Enhancing the Gran Castello’s Unique Selling Proposition

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Introduction

The intrinsic value and outstanding potential of the Gran Castello are undisputed. A staggering 80.9% out of 1052 interviewees taking part in a comprehensive Tourism Locality Survey focusing on the town of Victoria (Malta Tourism Authority, 2004) confirmed that a visit to the imposing and strategically located Castello is a must for every self-respecting visitor to the island, while 16.8% of the same representative sample identified it as the most iconic resource in Gozo. An equally significant finding emerges from the periodic tourism surveys undertaken by the National Statistics Office (National Statistics Office, 2003) whereby it has been established that between 50 to 60% of all inbound tourists to Malta cross over to the sister island during their stay. This translates into some 600,000 international visitors, to this must be added several thousands of residents on mainland Malta who frequent Gozo as a holiday destination. Evidently, many of these international and domestic tourists make their way up to the lofty Castello, being the most dominating monument in central Gozo and a clearly visible feature from the greater part of the island and from several promontories along northwest Malta.

Going back to the aforementioned Tourism Locality Survey, a notable proportion of respondents called for more practical information about the site and for a holistic and comprehensive interpretation.
provision. Having served as Manager Gozo Area Office within Heritage Malta from 2004 to 2008, I can vouch for this critical shortcoming. Many a time, I was approached by disoriented and puzzled visitors trying to make their way to the respective museums, amenities and viewpoints or looking for some information on the Castello’s millennial story. As things stand, unaccompanied visitors who do not plan out their excursion in detail and arm themselves with a decent guidebook or a related guiding and interpretation aide, risk missing out much of what Gozo’s most extensive and multifaceted heritage asset has to offer.

**Restoration and Rehabilitation**

Over the past fifty years the Gran Castello underwent an extensive restoration and rehabilitation programme, and attracted five complimentary museums, three exhibition and educational facilities, and a host of associated visitor amenities. Nonetheless, it still lacks a visitor centre that encourages visitors to discover and experience the uniqueness of the site, and which offers a thorough introduction to the site, sustaining a range of different services. This said, the main problem is where to locate such a facility and whether an existing building could be utilised as against constructing a new edifice. As illustrated by corresponding developments at other popular sites in the Maltese Islands and beyond, a new purposely built visitor centre within the immediate and sensitive environs of a significant site, no matter how well designed, will hardly blend in happily. Likewise the adoption of existing buildings has the advantage of being historically

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3 Namely four Museums/Sites run by Heritage Malta (Archaeology, Folklore, Nature and Old Prison) and the Cathedral Museum. Besides, the Non-Governmental Organisation Wirt Għawdex is planning to open up on a regular basis the old polverista at St. John’s demi-bastion and adjacent battery, silos and World War II shelters.

4 The former Crafts Centre and Sentinella Base have been redesigned as the Cittadella Centre for Culture and the Arts, while Heritage Malta’s Gozo Area Office and adjacent Nature Museum host modest exhibition, conference and educational facilities.
and visually acceptable but presents challenging, if not insurmountable, layout and accessibility constraints. Ultimately, however, it is the nature of the information and accompanying facilities and not the kind of building that transforms premises into a visitor centre or not.

Late Nineteenth Century Water Reservoirs

It is hereby being suggested that two capacious, underutilised and adjoining late nineteenth century water reservoirs abutting onto St. Michael’s Bastion be adapted to serve as a visitor centre. This proposal takes into consideration the configuration of the Castello, the availability of covered and open spaces within its footprint, and the relevant planning regulations whereby the development of heritage tourism through imaginative and contextual upgrading of existing buildings is encouraged.

Sunk into the ditch’s void and spanning the entire front of the mighty bastion, these reservoirs stand at the very top of Castle Hill Street, next to the narrow flight of steps winding up to the early 16th century entrance and adjacent 1956 breach through the curtain wall. The joint footprint of the reservoirs’ vast interior measures 550m² approximately, appreciably larger than the added up floor area of the Cathedral’s nave, presbytery and choir. The roof is constructed on spatially and symmetrically laid out stone pillars surmounted by a two-tiered succession of arches, and the resultant covered space is thereby capable of accommodating a versatile set up and a voluminous visitor flow. It overlooks the gently sloping counterscarp by circa two metres but stands almost eight metres above the floor of the adjoining ditch. No large scale structural interventions are required to facilitate access in and out. Indeed, all it takes

\[5\] During 2003 the Department for Projects and Development within the Ministry for Gozo installed some equipment to irrigate the soft areas outside the Castello and to replenish the water reservoir at Villa Rundle. Should this proposal be implemented, such equipment could easily be transferred to the smaller water reservoir underneath the commemorative obelisk.

\[6\] Gozo and Comino Local Plan

\[7\] The façade of the early 16th century gate was remodeled in 1904.
is the perforation of an entry point along Castle Hill Street, an internal link though the reservoirs’ dividing wall, and an exit point into the ditch, at the foot of the towering bastion spur. An added bonus of such flow is the inclusion of the same ditch within an exhaustive trail of the Castello.

At present, visitors roam on the ramparts, enjoy the inspiring views of the greater part of Gozo, northwest Malta and on clear days Mount Etna in Sicily, but are not directed to appreciate the imposing defensive ensemble under their feet, let alone the interesting archaeological features along the underlying cliff face. As a matter of fact, the ditch needs to be looked at as an integral part of the Gran Castello, as a strategic extension of the amenities incorporated within the proposed visitor centre proper, and as planned during the early years of the twentieth century a potential opportunity to craft another tasteful green lung in the heart of sprawling Victoria (Pisani, 1968:7). Visitors can eventually make their way up to the main entrance of the Castello through a conveniently placed sally-port at the back of St. Michael’s bastion.

Along with several other heritage enthusiasts, I have been dreaming about this scheme for a period of time. On being recently invited to share my views on the enhancement and management of the Castello with the multi-disciplinary team of experts currently compiling the eagerly awaited Master Plan, I grasped the opportunity to put it forward. The present write-up is not an attempt to claim a title on this proposal should the powers that be ever decide to adopt and implement it, but to invite everyone interested in the valorisation and sustainable enjoyment of Gozo and its cultural resources to participate in a constructive discussion on how to enhance the Gran Castello’s unique selling proposition. In full knowledge that any sound decision on the appropriate use of our cultural resources rests on a good understanding of their significance, what follows is a brief historical note on the reservoir mentioned above and associated water management facilities within the Castello.

A Water-Management Master Plan

A pressing hurdle faced by the inhabitants of Rabat (namely the Castello and underlying historic core) was the laborious transportation of fresh water supplies all the way up from the Gran Fontana whenever their domestic reservoirs fell short from being replenished by annual rainfall or got contaminated (Bezzina, 1985:76). Indeed, during the 19th century the British Colonial Government invested substantial sums of money to service the then expanding Rabat settlement with reliable fresh water supplies as part of an extensive works programme to improve the islanders’ overall quality of life (Vella, 2007). The first decisive steps in this regard seem to have been spearheaded by the cholera outbreak of 1837, when 366 inhabitants perished. Cholera is a bacterial disease that is usually spread through contaminated water, and the supply of good quality water must have been viewed as an effective mitigation measure against repeated outbursts.

The overall objective of the Master Plan is to establish a basis for the formulation and adoption of a long term policy framework – one which recognises the Cittadella as an extremely valuable asset and which provides the guidelines necessary for this asset to be managed effectively and in a sustainable manner with the final aim of safeguarding its historical aspect yet at the same time promoting and developing its cultural, social and economic life.

The most abundant fresh water spring\(^{11}\) that could be feasibly channelled to Rabat by gravitational force was located at Ghar Ilma, circa two kilometres to its west. Flowing at the foot of a south-facing Upper Coralline cliff-face, the Ghar Ilma spring stands 140 metres above sea-level and some 40 metres higher than Rabat’s historic core. Its average yield hovered around 7000 gallons per day during the rainy season and 2000 gallons per day in the dry summer months (Gatt, 1934:142). Works commenced on 24th September 1839 and involved the construction of a gently sloping tunnel skirting past Santa Luċija and Qasam San Gorg until reaching the evocative string of elegant arches aligning Gharb Road. Water was successfully conveyed to a fountain in Savina Square on 6th September 1843 (Gauci, 1966:38). By 1859, the arches carrying the aqueduct suffered serious damages during a severe storm and were eventually subjected to large scale repairs, (Government of Malta, 1857:47) a 100 metres long stretch of the original clay pipes was replaced by more resistant iron tubes, (Government of Malta, 1859:157) while other neighbourhoods of Rabat became serviced with flowing water (Government of Malta, 1858:147). Likewise, a 420-ton water-reservoir and two fountains were projected in August 1866,\(^{12}\) whereas a 150-ton tank was being built as from June 1867.\(^{13}\)

A major upgrade was successively taken in hand in February 1877, almost nine years after the uprooting of the Gran Castello from the War Department properties list.\(^{14}\) The cultivated and gently sloping terraced fields along the Castello’s main front\(^{15}\) became earmarked for the erection of three reservoirs with a combined capacity of 6000 tonnes, namely a smaller reservoir underneath

\(^{10}\) (NLM, Libr. Ms 1271, f.5)

\(^{11}\) Rainwater seeps through the porous Upper Coralline and Greensand layers. On reaching the underlying Blue Clay it is prevented from seeping further downwards and emerges sideways in the form of fresh water springs. The larger the Upper Coralline/Greensand cap the more abundant the fresh water flow.

\(^{12}\) “Constructing a water reservoir of the capacity of 420 tons, and two fountains, and laying down channels, to increase the water supply in Rabato Gozo”, Blue Book 1866 Fol. 51. Even though the quoted entry does not make any reference to the exact whereabouts, this tank seems to be located next to the Gran Castello ravelin.

\(^{13}\) “Constructing a water tank of the capacity of 150 tons at Rabato of Gozo”, Blue Book 1867, Fol. 51.
Crafting an Engaging Experience

The Ċittadella Master Plan presents an excellent opportunity to forge a strategic plan of action for the Gran Castello. It is up to us all to perform as a mature team, play skilful tackles and net a much deserved winning goal in favour of Gozo’s most imposing cultural resource! If we truly believe in our potential, the Gran Castello will inevitably evolve into a remarkable cultural experience that will in turn play a definitive role in promoting Gozo as a distinct, more eco-friendly and engaging leisure destination.

References


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Godwin Vella heads the Ethnography Unit within Heritage Malta.

14 The Gran Castello was formally handed over to Civil Government on 1st April 1868.
17 Verbal communication with Mr. Lorry Saliba., Water Services Corporation – Gozo Office.