

NATIONAL

# The revival of a dead palazzo

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Like many centuries-old buildings in Valletta, Palazzo Carafa is haunted.

While it remains to be seen whether spectral apparitions and ghostly figures skulk in its decaying archways or hide away in cavernous halls that have not seen the sun in decades, the 17th century palace is haunted by signs of life.

**“We opted for something that will restore this jewel to its former glory”**

Its imposing facade on Old Bakery Street does not linger in the memory once you turn a corner. While its heavy doors are shut, their brass knockers gathering dust on a busy road, its legacy as a community centre and hub for youth engagement is only distantly recollected by a few.

If you were to make your way past the doors, through the courtyard and up the many steps, you would be met with the sight of a property where many children made happy memories, now eaten away into a ghost of its former splendour.

Halls that might have greeted nobility, and chambers where knights and diplomats would have rested their heads were adapted, almost charmingly, into classrooms or activity



The Church says it wants to lead by example in its plans for the imposing Palazzo Carafa in Old Bakery Street, Valletta. PHOTOS: CHRIS SANT FOURNIER



centres. The modern interventions clashed starkly with the baroque architecture.

In a room with impossibly high ceilings, a trio of neon clowns spray-painted onto the masonry smile down, while above them a delicate fresco depicts idyllic country scenes interspersed with intricate patterns on a royal bed of blue.

Built in the 1600s, the Grade 1 scheduled palazzo was

named after its owner, Fra D. Carlo Carafa, who joined the Order of the Knights of St John in 1663.

In 1944, the property was acquired by the Church. It had previously housed the *Unione Cattolica di San Giuseppe*, a predecessor to APS Bank, as well as the *Istituto Italiano Umberto Primo*.

It perhaps remains best known as the premises of the

*Circolo Gioventù Cattolica*, a formative centre for boys that lent itself to myriad cultural and social activities.

“Our goal here is not to make major alterations but to remove interventions made over time that are not in keeping with heritage preservation,” Michael Pace Ross, administrative secretary of the Archdiocese of Malta, told *Times of Malta* while on a tour of the building.

The Church has plans to restore the property to its original context as a palazzo. Given the size and years of damage by disuse, the property is being leased to a developer who is spearheading the project, primarily to restore the palace and retain its unique and original architectural features.

The proposal selected through an open call went to Neville Agius, who was responsible for

the restoration of the Wignacourt Museum in Rabat as well as the Carmelite Priory in Mdina.

Agius presented a six-tier proposal that focuses on restoring the building as well as incorporating corporate offices, an arts hub, an area designated to house a private collection of master paintings, office space for use by cultural exhibitions and workshops to be run by a charity foundation and a roof garden and cafe with a focus on arts networking.

“This project really isn’t about the money,” Pace Ross continues.

“The Archdiocese could have easily sold it off or opted for a proposal with a stronger commercial element. But we believed strongly in restoration and felt that other projects were not in line with the Church’s philosophy.”

“We want to lead by example. It would be remiss if we allowed a boutique hotel to ruin the fabric of the building so we analysed proposals carefully and opted for something that will restore this jewel to its former glory.”

Contention has arisen with the proposal after a ‘historic’

wooden stage used in theatre productions in one of the palace’s repurposed halls was removed by Agius. Original flagstones as well as an ornate fireplace, which matches several others throughout the site, were subsequently uncovered.

An emergency protection order was also issued on a concrete viewing platform and projection room, believed to have served as one of the country’s oldest cinemas.

The later additional structure cuts into the original masonry, obstructing a doorway as well as a balcony with unobstructed sea views.

**“Projection room is believed to have served as one of the oldest cinemas”**

“We appreciate that the building had multiple uses and was enjoyed by many as a theatre and cinema, we are even ready to document this and the many phases the building has seen through 360 years,” Pace Ross said.

“But a concrete platform is obviously not part of the 17th century building, and certain interventions have to be undone in order to enjoy its original context. Some features and commemorative plaques will be retained, while also making it accessible to people with disability,” he added.

Plans for the project are currently suspended at the request of the applicant while talks with the Superintendent of Cultural Heritage are ongoing.

