

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

**PAPER**

**Regeneration of a City through Culture and Events by the Hon Dr Francis Zammit Dimech**

Back in 1732 Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena built the Manoel Theatre in Valletta for the entertainment of the members of the Order. And for the Maltese elite. It was a centre for various activities, a cultural and an opera house, a venue for theatrical and spectacular events. The Knights of St John were a multi-national and multi-lingual Order who brought over to our islands the best of European nobility. These in turn attracted to Malta kinsmen and friends. Those were among our first tourists! They came from different European States and thus ushered the concept of a European union to Malta.

Over a century following the inauguration of the Manoel Theatre, in 1861 Governor Sir Gaspard le Merchant constructed the “Teatro dell’Opera”, the Royal Opera House, on the site of the demolished “Casa la Giornata”, the one time residence of the Turcopilier of the Auberge d’Angleterre during the time of the Knights of St John. The Royal Opera House was inaugurated on the 9<sup>th</sup> October, 1866 with “I Puritani” by Bellini.

At that time it was felt that the Manoel Theatre was too small for the ever greater numbers of opera lovers. Besides its stage was too restricted for the performance of operas. Whereas in the seventeenth century the Manoel Theatre was large enough for performances by Cimarosa, Monteverdi and Paisello it did not have the space for the great opera performances of Rossini, Verdi and Puccini. The ‘Teatro Reale’ was not just an opera house. It was also a mecca for symphonic concerts, plays in Italian and English and for the October repertoires of the renowned dramatic company “Indipendenza”.

The Royal Opera House was destroyed in the Second World War and after more than 60 years we are still discussing what to build in its place. I stand by my conviction that in this site we should have an opera house or a multifunctional cultural centre and that the Valletta Entrance should form part of this project!

Speaking of this project I cannot but recall another project so close to this site: the Saint James Cavalier which from an instrument of war to defend our capital city during the rule of the Knights of St John was converted into a Centre of Creativity eight years ago, in time for the Millennium celebrations. I was the minister responsible for that project and I cherish every moment I spent going through the plans of this unique restoration project and visiting this marvelous building during its restructuring and restoration. Now St James Cavalier is another link in the chain of buildings that have turned Valletta into a cultural centre, attracting thousands of art and culture lovers to the various events organised.

The Mediterranean Conference Centre is the last component in the Valletta cultural infrastructure. This building was constructed by the Knights of St John as a Holy Infirmary in 1575 and played a pivotal role in the medical organisation of our country up to 1798. It suffered from neglect and from enemy bombing during the Second World War. But it was restored to its pristine glory. History and the huge halls combined together to give our islands a unique conference centre which is serving its purpose at a time when we managed to attract to Malta thousands of tourists for conferences and incentive travel. The holding of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in the Mediterranean Conference Centre is a tribute to this unique conference complex!

The Manoel Theatre, the Mediterranean Conference Centre and St James Cavalier are the main cultural centres but our capital city boasts of much more. Some of the auberges, which housed the different languages of the Order of the Knights of St John, have been turned into national museums. St John's Co-Cathedral, the finest building built by the Knights as their Conventual Church, is not just an architectural and artistic gem in the centre of Valletta, but serves also as a venue for vocal and musical concerts, some of international standing. As the Minister for Tourism and Culture at the time of Malta's accession to the European Union I was responsible for the organisation of the celebrations marking this event and I remember with pride two of the activities organised at the Co-Cathedral: the San Gregorio Magno Oratorio which was the activity that kicked off these festivities and the Concert for Europe directed by the renowned Swedish Musical Director Manfred Honech, later transmitted by Eurovision through the Nodisk Film & TV Organisation – produced and directed by Stein-Roger Bull – which brought to an end the festivities.

Valletta is fastly becoming a live theatre for vocal and musical concerts, international choirs, arts festivals, cultural exhibitions and enactments depicting the history of our capital city. The courtyard of the Grandmaster's Palace, St George's Square, the Upper Barrakka Gardens and the Lower Barrakka Gardens, Hastings' Gardens, the ruins of the Royal Opera House, the Valletta Waterfront and the precincts of Ta' Liesse Church are the preferred venues for concerts and festivals.

Valletta has become synonymous with Notte Bianca which was last held in the capital city only three weeks ago. This is an occasion for the Maltese, Gozitans and tourists to visit historical buildings, churches, auberges, museums and works of art in Valletta. It is a night of happenings with 100,000 people flocking into the city for the over 100 events that are organised. When as Minister for Culture I had set in motion this cultural extravaganza few thought that it was going to be such a huge success. Far more thought that this was another crazy dream of mine. Thank God for dreaming and making it happen!

Valletta is also synonymous with the Choir festival which grew into an international event, with the 'BOV Streets Alive' that attracts thousands of Maltese and tourists for all types of cultural, musical and other activities; the Arts Festival, a marathon of arts, music and entertainment spanning over a period of about four weeks in summer; the International Jazz Festival which now all form part of our calendar of activities.

Valletta is also the city of Caravaggio as it is in Valletta that this famous artist produced some of his best paintings, and "The beheading of St John" which is his masterpiece.

My references to the Knights of St John are meant to signal our appreciation to this Order that built our capital city, and to the many works of architecture and art that this Order bequeathed to our country. The Knights of St John brought the best architects to our country to build the city of Valletta with its unique bastions and the churches and palaces that adorn it. They also brought to Malta the best contemporary European artists to decorate the churches and palaces. The Knights of St John through its fortifications, turned our capital city into an invincible city-fortress.

Now Valletta is not a fortress any longer. It is no longer there to defend us. Valletta is a city built by gentlemen for gentlemen which since Independence changed its mission to one of creativity and culture. Valletta is a living museum and a living cultural and artistic experience.

UNESCO declared Valletta a world heritage site. We should bolster this recognition not only by maintaining its fortifications, its churches, its palaces and gardens but also by making it a living city all the year round. In 2018 Valletta will be the capital city of Europe. This is Valletta's year with destiny and we should all contribute towards turning our city into a city of culture 365 days a year.

I already declared publicly that I should like to see the building of an Opera House or a multifunctional cultural centre in the same place where the Royal Opera House stood. But Valletta does not only consist of the Royal Opera House site. There are other buildings that yearn for restoration and regeneration. Fort St Elmo is one of these buildings. This fortification, which reminds one and all of the heroic defence of Malta by the Knights of St John and the subsequent building of

a new capital city for our country, should be developed into another centre for culture and the arts. This will contribute towards the further regeneration of Valletta through culture.

Culture is an international language. In an age of interdependence and globalisation we should emphasise all that unites us as human beings. The European Union respects the diversity of the cultures of its Member States and contributes through programmes and funding in the promotion of culture. Valletta was born as a city of different cultures representing the different countries of origin of the Knights of St John. I am sure that our capital city, as a city born of different cultures will be eligible for funds for regeneration and restoration.

Valletta is our capital city. It is a historical walled city which we should all look after and contribute towards its regeneration through culture.

If we recall the economic returns generated by such events as Notte Bianca, the Arts Festival or festivals such as the one with our own tenor Joseph Calleja, to give but only a few examples, it should be clear that it is through culture and the arts that we can best regenerate our capital city. Moreover, one has only to look at such classic success stories as represented by Edinburgh, Salzburg and Bilbao to realise that what we have set in motion over the past years needs to become a programme of continuous action that gains even more momentum in the coming years, not least as we prepare for when Valletta is declared the Cultural City of Europe.

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