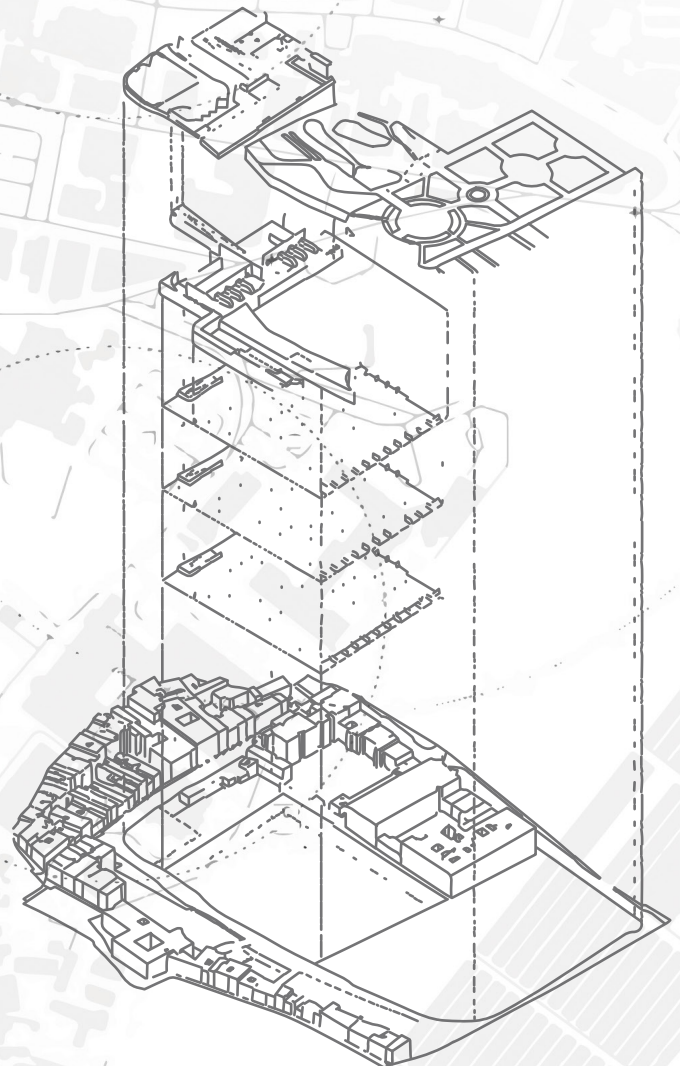




GOZO REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

GRDA Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading

An Introduction to the Concept



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An Introduction to the Concept

1.0 Background

The Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) has been set up to formulate, streamline and help in the implementation of regional policies to ensure Gozo's sustainable development. One of the main roles of the Authority is to ensure that the 'development' of the region remains true to the long-term sustainable needs of Gozo, its inhabitants, and all those that have Gozo's interests at heart. As part of this function, the GRDA is presenting its vision for the urban upgrading of Victoria. GRDA's vision centres around a proposal to transform the existing parking area in Victoria (adjacent to the Villa Rundle Gardens and the Bus Terminus), including the adjacent football ground, into a green park. This entails relocating the parking spaces underground, with circa 800 car spaces being made available. This proposal forms part of GRDA's wider plan to design a long-term and holistic sustainable master plan for the island of Gozo.

The need for a long-term sustainable plan for the island of Gozo is highlighted by the existing challenges, particularly in Victoria, which include lack of open spaces, lack of parking spaces, and traffic congestion. These issues and challenges have been voiced by various stakeholders who have been consulted when drawing up the Regional Development Strategy for Gozo. While these challenges as well as recommendations have been considered when drawing the Gozo Regional Development Strategy, the GRDA took the initiative to address or mitigate some of the major challenges through a separate initiative focused on Victoria. Through this initiative, the GRDA will present a concept, engage with local stakeholders, and finally draw up a more detailed plan that aims to address existing challenges and create a vibrant and inclusive urban environment.

2.0 Context: Locality of Victoria and Beyond

Victoria's geographical context, administrative role and presence of cultural and heritage sites are prime considerations for the concept being presented. Victoria is the largest and the most prominent locality of Gozo, having an area of 2.9 km² and a total population of over seven thousand people. It is located at the centre of Gozo and is bordered by six towns and villages namely: Fontana, Għasri, Kerċem, Xagħra, Xewkija and Żebbuġ. Victoria is the centre point in Gozo in terms of the road network, and provides the only route for commuting between several of its surrounding villages.

Victoria is also the administrative centre of Gozo, including the Ministry offices, the law courts, the hospital, and key schools. It also hosts some of Gozo's most visited historical and cultural heritage

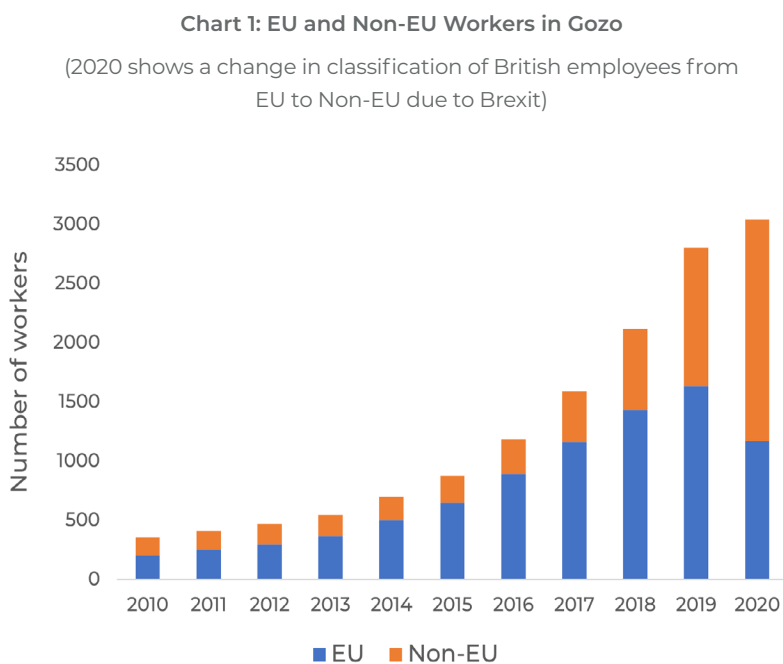
sites including the Citadel, which is the ancient city of the island, as well as a cluster of museums dedicated to folklore, archaeology, and natural history, including the Gozo Museum of Archaeology, Gozo Nature Museum, the Old Prison, WWII shelters and battery, the Cathedral Museum, and the Gran Castello Historic House. It is home to various other places of attraction including the several churches and chapels, and the Villa Rundle Gardens. Moreover, several shopping malls and local market stalls are also found in Victoria, complimented by various restaurants and cafeterias.

2.1 Challenges and Opportunities

Being the social and economic centre of Gozo, rendered the locality of Victoria more vulnerable to urbanisation and population growth. In addition, being a main tourist area in Gozo as well as a major passage-through for most activities, the city of Victoria is increasingly facing challenges related to urbanisation, including lack of open spaces where one can integrate with nature, as well as traffic congestion and transport related issues.

The locality, reflecting what happened on the whole of Gozo, has experienced substantial economic growth in recent years, leading to an increased demand for workers. This resulted in an influx of foreign workers from both the EU and Non-EU nations. As per GRDA's note on **Foreign Nationals Employed in Gozo**, published in November 2021, the number of foreigners employed in Gozo increased by an annual average rate of 24% over a ten year period between 2010 and 2020, reaching over three thousand by the end of 2020.

The island of Gozo attracts thousands of domestic and international tourists, with the majority of these tourists visiting the city of Victoria. In 2021, the total number of inbound and domestic tourists



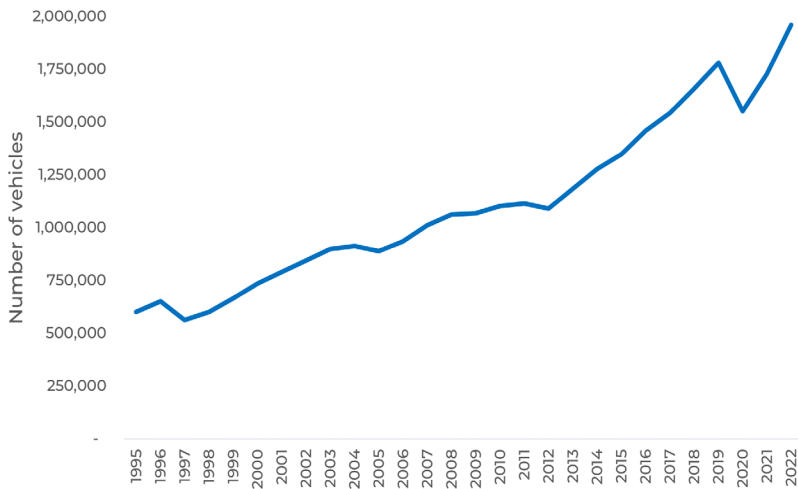
who visited Gozo amounted to 435,907.¹ In addition to the overnight tourists, the island of Gozo also attracts a significant number of day-trippers. The number of passengers and vehicles crossing between Malta and Gozo have increased exponentially over the years, as can be seen in Chart 2. A total of 4,451,692 passengers travelled between Malta and Gozo in 2021, while the number of vehicles that crossed between Malta and Gozo amounted to and 1,727,629, an increase of 11.3 per cent over 2020.²

Source: GRDA Note.

¹ NSO News 129_2022: <https://nso.gov.mt/regional-tourism-2021/>

² NSO Transport Publication 2022: <https://nso.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/Transport-publication2022.pdf>.

Chart 2: Number of vehicles crossing between Malta and Gozo



Data Source: Gozo Channel Ltd.

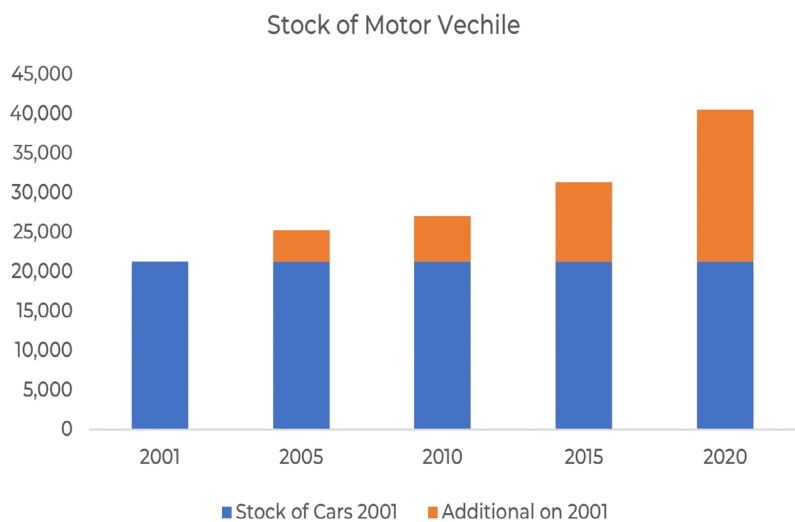
experienced in Victoria.

Transport-related issues and traffic congestion problems have been exacerbated by the reliance of Gozitan residents and tourists, both domestic and international, on private vehicles. Currently, transport in Gozo is mainly based on private vehicles. In fact, the number of vehicles registered in Gozo shot up from 21,311 to 40,599 between 2001 and 2020, as illustrated in Chart 3. Coupled with the additional vehicles used by tourists and visitors, the use of vehicles, is putting a strain on existing infrastructure, in particular road network and parking spaces. This has resulted in bottleneck congestion, particularly in Victoria, which is the centre point in Gozo in terms of the road network.

The increase in the number of vehicles has led to an ever-growing demand for parking spaces in Victoria. While the number of vehicles has been increasing persistently over the last two decades, the number of parking spaces in Victoria has remained relatively unchanged over these years. This has led to an increased traffic congestion in Victoria with several vehicles circling around Victoria looking for a parking space.

Furthermore, given the limited public area/space available, and the ever-growing demand for parking spaces in the locality of Victoria, vehicles are consistently competing for space with pedestrians. Moreover, on-street parking, which is prevalent in the city of

Chart 3: Stock of licensed motor vehicles for Gozo and Comino region: 2001-2020



Source: GRDA Note.

Victoria, restricts greening initiatives since much of the space currently available is dedicated for vehicle use. As a result, pedestrianization in Victoria is restricted, with streets and public spaces mainly prioritizing the use of vehicles.

Apart from these challenges, Victoria presents various opportunities including close distances from key spots, its urban character, and its cultural and historical heritage. There is also a large area at the centre of the locality whose potential is still not maximized. This area is currently used as an open car parking and a disused football ground used also for the same purpose. This area presents huge opportunity to be at the centre of Victoria urban upgrading.

3.0 GRDA's Vision

The Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) believes that the key to Gozo's future is the sustainment of a formula that safeguards sustainable development through optimal use of space. This requires a reconciliation of the social and economic claims for spatial development with Gozo's ecological and cultural functions to ensure a sustainable and balanced territorial development.

GRDA's vision is to direct the Gozitan economy towards a greener transition, with Gozo building on its strengths to become a destination of excellence, and with success not being solely based on economic growth, but also the quality of life and wellbeing. The standard of living does not depend exclusively on the income and the productivity scale. In some instances, islands like Gozo and cities like Victoria may offer a better quality of living resulting from a higher level of safety and security.

To achieve this vision, it is necessary to develop an urban and ecological framework that embraces the following key fundamental concepts:

- **Gozo as 'an Island of Villages:** Gozo has a distinctive urban characteristic that differentiates it from the mainland. Gozo's urban development strategy and planned measures should be directed towards its needs and well-planned and managed implementation to safeguard the island's urban 'Village' heritage. The preservation of heritage, out of a concern for its intrinsic value to place, identity, and uniqueness for present and future generations, is key to improving the quality in Gozo's built environment. As urban change continues, the assertion of heritage protection becomes increasingly important for marketing Gozo as a heritage destination.
- **An Ecological Symbiosis:** Literally "living together", the symbiosis between natural logic and habitable spaces becomes a new fundamental relationship for living in Gozo - intending to generate spaces in which mutualism between nature and man leads to the good for all. This new and increasingly necessary relationship leads to the creation of new spatial figures - ecological and habitable patterns find reconciliation where design and planning strategies include an ecological dimension into their protocols and processes. Specifically, together with the strategy of protecting Gozo's heritage as an "Island of Villages", the symbiosis brings design practice closer to that of landscape urbanism

and ecological urbanism, allowing for the possibility of defining processes, spaces, and figures that man and nature can inhabit.

- **Resiliency through Distinction:** Ecological, economic, and cultural resilience is key to achieving this long-term sustainable vision. Gozo's unique setting has a distinctive appeal which in itself should attract a particular kind of quality investment that deserves encouragement as much as it requires diversification. Building on these values when mapping out the following stages of Gozo's evolution will allow for the development of resilient communities which interact with the natural and built environment.

Through its vision for Gozo and its proposal for Victoria urban upgrading, the GRDA aims to achieve the following goals:

- A better quality of life for residents and visitors alike;
- A natural network of accessible open spaces within the urban and rural environment for residents and visitors alike in which biodiversity can thrive;
- To ensure that the urban landscape represents the rich communities that live within and offers opportunities for interaction and communication; and
- To plan, safeguard and build an ecologically sustainable environment over the long-term; one which contributes positively to the economic prosperity and quality of life of the present and future generations.

4.0 Overarching Principles

Apart from seeking to attain the above goals, the proposal for Victoria urban upgrading is also aimed at addressing the key challenges and opportunities explored earlier.

Achieving this vision and goals requires a careful and coordinated design and planning effort. As an initial step in this regard, the following overarching principles were developed to guide the urban upgrading of Victoria:

- Encourage community vitality through a mix of uses:** The design of new infrastructure, buildings and open spaces should accommodate and encourage a wide variety of uses to support an active and diverse community.
- Promote public participation in urban planning:** Urban planning should involve active participation of several stakeholders and the general public.
- Integrate mobility, parking, and public spaces to achieve a transformation towards people centred streets:** The development of new underground multi-level car parks and rethinking of public spaces would enable a pedestrian-oriented city, maximize active frontages, and maximize development opportunities. This would allow the removal of cars parked on the streets, and thus improve the quality and walkability of the streetscape, allowing for better pavements. Shared streets and pedestrianisation

enable people to move freely within the city and make use of the public spaces without needing to use the car. Public spaces can take the form of both permanent and temporary structures to promote activities in the streets beyond that of vehicular movement.

- iv. **Promote greening and sustainable vehicular mobility:** Greening and landscaping would improve the quality of existing and new public and open spaces as well as streets.
- v. **Create high quality open spaces:** A network of well-designed green spaces, walkways, and pedestrian oriented streetscapes would provide a variety of experiences for new and existing residents, shoppers, and visitors.

5.0 Concluding Remarks

GRDA's vision for Victoria urban upgrading outlines actions that can address key challenges, including mobility and transport, and gentrification. The proposed actions could serve as a prototype for similar urban upgrading proposals in other locations, providing a model for sustainable and responsible urban development. Through this proposal, the GRDA presents concepts for the future layout of the city that considers both the existing and proposed open spaces, and roads.

This initial high level proposal, which is available on **GRDA's website** together with supporting communication material (video and high resolution images), will be used as a basis to engage with the community members and relevant stakeholders, through a public consultation. The latter will enable engagement with the public to assess the proposal being put forward and actively contribute to the ongoing urban planning process, aimed at drawing a sustainable solution that addresses existing challenges and creates a vibrant and inclusive urban environment.

The public consultation aims to:

- i. Present the proposal to the public and outline GRDA's vision for Victoria's urban upgrading;
- ii. Foster a transparent and inclusive urban planning process;
- iii. Engage a range of stakeholders with varying backgrounds and expertise to participate in the process;
- iv. Provide opportunities for people to formulate an opinion and make their informed views on the proposal known; and
- v. Act as a source of opinions on possible improvements.

Following the public consultation, the collected feedback will be assessed and analysed. The stakeholders' views and recommendations would be taken into account by the GRDA, and any potential improvements would be incorporated in the subsequent phases of the proposal's development, should the proposal move forward.

The GRDA is highlighting the fact that this public consultation on the proposal for Victoria urban upgrading is not being conducted as part of a Regional Impact Assessment Study (RIAS)³ but is intended mainly to engage with the public and important stakeholders to assess the proposal being put forward.

³ https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GRDA_Regional-Impact-Assessment-System-revised_02.02.22.pdf



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