



## Living in Valletta: the liveability of a historic city

(paper)

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This short paper will consider the liveability of Valletta today, based on my experience as a resident bringing up a young family in Valletta over the past decade. It will focus on four key themes, not because they are the only issues, or even the most important, but simply because I have become acutely aware of them, as areas where Valletta's liveability is under threat. These are (i) shorelines, (ii) soundscapes (iii) viewsapes (iv) social fabric & affordable housing

Valletta is no stranger to sieges, and is today once again under siege. First conceived as a consequence of the siege of Rhodes, it was then created in the wake of the siege of 1565. After witnessing further sieges in the Napoleonic period, it suffered much punishment during the Second World War. Today it is under a siege of a different kind, which is however no less of a threat to its fabric, its sense of place, and the quality of life of its residents. The effects of this new siege will be examined in each of the four areas listed above.

### (i) Shorelines

Standing on a narrow peninsula between two magnificent harbours, Valletta is defined and delimited by its shorelines. The narrow band of foreshore between the outer walls of the city and the sea has for centuries been pressed into service for trade and storage, fishing and shelter. Today it represents a vital lung and recreational space for residents who are otherwise deprived of gardens and open spaces. The foreshore is a vital node for popular leisure activities such as swimming or fishing, which have become integral to the quality of life of Valletta's residents.

Pressures on the shoreline are ever on the increase. Over the past decade, a growing number of proposals have been put forward for more quays and berthing facilities for cruise liners, yacht marinas and breakwaters. The implementation of any of these proposals could have a devastating effect on existing uses by Valletta's communities, and could have a direct negative impact on the liveability of the city.

### (ii) Soundscapes

One of the great discoveries for me upon moving into Valletta a decade ago was its rich and varied soundscapes, which ebb and flow to their own rhythms and cadences. Voices and church bells, the flurry of commuters at the beginning and end of the working day, alternating with peaceful lulls in midafternoon and evening, in an endless orchestra with no conductor, shaping the acoustic space inhabited by the residents of the city, an intrinsic element of their quality of life.

This soundscape is being rent apart and drowned out by a new wave of noise. The impact of the recent re-designation of parts of Strait Street as a 24-hour entertainment destination has been rapid, relentless, and devastating for the lives of nearby residents. Several residents have reported how the constant throb of piped music has become unbearable, and some have already moved out. The same is happening in neighbourhoods where restaurants have mushroomed, such as Archbishop Street. The number of hotels and catering establishments has increased exponentially over the past five years, bringing with it a wave of noise that is directly threatening the health and wellbeing of existing communities. The severity of this acoustic impact is made worse by the particular acoustics of Valletta's streets and buildings. Noises at street level tend to echo and reverberate up the steep walls that hem in the streets, and when windows are open in the warmer months, may as well be inside residents' houses and bedrooms. A pair of revelers returning to their car after a late dinner has the ability to disturb the sleep of several hundred residents. For this reason, residents are increasingly objecting to applications for new catering establishments to be opened, particularly in areas designated as Residential Areas in the Grand Harbour Local Plan. Valletta is under siege, and unless its liveability is defended more vigorously, its liveability will quickly fall to that siege.

### **(iii) Viewscapes**

The visual kaleidoscope that is Valletta has been treasured and celebrated in four and a half centuries' worth of paintings, drawings and photographs. The dramatic form of the peninsula, and the order of a grid-iron plan superimposed on its steeply undulating contours, give the city its distinctive visual character. Buildings from different periods are held harmoniously together by a common grammar of geometry, volumes, and the ubiquitous limestone. The roofscape of the city echoes the contours of the land beneath, and is intrinsic to the values and qualities of the city.

The present onslaught on Valletta is very much in evidence in its impact on its views and vistas. The roofscape is a particularly vulnerable dimension of the city.





As noted by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2009, more clear regulation of changes and additions to Valletta's roofscape is required. Every other week, a new structure is puncturing the skyline of the city. Too often, the approval of such additions has been justified on the grounds that it is either set back from the street, and therefore not visible from street level in front of the building, or that it does not rise higher than nearby buildings, therefore not rising above the profile of the city when viewed from a distance. Both these lines of argument are myopic and destructive. The viewpoints onto the city are infinitely varied, and include viewpoints from other rooftops, balconies and windows within the city, or popular public viewpoints such as the Upper Barrakka Gardens and Lower Barrakka Gardens. From such viewpoints, the impact of each addition of a penthouse or 'washroom' (the current euphemism in planning jargon for any rooms added at rooftop level) is screamingly obvious.

Bodies that are expected to act in the public interest are hardly setting the best example. The gigantic tapestry hall that would tower over Merchant Street if the Saint John's Co-cathedral Museum extension is built would dramatically alter many of the perspectives along and around this axis. Walking up Merchant Street at present, for example, I find that from the moment I walk past the former Jesuit College, my eye is drawn in by the lantern and dome of Saint James' church, which delightfully commands the perspective of the street. The proposed tapestry hall would block out that view, and my life would be so much the poorer. In the neighbourhood of the house where I live, an massive, 1,000 square metre rooftop platform has been proposed to surmount the roof of the Long Ward of the former Sacra Infermeria. Meanwhile several fabulously preserved townhouses are being mutilated with pseudo-historic additions as they are converted into boutique hotels, on the dubious pretext that without rooftop additions they would not be economically viable. Valletta is under siege, and the qualities that distinguish it are visibly being eroded by the day.

#### **(iv) Social fabric & affordable housing**

The last of the four points that were chosen for this brief presentation is the impacts that are being observed and experienced on the city's social fabric itself. In spite of decades of restoration and rehabilitation, as several other speakers have noted, the city's population remains in decline. The familiar factors of an ageing population and many vacant and derelict properties are now being compounded by new threats. The threats to liveability outlined above, such as the increase in noise pollution, is already driving some residents out of the city. Valletta is clearly at a crossroads. The decisions that are taken over the next couple of years, in the final run-up 2018, when it will be Valletta's turn to host the European Capital of Culture title, will determine the direction the city will take for decades to come. On the one hand, there is the route of unbridled and opportunistic building activity, which may make some short term financial gains, but will leave communities gutted and displaced, and permanently scar the historic fabric of the city, and degrade its long-term economic potential. On the other hand, there is the route of sustainable and integrated development of the city, which has at its heart the wellbeing of existing resident communities.

One of the current dynamics is that low to middle income families have been priced out of the Valletta property market by the inflated prices driven by gentrification. The fact that the Government is the biggest property owner in the city, however, puts it in a unique stead to implement policies to help



reverse this trend. The quarter of the city bound by Bakery Street, Auberge d’Aragon and Auberge de Baviere, for instance, is largely government-owned, and contains a concentration of vacant and dilapidated buildings. It is in many ways the ideal testbed for an experiment in affordable housing, where clearly defined criteria would be used to allow new families and first time buyers to invest in the city. For the benefits of such a scheme to endure, the ongoing management of the ownership of such property would be vital, that is such properties should not be allowed onto the free market, but continue to be restricted to the preferred classes of candidates.

## **Conclusion**

Valletta is experiencing more investment and interest than any other time since before the Second World War. It is an opportunity to be seized, harnessed by values and vision, and pressed into the service of the long-term sustainability and liveability of the city.