

## Passion for a project

What if somebody turned up and offered to rebuild the Opera House for €15 million in two years? HARRY VASSALLO on the Giovanni Trevisan proposal for the Royal Opera House site.

What if somebody turned up and offered to rebuild the Opera House, for a price of €15 million in two years?

It should be tempting; particularly so since some such amount would barely cover the architect's fees in the Renzo Piano proposal. Still, it has to look and feel good and not simply be inexpensive. What if it does?

Giovanni Trevisan's proposal marries Barry's neoclassical expression of his times with contemporary techniques and materials. With 50 years of hands-on architecture experience behind him, the Venetian has made more than a sketch. Since 2004 he has focused on the rebuilding of the Opera House in Valletta, producing a feasible project complete with costings and quotes from suppliers.

Seating 1,500 people on three levels, his theatre also has room for a restoration centre and a centre for Caravaggio studies under its roof. It has a roof. Instead of Barry's steel trusses, he spans the width of the site with perforated carbon fibre beams capable of sustaining the weight of the roof of the building as well as the floors of the culture centre, the stalls and whatever else is suspended from above in order to provide an unobstructed view of the stage.



Nothing about this 79-year-old is slick or flashy. He is more than he appears to be. In today's world, being authentic and neglectful of appearances can be a serious handicap especially when aiming for a public and highly politicised project. Renzo Piano is much sexier.

To make matters worse, Giovanni shows enthusiasm, passion for the project. The Maltese are instantly suspicious of enthusiasts. Passion on display is something they would rather not have to deal with. What he has going for him is that his project makes sense and does not seem like an extravagance in a recession. Perhaps somebody should find out what he has to say.

It turns out that in our 45 minute meeting, poring over his plans and flicking through brochures of his past projects was much longer than his time with the Prime Minister just over a year ago. The Prime Minister is a busy man.

Besides, Trevisan has focused on turning the Opera House ruins into a vessel for Valletta's soul. Popping a parliament into Freedom Square was not on his agenda. Seventy years of frustration over the nothing that has been done about the Royal Opera House have been harnessed into providing the Gonzi administration with its monumental legacy: a new parliament. The Piano proposals for City Gate and the ROH became a vehicle for the parliament.

What Trevisan has in mind is to provide a space for much more than theatrical or operatic performances. He prides himself on producing multifunctional buildings and sees no reason why the new Royal Opera House should not also double up as a conference hall, exhibition venue or anything else as the need arises. He gauges the success of his buildings by the uses that are grafted upon them, by the number of people from various walks of life who come to make them a meeting point, a place of work or relaxation.

He speaks of buildings as vessels for a city's soul and is determined to provide such a vessel. Do we have a soul to match? He found the question provocative if not offensive: architecture is intended to provide spaces where souls are enticed to grow.

Awarding Renzo Piano a monopoly on the City Gate project always seemed odd to me. It would be even more odd if Trevisan were given the task without competing against other proponents. None of this makes him falter. As a matter of fact, he brought to mind the image of an athlete sprinting at hurdles: of course there are hurdles but even as you clear or knock this one down your eyes are on the next. We could do with a few more Trevisans around here and I can think of nobody more appropriate to end the season of inertia that has monopolised the Royal Opera House for more than three generations.

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