

Giving Valletta its dignity back

by NOEL GRIMA

There is possibly one word to describe the ensemble of Renzo Piano's plans for City Gate, the new Parliament and the Opera House site – dignity.

The project will give back to Valletta the dignity it lost as a result of World War II, besides the inappropriate 1960s intervention and the subsequent years of neglect and resultant shabbiness.

The ceremony at which the plans were presented was attended last night by a large number of guests and also by a sizeable crowd who could follow the speeches and the presentation by means of a translucent skin hanging outside the National Museum of Archaeology, which was used for the first time in Malta last night and which will be used in the open-air theatre on the site of the Opera House ruins.

Last night Renzo Piano gave a long presentation, or rather a lecture, in his own inimitable, discursive way.

He immediately acknowledged how in the 25 years that he has been in touch with Malta, specifically Valletta, has made him fall in love with Valletta – the little Manhattan of the Mediterranean, as he put it.

These 25 years have made him listen – to the people, to the stones, all of which have their own stories to tell. Stone is the DNA of Malta, he said as he showed slides of Maltese quarries.

He went on to explain, in detail, the reasons for the particular decisions taken over the course of the project.

While lavish in his praise of Maltese stone, he emphasised how the projected Parliament building will be light, airy and give the impression to be 'flying'.

In his own speech, Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi described the event as far more than just the launch of an idea, a concept, a design, or a project. The Valletta that will emerge once the project is completed will speak to people on behalf of all of Malta.

It will, he said, show how the Maltese fought to gain independence and freedom, to establish democracy on the island, to get its first Parliament and to strengthen democracy in the country.

Valletta will also show that all we do is linked together through cultural and artistic activities. Together, he said, all this will reply to the question of: What is it that makes us Maltese? This tradition has been created by means of folklore, culture, history, art, and our lifestyle. Valletta is a living museum of the Maltese way of life.

Dr Gonzi reminded his listeners that this year Malta celebrated the fifth year since its accession to the EU. In 2014 it will celebrate 50 years since gaining Independence, the year after that the 450 years since the Great Siege and in 2016 the 450th anniversary of the founding of Valletta. In 2017 Malta will have the presidency of the EU and in 2019 Malta will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Sette Giugno events that led to the establishment of the first Parliament of Malta.

The Renzo Piano project must be completed before all these celebrations, Dr Gonzi remarked.

After the inauguration, crowds converged on the museum to be among the first to see the more detailed presentation of the Piano plan in the grand salon of the Auberge de Provence.

Pages 4 and 5 carry more details about the project with designs and explanations by the Piano team.

When observing closely the panels in the exhibition, one can pick out more and more details about how the end product will look.

Here are some snippets:

Valletta entrance

The bridge leading to Valletta will be reduced to one fourth of its present over-inflated size. Back to the original width of the bridge built by the Knights, it will re-create the impact of crossing over a bridge into a fortress. The last part of the bridge will once again be made of wood. This was removed in the 1960s 'renovation' and the space underneath was filled up.

There will be a new addition next to the bridge, a watchtower that will be a replica of the St Elmo watchtower, which was pulled down before World War II and is being re-built. From the City Gate watchtower, one can look down on Republic Street and on the surrounding areas.

A nice touch is the addition of chair lifts by the side of the two grand staircases coming down to City Gate from near the Central Bank and the St John Cavalier area.

As the road on top of City Gate is being eliminated, entrance to the Hastings Garden area will be through St Mark's Street, with the one-way system in the upper part of Old Bakery Street being reversed. Delivery trucks will be able to deliver goods in the early morning by going through Castile Square and down Ordinance Street.

Parliament

Parliament will be composed of two blocks, linked by bridges. It will also be on stilts, so that people walking at ground level will be able to look through to St James Cavalier.

Contrary to common perceptions, the new building will not remove all the Freedom Square spaces. The actual footprint of the entire Parliament building will not encompass all Freedom Square. At the back, at the foot of the huge St James Cavalier which will be brought back in all its awesomeness through the demolition of the shops in Freedom Square, there will be a sunken garden leading to a courtyard, which will be the hub and entrance to Parliament.

Down below in the ditch, the old railway bridge that leads to the old railway station (today's Yellow Garage) will be turned into a restaurant. Behind the restaurant there will be the archives of Parliament and essential services, inaccessible to the public.

On the side of the sunken garden will be the Parliament offices and the biggest committee room.

The actual Parliament will no longer bear a historic resemblance to the British House of Commons with two sides facing each other, a rather confrontational situation. Malta will not go for the Italian or French model of a hemicycle either, but for a hexagon formation, with a Strangers' Gallery and a Press Box on a higher level than that of MPs.

Each MP will have a workstation – something they do not have now, while ministers, the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister will have far more space than they have now. The Speaker will have an entire floor, just underneath the House, at mezzanine level, with a large hall for receptions etc looking on Republic Street. There will be more committee rooms on the topmost floor.

Interestingly, the angles of the two Parliament blocks will respect and continue the lines set by the flanks of St James Cavalier.

The Opera House site

Let's start from the back. What is now the Police Station plus its parking space in South Street will be pulled down, leaving St Catherine's Church almost isolated.

This will open up the side of the Auberge d'Italie, which was the original entrance of the auberge before the monumental entrance on Merchants' Street was built.

Underneath this space there will be a hall, the theatre's Green Room, where artists can prepare before they go on stage.

As said, the sides of the open-air theatre will be lined with the translucent material already mentioned, which will be transparent by day but which can be used for the projection of images at night. Inside the exhibition, there is a special cubicle showing this material and its uses.

Apart from Mr Piano, the two speeches made yesterday reflected the sense that something historic was being done.

Minister Austin Gatt, in an emotional speech, outlined the Valletta that stretches from St Elmo to City Gate. For 60 years, Dr Gatt said, "We have been discussing what needs to be done. The time has come to take decisions that will not just correct our mistakes but also create something that will leave to those who come after us a heritage of our times."

The speech was however marred by the unfortunate error, committed twice over, of referring to Fort St Elmo as Fort St Angelo.

He described the Piano plans as highlighting the memory and identity of this nation: "City Gate is the bastion, created to protect the people from the enemy, but also the

impact of the enemy on Maltese lives.

“The theatre ruins remind us of a people that found entertainment and culture in that building, the cultural aspirations of this people, but also a reminder of times when the enemy made the Maltese suffer not just physical hunger but also forget and lose memory of its culture.

“Freedom Square, which was created by removing the ruins of the houses bombed during the war, was never a place where people could meet as a community– it became a car park. We want to erect a building that symbolizes the freedom of the Maltese

“Valletta was built and enhanced by the likes of Laparelli, Cassar, Carapecchia, Ittar, Floriani, and Barry, among others. Through the Renzo Piano plans, future generations will enjoy the Malta we want them to inherit – a country where freedom reigns and where human rights are held in the highest regard.”
