



**WOULD YOU
NAME YOUR
HOUSE?**

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*In Malta, the answer is overwhelmingly 'Yes'. This is one of the few countries in the world where a majority of houses do not have just numbers but also names. Homes are an extension of our personal identity, and house naming serves as a ritual, emphasising a wish to interact with the community and express something about oneself or one's family. **Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino's** research explores this sociological phenomenon in detail.*

(**N**aming one's house is a deeply personal choice,' Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino (from the Department of Sociology, UM) says. 'And yet, one can look at all these individual personal choices across localities and analyse them to better understand society as a whole.' Baldacchino's interest in house names started while walking through Malta's villages as a young man and noticing that the names of houses in the town or village core, which are typically the oldest, differed from those on the outskirts of the settlement. He concluded that something as subtle and simple as house names can tell us a lot about how a society changes over time and was inspired to eventually carry out academic research on the subject.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS

In 2023, Baldacchino and his students carried out a study of Maltese house names, looking at the Local Council Elections Electoral Register of October 2022 to gather the needed data over ten localities in Malta. The research provided house names and addresses, allowing them to segment the data according to which houses have names or not. The research revealed that 66.1% of Maltese homes have names. The idea that naming one's home is a way of expressing oneself is clear when one ties it to home ownership, as the proportion of names is highest in localities where homes are predominantly owned by their occupants.

Marsaskala, Mosta, and Għaxaq show the highest proportion of named dwellings at 82%, 77%, and 75% respectively. On the other hand, an area with a high stock of rental housing, Senglea, only has 8% of houses with names.

The question then arises regarding what the names of people's houses are telling us about them. Thanks to Joseph G. Borg's 1977 book, *A to Z of Malta and Gozo*, researchers were able to make a historical comparison, as Borg's book shows which streets were already in existence in 1977. Therefore, researchers could compare the names of houses built before 1977 with those built afterward. In doing so, they were able to reveal a clear trend of increasing secularism, as people went from largely naming their houses after religion to also naming their homes along more personal themes. The share of religious names has dropped from 16% to 10%.

'We organised the house names into six categories, the first being religion. Then one finds houses named after the persons living in the house: names, nicknames, family names, professions, and so on. Then there is sport, with people obsessed with certain football teams or stadia. There are, for example, at least 16 Liverpool fans in Mosta alone, with houses named Anfield after the Liverpool football stadium. Next would be names inspired by the lay of the land, such as the landscape, including geographic features which may have been there previously and what one can see from one's window or roof. The fifth category would be politics, ranging from historical names, references to events such as



A selection of house names showing personal and religious themes
Photos by Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino and James Moffett

Independence, or references to political figures such as calling one's house Dom (after former prime minister Dom Mintoff). Then there is the inevitable miscellaneous category, which we keep as small as possible, but one always has some names where one can never tell what they stand for. That obliges one to speak to the owner of the house,' Baldacchino elaborates.

Baldacchino points to a field trip on a windy Saturday morning in November 2023 as a special step forward in the study of house names, when students from the Department of Sociology went door to door in Senglea. Students were sent in pairs, and in cases where there were international students, they were paired with Maltese speakers. The students knocked on doors and asked residents about the names behind their houses as part of the study-unit 'Sociology of Space and Place'. Residents proudly explained their choices. By showing an interest in people's lives and their personal stories, the students secured a phenomenal response.

Within a minute, the students found themselves inside people's homes. Baldacchino recalls how residents were glowing as they told students why they bought the house and how they decided to name it. At first, students were rather afraid of accosting complete strangers in this way, but the reception was positive, and as with any such challenge, it got easier as the exercise progressed. In a sense, the exercise of

collecting the stories behind the names was educational in and of itself, providing an insight into the way people live and react to an interest shown in their way of life, revealing the people of Senglea as being warm and welcoming.

The most common house name in Senglea is Maria Bambina, based on the patron saint. The second most popular is Redeemer or Redentur, referring to a statue in Senglea that is a subject of devotion and pilgrimage and ascribed with miraculous powers.

ORIGINS OF NAMING HOUSES

When asked how the tradition of naming houses in Malta began, Baldacchino explained that his research tried to contextualise the naming tradition in the wider European context. There are few trends of house naming in continental Europe, but the United Kingdom seems to be the place where this practice is most prevalent. However, in the United Kingdom, it is rural houses which are most often named, while in Malta, it is the opposite, with urban homes most often being named. Baldacchino remarks that it is likely the Maltese practice of naming houses was inspired by the cultural exchange with Britain.

'For a time, in Malta, the only way to identify a person's house was by its name. The practice of numbering houses is a fairly recent phenomenon. I lived in Fgura for 20



years in a non-numbered house named Mount Carmel, and I remember when, in the 1980s, my parents received a letter from a state department informing us what the number of our house was going to be when previously, it had only ever had a name. Thereafter, there has been less motivation to name one's house, given that it is less necessary for its identification,' Baldacchino recalls.

THE FUTURE OF NAMING HOUSES

The trend towards naming houses is likely to decrease, Baldacchino remarks, as people increasingly live in apartments and flats with common entrances. This is not only a practical consideration, as people no longer build their own houses, but it is also because one is more likely to have temporary residents renting the property rather than family units spending a lifetime rooted in the same place.

Nonetheless, blocks of apartments may still be named in a more traditional way, after the developer or according to some locally relevant feature. However, the individual apartments would be unlikely to have names.

'People give houses names as a form of attachment. It is a form of self-recognition. You name it because it is your house. One builds their house with effort, labour, and at huge expense. Anything that requires that much

work deserves a name. So, naming houses is a tradition on the decrease. We are living in a time when the number of occupied houses has reached a plateau, which is now beginning a decline. Nonetheless, if one has always lived in an apartment, that apartment may still be as significant as the largest house. It is your home,' Baldacchino observes.

What can we expect for house names in Malta in the near future, then? Baldacchino forecasts larger linguistic diversity; so far, English has been the most common language for house naming, followed by Maltese and then Italian. With the plethora of foreign migrants now making Malta their home, at least some of whom have or will purchase their own homes, we can expect a surge in houses with names in languages such as Punjabi, Arabic, Tagalog (Filipino), or Albanian. 'House names are a true window onto social change, reflecting and respecting a changing Maltese social landscape,' Baldacchino concludes. **T**

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