

# The Privatisation of Public Spaces and the decline of Urban Connectivity in Paceville

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## S U M M A R Y

Paceville is unique in Malta and yet it is representative of the possible evolution of Maltese urbanity. It is an excellent platform for understanding the complex bond between space and politics in a Mediterranean country that depends heavily on tourism. This seemingly random concoction of massive international buildings, luxury hotels, financial towers, conference spaces and schools of English leaves little space for any sense of belonging and for a strong local life which is usually based on face-to-face relations in Malta. However there is, despite the vertiginous turnover of the population, a micro community of residents that feel it is where they belong. This article reveals the rising difficulty to keep open public spaces where the commoditization of space and its enclosure are putting more pressure on the few spaces left for the public. Generally the discussion rises question about the appropriation of public space in a tourist ressort.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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Paceville is the epicentre of Malta's nightlife. For some it is a paradise of nightclubs, loud music, free entrances and cheap alcohol. Locals are undeterred by the traffic jams to get there and tourists book into cheap accommodation just to be there; to relax, to dance and to drink to their heart's content. Paceville is also referred to as 'Storbjuville', 'the mekka of entertainment', an urban jungle where decadence and immorality thrive. Paceville is notorious for its vices making it a regular feature on local media as residents complain of the noise and dirt and conscientious parents voice their concern for their children's forays into this underworld.

In this article, I wish to argue that this all too obvious portrait of Paceville, it is simplistic and does not allow for a constructive debate. During my ongoing fieldwork this year, I have seen a far more complex reality that calls for a deep anthropological analysis.



Figure 1: Photograph by David Pisani, 2013.



Figure 2: Photograph by David Pisani, 2013.



Figure 3: Postcard, circa 1900

Paceville, I will argue is unique in Malta and yet it is representative of the possible evolution of Maltese urbanity. It encompasses many contemporary debates on urbanism and social equality, it is an excellent platform for understanding the complex bond between space and politics in a Mediterranean country that depends heavily on tourism. Paceville is not (and never was) a typical Maltese village which is usually characterized by a strong parochial homogeneity and local identity. This seemingly random concoction of massive international buildings, luxury hotels, financial towers and conference spaces leaves little space for any sense of belonging and for a strong local life. However there is, despite the vertiginous turnover of the population a micro community of residents that feel it is where they belong.

Looking at Paceville today is a way of questioning the evolution of Maltese urbanity: how Maltese social life will adapt to the restructuring of public space? Paceville may still be unique in its paroxysm, but the tendency of the tourism industry to invade Maltese local communities has already been witnessed. Jeremy Boissevain and Paul Sant Cassia have written about the decline of Mdina from noble historic city to museum commodity for tourists<sup>1</sup>. Mdina and Paceville are diametrically opposite places yet they are suffering from the same malaise, the commoditization of public space and the disemboweling of the local resident community.

To understand what kind of connectivity is possible in Paceville, I will trace a brief sketch of Paceville's history, before looking into what the privatization of public space entails. This should, I hope, trigger a fruitful debate on the consequences of mass tourism on urban connectivity.

### ***Paceville's history.***

At the start of the 20th century, the place now known as Paceville was barren land apart from the Spinola Palace overlooking St. Julians bay and the summer villa of the marquis Scicluna at Dragonara point. The very few inhabitants in Spinola bay were fishermen and farmers. The old maps do not depict any urban centre. A few Maltese families of noble origin owned the land, the Manduca, Testaferrata and Scicluna families. Paceville was virtually invented in typical Maltese patronizing style. In 1936, Guzeppa Pace, an entrepreneur and a lawyer, bought the land from the Manduca family and built a hamlet of colonial style houses to rent to the British servicemen stationed in Malta. He also gave the place its name after his own, hence Paceville.

In the 1960s, as the British left Malta after independence Maltese families moved in to replace the departing British

tenants. At the same time, the first blocks of apartments were built alongside the quaint colonial style houses built by Pace. This period represents the first long term community of residents in Paceville which owes its relative stability to "Cable and Wireless" which employed many people that came to settle there. They were generally from the same *milieu*, the neighbouring town of Sliema which helped to foster some kind of social homogeneity. Eventually these young families started raising children and Monsignor Guzeppa Pace built a church for the community.

In the 1967, as post-independence economic pressure veered Malta towards the tourism industry, three hotels were built on the coastline right in front of the residential hamlet. The Hilton, Sheraton, and the St George complex arguably spearheaded the trend for large scale tourism.

In the late 1970s, bars, restaurants and low cost hotels crept into the core of the hamlet as the prospect of easy cash and almost inexistent urban regulations fed the increasing flow of tourists. The rest as they say, is history.

According to the planning authority, inhabitants started to leave Paceville because of noise and dirt disturbance, a trend which fueled even more property speculation. In 1989, the national authorities were already concerned about the evolution of this tourist resort. A first report stressed the need to '*reverse the present trend of resident population decline in the area by improving generally the ambiance of Paceville*'. But their propositions to increase parking space for residents, to pedestrianize streets and to build a promenade from St. George's Bay to Spinola bay (thus passing in front of the luxury hotels) were never implemented. Instead just a few years after this report was published, a permit was given to start the extension and reconstruction of the Sheraton and the Hilton which would eventually privatize the access to the sea.

### ***Disclosing Enclaves.***

By the 1990's luxurious enclaves or semi-gated communities were under construction and these would give to Paceville its now highly divided urban structure. Until then borders around each tourist enclave were still porous. They were what Richard Sennett calls boundaries, as opposed to sterile borders. Residents recall passing through the Hilton's green space to access the beach and those living next to the hotel Cavallieri could still access the nearby rocky coastline for a swim. The barren land in front of the Westin Dragonara, was an unofficial free parking space for all. The children's playground behind Spinola palace, although run down was open day and night and had all the amenities that kids enjoy. The underground garden built for the Marquis Scicluna, which



Figure 4: Postcard, circa 1900.



Figure 5: Postcard, circa 1960 (with the kind permission of BayRetro).



Figure 6: Paceville Hamlet (Church street) circa 1970.

in the 1940s hosted a lion and 2 camels, was also used by the children.

There were also more pathways to go across the district. For instance the now privatized and closed alley extending Qaliet street was a short cut to get to the Garden's residential area. Nowadays several streets and pathways are closed. The few public green spaces left have been sold to build even more restaurants and clubs. Streets have been narrowed down with both sides of the pavement being colonized by restaurants or bar terraces. The original hamlet with its grid of dirty streets is the only space left open for circulation, which is by itself supporting the pressure of the 30 000 tourists that transit there during the summer months. There seems to be a link here between to privatization of public space and the increase in neglect, dirt and lawlessness in the area.

Each enclave is turning its back to the public street; built to look inwards at their inner piazza or out to the open sea. Contrary to the old noble houses which were proudly facing the street life with their main door on the city's main square, the recent enclaves of Paceville or Pender Gardens turn a cold shoulder on the rabble below. Pender Gardens is described by its architects as a 'self-contained development' and on its high surrounding walls the marketing blurb to sell this development is: "Everything surrounds you" as if to emphasize the introverted nature of the property<sup>2</sup>.

The privatization of public space in Paceville is best illustrated by the Portomaso complex which comprises the tallest tower in Malta, a Hilton hotel hosting 400 rooms and suites as well as 400 luxury apartments surrounding an artificial marina. The project was heavily criticized as it cut through a historical protected fortification, it endangered protected natural species, and it privatized a large stretch of public coastal land, a beach which was previously enjoyed by all. According to the original contract the marina was to remain open to all and a promenade on the rocky coastline from the marina to the hamlet should be built. The marina also had to be accessible to cars coming from the Spinola road. None of these conditions were implemented.

Portomaso with its glass skyscraper, its luxury yachts and its immaculate lawn exists in a world of its own. With its palm trees and manicured gardens it is more akin to a slice of Dubai than anything remotely resembling Malta. The open spaces are immaculate. Private guards patrol the property day and night, keeping the space free of any unwanted individuals. There are no benches around so as not to encourage idle occupation of the place. Along with the luxury properties comes the usual catwalk of high end restaurants, overpriced cafes and high fashion brands that cater for the select clientele of young and well-dressed foreign employees of the 'betting companies' the upper

class Maltese man who comes for a business lunch, mothers wheeling their designer push chairs, Russian women living in Portomaso's apartments walking their groomed little dogs. Unsurprisingly the original residents of Paceville are nowhere to be seen. As a resident told me, 'there is nothing for me there'.

### ***Discussing Public Space.***

Leaving the idyll of Portomaso one is confronted by the contrasting shabbiness of the pavements, the lack of garbage bins, the absence of any public toilets let alone trees, lawn or some open space. However one also notices instantly the dynamic atmosphere, the lively streets, the international crowd and the faster pace that has come to characterize the urban dweller and which makes Paceville such a unique place in Malta. The few remaining residents generally enjoy living in the middle of this cultural blend. Many of them have hosted foreign students and are still in contract with the English Language schools. In the hamlet, the millennium chapel which serves as a refuge for party-goers of the night is run by 200 volunteers many of them from the Paceville community. Here one can speak of real connectivity, a place where people from all kinds of backgrounds come to seek peace. Support groups to help drug addicts and gamblers meet on the premises of the chapel. The resident community, strongly organized around the figure of Father Hilary Tagliaferro, offers a network of social help which is unique in Malta.

However Paceville faces in greatest challenge at night when hundreds of night revelers descend on the hamlet to party until the very early hours of the morning. The night crowd is mainly responsible for all manner of neighborhood disturbances, terrible smells, the invasion of rats and littered slippery streets. The narrow strip of coast line still accessible is scattered with broken glass. The resident's doorsteps are repeatedly vandalized and used as public toilets. In any other place in Malta such behavior is unheard of; in Paceville it is the norm. Without a face-to-face community that moderates social behavior Paceville falls victim to its own vices. Tourists have no "face", they are in transit and are there solely to consume the place. Residents find it increasingly difficult to remind the passer by that wearing a bikini is not allowed on the streets. Who can they blame for the dirt on their doorstep?

The residents are not the only ones to ask for a cleansing of the streets. Tourists themselves lament the dirt and the noise and consequently the owners of the entertainment establishments are concerned about the worsening reputation of the area. If the usual *gemeinschaft* type of regulation does not work in Paceville, how is the situation



Figure 7: Aerial view. Before the extension of the Hilton (left) and the Sheraton (right). Circa 1970.



Figure 8: Aerial View. Circa 2000.



Figure 9: Aerial view of Portomaso complex, circa 2010 [<http://www.alexandrahotelmalta.com/Default.aspx?tabid=1476>].

handled? Who is responsible for the public space? This question raises the main issue of Paceville which is the absence of ownership. Who owns the streets or the beach? There has been widespread concern about "the privatization of public space" in cities. Social cohesion and democracy are at risk without spaces where one can meet fellow citizens. Famous Architects such as Lord Richard Rogers and the team of experts of the Urban Task Force call for more public spaces in their report 'Toward an Urban Renaissance'<sup>3</sup>. However few people are actively questioning the definition of public space. Doreen Massey, reading Rosalyn Deutsche<sup>4</sup>, unveils the "*tendency to romanticize public space as an emptiness which enables free and equal speech*"<sup>5</sup>. The truth is that public spaces, such as Paceville's streets and beaches are "*the product of, and internally dislocated by, heterogonous and sometimes conflicting social identities.*"<sup>6</sup> Public spaces are places of conflict, places of contestations, places of territorial wars. There is no certainty in the ownership of a public space. To assert one's ownership of a public space, garbage can play a strategic role.

In 2003, right in the middle of the most frequented crossroad of Paceville, piles of garbage remained uncollected for several days. This unsightly and foul smelling situation ignited a harsh debate in the media between the local council and the entertainment establishments' owners, each side denying responsibility. Eventually it was the Malta Tourist Authority who took care of the issue. Years later, the same problem was still in the headlines, and the minister of tourism, after discussions with the mayor and the representatives of the local businesses, implemented a unifying rubbish collection to guarantee an efficient garbage collection service.

The tourism authorities involvement in what is essentially a local district issue indicates clearly that Paceville is managed as an important tourist product. The state is careful not to lose potential tourists as it still considers revenue from tourism as pivotal to the Maltese economy. This is also illustrated by the so-called 'upgrading', in fact the simple repaving of the small area limited to where most of the bars and clubs are based. An upgrading for the entertainment establishments but not for the residents without doubt. The completion of these superficial works was celebrated in the same spirit by a free party.

The state is therefore only protecting the tourism product. For the authorities, the building of Portomaso and Pender Gardens together with the establishment of international financial companies constitute an improvement. It means more income for the state and an upper class population that is presumably cleaner. The latest idea to "upgrade" Paceville is to make it a "24 hours hub of activities" – the

prospect of which obviously has the club owners rejoicing and the residents cringing.

As I have argued here, the building of more international enclaves will not foster lively and inclusive public space but will increase the pressure on the few open spaces left. The thousands of tourists who come for a week-end or foreigners working on short term contracts do not invest in the place as long-term residents would. Consequently the streets of Paceville are doomed to be either privatized and closed to the public, or left abandoned with no real investment from the local stakeholders. Streets, beaches and gardens need to be owned if they are to thrive. Public spaces are not empty spaces owned by everyone, especially when everyone just comes and goes.

Urban space is the product of social relations which are often conflicting and unequal. The tension between stakeholders will only increase as long as there is no negotiated ownership of the public spaces.

## Conclusion

To conclude I would say that Paceville is an urban laboratory for the future of Malta. If the tourism industry continues to thrive, there will be more places like Paceville. In fact there are already several large enclaves being built elsewhere on the island: Ta' Monita, Madliena Village (ex-Busietta Gardens), Fort Chambray, Fort Cambridge, Tigné Point, and Hal Sagħtrija in Gozo. Thus the need to invent a new urbanity that is not based on face-to-face negotiation will become crucial. Tourists cannot take care of a place that they came to consume. The commoditization of space and its enclosure are only putting more pressure on the few spaces left for the public. Who will take care of the public space, and who will guarantee a public good?



Figure 10: Paceville street, 2013. Photograph by Elise Billiard.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Boissevain: *But We Live Here*: Perspectives on Cultural Tourism in Malta." P.221-240, in "Sustainable Tourism in Islands and Small States Case Studies." (eds.) L.Briguglio et al. London: Pinter, 1996.

Paul Sant Cassia: 1999 *Tourism, Tradition and Memory in Malta*. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Vol 5 No 2 (1999) pp. 247-263.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from : <http://www.pendergardens.com/> (last accessed 10 January 2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Toward an Urban Renaissance. Final Report of the Urban Task Force Chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside*, London: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche. *Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics*. London: Mit Press.1998.

<sup>5</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London: Sage. 2005 quote page 152.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.

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