

## Theatre guru recommends 'opera house' at the MCC

### Cameron Mackintosh backs Piano's project

Herman Grech



The MCC has hosted several concerts and conferences, including the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2005.

Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

World-renowned producer Cameron Mackintosh is to present a report to the government proposing to turn Valletta's Mediterranean Conference Centre into a "major" theatre and "grand opera house" within a two-year period.

The man known as the 'king of theatre', who owns seven historic theatres in London and a home in Valletta, told The Sunday Times he would present the first draft model of the plans in a few weeks' time.

The Culture Ministry had commissioned Sir Cameron and his architectural team "several months" ago to suggest a financially viable solution for the MCC, which is one of the largest auditoriums in Malta but ill-equipped.

The 63-year-old producer does not mince his words about the MCC's lack of attributes: the auditorium is ugly, badly laid out and has poor acoustics. Its stage and access are entirely inadequate. The plan is to turn the MCC into a 1,700 to 1,800 seat auditorium with a spacious 50-foot modern stage and fly tower. He said the grand historic rooms of this complex were perfectly situated for the theatre public areas.

In addition to the main auditorium there is space to build a proper black box studio theatre ideal for encouraging new writing. Rehearsal spaces can be created while retaining most of the conference facilities.

"If money can be found for this important project, I believe it will be a tremendous cultural asset for Malta and a much needed platform for many of the island's talented artists," he said.

It is still unknown how the government intends to finance the entire project even if Sir Cameron said the comparative bargain cost would be only 20 per cent of that incurred on a comparable new theatre elsewhere in Europe.

"My team and I believe we could create a truly grand opera house overlooking Valletta's Grand Harbour within two years," he said.

He said a big theatre on the MCC site would also revitalise the most run down area of Valletta, especially once Fort St Elmo was restored.

Sir Cameron, who has been instrumental in restoring theatres in several cities around the world, urged the Maltese to realise the considerable financial benefits of a successful show. Sales for his latest production of Les Miserables, currently on a five-week run in Norwich, have totalled nearly €5 million.

Restored in the 1970s, the MCC, which used to host the historic Knights of Malta hospital, would also provide Malta with a major theatre that could house large scale local and international productions of musicals, opera and ballet that cannot be catered for at the Manoel Theatre or St James Cavalier.

On the other hand, Sir Cameron said he believed Mr Piano's proposal for the former opera house site would provide a terrific venue for open air music, drama and opera in a spectacular setting during the summer months.

He said the former opera house site had several shortcomings, including a cramped auditorium and a lot of obstructed view seats in balconies.

"Even if a full restoration of the old theatre was economically feasible it just wouldn't stack up as suitable for modern productions or the rightful expectations of the contemporary audiences to enjoy a show in comfortable glamorous surroundings with good sight lines and acoustics."

His views echo a report drawn up for the government in 1945, which had said the Opera House was "marred by serious practical defects." The authors - Austen Harrison and R. Pearce Hubbard - even went as far as to say that the opportunity presented by the war bombing should be eagerly seized to erect a building better suited to contemporary needs of music and drama.

He said that while having sympathy with the Maltese artists who petitioned the Prime Minister to reconsider the current plan, he felt Mr Piano's proposal was aesthetically pleasing though only suitable for open air music and drama.

He said the restoration plans of the former opera house already included a fully equipped proper stage. Furthermore, the "extremely imaginative new shell" of the building inspired by the original design is flexible enough to open up to become an

inviting public space, similar to the intimate Greek theatre out of the performance season.

"London has its authentic Shakespeare's Globe and the open air theatre in Regent's Park, New York has its Delacourt Theatre and Aix en Province has its historic old courtyard. Valletta is the perfect place to have a similar attraction."

## Comments


Kenneth Zammit Tabona(on 8/3/10) 

Unlike Renzo Piano, Cameron Macintosh is half Maltese.


Despite this both Sir Cameron and Mr Piano are unaware of malta's cultural needs and we really do not need them to foist open air jokes or unsustainable grand opera houses on us.

I fully agree that something should be done with the MCC which should be the theatre that everyone is hankering for however the operahouse site should be a proper concert hall to house our Malta Philharmonic.

Opera is a prohibitively expensive genre that we simply cannot afford on an ongoing basis. The MCC should be able to take opera on its boards along with dance and drama and anything else that is required.


Marisa Bugeja(on 8/3/10) 

MCC as parliament; Royal Opera House rebuilt on original site; logical solution - what are we waiting for?

K Spiteri(on 8/3/10) 

Basically it's not worth it hiring MCC for a production... with the exaggerated fees charged by MCC (about 1500 old Maltese liri per day incl. rehearsals PLUS the electricity bill) it is evidently impossible to stage a production there.


These fees are literally discriminating against upcoming production houses who do have talent to offer to the general public but do not have enough finances...

Joe E Galea(on 8/3/10) 

"On the other hand, Sir Cameron said he believed Mr Piano's proposal for the former opera house site would provide a terrific venue for open air music, drama and opera in a spectacular setting during the summer months."

This statements says it all. The open theatre is only good in summer or in good weather conditions as not only the rain is a problem. Remember that in Malta we have many days with winds, which will also interfere in the use of the open thatre. The Return on Investment on the piano's project would never materialise. Cameron is just telling the government politely, my project (which is for an all year round usage) is better than than that of Piano's. Can Gonzi stop his pigheaded attitude and

start considering options before he decides to spend millions from the taxpayers money?

George Debono(on 7/3/10) 

So "Cameron Mackintosh backs Piano's project"

Well, fancy that !

What's the reward for agreeing with Govt and disagreeing with all us local natives?

I think outsiders should keep their nose out of our business...

G

Anthony Pace Gouder(on 7/3/10) 

@Paul Kelly Please VERIFY , who actually declared that the EXISTING AREA is not sufficiently large enough . Certainly it was'nt uttered by those 128 Artists, including none other than our World Renowned Tenor Joseph Calleja ! who I BELIEVE may be the legitimate ones with SOME professional experience in theatre or opera .

I don't think Maestro RENZO belongs to this category!


Besides , I have already given more than enough hints, if the footprint needs to be extended. Then , you can also be wiser to check out how many famous Opera Houses , just to mention La Fenice in Venice, have practically the same dimensions. I'm just about curious to find out those of La Scala , Milano . Good Night .

R.J Micallef(on 7/3/10) 


To all those opposing a parliament in freedom square ,you can join ....

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=326608023747&ref=nf>

If we really need a new parliament we can find an alternate site and leave one of the few open space in our capital city.

Paul Kelly(on 7/3/10) 

@Anthony Pace Gouder Anyone with professional experience in theatre or opera will tell you that the footprint (ie area) of the Old Opera House is insufficient to meet the demands of a modern theatre or opera building.

Joseph Grech(on 7/3/10)   
(contd)

Sir Cameron concludes in a manner that may inadvertently mislead people. He declares:

"London has its authentic Shakespeare's Globe and the open air theatre in Regent's Park, New York has its Delacourt Theatre and Aix en Province has its historic old courtyard. Valletta is the perfect place to have a similar attraction."

But the facts are quite different. The Globe does have covered galleries... and a

thatched roof as well.

Cameron knows that both the roofless theatres in London and in New York which he mentions are located in extensive PARKS with extensive backstages. This makes their comparison with the Valletta site distinctly ridiculous!

Readers should visit these sites:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_Air\\_Theatre,\\_Regent%27s\\_Park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Air_Theatre,_Regent%27s_Park)

"...performances are dependent on the weather and shows can often not be held for longer than 45 minutes...."


<http://www.shakespeares-globe.org/abouttheglobe/latestnews/20081014/5622/>

This begins: Shakespeare's Globe will begin repair works to the roof of its iconic theatre on Monday 20 October 2008.


[http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Why\\_was\\_the\\_Globe\\_Theatre\\_open\\_air](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Why_was_the_Globe_Theatre_open_air)

..."English playhouses developed from inn courtyards, the usual place for performances before the 16th century. These had galleries round the edges and were open in the middle. The open-air theatre was a very short-lived thing; even Shakespeare moved indoors towards the end of his life; the Blackfriars was enclosed".

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aix-en-Provence\\_Festival](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aix-en-Provence_Festival)

P.Scicluna(on 7/3/10) 

I think the MCC should be used as parliament, enough room for parliament hall, committee rooms and offices for MP's , and we should save another square in Valletta.

Joseph Debono(on 7/3/10) 

Why do 'foreigners' (Cameron Mackintosh actually has a Maltese mother) keep pointing out the obvious for us and we still keep arguing?

Rather than subsidizing three theatres none of which make the grade, we should have the MCC as our main focus and dedicate enough money and effort to make a real success of it.

The old opera house site is simply not good enough, nor big enough, nowadays. Only nostalgia keeps people wanting to rebuild it as it once was.

Let's keep emotion and nostalgia out of it and heed the advice of world-class experts like Renzo Piano and Cameron Mackintosh who are pointing out what is manifestly obvious, if we want to see it.

Joseph Grech(on 7/3/10) 

Sir Cameron believes: "Mr Piano's proposal for the former opera house site would provide a terrific venue for open air music, drama and opera in a spectacular setting during the summer months."

Are any of his seven West End theatres "open air"?

Would he invest in a white elephant that will be used only "during summer months"?


Is the congested, noisy and distracting site really "a terrific, spectacular venue that would meet the rightful expectations of contemporary audiences?"

Cameron is dazzled by the "aesthetically pleasing" potential of the project. Does not this potential, so colourfully drawn on paper, run the risk of fizzling out into bitter


disappointment later on? Most Maltese fear that much.

Sir Mackintosh, please remember that this is no Regent's Park setting, no Greek theatre site setting!


Cameron goes on: "the extremely imaginative new shell of the (proposed Piano) building inspired by the original design (of the bombed Theatre) is 'flexible enough to open up to become an inviting public space, similar to the intimate Greek theatre out of the performance season.'" So, for nine months out of twelve brother Mackintosh would see us Maltese using this place just for walks or to play "bocci" in! (contd)

Lincoln Spiteri(on 7/3/10) 


I happen to share Mr Piano's vision for the theatre and welcome Mr Mackintosh's suggestion. I do not believe that the site of the old theatre is adequate to build a modern venue for the arts that can provide significantly more than the other venues on the island. A proper re-purposing of MCC would definitely provide better facilities for large scale productions. An open air venue is the best solution since we can take advantage of the generous weather and provide an alternative venue that is very unique. Many great events have been staged in the open air, events such as the three tenor's concerts come to mind apart from all the myriad productions that are held in the open air all around the year in make shift venues. Valletta will be fortunate and unique if it can offer 1st class open and roofed venues for artistic productions. Having said that an open air theatre will be more complete if we forget this nonsense of erecting a new building to host parliament in freedom square. For sure fix the area and make it appealing to the public. Let's stop contemplating the 3rd seat of parliament in a 100 years.

CVella(on 7/3/10) 

Frans Sammut: Why not grow up and stop considering 'Maltese' to be superior to 'foreigner'? There is expertise and there are people who can offer it. Nationality is secondary.

Wesley Ellul(on 7/3/10) 


Did any of you read the petition the 128 artists put forward??? They said the money would be better spent in a proper theater than an open air theatre, not rebuild the opera house as it was or even build the theatre there... it was give us a decent theatre before spending a Penny on this useless open air theatre, which I can assure you will be used a maxim of 5 times a year, except in election years when it will be used for mass meetings.

Joe Micallef(on 7/3/10) 


It baffles me how knowledgeable globally acclaimed individuals have the nerve to tread this land of text book experts - I mean I understand that Mr. Mackintosh (surname reminds me of a great architect and designer) knows a thing or two on the subject but notwithstanding this he remains a lonely voice possibly echoed by an amateur architect with the music related surname of Piano.

Here in this land where expertise transcends our geographical boundaries we have at least 128 who have put a signature on paper and countless more who will soon be rallying in Valletta.

Take my humble advice Mr. Mackintosh and stay away – it's just not worth the trouble.

Peter Vella(on 7/3/10) 

So the Maltese "experts" and "know it alls" can now disagree with TWO world renowned figures, Renzo Piano and Sir Cameron, about the proposed open-air theatre in the site of the old opera house. That is quite an achievement!

Joseph Grech(on 7/3/10) 

Sir Cameron Mackintosh's involvement is quite understandable - and welcome. After all this rich - and respected - theatre producer is partly Maltese who (it is said) owns property in Malta.

Cameron was named as one of the big Cash providers of the U.K. Labour party so he is quite adroit at politics...we need to remember that too.

If he can really fix the MCC he should be eternally thanked but it is hoped that his solution will respect the intrinsic historical and architectural value of the MCC.

The timing of Cameron's "unexpected involvement" causes readers to wonder whether the Culture Ministry sought his opinion not just to fix the MCC BUT also, possibly, to help bail the administration out of the silly situation it has lodged itself into what with its ridiculous insistence that the roofless theatre concept is the right choice.

Opponents to Renzo Piano's plans for a "roofless theatre" are suggesting that the problem of Space could be overcome if the Bombed Theatre Site, Ordnance Street and part of Freedom Square be incorporated into one site where a modern Arts Centre / Theatre Building could certainly be built. What does Sir Cameron think of this suggestion? (contd)

Anthony Pace Gouder(on 7/3/10) 

WE WILL APPRECIATE WILLINGLY IF THIS THEATRE GURU RECOMMENDS THE GOVERNMENT TO SET UP PARLIAMENT AND ANCILLARY ADMINISTRATION OFFICES AROUND THE MCC , EVANS BUILDING AND FORT ST. ELMO .

THE OPERA HOUSE OR NATIONAL THEATRE ARE TO RISE EXCLUSIVELY ON THE "SACRED" GROUND OF THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE RUINS. PLEASE MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS , MR. MACKINTOSH !.

Joseph Cauchi(on 7/3/10) 

@ Francis Xavier Sammut of Zebbug and old Aloysian,

When are we going to eat humble pie, for once, please?


Let's keep everything in perspective and give what's due its due!

JC


Frans Sammut(on 7/3/10) 

Well said, Mario, well said. When will we grow up and stop considering foreigners as our superiors? Some of them are, but most aren't. That's all there is to it. But, on

second thought, I do not readily believe we bring in foreigners on the basis of that perception, there may very well be other motives, any guesses?

ASpiteri(on 7/3/10) 


Purely cheap propaganda by the government!

Mario Tabone-Vassallo(on 7/3/10) 

Meta kont president ta' l-Orkestra Nazzjonali, qabel ma tlaqt wara xi sena biss minhabba n-nuqqas ta' serjeta u n-nuqqas ta' carezza, hekk kont issuggerjtilhom. Forsi issa li jkollhom ihallsu tal-parir johduh. Milli jidher ser johduh, ghax ga fahhrilhom lil Piano, li m'ghandix dubju jfahhrilhom il-pjan ta' Mackintosh u m'ghandix dubju li xi susa minn Malta tfahharhomlhom it-tnejn. Il-Manoel ghall-klassiku dejjem nofsu vojta u n-nofs li jkun hemm, sikwit ikunu biljetti moghtija b'xejn fl-esperjenza tieghi.

Claire Busuttil(on 7/3/10) 

Can we stop taking advices from foreigners one for all!?!?!?!?

Simon Borg(on 7/3/10) 

I, for one, think that the opera house should be re-built exactly the way it was, and then bombed again.