

Plans to turn Fort St Elmo into a major tourist venue



Transforming Fort St Elmo in Valletta into a major tourist attraction complete with accommodation and catering facilities within the dilapidated space are just a few of the recommendations proposed in a fresh draft development brief.

The planning authority has launched a 6-six week public consultation following a review it carried out on the 1997 draft development brief for the rehabilitation of Fort St Elmo and its environs. The reviewed brief takes into account the new government policy initiatives for the urban regeneration of Valletta and will serve as a proposed framework for future rehabilitation plans.

With its panoramic views, the plans are to restore the fort and rehabilitate it as a major tourist and local visitor venue that could incorporate a number of cultural attractions and office space. The brief acknowledges that upgrading the surrounding public spaces is of paramount importance and will be beneficial in terms of employment and revenue generation in the area.

Fort St Elmo is one of the most significant historic landmarks in Malta, occupying a strategic position at the tip of the Sceberras peninsula upon which the Order of St John founded the city of Valletta. The original fort was constructed by the Knights in the mid-16th century and played an important role not only during the Great Siege of 1565 but even during World War II. In 1977 the fort was used as a film location for the Turkish jail in the Oscar-winning film *Midnight Express* directed by Alan Parker.

The reviewed brief sets out the various parameters and environmentally compatible strategies that aim to utilise the potential of the area without compromising its unique historical value. It also considers various aspects of the rehabilitation process within the context of the Grand Harbour area, including historic conservation and design issues, transportation, services and infrastructure.



The area covered by the brief has an approximate footprint of 9.25 hectares and includes the original fort and the later additions at the Carafa esplanade, the extended outworks along the bastions, the ditch and granaries in front of the fort, the Evans building, the Examination Centre and the foreshore.

At present, a large part of the site and its residential neighbourhood is in a state of neglect with few venturing towards this lower end of Valletta. The rehabilitation project proposes the restoration and re-use of the existing structures as a museum and related facilities such as souvenir shops, restaurants and tea rooms. The possibility of locating an audiovisual facility within the barracks is also indicated. The piazza, on the other hand, would be ideal for outdoor activities in summer.



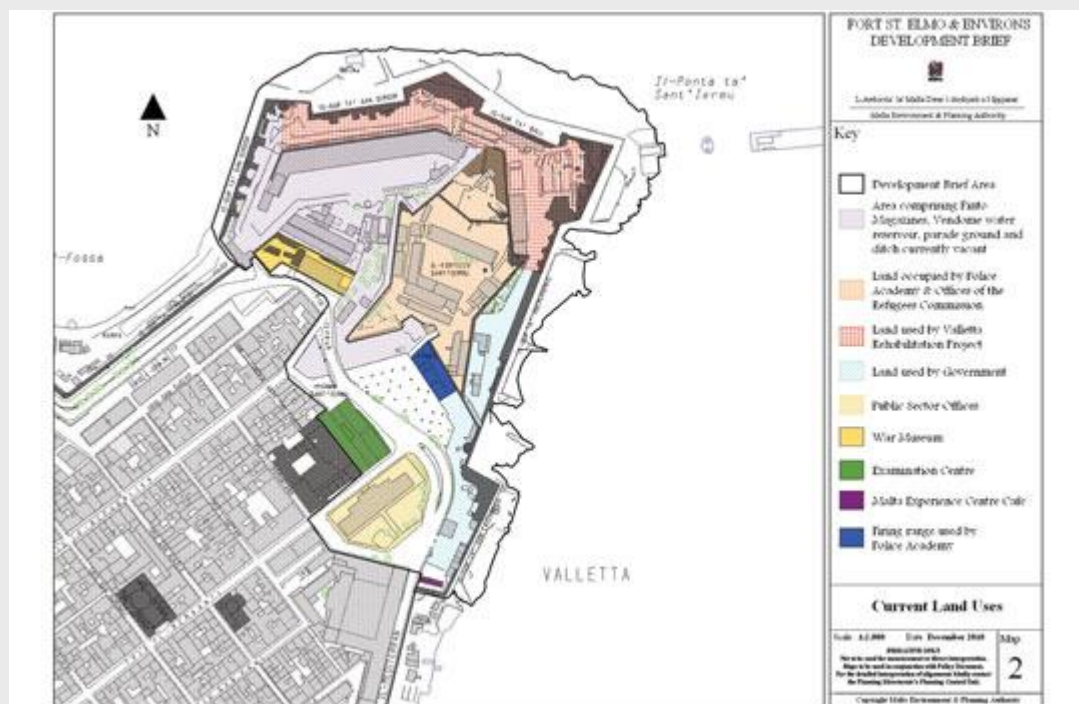
A scene from the Oscar-winning movie *Midnight Express* shot in 1977 at Fort St Elmo.

During this second phase of public consultation, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority is encouraging interested parties and the public to view the revisions and submit any comments and feedback. Submissions are to be sent to by not later than March 21, to: Director of Planning, Fort St Elmo and Environs Development Brief, Malta Environment and Planning Authority, PO Box 200, Marsa, MRS 1000, or via e-mail at fortstelmo@mepa.org.mt. The revisions and brief can be viewed on <http://www.mepa.org.mt/LPDocumentDetails?syskey=%201325>

Recommendations for St Elmo's regeneration

The reconstruction of the old lighthouse on the Cavalier that may serve as a viewing platform for visitors and a landmark beacon within the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett region.

The restoration of the chapel near the Porta del Soccorso and St Anne's church.



The restoration and rehabilitation of the imposing three-storey Pinto stores with later British additions for commercial uses including tourist accommodation, food and beverage outlets, retail outlets and office accommodation.

The development of a heritage route along the outer bastions with appropriate paving and landscaping starting from The Malta Experience building all along the outer side of the fort and the Carafa bastions, behind the Pinto magazines and ending near the Drill Hall, where the War Museum stands.

The possibility of expanding the War Museum, using existing historic structures along the enceinte, which are to be duly restored for this purpose or other cultural uses.

The reinstatement of the Knights' botanical gardens in the land front ditch, which serviced the medical school of the Order within the framework of a comprehensive landscaping scheme.




St Elmo has been neglected for years. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

Detailed architectural studies that should lead to a decision on the retention or otherwise of the Evans Building and the potential for underground car parking on the site. The brief recommends the exploration of reusing Evans Building as a residential, office and/or tourist accommodation complex.

The use of the granaries in front of the fort as an alternative entrance, providing visitors a full appreciation of the land front fortifications.

Pedestrianising certain areas such as part of the main road leading to Triq il-Mediterran.


Comments

Lars Vangdal Tveisme(6 days, 20 hours ago) 

I think it is a splendid idea.


As a tourist I am really looking forward to see the results of this project.

To visit the "hidden" gems of Fort St. Elmo will a new and exciting experience.

S.Vassallo(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Now we finally know why the investment for Parliament house could not be done at St.Elmo.

Other plans, and commercial ones, had been made for this.

Raymond Sammut(1 week, 1 day ago) 

One cannot leave out the Turkish aspect of this fort. The reason why this fort was built, and built hurriedly with a pragmatic approach, was because of the anticipated arrival of the Turkish armada. At the very least, a monument should be erected at a suitable location paying homage to Dragut Raiz; and the Turkish government could be invited to establish some form of representation or make some kind of contribution/presence. This may sound unorthodox, but history belongs to both belligerents; else history would degenerate into vain nationalism which is useless -- perhaps just good enough to earn tourist money.

I also hold the view that everything, right down to the last stone and bit of concrete, that the British left behind should be demolished and cleared off. This fort is all about some past and very serious business between our ancestors and the Turks. What happened later on belonged to someone else, and can never be anywhere as significant. In fact, I wish to point out that the British desecrated this historical place with the mess they left behind --only because they saw that we are small and were cut off from our ancestors.

M.Cachia(1 week, 1 day ago)

Why in good God's name would we want to set up a monument to Dragut?? It's like asking the Spanish to put up a monument to Napoleon in Madrid or the Texans a monument to General Sant' Anna in front of the Alamo....

Raymond Sammut(1 week, 1 day ago)

@ M.Cachia

Unlike the two you have mentioned, Dragut was one of the best commanders of his time both at sea and on land (an immensely rare trait in military history), and in addition he also had a great capacity for administration. More importantly, neither Bonaparte died in Madrid nor de Santa Anna died in Texas. Dragut knew Malta (and Gozo) more than Bonaparte ever knew Madrid or de Santa Anna Texas.

Everyone should recall that the unthinkable cruelty that occurred later in the siege on both sides (cruelty which, by today's standards, would be considered as the most heinous war crimes) may not have occurred had Dragut (at age 80) survived the siege and remained in command. Of course, it will always remain a contentious issue as to what would have happened (especially to Maltese families) had Dragut went on to lay siege on and rout the remaining two forts, and take charge of Malta's administration by decree from the Magnificent Sultan. Nevertheless, I remain of the view that due homage should be paid, in conjunction with the Turkish government, to this great commander and administrator as part of the restoration effort of this fort.

tT Mercieca(1 week ago)

Then you could demolish all the fortifications on the Island! The Brist modified all forts according to the defences of the era. They also built lower St. Elmo, thus ensuring that no landing could be done on that side of the Fort.

And since you mentioned it, why not ask the Turkish Government or any other Arab country to build a monument to the Rights of St. John, or Grand Master La Valett (for the defeat of their superior army in 1565).

Raymond Sammut(6 days, 23 hours ago)

@ T Mercieca

The British built fortifications of their own, such as, for example the Victoria Lines. These too, hopefully, can be restored. The idea is to restore historical buildings to their original design wherever the integrity of this design had been markedly violated.

The British mutilated St Elmo, and left a pretty mess behind. It is also known that inside St Angelo they left a wrecked empty swimming pool, among other things.

I cannot see the relevance in your second paragraph. What the Turkish government does in Turkey is a matter for Turkish people. de Valette never set foot on Turkey. On the other hand, to Dragut, Malta was just about his second home, had thorough knowledge of the island, and it's where he died. Thus he remained profoundly connected with fort St Elmo. There is nothing in Turkey that has anything to do with

the Order of St John. Clearly, your logic is out of kilter.

What we need is a balanced version of history. This can be achieved only by including input and corroboration from Turkish historians. We would like history to teach rather than creating misconceptions and or unnecessary glorifications.

I.Cocker(6 days, 19 hours ago)

Rais Dragut was not truly a Turk but a subject from the vast Ottoman Empire. During the siege he was commissioned as an advisor as his knowledge of the islands and experience in siege, land and naval exploits was much more superior than the other two commanders and probably the Sultan gave him the mission to balance the ego struggle between Piali and Mustapha.

On the other hand the Fort is in Malta, it has been raped by everyone who conquered our island and the Republican Maltese that followed, so I wonder is it not US that have to save her, not the Knights, not the Turks, nor the Allies or the Axis ... just US!

Raymond Sammut(6 days, 12 hours ago)

@ I.Cocker

The Wiki page currently states that he was actually of Greek descent. Under his administration, Tripoli was one of the most impressive cities.

St Elmo is the total responsibility (and presently the most colossal shame, barbarism and disgrace) of the Maltese government, and the restoration of this fort to its pristine condition is long overdue. Original designs are extant. The Maltese government has absolutely no excuses, and should be inviting and encouraging public input.

I would also like to urge the Maltese government to invite the Turkish government to provide input on how to pay homage to Dragut within the walls of St Elmo. It's an extremely important historical fact that Dragut was still alive when the besiegers took St Elmo under his command. It would be a disservice to history, and to lovers of history in general, if this important point were not highlighted prominently as part of the restoration.

T Mercieca(6 days, 1 hour ago)

@R Sammut

If you're referring to the concrete structures, mostly is WWII. Those built possibly later could be removed. However, most of the structures are made of stone, and were built up during the early British rule.

As regards St. Angelo, since you mentioned it, the pool was built when the Fort was a hotel!

Turkey was part of the Ottoman Empire as well as most of the Arab countries in touch with the Mediterranean. La Valette, was like Dragut, an excellent raider. The Order's fleet was very active under his command. And mainly, due to his raids, the Ottomans opted to invade Malta. As for Dragut, he had a lot of second homes, Sicily, for one. If you go to Tunisia, just visit a few of the old coastal towns, which have interesting historical boards, about the raids which were done by the Order.

History is history, you cannot balance it.

Since you want the monument for Dragut, what about the Maltese who lived in that period. Why not erect a monument to them, or their off springs who later rose against the Order, then the French and also the British?

Raymond Sammut(5 days, 23 hours ago)
@ T Mercieca

I have no knowledge of St Angelo ever being a hotel, nor it's so mentioned online that I can find. What hotel was this? Who owned this hotel?

I visited St Angelo twice (2003). Although views of the harbour from this fort are breathtaking, the fort itself is a total abomination of neglect. And every structure that had been built and left behind by the British Military makes the place look like a frightening chimera.

I never got to locate the swimming-pool. I'm only aware of its existence thanks to an interview I was watching on a Maltese TV programme (broadcast in Melbourne) with a rep from Heritage Malta. The pool could be seen right behind him (empty and neglected) as he was answering questions. I'm saying things, here, from memory.

The reason why I say that everything that the British erected --inside both St-Angelo and St-Elmo-- must be demolished and carted off is because I would like to see the British saved from the continuing shame they suffer for their humongous litter left behind. The least they could do was to clear up their sticky mess before they sailed-off in 1978.

Raymond Sammut(5 days, 23 hours ago)
@ T Mercieca

I wouldn't call la Valette "an excellent raider". La Valette had been Grand Admiral of the Order before he was made GM. The position of Grand Admiral hardly qualified him as "raider".

Turkey wasn't part of the Ottoman Empire. This should be clear since Turkey wasn't established until 1922. You probably meant Anatolia.

"The Arab countries in touch with the Mediterrian..."(Mercieca) is inaccurate. These are historically referred to as, for example, Barbary, Tunis, Tripoli, and so on. Arab countries with their present borders were established long after the Ottoman Empire.

"History is history, you cannot balance it."(Mercieca) I cannot see what you mean here. History is told in a balanced way if it were told by all the sides involved --in this case, by Maltese and Turkish historians.

"Since you want the monument for Dragut..."(Mercieca) By monument I didn't mean some dreary bronze statue like we see in every corner of Malta. I meant a suitable structure. The Maltese of 1565 have that monument --St-Elmo. As for Dragut, that's for the Turkish and Maltese governments of the day to determine --a cultural opportunity for both to tell history as it really happened.

T Mercieca(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Fort St. Elmo should be bought up to the same standard as other historical places in Europe. Such forts with historical backgrounds are not hotels, nor catering outlets! They are turned into museums, showing armour, weapons, how the fort developed, etc. Edinburgh Castle in Scotland is not a hotel, and neither is Windsor Castle! St

Elmo has a lot of historical value, the highlight is the siege of 1565, the uprising of the priests against the Order, the arrival of the French Fleet, the attack from sea by the Italians in WWII.

The fort deserves to remain a historical place

victor pulis(1 week, 1 day ago)


At the risk of sounding a traitor to my country I wish that these forts were in some other country where they would be appreciated. Better to lose them to someone who cares than to let them rot or turned into prostitutes to fatten the pockets of some entrepreneur who thinks he owns our heritage. Why can't we think outside the box for once and forget about hotels, yacht marinas and shopping complexes? Don't we have more than enough of these? it's time to think about neglected areas like culture, history, art. To our shame we still don't have a modern art museum but we'll soon have one between the stilts of the new parliament featuring our political history! As if politics are not already oozing out of our...noses.

victor pulis(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Let's not forget to include a health spa, a nail bar(!) a boutique, a large swimming pool and a disco. With a yacht marina just below the ramparts.

iCocker(1 week, 1 day ago) 

This place is a monument to the sacrifice of many friend and foe in both great sieges Malta endured! This is an icon for our heritage much more than anything else, the last stand of this little fort in 1565 is immortalised in military history as the ultimate sacrifice to save a nation and religion. I agree that something should be done, but please with respect, selling our heritage to anything commercial is insane, it is like saying for the Texans to make a hotel in St Alamo!

J.F. Vassallo Ebejer(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Whilst acknowledging the importance of tourism to our economy, I do not think that a historic building should be turned into a tourist attraction.


In my opinion, it should be turned into a leading centre for learning for the whole Mediterranean region.

Thus, I would involve world-renowned overseas Universities who would share St. Elmo as their campus, and from here they would be able to reach out to potential students from the region.

Hence, a Syrian can come to Malta to study oceanography as a student of so and so university. An Italian could come to study industrial design, as a student of another university and so on. Maltese students will also benefit by a wider choice of graduate and postgraduate courses which today are not available in Malta.

This would ensure that St. Elmo is given life again, but this time it will dispense learning not death...

It will also generate economic benefits for Malta because statistics show that overseas university students (as against the young teenagers we get posing as English language students) spend much more money in the host country than any tourist.

Phil Humphries(1 week, 1 day ago) 

This is long overdue. - Just don't let Piano anywhere near it.