

## (Not) part of a Master Plan...

So it was all about Parliament in the end. Never mind the previous talk of a “Master Plan” for the urban regeneration of Valletta. Never mind all the architectural mumbo jumbo regarding spatial dynamics, the spirit of our forgotten heritage, and all that crap.

When Renzo Piano finally unveiled his plans last Saturday, there was no mistaking the nature of the man’s brief. It was visible even from a cursory glance at the thumbnails: 90% Parliament, 10% everything else. And my guess is that it would probably have been 100% Parliament, too: if it wasn’t for a bunch of pesky, selfish and arrogant kids, who seem to think that an Opera House bombed 70 years ago might actually deserve to be rebuilt for posterity.



Some chance. It is clear from the plans that Gonzi’s new Parliament is all the Master Architect actually worked on. So much so, that City Gate – once a source of such massive, profound, unending controversy – has been redesigned out of existence at a single stroke of the architect’s pen. And why? Let’s see now... could it be that the presence of a gate might otherwise detract from the view of Gonzi’s precious Parliament from the newly-narrowed bridge? Much the same could be said for the Opera House ruins. Why reconstruct the Theatre Royal at all, if the resulting edifice would only get in the way of Piano’s super-doooper, space age House of Representatives – the fulcrum of the entire project, and the only thing he was actually briefed to design?

But my word, this is a remarkable turn of events. You have to hand it to the man: Renzo Piano must really be a genius to have pulled off such an improbable trick. Had I been told 10 years ago that the entire Opera House/City Gate redevelopment saga would end up without either City Gate or Opera House... well, I would have probably laughed the idea to scorn. Yet this is precisely what has happened. Lawrence Gonzi wanted a Parliament; and hey presto! Everything else gets thrown out of the window in the mad scramble to see to that it his wishes are obeyed.

And believe me: it’s not just gate and theatre to have been sacrificed on the altar of Gonzi-mania. Quite literally everything has been dropped to make way for his House of Parliament obsession – including the original idea to regenerate the city entrance, and which featured in virtually every previous plan for the same area.

A city’s “entrance”, by the way, does not comprise its bridge and gate alone. It seems we have all forgotten about the existence of a huge, unsightly and quite frankly dangerous bus terminus situated right outside the “Putirjal”... with its aroma of sickly sweet Mqaret and burnt cooking oil, its karrozzini stands and associated puddles of horse-piss; as well as all those kiosks and would-be Bedouin caravans, from which one can purchase anything from a stick of nougat, to a nuclear warhead (if you know whom to ask).

Consider the implications. In years gone by – i.e., when the talk was about really regenerating the city entrance, instead of merely massaging Gonzi's ego– these and other issues were actually discussed at length, and some pretty good ideas came out of the woodwork, too.

For instance: some time in the late 1990s I remember interviewing Prof. Richard England on his own plans for the same site, in the course of which he described his idea to shift the bus terminus to a nearby site in Floriana, down by the Excelsior Hotel. If England had his way back then, buses today would discharge their passengers in an underground depository in front of City Gate, and then drive off unobtrusively to park at a discreet terminus some distance away – out of sight, smell and all earshot.

The same designs also provided for the removal of the Tritons' Fountain, which – no offence to the Tritons or anything – was originally sited on top of a 17th century counterscarp, now buried along with the rest of Valletta's outermost defences. These in turn would have been re-excavated, and the entire esplanade turned into a walkway leading into the city directly from the Floriana Mall – as the Knights had evidently intended, considering the natural alignment with Republic Street.

Well, all this is now ancient history. Piano has unveiled his Grand Plan for the entrance of Valletta, and astonishingly, the bus terminus does not even get a mention, still less a facelift. Not only that, but other than the bridge itself, there is no allusion to anything at all leading up to the gate. Nothing whatsoever.

It seems, then, that from the holistic "Master Plans" of yesteryear, we have descended a rung on the evolutionary ladder, and are now faced with a situation where plans are formulated with no thought or care for the surrounding areas. Worse, it seems we are now expected to tinker with existing macro-plans for the city, simply to accommodate any new micro-developments to have become politically important because of the Prime Minister's personal involvement.

So as a result of Piano's plans for a new Parliament, the entire traffic management plan for Valletta has had to be amended – as well it might, considering that one of only three roads leading into the city has been lost in translation with the removal of City Gate. How does the new system work in practice? Simple. The Malta Transport Authority (MTA) has reversed the flow of traffic through several of Valletta's arterial roads... including Old Bakery, arguably the steepest urban hill after San Francisco's Lombard Street.

Yes, folks. Like the Grand Old Duke of York, it appears that in future we will all have to drive up Old Bakery hill, instead of down. Why? Because it's more convenient for motorists? More economical for their vehicles? Because it would add some much-needed smog and exhaust to Valletta's enticing urban environment? Nope. The only reason is because Piano's brief evidently did not include how City Gate's "new look" would affect the rest of the city's traffic flow... and the ADT was left to solve the resulting infrastructural problem as best it could.

(On the bright side, at least Malta's motor-sport enthusiasts have something to cheer about. After all, hill climbs have always been popular events locally, and let's face it: Old Bakery Street in Valletta is just slightly more central than Ta' Penellu in Mellieha...) As for the Opera House ruins, well, by Gonzi's own admission this part of the project was intended as a "compromise": a small sop, to keep his many critics from growling too loudly.

But this is only part of the truth. In actual fact Piano's plans for the theatre site are entirely superfluous. He needn't have bothered. Certainly he has added nothing to what is already there... except perhaps for some permanent changing rooms, and what appear to be temporary fixtures for stage-lights.

Honestly: was that the best Renzo Piano could do? I somehow doubt it. Judging only by his plans for Parliament – which, appraised entirely on their own merit, are so breathtakingly magnificent that I might seriously have to contest the next election, just to be able to work in the place – I reckon he could have designed us a truly awe-inspiring theatre, instead of the unfinished building site he now proposes.

But no. It wasn't in the brief, you see. So all we got in the end is half a theatre... and to add insult to injury, there are even those among us who would argue that "half a theatre" is precisely what Malta needed all along, because... wait for it... an open-air theatre is currently "missing" from this country's cultural milieu.

Huh? What planet are these people living on, exactly? Gonzi himself may be unaware of this fact, but the same space Piano now envisages as an "open-air theatre" has been serving that very purpose for almost 20 years. I was present for what was probably the first theatrical event held at the Opera House ruins after WWII: it was a production of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, performed by Teatru Strada Stretta in the early 1990s, and I think I still have the programme locked away in a drawer somewhere.

Since then, the site has doubled up as an alternative venue for the MADC open-air Summer Shakespeare, traditionally held at San Anton Gardens; there have been concerts, plays, ballets, Flamenco evenings, jazz nights, you name it... an entire repertoire of open-air theatrical events, all in the same 'Teatru Mwaqqa'.

But in what reminds me of that classic cinematic comedy motif – you know, the one in which the "stupid" henchman's ideas are always rubbished by the "clever" Boss, who afterwards appropriates the exact same ideas as his own – people are now being sold the patently false impression that the entire "open-air theatre" concept was all along a Piano invention.

No it was not. Far from it. But then again, I suppose you'd have to actually go to the theatre every now and again to know that...

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