

Valletta City Gate: the making off - Renzo Piano

The history of this project goes back a long way.

The first time I was summoned to Valletta was almost thirty years ago, in 1986. It was an initiative promoted by UNESCO (and coordinated by Salvino Busuttil) and the Government of Malta to recover the ancient city gate. The gate had been rebuilt several times over the centuries, down to the fifties. At that time it was connected to the city by a large road bridge, and looked out over a roundabout that was the city's bus terminal. Together with Bernard Plattner, who had been with me ever since the Centre Pompidou, I worked for a while on the idea of replacing the road bridge with a wooden walkway for pedestrians only. This was a kind of drawbridge from which to admire the gardens laid out in the moat. The project regrettably came to nothing, and seemed to have been forgotten. But sometimes ideas travel a long way round before finding the right moment to be built. That's what happened here: in 2008 we were summoned to Malta for the second time. So we set off again, Bernard Plattner and I, this time together with Antonio Belvedere. Three years later, during construction work, Antonio was to become a partner in my practice.

This project redeveloped the whole area of the entrance to Valletta, which had suffered from a confused and hasty urban transformation at a time when Malta was freed from the British, becoming an independent Republic. Our first concern was to restore to the foreground a historical and architectural heritage that had been rather mistreated, in this place with such a powerful and symbolic value for Malta. At the same time we had to create new cultural and civic spaces. We worked on three fronts: the city gate, the new building housing the Parliament and the redevelopment of the Royal Opera House, which was destroyed by bombing during World War II.

The ramparts and moat are salient features of the city gate area. The original entrance bridge, wider than it was long because it had been distorted by disproportionate enlargements, over the years had finally grown into a sort of square, losing its identity. This time the project was carried through without setbacks. We restored the bridge to its original function and dimensions, as it had been designed and built by Tumas Dingli in 1633. The passers-by could finally experience the pleasure of crossing it from end to end, gliding over the moat and enjoying a view of it.

Interrupting the stretch of Pope Pius Street superimposed on the city gate made it possible to insert two broad flights of steps which connect with the city. They make it possible to reach St. James, St. John's Cavalier, and Republic Street opposite. A fundamental element of this project was the opening of the gate to the sky. A panoramic elevator also takes you down into the moat, enabling you to fully appreciate its depth and stroll in the gardens below.

The new gate is made out of large blocks of stone, cut and joined by steel blades that clearly define the boundaries between the existing and the new. Local stone is the true eye-catcher of the whole project. On the neighboring island of Gozo a quarry was specially reopened to supply this yellow limestone, which can be seen in many buildings in Malta. Yet, if the gate required a strong, heavy, powerful use of it, the Parliament Building introduces a new and vibrant interpretation of the technology of building in stone.

The Parliament House is the first building you see when you cross the bridge. The parking lot has disappeared from Freedom Square. But the square has not disappeared. Measuring 60 meters by 25 it welcomes visitors immediately after they come through the gate. A public square typical of European cities where the rituals of meeting and urbanity take place. Constructing the Parliament Building, Malta's most representative institution, on this site meant creating an urban dynamic at the very entrance to the city. The building consists of two massive stone volumes eroded by the sun, supported by steel columns set back from the façade, creating a sense of lightness and buoyancy, as if airborne. The façades have been carved: we did not add decorative elements, but rather created a stone machinery that filters solar radiation and ensures natural lighting. But perhaps what is most important is that it is a sustainable

construction with nearly zero emissions: for heating and cooling we used the energy from a system of 40 wells dug a hundred meters below sea level. The roof is carpeted with 600 square meters of photovoltaic panels.

Finally there is the reborn Royal Opera House, destroyed in 1942 during the air raids that ravaged the island. Here the existing ruins and the presence of the theater became a part of Maltese history, consolidated in the collective memory. They had to be preserved. Within the new multi-purpose space we inserted a steel structure with wooden tiered seating, equipped with lighting and acoustics. An open-air theater seating a thousand spectators, which when not being used for productions functions as a public square, offering a magnificent view over the Auberge de Castille. I like the idea of uniting past and future, history and modernity, in a place like Valletta. Preserving the ruins, endowing them with dignity, giving them a function and adding the modern stage machinery is, I believe, an extraordinary achievement, a magical gesture.