



Dr Simon Mercieca, Director, Mediterranean Institute

As the Director of the Mediterranean Institute, under whose auspices falls the teaching of the Performing Arts at the University of Malta, I welcome with great satisfaction Renzo Piano's project for the entrance to our capital city. I also welcome the fact that the current space of the old theatre will be re-utilised as an arts location. I strongly feel that Valletta needs such an open space. Piano struck a balance between history and the needs of the performing arts in the Twenty-First century.

I favour Renzo Piano's choice to develop a modern building in the space of Freedom square. In urban terms, such a building will give back to Valletta its grid format which was partially tainted when this space was created after the Second World War. However, its rebuilding will be reducing the number of open spaces in Valletta which are already few. For this reason, I would have appreciated a different use for it than the one proposed. I would have preferred that this square be retained – a meeting place for the public.

I would prefer to see Parliament placed somewhere else in the city. By virtue of its nature, Parliament is a secluded space which offers no interaction with the people. Its building is not meant to be enjoyed and visited by the masses. Piano is very conscious of this to the extent that he is proposing an ethereal building made principally of glass walls.

When one is projecting an important building within such an important urban space, one should think in terms of long term usage. What the government wants is something that in a hundred years' time will still have a function. Perhaps, this is why the politicians want a Parliament. The current plans are only schematic designs. I hope it is the same for the usage destined for this building.

On the other hand, if Malta wants something innovative in this year dedicated to Creativity then, it should go for Piano's designs. I am sure

that Piano is giving something which is unique, that puts Malta on the twenty-first century architectural map as what he is proposing, is a plan through which Valletta can continue to be a living city and not a fossil of the past.



Nationalist MP David Agius

The Prime Minister's vision for the Palace, a vision I dearly share, is to return the Palace to its former splendour and glory and as one of the main cultural and historic attractions in the centre of Valletta.

The potential of the Palace cannot be overstated and assigning the overall responsibility of the Palace to Dr Giovanni Bonello was a major step forward. Such a vision cannot be accomplished unless an alternative site for Parliament is developed.

I am also a strong believer that in a democracy the House of Parliament is an important functional and symbolic building, which should be the pride of all Maltese citizens. Valletta is what it is and its boundaries cannot be extended. No doubt, the entrance to Valletta presents itself as an ideal place for the House of Parliament.

Renzo Piano's proposal as presented to us the Saturday before last shows the transformation of the entrance to Valletta into an epicentre for political and cultural activity. It is a way of giving a strong uplift to our capital city.

The investment that is being voted for this project

will also be a good way to inject much-needed money in the local economy. I look forward to the completion of this project in the coming months.



Dr Jean Paul Grech, one of the Vice-Presidents, Leone Philharmonic Society, the owner of the Aurora Opera House which each year organises opera in its theatre. This year Verdi's Aida is scheduled to be performed.

Living in a country which has an inherent ability to bipolarise each and every issue which comes up on the national agenda, it was inevitable that we be faced with two diametrically contrasting positions as to what should replace the eyesore which every single morning catches the attention of the thousands of people walking up and down Republic Street in Valletta. The bone of contention was whether the site should house the new Maltese Parliament or whether the area should be reserved as a place for cultural expression, as after all it had been designated by our forefathers. The series of proposals put forward recently by Renzo Piano hopefully should round off once and for all the decades-long discussion as to how this open space should be best used.

The proposal to have the former Royal Opera House site developed into a 1,200-seat open air theatre is undoubtedly a much more suitable proposal than having the site housing the new parliamentary chambers. The site had since time immemorial been earmarked for purely cultural initiatives.

The idea of having a multi-functional theatre rather than a traditional Opera House is laudable. There is no need for a new Opera House since the Gozitan Aurora and Astra theatres, though with severe financial difficulties, are already satisfying the demand for opera productions. What is really needed is a multi-functional hall with adequate theatrical infrastructure to enable the staging of London West End type musicals, plays and even concerts. This should serve to eliminate the theatrical infrastructure vacuum which currently exists in our Islands. Renzo Piano's plans for the site include the construction of a relatively big stage meeting modern theatrical exigencies; optimal use of the auditorium area will also be made so as to ensure maximum seating capacity. Though it definitely constitutes a marked improvement over the parliamentary chambers proposal, the idea being put forward is still a half-baked one since the site will remain an open-air venue. This could not only create acoustic problems for performances but it would also render the theatre practically unusable during the winter months, thus being a venue for seasonal rather than all-year-round productions.

One fundamental aspect needs to be kept in mind: the major feat however does not so much concern the developing of the site but rather that of manning and managing the premises. While it may take one big effort to set up the infrastructure necessary, a series of continuous efforts will be required to keep the theatrical centre up and running and to avoid it becoming another financial haemorrhage. The public-private partnership philosophy which has been a recipe for success in other scenarios could well provide the needed impetus to run the multi-functional hall on professional lines.



JOSEPH VELLA BONDIN

I do not know how committed the government is to the Piano plan. I hope I am wrong but it seems to me

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there is a veil of determination behind the soft talk and poetic claptrap, both official and unofficial, meant to persuade the people of the suitability of the suggested development of the Royal Theatre footprint as an open-air theatre. But I believe that this solution is essentially a sop and does not satisfy. What are the realities of an open-air theatre?

In my career of around three decades as an operatic bass singer, I was asked to participate in many open-air operas and concerts in multifarious open-air venues. I remember very few occasions when external conditions did not impinge, at times acutely, on the performance's quality and enjoyment.

A project cannot be justified on the rationale that open-air venues in historical ruins like the *Terme di Caracalla* do well. Malta is a small overpopulated island in mid-Mediterranean with its specific climatic, demographical, religious and social conditions.

In the context of a purposefully-developed open-air theatre, with substantial scarce resources committed to the project, external conditions become even more critical and require a careful assessment to determine its viability and through-year potential use. Additionally, decisions in this field do not affect solely the current population but also inheritance rights and cultural well-being of future generations. Let us not demote the importance of giving them a birthright that is not inferior to what we ourselves have inherited, even though we may have cold-shouldered it for more than half a century in favour of embryonic solutions.

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