



## **Economics, liveability and urban heritage: can they co-exist?**

Is Valletta still missing a heart and a soul?

The real significance of a renaissance in our capital city

*(paper)*

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It is my great pleasure to be invited again by the Valletta Alive Foundation to address this gathering of residents and admirers of our capital city. It was more than seven years ago when I voiced the plea for a modern make-over, a renaissance of Valletta with the aim of recreating our city in both character and personality and to re-establish and re-energise its social and economic life.

Valletta's natural geography, history, urban planning, architecture and art, inherited from the Knights of St John and Maltese and European nobility and its citizens have created an ethos to a city which is in the periphery of Europe and so close to North Africa. This foundation has played a pivotal role in determining the social fabric of the city based on an economy that predominately trades either goods or services. Valletta has also been the centre of political and administrative life of the country. The folklore and traditions of the city reflect its character and personality nourished by social and economic development over the four hundred fifty years of its existence.

Serious scars on the face of the city caused by the bombings during the Second World War left behind a devastated society with families leaving the city in search of safer houses with better modern amenities. This social neglect took over sixty years of Valletta's life – lost years of people and families leaving the city and depleting it of its core organs – the lives of persons and families. For sixty years the city was in free fall as it was deserted in the evenings with a restricted circulation of people visiting it in the morning to attend court hearings, visit Government departments and to shop. The traders left the city as the once busy streets of Merchants, St Paul and Old Bakery, were left deserted with abandoned shops and houses. It was only in the last years of the end of the last century that renewed attention started being given to the city.

The situation now is changing – the Renzo Piano plans for City Gate, the Opera House and the new Parliament building are now a reality, and an integral part of Valletta's attractions. The € 80 million investment marks a contemporary and vivid statement in the heart of our capital city. The restoration of the bastions, metaphorically representing the values of faith, fortitude and perseverance, have revived the splendour of what Malta represents in the minds of many – the defence of our Christian values and culture.

A traffic congestion payment scheme has made room for people to roam around the streets with pedestrian zones taking prominence in Republic and Merchant streets and other surrounding areas.

Open spaces like St George's Square and Castille Square have been embellished and restored close to their original design, making these piazzas regain their role as meeting places.

A varied calendar of cultural events – and lest we forget, re-ignited by the Valletta Alive Foundation with its *Streets Alive* events, have been a source of attraction to both Maltese and tourists. Valletta is today a hub of cultural and artistic events – Notte Bianca, wine festivals in summer, food and fireworks displays and concerts.

A number of palazzi and large town houses have been converted or are being earmarked for boutique hotels. Two iconic Valletta hotels – the Osborne and the British are being modernized and renovated. Derelict buildings are also being restored by law and notary practices. High street retail chains are recognising the potential of a growing trade. Real estate agents are focusing on a renewed residential market. The proposed regeneration of the closed market, *is- Suq*, and the renovation of St Elmo are a vivid proof of this positive drive to revamp the idea of making Valletta the pride and joy of the nation once again.

These various improvements and events form part of a collage that is reshaping Valletta. This does not restrain me from asking a serious question... are we transforming Valletta into a live museum and an events arena. Throughout the centuries, our capital city's character has swerved and twisted predominantly around its neighbourhoods... are we now at another bend?

Are we satisfied with the commercialisation of Valletta? The developments in Strait Street which is developing into another Paceville with open air entertainment, loud music and tables and chairs of bars and restaurants taking over the pedestrian areas? Are we satisfied with the still decaying neighbourhoods with young Valletta citizens looking for houses outside the city as prices of town houses are going up?

Could it be that we have tackled the Valletta problem the wrong way? Were the decisions on Valletta taken without consultation with its residents? Does this new Valletta reflect the ethos of the city? Or is it a superficial dressing to our capital city which does not resonate with the aspirations of its inhabitants?

Where is this taking us? Can we correct the route that we have taken?

Urban regeneration projects have failed in other countries because they heavily discounted the human and social side of such development. The main difficulties arose from the lack of consultation with the local residents in the decision making process of renewal projects, the failure to take into consideration the welfare of the people living in the city, the over-reliance on physical development, mostly construction for renovation, in the urban renewal, and the missed link between commercial development and the development of the local community. This implies that one of the major dangers of urban regeneration is the lack of a holistic view of development.

The new Valletta is still without a heart and a soul. During the past century, Valletta experienced an exodus of its citizens. The bleeding is still going on. The city has not managed in keeping its young people living in the city, and it is not attracting young families to have their home there. In the beginning of the nineteenth century the population of Valletta was that of 23,000 inhabitants, whereas the latest



statistics show a population of less than 6,000. Valletta's mean population age stands at 45.5 years, which is well above the Islands' average age of 40.5 years. The population is predominantly skewed towards the lower income groups, which contrasts largely with the case found in other European cities where you have households with a wider ranging income.

Regeneration is not to be measured by how many people you have in the streets, and how long food and drink outlets remain open at night during the week-end. It has to be measured by how much the welfare of the citizens has improved, by how much they are willing to go on living in the city, and how comfortable they are living in their homes.

Valletta needs therefore to be transformed into an animated and lived-in organic city with a revival in the neighbourhoods where citizens can live with all comfort. The different quarters of *I- Arcipierku, il-Fossa, il- Biccerija* and *id- Due Balli* need to be reanimated with families, particularly younger families, living in comfortable residences and with surrounding amenities.

One strong recommendation goes in the direction of strengthening the Valletta Local Council. This might be considered as a pilot project in the spirit of subsidiarity. The local council of Valletta must be given wider responsibilities to tackle the issues of this important capital city. The local council cannot be considered as any other council as it spans a circle of responsibility which is much larger than that of others. To start with, it needs to have proper representation of the citizens of these neighbourhoods to give a stronger voice to the inhabitants of the city.

It is the Valletta local council that contributes to the design of a social and economic policy for the city that considers the needs of both its residents and its visitors. These are only a few ideas that the Council may address.

The authority to issue bonds, with preferential withholding tax enjoyed by holders, as a financial instrument specifically issued to finance housing and environmental and recreational projects. Major attention is to be given to renovation and modernisation by existing citizens of sub-standard housing

Promote independent grocery shops, green grocers, butcher shops and confectioners to fulfil the daily needs of the residents.

Design a master plan for infrastructural improvements including parking facilities for residents. Perhaps underground structures with the aim of complementing the policy of increasing pedestrian zones and factoring the physical constraints created by the priceless buildings to host garages or parking spaces.

A policy for a more young family friendly capital city, with the setting up of crèche and kindergartens.

A primary health centre which caters for the needs of the Valletta community, particularly the elderly, and with the setting up of residential homes for the elderly.

The vision of a living city encompasses a strategy which calls for the reallocation of faculties and institutes of the University of Malta in Valletta to transform parts of it into a university town. The most natural faculties being those of Law and the Humanities which can use the old University building as well as restoring Evans into part of the university or as a university residence.



Valletta had been a university city for centuries. University students have animated its streets and participated together with academics in political dialogue as any ancient university would do. Just imagine transferring the University of Bologna from the centre of the city. Get at least part of our university back to the centre.

The private sector, especially the financial sector, can be encouraged to set up offices in Valletta with zones such as Old Bakery Street and St Paul Street catering specifically for this sector. The restoration of palaces and buildings can be accelerated by providing fiscal incentives to businesses in specific categories interested in setting up there. All major cities have a financial quarter – we already have the Central Bank and the Malta Stock Exchange located in Valletta. A Valletta address for a bank, an insurance company or an investment services company adds to its reputation. The financial services sector needs a base in Valletta.

Over the past years a marked effort was observed in enhancing the City's aesthetical side and in the revival of activities, as part of Valletta's journey to the European Capital 2018 deadline. Although no effort and investment should be spared to present Valletta at its best for this special occasion, to showcase the Island's priceless assets, valuable history and exciting culture, frenetic decisions should be restrained. The emphasis must be more on quality than on quantity, and the quality of events has to resonate with Valletta's charm. The renaissance is meant to stretch over the years with the objective of reviving the life of our capital by turning it into a lived-in city. History will not forgive us if rash and uniformed decisions tamper with the inspirations of the people who reside and raised families there.

The vision outlined today is meant to shape the future life of our citizens who inhabit the city, and not only as a source of attraction to its visitors. We should give Valletta's citizens the space and opportunity to satisfy its long-standing urge to find again its soul. An ambition to become a liveable city, inherited from our ancestors, enjoyed by generations and handed to the next full of life, hope and optimism.