

Interview transcript for Laura H.

Project Title: *Defying Convention: Devising New Approaches to Heritage Values in Valletta, Malta.*

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(First Spot – Upper Barrakka Gardens)

This so this is your first spot, so, I guess why have you chosen this spot?

This is the first place I usually take people, when I have guests from overseas staying in Valletta, and this was probably the first where I spent any substantial amount of time in Valletta. I didn't live here in the past, but I would have just come here on a bicycle, and I would spend a lot of time studying there (points to a spot)

I used to come here to study when I was doing my bachelors.

So, you have been to Malta before you moved to Valletta?

I have been in Malta for 14 years, so I have been here for a while. And Valletta has always been very special to me, and I never get bored of this view. I think it's just magnificent and in fact whenever I walk up to Castille from Floriana or from the bus depot, I make it a point that I appreciate that view. I think it would be a sin if I let myself take that for granted, because I still feel very lucky that I get to live in a place like this. (1.36) I mean...this view, where can you find this. I mean I am from somewhere in the middle of nowhere with just countryside around I thought that I would feel claustrophobic in Malta without any nature and stuff, but it's just a different thing. I mean all the history and it's just so picturesque. And for me this just the kind of place where you, I don't know, this is as much nature as you are going to find in Valletta.

Yeah, there is not much open space, right?

Yeah, so that's another reason why I like this but the same time it gets crowded. I mean right now it's full and its Covid times and there are barely any tourists here and it still has quite a few people in it, but obviously when there are people, when tourists here it's just packed. So, over the past few years I been coming here much less than I would have in the past. But there is another reason why I like this place, which I discovered recently, that from this side (faces Marsa) you can actually see all the planes taking off. So, when my best friend moved out of Malta in the beginning of the year, I took him to the airport then I came here and sat on the bastions, right here and checked online the timing of the plane and then I saw it taking off, so there is this significance in this place also. And it's also like a nice public to meet new people as well, when you don't want to meet somewhere, like, too noisy but at the same time you want to go somewhere safe. So, I think that's my relationship with this place in a nutshell.

That's interesting, do you feel unsafe in Valletta at all?

No, not really, but what I mean, its slightly embarrassing for some reason but meeting from dating apps. It's nice to go into a place immediately that is too intimate, so that is what I mean, there is this open space that gives safety but at the same time it's not like you are sitting in the middle of a street on a bench. It's like a compromise between those two, and that's another

thing that I wanted to mention, what for obvious reasons is kind of missing in Valletta is this ability to find private spaces, and in fact one of my favourite places I am not even going to take you, because I don't want too many people to know it, because it is one of the few places I can go and almost nobody would ever even run around there at all.

(Walking to second spot St Barbara's Bastion)

I mention this because I was once able to get into Upper Barrakka when it was closed. It was not open, but I was able to get in, so it's because I would have this need to find spaces which are, which have this feeling that are no people around, and obviously Valletta is not great for that. But funnily enough it's almost easier to find these places which are just a bit isolated. Because everyone looks in the countryside for these nooks where there is no one, and in some ways, you have more chance of seeing people around sometimes, than if you find a quiet spot on the bastions somewhere, where you are technically not supposed to be. So basically, that's the point, so here if you want to find a bit more private you practically do something you are not supposed to do.

(Via Lascaris War Rooms)

Yeah, I have never actually managed to find where these "war rooms" are or been to them, I just keep seeing these signs.

Hmm – I love these little alleyways as well.

So, we are seeing the second spot where I wanted to take you, which is St Barbara's Bastion. That is another place that I wanted to go because it also has some memories linked to it and I think I had come there for the first time when I did my BA here, and my other subject was Geography. And we did field work that took us here, to St Barbara's Bastions. And I had never been, I have never been to this part, this side of Valletta. So, I was quite taken by it and ever since then, I have said like this is my favourite street in Valletta, this is my favourite place. And I am very aware that many people seem to share my opinion and it's ridiculously expensive to love there.

Obviously, we are going to be passing the Bridge Bar, which is another spot that is, that captures the something, the best parts of Valletta. Especially pre-covid. It's like this perfect mixture between a bit fancy so Jazz, but then low key because you are just sitting on the steps with cockroaches coming out of the drains half the time. So, it's kind of this, I don't know, it's my comfort zone. It's kinda that sort of place where you go and you just run into people...

It's also one of those places in Valletta that was around pre-boom

Yeah, I probably would have come here the first year I moved, so 2007. So, I remember it was always there for me, but obviously 14 years is not the biggest frame of reference.

But yeah, we had come here for this Geography fieldwork and the reason we had come here was because of the Grand Harbour Regeneration Project or something and our lecturer had thought that this was a good spot to kind of see everything and I had learned about Villa Bigbi. That is when I had fallen in love with this street, but then after that this place became the place where I would to watch the Jazz Festival when I did not want to go into the Jazz Festival. Which I had done a good few times, then there were reasons why I did not want to go there.

So, I spent quite some time here for that and there was some kind of regatta or something two years ago. And I had met here for the first time with someone who then became one of my best friends.

We would just a bottle of wine during the Jazz Festival and sit on the bastions, listening and looking and you can see stuff better than when you actually go into the festival.

(Walking to next spot – Lower Barrakka)

The route you have chosen is skirting around the bastions, is that intentional?

Its partially intentional, also because we will end up closer to the centre eventually, but I think that's also a bit of me I feel more comfortable on the periphery, in general. I live here now but I am not a city person at heart. But Valletta to me does not feel like a city, it feels like a town. That's part of the reason why I wanted to start from the outside, because these are the places I would be looking for in fact. But the "outside part" will end here at Lower Barrakka.

I am from an area originally where there are quite a lot of hills, so I would always, so I am used being able to go somewhere and have a view, far away. And I think that's why also that I like this bit, I love the fact that Valletta is high up, and you can go around and just have a view even if it's built up and what not. You can see far and unobstructed. And I would be very happy if those cranes and whatever were not there, that would be a lot better! But I do understand that industry is important too.

(Third Spot – Lower Barrakka)

It took me a couple of years to discover that there is a LB, because the UB that everyone knows. Yeah, and ever since I found it I thought this is so much better. Probably because its forgotten, because there are less people. I like that, that it's not so full and it's a bit more peaceful. Again, this is a place where I have come when the gates are closed as well.

Now this has become my lunch spot. I have not come here many times but it's very close, I live in this area. I find it very relaxing to just come here and look at the view, and even in COVID times, there are not a lot of people, so I don't feel bad.

(Walking towards railings overlooking Bell Monument)

There were other places I had in mind, but I don't want to walk too far! Not because I don't want to walk but it would take too long. But if had to I think of the theme of the places when I first think of when I think of Valletta it's the hidden, the places where you can find some sort of privacy, like this place. There aren't many people, and even more so a night when they close them.

But I find that a pity, that they close these places at night. I mean in summer they are open longer, but I cannot remember how long exactly. But still, I find it a pity that they aren't open at the moment for as long as I would like them to be. It would be good to have access to somewhere were you can stay in a public space away from the streets, that isn't somewhere where you have to pay to sit on someone's table.

I wanted to come here, because that (Bell Monument) is another place like the ones I have spoken about, like behind that Bell is a place where you can pretend that there aren't people around.

The Breakwater as well, I mean you cannot go there, especially now. But as an area, I had gone there, not completely aware of how much you should go there. Then I found the sign saying "Whoever comes here will be fined €3000". It was shortly after they had put that bridge on because that bridge is quite new. I still remember when it was just this archway into nothingness. I know someone who thought that was a very special bit and were really sorry when the archway into nothingness disappeared and was replaced by something more functional.

I never see people there, I just see it closed.

And obviously, there is the beach down there which has become a place where, especially in summer, I would be there. I mean it gets very dirty, if you wanted to really appreciate how we have screwed up the sea, come here when the wind is coming from that direction.

(Moving to the centre via St Christopher's Street, St Pauls, Archbishops to Suq Square)

Ok we are going to get more towards the centre now. So, this is going towards where I am staying at the moment. I had always wanted to live in Valletta, and I have been renting here (Malta) the whole time I have been here. But Pre-Covid this was not affordable.

Why Valletta specifically?

It's a bit hard to answer because, even when I chose to move here, I was very scared, because I like peace and quiet in reality, and I was very aware that that is not compatible with living in Valletta. But I wanted to come here, it's just the feel of the place. In fact, I would always come here to relax eve during weekends. I told you I would with the bicycle go to Upper Barrakka and just stay there, but even other places, just coming in and walking around.

And I spent the first few months after I moved here just every now and then I would say I cant believe that I live here and do a bit of a happy dance. It was just unbelievable to me that I actually live in this city.

I am not sure how to explain the feeling, there is something related to history for sure. Because it's a different feeling that I would get in any other place. But even the other historical places, I am thinking of the oldest bits of Attard and all of that.

Are you suggesting a particular sense of place?

Yes, yes it's very particular. There is this sense that this has been lived in. Very much, I think that's the difference if I had to compare this with the more secluded places in Malta, maybe not secluded but slightly more rural feeling places like Attard for example. Even if they were the same age which I think they are not, because this is probably older than most of those areas. But even if they were, the sense is that this place has seen a lot more life in it. A lot more has happened.

That sense of History is important to you?

Yes, I think it is the sense of knowing, just knowing how many people have walked these streets if that makes sense. I remember even when I was a very young girl, that I had gone to the house where my father had grown up....and I remember that sense of awe, think "Oh he has walked here when he was 5 years old"...it felt like a privilege that I could go there.

I honestly did realize they had taken the parking areas away because it was pedestrianized. For a while I was upset about it, but then I have to agree it's much nicer now. Its better like this. It's just annoying to know why it happened, at least the version I heard is that the guy who owns the place on the corner he got it all done for his tables.

Valletta change driven by business?

It's unfortunate because this space, because there is a lot of space and not much has been done with it ever since it was pedestrianized, what 7 or 8 months ago? There are people who believe in pedestrianization less than I do who would be very annoyed seeing and saying it was so much better when I could actually leave my car here.

(Fourth spot – Is-Suq)

This part of Merchant Street, especially from here – where it was pedestrianised earlier. This bit and the square in front of Is-Suq Tal-Belt. I chose this because this is where I live basically, around this area. And I am aware that this building has, let's say, upset quite a few people to put it mildly.

Why do you think that is?

Well, the views that I have heard, is that it had so much potential it could have been used so much better. And it's kind of been wasted by having a pretty cheap food court in it, something that does not have much quality and does not really to the place as much as it should and could. I mean I have heard people compare it to food courts in other cities where were it would be more artisanal, and there would be more something local. This is commercial, at least there isn't McDonalds, not that level of commercial but it stops just short of that.

For me at least, I associate it with noise, and the aspects where residents are not considered in Valletta. It's kind of like we are expected to just suffer the consequences of tourist, and the consequences of all the restaurants and cafeterias, because it is extremely noise here at times, especially in summer. Even last summer, which apparently was a quiet summer, but I would sleep every night with all my windows and doors closed with earplugs in and on some nights I could still hear the music.

But this place is kind of home now as well, that's my super market....that's the part I can't really object to. I can see how that is part of the problem to, but I benefit from it in all honesty at the moment, so it's a bit hard to complain, because it is very convenient.

It's also convenient that there is a really good coffee place here too, Lot 61, a lot of people say that it's the best coffee in Malta. That's what I have heard but I am not sure I agree with that.

Especially now working from home I like that I have a million nice lunch places within a 5 min walking distance.

(Walking to final spot – St George's square)

Have you noticed a difference in Valletta under Covid?

Well, I moved here during Covid, I moved here last May. It was completely dead, obviously it was still part of the lockdown. I had moved here a few weeks after restaurants had opened, and I had gone to a restaurant with a friend of mine that you normally cannot get into without a booking, and we were the only people there the whole night.

Then it slowly slowly opened up more and by July or whatever it ended up being very loud. It was funny, everything was dead, but my street was the loudest!

(Final spot – St George’s Square)

This is my last place on my list of places, and I wanted to choose this because this has changed so enormously from when I moved to Malta 14 years ago. This was a gigantic parking lot; I don’t think it even had asphalt. And I remember the “Karożżin Horses” they all used to be parked on this corner. It was such contrast with this rather nice café (Cordina) a few steps away. I remember the smell of the horse urine; it would hit you anytime that you passed from here. Then they created this square, and it may not be the style that I identify with much, but I really enjoy that fountain. I have spent a lot of time just sitting on one of these benches. I used to have piano lessons down by St Elmo, and it was part of routine that I would come after my lesson on Saturday, and I would get a croissant and a coffee from Café Cordina and I would sit here at the square.

And back in the day they would have the light show with the music, with the water as well. I don’t when they stopped it, but I think it’s been years. I never got bored of it, I would always watch it. It was a thing; I would come and maybe I had a book to read but when the show would start, I would look at it even though it was the same music and the same pattern.

There was this particular time when they had this project where they brought a bunch of pianos in a bunch of different places in Malta in general but there was one here. And I remember this one particular time where this was this old man was playing on the piano, and I had my croissant and my coffee, and the sun was shining, and it was just perfect.