

## Extension to St John's will 'safeguard' treasures



The foundation released pictures to show that the priceless collections are being inadequately stored, rather than displayed, due to lack of space.

The primary aim of the proposed extension of the St John's Co-Cathedral museum is to safeguard the popular Valletta tourist attraction and its treasures, according to the church's foundation. In a detailed statement the foundation said the project, which has attracted controversy, will significantly ease visitor congestion inside St John's and help conserve the church - which has become the main cultural tourist attraction, drawing some 450,000 visitors per year.

It has made two proposals: the construction of a three-storey building on the courtyard along Merchants Street to provide additional space and a canteen at roof level, or extending the co-cathedral's museum by excavating chambers underneath St John's Street and connecting them to existing underground water reservoirs.

But the environmental NGO Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar said Malta Environment and Planning Authority's planning director had described the excavation project as "a non starter" due to the risk of potential damage to the cathedral's foundations. On the other hand he said the authority would consider the proposal to cover the knights' cemetery with a glass ceiling, FAA said.

However, the foundation has defended the proposed extension, saying it would never risk any real or potential damage to St John's or any of its possessions.

This was reiterated yesterday when the foundation said an independent environmental impact assessment would be carried out to ensure there was no risk to the cathedral or its adjacent historical buildings.

It said that it has an obligation to retain and promote the sacred character of the co-cathedral "as primarily a House of God and a place of worship", adding that the extension would relieve the church of the periodic congestion of visitors.

Giving details of the extension, the foundation said the cisterns in front of the cathedral would not be destroyed, but rather cleaned and opened to visitors as part of the new museum.

The foundation said that the existing museum consisted of a number of rooms built in the 1960s to cater for a few thousand visitors a year, and did not contain the spaces and facilities that a museum of its importance required and deserved.

"Priceless collections and treasures are not being exhibited in a manner which is informative, educational or even pleasurable to visitors.

Priceless collections of artefacts in storage are being hidden from view and in certain cases even damaged."

It said it was prepared to meet any NGO or interested body to explain the dynamics of its proposal, which it described as an "important national project of an unprecedented cultural magnitude".

Din l-Art Helwa yesterday expressed conditional support for the St John's development, saying that with appropriate safeguards and careful attention to any structural or archaeological issues, the proposal deserved "further study".

It said in a statement that it favours a search for solutions to increase the exhibition spaces of the museum.

"The public, as well as visitors, stand to benefit from the display of a larger number of artefacts, especially considering the exceptional quality and historic importance of these objects...

"It is imperative that the collection of original artefacts of St John's is kept together and not dispersed in other museums or locations.

"The collection is unique and should be kept together in its entirety. This also supports the (foundation's) attempt to find ways to enlarge the existing exhibition spaces at St John's."

## Comments

Jonathan Farrugia (2 weeks, 3 days ago)

Does anyone really believe that tourists will be pleased to visit the Co-Cathedral, see part of its collection in the present Museum, then go out, walk left on St.John's Street, walk left again on Merchants' Street, cross St.Lucia Street, wade through the Monti hawkers (that would be a shock!), turn right on Merchants' Street and see what's left of the collection in a building that has no connection with the Co-Cathedral?

Does anyone really believe they would?

By the way, no one has said the 'palazzo' being proposed is government or Church property. So the Co-Cathedral will have to buy it from its present owners.

Which would be more waste of money to house part of the collection in an inferior and unconnected place that no one would visit.

Let's talk reason here and not obsession with changing nothing.

Enlarging the Co-Cathedral Museum as proposed will be a boon for the Co-Cathedral's collection that is now hidden or shown in very limited and inappropriate space.

That's why Din l-Art Helwa declared:

" It is imperative that the collection of St.John's is kept together and not dispersed in other locations. The collection is unique and should be kept together. "

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M Camenzuli (3 weeks, 1 day ago)

@ Astrid Vella:

Elsewhere I have replied to your same points.

In short, museums abroad do develop.

The Louvre and the British Museum immediately come to mind.

In the Co-Cathedral proper, we walk over the gravestones.

With a proper visitor centre and an extension of the museum in the annex, at least we would not be walking over the gravestones there.

A 'palazzo' you suggest is no alternative.

As Din l-Art Helwa said, the entire Co-Cathedral collection should be kept together.

The collection was mostly donated or commissioned specifically for the Co-Cathedral and it would make no sense dispersing it.

The 'palazzo' you suggest is at present a pizzeria with no connection with the Co-Cathedral.

Do you know there is already a shop in the Co-Cathedral's museum even as at present?

Astrid Vella (3 weeks, 1 day ago)@M.Camenzuli: the Louvre case does not relate to the St.John's situation.Roofing-over the courtyard hardly makes it an artistic or architectural work of IM Pei calibre. As regards the British museum, in spite of all the space you mention,the British Museum collection is dispersed all over the UK and the Foundation is refusing to consider an extension to a building just feet away.

However many are missing the most important aspect. Unlike the British Museum or Louvre, the courtyard is a sacred graveyard, the last resting place of national heroes, the Knights who fell to defend Malta during the Great Siege.Can you imagine a shop being built against London's Cenotaph or the Abraham Lincoln monument? Or a café within the railings of Westminster Abbey or Paris' Les Invalides? Where is our dignity? Why are we so ready to sell off our national pride? We would be the laughing-stock of Europe.

You accuse of short-sightedness. What could be more short-sighted than the destruction of underground heritage WHEN ALTERNATIVES, recommended by the highest heritage authorities exist? These passages are not only our heritage, they are also another potential tourist attraction. Their destruction is surely the most short-sighted and vandalistic act of all.

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M Camenzuli (3 weeks, 2 days ago)

Someone mentioned the Louvre in related posts: its pyramid having been controversial and now accepted as a landmark in its own right. I would add the British Museum as well.

The British Museum's most recent and significant development was the Great Court, a huge glass canopy designed by Norman Foster who has been celebrated for it since. It was opened in 2000 and is now the largest covered square in Europe.

The Great Court was not the only development undertaken at the British Museum but is the apex of continuous change in the Museum.

This is what we need to be: forward-looking about the great heritage we enjoy rather than short-sightedly keeping anything and everything as it is. If we are myopic, we risk hiding the treasures of St John's just because we're afraid of doing precisely what those who bequeathed us St John's did – develop for the better rather than leaving everything as it is.

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Franco Farrugia (3 weeks, 2 days ago)

Those who are in agreement with building over the Courtyard, simply have no idea what they are talking about. How can you destroy a beautiful and important part of the Cathedral in order to have a museum for artefacts and a cafeteria at the top? Can't you see that this is the wrong way to setting priorities?

Are you sure you know which Courtyard we are talking about, if this project were to come to fruition?

@ Ms Montebello - DLH is giving a RESERVED approval, ONLY for the St John's Square excavations, NOT for building over the Courtyard.

@ Mr Abela - Valletta is a walled city, and so it is different from Paris. The Louvre is a Museum fullstop! It is not a Cathedral. The construction of the Louvre was only criticised for its aesthetic appearance, not for anything that had to be demolished and destroyed forever through its construction, as would happen if the Courtyard had to be built upon.

Mr Galea's suggestions may be worked on, no?

Let us see if we can find some building, very close to the Cathedral, which can serve as an extension.

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Mandy Montebello (3 weeks, 2 days ago)

With Din l-Art Helwa giving its support to this project, it is clear that the proposals of St John's Foundation are positive for a most important national monument.

Very interestingly, Din l-Art Helwa said:

" It is imperative that the collection of original artefacts of St John's is kept together and not dispersed in other museums or locations.

The collection is unique and should be kept together in its entirety.

This also supports the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation's attempt to find ways to enlarge the existing exhibition spaces at St John's. "

Which goes to show that level-headed appreciation of the proposed project should bear in mind that the collection was donated to or made specifically for St John's Co-Cathedral and should thus be kept there.

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L Galea (3 weeks, 2 days ago)

How about the Foundation buying the neighbouring bank building and other properties in Merchants street and possibly in St Lucia street (Gold sellers shops) and develop these as an extension of the museum even if it has to carry out alterations instead of building another extension?

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Charles Abela (3 weeks, 2 days ago)

As far as damage to foundations etc..I think that can quickly be solved by experts in the field.

As to the overhall idea it's brilliant...we simply have to be bold...Architect .Pen's.... Pyramids at the Louvre..caused an uproar at the very idea.....today they are simply accepted with pride by all Parisians...and the millions who visit the Museums.

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