



COMMUNITY INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY IN VALLETTA 2018

Michael Deguara
with Marguerite Pace Bonello
and Rene Magri

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from the third cycle of a research project which aims to identify factors affecting participation by various community groups related to the Valletta 2018 project, with particular emphasis on elements that promote or hinder the inclusion of a diverse audience. The report also focuses on the theme of accessibility, which is understood as comprising physical, social, geographical, financial, linguistic, and intellectual accessibility.

The first cycle of this research project, held in 2015, emphasised the importance of an in-depth understanding of social context and the involvement and engagement of the public as critical success factors for the Valletta 2018 initiative. It also brought to the fore the reality of Valletta as a complex social space encompassing multiple layers of meaning for different community groups and individuals.

The second cycle of research, covering 2016, took a closer look at the awareness that respondents had of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme, in which it transpired that there is a good level of awareness of both Valletta 2018 as a brand, and of several of the individual events that fall under its programme. However, persons interviewed found it hard to identify which events were part of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme or not. One other significant theme in the 2016 research was the impact of urban regeneration on Valletta as a communal space: widespread optimism regarding immediate developments in the city was countered by a sense of fatalism regarding Valletta's long term future, with many respondents stating that it will eventually become unfeasible for most people to be able to live there.

The current cycle of research builds on the insights gained from the previous ones and aims to explore the themes and concerns identified in previous cycles in greater depth, and monitor shifts as the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme is launched and the European Capital of Culture year draws closer. All interviews were carried out following the launch of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme.

This report will present a brief review of the methodology used, which remains unchanged from previous years, and the key themes emerging from the research, followed by an account of the findings from the current cycle. These will reflect the three headings already explored in the previous cycle, namely:

1. Valletta – the city and its accessibility;
2. Urban regeneration and its impact on communal life; and
3. Awareness and accessibility of the Valletta 2018 Programme.

Finally the report will give its conclusions, and will proceed to pave the way forward for further research and provide recommendations.

METHODOLOGY & KEY THEMES

The Methodology used in this cycle remained consonant with the one developed and used in the previous cycles, being based on semi-structured interviews carried out with four individuals selected from each of six identified community groups, namely:

- i. Persons who identify as being from Valletta (Beltin), and who reside in Valletta;
- ii. Persons who identify as being from Valletta (Beltin), but do not reside in Valletta;
- iii. Persons who do not identify as being from Valletta (non-Beltin), but who reside in Valletta (including expatriates);
- iv. Persons who are residents of the Inner Harbour / "Greater Valletta" area;
- v. Maltese people in general, who commute to Valletta with different levels of regularity;
- vi. Maltese people with a disability.

This set of community groups reflects a range of ways in which Valletta is perceived, lived and experienced and highlights important distinctions that run along the fault lines of residence, symbolic belonging and accessibility of Valletta as both a geographical space and a social place. The retention of these groups also provides continuity throughout the research, thereby allowing for comparability between results obtained from year to year. This is especially important in the wake of the launch of the programme, and as the ECoC year draws closer. The respondents chosen for this cycle included mostly new respondents, although some respondents were retained from previous cycles to be able to provide comparative data on any changes in perception. Furthermore, for the internal consistency of the data, all interviews with individual respondents were held after the launch of the programme.

The interviews carried out were complemented by participant observation in community oriented programmes within Valletta 2018, which provided further insights. In particular, participant observation was carried out in activities related to the Ġewwa Barra Valletta 2018 project and a Shake It! activity organised by the Foundation and MOVE Malta in November 2017. Furthermore, meetings were held, amongst others, with the coordinator of the Valletta Design Cluster, and with a representative of the Valletta LEAP Centre.

Valletta – the city and its accessibility

The inclusion of a cohort of Maltese persons with a disability has been found to highlight issues of accessibility with exceptional clarity. Although accessibility is not limited to issues related to physical mobility, it is clear even from previous cycles of research that the degree of physical accessibility of a space conditions the degree of social engagement that is possible. Furthermore, although the respondents from this group were all persons with a physical disability, the richness of the interviews has allowed insights into a wider range of issues than merely physical notions of access, and included emotional and socio-environmental concerns. The notion of accessibility was also mainstreamed throughout the groups so that questions on the subject were asked to all respondents.

Urban regeneration and its impact on communal life

Following last year's research, the role of Valletta 2018 as a catalyst for urban regeneration, and its impact on communal life were explored. Interviewees were asked about which spaces in Valletta they frequent, how liveable they feel Valletta is and whether they would consider living there (or moving out, if they already live there). They were also asked what changes they thought Valletta 2018 and related projects would bring, and what effects they thought these would have on their quality of life or that of others. Valletta residents in particular were questioned about their thoughts on how feasible and affordable living in Valletta will be for them and others in future.

Awareness and accessibility of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme.

As in the previous years, the interview included questions about the respondents' awareness of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme and its aims. It was noted that, in most cases, respondents could relate more to specific events even when they had some awareness of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme as a whole, and therefore, following questioning on a general level, reference was made to specific key events and initiatives, if respondents had not already identified them.

FINDINGS

This section of the report presents the most salient points emerging from the research conducted this year, primarily from the semi-structured interviews held with the various community groups identified, as well as the participant observation carried out.

This report, which builds on the findings of the first two cycles of this project, aims primarily to explore:

- issues related to accessibility and day-to-day life in Valletta;
- the role of Valletta 2018 as a catalyst for urban regeneration, and the impact this has on communal life; and
- the level of awareness of the Valletta 2018 Programme and its aims, together with the accessibility of the programme itself.

Valletta – the city and its accessibility

Previous research cycles have shown that Valletta is a place which has multiple layers of meaning to people from the various community groups identified, straddling a number of roles: from the political, administrative and cultural capital of the nation state to the intimacy of a home town with close knit community groups. As a geographical space it is well connected by public transport, but the effectiveness of this connectivity is diminished by congestion and a shortage of parking facilities, as well as by the natural topography and built environment of the city which reduces its physical accessibility, especially for persons with limited mobility.

The shortage of parking was seen as reducing the accessibility of Valletta, particularly but not exclusively by the cohorts of residents of the Inner Harbour area and people with disability, since for these the lack of parking spaces acted as a disincentive to engaging with the City. Indeed, in the previous cycles, it was noted that a difficulty in accessing Valletta as a physical space in turn limited the level of engagement that individuals have with the city as a social place, and consequently with the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme. In the research carried out in 2016, there was a marked feeling among the cohort of persons with disability that the situation has improved slightly, and in this regard Valletta 2018 was mentioned as a main contributor to ensuring that spaces can serve the diverse needs of a community. This also resulted in more engagement with the Valletta 2018 programme by this cohort. Nevertheless, it was also observed that more needs to be done to ensure universal access.

This sentiment persists in the interviews carried out this year, in which several respondents have stated that accessibility within Valletta has come a long way, especially considering that it is somewhat limited by the existing topographical and built fabric of Valletta, but that more could be done. At least two areas which are central to the Valletta 2018 programme, namely Strait Street and the Biċċerija area, are inaccessible to anybody who is not able-bodied, and we have observed instances in which even the electric taxis refuse to drive to these areas¹. Suggestions made by respondents included the introduction of concealed escalators, use of car lifts to increase parking availability, high contrast signs and information that can be accessed by people with sensory impairments, the use of technology such as mobile applications to make the city more

¹ The Biċċerija area lies in a part of Valletta which is only accessible through streets that are steep, and as indicated above, several electric taxis refused to drive to the area. With regard to Strait Street, reports of the inaccessibility of this area was a commonly reported experience among the cohort of persons with a disability, and this is due to a combination of factors including the fact that the narrowness of the street make it impossible to reach directly by car, and the streets leading to Strait Street can also be quite steep. In addition to this, the tables and furniture placed outside by entertainment establishments make the street difficult to navigate for people who are in a wheelchair or have other impairments that restrict physical mobility. A fact often mentioned by respondents was also the lack of accessible facilities in most of these entertainment establishments, or even public toilets in the area itself after a specific time.

navigable, the use of tactile representation as had been done at the Museum of Fine Arts. Indeed, one of the barriers identified by respondents from the disability cohort was the lack of awareness of the location of accessible facilities, reserved parking spaces for disabled persons and other existing provisions that can make Valletta a more accessible space.

Some respondents have voiced scepticism that there are times in which Valletta's historical infrastructure is, at times, used as an excuse to delay initiatives that can make Valletta more accessible,

"At times this is justified as it is truly difficult to provide accessibility, but more often than not, there is just inertia, and lack of initiative to really include us."

Another respondent said,

"I do understand the challenges of working around a historical city, and to 'uglify' the city with certain amendments - but something surely needs to be done."

Perhaps the counterpoint to these perspectives was that of a respondent who is a non-resident Belti, strongly attached to Valletta as it once was, and who views the concept of "accessibility" as being detrimental to the City's aesthetics and structural integrity,

"There isn't much to do about accessibility – the opening in the city walls close to the Siege Bell increased accessibility but how much can you open up the walls? It's best that they stop there. Mdina is 'the Silent City' – so are we to destroy Valletta? Enough damage has been done – let us stop here and be moderate."²

Nevertheless, other respondents have emphasised that technology can reduce the need for physical interventions that may be aesthetically detrimental,

"In my view, for a place to be a world heritage site, it needs to be available for everybody. The age of the building is mostly an excuse, as the technology we have can make this accessible."

It is to be noted that accessibility issues can affect various aspects of a person's social life, including interpersonal relationships, work and cultural participation, as the following quotes indicate:

"We went to eat at a restaurant which was not accessible and I had to just get home and leave my friends for the night."

"In my case - I use a catheter so I do not particularly need to use facilities. But what I can tell you is that there are some establishments which, albeit accessible, offered amenities that are not up to par to what we deserve or require."

"There are certain places where I feel really included and others where I feel totally left out, literally and metaphorically. What is the message here? Am I not entitled to have fun; to meet people of my own age; maybe to find love?"

² "L-aċċessibilità' ma tantx hemm fejn issolvi – ftuħ fis-sur fejn il-qanpiena żiedet l-aċċessibilità' kieku imma kemm se ddum toftoq? Aħjar jieqfu hemm. L-Imdina Silent City, allura l-Belt se ngibuha duħhan? Saret biżżejjed hsara. Nieqfu hemm u nimmoderaw."

"At work, the lift was out of order and I had to ask them to relocate the meeting as I could not access the meeting, and they did. A bit embarrassing."

"To access culture - you have to be in a good financial position to do it. Access requirements incur additional costs and to have to these regularly met is next to impossible for most of us."

Despite these inconveniences, some persons with disability manage to maintain a distinct optimism:

"I have noticed a societal change in attitude. I would like for disabled people to be seen as ordinary citizens within Valletta, not disabled people who are being included. I would like to see an attitude that is positive and based on acceptance."

"In the last year I have seen a gradual acceptance and more inclusiveness in these events. There is more acceptance that disabled people are included - and they are interested in what they are doing not just because they are disabled. Changes are happening. Disabled people are trying to make more of an effort."

"Eventually accessibility will be taken care for. Valletta will be for everyone, disabled, old, foreign, local, residents, non-residents. As alluded already Valletta's dynamism will keep coming to the fore."

Finally, one respondent from the disability cohort indicated that she would like to see the inclusion of persons with disability not only as the consumers of culture, but also as cultural producers,

"Many disabled people would like to be involved. There are a lot of disabled artists who would love the opportunity to exhibit their work. If they are not given the opportunity, they are ignored again. Getting disabled people to produce the events, and not just be spectators but also as organisers, artists, and so on is important. I would really love to see an inclusive and positive attitude which sees the impairment as irrelevant - where one can look at a person and say 'she is an artist who happens to be disabled.'"

Several respondents from the other cohorts mentioned that Valletta is a walkable city, or at least has the potential to be so. One expatriate respondent living in Valletta, for instance reported that with vehicles driving into Valletta's narrow streets, he can't tell who is more frustrated, or who is braver - people travelling on foot, or drivers. However, he sees Valletta as essentially a walkable city, and anticipates that the problems caused by the mix between vehicles and pedestrians would clear up if all parking is moved outside Valletta, with concessions.

There is a certain skill in finding your way around Valletta - akin to the notion of "tactics" as deployed by de Certeau to describe the ways in which "walkers" use and navigate the streets (de Certeau et al, 1998). People, especially those living in the city, either have these skills or need to develop them in order to function well. A resident Belti who had spent several years living abroad as well as in other Maltese towns described how living in Valletta, he had to learn to weave his way through tourists and café tables on the streets. Thus, one of the expatriate respondents who has been living in Valletta for a few months talked about how he is still in the process of making the shift from doing his shopping in supermarkets, as he is used to doing in his home country, to discovering a network of smaller shops around his area through which he can source his needs.

In this regard a number of respondents have seen the development of Is-Suq tal-Belt into a food market (including a supermarket) as increasing the level of convenience for residents, although there are concerns about eventual affordability. However, one other expatriate respondent who has lived in Valletta for years describes how she has managed to maximise the more communal approach to navigating the city,

"The Suq does not interest me. I get my daily essentials from the grocer round the corner and once every three months we go by car to a large supermarket in Hamrun to stock up. The Suq would be too far to carry heavy shopping home to where I live and too close to go by car. Besides, where would we park? It does not tick any boxes for me."

This situation may provide grounds for an innovative approach which could help to make the city more navigable whilst promoting local businesses through the use of, for instance, mobile applications which could show where the nearest shops are.

One less navigable obstacle for people living in Valletta or aspiring to live there is the logistical nightmares faced when requiring services to be delivered, including construction or maintenance services where several service providers refuse to work in Valletta. This also has been seen to have implications on the fabric of Valletta, with the use of big trucks to deliver small amounts of merchandise being specifically criticised.

There was, overall, very little change from the findings of the previous cycle of research concerning issues encountered in day-to-day life in Valletta, with common themes related to refuse collection, cleanliness and street infrastructure remaining recurrent in the interviews, especially with Beltin and other Valletta residents, and lack of parking being a common complaint across all of the cohorts. The one topic that was less apparent was that of abandoned buildings, and when this was discussed it was more in the context of wider dynamics of the purchase of properties by people from outside Valletta and expatriates, and increasing facilities for entertainment and tourist accommodation. It is understood that this reflects current property trends which will be discussed later in which, at the very least it can be said that with the current process of urban regeneration, the use of property may have become a greater concern than that of vacant buildings.

As the Valletta 2018 programme unfolds, some concerns were voiced by respondents who perceived certain aspects of branding as being exclusionary. One respondent was critical, for instance, of the "Festa"-based brand of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme, which was chosen to emphasise the communal and celebratory aspects of the ECoC, but which were interpreted by this respondent as giving the message that the public will be reduced to the role of spectators rather than being actively involved.

Urban regeneration and its impact on communal life

As has been stated above, Valletta as a social place has been assigned a multiplicity of meanings ranging from national capital to intimate home town and communal space, and from previous research it transpires that these perspectives often make Valletta a contested space, with different stakeholders having their own perspectives on what should be done with the capital city. It was also shown how Valletta 2018 as a project was seen to be a catalyst, both directly and indirectly, of a process of urban regeneration and commercialization which led to an increase in the use of spaces for entertainment, catering and tourist accommodation. This also led to an increased demand for property which, in conjunction with other socio-economic forces has induced a spike in property prices and rents. Shifts in the use of space within Valletta have become more strongly pronounced as 2018 draws closer, but this is also due to several other socio-economic factors, not least amongst which have been the changes in rent laws which made it possible for private tenants to increase rent.

It must be stated that the unprecedented commercialisation of spaces in Valletta has not yet eroded the sense of Valletta as "home" which has been reported since the beginning of this research project. This is, of course, true of older Beltin who often display a strong sense of romantic nostalgia. However, this feeling was not limited to such respondents. Indeed, one Belti who is in his thirties and has lived abroad, as well as in other towns in Malta, reported that Valletta gives him a sense of solidity,

"Valletta is the only place I feel comfortable in. It feels like the most real – concrete, as opposed to transitional – place I have lived in. It exists in so many people's minds. In-betweenness is such a part of my narrative – but Valletta gives me something to hold on to."

Likewise, an expatriate who has been living in Valletta for several years stated, "It is my home and I love it, but it is also a capital city", going on to describe the tension often experienced between the two faces of Valletta. The notion of "home" should not be dismissed simply as a romanticised notion – indeed, the concept of "home" is a central social concept, and has been defined as "where one best knows oneself" (Rapport and Dawson 1998) – where "best" means "most", even if not always "happiest" (Rapport and Overing 2000, 158). Thus it is important to understand the ongoing changes in Valletta, especially where significant changes in the social fabric and residence patterns are concerned, directly impact one of the aspects of social well-being.

Some respondents, most significantly those from the Greater Harbour area, described the economic processes going on in Valletta, often in a dispassionate and analytical way. One respondent put it this way, acknowledging the difficulty to Valletta residents, but ultimately recognising current trends as unstoppable and even positive,

"Property prices have gone up. Valletta residents will have problems, and development has brought this problem on them – foreigners and commercial interest. And what happened is also that Valletta is full of elderly people and rich foreigners – social continuity has been disrupted, young people are not able to find an apartment in Valletta near where their mothers live. However, prices will keep going up. Perhaps Government will need to intervene and create social housing units once again! Improvement is always positive, let's say. Regeneration of certain places – all good. Now Valletta looks decent and worthy of being considered our Capital. So they have to keep the ball rolling."

Within the Beltin and Valletta resident cohorts, concerns varied depending on the individual respondent's situation. Respondents who have their own property were significantly less concerned. Although they recognised the situation as being problematic, practical and aesthetic concerns featured more prominently in these interviews. One non-resident Belti in his sixties, when questioned about Valletta's problems, said,

"The problem with Valletta is the lack of cleanliness, and slum areas. I also don't like it when tourists are pestered to come into shops. There have been a lot of changes, such as the way they have ruined City Gate. Abroad they cherish these things rather than demolish them, and the British took better care of them than we have done. We have progress at the expense of culture – at least after the old City Gate we had the other one, which was popularly called "the garage door" or "Carnival gate" – but now we are left with total destruction."³

This emphasis on "cleanliness" and appearance has its critics. One expatriate respondent living in Valletta stated that: "All in all, I am not against the restoration or rehabilitation of buildings but I find that the projects insist too much on the concept of cleanliness and order. It is as if the Maltese are saying, 'Look we are clean, we are European'. It smacks of an inferiority complex that is so post-colonial. ... For example, City Gate: they removed all the kiosks and plan to have that large paved area around the fountain with carefully planted trees. I hope that there will be a kiosk here and another there as otherwise it looks artificial."

³ "Problemi ta' nuqqas ta' ndafa u slum areas. Fittagni fuq turisti. Kambjamenti – kif irvinaw Bieb il-Belt – barra minn Malta jgħozzuhom mhux iwaqqgħuhom dawn l-affarijiet. L-Ingliži beżgħu għalihom iktar milli bżajna għalihom aħna. Progress a skapitu tal-kultura. Wara l-Bieb l-antik kien hemm dak li kienu jsejnhulu Bieb ta' Garaxx jew Carnival Gate – imma issa total destruction."

Likewise, another respondent who is a second generation Valletta resident described how the definition of “slum” has been a label that has been imposed externally, and not by the resident community, and how it has often been used as a pretext to displace communities.

However, the respondents who were most directly concerned were those who are either in rental property belonging to private landowners, and to only a slightly lesser extent, property owners in areas that are being considered commercially exploitable, who have reported feeling pressured to sell and move out. Rent was a very important issue, for instance, for a Belti respondent who lives outside Valletta, but whose Valletta-resident mother has been informed by her landowner that rent will be increased, which may force her to move out,

“Who isn’t living in a Government rental is facing dramatic increases in rent. My (late) father had never wanted to buy property because at the time, rents were low – now they have increased the rents by a lot, and they want her to move out because they want the flat for foreigners.”

This respondent sees this trend as having been caused by a number of factors, of which Valletta 2018 is one, and amongst which he also counts the changes in rent laws, increased foreign investment, the regeneration of areas such as Strait Street and the proliferation of boutique hotels and Airbnb-type accommodation. He sees this heading towards a peak, after which momentum will be lost and this would be followed by a collapse, which to him will be a final blow to Valletta’s resident community,

“When Valletta faced decline in the past, there were still people living there. This time, the residents will be gone.”⁴

This respondent stated that concerns first started after a 2013 court case regarding rent, but were felt at a more grassroots level only some years afterwards when rental contracts started to expire. One respondent noted,

“Few people in Valletta have their own property ... and since Government has stated that it will not be interfering with the rental market, I can’t see a solution. Valletta has been all frills, but her spirit is dying because people are leaving and there are other problems: traffic, pavements in disrepair, parking problems – they are letting Valletta die.”

In fact, respondents have indicated that it is not only financial considerations that has made living in Valletta difficult. The respondent above talked about how noise pollution and extensions of entertainment facilities have created disturbance to residents, and that in conjunction with other difficulties, “one ends up deciding that it is worthwhile leaving Valletta”. A Valletta resident stated,

“Certain areas of Valletta are already dying. Strait Street is killing off the residential area around it. I know of someone who had bought two flats between St Albert’s school and Tico Tico area in Strait Street. They are now for sale because he realised that no one can live there any more. In the morning there is the noise from the school and delivery vans. In the evening, noise from the entertainment and diners.”

Another respondent has stated that she is afraid of being pushed out of her home because a property tycoon, who has been known to aggressively purchase Valletta property, lives in her neighbourhood, and describes the possible future of Valletta as,

“one large boutique hotel if they manage to attract enough crème de la crème society members who are willing to pay the price”.

⁴ “Meta waqgħet il-Belti qabel kien għad hemm ir-residenti. Did-darba ir-residenti se jkunu telqu.”

However, she notes that this business model depends on people coming to see Valletta's particularities, which they themselves are killing off – "so it is a cannibalistic model that will eat itself." Alternatively, according to this respondent,

"if Malta's reputation deteriorates and foreigners start to leave, Valletta will become a liveable place. But that means that things have to get a lot worse before they get better."

Another resident, who is also a property owner in an area considered desirable, has described how pressure is made on property owners and tenants alike to move out: "The balance lies always in favour of businesses – there are holiday flats even in the Bicc'eriġa (Old Abattoir) area now!" Like other respondents before him, this person believes that only Government can bring significant policy change, and disagrees with activists who claim that such change can be carried out through civic action, "We need Government policy to be more resident friendly and less aggressively pro-business."

Another resident stated that,

"if current trends continue, there won't be any people living in Valletta any more. Up to now I could only afford to live here because I shared the rent with co-lessees. I fear Valletta 2018 will bring more of the same effects that have already happened: high rents; change of use from residences to commercial, unaffordability for Beltin and Maltese. I will probably no longer afford to live in Valletta and that would make me very sad."

One respondent who is a Belti and Valletta resident, and who is involved in real estate specializing in Valletta property, negotiates his own personal situation by paradoxically synthesising, on the one hand a compartmentalisation of his business from his personal feelings about Valletta, and on the other hand a combination of his business acumen and ability to appraise Valletta properties with his own appreciation for the city's beauty and significance. Regardless of this, however, he acknowledges that living in Valletta can be difficult,

"What we have as a family is ours. However, some very well known families are selling out. They don't care any more about Valletta – and I can't blame them entirely. As a Belti I can't say anything against Valletta but there are problems of (availability of) parking, dilapidated property and (lack of) open spaces."⁵

This has led to some of the respondents quoted above describing Valletta as,

"a bit like Frankenstein's monster – being patched here and there but ultimately not having a soul, or at least its soul is dying"; or "a fragile old lady who needs a lot of TLC".

The Belti involved in real estate criticised the monumentalisation of Valletta by saying "People live here, and Valletta is a monument in itself."

What these respondents are indicating as the "soul" or "life" of the City is somewhat different from what had been described in previous cycles of research, where the concept of the City's vitality was related principally to commercial activity and to buildings being filled and not remaining vacant. These concerns have been noted, but in the cases quoted above were overshadowed by the more pressing issues of Valletta remaining a liveable city and having a sustainable social fabric, which resonates with the theme of the Valletta 2018 Fourth International Conference, namely that of "Living Cities, Liveable Spaces". As Redfield (1960:59) said

⁵ "What we have as a family is ours. Imma laqmijiet kbar qed ibiegħu. They don't care any more about Valletta – u ma ntihomx tort kompletament. Bħala Belti ma nistax ngħid kontra l-Belti imma hemm problemi ta' parking, dilapidated property, open spaces."

"As soon as our attention turns from a community as a body of houses and tools and institutions to the states of mind of particular people, we are turning to the exploration of something immensely complex and difficult to know. But it is humanity, in its inner and more private form; it is, in the most demanding sense, the stuff of community."

Indeed, while with external discourses (particularly people interviewed who are neither Beltin nor Valletta resident), regeneration projects are seen as strongly positive, the response of Beltin and Valletta residents privileges the communal aspects of living in Valletta. Interestingly this was not limited to Beltin, as even non-Beltin and expatriate Valletta residents have said that one of the reasons for living in Valletta is the feeling that there is still a palpable sense of community. Nor was this purely a case of nostalgia nurtured by older persons, as even a sixteen year old respondent emphasised the communal aspect of living in Valletta as something which she felt was central to her life,

"In Valletta I could call my cousin from across the street – you can't really do that in other places as people would look at you as if you are doing something wrong. ... Valletta is where I can be fully who I am."

Another respondent, an expatriate married to a Maltese who has now lived in Valletta for many years and is well integrated into the community said,

"Gentrification is an issue as the sense of community I love can disappear. Foreign and local investors do not become part of the community. They are only in it for profit." ⁶

Likewise, a resident Belti said,

"This emphasis on the entertainment industry is symptomatic of a retrograde mentality – regenerating a place doesn't have to mean pushing people out."

This last comment, in fact, captures the important point that the need that has been voiced to preserve the social fabric of Valletta is not an argument against development – none of the respondents, even those most concerned about gentrification and monumentalisation, have been dismissive of regeneration projects in themselves. As Bauman (2001: 149) says,

"we all need to gain control over the conditions under which we struggle with the challenges of life – but for most of us such control can be gained only collectively."

One respondent, a Belti resident, said,

"There's a feeling that financial wellbeing is the only form of wellbeing, there is no pursuit of beauty or spirituality, but we need to look beyond this amazing economic growth to which we have all submitted."

What is being proposed, therefore, is that the challenge is to make urban regeneration more community-friendly, sustainable and ultimately aimed at making Valletta not just a more culturally and commercially vibrant city, but also a more liveable one.

⁶ This quote appears to be referring specifically to foreigners who invest in Valletta property, and it needs to be borne in mind that the statement quoted was being made by a person who is an expatriate herself. Also, one other respondent stated that: "It is true that some foreigners do not live here for long but others do and try to integrate. I am organizing some outings and half of the small group that gathers is made up of foreign residents."

Awareness and accessibility of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme

There is a strong sense of pride in general related to Valletta 2018, with the idea of this being a way of increasing tourism and having Valletta showcased across Europe being often mentioned. The programme also seems to have elicited a degree of enthusiasm, with various respondents stating that they look forward to the opening festivities and to other events in the Programme. One respondent from the disability cohort, for instance, said,

"I'm looking forward to ... the opening of Valletta 2018. I am also looking forward to this year's Carnival. Although I am not a Carnival enthusiast, I am planning to attend Carnival after being absent for about 20 years. I am also looking forward to the Carnival happening in the Cottonera. The Pageant of Seas in June, is another event which I am also looking forward to."

Another respondent who is proud of being a Beltija from the Biċċerija area, stated that,

"God willing, I hope to enjoy all the events. I always come for Carnival, when the Valletta Football Team win, Notte Bianca, I visit museums, Auberge de Castille. When we were children, we didn't use to see these things."

One respondent who is himself involved in the arts scene, however, cautioned about this sense of pride: "Pride is there alright, but culture often gets forgotten." This respondent was particularly well aware of the programme, but was critical of the fact that many of the events that were scheduled (such as Carnival, the Malta Arts Festival, Notte Bianca and the Book Festival) had been going on already, and this to him meant that Valletta 2018 was not being exploited to its maximum potential,

"I expected a year of continuous activity that can mobilise people and allow anybody entering Valletta to find something going on."

There was also some criticism, especially from respondents who have attained a high level of academic education, to initiatives in which culture was seen as being introduced to the local community from an external source, "I regret that Valletta 2018 means that culture has to be imposed on Valletta from above, as if Valletta doesn't already have its own culture." (Another Valletta resident has said that as a resident he feels like a prop ("qisni pastur") in a stage set for tourist attention. One respondent, an academic, stated that "Valletta 2018 could have become a real cultural hub – but I fear there will not be enough legacy, despite numerous activities, because it is not leading towards a cultural foundation."

Another respondent who has a strong academic background felt that the programme seems to be geared towards putting a gloss over Valletta's wounds (such as poverty, problems faced by the elderly, minorities etc.), but it is better to expose them and start the healing process than to cover them up, "Projects should be more political in the real sense of the word, even if it could be embarrassing."⁷

Notte Bianca, as in previous years, is the best known event, although many respondents were not aware that this has now been incorporated into the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme because it has become something that the Maltese public is accustomed to. The Valletta Design Cluster project, on the other hand, was the project that was least well known by respondents. Many, in fact, drew a blank when asked about it, with notable exceptions being, for instance, a respondent involved in the art scene (who said that information has been limited and people in the area are only aware that buildings are being restored) and another respondent who is a resident of the Biċċerija area where the project will be based (who likewise was only aware that buildings are being restored).

⁷ As an example, this respondent stated: "To me the most interesting piece of art in Valletta right now is the memorial to Daphne Caruana Galizia", going on to discuss how it would have been difficult for this to be included in a cultural programme such as that pertaining to Valletta 2018 not least because of the strongly polarised views that the issue evokes. The memorial in question is a spontaneous collection of flowers, candles and photographs laid at the foot of the Great Siege monument in memory of slain journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, and has not been without controversy. Attempts at removing it have been reported, and one person we spoke to argued that it as a defacement of the Great Siege monument.

Is-Suq tal-Belt probably stands as the single project that has triggered the most varied reactions. On the one hand, a number of respondents have welcomed the restoration of a building that was historically central to the Valletta community, and have seen this project as upgrading Valletta's profile and making living in Valletta easier. On the other hand, though, several Beltin and Valletta residents have been critical of the concept – with some stating that it has been a missed opportunity to promote small local businesses or finding aspects of the design (particularly the canopy) to be objectionable, and others yet finding it impractical for their needs, preferring to use the smaller shops close to their homes.

With regard to physical accessibility, respondents from the disability cohort have indicated that not all venues are universally accessible (especially for wheelchair users), and that several art galleries can be difficult for people with visual impairments to engage with. As has been stated before, one respondent said that there could have been more room for persons with disability as cultural producers, although she proposed that an ideal situation would be one in which access is given to all, rather than the deliberate inclusion of persons with disability.

One respondent who is participating directly in the Ġewwa Barra project was aware, of course, of Valletta 2018 but had little knowledge beyond what she was exposed to through her direct involvement. While this may be seen as a problem from the perspective of branding, there is a sense in which this example shows the power of a community-based project such as Ġewwa Barra to have a high degree of social penetration, reaching people who for various reasons may not have found the Programme in general to be accessible. One expatriate resident, who is a highly educated person who often attends cultural events also voiced this sentiment, "I don't care much for labels, so I don't really know which of the events I attend are approved by Valletta 2018 or not".

This suggests that there are several ways in which Valletta 2018 can present itself, and that apart from the launch of a Cultural Programme in its entirety, which may be inaccessible or not engaging for many, there is also a more grassroots approach which can be carried out especially through community-based projects as well as the system of regional coordinators which the Valletta 2018 Foundation has engaged.

CONCLUSIONS & WAY FORWARD

From the findings above, it is clear that awareness regarding Valletta 2018 is at a peak, although there is a range of variance in how much individuals are aware of the programme itself. Those aware of the programme demonstrate a degree of enthusiasm and expectation, although respondents with a stronger academic background have been more critical of various aspects of the programme. This critical approach is, of course, to be expected when dealing with an initiative such as Valletta 2018, and reflects debates within Maltese society at large as well as the contentious nature of Valletta itself as a social space.

There is also a fair amount of critique in terms of accessibility, but this is also coupled with a widespread recognition that there are difficulties to making Valletta universally accessible, albeit these obstacles have been seen to be used as excuses to delay or avoid interventions that can actually be done. Despite this critique, there is also a feeling that accessibility within Valletta has come a long way, and there has been some strong optimism registered within the cohort of persons with a disability regarding the future of Valletta.

Finally, the future liveability of Valletta emerges as a strong concern. The attention generated by Valletta 2018, together with other factors such as changes in rent laws, economic growth, foreign investment and change in perceptions of Valletta, have led to a spike in property prices and rents. These factors have also contributed to a dramatic increase in the entertainment-based economic activity in Valletta, which has the cumulative effect of making Valletta a difficult place to live in. The notion of “community” should thus be re-appraised, and seen to be not simply as an abstract social concept or a romantic idea, but as a real contributor to personal and social well-being, which would encourage a more sustainable approach to urban regeneration aimed at not only economic activity, but also at making Valletta a more liveable city.

No changes within the methodology are envisaged at the current juncture, although it is anticipated that participant observation will increase as key events within the unfolding of the Valletta 2018 Programme take place. In terms of key themes, the ones highlighted in this report and the previous one, namely accessibility, participation and awareness of the Cultural Programme, and urban regeneration and its effects on communal life, will be retained.

Regular contact will be maintained with the teams working on the Valletta Design Cluster project and Ġewwa Barra projects to discuss how developments in their respective programmes can link to the findings of this research, and vice versa. Likewise, quarterly meetings will be held throughout the year with the Programming Coordinator of the Valletta 2018 Foundation to keep abreast of developments and to provide reciprocal assistance wherever possible.



REFERENCES

Bauman, Z. (2001) *Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Oxford: Polity.

Rapport, N.J. and Dawson, A. (eds) (1998) *Migrants of Identity. Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement*, Oxford: Berg.

Rapport, N. and Overing, J. (2000) *Social and Cultural Anthropology – the Key Concepts*, London and New York: Routledge.

Redfield, R. (1960) *The Little Community, and Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.