

A magic city in a magic island

Mark Micallef



Photo: Paul Spiteri Lucas

More than 20 years after he first tried his hand at redeveloping the entrance to Valletta, world-renown architect Renzo Piano will this week take a second shot. Here he speaks to Mark Micallef about his passion for the city and his plans to inject it with more magic.

Mr Piano may very well be one of Malta's best ambassadors and especially Valletta's. Eulogies spring out like carefully-scripted adverts. The clever type, which let you sense an element of poetry about them. Only, in this case, it's spontaneous.

Valletta is magic, a miracle, as is Malta and the Mediterranean Sea, he keeps insisting throughout a 40-minute conversation in his Paris studio, ahead of this week's launch of his plans for the entrance to Valletta.

"I love the Mediterranean Sea, which is not really a sea but more like cosmic soup," he says in a soft Italian accent. "You know, it has been consuming for centuries and centuries different cultures; it's so rich. It's full of sounds, smell, full of everything. It's really a little pond but it's so rich and, right in the middle, you have Malta. And Malta is magic for that reason."

It's especially surprising that he should be so attached to this country given the slap in the face his plans for the capital's entrance got 20 years ago.

"It's not very rare for an architect to be involved in a scheme which goes away and comes back 20 years later... probably we were not good enough," he says modestly. "I mean when something goes wrong, the first thing you have to wonder is what you have done wrongly."

He was already one of the most prestigious names in the business back then. He returns aged (he is 71), in the good sense... like a good vintage which got better and is now more sought after than ever.

There are models or sketches of recent projects that have become, or will become, prime landmarks in the world's most important cities in every corner in his loft-like offices - a few blocks away from the Georges Pompidou centre, which put him (along with his long-time partner Richard Rogers) on the map at just 31.

There is the New York Times building, lauded for the way it manages light (an obsession of Mr Piano's, by his own admission), the extension to Columbia University in Harlem or the London Bridge Tower, the so-called "Shard of Glass", due for completion in 2010 or the new Athens opera house - a gigantic, state-of-the art auditorium and cultural complex stretching 16-hectares, on a site which was previously a horse-race track.

But Valletta always had a special appeal to his Mediterranean roots (he was born and bred in Genoa).

"In the job, you fall in love. You know, even if 20 years pass, you're still in love with the places. And, you know, Malta, and particularly Valletta, for me, and that part of Valletta, City Gate, the ditch, Republic Street, Freedom square, and the old opera ruins, remain for me trapped in the kind of day by day life... So it's something which has been with me for a long time."

Still, he admits that it took quite a bit for the government to persuade him to come back. "It's not because of arrogance," he is keen to stress but because every project absorbs him totally, leaving little time for anything else.

"I'm like one of those children who are playing with the sand," he quips. "If someone comes up and asks something, it's like... it's OK, wait a second, I'm very busy here... that kind of thing."

The good news is that when he finally commits to do something, "then we do it, because we love commitment".

Like last time, however, it's not just the place he will have to contend with but the people and, particularly, the conservative taste of a large swathe of the Maltese population.

"I understand but there is nothing wrong with controversy," he cuts in, clearing the way. "Discussion and controversy can actually be quite interesting in architecture. You should not escape that. Because discussing with people, even when the discussion becomes irritating, is normally good for the project."

Listening is very important, he insists, because architecture is a "dangerous profession... because if you do something wrong, it will remain wrong for a very long time".

He puts a caveat to that, pointing out that listening does not necessarily imply that you have to obey. "The art of listening does not mean you have to be an obedient listener but listening is very important because sometimes people say something very important.

"You have to be light, in terms of intelligence, and you have to be stubborn at the same time. It sounds contradictory but it's not. You can easily be stubborn, once you know, but before you know, you have to be reactive and you have to be able to listen and to absorb... to listen.

"Those two qualities are essential."

He has already been doing a lot of listening in the past months, especially during incognito visits to the site. Many people would have missed the grey-haired, distinctive gentleman, walking around the city and absorbing the site from different angles. But he was there, "several times".

In fact, it was Mr Piano who convinced the government that the site of the old opera house was not the right place for the new seat of Parliament.

"I think it would have been a big mistake not to have it (the opera house) there... I like the idea of not giving up on a function that is cultural and I like the idea that the memory of the opera house is there... the idea that the memory of a very iconic building is there. I don't honestly feel that it is a good idea to rebuild (a replica of) the opera house."

It's a sore point, because part of the controversy 20 years ago hinged on the call for the place to be built exactly like it was before being bombed in World War II but he is as passionately against any talk of a replica as he is about the beauty of Valletta.

"I think it is wrong because it is totally romantic... I don't want to be bad to anyone but it is wrong. It's wrong. To rebuild a kind of fake of the opera house would be wrong. And immensely expensive, with public money. And, at the end of the day, it will not work."

There are two elements to his argument.

The first is that a replica would be a historic disservice. "I speak for those people who love history: the worst way to betray history is by making a fake."

The second is that the site is too small to have a dedicated, contemporary opera house that could successfully introduce itself in the international circuit.

"It doesn't fit. So you end up doing a funny replica of the opera house, out of market and out the logic of today...." Many of the productions that are staged for the international circuit would not be able to be performed in their standard form here.

What he is suggesting, in fact, is a multi-purpose theatre for performing arts. It's in line with what key figures, protesting against the idea of having Parliament there, had suggested but his vision goes further.

Rather than build an enclosed theatre, Mr Piano is suggesting having an open-air space that will incorporate the ruins themselves, into a 21st century tribute to the memory of the bombed opera house.

"We keep the soul of the opera house. We keep the soul of a public cultural building there. So we don't steal that noble function that is cultural. Cultural buildings are very important for the city, you know, because they keep away barbarians."

But, at the same time, the place he has in mind would be more than just a cultural centre. It would be the restoration and projection of a wartime scar, which has plagued public debate for 60 years, into the country's future.

"I like the idea of joining past and future, the history and modernity in the place that is Valletta and on the ruins of something that was so beloved... The real sacrilegious thing would have been to destroy those ruins, to put there some other function. But to keep those ruins, giving them dignity, giving them function and adding machines, modern machines for performing art... I think that's great, that's part of the magic."

He will not go much further. He was briefed, in fact, not to reveal much and, actually, the little he did uncover, he let slip out of enthusiasm for the project. But, in essence, the plans envisage a 1,200-seat theatre, built around the ruins at the site, and other remains that over the years were stored elsewhere.

All this will be enhanced with state-of-the-art technology that will give the place the scenographic and acoustic properties expected from a contemporary theatre.

"I think if we do our work well... and we will spend a lot of money there. We don't want to do little things. We want a place where we can create acoustic, light and scenographic conditions that belong to different functions... ballet, opera and all that. The only thing is that this is not going to be in a building with a roof. This is going to be even more magic. I think this is going to be one of the most magic places in the Mediterranean..."

Right next to this magic, Mr Piano now plans the seat of Parliament, an institution where many Maltese have come to expect a less enthralling experience.

But even here, there has been a lot of listening going on. The building will not only house Parliament but a public library too, as suggested by a group that joined the fray when controversy sparked over the Prime Minister's declaration that the new House of Representatives would be built on the site of the ruins.

The new building will take a chunk of Freedom Square but the street will still be wider than the rest of Republic Street there, narrowing only after the new theatre.

There was some toing and froing about the size of the building. Things started off with a very small building. Then designs went the other way and now things seem to have settled on a medium-sized structure that will have as its backdrop a garden and St James Cavalier.

The arcades that mar the view of St James Cavalier will fall under Mr Piano's plans. "We don't want to make a monumental Parliament, you know, this is not the spirit. It's about welcoming people, about having spaces that are not hermetic, inaccessible. We want people to get into Valletta and feel how open and transparent Parliament is, especially on the ground floor."

The building will "fly" above the ground floor, he says, quickly reassuring that he has no intention of producing a hovering structure.

"Well, it does not fly... buildings do not fly but they are high enough. And through that space underneath you can see the Cavalier, which is a beautiful building that you now cannot see because it is hidden by the arcades.

"The new building will allow you to see the St James Cavalier in all its glory. What's more, there will be a garden between the two buildings, at the back.

"I want people to enjoy going there. We want to put on the ground floor of the Parliament a function that is public. I don't think that there will be shops there... the shops are already there. I think we have to put there a dignified, noble activity. We are thinking about a library..."

The scenic properties of this area will be very important because Mr Piano essentially plans to have two main avenues to the city: one from the bridge leading to City Gate, which is likely to be reduced to the size of the original one, and one through St James Ditch, where there will also be a garden.

"The itinerary of tourists is important and that is what we have tried to do, by taking a lift there (in the ditch) that comes up and you come to eye level and enter into Valletta... So for me coming from that direction and walking down is certainly going to be one of the best ways to come and to visit."

Again, he promises magic. "Entering from there is quite magic, believe me... because you have that beautiful Republic Street and then every time you turn right you have the

sky and the sea and every time you turn left you have the sky and the sea. I'm telling you it's magic."

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Excerpts of the interview can be seen online on www.timesofmalta.com. Extensive parts of it will be uploaded this evening.

Comments

j.camilleri (1 week, 2 days ago)
is this some kind of state of the art?

Anthony A. Mifsud (1 week, 2 days ago)
Magic? Who will fork out such funds? it's nice to have a Renzo Piano project in the Capital. We simply can not afford such budgts.
keep on crying, Renzo Piano, he who cry sucks.
Tony

Karl Consiglio (1 week, 3 days ago)
I must admit that this article brought a tear of joy to my eye, I can't wait to actually see it. This ought to lift local moral and give local culture that much needed boost forward. I fully trust the guy, I'm definitely a fan, I love his philosophy, his approach towards his work. In this regard, these are truly exciting times.

mario gellel (1 week, 3 days ago)
I WONDER WHO HAS THIS MAGIC STICK FOR THIS PROJECT SINCE DR,GONZI FOUND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO LOWER THE UTILITY BILLS. SOMETIMES IT MAKES ME WONDER IF THIS IS ANOTHER GIMMICK TO TAKE US OFF FROM THE REAL PROBLEMS WE ARE FACING ON A DAILY BASES, LIKE THE COST OF LIVING, JOBS AND THE PROBLEM OF ILLIGAL IMMIGRANTS, TO MENTION A FEW.

J Martinelli (1 week, 3 days ago)
@ MARK MIFSUD BONNICI What would YOU do? Wait another 60 years?

P Debono (1 week, 3 days ago)
I must admit I'm absorbed by his passion for his project.
Everything he describes makes perfect sense and I'm in favour with most of his plans, except, of course, Parliament being the first building that one will encounter when entering Valletta.
Why do Maltese politicians always have to hog the limelight like that, when they already have ample space in their current Parliament building and considering that they will be

draining the honest taxpayer's pockets to fund a needless project simply to match their over-inflated egos?
It's such a shame.

carlo o. d'emanuele (1 week, 3 days ago)

Thumbs up for Mr. Piano. Recession or no we need something to be done to our city. my pride for Valletta is not romantic but instinctual. we need magic, yes! especially for our children who will be proud of having a decent entry to their capital city. mind you, valletta is not only of the 'tas-city' people but of all of us.

and may i also point out that both the planning of valletta and the opera house were designed by foreigners.

and hopefully the idea of a library will gain some momentum. i will be queing when it opens!!

Marvin Mizzi (1 week, 3 days ago)

Lets hope that we do not end up having another monster like we have today the city gate. And from the first impression it does look good at all!!!!

D.MANGION (1 week, 3 days ago)

"se son' rose, fioriranno".....

His passion for our city is a very good start. Let's just hope that there will be no individuals who would put their egoistic interests before the common national pride.

Let us all have faith in the people who can do it. He is promising magic. We can finally have our own polished diamond. Maybe we can finally hand a worthy gift to our children and their children.

"Buon lavoro signor Piano.....vi prego di ascortarci....perche' Valletta e' la nostra vita quotidiana....ma non fermarti troppo sulle nostre lamentele.....altrimenti adresti troppo piano.

On a lesser optimistic note, let's just hope that this does not turn out to be another Mater Dei soup !

Stephanie Falzon (1 week, 3 days ago)

This interview has put to shame all Maltese because we have never had such passion and pride in our own capital city so Renzo Paino please bring on your idea and vision because it will surely make Valletta an amazing place....you have the credentials to make it so and we can only see them in awe...

MARK MIFSUD BONNICI (1 week, 3 days ago)

A magic city in a magic island. With all these magical proposals will we performing magic to pay for them!!

Piano himself says we will have to spend a lot of money to do what for over 60 years has been in ruins.

Perfect timing, considering the current global recession. Adding more to our taxes to fund a new building for parliament will definitely be welcomed by all. As for an open air theater, might i suggest Mr. Piano incorporates an umbrella vendor at each corner of his project.

Magic nothing but magic. It's all we need right now.

Giancarlo Refalo (1 week, 3 days ago)

Looking forward to seeing the result. Valletta does need an urgent facelift and having a renowned architect redesigning the opera house area is an honour for us, and definitely an honour for Mr. Piano.

Let's hope the Maltese public co-operates as much as possible to make this project finally come true, a project which will doubtless enrich and enhance our capital city, drawing in even more people and the attention it deserves from the worldwide media.
