

A new national museum

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An artist's impression of the reconstruction of the Opera House and the entrance to Valletta.

Since I first proposed a master plan for Valletta (The Sunday Times, October 29, 1989), many articles, reports, presentations, etc. on the subject of Valletta's rehabilitation have been published by various personalities. Regrettably, however, very little has been done and our gem of a capital city still looks neglected.

I have been reading with interest the arguments about the proposed museum within the grounds of St John's Co-Cathedral and here I propose to deal with the wider question of how to show the wealth and beauty of our historical and artistic heritage to the best advantage.

By all means, the Flemish tapestries and precious relics at St John's Co-Cathedral and other churches must be displayed in a purposely-built museum, with the right constant temperatures and lighting. The current museum at St John's is definitely inadequate.

In October 1989 I had already written about the maze of underground tunnels underneath Valletta which I referred to as an "undiscovered city within a city". I have been through these tunnels together with my brothers and George Hyzler, then Parliamentary Secretary for Health. These tunnels must also be opened for public viewing and turned into another tourist attraction. As can be seen from the accompanying pictures, they are not narrow, as some imagine.

Taking a holistic view of our country's need to highlight its unique heritage, one can easily conclude that we badly need a new national museum that can present and preserve our precious heritage with all the modern facilities and services that could compete with other important European museums.

We have various small museums all over the island, which may need to be grouped together in one building. Obviously one has to identify a location for this museum.

The ideal location would be in the centre of the city, which makes it more accessible to local and foreign visitors. I have carried out research and written a number of articles about the revival of Valletta and long-term plans to restore the city to its former glory.

To develop a national museum with today's technology, as we can see at the Louvre in Paris for example, one requires large spaces and good accessibility. The three areas I have shortlisted are the Palace, the old Opera House site together with Freedom Square, and Fort St Elmo. These all have their advantages and disadvantages, but one has to weigh them up and take a final decision.

Fort St Elmo is away from the centre which is a disadvantage and requires massive investment. Furthermore, the underground tunnels, which we have to exhibit as well, are concentrated in the centre of the city. So this site is my third preference.

My second option is the old Opera House and Freedom Square. In my opinion the theatre's ruins should be demolished and the theatre should be rebuilt as most European cities have done to their demolished or damaged prestigious buildings; the interior could be modern open spaces that can be adapted for various uses.

From the accompanying artist's impressions and section which my consortium had submitted in 1998 and 2001, one can note that a huge space is available below ground which can have two alternatives: an entrance from Freedom Square to the underlying structure, and one for the old Opera House building from street level and a link to St James Centre of Creativity. It is also easily accessible to public transport. Although this proposal has many positive aspects, it would require huge investment.

The third, and in my opinion best option, would be to house the new national museum within the Presidential Palace. Parliament would obviously have to move to a more adequate building, possibly in Floriana. Our President's office could still be housed within this Palace or moved to Castille, unless this continues to house the Prime Minister's office. However, the Prime Minister's office could be moved closer to the new Parliament building.

As in the case of Freedom Square, more space could be created underneath St George's Square while the Palace's courtyards could be roofed over in glass, as has been done at the Louvre, and form part of the museum. Naturally the square would be elegantly landscaped.

This national museum would be sectioned to display the different periods of our country since prehistory. It could also incorporate a good part of our Church's relics and heritage that could

still be owned by the Curia. These could be housed in one or more theatres with a 360-degree audio-visual presentation of Malta's history, with access to the underground maze of tunnels.

Naturally, during excavations, it is quite possible that other tunnels or foundations could be discovered, which could also be incorporated in this museum. Today we have geo-radar equipment that will deduct structures or objects below ground before any excavation begins.

Other countries boast large national museums. With our vast and rich heritage, I am sure that we can establish an outstanding national museum that would make us proud. We must have a clear vision on a master plan for our capital city together with Floriana, start implementing it, then advertise this 'Mediterranean gem' around the globe.

We have been talking and discussing for too long now, while this World Heritage site is still in shambles. Let us have less talk and more action. In a small way I have already proved my vision as a promoter of the Valletta Waterfront where my consortium has created another landmark.

Let us study all the available options as to how best we can exhibit our great heritage and then act according to an approved master plan in stages and according to priorities. Let future generations be proud of our actions.
