion gives rise to communicative dissonance, making the process of reaching consensus on the future of contested spaces increasingly difficult.

This research highlights an opportunity to shift focus away from public debates and toward earlier, more reflective stages of engagement, before narratives solidify into rigid positions and common ground is obscured. By creating space for complexity and self-awareness, there may be greater potential to uncover common ground and reframe disagreement not as opposition, but as difference worth understanding.



# Table of Contents

|                                                               |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Acknowledgements .....                                        | vii       |
| Abstract .....                                                | ix        |
| List of Figures.....                                          | xiii      |
| List of Tables .....                                          | xiv       |
| Glossary .....                                                | v         |
| <b>Introduction .....</b>                                     | <b>1</b>  |
| 1.1 Background.....                                           | 1         |
| 1.2 Goals and Objectives.....                                 | 2         |
| 1.3 Research Questions and Hypothesis.....                    | 3         |
| 1.4 Overview of Research Methods .....                        | 4         |
| 1.5 Structure of the Dissertation .....                       | 5         |
| <b>2. Framing Space: A Theoretical Foundation .....</b>       | <b>8</b>  |
| 2.1 Architecture as a Symbolic Entity .....                   | 9         |
| 2.2 Symbolic Shifts in Malta's Built Environment .....        | 11        |
| 2.3 Narrative and Conflict.....                               | 14        |
| 2.4 Communication, Trust, and Power.....                      | 17        |
| 2.5 Conclusion.....                                           | 18        |
| <b>3. Collecting The Symbolic .....</b>                       | <b>20</b> |
| 3.1 Research Design.....                                      | 21        |
| 3.2 Target Population and Sample .....                        | 22        |
| 3.3 Data Collection and Qualitative Measurement Methods ..... | 24        |
| 3.4 Data Analysis.....                                        | 26        |
| 3.5 Limitations .....                                         | 27        |
| 3.6 Conclusion.....                                           | 28        |
| <b>4. Understanding The Symbolic.....</b>                     | <b>31</b> |
| 4.1 Expression of Symbolic Concern .....                      | 32        |
| 4.1.1 Narratives of Loss .....                                | 32        |
| 4.1.2 Narratives of Aspiration.....                           | 34        |
| 4.2 Narratives of Legitimacy and Role .....                   | 37        |
| 4.2.1 Professional Integrity and the Moral Developer .....    | 37        |
| 4.2.2 Narrative and Strategic Framing .....                   | 39        |
| 4.3 Communicative and Symbolic Collapse .....                 | 41        |
| 4.3.1 Misinterpretation and Role Confusion.....               | 41        |
| 4.3.2 The Politics of Trust.....                              | 42        |
| 4.3.3 Systemic Failure of the Communicative Arena .....       | 43        |
| <b>5. Unpacking The Symbolic.....</b>                         | <b>46</b> |
| 5.1 Analysing Symbolic Positions.....                         | 47        |
| 5.2 Strategic Narratives & Claims of Legitimacy .....         | 50        |

|                                                             |           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 5.3 Communicative Dissonance .....                          | 54        |
| <b>6. Conclusion .....</b>                                  | <b>57</b> |
| 6.1 Research Findings .....                                 | 58        |
| 6.2 Reflections.....                                        | 59        |
| 6.3 Moving Forward .....                                    | 60        |
| References .....                                            | 62        |
| Appendix 1 – Interviews .....                               | 67        |
| Appendix 2 – Sample Consent Form & Information Letter ..... | 124       |

## List of Figures

|                                                                                                                                                      |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1 - Dissertation Structure .....                                                                                                              | 6  |
| Figure 2 - Lefebvre's Triad, Via Schmid, 2008 .....                                                                                                  | 9  |
| Figure 3 - St.Pauls's Pro-Cathedral, built by the British to cater to the Anglican community in Malta, Via Kathmandu & Beyond, 2018 .....            | 11 |
| Figure 4 - Fort Rinella, built by the British as a coastal fortification for the Grand Harbour, via Dreamsline .....                                 | 11 |
| Figure 5 - Fort Manoel, Ariel view, Via The Malta Independant, 2023 .....                                                                            | 12 |
| Figure 6 - The Hilton Hotel, St. Julian's, 1970s. (source unavailable) .....                                                                         | 12 |
| Figure 7 - Most recent Manoel Island Master Plan Proposal, Via MIDI plc., 2025 .....                                                                 | 13 |
| Figure 8 - Position & Perspective affects the way different stakeholders perceive the same subject. Via Gert J. Malan, 2017 .....                    | 15 |
| Figure 9 - Cultural Narratives use symbolic ideals to create influential narratives, Via Kotler, 2019 .....                                          | 15 |
| Figure 10 - Strategic Action may lead to distorted communication, Via Ehrenfeld, 2024 .....                                                          | 17 |
| Figure 11 - Methodology Framework .....                                                                                                              | 29 |
| Figure 12- Stakeholders express shared symbolic concerns – but diverging ideas of the future. Via Author .....                                       | 48 |
| Figure 13 - Symbolic Language mobilised to legitimise resistance towards the Manoel Island Development, Via Moviment Graffiti, Instagram, 2025 ..... | 51 |

**List of Tables**

Table 1 - Thinking Hats & Example Questions .....24

# Glossary

**1. Symbolic**

Meanings or concerns that represent social, cultural, or political significance beyond material or practical issues.

**2. Emplotment**

The process through which memories, experiences, values, and aspirations are structured together to create a coherent story.

**3. Narrative**

The result of 'emplotment' – a finished story which gives symbolic meaning to space. This justifies present concerns and creates imagined futures.

**4. Legitimacy**

The perception that a person, group, or aspiration is valid, trustworthy, or morally sound.

**5. Communicative Dissonance**

A breakdown in dialogue between stakeholders facilitated by mistrust, strategic language, and conflicting narratives.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The study of architecture, urban space, and spatial contestation is an ever-evolving field that delves into the complex relationships between built environments, societal values, and political power. The interaction between architecture and society is not merely functional; it is deeply symbolic, with built forms acting as vessels for ideologies, power dynamics, and cultural narratives. This dissertation explores the symbolic dimensions of architecture and urban space, specifically focusing on how contested spaces in Malta, such as Manoel Island, become arenas for competing narratives.

The context of this research lies in the increasing tensions between development and heritage preservation in rapidly urbanizing regions. Malta, with its rich historical landscape and its ongoing urban transformation, presents a unique case study for exploring these tensions. The redevelopment of historical and public spaces in Malta, driven by both state and private actors, has sparked significant public debates. These debates, particularly those surrounding the future of contested sites like Manoel Island, reveal how conflicting visions for the same space are shaped by symbolic narratives, and how these narratives influence both public perception and the dynamics of negotiation.

## 1.2 Goals and Objectives

The goal of this research is to examine the symbolic contestation over urban development projects in Malta, focusing on the ways in which different stakeholders engage with space and project competing narratives. This research seeks to understand both the ability of symbolic language to shape the built environment, and the effects of this symbolic language on the landscape of negotiation.

The primary objective of this dissertation is to explore the following:

- To analyse how symbolic ideals embedded held by different stakeholders contribute to the contestation over spaces like Manoel Island.
- To examine the role of narrative in the ongoing conversations surrounding contested spaces in Malta.
- To investigate the role of communicative dissonance in spatial conflict, focusing on how differing symbolic interpretations of space contribute to the breakdown in communication between stakeholders.

These objectives will guide the research towards a deeper understanding of the intersection between symbolic contestation, narrative, and communicative breakdown.

## 1.3 Research Questions and Hypothesis

This research will seek to answer the following central research question:

*How do symbolic narratives affect public contestation over territories of negotiation in Malta?*

Additionally, the dissertation will explore the following sub-questions:

1. *What symbolic narratives do different stakeholders attach to contested spaces?*
2. *How do stakeholders mobilise symbolic language to construct legitimacy in the negotiation of contested spaces?*
3. *How does communicative dissonance reinforce conflict in contested spaces?*

The concept driving this research is that symbolic meanings, embedded in architectural forms and narratives, are central to the contestation of urban spaces, and that communicative dissonance between different stakeholder groups leads to misunderstandings, mistrust, and a breakdown of effective dialogue.

## **1.4 Overview of Research Methods**

This dissertation employs a qualitative research methodology, which is particularly suited for exploring the symbolic dimensions of urban space and the narratives that surround it. The research is based on a case study of Manoel Island in Malta, utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the development process. These stakeholders include developers, institutional actors, and members of the local community.

The interviews will be analysed using narrative analysis to uncover the symbolic meanings attached to the island by different actors. This will be complemented by thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and discursive patterns in how space is represented and contested. The research also incorporates elements of document analysis of media and public statements related to the development of Manoel Island.

## 1.5 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organised as follows:

- **Chapter 1:** This chapter introduces the field of study, provides background information, states the goals and objectives of the research, outlines the research questions, and presents the methodology and structure of the dissertation.
- **Chapter 2:** This chapter reviews relevant theoretical frameworks and existing literature on symbolic space, spatial contestation, and architectural theory. Key concepts such as Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, Paul Ricoeur's theory of emplotment, and the role of narrative in spatial contestation will be discussed, with specific focus on the case study of Manoel Island.
- **Chapter 3:** This chapter details the qualitative research design, including the data collection process and the methods of analysis deployed by the researcher.
- **Chapter 4:** In this chapter, the interview data will be presented, and their initial implications will be brought forward.
- **Chapter 5:** This chapter will examine stakeholder's individual symbolic concerns and mobilised narratives, while attempting to understand their implications on the conversations surrounding contested spaces.
- **Chapter 6:** The final chapter summarises the key findings of the research, reflects on the implications of these findings for urban development in Malta, and suggests areas for further research.

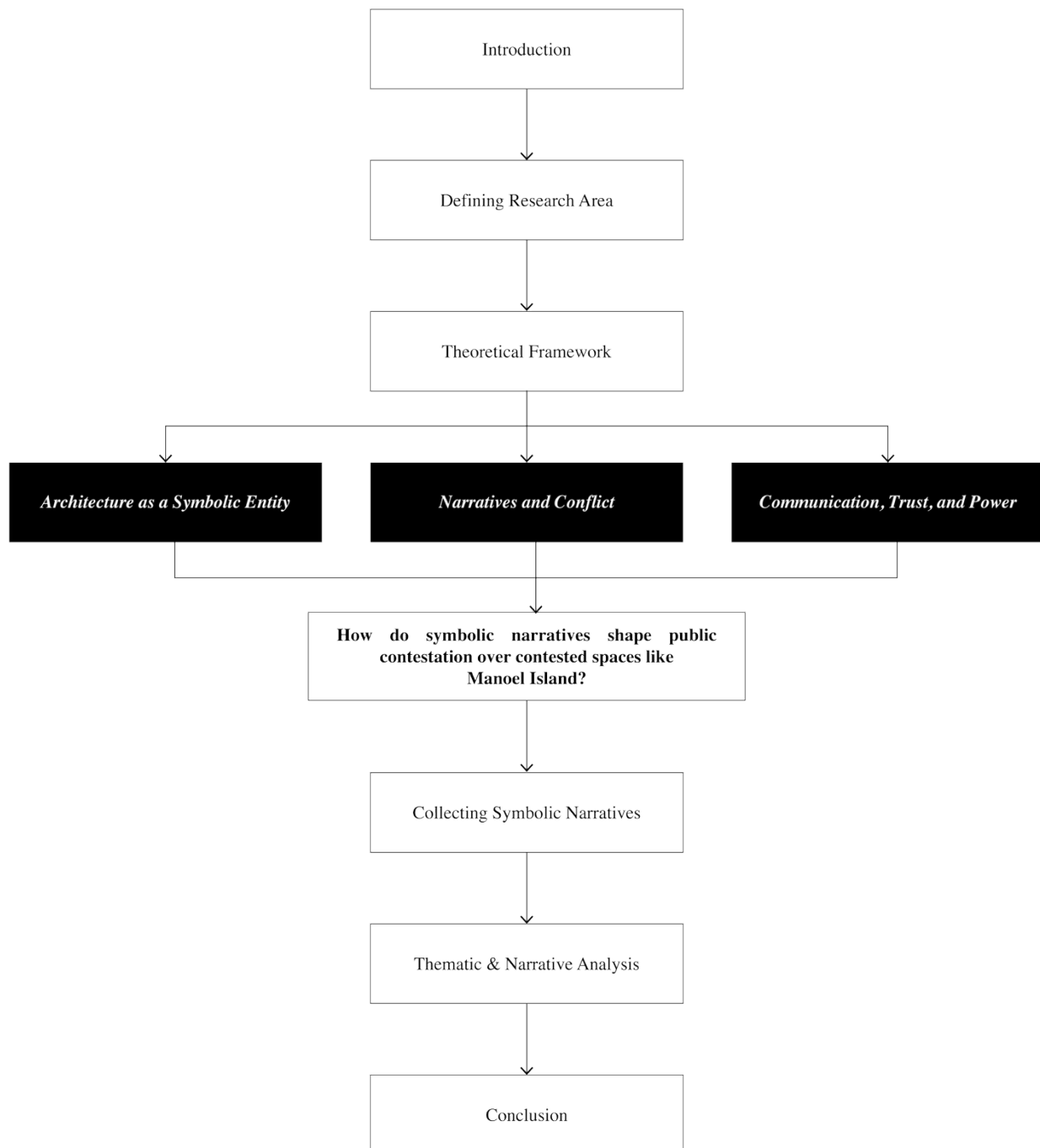


Figure 1 - Dissertation Structure



## 2. Framing Space: A Theoretical Foundation

This chapter explores the symbolic reality of architecture, how symbolic language may affect development outcomes, and the effects which the use of symbolic language may have on negotiation processes, using Manoel Island as a focal point where these dynamic are unfolding locally.

## 2.1 Architecture as a Symbolic Entity

Henri Lefebvre's '*The Production of Space*' (1991) provides a foundational framework for understanding architecture's influence in the realm of the symbolic. Lefebvre emphasises that space is socially produced, existing as a complex interplay of physical, conceptual, and lived dimensions. Using his spatial triad, Lefebvre outlines these interactions:

1. Spatial Practice: The *perceived* physical & functional aspect of space, tied to daily life and practical use.
2. Representations of Space: The *conceived* abstract space of planners, designers, and authorities, often infused with the underlying ideologies of those who operate within it.
3. Spaces of Representation: The *lived* and experienced space of individuals and communities, rich in cultural symbolism and personal meaning.

This triad (Fig 2)<sup>1</sup> elucidates that architecture is not a static backdrop to human activity, but an active participant in shaping social reality. It exists both as a tangible object, and as a symbolic entity, communicating cultural and social values. Through this, Lefebvre emphasises that space is a political instrument, serving as both a medium and an outcome of ongoing power struggles. Dominant groups often seek to impose their representations of space to control spatial practices and, by extension, social relations. Conversely, marginalised groups may resist by creating alternative spaces of representation, challenging the imposed spatial order.

In this context, architecture is not just an outcome of spatial production; but a mechanism through which symbolic meaning is embedded into space itself. Unlike abstract forms of spatial representation, architecture materialises ideology through its permanence.

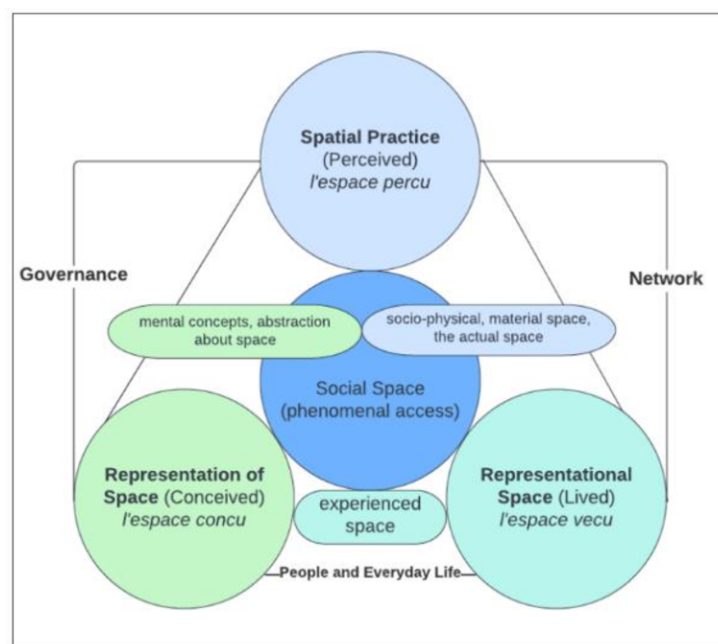


Figure 2 - Lefebvre's Triad, Via Schmid, 2008

<sup>1</sup> Fig. 2 is the author's own adaptation of Lefebvre's spatial triad, based on *The Production of Space* (1991).

Building on Henri Lefebvre's foundational framework of space as a socially produced and contested realm, Neil Leach (1999) further deepens our understanding of architecture's symbolic power, by asserting that architecture does not simply house ideology, it gives it form. In '*The Anaesthetics of Architecture*', this observation highlights architecture's active role in shaping and materialising ideological meanings, rather than merely reflecting them passively. Architectural form thus becomes a medium through which social, cultural, and political forces are inscribed, embodied, and communicated in the built environment.

Leach cautions against simplistic readings that assume architecture carries a fixed political meaning through its design. Instead, the meaning of architecture depends on how people appropriate the space, how it is perceived, and the power hierarchies which surround it. This perspective aligns with Lefebvre's notion of space as both a medium *and* outcome of power struggles, emphasising that architecture is simultaneously shaped by social struggles, while influencing them.

## 2.2 Symbolic Shifts in Malta's Built Environment

The frameworks presented by Lefebvre and Leach provide valuable insight into the role of architecture as a site of ideological and symbolic contestation. In both theoretical and practical terms, architecture functions as a material and symbolic tool through which power dynamics, identity, and social relations are negotiated. This notion can be applied to both historic and contemporary spatial struggles in Malta, where territorial negotiation over contested sites mirrors the power struggles and ideological conflicts described by both theorists.

Under British colonial rule (1800–1964), architecture served as a powerful tool to consolidate imperial influence and shape cultural identity. Public architecture was used to inscribe values of order, rationality, and control. Neoclassical (fig 3) and military (fig 4) forms dominated the landscape, serving as visual assertions of empire. As Borg (1996) explains, British colonial architecture was not simply functional - it was a deliberate political instrument. This process “modified the urban texture, altered the skyline and redefined the Maltese landscape,” Borg, 1996, p.16) linking Malta architecturally to other parts of the British Empire while also fostering the development of a distinct colonial style.



*Figure 3 - St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral, built by the British to cater to the Anglican community in Malta, Via Kathmandu & Beyond, 2018*



*Figure 4 - Fort Rinella, built by the British as a coastal fortification for the Grand Harbour, via Dreamslime*

One of the most symbolically charged sites to reflect this colonial spatial logic is Manoel Island. While the fortifications on the island were originally developed by the Knights of St. John in the early 18th century (fig 5), it was later repurposed by British colonial forces as a key military installation and remained under naval control until the 20th century (Spiteri, 2014). This extended its use as a strategic space by colonial forces. Fort Manoel, redesignated as HMS Egremont and later HMS St. Angelo, housed British battalions, artillery emplacements, and administrative quarters. The British significantly limited access to the public (Borg Manch , 2021 p9) reinforcing the island's role as a closed military zone. The adjacent Lazzaretto complex, also built by the knights, was used for plague quarantine during the 19th century (Ellul, 1993). This further entrenched its status as an exclusionary space defined by surveillance, containment, and control.



*Figure 5 - Fort Manoel, Ariel view, Via The Malta Independent, 2023*

Following Malta's independence in 1964, the built environment underwent a symbolic transformation. While British colonial architecture had functioned as a tool of imperial authority, the post-independence period marked a shift toward tourism-led development. Although tourism had been encouraged under colonial rule, it was quickly adopted by the independent Maltese government as a cornerstone of national economic policy (Borg, 1996).

Architecture played a central role in this transition. Large-scale coastal developments - including high-rise hotels and resort complexes (Fig 6) - emerged as material expressions of Malta's new economic orientation. These changes introduced a modern architectural style that contrasted sharply with the island's historical fabric, reflecting contemporary approaches to urban regeneration and heritage conservation (Ebejer & Tunbridge, 2017). As Attard (2020) notes, the growth of the tourism sector drove the development of new accommodation types and leisure infrastructure, particularly along the coast. These changes, while economically motivated, also contributed to a shift in how Maltese space was imagined and produced.



*Figure 6 - The Hilton Hotel, St. Julian's, 1970s. (source unavailable)*

The trajectory of Manoel Island fits squarely within this broader shift. In 2000, the Maltese government granted a 99-year concession to MIDI plc for the redevelopment of Manoel Island and Tigné Point, as part of its broader urban regeneration policy based on long-term land concessions (meddmo, 2025). The agreement granted development rights across the island, including a yacht marina, and was formalised through a public deed (ERA, 2019). The redevelopment project (Fig 7), covering approximately 44 hectares and valued at around €600 million, represents one of Malta's largest property regeneration schemes to date (MIDI plc, 2025). This project exemplifies Malta's ongoing strategy of leveraging historic and public land assets to drive tourism-led urban regeneration, blending heritage preservation with contemporary commercial development.

As Lefebvre and Leach suggest, architecture can function both as an instrument of influence and as its outcome. In colonial Malta, it was used to shape cultural identity from above, imposing imperial values through spatial form. By contrast, in post-independence Malta, architecture became a reflection of economic goals and cultural needs. Projects like Manoel Island show this shift clearly. The proliferation of high-rise hotels and leisure developments no longer reflect top-down control but evolving national aspirations.



*Figure 7 - Most recent Manoel Island Master Plan Proposal, Via MIDI plc., 2025*

## 2.3 Narrative and Conflict

However, these aspirations are not always shared between effected parties. In this context, Manoel Island provides an effective lens to observe how disagreement emerges around the imagined future of a space; and how this leads to spatial contestation.

Manoel Island has become a highly contested site that vividly illustrates the tensions between competing visions of progress and preservation in Malta's urban development. On one hand, proponents of redevelopment emphasise economic growth, modernization, and tourism-led regeneration as essential for Malta's future. On the other hand, activists, scholars, and large segments of the public stress the importance of preserving Manoel Island's cultural heritage, ecological value, and public accessibility as a green space (Fenech, 2020; Schembri & Attard, 2006).

Public frustration over restricted access to Manoel Island culminated in a dramatic protest in September 2016, when activists from the environmental group *Kamp Emerġenza Ambjent*, supported by Gżira Mayor Conrad Borg Manche, forcibly cut through locked gates and fences installed by the MIDI consortium to block public entry to the space (Times of Malta, 2016; Diacono, 2016). This direct action was a response to the closure of public access that had persisted, despite contractual obligations under MIDI's long-term development agreement to keep the foreshore open. The protest not only highlighted deep community dissatisfaction, but also underscored the symbolic importance of public access to the island's coastline and heritage sites, which as discussed, had been limited as early as British colonial rule.

In response, MIDI plc reaffirmed its legal rights and promptly reinstated the gates, asserting full compliance with the concession terms and attributing delays to archaeological discoveries and permit processes (Times of Malta, 2016).

Meanwhile, public opposition has continued to grow, with over 260 academics signing a letter urging the government to reclaim Manoel Island as a national park (Fenech, 2025). This coalition emphasises the island's unique ecological and cultural significance and argues that the development agreement, signed over two decades ago, no longer aligns with Malta's contemporary socio-economic and environmental priorities. They call for a reorientation toward public stewardship and nature-based solutions, underscoring the preservationist perspective.

The conflict over Manoel Island thus encapsulates a broader debate about how Malta negotiates the balance between progress and preservation - between economic ambitions and the safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage. Understanding this tension is crucial to unpacking the competing narratives that shape urban development and public space in Malta today.

Scholars have noted that sites imbued with cultural and emotional significance can become arenas of conflict when development threatens established meanings (Smith, 2010; Jones, 2015). Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity is particularly useful in this context, as it explains how collective ideals are constructed through the interplay of multiple, sometimes conflicting, stories. Ricoeur (1984) explains that individuals and communities make sense of the world through *emplotment*; a process that configures events, memories, and aspirations into coherent narratives. Emplotment gives form and meaning to experiences by establishing links, moral arcs, and imagined futures. In the case of urban transformation, different stakeholders may emplot the same space in radically different ways: some frame redevelopment as a rupture with the past, erasing public memory and identity; others construct a plot of economic renewal and national progress. These conflicting stories emerge not simply from factual disagreement, but from deeper differences in stakeholders' values, perspectives, and experiences (Fig 8). These conflicting plots reflect differing interpretations of reality (Ricoeur, 1984), making it harder to form a shared understanding of space.

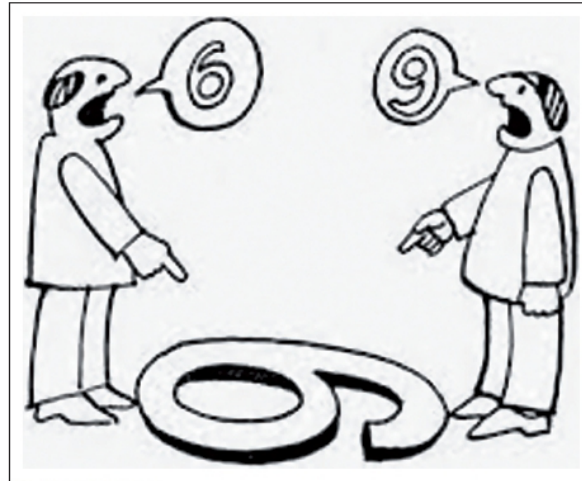


Figure 8 - Position & Perspective affects the way different stakeholders perceive the same subject. Via Gert J. Malan, 2017

These competing stories, which revolve around symbolic values, are often shaped and advanced by coalitions of actors who share aligned perspectives. Such coalitions strategically construct and promote particular stories, or narratives, to influence public opinion and decision-making, thereby legitimising their preferred visions of spatial change. Here, Ricoeur's idea of narrative emplotment intersects with Hajer's concept of "discursive coalitions" (Hajer, 1995, p53-55), which describes how diverse actors form strategic alliances, not necessarily through formal coordination, but through their shared commitment to a particular narrative that frames an issue in a way that renders specific actions legitimate and desirable.

Phillip Kotler<sup>2</sup> illustrates this process (Fig 9), showing how symbolic ideas of vision, hope, and fears can be mobilised by sociopolitical alliances in order to create narratives geared towards achieving specific goals (2019).

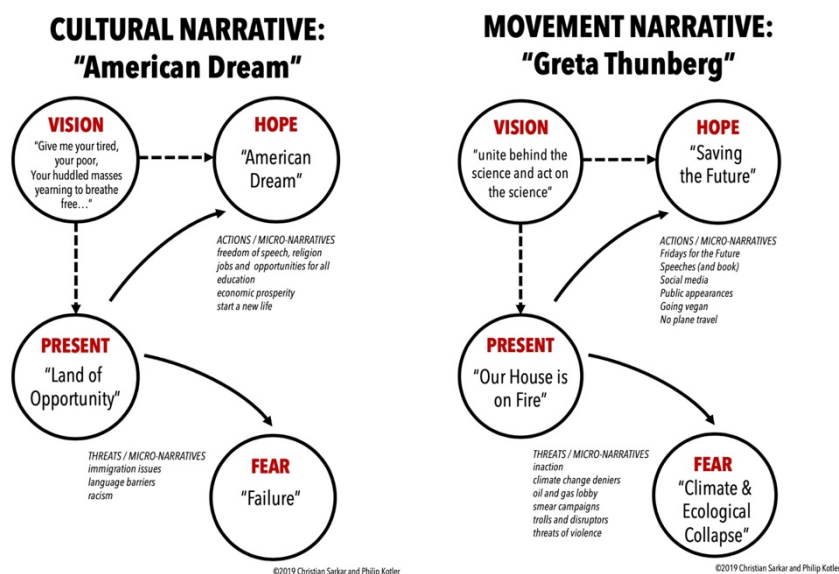


Figure 9 - Cultural Narratives use symbolic ideals to create influential narratives, Via Kotler, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Philip Kotler is a leading theorist in marketing and public strategy. In works such as *Marketing Places* (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993), he explores how cities and regions construct symbolic narratives to brand themselves and influence stakeholder perceptions.

The Malta Developers Association (MDA), Malta's main construction lobby, exemplifies what Hajer (1995) describes as a "discursive coalition." It unites private developers, estate agents, and policymakers around a shared narrative that links construction to national progress and economic stability. Through media statements and policy engagement, the MDA promotes a shared story equating development with national prosperity and social progress. (MDA, 2024; Maltainvestportal, 2024). This narrative frames opposition as anti-growth or out of touch, reinforcing the symbolic connection between building and national vitality.

MIDI plc embeds Manoel Island within the same pro-development narrative by presenting it as a cultural and economic asset with clear community benefits. In its revised masterplan, MIDI reiterates that more than €400 million in investment, including €50 million for restoring heritage buildings, will support local employment, business opportunities, and skills training during the construction phase (MIDI plc, 2025a). The company also highlights the long-term economic impact of a cultural hub at Fort Manoel and a restored Lazzaretto hotel, framed as drivers of tourism, arts, and hospitality growth (MIDI plc, 2025a). This economic framing aligns directly with the MDA narrative of development as a national good, portraying Manoel Island not just as heritage conservation, but as a strategic economic catalyst embedded in Malta's future prosperity.

Just as pro-development actors construct symbolic narratives to legitimise spatial transformation, scholars have observed that informal resistance groups also employ symbolic language to contest dominant framings. Tilly (2006) highlights how social movements use symbolic performances and storytelling to construct collective identities that mobilise supporters and challenge dominant power structures. These symbolic tools include rituals, slogans, and narratives that give coherence and emotional resonance to resistance efforts. Castells (2012) builds on this by emphasising the creation of counter-narratives that reclaim contested urban spaces through appeals to cultural memory, social justice, and communal values, framing resistance as a defence of identity and rights rather than merely economic interests.

To understand how such symbolic narratives may effectively influence urban outcomes, Denise Yanow's (2000) interpretive policy analysis offers a critical lens. Rather than viewing spatial conflicts as technical disagreements, Yanow frames them as struggles over meaning, in which competing narratives compete for legitimacy. The persuasiveness and emotional resonance of these narratives shape which interpretations of reality gain traction among policymakers and the public. In this view, narratives function as a powerful tool, with the ability to directly shape the built environment.

By this logic, the success of any narrative depends on its ability to connect with stakeholders' values, evoke empathy, and establish a compelling moral point that motivates support or opposition. The contest between pro-development and heritage-focused narratives may then reflect a deeper struggle over whose vision of the future will be institutionalized and enacted through policy and development decisions.

This perspective once again highlights that contestation over urban space transcends technical or factual disputes; it is a narrative struggle where competing symbolic claims seek to establish their aspirations as the guiding framework for the built environment. Understanding this dynamic through Yanow's lens reveals how narratives operate as powerful instruments in shaping policy outcomes and the physical transformation of contested spaces.

## 2.4 Communication, Trust, and Power

However, this strategic use of narrative has been criticised by theorists. Famously, Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action distinguishes between two fundamental types of social interaction: communicative action, which is dialogue oriented toward mutual understanding and consensus-building, and strategic action, which aims to influence or manipulate others for individual or group advantage. Communicative action is grounded in the ideal of “communicative rationality,” where participants engage in open, transparent, and equal discourse (what Habermas terms the “ideal speech situation”) free from coercion and distortion (Habermas, 1984; Mattila, 2020). However, in practice, power imbalances, social inequalities, and strategic interests often undermine this ideal, leading actors to adopt strategic communication tactics that prioritise persuasion over genuine dialogue (Habermas, 1984; Forester, 1993).

In the context of contested urban development, such strategic use of narratives can erode trust, foster scepticism, and contribute to communicative dissonance among stakeholders (Fig 10) complicating efforts to collaborate and find solutions (Hachelaf & Qatamin, 2024;).

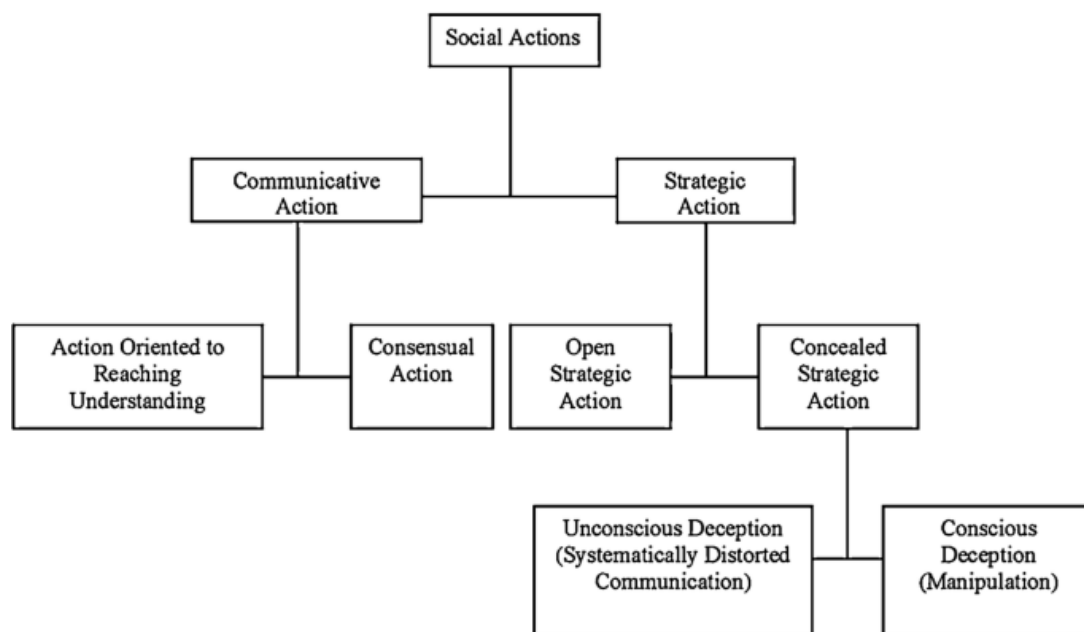


Figure 10 - Strategic Action may lead to distorted communication, Via Ehrenfeld, 2024

Other areas of research point to public misunderstanding of institutional roles as a significant factor contributing to planning conflict. It is recognized that citizens often expect planning authorities to act as neutral, technocratic arbiters, yet in reality, these authorities are embedded within broader political and institutional contexts that shape their actions and constraints. Åström (2020) observes that this misalignment between public expectations and institutional realities can foster distrust and misunderstandings, complicating participatory planning processes.

Expanding this perspective, Zaum (2015) argues that when the state fails to meet expectations of transparency, fairness, and procedural integrity, public confidence erodes, and state actions, including those expressed through architecture and urban planning, are often reinterpreted as politically biased or collusive. Building on this, Ruigrok and Van de Walle (2016) explain that this erosion of trust transforms planning disputes from technical disagreements into symbolic struggles over legitimacy, power, and representation.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The previous section explored key concepts surrounding architecture as a symbolic entity, focusing on its dual role in both the physical and symbolic realms. Theorists such as Lefebvre (1991) and Leach (1999) highlight the complexity of space as both a product and a medium of cultural expression, which provide a framework to observe the shifts in Malta's built environment from the British Colonial era, until present day. Furthermore, concept such as Ricoeur's (1984) emplotment portray how different ideas are projected into the same space, resulting in conflicting narratives, and fostering spatial contestation. Finally, the use of these narratives as strategic tools to influence built outcomes was observed, along with its theorised implications on stakeholder trust.



### 3. Collecting The Symbolic

This Chapter will outline the methods utilised by the researched to gather, analyse, and understand the data required to explore the defined research objectives.

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the symbolic and emotional dimensions of contested spaces. By combining narrative and thematic analysis, the research aims to uncover how stakeholders construct meaning and frame their relationship with spaces like Manoel Island. Narrative analysis allows for the examination of how personal stories about these spaces reveal underlying symbolic meanings, while thematic analysis identifies key recurring themes across interviews.

The semi-structured interview format was chosen for its flexibility, enabling participants to share their perspectives while focusing on central themes. By using Manoel Island as a symbolic reference, this design captures the social, political, and emotional factors influencing spatial contestation, providing a comprehensive understanding of the negotiation processes at play.

## 3.2 Target Population and Sample

The target population for this study consists of key stakeholders involved in contested spaces, particularly those engaged in the symbolic and emotional dimensions of spatial conflicts.

Purposive sampling was chosen for its effectiveness in targeting individuals who can provide rich, detailed information about the contested space and its meanings. This technique allows for the selection of participants who are most likely to contribute to the understanding of the narratives and identities tied to the space. As Patton (2002) explains, purposive sampling is ideal when the researcher seeks to explore specific experiences or perspectives, ensuring that the sample is relevant to the research questions and directly addresses the phenomenon being studied.

The sample includes the following key individuals:

1. **Member of the Public (Opposing Development):** This participant is a public activist, in opposition to the development or transformation of Manoel Island. Their perspective offers valuable insights into the emotional, cultural, and symbolic significance of public spaces, particularly in terms of loss, heritage, and identity.
2. **Member of the Public (For Development):** In contrast, this individual supports the development or transformation of Manoel Island. Their narrative provides a counterpoint, reflecting ideas of progress, modernisation, and the potential benefits of development, including urban regeneration.
3. **Member of the *Kamra tal-Periti* (KTP):** Representing the architectural community, this participant brings a professional perspective to the study. Their role involves a technical understanding of urban development, along with insights into the ethical, aesthetic, and symbolic considerations that arise in contested spatial negotiations.
4. **Member of the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA):** This participant provides a governmental and regulatory perspective, offering insights into environmental preservation, public policy, and the role of state institutions in managing contested spaces. They also have previous professional involvement with the Planning Authority.
5. **Developer:** This individual represents the private sector perspective, shedding light on the business, economic, and practical considerations driving development projects. Their narrative reveals how developers frame contested spaces as opportunities for regeneration, growth, and investment. Importantly, this individual had some prior involvement related to Manoel Island.

Each of these participant groups was selected due to their essential perspectives in understanding the symbolic and communicative dimensions of spatial contestation. By focusing on individuals directly involved in or affected by the development of contested spaces, the study aims to capture diverse narratives and interpretations of these spaces, exploring how meanings are negotiated and contested across different social, political, and professional groups.

Importantly, interviewees will remain anonymous. This choice is made to encourage participants to share their honest and unfiltered views, without fear of repercussions or bias. By protecting their identities, the study aims to foster an environment where participants can speak freely about their experiences and opinions regarding contested space such as Manoel Island, contributing to a more open and candid exchange of perspectives. As Kaiser (2009) highlights, anonymity in qualitative research is crucial for ensuring that participants provide detailed and honest accounts, as confidentiality promotes trust and openness in the research process. In line with this, participants are not identified by their stakeholder roles in the presentation of results or discussion. Instead, they are coded alphabetically (e.g., *Participant A*, *Participant B*), which minimises bias in interpretation and ensures that attention is directed towards the narratives themselves rather than the positional authority of the speaker.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Qualitative Measurement Methods

This study will use semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from aforementioned stakeholders. The semi-structured format is ideal for allowing flexible, open-ended responses, enabling participants to share their personal experiences, perceptions, and emotional connections to contested spaces (Kvale, 1996).

The interviews will be guided by key thematic areas:

1. **Personal Connection to the Space** – Exploring emotional ties, memories, and perceptions of the space.
2. **Conflict and Contestation** – Understanding participants' views on the social and political debates surrounding contested spaces.
3. **Future Visions** – Gathering insights into how participants envision the future of these spaces.

Interviews will be conducted individually and in person, except the ERA stakeholder, who will be interviewed online. Individual interviews were selected over a ‘focus group’ format to mitigate the risks of power dynamics and social hierarchy inherent in group settings. Literature shows that individual interviews encourage participants to disclose sensitive insights and avoid pressure from more dominant voices (Gill et al., 2008; Fern, 2001). Furthermore, the personal format enhances confidentiality, reduces social inhibition, and enables richer thematic data per participant (King & Horrocks, 2010; Barbour, 2007). In the context of contested spatial narratives, this approach fosters honest, reflective exchange unmediated by group influence.

The interview questions were influenced by Edward de Bono’s *Six Thinking Hats* (1985), which encourages participants to explore issues from multiple cognitive and emotional standpoints by metaphorically adopting different ‘hats’. Central to this is *parallel thinking*; a method where varied perspectives are explored side by side, rather than in opposition. While typically used in groups, applying it in individual interviews will enable participants to reflect more freely without social pressure, while still engaging with unfamiliar perspectives in a structured, non-defensive way.

| Thinking Hat   | White Hat – fact / information                                                                                                                  | Red Hat – Feelings / Intuition                                                                                                              | Black Hat – Risks / Concerns                                                                     | Yellow Hat – Positives / Benefits                                                                              | Green Hat – Creativity / Alternatives                                                       | Blue Hat – Thinking / Reflection                                                                                                           |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Function       | Understanding priorities, what stakeholders view as ‘objective’ fact                                                                            | Understanding personal emotions and intuition                                                                                               | Understanding potential risks, negative outcomes, and concerns.                                  | Encourages looking for potential benefits and positive outcomes, empathy.                                      | Encourages creative thinking, new ideas, and potential alternatives.                        | Focuses on reflection about decision making processes, structures which effect spatial contestation                                        |
| Example Prompt | What are the most important facts, stories, or impressions you think people should understand about this place and the changes it’s undergoing? | “When you think about this site or the situation unfolding around it, are there particular feelings or gut responses that come up for you?” | “Looking ahead, are there things about this process or development that raise concerns for you?” | “Are there aspects of this proposal that you think could lead to something positive, if approached carefully?” | “If you could suggest a compromise, not necessarily a solution, what might that look like?” | “Have you witnessed moments where the decision-making felt like it served particular interests over the community? Can you describe that?” |

Table 1 - Thinking Hats & Example Questions

However, this method will not be explicitly disclosed to interviewees to maintain the organic flow of the conversation and allow participants to express their thoughts freely, without being constrained by a predetermined framework. Instead, the Six Thinking Hats will serve as an internal structuring tool for the interviewer, guiding the sequencing and nature of prompts.

Manoel Island was chosen as a central case study because it exemplifies the symbolic and contested dimensions of urban development that this research seeks to explore. As one of Malta's largest and most high-profile regeneration projects, it crystallises the tension between economic ambition, heritage preservation, and public accessibility. The site is not only one of the largest regeneration ongoing projects on the island, but it has also become a focal point of public protest, academic critique, and NGO advocacy, making it uniquely representative of the wider debates shaping Malta's urban development. It thus provides a concrete and locally resonant lens through which themes of spatial contestation, symbolic meaning, and stakeholder positioning can be grounded, making it highly relevant and representative within the research scope. However, to preserve openness and allow participants to express their own spatial associations, other contested sites may also be introduced depending on the interviewee's background, interests, or lived experience.

The goal of this data collection method was to capture diverse perspectives and gain in-depth insights into the symbolic meanings people attach to spaces like Manoel Island and other contested locations.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Once interviews are transcribed, they will be analysed using a hybrid approach combining narrative analysis and thematic analysis. Narrative analysis will focus on how participants construct meaning through their personal stories, with a particular emphasis on how emotional and symbolic connections to contested spaces, like Manoel Island, are framed. According to Riessman (2008), narrative analysis allows for the examination of how participants organise their experiences into coherent stories, often revealing underlying social, cultural, and political dynamics. In this study, the analysis will explore the structure of participants' symbolic narratives, analyse their implications, and outline how these elements reflect differences in the participants' perspectives on the space.

Additionally, thematic analysis will be employed to identify and analyse recurring themes across the narratives. This method, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is widely used in qualitative research to identify patterns in data and organise it into meaningful categories. In this study, themes such as identity, loss, resistance, and belonging will be coded and analysed for patterns across the interviews, allowing for a comparative understanding of how different stakeholders, such as developers, activists, and public actors, frame their relationship with contested spaces.

For example, during the interview process, Participant D said:

*"I always say this - Malta is an unpolished gem in the mediterranean. We need to polish it..."*

Here, narrative analysis unpacks the metaphor, which frames Malta as a valuable yet flawed object, casting the speaker in a redemptive role, as the one who restores value through development. Thematic analysis would then code this under broader themes, such as *'progress and modernity'* and *'symbolic ownership'*. This enables comparison with other stakeholders who may construct contrasting narratives.

*Taguette*, an open-source qualitative analysis tool, will be used to assist in organising the data and identifying key themes. Manual coding will also be utilised, in order to enable a more nuanced interpretation of the data, allowing for greater flexibility in identifying themes and structural elements in the narratives (Saldana, 2016).

For this process, a hybrid coding approach was adopted. Deductive coding will be guided by key themes which emerged in the relevant literature, ensuring the analysis remains focused on the research questions. However, inductive coding will allow new themes to emerge directly from data, capturing unexpected perspective within participant narratives. This combined approach aligns with the recommendations of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), who argue that hybrid coding enhances the depth and flexibility of qualitative analysis by integrating theory-driven and data-driven coding strategies.

This approach ensures that both the narrative structure and the thematic content of the interviews are analysed comprehensively, offering a more holistic view of the symbolic and emotional dimensions of contested spaces.

### 3.5 Limitations

While this dissertation aims to offer a theoretically informed account of symbolic contestation in ongoing territories of negotiation, it is not without limitations. These arise from methodological choices, scope constraints, and the interpretive nature of the analysis.

First, the sample size and composition, though deliberately structured to represent a relevant spectrum of stakeholder positions, remained relatively small. Interviews were conducted with representatives from government-linked institutions such as the ERA, Professional organisations such as KTP, private development companies, and opposing views belonging to the general public. While these voices offer insight into essential perspectives, they cannot account for the full spectrum of actors involved or affected by the development process. Notably, some institutions, including developers and the Government officials, either declined to participate or were not able to make themselves available in an adequate timeframe. This limited direct engagement with some crucial voices. As such, the findings reflect a cross-section rather than an exhaustive mapping of stakeholder positions.

Second, the semi-structured format, while intentionally designed to allow narrative emergence and thematic flexibility, also meant that not all topics were explored equally across interviews. This occasionally resulted in uneven depth of insight across themes shaped by direction of conversation, time constraints, or participant willingness.

Third, the reliance on narrative analysis introduces an interpretive subjectivity that must be acknowledged. This approach does not claim to deliver neutral or objective truths, but rather interprets meaning through the lens of symbolic and communicative frameworks. Theories by Lefebvre (1991), Ricoeur (1984), and Hajer (1995) guided the analysis and shaped the lens through which narratives were read. This introduces a degree of theoretical partiality: other analytical frameworks may have yielded different insights. The decision to prioritise symbolic meaning and narrative construction necessarily privileges certain forms of knowledge (emotional, experiential, cultural) over others (quantitative, procedural, technical).

Furthermore, the researcher's own position, as a Maltese student with architectural training and social proximity to some of the discourses at play creates bias which may affect critical assessment. This positionality may have influenced which narratives the researcher found most compelling, how symbolic meanings were interpreted, or which aspects of stakeholder discourse resonated most strongly. While the use of established theoretical frameworks provided analytical structure and helped mitigate potential bias, the researcher acknowledges that complete detachment was not entirely possible.

Temporal context also introduces limitations. Interviews were conducted during a period of heightened public attention around Manoel Island. The symbolic and political salience of the site at the time of fieldwork may have amplified certain emotional or strategic responses. Stakeholder narratives are, in this sense, products of their moment. Repeating the study at a different time may yield shifts in discourse, alignment, and perception.

Together, these limitations reflect the complex, politicised, and emotionally charged terrain in which this research is situated. Rather than obstacles to be overcome, they are treated as constitutive elements of the symbolic and narrative dynamics this dissertation seeks to uncover.

## **3.6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, a qualitative research approach utilising a hybrid of narrative and thematic analysis will be employed to explore the role of symbolic ideals, narratives, and communication within contested spaces in Malta. The semi-structured interview questions, guided by relevant literature, will use Manoel Island as a point of reference while encouraging organic input from interviewees. The emerging themes will be examined in relation to the defined theoretical framework. and later used to address the research motivations of the study.



Figure 11 - Methodology Framework



## 4. Understanding The Symbolic

The results chapter outlines the data collected from stakeholders regarding the development of the contested site. It presents a summary of key findings, highlighting the range of perspectives on the site's significance, the concerns raised, and the perceived impacts of the development. These results form the foundation for the subsequent analysis of the broader implications of these views.

## 4.1 Expression of Symbolic Concern

Stakeholders expressed symbolic concern in a variety of ways, with reference to diverse contested spaces and subjects. This section explores these concerns through the lens of *loss* and *aspiration*.

### 4.1.1 Narratives of Loss

Across all stakeholder groups, participants expressed a strong sense of symbolic loss related to Manoel Island and similar contested spaces in Malta. These losses were not framed merely in terms of land use or legality, but in deeply emotional, cultural, and moral registers. For many, the act of development represents more than physical change; it symbolises erasure, betrayal, and the rupture of a collective memory or public inheritance.

One participant recounted the emotional weight of losing a beloved landscape from childhood:

*"That used to be a place I used to go and adventure when I was young, and now it's gone. So, for me it was a huge double standard. You took a place that meant a lot to me, that gave me memories... that was mine."* [Participant B]

This statement was followed by a reflection on competing definitions of ownership:

*"It comes down to the fact that there is more than one type of ownership. Legal ownership, fiscal ownership – is only one kind of ownership. Memories, sentimental meaning, whether we accept it or not, creates feeling of ownership inside us."* [Participant B]

This sense of ownership through emotional and symbolic connection recurred in citizen testimony. Participant C similarly referenced childhood and memory as key elements of attachment towards Manoel Island:

*"I always remember problems with access, probably because I'm still quite young, so by the time I was kind of conscious of what was happening on the island, there were already many problems with accessing it."* [Participant C]

Furthermore, they connected it to a systemic pattern:

*"It's also really important to mention that in Manoel Island there is a literal fort, and this is another issue we're facing with Fort Chambray, where our forts, our cultural heritage is not given the priority of public access, but it is given to private companies. This is a recurring issue."*  
[Participant C]

This idea of systemic denial re-emerged in reference to restricted access:

*"A lot of Manuel Island is actually closed off with barbed wire. There are still a lot of buildings which are actually abandoned, so those can be turned into community spaces."*  
[Participant C]

Furthermore, the same participant reflected on this denial of access in moral terms, expressing their belief the public had already given up enough:

*"I think citizens have already sacrificed a lot, so I think, for once, [they] shouldn't be the ones sacrificing. Obviously, the private company will have to sacrifice that, and the government will have to sacrifice it's, kind of, relationship to developers."* [Participant C]

Loss was also expressed through environmental language, particularly in reference to overdevelopment and disappearing natural spaces; insinuating that enough green spaces had been sacrificed in the name of development; and asserting that untouched areas should remain that way:

*"I would say that it is one of the very few green lungs that we have, especially given that it is in such a busy area of Malta."* [Participant C]

Such concerns intersected with a deeper frustration about governance and cultural priorities:

*"If you have a state which is constantly raping our natural environment, like, no care for it whatsoever, it is going to trickle down."* [Participant C]

The experience of symbolic loss was also linked to physical and psychological well-being:

*"There are studies that actually support that our well-being is going to suffer if we do not see nature. So why is that not being kind of held as a primary kind of value when we are trying to decide what we're going to do with the land that's already available?"* [Participant C]

This desire for preservation was echoed by Participant A, who shared concerns surrounding the loss of calm spaces & its result on public wellbeing:

*"We need spaces for calm, for calmness as well. We need this for, also from a mental health point of view. There's nowhere to go... There are no pleasant public spaces formalised."* [Participant A]

In comparison, Participant E spoke briefly of loss, through a passive form of longing, imagining the value of what could have been preserved:

*"Well, let's say no one ever invested into Manoel Island... It would be nice that it remained an untouched island."* [Participant E]

Participant D recognised the symbolic significance of loss in relation to Manoel Island; expressing that the site should have remained open, that it had been overbuilt, and that the public's concerns were valid:

*"The ideal situation for this place is creating open space... They didn't honour the contract; the area has been over built. I agree with the public sentiment."* [Participant D]

Together, these reflections form a cross-sectoral symbolic narrative of loss, where Manoel Island becomes a canvas onto which personal memory, environmental grief, and frustration are projected. These narratives of loss foreground symbolic ownership over Manoel Island and other contested sites, challenging the dominant framings of development as technical progress or legal entitlement.

#### 4.1.2 Narratives of Aspiration

Throughout the interviews, Manoel Island emerged not only as a site of memory and loss, but also as a locus of aspiration. Participants articulated future-oriented desires for the site, often projecting broader hopes or frustrations about the country's trajectory onto its development.

For some participants, these aspirations took the form of a clear call for preservation. One participant described their advocacy through a personal campaign:

*"My video in particular started with: Malta has already lost so much, we are not losing Manoel Island as well."* [Participant C]

They also drew a distinction between curated public spaces and the value of natural, untamed environments:

*"But parts of it, yes, leave it as it is. It's nice when you go to a place and there's this feeling that nature is taking over. Not everything has to be so curated when we're doing a public park... it's nice to experience the kind of wildness of nature, you know?"* [Participant C]

A related emphasis was placed on public sentiment and the opportunity for institutions to rebuild trust:

*"It would mean so much as well to regain the trust of the nation, because people have had it... I think people are pretty fed up of their opinions, of their needs, of their sense of well-being... it's always being kind of rushed away."* [Participant C]

This sense of exhaustion was linked to wider issues of urban expansion and saturation:

*“We’re constantly facing so much more construction and so much more traffic because of growth.”*  
[Participant C]

*“I mean, an ideal scenario is that we don’t take the Greenlands. We leave the Greenlands.”*  
[Participant C]

One participant’s call for non-intervention became even more direct in this remark:

*“In my ideal world, the project would not exist.”* [Participant C]

Participant B agreed with this sentiment:

*“I think it should be a kind of park.”* [Participant B]

In contrast, Participant E adopted a softer approach, advocating for development on more pragmatic grounds:

*“Because of our limited amount of land, I tend to agree that Manoel Island should be developed. We don’t have the liberty to leave such large stretches of land untouched...”* [Participant E]

Participant E supplemented this idea by drawing comparisons to the international example of Singapore:

*“I’d relate it to Singapore, actually, if I may. It’s a similar size to Malta, and they have their own ‘Manoel Island’. It’s a sanctuary and it’s beautiful... It has some investment, but... there are ways to do it, I suppose.”* [Participant E]

For this stakeholder, aspiration for Manoel Island was for a form of development guided by quality and care, similar to other local areas:

*“Marsaxlokk, Santa Maria Estate... These places are developed, but beautifully. You can enjoy architecture, planning, the human touch. I enjoy it. Maybe Manoel Island can be like that... The development proposal has gradually shrunk, so maybe if we push harder, it could be one of these nicely developed places.”* [Participant E]

This contrasted with other urban landscapes, seen as profit-driven:

*“A lot of the development going on is ugly. If you look at Valletta from Tigné, it’s beautiful. Vice versa, it’s disgusting — it’s obvious that the goal wasn’t to create beautiful development there, but to earn money. Aesthetically, not pleasing. But people are happy to do it because it makes money.”*  
[Participant E]

Parallel sentiments were expressed by Participant D, who positioned aesthetic quality as a central concern. They articulated a sense of personal investment and pride in their own work:

*“I want good quality product, and I always do. People misunderstand my intentions. It annoys me, but I keep moving.”* [Participant D]

Their comments also reflected dissatisfaction with the existing built environment and aspirations for a positive future:

*“It makes me sad to see ugly buildings thrown all over the place. I like nice buildings. I’m pro development, I’m pro-environment. I’m all out against the way things are going. I’m a proud environmentalist...”* [Participant D]

Interestingly, Participant B did not express particular aspirations towards Manoel Island:

*“I don’t really have an opinion. I adapt myself to whatever there is.”* [Participant B]

These statements, while varied in focus, shared an orientation towards the future. Manoel Island was described as a site that could either reflect current shortcomings or offer an example of how things could be done differently.

## 4.2 Narratives of Legitimacy and Role

Stakeholders involved in the Manoel Island development narrated their own roles and legitimacy through a range of rhetorical strategies, often seeking to distinguish themselves from institutional or political failure. While these narratives varied greatly in tone and detail, they were consistently employed to position the speaker as credible, responsible, or misunderstood. In contrast, opponents or critics were occasionally framed as manipulative, performative, or naïve. These patterns suggest that legitimacy is not a static status, but something claimed, defended, or performed through discourse.

### 4.2.1 Legitimacy and Professional Integrity

Participant D frequently framed legitimacy through reference to personal values, technical care, and aesthetic principles. Their narrative consistently positioned certain actors as conscientious exceptions in a field dominated by profit-maximising actors:

*“In [their] projects, [they] emphasise quality design and proper workmanship.”* [Participant D]

They contrasted this approach with what they perceived as a lack of care within the construction industry:

*“I think the reason here is that most developers want to squeeze as much as they can from every plot. They don’t care about the quality of their buildings. No care about thermal insulation, building details... things that bring quality up. A lot of focus on economic gain.”* [Participant D]

This contrast was reinforced through examples of other practices:

*“Here, for example (referring to an ongoing project) [there are] a lot of hidden details to create a better product. A lot of it is imported from Dubai. Most developers will go, see what's available locally for the cheapest price, and use it. [They] don’t need to do these things, but [they] care. And I don’t think that is the norm here.”* [Participant D]

Participant D emphasised delayed gratification and patience as part of legitimacy:

*“[They] waited 27 years for a permit here. Forget about policies and money — [they] want to create an iconic building here. Maybe a landmark, later on, who knows.”* [Participant D]

Their frustration with mainstream industry practices extended to systemic incentives:

*“If [they] replaced this project with ‘pigeon holes’, [they] would have saved time and made more money.” [Participant D]*

These claims were extended to past work as well, where Participant D emphasised pride, investment, and the importance of beauty and detail:

*Pristine condition — it was about pride. [They] cared about making it beautiful. These things are important. It’s all in the detail.” [Participant D]*

In this logic, development was not inherently harmful, it was the way things were done that mattered:

*“Yes. Unfortunately, yes. I always say this — Malta is an unpolished gem in the Mediterranean. We need to polish it.” [Participant D]*

These narratives framed legitimacy as earned through technical mastery, financial risk, and aesthetic ambition:

*“I’ve made my money, earned with my own hard work. And I refuse to stain myself with politics. Others play the game.” [Participant D]*

They framed political engagement as suspect and disavowed it personally:

*“It’s all politics. I hate politics.” [Participant D]*

Even when reflecting on broader industry behaviour, they cast themselves as the outlier:

*“Other people don’t think like me.” [Participant D]*

Their criticism of other actors reinforced this framing, particularly in relation to MIDI:

*“When the Tigné project was eventually built, by MIDI, they used [competitor’s] idea to pass a road underneath the project. That was [their] idea. I can speak about this project for hours. Their work was awful. A junior architect could have done a better job.” [Participant D]*

*“[Showing a different proposal] A student would have done a better proposal than MIDI. This was only four floors, maximum. Low buildings, paying attention to what the site needs. Now the area is overbuilt.” [Participant D]*

They also framed compliance with environmental standards as proof of responsibility:

*“[They] conducted 95 studies. 95! Trying to ensure it would be a safe project. Birds, wildlife, dust — whatever. Anything that was asked.” [Participant D]*

#### 4.2.2 Narrative and Strategic Framing

From other perspectives, legitimacy was also constructed through contrast. In this case, by pointing to strategic framing by developers and consultants. One participant was particularly critical of the marketing strategies used in the Manoel Island case:

*“Now, what do MIDI do? They hire a bunch of image and marketing consultants to create renders and statements, and the things they come up with are utterly pompous. ‘We care about the environment’ ... they are just trying to understand what the opposition is looking for, and marketing themselves accordingly.” [Participant B]*

They suggested that performative language was being used to reframe unpopular development as environmentally sensitive, without real commitment:

*“Yes, but with Manoel Island, you have to be careful with what the media is telling you. When the ERA hosted a quick survey, a large group of people seemed to be in favour of it.” [Participant B]*

Such statements foregrounded mistrust in public discourse, and a belief that legitimacy was being constructed through optics rather than substance. This was further elaborated as a wider cultural trend:

*“It seems so. Make people angry and say whatever you want. Negative emotion is always an effective method to engage the public.” [Participant B]*

An interviewee with experience in public communication acknowledged the strategic use of emotional hooks in shaping legitimacy and support:

*“As more time went by with me working in media, the more I saw the need to kind of dumb down the language, so that everyone can understand it. You know what I mean? Sometimes when you go too technical, people are not going to understand you, or else people are just going to feel like, you know, this is not meant for me, so I’m going to, like, scroll away.” [Participant C]*

They reflected on the effectiveness of emotional appeal in engaging broad publics:

*“In these types of fights, it's very important to communicate in a way, in the best way possible, to reach as many people as possible.”* [Participant C]

*“Emotion is definitely a hook.”* [Participant C]

These comments demonstrate an awareness of communicative strategy. Participant A approached legitimacy from an organisational perspective, framing some environmental NGOs as performative or self-serving:

*“So there is a business behind being an NGO. In the sense that if your membership fees are dependent on how active you are in campaigning for the environment — then you have an interest in creating outrage.”* [Participant A]

They pointed to media coverage and statistics as tools for perceived legitimacy:

*“Let me give you another... So why... For example, let me give you an example. Din l-Art Helwa issued a press releases that they filed 10,000 objections in a year. Without getting the merits of whether they are valid objections... or whether they are actually all relevant. 10,000 is the number that they were after, to show how active they are and how they're fighting for them.”*  
[Participant A]

This statement implied that legitimacy can be engineered through volume or visibility, not necessarily substance:

*“Are they fighting for the environment by doing this? Well, they're possibly abusing the system as well.”* [Participant A]

They also described how controversy garners attention:

*“Sometimes [people] make these controversial statements, they end up spending the whole day on The Times on the front.”* [Participant A]

This framing positioned media exposure and public controversy as tactics.

## 4.3 Communicative and Symbolic Collapse

Across all stakeholder interviews, communication emerged not only as a procedural concern, but as a symbolic battleground. While the official planning framework presents development as a technical process, many described a deep misalignment between institutional narratives and public interpretation.

### 4.3.1 Misinterpretation and Role Confusion

Stakeholders described widespread misunderstanding from the public regarding institutional roles and responsibilities. These misinterpretations often led to frustration and misplaced expectations:

*"Somehow they thought that the Planning Authority should be this independent entity... This is not what planning authorities are about. It shows that they don't read."* [Participant B]

*"Planning is not independent of the government – it is an arm of the government. Its job is to find land, provide it to the government in order for them to execute their plans."* [Participant B]

*"The public doesn't understand. It was legal – and what's legal, goes. If the government believes it is their best interest, and it's legal, the developer will get his way."* [Participant B]

*"At the end of the day, developers work in a framework as well."* [Participant A]

*"Listen, [architects] can't be against development because it doesn't make sense. How can they be against development?"* [Participant A]

Participant B directly blamed public disillusionment on other institutions, including public media:

*"Public opinion is completely informed and swayed by the media. A negative headline will sway public opinion in a second. They don't have the time to look into an issue."* [Participant B]

*"For example – there was a freak out that local plans were changed, for Franciz, in order to make Villa Rosa happen. This happens all over the world, and the freak out is the fault of local journalists who don't do their research."* [Participant B]

This sentiment was also shared by Participant D, who outlines a time when local newspapers used sensationalism to target ongoing proposals:

*"... He said he has 200 families that eat off that land. I refused it... 200 families was a lie. Then the papers obviously used it as a sensation to get people against the project."* [Participant D]

### 4.3.2 The Politics of Trust

Interestingly, the media was also accused of distortion by stakeholders, who instead portrayed it as an extension of the government and as a tool for partisan influence:

*"There's a lot of manipulation in the media, unfortunately. It might not seem obvious, but there is a lot of propaganda going on. A lot... a significant portion of the population and where they get their news from is very problematic. Because if you are listening to a party-owned radio, media, like TV, the narrative is always twisted..."* [Participant C]

Communication and symbolic meaning were described as distorted by partisan allegiance. In particular, participants highlighted how political affiliation coloured both interpretation and response:

*"Automatically, the second that you have the party that's in government for something... supporters of the other party are automatically going to be against it."* [Participant C]

*"It is absolutely political; if you're aligned with a colour, you'll get something from them."*  
[Participant E]

This perception was echoed by Participant D, who insisted that it is politics which dictates planning outcomes, rather than merit:

*"Once people turn against you, the politicians want their vote, and they won't let you do what you wanted to do."* [Participant D]

This view contributed to a broader sense of alienation among certain stakeholders, who described a loss of faith in the system itself. Rather than a space for negotiation, planning was perceived as a scheme designed to serve political and commercial interests:

*"It is very obvious at this point that both parties are in bed with developers in Malta. They're all benefiting from it."* [Participant C]

These politicised framings contributed to a widening gap between official narratives and public belief. While disagreements initially revolved around media framing and institutional trust, this ultimately deepened into a structural disillusionment, with implications for the legitimacy of spatial decisions themselves.

### 4.3.3 Systemic Failure of the Communicative Arena

While earlier quotes highlighted politicisation and strategic messaging, this frustration ultimately gave way to a deeper disillusionment. Participant C observed that the institutions in place were unresponsive, and that effort for public engagement had little impact:

*“I feel there have been many instances where the public went out like... full force. Full on, like full force... and were just ignored.”* [Participant C]

The same interviewee also dismissed gestures of reform by authorities as inadequate and superficial:

*“I think it is not given enough importance and a project like Project Green is not going to fix it. I feel like Project Green is a band-aid when what we need is like surgery, you know what I mean?”*  
[Participant C]

Participant B acknowledged institutional distrust from those who often oppose development:

*“The people who sort of normally object to projects don't trust [the institution]. They are considered to be... sort of the hit men of the developers.”* [Participant B]

They reflected further on this matter, describing *Environmental Impact Assessments* as failed methods of negotiation reduced to a token of permission for development:

*“Although the EIA is intended to be part of the communicative instruments... they are just treated as people who produce a piece of paper.”* [Participant B]

These frustrations were echoed by the Participant A, where a deeper systemic critique emerged. This stakeholder rejected narrow definitions of failure, instead painting the system itself as corrupt at its core:

*“It's, it's corrupt. I mean, there's no other way to explain. And I don't necessarily mean corrupt through exchange of money for, for, for whatever was done. Corrupt because it doesn't work. Because people making decisions are incompetent, because the whole system doesn't work.”*  
[Participant A]

This stakeholder went on to describe what they saw as the self-sustaining nature of systemic corruption, where even those who recognise its failure may choose not to oppose it, instead benefiting from it. This, they suggested, included members of the public:

*“So obviously people, some people, benefit from having a system like this... because there's no oversight. There's no... so then they cut into these other interests. But there is an interest to keep things not working as well, because people are thriving in this system.”* [Participant A]

For many, the issue was no longer a matter of misunderstanding or poor communication, it was structural. Participant A confirms this, lamenting that ethics alone can no longer fix the issue in a system which is described as broken throughout:

*“The narrative out there is that you should say no, and there is an ethical obligation to say no, but... there's so much you can do with ethics. Ultimately, if the system is rigged or the system is corrupt, ethics is only getting you so far. You can't have this entire system depending on ethics.”*

[Participant A]



## 5. Unpacking The Symbolic

This chapter focuses on analysing the results presented in the previous chapter, using tools of thematic and narrative analysis to unpack both explicit and implicit ideas expressed by stakeholders.

## 5.1 Analysing Symbolic Positions

This section explores the symbolic narratives and emotional associations that stakeholders attach to contested spaces such as Manoel Island. Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of representational space, it examines how Manoel Island becomes more than a physical site; it becomes a vessel for memory, identity, loss, and moral value. Through interviews with developers, public actors, activists, and professionals, the section traces how emotional attachment and symbolic meaning shape how the island is remembered, claimed, and contested. These associations provide the groundwork for the more strategic uses of narrative explored in the next section.

Interviews revealed that contestation over spaces like Manoel Island goes beyond procedural disputes or technical planning issues. It is fundamentally a struggle over meaning - how space is remembered, imagined, and claimed. While some actors portray contested spaces as opportunities for national progress, others assert their claim over the space through ideas of public memory and loss. In this sense, contested spaces function not as neutral development zones, but as what Henri Lefebvre would term a *spaces of representation*: lived and imagined spaces charged with symbolic and sentimental value. Loss, betrayal, pride, frustration, beauty, nostalgia, and ecological grief are all invoked to describe the stakes.

This symbolic dimension becomes especially pronounced in the personal emotional attachments that stakeholders express. Emotional outrage often emerges from a deeper sense of belonging; a feeling that something which was intimately 'theirs' is being threatened. Participant B expressed this sentiment in relation to the now developed locality of Pembroke; a place he used to visit as a child, before it was appropriated by what he calls "ugly" development. His claim that "this was mine" is simple, but powerful. It reframes contested space as a matter of personal loss as well as policy; where forms of ownership such as "*memories [and] sentimental meaning*" come into play, creating tension with "*legal ownership [and] fiscal ownership*".

This was expressed across interviews, particularly by a Participant C, who described their connection to Manoel Island specifically in terms of memory, heritage, and emotional investment, rather than formal title or use rights. For certain stakeholders, resistance is not merely a technical objection, but a defence of memory and moral ownership. Statements like " [the public] sacrificed enough" and concerns expressed about public heritage being given up to private entities reflect more than nostalgia, they assert that development threatens something that rightfully belongs to the public. Participant D echoes this symbolic framing, by claiming to "*agree with public sentiment.*" Their language does not refer to policy, but to its sentimental significance - revealing that all actors, even those supporting development, are aware of the symbolic reality underlining these negotiations.

Despite symbolic meaning appearing as a shared mode of expression for multiple stakeholders, this common ground begins to fracture when it comes to ideas of aspiration for the future. Stakeholders don't merely mourn the loss of space, they inscribe their own visions onto it, and this is where ideas begin to visibly diverge. Contested spaces become a canvas of conflicting ideals: Participant C wishes for Manoel Island to remain untouched in a context that has already lost so much, expressing ideas of *preservation*. Participant E sees opportunity for restrained development, drawing comparisons to milder areas of local development, expressing ideas of *curation*. Participant D's rhetoric remains within the symbolic register but orients it toward ideas of pride and legacy, where development remains absolutely necessary for national *progress* and *modernisation*.

Architecture, in this context, becomes more than infrastructure: it is the surface onto which these symbolic values are projected, transforming buildings into a contested representation of identity

(Lieven Ameel, 2020). These conflicting values - curation vs. authenticity, pride vs. preservation - reveal that stakeholders are not simply expressing differing preferences, but constructing divergent narrative futures, which appear incompatible.

Here, Lefebvre's theory intersects productively with Paul Ricoeur's (1984) notion of emplotment. Stakeholders do not simply interpret territories of negotiation differently, they construct conflicting plot lines in which the site plays a role: a lost opportunity, or a future legacy. These plots assign moral roles, define stakes, and imagine resolutions. While Ricoeur presents emplotment as a process of meaning-making, in this context it also becomes a mechanism of separation, reinforcing symbolic boundaries, rather than resolving them.

As such, the struggle over contested land moves beyond technical planning, into symbolic narrative. Each actor projects meaning not only to assert their sentimental priorities, but to claim the authority to define what the space should become. These stories are not neutral; they are strategic instruments of influence. Through narrative emplotment, space is claimed, defended, and moralised. It is in this realm that the foundations of conflict become most visible.



## 5.2 Strategic Narratives & Claims of Legitimacy

While symbolic narratives may emerge from genuine emotional investment, they are also consciously mobilised to serve strategic ends. This section investigates how stakeholders transform meaning into instruments of legitimacy, positioning themselves as moral authorities while discrediting opposing perspectives. Building on Ricoeur's notion of emplotment and Marten Hajer's concept of strategic use of narrative, this section examines how actors mobilise symbolic storytelling in an attempt to shape both public perception and development outcomes.

Participant D exemplifies the process of narrative construction clearly. Throughout the interview, they framed certain actors in the industry as both visionary and benevolent, stating their aim was to polish the "*unpolished gem*" that is Malta. This phrase positions these actors as stewards of national identity, rather than mere private actors. Their narrative frames architecture not as a commercial venture, but as a contribution to the island's progress.

Participant D describes what they see as "*ugly buildings thrown all over the place*", contrasting this with approaches that care about quality, the environment, and the future of Malta. By doing this, they attempt to merge values that are often seen as conflicting. Even as Participant D distances themselves from certain actors by questioning their moral code and ability, their stance still aligns with the broader discursive coalition (Hajer, 1995) currently shaped and sustained by actors like the MDA, which equates development with progress. Their critique does not challenge the continuation of development itself, but instead reinforces a narrative in which it is justified; so long as it can be cast within the familiar trope of being 'one of the good ones'.

In the case of Manoel Island, Participant D criticises the existing proposal harshly; instead portraying an earlier proposal as more sensitive and appropriate. Here, architecture itself becomes proof of virtue and ability - a way to legitimise one's right to shape the built environment over others. While these opinions may be genuine, the language also paints an effective picture.

Interestingly, Participant B stated that they do not hold a narrative position regarding the future of Manoel Island, instead adapting themselves to whatever happens. This contrasts significantly with their personal emotional ties to the Pembroke area. Participant A expressed concerns regarding wellbeing and public loss, and agreed with the notion of creating a public park. However, their tone surrounding the contested space remained rather procedural. When Participant A was asked about their feelings towards the current trajectory of Manoel Island, they simply stated the contractual breach will stop it in its tracks. This projection of neutrality can be interpreted not as an absence of narrative, but as a narrative in itself; one that projects legitimacy *through* impartiality. In contested settings, avoiding overt symbolism can be a way to maintain authority, presenting one's stance as rational, objective, and above the conflict.

Yet neutrality does not imply detachment. For example, Participant B actively criticised MIDI's "*pompous*" renderings and marketing slogans for Manoel Island, labelling them as superficial. While they do not claim outright deception, they imply that symbolic expression is being weaponised for persuasion rather than genuine engagement.

Other interviews reveal narratives that contest the pro-development stance, constructing an alternative moral plot. Manoel Island, in these accounts, is not a site of opportunity, but a symbol of loss. Participant C described the development as a continuation of a longer trajectory; a pattern in which public access, cultural memory, and ecological integrity are repeatedly sacrificed. In contrast to Participant D's idea of 'good development', this stakeholder wants to leave remaining local

“greenlands” untouched. Rather than technical critique, this plot functions as a broader claim: of a system that privileges private gain over public interest.

Within this narrative, the public becomes protector, construction becomes intrusion, and the state a facilitator. The island is cast not as a site of development, but as a threatened entity within an ongoing pattern of dispossession.

This framing aligns with ideas expressed in a video posted on Instagram by *Moviment Graffiti*<sup>3</sup> (2025) where Andre Callus refers to Manoel Island as a “*treasure... among congestion*” and urges authorities to “*give it back to the people*” (Fig 13). The framing uses similar symbolic language to communicate a tight narrative: the island is portrayed as threatened, juxtaposed against a backdrop of overdevelopment and loss, while activists fight to protect it. These examples support Tilly’s (2006) and Castells’ (2012) observations that social movements actively construct legitimacy through symbolic communication and media representation; and that commercial discursive coalitions, such as the pro-development coalition in Malta, are met with equally narrative-driven resistance.



Figure 13 - Symbolic Language mobilised to legitimise resistance towards the Manoel Island Development, Via Moviment Graffiti, Instagram, 2025

The strategic use of this narrative becomes evident through Participant C’s own admissions; using simplified, emotionally resonant language in their public messaging, stating that they “*dumbed*

---

<sup>3</sup> Moviment Graffiti is a Maltese activist organisation involved in environmental and social justice campaigns, including opposition to large-scale developments (Moviment Graffiti, 2024).

down” language to make it more accessible. This acknowledgement shows that narrative is not just opinion, but a strategic tool to persuade the public and shape the built environment.

Participant B notices this shift, particularly in relation to NGOs and activists - remarking that they are no longer “naive” but now actively play the political game, using narrative strategically to build support in numbers. While initially Participant B seems to praise this strategy, a following remark that “*Callus [Moviment Graffiti] likes cameras a bit too much*”, and that it “*annoys*” them reveals a hint of animosity or scepticism toward activists’ new-found media-savvy tactics.

Participant A echoed this opinion and embraced scepticism openly. This interviewee was concerned that NGOs such as *Din l-Art Helwa*<sup>4</sup> actively used headlines for shock value; specifically citing their claim of filing “*Record 1,500 planning objections*” (Times of Malta, 2023) within a single calendar year. Here, Participant A questions their intention, casting doubt on whether such volume indicated genuine engagement or spectacle. Furthermore, they emphasise the idea that such actions risk reducing legitimacy to a matter of visibility, rather than substance.

Here, Hajer’s (1995) concept of the strategic use of narrative is brought forward by interviewees. In contested planning environments, actors do not merely describe reality; they craft storylines to legitimise themselves and delegitimise others. These narratives operate in the symbolic realm, shaping public perception and institutional response. As Hajer (1995) notes, legitimacy increasingly hinges on whose narrative resonates most effectively, not whose argument is most technically sound.

This trend is echoed in the observation made by Paul Bonello for *Times of Malta* (2025) in relation to recent events surrounding Manoel Island’s development:

*“The rule of law in Malta often and swiftly degenerates into the rule of the popular, where right and wrong are often summarily determined in terms of popular expression rather than notions of rights and justice.”*

In this environment, once a narrative gains traction, it becomes difficult to challenge through formal planning processes. Dissenting stakeholders are portrayed not as interlocutors, but as ideological obstacles. As theorised by Yanow (2000), development becomes a popularity contest, where resonance, not reason, determines spatial outcomes.

These critiques also raise a broader tension: when narratives are crafted to influence, do they lose authenticity, or do they simply reflect the reality of a communicative arena in which emotional appeal is required to be heard?

Nonetheless, as expressed by Participant A and B, when narrative strategies become performative, signs of mistrust begin to surface. Stakeholders grow weary of one another’s intentions, questioning whether communication reflects principle or manipulation. It is within this climate of mutual scepticism that a deeper communicative failure begins to emerge.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Din l-Art Helwa* is a Maltese non-governmental organisation focused on the protection and promotion of cultural and natural heritage (Din l-Art Helwa, 2023).



## 5.3 Communicative Dissonance

This section explores how the erosion of trust between stakeholders leads to *communicative dissonance* - a total breakdown in mutual understanding that reinforces spatial contestation. Once stakeholders recognise the use of strategic narrative, they begin to view one another as insincere, and communication no longer functions as dialogue. This directly supports Habermas' (1984) notion of strategic action. Symbolic narratives, once used to express memory, pride, or concern, become sources of suspicion. With this, misunderstanding becomes inevitable. What follows is not just a clash of perspectives, but a breakdown in recognition - where roles are misunderstood, motives are doubted, and expectations no longer align.

Participants described a persistent misalignment between how institutional roles are publicly perceived and how they function in practice. According to Participants A and B, the public often assumes a level of institutional neutrality that is, in reality, unfeasible. According to these interviewees, the public expects the Planning Authority to act independently when they are "*an arm of the government*", and they expect architects to oppose development outright when it is a "*part of [their] job*". The public's view on developers is also criticised as unfair because they simply work within an existing framework. These stakeholders do not view institutional members as neutral arbiters, but as actors embedded within bureaucracies and pre-defined roles. This aligns with the notion that public misconception surrounding institutional roles aggravates spatial contestation (Åström, 2020).

However, this misaligned perception directly feeds existing mistrust. Participants A & B describe the public majority not only as manipulated by activist rhetoric, but also as fundamentally misinformed, lacking an understanding of the rules of the game. Even Participant D adopts this stance, explicitly stating that they do not concern themselves with public opinion. In this view, public criticism is not interpreted as reasoned objection, but as naive, emotionally charged misunderstanding that can be swayed by media tactics "*in a second*".

Labelling the public as 'emotional' is not a neutral description, but another strategic tactic. It positions certain actors as rational, while casting dissenters as irrational others, removing their claims from serious consideration. This dynamic reinforces communicative dissonance, once again exemplifying Habermas' warning that strategic action undermines the very possibility of democratic spatial negotiation.

Additionally, a key perspective emerges that further complicates this dynamic. Nearly every stakeholder interviewed, regardless of position, ultimately directs some form of blame towards the government; not just as a policymaker, but as a manipulator of process and meaning. Some interviewees, such as Participant C, believe that politicians are "*in bed*" with developers; while Participant D paints politicians as supportive of development as long as their power isn't being actively threatened. The idea that private interest appears consistently prioritised over public wellbeing - until votes come into question - was frequently expressed.

This perception appears further reinforced by recent events. In May 2025, following a petition signed by over 30,000 citizens opposing the Manoel Island project, both Prime Minister Abela and Opposition Leader Grech publicly revised their positions, expressing concern over the development. As reported by Debono for MaltaToday (2025), this sudden shift was seen by some not as a matter of principle, but a response to electoral pressure. In this context, the idea that development outcomes hinge on political optics rather than public interest gains credibility.

Once the state is no longer trusted as a neutral arbiter, architecture itself is viewed with suspicion: no longer a shared expression of future possibility, but the physical evidence of communicative dissonance itself. Built form becomes implicated in narrative and burdened with the weight of mistrust (Zaum, 2015; Ruigrok & Van de Walle, 2016). This perception is reinforced by Participant C's critiques of government-driven design initiatives, such as Project Green, which are dismissed as superficial "*band-aids*" rather than genuine attempts at meaningful change. Such views underscore how architecture is increasingly judged not by its utility or vision, but by its alignment with political performance and symbolic gestures.

In the end, the symbolic contestation of negotiated spaces seems to result in fatigue. Several interviewees across all domains imply that communication has become so performative, so stripped of sincerity, that it is no longer worth participating in.

Participant B acknowledges this in a frank manner, questioning if "*genuine communication*" is even possible anymore in an arena where "*everyone speaks past each other*". They also note the lack of trust the public has in institutional bodies, believing they are perceived as the "*hit men*" for developers. Similarly, Participant C observed a sense of fatigue surrounding resistance efforts, noting that such actions were often ignored.

Finally, this total resignation is expressed most thoroughly by the Participant A, who labels the entire system itself as so "*corrupt*" that virtues like ethics and honesty have limited function within the existing landscape of communication.



## 6. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore how architecture, as both form and field, becomes contested through symbolic meaning and communicative struggle. Using Manoel Island as a point of reference, it examined the emotions, narratives and strategies through which different stakeholders lay claim to multiple contested spaces, not merely as users or owners, but as authors of its meaning. By investigating how public, private, and institutional stakeholders construct conflicting visions of Manoel Island's future, the research revealed how spatial planning in Malta is not only a technical or legal process, but a deeply political act shaped by symbolic projection, narrative emplotment, and systemic mistrust.

## 6.1 Research Findings

This research shows that symbolic narratives play a central role in shaping public contestation over territories of negotiation in Malta, by turning contestation into struggles over meaning, identity, and belonging. Stakeholders do not only dispute planning rules or legal ownership; they construct plots about what a space means, and what it should become. In contested spaces such as Manoel Island, these competing narratives create tension, as their goal is to legitimise one position, over another. As a result, debate becomes a struggle between these narratives, which one is more convincing - and which one will shape the future of the built environment.

Interviews demonstrated that all stakeholders engaged with the symbolic dimension of contested spaces, attributing emotionally charged and meaningful associations to them. Despite their differing roles, a shared recognition of symbolic and cultural concerns emerged across the board. Many expressed concerns over themes such as loss, access, and the erosion of public value, highlighting a common sensitivity to the island's past and present significance.

However, when it comes to aspirations for the future, specifically in relation to Manoel Island, this common ground seems to fragment. Participant C framed the site in terms of memory, heritage, and moral ownership, critiquing development as part of a broader pattern of dispossession. Participant E acknowledged this sense of loss yet viewed carefully curated development as a potential vehicle for national improvement. Participant D echoed these themes but positioned intervention as essential, presenting development as a means of preserving legacy and progress. These diverging visions for the future are a result of a combination of factors - unique perspectives, personal experiences, responsibilities, and more.

This is where symbolic language becomes a *tool* - mobilised through the action of *strategic narrative*. By turning symbolic language into a convincing story, actors attempt to steer development outcomes toward their own imagined future. These narratives are crafted to influence perception, legitimising one position while marginalising opposing views.

Some draw on themes such as national pride, legacy, and progress to frame intervention as an act of patriotic responsibility, deliberately distinguishing certain actors from less capable or morally sound competitors. In contrast, others invoked narratives of loss and dispossession to refuse further development and claim moral authority, presenting themselves as defenders of public interest. This framing was consciously simplified to resonate emotionally and build broader support.

It is through this framing that stakeholder goals start to appear mutually exclusive, and semblance of common ground is lost. Not necessarily because of inherent incompatibility, but because each narrative increasingly positions itself in opposition to others. The focus shifts from the possibility of collaboration, to "How can I ensure *my* vision becomes reality? Or "How can I position *myself* as the legitimate voice in this debate?"

These dynamics effect the broader negotiation process. As narratives become increasingly strategic, stakeholders also become aware of their instrumental use. This perception hinders trust between actors. Even when concerns may be genuine, they may be perceived as manipulative rhetoric rather than attempts at dialogue. This scepticism plays into a broader context of communicative difficulties, further eroding the possibility of true productive negotiation.

## 6.2 Reflections

The researcher understands that narrative may play an important role, by providing a degree of power to certain actors which otherwise may not have a significant voice. For example, public activists' power relies heavily on mobilising their narrative and gaining support in numbers. Without this opportunity, they lack the institutional influence to make any sort of significant change. In this sense, it mitigates imbalances, allowing them to project their opinion in a way that matters.

However, in the mobilisation of these narratives, stakeholders turn a blind eye to concerns which do not directly align with their aspirations for the future. When narratives are used strategically, they must simplify complexity in order to oppose competing visions. That's how they gain traction: by presenting a singular story that leaves little room for nuance.

This simplification is not accidental; it is inherent to how strategic narratives function. In order to persuade, narratives must be clear, compelling, and competitive. Acknowledging complexity or alternative perspectives risks diluting the message. As a result, nuance is stripped away, and symbolic concerns are selectively amplified to support a singular vision of the future.

Therefore, once narratives become a tool for persuasion, they obscure the very concerns that could unite stakeholders - concerns which are often buried in the complexities and contradictions of their unfiltered reflections. Here, narratives take on a character of bias. Interviews revealed that beneath constructed storyline, shared concerns of loss, hope, and pride emerged across seemingly opposing stakeholders. These fragments of common ground preface the strategic use of narrative.

Hence, in order to foster authentic dialogue, intervention must occur *beneath* the narratives. It is at the level of personal reflection where the potential for collaboration exists. Once positions are formalised in competition with one another, this potential is compromised. Here, there is a clear, defined need for mediation. In theory, this mediation should be actioned by institutional bodies and professionals.

For example, the architect has the unique ability to understand abstract forces - social, cultural, political, economic - which facilitate the creation of narratives, and visualise a final intervention which is sensitive to them. However, as expressed certain participants, architects' direct interest in development itself and their responsibility to their client may skew their lens. Often, it is the narrative of their client which they must execute. Under these circumstances, it may be difficult for an architect to be the objective bridge between diverging narratives and a finished product.

Planning was also discussed as a site of responsibility. It is tasked with setting guidelines that ensure concerns are considered in a balanced manner across the board, early in the development process. However, one interviewee expressed that this position is compromised, arguing that such institutions operate largely as extensions of government interest. From this perspective, planning may be guided by state priorities, whether commercial, electoral, or otherwise.

Here, it seems that even professional and institutional bodies may struggle to maintain neutrality. Entanglements of responsibility, loyalty, and bureaucratic structure blur the lines between professional duty and political interest. As a result, even those best positioned to mediate often find themselves unable to act independently of the systems they serve.

Therefore, what if the mediator is not a single actor, institution, or stakeholder - but a mentality, adopted by stakeholders across the board?

## 6.3 Moving Forward

Through these interviews, the researcher's own opinions have significantly shifted. Engagement with actors in the realm of spatial negotiation but outside the professional circle of architecture exposed a possible echo-chamber of opinion and narrative which shaped their personal bias.

In particular, the parallel thinking structure provided by Edward De Bono's 6 Thinking Hats, as outlined in the Chapter 3, prompted a critical re-evaluation of the researcher's own stance.

This underlines the necessity for *self-awareness*. Without recognising the narratives we subscribe to, it becomes nearly impossible to engage meaningfully with the complexity of spatial conflict. Tools like the *Black Hat* (which surfaces potential risks and limitations) or the *Yellow Hat* (which opens space for positive, shared futures) can help dismantle narrative rigidity, especially when integrated into genuine, good faith conversation with stakeholders who hold different views. It is through this structured yet open exchange that individual biases may begin to unravel, and the barriers created by strategic narratives start to dissolve.

This suggests an opportunity for further research. While this dissertation employed Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* as an analytical tool, using parallel thinking to examine stakeholder narratives in isolation, the next step is to explore its potential as a method of facilitated dialogue.

Existing findings demonstrate that shared concerns exist among stakeholders. Following research could potentially investigate whether structured, direct dialogue between opposing stakeholders, using parallel thinking approaches, may help them more effectively recognise common ground and collaboratively envision shared aspirations rather than diverging ones.

A practical starting point might involve pairing individuals who already express similar emotional or symbolic concerns but differ in their proposed solutions. For example, two members of the public who both value heritage, beauty, and access to public space, but who disagree on whether a contested space should remain entirely untouched or be sensitively developed.

Beyond Manoel Island, other high-profile cases underline the value of applying this framework. The key is to identify contested spaces where competing narratives are not only present but actively draw on specific symbolic, cultural, or ecological ideas to oppose one another. Fort Chambray in Gozo illustrates this dynamic: large-scale redevelopment of a historic fortification, including plans for a five-star aparthotel and residential units, has provoked strong opposition from heritage NGOs concerned about the dismantling of nineteenth-century barracks and the erosion of cultural stewardship (Galea, 2024). Similarly, the proposed Villa Rosa redevelopment in St. Julian's, involving towers of up to 39 storeys adjacent to a Grade 1-scheduled villa and Level 1 natural cave, has sparked heated debate. Parties involved in its development frame the scheme as a flagship for economic growth, while critics highlight risks to heritage, ecology, and democratic process (Cordina, 2024). These sites, like Manoel Island, demonstrate how narratives of progress and preservation come into direct conflict, making them strong candidates for testing the narrative and parallel-thinking framework in future research.

Moving forward, the objective of further application should not necessarily be consensus, but recognition. The aim is to move beyond polarised positions and acknowledge the legitimacy of differing visions. This approach could begin to reveal whether narrative barriers can be softened through structured reflection.

In doing so, we may edge closer to understanding a form of spatial dialogue that is grounded in mutual understanding rather than conflict or persuasion.

# References

- Åström, J. (2020). Participatory urban planning: What would make planners trust the citizens? *Urban Planning*, 5(2), 84–93. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v5i2.3021>
- Attard, S. (2020). Evolution of tourism, challenges, and its sustainability in an island state: Case study of Malta. *Journal of Tourism Studies*.
- Barbour, R. (2007). *Doing focus groups*. SAGE Publications.
- Bianco, L. (2019). Participatory engagement in urban design process: The case of an urban settlement in Malta. *Spatium*.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308046339\\_Participatory\\_engagement\\_in\\_urban\\_design\\_process\\_The\\_case\\_of\\_an\\_urban\\_settlement\\_in\\_Malta](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308046339_Participatory_engagement_in_urban_design_process_The_case_of_an_urban_settlement_in_Malta)
- Bonello, P. (2025, June 9). *Manoel Island: Rule of law à la carte?*. *Times of Malta*.  
<https://timesofmalta.com/article/manoel-island-rule-law-a-la-carte.1111148>
- Borg, M. (1996). *British colonial architecture: Malta 1800–1900* (Master’s dissertation). University of Malta.
- Cordina, J. P. (2024, October 26). *Villa Rosa project denounced as ‘affront to democracy’ in protest*. Newsbook. Retrieved from [https://newsbook.com.mt/en/villa-rosa-project-denounced-as-affront-to-democracy-in-protest/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://newsbook.com.mt/en/villa-rosa-project-denounced-as-affront-to-democracy-in-protest/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
- Debono, J. (2025, June 9). *Manoel Island: How Abela and Grech wavered under pressure*. *MaltaToday*.
- Diacono, T. (2016, September 10). Gżira mayor, activists break through Manoel Island fence to demand public access. *MaltaToday*Farrugia, M. (2024, December). NGOs slam Planning Authority’s nod to destruction of British barracks in Fort Chambray. *MaltaToday*Manoel Island Development Corporation. (n.d.). *History of Manoel Island*.  
<https://www.manoelisland.com.mt/en/history>
- Din l-Art Helwa. (2023). *Our work*. <https://dinlartelwa.org/our-work/>
- Ebejer, J., & Tunbridge, J. (2017). The role of urban heritage in Malta’s tourism: Issues and initiatives. In *Heritage, Tourism and Society* (pp. 123-142). University of Malta.  
[https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/58596/1/The\\_role\\_of\\_urban\\_heritage\\_in\\_Maltas\\_tourism.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/58596/1/The_role_of_urban_heritage_in_Maltas_tourism.pdf)
- Ehrenfeld, J. (2024, March 7). The awesome power of speech (Part 2). *The Right Way to Flourish*. <https://www.johnehrenfeld.com/2024/03/07/the-awesome-power-of-speech-part2/>
- Ellul, M. (1993). *The quarantine service: The Lazzaretto of Malta*. University of Malta Historical Society.
- Environment and Resources Authority. (2017, October). *Amended master plan for Manoel Island – Project description statement* [Official document]. Environment and Resources Authority.

- Fern, E. F. (2001). *Advanced focus group research*. SAGE Publications.
- Forester, J. (1993). *Critical theory and planning practice*. SUNY Press.
- Galea, A. (2024, December 12). *Fort Chambray mega-development, dismantling of British barracks approved by PA*. The Malta Independent. <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2024-12-12/local-news/Fort-Chambray-mega-development-dismantling-of-British-barracks-approved-by-PA-6736266480>
- Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Methods of data collection in qualitative research: Interviews and focus groups. *British Dental Journal*, 204(6), 291–295. <https://doi.org/10.1038/bdj.2008.192>
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press.
- Hachelaf, B., & Qatamin, M. (2024). Communicative dissonance in contested urban development: The role of strategic narratives. *Urban Studies*, 61(5), 1023–1041. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098023123456>
- Hajer, M. A. (1995). *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. Oxford University Press.
- Independent Malta. (2016, September 10). Manoel Island open to the public again as activists cut through MIDI gates and fences. <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2016-09-10/local-news/Manoel-Island-open-to-the-public-again-as-activists-cut-through-MIDI-gates-and-fences-6736163561>
- Kaiser, B. (2009). *The importance of anonymity in qualitative research*. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 42–57. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902>
- Kathmandu & Beyond. (2018, March 11). St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral in Valletta, Malta. *Kathmandu & Beyond*. <https://www.kathmanduandbeyond.com/photo-st-pauls-pro-cathedral-valletta-malta/>
- King, N., & Horrocks, C. (2010). *Interviews in qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.
- Kotler, P., Haider, D. H., & Rein, I. (1993). *Marketing places: Attracting investment, industry, and tourism to cities, states, and nations*. The Free Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1974)
- Malan, G. J. (2017). Figure 1: Emplotment and plot in narrative theory [Diagram]. *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 73(1), Article 4499. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i1.4499>
- Mattila, H. (2020). Habermas revisited: Resurrecting the contested roots of communicative planning theory. *Progress in Planning*, 141, Article 100431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2019.04.001>

Malta Development Association. (2024, May 1). *Malta Development Association announces record-breaking April* [Press release]. MDA. <https://mda.com.mt/malta-development-association-announces-record-breaking-april>

meddmo. (2025, June 13). *Fact check: How much did Manoel Island cost MIDI?* MEDDMO. <https://meddmo.eu/fact-check-how-much-did-manoel-island-cost-midi/>

MaltaInvestPortal. (2024). *Malta Developers Association: unity makes strength*. MaltaInvestPortal. <https://maltainvestportal.com/malta-developers-association-unity-makes-strength/>

MIDI plc. (2025, May 21). *Manoel Island: A mixed-use development defined by open spaces and heritage*. <https://www.midimalta.com/en/news/1/3124/manoel-island-a-mixed-use-development-defined>

MIDI plc. (n.d.-a). Our strategy. <https://www.midimalta.com/en/our-strategy>

MIDI plc. (n.d.-b). Our company. <https://www.midimalta.com/en/our-company>

Mifsud, P. V. (1979). Sliema: A study in urban growth. *Hyphen*, 1(5), 1-9. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/20411>

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. Routledge.

Moviment Graffiti. (2024). *Campaigns and positions*. <https://movimentgraffitti.org/en/campaigns>

Moviment Graffiti (2025, May 2025) *9 years ago, I stepped into a place I had never seen before, and I was left in awe...* [https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ\\_FbaLoTqD/](https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ_FbaLoTqD/)

Piccinino, I. (2025, May 18). *Manoel Island: Character and cultural preservation*. *Times of Malta*. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/manoel-island-character-cultural-preservation.1109778>

Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative* (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans., Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1991). Narrative identity (D. Wood, Trans.). *Philosophy Today*, 35(1), 73–81. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday19913514>

Ruigrok, N., & Van de Walle, S. (2016). Researching state legitimacy: A political approach. *Developmental Leadership Program*. <https://dlprog.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/RuQ51TTiShGKssENeflFFM1KsOAvTS59Nvbn5OT6.pdf>

Sarkar, C., & Kotler, P. (2019, November 19). *Competing on stories: Marketing and cultural narratives*. *The Marketing Journal*. <https://www.marketingjournal.org/competing-on-stories-marketing-and-cultural-narratives-christian-sarkar-and-philip-kotler/>

Schmid, C. (2008). Henri Lefebvre's The Spatial Triad Framework. [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Henri-Lefebvres-The-Spatial-Triad-Framework-adjusted-from-Schmid-2008\\_fig1\\_365391676](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Henri-Lefebvres-The-Spatial-Triad-Framework-adjusted-from-Schmid-2008_fig1_365391676)

Spiteri, S. C. (2014). ARX Fort Manoel!: The design & construction of an 18th-century Hospitaller fort. *MilitaryArchitecture.com*.  
<http://www.militaryarchitecture.com/index.php/Research/arx-fort-manoel-the-design-construction-of-an-18th-century-hospitaller-fort.html>

The Malta Independent. (2023, October 13). *Join us in celebrating the 300th anniversary of the foundation of Fort Manoel*. The Malta Independent.  
<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2023-10-13/newspaper-lifestyleculture/Join-us-in-celebrating-the-300th-anniversary-of-the-foundation-of-Fort-Manoel-6736255583>

The Malta Independent. (2025, June 8). Taking back Manoel Island.  
<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2025-06-08/blogs-opinions/Taking-back-Manoel-Island-6736270725>

Tigné Point. (2021, May 18). *About Tigné Point*. <https://www.tignepoint.com/about>

Times of Malta. (2016, September 10). Activists cut locks at Manoel Island to gain access to foreshore. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/activists-cut-locks-at-manoel-island-to-gain-access-to-foreshore.624607>

Yanow, D. (2000). *Conducting interpretive policy analysis*. Sage Publications.

Zaum, D. (2015). Legitimacy, statebuilding and conflict (GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack No. 11). University of Birmingham. <https://www.gsdrc.org>



## Appendix 1 – Interviews

## *START OF INTERVIEW - PARTICIPANT A*

### **[Interviewer]**

So basically, the dissertation is exploring contested in Malta. and what that means are basically, disputed, public projects, uses of public spaces in Malta. but what I'm doing specifically is I'm not kind of trying to understand right or wrong within these projects, I am specifically looking at communication between stakeholders. I think, right now there are many hot topics, things Manuel Island, things Ms. Heather Creek project, things Villa, Villa Rosa, and a lot of people have a lot of opinions. but it seems the closer we get to realising certain projects, the further and further we are away from reaching agreements on them, and even when they're realised, we never... It's, it's, it's rare that we have a majority agreement on something that we didn't have in the beginning of the project. And so, what I am studying is, why negotiations or why communication maybe isn't where it needs to be, why, majority agreements aren't reached on projects that maybe should, and where things might get lost in translation within the communication project. and I think obviously your position as president of KTP, your experience, representing the body of architects in Malta might have a lot ex- of experience, regarding communication between these different stakeholders. So my first question to you would be quite broad. It would be, as your experience as, as an architect and as, at within the body of KTP, what is it communicating specifically to the public regarding long-term plans or, or projects, ongoing projects, ideas? Is it... has it been a positive experience for you, or have there been specific challenges that you would note?

### **[Participant A]**

I think the first... In fact, I was going to ask you to you, while you were talking earlier in your introduction was, communicate to whom or with whom? because that's, part of the changes, both the content and the form of communication. So, so even when you were talking before about the projects and communication, depending on who was communicating what. I mean, if you're talking about the developers, obviously they have their own message to convey and obviously the, the planning authority has its own, and presumably or hopefully the architects have their own, - ... message to convey. So, so there's all of these, these, these facets to your question. And so, you asked me a question without giving it too much, detail, so I don't, I don't know if you want to elaborate or maybe you want me to- ... leave it open and I'll answer it how-

### **[Interviewer]**

-huh. I think, I think, I didn't want to kind of give it too much detail. I- in terms of have there been-

### **[Participant A]**

I, I have no problem answering it, even more details.

### **[Interviewer]**

No, no. Exactly. So in terms of these communication processes, are there certain areas that are more difficult? Is it, for example, more difficult to communicate with the public? Is it more difficult to communicate with developers? Is it more difficult to communicate with government bodies?

### **[Participant A]**

Okay. So as I was hinting at before, the first thing you need to have when you're communicating is a message. So unless you're clear on what, what, what the objective of your messaging is, it's going to be difficult, [taps pen on table] to reach your goal. So if you have an agenda, and that agenda, that agenda

which needs to be communicated somehow. So, .. Now the effectiveness of the communication is obviously depending on the strength of the agenda. So if it's, an agenda based on personal interests, then it's going to be received in a certain way. If it's a message or an agenda that is seeking to reflect m- public good, for instance, then obviously... Well, obviously no. but possibly the message is going to be much more broadly received. now, obviously in communication, there are two... I don't want to just lecture 'cause I'm not an expert in communication, but, but basically you've got the per- the, the messenger, the person, delivering the message or conveying the message, and the receiver of that message, right? And then between, there's interface, there's the medium of how that message is coming across. So the... so even though you have a clear message, you need to be, clear. You need to be sure that the persons is... first of all, that the, the message is being received, and that that message... who is receiving that message is understanding it. So for example, when we were having this campaign in 2019 till recently, although it's still ongoing really, on the building regulation reform- ... the difficulty with that message or that agenda was the complexity of the subject that we are addressing. so we had to try to convey the urgency and the need, of the reform, while at the same time, there were all these accidents happening, and the main culprit, the... both the government agenda and obviously the developers' agenda, was to scapegoat the architect. so for... from their side, it was easy. The messaging was very easy. It's the ar- the fault of the architect cause they're not going on site because this and that, and, and they had a very, simple message, while we had a much more articulated and complex message to convey. The difficulty with that was how to do it. It's... obviously we had different audiences for this, so we had the professionals and the industry, with to whom we comm- conveyed the message in a more technical and elaborate way, and then we had the general public- ... to whom we had to... simplify the message, and more than convey the detailed technical content, we had to convey the spirit- ... of what we were trying to do. And I don't... I'm not sure if you have come across it, but the way we had decided to go about it was to engage John Mallia. And he had done... I don't have his... I don't know if you've seen this. It's still... should be still there. No, not the podcast. before the podcast. It was when... year or- or a year and a half before that. We had engaged Love In Malta. He was... John was working for Love In Malta at the time, to, put together a message, a- a- a video which was about 25 minutes, I think, explaining the salient points of our, of our document- ... that we had just published. In fact, I remember when we had launched it, we had done a double thing. So first we had done... we had done a press conference, with the media present, and there was, stakeholders. It was down at the Chamber of Commerce where we had basically presented the final version of the document, that black book with the squiggly lines. And that was when we first launched it, the final version of it, after a one-year public consultation. And... but as soon as that press conference was over and it was streamed live on- on Facebook, we had Love In Malta, launching the- the- the doc- kind of... Not sure I would call it a documentary. It was... Well, it was kind of a satirical take- ... on the situation and basically explaining our position. And I think that was very effective-

### **[Interviewer]**

In terms of how the public received it?

### **[Participant A]**

Yes, because that was the target. We had a different audience there, and so we had- we had a double audience. We had the- the more technical audience- ... and- and the press, and then we had the- the

general public, who kind of could begin to understand, because obviously no one gets it with one video. But at least you can begin to understand just how messy and, unacceptable the status quo was. So I don't know if this answers your question, but basically the difficulty was basically trying to target the messaging and the content, to suit the- the- the recipient basically.

**[Interviewer]**

You've actually brought up something I wanted to ask. Other interviewees needed prompting, but you mentioned it straight away. When you spoke publicly, you referred to the "spirit" of the project, rather than focusing on technical details. By that, do you mean the broader goals, like preserving certain elements, respecting public memory, or protecting architecture, rather than using technical or planning jargon?

**[Participant A]**

The building regulation reform focused mostly on construction quality and methods, not on the quality of space. So we didn't run a strong campaign around planning or public space like we did for building regulations. We've still been involved, of course—for instance, just before Christmas 2023, I gave an interview to The Times where I criticised the Planning Authority. But criticism alone only goes so far. What made the building regulation reform and the Msida project successful was that we presented clear alternatives. Once people understood them, they got on board. Without a tangible alternative, people are skeptical. They tend to only believe what they can physically see. Unlike us, most people can't imagine a design unless it's already presented to them. And there's a training bind. We're trained to do... to think this. But unfortunately, the public m-... and there's nothing wrong with it, but they don't have this training, so, they need to be helped to kind of understand, and this is part of the role of architects in general. I mean, communication is a fundamental role of architecture. It's not just vision, but communication.

**[Interviewer]**

True. True. I think there are a lot of really good examples of kind of-... public projects right now that are, hot, and that they are being disputed. There are lots of conversations around. And one that I've been exploring myself is, is Manuel Island. I think it obviously touches on a lot of relevant topics, sustainability, accessible green spaces in Malta. And seems to be other things that people are latching onto, whether it's right thing to latch onto or not. That's not what I'm here to comment on. But, but I think it's a, it's a very good place to explore how different stakeholders are communicating. So if I had to ask you this question, if, if someone who's never been to Manuel Island, someone who's never been to Malta, never saw Manuel Island, how would you describe Manuel Island to them, for someone that's never been there, or who's never seen it?

**[Participant A]**

How will I describe Manuel Island? well, well, it's obviously an island. It is located in one of the two harbours outside Valletta. It has a fort, which was built towards the end of the 16th century, of the Knights', kind of rule over the islands. It is largely undeveloped. And there's this whole controversy around it, on, on what's going to happen. 'Cause I did have this conversation actually with, ? At the International Conference of Architects. And one of the speakers was Foster, was one of the partners at Foster. One of the directors of, of, of Foster. And they were involved in the initial designs. And we were having this conversation, and around the table, there were others who were not, were not aware of what was going on. So we did have this conversation. And this is more or less how I described, - ... Manuel Island

and this whole controversy. And, and also explained to them how the people don't want anything to happen there. And, yes, and, anyway...

**[Interviewer]**

I, -huh. To be fair, that, that was my first inclination when I started discussing Manuel Island, even in my dissertation. My first kind of, instinct was to describe, describing technicalities. So the size of it, area, historical context. And when I spoke to people in the industry, development, architecture, etc that's how they described it to me. But when I speak to people of the public, that's not what they tell me. They tell me things like "It's one of the only places we have left in Gzira that we can go to and enjoy."

**[Interviewer]**

Yes, yes. But I think it's, it's, it's, it's more just an interesting difference in habits that we have as part of the profession, versus how people look at who aren't in kind of this area. And that stood out for me.

**[Participant A]**

So people... That's interesting. People describe it to you as a site?

**[Interviewer]**

People... So in the industry, it's as a site, but people who aren't in the industry describe, it's much more of, they mention much more about, it's kind of symbolic language, what it means to them and what they're scared to lose. And that's their first reaction. It could be because I've spoken to people who feel passionately about what's going on. But I noticed that that difference was really interesting. Was really interesting to me. I'm not sure if it's because there's currently an emotional reaction to it. but I, I thought, and I, I'm not sure why it goes that way, I think maybe we have a habit, right, to get to technicalities as architects, as developers, and stuff that. But, but, -huh.

**[Participant A]**

But it's very interesting though that recently... So I have a, I live in Gzira, and I have a big apartment in my, with... And, and I had, what, what, a point I had rented out to a friend of mine, a foreigner, Brazilian. And basically what I learned, kind of, is that Manuel Island, especially in summer, is, is a place where people actually go to- ... f- to, to swim, or to kind of sunbathe. It's very popular. I didn't realize- ... that it was And I've lived in the area more or less since I was born. So I lived in Sliema, then Kapara, now Gzira. So, I never had, I had never gone to Manuel Island before. I had this farm neighbour. And we went to the beach together. There. So for me, it wasn't a destination- It's just something I, I drove by, or, or, or saw- ... or saw from a distance. But it wasn't never something I actually... I mean, we had to organise... When I was a student, we had to organise there. so there was that. But and, but I don't think it was even restored yet, Fort Runnel. But, but it was being restored or it was just parts of it were restored, I don't remember exactly. But, I think for many, the m- especially the Maltese, I don't think it ever was a place where people go. Okay, there's paparazzi. There's a good football club there, the Luna Park when it was one. But I don't think it was a destination per se. it's more something, a backdrop more than a- ... more than a thing.

**[Interviewer]**

And do you think that's a result of maybe the fact it was inaccessible for so long? I think so as well. I think so as well.

**[Participant A]**

No, it was blocked, blocked off for long time. I mean, obviously there was the yacht, yacht club there- ... so maybe those people went to the yacht club, possibly. But again, the yacht club is very, very isolated set apart from the rest. And its not inclusive.

**[Interviewer]**

So, if you have to disregard facts about projects and things you have to weigh against each other, and just a gut feeling about where the project is going. Does anything stick out to you, positive or negative?

**[Participant A]**

Well, the project is not going anywhere 'cause it's very late. I mean, they had a ti- they had timeline, they had, they had to complete it-... I think part of it's ages ago. I was having lunch with a lawyer now, and we were talking about it. I believe some of... that there were some targets in 2005 or 2006- ... to be met. so obviously, n- not being met, so I'm not sure the reason, what the reasons are, but, so from a project point of view, I mean, seems there are problems there.

**[Interviewer]**

So what I understood is that kind of the government's opinion on this is that it would cost too much money to buy it back, something ab- about a billion euro, something that. So-

**[Participant A]**

But not on a breach of contract. But even then, I mean, even if it costs money, so what? If that's what the people want- ... and that's what their taxpayers want, and they're willing to sacrifice their, part of their tax- ... to get their land back- I mean, let, let me tell you one thing. And this is also things I say even... Forget Manoel Island for a minute. On planning reform in general, my... And I, this is something I hinted at also on the j- podcast on Joe Mallia. This is basically my opinion of what needs to happen next, is that a lot of plans need to be trashed. They not replaced, and instead we do master plans. And the master plans will basically, design each space and of each, each conurbation, each whatever urban area- ... bit by bit. And there needs to be... But the planning is not just an economic or land use planning. It has to be a financial planning, an implementation planning, everything. the land ownership. There has to be a concerted national effort to fix a lot of the mistakes that were done. And, and the cost of these mistakes are, so have to be borne by the taxpayer.

**[Interviewer]**

Yeah, for the future, for how things are changing.

**[Participant A]**

So this, this, what we're doing today, these €40 million are being basically thrown away. Now to learn that lesson, we're going to have to waste those €40 million. ? And so, these mistakes are happening everywhere. If you really see this, this, this, this disastrous planning system that we've had, especially from the Local Plans onwards, where people are pulling down houses, building flats. I mean, it's, it's, it is... When I... Two weeks ago, I was in Luxembourg, and basically I was talking to the Irish and we were c- comparing planning systems. And I was explaining to them what happened with our Local Plan. And, I mean, when you explain it, it's, it's, it's so much worse than when you actually exple-... I mean, when you're speaking to foreigners and you're telling them- ... how it works, and the government decided to give extra floors to everybody, even on points which are already inhabited, inhabited then, it is so outrageous, the whole planning system, the way, what we are doing, that it's shocking. Oh, I mean, when you come, when, when you, when you kind of zoom out a bit and looking at, look at it from a distance and, and just think about what we've been doing for the past 20, 30 years, it's, it's, it's a m- it's a, it's, it's shocking. It's really r-... I mean, there's no other word to describe it other than corrupt. I mean, this is what it is. It's corrupt.

**[Interviewer]**

we live in it every day, and then when you say it out loud, you get reminded- ... of how ridiculous it is.

**[Participant A]**

It's, it's corrupt. I mean, there's no other way to explain. And I don't necessarily mean corrupt through exchange of money for, for, for whatever was done. Corrupt because it doesn't work. Because people making decisions are incompetent, because the whole system doesn't work. And this is what I mean by corrupt, mainly. so when you go around and look around and see everything... I m- I mean, when I had left, if you've seen the podcast, that I had... At one point, I decided to leave 'cause I couldn't take it anymore. And especially 'cause of the Local Plans. it was getting to a point with everything I looked, whenever I looked around, this is before the chaos that we have today, 'cause now it's much worse than it was in 2006. you, you just look around, and you see the, the ugliness and these, and you, and the, and I mean, I look around, and I see corruption. That's what I was looking at everywhere, the ti- the pavement's not wor- not, not done up well, the, the chaos on the roads, the, the rubbish everywhere. But it's just corrupt. So if things don't work, it's because something's wrong, and it's wrong because there's, there's a... When I say corrupt, again, I'm using the term in the broader sense of the term. So when you have a corrupt, computer

**[Interviewer]**

Corrupted, exactly. No, I understood. Not necessarily about dirty money or something that.

**[Participant A]**

so, so obviously people, t- pe- some people, benefit from having a system this, because there's no oversight. There's no interest to keep things working well.

**[Interviewer]**

You were describing corrupt, the corrupt system, and you were saying it doesn't work. It's not just, I mean, you're not trying to-

**[Interviewer]**

I was going to latch onto something you said there about corruption. That we have to take the brunt of it?

**[Participant A]**

So, so, so... exactly. So the... because of these mistakes, now whether they are nefarious or whether they are in good faith but still mistakes, there's still a cost to making this. So basically, what I've been, and hopefully this would become official position of the camera eventually, what I'm saying is that the next phase of development for our country has to be undoing this disaster. which, which entails also having to buy back a lot of this, this land that was badly developed and, and, and reconfiguring it, remastering, doing, re- re- replanning it, with a proper transport, proper infrastructure, drainage, rainwaters, storm waters. Another thing that we don't do here. And so, and there's a cost to this side. The cost will be high because of the corruption. but Manuel Island, back to the point, will cost money to buy back, because there was a bad decision in the past, and there's a cost to that- ... ba- bad decision. That's, that's, that's basically it.

**[Interviewer]**

So with with, Msida Creek, KTP had proposed kind of your own idea of how things might be done, looking at it from a different angle. Let's say you could propose something that for Manuel Island. You've got, o- off of that instinct, what would that look today?

**[Participant A]**

Well, obviously the sites are different. I mean, I... I... I am one of the signatories of that petition. So it's on my personal capacity, although the Kamra is supporting the campaign. So, I tend to agree with the idea. Although I think the communication is not very good. I think it needs to be a, a bit more direct. It's, it's easy to say, "I want a park," but what's the consequence of this? And that's, I think, where the message is failing, because now the government is rebutting by claiming these amounts. And there's no way of countering these statements- ... which is, I think, the weakness of the campaign. So, the legal aspect, the financial aspect has to be factored into this, this whole proposal.

**[Interviewer]**

Yeah, so there are always kind of trade-offs when a project this is done, right? Kind of, maybe the public sees it from one angle, but when you're in charge of a big piece of land that, there are other things that maybe have to happen, sort of thing. So I don't know. For, for example, if it's a massive economic opportunity, some people might think that that's a very important thing to take advantage of. So in a way, that's a trade-off, right? Because when you're deciding for something with a piece of land...

**[Participant A]**

But who's deciding that?

**[Interviewer]**

That's another question. I mean, in this case, it seems it's already been decided. That was- ... decided a long time ago.

**[Participant A]**

But that decision came with a, with a deadline as well. Can you imagine 2025 building a casino? Because that's one of the things I have to build there. do people still go to casinos? I don't know. I mean, gosh. I mean, there are three other casinos or four casinos on the island. I mean, how many more? It seems the concept behind the project is also dated now.

**[Interviewer]**

I actually spoke to some very prominent developers here for this dissertation. And I mean, I think it's easier to refute this project when you don't have concession to the land, but a number of them fully agree that it should be a green lung and that Gzira has had enough development and that this proposition that does not make sense anymore. And, keeping that from being a green lung for that area is going to be very, very damaging if you remove the use it has now. I think once you put private development somewhere and you say, "Okay, you can walk around these private developments or something," it doesn't really remain public in the same sense.

**[Participant A]**

It's privately owned though. I mean, they... you get there at the discretion of the owners. And frankly, even the space itself is not conducive to public use. It's not a square, where people can just go there, get their bicycles or whatever. It's not really public. It's maybe publicly accessible- ... but not a public space.

**[Interviewer]**

So two different things, right? Because one of them's a technical label, and the other one goes beyond what the label is.

**[Participant A]**

Can I do a concert in the space, for example?

**[Interviewer]**

Exactly. What I initially thought was that there's a big gap, because maybe certain people in the industry get used to these technical words and, maybe they throw them around they mean the same thing. But to the public even if they don't know, they're seeing through it. They know that this isn't what a public space is to them.

**[Participant A]**

Metropolis is a classic one, for example. I don't know if you're familiar with the project. So it's that, that big hole in Gzira. There were going to be three towers there, but they never built. And again, that project at the time, had a deadline. I used the floor area ratio. So the floor area ratio concept is where you reduce your footprint on the lot and compensate by leaving public space. In a second renewal of the permit, I think under this administration, what they did was put the towers on a podium. The podium is a massive supermarket, and the public space is on the roof of the supermarket, as above the first floor. So, is it public? I mean, even Zaha Hadid's face, is it public, that? It's really a shopping centre.

**[Interviewer]**

Do you think the way people feel about a place is taken into consideration, in large-scale developments?

**[Participant A]**

I think this is one of the problems where, well, one of the reason, why I don't agree sometimes with the voluntary organisations, with the NGOs, FAA, when they target the developer or the project. That wasn't the right forum to address it, but the problem was in the local plans. That is what, that is what started all this.

**[Interviewer]**

Because if the law allows them to not do it, then they're not going to do it?

**[Participant A]**

It's not about not being required. The problem is the cost of land is, is, is valued based on development potential. So when you're doing valuations, very often you don't... No one, the people who do valuation, don't factor in public amenity, memory of space, and heritage. It's not a factor in the valuation. If there are a number of price ranges of, of potential offers that you're gonna get, it will be distributed in a shape of a bell curve, right? So you're going to have the mean, which is going to be the value people will probably get. But at the end of the day, that's not the value of the property. The value of the property is the highest, it's the topmost value you can get for that, that's the value.

**[Interviewer]**

So what you're saying here is that we can't really blame the developers because they're going to do what they do?

**[Participant A]**

The system is flawed. The whole system is flawed. Because, our system creates speculation. So there is no plan. In other European cities, plans are outlined clearly.

**[Interviewer]**

So, what you're saying is kind of the fingers are being pointed in the wrong place almost, because the developer is going to try maximise his profit every time.

**[Participant A]**

Yeah, I think that's, that's their job, no? I'm not here to say defending them, but I think the attention's being placed on the developers when the attention should be on the government. They are allowing this to happen. So if they've created a system where this is possible, then, I mean, it's going to happen, no?

**[Interviewer]**

The voice targeting the developer is quite loud right now.

**[Participant A]**

They're part of the system as well, probably. I'm sure some of them have spoken to politicians.

**[Interviewer]**

So do you think the public is not informed about who they should be pointing a finger at? Do you think they don't know how these things work?

**[Participant A]**

Well, I think public opinion is shaped through public discourse, right? So it's the people who participates in public debates that are forming people's opinions. Now, if the message that the public continuously receives is that developers or development is bad, and doing nothing is good, that's where public opinion will go. And this is what we're seeing. So we're seeing a lot of, of, of VOs, of, of NGOs, ENGOs especially, who are competing almost with each other on filing objections, for example. I don't think this is the right approach. KTP doesn't participate in these activities. I mean, we kind of tackle certain specific projects, but we never enter into campaigns on, on, on specific projects because we know this is not going to work, because ultimately if a project or not is approved is a legal process. The local plans form what is called a legal commitment. The planning law itself says this.

**[Interviewer]**

Are there... Do you believe there are vested interests not to change the system?

**[Participant A]**

Vested in whom? I think the general public, despite all the, all the protests, I have a feeling the general public doesn't really want too much change, despite the perception and the public outrage. Let me put it this way. So when there are these articles that come out on the press... Recently, there was one property increase by 25% in, in whatever, in what... what range? I think it's one year or whatever it was. And there was, there was an article saying, how property prices increased. There are two ways of, of receiving that information that you see or that you read. Either be horrified thinking "Jesus, the price of properties is going up faster than my salary." " The other reaction is, "This is amazing," have property, so the more the prices go up, the wealthier I'm gonna get. My, my future is stable. So the this system of speculation affected everybody. There's very few people who are not participating in this whole experience, this disaster in the country. Unless you're living on a UCA or an apartment already.

people don't want change. They want, Stivala to do less, but they don't want to be the ones to be doing less. They want to keep going where they are.

**[Interviewer]**

I see – do you think it's performative, or a 'if I can't beat them, join them' situation?

**[Participant A]**

Neither. People do their own thing.

**[Interviewer]**

Okay. But then if people don't resist, will we ever see change?

**[Participant A]**

I've partially already answered this question by proposing an alternative. A cogent one. not, not just saying, "Let's stop development." because that's not the solution.

**[Interviewer]**

So, a top-down approach?

**[Participant A]**

It depends what you mean. But I mean, building regulations, our campaign of six years, was that bottom-up or top-down? I don't know. Maybe we will come up with something, an alternative to the current system which will benefit the developers, but the government and also the interests of the residents and environmentalists. But it takes time. I want to add something... a hot take. So there is a business behind being an NGO. In the sense that if your membership fees are dependent on how active you are in campaigning for the environment, then you have an interest in creating outrage. I know it's a bit cynical.

**[Interviewer]**

And I have never thought about that, but it's very interesting you say that.

**[Participant A]**

Let me give you an example. Din l-Art Helwa issued press releases that they filed 10,000 objections in a year. Without getting the merits of whether they are valid objections. Or whether they are actually all relevant. 10,000 is the number that they were after, to show how active they are and how fight, they're fighting for them. Are they fighting for the environment by doing this? Well, they're possibly abusing the system as well. I'm very open with both sides, like Andre Callus (Moviment Graffiti) ... I mean, I, I respect them a lot. I think they're one of the most, consistent and I think credible NGOs that are on the island, more than the others, I think. I tell him, I tell them, "Listen, I can't be against development because it doesn't make sense. How can I be against development?" But they, they'd rather now have a position against everything. But I cannot, I can never take that position, because it's part of our profession.

**[Interviewer]**

Would you agree that there is a sensitivity to negative headlines?

**[Participant A]**

Yes. Sometimes I make a controversial statements they end up spending the whole day on The Times. They've taken it out of context and make a whole thing and it stays, always stays on the... But, absolutely, there is a lot of sensitivity. I think part of the problem is also our density. So many people in each other's business. Instead of spying over our neighbours through the balcony, we are getting into the objections against each other's work.

**[Interviewer]**

So one of the things that really opened my eyes with these interviews is speaking to developers and, .. Obviously I'm a student, architecture. I've never really been in the real world. This is my first time interacting with these people, and they did not hold the opinions which I expected them to hold at all.

**[Participant A]**

Look, the problem with developers isn't just that they want to make money, of course they do, but they're working within a system that only allows for one type of development. They can influence politics, sure, but even they're limited by the framework they operate in. And honestly, it's the same for us. As architects, we're trained at university with certain values, but when we go out into practice, we quickly realise we can't really apply those values the way we thought we could. The system channels us in a direction that goes against the way we were taught to think. So yes, we can criticise

developers, but we also have to acknowledge that the system itself is part of the problem, it restricts all of us.

**[Interviewer]**

I see what you mean.

**[Participant A]**

Developers operate within a flawed system where they must compete for land, struggle with permits, and bureaucracy. The issue is not just individual behaviour but the system itself. Architects as well, are expected to act ethically, but in a corrupt environment, ethics alone can't fix structural problems.

**[Interviewer]**

Agreed. Agreed. so there were kind of a few moments that, stuck out to me. There was a project, I don't know if you remember it. It's been quite a long time, and it was shelved for a long time as well. It was basically about a proposed a ferry between Senglea and Sliema, stopping in Valletta underneath in the rock. And it even got, endorsement by UNESCO, who loved the idea. And, I was told, eventually because of an agreement between government and Virtu Ferries, it never happened. My question is this - voices are only loud when they're against development, and sometimes they're not as loud in support for positive development.

**[Participant A]**

But you touched on another thing there, is transport. And the co- people don't really care about modes of transport other than the car. Remember the scooters? They got banned from Malta for some minor issues, which could've easily been fixed by adding parking bays like other European countries. This causes issues, and people didn't care to seem them go because they were misused. With proper care, they could've been great for Malta.

**[Interviewer]**

And I suppose that circles back to our previous point of people not wanting that much change. My brother cycles a lot. He trains triathlon. He cycles a lot of places. But even for him to travel long distances, it's very difficult, because, we have bike lanes that end up abruptly.

**[Participant A]**

Well, there's also the lack of cleaning of the roads as well. But that's because the people who take decisions don't have the sensitivity to look for these problems. Yeah, I used to go to meet the minister of transport Ian Borg with the scooter. I used to take it into his room. On purpose, to show him. But people were even using them for dangerous joy rides in public space. I mean, it's dangerous. People can get hurt. So there's a need for more control. Same thing, really.

**[Interviewer]**

Only a few questions left. If you could suggest different direction, for Manoel Island, what would it look like?

**[Participant A]**

I think it should be a kind of park. Msida Park was also trying to address this point, which is why I think it got, captured public opinion so, resonated so well in public opinion. But it is, we need spaces for calmness as well. We need this also from a mental health point of view, there's nothing. There's

nowhere to go. I mean, if I want to go jogging, there's nowhere. Even in Valletta, there are no well-designed public spaces anymore.

[Interviewer]

Maybe on the west side? Rabat, Mdina?

[Participant A]

Not even Mdina. I went recently with some speakers — there are cars everywhere. It makes the whole place ugly. And it's done so a mayor doesn't lose votes. That's what this is about. Same pattern.

[Interviewer]

What makes it difficult to explore alternatives like this?

[Participant A]

The state. Since independence, the state has always been fearful of upholding public interest over private. Local plans were designed to create wealth by enabling development in everyone's backyard.

[Interviewer]

So, you've witnessed decisions being made in favour of private interest?

[Participant A]

All the time. Even with Comino, they're trying something feebly with the ticketing system, but still. There's a perception that upholding the public good loses votes. It might be true in the short term. But in the long term, the quality of life improves. So you need to be a bit patient if you're a politician, and take a bit of a leap, and trust that eventually people will come around if you do it well. Because if you execute a decision participation badly, like they did with scooters, for example. They did it badly, obviously people turned against it, and they had to take it, take it down.

[Interviewer]

Yes. And my last question will be this. These are long-term interests, right? Things that you're not gonna see immediate gratification. people might, lose the luxury of being able to park their car right under their house because they live in Mdina, they might- ... et cetera, et cetera. How do you think we could communicate these things to the public more effectively? Because clearly, these things aren't working. People are still scared of losing votes. Is it a communication issue, or can we not communicate these things, we just have to do them and move on?

[Participant A]

I think, I think the communication... So there will be people who are sensitive to these subjects and will receive them well. But at the end of the day, it has to, the communication has to be towards the politician. Politicians need to be convinced, because they are then the ones who have to take the executive decision. Just think, just think the Mosta decentralization for example. There was that project which was good, and then there was a late change in administration at the local council and they reverted it. And, the majority of people either don't know, don't care, or don't even want change to happen.

*END OF INTERVIEW - PARTICIPANT A*

**[Interviewer]**

My dissertation currently is exploring negotiation in Malta,, regarding ongoing public projects. Um, it seems like now more than ever, there are a lot of big projects that are things like Msida Creek, Manuel Island, Villa Rosa. And the closer certain projects come to realisation, the further we get from agreement or majority agreement from all stakeholders. So my intention is to kind of understand, um, communication, maybe where it falls flat and where it can improve. Now, I understand that you've kind of had an important role as a planner in Malta, um, in spatial planning, kind of, and you've been very much part of these ongoing processes involved in a lot of these projects. So my first question to you would be a general one, um, related to communication, uh, as your experience, um, as a pa- as a spatial planner in Malta, with regards specifically to the public. So what are the key challenges that you've experienced as a spatial planner in communicating developments and long-term plans to the public?

**[Participant B]**

I must admit that I don't always understand, I don't know what to say, and sometimes I didn't even try. What drives people to take specific positions with respect to specific projects. Actually, what is happening is I don't think there is much communication because the stakeholders tend to speak past each other. The reason being because they have divergent interests. So, um, uh, the view, the, the targets is not to sort of give something up, so all need two or more sides meeting halfway. Um, uh, the approach normally is, um, uh, the winner takes all. Which, uh, is happening in Manoel Island, for example. I mean, the Manuel Island people, there's a famous, um, statement made by Mizzi, which I wasn't aware of before. In those days I used to work with them. But I wasn't aware that they had made a statement back in 2012, which is being cited a lot by, um, the people who are now running the, uh, petition. Um, but irrespective of that, there were early movements that there was already a feeling, that Ma- Manuel Island probably... Because it's, uh, an island, or an islets, does not, um, uh... should not be... Of course, from the point of Participant D, so much developed, so much effect. At one point, um, uh, MIDI negotiated with government to transfer a substantial proportion of permitted floor space from Manuel Island to Tigne. So overall, they still, well, uh, um, had the same amount of floor space for dwellings, office space, et cetera. But they, they shifted because they, they wanted, the thought of a, a Manuel Island light. They really wanted as it, as, uh... It was provided for back in 1992 when the development plan was issued. Then after the, um... EIA, the first EIA, of 2017 was, uh, um, uh, nullified by the board of EPIN because there was, namely Edward Said, who had signed a false declaration. And I was accused by the chairman of the, or the chair of the board, that I should have carry o- carried out, uh, due diligence, um, which I co- I wasn't given time to contest because when he made the statement, I wasn't there yet. So, uh, um, Marsa one party. Um, then after that, um, uh, my, uh, MIDI reduced, um, the land cover, the proportion of the, the land cover filled adding, like, I think, 20,000 square meters, um, to the undeveloped parts. So there, there was an attempt. Mind you, MIDI was not giving up anything because what they did was exchange. They exchanged floor space in Manuel Island, which floor space, to, uh, additional space in, uh, Tigne. In the case of the, uh, um, the second one, that is the exposure of what is called the cemetery area. I don't know what, um, what, uh, um, sh- say, how should I say, um, what was given up and what was gained. Probably... um, uh, manual way. They figure, maybe figured out that with less developments, the apartments would be sold more expensively. Sort of, because obviously there would be more open space, et cetera. Probably that's how they figure things out, um, I wasn't... Because, um, uh, we, uh... Although the EIA is intended to be part of the

communicate- communicative instruments, for negotiation, it is not treated as such. We are just treated as people who produce a piece of paper, which, uh, makes it easier, um, makes it relatively easier for them to get that permission. That's all they care. The people who sort of normally object to projects don't trust us. We are considered to be, um, uh... We are considered the, sort of the hit men of Participant Ds. So we are not, we, we are not really trusted by anyone. So basically, um, I cannot... At least in the impact assessments that I have participated in, um, I don't think there was what I would call real communication. And then there's a lot of communication between developers and politicians, which, um, and I'm obviously left out of those. They wouldn't want me to witness what they sort of discuss between them. So although on paper... In fact the EIA is regulated under the, um, Aarhus Convention also. In fact, since, um, in 2010- 2003, the EU adopted the Aarhus Convention, so automatically, Malta had to adopt it. And, um, uh, provisions, um, uh, regarding the, this convention were, um, uh, introduced or entered into different directives, including the EIA directive. So basically, I, I, um, I don't see a thing that I can talk in terms of... Well, let's use the term genuine communication. But then, can communication be genuine? I mean, when we participate in, um, when we participate in, uh, discussions, do we really say what we mean? Do we really mean what we say? There's a famous song which when I was young, which I really used to sort of listen to a lot. Um, you know, there, there are certain... A lot of nuances which, in my opinion, don't really, In fact, I don't think that genuine, genuine, as we imagine... I don't think that we can even speak of genuine, um, communication. Because you don't really know what's going on even in your mind while you're talking. You're not sure whether you're speaking what you feel at all. What do you really feeling? You know, there, there, there are these, um... at the same time, um, the environmental lobbies or groups have finally become more politically savvy. Like, when they started 20 years ago, it was about 2007, like FEA emerged when Fort Cambridge was being discussed. I remember it was one of their first. And in those days, they used to argue, let the case officer, um, write, um... Let the case officers write their reports independently. Don't try to twist their arms. And, uh, they, they were naive. They thought that it... Somehow, in my opinion, they were naive, in my opinion, uh, because somehow they thought that there was... The planning authority should be this independent entity there, where... Which gives independence or independent, um, advice or directions. And that when, uh, that it is, um, required to oppose government. This is not what, what planning authorities are about. This is basically it shows that they don't read. They don't read the law. If you read the law, from 1992 onwards, you will see that the planning authority is there to provide land for government to implement their policies. They can be social policies, they can be environmental, but you have to provide the land. If a government decides that they need to build schools, primary schools and urban centres within walking distance, the planning authority's role is to provide that land. Um, or the land is there. And to make it, um, uh, easy, uh... Not easy. To facilitate the, uh, adoption of a particular... The assignment of a land use to a specific land, 'cause the government has the power to do it. And there is absolutely no planning system in the world which enjoys the, th- the level of independence that these people assume. The planning authority cannot oppose government. It is there to implement government's will. Their autonomy lies not in, in the way they do..... policy or the approved developments, but in the way they operate. How do you treat it?

**[Interviewer]**

Mm-hmm. It's a branch of the church.

**[Participant B]**

Um, uh, the- the Jesuits are Catholics and they are bound to promote the idea, the teaching of the church. But, the organisation and system gives them certain freedoms. They are like the commandos of the church. They don't have to read, um, the stuff that other priests have to read every day, for example. They are free of that. They, um, they can... They were amongst the first to wear, um, lay-layperson's clothing, for example. And they're- they're still Catholics, but they're- they're- they are not free to say that there is no God, for example. They cannot do it. And then the same with the pla- the planning authority is basically the equivalent of the Jesuits for government. They have to implement government policy, um, but their *modus operandi*, um, uh, detaches them from, uh, the will of the permanent secretary, for example, of the minister. That's- that's basically it. There's- there's no such a thing as a... And that's nowhere in the world. Nowhere. The closest was the United States in the '20s and the fact they enacted a federal law, and it was abandoned. And the model was similar... Our planning law in 1992 was similar. They stole certain things from or borrowed certain ideas from this- this federal act in the United States. But it was abandoned. There was even a person advising President Roosevelt, um, Tugwell, a certain Tugwell, that, um, planning should be default power of the state after the lo- after the judiciary, the executive and the legislative, and there should be the planning part. Um, but it was never taken. In fact, Roosevelt was pressured by the New York business class to get rid of him, and he was sent, um, as the governor of Puerto Rico. In fact, when I wanted to read his papers, I managed to- to... The only place where I could get his papers was from the University of Puerto Rico, and they sent me photocopies of a collection of his papers.

#### **[Participant B]**

That's the only place in the world where you can- can find the academic papers of this Lexford Tugwell. Then in the United Kingdom, there was a proposal in 1939, um, for the Planning Commission, they used to call it, which had to be an independent commission. When, uh, the pro- the 1939 proposal, they were suspended because of the war, of course. And then they were sort of resumed, uh, all the work on the new Town and Country Planning Act was resumed in 1944, or, uh, 1945, '44 even in Malta. We had a, um, a bill for a Town and Country Planning Act in 1944. But it Minto never wanted it - to earn more money. Um, or the refused. In fact, um, Barlow had proposed the, uh, there was a certain guy called Barlow, and he proposed setting up a planning commission, which was to be what nowadays the Brits call QAGOS. Um, uh, quasi-autonomous government organisations they called them. Uh, and they didn't do it. Actually, all them, uh, the British planning system was very political and, uh, there are no such things like our Planning Board, for example. All the decisions are made, both the plans and decisions, permissions are issued by local councillors. That's all. They wanted to retain strict government control. There was a Minister for Planning, responsible for planning. And nowadays it is the minister responsible for local authorities, who is responsible for planning. Whenever the central government feels they have to intervene, they intervene. And they try to give them as much auto- autonomy from central government as possible, but within limits. Now the limits are going to be harsher under Starmer. Under Starmer, If, um, a project which is going to create jobs or is an- an important infrastructure project, and the people protest, the local council which heeds the protests of the people and issues a refusal, will, uh, not receive any funding from central government. And very few people are aware of these developments. Very, very few people are aware.

#### **[Interviewer]**

Can you- can you explain exactly how that's going to be? So if they don't receive-

#### **[Participant B]**

Under English law, a plan is not a guarantee that a development can take place. Okay? The, uh, decision makers, in- in our case it's the Planning Board, have the power even to issue a permission which is contra- contra- which contradicts a- a plan. Or Mark Chetcuti doesn't know what the hell he's doing. Mark Chetcuti's the Chief Justice who makes a lot of decisions on planning. Not even the planning authority, because they don't explain themselves. Because if you depart from plan, you have to explain why you departed from plan. This particular feature of English planning law, not continental. In the continent, they cannot do it. It's- it's against their constitutions. But whether it- it was, it is done in the UK because the UK don't, the bits don't have a constitution. And they go wherever they decide constitution cases, they go as far back as William the Conqueror. All because they study proceedings. And it is written in our law, Article 72. Initially it was Article 33, 69 and now 72. Anyway, it's a stern ,mandate. This stop. And this particular feature of English law was requested by local author- when local authorities in the UK realised that the political class did not want a planning commission, and they were going to, uh, delegate planning powers to local governments. To what are called local planning authorities, LPAs. The local authorities requested that the law, the Town and Country Planning, Planning Act includes a provision which allows them to depart from policy legally. And that is why they used, used the term development plan, because development implies movement. Before they used to call them schemes, which i- which is, implies permanence, kind of. A static scheme. They called it a scheme. And that is what we did. We borrowed these ideas from them and we call our plans development, actually.

#### **[Participant B]**

If you look at the law. Now, the local, the local planning authorities, which were the local councils, and in case of a large local council, a sub-committee of the local council. In fact, when I was doing my PhD, the chair of the sub-committee, planning sub-committee of the Newcastle Council, was doing her PhD with me. And so we used to watch these things live, she used to discuss her experiences, you know, in our seminars. Very, very educational. Initially the local authorities wanted this particular power because they argued that if we get an application for a development, which we haven't provided for in the brief, in- in the plan, but which we thought was imp- important for the development of our community; They needed the power to approve it if they wanted it. Okay? Keep in mind this was just after the war. So, and, uh, now, in England, the people who are using this particular feature of the law are not the local councils, but the better off. If someone comes and proposes a factory which will effect the value of properties in the area, you can use the legal power held by the council to oppose the project. Even if the councillors are not voting, they will vote against it - especially if they are rich conservatives. Conservatives are more likely to do so, obviously they live in the more expensive houses. They want to enjoy their views in the periphery of the town. Um, they- they- they are concerned with the values of their properties, *blah, blah blah*. Therefore, the conservatives are instinctively against planning. They hate planning. They didn't introduce planning in the UK, the Liberals did, in 1909. And the Labour Party kept it up. Individually, conservatives figured out how to manipulate the law for themselves. And how, and how to blackmail the councillors. When Margaret Thatcher tried to, um, dissolve the planning system. She didn't manage to. Why? Because her own people turned against her.

**[Interviewer]**

So what for their own developments? How, for- for what?

**[Participant B]**

So, you've got very rich people who invest in factories and whatever. And we assume they are against planning. Because, they need to do impact assessments etc.,. But when something is proposed near their detached house, then they're in favour.

**[Interviewer]**

Okay, because that's going to help their property skyrocket, right?

**[Participant B]**

Yes - they're bipolar. And, uh, Thatcher was a bit naïve and she thought that, uh- and she did not manage to. Boris Johnson tried also. He appointed a certain Jenrick and he did not succeed. Their job was always to placate..... the Conservatives in local constituencies to accept certain development because there wasn't work. On this recent election, planning was the top issue for both parties. But people knew the Labour party looked on the long line, and people wanted to tame the planning system because there are no jobs. UK, they want development, full stop. Now, Starmer is going to make it clear that if councillors back development opposition, they'll get their funding cut.

**[Interviewer]**

This principle that you're talking about now is written in our law?

**[Participant B]**

It is written in our law, yes, yes. Article 72. Now - at some point, the environmental lobby understand that an autonomous Planning Authority was not the way. The way is get people on your side - get political. Play the game. Try to get public opinion in your favour and play the game. And I think they've been very successful, I'm not saying that I agree with them, but definitely you cannot disagree that they haven't been successful in certain times. Its not a question of if dirty play was involved or not, thats a different conversation - they're playing the game and they've been playing it effectively.

**[Interviewer]**

I actually-- I had an interview yesterday with someone and they brought this point up as well, but in a different way. And I'm-- I'll actually circle back to it later, um, because he brought up something I'd never thought before regarding the environmentalist lobby sort of in Malta. So this idea that they're now playing the political game because you- That's what they should be doing. That's, that's the, that's the way to do it.. You mentioned earlier, um, that communication here, it's kind of like winner takes all. Right? But not only here.. that's what I wanted to ask you. If we look at Malta and it's that way over here, do you think that's just something that's... imbedded into the local system?

**[Participant B]**

No, no, no, no, no, it is part in the way all societies work. We are no different to other countries. We always look at other countries as if they're superior - "*oh, when someone does something corrupt abroad, they resign*" - this is absolutely false. Our situation is no different to other places in the world. And a lot of our issues are common with the rest of the world. In fact, even in my time studying abroad I've encountered the same issues as I have in Malta. Almost never in a situation, anywhere I've been, have developers and the community disagreed and then been willing to meet halfway. I remember a situation where a friend of mine, an architect, and Michael Mason, in charge of transport at the time, had a disagreement, and the architect suggested that they meet halfway and compromise. Mason replied ; "Meet halfway? What, and build a 3 meter road instead of a 6 meter one, and expect to squeeze a dual carriageway in there? No - we either build it, or we don't." There were entire movements dedicated to these ideas - 'Let's get to the yes' or... "Getting to yes"... based on a lot of Habermas' beliefs. But I never agreed with their philosophy. The reality is, these are what we call 'Wicked Problems'. These are problems we have to live with. We manage them, we work around them... but we can never truly solve them. Unlike 'complicated problems' - which maybe an engineer can unravel with time; *complex* or *wicked* problems have no solution. In planning, these are the issues we deal with. Wicked ones. There's also the issue of power. And with power, it's simple. Whoever can make the opposing side do something that they don't want to do, coercion, force, etc - whatever. Do it.

**[Interviewer]**

This sort of alludes to this idea that, um, that kind of even if the public disagrees, kind of the law is laid out and if something is allowed to happen, there can be as much public outrage as possible. Most of the times, if it's legal, things will go through, right?

**[Participant B]**

Yes, and even in this case - law is something we voted for, not something morally correct. We draw a line, more often than not a completely arbitrary one. Its about order, not ethics. It draws boundaries, who gets power and who doesn't. Law is law when you have the coercive means to implement it. Why does international law fail so often? No one's going to mobilise their army to get Netanyahu to fall in line. Whereas if you break the law in your hometown, Police come and make you fall in line. And sometimes you have a project which is approved to happen but no one wants it - either the government gives in and puts a stop to it, or they go through with it. Historically, those opposing the project, who in their mind have the moral high ground, have not always been right. Take the Eiffel Tower for example. The equivalent body to 'Din l-Art Helwa' back then were all out against it... but they left it. Parisians now overwhelmingly see it as a symbol of their home. How are we even meant to know whats going to happen? Public opinion could be wrong every single time. The same intellectuals who oppose modern design, calling it ugly, will overwhelmingly support the Parisian Boulevards - which required the bulldozing of countless local communities in the area for their construction. In planning schools, Paris is still debated, maybe not in architecture schools - but I feel architecture schools are still very superficial... all about looks. They care about looks, never the social implications. The point is, when someone wins, it's not because they were right. Its about law and power. Sometimes those with power are right and sometimes they are wrong.

**[Interviewer]**

I think it's-- these are interesting examples and kind of especially when you relate them to the kind of rule of law. From your perspective in these processes, how important is it actually that the public understands long-term planning and development goals?

**[Participant B]**

The, the, the, the public cannot understand. The public don't, don't... The public at large don't have the luxury where they can sit down and think about the future. They don't have that luxury. In order to think about the future, you have to be literate about certain things.

**[Interviewer]**

Very hard for people who are not trained to be literate on those things, right?

**[Participant B]**

Yes. Take Trump's Tariffs for example. Most people thought exporters would be paying for those Tariffs - they didn't know that money was going to be taken from their own pockets. You cannot trust people to be educated on it. In fact, those at the top will utilise the public's lack of knowledge in order to get further.

**[Interviewer]**

I think one of the most prevalent conversations that the public is engaged in, now whether it's the loud minority or not is debatable but, there is clearly a lot of resistance. I think it's related to several topics on people's minds such as accessible public space, urbanisation, sustainability... and it's a hot topic at the moment.

**[Participant B]**

Yes, but with Manoel Island, you have to be careful with what the media is telling you. When we (ERA) hosted a quick survey, a large group of people seemed to be in favour of it.

**[Interviewer]**

I would like to ask you a bit of a question that's not maybe about you as a planner, or your involvement in the ERA. as Dr. Paul Gauci, had to describe Manuel Island to someone who's never been there before, how would you describe it?

**[Participant B]**

Hmm... interesting. I don't know. Honestly. I don't know. I wasn't too familiar with it until 1997 when we formulated the traffic statement for that and the Tigne project. I know it belonged to the English for a while, and not really 'for' the Maltese... kind of a no-go area.

**[Interviewer]**

Why was it a no-go?

**[Participant B]**

Because it, uh, it was controlled by the Brits.

**[Interviewer]**

Not a complete no - go... I was also involved in the yacht marina of Birgu basically. Another no-go. Maltese people used to visit once a year to watch the Regatta on the 8th of September. When they made plans to build the actual Marina, people from Birgu used to come down and fish in the area - challenging them to come kick them out, implying sort of 'this is our land - don't lock us out' - a classic contested space. In fact, Mintoff and Alfred Sant fought over this. Alfred Sant wanted the project and Mintoff didn't, so Sant's government fell.

Golden Sands is a similar situation... it used to be called Military bay. Pembroke as well. Military owned, contested by locals. When the Brits left, Maltese people went in and said 'This is Ours'. I think a large part of people's issues come from the fact that we all depend on powerful people, and rich people, to live. We're either paid directly by them, or they're taxed to fund us. But we don't like to admit it. That's reality. But we don't want to accept it - that they can come in, take what they want, develop in what seems to be their own best interest. But that's my opinion.

**[Interviewer]**

I agree. So when it comes to this stuff, obviously right now there's a lot of discourse. There's the petition. There's now this thing that you know, they were meant to finish or 75% of works by last year.. So there's a lot of conversation going on. I found it-- What I-- I found a couple of things interesting. First of all, obviously there's a lot of emotion tied to the site right now where the people-- the people who disagree, there seems to be a lot of emotion. I went through the videos that they put out and I found the language really interesting. So they did not really speak about technicalities, physical, barely any mention of the building. These are things like this. These are quotes. So Malta has already lost so much. We are not losing Manoel Island as well. We still have Manoel Island. They want to take that too. So even under Callus, when he was speaking about Manoel Island, he spoke about a treasure, "*aħdar fost il kongressjoni*", joy, meaning... A lot of this very symbolic, very emotional language, right? And I think when you look at the history of Manoel Island, so it went from, you know, the British, right, where people weren't really meant to go straight into the hands of, you know, our new ruling class - the rich -

**[Participant B]**

Yeah, yeah. That's what they are. That's what they are. I mean that is the, the hard reality of this world, whether we like it or not.

**[Interviewer]**

Do you think this kind of element, right, of owned by the power and you are kept out, do you think it fuels this harsh retaliation against the project?

**[Participant B]**

Yes, yes. It, it, it, it, it can do. Either-- It can go either way because you have different types of people. There are people who sort of defer to power, and those who choose to oppose it and fight for better odds. I will say that I think Callus (*member of Movement Graffiti*) likes cameras a bit too much, however. Maybe I'm coming off a little cynical. But every generation has their contested spaces. Anyways, at the end of the day, whoever gets their way, wins. Personally, the case of ITS, in Pembroke sticks with me. People were whining when they proposed ITS, but residents themselves had gone into Pembroke earlier, levelled the landscape and built their ugly buildings - not even a single decent build. That used to be a place I used to go and adventure when I was young, and now its gone. So for me it was a huge double standard. You took a place that meant a lot to me, that gave me memories., that was mine. Now you feel the right to defend the land because you feel it's being stolen? Is that fair? It comes down to the fact that there is more than one type of ownership. Legal ownership, fiscal ownership - is only one kind of ownership. Memories, sentimental meaning, whether we accept it or not, creates feeling of ownership inside us.

**[Interviewer]**

Let me continue on this line of thinking - do you think planning processes account what places mean to people - symbolically? And to what extent?

**[Participant B]**

Yes, but places mean different things to different people. You cannot generalise from the position of a planner. There was a famous survey by Charles Hocke - trying to understand types of planners. It concluded that 60% were the bureaucratic type. All about calculations, money, etc, while the remaining 40% would delve into cultural issues, etc. It really depends on the individual. Meaning isn't something you can generalise. Once you're a consultant, you put yourself automatically on one side - a hired car for the development's side of things. What happens when people like Callus (*Movement Graffiti* activist) come into play? I think he just likes the cameras. I don't have a high opinion of him. I enjoyed how he spoke about the struggle of the Palestinians on the radio... he was extremely informed. But in other circumstances, he has annoyed me. How things are right now, the Prime Minister is on MID's side. He could wake up tomorrow, scared that he's losing too many votes, and veto the whole

thing.

**[Interviewer]**

This seems to be a recurring theme. When does it become worth while to sacrifice private interests for public opinion? - there seems to be a line there, and before it is crossed, things seem to say the same.

**[Participant B]**

Yes - and only after elections, or events, are concluded, can you see whether those in power have made the right decision for their interest. Have you seen the Line, NEOM's project in Saudi Arabia? That's the same thing as the boulevards in Paris. If a tribe that happens to be there doesn't move in time, the bulldozers will flatten them. When I open LinkedIn, most comments are extremely supportive - especially from architects. They see a shiny building and they get impressed. More of the same. Nothing special to me, especially considering the social implications. Maybe in the future, people will consider it a marvel like the pyramids. Who knows. It boils down to people having power, making people do something that they don't want to do.

**[Interviewer]**

Let's say I had to ask you about Manoel Island, and you had to suggest a different direction, not necessarily a solution, just a direction that to you would make more sense. Even if... So, make more sense. Maybe in terms of giving more importance to public opinion. What would that look like to you?

**[Participant B]**

I don't respect public opinion because public opinion is basically, um, another word for double standards. They talk about the environment, and go buy another SUV - or eat I don't know how many kilograms of meat per week. So, I mean, I-I don't think much of public opinion.

**Interviewer]**

In context of Manoel Island, if you had to imagine what Manuel Island could look like by the end of a project, what would that look like to you?

**[Participant B]**

I don't really have an opinion. I adapt myself to what the, whatever there is. Whatever it becomes, there's going to be pressure for things like parking, some sort of commercial activity... if environmentalists are coming to visit, they're going to drive. I don't apologise for my cynicism. It won't be a pristine natural lung. Some sort of compromise will have to happen. Toilet facilities, parking... there's no chance it will be development free. What are you going to do with the Lazaretto? And the Fort? You need to generate money to make it work. In planning, you learn how complicated things get.

Now let's say the government takes on the cost of making this a Public Park... you'll have a tax payer in Paola with a block of flats in front of him who says right, well, knock this thing down because I want a public park in front of mine as well.

**[Interviewer]**

Maybe there's the opinion that everyone would benefit from it, but someone who lives far away might not feel that they're going to benefit from it?

**[Participant B]**

This became clear through social impact assessments in Hondoq ir-Rummien. In fact, everyone stopped doing them after this. Mario Vassallo, a sociologist, conducted a questionnaire among all of Gozo. The further away people went, the more people were in favour of the project, whereas in Qala, no one wanted it as they knew it would effect their quality of life. Its so predictable. The less it effects you, the less people care.

**[Interviewer]**

You'd think in a country this small, things like that wouldn't really...

**[Participant B]**

No, size doesn't make a difference. When I lived abroad, people didn't believe that we have 60 dialects in Malta. They would ask what do you do 'on' Malta - like Malta was some kind of rock you step on. They couldn't believe our 100 square mile home acts like a complete country with ample diversity. Size is not a factor.

**[Interviewer]**

I understand. I understand.

**[Participant B]**

I came across a theory I'd like to find again... no community can be truly united. We are aware of limited resources, so we know we have to fight to get our share. I need to get a majority to support me, but the smaller the majority, the better, so I can share with less people. So we try to concentrate everything in our own hands, in a way where we are as individually rich as possible. Now, whether it is a large country, or a small one - this applies. Actually, in a small country, I would argue that the scarcity of resources makes it even more cut throat.

**[Interviewer]**

One thing I've noticed, and one thing I've discussed with a lot of people now, is that in Malta, even if the opposition is small, because of social media and because of other things they have their hand on, they're, they're very loud. Especially-

**[Participant B]**

I, I, I don't... I don't like to use the word "loud". They are people who have decided to fight a battle, and they are making their voices heard.

**[Interviewer]**

You're right - I don't mean to imply any negative, just to place an emphasis on their determination.

**[Participant B]**

Now, what do MIDI do? They hire a bunch of image and marketing consultants to create renders and statements, and the things they come up with are utterly pompous. "We care about the environment"... they are just trying to understand what the opposition is looking for, and marketing themselves accordingly.

**[Interviewer]**

I see. The point I'm trying to make is this ; people are very outspoken about what they believe is bad, right? But there are a lot of projects I think may be of great interest to majority of the public - environmentalists included. One of the ones that comes to mind is recently I learned about a project that developer Mr. Angelo Xuereb had proposed which was ferry, transport from Senglea to Sliema, passing underneath Valletta. It passed ERA assessment, and UNESCO even issued a letter to the planning authority saying that they recommend it, stating it would improve the harbour, et cetera, et cetera. Personally I thought it was a sensible idea. Participant D even offered the bare the brunt of the costs - but I was told later the deal fell through due to certain dealings between the government and Virtu Ferries.

**[Participant B]**

Yes. The original idea was designed by Perit Edward Micallef.

**[Interviewer]**

What I'm trying to ask you, actually has a lot to do with this. There's a loud opposition against, but when it comes to positive development, sometimes things ...

**[Participant B]**

No, no, no, no, no.

**[Interviewer]**

There seems to be less support for developments, than resistance towards it - even when developments may support public interest. Do you think we have a tendency to focus on the negative headlines? To me, it seems that fighting for the right opportunities is as important as fighting against the wrong ones.

**[Participant B]**

It seems so - make people angry, and say whatever you want. Negative emotion is always an effective method to engage the public.

**[Interviewer]**

This will be my last question. From your side of things, um, when there's so much noise around ongoing projects, our own development. How do you think people choose what to focus on and choose which battles to fight? Is it what they read about? Is it what's shown on their television? How do you how do you think people choose, um, what to latch on to?

**[Participant B]**

From my perspective, with Manoel Island in particular, the primary driver was Astrid [Astrid Vella, coordinator for FAA]. Manoel Island was special to her and her family, she used to live close by. In the beginning, she focused a lot on Tas-Sliema. A lot of the initial outspoken individuals were those who would be directly effected by the development of Manoel Island - similar to my experience with Pembroke.

**[Interviewer]**

So you believe it's difficult to get people to care or to listen to something when it doesn't affect them directly - emotionally or economically, or otherwise.

**[Participant B]**

Yeah, that's, it. And everyone is unique - everyone has their own interests, biases... reasons. You can generalise sometimes though, and thats how elections are won. If you get something and catch a group vote, especially using social media - its very effective. I think Obama originally used that method, and very effectively. Still, everyone is different. Actually, if I remember correctly, Astrid [FAA] had praised a lot of Richard England's work a lot, so thats an instance were development was praised by environmentalists. Something I wish to make clear is the closeness between the government and Participant Ds. In reality, people have no reason to be shocked by this. Planning is not independent of

the government - it is an arm of the government. It's job is to find land, provide it to the government in order for them to execute their plans. People should not expect it to oppose the government. Because of this proximity to the government, the ruling class, its only natural that there is distrust from the people. This has existed since the beginning of cities and civilisations. We can see it in planning methods of the past, in things like Citadels... citadels would host the ruling and religious class as a means to protect themselves not only from invaders, but from their own people who could turn against them. This distrust has existed as a complex issue as far back as we can trace. Today, we need the government, but we don't trust them. We need bankers, but we don't trust them. It's a love - hate relationship. Sometimes, it escalates. Environmentalism is an extension of this distrust. It is born from a feeling that, the people in power - whether we elected them or not - are corrupt. Even in the case of honest politics, politics that means well for the people. If I want to implement policies, and change, I don't go to some per pusher or a common Joe. I go to someone capable, proven. People who are successful, like established developers. At the end of the day, even in honest politics - you must have power in order to impose your policies on the people - and powerful individuals, moguls, in a capitalist society, help the ruling class to impose as so. Both parties benefit from this transaction. One gains money, the other exerts influence. Obviously, with this in mind, there is going to be 'hanky - panky' between these parties. Participant D will send a nice, fat hamper to the politician who helps him make millions... but what would we do without them? For example - there was a freak out that local plans were changed, for *Francis* in order to make Villa Rosa happen. This happens all over the world, and the freak out is the fault of local journalists who don't do their research. Governments helping private investors, for their mutual gain - whether it was done honestly or not is another question; but the act in itself is not really unique. A lot of the time, the things that get built are often very telling as well. I'm going to go on another tangent, but I can't help myself. If you look at Washington, the capital city, the layout they saw imitated Versailles. In Versailles, you had the King as the focal point of the spatial layout. In Washington, it was the Congress and the Senate...

**[Interviewer]**

So the symbolic importance here is clearly shifted...

**[Participant B]**

Yes. Here, in Washington, the white house is shifted to the side; symbolically sidelining the power held solely by the executive. Now, take Brasilia for example. The centre of the capital is laid out in the form of an aeroplane; this is built post second-world war, where the aeroplane was seen as the most important technological advancement at the time. Here, Oscar Niemeyer placed all 3 branches in the same building - in what is known as the palace of the 3 powers. But again, the president is sidelined. Symbolic expression is explicit in all of these examples. The presidential house also has a famous chapel, by the way, and it's extremely similar to England's Manikata chapel - clearly influenced it. In fact, in the 1950s, Niemeyer was extremely popular with architecture students. His architecture was directly challenging the leaders of the free world. Brazil was saying "look - we have an architect who's as good, if not better, than yours". Maltese architects, and architects from other colonised countries, were very inspired by this. You can see the influence all over Malta - especially in local public schools. The ones Huntingford designed.

**[Interviewer]**

Circling back to what you said, regarding the Villa Rosa project. There was significant public uproar about that particular incident, with regards to local plans being changed. Right?

**[Participant B]**

Yes. The public don't know how things work, really. The public doesn't understand. It was legal - and what's legal, goes. If the government believes it is their best interest, and its legal, Participant D will get his way. In this case, that's what happened. The public don't have the time to understand these nuances... the same reason why we don't use direct democracy, and use representative democracy instead. Public opinion is completely informed and swayed by the media. A negative headline will sway public opinion in a second. They don't have the time to look into an issue.

**[Interviewer]**

Do you think - with a project like Manoel Island... something I'm trying to understand is this. You've previously brought up the idea of development as a symbol of power - colonial or otherwise. When you look at Manoel Island, which went from the knights, to the British, and now the the new 'ruling class' - private companies, do you think there's an underlying feeling of, "this is being held and kept from us by the ruling class" that fuels resistance?

**[Participant B]**

To a certain extent, yes. The ruling class has used development to build monuments to themselves; and now, the ruling class, which includes development moguls and companies like MIDI, are building these so called 'monuments' to themselves. I think however, everyone participating in this discussion has their own agenda. There may be a common streak between them, but it's hard to pin point it - I can't say I know for sure what it is. While it can be considered a monument, it is hard to know for certain whether that's a common streak that adds to every single one of their emotions. However, this idea of people reacting as monumental buildings is another issue we've seen throughout history - all the way back to the Babylonians. When the Jews saw Babylonians building *Ziggurats* that stood 26 meters, they accused them of trying to imitate God, or reach him. There was a sort of envy and disdain for it.

**[Interviewer]**

It's almost as if the conversation lives on, taking a new form as time goes by.

**[Participant B]**

Yes, and everyone has their own interpretation of it. These debates will go on forever.

**[Interviewer]**

I have one last question, regarding something you mentioned outside of this formal interview. If I put you on the spot, feel free not to answer. Colloquially, you encountered a phrase - "*Tieqaf il-Gebla*,

*Tieqaf Malta", correct?*

**[Participant B]**

Yes. Many people used to say it. In the 60s, we had already encountered it. It emerged because manufacturing did not help Malta's economy like we wanted it to, and development was what really saved it. That created the idea that development was crucial to our progress as a country. People used to use it to imply how important it is that we keep building, in order to keep moving forward.

**[Interviewer]**

Perhaps, this strengthens a previous implication. Not only is development a show of power, but one that holds huge importance within our culture. Here, it becomes an extremely relevant conversation to have regarding power dynamics in the country. With this being said, it seems there's a tipping point - were as a country, our priorities are changing, and a large portion of vocal people no longer hold development to this light, hence their resistance to projects such as Manoel Island.

**[Participant B]**

Yes - we seem to have gone from one extreme to another, in terms of the amount of development, as well as the reaction or attitude towards it. Slowly, but it seems so. I remember when my land lady offered to remove a tree the local council had planted in front of my house because she implied it would dirty my car. Just shows the attitude of the Maltese - but things are changing. yes.

**[Interviewer]**

Thank you - that concludes this interview.

*END OF INTERVIEW - PARTICIPANT B*

## *START OF INTERVIEW - PARTICIPANT C*

### **[Interviewer]**

Let's get started. So, the first thing I'd ask you would be, about a hot topic right now, which is negotiation, and that's Manoel Island. I think it touches on a lot of relevant topics, like sustainability on a national level, access to green spaces on a national level, as well as a lot of other things which might go unsaid.

The first thing I'd ask you to do is, if you had to speak to someone who has never been to Manuel Island before, how would you describe it to them? What would be the first thing you'd tell them about it?

### **[Participant C]**

I would say that it is one of the very few green lungs that we have, especially given that it is in such a busy area of Malta. I always remember problems with access, probably because I'm still quite young, so by the time I was kind of conscious of what was happening on the island, there were already many problems with accessing it. I believe it was in 2016 that we were actually given access to it, to part of it, and there is this kind of agreement where it was sold to MIDI, essentially. So, if I'm not mistaken, the contract also included Tigne Point, so Tigne Point has already been built, but Manuel Island hasn't. And now the public has been given this opportunity, essentially, because of this kind of loophole that the agreement with the deadline is in 2026. Technically, it should already be kind of voided, because there is no way that they're actually going to manage to construct a significant portion of the project by the deadline, and that is written as a term. So, yeah, I would say that's how I would kind of start explaining it.

### **[Interviewer]**

I would say as well, just as a note for this, I'm not looking for hard facts, whatever you think, things you've heard, those are very valid for this issue, so don't worry about it.

### **[Participant C]**

And it's also really important to mention that in Manuel Island there is a literal fort, and this is another issue we're facing with Fort Chambray, where our forts, our cultural heritage is not given the priority of public access, but it is given to private companies. This is a recurring issue.

### **[Interviewer]**

So it's something we've seen multiple times.

### **[Participant C]**

Yes.

**[Interviewer]**

And as a member of the public, how would you describe your role in this conversation right now?

**[Participant C]**

My role has definitely been to be front-facing, to use my platform, to use my voice, to make people aware, because it's crazy how sometimes, for example, when there's a petition going on, we just had the petition, it is so hard to actually tell people about it, because somehow we're always on social media, and it's magically so difficult to come across. So I've always been an activist, that is always a part of me that I could never shut away. So in the context of this, it was definitely rallying as many people as possible to actually sign the petition, because I personally don't feel comfortable just sitting here and not doing anything.

**[Interviewer]**

Do you feel like people who feel the same as you do you have a responsibility to speak out about these things?

**[Participant C]**

Yes, definitely. I think it is everyone's responsibility to speak out, and unfortunately, especially in Malta, maybe it's because of how small we are, and the fact that it can actually cost you your job or future opportunities, we do have this problem. But I think if everyone spoke out, we wouldn't have this problem, because no one then is going to lose their job for speaking out.

**[Interviewer]**

Yes. So you mentioned a number of problems there, kind of. This recurring issue of Manoel Island being sold to a private company, obviously access to public space being very limited, all extremely valid issues. So when I was trying to inform myself on this better, because as an architect, or as an architecture student, again, I've influenced this from both sides, and it becomes a bit muddy. And so I tried to start informing myself on this, and actually, one of the things I'm referencing is a video you put out, or you were featured in, and a video Andre Callus (member of Moviment Graffiti) put out very recently. And I found the language you used really interesting.

**[Participant C]**

The one of me actually speaking?

**[Interviewer]**

Yes, yes. And I had some quotes here that I wanted to just reference. So I think something you said was we still have Manuel Island, and they want to take this too. There is a place where, Callus said, there is a place where families and children can unwind, a place where we can experience our cultural heritage, a place for us. He describes it as a treasure that's kind of hidden among all this chaos. And the language used here is very interesting. Maybe when you go to people that are more involved in the technical side of things, they mention physical attributes, the size, the opportunities it has economically, etc. But, there's a lot of emotion tied up with it as well. And while the fight is about

Manuel Island, do you think that there are kind of stronger emotions bubbling under the surface, about a broader conversation?

**[Participant C]**

Yes, for sure. My video in particular started with Malta has already lost so much, we are not losing Manuel Island as well. And I find it interesting that you commented on the language, because as more time went by with me working in media, the more I saw the need to kind of dumb down the language, so that everyone can understand it. You know what I mean? Sometimes when you go too technical, people are not going to understand you, or else people are just going to feel like, you know, this is not meant for me, so I'm going to, like, scroll away. So I find that in these types of fights, it's very important to communicate in a way, in the best way possible, to reach as many people as possible.

**[Interviewer]**

Yes, I completely understand.

**[Participant C]**

And with emotion, emotion gets to people.

**[Interviewer]**

Because emotion is a hook. Yes. Okay, that's extremely interesting.

**[Participant C]**

Yes, emotion is definitely a hook.

**[Interviewer]**

I agree. It's almost like when you're playing against some of these players that are involved in the game, you almost have to play a bit politically with them, because they use language, or I would say most parties now, they use this language, they use political language, they use even, I mean, I would go as far as to call it sensationalism sometimes. And if they're playing on that field, it's very hard to beat them without playing that sort of game. But even besides that, I think commenting on the emotional side of it, beyond just being this piece of land connected to Malta by Bridge, I think it is being perceived as something a lot more important than that, almost a symbol of getting control back to people. And I think that's a very prevalent part of the conversation, where some people are discussing it, not all of them. So even that, the difference between kind of who's mentioning and who isn't.

**[Participant C]**

What was your question exactly initially? Did I answer it?

**[Interviewer]**

Yes, yes, very well, actually. One of the most direct answers from all of my interviewees. So you did, you did.

I assume, so, obviously I'm familiar with your opinion on this, but if I would ask you what the project would look like ideally to you, how would you describe it?

**[Participant C]**

In my ideal world, the project would not exist.

**[Interviewer]**

It would be left as it is right now?

**[Participant C]**

No, no. The government would take it over to rehabilitate most of the area. A lot of Manuel Island is actually closed off with barbed wire. There are still a lot of buildings which are actually abandoned, so those can be turned into community spaces. Literally, there's so much that you can do with that place. But parts of it, yes, leave it as it is. It's nice when you go to a place and there's this feeling that nature is taking over. Not everything has to be so curated when we're doing a public park. When Project Green announced that they're going to work on something, I'm like, okay, it's going to end up cemented, with everything prim and proper, and it's nice to experience the kind of wildness of nature, you know?

**[Interviewer]**

It's just something untouched here, because everything seems to be developed.

**[Participant C]**

Exactly, exactly. So I would say this is the government's perfect opportunity to, so we have this company, yes, they are, to a certain extent, it is their responsibility to uphold this contract. But this company has already shown that it is not going to reach its deadline. So I think the government is very often way too concerned about votes, of course, and, for example, they said it would cost like 100 million to take it back. Meanwhile, they just announced, if I'm not mistaken, a 300 million campaign to tackle obesity. It's like, okay, priorities are not there, kind of. And it would mean so much as well to regain the trust of the nation, because people have had it. I mean, 30,000 signatures is not a joke. The petition was not open for a very long time. It is quite a significant part of the population. And I think people are pretty fed up of their opinions, of their needs, of their sense of well-being as well, like their quality of life. It's always being kind of rushed away. We're constantly facing so much more construction and so much more traffic because of growth. So I believe it's a really good opportunity that they really shouldn't miss out on. One can dream.

**[Interviewer]**

Often in projects like this, I mean, I wouldn't say often, I think every time, in projects like this, especially large-scale projects like this, there are trade-offs, right? Someone's going to have to sacrifice something. Here we have developers who, no matter what happens to this project, developers have to be involved. They get things done. The state has to be involved to some capacity, the public, architects, etc. In your mind, if your ideal scenario had to go through, could you imagine who would maybe have to sacrifice something for that to happen?

**[Participant C]**

I mean, definitely the private company would lose billions down the line. I think citizens have already sacrificed a lot, so I think, for once, we shouldn't be the ones sacrificing. You know what I mean? Obviously, the private company will have to sacrifice that, and the government will have to sacrifice its kind of relationship to developers.

**[Interviewer]**

When it comes to alternatives like this, you mentioned that it's rare that we sacrifice private interests over public interests.

**[Participant C]**

Unheard of, almost.

**[Interviewer]**

Do you think there's something that makes it hard for us to explore that side of things in Malta? Does it go against the grain? Does it challenge existing dynamics? Are there priorities that maybe we don't see or that control the narrative? Why do you think those alternatives are so hard to explore here?

**[Participant C]**

Because they're not the ones that are going to bring in the most profit.

**[Interviewer]**

So it's focused on how much money we're generating.

**[Participant C]**

I do believe a lot of life is focused on that, unfortunately. At this point that we are in, everything is about money. Everything is about money. So this is what they're thinking about, even the government, when they're trying to decide if they're going to make the decision to give this land back to the people. One of their main things that they would bring up is the 100 million.

**[Interviewer]**

That makes sense to me, and I happen to agree with you on this.

**[Participant C]**

Money is ruling the world right now, literally.

**[Interviewer]**

It would be hard to point to anything else. I think this Manuel Island example especially. Although I've had some people argue that 30 million people signed this petition. But it could be a loud minority. And maybe there are a large part of the population who aren't as outspoken and who don't actually mind this. First of all, I think it's probably a valid concern, even though it's not proven or anything. Would you agree with that? Do you think it's likely that a lot of people either don't care or agree?

**[Participant C]**

For sure, 100%. I think that one of the main problems that we have in this country is ignorance. The significant portion of the population and where they get their news from is very problematic. Because if you are listening to a party-owned radio, media, like TV, the narrative is always twisted. So these people never actually get the full picture. Plus, they don't actually have the interest to question and to look for the full picture themselves. There's a lot of manipulation in the media, unfortunately. It might not seem obvious, but there is a lot of propaganda going on. A lot.

**[Interviewer]**

How do you think, and this is an excellent segue into yourself, how do you think people in Malta decide what to focus on? Because I think this is a valid concern in all aspects. I would say you are part of a loud minority who really are pushing to get their point across and their point heard. But maybe something I have seen is that development is definitely not always bad. It's necessary for change. For sure. It's a part of change. For sure. And there have been projects that, personally, I thought were amazing, that got swept under the rug for the usual reasons they get swept under the rug. They conflict with interests, party interests, etc. But there was never any uproar about them. And I think if I spoke to people about this project, they would say, Oh, this should totally happen. But it seems like there isn't the same uproar for good projects that don't happen as there is for bad projects that will happen. And I find that interesting. So, yeah, that's my question. How do you think people decide what to focus on? Is it about negative headlines?

**[Participant C]**

It is in human nature that negativity is always going to be stronger. It's more powerful. Even the way that our brains are wired, our brains are wired in a way that they seek negativity because it actually gives some kind of shock.

**[Interviewer]**

It captures you somehow, right?

**[Participant C]**

Exactly. I do think that this two-party system that we have happening in Malta contributes a lot to what people focus on because automatically, the second that you have the party that's in government against or for something, it means you're going to have thousands of people also against or for. And then, for example, if you have the opposition against a project, the supporters of the other party are automatically going to be against what they're saying even if what they're saying is the most obvious and sensible thing.

**[Interviewer]**

You know what I mean? It's like partisans kind of. They're with their party and instead of being informed, they choose to play the game like it's their property.

**[Participant C]**

Exactly. So even, for example, going back to Manuel Island, some comments which I saw on Facebook, which I found pretty bizarre, they were on these '*laburist sal-mewt*' groups and that part of the internet. So someone had shared a petition for people to sign it and people in the comments were like, wasn't it the nationalists that did the contract in the first place? Tell them to fix it. It's like, it doesn't work like that, you know? Now, the nationalists made those mistakes. This is also a very strong narrative in our country, right? When we have something that we're dealing with. When we have something that we're dealing with that is a problem in the present and can only be tackled with the party in government, which is labour.

**[Interviewer]**

Yes.

**[Participant C]**

But if it was created by PN, labour do tend to show this kind of... What's the word I'm looking for? They don't want to work on it just because it wasn't a problem that they created.

**[Interviewer]**

It's like apathy towards it.

**[Participant C]**

Exactly.

**[Interviewer]**

No one will blame us for that sort of thing.

**[Participant C]**

So with this reasoning, like...

**[Interviewer]**

There's this idea that we're not all in together. It's like we want to win and then you make mistakes and...

**[Participant C]**

Exactly. So seeing this kind of thinking which really dominates our islands, and everything that we try to tackle apply to the Manuel Island thing, I hadn't even thought of it. Like, as we said, it's the Mohali people who are going to take this approach with it.

**[Interviewer]**

But, I mean... I feel like it's a very hard problem to escape. So it's actually really interesting you say this. So I had an interview with a very prominent planner, very intelligent man, very, very informed.

**[Participant C]**

Can you tell me who?

**[Interviewer]**

I'll tell you who? I can't, I can't. He's on the university contract as well.

**[Participant C]**

One of the bad ones? No, no.

**[Interviewer]**

I mean, it's very hard to label them like that. They have their own opinions. And it's also very hard to argue against them because they're way more educated than me. They've been in the industry for a long time.

**[Participant C]**

They're good, eh?

**[Interviewer]**

Sharp, sharp. They're good, they're good. And he's very good. I asked him something. I'll actually ask you now. Maybe you have a different opinion on it. But I asked him, how important is it that the public is informed on long-term decisions and plans? And he told me, not at all. He said, not at all. He said, because you can't trust the public to make educated decisions, even if you pour in all the money you can to educating them. How can you count on them to care and to inform themselves? He said, the only thing that can make good planning decisions are a capable body of planners and people in the state who make the right decisions. He said, informing the public at the end of the day doesn't help you to make the right decisions.

**[Participant C]**

Informing the public definitely doesn't help said developers. It doesn't help them, right? But I do think it goes back to the responsibility and duty. We should be informed and it is not that difficult to inform yourself. Most people are just not interested in doing it.

**[Interviewer]**

Exactly. I think that was what he implied. He said, you can try to inform people but the apathy prevents it from being something reliable. You can try as much as you want at the end of the day. Most of the time, it doesn't get you anywhere. And he also alluded to the fact that this isn't just a Maltese problem. It's all over the world. Where yes, you have to be transparent and yes, you have to make sure your intentions are clear but whether the public knows exactly what you're doing or not it sort of makes a difference in the future. And I was a bit taken aback. I can understand it. And maybe it's because I'm young and naive. But I can't imagine myself in the future not caring about whether the public knows exactly what's going on or not. I don't know. Maybe it's his kind of cynicism he's gathered over the years.

**[Participant C]**

I think it's from my perspective I see it more as like it's the answer that benefits him, right?

**[Interviewer]**

Maybe.

**[Participant C]**

A lot of people have a lot to gain from people's ignorance. And this can be applied also to politicians to a certain extent.

**[Interviewer]**

To make it clear, it's not a developer. It's a planner. He's in the ERA, for example. Or he had some time in the ERA. And he said the conversation with the public is a difficult one to make use of. A lot of effort. Where does it get you? That really took me aback. And to be honest in my conversations with people high up in the industry because I got some really, really good... I was really lucky. They all shared that sentiment. They said the public they don't give you anything. You move by the rules and you communicate to the people that can stop you. And that's how the game is played. And it almost took me out of my dissertation because my dissertation is like OK, how do we give more sentiment to public emotional feelings? Their sense of loss. Their sense of lack of access. Their sense of fighting this uphill battle against ruling entities. They told me we don't care about that sort of thing. It's not a big problem in our game. And that was one of the things that shook me the most, I think.

**[Participant C]**

It doesn't make sense in a way. On the one hand, we're saying people don't care. On the other hand, when people do care, they're ignored. So what's your point exactly?

**[Interviewer]**

You know what I mean?

**[Participant C]**

There are many... So they tend to pick and choose what they're going to actually listen to. But I feel there have been many instances where the public went out like...Full force. Full on, like full force.

**[Interviewer]**

Yes.

**[Participant C]**

And were just ignored.

**[Interviewer]**

Yes.

**[Participant C]**

So you can't blame the public for not wanting to know what's happening.

**[Interviewer]**

And I mean that kind of... It almost plays into it. Because if the public can go out full force and be ignored, then what's the point of caring what they say? Like that's really... It's sad almost, but like... Let's say you're a developer with a lot of money and you're determined to get a project done. And you know that if on the slight chance the public gain momentum and go all out against you, it's still unlikely they're going to do anything. Why even listen to what they say? That's something that I have been internalising over the last few days.

**[Participant C]**

I think it's always good to look at the wins. When I was still working as a journalist, I used to focus a lot on development. A lot. I was a pain in the ass for many people. Michael Stivala threatened me with a libel three times in my life. I wasn't even 25 yet. It definitely takes persistence, yeah? Because when you get a win, that win can really charge you and power you through to the next ones.

**[Interviewer]**

Do you think there is anything we can do... So, not we. Anything the public can do to make their opinions stronger, more heard? Do you see anything? Maybe something that happens overseas?

**[Participant C]**

One of the main issues that we've had in Malta when it comes to activism is that we have a lot of these keyboard warriors that on Facebook will express their opinion but then when it comes to a protest, you don't get as many people as you should. So, definitely, and this is something that has been repeated throughout the years, going out in the streets. That makes a massive difference. And educating yourself. But it has to come from you, right? You have to have a certain level of care and appreciation for your country that you actually want to know what's happening not because it's something... I have to know what's happening, you know what I mean? Unfortunately, unfortunately, I would go out and say the majority of the population are not even aware of the places that we have in Malta. So I find that sometimes it's like they don't know what they're fighting for because literally the idea of going out in nature is going to Riviera and parking in the car and maybe walking five minutes there and then going back to the car, you know? So, the fact that so many citizens aren't actually familiar with the beauty of our country makes it less likely that they're actually going to fight for it.

**[Interviewer]**

I agree. If I have to say, moving forward with this process of Manoel Island and how things look to be going, right? What concerns you the most overall?

**[Participant C]**

It definitely concerns me that the opposition and the government seem to be on the same page.

**[Interviewer]**

For once.

**[Participant C]**

With all the wrong stuff. The opposition have been worrying me a bit recently, I don't know if you were following Fort Chambray, but it was a bit worrying as well how normally there is that kind of sense from that side.

**[Interviewer]**

So, if we build on this, right? They seem to be united under development. What do you think that says about an existing hierarchy? Is there something going on there? What would you describe that as?

**[Participant C]**

It's very obvious at this point that both parties are in bed with developers in Malta, so in my eyes they are protecting their relationship with very rich people who, when you have money, you have a lot of power. So, again, it goes back down to money. That's all it boils down to.

**[Interviewer]**

So, we're talking about these almost resources over public interest.

**[Participant C]**

For sure, over public interest, over public well-being, I think it is not given enough importance and a project like Project Green is not going to fix it. I feel like Project Green is a band-aid when what we need is like surgery, you know what I mean? I've always found it quite hypocritical that we have a project like Project Green which is transforming these little fields or plots into parks. And then what we have that is already existing is not protected. This is the same. I make this kind of example with trees. Whenever the government is about to do a project that's going to cost us a lot of mature trees the argument is always but we're going to plant saplings. A mature tree is not a sapling. So, it's going to take years and constant attention to actually have that mature tree. So, why can't we get to the point that we protect what we have and then focus on creating new spaces but the spaces that are already existing, protect them. Because it's a slap in the face to have all these new little gardens.

**[Interviewer]**

That me and you are never going to enjoy in our lives.

**[Participant C]**

Manuel Island is an opportunity. It's an opportunity for this country to literally look its people in the eye and tell them we care about you. Because there have been way too many projects that many people have spoken against and they still went through anyway. And then it's like we care about the environment.

**[Interviewer]**

Can I just say I love the language you're using and it's a breath of fresh air because the way you position it as it's an opportunity for Malta to say we care about you. That's not about what are we going to put there you know, it's literally it's talking about the relationship between Malta and its people, the state and its people. It runs a lot deeper than what do we do with Manuel Island. It's really about the dynamic that people are tired of. Yes, I agree completely. And I would just end this with a short line of questioning. They intend to develop Manuel Island, right? And they intend to build X amount of flats and this and that. Hundreds. There's an area, and I'm just using this as an example, right outside of Manuel Island Europa Park, right?

**[Participant C]**

Yes.

**[Interviewer]**

I had written about that extensively. They were going to do that. So, something I was talking about earlier kind of these trade-offs. There's never a win-win for Malta, ever. I mean, in Malta maybe developers do get some win-wins, but it's very rare you get a win-win. So, imagine for the sake of it, I propose that, OK, the public gets Manuel Island back, the government takes it and with taxpayer money it's going to turn it into this public park. But Midi, in return they get to take the volume that they were going to build and they take Europa Park, right? How would you feel as a member of the public if a deal like that was made? Would it be a win for you?

**[Participant C]**

No, no, I don't think it would be a win. I mean, in scale it looks like a win because Europa Park is much smaller than Manuel Island.

**[Interviewer]**

It stretches a bit down the promenade. It would be like towers.

**[Participant C]**

I mean, an ideal scenario is that we don't take the Greenlands. We leave the Greenlands.

**[Interviewer]**

That's to you. It's not about negotiation.

**[Participant C]**

I mean, we have so many buildings on Malta. We have so many buildings. Now the towers are getting a bit out of hands. Do we need even more? And in a place like Zira that traffic-wise it's bad. We don't have space so you're just going to increase even traffic flow in the area. What are you going to do to address that issue then? You know what I mean? And I think also this was a very old figure that I want to quote. So I would check it. This is how I remember it. A few years back a study found in Malta we have 80,000 abandoned buildings.

**[Interviewer]**

Oh, that's a huge can of worms.

**[Participant C]**

So can we see what to do with that maybe? Instead of taking our green areas.

**[Interviewer]**

And I mean Malta has one of the worst legislations when it comes to vacant properties. Because in a lot of countries basically the state tells you, you can own this property but if it's unused for 10 years we're going to tax you hard on this. Or some just take it back. In Malta we left. Parents have kids who have kids who have kids who have kids who have never been into this apartment and it's going to be split between 64 people. Now what? Now there's no solution to it now. Who gets this apartment? They rent it out and everyone gets 1/64th of what they're making. This is a problem that should have been fixed like... Ages ago. 50 years ago. And that is the number one thing that annoys me about Malta. That piece of legislation. Even everyone you speak to has experienced this issue. My grandfather and his brothers have a flat and now it's coming to my parents.

**[Participant C]**

And then they're trying to divide the court.

**[Interviewer]**

People fighting, people not speaking after years. If the government grew some balls I was just going to say, they don't have the balls to do it. Because they know that there are going to be certain people who hate this. But we need to grow some balls and look at the future. These things, and you know what really, makes it so much worse for me. When you speak to people in the industry from out of Malta, and you explain this issue, they just look at you like what do you mean? How is that a problem you're dealing with? I don't know. It sounds so much worse when you say it out loud. Yes, that's a big thing.

**[Participant C]**

Our state does tend to try to please everyone. Especially people in power or influential people or people with money. But there are many decisions that need to be taken that require quite balls to take them. And someone needs to take them.

**[Interviewer]**

Of course.

**[Participant C]**

But you know what it all boils down to again? Votes. Everyone is constricted from doing anything because they're too worried about losing votes. This is like the thing of abortion which is totally unrelated to this issue. I don't need to mention this in there. But it's the same. We're dealing with an issue that in another country it is unheard of to be in 2025 and this is what we're dealing with. Unheard of. But then you come to Malta and because there are many people who are at stake and you don't want to upset those people you don't want to upset these people and those have money, they can sue me. We kind of reach this kind of stalemate. Exactly.

**[Interviewer]**

It's like, where do we go from now? And I don't know if it needs to be a strong leadership I don't know if that can even exist in the political landscape. And I don't want to get off point there.

**[Participant C]**

It needs to be someone who is willing to piss people off.

**[Interviewer]**

And for once, not citizens. You know the biggest thing? I couldn't care less what colour they are as if there's a difference I know this is a cliché conversation but as if there's a difference between them. If you look at the two parties in Malta, one side says I'll take those liberal values and these conservative ones, you take the others and we'll just be a fucking mess of no political moral whatsoever.

**[Participant C]**

And we're really not that liberal.

**[Interviewer]**

They're liberal in terms of, alright, social welfare or whatever, I think that we'll get them both. Easy things like if we have good social welfare and social funding we know there's a huge block of people that want to give us their money.

**[Participant C]**

And legalising cannabis was all that. So it's so obvious that it was all that.

**[Interviewer]**

And even this thing of euthanasia is all that. And I can talk about that for a long time, but again, I'm going to get off topic. And a final thing I wanted to ask you here about Manoel Island. Yes. With regards to the stalemate like, obviously it's going to need to be backed by us, as the public. Right? Otherwise these things are for nothing. In a democratic country, you need people to back someone else. In general. Changes don't happen without public support. You think in Malta there is like, I don't know, a lack of patriotism, or I don't know if patriotism is like that. A lack of love for the country. This apathy. Do you think it plagues us? And why do you think that is such a big problem here?

**[Participant C]**

It definitely plagues us as a problem. And something which is really interesting is that I tend to meet more foreigners who are very passionate about Malta.

**[Interviewer]**

So funny you say that.

**[Participant C]**

And about like fighting for what is ours like for example the Manuel Island one. If foreigners could sign... imagine.

**[Interviewer]**

You know how funny. So I like sport fishing a lot. Catch and release. Photographing species and stuff. And I've been raised that way. My nan used to take me fishing. So it's one of my biggest hobbies. And the sea is a massive part of my life. And I'm extremely passionate about the sea. In Malta we have a huge issue with illegal commercial fishing. Massive. In the Mediterranean in general.

**[Participant C]**

Overfishing as well.

**[Interviewer]**

The seas are very depleted. The Mediterranean is the most overfished body of water in the world if I'm not mistaken. And Malta is just bang in the middle doing its thing with the issue. And I'm fishing at Sliema Ferries with a couple of my friends. And there's a dead fish in the water. Clearly like from the nets. It's not a good fish so they just throw them back. And they get washed into the harbour. And I think she was Australian. One of them comes up to me. And she's like, can you help that fish? I'm like, no. It's dead already. And she's like, why is there so much dirt here? And I'm like, I assume you're visiting Malta for the first time. She said yes. I'm like, it's not what it looks like on the virtualisation. She's like, no. It's like, the water is so dirty. She told me she went to Camino and it's disgusting. She literally pointed to Manuel Island and said, why can't you go in that building? And I had no answers for her. And she's like, it's really disappointing. I was expecting a lot more. It's rare that you hear a Maltese person give a shit like that. It's genuinely rare. So I completely agree with your point.

**[Participant C]**

Maltese people litter like there's no tomorrow. Foreigners don't litter as much as Maltese people.

**[Interviewer]**

They don't.

**[Participant C]**

For example, I go hiking a lot. For the most part it's foreigners doing the hiking. No one litters. Yeah. This is very weird, very interesting.

**[Interviewer]**

It's like sometimes I don't know. Actually, I'm not going to give my opinion. What do you think could be behind it?

**[Participant C]**

When I observe that kind of sense of being a patriot for Malta, I don't know why. I think a lot of people go to Mintoft times and they make it political.

**[Interviewer]**

It's like nationalism.

**[Participant C]**

Exactly. I think for me what I observe the core issue is that many Maltese people are not connected to nature. And as soon as you're not connected to nature, you're going to approach it from a very dis-regulated space. They don't see the benefits of nature, they don't experience the benefits of nature. And I wanted to say something else on this line. And I see it a lot. For example, I post a lot of nature content and places like hiking are publicly available.

**[Interviewer]**

Yes, you take some very nice photos.

**[Participant C]**

And one of the main comments and messages that I get on Instagram is always like, where is this? And it would be the most basic commonplace. So, it goes back to what I was saying before. A lot of people don't know what we actually have in Malta. I think they get stuck in a kind of... If you're living in central Malta and your daily routine is getting up, spending an hour in traffic, going to the office, going back home another hour in traffic, and then you have your evening. I don't know what people do. I feel like I meet so many people who have never actually been to these beautiful places that we have. They would never go on a hike. So, I do feel that this is a major kind of factor. This lack of connection that we have with the environment.

**[Interviewer]**

It's very interesting.

**[Participant C]**

I kind of went on a tangent off though.

**[Interviewer]**

No, no, no. It makes sense. You think sort of in a system that seems to consistently disappoint people. Do you think it becomes easier to not stop caring?

**[Participant C]**

For sure. I mean, I have had moments where I stopped caring. It's like, I can't handle any more negativity in the news. I'm just going to shut it off, kind of. I mean, it's overwhelming sometimes. Because this kind of general disconnection that we have from the environment, I feel that it comes, it stems from the top, and then it kind of just trickles down. When you have a state, a government, who is not valuing a connection to nature, literally, they don't see the value in it, it's going to trickle down. If you have a state which is constantly raping our natural environment, like, no care for it whatsoever, it is going to trickle down, especially in a place like Malta, where whatever the party in government says, you know how Labour supporters tend to be, like, the worst is like, retirement, like that. If he said that, if the *kapo* said that, then nothing.

**[Interviewer]**

And in an atmosphere like that, maybe it becomes harder to be objective.

**[Participant C]**

For sure. I think it's very hard for many people in Malta to actually be objective when it comes to different issues we're dealing with.

**[Interviewer]**

And so, when we propose alternative projects, prioritising alternative things, like your vision and so many people's vision for Manuel Island, would you say that challenges these existing dynamics, like, directly?

**[Participant C]**

For sure, definitely. Definitely. I mean, I do feel like I'm on a kind of educational campaign to really show people, like, this is what we have. This is what we can lose. Let's not lose it. But once this goes through and the building is built, like, there is no chance whatsoever of getting it back.

**[Interviewer]**

As it stands, do you think this is circling kind of back around to, you know, what Manuel Island means rather than what it is? Do you think planning and development takes into account how people feel about a place rather than what we can get out of it? I think it should, but for the most part it doesn't. It doesn't tend to. I think what we can get out of it is always the kind of driving force. There is, like, for me, capitalism is the root of many issues that we are dealing with.

**[Participant C]**

Yes. And that is always, that's like, money is always the driving force. It's not what people actually need. And especially, like, studies when it comes to well-being, when it comes to depression, when it comes to how much our surroundings affect us. In Malta they are reflecting quite poorly when it comes to the rise of development. So there are studies that actually support that our well-being is going to suffer if we do not see nature. So why is that not being kind of held as a primary kind of value when we are trying to decide what we're going to do with the land that's already available?

**[Interviewer]**

Very good answer. That's it for my questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

**[Participant C]**

Well, you're a really good interviewer.

**[Interviewer]**

Thank you very much.

*END OF INTERVIEW - PARTICIPANT C*

## START OF INTERVIEW - PARTICIPANT D

### [Interviewer]

SO, this interview is regarding communication around certain ongoing projects in Malta - investigating feelings towards ongoing projects, and if different stakeholders can express themselves more effectively. From your point of view, as an experienced developer, have you had any notable challenges communicating ongoing long term plans or developments to the public or other related entities in the industry?

### [Participant D]

That is a huge challenge. I started from nothing as a developer. I started with 2 employees, using my wedding gift, and today I'm engaged with over 1200 employees in different sectors. But development and construction is my baby. That's how I started, and I love it. I have healthcare, hotels, and other services as well. The challenges mainly, in Malta specifically... in the 1970s, everything used to pass. Everything was done quickly. Quality was nonexistent. Today, we can see that most of it is rubbish. Buildings from the 1970s need to be dropped most of the time. For example - open staircases that we used to use prevent the building from being heated or cooled properly. In the 80s, 90s, 2000s, etc, regulations and standards improved. Old buildings are no longer effective in a modern scenario. There's also a lot of bureaucracy today, but projects are generally better. In our projects, we emphasise quality design and proper workmanship. I like to consult architects, but I actively change things for the better myself. Even with budgets - I sacrifice money to create a better end product. Even with structure, the way we build has changed. Buildings become outdated, including old projects of mine, such as Sunny Coast hotel and Suncrest. Its been almost 38 years; I gutted it out completely, created new columns, foundations, new rooms, and more. As you know Yao worked on that project. They are good architects. They have good ideas. One of the best architects. I've worked with 100s of architects in my life, but they are practical and create nice designs. In Malta, unfortunately, architects seem to recycle designs. They have limited vision. Foreign architects have new ideas. However, the most important thing is getting involved and understanding. You need to read, attend conferences, stay updated. ITs essential as an architect, and even as a developer like myself.

### [Interviewer]

That's interesting. Do you think there's a reason behind the recycling of ideas here?

### [Participant D]

I think the reason here is that most developers want to squeeze as much as they can from every plot. They don't care about the quality of their buildings. No care about thermal insulation, building details.. things that bring quality up. A lot of focus on economic gain. Here, for example (*referring to ongoing project of his*) I have a lot of hidden details to create a better product. A lot of it is imported from Dubai. Most developers will go, see whats available locally for the cheapest price, and use it. I don't need to do these things, but I care. And I don't think that is the norm here. If I replaced this project with 'Pigeon Holes', I would have saved time and made more money. I waited 27 years for a permit here. Forget

about policies and money - I want to create an iconic building here. Maybe a landmark, later on, who knows. I could have stuffed it with buildings across all the footprint. But I take pride in my projects. Other people don't think like me.

**[Interviewer]**

I have noticed that you take pride in your projects. The ferry connection project and Capua palace stand out to me, as well. I think this project is also coming together nicely. I noticed your earlier application for this project, as a golf course, was more negatively received from the public than this one. What do you think the reason behind that is?

**[Participant D]**

Politics. Politics. That's it. I'm an amateur golfer myself - the course we have at Marsa does not appeal to the foreign golfer. They accused me of removing farmer's work. Actually, I would have given them work. They don't have much land to work in summer, because the land dries up. I would have needed year round work, with open green spaces, that I could have paid local farmers to work. Even to grow crops on. 90% of them accepted - but the 10% resisted. You're never going to get a 100% approval rate. The 10% went to the local bishop, accusing me of starving their families. He said he has 200 families that eat off that land. I refused it - I don't believe any of them were full timers in the space I was going to use. 200 families was a lie. Then the papers obviously used it as a sensation to get people against me.

**[Interviewer]**

How do you think people choose what to focus on? Does sensationalism play a role?

**[Participant D]**

Yes - always sensations. Sensations. They have no clue of what's really happening. They didn't now I would invest in fixing up all the rubble walls in the area. I answered questions on sewage, water, anything they needed. They didn't understand any of it. People actually went, took pictures of arable land outside of the designated area I outlined, and accused me of wanting to destroy that land. It was ridiculous. They used pictures of courgettes - you can't even grow courgettes on this land. And suddenly, everyone turned against me. And politicians take advantage of it. Once people turn against you, the politicians want their vote, and they won't let you do what you wanted to do. I conducted 95 studies. 95! Trying to ensure it would be a safe project. Birds, wildlife, dust - whatever. Anything they asked. I have them in a room somewhere. I had international architects working on it. It would have been *Krema ta' Malta* - I wouldn't have gotten rich from it! Property in the area would have gotten rich. When in 1991, I opened a factory for precast concrete, people accused that I was going to bring ready-built houses to Malta, killing the builder's jobs. They even protested outside Castille. It was ridiculous. People don't truly understand what's going on! Go try and make them understand. The lawyers went out against me, and the workmen went on strike. The government voided my contract altogether, all because of public opinion - which was wrong.

**[Interviewer]**

Is it difficult to communicate your view, your truth, to the public?

**[Participant D]**

I don't pay any attention. I keep moving. I try my best. It annoys me, but if I know I'm right, I don't concern myself with public opinion. Look at the cladding on this building - I designed it myself. I even added a 7.5m cantilever between stories to make sure everyone has their own privacy. I sacrificed usable floor area for these things - but it's a prestige. I want. Good quality product, and I always do. People misunderstand my intentions. It annoys me, but I keep moving.

**[Interviewer]**

You mentioned that you're a patriot. You had mentioned this in an interview with the times of Malta, discussing the ferry connection project; explaining you wanted to bring more use to the Marsamxett harbour, and offered to bare the brunt of the full costs of the project. Something like this is generally unheard of; most of the time, the state always shares in costs in relation to infrastructural projects such as that. I think this shows a lot of interest on your part to use your expertise towards what you believe would help the Island. There's a very loud opposition towards development in Malta - but when it comes to positive efforts, some would say these aren't discussed with the same rigour. Would you say that, maybe, the positive is not as interesting to people?

**[Participant D]**

There's a lot of hearsay unfortunately. I started in 1989; along with the masterplan of Valletta - I remember when Renzo Piano wanted to drop the bridge into Valletta - I said "No! That was built by the *Kavallieri!*" And there was a lot more to Valletta than just the bridge. I proposed a lot of pedestrianised areas as well. And the ferry; from Sliema, to Valletta, to Cottonera. Some people suggested cable cars - I don't think they realised how much wind the harbour area gets there. They think they're going skiing. I got all the approvals, there were no objections. They even got UNESCO down to Malta. They assured me it would get the green light - they called it a genius idea in their report. It was Valentine's day, 2018 - the draft was ready, it was all finalised, the government wasn't going to pay 1 euro of it. We did geological tests, everything. I spent 800,000 euros. But, what happened? We stepped on the toes of certain people. When the Prime Minister changed, they stopped everything, it got shelved.

**[Interviewer]**

When good, or interesting projects, like this get shelved - why do you think there isn't public outcry? Similar outcry to when they resist projects?

**[Participant D]**

It's all politics. I hate politics. When you have big muscles, you decide what goes. They control it all from underneath. Similar to what happened on the golf course. I'm here, single handed, trying to do it all. I have guts, and I have finances. But those who are politically powerful will outvote you and stop you in your tracks. Planning Authority is not independent. It's a government arm. If the government opposes you, you're finished. It's a pity that the ferry never happened. There was no risk! I was really pissed off on this one. I have all the reports. Good engineers, local, foreign - whatever.

**[Interviewer]**

I think efforts like that, sort of, highlight how you consider what places like Valletta mean to people. Its not just about the physical, or the economical gain, but maybe more than that. Symbolic feelings are important - your restoration of Palazzo Capua also speaks to this. Ideas like public memory, heritage, culture, are all valuable. When you make decisions around a project - do you consider how people feel about a place? Or is that difficult?

**[Participant D]**

I listen to everyone, but I decide. If they say stupid things, I move on. Everyone's input is valuable to some extent - I will listen to anyone. But I make my own decision. Even the cleaner can suggest something and I might say "I never thought of that!" ... but at the end of the day, I have the last say. I paid 1 million Lira Maltin to restore Capua. Prestine condition - it was about pride for me. I cared about making it beautiful. These things are important for me. Its all in the detail.

**[Interviewer]**

A lot of people are debating on a specific hot topic at the moment. It's very related to relevant issues - it's the topic of Manoel Island. The closer we get to a realised project, the further away an agreement between all negotiating parties seem to be. Do you think some of these places carry more importance to people than others - and do you see that here?

**[Participant D]**

Very very interesting. I am very familiar with this project. I was one of the 3 bidders onto this project. We bid for Tigne and Manoel Island. We had foreign and locals working on it - including Richard England. The government put them both out as a bid. I made a proposal for Manoel Island and Tigne at the time. In 1981, I had a concession for Tigne. I was only 29 years old, and had plans ready to go. My competitors were not pleased at all. The government asked me to resign from a partial shares I had in a government sector , because competitors were arguing about conflict of interest. I didn't want to resign, I had already invested a lot of money. So instead, I gave up the concession for Tigne. Then, when the Tigne project was eventually built, by MIDI, they used my idea to pass a road underneath the project - that was my idea. I can speak about this project for hours. Their work was awful. A junior architect could have done a better job. They filled it with apartments. Then, Manoel Island, they left it there - because the true value was in Tigne. Now, they've voided the contract. They were meant to have started works by now, and they didn't. Now if the government was smart, they would've given the projects to different people, and made them compete - but obviously, politics prevented this as usual. Now they have to stick to the contract. These contracts aren't written for nothing. Enough time has passed. There's so much corruption. Even the reason they arranged the fort - why did they do it? Austin Gatt's daughter had her wedding there. He was the principle of the consortium. The ideal situation for this place is creating open space. Now, Tas-Sliema there's no greenery. Ta' Xbiex, Gzira, Hamrun, Valletta - all the same. There's so much built environment. That place needs to remain be green space.

**[Interviewer]**

Is that your ideal vision of the space, today?

**[Participant D]**

Yes. Leave it open. They didn't honour the contract, the area has been over built. I agree with the public sentiment, but I can't go and protest myself. The public should push full force for the contract breach to be recognised.

(Showing me plans for his proposal) This was our proposal. A student would have done a better proposal than MIDI. Mine was only 4 floors, maximum. Low buildings, paying attention to what the site needs. Now the area is overbuilt. This proposal wouldn't even be relevant today - needs have totally changed.

**[Interviewer]**

There's a lot of resistance. And they echo your sentiment. Their voices seem to go unheard. I noticed you used to be the mayor of Naxxar; which is very interesting, and I believe shows your enthusiasm to engage with the community. Do you notice a difference when you communicate to the public as a local council representative, versus as a private entity - even if your intentions are the same? Is there a difference in how you were received?

**[Participant D]**

In the local council, I believed I was very difference from others. People knew me. Thats my hometown. I had made a council for the environment for Naxxar, before the local council did,. I had put an effort into making new benches, planting trees, fixing the square, before they put any effort. So I was elected because people knew me and my intentions. But when I went up for local council as an independent candidate, they made my life hell. I didn't want to stain myself with politics. They put as many candidates as they could to steal my votes. I got the most votes from anyone in Malta that year, so they never managed.

**[Interviewer]**

So the resistance - both as an independent local council candidate, and a private entity - came from the same place, the political class?

**[Participant D]**

Yes. Unfortunately, yes. I always say this - Malta is an unpolished gem in the mediterranean. We need to polish it, and this is what I try to do as a developer. That is my job. It makes me sad to see ugly

buildings thrown all over the place. I like nice buildings. I'm pro development, I'm pro environment. I'm all out against the way things are going. Im a proud environmentalist and Participant D. People are confused by it, but its true. People think it can't be true. But I recognise, there are very few like me. I've made my money, earned with my own hard work. And I refuse to stain myself with politics. Others, play the game.

**[Interviewer]**

Thank you very much.

*END OF INTERVIEW - PARTICIPANT D*

**[Interviewer]**

So - there's a proposal, by MIDI - in Manoel Island. What are the salient facts, what do you know about the ongoing discussion around Manoel Island, that helped you form your opinion around the subject?

**[Participant E]**

OK - so while you're trying to interview me as a man in the street, through my work, I was actually somewhat involved in the ongoing process of Manoel Island. I'm familiar with the original design and contract. I know what they wanted to do initially. It has progressively downsized over and over. However, the elephant in the room is obvious. The biggest problem here that I see, similar to Tigne and Smart City, is that these concessions are being given at extremely low prices with the excuse that once development is completed a lot of money will be generated. Unfortunately that's not an excuse. The value of the land is much higher than the amount its being given out at. It is absolutely political; if you're aligned with a colour, you'll get something from them. The excuse that private investment will generate a lot of money and so you can give it out at a misery price has to stop.

**[Interviewer]**

When you say it's worth more than its being priced - fiscally? In amounts of money?

**[Participant E]**

Yes, fiscally - but more than that. Whats the value of water? Not its price - but what it gives you. The value of land goes far beyond what its priced. Obviously, if you try to put a price on these things - you'd never get there. These things are priceless, essentially. Things like culture, heritage, open spaces, Feng shui, people's happiness.. everything. I'd relate it to Singapore, actually, if I may. ITs a similar size to Malta, and they have their own 'Manoel Island". Its a sanctuary and it's beautiful... It has some investment, but... there are ways to do it I suppose.

**[Interviewer]**

And what would that look like, to you? The right way to do it?

**[Participant E]**

Well, let's say no one ever invested into Manoel Island... It would be nice that it remained an untouched island. However, we have one problem here. We're surrounded by the sea. We have a lot of areas where we can go and enjoy ... the sea provides some sense of liberty. But, because of our limited amount of land, I tend to agree that Manoel Island should be developed. We don't have the liberty to leave such large stretches of land untouched, and if we want to go down that route, we should go down land reclamation. Look at Madliena, Marsaxlokk, Santa Maria estate. These places are developed, but

beautifully. You can enjoy architecture, planning, the human touch. I enjoy it. Maybe Manoel Island can be like that. The development proposal has gradually shrunk, so maybe if we push harder, it could be one of these, nicely developed places. It could actually work out. I think we'd be ignorant to say that we can leave large spaces of land undeveloped when others are so densely packed with development. It's better to spread things out more evenly.

**[Interviewer]**

Considering where it is now, in such a congested area... it seems to already be like that. I don't think you could develop Gzira more if you tried! So maybe, for the opposition to this project, this is an opportunity to leave a large portion of land untouched in an area that has been ravaged. So in your opinion, the right way is development - but in a subtle way; somewhere in-between. Something interesting I've noted in the ongoing process of these interviews is that there's a difference in language between stakeholders. People from the industry - developers, architects, planners - they tend to discuss Manuel island in the context of opportunity and technicality. The size, the economic investment, the return, the contracts. The opposition from the public tend to use symbolic language to describe their feelings. Manoel Island as a loss of ownership of land, as an opportunity for happiness, as one of the last untouched gems by private interests. I think the underlying idea is that decisions are being made without their feelings in consideration - do you see any truth in that?

**[Participant E]**

Yes. This brings me back to that I said in the beginning. All decisions are politically motivated. The decisions are being made to ensure the people who are in charge, remain in charge.. To retain positions of power. The feeling that people have that a piece of land has been given to private investors for these reasons are real, and they will remain. I don't see a solution to this; except for planning to be planned extremely long term. So long, that it overrides government interests. Whatever they choose to do. Guard rails keep them in place. Control from separate bodies. You can never expect, for example, developers to not develop - they will take every chance they get. Someone will take the opportunity every time. They need to be controlled by someone. The problem is the opportunities that are being given, fullstops. I mean, if you read DC15, you would kind of think "hmm.. we're going to fix things here." But in reality, no one fixed anything. We are creating opportunities for everybody to grab.

**[Interviewer]**

I understand. Obviously, at the end of the day, development isn't good or bad - it's a tool. If the government wants to create say, 5000 jobs, development has a role in for example, building the factory. Locally, some would say there's a reactive opposition - whenever something new is proposed, people are ready to attack it. There's a very loud opposition against development which is perceived as 'wrong', but when it comes to supporting positive development, or what people may perceive as positive development, support seems a lot weaker. Do you think people are sensitive to negative headlines? What do you think is going on here?

**[Participant E]**

I guess. Don't forget how partisan the country is. Here, even in football - you have people with Italy or with England. They don't know why, it's just how they were raised. Support this side, and don't question it. It's the same way in our politics. It saddens me to admit but, a lot of the conversations are about opposing the government that they don't support. But then again, people are unhappy because I mean - a lot of the development going on is ugly. If you look at valletta from Tigne, its beautiful. Vice versa, its disgusting - its obvious that the goal wasn't to create beautiful development there, but to earn money. Aesthetically, not pleasing. But people are happy to do it because it makes money.

*END OF INTERVIEW - PARTICIPANT E*

## Appendix 2 – Sample Consent Form & Information Letter



L-Università  
ta' Malta

## Participant's Consent Form

### Territories of Discontent : Planning & Negotiation in Malta

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Daniel Sammut. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

#### Territories of Discontent: Symbolic Space and Planning Negotiation in Malta

I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.

I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

I understand that I have been invited to participate in **an interview process** in which the researcher aims to explore ongoing processes of territorial negotiation in relation to planning and construction projects in Malta. The goal is to understand **how different stakeholder groups perceive contested spaces symbolically and strategically**, and to reveal **underlying values, assumptions and emotional positions** that may remain unspoken in formal negotiations.

I understand that the study includes **A semi-structured interview** in which I will be invited to consider the same issues from different angles (factual, emotional, cautious, optimistic, critical, and creative) to help reveal deeper or symbolic aspects of my position, and compare it to those of others. I understand that this research may contribute to a clearer understanding of how symbolic and psychological meanings influence planning negotiations, and may benefit future dialogue between stakeholders by helping to identify where and why misunderstandings or disconnects occur.

I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

I understand that under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.

I understand that all data collection will be done through audio recordings, which will be transcribed manually after each session. The resultant findings will be stored on an external digital hard drive, and only used for the purpose of this dissertation.

I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

I understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Daniel Sammut



\_\_\_\_\_

JingYao Xu





**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

## **Information letter**

14/02/20224

Dear Participant,

My name is Daniel Sammut and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master's degree in Architecture. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled *Territories of Discontent: Symbolic Space and Planning Negotiation in Malta*; this is being supervised by Perit JingYao Xu. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to understand different perspectives with regards to ongoing processes of territorial negotiation in relation to planning and construction projects in Malta, while attempting to streamline effective negotiation between opposing stakeholders in these processes. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of these opposing perspectives. Participants will be given the opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions on these relevant matters, while participating in an attempt to understand the core beliefs which lead to these perspectives. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be invited to take part in a semi-structured interview designed to explore your personal and/or professional perspective on the contested site of Manoel Island. During this conversation, you will be encouraged to consider the same issues from a range of perspectives — factual, emotional, cautious, optimistic, critical, and creative — in order to help uncover deeper symbolic or value-based aspects of your position. This approach may also support a broader understanding of how such meanings shape planning negotiations and highlight areas where stakeholder positions align or diverge. The interview is expected to last between 45 - 120 minutes.

Data collection will be done through audio recordings, which will be transcribed manually after the interviews are concluded. The resultant findings will be stored digitally. Any data that may lead to the identification of research participants will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive and kept in a locked secure place when not in use / on a secure UM-approved server with the appropriate access settings applied, to ensure data security.

Any material in hard copy form will be placed in a locked cupboard. Only my supervisor and myself (and in exceptional cases, examiners) will have access to this data.

The findings which emerge from this research may be published (e.g., in a dissertation, academic journals) and/or presented (e.g., during conferences, meetings). Your name (or any other identifying information) will not appear when the findings are reported.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as

this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that you have the opportunity to voice your concerns and communicate your standings on the issue of ongoing planning and construction negotiations to both like-minded and opposing stakeholders. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

Yours Sincerely,

Daniel Sammut



JingYao Xu

