

## Fr Peter's Perspective

# Towards the city's 450th birthday

**At least, one newspaper reported the seminar organised by the Valletta Alive Foundation as if it had been mainly a showdown between Austin Gatt and yourself. Was it?**

The circus aficionado in me deeply regrets that our performance was not in reality anything like the classic adversarial clown acts, such as Chocolat vs Footit, Auguste vs White face.

My allotted slot was the penultimate. It was consequently only the ghostly, although still heavyweight, figure of the de facto, if not de jure Minister for The City (as he reminded us we always refer to it in Maltese, never Valletta) that still lingered in the hall with its usual overpowering aura when I bleated out my feedback in a septuagenarian voice.

There had been general applause for the minister's insistence on the need for law enforcement in the capital and concern about the skyline, as well as for the contrast between the social plight of the squatters squeezed in peripheral spaces and the dweller-deserted core.

Practically everyone else thought that the ideal population size was that originally envisaged by the founder knights, probably half of what it got swollen to in my boyhood or, in other words, twice what it has shrunk to at present.

Also a lot of investment, both public and private, was required if The City was to become again Valletta Alive, and not just a scantily lived in museum for tourists.

**Surely, given the quality and variety of the participants whose views you were supposed to sum up, there must have been many business-like, as well as quirky, if not bizarre proposals. Is there any one you felt should be highlighted?**

Had I been forced to stick to just one, I would unhesitatingly have picked the proposal made by Sir Martin Laing that the government set up an Urban Development Company specifically for Valletta.

For anyone who does not know it, Sir Martin, now resident in Malta, graduated at Cambridge University in estate management, and then worked for the Laing Development Company of which he became chairman not only in the United Kingdom, but also in Canada and the Middle East. He has distinguished himself very much for his environmental concerns.

The government would identify properties it owns and can dispose of in Valletta and transfer them to the company in return for a 51 per cent shareholding. The equivalent of the market value of the properties would be issued as shares available to private investors.

The UDC would renovate the properties as well as any others it acquired and put them up for sale. The government would invest its 50 per cent of the profits into further improvement of Valletta.

Sir Martin made many other intriguing suggestions as he went along, such as turning the old St Luke's hospital site into the administrative city that the government had once planned to put many of its departments into, located in some area outside, but close to, Valletta. Another suggestion was setting up specified forms of tax incentives for those who rehabilitate a property in Valletta for use as their own home.

However, most of Sir Martin's valuable suggestions were ways in which urban regeneration could be used as factors reducing carbon emissions in particular and improving the environment more generally. They deserve study from this point of view which gives them applicability beyond the narrow confines of Valletta, even though the general feeling of the seminar was that we should be thinking again in conformity with the conceptions of the Knights, of Greater Valletta stretching from Ricasoli to Tigne'.

**The Valletta Alive Foundation, although supported by leading architects and designers, seems to have been primarily animated by businessmen and economists. Besides the contribution of Sir Martin, with its primarily environmental slant, was the economic perspective reflected in other contributions?**

Not surprisingly, Joseph F.X. Zahra made a most eloquent plea outlining a fairly comprehensive plan for a "modern renaissance" in which the cultural industries would be the motivating force of economic flourishing.

For instance, he urged the relocation of faculties of the University of Malta, such as Laws and Architecture, to Valletta so that it could return to being a university town.

He also urged the establishment of an academy of music and the conversion of Strait Street into a different sort of gut from that which it was in British times and more like what it was in the days of the Knights, when it hosted the artists who performed at the Manoel Theatre. This transformation would happen with the provision of studios for artists of all kinds, from writers to photographers, in what is, at present, a miserably dilapidated street.

The managerial economist Zahra naturally included the reconstruction of the Opera House in his revival strategy. An impassioned plea was made by Francis Zammit Dimech for keeping the site as a multivalent space for cultural activities.

To put Parliament there would be a clear option for The City as a museum rather than for Valletta Alive, since Parliament requires a building with severely restricted entry and even more stringent security precautions than those which have impeded St James Cavalier from making use of its splendid roof space (because of proximity to the Prime Minister's office).

I personally think that Ray Bondin is one of Valletta's greatest benefactors, except for his idea that would have been most befitting for the capital city of Topsy-turvydom.

*Fr Peter Serracino Inglott was talking to Alessandra Fiott*