

Cittadella - the Re-Discovered Treasure

JOHN CREMONA

Introduction

The cranes, excavators and heavy machinery that for more than five years invaded the peacefulness and tranquility of Cittadella are gone and almost completely forgotten. Visitors to Cittadella are struck with awe when they see the bulky mass of the fortifications from a distance or when they actually stroll along the narrow winding streets of the old city of Gozo. Cittadella is like a re-discovered treasure, a newly polished pearl that surprises one and all with what it has to offer.

This was possible through a long process of thinking, planning and action undertaken by the Ministry for Gozo over the last decade in order to conserve, restore and rehabilitate one of Gozo's major historic sites and a prime touristic attraction.

Cittadella is a unique site because in a space bound by a one kilometre stretch of fortifications it embodies important and sometimes unique characteristics be

it of a historical, natural, military, architectural, archaeological, religious or social nature.

The Projects

During these last years, Cittadella has seen a spectacular transformation through two EU co-funded projects under the European Regional Development Fund. One project, coordinated by the Restoration Unit in Malta, addressed the problem of the fortifications. Not only were the high and massive bastions consolidated and restored but a pressing issue of the stabilisation of the underlying soft 'green sand' bedrock was addressed for the first time in the history of Cittadella. This has ensured that not only the fortification walls look as new but the underlying bedrock has also been secured. This project cost around €7 million.

The other project, also co-funded by the EU and coordinated by the Ministry for Gozo, was responsible for the implementation of a number



of key actions recommended by the Cittadella Masterplan. This document was drawn up in 2010 through funding by the European Economic Area Financial Mechanisms (EEA) following a wide consultation process with all the stakeholders of Cittadella. Funding for this project was secured in 2012 and following years of preparation, works on site kicked off in March 2014. The project was inaugurated just two years and three months later by the Prime Minister on 30 June 2016 and cost around €14 million.

A quick glance at the major components of this project includes :

The conversion of two unused water reservoirs built during the nineteenth century into a multi-lingual Visitors' Centre which has become one of the main attractions at Cittadella and which since its inauguration has attracted more than 170,000 visitors. The Visitors' Centre and the responsible architect Martin Xuereb were the winners of the prestigious awards for architecture and restoration awarded by the Kamra tal-Periti and Din l-Art Helwa during 2016.

Up till recent years there were attempts to convert the Cittadella ditch into a car park. Fortunately this did not materialise, rather, it has been ably rehabilitated and converted into a leisure area with the possibility of offering unique space for the holding of cultural and social events.

The piazza in front of the cathedral has been levelled and all the streets and open spaces within Cittadella have been paved. In the process all services, including drainage and rain water as well as electricity and telephony, were re-routed underground. In the process numerous steps around the Citadel were eliminated thus facilitating and increasing accessibility.

The ruins, which form a substantial part of Cittadella, were acquired by Government from private individuals. All these areas were cleaned and the rubble walls re-built or consolidated. These ruins are of great importance for Cittadella because they conserve important archaeological deposits which may shed invaluable information on Cittadella's past.

The façades of the most important buildings in Cittadella have been expertly restored and freed from layers of cement and other accretions. This includes the lower part of the cathedral façade as well as all the buildings around the main piazza.

The newly installed floodlighting and street lighting system has given Cittadella a magical aura at night and a completely different experience from that of the morning. Apart from using energy-efficient light fixtures, which help to reduce the carbon footprint, the floodlighting system has been designed to protect the roosting sites of the endemic bat species which live in the dark crevices of the bastions.

Accessibility has been significantly improved with the installation of two lifts, two stair lifts and a lifting platform as well as a number of ramps. Safety and security have been increased with the installation of railings, gates and well covers.

The large breach in the bastion walls has been closed with a specially designed door which is opened according to need.

Conclusion

All these interventions and works were carried out under the continuous and vigilant eyes of archaeological monitors and of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and the Heritage Protection Unit of MEPA. During the execution of the works, several spectacular archaeological discoveries were made, including the mysterious stone circle in the Cathedral Square, the Knights period access road, the Bronze Age silos and the Roman wall all of which have been incorporated in the project and are now added attractions.

With the aim of maintaining to the highest standards what has been achieved through these projects, the Ministry for Gozo has set up the Cittadella Management Committee which is responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of Cittadella.

John Cremona is the administrator of Cittadella and a member of the Cittadella Management Committee. He was the project leader of the Cittadella Masterplan project and of the project for the Implementation of the Cittadella Masterplan Recommendations ERDF 246.