

Parliament to move to Opera House - PM calls for national pride in City Gate project

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The government is forging ahead with the idea of moving Parliament to the old Opera House in Valletta in a project that should see the theatre and City Gate rebuilt by world-famous Italian architect Renzo Piano.

The project should be finished right at the end of this legislature, Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi said yesterday as he unveiled the plans.

Speaking at Castille, Dr Gonzi said Parliament will be removed from the President's Palace where it will be replaced by a number of museums. The plan is to transfer it to the site of the old Opera House, which would also feature a cultural centre facing Republic Street and will be designed with this dual-purpose in mind. The shops currently housed inside the building will be relocated.

The idea to have Parliament transferred to a rebuilt Opera House had sparked a raging controversy when it was first suggested in 2004 by then Infrastructure Minister Jesmond Mugliett.

The Prime Minister yesterday said the government chose not to rebuild the Opera House as a theatre because it did not want to saturate the area, which already has three theatres. Moreover, the footprint of the ruins was not big enough for today's theatrical requirements.

Dr Gonzi and Infrastructure Minister Austin Gatt discussed the proposals with Mr Piano personally in Paris last week.

The idea is to have an entrance that invites people into the city as well as a unique landmark that integrates the national heritage of Valletta, Dr Gonzi said.

Mr Piano's contact with Malta started in 1985 but his master plan for Valletta was shot down by public opinion.

Dr Gonzi yesterday emphasised that the new plans will be updated from the ones presented more than 20 years ago, to suit current trends.

The project will have to be concluded within the next four years.

The two projects will cost between €60 and €80 million and will not be co-funded by the private sector, Dr Gonzi specified, saying he does not want the entrance to Valletta to become a hub of business but one of culture and heritage.

"Mr Piano knows Malta and Valletta well. He sees Malta as being at the centre of the Mediterranean, an island between two continents that needs to be brought back to the stature it deserves, in its historic context," Dr Gonzi told members of the press.

The Prime Minister said he wanted to entice visitors to explore Valletta and so these projects will be undertaken in the context of a complete regeneration of the capital city by 2018: from City Gate to Fort St Elmo, with the President's Palace as the fulcrum.

The palace is to be restored to its former glory, housing various museums and exhibitions on its ground floor, while leaving the President's quarters where they are today. The square facing the palace will also be upgraded.

Old plans to turn Freedom Square into a car park, and to rebuild the bus terminus underground, were also scrapped. Instead, Freedom Square will be the link between City Gate and the Opera House and will be regenerated to welcome visitors.

The bus terminus will be reduced in size as part of the public transport reform which will see fewer buses working more frequently. It is planned that the terminus would not have to house more than 20 buses at any given time.

Dr Gonzi added that Merchants Street, which this year was freed from the open market, will continue to be restored with the use of street furniture and should also be complete within four years.

EU funds will not be used for City Gate or the Opera House, because according to Dr Gonzi this would commit the government to reaching a number of employment and touristic targets.

On the other hand, projects such as Fort St Elmo, the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour will probably be EU

funded, Dr Gonzi said.

Fort St Elmo is to be restored to become a centre of culture and the arts, with part of it used to enhance tourism with a special focus on the cruise liner industry.

Dr Gonzi said both the government and Mr Piano were willing to listen to NGOs and the public about their suggestions but he called on the Maltese to take pride in this national project.

"This project has been 60 years in waiting. It is satisfying to have finally taken a decision and brought one of the most famous architects in the world on board," Dr Gonzi said.

Taxpayers will have to fork out between €15 and €20 million each year for the Opera House and City Gate project but Dr Gonzi is confident that the country can afford such an investment, especially because it will strengthen Malta's position at a crucial time of global recession.

He added that all deadlines will be published as soon as everything is finalised with Mr Piano.