

I'm lovin' it: a call to restore Valletta's Opera House

It is remarkable that one of Malta's most famous and well recognised buildings is in a state of almost total destruction. I am referring, of course, to the Royal Opera House in Valletta. Its image appears in countless books and Websites. It acts like a time machine propelling us back to various points in history.

The version we see today bears all the hallmarks of the Luftwaffe attack of April 7, 1942. This left the building a smoking shell. The smoke might have cleared but the shell still remains. In this article I wish to add my voice to those who favour permanently keeping this architectural skeleton and explain why I believe it should be 'restored'.

This is first and foremost because the Opera House has had such an exceptionally eventful history. Its fateful story began long before the Luftwaffe menaced the skies of Malta. A sign of things to come occurred a few years after its inauguration in 1866 when the building was gutted by fire.

Joseph Bonnici and Michael Cassar's fascinating book on The Royal Opera House (1990) relates this and many other stories, revealing in the process that controversy and disaster has stalked the building from the very moment it was conceived. This was perhaps inevitable, given that the architect was Edward Middleton Barry (1830-80).

Anyone who has ever felt stressed or harassed at work will have some sympathy for Edward Barry. For a start, he never really wanted to be an architect. This was somewhat unfortunate given that his father happened to be Sir Charles Barry, the man responsible for that most iconic of British buildings: the Houses of Parliament. His son might have gone on to design some fine things (not least the opera houses at London's Covent Garden and Valletta) but they came at a very high price.

Problems bedevilled a career that was famed for its 'disappointments'. This included being sacked from completing his late father's work at Westminster. He almost suffered a similar fate in Valletta when Barry, for some strange reason, decided to entrust the job of overseeing the Opera House project to someone he himself described as "a half-educated clerk of works who has had no experience whatever in theatres". It is not surprising that costs spiralled and the designs ran into difficulties. And all this was seemingly in vain given that it burnt to the ground less than seven years later. It rose phoenix-like from the flames - only to be decimated in 1942. The remnants that still stand should be kept as a painfully apt monument to the architect.

What is left of the Opera House also merits keeping because of its heritage value. Heritage does not just consist of beautiful things made of precious materials crafted by the skilled hand of an artist. Anything can become heritage.

Malta's Cultural Heritage Act covers everything from "intangible cultural assets" (such as the performing arts) to "movable or immovable objects of artistic, architectural, historical, archaeological, ethnographic, palaeontological and geological importance... pertaining to Malta or to any other country" (Part 1 §2, p.2).

Can bits of old rope or stone become heritage? Well, next time you are visiting Malta's National War Museum take a look at the collection of 'war relics' donated by Gino Muscat Azzopardi. Labels tied to this 'rubbish' explain why it is worthy of being in the museum. We see bits of the first buildings bombed during World War II; paving slabs broken "during an anti-Italy demonstration on 8th June 1940"; rope from a parachute dropped on Valletta. Alongside such secular treasures one can think of religious relics, such as the church of St Paul Shipwrecked's fragment of marble column on which the saint was beheaded.

These two examples prove that scraps of stone can become important by association. And there are few scraps of stone that have as many associations as the remains of Barry's Opera House. Even the graffiti that have in places been illicitly written on this rubble might one day become as worthy of preservation as the ship graffiti carved on to the ancient stones of Tarxien temple. These have been moved indoors to prevent decay thanks to a joint initiative between the Bank of Valletta and Heritage Malta.

The BoV Tarxien Temples Project, begun in 2003, "aims at upgrading Tarxien Temples so that they may be understood, preserved and treasured by present and future generations." Given that the bank has its offices overlooking the site of the old Opera, might its directors not be similarly persuaded to safeguard this more recent but no less valuable fragment of cultural heritage?

The ruins of the Opera House should also be preserved for hard economic reasons. They can help safeguard Maltese tourism by offering something 'real' and unique to the visitor. A recent report entitled Malta makeover written by two experts in the field of heritage tourism* concluded that there are two historical moments that can best be used to market Malta: namely 1565 and 1940-43.

The same report declares that it is "remarkable" that the site of the Opera House has been left as a "ruinous and untidy space". The authors' suggestion that it be turned into a temporary outdoor theatre has been realised. While this is to be applauded, I take issue with the implication that this site is an 'eyesore' which 'pollutes' the city and is "in urgent need of redevelopment".

From time spent watching visitors sitting on the stumps of columns or resting on the walls it is clear that the Opera House is definitely a tourist destination and a place to take photographs and think about the city and its history. Plus, even if it is an 'eyesore', what better memorial could there be to the realities of war and the legacies of 1940-43 than the bombed out remains of the Opera House? This is no sanitised version of the conflict, but tangible evidence of the destructive consequences of war. Even if the site must be redeveloped, let the broken columns remain - just as in England where the blitzed ruins of St Michael's Cathedral in Coventry have been left alongside Sir Basil Spence's new building (built 1956-62).

The Opera House ruin is already an unintentional memorial, so why not turn it into a ready-made museum? One of the arches underneath could house an exhibition explaining the building and its colourful history. It could tell all sorts of stories: such as the consequences of British rule; the impact of World War II; the transformations that have taken place on Freedom Square; the changes in architectural taste; the politics of the planning process. It is easy to think that heritage means something ancient.

There is heritage inside the Opera House, but it is not of the 'dead' museum variety. It is, instead, a living heritage. Take, for example, the shop selling every conceivable kind of handbag and suitcase. It has occupied one of the arches of the Opera House for decades. On a wall inside is a black and white photograph of the father of the current owner. It shows him standing proudly outside his 'City Bazaar'.

Today, the same building is festooned with signs advertising things and displaying the latest news headlines. There is also a plaque giving the Tourist Infoline number (dial 9973-0000- 2011) where one can "listen to two minutes of information on this historic site". Above this notice is a ubiquitous McDonald's "I'm lovin' it" advert.

In a world where everywhere looks and tastes the same, there is a pressing need for something a bit different. Valletta is a UNESCO World Heritage Site precisely because it is different and special and because the things that make it unique remain visible in its streets and squares. The Opera House is one such element of this exciting and varied story. This 'World Heritage' city will be impoverished if Edward Barry's battered building is one day allowed to disappear.

For the remains of the Opera House - even if they are 'ruinous and untidy' - are clearly part of Malta's cultural heritage and steps should be taken to restore it. The Cultural Heritage Act defines 'restoration' as an undertaking intended "to conserve the integrity of cultural heritage, and to reveal its cultural values and to improve the legibility of its original state, form and design, within the limits of still existing material" (Part 1 §2, p. 4). A building does not therefore need to be reconstructed in order to be 'restored'. Instead, restoration is a process of disclosing something's heritage value and safeguarding it for the future - based on what remains of it from the past.

It is easy to overlook just how much of the past is still visible in the Opera House. Take, for example, the decorative keystones with their bearded faces staring down like Old Father Time. Some are so badly weathered and damaged that they look like surreal semi-abstract portraits.

Or consider the solid masonry with its rusticated stones at the base of the building. Their rough, pitted surfaces bear an uncanny resemblance to the countless indentations in the stones of temple sites such as Hagar Qim! The spiralling scrolls on the Opera House steps are made up of plants and fruits metamorphosed into stone. These remind me of both the tree patterns painted on the ceiling at the Hypogeum, and the carved altars at Tarxien.

Malta's pagan temples appeal to visitors not just because they are fabulously old, but because they wear the degradations of time - because they are fragmentary - because they pose more questions than answers - because they need our imaginations to bring them to life - because they put us in the shoes of those strange-yet-familiar people that must have entered the same space countless generations ago. Yet the flamboyantly dressed theatregoers of the 1870s are in many ways as distant from us as the pagan worshippers at Hagar Qim. The archaeological remains of both can and should be used to teach us about the past.

An example of how this might be achieved is on sale at the Tarxien temple. It is a school worksheet. One of the exercises features an outline drawing of the temple's damaged colossal statue. It invites children to complete the figure as it might have looked. Why not use the same principle for the fragmentary Opera House? It could then become a test piece for the next generation of architects and urban designers.

And this leads to a final, clinching reason for 'restoring' the Opera House. For the fickle hand of fate has turned this relic into a monumental architectural joke. One of the most criticised aspects of Edward Barry's original design was the arcade on the main façade. Many felt that this took up too much space, was too low to accommodate shops and restricted the view of the columns.

When the Luftwaffe attacked in 1942 they didn't know or care about this and thus failed to destroy the one part that many people wanted removing. This hardy feature had already survived the fire of 1873. And it prevailed again when the building began to be demolished in the 1950s to make way for an abortive new theatre.

The stubbornly resilient arcade of shops and flights of stairs are still there today. They reveal a great deal about the design of buildings; arguments over architectural style; and the all too frequent mismatch between form and function. They remind us that planning controversies are nothing new. The remains of the Opera House provide the perfect antidote to the vanities of architects and the insatiable appetite of urban planners. What better reason could there be for 'restoring' this invaluable piece of cultural heritage?

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*Ashworth, G.J. & J.E. Tunbridge, Malta makeover: prospects for the realignment of heritage, tourism and development, URSI-report 304, Urban and Regional Studies Institute, Rijksuniversitet Groningen, c.2003.