

A Historical Outline of School Architecture in Malta

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Although the history of education in Malta is well documented, the architectural history of local educational facilities is still as yet uncharted territory. The available literature on the architecture of schools in the Maltese islands and their underlying design philosophy is almost non-existent. A tentative outline can only be sketched on the basis of the substantial corpus of surviving drawings, various *ad hoc* reports and for the international style modern schools, built in the 1950's and 60's, by direct verbal communications with their architects. This paper will present a concise historical exposition on school architecture in Malta and Gozo.¹

From Humble Origins

Before the crystallisation of formal educational institutions during the British Colonial period, educational facilities were severely limited both in number and also, in terms of their typology. The arrival of the Jesuit Order in Malta in 1592, was a landmark in the history of local education.² In the early seventeenth century, the Jesuits constructed their *Collegio* adjoining the Jesuit church in Merchants' Street Valletta. The Jesuit College known as the *Collegium Melitense* survived for over 150 years and it served as the quarters for the educational of several novices. Some of the most distinguished Maltese scholars including Gian Francesco Abela (1582-1655), received their education at the college under the tutelage of the Jesuits. On the instigation of Bishop Gargallo, the King of Spain had donated the sum of two thousand scudi for the foundation of the college.³ The Jesuits acquired a whole isolated block in Valletta which was bounded by Merchants' Street on the west, Christopher Street on the north, St. Paul Street on the east, and Archbuship's Street on the fourth side. The college was constructed over half the block with the other half serving as the site of the Jesuit church.

The college was originally constructed to the design of the Neapolitan Jesuit architect, Giuseppe Valerino who was also responsible for the design of the adjoining church. The plan of the college is based on a linear series of rectangular rooms around three sides of an open central courtyard which is flanked on the northern and western sides by cloisters. Valeriano's plan was modified by the interventions of the Order's

military engineer, Francesco Buonamici during the first half of the 17th century when he built more instruction rooms over part of the courtyard and reconstructed the façade overlooking Merchants' Street.⁴ This basic arrangement of rooms around a central open court was particularly well-suited not only in terms of facilitating access between the adjoining classrooms but also for alleviating the intense summer heat by cross-ventilation to the internal spaces. This central court block typology adopted for the Jesuit college, also served as the model for a number of primary schools built by the British Colonial Government in the early twentieth century.

When the Jesuits were expelled from Malta in 1768, Pope Clement XIV granted permission for their property to be taken over as a university which was officially instituted by Grand Master Emanuel Pinto.⁵ The public university of general studies included Faculties of Theology, Medicine and Law, with additional schools of Navigation, Naval Architecture and Cartography being set up a few years later.

Throughout the rule of the Order of St. John in Malta (1530-1798), there was no educational institutional set-up on a national level. Education was mainly entrusted to a few religious and private schools. A number of religious noviciates especially Dominicans and Friars Minors, held religious classes within their convents or residential houses which were improvised into classrooms. The diocesan Church encouraged priests to instruct local children in the elementary, Latin and Italian.⁶

With the end of the Order's rule in 1798 and the brief French interlude, the British Colonial Government set about to introduce formal educational institutions at a national level. The secretary of the State for the Colonies, Lord Bathurst had in his instructions to the British Governor, Sir Thomas Maitland, made it explicitly clear that the establishment of 'public schools on the economic lines introduced in this [United] Kingdom' was a highly desirable objective.⁷ The intentions were politically motivated so as to diminish the influence of the Italian culture in Malta and to promote the English language. An elementary school was opened in Valletta (St. Christopher Street) in 1819 and this was followed, shortly after, by other similar

schools in Lija and Vittoriosa.⁸ Still, these modest schools were financed by non-Governmental philanthropic organisations with all their severe financial limitation. The acute shortage of adequate facilities was undoubtedly a major stumbling block to the improvement of the educational set-up on the island.

In 1838, a specially appointed Royal Commission headed by Sir George Cornwall and Dr. John Austin, lamented about the general lack of interest in education and the very few schools available.⁹ They deplored the poverty and the ignorance in which the Maltese population had been kept by the Colonial Government and the complete neglect of education. In fact, only three elementary Government schools were operational at the time that the Commission presented its report; one of the schools was in Valletta, another in Senglea and the third school was to be found in Gozo. The Commission urged the government to embark on a school building programme, recommending a minimum of ten primary schools to be constructed; one in Valletta, two other schools to serve the Cottonera area and seven other schools to be built in the various outlying *casali* or districts.¹⁰

Although the number of schools increased substantially by the late 19th century, most of these schools were of sub-standard quality. In 1880, Sir P.J. Keenan was appointed to report on the state of educational facilities in Malta and Gozo.¹¹ It was reported that over 7,500 students were registered at over 79 government primary schools. In addition, there were also two secondary schools, one for male and the other for female pupils, the Lyceum with almost 500 students and the University which hosted 168 students.¹² However, most of the school buildings were privately owned houses which were appropriated by the government on the basis of a yearly rental lease. Although usually the more spacious property was selected, overcrowding and inadequate ventilation was quite common place. The internal planning of rooms intended for a residence had a limited flexibility to adequately serve as a school. Sir P.J. Keenan was particularly appalled by the standard practice of constructing water closets in the school houses or yards: "It would be difficult to imagine any arrangement more repugnant to good taste, or more injurious to health, than those to which I refer. Frequently, the odours from these closets were simply sickening; indeed in some cases more than sickening, intolerable such as for example at Cospicua and Senglea."¹³

Besides the sub-standard sanitary facilities, another serious deficiency identified by Keenan was

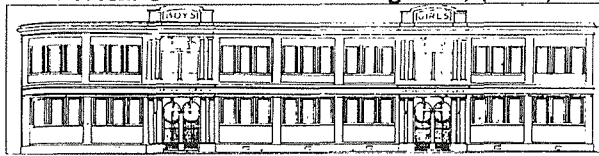
the total lack of playgrounds in many school-houses. However, the pioneer for the foundation of a national system of primary education which was accessible to the local population was not a British personality but the Maltese Canon Paolo Pullicino (1815-1890). In 1849, the British Governor, Sir Richard More O'Ferrall earmarked the young Maltese cleric, who at that time was a teacher of a primary school in Zejtun, to completely overhaul and reform primary education in Malta.¹⁴ Pullicino embarked on a study tour of educational facilities in Italy, France, England and Ireland. Upon his return to the island, he set out to reform and disseminate primary education to all local towns and villages. Besides drafting a new curriculum which also included music and art classes Pullicino selected and rented premises for use as schools. Although, Pullicino was not an architect by profession, he personally drew design proposals for a Girls' Secondary School in Valletta (1865) and the Boys' Lyceum in Gozo.¹⁵ Throughout his distinguished thirty year career, he constantly strove to construct new schools to supercede the older school-houses.

The lack of finances required for an intensive school building programme persisted throughout the nineteenth century. In 1883, S. Savona, director of primary schools observed in a report on educational facilities that "no portion of the public money can be better spent than that which is devoted to the physical, intellectual and moral improvement of people."¹⁶ Problems with student overcrowding became even more acute by the end of the nineteenth century, so much so that by the year 1896-7, it was estimated that almost 7,000 children could not be accommodated within primary schools.¹⁷

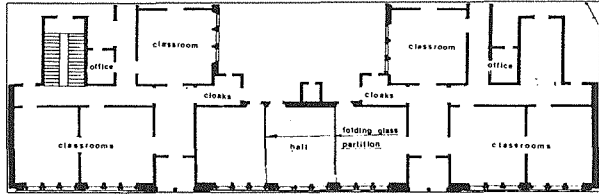
Schools in the early 20th century

The primary schools of Rabat and Mosta, both referred to as school 'A' and kindergarten, were constructed during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Both schools had separate physical quarters for boys and girls, as explicitly indicated on the raised centrepiece on the school façade. The plan of the Rabat primary school (1894), is based on the arrangement of a series of classrooms around a rectangular court which served as the playground. This layout was reflected almost identically in the other half of the school building. The introverted nature of the plan also underlies the 'T' shaped arrangement of classrooms adopted for the Mosta primary school (1896). The façades for both schools are symmetrical and academically restrained in character.

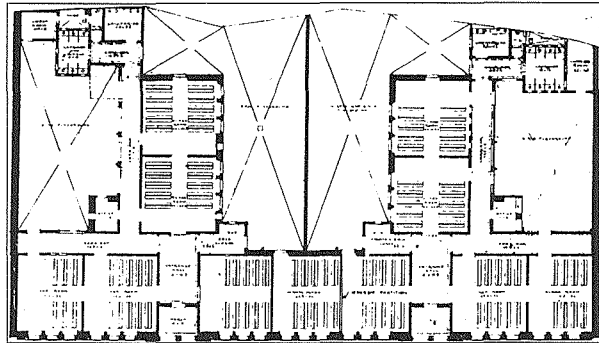
Mosta: School 'A' & Kindergarten, (1896)



Front Elevation



First Floor

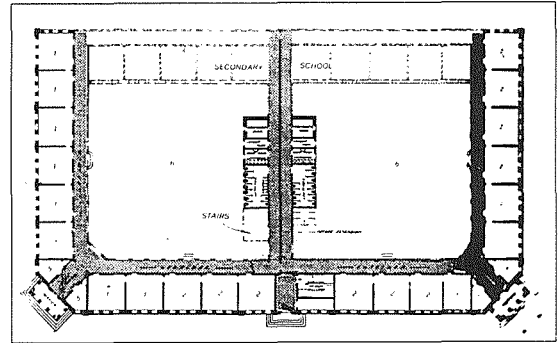


Ground Floor

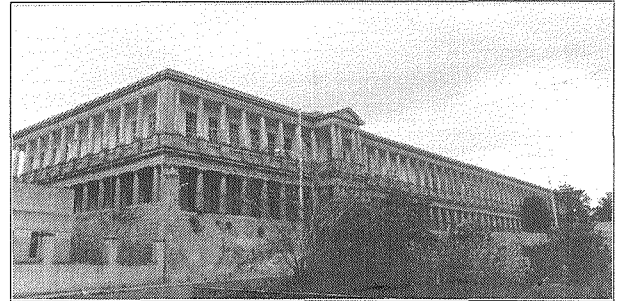
A considerable number of primary schools were built during the first two decades of the twentieth-century. Some of the finest primary schools such as that in Sliema (1915), Hamrun (1919), B'Kara (1924), and Żejtun (1929) were constructed during this period. The plans of the Sliema and B'Kara schools are almost identical in that they occupy a whole block with the classrooms lining the outer perimeter and being planned around two large internal courtyards. The sanitary facilities for both the male and female pupils were accommodated in free-standing units, back to back along the central axis.

The plan of the Żejtun school deviates from the standard central court model. Instead, it is situated on an emphatically longitudinal site, with an uninterrupted line of classrooms along the extremely long façade with four shorter perpendicular arms of three to four classrooms which separate the three internal open courtyards. Access to the classrooms along the main façade is through a narrow corridor, some three hundred feet in length, and which is well-lit by the open courts.

The Żejtun primary school ranks as one of the finest twentieth century Neo-Classical buildings in Malta. Externally, an open portico runs continuously around three sides of the school building. This is repeated on both the ground floor and the first floor level. The regular rhythm of superimposed Doric columns



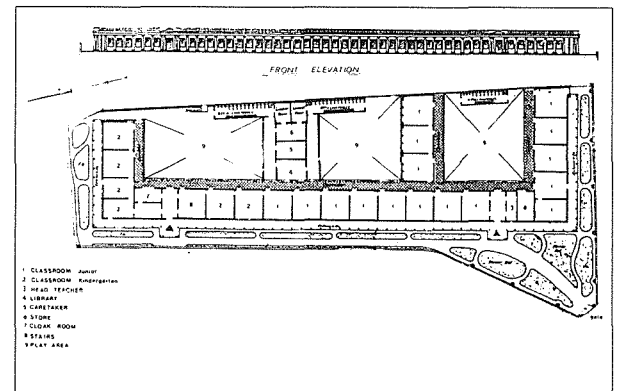
Birkirkara: School 'A' & Kindergarten, School 'B', (1924)



Żejtun Primary School (1929), façade



Żejtun Primary School, detail of façade



Żejtun: School 'A' & Kindergarten, School 'B', (1929).

contributes to an imposing and majestic façade. The Greek Doric revival style employed in the Żejtun school was iconographically closely associated with the British Colonial Government. One of the first major public

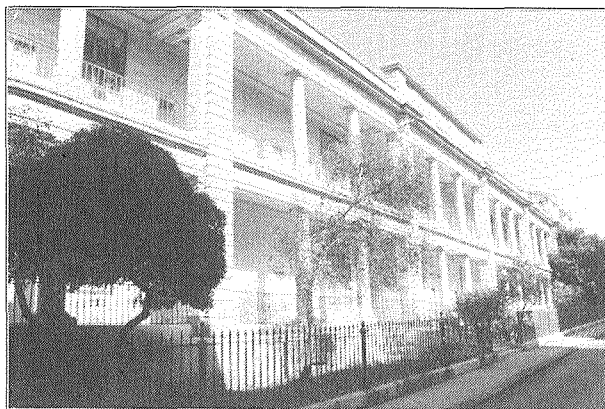
buildings to be constructed in Malta by the British was the Bigħi Naval Hospital which was a monumental Neo-Classical ensemble of buildings with impressive Doric Order colonnades. The adoption of the Greek Doric revival style for the Żejtun primary school could symbolically be interpreted as a rhetorical political statement that projected the British Colonial government as a benevolent and paternalistic institution with the local community's social welfare at heart.

The Sliema Primary school which pre-dates that of Żejtun by more than a decade, was designed by the Maltese architect, Andrea Vassallo (1855-1927). Vassallo was one of the most active architects on the island during the late nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century. Undoubtedly, his architectural magnum opus is the monumental and eclectic, pseudo-Romanesque 'Ta' Pinu' church, situated in the open countryside on the outskirts of Għarb, in Gozo.¹⁸ In the Sliema Primary school, Vassallo adopts a more restrained Palladian style with porticos along each of the four sides of the school. Each corner of the building block is boldly emphasised by rusticated square towers which although integrated within the building fabric, project over the parapet wall at roof level. The low segmental pediments that cap the squat roof projections add visual interest to the school's roof-line.

In the 1920's, a large number of primary schools were built including those of Floriana, Għargħur, Għaxaq, Hamrun, Paola and Qormi.¹⁹ These schools were typical of contemporary schools in the United Kingdom with the traditional arrangement of classrooms around internal courtyards being separated by corridors and colonnades. The schools were monumental in scale and their fortress outlook is reminiscent of the British military buildings of the time. The classrooms were usually of spacious proportions with high ceilings and thick dividing walls.

Notwithstanding the construction of new schools during the first half of this century, public awareness of the value of primary education was still not well developed. In 1923, the 'Compulsory Education Bill' was enacted with a view to improving school attendance.²⁰ This was later changed to the 'Compulsory Education Act' of 1946, whereby both primary and secondary education were made compulsory. With the outbreak of the World War II, the construction of new schools came to an abrupt halt. Several schools in the Grand Harbour area sustained some form of physical damage. Other schools were requisitioned by the military and civil authorities and temporarily converted into headquarters, hospitals and emergency housing.

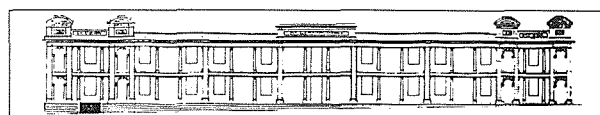
Sliema: Mixed School & Kindergarten



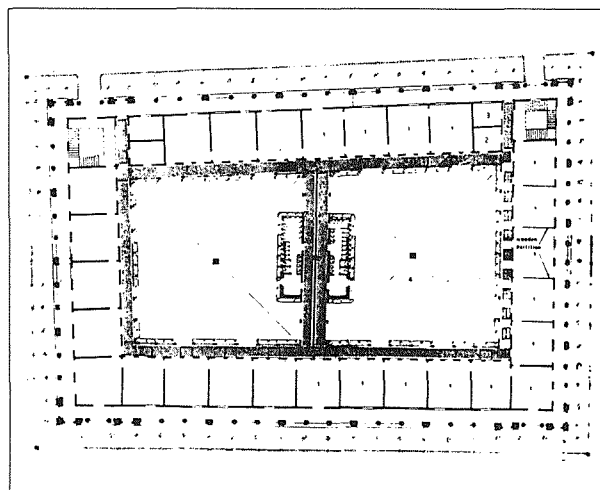
Sliema Primary School, (1915), facade



Sliema Primary School, detail of facade



South Elevation



Ground Floor Plan

With the end of hostilities, attention focused on the extent of the war damage and the urgent need for reconstruction. The immediate post-war baby boom emphasised even further the need to embark on an intensive school building programme. A grant of £ 30 million was provided for War Damage Reconstruction.²¹ Out of this sum allocated for reconstruction, the government diverted some of the funds for the construction of six new primary schools by 1948, in the towns of Kirkop, Mtaħleb, Naxxar, Qormi, Siġġiewi and Żabbar. These schools assumed the same monumental forms as those built during the early twentieth century. The architectural design of many of these schools were retardaire and out-dated. For example, the facade of the Siġġiewi primary school was fashioned after the Italian *stile littorio* and was specially influenced by Marcello Piacentini's Senate building in the new University of Rome (*La Sapienza*) campus in Rome, built in 1932 during the Fascist period.²² Other primary schools in Żurrieq, Sliema, B'Kara and Żejtun were repaired and in some cases additional floors were added to the existing buildings.

The 'Compulsory Education Act' of 1946 and an ever increasing public awareness of the benefits of education resulted in sharp increases in school attendance. Great Britain had also promised to continue to provide the Maltese with the financial support to assist the social and economic development of the island. A *National Development Plan* for the years 1959-1964, was published and implemented.²³ Education was included in the plan not only in the form of a general education programme but also as an integral element of the island's infrastructure. This resulted in an intensive school building boom in the 1950's which lasted until Malta's independence from Britain in 1964.

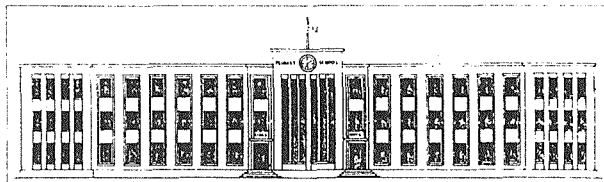
The Advent of International Style Modern Schools

With the increasing growth in population and a corresponding rate of urbanisation, more new schools were urgently required. In the late 1950's and early 60's, new primary schools were built in several localities including Qrendi, Safi, Floriana, Valletta, Pietà, St. Julians, Marsascala and B'Bugia. Special emphasis was placed on the construction of schools in the outlying smaller towns and villages which had until then inadequate educational facilities.

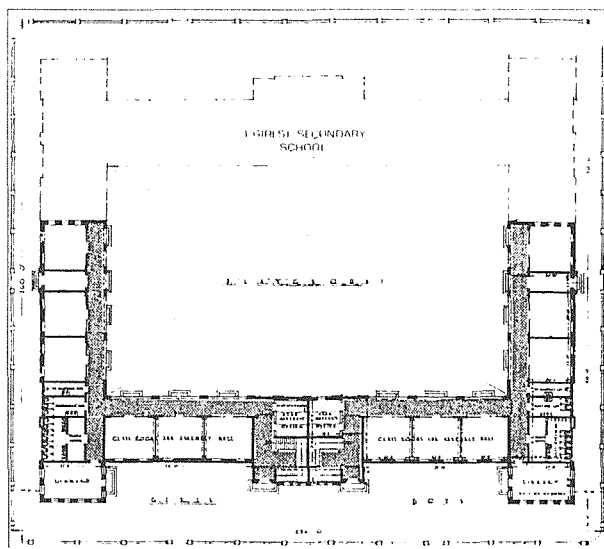
The new schools were built along totally different design principles from those dating to the pre-War period. A team of young architects employed by the Works Department with the specific task of designing these new schools were well in tune with the flourishing of the International Style Modern movement in Europe and North America. The more prominent architects involved in this intensive school building boom were Joseph Borg Grech, Joseph Huntingford, Joseph Consiglio and Renato La Ferla.²⁴ They were all deeply influenced by the major exponents of the International Modern movement, especially the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer in Brasilia, the new capital city of Brazil, Le Corbusier's buildings in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad, India and the designs of Gropius in the United States.

The new schools of the 1950's broke away from the traditional insular block form of classrooms enclosing internal courtyards. Instead the form of the school buildings became more flexible and informal in their arrangement and occasionally they were even fragmented into separate blocks. Special provision was made for extensive open playground spaces in between and around the building and the use of covered walkways to connect the different parts of the school complex became a characteristic architectural feature.

Siġġiewi: Mixed School and Kindergarten



Front Elevation



Ground Floor Plan

Some of the more avant-garde International Style primary schools were built in Gozo, by the late architect and town planner, Joseph Huntingford. The new schools are to be found in the localities of Victoria, Xewkija, San Lawrenz, Sannat, and Ghajnsielem. They are in most cases constructed on vast open sites, the classrooms are well-lit by natural light and special attention was paid to the relationship between the external and internal circulation spaces by integrating open colonnades and covered walkways. These schools were not only innovative on the basis of their design but they also incorporated the use of reinforced concrete which was still a relatively alien building material on the local architectural scene.

At times, some of the more innovative design concepts were poorly understood and not appreciated by old-fashioned civil servants. A case in point, was Renato La Ferla's design for the primary school at Floriana opposite the Sarria church, which underwent several unhappy modifications, the most notorious of which was that of encasing the base of the slender concrete columns or *pilotis* that supported the upper floor in huge blocks of concrete. The justification for this aesthetically disruptive intrusion was that some reckless driver could knock down the *pilotis*, with disastrous consequences.

Also, during this period a number of secondary schools and technical institutes were built on the informal block system; Maria Assumpta, Maria Regina secondary schools, Żejtun (Guze' Diacono) Girls secondary school and the Naxxar and the Corradino Technical Institutes. The major deficiency in the design of these schools was the introduction of vast expanses of window areas which although introducing more natural light to the school interiors also made the classrooms highly uncomfortable on the hot summer months. The designers of these schools had blindly abided to the building codes for schools in the United Kingdom without taking into account the local climatic conditions. Some architects became conscious of this problem and integrated a *brise-soleil* or sun-shading screen device within the façade as utilised in the Marsascala primary school designed by Joseph Borg Grech.

The 1960's also witnessed the foundation of the new University of Malta campus at tal-Qroqq. A master plan was prepared in 1961 by the British architectural firm, Norman & Dawbarn.²⁵ The plan was based on the North American university campus model with separate blocks for administration, assembly hall, library, and the faculties of science, arts and architecture. The construction followed traditional stone load-bearing walls although in its design philosophy

there is no continuity with local architecture. The physical form of the university campus remained relatively intact during the 1970's and early 80's, with a total student population not exceeding 2,000 students. However, during the first half of the 1990's, student registrations at the university attained record figures, with the student population being currently around nine thousand students. This exponential increase in the number of university students was matched by an equally intense physical expansion of the campus. Several architectural projects including an extension to the library, the new faculty of architecture and civil engineering building and various landscaping schemes were implemented to designs by the architect, Richard England. The new faculty of engineering building constructed to the design of the architect, Jo Tonna is a fine building which is equally dynamic and at the same time contextual with the older buildings. Unfortunately, a few of the new interventions were mediocre in design quality such as the extensions to two existing farmhouses and the oppressively austere new I.M.O. block.

Schools - The Present and Future

The 'Temporary Provisions Planning' schemes (1988) and the Structure Plan, outlined more stringent land-use planning policies. As a consequence, virgin land is no longer readily available for the construction of new schools. In recent years, the educational authorities have concentrated their efforts on the renovation and rehabilitation of existing schools, some of which are in a physically dilapidated state. Still, there are a few exceptions to this general trend; recently, planning permission was granted for a private school to be constructed in the open countryside in the Imselliet area, limits of Mgarr and the Works Department has prepared designs for a new primary school in Santa Lucia. Another trend has been that of accommodating kindergarten and facilities within converted residential units.

The present government policy is more geared towards proper maintenance and alteration works to the existing schools. Another opportunity area lies in the conversion of former British military buildings into educational facilities. With land being such a finite resource, the construction of new school buildings with their extensive open spaces has serious environmental implications. A more sustainable approach would be to ensure the optimal utilisation of the existing stock of school buildings and re-use and conversion of ex-British services buildings. The era of the school building boom is definitely a closed chapter in the history of school architecture in Malta.

Footnotes

- ¹ The only existing in-depth study on school architecture in Malta is the unpublished B.E. & A. (Hons), University of Malta dissertation by Vincent Saydon, entitled *Government Primary Schools in Malta: the way ahead*, (1987). Although a seminal work in its own right, the study also has its limitations; for example, it does not make reference to any of the Gozo primary schools which are representative of the finest International Modern style architectural works. There is still ample scope for further academic research, especially on the intensive post-World War II school building programme of the 1950's and 60's. The adoption of International Style Modernism as a mode of architectural representation in the socio-political context of the Independence era is worthy of further study. This would be an intriguing research topic for a dissertation by some enterprising student in the Faculty of Education or the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering.
- ² J. Zammit Mangion, (1992). *Education in Malta*, 12-13.
- ³ Q. Hughes, (1956). *The Building of Malta*, 156-157.
- ⁴ For an exposition on the architectural works of Francesco Buonamici refer to C. Thake, "Francesco Buonamici (1596-1677): A pioneer of Baroque Architecture in Malta and Siracusa", in *Annali del Barocco in Sicilia / 2. Studi sul Seicento e il Settecento in Sicilia e a Malta*, Roma: Gangemi (in print).
- ⁵ J. Zammit Mangion, (1992), 13
- ⁶ *Ibid*, 12-13
- ⁷ A. V. La Ferla, (1963). *British Malta*, vol. 1, 94-95, cited in J. Zammit Mangion, (1992), 16-17.
- ⁸ J. Zammit Mangion, (1992), 17.
- ⁹ Sir G. Cornwall Lewis and J. Austin, (1839), *An Inquiry into the State of Affairs of the Island of Malta*, (1839).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*.
- ¹¹ Sir P. Keenan, (1880). *Report upon the Educational System in Malta*, (Command paper 2685).
- ¹² *Ibid*, part iv, p. 1.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, chap. 6, part iii, p.5.
- ¹⁴ For a detailed biography of Canon Paolo Pullicino and his educational works refer to J. Camilleri, *Canon Paolo Pullicino*, unpublished dissertation for the M.A. degree in the Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, 1969.
- ¹⁵ J. Zammit Mangion, (1992), 20-21.
- ¹⁶ S. Savona, (1883), *Report on the Educational Institutions*, section 5, p.1.
- ¹⁷ Figures cited are from the annual report of the Director of Education for the year 1896-7. Refer to V. Saydon, (1987), *Government Primary Schools in Malta: the way ahead*, unpublished B.E. & A. (Hons.) dissertation.
- ¹⁸ E. Sammut, (1954), *Notes for a History of Art in Malta*.
- ¹⁹ J. Zammit Mangion, (1992), provides us with a concise outline sketch of the building of schools in the twentieth century. Refer to *ibid*, 270-272.
- ²⁰ J. Zammit Mangion, (1992), 57-58.
- ²¹ V. Saydon, (1987), 11.
- ²² K. Frampton, (1985), *Modern Architecture: A critical history*, 204-205
- ²³ Government of Malta, (1959). *Development Plan of the Maltese islands for the years 1959-64*, Malta: Government Printing Press.
- ²⁴ C. Thake, (1995), "Schools of Thought" in the *First Sunday* magazine of *The Malta Independent*, (5 February 1995), no. 16, 17-18.
- ²⁵ *Architectural Review*, (1969), Special issue on 'Malta-Past, Present and Future', no. 869, vol. cxlvi.

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