

The fortress builders

by Annaliza Borg

The name Biaggio Steps in Valletta spells out exams for many people. However, the Restoration Unit within the Resources and Rural Affairs Ministry has set about its restoration and reconstruction.

The building – a butting fort as part of the bastions, a system of stores built in the sixteenth century – will be transformed into an educational centre and an interactive information centre for the interpretation of fortifications.

Sources within the Restoration Unit said the problem with architectural heritage is that it never featured anywhere. Up till now, fortifications lacked certain legitimacy and were never perceived as an entity. This will be the focal point of the information centre.

Currently, the government is heavily committed to restore over 60 kilometres of ramparts – no joke when considering Malta only has a surface area of 316 squared kilometres. The restoration project is therefore very vast and taking up 90 to 95 per cent of the Ministry resources.

The envisaged information centre- aptly named 'The Fortress Builders' will serve as a resource centre for new restorers and a database repository for all fortifications, fortresses, towers and batteries around the Maltese Islands. It will showcase Malta's fortifications to visitors while serving as a learning centre for the younger generations.

Biaggio Steps was specifically chosen since it is situated at the heart of Malta's most important fortification – Valletta.

All three floors of the building will be transformed into this centre. The main exhibition area will be spread over the two lower floors focusing on the Hospitaliers' period and British period. On accessing the building through St Mark's Street, a short audiovisual presentation will be given after which visiting school children will be led to a specifically set interactive area.

Sources explained that the exhibition will be enhanced by multimedia and therefore featuring interactive information. Visitors will be able to react to information panels, ask questions and access information on matters that catch their eye.

The several 3-D Graphic Fortification Models exhibited at the information centre will include Birgu Land Front fortifications, Valletta Land Front fortifications, Fort Manoel, Fort Chambrai, Fort St Rocco (British period – 1872), Greeks' Gate (Mdina – Medieval), Comino Battery and Marsalforn Tower.

Large plastic scale models of major fortifications will also be exhibited. Meanwhile, audiovisual presentations on The Development of Fortification in the Maltese Islands, The Art of Fortress Building in Malta and British Coastal Defences among a number of others, will be given.

The upper floor will comprise of a resource library and an auditorium where a series of specialised lectures are to take place due to the fact that there are still generations worth of research into fortifications.

Upon walking out of the building, visitors will ultimately end up on the ramparts by St Andrew's Bastion (over the 222 night club). Biaggio Steps is also in close proximity to the Sliema Ferry berthing place. Visitors crossing over to Valletta will consequently be able to use a public lift which will take them up from St Mark's Street to Melita Street. This public lift will also be in use outside the information centre's visiting hours.

The philosophy behind the building of fortifications and bastions was protecting life rather than glorifying war. On the other hand, the genius of engineering and architecture within a historical context must be given its merited praise and status.

Malta is unique in terms of fortifications whereby a cross section of all engineering and architectural schools that developed in Europe from the 1500s onwards, is found, the sources within the Restoration Unit explained.

While most of the engineers who set about building fortifications were foreigners, except for Glormu Cassar and his son, most builders and masons were Maltese. The fortifications restoration projects must be an ongoing one and the plan is to train Maltese personnel in the trade.

The Restoration Unit is currently rebuilding parts of the Biaggio Steps building which were demolished in World War II. It plans to have the information centre up and running within two years.
