**So close, and yet so far: Divergent experiences of gentrification in**

**two neighbouring fortified cities in Malta**

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On the first day of this year I was talking to someone who had been to, in her own words, ‘a wonderful New Year’s Eve party in a wonderful old house in wonderful Birgu’. Given that I take my daily walk in Birgu and know the town well, I asked her which street the house was on. When she replied ‘Nelson Street’, I told her I knew of no such street in Birgu; anyway I asked her to provide some directions. It turned out that Nelson Street was one I knew well. Only it’s not in Birgu but rather Bormla, the neighbouring town. When I pointed that out she changed the subject. When *that* didn’t work she said ‘Oh well, I suppose the house and street are in BirguBormla’.

Problem is, such a hybrid is hard to imagine. Birgu and Bormla may be neighbours but they are very distinct, in two ways. First, each town is separately fortified; the lines of early modern bastions and works leave little doubt as to the line of demarcation between the two. Second, there is no evidence of schizophrenia among Bormlizi and Girbin (as local from Bormla and Birgu respectively are known) themselves. In no uncertain terms, one is either from Bormla or from Birgu. I am happy to give our young lady the benefit of the doubt, especially since many Maltese are quite unfamiliar with the area. And yet that leaves us with a question: Why was she so reluctant to say she had been to a party in Bormla?

The answer to that question is fairly straightforward: It doesn’t do one’s reputation as a socialite much good to spend New Year’s Eve in Bormla. At best the place is seen as a featureless working class landscape with nothing much to declare except its social housing. At worst, and perhaps more commonly, Bormla is thought of as Malta’s skidrow-on-sea, the shabby haunt of unemployed layabouts, junkies, unmarried mothers and what in Malta are called ‘social cases’ generally. On a good day people will mention the parish Church, a vast baroque pile that by some fluke survived the WWII blitz, as the only attraction; on a *very* good day they might add that Bormlizi are tarts with big hearts. This state of affairs is reflected in real estate values among other things. Although there is hardly such a thing as cheap property in Malta, the undesirability of the location regularly knocks 25-30% off the value of intact and beautiful period houses – provided one can find a buyer at all. As for tourists, the ones that make it to Bormla are likely to have misplaced their maps and to ask for directions.

Their intended destination is usually Birgu, a full two minutes’ walk down the road from Bormla. There’s a certain ambivalence to the place. On the one hand most of the residents are working class and noticeably so. On the other it has in the last twelve years or so been elevated into respectable society. People popularly associate it with palaces, forts, quaint medieval streets, and an up-and-coming waterfront complete with yachts, a casino, and several cafes and restaurants. The tourist presence is not quite yet the crowded one of the classical Maltese destinations; and yet, Birgu and its three museums are increasingly a fixture of tourist itineraries. Real estate, particularly in the older and more atmospheric parts of the town, is increasingly expensive and hard to find. The best houses have been scooped up by foreigners and Maltese buyers who however do not always use them as their main residence.

The point is that while Bormla and Birgu live cheek by jowl and are very similar – they are both maritime fortified towns with their backs to the hinterland and a largely working class population – they are in at least one respect very different. Birgu tells a story of ongoing and successful regeneration and gentrification, of a town with a glorious past that is looking towards a bright future. Bormla on the other hand is largely about disappointment and resentment, about a missed appointment with the gift-bearing regeneration genie. These are narratives and feelings I come across every day as a long-term participant observer. The question is why, given their similarities and proximity, do the two towns experience regeneration and gentrification so differently.

In this paper I shall approach this question by looking at three categories of reasons why the two towns have fared so differently. I believe that the fact that Bormla and Birgu are so close and share so much lends value to my comparison. Clearly, the case study sheds light on what gentrification is, its irregular progress and discontinuities, and its hits and misses. I might add at this stage that I’ll be using the term ‘gentrification’ fairly uncritically to refer to a process whereby a town experiences (not least in the active sense) a shift towards a genteel and respectable image. I’ve looked elsewhere (e.g. Falzon 2008) at issues of displacement and won’t be doing so here. I will also be assuming that in the case of Birgu and Bormla gentrification is largely desirable – not necessarily because *I* think it is but rather because the inhabitants of these two towns see it as such.

*Townscapes and histories*

Birgu and Bormla are part of the inner harbour conurbation of Malta. The whole area has been a hub of urban and maritime activities since the sixteenth century and the establishment in Malta of the Knights of St. John, a military-hospitaller Order that depended in substantial and increasing measure on maritime activities such as corsairing and entrepôt trade. The maritime vocation retained its strength throughout the British period and only began to subside in the post-War decolonisation process. Valletta, the capital city of Malta, occupies the peninsula on one side of the harbour. The other side is made up of the three cities of Bormla, Birgu, and l-Isla which are known collectively as Cottonera. Apart from these Maltese names they are also known as Cospicua, Vittoriosa, and Senglea respectively.

The dynamics and politics of this interchangeable nomenclature is relevant, in the sense that the ‘English’ (actually Romance) versions are thought to sound softer and more genteel – here one has to keep in mind that English is the prestige language of Malta. Thus what the locals call the ‘*xatt tal-Birgu*’ is known officially as the Vittoriosa waterfront. If the manufactured slippage is acceptable in Birgu, the same cannot be said of Bormla. To say ‘I live in Cospicua’ for example sounds suspiciously like some sort of euphemism, a conceit really.

The first consequential difference between Birgu and Bormla concerns the actual spatial-physical lie of the land and towns. The last thing I wish to do is come up with a sort of topographical determinism; rather, it is the interaction between topography and contemporary notions of what is worth preserving that matters.

As Fenech (1993) rightly notes, Bormla is disadvantaged by virtue of being a thoroughfare rather than a peninsula. Question is, Why should that matter? My answer is that a peninsula lends itself better to the *centro storico* European model of urban valuation. Walking is a central component of that model, which is why pedestrianisation and urban regeneration often go hand in hand. Birgu doesn’t lead anywhere and in any case the narrow streets scarcely lend themselves to cars. The limited parking space that exists is mostly reserved for residents. The town invites people to walk through it. Most visitors park their cars in the various open spaces outside the walls and continue their journey to the heart of the town on foot. There are two main bus stops and both drop people off outside the walls; the same goes for tourist coaches. Things would have been quite different had the post-War planners had their full say – one 1948 plan for reconstruction by British consultants would have had large areas of town bulldozed to allow the free circulation of cars. Thankfully one might say, financial and other constraints meant that that never happened. Birgu, or at least its old part, is now a walking town which invites one to stroll and look, a practice which in turn invites residents to gentrify their house façades. This constant visibility also means that the national planning regime is more careful about Birgu than it is about Bormla. Bormla is a place non-residents drive through and in case the old part of town is hidden away from the main thoroughfare.

Another difference has to do with landmarks. Albeit small, the centre of Birgu is rich in historic and monumental buildings from the period of the Knights. The old part of Bormla is brimming with period façades and streetscapes that span across three centuries, to be sure. But there is nothing that stands out and/or that can be linked up to a grand narrative. The last two decades saw the restoration, by government, of a number of monumental façades in Birgu. When locals talk about their homes and town today, they make constant reference to the presence and proximity of stately buildings. “This house was once part of a Knights’ palace”, one person told me, “I bought it for very little but it must be worth a fortune now”.

I would suggest that the gentrification of Birgu has a lot to do with such processes of revaluation. The publication in 1993 of *Birgu: A Maltese maritime city*, a two-volume book in coffee-table format, was significant in this respect. I would call it a kind of initiation ritual into an inner circle of valuable and worthy protagonists of national history; Mdina, the old medieval city of Malta and a paragon of genteel and regenerated urbanity, only got its two volumes three years later in 1996. Thanks to this book Birgu found itself sharing coffee table and library space with rarefied ‘melitensia’ topics such as Maltese clocks, Maltese silver, Maltese furniture, and so on. Further, the drift of the book was not just to describe what was but rather what could be – there was a programmatic and anticipatory thread running through the various contributions. To cite one passage from the book:

The problems of Birgu are many and perhaps not easily solved. However preservation of Birgu’s heritage is imperative. Whatever is done, and however it is done, let us not lose the happily unspoiled bits that are still left to us, with their narrow old-world intimate streets, streets which twist and turn, streets with hard stone steps and paving stones, streets with small individual houses with brightly painted doors and balconies, with shining door knobs, wrought iron gates and small graceful balconies with lace-like iron railings (Mahoney 1993, 456).

The work of historian Dominic Fenech is crucial here, in two ways. First, Fenech (1993) shows how during most of the British period (de facto 1800-1979) the three cities were readily distinguishable in terms of prosperity and its corollaries. L-Isla topped the list most of the time followed by Birgu and Bormla, the last two in alternating order. For various reasons it was however a hierarchy on the gradual way out as the more affluent people increasingly left the area to its working class devices. By the onset of WWII the three cities were to all intents and purposes a “single socio-economic unit” (Fenech 1993, 156). Second, Fenech’s work puts a big dent into the narrative, so commonly peddled by locals and popular histories today, that the three cities were something of an elite stronghold up until WWII when the bombs and subsequent social housing schemes stole their fair share of posh. Rather, the census and other data show that the exodus of the upwardly-mobile set in much earlier – as early as the mid-19th century in fact. Besides, none of the three cities – Birgu included – were seen by 19th and early-20th century travellers as anything to write home about. The general drift was of overcrowded working-class towns with a bit of old-world quaint thrown in, Birgu taking the most generous helping of the latter. The point with respect to the present work is that Birgu’s ascendancy is very much in the spirit of recent invention rather than long-term continuity.

I mentioned earlier that topographical determinism wouldn’t do. Nor would historical determinism. It’s not necessarily the historical-factual divergences between Bormla and Birgu that matter, as what contemporary narratives happen to do with them. In the case of Birgu these narratives have latched on to the period of the Knights, notwithstanding the fact that the town only hosted them for about forty years in the sixteenth century. Of course the Knights were great builders and those few decades are still fairly evident physically. Be that as it may Birgu today is unequivocally the Vittoriosa of the Knights. Every year during the Birgufest for example, there is a re-enactment of the Grandmaster’s arrival by barge from Valletta. The vigour with which the narrative is pursued is relevant to our topic. Knights of St. John were drawn from aristocratic European families and thrived on an imagery of chivalry and grandeur. Appropriating that pedigree means appropriating fancy names, heraldry, suits of armour, Caravaggios, and so on. Besides, the Knights have become embedded in officializing histories of Malta as the bearers of glorious gifts.

How about Bormla? I would say that the town hasn’t yet formally chosen which grand historical narrative to align itself with. By and large in the popular collective memory however, it is associated with the dockyard (which until 2001 was located there), the WWII bombings, and the birth of the Labour Party. (It is often called a ‘*fortizza Laburista*’.) The images that come to mind are of working-class people and short-fused and politically-charged dockers. The point is that there is a difference between their hard hats and the helmets worn by the Knights. Unlike Knights, dockers are hardly located within desirable officializing histories. I would add that Knights are infinitely more romantic – or should I say romanticisable? – than unionised dockers. Certainly they lend themselves better to the gentrification theme.

*Local politics*

The second category of reasons is that of politics, specifically that of local councils. In Malta the institution of local government goes back to the medieval ‘università’. There was however a long period of discontinuity and to all intents and purposes it owes its modern origins to the Local Councils Act of 1993 when the island was divided into 67 localities. Since then there has been a gradual process of decentralisation and local councils today enjoy substantial political brief and autonomy, particularly in the field of culture.

Both Birgu and Bormla have their own local councils that are answerable to the exact same set of laws and regulations. There are however important divergences. The Bormla local council has had a reputation for lethargy and petty political intrigue. There have been four mayors since 1994, two of whom were elbowed out of office following protracted tensions over accusations of vote-rigging and nepotism. The general feeling in Bormla is that the council is comatose (‘*qatt ma jaghmel xejn*’) and that the result is a general neglect (‘*telqa*’). Birgu is luckier. The key protagonist is the mayor, John Boxall, a colourful and hands-on go-getter who has won every election since 1994. Stories circulate of him doing the rounds every morning to pick up empty bottles and stray bits of rubbish. His class background is not different from that of the Bormla mayors but he has managed to establish for himself a network of connections with state bureaucrats and in international (EU especially) local government circles. The net beneficiary of his energy is Birgu. The Birgu local council has an infinitely stronger presence than its counterpart in Bormla; there are notices advising visitors to keep the noise down, historical landmarks are signposted, and the place is generally far better tended to. The local council has managed to attract funds for a number of initiatives, important visitors, and so on.

It has also played the culture card very effectively indeed. The story is long and complicated but I have to be telegraphic. Malta is known for its local *festi*, town and village feasts that celebrate some or other local Catholic patron saint. In the last fifteen years or so however we have witnessed the meteoric rise of another type of local event, one that is secular, organised largely by local councils, and intended to celebrate the (real or invented, it doesn’t matter here) traditions of the place. History, folklore, and cuisine are the usual suspects. Birgu has emerged as one of the more successful candidates. (It was actually one of the pioneers in this respect.) The two big events are the Birgufest and Birgu by Candelight. The second in particular draws immense crowds of Maltese and tourists who flock in their thousands to spend the evening roaming the candlelit streets, eating and drinking, and sampling the various cultural offerings.

The Bormla big day on the other hand has never caught on. The local council seems unsure as to what exactly to celebrate, let alone when and how. Last year it was Festa Kulturali Bormla which consisted on a few stalls run by local artisans, actors in ‘medieval’ costume, and a small train that took people round the streets. Not that there were many customers. At its busiest, Festa Kulturali Bormla was enjoyed by a couple of hundred people or so, most of them locals curious to see what it was all about and to complain that their party was nothing like that of the neighbours.

When asked, they blamed two things. The first, formulaic and rhetorical almost, was that the people of Cottonera are *minsijin* (‘forgotten’ – by the state that is). But then those of Birgu it seems are not so *minsijin*. Hence the second given reason, that the Bormla local council cannot begin to compare with that of Birgu – Bormla hasn’t had the good fortune of a John Boxall. This draws our attention partly to contingency, more importantly to the crucial value of individual cultural and political entrepreneurship as a means towards urban regeneration and gentrification.

*Waterfronts*

Bormla and Birgu both face the historical Galley’s Creek inlet of Malta’s harbour. The fact that the waterfront from the Bormla to the Birgu end is only one kilometre long is easily misleading. From early Modern times through the British period and into the present day, this short stretch was and is used intensively and disjointedly. Certainly the Birgu and Bormla sections are considered separate.

When the time came in the nineties for lengths of the harbour waterfront to be transformed from working into recreational ones, the prophets of regeneration had argued that Birgu and Bormla were to be considered as one. Take Peter Serracino Inglott, then Rector of the University and advisor to the Prime Minister:

It is plainly advantageous to consider the whole waterfront from St. Angelo to St. Michael’s, including Dockyard Creek, as a continuous, although articulated, whole; but, despite its dilapidated condition, the Birgu waterfront contains the most attractive architectural gems, as described in previous pages, and it is the most obvious starting point for restoration (Serracino Inglott 1993, 799).

The ‘but’ turned out to be prophetic for Birgu, jeremiac for Bormla. What in fact happened was that the Birgu waterfront was indeed, as Atkinson would put it, domesticated by cappuccino. A casino and several restaurants were set up opposite the new and upmarket Vittoriosa Marina - a series of moorings for yachts.

I consider the marina, or rather the yachts, very relevant to our subject of gentrification. Yachts, in particular the mega-million dollar gin palaces that regularly berth at Birgu, set up a fascinating ambiguity between viewer and viewed. On the one hand they are designed to give their owners and/or users privacy by making them invisible, so to speak. The lack of visibility however only adds to the mystique and therefore invites gazing and its corollary, appropriation. To stroll along the waterfront and look at the yachts is like entering another world (‘*qisek qed idduq dinja ohra*’), one young lady told me. The *dinja* (world) she had in mind was impossibly cosmopolitan, elite, and glamourous. A remote world maybe but one which affords the occasional glimpse right there in Birgu. I often observe people stopping to look at yachts, speculating about their value and the identity of their owners. A typical conversation (I overheard this one just last week) goes as follows: ‘I heard it belongs to Beckham ... he’s probably on board somewhere singing the Gloria with Victoria’. In sum, the waterfront at Birgu is today one of the more genteel and sanitized places anywhere in Malta.

The Bormla waterfront is a different matter. Following years of feet-dragging years it is now being given a facelift in the cappuccino flavour. Unlike in Birgu however the brew is turning out to be problematic. Suffice it to say that ‘*il-progett tax-xatt ta’ Bormla*’ has become a by-word for the broken promise of government projects that are never quite completed. As I speak the place is still a shambles of dust, pipes, and gravel – as it has been for the last two years.

One might object that the subject should be gentrification not waterfronts. Indeed the point has been made by many critics (including myself in earlier contributions) that manicured waterfronts can and often do give their backs to neglected hinterlands. I’m no longer sure this is the case at Birgu. Rather I think that the domesticated waterfront and gentrifying townscape are linked, in the sense that Birgu as a whole is linked by association to the waterfront. The idea sounds vague but isn’t necessarily; for example, the value of property in Birgu has undoubtedly gone up in recent years thanks also to the proximity of the waterfront, a presence that real estate agents will invariably point out to prospective buyers. It is in this sense that the casino, restaurants, and yachts matter to the gentrification of Birgu; it is also in this sense that their lack affects Bormla.

As I pointed out earlier, the residents of both Bormla and Birgu think of gentrification as a good thing. They look favourably on outsiders buying properties there for example, quite as if outside judgement is the best litmus of the towns’ worth. The hope is that the differences discussed in this paper serve to highlight some of the contents and discontents of these desires.

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