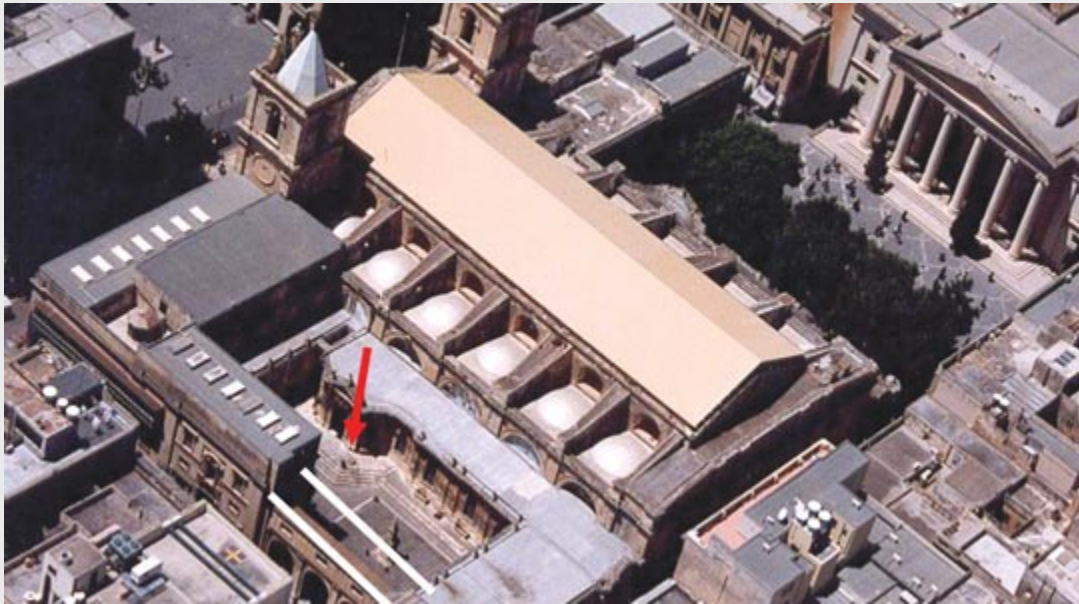


St John's Co-Cathedral museum extension

Foundation asks Mepa to draw up EIA terms of reference



Flimkien Għal Ambjent Aħjar released this aerial view of St John's Co-Cathedral indicating how increasing the buildings on the Merchants' Street side will create a damaging sense of enclosure.

St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation is asking the Malta Environment and Planning Authority to provide the terms of reference for an Environment Impact Assessment on the proposed new museum, which would also cover any potential risks to the co-cathedral.

Referring to comments by the environment body Flimkien Għal Ambjent Aħjar, the foundation said that, as already made clear, it will not make any decision that in any way endangers the fabric of the co-cathedral or that is not conducive to the enrichment of Malta's cultural and religious heritage.

FAA has expressed concern over a development application to extend St John Co-Cathedral's Museum by constructing a new three-storey building on the courtyard along Merchants Street to provide extra space. A canteen at roof level is also being proposed.

The foundation said it had made it clear that it would appreciate any constructive advice regarding the new museum. The museum is necessary to exhibit the co-cathedral's hidden or poorly-displayed treasures for the appreciation of all, it said.

The foundation insisted that no "other feasible and simple alternatives exist" to house many of the treasures that St John's possesses. Currently, in total or partial storage at the co-cathedral is a unique complete set of 29 tapestries (the largest set in the world of tapestries based on Rubens' cartoons), the exceptional Cappella Ardente and collections of liturgical vestments.

These collections require about 2,000 square metres of space to be displayed professionally and an additional area of about 800 metres is required for storage and utility services.

The foundation pointed out that these are treasures commissioned for the co-cathedral and that, therefore, every effort should be made to display them within the precincts of the co-cathedral. This is what the foundation is striving to do. Proposing to break up the co-cathedral's collections and place them in various buildings around Valletta, as is being proposed by FAA, is wrong.

The foundation is confident that the Mepa process will ensure that its proposed museum will conform to the highest standards, respecting all existing laws and regulations.

FAA reiterated that the proposed project would violate the clauses of the National Monument Grade I scheduling and cause irremediable damage to Valletta's underground chambers, tunnels, channels and water cisterns, which should be mapped out, studied and preserved, and not damaged and exploited.

Feasible alternatives exist for the extension of the required museum space such as the acquisition of a nearby palazzo that can be restored and used as an extension. This option would not only serve to restore the building and enrich Valletta but would have the added advantage of relieving St John's Co-Cathedral of the heavy influx of visitors, allowing the foundation to accept more visitors and increase its earnings.

FAA has invited members of the public who have Malta's heritage at heart to visit its website www.ambjentahjar.org where they can submit an objection to Mepa in relation to the extension applications.

The Labour Party's spokesman for planning, Roderick Galdes, said the proposed extension project would have a negative impact on an important historic site in a zone that is considered a World Heritage Site.

As proposed, extensive excavations would cause another precedent in a zone that is supposed to be protected by the Structure Plan and Mepa policies.

Moreover, Mr Galdes added, the cathedral and the surrounding buildings, including the museum and the sacristy, are scheduled under Grade 1 and, as such, should be protected.

Alternattiva Demokratika said it supports FAA and other NGOs in their objections to the proposed extension. Chairman Arnold Cassola said it does not make any sense to embark on works which can modify the core of the historic centre of Valletta, the capital city of Malta which attracts so many for its typical baroque design.

On the other hand, AD also appreciates the fact that St John's Co-Cathedral houses "in total or partial storage" the unique complete set of 29 Goblain tapestries.

AD suggested that the foundation identifies an appropriate building in some other part of Malta and sets up a museum entirely and solely dedicated to the 29 Goblain tapestries. This would be a perfect example of niche cultural tourism, whereby a building of character would be rehabilitated and at the same time there would be diversification of the Maltese touristic and cultural product - with the relative economic benefit for the local population - in some other part of our country.