

Piano unveils 25-year-old dream for Valletta

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World renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano last night unveiled his schematic designs for the proposed €80 million regeneration plan of Valletta's City Gate, the Opera House, and Houses of Parliament.

In an official public presentation held in Republic Street in Valletta, in the presence of Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi and Minister Austin Gatt, Piano revealed the long-awaited designs for an 'open air' opera site that will include the 60 year-old ruins, and a parliament building that will be housed in what is Freedom Square today, while City Gate will take on a brand new dimension, without an overhead road, but with a belvedere, and lift.

"What I present to you is a scheme that upholds civil pride," Renzo Piano said, explaining that including commercial interests would have ruined the concept that Valletta and its streets represent civil pride.

"Don't be tempted to mix the sacred with profane. We are presenting a project with an idea, that this magnificent city was made for people, and it's through listening to the many little voices that come out of this great place, that we came up with such enlightening ideas," he said.

Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi praised the Italian architect's passion. "Dear Renzo, this is a magical moment for all of us, as through your vision we are closing a 60-year-old

debate, that will give Malta and Gozo a reborn sense of pride in their capital city. We are transforming a dream into reality,” he said.



The plans

But it seems the debate is certainly wide open now. City Gate is to be replaced by an eight-metre wide breach in the bastions, and Freedom Square will be replaced by two interconnecting building blocks on stilts for the new parliament with a transparent ground floor that will house Malta’s museum of history and political development. The Opera House site will become an open air theatre incorporating the old ruins.

Gonzi said the project should unite all people in pride for their capital city.

Three simple thoughts have led Renzo Piano’s idea to use the opera site for outdoor performances: first, the site was considered as too small to contain a Parliament building as was initially envisaged. Secondly, a modern opera, of conventional size, would equally not fit in this place considering today’s requirements for rehearsal, backstage facilities and accessibility, besides generating exorbitant running costs.

Thirdly, after more than 60 years of controversy, the ruins of the demolished opera have undeniably reached the status of monument, irrevocable witness of history and the dignity of collective memory.

The project envisages the preservation of all the existing stone work and the reuse of some of the still existing scattered fragments to complete and embellish the ruin. A new, very light skin or façade will define the space, supported by a surrounding alignment of steel masts and columns.

These will carry removable walls, lighting systems, acoustic and sound equipment, and shall give the space its specific identity during the staging of performances. When the

theatre is unused, the place works as an open piazza with a shallow stepped seating deck, totally accessible and offering the view towards Castille, to the Churches of Santa Catarina and Our Lady of Victories and St James Cavalier.

The translucent wall elements – in alabaster – shall be constructed in such a way that they can enclose the space, but also remain sunken, so that performances can be held in the most extraordinary scenery of some of the city's best buildings.

The gate and the ditch

The project proposes simply to restore the bridge in its original dimensions of Dingli's gate of 1633 in a bid to enhance the experience of crossing over from one side to the other and to make the view of the ditch possible again.

The new design aims at giving back to the bastion walls their original expression of depth and strength by enhancing the feeling of narrowness while at the same time opening up the view to the perspective of Republic Street.

The new gate is a breach, just 8 metres wide, compressing movement during the crossing. The fundamental new element is that the gate has become open to the sky. The street crossing above will be demolished and two large and gently sloped stairs, reminiscent of the dramatic staircases flanking the gate before the creation of Freedom Square, will lead from both St James' and St John's Cavaliers down to Republic Street. Gate and ditch shall be connected through a redesigned stair and an exterior, panoramic elevator that provides the experience of the depth of the ditch and leads to the protected gardens below.

Once the car park has disappeared to be replaced by a garden atmosphere, visiting the ditch will also become an extraordinary experience.

A green parliament

The proposal to locate the new Parliament building on Freedom Square stems "from a desire to create a vibrant urbanity at the entrance to the town."

The new building will be made of two massive volumes of stone, supported by stilts that recede from the façade to create an impression of suspension in air. The East block will house mainly the chamber and the speaker's office; the West, all administrative offices for parliament members, the Ministers, the Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition.

The Old Railway tunnel beneath will be connected to the sunken garden between the east and the west sides, so as to make this otherwise unusable historical tunnel amenable for public use.

It is also planned to use the stable temperature of the immense mass of the rock below for to heat and cool the whole building: the introduction of a system of heat pumps will

avoid the necessity of external cooling towers or additional boilers.

The building will attempt to create a zero-carbon emission environment whose energy will be recovered by heat exchange with the underlying rock.

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