

Knights' burial place to be linked to Piano's theatre

Christian Peregin



The church of Our Lady of Victory and Casa Cassar in Valletta. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

A basement linked to the crypt of the church of Our Lady of Victory in Valletta is being excavated to be connected with the open-air theatre designed by world-renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano.

The basement of Casa Lanfreducci, formerly known as Casa Cassar, was until last month used by the Maltese association of the Knights of the Order of St John. The building was leased out for 50 years in 1991 and was restored by the Order. Excavation works carried out in the basement in 2007 had been halted when skeletal remains were found, probably of knights. Most of the basement went unused as the area was earmarked for its archaeological importance.

But the Order realised that for the remains to be exhumed and studied fully they would need significant resources so instead they decided to treat the area as a sacred burial ground.

According to the government, which terminated the Order's lease last month, the space will be used as back stage facilities, incorporating changing rooms, showers, toilets, a storage area for instruments and a resting place for artists.

It would be connected to the excavations taking place beneath the Valletta police station and the premises of Bank of Valletta, a spokesman for the Ministry of

Infrastructure said. "The utilisation of this space was crucial for the project as it will provide the necessary back stage and storage facilities, thus avoiding excessive excavation in the Auberge d'Italie area," he explained.

But members of the Order are concerned a place they consider sacred would not be given its due importance. Some of them said this former burial place could be "desecrated" and development would destroy its integrity.


The president of the Maltese association of the Order, Philip Farrugia Randon said the government approached the Order in a "most amicable" manner because the place was required for "a public purpose".

He said negotiations were underway to decide on compensation for the early termination of the lease.

"The association also wishes to make it clear the authorities in question have given it every assurance any future development of the basement premises of Casa Lanfreducci shall be made mindful of the care and sensitivity required to ensure that the memory of the ancestors of the Order and of Malta is preserved," Dr Farrugia Randon said.

The association also said it had plans to reintegrate the church's crypt with the basement to turn it into a museum for the public and preserve the dignity of those interred there.

Comments

Kate Lutchko(5 days, 6 hours ago) 

I have read this article from my home in the United States. As an American citizen I am troubled by the thought that the people of Malta would tolerate the desecration of this Sacred Burial Site. Do you also build toilets throughout your country on the grave sites of all of your own more recently interred ancestors??? I should hope not and doubt that you do. I would expect that the highly intelligent and spiritual individuals I believe the Maltese People to be will fight this unjustifiable desecration with the same courage the Knights displayed in all of their Battles throughout History ...that you will fight this siege of their Burial Site in honor of all of the Knights who ever existed in Malta. I will be watching this story with great interest in it's outcome.....


m borg(4 days, 2 hours ago)

Dear, Ms. Lutchko, you do not need to feel troubled. This is the reason why.

<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20110110/letters/use-of-space-for-renzo-piano-project>

Astrid Vella(3 days, 19 hours ago)

Mr. Borg, Ms Lutchko has every reason to be alarmed. Rather than allaying our fears, the letter you refer to only serves to heighten them. The information supplied is misleading at best. By saying "The spaces at lower ground floor level are vacant and UNTIL SOME TIME AGO were leased to third parties for commercial use." one is led to understand that these rooms were leased until the recent past, ie about 5 years ago. That gives the impression that the rooms to be taken over are the ones further down the road near the restored fountain. Instead, enquiries have revealed that the 'lower ground floor' rooms repossessed by Govt are indeed the extension of the church crypt under Casa Lanfreducci with its wonderful vaulting and which was last occupied commercially by a barber who vacated in the late sixties-almost 50 years ago! So much for "until some time ago"! The letter has served to confirm that this sacred space will still be used as "changing rooms/make-up preparation, toilet/shower facilities". The lack of transparency of this letter has only served to remove what little trust one might have had in the promises that have been proffered re ensuring the dignity of the site.

C Galea(6 days ago) 

LONG LIVE THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA !

iCocker(5 days, 5 hours ago)


What is happening to Malta and the Maltese, we are losing our dignity, heritage and soul!

Our heritage is being sold for dreams!


This is an insult to those who died to defend the ROCK and FAITH!

This is worst then any of those silly polls to take off the George Cross from our flag!

TAL-MISTHIJA!!!!

B. Storace(6 days, 3 hours ago) 

Recently, graves were desecrated by some unknown persons. They belonged to the grandparents of our PM. Lo and behold mayhem in the newspapers and solidarity from all corners of society. Now the PM is sanctioning desecration of graves belonging to brave and noble knights who gave their lives for our Island. He will be remembered for all the wrong decisions regarding Valletta, the theatre, the entrance, traffic chaos etc. Climb down off your high horse, sir and listen to vox populi before it is too late. Stop this Piano/Gonzi/Gatt madness with a stroke of the pen and eat humble pie for a change.

Steve Evans(6 days, 17 hours ago) 

Not religious, Not a Catholic, but whatever your God is leave them in Peace at least. They once defended your country in the name of Christianity. Can't argue with that!!!

G BORG(1 week ago) 


Do they have a MEPA permit?

Just because it is under ground does not give them a right of permit.


Are they building as it goes? Hey look if we dig this way we can have shower and if we go further we can install a bath too!

Dr Anthony Abela Medici(1 week ago) 

I was fortunate to be asked to examine the human remains in the basement of Casa Lanfreducci. They are possibly those of Knights who died during the great siege of 1565 and their lives paid in full the right to be buried there. In the adjoining crypt under the Church of Victory there is a stone sarcophagus which possibly housed Grand Master La Valette before retransfer to St. John's Church when completed. The crypt and the basement were definitely one single burial ground with a door currently blocked by stone in between. An inscription in the wall of the crypt states "1647". The architectural dome in the basement is a marvellous structure and the ducting for rain water and draining built with the Church of Victory is just fantastic. This latter for sure will be covered up! Our heritage and the first building works in Valletta, should surely be scheduled rather than destroyed for posterity. I agree with others that this site is being desecrated and the authorities are pushing ahead because they have not visited the site themselves. A video of the site had been prepared and I believe given to the authorities. It is shameful.

Raymond Sammut(1 week ago) 

Minister George Pullicino has at the very least a moral obligation to make clear to the general public his intentions on the future development of the basement premises of Casa Lanfreducci. We need much more than a mere "mindful of care and sensitivity" he is promising to Dr. Farrugia Randon. Why is it that we come to hear about this from Dr Farrugia Randon but not from Minister Pullicino?

George Vella(1 week ago) 


Please be rational ... stop the whole Piano project. Are we Maltese that barbaric? I need to say no more.

George Debono(1 week, 1 day ago) 


Hey all you guys, what are you complaining about. ?? At last Malta is going all modern and up to date. Haven't you heard????.....

Open air graves are the latest rage!

Yipeeeeeee!

Miriam Cremona(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Hi Ben. It is absolutely unthinkable that anyone could possibly even consider making use of the basement of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta's office and base as theatre facilities. The basement is an integral part of the house where the SMOM carry out their administrative work. It is even more outrageous when one considers that this same basement is the burial place of Knights of the Order. So Euripides' saying "Whom the Gods wish to destroy they first make mad" is most apt. It could have been written with this in mind!

jcamilleri(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Most probably we will be having knights' ghosts crying for justice to be done to their burial place.

Joe Degiorgio(1 week, 1 day ago) 


This is an outrage! Where is all the "preserving our heritage" gone?
Shame on the authorities for allowing a Knights' burial ground to be turned into changing rooms and toilets (among others) for the sake of an open air theater (which compared to the former opera house is a farce).
What's next? An open air discotheque in Hagar Qim?

Joe Degiorgio(1 week, 1 day ago)


A new group has just been launched on facebook against this historical blasphemy.
http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/home.php?sk=group_153736781344469

G Spiteri(6 days, 23 hours ago)

We did have on at Fort St Angelo! Even the Chapel dedicated to St Anne was part of this Disco in the 80's!

James A. Tyrrell(1 week, 1 day ago) 

So not only are the present Government throwing away taxpayers money on a Parliament that is not required, and a roofless theatre not to mention destroying the city entrance, they are now allowing Piano commit the ultimate insult to the Maltese people, namely turning a Knight's sacred burial ground into an underground toilet. I can't think of another Government in the world, which would allow such a thing nor a people who would stand by and allow it to happen. Gonzi and his bunch of merry men have been responsible for a lot of crazy things whilst in power but this is just disgusting.

Phil Humphries(1 week, 1 day ago) 

"Knights' burial place to be linked to Piano's theatre" - Is this someone's idea of a sick joke, or does Gonzi think Valletta needs another 'Phantom of the Opera' ?

Talking of sick jokes... Have you heard the one about the internationally renowned architect who received millions of euros for designing a back-stage facility(less), changing room(less), shower(less), toilet(less), storage area(less), resting place(less) theatre, as well as a pillbox on stilts and a hole in the city wall ? - Worse still, he designed the theatre walls out of scaffolding poles and forgot to add a roof !

Miriam Cremona(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Prosit Victor for quoting Euripides « Quid Deus vult perdere prius dementat » - an absolutely apt dictum also in this case!

Ben Richards(1 week, 1 day ago)


And whats that exactly in layman's term Miriam, would U please AD LIB a bit more for us ignoramous individuals . cheers. a moaner from the UK

Jacob Sammut(1 week, 1 day ago)

Ben Richards Those whom the Gods want to destroy they first make mad

Joe Spiteri(1 week, 1 day ago) 


Disgraceful, disgusting and any other similar title is equally applicable.

victor rodenas(1 week, 1 day ago) 


First He gives you power,then He makes you mad.

Joe Cassar(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Dr Farrugia Randon should go and wipe his nose - it has gone a funny shade of brown

Charlie Micallef(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Shame, Shame, Shame ,Malta and its government for destroying a historic place under the nose of the Maltese people where is the world heritage ,where is the E.U. when you need them .

JOe VELLa(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Sir,

After I ascertained the news, I recalled my experience of Our Lady of Victory church, in Valletta, (1) It is the Gran Master assigned place for His first stone of His City, (2) Value its crypt, the remains of the knights, (3) It has been restored with such pomp by this government, (4) It is consecrated and sacred ground as any burial site, (5) the Order continued to restore, but stopped because of its archaeological importance.


I asked myself, if only, IF ONLY Mintoff tried it in his days to take by order of the state the church basement because he needed it as back stage facilities, changing rooms, showers, toilets, storage area for instruments and resting place for the artists.

What would have happened? What would the P.N. have said? Where is the church? The Valletta Rehabilitation? Where is Din I-Art Helwa? Where is MEPA? Where is the LP?

These things do not take place, to put more showers, restrooms, toilets on or close to consecrated land, it is unbelievable. I hate to guess how Archbishop Gonzi would have handled it!


gxuereb(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Could someone enlighten us (poor souls!) as to what that gigantic drill is doing inside the Piano Project (ex-Freedom Square)? Are they drilling for OIL without our knowledge??.....and the tragedy goes on!!

m.portelli(1 week, 1 day ago) 


Wonder what assurances Dr. Farrugia Randon was given. What was it , 'nothing but solemn requiems, dirges and memento mori performances will be allowed'? Is this how Valletta's niche will be carved on the theatre circuit - theatre and music for the dead? Well might just turn out to be a pulsing 'dead' space anyway.

Think of all the eerie weather effects you could harness from November to March on windswept evenings!


Sabrina Borda(1 week, 1 day ago) 

What a shame. Nothing is sacrosanct anymore. Its not even funny, or is it !?!


If from an inch he takes a whole hand then Gonzi should invite Renzo Piano to go dig just a little bit further up to Castille, it should really be useful to have a large underground parliament by slipping downstairs for a shuddering effect himself and not dump the real talented artists into any kind of underground sacred crypt to save space.

Chris Ebejer(1 week, 1 day ago) 


.....u din l-istorja paprata tkompli ghaddejja. Nistennew l-episodju li jmiss.....

Miriam Cremona(1 week, 1 day ago) 

This shows huge disorganisation and confusion in the minds of those who hatched the idea of a roofless theatre, demolishing here and there and everywhere to pave the way for the politicians' monument. It is also evident that the people working on the project did not carry out enough research otherwise they would not have just discovered this lack of space for the roofless theatre facilities! And were we not told that the theatre space is too small for a proper theatre then why does it need so many backstage rooms and facilities - theatre bunkers – a repeat of the St John's Cathedral bunkers!? Moreover this is extremely disrespectful of a burial place, whoever might be buried there! What desecration and how crude and ruthless!! 'The Government approached the Order in an amicable manner!' Oh really!

F Camilleri(1 week, 1 day ago) 

If a private individual buys a plot of land for development and unexpectedly finds some historical remains during excavation, development permits are withdrawn and he would say goodbye for his planned development. Here we are now on the other side of the fence where it is a well known fact that there are historical remains under this site but being part of the proposed Renzo Piano project development could automatically proceed. Where is Heritage Malta and MEPA? Still having a snooze with the drinks they had for Christmas?


Victor Laiviera(1 week, 1 day ago) 

If I remember correctly, one of the main reasons given why the Opera House couldn't be rebuilt to Barry's design was that there would not be enough room for backstage facilities. The suggestion that they could be located somewhere else was dismissed out of hand.

Why has it suddenly become not only acceptable but necessary?


victor pulis(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Goes to show the professionalism. I'm not talking about Piano because I'm sure he had plans for the showers, toilets etc. but I suspect there was some pressure from the usual quarters. The government approached the order 'in an a most amicable manner' meaning he didn't go in with a bulldozer and flatten the place! These bits of news indicate that the parliament project is still not definite and heaven only knows the final cost. Austin Gatt has said that Piano's fee is still unknown due to the work involved. this is such a case. And i bet there will be many more before the monster rises.

Joe Cassar(1 week, 1 day ago) 

It's not an open-air theatre, it's a roofless theatre masquerading as a gorilla-cage.


There is quite a difference.

victor rodenas(1 week, 1 day ago) 


I always taught that the Knights of Malta were tough people..La Valette must be turning in his grave.A burial place of the Knights turned into a changing room.Disgrace.

P Borg(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Will soon be having a Phantom of the Opera!!! :o)

Joe Morana(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Readers may wish to view the interesting documentary on the (suspended) restoration works at the historic and beautiful Church of Our Lady of Victory Valletta on the TV cultural programm 'Meander' which will be aired this evening.

D. A . Agius(1 week, 1 day ago) 

"But the Order realised that for the remains to be exhumed and studied fully they would need significant resources so instead they decided to treat the area as a sacred burial ground"

Good... so first they went oto dig, then they found the skeletons. Since it was too expensive, they decided not to do anything about it and now they are complaining because the site will be used by the Maltese Government.

Two weights, two measures. This is simply a case that they are getting their lease halted and thus they are simply irate.

Now, let's hear the compensation that will be given!

On the other hand, the Police Station's basement is known to be pretty huge. Why is this not enough? Will it be used for other purposes?

C.Sammut(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Let's hope it was knights and not lovers buried there.. a forensic study would have been of quite some historical value..

Astrid Vella(1 week, 1 day ago) 

These backstage and storage facilities were originally to be located under the present police station. Has that plan changed or was the space found to be inadequate.

If anyone seriously thinks that what goes on backstage at any theatre is at all dignified or respectful, they are eluding themselves and have obviously never worked in the theatre scene.

Franco Farrugia(1 week, 1 day ago)

I agree with you completely. This is nothing short of scandalous! But it's the government, hey, and it does what it likes! The government will not be stopped, especially after the St John's fiasco.

Raymond Sammut(1 week, 1 day ago)

@ Astrid Vella

As I understand from this report, there are three other areas being excavated; namely, the Valletta police station, the premises of BoV, and the Auberge d'Italie. The basement of Casa Lanfredis just happens to be adjacent to these areas, and (from memory) it would be located some 200m upstream away from the theatre site.

I do not see, therefore, why there should be any significant problem here. It's up to the Maltese association of the Order to negotiate effectively, and secure a favourable outcome to them and to the general public.


A similar situation would have existed in the past --co-existence of theatre artists and the historical site of Casa Lanfredis-- when the Royal Opera House was operational. Why should it be any different now? In my view, it's entirely up to Dr Farrugia Randon to keep checking closely on what's going on, negotiate with the Ministry of Infrastructure and get it right. This is the norm whenever there is a development going on.

Astrid Vella(1 week, 1 day ago)

Raymond - How can you say that this is no different to the past; at that time actors kept to the Opera House premises and did not invade the space of the dead. So much for "the dignity of those interred there"

What you say sounds very good on paper, but sadly reality is far removed from the lofty and hollow promises being made: "the authorities have given every assurance any future development of the basement premises of Casa Lanfredis shall be mindful of the care and sensitivity required to ensure that the memory of the ancestors of the Order and of Malta is preserved" - how exactly do they propose to ensure that youngsters don't get up to the usual hanky panky that accompanies backstage life? Are they going to post a morality warden?

You have put the onus on Dr Farrugia Randon and Minister George Pullicino to get it right - are they going to set up a camp bed outside the dressing rooms "to check closely what's going on"?

Jean Pierre Attard(1 week, 1 day ago) 

What if this was a private land? Would the government permit us to develop such piece of land?


A. Galea(1 week, 1 day ago) 

... minn maqbar għall-maqjel! Prosit!


c. xuereb(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Most of our very talented local artists had campaigned against this theatre. Now changing rooms and bathrooms instead of such a sacred site!! YOU SHOULD BE ASAHMED.

I agree... petition it is!

Ernest Vella(1 week, 1 day ago) 

Issa jidhrulkom l-erwieh ta dawn il-kavallieri imbaghad ntemplu l-Ghost Busters...ghogbitni l-fatt li ha jkun "a resting place for artists".....but not for Knights. Taf x'jonqos, li twaqqghu il-kappella wkoll...u leeee

Norman Lowell(1 week, 1 day ago) 

The irresponsible Piano Project carries on with the destruction of Valletta. Truly shameful - a lasting blemish on the PM and his Govt. Fortunately, the whole plan will be buried at the next election.

Ronnie Gauci(1 week, 1 day ago)

Well said Norman - As always

Maria Gauci(1 week, 1 day ago)


Well said! Even if the project is halted in 2 years time, one still hopes that what happens in the meantime can be undone at a later stage

J. J. Borg(1 week, 1 day ago)

The whole plan will be finished before the next election.

john vella(1 week, 1 day ago)

As long as Nero is happy playing the harp and with his pay increase who cares if we burn!

Raymond Sammut(1 week, 1 day ago) 

I would like to petition Dr Farrugia Randon to keep a sharp eye on what those developers will be doing that might adversely affect this sacred site. And kindly do the best you can and keep the general public informed.

Paul Borg(1 week, 1 day ago)

"Keep a sharp eye"?? Once the lease is terminated they probably won't be allowed to go in while the works are being done. Don't you see how the whole Opera House site is boarded up so the public can't even peep in, just in case they see something being bulldozed? U hallina, what a bunch of idealists, what a load of rubbish that :

"the authorities in question have given it every assurance any future development of the basement premises of Casa Lanfreducci shall be made mindful of the care and sensitivity required to ensure that the memory of the ancestors of the Order and of Malta is preserved,"

What does Farrugia Randon thinks, that the Government he is going to put a warden there to make sure that the performers behave respectfully? Mela we don't all know what goes on in such places? Not even the Maltese will care, let alone the foreigners who come to perform. Please do not "titfghu bzar fl-ghajnejn" - if you are fools enough to believe such empty promises, the public is not.

Raymond Sammut(1 week, 1 day ago)

@ Paul Borg

You say "probably"? You clearly speak out of prejudice against the Piano Project. It's also normal procedure (and the only accepted procedure) to have a site under construction fenced and boarded for obvious reasons, such as safety and security. That's exactly what's done in industrialized countries.


The association has plans to reintegrate the church's crypt with the basement, with the aim of making the crypt more accessible to the general public. Negotiations are ongoing, and one would hope for a good outcome, and there appears to be no reason (at least at this stage) for making a fuss.

In the meantime you obviously, and apparently quite purposely, miss those hideous flats in the background, which everyone here should be complaining about --an ugly public housing estate right on the most sensitive and historical site of this nation. Your comment here is obviously politically motivated, and therefore to no good effect in this context.

Paul Borg (1 week, 1 day ago)

Raymond Sammut you are obviously one of those close-minded people who thinks that the only reason for criticism is political sabotage. Thanks God, I have my own mind and if you are not up to independent thought, I am.

You have thrown the stone on your own foot. The reason I don't mention the housing estate is so I don't politicise the issue further because it shows how stupid this Government was to plan a Parliament across the road from a housing estate. And even more stupid to sell off the flats so now there is no way the block can be demolished.

I fenech(1 week, 1 day ago) 

The half baked theatre, the uncalled for parliament and the valletta entrance with no door should be buried with Sir Knight and make him shudder.
