

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

**PAPER**

**Reducing our Urban Footprint through Regeneration by Sir Martin Laing**

I have now had the great honour and pleasure of living in Malta for 5 years, and during my career in the UK have been involved in the development of sustainable policies for all types of construction, chairing The Sustainable Construction Task Force for the Government. I also spent many years as Chairman of The World Wide Fund for Nature and am passionate about all matters concerning the environment.

When my wife and I first arrived, as with so many before us, we instantly fell in love with Malta as a whole, but in particular with this very special City. I have to admit that I was immediately struck by the number of beautiful old buildings in disuse or disrepair, but of course, this is partly as a result of how different generations – worldwide - view their surroundings and customs. Life will always evolve and current fashion dictates the lifestyle of the moment. Thus, what's highly desirable one moment, is 'old hat' the next and people move on to the latest 'must have' in fashion; whether that be in the area of clothes and gadgets, or more fundamentally, in the living/working environment.

Our generation is particularly fortunate to have been born in an era when time and labour-saving gadgets (not to mention those inventions which make our lives so much more comfortable - such as air-conditioning or central heating) have become available. However, although making our lives easier, they have brought their own, previously unforeseen problems, as far as the environment is concerned.

Although Valletta's popularity as a city in which to live appears to have waned for a while, the majority of Maltese and foreign residents (as well as a multitude of devoted fans throughout the world) certainly not only recognise the beauty and value of Valletta and its buildings, but many now also acknowledge the fact that for numerous years it was taken for granted. Sadly, there's been a woeful lack of investment and this 'jewel' has been allowed to become "tired " - to use an affectionate understatement – and the old ways rejected.

With 2016 fast approaching, this is the ideal time to seriously address the crisis involving the built environment, whilst making maximum effort to prepare the City for its latest starring role in the eyes of the world!

So, down to the huge task of **Reducing our Urban Footprint through Regeneration** (although I am defining this more as a 'carbon footprint', as many of the other speakers are touching on the City as a whole).

## **CARBON EMISSION**

In terms of EU carbon dioxide emission, the target for Malta is to reduce it by 20%, by the year 2020.

As we are all aware, carbon emission takes place as a result of virtually every economic and social activity carried out by man – the generation of electricity; manufacturing processes; agricultural production; as well as the more obvious problems caused by fumes from vehicles and ships. As a matter of interest, the energy used in constructing, occupying and operating buildings represents approximately 50% of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK. I would imagine a similar situation applies to Malta, so a review of how we use, design and maintain our buildings is a good place to start, if we want to reduce our carbon footprint. Much of this is in the capable hands of our eminent architects and planners and again, I do not need to repeat what has already been said.

However, it is important to constantly remind ourselves that the rare nature of Valletta requires specific approaches to carbon emission reduction, in line with the city's unique aspects, particularly with regard to:

- The historic urban fabric; most of which is over a hundred years old, with some even older
- The thriving commercial centre, which is visited by thousands of workers and shoppers everyday.
- The residential community
- The busy port and harbours, coupled with the fact that the City itself is a major tourist attraction.

My proposals relating to Valletta provide several opportunities for Malta to reduce its carbon emissions generally:

1. If we can encourage the re-occupation of existing buildings and resources, this better use of land will in turn reduce the need to take over yet more valuable arable land elsewhere on the island.

This can be achieved in two ways:

- i) By making better use of existing built fabric, the need to extract new stone will be reduced
- ii) By utilizing the selective use of concrete, where appropriate, this will also reduce the need to extract stone.

Re-occupation of existing buildings would certainly reduce the need for yet more new ones.

2. Valletta's older buildings are particularly effective in keeping cool and hence reducing emission from cooling devices. Therefore, by renovating existing buildings, this will reduce the energy consumption required for cooling and heating.

It is well known that, for example:

- *Timber balconies* prevent the entry of sunshine into rooms – the balcony itself can be easily ventilated thus preventing heat entry. The plans and funds available to help with the cost of replacing the dreaded aluminium balconies (which also eventually cause grave damage to the stonework) are to be praised and hopefully will be continued.
- *The central courtyards*, typical of many Valletta buildings, provide shaded spaces and air circulation for cooling
- *The thick walls and thick roofs* of the older buildings provide better insulation against heat entry in summer and also heat loss in winter.

It would be useful to compare the carbon emission of rehabilitating and using an empty property in Valletta, with the construction of a new property elsewhere. My guess is that the total emissions from a rehabilitated building will be significantly less than those produced by redevelopment.

A UK study, 'New Tricks With Old Bricks', states that reusing and refurbishing existing and empty properties could actually save more carbon dioxide than constructing new ones.

The study found that the construction of a new house generated 50 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, but the renovation of an existing house emitted only 15 tonnes. In actual use, there was little difference between the performance of the older house and the new one, and it could take decades for the operational savings to offset the carbon load of the initial construction.

Put another way, it is my firm belief that by ensuring better utilization of the dwelling stock in Valletta, we can reduce this country's carbon emission – an extremely important way in which this magnificent historic capital can make its own contribution to a very modern day problem.

Another area much talked about, is that of using more solar energy, both for water heating and electrical generation. However....

There are grants for the first-time installation of solar water heaters, but how great has been the take up?

Grants are also available for photovoltaic panels, but again, what has been the take up?

If it is low in both these cases, what is the reason?

How can we encourage a greater take up, by Valletta residents in particular?

In the past I have suggested the establishment of a solar research facility in Malta, possibly working with our friends in the UAE. Perhaps one day this idea will be expanded further.

In the meantime, and in order to establish whether or not our efforts to reduce energy consumption in Valletta are working, I suggest this is monitored and it would certainly be extremely useful if we could establish the figure for *current* usage.

## **INFORMATION FROM THE 2005 CENSUS ON VALLETTA'S DWELLING STOCK**

Let us just have a quick look at the situation in terms of the use of Valletta's dwelling stock and compare the 2005 data with that of 1995.

Although there has been an increase in the number of dwellings in Valletta (by 6% from 3,586 to 3,814), there has also been a *decrease in the number of occupied dwellings* (by 7% from 2,753 to 2,576) and a *decrease in population* (by 13% from 7,262 to 6,300).

In 2005, as many as 1,283 dwellings out of a total of 3,814 - or 34% - were vacant and a remarkable piece of information from the census is that 73% of all occupied dwellings are rented properties. That is 1,897 out of a total of 2,576.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE DATA**

A detailed analysis is required to evaluate these trends. Allow me, however, to speculate:

The increase in the total number of dwellings among the properties suggests that in the past there were those which had been used as an office or store.. At some time this usage was discontinued and for the 2005 census purposes, the building was recorded as a dwelling. This suggests that the Local Plan policy, which prohibits conversion of residential to office use, has achieved its objectives; namely that of safeguarding against loss of residential stock.

I would also speculate that the high number of rented properties is the main reason for the decrease in occupied dwellings. When a property becomes empty owing to the death of the resident, rent regulations prevent the property from being brought back into use, through sale or rental.

The increase in vacancy has occurred despite a reported surge of interest among Maltese and foreigners, wishing to acquire property in recent years. It may be that this interest failed to translate itself into an increase in occupied dwellings, either because foreign owners were away from the island during the census or, more likely, that the increase in prices acted as a strong disincentive to actually purchase.

Because of the high number of rented properties in Valletta, the changes to rent regulations will have a profound effect on the city. I would like to believe that as more properties become available for rehabilitation into residential use, the effect will indeed prove to be positive.

However, a word of caution is in order here. The acquisition of properties by overseas residents is beneficial economically, but may be less so, socially and culturally, for our capital. In order to maintain their heart and vitality, cities need the majority of property owners to actually live there.

And by the by, have any studies been undertaken to investigate why people choose to move from Valletta to other parts of the island? We may think we know, but have people actually given reasons?

The revision of rent regulations raises some important questions:

How are the revised rent laws likely to affect dwelling occupancy and vacancies?

How many rented, unfurnished properties are government owned?

How many of these are likely to revert back to government in the foreseeable future?

I have a couple of proposals, which I respectfully offer for consideration:

### **Proposal 1**

The following points are aimed at making better use of Valletta's housing stock, without incurring government in any particular expenditure and I suggest that:

- i) The Government sets up an Urban Development Company specifically for Valletta.
- ii) The Government identify property in Valletta which it owns, and of which it would be willing to dispose.
- iii) Any such properties would be valued in their current state by independent valuers.
- iv) The properties would then be transferred to the Urban Development Company and in return, government would receive a 51% shareholding in this company.
- v) A call would be issued for private investors to put up funds for the proposed Urban Development Company. The funds sought should be equivalent to the market value of the properties. In return for the funds, private investors would be allocated a 50% shareholding in the UDC.
- vi) The Government would have overall control of the company and as such would appoint the chairman and half of the board members. The remaining board members would be appointed by the private investors.
- vii) The UDC would be empowered to carry out whatever works are necessary to renovate the properties and put them on the market. It would also be able to buy up other property for renovation and eventual sale.

viii) Profits from the company would be shared 50/50 The Government would undertake to reinvest its share of the profits into the further improvement of Valletta,

The advantages of the proposed Valletta Urban Development Company over existing public sector structures are twofold:

- i) It brings capital from the private sector into the equation.
- ii) It provides a means for introducing private sector property and marketing expertise to the regeneration process.
- iii) It would hopefully speed up the whole development process

Experience in European cities, particularly as in the UK with London Docklands and Manchester, suggests that where the private sector is involved in purpose-established agencies which have a clear focus and objectives (together with a market-oriented approach), such projects are more likely to succeed. (This, of course, assumes that it will be possible to quickly establish exactly which are Government-owned properties)

The opportunity could perhaps also be taken to assess which parts of government absolutely *must* be based in Valletta and which could be moved elsewhere - perhaps to the old St Luke's Hospital site ?

## **Proposal 2**

My second proposal would be to use tax incentives to encourage the rehabilitation of Valletta residential properties. This would entail the Government offering a deduction for income tax purposes in respect to the cost of rehabilitating and renovating a Valletta property (excluding the cost of acquisition) and could be offered over a 10 year period i.e. 10% per annum, with the strict proviso that the dwelling be used as the sole or main residence of the person who incurred the expenditure.

This would be an encouragement, not only for people to buy and rehabilitate property in Valletta, but also for people to take up residence in the City and would be similar to a scheme adopted by the Dublin Corporation under the Urban Renewal Act of 1998. From what I have been told, it was instrumental in reversing the decline of the historic parts of Dublin.

## **BEFORE CONCLUDING, I'D LIKE TO MAKE A COUPLE OF PLEAS:**

1 That in order to maximize on natural rainfall, the use, or re-use, of wells is made mandatory in old buildings and that provision of wells be included in new buildings.

2 That in order to minimize damage to the environment by the fabrication of new materials - in particular stone, wood, metal railings, tiles (both floor and roof), doors, fireplaces etc - the re-use of existing building materials be actively encouraged. With the present intense interest in interior design, this is an area which can be promoted to good effect. In other parts of the world,

demand for reclaimed materials is high and there are several companies making extremely good money from recycled building materials. Why throw them away if good can come to all sides – good for the consumer; good for the entrepreneur and, more importantly, be of huge benefit to the environment?

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that reducing carbon emission is a strong, added justification for urban regeneration – but urban regeneration requires action on a number of fronts.

Thus, the setting up of an urban regeneration company is suggested, to accelerate the rehabilitation and use of many residential properties in Valletta.

Some form of tax incentive is also suggested for those who rehabilitate a property in Valletta, for use as their own home.

I hope that perhaps I may have spurred your thoughts in new directions; or even confirmed your own thoughts on some of the positive ways ahead in this vital, but tricky (and sometimes unpalatable) area, of trying to ensure that this beautiful city is able to survive for future generations – by reducing our urban footprint through regeneration.

### VALLETTA

Year	population	Population change	
		Number	Percentage
1985	9340		
		- 2078	- 22%
1995	7262		
		- 962	- 13%
2005	6300		

### Southern Harbour – the region around Grand Harbour

Year	population	Population change	
		Number	Percentage
1985	86,843		
		3609	- 4%
1995	83,234		
		2187	- 2.6%
2005	81,047		

2. Dwelling stock by occupancy status and locality: 1995; 2005 Censuses ...

District and locality	1995			2005			Change 1995-2005		
	Total	Occupied	Vacant	Total	Occupied	Vacant	Total	Occupied	Vacant
<b>MALTA</b>	155,202	119,479	35,723	192,314	139,178	53,136	37,112	19,699	17,413
<b>Malta</b>	139,754	110,104	29,650	171,833	128,459	43,374	32,079	18,355	13,724
<b>Gozo and Comino</b>	15,448	9,375	6,073	20,481	10,719	9,762	5,033	1,344	3,689
<b>Southern Harbour</b>	31,642	26,693	4,949	34,933	28,093	6,840	3,291	1,400	1,891
Birgu	1,356	1,049	307	1,316	996	320	-40	-53	13
Bormla	2,647	2,124	523	2,653	2,071	582	6	-53	59
Fgura	3,554	3,216	338	4,121	3,633	488	567	417	150
Floriana	1,220	981	239	1,280	884	396	60	-97	157
Isia	1,508	1,257	251	1,551	1,164	387	43	-93	136
Kalkara	1,016	883	133	1,126	944	182	110	61	49
Luqa	1,772	1,594	178	2,018	1,722	296	246	128	118
Marsa	1,984	1,786	198	2,443	2,009	434	459	223	236
Paola	3,776	3,256	520	3,990	3,317	673	214	61	153
Santa Luċija	1,063	1,047	16	1,118	1,063	55	55	16	39
Tarxien	2,678	2,270	408	3,075	2,535	540	397	265	132
Valletta	3,586	2,753	833	3,814	2,576	1,238	228	-177	405
Xghajra	651	224	427	855	428	427	204	204	-
Żabbar	4,831	4,253	578	5,573	4,751	822	742	498	244

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