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## Valletta: A Systematic Literature Review

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### **Abstract:**

*Valletta is the capital city of Malta and is located on a peninsula which is heavily fortified occupying a land space of 0.8km<sup>2</sup>. Over the last twenty years, substantial changes to its population, physical spaces and cultural capital have occurred. This systematic literature review attempts to capture these changes and its impacts on the lived experience of the Valletta community by utilizing a search database to capture texts written about Valletta. From an initial sample of 499, after several processes of screening and coding, 58 were deemed pertinent to the lived experience of the Valletta community. After reviewing the various texts, several underlying conflicting discourses were identified. Future directions for further research are provided to deepen the academic knowledge about Valletta.*

**Keywords:** Valletta, capital city, community, development, Malta

### **1. Introduction**

On visiting the city of Valletta then, British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli described Valletta as 'a city of palaces built by gentlemen for gentlemen' (Cardona, 2015). His prescient description of Valletta has been able to withstand the scrutiny of time, both because it is factually correct; there are indeed many palaces in Valletta. However more importantly, because both the beginnings of Valletta, and as this paper will in more recent instances argue, Valletta is a city built for gentlemen, therefore constructed from its inception but more recently maintained and regenerated in ways that privilege the needs and visions of some stakeholders while ignoring the needs and vision of others.

The city of Valletta was built using the financial support received from European nobility following the Great Siege of 1565. The imprint of the various powers du jour can be noticed within Valletta, with the main stylistic and design input being given by the Knights of St. John but also with some stylistic flourishes from British colonial rule (Smith & Ebejer, 2012). The knights were divided into *langues* according to their nationality, and each had their own auberge, connecting Valletta's heritage to a broader European history (Smith & Ebejer, 2012). Since its inception, Valletta has had dual functions over the centuries namely that as a capital city and a port city. Over time the evolution of this dual role was seen when the administrative functions, that are the product of a capital city, saw the auberges becoming the sites of ministerial offices, and the port which was Malta's primary point of contact with the outside world becoming a host for over half a million tourists who reached Valletta's shores by cruise every year (Smith & Ebejer, 2012).

Geographically Valletta is a peninsula city that occupies a small, constricted site, surrounded by fortifications and the sea. Valletta covers a total area of 0.8 km<sup>2</sup> and is physically constrained by walls and the sea on three sides, creating issues of overcrowding, access to traffic and over tourism (Attard & Enoch, 2011, Ebejer et., 2020). Throughout the 70s lack of investment, restrictive rent laws in Valletta resulted in waves of outmigration. Since the last census, the population of Valletta stands at 6,309 persons (or 1.1% of Malta's total population) (NSO 2016). Dilapidation and grandeur co-exist side by side in Valletta with palaces frequently neighbouring abandoned and decrepit buildings (Markwick, 2018a, Ebejer et., 2019). Traditionally few hotels existed within the city, however the recent run-up and hosting of the European City of Culture (ECOC) in 2018 has led to the development of numerous boutique hotels and brought about the development of many Airbnb accommodations (Ebejer, 2020a). Valletta's physical form reflects a number of contrasts, between inward- and outward-looking, nostalgia, and looking towards the future on both a national and local level, as well as bearing the marks of an international and European city yet being uniquely a Maltese national symbol. The main gate on the landward side (City Gate) leads to the 'mainland', whereas Victoria Gate faces the Grand Harbour and is just a few metres away from the shoreline. (Smith & Ebejer, 2012). Valletta is a recognized World Heritage Site (Ebejer, 2013).

When dealing with cities, it is useful to identify what aspects make up the city. Paul SantCassia (1999) suggests the following three aspects which one can consider when perceiving the city:

- As a symbolic site by being the centre of geography in space and time.
- As an architectural-photographic representation with its baroque style and its connection to European roots.
- As an 'experience' where the visitor experiences a series of encounters through the city's intimate spaces, and by walking through its interpretive layout.

In this article, Valletta will be seen as more than the mere physical space but will be viewed from the lenses of its identity, structure and meaning to understand it comprehensively (Bossleman, 1998). Using literature about Valletta since 2010, this research has categorized what has been written about Valletta within this time period into four sections: 1) the people of Valletta, which will look at the social dynamics present within Valletta; 2) the physical space in Valletta which looks at changes that have occurred in the last two decades within Valletta; 3) the cultural gaze, which will look at a particularly frequent lens that is used particularly by outsiders to understand the city; and 4) discourses in tension which will attempt to capture several tensions between discourses that underlie almost all that is written and said about Valletta.

## 2. Methodology

Systematic literature reviews provide an opportunity to bring together a plethora of written texts on any given subject in an evaluative manner and helps bring clarity to the subject in question. Keywords are an important part of any literature review as these allow one to find the corpus of literature on the subject one is interested in when used in appropriate databases. Once this corpus is established, studies which fall within defined criteria are catalogued and selected for the systematic literature review (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009).

For the literature review presented in this paper, Google Scholar was chosen as the search database as it has access to both white and grey literature. The decision to include grey literature is due to the fact that previous work of the authors has indicated that a dearth of peer-reviewed work would significantly limit the scope of what has been written about Valletta. Given that this article is written within the field of community development and seeks to understand the experiences of the current Valletta community, formal and informal sources of writing were deemed pertinent to the lived experience of a community.

One keyword was used namely 'Valletta' with the exclusion that it could not form part of an author's name or surname. Additionally, given the ever-changing context of a city, it was felt that texts exceeding ten years of age would become outdated. The search title was felt to be comprehensive enough to catch within it most texts written on the subject matter and in fact brought in a significant number of results. Texts were limited to those written in the English and Maltese language.

The literature search was conducted over a period of three months between February and May 2021, and included all texts published from 2010 onwards. The coding was subsequently conducted by an experienced researcher, with discussion and resolution of critical cases.

The first step in the process involved collecting the meta-information of the identified population of articles. This resulted in 399 hits. The second step involved scanning all titles and removing irrelevant texts. These included texts that used Valletta merely as the location of a conference but did not relate to Valletta per se, texts relating to a mine which was called Valletta and some which had escaped the filter and were included because the author's name or surname was Valletta. This reduced the sample by 145 entries with a remaining sample of 245 papers. In a fourth step the remaining papers were coded based on their title and abstract into the following categories art (n=10), commerce (n=2), conservation (n=17), culture (n=14), European City of Culture (n=24), ecology (n=8), history (n=74), politics (n=1), religion (n=24), social dynamics (n=24), technology (n=5), tourism (n=10), urban infrastructure (n=29), and urban regeneration (n=13).

Once the coding was done, a decision was taken to remove the following categories: art, conservation, ecology, history, politics, religion, and technology. The reason for this removal was that these articles did not deal with the lived experience of the current Valletta community. Within the art, history, and conservation categories, articles dealt with singular institutions and their artistic state or restoration. Similarly, articles coded within the theme 'religion' did not deal with experiences of the Valletta communities but instead focused on paintings and statues within catholic churches which was a more granular focus than that aimed for in this article. Within the historical category, all the articles dealt with issues prior to the 1950s which are less relevant to the current lived experience of the Valletta community. This resulted in a further 144 texts were removed leaving a sample of 104 texts.

The next step involved downloading and analyzing the remaining text. On further review from the 104 texts only 57 were deemed to be pertinent to the subject matter, with 47 texts having minimal or no information about the lived experience of the Valletta Community. Once the remaining 57 texts were thoroughly analyzed, the chapters of this paper emerged, with most papers dealing with the physical space in Valletta, the community, cultural events. A final step involved a further step of analysis as the authors started identifying a further pattern within the texts in the form of contrasting discourses which are also catalogued in this paper.

## 3. Valletta: The People

The Maltese word to identify someone from Valletta is *Belti*. The word in itself has two meanings, it can mean both 'my city', while also referring to the 'person from Valletta'. The term however has a more nuanced meaning than merely describing one location of residence (Debono, 2016). Being a *Belti* means that you have acceptance from the community as one of their own, with all the rights and obligations that that involves. Indeed, one need not necessarily live in Valletta to be a *Belti* as evidenced by the diaspora of *Beltin* (plural of *Belti*) living in other cities in Malta who still identify as *Beltin* and have community acceptance (Cardona, 2015).

Persons not of Maltese descent do not gain easy access to the title of *Beltin* and in certain occasions might take years to find their place within this community (Cardona, 2015). A similar category is persons who reside in Valletta because they have been assigned government housing within Valletta. Acceptance within the community is similarly not automatic.

Despite the high footfall, the low residency can be attributed to the fact that the city had been allowed to degenerate between the 1970s to the early 2000s due to low levels of public and private sector investment resulting in dilapidation in many parts of the city (Smith and Ebejer, 2012). Over the last 25 years, while the population of Malta has increased by 31%, the population of Valletta has decreased by 38% (Gauci, 2019).

Demographically, Valletta has 6,309 residents occupying around 2,576 homes, the population of Valletta makes up only 1.5 percent of the total for the Maltese Islands (Gauci, 2019). Despite the small population, footfall within Valletta is disproportionately high, with many administrative offices of government being found in Valletta, as well as a significant but dwindling retail sector (Finn, 2014), a number of offices for the private sector, increase in leisure and hospitality, and last but not least tourists (Cardona, 2015). The residents' attachment to the city is evident for all. Despite problems of livability and prior to the recent regeneration dilapidation, pride in being a *Belti* was a constant with a resident writing in quantitative survey in the margins that 'You will only take me out of Valletta in a casket' (Brown et., 2019, Cardona, 2015). Within the demographic of the residents one can note that a significant number are over 60 (Grima, 2016, Gauci, 2019) as frequently captured in the phrase *Il-Belt xiha* meaning that Valletta is old and referring not to the age of the city but the age of its population. SammutAlessi (2014) noted the passion that the elderly within Valletta had about the problems and possible solutions, chief amongst which is mobility. Given that most properties in Valletta have long and winding staircases due to the physical properties of the city, namely narrow streets with tall buildings, elderly people who lose their mobility face significant mobility challenges to leave their homes. Additionally, the lack of primary healthcare within Valletta, with the Floriana Health Centre not in close proximity (SammutAlessi, 2014). Plans have been launched for a health care centre to be opened using an unused section of the Local Council offices, but these are not yet available to the public. These changes in demographics contribute to various narratives of glory and decline.

Weaving the identity of *Beltin* together is a number of public rituals that plays an important role in Valletta. Three of the most important are the festas, the local religious expression that takes place once a year, carnival, and football; the latter sometimes dubbed as the religion of Valletta.

Carnival is held over five days preceding Lent; a period of revelry and excess before forty days of restraint and reflection (Gregory, 2019). With a tradition harking back to the rule of Grand Master de Ponte in 1535 (Cardona, 2015) Valletta explodes into an extravaganza of music, colour, dance and tradition. Satiric floats, and the mandatory King Carnival Float are accompanied by dancing companies and music bands; the result of many months of preparation. Thematically they normally correspond to some event that would have happened throughout the year (Cardona, 2015). As soon as Carnival ends on Shrove Tuesday the city space is immediately sobered up. (Gregory, 2019)

Religion is also a nuanced affair. With 28 churches within the city, religion is an important thread within the city fabric. The epitome of religious expression is undoubtedly the festa, the celebration with both religious and secular components. Valletta has three parishes namely that of St Dominic, St Paul and St Augustine. However, a fourth church also participates in the festa ritual - Our Lady of Mount Carmel whose Carmelites do a great deal of parish work within Valletta (Cardona, 2015). The two main festas with the most resources dedicated to celebrations are St. Paul's and St. Dominic's, conveniently split along political and socio-economic lines. Traditionally St. Paul's is affiliated with the conservative and centre-right Nationalist party who tend to have higher socio-economic statuses. Conversely, St. Dominic's patrons tend to be associated with the centre-left Malta Labour Party and are less economically well-off. One must note that there are notable exceptions for both these claims and there has been a greater mixing in both parishes. While a sense of rivalry still exists and some banter exchanged during both festas, most times the mood is mostly collegial with many circumstances when organizers from both festas have helped or lent resources to one another. While in Valletta there are many other religious communities such as the Bahai, the Coptics and the Protestants to name but a few, these are not given significant importance in most discourses.

A community that deserves mention is the football community. Football is an important means of connecting the Beltin with the Beltin diaspora living in other towns and villages (Gregory, 2019). Football brings the community together, and when the Premier League is won by Valletta F.C. complex celebrations are enacted including the funeral. The funeral is a ritual engaged in by the Valletta F.C. supporters in which the rivalry with their next-door neighbours Floriana F.C. is given prominence. Marching through St. Anne's Street (in Floriana) a funeral casket with signs and banners dedicated to Floriana F.C. with messages reigning from the mischievous to the insulting, the funeral is celebrated to mark the 'death' of the Floriana football club.

Valletta has the second largest number of recipients of social welfare protection (NSO, 2019), making poverty a significant issue within Valletta. Research by Khan (2014) shows that poverty is perceived as such by Valletta residents only when it relates to material deprivation and often the underprivileged within Valletta hide their poverty due to shame. Poverty and the needs of underprivileged people are generally secret knowledge and only made accessible to certain people, such as priests and church workers, but not necessarily to others such as social workers (Khan, 2014). It is trust which unlocks whether the underprivileged disclose or not their socio-economic situation (Khan, 2014).

Despite an underbelly of socio-economic issues, the gleaming façade that is often encountered in Valletta is one of prosperity, culture, and city life. Inevitably, significant private and public investment in urban regeneration has resulted in gentrification which has continued to displace Valletta's significantly dwindling resident population (Markwick, 2017). As the cost of properties has increased, younger Valletta residents and families seeking their first home have been found to have been priced out, resulting in people with no or little connection to the community but significant capital replacing the elderly or less wealthy residents (Dingli, 2016, Gauci, 2019, Grima, 2016).

#### 4. Valletta: The Physical Space

One of the easiest ways to recognize Valletta is without a doubt its classical skyline. A product of Valletta's adherence to its World Heritage Status, Valletta's physical space has frequently been the site of multiple narratives on what Valletta should represent. From rosy-eyed nostalgic to adamant futurists, the streets, buildings, and spaces within Valletta have occupied different meanings in different years. The conceptual shift represented in the two development policies put forward by local authorities demonstrate this concept significantly.

The first, written in 2002, set a number of priorities including the enlivening Valletta in the evenings through a mix of visitor and leisure loci and the encouragement of residential use of Valletta through a series of steps taken to rehabilitate older houses, the use of vacant floors above business premises, residents' parking schemes, improve children's play provision, and the limitation of office expansion into residential blocks. The document also highlighted the need for greater and more efficient use of community spaces despite the declining population, such as the using of vacated government buildings for social and educational purposes (Malta Environmental and Planning Authority (MEPA), 2002). The document also provided a series of measures that would be looked upon favourably by the Planning Authority when related to measure to expand housing provision. The 2002 plan also envisaged sectors within which commerce, historical and residential areas were given priority. This would direct overall development and ensure that loss of open space and thus loss of identity are avoided, and more efficient use and recycling of existing land for development are promoted (MEPA, 2002).

The second government development policy was entitled 'A Strategy for Valletta' (MEPA, 2016a). In this document one can note a shift in the priorities of the policymaker wherein despite still promoting the quality of urban living makes no mention of promoting more residential spaces. Additionally, whereas in the 2002 document offices were deemed as requiring limitation, the attraction of high-end retail outlets the facilitation of the setting up of more offices coupled by auxiliary services such as food and drinks for employees, users, visitors and tourists were deemed on par with promoting the quality of urban living (MEPA, 2016).

Such shifts indicate the contested space and changing values over time that influence the way the physical space is understood, framed, used, and assigned to various stakeholders. Throughout this section we will see a movement from Valletta being seen as practically a liability, to being 'rediscovered' and the massive projects and undertakings in this respect.

##### 4.1. Regeneration

Following an exodus of its population in the 80s and 90s, Valletta was given low priority by a number of successive governments. Any investment that took place tended to be minor restoration projects which had a knock-on effect on private investment (Ebejer, 2016). Such a downward spiral led to increased dilapidation and many buildings being abandoned, with 34% of buildings in Valletta in 1995 being vacant (Caruana, 2015, Ebejer2016). Additionally, the presence of anachronistic rent laws ensured that property owners in Valletta could not obtain the full market value of their properties as these were set at post- World War II levels and had not changed.

Two important projects that took place that foreshadowed things to come were the restoration and adaptation of St. James Cavalier into a cultural centre, and the Valletta waterfront conversion of a row of waterfront historic stores into a cruise passenger terminal (Ebejer, 2016). Strengthening this change was the change to rent laws that occurred in the mid-1990s which opened up the Valletta property market and gave investors more confidence to regenerate dilapidated buildings (Ebejer, 2016).

The ECoC bid further consolidated the drive to regenerate Valletta and a number of projects were embarked on, including the:

- Extension of pedestrianization including Merchants Street and Pjazza San Ġorġ;
- Restoration of Biagio Steps and the establishment of the Fortifications Interactive Centre;
- Paving and embellishment of Misraħ Mattia Preti at Mandraġġ;
- Restoration of the facades of several buildings including Grandmasters Palace and Auberge de Castille, and Church of Santa Caterina d'Italia;
- Restoration of chapels and other features of St. John's Co-Cathedral (by St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation);
- The redevelopment of City Gate;
- The new Parliament building;
- The building of the Opera House Ruins into an open-air theatre;
- The restoration of Fort St. Elmo and Carafa Enceinte to establish 'Fort St. Elmo Heritage Experience' including a Military History Museum, Valletta Museum and a Ramparts Walk
- The regeneration of Peacock Gardens;
- The restoration of extensive stretches of Valletta fortifications;
- Triton Square;
- The restoration and adaptive re-use of Palazzo Zondadari, Merchants Street, Valletta;
- Upgrading of the Valletta Bus Terminus;
- The Barrakka Lift;
- The upgrading of Castille Square;
- Increase in parking in the Ditch;
- Restoration at Ta' Lisse;

- Valletta Land front ditch;
- Renovation of Bastions;
- Renovation and conversion into a community cultural centre of the Tal-Biccerija building (Ebejer, 2013, Past projects, n.d)

The regeneration process throughout Valletta has not been interspersed equally throughout Valletta, with much of the regeneration taking place within the centre and the most frequently visited places by tourists. The interest displayed by the private sector together with public sector investment has resulted in greater commercialization and gentrification as stated in other parts of this article. Thus, one can conclude that the regeneration and revitalization that has occurred has been for the most part a superficial exercise and has not managed, as Caruana (2015, pp.194) puts it, to 'find a balance between the opportunities the area presents and the social requirements of its residents.' Instead, residents were seemingly alienated from the massive changes occurring within their city to the chagrin of nearly all, with perhaps one notable exception, owners of (mostly dilapidated) property who saw the value of their property increase exponentially.

#### 4.2. Urban Infrastructure

With a limited space and particularly narrow roads, access to the Valletta peninsula has been a problematic policy issue for many years. Pavements are particularly uneven within the city which impacts the possibility for mobility for the aged and those with impairments (Dingli, 2016). The responsibility to maintain and develop these spaces is mainly assigned to the local council, however with a paltry budget of 700,000 Euros, this has often resulted in a disheveled and unseemly road infrastructure (Dingli, 2016).

Valletta's accessibility, or lack thereof, was also commented upon by Aquilina (2018) and Deguara (2018). Through their research, Aquilina (2018) found that most shops do not provide for wheelchair access while other cultural sites such as St. James Cavalier required one to enter from an alternative entry which resulted in humiliation. Restaurants and shops were also restrictively designed impeding wheelchair access. Similarly, in commenting about the accessibility of the ECoC event, participants in Deguara's (2018) research found that the infrastructure of the city was particularly punishing with instances of persons with disability leaving a social event at a restaurant due to its inaccessibility. Greater awareness of disability issues, as well as more spaces to cater for various forms of mobility, were recommended by Aquilina (2018) as a way forward.

Moving to road infrastructure, Valletta's administrative, cultural, and commercial roles sees an average population of over 55,000 all gathered within 0.8km<sup>2</sup> (Dalli, 2020). Being a peninsula means that traffic can only enter from one side, or else use seaborne methods of transport (Ebejer, 2016). Since the early 60s the government has charged an annual charge for cars to be able to enter into Valletta (Attard&Ison, 2010). As Valletta gained prominence amongst tourists, office workers and persons running administrative errands, parking became a significantly problematic issue. A fee of €46 was leveraged on drivers who wished to be provided the V-license to enter into Valletta, which contributed €1.4 million to the Government Consolidated Fund in 2004. The intended goal of deterring drivers from entering into Valletta did not work (Attard&Ison, 2010).

A number of measures were introduced to mitigate the congestion concerns. These included a Park-and-Ride, the extension of the pedestrian area covering the full commercial centre, the introduction of alternative modes of public transport including sea borne modes and the change from the V-license to a time-based road user charge known as the Controlled Vehicular Access System (CVA) (Attard&Ison, 2010)

After a year of consultation, the CVA that would make the final cut was the following:

1) A singular charge would be levied which would reflect time spent with the car within Valletta. 2) Weekdays had longer hours while weekends had shorter hours, with the first thirty minutes free and a number of exceptions including residents, emergency vehicles and electric vehicles. (Attard&Ison, 2010). Over the years the CVA was subjected to a number of changes and the initial proposals were significantly watered down with much less hours spent in Valletta being made subject to payment.

The overall effect is that Valletta's roads tend to be overly congested and parking very scarce (Dalli, 2020). A system was introduced wherein green car spaces can be utilized only by Valletta residents, blue only available to the general public between 7am-7pm, and white being available to the general public. As with other issues of regeneration, residents living in lower Valletta have once again been excluded due to the fact that the park and ride facilities as well as car park facilities are much farther away than for those who live close to the city gate. (Ebejer, 2016)

#### 5. Valletta: The Cultural Gaze

The gaze is an influential concept in the study of sociological phenomena and has been written about from feminist, psychoanalytic, historical, and psychological perspectives (Olin 1996). To gaze is more than simply to observe but signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze (Schroeder, 1998). From sexuality and feminism (Mulvey, 1989), colonialism (Pratt, 1992) it has been extended to the relationship tourists have with the places they visit (Urry, 1990).

Valletta is often perceived and defined through a cultural gaze; highlighting and narrowly focusing on its cultural capital, often at the expense of other facets of the city. One of the ways in which the cultural gaze is enacted is through the myriad of festivals that take place in Valletta including: the Malta Jazz Festival, the Malta Fireworks Festival, Malta International Arts Festival, Malta World Music Festival, Carnival, Ghanafest, Notte Bianca, Valletta International Baroque

Festival, and Isle of MTV1 (Gallagher, 2017). Given that most of these festivals do not reference Valletta directly but instead use the 'Malta' brand, it is interesting that there has been such a concentration of festivals within Valletta while other towns and villages have never hosted such festivals. The effect of such a concentration of festivals and cultural activities leads many within the Maltese Islands and beyond to perceive that Valletta's primary reason for existence is to host all, or most, of the significant cultural events within Malta.

Take for instance one of Cardona's (2015, pp 23) opening salvos:

*'Some places have cultural depth which derives from history. History has the power to push forward by allowing the city to work with a range of ages, by anchoring identity, and also by giving confidence through civic pride. However, at the same time history can in certain ways hold back, since people can hark back to old times. ...The city of Valletta cannot exist as a re-enactment of its past. In order to empower all Valletta's present generations, one must give Valletta, and even Malta, a future. This is done by engaging younger generations in culturally enriching and creative activities, and in the everyday life of the city.'*

Cardona (2015) rightly points out that Valletta cannot be caught in the trap of nostalgia with long tales of glorious pasts and ignoble declines (this will be discussed further on in this paper) but needs to regenerate itself to become a city for the present and the future. Interestingly, Cardona makes no mention of commerce, employment, housing, community, issues of infrastructure, and socio-economic issues, but tying this regeneration and moving forward solely to cultural depth derived from history which is used to engage future generation in culturally enriching and creative activities.

The culture that is present within Valletta is not equally accessible to all, or at least not equally accessed by all. Many initiatives happen in upper Valletta which is perceived the place where cultural things happen (Debono, 2016) while lower Valletta is not perceived as such. Residents, it is suspected, do not engage with the museums and other cultural institutions and activities which are often felt 'to be exclusive, oftentimes dogmatic and endorsing official knowledge. ... [with a] Maltese museum institution which was conceived in a top-down approach, focused on the conservation and preservation of Malta's cultural heritage.' (Debono, 2016 pp. 28)

### 5.1. Valletta 2018, the European City of Culture

The epitome of the cultural gaze that besets Valletta has undoubtedly been participation within the European Capital of Culture programme in 2018. Valletta was declared European Capital of Culture (ECOC) in October 2012, providing six years of preparation for the event that would run over the course of a year (Markwick, 2018). The ECOC was the main vehicle to implement most planning measures of the 2011 National Cultural Policy (NCP), and this vision is encapsulated by the formation of the Valletta 2018 Foundation (V18) whose remit was to transform and regenerate the cultural and urban environment in Valletta sustainably and for the longer term (Markwick, 2017). This was to be achieved by enhancing cultural education and professionalism, and secondly, by developing cultural excellence by strengthening the cultural infrastructure, the artistic community, and quality of cultural life in Malta for locals as well as tourist visitors (Markwick, 2017, Ebejer et al., 2020). The final outcome that was aimed for was aid in social inclusivity especially of local stakeholders, particularly by emphasizing local cultural infrastructure investments over image promoting 'landmark' buildings (Vella, 2012).

Throughout the years, V18 provided a number of projects that included those related to community, visual arts, design, children and young people, performance, opera, music and film (Blagojevic Vella & Godhwani, 2018). By 2018, the Cultural Programme had featured 168 projects involving nearly 500 events with activities in musical and visual art forms cumulatively comprising over half of its offering. Theatre, dance, and literature were offered less often but a number of interdisciplinary projects were offered (Blagojevic Vella & Godhwani, 2018). Given that the new events continued alongside yearly festivals logistical difficulties were encountered, particularly when dealing with the limited venues offered (Blagojevic Vella & Godhwani, 2018). The V18 used a variety of methods to advertise the different events based on the interest and particular audience being targeted. Some events were sold out despite being considered hard to market, while others that were considered as crowd-pullers failed to fill all the seats (Blagojevic Vella & Godhwani, 2018).

A key issue throughout the ECOC event was the participatory nature of the events to citizens and the local communities. One of the goals of the ECOC event was "Inclusivity, accessibility and participation ... All our community and participation-focused events are an open invitation to a celebration that begins in the symbolic heart of our programme." (Blagojevic Vella & Godhwani, 2018, pp. 35) Despite this goal, commentators have noted that throughout the ECOC event and its run up, involvement of key stakeholders and players varied, with a number of local councils complaining they were not consulted in the bidding process (Borg, 2017). Once the event was confirmed, there was initially great enthusiasm by a number of Valletta stakeholders but this turned into cause for concern around 2014/5 when the more commercial approach started to dominate (Ebejer, 2019). Here one can note that the V18 foundation was not an entity with a singular approach as while the officials were speaking the language of participation and social involvement, the chairman had a different focus mainly on the commercialization aspect of the ECOC event (Ebejer, 2019), much in line with the discourses of the government of the day (Valletta 2018 is generating positive vibes about the capital, 2017).

Perceptions of the impact of the ECOC varied. On the more positive side, commentators focused on the findings through various surveys that overall support for the ECOC event was positive. This support included support for the ECOC event itself (79% in favour) but also support for similar cultural events (82%), the promotion of Malta as a tourist destination during the ECOC (91%) and community activities that coincided with the ECOC (79%). Local residents also believed that the costs of the event would not exceed the benefits (71% expecting positive economic benefits as opposed

<sup>1</sup>Technically in Floriana, just outside Valletta but using Valletta a backdrop.

to 34% expecting economic costs). Residents that expected more costs would be less supportive of the event while those who expected benefits would be more supportive, which is in line with ECoC literature (Van der Steen & Richards, 2019).

Additionally, the programme was hailed as being diverse and provided a platform for Maltese artists to collaborate with international artists and gain experience on the international stage (Ebejer et., 2021), while stimulating greater participation in cultural activities amongst the Maltese population (Georgieva, 2018)

Conversely, the ECoC event was criticized for ignoring one of the goals of the event, namely the concept of 'Europeanness' (Clopot&Strani, 2019), a lack of vision and consistency in the artistic program, lack of inclusion of the non-Maltese identities residing within Valletta and for diverging from the original themes of the initial bidbook. (Ebejeret., 2021). Ebejeret. (2021) claim that the ECoC event was a missed opportunity to generate new areas of cultural tourism and reinforce the cultural infrastructure of the island. The event was severely condemned when the V18's Chairperson, Jason Micallef, posted comments on social media appearing to mock the murder of investigative journalist Daphne CaruanaGalizia (Ebejer et., 2021). The situation escalated with the City of Leeuwarden-Friesland (the other ECoC titleholder in 2018) deciding that it would not send any official representatives to V18 celebrations (Leone Ganado, 2018) in addition to the chairperson of the V18 Monitoring and Advisory Panel not attending any ECoC event in Malta (Ebejer, et. 2021)

Other effects that were registered but that will be explored in greater depth in other sections of this paper include gentrification due to rising costs of property, issues of livability for residents due to the greater commercialization of Valletta, with a noted transformation from a residential to a catering destination (Zammit&Aldeiri, 2018). Changes were also noted in the amount of building permits that were applied for in the run-up to the ECoCevent which were as a result of and in their own turn bolstered more private investment, as well as a publicly-funded urban regeneration (Zammit&Aldeiri, 2018). These changes resulted in negative impacts on the social dimension of Valletta with residents increasingly feeling left out of key decision-making processes (Zammit&Aldeiri, 2018). Despite the plethora of impacts attributed to the ECoC event Ebejer (2019) opines that claims that the ECoC event was instrumental to the regeneration of Valletta are incorrect. A number of projects occurring since 2005 including the pedestrianization of Merchants Street and Pjazza San Ġorġ; the restoration and reuse of Fort St. Elmo; the Fortifications Interactive Centre; restoration of Valletta's more important buildings and the City Gate project provided important momentum whose effect culminated throughout the ECoC years or immediately after (Ebejer, 2019).

Another key impact of the ECoC event was cultural tourism. As noted by Sultana and Saliba (2018), the ECoC event did not significantly alter the number of tourists that visit Malta, and specifically Valletta for cultural reasons but contributed to maintaining a consistently high levels of tourists. Instead, the ECoC event shifted regeneration focuses from more physical conservation to improving the economic and social milieu of residential neighbourhoods such as Strait Street (Markwick, 2018).

## 5.2. Tourism

The cultural gaze is perennially sustained by the high levels of tourism that Valletta experiences. Since its inception, Valletta has always been a symbolically rich space with attractions that include its layout of urban spaces, style of architecture, and significance of buildings (Maitland& Ritchie, 2009, Cardona, 2015). Over 90% of the tourists that visit Malta visit the city each year, which can easily translate into over 1.3 million tourists per year (Ebejer, 2015) Despite Smith's (2009) association of Valletta tourism with its monumentality, his research indicated that mundane features (from a local perspective) such as doorways, timber balconies, stone features, streetscapes, and stepped streets were frequently mentioned as things of note by tourists (Ebejer et., 2019). This attractiveness has inevitably resulted in increased provision of tourism accommodation in boutique hotels and tourism short-term rentals. When compared to a dwelling stock of 3865, the increase of 160 rooms in boutique hotels and an increase of 344 Airbnb units since 2016 (Ebejer et. 2020) has continued to create additional difficulties for first-time buyers to buy a home in the city (Sciberras, 2016, Ebejeret., 2020).

The additional tourism has also contributed significantly to evening leisure activity which until the 2000s was mostly non-existent (Smith 2016). Additionally, the presence of many cruise ships within the ports brings on average two to three thousand cruise passengers in Valletta, creating significant infrastructural pressures on central Valletta (Xuereb, 2012, Ebejeret., 2020). The increased pressure of added tourism including the larger Maltese migration of those looking for a more urban lifestyle has continued to make Valletta less livable for residents contributing to an outflow of persons born and bred in Valletta (Ebejer, 2020a).

Safeguarding livability requires that tourism be capped, and to engage in a paradigm shift who view continuous growth and aggressive commercialization as the solution to most of Valletta's problems (Ebejer, 2020). Curbing illegal use of space by tables and chairs set out by the catering industry is also imperative to avoid over tourism in Valletta (Ebejer, 2020a).

## 6. Valletta: Discourses in Contest

Beyond the landscape and inhabitants of the various communities within Valletta, the city is an ideological site of contestation. Throughout various national and local conversations one can find themes and discourses that are recurring, and which seem to underly every debate that occurs about Valletta. The following section will attempt to catalogue these discourses.

### 6.1. Beltin vs Barranin

One of the first and most important discourses that one can frequently encounter in Valletta is the *Belti vs Barrani* debate. *Barrani* means foreigner in Maltese but uniquely to Valletta, this does not refer to anyone who is not Maltese but refers to anyone who is not a *Belti* (literally meaning someone from a city but used to refer to someone from Valletta). Being a *Belti* is not about where you are born, but about being accepted by the community of Valletta; a process which in itself is also a ritual (Gregory, 2019). Sometimes one is not required to be Maltese and a few persons not of Maltese descent have actually become *Beltin*. Becoming a *Belti* comes with privileges. *Beltin* are entitled (at least in the eyes of other *Beltin*) to have opinions on Valletta, especially disparaging opinions. Particular areas within Valletta are often called ghettos but being a *Belti* entitles you to call such a place a ghetto and still be socially accepted by neighbours (Gregory, 2019). *Barranin* do not get such 'royal' treatment and are often considered negatively when expressing opinions about developments in Valletta in front of other *Beltin*.

### 6.2. One City vs Multiple Communities

In many documents that mention Valletta, the city and its inhabitants are frequently referred to as a singular unit possessing the same goals, ideas, and visions for Valletta. A closer look at conversations with the community itself reveals that more differentiation is required. Areas like Il-Mandraġġ, Dijuballi and L-Arcipierku - constitute defined neighbourhoods with a tightly knit community that identifies itself not only as *Beltin* but as being specifically from their respective area, each with their history and stereotypical narratives (Vella Gregory, 2019). Additionally, religious communities often dividing along political and the associated socio-economic cleavages within the St. Paul and St. Dominic parishes also present different identities and viewpoints (Vella Gregory, 2019). Football is also a source of communal identity with some residents jokingly implying that it is a third religion. Other religious identities; such as the Bahai religion, and the Coptic and Protestant Communities; also feature within Valletta's rich tapestry but are rarely acknowledged even by *Beltin* themselves. Additionally, people who reside within Valletta not through choice but because of government provided social housing also form a part of the Valletta community. Finally, non-ethnically Maltese residents have in recent times formed a more important and numerous parts of the Valletta Community. The last two however co-exist with *Beltin* and are accepted, welcomed, and tolerated to varying degrees.

### 6.3. Decline vs. Revival

Another form of discourse in contest is the glory and decline as opposed by the revival discourse. The former as will be discussed also in the next form of discourse relates to the glory days of the past and will seek to cast most of the recent developments in negative light, highlighting the negative aspects of recent developments (Markwick, 2017, Gauci, 2019). Persons engaged in this discourse will frequently be cynical of developments and changes, at times seemingly disillusioned by the change itself rather than the quality of such change. Conversely, and frequently influenced by one's political orientation is the discourse of revival, optimism, and development. Proponents of the latter discourse will frequently use terms as 'alive' and 'dead' to signify the current and previous state of the city which they tend to highlight in an overly optimistic manner (Fabri, 2016)

### 6.4. Nostalgic vs Forward-looking

Attitudes towards Valletta are characterized by two opposing point of views. On the one hand one finds a profound nostalgia that sees the past as not only qualitatively different from the present, but demonstrably better (Cardona, 2015). On the other there are those who view Valletta as an opportunity to mark their legacy and open the city to the future and modernity (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2017). This was seen clearly in the vociferous debates on the Opera House development. Some felt a replica should be built with one contributor stated: 'It is a monument! A monument that we once had and it was taken away from us'. (Smith & Ebejer, 2012, pp. 144) Conversely, some claimed 'A nineteenth century opera house should not be built in the twenty-first century; we are a different society with different needs' (Smith & Ebejer, 2012, pp 144). Frequently the position taken on these kind of debates mirrors a deeper relationship to power. Persons who feel closer to exerting agency either through political affiliation or status obtained through industry will view the future as exciting and to be embraced. Persons who on the other hand feel disenfranchised from current power structures will tend to want to crystallize a past that may have never existed but serves to quell their present disempowerment anxieties by harking back to better days.

### 6.5. Capital vs City

Possibly an extension of the *Beltin vs Barranin* discourse. Capital cities are invariably accompanied by additional administrative functions, and as previously mentioned, a romanticized cultural gaze. In similar stead Valletta is weighed down with more than its fair share of burdens, such as road closure when an important head of state visits the parliament, or a festival is underway. Residents have reacted to this and feel in a sense that their city is being taken away from them, or even invaded (Brown et., 2019). This is epitomized with the parking issue, which at present comprises three colours of parking. Initially the proportion of each colour was decided as a result of studies conducted on an optimal ration of each colour. However, each successive local council has used its position to increase blue but especially green parking spaces. This conflict is symptomatic of a deeper discourse in tension, namely the local and residential discourse which claims the city, especially its physical spaces belonging to the *Beltin* and the general population who sees the city as part of their cultural heritage and identity. Many discussions and initiatives will contain elements of this tension in their discourse, and



often ideas particularly on the physical infrastructure are accepted or shot down depending on championing by prominent *Beltin*.

#### 6.6. National Beacon Vs International/European Symbol of Connectedness

Valletta's role as an icon within Maltese consciousness often takes contrasting roles. On the one hand it is seen as a national symbol conveying Maltese identity (Smith, 2010), and contrastingly as a symbol of connectedness to Maltese European roots (Ebejer, 2016). This conflict presents itself most clearly when it is perceived that foreign elites are given greater space and latitude to influence political outcomes. In this instance, Valletta quickly becomes a bastion of national identity and any change.

Interestingly, however whenever foreign elites are being enticed through marketing to invest within Malta or bring significant capital, thereby influencing the political ecosystem, Valletta's connectedness with the world and with Europe is highlighted as a selling point. One is never quite able to tell whether Valletta is the connection to the world or the beacon of national identity, and discourse shifts quickly from one to another.

The discourses that have been reported in this section do not pertain merely to Valletta but are the contrasts and conflicts which permeate Maltese identity (Smith and Ebejer, 2012). Valletta often becomes a tangible canvas where abstract theoretical discussions on past and future, insider and outsider status, singular and multiple identities within Maltese cultural consciousness is given substance. In understanding the debates and discourses that surround Valletta, it often feels that one is being given a deeper insight into the national rumblings and the messy processes that comprise the formation and cementing of national identity.

### 7. Conclusion

This systematic literature review has attempted to categorize and provide a form to all the literature that exists about Valletta from 2010 onwards. Naturally, such a broad endeavour makes it impossible to include all sources, and therefore this study has some notable limitations including the lack of mention of religious art and history, art and conservation, ecology, as well as a broader view of the underlying historical forces that have made Valletta what it is today. Valletta is more than a location. It is a system of shared memories, a political discourse used to obtain political goals, and a canvas on which one imprints their ideas of modernity or of some golden classical age. The community within Valletta has undergone severe changes over the last two decades and the physical space has changed to accommodate the different discourses that have prevailed at different times. Despite these changes, Valletta remains in the minds of many the primary place for culture within Malta, even when that culture is not shared by all and may even negatively impact some members of the Valletta Community. Six underlying conflicting discourses have been identified which still shape many debates of what has occurred, what is occurring and what should occur in the future. For the future using these frames and broadening the frame beyond the criteria of this study will manage to bring a more nuanced and complete picture of the city; perhaps one day this city built by gentlemen will become a city for all.

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