

Closing address by the Mayor of Valletta

Prof. Alexiei Dingli

We are very close to 2018, the year when Valletta will become the European Capital of Culture. A very important year for our city. A title which we've been working for since 2009 when I submitted my intention to Government, declaring the fact that Valletta, will be applying for the prestigious title. We all know what happened in these years, so I'm not going into it. I can say that Valletta transformed itself thanks to public and private funding. However, while emphasising the importance of that year, we have to prepare ourselves for what happens after. That is why this conference is highly relevant because it is looking beyond 2018.

If we had to take a snapshot of the current situation in Valletta, we find that the city hosts around 6000 residents. Valletta has an aging population. In fact, the average age of a Valletta resident is 54 (when compared to 48 of the rest of Malta). On average, these residents lived in the city for 46 years.

Around one every ten residents are foreigners. We have about 750 commercial outlets and offices. We also have eleven hotels (most of which are boutique hotels) and others are in the pipeline.

Everyday we host a crowd of around 40,000 people amongst which; tourists, employees and those that need some sort of service offered by the city. On average, almost 50% of the Maltese visit Valletta at least once a month.

This focus on Valletta has led to a reawakening of the City and one can easily find pockets of life distributed in every corner.

However this also brought some adverse effect on the city. This new activity is causing discomfort to the residents living in the area. The price of property is also shooting up at an alarming rate. This is why I believe that this is the right time to take a pause, digest what the city is going through and prepare for what's coming in the future.

Mind you, we are not against this development. However we are in favour of striking a balance between the residents and the commercial community.

I cannot imagine Valletta devoid from its citizens, they are the soul of the city. We don't want a museum city so we have to help them to flourish. And this can only be achieved if we once again make Valletta Liveable.

Liveability is a very important property of any city, which people sometimes tend to ignore. This can be further subdivided into other factors such as access.



Access to the city. Even though we've seen a substantial increase in alternative means of transport to and from the city (such as the ferry connection) the resultant impact is worrying. A survey held in 2010 shows that the number of people who used their car to come to Valletta was at 40%. A survey held towards the end of last year shows that 57% of people prefer to use their car when commuting to the city. An increase of almost 20%! This is very worrying.

On access within the city, we have seen an increase with regards to alternative means of transport such as the circular bus, the electric cabs and in the coming months we'll be seeing the electric trolleys. However, the state of the pavements is worrying. I like to describe the big restoration works in the city like a rusty necklace of diamonds. The diamonds are our buildings which have just been polished. The rusty necklace represents the pavements which link these diamonds together.

But how can we expect a council, with a pittance of a budget, to seriously maintain a 450 year old infrastructure. Valletta has to be given its due importance, it cannot be considered as any other Local Council. What's more frustrating is the fact that there are dormant funds lying around different entities, one of which is around 1 million euros, which we've been pledging government to allocate to the city so that we can expedite the much needed infrastructural works. Yet so far we didn't get any. We have to make do with 700,000 euros. When you remove the cleaning, wages and services, and when considering that the price of contracts is always on the increase, we're left with almost nothing for the infrastructure.

Access to properties. In the past decade, the price of properties in the city shot up. Some of which at a ridiculous amount. This is creating areas devoid of young families. We also have entire streets without children. This should not go on and if we're not careful, this element alone might kill the city. If we have a look at major studies behind urbanism, they tend to advocate various attributes behind successful cities. Valletta tends to tick most of them. However this spike in properties is damaging a vital pillar behind creating effective neighbourhoods. The city needs mixed primary uses because it activates streets at different times of the day. This won't happen if we go just for the high end market.

A few days ago, I spoke to the owner of a cafeteria that has been in the family for at least 150 years. An icon in Valletta. They will close in the coming years because of the rent law reform. In some cases, the rent is going up by more than 1000%

I've met young families who told me that it is impossible to relocate to Valletta because they simply can't afford it. This can't go on. We need to strike the balance.

These are just some of the issues which I meet on a daily basis. Issues which worry me. Because on the one side, I've seeing a lot of investment going on in the City. But on the other side, I've realised that the heart of the city is being depleted.

Finally I would like to thank Valletta Alive Foundation for organising this seminar. It is this type of debate that will enable us to more aware of the issues that affect residents and other users of our City.



Valletta Beyond 2020: Speakers' bios:

Prof. Alex Torpiano is currently Dean of the Faculty for the Built Environment, and Head of the Department of Architecture and Urban Design. He is also Vice-President of the Kamra tal-Periti. Alex Torpiano was born and bred in Valletta, but did not return to live in Valletta when he returned from his studies in the United Kingdom in 1986. He was appointed as Chairman of the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee between 1995-1996 and 2000-2001. He led the team of specialists responsible for the restoration of Fort Manoel and Fort Tigne', between 2000 and 2011, and is currently involved in the recovery of Fort Cambridge and Fort Chambray.

Vince Fabri was elected as Councillor in the Valletta Local Council in 2013. As a musician and song writer he has been involved in writing lyrics and composing music for television and theatrical productions. He studied at Johann Strauss School of Music and the University of Malta. He works as an Assistant Precincts Officer at the University of Malta. He is one of the coordinators of a Maltese literary group Poezijaplus, which has been holding monthly literary evenings since 1999. In 2007 he participated in the poetry festival Voix de la Méditerranée held every year in Lodeve, a town of southern France, in November 2008 he performed at Literature live Festival in Croatia and in the Biennale Internationale de Poésie en Val de Marne in France.

Joseph F X Zahra is a Maltese economist who is the Founding Partner of MISCO, an independent economic and management consultancy operating in Malta, Cyprus and Italy. He is a former director of the Central Bank of Malta (1992-96) and a former Chairman of Bank of Valletta plc (1998-2004). He led the National Euro Changeover Committee that had the responsibility to introduce the euro in Malta in 2008. He is a chairman or board director of a number of private and publicly listed companies including a bank and insurances with global reach. He lectured micro and managerial economics in universities in Malta and Italy and he regularly addresses conferences in Europe and North America. In July 2013, Pope Francis appointed him President of the commission for the reforms of the economic and administrative structures of the Holy See (COSEA), and consequently Vice Coordinator of the newly formed Council for the Economy.

Sandro Debono is a curator, art historian and academic. He is Heritage Malta's current Senior Curator at the National Museum of Fine Arts and Project Lead for MUZA, the national-community art museum for Malta and flagship project for Valletta 2018 European Capital of Culture title. Sandro is a regular visiting lecturer at the University of Malta, where he lectures in Visual Literacy and Museography. He has also lectured and regularly collaborates with various European museums and institutions. Sandro has fond memories of his childhood days with his grandfather who was a sexton at Valletta's St John's Co-cathedral.



Dr. Reuben Grima is a lecturer in the Department of Conservation and Built Heritage at the University of Malta, where he lectures in cultural heritage management. He studied archaeology at the University of Malta and the University of Reading, then read for his PhD at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. He joined the curatorial team at the National Museum of Archaeology in 1992, and from 2003 to 2011 was Heritage Malta's Senior Curator for prehistoric World Heritage Sites. He has represented Malta on the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, served as Malta's National Focal Point for UNESCO World Heritage Sites from 2006 to 2010, and as a member of Malta's National Commission for UNESCO from 2004 to 2013. His research interests include cultural landscapes, and engagement of the public with the past. He has lived in Valletta since 2006.

Dr. John Ebejer lectures at the University of Malta, with a special interest in urban tourism, tourism product development and urban regeneration. Prior to becoming a full time academic, he worked extensively as an urban planner and tourism development consultant. Over twenty four years, he was involved in numerous planning policy documents, some of which were relevant to Valletta. He was also involved in many tourism product development projects, the most notable being the restoration and reuse of Fort St. Elmo as a museum and ramparts walk. He sat on the Development Control Commission (2002-04) and was Chairman/CEO of the Building Industry Consultative Committee (2008-10). He was advisor to the relevant ministry on urban planning and on planning legislation (2004-08). He was one of a group of people who worked to bring Valletta Alive Foundation into being in 2006 and who was then actively involved in VAF's various initiatives.

Dr Lawrence Gonzi was born and raised in Valletta where he lived for 25 years before he married and moved to Safi. In his youth he was active in a number of Valletta Catholic Youth and sports organisations such as the San Gakbu group and the Catholic Action at Palazzo Caraffa. With a political career spanning twenty five years, Dr Gonzi occupied several positions prior to becoming Prime Minister including Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Social Policy and Speaker of the House of Representatives. Prior to public office, Dr Gonzi was Chairman of one of Malta's leading private companies and President of the National Commission for Persons with Disability. Although retired from active politics, he has recently acted as consultant for the Commonwealth Secretary General on constitutional matters. A lawyer by profession he is presently a senior partner and consultant with Gonzi & Associates.