

Renzo Piano - Acclaimed by the world, shunned by Malta

by Stephen Calleja

The man Malta shunned some 20 years ago, when his first plans for the regeneration of City Gate were shelved after months of controversy, is being acclaimed worldwide for his “superb” designs of the Modern Wing of Chicago’s Art Institute, which was opened last month.

And, as the hullabaloo is set to be raised again in three weeks’ time when his fresh set of plans for the entrance to Valletta are revealed – Minister Austin Gatt hinted as much when he was interviewed a few days ago – it is perhaps a good idea to see what others are saying about Renzo Piano and his work.

Had his original concept to rebuild the old opera house in Valletta and give a new look to City Gate been accepted in the early 1990s, the project would have been completed by now, and we would have gotten used to a much more sophisticated and pleasant appearance of the place most frequented in the country, day in day out.

But Mr Piano’s plans created too much hassle for a government that, at the time, failed to take the bull by the horns and move on with the project, irrespective of the disagreement expressed by some quarters. The Italian architect had been paid his dues – and they were not cheap – but his proposals never materialised, and City Gate remained in a shambles.

Now, two decades later, he is about to present us with a fresh set of designs, no doubt “updated”, as Mr Piano’s evolution as “the current favourite” architect – as Artinfo described him – continued over the years.

Only God knows how many self-styled experts will pop up to criticise his designs once again after 27 June, and only God knows how many will shoot down his ideas, thinking they know better than the architect whose designs “have been praised for relating well to their surroundings” – again according to Artinfo.

But with Austin Gatt leading the proceedings, the government is in a better position to

push ahead and finally remove the biggest eyesore that the country should be ashamed of, making Valletta once again the jewel of a city that it once was. If Dr Gatt is not capable of doing so, then the World War II ruins will probably remain there for eternity, a sign to remind us how successive generations were unable to find a solution.

Artinfo continues to shower praise on the man who will be criticised sharply by the Maltese know-alls. “The new (Chicago) structure seems marked by its ability to gracefully combine weightiness and weightlessness. A series of heavy walls made of the same Indiana limestone as the rest of the museum frame the main entry and are lightened by the towering glass and steel façade punctuated by slender columns...”

Time describes it as a “resolutely modern building; it not only manages to gently introduce itself into the greenery of Chicago’s Millennium Park but also draws in three tricky neighbours – the original Art Institute, the active commuter railway lines that run between them and the city of Chicago”.

The second largest American museum, second only to the Metropolitan in New York, is “a fantasy of magical reconciliation between the natural and man-made worlds... Over the past decade or so, Piano has become one of the most sought-after architects in the US... In Houston, Atlanta, New York City, San Francisco and Fort Worth, Texas, museum trustees have gone to Piano for buildings that are serene, lucid and elegantly detailed. His designs may not push the envelope, but they seal it with a kiss.”

Only some Maltese seem to know better than Mr Piano and the Americans.

The San Francisco Chronicle goes further. “Piano has delivered a luminous, seemingly weightless addition to the (institute’s) complex of buildings... Piano has provided elegantly proportioned galleries to accommodate special exhibitions and canonical gems.”

The New York Times says the designs are “sophisticated but not too threatening or unfamiliar... (Piano) is not out to start a revolution. His designs are about tranquillity, not conflict. The serenity of his best buildings can almost make you believe that we live in a civilised world”.

The NYT goes on: “Most of all, the addition manages to weave the various strands of Chicago’s rich architectural history into a cohesive vision, one that is made more beautiful by its remarkable fragility....

“Mr Piano’s towering glass-and-steel façade, with its floating roof and excruciatingly slender columns, even evokes a lighter, more ethereal incarnation of Mies (van der

Rohe's) Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, a landmark of 20th century design....

“The entry hall, a long towering space enclosed beneath a glittering glass roof, could be a temporary version of the cathedral, designed for the worship of art... The rooms are beautifully proportioned... Mr Piano also seems to have created the right amount of intimacy between art and viewer, without completely shutting out the world.

“The idea is to make you aware of the shifts in daylight – over the course of a visit, from one season to another – without distracting you from the artwork, and the effect is magical...”

One minor discordant note comes from the Wall Street Journal, which says that “there is much to admire about the new Modern Wing: its sleek blond oak floors, the Miesian suspended staircase, skylights through which you can perceive sun, clouds or rainwater, and expensive floor-to-ceiling windows that offer attractive views of the city. But it leaves much to be desired in terms of audience-friendly, art-enhancing design.”

This is the only criticism that was levelled at the Piano design for the Chicago building, a far cry from what was said about his plans for Valletta 20 years ago.

The Financial Times however sums it up in a few words, describing Mr Piano “as an architect of impeccable taste... He manages to deliver a blend of cool urbanity and faultless functionality”.

Will he be good enough for Malta this time?

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The Art Institute of Chicago's massive new extension, designed by Renzo Piano, opened to the public on 16 May, making the museum the second-largest art institute in the United States. The new wing – costing US\$300 million – increased the museum's space to one million square feet, landing it in second place behind the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. The ground floor of the Modern Wing houses a shop as well as photography and temporary exhibition halls with education facilities and a garden courtyard. The second floor is home to abstract expressionism and contemporary and pop art, while the third floor is devoted to European art from 1900 to 1950. A pedestrian bridge from the new wing gives visitors a channel from the top floor to Millennium Park across the street.

Renzo Piano was born in Genoa on 4 September 1937. He attended architecture school at Milan Polytechnic, graduating in 1964. Piano became famous worldwide when he and Richard Rogers designed the Pompidou Centre in Paris (1977). Piano's other buildings include the Menil Museum, Houston (1981-86), known particularly for its leaf-like ferroconcrete louvers that filter the light from its transparent roof; the vast Kansai Air Terminal, Osaka (1994); the long, low, and elegantly simple Beyeler Foundation museum, Riehen, Switzerland (1997); and the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Nouméa, New Caledonia (1998).

His 21st-century projects include the naturally illuminated Nasher Sculpture Centre, Dallas. (2003); the innovative Padre Pio Church, San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy (2004); the undulating Paul Klee Centre, Bern, Switzerland (2005); the light-filled addition to the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City (2006); the sharp-edged 52-storey New York Times Building, (2007); the Broad Contemporary Art Museum, an addition to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2008); and the glass and steel California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco (2008).
