

## Why are Valletta's piazzas dead?

by Michael Carabott

When one visits places in the Mediterranean such as Rome, Naples, Barcelona and even Tunis, one cannot fail to feel the pulse of these vibrant cities and none more so than when sitting in the sunshine and enjoying a coffee in one of the many squares.

Yet in Malta we seem to be doing the opposite. We are not talking about village squares here, we are talking about Valletta. As always, in Malta we go against the grain, and the greed of people that can take over squares led the government to ban them from camping at City Gate.

Why can't we ever get it right? We are not talking about the complete take over of squares by cafeterias either, such as used to be the case in front of the Bibliotheca in Piazza Regina – that is wrong and the government was right to enforce against encroachment.

As we have said, it is also wrong for the various novelty sellers to put up their tables right at the entrance of City Gate, and the government was again right to remove them. But how sadly empty the squares are, used only as a giant latrine for horses and pigeons or for the fat cats to park their cars opposite Parliament.

Where is all this coming from? I'll be honest, I have just returned from a fantastic holiday in Rome with my partner and apart from the usual sights and activities, the nicest parts of the day were always settling down for an espresso or a beer at one of the many squares. Piazza Navona, Campo dei Fiori, Piazza del Popolo... they are all absolutely enchanting. "Why?" One may ask... despite their rag-tag organised disorganization, the Italians know how to do one thing well and that is preserving the Italian piazza way of life.

Let us take Piazza Navona with its beautiful fountains. The square is brimming with brush artists, performing artists, comedians and many other forms of live entertainment and it is lined by cafeterias that take up a reasonable part of the perimeter of the square without over encroaching. You can sit outside in winter warmed by a gas heater, and the pure and simple enjoyment of sipping coffee and watching the world go by is second to none.

Small cafés and restaurants line the perimeter of Campo dei Fiori (similar to other city squares in Europe) and in the square itself there are flower stalls, vegetable stalls, traditional eatery stalls, violinists and all sorts. It might not be everyone's cup of tea, but it's certainly better than commercial tents selling mobile phones, rank upon rank of Mercedes and BMWs or masses of tables and chairs to cater for elite cafeterias and their patrons. Squares were made to give life to a city. That is their fundamental purpose; the Tunisian's do the same, as do the Catalonians, the Germans, hell... even the Brits, yet we do the opposite... we stifle them.

And this brings me to another point. The world renowned architect Renzo Piano, who has been commissioned to oversee the regeneration of Valletta's City Gate has already said that while he must, in all probability, go modern he intends to make full use of Freedom Square. This space is currently and hideously used for parking, Carnival dances or to allow mobile companies to set up shop there (and to be quite honest I really can't see the difference between these kiosks and the guys selling beads and candles who were forcibly moved). If Signor Piano intends to make the piazza a focal point in the entrance, I'm going to offer my two cents worth. Instead of having the façade of the new Parliament, exhibition centre, Opera House or whatever it will be, look out onto Republic Street, it should face Valletta's main gate and hence Freedom Square. I am no expert, but at least this suggestion should be taken on board. Let us use those squares and give them back to the people because at present they are an absolute waste.

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