

URBAN SPACES IN VALLETTA realising their full potential

A city is not just buildings – it is also the streets and squares, and it is people who give life and meaning to these spaces. Urban spaces are as important as the buildings which shape them. Ultimately they will determine the experience of the city and the image which users and visitors will take away with them.

Valletta's urban spaces did not come about by chance, but are the result of a plan based on the utopia of new town planning concepts in vogue in the 16th century. The concept was adapted to the specific circumstances, namely a peninsula which was to be heavily fortified on all sides.

SPACES FOR PEOPLE

We have allowed most of Valletta's urban spaces to be treated with disrespect. Most open spaces are packed with parked cars for most of the day. One can mention Pjazza Helsien (City gate), Pjazza San Ġorġ (Main Guard), Pjazza Indipendenza (Auberge d' Aragon) and St. Andrew's Bastion among others. The pedestrian is an unwelcome species pushed to any left-over space there may be at the side.

There are several vantage points around the bastions of Valletta which enjoy unique harbour views. Except for Upper and Lower Barrakka, and the Siege Bell Memorial, these spaces are treated as left-over spaces. They are either given over to cars or left in a dilapidated state. Moreover, Hastings Gardens and the Mall are in need of comprehensive refurbishment.

Naturally one cannot simply remove on-street parking without providing viable alternatives. Hence the need for a comprehensive strategy for access to Valletta. Concurrent with pedestrianisation and removal of on-street parking, there needs to be an efficient park and ride and the provision of substantial off-street parking. The latter can be provided by means of underground car parks in Pjazza Helsien and Pjazza San Ġorġ.

In 2003, some refurbishment works were carried out at the bus terminus which however, along with City Gate, is still a long way off from providing a

suitable approach to the Capital. In particular, hawkers within the gate itself give a tacky image to the City and occasionally restrict pedestrian flows.

APPRECIATING OUR HERITAGE

Merchants Street boasts several impressive buildings. Due to a poorly managed market at one end and traffic and parking at the other, these buildings go largely unnoticed. There is no reason why the pedestrianisation of Merchants Street, if and when it happens, should not be as successful as Republic Street. In spite of initial misgivings when it was pedestrianised some three decades ago, Republic Street has provided an important hub of commercial and leisure activity.

Castille Square is generally well-kept and recent landscaping initiatives are most welcome. Yet far too much of the space is dedicated to traffic. Pavements are too narrow especially when one considers that the area is frequently visited by tourist groups. The square could be redesigned to allow for easier pedestrian flow around and across it while concurrently allowing for vehicle flow by means of a T-junction, rather than a roundabout.

Both here and abroad, I find it very annoying when I cannot find a spot from which to get a proper view of a building which interests me. A typical example locally is Pjazza Regina, where most of the space is taken up by tables, chairs and umbrellas. There is not single viewpoint that allows a proper and uncluttered view of the Biblioteca, which is certainly one of the finest facades in Valletta.

Increasingly, spaces are being dedicated to open-air cafeterias - a welcome trend, provided of course that these do not restrict pedestrian flows or obstruct views of historic or architecturally important buildings. The piazza in front of St. John's Co-Cathedral is a good example of how this can be achieved.



1. - 4. Parked cars block the view of some buildings, and take spaces away from the pedestrian. 5. Umbrellas, tables and chairs cluttering Pjazza Regina. 6. and 7. Neglected parts of Valletta's fortifications

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

My interest in Valletta is three-fold. First, as an architect and planner, I believe that the urban space qualities are not being used to their best potential. These spaces can be made more amenable to the pedestrians, transforming Valletta into a more pedestrian-friendly city.

Secondly, as a person involved in tourism, Valletta interests me as a crucial part of Malta's product offer. I am convinced that, in the long term, our fortified historic cities, Valletta in particular, will provide one of the more important reasons for tourists to choose to visit Malta. Buildings of architectural and historic interest, extensive fortifications, exceptional harbour views and a remarkable history make Valletta a unique city, providing a unique visitor experience. It is not just a series of visitor attractions which happen to be within walking distance of each other – Valletta's main attraction is in its totality. Urban spaces are an integral part of that totality and our inability to make the best possible use of them restricts the City's potential as a visitor attraction.

Finally, as a Maltese, I consider Valletta as a symbol of Malta's identity and as such the quality of its urban spaces is a reflection of the country as a whole.

A LOBBY GROUP FOR VALLETTA

The need to do more for Valletta has brought together a number of organisations to set up a lobby group, namely Valletta Alive Initiative. VAI brings business and resident interests together with a common objective, and includes representatives from GRTU, Malta Chamber of Commerce, Malta Tourism Authority, Merchant Street Business Comm. Association, Republic Street Business Comm. Association, VRC and Valletta Local Council.

VAI has prepared a position paper entitled "A Way Forward for Valletta", which proposes a regenerative strategy based on ten guiding principles, namely a livable city, access,

pedestrianisation and public spaces, cleanliness and basic infrastructure, streetscapes, City Gate, lower Valletta, leisure shopping, evening leisure and a cultural capital. Other VAI initiatives include a photographic exhibition to raise awareness, and CCTV monitoring network aimed improving security.

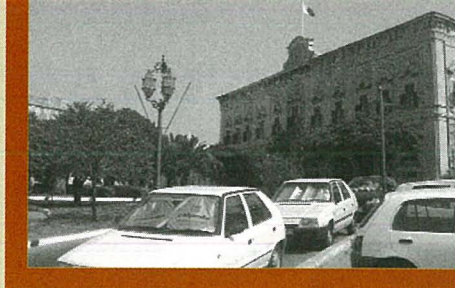
VAI held meetings with Ministers and political parties to encourage more commitment towards Valletta. In these meetings, VAI noted that Valletta's role as a residential, business, tourist, leisure and cultural centre should be safeguarded and enhanced. Most people feel that two important projects in Valletta are now long overdue: the redevelopment of the opera house site and Fort St. Elmo.

In spite of limited resources, VAI has generated significant interest from residents, former residents and businesses which operate in Valletta. It is in the process of setting up a foundation, thus providing for a more permanent set-up, which will offer membership to individuals and businesses, allowing them to actively contribute towards the Foundation's objectives.

In recent years, there were several important initiatives in Valletta, notably the Centre for Creativity, the Upper and Lower Barrakka Gardens, and various restoration projects (particularly the exterior of the Church of St. Catherine of Italy). The architects involved in these projects should be congratulated for their efforts.

Clearly, there is much more that needs to be done. From indications given during meetings VAI had with Government, it appears that Valletta has been pushed further up on the agenda and that several important initiatives are in the offing.

by John Ebejer, Communications Officer of Valletta Alive Initiative



October 2004

22 October | Amsterdam
European Day of Competition
Debate on many issues that affect competition in the EU.
europa.eu.int/comm/competition/misc

22 – 23 October | Gent, Belgium
The Pathology of the Façade
International Congress on the problems posed by various facades from antiquity to modernity.
Organised by the College National des Experts Architectes de Belgique.
www.architectexpert.com

24 – 26 October | Rotterdam
The culture of architecture and spacial planning in the EU
The European Forum for Architectural Policies is organising a series of events, including a working conference on the above topic. It is being organised in the context of the Dutch Presidency of the EU and promises to be a stimulating event that will seek to enhance the collaboration between governments, institutions and architectural organisations on the enhancement of architectural quality in Europe.
www.architectureforum.net

29 – 30 October | Birmingham, England
The Art of City Making: Urban Challenges for 21st Century Europe
www.birmingham.gov.uk/acm.bcc

February 2005

10 – 12 February | Florence
The restoration of the Pisa leaning tower: the state-of-the-art methodology for the conservation of the ancient monuments
www.fondazione-delbianco.org/inglese

17 – 19 February | Florence
International conference *Conservation of Historic Wooden Structures*
www.fondazione-delbianco.org/inglese

17 February – 17 March | Florence
2nd International Best Diploma Projects Show-Competition
Theme: "For an Ecological Future: Architecture, Environment and Design"
This exhibition is addressed at Universities/Faculties/Institutes in the field of Architecture, Environment and Design, for the presentation of students' diploma projects (years 2003 and 2004).
info@fondazione-delbianco.org
www.fondazione-delbianco.org/inglese/InsertNews

March 2005

22 – 23 March | Rotterdam, Netherlands
Revaluating Construction 2005
World Trade Centre, Rotterdam, Netherlands.
Theme: *The Challenge of Change in Construction.*
www.rc2005.org



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MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTION

I, the undersigned, would like to apply for membership of the Kamra tal-Periti.
Please find this CV duly filled in together with a photocopy of my warrant, and relative fees due.

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Home Address:			
Tel:	Fax:	e-mail:	
Academic Qualifications:		Year of issue of warrant:	
Specialised fields of work/interest:			

PAYMENT DETAILS: cheque:
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Signature: _____ Date: _____

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:
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Graduate Lm15
(up to 5 years after warrant)
Full Member Lm25
Honorary Member Lm 5
Retired Member Lm 5