

Safeguarding Tangible Heritage in Socially Deprived Areas: The Role Played by a Small Museum

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Abstract: Exponents of Critical Heritage studies maintain that people, communities, events, and places linked with the working class are often underrepresented and misrepresented by dominant discourse. Working-class communities tend to be erased from official history or portrayed in a negative light. This article concerns the role played by a social history museum to promote social inclusion through representation made for and with a community faced by detrimental economic, social, and political social changes. Cultural reclamation is crucial for communities that bear the brunt of deindustrialization and the consequent loss of power, leading to social and economic dislocation. Changes in the world's political economy have endangered many of these communities. These changes also threaten the heritage that provide these social groups with a positive sense of place and identity since low-income areas are often perceived as blighted, in need of bulldozer renewal by urban planners. This participatory action research demonstrates that circumstances may push social history museums to go beyond education and embrace social activism in an effort to bring about social justice.

Keywords: Heritage, Social Exclusion, Social Inclusion, Misrepresentation, Representation, Social Justice, Participation Action Research, Stewardship of Place

Introduction

This article focuses on the role played by the curator of a small, privately owned museum in Bormla in a protest organized by concerned residents and service providers involved in the *Forum Komunita Bormliża*. The aim of this protest was to make the authorities aware that low- to medium-income local residents living in privately rented accommodation in Bormla were in dire need of decent and affordable accommodation as regeneration in the area started hiking rent prices up exorbitantly. The authorities responded by kick-starting a social housing project which had been in the pipeline for decades. Unfortunately, the site on which this social housing project was going to be built encompasses a number of historic buildings which had not been scheduled, so the forum had to secure the help of a curator of a small, private, social museum found in the area, to help protect this heritage.

The economic boom the Maltese Islands have witnessed in the last decade has led to an influx of workers from around the world who have made their way to Malta in search of employment. This has led to a spike in the prices of real estate and the renting market (European Commission 2018). Bormla was not affected by these changes until the regeneration projects along the Bormla part of the Cottonera Waterfront were finished by the summer of 2015. During the same summer, central government announced that Dock No.1, an iconic landmark found in the area, had been leased to the Sadeen Group, the financial backers of the American University of Malta (Barry 2015). Rentiers and property speculators started grabbing property to rent or buy in an attempt to elicit as much exchange value from commodified property as they could.

The gentrification of this area meant that working-class and middle-income households and individuals who had been residing in the area for decades could no longer afford to buy or rent property there. Gentrification also became a threat to Bormla's hinterland heritage which was dubbed as "slums" by the authorities, but which provided a sense of place and identity to the bulk of the residents who identified as Bormliži.

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In an era when European governments maintain that everybody has become middle class, working-class communities find themselves socially excluded from public policy, and hence find it difficult to promote their needs and concerns when official discourse portrays these subordinate groups in a negative light. This article is about the *Forum Komunita Bormliža*'s struggle to persuade the Maltese government to provide affordable decent housing for Bormla residents (Cutajar 2020) in the area without destroying its architectural heritage. The primary focus of this article reports how this group, with the help of a curator of a small social history museum, used tangible heritage to establish their claim for recognition and acknowledgement by central government in this group's fight for equity and justice (Fraser 2005). The representatives of this group were in the majority middle class. Previous attempts to bring about equitable social change and to protect heritage in the area had been discredited or ignored by the media and the authorities. The forum therefore needed to find ways of making their claims more visible.

The curator of the small, private social history museum became embroiled in this struggle for two reasons. Tangible heritage is an important asset for the majority of the people who live in Bormla. It is a source of pride, a political resource which represents or stands in for community identity (Smith 2006, 48). The curator of the social history museum became involved because as an expert on the area's heritage, he could act as a mediator for the community where heritage was concerned. The power of the curator to act as mediator, derived from the institutional authority vested in him by the state when he was given the license to run his museum. His authority also derived from the knowledge garnered through community consultation conducted with people who identified as Bormliži and experts about the history of the area. The key role of curators is to negotiate which aspects of history to promote, when, with whom, and for which purposes. Socially disenfranchised groups are often angry and socially disillusioned when they are either left out or misrepresented in history or by heritage institutions. As Smith, Shackel, and Campbell (2011) underline, heritage is a resource communities often resort to when seeking to remake themselves and (re)present themselves in the wake of deindustrialisation.

This article, therefore, is about how a group of self-defined community representatives used heritage in their struggle for social justice. As Smith and Fouseki (2011, 7) who cite Fraser (1995) note: "Identity claims and the acknowledgement of specific histories and social and political experiences of communities, become an important plan in struggles for redistribution of resources. The political and historical legitimacy or recognition given to identity claims will bolster and legitimise the special claims communities may have to material resources needed to achieve equity and parity of participation in political and social policy debates."

Theoretical Background

This article is deeply indebted to "New Museology" and Critical Heritage studies. Da Milano (2013) notes that museums were intended in the nineteenth century to deify people, places, artefacts, and traditions associated with economic and cultural elite of particular countries. The role of museums was and still is to some extent an attempt to establish official values and images of society, promoting and affirming these dominant values and in the process, subordinating or rejecting alternative collective values and social understandings. In the nineteenth century the objective of museums was to bring the disparate social groups together; it was about creating a national identity (da Milano 2013) by ironing out differences.

The practices espoused by "New Museology" and Critical Heritage studies question the promotion of Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith and Waterton 2011). They question the museum practices that homogenize groups, communities, and societies. When sites, places, and events important to subordinated communities are not given priority in heritage policy or promoted as having historical significance, when certain experiences are given more exposure than others, the likely outcome would be a negative impact on local cultural resources and a deleterious effect on the self-identity of subaltern groups whose identity and values are not represented or misrepresented.

“New Museology” promotes social inclusion. It is concerned that certain groups’ access to heritage or other resources are curtailed for a number of reasons and that actions should be taken to remove the barriers that prevent access. Da Milano (2013) underlines that personal and social barriers (semi-literacy, poverty); perceptions and awareness (individuals or social groups who may perceive museums and other cultural institutions as alien to them), as well as environmental factors (physical access, isolation due to poor transport links) might mean that not everybody might have access to museums and other forms of culture. Linked to this is the fact that not all social groups are in a position to regard museums as representing them and their past. In this case, these museums cannot elicit the feeling of belonging, which can lead to community empowerment, health, and well-being.

“New Museology” is based on the premise that social institutions linked with heritage should have a positive impact on people’s lives by striving to bring about social inclusion through access, representation, and participation (da Milano 2013). Social inclusion, Smith and Fouseki (2011, 5), should not be limited to finding new ways of attracting new audiences or more visitors to museums. Social institutions linked with heritage need to find ways of getting the excluded to visit the cultural sites of the included. They also need to get traditional museum audiences (the middle class and elite) to visit and appreciate working-class heritage sites and practices. The working class, Smith, and Fouseki note, are one of the traditionally excluded communities in museology.

Exponents of the Critical Heritage studies underline that people, communities, events, and places linked with the working class are underrepresented (and in Malta misrepresented) in national heritage efforts (Smith, Shackle, and Campbell 2011). When this happens, working-class communities struggle to produce their own meaningful worldview when faced with deindustrialisation and the undermining of trade union power, which has led to the trivialization of working-class life and experiences (Debary 2004, 127). Subordinate groups erased from official history or portrayed in a negative light by the dominant group struggle to reclaim their identity and history (Smith, Shackle, and Campbell 2011).

Social history museums represent subaltern groups, the social groups who are socially, politically, and geographically removed from hegemonic power structures. These heritage institutions and others feel duty bound to become involved in assertive and reflexive projects of social memory made for and with communities faced by detrimental economic, social, and political social changes (Smith, Shackel, and Campbell 2011). This cultural reclamation is crucial for communities which have had to bear the brunt of deindustrialisation and the consequent loss of power, leading to social and economic dislocation. Changes in the world’s political economy has endangered many of these communities. These changes also threaten the heritage that provide these groups with a positive sense of place and identity.

For heritage institutions the successful representation of subaltern groups entails going out there and becoming involved in community consultation. The issue though is that different people from within the same community may have different interpretations of the same sites, practices, and events linked with particular places. In the view of Smith and Fouseki (2011) the curators who bother about going in search of alternative narratives, histories, and experiences become as a consequence embroiled in negotiating their legitimacy to represent the social group they are working with and for.

At the same time, this outreach helps build meaningful relations with some of the community’s representatives. Smith, Shackel, and Campbell (2011) strongly feel that curators have the moral imperative to go in search of these hidden narratives/histories and, in the process, tease out the hidden injuries to self-respect and self-worth. Smith et al. feel that when curators uncover these hidden injustices, they are advertently or inadvertently promoting social justice and reconciliation.

Community consultation tends to be, according to Smith and Fouseki (2011), a contentious process for a number of reasons. It is contentious because lived experiences cannot always be

adequately represented in material forms in their plurality. Curators partake in community consultations so that they can use some of the narratives and use these and other cultural artefacts to act as platforms for communities to represent themselves to themselves, and more importantly to others. These representations may affect visitors' identity, confidence, and self-esteem, and this in turn has an impact on community identity and social inclusion. However, it does not mean that these representations represent the whole community.

This is because communities represented by these social museums are not homogenous, and they are not static (Smith and Fonseki 2011, 4). A community is fluid, not easily identifiable, and often riven with dissenting voices. People who live in a particular area might have different interpretations of that space since they differ from each other on the basis of age, gender, political allegiances, ethnicity, and race. Hubbard and Kitchin (2011) point out that even the boundaries of place are contingent, temporarily achieved through cultural systems of signification. As a consequence, this has repercussions on the definition of "community," the issue of who belongs, and who is perceived as an insider or an outsider.

Community representatives cannot represent the community as a whole since different people have different opinions about the same aspect (Smith and Fonseki 2011, 4). Not everybody is in agreement on what is heritage, and which heritage one has to preserve. It is not always clear who has the authority to speak for the community or group in question. This means that when cultural institutions represent heritage from below, it has to embrace the dissonant, multiple values, and cultural meanings that heritage has in a particular locality and/or for a particular group. This is not an easy task, so the definition of heritage is open and ongoing.

Smith, Shackel, and Campbell (2011, 11) underline that heritage, whether it denotes places and practices, is also used by communities to negotiate and navigate economic and cultural change. Heritage is perceived as an important cultural tool which is used in the process of individual and collective remembering and commemoration, and constantly redefined in the cultural process involved in the performance and negotiation of cultural values, narratives, and meanings (Smith 2006, 201). Smith, Shackel, and Campbell maintain that the ability to control collective memory and representation is an important resource in the struggle for political legitimacy. Curators help subaltern communities "work" out, assert their alternative sense of identity and sense of place when they are chosen or choose to mediate for subordinate groups. Smith and Fonseki (2011) add that when curators start questioning and challenging mainstream historical narratives that undermine the credibility and legitimacy of identity claims made by subaltern communities, they become embroiled not only in the negotiation for political recognition, but also in demands for social justice and equity, even when this might not be their primary agenda.

Smith, Schackel, and Campbell (2011), however, note that the power of the expert representing subordinate groups is constantly being challenged. They claim that curators implicated in struggles for the political recognition of subaltern communities or social justice may risk exposing themselves to criticism from peers, community groups, and stakeholders.

Heritage is the resource in which working-class people and communities resort to reinterpret and rework contemporary identity in the face of economic, social, and political changes wrought by deindustrialisation, attacks on organized labour, trivialization of working-class life and experience, and wilful amnesia (Debary 2004, 127). Heritage therefore is a highly political source of power which is used not only to help communities rework a positive identity after they have been trampled by changes in the economy, but is often used in political action that seeks social justice and the end of exploitation.

Historical Context of Bormla

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in Britain (2004, 2) defines social exclusion as "what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, poor health and family

breakdown.” Sandell (1998) adds that social exclusion is a state and a process which prevents an individual or group from participating in the economic, social, and political systems which prevail in a given country. Bormla epitomizes the characteristics that define social exclusion in the quote above (see Cutajar 2014).

Bormla is one of the Three Cities (namely Bormla also known as Cospicua; Senglea also known as Isla; and Vittoriosa also known as Birgu) in the Grand Harbour area. These Three Cities are also collectively referred to as Cottonera. The Grand Harbour was once a thriving hub of activity before World War II when Malta was servicing the needs of a fortress economy during the British era (Borg and Mayo 2006, 58). World War II led to the massive destruction of buildings around Dock No. 1 since the docks were the focus of attacks by air and sea. The destruction wrought by the war was used as an excuse to continue razing buildings in the area and build a number of social housing units needed to make up for housing shortages then.



Figure 1: Bormla
Source: Google Maps

Vakili-Zad and Hoekstra (2011) maintain that what was built after the war was not sensitive to the baroque architecture found in the surrounding area nor did they fit in with the proportions of the prevalent historic urban form (Chapman 2005). The “drab and unimaginative” (Theuma 2000, 12) blocks of social housing units built from the 1950s onwards helped destroy the historic and social fabric characteristic of the Cottonera area (Boswell 1994) since they did not adhere to the characteristics and scale of the older parts (Chapman 2005, 247).

In the aftermath of the second World War, a number of old buildings were destroyed without impunity to make place for social housing projects. The authorities did draw up an inventory of some of the historic buildings and heritage found in the area, but they did not include a number of buildings found in the centre of Bormla. This led to a massive destruction of heritage which had survived the war, but was bulldozed because policy makers and developers claimed they were conducting “slum clearance” (House of Representatives, Parliamentary Question 17127 2000). Buildings that could have been easily renovated and reused were erased to make place for blocks of flats without any character, and which were discordant with their surroundings. These buildings were populated by “a poorer and socially more depressed working-class population than it had before its elite moved out” (Boswell 1994, 135).

The economic, social, and political well-being of the Three Cities was tied to the docks found in the area. In the 1970s, the Malta dockyards were the largest single industrial employer (King 1978), and it still is. In 1959, following Britain’s decision to relinquish their hold of some of their colonies, the British admiralty decided to turn the docks into a commercial enterprise. The attempts to do so were not successful at that time. Cassar (2011) states that when the Maltese took over the Dockyard from the Admiralty and Bailey, they did manage to turn it into a major

global ship-repair yard, but the turnover of sea vehicles dealt with was not high. In the 1990s the dockyard was privatized. The new owner replaced Maltese workers with foreign ones, and this led to massive unemployment in the area.

Cutajar (2014) claims that one of the reasons behind the dismantling of the state-owned ship-repair industry was the fact that it was the power base for the Malta Labour Party and General Workers' Union. The intention for closing it down was to undermine the following this party had in the area. When the dockyards and shipbuilding company were privatized in the 1990s, Cottonera ceased to be the hub of the Maltese economy. This move had a concomitant effect on commerce in the area. Some of the local communities living were unable to cope with this reversal in fortune.

There were attempts by central government to regenerate Cottonera. For some reason, this regeneration drive was concentrated in one of the Three Cities, namely Vittoriosa (Birgu). Borg and Mayo (2006) states that this differential treatment drew the ire and envy of the residents living in the other two cities. To exacerbate matters, Bormla lost a third of its territory to the neighbouring town of Vittoriosa when in 1994 the local council boundaries were redrawn. This event helped to further undermine the ethos of the beleaguered Bormlizi.

In a needs assessment survey conducted in 2010 with a representative sample of residents from Bormla, it was evident that the residents were concerned by a number of issues, namely by the way they were portrayed by the media, the low educational attainment in the area, the lack of employment opportunities in the area, crime, and the sense of neglect that prevailed (Cutajar 2014). At the same time they felt proud about living in Bormla, a city steeped in heritage. There were some who gave ideas on how iconic buildings in the area could be renovated and used as economic catalysts in an area with the highest rate of unemployment and illiteracy in Malta. Others were, however, more concerned about the need of decent and affordable housing for people with a low income. So, the community's attitude to heritage depended on their needs.

Method

Participatory action research was used to collect data for this article. Baun, MacDougall, and Smith (2006) define participatory action research as a research method that uses experience as the basis of knowledge. The members of the forum used their experience to conduct collective, self-reflective enquiry to understand and improve upon the practices "in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by an understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships" (Baun, MacDougall, and Smith 2006, 854).

People who participated used the forum to discuss social issues that affected community members. They became aware of these issues because they experienced them on a firsthand basis, or it was brought to their attention by acquaintances. The forum consisted of people who lived in the area as well as those who worked with residents. Some of the residents who turned up for meetings represented local entities such as the local parish, residents' associations, social history museum, shopowners, the police force, nongovernment associations, as well as the football, band, and *boċċi* (bocce) clubs. Among the service providers involved in this forum, there was the principal of St Margaret's College (the educational coordinator of the area), a health official, the director of the Cottonera Resource Centre of the University of Malta, a representative of LEAP, representatives of the social security office and Jobsplus as well as social, community, and youth workers. The number of members who turned up for the meetings varied, depending on the topic at hand. The forum was coordinated by Dr. Yana Bland Mintoff, the daughter of an ex-Prime minister who hailed from Bormla. Mr. Roger Mamo assisted her.

Community members were asked to come up with critical issues that needed to be tackled. Forum members then met to plan what type of action was needed to bring about social transformation in the area. Although there were a number of people who represented different

groups and associations in the area, they tended to bring their own individual take on issues. Forum members did not always concur on what issues to give priority to, or how to solve them. They, however, came together because they felt that something had to be done in response to structural inconsistencies and the social exclusion faced by the community in question where social policy and urban planning was concerned.

Different factions within the community had their own take on the different issues raised. One must underline the fact that conflict and power relations underpin communities connected to particular geographical places (Parker 2006). When speaking about people who share geographic space one should not presume solidarity, solidity, or the fact that they share values. Parker insists that community is not a separable or distinctly spatial analytical unit. Meanings and identities of communities are constantly contested and evolving (McDowell 1999).

Iris Marion Young (2006) sustains that counter-reactions to particular capitalist and/or neo-liberal projects and practices tend to be fractured. Communities are not organically unitary, but fractured on the basis of gender, social class, age, and, in Malta's case, political allegiance. This means that space-place is perceived and acted on differently by people living in real places. As Young argues, individuals are conditioned by their positioning not only in time, but in place and in relation to other social groups. This leads to fluid, multiple, and constantly renegotiated and contested structures of meaning. One should note that the forum was not representative of the community in question, and the individuals who participated had different opinions on the same issue.

For the purposes of this article the focus will be on the role played by one museum in the fight for social justice. My concern is not to delineate who did what, when, and with what impact, but to deliberate in what ways small museums can strive for social justice where blighted communities are concerned. McLeod (2017) sustains that the specific geographical location and political culture of the place where museums are embedded pushes museum curators to take a political stand. Their decision to become political activists is dialectically shaped by the physical and symbolic characteristics of places with which they are emotionally linked. This is because emotional attachment to a place often leads to political activism (Risager 2012).

Ashley (2005) regards museums and hence curators as custodians of a community's heritage. Sandell and Nightingale (2012) sustain that museums *should* become involved in the needs of the communities in which they are embedded, using their expertise to bring about social change which could lead to social justice. Furthermore, Ashley (2005) maintains that museums hold symbolic power. This power might be dampened by the place where it is located, but it is the locality in which museums are found that also give rise to the social history museum concerned.

Place and Mobilization

People assign meanings to places—these meanings are embedded in historically contingent and shared cultural understanding of the area, maintains Boyer (1994). Gieryn (2000) further adds that places are made by people who tend to ascribe qualities to the material and social stuff located in a particular space. Places are invested with meaning and value. They are perceived, interpreted, narrated, understood, and imagined differently, depending on the person's location in time and space (Soja 1996).

This also means that places assume material and cultural forms congruent with political alignments and economic interests (Gieryn 2000). The places we see, inhabit, or visit are the consequences of decisions made by place professionals. Place professionals include urban planners, historical preservationists, policy makers, regulatory agencies, and developers among others. All these have an impact on what is built and how it is built. The decisions they make can lead to segregated class-specific localities that have an impact on the agency and mobility of the people who live there.

Although the perceptions of places and the people residing in them might seem arbitrary, these have real consequences for the material and social components living in them. Cities and

neighborhoods tend to be ranked on the basis of perceived desirability and quality of life (Gieryn 2000). Places reflect and reinforce hierarchy. They tend to have a deleterious effect on the chances of groups located in so called “stigmatized places”—Bormla being a case in point. These stigmatized spaces shape the capacity of the community linked with such places where mobilization or expression are concerned. It does not mean that residents or the community lack mobilization capacity, but that this mobility might not be given its due attention by policy makers or other place professionals. This is because their agency will be judged according to their location and positionality in space, and in time. When places are stigmatized, the stigma has a chilling effect on the efficacy of mobilization and public protest (Smith and Scarpato 2010).

Residents and other individuals have spoken out in the past when they were concerned by what was happening around them. The objective of this article is, however, about the spate of dispossessions that started taking place from summer 2015 onwards which attracted the attention of the *Forum Komunita Bormliża* (Bormla Community Forum), a community action group set up in 2014 comprising of residents and service providers working in the area.

The forum was aware of the consequences localities face when they lose a group of residents overnight. They had seen what regeneration had led to in neighbouring Birgu (also known as Vittoriosa). Regeneration had led to the massive out-migration of a good portion of the residents who had lived there for generations. This regeneration impacted mainly on young families which found it difficult to find affordable and decent housing in the area. When they moved out, they were replaced by materially better-off residents, but ones who did not have the same sense of emotional ties to the place. From a community defined by strong ties, they were replaced by communities with weak ties who were ready to invest in property in the area, but not to becoming involved in local activities. It was this involvement borne out of the attachment to place which had helped establish Birgu as a cultural attraction in the past (Cutajar 2008).

Forum members were aware that the Hanover social housing project had been in the pipeline since the late 1990s but for one reason or another the Housing Authority (Figure 2) had never got around to building it. In 2016 forum members petitioned central government to implement this project without eradicating more heritage in the area. They turned to the curator of Birmula Heritage Museum to persuade urban planners that what was described as a “slum clearance” exercise on the Planning Authority’s application No. 01520/00, was in fact heritage which needed to be vouchsafed for future generations.

Regeneration and development projects in Bormla helped preserve iconic buildings on the Cottonera waterfront, but often razed those found in the inner core. Regeneration was about commercializing iconic buildings in the area and less importance was being given to social issues. The forum felt that it needed to conscientize central government of its duty to appropriate space for social purposes without allowing commercial purposes to rule the day (Lefebvre 1991). The forum’s first encounter with policy makers was to promote the compatible reuse of already existing buildings. For the community in question, some of the houses which were going to be razed to make way for the social housing project in Hanover were “symbols full of meaning and memories” (Avery 2007) for the local community. One of the houses that was earmarked for demolition was the house in which one of the first Maltese Prime ministers, Dom Mintoff, grew up. The government did not want to rehabilitate these houses since according to a spokesperson, the government could borrow more funds from lending entities if it built rather than renovated older buildings.



Figure 2: Hanover social housing project. The yellow area was demolished in 2011. The white area was demolished in the 1990s and rebuilt as social housing blocks. The green area was demolished in 2017. This area consisted of sixteenth century buildings and underground structures created prior to this date.

Source: Fenech 2016

This forum was set up because of the emotional bonds the members had to Bormla. Gieryn (2000) notes that attachment to place is stronger when people live or work in areas with historical landmarks, as in the case here. In 2016 the forum realized that it had to do something quickly to ensure that central government provided decent social housing, without destroying heritage in the area. To do so, it brought together people working within academia, the community, civil servants, policy makers, as well as the curator of a local museum. This led to a convergence of skills, knowledge, and interests.

Castells (1991) notes that local societies fighting to preserve or renegotiate their identity in the face of change often do so by resorting to their historical roots. Heritage denotes the symbolic markings of place and preserving these symbols of recognition helps safeguard the expression of collective memory. The casual eradication of what makes places distinctive, their heritage, leads to standardized landscapes, insensitive to the significance of place (Relph 1973). The destruction of heritage leads to a loss in pride in place and community, especially when this leads to the homogenization of place.

Gieryn (2000) underlines that the stigmatization of place that has a chilling effect on the possibility of mobilization and public protest. This was not the case in Bormla. There was a nucleus of discontented people who united against a political and economic system that they felt failed to meet the interests of the socially disenfranchised.

Small Museums and Social Activism

Bormla residents repudiate the way their community is portrayed by the media and the rest of Malta (Cutajar 2014). Some people act on their emotions. A curator chose to set up a social history museum in the 1990s when Bormla was beleaguered by a number of problems—massive unemployment caused by the privatization of the dockyard, high dependency on social welfare, lower standards of educational achievement among the youth residing in the area, and a loss of its space when a good chunk of land was passed over to the neighbouring town.

Museums are places where people find information, material resources, and communication about a particular place. These entities help shape the way in which information and symbolic content circulating about a particular place and space are produced. Museums, according to

Ashley (2005), are repositories of material culture, which help in creating an identification with a place. Museums are in turn perceived by people as the community's custodian of historical artefacts, the place where history is kept. It is the place where historical occurrence is raised from a first order meaning to mythic signification. Heritage, Ashley adds, has a major impact on how a community sees itself and presents itself to others. In this case Birmula Heritage Museum was set up to provide the community with a space to help it develop its own meaning of this stigmatized locality. The owner and curator of this small museum invested time and money in this endeavour because of his emotional identification with the place and the people related to it.

Ashley (2005) notes that cultural pride and activism often leads to the creation of museums devoted to alternative expressions on what counts as heritage or culture. Social history museums such as Birmula Heritage Museum help in the promotion of a sense of "connectedness," "belonging" (Baeker 2002). Visitors can visit the place to get information about the area. While they are there, they have the opportunity to see how people lived or worked in the past. It acts as a depository for residents or people linked to the community who donate objects linked to people, household good, events, trades, or skills related to the area. These artefacts are donated to the museum because the donors are often afraid that their children and close relatives might throw these away when they die. By donating these to the museum they are guaranteed peace of mind that the artefacts they donate are kept for posterity. At the same time one should note that the pieces that they donate are based on their subjective definition of what is heritage.

The museum also provides a space for discussion, construction, and contestation about the representation of the locality. It serves as a grassroots space for the sharing of private memories and stories, which result in multiple versions of history. When people come to see the museum, or whenever they bump into the curator in their day-to-day interactions, they often identify and geographically locate cultural assets. This interaction serves to leave a depository of community narratives, memories, and relationships which help to shape the space.

Multiple versions of history emerge when people engage with the same artifact differently. Different people have different narratives to recount or different explanations to give of how an artefact was used, depending on their socioeconomic background, gender, or age. This pushes the museum into adopting a non-authoritative representation that promotes a more inclusive participation in the definition and presentation of cultural history. The objective of this museum is not about "civilizing the lower classes" (Ashley 2005), but the opposite. The museum provides the lower classes with the space to connect with the curator and help enlighten him on narratives of events, people, and artefacts connected with the area. As Weil (1999) argues, heritage institutions should be there for their citizens, which means that they cannot promote one narrative about history. One should note that cultural systems of signification are open to multiple interpretations and readings, hence polyvocality, which lead to a fluid identification with place.

The Struggle for Social Justice as Spatial

Gilmore (2002, 16) maintains that the struggle for social justice is spatial, that it is part and parcel of making a place. Places matter to people. Places are meaningful areas for local inhabitants, the focus of emotional identification or investment (Duxbury, Garrett-Petts, and MacLennan 2015). This is because human experience, memory, identity, discursive constructions are linked to a place (Ralph and Staeheli 2011).

Built environments, local cultures, and people distinguish one locality from another, sustains Harvey (1985). Places are the end result of successive layers of development over time (While and Short 2011). Somebody, somewhere, at one moment or another, made choices on what to keep, salvage, or destroy in response to social, commercial, and aesthetic preferences and aspirations. While and Short (2011, 5–6) underline the urban regeneration projects that are "situated within a set of frameworks, discourses, and collective understandings of heritage/design identity of particular locales enacted at different levels of decision-making and accumulated over

time through regulatory mechanisms such as land-use plans, heritage designations, policy statements, place marketing, and branding initiatives, media articles, and various publications.”

Policy discourses are shaped by place narratives linked to particular locales. Regeneration projects are based on what policy makers and planners feel is needed on an economic, cultural, political, or social level for certain localities (Graham et al. 2000). They are also based on conceptions of what is heritage. Over time, cities become assemblies of architectural and planning interventions. Urban upgrading often comes in conflict with conservation (While and Short 2011, 9). What is conserved, what is erased, what is redeveloped is also linked with contested place narratives.

Andrea Smith and Rachel Scarpato (2010) sustain that low-income neighborhoods are more likely to be perceived as “blighted” areas in need of “bulldozer” renewal. Policy makers and developers often believe that socially deprived areas have no heritage worth saving. The conception of what is worth saving is therefore linked with how particular places are perceived by urban planners and policy makers.

Policy makers often discursively define Bormla as a slum. The word “slum” was used in a number of parliamentary questions when referring to the Hanover area. The terms “slums” and “substandard” are often used by policy makers as a prelude to conscious social clearance (see House of Representatives Parliamentary Question 17127, 2000; Parliamentary Question 35398 2002; Parliamentary Question 203 2003).

Erasing this heritage can have a deleterious effect on communities. As Jackson and Herranz (2012) point out, heritage is an important element of community life and an essential component in community-building processes. It helps fashion a group identity, improves the community’s self-esteem, and leads to intergenerational bridging when stewardship of place is transmitted from one generation to another. Heritage within and outside museums embodies the hopes and aspirations of the community. It is embedded in community processes and interacts with them. For some people, the heritage found outside the museums has more value since it is the less institutionalized way that residents experience and interact with heritage.

Heritage Inventory

To prevent history from repeating itself, the forum asked for the help of the curator of Birmula Heritage Museum who had compiled an inventory of tangible heritage in the area. In an email sent to all members of the forum (January 14, 2016), he noted that he had drawn up an inventory of historical buildings and other structures found in the area when he was a local councillor in charge of culture in Bormla. The local council had used this information to create a tourist map with the objective of promoting cultural tourism in the area. Few tourists visited Bormla since the place had such a negative reputation among outsiders.

The curator had started informally compiling this inventory when he was still young, walking through the streets of Bormla accompanied by his uncle, an amateur historian. The documentation of heritage persisted when he got elected councilor. He used the information compiled through this exercise to establish Birmula Heritage Museum, a small social history museum. As a curator he continued with his community consultation and substantiated the claims of residents through documentation. Duxbury, Garrett-Petts, and MacLennan (2015) maintain that cultural mapping is a community engagement catalyst. It helps mobilize communication among varied community actors, while building cross-sectoral networks initially within the community, and eventually without.

One of the places the curator got to know about through community consultation was the Byzantine rock-cut chapel. This chapel was not on the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage inventory. It was located close to the area where the Hanover social housing project was going to be built, and there was the possibility that excavation in the area could damage it. The other buildings under threat of projects had appeared on sixteenth-century maps of Bormla. Other

documents were used to substantiate the fact that they derived from this time period. Some of the structures came to light during the excavation itself.

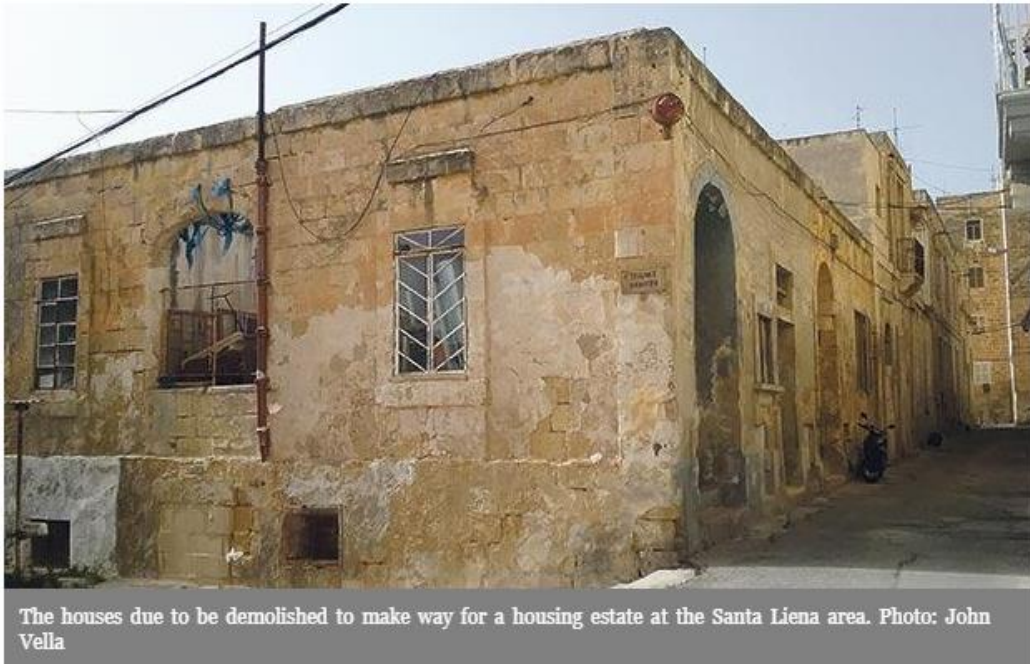


Figure 3: Press coverage of attempt at place stewardship
Source: Carabott 2016

Inventories are the product of situated social practices, informed by multiple relational contexts that impact on the experience, understanding, and the creation of these artifacts (Kitchin, Perkins, and Dodge 2009). Different individuals define heritage differently, depending on their “situated literacies” (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič 2000). The inventory compiled by the curator included heritage which different individuals got to know about and appreciate. Jackson and Herranz (2012) claim that the definition of heritage depends on the cultural values, preferences, and realities of the residents and other stakeholders linked to the community. Parker (2006) suggests that this might mean that the end product might be nonrepresentative since it is embedded in local power relations. Whatever their shortcomings, these inventories are self-consciously social and political in their intent. As context and place specific concepts, they are steeped in local political or social circumstances (Drew 2003). Constant community consultation helped the curator contextualize the museum in a particular historical location. It also led to the “stewardship” of place.

Social Action and Social Justice

The heritage inventory exercise came in useful when demolition started on the Hanover site in the early months of 2016. It became evident that the developers and urban planners had not conducted any historical resource impact assessment even though this project was being enacted in an urban conservation area. The forum felt that although a number of meetings had been held with officials linked to the Hanover project, their voice had been heard but not attended to. So they decided to seek the help of journalists to promote their own take on the issue.

On May 18, 2016 the Inventory of Heritage and Historic sites in Bormla was presented to the Cottonera Rehabilitation Committee. This event was covered by the press (Fenech 2016;

Carabott 2016). The forum made sure that there was press coverage so that the authorities would not be given wiggle room for inaction. This media coverage came to the attention of policy makers. Forum representatives were invited to meet up with the officials and architects in charge of the Hanover social project. In these meetings the curator explained that among the buildings they were about to bulldoze, there were a number of historic buildings and structures dating back to the Knights of St. John, which could be incorporated into the project and hence protected. Forum representatives also stressed that the new project had to conform to the surrounding architectural style. They underlined that they wanted the government to provide decent housing, and “not simply building flats and throwing people in them” (Grech 2017).

The media coverage given to these consultations gave rise to a nation-wide debate on a number of issues, including the need for the introduction of rent control mechanisms in the private rental market, the provision of more decent social housing units, and consolidated the claim made by Caritas Malta that the government needed to work on providing a living wage since those on a minimum wage were facing drastic material problems.

Media coverage of the collective action was essential in legitimating these claims. Bormla is rarely on the customary beat for reporters when political stands are being made by the community. This media coverage helped legitimate the valency of the forum’s claim. It helped the activists interviewed by journalists create media narratives which helped define them as actors intentionally contesting, resisting, and shaping a number of processes—conservation, housing, and living wages.

The cultural inventory gave the forum the legitimacy and enhanced effectiveness in negotiations with policy makers. The inventory presented to the Cottonera Rehabilitation Committee helped document places of value in Bormla. These documents were used to resist historical marginalization while securing legal control over resources and rights.

After the presentation of the inventory the curator was consulted by the architects in charge of the Hanover social housing project a number of times. This constant consultation led to amendments to planning permit PA/01520/00 (delineated in PA/06836/17). The architects decided to exploit the design proportions of the area and build three blocks instead of one whole block, leaving space in the middle to act as a piazza which could then be used by the residents for recreational purposes. This open space ensured that the apartments had more access to natural light, hence reducing the building’s carbon footprint. A palazzo from the Knight’s era that had previously been scheduled for demolition was to be renovated to incorporate a community, a childcare, and a day care centers within it. The developers were also instructed to excavate with care in order to safeguard a secret tunnel built during the Knights’ era (Sansone 2017).

Nzegwu (1996) notes that urban spaces are sites of contestation and interaction based on cultural desires and symbolic representations. The inventory helped the forum engage with people in authority. This inventory led to a new relationship between local knowledge and the larger and strategic prerogatives of cultural policy and service delivery. It helped promote the underrepresented world views or knowledge in a medium which could be understood by policy makers (Duxbury, Garrett-Petts, and MacLennan 2015). In this case the inventory helped to reconstitute and subvert power relations. It allowed amateurs to share their experiences, their values, and their visions about heritage located in a particular space. Sieber (2006) maintains that inventories created with the help of community members help affirm locally derived knowledge and repudiate the knowledge of outsiders—namely that of urban planners, conservationists, and developers.

Conclusion

The making of a place involves negotiation, translation, and the alignment of political and economic interests (Stieber 1998). As we have seen, social history museums are important when it comes to place making. Place making, Maharawal and McElroy (2018) note, is vital when it comes to fighting for social justice. In this case, the curator and the other social activists used the

inventory to conscientize the general public and policy makers about the heritage found in Bormla. This social conscientization also led to procedural change as government entities kept coming back to the forum when they were building the blocks of flats.

This leads me to conclude that the inclusive museum is not only about collections and research. In blighted places it also involves curatorship of heritage found in the location. Stigmatized areas need decent social housing, and they also need to retain the beleaguered heritage in which they are embedded in. Heritage helps boost the community's esteem and gives communities the empowerment needed to trigger social change.

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