

City Gate: 10 points, St George's Square: Zero

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Same difference? Whether this is Ross Lovegrove's Solar Tree in Vienna or St George's Square when it gets a facelift, "stealing" ideas seems to be the name of the game.

Leading architect Richard England has slammed the planned makeover of St George's Square, in Valletta complaining that the project has been entrusted to "interior designers".

"By definition, their role would be to design interiors and not what has become the most important public space in the capital," Prof. England said, stressing that a major square, complete with the Presidential Palace, museums and history, had been thrown out to the "wrong profession".

His comments are added to those of another prominent architect, Conrad Thake, who also criticised the designs, claiming they were plagiarised.

"Full marks to Renzo Piano's scheme but zero points to St George's Square," Prof. England said.

Carlo Schembri, art director responsible for the capital city's projects, insisted the job was entrusted to a team consisting of an urban designer, planners and architects from the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee.

In his defence, Mr Schembri said that while he owned an interior design studio in Malta he had also been running Forfun Design in Milan for three years in partnership with Italian architect Antonio Zardoni and dealing specifically with art direction.

As art director, his brief has been to coordinate the vision of the city's various projects, turning streets into public spaces and creating a central space for families.

"Even Napoleon III commissioned Georges-Eugène Haussmann, who was not an architect, to design the urban plan of Paris," Mr Schembri said.

The €1 million regeneration project, which should see the square repaved and water jets installed, is expected to be ready in November.

Mr Thake has described its design as "disjointed and superficial". He is hoping that "the dragon rears its head and is in time to burn this scheme before it is slain by St George".

Both Prof. England and Dr Thake have also pointed out that the lamps for the square were copied from Vienna and elements in Milan.

While admitting to the similarity, Mr Schembri, referring to the Vienna project by Ross Lovegrove, called Solar Tree, insisted they were "totally different on closer inspection.

"Even a car, from a distance, looks the same... Piano, in his latest speech, said he has been stealing ideas all his life and Fiat boss Sergio Marchionne said that if there was a good idea, even from the competition, he would take it."

Prof. England maintained that the St George's Square project called for the organisation of a competition for architects. "How can the government fail to hold a competition for such an important project but organise one for the embellishment of Gozo's Xlendi Bay?"

Having Mr Piano already on board for the entrance to Valletta could have resulted in his appointment as chairman of the jury panel, ensuring that any plans for the square and even Fort St Elmo would be compatible with his own designs for City Gate.

"You cannot have one language at the entrance, another in the middle and yet another down at St Elmo," Prof. England argued, highlighting the lack of a master plan, which led to a lack of coordination.

For Mr Schembri, though, the situation in the capital was quite the opposite: "That is why we are trying to channel every project for Valletta through the team that has been set up by the government. We did a fact-finding mission to see various proposals and projects for the city - from the proposed transport system to creating a cultural path for visiting tourists; from creating usable open spaces for the locals to well-designed outdoor catering spaces - basically to make the city alive, liveable and one to be proud of".