

Renzo Piano's City Gate

Parliament on Freedom Square; Open-air theatre on ruins

Mark Micallef



**The Opera House ruins along South Street, Valletta.
Photo: Matthew Mirabelli**

The old opera house site will be converted into an open-air theatre that will incorporate the bombed ruins according to plans by Italian architect Renzo Piano to be unveiled this week.

The plans envisage a 1,200-seat roofless theatre, built around the ruins and other remains stored elsewhere over the years. It will all be enhanced with state-of-the-art technology that will give the place the scenographic and acoustic properties expected from a contemporary theatre.

"We keep the soul of the opera house," he says in an interview published today ahead of the official unveiling of his plans on Saturday. "So we don't steal that noble function that is cultural... The only thing is that this is not going to be in a building with a roof... I think this is going to be one of the most magic places in the Mediterranean... "

The world-renown architect was the one to persuade the government not to construct a new Parliament building on the old opera house site.

"I think it would have been a big mistake not to have it (a theatre) there," he says, pointing out that, besides being a shame not to reserve the old theatre exclusively for culture, the site would have been too small for a new Parliament.

Instead, the new Parliament will be on Freedom Square. The first floor of the planned building will appear to "fly" over the ground floor, which will have an element of transparency, to reveal St James Cavalier and a garden being planned there.

"We don't want to make a monumental Parliament... this is not the spirit. It's about welcoming people; about having spaces that are not hermetic, inaccessible. We want people to get into Valletta and feel how open and transparent Parliament is, especially on the ground floor."

The details on City Gate are more sketchy but Mr Piano speaks of a garden in St James Ditch that will give access to the city through a new lift.

The bridge leading to City Gate will likely be reduced to the original size in order to give a better sense of entering a fortified city. In the ditch, Mr Piano is planning a garden, which he hopes will turn out to be a special attraction.

Speaking during an interview on Radio 101 yesterday, the Prime Minister said the City Gate finalised plans should be acceptable to everyone, although compromises had to be made. Even he had to compromise on certain aspects but he was "very happy" with at least 80 per cent of the final proposal.

"This is decision time. It is not the time for more discussions. We've been discussing this for at least 20 years. My aim is to ensure that what should have been done in these past 60 years will finally happen now and Valletta will be given the dignity it deserves," he said.

Excerpts of the interview can be seen on www.timesofmalta.com. Extensive parts of it will be uploaded this evening.

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Comments

Joseph Galea (6 hours, 29 minutes ago)

...and so it starts! The plans have not been published yet and already the naysayers are out in force. Some continue to insist to rebuild what never really belonged in Valletta. Others harp on about 'dishonouring Maltese Architects' (while no Maltese Architects seem to be protesting) etc. etc. etc. Keeping the ruins acknowledges an event in Malta's history - good or bad - and the ruins have been there so long that it seems a sacrilege to remove them now. Retaining them makes historical sense. As for the rest of the plans, they have not been published yet, so let's reserve judgment, keep an open mind and hope and pray that the current state of affairs does not continue for another 60 years.

Mario Tabone-Vassallo (8 hours, 30 minutes ago)

Dal-genju ta' l-arkitettura jew zbalja meta hareg bl-ewwel pjani jew qed jizbalja bil-piani ta' issa. Ma jaghmilx sens li d-darbtejn kellu ragun u holoq l-ahjar soluzzjoni ghal Bieb il-Belta meta z-zewg proposti huma hekk differenti. Li dan juri hu, li hu fallibli u bil-kbir. Milli smajt s'issa, fil-fehema tieghi [u jien ukoll fallibli] rega' ghasadha

L Debono (9 hours, 37 minutes ago)

Valetta was built with a lot of pride and it was a state of the art cit of the 1500's. Kings from all over Europe and even the pope contributed to the building of Valetta. We know that it was well ahead of its time and even the buildings that were built after the departure of the Knights had a strong historic character. Why do the Maltese people have to settle for any thing less than the original building? IMO a historic work of art like the old opera house should be replaced by nothing less than the same qualities. A roofless theater is not the same.

With modern technology rebuilding the old opera house is not as difficult as when it was originally built. Leaving ruins scattered around and changing the original plans would demonstrate inferiority not pride and accomplishment. Rebuilding a masterpiece like this would certainly be a huge achievement for the Maltese people and would also preserve the immense history of the Nation.

joseph camilleri (12 hours, 18 minutes ago)

Why is it that we have to have a piece meal project? Why not consider the valletta and sea ports projects in a holistic manner? Unless one considers the big picture, expressing oneself on a single project is like commenting on one piece of jigsaw puzzle.

I tend to think that government's modus operandi is driven by what can be completed by next election time, and thus opt for the piece meal approach. How sad indeed!

Galea. L (12 hours, 48 minutes ago)

Pauline Borg

Huwa ta' dizunur ghal Malta u aktar u aktar ghal Gonzi li jinjora periti Maltin biex jilghaq perit barrani maghruf kemm huwa maghruf. Tal misthija.

Marvin Mizzi (12 hours, 58 minutes ago)

This is decision time. It is not the time for more discussions. We've been discussing this for at least 20 years. My aim is to ensure that what should have been done in these past 60 years will finally happen now and Valletta will be given the dignity it deserves," he said. So imposition time so even if our city is going to be ruined we just cannot speak!!!!!!!

B Agius (13 hours, 37 minutes ago)

Why would we want to keep ruins caused by a german bomb in the entrance to valletta? And build another building on one of the few open spaces the city has ? One has to hold judgement until all of the plans are seen and understood. But you get this feeling that things are going from bad to worse.

Gabriel A Pellegrini (14 hours, 10 minutes ago)

I am all out for the rebuilding of the Opera House, however if this is not to be why not honour our own people like Antonio Sciortino and build perhaps on a smaller scale his master piece project of the Monument to unkown Warrior.

Pauline Borg (14 hours, 57 minutes ago)

Kemm tinsab ecitata naqra din l-intervista - huwa ta'unur kbir li Malta tilqa b'ideja miftuha l-perit ta fama internazzjonali Renzo Piano biex jaghti lura d-dinjita li din il-kapitali jisthoqila...ejjew Maltin nintefaw wara dan il-progett li sa fl-ahhar ha jsir...fuq din mieghek jien Prim....

D. Scerri (15 hours, 16 minutes ago)

"We want people to get into Valletta and feel how open and transparent Parliament is"

LMAO!!
