An exhibition of a collection of small scale models of existing Maltese Balconies made by Mr. John Cutajar of Gżira.
The Maltese Balcony
A Historical Approach

When we refer to a balcony, our mind immediately pictures the enclosed wooden structures on the facade of our homes and palaces. We tend to take this wooden structure, the “gallarija” very much for granted and tend to look at it in a very indifferent way, as it is so common in Malta. But this structure is not at all ignored by foreign visitors and tourists. It is very much taken notice of, as being looked upon as a very typical and a peculiar feature of these islands’ architecture. This is truly an indigenous architectural feature in our buildings.

Our urban and also many of the buildings in the rural area, look very European in the architectural aspect, form and design. However the wooden balconies on the facade of our homes and palaces, tend to give to our architecture, a near eastern, an oriental or even a North African aspect. The wooden balcony could be indeed very oriental in character and perhaps in influence.

After all one finds similar types of structures in Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, India, etc. Such structures are also found in Peru. The balcony is called “balcone” in Italian, “gallarija” in the Maltese language. The word “gallarija” is derived from “galleria” (Sicilian) or “galleria” (Italian) - “balcone elegante che sorge dalla poppa dei vascelli”, a highly ornamented balcony on the poop of timber carracks and galleons. A good example of a “galleria” could be seen today in the Council Hall of the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta, a section of the “galleria” of the great 16th century carrack of the Order of St. John, the “San’tAnna”. The balcony was salvaged, restored and brought to its present place when that ship was broken up.

The Maltese “gallarija”, the wooden enclosed structures on the facades of our houses were and to a certain extent are still very popular and much liked by Maltese womenfolk. The “gallarija” is an ingenious compromise and a way of life in our domestic life. It offers (in design) a challenge to any architect in balancing and placing it on to the facade of the building. It seems however that very little has been written about these structures from an architectural and historic point of view, considering that, as we know it today in its functional purpose, is not all that old.

I have carried out research on the “gallerija” and was particularly interested to find how long balconies have been used in buildings. So far the oldest depiction of the “gallerija” I have come across is painted in the fresco in the bedroom of Publius Fannius Sinistor’s villa in Boscoreale, outside Pompeii, Italy. Fortunately, these frescoes were preserved from destruction by the very volcanic fallout that covered Pompeii in the great eruption of the Vessuvio in 79 AD. Sinistor’s bedroom frescoes depict in detail at least two covered balconies, a detail of which is being published in this brochure.

Probably there were other such balconies in Rome and in the rest of the Roman Empire, including Melita. There could have been other balconies in Pompeii. One of the streets of Pompeii is named “the street of the balcony”. Balconies were, as shown in the frescoes structures projecting or cantilevered on corbels (saljaturi). Such structures were utilised for extending the existing floorspace on to the street area on the floors above the ground level. In the Boscoreale frescoes it could be observed that balconies were of both the open and enclosed types. They were mainly constructed for the embellishment of the architecture and for their occupants’ enjoyment of the panoramic views. The enclosed balconies in the Boscoreale frescoes are very similar to the Maltese “gallariji”. So this architectural feature of ours is not after all “Eastern” or “North African” as has often been intimated by many travellers and writers. It is a European feature, it is also a Mediterranean building tradition.

In classical times, balconies rested (structure-wise) on projecting cantilevered beams which also served as corbels. We cannot ignore the possibility that in these islands we had some two storey buildings which could have had these types of balconies.
In Medieval times balconies did not seem to have been constructed, mainly for reasons of security due to frequent sorties by marauding pirates. In rural areas, farmhouses were built inward looking around a central courtyard with just one entrance and no windows on the external walls on the ground floor. The outer walls of farmhouses and of houses in the villages were simply defence walls.

The “Muxrafija” - is a wooden or stone structure which covers the opening of the window in the first floor above the entrance of town and village houses or outlying farmhouses all over Malta and Gozo. The structure projected about 25 cms on the facade of houses. The wooden variety generally had a louvered shutter hinged at the top end; sometimes it had plain shutters and spy holes. The “muxraftija” also had spy holes on the sides and on the bottom ledge overlooking the main door. This type of window was quite a common feature in towns, villages and on farmhouses up to the 1930s. One can still find a few existing examples around. I do not believe that the “muxraftija” had been of any influence on the design and construction of the balcony, as has been expounded from time to time.

With the coming of the Knights of St. John and its powerful fleet of galleys, there was more security on the Maltese Islands. Baroque architecture later became fashionable and open balconies started to make an appearance on buildings. Many fine examples survived the blitz of World War Two. I remember in Senglea, the balconies of the D’Homeyes Villa and the House of La Sengle’ (Id-Dar il-Kahla), both built in the 16th Century and destroyed during the last war.

During the 16th and 17th Centuries baroque style open balconies were built in Valletta, Mdina and in the Cottonera cities. Many are still there to see. The open balconies of this period compare very well with those contemporarily built in Sicily and Italy. During this period there were no closed type balconies, in either timber or stone, built. 18th Century enclosed-type balconies are very rare in Sicily and still more so on mainland Italy, so there was no likelihood of the Maltese copying the idea and introducing it here.

The change began in the early years of the 18th Century when it became fashionable to replace the existing open balcony with an enclosed wood balcony. Many such wooden structures began to appear all over the City of Valletta, Cottonera and in the villages. One of the first such open balconies to be enclosed was the large corner one on the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta. One could still notice that section, which is an open balcony as it was originally along Archbishop Street. Another early example of the adaptation of an open balcony to an enclosed one was that of “Dar il-Kahla” (The Blue House) at Senglea, which was unfortunately destroyed during the last war.

Enclosed balconies became a “fashion” and although some, admittedly look rather cumbersome in aspect, they are very practical for use in all kinds of weather. They offered shelter, seclusion, privacy and security for the housewife and the other female members of the household, to have a look outside the home on to the street below, without much fear of trouble or annoyance.

In North African and in Eastern countries we meet with such enclosed wooden balconies. These evolved through a strict social tradition dictated by a religious observance. Women secluded and barred from showing themselves in public had the balcony from which to look on to the street below through a louvered shutter. However this was not the case in Malta. Balconies were the domain of the Maltese womenfolk and obviously a woman had her say about its design. Her balcony had to look different from that of her neighbours, as a dress, a hat or a faldetta would have had to be.

There were folk songs composed about the balcony; the opening verse of one of these “Ah lillek tal-gallarija, .......” must have sent many a woman scurrying in a huff inside.
Looking closely at some 18th C. balconies, one could presume that the design and shape of these were custom made, specifically designed according to the wishes and whims of the customer. The balcony was a challenge and a job for the specialist joiner to manifest his skill and craftsmanship. There were a great number of balconies constructed and a great variety in design, shape and size. One has simply to walk around the streets of Valletta to admire them. These balconies are Malta’s National Heritage and must be protected, restored and preserved.

In the Three Cities of Cottonera most timber balconies were lost during the blitzes of the 2nd World War.

The narrowness of the streets of the Three Cities of Cottonera made balconies of little advantage as they offered hardly any privacy except to the houses facing the sea, the squares, the wider main streets and those houses which looked on the open spaces of the bastions.

During the 18th and 19th Centuries some beautiful and well-proportioned enclosed-type timber balconies were constructed on houses in the rural areas too, but those in Valletta excelled in design and craftsmanship. If the Maltese enclosed balcony has any oriental or North African influence or character, these have been much mitigated by its Europeanised form, proportion and design, especially those which were constructed to fit on to the contours of the baroque balcony plinths of some of the palaces and patriarchal houses in Valletta.

The 19th and 20th Centuries saw a continuation of the tradition in the construction of enclosed wooden balconies. Balconies continued to be that prominent feature of our domestic architecture. It was still a specialist’s job to construct these structures. More so when it came to the long rows of balconies of workers’ homes in newly built areas, such as Hamrun and Paola, when balconies began to be standardised in size and shape.

High rise, four to eight storeys high apartment buildings in the cities, especially in Valletta, required the production of rows of equally sized, design and colour enclosed balconies, that lead as a result to make the cityscape look somehow monotonous.

Building Bye-Laws and Regulations were issued to control the balcony’s safety, projection, size, height and the distance a balcony had to be kept away from the party walls of the adjacent habitations. From time to time Price Regulations for materials and construction of balconies were also issued.

Except for the few timber balconies of some distinctive design or shape, mostly were painted with an oil based faun, light buff or cream colour. The Vienna green, popularly referred to as the Senglea green, was another very popular colour for balconies all over Malta. The use of red paint on balconies was frowned upon, as it was considered to be too showy and vulgar.

Lately, the intrusion of metal in the construction of balconies produced some soulless and ugly results. However, on the positive side, there is nowadays encouragement for the conservation, restoration and protection of what exists of his unique and endemic National architectural feature.

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