

## Immediate controversy over Opera House

by Nigel Said - nsaid@di-ve.com

The proposal to reconstruct the old Opera House in Valletta has already met with growing resistance from the public.

On Monday night, a Facebook group entitled "No to House of Parliament instead of Opera House (Malta)" was set up by Unifaun artistic director Adrian Buckle. The group was founded for people who opposed the initiative proposed by government and believed that the site should instead be developed for "the Arts, Theatre and Culture". By Tuesday morning, the group had attracted 250 members. By the afternoon, numbers had swelled to well over 500 strong.

The group's notice board or "wall" attracted many comments, some serious, some satirical, but all in one way or another critical of government's plans. Remarks varied from how it was financially irresponsible to spend €60-80 million for a new House of Parliament in the current economic climate. Others said that the site should be a place for the general public rather than just 65 individuals. Many would like to see the site restored for its original purpose.

Mr Buckle told [www.di-ve.com](http://www.di-ve.com) he was an ordinary individual who wanted to voice his protest, believing the old Opera House site should be used to encourage culture and theatre and that the government's plan did not do so.

He suggested that Malta was in dire need of a new theatrical venue that would invigorate tourism and generate jobs and activity, something that a new House of Parliament would certainly not do.

This is not the first time the plans to renovate the old Opera House site have been met by derision by the public. The architect commissioned for the current project, Renzo Piano, had proposed a master plan for the renovation of Valletta in 1985 but had been shot down by popular opinion. He later said bitterly that he would never consider coming back, even if asked. Local architect Richard England had also come up with plans for the area – a public/private partnership incorporating an opera house as well as commercial space - which again raised fierce opposition in the time of the Labour government. In 2004, the idea of moving Parliament to the old Opera House site was suggested by then Infrastructure Minister Jesmond Mugliett and sparked fierce controversy.

The Nationalist party said that the government's proposals would help Valletta achieve the dignity and stature it deserved, turning it once more into a cultural capital city. In 2018, Valletta will be the European capital city for culture and the government's projects will help to cement Valletta as a hub of culture and heritage in Europe and in the Mediterranean.

The plans also met with the approval of the Federated Association of Travel and Tourism Agents who said that the eventual relocation of Parliament would enable the Grandmaster's Palace to be showcased more effectively to visitors.

And finally, the Society of Architecture and Civil Engineering Students said the projects were essential for the regeneration of Valletta and would greatly enhance the cultural product offered by the capital city.

---