

Appreciating Fortified Cities: An Educational Perspective

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Abstract: *One element in the heritage around us is constituted by the numerous sites which evoke life from long ago. One such heritage site is the fortified city. In the Maltese Islands, although not so numerous, such fortified cities do exist, and these offer much opportunity for the young and not so young to learn about a particular type of past. In modern times these heritage sites still offer snapshots of days gone and, though contemporary elements have now become an integral part of their historical texture, they are still important centres for the transmission of historical, social, architectural, and cultural education to both students and tourists who visit them.*

Keywords: *education, heritage, fortified cities.*

Heritage sites are among the most enticing and instructive elements which can be used by educators while helping others in their quest for knowledge, information, cultural experience, and historical understanding. Arguably one category of heritage sites which can transmit a variety of exciting emotions is the fortified city.

Taking the Maltese Islands as the focus of this paper, it is an undeniable fact that Malta and Gozo possess innumerable sites of great cultural interest. Indeed, considering their size, the islands are enormously wealthy. These sites constitute one of the highly significant assets of Malta; resources which, from an educational point of view, are a goldmine for all those whose task is to transmit the cultural heritage to others. Such sites are a source for all levels of heritage education and it is up to the professional educator to adopt methodologies for the different learners, be they students, tourists, or others who nurture an interest in the cultural and heritage aspects of the site being visited.

Professional educators are skilled in employing anything that can help those they are teaching, to understand, visualize, and conceptualize, difficult components that are offered by the site they are reviewing. Such educators must understand their clear and highly significant responsibility towards their learners, be these school children, local or foreign visitors, and any other person interested in the quest for knowledge. Thus they need to facilitate understanding, so basic to the

interpretation of a heritage site, whether this is a prehistoric temple, a Renaissance building, or a fortified city.

One of the most important aspects of heritage education is for educators to get the persons under their care into a frame of mind that makes the abstract concept of time a little easier to grasp. What better way is there to bridge this time gap between the past and the present than to go back in time while simultaneously retaining one's feet in the present? Considering the abundance of heritage sites in Malta, and no less of fortified towns and cities, it would be a pity not to make use of such places to the utmost. Furthermore, in the name of economic and social advancement, society has, many a time, made victims out of several heritage sites. Educators, therefore, should hasten to utilize and emphasize what is still available before it disappears or is indelibly altered in the name of 'development'. Added to the fact that what still exists is only a small fraction of what existed originally, one would at once comprehend why educators should seize the moment to utilize and bring what remains to the fore. This is not a revelation that we have discovered only today. To the contrary, back in the 1970s, P.J. Rogers, for example, was remarking that site visits had become particularly important as a means of reconstructing a past which had almost disappeared, apart from a few fortuitous remains.¹

Educators, while taking their students along the streets of fortified cities, do well to encourage them to be on the lookout for balconies, particular doorways, milestones, pillar boxes, pill-boxes, and other small but significant historical and architectonic features which blend into the texture of the heritage site. Of course, one will also be pointing out, focusing on, and emphasizing, the more obvious and more pronounced buildings, fortifications, and other features which constitute these fortified cities, namely, Valletta, Mdina, Floriana, Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua, in Malta, and Victoria, in Gozo. A good way in which details are noted and brought to the fore is through carefully prepared workbooks. Questions in the workbook would require students to use their imagination and interpretation skills, especially when particular questions imply more than one possible answer or solution.² Such an exercise has the objective of giving the learner a chance to 'restore to the past its lost uncertainties; to reopen, if only for a moment the doors which the *fait accompli* had closed . . . This requires an effort of imagination.'³

It should be appreciated that, though these are historical places, nevertheless many a time they are also residential, commercial, administrative, and tourist centres, which makes them towns and cities of the past but also of the present. In many cases they are also towns and cities of tomorrow for the simple reason that time does not stop

¹ P.J. Rogers, *The New History: theory into practice*, London, 1979, p. 12.

² Y. Vella, *The Tarxien Temples: Teacher's resource book*, Malta, 2006, p. 5.

³ H.R. Trevor-Roper, *History Professional and Lay*, Oxford, 1957, in *ibid.*

at one particular point, and thus the developments that other, more modern and more utilitarian towns undergo, are in many ways also experienced by historic fortified towns and cities. We are not dealing with fossilized urban structures but with live and active urban centres. This means that the educator has to select particular aspects of heritage, while concurrently integrating the various facets of the sites being studied to present them as they really are – a mixture of history and modernity, of past and present.

Heritage sites – such as palaces, fortifications, churches, and other large and noteworthy buildings, but also the less visible, yet similarly significant, structures, such as small chapels, side-street buildings, corner statues and niches, and the odd feature here and there – should be utilized by the educator to help learners and visitors to find the right answers to questions and queries that are evoked by the site itself and by the curiosity stirred in the mind of those who come actively in touch with such cultural environments, and who are really interested in what they are seeing and experiencing. Guided visits to such sites should be planned well and meticulously prepared so that their cultural benefits are reaped by the visitors.

Through visits to such locations educators can develop the evaluative and interpretative abilities of their students. Empathy, so necessary for the better understanding of how things were, could also be developed so that a clearer and more faithful reconstruction of the events and situations experienced by our ancestors could be extrapolated. Through the use of these sites one could also work towards the attainment of analytical skills of causation and motivation.⁴ Along with such objectives in mind, educators would also be fostering in their learners a concern for the built and natural environments so important in the preservation of the historical and cultural heritage.

The education of the young

Considering the wealth of pedagogical opportunities these sites offer to education, one realizes that through the activities carried out on such locations students become small historians, that is, investigators of the past. Through measuring, touching, designing and drawing, photographing, video-recording, examining, and even, by simply just being there, they become part of what heritage is; and working with the historical material, they become young historians in their own right. Thus fieldwork gives the learners ‘the opportunity to identify, record and organize evidence for themselves’.⁵ This is the first step that can later on lead them to become true historians and heritage interpreters.

⁴ R.R. McKinley, ‘The adoption of an evidence-based approach to a site visit: a case study’, *Teaching History*, No. 38, Malta, 1984, p. 17.

⁵ Department of Education & Science, *History in the Primary & Secondary Years: An HMI view*, London, 1985, p. 37.

One word of warning should at this point be put to educators using heritage sites and even more to those tackling fortified towns and cities. One should take care not to fall into the very real temptation of using all the wealth these places offer at one go. Educators should configure their programme so as to make it unfold progressively. Trying to grab all the educational offerings will not help the educational objective of structured learning but will lead to indigestion. The learner cannot gain much from a visit to the site if he is left alone in the middle of nowhere. He must be helped to link the stimulus with a positive response.⁶ Students, as beginners, need guidance towards discovering the past at their own pace and according to their abilities, and one should guard against giving them too much information to the detriment of teaching skills and concepts. It is skills and concepts that give young learners the ability to examine and analyse other heritage sites when they are on their own and as they grow older. These students will be tomorrow's tourists and visitors to heritage sites and the tools they will need as grown-ups to understand such places are given to them when they are still fresh and more alert to learning novelties.

Educating the not so young

When educators have older adolescents and adults such as tourists and other grown-up visitors under their care, the strategy should obviously be different and planned to cater for a more mature mentality and disposition. In the case of persons who are not schoolchildren and students, the educator needs to keep in mind the very real situation that though the learners are there to discover new things, the method of how this is brought about should be in line with their age, background, and disposition. Thus information should be imparted through anecdotes, specific and concrete examples, and by introducing them to the historical environment, where possible through comparison and contrasts. Older learners can do this as they bring with them particular experiences and visions of other places and this can help them empathize and extrapolate from the built environment around them.

Tourists come to the site with various expectations. Some are there to discover; others visit to learn; yet others happen to be there because it is part of a package tour. Whichever the reason, educators should try to excite the imagination by challenging their intelligence and curiosity. Interaction between the educator and the visitor should be as personal and immediate as possible. The language should be as clear and intelligible as possible and at the same time the historical message should be simple and uncomplicated. At this level and in these circumstances, the educator is not there to train but to inform.

⁶ G. Cassar, 'Teaching History in Maltese State Secondary Schools: Problems of Resource' (unpublished M.Ed. dissertation, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, 1989), p. 66.

Why the visitor is on site is not always easy to guess. To the contrary, it is most often impossible or at least quite difficult. As one writer puts it, 'I go upon the assumption . . . that whatever their reasons for coming, the visitors are there.' And if they are there, the dilemma emerges as to what the chief interest for them being there is. The same author supplies the answer: 'The visitor's chief interest is in whatever touches his personality, his experience and his ideals.'⁷ That is what the educator – or heritage interpreter as he is sometimes known – has to keep in mind. The focus of the presentation is concentrated less on pedagogy as the adult visitor is not there to learn in the same way the student is. The grown-up visitor does not need the refined lessons and activities which educators prepare for the younger audience who is visiting the site as part of a school activity tied to a syllabus and a curriculum.

In a recent study carried out in Britain among visitors to a heritage site, the question was put to these guests asking them why they went on that site. Was it for educational or entertainment reasons? The response was invariably the same. If the adult visitors were accompanying their children, their motivation – also manifesting a sense of parental duty – was educational; however, if the adults were on their own or with one another, their motivation focussed on the entertainment offered by the site.⁸ It is quite evident therefore, that one has to treat adult visitors differently from children and students. That adult visitors – these being mostly tourists – do not generally visit heritage sites out of educational interest is further manifested through a number of other surveys carried out among such individuals. Surveys in Wales, for example, established that tourists visited heritage attractions at Easter 'out of general, rather than specific, interests or to enjoy sightseeing, with an interest in archaeology, architecture, culture or other specific interests in a site as only secondary reasons'. And these results repeat themselves for other places, such as in Ohio and Gwent.⁹

When dealing with adult visitors the educational background may be of some consideration. It may indicate the various responses as to why certain heritage attractions are visited. There are some indications that 'sightseeing' being the reason for a visit to a particular heritage venue is less likely to come from the more highly educated tourists. This class of visitors give reasons such as an interest in the culture of the locality, or personal education, as the main motives for their visit. One should not, however, take the educational background as a direct corollary to why certain visitors go to certain places. It seems that, for example, an interest in

⁷ F. Tilden, *Interpreting our heritage*, North Carolina, 1977, p. 11.

⁸ W.J. Tramosch, 'Heritage recreated in USA: Colonial Williamsburg and other sites', J.M. Fladmark (ed.), *Cultural Tourism*, London, 1994, p. 41.

⁹ R. Prentice, *Tourism and Heritage Attractions*, London, 1993, p. 79.

castles or other historic places has nothing to do with the level of education of that particular visitor.¹⁰ One never knows exactly why certain people visit certain places but some indications seem to be more prominent than others.

When certain considerations are taken into account a reasonably clear picture seems to emerge as to why adult patrons visit heritage sites. According to particular statistical evidence taken in Wales, but which seems to be highly relevant to all Europe, indicates that consumption of heritage is highly selective. These studies show that 'Heritage consumers tend to be from the middle classes, well educated, middle-aged, in a group without children, on holiday away from home and with a prior interest in history.' From this description it transpires that the leisure needs of these people 'encompassed experiencing and learning about the past.'¹¹

Fortified Cities

Heritage sites include a variety of types but arguably one of the most intriguing involves fortifications and fortified towns and cities. The reason for such an assertion lies in the fact that fortifications have a particular fascination that verges on the mysterious. The excitement of discovering particular forms and shapes, the nicks and corners of the structures, and the imagination which such structures elicit from the mind – such as the cries of battle, the clash of weapons, the scaling of walls and all the hubbub that warfare brings forth through the fertile mind of the visitor – make such places interesting to visit. Fortified towns and cities, moreover, create that aura of the unexpected with every corner one turns, with every building one visits and with every coat of arms one meets. These are the perfect places for the educator's expertise to stand out at its best.

Being there is already an important factor which should be exploited by the educator. In this way the learners are being introduced to the material at first hand and this conveys to them the 'precious quality of immediacy'.¹² There is, of course, the danger that the surroundings themselves may create an interference with the learner's attention. Traffic, modern-day structures, the hustle and bustle of a normal day, and a hundred other things and happenings, tend to be a chief problem in the educator's struggle to make the past environment more 'original' and intelligible. In fact, as one pedagogue puts it, 'The historic environment lies all around us; what varies is the extent to which it appears within today's environment and how far we are able to recognize it.'¹³ It is exactly this that makes fortified cities –

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 81 and 83.

¹¹ D. Light & R.C. Prentice, 'Who consumes the heritage product?' G.J. Ashworth & P.J. Larkham (eds), *Building a New Heritage: Tourism, culture and identity in the new Europe*, London, 1994, p. 112.

¹² P. Mays, *Why teach History?*, London, 1974, p. 71.

¹³ T. Copeland, *A Teacher's Guide to Geography and the Historic Environment*, London, 1993, p. 4.

those that are not strictly historic structures – a teacher’s headache. The more conflicting the environment the less likely the learners will be able to imagine the past. The more the modern additions to the original structures, the less they are clear in their mind’s eye. As the same author has expressed it, ‘The historic environment is dynamic, it has changed greatly and continues to change.’¹⁴

One important exercise which educators can use to stimulate the imagination of their learners is to ask them to try to imagine the landscape before it was developed. When the drawings are ready these could then be compared with maps and historic records.¹⁵ This is an exercise in historic imagination, a skill through which the learner can develop a sense of extrapolation. The learner will enter the world of the architect who designed Valletta, the peninsula which was a bare rock but which today is a fully fledged and dynamic city. The learner can, for example, look at the original landform and this will give one an insight into why a particular structure was sited in its present position.¹⁶

The educator using the fortified city as a learning example will be helping the students to ask certain questions although these are often ‘intuitive and unspoken’. Questions would include, ‘What was this place like, and how has it changed?’ And this leads to other questions including ‘How old is it?’ ‘Who built it?’, ‘Why did they build it?’, ‘How did they build it?’, ‘How is it connected with other, similar old places?’, ‘What happened there?’, ‘How do we know?’ Each of these questions leads to a common impulse. ‘We want to make sense of the physical evidence that we see, with the eventual aim of knowing what it was like to be there when the structure was in use.’¹⁷ Such questions induce the learner to embark on a series of skills including interpretation, extrapolation, empathy, analysis, and imagination. Just imagine the learners going round Mdina or the Gozo Citadel and while investigating the narrow winding streets of these old cities, they pose the various questions and try to get some form of answer. Answers may be deduced from the existing environments; they may be guessed from the specific landmarks; others may be extrapolated from particular details noticed on the spot – such as an inscribed date, a coat of arms, a marble plaque, a statue, a doorway, an architectural style, and so on and so forth.

Fortified cities furthermore have an added ingredient, the fortified enceinte itself – the bastions, curtains, gateways, embrasures, ramparts, and so many other features which supply the educator with fuel for further discovery. And being on-

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ J. Pownall & N. Hutson, *A teacher’s guide to Science and the Historic Environment*, London, 1992, p. 4.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ T. Copeland, *A Teacher’s Guide to Maths and the Historic Environment*, London, 1991, p. 6.

site gives the educator the chance of making learning more interesting and appealing if the inquisitive learning mode is used.¹⁸

In the case of a fortification, one should aim at presenting all facets of the defensive lines by outlining the principles on which and for which they were built, the architectural and defensive techniques used, the utility of such a massive construction and the value the lines offer to the built environment. Moreover, educators should underline the wealth that such a site contributes to our heritage and why, therefore, it should be safeguarded, and improved for the benefit of posterity. All this could be achieved when learners are presented with on-site situations, when they seem to touch, observe and experience the educator's explanation. In other words, learners empathize with the soldier patrolling the lengthy defensive wall, with the sentry in his post swept by the cold north wind in winter, with the artilleryman manning his gun under the hot Maltese summer sun, and with the ammunitions personnel in the dark, stuffy humid underground magazines preparing fresh supplies of gunpowder for their comrades on the ramparts. It is only by being on site that such situations can be, so to say, 'lived' again.¹⁹

According to one recent survey among Maltese history teachers, 'defence and fortifications' as a theme for study was considered by the greatest majority as relevant to both the history lesson and the students' knowledge of the past. Most respondents felt that since fortifications are found everywhere in Malta, learners are aware of their presence.²⁰ This facilitates the discussion of fortified cities with Maltese learners, as they are already somewhat aware of the defences and fortifications looming in front of them. It takes little to 'discover' the fortifications if you were only to go to Valletta on normal everyday errands. Many also live in or near the three cities of Birgu, Isla, and Bormla – or as they are also known, Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua respectively. And how about a holiday to Gozo and going on the habitual visit to Rabat and its environs with the Citadel rising above you? Again, Mdina is another treat, which is visited once in a while not least by students who are normally taken on an educational and cultural excursion there in one or more of their years in school. All fortified cities in Malta are within reach. Distances are short and so travel is facilitated and access is quite easy.

Yet, many Maltese do not seem to really know what's around them. Many take their built environment for granted and fortifications are no exception. One may need to make people aware of where they are, of what is around them. This is

¹⁸ A. Cutajar, 'Using educational excursions as a resource in History teaching' (unpublished B.Ed. dissertation, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, 2002), p. 28.

¹⁹ G. Cassar, 'The educational potential of heritage sites: A teacher's view', *Vigilo*, No. 10, 1998, pp. 22–3.

²⁰ J. Muscat, 'Teaching defence and fortifications with the north coastal Knight defences as an example' (unpublished B.Ed. dissertation, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, 2001), p. 43.

the work of the educator, no easy task at times. Making one aware of what he or she is seeing may take all the professional skills an educator possesses.

Bringing out what is on site requires a good and efficient professional educator, a teacher who knows his or her business well. In a teaching situation one should find that the educator's main tasks are to lead, help and motivate the group so as to elicit from the learners that which is of benefit to them.²¹ This can be done through a number of activities aimed at making teaching enjoyable but fruitful. One such activity could be structured around a mystery story. Structuring a story around situations that really happened at some point or other in the life of the fortified city makes the city, so to say, come 'alive'. The visitors feel closer to the city and become more interested in what they are seeing. Taking an example from the Great Siege of Malta of 1565, a story could be built around the vicissitudes of the men, women, and children under siege in Birgu. A plot can be set up and dramatized on the spot through the use of simulation. Learners benefit greatly from this form of learning as 'simulations both illustrate ideas and present evidence in a manner which impinges directly on the pupil's consciousness'.²² Through simulations, like drama, the situation is re-enacted. There is, however, one particular difference, in that, while in drama the learners play the part by showing the character and attitudes of the person concerned, in simulations they enter only in the situation. In a way simulations require less time and study on the part of the learners because these have the rules and play the game.²³ In the end, what is important is that the learners have been induced to feel the pressures of the besieged population under attack, the priorities of the officers and the preoccupations of the commoners, the fear of dying of hunger, the horror of finding that there was no more potable water, the terror of seeing the walls breached and the enemy entering and making havoc of all that is dear and important, and myriad other situations. These are evocative feelings which make the learner re-live, as it were, in the first person the moments experienced by the people in the fortified town of Birgu, but also in that of Isla during the three months of fighting during the Great Siege.

Conclusion

Fortified towns and cities have qualities that the skilful educator should know how to exploit. It is through education that the visitor – be s/he a young student or an adult tourist – lives the vicissitudes of the fortified city, as of any other heritage site. It is in this way that such places are brought to the notice of the uninitiated. Heritage needs to be 'spelled out', so that this becomes clear and intelligible. And it is the task of the educator to do just that.

²¹ Cassar (1989), p. 21.

²² D. Burt & J. Nichol, *Games and Simulations in History*, London, 1975, p. 5.

²³ G. Cassar & P. Cassar, 'The Teaching of History in Maltese Secondary Schools' (unpublished B.A. (Educ.) dissertation, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, 1981), p. 62.