

NATIONAL

Public 'will be better served' with Manoel Island project

Last March, the Planning Authority approved the Manoel Island masterplan as part of a 99-year concession which Midi plc had been awarded by the government in 2000.

Keith Micallef spoke with Midi CEO **MARK PORTELLI** on the major project.

At what phase is the Manoel Island project?

We have submitted eight development applications to the planning authority, some of which are related to our deed obligations, like relocating the Gżira United football pitch and the reclamation of part of the sea to extend the yacht yard facilities. The latter is being done to compensate for the loss of land, due to the fact that part of the yard will be taken up to shift the existing road.

Further applications will cater for dredging to improve sea-water circulation around the island, the construction of a breakwater and the first phase of the residential units.

More applications are in the pipeline for the rest of the residential complex, the yacht marina and the remaining developments. Our objective is to start works on the residential blocks in the first half of next year.

When is the project planned to be completed in its entirety?

It is a five-to-seven-year project which will be completed in phases in such a way that the parts which are completed may operate independently from the rest.

The historic Fort Tigné in Sliema, which is also part of this concession, is not yet publicly accessible, and the environment surrounding it leaves much to be desired. What are the plans for this site?

Though from the outside one gets that impression due to the overgrown vegetation, in actual fact the fort has been restored, in line with the obligation of the deed through which Midi was also bound to bring Fort Manoel back to its glory.

The challenge on Fort Tigné, which was in a bad state as it was previously used to house a reverse osmosis plant, is to decide on its future function. We are not very keen on the idea of having food and beverage outlets there, but are more inclined to explore possible cultural uses.

When is the fort meant to be open to the public?

While the fort has been restored, the glacis has not.

Within the next three years, Midi is obliged to complete the promenade which will link Quis-Sana all the way around Tigné peninsula on the other side.

One of the main criticisms on the Manoel Island project is



The Manoel Island masterplan. Inset: Midi CEO Mark Portelli.

that it would result in over-development in one of the few remaining public open spaces in this densely populated area. What is Midi's position on this?

We are only developing about a third of the island's footprint which is of 300,000 square metres. You cannot call a football pitch a development.

I believe it is a fair ratio.

We respect the fact that most of the island consists of the Fort Manoel's glacis which will be accessible to the public. The area earmarked for development has been abandoned since Medserv left Manoel Island.

"Surely a developed island will be better than today"

Wouldn't it have been better to make the entire island a public park, in line with a petition endorsed by more than 8,000 people?

I respect such opinion. Our position is that the island can be developed to a certain extent within the parameters of the local plan and more importantly

respecting the historical context of the site. When the project is completed the public will be served better than today.

Will they be better served if somebody sinks the money into it as a public park and maintains it for such purpose? That is not a comparison I can make, it is unrealistic. Surely, a developed island will be better than today.

What kind of public spaces will this project include?

Most of the island will be pedestrianised. There will be a square the size of Piazza Regina in Valletta at the entrance.

Access to the foreshore will remain while Fort Manoel must be used for public purposes.

In total, public open spaces will account for 65,000 square metres, over and above 80,000 square metres of the park.

We are also redesigning the traffic junction at the Manoel Island entrance to improve traffic flow. There will be a separate pedestrian bridge, as part of a plan to have a continuous promenade from Sliema to Gżira.

How is the guardianship deed signed with the Gżira council meant to safeguard Midi's obligations?

We created a foundation to serve as a watchdog. Its purpose is to ensure we honour our deed obligations such as guaranteeing

access to public areas like the foreshore, and abiding by conditions regulating use of the fort and building height.

Under this model, we cannot apply to increase more storeys in a few years' time.

Criticism has also been levelled that the development will negatively impact the island's skyline and obstruct views between Sliema and Ta' Xbiex seafront.

The development is over five floors and one has to take into consideration the land's topography whereby some of it is at a higher level.

Nonetheless, none of the buildings will exceed the island's highest existing building which is within Fort Manoel.

From the visual impact assessment it did transpire that there are some negative impacts from a particular angle. However, this will be at a very close range, where it is impossible to avoid any kind of visual impact.

What is the project's ultimate cost?

It runs into tens of millions. The first phase, which includes the residential and the deed obligations, exceeds €100 million. This is over and above the fort's restoration where we have spent between €8 and €10 million.



Is Midi planning to generate more money through bond issues?

We have already done that, and at the moment we have no plans to issue more bonds.

Last year, Times of Malta had revealed that talks were underway with Tumas Group over the possibility of the latter acquiring the majority of shares. At what stage are these talks?

Any matter with respect to the sale of a significant part of Manoel Island, be it equity or property, is the subject of a company announcement.

Such step has already been taken whereby we said we were in talks with Tumas Group. Negotiations are ongoing. However, I am forbidden from disclosing any details at this stage, even though our ideas are very clear on the matter.

While on paper this plan might look attractive, sceptics will immediately point out that this project has been coming for 20 years, but for some reason it never materialised. What makes you believe this will be the right time?

I would not say the project had stalled. Tigné Point took time to be developed and it was only when this part was nearing completion that we started focusing on Manoel Island. In the last four years we completed the Fort Manoel restoration, and it was only recently that we submitted development applications for the rest of the island.

We opted to start from the fort due to the urgency stemming from its dilapidated state. Had we postponed it further, it could have been damaged irreparably. This was the largest ever restoration project ever undertaken by the private sector together with Tigné Fort and the Garden Battery, which translates to about €50 million.