

## City Gate and the emperor's new clothes

Lina Thake, Fleur-de-Lys

Are we realising that when the much-lauded City Gate project is completed, we are going to be left with nothing but a far from imposing entrance to the city "built by gentlemen for gentlemen", Houses of Parliament highly reminiscent of a pagoda (filling one of the rare open spaces and reducing much needed spaces for parking) and what we are now affectionately calling an "open-air theatre"?

Has not the Royal Opera House been "an open-air theatre" since the German bombs razed it to the ground? However, to my knowledge, nobody ever used it, not as a theatre, anyway.

I think that what is happening is a sort of re-enactment of the story The Emperor's New Clothes when the citizens of that country, afraid of being thought unsuitable for their job, went along with the emperor's tailor's ruse and pretended that they were seeing the emperor wearing magnificent robes when in fact he was parading the streets stark naked. And the farce continued until an innocent little child shouted: "But the emperor is wearing nothing at all!"

I believe that having heard that Renzo Piano is a world-renowned architect, we are all afraid that, if we dare disagree, we will be deemed worthy of "designing plans for pavements" and nothing else. So we are all nodding our heads in assent... until we finally realise that we have been left with a gaping hole in our national coffer and nothing much to show for it!

So, please, let us do something before it is too late! Let us let the people speak! Let us vote as we did prior to the introduction of the euro coins. This is a national project and deserves the heartfelt involvement of all Maltese citizens. Now, before it is too late!

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## Comments

Martin Spiteri (16 hours, 56 minutes ago)

@ jason xuereb

what would you build if God forbid something happened to st johns co cathedral? some stainless steel structure with dabs of pink and blue and grey and a little circle with a little pole on top? and endless ammount of aluminuim windows with morrors? Get a life? Those buildings which have been destroyed should be rebuilt and revitalised. I do not believe that we need an opera house the size of a central courtyard! I believe that that building should be rebuilt if possible as it was in the times of the 16th century and no one should dare criticise. I would remove that horrible general workers union building as well and some other buildings and restore valletta back into its original splendour. Just think of Mdina and birgu if our beloved renzo piano had to lay his hands on them!!!! I can buy ice creams from many places but not from city gate!

Jason Xuereb (1 day, 8 hours ago)

@Martin Spiteri

I definitely agree with restoration of abandoned Baroque buildings of Valletta (which there is still a lot to do in this sense), however, there is nothing to do with completely demolished buildings, like Royal theater, city gate, etc.

Martin Spiteri (2 days, 7 hours ago)

@jason xuereb

i never mentioned living with new baroque buildings but RESTORATION bringing back to life what was demolished. That is what is being done around the world especialt in Germany.

Jason Xuereb (4 days, 16 hours ago)

@ Martin Spiteri

Having said this, it is no use of building a gate because Valletta is no longer an enclosed city living in times of war. You are right to say that Piano's ideas won't fit Mdina because Mdina is the OLD city of Malta, but on the other hand Valletta is the present city and it has to reflect the past plus the present, so this has to be expressed even in modern architecture, there is nothing wrong with this. Your reasoning is very old fashioned, sorry!! You have no right to say that I have no sense of style just because I want to live in the present. This kind of mentality does harm to our culture, and open- mindedness!!!

Jason Xuereb (4 days, 16 hours ago)

@ Martin Spiteri

you judged me that I have no care for style. I sustain my previous comment that people need to open their minds to contemporary approach towards doing things. Building in Baroque style in today's time would be a fake thing to do, because we do not live in the Baroque period any more. Piano's ideas are ideal because they give Valletta an image of a living city, combining the old and the new. Giving a taste of modern does not mean that we are disrespecting the past. Moreover, Piano's plans are ideal because one notices that though his architecture is in a more modern style he is still respecting the characteristics of the rest of Valletta. For example, he introduces parallel straight lines in his plans which link to the parallel straight lines in Valletta's streets, the style of the house of parliament and the entrance to Valletta ( big stone slabs) fuse very well with the rest of the bastions.....

Cecil Herbert Jones - K.U.L. EWROPA (4 days, 19 hours ago)

@ Martin Spiteri

Dom Mintoff through his MLP demoralised this country, it was how he retained control, and the PN got jealous. You will notice that neither of them will correct the fiasco of the other in the hope or certainty that they will win credibility that way by default showcasing the errors. Therefore it will be the MLP who will put a roof on the Royal Opera House Theatre not the PN, just as the MLP wouldn't touch City Gate and Freedom Square. Observe this trend and notice how it transcends our culture. It explains why people here would like you to fail and not succeed.

Unless we do away with these two parties we will never reverse the negative trait that haunts us like the plague!

Paul Borg (4 days, 21 hours ago)

@Martin Spiteri: What are the political reasons that the English Barry Opera House was demolished in spite of the fact that only one-quarter to one third of it was demolished in the war?

Could it be the same reason that Borg Olivier started dismantling the British City Gate exactly the day after Independence? Could it be that the pro-Italian Nationalists were no better than our other rulers, the French and the British who both tried to erase the memory of previous rulers by vandalising the crests of the knights on their buildings to wipe out the memory of the Knights.

If that is the case, then it is ironically fitting that the PN Government is using Piano, a socialist Italian who was first brought to Malta by Mintoff, but he is suitable to them being Italian. So they tie his hands (or his purse) so that he has no choice and gives us a theatre that is nothing but a celebration of the Axis destruction of Malta's most glorious buildings.

Prosit! What a colonialist farce we are still living!

Martin Spiteri (5 days, 8 hours ago)

@ lina thake

I would like to correct you , the german bombs never razed the theatre to the ground, They only damaged it 30% it was easily to be restored but for political reasons then it was completely demolished by our then government.

Martin Spiteri (5 days, 8 hours ago)

@ jason xuereb

it seems to me that you have no care for style and investment. It is people like you who will do away with style and live in dreamy projects which only consume money and render nothing.

The piano project is a total failure. If anyone has the guts to be honest , it does not fit Valletta. the City requires care and in matching that area one has to think the way the majority of the buildings. According to Mepa Village cores are very severely taken care of. No aluminium , must adhere to the present style and architecture and respect existing buildings and churches. Why is Valletta going to be treated different? why not build renzo pianos project in Mdina then? since it is so viable it should be implemented in Mdina or the citadel in gozo. How about Birgu or Birkirkara village core or balzan or lija? This is a project with other hidden interests. IT is definitely the emperors new clothes. IT is A NOTHING. It is another way how to creat another project in another 50 years.

Jason Xuereb (5 days, 18 hours ago)

I truly believe that we will never have Valletta's project finished if we continue with this negative attitude towards all of Piano's plans. Do we have guts to decide on anything in this country? I ask, is there any Maltese who is capable of designing a functional, original plan for our capital which is better than Piano's? We are the first to criticize but we come last in innovative ideas!! I believe that the Government should put Piano's designs forward and take a decision. If we had to put up Referendums on every issue in Malta then we would be truly fossilized. Let us move on and take decisions, and forget about old, stale mentalities. Renzo Piano's plans are truly ingenious!

George Casha (5 days, 18 hours ago)

Why not rebuild the old Opera House site to a close architectural design as the previous one and house Parliament in there? Redesign the square behind City Gate, leaving it as an open space and erect a magnificent monument dedicated to La Vallette in the centre. Also, the City Gate could be rebuilt similarly to what it was during medieval times, which is certainly more fitting as an entrance to an old city. This would not only work out cheaper but would also preserve the open space at the entrance. It's sheer madness losing this precious and airy space to a modern

building in my opinion. I am sure there are Maltese Architects quite capable of coming up with the right plans. Although Mr. Piano has designed many brilliant projects Internationally, I don't think the ones he came up this time around would be suitable at all. Do we ever get it right ?

Joseph Borg (5 days, 20 hours ago)

with my respect to all involved. i would like it much better should the 'Gvern' pay his local dues and then we will see. its no use embarking on further projects if we have no money left. the 'Gvern' should first get his dues straight and then embark on further projects. I'm sure that many local contractors will agree.

sarah borg (5 days, 21 hours ago)

This is what happens when a people (the maltese) cannot sustain a civilization which was greater than their own (noble & aristocratic european knights)  
Maybe us Maltese doesn't deserve a gem like Valletta afterall, since not only we are not able to at least Preserve it to its bare standard, but we made a mess out of it, starting with those socialist Flats and ending with a Worthless Modern style parliament which has nothing to do with the Baroque character of Valletta and is out of fashion in few years. Nothing beats the splendor and magnificence of the baroque, where architecture and sculpture is a true work of art (not like some modern worthless boxes of concrete)

Astrid Vella (6 days, 4 hours ago)

@ R. Caruana: you have just proven the point of every commenter on this page,&shown why they are so hostile to modern architecture in Valletta. Every building you have mentioned:

GWU in South and Bakery streets,  
Savoy and Embassy complexes,  
new block of flats in Freedom Square,

is an architectural blot on the Valletta landscape, and please note that I'm doing my very best to be polite here. The only ones that harmonise are the buildings around St John's Square which, interestingly, created a square where there was none, instead of building up an existing square as the present project seeks to do.

You are right that the Barry Opera House did not match Valletta's architecture, but how much less will the new Parliament building? Rebuilding Barry's opera house is not our only option. We have paid hundreds of thousands of euros for Richard England's designs, Trevisan has presented more options, not to mention all the designs submitted for the competition of some years ago.

The last thing we want is designs that we have to "come to accept" or that "Piano's work will likewise grow on us" This is a unique opportunity, lets not get it wrong again!

Mario Mifsud (6 days, 4 hours ago)

With all due respect to everyone involved, I did not like the present proposals for City Gate, the new Parliament and the Royal Opera House.

Here I dare to humbly submit my suggestions for the re-building of the 'Royal Opera House', the 'City Gate' and the National Parliament.

First suggestion is to re-build the Royal Opera House according to the designs of the Venetian Architect Giovanni Trevisan. His designs seem good, elegant, flexible, respecting the original (Barry's) designs while acknowledging the needs of a modern society that a modern theatre must cater for.

Secondly, according to historical records available, the indications are that the original 'City Gate' was nothing special. It was just a hole/tunnel in the wall. Let's go for the

original design. Let's rebuild 'City Gate' as it was built by the Knights of St. John, obviously on a larger scale, to accommodate today's needs.

Finally, leave Freedom square alone. It's one of the very few open spaces still available in Valletta. There's the Main Guard Building available. Use it. Renovate the present ground floor. Add a couple of elegantly built floors on it and it will be a wonderful House of Parliament right in the heart of Valletta.

Reuben Gauci (6 days, 4 hours ago)

I like the analogy put forward by this letter. "The Emperor's New Clothes" story puts the current City Gate story in a nutshell.

R. Caruana (6 days, 5 hours ago)

No one seems to realise when they're talking about the 'Royal Opera House's former glory that Barry's design was completely alien to Valletta, a 'wedding-cake' Neo-classical monster with all the trimmings in a Baroque environment.

Since the war Valletta has seen big transformations, with modern buildings such as that of the GWU in South and Bakery streets, the Savoy and Embassy complexes, the new blocks of flats in Freedom and St John's squares, and so on. We've come to accept them, and Piano's work will likewise grow on us in time.

victor pulis (6 days, 5 hours ago)

Please stop calling this undertaking 'The City Gate Project' as there is to be no city gate but a breach in the wall. We cannot call it the opera house project either simply because there is to be no opera house. What we can and should call it is the New parliament Building project because this building is the main element in the whole project. The other structures have been relegated to after thoughts. When the idea of the parliament was included Renzo Piano's plans were thrown off balance and he had to improvise to accommodate the new addition. Hundreds of letters have been written in disagreement but as it is written in Genesis when man started building the tower of Babel; 'Now that man has set his mind to building it nothing will stop him' and we all know where man ended up eventually!

Alfred Baldacchino (6 days, 5 hours ago)

Whichever way you look at it, the Piano City Gate is not Valletta. The original design has somehow to be reinstated.

Joseph Meli (6 days, 7 hours ago)

@Lina Thake:..... Many like me agree with what you wrote, as..in Malta..&..Gozo we do have a good Architects than can produce perfect plans for our city.

First..and..foremost, the majority of the Maltese wrote in the local press and on media in favor of re-building the..Royal Opera House to its former glory and those magnificent pillars around it. Someone..stated that one can take part of the road next to the parking space so that the opera house would be wider, others stated to have it vertically rounded facing a bit towards the entrance city gate flats/buildings.

The proposed..entrance is totally bare, and one prefers to have a similar gate to a Victorian style, but now could be on a wider scale. So let have this style of gate with those statues that we..used to have, if I am not mistaken..those..of King..George.

As for parking..I do recall..what was..suggested by the Touring..Club..Malta, Dr. Philip..Agius long ago that we should use the underground tunnels. But maybe making them deeper for double parking space. If an exhibition or..competition be organized, Government with local Architects Association, could produce a better plan for our parking..space system under the city of Valletta.

Ray Mangion (6 days, 8 hours ago)

Well said Ms Thake, but I don't think that the Maltese are afraid to speak out. Many voiced their disapproval and irritation that a national project like this, the Maltese were neither consulted nor given a chance to decide on a project to safeguard our Heritage City. Everything was done behind closed doors and I can assure you that even if people rise to the occasion by challenging this project, it will fall on deaf ears; it will never happen, because we mean nothing to the Government except when they need our votes and pay taxes.

m Mealclaff (6 days, 8 hours ago)

Over and over I have said that the only way for City Gate is to Re instate the original Design.

By doing this it will stand the test of time...Will still be good in 200 years time. How will the Piano look in 200 years time ?...

Cecil Herbert Jones (6 days, 8 hours ago)

I agree with Ms Thake, we risk all of what she described plus we also risk losing Valletta's status as a World Heritage City. The World Heritage Committee has already signalled this to us, not only because of the proposed plans but also because of the Tigne High-rise construction. Valletta belongs to the original authors, the Knights of the Order of St John. It is a priceless construction deemed as valuable or more than a Caraveggio or Mattia Preti painting. It has to simply be restored to its original specs.

The idea of doing away with the theatre altogether is abominable. This country needs theatre and the sooner everyone realises this the sooner we begin to heal from the constant delusions we face. I am an artist and to me my imagination is reality. I understand that this is not so for the general public who makes a clear distinction between the two. However this is exactly where the artist comes in to bridge that gap. Often things are best left to the imagination rather than to reality, but people need to realise them nonetheless, and this is why theatre is so important for us, for all civilisation.

J Micallef (6 days, 9 hours ago)

So well put, Ms. Thake.

There are many valid arguments appearing on the various papers and being discussed on this subject. I've been to a couple of 'walled cities' in Europe, and they all sported some sort of 'gate'. Unfortunately, our Valletta has never had a proper one in my opinion, and Mr. Piano wants to leave it to an 'grand opening'.

I concur with Ms Thake as regards the transformation of one of the few open spaces into parliament. What a pity that would be. We are so limited in space, let alone open spaces (piazza's are a must in any self-respecting city), and this is the solution being put forward.

Piano had his reasons for this suggestion as the Palace is being underutilised, but a rethink would not be a bad idea, perhaps.

What I am afraid most of is not the the Emporor goes around stark naked, but if he's not had a good bath...so why concentrate all the energy on a facelift when there are so many buildings in Valletta begging for attention?

Regarding the opera-house, I think that this should be scrapped-it was never really any good - aesthetically and practically.