

Interview: Restoring Malta's historical heritage

by Scott Grech

In total, over 135,000 square metres of bastion walls will be restored totalling six kilometres in length, thanks to the €36 million project, which is 85% co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. Several people ranging from architects and draughtsmen to restorers, both from the public and private sector, are actively involved in the project.

Decay, erosion, weathering, vegetation, rust stains and grime have all contributed to reducing the bastions, which had once protected Malta from foreign invasion, to a degrading state.

Cracks, drains, metal bars, and irrigation pipes over some areas reduced some bastions to an eye-sore.



Not only, in Norbert Gatt's words, were some bastions "long forgotten, but they were also on the verge of collapsing".

However, things are looking up.

"Ever since it was set up in 1997, the Restoration Unit, which recently has been elevated to the status of Directorate, has carried out several restoration works on many historical and monumental buildings in Malta and Gozo. Responsibility for planning and drawing up restoration projects, preparation for the issuing of tenders and the supervision of restoration also falls under the Restoration Directorate's remit.

"Besides the bastions, restoration works on St John's Co-Cathedral, Auberge de Castille and the Presidential Palace in Valletta are also gaining ground, while the renovation of the Biagio Steps, which was underutilised as an examination centre in the past and which, once ready, will host an interactive centre to provide an in-depth explanation of Malta's fortifications and historical history, should be completed by the end of next year," commented Mr Gatt.

Testimony to how much the Restoration Directorate has grown since it was founded 13 years ago, Mr Gatt said, lies in the fact that the Directorate now has a staff of around 220 personnel, and boasts a multi-disciplinary team of professionals, technicians and skilled workers, all who are Maltese. The

Rehabilitation Project Office, a vital player in the regeneration of Valletta, also falls under the remit of the directorate.

Between 2004 and 2009, the Restoration Unit has carried out restoration works on 90 historical sites, most of which include chapels, towers, palaces and monuments.

“Appreciation for this type of architectural work has grown substantially in recent years, to the extent that academic training at all levels, ranging from Masters degrees specialising in stone conservation at the University of Malta, to vocational training in Heritage skills at Mcast, are now being offered locally.

“When a restoration and conservation project falls in our hands, the documentation section within the directorate is in charge of preparing a detailed survey and coordinates deterioration mapping. This is an indispensable tool whereby the main areas outlined for restoration are earmarked.

“Despite all the initial planning which presides over the start of every project, prior to the restoration of the bastions, it is only when specialised architects and restorers were up on scaffolding and in close proximity to the bastions that the extent of the damages they had accumulated throughout the years was calculated accurately,” Mr Gatt commented.

One reason why the bastioned fortifications have been left to deteriorate for so long was because no one knew what to do or how to use them once they stopped serving as a military function. Lack of funds also contributed to their degradation, and interventions were very often limited to emergency works on dangerous areas.

What has led to their current perilous state?

“There are several factors,” Mr Gatt explained.

“For example, the state in which the north-facing bastions in Valletta find themselves in is different to the south-facing bastions, as the orientation, weather and the climate have played a very important role in their deterioration.

“The sea is, perhaps, the major factor which has contributed to the erosion of the bastions’ façade. Sea spray travels a lot, and depending on the force of the wind can, in some cases, travel even as far as Mdina. This is laden with salts, which are main contributors to the deterioration mechanisms, while the fumes emitted by vehicles and the vicinity of the power station, first in Floriana and later in Marsa, have also contributed to the excessive grime which has tarnished the fortifications’ appearance in Valletta,” the architect said.

While the damages of the Mdina and Cittadella bastions were “more in-depth and rooted to the structures’ core”, damages the Vittoriosa and Valletta bastions suffered throughout the years had more to do with the softness and sensitivity of the stone which was used during their construction centuries ago.

Since the project is very delicate, the restoration process of the bastions can, at times, be very laborious and time consuming, asserts Mr Gatt. "All restoration and conservation works are divided into three main stages: the cleaning of the stone, the consolidation process and the finish."

During the cleaning process, most employees only make use of handheld tools such as nylon brushes and surgical blades.

"Other types of cleaning methods involve mechanical and chemical cleaning employed in situations of more stubborn deposits. Such methods are used carefully and only in very controlled situations.

"One such method is controlled micro-blasting cleaning, used to cleanse small areas of the bastions, although full attention to detail and careful planning is given before so as not to damage the bastions' structure," Mr Gatt explains.

The second stage on restoration entails consolidation.

"Perhaps the most obvious solution to some would be to replace some parts of the bastions which are falling to pieces with new stones. However, when it comes to restoration, the underlying philosophy is that stone replacement should be kept to a minimum. Stone replacement is only resorted to when the structural integrity is seriously undermined. "The stones are then applied with a semi-transparent lime-based layer to improve the bastions' visual appearance, while also acting as a protective layer for the stone surface," says Mr Gatt.

Mr Gatt stresses that the main purpose of restoration should not be an aggressive attempt to bring the bastions back to something verging on the brand new.

"On the other hand, all restoration is a step to improve appearance, to bring about stabilisation and to maintain the bastions' historical integrity.

"We would be kidding ourselves if we think that once the €36 million project is done and dusted, the bastions would no longer require any maintenance works from time to time, because all restorations will never last a lifetime.

"Restorations depend on preservation, and any restoration will quickly become useless unless we come up with ways to protect the monuments and bastions from further human-induced damage and the elements".

"This is where four modular platforms which the Restoration Unit has purchased in recent years, to the tune of €100,000 will come in very useful as they will allow employees go up and down the bastion faces quicker to keep in check the situation and carry out maintenance interventions where necessary"

The restoration of the bastions in Valletta, in particular, is also seeking to recuperate forgotten spaces and passageways within the ramparts and to make underutilised sections accessible to the public.

He stresses that the other major aim of the project is to recuperate large areas of the fortifications which have, for a long time, been inaccessible to the public, says Mr Gatt.

He cites the recent open day held at St Michael's Counterguard in Valletta, which is situated along the west side of the Marsamxett area within the city and access for which has often been difficult and restricted, as an example.

"There are certainly a lot of spin offs which we hope will draw the crowds in light of the €36 million project. Over 2,000 people attended the recent open day at St Michael's Counterguard, and if given enough publicity, the bastions will certainly entice both tourists and locals alike. We are currently also studying ways of rehabilitating important access routes into Valletta through existing disused tunnels.

"We are committed to increase the public awareness in this unique heritage component of our architectural landscape.

While for some, five years for this project is quite long, Mr Gatt concludes this interview by commenting that "we need to keep in mind that when restoring the bastions, and bringing them to an accessible shape, we need to also restore their environs and surroundings.

"Although the bastions will never be a hive of activity as they once were, it is up to the Restoration Directorate to not only restore their appearance, but ensure that they are just as important to Malta today as they were in the past," he remarks.

- Norbert Gatt is Director of the Restoration Directorate within the Ministry for Resources.
 - He graduated as an architect from the University of Malta in 1992, and went on to specialise in Monument Restoration at La Sapienza in Rome, completing his studies in 1996.
 - Since then he has been very active in the local restoration scene, and was directly involved in the setting up of the Restoration Unit (Works Division), recently elevated to the status of Directorate.
 - He has been responsible for major restoration works, amongst which the Conservation of the Old Parish Church in Siggiewi, for which he was awarded the Prix D'Honneur Award by DLH in 2008.
 - Mr Gatt has occupied various public posts, amongst which Governor of the Malta Centre for Restoration and Chairman of the DCC (UCA team).
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