

A place for people

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Castille Place in Valletta has the potential to be one of the finest urban spaces in Valletta. Its current state does not do justice to the important buildings and structures that surround it. What are the issues that one would need to consider in an eventual redesign of the piazza?

Currently, the predominant floor surface is tarmac. Its layout is determined by the requirements of the motor vehicle and hence the presence of a roundabout. The needs of pedestrians are given very low priority with little space for people in front of Castille and along the periphery of the piazza.

This can and should be reversed. The piazza needs to be redesigned first and foremost for the needs of the people. The piazza should be pedestrianised with the appropriate use of paving material and design. Traffic flows should also be catered for but this can be done without having excessive areas of tarmac. Design also necessitates the consideration of pedestrian flows across the piazza and the various entry and exit points for pedestrians.

The piazza offers numerous and diverse views. The Auberge de Castille is a dominant building reflecting its political and

historic importance. The redesign of the piazza needs to reinforce the dominance of the auberge and allow for people to view and appreciate the building from different parts of the piazza. Other important views are those of St James Cavalier and the Stock Exchange, as well as outward views from the piazza of Floriana and Grand Harbour. The piazza as seen from the approach road and bridge (Girolamo Casar Avenue) sets the scene as to what one will see within the city.

Design of urban spaces requires careful consideration of street furniture such as seating and light fittings. Detailed design and materials of street furniture would need to be in keeping with the space within which they are located. There needs to be more public seating within urban spaces in Valletta. It would afford shopper or sightseers a place to rest and within Castille Place to better appreciate the full majesty of the Castille façade. Evening lighting of the piazza also needs careful design to ensure adequate levels

of light while allowing for the appreciation of the various historic buildings.

Two monuments within the piazza are part of our collective memory and decisions will need to be taken on whether to locate them in other piazzas in Valletta or integrate them into the re-design of the piazza. The space adjoins a bastion which in turn is part of an extensive and complex system of fortifications surrounding the city. This too will need to be taken onto account.

Because of the auberge, the space is popular with tourist groups. With partial or full pedestrianisation of the piazza, the visitor's experience will be significantly improved. If anything, pedestrianisation will eliminate the current crowding of tourist groups near Sir Paul Boffa monument and in front of Castille. The piazza is likely to become much more popular with visitors and tourists. Castille Place can and should become an important addition to Malta's tourist product offer.

In recent weeks, many strongly objected to the proposed removal of trees from Castille Square. Although trees are important, it is erroneous to discuss the issue of trees in isolation of the many other issues

pertaining to this urban space. Trees provide shade and reduce the glare in the hot summer months. On the other hand, they can be detrimental to important views of buildings or to open vistas. Moreover, the location and layout of the trees need to be compatible with the overall design. It is the design of the piazza that should determine where trees, if any, are to be located and not the other way round.

It is unfortunate that the quality of discussion on architecture and design in the printed media is poor; the discussion on Castille Place is a case in point. A positive initiative aimed at raising the level of discussion on architecture is that being taken by the Chamber of Architects, in the form of a series of talks by renowned international architects.

We need more of such activities to raise the level of architectural debate, resulting hopefully in an increased desire by public and private investors for good design of buildings and spaces. Ultimately, the quality of our urban environment depends on it.

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