Title of the Story: A long-lost historical building brought back to life: the restoration and regeneration of ‘Tat-Tmien Kantunieri’ Windmill

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Issues faced

‘Tat-Tmien Kantunieri Windmill’ is an 18th century windmill located in the village of Xewkija. It is situated in a very prominent place, on the main road between the capital city of Victoria and the village of Ghajnsielem, the gateway through which visitors reach the island of Gozo. Its name in Maltese translates to ‘the windmill with eight corners’, deriving from its unique foundation which is octagonal in shape.

This windmill is one of various windmills built by the Knights of St John all around the Maltese islands between the 17th and 18th centuries. What makes it stand out from the others is that it is the oldest surviving windmill in Gozo. It was commissioned by Grand Master Perellos and started milling wheat in 1710 by a miller named Ganni Scicluna. The building comprises a large entrance hall, two spacious rooms, a birth room, and a kitchen. A winding staircase in the middle leads up to the roof of the tower.

The windmill remained in use until 1886 when it was destroyed by a fire. Later on in the 20th century, the building served as the first base of the Xewkija Band Club, which used the site between 1956 and 1965. However, after this date, it was left to deteriorate and remained unused in a dilapidated state. As a result, an analysis of the building revealed that without any maintenance, it would continue to deteriorate with considerable damage to the existing roofing systems. Moreover, it would exacerbate the negative impact on the entire neighbourhood and visitors by being an unattractive building whilst it could become a hazard for passers-by and if any part collapses, greater expenses and efforts to recover it would be required. It would also remain an insignificant building whereby both locals and visitors would have no opportunity to learn about the true importance of the building in a bygone era.

For this reason, the Ministry for Gozo deemed it crucial to embark on the windmill’s restoration project to return a long-lost national heritage site back to the community whilst attracting tourists to a newly renovated attraction. The idea was to better conserve and valorize Gozo’s cultural heritage for tourism purposes in order for the island to continue establishing itself as a distinct all-year round tourist destination, instead of one which is simply based on sun and sea, and reduce its dependency on day trippers.

Methods, steps and tools applied

The restoration and renovation process involved carrying out different kinds of manual work on both the interior and the exterior of the windmill.

Professional restorers were appointed to carry out the much-needed renovations on the entire building and its surroundings. Due to the fact that the windmill dates back to the 18th century, it contained a number of original bygone objects such as stones as well as a traditional type of stone slab known as ‘ċanġatura’ in Maltese. Those that were still in a good condition were preserved whilst others which were found to be broken were fixed using fibre rods and epoxy resin. Whilst the works were undergoing,
the restorers encountered some surprises along the way. These included an old wooden oven and its chimney which were restored, as well as an unusual spalling floor which was meticulously conserved.

The necessary mechanical and electrical installation works were carefully carried out under the guidance of the Ministry for Gozo’s engineer and according to the latest applicable regulations and codes of practice. In order to preserve the original stones and not cause them any damage, conduits were passed through already existing pointings and specific tools were utilised throughout the restoration process. Moreover, the windmill was supplied with water, electricity and energy-efficient A/C systems, as well as a fire alarm system and fire fighting equipment.

The design and construction stages of the rehabilitation project were overseen by a key expert and health and safety officer. In previous years, the same expert had already been involved in the restoration project of another windmill on the island of Gozo, Ta’ Kola Windmill in Xaghra, which is still in a good working condition to date. This ensured that the expert was in a position to provide the best advice for the rehabilitation project of the Xewkija Windmill based on his previous experience. The expert’s recommendations concerned the appropriate timber to be used and the re-design and construction of the milling mechanism in a way to reflect the original one. In this regard, the carpenters were guided and assisted by the expert along the manufacturing and construction process of the mechanism.

Different kinds of timber were used to create the functioning milling mechanism of the windmill. Pine timber poles were used for antennas to make the windmill’s mechanism functional. Ash timber was mainly used for the external part of the windmill to complete the antennas as well as inside the windmill as part of the wooden gear mechanism. In addition, iroko timber was also used on the inside of the windmill to manufacture two round circles with 156 inches of diameter each and for the manufacturing of the internal main shaft. Two other iroko beams were used to support the grinding stones whilst red deal timber was used for the cone of the windmill at the very top, which was also painted and given membrane.

Steel parts required to construct and mount together the milling mechanism parts were custom made and milling stones were specifically manufactured for the windmill. Moreover, the process included the manufacture and installation of new apertures complying with the windmill era, as well as railings, bollards and gates to ensure a safe environment for prospective visitors. All apertures were double glazed, LED lighting was utilised whenever applicable, and the natural light and ventilation systems of the buildings were reinstated where possible to reduce energy consumption. These interventions ensured that the project is energy efficient and therefore indirectly contributing towards the reduction of GHG emissions.

The most crucial phase of the project included the assembly of all the robust mechanism parts. These were constructed in place by a specialised team from Heritage Malta, which is Malta and Gozo’s national agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage.

Finally, the restoration project also included the creation of a small square at the exterior of the building, around the windmill. Works included the paving of the area and the construction of three public restrooms and a breastfeeding room, which were all carried out under the guidance of the Ministry for Gozo’s architect.
With regards to the length of the restoration project, the whole process of the planning, issuing of tenders and purchasing of raw materials, manufacturing and installing the whole mechanism lasted approximately three years, as it started around October 2017 and ended in January 2021.

**Key success factors**

Despite being a very small island, Gozo is characterised by a rich cultural heritage dating back to prehistoric times. A key success factor for this project was primarily the continuous commitment from the Ministry for Gozo to preserve the island’s cultural heritage. The Ministry’s mission is primarily to effectively, efficiently, economically and with a service excellence culture implement the regional and national strategies and policies to secure economic and social prosperity for citizens residing in Gozo within the context of the island’s unique characteristics. In particular, the Ministry is committed to develop the tourism product and has embarked on a strategy to guarantee sustainability within this important economic sector by attracting high quality tourism that has the potential of longer stays and higher spend. The Ministry for Gozo believes that the island offers a unique destination experience and proposition and that this can be communicated more effectively through further development of the tourism product, in particular by giving greater prominence to Gozo’s culture and heritage which is crucial to decrease the disparity in numbers between day trippers and multiple-night stay tourists.

Therefore, this project portrayed that the Gozitan authorities are very much invested in the development of the island not only by focusing on infrastructural projects, but also by giving great importance to the maintenance and restoration of national heritage sites. Nonetheless, the authorities often encounter challenges when embarking on such projects, particularly because Gozo suffers from double insularity hence a number of permanent characteristics influence its socio-economic development whilst resources are quite limited.

In this regard, almost €500,000 were invested in the restoration and regeneration of the Xewkija windmill project, most of which came from the European Fund for Regional Development 2014-2020. In particular, the project fell under Operational Programme I (OPI) whose vision was to foster a competitive and sustainable economy to meet our challenges. The programme had a number of priority axes to help it achieve its objectives, with the Xewkija Windmill project falling under Priority Axis 5 – *Protecting our environment – investing in natural and cultural assets*. The aid from EU funds was a very crucial asset for this project since the Ministry for Gozo has insufficient financial resources to undertake large scale restoration and/or corrective intervention projects. This investment led to the windmill being now accessible to the general public at no cost.

Moreover, the collaboration efforts between the human resources involved in this project, which were all local individuals, were of utmost importance for its success. These included directors, the project manager, key technical experts, government workers, carpenters, as well as Wirt Għawdex - a Gozitan NGO which aims at fostering the knowledge of local heritage amongst all levels of society and safeguarding the natural, archaeological, historical and anthropological patrimony of the islands of Gozo and Comino. The local NGO provided technical expertise and input with regards to the restoration of the windmill when the work tenders were being drafted. Following the completion of the project, a new NGO named Tal-Fuklar Folk Group is currently managing the site and has already started running it on daily basis.
Finally, the guidance of the Planning Authority ensured that the works were carried out in accordance with an approved restoration method statement and monitored by the Planning Authority’s conservation officers.

**Lessons learned**

The Xewkija Windmill project is one of the most successful projects implemented on the island of Gozo. Yet, this did not come about without its own set of issues, which nonetheless the team was able to overcome.

The greatest challenge faced in the regeneration and restoration of the windmill was undoubtedly the fact that since the building had been neglected for so many years, it was in a state of total disrepair and deterioration. Therefore, a lot of work had to be carried out both in the planning phases as well as in the physical work required in restoring the building itself, in particular building the windmill’s mechanism from scratch. Also, metallic inserts and cement renders had to be removed and the concrete roof had to be replaced with more traditional stone slabs to increasingly resemble the original building.

A further challenge faced was the inherent nature of the building, being the oldest windmill on the island of Gozo. It was essential that the restored building resembles the old building in order to maintain its original character. This meant that the restoration works had to carefully preserve any remaining objects which were of significant value, particularly because they can no longer be seen in the modern buildings we have nowadays. This also led to the further challenge of incorporating such objects into the restoration project, whilst making sure that they were not further degraded by the works themselves.

The most crucial task was putting together the different parts which made up the mechanism of the windmill. This proved to be a challenge not only physically to assemble the mechanical parts together, but also due to the fact that experts having great knowledge in this field were indispensable for the complete success of the project. In fact, a great level of traditional craftsmanship was required. This was not something easy to achieve especially since local windmills are no longer in operation, therefore meticulous skills were required to preserve the building as well as ensuring that it is returned to its original functioning state.

Finally, since the project was finalised in a year characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic, this undoubtedly presented a number of challenges in itself. Nonetheless, a positive element in this regard was that the project contributed to sustaining the local workflow in a time when employment was particularly negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Results, achievements and recognitions**
The aim of the rehabilitation and restoration of the Xewkija windmill was to provide an innovative cultural and historical tourism experience by preserving and restoring a national heritage site, rather than allowing it to fall into an even deeper state of disrepair. The works carried out not only improved the viewing experience and accessibility facilities of the windmill, but also sought to enhance Gozo’s tourism product by creating a further location to maintain and consolidate Gozo’s cultural and historical heritage.

Apart from turning what used to be an eye sore into a new attraction situated in a prime location, the building has also gained new functionalities. First of all, the windmill will be utilised to showcase and celebrate intangible cultural heritage, hence setting forth a further facet in its tourism offering. In particular, the building will be used as a cultural hub by offering the ideal venue for hosting cultural activities and events. Amongst others, these will include folkloristic re-enactments, for example folk dancing and folk playing, which will portray the traditional Gozitan heritage such as attire, dance and customs. Moreover, the venue will also serve for interesting and educational talks about the windmill itself and its unique history, reflecting the lifestyle of previous generations which rests at the heart of Gozitans. In the meantime, visitors will also have the opportunity of observing a functional windmill, which is something rare to see nowadays.

Due to its high significant value, this will promulgate Gozo’s cultural patrimony not only to international visitors but to domestic ones alike, and also to present and future generations. Moreover, the building will serve as a venue for cultural exchanges, particularly between locals and tourists, thereby encouraging the transfer of ideas whilst broadening the educational and cultural horizons. This has the potential of contributing towards generating a more inclusive and open society and creating the right conditions conducive towards further artistic and cultural development.

Tourism is the bedrock of the Maltese economy and has been steadily increasing along the years. From 2013 to 2019, the peak season (April-September) saw an increase of 66% in visitors, while the low season (October-March) saw an increase of 88%. In addition, the 2.8 million tourist arrivals in Malta & Gozo in 2019 resulted in direct spending levels of €2.2 billion into the Maltese economy, representing a direct contribution of 17% of nominal GDP. Therefore, any intervention to improve the tourist product of the islands to target higher value tourists would in turn translate into sustainable socio-economic development. In this regard, the project will improve Malta and Gozo’s competitiveness within the tourism sector through the promotion, protection and preservation of the natural, cultural and historical assets within the public domain. It will contribute to improving the cultural tourism experience whilst maintaining increased tourist flows which have been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the windmill will help combat seasonality and contribute to sustainable tourism by dispersing its activities evenly throughout the year to balance the tourism flow. The cultural and heritage tourism niche is considered essential for Gozo to entice travellers during leaner months whilst ensuring the island’s success in the tourism market.

The project has also contributed to the creation of new jobs necessary for the building’s administration and operations. For the time being, fourteen (14) attendants, who are all reading for a Diploma in Baroque Studies at the University of Malta, have been employed. Apart from these, a further generation of jobs is foreseen due to the increased visitor flows which would push up the property values of residences in historic districts and encourage businesses to establish themselves in the surrounding area.
Hence, the restored windmill will have the added value of offering the Gozitan community a new venue for safe, active and healthy recreation and will serve as an instrument for social cohesion, instilling a sense of identity and belonging in its users. It will improve the quality of life of the Gozitan community whilst keeping alive the intangible cultural aspects.

The cultural venue shall operate on a free of charge basis. This aims to improve the access of disadvantaged socio-economic groups to cultural and recreational sites/activities and encourage them to become more appreciative of the island’s cultural heritage. Moreover, it removes a potential barrier that might have prevented vulnerable groups from experiencing social and moral inclusion through culture. In addition, the prime location of the windmill makes it very accessible via public transport, therefore even persons who do not own a private vehicle can easily reach it.

As a result, the project can be an inspiration for comparable regions to adopt similar solutions to their problems. It is an example of the importance of diversifying the elements which can potentially attract high-quality all-year round tourism, especially for small island states which are heavily dependent on the tourism sector for their economic development. Moreover, the project portrays how neglected buildings can be sustainably developed into functional ones with an adaptive reuse concept. By restoring and ‘recycling’ the Xewkija Windmill, the project will contribute to improved resource efficiency and climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

The Xewkija windmill restoration project was praised by the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, whose role is to fulfil the duties of the State in ensuring the protection and accessibility of Malta’s cultural heritage.

Unfortunately, due to the current situation, the newly renovated windmill has not yet reaped the harvest of its investment. Nonetheless, it is envisaged that through this project, 13,866 visitors would visit the site upon the first year of its completion, whilst increasing the percentage of tourists who opt for a Gozo-based holiday due to its history and culture by 3% (in normal circumstances). As soon as COVID restrictions are eased, there is a well-planned programme of cultural activities, events and informative talks to take place. In the meantime, as the site is closed for the public due to the COVID restrictions, all employees have been trained and given the required information both from the historic and the restoration point of view, since it is very important for potential visitors to be aware of the works meticulously done on the site.

In this regard, Gozo looks forward to welcome tourists and locals alike to this unique attraction to explore more about the Gozitan traditional way of life and appreciate the importance of sustainably preserving historic buildings.

Additional references
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