

Open Spaces as a Means to Promote Healthier Lifestyles and Psychological Wellbeing

Public spaces have an important role to play in the urban agenda. Their quality, accessibility, and connectivity lead to increased economic growth, socialisation, and wellbeing, especially for the most vulnerable groups of society. They are multi-functional and dynamic spaces that can revive the soul of our towns and villages, thus acting as communal spaces that revitalize the spirit of urban fabric. In a society where individualism is seeing an increase, the regeneration of our localities and urban revival provides an opportunity for social cohesion and healthier lifestyles to flourish in cleaner, greener and more inviting environments, writes Laura Sue Mallia, Director Risk Management, Policy and EU Affairs Transport Malta.

Photography Peter Paul Barbara.

Environmental champions and challenges such as climate change, urban liveability and noise pollution have given rise to a more environmentally conscious population. In a country wherein most of our open spaces are streets, it is inevitable that these will play a significant part in the regeneration process of our landscape. As a population we are characterised by our love for the private vehicle. This is resulting in increased congestion, air pollution and sedentary lifestyles which, also have significant effects on both psychological and physical health. Notably, during the pandemic, we became more aware of the fact that, in an increasingly urbanised society, our access to nature is dwindling and often the most disadvantaged segments of the population face the major barriers. Research has shown a link between access to nature and open spaces with decreased anxiety, mood swings and increased happiness, with nature providing a positive sense of belonging and meaning to life.

However, if our streets are reserved for cars, they cannot be used for anything else. This is a pity considering that most vehicles sit idle for a good number of hours each day. In this regard, the Slow Streets project which will see several squares in towns and villages turned into pedestrianised zones for varying times of the day will support a future that will see a shift in the priority on the street, from vehicles to pedestrians, cyclists, and users of eco-friendly micro-mobility.

Change can take many forms. Depending on the circumstances, however fast or slow, behavioural change here takes centre stage. The idea is to encourage people to rethink their mobility; their mobility needs as well as their trips. The recent months and the pandemic have changed many aspects of our life including the way we work and shop. By doing the same activities differently we can reduce our need to travel and thus emissions. In a city system, connectivity is crucial. However, transit does not necessarily require all the space and, it certainly does not need to be given centre stage.

In this regard, public transport which, as of October shall be free of charge for all can play a significant role together with car sharing, bike and bicycle sharing opportunities which are becoming increasingly available particularly in highly dense and touristic areas. In addition, Transport Malta with the support of consultants appointed by the European Commission, shall soon be embarking on an exercise to identify and, subsequently have an action plan to implement, to what extent urban regeneration could be linked to policy responses and action plans that can turn our towns and villages into climate conscious, enjoyable and breathable urban spaces for the whole community to enjoy and flourish in. These sustainable urban mobility plans and sustainable urban logistic plans will also provide a clearer vision of how the local transport systems can develop to become more sustainable but also safer and accessible for all.

Such initiatives, coupled with an ongoing mid-term review of the Transport Master Plan, which is expected to be completed later this year and, wherein the Authority is looking at the status and progress of existing measures whilst aligning the plan to wider policy framework such as the EU's Cohesion Policy for 2021-2027 as well as its Climate Target Plan for 2030 will support our country's aim to obtain a 19% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2030. The private sector also has an important role to play, particularly in open space developments, in reducing trips that could easily be shared or timed outside of peak hours, by introducing green travel plans for employees, and by providing the facilities to encourage remote working and cycling, walking and the use of micro-mobility for daily commutes to and from work. In view of this, Transport Malta is also working on an initiative that will encourage private enterprises to develop a Green Travel Plan and implement measures proposed in these plans. Looking at examples from other countries with characteristics similar to Malta one can see that the benefits of green travel plans are many and on various levels, including decreased congestion and increased physiological well-being. For the business owners and the employee, there are significant cost savings whilst the community benefits from less congestion, time saving and improved air quality leading to better and healthier lifestyles. ■