

## **Army concerned about new Palace Square proposals**

Only weeks after Minister George Pullicino had to withdraw proposals for an underground car park in St George's (Palace) Square due to the tunnels discovered under the square, he is again facing problems with the latest proposals that have been submitted for the paving of the square. This paper has learnt that the Army has expressed concern about the fresh proposals submitted, which include a large pool in the middle of the square that would make it impossible for it to be used for parades.

The discussion on the proposed car park was stopped when the original entrance, which was to be widened for access to the car park, revealed, as was known to many who wrote to newspapers, that it led to a tunnel under the square. However, fresh controversy has arisen on the proposals put forward by the Ministry and the Valletta Rehabilitation Project. The minister had declared that it would withdraw the proposal of a car park and go ahead with the paving project.

It was presumed therefore that the ministry would go ahead with the proposal for the paving as it had originally proposed. This included a large Maltese cross in the middle of the square that had water sprouts inside it. This proposal had also been criticised by the Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee (CHAC), which had said in its memo of 10/11/08 to Mepa that it is concerned that the area is treated as one whole square rather than allowing the Republic Street paving pattern to continue in front of The Palace, because treating the whole area as one whole square would lead to lower Republic Street being completely cut off from the main central part of the street.

Historic pictures show that there was different paving in front of The Palace while the Main Guard square was treated as a square. The committee had accepted the paving pattern for the central part of the square.

CHAC had also called for the restoration of the concrete pattern immediately in front of the Main Guard, as this is all that remains of the original parade ground concrete paving from the British Period. CHAC had objected to the fountain in the middle of the square even though this was hardly apparent at the time.

According to the Mepa website, architect Claude Borg of VRP has presented fresh plans with a completely new design that ignores the original CHAC comments and also proposals for a very large but very low "reflection" pool in the middle of the square. The Mepa website reveals that last week CHAC pointed out that the proposed plans could not function as the square has a very strong incline and requested more information. The proposal had not, it seemed, taken the gradient into consideration.

In the meantime, this paper has learnt that the Army has shown serious concerns about

the pool as this would mean that no parades could be held in the main square of Valletta. The Malta Independent on Sunday has been told that, following this, VRP has come up with a proposal to temporarily cover up the pool when a parade is held. The Army is still not pleased with this proposal.

The new proposals were again submitted to CHAC last Monday, this time with a pool that would be stepped to address the problem of the square's gradient. The Mepa website reveals that CHAC has expressed its reserves about the fountain, the impact of the design and the impact of the fountain in this square of "enormous historical importance".

CHAC, while agreeing that the original fountain should be somehow "evoked", said this should be done without the stepped fountain proposed and this way the fountain would not need to be covered during public events (that is according to the original proposal of water sprouts coming from an even paving).

CHAC stated that the Verdala column should be reincorporated in the project and studies should be made about this. CHAC however agreed with the principle of the paving project. Only Dr Ray Bondin registered his disagreement, stating that most of the comments in the original memo of last year were still valid concerning the paving.

When contacted Dr Bondin confirmed that he was in favour of the paving of the square but insisted on retaining a separate paving in the "street" in front of The Palace. He stated that the new design was completely unacceptable and was much worse than the original one.

The very large stepped reflecting pool would destroy the harmony of this important square. He stated that he voted against the decision, as the original comments of CHAC were not taken into consideration at all in the proposal.

---