

Mall as a Measure of Society

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ABSTRACT

Maltese visitors to Gozo frequently describe the nearby island's more traditional, rural, and quiet atmosphere as part of the reasoning in selecting the island for their holiday getaways. While the reputation of a pristine cultural experience shines through the minds of tourists, in actuality it is noticeable just how Gozitan businesses try to manipulate this presumed authentic standing into a lucrative market. The dichotomy of the tourist "authentic aesthetic" and the globalized, commercialized status of the island are well represented by the island's capital city of Victoria's two larger shopping complexes, Arkadia and Tigrija Palazz. By comparing these two centers of commerce, I argue that there are two contrasting business sentiments – one that promotes use of a specified Gozitan culture and another which relies more on the more contemporary sense of internationalism. While these two outlooks of representation initially seem divided, a closer look shows contradictions riddled between both spaces that are evocative of the multifaceted modern Gozitan identity. In comparing the two environments, I also present some of the sharp contrasts between customers and employees of these two spaces and smaller shops around Gozo.

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Introduction

The two shopping centers of Arkadia and Tigrija Palazz are two very different spaces in the singular environment of urban Victoria, the capital of the Maltese island of Gozo. While I originally desired to look into the hourly traffic patterns and social groups that inhabit both areas, by spending days in each space I discovered more about each locale, including the contrasting inhabitants, employees' morale, the apparent sense of internationalism, and the overarching modern Gozitan culture. By examining the hours of siesta, the attitudes of employees and customers, and other elements surrounding the environments I achieved a greater understanding of the island's inhabitants.

Methodology

The research for this paper took place from July 28 to August 16 of the year 2008 on the island of Gozo. My data was acquired primarily through observations of the inner and surrounding streets of Arkadia and Tigrinja Palazz, two shopping centers in the island's capital city of Victoria (known locally as Rabat). In addition to frequenting these larger complexes, I also took notice of smaller businesses, including clothing stores, camera shops, pharmacies, and souvenir shops. During my stay, I also spoke to both locals and tourists about their sentiments of these contrasting spaces. As my research pertained to the relevancy of tourism in these areas, I additionally took an analytical approach to visiting popular tourist sites. Attractions I visited included the Citadel in Victoria, and more uncommon destinations, such as a cheese making and farming family from Xewkija who open their home to small groups for "cultural tourism" demonstrations. The greatest limitation on my research was the time constraint, with only three weeks to properly survey the field and my participants. The indifferent, unapproachable dispositions of employees at Arkadia also sometimes limited my ability to gather data, yet I still attempted to consider their behavior in relation to cultural factors which, in the end, further aided my holistic understanding of both the mall environment and Gozitan society.

The Siesta

Between the hours of 1pm and 4:30pm, Gozo becomes significantly quieter. Most of the island's numerous villages, including the island's capital city of Victoria, turn into deserted spaces. Outside of the small packs of tourists, only a small number of locals are out apart from the few scattered older men in the remaining opened cafes who sit around leisurely drinking coffee and conversing. Even the group of taxi drivers in Victoria shifts their row of chairs from the area adjacent to the bus terminal to the opposite side of the street in the shade. It is not infrequent to see one or more of these taxi drivers slumped in their chair, snoozing to forget about the dripping humidity and pounding heat. There is little relief in the streets from the hot midday sun beating down, beyond the inner sanctuaries of limestone homes that run along the large thoroughfares, line the skinny alleyways, and scatter the countryside of Gozo.

Mall vs. Mall

There is a spot that offers an extreme alternative from the hottest time of the day. Down the hill on Fortunato Mizzi Street, outside of the cramped inner-city of Victoria, where

buildings are crammed between small windy passages, occupies a modern refuge. The Arkadia Shopping Center, standing tall and wide in clear contrast from the slim facades of typical Gozitan buildings, offers a vivid contrast from everything around it. Red signs with the iconic Golden Arches and imprinted "McDonald's" logo line all sides of the complex, marking clearly how Arkadia is representative of Gozo's placement today's globalized world. Positioned in the center of Gozo, Arkadia and McDonald's, the center's only eat-in establishment, is another hub of Victoria – now comparable to points of interest such as The Citadel or Pjazza Indipendenza (Independence Square). Publicity for McDonald's is all over the island, from bus stop billboards to newspaper advertisements featuring the campaign slogan "Everyone's a star at McDonald's." In Gozo, reaffirmation of personal potential comes not only from family and friends, but also from the world's largest fast food retailer. Once inside the shopping center there is an even more drastic picture of just how Arkadia differs from other smaller local shops.

On my first visit to the Arkadia I expected to find a place that simply stayed open during siesta, that 1pm to 4:30pm block when normally almost every other shop in Gozo closes. However, upon entry, I was taken aback. After walking in the side entrance, past a short row of arcade games and the "Urban Jungle" store, I entered the steamy hallway which traps the outside summer heat in a stuffy box of stagnant dead air. Yet in only a couple of steps more into the core of Arkadia, I was surprised and relieved with a blast of air-conditioning. I could easily say it was the coolest I had been since my arrival in Gozo. Instantly, I also noticed one initial, ironic, symbol of modernity, the vacant internet stations situated in the very center of the mall. After several visits to the mall I realized few customers, if any, use the expensive internet service.

Initially, my research questions were rooted in the only thing I knew about the mall, the fact that Arkadia stayed open during the commercially dead hours of siesta. My overarching inquiry revolved around if and how these all day hours affected the nature of siesta as a time for family, rest, and relaxation, particularly among the younger generations of Gozitans. But as I explored the premises I realized there was a more striking issue that was reflected in not only the physical structure, but also the atmosphere and, most importantly, the attitudes of customers and employees of the shopping center. Arkadia stands as a symbol for one way of life, in which Gozitan identity is shunned in favor of an environment rooted in a sense of worldwide diversity.

Before even visiting Arkadia I had visited another large shopping complex, Tigrija Palazz. The second large complex is located less than a block from the bus terminal, the transportation hub of Gozo which brings travelers from all around the island into Victoria. This alternate space reflects a median establishment between the global facade of Arkadia and the smaller private shops run by locals. While the premises of Tigrija Palazz stays open during siesta, its shops close their doors and the air-conditioning shuts off. Besides the few people cutting through the shopping center to pass from Republic Street to Fortunato Mizzi Street, the mall is essentially vacant during this time. Once or twice I noticed some young teens playing on the arcade machines downstairs and some tired people sitting in the seats of the closed “Bamboo Bistro,” but even this was a rare sight in the virtually empty complex. Tigrija Palazz follows the routine of accepting siesta-oriented business hours, while Arkadia directly challenges the notions of traditional commercial patterns. By making their widely publicized advertising campaign spotlights the fact that they stay “Open All Day,” the owners of the complex desire to tap into previously unused market territory. The Arkadia Corporation has even made sure to capture the eyes of tourists right away by advertising on the back of the Gozo Channel Line’s tickets, the ferry which runs from the larger island of Malta to Gozo. As one of the only modes of transportation to the island, visitors instantly have understanding of the Arkadia Foodstore, which can be accessed even when most of the island is quiet.

The sharp disparity between Gozo’s main shopping complexes reaches far beyond the siesta distinction, though understanding of this particular factor is imperative in the study of the two spaces. From an initial structural perspective, Tigrija Palazz is nestled tightly between the street of packed storefronts and offices. One could easily pass by the small entranceway and not even realize that a whole shopping center is crammed into the limestone building. Besides fitting in snugly along the street with the Gozitan architecture, the interior is also more comparable to the Mediterranean flair of Gozo itself from the stone wall fountain to the marble-style tiled floors.

And while the physicality of this space constructs a mental image of “traditional Gozo,” it really is not just a facade. The complex is actually much more vested in Gozo’s history, as it has not only been located in the space for well over a decade, but it is also run the Magro Group, a Gozitan company that has been operating since 1934. It is common knowledge between both local Gozitans and Maltese visitors that the two shopping centers have different corporate

backgrounds. In contrast, Arkadia is owned by the Arkadia Corporation, a larger conglomerate which has sprouted outside of Gozo and Malta to Central Europe and the Middle East, as proudly displayed on their website.

In just a decade, Arkadia has grown out of its home in Gozo, Malta and has expanded rapidly across Central Europe, soon moving into the Middle East, with one ambition: To be the premier retail operator in different markets.

Arkadia in this manner embodies a conquering foreign space, while the Tigrija Palazz is an emblematic attempt at the “authentic Gozo” that many tourists desire in their romantic search for a traditional atmosphere.

Contradictions though are ever-present with the comparing of these commercial environments, as there can never be such a rigid separating and stigmatizing divide between the two spaces. This comparison therefore marks an identity crisis of sorts, which can be seen by the actions, sentiments, and architectural culture of the Gozitan people, who must stand in-between their colonial history and modernity.

The Cafes

To find more about the contemporary Gozitan identity one must look at how the spoken sentiments correspond to the actions of the locals. While oppositions are clear in the aesthetics of the two malls, a deeper look into the interactions of the people inside both spaces exemplify the image of an island constantly in change.

One of the prime examples of the culture in flux is the “McCafe” inside of Arkadia. Located right next to the McDonald’s in a separate room, the warm color tones and comfortable sitting area is evocative of the atmosphere of a neighborhood coffee shop. In reality though, it is just a segmenting of the McDonald’s; serving different premade confections and drinks at costly prices. Small cafes, coffee shops, and bars are riddled across Gozo and have a firm root in the society’s social interactions, predominantly with older generations of men who sit outside cafes for hours conversing, smoking, eating, and drinking. Oftentimes tables and chairs from these establishments pour out onto the sidewalks outdoors.

Besides not being pent up in stuffy, sometimes dark interior, the outer social environment allows for greetings and interactions with passing neighbors and friends. The cafe is the forum in which news, gossip, and the nuances of a culture pass through.

The establishment of a McCafe symbolizes the hand of American influence in the Gozitan cultural form. As a current representation of an older model, there is a clear sense of artificiality. All of Arkadia has a synthetic feel of a mass produced environment, with whitewashed walls, chain retail stores, and purely commercialized atmosphere without any of the easygoing, sociable warmth that the people of Gozo take pride in. Customers and even employees at the McCafe consequently have little connection to the place itself, whereas the men at other cafes have a vested interest in the cafe itself, the workers and their fellow regulars. While the McCafe is much more of a commercial base, it is still being adapted by small groups, particularly of younger generations, to serve the social functions of these long-standing locales. As with all progressions though there are some major differences between these two environments.

While the groups of younger people chatting and relaxing in the air-conditioned mall may resemble the clusters of older generations socializing on the sidewalks of cafes, there is one striking disparity: the inclusion of females in the new setting. Whereas it is rare to see women inhabiting street cafes for hours during the day, besides waitresses, the mall is populated by many young women. Teenage girls inside Arkadia, both in coed and same-sex groups, sip slowly on their cappuccinos and frappes sharing stories and gossip similarly to their elder male counterparts outdoors. The gender shift in clientele may be result of the McCafe's situation in the mall itself, as many of these same girls are equipped with bags from their shopping venture. But by speaking to some of them it is clear that shopping is not necessarily the primary objective, but just one part of the mall visit, which is largely a social endeavor. For most Gozitans looking to really shop, especially for clothes, an excursion to Malta is preferred. One female employee inside a small local clothing shop pressed the fact that Gozo offers little variety when it comes to shopping. She went as far as to imply that her own store was lackluster compared to the variety found in the more urban and fashionable Malta. Another young male vendor at the festa (feast; the celebration of each village's patron saint) in San Lawrenz also held the same stance about the island's lack of selection in comparison to their more cosmopolitan sister island (where more European and American clothing brands are available), namely in the capital city of Valletta. **Personal Investment in Employment:** In comparison to the McCafe, these smaller cafes, and even other local shops, operate businesses rooted in customer loyalty and employee comradery rather than merely the profitability rate of their revenue stream. Nearly daily trips to Coffee Break, a busy cafe across from the bus terminal, helped exemplify the more conventional Gozitan business. Over the course of my

three-week research period, my own group of fellow anthropology students and our instructors became regulars to this establishment. Conversations with our waitress Sonya, and the fact that she quickly remembered our favorite drink orders, impressed upon just what was extraordinary about both Gozo's friendly people and the older business model, where social interactions are key to a dedicated customer base. Even the way our usual waitress interacted with other employees confirmed the hospitable ambiance absent inside the McCafe. Usually found joking around with her staff, it was a drastic change from the apathetic gazes of McCafe and other Arkadia stores' employees.

It becomes apparent both from both observation and further interrogation that the mall workers had no true personal attachment to their jobs when it came to the future welfare of the business and their customers. Instead their employment was simply for a paycheck. Two women inside the stationary, card, and assorted gifts store "Update" stood out as the archetypical members of the Arkadia workforce. After entering the store one day and purchasing a card, I asked at the counter if they also sold any postage stamps. Standing there were two female employees, one who was approximately eighteen and the other in her mid-fifties. The younger woman who rung me up snapped back at me with a quick "no." The other older lady did not even look up at me.

When I inquired further where the closest place around Arkadia to purchase stamps was, the older woman finally looked up and sneered, "At the post office!" Trying my luck one more time, I asked whereabouts that was, to which she unhelpfully replied "up the street." There was no desire to help the customer, as the extra assistance would have not directly benefited either employee in any way. As part of a larger corporate conglomerate, there was rarely any prevailing customer or employee connection that gave meaning to those people working jobs or shopping in Arkadia. During several other instances, particularly inside the upstairs department store, I noticed unconcerned workers unwilling to help customers.

For those working within smaller shops, the best interests of the customer are understood to be what make the business survive and thrive. Comparatively, in these shops I noticed a trend of family members working together. A camera shop on a side street in Victoria had an elderly mother helping customers, while her middle-aged son worked on the business' accounting in the back. On another visit, a different son was helping stock new merchandise. Another similar operation was a nearby pharmacy where a mother

and father and their two young adult sons and daughter helped around the shop. Both of these shops also had pictures on the wall of the stores' late previous owners. When I questioned the elder lady in the camera store about the photo she nonchalantly answered that it was her husband. When I asked if he was the owner she nodded and also acceptingly replied "He's dead!" The hanging photos not only serve as a visual memory of their family member, but also for the sense of a spirit safeguarding their former establishment. It is obviously impossible to say that these family environments made for perfect business models. From a tourist's perspective however, they had a certain rustic charm that was not found in the commercialized retail shops owned by larger global corporations. Recognition of this local shop's charm allowed me to connect just how Gozitans use their heritage to their advantage in the tourist and private sector.

Manipulation of "Authentic Culture:" Tigrija Palazz is an excellent example of the attempted use of established forms in promoting and maintaining a tourist base. It must be clarified that while the entire space is still an element of Gozo's current culture, they still attempt to use the aesthetic of traditionality in their representation. The shopping center is more than just a place for Gozitans to shop. As a middle ground, in both location and symbolically, between modern Arkadia and the scores of smaller local shops all around Gozo, the shopping center attracts tourists arriving in Victoria from the adjacent bus terminal. An exemplary illustration of the "middle status" of Tigrija Palazz can be seen by their closing rituals. As stores get ready to shut, both for siesta, and afterwards for the day, employees from different stores chat with each other freely. While during their open hours, employees do not leave their shops, afterwards they lighten up on their job dedication and commercial rivalries to simply interact like friendly neighbors. The business hour job dedication is expressive of the more aggressive business agenda, but the closing rituals embody the affable customs of Gozitan society. Comparatively there is little interaction between coworkers even within the same store in Arkadia.

Two striking features in particular separate Tigrija Palazz as a noticeable manipulation of Gozo's culture. The tourism office and the more subtly recognizable, but equally important, "Bamboo Bistro" are luring points for tourists. In the first place, the tourism office offers information about all of what Gozo has to offer for visitors. Many of those tourists wanting information are subsequently attracted into Tigrija Palazz and are seeing Victoria for the first time as they have just left the bus terminal. Therefore their first impressions

of typical Gozitan businesses lie within the doors of the shopping center. While the stores inside are more comparable to the smaller local shops than are those in Arkadia, it gives a false impression of Gozo's current modern state. Businessmen and the tourist ministries thus want to show off a more appealing version of "traditional Gozo" as seen with the Tigrija Palazz. A simple comparison between this wanted tourist-driven cultural aesthetic can be seen with the center's name itself – "Tigrija Palazz." In Maltese "tigrija" means "course" and "palazz" means "palace." In comparison the generically European "Arkadia" is an alternate spelling of Arcadia, which is representative of a utopia found in much fictional folklore and literature. Even the signs outside imply the greater impression for the complex's cultural connection to Gozo, as a stone plaque states that it is a "dedicated to all workers and their families of the Magro Group of Companies." The plaque illustrates the dichotomy of Gozo in a state of change, as dedication is given to the people of Gozo, though through the lens of a Gozitan company which has grown to be a rather large business (yet still not as large as the Arkadia Corporation). While both Arkadia and Tigrija Palazz are parts of Gozitan culture as a whole, the first space is more appealing to those tourists looking for a romantic image of a traditional culture.

The second tourist lure within Tigrija Palazz is the "Bamboo Bistro," a place filled with contradictions. From outside of the complex there is a sign pointing inside for the takeaway cafe. Interestingly enough it boldly states "Gozitan cuisine," despite the name being "Bamboo Bistro," which instantly conjures images of Asian fare. Once in the basement of the complex where it is located, further serious questioning would be made by any entering tourist. Expecting to see a Gozitan atmosphere akin to their suggested cultural cuisine, instead there are thatched umbrellas, wooden tables and seats, Tiki masks, and generic food options of sandwiches and salads. The confusing environment places a value in an internationalism represented by the cafe's name, artwork, and design. Even in an environment where businesses have attempted to harken a traditional sentimentality, one can see the prominence of internationalism peeking through.

Worldwide Gozo

Inside of Arkadia there are constant allusions and references to the same budding sense of internationalism to a much larger degree. The grocery store places emphasis on foreign cuisines (highlighting Italian and Asian delicacies on the billboard right in their entryway). The store I discussed earlier, "Update," has a section that has foreign

artwork and gifts in which every item is carefully labeled by not only price, but by also country of origin. Products originated from countries including India, Cambodia, and China. Even both the McCafe and McDonald's accentuate the globalized world with their respective offerings of foreign-style pastries (from French croissants to New York cheesecake) and the "Greek hamburger" (with side yogurt sauce). It should be noted that this stress on internationalism is within the aim of the targeted market audience of many of the mall stores, young Gozitans. "Update's" window display features punk-styled pink and black purses, girlish accessories, and guitars. Their advertising campaign, leaning marketing toward younger teenage girls, was visibly effective as well, as on multiple occasions I saw groups of young girls dragging their mothers reluctantly into the stores. Even the merchandise racks directly outside the store were aimed towards younger girls, with gemstone necklaces and tabloid and gossip magazines including *Chat*, *Love It*, *Take a Break*, *Reveal*, and *Heat*. Arkadia's largest chain store, "Things," also had an appeal to younger girls with the store's purple color scheme and walls displayed with costume jewelry and fashion accessories. Other stores with similar youthful approaches to marketing included "Boulevard," "Urban Jungle," and "Toni & Guy Hairdressing."

It is difficult to conclude if Arkadia is in fact impacting the youth of Gozo or if the modern age, particularly the global mass media, is simply creating a niche for these contemporary environments. The desires of the teenage Gozitans to separate themselves from their older relatives are noticeable through their physical styles. Adolescent males often have spiked hairstyles with frosted colors, unlike the older compatriots who have no particularly distinguishing hairstyles. Clothing also separates this younger group, especially in the village feast atmosphere. When I asked teens about what for they were clothes shopping, most answered for either the nightclub or feasts. The fact that many younger Gozitans are shopping for the feast shows just how strong of a cultural institution it is. Today's Gozitan for youth now is illustrative of the pervasiveness of modernity, as adolescents walk around the village squares showing off their new attire – short skirts on girls and crisp collared shirts on boys.

Observing in Arkadia, I also began to frequently detect just how many more members of different ethnicities were visually noticeable. On the streets of Gozo I found it rare to find clearly evident members of different ethnic groups besides Gozitans and European tourists, yet the mall seemed to highlight the minor ethnic diversity that Gozo

did partially have. It was common to see small groups of East Asians inside the mall, as well as groups of Muslim women in burqas. It is possible that this "foreign space" of Arkadia allows for the integration of different groups of people, whereas Tigrija Palazz caters to clearly to a clientele of local Gozitans and tourists. All situations cannot be so clearly defined though, as one shop inside of Tigrija Palazz was in fact run by Asian people. I did not notice the store as having a significant number of Asian customers. Their products and outer displays also did not vary greatly from their adjacent Gozitan vendors. Instead they tried to mesh in with their surrounding sellers as best as possible. Similarly at the various festas around the island, a symbol of traditional culture, there were Asian food vendors. One festa in Qala had a staff of Asians preparing dishes, yet at other festas in Rabat and San Lawrence, a food truck run by a Gozitan sold eggrolls and other Asian delicacies.

The sentiment of the global community inside of Arkadia with specified international products and signage also leads workers to feel less attached to the local space of Gozo. With a push for an international approach to business, employees are merely part of a space controlled by a corporate conglomerate and the forces of a larger world. Local shops instead interact constantly with the neighborhood between their familial coworkers and dedicated customers.

With a younger generation being directly confronted with images and items of a widening global sentiment, they may feel less attachment to Gozo and more compelled to move towards the generalized "world culture." Many of the Gozitans I spoke to also mentioned their relatives who have migrated from their homeland to the United States, Canada, Australia, and other parts of the world. As one of the newest members of the European Union, Malta also now has to deal with being part of a larger European community with a unified currency system and the overriding regulations of a superior organization. All of these factors further add further attachment between the traditions of a home island and the constantly globalizing world. Malta throughout history has been host to numerous colonizers ranging from the Phoenicians to Knights of St. John to the British. Now it is curious to see if and how Gozitans will be accepting of both the EU's administrative control, a new style of colonization, and the growing world market of economic and cultural values.

The general popularity of Arkadia and the construction of a new similar center suggests of a continuation of this trend. Gozonews.com reported in October of 2007 of the initial

construction of the Prime Mall, another new shopping complex in Victoria. Many youth I spoke to have an evident urge to leave Gozo, whether it is for shopping or travelling and exploration of the world. Programming from America and other areas of Europe on television, wider access to internet, global popular music pumped into stores and restaurants, and the presentation and selling of international products in malls make an impression on youth to embrace this united “world culture.”

Conclusion

The manipulation of traditional architecture and business forms to draw tourists in is superseded by an overriding sense of internationalism found in both large shopping complexes. The three spaces of Arkadia, Tigrija Palazz, and smaller shops differentiate themselves in style, workforce, and customers. What are even more distinct from the first two are the local private shops around Gozo that use a family approach and a reliance on customer loyalty in promoting their businesses. With larger commercial spaces lacking these components, employees are less likely to have vested interests in their place of employment as seen by the workers in Arkadia. Elements of Gozitan culture also are equally as pervasive at the current trend towards universal modernity. These former cultural staples still exist, yet they also have been manipulated to the mores of the contemporary world. Particularly remnant customs are the village feast, where young generations show off their store-bought clothing, and the public cafe where young women now contribute to the social environment at the McCafe. Consistent transformation is seen all around the island, embodied by large construction sites and the building of the new Prime Mall. Thus modern day Gozo is a clear mixture of both their own historical past and the changes of the 21st Century.

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