Spaces for People: Lessons from Valetta   *(paper)*

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Barely two weeks ago, Valetta celebrated the 450th anniversary of its Foundation. To mark this occasion the Times of Malta re-printed a Special Number that was first published fifty years before, on the 28th March 1966, to mark the 400th Anniversary of the Foundation of Valetta. Practically all the twenty-four articles in this supplement looked at various aspects of Valetta's past, except for the final one, by Perit Salvino Mangion (1) who wrote about the Valetta of the Future. In order to look forward into the future, it is normally always necessary for us to look back into the past, into history; in the context of this seminar, I found this article of greatest interest, because it is a vision of the future that was conceived fifty years ago. It really ought to be a picture of Valetta today, and therefore, by looking at it in detail, it can suggest to us how easy, or difficult, it is to anticipate the future.

Perit Mangion, who was then the Director of Public Works, refers to Valetta as the administrative, cultural, commercial and business centre of Malta, which still receives "a daily influx of large numbers of people and cars"; however, he predicts that the growth of tourism development in the north-west of Malta and the development of a Freeport in Marsaxlokk, would lead to a degree of decentralisation of the administrative, commercial and business activities. He predicts that growing "business, industry and professional practice" would require more "adequate" office space, which, he presumes, has to be located in Valetta; he predicts that the "machinery of Government" of the recently independent Malta would grow substantially, and salutes the Government plan to start relocating some of its offices to Floriana.

Perit Mangion predicts a growth in the "hotels, restaurants and places of entertainment" required to cater "for a much larger influx of foreigners"; he also predicts that the quality and number of shops was bound to increase. One of the fascinating aspects of the 1966 publication was, for me, the large number of commercial establishments, that are advertised within it, which no longer exist, or which changed destination; as well as noting the smaller number of the ones that survive!

The reference to residential accommodation is particularly interesting. Perit Mangion refers to five areas where slum clearance still needs to be undertaken. He makes the comment that the density in these areas is 1235 persons per hectare (500 persons per acre, or 8 sq.m per person), and that therefore, in the new "modern, efficient and hygienic dwellings" that would be erected in these areas, only about half of this population could be accommodated. The concept of the relatively new townships of Sta.Lucia and Msieraħ, and the proposed development on Corradino Hill, to jointly receive the overspill from this impossibly large population, is highlighted, given that within Valetta there was "no land available for expansion".

This level of density is indeed high. In a 2009 study (2), the author presented a comparison of residential densities in city-states such as Singapore or Hong Kong, (150 sq.m. per person), with contemporary

residential densities in Valetta and Birkirkara, (125 sq.m. per person) and Sliema, (100 sq.m. per person), and with the average residential density in Valetta in its heyday, (44 sq.m. per person).

The slum clearance projects, namely in the St.John's Cavalier area, and the Arċipierku (Old Hospital Street), and Due Balli areas, were carried out in the 1970's, in a context of great political controversy and confrontation. The slum clearance projects envisaged the replacement of the "run down" areas by blocks of social housing. It is interesting to note that Perit Mangion envisaged that, in some areas, where "traffic noises" were not an issue, and which enjoyed "very attractive views", it was possible (he uses the word "likely") that the redevelopment would involve multi-storey residential blocks catering for "higher income" families, wishing to return to Valetta, and seeking "to recapture the old social life". This is a very important issue which will be developed later on in this paper.

Perit Salvino Mangion's paper also addresses the other major problem of Valetta, namely the issue of vehicular access. He points out that on the one hand, it was not possible for the city to continue to accommodate the daily onslaught of cars, to the extent that "traffic barely moved". He makes the very revealing observation that if traffic projections were to be made (in 1966) the results would "prove conclusively" that it was not feasible to cater for cars "on the scale of, say, one car per family" – something which, he considers, in 1966, as not an "unrealistic forecast for the next 20 years"!
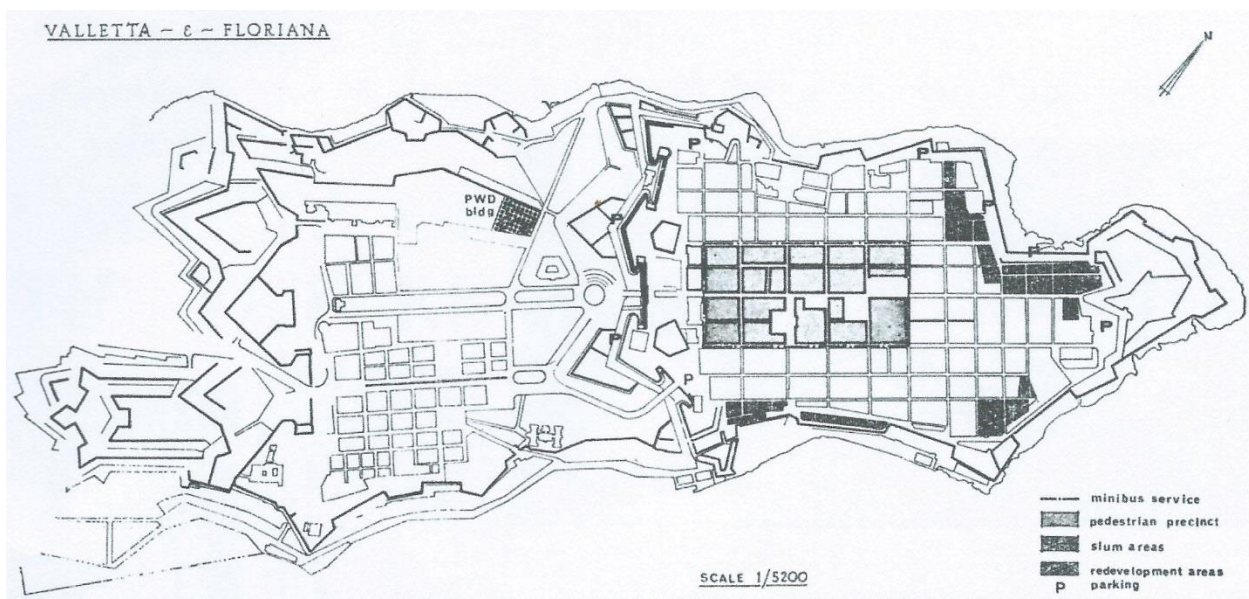

Fig. 1: Valetta pedestrian core, from Mangion (1)

In order to resolve this tension between the historic aspect of the city "with very definite character which must be preserved" and the requirements of a thriving capital city of a young independent state, Mangion talks about his vision of a balance between redevelopment and preservation. Within the central part of the city, which he defines by the lines formed by Merchants' Street and Old Bakery Street, and South and Archbishop Street, he proposes that redevelopment had to be very restrained, Fig. 1. He predicts that cars would soon be permanently excluded from Kingsway (Republic Street), and

possibly from the whole central part of Valletta as defined above. He is not insenstive, however, to the needs of good accessibility and communication, and proposes that this central area be served by a circular mini-bus service.

In the peripheral areas around this centre, he proposes that modern redevelopment, allowing "latitude in the use of materials and in the shapes and treatment of buildings" would not be harmful as long as the Valetta skyline is respected. He acknowledges that, within these redeveloped areas, it would be very difficult to "recapture the characteristic urban scene of the small town" because of "modern daylighting and planning standards" and, of course, the demands of the private car. The latter must be served, he suggests, by large underground car-parks, or located in ditches, or along the bastion periphery, or outside the bastions. This point of view is probably very typical of city planning of the 60's.

However, Mangion also makes a very strong case for the importance of walking, and especially for "maximum separation between vehicles and pedestrians". His most memorable quote, which is highlighted by the editor on the second page of the article, is taken from Colin Buchanan's paper "Rebuilding for Traffic", (not referenced but probably from *Traffic in Towns* (3) . It is worth repeating the quotation here:

"This simple act (of walking) is responsible for a great deal of movement in towns, including all the final distribution from bus stops and car parks and it is common sense that it should take place in conditions of reasonable comfort and safety. Walking is also involved with more subtle matters such as looking in shop windows, admiring the scene and talking to people, and it is almost true to say that *the ease and comfort with which a person can walk about and look around is a measure of the civilized quality of an urban area"*.

This article highlighted issues that are still relevant today, namely vehicular access, pedestrianisation, new development and "gentrification".

In the 28th March 2016 issue, there were also two relevant articles, the first by Prof.Alexei Dingli and the second by journalist George Cini. In both contributions, there is hint of wistful nostalgia; George Cini (4) decries the disappearance of the "barbers, tailors, and cobblers", the "itinerant hawkers", and writes about "the vacuum .... being filled by gentrification" which caused property prices to rise, "well beyond the reach of the locals".. He decries the shops sporting "international brand names" and "garish shop signs" (ironic comment in the context of Mangion's prediction of a better quality of shops) – and calls for "entrepreneurs capable of resurrecting the old world charm Valletta was known for". Prof.Dingli (5) also warns about the risk of "over-development" and of "gentrification", but, at the same time he comments about how Valletta is "devoid of young families", and salutes the investment in the city by public and private investors, over recent years, which is now waking Valetta up, after lying "dormant for so many decades".

Cities have their own life, and there are limits to how much one can avoid the cycles of flourish, decline, re-building, re-flourish. The fear of gentrification is a curious one, in this respect. The original city was built by "gentlemen for gentlemen", and as also explained by Mangion (1), the original city consisted of big architectural statements in the form of, of course, churches, auberges and convents, but also, and especially, of large beautiful palaces or noble houses, belong, first, to the noble families who came to live in the city, and then the rich merchants who lived and traded in the city. This is the genesis of the

central part of Valetta, which Mangion envisages as a completely pedestrian area. The space around this core, going out towards the bastions, was gradually filled up with the people who needed to live in the city to make a living, either in the service of the Order of St.John, or of the noblemen, or of the merchants; this included the butchers and fishmongers, and cloth merchants, and artists and artisans, and carpenters and metal workers. In addition, there were also for those tradesmen who supported this army of "support staff", as it were – hence the cobblers, the barbers and the hawkers. It is as a result of the exodus of, first those who had alternative dwellings elsewhere, and who no longer needed the safety of the city walls to live comfortably, and secondly of the middle class, whose aspirations for higher quality dwellings, but probably also aspirations for social advancement, that led to the emptying of the city, leaving only a small number of residents, whose socio-economic strength is weak, below the national average, and certainly not representative of maltese society in general.

In this context, to talk of "gentrification" as if it were a loss for the city is to deny that the problem of the city results from "de-gentrification". Being nostalgic for an "old charm Valetta" is not enough to guarantee a future for the capital city, not unless we are happy with the city remaining a "museum" with lots of things to show the tourists, or a Saturday night place, with a number of cultural activities (some high culture, and others much lower!) and restaurants attracting custom from outside the city, but whose resident community otherwise slowly disappears. Is that the future of our capital? The author therefore feels that one must ask who the "locals" are, which Cini (4) refers to when he comments that there is the risk that the latter will not be able to afford the price of property in the city, if such property becomes sought after by more prosperous, prospective residents.

Fig.2: Streets taken over by restaurants for residents or tourism?

This discussion also raises the issue of density. As has been pointed out before, Valetta was certainly inhabited at much denser level than nowadays. Density is, however, not just a simple calculation of the number of people living in a given area. An interesting characteristic is the number of acquaintances of an average resident, which is also referred to as the social-tie density. Social-tie density has been identified as a prime factor in the fostering of innovation, and hence economic well-being, (Pan et al. (6). Loss of density, therefore, is also the loss of potential economic advantage.

The author has recently re-visited a publication by Jon Mitchell (6) where the author himself is quoted as having argued in favour of a balance between the Baroque City and the Modern City. This was in the context of a forum organised in 1993, on "How can we *really* give life to the city of Valletta?" (– "Kif nistgħu verament ngħatu hajja lill-Belt Valletta"). This author had completely forgotten about the event, and is therefore not quite sure of his contribution then, but it seems, from the report in Mitchell, that the concerns in 1993 were the same as those held in 2016. The forum had referred to the excellent work which had been carried out by the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, set up in the late 1980's, to repair and restore the architectural fabric of the important public buildings in Valetta; but it wished to explore what else could be done to *really* give life to Valetta. The population in Valetta in 1990 was 9000; in 2014 it was recorded at less than 6500, and therefore the trend is still terminal. The trend was downwards even when, in the 80's and 90's, the population growth rate of Malta was hovering around the 1%. In 2016 it is 0.22% and falling – in 2020 it is projected to fall to 0.167% and by 2035 the population is expected to start declining, because the current fertility rate is already below the replacement rate. In other words, the problem of the absence of young families, decried by Mangion (1), and Dingli, (5), is likely to get worse, unless something drastic happens. Surely if "gentrification" brings in new residents, then it cannot be a bad thing, since the locals are, in any case, a, literally, dying breed (unless you include, as Mitchell (6) suggests, you include under the term "Beltin" those who were born and bred in Valletta (like the author), and worked or studied in the city. Can these "locals" be enticed back?

The promoters of this seminar refer to the need to address the "aspirations of Maltese society of the future". The author thinks that this is a very important issue. What do we really want the future of Valletta to be? If the population continues to decline, do we envisage a situation when the buildings within it accommodate offices, private or government, shops or tourist-related facilities, , (Fig.2)? There are cities of a comparable size where this has happened. There are even places (in Italy, for example), where all the buildings are empty and the place more or less vacant. If that were the case, then we might not need to worry about making the city "liveable, safe and healthy". If we are not worried about attracting residents with young families, we would be less concerned about noise pollution, about green spaces, and even about the type of evening entertainment we attract. The mayor wishes to have a city which respects its residents, (5); this presumes that the city contiues to have residents.

We could have a balance, but we cannot have the cake and eat it.

So, to try to respond to what the promoters asked the author to talk about, what architectural and urban space lessons can be learnt from the city, which could help us address Valetta of 2020 and beyond.

First of all, it is necessary to acknowledge that we are lucky that in Valetta we have an abundance of interesting urban spaces, the like of which it is difficult to find elsewhere. Valetta is, by any standard, a beautiful city. It is excellently located between two beautiful harbours, it has an abundance of interesting public urban spaces, (Fig.3). Probably because of the bastions that circumscribe it, Valetta has also, more or less, maintained its coherence, and its urban consistence. There are many spaces that have been designed with people in mind. The (in)famous steps in some streets inhibited their being taken over by the car, and therefore their particular character has survived more than other places, (Fig.4). There are many places where the play of light and shade creates interest, where change in scale, from the restrained to the monumental, creates surprise and delight. There are many spaces for people to discover and enjoy.

Fig. 3: Valetta is still full of beautiful spaces to discover on foot

Fig. 4: Steps kept cars out!

As discussed earlier, "gentrification" can bring problems. But do urban improvements, and the restoration of vacant dilapidated buildings, really push existing residents out? The example of the on-going transformation of Birgu suggests that this is not necessarily the case. As a result of the infrastructural investments that have been made by public funds, and the corresponding investments in houses by private individuals, Birgu, today, suggests that a balance may exist. Many of the original residents of Birgu still own and live in their houses, and even if some other houses are gradually being transformed either into new homes for foreign residents, or small hotels for a different type of tourist, there is no overall feeling that the place is being "gentrified". It could be argued, of course, that as the returns from such private investment are demonstrated to be very satisfactory, the pressure may rise for existing residents to sell out and hence move to other places.

However, Birgu is also different. It is smaller, and has always been. At the beginning of the 20th century, Birgu had a population of about 6000 people, and by 2014 it had declined to just over 2500. Its physiognomy is also very different, in the sense that, apart from the damage caused during the Second World War and the subseqent reconstructions, the distribution of major buildings such as palaces or churches and convents, amongst the fabric of more modest residential units is more diffused.

The attractiveness, or otherwise, of modest residential units to new residents depends not only on the quality of the units themselves, and the views they perhaps afford over the harbours on either side, but also on the qualities of the urban spaces around, or immediately adjacent, to the units.This is where conflicts can arise.

Herman Hertzberger (7) gives some interesting insights into the characteristics of public and private space, and of, what he refers to as, the "in-between": "The concepts "public" and "private" can be interpreted as the translation into spatial terms of "collective" and "individual". In a more absolute sense you could say: public: an area that is accessible to everyone at all times; responsibility for upkeep is held collectively. Private: an area whose accessibility is determined by a small group or one person, with responsbility for upkeep". The "in-between" then is the "threshold" providing the "key to the transition and connection between areas with divergent territorial claims, and as a place in its own right, it constitutes, essentially, the spatial condition for the meeting and dialogue between areas of different orders."

Hetzberger is an architect of the Dutch social tradition, working in a society where the difference betwwen the upper and lower income families is not as wide as it is elsewhere – and where there was certainly the desire to promote this social uniformity through the design of new urban settlements, or the interventions in existing cities. Hertzberger consequently associates the "inexorable decline" of the "public domain" with the decline of the collective and the rise of the individual. He comments "the more buildings stand apart as autonomous volumes with individualized facades and private entrances, the less cohesion there is".

It is not useful to be judgemental about this trend. The point is that it exists, and no degree of social engineering can reverse it. In cities, the "closeness", the limited space between buildings, that nowadays we recognise as urban attractiveness, almost invariably was motivated by defence, and especially by communal defence. This military requirement often had other, more social, consequences. Especially in the areas where prosperity was limited, and therefore the houses small, the street becomes a communal living room. This is where children play together in the street, where neighbours can take their chairs out, in the summer evenings, to socialize with the neighbours, or even simply to watch the street. The street is also where people could look out for each other.

Hetzberger comments about how the character of an area depends on who determines the "furnishing" and "arrangement" of an urban space, much as of an interior space; the character depends on *who takes charge of a space, takes care of it, and who is, or feels, responsible for it*. Public spaces, including streets, are increasingly looked after by the local authorities, and therefore there is both a reduced scope for personalisation, as well as a general dilution of the concept of the street as a collective space.

Groups of streets, then, form the "parish", and the individual street community would then relate to other specific street communities. Valetta had, and, to a certain extent, still has, a strong parish structure. The primary ones, reflecting not only the location of the churches, but also the density and uniformity of the residential quarters, are the parishes of St.Paul's Shipwreck, of St.Dominic, of St.Augustine and of the Carmelites. The ownership of the public streets of these parishes could not, for obvious reasons, be seen at any stage during the year, since the responsibility for looking after them remained that of the city or national authority. But, during the special days when the parish celebrated its feast, the responsibility for the "furnishing" of those particular streets was delegated to the parish collective.

This type of street can be contrasted to the typical "suburban" urban space, where the space for vehicular movement, for car-parking, for cycle lanes, for pedestrian walkways, and, even more, for the

ubiquitous front garden – often in the name of some building regulaton or another - pushes buildings away from each other to the extent that the space in between does not exist, and, consequently, to the extent that the social interaction across buildings cannot bloom. Or perhaps, we increasingly do not wish it to bloom? Hertzberger comments that the affinity between inhabitants tends to diminish as prosperity increases. Arguably, better economic circumstances of people result in a reduced dependance on doing things together with your neighbours.

There are however other spaces, which are nominally public, but which, by reason of their geography and location, do not feel public at all. Sometimes they are public spaces which have been converted into extensions of the private dwelling. In other case, these spaces could probably correspond to those spaces which Hertzberger refers to as "in-between" (Fig.5). This can still be observed in some particular spaces in Valetta, sometimes in spaces that are not, strictly speaking, streets, but also elevated terraces, alcoves under archways, landings in steps, or unfrequented street ends, which are "taken over" by the residents of the immediate neighbourhood. These spaces exist because the responsibility for looking after it has been effectively delegated to the local collective. Communities are often built around such spaces, spaces which are thus "taken over", even if nominally public. The casual visitor, or even the new resident, may even find it difficult to enter into this "public" space, because of the overt "ownership" claims by others, generally collectively – although sometimes also by an individual. The "in-between" space, which is meant to be the "threshold" to the private spaces in a particular location becomes, instead, a buffer space, much as the front garden in suburbia does not act as an in-between space between the public street and the private dwelling, but a further buffer against the community.

Communities can also exist in other ways. The author grew up in a post-war block of apartments located at the corner of St.Paul's Street with St.Dominic's Street, which shared an open courtyard with another two apartment blocks, one which was also accessed from St.Paul's Street, but also another one accessed from Merchants' Street. The author remembers the courtyard space – not the ground level, which belonged to a separate entity, but the actual multi-storeyed air space of the courtyard – as the primary community focus of the residents of the three blocks, where they shared their daily stories, lent things or support to each other as the need arose, to the extent that the children were brought up to think of these neighbours as aunts and uncles.

Fig. 5: Public urban space; but feels private?

How do new potential residents relate, therefore, to these "public" areas, located adjacent or in the immediate vicinity of their prospective residence? Do they feel inhibited by the need to be less private (and hence the need to concede more to the communal), and hence inclined to give up? Or, if in sufficient numbers, can the arrival of new residents dilute the collective nature of the space, and even push them out completely? In St.Barbara's Bastion, which has always been one of the most beautiful and desirbale areas of Valletta, many residents have moved out – probably against considerable financial gain – in favour of either rich corporate clients, or rich expatriate residents.

How can the process of attraction of new residents be moderated?

In Valletta, there are few opportunities for designing new buildings and designing new urban spaces. A potential exists in the redevelopment of the 1970's social housing that were built following slum clearance operations – but which were not ambitious enough, and which therefore laid the seeds for the slums of the future. In order to attract new residents, particularly new young families, we need to find new ways to use existing urban spaces. The revival of the public street as the communal living room is unlikely to be successul, not least because of the reduced social homogeniety, and reduced appetite for the sort of neighbourliness that characterised previous communities; but also because of the continuing dominance of the car – unless the steps in the street prohibit the car!

The gridiron nature of Valletta has not really been exploited. Although the grid ought to facilitate the linkage between the periphery and the centre, this has not been the case. The central zone, even if not as delimited as proposed by Mangion, continues to dominate, partly by reason of geography – the character of the lower part of Republic Street changes where the slope becomes steeper, as does the upper part of Merchants' Street – but also by ease of access, quality of public infrastructure, and distribution of amenities. There are areas on the periphery of the city where investment is still

necessary, (Fig. 6). These areas need to be brought back into the urban collective, so that the liveable core is stretched to extend to the enclosure of the bastions- because this is where more people actuallyu live. It is necessary to create tension in the City, by stretching the centre, and linking it more intimately to the periphery. This can also be done by the creation of public facilities/buildings which can have the function of promoting social interaction.

Fig.6: Urban spaces on the periphery where investment is still necessary.

In the 19th century, many cities benefitted from a number of "private" buildings which became part of the public realm, where social interaction was possible, for example, exhibition buildings, department stores, railway stations, covered arcades. In Valetta, there are some, such as the Old Market, and now, possibly the Pjazza Tijatru Rjal, the Fort St.Elmo Museum, which could have the same function, if promoted as such. It is necessary to enhance these facilities, and to distribute them over the whole of the city so as to "stretch" it. One idea could be the recovery of the magnificent buildings that until recently were Malta's best equipped furniture factory, as a building which serves this type of public function.

It is also necessary to put more emphasis on the enhancement of the public domain. Valetta has gardens located at its periphery, notably the Upper Barakka, the Lower Barakka, and Hastings, but it is first of all necessary to upgrade the latter two, to make them places for young families, (Fig.7). It is also necessary to improve the green infrastructure within the public spaces throughout the city. We need to have less advertisements and less paraphernalia in the public realm, and more well-detailed public furniture and well maintained green areas. The author would urge the City to assiduously pursue the dream of creating more gardens and leisure spaces in the Ditch, particularly where, one hopes, it will be more easily accessible via the projected elevator.

Fig. 7: Upper Barraka

In recent years, there have been some excellent additions to the public realm of Valetta, especially the entrance to the City, and the Parliament area, and, to a degree, St.George's Square, (Fig.8 and 9). Other recent interventions feel less successful; the area adjacent to the Auberge d'Italie has "not happened" yet, and almost invites the ubiquitous "festa hot-dog gabbani" to keep company with a forlorn-looking La Valette, (Fig.10). And Castille Square is surely a badly missed opportunity for a grand public open space (Fig. 11) – admittedly in a difficult site – in front of one of the most beautiful public buildings in Valetta. Unfortunately, these types of opportunities do not often arise. Following the opening of this square, and embellishing it with yet more statues of politicians, (can we ban these, from now on?), does anybody, tourist or resident, really feel any attraction to visit the square (other than to take a photo by the guns), as one does to visit the Campidoglio or Covent Garden or the Place de la Concorde. Could well have been!

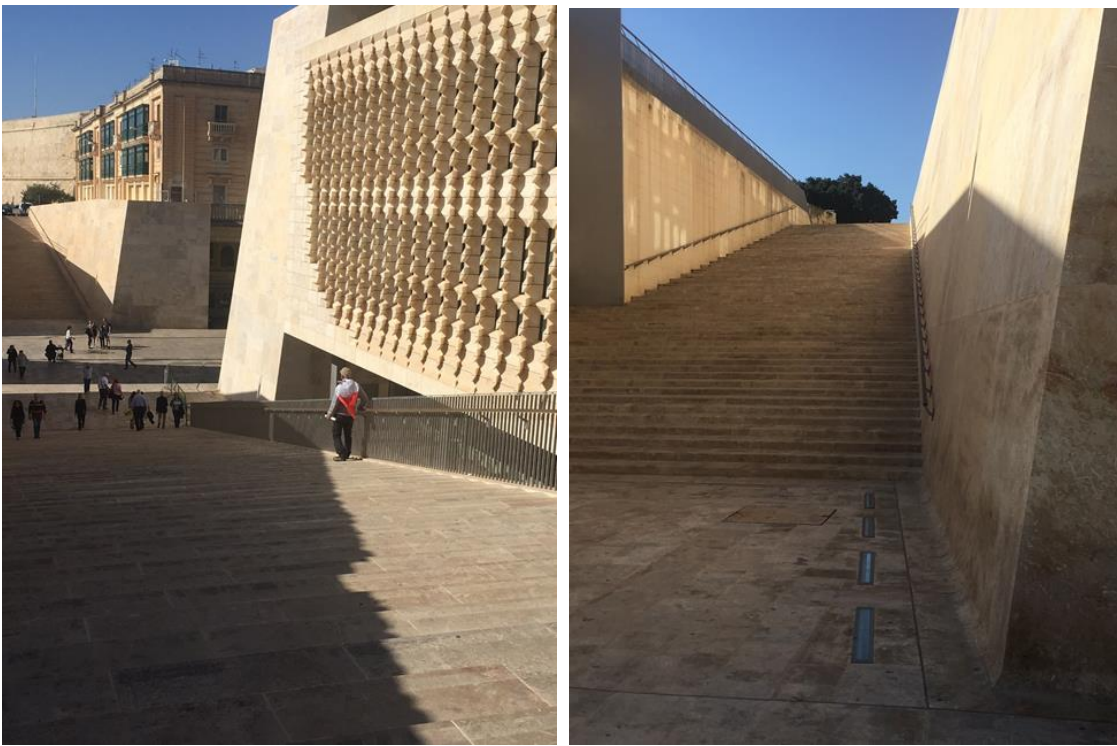Fig. 8: St.George's Square, reclaimed from the car.

Fig.9: Urban theatre – City Gate

Fig. 10: Forlorn looking La Valette – this urban space is not really working, yet.

Fig. 11: Castille Square: Missed opportunity?

So, what is the future of Valetta looking like? What can we expect (or hope for) for 2020? The core areas of Valetta are currently looking bright and lively, as a result of the investment that went into these areas. Public money has gone into public buildings, museums, palaces, etc. Private money has gone into shops, offices, some residences, and now boutique hotels. However, the resident population of the city is still declining. And it is vitally necessary to understand why; and then to do something about it.

More investment is required to help existing and new residents to upgrade the public and private infrastructure of the more peripheral dwelling areas. The existing residents can no longer afford the upkeep of the areas that the local communities used to "look after". The investment has to come from other sources. There are various funding mechanisms that can be explored to serve this purpose.

The Local Council should be given the resources to understand, (i) the current socio-economic profile of its residents, and the quality of dwellings they inhabit; (ii) the factors that encourage existing residents to stay in Valetta, or alternatively push them to leave, if they could; (ii) the geographical distribution of vacant or under-utilised property which could, under some form of corporate intervention, be upgraded and brought into the market for families with children. It is important that planners, and other City managers, do not misunderstand the type of investment and the type of uses that can make Valetta a city which is beautiful to live in, and not just a city to visit as a tourist, or for evening entertainment.

This is a tricky stage of the revival of Valetta. Getting new residents in must be a top priority.

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