

Freedom Square arcades come crumbling down

Fiona Galea Debono



The demolition of the arcades next to St James Cavalier at Freedom Square, Valletta, forming part of the City Gate project continued yesterday.
Photo: Matthew Mirabelli

A ravenous bite was gnawed out of Freedom Square's arcades in Valletta yesterday and the demolition will continue on to City Gate at the end of March as the Renzo Piano project starts to materialise.

The first column crumbled at about 11 a.m. and the rising dust cloud was mitigated by water cannon to reduce the impact on the public, businesses and environment being a priority.

Once the arcades and underlying shops are flattened, excavation for the Parliament building would start, though the idea was to first complete the open-air art and culture area on the Royal Opera House site and the garden in the ditch, Infrastructure Minister Austin Gatt said.

The completion date of the City Gate project is the end of 2012. It was "on schedule and intends to remain on schedule", he said after a visit on site with the Prime Minister.

Yet, the plans were "not cast in stone", he said, insisting on flexibility and saying that, even though no expense was being spared to ensure European standards, it remained a major project that would have some sort of impact on such a densely populated area.

The knocking down of Pope Pius V Road, on top of the gate, would be preceded by traffic management plans that would use the Marsamxett side of Valletta, Dr Gatt said, mentioning voluminous studies on alternative routes once the street gave way to the original bastions.

Dr Gatt said the loss of about 130 parking spaces once the ditch was transformed into a garden would be replaced – and “tripled” – by three alternatives Transport Malta had already applied for: an extension of the park-and-ride system to accommodate an additional 380 vehicles; 200 parking spaces on the Grand Stand in Floriana; and another 130 in St James Ditch.

The site perimeter hoarding had five access points but the main one for trucks was through the ditch to minimise construction traffic in the city heart, said project director Jean-Marc Smits, from Bovis Lend Leasing, in charge of logistics.

Construction debris is being removed through a chute in an existing opening in Freedom Square onto trucks in the ditch to exit the city from below while building material of a certain size could be hauled from the ditch via a tower crane on the square above to further reduce the impact.

Accommodation for the workers – about 150 on site at one time – is being set up in the ditch, with a washing facility for the trucks before they emerge onto the streets and another on Freedom Square for heavy vehicles that have to access the site from the surface.

Until the project was complete, the ditch was being linked to the surface through temporary stairs, the existing ones being enclosed in the site boundaries, Mr Smits said.

So far, the ditch is still open to traffic but, once the garden inside it takes shape in January 2012, access would be closed.

The works on City Gate also include the demolition of the police station and the Bank of Valletta building in South Street to make way for a square and backstage facilities.


For safety purposes, access would only be through part of South Street and into Zachary Street, where a three-metre wide passageway would guarantee emergency vehicles could pass, Mr Smits said. Restoration on the opera house remains was under way and the unearthed ruins, including parts of aqueducts, would be retained as visible as possible through the construction of temporary structures, he continued.

The “delicate and surgical” demolition of the bridge into the city would be carried out in such a way that pedestrian access would be maintained, as requested by the government, shifting from left to right, depending on the section being removed to end up with an entrance a third of the original

width. Mr Smits mentioned the possibility of instances when it would have to be closed off to avoid any danger.

The planning authority hearing on the moving of the bus terminus is scheduled for tomorrow and fresh designs for the entrance to Valletta, which would become an empty space, and St James Ditch, have been requested for the second phase of the project.


Comments

victor aquilina(5 days, 3 hours ago) 

Oh God not another block of concrete FLATS, Thats all they know, Get a 2nd hand (Condemmed) JCB from England, some crazy Maltese to drive it , and Smash it down !!! Lovely, Then built a Block of CONCRETE, Easy, Peasy, Hope it,s better workmanship than the pedestian key block paving!!!!

M.Cachia(5 days, 1 hour ago)


Flats? Do you even know what the City Gate project is?

Jaycee Sullivan(5 days, 7 hours ago) 

@G Scerri - I was about to same the same thing. Rise-up and make 'em leave it as it is. Parliament can be build in "Mandraggio". And whilst you're at it - tear-down the apartment building opposite.

Raymond Sammut(5 days, 6 hours ago)

The Piano design will leave it as it is. That's the idea. Parliament House will be a free standing structure, and pedestrians will be able to walk around St James Cavalier bastions. This is what is beautiful about the Piano concept. Piano allows for people to walk around structures and to feel/appreciate these structures from an external perspective. Piano is Valletta's saviour. He is freeing up what has been buried and fossilized now for some 50 years.

Tom Broadley(5 days, 9 hours ago) 


Did the people of Malta vote for Valletta to be ravaged?

J. J. Borg(5 days, 4 hours ago)

What ravaging of Valletta? The place hasn't looked this good since the 1930s. Or did you think those shopping arcades date back to the 16th century?

M. Aloisio(5 days, 4 hours ago)

Yes it's a sad day for democracy when the government has the gall to tear down a shopping arcade and a square turned into a car park without first putting it to a referendum.

g. scerri(5 days, 10 hours ago) 

St. James Cavalier in all its beauty - for a while.

R Borg(5 days, 9 hours ago)

same sentiments exactly. Better leave St. James as it in full glory. Saves costs or rebuilding some other form of crap and is also much nicer.

Goodbye Valletta and royal opera house your doom is near

M.Cachia(5 days, 9 hours ago)

Doom? You do know there was always a building there from Day 1 of the City's life.
