

Valletta's protectors are us

Ray Bondin

I have no right to respond on behalf of anyone but myself but I cannot let the very strong attacks made against the World Heritage Committee by two correspondents be left unanswered as I have been involved in all matters relating to world heritage over the past two decades. The opinion of Kenneth Zammit Tabona, usually one of the strongest voices in favour of heritage protection, and of Alex Torpiano, one of our foremost architects who wrote on behalf of the firm doing the Tigne project, are full of inaccuracies and misconceptions.

The Unesco World Heritage Committee (WHC) is not responsible for ensuring that Valletta, as an approved World Heritage site, retains its outstanding universal value. The responsibility is of the State Party, that is the Government of Malta. The WHC is there to ensure that all world heritage sites adhere to the clear rules pertaining to world heritage and to take action when necessary. Contrary to what the two correspondents imply, there is no underhand work here. The WHC acts after a series of checks and balances are taken into consideration and always with the full knowledge of the State Party.

The discussion about what has been happening in Valletta and around it has long been happening in the circles that I am involved in. People that travelled here or reports that have been sent to Paris over the past five years have caused great alarm. However a full investigation was only started after a prominent NGO and also individuals wrote to the World Heritage Centre in 2007. The procedure taken then is that the opinion of the consultants to the WHC, that is Icomos, is taken into consideration. Unesco will also inform the State Party. A State of Conservation (SOC) report is then drawn up after giving the State Party time to respond. It is only then that it is presented to the WHC and this could not be done before the 2009 meeting. The point is that the country should have avoided arriving at this very serious state of affairs not least by ensuring a presence of technical persons at the WHC. When I, as the person responsible for the Valletta Rehabilitation Project in early 2007, made a request to my minister that I attend the WHC to be able to respond there, my offer was rejected.

In answer to a clear insinuation against me by Prof. Torpiano I wish to publicly declare what he, as an ex-member of Icomos, should know, namely that the ethics of Icomos would not allow a local member to be involved in the writing of an evaluation or a monitoring report in his own country. I did not write any report. On the contrary the Maltese government has a copy of everything. Furthermore he knows, as he was also present during a seminar in 2007 when I did warn what would happen (besides various other occasions), that I have always spoken publicly about my views on the matter.

The facts are clear: Valletta is in breach of the WHC rules. There is no doubt about this. We do not have a declared buffer zone. We do not have a management plan (and this is not what is currently being prepared as I had told the minister way back in 2007). We do not have a high-rise policy. Buildings in Valletta are being subjected to major changes including extra levels and changes in their façade and interior.

There is a lot more that could be said. Mr Zammit Tabona should point a finger at Mepa's DCC and not at Unesco. Also the Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee has almost always been contrary to permits for new levels except in a few exceptions. In 2007 I resigned from VRP precisely because I did not agree with what was happening.

All these changes together with some other proposed ones, and together with the views towards Valletta, are seriously affecting Valletta's OUV (outstanding universal value).

No matter how photos are taken or presented. No matter that we have been paving our pedestrian areas (important but certainly not the most important), the changes taking place are not acceptable. As for Prof. Torpiano's attempt to shoot down WHC by stating that Renzo Piano's plans are recent, I wrote in answer to one of the comments on timesofmalta.com that the Piano proposals have nothing to do with the WHC decision but at the same time we are forewarned that all major projects in Valletta have to be submitted to the scrutiny of Unesco. Those are the rules.

Prof. Torpiano made a very serious allegation when he said I would be vindicated if Valletta lost its world heritage status or is put on the world heritage List in Danger. I have loyally served my country all these years. I do not mix up my local and international responsibilities. But yes I have for years been warning that this would happen and if Malta's image is tarnished it is certainly not due to any project I have executed.

As president of CIVVIH, the International Committee of Historic Towns and Villages, I would be ashamed to see that my own city's name is being tarnished. It is something we should cry about and not feel vindicated about. I have always fulfilled my duty and been loyal towards my country.

No one can point a finger at me. All those responsible and capable of making changes who chose to ignore my plea in the past should find another scapegoat.

Comments

mike turner (1 week, 3 days ago)
Prosit Mr. Bondin, a man of integrity

Joseph I. Camilleri (1 week, 3 days ago)

Would Mr K. Zammit Tabona please remember that calling the mirror names does not help: it only reflects the person in front of it. Unesco is not the problem, the World Heritage Centre is not the problem. The real problem is Malta's handling of its own cultural heritage! We Maltese are the only ones responsible for maintaining our heritage, no one else is. If we do not want to maintain it (and we are not really doing much maintenance), so be it - others will simply note that we do not want to bother! In any case, Mr Bondin need not worry about unfair attacks - the unfairness reflects only on the authors.

K. Mifsud (1 week, 3 days ago)

Mr. Bondin, this is a superbly written article that strikes a chord. I think I am not the only reader who has been able to understand and empathise with the frustrations you have experienced.

The pity is that the true professionals and experts - rather than being welcomed, listened to and respected - get pushed out of the Maltese system because their ideas are 'different' and 'inconvenient'.

Mario Tabone-Vassallo (1 week, 3 days ago)

100% ma Ray Bondin fuq din
