

## **What if...? Speculating on the outcome of the Valletta City Gate project**

**by John Ebejer**

What if the government decides not to continue with its current plans for City Gate and go for a different project instead? A very unlikely scenario but it is worth speculating what the outcome will be.

The government would probably appoint a consultative group composed of various NGOs and individuals. The group is determined to come up with the best possible proposal in the shortest time possible – a proposed development with which everyone would agree. Meetings are held virtually every other day. In no time, the consultative group splits into two distinct camps; there are those who are adamant that both the opera house site and city gate will be built as they were before being demolished. A second camp wants a national theatre at all costs. They want a 2000-seat theatre with all the latest theatre technology.

The “bring-back-Barry” camp points out that the MCC theatre remains unused during the summer and under-utilised for the rest of the year. What’s the point of building a 2000-seat theatre if for many weekends throughout the year it will stay empty? If and when the theatre is used, there will be traffic mayhem in the streets in and leading to Valletta because of parking and increased traffic flows. They argue that a 2000 national theatre with all the theatre equipment and ancillary spaces would take up all both the opera house site and Freedom Square leaving no open space. St James Cavalier would no longer be visible from Republic Street.

The “national theatre” camp points out that culturally Malta needs to move forward, not backwards.

Each side argues that for the sake of compromise, the other side should give in. Soon the argument becomes very acrimonious and spills over into the media. As is typical of all Maltese controversies, the letters to the editor become progressively more personal and spiteful.

Efforts to retain Renzo Piano as the project architect (if and when the consultation group decides what it wants) prove fruitless. “Thank you but no thank you,” he says. “Malta never again,” are his thoughts.

Other groups put their views forward. The business community in Valletta

insists that an underground car park should be built under Freedom Square. If the government is willing to appease anyone who expresses an opinion, why shouldn't it appease the business community on something that affects their livelihood? Others argue that the opera house remains should be left as is and the area changed into a public garden. More and more ideas are put forward, each idea more innovative and bold than the previous one.

It soon becomes evident that the consultative group is getting nowhere and that there is no way it could come up with a common position.

Those not directly involved in the debate become increasingly embarrassed by the charade. For the under-thirties, the embarrassment turns into disgust. Here we are, seven decades after the opera house is hit by a bomb and we are still debating what to do with the site. They cannot understand why people would want to rebuild what there was before. So what if it was a nice building. Are we not able to design and build nice buildings today?

In a mock commemoration of the anniversary of the bombing of the opera house, a group of young people place a wreath on the opera house steps. The ruins of the opera house remain intact as a monument to our incompetence.

One could argue that all this is speculation and guesswork. Yes and no. Over the years, we have seen numerous controversies being played out. I can think of several past instances where nothing gets done because of the government's indecision or its unwillingness to go against the wishes of a section of public opinion.

The view that the government should change course at this stage is, in my opinion, a very short-sighted one. Any change in the government's decision means that we will remain with a bombed site for many decades more.

On the other hand, the alternative scenario is that the government will pursue the project to completion (as it appears determined to do). It is useful here to speculate what the eventual benefits of the project will be say five or ten years after it is finished.

On completion, the Piano project gets substantial coverage in international media, not only in the specialised architectural journals but also in cultural magazines and mainstream newspapers. The coverage enhances the image of Malta and Valletta and makes them known to a much wider section of the European public.

Because of the enhanced image more people visit Malta, not specifically for the Piano project, but to see it as part of an overall tourism product (including Valletta, other historic fortified towns, prehistoric temples and

much, much more). Malta is no longer perceived as a sun and sea destination but a destination where visitors can truly indulge in culture.

Following the relocation of Parliament to the Piano project, the Grand Master's Palace becomes a hub of cultural and tourism activity with numerous museums including a refurbished armoury on the upper floor. A new indoor lighting system brings out the full splendour of the building's halls and corridors. The Palace becomes a major tourist attraction on a par with St John's Cathedral.

The open-air theatre of the Piano project provides ample opportunity for local and international artists to experiment. The use of the latest systems of modern communication, light projection and electro-acoustic sound systems together with the flexibility of the wall panels provide a performing space like no other in the Mediterranean or elsewhere. The theatre attracts international companies to perform as part of the annual Malta Arts Festival. Mediterranean summer evenings provide the perfect ambience for cultural open-air performances. The quality of the productions is such that the cultural and tourism authorities are able to market the Arts Festival overseas and attract tourists specifically for the festival.

The floor of the theatre can be made flat so that when the theatre is unused, the place works as an open piazza. The subdued use of the multimedia facilities with projections on the wall panels and matching background music will make this urban space a place to visit. The open-air theatre could also be the venue for educational and cultural activities such as fairs, public debates, Christmas crib etc. The flexibility of use allows for all year round use of the site.

The retention of the stonework makes the site a reminder of Malta's central role in the Second World War.

Similar to some European parliaments, the Maltese Parliament uses the new premises to interact more with the Maltese public. Parliament's ancillary spaces become the venue for meetings, seminars, public consultations and exhibitions. Better facilities for parliamentarians make it easier for Joe Public to meet his elected representative.

Valletta becomes a model to emulate as far as regeneration of historic cores is concerned. The Piano project, The Grand Master's palace as a visitor attraction, the substantially improved environment for pedestrians and the enhanced image of Valletta generate new interest in Valletta, with more and more people willing to invest in the refurbishment of property for residential use. (There may be a downside with increased value of properties and gentrification).

Will these many benefits really become a reality? I think yes. Suffice to see some success stories in various European cities. Many medium sized

cities seek to develop an iconic building to attract attention at a regional, national or even European level. Having Renzo Piano as the architect is central to the eventual success of the project, not only because of the design but also because of the international attention this will attract.

In the first part of this opinion piece I argued that changing the plans for the opera house/ City Gate at this stage would effectively mean that we will remain with a bombed site for many more decades. On the other hand, if the government remains focused and decisive, we will all be able to reap the benefits of this important investment.

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