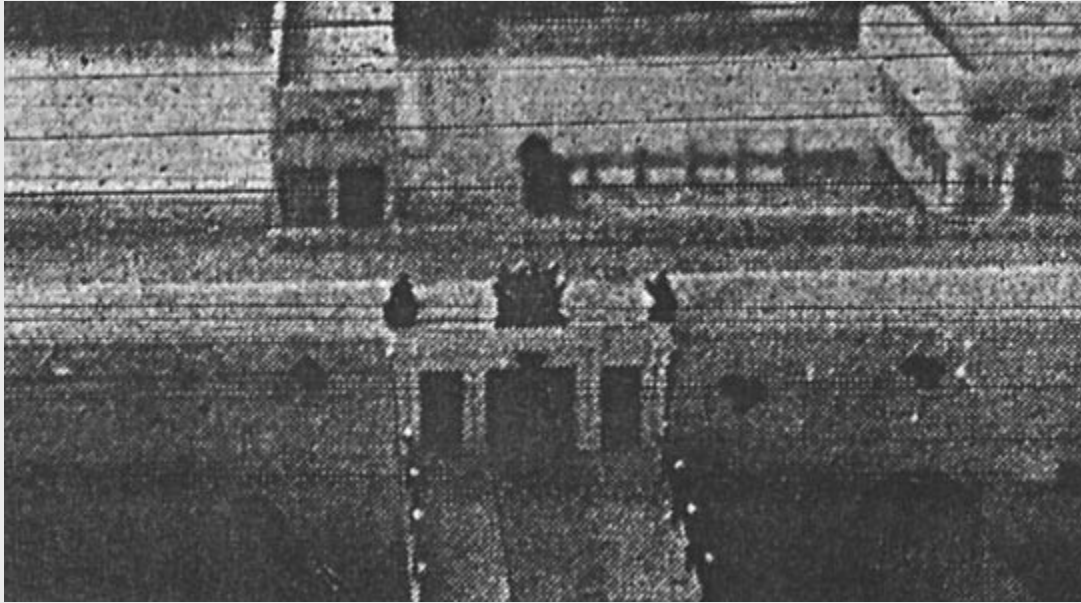


# The gate triumphant

Chris Attard



The model of the new City Gate, exhibited during the 1963 Trade Fair  
(The Sunday Times, June 7, 1964).

The knell for old Porta Reale tolled at the 1963 Trade Fair Exposition, exactly 110 years after it was completed. A detailed model of the new Valletta main gate, displayed at the Government Pavilion, clearly explained what the architect had envisaged. The idea proposed was radical, iconoclastic, simple and essential.

The proposed model should have stirred up some heated discussion along with teasing public opinion. But save for a certain G.Cini, who personally wrote to the government tourist board urging a thorough rethinking prior to the demolition of the old gate, it virtually passed by unheeded.

Immobilised by the crucial decision whether to vote for Malta's independence or not, the Maltese failed to take notice of this seemingly trivial issue. Voices of dissent, sometimes outrightly disapproving of the project, were only raised months later. Too late as it turned out, for by the time, all the important decisions had been taken and work was well underway.

The construction of a new city gate should have been only a fraction of a wider and more ambitious project, comprising a large piazza and the rebuilding of the much maligned Opera House, devastated by the Germans during the war. Any account of the building of City Gate has thus to go back, at least, by another 10 years.

A 1953 competition for the redesigning of the Opera House, but in consideration of the whole area, was won, subject to some minor alterations, by the Italian Dott. Ing. Marcello Zavellani-Rossi. The spirit animating the winning project is very much under the spell of the Mussolini-era rationalist architecture.

The perspective view of the Zavellani-Rossi plan looks, for all intents, like an idea culled out of Rome's E42 area, better known as the Eur. It has the same eeriness and imposing solemnity of a De Chirico piazza. The large equestrian statue clearly delineated, and the smaller statues set within the square niches of the proposed building in the piazza are so unmistakably similar to those at Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana at E42, the so-called square coliseum.

Valletta's rigorously geometrical layout abides, after all, by the myth of the Renaissance ideal city. And considering that Fascist Italy believed that it was experiencing a kind of a new Renaissance, the Mussolini-reeking Zavellani-Rossi project together with the 16th-century city should have made a well-suited match.

Regardless of the clamour, nothing came out of the competition. In 1955, there was a change in government. Soon it was the process of Integration that held sway public opinion and the rebuilding of the Opera House drolly receded into the background. On April 3 of that same year, Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Dom Mintoff, decided to shelve the project. In a country still scarred by war, the strong financial backing needed for the rebuilding of the theatre and its surrounding area could be more sensibly used. That was Mintoff's verdict and it soon came to pass.

Mintoff's integration with the British failed, and in 1962, Giorgio Borg Olivier, just re-elected Prime Minister, started negotiations for Malta's independence. One of the first projects launched during this legislature zoned in, once again, on Valletta's entrance area. The Zavellani-Rossi plan, after 10 years, saw once more the light of day. This time, however, City Gate, rather than the Opera House, was the main focus.

Understandably, since it was his Opera House and his piazza that were to be built, the job for designing the gate was given to Zavellani-Rossi.

In turn, Zavellani-Rossi carried it out with the architect Alziro Bergonzo (1906-1996), who, for all intents, seems to have taken in hand the lion's share of the project.

This architect from Bergamo was an important exponent of Rationalist architecture as exemplified by the Fascist regime. Time and again Bergonzo was directly commissioned by the party to design and build case del fascio and littorie, large edifices built for the dissemination and imposition of Fascist ideology.

Perhaps, his best is Case Littoria in Bergamo. In spite of all his political affiliations, Bergonzo was an interesting architect. He was intensely prolific, designing hotels, schools, private houses, funerary chapels, fountains and piazzas. His are the designs for the Manzoni Theatre in Milan and the Church of the Three Martyrs in Rimini.

Architecture is the art of the state. That was the aphorism that art historian Pietro Maria Bardi came up with in 1931, during the second exhibition of rationalist architecture organised by its

main nucleus, the MIAR. With which Bardi meant that the forms and ideas propagated through architecture should correspond to the forward-looking ideology of Fascist Italy.

It is a baleful paradox that the first important building project in independent Malta should have connotations with such totalitarian rhetoric. And yet, the thorough efficiency with which the Public Works Department brought the project to completion, gives the strange sensation that this could only have been some uncanny spillover of totalitarian modus-operandi. For in just over a year, from June 1964 to August 1965, the site was cleared, rebuilt and ready for public use.

Under any other circumstance, the clearing would have required all those meagre months. The issuing of requisition orders for the vacation of buildings on the site was certainly a tough job. Tenants had to leave their houses and shop owners had to suddenly stop short their thriving businesses. As was expected, some put up a fight.

The owner of Café Mondial, repeatedly requested an alternative space, and eventually did manage to reach an agreement of sorts. He was temporarily given an area in the old, damaged Valletta train station.

The project was further compounded by the proposed building adjacent to Palazzo Ferreria. The building was originally earmarked to house a large administration block for the Statistics and Public Works departments, a proposal that led some to declare that the Public Works Department, as the sole executor of the project, had an evident vested interest.

The director of Malta Development Ltd had, however, another enterprising suggestion for the utilisation of the site. He put forward the idea of building a large supermarket at basement and ground levels, two storeys of offices, and a further five/six storeys to house a large first class hotel; a project which was estimated to cost some £1,500,000. Both ideas were discarded.

Nothing was done to save the old gate. Letters were written on newspapers lamenting the loss of the old gate and subscribing to the general belief that the new gate was not really up to scratch.

The Chamber of Architects lashed out at it from all fronts while, during a press conference on March 27, 1965, its members, through their president and spokesman, architect R. De Giorgio, washed their hands clean from any involvement in it.

The chamber deemed the design 'inadequate, unsuitable and aesthetically incorrect, an architectural flop, a monstrosity'.

It considered the choice of Bergonzo as arbitrary and discriminatory. De Giorgio accused the ministry of turning a deaf ear to their constructive criticism, and of opting to rush headlong with the original, limp, plan.

The Minister of Works, Dr J. Spiteri, argued that the 'simple and sober lines (of the gate) befit the austerity of the bastions'. This seems to be quite an objective and reasonable view.

The new City Gate, admittedly, has its triumphant iconography and, even though reminiscent of Italian architecture under a totalitarian government, its clean unfussiness and understated celebratory characteristics strike a good balance between cool aloofness and style.

Its pure, geometrical forms present a blank canvas leaving us the necessary breathing space to project upon it our own ideas and beliefs. And to start with, artists and sculptors can come up with some interesting ideas for the creation of two reliefs to fit within the twin blind roundels on the gate's façade. After all, it was always Bergonzo's intention to alleviate the sober lines of his design with the addition of bronze reliefs and escutcheons.

We must look at the gate with a fresh and unbiased frame of mind, irrespective of all that its stylistic qualities may stand for. If the gate looks rather nondescript, it is the area surrounding it that is mostly to blame: the appalling bus terminus, the featureless space of Freedom Square and the doleful remains of the Opera House.

A clever architect can surely incorporate Bergonzo's city gate in the long overdue face-lift for Valletta's entrance area. The gate, moreover, is one of the very few, if not the only, remaining example of rationalist architecture in Malta. The Italians did not tear down the Eur, or any other of the myriad structures built by Mussolini, because they are evocative of an unsavoury era in their history. Instead, they acknowledge and exploit their peculiar beauty.

The Eur was, and still is, loved by acclaimed film directors Fellini, Pasolini, Antonioni, Bertolucci and Julie Taymor, just to mention a few. Maybe Bergonzo's city gate may one day, likewise, draw here some important cinematographic project. Who knows?

By simply pulling it down, we would certainly contribute nothing towards the improvement of the area.