

Editorial

To roof or not to roof

Comments on the Renzo Piano project were expected and desirable. After all, once implemented it is likely to change the face of the entrance to Valletta forever - or at least for as long as many of us will spend on this earth. And the last time someone made an alteration to City Gate it was to create an abomination which potential bombers could have been forgiven for thinking had already been destroyed.

If there is one thing everyone agrees upon, it is that there is need for change. The area which currently houses the bus terminus - recently added to the project - is dirty and dilapidated, the gate is garish, Freedom Square is an oil-soiled car park, and the ruins of the old opera house resemble a ghetto. So if the government got one decision right, it was the biggest one of all: that something needed to be done.

It also made the right decision in engaging Mr Piano to design and oversee the project. Valletta, at least the section that requires change, deserves to bear the stamp of such an innovative architect - particularly when he is working in close collaboration with, and when necessary under the direction of, the Maltese.

Did the government, however, make the right decision when it decided to go for a parliament building rather than, as is by far the most popular of the mooted alternatives, some kind of national theatre? There have been some calm and sensible arguments to suggest that it did not. And our politicians will find it hard to escape from the perception that they are doing something for themselves rather than for the nation.

The mistake several people are making, however - and this includes the 128 artists who signed a petition, as well as the utterly ridiculous proposal by Mario Philip Azzopardi for 100,000 members of the public to pay 33 cents a day for the next five years - is to connect the cause that the parliament building be replaced by a theatre with the issue of the old opera house having a roof.

In the case of the former, it is the government that has been the driving force. In fact, the original brief to Piano's team failed to even contemplate any kind of theatre. In other words, the Italian architect's say has only been in relation to design, not on the purpose of the building; although his opinion is that theatre facilities would take up too much space in that area and obscure the entrance.

In the case of the latter, Piano's team have come to the conclusion that the best solution is to have an open air theatre, because, they say, this will give a sense of space to the project and retain the character of the old ruins. It is a misconception that the site can become an indoor venue by simply adding a roof. For this to happen it must be built from scratch, with thick walls and acoustics to match.

The fireworks issue aside, open air in a country like ours has many advantages, not least cost. And if one of the world's leading architects is of the opinion that if Malta is to have a theatre it should be located elsewhere - he has some experience, since he

is building one in Athens on a site six times the size of the opera house site - then who are we to argue?

Comments

Mario Philip Azzopardi (3 days, 2 hours ago)

NEW YORK MAGAZINE:

Libeskind has been all but routed from the project; he is responsible only for about 4 percent of the estimated square-footage. Other than the museum at the edge of the reduced pit and the general outline of the site plan, there is little left of the Libeskind scheme visually or conceptually. Five wildly different architectural signatures—Foster, Maki, Calatrava, Nouvel, Childs—do not add up to a coherent vision.

Read more: Daniel Libeskind - Ground Zero - WTC - New York Architecture Review http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/architecture/reviews/n_9348/#ixzz0gxdlfgq

My mistake. He was not fired. He was "routed" from the project.

Mario Philip azzopardi (3 days, 7 hours ago)

Please reference CBS, "60 minutes" 22nd February edition.

Joe Xuereb (3 days, 11 hours ago)

@ Charles Abela. There is proof positive that venue like the Colosseum had awnings to protect the people from the searing heat. This was entertainment round the clock remember. Theatres, Greek and Roman I have visited by the hundreds. They MAY HAVE HAD had awnings for protection from the elements, I haven't researched. One think is for sure. They were built in natural or excavated hollows to accommodate the required numbers depending on the extent of the town (see Ephesus, Aspendos, Epidauros - <http://web.kyoto-inet.or.jp/org/orion/eng/hst/greek/epidauro.html> - Pergamun/Bergama - <http://www.pbase.com/dosseman/image/28792077> - built on the flank of a hill, Aspendos(seating twenty thousand) - <http://www.whitman.edu/theatre/theatretour/aspendos/introduction/aspendoso.intro1.htm> - and scores and scores of others too numerous to mention. The Pianos of those days were experts at acoustics and did not have to worry about fireworks, traffic, aeroplanes, etc. I hope you get the point Abela. Isn't the internet wonderful. It could plunge you into the depths if you let it. It can uplift you to the heavens if you use your brains. Power to the people! and all that. Incidentally, I'am working-class because my blue-collared 'daddy' worked for a living. He introduced me to Hagar Qim as mere curiosity value.....and that's when it took off.

John Agius (3 days, 15 hours ago)

Eleanor Roosevelt: "Great minds discuss ideas; Average minds discuss events; Small minds discuss people" Malta version: "Great minds discuss results; Average minds discuss solutions; Small minds discuss justifications" Perhaps, one day this country manages to vision the results of its actions, avoid ignoring inevitable consequences and, Act , not simply pretend to be smart. With apologies to some.

v zammit (3 days, 15 hours ago)

Dear Editor. Good leader. Designs by masters have a motive and cannot be tampered with impunity. But I look forward to your paper commenting - it goes a long

way - on the location of Parliament; to my mind that it should be relocated, and the city gate concept - that the entrance needs restoration not building anew.

Albert Buttigieg (3 days, 16 hours ago)

'then who are we to argue?' We are only the people paying for it, but then, what does that matter?

Joan Nelson (3 days, 19 hours ago)

Has it been considered that the area of the old theatre, is now too small for our population!?

Parliament already has a building, but it does owe the public a new theatre.

Our much beloved, grand and historical Manoel Theatre is well attended but it is packed for days for most events which tells us that our population has outgrown it.

The space of the old theatre + the rare convenience of the space that Freedom Square square provides would serve the public well to support a larger scale of the same original plans. We owe it to our forefather who were proud of it, and will serve as a memorial to all that suffered the war. We owe it to ourselves who walked by its ruins all these years and wished it was still there. The ruins has stood as a reminder of the wrath of war. We can keep the memory alive and gain from it as well. Like the Manoel it will already have history backing it. Future generations thank us for our foresight. Best of all we will all get a chance to experience its marvel that was previously reserved for only aristocrats.

foresight

C.Scerri (4 days, 1 hour ago)

@ Mario Philip Azzopardi

Your info on the World Trade Tower is unfortunately full of inaccuracies.

Daniel Liebeskind was commissioned to lay out the master plan of the area - he was never sacked and the buildings that are at the moment being erected are still following his plan.

David Childs is the main architect of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and as project architect, he is responsible for the day-to-day design development.

The main controversy was not with the "people of New York" but with Larry Silverstein, leaseholder of the site (ironically he had signed a 99 year deal in July 2001). The controversy did not involve the aesthetics of the design but was more on the limited number of floors that were designated for office space, so basically on money. It is true that David Trump had also unveiled his own design that were basically a reconstruction of the two towers that just as a matter of information, were also the subject of controversy back in the late 60's when they were designed.

Joe Xuereb (4 days, 1 hour ago)

'Piano's team have come to the conclusion that the best solution is to have an open air theatre, because, they say, this will give a sense of space to the project and retain the character of the old ruins'. So the ruins of the old theatre is inspirational. And to maintain a sense of space and retain - for nostalgic purposes, maybe? - more than a nod to its main current characteristic, ie its rooflessness. I now think I've heard it all.

If the aim is to create a big roofless space for 'entertainment', why don't we find a field - easier said than done, from what I hear - and erect a kind of fence with chicken wire. In the arena we could have visiting bull-fighting spectacles (animal-lovers hopefully keeping their traps shut) and rodeos (ditto). Carmen would be a

suitable inauguration spectacle, requiring minimal production props. Maybe Albert Sturtevant could endorse this idea, never mind the rest.

Daphne Caruana Galizia (4 days, 3 hours ago)

@Mario Philip Azzopardi

David Childs, and not Daniel Libeskind, is the architect of New York's Freedom Tower. He was not dismissed. Frank Gehry and Santiago Calatrava designed entirely different buildings within the same complex on the site of the former World Trade Center. Gehry designed the World Trade Center cultural complex, while Calatrava designed the World Trade Center Transport Interchange. Neither architect was dismissed.

All three designs were subject to much controversy and debate, but to suggest, as you do, that

"New York then turned to Architects, Designers, Artists and ordinary citizens to contribute their ideas" is patently ludicrous.

A skyscraper of that magnitude cannot be designed by an artist, 'designer', or ordinary citizen - and that is quite apart from the fact that in the United States, at least, artists and designers are ordinary citizens and not more equal than others.

Your use of an initial capital letter for Architects, Designers and Artists (thereby turning them into the proper nouns which they are not) while using lower case for ordinary citizens, says more about your approach to democracy than you would like to let on.

Mario Philip Azzopardi (4 days, 4 hours ago)

"we're so afraid of the freedom it brings"

Bad syntax

I meant

We're so afraid of the freedom the shedding of colonialism brings.

Mario Philip Azzopardi (4 days, 4 hours ago)

More Ammo: The BOLSHOI in Moscow was closed down five years ago. It was "sinking" and according to architects it had to be demolished. The people rose up and instead of building a new theatre, they convinced the powers that be to save it by placing the whole structure on stilts, and re working the foundation. They are now in year 5 of a total RESTORATION of the ICONIC theatre of the city. I could go on and on. Why this unabashed stubbornness. What's behind your tunnel vision? It cannot be just party politics. I will really really give you the benefit of the doubt.

Mario Philip azzopardi (4 days, 4 hours ago)

Daniel Libeskind (google this great international architect) was eventually dismissed from designing the new World Trade Centre in New York after public outcry. All details online.

Frank Gehry was next. Also dismissed.

Santiago Calatrava was #3

New York then turned to "Architects, Designers, Artists and ordinary citizens to contribute their ideas. "

Presently there are 6 different Architects whose ideas are to be incorporated into the new design.

So far 6 billion dollars spent

Progress after ten years: A very big hole in the ground. But Renzo Piano speaks and we all fall down. Our aspirations, our dreams, yes dreams, our heritage, our history, dashed to the ground. But then of course the Maltese are not like those unruly New Yorkers. The Maltese know their place in history. They will shut up and take it from all sides from the foreigner who is to be respected beyond fault.

Yes G Scerri. Colonialism is hard to shed off. We're so afraid of the freedom it brings.

apgrech (4 days, 5 hours ago)

The argument that I feel stands solid is: We had a very beautiful Opera House and the new one should be built to the same design. No Piano and no Gonzi can persuade me that a new design will be better than the original one.

Built it as it was. It was a gem.

george farrugia (4 days, 6 hours ago)

And I thought that there was only one person on this earth considered INFALLABLE. I was not aware that Enzo Piano joined this exclusive club. How ignorant of us, the many thousands harping for the old opera house to be rebuilt in its original exterior format - to even doubt his proposals.

Joan Nelson (4 days, 7 hours ago)

Has it been considered that the area of the old theatre might be too small for our population. We are basing a new theatre on one that existed pre-1945. Our population has exploded since. Our only beloved Manoel Theatre with all its glory and history, is usually booked solid for days for most events because we have outgrown it.

Our forefathers were so proud of the old theatre. We have faced its ruins for many years now serves as a reminder of the war each time we walk by. What better monument than then to rebuild, yet again, with all the pomp and history attached to it. It will be the right thing to do as a nation.

Parliament already has a big building. What our nation needs is a bigger theatre. The old theatre space plus the space of Freedom Square would better serve to build a theatre the size that will serve our growing population for generations to come, based on an extension of the previous plans. Future generations will marvel at our foresight and give everyone the chance to experience the splendour that was reserved only for the aristocrats. We all want this.

Charles Abela (4 days, 8 hours ago)

It is a very interesting note that throughout the whole of the Roman Empire, the building of open air theaters (different in their purpose from Amphitheaters) was the norm of the day. One can still find very well preserved Roman theaters anywhere in Europe, just to mention some just a few kilometers away from our shores one can still marvel at the ones in Taormina and Agrigento in Sicily, and Libya's "Leptis Magna". The magnificence of these buildings testifies the influence of Hellenistic/Roman culture, in the daily life of citizens.

g. scerri (4 days, 13 hours ago)

And if Piano speaks who are we to argue? The colonial mentality is alive and strong in Malta.

laurence schembri (4 days, 13 hours ago)

The Editor's arguments are valid, but please name another country without a National Opera House, There isn't any.