

ARCHITECT ANDREA VASSALLO (1908-1928)

Leonard Mahoney

On Nov. 7, 1908, the three members of the Examining Board of Engineering and Architecture, by a secret ballot, voted that Andrea Vassallo, who had never attended a formal course in architecture, should be granted the Warrant of Land Surveyor and Architect (the equivalent of to-day's A & CE) without the need of sitting for any sort of examination.¹ This action was so unusual and irregular that it earned, almost immediately, the vehement condemnation of the Istituto dei Periti.²

The architects were justly angry. How could the Governor lay down that architects “have to be examined by a Committee to be approved for the purpose ...”,³ and then, all of a sudden, to condone such a flagrant breach of the regulations?

The circumstances, of course, as the Examining Board reported, were “quite exceptional and unlikely that similar cases could ever present themselves”. Vassallo's competence was beyond dispute. Already, without any examination, he had been admitted (in 1892) in the Institution of British Civil Engineers, having been recommended by, among others, Field Marshal Sir Lintorn Simmons, a Governor of Malta who was a Civil Engineer, and the distinguished geologist and hydrologist, Mr. Osbert Chadwick.⁴ Lately (in 1907) Vassallo had also been recognised as an Architect by the Royal Institute of British Architects by the conferment of the Diploma of “Fellow”, which is the highest class of the profession the Institute can confer.⁵

Let it be said from the outset, none of these recognitions came to Vassallo on a plate, but rather here was a man who, by dint of hard work and sheer ability, got what he deserved - although, as we shall see, justice came very late in the day. Vassallo was an unlucky man, and has remained so to this very day. Most of his masterpieces are still among us yet very few know that he was their author. The dome of St. Gaetano, the parish church of Hamrun, is usually attributed to Chev. Guze D'Amato who was responsible for its construction. The dome of St. Nicholas of Siggiewi is attributed to Dr. Nicola Zammit or to Prof Nerik Vassallo. The church of Tal-Herba, B'Kara, is attributed to his son, the architect Edwin Vassallo; whilst the government school at Sliema is usually without title - not even Vassallo's grandson, Mr. Wilfrid

¹ (M)alta (N)ational (A)rchives, Rabat, PWD 3948/1908.

² MNA, Rabat, L182/09.

³ Govt. Notice of 14-4-1856.

⁴ MNA, Rabat, PWD 3530/16; Works 217/905.

⁵ MNA, Rabat, PWD 3948/1908.

Vassallo (who helped me generously in my researches) remembering that this fine building had been designed by his grandfather. It was in this atmosphere, when Vassallo's achievements were slipping away into the mists of time, that I decided to document his works and to register them for posterity.

Andrea Vassallo was born at Luqa on 2 January 1856.⁶ According to Renato La Ferla (Sliema Art Nouveau Architecture, Malta, 1969) Vassallo started his life as a stone sculptor. The first eleven years of his professional life were spent in private practice.⁷ In 1887, when Vassallo was 31 years old, he claimed that he had undergone a long training "in all the branches of the art of construction"; that he had been entrusted to supervise many buildings; the remodelling of drains and other Sanitary improvements by private parties; and besides entrusted in the following works, viz.: the construction of four skew bridges for the Malta Railway; the reconstruction of the Monument of the late Sir Alexander John Ball in the Lower Barracca "under the supervision of the Hon. L.E. Galizia Esq. C.E."; the building of the extension block of stables and dwellings outside Porta Reale; the construction of a Poor House for the little Sisters of the Poor; the construction of Princess Melita Theatre at Sliema; the enlargement and almost total reconstruction (internally) of the Stella Maris church at Sliema; the design and building of "several villas in the Early English style for judge P. Mifsud, the Misses Pace and Baron Depiro on the Saqqajja, at Rabat, as well as another house near the Cathedral for the latter noble gentleman"; a Villa Residence at Casal Attard; and several works in Villa Bologna "entrusted to me by Sir Gerald Count Strickland". It appears that Vassallo had many English patrons. His work in this period included "a design for a Soldiers and Sailors Institute entrusted to me by Colonel Woodward; the designing and carrying out of several buildings at the Marsa Race Course, the levelling and surveying of a portion at same, all entrusted to me by Lt. Col. F. Slade DAAC, now Inspection General of Fortification; the designing and carrying out of other works for Col. Philpott C.RE. and Admiral Culme-Seymour, besides I was entrusted by the late Gen. Wilkie, Commanding the infantry Brigade, to prepare a design for a Branch Union Club at Sliema". There is also a reference to the "design of a Church and Chaplain's residence for the Confraternity of the Rosary".⁸

FRUSTRATION

This private work was not, apparently, sufficiently remunerative because Vassallo entered Government service on December 21, 1887, as a Clerk of Works - filling the

⁶ Personal communication by Mr. Wilfrid Vassallo, Andrea Vassallo's grandson.

⁷ MNA, Rabat, PW 3948/1908.

⁸ Ibid., petitions 4773/V.

post which had been vacated by Webster Paulson, a Civil Engineer who had come out from England in 1867, and to whom the task of rebuilding the Opera House had been entrusted when it was burnt down in 1873. Vassallo's post carried the salary of £100 rising by £5 to £230. In this Vassallo was to remain, in spite of his professional recognition and "excellent professional work in the Department" until just three years before his retirement. As the Hon. Lorenzo Gatt, C.E., the Superintendent of Public Works, was to report, "Vassallo was left out in the cold" - the penalty he had to pay for not having been through the formal course of Engineering and Architecture.¹⁰

Understandably Vassallo tried to better his salary and position. Perversely his efforts were torpedoed somewhere along the line. In 1905 his petition was refused on the ground that it was not customary to classify as Surveyors (the equivalent of to-day's Engineer) persons "who did not hold a regular Government Warrant to practice as Surveyor and Architect".¹¹ An application for an increase of salary was also refused on the ground that Mr. Vassallo was sufficiently paid.¹² He was then drawing £180 per annum, together with a personal allowance of £20. It was useless that Vassallo obtained his Warrant (in 1908) because his position was not bettered. Promotion to Surveyor First Class finally came at the end of 1917 with an adjustment of Salary reckoned on the basis of a promotion in 1909, i.e. on his attainment of the Warrant of Architect and Land Surveyor.¹³

From his many petitions we learn about some of the works in which he was engaged. We are told, for example, that in 1908 he had been entrusted "with the project of planning the proposed new Hospital, which in respect of magnitude and importance exceeds all others that have so far been undertaken in Malta".¹⁴ We learn that in 1915 he had been entrusted "with the conversion, under the Superintendent's direction, of a large portion of the Poor House building into a Central Hospital".¹⁵ This Poor House had been designed by T.H. Wyatt, of London, but its construction had devolved on Vassallo. He reminds us that on the completion of this large building Prof. G. Schinas had granted him a flattering certificate. He had built a school at Hamrun, new Latrines, "on improved system", in District Elementary Schools; had been responsible for the excavation and piercing of the large tunnel and ramp, and the formation of the zig-zag road in the Valletta bastions; had supervised

⁹ MNA, Rabat, Blue Book 1887-88, Petitions 4773/V.

¹⁰ MNA, Rabat, PWD 3530/16.

¹¹ MNA, Rabat, Works 217/905.

¹² MNA, Rabat, PWD 3001/907.

¹³ MNA, Rabat, Blue Book 1917-18.

¹⁴ MNA, Rabat, PWD 3948/1908.

¹⁵ MNA, Rabat, PWD 3530/16.

the construction of the new workshop and the planting of machinery therein existing; the construction of the male Infirmary (one wing) Lunatic asylum; the Chapel of the Poor House; and the Military Slaughterhouse at the Civil Abbatoir.¹⁶

ACHIEVEMENTS

We are told that he had also designed the “prison for women and Laundry”; designed “the Asylum for Lepers (existing male wing) and the Female Wing, Chapel and Administration Block.”; he had designed and built the Sliema Government Elementary school (in 1908 still under construction) and he had designed and erected the wrought iron Conservatory at the Argotti Gardens (“quite a new kind of blacksmith’s work for Malta”). Photographs of this ambitious conservatory still exist but the structure itself was pulled down “because”, it is said, “of its high maintenance cost”.¹⁷

Public Works employees were precluded from carrying out private work but Vassallo surmounted this obstacle by the usual device, i.e. by getting other architects to sponsor his designs. His son, architect Edwin Vassallo - who later became Minister of Public Works - only worked for the Strickland family,¹⁸ and thus we find no difficulty in assigning the majestic dome of St. Nicholas, at Siggiewi,¹⁹ or the Rococo church at tal-Herba,²⁰ to Andrea Vassallo; even though these works are linked to his name only through that of his son. The dome of St. Gaetano, Hamrun, was built many years after the death of the two Vassallos, but two independent witnesses - Mr. Victor Anastasi who had been Chairman of the Diocesan Commission for Sacred Art, and Rev. Joseph Cachia of St. Gaetano parish church - support the evidence of Mr. Wilfrid Vassallo that the dome was built exactly as designed by his grandfather.²¹ This magnificent dome was constructed in 1953-55 under the direction of that prolific builder of churches, the late Chev. Guze D’Amato, who prepared all the working drawings and structural designs. However the parish priest, Mons. H. Cordina-Perez, was adamant that D’Amato should

¹⁶ MNA, Rabat, PWD 3001/907.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Personal communication by Wilfrid Vassallo, Edwin Vassallo’s son and grandson of Andrea Vassallo.

¹⁹ Personal communication by Wilfrid Vassallo and Archives of the Parish Church of Siggiewi; Libro Esito delle ven. lampade della Sta. Parrocchiale Chiesa del Siggiewi, under Amministrazione sac. Giuseppe Aquilina.

²⁰ Personal communication by Mr. Wilfrid Vassallo and Archives of the Church of Tal-Herba, Birkirkara.

²¹ I have been shown, besides, the original competition drawing over Vassallo’s nom-de-plume “Fides”. The dome built by Chev. Guze D’Amato is faithful to this design in all particulars.

adhere faithfully to Andrea Vassallo's design - this had been judged the winning design in a competition held in the 1920's; Vassallo receiving the princely sum of £25 for his project.²²

Vassallo was an eclectic, designing in the different period styles with the same ease. Two of his last works are in the Art Nouveau: The Casa Said, on the Sliema front,²³ which was demolished recently; and Villa Rosa, in St. Andrews,²⁴ this last crowning the brow of a hill which was terraced, laid out with exotic trees, walks, pergolas and a nymphaeum. Vassallo's last work was the Romanesque basilica at Ta' Pinu, justly admired for the beauty of its lace-like stone carving.²⁵ The wheel having turned a full circle, Vassallo died on 28 January, 1928, at the Blue Sisters, a hospital which he had, himself, designed.²⁶ By his own merits Vassallo had risen to a pre-eminent position in his profession, his prestige being further enhanced when, on 17 November 1913, he was decorated by His Holiness Pius X with the insignia of the Order of St. Gregory the Great, Civil Class, for his services rendered during the Eucharistic Congress; a reminder of which is the tribune designed by him and immortalised in a painting by Chev. E. Caruana Dingli, his illustrious compatriot.²⁷

CONCLUSION

The above, I believe, covers Vassallo's principal works as well as some of lesser importance, which emerge from one or another of this architect's petitions. Vassallo was understandably reticent about his private practice during his long period of Government service and, his works at this time being "hidden", it is not inconceivable that many have yet to be discovered. As it happens it was during this period that Vassallo reached his maturity and produced his major works. It is clear that he had earned a reputation as a good engineer and as one particularly skilled in dome-construction. Thus, following his successful completion of the high dome of St. Nicholas, Siggiewi (completed 1919) he was called in to stabilise the newly constructed dome of St. Paul's, Rabat, damaged four years after its completion by an earth tremor (Biagio Galea, *L-Imdina ta' ifuliti*, Malta 1989, p.5). Like many successful architects Vassallo was very prolific whilst, as one might expect, the quality of his designs tended to vary. Some of his works have been criticised for their

²² Personal communications by Mr. Victor Anastasi, confirmed by Rev. Jos. Cachia of S. Gaetano parish church.

²³ Renato La Ferla (Sliema Art Nouveau Architecture, Malta 1969) confirmed by Mr. W. Vassallo.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ E. Sammut (Art in Malta, Malta 1954) confirmed by Mr. W. Vassallo

²⁶ Documents held by Mr. W. Vassallo.

²⁷ Painting and documents held by Mr. W. Vassallo.

irreverence to their setting. His house “in the Early English style” next to the Cathedral at Mdina has been described as a “sore thumb”. Of course it is the style itself which is at fault rather than the design, and this particular period style was probably specified by Vassallo’s client, the Baron Depiro.

Similarly Vassallo’s church at Ta’ Pinu is often criticised for its Romanesque style which is felt to be alien in its Maltese countryside setting. Vassallo was more convincing when he was building in the Art Nouveau style or in the more genial Baroque-classical style.

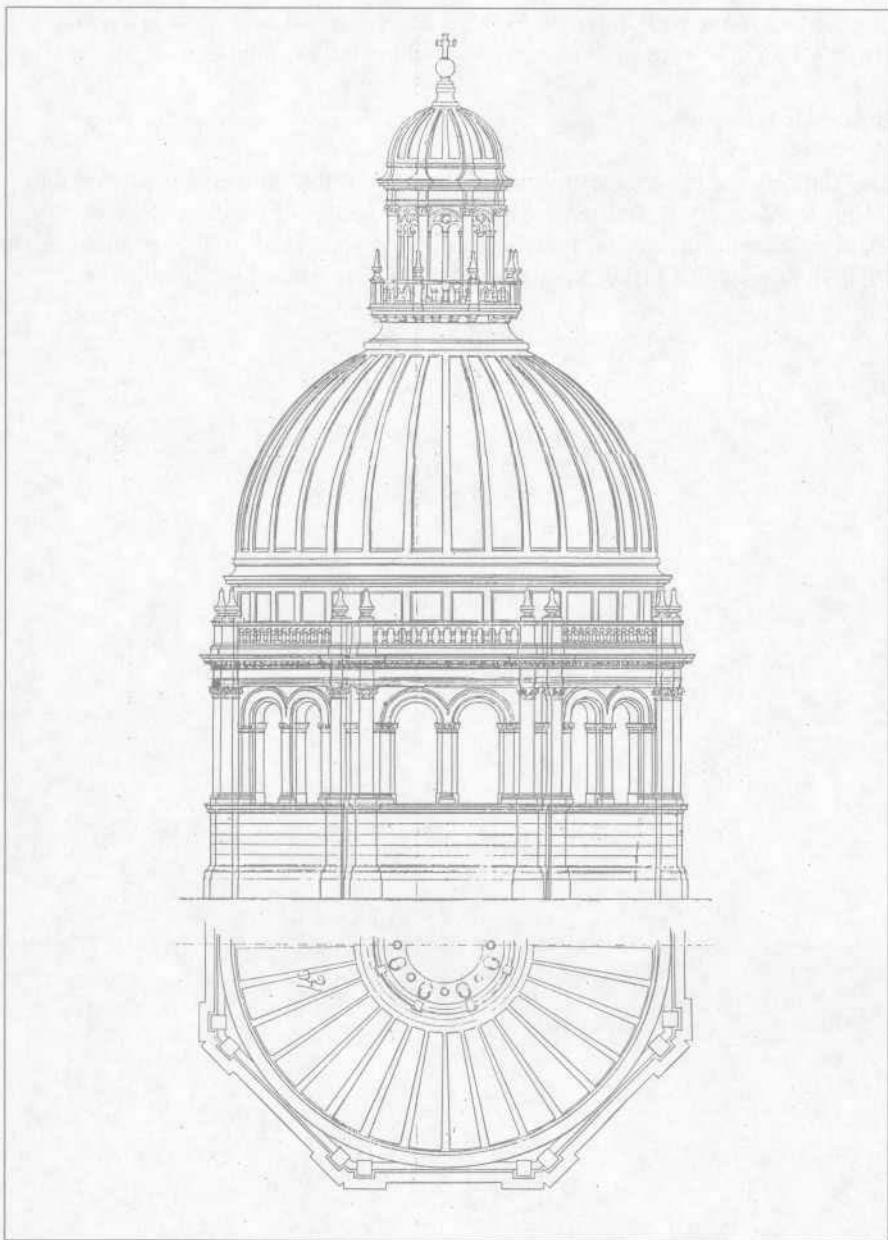
In his *Sliema Art Nouveau Architecture* Renato La Ferla enthuses over Vassallo’s Casa Said and would doubtlessly have showered the same praise on this architect’s virile Villa Rosa. Vassallo was at his best and deserves a secure niche in Maltese architecture for his two domes of Siggiewi and Hamrun; the latter, in particular, being considered by many as the finest dome in the island. If Vassallo’s house at Mdina had somehow tarnished his reputation for rightness this was more than redeemed by the beautiful Hamrun dome which soars majestically over its drab surroundings and provides a focus and gives point to an otherwise over-crowded and monotonous suburb. One cannot help admiring Vassallo’s successful blending of medieval and classical elements; improving, in this respect, on Prof. George Schinas’s inspired composition which derives from the French Gothic of Laon Cathedral and the Venetian Baroque of Sta. Maria della Salute. Schinas had proposed that the crossing should be crowned with a multi-storied, turret-like structure fostered, probably, by French and German Romanesque models (as, for example, the lanterns crowning the crossing of Mayence Cathedral and of St. Sermin, Toulouse).

Now here was a feature which, unlike the rest of Schinas’s design, clashed decisively with the Maltese environment, and perhaps it was for this reason that Schinas’s “dome” was never built. Vassallo very cleverly took his cue from Schinas’s references, in the facade, to Sta. Maria della Salute and designed a dome which, clearly, was inspired by the dome of the Venetian church. It was a felicitous design which is in complete harmony with Schinas’s facade and mixes well with the Maltese townscape. The dome proper and the lantern were more or less repeated in St. Nicholas. Siggiewi, which Vassallo here merged with a high “Baroque” drum. This dome has been called “a thermos”, “elegant”, “the most graceful dome in Malta”, etc. The truth is that Vassallo designed the dome to rise well above the facade which, considering that the ground in front of the church sloped steeply downhill, took quite some doing. Vassallo, however, succeeded admirably and with Dr. Nicola Zammit’s beautiful porch-facade and Lorenzo Gafa’s flanking bell-towers was responsible for one of the most impressive ensembles in the island. It is also just

that the two foremost builders of Maltese domes should here meet in a combined effort - Gafa in the internal shell and Vassallo in the external dome.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the help of the following gentlemen: Mr. Victor Anastasi, Mr. Wilfred Vassallo, Rev. Jos. Cachia of St. Joseph Parish Church, Hamrun, Rev. Can. Lawrence Mifsud, Archpriest of St. Nicholas Parish Church, Siggiewi and Rev. Nicola Aquilina D. Litt. of the same parish church.



1 Copy of original design by Andrea Vassallo entered for a competition for the dome of St. Gaetano's church Hamrun, under the pseudonym 'Fides'. Like Schinas's façade, Vassallo's dome has references to S. Maria della Salute, Venice.



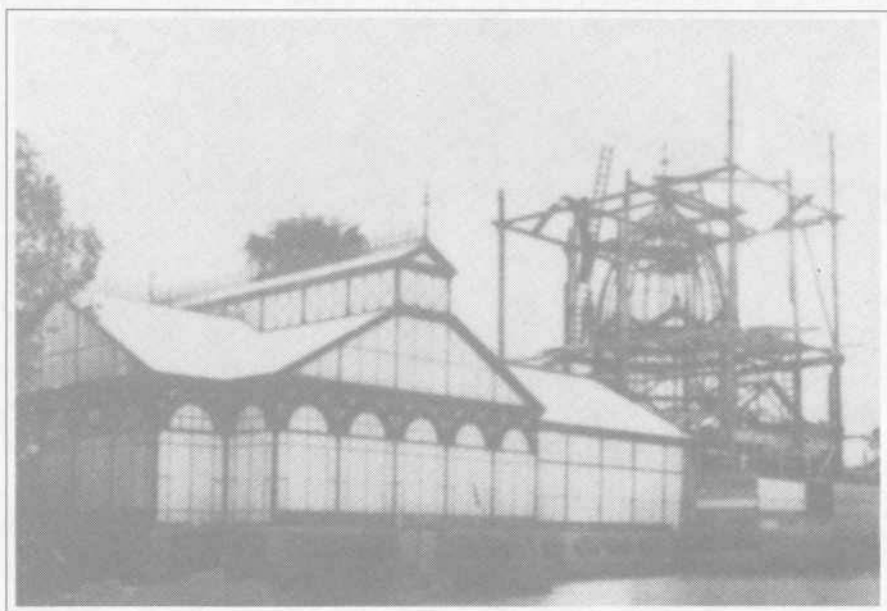
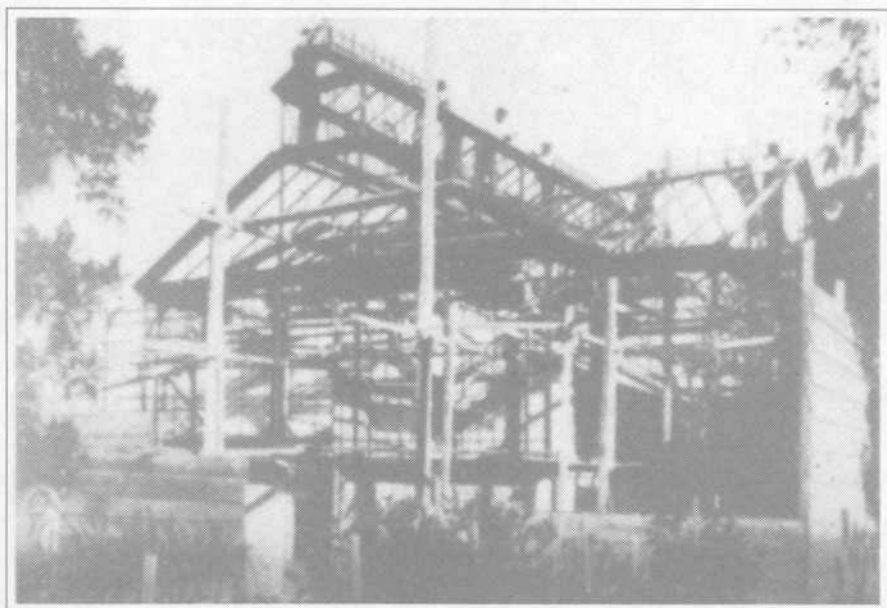
2. St. Nicholas, parish church of Siggiewi, designed by Lorenzo Gafà, 1676-93. Aisles 1862. Façade rebuilt in 1864 to the designs of Nicola Zammit. Exterior done built in 1919 to the designs of Andrea Vassallo.

Photo: Lino Psaila



3. The church of St. Gaetano, Hamrun (1869-75) was designed by George Scinas. It is of great interest for its combination of ideas from the French Gothic of Loon Cathedral and the Venetian Baroque of S. Maria della Salute. The dome, regarded by many as the finest dome in Malta, was designed by Andrea Vassallo and was built in 1953-55 under the direction of Guzè D'Amato who was also responsible for the working drawings and the structural design. The oratory was built in 1895 to the designs of Andrea Grima, the architect of St. Joseph's church, Msida.

Photo: Jos. Cassar

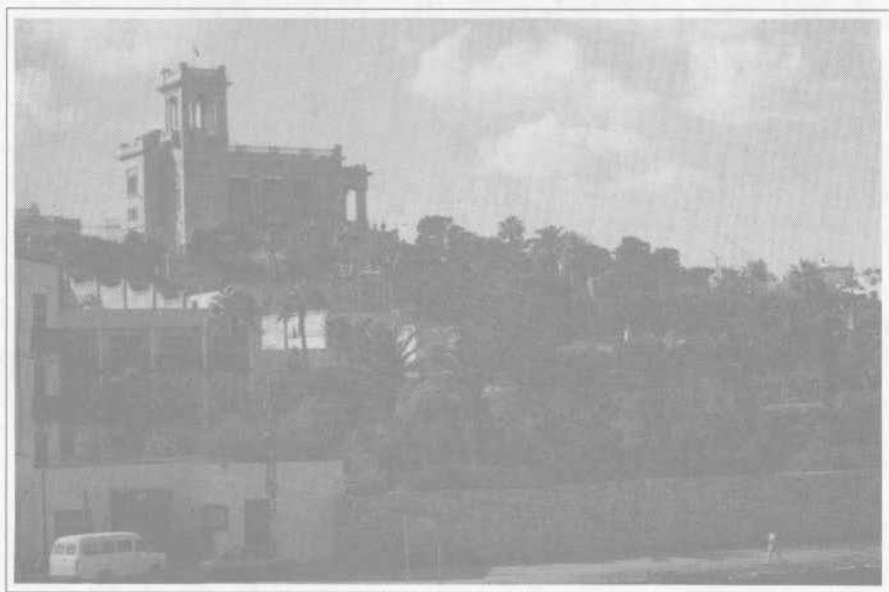


4. The Old Greenhouse, at Argotti Gardens, Floriana, designed by Andrea Vassallo, before 1907. This wrought iron structure was later dismantled because of high maintenance costs.



5. Ta' Pinu Basilica Gozo, 1920.

Photo J. Tufigno



6. Villa Rosa, St. Andrews, designed by Andrea Vassallo in the first decades of this century. The tower on the skyline was a favourite motif of Andrea Vassallo and was repeated in Casa Said, Sliema, now regrettably demolished.

Photo: Moira Pisani



7. Government Elementary School, Sliema, designed by Andrea Vassallo. Built c. 1908.

Photo: Moira Pisani