

Valletta: striking a balance

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Article featured in The Times on 10 February 2017.

<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170210/opinion/Valletta-striking-a-balance.639183>

Dr. Ebejer argues that there can be no regeneration of Valletta, if its liveability is compromised. Nor can a regenerated Valletta sustain economic, social and cultural activity unless it can be accessed without difficulty, with both public and private transport.

Urban regeneration is a process spanning decades. Valletta's regeneration gained momentum with several public sector projects in the last fifteen years. These have generated renewed interest in the city and were an incentive for private sector investments in rehabilitation of properties.

There are far too many properties in Valletta which are vacant or which are not well maintained. Private investment in Valletta is essential for Valletta's regeneration because it rehabilitates properties and more importantly it brings properties into use. Most of the private investment is in boutique hotels, catering establishments, rental properties and upmarket residences.

Increased evening activity in Valletta is a welcome change. On the other hand, evening activity is negatively impacting residents because of noise. It is not uncommon for music to be played loudly beyond 11 pm. Lack of enforcement is making a difficult situation unbearable for residents. Another major inconvenience for residents is the difficulty to find parking. This was always a problem in Valletta but the situation has worsened in recent years, largely because of the loss of some residential parking spaces and also because of poor enforcement. These and other difficulties are undermining Valletta's liveability and in turn they undermine regeneration objectives.

Residents develop strong roots in the City. The residents' sense of belonging is essential to have a vibrant, liveable city. Whenever decisions are taken for Valletta, the relevant authorities should consider how these will impact residents. Apart from encouraging others to take up residence in Valletta, the authorities should strive to make Valletta more liveable to make it less likely for residents to move away.

Rehabilitation and reuse of properties in Valletta is a positive development. On the other hand, excessive commercialisation could undermine urban regeneration objectives if it makes Valletta less liveable. The situation requires careful monitoring and effective enforcement, and where necessary policy changes to ensure that the right balance is achieved.

Valletta Alive Foundation recently addressed a press conference together with the Valletta Local Council, Din l-Art Helwa and Friends of the Earth. The point insisted upon by VAF in the conference was that there can be no regeneration of Valletta, if its liveability is compromised.

No area can sustain economic, social and cultural activity unless it can be accessed without difficulty, with both public and private transport. There are many different users of Valletta; residents, office workers, shoppers, theatre-goers, diners and tourists. As far as is practicable, the needs for access

of each should be catered for. In the last decade, there were positive developments on access including the CVA, the park and ride, a new car park in Floriana, the Upper Barrakka lift and ferry services to Cottonera. These are not enough because, with regeneration, the level of activity and hence demand for access has increased. There is an urgent need for a new transport strategy that looks at Valletta access issues in a holistic manner.

In the meantime, the authorities should consider short term access improvements including better public transport; more encouragement for people to use park and ride; effective management of the CVA and effective enforcement over illegal parking. As a long term measure, the authorities should consider the development of a multi-storey parking at the lower end of Valletta. Because of the fortifications, identifying an appropriate site is not easy but it is still doable. Improved access to Valletta should be a main objective for the City's regeneration.