

Seeking Solace in the Mediterranean: Architect Basil Spence in Malta

Conrad Thake



Fig. 1
Basil Spence, *Filfla*,
oil painting.
(Private Collection)

Fig. 2 & 3
Dar tal-Għar, Fawwara.
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Sir Basil Spence was the best-known British Architect, almost the only one known to the general public. The centre of many controversies, a passionate defender of his works, he was always news and on his death on the 19th November last year [1976] even television reports covered his life and works. There would be no doubt that a national figure, a 'Great Architect' had died.¹

Sir Frederick Gibberd

In the late 1960s, the renowned British architect Sir Basil Spence (1907-1976) acquired a traditional house in Malta. It was certainly not one of the typical run-of-the-mill holiday villas that were popular with foreign visitors at the time. Rather, it was the complete antithesis of the speculative type of new accommodation that was fast sprouting to cater for the major influx of British expatriates who decided to take up residence in Malta, lured by generous tax incentives and the other intangible life-enhancing benefits of a relaxed lifestyle and a mild climate. The property that Spence had purchased, appropriately named 'Dar tal-Għar' was situated in the desolate landscape setting of Fawwara, on the outskirts of Siġġiewi. It enjoyed extensive views of a then pristine and enchanting countryside setting of terraced fields with rubble walls sloping down dramatically to the rugged coastline.

The property was basically a variant of a cave-dwelling combining a cluster of man-made structures that merge with the natural rock formation. The stone walls enclosing the series of irregular-shaped rooms appear to emerge from the craggy outcrops of natural rocks that defined the land. The property came with a generous landholding set within terraced fields, and would serve as an ideal setting for Spence's forthcoming interventions.

During the 1950s and '60s, Spence's stature as Britain's leading architect had flourished to such an extent that he was a household name. In the early stages of his career he had earned a reputation as an accomplished architectural draftsman and designer of exhibition stands, as testified by his imaginative design of the 'Sea and Ships' Pavilion at the Festival of Britain in 1951. However, he attained both domestic and international fame instead when in 1951 he won an architectural competition for the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral which had been bombed by the Luftwaffe during the Second World War.²

Spence's innovative winning design proposed a modern structure that would be physically linked to the existing ruins of the historic cathedral. The realization of Coventry Cathedral lasted for several years until its completion in 1962, but this high-profile project served as a catalyst for several other prestigious commissions that included the Canongate Housing scheme and airport in Glasgow, a university campus at Sussex, and the new British Embassy in Rome, situated a stone's throw from Michelangelo's Porta Pia set within the former Aurelian walls.³

However, it was not only glitz and glory, for by the end of the 1960s Spence was in the line of fire of some highly scathing, and at times even personal, vitriolic attacks. The adverse criticism in the press, and at one time even featuring in the debates at the House of Lords, mainly

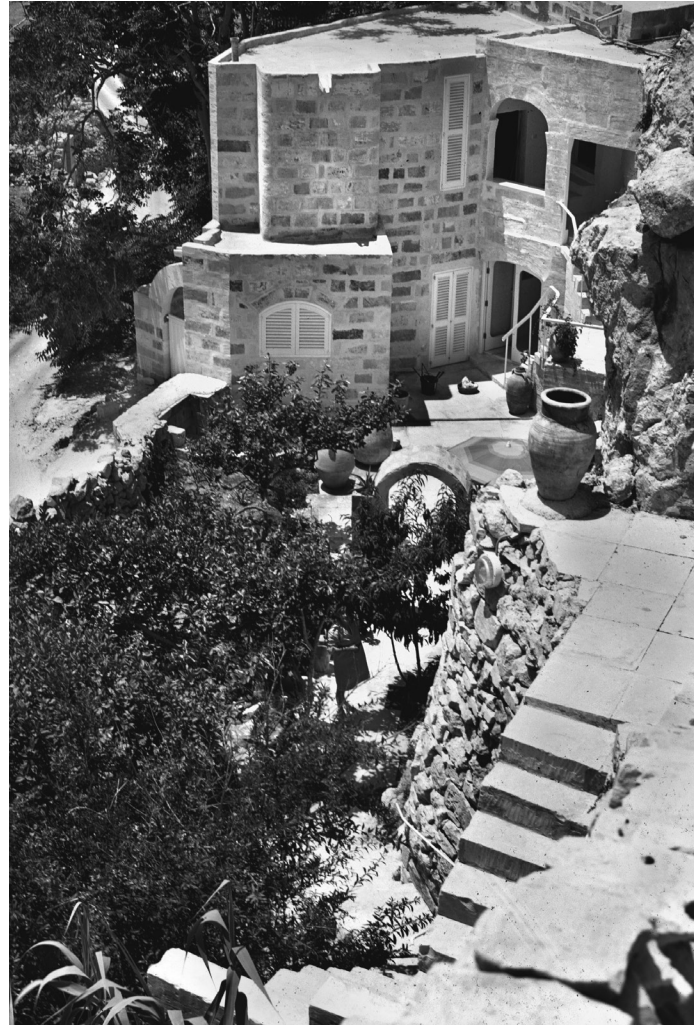
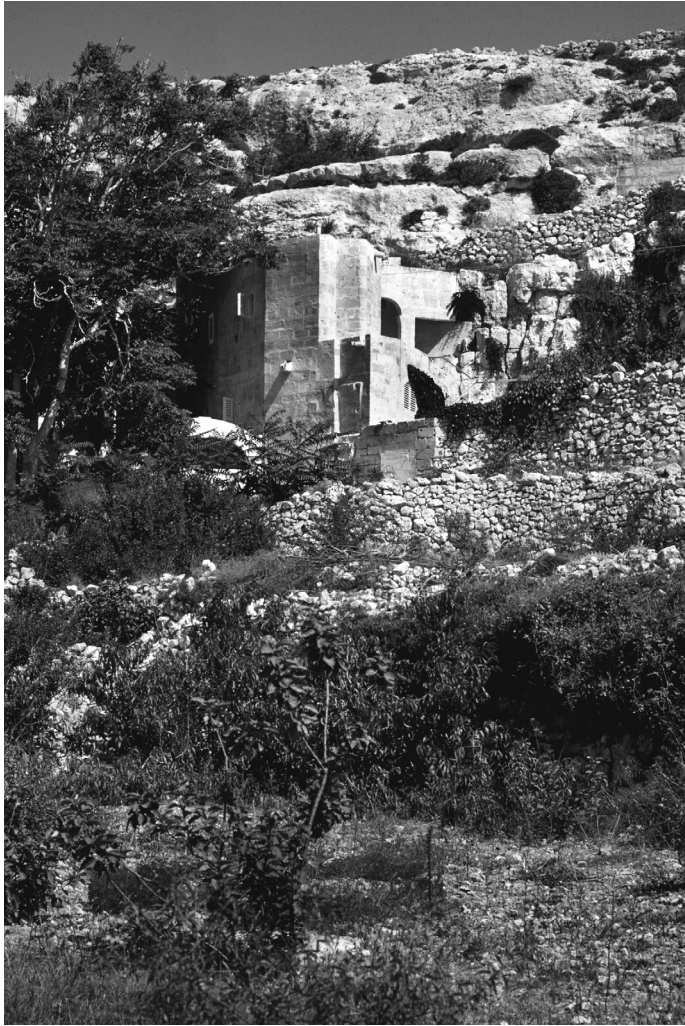


Fig. 4
Basil Spence, sketch of Dar
tal-Għar.
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stemmed from the highly controversial high-rise development projects such as the Hyde Park Cavalry Barracks project, London (1970), followed soon after by the Home Office Building at Queen Anne's Gate, overlooking St James Park (completed in 1977).

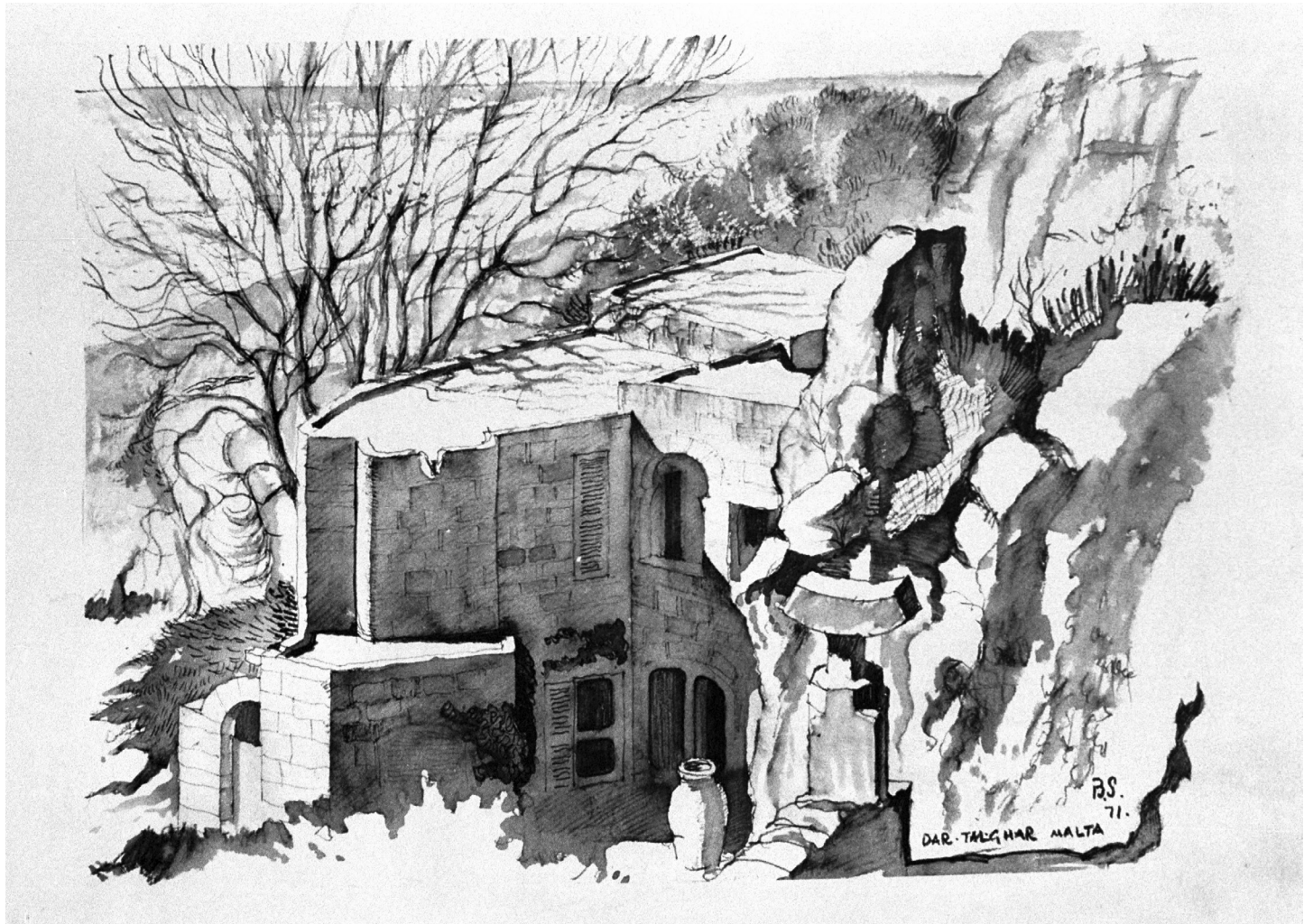
The rapid rise of heritage conservation activism at grassroots level, together with the emergence of several younger architects who viewed Spence as being part of the establishment, accounted for a marked shift in perception. Spence, then in his early sixties, was in the twilight years of an outstanding architectural career. However, his standing as a star architect was on the wane, as an unforgiving press blamed him directly for the unfolding controversies. It is within this context of adversity and stress on the home front that Spence must have been yearning for respite and a strong dose of tranquility and solace when he ventured to acquire and transform Dar tal-Għar in Fawwara.

Friendships in Malta

In the aftermath of Independence from Britain in 1964, Malta had attracted to its shores several British artists and writers who contributed in a significant manner to the flourishing of the arts and intellectual discourse. The list of protagonists would include the likes of archaeologist John D. Evans (1925-2011), architect and historian Quentin Hughes (1920-2004), the abstract artist Victor Pasmore (1908-1998), the zoologist and surrealist painter Desmond Morris (1928-), the historian and writer Ernle Bradford (1922-1986), the novelist Nicholas Monsarrat (1910-1979) and the writer and playwright Nigel Dennis (1912-1989) amongst others. Most of these would interact socially at regular informal cultural gatherings held by Vera Greer (1904-1995) at her residence underlying Saqqajja Hill, Rabat. These events were frequented by the more cultured and erudite members of the British community resident in Malta, and also by a number of leading Maltese artists and intellectuals. This was the kind of social and cultural milieu that prevailed during the time that Spence acquired his holiday home in Malta.

During his brief visits to Malta, Spence forged two close friendships. He was already well acquainted with Victor Pasmore and frequently visited the artist at his residence, a converted farmhouse in Gudja where he would have admired his 'three-dimensional collages and reliefs that had a close affinity with architectural constructions'.⁴ Another special friendship was with the then young and upcoming Maltese architect Richard England. England would develop a close bond as Spence served both as a mentor and source of architectural inspiration. England fondly recalls the cherished moments that he spent at Spence's cliff-top studio in Fawwara.

Here, on many an occasion, one could watch Spence at work, both at the painting easel and also at the drawing board. The remarkable dexterity of his graphic skill was sure to impress any on-looker. He worked ceaselessly on his many international projects, but also indulged in painting as a relaxation, whilst also spending a lot of time building his much loved model aeroplanes.⁵



right: Fig. 5
Basil Spence, chisel in hand
at Dar tal-Għar.

opposite: Fig. 6
Sketch of screen-wall
alcove for Dar tal-Għar.
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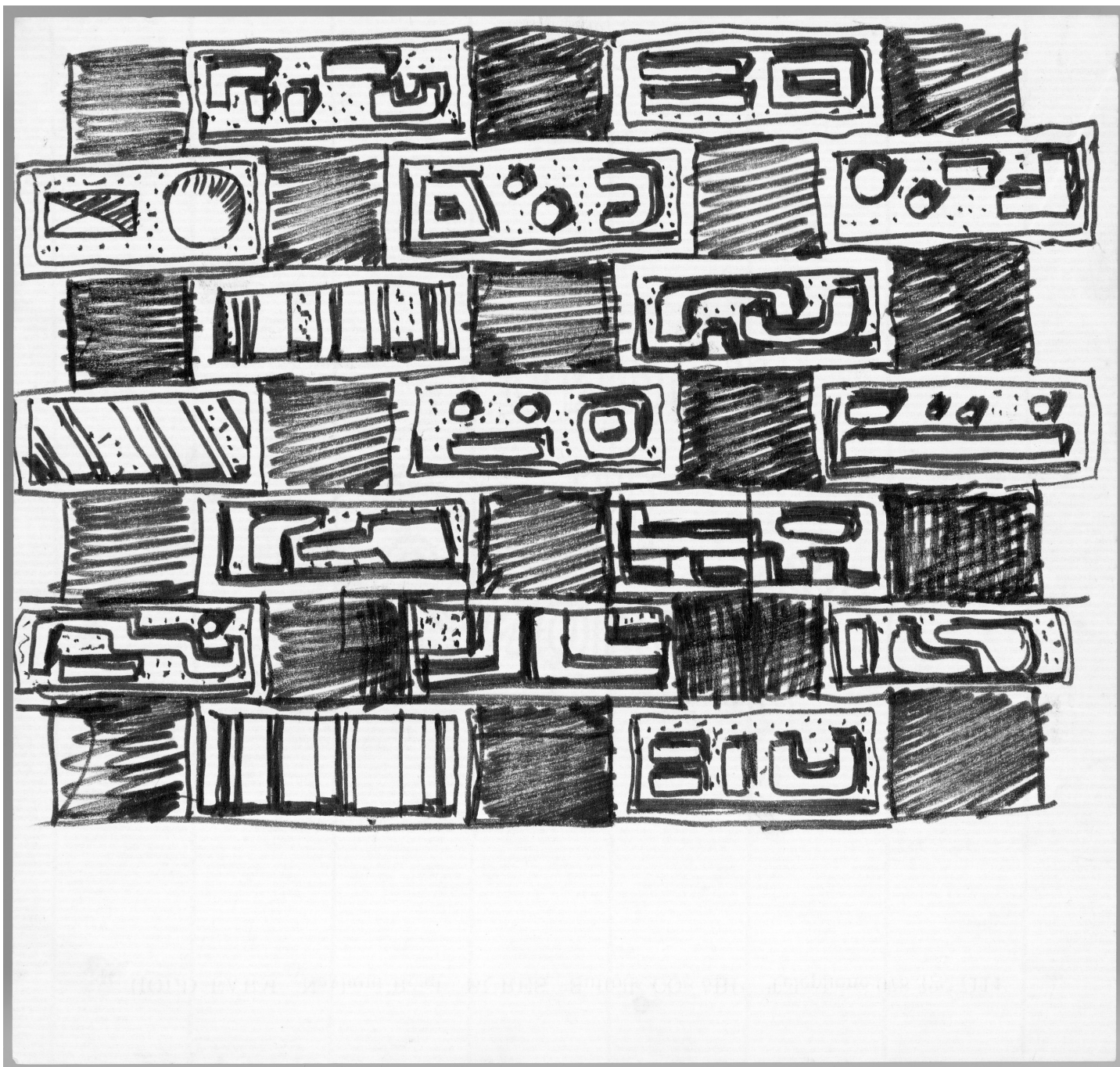


Fig. 7
Detail of limestone block
carvings forming part of
screen wall.
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Dar tal-Għar, Malta

The Dar tal-Għar project was totally different in spirit and genre to the large-scale and, at times, monumental projects that Spence worked upon. Although certainly not a high-profile project, being limited in size and having only featured fleetingly in publications on Spence, it provides us with different insights on Spence as an architect. In his conversion of the cave-habitation, the creation of the artist studio perched high on the cliffs, and the formation of a rock-pool for bathing, we are exposed to Spence in the guise of a sensitive artist-architect working in harmony with nature, not dominating or subjugating it, but interacting with it in synergy.

The masonry walls are curved and rounded with a degree of fluid plasticity as if to suggest that they are not rigid walls but rather conceived as natural accretions to the cliff-face. The artist studio with its distinctive framed bay window sheltered from direct sunlight by a boldly projecting segmental overhang is visually aligned to the mystical island of Filfla. The rock-pool which underlies the ominously craggy cliffs, is accessible by means of a meandering footpath and a short flight of steps. Spence planted the design of a footprint on its floor as a response to its natural shape. Sadly, following Spence's death in 1976, the subsequent owners of the house redeveloped the pool besides making other alterations to the house.

The project is a master class in landscape architecture as Spence skillfully weaves an intricate relation between the man-made structures, that is the three principal architectural components - the cave-dwelling, the studio and sunken rock-pool, all merging with the natural rugged landscape of terraced fields and rocky outcrops. Several freehand sketches and drawings by Spence depicting the house and its landscape attest to the architect's quest to capture the unique *genius loci* of the site. Architect Anthony Blee, Spence's son-in-law, reinforces this symbiotic relationship between the man-made and nature, stating that '... he managed to merge these buildings with the rocky landscape. The building which started as a cave emerges as an outcrop of the same stone. Rock face and building are indivisible. Basil's previous Mediterranean retreat was the house that he built in Majorca which in its own way grew out of the steeply terraced landscape there - hence his name for it - Casa Cliffhanger.'⁶

Spence was in love with the local globigerina limestone. He enjoyed carving it as it was 'rugged yet malleable under a stonemason's chisel'.⁷ These stone carvings are evident in various stone blocks, a fountain head and a distinctive, freestanding curved screen wall relief that served as an exedra to an open-air terrace. For the latter, Spence made various detailed preparatory sketches in pencil, meticulously delineating the carvings of the individual stone blocks that constitute the screen and highlighting with strokes of bold shading the low relief effect that he was striving for. The motifs adopted for these stone carvings varied thematically, ranging from stylized abstractions of indigenous plants forms, marine life, geometric patterns and spirals inspired by Malta's prehistoric temples.



left: Fig. 8
Spence by the pool at Dar
tal-Għar.

right: Fig. 9
Artist's Studio at Dar tal-
Għar (detail).

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In his more high-profile international projects it is hard to decipher and appreciate the architect's sensitivity and affinity towards the building's materiality and tactile quality. At Dar tal-Għar, Spence assumes a role that goes beyond that of the architect to one of a craftsman-sculptor who interacts intimately and directly with the process of creative construction, as with 'chisel in hand' he literally leaves his mark on the building fabric. It is this interactive personal dimension and the way that all interventions are orchestrated holistically within the landscape that makes this project so remarkable and different from others.

Depicting Maltese architecture and the landscape

Spence was a keen admirer of Maltese architecture in all its forms, be it the more formal and monumental to the more humble and indigenous vernacular. A number of watercolour drawings, mostly in private collections, attest to this interest. The sketches depicting the Church of St Gregory's at Żejtun and the Tal-Providenza Church on the outskirts of Siġġiewi, are interpreted through a series of deft strokes of the pen, tempered with delicate washes that capture the unique spirit of these stone buildings bathed in natural light in their unique landscape setting. From his studio perched high on the rugged land Spence painted the mystical island of Filfla. This he depicted in an oil painting where the mass of Filfla is placed at the centre of a series of concentric rings and parallel bars rendered in hues of orange and shades of blue, and symbolically alluding to the island's role of being used for target practice by the military air force.

During his brief periods of tranquility in Malta, Spence indulged in his artistic passions of painting, drawing, sculpting and model-making. Wine and home-dining in the congenial company of family and close friends were equally important for the full enjoyment of life.

Basil Spence's legacy

Basil Spence's approach to architecture was essentially driven by the quest to seek personal and individual solutions, and this at a time when homogenizing modernist ideals were the norm. In Richard England's own words, Spence was one of the few voices in the architectural community who sought to go against the grain:

In a mechanized soulless era of mass production his belief, plea and commitment was essentially for the individual, the particular and the unique. Consequently his approach to architecture was incontestably humanistic and essentially personal: one which took into account the users of his buildings, radically opposing the materialistic, anonymous criteria adopted by the so-called International Style followers.⁸

Spence continued to enjoy his periodic visits to Dar tal-Għar, until ill health prevented him from doing so. He died at his home in Yaxley Hall, Suffolk on the 19th November 1976. In the

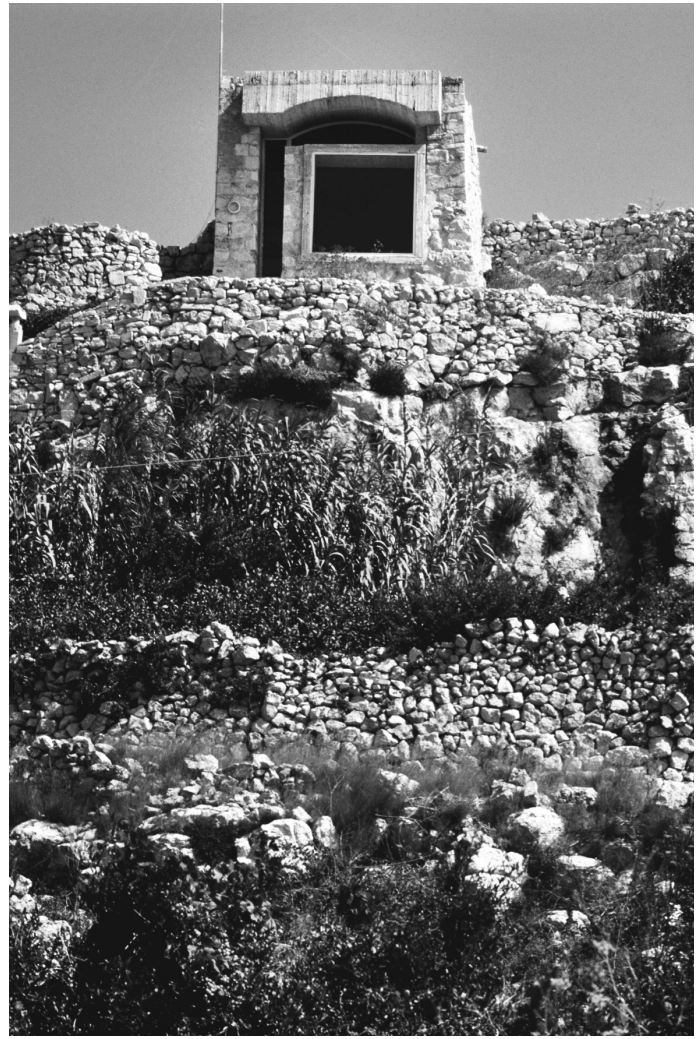


Fig. 10
Basil Spence, pen and
watercolour drawing of
San Girgor Church, Żejtun.
(Private collection)



aftermath of his death Spence was not given the recognition he deserved. He was deemed to be too eclectic by the purist modernists, at times overly monumental and overbearing, and even unfairly blamed for all the ills and misdeeds associated with high-rise residential development. Typical of the mixed press reviews is the following by Matt Weaver in a commentary published in *The Guardian*: 'He was once considered an architectural genius but, by the end, Sir Basil Spence had become a hate figure'. Critic Lewis Mumford described Coventry Cathedral, Spence's best-known building, as a triumphal combination of continuity and creativity. However, in the years before his death in 1976, public tastes had turned sharply against Spence's brutalist style.⁹

Architect Michael Manser's observation that one day Spence would be recognized as the 'last great romantic and the first high technician' turned out to be prophetic.¹⁰ For a quarter of a century after his demise, caught up in the ephemeral currents of various anti-modernist stylistic 'isms', ranging from Postmodernism to Deconstructivism, Spence's architectural reputation was viewed with guarded suspicion. However, over the past few years there has been a renewed interest in Spence's work leading to a dynamic reappraisal and reassessment.¹¹ In 2007-8, on the occasion of the centenary of the architect's birth, an extensive touring exhibition of his work in Britain and a nationwide educational programme highlighting his legacy was organized.¹² A comprehensive monograph outlining his artistic and architectural work soon followed, and contemporary architectural historians have been busy re-evaluating his standing in the course of twentieth-century architecture.¹³ It would be safe to state that in the light of these latest appraisals his architectural star will continue to shine for many years to come. The fact that Spence had a personal connection with Malta makes our appreciation of him all the more special.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to Architect Anthony Blee, son-in-law of Sir Basil Spence, for sharing his personal reminiscences and reflections on the architect's visits to Malta. Professor Richard England was very generous in sharing his experiences with the master-architect both through verbal communications and his writings. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance provided by Mr Lawrence Pavia.

Professor Conrad Thake is an architect, urban planner and architectural historian. Following his studies at the University of Malta, and the University of Waterloo in Canada, he graduated with a PhD degree in Architecture from the University of California, at Berkeley, U.S.A (1996). He has co-authored with the late Dr Quentin Hughes the two volumes 'Malta - The Baroque Island' (2003) and 'Malta - War & Peace, an Architectural Chronicle 1800-2000' (2005). He has recently published a monograph on the British Admiralty architect William Scamp. Conrad has published extensively in several prestigious international journals such as 'L'Arca', 'Demetra', 'Palladio' and 'Spazio e Società'. Thake is a Salzburg fellow and a Member of CICA - Comité International des Critiques d'Architecture (International Committee of Architectural Critics).

Conrad has served on the Planning Appeals Board and the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee, and currently serves on the Commissione Art Sacra. He is also Associate Professor in the department of History of Art (Faculty of Arts) at the University of Malta.

Notes

- 1 Originally published in *The Architecture Review* (April 1977), cited in Jane Thomas, 'Envoi', in Louise Campbell (ed.), *Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects* (RIBA Publishing, 2012), 279.
An earlier and shorter monograph is Philip Long and Jane Thomas (eds), *Basil Spence - Architect*, National Galleries of Scotland (RCAHMS, 2008).
- 2 Sir Basil Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry - The Building of a Cathedral* (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd, 1962); Basil Spence and H. Snoek, *Out of the Ashes, A progress through Coventry Cathedral* (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd, 1963).
- 3 Brian Edwards, *Basil Spence 1907-76* (Edinburgh, 1995).
- 4 Personal email communication dated 29 October 2012 from Architect Anthony Blee.
- 5 Richard England, 'Basil Spence (1907-1976)' in Petra Bianchi and Peter Serracino Inglott (eds), *Encounters with Malta* (Malta: Encounters Book, 2000), 328-330.
- 6 Personal email communication dated 29 October 2012 from Architect Anthony Blee.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Richard England, 'Sir Basil Spence - Intellect and Heart (1976)', an appreciation originally published in *The Sunday Times of Malta* and reproduced in *Uncaged Reflections (selected writings 1965-80)* (Valletta: M.R.S.M. Ltd), 107-109.
- 9 Matt Weaver, 'Let's be frank about Spence', in *The Guardian*, 16 October 2007.
- 10 Quoted in a lecture by Architect Anthony Blee in 1984, cited in Louise Campbell (ed.), op. cit., 279. I am indebted to Prof. Richard England for bringing this note to my attention.
- 11 Liam Rudden, 'Rebuilding Sir Basil Spence's battered reputation', in *The Scotsman*, 8 September 2006.
- 12 The Sir Basil Spence Archives are today an integral part of the collection of the 'Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland', Edinburgh. Refer to www.rcahms.gov.uk; 'Basil Spence archive exclusive', in *Wallpaper*, 27 September 2007.
- 13 Louise Campbell (ed.), op. cit.