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## A fresh Maltese breeze

*With wide open windows, full-bodied voices, joyful fragrances and smiling arms, with tongues red carpets rolled out, be welcomed, traveller treading the cloth of worlds within worlds braided, be welcomed, reader and listen to the song of a thousand stories upon faces engraved*

*Merħba*, a poem of hospitality

Antoine Cassar

Awarded the Grand Prize of the United Planet Writing Contest in September 2009

A welcoming fresh breeze is coming from the Mediterranean. It is coming from Malta, a small member-state of the European Union 80 km south of Italy and close to the Libyan and Tunisian borders, in the middle of the sea at the crossroads of Europe and Africa. With a population of about 420,000 and covering just over 316 km<sup>2</sup> it is one of the world's smallest and most densely populated countries. Everybody is related to everybody else in one way or another. Festas and bands colour the localities. Life is full of energy. Covering 7,000 years of culture, the islands always played a strategic role in that part of the Mediterranean and have been challenged by different cultures throughout history.

Independent since 1964, becoming a republic 10 years later and joining the European Union 30 years after, Malta had been searching for its own identity quite a lot. In 'Shaping of a National Identity', Anthony M. Abela remarks about the shift from a strong traditional local identity to a more Mediterranean and European sense of belonging, particularly when Malta became member of the EU in 2004. One has to know, Abela states, that

*'the emotional transmission of an inherited national identity, which has so far been driven by people's attachment to the Church and religion, party politics, local and social solidarity, traditionalism and materialism, is gradually giving way to the reshaping of a national identity in a new social context. The latter is influenced by individualized values, the importance of leisure, and a concern with global solidarity'*<sup>1</sup>

Fifteen years later this change is noticeable.

Wandering through the streets of Malta's capital city, Valletta, one cannot ignore the feeling of vibrancy in the air. Valletta's city gate has been reconstructed. Renzo Piano's Parliament Building at the entrance to Valletta merges new and old architecture in a perfect way and, on the ruins of the former Royal Opera House known as *Teatru Real*, a new open-air theatre has been built as part of an all-

important facelift to the Renaissance city of knights and certainly a sign of changing times.

Malta might not yet be that well known throughout Europe, but this is clearly about to change owing to a course of events that challenges the country to meet up to high expectations on an international, diplomatic, and cultural level. In 2018 Valletta will be European Capital of Culture while at present Malta it has taken on the rotating role of president of the Council of the European Union for the first time. This is happening with eagerness and an ambitious agenda, including a focus on migration, social inclusion, Europe's neighbourhood, and maritime issues.

These topics are also present in the cultural programme that supports the presidency and can be seen as the runner up to the Cultural Capital year. Generations, routes, cities, and islands are the four themes of Valletta 2018 with specific projects on migration (to and from Malta), communities, education, encounters, and the sea. Most of the projects are embedded in the socio-cultural tissue of Malta through long-term processes, so that hopefully after 2018 traces will still be visible.

As a runner-up the presidency and Valletta 2018, Malta showed strength and dynamism in hosting and successfully the Valletta Summit on Migration, the hosting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the Summit of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFFACA), and the MED Forum (Anna Lind Foundation/Euromed) between 2015 and 2017. Diplomacy and culture were never so consistently on Malta's agenda.

So what drives this dynamism? Here different levels seem to interact with one another. On the level of cultural heritage, the enactment of the Cultural Heritage Act in 2002 was certainly an important trigger to ensure the protection as well as the accessibility of Malta's vast heritage. The act also broadened the definition of 'cultural heritage' to include movable, immovable, as well as intangible cultural assets<sup>2</sup> so that Malta's rich and beautiful heritage can be safeguarded for the future. Cultural policy follows on pretty much the same lines. A lot has changed over the last year. Culture has been given a higher priority on the political agenda.<sup>3</sup> Between 2006 and 2010 a national cultural policy came to light, the bid for Valletta 2018 (which encompasses all of Malta and Gozo and not just the capital city) was handed in and a creative economy strategy was developed.

The vision behind Malta's cultural policy is to transform cultural and creative activity into the most dynamic facet of Malta's present socio-economic life. In the area of policy empowerment, participation, and synergy between all stakeholders including citizens and tourists to Malta are key elements also featured in the mission of the Valletta 2018 Foundation which is committed 'to drive cultural, social and economic regeneration in Valletta and the Maltese Islands through collaboration, exchange and innovative practice'.<sup>4</sup>

Malta's capital of culture bid certainly generated the necessary momentum in the development of the cultural and creative sector. It also accelerated certain processes on an infrastructural and a strategic level. Let's highlight two of them. There is the artistic change at Spazju Kreattiv, the former St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, in Valletta. Their programme is a mix of own projects and proposals

focussing on a much broader definition of creativity than before, including science, technology, broadcasting, etc..., in order to foster Maltese contemporary art and creativity in all disciplines. And there is the significant transformation of Malta Council for Culture and the Arts which became Arts Council Malta (ACM), in order to support the changes needed in the sector to meet the challenges of a European Cultural Capital year and beyond.

On 12 May 2015 the Maltese Parliament approved a new legal structure for the Arts Council and, six months, later the Strategic Department of the Council was able to launch a five-year strategy. This action plan was developed thanks to a broad consultation process involving around 330 artists, creative practitioners, and other stakeholders meeting to discuss insights, ambitions, and dreams for Malta's cultural and creative sectors in the five years to come.

'With 2018 set as the fulcrum of our plan, we are building towards the Valletta European Capital of Culture and simultaneously working towards its legacy for post-2020 cultural development'<sup>5</sup> the Create 2020 Strategy states. The strategy was shaped thanks to a series of workshops, focus groups, and interviews. Key goals include professionalization of the sector by nurturing creative potential, supporting its development into provisional activity and its artistic excellence for culture and creativity on every possible level. Furthermore the strategy focuses on audience development in order to enhance cultural participation throughout the country in an inclusive manner. It also has the ambition to connect Malta to the international artistic community on a structural and long-term basis and to strengthen the capacity of Malta's public cultural organizations.

In a country where both human and infrastructural resources, are limited, the chosen cultural strategy can only succeed through collaboration between the different entities on a national and a local level. Although the main drivers of Malta's cultural policy are key actors, one cannot ignore the fact that local communities play an important part in the cultural development of the country. The intertwining of both makes the cultural and creative tissue stronger and more sustainable on the long run.

As Valletta 2018 executive director Karsten Xuereb points out 'the success of the cultural capital year will depend on the improved and sustained level of well-being of its citizens and visitors that is possible if cultural, economic, and social regeneration address, in a sensible manner, people and their spaces'.<sup>6</sup>

This is how Malta goes about with projects like MUŽA, the new national-community art museum that will open in 2018 and that puts community curation at the centre of its vision and objectives. The Valletta Design Cluster too is one other case in point, to be developed in an old building in a residential area of Valletta where residents, designers, artist, planners, and authorities work together to create a space that will be as much a place for the neighbours as it is for creatives and artists.

A year after the launch of this much-awaited strategy, it is clear and beyond doubt that the team leading this process of change is implementing the actions proposed in the plan one by one, supported by the necessary budget increase. New funding schemes offer space for experimentation and research to artists. Mobility

funds and multi-annual projects with international collaboration are encouraged. Valletta 2018, the Arts Council, and the Presidency Working Group joined forces to launch a second version of the Malta Showcase. Artist residencies are running thanks to Blitz (an independent, not-for-profit, project space in Valletta, which supports experimental and radical arts practice and residencies in all its forms) and thanks to the collaboration between Valletta 2018 and Spazju Kreattiv on that behalf. Sustainable international relations are developed across Europe and the Mediterranean. Malta will again be present at the Venice Biennale after 19 years of silence.

The cultural program of the presidency developed in collaboration with Valletta 2018 and the Arts Council also seeks to highlight Malta's strengths and identity? A key remit to all this is the internationalization of the artists and their work. But the programme is not just a showcase of what Malta has to offer on a cultural level. It also strengthens existing relationships, interacts with communities about the future, and gives citizens a voice through the citizen journalism project.

One can say that Malta holds the promise of exciting times for artists and creative people today. When talking to young artists they recognize that there is now a climate to set out one's own journey. One is more mobile and receives more input and critical views from the outside. A new momentum is clearly felt and a new fertile ground is tangible again as there was for artists at the beginning of the century when Malta joined the EU and artist collectives, such as START, engaged with specific historical spaces rather than a gallery or a museum to set up exhibitions. Their legacy is now present in the current generation of young artists. Hopefully more initiatives like Blitz might see the light in the coming years, so that more spaces to experiment will be available for the creative sector. There is still a long way to go but the strategy is a step in the right direction, and the present events create capacity and opportunities to develop.

All those involved in the consultation for Create 2020, the strategy launched by Arts Council Malta, agree on the value of the arts, their centrality, their importance in fostering a sense of belonging, understanding, and connecting ... and thus place the arts and creativity at the heart of Malta's future.

So let's feel welcome, take the invitation, 'Catch the Maltese breeze and see where it takes us to.'

#### NOTES

- 1 Anthony M. Abela, 'Shaping a National Identity. Malta in the European Union', *International Journal of Sociology*, vol. 35, No. 4, Winter 2005–06, 10.
- 2 Cultural Heritage Act, CAP. 445.
- 3 A survey held among local councils in 2015 showed that 78% of these councils believe culture has been given a higher priority on the governments political agenda: Marie
- 4 Briguglio, 'Cultural Participation in Malta: The Who, the How and the Why', in *On Culture Mapping Valletta 2018*, Vicky Cremona (ed.) (Malta, 2016), 17–19.
- 5 See website: <http://www.valletta2018.org>
- 6 Create 2020 Strategy Arts Council Malta 2016–2020.
- 7 Karsten Xuereb, 'Urban regeneration & Valletta 2018', in Cremona (ed.), 195.