Property Register: Malta's Baseline for Cultural Heritage Protection and More

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Introduction

Statutory heritage protection in the Maltese Islands first started in 1925 with the publication of the Antiquities (Protection) Act, which was followed by the Antiquities (Protection) List of 1932, amended in 1936 and 1939. The Antiquities (Protection) List was essentially a "shopping list" of properties meriting protection however the list was extremely basic and generic. The information provided varied depending on the familiarity with the sites by the people compiling the list at the time. No site plans were published with the list, indeed in certain cases a feature of a house in a street was the only feature being protected within a single locality which made locating the site in question difficult let alone its protection.

Apart from this, little was done however to protect heritage in Malta between 1939 and 1992 when the (then) Planning Authority was set up. Indeed, heritage protection by MEPA commenced in 1994 with the identification of the most important archaeological sites and areas, delineation of Urban Conservation Areas for the fortified cities around the harbour and the identification of specific sites then under study through the Marsaxlokk Bay and North Harbours Local Plans. Protection of individual sites and buildings continued somewhat sporadically until 2006 when a thematic scheduling agenda was drawn up. Although a few groups of thematic scheduling had been carried out by then, most scheduling was undertaken depending on the studies being conducted at the time.

The NPI and MSPR, originally referred to as the List of Scheduled Property started off as little more than a list similar to the Antiquities List with the addition of pertinent information such as the proper address, images, a site plan denoting the extent and site curtilage if necessary, and other information required for planning purposes. In the late 2000s, the need was felt for better organisation of the information available and with it the better organisation of the NPI and creation of the MSPR.

National Protective Inventory

The NPI is the basis by which heritage is protected in Malta such that the formal process for protection of heritage assets begins at this point. Defined in simple terms, the NPI is a collective digital database of data inventory cards containing information on different properties which contain varying degrees of heritage significance. The assessment of heritage significance in Malta is based on international conventions and charters, and explores historical, architectural, scientific and social aspects. Those properties that are deemed to contain an acceptable level of significance are then considered for formal individual protection. The NPI has its origins in the Inventory of the European Cultural Heritage (hereinafter referred to as IECH) system as explained in detail in Borg and Formosa (2008), which commenced in Malta in 1964.

The IECH was eventually replaced by the NPI in line with the policies provided by the 1990 Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands. Whilst the original IECH and NPI data cards have evolved over the years, the concept behind these tools has always remained the same, that is to provide a record of, and information about properties with a potential to be protected as heritage assets. Indeed properties selected for protection are chosen based on the information provided by these cards, which also act as a record of those properties that have not yet acquired an appropriate level of heritage significance to merit protection but may do so in the future.

The latest revision to the data inventory cards that form the NPI was carried out in 2007. This resulted in an increased volume of information and an improved structure held within the inventory. Depending on the availability of information, the revised NPI cards generally contain the following: architectural description, history including planning history, centre-point co-ordinates, photographs (both historical and current) and most importantly cultural heritage significance. References to further information are also included when these are available. The NPI cards are designed in such a way as to allow the addition of newly acquired information at any stage. This is an important function since a frequent occurrence especially with regards to the NPI is the attainment of material, such as historical photographs, even after the completion of the data card. This flexibility permits NPI data cards to be easily updated allowing the NPI to continuously evolve and therefore to become a library of information for heritage assets in Malta.

The NPI database can be viewed by anyone at the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (hereinafter referred to as MEPA) premises, which is the competent authority for heritage management in Malta. It can also be accessed online at the MEPA website (MEPA, Undated). The NPI database is linked to the Malta Scheduled Property Register (hereinafter referred to as MSPR) which utilises the information from the NPI database to provide information on protected built heritage. The MSPR will be discussed in more detail below.

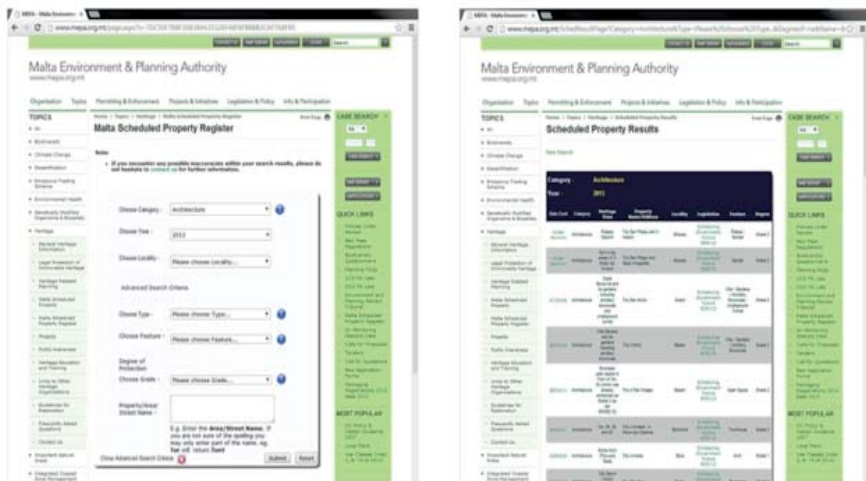Figures 1, 2 and 3: Example of NPI card as amended in 2007

Malta Scheduled Property Register

The MSPR is essentially a database of protected immovable cultural heritage assets in Malta. The MSPR owes its origin to what was known as the List of Scheduled Property. This list was developed shortly after the introduction of the Development Planning Act (DPA) of 1992 which, in addition to the 1990 Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands, equipped Maltese authorities with a sound legal framework that allowed the effective protection of Malta's cultural and natural historical assets. The DPA has now been superseded by the Environment and Development Planning Act (EDPA) of 2010.

While the List of Scheduled Property provided some information on protected assets, it was originally stored in Geographic Information System (GIS) format as explained in Borg and Formosa (2008). This made querying information from the list rather efficient especially when required data related to statistics on area, location and other spatial references. It was much more difficult to obtain information related to the actual number of protected assets however in view of certain sites being composed of a number of vector polygons delineating their value, typology or other features. Its conversion into a register providing more detailed information on individual, as well as groups of properties, eventually became necessary. As a result, in 2008 work began so as to convert the list into the MSPR of today.

The project was a major exercise that spanned one year and included individually checking each site around the country (at the time there were about 2,200 protected properties) and correlating that information with the information contained in the Government Gazette, which is the official national tool used to declare the protection of cultural assets. The information was included in a newly designed website with multiple search functions enabling users to search by numerous criteria. Indeed, as for the NPI, the MSPR is freely available to anyone who goes to the MEPA premises, or from the MEPA website. On the website the MSPR is available in two main digital formats: either as a searchable list of properties or through a GIS interface known as MapServer. The MSPR list was created after a process of sorting the data available on the GIS into individual sites rather than polygons as originally stored.

Figures 4 and 5: Screen shots of the MSPR search criteria and results obtained

By the end of 2013 the MSPR contained almost 3,000 entries consisting of Malta's heritage including protected buildings, sites and areas. The project also included the linking of the MSPR and NPI so as to strengthen the capabilities of the two to provide information. Indeed the current versions of the MSPR and NPI are intertwined to such a point that it is difficult for either of them to function effectively without the other. While the MSPR contains the basic information required for statutory and planning purposes, the NPI contains more detail on the heritage asset that is being protected.

Where we are now and where we need to go

The updating / creation of the NPI cards and MSPR respectively has resulted in a boost to Maltese heritage in terms of providing more accurate and detailed information and improved accuracy, efficiency and efficacy in data compilation. Prior to the development of the MSPR, data compilation on protected property was a slow process that provided information whose validity was at times questionable. The reason for this was that since the main data depository was a vector Geographic Information System (GIS) database, there were at times multiple entries for a single property. Slight changes to the scheduling meant that the annual figures collected (at times manually) would become obsolete from one amendment to the next resulting in conflicting figures being provided for official record purposes This is also somewhat reflected in the statistics of this data being accessed from MEPA's website as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Access figures of the MSPR

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
2,163	7,944	7,880	10,637	9,026

Of equal, if not greater importance is the fact that through the development of a web-based interface, and the increased use of internet in Malta, information on all types of Maltese heritage assets is now readily and easily available, which in turn allows the dissemination of information and increased knowledge for anyone interested in the subject matter, be it heritage and planning professionals or the general public alike. These tools allow people to research some of the more obscure or less known elements of heritage thus promoting these assets.

Moreover, these tools remain relevant regardless of the legislation and policies of the time albeit slight changes may be required periodically depending on any changes to the legislation. While they owe their existence to legislation and policies, should they become legally redundant, their value as a planning and / or heritage tool will remain unchanged. Indeed, by being able to store accurate information that can be constantly updated, these tools act as an excellent historical record for current and future generations. They are also used consistently by the Development Control Services within MEPA during assessment of planning applications for new development, restoration and other works. The stresses between heritage protection and development on a densely populated island are ever present (Camilleri, et al., 2012), and thus tools as described above will always be very helpful in these scenarios.

Updating the information contained in these tools is a crucial component of heritage management as inaccurate or misleading information can result in the destruction of a heritage asset, or conversely the retention of one with limited value. Despite the fact that these tools allow the easy updating of the information within them, this nonetheless comes with challenges related to human and time resources, as well as coordination and consistency issues. Indeed, to be able to keep an up-to-date record of the heritage assets within these tools, one or more heritage professionals would be required to constantly carry out research and coordinate the updating process in a consistent manner. The need for good coordination is exacerbated by the fact that the two tools have to be updated separately such that the information on one property has to be added twice. Therefore, unless properly managed, inconsistent information may be found on the NPI and MSPR respectively.

Further to the above, at present the GIS and word selection based searches have not been linked. This linkage is crucial for an all inclusive search of protected properties as a single search would cater both for people who prefer to search by maps and those who prefer word based searches. At present these two independent searches are located in two different sections of the MEPA website.

Another factor to consider is public awareness. The new MSPR (with the integrated NPI) was only mentioned once in a newspaper article (New Make-over for MEPA website, 2009) upon its release back in 2009. Those who visit the MEPA website regularly are likely to come across these tools and those who deal with MEPA officials may be made aware of their existence. However, very little else has been / is being done to promote their existence and/or to show how these tools can be used and what they are used for. Word of mouth is the only marketing tool that is being relied on, mostly at the whim of MEPA officials. The need is being felt however to complete this system to ensure that basic information is at least available for each of the entries in the MSPR through the NPI. To date, a number of entries are not linked to data cards with the result that the public is at times requesting information that is not readily available. There have been some suggestions including the compilation of a very basic card containing an image and/or site plan of the protected property. Although this suggestion is being considered, it will take time to implement in view of resources currently available and other priorities taking precedence.

From the above it follows that to remain relevant in the future a sufficient and adequate amount of resources needs to be allocated to ensure appropriate updates are carried out. In this respect, consideration should be given to the conversion from standard software available to a more database specific one, which may considerably reduce the workload for future maintenance and to make both databases in line with data management conventions. Furthermore, improved IT infrastructure in terms of linking the GIS and word-based searches is also necessary. Countries all over the world including England

(English Heritage, Undated), Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, Undated) and Canada (Parks Canada, Undated) have been providing these tools successfully for years and also provide the user with continuous improvement by publicly displaying registers and inventories of their heritage assets. While some countries simply provide a basic list of properties that are protected, others go as far as integrating GIS and three-dimensional elevations and cross sections into some of the well known. This is a direction that Malta may want to consider in a quest for ever-improving the availability of information. LIDAR (NOAA, 2013) Surveys of the Maltese Islands carried out in 2012 and 2013 (MEPA, Undated) can also be used to create 3-D maps of cultural landscapes, historic properties and historic natural landscapes amongst others.

Figure 6: Example of simple NPI card for use on MEPA's website

Centre Point Co-ordinates: E:49,873 N: 72,291

Local Plan Area: Central Malta Local Plan

Level of Protection: Grade 2 (Government Notice: 835/13)

National Protective Inventory: ATD008

Designer: Capt. J Bonavia (unconfirmed)

Period: Late 18th century

Significance: The property is a large townhouse with substantial gardens behind it constructed during different periods as evidenced by the different styles and workmanship. The walls of the entrance foyer were covered in frescoes, a number of which were removed from the walls in more recent times. The ceiling frescoes were also painted over but on MEPA's instance these were uncovered. Across the street is another part of this property consisting of a small enclosed garden and a casina.

No. 147, Casa Bonavita
Triq Sant' Anton, Triq il-Mithna, Triq Birkirkara, H' Attard

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With the recent expansion in internet mobility, chool children, tourists and professionals alike are now used to having GIS and other applications available at their fingertips. The increased use of smart phones in recent years has also led users to expect the same accessibility while on the move. In this regard, the extension of the NPI and MSPR tools to mobile applications should also be considered. Making these tools easily accessible

(and tailored to suit) on these devices would have the added advantages of improving their awareness and access to them. A very tangible result might be the possibility of searching the MSPR or NPI databases for historic and/or protected properties in the vicinity of the user for example, extending awareness of historic properties locally to a completely new level.

Finally, more attention should be given to public awareness schemes, which should be integral to the system and not simply an after-thought. Irrespective of how good, informative and easy to use a database is, it may not succeed if the public are not aware of it. The project may also die a natural death if not enough use is made of the system.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the MSPR and NPI are useful tools. Furthermore, as discussed, legislation such as the current Environment and Development Planning Act of 2010, and policies stated within the 1990 Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands provide a solid foundation for their existence. However, these tools have so many benefits to them in terms of being useful to planning and heritage professionals as well as locals and tourists alike, that they are worth having irrespective of whether they are backed by legislation or policies. In these circumstances one can say that legislative tools become non-compulsory and possibly not even necessary other than to legally protect the heritage assets presented in these tools and as a checklist to ensure that protection is carried out in a legislatively correct manner. Indeed the MSPR and NPI are larger than current or future legislation as they provide valuable information for future generations to interpret Malta's history.

While as discussed above the power of these tools cannot be underestimated, their usefulness is highly dependant on crucial factors with specific reference to a high level of co-ordination, accuracy and consistency. Without these elements, successful and informative databases are simply not achievable. Moreover public awareness schemes are also important, which as discussed should be integral to the system. Finally, in an age where technology changes occur rapidly it is important for these tools to keep up with the times in order to remain relevant.

As evidenced in this paper, like every other tool the NPI and MSPR have their pros and cons. However, if the right amount of effort is placed in them they have the potential to become a powerful tool that can be used by different sectors to protect, manage, promote and showcase Malta's rich and diverse heritage.

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