

John Ebejer

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Valletta under the spotlight

Valletta (and Malta) is among the countless towns and cities across Europe that compete for global attention to attract investment and tourism. Many cities chose to attract attention by means of urban projects, sometimes involving an iconic building designed by a renowned international architect. The best and most successful example is the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry. The Guggenheim completely transformed the image of a city, which, until recently, was virtually unknown outside Spain.

The London Eye, within a few hundred metres from the British Houses of Parliament, attracts two million visitors each year and is often depicted alongside the Houses of Parliament as part of the iconic image of London.

Most iconic buildings generate controversy before being built and,

yet, many are subsequently acclaimed for their success.

Apart from attracting attention, the linkage of Valletta, a World Heritage Site, with the name of Renzo Piano will provide for added value to destination Malta. Mr Piano has come up with a solution that is innovative and, yet, respectfully of the context.

The City Gate project will be a catalyst for Valletta's regeneration. One advantage of the project is that it addresses all the area in a holistic manner including the opera house site, Freedom Square, City Gate, the ditch and the bus terminus. This means that, within a reasonable timeframe of, say, three or four years, all the area will be finished. Another plus is that Parliament will be moved out of the Grandmaster's Palace, releasing it for cultural and tourism use. The Palace has the potential to become an exceptional visitor and cultural attraction on par with St John's Co Cathedral.

What many refer to as a roofless theatre is, in fact, an open-air performance space. It will be the ideal venue for countless activities of varying artistic/creative content, even if it may not be the perfect venue for all forms of artistic self-expression. The facility will provide a space where artistes can experiment to create unique experiences. The concept is also to use the surrounding historic buildings as a backdrop. Alternatively, images can be projected onto the translucent wall elements. It is likely that, in the summer months when the Manoel Theatre and the Mediterranean Conference Centre are closed, the open-air performance space will be used intensively.

Even when the site is not in use for performances, the space within the ruins will be an urban *piazza* fully accessible to the public. The use of audio and the projection of images on the translucent wall ele-

ments will make this urban space all the more attractive and unique. This is a pedestrian urban space which, in my opinion, people will like and enjoy.

Some are calling for a national theatre on the site instead of what is being proposed. A decent national theatre is unlikely to fit on a combined opera house/Freedom Square site. For example, the Oslo Opera House, completed in 2007, occupies a site that is four or five times larger than the opera house/Freedom Square area. Even if it were made to fit the site, the national theatre building would be an inappropriate urban intervention because of its massivity in a sensitive historic context. If and when Malta decides to build a national theatre, we will need to identify a site large enough to cater for what is required.

The present state of the entrance to Valletta, with a seven decade-old opera house ruins, is unac-

ceptable. If the City Gate project were to be severely delayed or, worse, halted, Maltese and tourists would have to put up with this state of opera house/Freedom Square for many more years. This would be a tragedy for Valletta. For projects of such importance and complexity, once a decision is taken, the government has the responsibility to implement.

In 2018, a locality in Malta (hopefully Valletta) will be the Cultural Capital of Europe. There is much that needs to be done in Valletta and elsewhere. The year 2018 will be with us sooner than we think because much of the investment required in our urban heritage will take years to plan, finance and implement.

The City Gate project is not about shortcomings in our cultural sector. It is about Valletta. It is about a much-needed urban intervention in this historic, yet, dynamic city.