

Let's not miss the wood for the trees

Alexiei Dingli



**The Old Opera House is a strategically important site because it welcomes visitors into the city.
Photo: Chris Sant Fournier.**

Why not build a theatre, library or cultural centre instead of the Old Opera House? A valid observation, if one considers this project in isolation. This is the flaw in most arguments. The project cannot and should not be considered in isolation. Otherwise, we would be missing the whole picture.

The Old Opera House project is a small part of a larger vision. Its main aim is to regenerate Valletta and restore it to its former glory. In this sense, one needs to take into consideration the Presidential Palace and City Gate together with other minor projects, such as Palace and Freedom Squares.

In the long term, one cannot exclude the regeneration of the Valletta promenade (Valletta Waterfront to St Elmo) and transport reform.

At the heart of the city lies a unique gem, the Presidential Palace, a unique place designed by the Knights to look majestic. Over the years, this has been the refuge of organisations and

departments which only occupy a tiny corner. What should have been a world heritage gem turned out to be mere office space.

Worse still, the space allocated to the presidential palace shrank to such an extent that the remaining area can be compared to a closet. The relocation of these organisations will allow the palace to regain its former glory - placing the armoury where it originally was and recreating the only original and complete armoury in Europe while creating the space for permanent exhibitions, such as Maltese silverware and traditional Maltese costumes, many of which are hidden away.

There is also the embellishment of Palace Square, or St George's Square, which is being discussed by the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee, which features a fountain and an open space, free from cars, where people can roam about at leisure.

If one moves towards City Gate and passes through either Republic Street or Merchants Street, one can admire the pavement enriching this path. One should soon see the installation of street furniture and further side roads in the city. On the way, one passes another gem, St John's Co-Cathedral. Without getting into any controversies, the cathedral should have a decent museum to exhibit its treasures. This will add to the wellbeing of the city.

Walking further, one finally reaches the Old Opera House, a strategically important site, because it welcomes visitors into the city. The fact that it was entrusted to world renowned Renzo Piano already gives out the message that the building will be a centre of excellence. More than that, I believe the architecture of the building should also send a strong socio-political message to everyone entering the city - that we are a country that respects its past while embracing the future as a member of the EU.

According to government plans, this site will be divided into two: a parliament and a multi-purpose centre. The reasons for the first proposal are threefold: to offer parliamentarians a decent place to carry out their public duties, to free the Palace's original armoury and because there is no other place in Valletta big enough for parliament. The multi-purpose centre on the other hand is intended to host various activities. It is hard to agree on what this place might host, but I would like to see an open place where arts and sciences are combined with a sprinkle of creativity. I imagine the place to be an active learning centre where everyone is free to express creativity through every artistic medium imaginable.

One finally finds the upgrading of Freedom Square and City Gate, a door within a fortified city designed centuries ago to keep out the enemies. Today, this door should serve the opposite purpose - that of welcoming people into Valletta.

So far, one has only seen the upper part of the city. On the outskirts, there's a lot of change going on, such as the upgrading of the road from Valletta Waterfront to Victoria Gate and the extension of the Valletta Waterfront into Valletta. One hopes to see the restoration and new uses of Fort St Elmo, Auberge de Bavarie, Evans Building and other abandoned buildings facing the harbours.

Other projects are the creation of a cruise liner terminal in the Marsamxetto area and the new transport strategy, which aims to link Valletta to Sliema/Gzira and the three cities by ferry and bus, to Sicily by ferry, to Gozo by seaplane, and heavy regeneration in the Mandraggio, Biccieriija, Due Balli and Arcipierku areas.

As you can see, the future looks bright and exciting for Valletta. Let's not miss the wood for the trees and look only at the micro issues. Let's look at Valletta holistically and help it become the priceless shining gem it deserves to be.

Dr Dingli is Valletta mayor.

Comments

Jimmy Magro (1 week, 1 day ago)

The Fort St. Elmo Foundation is excited by all these prospects. More so when so many Maltese have expressed their great aspiration to have change and do something to convert one of these Valletta gems into something useful for the whole communities. Even the pre-budget documents spoke of sustainable communities and one cannot have this unless there is a meaningful role for the civil sector.

More and more countries, their political leaders have been recognizing the role of citizens in building a new future of sustainable communities, that of course will include by offering neglected spaces and properties to not-for-profit-foundations to regenerate these spaces/properties to a sustainable use. There are so many people that can be empowered to meet this challenge that the Fort St. Elmo Foundation is ready. willing and able to open.

The Fort St. Elmo Foundation looks forward to working together with Government and the Valletta Local Council to make another success story of devolution in practice and urge Government to continue to recognise the role of the tertiary sector in the regeneration efforts of Malta and Gozo.
