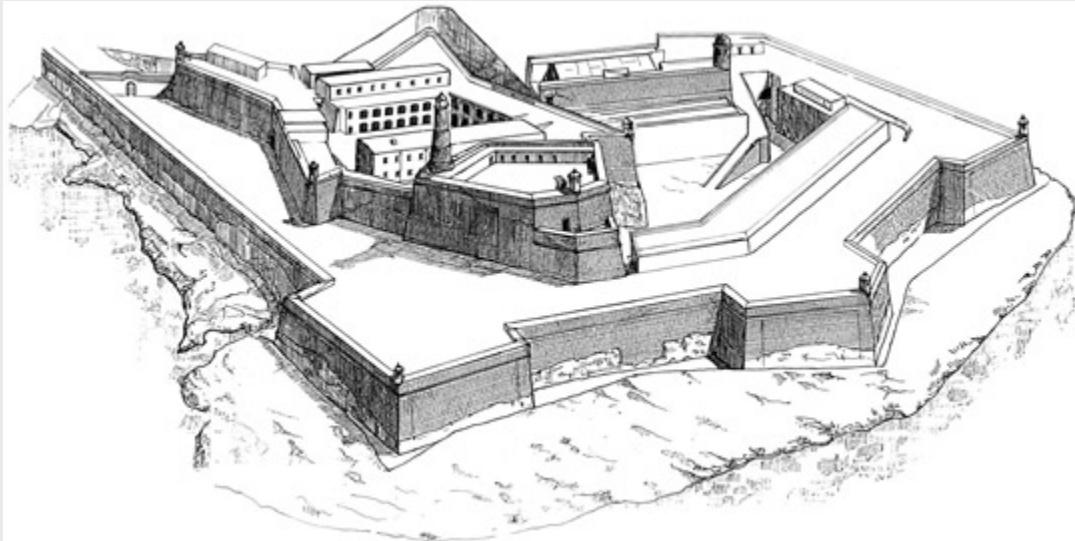


## Fort St Elmo restoration to complement Piano designs

Marie Louise Musumeci



Valletta is a vibrant city with two major nodes - City Gate at one end and Fort St Elmo at the other.

In the wake of last week's press conference by the Prime Minister that world-renowned architect Renzo Piano will once again propose designs for City Gate and the Opera House, one can only applaud this much-awaited project.

It is high time that Valletta, to be nominated World Heritage Capital in 2018, is given the prestigious entrance it deserves. However, as Lawrence Gonzi rightly pointed out, things cannot just stop here. Valletta is a vibrant city with two major nodes - City Gate at one end and Fort St Elmo at the other.

To date, these have not performed their function of acting like magnets, whereby people are channelled through Valletta's main pedestrian road all the way down to the Grand Harbour. Such an animated flow is desirable in the light of tourism and culture even in the peripheral areas of the city, namely the Fort St Elmo area. Any government would want to see such a project through. However the nooks of it all lie in the two key issues: the initial financing of the project and making it self-sustainable in the long run.

As chairman of the rehabilitation committees, I have come across the development brief of Fort St Elmo and its environs prepared in 1997, which was commissioned by the Valletta Rehabilitation Project. This document in part provides a socio-economic justification for the need for redevelopment of the fort within the context of the Grand Harbour area with specific reference to the Valletta context, including historic conservation and design issues, transportation, services and infrastructure.

Unlike what most people think, what is collectively known as St Elmo does not only comprise the Pinto magazines, but consists of the old Fort St Elmo (1552) with its rock-hewn ditch, the Carafa enceinte (1680s), the Pinto magazines (mid-18th century) and the esplanade of the Carafa enceinte, Lower Fort St Elmo, the peripheral areas, the land front ditch, the pedestrian precinct, the foreshore and Evans laboratory and examination centre.

The Upper Fort is accessed from Porta Principale in Spur Street and consists of a parade ground surrounded by the Pinto magazines. To date, the latter have been occupied by carnival enthusiasts and squatters. The peripheral areas of Fort St Elmo are the Abercrombie curtain wall and the St Gregory Curtain wall, which forms the peripheral area of the fort.

This area offers spectacular panoramic views of Marsamxett and Grand Harbour. The land front ditch is cut off by a bridge forming part of Valletta's ring road.

The pedestrian precinct encompasses the granaries, the fort's main approach. The foreshore is accessed from a staircase in front of the Mediterranean Conference Centre and runs all the way round, from the Grand Harbour shoreline.

Many suggestions have been made as to the use of the building, the most favourite being that of a cultural village. In truth, culture is the most obvious use that comes to mind for this Grade 1 military building. However, a more scientific approach should be applied.

One of these scientific tools is that of conducting a cost benefit analysis. I will not go into the merits of the economic process of carrying this out, but will explain how it can be utilised as an economic tool for the restoration of the fort.

There are a number of uses one can adopt. The government would want the most desirable and efficient. The costs and benefits of the impacts of an intervention are evaluated in terms of the public's willingness to pay for them (benefits) or willingness to pay to avoid them (costs). Inputs are typically measured in terms of opportunity costs - the value in their best alternative use. The guiding principle is to list all parties affected by an intervention and place a monetary value of the effect it has on their welfare.

Intangible elements, such as the use of a place, need to be assigned a monetary value. This is where economists' ingenuity comes into play. What use is best adaptable to get the best financial/economic return?

The first step to the eventual restoration/rehabilitation of Fort St Elmo should be the set-up of a forum of multi-disciplinary entities, such as politicians, architects, historians, interested stakeholders as well as economists to collate the most desirable us/uses.

It is at this stage that the government must seek the public's opinion on the most favourable use and, on conclusion, a scientific tool such as the cost benefit analysis, could financially and economically justify this. This approach is the best way forward.

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## Comments

Igalea (3 days, 23 hours ago)

The Fort should be restored according to the original plans it was built on.

Then it should be used to hold battle re-enactments with tourists paying to see the show and touring the Fort.

That should bring in enough money to maintain the Fort in tip-top condition.

So forget about making millions from the Fort, but concentrate in keeping it shipshape and worthy of visiting.

One last thins.

Keep Renzo Piano with his modernism away with a barge pole from having to do anything with Fort St Elmo.

Raymond Sammut (4 days, 2 hours ago)  
@ Marie Louise Musumeci

You obviously make too much of the "cost-benefit analysis" method. I get put off by the way you keep calling it a "tool". In your letter, you keep whipping it up as if it were far more important than the precious fort itself. One could hand pick a small group of top grade first year science students from UoM, and teach them cost-benefit analysis straight out of the text book in six months.

Better to cut all the nonsense and make this clear. Fort Saint Elmo has high priority owing to its significant historical importance. The Maltese government has already lost too much time. Chances are that there would be a long list of people who have occupied governmental positions and who could technically be held legally liable for the prolonged negligence and deterioration of this unique fort. Frankly, in my view, it amounts to state funded vandalism.

It is well known that funds are available if the Maltese government cared to secure and invest these funds until such time when restoration works can commence. The world is watching, and no more time must be lost.

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