

A decision on the Opera



THE redevelopment of the most prominent location in Valletta, a World Heritage city, has been in constant discussion for the past 60 years.

Various attempts to reach a decision were made during the Sixties, in 1989, in 1997 and in 2002 without reaching any conclusion. It is now high time that a final decision be taken so that we can move ahead. We just cannot continue procrastinating.

There has been considerable debate, many proposals have been put forward over these past decades and we have compiled enough information to help us reach a decision. We must decide with a commitment to proceed. I know that it is not an easy decision, since we are deciding what to do with one of the jewels of our crown.

The final decision will not meet everyone's expectations. While it is hoped that the majority would be satisfied, it will also leave some others disappointed. However, we should do our utmost to take the right decision for the benefit of this generation and of those to come.

We want to take the right decision. We want to add a historic monument to be admired by future generations and the millions of tourists who will visit us.

The city of Valletta is the heart of my affection for our heritage and has been very high on my personal agenda for many years, especially since my first proposal of the Valletta Master Plan, which was published in *The Sunday Times* of October 29, 1989, including a colour plan of Valletta and Floriana, indicating various ideas how to revive our capital city.

This included the rebuilding of the Opera House, Freedom Square, City Gate, free use of two circular bus routes around Valletta, a new bus terminus, together with a relaxing pedestrianised piazza, a park and ride project in Floriana, various underground car parks in Valletta, pedestrianisation of certain main shopping streets (this has been implemented in Republic Street and St John Street), the exploration of the undiscovered city within the city as a tourist attraction (referring to the maze of underground tunnels), a link between Sliema-Valletta-Cottonera, etc.

The introductory paragraph to my article is still valid today: "I have been reading so much about Valletta and its entrance, and since develop-

by **Angelo Xuereb**

ment is one of my main interests, I felt it is my duty to give my own opinions about the development of our unique city of Valletta."

During these 15 years I have attended numerous conferences, debates and meetings, entered into correspondence, and my group has been part of a consortium site City and tendered twice to redevelop the Opera House site, City Gate and the bus terminus, which entailed great detail and a very high cost. The attached artist's impression was one of our proposals which we submitted in 1997. We also read most of the newspaper readers' letters on the subject. All this gave me a feel of what most people in Malta think.

Since the Opera House site is a prime location, many interested entities have their own agenda – the politicians and the residents, the views of many cultural organisations, the shopowners, the financiers, the contractors with their constraint to develop this massive development with the least possible disturbance to shopowners, in the shortest possible time, etc.

Given my experience in construction and development, coupled with my feelings for our heritage, I could write a whole book on the needs of our capital city to bring about Valletta's renaissance. However, here I shall limit myself to the reconstruction of the Opera House site, Freedom Square, City Gate and the bus terminus, since I firmly believe that we need to address these four areas holistically to make commercial and architectural sense.

The debate on the style which should be adopted for the façade adds more pressure; some prefer a contemporary design, some a Baroque one. In my opinion our capital represents a stone legacy and therefore any approach on the façade has to complement this legacy.

Valletta is full of Baroque so this should also be the architectural style for the reconstruction of the Opera House. I say reconstruction because this is a rebuilding of a structure that was partly demolished during the war. In most cases similar buildings in Europe were reconstructed in their original style. We can adopt the same Barry architecture on the outside or we can appoint a team of local archi-



itects with a clear brief to prepare three final options to be presented to the public for their feedback.

I emphasise "a clear brief", as otherwise we will get bogged down

with so many different architectural styles that they will only confuse the public further and we will again end up without taking a decision. I sincerely hope that politicians will understand that constructing such sensitive buildings, which will form part of Malta's main heritage, requires proper planning, detailing and involvement of special trades and craftsmen. This needs time, which means that the project may not necessarily have to meet an electoral deadline. In fact this should be seen from the national interest viewpoint and not as part of the political agenda.

If we can speed up the process, it will be in the interest of all concerned, but let us be sensitive to this very delicate development. This prestigious new building must be so impressive that it should become a tourist attraction. Its architecture has to stand out enough to make tourists

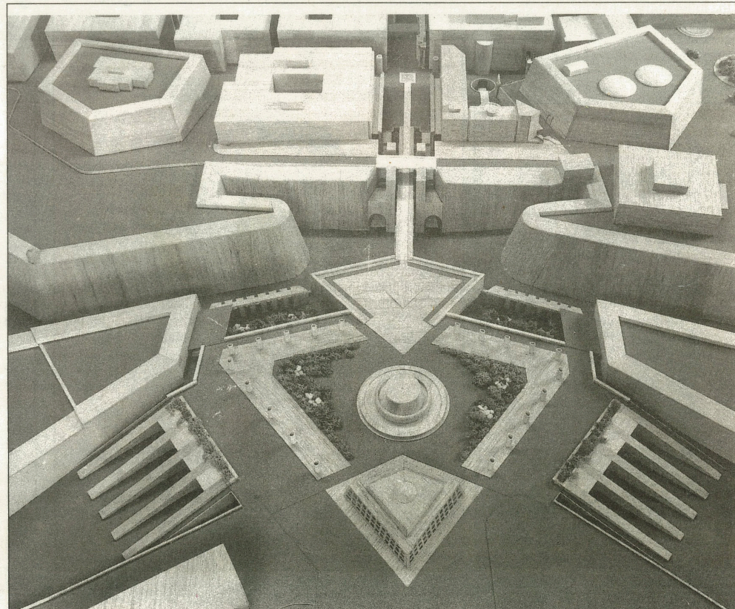
AN ARTIST'S IMPRESSION OF AX Holdings' proposal for the rebuilding of the Opera House and Freedom Square submitted in 1997

and locals admire it.

The use of the building is of secondary importance since there is a general agreement that the building should be put to a different use from an opera house and the interior should be modern to reflect today's styles and have flexible uses so that could be changed or updated in time.

This means that its use may change from time to time, as has happened with various other buildings, such as the auberges and the Palace. It could happen, for example, that ministries could move out of Valletta, and Parliament would have to move again.

Some years ago I said, and I still believe, that the best use of this site in the current circumstances is to accommodate Parliament, for various



RICHARD ENGLAND'S plan for developing the City Gate bus terminus

House site is a must

reasons.

- The need to move Parliament out of the Palace is widely acknowledged. It makes more sense for the Palace to house our National Museum, complemented by the transformation of St George's Square into a pleasant pedestrianised area.

- Parliament, for the foreseeable future, has to stay in Valletta for various reasons. The alternatives are the former Opera House site, the Mediterranean Conference Centre and Fort St Elmo.

- Given our present financial situation, we cannot afford to develop both the Opera House and Parliament concurrently.

- Security should be a top priority for Parliament so it needs to be located in a secure area, taking into consideration the possibility of occasional large-scale demonstrations, riots, etc. Therefore the Parliament building should not be located somewhere it could be 'besieged'.

It has to have other exits in such situations. Even during the Knights' era, the auberges were all linked to secret underground passages, and I have gone through some of them. Fort St Elmo and the Mediterranean Conference Centre cannot offer this security.

- The most important role in Parliament is played by the Prime Minister. So the Prime Minister needs to be close to his main office, where he has over 200 officers to back him up in his administration. He must have full control and cannot manage by 'remote control'; he needs to be 'hands-on'.

A Prime Minister's agenda is so hectic that sometimes he has to fit in various meetings, with the least possible time wasted on travelling. For this reason the former Opera House site is ideal, since a decent underground passageway/corridor can be constructed to connect the Parliament with his office and he would attend to the Parliament when he is really needed.

Anyone who has visited the current Parliament can understand that ministers and parliamentary secretaries can work more efficiently if they have their full complement of office staff to support them in the administration and not end up on many occasions with only one or two assistants.

In my opinion we should try to reduce the long parliamentary season which requires the presence of most ministers.

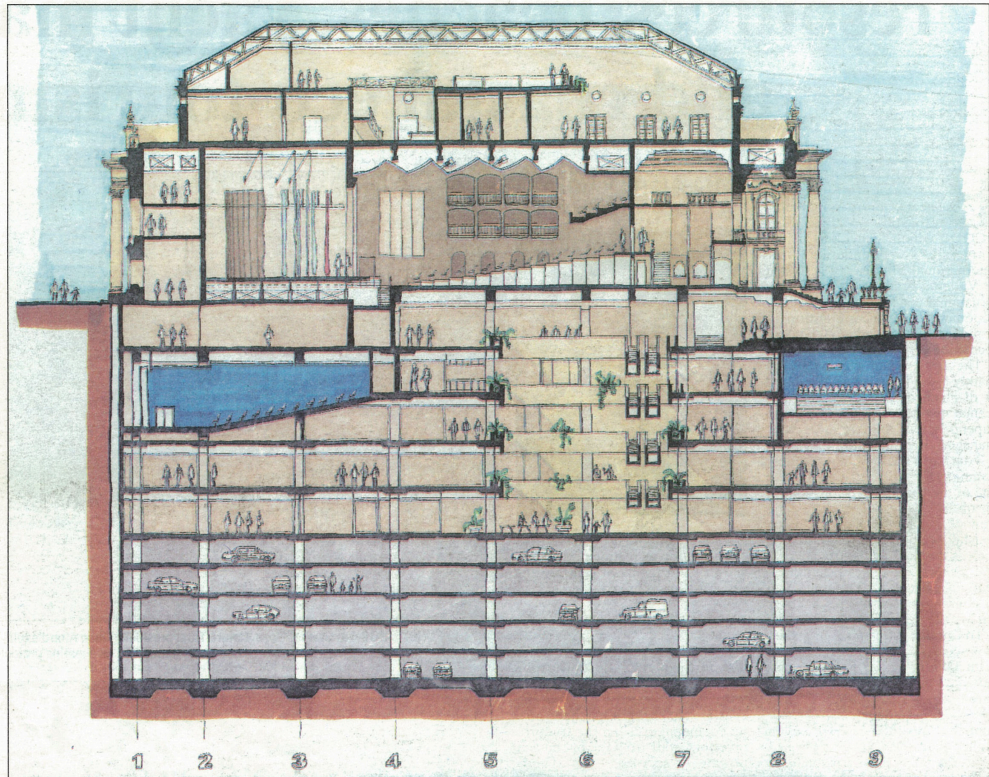
- Parliament should also incorporate an underground car park with two separate entrances/exits for use by MPs. Again, only the former Opera House site can fulfil this requirement.

- The reasons brought forward by some entities to house our Parliament at St Elmo, in order to upgrade this neglected area, is not a strong enough argument in the present scenario and when considering the above mentioned constraints. If funds are available, I am sure we can restore this neglected site and put it to cultural or other commercial use as we have experienced with Pinto Stores and St James Cavalier.

- Some say that the Opera House site could be rebuilt as an Arts Centre or a theatre. However, other places can be put to such use on a smaller scale. We all know that the beautifully restored St James Cavalier as an Arts Centre is not attracting the desired number of visitors and revenue. How about using part of the Palace for cultural purposes, once Parliament is relocated?

We cannot expect to redevelop the former Opera House without incorporating Freedom Square and City Gate. This has to have a holistic approach. From what I have read and discussed over the past three years, there seems to be consensus support for what Richard England had proposed for the replacement of the present bus terminus.

In my view he came up with an excellent concept and contemporary



architectural design that fits well with the backdrop of the bastions with the pedestrian link to the shopping centre beneath Freedom Square.

The design of City Gate is still a controversial issue, although lately it is hardly being mentioned. In my view the 'gate' should be constructed in stone to complement the stone legacy that one would find behind the gate's entrance.

There is no question asked that the existing horrible entrance has to be replaced. After reviewing Renzo Piano's/Richard England's design, one can create an improved version to respect the modern contemporary design on the proposed new bus terminus and the aforementioned stone legacy that one finds behind the entrance. But in my opinion we should not introduce foreign materials like wood and steel. The existing entry bridge should be retained or if necessary narrowed by removing the late additions of the Sixties.

Freedom Square could be excavated right down to the lower part of the ditch to accommodate a huge underground car park with the top four floors for commercial use that would be linked directly with the proposed interchange underground station that incorporates the bus terminus, the drop-off for the park and ride, shuttle buses and possibly an underground train system that would link the north and south of Malta.

The buildings covering up the bastions of St James Cavalier on Freedom Square should be demolished and a grand staircase similar to the Auberge de Castille entrance should be constructed to lead you to the arts centre in St James Cavalier.

The rest of the piazza should accommodate only light structures that lead you to the underground bus station with some other monumental features like an imposing statue of Grand Master La Vallette, the founder of the city and is still without a monument in the capital which bears his name.

The whole project incorporating

the former Opera House site, Freedom Square, City Gate and the bus terminus could be developed through a Public - Private Partnership. Naturally there is no real income to the private sector from the Parliament and the bus terminus, which means that a substantial amount has to be paid by Government.

No one should expect a consortium to finance an underground shopping centre without having a direct link for pedestrians from the interchange station. But once the concept plans are finalised, a feasibility study can be undertaken and a call for tenders is issued.

A decision must be taken now. We cannot afford to tolerate any longer the ruins of the Opera House in the heart of our capital city. The Parliament building is not adequate for today's needs. Even if we have to redevelop the Opera House site for other cultural uses, we still need a new Parliament building, and I do not think that our economic situation can afford two such large developments concurrently.

The Palace, which is a splendid building, deserves much better use. Malta does not yet have a grand National Museum as can be found in all major European cities. The Palace is huge and could possibly also accommodate a cultural centre.

Finally, I know that the siting of the Parliament is quite an issue for some who have expressed their views in the press, but my experience tells me that the majority agrees with the idea but do not express their approval of it in public. We have to respect their opinion as well. Experience has proved that those who oppose are quick to talk but those who approve keep silent.

Thank God we did not develop the Opera House site according to the Zavelani-Rossi design in the mid-Fifties. Otherwise, today we would be crying with disgust at its 'modern' architecture. Today we still have a sample of that approved architecture - take a look at our present City Gate

TRANSVERSE SECTION of AX Holdings' proposed showing the Opera House with multi-level underground parking and shopping area

and you can have the feel of what we could have developed at the Opera House site.

Foreign external building materials and modern designs may look acceptable today but their popularity in most cases lasts only a few decades. We cannot afford to make mistakes. Baroque and other similar stone

architecture has proven beautiful over hundreds of years and will continue to be acceptable.

Let us not take uncalculated risks with one of our most prominent sites in our capital city, one of our crown jewels. We should be looking towards praise from posterity, and not blame! Let us go for it!