

Talking Point

Legality now in Valletta

Astrid Vella

Quote: "We want to see something on the old opera house site which is in harmony with the rest of the buildings in the city - something which is balanced and which takes account of the scale of the site and the small size of Valletta. While Paris, London and Berlin can absorb daring, modern architectural challenges to the traditional structures around them, Valletta can not.

"Other things being equal, we would therefore prefer to re-build the opera house with an outer fabric which is compatible with the traditional style and character of Valletta.

"As to Freedom Square, which is an intrinsic part of the Opera House site, we want to see the current unbalanced and characterless square restored, with buildings on one side and a public recreational space at its core - a fitting and dignified ante-room to the restored Opera House site and the rest of Valletta."

Fine words, though I cannot claim to be their author. The above paragraphs form part of a speech delivered by Martin Scicluna, at the time executive president of Din l-Art Ħelwa.

One may be forgiven for thinking that Mr Scicluna was referring to the present Valletta Rehabilitation Project, for the words seem as relevant today as they were when they featured in Din l-Art Ħelwa's Vigilo magazine of October 2004.

Valletta is no stranger to controversy; the size of the new city was fiercely debated in 1565. Contrary to popular perception that Valletta was always intended to be laid out on a grid pattern, the Order's engineer, Francesco Laparelli favoured one wide main street flanked by winding streets that would provide shelter in winter and shade in summer.

However, when criticism of his plans threatened his project, Laparelli silenced dissent by "inviting all those who had better suggestions to make to submit them in writing accompanied by appropriate designs". We are not suggesting that this should be done in the present debate, but it is striking that during the autocratic regime of the Order, public participation should have been encouraged, while our democratic administrators have not held serious discussion on the present Piano project, nor been ready to take public opinion into consideration.

Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar (FAA) has repeated ad nauseum that it is in favour of the remodelling of the City Gate area and that it is not trying to stop the project. Like the Valletta Alive Foundation, it has reservations over certain aspects of the plans, however it cannot accept the trampling of one the basic tenets that we aspired to

achieve in voting for entry into the EU, the right of public consultation. The Aarhus Convention, which Malta signed, obliges our government to go beyond consultation to public participation, stating:

"Each Party shall ensure that in the decision due account is taken of the outcome of the public participation." Is that tenet being honoured? So far the answer is a resounding "No".


FAA's other serious concern is also the fact that the legally binding Structure Plan states: "Parliament and the Ministries will concentrate in the palaces and auberges of Valletta."

Much of the discussion surrounding the Valletta Rehabilitation plans is subjective. The style of the proposed theatre and gate have in the past provoked debate from many quarters: "Din l-Art Ħelwa was - and remains - against the Renzo Piano design for the entrance to Valletta which took scant account of the fact that the Gate, as the principal landward approach to Valletta, should convey the massiveness and solidity of this great fortified city." An opinion that many would consider also applies to Mr Piano's new project.

However the above clause of the Structure Plan is clear and indisputable. It makes as much sense now as it did in 1990. Valletta has many empty or under-used structures that can accommodate Parliament, like the Auberge de Bavière and the Conference Centre for which site Richard England had already drawn up plans for conversion to a parliament. Unlike Freedom Square, both of these options have the important advantage of ease of access and security with minimal construction disruption and costs. Moreover, they will lead to the regeneration of lower Valletta, not just the over-developed upper quarter, where commerce and tourism will be greatly impacted by years of disruption on Freedom Square.

The above legal violations are what led FAA to include the Valletta Regeneration Plans in the Legality Now rally, along with issues of planning abuse, destruction of heritage, air pollution, illegal groundwater extraction and illegal hunting and trapping. We urge all those who feel that Malta's laws should be upheld, first and foremost by our government, to join us at the rally, tomorrow at 10 a.m. at City Gate, Valletta.

Comments

Joseph V. Grech(4 weeks ago) 

Our Prime Minister should not just ignore the pleas of the greater majority of the Maltese. He should be made to listen. And I personally fear that it is our M.P.s who can have an effect on him.

This project can be altered in time. We should NOT build most of Freedom Square; the site over the old theatre remains can be extended through the addition of the adjoining Ordnance Street so that a roofed building can be built. Whether this will be a National Theatre or anything else is not for me to decide...but please spare us the

roofless, little open theatre. I appeal once again to the Hon. P.M. to listen to his people.

James A. Tyrrell(4 weeks ago) 

@Joe Micallef. Well since you have to ask the question it seems you have surrendered it already. Lets see, if you opt for the advice of DLH you will be getting the opinion of the present Government, as they have no intension of biting the hand that feeds them. The FAA on the other hand have no such ties and care only about the environment and heritage of Malta, something which you obviously care little about.


@J Martinelli. What can I say? You sound like a PN supporter and developer. Do you have a sad friend called Daphne by any chance? Obviously you have no children as you have no regard for the state the country is left in for them. Just so long as Gonzi and his supporters make plenty of money from everyone in the country, including you of course, that's fine.

@Joseph Cauchi. You appear to feel that it's okay to campaign on purely environmental issues but if the Government are involved in illegal dealings we should ignore that. Have you any idea how stupid that makes you sound?


Paul Borg(4 weeks ago) 

@ Martinelli - Your pathetic attempts to defend your government at all costs only reflect even worse on your party and your credibility (sorry, what credibililty?) You think the people don't know the difference between spending 80 million wisely on schemes to save jobs and a extravagant Ceauşescu-like palace that will only be used by 65 politicians.

In fact you dropped the stone on your own foot mate. It is exactly because we are in an economic crisis and risking plants closing down and thousands they might lose their jobs that we can't afford this extravagance. The fact that the Government can't see that is so damning that it makes it look like the reign of Louis XV in France, or Marie Antoinete saying "Let them eat Cake"


v zammit(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

When all is said and done...and done, the underlying feature for those pro or con the project is that it is a Renzo Piano's. His work has exhilarated and frustrated many a mind but his standing is beyond question. Genius is very much ambivalent and defies pinning down. To tie up with Ms Vella's flashback, had the Grand-Master in 1565 for some reason rejected Caravaggio, who would have been the loser? Or if a Michaelangelo were to come, and not a Piano, who would have said no, now with the benefit of hindsight? Wouldn't you bend a bit the structure plan for some imagination? The future is the future and you'd have to gamble not without some thought. My qualm is more about parliament bang next to a hub. And if parliament moved house in time (as it has done in the past), would the building adapt?

Anne Marie Kissaun(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

Well, said Astrid. You really know what you are talking about being the well read person that you are. I am just keeping my fingers crossed that there will be a last


minute change of heart/mind from the powers that be. What surprises me is that the 1st April has been chosen for the commencement of the project. In my opinion very appropriate to!!!! as it is really foolish to make such a decision in the first place then choose 'APRIL FOOLS DAY". believe it or not. Good luck Astrid, see you tomorrow.

J Martinelli(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 


@ Paul Borg Don't make me laugh, Paul Borg! According to you it is illegal for a government to embark on a project unless it appeared in its electoral programme? According to you, the government should not have spent 80 million euro in order to avoid closure of two or three plants and the loss of a couple of thousand jobs, because that expenditure was not included in the NP electoral manifesto? and, lesley kreupl, if you don't agree with my comments, you have two options: 1. Express your own opinion and /or 2. Ignore my comments. There is no #3 option such as the one you chose of calling me 'less literate'. That shows your obvious lack of valid arguments on your part. Go march tomorrow and on your way in, don't forget to buy some imqaret from vendors who adorn City Gate and who create such an attraction for tourists! I hope the pigeons will be kind to you and Astrid!

J Martinelli(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

Governments are not elected to sit on fences! That's left for the Opposition spokespeople and NGOs who seek to ally themselves with them in order to add to their notoriety.

lesley kreupl(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

I do hope that some of the less literate readers of this newspaper – such as Mr. Marinelli for example - will be able to understand this excellent explanation! Those of us that really care about the future of these islands and who are able to, will be walking with you and the other NGO's tomorrow. Come Hell or High water and hopefully a bit of rain to fill the depleted aquifers..... See you tomorrow!

Joseph Cauchi(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

This project is starting on April 1st, protests or no protests!

This protest-march is solely organised to protest against the Renzo Piano's Project and for no other reason.

Once this project is completed in due course, this will put our capital city on the world map and thus enhance its status as a World Heritage Site.

Do you think that the SILENT MAJORITY is a bunch of imbeciles, who do not know how to distinguish between right and wrong?


Yes, the FAA was successful in destroying the project of the St. John's Co-Cathedral museum, but not this time!

I used to admire the FAA's environmental campaigns up to some time ago, of which this organization was supposedly set up to do, but now it seems that it has been "hijacked" by "lawyers" as its main protest is not longer on an environmental issue


but a LEGALISTIC issue!

Come on, the Noisy Minority; stop pulling our legs, please!


JC.

Joe Micallef(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

Now let's see. if I decided to surrender my thinking faculty to megaphones, whose advice would I value on such developments? FAA and Birdlife?????? or DLH.


Helen Caruana Galizia(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

DLH members and life members might stop to think and consider their views on the Piano project. I know at least three members who object to it and there are likely to be many more. What holds such people back from standing up for what they believe in? For too long so many have kept quiet and not expressed their views because of their political, class and other social affiliations. This is not surprising in such a small country but it is time for people to stop being embarrassed and worried about what others will think; time to come out courageously and concentrate on the issues - irrespective of which political party they usually support. This is the way that an intelligent civil society can begin to bring about justice and an end to irregular practices.


Paul Borg(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

@ Martinelli. The debate would be over if it had ever began. There has been no debate at all about building a Parliament, it was never included in any Electoral Manifesto, even though Piano was commissioned 5 years ago. That is another illegality that not even Ms Vella is bringing up.

This is not just taking the people for a ride, it is arrogantly giving them the finger to boot!

James A. Tyrrell(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

Excellent opinion piece from a lady who knows what she is talking about. What a pity people of Ms Vella's obvious expertise and deep regard for the natural and cultural heritage of Malta are apparently absent from the political theatre in your country. I wish FAA and all the NGO's taking part a good turnout for what is an important rally on Saturday. Malta must be protected from those who would twist if not break the laws for no other reason than financial gain. It is time for the rape and uglification of Malta to stop for the sake of everyone concerned.

Jon Vercellono(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

J. Martinelli's PN spin machine is what is clouding the issue of what this protest is actually about; not about the project (if he would have read the article), but about other illegalities, and non-consultation (which Ms. Vella has pointed out is in itself an illegality according to Aarhus). Additionally, had Mr. Martinelli looked further, it's not an FAA Protest March. Your envy of Ms. Vella gets in the way of your own arguments (which may in their own right be well thought out and sensible).


Rio Sammut(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

Well said, Astrid. Martinelli and co. are about to ruin a majestic city.

J Martinelli(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

Debate over Astrid!

The project will commence April 1 and there is no looking back - FAA protest march or not!

v zammit(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

The flashback to 1565 is brilliant. Ms Vella studied baroque architecture. So she knows. Very pertinent too is her mentioning of the Aarhus Convention, and, as it happens, in conjunction with the Venice Charter mentioned by Dr Bianchi of DLH in these columns two days ago. A meeting of minds won't be amiss.

g. scerri(4 weeks, 1 day ago) 

This clear statement might help the public decide who is acting in the best interests of Valletta. FAA has nothing at all to gain from fighting either abuse or pseudo consultation. Like other environmental groups, FAA is composed of ordinary citizens who go out of their way, in their own time, to safeguard their country's interests in the name of present and future generations. They do not deserve the hostility they meet from those who can only see life through political lenses.
