

Lived Heritage through the Changing Gaze: A Views and Vistas Analysis for Valletta

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Abstract

This paper investigates the transformative potential of urban planning by presenting the process through which a comprehensive Views and Vistas Analysis for Valletta World Heritage City was drawn up. The theoretical background is presented through key themes related to Urban Cultures and Lived Heritage. We explore how space is a relational concept and present a critical understanding of the changing gaze in its regard to the city. The methodology for the analysis is then presented, this based on identifying key visual elements within the city, assessing their aesthetic and symbolic importance, determining optimal viewing positions and analysing the visual composition of the views. The analysis resulted in a set of key principles for good governance in the interpretation and application of Maltese spatial planning policy.

Keywords: Community, Ritual, Spatiality, Views, Visual Integrity

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1. Introduction

Valletta was conceived by the Knights of St John as a Renaissance city with the rather grandiose duty of serving as a 'bulwark of Christendom'. Striking while the iron is hot, as the saying goes, the Grandmaster appealed to the Pope to fund a new city in Malta following the Knights' successful survival of the Great Siege in 1656. Faith and military prowess thus intertwined, Valletta was inaugurated as Malta's capital city in 1571 and has remained so to this day. It was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1980 under criteria (i) and (vi) and is currently the subject of several studies being undertaken to draw up a Management Plan for the city. A Views and Vistas Analysis has thus been completed and submitted to the World Heritage Committee (MHAL, 2023), the methodology for which is described in this paper. The Analysis underscores the significance of visual perception within the historical and cultural fabric of Valletta, a point echoed by the reflections of Italian author Italo Calvino. He observed that the eye is perhaps the most existential organ of the body and hence the most important one (Calvino, 2010).

Calvino's observation was particularly inspired by the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger so preponderant at the time, who in his 1927 magnum opus 'Being and Time' dwelt considerably upon the 'thrownness' of Being, and hence the 'situatedness' of existence (Heidegger, 1962). According to Heidegger, there is little that has to do with choice when it comes to our existence; we find ourselves 'thrown' in the world, and the world is always a situation that has already been worked out. One could say that we are not only born in a determined time and space, but, perhaps more important, we are also 'born in language'. By language it is understood a system of signs and signification, of symbols and their meaning, of an ordering of the world that provides us with an understanding of it. This paper shall delve into such an understanding of Valletta by taking a theoretical and practical journey through the assignment of significance and meaning to our changing gaze of the city.

2. A Theoretical Lens on Views and Vistas

To continue upon Calvino's astute observation, the eye is not merely a biological organ but is also a linguistic (and thus an existential) phenomenon. Through the gaze, the act of seeing, we understand where we stand in the world, because the eye is never a naked organ, but an organ dressed in the livery of meaning. The act of seeing is not a natural act but an educated (or informed) act; we learn how to see, what to see and where to put that which is being seen within the order of meaning.

This has a profound impact on our understanding of space. Space is therefore always relational to our gaze. We never look at space with a naked, neutral eye. Ours is an informed eye, and therefore even before the act of

seeing we already have expectations, assumptions, values that will impact what we see and how we will relate to it. To a certain extent we see what we prepare ourselves to see and overlook pretty much else. This explains why, for example, many tourists experience heightened emotions in front of such monuments as the Great Pyramid of Giza, but then those emotions are significantly less strong in front of, say, the step pyramid in Saqqara projected by Imhotep – ignoring the fact that the quantum leap in the structuring of burial mounds occurred in Saqqara rather than in Giza. The tourist, whose gaze had already been armed by the expectation of wonder and grandeur, finding himself standing in front of the Great Pyramid, is further awed by sheer size, and therefore, the already informed eye not only finds confirmation of its expectations but the relationship in size experienced first-hand only fuels further the sense of awe and wonder.

The impact of a foreign set of eyes can also work the other way round. An expectant pair of eyes, on the lookout for things of interest, can also serve to open the eyes that have got used to the gaze to see new things. In the Maltese experience, it was the eyes of the foreigner that first noticed the strange formation of boulders on land used by the locals for foraging. Once the area around them was excavated these boulders proved to be the remaining menhir of stone age temples now recognised as World Heritage Sites. In the historical field, travel diaries left us accounts written through foreign eyes of customs, fashions, monuments, that many times their authors misunderstood – precisely because theirs was a foreign gaze – but which in the long run left us with precious details that did not necessarily hold the same value or importance with the locals.

For the purpose of our journey to understand the changing gaze vis-à-vis Valletta, this theoretical standpoint implicates that any analysis of views and vistas will always depart from an already informed eye. In the case of Valletta, the inward views and vistas (looking from outside viewing points towards Valletta) were influenced by three different gazes, which in themselves are not mutually exclusive: a) the 'local' gaze; b) the 'touristic' gaze; and c) the 'technical' gaze. What we are calling 'the local gaze' is influenced by the symbolic meaning that Valletta has for the Maltese people. Given that such symbolic meaning changes over time, it is significant to point out that there was a resurgence as to the value of Valletta, not merely as a capital - political - administrative city but as an architectural, cultural and social phenomenon, during the past twenty years in Malta. During the 1980s and especially the 1990s, the local gaze was more directed towards more modern areas and developments as the country was experiencing an unprecedented wave of modernisation and economic expansion. Valletta was a remnant of a decaying past, eyed with a sense of detachment, as the new high-rises in Sliema and St Julians' most prominently provided a view towards a prosperous future to a fast growing, considerably affluent middle-class. Valletta was rediscovered by the Maltese when that same growing economy brought towards the island archipelago wealthy European foreign executives whose 'foreign eyes' saw an opportunity to invest in elegant baroque palaces either as their private residences, offices or the hospitality industry. Restoration – including a widespread rehabilitation programme by the Maltese Government prior to Valletta becoming European Capital for Culture in 2018 – and commercial development, especially in the food and beverage sector, together with more cultural activities taking place within the city walls, made the Maltese fall back in love with their capital city.

The 'touristic gaze' is based on the narrative by which Valletta is 'sold' to the tourist that visits Malta. It is what one could alternatively call 'the iconic gaze'. The most prominent of these is the view of Valletta from across Marsamxetto Harbour, with prominence given to the skyline marked by the spire of the Anglican Proto-Cathedral of St Paul and the massive cupola of the Carmelite Church constructed in 1955. It is quite ironic that the most prominent elements of this most iconic view are the two elements appearing to sit on the original bastions built by the Knights of St John that were not in the 'ideal' original plan of the city and were not built by the Knights. On the other side, the viewpoints from Cottonera, exalt the beauty of the Grand Harbour, and bring to prominence the garden element of Valletta, since both Barrakka Gardens are on the eastern side of the city.

Perhaps the viewpoint that remains closest to the original intended gaze of Valletta is the one from the sea where at the tip of the peninsula rests Fort St Elmo. The Knights of St John were profoundly aware of the visual impact that Valletta was intended to leave upon anyone approaching it from the sea. It was not just a military statement. The imposing fortifications, St Elmo at the forefront curtained by multiple layers of bastions, was not just meant to send a message of military might to an approaching enemy. They were also the Order's calling card – a symbol of affluence, modernism, and cultural refinement. In an age where wars are fought by drones and digital technology, this is the least obvious gaze to the uninformed eyes and the details that make up the big picture tend to escape the attention not just of the tourist but sometimes to the modern planner too.

The 'technical gaze' of the expert is informed by the study of the historical development of Valletta. It is a gaze that must often find balance between the 'ideal' city and the 'real' one. The Knights themselves had to veer from their 'ideal' plans for the city for various reasons, perhaps the most notorious being the Manderaggio, where originally they planned to have an enclosed bay for their galleys but due to difficulties during excavations they had to abandon their plans and the empty quarry ended up taken over first by workers migrating from the countryside and then eventually degenerating into a slum area, until it was finally cleared and new housing units were constructed in the 1950s. During the late baroque period the Knights further altered the original plans for the city to make way for new developments along the fashion of the times. The British period also brought about various changes, especially after the devastations of the Second World War. Other significant changes happened following Malta's independence in 1964, the last most significant one being the construction of a new Parliament and City Gate in 2015. Although elements of the 'ideal' city remain, sometimes masked behind alterations from later periods, these 'traces' (as Walter Benjamin would call them) are not enough to construct a credible narrative of the actual city.

The 'real' city is a lived city, that has undergone numerous transformations, some of them at the hands of political-administrative authorities, but other mutations are simply the result of the local community's lived experience. On the eastern side of Valletta, to take an example that divides expert opinion, on the coastline, against the walls of the city, over a period of time certainly dating back to the nineteenth century several boathouses were constructed by the locals. These had (and still have, at least a number of them) the function of housing the boats of Valletta fishermen. However, they are also used during the summer months for recreational purposes, where the owners host their families and friends when they want to spend a day by the sea or have an evening barbeque. The question facing experts is: should the 'real' city, that includes these inelegant constructions that hide a good part of the walls on that side, make way for the 'ideal' city to stand out? Or should the 'real' city prevail, and the routine that has shaped the livelihood of those families be considered as part of a lay ritual that has become endemic to the city itself?

Here we would like to make a small digression in favour of a certain historical consideration. We would like to argue against a static view of history in favour of a dynamic understanding of history as a state of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977). History is a continuous process and today, as we stand here, history is still being written. There is never a final history. If for planning or conservation purposes we understand history as 'what it was' or 'how it was originally conceived', in other words if we seek comfort in the 'ideal' city, we overlook the lived experience of the city. The city is not a plan designed on paper, and it is beyond the physical or monumental dimension. It is a human and humanised space, and beyond its physical it also has a meta-physical, symbolic dimension (Lowenthal, 1998). The experience of living in the city means that the communities that somehow meet within the city alter not just its physical dimension but also its symbolic qualities. Living also entails adaptability. For example, considering the challenges posed by climate change in our age, to what extent should the implementation of rooftop gardens and further greening be prioritised in Valletta, even though this might bring some changes to the idealised views of the city? Would the benefits that urban greening can bring to the air and sea quality, as well as the reduction of temperature, benefit the conservation and preservation of the city in the long run?

When it comes to the outward views and vistas (from Valletta looking out or within Valletta itself) the three gazes used for the inwards views and vistas still hold. However, in addition, one has also to consider the Valletta community more closely. It has been estimated that over 55,000 people cross the streets of Valletta every day. They include employees (especially in the public sector), tourists, shoppers and customers, service providers and school children. On special occasions such as public events of a religious and cultural nature, most notably carnival, Good Friday, New Year's Eve celebrations, concerts and political mass events, this number increases exponentially. In comparison, the community of Valletta residents is small, close to six thousand souls. It is a small population, mostly living in the lower part of Valletta, and ageing. They are increasingly besieged by tourism, commercial development, and a sense of alienation even from basic services. Their gaze has progressively become more nostalgic and what used to be a very worldly population (as a port city Valletta, together with Cottonera, used to be the cradle of Maltese intelligentsia and enlightenment) has become with the steady dwindling of its numbers more inward looking and pessimistic.

The element of nostalgia, with its characteristic element of remembering only selective fragments that create

a romanticised ideal narrative, now characterises the symbolic value of different areas in the city. Thus, Strada Stretta, a narrow street that cuts across Valletta from north to south and which used to be known by sailors across the Mediterranean as The Gut for the poverty, crime, prostitution and sordid entertainment that characterised it, has been sanitised and idealised as an emblem of a presumed golden age for Valletta. This narrative is often used to contrast with modern entertainment outlets that operate nowadays in the same street, even though in reality there is no comparison to the squalor of the past. These narratives attached to different locations, idealised as they might be, are also a community's way of resistance at the face of extinction. In fact, during the past few years, the Valletta community has become more sensitive and more vocal with regards to certain public occasions, such as religious rituals and festivities, as a way to reclaim – even if only for the duration of the event – public spaces that they feel were stolen from them especially by the commercial community. In the gaze of the Valletta community, therefore, the presence of churches, places where the community gathers – or used to gather – local shops owned by Valletta residents, informal meeting spaces along the waterfront, and other places that hold a historical significance to the history of the city as home to the local community hold paramount importance. One might even argue that for the Valletta community, its interest lies almost exclusively within the city walls and their gaze rarely ventures outside – to what surrounds the city. This is often in contrast with the attitude of the general Maltese gaze, which looks at Valletta mostly from the outside, and is more concerned about the impact of outside elements upon the city, than it looks at Valletta from the inside. Perhaps this is the case because their trips to Valletta are usually motivated by something other than Valletta itself and therefore in their gaze Valletta never really emerges from being in the background.

As fundamental as the gaze of the Valletta community is for an adequate understanding of the city, one must not forget that Valletta is also the capital city of Malta and therefore certain of its elements hold national symbolic importance. If one had to trace a line from the Mall in Floriana to Fort St Elmo on the northernmost tip of the Valletta shoreline, it is one long road going from the monument for Independence, to the monument for the Eucharistic Congress of 1913, to the Triton Fountain, to City Gate and all down Republic Street (previously known during the British Period as Kingsway) it is all one road to the sea at the horizon, mostly pedestrian. It is for the Maltese people a national symbol, a place where lay rituals are held, where all important Events of State pass including State Funerals and the first public outing of prime ministers and Presidents of the Republic. In Republic Street is also the former palace of the Grand Masters, now the palace of the President of the Republic of Malta, fronting St George's Square, the former piazza d'armi where the most important public and State events are held.

Just before St George's Square is Republic Square, however the Maltese still know it as Pjazza Regina (the Queen's Square), because of the statue of Queen Victoria that still dominates this public space. The presence of the statue in the square, right in front of the National Library, has long been the subject of controversy within the context of post-colonial debate, since it is often regarded as an imposition of British colonial authority. Some argue that it should be removed, but till now a consensus still has not been reached, largely the result of divergent views about colonialism and its impact on the Maltese islands. The same square, the space of which is nowadays divided between umbrellas, tables and chairs from different food and beverage outlets, used to house two historic cafeterias – Cordina, which is still running, and Premier, which has been turned into the offices of the Valletta Local Council. The former Premier site still forms part of the nostalgic gaze in Valletta because of its past ties to the Maltese Jazz golden age during the first half of the twentieth century and later in the late 1960s and 1970s in association with the Maltese literary movement called Moviment Qawmien Letterarju.

The act of seeing in fact, is not always the act of seeing 'what is there', but seeing 'what was there', or even 'what could have been there', and this alters the symbolic value what is being seen. We often find ourselves in a place that elicits memories and consequently the value we attribute to that place is intrinsically linked to those memories and similarly could be said to aspirations that we might have had for that place and did not materialise. As in the case with Premier, the gaze towards the past, towards 'what has been', tends to shape the gaze of the present, with nostalgia and possibly even resentment, for those who still hold memories from when Premier still existed. The Valletta community can provide many other examples of artisan workshops, the homes of notorious citizens, and community spaces that nowadays have either been completely transformed or are no longer existent. In contrast with the narrative about Strait Street, these have not become subject to a narrative of resistance perhaps because their existence was never in itself transgressive enough to become a symbol of defiance. One can sense this element of resistance even in the pride that some Valletta residents take in identifying themselves as coming from certain areas that were held in ill repute in the past, such the Mandraġġ, Kamrata or Diġu Balli.

For younger generations these considerations have no value, and for them, Pjazza Regina is a square like any other, which in summer provides the perfect spot to quench your thirst whilst watching the world go by like a true flaneur. Indeed, side streets, especially those narrow staired streets that were traditionally given lesser importance – many of which used to be characterised by empty buildings in a bad state of conservation, have since been rediscovered by commercial outlets, especially in the food and beverage sector, become meeting spaces for younger generations and flourishing even touristically. Their quaintness, enhanced by street decorations, and often by their views of the port, have made them much sought after not just for entertainment but also as a visual spectacle in themselves. A look at social media would immediately indicate that they are amongst the most photographed by tourists visiting Malta. Looking outwards from the streets of Valletta, on the eastern side the views are dominated by the sight of the port waters and Cottonera on the other side including Fort St Angelo and the Drydocks, depending on from which side street you are viewing from. For the Maltese gaze, looking westwards is where perhaps the most controversial views are. The westwards outwards gaze from Valletta is characterised by the high rise buildings in Sliema and Gżira. This is, in our opinion, a perfect example of a conflicted gaze.

On the one hand, the Sliema-Gżira development is very much symbolic of economic affluence and success within the context of a globalised free-market economy. It is aggressive and dominating, aesthetically rooted in global-capitalist urban aesthetics very much removed from the Mediterranean characteristics that even British colonialist architecture and spatial dynamics had incorporated within its style. The Sliema-Gżira area is home to a multi-national, multi-ethnic population, mostly working within the offices and establishments of trans-national corporations that made the same area their regional hub. For this reason, that same economic success and expansion can be considered equally symbolic of a loss of national identity by some, an imposing reminder of the might of corporate power and money. The preservation of the views and vistas to and from Valletta, alongside the World Heritage Status of the city, often becomes a political argument tainted with a blend of nationalist-nostalgic discourse whereby Valletta becomes a symbol of national identity and (misunderstood) authenticity juxtaposed with the unrestrained development and greed symbolised by nearby mega-developments on either side of the peninsula. Such arguments often pose Valletta as an 'idealised' city neglecting the complex realities of the lived city. It is indeed the minority view that the Sliema-Gżira developments and those at Xgħajra need not be necessarily alien to Valletta despite the obvious visual difference that characterise them. Such differences can in fact be interpreted as two different facades of modern Malta, at once rooted in its long history but also moving forward with the modern world.

3. Methodological Considerations of the Views and Vistas Analysis

The way in which the Views and Vistas Analysis of Valletta unfolded is one typical of spatial planning policy - the rationality of logic pitting itself against the vagrancies of politics. These two contending bedfellows define the process that was undertaken to understand the context of the policy, to carry out the analysis, and to ratify the measures that were eventually recommended. Over the course of several years and numerous collaborations, a multidisciplinary team of heritage professionals strove to understand the meaning of a World Heritage context, the responsibilities that the designation entailed, and the considerations related to the development control of tall buildings within this context. Malta has a strong regulatory background, with several targeted policies in place for the safeguarding of strategic views to and from Valletta. A significant weakness lies however in the application of such policies, when faced with development pressure and land-based commitments for the construction of major development projects and tall buildings, as shall be discussed.

An easy trap to fall into is to consider Valletta only within the immediate context of the Grand Harbour, or even within the national context of the Maltese Islands. As a World Heritage Site, matters of international significance come into play, based on the criteria for which the city is inscribed onto the World Heritage List, and specifically its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). Another key consideration was obsolescence, used here as a term to define the relevance of the city, both in the physical sense - its morphology and building typologies, and in the socio-economic sense - its administrative and commercial role. In this, heritage policy plays a crucial role, both from a national and international perspective. These matters guided the identification of the view value during the analytical stage of the Views and Vistas Analysis. To define such a view value however, a meticulous process of investigation was embarked upon. To begin with, the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2021) were thoroughly consulted, to understand the requirements of the World Heritage Committee and therefore, the remit of such a study. The Recommendation on the Historic

Urban Landscape was an influential reference, stating that “the urban area [is] understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of ‘historic centre’ or ‘ensemble’ to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting” (UNESCO, 2011). This definition allowed us to consider the city in its totality, both tangible and intangible, as opposed to the more traditional understanding of the city as a receptacle for monuments large and small.

The team was now well-set to place heritage value at the centre of the study and could continue shaping the methodology. To assist, best practice methodologies were identified, searching specifically for similar studies on World Heritage Sites which are Mediterranean cities, towns or historic centres in a dense urban context, located in proximity to a port or riverside. Ratified UNESCO Management Plans were helpful in this regard, that recently drawn up for the Historic Centre of Florence World Heritage Site (Municipality of Florence, 2022) standing out amongst the many relevant case studies from Albania, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Portugal and Spain. Though some of these case studies did not offer much in terms of a methodology for the assessment of views and vistas, they all have a defined buffer zone which was studied for its relationship to the OUV of the World Heritage Site to which it appertains. This served to forge a strong link between the assessment of the view values for different strategic viewpoints to and from Valletta, and the delineation of a proposed buffer zone for the city, in line with the requirements of the World Heritage Committee for each inscribed site. Since Valletta is the core of Malta’s Principal Urban Area (PUA), as defined in the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development (SPED) (MEPA, 2015), ratifying such a buffer zone has historically been a policy minefield. Development pressures abound within an urban context that is one of the densest globally, with high rise buildings and mega-projects taking centre stage in the drive to modernise Malta’s economic model. Nevertheless, Valletta’s peninsular topography and the historic cities of the Cottonera to the south-east have protected the city somewhat from such development within its immediate environs, despite the density of the urban environment. The environs to the north-west are however another matter entirely, as shall be discussed.

A seven-point methodology was subsequently devised for the Views and Vistas Analysis and the eventual delineation of the proposed buffer zone for Valletta, as follows:

1. Understand the SOUV for Valletta and extract key view-based indicators.
2. Identify the features of Valletta that have visual amenity, based on the key indicators.
3. Discuss the visual and symbolic merit of the features identified.
4. Define viewing positions from which visual assessments of the features can be made effectively.
5. Analyse important visual compositional characteristics of the views from these viewpoints.
6. Summarise the compositional attributes of the background, middleground and foreground.
7. Outline measures for protecting the visual integrity of the features from the viewpoints.

Once these methods were successfully implemented, a visual sphere of influence around Valletta was defined, within which the proposed buffer zone was to be delineated. This served as a springboard for discussion as to where the actual regulatory boundary was to be placed, since it shall become an important spatial planning policy tool to be used in development control mechanisms for the region. Prior to undertaking this exercise however, an assessment of the relevant local spatial planning policies and guidance documents was necessary to understand the protective measures already in force. There are several strong measures in favour of protecting the OUV of Valletta, specifically targeted to the retention of the skyline and views towards the city. The challenge was therefore to understand why such measures were not being as effective as one would expect them to, considering their status within the hierarchy of spatial planning policy for the Islands.

Let us therefore delve briefly into which the relevant policies for the purposes of the Views and Vistas Analysis are. From an internal perspective, the most pertinent documents are the Resolutions on the Conservation of Smaller Historic Towns, 1975 (ICOMOS, 1975), the Xi’an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas, 2005 (ICOMOS, 2005), and the Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance, 2013 (The Burra Charter) (ICOMOS, 2013). Cumulatively, these documents make the case for a sensitive approach to development both within the heritage site and within its setting or visual sphere of influence, as we have chosen to call it. They repeatedly mention the cultural significance of a heritage site and the need to respect both tangible features and intangible aspects of the site, the latter including views and other sensory indicators that contribute an integral part of the heritage value of the World Heritage property.

Nationally, the SPED sets out policies for cultural landscapes in Thematic Objective 8, referring to the need for “Re-appraising the value of the character, amenity and distinctiveness of designated areas and sites for their built heritage value” (MEPA, 2015). Valletta is recognised a cultural landscape since it is a designated Urban Conservation Area (UCA), as ratified in the Grand Harbour Local Plan 2002 (Government of Malta, 2002). The city thus benefits also from the protection of other SPED policies, specifically Urban Objective 2, which mentions “a context driven approach to the control of building heights within Urban Conservation Areas” and that “[d]evelopment within historic sites is to be carried out in such a manner as to ensure that the historic sites’ skyline is not adversely affected.”

Furthermore, the Grand Harbour Local Plan 2002 designates an Area of High Landscape Value (AHLV) which encompasses the Grand Harbour Fortifications, of which Valletta forms part; and the North Harbour Local Plan 2006 (Government of Malta, 2006) designates Strategic View Corridors (NHSE07), with the aim to protect “the settings of key landscapes, landmark buildings, Urban Conservation Areas and the Valletta World Heritage Site.” Considering guidance documents which form part of Malta’s hierarchy of plans, we find the Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards, 2015 (DC15) (Malta Environment and Planning Authority, 2015), the Planning Authority Circular 3/20 - Assessing and Determining development Applications in the Setting of Scheduled Buildings and Monuments, 2020 (Planning Authority, 2020), the Planning Policy Guide on the Use and Applicability of the Floor Area Ratio, 2014 (FAR) (Malta Environment and Planning Authority, 2014b), the Height Limitation Adjustment Policy for Hotels, 2014 (Malta Environment and Planning Authority, 2014a) and the Height Limitation Adjustment Policy for Retirement Homes, 2017 (Planning Authority, 2017). These numerous documents set out an agenda for sensitivity towards heritage contexts, including key considerations related to the visual impact of development on rooftops and at exposed ridges within and in the context of heritage sites, the appropriateness of increased height for specific types of development, and crucially the siting of tall buildings in relation to the impact of such landmarks on views to and from heritage sites.

Once the policy context was sufficiently understood, a photographic analysis was carried out to serve as a visual baseline for determining the view value of each strategic viewshed. The take-off points for a series of photographs were carefully chosen to represent ubiquitous views of the city, and from the city, therefore including belvedere along the imposing Grand Harbour fortifications and picturesque waterfronts on either side of the Valletta peninsula. Within the city, the photographic take-off points highlighted the undulating streets parallel to the main thoroughfare, Republic Street, and public spaces off this street. The views were characterised based on a methodology developed by DEGW to assess London’s Skyline, Views and High Buildings (DEGW, 2002), defining each Viewing Experience as a sum of the Viewing Place and View Type. Three viewing places were identified for Valletta and its environs – the High Point, the Open Space and the Axial Route. The viewing types were consequently characterised as a Panorama, a Contained Prospect and a Linear View respectively. The sum of these definitions thus led to three Viewing Experiences, namely:

1. A wide view looking towards or outwards from the city.
2. A broad view with a clearly defined edge.
3. An unfolding, changing view along major routes.

In parallel, a formula for defining a set of View Enhancement Criteria was developed, based on the sum of the View Value, the Compositional Quality and the Landmark Impact. Having set out these parameters to frame the analysis of the views, each was critically described in terms of the composition quality of the background, middleground and foreground features that are visible at the time of the study and making sure to describe the landmark impact of key features. Subsequently, a technical analysis for each view could be carried out, focussing on a detailed description of each View Experience in relation to its perceived visual and symbolic value, and the ultimate delineation of a set of View Enhancement Criteria based on the preservation and enhancement of the views to and from the city. The exercise culminated in a set of guiding principles for the protection of views to and from Valletta (MHAL, 2023).

4. Deconstructing the Changing Gaze in Valletta’s Visual Narrative

A more detailed description of the view value is warranted here, since this sets the scene for a later outline of the ensuing guiding principles. The view value can be described under three headings, firstly considering the foundational aspects of Valletta that can still be appreciated, thereby referring to the criteria under which

the city is inscribed on the World Heritage List – “an ideal creation of the late Renaissance” that “is irrevocably affiliated with the history of the military and charitable Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem” (UNESCO, 2023). Secondly, we consider the defining characteristics of the fortified city itself, rising high above flanking harbours. Finally, we consider the dense urban context that characterises the setting of the city on either side of the peninsula.

To begin with, let us recall that the first impression of many visitors to Valletta prior to mass air travel was by sea, arriving at one of the city's heavily fortified maritime gates and walking up St John Street towards the eponymous Co-Cathedral with its distinctive twin belfries. This route is visible today by following a dip in the saddleback skyline of the city when viewed from across the Grand Harbour. Thus, although the visual landscape of Valletta and its approaches has changed drastically, there is much charm in its skyline, and in the strong line of fortification walls of the city. This places much value on keeping the waterfronts free of unsympathetic accretions at the base of the fortifications, and the same goes for the spaces above the numerous bastions and curtain walls, all of which warrant ongoing restoration to ensure their continued appreciation within and around the World Heritage Site.

Within the city, the undulating streets lead the eye along a picturesque route lined by honey-coloured stone façades that often culminates in the blue waters of the two harbours and beyond. Unsympathetic rooftop development can easily mar the uniqueness value of these streets by failing to mirror the topography at street level. Such development also has an impact on the aesthetic value of the city's skyline, since it can obscure the view of key monuments that attest to its history, both from its early years such as the various belfries and cupolas of Baroque churches, and from later alterations such as the definitive cupola of the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the spire of St Paul's Anglican Cathedral. From beyond the city walls, one can appreciate the mammoth undertaking that the entire system of harbour fortifications once was, as well as the impact of many centuries of development that the harbour region attracted. The still visible gap between the Valletta and Floriana land-fronts attests to this continuous change and provides a visual clue as to the boundary of the World Heritage Site. Around both harbours, the fortifications that line the foreshore in an almost unbroken line are a visually appealing reminder of the military nature of Valletta in its earliest attestation, and proof of the heritage value that countless generations have imbued these sites with. As a culminating observation that attests to the Islands' scale, the Mdina promontory rises in the far distance view viewed from many places around the harbour cities, another valuable visual cue attesting to the relationship between the former and current capital cities of Malta.

A series of guiding principles has ensued from the detailed consideration of the view values pertaining to Valletta, with the foremost referring to the need to responsible governance in applying spatial planning policy, harking back to the point made earlier about planning as both a rational endeavour and a political practice. Note however that although several relevant policies for the safeguarding of the views exist, they are not universally applied when deciding upon whether to grant or refuse applications for development permission that may have an adverse impact of the World Heritage Site. Considering the principles that apply to the foreground views, these pertain primarily to the immediate visual experience of Valletta, when it comes to applying appropriate textures, materials, colours and even forms. Here we observe the jarring effect of large, glazed areas, exposed party walls created by developments higher than their context, and the cumulative impact of rooftop extensions within the city. Visual clutter too plays a part, this including redundant wiring and signage, as well as paraphernalia erected for outdoor catering areas.

Continuing to the middleground views, the principles focus on fostering urban attractiveness within and around the city, and especially within the proposed buffer zone. Good design takes centre stage when considering appropriate building height, form and rooftop design, recognising that the overall massing of new developments significantly influences views to and from Valletta. Recalling the OUV of the city, the morphological characteristics of the grid-iron plan and the topographical characteristics of the undulating streets must be respected during redevelopment projects, as this will protect the visual dominance of existing landmarks that are a key aspect of the iconic skyline of the city. This applies also to development that may obstruct seascape views from within Valletta, a picturesque feature that evokes memories of a time when this city was the maritime hub of the Mediterranean. As guiding principles for background views, the analysis proves that tall buildings visible from Valletta must showcase sensitive architectural techniques that allow them to meet the sky gracefully, such as

tapering upper levels or incorporating translucent elements to create a smoother visual transition, drawing inspiration from both exemplary modern designs and the traditional Maltese skyline adorned with church spires and cupolas. Protected viewshed gain much significance here, since they serve to outline locations where tall buildings are acceptable or otherwise and emphasise the importance of determining a height envelope within the visual sphere of influence of Valletta to enable development control to serve as a protective measure for the visual and symbolic value of the city.

The synthesis of the visual sphere of influence into a proposed buffer zone for Valletta was heavily prejudiced by the consideration of previously made land commitments and the vested interests of influential lobby groups. The blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea lapping at the albeit heavily contested foreshore of the Valletta peninsula, act as perhaps the strongest deterrent to overdevelopment in the immediate vicinity of the World Heritage Site. An initial proposal for the buffer zone, submitted to the World Heritage Committee for consideration, incorporates Marsamxetto Harbour and the Grand Harbour, the latter with its many creeks on either side of the Ricasoli, Kalkara and Cottonera peninsulas. The entire urban area within this zone is incorporated into the proposed buffer zone, as is Floriana, Manoel Island and Fort Tigne. These are all historic places that have been intimately tied to the history and development of Valletta over the centuries and are therefore well-suited to be offered the additional protection that the buffer zone may provide.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, through the analysis of views and vistas in and around Valletta, we have sought to highlight the critical importance of visual perception in understanding and safeguarding the city's lived heritage, within the scope of its significance as a World Heritage Site. The analysis forms a key component of the city's Management Plan, which though yet to be ratified, considers Valletta's urban fabric and its susceptibility to change. Through the reflections of thinkers such as Calvino and Heidegger, we have accentuated the importance of the gaze in shaping our experience and understanding of place, specifically heritage places that are fundamentally imbued with values both tangible and intangible. Therefore, we posit that the way we see and interpret Valletta is deeply intertwined with its historical and cultural significance in a fluid and dynamic manner that requires ongoing valorisation.

The proposed buffer zone emerges as a crucial policy mechanism for safeguarding Valletta's visual integrity in the light of its position within Malta's dense conurbation. Here, the city's visual landscape is pitted against land commitments and vested interests that pose a threat to strategic views to and from Valletta, thus potentially undermining the experience of the city for those who look upon it. The maritime boundary of the natural harbours at either flank of the peninsula on which it is built provide an inherent protection that sets the city at a distance for its built environs, however short this may be. Thus, the Views and Vistas Analysis aids in the strategic implementation of essential steps that are required to ensure that Valletta's visual and symbolic value endure for future generations to appreciate, recognising the profound connection between lived heritage and the ever-evolving gaze.

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