



MaLIA Short Report on Proposal for the Opera House Ruins

March 2009

Introduction

The Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA) issued a press release on the 10 October 2008 proposing that the ruins of the Royal Opera House are built into a cultural centre and that a state-of-the-art public library is included as the main part of this centre. The MaLIA Council's objective is that such a project would satisfy an immediate and important need that is currently lacking in Malta. To date, Malta does not have a modern, centrally located and readily accessible public lending library with all the facilities found in other state-of-the-art libraries all over European cities and towns.

Following the issue of the press release, MaLIA also launched an iPetition in favour of this project as well as a Facebook group. Both these initiatives have been a success with the iPetition having 440 signatories to date and the Facebook group accumulating over 780 members. This shows that there is a definite interest in the idea proposed by MaLIA and this is the main reason why the MaLIA Council has decided to present this report to the Prime Minister of Malta.

This short report has the objective to present the main reasons why the MaLIA Council is promoting this project without commenting on the other proposals being proposed for the site. The MaLIA Council is of the opinion that there is a possibility that other suggested proposals can be integrated in one holistic project.

Disclaimer

It must be made clear that MaLIA is presenting this report with the limited facts that are currently available. Additional research will definitely be required if the proposal gains further momentum and a decision is taken to move forward with our proposal.

The current scenario

Statements made by various entities have suggested various solutions on the project concerning the rebuilding of the Royal Opera House ruins. Whilst there have been several public discussions on these proposals, in favour or against, MaLIA would like to publicly state that it believes its proposal can coexist with other proposals for the same site if:

1. Two floors (approx 5,000 sq m) covering the whole site area are allocated to the Library part of the building. *NB Any Additional necessary space for the non-public available (administrative & stack storage) space can be made available underground beneath the site or adjacent in Republic square or at the present Central Public Library building in Floriana*
2. The main entrance to the Library part of the joint building is from the Republic Street end and/or Republic Square.

MaLIA strongly believes that a state-of-the-art public library is needed in Malta for various reasons.

1. Location The first and most obvious reason is that the current location of the Central Public Library is not ideal or suitable. A public library needs to be located within the city in a prominent, readily accessible site which most people who enter the city for any reason will find without any difficulty. It is the most simple and effective way to entice people to walk in and use the library. The present library in Floriana, apart from being off the beaten track, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way down a steep hill, presents a veritable challenge to older and disabled persons without their own transport. MaLIA also considers the current location as unsafe for children and young adults after sunset. In recent years, there have been a number of research projects, mainly long assignments of the Diploma in Library and Information Studies, which have indicated that the current location is not considered ideal amongst users. Furthermore, statistics on book loans issued by the Central Public Library indicate a consistent decrease during the last 4 years, from 295,686 in 2004 down to 214,837 in 2007. These figures can be interpreted to mean a decrease in the popularity of this library which can be corrected by a library located within the city.
2. Literacy The second reason is that, as statistics have shown, Malta is at the bottom of the reading league in the EU. We believe that a modern public library, especially one in a prominent location such as the one we are proposing, will entice more people to walk into the library, read and access information. Whilst there are various factors contributing for the poor reading habits of the Maltese, it has been proven that modern public libraries that provide a family friendly environment, up-to-date adequately sized collections, and innovative services for all the family are conducive to attracting people that do not normally make use of a public library.
3. Library Standard The third reason is that such a modern public library would be the benchmark that other local public libraries will try to emulate in a coordinated effort to revamp all our public libraries and dispel the archaic notion that public libraries are old stuffy places where a few people go to borrow a book. As an association promoting the use and importance of libraries and the library and information profession, we feel that our public libraries need a massive boost to carry out their important role in the knowledge-based society and this could be the first important step and a bold statement by government that it intends to revamp libraries.

Main Function of the Public Library Institution

As IFLA clearly explains <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s8/proj/gpl.htm>

“A public library is an organisation established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organisation. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment.”

The primary objective of the public library is to provide resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for education, information and personal development including recreation and leisure.

Education

"Supporting both individual and self conducted education as well as formal education at all levels"

Information

"The public library is the local centre of information, making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users."

Personal Development

"Providing opportunities for personal creative development"

Children and Young People

"Creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age."

Cultural Development. Providing a focus for cultural and artistic development in the community

Collections

The information that would support such functions would need to cover both non-fiction and fiction items in lending and reference collections covering the whole range of information formats; printed books and magazines, music, films, maps and digital content on-line or not etc.

The whole range of subjects would be covered with pronounced emphasis on Maltese publications. What would make this library different from other libraries in Malta would be two unique collections that we are suggesting should be the following:

1. History and Culture of Valletta Collection
2. A Maltese Art and Design (visual, graphic, 3D, sound, A-V) collection in digital format covering all epochs and artists.

More than just collections

The range of services that this library would offer besides its collections (making available its shelved and electronic collections for reference or lending purposes) will include:

1. A national Information Literacy Centre (teaching information research skills)
2. Collaboration with other libraries in Malta for the sharing of resources between all public libraries and other publicly funded libraries mainly UoM libraries, MCAST, ITS and School libraries
3. Space allocated for book and other Maltese publications launches
4. Family Learning sessions (including story-telling for children and literacy sessions for adults)
5. Medium lecture room (50-75 persons for booking by culture NGOs offering talks to the public)
6. Exhibition space for subject themed library collections

7. Community information centre covering Government, EU, Commercial and Tourist information
8. Coffee shop
9. Book/stationery/gift shop

Allocation of space for this project

MaLIA is of the opinion that the allocation of a minimum of two floors (ground and first floor) is needed for a state-of-the-art public library serving the general public from all over the island. This would mean approximately 5000 square meters that should be able to accommodate the collections and all the services expected from a modern public library mentioned above.

This document is suggesting that the administration and back office of this library need not be placed on-site if space does not allow, but could be housed elsewhere; underground beneath Royal Opera House site, under adjacent Republic Square or remain in the current Central Public Library location in Floriana.

The Investment Needed

Whilst it is difficult to make precise costings of such a project at such an early stage, MaLIA is presenting estimates on the approximate capital and recurrent expenditure that such a project would require. The estimates do not include capital expenditure for the actual building and engineering fittings of the site as this will be built in any case, with or without or proposed project.

Capital Expenditure:

IT Expenditure -	€300,000
Furniture (desks and seating) -	€90,000 (450 covers @ €200 each)
Other furniture (office, leisure areas)	€40,000
Shelving -	€300,000
Initial Book/Journal Stock -	€250,000
Library Security System - collections)	€75,000 (1 entrance/exit incl. tagging initial)
A-V equipment	€50,000

Note: IT Expenditure to include provision of approx 150PC's, server and Wi-Fi throughout the building. Furniture expenditure to include reading desks, chairs, and leisure reading seating, Shelving calculated on approx. 5 km of shelving required including display units for periodicals and, A-V collections. Book stock estimated as an initial investment to boost current collection that is extremely poor at the moment and requires an initial boost to get anything near offering adequate resources for users.

Recurrent Expenditure:

Manpower covering the cultural centre AND Library

(25 FTE at peak day hours Monday to Friday 10.30am to 7.30pm + Saturday am)

+ additional 5 persons to cover morning hours (08.00am to 10.30am Monday to Friday).

This covers the Library and Cultural Centre at approx average salary of €15,500 = €465,000.

Collection Development -	€150,000 (including books, periodicals and AV material.
IT maintenance and upgrade-	€45,000
Training -	€20,000
Sundries	€50,000 (covering stationery, consumables etc.)

Note: Collection development to include both print and electronic resources based on a collection development and selection policy. IT maintenance includes all repairs and replacement of damaged hardware plus software acquisition and costs for Internet provision. Security includes maintenance of library security systems. Training includes all types of training including courses, conferences and ad hoc training modules.

Building maintenance / repair / cleaning costs are not included as these will form an integral part of the whole building complex.

Recommendations

MaLIA is of the opinion that the current organisation structure of the Department of Libraries is in dire need of a completely new set-up and our feedback on the proposed Libraries Act included a new structure. There is no doubt, however, that a significant investment must be made in human resources. This should include training of current employees as well as the recruitment of new additional human resources that should be qualified in library and information studies.

MaLIA is of the opinion that such a project should be run by professional staff that have the right vision of how modern libraries are managed and the motivation to make this project a success. There are various best practices that can be followed of projects involving the building of modern public libraries. The Amsterdam Public Library was opened last year and a video of what it offers is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pJl1wDGMr0>. On a smaller scale, another public library project was inaugurated in 2006 in Oldham (UK) and details are available at <http://www.oldham.gov.uk/community/libraries/oldham-library.htm>. Pictures of several other public libraries in Switzerland and The Netherlands can be viewed at

http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=3&id=616988984#/photo_search.php?oid=35633385778&view=all

These are just a few examples of successful new public libraries that totally dispel the myth that public libraries are going to die a natural death because of the Internet. The fact is that the libraries and the Internet are mutually compatible and not diametrically opposed.

Conclusion

This short report is just a brief overview of what MaLIA believes such a project should entail from the concept and resources point of view. MaLIA is of the opinion that a state-of-the art public library that could become a landmark in Malta and would not only boost the image of Valletta but also support the formal education system and promote lifelong education and the promotion of culture in an informal and family friendly environment.

MaLIA also believes that the governments' strategy, Vision 2015, that emphasis the role of education would clearly be incomplete without the promotion of our culture and focus on the importance of lifelong learning. A state-of-the-art public library is one fundamental step towards the promotion of lifelong learning through informal learning, the provision of information and a relaxing place for leisure and enjoyment for the Maltese citizens in general.