GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES
HISTORICAL HERITAGE, URBAN CORES (HUBS) AND PIAZZAS

Resident First
A better quality of life

Contents

1. Introduction

A defining element of most localities in Malta and Gozo is the historic urban core, comprising central *piazzas* and compact districts with traditional streets, often rich in architectural heritage. Not surprisingly, many are designated as Urban Conservation Areas within the Local Plans issued by the Planning Authority. In Valetta alone, around 320 monuments may be found, making it one of the most concentrated historic areas (in terms of built heritage) in the World. In the words of UNESCO, in order to improve the liveability of urban areas, urban heritage should be more than just a relic – it should be considered as a key resource present within the community's daily life that strengthens its identity.

Currently, Malta's historic centres face an imminent pressure of rapid modern development and a car-centric infrastructure, amply highlighted in the Local Councils' Association's documents on **Sustainable Mobility** previously published. Local Councils, policymakers, urban planners, NGOs and residents are slowly acknowledging the need to rethink such important sites for more sustainable community development. This document aims to guide stakeholders and policymakers to enhance these historical areas through responsible interventions that transform them into vibrant social hubs by primarily returning them to people rather than cars.

Ultimately, revitalising historic urban cores is about reaching a balance: honouring the past – the architecture, traditions and collective memory – while planning for the future – safer, greener and more inclusive public spaces. Heritage must be seen as a valuable asset. Central to this approach is the public space, which may catalyse improved liveability and social well-being within our localities. In this way, Local Councils may ensure their historic hubs remain the beating heart of the community for future generations.

Photograph by Anja Lee Ming Becker on Unsplash

2. The Need to Enhance Historical Urban Cores

Many town centres in Malta surround a parish church and piazza, which naturally become a nucleus of everyday civic life activity. Their well-maintained status benefits the nation by preserving its cultural heritage, strengthening local identity and pride, providing spaces for businesses and social interaction, promoting sustainable tourism and boosting residents' quality of life.

These centres often suffer from traffic congestion, insufficient pedestrian safety, outdated and poorly maintained paving and furniture, as well as underutilised public spaces. Nevertheless, they still feature historical buildings, monuments, fountains and other elements that could greatly enhance the town's urban character. Thoughtful improvements, such as **restoring facades, pedestrianising streets and calming traffic, adding lighting and greenery and reversing past car-centric mistakes** (like converting squares into roundabouts or parking areas), can help regain their original spirit as places for gathering, trade, and celebration. Such an approach aligns with current EU priorities concerning sustainable urban development and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Moreover, investing in these interventions within historical cores strengthens community well-being and boosts local economies. UNESCO highlights how urban heritage conservation can balance growth with quality of life, while reimagined public spaces increase foot traffic, support local businesses and attract tourists seeking authenticity. The central government has recognised this potential, as evidenced by the recent regeneration of many main piazzas. Enhancing these hubs is not a luxury, but a necessity — vital for preserving both our built heritage and the social fabric that defines Maltese communities.

Mosta's and Birgu's recently completed main squares have reimagined urban space for people, introducing important place-making principles in the heart of these two important localities. Both examples were rethought initially as part of the broader Slow Streets strategy initiated by the LCA.

2.1 The Role of Piazzas as Social Spaces

The centre of every traditional Maltese town serves as the residents' living room for daily life and social interaction. As a result, it often features key institutions such as the Parish Church, band club *(kazin)*, Local Council office and local shops that animate the urban area. Thanks to this concentration and mixture of elements, a distinctive scene emerges within the urban environment: elderly individuals chatting on benches, children playing, bustling markets and people walking or stopping, alongside village feasts *(festi)* celebrations, processions and cultural performances.

Photograph by Jan Antonin Kolar on Unsplash

Photograph by Ingrid Martinussen on Unsplash

In today's fast-paced world, village squares hold vital social value as inclusive and neutral spaces where people of all ages can connect. Often seen by residents as extensions of their homes, these public areas offer fresh air, spontaneous encounters and a sense of belonging, which is especially important in high-density areas with limited private outdoor space. Ultimately, a way for a place to become emblematic is when it stays printed in the collective memory of local people. They are connected by one space in time where stories have taken place; this is another way to build a sense of community.

Beyond their social role, piazzas also support local economies and cultural life. Surrounding cafés and shops benefit from increased footfall, while tourists are drawn to their authentic atmosphere. Weekly markets, fairs, and festas animate these spaces, sustaining traditions and turning the square into a lively hub for local celebrations.
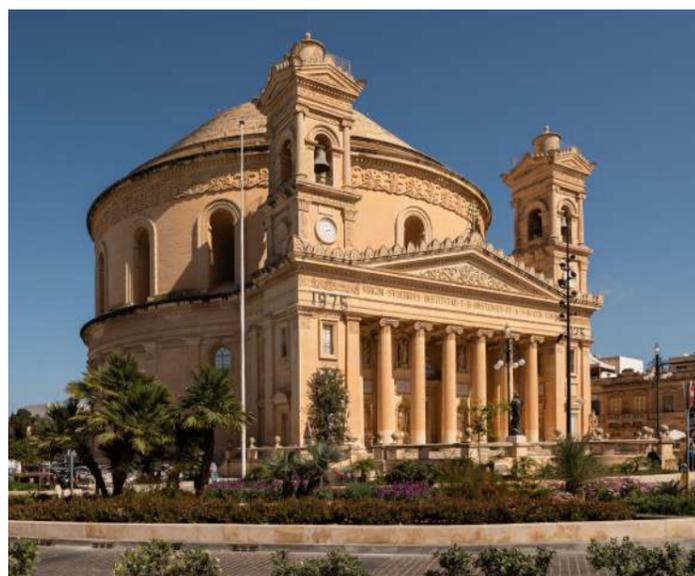
Source: Studjurban, Photo by Sean Mallia.

Illustration by Studjurban.
The redesigned Mosta Square

Mosta's new design features improved and wider pavements, landscaping, urban furniture, and rethought traffic paths, following an in-depth study of the locality's heritage value and urban character. Complementing the design are new traffic calming measures that have transformed a car-dominated space into a more pedestrian-priority area, albeit with vehicular traffic. As a result, this new safe space can now be enjoyed and utilised for various events by the community.

In recognition of a square's pivotal role to keep Malta's localities lively and connected, efforts to enhance urban cores often begin with rethinking the piazza – prioritising pedestrian traffic, adding greenery to the space, creating an aesthetically pleasing environment which is also robust enough to have different functions and hold various events, as discussed in the LCA's document *3.4 Open Space Re-use*. When a piazza is welcoming and well-utilised, it can promote a strong sense of community. Conversely, if a square is filled with vehicular traffic, residents' social life around this area weakens, resulting in an unused space.

Photograph of the redesigned Mosta Square by Studjurban.
Source: Studjurban
(photo by Sean Mallia)

Photograph by Artem Lobastov on Unsplash

2.2 The need to return urban spaces to people

Throughout the latter decades of the 20th century, as private vehicles started taking over, village centres became relegated to providing car access and parking, with vehicles dominating spaces that historically belonged to people. The consequences have been multifold – a loss of accessible public space for people, noise and air pollution in the heart of communities and safety issues for those venturing on foot.

As discussed within the LCA's **Sustainable Mobility** documents, Malta has one of the highest vehicle densities in Europe. Many piazzas have been turned into formal or informal car parks over the years and narrow streets and urban squares within the inner cores have been overwhelmed by through-traffic far beyond what they were designed to carry. Due to the presence of cars and parking areas, children are not allowed to play or run around the urban space, elderly people cannot commute safely, and the place's character becomes significantly compromised.

Encouragingly, Malta is demonstrating an increasing commitment to prioritising this cause. The **Slow Streets** initiative, led by the LCA in collaboration with Transport Malta and the Planning Authority, has recognised a national consensus to reduce vehicle dominance and enhance public accessibility in squares. More recently, and also building on this scheme's importance, Infrastructure Malta launched the **Vjal Kulħadd** programme to redesign 14 sites across Malta with pedestrian zones, cycle lanes and green spaces.

Slow Streets. Source: Local Councils' Association.

Returning spaces to people does not necessarily mean banning cars everywhere, but reclaiming a balance. Strategies could include a degree of full or partial pedestrianisation, with a focus on the main piazza and adjacent streets (limiting vehicular traffic, if at all, to certain hours at night/early morning), re-routing through-traffic to peripheral roads (with a focus on the outer distributor roads rather than other local streets) and providing alternative transport options (amply discussed in the LCA's *Last Mile Transportation* document as part of the *Sustainable Mobility* series) to improve pedestrian and public transport accessibility to the centre. Where full pedestrianisation is not an immediate solution, traffic calming and "shared space" designs, as discussed within the *Slow Streets* schemes and other *Sustainable Mobility* documents, may also elevate the pedestrian experience and improve safety for all street users.

It is well-known that reducing car dominance in town and village cores may bring significant societal benefits, such as cleaner air, less noise, improved safety and more public space availability for greenery, seating and play areas. Ultimately, traffic and polluted, inaccessible spaces result from planning choices that can be reversed. The success of Valletta's pedestrian streets, Sliema's Bisazza Street pedestrianisation and, more recently, Birgu's Square, illustrate how pedestrianisation may succeed despite possible early resistance, boosting foot traffic and creating welcoming public realms.

Birgu Square – before and after visuals of the piazza. Source: Google Earth (top), Studjurban (bottom)

Traffic-calming measures in Għajnsielem, Gozo, further support this idea: closing key streets on summer weekends has reclaimed over 25,000 m² for the residents' use. However, the successful transformation of urban spaces depends on more than just restricting traffic. While valuing space as a physical entity is crucial, it should also be activated with amenities and planned events to provide purpose and meaning. Community involvement and thoughtful design are the basis of any successful urban space redesign. Schemes that are community-centred can restore dignity and life to historical squares, aligning with a national vision of prioritising people, supported by walking, cycling and other sustainable mobility options.

Sustainable tourism strategies, including interventions on historical spaces, may also provide significant economic benefits, supporting local businesses, encouraging extended visitor stays and further elevating our cultural heritage and Malta's profile as a high-quality destination.

Regenerating historical hubs within a sustainable tourism framework may position Malta as a historically rich destination of preference and a pioneer in responsible tourism. This approach protects cultural assets and paves the way for a more resilient economy, hand in hand with our heritage.

Photograph by Sergio Aguirre on Unsplash

In summary, the Maltese experience can echo as a global urban trend: streets and squares for people, not just for vehicles. Embracing this in our historic cores is essential in order to restore their original purpose and unlock their full potential for the community.

3. Malta – Challenges and Opportunities

It would first be opportune to contextualise the discussion on transforming historical urban cores in Malta, by addressing distinct challenges and opportunities that need to be understood and navigated effectively.

3.1 Key Challenges

Claiming back Malta's historical public spaces faces various challenges, not least since urban space is at a premium and competition for land is intense, making changes like removing parking logistically harder and often a controversial issue within the local community. Coupled with this is the car-centric approach that characterises most local mindsets, wherein residents are used to driving into urban centres. This inevitably leads to resistance against pedestrianisation and fears of traffic displacement (and congestion) elsewhere. Local businesses will also worry about losing customers, despite evidence that the increased foot traffic in a safer and pedestrian-priority environment simultaneously increases their revenue over time. Maintenance and enforcement are further issues, especially if Local Councils lack the resources to keep such spaces clean, safe and well-regulated. This is particularly pertinent with regard to the appropriation of space by Outdoor Catering Areas (OCAs). Heritage protection adds another complex layer, with design restrictions due to heritage assets and the possibility of delays due to archaeological

discoveries. From an infrastructure point of view, Malta's hot climate and sudden storms call for thoughtful climate-resilient design, such as shaded areas and improved drainage, which is often hard to retrofit adequately into compact, historical environments. Finally, finding appropriate ways of ensuring residents' active involvement in the design and planning process is crucial. Even the best-designed public spaces can fail if the community does not embrace them. Residents need to be heard in the discussions even because they will have valuable information about the space they interact with on a daily basis. Residents need to be at the heart of the proposed changes, as ultimately, the improvements to urban spaces should aim to make a real difference in their daily lives. To ensure a good relationship with the local community, a project's benefits should be visible early on, such as safer pavements, more seating and better lighting at night. It is also important that these spaces are brought to life with regular activities and events – again, the local community should play a central role in this.

3.2 Key Opportunities

Despite the challenges, Malta has several advantages that strongly support the regeneration of its historical centres. First, Maltese communities have a deep cultural identity and emotional attachment to their towns and villages, with pride in their local traditions, the *festa* and landmarks that must not be ignored. Each successful urban space regeneration contributes to a growing momentum: national authorities, Local Councils and the Local Councils' Association increasingly prioritise people-centred planning, with programmes such as *Slow Streets* and *Vjal Kulħadd*

focused on supporting pedestrian-friendly spaces. Furthermore, Malta can access EU funds and initiatives aimed at cultural preservation, mobility and sustainable urban development, offering financial and technical backing. These realities have simultaneously raised a wave of civic engagement from NGOs, youth groups and residents calling for better public spaces. This reinforces the belief that communities are ready for change and eager to lead it when they can see tangible, positive results. These combined forces can represent a strong foundation for building meaningful regeneration efforts.

CHALLENGES   **OPPORTUNITIES**

Limited land availability   Cultural identity and pride

Maintenance Costs   Rising civic engagement

Historic Hubs

Heritage protection delays   Successful examples

Climate conditions   Political support & EU funding

Illustration by Studjurban

Photograph by Ben Mathis Seibel on Unsplash

4. Key Design Pointers for Developing Public Spaces in Historical Contexts

When planning and designing improvements in historic urban cores and piazzas, certain design principles and best practices should be followed to ensure the outcome is both respectful of heritage and responsive to contemporary needs. Below are key design pointers tailored to Malta's historical contexts:

Respect the Historic Fabric and Identity

- Begin by deeply understanding the site's history and character.

- Preserve and highlight important heritage elements.

- Integrate archaeological features discovered during works.

- Integrate new additions (such as urban furniture) sensitively, seeking to respect and enrich the existing historical context.

Prioritise Pedestrians and Shared Use

- Design should centre around pedestrian comfort, expanding pavement area and creating pedestrian-only zones wherever possible.

- Implement traffic calming measures, such as curbless streets or textured paving, to slow down vehicles.

- If vehicle access is necessary, limit it to peripheral areas, keeping the central and most accessible space pedestrian-focused.

Reorganise Parking and Transport Links

- Reduce most parking spaces within the core and relocate them to the outskirts, supporting the parking strategy with parking management schemes and resident-priority parking, as amply discussed in the LCA's publication *Parking Projects* within the *Sustainable Mobility* series. Such remaining parking should be discreet, avoiding dominance in the central area.

- Ensure easy access to the core via alternative transport modes (e.g., bicycles, shuttle services and local bus connections).

Ensure Accessibility for All

- Ensure the space is inclusive, addressing mobility challenges with gentle ramps or smooth transitions.

- Use tactile paving for the visually impaired, provide seating for rest and install handrails at key points.

- Ensure that vehicular drop-offs are available for people with disabilities, preferably at the edge of the urban core.

Use High-Quality, Contextual Materials

- Choose materials that complement the historic context, such as local limestone or traditional paving patterns.

- Materials should be durable, easy to maintain, and safe (non-slip surfaces for high-traffic areas).

Mosta Square landscaped areas.
Source: Studjurban,
(photo by Sean Mallia).

Introduce Greening and Shade Thoughtfully

- Add green infrastructure that complements the historical setting without blocking important sightlines.

- Choose native or climate-appropriate plants that provide shade and enhance the microclimate.

- Plan for irrigation and maintenance of greenery, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Provide Adequate Street Furniture and Amenities

- *Install comfortable and well-positioned seating (benches, seating walls) in shaded areas.*

- *Include practical amenities such as waste bins, bicycle racks and innovative surfaces that lend themselves to various local activities.*

- *Ensure lighting is studied carefully, creating a safe and welcoming nighttime environment. Fixtures should not compete unnecessarily with the space but complement the surroundings.*

Balance Open Space with Flexible Use

- *Keep the central space open and flexible for various activities (holding markets, as discussed further in the LCA's publication **3.3 Open Markets**, events and performances).*

- *Design should allow easy reconfiguration for events, such as setting up temporary stages or tents.*

- *If possible, integrate zones for specific activities (e.g.café seating). Control instances of spatial appropriation and enforce against misuse, to ensure a balanced use of the entire urban space.*

Mosta's square used neutral-toned paving that blends seamlessly with the area's historical architecture.
Source: Studjurban,
(photo by Sean Mallia).

Photograph by Fikri Ahmad Maulana on Unsplash

Sustainability and Infrastructure Upgrades

- Use the regeneration process to update underground infrastructure (water mains, electricity cables and sewers) and remove unsightly overhead cables and wires.

- Incorporate green infrastructure solutions such as stormwater management systems (e.g., rainwater harvesting, permeable paving and bioswales).

- Install energy-efficient lighting and consider renewable energy sources like solar power, but be mindful of the visual implications of PV cells within a historical setting.

Community Engagement in Design

- Actively involve residents and, more specifically, the neighbourhood in question, in the design process through participatory consultations, public exhibitions, design charrettes and feedback discussion sessions. Ensure the final design reflects the residents' needs and values, from accessibility to preserving local traditions.

- Engage local groups (residents, local businesses and NGOs) to build a sense of ownership and support for the project.

Key Design Pointer	Summary
Respect the Historic Fabric and Identity	• Understand the site's history • Preserve heritage elements • Integrate archaeological finds • Ensure new additions harmonise with historic style.
Prioritise Pedestrians and Shared Use	• Focus on pedestrian comfort • Expand sidewalks • Traffic calming by limiting vehicle access to periphery.
Reorganise Parking and Transport Links	• Move parking to outskirts • Keep any remaining parking discreet • Improve alternative transport links.
Ensure Accessibility for All	• Inclusive design with ramps, tactile paving, seating • Accessible drop-off points.
Use High-Quality, Contextual Materials	• Select materials (e.g., limestone, traditional paving) that suit the historic setting; • Ensure durability and safety.
Introduce Greening and Shade Thoughtfully	• Add trees and plants without obstructing views • Use native species • Plan for maintenance.
Provide Adequate Street Furniture and Amenities	• Install seating, lighting, and practical amenities.
Balance Open Space with Flexible Use	• Keep spaces open for events and flexible activities.
Sustainability and Infrastructure Upgrades	• Upgrade utilities • Integrate green infrastructure
Community Engagement in Design	• Consult locals to shape and support the design.

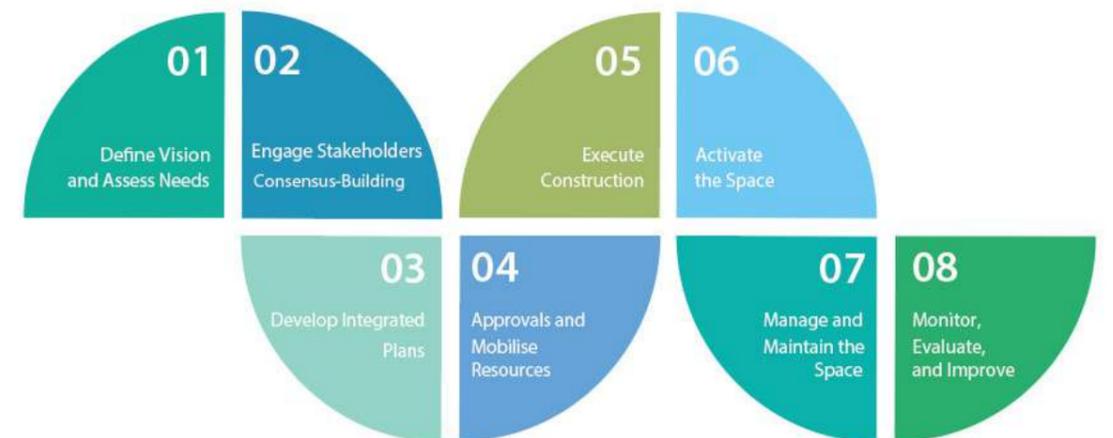*Illustration by Studjurban.*
Key Design Pointers.

The success of projects in historical urban cores may be gauged by their ability to successfully balance issues related to contextual respect, pedestrian priority, accessibility, appropriate materials, green infrastructure, integration of amenities, resilience, robustness and community inclusion throughout the design and implementation process.

They can renew the area's functionality and comfort for today's users while enhancing, rather than detracting from.

Good design in these sensitive contexts is ultimately about subtlety and responsiveness: making improvements with the grain of history, not against it, so that locals and visitors alike can appreciate the historical character that makes each town and village unique.

5. Steps to support the implementation of historical heritage, urban cores and piazzas

Turning plans into reality in historical urban cores requires good design and a clear implementation strategy. The following eight pragmatic steps provide a roadmap for Local Councils and other stakeholders to plan, execute and sustain improvements in public spaces.

01 Define Vision and Assess Needs

02 Engage Stakeholders Consensus-Building

03 Develop Integrated Plans

04 Approvals and Mobilise Resources

05 Execute Construction

06 Activate the Space

07 Manage and Maintain the Space

08 Monitor, Evaluate, and Improve

Illustration by Studjurban.
Design steps for historic hubs.

Photograph by Nick Fewings on Unsplash

Step 1
Define Vision and Assess Needs

Photograph by Rames Quinerie on Unsplash.

- Start by **evaluating the chosen urban space's current condition.** This includes collecting detailed data about pedestrian traffic patterns, nearby businesses, local services, and community needs. Conduct surveys among residents or hold focus groups to understand better the specific concerns and desires of those who live, work and visit the area. This analysis is essential to creating a functional and relevant plan for the community, laying a strong foundation for all subsequent design and planning efforts.

- **Engage local businesses, residents and other key stakeholders** early in the process. Host meetings, conduct interviews and collaborate with community leaders to help collect valuable input. This dialogue generates trust and ensures that the project aligns with the needs and desires of those who will be directly impacted by it.

Step 2
Engage Stakeholders and Build Consensus

Photograph by Dario Daniel Silva on Unsplash.

- After the stakeholders have been identified and consulted, a key factor would be **maintaining constant communication** to ensure the project meets their expectations. Engage community members throughout different design phases, ensuring their voices are heard when making decisions. This includes, among other things, planning safe and direct pedestrian flows, integrating heritage elements, and ensuring accessibility for all.

- Securing **permits and funding** is crucial before progressing to the next phase. Apply for relevant grants and seek government support to ensure financial support. Obtaining local authority and stakeholder approval is vital, as it will provide the needed legal and financial backing to move forward with confidence.

Mosta Square public meeting organised by the Mosta Local Council. Source: Studjurban.

Step 3
Develop Integrated Plans

Photograph by Louis Sproul on Unsplash.

- **Divide the work** strategically to make it more manageable, ensuring each stage is defined and achievable within a reasonable timeframe. **Prioritise infrastructure** improvements, followed by their integration with the surroundings.

- It is essential to **build in flexible timeframes** for potential delays, especially in heritage areas where unexpected archaeological discoveries or structural challenges might arise. Create a contingency plan to address and foresee these situations, without losing much momentum or causing significant delays to the general schedule.

Step 4
Secure Approvals and Mobilise Resources

Photograph by Maria Kovalets on Unsplash.

- **Extend the needed work** to reputable construction companies with expertise in similar projects, especially when dealing with historical areas. Ensure clear technical specifications for materials and methods.

- Together with the Architect- and Engineer-in-Charge, it is highly recommended to hire a **project manager** for the day-to-day construction process. Such experts will ensure that quality standards are met, monitor compliance with safety regulations and address any issues that arise during construction. A dedicated project manager will provide easy flow communication, coordinate tasks and keep the project on track.

Step 5
Execute Construction

Photograph by Steffen Lemmerzahl on Unsplash

- At this stage, **transparency and communication** with the community become even more important. Updating the public regularly through various media or meetings keeps residents informed about project milestones and potential disruptions. Transparency always helps maintain the community´s support and allows residents to plan accordingly for any inconveniences.

- It is crucial to hire skilled **labour**, especially for sensitive heritage restoration work, to guarantee that materials and methods are handled appropriately. Regularly monitor the quality of work and address unforeseen challenges as they arise. Be proactive in solving problems to ensure that the project remains on schedule and within budget.

Step 6
Activate the Space

Photograph by Ross Sheddon on Unsplash.

- Once the construction phase is complete, draw attention to the revitalised space by encouraging community engagement in **organising events.** This allows residents to celebrate the transformation and feel a sense of pride in the new space that has been created. Scheduling regular, and diverse, events will draw a wide range of people, ensuring that the space remains vibrant and accessible to all.

- **Offer constant support to surrounding local businesses** to adapt to the new environment and contribute to the area's economic vitality. At the same time, ensure that the public space is not compromised for its main intended users, the residents.

Step 7
Manage and Maintain the Space

- Local councils should seek to designate a **person** or **committee** responsible for managing the maintenance of the space, including cleaning, repairs and enforcement of new regulations such as pedestrian-only zones, noise restrictions and designated OCA extents. This ensures that the space remains welcoming and functional for all users.

- The space should remain an integral part of the community's everyday life by **providing a venue** for events to foster a sense of ownership and pride among local residents.

Photograph by Sterling Lanier on Unsplash.

Step 8
Monitor, Evaluate, and Improve

- Track key indicators such as foot traffic, event attendance and public satisfaction to assess the project's success and use the urban space as a test base for future urban spaces.

- Use residents' feedback and monitoring data to make improvements and adapt programming.

- If the project proves successful, consider replicating this approach in other local areas, expanding its positive impact across the town or village.

By following through the above eight steps, a Local Council may transform a historical urban core in a participatory, evidence-based and sustainable manner.

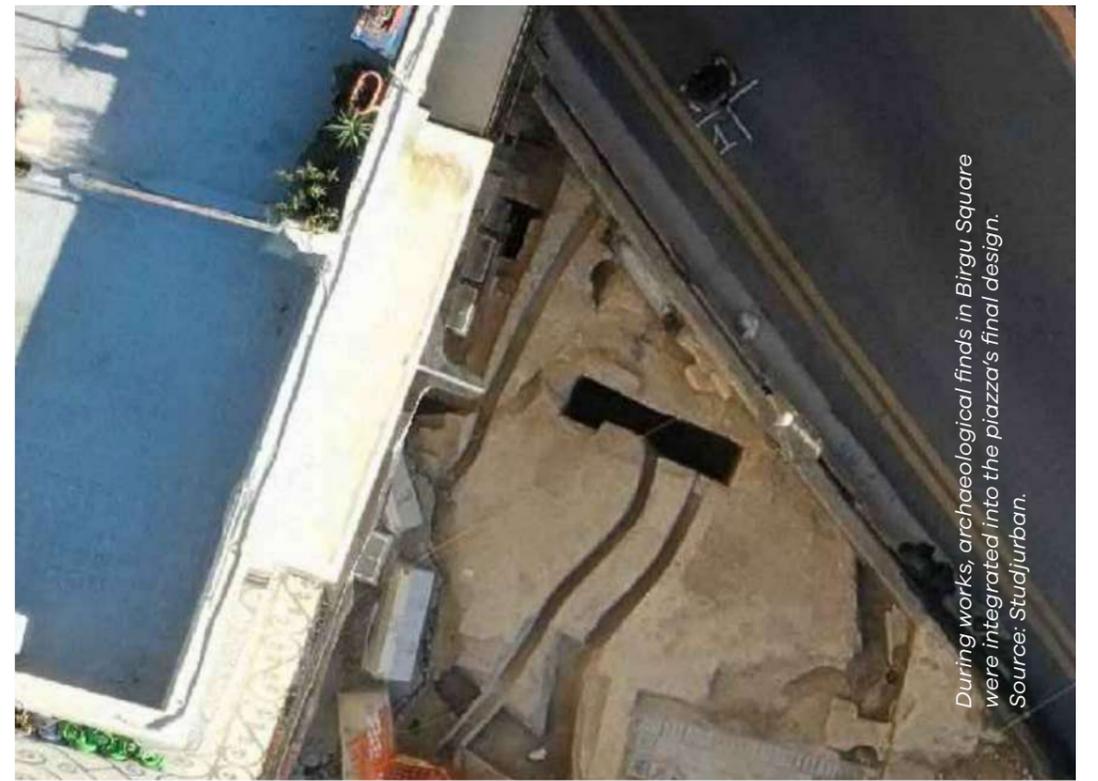*Source: Studjurban, photograph by Sean Mallia.*

Case Studies

Mosta Square

Mosta Square is a point of high connectivity, located at the intersection of major urban routes. The new design features an uninterrupted central *piazza* that forms the heart of the space. Where the area around the Rotunda was once dominated by vehicles, there are now green pockets with strategically placed crossings accessible to everyone. The *piazza* retains its historical essence while helping slow down vehicular traffic and improve pedestrian flow through the design and strategic placing of elements, the paving layout and the selection of respectful, locally sourced materials. Today, the local community and visitors can enjoy the *piazza* on foot, particularly during weekends when the space opens up fully as a pedestrian space, further accommodating large events and gatherings. The new layout also enables partial closure to traffic, which may pass peripherally, permitting the co-existence of both activities if required.

Birgu Piazza

The regeneration of the Main Square of Birgu is a successful example of urban design that balances contemporary spatial needs with the site's layered heritage. Where it was once a car-dominated area and a parking lot, we find a historical piazza transformed into a pedestrian-oriented space that prioritises community use, accessibility and memory. A pedestrian-only zone is at the heart of the design. It has been repurposed for gathering, resting and interaction. Linear benches follow the movement paths, leading to the main feature: a red travertine composition of trims, kerbs and extrusions that traces the footprint of a historic clock tower lost during WWII. The archaeological remains of a domestic yard were found and integrated into the paving to preserve and reveal layers of history on site. This sensitive design approach invites an open dialogue between past and present through the material choices and minimalist interventions, enriching community life while reinforcing cultural identity.

6. Relevant EU Programmes and Funding Resources

Enhancing historical urban cores and piazzas often requires significant funding and expertise. Various European Union projects, initiatives and funding programmes support these goals. Below is an overview of relevant key EU resources and how they may be leveraged:

- **The ERDF and Cohesion Fund** are two of the primary EU funding sources supporting urban regeneration projects. These funds have enabled initiatives such as the restoration of heritage sites, the revitalisation of public squares and the enhancement of pedestrian infrastructure. Two priorities for the 2021–2027 programming period are particularly relevant: Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development. Local Councils interested in such projects — especially those involving regeneration of squares that combine heritage value with improved accessibility — should regularly consult the Planning and Priorities Coordination Division (PPCD) for open calls. ERDF funding typically covers most eligible costs, though a local co-financing contribution is required.

- The **Interreg V-A Italy-Malta** programme supports cross-border projects with Sicily to enhance access to cultural and natural heritage. It funds initiatives like historical centre revitalisation, cultural routes, and heritage tourism. The recent CHORAL project (2025) focuses on improving digital and green accessibility to heritage sites. Local Councils may collaborate with Sicilian towns to regenerate piazzas and create shared cultural itineraries — ideal for Interreg, which can cover up to 85% of costs.

Photograph by Recycling Lanienon Unsplash.

- **New European Bauhaus (NEB)** is an active EU initiative promoting sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion — values that align perfectly with revitalising historical squares. While not a funding programme, NEB connects projects to various EU funding streams like Horizon Europe. Malta has already engaged with NEB through initiatives like the Valletta Design Cluster (discussed in the LCA's document *3.1 Parks and Gardens*). Local Councils may tap into NEB for expertise, networking and strengthening funding proposals by adopting NEB principles such as cultural expression, community co-design and circular materials.

- **CulturEU Funding** is another European Commission initiative that supports the cultural and creative sectors, including heritage. Culture Strand often includes heritage-led regeneration. It is active and has a support team to connect potential partners with funding opportunities related to individual projects.

- **Horizon 2020 / Horizon Europe (until 2027)** funds research and innovation projects, often led by universities or companies, but cities can participate as pilot sites. Malta has participated in projects such as CIVITAS DESTINATIONS, which tested pedestrian-friendly tourism mobility. Local Councils may join either as partners or testbeds. They can still benefit from expertise, tech installations, or visibility. Under the Horizon Europe scheme, themes like climate adaptation and digital heritage tools could support projects in historical areas. With indirect funding, these projects may obtain smart features (like Augmented Reality apps or Wi-Fi points) that may boost a locality's profile in terms of urban innovation.

7. Concluding Thoughts

Photograph by Wilson Wu on Unsplash

Malta is shaped by its historical urban cores and piazzas. Not only are they key to our cultural heritage, but they are also essential to the vitality of our past, present and future communities. Revitalising and adapting these spaces to today's realities can be a celebration of our rich history – an undertaking that is both challenging and exciting. The transformation of urban spaces requires a thoughtful balance of careful planning, genuine collaboration, respect for the past and a forward-thinking approach. The rewards may be profound, creating revitalised spaces that are both beautiful and functional, establishing a forum for stronger social bonds, improved public wellbeing and a renewed sense of pride and national identity.

As discussed throughout this document, as long as there exists a deep understanding of site value and a drive towards community improvement, the journey towards revitalising these spaces will be strong and steady, no matter the inconveniences and problems. While physical elements such as paving, preserved historical elements, green infrastructure components, local materials and street furniture are all key design assets, the true success of these projects lies in the day-to-day life of the locals living their lives in the squares. The ultimate goal is not to solely preserve these spaces as frozen relics of the past, nor to modernise them without sensitivity, but rather to facilitate their gradual evolution and adaptation through time. Through some case studies in this document, we have seen how infrastructure upgrades and heritage conservation can work together to create vibrant, functional and sustainable urban spaces.

Most importantly, however, any successful project lies in community ownership. The most effective transformations are those shaped with and for the people who will use them. When you can count on the collaboration of local residents, business owners, and community groups, you also ensure that these urban spaces truly meet their needs, fostering a sense of pride that will provide special care for the site in the long term. With the concerted effort of Local and Regional Councils, authorities, agencies and other institutions, Malta has the opportunity to be a leader in demonstrating how nations with rich cultural heritage can rethink and reimagine their urban spaces for future generations. A national programme could link these spaces through thematic trails or shared branding, inviting both locals and tourists to explore and enjoy the character of each locality. Such a vision could have a transformative impact on the quality of life for residents, while enhancing Malta's international reputation as a forward-thinking, heritage-conscious destination.

Local Councils thus have the opportunity to lead successful, meaningful transformations. These urban spaces are not just places on a map; they are living environments where people can come together, memories are created and identities are shaped. That is why they deserve nothing less than our best efforts. By acting now, we honour our past and provide the foundations for a richer, more inclusive future for generations to come.

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