

The Royal Opera House in Malta: from ruin towards a new Reality.

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The bombed remains of the old Royal Opera House have deteriorated for over sixty years. Located at the entrance of Valletta, the capital city of Malta, the site constitutes a prominent element of the urban fabric and its considerable use value, as well as its importance as a symbol in the collective memory of the local population, gives it high cultural significance.

The Royal Opera House project required preliminary excavations and studies that brought to light the basements and underground spaces of the theatre, unknown to the public before their recent unearthing. These, together with a large lapidary collection scattered all over the island, have become intricately connected with the 21st century conversion of the site into an open-air performance space situated above. The ruins, together with the values encompassed by the site itself, are factors that determined the design approach, as well as the restoration and technical methodologies adopted during the building works. This paper describes the approach to the project that resulted not only from the careful consideration of the remaining elements of the theatre but also from a re-examination of the time-honoured concept of ruins. The overlap of the latter was necessary to achieve the desired urban, social and cultural impact on the on-going rehabilitation of the entrance to Valletta.

What ruins tell us

When Christopher Woodward's book, *In Ruins*, draws to a close, it does so in a somewhat unorthodox way. A page of acknowledgements normally reserved for the start of any essay, ends thus:

"Finally, I must thank my wife Anna, who married me on the Campidoglio last summer: the Registry office is in Michelangelo's piazza on the Capitoline Hill, overlooking the forum. A roman of slender, perfect and timeless symmetry, she rescued me from libraries, graveyards and dead stones. *Son molto fiero chemiofigliosa' mezzo-Romano.*"¹

Strange that a book dedicated to buildings of the past, to the ravages of time and to the ineluctable triumph of nature over the work of man should end on such a gentle, life-nurturing note.

Ruins, to use a metaphor devised by John Ruskin to imbue buildings with human qualities, can speak volumes. They can tell us about past generations, relate their ambitions and failures and describe their desires and distractions. A mixture of nature and artifice, they have come to symbolize destruction, death and decay, and the decline that is an inexorable ingredient of life.

A close reading of the works of artists and writers who have dedicated a part of their work to the depiction of ruins and ruinous landscapes, however, offers up a fascinating reverse of the traditional concept of the ruin as a symbol of death. Ruins, in fact, have often exerted their fascination precisely because they are a great device to intensify the sensation of life.

Percy Bysshe Shelley placed ruins at the centre of his personal and political philosophy. In 1818, when he passed through Rome with his family, he composed the greatest passages of his *Prometheus Unbound*. In his preface, he wrote:

"This poem was chiefly written upon the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, among the flowery glades, and the thickets of odiferous blossoming trees, which are extended in ever winding labyrinths upon its immense platforms and dizzy arches suspended in the

air. The bright blue sky of Rome, and the effect of the vigorous awakening spring in that divinest climate, and the new life with which it drenches the spirits even to intoxication, were the inspiration of this drama".²

In contrast to this hymn to rebirth, the Modern Age, characterized by two devastating World Wars, could not but give a horror-ridden image of ruins naturally associated with the terror of War and the onslaught of progress. They became the product of a horrifying catastrophe best described by Walter Benjamin in his ninth thesis from the essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* is used as a representation of the violent storm "that we call progress" and that heaps piles of ruins at the feet of the reluctant angel.

The first, perhaps truly scholarly work on 'the growth and development of this strange human reaction to decay' is undoubtedly Rose Macaulay's *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953). The title itself indicates a shifting of the Modernist theme from a study of ruins as a symbol of destruction to an exploration of pleasure. For "whatever its complex elements, the pleasure felt by most of us in good ruins is great".³

Valletta's plan

This epicurean spirit has been a major influence in driving the design and development of the project for the rehabilitation of the Entrance into the sixteenth century town of Valletta. The area of intervention is undeniably one of the most intricate and sensually rich in the city. Geographically, it embraces the areas immediately outside and inside the landward fortifications, spanning levels that are the lowest (the ditch) and the highest (the parapets of the curtain walls and the backdrop of the cavaliers) in the town. The site, with its complex stratification and historical remains, provides a distinctive scenography where solid and void, open and enclosed, public and private, mineral and vegetal essences, are juxtaposed to provide a formidably worked canvas on which to graft the new intervention.

Understandably, the urban organisation of Valletta has always been determined by its original plan, developed on the principle of the gridiron. Following the military rules that guided the planning of the “fortress” of Valletta, however, the city grid was carefully set back from the fortification walls to allow freedom of movement and access to the defences.

After the construction of the enceintewas undertaken, a list of regulations was drawn up to determine regularity and quality in the new constructions. The city plan consisted of orthogonal blocks which strictly followed the street pattern while only two areas escaped this rational layout: the *Manderaggio* on the Marsamxett harbour side, and the area located right behind the City Gate curtain wall. The latter area, eventually occupied by Freedom Square and the remains of the Old Opera House adjacent to it, constitutes the site of the project which is the subject of this study.

The royal opera house

The Royal Opera House, erected between 1860 and 1866, was constructed on this site as an extravagant Neo-Classical building, contrasting with the late Baroque which characterized the architectural developments of Valletta in the second half of the eighteenth century. Designed by Edward Middleton Barry, architect of the Covent Garden Royal Opera House, it was an “uninspired extravaganza opulent to the point of vulgarity and completely insensitive to its environment”.⁴ The building in question occupied a 63 m by 34 m site, which previously housed the *Casa Lanfreducc* that formed the first city block encountered on entering the city. During the seventeenth century, this was one of the largest and most important palaces of Valletta although its significance decreased rapidly since it “was far from having an imposing appearance: its southern end was... used as a bakery and that part overlooking Strada Reale was a mere row of second-rate shops”.⁵

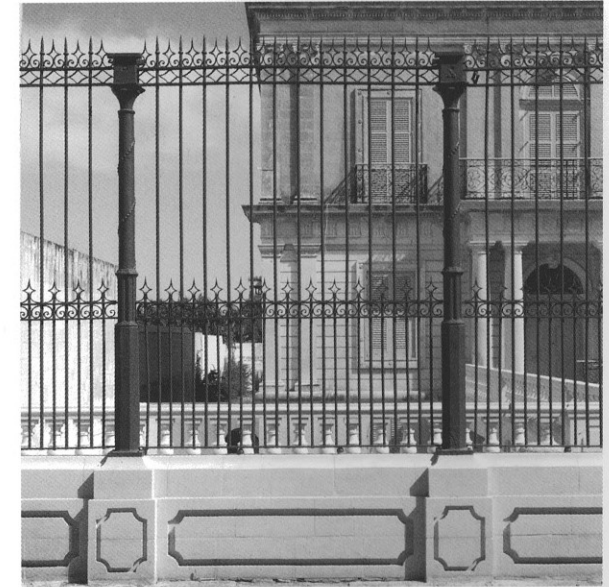
Construction works, begun in 1862, were beset by many problems almost from the start. The stone used for the

foundation walls was quarried from the site itself, but was not found strong enough to support the load of the building. The bonding of the stones was judged to be weak, and some of the walls constructed on uneven rock were of a thickness that was less than that specified.⁷ The foundations had eventually to be pulled down and reconstructed.

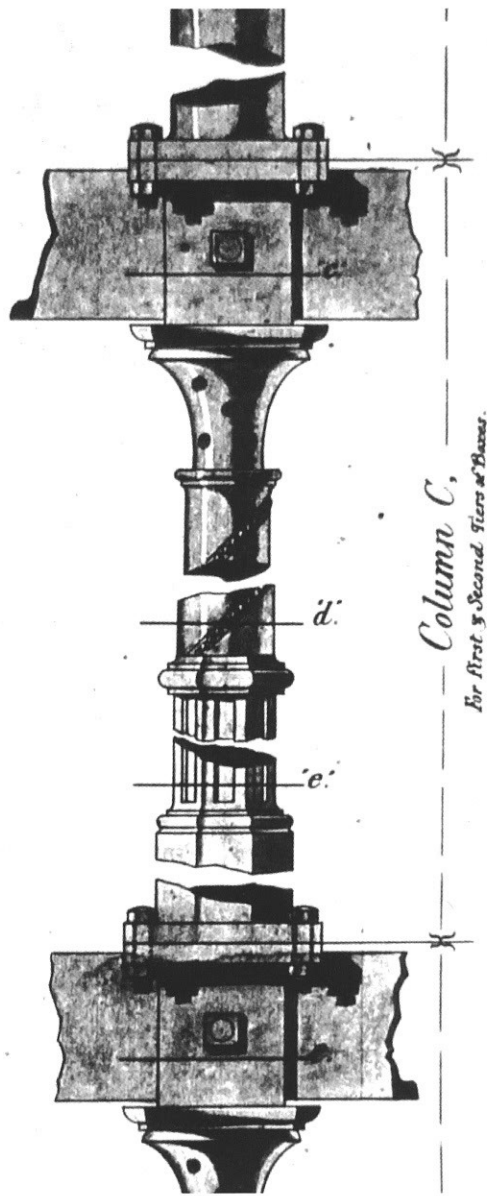
The Royal Opera House opened its doors to the public on the 9th October 1866, with the opera *I Puritani* by Vincenzo Bellini. Only six years after its opening, on the 25th May 1873, however, the theatre was brought down by a fire. The exterior of the building was undamaged but the interior stonework was calcified by the intense heat generated by the fire. It was decided immediately after the catastrophe to rebuild the theatre. The project was based on the plans drawn up by E.L. Galizia, S. Fenech and W. Paulson who formed part of a Select Committee chosen by the Government to oversee the project.

The Royal Opera House reopened in October 1877, but was damaged again during the bombing of the Second World War, after having become, in the inter War period, a symbol of Maltese “italianita”, a cultural movement serving to emphasize Malta’s Latin European nature in contrast with Imperialist “Britishness”.⁸ “On the evening of Tuesday, April 7, 1942 the theatre was devastated by *Luftwaffe* bombers..... The portico and the auditorium were a heap of stones, the roof a gaping hole of twisted girders. The rear end starting half way from the colonnade was however intact”.⁹

In 1953, the Government launched an international competition for the rebuilding of the Royal Opera House. Although the competition had a winning scheme, that by Marcello Zavelani Rossi, the project was never realized. The following decades, right up to the end of the 20th century, witnessed several attempts at rebuilding the Royal Opera House or replacing it with a more suitable alternative. Yet, in spite of its prominence not only at the entrance to the city, but also in the collective memory, none of the proposals were ever



Iron columns from the Royal Opera House re-employed in the street fence of Bijou Villa (1889, Rabat) ©Architecture Project, ph. G. Dreyfuss



Detail of the iron columns and tie rods for the Royal Opera House (1875, Valletta) ©Public Works, Records & Archives Section, Malta

carried out and the site progressively sank into a state of dereliction, disappearing into the urban context where it served merely to mark the boundaries of a public car park that had spontaneously invaded the concreted-over empty space. “L’Opéresteruinenavrante, cicatrici-silencieuse” said Gilbert Gardes.¹⁰

Planning context and public opinion

Having *achieved* the status of modern ruin, and never having lost its popular appeal as a symbol of the Maltese cultural *amour propre*, the Royal Opera House was included in the Malta Scheduled Property Register as a Grade 2 monument by the authorities in 2008.¹¹ Paradoxically, although the ruins were scheduled, the site itself was excluded from the protection afforded by legislation. Conservation policies, embedded in the Structure Plan for the island, served no other purpose than to turn the Opera House ruins into an object separated from its physical and urban context. This idiosyncrasy was further accentuated by the existence of parts of the old theatre, elements of its façade especially, cannibalized and bastardized to form new decorative compositions in institutional buildings scattered across the islands. These detached and isolated stone pieces, too, were considered worthy of protection.¹²

Needless to say, hearsay and nostalgia fuelled public opinion every time the site was mentioned officially. Letters in the press, clamouring for its reconstruction especially, have been relentless, and the theatre has been the subject of discussion and debate at every dinner party and reception for the last five decades. It is against this rich and colourful backdrop of social and cultural minutiae that one should judge the bold, yet inevitable, decision to include of the Opera House ruins in the site earmarked for the construction of a new parliament house in 2008, as part of a regeneration project entrusted to Renzo Piano Building Workshop in Paris who, for the purpose of this project are associated with Architecture Project (AP), their local partners. What followed has been a careful balancing act between the

establishment of the real and perceived values of this heritage site and a design driven project born of the strong political will to breathe new life in this once vibrant entrance to the city.

The first public foray occurred during the introductory exhibition which was received with much passion by the public whose opinion was distilled into hundreds of letters and comments sent to newspapers, to blogs, and to specifically set-up social network groups. It even catalysed a petition put forward by the local artists to the Prime Minister in February 2010.¹³ It followed another of January 2009 supported by the Malta Library and Information Association.¹⁴ While the artistic community objected to a *roofless theatre*, the MaLIA group petitioned for the creation of a cultural centre and public library within the ruins of the Royal Opera House. Innumerable commentaries simply made a plea for and advocated the complete reconstruction of the 19th century building.

A proposal for the site

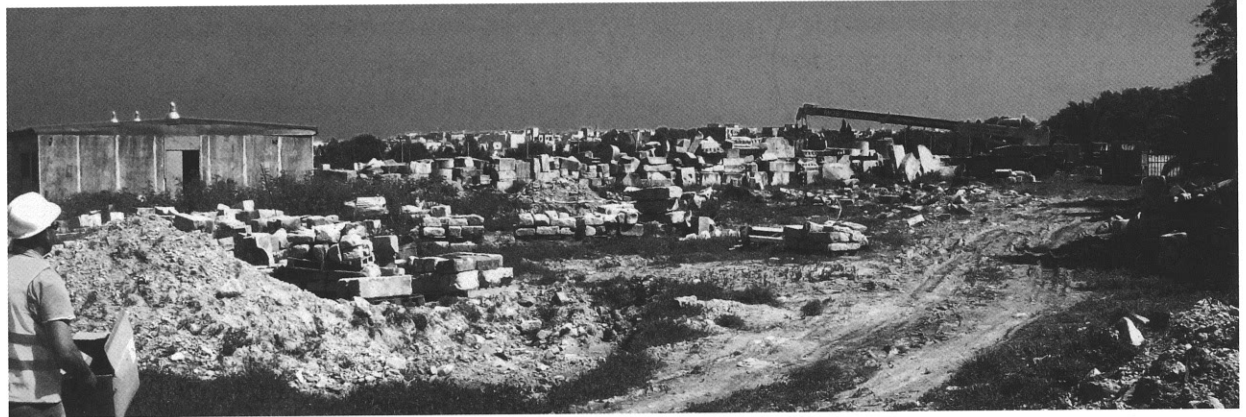
The restoration of the theatre ruins and their rehabilitation to house an outdoor theatre constitutes one element in the complex remodelling of the entrance to the city which includes the building of a new Parliament House just inside the walls, the construction of a new Gate, the restoration of the original sixteenth century entrance bridge, and the planting of an enclosed garden in the Mediterranean tradition in the ditch underlying the new Gate. The theatre itself envisaged a new light skin to define the space, supported by a surrounding alignment of steel masts and columns intended to carry removable walls, lighting systems, acoustic and sound equipment, and to give the space its specific identity during the staging of performances. The translucent wall elements, were to be constructed in such a way that they could enclose the space to different degrees, at times remaining sunken, so that performances be held in the most extraordinary scenery of some of the city’s best buildings.

Historically, the site is exceptionally multi-layered, having been the focus of innumerable projects aimed at improving accessibility to and mobility in the town. Some, like the Malta Railway, whose terminal station was situated below the new Parliament House site, were executed, became an inexorable part of public life for a limited period and were subsequently abandoned, leaving the site marked with relics and scars from previous centuries. Others, like the Royal Opera House, bombed during the Second World War and subsequently dismantled, have been left as ruins for over sixty years, long enough for them to become not only a symbol of the memories of an opulent past, but also to be irrevocably associated with the image of the entrance into Valletta itself.

All these vestiges of earlier times provide a canvas which is anything but blank. The site is, instead, pregnant with national and personal histories, memories and values. With its origins firmly rooted in the past, it nevertheless inspires a particular pleasure, like the ruins of Caracalla did for Shelley, which is generated especially by the opportunity that it presents of a “vigorous awakening”.

The future is therefore a most essential ingredient of the restoration aspect of the project and the methods employed for the preservation of the historic structures on the site were, as a result, determined by the need to establish continuity with the past while serving the future needs of Valletta. The approach to the preservation of the ruins must be seen in this light.¹⁵

This interpretive discourse, developed to understand the best way forward for this culturally complex historical site, dictated the design decisions taken by the design team. These were based on a faithful re-examination of the positivist philosophy of the pre-Burra Charter documents (the ‘material fetish’ of the Charters of Athens and Venice, in particular), while reconciling the relativism and plurality rooted in the later documents. There is no doubt that, with respect to this project of national importance, the “construction of significance [...] must



General view of the field where large amounts of fragments were uncovered (2009) © Architecture Project, ph. M. Mifsud

be based on complex and interrelated meanings bound into a [Maltese] cultural milieu. It is only through this richness of meaning that heritage conservation can contribute to human flourishing”.¹⁶

In addition to this consideration, however, if it is true that postmodern society veers towards a polymorphic world, the globalised one is yearning for a recreated, mediated authenticity, in the process blurring and inevitably doing away with the traditional boundaries between culture and entertainment.¹⁷ With this in mind, the project was intentionally directed at preserving the temporal and physical ruptures inscribed in the building fabric whilst recovering the continuity of the intended cultural use of the space. Françoise Choay described this option thus: “Moderniser n’est pas alors donner l’aspect du neuf, mais ficher dans le corps des vieux bâtiments un implant régénérateur. De cette symbiose imposée, il est escompté que l’intérêt suscité par l’œuvre du présent se répercute sur l’œuvre ancienne et amorce ainsi une dialectique.”¹⁸

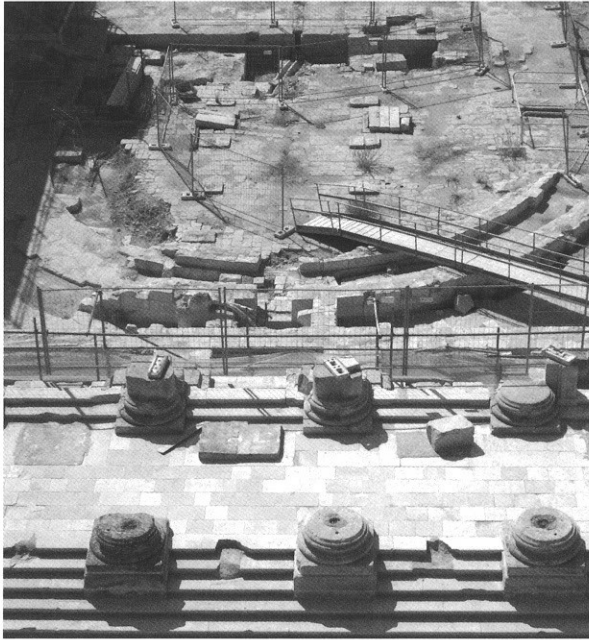
From this perspective, it became not only acceptable, but also necessary, that design be adopted as the fundamental catalyst of regeneration and as the mediator for the multi-layered history of the site. The architects felt that this design motor, rather than mere guidelines

and policies, could, when coupled with the regulation provided by strong conservation principles and professional preparation, afford fertile ground for a debate which actively engaged in control and mitigation while delivering innovative solutions to the project.

Discoveries and redesign

Following the initial studies, the old Royal Opera House, which was then being used as a car park, was excavated. The three months long excavations allowed the team to uncover the remains of the basement and foundations of the Royal Opera House, including the semi-circular wall that supported the tiers. This level also unearthed the remains of the 16th century aqueduct that cut across the back of the site. Furthermore, a number of scattered remains of the Royal Opera House itself were extracted from and removed from the site, and stored in a safe place where they were surveyed and documented.

In parallel with these excavations, the front rooms, that were originally designed to support a deep terrace at the entrance of the Royal Opera House, were cleared and all recent additions and finishes gutted. The stripping of internal finishes uncovered a basement level connected to the level of the excavations being carried out in the



View of the exposed ruins with the podium in the foreground (2010)
© Architecture Project, ph. G. Dreyfuss

car park area.

The excavations of the main area of the theatre site served as a prequel to the investigation of the large amount of debris and remains of the Royal Opera House discovered buried on site. Large quantities of architectural and ornamental fragments were also found scattered across the islands. Reports were subsequently drawn up documenting the scattered remains and their respective location and a database created in order to cross-reference the original position of the stone fragments with their current location, their dimensions and state of conservation.

The documentation process was fundamental in providing the confidence to redesign the project. The extent of the ruins uncovered was important enough to justify a new design that incorporated and left visible as much as possible of the unearthed ruins, thus contributing to the site interpretation through an enhanced didactic experience.

The new proposal therefore presented a stronger case for the restoration of the remains as a ruin in the classical sense, using orthodox scientific methods and materials that were coherent with the design approach, while their integration with a new contemporary structure would not only consolidate the image of the ruin, but also provide the infrastructure for its projected life in the future.¹⁹ The re-design also eliminated the moveable translucent walls that would have required the creation of extensive stone-cutting at the level of the unearthed ruins, reducing the intervention to the insertion of the steel perimeter columns for the support of technical equipment.

This approach, coupled with the restoration philosophy described above, was at the base of the decision to study the reintegration of part of the fragments found off-site in order to assist in the understanding of the original building fabric and its function, whilst ensuring its legibility in the contemporary urban landscape.

The columns proposed to be re-erected are only sections of the original columns and are aimed at increasing the proportion of solid stone over void in order to balance

the strong presence of the stone façade of the Parliament Building currently being built adjacent to the site. To maximise the potential of the historical site and to reduce the impact of the required infrastructure on the original building fabric, all backstage amenities – changing rooms, green area, props' storage, plant rooms, etc., have been located underground outside the historical boundaries of the site.

Conclusion

The approach to the Opera House project has been characterised by a thorough and inclusive understanding of the ruins in their direct and wider context, not only their current and projected urban setting but also the vicissitudes undergone by the theatre as a result of the social, cultural and political underpinnings of its history. In order to navigate away from the profound nostalgia and latent historicism that resurfaced at the beginning of the project, the team understood that key to the success of the project was the assumption that the use-value of the monument was the main container of the authenticity of the site.

Ironically, the intervention on the historical fabric that was necessary to ensure a compatible and sustainable use of the site also prompted most comments and criticism. Whilst no arguments were put forward to date, the authenticity of the building fabric alone still seems to be perceived as having more value than its historical use as a support for live-performances.

Thanks to their open-air concept, but also due to their strategic location at the entrance to the Valletta, the Opera House ruins have the potential to act as a catalyst to regenerate both social and cultural layers of the city. They can become a new symbol signalling the rebirth of the area not only through their consolidation, but also through the visible introduction of contemporary architecture and of a long overdue and novel cultural offering to be housed inside them.



The new structure in place within the ruins (2012) © Architecture Project, ph. G. Dreyfuss

Note

1. Woodward, C., *In Ruins*, Vintage, London (2002), p. 25.
2. Hutchison, T. (ed.), *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Oxford University Press, London (1935), p. 201.
3. Macaulay, R., *Pleasure of Ruins*, Thames and Hudson, London (1984), Introduction p. ii.
4. Buhagiar, M. "Neo-classicist Architecture of the Early British Period", *Heritage*, No. 26, August 1979, p. 509. Ellul, M., *Heritage of an Island: Malta*, Malta (1975), p. 75.
5. Ellul, M., "The building of the Royal Opera House 1861-1866", Xuereb, C. (ed.), *Theatre in Malta*, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Valletta (1997).
6. Caruana, T.M., *The Malta Royal Opera House: Past, Present... Future?*, B.E.& A. (Hons.) Dissertation, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, University of Malta, 2004.
7. Ellul, M., *op. cit.*
8. Frendo, H., "Intra-European colonial nationalism: The case of Malta: 1922-1927", *MelitaHistorica*, Vol 11, No 1, 1992, pp. 79-94.
9. Bonnici, J., Cassar, M., *The Royal Opera House*, Gutenberg Press, Malta (1990).
10. Gardes, G., "La Valette 2001. Lettre d'un voyageur", *Revue des Sciences Sociales*, No 29, 2002, Université Marc Bloch, Strasbourg. [The Opera House remains an upsetting ruin, a silent scar.]
11. Is it possible to attribute value to that which is not known or that is invisible? For arguments in favour of research rather than monumentality as the principal asset of the heritage, see: Carver, M., "On archaeological value", *Antiquity*, Vol 70, No 267, 1996, pp. 45-56; see also: Carandini, A., "Dall'erovine allagrande totalità del reale", Barbanera, M. (ed.), *Relitti Riletti; Metamorfossidelle rovine e identità culturale*, Bollati Boringhieri Editore, Torino (2009) pp. 172-176.
12. Government Notice 276/08, *Gazzettata - Guvern ta' Malta*, 28 March 2008, p. 5338 item 84. The text stipulates the following "The remains (but not the site) of the Royal Opera House and all other remains now found elsewhere from the site".
13. www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20100216/local/artists-oppose-decision-to-retain-roofless-theatre.294398 [accessed 28 August 2012].
14. www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20090120/local/online-petition-for-library-at-opera-house-site.241443 [accessed 28 August 2012].
15. Hugo "Guerre aux démolisseurs" article written in 1825 and published in the *Revue de Paris* (1829) and Ruskin (*The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New-York (1979), pp 169-170), both considered the importance of the future in the life of a building
16. Wells, J.C., "The plurality of truth in culture, context, and heritage: A (mostly) post-structuralist analysis of urban conservation charters", *City and Time*, Vol 3, No 2:1, 2007, pp. 1-13.
17. Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée*, Gallimard, Paris (1987), p. 158.
18. Choay, F., *op.cit.*, p. 162. For an English translation see O'Connell, L.M. (trans.), *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2001).
19. On the idea of "anachronistic contemporaneity" and the interaction between contemporary architecture and heritage buildings, see Paquin, A.G., "Innover pour actualiser. Le musée de l'AraPacis à Rome", *16th ICOMOS General Assembly and International Symposium: 'Finding the spirit of place - between the tangible and the intangible'*, 29 Sept - 4 Oct 2008, Quebec, Canada.