



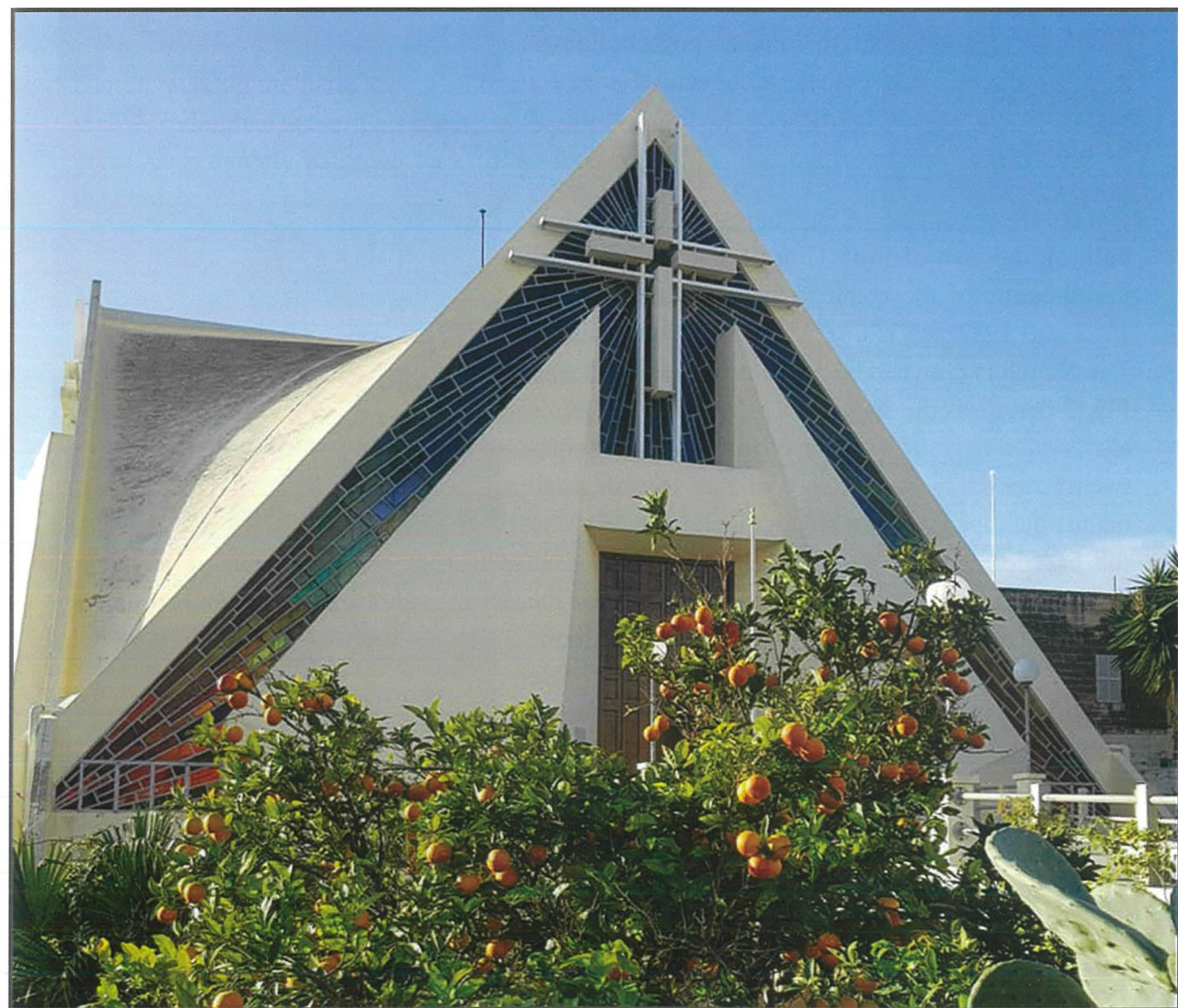
Studju dwar Knejjes Moderni f' Malta

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Introduzzjoni

Għal mijiet ta' snin fil-Fgura kien hemm niċċa tal-Madonna u hdejha fl-1798 inbniet kappella żghira, li reġghet inbniet fl-1844. Din il-knisja twaqqgħet mill-Gvern fl-1956 biex tkun tista' titwessa' t-triq li minn Raħal Ġdid tiehu għal Haż-Żabbar. Ftīt 'il bogħod minn fejn kienet il-knisja, il-Patrijiet Karmelitani fl-1950 bnew knisja ohra li fl-1965 saret knisja parrokkjali. Minhabba li l-popolazzjoni tal-Fgura kibret sewwa u l-knisja kienet żghira wisq għan-nies, inbniet knisja ġdida fi Triq Hompesch li ġiet imbierka fl-1988 u ddedikata fl-1990. Liema knisja li hija mibnija fuq stil uniku u modern. Dan li ġej huwa studju li sar minn Celine Portelli bhala parti mill-istudju tagħha fil-Baċċelerat fl-Istorja tal-Arti. Liema studju jittratta d-disinn tal-knisja tagħna tal-Fgura u dik ta' Santa Tereza ġewwa Birkirkara.



The Sanctuary of St. Theresa of Lisieux in Birkirkara **Fig. 1** and Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish Church in Fgura **Fig. 2** are amongst the most innovative in the study of Modern church design in Malta. Both churches make use of new building materials and explore space in a different manner than the churches of the previous centuries. During the post-war period, an increase in building material and a search for innovative design in architecture seems to have resulted in an increase in modernist buildings on the island.¹ The reforms put in place during Vatican Council II were very influential and are evident in both cases. The main change is noted in the plan of such churches. In contrast with previous churches, the plan of both the churches is no longer the traditional Greek or Latin cross plan. Instead, a new plan that better results from the innovations in technology and material was adopted. It is essential to look at both buildings separately and analyse their architectural identity before stating their significance to the history of Maltese church design.

The Sanctuary of St. Theresa of Lisieux was built on the plan of Prof. Giorgio Pacini and under the direction of the architect Louis Naudi between 1965 and 1982 and is a large rotunda type church.² The church is crowned by a reinforced concrete roof **Fig. 3** that takes the shape of a folded plate which is also visible from the interior of the church **Fig. 4** as twenty ribs converge at the centre to form a small oculus that opens up to a smaller lantern structure to the exterior, that is also ribbed and decorated in stained glass³ to allow diffused light into the church.⁴ Due to the exposed raw concrete finish, the church can be 'classified as a Brutalist-style building'.⁵

The church is also accompanied by a large slender tower.⁶ The exterior of the church defines the interior. The church can be accessed from two streets with two entry and exits on each side to allow maximum air circulation and better ventilation during the hot summer months. The

A Case Study of Modern Churches in Malta:

The Church of St. Theresa of Lisieux, Birkirkara and the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Fgura



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

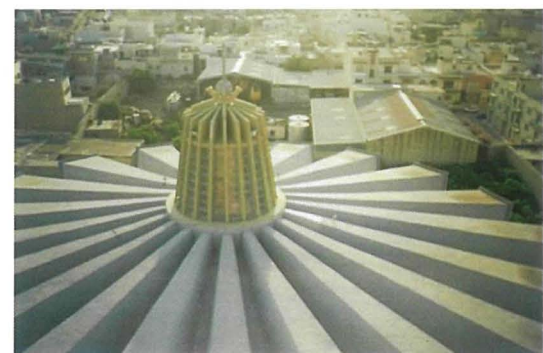


Fig. 3

fact, the basement has multiple entry and exit points, one on either side of the church's exterior and one that can be accessed from inside the church's sacristy behind the main altar. One of the main features of the church apart from its unorthodox form is the heavy use of stained glass **Fig. 8**. A wide selection of multi-coloured stained glass offers a spectrum of over 25 colours.¹⁰ Apart from decreasing the structure's overall weight on the piers, the stained glass provides ample light in the interior of the church without having to rely on artificial light. The glass also creates a spiritual aura, especially behind the main altar **Fig.9** where a statue of an Eternal Father executed in bronze supports a crucifix.

Of interest to note is that prior to the instalment of the current Eternal Father and the Crucifix that currently hangs as the main altar decoration. The parish had commissioned Vincent Apap to execute a statue of Christ the Redeemer in fibreglass. The statue was very well proportioned and was hung instead of the present crucified Christ. The statue was much more in line with the modern currents of the church, but was not appreciated by members of the clergy and eventually removed in favour of the current crucified Christ.

The main structure of the Sanctuary of St. Theresa is built out of concrete,¹¹ and then finished by bricks where needed. The concrete was poured on site and not pre-cast. This process was carried out in layers and as can be seen in the photographs in **Fig. 10**, it was poured onto a skeletal frame that reinforced the whole structure that was also built in layers. On the other hand, the parish church of Fgura required that a metal skeletal structure be completed first **Fig. 11**, before any concrete was poured or pre-cast. This base is what supports the whole structure and distributes the weight of the concrete evenly down to the four main corner points or buttresses of the plan. Both churches also explore a feeling for grandiose open space, as side aisles are

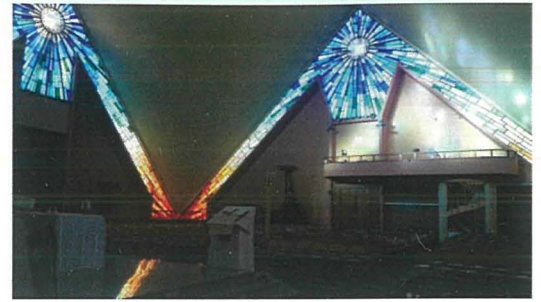


Fig. 8

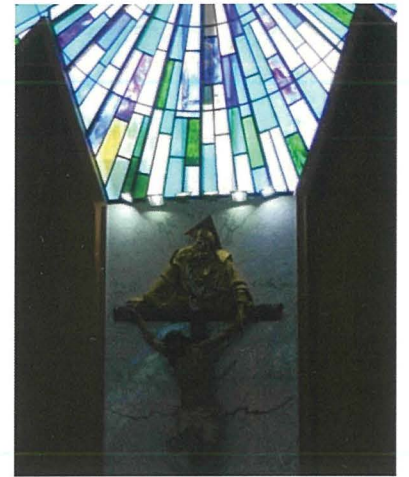


Fig. 9

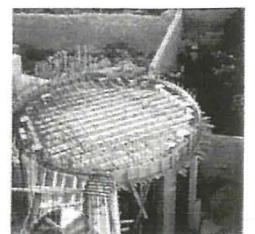
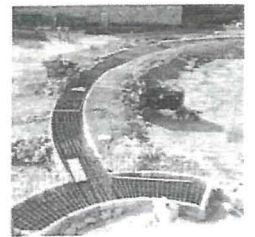


Fig. 10



eliminated in an attempt to open up the space and bring the congregation together in one singular uninterrupted space. In addition to this, both churches are purged of the horror vacui sensation manifested in the exuberant decoration present in Baroque churches. Instead stained glass is used in both cases to allow more natural diffused light in the church. The stained glass also remains one of the main decorative features in both churches as additional decoration is changed according to the liturgical calendar. Both churches are purged of surface decoration, additional statuary and altar paintings.

Possible inspiration for the form of the Parish church of Fgura were the churches in Mexico by Felix Candela (1910-1997), known for his adoption of 'reinforced concrete shell vaulting'.¹² The importance therefore lies in the form of the church and not it's mass. Likewise, the church in Hyvinkää **Fig. 12** built in 1961 by the architect and professor Aarno Ruusuvuori mirrors the same interest in technology and new materials. The church has the same tent-like form expressed by a dynamic prism containing an impressive space. The church also makes use of glass in the façade that allows a flow of natural light into the church **Fig. 13**. Unfortunately, unlike the church in Hyvinkää the church in Fgura cannot be viewed from any angle except from its façade due to the residential development around it. This inhibits the viewer from fully appreciating the true form of the church which was meant to be viewed from all sides. The only full view that the viewer gets of the church, the facade, leads the viewer to think that the church has a triangular structure with side projections. It also deceives the viewer into thinking that the interior is actually smaller than it is. On the other hand, the Sanctuary of St. Theresa can be experienced from almost all angles. Two modestly sized piazzas that are used as parking areas are on either side of the church and allow for an open view of the church. The entrance to the tower which is on the right side

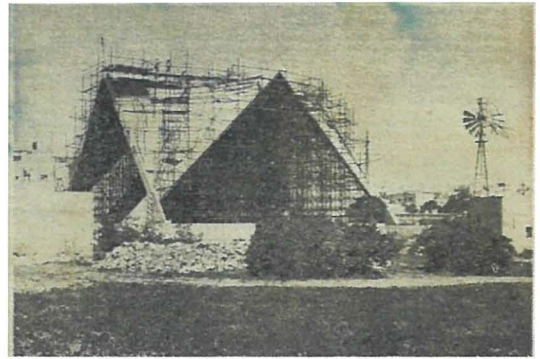


Fig. 11

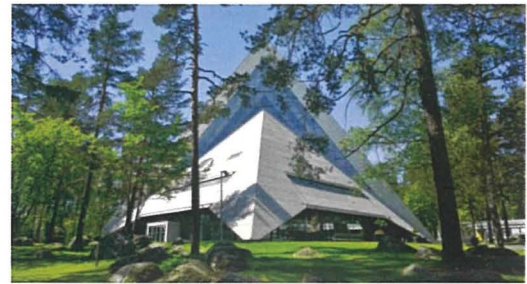


Fig. 12



Fig. 13



from the main piazza¹³ through a corridor that links the two main piazzas and curves around the church.

Moreover, both churches have a distinct altar space. The altar space is emphasised from the rest of the congregation by an elevated circular space. This separates the sacred space of the divine from the profane space of the repentant sinner. Raised steps physically manifest this transition. This element of space was not only re-defined in Malta. St. Engelbert in Cologne built by Dominikus Böhm **Fig. 14** shows a similar interest in breaking away 'from the tyranny of the rectangular plan'.¹⁴ St. Engelbert has a round plan with oval curvatures that define the altar which is also elevated by a series of steps. Similarly, the element of curved spaces seems to be most effective in the Sanctuary of St. Theresa. Every space that corresponds to the main rotunda plan, internal and external, is curved.

St. Theresa of Lisieux has many elements which were designed by Frank Portelli. Frank Portelli designed the altar which is made from one block of Carrara marble. Portelli also designed the tabernacle which is further elevated and can be reached by a series of marble steps behind the main altar. He also designed the decorative scheme for the presbytery that was never actually created, as well as the floor design for the church particularly the central design that leads from the steps of the altar to the back of the church. Moreover other designs by Portelli include the confessional in the main congregational space and the niche for the stature of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The stained glass that decorates the chapel doors and the glass that decorates the outer ring of the facade¹⁵ as well as the stained glass used in the lantern was also designed by Portelli. The design for the stained glass door that leads out of the chapel of St. Theresa **Fig. 15** and into the piazza symbolises the spirituality of the saint through the representation of roses cascading down from the heavens and blessing the devout. The execution of metalwork and glass of these doors was praised by many, including Giorgio Pacini.¹⁶

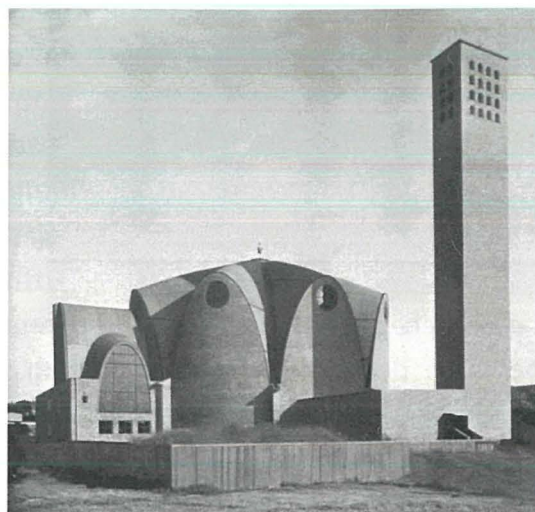


Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Without the advancements made in the field of building technology these church structures would not have been possible. The designs of both churches although unique in character rely heavily on newly important materials and knowledge of concrete construction. Since the spatial qualities of both churches are heavily reliant on how each space corresponds to the other whilst maintaining a main functioning space, the material must provide the structural support without interfering with the function of the church. As A.W.N. Pugin wrote;

The great test of Architectural beauty is the fitness of the design to the purpose for which it [the church] was intended, and that the style of a building should so correspond with its use that the spectator may at once perceive the purpose for which it was erected.¹⁷

Although Pugin was referring to architecture of the previous century when writing *Contrasts*, his description of the design being directly linked to the purpose of a building and the style being linked to its function is extremely relevant in the study of these twentieth century churches. The design of both churches does not interfere with the purpose of what a church is meant to provide to its community. On the contrary both churches combine the community in one congregational main space. Moreover, the style of the building, although unorthodox, still clearly outlines the differences between the profane space that is reserved for the congregation and the divine space. In the case of both churches, the altar space is still clearly distinct from the rest of the church. Taking all this into account, it is impossible for any visitor not to recognise the function or intention of the two buildings. As a result, the successful adoption of modern architectural currents in Malta must be noted.

In conclusion both churches are the products of their time. The churches are both pioneers of modern churches in Malta, not only through their design, but through the materials with which they were built and the technology that was used in the process. They are influenced both by the developments within the church after Vatican II as well as the changing mentality of the people at the time and the new taste which was slowly entering into the local artistic production, in architecture as well as painting and sculpture and the decorative arts. In addition to this, the churches both have similar counterparts in other parts of the world. Whether the architects were knowledgeable about such churches cannot be determined. However, the fact that Maltese architecture was moving in the same stylistic direction as other countries is significant. This not only shows the artistic knowledge that members of the community and the church possessed about art and architecture, but it also establishes that Malta was by no means an artistic backwater. Modern art and architecture had successfully been introduced, even by the local Church authorities that had previously been hesitant to accept modern tendencies in art.



Endnotes

¹ Apart from other churches, buildings such as theatres, schools and private residences were also being built in a modern architectural language.

² Its diameter spans 40 meters. The chief engineer in charge of the project was Andrea Fini. The company Blokrete, based in Lija was chosen as the contractor and responsible for the buildings materials needed for the church. Some of the wood casts for the concrete was actually built by my great grandfather, Ninu Spiteri, a wood worker based in Birkirkara who worked with Blockrete at the time. The Steel was provided by the Malta Steel Co. Ltd, based in Fgura. Santwarju Santa Tereza, Programm tal-Festa tal-Karmnu, Birkirkara, 2007, no. 32.

³ The lantern has 20 window openings witch each window being 3.5 x 0.5 meters at the base. 5 The height of the church including the lantern is 40 meters.

⁴ The height of the church, including the lantern, is 40 meters.

⁵ Conrad Thake, 'The advent of Modern Architecture in Malta', *Modernist Malta: The Architectural Legacy*, Alberto Miceli-Farrugia and Petra Bianchi (eds.) (Malta, Kamra tal-Periti) 2009, 22.

⁶ Estimated to be about fifty meters high.

⁷ The side chapels each span 12. 5 meters.

⁸ The Churches of St. Theresa and Our lady of Mount Carmel are among the first to dedicate such an area for its congregation. The area has its own ventilation and any noise coming from its occupants cannot be heard from the rest of the congregation in the main space, allowing the main space to remain as silent as possible. This development shows that church design was gaining a more social aspect, as the church was keeping in mind the needs of its congregation.

⁹ Thake, 22.

¹⁰ The stained glass was ordered in August 1986 from the company S.G.S Bristol based in England. The actual cutting and placing of the glass was done by Mr. Charles Vella from Sta. Venera. Lehen il -Fgura, Tifkira tattberik solenni tal- knisja l-gdida tal- Fgura.

¹¹ The work in concrete is recorded to have been finished by September 1975.

¹² Thake, 22.

¹³ The main piazza is the one that can be accessed from Valley Road Birkirkara. It is known as such because the processional statue exits the church from this side and is therefore more frequented by visitors. Moreover, the main principal door is on this side of the church. The piazza also includes a staircase that leads up to the church and a small fountain to the left, making this area more prominent than the other piazza.

¹⁴ Edwin Heathcoat and Iona Spens, *Church Builders* (UK, Academy Editions) 1997, 27.

¹⁵ The metal work for these windows was executed by the priests of the convent. The 'glass' used is in fact plastic material that does not easily break. The design itself and the choice of the colour scheme was decided by Frank Portelli.

¹⁶ Santwarju Santa Tereza, Programm tal-Festa tal-Karmnu, Birkirkara, 2007, no. 32., 29.

¹⁷ A.W.N. Pugin, *Contrasts or a Parallel between the architecture of the 15th and 19th centuries*, London: 1836, Accessed on 5 May 2017 from https://archive.org/stream/contrastsorparal00pugi_0#page/n13/mode/2up/search/the+great+test+of+architectural+beauty.

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