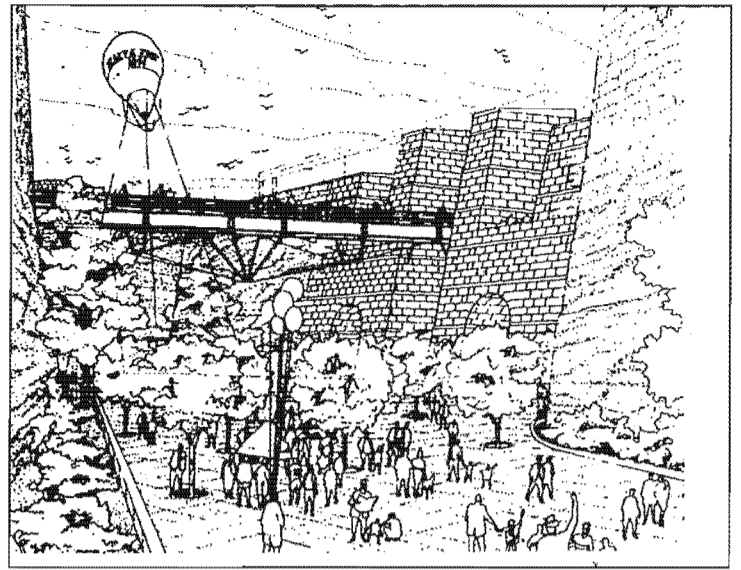


The island city – Malta's potential for urban tourism

The second part of an article by JOHN EBEJER



COULD Renzo Piano's gate to Valletta become Malta's own flagship building?

ONE IMPORTANT difference between urban tourism and seaside tourism is that in the former case the tourist is more likely to make use of those facilities which the residents of the town or city use. These would include commercial and leisure facilities as well as roads and transport.

There are areas where significant investments are required, particularly in relation to the presentation of our visitor sites and the improvement of our urban environment.

Urban tourism takes a greater significance within the context of economic restructuring and Malta's application to join the European Union. One should consider seeking EU financial assistance, at the appropriate stage of the process, in support of infrastructural projects aimed at improving Malta's product offer for urban tourism.

Commercial centres

The introduction of local councils has led to many improvements in our towns and villages with embellishments, landscaping and the provision of facilities. In major commercial areas, however, the environment provided for the pedestrian is poor and falls short of what would be considered as an acceptable quality. In places like Sliema, Hamrun, Birkirkara, Paola and Victoria, others, pedestrians are forced to walk on crowded pavements and are subject to noise and exhaust from cars and buses.

The pedestrianisation of streets in central commercial areas would go a long way in improving the environment within which people shop, meet and relax. An improved town centre environment would encourage more people to visit and within the context of urban tourism, would provide for an improved holiday experience in Malta.

Pedestrianisation needs careful planning. To ensure that a commercial centre remains accessible and hence viable, the closure of a street to traffic must be accompanied by measures to improve access including extensive parking space. For some commercial centres, only a radical transformation (and hence significant investments) can bring about a quality urban environment.

Possibly the most urgent of these works is the entrance to Valletta (for which plans have been drawn up) but there are other areas which warrant significant interventions.

Compared to many European cities, we have a very long way to go before our main commercial centres are of sufficient quality for the purpose of urban tourism.

Another consideration is the opening times of shops. Retailing is increasingly becoming a leisure activity. Extending shopping hours in the evening will give added vitality to our main commercial centres. Tourists will have the option of spending some of their evening leisure time shopping.

Green parks

Many European cities enjoy extensive greenery, including gardens, parks, woods and even forests. Tourists from these cities are therefore unlikely to come to Malta specifically for our countryside and greenery. Our gardens and parks could, however, form part of our tourist product so as to provide alternative sites and experiences.

In particular, highlighting their specific context and characteristics provides added interest. For example Buskett, San Anton and Hastings Gardens are historically important and they are set in the environs of a palace or the bastions. They can also

be promoted as a display of typically Mediterranean trees, shrubbery and landscape design. Ta' Qali and Kennedy Grove can be appreciated for their settings (the latter, for example, for the historic salt pans nearby).

Apart from putting them on the tourist map, these gardens require improved management so that ongoing maintenance and improvements are carried out.

There are other landscaped areas which could be promoted for tourists and Maltese. Around Mtarfa, for example, there are extensive areas with mature trees, from where excellent views of Mdina and Wied il-Qlejgha can be enjoyed. A scenic walk connecting these landscaped areas was designed as part of the Mtarfa New Town. With minimal investment, this scenic walk could easily become a magnet for recreation and leisure.

Historic buildings

The appropriate reuse of historic buildings is a principle most people would agree with. It generates revenue for the maintenance of the building and, depending on the use adopted, could be an added asset to promote urban tourism.

There are however many difficulties, both technical and financial. To what extent can physical changes be made without compromising the buildings' historic value? How are the relatively expensive renovation works to be funded? Clearly we need to develop further expertise and know-how so that more historic buildings can be brought back into use in a satisfactory manner and without unreasonable delays.

One example which comes to mind is the Magisterial Palace in Mdina, part of which is used as local council offices and part as a natural history museum. The building is strategically placed immediately adjoining the main entrance to Mdina and enjoys scenic views at the back. Yet sizable parts of the building have been allowed to fall into decay and the museum is very poorly presented. Failure to utilise the full potential of this building is a loss to our tourism and our economy.

Modern development

Our urban environment has over the years been spoilt by poor architecture. Buildings which may be described as eyesores are common. In more recent years, there have been improvements with developers and architects making increased efforts to produce good quality buildings.

Apart from eventually increased profits, good design is part of the construction industry's responsibility towards our community and to our tourist industry.

Some cities have a flagship building – the image of the building is linked to that of the city. The most famous examples are the Eiffel Tower, and the Statue of Liberty. More recent examples are the Sydney Opera House and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

Such buildings give brand to a city which no amount of advertising money can achieve. Curiously, most flagship buildings caused controversy when they were first conceived or constructed. Could it be that Piano's gate to Valletta will (eventually) become Malta's own flagship building?

Transport

To date, the choice available to the tourist in terms of transport is limited. For a tourist wanting to explore, a hired car is a must. Those using public transport will find that their choice of sites to visit is severely limited, unless they are willing to spend a high

proportion of the time travelling.

The quality of our roads is also relevant to urban tourism. Apart from the improvements in road design and surfacing (a problem which Government has committed itself to resolve), we also need to think about landscaping along our main arteries.

A tourist will get a general perception of the city as he travels around and the increased greenery would give a good impression. More important, landscaping strategically placed along a road would be effective in concealing some eyesore in the landscape.

Transport choice is also of relevance to overseas residents. I know of one overseas resident who left Gozo because it was impractical for her to chauffeur her teenage daughter every time she wanted to go out.

Overseas residents

One form of tourism is foreign persons taking up residence in Malta for several months during the year or even throughout. The profile of overseas residents would normally be retired 60-plus persons or semi-retired persons who make use of modern communications to continue their part-time economic activity.

One should not confuse overseas residents with foreigners who buy

property in Malta, for investment purposes and who would only occasionally come to Malta, if at all. In the former case, the economic benefits are greater because of the acquisition of goods and services by the foreign resident during his time in Malta. Moreover, overseas residents encourage overseas friends and relatives to visit. In a single year one overseas resident could generate as much revenue as some 20 to 30 tourists. Hence, the potential economic benefits are significant and should therefore be actively promoted and encouraged.

In my view, Gozo is particularly well-suited to attract overseas residents. It is quieter than Malta and largely unspoilt. Most services are readily available in a single commercial centre namely Victoria. Moreover, Victoria has a distinctive charm and character with its narrow streets in the historic core, and the Citadel.

Above all, Gozo is safe from crime – a consideration which would top the list of criteria of any elderly persons considering taking up residence.

John Ebejer, BE&A (Hons), MA (Planning), A&CE, MRTPI, is an urban planner and architect and works with Mangian, Mangion and Partners. In 1988/89, he worked on the Tourism Master Plan for the Maltese Islands prepared by consultants Howarth and Howarth.

The author attended an international conference on Tourism and the City Sustainability and Development organised by the International Urban Development Association. This article considers some of the issues raised with reference to the Maltese context. It is hoped that the ideas expressed may be of use for the improvement of our urban tourism product.

(To be concluded)