

Regeneration of Valletta: Architects welcome Piano appointment

The goals of the Kamra tal-Periti (Chamber of Architects) include providing support in achieving excellence in architecture in the interest of the community. This is also accomplished by informing society of the Kamra's views on issues of national importance and by encouraging values of economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability and promoting beauty in architecture and the built environment.

In the Kamra's Position Paper, "The Urban Challenge", which was published last year and which dealt with the quality of our built environment, the Kamra had stated that, "Certainly, the public sector has a special responsibility to society, in terms of the quality of design of buildings which are built with public funds. Government's unique position makes it an ideal champion for good design and all government projects should employ a best practice approach to design and construction, founded on a strong green procurement approach, to significantly improve development expectations and lead by example.

In order to ensure that the public is provided with the best quality project possible, then it would be better if all government projects of scale and importance should be awarded on the basis of design competitions, backed by adequate funding and evaluated from the point of view of their contribution to the social and built environment, again promoting a commitment to good design."

In normal circumstances, the Kamra would therefore have insisted that the design for City Gate and Parliament project be the subject of an international competition – the proven process for achieving design excellence. However, the Kamra acknowledges that this is no normal situation. Indeed, the government's decision to re-initiate the project, has brought about the unexpected opportunity, 20 years later, to renew its commitment to an architect whose commission was suspended once the project was shelved.

After more than 40 years, the community has the right to expect a fitting completion to the gateway to our capital city.

In the light of this, the Kamra believes that the choice of Renzo Piano falls within the expectations set by the high standards required, within both a social and a cultural context, for this project. Indeed, the choice must fall upon an architect who can provide the extraordinary design solutions that the city of Valletta deserves.

Piano has throughout his career built up experiences that are relevant to this commission. He has developed a reputation for being a master of the art of listening and is an excellent communicator of both process and intention.

He has carried out a number of projects under the auspices of UNESCO, urban interventions that were intended to improve the life of ordinary people. Piano is known to believe that "Participation is the means of awakening the people's pride in the city", and "Working with old architecture made me more sensitive to the historical context: it's really just another aspect of listening."

The decision here is not one about whether the selected architect should be Maltese or foreign.

On the other hand, this is about the search for that gesture that could leave a tangible and lasting impact on the quality of our built environment and to serve the aspirations of our nation.

It also needs the contribution of the best in the world to challenge local talent and be a source of inspiration for the students of architecture who will continue to build the future of Malta.

The Kamra therefore commended and supported the government's decision to proceed with the project and the choice of Renzo Piano as architect. Indeed, it also invites Government to also consider the status of the Guidelines for the Regeneration of Valletta drawn up by Piano himself in his previous commission.

These are the first two steps of what will most definitely be a long and tortuous road. Several other challenges lay ahead, in particular the urban issues for what are now an extended scope and site area and the intended use, presumably the subject of a Development Brief that is yet to be prepared. Furthermore, the need for structured public participation in the design process is evident. In "The Urban Challenge", the Kamra had already called for the establishment of a Design Review Commission, an internationally recognised practice, particularly within the European Union, providing a concerted effort at ensuring the highest design quality of public projects.

The Kamra believes that this project presents an excellent opportunity to catalyse the setting up of this Commission.
