

## St. Anne's Square, Sliema – Saving Urban Spaces

The Sliema Front is undisputedly Malta's most popular seaside promenade. Yet despite having this highly successful urban node, the large town that is Sliema today boasts very few open spaces. For instance none of the locality's four parish churches are endowed with the squares typically associated with such landmarks. The few openings referred to as *pjazez* are either merely widened streets such as Annunciation Square or crossroad junctions such as Dingli Circus. These examples are dominated by vehicular traffic with any extra allocated space dedicated for precious parking bays limiting the pedestrian to the pavement. Few realize, however, that there exists a public open space in Sliema which, as a result of bad planning, has been encroached upon and subsequently mutilated.

In the mid-nineteenth century orthogonal street planning of this new sprawling town, which retained a link to Valletta by means of the ferry service, was given special importance. The main reason for this was that, initially, many of Sliema's summer residents hailed from the capital. Thus, just across the road from what was known as the *Sliema landing place*, a rectangular open space was set out at the strategic pivot between The Strand and Tower Road (Bisazza Street was only opened up after World War II). This *piazza*, named St. Anne's Square after a statue put up on one of its corners, immediately became a popular rendezvous with those arriving and leaving this new seaside town. In the early years a curious diminutive arcaded building once stood at the centre of the piazza. This was later replaced by a fountain and a graceful statue of the goddess Diana, celebrating the arrival of piped water to Sliema and carried out under the supervision of the highly acclaimed architect E.L. Galizia (1830-1906). The fountain was later removed and now stands in Balluta. Over the years a number of small timber kiosks housing souvenir shops and cafeterias were erected in the piazza. Galizia also designed the neo-classical police station that stood on the shore-end of the square. This, together with the steady growth of the lofty ficus trees must have characterised *Piazza Sant Anna* with an intimate sense of enclosure. In the 1960s, with this part of Sliema already a throbbing commercial centre known as *The Ferries*, St. Anne's Square became a favorite meeting place especially for those frequenting the surrounding cinemas, including The Majestic, whose imposing façade still overlooks it. The demise of this much-loved urban space came with the uncontrolled development of the permanent commercial outlets that one sees today.

Recently it has been revealed that there exists the possibility that this sprawling structure may be removed. A golden opportunity has thus presented itself to the authorities to regenerate this once teeming node. St Anne's Square is rather unusual in that it is asymmetric. According to the classification made by Paul Zucker (1888-1971), an architect and city planner, of the typology of urban squares, it ranks as an amorphous square being semi-enclosed and dominated by tall buildings and mature trees.

Restoring this enclosure can be done through effective landscaping and the discreet insertion of an adequately designed, downsized version of the kiosk. The reinstatement of St. Anne Square together with the recently approved pedestrianisation of Bisazza Street will turn The Ferries into an infinitely more attractive, user-friendly urban experience.

The Kamra tal-Periti invites all parties concerned to co-ordinate their efforts in this direction and to collaborate in giving back to Sliema some of its lost dignity for the enjoyment of the community.

Kamra tal-Periti