

Listening to the voice of the people

by Noel Grima

There we were, yesterday week, all agog to witness the unveiling of Renzo Piano's plans for Valletta. We were seated as though in church, with neat rows of chairs and an aisle down the middle. The event, centred as it was on a revelation, was indeed religious.

But for ... for the trombone player outside a restaurant next to St John's who kept playing, at times drowning out the nuances in Renzo Piano's soft-spoken presentation. But for the noise of people talking loudly inside the bar of the Labour Party Club next to us. But for the overpowering stench coming from the manholes in the middle of the street – reminding us once again that Valletta is also known for its intricate subterranean network of drainage tunnels under each street, linking all houses.

But for the realisation – you would not notice it unless you sat and looked around as we did – that by far the vast majority of upper storeys in this part of Republic Street are uninhabited, forlorn in their blank windows, mirroring the equally blank windows on the upper storeys of the Auberge de Provence.

This is Valletta in a microcosm – a place exhibiting all signs of neglect where anyone and everyone has been allowed to do his thing regardless of the impact on everybody else. Outside Valletta, at City Gate, it is even worse – worse because of the absence of law and order at any time; worse because the confusion, the danger, the ugliness there are even more in-your-face. And worse also because the Piano plans will not solve anything there.

There was a fundamental inconsistency at play on Saturday. But this was only revealed to us by Mr Piano himself at a small reception held in Great Siege Square after the presentation, just before Dr Gonzi introduced Astrid Vella to Mr Piano as Malta's best environmental warrior (or words to that effect).

In his quiet, reflective way, Mr Piano mused that this had been a first for him, the first time he had to do what he had just done – explain his designs to people at design stage. This he had never done, he said, and he did not quite know what to make of it or how it would turn out.

He could have added one consideration – the Valletta all around him, specifically St John's round the corner, were not built by popular consent but by the imposition of a strong will that chose the design, the architect (possibly in that order) and went ahead and did it. Removing all obstacles in the way, of course, in all cases, because they were the ones paying for it, which gave them added power.

What Mr Piano seemed to be saying was that choosing a design, even for a public building, is not done through popular consultation, or through submitting a design to popular referendum.

But now that the democratic mode, so to speak, has been chosen for the launch and the exhibition, now that the discussion is wide open on all blogs and social networks, now that everyone will have his say, how will the whole issue be managed? Will the government say, "I know what you said, I heard you all, but I will still do it my way?" Will the whole exercise be another exercise in futility? Or would it have been better to go down the road Mr Piano seemed to prefer – to do it first and let the results be judged in time?

Time and again, on this issue, we go back to what happened recently regarding the St John's Museum extension plan. Just as I left Dr Gonzi and Mr Piano, a high ministry official was very interested to know what Astrid Vella was telling them – there is this total obsession that this project must not go the same way. When it comes to taking a decision at St John's, it has always been top-down, many times with the direct intervention of the current Grand Master. St John's, Valletta itself even, were not built by popular consent. Yet the result is what we see today – a wonderful example of friendly competition and emulation by the various European nationalities resulting in a veritable work of art.

Nor did the Imperial government seek the consent of the Maltese when it commissioned Barry, just finishing the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, to create an opera house without even setting foot in Malta. Maybe too, if we delve into the papers of the time, we may discover Church-inspired grumbles that this was all a strategy to keep people from church and religious festivities. To say nothing then of actresses, chorus girls – the lot.

When Mr Piano himself, a youthful rebel back then, was about to design the Beaubourg, the Pompidou Centre, bringing what normally lies hidden inside a building on the outside, a symbol of 'creativity in power', which was the slogan then, people were aghast, but the project went ahead and the notoriety itself added spice and attractiveness to the project itself. Even more when IM Pei redesigned the Louvre courtyard and the glass pyramid.

Mr Piano said he listened to the stones of Malta and they spoke to him. There are stones and stones. Had he listened to the stones of Bugibba, for instance, they would have spoken about the ugly lives of those who created that monument to ugliness.

In his mind, at the back of the whole plan, there is his ambition to give Valletta back its dignity. This has struck a chord with so many people, for 60 years humiliated and downtrodden, having to succumb daily to the humiliation of the chaos outside City Gate, as they weave and swerve to avoid buses, horses, taxis and whatnot, to enter their capital city, or who have to trudge up steps covered in urine from the ditch. The past 60 years have highlighted a national inability to tackle problems head on, the Opera House site too. Those who want the Barry building re-created had all their chances, even their governments, and yet did nothing. That would have been, indeed, a worthy action. But it did not happen. The Maltese have rebuilt churches, even when there was no real need for their re-building, because they love their churches. They claim, now, to love opera and symphonic concerts but they do not show this by their attendance.

It would be a wonderful ideal to create a world class opera house, which can compete for international recognition and bring Malta to a level as yet unattained. The Piano Plans rule out this from the City Gate area, for reasons of space, it says, but it does not preclude it from any other of the possible alternative sites. If we Maltese want it enough, we can get it done.

It would also seem that there are no defenders of a Parliament building on its own, certainly not at City Gate, though siting Parliament in Freedom Square gives content to the name far more than using the space for a car park or a Carnival venue. People are not against moving Parliament out of The Palace, but their suggestions where it could move to, from the Auberge de Baviere to MCC to anywhere, does not speak highly of their appreciation of the House and all that goes on in there.

So, it is not just the artistic or architectural design that the people who are expressing their views are contesting, but far more, the political context of the whole design, the relative importance to be given to the arts, and the importance of a Parliament in the country's scheme of things. To say that the people are a bunch of ignoramuses begs the question: if so, why the exhibition, why allow the comments?

It is still unclear where things will go from here. Is anyone taking note of what people are saying? Will what people are saying have any impact at all on the designs? In other words, will there be a real dialogue between the Piano ideas and the people's ideas? Mr Piano has already shown he is sensitive not just to stones but also to the Maltese

psyche, certainly far more than some people in power, who should know better.

There has not been the national uprising there was in 1987 when Mr Piano first revealed his plan for City Gate. People are more appreciative today of the wider aspects of the design. And people are tired of talk and more talk and nothing being done. As it is, the plans can go ahead and be implemented, but it would be wonderful if they can be tweaked further and some of the concerns expressed addressed, such as that regarding the lack of a cover over the theatre site in case of rain. This would not break the bank, nor does it have to be “weighty” and upset the “buildings that fly” template.

Tackling the inaction of 60 and more years, the neglect that has been allowed to rule at the entrance to the capital city, is a worthy aim in itself. And also the fact that politicians have so abused each other that they have given politics, politicians, Parliament itself, the structures of democracy in other words, a very bad name. It takes courage to push against such trends which neglect have made so powerful. And certainly, this emerges loud and clear from the comments, both what one hears on the streets and in cafes, and one reads on the blogs. Democracy, the rule by the demos, the people, is not necessarily another name for neglect, anarchy, ugliness. This project is showing us that democracy can be anything but this, and for this, the Piano Plans are already working wonders.
