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PAPER

Accessing the City – Transport Issues by Perit Chris Falzon
(A public Transport Strategy Centred Around Valletta – A Personal View)

Introduction

One cannot decide what a transportation strategy for a particular geographical area should be without understanding its context. The central idea in what is to follow is my conviction that the city of Valletta can only be seen in the context of the two great harbours that flank it.

The Geographic/Historic Context

Grand Harbour is a large, natural, all weather harbour with a number of historic creeks providing many deep-sea anchorages. It is as if nature provided us with a high tech infrastructure thousands of years ahead of everybody else. This fact did not go unnoticed by the various super powers of each era. For thousands of years, up to fifty or sixty years ago, it was these islands' only gateway to the outside world. In my view it is what made Malta and its inhabitants what they are today and what distinguishes us from the other minor islands around the coasts of Sicily and Southern Italy. The islands' social, economic and political fortunes were dictated by it. In short, without Grand Harbour there would be little to tell us apart from Pantelleria or Lampedusa.

The cities around Grand Harbour came about precisely because of it. In a way they are appendages to it. The building of such a grand and expensive city as Valletta could only be justified and sustained because of the economic and strategic (militaristic?) potential of this harbour.

Over the years the fortunes of Valletta ebbed and flowed according to the extent to which Grand Harbour was in demand. In fact Valletta has been in decline ever since we unconsciously turned our backs on our beautiful harbour starting from the nineteen fifties. Following the devastation caused by the war and with the arrival of cheap air travel, the Freeport, the private car (or as my

grandmother used to call it 'il-motor'), rising standards of living and the decline of the dockyards, we thought we did not need to depend on our now ravaged harbour any more and Valletta's decline went into a tail spin.

In my opinion, as Valletta is a maritime city, we can only revive it in an authentic way if we revive the harbours that made it. Proof of this are the many well meaning but 'doomed from the start' efforts that have been made over the past few years. The two harbours and the city are one and any attempt to look at them separately detracts from each one of them. In tourism terms for example, one can say that when one visits Grand Harbour one must also visit Valletta and one cannot visit Valletta without visiting Grand Harbour. Valletta and Grand Harbour are one destination. In today's world where people expect instant and painless gratification the only way to keep them as one destination is to provide varied, effective, comfortable, affordable means of transporting people between the city and the two harbours. Reviving Valletta means reviving the two harbours and vice-versa.

Public Transport today and yesterday

I grew up in Floriana and precisely at 51, Strada Mercato, a house first mentioned by Herbert Ganado in Part 1 of his *Rajt Malta Tinbiddel*. He was born in this house and spent his childhood there some fifty years before me. The intervening two world wars of course had had their toll. Our house was hit in the bombing raid that also completely destroyed the Gun House opposite. The decline we see today had already set in when I was a boy. However in those days, in the late fifties, sixties and early seventies, more so than today, there were still hints of the elegant garden town and proud, defiant suburb of the capital Floriana had once been. Even then however, few of the old established families still lived in the inner harbour area; most had left during the war years never to return.

Even then there was nothing remaining of the electric tram system that operated between Valletta and Hamrun at the turn of the century, or the railway between Valletta and Mdina. The Barracca lift was moribund and the ferry service that connected the peninsula to the towns on the shores of the two harbours was but a shadow of the excellent transportation system it had once been. By the late fifties the coloured buses had acquired a total monopoly on public transport. No stone was left unturned to accommodate them even though this system was not 'designed' in any way as a public service. It was more like individual bus owners loosely connected together filling in a vacuum when the opportunity arose. In fact the bus system was never a system at all, it was more like a loose alliance of bus owners intent on maximizing business for their own bus at the expense of the public, and if possible, their colleagues. In fact there was very little in the system that met the needs of the user but a lot that met the needs of the bus owners. These are the origins of public transport in Malta; perhaps this explains a lot about our system today.

Starting from the nineteenth century up to some decades ago the once impregnable walls defending the Capital were peacefully breached in a number of places: twice at Floriana; at Porte Des Bombes and at St Anne's Gate. In addition Duke of York Avenue, now so inappropriately called Gilormu Cassar Street (good old G'lormu slaved throughout his life to seal up the city not to open it up!) but we always called it 'It-Triq il-Gdida', had been in operation for some decades when I was growing up there. Victoria Gate and King's Gate, re-modeled in Victorian times, were an accepted part of the landscape then only for the latter to be replaced with the abominable shambles we have today in the early sixties. As far as I know there were two other breaches around this time, the one at the Pischeria on the Grand Harbour side and the one on the Marsamxett side of the city in the area known as Taht il-Forka. Most of these breaches were made to accommodate motorized transport.

Maybe thanks to these breaches, today, there is so much traffic congestion and chaos that it is not practical to walk around the Valletta peninsula. However up to some thirty years ago it was the standard way to move around. Once a week during the school summer holidays we used to walk from home to the Biblioteca in Piazza Regina for a new supply of books to read our holidays away. Not many kids anywhere in the world would have had that privilege. Later on when I entered Junior College, it was still in Valletta then, I used to walk to Valletta and back every day. My father was a great fan of Valletta and for as long as I can remember he used to take his daily exercise by walking from home round Valletta and back. I am not sure if people do this these days.

Regenerate What?...How?

A number of generations of my extended family lived together in our big house in Floriana. My great grand father was always on about the good old days when the Teatru Rjal was at its peak, my mother always spoke about the time when 'everybody' used to meet at Il-Barracca ta' Fuq, my great aunt was always talking about the churches of Valletta with all their romantic Italo/Maltese names or about il-Madonna ta' Filermo in St John's cathedral. This was the social/cultural context that even when I was a kid had started to slip away.

I realise that not everybody would consider the above as relevant to today's needs and realities especially in the context of the regeneration of our historic centres. Some could also say that I am being sentimental and in a way dishonest as I fail to mention the poverty and hardships people living in the historic centres had to contend with up to fairly recently.

Should regeneration mean recreating how we think the city looked at the time of the knights or in the nineteenth century at the height of the British Empire without the filth and the pain? Is regeneration just about 'doing up' buildings, pavements and street paving? What about the culture, customs, traditions, etc or at least a sanitised version of them?

I am not sure what the answer should be but I do know it would have to be some sort of a compromise. Whatever the solution I am certain we will all agree that we cannot simply conclude that all we have to do to revive Valletta is to have lots of nice shops and restaurants and the odd bingo hall. There is a lot more to it.

Probably the most basic requirement for regenerating a depressed urban area is lots of new residents. To get them we need to create a pleasant and attractive environment and a good quality of life thus enticing people to move back in. To do this we must provide homes of a high standard and corresponding infrastructure, cultural and sporting facilities, a thriving business environment, etc.

The 'glue' that is required to weld these things together is a transportation system that works.

Therefore some of the overall objectives that would need to be achieved in the regeneration of Valletta and the other historic centres of the 'extended' city would be:

1. Create the right conditions for people to move back to living in Valletta, Floriana and the Three Cities through the creation of good quality housing and the related infrastructure and the upgrading/creation of cultural, sporting, commercial, business and educational facilities. All this in the context of a good knowledge and appreciation of the customs, traditions, history, etc, of the area.
2. Provide a good, clean, well integrated public transport system that would allow residents and visitors alike to move between the various parts of this 'extended city' cheaply, safely and quickly.
3. As in past eras but in a modern context, exploit the two harbours economically and in particular for the use of clean sustainable transportation linking the various parts of this 'extended city' thus creating an integrated community; a 'Venice in the sun'.

Clearly having a public transport strategy that is well integrated with the above objectives is crucial for the successful regeneration of our historic centres.

Conclusion - Suggested Objectives for Public Transport Strategy

I suggest that the following are some of the specific objectives that would need to be aimed for by a well integrated public transport strategy.

The strategy should:

1. Aim to minimize the need for people to use their private cars in the 'extended city' by encouraging people to walk and to use bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles.
2. Ensure that public transport in all its forms will help bring about the integration of all the towns along the shores of the two harbours and the immediate communities beyond with the least environmental impacts. This will contribute towards an upgrading in the quality of life of the residents of the 'extended city'.
3. Ensure that the chosen public transport network will not require the use of a major bus terminus at the entrance to Valletta.
4. Encourage the full exploitation of the two harbours by creating the right conditions for the integration of sea borne public transport systems into the public transport network.
5. Create the right conditions that would make it easy for visitors and commuters to move between the harbours and the centre of Valletta.

Ten Project Proposals

It is proposed that the following projects, all of which are reversible, can contribute towards achieving the specific objectives outlined above:

Project 1

Recreate the old tramway that operated between Valletta and Hamrun at the turn of the century using modern light trams running between Castille Square (and/or City Gate) and Fra Diego Square in Hamrun. The tramway could also possibly be extended to cover a larger catchment area. (See new Dublin Tramway)

Project 2

Build a cable car system from Park and Ride down to Grand Harbour and into the city. This will certainly be much less intrusive than the many well meaning but ill-fated transportation 'projects' of the past e.g the various breaches in the fortifications around the city. In addition it has been shown that the visual impact of such a system will be considerably less than the Barracca Lift's visual impact. However while the Lift used to have a capacity to carry a couple of hundred people from Lascaris to Barracca every hour, the cable car system would be able to ferry a thousand people an hour from the Park and Ride to Castille Square. In the local context this will amount to a mass transport system. Like the Lift, the cable car machinery and infrastructure will be reversible. The system will be environmentally friendly since these systems are electrically driven. (See old Barcelona cable car system)

Project 3

Excavate a canal/tunnel 7 to 10 metres wide in the Valletta moat to allow the navigation of passenger ferries in both directions. In most places the moat is significantly wider than this so it is not necessary to excavate the entire width of the moat. This means that by choosing the optimum lines one will not be changing the basic character of the moat. As canal boats typically require a draft of a metre or so, the canal need not be very deep. The resulting canal banks (that is the floor of today's moat) will be wide enough to allow landscaping, benches and walkways. Lifts into the city at 2 or 3 places along the walls of the city including one where the old Barracca lift once stood (see Siena lifts and escalators). It is clear that the impact will be much less than any of the breaches made to the city fortifications. Being only a canal, the existing moat floor will not be violated and thus this project can be reversed simply by filling the canal up again.

This canal/tunnel system will allow the two harbours on each side of the capital to be finally connected directly thus allowing public transport and also private craft to easily reach all the towns along the shores of the two harbours. The two harbours will start to see a lot of activity after many decades of almost complete 'silence'. The various creeks and inlets especially on the southern shore of Grand Harbour will be revived; 'a Venice in the sun'.

Project 4

Construct adequate weather defense systems at the mouth of Marsamxett harbour.

Project 5

Recreate the ferry system connecting all the coastal communities around the two harbours. This will greatly reduce the need for buses to start and finish their routes at the Valletta terminus. Hence it may become possible to replace this terminus with a number of smaller termini at more appropriate locations. Once this is removed from its present location it may be possible to uncover and restore the old fortification system and launch a suitable new city gate project.

Project 6

Set up a bus system using appropriate vehicles, possibly electric, up through Castille Square down Old Bakery street and round peripheral city road in both directions. Buses will stop on request when going down Old Bakery Street and at strategically located stops along the rest of the way. (See the Rome city electric mini-buses)

Project 7

Encourage the use of electrically assisted bikes. These machines are now becoming very sophisticated and can make a significant contribution. Note that these bikes should not be equated to mopeds or scooters. In legal terms an electrically assisted bike is one that requires the rider to pedal in order for the

electric motor to engage. In the EU the maximum allowable speed of electrically assisted bikes is set at 25 km/hr.

Construct bicycle/jogging/walking paths all along the coast of the 'extended city'.

Project 8

Construct panoramic lifts at two or three locations along land-side city walls. The bottom stop of the lifts will of course correspond with the respective stops of the ferries as they pass through the moat. (Refer to Project 3)

Project 9

Connect transport systems at a number of strategic locations thus forming a seamless transportation network.

Project 10

Recreate the old railway system as a light electric tramway using the original railway stations and the other infrastructural elements that have survived. Possibly link City Car Park and the Park and Ride system to Valletta. This may be possible through the exploitation and possible modification of the various tunnels and bridges originally constructed for the railway project. This would be an easy and convenient way into Valletta for commuters and day-trippers from Marsa, Hamrun, Balzan, Attard and beyond.

Chris Falzon 17/10/08

Notes:

1. In the first part of this paper I quote extensively from a letter I wrote to the Times of Malta in 2004.
2. In the slide presentation that complements this paper I have used a number of slides with the kind permission of Architecture Project and VISET Malta plc.

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