

Gateway to a city

Angelo Xuereb evaluates Renzo Piano's designs for the entrance to Valletta

Congratulations to Renzo Piano for his exceptional skills in producing an outstanding design for the City which we all love.

I must admit that I was a bit sceptical of introducing a modern structure within the lobby "entrance" of our capital city which has a stone legacy. Over the past 20 years I have presented a number of proposals for these three main areas and a master plan for Valletta, and I was in favour of rebuilding the Opera House to its original elevations. After viewing the exhibition in detail, and with a technical eye, I must admit that in general the master plan and its sensitivity towards the original design of Valletta are outstanding. I have some observations and comments to put forward for further consideration.

From the architectural point of view, Renzo Piano managed to extend the massive fortification walls of St James Cavalier through the new parliament building. The transformation of the Yellow Garage with a perched ceiling for natural light at the end of the tunnel and the use of the ditch is excellent, but unless these areas are linked to the underground transportation node beneath the existing bus terminus the concept of this pedestrian area will not function. I shall deal with this area later on.

The recreation of a wide gentle stepping access behind the bastions and the new city gate is an innovative idea. The creation of a new open square instead of the police station to expose the oldest chapel of St Catherine and the original entrance of Auberge d'Italie is great. The adjacent new narrow block of building has to go as well, and this new piazza extended. The maximisation of an energy efficient building by using stone louvered windows and the use of the rock base for heat exchangers are outstanding. I have my doubts, however, whether we could locate enough hard stone in the Maltese islands that are fissure free, so as to withstand the climate elements over decades of years without falling.

OPERA HOUSE

Now that the existing remains of the old Opera House are to be retained, I like the idea to enclose this site with a modern structure on similar lines as presented, but definitely would go for a roofed structure to maximize the use of this prestigious site that can be an attraction for the theatre goes all year round. Unfortunately our land is limited and we need to make the best of land use, especially in prime sites. An open theatre can be developed with a much lower budget on the outskirts like Ta' Qali National Park. I am sure many other fellow Maltese would agree to this. We have to plan with the future in mind, which means that if the public perception is for a roofed theatre, let us get the same architectural team now to design it and not let another architectural team in the future, which may end up with another controversy and decades of discussions.

I would extend the underground space behind the Opera House (proposed green room) and the new square next to the St. Catherine Chapel, so as to maximize this prime space. Otherwise, it would be very difficult to re-excavate at a later date.

One floor of underground car park could be used for the Prime Minister's office, and for VIP car parking area, with an access from the ditch presently used by the old lottery building. This would also be ideal for use by persons with special needs. There are some existing underground tunnels which could be integrated to this scheme as a VIP access to Castille, the Opera House, and the Parliament, and as an emergency exit in case of large protests.

PARLIAMENT BUILDING

The whole planning concept and the design feel of lightness is very good. I would suggest reducing the glazed ground floor area to the minimum, so as to guarantee the creation of more open space. We all know that over the years these glazed parts may be screened by screens or other solid material and would completely change the design concept of such an important building.

Parking and access issue to the Parliament needs to be addressed thoroughly. The closest car park area would be in the ditch where the lottery building is located with a people's mover in an underground tunnel, that leads directly to the parliament. The fact of having a separate building for the Parliament Hall with plenty of natural light from the ceiling makes it unique. I think that the internal layout of Parliament could be improved, but these are details at this stage, like wider staircases and a VIP access through a direct link from St. James Cavalier.

CITY GATE

The overall approach and planning has been very well thought out, but I have some suggestions that could improve upon the existing plans. For example I would suggest the use of escalators, rather than the external glazed lift. Escalators are much faster and more practical than lifts. I am aware that one lift is required for persons with special needs or old persons, but this could be located within the bastion's staircase core, with plenty of natural light from the top and from the narrow gaps between the proposed heavy steel plates and the new wall. There is no scope for a panoramic lift over only a relatively low height, with no views except the other side of the ditch. Furthermore unless the glazing of such lift cabin is kept clean daily, it will give a very shabby approach to the whole project. We also have to keep in mind the maintenance aspects where we are faced with a frequent stoppage.

I think that the steel structure at the top end of the staircase could be improved with natural stone material.

The proposed restaurant on the railway buildings should be located on the lower level of the ditch. There are a number of reasons for this suggestion.

- The whole project still has to be complemented with a large underground transportation node below Triton Fountain to house the public transportation, buses, tourist coaches, taxis, circular bus station, shuttle buses, link from new large underground car parks, etc. All of these could be linked to the embellished old railway tunnel that will lead you directly to the proposed escalators within the City Gate.
- If there is no special attraction for the people to go down to the proposed garden in the ditch, people will not make use of this potentially attractive garden.

- A large modern shopping mall could be constructed at the same level of the bottom of the ditch, which would be complemented by the above mentioned garden and open air casual dining. Keep in mind that this would be located immediately below the underground mass transportation level.
- With these new complimentary facilities, the old railway bridge would be required to be clear so as to act as the main pedestrian passage with an exit between the Parliament and the Opera House.
- A lightweight canopy would be appropriate over the railway bridge in order to protect the pedestrians from the inclement weather and from falling objects.

THE MISSING PHASE

As mentioned above, to complement this project, I suggest including the public transportation drop offs and termini to be located below Triton Fountain on the concept plans that were presented by Professor Richard England. Over the past two decades, I personally have presented a number of proposals for this area, so as to clear up the present mess at the City Gate and create a majestic piazza and approach to this world heritage monument. I would recommend to include a much deserved large statue of La Vallette: the man behind the original vision to develop this magnificent fortified city.

A huge underground car park should be developed below the existing football ground next to Belt Is-Sebh, connected to the restored and embellished old railway tunnel that leads to the city. This tunnel could be complemented with a number of electric driverless small trams. This large car park can have eight levels with a direct entrance and exit from a short tunnel that leads to the area where the Gozo Ferry berths at Sa Maison. This will reduce the traffic congestion in Floriana and Valletta.

In future, Government departments and Ministries may be housed within a new development at Belt Is-Sebh. Again this development could be complemented with this new car park and link. The MCP carpark should increase its car parking spaces in the centre core and be roofed over with a landscaped public garden that complements the new City Gate complex.

This is a fantastic concept, and with some minor improvements would definitely make our future generations proud of today's decision.

Let us hope that this project will not end up as a political game, and all parties should join forces to develop the best possible project for tomorrow's world. Over the past sixty years we have heard and seen too many versions over the past sixty years. Now we need to ACT FAST. It is a major challenge to complete it within four years, but as the English saying goes, "where there is a will there is a way". If the will is there, the way will be found.

Well done Renzo Piano and his team!
