



# NEWSLETTER

## VALLETTA ALIVE FOUNDATION

[www.vallettaalivefoundation.org](http://www.vallettaalivefoundation.org)

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### 1. Saturday Late Shopping in Valletta

The Foundation has taken an initiative aimed at promoting Late Shopping in Valletta. On four consecutive Saturdays ( 28<sup>th</sup> November, 5<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> December), there will be Late Shopping in Valletta

The confidence in Valletta's potential as a main commercial hub is patently evident. In the last few years we have seen a considerable number of well known, branded as well as upmarket national and international retailers, opening their shops in the main streets of the city. Although it would appear that prestigious brands still consider Valletta as a highly desirable location for their outlets, emerging commercial centres around the islands may gradually reduce the attraction for shoppers.

Saturday Late Shopping will generate new interest in the City whilst promoting leisure shopping. Participating shops will commit themselves to open on Saturday evenings until 9.00 p.m. They will also be asked for a small contribution towards adverts in the printed media.

The adverts will emphasise how easy it is to get to Valletta on Saturday evenings by public and private transport.

This initiative received strong backing with a substantial number of shops showing their intention to participate. A good number of catering establishments have also indicated their willingness to contribute for the adverts.

People coming to the City in the run-up to Christmas will avail themselves to the full compliment of shopping and entertainment that Valletta can offer. **So pencil it in your diary. As from 28th November, shop and dine in Valletta on Saturdays in the evening.**

### 2. Pjazza San Gorg

A project that follows fast the pedestrianisation of Valletta's central zone is finally on the verge of being launched. Early controversies ranging from the style of street furniture and lighting installations, to alternative use of this space have now been put behind as this area gradually reverts back from an unofficial car park into a public piazza, a place where people can meet and talk. The project is now nearing completion.

The pedestrianised piazza will be inaugurated with a series of activities organised by MRRA from Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> to Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> November. From Monday to Thursday the activities will be in the evening whereas on Friday, Saturday and Sunday (27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>), the activities will be all day long.

The piazza is being inaugurated a few short weeks before Christmas and a time when we will see Valletta kick start its festive and commercial activity.

VAF congratulates the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs on this project which puts back the focus on the city core, whilst giving the Grandmasters Palace a rightful setting, befitting one of the finest examples of baroque architecture on these islands.

### **3. Valletta City Gate Project**

The Foundation has taken a clear stand in favour of the Piano project. VAF is concerned that any wavering or excessive delay in the implementation will mean that the project will not happen and that Malta will spend several more decades with a bombed out opera house at its entrance. An article by VAF Secretary Perit John Ebejer was featured in the Independent on Sunday on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2009. This is reproduced in the addendum of this Newsletter.

The Foundation has also given its feedback to government on aspects of the project which raise concern particularly the discontinuance of the road over the current gateway and the loss of further parking in Valletta. This feedback was given in meetings with the authorities and through several VAF opinion pieces in the printed media.

### **4. Valletta Accessibility and Parking Spaces**

If Valletta is to remain a city of 'people' and not just of 'buildings and heritage', access will need to remain on the forefront of town and traffic planning proposed by central government.

Accessibility to Valletta was the main topic of discussion in a meeting between the Hon. Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi and VAF officials (9 March 2009). The Foundation expressed its concern and argued that the social, cultural, commercial and economic life of any city is dependent on access.

Parking in St. George's Square, opera house site, Freedom Square, the ditch and other Valletta locations were lost or will be lost in the coming years. In two or three years time we will come to realise that the cumulative effect of this will be substantial.

Whilst agreeing with the pedestrianisation of Valletta streets and piazzas, the Foundation noted that appropriate alternatives need to be found. The Park and Ride, the Controlled Vehicle Access and the electric taxis provide partial solutions but more needs to be done to compensate for the continued loss of parking.

The Foundation appreciates that providing parking within Valletta itself is problematic but alternatives outside Valletta need to be identified. The reform in public transport could result in improved access to Valletta but this is dependent on many factors.

This was emphasised in an article by VAF Chairman, Alfred Zahra which appeared in the Independent on Sunday (17May 2009). Whilst acknowledging the many projects and initiatives in favour of Valletta, the article urges government to consider more carefully issues relating to accessibility and parking.

More recently, VAF was invited to a meeting with MITC officials on the subject. VAF reiterated its position and proposed a surface car park in St. James Ditch. This would entail the removal of the structure formerly used for lotteries. With the reform in public transport it is likely that the area will no longer be required for the parking of public transport vehicles. The location is ideal because it can take a good number of cars and is fairly close to Valletta centre.

VAF has supported an initiative by some Valletta retailers related to parking in Valletta namely the Valletta Business Community Joint Committee. The Joint Committee put forward a number of proposals to the Ministry of Information, Transport and Communications. These include the extension of park and ride area; adjustment to the current CVA to encourage increased turnover of parking space; increase of CVA daily charges; time limitation of CVA to 15:00 hours and the installation of vertical lifts from the two harbour areas.

VAF officers were recently invited to a presentation made by Mr. Angelo Xuereb on a proposal for a major new car park under Independence arena and a redesign of the bus terminus area and transportation network connecting Valletta centre to peripheral car parks and to the harbours.

## **5. Notte Bianca**

The return to autumn evenings was once again hailed in with this year's 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Notte Bianca which took place on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October.

This annual event has become synonymous with street arts, music and culture. The activity footprint this year was extended even further covering the peninsula from City Gate to St. Elmo on one side and from Gnien Mattia Preti to the Valletta Water Front on the other.

Performances were of a high calibre and it was delightful to note a return to the former glory of Republic Square or Piazza Regina as it was better known, where the crowds were entertained to live bands reminiscent of the 60's and 70's.

It is estimated that well over 50,000 people attended this event. An encouraging number of commercial outlets opened their shops late into the night giving visitors a chance to view their merchandise and even carry out some shopping. An eclectic mix of food and beverages were provided both in the established restaurants, as well as through the multitude of street vendors that lined Merchants and Republic Street. Streets were thronged with visitors of all ages

and nationality trying to catch up with as many of the ongoing activities as was humanly possible, alas an unsuccessful attempt in most cases, but a guarantee for attendee return in the next year.

The organisation ran smoothly throughout. The scheduled bus service operated well into the early hours of the morning whilst the cleaning services department ensured that the streets were made fit to welcome new guests to the city in the morning. Well done to the Ministry of Culture, Malta Council for Culture and the Arts and all those who were involved in making Notte Bianca yet again an unforgettable event.

We look forward to the next Notte Bianca, which, according to our informed sources, will be extending even further, possibly reaching beyond land and into the majestic Grand Harbour.

## **6. KV1566**

People who have some connection with Valletta make it a point to mention it in their writings or to their peers. This gave VAF the idea to establish a sort of a “Club” membership of which will provide tangible recognition of a person’s affiliation to Valletta . Klabb Valletta 1566 membership will be a recognition of a person’s connection to the City by reason of birth, residency, public office, philanthropic, sport or honorary service in areas which include economic, social, environmental, cultural, political or cultural contribution to Valletta.

There will NOT be any annual membership fee. Instead a one time small donation will be requested to cover expenses.

Klabb Valletta 1566 aims to inspire a sense of pride that one associates with people who either reside or whose roots emerged from the city.

Members of this club will be presented with a unique KV1566 badge as well as a certificate endorsed by the Valletta Local Council. More details will be made known in the coming months.

## **7. VAF Mid Summer Dinner**

Members and friends of the Valletta Alive Foundation had the opportunity to treat their senses to the splendour of the sights and sounds of the Grand Harbour during the annual mid-summer dinner which took place on the first week of August at the saluting battery of the Upper Barrakka Gardens.

A total of 143 people attended this year’s event, which as in previous years, coincided with the Delicata Wine Festival, providing the venue with live background music entertainment.

Sincere thanks goes to Messrs Delicata for their generous offering of some of their excellent wine which was provided free to our dinners during dinner.

## 8. New Year's Dinner Party

Arrangements have been finalized for the New Year's Dinner Party to be held on Friday, 22 January 2010. The venue will be Spezzo Restaurant in Archbishop Street opposite the newly refurbished and soon to be inaugurated Piazza San Gorg. Space is limited so early booking is recommended. Write to [pisben@gmail.com](mailto:pisben@gmail.com).

## 9. Valletta's World Heritage Status is NOT at risk

On 11<sup>th</sup> August 2009, a Times report entitled *"Concerns on heritage status of Valletta"* claimed that *"Concerns about the capital's privileged status were raised in the last meeting of Unesco's World Heritage Committee in Seville"*.

This was a misrepresentation of the truth because in its decision, there is no suggestion that the World Heritage Committee is considering the removal of Valletta's WH status. On 17<sup>th</sup> August, a letter to the Times from Prof Alex Torpiano demonstrating that the Times report of the 11<sup>th</sup> August is misleading and that *"At no stage of the deliberations was there any mention of Valletta losing its world heritage status."*

On 26<sup>th</sup> August, an opinion piece in the Times from Perit John Ebejer, VAF Secretary further demonstrated that the claim that Valletta's WH status is at risk is incorrect. Bath (a World Heritage city like Valletta) is used as an example to demonstrate that *"new development does not necessarily mean that the World Heritage status is in danger, even if the development is substantial. What matters is the impact of the development on the outstanding universal value and integrity of the city."*

Perit Ebejer affirms that: *"There is no indication in the WHC's decision of any intention to remove Valletta's World Heritage status nor does it intend to initiate the process leading to such removal. The impact of developments has to be considered on Valletta in its totality rather than focusing on a particular street or building. The impact of a few additions on rooftops and the development of apartments on the other side of Marsamxett harbour has little or no effect on Valletta in its totality and, therefore, could not remotely be considered to threaten Valletta's World Heritage status."*

It is indeed a sad situation that information which is untrue is given front page prominence and sensationalised. Excessive negativity about Valletta is harmful, especially when it is based on false information.

## **Addendum**

### **What if .....?**

#### **Speculating the outcome of The Valletta City Gate project**

##### **John Ebejer**

What if Government decides not to continue with its current plans for City Gate and go for a different project instead? A very unlikely scenario but it is worth speculating what the outcome will be.

Government would probably appoint a consultative group composed of various NGOs and individuals. The group is determined to come up with the best possible proposal in the shortest time possible – a proposed development with which everyone would agree. Meetings are held virtually every other day. In no time, the consultative group splits into two distinct camps; there are those who are adamant that both the opera house site and city gate will be built as they were before being demolished. A second camp wants a national theatre at all cost. They want a 2000 seat theatre with all the latest theatre technology.

The “bring-back-Barry” camp points out that the MCC theatre remains unused during the summer and underutilised for the rest of the year. What’s the point of building a 2000 seat theatre if for many weekends throughout the year it will stay empty? If and when the theatre is used, there will be traffic mayhem in the streets within and leading to Valletta because of parking and increased traffic flows. They argue that a 2000 national theatre with all the theatre equipment and ancillary spaces would take up all both the opera house site and Freedom Square leaving no open space. St. James Cavalier would no longer be visible from Republic street.

The “national theatre” camp points out that culturally Malta needs to move forward and not backwards.

Each side argues that for the sake of compromise, the other side should give in. Soon the argument becomes very acrimonious and spills over into the media. As is typical of all Maltese controversies, the letters to the editor become progressively more personal and spiteful.

Efforts to retain Renzo Piano as the project architect (if and when the consultation group decides what it wants ) prove fruitless. “Thank you but no thank you” are his words. “Malta never again” are his thoughts.

Other groups put their views forward. The business community in Valletta insists that an underground car park should be built under Freedom square. If Government is willing to appease anyone who expresses an opinion, why shouldn’t it appease the business community on something which effects their livelihood? Others argue that the opera house remains should be left as is and the area changed into a public garden. More and more ideas are put forward, each idea more innovative and bold than the previous one.

It soon becomes evident that the consultative group was getting nowhere and that there is no way it could come up with a common position.

Those not directly involved in the debate become increasingly embarrassed by the charade. For the under-thirties, the embarrassment turns into disgust. Here we are, seven decades after the opera house is hit by a bomb and we are still debating what

to do with the site. They cannot understand why people would want to rebuild what there was before. So what if it was a nice building. Are we not able to design and build nice buildings today?

In a mock commemoration of the anniversary of the bombing of the opera house, a group of young people place a wreath on the opera house steps. The ruins of the opera house remain intact as a monument to our incompetence.

One could argue that all this is speculation and guesswork. Yes and no. Over the years, we have seen numerous controversies being played out. I can think of several past instances where nothing gets done because of Government's indecision or its unwillingness to go against the wishes of a section of public opinion.

The view that Government should change course at this stage is, in my opinion, a very short-sighted one. Any change in Government's decision means that we will remain with a bombed site for many decades more.

On the other hand, the alternative scenario is that Government will pursue the project to completion (as it appears determined to do.) It is useful here to speculate what the eventual benefits of the project will be say five or ten years after completion.

After completion, the Piano project gets substantial coverage in international media, not only in the specialised architectural journals but also in cultural magazines and mainstream newspapers. The coverage enhances the image of Malta and of Valletta and makes them known to a much wider section of the European public.

Because of the enhanced image more people visit Malta, not specifically for the Piano project, but to see it as part of an overall tourism product (including Valletta, other historic fortified towns, prehistoric temples and much much more). Malta is no longer perceived as the sun and sea destination but a destination where visitors can truly indulge in culture.

Following the relocation of Parliament to the Piano project, the Grandmaster's Palace becomes a hub of cultural and tourism activity with numerous museums including a refurbished armoury on the upper floor. A new indoor lighting system brings out the full splendour of the building's halls and corridors. The Palace becomes a major tourist attraction on par with St. Johns cathedral.

The open air theatre of the Piano project provides ample opportunity for local and international artists to experiment. The use of the latest systems of modern communication, light projection and electro-acoustic sound systems together with the flexibility of the wall panels provides a performing space like no other in the Mediterranean or elsewhere. The theatre attracts international companies to perform as part of the annual Malta Arts Festival. Mediterranean summer evenings provide the perfect ambience for cultural open air performances. The quality of the productions is such that the cultural and tourism authorities are able to market the Arts Festival overseas and attract tourists specifically for the festival.

The floor of the theatre can be made flat so that when the theatre is unused, the place works as an open piazza. The subdued use of the multimedia facilities with projections on the wall panels and matching background music will make this urban space a place to visit. The open air theatre could also be the venue for educational and cultural activities such as fairs, public debates, Christmas crib etc. The flexibility of use allows for all year round use of the site.

The retention of the stonework makes the site a reminder of Malta's central role in the Second World War.

Similar to some European parliaments, the Maltese Parliament uses the new premises to interact more with the Maltese public. Parliament's ancillary spaces become the venue for meetings, seminars, public consultations and exhibitions. Better facilities for parliamentarians make it easier for Joe Public to meet his elected representative .

Valletta becomes a model to emulate as far as regeneration of historic cores is concerned. The Piano project, Grandmaster's palace as a visitor attraction, the substantially improved environment for pedestrians and the enhanced image of Valletta generate new interest in Valletta with more and more people willing to invest in the refurbishment of property to residential use. (There may be a downside with increased values of properties and gentrification).

Will these many benefits really become a reality? I think yes. Suffice to see some success stories in various European cities. Many medium sized cities seek to develop an iconic building to attract attention at a regional, national or even European level. Having Renzo Piano as the architect is central to the eventual success of the project not only because of the design but also because of the international attention which this will attract.

In the first part of this opinion piece I argued that changing the plans for the opera house/ City Gate at this stage will effectively mean that we will remain with a bombed site for many more decades. On the other hand, if Government remains focused and decisive, we will all be able to reap the benefits of this important investment.

*Mr Ebejer, an urban planner and architect, is the secretary of the Valletta Alive Foundation.*