Research Article

House names in Senglea: Communicating identities in a fortified town in Malta

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Abstract

Malta is one of the few countries in the world where most dwellings are assigned names by their owners or occupants. Building on previous research on house naming practices in the Maltese Islands, this paper zooms in on just one locality, one of the smallest: the fortified town of Senglea. The methodology this time involved (a) desk research identifying house names from a recent electoral register; and (b) fieldwork on site, whereby the specifics and extent of house names were confirmed or revised, and where home occupants were invited to discuss and disclose the reason(s) for naming their house, and for their particular choice of name. The results suggest that: (a) there are many more house names than are reported in Malta's Electoral Register; and (b) categorising house names according to what come across as self-evident labels can prove naive and incorrect.

Keywords: house names, identity, fortified town, Malta; Senglea, sociology

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Introduction

In what may be a unique characteristic, a majority of contemporary Maltese dwellings do not just have a number provided by the competent central authorities, but also a name developed according to the whims of its owners or occupiers. While there is no obligation to adopt a name for one's house, around two thirds of Maltese dwellings sport this feature, as suggested by 2022 fieldwork in ten localities in Malta (Baldacchino et al., 2023).

Other studies (Alden, 2024; Brincat, 2009, 2019; Brincat et al., 2024) have explored and attempted to categorise the diversity of house names in various localities in Malta and Gozo. They have suggested that: most house names are written in the English language, followed by Maltese and then Italian; the proportion of house names that have a religious or spiritual reference (such as the name of a saint) has declined in recent decades, and those with a direct connection to the home dwellers has increased; and the most common house name in Malta is 'St Joseph' (and linguistic versions thereof). Such studies have also identified a 'miscellaneous' category of house names that seem to defy categorisation.

Clearly, the inability to explain a house name stems from a research methodology based primarily on desk research. In other words, should researchers approach the actual house

occupants, most should be in a position to explain the meaning and inspiration behind their house name.

This study is based on one such attempt: visiting a particular locality in the Maltese islands and actually asking its residents whether they care to explain the choice behind their house name. The assumption was that such a question, based on genuine interest and curiosity, would elicit a high degree of response and would probably serve to launch interesting conversations. And this is exactly what happened.

This paper documents the characteristics of current house names in the locality of Senglea, in Malta's inner harbour region. The study is based on both a desk survey of house names, but then complemented with an actual on-site visit and multiple physical interactions by pairs of University students with residents. The experience was part of the fieldwork to a study unit Sociology of Space and Place, part of the curriculum for the undergraduate degree in Sociology at the University of Malta.

Senglea has been described as a "traditional, urban working class community" (O'Reilly Mizzi, 1994, p. 371). Of late, it has however been rediscovered as a place of residence, an appeal that has particularly attracted foreigners to move and settle there.

Context

Until 1540, the peninsula on which Senglea (or Isola or L-Isla, meaning 'the island') now rests was an open space interspersed with carob trees, except for a few scattered houses, two windmills and an old chapel dedicated to St. Julian, the protector of hunting. With its splendid view over the harbour, Isola was greatly admired by Grandmaster Juan D'Homedes, who had developed an animal park there, with a garden, for his pleasure. In 1552, St Michael's Fort was built along the landward perimeter; more fortifications were built by D'Homedes' successor as Grand Master, Claude de La Sengle. A new model town was designed – and named after La Sengle – using the grid layout that was then becoming common throughout Europe. Incentives were offered to encourage new settlers and, in this way, the congestion of residents in Birgu (or Vittoriosa) was somehow relieved (Rizzo, 1979).

Senglea rests on a narrow peninsula. From its imposing entry gates to the vedette at its outermost point over Grand Harbour, it is some 820 metres long and less than 300 metres wide, rising to a height of 28 metres above sea level towards the end. It has two steep hills with a valley in-between: St. Philip's hill in the north is linked with Mount St. Michael in the south by a saddle 12 metres above sea level. There is a narrow creek on either side of the peninsula. Isla is separated from its sister-town Birgu by an arm of sea then known as Port of the Galleys, now known as Dockyard Creek; whereas French Creek lies between Senglea and Corradino Heights, today occupied by six dry docks and operated by Palumbo Shipyards and Palumbo Superyachts. Both creeks have long been acknowledged as fine sheltered harbours, capable of accommodating a sizable fleet.

When the Order of the Knights Hospitaller of St John, an aristocratic maritime power, started exploiting the strategic value of these harbours, it was inevitable that the main centres of industry, commerce, administration and population in the Maltese Islands should come to lie in and around Senglea and its adjacent cities of Bormla (or Cospicua) and Birgu, along with the

new capital of Valletta, founded in 1566 (Rizzo, 1979). This was particularly the case during the British period, which coincided with the construction of the dry docks and the Valletta breakwater (Busuttil, 1965). This 'Golden Age' of the 'Three Cities' was brought to an abrupt end with the Second World War (in Malta: 1940-43): during this time, regular bombing raids and destruction to the Dockyard and Harbour area led to a mass exodus of most of its population; most of whom did not return after the war ended.

Senglea had around 8,000 residents – 3,900 men and 4,100 women – according to the 1911 census, when the total population of the Maltese islands was 220,000 (NSO, 1911). The 2021 population census registers just 2,300 residents in Senglea (out of a total national population of around 525,000). Around one third of Senglea residents are 60 years old and over (NSO, 2021), suggesting an ageing community.

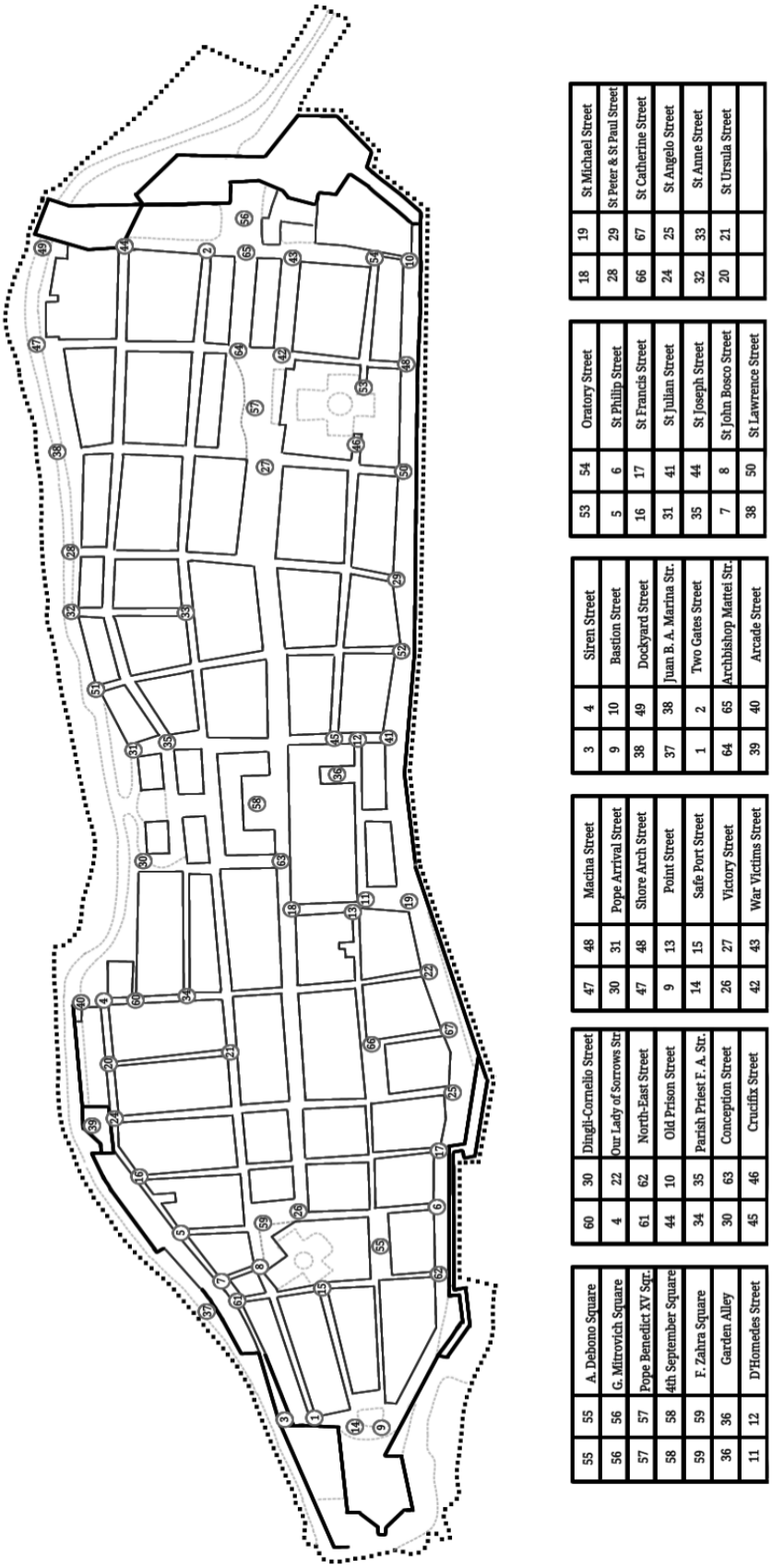
The map of Senglea was drawn up by Stefan Galea for the purposes of this study (attached as Figure 1). The map has been rotated roughly 60° anti-clockwise, to facilitate its use and reading during on-site fieldwork. Thus, the student researchers could follow the map on their phones and see the entire peninsula in landscape orientation.

The boundary identifying the area under the authority of the Senglea (L-Isla) Local Council is marked by a black dotted line that runs all the way around the map. All the houses with names contained within this area are up for analysis in this study. The bold solid black lines mark the bastions of the fortified city of Senglea. The faint dotted lines add detail to the map, portraying the town's main features: two main churches, various sidewalks, and gardens. The thinner black lines mark the city blocks making up the grid pattern of Senglea's urban plan. The negative space left by these mostly rectangular prisms creates the 41 roads, plus five squares and an alley, listed in Table 2. On the map, these streets are defined by a set of two numbers as seen in the key below the map. These numbers mark the two ends of each road: for example, Bastion Street starts on node number 9 and ends on node number 10 ignoring the 12 other nodes that would otherwise obstruct its path. The five public squares and single alley are marked slightly differently as they are represented with only one number instead of two. Garden Alley, for example, is marked with the number 36.

House Names

A 2022 study of house names in ten localities in Malta examined almost 30,000 addresses, of which almost 20,000 had a name reported in the latest Electoral Register (Baldacchino et al., 2023). For the purposes of assessing historical trends, these names were organised into two sets, depending on whether the streets where they were found already existed in 1977, in which case they would have been indicated in the map and street lists provided by Borg (1977). This option does not arise for Senglea: like one other completely walled city in Malta – Valletta – Senglea has not had any change in the number of streets within recent decades, except for some changes in (existing) square and street names1. Additionally, only 109 out of 1,327 discrete addresses in Senglea had a name in 2022: that is just 8.2% (see Table 1). Amongst these names, the most common is Maria Bambina (six times), followed by Redentur (or Redeemer) (five times).

Figure 1: *Map of Senglea*



There are only 41 thoroughfares in Senglea. According to the October 2023 electoral register, ten of these streets, squares and alley do not have a single named house or dwelling (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Data concerning street names in Senglea*

No. of Streets as at 1977	No of Addresses in Streets	No of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No of Religious House Names	No of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
41	1327	109	8.2%	Maria Bambina (6)	Redentur (5)	29	80	26.6%	English (35)	Maltese (17)

Source: October 2023 Malta Electoral Register

Following the site visit in November 2023, Table 2 includes the names of the 41 thoroughfares – 35 streets, five squares and one alley – in Senglea, with the updated number and names of houses. With the additions of 89 house names found on site but not found on the electoral register, and with the removal of 23 house names from the list which were on the electoral register but not found on site, the new tally is 175 house names (and not 109; a net increase of 66).

Table 2: *House names in Senglea, by street, square or alley (as collated by students in November 2023).*

	Names of Alleys (1), Squares (5) and Streets (35) in Senglea (Total = 41)	**No of Addresses in Street**	**No of Addresses with a House Name in Nov. 2023**	**List of House Names (in alphabetical order)**
1	4th September Square	6	0	0
2	Andrea Debono Square	1	0	0
3	Arcade Street	7	0	~~Marina Sea View~~
4	Archbishop Mattei Street	10	0	0
5	Bastion Street (Fuq is-Sur)	108	15	Belfar, Bianca, Cana Flats, Casa Lia, Dar Pillar, Ejj' Oqgħod, Harbour View, Maria Bambina, Pisces, Redeemer, Redentur, ~~Rita~~, Ruthmar, Senglea, ~~Smithy~~, Vella, White Hart Lane
6	Conception Street	4	0	0
7	Crucifix Street	63	11	Chan Abig, Erimar, Jake, Jordic, Margerita, Ramon, Redentur, Rusca, Sonia, Stella, Summer Breeze
8	D'Homedes Street	24	4	Kavall,Maria Bambina (x2), Mark
9	Dingli-Cornelio Street	11	0	0

10	Dockyard Street	41	1	~~Dar ir-Risq~~, ~~Dar it-Tarzna~~, Home by the Sea
11	Francesco Zahra Square	1	0	0
12	Garden Alley	2	1	Manajo
13	Gorg Mitrovich Square	1	0	0
14	Juan B Azopardo Marina Street	2	1	Casa Sirena
15	Masting Crane (Macina) Street	25	4	Ġesu Redentur, Sandor, St Paciencia, St Lawrence
16	North-East Street	12	0	0
17	Old Prison Street	14	1	Maria Bambina
18	Oratory Street	25	1	~~Independence,~~ St Michaela
19	Our Lady of Sorrows Street	53	11	Alvik, Carmjes, Castelinho Sao Marcos, Dar il-Hena, Dar il-Hena, Degiorgio, M. Bambina, Marianne, Pixi Tower, The Glen Residence
20	Parish Priest Azzopardi Street	15	3	Gwenley, Maria Bambina, Redentur
21	Point Street	55	12	Adeline, Clayanika, Clis, Dar Alver, DenChris, Great Siege, Nino's Apartments, Phoebe, Rodney, S. Ġorġ, ~~Santa Katerina~~, SharPhyll, Tortellino
22	Pope Arrival Street	22	1	~~Loreatna~~, Sunrise, ~~Veduta~~
23	Pope Benedict XV Square	18	0	0
24	Safe Port (Portu Salvu) Street	18	3	Denlau, ~~Safe Haven~~, St Anthony, Ta' Fortunata
25	Shore Arch (Mina tax-Xatt) Street	29	3	Jamie, Just Yan, Fiopat, ~~Water Gate~~
26	Siren Street	87	6	~~Cane~~, Binja San Filippu, Casa Sirena, Castrum Maris, Harbour Lights, Milva House, Mina
27	St Angelo Street	45	9	Ave Maria, Casa D'Angelo, Casa Madonnina, Dylkim, Hyacinth, Imbierek Alla, Maria Benita, Moco, Papillon
28	St Anne Street	12	2	Lasagne, ~~Manfrance~~, ~~Maria Bambina,~~ The Pot
29	St Catherine Street	13	0	0
30	St Francis Street	42	7	Ave Maria, Dar Isla, Harbic, Henry House, Redentur, ~~San Frangisk Flats~~, Senglea Suites, Shalom
31	St John Bosco Street	12	2	Binja San Filippu, Pengarreg

32	St Joseph Street	92	11	Bacolet, Checkpoint Charlie, HelFrans, Lorvic, Mamamas House, Maria Bambina, Nagoju, Sacred Heart, St Joseph, Victoria, Wilclaud
33	St Julian Street	10	4	Karen, Vanessa, Canbert, Rit Cha
34	St Lawrence Street	25	7	Casa Fior, Lorian, Shazai, St Anna, Ta' Ġuża, Roseburg, Warda Mistika
35	St Michael Street	15	1	Hydra, ~~St Michael's~~
36	St Peter & St Paul Street	40	8	~~Casa Roma~~, ~~Celine~~, Doris, ~~Glennval~~, Nid d'Amour, Omm tal-Grazzja, San Ġużepp ta' Qalb Safja, Casa Attard, Saltford, Frajos, Marina
37	St Philip Street	19	4	Harmar, Safe Haven, Sky, Staffordshire
38	St Ursula Street	24	4	4th September, Four Fiors, Settembrina, Thomas House
39	Two Gates Street	175	13	~~Casa Rita~~, Casa Walsingham, Coronation, ~~Dolphin House~~, Frarutcha, Gun House, Maria Bambina, Maria Victoria, Merville, Priaarred, Reality, San Ġwakkin, Sant'Anna, Ven Amoris, Victory Flats
40	Victory Street	116	21	Autumn Lodge, Beth El, Carmen, Conray, Dar il-31 Marzu 1979, ~~Invicta~~, Jumaaret, Lone Wolf, Maria Bambina, Mizzi, Phoenix, Portview, Qalb ta' Ġesu Salvana, Redentur, Redlene, Sagra Familja, St Joseph, St Philip's Residence, St Rita, St Teresa, Tizrod, Victoria
41	War Victims Street	33	4	Asterix, ~~Mais~~, St Joseph, St Lawrence, Victory Flats
TOTALS		1327	109 (according to electoral register) 175 (according to 2023 fieldwork)	Religious House Names as at 2023=45; Non-religious=130; Religious house names=29; Non-religious=80 (according to electoral register); Most Common House Name = Maria Bambina (8); followed by Redentur/ Redeemer (7); House Names in: English=66; Maltese=33; Italian=18; Latin=5

Notes: Names ~~struck through~~ denote house names listed on the October 2023 Electoral Register which were not found during data collection. Italicised names denote house names found during data collection which are not listed on the same Electoral Register.

Methodology

This work set out to provide a description of "a phenomenon in detail in its real-world context" (Yin, 2009, p. 18; also Priya, 2021, p. 94); and may thus be characterised as a descriptive case study, in which detailed accounts on the reasons behind the naming of houses in Senglea were gathered.

This paper emerged from fieldwork undertaken as part of the study unit Sociology of Space and Place, offered by the Department of Sociology at the University of Malta, under the supervision of Professor Godfrey Baldacchino. It was agreed in advance that brief and casual conversations with Senglea dwellers would aid in best extracting the sought after data, with the eight student researchers dividing themselves into four pairs during data collection. As seen in Table 1 and Table 2 above, 109 house names were extracted from the October 2023 Electoral Register. These houses were equally divided among the four groups of student researchers using the geographical location of the streets, ending up with around 27 house names assigned per student pair. A route for each pair was also drawn up in advance, in order to determine an efficient route for conducting the fieldwork, and thus save precious time on the actual day. An application to the Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee was also submitted and filed (Ref: ARTS-2023-00509).

The main fieldwork session took place on the morning of Saturday, November 25th 2023, and was pursued by individual students in the following weeks to improve the study's response rates. The students were encouraged to work in pairs: to knock on doors and ring doorbells or accost residents casually and courteously, entering into informal conversations. Various respondents, evidently pleased that the name of their house had attracted attention, even invited the students inside their homes to continue the conversation which, of course, could then easily proceed in various other directions over coffee and biscuits. None of these conversations were recorded in order to maintain a genuine and human interest in the exchange; and only limited fieldnotes were taken on site after particular conversations had been completed. Other details were committed to memory and elaborated upon, after the fieldwork was terminated.

Having collected data mid-morning on a Saturday – which was characterised by a very strong and fresh north wind and rainy weather conditions – may have increased the likelihood of dwellers being at home during the fieldwork. Such weather conditions also created challenges, however. In those instances where conversations took place outdoors, some home dwellers refused to spend too much time out in the cold. Others conversed with researchers from a window or balcony, resulting in communicative difficulties, given the rush of the wind. Conversations were mainly conducted in English, which was in part due to the participation of non-Maltese speaking student researchers (although these were paired with Maltese speaking students). Conversations conducted in Maltese (often with elderly dwellers), were subsequently translated into English.

Access and sampling

The study aims to extract and analyse the justifications and reasons behind the naming of houses in Senglea. Such analysis concerned with a particular subsection of society thus requires the utilisation of purposive sampling – a method in which "people or other units are chosen, as

the name implies, for a particular purpose" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 206) – in an attempt to gather primary data relevant to the above objective. Participants were therefore required to have been residing in Senglea, with their perspectives providing baseline data which permitted the gaining of greater knowledge about house names in the town. The inclusion of various participants in this study also boosted both the quality and diversity of data, resulting in what has been referred to as "a 360 degree or multi-source feedback" (Latham et al., 2005, p. 80).

The Electoral Register lists the "names, surnames, Identity/ e-Residence Card numbers and addresses of those persons who are registered to vote in elections and referenda" (Electoral Commission Malta, 2024). Prior contact with participants was thus not made. However, a list of registered residents, alongside their home address in Senglea, was prepared in advance of the site visit.

Data collection instruments

The study sought to obtain data which is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research gathers information on the subjective experiences and viewpoints of participants. Such an approach was selected due to its ease in elucidating the justifications and feelings behind the naming of one's house.

Weekends tend to be rest days for the majority of persons, and student researchers would be physically present at dwellers' doors; and so, care was taken to ensure appropriate and respectful lengths of conversation so as not to encroach on the residents' leisure time. Additionally, by initially stating that conversations would be brief, participation was less likely to be rejected, whilst also enabling the student researchers to amass a substantial amount of data during the same day.

Data analysis techniques

Brief, casual and semi-structured conversations were selected as the data collection methodologies, with the assurance that they would be the medium best capable of extracting the sought after data, as long as the home owners or occupiers could be spoken to. The collected data was subsequently categorised thematically, by "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis is often utilised due to it being a "rigorous ... approach [that can] produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 97).

Data was collected through brief conversations, in which dwellers detailed their reasoning for naming their homes, alongside the personal significance of such names. Collected data was thematically organised into the following categories: 1) topography and locality, 2) religion and the sacred, 3) home dwellers, 4) first name sets, 5) politics, 6) sports, 7) hobbies and professions, 8) links beyond Malta, and 9) miscellaneous. Similar categories have been proposed in other studies (Alden, 2024; Baldacchino et al., 2023; Brincat 2009; Brincat et al., 2024). A detailed analysis of each category, with suitable examples from each, follows below.

Limitations

There are some methodological limitations encountered whilst conducting this study. Three are identified here.

Inevitably, some dwellers were not at home at the time of data collection. In this case, information letters were posted, detailing the nature of the study and including researchers' contact information should these individuals wish to make contact and participate in the research; this action did lead to some additional responses. Similarly, various house names which were listed on the Electoral Register were clearly abandoned, looking for a new owner and/or in a derelict state (e.g. Figure 7), with the researchers thus being unable to make contact with any individuals which may currently or have previously resided in them. This situation, along with dwellers not being at home or otherwise unreceptive at the time of data collection, resulted in some missing data amongst the general population.

Secondly, some dwellers did presume not to know the reason for the actual choice of the house in which they lived. Conversations were thus cut short. Such episodes tended to occur amongst elderly dwellers in particular, and may be due to indifference or suspicion as to the motives behind the exercise. A language barrier was sometimes encountered: some dwellers may have felt apprehensive about participating due to a lack of proficiency in the English language. In most instances, conversations were conducted in Maltese; but that left the non-Maltese students doing the exercise rather clueless.

Thirdly, the categories utilised to thematically organise the collected data are restrictive in nature, with various house names tending to fall within two or more of such groupings. The implicit rigidity of the categories, coupled with the fluidity of house names and their significance, may thus not allow for a wholly accurate representation of their colour and meaning.

Data Categories

This section explores and analyses the collected data in relation to the above eight categories, whilst providing examples of such house names for illustrative purposes from each category. The examples are sometimes accompanied by information gleaned from some of the casual conversations held with the house dwellers.

1. Topography and locality

This category refers to "the physical appearance of the natural features of an area of land" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). A few houses in Senglea have names relating to topography and locality.

Three buildings are named 'San Filippu' or 'St Philip', occupying positions very close to the church dedicated to the same saint.

The so-called 'Marina (Flats)' are located above the Marina Restaurant, both of which overlook the popular Marina, a promenade along Dockyard Creek and the largest open space

in the town. The respondent explained that he was the owner of the restaurant, so he named the apartment the same as his restaurant.

'Home by the Sea' sits on the Senglea waterfront. The home dweller stated that it was his late wife who had chosen the name, purely for descriptive purposes: a home by the sea. He revealed that the name initially bore no significance to him, and he did not like it much; but now it reminds him of his late spouse, and would thus keep the name.

The apartment building 'Harbour View' overlooks the south-eastern bastions and the harbour below. The name was assigned by earlier occupiers. Despite bearing no significance to the actual home dweller, the name persists as there is no consensus among the tenants on a suitable alternative.

The family of 'Castrum Maris' invited us inside and regaled us with coffee and biscuits and a guided tour of their home. The name refers to the old name for the fortress on whose site Fort St Angelo is now located, and towards which this property faces.

2. Religion and the sacred

House names within this category accounted for less than one third of named houses found in Senglea: 45 out of 175 names had clear links to religion and notions of the sacred. 'Maria Bambina' was the most prevalent house name in the town, with six houses bearing such a name. This was no surprise, considering the fact that Maria Bambina is the patron saint of Senglea and its feast day (8th September) is a national holiday. 'Redentur' [MT] or 'Redeemer' [EN]) was not far behind as the second best choice.

Various other house names bearing connotations of religiosity and sacrality include 'Cana Flats', 'Sacred Heart', 'St Anna', 'St Joseph', 'St Lawrence', 'St Michaela', 'St Paciencia', 'Madonnina', 'San Ġużepp ta' Qalb Safja' (which translates as 'St Joseph of Pure Heart'), 'Imbierek Alla' (meaning 'Blessed be God'), as well as the unlikely 'Casa Walshingham': about which more below.

A curious combination of the name of a flower, religiosity and the amalgamation of two names, 'Settembrina' reflects the dweller's impassioned association with the 8th of September feast, which celebrates both Victory Day and the city's patron saint Maria Bambina. The dweller stated that he had rented his previous residence, and so, chose to name the house upon purchase to symbolise his ownership.

The home dweller at 'St Rita' explained that it was her father's favourite saint. She added that the name of the house is really important to her, and bears a deep emotional meaning.

For the resident at 'Maria Victoria', Maria is her favourite holy figure. Her daughter was named Victoria and bears a double meaning. She confided to us that she prayed to the Virgin Mary to deliver her a healthy child, and her request was fulfilled, hence her daughter's name.

There were also 'S. Anna' (St Anne) and S. Ġwakkin (St Joachim): the parents of the Virgin Mary. These houses belonged to the same owner. The home dweller in one of these houses told us that it was quite appropriate to have homes named after Mary's parents, literally in the shadow of the parish church dedicated to our Lady, their daughter (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *November 2023: House name, resident and student researchers*

Photo: Godfrey Baldacchino. Photo taken and used here with the permission of the people shown.

'Sunrise' may not come across as a religious house name. But, according to the occupant, each sunrise is a day to be grateful to Christ.

There are links to the sacred beyond Christianity. The house named 'Beth El' means 'house of God.' In the Bible, Bethel was the placename given to the spot where Abraham built an altar. It is the name of a settlement that existed in ancient Palestine, north of Jerusalem. The occupants of the Senglea house with this name are long-time renters, but they are now planning to buy the house.

3. Home dwellers

This category refers to house names identifying individuals, probably having to do with "the persons who own the building, live in the house and/or their family, including nicknames and other references to those residing inside the home" (Baldacchino et al., 2023, p. 4). Such house names in Senglea include: 'Casa Attard', 'Jake', 'Jamie', 'Margerita', 'Ramon', 'Ta' Fortunata' and 'Ta' Ġuża'.

'Sonia' is the current name of a house, which used to have a different name. It has been changed by the current owner to honour daughter, Sonia, who has passed away.

'Henry House' is named after the dweller's grandfather, who passed away at a young age.

'Dar Alver' is named after the dweller's great-grandfather, who was a stonemason. The decision to name the house was taken by the family in order to follow "a nice Maltese tradition".

The house named 'Mizzi' takes the surname of the family owner who explains that the house has been inherited within his family for at least 50 years.

'Vanessa' is named after the home dweller's daughter. She and her family have rented this apartment uninterruptedly for some 40 years.

The house named 'Rodney' has been rented to the same tenant for over 35 years. It is named after the owner's son who died at the age of four, and therefore carries a lot of significance.

4. First name sets

Here, one notes "a curious practice which involves naming the house with a selection of letters from the names of the partners (or children) living there" (Baldacchino et al., 2023, p. 4), and may be described as a sub-set of the category 'Home dwellers'. This comes across as the category most resorted to among Senglea residents for their house names.

After conversing with Senglea home dwellers, it was apparent that the majority of first name sets were named as a tribute to children. Examples include: 'Alvik', 'Canbert', 'Clayanika', 'Jordic', 'JustYan', 'RitCha', 'Ruthmar', 'Sandor' 'SharPhyll' and 'WilClaud'.

The dweller residing in 'HelFrans', which she inherited from her father, stated how her father had chosen this name to act as a tribute to his two children, her brother and herself: Helen and Francis (Frans, in MT).

'Gwennley' is a combination of the names of the daughters of the original homeowner: Gwenneth and Wesley.

Similarly, 'Dylkim' refers to Dylan and Kim, the home dweller's children. The children's mother stated that, when purchasing the property 31 years ago, the house was named 'Black Pearl'. She chose to change the name as she wanted the house to bear a clear link with her own family.

Another example for this category is 'Jumaaret', being the amalgamation of the dwellers' four sons' names: Jurgen, Marvin, Arthur and Ethan. Here, the first two letters of each name, from the oldest to the youngest, are strung together, resulting in an original combination.

We spoke to the owner of the house named 'Frarutcha'. She admitted that her name is Ruth – the 3-letter 'Rut' in the house name – flanked by three letters from each of her parents' names: Frances (her mother, who lives across the road from her) and Charles, her father. Hence 'Fra' and 'Cha' (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *House name made from the combination of three letters from each of three names*

Photo: Godfrey Baldacchino

The house name 'Priaarred' is a combination of Priscilla, Aaron, and Redent, the owner's three children. She emphasised the importance of home names in Malta for identifying

purposes. However, she admitted that, if she has the opportunity to alter her house name, she would choose 'Redentur', to honour Senglea's holy icon. (Indeed: her son's name, Redent, is taken from The Redeemer, a representation of Christ on his way to the cross: Redentur in MT.)

'Harmar' is a house name assigned after the names of the former female home dweller's parents, Harry and Marie. It bears this deep emotional connection with the current owner's wife's parents and their passing, and so he has no intention of changing it.

'Tizrod' is a combination of the first name of the owner's sister and brother: Tiziana and Rodrick; while 'Redlene' is the coming together of the actual owners' names; Alfred and Marlene.

'Maria Benita' is so named by a German couple who moved to Malta for work reasons. They have five children, of whom one is a daughter and the house was named after her when the daughter, then 11 years old, was undertaking a school assignment on house names in Senglea. They insisted on having both their daughter's names on the plaque, so as to distinguish their house name from all the various Maria Bambina house names in Senglea.

5. History and politics

House names in this category bear connotations of historical and/or political significance.

The apartment complex 'Coronation Flats', for example, is named after the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, then also Queen of Malta, in 1952, after the significant destruction caused by the World War II bombings, and is reminiscent of British Rule.

Another dwelling is called 'Gun House'. According to its occupier, during the Second World War, a plane was hit in a dogfight overhead and the plane's machine gun fell and crashed onto the roof of this particular house.

'Dar il-31 Marzu 1979' commemorates Freedom Day, when the last British military service personnel left Malta for good. The 31st of March is one of Malta's five national days.

Other examples of house names with links to history or politics in Senglea include 'Great Siege' and 'Victory Flats', both commemorating the victory by the Knights of St John over the Turks after the Great Siege of 1565.

6. Sports

This subcategory refers to sports personalities and/or teams.

We spoke to the couple who live at 'White Heart Lane', a name which pays tribute to the Tottenham Hotspurs (or Spurs) football pitch in London, bearing the same name. The dwellers admitted, and not without some embarrassment, that the name on the plaque is misspelt, reading 'Heart' instead of 'Hart'; they have the intention of changing it to reflect the correct spelling. Nonetheless, the male occupant expressed his desire for wanting everyone to know which football team he supports.

7. Hobbies and professions

The house name 'Phoebe' pays tribute to the dweller's daughter; the latter was named after HMS Phoebe, a light cruiser in the Royal Navy which had seen active service in the Mediterranean during WWII, and on which the house owner had served as a sailor (www.uboat.net, 2024). (Indeed, Phoebe's brother's name is Duncan, named after another Royal Navy vessel, HMS Duncan.) The connection with the sea is illustrated on the house name's plaque, which is accompanied by the rendition of a sailing boat.

8. Links beyond Malta

Various house names relate to links beyond Malta: "a practice usually associated with households where one or more family members may have spent their honeymoon or lived abroad, and then returned to Malta" (Baldacchino et al., 2023, p. 4). Reference points in this regard include Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The dweller of the house 'Tortellino' named it as such to reflect his desire of participating in the 'nice Maltese tradition' of house naming. Originally from Bologna, Italy, he noted how *"tortellini are one of the symbols/icons of the city"*. The house name thus also acts in establishing a nostalgic link with the home occupier's birth country and town.

The house name 'Saltford' bears the name of a village in Somerset, England, where the dwellers have family ties.

Another house name with likely links to the world beyond Malta is 'Staffordshire'.

The house 'Casa Walsingham' bears an interesting story. Its previous owners hailed from Walsingham (also known as England's Nazareth), a small English town close to Norwich, and a place of pilgrimage. A plaque showing our lady on the house's façade confirms the religious connection (Figure 4).

Figure 4: *A house name linked to religion as well as an English town*

Photo: Godfrey Baldacchino

9. Miscellaneous

Finally, one must always provide for those names that, for some reason, defy explanation. For miscellaneous house names, no particular meaning is self-evident, or else they do not fit easily into any of the identified categories. Three examples from Senglea include Asterisk, Summer Breeze and Nagojo: we were sadly unable to speak to their owners or dwellers. (The latter might be a combination of three names).

A Senglea house bears the name 'Papillon', which means 'butterfly' in French. The home dwellers chose the name to represent their unbridled travelling spirit, comparing themselves to butterflies. The use of French also serves a tribute to the dweller's husband, who is originally from Tunis, in Tunisia, where French is an official language.

Another house name is 'Roseburg' (which translates as Rose hill). The person residing in this house declared that it bore no particular significance to the family: her mother had found the name on the internet and chose it due to her liking of roses.

Meanwhile, 'Checkpoint Charlie', an official crossing for foreigners and diplomats between East and West Berlin until German reunification in October 1990, and now a tourist attraction, is also a house name in Senglea. But, so far, one remains unaware of its connection with its owners or occupants.

A Senglea house is named 'The Pot'. The owner explained that there was no specific reason for choosing that name, other than that his lost wife loved wine. The plaque with the name symbolises a typical ancient practice of conserving wine. He further said that he enjoys wine occasionally, but the name bears an emotional significance for the loss of his wife who dearly loved wine (Figure 5).

Figure 5: *The name of the house is accompanied by its artistic rendition*

Photo: Daniel Henry Solberg Bell

The house name 'Ven Amoris' is the outcome of a deep reflection on life. The owner explained that, at the age of 21, he purchased the house with money won in court following a traffic accident that almost cost him his life. When he thinks about his house, he muses over love and death. Love for his hometown and the street where he was raised; and death as a result

of his harrowing experience, which eventually led him to the Church, where he felt that his broken state of mind was emotionally healed and transformed. 'Ven Amoris', he declared, is Latin for both the vein of love and the vein of death.

We asked the owner of the house 'Reality' to explain the reasons behind the name. He was visibly distraught, and told us that we would have to ask his wife, who was not available at that time.

And are we ever to know why a particular house is named 'Bacolet'? This is the name of a town in Trinidad and Tobago, but the possible association of this town with the house or its name is so far unknown. The current dweller stated that the house name had already been there upon its purchase and bears no significance to him. Nor did he bother to change it.

Analysis

The aim of this study has been to identify and analyse the reasons for the naming of one's house. Several home dwellers cited justifications of emotional and personal significance, most notably those paying tribute to family members or invoking religious affiliation. They explained how a house name provided individuality, personality, and character to the house, subsequently revealing the rich cultural identity that is embedded within this old, urban, ageing, working class community of Senglea.

The Senglea exercise manifests the importance of fact checking the rationale and justification of house names with their dwellers. Things are not always what they seem; and nothing beats a face-to-face conversation for checking assumptions, and finding out the stories behind house name choices.

Perhaps the main and unexpected discovery of this research exercise was the discrepancy between the number of house names listed on the Electoral Register (109) and those actually found and noted during our walkabout (at least 175). Many of the named houses in a street were not to be found according to the Electoral Register; while at the same time, there were evidently house names affixed to house façades that were not listed on the Electoral Register. For example, in the short street of St Anne, there were originally three house names listed, according to the electoral register: Lasagna, Manfrance, and Maria Bambina. Upon visiting this street however, only Lasagna was found. An abandoned house, with signs of an erstwhile name plaque, might have been either Manfrance or Maria Bambina (Figure 6).

In St Peter and St Paul Street, the clear discrepancy between house names as listed on the Electoral Register and the real world was again evident. Out of six names that were listed in the register – 'Casa Roma', 'Celine', 'Doris', 'Glennval', 'Nid d'Amour', and 'Omm tal-Grazzja' - only three could be found: 'Doris' (no response to door knocks), 'Nid d'Amour' (French for 'Nest of Love', assigned by the previous owner), and 'Omm tal-Grazzja' ('Mother of Grace' in MT, with possibly a religious connection to the town of Żabbar, of whom she is the patron). There were then five other houses which had names, but whose names were not mentioned in the electoral register: 'Casa Attard', 'Frajos' (Figure 7), 'Marina', 'Saltford' and 'San Ġużepp ta' Qalb Safja'.

Figure 6: *The house name is no more*

Photo: Daniel Henry Solberg Bell

Figure 7: *'Frajos' is for sale.*

Photo: Daniel Henry Solberg Bell

There are likely to be more house names: for example, the five streets and five squares in Senglea that do not have any house names according to the October 2023 Electoral Register (see Table 2) were not visited by the student researchers during their fieldwork.

There are probably several reasons for the discrepancy between the number of house names found on the electoral register and on the actual streets of Senglea. Some home owners do not bother to register their house name anywhere, referring only to their door number when noting down their address. Others may be living in a rented property for a very long time, and so decide to name the property anyway, and affixing a plaque to its façade, even though they are renters and not owners. This narrative came up in several interviews, as with those conducted with the residents of 'Papillion' (residents, but not owners, in the same dwelling for 60 years), 'Vanessa'

(40 years), 'Rodney' (35 years), 'Degiorgio' (30 years), 'Marija Bambina' (over 30 years) and 'Four Fiors' (13 years).

An interesting observation made during data collection was the identification of clusters of house names in one part of a street. Such a phenomenon may have occurred as a result of the influence neighbours may have had on each other, in wanting to either participate or not stand out. For example, in the (rather short) D'Homedes Street, two houses were named 'Maria Bambina', with one dweller stating that a neighbour copied the name from her own, prior naming of her house. Other examples of observed home naming clusters were found in Point Street and Our Lady of Sorrows Street.

Through analysing the above data, one notes that justifications for naming one's home often relate to the desire for personalisation and individuality, effectively transforming a construction into a place redolent with meaning. Justifications for not naming one's house, on the other hand, may provide insights as to the reasons for the town of Senglea as having one of the lowest proportion of house names in Malta. Despite this low proportion, a curious, alternative form of personalisation was sometimes observed. Some house numbers on Siren Street, for example, were written on personalised plaques (see Figure 8 and Figure 9). The residents of House No 1, for example, may own or like cats. The plaque of House No 22, on the other hand, depicts the dwellers' assumed affinity towards Senglea heritage with its representation of the statue of Maria Bambina: Senglea's patron saint. Both plaques also show the Senglea vedette, or watchtower, in their background.

***Figure 8** and **Figure 9:** Other ways of personalising one's house in Siren's Street, Senglea, without resorting to a name*

Photos: Jana Hélène Azzopardi

The reasons for not naming one's house may relate to justifications provided by one resident: she claimed that the process of officially registering a house name is arduous and time consuming. Moreover, dwellers may have simply added a name to the front of their house without going through the process of official registration, perhaps because they could not have done so officially: if they do not own a property, and merely rent it, even if long-term, would they presumably lack the legal basis for naming it? Occupation is not possession.

Recommendations for future research

This study often refers to homeowners and occupants. The latter might be tenants in dwellings under controlled rental agreements, making the home de facto theirs, and for whom naming the dwelling is therefore also an option, albeit unofficially. There are however probably other occupants who might not be able to name their dwelling because they are regular tenants. Such tenure issues did not feature in the Senglea conversations except occasionally and obliquely: they deserve their own research spotlight. There is scope for future studies connecting with residents who wish to name their homes but cannot for various reasons, such as dwelling in social housing tenements, and exploring what the inability to personalise their home (at least in terms of a name) means to them.

Conclusion

A house name is much more than the name of a house. Many transcend simple and perfunctory categorisation. They define history, current family or ancestral ties, and personal anecdotes of emotional significance, aiding in our understanding of the inhabitants of specific communities.

Onsite research has revealed that Malta's electoral register does not fully grasp the full spectrum of the house naming activity underway, certainly within Senglea, but possibly in other localities of Malta and Gozo.

Of course, the motivation and explanation of various house names in Senglea continue to defy explanation since their residents were not available, or they themselves could not provide the requested information. However, all in all, the rich information gathered did afford some deep insights into this culturally rich locality, aiding and deepening our understanding of this fortified town's history and community. It may be a fortified settlement, but Senglea dwellers proved extremely open and willing to share the stories that explain their house names, where they exist.

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