



NEWSLETTER

VALLETTA ALIVE FOUNDATION

December 2008 – Issue No 11

1 VAF welcomes Government decision on Opera House Site and City Gate

Lately the Prime Minister Dr. Gonzi announced that government has appointed Renzo Piano as architect to the redevelopment of the opera house site and city gate. The PM also announced it is government's intention to complete the project within four years; VAF welcomed the decision and issued the following press release on 2nd December 2008.

City Gate and Old Opera House Project

The Valletta Alive Foundation welcomes government's decision to embark on the City Gate and the old opera house project. VAF agrees that the opera house site is to house the new Parliament. Moreover, the various activities organised throughout the year in Freedom square indicate a strong demand for popular cultural and educational activities in this strategic location of Valletta. Hence, part of the volume of the opera house site especially at street level should be used as multi-purpose cultural space.

VAF also agrees that the Grandmaster's palace should be for tourism and culture related uses, such as museums.

VAF asks government to consider including a multistorey car park under a pedestrianised Freedom Square. Valletta's economic, social and cultural role could be undermined unless good access is maintained, including parking provision. Provision of underground parking would also allow for reduction of parking and traffic within Valletta streets.

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The Foundation appeals to civil society to debate the projects in a constructive manner. Under no circumstance should decisions and actions be unduly delayed with endless debating of what should or should not be done. Whatever decision is taken, there will always be those who will disagree with it. In a democracy, the elected representatives should listen and take note of the opinions expressed but then a final decision has to be taken in the least possible time in the best interest of the Maltese society. This project needs to go ahead urgently after being shelved for so much time.

2 The Need for Lobbying

The Foundation has actively lobbied government on various issues relating to Valletta. Lobbying takes place in a number of manners including formal meetings with Minister and government officials, informal discussions with authorities during social occasions, articles in the printed media and the organization of seminars such as the Valletta 450 seminar held in October. Apart from influencing the decision maker, lobbying should also aim at influencing public opinion.

VAF prefers to lobby with as little fanfare as possible even if this may give the impression that the Foundation is doing little.

Since its inception almost four years ago, VAF has repeatedly made reference in meetings and in opinion pieces in the printed media for the need for a decision on the opera house site. For example, in an interview in the Valletta magazine some months ago, Mr. Alfred Zahra, Chairman of the Valletta Alive Foundation had stated as follows: ***“Another site whose redevelopment is overdue is the opera house site. Redevelopment of the site as our national parliament, as was proposed by government some time back, would have several important benefits. Apart from providing much better facilities for our parliamentarians, it would release the Grandmasters Palace for tourism use. The Palace has the potential to become one of the most visited sites in Malta.”*** This is almost precisely what government announced recently for the Opera house site.

Similarly, at the end of 2007, the Foundation wrote to the Prime Minister urging government to safeguard pedestrian spaces by appropriate decisions and effective enforcement by the responsible agencies.

Fort St. Elmo became a topic for discussion in the media following comments made Hon. Mario Demarco and by other Speakers in the seminar Valletta 450 organised by VAF. The increased coverage was accompanied by calls to government to decide on a long term permanent solution to Fort St. Elmo.

It is difficult to say what the effect of lobbying is on eventual decisions and actions by government. VAF believes that as a minimum, it helps the decision maker develop

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ideas and proposals and hopeful arrive at decisions which are in the best interest of Valletta and of our country.

3 Successful seminar on Valletta

How would we like Valletta to be in 2016 on its 450 anniversary? This is the question which was put to a number of Speakers in a seminar organized by VAF on the 25th October 2008. VAF selected speakers who are not from any particular agency or organisation so that, as far as possible, they will give their own independent view. Each Speaker answered the question from his/her perspective based on his/her knowledge and experience. All the Speakers rose to the challenge and came up with very interesting and thought-provoking presentations which the numerous audience appreciated.

Valletta has many different aspects. History and architecture are the first that come to mind but there are other aspects which are just as important. There is a resident community as well as a commercial aspect. There are also tourism and transport issues. It is difficult to speak about one aspect putting it in the context of the wider picture. The seminar provided a good overview on these various aspects of the City.

The *Valletta 450* papers can be seen on www.vallettaalivefoundation.org

Thanks to all the Speakers for their contribution and the VAF officials who coordinated and organised the event. A special word of thanks to the sponsors namey **Farsons, Valletta Local Council, Middle Sea Insurance and Malta Maritime Authority.**

4 Saving the Fort

During the Valletta 450 the need to rehabilitate Fort St. Elmo was noted by several speakers, most notably by Dr. Demarco in his closing address. Since then, there were various contributions in the newspapers about the Fort. It also transpired that government was taking the initiative to clean up the place, remove the squatters and provide 24 hour security.

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In the debate the Foundation gave its own contribution in an opinion piece feature in the Times last month, VAF reiterated its view that the solution most appropriate for the fort and the one most likely to be financially viable is a complex of museums and visitor attractions with limited associated commercial activity. The model which Fort St. Elmo could emulate is Edinburgh Castle in Scotland. The Castle offers as many as sixteen different sites, attractions and museums for visitors. With one single entrance fee of £12.00, visitors can see all of these attractions, not to mention the views of the City from the ramparts. Over one million people (paid admissions) visited Edinburgh Castle last year.

The full text of the opinion piece is reproduced as an addendum to this newsletter.

An initiative has been taken by Mr. Jimmy Magro to set up a Fort St. Elmo Foundation. A meeting was organised for those interested. VAF supports the initiative in so far as it keeps the need of finding a long term solution for the Fort high up in the country's agenda.

5 An Appeal for New Members

What has been achieved by the Foundation is all done on a voluntary basis. Even what seem to be the simplest of initiatives require time and effort which is put in mostly by volunteers. The Foundation's main focus since its inception was lobbying and the organisation of BOV Streets Alive during the summer. There is however so much more that needs to be done.

The Foundation would like to work more closely with the Valletta Local Council, the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee and Valletta community groups on initiatives which will benefit Valletta. There is also scope for collaborative efforts with other NGOs such as Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna and Din l-Art Helwa.

The Foundation would like to reach out more to Valletta residents. Over the past year it has renewed its effort to involve more residents in the Board of Governors but much more could be done.

The Foundation needs new people with initiative to take part and contribute to the work carried out by VAF.

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6 Removal of Illegal Encroachment commended

The Valletta Alive Foundation welcomes the enforcement action taken by Government's Property Division to remove illegal encroachments at City Gate which took place in October. For too long, a laissez-faire attitude has allowed City-Gate's appearance to become tacky and cheap, an image which is certainly not appropriate for the entrance of Malta's most important City. The illegal take-up of public space by chairs, tables and other paraphernalia deprives people of space as they walk through or make use of the bus terminus.

VAF also notes that there are other streets in Valletta which have benefited from the removal of illegal encroachments. Enforcement on illegal encroachment together with the extension of pedestrianisation has brought about, and will continue to bring about, much needed improvement in Valletta's urban spaces. VAF urges government to maintain the initiative and ensure that Valletta's urban spaces are appropriately safeguarded for pedestrians.

Government's Property Division also cleared Fort St. Elmo from illegal squatters.

7 Renewed Interest in Valletta for Evening Leisure

The Foundation contributed its fair share to the revitalisation of Valletta in the evenings by organising BOV Streets Alive. This was organised in August for the third year running.

On the 4th October 2008, Notte Bianca was held in Valletta. These events do not seem to make much news any more.

The success of both events is evidence of the general public's interest in the Capital and willingness to discover Valletta and its peculiarities. Such initiatives, sponsored by Government or local entities, whether public or private, are initiatives that the Foundation welcomes and supports, since they strive and aim to fulfill the aspirations of the Foundation, that is, the regeneration and rediscovery of Valetta as a cultural, historical and recreational capital of Europe.

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8 Dinner - New Year

This year's Christmas and New Year's dinner for members and supporters is being held on the 9th of January 2009 at "De Robertis Restaurant" Price for dinner is €25. For reservations please call Maria Dela on 21472255 during office hours.

9 AGM February 2009

The Foundation's Annual General Meeting will be held on Thursday the 26th of February 2009.

***Merry Christmas and A Happy
New Year to You All***

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ADDENDUM

Opinion piece featured in the Times.

Saving the Fort

Fort St. Elmo has been the subject of several features in the Times. The Valletta Alive Foundation (VAF) has been lobbying government on much needed projects in Valletta since its inception in 2005. In a memorandum submitted by the Foundation to Government in April 2006, it had suggested the following for Fort St. Elmo.

“The Foundation suggests that Fort St. Elmo becomes a complex of museums combined with catering outlets, specialized retail, a small hotel, a venue for open air concerts and limited leisure activities. An appropriate mix of uses will transform the Fort into a major pole of attraction and a hub of activity. The Foundation is aware that the main difficulty for the fort is finding long term viable uses. It is felt that a mix of cultural and leisure uses as proposed should resolve this problem. Museums which could be considered for the fort are Museum of Fortifications, Museum of the Mediterranean and an extension of the current War Museum. There is no better site for a Museum of Fortifications than the Fort St. Elmo which is historically the most important fort and the one with the most important strategic location. The Museum of the Mediterranean could present Mediterranean history and warfare through the ages from Phoenicians to the present day. It could place Malta in the forefront on matters related to the Mediterranean. The War Museum should be allowed to extend into other parts of the Fort and made more interactive. Government should also seek the relocation of some of the small crafts from Ta’ Qali to a regenerated Fort St. Elmo, where they are more likely to attract clientele from visitors to the museums and the various other activities.”

The memorandum was presented to the Prime Minister. The feedback received at the time was that Government’s felt that a complex of museums might not be the best option. It appeared that there were concerns on the financial viability.

In its reaction to the Grand Harbour Vision published by Government in September 2007, VAF had reiterated its suggestion for Fort. St. Elmo and argued that *“Whilst commending Government’s vision for the Grand Harbour, VAF is concerned that some of the projects being proposed could divert attention away from what the real priorities are, at least as far as cultural heritage and tourism are concerned. The rehabilitation and appropriate reuse of Fort St. Elmo is long overdue.”*

When commenting on the Vision for St. Elmo and Marsamxett port issued by government in December 2007, the Foundation argued that the proposal for Upper St. Elmo for *“public manifestations of a cultural and artistic nature”* does not really capitalize on the immense potential that is offered by the location and the heritage value of the site. VAF re-iterated its proposal made in April 2006 and argued that *“A good mix of*

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cultural and leisure uses in St. Elmo, together with a hotel on the Evans site, should aim to make it a hub of leisure and cultural activity so as to act as a catalyst for the regeneration of lower Valletta.”

In the seminar Valletta 450, organised by the Foundation a few weeks ago, Hon. Mario Demarco argued that the rehabilitation of Fort St. Elmo needs to be given priority. VAF fully agrees with Dr. Demarco's assertion in a recent feature in the Times that action to save Fort St. Elmo is needed now.

The model which Fort St. Elmo could emulate is Edinburgh Castle in Scotland. The Castle offers as many as sixteen different sites, attractions and museums for visitors. With one single entrance fee of £12.00, visitors can see all of these attractions, not to mention the views of the City from the ramparts. Over one million people (paid admissions) visited Edinburgh Castle last year. A similar approach for Fort St. Elmo could provide for a solution which is financially viable and long term, even if initial capital outlays from government or EU source would be required to get the project up and running.

The Foundation commends Government's vision of having Malta and Gozo as a tourism destination of excellence. Even if Malta and Gozo boasts hundreds of sites well worth visiting, Valletta can and should take pride of place in Malta's drive to become a destination of excellence. Valletta is attractive not only because it is a historic fortified city with views over two harbours but also because of many interesting streets and piazzas and the numerous attractions to visit.

As far as tourism attractiveness is concerned, Valletta is like a jigsaw puzzle; a jigsaw which is almost complete except for a few missing pieces. The two most important jigsaw pieces which are still missing are the rehabilitation of Fort St. Elmo and the redevelopment of the opera house site.

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