

Valletta Alive Foundation – a common front for Malta's capital

JOHN EBEJER interviews **Alfred Zahra**, chairman of the Valletta Alive Foundation

Valletta is in many ways different from other towns in Malta. You are a resident of Valletta. What are the pros and cons of living in this city?

THE BEST THING about living in Valletta is that you have all the facilities you need at your fingertips. You hardly ever need to go out of Valletta. Shops, services, gardens and churches are all within walking distance. The downside are some of the steep streets.

You are quite active in Valletta organisations.

Yes. Apart from being chairman of the Valletta Alive Foundation (VAF), I am also vice-president of the La Valette Band Club and governor of the Our Lady of Charity Confraternity.

Government is in the process of removing the V licence and introducing a system of time-based fees for parking within a defined area of the capital? As a resident and as a businessman, what is your opinion on these changes?

The removal of the V licence is part of an overall Government strategy for Valletta's accessibility. This includes the provision of the park and ride system, the provision of lifts and escalators, time-based fees for parking, the relocation of parking spaces, improved parking in the ditch, the pedestrianisation of a number of streets and the relocation of the open-air market, the *Monti*.

In its submission to Government, VAF expressed its support in principle for the strategy, provided that the current levels of access to the city are maintained or improved. During the public consultation, the foundation argued that a high price for the park and ride could be detrimental to accessibility to the city, and this in turn would undermine commercial activity in Valletta. Thankfully, Government has decided to make the park and ride service free of charge.

If properly implemented and managed, the strategy will make Valletta more accessible to a wider number of Maltese and tourists. There needs to be a no-nonsense approach in the implementation of matters relating to, for example, the removal of all reserved parking and the validation of genuine Valletta residents. Following implementation, there will need to be careful monitoring so that corrective action can be taken as and when necessary. VAF is willing to assist government in this respect.

With pedestrianisation and the reduction of on-street parking, the urban environment of the City will improve significantly. For example, there are innumerable instances where cars parked on the pavement block shop fronts. Similarly, there are several vantage points around Valletta which provide excellent views of the harbours. Instead of creating belvederes we simply use these spaces as car parks.

The foundation supports the relocation of the market. Merchants Street has some of the finest buildings in Valletta. With pedestrianisation and the relocation of the market, Merchants Street could potentially become one of the most attractive streets in Valletta.

The implementation of the strategy has to be seen as the precursor to further improvements to be carried out over a number of the years, including the provision of underground car parks at, say, Freedom Square and near Evans Building. Freedom Square, St George's Square and other secondary urban spaces in Valletta should be pedestrianised sooner rather than later.

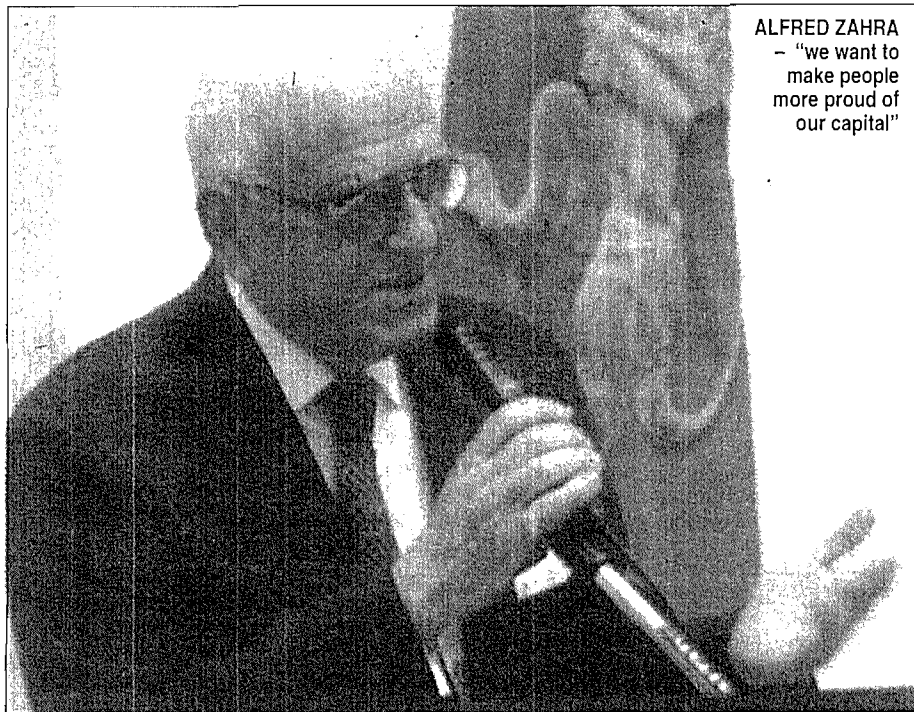
Our only criticism to date is that implementation of the various elements of the strategy is taking far too long.

In February 2005, VAF was set up and you are the chairman of this foundation. Why is there a need for such a foundation?

Over the years, Valletta has generated significant interest because of its uniqueness and its heritage. The setting up of the foundation is a direct result of this interest.

The foundation is an independent, non-profit, voluntary organisation which works in the interest of Valletta. It was set up by seven public and private sector organisations: the Republic Street and Merchants Street business community association, the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise, the Malta Tourism Authority, the Chamber of Small and Medium Enterprises (GRTU), Valletta council and the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee.

At one of its first meetings, the foundation decided on a number of objectives. VAF encourages more investment to improve the city's



ALFRED ZAHRA – "we want to make people more proud of our capital"

building fabric and public spaces. It actively lobbies Government and the private sector, and raises awareness of the city's immense historic, cultural, social and commercial value. The foundation aims to exploit the city's tourism potential.

There is a perception that this is an organisation that represents the business interests of Valletta...

One of the foundation's strengths is the involvement of persons with different backgrounds, all with a common interest: Valletta. In fact, two of the most active foundation officers have no direct link with Valletta, and yet they willingly give time and effort in the interests of the city.

The foundation brings together businesses, residents and others. It is true that there is a predominance of business people in the foundation, but as time goes by we are seeing more involvement of persons in the foundation who have no direct link with the capital. We would like to see an increased involvement of residents as well as of people whose roots are in Valletta.

In setting up the foundation we were careful to offer the opportunity of membership to anyone who wishes to see a better Valletta. The foundation offers five different types of membership: individual, NGO, small business, corporate and international.

Can you tell us more about BOV Streets Alive?

Our most ambitious project to date was BOV Streets Alive, organised over four consecutive Friday evenings in July and August. VAF managed to put together an interesting and varied programme featuring musicians, artists painting in streets, late opening of museums, walking tours, a children's corner, classic car display, table tennis and karate activities.

Several shops stayed open until 8.30 p.m. and beyond, and discounts and other incentives were offered to shoppers. Many catering outlets had brisk business on these four Fridays.

BOV Valletta Streets Alive was very well received and many have encouraged the foundation to have the event over a longer period next year. Although conscious of some shortcomings, the foundation is very satisfied with the outcome. When one considers that we are a voluntary organisation, the success of the event was to us a little miracle.

I would like to congratulate the organisers of *Notte Bianca* - *Lejl Imdawwal* for their successful organisation of all the events and activities last weekend. The spirit of the Valletta Alive activities in July and August culminated on the night of *Notte Bianca*.

Apart from BOV Streets Alive, can you describe briefly some of VAF's initiatives?

The foundation lobbies on a number of issues related to Valletta. Recently we had a meeting with Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi, with ministers Jesmond Mugliett and Ninu Zammit also present.

The foundation issued a flyer, aimed at raising awareness of the significance of Valletta and hence to make people more proud of our capital. The thinking is that, if people are proud of something, they are more likely to take care of it.

A magazine, *Valletta A City for All* is issued quarterly with *The Times*. There is so much to say about Valletta that one magazine every four months is certainly not enough. The magazine became a reality following VAF's approach to local publishing companies.

VAF produced a five-minute DVD on Valletta to be screened on cruise liners as they approach Malta. It is a taster of Valletta and depicts the city in its totality, including its main attractions as well as its shopping and recreational facilities. The objective is to entice cruise passengers to discover the city when they are ashore.

The foundation participated in an EU-funded project on urban transportation issues. We also organise regular social events for members and issue articles and press releases to the media.

The foundation does a lot of networking. We try to work with others in seeking the best interests of Valletta. For example, Bank of Valletta is actively considering providing assistance to shop owners to upgrade their shops. This, I believe, is the indirect result of the excellent relations VAF has developed with Bank of Valletta.

There are number of projects in Valletta, which are now long overdue, such as Fort St Elmo, City Gate and the Opera House site. What are the foundation's views on these projects?

We submitted a memorandum to Government in which we listed the many projects, we consider essential for Valletta. Government needs to adopt a long-term strategy for Valletta and ensure that, over a period of ten to 15 years, the various priorities relating to Valletta are addressed.

The EU is an important source of funding but there are other sources of funds that can be used, including central government's own budget allocation (through its various agencies) and private funds through public-private partnerships.

A long-term strategy for Valletta is required, not least because Valletta will take centre stage in Europe as the European Capital of Culture in 2018.

The foundation recognises that public and private investment has brought about many improvements in the city but feels that there is much more that needs to be done. The city is a symbol of Malta's identity and, as such, the quality of the buildings and spaces is a reflection of the country as a whole.

If Government feels that the provision of a new gate to the city should be postponed, there should at least be investment to refurbish the area. With a refurbishment of the colonnade and the pedestrianisation of Freedom Square, the entrance to the city can be made to look quite attractive.

The development of the Opera House site is long overdue. VAF has no views either way on the idea of having Parliament built on this site.

What is important is that a decision for the site be taken and implemented as soon as possible.

If the site cannot be developed in the short term, the area should be properly rehabilitated and, in this context, the idea of using it as an open-air theatre makes sense. The appearance of a bombed-out site should be ended without further delay.

The foundation suggests that Fort St Elmo become a complex of museums, combined with catering outlets, specialised retail, a small hotel, a venue for open air concerts and limited leisure activities.

An appropriate mix of uses will transform the fort into a major pole of attraction and a hub of activity. Museums which could be considered for the fort are a Museum of Fortifications, a Museum of the Mediterranean and an extension of the current War Museum.

There is no better site for a Museum of Fortifications than Fort St Elmo, which is historically the most important fort and the one with the most strategic location. The Museum of the Mediterranean could present Mediterranean history and warfare through the ages – from the Phoenicians to the present. The War Museum should be allowed to extend into other parts of the fort and be made more interactive.

There are many urban spaces that require redesign or upgrading, including St George's Square, Freedom Square and Castille Place. With reference to the latter, it was disheartening to see the reaction of some people to the proposed removal of the trees.

Instead of welcoming Government's intention to redesign, upgrade and pedestrianise Castille Place, some people chose to make an issue out of something which is just a detail when taken in the context of the overall redesign.

With pedestrianisation, Castille Place could become one of the finest spaces in Valletta and the excessively negative reaction regarding the trees will simply prevent this much needed upgrading from happening.

The recent branding campaign by the Malta Tourism Authority met with a negative public reaction. What are your thoughts on branding in relation to Valletta?

Valletta is a crucial part of Malta's product offer. In the long term, our fortified historic cities, Valletta in particular, will provide one of the more important reasons for tourists to visit Malta. Buildings of architectural and historical interest, extensive fortifications, exceptional harbour views and a remarkable history make Valletta a unique city, providing an exceptional visitor experience. People often forget that Valletta is a World Heritage Site.

The core values of the Malta brand are heritage, hospitality and diversity; the visitor experience offered by Valletta is very much in line with these core values.

Although the city is already visited by some one million tourists a year, the city's full tourism potential has yet to be realised, particularly in the context of the Malta brand that is being developed.

Cleanliness is a perennial problem in Valletta. I am aware that the local council tries its best to keep Valletta clean and, in all fairness, the city is not as dirty as some would like to depict it. People need to co-operate more to ensure that our streets are kept clean.

My guess is that the MTA's branding exercise sought to encourage people to take more responsibility for our tourism product. This includes cleanliness. Earlier this year litter regulations have been introduced and I urge government and the local council to engage more green wardens to enforce them.

What are the foundation's plans for the future?

Our next major project is a Website for Valletta. We would like this to be, so to speak, a repository of information on Valletta. It will not be limited to culture-related information but will also include information on services (shops, catering outlets, banks, professional offices, etc.) as well as information of community-related organisations.

We plan to establish BOV Streets Alive as a regular feature in Valletta's calendar. We also need to upgrade our administrative and secretarial support to be better able to cope with our various initiatives.