Msida Creek Project

A crucial intersection

24 October 2022

Msida Creek is a crucial intersection, linking some of Malta's most populated localities. Hence, the delivery and effectiveness of this project must be nothing short of perfection. Traffic accidents in Malta have reached record levels this year. Sustainable and active mobility is becoming ever so important but also more difficult, especially when new projects put the car first. While we still need to account for the great number of cars on the island, we need to shift our perspective and put pedestrians, bicycle users and bus users first. These modes of transport are more efficient, take up less space, and positively impact the environment and our health. We refer to the aphorism, "if you find yourself in a hole, stop digging". We design roads for cars, then we ask ourselves why don't more people walk or cycle? The answer is right before our eyes, we just need to see it.

Rota finds the new changes significantly improved over the previous design for Msida Creek, but we stress for more improvement. While it is an improvement over the previous design, we find the improvement over the current state of Msida Creek to not be substantial for bicycle users. Two primary concerns include missing essential links between localities and the lack of bicycle lanes. Msida creek is a crucial intersection which connects several key localities. Therefore, we must prioritise the plan for an eventual bicycle network around Malta with immediate effect and include bicycle lanes in such high-speed zones. We also highlight that space is available for such interventions.

This document provides Rota's suggestions for this project.

Rota is an NGO registered with the Office of the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations (VO/0859) and a member of the European Cyclists' Federation.

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Positive changes

The removal of pedestrian bridges

One notable change for pedestrians and bicycle users is the removal of pedestrian bridges in favour of on-grade crossings. We highlight that this is not an improvement over the current state of Msida Creek, but an improvement over the previous proposed design for the area. Moving away from designing more pedestrian bridges has been a step in the right direction. These bridges, while seemingly safe and convenient, are actually frustrating for pedestrians and bicycle users since they add time, distance and effort to cross the road. Additionally, as we have seen in cases such as Marsa, where the only crossing depends on lifts, pedestrians and bicycle users end up being isolated when these malfunction (which is a very common occurrence based on the data we collect from www.rota.mt/lifts). This improvement creates much better and reliable street-level pedestrian and cycling crossings. We highlight that on-grade crossings must be designed with the user in mind and should not come with long waiting times for pelican crossings, and the crossing should be well visible for oncoming traffic. Additionally, such crossings should be as direct as possible to make crossing efficient. Traffic calming measures approaching crossings prove to make them safer as well.

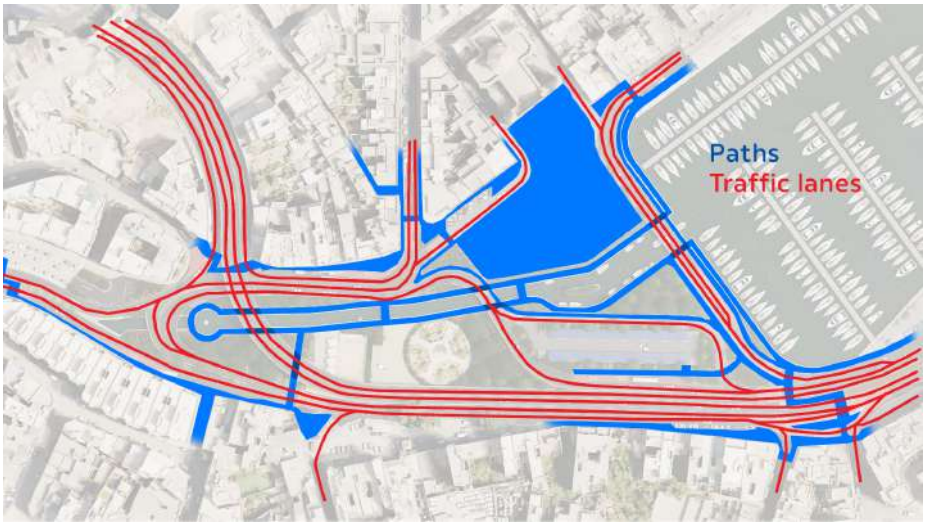
Open space

The green area is also a step in the right direction since this creates a safe buffer zone between areas. We also commend the redesign of the village piazza, which stops traffic flow and creates an open space for people. Prioritising open spaces in a busy intersection is a step in the right direction, since we are lacking such spaces in Malta.

Improvements Needed

This section will recommend in more detail how the 2 main problems highlighted below can be addressed.

1. Missing essential connections between localities
2. The lack of bicycle lanes in a high speed zone. We strongly recommend the introduction of bicycle lanes on both sides, especially in the direction towards Birkirkara since bicycle users will be cycling next to 5 car lanes.



Allocation of space at the Msida Creek Project proposal

Widths of shared paths

While we do not have the exact measurements of the paths visualised in the design, we can assume from the proportions. The adjacent lowered green path, mainly for scenic/recreational use has several tight turns which can be problematic by bicycles, especially longer ones such as tandems, cargo bikes, or having an attached trailer. It might also pose to be the most flooded section of the road as well when it rains, as it is lower than the main carriageway. Squeezing several users together into small spaces can lead to conflict, accidents and annoying situations of inefficiency.

One alternative to the crossing highlighted in yellow in the image below would be to have a bridge wide enough for cyclists and pedestrians directly and without any diversions, similar to the recently built pedestrian bridge in Bormla Dock 1, where small boats can still traverse beneath. Otherwise the bridge in the design should be extended to allow ample space for pedestrians and cyclists to share the space.

Circular Bicycle Path

The project scheme requires a circular two-way bike path that covers the perimeter of the entire Msida Creek junction, which can connect buildings and establishments along the way. This is a major intervention on the proposed plans, but one that is required.

The bike path should connect reference points such as AVIS and the Wembley Kiosk, turning around the Menqa and the Msida Local Council, the Malta Labour Party club, Msida police station and the church.

We highlight that going in the direction of Valley Road from Msida, a bicycle user will be in the street next to 5 car lanes, in a high speed zone. This situation is not only intimidating for the user, but also dangerous. Such occurrences will push people away from considering the bicycle as a viable option for transport. One question one can ask themselves to gauge the safety of infrastructural interventions is, would I trust my child to walk or cycle along this road? If the answer is no, then the intervention needs to be improved.

This ring bike path would ideally be bi-directional, to provide high permeable bike connections, and connect flexibly to all the nearby side streets, namely:

- Rue d'Argens to Gżira/Sliema & alleyway Triq Johnny Catania to the primary schools
- Valley Road to/from Swatar & Birkirkara
- Triq Qrejten to/from St Luke's, Gwardamanġa & Ħamrun
- Triq il-Baċir / Triq Oscar Zammit to/from Junior College
- Triq Garcin to west Msida
- All the grid residential streets behind the church

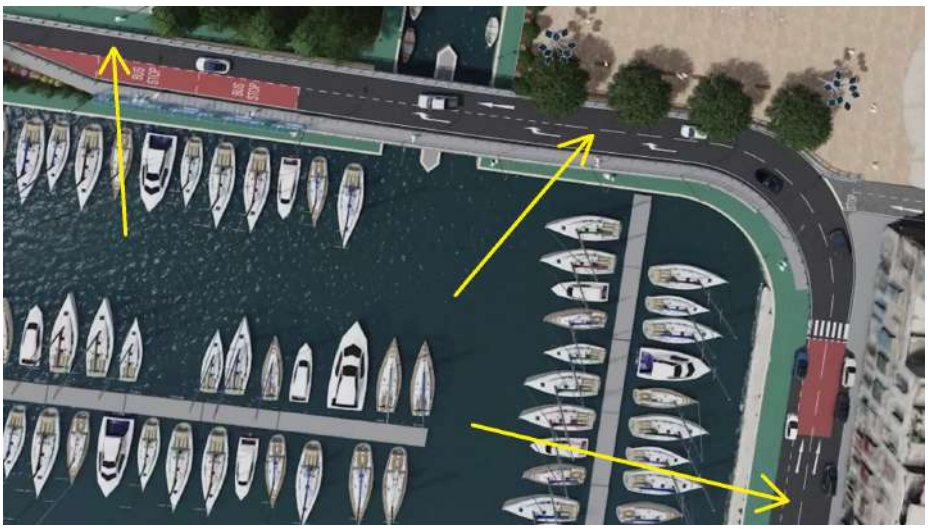
Given the huge space of the junction (narrowest point being 70 metres wide) this can be easily achieved by shifting the entire car configuration more centrally to gain 3 metres on either side for the bike paths.

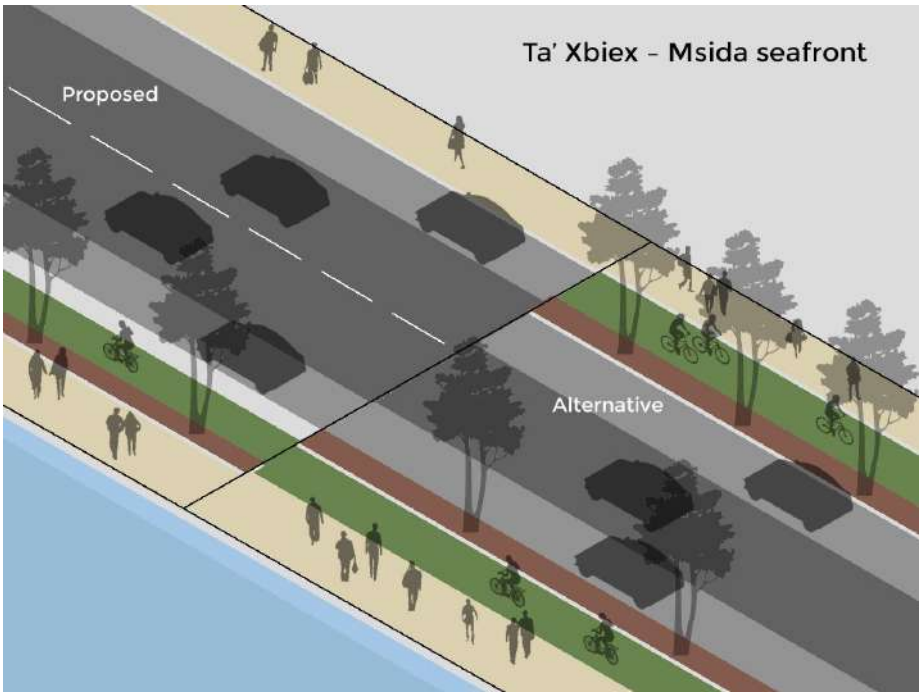
A few merging lanes can also be changed or removed. The road from Msida Creek to Valley Road continues to 1 lane per direction, but in actual fact the available public road width is around 30 metres wide from the Local Council until the Għajn tal-Ħasselin. On-street one-way bicycle lanes can continue here per direction to create a bicycle transition between the Msida Creek Project and Valley Road.

Connectivity from Ta' Xbiex to Birkirkara

It is encouraging to see the car connection from Ta' Xbiex to Birkirkara removed, as that means drivers will be more likely to opt for Regional Road well before-hand as it was originally intended for, and as a result reduce through-traffic in Ta' Xbiex's seafront. Connectivity for walking and cycling still remains rather rigid and problematic in this design, as there are a number of missing important links, especially to the University of Malta being an important hub for over 10,000 students, and the crossroads of all neighbouring towns.

Therefore we suggest Triq ix-Xatt ta' Ta' Xbiex (Busy Bee, Mamma Mia, etc) to be transformed to a single lane road instead of two but keeping parking, to downgrade it to a local access road. It is already proposed to converge to 1 lane by the Kulleġġ bus stop now, so might as well start it earlier that way. This will gain space for a contraflow bicycle lane in the direction of Sliema, in tandem with the other bicycle lane being currently built by the GHRC promenades project in the direction of Pietà.





Rue d'Argens

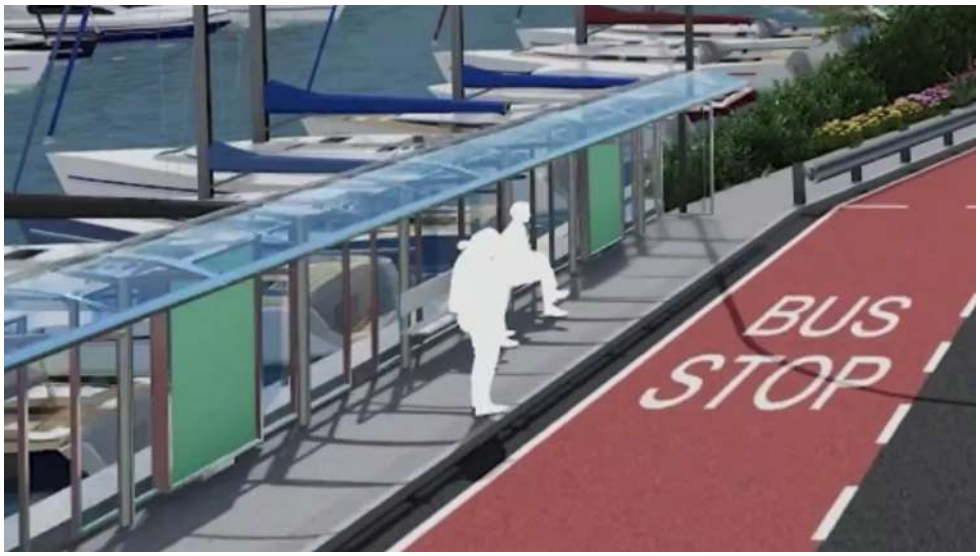
Similarly, Rue d'Argens can afford to be kept to a single-lane (as it is today) instead of reinforced to another 2-lane road to Sliema, where bicycle lanes would be highly valuable here as well, given the presence of the nearby Kappara & Regional Road main roads connected by the main 4-lane hill of Skatepark.

Sa Maison / Pieta to Ta' Xbiex Connection

Sa Maison/Pietà seafront to Ta' Xbiex: While current pedestrian/bicycle levels coming from Sa Maison are currently low and could afford to mix together on the promenade as a shared path for the time being, we need to envisage a future uptake of walking and cycling from there as well, as it is the principal desirable road of the entire Msida/Sliema/St Julian's peninsula to the capital city and to the north-south corridor of Marsa just 2km away. Keeping this as a four-lane road for the entire way blocks the potential for bus/bicycle lanes. A long-term plan should aim to shift through-traffic further out to the remainder of Regional Road by continuing to the Santa Venera tunnels, Marsa/Ħamrun bypass and Triq Diċembru 13.

Passageway between Kulleġġ bus stop (Junior College) and the Ġnien bus stop (church)

The passageway between the Kulleġġ bus stop (Junior College) and the Ġnien bus stop (church) seems to continue on a shared space of two-way pedestrian traffic and two-way bicycles/scooters, unsegregated from each other, in a space which looks quite small and gets narrower by the bus stop shelters. There is a high amount of pedestrian traffic in this area frequented by locals and students getting across the different bus stops.

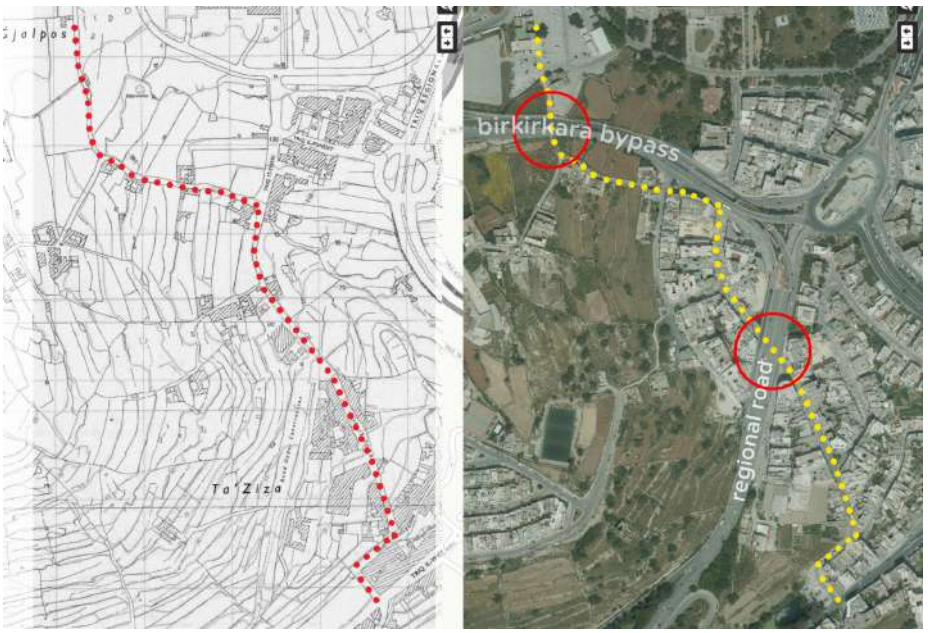


Road connecting Msida Creek to University of Malta

The main road between the Msida Creek and Skatepark junction has the space for bicycle lanes. The 4 lanes can still be retained but each lane needs to be slightly narrowed down, to match with its intended speed limit. The Skatepark roundabout at the top is a wider junction than the Msida Creek, spanning up at least 80 metres in diameter by 130m. The roundabout has ample room to fit in a Dutch-style roundabout connecting to University, Mater Dei Hospital & the valley tal-Għargħar to San Ġwann.

During Rota's meeting with Infrastructure Malta, Rota welcomed the proposal by IM architects to open and connect the missing link of the existing Skatepark pedestrian underpass from the University to the villa areas of Ta' Xmiexi.

However, it should be noted that the winding underpass should be for secondary use, and reconnecting the older Triq it-Torri route should be the priority.



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Concluding Remarks

While the proposed project is significantly improved over the previous design, it does not offer any substantial benefit for bicycle users over what currently exists in Msida. We still feel that this is a car-centric project that does not truly consider the needs of bicycle users. Bicycle infrastructure should adhere to the 5 CROW principles which include: 1) cohesion, 2) directness, 3) safety, 4) comfort and 5) attractiveness.

With additional work, this project can be highly improved and serve as an important foundation for future infrastructural work to target active mobility in Malta. Such interventions can positively impact the lives of many, and will affect our environment and our mental and physical health. Additionally, these interventions will make our roads safer and lead to less accidents and deaths, which have reached record levels this year.

We hope our suggestions do not fall on deaf ears. It is much easier to affect such changes in the planning stage than in retrospect.