

Conservation issues
Of two fortified historic towns and World Heritage Sites:
Rhodes and Valletta¹

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*This paper was presented at the
5th Heritage Forum of Central Europe; Heritage and Environment,
International Cultural Centre, Krakow, Poland
20 September 2019*

Abstract: The paper compares two remarkable fortified historic towns namely Rhodes Town (Rhodes) and Valletta (Malta). In history the two cities were the seats of the Knights of St. John, a formidable military force in the Mediterranean (1306 to 1522 and 1530 to 1798, respectively). Both still possess a rich urban heritage including extensive fortifications. Both are listed as World Heritage Sites. Both are dynamic urban centres and important tourist destinations. The paper compares the similarities and differences on matters of planning and conservation. In particular it will consider to what extent conservation initiatives enable the two cities to cope with modern-day urban and tourism pressures.

1. Introduction

Urban areas are dynamic and are subject to change. This also applies to historic areas. The urban conservation processes direct change to ensure the appropriate maintenance and management of a historic area for the purpose of sustaining and enhancing its significance.

Approaches to urban conservation have changed over the years. There were times, mostly before the 1960s, when the preservation of historic buildings was seen to be a moral cultural imperative, without any consideration of wider economic and social priorities. Today urban conservation

¹ To cite this paper: Ebejer, J & Dimelli, D. (2019) Conservation issues of two fortified historic towns and World Heritage Sites: Rhodes and Valletta. Conference paper at 5th Heritage Forum of Central Europe, International Cultural centre, Krakow Poland. 19-20 September.

places more emphasis on the improvement of residents' quality of life and the support of economic development. The latter in particular requires greater emphasis on making historic urban areas more attractive for tourists, as well as for residents.

In this paper we propose a model that represents the process of a historic area conservation. At the heart of the model are the morphological and social elements that shape the historic area namely the area's liveability, the vitality of its urban spaces and the urban accessibility to and within the area. These elements are impinged upon by the planning framework and the methods of financing for interventions. Tourism and leisure activity is treated as the outcome of the conservation process.

In sections 4, 5 and 6, the model is applied to Rhodes Town and Valletta.

The paper will focus on the issues regarding planning and management of two historic centers that have some common characteristics. They were constructed hundreds of years ago by the Knights of the Order of St. John. Both are listed as World Heritage Sites. They both function as tourism attractors and face strong pressures including less long term residents. Both still possess a rich urban heritage including extensive fortifications. In both cases, residents are in some way effected by the tourism activity. The difference between Rhodes and Valletta is that they are regulated by different planning regimes and are subject to different funding mechanisms.

2. Approaches to urban conservation

Urbanization, urban development, the changing socio-economic role of cities and the changing perception of urban heritage values are the processes that have an impact on the practice of urban conservation. These processes create a complex and dynamic environment with growing interrelationships and a widening circle of stakeholder groups, often with conflicting interests. Today more than ever, it is essential to address the issue of urban conservation in ways that reflect the great diversity of cultural traditions in different societies.

Historic centres started being subject to some form of planning since the second half of the 19th century. Many years later, by the 1950's decade, historic cities were defined as areas of cultural heritage because of the complexity of their dual nature. This nature resulted from the symbolic and artistic value of buildings, as well as from the exposure to constant transition and substitution in order to adjust to their current role. Until the end of the 20th century, the idea of protecting historic buildings in the form of conservation, preservation, adaptive reuse or restoration was not given the same importance as new development.²

Conservation of historic city centres and urban regeneration contribute largely towards upgrading environmental quality, thus serving as a fundamental catalyst for change. Today, according to the modern principles, urban conservation must be included in all planning scales, from regional to architectural. At the same time urban regeneration should not be fragmental but should be part of a wider plan which addresses the urban issue in its totality. Development projects taking place in historic districts tend to attract a variety of creative economic activities and competition, thus encouraging both new inhabitants and visitors to revisit and rediscover

² Shahrul Yani Said, *Modern development in historic cities: The case study of the Historic City of Malacca*. York: University of York, 2007.

these restored neighbourhoods of their cities. Moreover, upgrading the physical built environment, social fabric and urban spaces within the historical urban structure all contribute towards increasing their adoption as places for public congregation and activity. This consequently increases social interaction and cohesion between citizens. Furthermore, conservation and regeneration of historic city centres tend to re-affirm residents' feelings of identity and sense of belonging.

Demolition for sanitation and security had been an established practice since the nineteenth century in Europe and in many other regions of the world. In this period the post war policies for reconstruction showed little interest in conservation, as the urgent needs for new housing were better served by new constructions. In the 1950s, the main policies for historic centres conservation, encouraged the replacement of the existing historic buildings with new ones. By that period the planning principles focused on the integration of aesthetic, functional and symbolic elements of the city by interventions that attempted to discontinue the city's historic process which would be based on the new planning principles. These principles were: the replacement of uses that degraded the urban environment with other new uses, as well as the re-organization of the road network to facilitate car use. In the next decades policies supported small scale conservation interventions that were financed by the private sector. By that time, policies focused on the legislative and financing system which encouraged creating new constructions instead of supporting the existing historic ones.

Clear principles of intervention were developed that became accepted practice in architectural conservation. The emphasis was on the sanctity of authentic historic fabric and the custodianship of buildings for future generations.³ It was also a time when old buildings were often regarded by public authorities as an obstacle rather than an aid to regeneration.

Through time, architects and planners believed that the modern 'dream' of managing and controlling urban processes was a utopia and tried to find other ways for the interpretation of the city's form. The contrast between the conservation of the existing city and the promotion of new design was often a source of debate amongst architects, developers and public institutions⁴.

In the new approaches that have gained ground at the beginning of the twenty first century the main characteristic is the growing awareness of the need to ensure sustainability of the built environments and planning processes. Two different directions are developed regarding the historic city. The first approach is based on the tradition of planning and management of the city as a built form of material culture, while the second approach is based on the meaning of place. These two approaches have in common the search for a new integration of tradition and modernity, of the built and the non -built environment.⁵

³ John Pendlebury, "Conservation and Regeneration: Complementary or Conflicting Processes? The Case of Grainger Town, Newcastle upon Tyne." [in:] *Planning Practice & Research*, vol. 17 no.2 (2002), p. 145-158.

⁴ Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance." [in:] *The Anti - Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Hal Foster (ed.), Washington : Bay Press, (1983), p.16-30.

⁵ Francesco Bandarin, "Towards a New Standard Setting Instrument for Managing the Historic Urban Landscape" [in:] *Conservation in Changing Societies: Heritage and Development*. Raymond Lemaire Centre: Leuven, Belgium, (2006) p.27-36.

Historic centres are today threatened both by human activities and natural disasters. Modern conservation policies must today focus on social, economic and environmental development.⁶ The above will be achieved with the new planning approach which has reversed the existing top-down process and is focusing on decisions that are the result of ‘bottom-up’ procedures. Historic urban conservation should be based on a governance model which will develop strategies and promote synergies between stakeholders, institutions and residents so that through participatory processes the cultural heritage can become a common consciousness. Conservation plans must identify and protect the elements that contribute to the values of the historic towns, as well as the components that enrich and demonstrate their uniqueness.⁷

Historic areas must be considered in their totality. Although through the years there have been many different approaches for their conservation, there are no certain rules applicable to the guidance for planning historic areas. On the contrary there are certain strategies regarding not only urban form and historic fabric but social cohesion and economic development.

Urban conservation cannot be considered in a vacuum. The process of conservation is closely linked to the overall context within which it takes place. A discussion on conservation of a historic area requires a holistic approach with many different aspects including planning and design processes and the individual and social perceptions of heritage.⁸

It is self-evident that the spatial form of a historic area dictates planning and adherence to the existing traditional morphology, thus avoiding drastic changes and interruptions in the continuity of the urban fabric.⁹ It is also to be expected that the traditional uses continue functioning as they constitute elements of a historic area’s identity. Regeneration often brings about gentrification. As much as possible the trend towards gentrification needs to be controlled to avoid the loss of the historic area’s identity. Planning should ensure both the development of a better quality of life for residents through the strengthening of the use of the dwelling and simultaneously increase the attractiveness of tourists in order to contribute to economic growth.

3. Conservation and regeneration

Conservation and regeneration have, in the last two decades, often come to be presented as largely complementary processes.

There are many examples of urban regeneration projects which included the conservation of one or more historic buildings. Patrick Geddes¹⁰ argued that the city is an organism in evolution, where the old co-exists with the new. He believed cities must be designed according to both their morphological and their social characteristics and that fragmented interventions in specific city’s parts should be avoided. Such conservation almost inevitably involves the adaptation of

⁶ Jokilehto, Jukka. "Management of Sustainable Change in Historic Urban Areas." [in:] *Conservation and Urban Sustainable Development*, SM Zancheti, Ed. Recife, Brazil: Centro de Conservacao 1999, pp. 61-68.

⁷ Ron van Oers, "Towards new international guidelines for the conservation of historic urban landscapes", [in:] *City Time*, vol. 3, (2008), p. 43–51.

⁸ Despina Dimelli, "Modern Conservation Principles and Their Application in Mediterranean Historic Centres - The Case of Valletta," [in:] *Heritage*, vol. 2 (2019) p. 787 -796. doi:10.3390/heritage2010051.

⁹ Francesco Bandarin and Ron van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing Heritage in an Urban Century*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

¹⁰ Volker M. Welter, *Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002.

the historic building for a modern-day use, one for which it was not originally intended. The inclusion of historic buildings is perceived to add quality and place distinctiveness to the regeneration schemes.¹¹

But although conservation and regeneration are often portrayed as being in synergy with each other, there are however underlying tensions between the two. First, there are different views to what constitutes valid conservation. Conservationists have a more purist view and would argue that major alterations and demolition are not acceptable in any circumstance. It is not uncommon for conservationists to be made deeply uncomfortable by transformations of historic buildings in regeneration schemes. On the other hand, some urban planners and place marketers would argue that demolition and major alterations of historic buildings should be actively considered if it will improve the feasibility of the urban regeneration scheme.

Ultimately they would argue, the long-term viability of the historic buildings are dependent on having a successful urban regeneration. A second source of tension between conservation and regeneration is the scepticism in the property sector over the importance placed upon conservation policy objectives.¹² Often, the construction sector places pressure on legislators and urban planners towards a planning system that is more amenable to interventions on historic buildings.

In an interesting study, Ashworth and Tunbridge¹³ explore the different approaches to urban heritage as adopted in the City Gate project, Valletta. The project, completed in 2015, consisted of three parts namely the City Gate itself, the new Parliament building and an open air performance space in the opera house ruins. On the one hand, the project was an act of preservation. The fortification walls, ditches and cavaliers were carefully preserved including the removal of some incongruous elements added in recent times. The Opera House ruins were also preserved and retained to be appreciated as ruins, with the internal space adapted for open-air theatre and musical performances. On the other hand, a dominant element of the City Gate project was the construction of a large conspicuous contemporary style parliament building. The new building is a reflection of today's architecture, even if the height and bulk are broadly compatible with the historic skyline. Apart from physical buildings and structures, a central feature to the project was the creation of new urban spaces within and around the buildings. Ashworth and Tunbridge¹⁴ describe it as:

“Different aspects of the site have been treated in a range of quite different and even seemingly contradictory ways, yet with the intention of shaping an overriding coherence of the whole ensemble. Thus the preservation of structures and their ruins, the replacement of missing elements, symbolic reconstruction, demolition, the creation of a remodelled public space, the reuse of historic structures and the insertion of an uncompromisingly contemporary new building, are all evident in close juxtaposition.”

¹¹ John Pendlebury, “Conservation and Regeneration: Complementary or Conflicting Processes? The Case of Grainger Town, Newcastle upon Tyne.” [in:] *Planning Practice & Research*, vol. 17 no.2 (2002), p. 145-158.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Greg Ashworth and John Tunbridge, “Multiple approaches to heritage in urban regeneration: the case of City Gate, Valletta,” [in:] *Journal of Urban Design*, vol. 22 (2017), p. 494-501.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 495.

4. A tale of two cities: The planning and financing of urban conservation of Rhodes and Valletta

Rhodes

The city of Rhodes is the capital of the Dodecanese which is a Greek archipelago. The city has a population of around 50,000 (2011 census) whereas the medieval city is inhabited by 2,000 people. The medieval city is a popular tourist attraction. Tourists typically combine a visit to the historic city with a visit to the sandy beaches of the rest of the island. The island was occupied by the Knights of St John who had lost their last stronghold in Palestine in 1291. They transformed the island capital into a fortified city able to withstand sieges as happened in 1444 and then again in 1480. Rhodes finally fell to the Ottomans in 1522 after a six-month siege.

The medieval city is located within a 4 km-long wall. Originally separated from the lower town by a fortified wall, the high town was entirely built by the Knights. The Order was organized into seven “tongues”, each having its own zone. The zones of the tongues of Italy, France, Spain and Provence lined the principal east-west axis, commonly referred to as Street of the Knights. The Street is lined with fine testimonies to Gothic urbanism. The lower town is almost as dense with monuments as the high town. In 1522, with a population of 5,000, the city had many churches, some of Byzantine construction. Throughout the years, the number of palaces and charitable foundations multiplied in the south-southeast area. The fortified town of Rhodes exerted an influence throughout the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Middle Ages. Its history and development up to 1912 has resulted in the addition of valuable Islamic monuments, such as mosques, baths and houses.

The medieval city of Rhodes maintains the architectural character and the urban organization of a medieval city as well as its primary building materials. The alterations to the fortification walls and the monuments within the city during the Ottoman period did not harm at all the character of the historical settlement and are evidence of the historic layering of the property. The Italian occupation after 1912 left a strong imprint on the urban landscape of Rhodes, with reconstructions of some of the major buildings.

During the 20th century the area was divided into a commercial zone with public facilities, while the rest of the area was residential. Since 1980 this status changed. The population of the area was gradually decreasing. The population reduction was mainly caused by the downgraded built environment, the lack of public space and infrastructures as well as by the tourism exploitation.

Today the historic city of Rhodes is divided in two zones. The south area has downgraded streetscapes, intense population reduction and social segregation. The north zone is completely different as it concentrates commercial and recreation activities and intense use during summer. In winter the north is empty as most of the enterprises are closed. This north zone has the highest land prices and it attracts tourism investments.

The first attempt of the Greek State for the conservation and the regeneration of the historic center of Rhodes took place in 1985 with a plan that focused simultaneously on conservation and regeneration. It defined zones for excavation, rules for historic buildings protection and at the same time, it defined the allocation of infrastructures and social facilities for the improvement of the quality of life of the area’s inhabitants. This plan was criticized as it failed to control land uses, tourism carrying capacity and public space issues. Tourism was developing at a fast rate

and this was making residents leave the medieval centre as it was more profitable for properties to be used as hotels. This fact of population reduction and the downgraded cultural monuments of the area due to tourism exploitation became the area's major issues that needed to be addressed.

In 2012 a new plan that was proposed focused on the above issues. It proposed public facilities, traffic reduction and conservation of monuments in order to make Rhodes' historic center liveable again. The plan defined three zones in the historic center, and it permitted the change of residences to shops. It also set restrictions for the recreation facilities as it defined their working hours in order to control the noise.

The plan has not been implemented because of lack of funding. In spite of constant pressures for tourism development, there are no efforts to control land uses nor to protect residential amenity.

Most of the properties in the historic centre belong to the Greek State, to the Municipality of Rhodes and to the Hebrew community. Very few properties are in private ownership. Properties owned by the Greek state are in a poor state or even dilapidated due to lack of funding. Some properties are illegally occupied by citizens. Such a situation makes any effort for regeneration very difficult.

Residential properties are not well maintained. This contrasts with the well conserved properties that are used for tourism. The Greek state has not dedicated any funding for regeneration. Efforts of the municipality are limited to small scale works and the maintenance of the existing infrastructures. On the other hand, developers are investing in the commercial area as demand for property increases and property values continue to rise.

Valletta

Valletta is the political and administrative capital of Malta, a small Mediterranean island 100 kilometres south of Sicily. It is a fortified historic city with extensive urban heritage. During the day it is full of life and activity, with innumerable offices, shops, cafes, restaurants, markets and sites to visit. It is the home of Malta's main cultural venues. In Malta it is commonly referred to as the City ('il-Belt'). In spite of its small size with a population of just 6,500, Valletta is home to several parishes, each of which is the centre of community life.¹⁵

The building of Valletta began in earnest in 1566, in the immediate aftermath of the Great Siege. At the time, Malta was an outpost defending the south flank of Europe. The Great Siege was an important historical event because of which the threat of invasion of Europe's south receded.

The plan was for a gridiron pattern of rectilinear building blocks and parallel streets. The topography was very uneven with a high ridge along its middle and steep slopes towards the shoreline. Levelling off the ground was considered, but time and technical constraints made this impractical. The failure to alter the uneven topography resulted in flights of stairs along the gridiron layout. Because of the City's location on a peninsula, in between two natural harbours, the sea is visible from most parts of the City, even from the inner streets.

¹⁵ John Ebejer, "Urban heritage and cultural tourism development: a case study of Valletta's role in Malta's tourism", *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, vol. 17(3), (2019), p. 306-320.

Valletta was built as the capital and military stronghold for the Knights of the Order of St. John. This religious and military Order controlled the Islands for 258 years. The fortifications surrounding the City are impressive both for their extent as well as for their height. The Order embellished it with many administrative, residential, cultural and religious buildings, some of which are impressive examples of Baroque architecture. Valletta's streetscapes are characterised by distinctive timber balconies and extensive use of Maltese stone. The urban fabric of Valletta communicates a Maltese identity as well as an international one¹⁶. The form of the town and its fortifications together with the meanings and associations are vital contributors to Valletta's sense of place.

Valletta's grid-iron street layout was based on the utopia of new town planning concepts that were in vogue in the mid-sixteenth century. Torpiano¹⁷ refers to Valletta as a beautiful city, and to its abundance of interesting public urban spaces, many of which were designed with people in mind. He notes that there are many places "where the play of light and shade creates interest, where change in scale, from the restrained to the monumental, creates surprise and delight. There are many spaces for people to discover and enjoy."

In 1992, Malta's planning system was overhauled with the enactment of the Development Planning Act that set up appropriate procedures for planning policy formulation and development control. Decisions on development applications were taken by independent boards on the basis of approved planning policy. Concurrently the Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands was approved by Parliament. The Structure Plan set up an essential planning policy framework that included measures for the protection of urban heritage. The new planning legislation provided for the scheduling of buildings and areas on the basis of their historical, architectural, archaeological, ecological or landscape value.¹⁸

Valletta was designated an Urban Conservation Area in 1995¹⁹ which in essence signifies that all buildings are Scheduled Level 3 and are therefore considered of historical value and worthy of conservation. Over the years other buildings in Valletta were Scheduled Level 2 or Level 1, depending on their historical and cultural significance.

In 2002 the Grand Harbour Local Plan was approved. The Plan provided detailed policies for localities in the Grand harbour area including Valletta. The Plan supported the regeneration of the City's urban fabric and the reinforcement of Valletta's functions as the capital, and as a residential, commercial and tourism centre. The main elements of the Local Plan strategy was to encourage housing improvement, urban regeneration and enhancement of urban spaces²⁰.

¹⁶ Andrew Smith and John Ebejer, "Outward versus inward orientation of island capitals: the case of Valletta," [in:] *Current Issues in Tourism*, vol. 15, no. 1-2 (2012), p. 137-152.

¹⁷ Alex Torpiano, "Spaces for People: Lessons from Valletta" [in:] Proceedings of Valletta Alive Foundation Seminar: Valletta Beyond 2020, John Ebejer (ed.) Valletta Alive Foundation, (2016), p. 9 (4-18).

<https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/17857> (access: 2 December 2019).

¹⁸ John Ebejer, "Baptism of fire: the first nine years of Malta's new planning system", [in:] *Planning*, vol. 22 (2002), p. 26.

¹⁹ Planning Authority "A Strategy for Valletta; Public Consultation Draft, 2016, https://meae.gov.mt/en/public_consultations/opm/documents/a%20strategy%20for%20valletta%20-%20a%20public%20consultation%20draft.pdf (access: 2 December 2019).

²⁰ Planning Authority (Malta), "Grand Harbour Local Plan: Area Policies", 2002, <https://www.pa.org.mt/en/local-plan-details/file.aspx?f=803> (access: 2 December 2019).

In 2005, the legal and planning framework for urban conservation was further strengthened with the Cultural Heritage Act that provided for the setting up of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage. It became a legal requirement that all applications relating to historic properties were to be reviewed by the new office.

Urban conservation requires investment and management. In the last two decades numerous conservation projects were carried out in Valletta and in other historic localities by the Restoration Unit, which is a government agency forming part of the Works Department. Major regeneration projects were entrusted to the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation whose projects included City Gate and the restoration and reuse of Fort St. Elmo. Another agency was the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee that was responsible for small scale restoration projects of public historic buildings. It also provided funds to property owners for the restoration of timber balconies, a scheme that was subsequently developed for restoration of historic facades of private houses in Valletta.

In recent years, the planning system in Malta has been greatly weakened with revised legislation in 2016 that virtually removed all autonomy of the Planning Authority, thus making it increasingly subject to the pressures of politicians. Moreover the Structure Plan was replaced with the Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (commonly referred to as SPED) approved by Parliament in 2015. This was a meagre document with a vague wish list subject to wide interpretations. A weakened planning system signifies weakened protection for urban heritage, including Valletta.

The World Heritage Site listing brings with it responsibilities on the state, responsibilities that are monitored by the UNESCO Committee. In 2009, the Committee requested clarifications from the Maltese authorities on the WHS site boundary, buffer zones and the policies to protect the Valletta skyline.

Prior to 2006, Valletta was very low in the list of priorities of successive governments. Other than minor restoration works, there was very little investment in projects. The lack of public investment was mirrored by a lack of private investment in privately owned properties, including historic ones. This created a gradual downward spiral and increased dilapidation in many parts of Valletta.²¹

In the past two decades there was significant public investment with a range of projects. These including the restoration and reuse of historic properties (such as Fort St. Elmo and the new Fortifications Interactive Centre). There were also investments in cultural projects, in the enhancement of public spaces including extensive pedestrianisation, and in the improvement of transport accessibility to Valletta.²² The most significant regeneration investment was the City Gate project, including a new parliament building. Public investment generated renewed interest from the private sector in Valletta, resulting in various investments in, tourism accommodation and catering, as well as residential properties.

²¹ John Ebejer, "The quality of urban spaces in Valletta and their relevance to tourism". Msida (Malta): University of Malta (2013), <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar//handle/123456789/14832> (access: 2 December 2019).

²² Ibidem.

5. Rhodes and Valletta: The morphological and social framework, liveability, urban vitality and accessibility

A central element in urban regeneration is the ability of an urban area to retain existing residents and attract new ones. New residents bring much needed investment into a historic area. Properties which would otherwise decay are restored and brought back into use. Regeneration also means making an area more liveable.

For any urban area to function effectively, it needs to be easily accessible by means of both public and private transport. This is also applicable to historic areas. Conservation of a historic building and areas often involves the conversion to new uses. The conserved building and its new uses can only be successful if people can get to them without undue difficulty. In historic areas vehicle access is often problematic because of narrow streets. Parking provision is normally limited because of restricted urban spaces and the need to dedicate spaces to pedestrians. Restricting vehicle access into historic areas is also necessary for conservation purposes. Cars pollute the air and dirty the facades resulting in increased rates of deterioration. Moreover, the physical presence of cars, whether parked or in motion, detract from the historic value of a space and makes it more difficult for locals and tourists to appreciate the historic context. A suitable approach would be to provide public and private transport access to the periphery of the historic area and then rely on walking as a mode of transport within the historic area itself.

Rhodes

The population of the historic centre of Rhodes within the fortification walls has declined steadily over the past half century. From a population of 7,500 in 1961, it dropped to 4,500 in 1991 and then dropped further to 2,000 in 2011. Tourism is the main cause for the continued decline of population. This happens for two reasons. First, tourism activity cause significant noise and traffic congestion in the historic area. Residents who are renting property would prefer to move out and rent in some other location away from the tourist areas. Second, for property owners, commercial and leisure uses are much more profitable than residential. In the tourist parts of the historic area, the value of property and the rents are much higher than elsewhere making it less affordable for new residents to move in. The lack of social and public infrastructure further exacerbates the problem of population decline. The historic centre now functions as a monument that is subject to activities that seek maximum commercial exploitation.

Between the summer and winter, the vibrancy of Rhodes' urban spaces is very different. In the summer, urban spaces are vibrant and at times these become excessively crowded. On the other hand, the urban spaces can be very quiet in the winter. The uses in and around an urban space define to a large degree the area's vitality. The historic of the city is an area that 'over-functions' during summer and 'under-functions' during winter.

In the summer, the presence of artists, musicians and street salesmen makes the area lively, including in the evenings after the shops close. In the daytime these combine with the small-scale traditional shops that put out their merchandise onto the public space. Moreover in the summer cultural events take place in the moats adjoining the fortification walls making the historic centre an attraction for the city's residents and visitors.

The high level of activity in Rhodes' urban spaces can be viewed in two manners. On the one hand it is seen to be positive as the nature of the human activity creates an environment that is friendly to the visitor. On the other hand, the 'spontaneous' way that public space is taken over causes problems as the space available for pedestrians becomes increasingly restricted. The situation is made worse by the cafeterias and the restaurants which take up space with external tables and chairs to make their business more profitable. The municipality has defined the public-private limits and enforces with fines the illegal use of the public space. This notwithstanding, illegal practices persist because of the high profitability of the use of public space.

Rhodes is similar to Valletta in that it has reasonably good access by public transport as its Central Bus Station is located within a few minutes' walk of the fortified city.

On car use, measures have been in place since the 1970s to restrict the access of cars into Rhodes' historic centre, though parking by residents is allowed. There are controlled entrances for vehicles, the use of electric cars is encouraged. The use of motorbikes, by both residents and tourists, is allowed but this has negative effects because of noise and some traffic congestion.

In Rhodes in the summer, the demand for parking is intense because of tourism. Research²³ (Mitsou, 2013) shows that there are only 2,000 parking spaces offered when peak demand in the summer is 4,000 spaces. This led to the arbitrary use of any available open space for parking. The municipality seeks to enforce regulations and impose fines, but illegal parking remains one of the area's main problems. In the winter, the situation is very different as the demand for parking is significantly less.

Valletta

The cultural and social of Valletta residents revolves around the parishes, the band clubs and the annual parish feast. Residents develop strong roots in the City, not least because it gives them a sense of identity. Over the years Valletta has experienced a decline in population and this has more or less stabilised at around 6,000 to 6,500 residents. Stable population numbers hide the changing nature of Valletta's residents. People with roots in the city are moving out and these are being replaced by people from outside who choose to live in the city. The downside of gentrification is the risk of losing the social and cultural activities that are rooted in local communities.

In the 1990s there was the trend for residential properties to be converted to offices. Less residential properties were available making it more difficult for first time buyers to take up residence in Valletta. The Grand Harbour Local Plan (1996) included a Valletta policy that did not allow the conversion of residential properties to office use. The policy effectively prevented the widespread conversion of residential properties to offices and hence prevented further significant loss in population.

²³ G. Mitsou, "Spatial and social changes in the Medieval city of Rhodes", Diploma thesis (in Greek), National Technical University of Athens, School of Rural and Surveying Engineering, 2013.

It is often argued that a historic area cannot be regenerated if its liveability is compromised.²⁴ Most Valletta residents already face difficulties relating to the cost of building maintenance and parking. More recently, there is a factor which is making Valletta less liveable, namely late night disturbances from the catering establishments. Not enough attention is being given to the impact of the increased evening activity on residents. Noise in the evenings is becoming more of a nuisance to residents, to the extent that night time sleep is being disrupted. Unless the problem of night time disturbance is addressed, Valletta risks losing more residents and this would undermine regeneration objectives.²⁵

In the last fifteen years, pedestrian areas in Valletta have been significantly increased. Before the millennium, only the main street, Republic Street, was dedicated solely to pedestrians. Most urban spaces, even the more important ones, were taken over by parked cars. Today the more important spaces in Valletta are pedestrianised, including Tritons Fountain, Castille Square, St. Georges Square and Merchants Streets. In particular, the completion of the City Gate project in 2015 has provided interesting pedestrian spaces at the most strategically important location – the City’s main entrance. Some minor streets are stepped thus making them inaccessible to cars. Most other roads are wide enough to have traffic as well as one side of on-street parking.

The daytime vibrancy of an urban space is determined largely by the uses of the buildings along it as well as the street frontages. Most of the commercial activity is concentrated within the central business area, along Republic Street, stretching from City Gate to St. Georges square. Extensive ground floor frontages are retail or catering, with the upper floors being offices. There are also a couple of visitor attractions along this stretch of road. Because of this concentration of uses, Republic Street is very busy during the day time, to the extent that at certain hours it becomes congested with people. Other streets in the central business area have similar characteristics in terms of usage and activity, but not at the same level of intensity as Republic Street. Beyond the central business area, most buildings are residential.

With pedestrianisation, many catering establishments sought and obtained permission to place tables and chairs outside their premises. These generally create a pleasant ambience for diners and for passers-by. On the other hand, there are aesthetic implications, as tables and chairs and the canopies and umbrellas that go with them, are often visually intrusive thus undermining the aesthetics of the historic environment. In some streets, tables and chairs impede the flow of pedestrians resulting in crowding. Weak enforcement is allowing the takeover of urban spaces with caterers’ paraphernalia, making this a serious threat to the pedestrian’s enjoyment of Valletta’s public spaces.

Since the millennium, there has been a consistent increase in evening activity in Valletta with more catering establishments opening. They cater for office workers, shoppers and tourists in the daytime and for leisure activities in the evenings. On the one hand, increased evening activity in Valletta is a welcome change. On the other hand, they are noise sources that cause nuisance to residents in the immediate vicinity, more so in the summer when residents tend to

²⁴ John Ebejer, “Valletta: striking a balance.” *The Times of Malta*. (2017, 10/02/2017), <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170210/opinion/Valletta-striking-a-balance.639183>. (access: 12 September 2019).

²⁵ John Ebejer, “Regenerating Valletta: a vision for Valletta beyond 2020.” [in:] *Proceedings of Valletta Alive Foundation Seminar: Valletta Beyond 2020*, John Ebejer (ed.) Valletta Alive Foundation, (2016), p. 35-44, <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/17857> (access: 2 December 2019).

leave their windows open. Noise issues are compounded because some of Valletta's urban spaces are sometimes used for popular music events, with loud music playing late into the evening.

There was also investment in open air cultural events in Valletta, the most notable being *Notte Bianca*. The first *Notte Bianca* took place in 2006, and it is now a well-established event in Malta's cultural calendar. Historic buildings, churches, museums and shops remain open till late, and streets come alive with recitals, opera, jazz, poetry readings, exhibitions, dance, walk tours, street theatre and more. Events are also part of the regenerative process of historic areas. There are as many as 16 different festivals that are held in Valletta throughout the year. Some target a national audience (Malta Arts Festival, Science in the City and Malta Fashion Week). Others attract an international clientele (International Jazz Festival, International Valletta Film Festival, Valletta Baroque Festival, Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival). Valletta offers many diverse and interesting open air spaces. Staging with historic buildings as backdrop gives added value to the events. Valletta also hosts events that are more closely linked to local culture (Carnival, religious feasts and Holy Week celebrations). Events are opportunities for Valletta residents and Maltese to creatively communicate their culture and way of life.²⁶

Malta's main bus terminus is located just outside Valletta's City Gate thus making it relatively easy for people to get to Valletta from most parts of island.

Because of its location and geography, access by private transport is more problematic. Internal vehicle circulation is restricted, in part because of the pedestrianisation of the more important urban spaces. The demand for parking in Valletta is significant because it is an important commercial and administration centre, over and above its residential and tourism role. For Valletta substantial parking is provided just outside Valletta, including a multi-storey car park and a park-and-ride facility. Within Valletta, a controlled vehicle access system operates, making on-street parking against payment, except for residents. At the lower end of Valletta, access problems persist because this is at some distance from the bus terminus and from the extensive parking that is available outside Valletta. The problems of lack of parking persist in both summer and winter, especially at the lower end of Valletta

6. Tourism and leisure activity in the historic cities of Rhodes and Valletta

Rhodes

Rhodes has been a tourism attraction since the 1970's. The coexistence of the historic fabric with the sunny beaches is an important advantage. The Greek state tried to capitalise on this by offering financial incentives for the construction of big-scale hotels. These were built in the city's west zone. The city of Rhodes combines the medieval historic centre, with the urban development outside the fortifications, most of which are buildings built during the Italian occupation (1911-1948). The interesting built environment is supplemented by the beautiful coastal areas that attract tourists intensively during the summer period. According to National statistics, 2.337.683 international visitors came by airplane to the island in 2018. Estimates show that if we add the cruise passengers, the visitors that use the ferries and the Greek tourists, almost 3 million people visited Rhodes in 2018.

²⁶ John Ebejer, "Urban heritage and cultural tourism development.....", op. cit..

There are an estimated 45 hotels with 660 beds ²⁷ in the historic centre of Rhodes. Most of them are low quality accommodation, although the Greek Tourism organisation has initiated a process to bring about their improvement. Some hotels are operating without a licence which makes the situation more difficult. Add to that the large number of short tourist rentals (such as Airbnb) that are being offered in Rhodes including in the historic centre. These are largely unregulated and that raises questions of quality. Short tourist rentals are also one of several causes of a declining resident population in the historic centre.

Valletta

For anyone visiting Malta, Valletta is a must-see attraction. It contains the island's more important attractions all within walking distance of each other. Valletta offers diverse and interesting urban spaces giving visitors ample scope to explore and discover. Moreover, it has numerous museums, churches and visitor attractions, all set in a historic context. The gardens at the periphery of the city provide quiet enclaves where people can relax and enjoy the open views.

The number of tourists visiting Malta doubled in just eight years, from 1.33 million in 2010 to 2.59 million in 2018. ²⁸ It is estimated that nine out of ten tourists to Malta visit Valletta which means that an estimated 2.3 million international tourists visited Valletta last year. Add to that thousands of cruise passengers²⁹ who visit Valletta for a few hours, as the cruise passenger terminal is within walking distance of Valletta centre.

The tourism attractiveness of Valletta inevitably results in demand for accommodation. Until a decade ago, tourism accommodation in or near Valletta was very limited. The situation has changed in recent years with the increased provision of boutique hotels and tourism rentals for tourists (for example Airbnb).

A rich urban heritage, more and better visitor attractions, increased tourism accommodation, a busy events calendar and revitalized evening activity are all factors that generate higher levels of tourism activity in Valletta.

Global changes in the way the tourism industry operates impacted on the nature and dynamics of Malta's tourism industry. Low cost airlines, independent internet booking and shared accommodation have made travelling easier and cheaper resulting in a more diversified and less seasonal industry. The changes that have happened in Valletta were influenced to some extent by the changes in the way the tourism industry operates.

²⁷ National Statistics Authority of Greece, "Records of hotels in Rhodes", 2017, <https://www.statistics.gr/statistics/-/publication/STO12>. (access: 2 December 2019).

²⁸ Lino Briguglio and Marie Avellino, "Has overtourism reached the Maltese Islands?" Occasional Papers on Islands and Small States, University of Malta, no. 1 (2019). <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/42767> (access: 2 December 2019).

²⁹ For statistical purposes, cruise passengers are not considered as tourists because they do not stay overnight in Malta. Figures for the number of cruise passengers that visit Valletta are not available.

5. Conclusion

Although more than a thousand kilometres apart, history has irrevocably linked these two towns forever. Valletta and Rhodes Town are located on small islands in the Mediterranean, Malta and Rhodes respectively. They both possess a rich architectural legacy that was left by the Order of the Knights of St. John. Both were, for a period of time, the home of the Order and as such played a central role in Mediterranean tensions and conflicts at different times in history.

In this paper we have seen how the two historic towns are both residential and, at the same time, are subject to significant pressures because of tourism and leisure activity. In both cases, the conservation of the historic urban fabric is problematic. Commercial pressures increase property prices and fuels the trend of conversion of residences to non-residential uses. Public spaces are often taken up with tables and chairs of cafes and restaurants, and sometimes also with the wares and signage of some shops. Political will and a stronger planning regime are needed to ensure that urban conservation efforts will result in the effective maintenance and upkeep of the urban heritage of these two important historic towns.

Partnerships between the public and the private sectors are required for conservation of historic areas. Planning and conservation should not just be about improving the aesthetics of an area so that people can better appreciate its history. Planning and conservation should seek to create liveable zones that function as cells of the city in a constant dialogue between the old and the new.

Short Biographies of Co-Authors

Dr. John Ebejer is an architect urban planner with a special interest in tourism and urban heritage. He lectures at the Institute for Tourism Travel and Culture at the University of Malta. He has published in academic journals and gave presentations in academic and industry conferences. Before taking up academia full time, he worked professionally as an urban planner and tourism consultant for over two decades. He identified project proposals and coordinated numerous major projects including the rehabilitation of a historic fort. Dr. Ebejer was educated at the University of Malta, University of Sheffield and the University of Westminster from where he holds a PhD. He is a Fellow of Higher Education Academy.

Assistant Professor Despina Dimelli is the Director of the Urban and Regional Planning Research Laboratory at the Technical University of Crete. She is working for 20 years in the field of Sustainable Urban Planning. She is an author of 8 scientific publications in international scientific peer reviewed journals, 7 book chapters and 60 publications in conferences. She is a reviewer in high ranked urban and regional planning journals and a proposals' evaluator in General Secretary of Research & Technology. She has worked in several urban planning projects, she has been awarded in national urban planning competitions and participated in many seminars for policy makers, market actors, engineers, technicians and installers.