

VALLETTA

Integrated Conservation and the Rehabilitation of Housing Stock

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1. Introduction

This paper gives a further dimension to the possibilities of rehabilitating Valletta. Valletta in this case-study is only seen as a crucial or critical area representing a widespread problem in the whole of the Maltese Islands. The town and village cores are deteriorating through neglect and vacant housing especially as a result of an antiquated rent law, a history of extensive build-up of social housing on virgin land and only a recent legislation which is conservation oriented. Whilst the rehabilitation of monuments is vital, the crux of prolonging Valletta's lifespan lies in the re-population and revitalization of its various quarters. This paper gives an overview of the population, migration and settlement patterns from the nineteenth century to date and refers to the attempts at renewal, re-development and restoration projects in the post war period. This paper also assesses the present complexities and offers ideas based on sustainable and integrated conservation.



Plate 1: Valletta Aerial View (1999).

2. A Brief History

2.1 Valletta – The new city

Valletta is part of a maritime fortified urban network which developed after 1530. With the occupation of the Knights of St. John the harbour became a favourable site for a city. The seat of government or governance was shifted from the heart of the Island and the Citta Vecchia to the Grand Harbour. In the first years the Order was engaged in fortifying Birgu (or Borgo) which lay to the east of Fort St. Angelo. Birgu became a thriving base with a church, eight auberges and a hospital. After three years the Borgo which was inhabited only by seafarers developed extensively and more than 500 houses were built. This remedy was

only temporary and the fall of Tripoli and the Gozo raid of 1551 forced the Sicilian Viceroy to take drastic measures. The design for fortifying Mount Sciberras and the opposite side of the *porto delle galere* later Senglea were based on earlier proposals made by Fra Leone Strozzi, Prior of Capua.¹ Pietro Prado under the guidance of Strozzi built two forts on Senglea, Fort St. Michael and another on the tip of Mount Sciberras, Fort St. Elmo (1551-52).

After the siege of 1565 in which the Turkish attack failed, further extensions of fortifications rose on Mount Sciberras. Here Grand Master La Vallette was determined to build a city. He applied to Pius IV for the services of an expert architect “well versed in town planning and design of fortifications.” The Pope chose Francesco Laparelli who arrived in Malta on 28 December 1565 and began to work on the project immediately. On 28 March 1566 works on the new city began. It was christened Valletta and dedicated to the Grand Master who had led the victory over the Turks.

Extensions were made over the existing fortifications. In 1634 the Valletta peninsula was reinforced from the land front. Pietro Floriani designed the extension and the town which rose was named after him. Several lines bastions and forts were built successively by Firenzuola. There were many interventions and gradually the harbour area was completely fortified. The best European military engineers contributed to this intense building project. Maurizio Valperga designed in 1670 a scheme which included a semi-circular ring of eight bastions with a circumference of 5,000 yards. These defensive works were massive and capable of sheltering 40,000 people together with their belongings and livestock.² In the eighteenth century another two forts were built on the Marasamxett side, Fort Manoel and Tigne. Valletta became hub and heart of this extensive maritime network and rose as a heavily urbanized network. The street layout and planning follows the grid-iron or rectangular plan and after the fortification of the peninsula was secured the rectangular plots were filled in with auberges, churches and convents, houses, villas and palazzi.

The French occupation (1798-1800) did not leave significant changes at least in the fabric of Valletta. There were only some amendments in administration which were revised by the British after Malta became a protectorate and later colony. During the British colonization (1800-1964) changes and adaptations were devised without interfering intensely with the disposition of streets and spaces. In fact these were exploited to celebrate the modern epoch and proclaim Imperial administration.

The most extensive works which occupied the extant rectangular plots were built during Victorian times between the 1840s and 1870s; St. Paul’s Anglican Church, the Covered Market, the Royal Opera House and the Camarata. Stylistically there is no conflict between the British neo-classical style and the sober restrained Baroque of the Order period. The spaces dominated by the colonnades and porticoes became reminiscent of Trafalgar Square and Regent Circus. The Frenchman, Louis Enault, who was in Malta in the 1850’s observed this phenomenon. Regent’s Quadrant was being used as a model on all the world’s *latitudes*.³ After all the British had adopted the same parameters for fortified cities during the Victorian period. Francesco Laparelli’s Valletta (c.1566) was in harmony with the traditional ideals of the Royal Engineers. Kingston, in Jamaica, designed by Sir Christopher Lilly R. E., followed the classic pattern in which he modified the plan used for rebuilding the city of London after the Great Fire. The suburban extensions and the fortified town of Corradino designed as an extension of the Cottonera lines was planned by Giuseppe Bonavia. It consisted of a compact grid-pattern system.⁴ The regularity was further accentuated by the equally proportioned square blocks.

¹ Lino Bugeja, M. Buhagiar, S. Fiorini (edit), Birgu – A Maltese maritime city, Malta University Services Ltd. (1993), pgs. 549-550

² Quentin Hughes, *The Building of Malta (1530-1795)*, London Alec Tiranti (1967), pgs 15-29.

³ Louis Enault, *La Terre Saint - Voyage des Quarante Pèlerins de 1853*. Paris 1854, pp. 16, 28.

⁴ NAR, CSG 04/28 5175, January 7th 1858, p. 389.

Although the colonial dimension may have not affected extensively the fabric, Valletta was traumatized successively as a result of urbanization and migration. Even during the period of the Order the fluctuations in economy, social development and strategic needs created great strains. Valletta's dimension was never local only or "Maltese" from its conception to the post-war era. This city was always dependent on foreign funds for administration and development and catered for the European princes during the Order period and for an Empire during British colonization. Valletta in that sense had an urban cosmopolitan identity, governance and population. The Order in fact represented one of the earliest ensemble of European power concentrated in one area with the different palatial auberges acting as embassies. During the British period it was a Mediterranean hub and centre for one of the most powerful European navies.

3. Depopulation and Migration –Is it a phenomenon of the 20th. century?

In this century Valletta went through a steady decline in population and was like all the maritime cities in the harbour area subject to migration either to the inner harbour area outside the fortifications or to the towns and villages. The reasons for this mass migration and decline comes as a result of various crises and elements. Valletta's colonial dimension created a series of fluctuations with a population explosion and a subsequent decline. Valletta was a thriving city based on an Imperial economy which oscillated according to defence needs. Its population also suffered because of military strategy. Because of greater control successive exercises were adopted during the British colonial period to lower population densities. Most of these failed in the short term but in the long term Valletta's population did drop at such an alarming rate that today it is difficult to cope with! Valletta's population today reaches 7,262 and is confined within 760,000 metres sq. Valletta is still one of the most densely populated areas in the Maltese Islands. The population density per square kilometre is the second highest when compared to the other fortified maritime cities (Senglea, Cospicua and Vittoriosa). It follows Senglea which has a density of 22,066. Valletta has a density of 8,635 but still has 833 vacant dwellings that is 23 % of the total.¹ This is 3% higher than the national average for vacant dwellings in urban conservation areas.² Vacant dwellings are one of the most pressing problems in the Maltese Islands and possibly one of the major causes of degeneration of the historic fabric and texture in conservation areas.

3.1 The Order Period

Even though today's statistics are alarming this is a recurrent pattern in Valletta. During period the Order great fluctuations were recorded. "In 1590, Valletta counted no less than 4,000 inhabitants, almost as much as the Three Cities put together."³ However the shift of the urban population from Mdina, or from the other cities and villages and from abroad created a boost in population reaching 11,251 in 1617. In the 1620s and 1630s the pressure of influx was so great that already plans were being made to transfer the population of Valletta to other sites round the harbour area without much success.⁴ The "equilibrium" was restored naturally in 1675-76 with the plague. However this was only temporary and the increase in population continued. In 1797 just before the French occupation 20,108 souls are recorded in Valletta. Valletta's population had augmented fivefold. The major affects of the decline in population were: epidemics, new settlement patterns and a "semi-stable" foreign element which worked in Valletta periodically or seasonally. The same patterns are recorded during the British period.

¹ Saviour Formosa, Census 1995 at <http://members.nbci.com/Saverius/>

² Malcolm Borg, Draft Urban Conservation Topic Paper, Planning Authority, March 2000.

³ Stanley Fiorini, Demographic Growth and Urbanisation

⁴ The design of a new town "Paola" by Grad Master Antoine de Paule and the extension of Valletta with a fortified suburb designed by Pietro Floriani, in 1635.



Plate 2: Main Gate to Valletta (Old Photograph c.1880)

3.2 The British Period

The earliest form of migration during this period is recorded in 1851. The potential of maritime cities as a magnet in attracting local population was only temporary. The sudden rise was short lived and after 1871 it gradually fell. Migration from the city was caused by a demand for higher rents for dwellings in Valletta. The situation had developed because of the high rents and also because “the owners of houses in the town chose to leave of their own accord, and remove onto the country with the view of bettering their circumstances, by obtaining higher rents for their premises in Valletta.”¹

The densely populated city of Valletta which developed into a district after the publication of a Government Notice dated 30 November 1880 is studied thoroughly. The Valletta District now comprised the City of Valletta, Floriana, Hamrun and Porto Nuovo, Pieta`, Msida, Sliema and St. Julians. The City had attracted these suburbs which were also expanding and the “population of Valletta and the Cottonera Districts inhabit, almost in an interrupted line, the shores of the Great and the Marsamuschetto Harbours, commencing from the Bay of St. Julian and ending at Fort Ricasoli.”² Valletta’s potential as a magnet in this sense is described by the commentator, “Valletta contains the plethora of the population on account of its being the principal city wherein all the Commerce and Industrial Arts of the Maltese Islands are concentrated.”³ Apart from giving the population of Valletta (24,854), the census also provides us with the number of commuters by land and sea. The number of persons counted in one day entering Valletta was 12,804. Valletta had to cope with that too and the engineering exercise to double the gates for better accessibility in the 1860s shows the importance of Valletta as a hub.

As in the period of the Order there were two “populations” in Valletta. The civil population consisted of 165,037 persons the remainder comprised Garrison, Royal and Merchant Navy. The density of population in the Maltese Islands in 1891 was 1,487 persons to the square mile therefore recording an increase in density over 1881 of 155 persons to the square mile. According to the registrar this density of population “when compared with the

¹ Malcolm Borg, *Urbanisation in Colonial Malta (1800-1901)*, Doctoral Research, University of Leeds 1999.

² *Ibid.* pg.72.

³ *Ibid.* pg.73.

density of population of other countries, show that the Maltese Islands are to be reckoned among the most densely populated countries in the world.”¹ The densely populated towns were in the Valletta District: Valletta (80,660), Cospicua (48,270), Floriana (21,598), Sliema (13,890) and Vittoriosa (13,154).

By the end of the century there is a significant decrease which marks only the beginning of an efflux which gives us today’s results and statistics. In the 1891 census the population of Valletta drops by 1,055 persons or 4.24%.

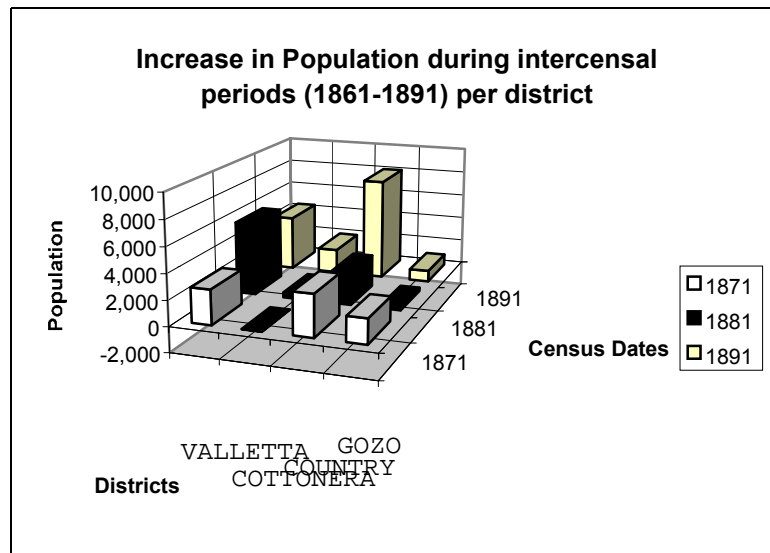


Plate 3: Valletta Skyline by William Scamp (Courtesy Mons. J. Azzopardi - Wignacourt Collegiate Museum)

3.3 The Early Twentieth century and the Post-War Period

Although Valletta again recorded an increase in population in the interwar period (1921-39) of 32% reaching the levels recorded in 1881 this was only temporary. Between 1839 and 1842 the population remains stable at 24,400 however in the period of less than half a

¹ Ibid. V paragraph 25

century the population figures plummeted to 7,262.¹ Between 1985 and 1994, the number of households in Valletta is estimated to have fallen by some 14% (3906 to 3341), whilst the number of registered voters is estimated to have decreased by 20% (7740 to 6183).² Still Valletta has an extensive commuter population and is invaded during the business hours but is dead in the evening. Some 35,000 vehicles have a "V" registered disc. These pay an extra registered tariff for access into Valletta. What is the real capacity of Valletta and how can it cope with this "disturbing trend?"³

4. Housing and Re-Development Projects, Urban Renewal and Rehabilitation

It seems that this disturbing trend has been dealt with before although one must say that the problems were never so acute. Moreover today there is a reversal of trends which have been inherited from the past and from foreign administrations. The Maltese have inherited an extensive heritage but also the responsibility of the administration and management of Valletta! Whereas maintenance works of government buildings and fortifications were possible with Imperial or European based financing how is the national government expected to maintain this patrimony which survived through 500 years of history. Does the Maltese Government have too much heritage to handle? The historical development and administration of Valletta shows two main trends which need to be investigated and reveal a recurrent concern; access and population distribution.

4.1 Victorian Times

The best recorded redevelopment of areas in Valletta date back to Victorian times. Possibly this period marks the starting point in the re-development of large areas of Valletta through extensive projects. Between the 1840s and 1900s Valletta's grid iron-plan and skyline is affected by the building of St.Paul's Church, a Covered Market on the old Prisons site, the Royal Opera House and the Camarata common housing. However through this period the British are dealing with over-population rather than depopulation. Still the projects for Valletta during this period reflect today's more acute problem of migration.

Governor G. Le Marchant, faced with the same housing problems of a developing industrial society imported British designs for the workmen's dwellings. This was not difficult. The Victorian building industry had produced several housing models and on the whole managed to control "massive growth in population".⁴ Housing in the densely populated harbour area became even more critical in 1859. The defective state of drainage in Valletta and the three cities demanded "serious attention from the local government." Properly drained and well ventilated dwellings for the "poorer industrial classes" became a necessity.⁵

Le Marchant proposed several sites which would not interfere with the fortification works, both in Valletta and the suburb Floriana. The unoccupied Jesuits College which had become dilapidated and yielded no revenue was earmarked for housing. Part of the old prison in St. Ursola Street was given at a lease of 128 pounds per annum. This money was used as a grant to construct a new street extending from that of St. Domenica. The street

¹ Austen St. B. Harrison and R. Pearce Hubbard, Valletta – A Report accompanying the Outline Plan for the Region of Valletta and the Three Cities, Valletta (1945), pgs. 20-22.

² Grand Harbour Local Plan - Approved Plan, Planning Authority (1998), pg.13.

³ lid.

⁴ The Victorian City - Images and Realities. Vol. 1. Edited by H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.London 1973. Donald J. Olsen - House upon House - Estate development in London and Sheffield. pg.334.

⁵ NAR, Dispatches to Secretary of State (May 1855 - Nov. 1860). No.14. Palace Valletta, Jan. 23rd. 1859. To Sir E. Bulwer Lytton from Sir G. Le Marchant. pgs. 407-409.

was ill-ventilated because it was blocked by an immense building. It also served for providing three family houses and a lodging house with 20 apartments capable of housing 80 people.¹

The most ambitious housing project however was that of the Old Camarata. The housing project was selected after a tough competition for which 22 plans and designs were submitted. The Camarata rises over an immense ventilated basement with a bold solidity. The first four courses are made up of conventional hard stone blocks used to isolate the upper courses from rising damp. The rest of the stories are constructed with narrow courses in a brick-like fashion with an air cavity in the middle so that damp would not penetrate the inner walls. The unadorned building has big rectangular windows. Only at ground level are they arched. In its simple design the block conceals an internal meticulous and symmetrical distribution of mass and space. The Camarata is probably one of the few examples of poor-class dwellings which has survived to date and is still in use!

Le Marchant also considered the plain in Floriana for the building of private lodging houses. It would definitely serve for the “industrious class, having dealings at the Marina”.² In the leasing out of property it was important to use the method of perpetual lease. This was the most favoured system of investment for the Maltese. Taking into account military and sanitary conditions Floriana would be an ideal dwelling site. It would encourage the inhabitants of Valletta to settle outside its town walls. Valletta was still considered on a military level, a stronghold! In case of emergency a lower population density meant “fewer mouths to feed”. The Floriana inhabitants could also be deployed during attack to cooperate with the troops in defence against the enemy.³ Housing in this case developed on a rigid military system with defence as a primary goal.



Plate 4: Camarata Building – Victorian common dwelling

Popular housing could also be a source of investment. Le Marchant considered building a “favourite investment with the Maltese”. British securities were not popular and yielded a

¹ NAR, P.W. 265. 31st. January 1862. To H.E. Sir G. Le Merchant report submitted by G. Vella Collector.pg.38-57.

² NAR, P.W. 265. 31st. January 1862. To H.E. Sir G. Le Merchant report submitted by G. Vella Collector.pg.38-57.

³ NAR, Dispatches to Secretary of State (May 1855 - Nov. 1860). No.14. Palace Valletta, Jan. 23rd. 1859. To Sir E. Bulwer Lytton from Sir G. Le Marchant. pgs. 407-409.

meagre return. Moreover the Maltese had little confidence in foreign investment. Building leases had developed as a major resource in Malta's economy. As the demand for building space had risen especially within the Valletta Fortification the value rose proportionately in value. The flow of capital especially during wartime would remain unemployed if there was no opportunity for local investment. The building of houses and *mezzanini* in Valletta would not only improve the Public Revenue and raise the value of Government property but will also create an "additional boon of extending house accommodation which is in most urgent demand".¹ This urgent demand for investment in building had to be regulated by the local Government to assure the interests of the population. If the land fell "into the hands of speculators" the poor classes would not receive any benefit out of the housing exercise.²

Although most of the housing projects during the period were designed to shift the population outside Valletta still had a significant number of common dwelling houses (rookeries) which kept the density of the city high. The Manderaggio was one of the worst in the 1880s it was calculated that 2,544 persons inhabited in 2.56 acres. No wonder Mr. Plimsoll a British Parliamentarian, was shocked by the living conditions of the inhabitants of the Manderaggio in Valletta. He published a pamphlet which created further pressure on the Cholera Committee and Governor to start housing projects.³ Housing projects for Valletta and slum clearance which started during Victorian times were to mark the re-development of Valletta to date.

4.2 "Art Nouveau" Planning – The 1920s

In the early twentieth century the pressures of overpopulation were still being felt by the Colonial administration. A Master Plan for the area outside Valletta and the Crownworks and Hornworks at Marsa was commissioned. The designs by Major James Galizia, F. Bonavia and R. Castillo are extensive. Although the plan was never adopted it reflects the exigencies of the time. It also gives an early warning signal of which the parts of Valletta are contentious in the redevelopment of the city.⁴

The Galizia-Bonavia-Castillo plan or the "Concorso per un piano regolatore nel Isola di Malta" tackles accessibility to the city and the pressing housing problems. The extensive project divided into 18 parts comprises detailed drawings, plans, elevations and sections of the various parts of the area. It opens up Valletta and Floriana and creates easier access with axial connectivity puncturing the walls for vehicular traffic. The double main gate of Valletta is freestanding and turned monument. The area outside the walls of Valletta is designed for mixed uses; government offices, tourist and cultural venues with a newly designed law courts, a museum, 2 hotels and garden villas or high class dwellings *abitazioni signorili*. On the glacis outside Portes des Bombes and in the Crown and Horn Works area the more commercial and industrial uses are located. The plans include a shopping centre, more garden dwellings and near the industrial zone workers dwellings *zona operaia* with a bank and a market.

¹ NAR, Dispatches from Secretary of State (Nov. 1855 - Dec. 1860) No.135. Palace Valletta, 17th. Sept. 1858. To E. Bulwer Lytton from Le Marchant. pgs. 342-343.

² NAR, Dispatches from Secretary of State. No.54. (1857) No.215 War Office, 8th. June 1857.

³ NAR, Dispatches from Secretary of State 76 (Jan. - Dec. 1879) Malta 187, 21 May 1879.

⁴ J.Galizia, F. Bonavia and R. Castillo, Concorso per un piano regolatore nel Isola di Malta, Malta 1925.



Plate 5: Master plan of Valletta and Floriana by Galizia-Bonavia-Castillo (1925).

This project reveals the problems Valletta would face in the post war epoch. The idea of accessibility, of vehicular traffic and of tackling a large commuting population is tangible. This had already been a problem in the 1860s when the first project of the doubling of gates in Valletta and the Three cities was developed. The problem of housing within close proximity of Valletta is also an issue. The idea of a garden town is not new (the British had already proposed one for the Marsa area in the late nineteenth century) and it tends to attenuate the use of space for housing by proposing landscaping. The project was not commissioned perhaps because it interfered too much with the fortifications and security issues.¹

4.3 Harrison and Hubbard – Planning for the blitzed Harbour area 1945

One can safely say that Harrison and Hubbard's report for the planning and reconstruction of Valletta after the second World War has been very cautious in preserving the planning of Valletta and what was left of its texture and fabric. There is already a "conservationist" approach in 1945 when dealing with the ancient monuments and assets which make up the city. The proposals are guided by two principal considerations: "The first is that the damage which the City has suffered through enemy action is not, in itself, such as to warrant a scheme of radical planning. The second is that...every care should be taken to conserve the unique character of what remains of the City of the Order." The problem was and still is today "to modify a City to serve the simple needs off the sixteenth century so that it may satisfactorily serve the complex needs of today."²

Valletta was least destroyed by enemy action when compared to the other cities in the Harbour area and Floriana. However there were three substantial damaged areas "North of the Church of St. John, the second between the Cavaliers; and the third, on either side of St. Christopher Street, where it descends to Grand Harbour." Still the proposal earmarked 16 sites; which were categorized and subdivided: 9 were affected by war damage, 6 obsolescent and 5 undamaged. Slum areas crop up once more and 6 out of the areas proposed are earmarked for demolition or amelioration. These were the "Manderaggio", the "Cavalier", the "Ghetto", "St. Lazarus", "St. Anthony" and "the Arsenal". The Director of Health had delineated 11 acres of Valletta as "condemned".

¹ Malcolm Borg, *Urbanisation in Colonial Malta (1800-1901)*, Doctoral Research, University of Leeds 1999.

² Austen St. B. Harrison and R. Pearce Hubbard, *Valletta – A Report accompanying the Outline Plan for the Region of Valletta and the Three Cities*, Valletta (1945), pg.64

The other areas indicated for redesign were Kingsgate and the Opera House site and St. John's Cathedral and square. Unfortunately for the latter the square did destroy the idea of surprise and visual impact. For Kingsgate Harrison and Hubbard were more sensitive than their predecessors and possibly by successive redevelopment projects. With regards to Kingsgate or the Main gate it is interesting to point out the clarity of judgement in retaining it "If we are opposed categorically to any such suggestion, it is not because we regard the Gate itself as sacrosanct, but because we are convinced that so important a breach in the enceinte of Valletta will, in the long run, lead inevitably to the destruction of the character of the city as a whole. We recommend on the contrary, that Kingsgate should be closed to all wheel-traffic."¹ The slum in the area was recommended for clearance and the formation a public open space. The open space was symmetrically disposed and not as one finds today onto one side only. Direct connectivity and the visual connection with Kingsway (today Republic Street) was thus assured in the Harrison and Hubbard proposal. Although the Opera House remains were earmarked for total demolition and a "building better adapted to contemporary needs" was contemplated the planners follow the indications of those consulted. The opinions were unanimous for its resuscitation.²

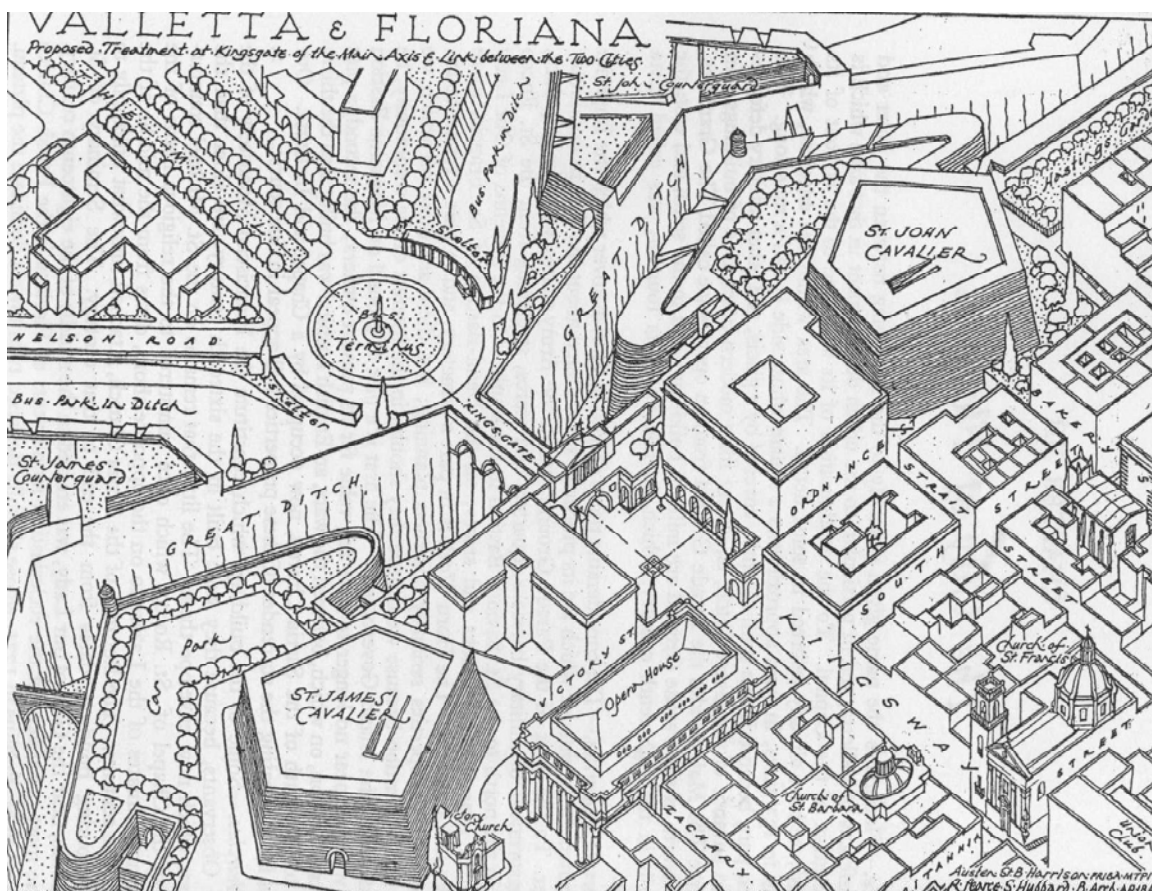


Plate 6: Harrison and Hubbard – Proposal for Kingsgate (Maingate) Area (1945).

4.4 The 20th Century - rehabilitation, social housing and contended sites

In the post independence epoch (post-1964) successive governments sought to create a social balance. One of the most popular political issues was social housing which both local parties supported and enacted. Valletta was affected because this epoch saw the build-up and mushrooming of social housing in most of the areas earmarked by the Harrison and Hubbard report; the Cavalier slum, the Arsenal slum and the St. Lazarus slum. All these were

¹ Ibid. pg.67

² Ibid. pg.71

cleared and substituted by new social housing until recently. Other areas were affected next to the Arsenal slum and the Camarata. Others who were not allotted a place in Valletta were given an apartment or house in the new estates round the outer harbour area, in the north harbours area or other more remote housing estates. This limited and eradicated social problems to a certain extent but created new ones. Today Valletta suffers from an ageing population with 35% of the population over 60.¹ It also risks to lose its intangible heritage; the *festà* parochial competition, the carnival culture which is most strongly felt in the area near St. Elmo or the football fever. The latter may create debate whether culture or not but all of these elements create group identity and a sense of belonging which should be exploited to attract people back to the vacant dwellings.



Plate 7: Valletta Social Housing Blocks in the background with traditional timber balconies (1990).

The work on rehabilitation rose exponentially from 1987 onwards with the establishment of the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee VRC. The Committee was set up “with the purpose of studying the best way to revitalise Valletta, conserve and restore its building fabric, and generally improve its environment”.² In 1989 the Valletta Rehabilitation Project was set up, it “had its own professional staff, to prepare projects, undertake direct projects or to supervise work done through contracts”.³ The localised project under an executive coordinator proved vital because it was acting at source and directing funds at critical areas. From 1992 the project undertook 50 major restoration and conservation projects, these include the design of briefs and environment improvement works. Amongst the major projects there are briefs for the National Arts Centre which included the Opera House site (1990-1996) and the design for a new city entrance in 1989.⁴ The Renzo Piano proposals “for a new City Entrance aroused a very heated debate which is still going on”.⁵

¹ According to 1994 statistics in the Grand Harbour Local Plan - Approved Plan, Planning Authority (1998), pg.13.

² Ray Bondin, The Rehabilitation’s Project Office within the Ministry of the Environment, Valletta June 2001.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

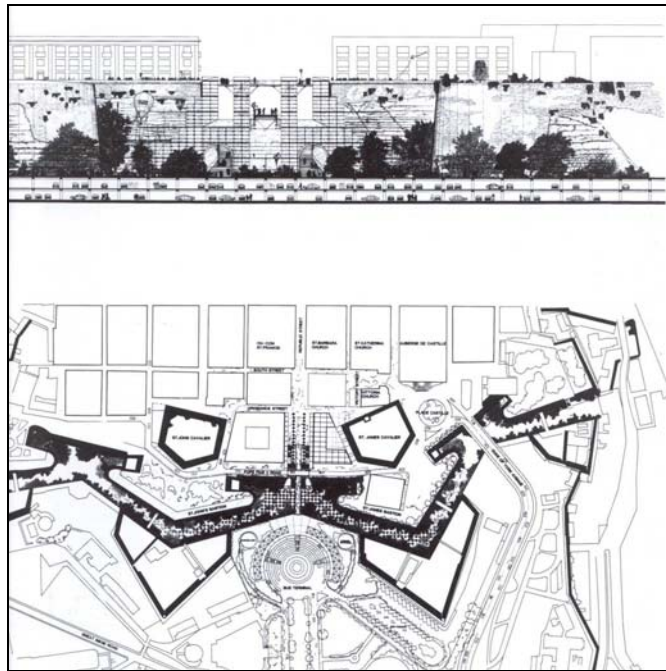


Plate 8: Renzo Piano's Project for Main Entrance of Valletta (1986).

From 1945 the Main Gate and Opera House area remains a contended site. Nothing was built instead of the Opera House or not a part restored. Today it lies in ruins and used pragmatically as a temporary car-parking area. The Harrison and Hubbard proposal for retaining the gate was dismissed. Instead a broad and high main gate supporting an over-pass to connect a circular road was designed. The Italian neo-fascist design unfortunately was not completed and was re-interpreted. It seems that both administration and the local population were never satisfied with the project and considered temporary.¹ For over half a century this area in Valletta remains a contended site. But why? Is it a case of lack of funding or is it cultural conflict? It is difficult to conceive how even though German Prisoners of War offered assistance in re-building - restoration never happened. It maybe an anti-colonialist sentiment which survived through the years – a post-colonial trauma. Malta as independent country is still young with only 37 years experience. Anti-colonialist sentiment may still exist. According to the general feeling which came out of the heated debate with regards the Opera House site and the Gate the popular sentiment is similar to what Harrison and Hubbard reported in 1945; the Opera House should be restored and the Gate retained. This is why Renzo Piano's project (1986)² for the demolition of the gate and the construction of a light weight bridge was never accepted and remained on the drawing board. Richard England's Master Plan (1999) incorporating the Renzo Piano project and the new bus terminal also raised criticism. Today housing in Valletta and access into the City remain a crucial problem in planning and conserving.³

¹ Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna – The National Heritage Foundation has commissioned a survey which shows that 80% of the Maltese are in favour of the rebuilding of Kingsgate and the Opera House.

² Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, Renzo Piano – Progetti e architetture 1987-1994, Electa 1994. Pg.66

³ Borg Malcolm and Joe Magro Conti (March 2000), Draft Urban Conservation Topic Paper, Planning Authority (Media Review Section).

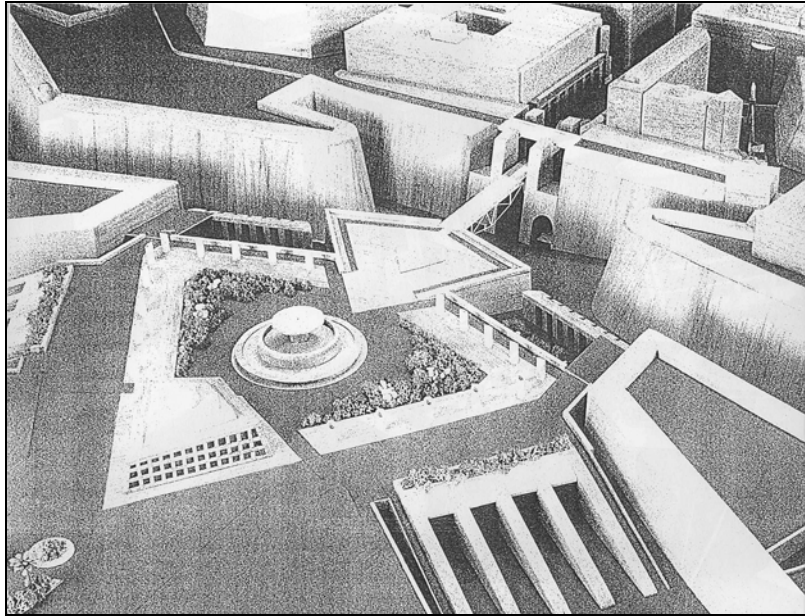


Plate 9: Model of Richard England's proposal for the bus terminal integrated with Renzo Piano's proposal (1999).

5. Conservation and Valletta's Future

5.1 Are Valletta's assets protected?

Valletta has the highest level of protection and value since it has been designated a World Heritage City in 1980. There are various levels of protection for Valletta. Most of the buildings and monuments are listed by the Antiquities (Protection) Act Cap 25. Subsequent legislation has considered the importance of the various elements in Valletta. Through the Development Planning Act (1992) Valletta was designated an Urban Conservation Area (1995) and through UCO 4 all buildings have blanket protection. An important step in conserving important elements was taken in (1995) with the scheduling of shop-fronts.¹ Lately as part of the recent exercise for the submission of the Harbour Fortifications as a World Heritage Site (submission date 1998) these were scheduled and the area declared Area of High Landscape Value.²

5.2 More Networking

The success of plans for Valletta depends on the effort that brings together the various bodies, organizations and institutions directly involved in the management of the City's resources. The main entities concerned here include; The Valletta Rehabilitation Committee, The Planning Authority, The Valletta Local Council, Works Division and Restoration Unit, ICOMOS (Malta), Lands Department, Housing Authority, The Malta Tourism Authority, Museums Department.

It is, therefore, proposed that a database holding information relating to Valletta should be created and updated by regular monitoring of the condition and use. This database will be shared by all entities mentioned to monitor all types of activities in Valletta, including commercial activities in order to assess the various effects these are having on the character of the City and its residents.

The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers meeting in March 1998 signed a recommendation on "Measures to promote the Integrated Conservation of Historic Complexes." From then on integrated conservation became the tool to approach

¹ Government Gazette Notice 235/95.

² Designated as per Government Gazette Notice 133/2001.

conservation holistically. With this document important moveable and immovable historic heritage was put into a context and the assets considered as a complex. This idea of complex heritage systems also has a pan-European dimension. A further development which occurred because of the introduction of this element is an integration of tools. On a legislative and administrative level European States are asked to cooperate not only in the state but also on an interstate level. The latest survey commissioned by the Council of Europe on Heritage systems in Europe calls for more networking and cooperation between the various departments and entities.

Valletta is definitely part of a complex and therefore has to be seen and managed in the context of the global and European dimension as a reference in the development of fortified cities in a cross-cultural environment.

The latest examples of Conservation Orders issued by the Planning Authority for the rehabilitation and restoration of scheduled sites have been devised to respond to this integrated approach and to make conservation more sustainable. It is important therefore to promote these two guiding principles even in the implementation of a management or master plans for Valletta. Therefore the need to establish a multi-disciplinary team of conservationists responds to both criteria. The implementation of an integrated approach is also sustainable because of the sharing of extant resources. This means lower cost projects and lower funds necessary for the future. The very recent history of conservation locally has seen the development of a number of entities working to promote conservation. These have never worked in unison or it is only very recently that there were attempts of cooperation between Museums Department, Restoration Unit and Planning Authority. But after the 90s there was a surge in Government entities responsible for Conservation principally through the evolution of two main legislations The Environment Protection Act and The Development Planning Act. This state of affairs made Government officials more conscious of the need to legislate and enforce but left them disarmed in an environment which was highly bureaucratic and therefore slow and inefficient and also political and competitive rather than apolitical and based on cooperation and support.

Although there must not be too much of a negative aura round the idea of competition in conservation cooperation is highly important because of the great need of resources both financial/economic and human. Local this should be greatly emphasised because the Islands resources are limited further by size and therefore there should be an effort geared at promoting intradisciplinary approaches and sharing of resources. The suggestion of the Council of Europe to create more networking between entities should be carefully endorsed. Does this mean a drive for centralization of resources? The history of conservation practice in Europe gives us lessons which may be applied locally which involve both centralisation and decentralisation in the sphere of Conservation.

5.3 Main Areas of Focus

The contended areas for Valletta remain however accessibility for a commuting population and the rehabilitation of housing stock to attract a resident population. One supports in this case grant schemes like the timber balconies scheme launched jointly earlier this year by the Planning Authority and the Valletta Rehabilitation Project. There has been also policy generated for the "Encouragement of residential use"¹ and support from all entities should be given. The use of a Heritage Management System as the one formed recently for Mdina (2001) should give a clear picture of the situation on ground and provide the groundwork for the proper management of housing stock. The other main issue which needs immediate attention is "Maintaining and improving access to the city, but seeking to minimise growth in peak hour traffic flows."² This must tie with the "Connections"³ project

¹ Grand Harbour Local Plan - Approved Plan, Planning Authority (1998), pg. 16

² Ibid.

³ Steering Committee, Connections, A project to facilitate pedestrian flows and transportations, August 1998.

which seeks to regenerate access through water transportation and may in the long term minimise vehicular traffic. The rehabilitation of the Main Gate area keeping in mind conservation and heritage values is a priority and will determine whether Valletta will regain its vitality and life.

6. Bionote

Malcolm Borg is a Senior Planning Officer at the Planning Authority and is responsible for scheduling and listing databases. He has been involved in Conservation both as a Planning Authority Official and as a Councillor. Was involved in compiling the UNESCO Tentative List for Malta. Last year won a scholarship in Heritage Management (La Sapienza Rome and Istituto di Ricerca Turin) sponsored by the European Union. His research studies focused on the history of architecture during the Colonial period (Masters Degree). His doctoral research deals with the same period and analyses urban Development and planning during British occupation. He is a member of ICOMOS (Malta).

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