

The quality of urban spaces in Valletta and their relevance to tourism

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Abstract

The quality of urban spaces is dependent on numerous factors involving the physical attributes of buildings, spaces and street patterns but also on other factors relating to the psychology of place. In this paper, Valletta’s urban spaces are discussed using a model from urban design literature. The discussion also considers the interrelationship between the City and the sea, and notes how the visual connection to the sea is one of several elements which could potentially contribute to urban quality. Urban spaces are also relevant to regeneration and therefore this paper refers to regeneration projects for Valletta, including several involving urban spaces. The paper concludes with a few observations on some urban spaces in Valletta.

Introduction

Valletta is a small city located on a promontory between two harbours. 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. Valletta is the seat of Government with Parliament and most Ministries being located within it. Valletta is home to several parishes, each of which is the centre of community life. As Theuma (2004: 297) describes it: *“The community is endowed with a strong popular culture. The normal day-to-day activities and celebrations of the residents can add colour and depth to the ‘cultural’ experience of the city.”*

Valletta’s is a vital part of Malta’s tourism product with nine out of ten tourists to Malta visiting the Capital. In addition, thousands of cruise passengers visit Valletta, with the cruise passenger terminal being less than 10 minutes walk from its centre. The City’s main attraction is its historic character which is ever-present in all its streets and urban spaces. 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.

Until the late 1970’s, Valletta was also the Malta’s main leisure and entertainment centre. Newly established resort and leisure areas, particularly St. Julians, led to Valletta’s slow decline as a centre of night activity (Theuma, 2004: 297). This trend has been reversed slightly in recent years with the opening of numerous bars and restaurants, most of which capitalise on the historic features of Valletta’s buildings.

Public sector investments in Valletta and the regenerative process

Prior to 2006, Valletta was given low priority by successive governments. Investment was limited to minor restoration projects, with projects worthy of note being few and far between. The lack of public investment was mirrored by a lack of private investment in the City, creating a gradual yet steady downward spiral and increased dilapidation in many parts of Valletta.

The only two projects worthy of note before 2006 were the Centre of Creativity in St. James Cavalier and Valletta Waterfront, completed in 2000 and 2005 respectively. Valletta Waterfront (actually located on Floriana's Grand Harbour shoreline), was a public private partnership with government providing the land and property and the private sector providing the investment. The project involved reclamation, quay extensions and the restoration of the historic Pinto Wharves. It now includes catering and retail facilities along an attractive promenade. The project was also instrumental in establishing Malta as a cruise home port (Theuma and Theuma, 2012).

In recent years, government has given greater priority to the needs of the Capital with a range of projects dealing with the diverse aspects, including restoration/rehabilitation, culture/tourism, pedestrianisation, accessibility (public transport and parking) and urban regeneration.

The projects implemented in Valletta since 2006 are;

- Extension of pedestrianisation including Merchants Street and Pjazza San Gorg,
- Restoration of Biagio Steps and the establishment of the Fortifications Interactive Centre (part of ERDF 39),
- Paving and embellishment of Misrah Mattia Preti at Mandragg,
- Restoration of the facades of several buildings including Grandmasters Palace and Auberge de Castille and Church of Santa Caterina d'Italia,
- Restoration of chapels and other features of St. Johns Co-Cathedral (by St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation).

Other projects are currently underway or nearing completion;

- The redevelopment of City Gate, including City Gate, the new Parliament building and 'Pjazza Teatru Rjal' within the old opera house ruins,
- The restoration of Fort St. Elmo and Carafa Enceinte to establish 'Fort St. Elmo Heritage Experience' including a Military History Museum, Valletta Museum and a Ramparts Walk (ERDF 244),
- The regeneration of Peacock Gardens (by the Valletta Local Council - ERDF226),
- The restoration of extensive stretches of Valletta fortifications (part of ERDF 39),
- Revival of historic visitor attractions to establish a Military Heritage Park, linking the Saluting Battery, the Lascaris War Rooms, the St Peter and St Paul Counterguards, the Underground NATO Communication Centre and the Wartime Tri-Services War Rooms, under the Upper Barrakka (by Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna - ERDF151).

Some of the projects were/are part-funded by the European Regional Development Fund. The ERDF reference is given in brackets, where applicable. Unless otherwise indicated, listed projects were/are implemented by government or government agencies.

These public investments are part of the regenerative process of Valletta. Regeneration is a process which takes many years, even decades. It is dependent on numerous actions over time of both the public and private sector. One project or one decision on its own will not regenerate an area.

Valletta benefitted from these public investments in a number of different ways. Some restored the built heritage and brought it into financially viable use. Others created spaces which are more amenable for pedestrians and which therefore allow visitors to better appreciate the historic heritage. Still others established new visitor attractions based on Valletta's heritage. They all contribute to making Valletta a more attractive and a much-improved tourism product.

Other projects made Valletta more accessible and these included the new terminus, the park and ride facilities at Floriana, the establishment of the Controlled Vehicle Access, the new Barrakka lift (ERDF 183) and new parking at Independence Arena. Public investments in transport infrastructure are vital for Valletta's regeneration because people will not invest in private property unless it is easily accessible by both public and private transport. In spite of the investments, difficulties for accessibility to Valletta persist.

In recent years, there was also investment in open air cultural events in Valletta, the most notable being Notte Bianca and New Year's Eve Celebrations. 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.

Over the years, there were also several private sector investments with historic buildings being restored and rehabilitated into residences, offices or shops. One would have expected that the significant public investment in Valletta would have leveraged private investment in property. This came about, but only to a limited degree. The level of private investment was generally slow and dilapidation of buildings in some areas of Valletta still persists.

Urban spaces and a sense of place

The quality of urban spaces is dependent on numerous factors involving the physical attributes of buildings, spaces and street patterns but also on other factors relating to the psychology of place (Montgomery, 1998: 95). When talking about streets and piazzas, people sometime refer to a 'sense of place' or *genius loci*. People experience something that goes beyond the physical form of the buildings. According to Montgomery (1998: 94), *"It is relatively straightforward to think of a successful place, and to experience it as such; it is much more difficult to discern why it is successful,...."*

In urban design literature, there are various studies which seek a better understanding of sense of place. Several writers describe and discuss a model based on three aspects of urban spaces namely 'physical setting', 'activity' and 'meaning' (Canter, 1977; Punter, 1991; Montgomery, 1998; Gustafson, 2001). The 'physical setting' refers to the visual aspect of a building or urban space based on its shape, aesthetic composition and the articulation of the building forms. 'Activity' refers to the presence of people and hence the liveliness of an urban space. 'Meaning' refers to the values, the symbols, the associations and the narrative which the building or urban space conveys to the visitor. The physical form and aesthetics of buildings impinge on the sense of place but it goes beyond that. Carmona et al (2003: 98) point out that *"The significance of the physicality of places is often overstated: activities and meaning may be as, or more important in creating a sense of place."*

Valletta's narrative and its association with the sea

Valletta's history provides a narrative going back to 1565 and before. Valletta's history and narrative is the 'meaning' which is an integral part of the experience of the City and its urban spaces. The sea features prominently in Valletta's narrative.

Valletta is located on a peninsula with Malta's two main harbours on either side. It was built to protect the entrance to the two harbours after the Knights of St. John repelled the Ottoman armada's attempt to take over Malta in 1565. Following their success in the Great Siege, the Knights of St. John enjoyed a period of prestige across Europe and the money poured in for the building of the City. Malta was vital for the defence of mainland Europe.

For hundreds of years, Valletta was the main entry point into Malta, with ships docking in the Grand Harbour alongside Valletta. Right up to the nineteen fifties, virtually all goods and people coming from overseas entered Malta through Victoria Gate, Valletta's gate facing the Grand Harbour.

In its bid for European Capital of Culture, Valletta 2018 Foundation recognised the central role of the sea to Valletta by identifying 'Islands' as one of the four themes for Valletta 2018 bid, the Bid Book (Valletta 2018 Foundation, 2012: 15) justifies this as follows: *"The sea has shaped our culture, manipulated our trades and industries, and influenced almost every part of our lives. Valletta exists solely because of the sea; its peninsula and strategic location fashioning the city as both defensive fortress and safe haven thanks to the natural harbours flanking it."*

The urban fabric of Valletta conveys a range of narratives, some associated with a Maltese identity whereas others are linked to past foreign occupiers. The Valletta streetscapes are characterised by the ever present Maltese balcony and the extensive use of the typical Maltese stone. The numerous churches at various locations in Valletta signify the importance of religion in the social and cultural life of the people and hence the relevance of the Catholic religion to the Maltese identity. On the other hand, the more dominant and distinctive architecture of auberges, palaces and public buildings are a reminder of the linkages of the City to the Knights of St. John. There are also buildings and structures which narrate Valletta's past during the British period from 1800 to 1964. Examples include St Paul's Cathedral, Victoria Gate and the Garrison Chapel in Castille Square (Ebejer, 2010).

The sea and Valletta as a tourism product

The two periods in history which left the most lasting mark on Malta and its urban landscape were the Knights of St. John (1530 – 1798) and the British (1800 – 1964). Each of these two periods is linked to an important historic episode. Ashworth and Tunbridge (2004: 15) explain how these historic episodes are also significant in terms of tourism product:

"Malta is strongly associated, especially in the imagination of foreigners, with two short episodes in Malta's history. The focus upon the two sieges that of 1565 and of 1940-43, has a number of clear advantages. Both are highly dramatic events, easily understood, with few historical ambiguities and with clear cut personification through heroes and villains. They are both capable of interpretation through 'experiences' and the sites, buildings and artefacts lend themselves to easy identification by the tourist. In both the local is strongly linked to the wider world through action and ideology. Malta becomes the focal point in a global struggle with which tourists can easily identify....The sieges are thus almost an ideal tourism product....."

The sea is a predominant element in these two narratives. There are numerous waterfront sites in Valletta and elsewhere in the Grand Harbour which enable the visitor to see, and even physically touch, tangible evidence of these two remarkable narratives, thereby making the narrative more powerful and real and thus the experience more interesting and enjoyable.

Distinguishing features of Valletta's shoreline

Valletta is a peninsula surrounded by sea on three of four sides. The sea is visible from most parts of the City, even from most of the inner streets. Wherever you are in the City, you are never more than a five minute walk away from the shoreline. In this context, all of Valletta, and hence all of its urban spaces, can be considered as being 'waterfront'. For the purpose of this paper, it is useful to distinguish between 'waterfront' and 'shoreline', the latter being the physical entity where water meets land.

The nature of the Valletta shoreline is very different to the shoreline of areas which one would typically describe as waterfront. The fortifications are a dominant feature along all of Valletta's shoreline. They act as a barrier between the inner parts of Valletta and the shoreline. Over a shoreline of several kilometres, the lines of fortifications limit movement between the City and the sea to just a few, the main ones being Barrakka lift, Victoria Gate, Jews Sally port and Marsamxett ferry area.

Another unique feature of the shoreline is that Valletta streets are at a much higher level than the shoreline. This is due to the fortifications but also because of the peninsula's topography. The observations made above about Valletta can also be made about Floriana, a 'suburb' of Valletta also located on the Sciberras peninsula. Both Valletta and Floriana can be considered as waterfront towns and yet in both cases, the connectivity of the inner streets to the shoreline is poor.

Valletta has a distinctive identity because of the built heritage which is present all across the City. The distinctive identity is reinforced by well-defined edges around its perimeter namely the shoreline on three of four sides and the fortifications on all four sides. The fortifications surrounding the city are impressive both for their extent as well as for their height. A sharp well-defined boundary gives the historic town a strong identity. The importance of 'edges' is highlighted in the work of Kevin Lynch (Lynch, 1960) and other urban design writers, who list edges as one of five '*aspects of the environment that left a strong image in the observers' mind*' (Carmona et al, 2003: 89), the other aspects being paths, districts, nodes and landmarks.

The iconic views of Valletta from across the Grand Harbour, and also those across Marsamxett Harbour, emphasise the City's distinct identity. A characteristic feature of Valletta's skyline is the stepping of buildings as well as two dominant landmarks, the massive dome of the Carmelite Church and the steeple of the Anglican Cathedral of St. Paul. Another feature is the line of fortifications close to the water's edge. This is a reminder not only of the defensive role of Valletta during the time of the Knights but also that this defensive role involved, to a large degree, maritime conflict. The form of the town and its fortifications together with the meanings and associations are vital contributors to Valletta's genius loci.

Valletta's iconic nature was given due recognition with its designation as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1980. It was the first entire city to be inscribed as such, with its well defined boundary being a contributory factor to this.



Iconic Valletta .



Valletta shoreline

A Valletta visitor's experience of the sea

One could talk of Valletta having different levels; the level of the sea and shoreline; the level over the bastions; and the level of the streets in the core of Valletta. When walking around Valletta, the visitor will experience the sea in diverse ways, with each 'level' providing a different experience. Along the shoreline, a walker would have high bastion walls to one side and the sea close by on the other. Along some stretches of the shoreline, the natural rock underfoot further enhances the experience.

At the 'level' of the bastions, the sea is seen from a distance, and from a higher level, as part of a wider view of the Grand Harbour. The view also includes buildings and historic structures on the other side of the Harbour. At this level, the night time views of the harbours are also scenic.

The third 'level', that from the inner streets of Valletta, provides yet another experience of the sea albeit very different from the previous two. The sea is visible, but barely, framed between the facades of high buildings in relatively narrow roads. From most streets in Valletta, the sea is visible in the distance. Valletta's grid iron street layout causes all east-west streets to lead directly from one waterfront to another, whereas the perpendicular streets lead from the land-front to the tip of the peninsula. The visitor is constantly walking towards or away from the sea.



Harbour views from the bastion level. (1) .



Harbour views from the bastion level. (2) .



Sea views from the inner streets (1)



Sea views from the inner streets (2)

For each ‘level’, natural light is an important factor which greatly influences people’s experience of space. As one Valletta foreign resident describes it (Times of Malta; 2010 a); *“I immediately fell in love with the combination of stone, sea and light.”* Light brings with it shade and shade brings with it contrast – the sharp contrast of one side of the street drenched in sunlight with the other side in shade. For the shoreline and the bastion levels in particular, the experience is heightened with the visual contrast of the bright blue sea and the yellow stones of the fortifications. People familiar with these views take them for granted but for first time visitors from, say, northern landlocked cities, the contrast of colours can be remarkable. It is one of the reasons why overseas visitors often note how enjoyable a visit to the Upper Barrakka Gardens is.

An unsuccessful urban space - Castille Place

The following are observations on an urban space which this writer considers to be unsuccessful in urban design terms, namely Castille Place. The space is very functional, with a layout dictated by the needs of the motor vehicle. Hence, the presence of a roundabout. It also includes a bus stop for the Park and Ride. Because of these uses, the predominant floor surface is tarmac.

The urban space has tremendous potential for a number of reasons. It is dominated by the Baroque facade of the Auberge de Castille. It is flanked by the austere St. James cavalier and the Stock Exchange. The former is a massive defensive structure which acts as a reminder of the Knights and their defensive works. The latter was originally the Garrison Chapel of the British. Each building, as well the urban space itself, have a story to tell. The piazza offers numerous and diverse outwards view over the Grand Harbour and over Valletta’s landward fortifications. The current layout of the piazza relegates the pedestrian to narrow pavements around the periphery of the piazza. These outward views cannot be enjoyed by pedestrians.



Castille Place.



Vantage points used as car park

With appropriate redesign including increased space for pedestrians, Castille Place has the potential to be one of the finest urban spaces in Valletta, without unduly compromising its function.

There are other locations around Valletta which could potentially provide be vantage points with scenic harbour views. Instead, the pavements for pedestrians are narrow, unkempt and/or blocked by shrubbery (for example the stretch of pavement from Biagio steps to Fort St. Elmo) In some instances, vantage points are used for car parking.

Successful spaces in Valletta

The following are some observations on some urban spaces which this writer considers to be successful. Some of these observations are based on the three aspects of the urban design model referred to previously, namely physical setting, activity and meaning.

Piazza San Gorg: Piazza San Gorg is along Republic Street, halfway between City Gate at one end of Valletta and Fort St. Elmo at the other. On one side of the piazza is the Grandmasters Palace, whereas on the other side is the Main Guard. Both are of historic and architectural importance. Until just a few years ago, the piazza was used for parking. It was not uncommon to see tourists walking in between parked cars to take photos of the Sette Giugno monument, which was within the piazza. Something which was totally unacceptable from a tourism point of view, was brought to an end in 2009 thanks to pedestrianisation.



Piazza San Gorg (1) .



Piazza San Gorg (2) .

The piazza today includes seating, as well as a water fountain which 'dances' to the music. In research being carried out by this writer, several tourists have noted how relaxing and enjoyable it is to sit in the piazza and watch other people going by or children playing with the water fountain. Interestingly, from one corner of the piazza, one can look down Republic Street towards Fort St. Elmo, with the sea clearly visible as a backdrop to the Fort. The 'physical attributes' of the piazza (i.e. the architectural interest of the buildings) combine with the 'meaning' (in terms of the history of the Grandmasters palace and other buildings) together with the 'activities' (in terms of people walking through the piazza or just sitting)

Siege Bell Memorial: The Siege Bell Memorial is located at a prominent location overlooking the Grand Harbour. It commemorates those who died in the Siege of Malta from 1940-1943 during World War II. It was inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth II and the President of Malta in 1992, on the 50th anniversary of the award of the George Cross to Malta. The monument was designed by Michael Sandle, a renowned British sculptor and assembled on the initiative of the George Cross Island Association. The Memorial is a unique example of how the sculptor/designer created a strong sense of place through design. A visitor to the memorial climbs up a long flight of steps to the belfry. The belfry's design is monumental in the form of an elliptical neo classical temple supported by ten, square-faced columns. Within the belfry is a huge bell which, supposedly, is tolled daily at noon. Upon reaching the belfry, the visitor is confronted with an open view of the Grand Harbour with the sea being virtually directly below.

Also below, a bronze catafalque overhangs the bastion parapet, symbolising the burial of the corpse of the unknown soldier at sea. The overall design and layout of the memorial is replete with narrative, with the 'meaning' being reinforced by the 'physical form'.



Siege Bell Memorial



Merchants Street before pedestrianisation



Merchants Street after pedestrianisation

Merchants Street: Merchants street runs the entire length of Valletta from Castille Place to lower Valletta. Until 2007, most of the width of the street was taken up with tarmac for moving traffic and parking. The street is close to and runs parallel to Republic Street which is Valletta's main shopping street. Its commercial potential, however, was not being used to the full because of the ever present traffic. Pavements along the side were usually crowded making walking difficult. Merchants Street boasts several historic buildings and it was not uncommon to see groups of tourists crowding the pavement while listening to the tour leader. All that changed with pedestrianisation.

People can walk freely down the road for shopping or sightseeing, safe from cars and without the nuisances of noise and pollution. The street also includes tables and chairs, confined in well-defined areas, as well as seating and potted trees. The street is characterised by the presence of people creating an enjoyable ambience. The pedestrianisation generated inward investment with the opening of new shops and refurbishment of existing ones. (Times of Malta; 2010 b);

Fort St. Elmo Heritage Experience - Museum and Ramparts Walk

Fort St. Elmo is at the tip of Valletta, strategically located to guard entrance into both the Grand harbour and Marsamxett harbour. The year 1417 is the earliest documented reference of a watch tower standing at the tip of Sceberras peninsula. Upon their arrival to Malta in 1530, the Knights immediately understood the strategic importance of the site. The fort, built in 1552, played a pivotal role in the Great Siege of 1565. Although the Fort eventually fell to the Turks, the Turkish forces were significantly weakened in the process, eventually leading to victory for the Knights and Maltese. After the Great Siege, a fortified city, Valletta, was constructed on the Sceberras peninsula. This was to protect Fort St. Elmo from canon fire from the higher ground of the peninsula (as had happened in the Great Siege). Over the years, the Fort was strengthened with the construction of a cavalier and a system of bastions and curtain walls on its seaward side. What is commonly referred to as Fort St. Elmo is in fact a complex system of fortifications. Before the Knights' departure from Malta in 1800, barracks blocks for troops were built within the Fort. During the time of the British, it was further adapted for military use. The Fort also played an important role during the Second World War.

Evidently the historic significance of the site is immense. Its history is closely linked with that of Valletta and of Malta. It features in the two most significant events in Malta's history; the Great Siege in 1565 and Siege of Malta from 1940-1943 during World War II.

Restoration works are currently underway. The project ¹, part funded by European Regional Development Fund (ERDF 244), is the responsibility of Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation on behalf of Government. The project area, totaling 3.9 hectares, includes the Fort itself and Carafa Enceinte (but does not include the area commonly referred to as Lower St. Elmo).

Fort St. Elmo and Carafa Enceinte currently include numerous buildings and structures which were in a poor state of repair or even derelict. These are now being restored and, more importantly, will be brought into a financially viable use. Upon completion the site will include a Military History Museum and the Valletta Museum, other display spaces as well as external interpretation facilities for various features within the Fort and along the Enceinte. On the basis of a cost benefit exercise, it was established that the operation of the museums and of the various facilities within the site will generate enough revenue for the historic buildings to be properly maintained, and hence, the project is compatible with principles of sustainable development. Fort St Elmo Heritage Experience, including the museum and the ramparts walk, will be managed and operated by Heritage Malta.

The site includes numerous buildings and structures each with a story to tell and each reflecting a particular time of the Fort's past. For example, if one talks about the design of fortifications in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there are tangible structures to demonstrate. Similarly, if one talks about the defence of the harbours during World War II, there are gun posts and pillboxes which tell the story. Other tangible elements of the narrative are the outwards views of the two harbours. It is not just about the physical aspect of the various military structures but also their location within the fortification system and the relation to the adjoining harbours. All these elements make it possible to create an exceptional visitor attraction.

The main objectives of the project (Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation, 2012) are (i) to restore and bring back to life historic buildings and structures and to do so in a manner which is financially sustainable, (ii) to convert what was previously a war machine into a machine for tourism, leisure, education and the appreciation of heritage, (iii) to create an outstanding visitor attraction and (iv) to enhance Malta's attractiveness as a tourism destination.



Fort St. Elmo (1)



Fort St. Elmo (2)

Fort St. Elmo Heritage Experience will be a catalyst for the regeneration of the lower end of Valletta. When in operation the visitor attraction will generate a steady flow of people. Increased activity could potentially generate increased investment by the private sector in restoration and reuse of historic in the area.

Conclusion

Valletta is a unique city due to many factors, one of which is its relationship with the sea. In the past decade, there have been significant improvements in the quality of urban spaces in Valletta. This was due to increased public sector investment. This paper highlights the relevance of the sea to Valletta and does this in the context of a discussion of an urban model which provides an explanation as to what makes urban spaces successful. The discussion is amplified by referring to examples of urban spaces in Valletta including both unsuccessful spaces (Castille Place) and successful spaces (Pjazza San Gorg, Siege Bell Memorial, Merchants Street and Fort St. Elmo).

Normally, the urban regeneration process involves significant public investment which in turn leverages private investment. In Valletta, private investment has been limited in spite of the significant public sector investments. This notwithstanding, without the investments in improved urban spaces in Valletta, the regenerative process would have been severely constrained.

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Notes

1. *As consultant to GHRC, the writer prepared the application for ERDF funds for 'Fort St Elmo Heritage Experience'. This included developing the concept for the project, in consultation with the project architects and Heritage Malta representatives. The application was submitted on 5th May 2011.*

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