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Revitalizing urban life and cultural heritage in Paola and Valletta

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Paola and Valletta, Malta



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Revitalizing urban life and cultural heritage in Paola and Valletta

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Paola and Valletta in Malta are regenerating cultural and heritage sites through decentralized and democratized urban planning to improve social, cultural and economic aspects of city life.

The harbourside City of Valletta and the Paola Township are true examples of the urbanization of the Maltese Islands. With a land size of just 316km² and a population of 417,000, Malta is one of the smallest but most densely populated countries in the European Union.

Over the past three years, the local councils of Valletta and Paola have developed action plans centred on the restoration and adaptive re-use of historical and cultural assets in order to improve their residents' quality of life.

These plans are co-funded by URBACT, a European exchange and learning program that promotes sustainable urban development. URBACT enables cities to work together to develop solutions to major urban challenges and assists cities as they develop practical solutions to the economic, social and environmental aspects of these challenges. Valletta and Paola have developed locally driven action plans, which is an innovative approach in the context of Malta's centralized urban planning regime.

A capital of culture

In October 2011, Valletta became a candidate European Capital of Culture (EoC) for 2018 and submitted a bid that included all of Malta. The EoC, an initiative established in 1985, is a designation awarded by the European Union that recognizes the cultural significance of a particular city. Being designated as an EoC is also a valuable opportunity for a city to incentivize urban regeneration, increase its international profile, boost tourism and enhance cultural vitality. Cities nominated as European Capitals of Culture provide living proof of the richness and diversity of European cultures. The initiative has grown to become one of the most prestigious and high-profile cultural events in Europe, with more than 40 cities – from Stockholm to Genoa, Athens to Glasgow and Kraków to Porto – having been designated European Capitals of Culture since the initiative's inception.

Valletta is also a World Heritage City and was recognized by UNESCO in 1980 as a city of outstanding universal

value that has preserved nearly all of its original historical urban features. Valletta is renowned for its imposing fortifications, which date back to the Great Siege of 1565, and the city represents the dominance of European powers in the Mediterranean. Even though Valletta was blitzed during the second siege in World War II, it is now a thriving metropolis that serves as an administrative hub, tourist venue and cultural centre. Still, urban development in Valletta during the post-colonial era has left areas in the city indelibly marked by the shift from an imperialist economy to a locally driven micro-economy.

This transformation is also reflected in the Paola Township, a predominantly industrial region located on the opposite side of Malta's Grand Harbour. The departure of the Mediterranean Fleet and the eventual closure of the town's shipbuilding docks significantly impacted Paola.

Paola is currently working toward regenerating the pillars of its economy in order to improve quality of life for its citizens and enhance its urban environment. The Paola Township is home to a number of cultural assets that have been designated as World Heritage sites, including Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, the Kordin III Temples and the Corradino Lines.

Revitalizing landscapes and tourism

Flagship projects have been developed in Valletta through the five-year (2010–15) Heritage as an Opportunity (HERO) Action Plan. These projects target vital areas in the Marsamxett region through a cultural heritage integrated management plan. The Action Plan for Valletta was based on a character appraisal and considered a new approach to the development of urban planning policies within the council's Valletta Local Plan.

One of these projects is referred to as CULTS (Cultural Urban Landscapes for Sustainable Tourism) and has been partly funded by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The ERDF aims to strengthen economic and social cohesion in the

EU by correcting imbalances between its regions.

The CULTS project involves the revitalization of a dilapidated and abandoned area called the Peacock Gardens into a recreational park, tourist hub and World Heritage City Interpretation Centre. A number of archaeological discoveries have been made in the Peacock Gardens, including 10 casemates, a World War II battery and a fortification wall. CULTS aims to showcase Valletta's cultural heritage and help tourists to discover the city's history through an interpretation centre. The park will also serve as a gateway to the city from the western side of the Harbour and the Marsamxett ferry landing.

Planning through urban regeneration

Paola's Sustainable Planning through Urban Regeneration projects have been developed as an integrated program through the Repair Action Plan over a five-year period (2010–15). Also funded through URBACT, this Action Plan adheres to four key pillars that aim to stimulate development, namely, conservation, tourism and recreation, energy and waste and local jobs for local people. By following these principles, tangible projects have been designed for areas situated upon the principal north–south axis of the town. Based on a green corridor and heritage route, projects target the restoration and adaptive re-use of heritage assets and the regeneration of

gardens and public spaces. The corridor connects two of the most significant critical heritage systems in Paola, the Corradino Fortification Lines (Tentative World Heritage Site listed) and the Hal-Saflieni Hypogeum (World Heritage Site).

The first phase of restoration for the Corradino Prison Museum, an integral component of the fortification lines, was completed in October 2013. The abandoned prison is managed by the Hibernians Sports Association (HSA) under a cultural lease and has been conserved as one of the few surviving Victorian buildings from the colonial era. The HSA, a private, non-governmental organization, took on this project to diversify the use of the complex to include cultural, tourism and educational activities in addition to sports. As it was a complex restoration project requiring significant capital investment, the European Union offered additional funding to complete the site's restoration.

The prison has now been restored and the east and central wings have been adapted to facilitate the operation of a museum. The project also focused on the external and internal restoration of the prison's wings, chapel, central officers' quarters, gatehouse and the south wing. A crucial phase in completing the south wing was restoring a double roof with a Victorian ventilation system, which was conserved in order to guarantee energy efficiency and maintain micro-climatic conditions.



Paola's grid-iron plan is marked by the Paola Parish Church, a significant landmark of the East Harbour skyline. The square is one of the most important commercial centres in the region and is being earmarked for revamping to interconnect critical World Heritage sites and encourage commerce and tourism. Image: Heritage Enterprise 2011.

The south wing's restoration will enhance the site's master plan. This plan is based on a triple-helix system aimed at enhancing use of the facility as a sports complex, developing a hostel and boosting niche tourism in Paola. Overall, this project is intended to increase tourism in Paola, further support the city's commercial centre and reduce unemployment in the area.

Heritage through participation

These action plans were developed with the support of the Paola and Valletta Local Councils with the assistance of an Urban Local Support Group (ULSG).

Each URBACT partner, and the Valletta and Paola local councils, was required to set up this support group of local stakeholders. This was an important step in creating awareness of local heritage conservation, empowering local actors and motivating citizens to participate in project planning processes.

The ULSG was a key innovation of the URBACT program. It fostered a participative policy-making approach at the local level and led to the founding of the non-governmental Paola Heritage Foundation. The projects undertaken in Valletta and Paola have also been enhanced by surveys and public consultations aimed at encouraging greater public participation.

These projects were only possible because of strong political will at the local council level. In both cases, the drive to encourage project implementation was

made possible through administrative decentralization. Additional EU funding has been integral in their continued rollout. Extra funding has supported integrated and long-term urban planning, with heritage and culture serving as a fulcrum for sustainable conservation and development. In addition, URBACT's sustained support throughout a three-year research period has been vital in the formulation of Paola and Valletta's action plans.

Decentralizing and democratizing urban planning

This Maltese experience supports the idea that decentralization in urban planning and democratization in planning and design are vital in ensuring wide public recognition. The experience of these local and council-driven projects supports the principle of subsidiarity and decentralization in a state where councils are still relatively young in the context of city management. Public participation in both projects demonstrated keen interest amongst local citizens, the engagement of stakeholders in project development and popular support for local projects.

The Local Councils of Paola and Valletta joined the United Nations Global Compact in 2012. In 2014, Regjun Xlokk, the South-East Regional Committee of Malta comprising 15 regional city councils, made the commitment to the Global Compact.



One of the 10 casemates discovered during the preparation works for the rehabilitation of Peacock Gardens in Valletta. The casemate was consolidated and was prepared as part of the interpretation of the garden. Image: Heritage Enterprise 2012.



Valletta, the capital of Malta, was nominated a European Capital of Culture in recognition of its rich history and cultural significance. It is also recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage city. Local action plans centre on restoration and adaption of cultural and historical assets to improve residents quality of life. Image: Gerardo Borbolla.