

When nature calls

Lisa Gwen Baldacchino



Relieve yourself with art... what the toilets in Republic Street will look like after they are given the five-star treatment.

Toilets are a source of inspiration. And before crude images start popping into your heads, picture this:

Random messages, phone numbers, doodles, declarations of love, odd bits of graffiti, jokes, 'wise' or witty sayings... I've seen, read and I'll also admit to having added personal contributions on the doors or walls of public toilets.

So how about having actual artworks adorning the walls of a public convenience instead of sporadic acts of vandalism? This is precisely what Chris Briffa Architects are proposing.

Having already kicked off the first in a series of five projects last March, with the launch of the Strait Street public convenience, this creative team of architects will be giving the same 'five-star' treatment to the next four venues – each having a separate theme and a unique design pertinent to their place and context within the city.

The public toilets to benefit from this regeneration project are those found in Melita Street, St Paul Street, Marsamxett Harbour and lastly those situated between Republic Street and Cart Street.

And for those raising their eyebrows, as many had done after the launch of the Strait Street toilets, combining public conveniences with art spaces is not an entirely novel idea, neither should it be the cause of controversy:

In 2008, a public toilet in Munich was transformed into an art museum. Built in 1894, the toilet had been disused for 16 years before this initiative took place.

The museum project coordinator Mathias Koehler explained the nature of his art-space-in-the-toilet concept as being “a great place for artistic expression because art is a form of relief in the same way that going to the toilet is”. The art space was only temporary – as the exhibitions in the Valletta toilet are and shall be – yet the 2008 exhibition made a bold statement.

So what’s in store for the Valletta toilets? From what I can grasp after a preview of the plans submitted... only the best. Considering Chris Briffa is hardly new at this, one and all should rest assured that Valletta’s lavatories and sanitary facilities are in the best of hands.

With designs featured in countless design/architecture magazines and in publications such as Restroom: Contemporary Design by Jennifer Hudson and Behind Bars: Design for Cafés and Bars by Frame, I reckon any tourist visiting the capital after the completion of the next four sets of toilets is going to want to make each their port of call. And not just for the sake of ‘powdering their nose’, changing a diaper or simply answering nature’s call.

Each of the public conveniences has an art space integrated within its design. The largest of the four public conveniences, on St Paul Street and surprisingly spread on four floors, will lend itself well to video projections/light/sound installations; the Marsamxett toilets will offer artists the opportunity of using the ceiling as a ‘blank canvas’; those closest to Republic Street demand works of a large dimension, such as blown-up photographs, collages, mural-type painting or billboard-style art; and lastly the Melita Street conveniences will have a long and narrow art space roofed over a stream of flowing water.

Each space will present a challenge to the artist undertaking the project. Yet the realisation and success of this series of projects depends on a considerable amount of funding. And before anyone gets their knickers in a twist, these state-of-the-art public conveniences will not be completely paid for through the hard-earned taxpayer’s cash.

Mayor Alexiei Dingli and the Valletta local council, who has engaged Chris Briffa Architects after submitting the winning bid for a call for tender, will be applying for financial assistance through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

These funds are aimed at those projects (falling under Priority Axis 2) Promoting Sustainable Tourism - ‘Investing in Competitiveness for a Better Quality of Life’.

The focus areas under this call are: Product Development and Niche Market Development and Branding: “The call is restricted to interventions undertaken by public entities with the aim to support the upgrading of the tourism product...

“In particular, interventions should aim to upgrade and develop the tourism product, including existing national cultural assets, in order to improve the tourism experience offered by the Maltese islands.”

The total indicative financial threshold for this call is €42 million.

This project is not just about the restoration and regeneration of a site or building made of stone. It is the restoration of people's perception. Briffa hopes the ERDF funds can be used to make Valletta's public conveniences an attraction, because of their functionality, cutting-edge design but also because of the innovative art space element.

He feels part of the funds should also be utilised for the professional curatorship and marketing of the spaces, including a programme of events that will help generate the necessary interest to make this project economically sustainable.

With the launch of bids for the city to be nominated European Capital of Culture ripe for the picking, Valletta will surely be a prime contender, if not as a distinct city then as part of a cluster.

Public conveniences are basic necessities the world over, yet features writer Alex James once wrote that even "the most basic and perfunctory of human instincts can become an excuse for creativity".

And if you ask me, there has never been a better time for Malta to 'get creative'.

More images on www.chrisbriffa.com.

Fabulous toilets around the world

- Toilet of Modern Art, Vienna, Austria
- Kawakawa public toilets in Northland, New Zealand
- Gents' restrooms, VIP area, Bangkok Airport
- Alexanderplatz public toilets, Berlin, Germany
- Victorian-era public toilets at Rothesay, Isle of Bute, Scotland

Comments

Joseph Carmel Chetcuti (1 day, 2 hours ago)

The latrine PN economic revolution for Malta. How trendy! You can even read a bit of Shakespeare as you wipe your bit! What culture! I am sure the tourists will flock in droves to our beautiful island ... if not to see St John's, then to see our latrines. No doubt being attended to by some coloured man or woman ... to make us Maltese feel so so superior. What about fixing the footpaths? And giving the streets a good sweep?

EDWIN DE MARCO (2 days, 14 hours ago)

@Lisa Gwen Baldacchino. Upon entering a men's toilet in Malta (I can't reveal the location as you wouldn't believe it!) I found this amusing couplet written on the remaining "wall-space." WHEN YOU ENTER THIS NOBLE HALL - USE THE PAPER NOT THE WALL!