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By [Nick Squires](#), Correspondent

## Medieval makes way for modern in Valletta, Malta

The picturesque capital of Valletta, Malta, is getting a \$122.4 million makeover that will radically alter the historic entrance to the World Heritage listed city.



A view of the dome of the Carmelite Church in Valetta, Malta.  
John Elk III/Lonely Planet Images

It rose from the ruins of an epic battle in the 16th century between Ottoman Turks and the warrior-monks of the Order of the Knights of St. John.

Now, 500 years on, a new fight is looming over plans to transform Valletta, the picturesque capital of Malta.

The government of the small Mediterranean island has given the green light to a 100 million euro (about \$122.4 million) project that will radically alter the historic entrance to the World Heritage listed city, a perfectly preserved gem of Baroque churches and palaces encircled by huge walls. But the plan, drawn up by the renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano in partnership with a Maltese firm called Architecture Project, has divided the island's 400,000 residents.

It involves constructing a brand new parliament building just inside Valletta's walls, tearing down the existing entrance gate to the city, and turning a 19th-century opera theater, which has lain in ruins since it was bombed by the Luftwaffe in World War II, into an avant-garde open-air performance space.

Critics say that it would be cheaper and more effective to create a new parliament by restoring one of the crumbling old palaces that were built by the multinational Knights Hospitaller of St. John. They want the opera house to be rebuilt as a proper theater, rather than a roofless performance space.

“The arrogance with which it has been passed by parliament is breathtaking. We are wasting millions on a huge white elephant,” said a heritage campaigner, Astrid Vella.

But supporters say the project will give a much needed sprucing up to the long-neglected gateway to Valletta – the first view that most tourists have of the citadel.

Konrad Buhagiar, a partner with Architecture Project, points out that the gate which will be demolished is an eyesore that dates not from the time of the knights, but from the 1960s, when the original entrance was brutally reconfigured. The current project is due to be completed in 2012.

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