

State repossesses lower Fort St Elmo

Fiona Galea Debono



The Government Property Division yesterday repossessed premises at lower Fort St Elmo in Valletta amid hot protests by the makers of carnival floats. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi.

The Government Property Division yesterday repossessed premises at lower Fort St Elmo, in Valletta, that have been occupied by squatters and identified the warehouses of carnival float builders who would continue to be allowed access.

Some seven empty rooms, which had already been vacated by the squatters following eviction notices last week, were sealed off and about 17 carnival workshops were identified and registered with the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, which has been collaborating on the exercise. The carnival leaders and helpers will be provided passes to enter the derelict site, access to which is now under the control of the Armed Forces of Malta.

The empty rooms were found to be a "disgusting mess" due, primarily, to animal excrement and other forms of waste and scrap, council executive director Davinia Galea said. She said anything imaginable, including syringes, could be found in lower Fort St Elmo.

A substantial number of police officers were involved in yesterday's early-morning eviction operation, which included the AFM, the Works Division and the SPCA to remove all animals found on the premises.

The strong police presence seemed to have "disrupted" the hot-headed carnival participants, who objected to the operation and derided them. They waited outside the fort, vehemently protesting that they had been "thrown out", although it transpired they knew they had not and have been cooperating with the authorities. Their major bone of contention was the removal of their "pets", which they claimed guarded their workshops from frequent thefts.

Animal welfare director Mario Spiteri, whose role was to remove abandoned animals from the fort, was restricted entrance at one point. He said all sorts of animals had been housed in St Elmo, including fighting dogs and horses, but most had been removed by their owners over the week.

One carnival participant yelled he would burn his float in front of everyone if they removed his pet and others threatened to drop out of next year's festivities, claiming the police's aim was to remove them and that they were not criminals.

The carnival participants have never been on the division's eviction agenda and, in fact, the president of their association, Jason Busuttil, clarified later that they welcomed the removal of squatters who, he added, were an annoyance to them too, and agreed with the heightened security at the fort. "However, we expect the AFM to be responsible for our warehouses now that they have removed our dogs," he said.

They supported any project that would turn the dilapidated Fort St Elmo into a tourist attraction, Mr Busuttil said, referring to their "extra scenes" staged outside the fort despite the agreement with the authorities on yesterday's procedure, which should have been "plain sailing".

Mr Busuttil shifted the issue to the pending situation facing carnival organisers and their premises, saying they would rather have moved to an alternative and adequate site from yesterday.

"We are not after a whole village, a political promise that has been in the pipeline for decades. We just want a warehouse."

Mr Busuttil gave the government a three-week ultimatum to propose an alternative site and any deadlines for the move, claiming the Prime Minister was already working on one. He said the carnival float builders would remain at Fort St Elmo until February but they wanted to know before where they would go when the festivities were over and they had to dismantle their floats.

Ms Galea, however, denied they would have to leave the fort by February, saying they would remain until the government decided on an alternative site.

The use of premises in Floriana had been shot down by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority but others were being worked on, she said.

The fort's gates were yesterday welded so they could not be lifted off their hinges and a crane hoisted over the wall a guard room for the soldiers. Another three points of easy access were also blocked off.

Floodlights for security and electricity meters to stop theft were also being installed, arousing mixed feelings among the carnival enthusiasts, who said they had worked in poor conditions for 30 years and could not believe that these were being sorted out in their last few months at the fort.

Comments

Raymond Sammut (50 minutes ago)

@ ivan Camilleri

You make a good point about the Knights introducing Carnival in Malta. In my view, however, Carnival as an institution in Malta may, like Saint Elmo, also need some restoration and innovation work of its own.

For example, better standards can be introduced by organisers to ensure that the quality of floats is improved each year. Floats could have a limited size which would require more skill and contrivance. Carnival could also be held at different villages/towns in Malta and Gozo each year rather than always being concentrated in the same place. The emphasis should be on the high quality of floats, more active participation across Malta and Gozo, and effective marketing. Participation from overseas enthusiasts can also be encouraged if this would increase the quality and not just quantity.

First and foremost, however, the Maltese Carnival craftspeople need to get a good place to work from. Saint Elmo was never the right place. The fort was originally built for a very different purpose. Malta has lots of alternative spaces that can be utilised, and one would hope that the issue will be resolved soon without further ado, and much human and animal drama.

ivan Camilleri (4 hours, 12 minutes ago)

Dear Manny Parnis,

I just wish to enlighten you that those who built St Elmo, introduced carnival in Malta. So those grotesque figures are part of our culture aswell. Both need protection and preservation

K Vella (5 hours, 42 minutes ago)

Can information be given as to what is going to happen to these abandoned animals, or have they already been put to sleep by the SPCA, who are quite known for putting down abandoned animals.

L. Grech (6 hours, 11 minutes ago)

Maybe these carnival enthusiasts could be given an abandoned factory, which I'm sure we have around the island, as alternative premises.

Oreste Calleja (6 hours, 23 minutes ago)

A well deserved 'Well done ' to the Property Division should be in order. A prime site like Fort St Elmo will, we hope, one day be another excellent jewel in the local heritage. Carnival enthusiasts I' m sure will continue with their contribution to our popular culture - hopefully with excellent results and in the orderly fashion as we all deserve.

J Farrugia (6 hours, 41 minutes ago)

Why not tell those who work on the carnival floats to tidy up their animal excrements and all the dirty things they left in St Elmo. Time is up for them to be kicked out of St Elmo and this magnificent fort be restored to its former glory. The people do not care where these carnival enthusiasts carry out their preparations. But not at the people's expense. Speaking for myself, I can do without Carnival. In fact we have several carnivals, by the unions, by the bus drivers, by the students, by festa organisers. Everyone is a King Carnival here in Malta.

Manny Parnis (7 hours ago)

I just cannot believe the temerity of some people, who just walk off the street, take possession of a national icon, desecrate a monument (or rather should be) ,to the heroes of old who defended Malta and Europe from being overrun by the Ottomans,and then when told that the game's over, act as the hurt victims of officialdom. Like Switzerland, Malta should have a series of referenda to test whether the Maltese would support the restoration of the Fort or would sacrifice it to a few "enthusiasts" who's only understanding of culture is some grotesque figurines that wouldn't stand a shower of rain, instead of a historical gem that has survived (admittedly only just) for 5 centuries.

Godfrey Pirotta (7 hours, 30 minutes ago)

Would it have been necessary for the government to repossess St Elmo if it had not itself abandoned it in the first place? Should we now feel grateful that after decades of absolute neglect the Statehas done what it was all the time its duty to do?
