

**VALLETTA 450 SEMINAR – 25th October 2008**  
**Event organized by the Valletta Alive Foundation**

**PAPER**

**Progressive Retail – a glimpse into 2016 and beyond by Mr. Paul Fenech**

Over the recent years, many have charted their wish-list for a “Valletta in 2015 and beyond”, but most items on those lists have unfortunately remained unfulfilled.

My message is positive and constructive as I truly believe that Valletta has a bright future ahead.

As a proud Valletta citizen, I am honoured to share my views on the sustainable development of our Capital City. The economic activity in Valletta, of which retail is an integral component, is highly dependent on the City’s sustainable development and, I firmly believe that all regeneration efforts should point in this direction. Focusing on singular aspects rather than the collective objectives, may induce us to lose sight of the bigger picture.

I was born and bred in Valletta. Today, I continue to have a direct commercial interest in Valletta’s development but more importantly, it is my personal connection to this City that drives me to dream of a Valletta full of life and activity, day and night. 2008 represents my 30<sup>th</sup> year of business activity – and I pride myself in stating that Valletta has been my business address for the best part of my working life.

I would like this presentation to serve

- As a constructive contribution to create a “Valletta for 2015 and beyond”
- As a catalyst for more concrete action, based on definite timelines, within the context of a holistic master plan
- As a loud wake-up call and a decisive call for immediate action to all stakeholders to come together and address Valletta’s sustainable development

Subsequent governments, local council administrations, NGO’s and the private sector have succeeded in accomplishing a great deal – however much more still remains on our to-do list.

As a matter of priority, the drawing up of a holistic Valletta Master Plan that goes beyond controlling minor aesthetic interventions, is urgently required to address the current situation. The successful regeneration of Valletta must be based on certain vital elements and it is our duty to ensure that any further regeneration and revival efforts, enshrine these vital elements wholeheartedly, namely:

- the respect befitting this unique UNESCO World Heritage Site
- the dilemma of modernity vs antiquities. How can we foster harmonious development, economic and social growth within a rich historical setting?
- finally, the Master Plan should look at experiences gained by other cities such as, London, to draw on their successes and avoid their failures in respecting the city's historical value whilst building a strong economic and cultural hub around that premise.

Meanwhile, as we strive to achieve our ultimate objective, there are also critical issues which require immediate attention and respective solutions to avoid further damage.

Primarily, e-commerce is a growing threat to Valletta's retail and economic activity. An intelligent approach towards retail in Valletta will cater for a counter mechanism that addresses this threat, by maximising the benefits of Valletta's unique environment and prestigious setting.

The rapid development of e-commerce activity cannot be repressed; on the contrary, e-commerce will continue to increase. Therefore, our challenge is to complement the e-commerce phenomenon by creating a unique and distinctive customer-focused shopping experience, in an environment which is home to us all, hence a familiar territory that holds great potential.

Valletta's regeneration should maintain a clear focus on retail and economic activity, while respecting the City's rich and diverse heritage. Striking this balance is a mammoth task. The onus lies on the authorities as much as it lies on the Valletta business community itself.

Another challenge.

Besides furthering and extending its direct investment, and channelling EU funds directly or indirectly into the City's regeneration, the Government should move with urgency to facilitate and promote third party investment in our Capital City:

- By providing more financial, technical and human resources to the Valletta Local Council, constituted bodies, NGO's (such as the Valletta Alive Foundation and other cultural or heritage organisations) and respective Valletta business communities
- By facilitating and fast-tracking the devolution of powers to the Valletta Local Council

- By creating specific fiscal incentives to promote and incentivise private sector investment in the City
- By setting up schemes for public private partnerships
- By immediately setting in motion electoral promises for the regeneration of the area, including Grand Harbour and Marsamxett areas, the Opera House and City Gate.

Simultaneously and with equal urgency, the Government must also continue to address critical national issues that have been impinging severely on Valletta's regeneration and long-term development for decades. In particular, Valletta's sustainable development, transport, accessibility, conservation of environment and heritage, and the reversal of current under-utilisation trends, should top this agenda.

- How do we want our City to develop during the current and next decade? As a commercial fulcrum, an administrative/government base, a cultural capital, an entertainment and leisure hot-spot?
- Can we strike a reasonable, multi-faceted balance between these aspects?
- Can the great leaps registered in technology, and ICT applications developed in recent years, contribute towards the creation of a state-of-the-art, chic, top European destination for culture, commerce and leisure?
- Can we ensure that Valletta's striking features are conserved, not only through enforcement but more importantly, through adequate education and support?
- Can we enhance public order, eradicate littering and train our eyes to look out for detail by raising benchmarks for embellishment projects?

Allowing economic activity to flourish will contribute substantially in reviving our City. I appeal to regulatory and enforcement agencies to focus their energies and resources on new areas where regulation and enforcement are desperately required, while removing red tape, obstacles and bureaucracy in other areas where economic activity is currently hindered.

I, for one, believe that regulation and enforcement are important tools to maintain order. It is up to us all to adapt our practices in line with the necessities of the rapidly changing lifestyles of our customers. We cannot possibly think of successfully countering the advent of e-commerce, without introducing flexible and accommodating retail hours to suit modern lifestyles.

Why is retail in Valletta practically non-existent on Sundays and Public Holidays? How can we possibly reverse the under-utilisation of Valletta if we limit shopping hours in such an archaic manner all year round, except for the Christmas period?

On a broader scale, I appeal to the Government to press ahead with the promised full and radical reform of our public transport system, and to continue fine-tuning and integrating the CVA, Park & Ride and electric cabs schemes.

I admit that there are aspects of the CVA which could be impacting negatively on Valletta's retail activity. These areas must be addressed effectively and without further delay, however in principle, the CVA and Park & Ride schemes have been highly successful experiences and therefore, we should be looking at ways to improve on this positive experience.

Equally, the pedestrianisation of certain prime areas in Valletta, has been a highly successful experiment. The key consideration however, should remain that of equally and equitably addressing the needs of tourists and locals alike.

Valletta's accessibility remains a thorny issue. Vertical connections have been promised many a time but so far, these have remained at a considerable distance away from immediate reality.

Sea transport alternatives should be further encouraged and if required, supported through cross-promotions across various platforms. Similarly, vehicular access needs further expansion possibly, through Floriana, Sa Maison and Marsa.

In conclusion, the suggested holistic Valletta Master Plan should address these large-scale issues, concretely and strategically, with a clear road map, agreed to by all stakeholders, and reinforced by the setting up of an inter-ministerial task-force to coordinate and oversee implementation.

Valletta cannot remain a 'works in progress' City and time is not on our side. Celebrating 450 years of Valletta in style, requires more synergies, hard work and tough decisions.

But failing to kick-start immediate action may result in an undesired metamorphosis, from a vibrant Capital City to a second Silent City.

I remain confident that this City built by Gentlemen, for Gentlemen will continue to serve as a unique and glamorous showcase for the entire Maltese Islands.

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