



THE PROFESSIONAL CENTRE
SLEIMA ROAD
GZIRA GZR 1633 - MALTA
TEL./FAX. (+356) 2131 4265
EMAIL: info@ktpmalta.com
WEBSITE: www.ktpmalta.com

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To support members of the profession in achieving excellence in their practice of architecture and engineering in the interest of the community

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ST. ANNE'S SQUARE



The Kamra tal-Periti expresses its satisfaction at the recent decision taken by Minister for Resources and Rural Affairs George Pullicino and Parliamentary Secretary for Lands Jason Azzopardito restore St. Anne's Square in Sliema to its former open aspect. The reported decision to reinstate this unique piazza is very much welcomed.

This opportunity was first highlighted in 2005 by the Kamra in a press release, which was also followed by a Talking Point in The Times in 2006. The matter was also discussed a number of times with Minister Pullicino and the Lands Department in recent months.

Coming on the heels of the Government decision on Television House in Gwardamangia, and also the recent MEPA decisions on Transfiguration Avenue in Lija and Villa Bologna in Attard, this decision bodes well for the implementation of a holistic planning policy throughout the country which conserves and enhances quality in urban settings and environments.

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 fichus trees must have characterised Pjazza 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, now incorporated in the Plaza centre. The demise of this much-loved urban space came with the uncontrolled development of the permanent commercial outlets that one sees today.

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 other local measures can 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.

(taken from the Architect, Issue 35, Winter 2005)