

## Valletta open-air theatre

You are going against the obvious, over 120 artistes tell Prime Minister

**Juan Ameen**



**Renzo Piano's model of the open-air theatre.  
Photo: Matthew Mirabelli.**

Over 120 artistes, directors and theatre crew of all ages, disciplines and genres called on the Prime Minister to rethink the planned open-air theatre in Valletta and replace it with one that fulfilled their needs.

Artistes of international and local repute, such as tenor Joseph Calleja, veteran actor Lino Farrugia, dancer Felix Busuttil and philosopher Fr Peter Serracino Inglott, came together to urge the government, in a letter, to consult them over the type of theatre that will be built.

In a statement attached to the letter, television director and playwright Mario Philip Azzopardi said the idea of an open theatre was a wrong one.

"Going against the obvious is tantamount to blatant arrogance that will ultimately prove disastrous and, at best, form part of the eternal cancerous weight of mediocrity," he said.

In less than 24 hours, 128 theatre lovers and critics signed the letter, which was delivered by hand to the Prime Minister yesterday afternoon.

They expressed their disappointment over the lack of consultation on the proposed open air theatre that forms part of the government's plans - drawn up by architect Renzo Piano - for City Gate.

The letter also contested a statement by Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi last week after a meeting with Mr Piano that an open-air theatre was a "new concept to Malta".

Maltese theatre practitioners had experience in the pitfalls and opportunities of open-air theatres but their advice was ignored, the letter said.

Describing the project as "interesting", the artistes said it was not a solution to the "huge shortcomings" found in other theatres but repeated and would lead to other problems.

Speaking about the open-air theatre, Mr Azzopardi said: "Having lived my life in the arts, I know the open-air theatre concept being presently considered is simply wrong. Wrong artistically, wrong technically, wrong environmentally."

The open-air theatre in Valletta would have a number of logistical and financial problems that would make the use of space as "successful" as the other open air theatre in Ta' Qali, the artistes added.

The letter was signed by actors, dancers, musicians, directors, choreographers, producers, crew and people actively involved in the Maltese performing arts scene.

## Comments

j ebejer (2 weeks, 1 day ago)

2. Architectural design is not about pretty pictures. It is about detailed research on different types of uses, on their requirements and also on the impacts such uses will have on urban spaces. The idea of the open air theatre came from Piano's design team and they have explained it as follows;

"A new, very light skin or façade will define the space, supported by a surrounding alignment of steel masts and columns. These will carry removable walls, lighting systems, acoustic and sound equipment, and shall give the space its specific identity during the staging of performances."

"..... performances can be held in the most extraordinary scenery of some of the city's best buildings. This "open air opera", if correctly equipped with the adequate systems of modern communication, light projection and controlled, directive electro-acoustic sound systems, will be very rare in the Mediterranean world and offer to many art groups an outstanding place to perform."

To me its sounds convincing. If Mr. Azzopardi has a problem with this then it is with the design team with whom he should argue.

Unless people try to see the whole picture, it will be very difficult for them to accept alternative ideas.

j ebejer (2 weeks, 1 day ago)

@ Mario Philip Azzopardi,

1. The difference between you and I is that we are seeing this project from two different perspectives. To me the theatre is not just a place for the performing arts. I see the open air theatre as part of the city of Valetta. It is at very strategic location.

The allocated uses will impinge on the activity and the vitality of the spaces around it. I believe the concept of the open air theatre is more likely to sustain activities in the urban spaces of Valletta than a fully fledged theatre.

Although it is referred to as a theatre, other productions will be put up within it. For example, most of the Notte Bianca musical performances would be well suited within the open air theatre. People with artistic sensitivity may describe such events as cheap and mediocre. For most other people these are popular events which draw the crowds.

I also like the idea of having an open public piazza within the site, when the theatre is not in use. The use of audio and the projection of images on the translucent wall elements will make this urban space all the more attractive and unique.

A. E. Abela (2 weeks, 1 day ago)

So apparently we have another two people who supports the open roof concept, so all together Mr. Piano, the PM and these two make four against the rest of the world. Valletta attracts a small number of what I call a 'particular tourist' and they solely come to appreciate the old historical buildings and the architectural design of this (till now) magnificent city. Any new buildings, alterations, extensions etc MUST, I repeat MUST conform to the current architectural design as always imposed and rightly so by MEPA and all other bodies involved when it comes to building structural works in Valletta. I will not go into the technicalities and space required for a world class theatre, since I am neither an artists nor an expert in this field, what I insist and emphasis is the conformity of the design which must blend with all other existing palaces/monuments. Business and activity in Valletta, thanks to the 'qabda gabelotti - politicians, that governed our country, past and present, has been reduced to this small number of 'particular tourists'. I think it would be fit for any gabelott politician to spoil this also. A legacy of Maltese politics.

Astrid Vella (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@JoeAzzopardi—since you lived in Valletta for 30 years it is very strange you claim that there are only 5 festas in the area when there are four in Valletta alone! Five sets of fireworks are let off on the Marsamxett side: Stella Maris, Nazarenu, Sacro Cuor, Gzira and Msida, plus the Valletta feasts of Karmnu, San Duminku, Santu Wistin and St. John's. I'm not familiar with each parish of the Grand Harbour side, but certainly there is Marsa, l-Isla, Bormla, Birgu & Kalkara. That makes at least 13 festas (one every summer weekend?) of bangs that often start on a Wednesday and climax on Saturday night.

Besides MTV there are also the Independence celebrations and other shows that are held on the Granaries.

As for Barrakka weddings, if the right wind carries their music right down to the Tal-Karmnu area on the other side of Valletta, how much more will they be heard 50 metres away at the Opera House site.

Still, scoff on. We have come to expect nothing more towards anyone who dares voice an opinion that varies in the least from the official spin. The fact that after the initial euphoria, even people like Fr. Peter SC are now seeing things in a different light is a bitter pill indeed.

Mario Philip Azzopardi (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

I wonder what background sustains arguments made by the likes of Joe Azzopardi, J Ebejer et al, who insist on refuting arguments that collectively represent years and years of experience in the field of theatrical expression. Have they ever produced, directed, performed, designed, created, staged, written, re-written, studied the arts, rehearsed, managed, technically supervised, acoustically designed, marketed, created light design, set designed, developed, financed theatre in their lives? I am ready to be educated by them.

Joseph Grech (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@Joe Azzopardi - So you are irresponsible enough to actually want a "roofless theatre" for Valletta? Is it the uniqueness you are after?

Are you unconcerned that Valletta will become one of the very few European capital cities without a beautiful - and practical - theatre building?

You try to denigrate the opinions of Ms. Astrid Vella rebutting her justified concerns with mere drivel. How unbecoming, how silly of you!

You make silly recommendations: "Why can't the new open theater even host part of the Jazz Festival?" I suppose you would expect residents living nearby - and owners of businesses close by to join the fun...and never mind the noise!

It is your puerile, shortsighted defence of the indefensible that does not merit a reply.

I appeal to the Hon. P.M. to reconsider and to put Valletta's needs above all else. He is still in time to avoid inflicting this serious blow on our capital city.

Andrew Camilleri (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

Joe Azzopardi: by any chance, are you one of those people who go to the theatre as a social occasion, i.e. to see and be seen, chat with friends and have a drink?

Because if you have ever been to a performance where outise noise interferes with the performance, you wouldn't excuse it the way you do!

j ebejer (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

This is what Fr. Peter wrote in the Sunday Times of 8th December 2008: "I am puzzled how after 60 years of bandying ideas about and international competitions with inconclusive results there are still those who clamour for more discussion. Instead, there should be just rejoicing that a decision has been firmly taken, even if it is not quite one's own desideratum. The final judgment can only belong to posterity."

<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20081207/opinion/gonzi-shows-his-mettle>

In spite of this, according to the Times the petitioners "expressed their disappointment over the lack of consultation on the proposed open air theatre that forms part of the government's plans."

I fully concur with Fr. Peter's view expressed in December 2008: we have been debating this site for far too long. The decision has been taken and Government should stick to it.

Joe Azzopardi (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@ Astrid Vella

How many summer weekends of Festa are there in the area? About 5.

MTV, Jazz Festival – How would be stupid enough to plan a performance in Valletta to coincide with these events?

Why can't the new open theater even host part of the Jazz Festival? Barrakka weddings? To reach the Opera House site the sound of such events would need to disturb at least a third of Valletta first.  
Has Astrid Vella counted the number of low flying airplanes over Valletta. I lived in the area for 30 years and was never particularly disturbed by these.  
All the other reasons put forward don't even deserve a reply.

Astrid Vella should also note that Festa bangs, noisy weddings, chatter and shouts are all aspects of our Mediterranean character which might add authenticity to any performance with a local context.

Anybody who feels the need to cut itself from the surrounding world to deliver a performance can use any of the other theaters in Valletta and leave us to enjoy the plaza during the day and a magical open theater during performances.

j ebejer (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@ Andrew Camilleri

There are several reasons why modern theatres take up more space than opera house of the past: (i) more floorspace per seat to provide more comfort (ii) more space for the stage to allow for larger productions and greater flexibility (ex revolving stage) (iii) a large flytower double the height of the stage (iv) workshop space for rehearsals (v) more space backstage for the comfort of performers (vi) space for services (ex air-conditioning)

Joseph Schembri (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

I do not think we need another theatre in Valletta. We have (more then) enough. And do not forget that we have to fork it out, before and after.

Andrew Camillleri (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

Can someone enlighten me as to how one hundred years ago in exactly the same space, grand opera was put on for a whole season in the same space for a huge number of people and now we cannot do the same? f anything, with modern technology, we need less space!

J Cardona (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@j ebejer

May I remind you, that the Royal Opera House site happens to conjoin with Freedom Square, therefore the argument of there not being enough space is ludicrous... There is actually enough space to build one of Europe's biggest opera houses (!! ) with all the facilities you could possibly ask for - if only you expand onto freedom square.

It is only the Parliment project that is getting in the way... and nobody asked for a new Parliment (PM aside) .... only a new Opera house!!

William Agius (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

It's all very clear that most of these objections reflect logic ,reason,and for a change the majority of everyone including most of the population as well as most MP's . But if the project had to stop to be better planned as everyone is requesting, when will it be ready????..... Probably NOT before next elections ...or could it ? Dear boss, please confirm and reconsider.

Alexander Pace Gouder (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@ ASTRID vELLA wHILST i WAS PREPARING MY OTHER COMMENT YOUR COMMENT APPEARED. fully agree with your report. That was a fantasitic project. But this project was shelved and this would have cost (do not know the % of Euro for the Theatre) but I am sure the amount would have been much less then the amount being spent for this open theatre.

victor pulis (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

We may as well forget about a roofed theatre for the simple reason that the original brief for the city gate project has been changed to the parliament project. Consequently, the funds earmarked for the theatre were channeled into the proposed parliament building and so both city 'gate' and the roofless theater were relegated to just after thoughts.

3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. 6 The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Genesis. 11:3-5

Sounds familiar?

Anna Marie Navarro (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

After having waited such a long time for the site to be rebuilt, we are going to have a theatre which the majority of the Maltese people are unhappy with, amongst whom our most distinguished ambassador tenor Joseph Calleja who performed in numerous theatres worldwide, therefore is accustomed to theatres of all shapes and sizes and a good number of artistes who yesterday signed the petition. The new concept of theatre does not suit our beloved island. This is not Central Park with its huge dimensions, where one can enjoy 'Shakespeare in Park' amongst other cultural events away from the noise of the city that never sleeps; what about our fireworks and bells ringing? We ought to be content with the limited space we have but at least let's maximise its potentiality. Let common sense prevail.

Astrid Vella (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@John Abdilla: without going into the Trevisan plans, the British theatre designers brought over by FrancisZammit Dimech years ago drew up plans for exactly what you describe: "An opera house large enough to cater for all the backstage requirements,the huge number of props,adequate space for a large amount of people" The seating capacity they proposed was 1,300 - 1,500 patrons.

Such a theatre could of course be enlarged if we did not have a parliament planted in Freedom Square rather than some of the other more suitable locations. Such locations like over the Main Guard, the Auberge de Baviere or Conference Centre would have the added advantage of allowing for projects that would leave a budget over for a larger theatre which would actually serve to provide employment and boost tourism - a win-win situation all round.

Such a project would also have the great advantage of legality, as it would not violate the legal Structure Plan which states: "Parliament and the Ministries will concentrate in the palaces and auberges of Valletta."

Oh but I forgot, what is legality? We can brush it aside at the stroke of a pen in Parliament.

Astrid Vella (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@ Pierre Agius: the difference is that the Knights planned their capital with great sense. Before writing off all the opinions here but yours I would suggest you read the Knights' ten building regulations whose sense and enforcement puts our present administrators to shame.

@ Joe Azzopardi: "A valid artist should be able to use what is offered to him/her and use creativity to offer something new and challenging" That certainly sounds very impressive and interesting. Now, let's see what it boils down to. Creating a spectacle or event that incorporates

Festa bands

Music from nearby events like MTV, Jazz Festival, Upper Barrakka weddings & events..

Aeroplanes passing overhead.

Chatter and shouts of pedestrians

Wind, rain, possibility of thunder and lightning.

Evening due jeopardising dancers' safety and musicians' instruments.

Even performances at the much more protected Palace courtyard ground to a halt in the face of these creative challenges this summer, let alone a completely open theatre. Maybe Mr. Azzopardi could illuminate us how many his quality performers could work the above into their performances, time and time again.

Joseph V. Grech (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

Maltese society should thank all those who signed this petition. The Hon. Prime Minister will do well to heed the wishes and the concerns of the majority of the Maltese.

To err is human but .....

Dear Prime Minister, it is never too late to rethink. I urge you once again to please put the interests of our lovely Valletta uppermost.

May each and every M.P. prevail on our P.M. to spare Valletta this shattering blow!

Mark Sammut (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

Put a new theatre (with roof) in the space it deserves. Put it with the new parliament building on the old granery in Floriana and build a traditional gate with a square on the site. The site is too small for either build and will create no impact on entering this famous city.

j ebejer (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

2. Moreover, the architects state: "When the theatre is unused, the place works as an open piazza with a shallow stepped seating deck, totally accessible and offering the view towards Castille, to the Churches of Santa Catarina and Our Lady of Victories and Saint James Cavalier."

The idea of creating an open piazza within the site, when the theatre is not in use, is an excellent one and merits much wider recognition. The use of audio and the

projection of images on the translucent wall elements will make this urban space all the more attractive and unique. I believe the piazza, within the opera house ruins will be one full of vitality as it will become a visitor attraction in its own right.

These two concepts ( a unique outstanding place to perform and an open piazza (when theatre is not in use)) are what convinced me that Renzo Piano's proposal for the opera house site is the correct solution.

j ebejer (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

1. This is an excerpt of the design architects' description and vision for the open-air theatre (available from MITC website):

“A new, very light skin or façade will define the space, supported by a surrounding alignment of steel masts and columns. These will carry removable walls, lighting systems, acoustic and sound equipment, and shall give the space its specific identity during the staging of performances.”

“ The translucent wall elements shall be constructed in such a way, that they can enclose the space, but also remain sunken, so that performances can be held in the most extraordinary scenery of some of the city's best buildings. This “open air opera”, if correctly equipped with the adequate systems of modern communication, light projection and controlled, directive electro -acoustic sound systems, will be very rare in the Mediterranean world and offer to many art groups an outstanding place to perform.”

“Complementing the activity of the Manoel Theatre and the MCC, this third, very special place will lead to the creation of an extraordinary combination of performance spaces in Valletta.”

...../continued

Lawrence Fenech (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

The whole plan is a great FIASCO if the old Theatre is not rebuilt to original designs and Freedom Square is left free.

Why is the Government afraid of a referendum and listen to the people's wishes and leave the project in the hands of all our competent architects with Maltese blood in their veins.

vincent a galea (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

By what stretch of the imagination can the PM ride roughshod over such personalities as Profs Peter Serracino Inglott, world tenor Joseph Calleja, and others !

Another famous Italian Architect, TREVISAN, has submitted EXCELLENT plans for the site of the Opera House. And according to him this will cost us FIFTEEN MILLION EUROS!

NEED ONE SAY MORE!!

As for the proposed UNSIGHTLY PARLIAMENT BUILDING on STILTS in the most HILARIOUS position in Valletta, I think I have at last cracked the 'MYSTERY' ! Knowing that PARLIAMENT is not the present PM's monopoly, he will not want any other future PM sitting MAJESTICALLY on such a MARVELLOUSLY POSITIONED

SITE as FORT ST ELMO, GLORIOUSLY enjoying the OPEN VIEWS on this PRIME POSITION in whole of the MEDITERRANEAN!!!

Charles Grech (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

An open air theatre will have limited use; days and months of practice of a performance will mean nothing should the weather be bad; Having performers from abroad would also prove costly. This apart from the audience who would be disappointed and want their money back.

The city gate should remain what we have, only further work should be done to make it more attractive. Two fountains of both sides and further work on the front and the inside to enhance the whole gate area, would make it much more acceptable. Local architects are able to come with attractive ideas if competitions are held. The road on top should not be lost.

Apart from avoiding further waste of time, it should save a bundle.

Frank Mercieca (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

Is the Verona Arena set inside a vacuum? Is there no noise there? Is there no wind and rain? Oh yes by the way, in Verona there are no village festas!!! Techniques exist to reduce background noise. Or do we not want to ruin our blow-dried hair if it drizzles? Substantiate your arguments for a change. Get down to work with quick, and valid arguments not just words. Why do you sign this petition after over 8 months from when plans were presented? Did it take that long to come up with a signed letter?

As usual this is going to result in NO project taking place and in your capital city having the most disgusting entrance in any civilised country; these artists will continue complaining that they have no theatre and our children wondering why 100 years on, the opera house site is still unbuilt.

John Abdilla (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

Can they please show us studies which demonstrate that the covered theatre they want to build is large enough to host all their shows BUT also international productions that would ensure that Malta can attract major productions?

Are these famous people sure that the rather small opera house site is large enough to cater for all the backstage requirements, the huge number of props needed to rapidly change scenes, adequate space for a large amount of people, etc. Did they listen to Piano himself explain that on the site only a small theatre fits which could solely be used for Maltese productions and NOT form part of an international ring of theatres like London, Milan or Boston? Is this what we want? Space requirements are fundamental and are the first thing one has to look at. I am assuming that all these famous people who signed the petition already have an alternative in mind, already thought about all these issues, already have some sketched plans in hand that show that their idea works. Or are these famous people now also entering the category of those "who just pass comments and don't substantiate their arguments".

mario gellel (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

Why waste breath, theatre lovers? Can you not see that Gonzipn had already made up his mind before he went to Paris? That was just a gimmick to make us believe that he took our opinions for consideration. Remember that it was a PN govt that demolished the original Valletta gate and now it is a PN govt that is not only going to demolish the valletta gate and make it just a rufeless door, but even the square.

Raymond Sammut (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

@ joe felice pace

Why should they have our full support? The Arts in Malta are in a dismal state because it has always been the domain of the close knit group. It is time that the Arts in Malta be made amenable to all people from all walks of life. The Maltese government should ignore them because they have ignored the general Maltese population for far too long. The Maltese government should go ahead with this project as recommended by Mr Piano. If the signatories do not like it, much the better. They should be the very last people on Malta to talk about mediocrity. The Maltese people, together with the new, young and upcoming Maltese artists, would make better use of their new theatre under new management --hired from overseas if need be.

j ebejer (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

The need for a properly designed national theatre is not in doubt. What is in doubt is whether the site of the opera house is appropriate.

Just putting a roof over Piano's proposed open air theatre would not be enough to provide the national theatre that the petitioners are asking for. There would be the need for a complete redesign including a much larger theatre, a large fly tower over the stage, much larger back stage facilities and substantial volumes dedicated to air-condition and other services.

As much as one would wish a national theatre to be sited within the Capital, this appears impractical and therefore an alternative site outside the Capital but possibly within easy reach of Valletta should be identified.

The draft National Cultural Policy issued recently states as follows: "Malta needs a versatile, dedicated space which can accommodate workshop areas, and large scale dance, theatrical and musical productions with adequate backstage areas and facilities. This ..... should be developed within the wider framework of major urban redevelopment measures, with sensitivity towards community and residents' needs."

The opera house site is not the right place to put such a facility.

Joe Azzopardi (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

2) I do concur that " Malta still needed a fully-fledged purposely-built space for the performing arts" but this should function mainly to foster creativity and quality and not " cater for the needs of artists, which are not being addressed in the existing theaters".

The quality deficit is admired to by the signatories themselves "Only in this way can we guarantee that this provides the high-quality performances that Malta, and any performance space, aspire to". It is my conviction that quality comes from the performer not the space.

"They said that ultimately, the performance space should not be seen as a monument". I bag to differ on this point. Any such building should be conceived as a monument. But apart from this, the signatories fail to realise that the site is already a monument. It would have been expected that they, of all people, could and should

appreciate this fact and the efforts made by Renzo Piano to preserve it as such and to give it back to all Maltese rather than to an elitist lot. Don't forget that the space will function as a public square when not in use for performances.

Joe Azzopardi (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

1) No wonder that, with a very few and significant exception, the art products on offer in Malta are what they are i.e. an amalgama of repetitive acts lacking in originality and betraying very little creativity.

It seems that the protagonists of the arts themselves, even the most respected ones, are not creative enough to envisage the grandness and the possibilities offered by this space. A valid artist should be able to use what is offered to him/her and use creativity to offer something new and challenging. But I suppose most of these people are too comfy in their cushy self-congratulating circles to challenge the Status Quo.

The signatories write

"This project also throws up a number of logistical and financial problems". What about the financial problems created by running a performing space such as that envisaged by them? Can they, looking at things objectively, guarantee that what they offer will be of such quality and appeal that it will generate sufficient funds to sustain it. Leaving quality aside statistics and reports show that appeal, particularly to the newer public, is missing in all performing arts.

Pierre Agius (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

Good thing the Knights did not consult with the Maltese to build Valletta. Had they done so, they would have never finished it! What a mediocre people we are!

renald williams (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

I like Egyptology a lot, but why build an Egyptian door, or in Maltese a għan door, instead of doing what was previously Valletta Gate? Like we still have in Mdina and Cottonera.

Besides we are going to lose a road, which will make people going more into Valletta's centre with a car.

The lift can be built opposite side, not on the facade, under the bridge.

After all we refused permission to wheelchair-bound persons, to build a lift on the facade of their home.

Regarding the parliament, why not build a square with trees and fountains instead, maybe adding a statue of La Vallette?

Regarding the opera, why not build something similar to what was before?

Why not choose Maltese architects to do all this.

Even a ragioneire Fantozzi would get us a better price.

Peace and health to all

Joe Felice Pace (2 weeks, 2 days ago)

These signatories to the protest should have our full support.

I recall that some years back, when the Festival tal-Għana started being held at The Argotti (i.e. in the open), the għannejja were often interrupted by the noise of aircraft and, more so, by

fireworks. At the time the judging board, of which I formed part, could not understand what was being sung.