

Valletta City Gate

Valletta, Malta
2009-2015

A first scheme for the recovery of the city gate of Valletta was presented by Renzo Piano in 1986, on behalf of Unesco. The new and fuller architectural and urban project – commissioned by the Great Harbour Regeneration Corporation – redesigned the access to the historic city, enriched by the new Parliament Building and the redevelopment of the Opera House destroyed during the World War II.

The ancient bridge giving access to the old city had been enlarged at various times through the centuries, affecting its proportions. It has been brought back to its original size, as conceived and built by Tommaso Dingli in 1633, giving citizens and visitors the experience of crossing it from one end to the other, passing over the moat and enjoying the view. The new city gate is joined to the bridge: an aperture towards the sky flanked by massive blocks of stone, cut and flanked by steel blades that clearly define the boundaries between the existing and the new. Local stone is the dominant feature of the whole project. On the nearby island of Gozo a quarry was specially reopened to extract the same quality of yellow stone that is found in many buildings in Malta. While the city gate required a massive and powerful use of this stone, the Parliament Building presents a new and vibrant technological interpretation of it.

The Parliament overlooks a new piazza, measuring 60 by 25 meters, created by the makeover of Freedom Square, previously used as a car park. The new building consists of two volumes clad in stone blocks that seem to have been eroded by the sun, supported by steel columns set slightly back from the facades to create a sense of lightness and suspension. Some of these stone blocks were pierced and sculpted by numerically controlled machines, in such a way as to filter solar radiation and ensure the natural lighting of the interior. The Parliament Building is eco-sustainable, with extremely low emissions: energy from a system of 40 geothermal shafts dug a hundred metres below sea level is used for heating and cooling, while electricity is derived from a layer of photovoltaic panels covering 600 square metres placed on the roof.

Alongside the Parliament Building, work was also done on the restoration of the Royal Opera House, which was destroyed in the air raids during World War II. The ruins, which over the decades have become a characteristic element in the history of the city, have been preserved, and used as the plinth for a new theatrical machine consisting of tiered wooden seating and a lightweight steel structure, equipped with lighting systems and acoustics. In this way, an open-air theatre seating one thousand spectators was created, which when not used for spectacles functions as a public piazza, offering a magnificent view of the Auberge de Castille.

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