

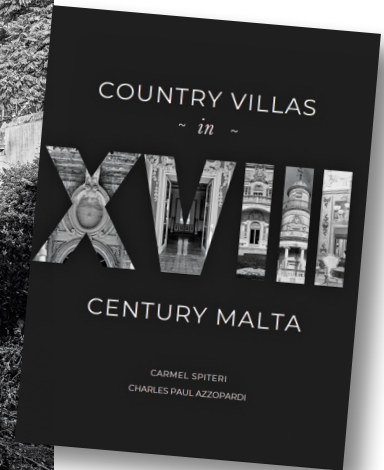
# THREE VILLAS

## IN THE THREE VILLAGES

Reviewed by Petra Caruana Dingli • Photographs by Charles Paul Azzopardi



Review of Carmel Spiteri,  
*Country Villas in  
Eighteenth-Century Malta:  
A Comparative Analysis  
of Villa Gourgion, Villa  
Preziosi and Villa Bologna*  
(Kite, 2020)



Villa Preziosi

It requires an imaginative leap to read about a world in which spacious country villas were built in the 'Three Villages' of Malta - Attard, Lija and Balzan. Today every corner of this area is tightly built up with houses, apartments and shops, of all shapes and sizes, and it spreads seamlessly into the sprawling urban mass of Birkirkara. It is hard to visualise the open landscape that once existed there.

The Order of St John began a trend in Malta, in the late sixteenth century, of building houses in the countryside, providing gardens and recreation away from the crowded, hot city of Valletta in spring or summer. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Three Villages had a sizeable concentration of such country villas. Some are now unrecognisable, or no longer exist. In this book, Carmel Spiteri focuses on three of the largest and best preserved examples: Villa Gourgion and Villa Preziosi in Lija, and

Villa Bologna in Attard. Besides giving a detailed architectural analysis, he also points towards the social, economic and political context of their construction.

Spiteri identifies possible reasons why country villas were popular in this area. San Anton Palace with its extensive gardens, the country villa of the grand masters of the Order of St John, was located in Attard. Moreover, the stone that could be quarried in that part of Malta was suitable for building, and the soil was fertile. The topography favoured rainwater catchment, and the location was central and not too far from Valletta, with wide countryside views.

The first of these three houses is Villa Gourgion, built in the early eighteenth century by Giovanni and Elena Gourgion. Spiteri suggests the involvement of *capomastro* Giovanni Barbara in the building project. This estate was built on sloping terrain, with the



Villa Gourgion

house prominent at the top and the garden and orchards at the lower levels. This layout also exists at Villa Preziosi, providing visibility and prestige for the house above and using the gradient to facilitate water management in the land below.

The façade of Villa Gourgion lies directly on the building line of the street, unlike the other two villas which both have a front garden. Part of its land was taken up for road-building, and other parts of the garden were sold off in the twentieth century and used for residential development. The villa now only retains its central formal garden at the back. Its upper balconies would once have enjoyed views all the way to Marsamxett harbour, but this vista is now blocked by extensive building in Lija, l-Iklin, Birkirkara, Swatar and Msida. The grand belvedere in its lower fields would also have enjoyed these views. This was a nineteenth-century addition by later owners of the property, and is now sited on the main entrance road to Lija.

Spiteri notes that the architecture of Villa Preziosi, today named Villa Francia, is more refined, and points out similarities to country houses in Bagheria near Palermo in Sicily. This villa was originally constructed by Count Giovanni Preziosi, and was expanded by later owners. Beyond its high garden walls, tracts of agricultural land also formed part of the estate.

Villa Bologna



The architectural historian Leonard Mahoney suggests that this house dates to before 1757.

Villa Bologna in Attard was built by Fabrizio Grech for his daughter Maria Teresa in the early 1740s. Spiteri points out that its formal garden and nymphaeum were originally to its left, with a total footprint of approximately 5,200 sqm, around one-seventh of the present area. In the 1920s, Margaret Strickland acquired adjacent land and added gardens at the back. Unlike the other two villas under study, this one lies on practically flat terrain. A main determinant for its location may have been its close proximity to the grand master's country villa nearby.

The book studies each house in a dedicated chapter, providing architectural drawings based on surveys. The architecture of each building is described and analysed in meticulous detail, including their decorative features. Spiteri also builds in considerations of patronage and social context, noting that all three owners adopted baroque architectural elements to enhance prestige and grandeur, seeking political power and social influence for themselves and their descendants.

This large-sized book is richly illustrated with striking and masterly photographs by Charles Paul Azzopardi. The images are all in black-and-white, which enhances the focus on the architecture and layout of the sites.

The study begins by tracing the evolution of the country villa from classical times. It is not limited to the Maltese architectural context, but also seeks to identify specific architectural influences and similar villa typologies elsewhere in Europe, even providing photographs of villas in Sicily and elsewhere in Italy for comparison. For example, the gazebo at Villa Borghese in Rome is compared to that at Villa Preziosi, with both illustrated side-by-side in photographs. Images of scenographic staircases in Italy are provided to indicate possible inspiration for Villa Preziosi, whose imposing external double staircase leading to the *piano nobile* was a later addition to the house. An insightful comparison is drawn between the main gate of Villa Bologna and architecture with military overtones in Malta, such as the De Rohan arch outside the village of Zebbug.

This study began as a Master dissertation within the History of Art department at the University of Malta. With this in mind, Spiteri is to be commended for the extent of detail and analysis which he provides. With introductions by Mario Buhagiar and Conrad Thake, and published by Kite, this volume covers new ground on a niche topic within the history of architecture in Malta. ■