

Regenerating Valletta: A vision for Valletta beyond 2020

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Introduction

Rewind to year 2000. Valletta was a gem waiting to be discovered but many of its more important buildings were badly kept. The worst offender were the ruins of the Old Opera House. It was an eyesore in Valletta's strategically most important site. More than that it symbolised successive governments' failure to take action for Valletta. There were many different interests in Valletta each putting its own views as to how life can be injected into the City. There were different ideas and perspectives; promoting commercial interests, safeguarding of residents; protecting the urban heritage; enhancing Valletta as part of Malta's tourism product. But there was no single holistic view on what future Valletta should strive for.

It was a time when the idea of Valletta Alive Foundation was born. Different people in different organisations saw the need for a holistic vision for Valletta. I am proud to say I was one of that group of people who worked to bring Valletta Alive Foundation into being in 2006 and who then kept it going through highs and lows. We realised that there were many commonalities across the visions of different groups and individuals. The Valletta Alive Foundation acted as a lobby group with politicians and with the general public. VAF encouraged action in favour of Valletta.

Today Valletta is very different to the Valletta of year 2000. In some aspects it is much better but many problems persists. The process of change continues and will continue for the foreseeable future. But what will be the outcome of that change? What will Valletta be like beyond 2020; in 2025 or 2030?

Objectives for Valletta's regeneration

Valletta is undergoing a process of change and of regeneration. Urban regeneration is a process spanning years and even decades. A central feature of Valletta's regeneration was the implementation of many important projects for Valletta, including the Centre for Creativity, the pedestrianisation of Merchants Street, Pjazza San Gorg and Pjazza Kasitlja ; restoration and reuse of Fort St. Elmo; restoration of many Valletta buildings; the City gate project and the CVA/park and ride. Each is essential for the continued process of Valletta's urban regeneration.

Valletta is unique in many ways. The urban heritage, its role as a capital city, its many diverse functions as a living city and also as a commercial and administrative centre. Experiences of other countries and cities provide lessons but approaches to regeneration cannot simply be copied from one place to another. Solutions for Valletta should be derived based on a proper understand of the issues and of the cultural and legal context.

For an urban regeneration strategy to be derived, there needs to be a good understanding of what the objectives are. How would we like Valletta to be in 2020 and beyond? What are the objectives hat we should set for Valletta's future? It is only on the basis of clearly defined objectives can decisions on planning policy and public sector investments be taken.

In this paper I outline what I believe should be the main objectives for Valletta's continue regeneration process. These objectives are based on an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the City.

I would argue that policy approaches to Valletta should strive for eight different objectives namely:

Objective 1: Urban heritage well-maintained and in use

Objective 2: Enjoyable urban spaces with a strong sense of place

Objective 3: A liveable city

Objective 4: A vibrant city

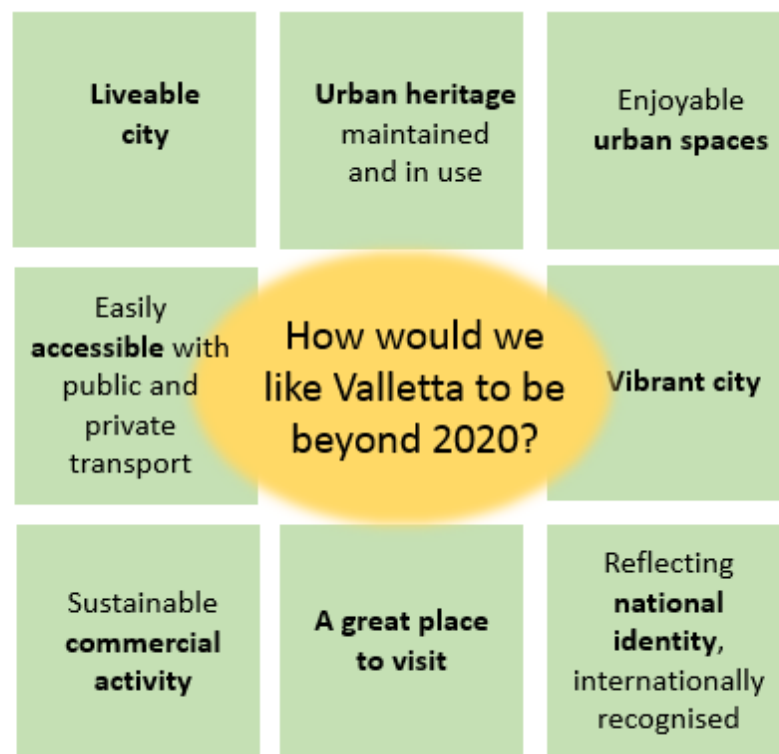
Objective 5: A city reflecting national identity and internationally recognised

Objective 6: A great place to visit

Objective 7: Sustainable commercial activity

Objective 8: Easily accessibility

Table 1 Objectives for Valletta's regeneration



Objectives for Valletta: Past trends and future prospects

For each objective, I specify and explain what the policy objective should be and then I amplify on the current situation on that objective. My discussion of the current situation is based on frequent discussion on Valletta issues, in the Valletta Alive Foundation but also between VAF and other stakeholders. The comments I make on Valletta issues made in this paper are reliable in that they are not one-offs but have matured over many years of discussion and observation.

Objective 1: Urban heritage well-maintained and in use

Objective: For most buildings in Valletta to be brought into use with owners investing adequately in building maintenance and upkeep.

Objective: For historic buildings to be adapted and modified sufficiently to allow viable reuse but not excessively that would compromise historic integrity.

Objective: For streetscapes and buildings facades to be kept clean and well maintained, with architectural features being restored.

Urban heritage well-maintained and in use: Past trends and future prospects

Prior to 2006, Valletta was given low priority by successive governments. Investment was limited to minor restoration projects, with projects worthy of note being few and far between. The lack of public investment was mirrored by a lack of private investment in the City, creating a gradual yet steady downward spiral and increased dilapidation in many parts of Valletta. The exceptions to this were two projects that used Valletta's built heritage in a distinctive and unique way. The projects were the Centre for Creativity that entailed the restoration and adaptation of St. James Cavalier into a cultural centre and Valletta Waterfront that converted a row of waterfront historic stores into a cruise passenger terminal. (The latter is actually in adjoining Floriana.)

For many years, anachronistic rent laws acted as a disincentive against property owners renting property. They also were a disincentive against landlords investing in Valletta properties (Smith, 2010: 79). Legislation was changed in the mid-nineties to facilitate the renting out of properties but reluctance to rent properties to Maltese persisted. The effects of the old rent laws were lack of investment in private residential property, degraded streetscapes and high proportion of vacant properties. A very high proportion of dwellings are vacant; in 1995, 34 per cent of a total of 3,814 dwellings were vacant (Census 2005).

Several government projects were started and completed between 2005 and 2014. With some projects, historic buildings have been restored and were put to good use. More important, it was one of several factors which gave added confidence to people to invest in Valletta properties, either for private residential use or for commercial use. The level of private investment has picked up in recent years but dilapidation of buildings in some areas of Valletta still persists.

In the last decade, interest in Valletta has increased markedly and therefore it is likely that there will be more investment in Valletta properties in the coming years. This is positive in that old dilapidated properties will be rehabilitated and this will have a positive impact on the streetscape. It is unlikely however that first time buyers and young families will move into Valletta, because of the increase in property values. Most of the property rehabilitations in Valletta will be either for wealthy families or

for commercial uses or for tourism accommodations (boutique hotels and short term tourist rental) . An interesting development has been short rentals to tourists (through Airbnb, Wimdu and similar agencies). This type of tourism accommodation brings back into use properties that might not otherwise be suitable for residential or other uses.

Objective 2: Enjoyable urban spaces with a strong sense of place

Objective: For Valletta to have urban spaces that are of good quality and enjoyable to pedestrians including Valletta residents, non-residents and tourists.

Objective: For pedestrian enjoyment of public spaces not to be unduly compromised with commercial uses (i.e. tables and chairs) or inappropriate parking of cars.

Objective: For well-maintained buildings, combined with history and character, to provide a strong sense of place to Valletta's urban spaces.

Enjoyable urban spaces: Past trends and future prospects

Since 2005, there has been a radical improvement in urban spaces in Valletta with the pedestrianisation of Merchants Street and Pjazza San Gorg and more recently Castille Square.

The completion of the City Gate project has provided interesting urban spaces at Valletta's strategically most important location – its main entrance.

Many catering establishments have tables and chairs outside their premises and these generally create a pleasant ambience for diners and for passers-by. There are some instances however where the tables and chairs conflict other uses. In recent years, Valletta's urban spaces have deteriorated because far too many spaces are being taken over with tables and chairs, and the canopies/umbrellas that go with them. Weak enforcement is allowing the takeover of urban spaces with catering outlets' paraphernalia, making this a serious threat for pedestrian's enjoyment of Valletta's public spaces.

Objective 3: A liveable city

Objective: For Valletta to be a liveable city and an attractive place to live, home to a sustainable community and to other residents who wish to share in Valletta's 'lifestyle'.

Objective: For Valletta to offer a strong social life and with ample opportunities for culture and leisure within walking distance.

Objective: For basic amenities to be available and for residents not to be subject to unwarranted inconveniences.

A liveable city: Past trends and future prospects

Like many other towns and villages, the social and cultural of Valletta residents revolves around the parishes, the band clubs and the annual parish feat. Residents develop strong roots in the City, not least because it gives them a sense of identity. This sense of ownership is essential for a town or city to remain a vibrant liveable city.

In the 1990s there was the trend for residential properties to be converted to offices. Less residential properties were available making it more difficult for first time buyers and new residents to take up residence in Valletta. The Grand Harbour Local Plan (1996) included a policy for Valletta not allowing the conversion of residential properties to office use with some exceptions. The policy was instrumental in preventing widespread conversion of residential to office and hence prevented further significant loss in population.

The decline in residents experienced over several decades has stabilised at between 6,000 and 6,500 residents. On the one hand, there are intrinsic disincentives for first time buyers to buy a property in Valletta including the high initial and running cost of rehabilitated properties and the difficulties to find parking close to home. Planning constraints, even if well-intentioned, create further difficulties, including additional costs, making it more difficult for people to invest in Valletta's historic properties. On the other hand, there has been increased demand for residential properties in Valletta from two groups of people namely young persons (singles or couples) and wealthy foreign elderly persons. The former seek properties at the lower end of the market, normally a small apartment which they refurbish. The latter seek larger prestigious houses which they refurbish. More than just a property, property are seeking a lifestyle they would not find elsewhere in Malta. A lifestyle of living in a magnificent historic context, within easy reach of enjoyable pedestrian spaces and gardens and close to most social and cultural facilities.

Stable population numbers hide the changing nature of Valletta's residents. People with roots in the city are moving out and these are being replaced by people from outside who choose to live in the city. The downside of gentrification is the risk of losing the social and cultural activities that are rooted in local communities.

A central element in urban regeneration is the ability of an urban area to retain existing residents and attract new ones. New residents bring much needed investment into the capital. Properties which would otherwise decay are restored and brought back into use. Regeneration also means making an area more liveable. Most Valletta residents already face difficulties relating to the cost of building maintenance and parking. More recently, there is a factor which is making Valletta less liveable, namely late night disturbances from the catering establishments. Not enough attention is being given to the impact of the increased evening activity on residents. Noise in the evenings is becoming more of a nuisance to residents, to the extent that night time sleep is being disrupted. Unless the problem of night time disturbance is addressed, Valletta risks losing more residents and this would undermine regeneration objectives.

Objective 4: A vibrant city

Objective: For Valletta's urban vitality to be reflected in lively urban spaces, a sustainable resident community, and a full cultural calendar.

Objective: For the City to display vitality in the evenings with leisure activity focused around bars and restaurants.

A vibrant city: Past trends and future prospects

In recent years, there was also investment in open air cultural events in Valletta, the most notable being Notte Bianca and New Year's Eve Celebrations. The first Notte Bianca took place in 2006, and it is now a well-established event in Malta's cultural calendar. Historic buildings, churches, museums and shops remain open till late and streets come alive with recitals, opera, jazz, poetry readings, exhibitions, dance, walk tours, street theatre and more. Events are also part of the regenerative process of historic areas.

When speaking about Valletta's regeneration, some commentators refer almost exclusively to evening activity. This is incorrect. Although evening activity is important, there are countless other issues relating to urban regeneration which need to be addressed. Equating urban regeneration with the generation of evening/night-time activity is not only wrong but also harmful to Valletta, as it distorts the priorities that should be addressed to sustain regeneration.

Over the past five years, there has been a consistent increase in evening activity in Valletta. More catering establishments have opened in the evening and some are providing good music entertainment. Increased evening activity in Valletta is a welcome change, provided of course it does not cause undue inconvenience to residents.

Objective 5: A city reflecting national identity and internationally recognised

Objective: For Valletta to be internationally recognised for its heritage and culture and to be generally perceived as a place well worth a visit.

National identity and international recognition: Past trends and future prospects

Valletta is an icon, or has the potential to be an icon, in its own right because of the sense of place it offers. In historic fortified towns, genius loci emanates both from the fortified town in its totality and also because of specific buildings and urban spaces within the town. Entrance into a well-defined town through a gateway becomes the first part of the overall experience of the town – a sense of coming from 'out there' and into a place. A well-defined boundary also gives the historic town a stronger identity normally reflected by iconic images of the external walls or important gateways.

The urban fabric of Valletta conveys both a Maltese identity as well as a foreign one. The Valletta streetscapes are characterised by the ever present Maltese balcony and the extensive use of the

typical Maltese stone. The numerous churches at various locations in Valletta signify the importance of religion in the social and cultural life of the people and hence the relevance of the Catholic religion to the Maltese identity. On the other hand, the more dominant and distinctive architecture of auberges, palaces and public buildings are a reminder of the linkages of the town to the Knights of St. John.

The siting of a parliament house at the entrance to Valletta is replete with meaning. The Maltese Parliament is one of just 27 EU-national parliamentary assemblies across the European Union. It is the legislative body of the smallest member in the EU and yet, its relevance in the EU is comparable to the British Houses of Parliament and the German Bundestag. Malta has a voice in the EU which is disproportionately stronger than its size.

Flagship developments enhance the image of the city as a tourism destination. The creation of a postcard image which is readily recognisable across Europe is worth millions of euros in terms of tourism marketing. Hopefully, the Piano development on the opera house/ Freedom Square will be a plus for tourism in terms of an improved tourism product and an enhanced tourism image of Malta overseas

Objective 6: A great place to visit

Objective: For Valletta to remain a great place to visit for tourists.

Objective: For Valletta to offer a good choice of tourism accommodation is offered in Valletta or within walking distance.

A great place to visit: Past trends and future prospects

Valletta is already a great place to visit because of its history and its many attractions. It also has diverse and interesting urban spaces giving visitors ample scope to explore and discover. Since 2005, there has been further radical improvements in Valletta as a place to visit. The pedestrianisation of Pjazza San Gorg, Merchants Streets and other streets has provided more space where people can walk and experience unique historic urban spaces. The completion of City Gate project gave Valletta an added important attraction namely an iconic building designed by a world renowned architect. The project also created important urban spaces that fit in very well in the overall urban fabric of Valletta.

Until recently, tourism accommodation in or near Valletta was very limited. The attractiveness of Valletta would inevitably result in demand for accommodation in or near the City. The number of hotel beds was insufficient to meet demand. The situation is currently changing with two types of tourism accommodation becoming more available in the City namely boutique hotels and short rentals for tourist.

A thriving resident community is also relevant to tourist attractiveness of the City. The social and cultural life of residents add vitality to the City and therefore make the City more attractive to tourists. When visitors see and share in life of residents, there is a sense of connectedness that enhances the visitor experience. The liveability of Valletta should be enhanced primarily for social objectives but also to make it more attractive for visitors.

Objective 7: Sustainable commercial activity

Objective: For Valletta to retain good levels of daytime commercial activity (namely retail, offices and catering) sustaining the city's vitality without unduly undermining liveability.

Sustainable commercial activity: Past trends and future prospects

Most of the commercial activity is concentrated within the central business area along the first half kilometre of Republic Street and the adjoining streets. Extensive ground floor frontages in this area, particularly on Republic Street and Merchants street, are retail or catering, the upper floors of buildings being commercial. Most shops are very small resulting in a shopping experience largely based on the interaction between the shopper and the shop assistant. Some shops have retained the traditional Valletta shop front whereas more recent shop fronts are mostly compatible with the historic character of the City. Beyond the central business area, there are limited commercial activities as most buildings are residential.

Valletta offices tend to be small and/or fragmented into small rooms. Because of their heritage value, adapting properties for modern day offices is difficult and often office workers have to put up with some inconveniences. Despite the attractiveness of having a Valletta address, many companies have moved out of Valletta as their demands for office space grew.

Objective 8: Easily accessible

Objective: For Valletta to be easily accessible by both public and private transport and this includes the lower parts of Valletta. Accessibility is sufficient to sustain the City's social, cultural and economic roles, without unduly impinging on the quality of Valletta's urban spaces.

Easily accessible: Past trends and future prospects

Parking and access to Valletta has been a constant point of discussion amongst Valletta stakeholders for decades because it affects all Valletta users. Being on a peninsula, land based transport access is limited to one side only. This makes land-based transport more difficult. Valletta's main bus terminus is located just outside City Gate, making it relatively easy for people to get to Valletta from most parts of island. Sea borne transport across the two harbours is available but it satisfies only a very small proportion of the demand for travel to Valletta. With controlled vehicle access system, on-street parking in Valletta is against payment except for residents. There are good car parking facilities in Floriana, just outside Valletta and this includes a park and ride facility. There are no off-street parking facilities in Valletta. This is problematic mostly for lower Valletta because of the distance from the Floriana car parks. This creates intense parking pressures on the streets in lower Valletta and also on the shoreline.

No area can sustain economic, social and cultural activity unless it is possible to access it without undue difficulty. In the last decade, there were positive developments on access including CVA, park and ride, new car park in Floriana, Upper Barrakka lift and ferry services. These are not enough because, with regeneration, the level of activity and hence demand for access will increase.

Conclusion

This paper outlines eight objectives that I think are essential to safeguard Valletta's social and cultural future. A clear understanding of objectives provides a framework upon which decisions can be based. A lack of understanding of objectives may result in wrong decisions on policy formulation and decisions on public sector investment.

Three main observations emerge from this paper. First, the importance of urban spaces dedicated to pedestrians. The pedestrianisation of important spaces has created more attractive urban spaces and this in turn has made Valletta more attractive to visit and to reside in. Linked to pedestrianised urban spaces is the issue of accessibility to Valletta. Because of its geography, there is no easy solution but more attention is required by the authorities to improve accessibility while at the same time reducing the impact of the car on Valletta's urban spaces.

Third, Valletta is home to a resident community with a strong social and cultural life. Living in Valletta has always been subject to some inconveniences but these have increased in recent years. This is problematic as it will further deplete Valletta's resident community. Effective action is required to make Valletta more liveable and this includes addressing some of the inconveniences to which Valletta residents are subject.