

Valletta will soon be 450

Alfred Zahra

Eight years from now, Malta commemorates the 450th anniversary of its capital city. It will be appropriate to celebrate this event in style but, in the meantime, there is so much that needs to be done.

The uniqueness of Valletta classifies it as a capital city like no other. The Knights of St John began building the city in 1566, soon after they had repelled the onslaught by the Ottoman Empire in the Great Siege. It is a fortified city located on a peninsula to protect both the Grand Harbour and Marsamxetto Harbour. Designated as a World Heritage Site by Unesco, Valletta has retained its historic ambience, notwithstanding it being a dynamic city as Malta's commercial, administrative and political capital.

The government has set itself ambitious targets for a number of sectors including tourism. Valletta is and should remain the flagship of Malta's tourism product offer. Tourists may have an exceptional visitor's experience because of the numerous buildings of architectural and historical interest, extensive fortifications, exceptional harbour views and a remarkable history. Valletta is not just a series of visitor's attractions which happen to be within walking distance from each other - Valletta's main attraction is in its totality.

A positive visitor's experience is also dependent on urban spaces which are more pedestrian-friendly. To this effect, trends towards the increased use of streets and piazzas for parking have been reversed in recent years. Pedestrian areas have been extended, hundreds of parking spaces removed from the city and the park and ride service has been introduced. These have brought about a transformation in some streets. Merchants Street, in particular, has taken on a new lease of life. Pedestrians can now appreciate the remarkable architecture that adorns this street whereas Merchants Street retailers are positively making a comeback.

In the past decade there were other important projects including the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity and the upgrading of the Upper and Lower Barakka and Hastings gardens. Notwithstanding these embellishment projects, there is so much more that needs to be accomplished.

In recent weeks, there were letters to the editor which depicted the state of Valletta as all doom and gloom, reflecting one's frustration of seeing so much needing to be done for the city. Suffice to mention Fort St Elmo, the opera house site and the upgrading that is needed in other areas. On the other hand, constant negativity depicts a distorted picture of a city which, in spite of its many flaws, has so much to offer.

With activities such as Notte Bianca, and the more modest BOV Streets Alive, organised by Valletta Alive Foundation (VAF), people are able to appreciate more the city's heritage, culture and artistic dimensions.

The Valletta Alive Foundation is pleased to note that the government is showing a renewed interest in the city with various upgrading and restoration projects initiated or in the pipeline. The Prime Minister himself recently noted the government's intention, during this legislature, to transform the city into the jewel in the crown.

How would you like Valletta to be in 2016? This is a question which a number of personalities are being asked to respond to in a seminar to be held on Saturday. Each will consider the question from a different perspective, be it residential, tourism, economic, retail, architecture, heritage, environment and accessibility. The speakers, all experts in their area, were selected to express their own objective view, independent of any organisation or government entity, with the aim of enhancing a constructive debate about Valletta, based on a holistic vision and with a spirit of innovation.

The seminar Valletta 450 will be held by the Valletta Alive Foundation at the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise on Saturday at 9 a.m.

Mr Zahra is president of the Valletta Alive Foundation.
