

# Renzo Piano resurrected for City Gate

Fiona Galea Debono

World-renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano is likely to be back to develop Valletta's City Gate after the government resumed contact with him, The Times has learnt.

Attempts to re-establish contact with Mr Piano started during the previous legislature but the effort has recently been intensified, paving the way for the design of the city's entrance by the "star" architect behind some of the most avant-garde contemporary architecture, including Parisian landmark Centre Georges Pompidou and Berlin's Potsdamer Platz.

Mr Piano's portfolio includes the New York Times building, Rome's Parco della Musica Auditorium and Osaka's state-of-the-art Kansai International Airport.

The design process for City Gate is expected to kick off next year, with Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi saying yesterday that capital projects should include Valletta and stating his intention for them to start as soon as possible.

Synonymous with controversy locally, Mr Piano had attracted strong objection when his contact with Malta started in 1985.

In 1988, he presented his guidelines for the master plan for Valletta, with conceptual designs for the urban space of Freedom Square, including the old Opera House, and detailed plans, down to materials, for its entrance.

His idea that Valletta no longer needed closed doors in the 20th century, but an invitation into it, did not go down too well with the public, and although the Cabinet of the day had originally approved the project in 1990, it had to drop it due to growing criticism.

The concept was simply not understood, and by 1992, the entire project had fizzled out, said the former coordinator of the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, Ray Bondin

"Kicking Mr Piano out could not have been a more stupid decision when other countries are so proud of his works, which are crowd pullers," he said.

It would have been the most important breakthrough in the regeneration of Valletta, he continued, adding that Mr Piano was extremely enthusiastic and that his employment had been financed by the Italian government.

Architect Richard England welcomed the reactivation of the Renzo Piano connection, especially in view of Valletta being World Heritage Capital in 2018, saying he has been appointed by cities worldwide to add "a sense of class".

Architects of that calibre, such as Santiago Calatrava, have put cities on the map, transforming them into tourist attractions with their iconic constructions, he said.

"Ditching Piano would have gone down in history the same way as had the Knights thrown out Caravaggio's paintings!"

Valletta is a "jewel in a rubbish bin", having "a disastrous beginning (City Gate) and an equally disastrous end (Fort St Elmo)," he continued.

In fact, the Piano project, for Prof. England, should not stop at City Gate but should be holistic, also including the other end and Grand Harbour.

"If a magnet is created between the two, the spine (of Valletta) would animate itself automatically," he said, referring also to the nodes that would feed it from the water, creating ancillary movement into it. As it stands, the capital city ends at Palace Square.

"Renzo Piano is not some crazy guy but a serious, professional man, who respects the place and its memory, and is concerned with a sense of well-being. That is what we need!"

Speaking about the public uproar at the time, Prof. England said: "The new is always uncomfortable but going back to the past is not the answer. A city works if it has a function and reflects the Zeitgeist".

Prof. England maintained, however, that the project required a "national" approach to kick off and hoped that NGOs would not be up in arms.

It was unlikely that Prof. Piano would fish out old plans from his shelves, Prof. England said, expecting him to go back to the drawing board and present fresh designs for City Gate.

Only last month, Mr Piano 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.

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## Comments

L. Bonnici (6 hours, 55 minutes ago)

If the French were Maltese they wouldn't have the Eiffel Tower. Great ideas are NEVER appreciated until it's either too late.

Also... how "knowledgeable" Maltese people are comes from the fact that they are saying that Valletta is built in a Baroque style. Valletta is of a Mannerist style..... look up the definition!!

In the end dear Mr. Humphrie life is a learning experience... instead of just complaining we

should take the projects you mentioned and learn from them so as not to do the same mistakes!  
Shouldn't our capital city be dynamic?!

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Chris Ebejer (7 hours, 4 minutes ago)

Obviously to compliment the holistic project those brutal socialist flats, greeting visitors into the city should make space for another piazza adjacent the piazza Helsen rendering a majestic piazza adorned with 2 splendid fountains reminiscent of the great European opulent squares.

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Chris Ebejer (7 hours, 4 minutes ago)

With much and great respect that I have for Renzo Piano, I am very honored that I have met him once in Rome but however I do still insist that we have to give him something else, an adventurous project where he can explode his creativity, by that we won't lose his talented opportunity !

The City gate, should be RESTORED to its original interpretation since there is an archeological memory of it.

After the rebuilding of the Dresden Frauenkirche baroque Cathedral with great satisfaction, in 2002, the German parliament agreed to demolish the brutal Walter Ulbricht's communist building in favor of having the royal Prussian Palace, residence of Frederick 1st the Berlin's Stadtschloss (Imperial Palace) rebuild again on the same site as it once stood before the communist edifice. This colossal palace was a reflection of the glory of Versailles until it was bombed by the allies.

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,478279,00.html>

And since the Germans are capable to restore their glorious past image, why we cannot?

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charles galea (7 hours, 7 minutes ago)

Why do we have to create problems every time a major project is in the offing ? why ? because our authorities plan it that way. it is already evident that this is going to be another St John Co cathedral and Ghadira Bay rd. If there was opposition last time round , why are we again trying to force down people's throat this time again .

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Guze Xerri (7 hours, 15 minutes ago)

I very well remember when the old gate was torn down and replaced with this monstrosity in 1964.

The old city gate was built in 1853, designed by Col. Thompson of the Royal Engineers to replace an even earlier gate.

Although the 1853 city gate had shortcomings, very evident by mid 20th century traffic it was still better on the eye than the one we have today.

So why use the same architect as in 1964 that created that mess?  
Better still, who in Malta approved the Piano plan?  
it must have been approved by a committee.  
His design was terrible then, has he gotten that much better?  
This old Italian architect must have very good social connections in Malta.  
I certainly would not re-hire him.

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Chris Briffa, Architect (7 hours, 19 minutes ago)

This is the greatest news I've heard in a long time! I sincerely hope that The Times (or indeed our government?) is serious on this one, for the good of Valletta and indeed our contemporary culture-less nation. Of course, everyone has a right to comment and express his thoughts but (with all respect to historicist, pseudo-patriotic and generally naive comments) Architecture is high art which should not be judged by the masses...a bit in the same way like we should not argue with our medical specialists when we follow their guidance. Renzo Piano is one of the world's most respected and awarded figures in our profession. We should put our 'big-fish-in-a-small-bowl' mentality aside and feel honoured at such an opportunity!

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Leo Mario Haber (7 hours, 37 minutes ago)

History repeats itself. At a certain point, I agree that art and architecture reflects its times of production.

But, if one has the opportunity to adjust a grave mistake of the past of demolishing the City Gate of a UNESCO heritage site, it can be more worth it for our historical heritage to restore the splendour of Valletta of one time.

In my opinion, the project of developing City Gate should incorporate the original architecture of the old City Gate and on the two sides of the same gate it can be given space for new design and ideas. It can be applicable because if one can notice the proportion of the present City Gate is much bigger than that of the old one.

What about the position of the carnival float builders?

It is clear that if today we are re-proposing the re-building of City Gate, it shows that it was a grave mistake of demolishing the old one. Let's do something that the future generation will not be disappointed of what we have done.

An old man can't wear like a teenager. It would be silly. We should adapt to the circumstances. We should respect the City Valletta.

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Joseph Cauchi (7 hours, 50 minutes ago)

To the authorities concerned.

Please do NOT listen to those who want to revert to yesteryears by having the citygate as in the past or the old opera house as per Barry's designs.

Please listen to the people who know and understand, in other words the experts.

Let RENZO PIANO and RICHARD ENGLAND lead the way. They know what they are doing !

I have complete trust in these two GREAT ARCHITECTS as I am sure are most of the Maltese.

We do not want to waste any more time; This development must begin.

Valletta cannot wait any longer.

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apgrech (8 hours, 23 minutes ago)

Is this going to be another waste of money project?

City Gate should not be of a modern design. It was a massive mistake to remove the original one we had and whoever made such decision deserves a kick in the rear end.

Why calling an outsider? Why not have locals come up with their version and have a kind of competition and then let the people vote for the best one?

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John Scerri (8 hours, 25 minutes ago)

Of course Architect R. England would welcome a Renzo Piano ultra modern design. Maybe he is expecting it would look like the Monstrosity Bunker church he designed for the Franciscans in Qawra!!!

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Simon Joseph Aquilina (8 hours, 33 minutes ago)

I have a small suggestion - why don't you do it in the same way as it was when the Order of St. John first built the gate! I believe sticking to the original would be of great historical value since this is how it was planned by the people who planned out the whole city. Also while at it why not also clean the city from all the modern elements that are ruining it (such as plastic doors, air conditions on the outside, etc). Why is Imdina so loved by the people - because it remains the same as it was in the past. This should be the same story for Valletta and we should not be scared to correct the mistakes done by others in the past! Outside Malta people are proud of every little piece of history they have. Here in Malta we think how best to destroy it!

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j n ebejer (8 hours, 34 minutes ago)

Does the call on Renzo Piano mean his original proposal is to be adopted ? If not, is there going to be a new price tag on the new designs? If Dr. Piano 'is unlikely to fish out the old plans from the shelf', then why not? did these have an 'expiry date' and now would have been the time that the 'new' gate of the time were to be redone?

Should there be a new call for submission of proposals?

The Maltese have been subjected to learned opinions but still most Maltese seem to want a baroque city entrance for a baroque city. Naive, retarded, uneducated, uncivilised whatever - still that is how they want their money to be spent -so can we have this as a national approach? If not, do we choose the 'some's national is more national' approach?

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Ray Sultana (8 hours, 37 minutes ago)

Bringing Renzo Piano back would be great news. Please let us not repeat the mistake we made 20 years ago and throw away this unique opportunity. Piano has created astounding works

around the world including Paris, London, Rome and Belin and I am shure he would create something magnificent for our capital city, something which would respect our history and culture while at the same time looking towards the future.

Going back to the pre-64 gate, of which some are nostalgic, should not be an option if anything because it was NOT the original gate. The British built it in the 19th century destroying a prevoious gate built by the Knights. It's true that demolshing the gate in 1963 was a mistake, however now it's useless going back in time. Valletta needs to look forward not backwards.

I also agree with Prof. England in saying that the plan should look at the city holistically and not just focus on City Gate.

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Eric Soames (8 hours, 41 minutes ago)

The New York Times Building is a skyscraper in a city of skyscrapers; privately owned and built over privately owned buildings some of which were wrested away from their owners in court. It stands on its own merits in the appearance stakes. A gate needing to be incorporated into existing walls, in my opinion, is a totally different matter requiring more sensitivity than vision. What's wrong with using home-grown talent among whom, I'm sure, is Prof England?

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Pierre Agius (8 hours, 48 minutes ago)

I remember Piano's plan very well. It was formidable. Alas, however, too bold for some Maltese. Had we gone for it then, we would have by now what would probably be the most beautiful and exciting entrance in Europe by one of the world's greatest architechtures! This time let's not miss the chance.

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D Vella (8 hours, 56 minutes ago)

@Mr.Humpries

As far as I know Portomaso.Tigne etc were designed by Maltese Architects and look at what a mess they made of that!

Isn't it about time that 21st Century Malta had some interesting architecture to leave to future generations,and if a foreign Architect is chosen,what's wrong with that?. Go to any of the great european countries and you see wonderful architecture designed by foreigners all the time.Renzo Piano's design would not only enhance a miserable entrance to Valletta but would give us a building to be proud of for once. If only it were done years ago!.

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Louis Gialanze (9 hours, 15 minutes ago)

"Soaking oneself in a tepid bath of nonesense" is how Winston Churchill credited the influence of the media on people's minds. By the look of things the authorities are in a tight spot and would like to deflect the flack from the utility bills fallout.

Good one this but we've been here before.

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Karen Zammit Manduca (10 hours, 35 minutes ago)

Do we really need to have a foreigner to re-design City Gate? I know that many local architects are building monstrosities and concrete boxes to replace former buildings, but we still have many others who would be capable of designing something worthwhile. I still have a copy of an

architecture magazine that featured plans for the reconstruction of the opera house which were submitted for a competition quite a few years back and the most pleasing one sensitive to the character of Valletta was that submitted by a Maltese architect.

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Phil Humphries (10 hours, 36 minutes ago)

I am not against modern architecture and Prof. Piano's designs are very attractive IN THE RIGHT PLACE. I submit, however, that historic Valletta is not that place.

If recent history is anything to go by then I wouldn't be surprised if a 'modern' city gate became the thin end of the wedge that would serve as the precedent and catalyst for 'developers with influence' to continue in their quest to uglify Malta. Allow this to happen and you open the door to Valletta becoming yet another monument to ego, greed and appaulingly bad taste. Portomaso, Tigne, Mistra... Need I say more ?

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p portelli (11 hours, 3 minutes ago)

Mario Tabone-Vassallo just about said it all. Otherwise, why not put up a Pei pyramid at the Acropolis? or a wine-cellar at Hypogeum? or tear down Tower of London gate & replace with a "user friendly" one?.....You might as well throw away all paintings & start looking at digital (Photoshopped of course) copies instead.

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John Meilak (11 hours, 9 minutes ago)

I think City Gate should be reverted to what it was in the old days. Here is a photo to show you. <http://www.sheba-imports.com/webVallettaGate.jpg>

In addition I think that those flats on the left side of the gate should be demolished, and the residents relocated elsewhere. It is not a pretty sight, entering the capital city and seeing a huge block of flats with clothes hanged in the balconies. Instead of those flats a huge plaza should be constructed, extending from St. John's Cavalier to St. James' Cavalier.

We do not need new design's for our capital city. Keep things simple, build everything baroque style. Thus, you maintain conformity and also a pleasing aesthetic look.

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James Borg (11 hours, 42 minutes ago)

I think that most Maltese agree about the fact that the current city gate construction should definitely be changed. Therefore this does not imply a simple restoration of an existing site. This is going to be a full-scale reconstruction. If the original city gate would still have been in place, we would be restoring the site to it's former glory. But unfortunately we lost the original and we have been living with an uglier site of decades. So now that we are thinking of giving Valletta an architectural boost to be on the same architectural and artistic level as most large European cities such as London, Valencia and Berlin, we should definitely look at the most avant-garde way possible to put Valletta back on the map of architectural gems of the new century. The truth is that Malta is getting architecturally poor because we're stuck with the baroque style from the Knights' period and since then, 3 centuries ago, we've built nothing new and monumental. This is the opportunity to grasp and show the world that we're keeping up with the times. Let's not be stupid again and let's save the criticism for the people who are qualified to criticise!

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J. Tonna (11 hours, 53 minutes ago)

Mr A sultana et all: I had a look at Renzo Piano's website and also searched his works on Google, but found nothing that matches our Capital City, built by gentlemen for gentlemen. I am not implying that I do not like his works but none of them fits.

I agree with Mario Tabone Vassallo that Valletta needs the gate to be restored in sympathy with the Baroque elegance and style of the city.

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Laurence Zerafa (11 hours, 56 minutes ago)

A state of the art public library / culture centre, as part of this redevelopment of city gate, would be an excellent service to the whole nation. The Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA) <http://www.malia-malta.org/> for the past few weeks has been promoting this idea through a press release, an i-petition and a Facebook group.

Valletta, like any other city, needs a centrally located, readily accessible, well stocked and equipped modern public library. As a country we need such a public library if we seriously want to attract more people to use libraries. Public libraries are a really worthwhile investment because they are a corner-stone in all stages of education especially outside the formal education process which we would like all adults to continue.

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R.Gauci (12 hours, 10 minutes ago)

I really hope that the promise for this project doesn't end up like theothers!

I agree with Profs. England that this project should be a holistic one and incorporate the restoration of all sites in Valletta which are in a shameful state! Even houses which are private tenants which have been kept close for a long time and are falling pieces cause those form part of this Jewel which unfortunately have never been appreciated enough by us locals!!

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Igalea (12 hours, 13 minutes ago)

Let City Gate be built as it was without any modernism from wherever and by whoever they are planned however famous.

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Isabelle Caruana (12 hours, 15 minutes ago)

Some food for thought:

It is good to come up with ideas to restore this part of our capital, however lets be sensible about it. Lets not start going overboard and try to impress ppl with big names (cause inevitably this means big money) when it might be useful to first look around for local talent. Plus we should not use such issues to deviate attention from the main problems that we are facing at the moment. Gonzi has over and over again made use of such sensationalism to detract ppls attention from critical issues, and over and over again we have been left with "xiber innieher" and less money in our pockets

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Adrian Amos (12 hours, 17 minutes ago)

Rebuild to Barry's magnificent classical design, reuse the existing foundations, encourage the traditional crafts - and to suggest that Valletta, a fortified walled city, needs opening up is self-evidently ludicrous.

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Joseph Micallef (12 hours, 21 minutes ago)

Richard England said: "Ditching Piano would have gone down in history the same way as had the Knights thrown out Caravaggio's paintings!"

From the comments I am seeing here it seems to me that most are ready to do just that - and they just don't bother about their stupidity of not recognising a Caravaggio painting and throwing it away!

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L. Bonnici (12 hours, 25 minutes ago)

Don't know what happened in distant 1985-1992... was still not born or too young to care about such things.

I think people might be too scared of innovation, and will tend to go towards conservatism.... Yes Valletta was built by men for men, but if we rebuild city gate as it used to be when the Knights built it, we're giving it back to them (the knights) and not to us, a new post-modern society... Look at what the Spanish did to Bilbao, or the Brits to Liverpool, London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham... shall I go on?!

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J Oatmon (12 hours, 53 minutes ago)

The entrance to Valletta from the bus terminal is definitely not inspiring, it is almost like threading your way through a mass of sidewalk vendors and hawkers, into an old grubby warehouse.

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Mario Tabone-Vassallo (12 hours, 56 minutes ago)

Following through the argument of Valletta not needing a defensive gate, come to that, neither would it need defensive bastions. So why do we not demolish the bastions as well, instead of restoring them. How can one talk of building arches over other breeches and then create a new one. The bastions as a whole, including the gates, are a masterpiece and should be considered as one whole. No one would consider adding a modern touch, an abstract repair, to a Caravaggio, so how can anyone be so insensitive to history and its monuments as to suggest this for Bieb il-Belt? Valletta needs the gate to be restored in sympathy with the Baroque elegance and style of the city, preserving what remains of the original supporting pillars and crowning the gate with the Maltese coat of arms. If one then restored the Barry's theatre and used it for Parliament, one would really give the message that at last, the Maltese realise they are independent.

Joe Borg (13 hours, 4 minutes ago)

Do you people remember the Lm400K spend for the plans to redevelop the theatre site.. what happened with that...

what do you think will happen now....?

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C.E.Agius (13 hours, 11 minutes ago)

City gate should be given its former glory.

The fools of yesteryear wanted the carnival floats to pass through citygate thereby ruining one of our best monuments and looting whatever they could lay their hands on.

I remember city gate in its glory and that's how it should be rebuilt. Who said that Valletta no longer needs closed doors in the 20th century? Yes, we should restore our city to its previous

glory - a city which was built by men for men and not a city built by men for money and greed.

Let's hope that this will not be another "FJASK"

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L. Bonnici (13 hours, 13 minutes ago)

Finally some good news... I hope this doesn't turn up like other "good" news, which is that and nothing more. Valletta is our capital city, but it doesn't feel like it. If it weren't for republic street and the effort and this and previous legislatures it would be more silent than the Silent city...

I really hope the Maltese people open up their minds, look around them and seize this opportunity to regenerate Valletta. As for the royal opera house, I firmly believe it shouldn't be built as it was... The new style of architecture will blend in the city as much as the neo-classical architecture of the old opera house did with the Mannerist architecture at the time it was built!

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Anthony Portelli (13 hours, 23 minutes ago)

It seems we never learn.

If anything should be done to it, it must be to restore it to its former self.

And stop playing around with the peoples' heritage and money.

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a sultana (13 hours, 23 minutes ago)

this is Renzo Piano's website ... check it out first and then comment. <http://www.rpbw.com/>

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H Dempster (13 hours, 29 minutes ago)

So Piano is back.... Lets hope he will give us a nice and an attractive plan of the valletta gate which integrates with the city. The last plan was horrible, it was like a couple of children's blocks place on each other .

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Manuel Mifsud (13 hours, 36 minutes ago)

I am looking forward to some sensible comments about what should and what shouldn't be done and perhaps some intelligent ideas.

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A. Saliba (13 hours, 54 minutes ago)

Modernising the city gate would be like painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa. For a second time.

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