

Parliament to find new home as plans for The Palace announced

by DAVID LINDSAY

In the latest development in the ongoing debate over the layout of the capital city, Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi announced yesterday that Parliament would need to find a new home in the near future to make way for the renovation of the President's Palace to its "original glory".

Of the many functions The Palace plays host to – including Parliament, the Attorney General's Office, the Public Service Commission and the Malta Community Chest Fund – it is only the Office of the President that will remain at the historic location, the rest of which is to take on a more cultural role.

The Palace's ground floor, for example, is to be utilised for specialised exhibitions, as has been done from time to time in the past, but now the space will be dedicated to these exhibitions on a permanent basis.

Describing the announcement as a "milestone" for Valletta, Dr Gonzi set no strict timelines for the move for the time being, but forecast Parliament would be vacated within a few years and that the historic building, rightly described by Dr Gonzi yesterday as a "jewel", would be gradually emptied as new locations for its current tenants were identified.

But despite the fact that timelines have not been set for The Palace's renovation and conversion, so as not to put those responsible for the ambitious project in a "straightjacket" from the outset, Dr Gonzi stressed yesterday morning that "the process starts now".

Also starting now, he said, was the process of identifying alternative sites for Parliament and the other functions currently being run from The Palace.

While the move clearly ties in with the wider project envisaging the redevelopment of the old Opera House site and City Gate, for which renowned architect Renzo Piano has been contracted, Dr Gonzi did not add fuel to the fire raging over whether Parliament would be accommodated at the Opera House site.

Instead, he said a process to identify alternative sites for all the activities taking place at The Palace would begin in the near future. The future of Fort St Elmo, which has been

suggested in the past as an alternative setting for Parliament, still depended on “other initiatives” in the pipeline.

However, one timeline was provided when Dr Gonzi confirmed that the portion of the mammoth project encompassing the entrance to the city is targeted for completion by the end of the current legislature, or by 2013.

As for the renovation of The Palace itself, the project has been placed under the superintendence of Judge Giovanni Bonello, who sits on the European Court of Human Rights and is a prolific author covering Maltese culture, history and heritage. Judge Bonello will soon be choosing his team, and specific legislation for specific projects in Valletta is in the works.

The project is interwoven not only with the wider plans for the city entrance and the opera house site, but also to the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett project. Dr Gonzi also cited that the government had offered any support that the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation would be able to lend toward the realisation of the project.

Speaking yesterday, Dr Gonzi – flanked by Judge Bonello, Culture Minister Dolores Cristina and Heritage Malta chairman Joseph Said – remarked, “The road toward any vision for Valletta starts at The Palace, the living heart of the city.”

The project, he added, was also intrinsically tied to the country’s economic development and its tourism product.
