

## **Dilemma at heart of government's thinking about Valletta exposed**

**by Noel Grima**

In the end, it was the incisive analysis of Fr Peter Serracino Inglott which exposed what lay at the real heart of the question: the dilemma present in government's thinking about Valletta and its future.

Rounding up a whole morning's debate, at a seminar held at the Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise by the Valletta Alive Foundation, Prof. Serracino Inglott positioned himself at the other extreme of one of the first speakers at the seminar, Minister Austin Gatt.

Dr Gatt, who lives in front of the Borza, (and so was spared the traffic jam at Floriana because the road in front of the Floriana local council was being tarmacked), and who is the only MP not just to represent Valletta but also lives in Valletta, put forward what, according to Fr Peter, is the residents' point of view.

All that Valletta needs, Dr Gatt said, was enforcement, enforcement, enforcement. We cannot allow everyone, he said, to do what he thinks is his right. He referred to people parking on the pavement outside his home (had he not rushed away, he would have possibly seen the car owned by a former colleague of his, identifiable by its unique number plate, parked exactly there), rubbish, advertising boards (such as that in the middle of the steps of Republic Street advertising a restaurant further down), people throwing cigarette butts on the ground, pavements broken because people parked their cars, and worse, their trucks on them (The solution, he warned, could be just like in Britain or France – remove the pavements and install cement bollards instead).

Fr Peter said this is a perfect example of how residents reason, even though he too comes from Valletta and considers himself a Valletta resident. What residents want, Fr Peter said, is for Valletta to remain a showcase of the past, encapsulating a past that is gone, somewhat like Mdina.

For Fr Peter, and other speakers at the seminar, there is another scenario for Valletta, Valletta as a living city, which lives 24 hours a day, a centre of arts and culture.

Dr Gatt said that everybody seems to have fixed, absolute, ideas about Valletta – all are experts, all dogmatic – whether it be about the Opera House, City Gate, and so on. If we really want Valletta to be a centre of excellence, Dr Gatt said, we must learn to listen, to discuss. There is no magic wand; there will never be a solution that pleases everyone. We must not expect to get all that we want to see done.

For Fr Peter, there can be discussions and debate but the two positions are as far from each other as the sun is from the moon.

There was more in the long-distance debate between the two than just this.

Fr Peter faulted Dr Gatt on the figures of Valletta.

Dr Gatt referred to the decrease in the population: 35,000 people lived in Valletta in the post-war years and now there were only 10,000. Not true, Fr Peter rebutted. It never had 35,000 people, and he is older than Dr Gatt. And today it only has 6,300.

Dr Gatt argued that when Valletta was at its most populous, there were people living in tenements (kerrejjiet) just next door to his house in Republic Street, where 27 people lived in five rooms and there was no toilet except for a hole in the yard. There were people living in cellars, and even in caves near Marsamxett, beggars at City Gate and so on.

Fr Peter did not dispute this tale of poverty. He even added that the most decrepit areas of Valletta, like the Due Balli, which used to house criminals and drug addicts, are now being taken over by illegal immigrants.

But the ideal number of inhabitants of the city must have been somewhere midway between the highest population figure and its present figure.

It was also difficult for Valletta, Dr Gatt argued, to attract residents back. Most of the people who live in Valletta reside in apartments, which are not comfortable at all. School buses do not enter Valletta. It is very often difficult to install air-conditioning and apartment buildings have many steps. These liveability issues must be addressed.

Besides which, Valletta has far more cars than it can handle. The number of pedestrian areas must be increased. Soon, he announced, the government will be issuing tenders for ferry transport from Cottonera and the electric taxi system will be extended to all Malta.

Dr Gatt also protested at Mepa permitting more than one development to raise more

storeys – this was at least one issue on which there was agreement from Fr Peter.

More than just quibble about figures, Fr Peter faulted Dr Gatt on an even more important assertion.

Dr Gatt said that apart from the four big restoration projects such as the Opera House, City Gate and so on, Valletta did not need any huge investment. What it needed mostly was, as already said, enforcement.

This elicited a stinging riposte from Fr Peter.

The City Gate project alone would cost some Lm100 million and another three to four million euros to do the Opera House. One must not forget St Elmo, because according to the Renzo Piano grand plan for Valletta, this would be the second pole of the reconstruction of Valletta.

Yesterday's seminar was entitled "Valletta 450 Seminar: How would you like Valletta to be in 2016? The date, 2016, a year after Dr Gonzi's Year of Excellence 2015, is the 450th anniversary of the founding of the city.

But Fr Peter (and Francis Zammit Dimech in his text notes) mentioned another date – 2018 when Valletta could become the cultural capital of Europe. Fr Peter pointed out that the city of Maastricht in Holland is another contender for this title and has already begun investing money – some €10 million a year – in preparation for this event. How can we regenerate Valletta without spending money, Fr Peter asked.

So the choice facing Valletta is either as a 24-hour active centre or Valletta as the second silent city, surviving as a showcase museum for tourists.

There was also a not so secondary split among yesterday's speakers – what to do about the Opera House ruins? Everyone was in agreement that something had to be done, with Architect Paul Camilleri speaking in favour of it becoming the new Parliament, Malta's new symbol of democracy and EU membership, and Dr Zammit Dimech maintaining strongly that it should be a Centre for the Arts.

The presentations by Mr Camilleri and Architect David Felice were fascinating and no short report can do them justice.

Mr Camilleri asked: "When was the last major building of any architectural significance built in Valletta? Why don't we have any contemporary buildings in Valletta? Why was

the Renzo Piano City Gate project not built?”

To those who may have thought these words were heretical in relation to Valletta, Mr Camilleri pointed out that Valletta itself has changed over the years. Valletta may have begun as a collection of single-storey buildings, which later became baroque palazzos. But later additions – such as the 19th century St Paul’s Anglican Church, Barry’s Opera House itself, and not even the GWU building, St Albert the Great College, the government flats near the Lower Barrakka, Vincenti Buildings, and even (surely tongue in cheek) the Tal-Karmnu Church, which replaced the Gerolamo Cassar church, did not substantially affect the urban pattern of Valletta. One cannot imagine Valletta without the spire of the Anglican church, without Palazzo Francia, without the flats in South Street, without the market in Merchants Street.

However, he argued, candidate sites for replacement would include Evans Laboratories, City Gate, the bombed opera house ruins, the GWU building and St Albert’s College.

Taking examples from Berlin, (Reichstag) Bilbao, and so on, Mr Camilleri defended the Renzo Piano plan for City Gate. This, he said, was backed by sound design philosophy – that Valletta has now become an open City beckoning to all and no longer a fortified city suspicious and afraid of new arrivals. “Should the Opera House site be again developed as an Opera House and to the original Barry designs, or should this prominent site, just like the Reichstag in Berlin, be utilised to embody Malta’s independence and democracy – an independence and democracy which despite our smallness we have managed to keep, as Joe Friggieri elaborated in his recent article in The Sunday Times, without the excesses which other countries had to go through?”

Mr Felice’s speech was along these lines. By means of slides he showed how Malta was debating the same issue in 1966 in a Times supplement, and even earlier Herbert Ganado had dreamt of it being 2000 and the Opera House was still unbuilt (though people said it would be rebuilt soon!). The Borza itself was a daring innovative building in its own time and the Market was the second glass and steel structure in Europe after Crystal Palace. Duke of York Avenue was almost heretical when it was mooted.

We should think more of greater Valletta, including the Waterfront and also Cottonera across the harbour, not forgetting the Marsamxett side and come up with a master plan.

Chris Falzon, former VISET CEO, built on this suggestion and, in a personal capacity, made 10 proposals:

- A renewed tram system, eg from Castille to Hamrun

- A cable car from Park & Ride to VISET and to Castille
- Cut a canal/tunnel 7 to 10m wide and one or two metres deep, from Customs House to Marsamxett thus extending the city to both sides, with hybrid buses and bateaux mouches plying both ways.
- Cross-harbour ferries
- Small electric buses on the Rome model.
- A jogging/cycle path all the way from Hilton to Rinella.
- Panoramic lifts at three key places
- Re-introduce the train since most of its infrastructure is still there.

Among the other speakers, Elizabeth Aquilina from MTA urged the restoration of old palazzos and their conversion into boutique hotels, and the opening of most churches in Valletta during the day, perhaps with volunteers from the local council manning has changed over the years.

On the minus side she targeted Valletta's primitive public toilets.

Dr Antoine Cachia also mentioned disused and dangerous buildings and balconies, many of which are crying out for restoration. He was joined by Sir Martin Laing who urged incentive schemes to get people back to live in Valletta's houses. Businessman Paul Fenech urged flexible shopping hours, not just at Christmas time. Joseph F. X. Zahra urged the university to come back, or at least some faculties, to Valletta, the setting up of a music academy and Strait Street being given over to artists. He also urged the holding of book and antiques fairs in the open spaces of the city at regular events. Auberge de Baviere should be turned into a hotel and the surrounding Biccerija area restored.

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