



Получена: 16.10.2021 г.

Приета: 30.11.2021 г.

MIRCO AZZOPARDI – THOUGHTS OF AN ARCHITECTURE STUDENT

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Keywords: *book review, architecture, architectural design, urban design, University of Malta*

ABSTRACT

This paper puts forward a review of the publication entitled 'Thoughts of an Architecture Student' authored by Mirco Azzopardi. This book is published by Union Print Company Ltd, Malta, 2021 (ISBN 978-9918-0-0146-0). Azzopardi is a graduate of the Faculty for the Built Environment, University of Malta.

1. Book review

'Thoughts of an Architecture Student' was sponsored by SACES (Society for Architecture and Civil Engineering Students), an organisation set up in 1974 to represent all students reading these disciplines at the University of Malta, and Cuschieri Architects [1]. Written in English as a foreign language, and without page numbers, this publication is a random collage of insights provoked whilst the author read architecture at one of the oldest schools in Europe (see Fig. 1). This book documents not only the lessons learnt by a young candidate at the University of Malta but also his observations, including contradictions and complexities present in the contemporary built environment.

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The book opens with a disclaimer that "the content is simply an attempt to raise consciousness and prompt individuals in the architecture/artistic field to ask questions that unfortunately aren't being asked while attempting to evoke a sense of open-mindedness and freedom (mainly) in students". It is a personal endeavour – a compilation spanning the author's years as an undergraduate student – which stemmed from the need to constantly document personal thoughts and observations through 273 short texts and 676 images respectively; "this book is to books as 'The Big Short' is to movies".

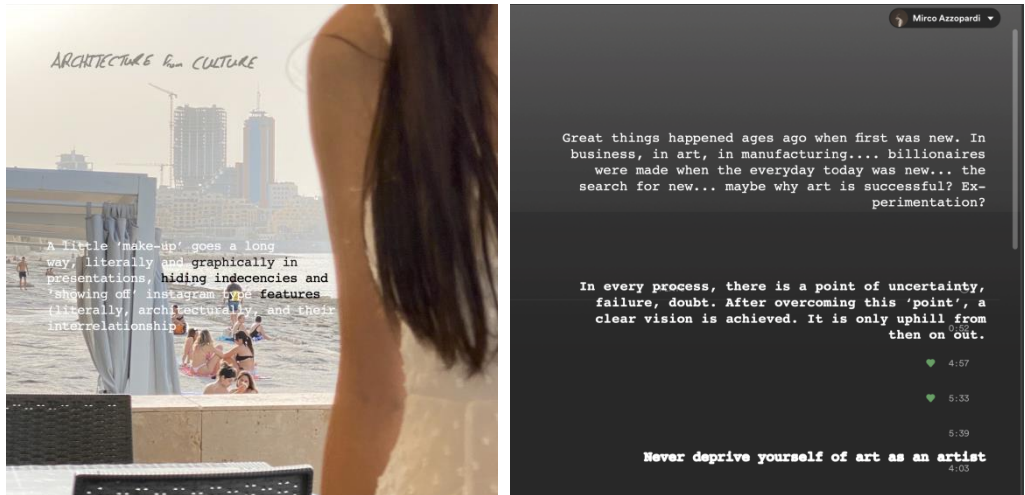


Figure 1. Typical pages

Several themes, albeit sometimes puzzling, emerge. The distinction between architecture and the building is blurred: "why is architecture always about buildings, building this, that, shape, form bla bla bla". These themes were essentially provoked by the architectural education in Malta, a country that is overrun by greed. The present environment – overbuilt in bad taste – is the result of gluttony fuelled by the unlimited thirst for immediate quick revenue. This new vernacular, today's Zeitgeist, is annihilating the traditional one. "Architecture is selfish; architects are selfish" is one of the many inciting statements. This thinking is ingrained in the cultural-political DNA of the country: "we, as citizens, think the way we think, and act the way we act due to the 'DNA' structure of the country, stemming from politics, translated physically through architecture. We think the way we do because we are allowed to". Architecture is a medium through which this DNA is manifested.

"Architecture is exhausted", exhausted both on the drawing board and on-site. Are students required to exhaust an architectural design brief to an extent whereby their aspirations/visions are prioritised irrespective of the needs of the projected users? Are one's knowledge and comprehension of beauty different to that of the public? Objective rather than subjective design stems from a need. The approach to intervening in urban regeneration is either holistic or micro, either dealing with massing, layout and materials or is very intimate, studying dead spaces, elevations, etc. Whilst noting that design has to cater for changes in demographic profile, reaching a balance that does not disrupt the landscape topography is the pinnacle. Should design be objective or subjective? Are changes in residential building typologies due to economic realities or to meet the new realities – technology, interior design and material/s? To what extent is the economic impact an objective in design? The beauty of a good design is not only in its visual appeal but also in its functionality.

"Art is an outward process/activity [which] social media is distracting." Architecture is an art and as artists, it is important not to live in a society but to contribute to its being, say, through sensory stimulation. It is not the task of the architect to defend his/her work; let the work defend itself. Public perceptions of contemporary architecture may be read through cartoons such as *The Simpsons*. "Architecture is as impactful as a doctor"; architecture can heal and can make one sick. Ideas are "quick thoughts that solve big problems"; creativity does not have as "an end ... to get attention". Is pecuniary the ultimate aim of art? Surely, "great art changes the way artists see art" and it is imperative that an artist should not deprive himself/herself of art.

Passing reference is made to liminal space and junk space. Citing Rem Koolhaas on the notion of bigness, Azzopardi ponders the antagonism between big and small; although his bias is for the latter, he does not make reference to architectural services as a go-between. "Bigness is a surrender to technologies; to engineers; contractors; manufacturers; to politicians; to others". The Mercury Tower – Zaha Hadid on "a very expensive budget" – is such a case study. It illustrates an example of a signature building in the current overbuilt landscape of Malta, a case whereby the "increase in country GDP = increase in postmodernism".

The author's stance runs contrary to the current approach to transport infrastructure. The political and economic solution to widen roads, thus taking the limited agrarian land, camouflages selfish objectives. Roads do not promote pedestrian use; all built settlements and lifestyles centre around the car. Electric or driverless cars are alternatives to the present but are not the solution to the present; they are "dangerous and detrimental to society". He argues against motorbike riders and the proposal for a drag racing track, a sport that the political establishment support.

Architectural drawings do not depict sensory experience and thus they have "a degree of uncertainty". The author is critical of design studio sessions – their content and not the idea of having them. As plans and elevations, paste-ups are a must in presentations. They are part of the 'checklist' of what to do in a review. They often overlook rather than acknowledge the artistic work and hence it "limits creativity in searching for other methods to portray and evoke to the viewer what is needed, despite their appealing image and popularity in social media". He recalls design presentations as "a hot mess". Makeshift cover-ups, connected bits and pieces on a board. A balance between 'looking visually pleasing', and functional ... [thus] ... mask[ing] errors and polish[ing] up [the] project". Are design projects psychologically detrimental? "Is there an innate need to materialise thoughts ... represented physically (on paper), I feel relieved, immortalised, can't forget it. ... Too many people want to have an impact". The "theatrical act" reinforces the quality of a good project but it must be grounded in sound philosophical, theoretical and programmatic research, aspects that are not addressed by students who primarily focus on perception. Design projects at the university aim to create a 'wow factor' to attain a better mark rather than to have a strong concept; they are competing for attention. Is it bad to cheat the system, to cheat on architecture for one's benefit, "or is the mere thought of doing so a key trait for an architect, a sign of maturity ... therefore fine"? Is this a plea for an inner call for architecture that a prospective candidate in this profession feels? Are we corrupting the mind of the prospective candidates?

Architecture ought to be a vocation, not a business. However, although it did not start as such, architecture is currently primarily a business. "Being an architect is extremely profitable (now) for all the wrong reasons". In this context, Azzopardi ponders: "What do I become after I graduate? Where do I go? and why?" He argues for obligatory internships through a gap year between undergraduate and postgraduate studies, the latter being the prerogative to qualify for a professional warrant as an architect. "We need more farmers" and not 120 architects graduating in 2025 and more in subsequent years; we do not need swimming pools in fields.

The book concludes with the following: "Architecture (in all its facets and tangents) is exhausted. Don't exhaust other forms through merely copying and regurgitating 'diluted' work for selfish aspirations. Explore and exhaust through getting inspiration and striving to evoke others ... by challenging and questioning the norm. Don't copy this book. That being said, everything is a copy of a copy". These statements reinforce the importance of rethinking what the essence and existence of architecture are, parameters that assume a response to the question of what architecture is.

2. About the school of architecture in Malta

Malta has a long-established school of architecture and supported prominent twentieth-century professionals and academics, notably during the period 1979–1989. The British Colonial Government first recommended the establishment of a Chair of Civil Architecture and Land Surveying at the University of Malta in the early part of the nineteenth century; by 1863, three-year duration courses were available [2]. After 1898, the civil engineering and architecture course was offered through the Faculty of Literature and Science [3]; it was given the status of an academic course in 1904. A year later, the School of Architecture, with its own board, was incorporated within the same faculty. In 1915, the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture was established; it offered the degrees of Bachelor of Engineering and Architecture (B.E.&A.), a qualification which was already being granted in 1913 [2]. By the mid-1960s, engineering was taught at the Polytechnic and architecture at the University, each offering their respective degrees.

British architect and University of Liverpool academic James Quentin Hughes (1920–2004) was assigned in 1968 to set up the School of Architecture at the University of Malta [4]. He was the first Professor of Architecture and was head of school until 1972 when he 'crossed swords' with the anti-colonialist prime minister of Malta, Dom Mintoff (1916–2012) – himself an architect, civil engineer and a Rhodes Scholar at Hertford College, Oxford [5] – who opted to reinstate the combined degree. The school was led by Czechoslovak academics during the period 1979–1986. Karol Kaldarar (1931–2019), an expert on prefabricated construction systems, was appointed dean in 1979; his academic staff included his mentor Vladimír Karfík (1901–1996) and Miloslav Tocháček, a pioneer in the plastic design of steel structures [6]. Karfík – a modernist architect and member of Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne – who taught at the faculty in Malta between 1979 and 1982, worked at the office of Le Corbusier on the 'Plan Voisin' (where he encountered Adolf Loos) and had joined the studio of Frank Lloyd Wright in 1928 [7]. Richard England (1937–), the outstanding twentieth-century Maltese architect [8] – an Academician and Vice-President of the International Academy of Architecture – was Dean of the Faculty of Architecture between 1987 and 1989; during his tenure, various high-profile architects delivered sandwich lectures and day design studios at the faculty, such as Justus Dahinden (1925–2020) and Denis Sharp (1933–2010). In 2009, the faculty was re-branded as the Faculty for the Built Environment and the B.E.&A. degree was replaced by a multi-tier degree structure [2].

3. About the author

Mirco Azzopardi is an architect design assistant. He completed his undergraduate Diploma in Design Foundation Studies (2018) and his Bachelor of Science in Built Environment Studies (2021) at the University of Malta, graduating with first-class honours. He

also studied architecture at the Politecnico di Milano (2019–2020) as part of the ERASMUS student exchange programme with the University of Malta. He is currently taking a gap year before enrolling for postgraduate studies/research.

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МАРКО АЗОПАРДИ – РАЗМИСЛИ НА ЕДИН СТУДЕНТ ПО АРХИТЕКТУРА

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Ключови думи: рецензия на книга, архитектура, архитектурен дизайн, градски дизайн, Малтийски университет

РЕЗЮМЕ

Този статия представя рецензия на публикация озаглавена „Размисли на един Студент по Архитектура“ от Мирко Адзопарди. Книгата е публикувана от Union Print Company Ltd, Малта 2021 (ISBN 978-9918-0-0146-0). Адзопарди е възпитаник на факултета по Архитектурна среда, Малтийски университет.

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