

## The Theatre-City of the Baroque Age

**Annabel Vassallo**

People living in Baroque times had a great love of dramatic representations in all their forms. This love of theatre extended into all areas, including those that are not usually viewed as theatrical. Theatre permeated every aspect of life.

During the period religion was dramatised, Mass was elevated to the form of ritual and processions became elaborate, spectacular events. Theatre became so pervasive that even daily living became an act: costume, gesture, etiquette were all ritualised.

Theatre thus became the showpiece of the age, in that it expressed the Baroque desire for display and exultation, elements that also emerge in architecture and in the city. This Baroque love of theatre can be seen in the great palaces and magnificent churches of the age, particularly in the Baroque notion of space as a living, pulsating element.

In architecture, as in theatre, Baroque space came to be viewed increasingly as an arena for action, where the space represented the action it contained and encouraged, such that in both disciplines there emerges a disposition towards the spectacular and the illusionist. Even military structures such as the fortifications can be interpreted as scenarios for action.

Vauban's fortifications (late 17<sup>th</sup>-century) can in fact be interpreted as settings for military drills and parades where the soldiers became actors performing to well-rehearsed movements.

The force behind this changing vision of the world was the Counter-Reformation. The Council of Trent brought about a revival of religious feeling and a desire to express the greatness of the Catholic Church.

The decrees of the last session of the Council laid down guidelines for artists encouraging them to fuse the three arts of painting, sculpture and architecture in an attempt to render the Christian message vigorous and alive.

The emphasis was now on feeling, on the spiritual made visual. Architects and artists took the convincing powers of theatre and applied these methods to their own ends in an attempt to render the whole of the religious experience, so that the mood of austerity that had prevailed immediately after the last session of the Council of Trent gave way to the joyous, exuberant Baroque.

Space in the theatre does not only mean the theatre building itself (the location for the theatrical action), but also and especially the representations of space that became part and parcel of the theatrical representations, hence Baroque scenography. The word scenography incorporates not only the painted backdrops that became increasingly elaborate and illusionistic, but also all those effects that contributed to making a spectacle memorable and extraordinary.

Foremost among these were the theatrical machines – one can call them the special effects of Baroque theatre. Together painted scenery and machines populated the world of theatre with fantastic beings and weird creatures. They created a short-lived atmosphere

of wonder and magic, a world that centred wholly on the spectator and was created for him.

One of the most striking aspects of the Baroque theatre, particularly its scenography, was its ephemeral nature. Often spectacles would be put up for one night only and thus a lot of trouble and expense would be taken to produce a wondrous world which lasted only briefly and which, once the spectacle was over, would be gone for ever.

One way to make the illusory world that was the theatre durable was to recreate it in stone – in the city. Hence scenography became a springboard for many ideas, which found their way into the city, such that the magic and illusion of the theatre world could live on in enduring form.

Unlike Renaissance spaces, Baroque city forms were designed in their entirety. Buildings were not simply planned on paper and inserted into the urban fabric. They were designed in relation to all other buildings in a space, they came to epitomise the Baroque love of self-expression and ultimately to reflect the mood of their maker, of the person they were dedicated to, or of the idea they represented.

Rome, where the Baroque originated, is replete with mystical spaces that transfigure the city, spaces that make it a city of wonder and greatness even today. St. Peter's Square, the Vatican, Piazza Navona, the Spanish Steps, are only among the best known of these magnificent spaces.

Malta too has its fair share of scenographic architecture. Mdina and Valletta are the first to spring to mind; yet to these we must add the numerous Baroque churches that fill our islands as well as the palaces and other buildings situated primarily in our village cores. Accentuated cornices, recessed windows, deep doorways, articulated street corners, grandiose yet sober churches, eschutcheons and monuments proclaim everywhere the supremacy of church and state.

Mdina, for long the forgotten stronghold of the Maltese nobility, was reconstructed and transformed from a dark, medieval enclave into a fine Baroque city at the time of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena following an earthquake, which in 1693 destroyed much of the existing fabric.

Vilhena grabbed the opportunity to transform the old capital into an opulent statement of the sovereignty of the Order. Seen from afar, the citadel stands out above the landscape proclaiming its presence long before one enters it. The main entrance and approach to Mdina is theatrical in itself, a monument to Manoel de Vilhena. His arms occur frequently throughout the city, yet nowhere as emphatically and magnificently as over the main



**St Peter's, Rome. The vast piazza and curving portico were designed specifically for their function as containers of the sacred spectacles linked to the mother-church of the Roman Catholic religion that crowns the square**

doorway, a proclamation that this is his city and that he is the master. He uses recurring scenographic methods to assert his supremacy over the nobility that had previously been the undisputed masters of the city, a stance of authority that is reinforced by the magnificent Baroque palace that he places directly inside the main gate, an enticing vision of the power of the monarch.

The scenographic practice of engendering expectation in the user of a space, and then presenting him with a completely different reality once this is attained, is employed in the city streets. Walking through medieval and Baroque Mdina is an experience of discovery. Areas present themselves suddenly and unexpectedly, engendering a wish to explore, to find out the hidden recesses which can be guessed at and which one feels must be attained.

The narrow, winding streets draw the walker onwards, hinting at the openings ahead but never preparing the viewer for the dramatic piazza or the monumental cathedral that crowns it.

The cathedral square presents itself abruptly to the walker, a vast open space that sweeps from the opening of a space downwards along the gentle slope, up the steps of the parvis and then rushing along the sober yet monumental cathedral façade.

To right and left are hints of other spaces, each exerting a gentle pull on the spectator. The tortuous streets, interspersed with minor squares that serve as areas of rest, ill-prepare the viewer for the grand, open view from the bastions, rendering the old citadel dynamic and vibrant.

Thus the city becomes a painted backdrop reproduced in stone. The lines of vision that are the work of perspective in the theatre become vistas in architecture so that one view leads on to another, and that onto another again. There is a perpetual play on natural human curiosity, a continual exploration of terrain, a changes of level. Theatrical notions of movement and changing perspective are incorporated on a city-wide scale.

In this manner streets no longer remained merely avenues leading from A to B. They became efficient, enticing channels for movement, pulling or pushing the citizen, who now also became the spectator, along carefully planned routes. A person walking along a street would be driven forward by tantalising glimpses of open spaces ahead, areas of rest within the city structure. As the walker progressed along the route his perception of it would change, continually engendering fresh ideas and new responses.

The lines along which the city of Valletta is laid are completely different. Mdina, being a much earlier city, had developed organically and somewhat haphazardly, with streets following territorial outlines – an aspect that the old capital never completely lost. Indeed the charm of Mdina lies in its artful mixture of natural development and novel methods of embellishment.

Valletta, on the other hand, was built from scratch, a city built to accommodate the military and hospitaller image of the Order. The city was laid out along intersecting gridlines, which made the development of the city much easier to control and which would have greatly facilitated movement in the event of attack. In other

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words it was the perfect military city for a military order: severe, solemn, and perfectly controlled.

This is evident immediately on entering Valletta. The main street becomes an avenue crossing the entire city. From the main gateway to the glimpse of the sea in the distance, the long vista enables the spectator to make a mental picture of the city. Yet again, along Strada San Giorgio (today better known as Republic Street), are unexpected areas that slow the headlong rush of the route.

Here too, as in Mdina, we find breathing spaces along the way, albeit vastly different, far more solemn and academic. Whereas in Mdina the architectural details are flamboyant and energetic, triumphant crowning of doorways and window frames, in Valletta the mood is more sober.

This reflects the initial development of Valletta as a fortress city, as well as its role as capital city of the Knights.

While Valletta's buildings are not lacking in richness of architectural detail, particularly evident in the Baroque transformation that occurred after 1650, the whole is subordinated to the overall organising scheme laid out in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Laparelli.

Hence the monumental buildings are rigidly in line, continuity and rhythm being provided by the strict alignment of doors, windows

and stringcourses, making the street the spinal column of this perfectly controlled system.

The sobriety of this system reflects the stature of the Order, in keeping with the theatrical notion of appropriateness, where the costume of an actor would immediately make evident his role in the representation. Thus the overall design of Valletta, which could be taken in at a glance, set the mood and revealed the nature of the capital city.

Inside the buildings a similar staging of the function of the space resulted in decorative schemes that reflected the nature of the space and the activities it was used for. Often space and user were both exulted, in the sense that a magnificent space reflects and equally important user.

Main stairways become monumental, making the daily passage from one level to the next a ritual of movement and of form, and celebrating the user at the same time. This taste for *mise-en-scene* was prevalent throughout the Baroque and emerges very strongly in the churches.

These are presented as magnificent arenas for ritual devotion, at the same time generating action and reflecting it.

One obvious case is the Conventual Church of San Giovanni Battista (St. John's Co-Cathedral), which functions as a minor city. The nave leads directly and unequivocally to the main altar, the embodiment of the Christian sacrifice. The altar faces the congregation in much the same way as the church faces the street or square.

On either side of the nave are the richly decorated secondary chapels, semi-private areas of devotion and resting places within the larger fabric of the church.

Along the barrel vault of the ceiling are spread scenes from the life of Saint John the Baptist; a reminder of the heavens that await us, while below the floor is covered with a constant reminder of our human mortality.

The church is a completely Baroque, symbolic representation of the whole of human life, connected to the world outside through this symbolism of plan and also through its layout. And one must remember that for the Baroque age all living was an act.

Thus the worlds of theatre, particularly scenography, and of architecture are strongly interconnected. Besides, having the same users and often the same originators, theatre and architecture had the same preoccupations and methods.

However theatre scenography was typically ephemeral, of passing nature. Once the show was over, the use for scenography was likewise over. What the Baroque architect did was to create the scenography in more durable material, in the city.

Today little remains of Baroque ephemeral structures. The scenography is gone, but the architecture remains as a living testimony to a different era and a different way of life.

**Plan of St Peter's, Rome (as built)**

