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Rebirth of an icon

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I wrote an article on this column, a few months back, entitled “Our Heritage”, and I had focused primarily on the regeneration of our capital city. At the time of writing, I had just had the opportunity to view the work of a group of architecture students whose installations centered on different sites that would require a slight bit of retouching, to put it mildly, in order to rekindle life in Valletta.

Among the more prominent works were those highlighting the City Gate, Freedom Square and the Opera House Site. Being my hometown, I have long emphasised on the need for fruitful dialogue and awareness on the changes which we need to spur in our unique city. Having said this, I have also pointed out that we desperately need to move from words to action. You can therefore imagine my reaction when the Prime Minister announced his plans to rebuild the Opera House site and City Gate. The thought that these sites will be rehabilitated in four years’ time is indeed exciting.

The present site does not do this magnificent city justice. The bus terminus, the present City Gate and the remnants of the Opera House are the main areas that welcome people into Valletta; it is a shambles. And there is of course Freedom Square which doubles as a parking area. Not exactly a grand entrance to a world heritage site, and a gem of great architectural and historical value I might add. I am sure we all agree that this present situation is untenable.

We now know that the fate of the entrance to our capital city is going to be passed into the meticulous hands of Renzo Piano, a world famous architect who will most definitely add to the prestige of Valletta. The project will certainly help to trigger the revival of the rest of the city.

I firmly believe that the entrance to one of the most beautiful cities in the world should live up to expectations. I am thrilled to learn that our Prime Minister has taken such an important decision in this respect. I am also glad that finally our parliamentarians will have decent offices that behold their status. I sometimes find myself impressed at the difference in working conditions between us five Maltese MEPs here in Brussels and Strasbourg and my colleagues in the Maltese House of Representatives.

The President’s Palace does not allow for all the luxury of resources and space that we have, being too small to have such a large number of offices. Furthermore, the President’s Palace was never designed to accommodate Parliament. I therefore strongly agree that its function should be that of housing the Office of the President and the Armoury; this would provide it with the dignity it deserves.

While I am convinced that my MP colleagues are grateful for the hospitality they have been afforded at the President’s Palace, they must be yearning to settle down in a more permanent place, and one which can accommodate a decent office and quarters to meet people, worthy of members of the highest institution of our country. When analysing the resources Maltese MPs have at hand, I have always been impressed at the degree of quality work they manage to achieve.

It was positive to see the overwhelming number of people who applauded the fact that a decision was taken. It was equally satisfying to hear how a great deal of organisations, ranging from tourism to employers’ sectors, publicly stated their agreement with the project. The choice of Renzo Piano has also been fully supported by the Kamra tal-Periti.

City Gate shall now be transformed into a proper landmark, rather than acting as a parking lot and doubling up as an open space housing haphazard kiosks; it will be a worthy entrance to the city built by gentlemen for gentlemen. However much we disagree with the choice of function of the Old Opera House site, we cannot disregard the fact that government has taken a bold decision and placed strict time frames for implementation of the approved designs. This further proves that our government is four square behind the serious regeneration of my hometown and our capital, a capital city that should make us all proud. This is a decision that should be embraced by all Maltese citizens and I’m sure that it will

ultimately be a living advertisement for our island.

It is crucial that these projects form the basis of the holistic regeneration plan for Valletta and the Grand Harbour. Even if they turn out to be the most spectacular pieces of architecture, they will function only if they are fully integrated within the regeneration plan of the whole of Valletta. This project will trigger the proper regeneration, from Fort St Elmo to City Gate at the other end. We will see the entrance of Valletta literally reborn. I am convinced that with an architect like Piano, Valletta's grandeur will be further enhanced as we would have seen the transformation of an eyesore to an iconic landmark inside an equally iconic city.
