

City Gate arcades shops shut for good

Claudia Calleja



The 19 shops lining the arcades and the opera house ruins had until yesterday to vacate the buildings.
Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

Music resonated through Valletta to celebrate the 444th anniversary of the capital's founding, as owners of the shops beneath the City Gate arcades pulled down their shutters for one last time.

The 19 shops lining the arcades and the opera house ruins had until yesterday to vacate the buildings as works on the City Gate project - approved by the planning authority on Thursday - are expected to start in the coming days.

By yesterday morning most of the shops were closed while some were still packing their stock in cardboard boxes as they planned to relocate.

One gift shop slashed its prices, offering 50 per cent off to get rid of stock before it moved the remaining boxfuls to another of its outlets.

The only shop within the arcades that remained in full operation was Chemimart Pharmacy, that initiated a court case against the authorities over its relocation.

Pharmacy owner Reginald Fava is requesting a temporary licence to operate his business from another outlet. If this is not granted he risks losing his licence since, according to the law, if a pharmacy remains closed for five days at a stretch, its licence is revoked.

Parliamentary Secretary for Lands Jason Azzopardi explained that negotiations with the 19 tenants had been going on since June and an agreement was reached with all, except the pharmacy.

Some of the shops, he added, would relocate to other premises while others were being paid compensation, the sum of which he did not divulge.

Angelo Gatt, who operates a news kiosk in the theatre ruins called Ta' Ġelardu, is one of the tenants relocating.

The 73-year-old has seen Freedom Square evolve and remembers the arcades being built in the 1960s.

Before they were built, he explains, there was a staircase crossing part of Freedom Square and people lived in residences that stood instead of the arcades but were destroyed during the World War II.


As a child Mr Gatt helped out his father, Ġelardu, run their news shop which was originally situated near the stairs. The shop then moved across the road and eventually, some 40 years ago, was relocated to the corner of the theatre's ruins after it was bombed in an air raid in 1942. He will now be moving to another outlet not far from his present spot.

On Thursday the Malta Environment and Planning Authority gave the green light to the Valletta City Gate project by the world-renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano.


Mr Piano's plans for the city's entrance do away with the arcade shops on one side of Freedom Square. The project includes a Parliament in Freedom Square, the redevelopment of City Gate and the contentious roofless theatre.

As Valletta prepares itself for this major aesthetic change, the capital yesterday celebrated its foundation day. Grand Master Jean Parisot de la Valette laid the foundation stone of the city which bears his name on March 28, 1566, at what became Our Lady of Victories church.

Comments

J Azzopardi(1 week, 5 days ago) 

Finally Valletta and with it all of Malta will get the entrance it deserves. I have been round the spot yesterday and objectively anything is better that the state it is in at present. Further more the current disgrace is being replaced by a visionary project of great caliber. Can't wait to see it done.

Mario Tabone-Vassallo(1 week, 6 days ago) 

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