

Comment & Letters



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... to be equal to other capital cities, Valletta must have a national theatre.

It's the national identity

The following is an extract from a letter to the editor which appeared in *The Times* some days ago. It best sums up the arguments that are being made in favour of a theatre on the opera house/Freedom Square site: "I know of no capital city in the civilised world that does not have a well-equipped theatre large enough to host all kinds of concerts, spectacular musicals, ballet performances, special events and, yes, grand opera too". Put differently, to be equal to other capital cities, Valletta must have a national theatre. The issue is one of national identity.

Cities across Europe invest in urban development projects to promote the identity of the city or region.

More often than not, cities chose to have an iconic building designed by a renowned international architect.

The best example of this is the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry.

The Guggenheim has completely transformed the image of a city, which until some years ago was virtually unknown outside Spain.

One can also mention the Globe in Stockholm, which, according to one writer, "represents the city's ambitions to become a global capital". Barcelona focused on its urban spaces and developed prestigious

projects like Richard Meier's *Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona*. The London Eye, within a few hundred metres from the British Houses of Parliament, has become a major attraction with three million visitors annually.

The Glass Pyramid at the Louvre (I.M. Pei) and the Pompidou Centre (Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano) have further enhanced Paris' image as a global city.

What is common in these examples is the attempt to attract European or even global attention, thereby enhancing identity and pride.

Moreover, such 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.

What was considered of paramount importance for the identity of a city or state, say, 50 years ago is not necessarily so today.

Moreover, national identities are dynamic and new urban development should be seen within a dynamic context rather than a static one.

The development of the opera house/Freedom Square site is an opportunity to enhance the image of Valletta and of Malta.

This is achievable with the appointment of Renzo Piano for

the project combined with Valletta's status as a World Heritage Site.

In the context of the global competition of cities, I disagree with the argument that a theatre should be developed on this site because all capital cities have a national theatre.

Thankfully, successive governments have resisted calls to rebuild a replica of the Barry building. This would have been a blow to Malta's image as a forward-looking, self-confident member of the EU.

The discussion on a new national theatre should also consider the size of theatre required. If the proponents have in mind a theatre with a capacity of 2,000 or more than one would have to consider a site elsewhere as such a building would not fit on the opera house/Freedom Square site.

The opera house/Freedom Square site would at best take a 1,500-seater theatre. This would be only marginally larger than the Mediterranean Conference Centre, also in Valletta, and would not take the major concerts which some proponents are referring to.

Major concerts of international artists are best staged open air in the summer in large open spaces or at the Ta' Qali facility.

If, on the other hand, a 1,000-seater is required, it would make more sense to refurbish, and if need be redesign, the MCC the-

atre to provide for the requirements of a modern theatre.

For the sake of Valletta's vitality, part of the site needs to be dedicated to both indoor and outdoor spaces where educational and cultural activities aimed at the wider public could be staged mornings and evenings throughout the week. This would be in line with the current use of Freedom Square and the opera house site. Occupying all the site with a theatre would, for most of the week, create a dead space in the sense that it would contribute nothing to the city's vitality because the building would be used only weekend evenings.

There are those who argue that our parliamentarians are not worthy of the privilege of being "given" this important site in Valletta. I strongly disagree with this view. Members of Parliament are our elected representatives. Decisions and legislation that effect the life of each and every one of us are discussed and decided in Parliament. Parliament is a symbol of our nationhood. In my opinion, locating Parliament in this strategic location is the right decision. It is worth reminding that the last sizeable remaining site along the Royal Mile in Edinburgh has been developed as a Parliament for Scotland.

Above all, the government's decision signifies that this six-decade-old "wound" in our beloved capital city will finally be healed.