

# Planning for urban tourism — a sustainable approach

The final part of a feature by JOHN EBEJER on Malta's potential for urban tourism

**A** CITY is dynamic. It is subject to many forces — commercial, social and legislative. It evolves, it changes, it grows. The outcome is the product which could make or break urban tourism.

Planning for urban tourism cannot be done in isolation of the overall planning of a city. Conversely, planning of the city cannot be successful unless it takes on board considerations related to tourism (as well as other sectors). An integrated approach to urban planning is a must if economic and social objectives are to be met.

## A concerted effort

Like any other sector, promotion of urban tourism requires a clear strategy set out by Government and the Tourism Authority, with priorities and policies being clearly defined. The review of the Structure Plan is one mechanism that can be used for this purpose but is certainly not the only one.

This raises the debate of the Planning Authority's role in policy formulation. For the purpose of this discussion, I will limit myself to two considerations. Firstly, the ultimate responsibility for policy formulation is Government's, which in turn is answerable to the electorate. The role of the Planning Authority is to provide technical advice and prepare in accordance with legislation the relevant policy documents within the parameters as set by Government.

For policy documents (such as the Structure Plan review) to be meaningful, they not only require Government's approval but also its full backing including the actions and the investments of various other Government agencies. Hence, with reference to policy formulation, talk of Planning Authority autonomy is absurd.

Secondly, the responsibility for evaluating applications for the development lies with the Planning Authority. In this area, it is right for the Authority to decide autonomously on the basis of the recommendations made by the Directorate. This must be done with reference to the Structure Plan and other policy document as approved by Government.

It is wrong for any Authority officer to make recommendations or take decisions inspired by a personal agenda, which is not in accordance to the Structure plan or Government policy — no matter how well-inten-

tioned that personal agenda may be.

Coming back to urban tourism; a concerted effort is required by the agencies involved so that our product offer can be improved. This entails the improvement of our urban and rural environment as well as providing additional facilities in support of tourism. Effective co-ordination between the Tourism Authority and the Planning Authority will maximise results for the time and effort spent. Similarly, the Tourism Authority will need to co-ordinate with the Environment Ministry and the local councils.

## Tourism capacity

The capacity of a tourist destination is an issue which needs to be considered on two levels — on the national level and on the local or site-specific level. In terms of urban tourism on the national level, capacity can never be a problem for Malta as the tourist intake during the winter and shoulder months will always be less than that for the summer months. On a local level, excessively high numbers of tourists visiting a site could create undesirable effects such as crowding, inconvenience to residents and loss of privacy.

**S**ustainable urban tourism requires that the assets which provide for a pleasant tourist experience are not allowed to deteriorate in any way. In Malta's case the best illustration of this is Mdina, where excessive commercialisation could undermine the very attractiveness of the Silent City.

The promotion of urban tourism requires infrastructure and facilities to cater for the tourists' needs such as hotels, visitor facilities, airport and utilities (water, electricity, drainage). Malta has invested heavily in these services to cope with peak summer demand. Hence excess capacity is available for use during the winter. One of the benefits of urban tourism is that the use of facilities and infrastructure is better spread throughout the year and hence provides for a better return on the investment.

A visitor's enjoyment of a specific visitor site could be compromised if there are too many visitors at any one time and/or if the site is poorly presented. To promote urban tourism improved management of tourist locations is required with programmed timings of tourist groups. One could also promote

other visitor sites to spread the pressures. For example, parts of Rabat have the potential to attract a higher number of visitors thereby relieving some of the pressures on Mdina.

In many cases, the issue of capacity arises primarily because of poor management of a resource more than the actual physical limit of that resource.

## Designer tourist product

Pressures resulting on the historic heritage could result in its deterioration. One speaker at a recent international conference on tourism argued that a sustainable approach to urban tourism is to create alternative visitor facilities, and hence reduce pressures on more sensitive sites. A theme park is one example

of what the speaker described as "designer tourist product". To create a designer product, one needs good design, good market awareness and creative individuals. The market research process would not only establish the feasibility of the product but also facilitates its design once the basic concept has been established.

In developing our tourist product, a building should not be perceived merely as a physical structure. It is the setting, within or around which, people activities take place. It has the potential to be a magnet and attract people to it by means of events. In Malta, this concept has developed well with an increasing number of events, festivities and animations being organised and promoted.

The development of our tourist product cannot be limited to seaside

resort considerations. It has to address the requirements of urban tourism.

*John Ebejer, BE&A (Hons), MA (Planning), A&CE, MRTPI, is an urban planner and architect and works with Mangion, Mangion and Partners. In 1987/89, 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.*