

VALLETTA 450 SEMINAR – 25th October 2008
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PAPER

Valletta – Malta’s Rome in the National Economy by Mr F.X. Zahra

Introduction

The Great Siege of Malta in 1565 opened a new chapter in our country’s history. It was an era of economic progress and development for Malta. The construction of the City of Valletta was an integral part of this development; with its buildings and monuments still speak emotions and inspirations shaping a nation’s rich history. Malta’s Capital is renowned as a well-preserved Baroque city per excellence, with innumerable buildings and monuments making it an artistic, architectonic and historical jewel.

The Renaissance of Malta’s Capital by the Knights

Valletta established itself as the main city, with an economic, social and political centre for Malta. The Knights understood Malta’s strategic position for trade and investment with their presence in the Mediterranean region.. The victory against the Ottoman Empire called for the need to build a new city with proper fortifications together with a harbour offering facilities for merchandise trade. Valletta’s geographical shape and its position perfectly fulfilled these criteria. The economy started to prosper; the harbour and its adjacent areas were open for trade and the population started to proliferate. The islands experienced a new beginning and in this sense, fuelled by the Renaissance of Malta’s Capital.

This era showed manifestations of enchanting architecture, magnificent pieces of art, culture and education never experienced before by these islands. The new fortified city was meant to provide the safest shelter to its inhabitants but it did not mean that it was lacking beauty. Architectonic beauty was at the centre of La Valette’s vision as a symbol of harmony and nobility of the population that would come to inhabit Valletta’s walls. Laparelli, one of the finest military engineers at that time, was assigned to undertake this task, still shaping and witnessing a nation’s wealth of architectural and artistic monumental buildings. Laparelli’s

successor, Glormu Cassar, was definitely another key instrument to materialise La Valette's vision.

Priceless assets of great economic potential

In a span of twelve years, Cassar was responsible for the design of the seven auberges occupied by the Knights of different nations, of which only four still survive. Furthermore, the Grand Master's Palace, St Johns Co-Cathedral, the churches of St Paul, St Domenic and St Augustine, amongst others, form part of an assemblage of works by Glormu Cassar with their foundations echoing a nation's history way back from the 16th century, long admired by prominent architects and visitors.

By virtue of its historic and architectonic jewels together with the City's function as the administrative, ecclesiastical, cultural and social hub, UNESCO declared Valletta a World Cultural Heritage Site in 1980. Several buildings around Valletta today are thus part of a unique 'word cultural site', the result of different phases of urban stratification and evolution especially during the early Baroque period. The large Palaces which flank Merchant's Street and St Paul' Street, the Manoel Theatre, the Grand Auberge de Castille together with several buildings are flamboyant remains belonging to this period. This evolution forms the basis of Valletta's landmark, a blend of Renaissance and Baroque Splendour – a Maltese pride appreciated by our nationals and the 1.3 million tourists visiting our shores every year.

Valletta Today

Most of the buildings and artistic monuments in practically every corner of the city, luckily resisted tonnes of bombs that were dropped over the Grand Harbour area during the Second World War. The bastions are metaphorically showing a manifestation of faith, fortitude and perseverance, synonymous to Malta and its People throughout the years. Nevertheless, a high price was paid by lives and destruction of some important patrimony monuments, such as the Opera House.

Malta's capital today calls for a socio-economic strategy, making Valletta Malta's Rome in the national economy to address modern threats and challenges to revive our capital. The highest possible return should be sought from the unique and priceless assets situated all within an area of 55 hectares, making it like Rome one of the most concentrated historic areas in the world. During the past century, Valletta experienced an exodus of its people. At the beginning of the 19th century, Valletta's population amounted to 23,000 inhabitants, whereas the last Census figure shows that in 2005 population dropped to a staggering 6,300 inhabitants or slightly more than ¼ of the population recorded a century ago. Even more of a concern is that a constant decline in population was reported during the past 75 years, with an average drop of 2,700 inhabitants per

intercensal period. Valletta's mean age of its population today stands at 44.2 years, which is the 4th highest from all localities and well above the total islands' average of 38.5 years. In other words, Valletta's population is ageing; with 45% of total inhabitants are aged 50 years and over. The population presently residing in the capital city is predominantly skewed towards the lower income groups, which contrasts largely with the situation found in other main European capitals. Vacant dwellings in Valletta today are estimated to be higher than 1,200 dwellings, explained by people looking for more comfortable quarters that better reflect present needs.

Monuments and buildings are at risk with air pollution caused by daily heavy traffic congesting the city and maintenance lacks the pace to mitigate dangers of erosion. Around 40,000 daily users and visitors are estimated to frequent the inner city during the day. Government's numerous administrative offices, commercial outlets; numerous restaurants, cafés and wine bars; the bus terminus, the open market and the Valletta Waterfront are considered to be the main contributory factors. However, the capital's main squares would be no more than a ghost town well before sunset. The latter fact again contrasts sharply with the reality of other capital cities in Europe.

Having said all this, it does not mean that nothing had been done so far. Credit should be given to several initiatives and occasions organised by the local council, Central Government, the Valletta Rehabilitation Project and the private sector in general to alleviate the difficulties and challenges just stated. However, the country's drive to rehabilitate and revive the city as a commercial heart in the Maltese economy, calls for a holistic and synchronised strategy – A cry for a 'Modern Renaissance'.

A Cry for a 'Modern Renaissance'

Like the Knights made history to revive Malta's Capital way back in the 16th century, now it is our turn to regenerate history to our future generations. Although today's economic, political and social reality should be factored in our vision for Valletta; the key fundamentals of the strategy formulated and adopted by the Knights years ago are still relevant today!

The call for a 'Modern Renaissance' requires retransforming Valletta into a lived in organic capital city – 'A Citta Aperta' – with different quarters namely, Arcipierku, Fossa, Biccierija and Due Balli, with a clearly defined commercial heart and a cultural focus for these four regions which will attract a wide spectrum of residents from all strata of Maltese society and visitors. A lived in City is an organic city generating commerce, culture, art and entertainment.

This vision is converted into a strategy which calls for the need to reallocate faculties and departments of the University of Malta to transform Valletta into a

University town on the lines of Bologna in Italy. The faculties of Art, Humanities, Law and Architecture could be amongst those that can be retransferred to the Old University building in St Paul Street and adjacent buildings in Merchant Street. Valletta's fine arts, architectonic skyline and landscaping constitute the perfect environment to host art and architecture students. An Academy of Music can be located in Valletta. The dynamism synonymous with youths will vibrate in the City and artists and writers can be attracted to permanent presence in Valletta, with the city acting as an incubator unit for new and established artists and designers. This proposal can be tied to the drive for reviving 'Strait Street' and its adjacent areas from the current socially deprived state to a spot where artists, writers and photographers set up their own studio.

Several vacant buildings around the fortified city, currently deteriorating and masking La Valette's vision for nobility, can be restructured into apartments and studio flats to reflect current demand for both residential and commercial purposes. Internal structural alterations can be carried out where possible but building facades should be kept intact. On the other hand, when existing buildings are structurally condemned, redevelopment will be allowed subject to strict architectural guidelines from competent authorities.

A calendar of events with more frequent commercial activities, especially to regenerate and spread social and economic activity in the evenings, is something that has to definitely feature at drawing board level. Proposals for closed and open markets such as book fairs, arts and antiques fairs, auctions and fish markets, with the latter at the periphery of the city, are thought to be commercially viable if these will be organised on a regular basis on a particular day of the week. All these activities blend with the baroque structure of the city and the idea is that there will be a commercial activity on each particular weekday, especially during the evenings. The weekends will be reserved for the organisation of annual or ad-hoc events, which already had been organised during the past years and today are considered as success stories in Valletta's calendar events, enjoying a very satisfactory response by both the Maltese and tourists. Cases in point are the Valletta Streets Alive activities in Summer, Notte Bianca, wine festivals, and open air concerts.

Spreading such commercial events in the evening will make it commercially viable for shops, complexes and establishments to extend their opening hours later in the evening and reap benefits from potential business being generated in the city during this part of the day. The number of restaurants, bars, and cafeterias around the City today, predominantly catering for morning business, would similarly enjoy spill over effects from activities created in the evenings. Extending activities seven days a week round the clock, will form part of our vision to create a 'Cultural City' that 'never sleeps'. The priceless and unique assets highlighted earlier offer a great economic potential for cultural tourism. Colouring the city with the proposed events will enhance our efforts to attract

high quality tourists that are willing to pay and experience our rich cultural patrimony.

The Biccerija area can be regenerated by the idea of converting the Auberge de Bavarie into a hotel. Currently the area is in a relatively bad architectural state, residents are few and social problems are an unhidden fact. The viability of this proposal can't be assessed in isolation. Other boutique hotels can be encouraged to set up in Valletta.. The way forward is to draft a holistic strategy assessing proposals for each area as a whole, although on the other hand the bigger the scale of the project, the slower it moves. Furthermore, smaller pockets of investment will be the ideal strategy with the advantage of being less likely to alienate residents. Government could lease historic property to the private sector, as an initiative by the state to implement this vision, on the condition that the buildings will be renovated. Real estate and retail outlets could be an integral part of the plan for this area, together with the already existing properties housing law firms and notaries offices.

Rehabilitation of historic places should gain more momentum over what has been done during the past years and extended to all areas within the fortified city. The maintenance and rehabilitation of old houses, palaces and Auberges form part of the strategy in providing the infrastructure to host activities being already proposed. Moreover, the recently renovated Auberge D'Italie to host MTA's offices was a remarkable accomplishment and should be used as a model to possibly host other administrative departments.

The public transport reform, being currently proposed by the central administration, should factor in inter-modal transport facilities with a proactive rather than a reactive attempt to ease access to Valletta by road and by sea. The transport reform should therefore foresee the future needs of a revived Valletta and act as a catalyst to implement this vision.

Local Governance has an important function and role to play. The currently debated amendment of the local councils' bill, featuring as one of the top priorities on the Government's agenda, should give Valletta's Local Council a different role than it has today and perhaps a different status than others. Valletta's local government should be empowered to draft ongoing commercial and cultural strategies, especially to repopulate the City and attract tourism within Malta's Capital. Moreover, it is essential to introduce the concept of a Regional Policy for Valletta, whereas Valletta's local council will act as a hard nosed driver to ensure that the nation's strategy and vision for Valletta really works.

The need of collecting, compiling and releasing demographic and economic statistics specifically on Valletta is another important requirement. The latter will add value added from a policymaking point of view, to measure progress achieved towards meeting the set targets. Valletta deserves well-planned capital projects like the City Gate planned some fifteen years ago, the building of the

Opera House hitting different government's agendas for the past fifty years and a serious plan for the shameful state of Fort St.Elmo. There is an urgent need to set up a business strategy for the capital city with clear and realistic deadlines, to make Valletta's call for a 'Modern Renaissance' heard and no longer plans and projects that remain on paper.

Nowadays are high time to test our pride and courage long renown for as a nation. The bravery, loyalty and diligence shown by the Knights of Malta are proudly demonstrated worldwide by the Maltese and symbolised by the famous 'Maltese Cross'. Like the Knights built the 'New City', it's our turn to carve history and really preserve what we have inherited and economically revive Valletta as Malta's Rome in our national economy. The required set-up and the proper channels to convey our beliefs and vision for 2016, where we will be commemorating Valletta's 450 years since its foundation, have now been set. The next step is to see this foundation act as a robust platform to achieve the objectives we are setting up today. A project management approach is now needed to make all this happen.

Thank you.

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