

Form and function – the marriage of two styles

by Gerald Fenech

Carlo Schembri is a world renowned artistic director who has a number of prestigious projects already to his name among which one may count the recent redesign of St George's Square in Valletta. Gerald Fenech met up with him to talk about the concept of an artistic director and his work in the context of the square's radical new look

Meeting Carlo Schembri is always an interesting and highly motivating experience. His great energy and zest for his radical ideas are truly infectious and we started off by discussing his latest prize project – the redesign and renovation of St George's Square. How did this all come about?

This was the first project where the client was the public as when I was approached by the Prime Minister he immediately made it specific that this was to be a "people's square". We wanted to transform the square from a "cemetery of cars" as Minister George Pullicino so rightly put it, to a square where life will be celebrated and the surrounding buildings would once again be rejuvenated.

An artistic director brings everyone together under one umbrella so in this case we had architects, historians, lighting and sound engineers. The square also has to be alive for 365 days a year and so one had to cater for the various diverse functions for which the square is used such as official parades, drama performances and other activities.

You also have to cater for state visits where cars are required to access the square and the whole renovation fits in tandem with the other project in Valletta which includes the placing of electronic bollards at certain junctions. For the other 300 days or so, you have to provide a space to keep the square alive and everything is designed to facilitate an activity platform with seating arrangements and that is what I believe we have managed to achieve.

The project also included historical research on the previous functions of and events which took place in the square to make it respect its past in the context of today

One interesting aspect which was completely forgotten was that when water arrived in Valletta, a fountain (which is now at the Argotti Gardens) was constructed in the square. We obviously could not bring this fountain back so I came up with the idea of an "in ground fountain" which is completely invisible.

At the same time a square has to be alive when it is empty so we came up with the idea of having synchronised music every hour to lighten up the area. We also used the latest technology to light up the square and these lighting poles are state of the art as they also include WiFi and all the gadgets one can imagine apart from their form which serves a function. The lamps are actually baroque but with a touch of 2009 and there were some who were sceptical about the actual design – some actually did not even want light in Valletta!

Another issue was the one straight road from City Gate to St Elmo but if you look closely, there is nothing which obstructs the road in front of St Elmo and even in the time of Knights there were open spaces in front of each Auberge so in a sense we are going back to the historical past of the city.

The new transport system which is currently being proposed will allow everyone who wants to get to Valletta to dispense with their private car. What will this system bring to the rejuvenation of Valletta?

We are used to entering our capital city from the side but with the new design, the visitor will be able to pass through a heritage trail starting from Freedom Square onto Castille, through Merchants Street and finally to St John's Co-Cathedral, Pjazza Regina where there will be a museum dedicated to our national heritage and finally St George's Square or People's Square' as I would like it to be renamed.

St George's Square has been transformed into a live theatre which can host all sorts of events ranging from a concert by world famous tenor Joseph Calleja to a Christmas Mass with artificial snowflakes onto a Gospel Choir. The ideas for the square's use are endless. But what is the role of the artistic director in all this?

The artistic director is involved in practically everything but does not actually implement the project. Suffice to say is that we have created a system where the lamp lighting can be controlled from a laptop in another building. We have also brought in foreign troupes and companies for the opening ceremony and managed to stay within our budget. I also want to see the children of Valletta make use of the space more as this is their square, first and foremost. The week long calendar of activities was a huge success where we managed to create events which appealed to everyone.

The square has immediately taken up a life of its own with initial critical reactions being completely dispelled by its combination of form and function. A lot of money was saved by using government workers to carry out around 70 per cent of the work involved. There will also be the possibility of certified buskers, 3D art installations and painting commissions. As Winston Churchill

so rightly said: “we create public spaces but public spaces create us”. That is exactly what is happening at St George’s Square which would have not taken place without the role of an artistic director.

Today an artistic director is being used much more frequently as he is usually brought in to improve the quality of life. At present, we are involved in setting a new artistic direction for an airline where we have managed to come up with a design which was 70 per cent created by the employees themselves. The director first receives a brief which is changed or re-written accordingly to fit in with the requirements of the project. You then have to talk at length with the stakeholders where you listen but do not necessarily obey. The whole process is a delicate and finely balanced one but the role of the art director is a crucial one as he brings together all the experts to me up with a final project which will eventually benefit everyone.
