

In praise of Piano

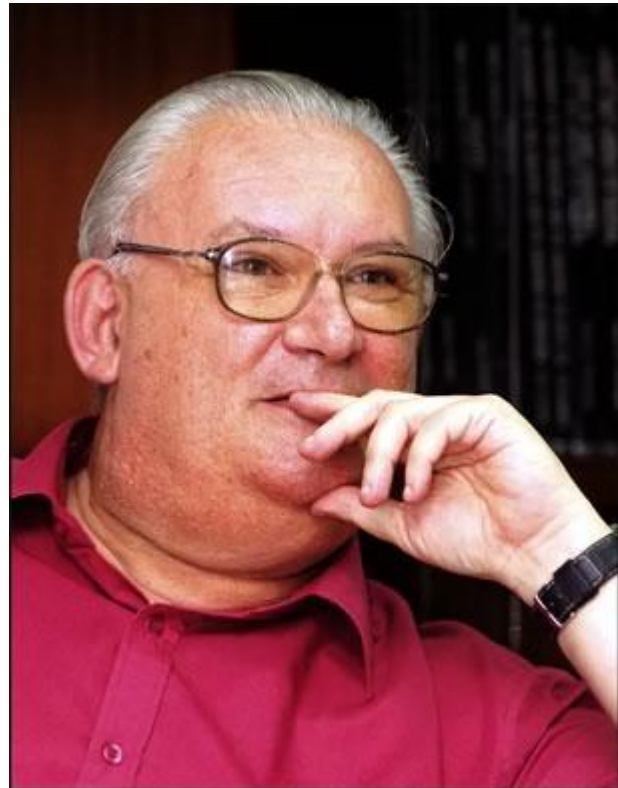
Professor DENIS DE LUCCA, head of department at the Faculty of the Built Environment, University of Malta, gives an architect's appraisal of Renzo Piano's plans for the entrance to Valletta

"The nice thing about Renzo Piano's scheme is that it provides a fresh way of communicating history to the people who experience it," Prof. Denis De Lucca begins. "Another world renowned architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, once said that 'every great architect is necessarily also a poet. He must be a great interpreter of his time, his day, his age'. Piano has certainly done this in Valletta, and I believe this creation will endure as one of our century's most enduring gift to the future..."

We are in the boardroom of the Faculty of Architecture, whose former dean last week declined an interview in order to digest the plans more fully before commenting in public. Certainly Prof. De Lucca has overcome his early reticence, and is now brimming with praise for what he concedes is a "controversial project".

"Controversial, but important," he qualifies. "Here we have a golden opportunity to create an image of modern Malta which, in architectural terms, the place sorely lacks at present..."

Few would disagree with this last statement, though of course opinions will differ wildly as to what this "image of modern Malta" should entail. But let's leave the controversy for later. As a professor of architecture in his own right, what is it about the Piano designs that De Lucca finds impressive?



"It is a superb solution, created by a master of architecture with several years of experience under his belt, and fully conscious of the very Italian tradition of 'l'idea del bello'," he begins.

Fair enough; but isn't 'bello' in the eyes of the beholder? And at the risk of precipitating a deluge of architectural jargon... could Prof. De Lucca outline what he considers to be the salient architectural features of the project?

“For one thing, Piano has brilliantly resurrected the original spatial geometry of the entrance to Laparelli’s city fortress, which was based on a long axis connecting Porta San Giorgio to the esplanade of fort St Elmo,” he replies. “I say ‘resurrects’, because this geometry was very much in evidence before World War II. It only vanished when the old entrance gate was dismantled, and Freedom Square evoked, with Carnival in mind, in the mid-1960s...”

According to Prof. De Lucca, the entrance to Valletta was originally considerably different from how it looks today – it was, after all, designed specifically to withstand a siege.

“Up until fairly recently, the ‘city’ proper did not actually begin before Wembley’s (opposite the old theatre). Everything in front of that was a military zone...”
Piano’s designs, De Lucca argues, pay homage to this original function in a way that can be appreciated by one and all.

“The way the scheme is laid out provides vistas which enhance the mathematical geometry of the fortifications. These in turn provide the people entering Valletta with the opportunity to appreciate the spirit of a Baroque fortress city: with its impressive array of curtain walls, its bastions and its counterguards, greeting anyone coming in from the esplanade of Floriana. Personally, I particularly liked the angled cut through the parliament building, allowing for a glimpse of the monuments of St James Cavalier and St Catherine’s; as well as the clever exploitation of the ditch, from where one can admire the scale of the walls, and the air of monumentality provided by Piano’s treatment of the main gate...”

This brings us to one of the first controversies surrounding this sensitive site. Piano’s earlier plans for city gate, presented in the late 1980s, had sparked furore by presenting a modern reinterpretation of the old gate motif. This time round, however, the Genoa-born master architect appears to have sidestepped the issue by leaving out the gate altogether. Is there an architectural justification for this?

“Piano’s treatment of the entranceway avoids the controversial issue of reconstructing the main gate in its original form during the British period, since he, like many other architects, believe that architecture created today should reflect this day and age,” De Lucca explains. “But at the same time he offers a unique opportunity for people entering Valletta to admire the narrative character of the curtain wall.”

However, in so doing Piano has also removed one of the access roads to the city centre. Admittedly, retaining this road is hardly a justification for keeping City Gate in its present form – about the only aspect of this entire upon which all parties seem to agree – but the resulting displacement of traffic appears at a glance to have come as an afterthought. I ask De Lucca what he makes of the Malta Transport Authority’s subsequent rerouting of traffic through Valletta. Couldn’t this have been part of the overall Piano concept, too?

“Piano didn’t go into that,” Prof. De Lucca concedes. “It wasn’t part of the brief. He assumed that traffic would be arranged to accommodate the new design. After all, you do not stop a project like this for traffic problems...”

True, but at the same time something appears to have been lost over previous, equally controversial plans for City Gate: namely the concept of a ‘master plan’, which seems to have fallen by the wayside...

De Lucca nods. “Ideally there should be a master plan, yes. In fact when Valletta was declared a World Heritage Site, having a master plan was not yet one of the UNESCO pre-requisites. It is today...”

At the same time, however, De Lucca reminds me that Renzo Piano himself was at one point involved in the drawing up master plan for Valletta, so he would have already been aware of the wider context. And in any case, even without a master plan Piano himself would have no doubt considered the wider context before embarking on any designs for the city.

“No architect would design anything in isolation. You first have to study the global, macro situation, and only then do you focus on the project itself,” he adds. At this point I can’t resist asking: is there anything at all about this project that does not meet De Lucca’s approval?

“Not about the architectural project itself: the design, the concept, and so on,” he replies cautiously. “But there are many controversial aspects to the way the whole project has developed. Should the brief have been to build a new parliament? Should the theatre have been rebuilt, and if so, to the original design? The problem is that a majority still wants the main gate and theatre to be rebuilt exactly as they were. That is the prevalent mentality. As an architect, I cannot accept this. Architecture involves creatively interpreting space in the context of this age...”

What are his views on the brief itself? Had the decision rested with Prof. De Lucca, would he have forgone a national theatre for a house of representatives?

“That’s not a question I can really answer,” he says simply. “If an architect is briefed to design a new Parliament, it is not within his remit to design anything else...”

But what about the overall use of the site? What does Prof. de Lucca make of the fact that a 70-year argument over how to rebuild the Opera House (please note: ‘how’, not ‘whether’) has now fizzled out completely, and the main issue has suddenly become the building of a new House of Parliament instead?

“If a decision was taken to build a theatre, then the architect would provide designs for a theatre. But no such decision was taken. As an architect myself, I cannot comment on what the brief might have been. This is speculative. I can only comment on how Piano derived solutions within the constraints of the brief he was given...”

Part of this brief certainly entailed coming up with a solution for Barry's former Opera House: a building that was badly damaged during an air raid in distant 1942, and dismantled in the 1950s.

Whatever one's opinion on the resulting ruin, it remains an intensely emotional and nostalgic site for a great many people. But rather than rebuild the theatre, or even design a completely new one to take its place, it seems that the present ruins are to be crystallised forever, and the Theatre Royal itself consigned finally to the history books once and for all. Does this meet Prof. de Lucca's approval, too? Is this a decorous end to a dream which has lasted almost 70 years?

De Lucca freely admits that Piano's "roofless theatre" is at best a compromise... but he also describes it as a "a poetic glorification of the former Opera House."

"Piano has decided to enhance the ruins of Barry's theatre – a symbol of the fact that that there is a future for our past, using modern technology."

Effectively, De Lucca continues, the new design will leave us with the "memory of a theatre"... but at the same time, isn't the "memory of a theatre" what we already had? "It is a controversial decision, no doubt," he assents. "And I understand it will provoke debate and discussion. But for professional reasons, the brief is the only thing I can really comment on..."

Nonetheless the architecture professor does throw in a comment on the undeniable irony inherent in the history of the former Opera House itself.

"We tend to forget that Barry designed his Opera House according to the Neo-Classical style that was popular in his day. This didn't fit in at all with the surrounding Baroque architecture of 19th century Valletta. Barry's theatre was controversial back then, in the same way as a modern theatre would be controversial now. And yet, the same people who would have opposed Barry's designs in the 19th century, now want to have the Opera House rebuilt to its original design..."

At the end of the day, however, the momentum gained by this project since its presentation last week now suggests that in spite of the popular demand for the old Barry theatre – or quite possibly in defiance of it – Lawrence Gonzi's own proposal for a new parliament will no doubt win over all other considerations. Would De Lucca be willing to comment on the plans for the new (and most likely inevitable) Parliament building itself?

"At a glance, it is based on an assembly of masses and space volumes which also evoke the spirit of the fortifications," he points out, making reference to the fact that the "transparent" base will allow for greater visibility of details that would otherwise have been shut out of vision by construction.

"Considered holistically, the project does full justice to the theory of planning that is

normally associated with Baroque fortified city. It will clearly communicate the spirit of Valletta, as Albert de Rochefort described it in 1664: 'one of the best fortified cities in the universe...'"
