



COMMUNITY INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY IN VALLETTA 2018

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from the fourth and final cycle of a research project which aims to identify factors affecting the participation of various community groups in activities 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.

Previous cycles of this research project have indicated that Valletta is a complex social space encompassing multiple layers of meaning for different community groups and individuals, with literature demonstrating that an in-depth understanding of the social context and the engagement of the public are critical success factors to the European Capital of Culture project (Garcia and Cox 2013). Another theme emerging from earlier research was the impact of urban regeneration on Valletta as a communal space, which has led to a wide variety of responses, often highly polarised.

The current cycle of research, in the actual year of the European Capital of Culture 2018, seeks to explore further developments within Valletta and Malta as the host city and region respectively. 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 previous cycles with the addition of a fourth theme:

1. Valletta – the City and its Accessibility;
2. Urban Regeneration and its Impact on Communal Life;
3. Awareness and Accessibility of the Valletta 2018 Programme; and
4. The Legacy of the Valletta 2018 Programme.

Finally, the report will give its conclusions and will proceed to provide recommendations.

All interviews were conducted in the last quarter of 2018, allowing for most of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme to be completed at the time when these took place.

The authors of this report are indebted to Dr Josephine Burden, a Valletta-based author and academic who has generously allowed us to quote extensively from an unpublished paper presented at the 'Sharing the Legacy Conference' organised by the Valletta 2018 Foundation in October 2018, and to Alfred Camilleri, an artist from Valletta who kindly allowed us to refer to and reproduce one of his artworks from his exhibition 'Civitas', held in the Malta Postal Museum and Arts Hub in Valletta in June 2018.

METHODOLOGY & KEY THEMES

The methodology used in this cycle remained the same as that which was developed and used for the previous cycles. This research was based on semi-structured interviews carried out with four individuals selected from each of the 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; and
- vi. Maltese people with a disability.

This set of community groups reflects a range of ways in which Valletta is perceived, lived, and experienced. It 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.

Furthermore, the respondents chosen for this cycle included a mixture of new respondents and others who were retained from previous cycles. This allowed us to provide comparative data on any changes in perception even on an individual level. Moreover, to maintain the data's internal consistency, all interviews were held in the last quarter of 2018, after most of the Programme had been executed.

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 *Gewwa Barra* project and *Il-Festa l-Kbira*, which were two of the main community-oriented events in the Programme.

Valletta – the City and its Accessibility

As in the previous cycles, 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 particular place conditions the amount of social engagement which takes place within it. 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 apart from physical access. These 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 the research outcomes from previous years, 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 and how liveable they feel Valletta is. 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 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.

Legacy of the Valletta 2018 Programme

This new theme was introduced into the interviews as of this year, allowing respondents to give voice to what they believe the probable legacy of Valletta 2018 is going to be, or else to explain what they feel is important. This was added as a concern because generating a legacy is one of the aims of every European Capital of Culture. It also builds on the theme of the recent Valletta 2018 Foundation annual international conference, which was titled 'Sharing the Legacy'.

FINDINGS

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

This report, which builds on the findings of the first three 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;
- the level of awareness of the Valletta 2018 Programme and its aims, together with the accessibility of the Programme itself; and
- the legacy that respondents feel that Valletta 2018 is likely to leave, or ought to leave.

Valletta – the City and its Accessibility

The research conducted in previous years has shown that Valletta, as a socially constructed place, fulfils several roles, being at once the political, administrative, and cultural centre of Malta, and increasingly a commercial and entertainment hub, whilst retaining the intimacy of a hometown to Valletta residents and to the communities and individuals that identify themselves as *Beltin*, regardless of whether they reside in Valletta or not. The impact of the processes of rapid urban regeneration that have been catalysed by Valletta 2018, as well as by other convergent political and economic processes, will be looked at in more detail in the next subsection, which deals specifically with urban regeneration and its effect on community life. Nevertheless, it bears saying that Valletta retains the sense of "home" to many respondents from Valletta, despite the many changes that have occurred in the city in recent years.

One respondent mentioned how during a difficult period in her life, Valletta remained a touchstone, a place that remained a constant, where she could rely on her family, friends, and community network. Others talked about how Valletta is their “life”, and explained how community networks have given them support, often giving them stability in turbulent times, and how they are particularly concerned for elderly people who are being pushed out of their communities. This relationship between place and community, often expressed concisely in the word “home”, has sadly not been mainstreamed into policy-making, although it clearly has an impact on people’s quality of life and should therefore be integrated into all decisions related to urban regeneration in Valletta and elsewhere.

Valletta’s accessibility is another theme explored by this research. While the notion of accessibility is not restricted to issues related to physical mobility, and can comprise of social, geographical, financial, linguistic, and intellectual aspects, these are often interlinked. Thus, although several barriers to physical accessibility remain as they were, the fact that Valletta has become a more lively space has also in turn encouraged more people to frequent the city. Several respondents talked about how they often did not feel safe in certain areas of Valletta which were perceived as dangerous, or after shop closing hours when there used to be very few people in the streets, and how this has now changed, since the city has become more frequented due to the dramatic increase of its popularity and the number of evening venues and events.

On the other hand, however, restrictions on accessibility continue to create a sense of isolation and a lack of engagement with Valletta and the Valletta 2018 Programme in a number of cases. Respondents with a disability talked about how the lack of provisions for accessibility in commercial establishments for instance, made them feel “unwelcome”. This has an effect also on Valletta residents who have often talked about being “besieged in [their] own homes” because of improper parking practices and noise levels, amongst other factors. One respondent, who is a Valletta resident, spoke about how when a family member had to move outside Valletta because of mobility issues, she developed a sense of resentment to her home city which had, as it were, excluded a close relative.

As a geographical space, Valletta remains well connected by public transport, it being the central hub of the public transportation system. Valletta’s connectivity has also been improved through the ferry service in both the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour following agreements between the company responsible for the service and the Valletta 2018 Foundation. Clear information on getting to Valletta is also provided on the Foundation’s website and on literature that has been distributed to the general public. The information screens outside and around Valletta have also been mentioned as a good step, especially by the disability cohort who felt that the provision of clear information was one factor that made the city more accessible.

Despite this, car dependency and a demand for parking remain recurrent concerns, especially amongst non-Valletta residents. One of the reasons for this is that public transportation services are often time-bound and this restricts the possibility of participation in evening and night-time events. Respondents mentioned the variability of bus timetables especially to peripheral areas of Malta, as well as the Upper Barrakka lift which closes at 9:00 pm from November to May. The Floriana Park and Ride facility also closes at 9:00 pm. Concerns about public transportation and parking shortages were particularly expressed by respondents with physical mobility limitations and those with young children.

One respondent who is a young mother said: “From my own perspective, parking is the main sore point. There needs to be a place where you can park your car, and then catch a shuttle – which needs to be an affordable service – that takes you inside the city. The Park and Ride service finishes at 9:00 pm so evening events are

cut short. At least, there is a nice atmosphere now, even in the evening. I no longer feel apprehensive going to Valletta.”

On the other hand, respondents residing in Valletta observed how incoming traffic to Valletta passes largely through St Paul’s Street and to a lesser extent through St Mark Street, creating congestion and restricting walkability in these areas. This has also been a concern of business owners, especially those having restaurants and shops in St Paul Street, who feel that at times the street itself becomes inaccessible and that this has an adverse impact on their enterprise. Likewise, concerns about garbage collection and unrestricted delivery hours were expressed by several Valletta residents and business owners.

As has been noted earlier, barriers to the various forms of accessibility are strongly interlinked. In 2015, 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 Programme. As a result, the persons with a disability interviewed showed a marked lack of engagement with both the city and the cultural programme. However, in 2016 and 2017, there was a marked feeling among the same cohort that the situation had improved slightly but ever so significantly, and Valletta 2018 was seen to be a catalyst for this.

There were various considerations regarding the limitations to physical accessibility posed by the built environment of the city and its natural topography – one respondent joked “It’s built on a hill. We can’t just flatten it out, can we?” However, as in previous years, other respondents were less willing to accept these limitations as intrinsic and insurmountable, pointing to such cases as the Museum of Archaeology, which is fully accessible, as an example of good practice. Such respondents want to see policies being put in place to make Valletta even more universally accessible: “I do not understand this. The excuse that this is a historical place, and that steps cannot be taken to make them accessible, is total bull. The pavement, in general, is always fixable. Just because a place has historical value, it does not mean you cannot make it accessible. I say that since the place has historical value, we should be all the more intelligent in the way we provide accessibility, as this place ought to be used and enjoyed by all” (Respondent with a disability, 40, male)

As in previous years, respondents with a disability shared anecdotes in which they were excluded from participating in activities, often because public buildings were inaccessible: “Europe House, the premises of the European Commission Representation in Malta, is another charade. The stairlift does not take all kinds of wheelchairs! My wife had her graduation there and I had to give it a miss as I did not feel like making a fool of myself. Same with the premises of Identity Malta - it is not accessible.”

The newly opened MUŻA, Malta’s new national-community art museum and one of the flagship projects of Valletta 2018, was seen by many of the respondents as being a test of commitment towards improved accessibility. It is noted that at the time when the interviews were conducted, MUŻA had not yet officially opened, so most respondents with a disability simply limited themselves to expressing their hope that it would be accessible. In a private conversation with Sandro Debono, Senior Curator and MUŻA Project Lead, it was established that accessibility had been very much a part of the plan for this museum, with the redesigning of the premises to introduce ramps and reduce the number of stairs, the inclusion of wheelchair access, lifts, subtitled video productions without audio commentary intended to neutralise the distinction between hearing impaired persons and not, and plans to provide staff with training to conduct tours for visually impaired visitors.

Commercial establishments also prove to be difficult for persons with a disability. A report commissioned by the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability, which has not yet been published but has been

covered by the media, indicates that only 30 out of a sample of 400 commercial establishments in Valletta were considered adequately accessible (Falzon 2018).¹

These difficulties were also reflected in the experiences of respondents with a disability in this research project. One respondent said: "I remember going to Valletta recently to see the opening of the Triton Fountain, after which I went to a restaurant. However, after all the effort in the world to get there, I realised it was not accessible for a wheelchair user. I have no idea why they do not cater for us. All it takes is a ramp, and we are ready to spend money there! CRPD monitors this, but unfortunately, certain pubs and entertainment areas of a certain small size are not obliged to be technically accessible. Local councils and the Government should provide incentives to these places to provide ramps. I have never witnessed any normal shopper not venture into a shop just because the shop happens to be tiny. It should be the same for us wheelchair users." (Respondent with a disability, 40, male)

Nevertheless, the small size of many commercial establishments, as well as the fact that toilet facilities are often not found on the ground floor, present obstacles which may be insurmountable for small entrepreneurs in Valletta to resolve in isolation. One respondent who runs a restaurant in a very compact space said: "I would like to make my restaurant more accessible – after all that would bring me more customers, but you've seen my restaurant. It's not only wheelchair inaccessible – it's even pushchair inaccessible – that's simply what the space can offer."

According to some respondents, on certain occasions, accessibility was restricted due to aesthetic choices, with a number of respondents pointing to Triton Square as an example of this. While the similarly coloured steps create a sense of open space and visual continuity, it was also very difficult for people with visual impairments to navigate these steps. One of the respondents, who is himself visually impaired, said: "You don't even need to be blind to trip on those stairs and fall flat on your face."

Upon reflection of the response received from respondents with a disability throughout the cycles of this research, it appears that the situation has come full circle starting from 2015 when most respondents from this cohort expressed feeling excluded and unengaged with both the city and the cultural programme, onwards to two years of cautious optimism and increasing engagement, to the final year of the ECoC, where these respondents feel that Valletta is still very inaccessible, but they are more strongly engaged and willing to demand accessibility as a right: "There is still a long way to go. We are far from making Valletta truly accessible. However, we have to be the ones to push for this." (Respondent with a disability, 42, male)

Finally, the theme of walkability, which was mentioned by several respondents as one of the strong points of Valletta, needs to be addressed. Valletta resident author, Dr Josephine Burden, in her presentation 'Process, Outcomes and the City: Reflections of a Valletta resident' (Burden 2018), given at 'Sharing the Legacy', the fifth annual conference by Valletta 2018, explored the importance of the tactical use of pathways, public buildings, and routes, where she looks at the alternatives for "the flaneur" who "arrives at a jumble of parked cars and motorbikes cluttering the footpath." In the case of MUŻA, Burden expressed a hope that people walking in the city, could use this space as an access between two key areas in Valletta, namely Jean de Valette Square and Merchants Street, perhaps stopping for a coffee at the museum itself, making this cultural space part of the living, walking routes that people use.

¹ The study in question targeted four areas in Valletta, namely Republic Street, Merchants Street, St John Square, and Freedom Square (Falzon 2018).

Burden, who kindly allowed her work to be quoted in this report, relates her joy at finding out that the Valletta campus of the University of Malta had restored a connecting passage leading from two main streets, namely Merchants Street to St Paul Street: "The space became a delightful linking haven away from traffic with occasional exhibitions to raise awareness of the University as a cultural institution engaging with the local community. The University became part of my cultural map and during the week, I walked through with my groceries and greeted the security people on the desk. Here was a cultural and academic institution that was part of the community and part of my life."

However, this was short-lived as the author was told that the site was a "prestigious institution" and that she could not just walk through it and will have to use alternative routes. Burden explains her disappointment thus: "My sadness is about an opportunity missed, a chance lost to create Valletta as a city where cultural institutions work with the local community to develop pedestrian routes that are safe and pleasant and build our social capital. Instead, the privileged world of the academic is separated from the everyday life of a working city. A pity."

Despite topographical limitations, Valletta still provides an array of services within a contained area of land, has an urban plan that was intended to make the city accessible primarily on foot and has several restrictions on vehicular access. Burden's reflection could be a provocation for planning initiatives to bridge the gap, following de Certeau (1984), between "strategies" – particularly the control and organisation of space – and "tactics" – the everyday practices of people moving about. This would mean taking steps to encourage the interweaving of the routes that walkers take with the havens and repositories of culture. These steps, as indicated by Burden's anecdote, may involve infrastructural changes, such as the opening of a passage linking two main streets. However, as also reflected in the experience, making such spaces accessible often requires authorities and institutions to remove social and conceptual barriers.

Urban Regeneration and its Impact on Communal Life

In previous years, this research indicated how Valletta 2018 was seen to be a catalyst, both directly and indirectly, of a process of urban regeneration and commercialisation primarily oriented towards entertainment, catering, and tourist accommodation. It also led to an increased demand for property which in conjunction with international and national economic and demographic changes, has induced a spike in property prices and rents. This dramatic rise is reflective of the national situation, but is particularly accentuated in certain areas, with Valletta being one of the most strongly affected.

Concerns about the lack of affordable housing across the country, together with the need to control irregular and illegal practices related to the rental sector, led the national Government to put forward a White Paper for public consultation in October 2018, proposing mandatory minimum leases and financial incentives for contracts longer than a year as two possible solutions to the instability of the private rental market (Parliamentary Secretariat for Social Accommodation 2018). It is noted that the proposed reforms exclude leases negotiated prior to 1995 and "luxury properties":²

The White Paper seeks to protect the interests of both landlords and tenants, and is strongly informed by an economically liberal discourse. Although the explanatory booklet concedes that the Government is considering the possibility of rent-capping should there be a practice of purposefully unaffordable

² "1995 is the year which saw the enactment of Act No. XXXI of 1995, which may be cited as the Housing Laws Amendment Act, and which was effectively a liberalisation of the rent market whereby new leases entered into would be controlled solely by the lease agreement and no further protective laws.

risers being imposed by landlords (Parliamentary Secretariat for Social Accommodation 2018, 33), the White Paper generally steers away from direct price control, and proposes that “properly informed State intervention in the PRS (private rented sector) should not threaten market confidence, especially as landlords themselves stand to gain with a more stabilised environment” (Parliamentary Secretariat for Social Accommodation 2018, 6).

Concern about the displacement of Valletta residents who are forced to seek cheaper accommodation in other localities, was voiced by respondents from all cohorts. One respondent from the disability cohort for instance, said: “It is happening. There are people who have lived in Valletta for a long time and cannot buy in the area. Foreigners are coming in and buying up properties. This is bad. It displaces people. The property then sits empty while local families who have lived in Valletta all their lives have to move outside – that is terrible. It is sad for Valletta as the prices go up, and the younger generations cannot afford it. It will create a deserted place once again, and the vibrancy will be gone.” (Respondent with a disability, 49, female)

Other respondents emphasised the displacement of residents as part of the loss of character or heritage of the city: “Development is eroding the historical capital aspect of the city - the *Bicċerija* (the Old Abattoir), the *Suq tal-Belt* (the Covered Market) are all lost. There are some areas of Valletta which need to be taken care of, such as areas near St Elmo. But this need for development must be balanced, managed, so as not to lose the soul of the city, as I believe is happening right now. We do not value history that much, or heritage to be precise. We are more into commercialisation and business. The balance is not on the side of heritage, preservation, and history.” (Respondent from the Inner Harbour area, 27, male)

Understandably, these concerns are felt far more strongly by the *Beltin* themselves. One respondent who now lives outside Valletta, but whose mother faces possible eviction from her private rental, said: “What’s happening in Valletta is that it is getting depopulated, while boutique hotels and other commercial enterprises are opening. You need commerce but you also need residents to keep a city alive. A city is made of its people – we are not talking about a necropolis, a tourist resort, or an industrial estate.”

One of the respondents who until last year lived in Valletta with his parents, but had to move out of the city when he decided to live with his partner, was more cynical, stating that “money which could have helped people was frittered away, and in effect the lasting legacy has been speeding up the touristification of the city and the expulsion of its people.”

The increase in commercial activity, particularly boutique hotels and tourist accommodation on the one hand, and the proliferation of catering establishments on the other, is another topic that was mentioned especially by Valletta residents. In both cases, respondents tended to be ambivalent, welcoming the increased activity especially if they are themselves business owners, but also lamenting the disturbance that is invariably caused. This was sometimes encapsulated by respondents in the terse Maltese idioms: “*Thobb haġa u tobġhod oħra*” (“You love one thing and hate another”, i.e. there are positive and negative points to anything) and “*Il-progress rigress*” (“Progress is regress”, i.e. progress always has its disadvantages).

In the case of boutique hotels and tourist accommodation especially, apart from the annoyance created by the construction and restructuring works required, there was also an added concern by some

respondents that these are contributing to the displacement of the resident population. Some responses from Valletta residents and non-resident *Beltin*, showing a variety of reactions to this phenomenon, include the following:

“The creation of boutique hotels means that large buildings, which most people couldn’t afford, are restored and made beautiful – but this does not justify the amount of traffic and garbage that the people of Valletta need to put up with.” (Resident *Beltija*, 41, female, working in the education sector)

“It is not true that boutique hotels are only taking up spaces that are not within the budget of the average person, because they are buying up even small spaces and after all, many of the large *palazzi* that are being turned into boutique hotels used to be split up into smaller spaces.” (Non-resident *Belti*, 42, male, working in the education sector)

“In the past, we used to hear a lot of griping (*garr*) about Valletta, but now people who used to find fault with everything in our capital city and those who only used to come here when they had no other choice are buying up every nook and cranny (*jixtru kull toqba*). I don’t mind the boutique hotels, because wealth gets distributed (*tinqasam lira bejn kulhadd*) – as long as people keep coming to Valletta, things are good.” (Resident *Belti*, 45, male, business owner)

The commercial buzz in the catering and entertainment sector was also not immune to being linked with the possible displacement of people and disturbance of residents. One resident *Beltija* who works in the social sector explained: “I remember Strait Street as a very quiet area. I know elderly people and mentally disabled people who live there and they will have to move, because the noise is just too much for them. And it is especially difficult for them to have to move away from the place they live in.”

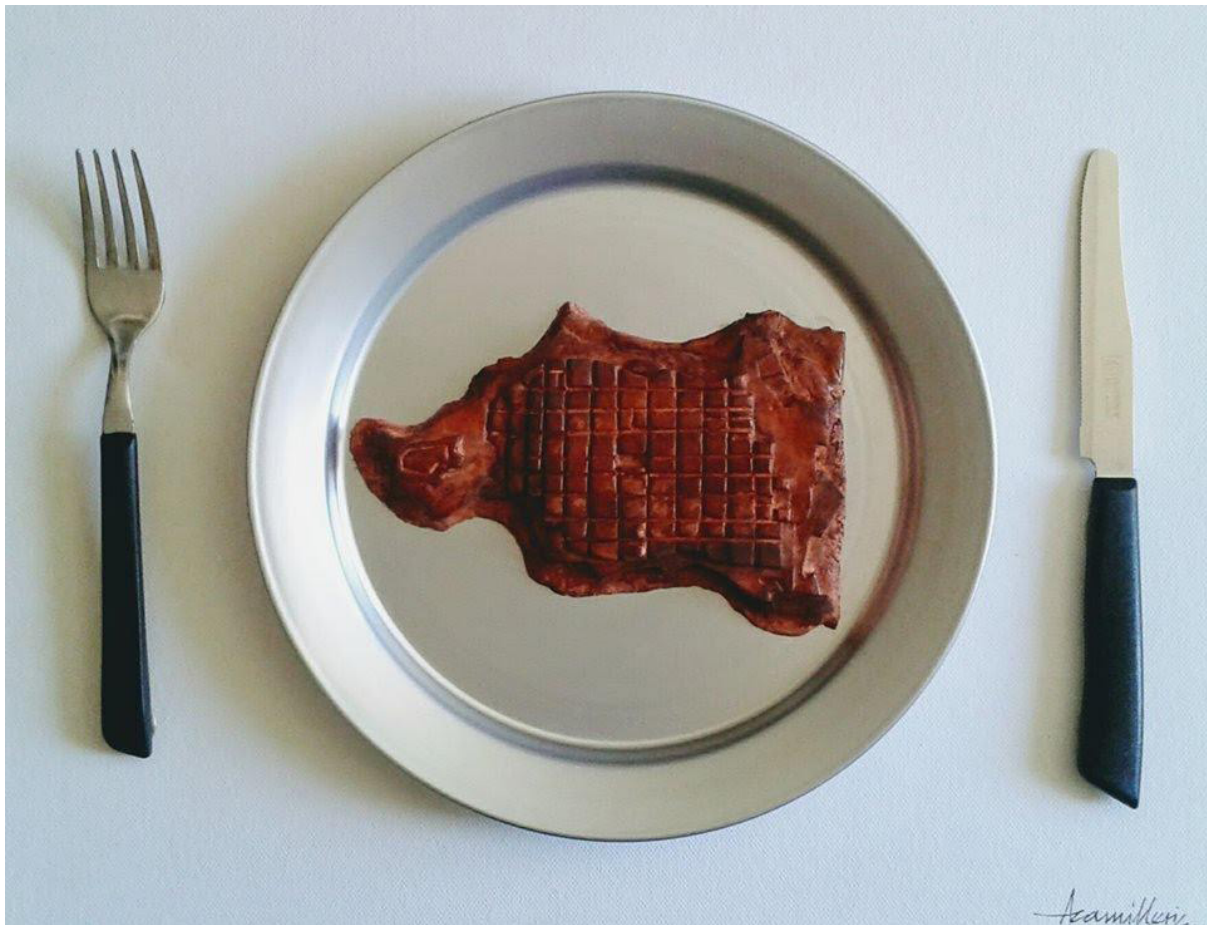
The same respondent further elaborates on the nature of the disturbance: “I used to prefer Valletta when it was quieter. I know it was run-down and shabby, and there wasn’t much to do. Now there has been the regeneration of buildings, people coming in and out, but for residents, it’s a headache. Parking, garbage, a disproportionate number of boutique hotels. There was a time when I couldn’t work from home. Construction, noise, people shouting, broken glass, noise from what I call ‘the Paceville area’³. It comes at a price, especially for people living in areas where catering establishments are found or where weddings take place.”

Valletta artist Alfred Camilleri also captured this annoyance with the adverse impact of the catering industry in a work titled ‘Well Done’. This artwork was the most critical of several pieces in an exhibition titled ‘Civitas’⁴, which explored the various facets of the capital city. This piece showed a representation of a steak shaped like Valletta’s map, served up on a plate with a fork and knife at each side. The caption said, “We don’t just meet expectations, we exceed them.” In a private conversation, Camilleri elaborated: “Our capital city has been given on a silver platter so that people can eat it up – we see this in the encroachment of catering establishments on pavements, streets and facades. Everybody wants a slice of Valletta.”

³ Paceville is the name of an area in St Julian’s which is widely renowned for its nightlife. In this case, however, the respondent is referring to areas within Valletta such as Strait Street, which have also become nightlife meccas.

⁴ The exhibition was held at the Malta Postal Museum and Arts Hub, Valletta in June 2018. It did not form part of the Valletta 2018 Programme.

Figure 1: 'Well done', artwork by Alfred Camilleri, exhibited in 'Civitas', June 2018, Valletta



One reason for this is that difficulties and waves of displacement are recurring features in the social history of Valletta, as had been argued in the report presented in 2016. One respondent, now a resident *Beltija*, talked about how her parents moved out of Valletta when they got married: "We speak about gentrification nowadays, but really gentrification had already started in the 1980s, which was when my parents got married. At the time, couples getting married would look for new accommodation outside Valletta, both because it would be larger and more accessible, and also because there was value placed on having a newly built dwelling."

Another respondent, a non-resident *Belti* who moved out of Valletta when he got married in the late 1970s, confirmed: "They say that it isn't easy to live in Valletta today, but it wasn't easy at the time I got married either, because the available properties were occupied. Other properties belonged to specific families who didn't want to sell. It was far easier to move out and find a new property."

Previous reports have identified various factors that have contributed to the way in which the communal aspect of Valletta has managed to outlast so many difficulties. These include the fact that property owners and residents in public-owned rental properties and social housing enjoy more protection from displacement; the symbolic negotiation of identity through social activities such as parish feasts, Carnival, and football; the retention of family and communal networks; and memory and nostalgia, which are often deployed to retain a sense of belonging.

This sense of belonging can be particularly strong - one respondent, who lived outside Valletta for a number of years and has since returned, said: "You only make a mistake once - since I returned to live in Valletta, I will only be taken out of here when I'm dead." The same respondent reflected about how certain projects in Valletta have made the city more liveable, not less. These include the opening up and the pedestrianisation of open spaces such as St George's Square and Merchants Street.

Another observation was that while respondents conceded that criticism towards projects was often justified, at times the positive points are overlooked: "The Covered Market, for instance, opens on Sunday - prices are what they are, but at least there is the option. The old Market as I remember it had died - we tend to romanticise it a lot and we use nostalgia in a very shrewd manner. In reality, many *Beltin* had stopped buying from the Market. It couldn't have remained the way it was - perhaps there have been unwise excesses in the project, but sometimes we also gripe excessively too. Likewise, some people are nostalgic about the *Biččerija*, where the Valletta Design Cluster is in progress. However, residents were asking for something to be done, seeing that the area had become completely derelict and there were problems with garbage collection, vermin, and bugs." (Resident *Beltija*, 34, female)

Finally, difficulties are offset to some extent at least by a sense of resilience and adaptability that Valletta residents often display:

"Valletta is liveable because at the end of the day, people cope, we develop adaptation mechanisms." (Resident *Beltija*, 41, female)

"You learn to live with the difficulties, especially because there are a lot of things that one can enjoy about living in Valletta. We know how lucky we are to live here, and often we do not admit it and this is because we feel this city belongs to us, so we tend to fear that it is being taken away from us." (Resident *Beltija*, 34, female)

In the report presented in the previous year, it was proposed that the challenge was 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. Valletta resident author Josephine Burden, in the presentation referred to earlier, mentions two practices that "enable the aim of enabling citizens to live well. First, good neighbourliness, the extent to which design and action take account of people. And second, the extent to which public space, the streets, squares, parks, enables human interaction." These, together with the adaptability and pride that *Beltin* and other residents display towards their city, remain precious but underutilised resources in making Valletta a more liveable city.

Awareness and Accessibility of the Valletta 2018 Programme

The Valletta 2018 Programme included a collection of over 140 projects and 400 events, and all respondents interviewed this year could readily mention at least one or two Valletta 2018 events that they attended. Although often critical, many respondents claimed to find some events to be fun, interesting, or even moving.

As expected, large-scale events such as the Valletta 2018 Opening and Notte Bianca were the most frequently mentioned. The Opening was seen by many to be an impressive logistical feat, where about 110,000 people visited Valletta. The event was largely felt to be good, highly spectacular, pride-inducing, and largely accessible, although some said that they expected more originality. Notte Bianca was considered primarily

as an opportunity to explore spaces in Valletta that are not usually open to the public, indicating that Valletta itself as a city is considered to be part of the cultural offer; an idea which will be explored in further detail in the next subsection of this report. On the other hand, smaller events were occasionally mentioned by a few respondents, usually those of a higher educational background who were already frequently attending cultural performances prior to the European Capital of Culture. It is to be said, however, that these events had the possibility of reaching specific audiences and generating dialogue, as in the case of 'Tactile', which presented concealed sculptures "intended to be never seen", thus neutralising differences between people with visual impairments and those without (Valletta 2018 Foundation 2018). This project was mentioned favourably by some of the respondents with a disability.

This may indeed be to some extent an effect of the content of the Programme in itself, as was observed by a respondent who had followed the cultural offer very thoroughly: "There may have been too much of a focus on visible mega-events – and spectacle is important as it engages people in large numbers – but this is not enough. Then, on the other hand, there were many niche events which attracted the usual audiences who were already engaged with the cultural scene. The marketing of the Programme could have been done in a more targeted manner, and beyond that, there could have also been more involvement of the local community." (Resident *Beltija*, 34, female)

Such an approach was, however, limited primarily to two events that engaged the Valletta community as an integral part, namely *Il-Festa l-Kbira*, which brought together the four parish feasts in Valletta for the first time and *il-Hasla*, which was the culmination of the *Gewwa Barra* project led by Victor Jacono. This consisted of "a theatrical performance created and performed by the residents of Valletta, to share what it means to be a "Belti" with the audience" (Valletta 2018 Foundation, 2018).

The potential of community-based projects had been highlighted in the report presented in 2017, where it was noted that respondents did not generally have a cohesive understanding of the Valletta 2018 Programme. It was argued that this could be viewed as an opportunity to rethink the several ways in which Valletta 2018 could present itself to the public. Thinking through this perspective would lead to the undertaking of a more grassroots approach, which could be carried out chiefly through community-based projects, rather than emphasising the launch of a Programme in its entirety, which may have been inaccessible or unengaging for many.

A respondent who is a non-resident *Belti* and who is involved in the arts, explained his disappointment and that of others in the artistic community in that not many artists from Valletta were involved in the Programme. Regarding "*il-Hasla*", this respondent said "Oh yes! That was certainly an event that gave a voice to Valletta, but it felt like a voice in the wilderness as there were no other similar things going on."

Il-Festa l-Kbira received some criticism, especially by people who are part of the religious organisations who normally preside over the organisation of the *fešta*. Some of these saw this event as converting religious feasts into a spectacle. One person actively participating in this event said: "I actually don't like what's going on. These are feasts that have their place in the Catholic liturgical calendar. To remove them from their rightful place and turn this into a touristic spectacle is wrong – but I am here carrying the statue out of devotion to the saint."

However, while the core of the *fešta* is tied to religious devotion, these celebrations also have a strong social element, often negotiating the symbolic belonging of people to a locality and forming a strong part of their

identity (Boissevain 2013, Mitchell 2002). In fact, this event was largely acclaimed as a successful event and most respondents saw this as an interesting idea. In the case of respondents who are *Beltin*, a show of civic unity and a celebration of the communities within Valletta also emerged:

"Il-Festa l-Kbira is something positive because, for the first time in Malta, feasts which are normally divisive have become a show of unity. The narrative has been changed." (Non-resident *Belti*, 42, male)

"Il-Festa l-Kbira draws on tradition – almost everybody loves feasts, and although a lot of people say we fight over parish rivalries, we proved them wrong and we showed how Valletta can be completely united." (Resident *Belti*, 45, male)

As regards the main infrastructural projects of Valletta 2018, the Covered Market was, as in previous years, the one that generated the most diverse views. Given the centrality of the Market to Valletta's social fabric, this has already been discussed in the preceding subsection. However, it bears saying that while most respondents acknowledged that the Market had been very run-down and largely abandoned and in need of regeneration, there was a variety of opinions about the final product. Some looked at it as a tasteful revival of a historical building, while others saw the imposition of a supermarket model and a food court to be stifling and misguided. Others complained about the aesthetics, particularly the addition of another floor and a structure at the back of the Market which juts out on St Paul Street; the take-up of public space, especially with the area in front of the Market which can now be used only by customers; and the disturbance the Market causes to the surrounding areas due to delivery trucks, the generation of garbage, and other annoyances.

With regard to Strait Street, many respondents saw this as a place that was run-down and has now been revived. The tables outside created some concerns about reducing physical accessibility in an area where the terrain already poses problems to persons with mobility issues. Likewise, some respondents, generally Valletta residents, expressed concern about the impact of noise on people living in the area, as has been described in the previous subsection. However, on the other hand, several respondents also said that now they feel safe passing through Strait Street, and therefore the regeneration of this street has also made this area more accessible in a social sense.

One response, by Valletta artist Alfred Camilleri, is being quoted at length because of its depth, and because it provides a challenge to ensure that the Strait Street revival is not only about commercial activity, but that it also regenerates the memory of the social history of the place, especially its contribution to the arts scene in Malta: "George Cini has documented the collective memory of Strait Street in his excellent books. And yet, although we say we revived this street by promoting new establishments, there is no place that has been dedicated to remembering these memories. After all, what is Strait Street? Who are those spirits that move here? Who used to open and close these doors? This is not artificial nostalgia – it is our cultural identity. Valletta is the stone from which it is built, its people and the souls of those who came before and left something for those who would come after them."

The least visible of the infrastructural projects related to Valletta 2018 were the Valletta Design Cluster, which is still a work in progress and is furthermore situated in an area that is not frequently visited, and MUŻA, which only opened after the interviews for this report were conducted. These have been somewhat dealt with in the previous subsection. However, the most salient points with regard to MUŻA was that there was a strong hope, especially amongst respondents with a disability, that this project would be a beacon of accessibility. As was

described earlier, accessibility was indeed taken into consideration as a primary concern in the design of both the museum space itself as well as the content and its presentation.

With regard to the Valletta Design Cluster, most respondents felt that regeneration of the area was sorely needed, however, comments were limited because most respondents did not have a clear idea of this project. In one case, a respondent who was originally from the Old Abattoir area but has lived outside Valletta for about 40 years, said that the Valletta Design Cluster will be occupying a site that is part of Valletta's history, but that the project has not been planned to contribute anything specifically to Valletta-based organisations. This demonstrates that some tension may occur between Valletta's role as a national capital and as a place of local identity and memory. Nevertheless, it is noted that in this case, the Valletta Design Cluster project is designed to be a national project whilst working "in collaboration with the neighbouring community, by providing a platform for a Local Action agenda that empowers action directly by the community members to improve the quality of life in its shared common spaces" (Valletta 2018 Foundation 2015).

Indeed, in the aforementioned presentation, Josephine Burden selected the Valletta Design Cluster as a good example of both good neighbourliness and taking people into account: "I also know from my experience of the process that door-knocking, artist and resident workshops, street meetings, site interventions, and tours have featured prominently over the years since the project was announced. A genuine effort has been made to resettle the squatters who had set up home in the sometimes precarious building and to counter the inevitable gentrification of the area. Unlike *Is-Suq*, immediate neighbours appear to be on-side and look forward to the proposed open access roof garden and the possibility of finding artists on their doorsteps."

To conclude, it is important to note that while all respondents attended at least one Valletta 2018 event, only a few participated directly as active participants, or through community consultation. In these cases, respondents spoke of the Valletta 2018 project with considerably higher enthusiasm and pride. Conversely, when respondents were not involved, at times this also elicited a strong response of disappointment and exclusion. In Burden's words: "I have felt engaged and happy with the process and consider community consultation as one of the legacies along with the establishment of spaces for artists to co-create." The interviews conducted for this report fully support this sentiment, and therefore it is strongly recommended that any future cultural initiatives in Valletta or elsewhere consider community involvement not as an afterthought or as a fringe element, but as a touchstone of legacy generation.

The Legacy of Valletta 2018

It is perhaps ambitious to look into the future and attempt to anticipate what the legacy of Valletta 2018 will be, especially before the year is over. However, legacy is one of the primary concerns of every European Capital of Culture and was, furthermore, the theme of the fifth Valletta 2018 Foundation's annual international conference, which was held in October 2018 with the title of 'Sharing the Legacy'. In view of this, in this cycle of research, respondents were asked what sort of legacy they anticipate, or perhaps even wish for.

It needs to be clarified at the outset that there was no absolute consensus that there will be a legacy at all, or that one is even needed. One respondent from the Inner Harbour replied: "Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. Valletta 2018 is not like Independence Day or anything similar! There will be some legacy in terms of this year helping Valletta push for more commercial activity – albeit commerce and the uplift that Valletta has experienced did not emanate specifically from Valletta 2018, but from the Government's pro-business policies." (Respondent from the Inner Harbour area, 38, male)

Other respondents claimed that in their opinion, there will not be a legacy at all, or that they just cannot know if there will be one. Nevertheless, two major themes were common in respondents' replies, namely the increase in commercial activity and the regeneration of Valletta as a space.

In fact, virtually all respondents readily recognised that Valletta 2018, together with other factors, has generated a significant commercial buzz. However, more than in any other year, there appeared to be a common sentiment amongst most respondents that this business-oriented approach needs to be checked by a concern for local communities and retaining the character and liveability of the city.

The notions of "character" and history were mostly resorted to by people who are not from Valletta, such as one respondent who said: "Well, I hope it keeps going on like this, but we should not commercialise the place too much. The historical elements of Valletta must be preserved. There are spaces where these hotels and guesthouses can thrive, but we should steer away from over-commercialising the place." (Respondent with a disability, 33, male)

Some visitors to Valletta were concerned about overpricing in the city: "This will affect me negatively. Essentially, with more foot traffic going to Valletta, and more restaurants and bars and cafés opening, and prices going up due to good business periods, this will have a negative impact upon me as a frequent visitor of Valletta, as I will have to pay more when I visit." (Respondent from the Inner Harbour area, 38, male)

Others, however, saw this increased commercial activity as making the city more interesting: "Basically, Valletta is getting much more foot traffic, and you see a plethora of activity happening in Valletta. Valletta 2018 has contributed to making Valletta a place to be. There is more diversity as to where to spend time socially. This is a lasting change for sure, that if not brought about wholly by Valletta 2018, was certainly supported by the effort and the events." (Respondent with a disability, 28, male)

Another respondent stated: "Valletta is buzzing, it is getting more foot traffic, and more tourists will hit our capital city like never before. It is a capital city with a mix of business, history, culture, and entertainment. In such a small place, you get a microcosm of bigger cities so to speak. The dynamics, the layers are there. You get people from every stratum of society – it is quite heterogeneous. You get different hues and diverse backgrounds." (Respondent with a disability, 42, male)

Valletta residents had mixed views on this intensification of commercial activity. Some, such as one respondent who has close relatives who are considering relocating outside Valletta, because the increased rent is no longer affordable, were understandably cynical: "Valletta has become poorer in terms of demographics, and now we have the boutique hotels. Is this the legacy we want from Valletta 2018?" (Non-resident *Belti*, 42, male)

Others, such as a business owner from Valletta, welcome the activity that Valletta is attracting, but is cautious about the long-term future: "I don't know what will happen after 2018. I hope things either keep going the way they are or get even better. However, I am concerned at what will happen if tourism slows down drastically and we are stuck with a lot of vacant boutique hotels and tourist accommodation." (Resident *Belti*, 45, male)

Other respondents have emphasised that continuity must be maintained: "The promotion of the city needs to keep happening after Valletta 2018 is over. We need to keep pushing so that we get more tourists and promote spaces and places, like MUŻA and Castille Square. We cannot stop – we need to keep riding the

wave, building anticipation, and making sure we maximise the opportunities that we achieved through Valletta 2018.” (Respondent with a disability, 33, male)

Regarding the cultural offer, sentiments were generally positive about the possibility that these will maintain the desired continuity, as expressed by this respondent with a disability: “Yes, there will be a legacy as most of the activities were a success and I do believe that people will be willing to attend such activities in future, as has happened with Notte Bianca, where people who enjoyed this event kept attending regularly.” (Respondent with a disability, 28, male)

Valletta residents and non-resident *Beltin* tended to place great value on the concept of legacy and prioritise the impact on urban space more highly than the cultural programme. One respondent from Valletta said: “While I see many ways in which the Programme could have been better, the way in which Valletta’s spaces have changed is an achievement in itself. For Valletta as a platform, the result was overall positive.”

Some other respondents also echoed this sentiment, including this respondent from the Inner Harbour area: “The regeneration in itself is part of the legacy. We need to keep taking care of Valletta.” Another respondent who visits Valletta said that people are more prone to remember the projects related to restoration, “simply for the beauty of the restoration rather than for its inclusion in the Valletta 2018 Programme, which I do not believe had any impact on the cultural mentality of the population.”

Two respondents, both non-resident *Beltin*, individually used the same metaphor drawn from the context of the Maltese traditional *fešta* to explain this need to prioritise the city’s infrastructure. The analogy invoked was that of the bandstand or *pjanċier*. In Maltese *festi*, local brass bands give concerts on bandstands that are elaborate works of art, often including sculpture, metalwork, and painting. Prior to sitting down for the band’s repertoire, it is common for people to take time to also appreciate the beauty of the *pjanċier* as a work of art in itself. Both respondents felt that the city, in its role as the platform for a cultural offer, requires more investment so that much like the *pjanċier*, it could provide an enduring legacy that goes beyond the ephemerality of a programme of events.

Respondents with a disability almost unanimously expressed that their hopes that Valletta 2018 would make the city more accessible have not been fulfilled. Despite proving to be highly optimistic in previous years, the fact that most commercial establishments and many public buildings remain inaccessible has proven to be disappointing. “Most activities were not accessible. Accessibility was not taken seriously enough. The activities that were indeed accessible were so just because they happened to be outside. Very little effort was made to ensure that these events, with all the programme brimming with activities, would in effect be available for people like me.” (Respondent with a disability, 28, male)

Respondents with a disability also stated the following:

“They did not pay attention to the feedback we gave them through the channel of CRPD, or perhaps they did not give it too much weight. Of course, this is only my opinion, and it could be that attempts were made to make the events accessible. However, the end result is that most of the activities that were held indoors, as well as activities in Strait Street, were not accessible.” (Respondent with a disability, 28, male)

"There is still a lot that needs to be done. We get resistance when we ask for buildings to be made accessible - which is utter nonsense. We all ought to have equal opportunities to enjoy Valletta. Museums should all be equipped with scale models and replicas for us to be able to have a tactile experience. Also, information should be made accessible to all forms of disability, including simplified information for those who are intellectually challenged." (Respondent with a disability, 42, male)

Finally, respondents have demonstrated hope that a newly set up foundation, which intends to continue the work of the Valletta 2018 Foundation, can help to maintain a legacy and to cultivate the networks that have been formed:

"The Foundation that is being set up is a good thing for continuity, because there will be no gap for another couple of years...I don't think the current vibe will die down over the next year or two, but it all depends on the activity of the new foundation. If things are all left to the private sector it will be more difficult." (Visitor to Valletta, 42, male)

"I also hope that the agency that is being set up to take over from Valletta 2018 will maintain and nourish the networks that have been developed with the cultural sector, and that they will continue to involve people." (Expatriate Valletta resident, 71, female)

One respondent who attended some of the workshops organised by the Monitoring and Evaluation Team also emphasised the importance of consultation and involvement: "At the workshops held earlier this year at the King's Own Band Club we discussed several important topics. Also, we all agreed that what happens beyond 2018 is important. How are we going to keep up the momentum? How can we keep promoting such a dynamic place, and all that Valletta has come to signify? We have to keep promoting innovation and accessibility." (Respondent with a disability, 42, male)

To conclude this reflection upon the legacy that Valletta 2018 may have, it is being emphasised that this moment needs to be seen as an opportunity. As one respondent put it, "the seed has been sown" (*iż-żerriegħa nżergħat*). To nurture it means to keep up the momentum, enhancing Valletta not only as a platform for both cultural and commercial activity, but also ensuring that the capital remains both a liveable and a lived-in city, while fostering networking, research, consultation, and dialogue.

CONCLUSIONS & WAY FORWARD

As in previous years, this research project has opted to take a polyvocal approach, allowing a wide variety of perspectives, perceptions, and opinions to be documented and compared. That there is such a diversity of views and experiences, and even the sheer amount of criticism that has been encountered, can be welcomed as a sign of engagement or, at the very least, interest in Valletta and in Valletta 2018. It is also a direct result of the openness that a qualitative, semi-structured interview can allow for.

One of the overarching concerns was that of accessibility, where Valletta remains largely inaccessible to people with a disability, impairments, and mobility issues. MUŻA can be seen as an example of good practice in ensuring that not only the structure, but also the cultural offer are presented in a way that is inclusive and accessible.

The commercial activity which has been catalysed, at least in part, by Valletta 2018 has been largely welcome, especially by small business owners in Valletta. However, efforts to reduce disturbance to Valletta residents are sorely needed. Another concern for residents, especially those in private rental accommodation, is the possibility of being uprooted from their own communities. The newly launched White Paper on the Rental Market hopefully brings light to this situation – however, it is noted that if residents are being forced to move out, this will have a negative impact on their personal lives and on the vibrancy and the social fabric of the city.

With regard to programming, it has been noted that the general view has been positive, but that more community-based events could have been included. It is hoped that the success of the two main projects that directly involved the Valletta community, namely *il-Festa l-Kbira* and *Ġewwa Barra*, should encourage stronger investment in similar initiatives.

Finally, there is potential for Valletta 2018 to leave an enduring legacy. However, a focus on programming alone cannot achieve this, and an important part of creating such a legacy needs to be fulfilled by enhancing urban infrastructure and liveability, as well as fostering networking, research, consultation, and dialogue.

WAY FORWARD

The research conducted from 2015 to the present year will feed into a combined report, which will be submitted shortly to the Valletta 2018 Foundation. This report will include the main insights obtained throughout the four year period of research, together with policy considerations and recommendations.