

## **‘Valletta faces a painful death unless it solves its parking problem’**

The renovation of a public convenience in Strait Street, Valletta has caused quite a stir recently, with many questioning the extravagance of a building which is used simply for such purposes.

Those given the responsibility of renovating the public convenience and sprucing it up were Chris Briffa Architects, who are synonymous with the design behind restaurants such as Two and a Half Lemon and 2 22 and firm believers that more needs to be done to entice the Maltese to art and culture.

Valletta can hardly be classified as a city that never sleeps. On the contrary, many have described Malta’s capital as a once proud lady, magnificent in her prime, but who has since fallen on bad times, with vices and old age finally catching up with her.

There is hope however.

Valletta will undergo a major transformation in the coming years, as construction works start (albeit with bated breath) on Renzo Piano’s designs, to the delight of many, including Mr Chris Briffa.

“Very few people are aware of contemporary art, culture and architecture. Perhaps it is not enough to spread the word, perhaps the man in the street needs to be enticed to attend an art exhibition or cultural activity, of which he is normally sceptical.

“The concept of an open air public space, which can be turned into a theatre replacing the Old Opera House ruins, has admittedly caused quite a stir; but is probably the best thing that could happen to Valletta right now.”

“The importance of celebrating culture in this day and age is paramount, because the way things stand at the moment, Malta’s cultural spots are few and inaccessible to most. When the ‘roofless’ theatre is built, someone will be walking in Republic Street without a care in the world, and all of a sudden he will happen to hear the resonances of an operatic performance, and he will instinctively listen, look up and take notice.

“Curiosity kills the cat, and perhaps the same person will try and find out where to get tickets for the next show to see what all the commotion is about,” says Mr Briffa.

According to Mr Briffa, who is also a part-time lecturer in the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of Malta, the country will benefit from Piano’s City Gate scheme because not only will Malta attract “a new wave of architectural tourism – Renzo Piano ranks at the top of the architectural elite, and few cities are privileged to have had him weave his magic in their streets – but will once again prove that

Valletta can be at the forefront of contemporary architecture. Just as the knights brought Laparelli 500 years ago to defend their city from invasion, we are engaging Piano to put our city back on the international architectural circuit,” he says.

Mr Briffa’s concept behind the design for the public convenience was also to give more prominence to art.

While some lambasted the plastering of words such as ‘Vagina’ and ‘Virgin Mary’ on the toilets’ windows, Briffa insists that while they were only commissioned with the renovation of the space, “we do not expect everyone to comprehend or sympathise with an art installation...(sometimes we do not fully understand the artist’s motifs ourselves) ....I see the text on display as an honest summary of the past and present happenings in Strait Street’s daily life, and the excellent installation by Norbert Attard has hit the nail on the head and created motivating debate.

“What is a public convenience in Malta? A smelly, shabby and unwelcoming room, constructed to serve one’s needs. Our architecture operates around changing people’s perceptions and as a result creating new experiences. So we came up with a concept that merges this necessary evil with an art display. We hope to make the latter just as necessary as responding to nature’s calls, when strolling about town,” says Mr Briffa, who was quick to rebuff claims that the public convenience’s extravagance came at a high cost.

“My team and I approached the local council of our own free will and outlined and designed the plans we had for the project. We risked working for no money, but after approval by the council, the project was financed privately, and not from taxpayers’ money,” stated Mr Briffa.

The renowned architect, who is also commissioned with the renovation of four other public conveniences in Valletta, was full of praise for the Valletta Local Council, in particular the mayor, Dr Alexei Dingli, whom he describes as the type of person who “knuckles down and gets on with things, rather than wait for matters to unfold by themselves”.

Can Strait Street find itself a hub of activity and frenzy, for which it was well known in the past?

“This all depends on the speed with which the government’s Estate Management Department will sustainably let out or sell the numerous vacant properties to people with vision.”

Mr Briffa sees a lot of potential for Valletta to be restored as a Mecca of vibrancy, culture and entertainment, if a healthy relationship between historic and contemporary architecture, so crucial for a progressive city life, is cultivated.

“Another thing which is hindering Valletta’s regeneration process is MEPA’s (Malta Environment and Planning Authority) outdated regulations for development within old city centres. The MEPA directorate needs to be more considerate and less prejudiced, and stop applying rigid rules when it comes to giving the go ahead for regeneration proposals.

“I emphasise the authority’s need to be flexible, and not bend its rules. I am not saying that everything proposed should be given the go ahead; they simply need to look at the global picture within a project and not just at the compliance of its separate parts. Recently we were defending a project in Valletta where we proposed a small pool, with no need for excavation, inside its large courtyard at ground level. One of the board members, when he understood our design, with a patronising voice, exclaimed, “as if we can allow pools to happen in Valletta!” It is this kind of attitude which puts locals and foreigners off the idea of investing their time and money in our city.

“However, MEPA dwells far too long before giving its consensus for a project to go ahead, much to the frustration of designers, architects and developers alike who have Valletta close to their heart. A case in point is 2 22 on Great Siege Road, on which works were completed in a quarter of the time of MEPA’s application process. This is also very discouraging for developers to want to invest in Valletta.”

Mr Briffa is adamant, however, that big master plans and great projects to recharge Valletta will be futile unless Malta’s capital city solves its longstanding car-park problem.

“We need to be realistic. We are living in the 21st century, and every capital city in the developed world caters for adequate parking. As a Valletta resident I crave for a car-free hometown, but one cannot expect residents or visitors to park their cars in Floriana or down by the sea: It is just not feasible.

“Valletta needs the facility of underground multi-storey car parks. The volume of bastions on the periphery of the city, which once protected Valletta from foreign invasion, can once again play a part in protecting Valletta from an untimely and painful death.

“Various bastions can be excavated to enable this facility, since on the inside, they are merely filled with rubble, and it would not be too difficult to construct car parks within them which will make Valletta more accessible day and night, and fundamentally, restore Valletta to its former busy activity,” says Mr Briffa with a passion.

## The price of overdevelopment

The property industry, perhaps more than any other sector of the economy, was greatly affected by the repercussions of the last two years’ financial crisis.

Malta was not exempt from the vacant properties, flats and houses, which shrouded most European countries. In the eyes of Mr Briffa, the country bore the brunt of the suffering not in the past two years, but more like the past two decades, as it is now that the dangers of overdevelopment are taking their toll on the Maltese landscape

and economy.

“Maltese architecture suffered a lot because of greedy contractors and developers, who demolished houses and built shoddy blocks of flats in their place, in the hope of earning a fast buck.”

With Malta committed to having 20 per cent of its energy coming from renewable sources by 2020, Mr Briffa was in praise of the new scheme that will see a house of property ranked according to how energy efficient it is. Owning a house that has a PV system, makes more use of natural lighting instead of low-efficiency light bulbs, is painted in non-toxic materials, and has insulated walls and windows will, with the upcoming regulations, increase the chances of selling the house.

‘Malta embracing the contemporary and modern’

According to Mr Briffa, there are two main things that, in his view, have led more Maltese to embrace the contemporary and modern in their life.

“The number of Maltese people who are venturing abroad and travelling often is increasing. As I can gauge from many of the students whom I have the privilege of tutoring, now more than ever before, the up and coming generations of this country are getting to see what is happening in other cities, new and historic, in different societies and cultures, and using this experience to blend this with more traditional methods in their architectural design.

“The second was the removal of levies – up to 45 per cent – prior to EU accession on imported furniture. The sudden availability of contemporary design in one’s living or bedroom, even if just a small object or a piece of furniture, has led to the appreciation and understanding of contemporary design as a very valid part of our cultural formation.”

How does Chris Briffa see the architecture field in Malta in 20 years’ time?

“I can see a new wave of architects who are more in touch with contemporary culture and its idioms, who will be able to take an architectural concept not only up to construction phase, but progress all the way to the interior design and the final finishing stages.

“However, this could be achieved in less than 20 years if Malta plays its cards right.

“The educational curriculum in Malta could do with being more oriented towards the Arts – be it music, drawing, dance or theatre – subjects which more often than not are looked down upon as being hobbies, rather than valid educational subjects. As a result, it is very difficult for students of a very young age to be creative and experimental, which is pretty much what this country desperately needs.

“There is no denying also that architectural students in Malta have to make the most of limited resources. For instance, students studying in most universities abroad are entitled to two square metres of studio space for them to work on projects and assignments. In Malta, this is impossible, and students have to go back home and work alone after their tutorial, which in turn discourages healthy competition and interaction with their peers and tutors.

“Having said that, the younger generation is greatly embracing change, and this is transpiring in the flexibility of their work, in what many agree are highly exciting times,” he concludes chirpily.

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