



ARCHITECTURE:

A dying art?



Konrad Buhagiar, AP Valletta



Prof. Antonio Mollicone

*Making smart choices for our current urban fabric through architecture requires a massive understanding of all the moving parts of the industry. But is it time to go back to basics? **Cassi Camilleri** speaks to **Prof. Antonio Mollicone** and the talented people at **AP Valletta** to come up with an answer.*

The changes in the Maltese landscape over recent years has been drastic. All over social media, petitions keep being shared to prevent one original building or another from being torn down and replaced with contemporary apartments. This has 'resulted in discomfort for many,' says Prof. Antonio Mollicone, an architect lecturing within the Faculty of Built Environment (University of Malta).

The discomfort is multifaceted. On one level, it has to do with the physical climate within buildings. Over the last few decades, Malta has seen a shift in the property types people buy, and these properties seem to be leaving people hot or cold in their own homes.

Through his research, which used an old Maltese farmhouse as his case study, Mollicone found that 'a property's orientation, double skin (having two layers of brick walls), ceiling height and window measurements all have a role to play.' Mollicone points out that 'orientation is most important.' In an ideal world, based on Malta's position on the globe, 'houses should be north-south facing

and rotated clockwise to east by eight degrees to get the best of the sun in winter and the least of it in summer.' Higher ceilings can create a four-degree difference in the temperature inside a room. As for the floor to ceiling windows you see in all the glossy magazines, Mollicone finds them problematic, noting the costs involved in terms of energy efficiency when replacing stone with glass. 'Certain basic techniques in design are being lost in the fast-paced world of today,' Mollicone asserts.

On this note, founding partner of AP Valletta, Konrad Buhagiar, says that with the 'era of radical pragmatism' we are currently living in, 'the commercial aspect of a project is paramount,' adding, 'It will always be so. It is the nature of the industry.' But with this being said, effort needs to be put into giving buildings and new projects a depth that 'connects [them] to [their] context.'

Even with the best of intentions, challenges still arise. Mollicone laments the flashy features he sees added to a building's façade before a thought is given to function. 'It's

make-up for buildings. Nothing more. I call it lipstick architecture.'

Luca Caruso, an environmental architect at AP, also speaks frankly, noting that the 'construction sector is the least innovative worldwide.' However, by putting an emphasis on quality and criticism, this can change. 'Criticism is important in order to raise awareness about the possible consequences of Malta's 'uncontrolled' growth. [...] Debate can lead to new, innovative ways to inspire decision-makers while respecting local characteristics.'

The reality, as Caruso states, is that 'Malta has undergone massive changes over the last 30 years, and this is a process that requires some more years to mature.' Buhagiar announces himself a cynic, saying that 'to produce something excellent, you need an enormous amount of thought and discipline, rigour, and dare I say, *sacrifice*, all words that do not describe the current culture in any way.' But Mollicone has hope that common sense will prevail. 'All we need is to take more time to think about things. Create mindfully. That's all.' **T**