

Regenerating our capital city through culture and the arts

by Francis Zammit Dimech

Recently, I had the opportunity to deliver a talk about the concept of how we can regenerate our capital city through culture and the arts at a seminar organised by Valletta Alive Foundation at the Exchange Building. I firmly believe that culture and the arts are the keystones that need to be used to regenerate our capital city.

I would like to share with the readers some of my main thoughts.

Back in 1732, Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena built the Manoel Theatre in Valletta for the entertainment of the members of the Order. And for the Maltese elite, it was a centre for various activities, a cultural centre and an opera house, a venue for theatrical and spectacular events.

More than a century after the inauguration of the Manoel Theatre, in 1861, Governor Sir Gaspard le Merchant constructed the “Teatro dell’Opera”, the Royal Opera House, on the site of the demolished “Casa la Giornata”, the one time residence of the Turcopilier of the Auberge d’Angleterre during the time of the Knights of St John. The Royal Opera House was inaugurated on 9 October, 1866 with “I Puritani” by Bellini.

The Royal Opera House was destroyed in the Second World War and after more than 60 years we are still considering what to build in its place. I stand by my conviction that the emphasis for this area must remain on culture and the arts and that the Valletta Entrance should form part of this project.

Speaking of this project, I cannot but recall another project so close to this site: the Saint James Cavalier which from an instrument of war to defend our capital city during the rule of the Knights of St John was converted into a Centre of Creativity eight years ago, in time for the Millennium celebrations.

The Mediterranean Conference Centre is the last component in the Valletta cultural infrastructure. This building was constructed by the Knights of St John as a Holy Infirmary in 1575 and played a pivotal role in the medical organisation of our country up to 1798.

The Manoel Theatre, the Mediterranean Conference Centre and St James Cavalier are the main cultural centres but our capital city boasts of much more. Some of the auberges, which housed the different languages of the Order of the Knights of St John, have been turned into national museums. St John's Co-Cathedral, the finest building built by the Knights as their Conventual Church, is not just an architectural and artistic gem in the centre of Valletta, but serves also as a venue for vocal and musical concerts, some of international standing.

Valletta is gradually becoming a live theatre for vocal and musical concerts, international choirs, arts festivals, cultural exhibitions and enactments depicting the history of our capital city. The courtyard of the Grandmaster's Palace, St George's Square, the Upper Barrakka Gardens and the Lower Barrakka Gardens, Hastings' Gardens, the ruins of the Royal Opera House, the Valletta Waterfront and the precincts of Ta' Liesse Church are the preferred venues for concerts and festivals.

Valletta has become synonymous with Notte Bianca which was last held in the capital city only three weeks ago. This is an occasion for the Maltese, Gozitans and tourists to visit historical buildings, churches, auberges, museums and works of art in Valletta. It is a night of happenings with 100,000 people flocking into the city for the over 100 events that are organised.

When as Culture Minister I had set in motion this cultural extravaganza, few thought that it was going to be such a huge success. Far more thought that this was another crazy dream of mine. Thank God for dreaming and making it happen!

Valletta is also synonymous with the choir festival which grew into an international event, with the 'BOV Streets Alive' that attracts thousands of Maltese and tourists for all types of cultural, musical and other activities; the Arts Festival, a marathon of arts, music and entertainment spanning over a period of about four weeks in summer; the International Jazz Festival which now all form part of our calendar of activities.

Valletta is also the city of Caravaggio as it is in Valletta that this famous artist produced some of his best paintings, and "The beheading of St John" which is his masterpiece.

Valletta is no longer a fortress to defend us. Valletta is a city built by gentlemen for gentlemen which, since Independence, changed its mission to one of creativity and culture. Valletta is a living museum and a living cultural and artistic experience.

In 2018, Valletta will be the capital city of Europe. This is Valletta's year with destiny and we should all contribute towards turning our city into a city of culture 365 days a year.

Culture is an international language. In an age of interdependence and globalisation, we should emphasise all that unites us as human beings. The European Union respects the diversity of the cultures of its Member States and contributes through programmes and funding in the promotion of culture.

If we recall the economic returns generated by such events as Notte Bianca, the Arts Festival or festivals such as the one with our own tenor Joseph Calleja, to give but only a few examples, it should be clear that it is through culture and the arts that we can best regenerate our capital city. Moreover, one has only to look at such classic success stories as represented by Edinburgh, Salzburg and Bilbao to realise that what we have set in motion over the past years needs to become a programme of continuous action that gains even more momentum in the coming years, not least as we prepare for when Valletta is declared the Cultural City of Europe.

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