



Valletta Museums in the Community

(paper)

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Our capital city, Valletta, is the venue of some of Malta's top museums and heritage sites of cultural significance. These sites of memory are one of the country's prime assets at the service of the tourism sector. Indeed, these key tourist attractions, are well-known and also publicised by the Malta Tourism Authority worldwide. I have come to realise that in spite of these efforts to publicise most of these are, as yet, paradoxically unknown to Valletta's residents. Recent local community initiatives, jointly undertaken with Valletta Local Council, brought Valletta residents to visit museums for the first time ever. The recent initiative, *Naqsam l-MUŻA*, jointly undertaken with Valletta 2018 foundation, also brought the MUŻA project, the new national-community art museum and one of Valletta 2018 flagship projects for Malta's European Capital of Culture Title, and the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts in touch with the community. Ten Valletta residents, purposely chosen to represent the community's varied districts and identities, were invited to choose artworks which they also spoke about and described, also highlighting the reasons behind their choice which was later displayed in the streets in visual form accompanied by the thoughts of each participant. Other projects have sought to engage with Valletta's communities in varied ways but these are by and large sporadic and uneven.

These initiatives may be highlighting the need, long felt, to engage with Valletta's community; caught between upper Valletta, perceived to be the place where things happen, and lower Valletta, where what happens is perceived to be not so frequent. This may not be entirely correct, given that the latest findings by the National Statistics Office suggest that the city's cultural profile has improved and that the city has become a centre of activity. How and to what extent the residents engage with these initiatives remains to be better understood although museums and heritage sites are probably not prime motivators. Two reasons may account for this lack of interface. The first concerns location. Valletta's key museums and heritage sites are within the footprint of upper Valletta, on the main thoroughfares and also on the periphery. They are not within direct reach or adjacent to the main community areas. The second concerns status and perceptions. Valletta's museums and heritage sites have been oftentimes understood to be exclusive, oftentimes dogmatic and endorsing official knowledge. This is also partly due to the history of the Maltese museum institution which was conceived in a top-down approach, focused on the conservation and preservation of Malta's cultural heritage and coinciding with Malta's aspirations to become a nation-state. This is also one of the guiding values for Malta's curatorial profession, still unrecognised even within Malta's legal structures. Outreach has, indeed, improved over the past years; cultural heritage management too. The question beckons - Why are Valletta's museums and heritage sites still seemingly detached from Valletta's community? Is a strong dialectic between museums and the Valletta community a possible achievement in the immediate future?

These questions have a wider context in the ways and means how the museum institution in particular is expected to evolve and develop in the foreseeable future. I choose to quote two particular sources out of a substantial corpus of studies and research.



The first source refers to the Austrian artist, curator and theoretician Peter Weibel who suggests one possible scenario in his study *The Museum of the Future* published in 2006:

“The museum of the future lives from the recognition that it is a public instrument of communication. Therefore, in the future, critical co-operation between museum operators and their visitors will be necessary, in order to bring about the past, present and future in the first place. Visitors must be freed from their passive role as consumers and encouraged to become active and interactive agents. The museum becomes a stage for the visitor – a place of options for activity and interactivity. In return, the museum elevates itself from a place of and for art to the level of art itself”.

A recent source is the 2016 issue of *Trendswatch*, published annually by the American Alliance of Museums, summarising emerging trends. Various contributions underpin the potential of cultural institutions, particularly museums, to become a community hub. *Trendswatch* also suggests that museums consider ‘the opportunity (many consider it an obligation) to play a role in community dialogue: defusing, healing, rebuilding.’ Such role may concern ‘collecting and exhibiting artefacts and oral histories that document conflict and calls for social change.’ and ‘bringing together people of good will to find common ground on contentious issues.’

Both authoritative sources are broadly indicative of an emerging trend. Indeed, the 21st century museum is slowly evolving into a community space. Education and outreach projects are just the point of departure, albeit important, of this growing trend concerned much more with co-creation and participatory governance. This is no mean feat, and in our case there are, as yet, unknowns which need to be better understood, prior to embarking on necessary policy development. I shall summarily refer to two of these requirements; necessary to rethink and develop pro-community heritage management models, with particular reference to Valletta.

The first concerns Valletta’s demographic profile. Malta’s capital city has always been cosmopolitan ever since its foundation 450 years ago. The city’s demographics have been, historically, in constant flux although in varied and uneven ways. This is also the backdrop history to contemporary Valletta and the ways and means how the community continues to change, evolve and seemingly become increasingly international. Valletta is far from being an exception. Indeed, communities all over the globe are becoming more than ever fluid and multi-cultural. Members often acknowledge more than one place as ‘home’ and, in spite of perceived expectations that communities hold shared values, cultural identities are becoming increasingly broad, varied and subject to constant shifts. This is also the case of Valletta’s community. Valletta’s museums and heritage sites have to increasingly engage with a community which is in constant flux and includes not only the ‘traditional’ locals from the various parishes and districts, but also a seemingly increasing number of expatriates. The challenge ahead concerns the extent to which an individual’s cultural heritage is represented within the mainstream cultural arena, the opportunities to participate in culture production that an individual has and the opportunity to enjoy culture, including one’s own culture. Do we have a clear picture of Valletta’s demographics? Not probable.

The second concerns the lack of information about the current visitor profile of Valletta’s museums and heritage sites which should serve the purpose of our point of departure as we develop pro-community heritage management models. The need to quantify visitor numbers is clearly acknowledged, although

the preferences, choices and tastes of the audiences to Valletta's museums and heritage sites is still, by and large, based on perceptions. The ways and means how audiences participate in the heritage experience also gets very little attention. Indeed, this needs to be much better understood for participatory governance to happen. We still lack most of this necessary data.

Valletta's museums and heritage sites hold potential to become public spaces where collections become resources to inspire rather than commodities to admire. Pro-community heritage management models would acknowledge collections and publics as having equal value and museums recognised as a place where debate and discussion happens through collections and cultural heritage which, in turn, acquires new meanings and a renewed significance for today's communities. Social cohesion is, indeed, one of the significant challenges ahead as an increasingly varied cultural diversity becomes even more detached from the museum's institutional narrative. The museum can become a tool for social cohesion and this can also be the case for Valletta.

This vision would not run counter to the national remit and aspirations of Valletta's museums and heritage sites. For a country the size of Malta, with a population slightly over 400,000, the nation-state paradigm can be neither an imagined community nor a neatly stratified society. There is no issue with museums holding on to the trappings of a nation-state cultural institution although reforms, particularly in both mission and vision of some, are necessary. In a sense, Malta can be recognised as a community in its own right albeit a complex and surprisingly multicultural one. The need for critical co-operation between cultural institutions and their publics, the necessity to move away from passive roles and embrace active and engaging participatory experiences, would still hold. What we should aspire to change is where this participatory process begins. The active engagement between Valletta's community and its cultural institutions should be the point of departure, the test bed for developing pro-community heritage management tools for Valletta's museums and heritage sites.

The challenge does not concern whether this is at all possible. It rather concerns the risk of adopting models developed elsewhere, or generic theoretical models that might work with one community but fail miserably with another. Home-grown pro-community heritage management models can help transform museums and heritage sites into the community's culture spaces where collections are acknowledged as resources rather than commodities holding values ascribed by art markets.

Nina Simon's concluding remarks in her 'The participatory Museum' serves the purpose of a fitting conclusion

'I dream of a comparable future institution that is wholly participatory, one that uses participatory engagement as the vehicle for visitor experiences. Imagine a place where visitors and staff members share their personal interests and skills with each other. A place where each person's actions are networked with those of others into cumulative and shifting content for display, sharing, and remix. A place where people discuss the objects on display with friends and strangers, sharing diverse stories and interpretations. A place where people are invited on an ongoing basis to contribute, to collaborate, to co-create, and to co-opt the experiences and content in a designed, intentional environment. A place where communities and staff members measure impact together. A place that gets better the more people use it.'

This too, is my vision for Valletta's museums and heritage sites.