

# **Developing project concepts for historic sites: Lessons learnt from Fort St. Elmo project**

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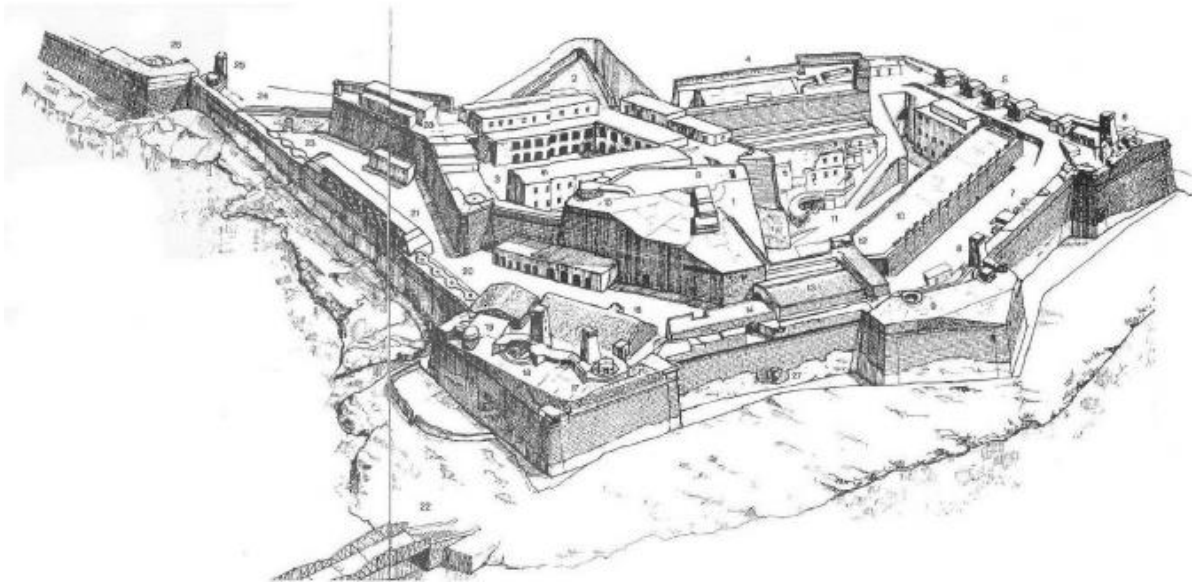
### **1. Introduction**

This presentation is about a project for the rehabilitation and reuse of Fort St. Elmo. The main purpose is to describe the process to change a dilapidated site to a prime visitor attraction. The paper discusses how issues were evaluated and how workable and financially viable solutions were derived. It concludes with lessons that can be learnt on how rehabilitation of historic sites is best approached.

What is referred to as Fort St. Elmo is in fact a complex system of fortifications spread over a large area. The site presented many challenges because of the extent of the area, the historic nature of buildings, structure and spaces and also because of the poor condition of most of the historic structures.

The actual works on site began in early 2012 although the preparations began long before that. Before works begin on site there was a long preparatory process starting in 2009. These included the development of the project concept, the drafting of the application for European Regional Development Funds and the architectural design. The project was inaugurated in April 2015.

The involvement of the writer in the Fort St. Elmo project began in 2009. It was as consultant to the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation, a government agency tasked with carrying out the project. Together with the client and with the appointed architect, it was his task to consider different options and come up with a proposed project which would be most viable in the long term. He was also tasked to prepare the application for European Regional Development funding. His involvement in the project ended in 2012 when works on site were well underway and the project site manager took over the coordination of the day to day site works.

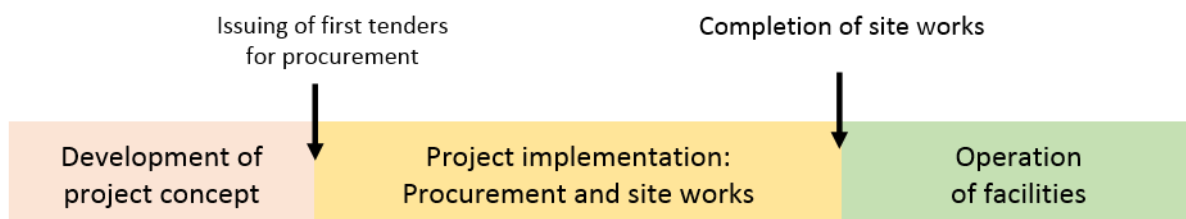


Source: Spiteri, S. (1996). *British Military Architecture in Malta*. Malta: Print Services Ltd.

## 2. Development of Project Concept

Picture this scenario. An officer in a public agency comes up with an idea for a project. The idea is discussed with his colleagues and superiors and there is an agreement in principle that the project is worth pursuing. These initial internal discussions are the start of a process namely the development of the project concept. But then, what's next? How is that idea developed into something more tangible and doable? What is the process that the agency has to go through to develop the concept?

Concept development of a project is process that comes before actual project implementation. In a very simplified format, the lifetime of a project can be schematically described as follows:



Concept development is often taken for granted. In most cases, it is carried out intuitively by persons with experience on projects. In some instances, it is carried out badly resulting in project failure. Project failure could happen either during project implementation (i.e. the project halted before completion) or during the operation of the facilities that are provided (operations of facilities discontinued or not operating in a manner to meet objectives).

This paper describes the process involved in developing the concept for a project, using the Fort St. Elmo project to illustrate. The project went through the process of a systematic development of the project concept prior to actual implementation. To simplify, the process is divided into five 'steps'. In practice, the steps are likely to overlap and it is not uncommon that one has to go back and revise the work carried out in previous steps.

Securing funding for projects is a very competitive process. Without funding the project would not have happened and therefore it was a priority to identify a project proposal that would be most likely successful in the bidding process.

To implement a project, it is advisable for the public agency, as clients, to set up a project team. The team should be led by a consultant or employee of the public agency. It would be preferable if the project team leader is a professional with a good understanding of urban development, like for example an urban planner or architect. During the project concept development phase the role of the project team leader will be central as important decisions on the project are taken. As the project moves on from concept development to implementation, the project leader takes a more secondary role, as other professionals take over, namely the project manager and the architect.

The steps for developing a project concept can be summarised as follows:

- Step 1: Understand the site
- Step 2: Identify constraints and opportunities
- Step 3: Decide on objectives and understand implications
- Step 4: Take strategic decisions for the project, taking into account the specifics of the site, the parameters of the project and in line with the chosen objectives
- Step 5: Work out the details of the project, based on the strategic decision

### **3. Stages in project concept development**

#### **Step 1: Understanding the site**

Understanding the site is primarily about physical aspects of the site. What structures are on site? What are the physical dimensions? It is also about how the site relates to its surroundings. Another aspect of site understanding is knowing about its history. Whether or not all or parts of the site is historical will determine the extent of intervention that may be permissible.

#### Fort St. Elmo project: Understanding the site

##### **The history**

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 cannon 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. 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. After the end of the British military base in Malta,

parts of Fort St. Elmo were used as a Police Academy. One of the structure, Vendome Battery, was used as a war museum.

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.

## The site

In 2012, the Maltese government decided to have the site restored. A process was initiated to decide on the site's eventual uses and also to apply for EU funds for its restoration. The project was entrusted to Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation, a government agency tasked with carrying out regeneration projects.

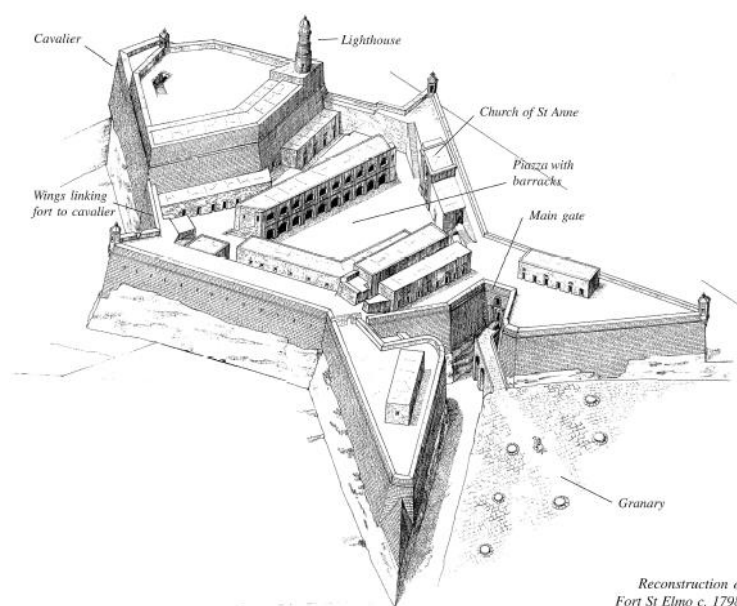
What is commonly referred to as Fort St. Elmo is in fact a complex system of fortifications. When in use as a police academy, the site was closed to the public. Because of its historical importance, it was featured on every tourist map, in spite not being opened to the public. Parts of St. Elmo fortifications were visible from outside its perimeter, so inevitably one would often see tourists trying to get a glimpse inside.

Being at the tip of a peninsula, the St. Elmo fortifications are very exposed to the elements. With three decades of neglect, the deterioration of the buildings and structures was inevitable. The only part which remained in a reasonably good state was that occupied by the Police Academy where some basic maintenance was carried out.

The Malta's War Museum was housed in Vendome battery, part of St. Elmo fortifications. The Museum offered an interesting experience to tourists on Malta's military role in the Mediterranean including many narratives relating to World War II. Because of the substantial number of artefacts that need to be displayed, the general ambience of the museum is cluttered thus detracting from the overall experience.

St. Elmo fortification system consists of three parts

- Fort St. Elmo itself (figure below)
- The bastions encircling the Fort, henceforth referred to as Carafa Enceinte
- Lower St. Elmo.



Reconstruction of  
Fort St Elmo c. 1798.

Source: Spiteri, S. (2001) *Fortresses of the Knights*, Book Distributors Limited

Lower St. Elmo is located at lower grounds in a gap between the Fort. St. Elmo and an outer bastion wall. Buildings within it were used by the Knights as stores and later by the British as barracks.

The decision was taken to restore and bring back into use two of these three parts namely Fort St. Elmo and Carafa Enceinte. The site is a large area and clearly it would not have been possible to source sufficient funds to restore all three parts.

The project site (i.e. Fort St. Elmo and Carafa Enceinte) totals 3.9 hectares (i.e. 39,000 square metres). Most of it is open space, with bastion and fort walls acting as boundaries. Within the open space there were numerous buildings and structures, all of which were in a poor state of repair.

## **Step 2: Identifying constraints and opportunities**

The particular circumstances of a site presents a set of constraints and opportunities that are unique to that site. To develop a viable project, the project team has to be clear as to what those constraints and opportunities are. Any project presents a series of challenges and the Fort St. Elmo project was no exception.

### Fort St. Elmo project: Identifying constraints and opportunities

The site for the Fort St. Elmo project is very large and all the buildings and structures within it are of historic importance. This had cost implications. With a large chunk of the budget going to restoration, careful consideration was required on how the budget would best be distributed. Restoring all the buildings, structures and bastions would have made the project cost prohibitive.

Identifying suitable uses was difficult for a number of reasons. The historic nature of the buildings and of the site meant that modern alterations and additions would be very difficult to get endorsed through the planning process. Moreover, the internal spaces within the buildings were small. So although the total internal spaces was quite substantial, this was fragmented in a large number of buildings. This created serious difficulties on the potential uses.

The site also offered a number of opportunities. The site offers exceptional views of both the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett harbour. St. Elmo fortifications is arguably the most important historic site on the islands mostly because it includes narratives of two major events in Maltese history: the great Siege of 1565 and World War II (1940 – 1944). The site is within walking distance to the centre of Valletta, a city that is visited by more than 1.2 million tourists each year. An added advantage of the site was the open spaces. Spaces within a system of fortifications provide an excellent venue for the staging of small scale open air cultural and artistic events. The rehabilitated historic buildings would provide a unique heritage backdrop.

The project team was well aware of a further constraint relating to the process, rather than the site. The Maltese planning system subject historic sites and buildings to very strict regulatory controls. Any new structure or any alterations to the historic structure would have been subject to intense regulatory scrutiny and this would have necessitated a lot of time to resolve. In any project, excessive delay is unwelcome, but for an EU-funded project unreasonable delay would risk the loss of funding and the premature ending of the project.

### **Step 3: Decide on objectives and understand implications**

In any project it is vital to be clear about what the objective are early on. When there are different and conflicting objectives, confusion can result and this will cause endless delays. That is why it is important to have a single agency responsible for the project, even if as much as possible all stakeholders are involved. In deciding on objective, there needs to be a proper understanding of the implications. For example, an objective may result in excessive costs. Such an objective would have to be discarded as it could jeopardize the project.

#### Fort St. Elmo project: Decide on objectives and understand implications

The primary objective for the Fort St. Elmo project was to restore and bring back to life historic buildings and structures and to do so in a manner which is financially sustainable. In effect, the project would convert what was previously a war machine into a machine for tourism, leisure, education and the appreciation of heritage. In doing so, the project would create an outstanding visitor attraction and enhance Malta's attractiveness as a tourism destination.

The project will further enhance Malta's tourism product offer with tourism facilities which will be visited all-year round. This will help reduce seasonality.

The project is conducive to sustainable tourism activity because (i) the historic buildings which are in a poor state of repair or even derelict will be restored (ii) the income generated, primarily from sale of entry tickets to Museum, will be sufficient to cover operational and maintenance costs, thus ensuring continued sustainable operation without the need for government to subsidize its operations.

The project will result in an upgrade of the tourism product particularly the tourism product offered by the fortified historic city and World Heritage Site, Valletta. It is worth noting that one of the main attractions of Valletta is the fortifications that surround it on all sides as well as its history. Opening up Fort St. Elmo to visitors will further increase awareness amongst visitors of these important features of the historic fortified city of Valletta.

Fort St. Elmo is arguably the most important historic site within this tourism zone as well as in Malta, apart from having the most unique geographical location, at the tip of a peninsula separating two natural harbours. The project will transform this site from one which is poorly kept and not open to visitors, to one with a pleasant ambience where the historic relevance of the site can be fully appreciated resulting in upgrade of the tourism product.

Government's objectives include a better seasonal spread of tourist flows and diversification of the traditional seasonal dependence. This can be achieved by developing niche markets. The two museums and ramparts walk could be instrumental in aiding tourism authorities in developing niche tourism markets related to the themes referred to above. .

Valletta was designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1980. This offers tremendous opportunities in terms of portraying Valletta as a unique and remarkable part of Malta's tourism product. For the realisation of Valletta's branding potential, the cultural-tourism product including important historic sites such as Fort St. Elmo and Carafa bastions need to be restored and maintained in the best possible condition.

The project will result in better utilization, conservation, enhancement and presentation of this important site which is a key component of Valletta's and Malta's cultural heritage.

Fort St. Elmo and Carafa bastions include the 'remains' of three epochs in Malta's history spanning from the early 1400s up to 1979. By means of interpretation as well as the complex of museums, the project will bring this unique cultural heritage back to life.

Fort St. Elmo and the adjoining bastions are in effect a war machine which has been altered and improved in line with improvements in warfare. The project entails the restoration of buildings and structures which are part of this fortification system. The Project will result in the revalorization of this integral and focal part of Malta's cultural-tourism product.

Another objective was for the newly refurbished Fort. St. Elmo to act as a catalyst for the regeneration of the lower end of Valletta. When in operation the new facilities would generate a steady flow of people. Increased activity could potentially generate increased investment by the private sector in restoration and reuse of historic buildings in lower Valletta.

#### **Step 4: Taking strategic decisions**

The next step is for the client to take strategic decisions on the project. Decisions are to be taken in line with the decided objectives, taking into account the constraints and maximising on the opportunities.

##### Fort St. Elmo project: Taking strategic decisions

When the GHRC, on behalf of the Maltese Government, decided to embark on the Fort St. Elmo project the intention was to restore an important historic site and bring it back to viable use. There was no clear idea of what the eventual uses would be and it was up to the project team to come up with doable proposals.

The first decision taken was to avoid alterations, extensions or demolitions of the historic structures. No new structures were to be proposed. The only changes considered were those of absolute necessity like for example to provide full accessibility. The only intervention allowed on the historic structures was restoration. The reason for this decision were concerns about potential delays and the need to focus financial resources on restoration of the historic structures.

The inability to make major changes to the structures had implications on the uses of the new structures. The project team decided to have two primary uses for the site namely a museum and a ramparts walk.

- The museum would be focused in the internal spaces of the buildings with different buildings having different themes. The museum would be against payment.
- The ramparts walk would make use of the external spaces. This would stretch along the entire length of the bastions that surround the fort. Being along the bastions, walkers would be able to enjoy the outward views of the harbours, whilst appreciating the historic heritage.

Because of the extent of the site, it was immediately apparent that significant funds would be required and hence the availability of EU funds was an opportunity for the project to be carried out. From a cost benefit analysis, 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. This was essential not only for reasons of sustainable development but also because long term financial viability is a requirement of the ERDF application. As the details of the project were worked out, the cost benefit analysis was further refined to give greater confidence of its reliability.

Another strategic decision taken referred to the eventual management of the facilities upon completion. Malta has a poor record on management of public spaces, more often than not because responsibilities for public spaces are not adequately defined. To ensure that the public spaces within Fort St. Elmo fortification system are well managed, it was decided that, when completed, all the site will be managed by Heritage Malta. Heritage Malta was chosen because it is the agency that operates government-owned museums. It was also decided to involve Heritage Malta in the design process and the agency was requested to appoint a representative on the project team. Being the eventual operator, Heritage Malta was better placed to determine the requirements of the museum and ensure that is designed in accordance to the latest best practice in museology.

## **Step 5: Working out the details**

Following strategic decisions, the project team works out the details of the project. Decisions on ancillary uses are taken and the required floor areas are tentatively quantified based on the requirements resulting from the strategic decisions. It is also for the project architect to translate strategic decisions to architectural design. During the architectural design process, the role of the project team leader remains essential to ensure that the design being developed is in line with the objectives and also compliant with the strategic decisions.

### Fort St. Elmo project: Working out the details

The project team decided to include the following in the project. These various facilities were included as part of the ERDF application. (The present tense is used although some of the minor facilities might not have been included in the end project after all.)

#### **Military History Museum.**

The new museum is within the various buildings that are in the Fort. The museum presents the military history of Malta from Neolithic times up to 1914. It includes the following displays (these are listed in the sequence that they will feature in the museum): (i) Bronze Age to Medieval (ii) Order of St. John (iii) The Great Siege (iv) The French interlude (v) The British up to 1914. (vi) World War I (1914 – 1919) (vii) Inter-War Period (viii) World War II (1939 -1945) (ix) Post-war British forces in Malta (x) Ball and Abercrombie Display (xi) 1979 onwards + Armed Forces of Malta Display.

The new museum replaces and extends the previous National War Museum, previously located in Vendome Battery (one of the buildings for the fortification system around Fort S. Elmo). The internal floor area of museum display increased from the 600 to 3,000 square metres.

Ancillary facilities like office space, library, artefacts repository and archive are also provided. These ancillary facilities were lacking in the former War Museum. Further spaces is provided for museum operational purposes such as ticketing, security and storage.

#### **A Story of Valletta Museum**

The Story of Valletta museum is in Vendome Battery, which was occupied by the National War Museum. No restoration works were carried out on Vendome Battery as this was restored a few years earlier. The Story of Valletta museum will focus on the history of the City since its inception and on the people who lived in it.



### **Open spaces within Fort**

The open spaces provides numerous interesting inward views (of the buildings and features) and outward views (of the harbours). The central piazza of the Fort is open to visitors without payment but the rest of the other open spaces within the Fort are only accessible to museum visitors who have a paid-up ticket. One very important open space is the roof of the Cavalier from where visitors can enjoy views of the harbours, of Valletta and of Fort St. Elmo itself. The buildings within the Fort are provided with (external) interpretation so that visitors can appreciate each building's significance and history.

### **Open Air Venue for Cultural and other Events**

The external spaces within the Fort provide an excellent venue for the staging of small scale open air cultural and artistic events including drama and music. The rehabilitated historic buildings provide a unique heritage backdrop. Making the best possible use of the context, namely the Fort, and its history enhances the experience and the appreciation of the Fort.

For any event organised, all structures are of temporary/reversible nature and stand-alone. Facilities for performers including changing rooms, toilets and storage are provided in an adjoining block.

### **Ramparts Walk along Enceinte**

The Walk will be along the entire length of the bastions surrounding the Fort. It provide numerous interesting views of the buildings and features as well as outward views of the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour. The Walk is a safe and comfortable urban space free of the intrusion and pollution of vehicles.

The Walk includes free seating and rest areas for walkers including sheltered seating. The bastions includes numerous structures built for defence purposes. The Ramparts Walk experience is enhanced with the interpretation of these historic structures. Visitors are able to see the restored remains of the various gun emplacements and other structures. By means of interpretation, visitors are able to appreciate and understand the history and intended use of the various structures in a 'war machine' which was continuously adapted in accordance to the warfare technology of the time. Interpretation is by means of appropriately designed and located information panels.

### **Other facilities**

An orientation room is located at the entrance to the Ramparts Walk. It includes information to enable visitors to plan their visit, be it for the Museum or for the Ramparts Walk.

Within the Fort, there are a church and a small chapel. The church is used for temporary exhibitions and small musical performances. The chapel will continue to be used for religious services.

Two catering facilities are provided within the Fort. The main purpose of the catering facilities is to service visitors to the Museum and also visitors to the Ramparts Walk. It is envisaged that the catering facilities being provided will be open throughout the day and evening up to the closing time of the Ramparts Walk. The catering facilities within the Fort will also service people who will be attending the open air cultural events. One facility is provided on the ground floor of the block adjoining the central piazza. A second smaller catering outlet is provided at an upper level of the

Fort to capitalize on the outward views. Each of the catering establishment will have external tables and chairs.

Small retail outlets are provided, the main one being a museum shop within a block adjoining the central parade ground.

One of the retail spaces can also double up as a tourist information office. The Tourism Information Office will provide a service to people visiting the museums or who are walking along the Ramparts Walk. Visitors will be able to get information on places to visit in Malta and Gozo, including numerous museums and sites managed by Heritage Malta.

It is envisaged that a space along the Ramparts Walk, just outside the Porta del Soccorso, will be used for occasional open air market of, say, traditional crafts or books. The spaces outside and within the arcades provides an excellent venue for such activities.

An office is provided for military related voluntary organisations such as the National War Museum Association. This Association provides invaluable support to the Military History Museum.

A number of public conveniences are being provided at various locations in the Fort and along the Enceinte.

#### **Parking for energy efficient small vehicles**

Support infrastructure is provided for energy efficient small vehicles (electric cars, electric scooters and/or bicycles). These are located at either end of the Ramparts Walk. This will include facilities for charging of vehicles and space for parking. The idea is to encourage the use of energy efficient vehicles as opposed to the use of private car.

No vehicles will be allowed within the Fort and along the Enceinte except for energy efficient small vehicles. Service vehicles will be allowed in at predetermined service hours.

## **4. Lessons learnt and conclusion**

- There should be a single agency responsible for project concept development and implementation. Responsibilities shared between different agencies and departments is a recipe for failure.
- On the other hand, develop a project team with the involvement of different stakeholders. This ensures that decisions taken by the implementing agency are well-informed.
- Make sure that the end user of the site is involved in the developing of the project concept. It is the end user who knows what is required to operate the eventual selected use and this will ensure that funds are spent in the best manner possible.
- Be clear early on what you want to achieve with the project.
- The long term financial viability is key to the success of the project. Failure to secure a financial viable use will mean that the site and buildings may eventually will be abandoned. Historic buildings will be left to deteriorate because there will be no income to sustain its proper maintenance.
- Ensure that what you propose is well within parameters of planning regulations. Departures from planning constraints will inevitably cause delays.

- Consider carefully transport issues. How will people get to your site? This is particularly important if the selected use generates large numbers of people.
  - Do not look at the site in isolation. Consider it part of a larger urban area.
  - Public participation at the project concept stage is advisable, if anything to develop a sense of ownership of the community to the project.
  - Be wary of prima-donna architects and of narrow corporate interests.
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### **Abstract**

The development of a project concept is often taken for granted. In most development projects, it is carried out intuitively by the architect or other experienced professional. Ill-advised project concept development may result in failure of the project. This paper describes the process involved in developing the concept for a project, using the Fort St. Elmo project as a case study. Fort St. Elmo project went through the process of a systematic development of the project concept prior to actual implementation. The paper presents it as a process in five overlapping and iterative steps. Fort St. Elmo project transformed a dilapidated site to a prime visitor attraction. The paper discusses how issues were evaluated and how workable and financially viable solutions were derived. It concludes with lessons that can be learnt on how rehabilitation of historic sites is best approached.

### **Short author bio**

Dr. John Ebejer is an architect, urban planner and tourism consultant with twenty-five years experience. He was involved in numerous planning projects including the Tourism Master Plan for Malta (1990), the Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands (1992), various local plans and development briefs. Between year 2000 and 2004, for the Malta Tourism Authority, he coordinated numerous initiatives and projects with the more important projects being the beach replenishment project at St. George's Bay and countryside walks for Malta and Gozo. After 2004, he was consultant to public sector agencies on several major projects, his role being to develop ideas and concepts for important sites and translate them into viable projects. These included 'Fort St. Elmo Heritage Experience - Museum and Ramparts Walk', the National Aquarium at Qawra and Pembroke Garden. He also prepared the relevant applications for ERDF funds. In 2013, he co-authored selected chapters of the Malta Tourism Authority report 'Tourism Product of the Maltese Islands'. He completed his PhD in 2015 and is now full time academic at the University of Malta with a special interest in tourism product development, urban regeneration and spatial planning.