

Valletta – A new beginning

by ALFRED ZAHRA

For all those who have the interest of Valletta at heart, these are truly exciting times. Over the past months, the government announced a number of projects for Valletta. The opera house site and City Gate will be developed into a Parliament House and cultural spaces. The Valletta Alive Foundation welcomes this decision and the evident determination of the Prime Minister to adhere to the time frames set. After decades of debates, raised expectations and false starts, this six-decade-old “wound” in our beloved capital city will finally be healed. Engaging Renzo Piano is a reassurance that the site will be developed in a manner that is appropriate to its context and its historic and strategic significance. Parliament is a symbol of our nationhood and as such its location at the entrance of Malta’s capital city is appropriate.

Piazza San Gorg is to be pedestrianised. Work should start within weeks and is scheduled for completion by November. The current use of the square as a car park does not allow people to appreciate the grandeur of the Grand Masters Palace and that of the Main Guard. Parliament is to be moved out of The Palace, as are the various offices on the ground floor. The Palace will be restored and converted into an exhibition area for artefacts that are part of Malta’s heritage. The Palace has the potential to become an exceptional visitor and cultural attraction on a par with St John’s Co-Cathedral. VAF welcomes the appointment of Dr Giovanni Bonello, a historian and art connoisseur, as superintendent of The Palace project.

Plans for Fort St Elmo to convert it into a multi-functional development including cultural and leisure activities are in hand. The construction of berths for cruise liners in the harbour below will allow the Fort to be used as a passenger terminal in the summer months. This is by far the most ambitious project that will take many years and millions of euros to complete. There are also plans to develop Evans Building into a hotel and underground car park.

Other projects have been announced. The building at Biaggio steps shall be rehabilitated and converted into an interactive fortifications museum. The Barakka lift will be rebuilt to connect Lascaris Ditch to the Upper Barrakka.

This is of fundamental importance for access to Valletta, particularly for thousands of cruise liners passengers. They will gain precious time they could then dedicate to the appreciation of Valletta’s heritage wealth. The breakwater bridge will be reconstructed to enable people to walk along it and appreciate the impressive harbour views from this unusual angle. Valletta fortifications will be rehabilitated and restored, with most of the costs being covered by ERDF funds.

These projects fall under the competencies of the Ministry for Infrastructure, Transport and Communications and the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs. Some of these projects were featured in the excellent special edition of Flair Magazine issued with The Malta Independent on Sunday last week.

The Valletta Alive Foundation concurs in general with the various decisions taken by the government in relation to these projects, as well as other smaller projects, including the re-instatement of paving and restoration of buildings. It also worth mentioning the enforcement action taken by the government's Property Division to remove illegal encroachments at City Gate and other locations in Valletta.

These various projects and initiatives are a continuation of actions taken prior to the March 2008 general election. The pedestrianisation of Merchants Street together with the re-location of il-Monti has completely transformed this important part of Valletta. The pedestrianisation has brought about increased private sector investment in retail developments in this street. Last year there was also the introduction of the Controlled Vehicle Access and the Park and Ride. Preceding years saw the rehabilitation of the Upper Barakka and Lower Barakka gardens and Hastings Gardens.

While welcoming the impetus that is being given to capital projects in Valletta, the Foundation is concerned about accessibility to our capital. The vitality of any city is dependent on the ease with which people can access it by means of private and public transport. VAF is very concerned that the progressive reduction in parking availability in Valletta could have serious long term consequences on the city. The authorities are, in the foundation's view, underestimating the consequences.

VAF fully agrees with the pedestrianisation of Valletta's streets and piazzas. We risk, however, having lovely pedestrianised streets with very few pedestrians because people will find it too difficult and arduous to go to Valletta. The Park and Ride and the CVA provided partial solutions but more needs to be done to compensate for the continued loss of parking.

The proposed underground parking in a redeveloped Evans site offers one solution. This project, however, needs to be expedited because parking spaces in Piazza San Gorg and Freedom Square will be lost in the forthcoming months. Another alternative could be the development of the internal yard at the MCP car park to provide a few hundred more parking spaces outside the capital city. Increased willingness by commuters to pay for parking and the reduction of parking spaces in the city, are likely to make parking in MCP a more commercially-viable option for its private owners.

Another concern is the impact that construction work will have on residents and businesses in Valletta. Care will need to be taken to minimize disruption and inconveniences. In particular, during the City Gate project, a proper pedestrian connection between the bus terminus and Valletta streets must be provided. These and other issues were discussed in a meeting VAF officials had with Prime Minister.

Lawrence Gonzi a few weeks ago.

Valletta already provides an excellent experience to visitors but its full tourism potential has yet to be realised. The projects for Valletta will provide a substantially improved tourism product that will benefit the tourism industry in particular, and the Maltese economy in general. Valletta is our nation's capital and as such should reflect our national identity. Valletta will feature as the European Cultural Capital in 2018 and the government is right to devote attention and investment in the city.

The foundation urges the government to remain focused to ensure that these projects are completed as soon as is practical.

Mr Zahra is chairman of the Valletta Alive Foundation
