

Spotlight on Valletta's covered market

Lisa Gwen Baldacchino



The covered market in Valletta is presently in dire need of attention and regeneration.

Modern or industrial are hardly words one would immediately associate with Valletta's architecture. Yet these words spring to mind when placing Valletta's covered market within the context of a capital city chiefly dominated by baroque architecture.

Built in the 1860s, this British Colonial construction is a gem of a place – albeit one which has been largely neglected for many years.

Although a few small businesses are still active within the complex, the place is far from being a hub of activity. And with the exception of the odd tourist, wanderer or passer-by, few are those who venture inside to admire the beauty of the ironwork and the uniqueness of this space.

Found in a prime location in Merchants Street, the covered market – known as Is-Suq tal-Belt – is almost shielded from view during the day by the competing outdoor market stalls.

Mostly frequented by the local community, the only time I had the pleasure of seeing this magical place come to life was during Notte Bianca, and more recently, during Patches: The Special Market (Christmas edition) that took place on December 12.

I don't mind admitting that I have more than a passing interest in the suq. Having been the focus of my studies (and concerns) for quite a while, I long to see this building restored, regenerated and restructured so that it may fulfil its potential once again. After all, the covered market was built to serve a specific purpose within the

capital's community. But one can hardly say that at present the suq is fulfilling anything. Unfortunately, even its present state and condition is hardly satisfactory.

Denise Scicluna, co-curator and co-founder of the Patches events, confessed that she had in mind to use the covered market as venue for subsequent Patches markets during the winter months. However, the state of the roof is such that with a heavy downpour, the market floods. Hardly an ideal situation when considering the venue for any such event.

So what exactly are the authorities waiting for? With "renovations" having been made as late as the 1970s, the market is in desperate need of attention – the building is crying out for conversion and re-designation. Options there are many, as there have been proposals. I rather fancy the idea of transforming the site into a modern art museum. However, I could be persuaded to shelf that idea should the market be scheduled to become a mecca for independent designers, artists and creatives. The place could lend itself very well as another Covent Garden or Camden Market. And anyone visiting the last Patches event could witness this.

The place was gorgeously inhabited with people. A pleasant hum rose above and beyond the music coming from the live band. Every now and again a whiff of something sweet, then savoury, then sweet again would hit me. In fact, I met several people sipping away at their hot cups of imbuljuta or pumpkin soups.

This is not to mention the 40 plus stalls scattered on two of the market's floors. My only displeasure was that the below-street-level market yard was not utilised for the event. During Notte Bianca 2008 this area was used as a "stage" and proved to be very effective as spectators only needed to peer down at the ongoing action from either of the two levels – this also gave the performance a very interesting dynamic. Sadly, all of this floor seems to be pretty much in disuse.

There has been a lot of attention directed to Valletta in recent years; and the government investing in the capital's regeneration, embellishment and urban growth is, for me, their seal of approval. The concept behind the creative clusters as launched in this year's Budget is further proof of a general consensus to elevate Valletta's status to a "city for gentlemen" once again and to take that notion to the next level.

Culture oozes out of our capital city – unfortunately, we have been stuck on the heritage aspect of Malta's culture for too long when we also need to incorporate contemporary perspectives in our long-term vision. With so many spaces within the capital city being targeted for regeneration and development, it stands to reason that the covered market should also feature in any serious discussion.

The bid for the Maltese city to be awarded title of European Capital for Capital in 2018 was launched last Saturday. And Valletta is an obvious contender for the title. Need I say more?

Factbox

- The covered market was the first building to be constructed entirely out of metal in Malta, even though pre-fabricated iron was used for the building of the Collegiate Church of St Paul in Valletta, the Naval Bakery in Vittoriosa and Corradino Prisons in Paola.
- Projected in 1845, the market was to be situated on the vacated site of the old prison in Valletta.
- The market was to cost £3,934, and it would incorporate both cast and wrought iron, specifically: 180 lineal feet of cast iron columns and girders, and 21,900 square feet of cast and wrought iron for the roofing.
- Works on the construction were shelved for a number of years, only to be taken up in 1858 by Governor John Gaspard Le Merchant.
- Hector Zimelli, who became Superintendent in 1855, was charged with the design of the covered market.
- The iron for the covered market was imported from Emmerson and Murgatroyd – an engineering firm from Stockport, England.
- The timber roofing of the market and the iron works were in turn supervised by William Scamp (1801-1872) and Charles Barry (1795-1860).
- The structure was completed, however, under the direction of Emanuele Luigi Galizia (1830-1906), the architect responsible for the design of the Addolorata and Ta' Braxia cemeteries.
- The final construction included 153 stalls and 65 cellars, as well as a central glazed skylight.
- Today the covered market has a simple rectangular plan, with masonry walls and arches, making up all three of the distinct levels of the building, while the upper superstructure, constructed with pre-fabricated wrought and cast iron, serves as a lightweight canopy, protecting the interior from the elements.
- The iron columns are lightly decorated with discrete column caps, reminiscent of the Corinthian order; some of these columns were the first examples to be cast in the new dock yard foundry.
- The whole structure was then roofed using a technique, known as roof cladding, involving the use of red deal boards covered with torba and deffun. This was one of the first of its kind in Malta.
- The market did suffer some damage during World War II, it was however subsequently repaired.

- The interior of the covered market was then modified in the second half of last century. Numerous additions were made in 1970, when two floors of food shops were built as well as a pair of escalators; however, the original internal structures were retained.

- In 2008 the Malta Environment and Planning Authority listed the covered market as a Grade 1 building.

Comments

Elizabeth Borg (5 days, 11 hours ago)

@Ms Fisher: Please note the last line in the factbox which reads: "In 2008 the Malta Environment and Planning Authority listed the covered market as a Grade 1 building." which means that it CANNOT be knocked down! It is a UNIQUE building - one of a kind in Malta. Even though it may be a "stinking eyesore" or an "embarrassment" in your opinion, that just means that it needs to be restored and taken care of.. knocking it down is not an option and it is ridiculous to make such a suggestion.

Mary Fisher (5 days, 21 hours ago)

Valletta market has become such a stinking eyesore that it is an embarrassment to even walk past it. The space it is occupying should be allowed to open as a supermarket which Valletta truly needs and failing that, knock it down and make it into a multi story car park which is needed so badly. I sincerely hope that something is done about it really soon.

Paul Borg (6 days ago)

I think a large part of the SUQ should be allocated to the Artisans from Ta' Qali to display their beautiful work, of course keeping one level for commodities for the sake of tradition

Wilfred L. Camilleri (6 days, 1 hour ago)

This is what the Suq could look like if restored to its former glory but with a modern touch.

St. Lawrence Market, Toronto:

<http://www.stlawrencemarket.com/photogallery/index.html>

Reading Terminal Market, Philadelphia:

<http://philadelphia.about.com/cs/toptenattractions/l/aa082800b.htm>

Faneuil Hall Marketplace, Boston: <http://www.faneuilhallmarketplace.com/?q=fhm>

Wilfred L. Camilleri (6 days, 1 hour ago)

I used to love going there in my youth and visited the Suq when it was till occupied my fishmongers and others as far back as the late 1970s. There are many big cities we these sort of old-style markets still operating and attracting locals and tourists alike. Some I have visited include Toronto St. Lawrence Market and the market in Boston and Philadelphia. The market in Toronto looks like a larger version of the Suq and it's still a vibrant place with dozens of shops selling cheeses, meat, fish, baked

goods, and fresh vegetables and fruits. It would be a great idea to convert the market back to its original purpose, perhaps with craft and art boutiques in the upper sections.

J Galea (6 days, 5 hours ago)

The population in Valletta is on the increase and the "Suq" could be a very useful venue. There is no bakery in the vicinity anymore so a bakery shop might be considered. The escalators have been scandalously neglected ever since they were installed - perhaps new activity sensors can be installed. Besides, a coat of paint would not be at all amiss.
