

Renzo Piano due in Malta next month

Fiona Galea Debono



Renzo Piano in front of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum, one of his designs.

Renzo Piano should be in Malta early next month on a reconnaissance visit to Valletta, the entrance to which the government has commissioned the world-renowned Italian architect to design.

It is the first time that Mr Piano will be coming to Malta since it was announced in December that he was back in business to take on the €80 million project that incorporates the rebuilding of City Gate and the Opera House ruins.

It is his third official visit since his relationship with Malta started some two decades ago while his associates have already been on a preliminary familiarisation trip. The government has confirmed the visit but not the date.

Mr Piano will be taking a look at the site, studying the context and understanding the situation, and picking up the brief, sources said.

Entrusted with the upgrading of the area, which is crying out for regeneration, the star architect is behind some of the most avant-garde contemporary architectural structures, including Parisian landmark Centre Georges Pompidou and Berlin's Potsdamer Platz. His name, however, had been synonymous with controversy locally. He had attracted strong objection when he presented his guidelines for a Valletta master plan, with conceptual designs for Freedom Square, the old Opera House and City Gate, in the late 1980s.

Even though the Cabinet had approved his project in 1990, it was dropped due to growing criticism. By 1992, it had completely fizzled out.

Today, however, the scenario has changed and, though the debate about the project is hot, it revolves around the government's decision to turn the Opera House site into Parliament, instead of a new opera house, or at least a building that is used for culture and the arts.

Mr Piano recently won the prestigious 2008 Sonning Prize, awarded yearly for "commendable work that befits European culture". A Goodwill Ambassador of Unesco for Architecture, his restoration campaign of historical sites includes the ancient city of Rhodes and Genoa's historical centre.

His portfolio also includes the New York Times building, Rome's Parco della Musica Auditorium, Osaka's state-of-the-art Kansai International Airport and the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, which not only demonstrates his aesthetic and technical artistry but also emphasises green design, having won a silver-level Holcim Award for Sustainable Construction.

Comments

D Vella (6 days, 7 hours ago)

@s.bugeja

Read my previous blog....slowly!! Do you want a fake reproduction of the architecture of a former era which, incidentally was dictated by requirements and a savage environment of conflict and war, totally different to that of today? Have you any idea what the original 'gate' to Valletta looked like? It was little more than a three foot wide sally-port with a narrow walkway leading to a forward counter-guard. Do you want our city's main entrance to be a siege machine designed for war? Regardless of your 'feelings' which are obviously subjective, there is no shame in having modern and historic architecture integrated together as long as due sensitivity and respect for the historic structure is kept. There are several such successful, outstanding examples in cities throughout the world. The fundamental principle of architecture always remains and goes beyond any subjective views or nostalgically driven opinions. Architecture is a physical calendar and must reflect the age, culture, identity and environment as well as

the aspirations of the people that produced it. Are you suggesting we have no identity of our own today or that it is in any way inferior or less important than those of the past?

J.Micallef (6 days, 20 hours ago)

All well, why not Renzo Piano, he has a real good portfolio, considering what he has done. He is a very capable architect. I do have a question not concerning the project. I have always been curious about the Law Courts of Malta. Why was such Doric Architecture used in the construction of this building when it seems to be out of place, really !!! Could someone shed some light here ?

I wish the Valletta Project and the residents of the capital success. It deserves it very dearly.

s.bugeja (1 week ago)

My comment is not about the opera house which is a free standing structure and doesn't form part of a still existing structure. But the city's gate is another matter. The structure must form part of the bastions as envisioned for a fortified city. As I see it Renzo Piano will be working to a set formula and the free hand he may exercise with the opera house will not be present in the city gate design. The bastions were built in the 1560s. I feel that the design of city gate should reflect the age. The design of the opera house is another matter.

D Micallef (1 week ago)

@ D Vella

Well said... thanks!

adrian galea (1 week ago)

@ Dempster

i would hold my horses until one actually sees a design. its too early to be cynical and negative

DVella (1 week ago)

Anybody with a passing familiarity with the subject will recognise that all great architecture is clearly representative of the age and culture that produced it (the Pyramids, the Vatican, Eiffel tower, Sydney Opera House, Guggenheim etc etc). Erecting a fake copy of Barry's building would be as relevant today as erecting a copy of the Ggantija temples on the site! If architects reasoned like these people do there would be no architecture today and we would be merely producing fake copies of buildings representing former eras!! Incidentally, for the better informed, Barry's building was criticised by a prominent architectural critic for having no relationship with Valletta or its buildings, he merely repeated the architectural idiom that was 'fashionable' amongst the english aristocracy at the time! Is this what these 'professors' think architecture is about? The colonial age has long passed as have the nineteenth and twentieth centuries... Malta deserves real architecture not a fake carnival mask! Deal with it!

H Dempster (1 week ago)

Will someone tell Mr piano that we dont like square boxes and if he is to re design the opera house , his design should be on the same lines as it was and have it to blend in with the old city of Valletta and give it its glory>
