

Cospicua: the need for a sustained effort

by Dr Simon Mercieca

THE CITY of Cospicua is geographically situated at the edge of a sheltered deepwater harbour. Historically, the sea area that kissed Bormla's doorstep abounded in fish. Its harbours offered scenes of clanking masts and spars, while its quays hosted fishermen patiently mending nets and caulking their boats. During the Knights' period, it developed into a proud angle of the harbour towns and from 1722 it began to flaunt the title of Civitas Cospicua bestowed onto this town by the reigning Grand Master of the time, Marc' Antonio Zondadari.

Cospicua was insulated from the rest of Malta by a vast countryside dominating its hinterland, dotted by isolated makeshift villages whose main attraction was a modest parish church and very few summer palatial residences for Malta's bourgeoisie.

The prowess of this city continued to increase during the British period (1800-1979) in particular during the 19th century. During this period, Cospicua had people who cannily grasped how to act in what may have appeared as a provincial city, making it one of the most important urban centres of 19th century Malta. At the same time, the city stood at an odd. The unruly success of industrialisation left its effects on the area.

The area would soon host all kinds of industrial factories, in particular in various parts of its waterfront, dominated by foundries and lumber mills emitting acid fumes. These industries must have produced distinctive odours which are characteristic of industrial towns.

Fortunately enough, many of these industries have closed down, but the industrial spell lingers on, like Damocles' sword over Cospicua. The current proposal for the building of oil tanks in the area is a case in point.

During the post-war period, the city failed to host the construction of important elegant buildings, and with very few exceptions, the last edifices in the chain of past glorious architecture were the swanky neo-classical buildings. In the past, the people of this city had dreams of grandeur but they were expressed in exterior manifestations through lavish decoration in solid silver of a number of paraphernalia of religious objects to decorate the parish church's interior.

The parish church, with its dome and two belfries, exerts a crystalline presence over the lower part of the town. It reinvigorates Cospicua's skyline. It can be defined as a single monolithic structure developed over three centuries in the area. Despite the span of years, the different architects employed succeeded in maintaining a consistent style, while keeping abreast with the architectural fashion of the day.

One needs to remember that old houses and streetscapes were not haphazardly planned, as has happened recently (and is still the rule) with regards to the development of a number of new urban zones. Nor was their layout dictated by land speculation issues.

Towns took another feature into consideration. Past architects studied in particular the effect of the sun, and how the morning or the evening sun was to hit the street or a particular building façade. In a number of



COSPICUA needs to develop according to the modern 21st century concepts of virtual space

old houses, these aspects are being rediscovered.

The past streetscapes were projected to meet both aesthetical and practical notions. A case in point is the western façade of Cospicua church. The western part of the church, which overlooks a narrow street and an old alley, acts as a mirror to indirectly reflect light, while providing shelter from the hot summer sun rays. It helps the sun's rays to bounce their light onto the streets, but as shade is being created the obtrusive and dense heat is lessened.

Even the placing of a religious niche on the corner where this street (Oratory Street) meets and diagonally crosses the passage that leads to the stepped lane behind the church cuts away the traditional rigorosity associated with blind corners.

It gives passers-by an unexpected beautiful view of a traditional, quaint Maltese view. The statue representing Our Lady of Sorrows enhances this angle with a theatrical image reminiscent of Baroque art.

The industrial development of the 19th and early 20th century divorced the city of Cospicua from its hinterland. Yet the hinterland can be Cospicua's asset. First of all, areas such as Fgura and Paola are towns that historically hosted many residents from the Cottonera area. There is therefore no feeling of antagonism between Cospicua and its hinterland.

On the contrary, the feeling is more of love and reciprocal respect. Elements of discord exist within the internal boundaries – among Senglea and Vittoriosa. This is also a new, post-war element. Historically the rivalry was not so much between parish communities of the three towns but more in relation to

Valletta. Cospicua's arch rival prior to the war was Valletta's parish of St Paul. Elements of this past rivalry haven't completely died out today.

A close, symbiotic relationship needs to be rebuilt with Cospicua's neighbouring towns. In itself Cospicua has the potential to be turned into a hub, yet like the human body, whose importance to the principles of architecture were discussed by various architects, both in Malta and abroad, it needs a holistic approach.

As the body, architectural works are complex in structure. Their skein of cultural and economic threads and tendons need to be developed in relation to the landscape. In the case of Cospicua, its development needs to take into consideration the towns of Senglea and Vittoriosa. In this sense, Cospicua needs to be developed on the lines of a post-regional city.

Whatever thoroughbred development is proposed for this area, it should cater for the inhabitants' aspirations, who reasonably look at this area as a centre for shopping, medical facilities, secondary education and a discreet place for entertainment, even if this latter element at this point in time is strongly missing from Cospicua.

The present out-of-the-way character of Cospicua can provide the right atmosphere for experimental but at the same congenitally working models, for such models have created problems wherever they were put into practice. The uprooting of people can appear a painful and incomprehensible process, while economic development can alienate many from the city in which they

have been brought up with the result that they would not regard their city of birth as theirs anymore.

The city needs to develop according to the modern 21st century concepts of virtual space. It should develop its own cyberspace. In exploiting these elements, Cospicua can move out of its present status of a sub-regional area.

The challenges that one hopes will be on offer by the creation of the so-called SmartCity, provided that it is a real holistic experiment, which can help the area develop on new unprecedented lines. One hopes that from this project at Ricasoli, situated on the outskirts of the Cottonera district, smart ideas are hatched for the benefit of the whole area.

One should also foresee for this area a host of cultural luxuries. It needs an art museum and fortunately enough, the parish community is working on this idea to transform an annex of the church's building into a museum. The town has enough space and structures to house a theatre or an opera house structure.

It does not have any good public library. A stunning library would be an addition to the town. At least, it has a state-of-the-art sports centre, but lacks sound structures for symphony halls or music performances. The local band club, despite its massive structures, leaves much to be desired.

Cospicua needs to disentangle itself from its present roots. This could result in the city making new enemies, but this should not be the concern of any town planner or town's administration.

The scenes of fishermen preparing their nets on Cospicua's quay

have vanished long ago. Even the more recent scene of amateur sailors mending their small diesel engine boat is at the risk of disappearing from this area. At the same time, this once dedicated fishing port should seriously begin thinking of creating modern berthing facilities for yachts. In the end, these facilities can only offer marginal revenue for Cospicua's residents, but it is always a push in the right direction.

At the same time, the old characteristics of the town should not be abandoned or forgotten. Certain areas offer a splash of local colour. The taste of an old inhabited area offers sensations to tourists. For this reason they are sold to the tourist to visit and picture. There is always space for a virtualised city in any project in real life.

Furthermore, the planners for the development of Cospicua should take into consideration that the current civic space is limited, if not rare. This should be increased by making the area in front of the British Dock No. 1 accessible to commuters.

Living in towns becoming an attraction again

IT IS A KNOWN FACT that among the upcoming middle classes, the idea of a residential dream crops out. The concept is not new. It can be traced in the history of all historic towns and cities. Malta is no exception.

Until recently, perhaps until the first half of the 19th century, many middle class people, or bourgeoisie as they were called at the time, dreamt to have a town house in one

of the harbour towns. Those who settled in one of the local villages, sought to acquire a palatial residence with a large garden and grandiose façade.

Malta's historic towns are again in the news, and it is now clearly evident that these areas are going to experience a residential boom. They are reverting to be a residential dream for various middle class families and are becoming part of Malta's up and coming market.

Developers and estate agents have learnt that selling an old house with a cellar carries another advantage. It offers a natural space for the storage of wine. These features are once again making living in old towns or village cores an attraction.

Yet, a leap forward for the towns of the Cottonera area can only be achieved if they become a destination for artists. If they succeed in becoming a chosen destination for these people, there is a chance that these centres recover their lost elegance.

If, on the contrary, they are only considered areas for land speculation, pieces of territory to be allocated to contractors and consortia for indiscriminate development, then the reverse effect is most likely to be achieved. Instead of becoming quintessentially Maltese, they will be another image of the emerging Maltese urban jungle.

The engagement of artists can help introduce new elements which blend with the local environment or provocatively create a debate. This latter aspect is also part of the architectural jargon. They can work to make new elements look as if they were always there. Artists can help recapture Cottonera's past glory.

It is very important that what has remained of our past heritage, and has not been destroyed by war or the successive reconstruction spree, is preserved. Preservation should not exclude modernisation of buildings. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

I was recently walking up Oratory Street in Cospicua and noticed that permission was granted by MEPA for the total demolition of an old house – that was a landmark in itself – situated at a corner with a major streets in Cospicua, Strada San Giorgio. This was demolished and its beautiful façade destroyed to make space for a horrendous block.

On the other hand, one has to admit that the Cottonera market in particular, lacks houses which are in pristine condition. Such a shortage can lead present owners to seek to upgrade their property. But in Malta's case, there are various stumbling blocks, in particular the 1939 rent laws which, in this case, is forestalling owners from recovering their rented property, in particular units that originally formed part of one whole building.

The building ended up divided in a number of units, and due to ridiculous rents, there is no incentive for either side to refurbish the property or for the owner to recover that part of the property to reconstitute the façade and the property concerned to its glorious past attire.

All around the Mediterranean littoral, coastal cities are very popular for residential purposes. When Malta's coastal cities lost their attractive flavour, new coastal towns emerged, Sliema first, followed by St Julian's and more recently St Paul's Bay, Bugibba and Qawra.

Various restructuring models have been adopted in major capital cities as well as in historic towns. One aspect was to conserve the historic façades of buildings while accepting alterations to the interior.

Various palaces had their interior altered, so that space was created for apartments. At the same time, the façade was preserved in its pristine condition. This situation has also created a positive effect and has encouraged owners of less grandiose buildings to take care and upgrade their modest dwellings.

In such situations one foresees the enactment of strict regulations with local councils empowered to oversee that these rules are strictly observed. However, such practices are very difficult even if some of the most zealous councils have succeeded in obtaining respect for their town's or village heritage, and are ready to support laws to protect the town or village environment.

Maltese citizens need to learn to treasure their heritage. It is a fact, that sadly, in the past, in particular in the Eighties, and even today, developers built ugly blocks. The trend is still in vogue. Yet, indiscriminate development is also risking that Malta will end up with a lot of houses for sale and with hardly any buyers.

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