

Note by the Chair

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When it comes to the care of industrial heritage in Malta, discussion is seriously lacking. There are however many players in the field – who individually or in small groups, as private individuals or as public officers, are doing a tremendous amount of work not only to salvage what still remains, but also to make that which is left known and accessible to the general public. These pioneers include professionals, such as engineers, and conservators, as well as far-sighted enthusiasts. Organisations, ranging from NGOs such as the Malta Aviation Museum and Din I-Art Helwa, to Government authorities and agencies such as the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) and Heritage Malta, are also deeply involved in this area. Private organisations, like The Farsons Foundation, Bank of Valletta plc and GO plc are also committed to preserve the elements of industrial heritage which pertain to their sectors.

This discussion amongst all of these players has now started. The catalyst has been the conference on industrial heritage organised by The Farsons Foundation, in collaboration with the Department of the Built Heritage of the University of Malta. Within the programme of this day-long conference held on 1st February 2013, a panel discussion was given pride of place. The distinguished guests on the panel included Mr Joseph Magro Conti (MEPA), Mr Godwin Vella (Heritage Malta), Mr Ray Polidano (Malta Aviation Museum), Prof. Robert Ghirlando (Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Malta) and Mr James Licari (from the organisation of Conservator-Restorers MapCoRe). The discussion was chaired by Prof. JoAnn Cassar (Head, Department of the Built Heritage, University of Malta). Interesting and important contributions from the floor included those made by Simone Mizzi (Din I-Art Helwa), Vanessa MacDonald (Bank of Valletta), Michael Farrugia (Farsons), Dr John C Betts (Faculty of Engineering, University of Malta), Joseph Schirò (Heritage Malta) and Dr Nicholas Vella (Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta).

The discussion started with each panel member being asked to give his view on two issues: how he felt industrial heritage in Malta is being catered for at present, and how the care of this heritage in Malta can be improved. It emerged from these interventions that Malta is lagging way behind several other European countries, not only in the care of this heritage sector, but also in awareness of the fact that

this heritage does merit being rescued from an ignoble death. One example of an important site which is all but lost was quoted by Prof. Ghirlando, being the wartime underground power station at Kordin which has six unique diesel engines – half of the 12 such engines still existing in the world. Other sites worth conserving (and in some cases some sporadic work has started) include the steam turbine at the Marsa Power Station, pumping station engines and underground flour mills, as well as the 1907 workshop at the Vincenzo Bugeja Conservatory. However, as pointed out by several panel members, particularly Mr Polidano and Mr Vella, both the private and the public sector are making serious headway in this respect, as public awareness continues to grow.

Interest in our industrial heritage is not, however, all recent in origin. The Government of Malta, following a number of initiatives by public-spirited individuals, set up the National War Museum in 1974, to preserve and present artefacts pertaining to the two World Wars (Vella, this volume). In 1994, the Malta Aviation Museum Foundation, an NGO, was set up, becoming the first privately driven foundation of its kind in Malta to care for at least one element of our industrial heritage (Polidano, this volume). Just one year earlier, in 1993, Prof. Robert Ghirlando had made a laudable effort to raise awareness of Malta's industrial heritage through his contribution on the subject in an edited volume on Birgu: a Maltese Maritime City (Ghirlando, this volume). Thus, during the last two or three decades of the 20th century, individuals and the Government were already making strides to keep this important part of our heritage alive. This work has been greatly helped by the scheduling of buildings pertaining to this period by MEPA, including the Rediffusion building which has not only been scheduled but also restored – a great challenge due to its being built of early concrete, the restoration of which is still relatively new in Malta. More recently, the NGO Din l-Art Helwa is currently putting in time and money to restore the Delimara Lighthouse with its mechanism. Also to be mentioned are the young professional conservator-restorers who have also joined in the effort to protect this heritage.

With representatives of both public and private organisations on the discussion panel, many of whom were themselves the very pioneers of the movement to care for local industrial heritage, it was to be expected that the discussion would be interesting, lively and long. And so it was. After a brief introduction of all of the members of the panel to the other participants, each outlined his thoughts and aspirations on the local situation. The situation, everyone agreed, was not ideal. Too much is being lost; awareness is far from sufficient and finances severely lacking. Other points were raised from the floor in addition to these points – these included

the great need to document, as well as preserve our industrial heritage. And this does not include only the tangible heritage, i.e. the machines, aeroplanes, buses and buildings, but also the intangible – memories and experiences of the many workers – females included it must be stated – who devoted their working lives to working in the early industrial ventures in the country. Examples which were mentioned, besides the iconic Farsons Brewery, included early equipment and buildings pertaining to the Drydocks and shipyards, as well as the telecommunications and transport sectors. Challenges mentioned by different participants included not only those financial, but also those related to space (where to keep the machinery and vehicles), personnel (to run the sites and also to document and carry out research) and conservation issues. Panel participants also underlined the importance of the challenge of prioritisation – what do we keep and what can we afford to lose?

It was however also pointed out that there is hope – hope in the sterling work being done by the Malta Aviation Museum, acquiring and displaying, salvaging and restoring, aircraft and memorabilia; in Heritage Malta, which runs the War Museum and the National Maritime Museum, which houses the salvaged engine of the grab dredger Anadrian and which has recently taken 93 old buses into its custody, and has now also appointed for the first time a Curator for Industrial Heritage. Hope in Engineers like Prof. Ghirlando, who does not miss an opportunity to share his lifelong enthusiasm and extensive knowledge regarding the importance of this heritage, and how fast and how much is being lost. Hope in MEPA, which is scheduling industrial buildings and administering grant schemes for the restoration of heritage buildings. And hope in the young conservator/restorers, many of whom are members of MapCoRe, who with their professional training and enthusiasm are out to extend a helping hand in the conservation of this heritage.

And hope in the figure of The Farsons Foundation, which is spearheading this discussion, and setting an example through the planned restoration, and exhibition of its Old Brewery, a true marvel of a building, purposely built as a brewery – a pioneer in its heyday and a well known and well-loved landmark in the Maltese Islands.

Several concrete proposals were made by both panellists and other participants in order to ensure that the future for industrial heritage would be a bright one. Particular emphasis was placed on the fact that it was especially necessary to make an effort to increase awareness (in all spheres and at all levels) of the importance of preserving our industrial heritage, and to promote the dissemination of information in this field. It was also considered important to encourage networking among the various individuals and entities working or volunteering in this field, not only for the exchange of information, but also to possibly create museums and/or trails which

could include various features of our industrial heritage, thus sharing the costs and responsibilities (specific museums such as, for example, one dedicated exclusively to telecommunications may turn out not to be viable). However, it was also emphasised that context and location of the machinery were extremely important, and should be retained wherever possible, as well as keeping the machinery in good working condition. Other challenges mentioned included the conservation of the materials of our industrial heritage – from early concrete, to steel, glass and even the issues around the elimination of asbestos.

The participants in this conference all expressed disappointment at the neglect, the abandon, and indeed the loss, of so much of our industrial heritage, the lack of coordination and the scarcity of finances. But much is being preserved for future generations by passionate individuals and organisations who have this heritage at heart. The fact that so many individuals, young as well as old, enthusiasts and professionals, from the private and public sectors, have set aside a whole day to meet, discuss and debate this theme, as well as the interest which the event has generated, indeed augurs well for the future.