

mValletta: Making full use of its potential

John Ebejer

'Valletta's urban space qualities are not being used to their best potential.'

Valletta is Malta's main commercial centre. Thousands of people come to Valletta daily to work, for shopping or to spend some leisure time. There are also some 7,000 people living in Valletta. Inevitably, the ease with which people can get to and from our capital city is important.

The V-licence is a means of controlling the number of cars that enter Valetta. This notwithstanding, cars enter the city in their thousands. At peak times, every conceivable space within the city is occupied by cars. Cars occupy spaces for a full working day, thus restricting access to others that may wish to come to Valletta for just two or three hours. There are many city streets and piazzas which could be occupied by people enjoying the historic ambience and the views. Instead they are choked with cars. Often, cars park on pavements restricting access to homes and to shops. The impact on the urban environment of the city is significant. Being a historic city, the impact of cars on Valletta is even more pronounced.

The government is in the process of implementing a number of measures relating to Valletta's accessibility. These include relocation of parking spaces from Valletta to Belttilhażna, the provision of park and ride, time-based fees for parking within Valletta, provision of lifts and escalators, improved parking in the ditch (under City Gate), the pedestrianisation of a number of streets and the relocation of the *monti* open market.

Valletta Alive Foundation supports these changes, provided that the current levels of access to the city are maintained or even improved. Payment according to the time a parking space is occupied is sensible and fair. Valletta

residents will have unlimited free parking. 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, the government has decided to make the park and ride service free of charge.

The provision of lifts and escalators will make it easier for cruise passengers to enter the city. Until these are provided, there is an urgent need for a shuttle service from the cruise passenger terminal to Castille.

If properly implemented and managed, the strategy will make Valletta more accessible to a wider number of Maltese and tourists. Following implementation, there will need to be careful monitoring so that corrective action can be taken as and when necessary.

Valletta is the hub of Malta's public transport network. Compared to other commercial centres it is more easily accessible by public transport than any other commercial centre. With some encouragement, more and more people could make use of public transport to come to the city.

With pedestrianisation and the reduction of on-street parking, the urban environment of the city will improve significantly. Hence, the foundation's support for the pedestrianisation of Merchants

Street. Merchants Street has some of the finest buildings in Valletta. Its pedestrianisation, together with the relocation of the market, will result in a road as attractive as Republic Street or maybe even more.

Valletta's urban space qualities are not being used to their best potential. These spaces can be made more amenable to pedestrians, thus transforming Valletta into a more pedestrian-friendly city. This will also enhance the city's potential as a tourist attraction.

The foundation's main concern on the government's strategy for Valletta is that implementation of the various elements is taking too long.

Valletta Alive Foundation urges the government to implement further improvements in Valletta over a number of the years, over and above those being implemented in the coming months. There are several other spaces which should be upgraded and pedestrianised including Freedom Square and St George's Square. The reduction of on-street parking (because of pedestrianisation) should be coupled with the provision of off-street parking with underground car parks at Freedom Square and near Evans Building.

Mr Ebejer, an architect and urban planner, is honorary secretary of the Valletta Alive Foundation.