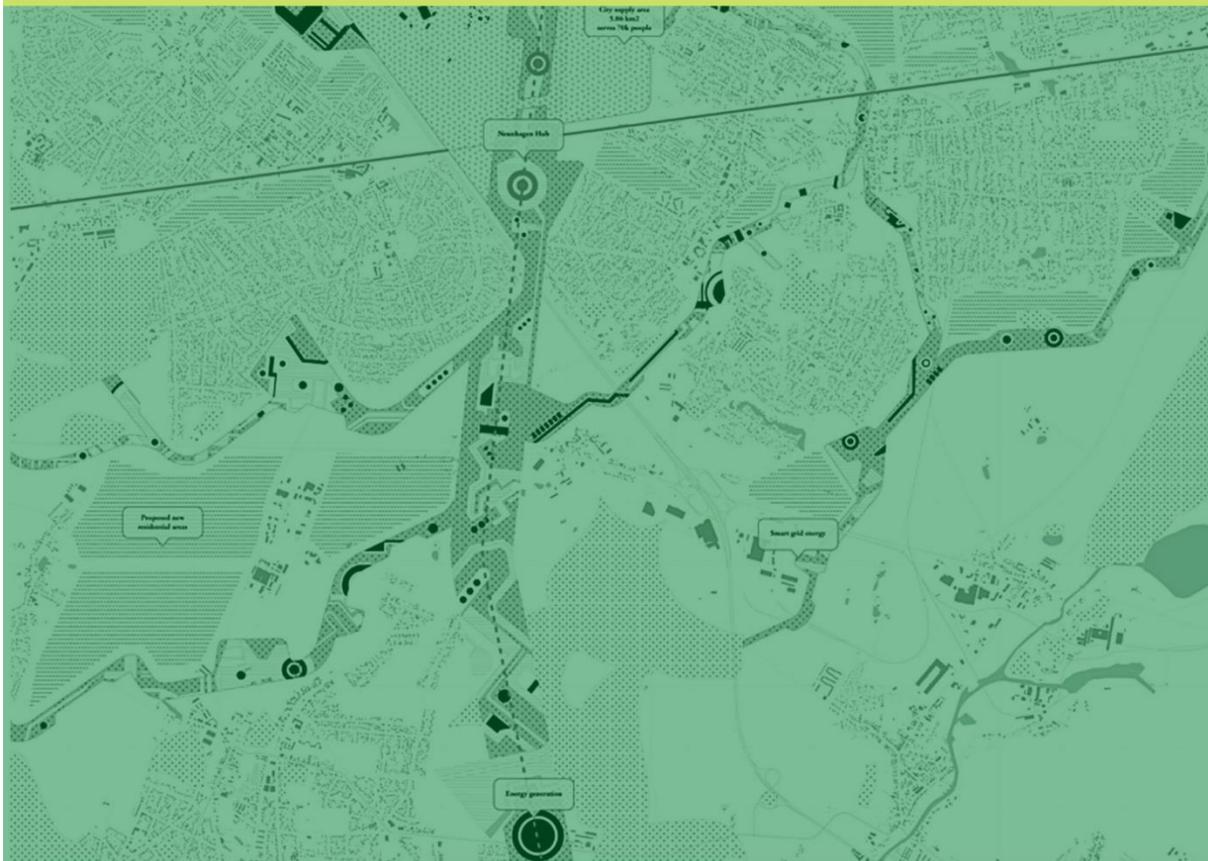


# BUILDING FUTURES

*Feedback on the National  
Cultural Policy 2021*



THE MALTA CHAMBER



VALLETTA

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## Introduction

Through this joint submission, “Building Futures”, The Malta Chamber & AP Valletta are taking the first step to converge on a shared vision for Malta’s cultural infrastructure, heritage and patrimony and their role in our society and economy. This initiative, as feedback to the National Cultural Policy 2021, follows an agreement between the partners to design and research educational and economic measures which can shape the future of the built and unbuilt environment in Malta. This exercise has been carried out with the underlying recognition of the grave, underestimated challenges posed by climate change to both culture and infrastructure, and for the ever-increasing need for economic growth to feed directly into an increased quality of life and wellbeing in a sustainable fashion.

According to its “Economic Vision 2020-2025”, The Malta Chamber expressed its concerns regarding “the extensive degree of low-quality and poorly regulated construction activity underway in Malta. The impression garnered is that construction takes precedence over sustainability, quality of life, wellness, and the environment.” Furthermore, there is recognition that planning decisions are taken without regard to local surroundings or the national context.

Through “Building Futures,” The Malta Chamber and AP Valletta acknowledge the negative impact upon national culture resulting from poor planning and insufficient criticism of the *status quo*, and take a step further than increasing the protection of cultural heritage assets. Addressing Malta’s planning problems with revised policies alone merely addresses the superficial symptoms, rather than the underlying causes, as the problem is ultimately cultural. It should therefore be the remit of the National Cultural Policy 2021 not only to preserve our heritage, both intangible and tangible, but to chart a vision for a responsible, civic, and inspired culture for tomorrow. Aside from preserving cultural assets and charting a bridge from past to present to future, “Building Futures” acknowledges that to protect and leverage our cultural resources, we must also tackle aspects, such as institutional culture, which enable poor planning.

The National Cultural Policy 2021 takes many positive steps in various necessary directions, and in this submission, The Malta Chamber and AP Valletta will attempt to further complement, reinforce, and consolidate this shared vision.

## Chapter 5: DEVELOPING CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

### Culture for Climate Action

At the heart of “Building Futures” lies an understanding that the current health and economic crisis, and the climate emergency before that, are on the one hand offering an unprecedented opportunity for change and on the other hand revealing the fragility of our urban environments.

The National Cultural Policy’s efforts to put climate change on the agenda are therefore to be acknowledged and admired. Cultural activities and figures with cultural authority have a fundamental role to play in the current crisis on many levels. Artists can contribute with their ability to communicate the tremendous challenges and risks which lie ahead, while enabling sustainable solutions which require cultural adaptation to embrace; and cultural spaces and infrastructure can take on a central role in the re-thinking the urban agenda which at the moment still prioritises non-sustainable practices like the use of private cars over people. The much-needed cultural infrastructure projects mentioned in the document, if developed and considered at an urban scale (as opposed to building scale only), will be able to engage with their context and contribute in a meaningful way to urban, social and economic regeneration processes. The proposal for the development of a Culture for Climate Action strategy is therefore laudable.

In line with the Baukultur principles quoted in the Policy document, the Malta Chamber and AP Valletta recognise that ***Building is an act of Culture*** and that therefore any policy aiming at supporting a cultural shift cannot restrict itself to the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage. While we agree on preservation being a central tenet in the development of sustainable practices, we also believe that enabling the ‘making of the heritage of tomorrow’ and, in doing so, addressing the far-reaching scope of Baukultur, should be highlighted as an equally important key objective. The first step towards such objective should be a governance shift of the architectural sector from ‘Works and Infrastructure’ towards ‘Culture’. Recognising building as an act of culture means that one recognises the complexity of architecture as a discipline which transcends the sphere of the technical and which, now more than ever, needs **to focus on its more intangible qualities** – including environmental, social, political, economic and cultural aspects – **to be able to offer tangible solutions**.

As prominent architecture theorist Jeremy Till recently said in a lecture for the Architecture Foundation, the current health crisis is an ecological crisis, and a crisis of the globalised market - which for the first time in history, does not have an answer. The need to find sustainable alternatives has been dramatically accelerated. There is **an urgent need for redefinition of processes and outcomes** to address the impacts

that the direction taken to date is having and will continue to have on the cultural, social, environmental and economic environment and their overall effect on wellbeing, from mental and physical health to economic resilience. Such urgency should be recognised and conveyed by the Policy document in a more direct way.

Also, a shift in governance of the discipline towards culture would contribute to opposing greenwashing initiatives, in other words, specific ways of conveying false positive impressions or promoting misleading information about how climate change and sustainability issues are tackled, which insist on mere technical aspects of building elements out of their context. No greenwashing operation will lead to the re-establishment of balance between development and the protection of our environment and our cultural heritage and only the adoption of a genuinely critical mindset on actions against climate change might.

Increased efforts on internationalisation, and the participation of Maltese artists and cultural figures in international initiatives tackling issues related to climate change in particular (e.g.: [the current programme of Milan's Triennale](#) in partnership with the EU Commission's "New European Bauhaus"), are also recommended as a strategic endeavour which would contribute to developing an informed critical perspective locally, while encouraging collaborations and increasing Maltese design and artistic sectors' visibility internationally.

In its "Economic Vision 2020-2025", The Malta Chamber states that "Malta's attractiveness to locals and foreigners alike is declining. This is not in line with the Chamber's belief that the progress of today must not occur at the expense of tomorrow's. On the contrary, the country should capitalise on the economic resilience of the present by investing in further development and growth that is both sustainable and beneficial to the country. Economic well-being and quality of life can and certainly must be able to co-exist and live as a means of balancing the contradictions between economic development and the environment, society, and quality of life."

## Conclusions

The need to investigate alternatives to the endless growth model on which Malta seems to rely, and to question the parameters defining the environments we inhabit is therefore more urgent than ever; for this reason, we ask: what is the role of culture in the definition of the built environment of the future? How can we demonstrate ways in which culture can contribute to different environments, at different levels, and monitor its effects?

While appreciating the attention given to climate change matters in the Developing Cultural Infrastructure chapter, The Malta Chamber and AP Valletta advocate an approach

- (a) **questioning** firstly the relationship between culture and architecture;
- (b) **aiming** at testing processes leading to the definition of the new parameters which will define the environment of the future; and
- (c) **fostering** multidisciplinary and collaborations among different sectors.