

Comment & Letters



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A sense of place

For some streets and piazzas, people often refer to a "sense of place". People experience something that goes beyond the physical or sensory properties of the place. One writer states: "It is relatively straightforward to think of a successful place and to experience it as such; it is much more difficult to discern why it is successful and whether similar success can be generated elsewhere".

Inevitably, the physical form and aesthetics of a building will have an influence on the sense of place but it goes beyond that. The "meaning" or associations of a building or urban space contributes significantly to the experience of place. For example, the sense of place along the Cottonera waterfront is created not only by the physical form of the buildings and shoreline but also by the maritime association of the place and the stories of the various buildings along the waterfront. Similarly, the sense of place in the Valletta ditch is a combination of the sheer size and extent of the fortifications (physical form) combined with their intended historic function of defending the city in the eventuality of an attack (meaning).

The meanings that can be associated with the opera house/Freedom Square site in Valletta are many. It was the location of pre-war Malta's most important cultural venue. It is immediately within the gate of a fortified city - a city which, for historical and cultural reasons, is closely associated with Malta's national identity. It has a frontage onto Republic Street and is within metres of Merchants Street, the most impor-

tant streets in our capital. It is within metres of several historically important buildings (St James Cavalier, *Auberge de Castille*, *Auberge d'Italie*, the church of Our Lady of Victories, the church of St Catherine of Italy and *Palazzo Ferreria*).

It is vital that whatever is built on the opera house/Freedom Square site will create a sense of place, which Maltese and visitors can experience and enjoy. Apart from the physical form of the buildings, the meaning of the buildings and the activities within and around them will determine the eventual sense of place of the area.

Over past months and years there has been endless debate on what should be developed on the site. Implicitly, many of the proposals are inspired by the "meaning", which one would wish to attribute to the site. For example, those who argue for the redevelopment of a replica of the opera house want to convey the meaning or message that opera is of central importance to us Maltese. Opera is important but is it sufficiently important for Maltese to merit a building specifically for this art form out of Maltese taxpayers' money? The cultural scene has evolved over the past decades. In post-war Malta, opera was one of the main, if not the main, cultural form of expression; today opera is one of a wide diversity of art forms.

To justify the case of the opera house site, some make reference to cities demolished during World War II, which were rebuilt exactly as they were before the war. The decisions to rebuild replicas should be seen in the context of post-war Europe. Clearly, the post-war social and

cultural context of these cities is very different from the context of modern-day Malta.

There are some who argue that a national theatre should be developed on the opera house/Freedom Square site. I will not enter into the merits of whether Malta needs a national theatre. Such a decision should be based on a proper assessment of current facilities and an evaluation of likely benefits compared to the costs. The main argument against a national theatre on this site is a practical one. The stage for a multi-purpose flexible theatre requires substantial space because of the stage equipment that goes with it. The opera house/Freedom Square site is likely to be too small to take a largish auditorium and a well-equipped stage together with the various ancillary cultural spaces normally associated with a national theatre.

It has been announced that the designs of Renzo Piano will be made public at the end of this month. Inevitably, this will spark off a new round of debate. It would be a mistake to reduce the debate to one of Parliament House vs cultural venue. The question is not whether a Parliament House is more important than culture or vice versa. The question is: Which are those uses, or mix of uses, which will give the most appropriate meaning to this important site?

The siting of a Parliament House at the entrance to Valletta is replete with meaning. The Maltese Parliament is one of just 27 EU-national parliamentary assemblies across the European Union. It is the legislative body of the smallest member in the EU and, yet, its relevance in the EU

is comparable to the British Houses of Parliament and the German *Bundestag*. Malta has a voice in the EU that is disproportionately stronger than its size.

From what has been said about the Piano designs so far, it seems that the theatre site will be kept with the restored ruins because of their symbolic value. The Parliament House will be built on Freedom Square. Retaining the opera house ruins will retain the cultural significance of the site and be a reminder of the hardships of war. The memory and cultural meaning will be vital for the creation of a sense of place of the site.

The sense of place for the opera house development needs to be considered also in the context of competition of cities across Europe. Cities often resort to flagship projects designed by renowned architects to attract European or even global attention. A successful example of this approach is the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

What is the image that the opera house development should communicate about Valletta and Malta to the outside world? I would like to believe that the image that will be communicated is that of a forward-looking, self-confident member of the EU.

Flagship developments enhance the image of the city as a tourism destination. The creation of a postcard image, which is readily recognisable across Europe, is worth millions of euros in terms of tourism marketing. Hopefully, the Piano development on the opera house/Freedom Square will be a plus for tourism in terms of an improved tourism product and an enhanced tourism image of Malta overseas.

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