

Fort St Elmo regeneration project: €100 million to give Valletta's Fort St Elmo a new lease of life

by Annaliza Borg



Fort St Elmo with its vaults, lighthouse, granaries and surroundings – decaying and almost moribund, such has been its neglect – is to be regenerated in a marriage of cultural and artistic aspects with commercial possibilities.

The intention was announced by Infrastructure, Transport and Communications Minister Austin Gatt at a news conference yesterday.

The area takes up 38,000 square metres in all and poses a number of restrictions to developers since it is mainly a historical structure. The whole project is estimated to cost over e100 million, Dr Gatt said, although the plan is still being drawn up.

Upper Fort St Elmo, which is the original part built after the Great Siege, is to be regenerated into a cultural and artistic area. Meanwhile, Lower Fort St Elmo with its 37 vaults, each taking 100 to 120 square metres, will be converted into a cruise passenger terminal, and a fair weather berth costing e15 million is to be built.

The outer curtain which may be rehabilitated to serve as an open walking space, and Evans Building are all included in the works. Parts of the ring road should also be re-routed.

Evans Building was described as the area with the greatest commercial potential since it has no historical connections except for being close to the Chapel of Bones ruins. A hotel designed to go well with the surroundings will be built at the site.

Due to the extent of works, the regeneration project will be carried out in phases.

The whole project will create an open area from the Mediterranean Conference Centre to Caraffa Bastions and Pinto Wharf. A heritage walk all around the fort itself will be made possible with architects looking at Dubrovnik, the historic city on the Adriatic Sea coast in the extreme south of Croatia, as an example.

The plan is part of the government's holistic vision to create a continuous walk from Sliema to Fort St Elmo.

Currently the project is in the master planning stage and plans are for the tendering process to kick off in 2010. This will lead to an international request for proposals. A number of studies and internal consultations on Fort St Elmo have already been carried out by a steering committee for the project.

The board is chaired by Mark Portelli, Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation and Malta Marime Authority chairman. Joseph Said, Stephen Spiteri, Claude Borg, Martin Galea, Joseph Caruana, Joe Magro Conti, Jesmond Schembri and Chris Paris are also on the committee.

The plan is to have Fort St Elmo made into a destination in itself, possibly working all year round, day and night. The story of Valletta is to be told from the place where it all started, architect Ray Demicoli pointed out – Fort St Elmo was built by the Knights of St John in 1550 before the building of the city itself.

Dr Gatt explained that the idea behind the whole project is to regenerate it and find the best possible balance between the historical, cultural and commercial aspects, rather than simply restoring it.

While pointing out that a part of university or educational institutions could shift to St Elmo, the whole sketch was still a carte blanche and the government faced "a very big challenge but one which could be met nonetheless," Dr Gatt said.

Once the estimation price for the whole project is calculated, a financing plan will be created. This would establish whether it would be viable for the government to fund the project by itself or enter into a public private partnership. Prospects of acquiring EU funds are also being considered.

Although plans are still very sketchy and nothing is concrete as yet, Fort St Elmo should incorporate layers of history in an innovative manner while acquiring social gain. The area should be a world heritage experience and a family oriented one.
