

Regeneration of City Gate: Red carpet leading to The Palace

by Annaliza Borg

The government yesterday announced plans for the regeneration of City Gate and the Royal Opera House which are to be turned into a “red carpet” leading to The Palace within the coming four years.

Addressing a press conference, Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi said that world renowned architect Renzo Piano would be commissioned to draw up plans for the two projects. These will see an investment of between e60 and e80 million to be financed by public funds.

The Palace, which to date houses the Office of the President, the House of Representatives, the Armoury and a number of offices, “is to become the city’s core” going back “to its original function of The Palace”.

It will therefore become a showcase of cultural heritage, with the Armoury moving upstairs in place of the House of Representatives. What today displays the Armoury, will be turned into a museum to show Malta’s best including a silver collection, a number of costumes as well as altars and other pieces of cultural heritage.

The House of Representatives would be relocated to the building that will be reconstructed instead of the Old Opera House, while the President’s Office together with offices related to its administrative structure will remain at The Palace. Palace Square (otherwise known as St George’s Square) will also be renovated as part of the project, Dr Gonzi explained.

“It is very clear that we should not rebuild the Royal Opera House into a theatre,” Dr Gonzi said, explaining that another theatre would not be viable in the capital city, which already boasted of three theatres; the Manoel Theatre, the Mediterranean Conference Centre and St James Cavalier. Moreover, “the Royal Opera House would not have a large enough footprint to host modern productions since the stage will be too small,” he added.

Italian architect Renzo Piano is to redesign plans for the Royal Opera House building, with the part on the side of Republic Street to become a centre of cultural and historic value. The other area is to host the House of Representatives.

The idea of building an underground car park underneath Freedom Square, which was being considered for some time, was totally abolished as was the idea of developing an underground bus terminus. The bus terminus will be included in Piano’s plans for City Gate but a much smaller terminus for no more than 20 buses at one time will be designed. This would be part of the public transport reform by which the government is proposing some four or five bus termini around Malta rather than one main terminus, among other changes.

The projects will be financed by public funds, since no commercial centres are to be included at City Gate, thus a public-private partnership could not work out. Existing shops at City Gate are to be relocated to other areas. The government could also not obtain EU funds to finance the projects, Dr Gonzi said, since plans were not being drawn up on commercial lines but aimed at giving Valletta its original concept

of a city at the centre of the Mediterranean. However, EU funds could be used for the regeneration of Fort St Elmo, Marsamxetto and the Grand Harbour.

While the government is focusing on City Gate and the Royal Opera House site, the Prime Minister pointed out that Fort St Elmo too should be restored. The government is proposing that Fort St Elmo becomes a "centre of culture and art," part of which is to be used in connection with the cruise liner business. Dr Gonzi also put forward the government's idea to start work on Fort St Elmo while the City Gate and Royal Opera House projects are in progress.

Dr Gonzi described the City Gate and Old Royal Opera House site projects as having national importance on which he encouraged debate free from partisan ties. The country has been calling for the rebuilding of the Royal Opera House site for the past 60 years and talking of regenerating City Gate for years, the Prime Minister explained. He will also be meeting the Valletta local councils and non-governmental organisations to listen to their ideas about the two projects and putting forward the ideas to architect Piano.

Renzo Piano who is well known for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and Berlin's Potsdamer Platz is to give "a special stamp to our country," Dr Gonzi said.

He was also described by the Prime Minister as having a connection of over 20 years with Malta and an architect who knew Valletta very well. Renzo Piano was commissioned 20 years ago to draw up plans for the renovation of City Gate and the Royal Opera House; however these were shot down by public criticism. Piano was now to focus on new parameters of the current day and age, thus there may be new appraisal of ideas, Dr Gonzi said.

By means of these projects, "Valletta was to win back its value and dignity," Dr Gonzi said.

In a statement, the Labour Party explained that Dr Gonzi informed Opposition Leader Joseph Muscat of the government plans regarding City Gate and the Royal Opera House site by means of a telephone conversation, since Dr Muscat is abroad.

While the PL fully believed in the need for rehabilitating and regenerating the Grand Harbour area including Valletta, the party was not consulted before the government took the decision but was simply informed about it. Consultation should also have been open to NGO's, local councils, the civil society and all interested parties. This decision was not spoken of in the budget presented last month and thus the public should be told how such projects will be financed and which projects the government was considering as a priority.

PL believed that such points of accountability should be given much more importance at a time when the public was being made to pay higher water and electricity bills.
