

## Renzo Piano and the lightness of buildings

by NOEL GRIMA

Announced just the day before, a meeting organised by Valletta Rehabilitation Committee saw the participation of a rather a large crowd of people who filled the St James Cavalier cinema on Friday afternoon to listen to Renzo Piano.

First, it was shown a CD of a conference given by Mr Piano himself in Rome. Although the conference was titled “What is Architecture”, Mr Piano ended up speaking about his many world-famous creations.

The character of the man came through as well: born into a construction family, he became an architect in the heady days of the 1960s. His work at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, just after the events of 1968, brought him worldwide fame as a rebel in a rebel generation.

Later on, he mellowed and, through his many creations, became engrossed with buildings that were light rather than heavy.

How will this person, we all asked ourselves, come up with a City Gate in a system of bastions that is anything but light? The City Gate project will also be very different from all he has been doing, as it will be the first time he will be working on the entry point and traffic flow nexus of a capital city.

The screening of the CD was followed by a discussion.

Richard England emphasised Mr Piano’s obsession with lightness. He ended by stating: “I am delighted Mr Piano will be doing the City Gate project. I am sure we will have a great work of art that looks to the future but will also be linked to the past.”

Architect Conrad Thake said Mr Piano is well suited to Valletta. Valletta was created as an instant city, much like St Petersburg or Brasilia. Cities that remain anchored to the past stagnate and die. Valletta is the city of the Knights, but it is also the city of the British. We cannot say that Valletta shows the contribution of the Maltese because the post-war contribution of the Maltese is very mediocre – the Law Courts, the Excelsior. Hardly any building of note has been created over the past decades. The last architect of fame was William Scamp and, of course, Barry. The knights built Valletta in just

seven years while we have spent 65 years discussing and doing nothing.

What will be done must not be aggressive: after all, the Piano of today is not the Piano of the Pompidou Centre.

The Malta of today needs an iconic building, just like the Guggenheim in Bilbao, or the Sydney Opera House.

Valletta is the city of synergy, where the past meets the future across the great axis from City Gate to St Elmo. We need a grand gesture and there is no one like Piano to produce it.

The debate in the country has shifted from the discussion about aesthetics of 20 years ago to the discussion about the use of the building on the Opera House site – which shows that public opinion has matured.

But we must let Piano alone: what will be done must not be the work of a committee, or we will get 400,000 “experts” telling Piano what to do and creating another hotchpotch.

Professor Peter Serracino Inglott went back in time to tell about his involvement with Piano.

During the 1981-1987 Labour administration, Foreign Minister Alex Sceberras Trigona had asked UNESCO for help to set up a toy museum in Sliema. The UNESCO official in charge of such projects at that time was Professor Salvino Busuttil, who had pointed out the availability of Renzo Piano who at that time was doing work at Otranto, a baroque city similar to Valletta.

But Professor Busuttil told then Prime Minister Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici that perhaps Piano could be used for something better than a toy museum. Dr Mifsud Bonnici agreed with the proposal and Mr Piano came to Malta.

---