

Renzo Piano plans discussion highlights needs in arts field

by NOEL GRIMA

It was billed as a discussion on the Renzo Piano plans for City Gate and the Opera House site, which indeed it was, but it turned out mostly to be a litany of complaints from arts practitioners about the inadequacies of theatres in Malta and the need for government funding.

A session of the Valletta Creative Forum was held yesterday morning at St James Cavalier, attracting quite a few well-known and lesser-known names in the arts field. The task set them, as explained by chairperson Jeanine Rizzo, was to draw up, on the invitation by the Minister for the Arts, specific reactions and recommendations for the Piano proposals. But, perhaps being arts people, they felt they could not be limited by such a brief and interventions covered the problems in this the sector. An agreed set of recommendations was due to be issued later.

By and large, the panel, which opened the discussion, kept to the Renzo Piano plans and discussed them from many interesting points of view.

Vicky-Ann Cremona, who besides being an ambassador is also a lecturer in theatre studies, started by admitting that the arts in Malta is something of an afterthought, but it would be better if, like Lazarus, the sector accepts the crumbs that fall from the table. (This led to a clear challenge by Kenneth Zammit Tabona who said he had no wish to be a Lazarus and would not accept crumbs).

Dr Cremona gave a detailed appreciation of the Piano plans for the open-air theatre. Some of the points she made were too technical for non-technical people: she said that while the orchestra pit will be on a hydraulic lift so that it could be raised or lowered, the stage was not. It would be desirable if the stage too were based on a hydraulic lift.

The problem in Maltese theatres is that they do not have a backstage. MCC, which is just a courtyard that has been roofed over, has no backstage either, unless one uses the actual stage as backstage and creates a stage in the orchestra pit.

The Piano plans show that the police station will be pulled down and that a space will be created underneath the space next to St Catherine's church, to serve as the Green Room for the open-air theatre. But it seems no one in the audience knew about this.

Dr Cremona suggested that the space now occupied by the Yellow Garage, which will be turned over to Parliament, should be dug deeper and used by the open air theatre for

the storage of props, rehearsal rooms and the like. (Later on, in a throwaway remark that brought the house down, Dr Cremona impishly suggested swopping Parliament for the open-air theatre).

Besides, with the theatre being open-air, would people have to rehearse in the sun and in full view in the early afternoon?

She also listed the hi-tech screens and surroundings of the proposed theatre but said that short-term one must do something about noise pollution such as festa fireworks, the noise in the middle of the town, bothering the neighbours. Long-term, one may hope that the theatre will one day be enclosed in a glass case. There would be more input all along in this vein.

Dr Cremona's final point was that the atrium is split into two by the ticketing office. There is likewise no space for a proper shop, a library and for selling theatre merchandise. She also spoke about Carnival and said Carnival should go back to its original space, St George's Square.

The next speaker, artist and lecturer Raphael Vella, in a riveting speech, said Valetta cannot live on memories only, nor can Malta. The people living in Malta now have a different view of things. Like all new things, the Piano proposal is difficult for people to understand as they have interiorised the traditions they were born in.

Dr Vella enthused over the City Gate segment of the proposal. Later generations of Maltese and visitors will view Piano's City Gate as an icon of contemporary art. In it, Piano is not just an architect but also a sculptor. City Gate is to Piano what Ronchamp is to Le Corbusier. Entering Valetta will mean walking through sculpture.

Although there will be limited space for the visual arts in the open-air theatre, the use of hi-tech screening on the translucent walls of the theatre can turn the streets around the theatre into a unique experience. The ditch too can become a space for the exhibition of sculptures, though Dr Vella hoped not another collection of monuments but rather a celebration of change.

Alison White, president of the Malta Dance Council, was the first speaker to question the basics of the Piano proposal. For 67 years, this country hoped for the restoration of the Opera House to its former glory. There is an abundance of talent in Malta, which can flourish if given the right incentive. She criticized the open-air theatre concept and asked where rehearsals would be held. Would not the stage be slippery with dew? Would the companies have to bring in their own lighting with them?

She then turned on Parliament, which is used by 65 people for seven months of the year. A Parliament at City Gate will be a waste of space for the people of Malta who could, in that space, have had a multi-use space for artistic creations, which could bring people to Valetta and attracts tourists as well.

Kenneth Zammit Tabona, the opinion-writer and artist, made it amply clear that without roofing and noise blockage, the theatre will be a waste of money. Malta's two theatres cannot function: one is too small, the other was never meant to be a theatre. A recent concert by the world-famous Arditti Quartet held in the courtyard of The Palace had to stop in the middle of a Bartok concerto to let the Kalkara people let off their kaxxa infernali for seven long minutes.

He then pointed to the block of flats at City Gate and asked: will these people watch from their balconies and disrupt performances?

Mario Frendo, the artistic director of the Malta Arts Festival, followed by Adrian Mamo, chairman of the Malta Arts Council, injected a certain amount of official thought in the debate. While admitting the equal validity of those who want the old Opera House rebuilt and those who want a big arts building, Mr Mamo saw more the validity of an open-air space as this would increase accessibility and perhaps raise the number of theatre-going public. Forty thousand people enter Valletta every day: there may be a way of enticing them, through sophisticated technologies, to give more space to the arts in their lives. People must not be afraid of the rain. When he recently showed the Piano proposals to the director of Globe Theatre, he was told that last year 50 performances were held in the rain and only one was stopped.

But it was only when the debate was given to the floor that it became vibrant and controversial.

Lino Attard, chairman of the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra had barely started when he asked whether we have open spaces for the arts in Malta and referred to Ta' Qali when he was stopped by Dr Cremona who referred to the Ta' Qali 'Greek Theatre' as rubbish. Its incline is wrong and it is made of concrete: the only solution for it is to blow it up. Besides, Ta' Qali is Ta' Qali and Valletta is Valletta.

Mr Attard then asked whether the orchestra would be playing in the rain and was told that sometimes, even La Scala performances were put on without a cover. Mr Attard himself said that the Malta Philharmonic did play, in Brno, during a storm but said people are not used to this here.

Mr Zammit Tabona said 12 years ago the Malta Philharmonic split with the Manoel Theatre and it is still without a home. Manoel Theatre is too small and MCC is not meant for concerts. This is a scandal.

Francesca Abela Tranter, for the dance sector, said all her life she has been waiting for something to be done to the Opera House ruins. The dance sector has no funding and it is so expensive to hire out a venue that she has stopped looking for one.

With the proximity of Parliament there will be additional problems due to security, parking, and so on. When Renzo Spiteri took part in the Strada festival recently, he was forced to stop at 10.30pm.

Felix Busuttill said we must thank Renzo Piano that we have a theatre for the months of July and August but what about the other months? Besides, what about insurance cover if a performance has to be cancelled because of rain? If this space is soundproofed and has air-conditioning, we can even have matinees.

Nanette Brimmer for MADC said they stopped using San Anton for their summer Shakespeare plays because it cost Lm1300 to rent. Then, through MAC, they took part in the Arts Festival. But even that stopped as MAC brought in foreign companies.

Mr Frendo intervened and called this arrogance. The company MAC brought in was none other than the Globe Touring Company, which cost less than MADC.

Alan Meadows said Malta has a backstage problem. Before Parliament was imposed, one could have hoped for a bigger performing arts centre with a footprint covering all Freedom Square and the Opera House ruins serving as the foyer. But this is what is being offered: one has to compromise and see what one can fit in within the space that is being offered.

Theresa Vella from the Museums Visual Arts sector said the performing arts depend on sustainability: the 40,000 who enter Valletta every day can be brought to appreciate art and culture. But Dr Cremona was adamant: no one in the performing arts sector can ever dream it can survive without public funds.

Another person from the dance sector said the government is not maintaining its own theatres properly. The floor of the stage both at the Manoel and at MCC needs changing. At MCC the curtain fell three times during performances and one has to bring in extra lights. Will the Piano buildings suffer from the same lack of maintenance?

Mr Zammit Tabona said the sane solution would be for Parliament to go to MCC where the St John's tapestries can be exhibited in the long halls. As a theatre, MCC is hopeless, especially its acoustics.

Ms Abela Tranter here suggested that all arts practitioners go out on strike, to which Ms White added that the people would be the ones paying for all this, so it is right to go out and protest. We are already taxed up to the hilt as it is: Malta is one of the highest taxed countries in Europe.

With that, and with Ms Abela Tranter asking where the minister was and why she was not present, everyone trooped out for a welcome cup of coffee.
