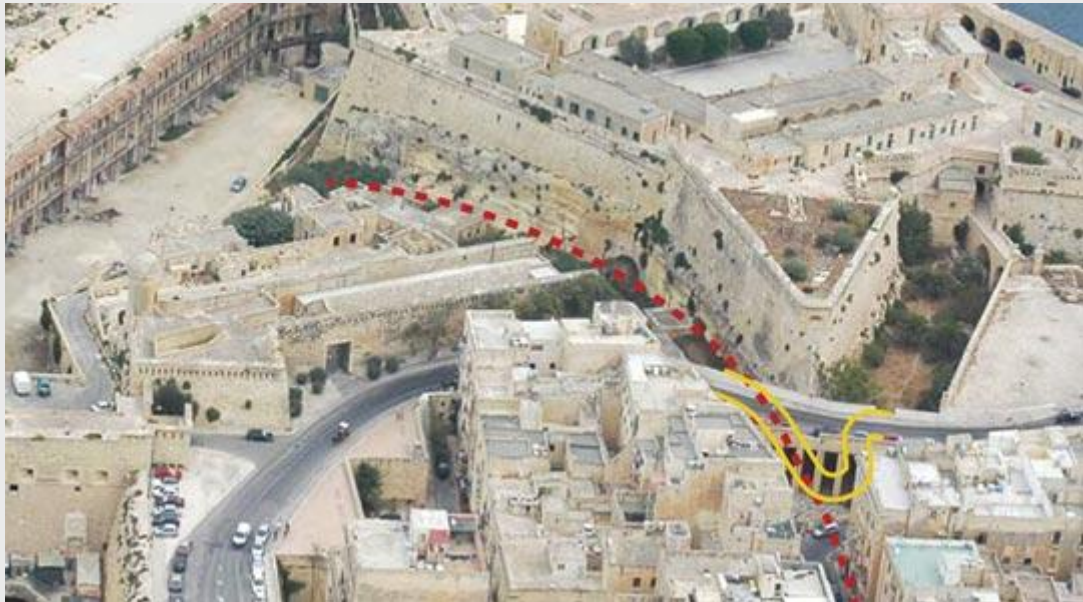


## Fire for St Elmo

Architect carries out meticulous research in plan to restore Valletta fort

Fiona Galea Debono



The ring road is too close to “respect” the monument and should be pulled out.

The bottom of Republic Street in Valletta should be split in two, with the creation of a lower road that could enter the ditch surrounding Fort St Elmo, leading visitors directly into its heart.

That is the view of the architect responsible for the preparatory historical research to apply for EU funding to restore the deteriorating fort. Ray Demicoli believes Republic Street should have a “more fitting end” and the fort a “more sympathetic approach”.



Architect Ray Demicoli revisits his “first love” – Fort St Elmo – to unravel its layers and restore it to its prime.

He also maintains that the city's ring road passes way too close to one of the imposing spurs, a projection of the star-shaped fort, and does not respect the site. He is proposing the road be pulled out, rather than practically scraping the point, to reveal this part of the fort in its complete splendour.

"Walking down Republic Street ends in an anti-climax but if it is split, as is the case in East Street, you could walk straight into the heart of the fort."

Mr Demicoli has other plans for the fort's surrounding ditch, once home to Malta's first botanical garden and used for medicinal herbs. He feels the garden should be recreated.

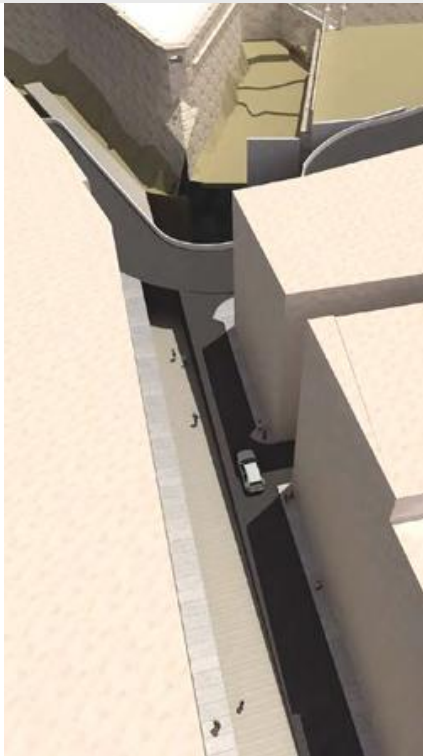
Over the past two years, the architect has been working intensely on the documentation necessary to apply for European Regional Development Funds, the call for which was issued last Friday by the Planning and Priorities Coordination Department.

In the process, he has located and confirmed interesting findings that show how "truly amazing" and "layered" the site is.

"Before embarking on a restoration project, you need to know every single thing about the site because decisions need to take into account the past and the layers of history," Mr Demicoli says of the mammoth task.

"Every single stone on every single wall has been drawn and measured. Every single aperture – 365 in total – has been documented and photographed."

The detailed exercise also included a survey of the eight wells – one alone that contains 5.5 million litres of water and would have been inspected by boat.



A fitting end to Republic Street: splitting it would allow access directly into the heart of the fort.

Mr Demicoli can picture its two huge vaults being transformed into a thermal spa, with its moist atmosphere, particularly if the lower fort's officers' quarters opposite could be converted into a boutique hotel as has been suggested.

The research has offered insight into what scholars already knew, but not quite how, what and where, says Mr Demicoli, using as an example the exact spot of General Abercrombie's reburial.

Exploratory work has also unearthed a multitude of tunnels, as well as the location of Don Gaetano Mannarino's imprisonment with his name engraved in the walls.

Despite the lengthy process, Mr Demicoli cannot say "we know everything about the fort. God knows what

we are still going to find. I envisage many more surprises. We could be looking for something and are likely to stumble upon something else".

The British period of the fort is crucial to Mr Demicoli, who is impressed by its war technology. It was a veritable “military machine” and every detail tells a story, he says.

Just under the cavalier is a maze of rooms, where the harbour fire control was located and which the architect thinks should also be recreated, complete with interactive technology and the possibility to see the spectacular views of the sentinels from down below.

He thinks the lighthouse, bang on the axis of Republic Street and a linear connective viewpoint from City Gate, could be rebuilt as an important symbol of Valletta.

The enceinte offers a one-kilometre walk and the plan is to have ramps that raise and lower the visitors so they can enjoy the views of the harbours and the open sea.


“To restore a layered site of the sort, you need to decide what date you want to go back to. It has been set at 1975 – when the fort was still in a good state of repair,” the architect says.

That year also has a personal significance for Mr Demicoli – Fort St Elmo was the subject of his final-year architectural thesis.


“It was my first love in architecture – and I am meeting her again 30 years later.”

Since then, like any other lover, the fort has been subject to “substantial degradation”, with areas that have been vandalised and others that have collapsed. And every day that passes, more damage is done.

## Comments


Charles.C.Brown(1 day, 23 hours ago) 

Im glad to read that someone is speaking out about this magnificent fort. If there is something in Malta that every Maltese should be proud of is Fort St Elmo and its second to none history, from the very first time that the fort was built, was not only in the heat of battle against the Ottoman Empire but history has it that that Maltese led by a few knights fought until the very last man. Also the first artillerymen who laid down their lives during W.W.2 for country and the then empire were six from the Maltese artillery, one being a 15 year old boy soldier. For many years this fort was home of the Royal Malta Artillery and the last regiment to be based at St Elmo was men of the 3/11 regiment RMA. Until the very last day before its disbandment in 1972, 3/11 regiment left this fort in pristine condition. Luckily there still many from 3/11 still around in the form of an association therefore whatever is to become of Fort St Elmo this association should definitely have a say about the future of this fort.


Marielouise Musumeci(2 days, 2 hours ago) 

I am glad that the idea of exposing the spur to reveal the grandeur and heaviness of this great military architecture has not been shelved. I recall seeing a report, way back in 2007, which specifically dealt with the vision for the harbour region including Fort St Elmo. In this report there was mention of the ring road making way in order to get a continuation of the ditch. This was the only time I saw such a proposal. The

rebuilding of the lighthouse is a must in the restoration project. It will not only revoke the past but serve as a beacon for the future.

Joseph E Briffa(2 days, 7 hours ago) 

Well done Ray Demicoli.....keep it up. We must work on this project very fast. Best of luck!

Phil Humphries(2 days, 11 hours ago) 

Architect Ray Demicoli clearly understands what is required in a World Heritage Site and he is addressing this project sympathetically and with respect. - Its such a pity that the other end of Republic Street wasn't afforded the same courtesy.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't appreciate Piano's work, or that I dislike modern architecture, because that is not the case at all (well, apart from the obscene boxes that litter the shores hereabouts) It's just that I don't think 'modern' or 'pretentious' is appropriate for Valletta.

Many visitors take the time and trouble to learn about this noble city and its proud history and come here expecting to see, feel and experience something uniquely Maltese. They don't expect to see the kind of architecture that graces (and sometimes disgraces) other, larger cities where various styles can be contrasted and compared.

Put simply, people don't visit the Pyramids expecting to find a McDonalds.

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