

A Fascinating Laboratory for New Experiences

by Perit David Felice

The flipside of the subscription form to *The Economist* used to show an idealised collection of iconic, well known, buildings which together formed a global city, a dream of a single place containing some of the most important buildings of the world. How powerful would the leader of such a city be! Only some months ago, a local organisation devised something similar, probably for marketing purposes, made up of a combination of historical buildings and current projects. Immediately evident is the fact that contemporary buildings happen within a strict context, a historical framework that is undeniable and any introduction of a new building will inevitably have to deal with this.

The European Forum for Architectural Policies recently published the *Bordeaux Manifesto for European Cities*. It states that the European City is a place for social, economic, cultural and political exchange. It has cultural values shared by all countries and the large majority of European citizens. The European city is both the symbol and melting pot of European identity and culture where social mix is an essential condition to guarantee the richness and the perpetuity of these exchanges. To this end, each of our cities should offer a quality environment relevant to their available resources, to their way of life and their needs. European cities are the pride of their inhabitants and, if this is not the case, they should become so. The citizen should be both a provider and a beneficiary; in this way cities will increase their competitiveness and sustainability, whilst remaining an essential component of our cultural wealth.

Life develops in urban zones throughout Europe but is subject to intense pressures. Climate change for example makes living conditions less pleasant and this phenomenon is more pronounced in the city. Pollution and environmental damage are constant threats to the quality of life in urban zones. Generally, the urban population increases yet cities dilute as they expand. The migratory flow towards cities strengthens culture, business and the quality of exchanges, but it also creates social tension.

Architecture is often the mediator of urban tensions. Indeed, important buildings have always been tools for expression; they often reflect a story and are used to demonstrate power and the capacity of a society to meet change.

The Manifesto calls upon us to rebuild cities to reconcile rather than divide and to enable their response to the aspirations of our time and those of future generations: finally, it calls for the creation of **united, innovative and beautiful** cities.

The concept of writing a manifesto is in itself quite beautiful – I would have thought, unfortunately, that no one writes manifestos anymore - and is really something borrowed from other times. The reference of such a call to the leaders of cities in Malta begs one obvious and hard question; do cities in Malta exist?

In a special issue on Malta, The Architectural Review of July 1969 included an article called *'Rape of a Village'* by Peter Richardson, then a lecturer at the school of architecture in the Royal University of Malta. Richardson wrote about the unique quality of the Maltese villages, with their compact planning so well suited to our climate. He wrote that they will disappear if they are broken open for the convenience of motorists or on behalf of some misguided idea of improvement. This had already happened in more than one village and was threatened to others.

All Maltese villages inevitably suffered under the onslaught of a rapid increase in motor traffic, speeding through a street system originally laid out for the quiet movement of the pedestrian and the donkey-cart. Richardson wrote how Zurrieq, for example, was a barrier to the tourists rushing from the smart Sliema hotels to the Blue Grotto. But a recently completed road effectively bypassed the body of the village. And next season, Richardson wrote, a new thirty-foot superhighway will whisk them from Luqa to the coast.

The structure of the Maltese villages is so tightly interlocked that any deviation from their pattern of development was bound to cause their destruction as marvelous examples of townscape developed as a direct response to simple functional and climatic problems – a place where people could live together in simple harmony, facing the fierceness of their environment. If Malta wished to retain these visual qualities, Richardson wrote, it had to apply the most rigid controls to ensure their preservation.

It didn't. What did happen, as always does, everywhere, was that new roads brought new development and the uniqueness of each and every original village, till then physically separated and distinct from one another, was lost. The result? One larger urban area forming one city; wound around its historical centre, our fortified towns, our capital, with a defining edge around the harbours.

Living on a monument

Living in a monument is not easy. Urban anthropologist, Jon Mitchell, wrote in *"Ambivalent Europeans – Valletta: Glory, decline and Rehabilitation"*:

"... we had the local people, the interests of whom appeared to be constantly subsumed under this hegemony of heritage, and who struggled to come to terms with the implications of living in a monument.

...They were aware and proud of the city's former glories and its rich architectural heritage. Living on a monument is not necessarily alienating, it can also be enriching, lending a certain civic pride to the narration of self."

What does Valletta want to become when it grows up? Valletta has again become a topic for debate, as always. This also the result of a silent revolution, of measurable change, that is due to mostly spontaneous interventions rather than the implementation of some complex masterplan...or is it? Leaders, political leaders, actually all types of political leaders, have throughout history, recognised that the ultimate legacy of their administration is the mark they manage to leave on their cities. Three years ago our own prime Minister had said in an interview:

"I find that Malta has always been, despite its size, a fascinating laboratory for new experiences... In a sense, Malta, but especially Valletta, was then an experiment of that which would eventually bring Europe together... These experiences, in the city of Valletta but within the context of the capital of the Order were the beginning of a time of great change in Europe, from division to the rediscovery of its roots.

The architecture of Valletta relates this story. The consistency of the buildings of Valletta brought diverse cultures together... And we stand here, now, as guardians of this marvelous heritage.

...it is only this generation that is recognizing its intrinsic value and has assumed the responsibility of restoration and re-use."

A place for new ideas

For the first time in history, there are more people living in cities than living in rural areas or villages – it is only natural that the same applies in Malta and this is a result of the merger of smaller villages into one urban area with Valletta as its pinnacle. This is further exasperated by the need to protect cities that are monuments of heritage, dedicated to history, with the requirement to be perpetually contemporary.

Cities are primarily political statements – it is within cities that ideas are generated.

The city is a fundamental and universal human creation. It is a unique centre for social life as well as individual and collective fulfillment. The frantic, irreversible urban growth that societies throughout the world have experienced has caused a transformation of cities and agglomerations. This has not always corresponded to inhabitants' legitimate needs, expectations or aspirations.

One of the things that always surprises me about Valletta is its yet unrecognised, but marked, historical capability to change to meet new challenges and to host new ideas. The Chamber of Commerce Building in Republic Street, for example, is reminiscent of exchange houses that graced cities throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, as is the market building in Merchants Street with its cast iron and glass structure, built so soon after the construction of the Crystal Palace in London. Important buildings or building projects are often controversial and frequently feed off the urban tensions present in any city.

The economics of regeneration, or the regeneration of an economy

Valletta was built as a military machine. Peaceful times, the positioning of authority and power within it, its location on the water that brought commerce and trade, all these and many other factors turned it into a city. Valletta is a city, very much a city. Valletta is about people, the people that work there but also, maybe especially so, those who live within it. Valletta, like most European cities, is a place to be enjoyed, a place for event, a place for celebration.

In rehabilitation work there is no contradiction between discipline and freedom, between caution and creativity. The history of cities consists of experiences constantly being arranged in layers marking time and, in relation to these, a new generation can demonstrate its capability to emulate the past. Besides, architecture never is completely finished or perfect. Imperfection is life and it is use by people that completes architecture.

The city state - Greater Valletta

The walls of Valletta are static but its boundaries are constantly changing. The separation between the fortified towns around the harbours and the villages that dotted the Maltese landscape, is no more. Indeed the opportunity that presents itself today is to interpret the current physical situation as one of a Valletta in close liaison with a Greater Valletta, made up of the vast urban area that has developed and grown around the fortified capital.

Does this mean anything? It certainly does. It would develop the as yet untapped potential of the Valletta brand; and it provides inspiration to other urban areas, outside Valletta, with the parallel of a quality built environment within the existing historic fabric and raises the challenge to provide similar standards by new development. Above all, this fertilisation of ideas, also releases pressure from the inner city and allows overspill of activity to areas outside it – not everything needs to be in Valletta, if the areas around it become capable of supporting it.

This is a process which has already happened in history; indeed what a great event it must have been to see the first buildings erected outside the walls of Valletta. How important it is that one of the first processes of contemporary economic regeneration of the Grand Harbour should have been the aptly named Valletta Waterfront.

Entering the creative economy

Kigge Hvid, the director of INDEX: a Danish design award programme, says about the economic benefits of building on uniqueness:

"If you do what everybody else does, you will not survive in the knowledge society. We believe that what you have to build on is the consensus and the uniqueness of...the country you live in. Right now there is a global competition for design leadership between countries like Finland, Singapore, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States. A lot of money is being invested in this. We had recommended to the Danish Government, in launching INDEX;, to focus on what Denmark is known for, design but also of course the welfare state and our democratic values. This is what makes Denmark special, a more human way of thinking, a planned society."

What makes Valletta or Greater Valletta unique? What are those factors that would make it special, much in the same way as other, even larger, more complex cities have identified for themselves? Milan is based on very specific factors which are known to all, simple determining characteristics like design quality, fashion, football; or Barcelona with Gaudi's buildings, the ramblas and its harbour. What would these characteristics be for Valletta, or rather for a Valletta branded as a city representing a larger region, a city of comparable size and population to many good quality small European cities, like Toulouse or Maastricht? Is it a Jazz Festival or a carnival? Is it a Caravaggio city? Could it be a transport system? Could it be turned into a university town, where the streets become the campus?

From Monocle

It is of course, always interesting to find out the way others look at us. Monocle Magazine, a must read glossy with, quote, a cool eye on the world, identified Malta in its January 2008 issue as one of five territories to watch. Monocle prides itself to report on people, policies, trends, states and games that will shape the years ahead.

The issue was called “The Forces of the Future”.

A Fascinating Laboratory for New Experiences is a summary of a presentation made by David Felice during the Valletta 450 Seminar organized by the Valletta Alive Foundation on 25th October 2008, at the Chamber of Commerce in Valletta. David Felice is a partner of Architecture Project (AP).

Captions:

Image A – From The Economist

Image B – A city in Malta?!

Image C – Valletta, a place for celebration

Image D – Greater Valletta