

THE GATE, THE DITCH AND THE BASTION

The history of City Gate and the entrance into Valletta is undeniably linked to the history of Malta and its people.

At the Gate, by definition, the weakest point in the enceinte of landward fortifications, people from Valletta and those arriving from outside the town met and mingled, creating a richness of social interaction only paralleled by the activity on the waterfront. Seen from this perspective, City Gate has constituted, since the beginning, a changing backdrop, not only to the everyday activities of the citizens but also to the commercial and social exchange with the country. This intercourse has always been a vital element of city life.

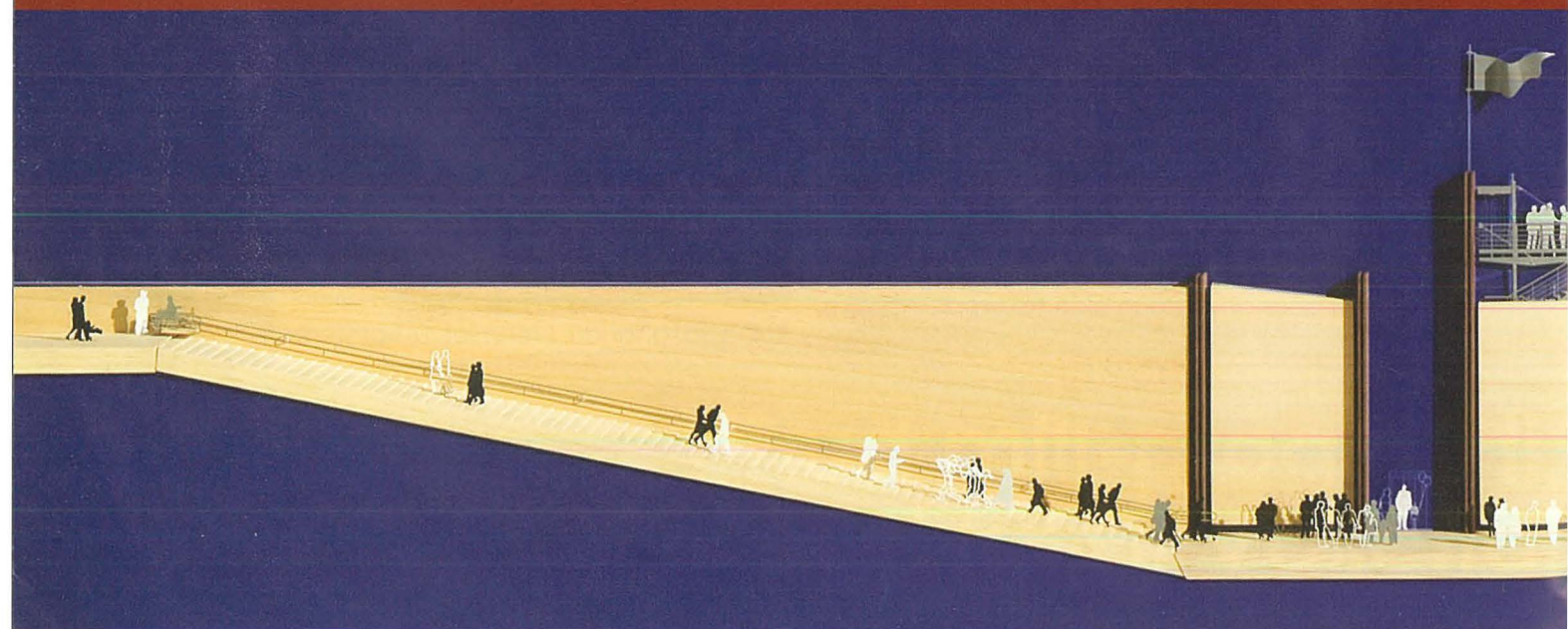
At this point of Valletta, important political and cultural events and manifestations commenced their progress through the town. Royal visits, political defiles and religious processions started their way down to St George's Square from City Gate, often richly decorated and candle-lit. Throngs of curious onlookers crowded the dramatic urban-scale staircases flanking the gate, keen to witness and participate in the spectacle.

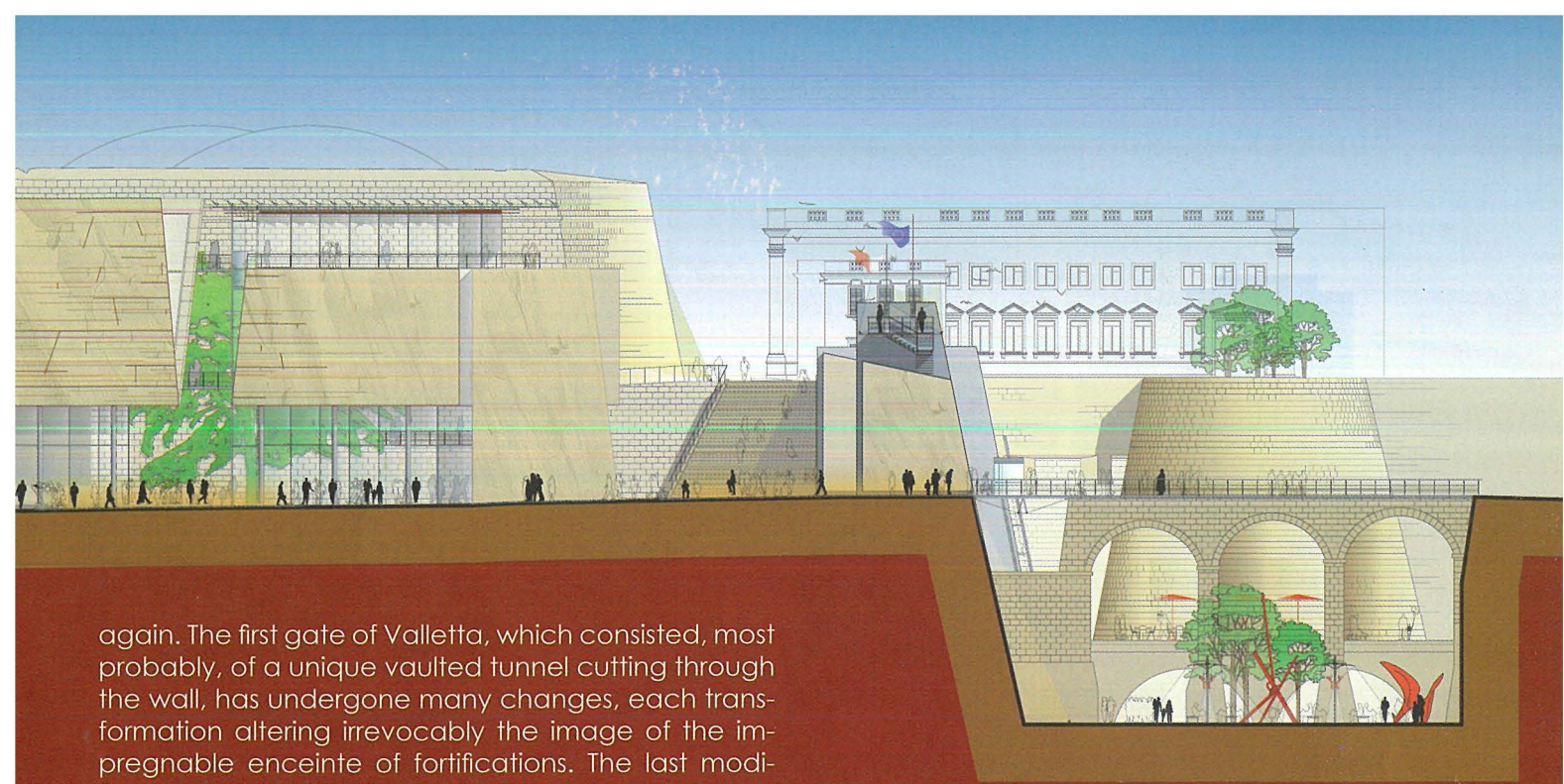
The social theatre that was created as a result could hardly have been better complemented by the construction of the Royal Opera House in 1863. In spite of

the apprehensions and misgivings of the population of Valletta with regards to the choice of location, the theatre contributed irrevocably to the spirit of the area, attracting to its monumental steps a host of finely dressed and prosperous people charmed by the blend of illusion and reality that created the magic of this place.

Given the ever increasing activity that began to characterize the area, the bridge leading to the Gate was, on several occasions, widened to cater for increasing traffic. The seventeenth century gate itself was demolished and rebuilt in 1853 by General Thompson of the Royal Engineers, this time with four openings, ostensibly to provide the local population with a more beautiful and efficient gateway. Confidential correspondence with the War Office indicates, however, that the enlargement of the gate was strictly dictated by defense requirements and the military

By definition, a bridge is rather narrow with respect to its length. The current bridge, has, as a result of several successive enlargements, completely lost its original functionality, becoming a hybrid between a piazza and a bridge. In order to reverse this unnatural transformation, the project proposes simply to restore the bridge in its original dimensions of Dingli's gate of 1633. In so doing, the experience of crossing over from one side to the other will be strongly enhanced and, what's more, the view to the ditch will at last become possible





again. The first gate of Valletta, which consisted, most probably, of a unique vaulted tunnel cutting through the wall, has undergone many changes, each transformation altering irrevocably the image of the impregnable enceinte of fortifications. The last modification, realized half a century ago, has destroyed the wall for a width of 32m creating, as a result, a complete and unprecedented new condition of blandness at the entrance to the town.

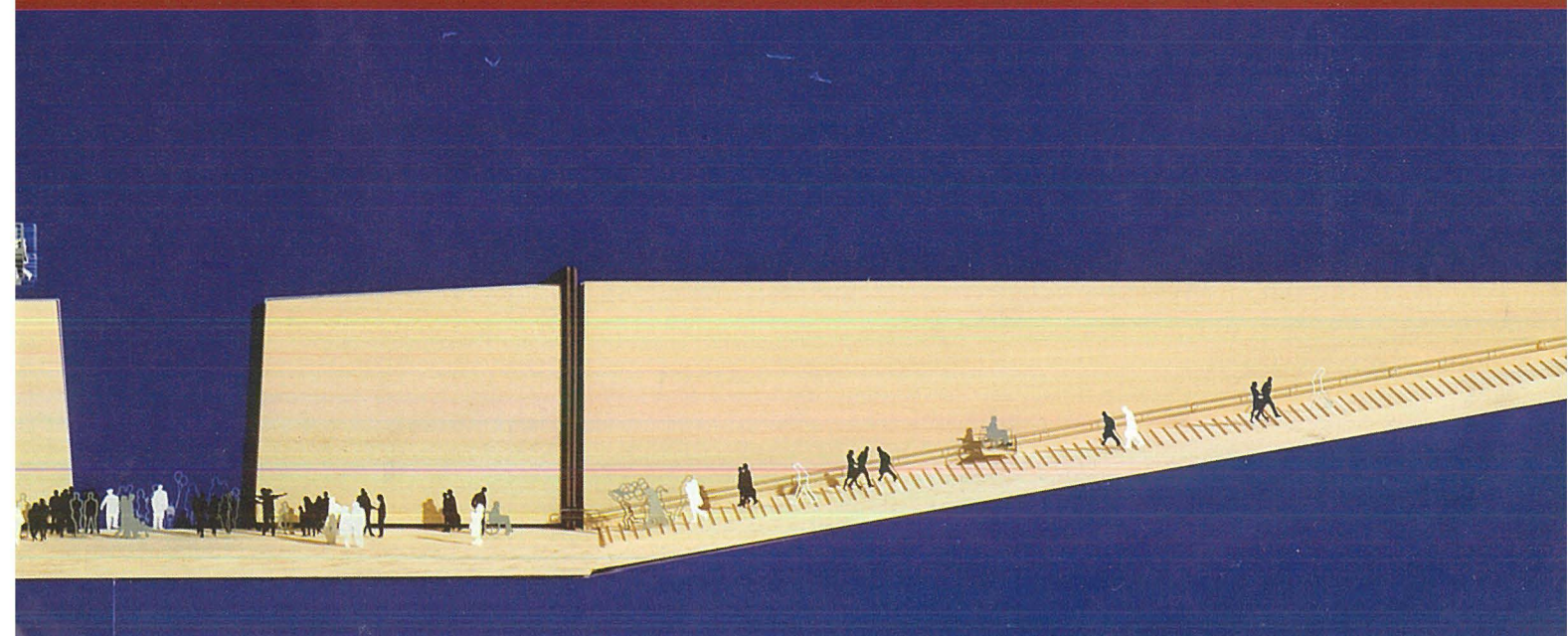
Our new design aims at giving back to the bastion walls their original expression of depth and strength by enhancing the feeling of narrowness while at the same time opening up the view to the perspective of Republic Street. The new gate is a breach, just 8 meters wide, compressing movement during the crossing. The fundamental new element is that the gate has become open to the sky. The street crossing above will be demolished and two large and gently sloped stairs, reminiscent of the dramatic staircases flanking the gate before the creation of Freedom Square, will lead from both St James' and St John's Cavaliers down to Republic Street. The fortifications will henceforth appear in their full height and strength from the inside, an image that is currently impossible due to the presence of the arcade and shop fronts on Freedom Square.

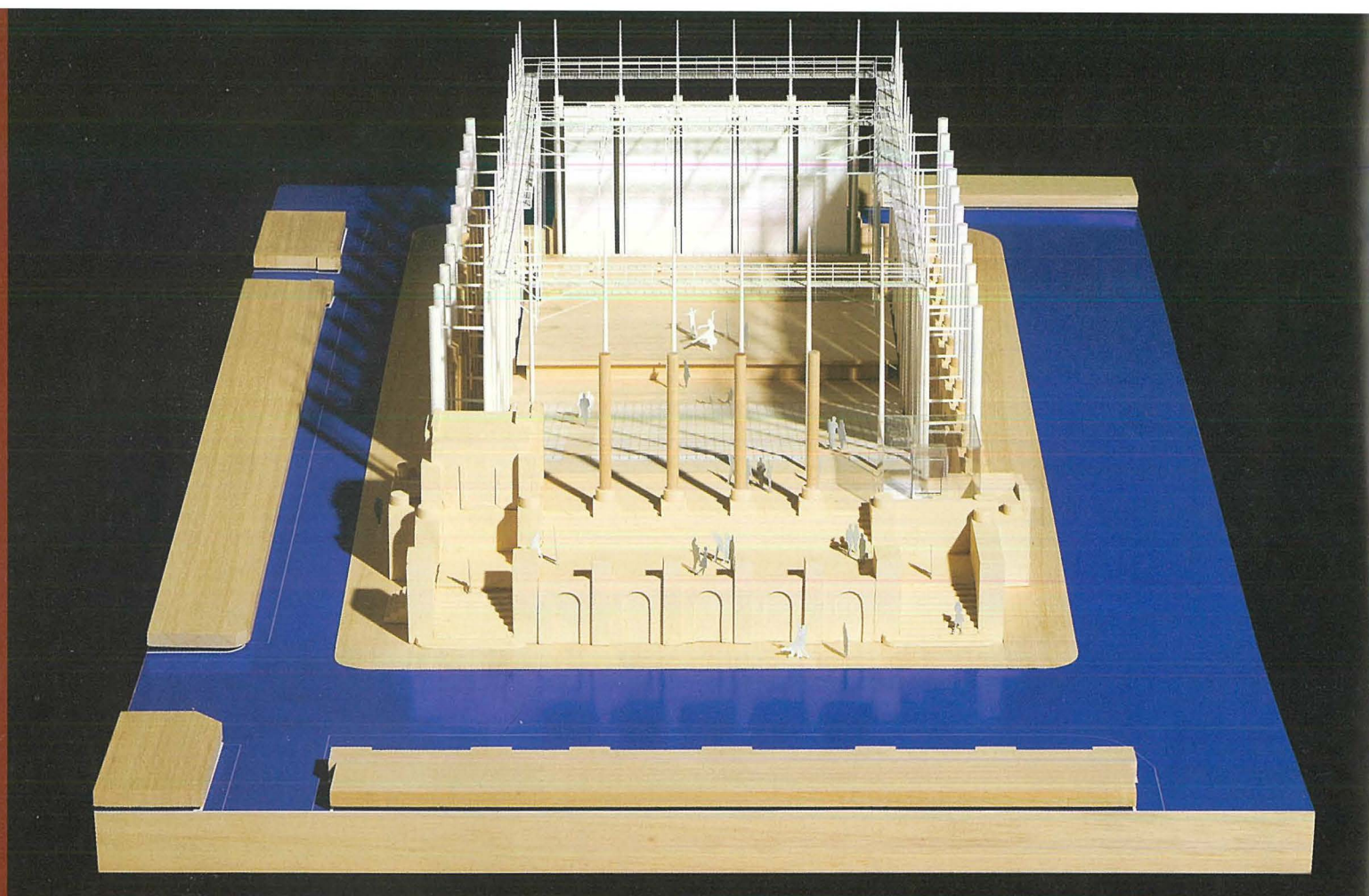
Gate and ditch shall be connected through a rede-

signed stair and an exterior, panoramic elevator that provides the experience of the depth of the ditch and leads to the protected gardens below. Once the unpleasant car park has disappeared to be replaced by a lush and fresh garden atmosphere, harbouring charming and relaxing activities and promenades, visiting the ditch will become an extraordinary experience. Moreover, the planted ditch can also become the dramatic scenery for spectacular outdoor events and performances.

The architecture of the Gate itself shall express the greatest strength and a certain austerity, bare of superficial and conventional decorations and futile, stylish elements which can never be timeless. It is made of massive stone elements, monumentally shaped and flanked by high, framing blades of steel. The latter will underline the fracture between the past and the present. The gate's architecture must be simple and strong, steering away of any extravagance.

It is the best tribute to genuine intention and authentic construction.





PARLIAMENT, A GREEN BUILDING

Today, a visitor, having passed the bastion walls and entered the city, will find nothing but a parking plot. The proposal to locate the new Parliament Building, the most representative democratic institution of the Republic, on this site stems from a desire to create a vibrant urbanity at the entrance to the town. Urbanity lives by density, by the transparency of its ground floor activities and the mixed use. With this in mind, it is proposed to house, on the ground floor of this building, an interactive Museum of Maltese History and Political Development. This shall be a place where visitors, Maltese citizens, young and old alike, students and tourists from all over the world, shall acquire an understanding of the history of the Maltese nation and the will of its people to stand as an equal with all other nations, naturally within a Euro/African/Mediterranean historical context.

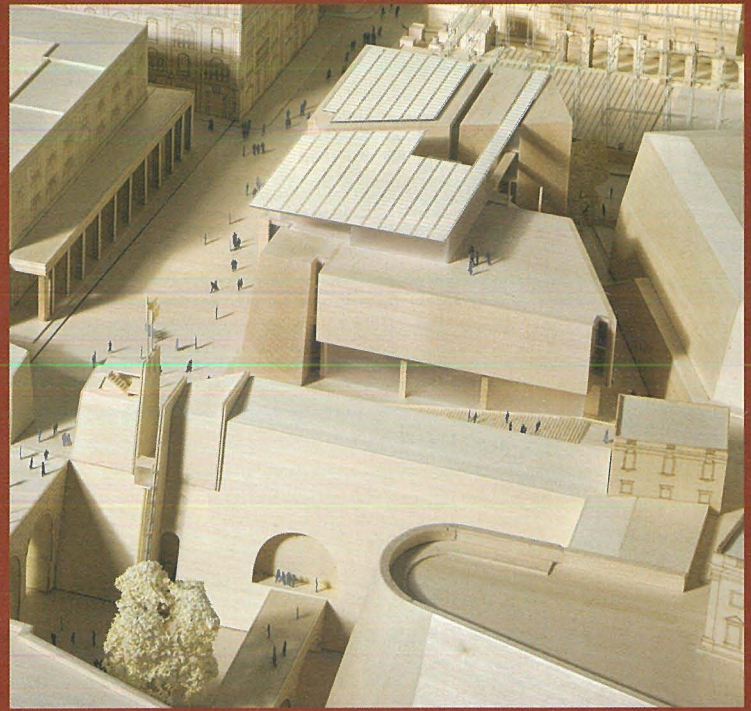
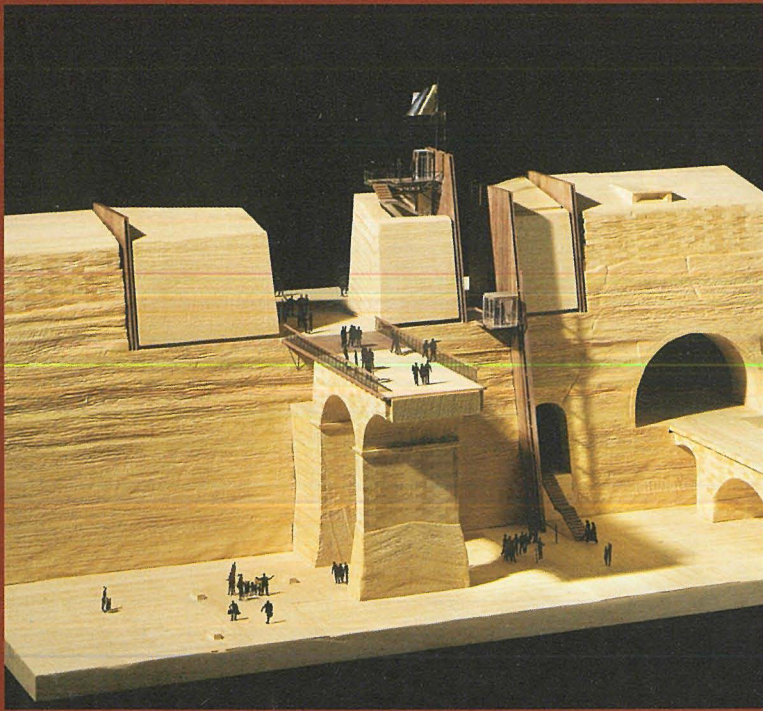
This will be achieved through the newest means of communication and information, including user activated and interactive screens, large screens for sequential presentations and 360 degree imagery. Interactive installations shall mix with original documents of value or replicas, while an ambient atmosphere created by appropriate music and sophisticated imagery and projections will be visible from the outside and designed to stimulate the curiosity of the passer-by. The new construction will distance itself from St James Cavalier, giving back to this historic structure its original grandeur and shape, not dissimilar to the situation for St John's Cavalier. The new building itself is made of two massive volumes of stone, supported by stilts that recede from the façade to create an impression of suspension in air. The East block will house mainly the chamber and the speaker's office; the West, all administrative offices for parliament members, the Ministers, the Prime Minister and

the leader of the Opposition. Both volumes are separated by a central courtyard, which is the main entrance to the Building. This court is shaped in such a way to allow views through it from the street of St John's Cavalier. Some activities, related to the business of Parliament, are housed in the basement, open to a planted court located at this lower level that is well protected from the impact of the sun.

The Old Railway tunnel itself will be connected to the sunken garden in such a way as to make this otherwise unusable historical subterranean structure amenable for public use while preserving its authenticity and legibility. One of the most important concepts from which this building derives its functionality regards energy. On the basis of today's knowledge, we can assume that, through the stable temperature of the immense mass of the rock below, enough energy can be recovered to heat and cool the whole building. The introduction of a system of heat pumps should avoid the necessity of external cooling towers or additional boilers. This building provides us with an excellent chance to create a "zero (CO₂) emission" building whose energy will be recovered by heat exchange with the underlying rock.

THE OPERA SITE

Three simple thoughts have led us to propose the use the opera site for outdoor performances: First, the site is of too small to contain a Parliament Building as was initially envisaged. Secondly, a modern opera, of conventional size, would equally not fit in this place considering today's requirements for rehearsal, back stage facilities and accessibility, besides generating exorbitant running costs. Thirdly, we strongly believe, that after more than 60 years of controversy, the Ruins of the demolished opera have undeniably reached the status of monument, irrevocable with



ness of history and the dignity of collective memory. This is why we strongly believe that the opera Ruin should not be eradicated but should serve as the framework for a place where artistic performances will be an evocation, in a contemporary way, of the activity of the past. Complementing the activity of the Manoel Theatre and the Mediterranean Conference Centre, this third, very special place will lead to the creation of an extraordinary combination of performance spaces in Valletta.

The project envisages the preservation of all the existing stone work and the reuse of some of the still existing scattered fragments to complete and embellish the ruin. A new, very light skin or façade will define the space, supported by a surrounding alignment of steel masts and columns. These will carry removable walls, lighting systems, acoustic and sound equipment, and shall give the space its specific identity during the staging of performances.

When the theatre is unused, the place works as an open

piazza with a shallow stepped seating deck, totally accessible and offering the view towards Castille, to the Churches of Santa Catarina and Our Lady of Victories and Saint James Cavalier. The translucent wall elements – why not in alabaster – shall be constructed in such a way, that they can enclose the space, but also remain sunken, so that performances can be held in the most extraordinary scenery of some of the city's best buildings.

This "open air opera", if correctly equipped with the adequate systems of modern communication, light projection and controlled, directive electro-acoustic sound systems, will be very rare in the Mediterranean world and offer to many art groups, an outstanding place to perform. This concept, away from the traditional opera circuit can be envisaged with much smaller backstage areas, for which there is not enough space available and offer therefore a capacity for an audience of about 1000 spectators.

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