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Architecture in Post-Independence Malta Past, Present and Future

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In July 1969, five years after Malta's Independence, the prestigious British architecture journal, *The Architecture Review* issued a special issue entitled *MALTA – Past, Present and Future*. The foreword by the journal's editors commenced as follows:

'Since Malta achieved independence many changes have come to the island and even greater changes are likely, largely owing to the growth of tourism. Since the run-down of the British naval base and dockyards, it has been increasingly evident in spite of some successes in the light industries, that the future economy of the island must largely depend on tourism and on the climatic and other attractions it offers to retired people and such like.

*This means a vast amount of building – of villas, hotels and pleasure facilities of all kinds – and the main problem facing Malta at the moment, a problem much of the building that has already taken place alarmingly illustrates, is how to prevent all these developments in aid of tourism from destroying the very attractions the tourist come to enjoy.'*²

True, the aftermath of Malta's Independence witnessed an unprecedented 'building boom' as the island embarked on an intensive

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2 Editorial in *MALTA – Past, Present and Future*, A special issue of *The Architectural Review*, Volume CXLVI, number 869, July 1969, London: Emap Ltd. 1969, 3.



Fig. 1: The Sheraton Hotel, St Julians (demolished)

building spree to cater for a flourishing up-market tourist industry.³ (Fig. 1) During the mid – to late-sixties various hotels were built along some of the country's most scenic bays and sandy beaches, that is, besides the several up market hotels that were developed

in the more urban areas of Malta. From an architectural standpoint, the immediate post-Independence era were exciting times – besides tourist accommodation, several new educational buildings in the form of primary and secondary schools were built in several towns and villages, a new university campus was developed and new industrial estates were established for an emerging manufacturing industry. It was not just the physical act of construction that was intriguing but the search for a new architectural identity that would reflect Malta's new state in the aftermath of Independence.



Fig. 2: Joseph Huntingford, Qala Primary School, Gozo (partially demolished)

International style modernism was embraced in the various government schools that were built at the time, with some of the best designs being produced by talented Maltese architects, then in the employment of the Government Public Works department, architects such as Joseph M. Spiteri (1934–2013), Joseph Borg Grech (b.1929), Joe Consiglio and last, but certainly not least, Joseph Huntingford (1926–1994) whose primary

³ C Thake & Q. Hughes, *MALTA: War & Peace, an Architectural Chronicle 1800–2000*, Malta: Midsea books 2005, 175-193.

schools in Gozo represented some of the most innovative and elegant modern schools built at the time.⁴ (Fig. 2) The new University of Malta campus in Msida designed by the firm Norman & Dawbarn was one of the finest architectural projects of its time and this original core still survives almost five decades later as an integral part of today's university which is bursting at its seams physically and metaphorically speaking in terms of student population.⁵ New factory buildings were also being constructed as industrial estates sprouted in different parts of the islands with design ranging from the nondescript to more elegant designs such as those in Mrieħel by the Maltese architect John Gambina. Other fine public buildings followed such as Carmelo Falzon's former Rediffusion building (Fig. 3) and Richard England's Joinwell showroom in Sliema.⁶



Fig. 3: Carmelo Falzon, Ex-Rediffusion building, Guardamangia

4 C Thake, 'The Advent of Modern Architecture in Malta' in *Modernist Malta: The Architectural Legacy*, A. Miceli-Farrugia & P. Bianchi eds., Malta: Kamra tal-Periti 2009, 12-31; Petra Bianchi, 'Modernist Architecture in the 1950s and 1960s: The Maltese Public and the Architects' in *Modernist Malta*, 35-51. R.G. Sultana & J. Falzon eds., 'Education, Special issue: Architecture and Schooling' in *Journal of the Faculty of Education*, Malta: Malta University Press, vol. 5, no. 3, 1995.

5 MALTA – Past, Present and Future, 48-49.

6 C Thake, 'The ex-Rediffusion Broadcasting Complex, Gwardmangia' in *The Architect*, no. 45, Malta: Kamra tal-Periti July 2008, 18.

The mid-1960s were both exciting and challenging times in the arts. In more ways than one it represented a coming of age, a new renaissance of writers, visual and performing artists engaging in a soul-searching and at times a rather elusive quest in search of a Maltese identity as expressed in their respective mediums. One can mention Charles Camilleri in musical



Fig. 4: Richard England, Paradise Bay Hotel, Cirkewwa (extensively altered)



Fig. 5: Richard England, Ramla Bay Hotel, Marfa (extensively altered)

composition, Francis Ebejer in drama and literature, Emvin Cremona and Frank Portelli in the visual arts, Gabriel Caruana in ceramics.⁷ In the realm of architecture the figure of Richard England (b.1937) stands out as a pioneering figure in forging a new architectural language which reconciled modernity with the deeply-rooted, local vernacular. As a young architect he established his reputation primarily on the basis of a several modern hotels that were built in a short period of time – the Paradise Bay hotel (Fig. 4), the Ramla Bay (Fig. 5), Hyperion and Dolmen hotels, the Tower Palace and Cavalieri Hotels.⁸ These hotel designs reflected a genuine desire to temper modernism to the Maltese conditions so as to respond to the exigencies of its climate, building materials, and construction processes. Sadly not one single hotel building from this era has survived, confirming the fact that architecture is the most transient of the arts. With today's global consumerist mentality architecture is certainly not rooted in permanence and is all too often perceived as being a disposable asset.

England's search for a critical form of regionalist architecture is well represented in the *Villa Maltija* – a sprawling luxury villa built in 1966.⁹ (Fig. 6) Its design was inspired by solid cubic massing of the Maltese traditional towns and villages. The sculptural approach adopted by the architect was characterized by the dynamic massing arrangement of staircases expressed in the form of towers. Sadly some years ago the building was demolished. Another design which was never executed was Villa Girna, a design explicitly inspired by the humble *girna* or stone corbelled hut to be found predominantly in the northern rural areas of Malta.¹⁰ (Fig. 7) However, the most iconic building of this era is the new Manikata church which took well over a decade to be fully completed.¹¹ England breaks away from the pressures of replicating a pseudo-Baroque or Neo-Classical church design in favour of a design that is intrinsically a site-specific solution that responded to both the reforms and changes emanating from Vatican Council II and that is also

7 Richard England ed., *Contemporary art in Malta*, Malta: Malta Arts Festival Publication 1973.

8 Emile Henveaux, *Richard England, Architect in Malta*, Brussels: Edition de la Librairie Encyclopédique, 1969; Charles Kneivitt, *Connections: the Architecture of Richard England, 1964–1984*, London: Lund Humphries, 1984.

9 *MALTA – Past, Present and Future*, 52; Thake & Hughes 2005, 182.

10 *Ibid.* 182.

11 C. Kneivitt, *Manikata: The Making of a Church*, Malta 1980, second edition 1986; C. Abel, *Manikata church*, London: Academy Editions, 1995.



Fig. 6: Richard England, Villa Maltija, San Pawl tat-Tarġa (demolished)



Fig. 7: Richard England, Manikata church
with *girna* in the foreground



Fig. 8: Richard England, Manikata church interior



Fig. 9: Architectural consortium: Austin-Smith, Salmon and Lord Partnership, Ex-British Married Quarters, Bahar ic-Çaghaq, 1968, (currently vandalized).



Fig. 10: Marquis Joseph Scicluna, Villa Mystique, Madiena



Fig. 11: Emvin Cremona & Joseph M. Spiteri, Villa Mediterranja, Attard



**Fig. 12: Hans Munk Hansen, Mellieha
Holiday Centre, Mellieha**

representative of the aspirations of the rural community of Manikata. (Fig. 8) The church is today a landmark building synonymous with Manikata, and acknowledged by all as an architectural masterpiece. However at the time of its inception it was perceived as a rather subversive piece of architecture. Suffice it to state that the archbishop Mgr Michael Gonzi had described it as being just like a German war submarine.

Very often, the passage of time is the supreme test of a building or project's endurance and sustainability. The Mellieha Holiday Centre designed by the Danish architect Hans Munk Hansen (b. 1929) and built in the late seventies/early eighties was inspired by the maze-like form of Malta's traditional villages and the typology of the traditional Maltese farmhouse. (Fig. 12) Its human scale and use of traditional globigerina limestone combined with a well-maintained landscaping scheme has over time rendered it in my opinion one of the most sustainable tourist-related project on the Islands. It is certainly representative of a more authentic architectural product than some of the more recent glitzy and kitsch five star hotels which could very well be anywhere in the world.

Creativity, invention and visionary designs were part of the *zeitgeist* of the time. One can mention Villa Mediterranja in Attard, (Fig. 11) the personal residence of artist Emvin Cremona (1919–1987) and the architectural *capriccio* of Villa Mystique in Madliena conceived by Marquis Joseph Scicluna (1925–1995).¹² (Fig. 10) However one particular futuristic

¹² Thake & Hughes 2005, 184, 202.

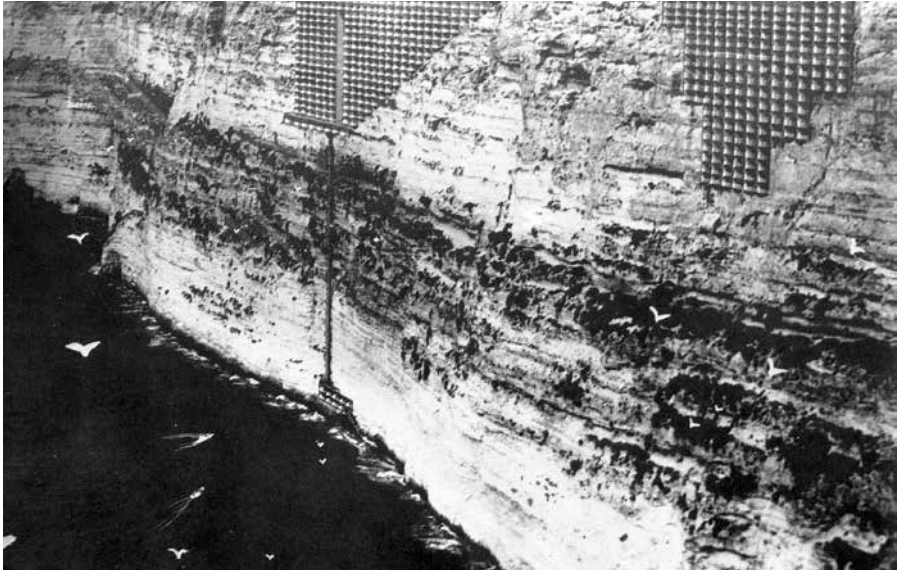


Fig. 13: Project by Julio Lafuente for a cliff-hanging hotel at Ta' Ċenċ, Gozo (unrealised)

scheme stands out. Julio Lafuente (1937–2013), the Italo-Spanish architect who had designed the master-plan for the Ta' Ċenċ tourist complex in Gozo proposed a daring scheme for a cliff-hanging hotel to be built in the sheer cliff-face with the hotel being literally inserted within the fractured part of the cliff-face.¹³ The façade of the hotel comprised an orthogonal and cellular grid of rooms with terraces and a spectacular panoramic glass lift all the way down to the sea level. (Fig. 13) Although by today's environmental consciousness it would be totally inconceivable to implement such a project, one cannot but admire the architect's flair for daring to dream and communicating his vision on paper.

The building boom also brought its fair share of environmental disasters. Some of the traditional cores of Maltese villages with their narrow winding roads and alleys converging to the central parish church were indiscriminately carved wide open to create a wide approach road

¹³ *Ibid.*, 191. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy described the Lafuente project in the following terms: 'This is the newest version of the ancient rock ledges of Spain, the Italian islands and Mount Athos in Greece – mountains honeycombed with dwelling caves. Man's habitation has been adjusted to the site and the site adjusted to man who has replaced the hauling basket on a straw rope with an elevator shaft to sea level.' *Matrix of Man: An Illustrated History of Urban Environment*, New York: Preager, 1968

leading directly to the square, analogous to Mussolini's aggressive *sventramenti* within Rome's *centro storico*. The classic local case was that of Żurrieq, which witnessed the demolition of several traditional dwellings to make way for the main avenue leading to the parish church – an intervention that was vociferously condemned in an article by Peter Richardson entitled 'Rape of a Village' also published in the special issue of *The Architectural Review* on Malta referred to previously.¹⁴ As car ownership increased and traffic volumes grew to high levels, further inroads were made both within the countryside and within the old village cores.

Quentin Hughes (1920–2004) once wrote that 'Malta is a veritable museum of architectural history.'¹⁵ Malta's historic architectural legacy is both an asset and a constraint in terms of what and how we should be building. Our future is to a certain extent conditioned by the past, certainly we have an obligation to safeguard the tangible building legacy bequeathed to us. The walled historic enclaves of Mdina, Cottonera, Valletta and the Cittadella are not only to be conserved but rehabilitated in a sensitive manner to render them relevant to our times whilst respecting their historical memory. Over the last few decades we have witnessed the rehabilitation and regeneration of some prominent historic areas – certainly the Valletta waterfront and the more recent Number One Dock project deserve the highest accolades for a successful synergy of weaving modernity within the historic context.

Economic progress which in turn generates material wealth and affluence is always high on any government's agenda. However, given Malta's very finite land mass as a small island the pressures on both the urban and rural environment are tremendous, and at times manifestly unsustainable. Ever since the prehistoric temples were built we have sustained an urge and passion to build wherever and whatever, so much so that building seems to be an integral part of Maltese DNA.

Over the years, *laissez-faire* building development has transformed some of our localities into blighted areas of speculation and exploitation. In this respect time is not on our side. We have to re-align our mindset to one that focuses more on architectural quality rather than just quantity, on ensuring that our urban environments are conducive to a better

14 P. Richardson, 'Rape of a Village' in *MALTA – Past, Present and Future*, 63-66. Also relevant is the contribution in the same journal by Ian Masser, 'The Perils of Non-Planning', 57-60.

15 Q. Hughes, 'Malta Past' in *MALTA – Past, Present and Future*, 7.

quality of life by improving access to natural light, air, enjoyment of public spaces and fostering social interaction.

I would like to end my brief communication with the following observation made by our patriot Judge Maurice Caruana Curran, founder and President of *Din L-Art Helwa* way back in 1968 when addressing the Society of Arts in London. His plea repeated almost fifty years later is just as relevant today:

*“The problem is clearly one of concept. It is not one of preserving any individual element, however important it may be on its own, but of saving a unique environment, and of saving it as a whole. This is necessary for aesthetic and economic reasons, but it is also important morally, since the protected environment reflects Man’s victory in the creation of a home, out of natural surroundings that were not always generous.”*¹⁶

We owe it to future generations to come.

16 Judge M. Caruana Curran cited in the editorial of *MALTA – Past, Present and Future*, 6.

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