

DIN L-ART HELWA *The National Trust of Malta*

VIGILO

53

ISSUE 53 June 2020



Restoring the Crypt
of the Grand Masters

Uncovering old ENTRENCHMENTS

**WAVES &
VANDALS**

Qbajjar Battery on the rocks



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Din l-Art Helwa strives to awaken awareness of cultural heritage and environmental matters, through a policy of public education and by highlighting development issues to ensure that the highest possible standards are maintained and that local legislation is strictly enforced.

FRONT COVER PICTURE: Daniel Cilia - See feature on page 18.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue marks the 55th anniversary of Din l-Art Helwa, which was founded on 9 July 1965. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic it is sadly not possible to celebrate the event at the annual dinner this summer, and the properties were closed throughout this last season. But work at Din l-Art Helwa has continued at a steady pace. As regular readers will see, its magazine Vigilo has been revamped in this issue with a fresh, new design by Ramon Micallef, while I have taken up the reins as editor. Its contents have essentially retained the same mix of features, opinions and news. This 53rd issue includes two projects which recently won Din l-Art Helwa awards for architectural heritage – the restoration of the fascinating crypt of the Grand Masters at St John’s Co-Cathedral and of a beautiful Baroque balcony in Lija. We also include a special feature on the Archbishop’s Palace in Valletta. This important building and its contents are an integral part of Valletta’s cultural and religious heritage, but perhaps less well-known to the wider public than other buildings such as the auberges. Other features focus on the dilapidated eighteenth-century battery at Qbajjar in Gozo, the threatened Villa Belvedere in Balluta, today Villa St Ignatius, and some old entrenchments which can still be seen around Malta. We are pleased to include an interview with the new Minister for the Environment, Climate Change and Planning, providing insight into the current direction in these sectors. Three opinion articles open up further reflections on the state of the environment and planning in Malta, together with a focus on recent planning concerns at Birzebbugia and the resolutions of Din l-Art Helwa’s annual general meeting held earlier this year. The issue includes our usual restoration report, and news on events, projects and books. We also present a new regular feature introducing people who contribute their time and efforts to our organisation. Din l-Art Helwa focuses its energies on the cultural and natural heritage of Malta, but for 55 years its heart and soul have always been the many people who willingly dedicate their time, energy and resources to take its endeavours forward.



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DIN L-ART HELWA AT

55

It is a privilege to mark the 55th anniversary of the foundation of Din l-Art Helwa. Reaching this milestone may fill our Council, volunteers, members and supporters with a sense of pride and some satisfaction, and with good reason. It also offers an opportunity to reflect on the past and to make plans for the future.

Din l-Art Helwa was founded on 9th July 1965 in response to a wave of building and speculation in Malta in the 1960s. Looking back in 2020, this onslaught has continued unabated since then. The problems are still there, and even bigger and more challenging than before.

For 55 years, Din l-Art Helwa has battled against the excesses of this building frenzy. It has campaigned ceaselessly to raise awareness of the unique importance and beauty of Malta's cultural and natural heritage.

Din l-Art Helwa has also rolled up its own sleeves to save cultural and natural properties, by raising funds and enlisting expertise and manpower to itself restore, conserve and manage historic monuments, buildings and stretches of countryside and open spaces. It continues to carry out this work, every day.

This has all been achieved through the tireless work of our many volunteers over the years, supported by the generosity of corporate sponsors, benefactors and members. Din l-Art Helwa reflects and is created by its people, by all those who love these beautiful and precious Maltese Islands, and who come from all backgrounds, ages and nationalities.

The organisation owes its existence to everyone who has been willing to give their time, resources, expertise and support to help it achieve and uphold its mission, as first set out 55 years ago. Each small effort or contribution, and every expression of support or goodwill, makes a difference.





Discovering the
**ARCHBISHOP'S
PALACE**
in Valletta

By THERESA VELLA

Throughout the history of Valletta, shortly after the city started to be built in the late sixteenth century, the Archbishop's Palace in Valletta has fulfilled a unique purpose, as the residence of the head of the Diocese of Malta. For almost four centuries, the building also served as the administrative centre of the diocese. The palace therefore has long been the setting for the public life of the bishop (later archbishop) as a religious leader, as well as his private life. It has also been the backdrop to an international array of diplomatic encounters which were hosted by its succession of foreign and later Maltese archiepiscopal residents.



1. The carved coat-of-arms of Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan.
2. The chapel dedicated to St Joseph and the Holy Family.
3. A 17th-century lintel with the name of Maltese Bishop Cagliares.
4. The chapel ceiling with 18th-century mural art.

The building's unique historic identity also lies in its many and varied layers of artistic and architectural heritage, as well as the natural heritage within its garden walls, all spanning from the seventeenth century to the present day. In fact, the palace grounds also encompass a rare instance of natural rock formation and water springs, around the reservoirs which were dug to supply the palace household with water.

The Archbishop's Palace is one of two archiepiscopal palaces, the one in Valletta complementing the older Palace of the Archbishop in the cathedral city of Mdina. Its location, between the Grand Master's Palace and the auberge of the Langue of Aragon, suggests an aura of authority, within the central Hospitaller zone of Valletta.

The Archbishop's Palace in Valletta was built between 1622 and 1631. Its design has long been attributed to the Maltese architect Tumas Dingli (1591-1666), although this attribution has recently been contested by architectural historians. The palace occupies an entire block,

with its imposing front entrance on Archbishop Street, flanked by Corinthian pillars and surmounted by a full-length allegorical figure representing the Catholic Church, carrying attributes of the virtues of faith and religion. The east wing of the palace overlooks Old Mint Street, its north wing faces St Christopher Street and its west wing overlooks the lane, Bounty Street. The steep incline between Archbishop Street and St Christopher Street led to the siting of the *piano nobile* at street level, with access to the lower floor workspaces of kitchens and workshops through an entrance in Old Mint Street, enjoying natural light and ventilation at all levels.

Early accounts from the seventeenth century give a description of the Archbishop's Palace, which had been commissioned and privately funded by Bishop Baldassar Cagliares¹, the first bishop of Maltese origin who headed the diocese from 1614 till his death in 1633. Mgr Vincent Borg has researched and written most of what is yet known about Cagliares, enough to reveal that

Vincent Borg, *Melita Sacra III: The Diocese of Malta during the Seventeenth Century* (Malta: 2015), 63-68.



the young bishop was a pioneering man for his time, who set up a number of new parishes and oversaw the building of several parish churches in the Latin cross manner of church building following the Counter-Reformation. In 1622, he set about building his palace in Valletta, against fierce resistance by the Order of St John. In his will, he bequeathed the palace to the Cathedral Chapter to be used by his successors.

As a Renaissance palace, belonging to the head of the Maltese diocese, the Archbishop's Palace served both as an administrative centre for the Roman Catholic church in Malta, as well as a residence for its bishop. Its imposing barrel-vaulted entrance hall leads to the Chancery of the Church Tribunal and the administrative wing to the left, and the Throne Room and the private chambers of the bishop to the right. The two wings flank a large central courtyard which once housed the stables and carriage, as well as the working quarters. The two wings join up in another barrel-vaulted

hall which houses the magnificent library, with its numerous volumes covering a wide range of subjects, from theology to history and geography, encyclopaedias and biographies, besides others, as befitted the erudition expected of a church leader.

The residential wing of the *piano nobile* was also intended to host high-ranking guests, its furniture and furnishings reflecting the Renaissance and Baroque tastes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The chapel in the Archbishop's Palace is found next to the Throne Room, and its location suggests that the archbishop would occasionally be accompanied by guests while praying or celebrating mass.

The chapel has long been known to be dedicated to St Joseph, and in fact the oil-on-stone altar painting shows *The Holy Family*, with St Joseph portrayed in his role as guardian of Mary, as the child Jesus plays with the child St John the Baptist. The artist is unknown, although its style suggests a Maltese painter who was



confident enough to paint directly onto stone. The frame of the painting is carved in stone, and is decorated to resemble marble. In the eighteenth century, the chapel was refurbished to its current design by Bishop Alpheran de Bussan (1728-1757), whose coat-of-arms can be seen on the ceiling. It is embellished with Baroque wall painting decorations.

The palace was also refurbished in the first half of the eighteenth century, to reflect the Baroque changes which were taking place in other stately buildings, such as the magistral Palace and other auberges of the Order of St John, as well as other private Hospitaller *palazzi*. The halls on the *piano nobile* were embellished with painted ceilings in the manner of classical style coffering. This complemented an earlier wooden ceiling which is still extant, and which portrays the coat-of-arms of Bishop Davide Cocco Palmieri (1684-1711) within a panelled arrangement.

A display of paintings can also be seen inside the palace, including a number of papal portraits as well as devotional paintings and others. One of the finest portraits in the palace is that of Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan (1686-1757), executed by Francesco Zahra (1710-1773), the foremost Maltese artist of the eighteenth century. The bishop is portrayed in the grand manner of Baroque portraiture. As befitted his standing within the Church as well as the Order of St John, Alpheran de Bussan is surrounded by the



trappings of a palatial Baroque residence. In the painting's background, the depiction of the Mdina Seminary building demonstrates that Alpheran de Bussan wished to be remembered for founding the institution, as the foremost achievement of his time as Bishop of Malta.

Another significant painting found in the palace art collection is that by Filippo Paladini, executed in 1589, titled *The Madonna and Child with St Paul and St John the Baptist and other Saints*. During the first years of the British period, the altar-painting of the former magistral chapel in the Palace of the Grand Masters was sent to the Archbishop's Palace by Sir Hildebrand Oakes, the British Civil Commissioner, in an exchange of paintings with Bishop Ferdinando Mattei (1807-1829).



1. *Portrait of Bishop Alpheran de Bussan*, by Francesco Zahra.

2. The Throne Room.

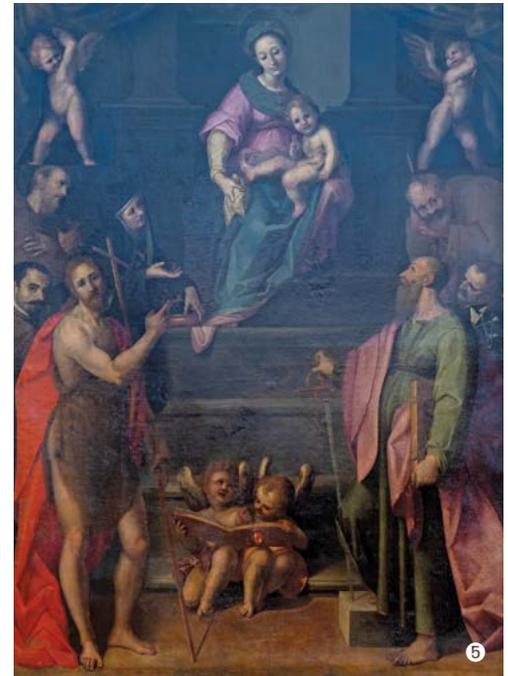
3. The vaults beneath the palace.

4. The Library.

5. *The Madonna and Child Jesus with SS Paul and John the Baptist*, by Filippo Paladini (1589).

This exchange took place between 1811 and 1814, at a time when the Verdalle chapel was being adapted to the Anglican rite. Paladini's altar painting had served for the private devotions of the Grand Master, whose dual roles – that of Head of the Order of St John, and Prince of Malta – are symbolically represented by the figures of St John the Baptist on the left, and St Paul on the right.

Archbishop Michael Gonzi was the last resident in the Valletta palace, having lived there from 1943 till his death in 1984. During his long ministry, he oversaw the further development of the palace, changes which can still be seen today. In the 1950s, the Throne Room was redesigned by Vincenzo Bonello, former Curator of Fine Arts, who proposed designs in a modernist vein, yet which complemented the classical architectural features of the palace. The hall also includes a frieze comprising coats-of-arms of all the bishops and archbishops of the Maltese diocese, starting with Tommaso Bosio (1538-39), the first in a successive line of resident bishops in Malta. Bonello also adapted the architecture of the façade to extend to the new floor built over the *piano nobile*, and the new private chambers which served as Mgr Gonzi's residence in a more contemporary manner.



Other office halls were added over the north wing to enable the better functioning of a growing administration.

As the twentieth century progressed into modernity, the Baroque palace was no longer deemed suitable as an administrative centre. In 1977, Archbishop Joseph Mercieca moved the administrative Curia from the archiepiscopal palace in Valletta to Casa Manresa in Floriana. Recently, Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna embarked on a major conservation and restoration project of the palace. However, the palace has remained constant to its original historic purpose as it still houses a fully functioning Metropolitan Tribunal. Since 1622, it has also continued to serve as the archiepiscopal chambers and ceremonial halls, as intended by the far-sighted Baldassare Cagliares, the first Maltese bishop of the Diocese of Malta. ■

The author thanks Chev. Michael Pace Ross, Mr Kevin Papagiorcopulo, Rev. Dr Nicholas J. Doublet and Mr Ian Pace on behalf of the Archdiocese of Malta as well as Ms Suzannah Depasquale on behalf of Curatorial Studio, for their assistance in the writing of this article. All photos are courtesy of the Archdiocese of Malta.

Theresa Vella is an art historian, museological consultant and founding partner of Curatorial Studio. She holds a doctorate in history of art from the University of Bristol and is President of the Malta Historical Society.



Restoring the Crypt of the Grand Masters

The Grand Masters' Crypt at St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta is a special place, for within it were laid to rest the first grand masters who shaped the history of Malta, from Fra Philippe de Villiers de L'Isle Adam, who brought the Order of St John to the island, to Fra Jean Parisot de Valette, the hero of the 1565 Great Siege; Fra Jean l'Evesque de la Cassière who financed the building of this church and Fra Alof de Wignacourt who was responsible for bringing the renowned artist Caravaggio to Malta.

By CYNTHIA DE GIORGIO





The crypt after restoration.

Early in the eighteenth century, during the reign of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena, the vault of the Crypt was embellished by Nicolò Nasoni, a Florentine artist. He used a fresco technique to paint the vault *en grisaille* with a funerary theme that alludes to Old Testament episodes accompanied by skeletons and war trophies. Playful putti rest above the monuments holding symbols of the Order of St John.

But the ravages of time had taken its toll on this beautiful space. At the start of the project, I recall that the Crypt was in a pitiful state. Fluctuating humidity and temperature levels in the atmosphere caused salt crystallization, resulting in a cover of salt efflorescence over the surface that obscured the sharp architectural *trompe l'oeil* effects of the painting. Cycles of deliquescence caused extensive detachment of the plaster support. The delicate carvings of the sarcophagi were severely deteriorated and powdered so extensively, that details could easily be lost if disturbed. Moreover, a thick layer of dust and soot covered the entire interior. These were the overwhelming conditions of the Crypt.

The restoration project was a long process because of the varied and delicate nature of the materials that constitute the artefacts, each requiring specific treatment and restoration.

The restoration of the frescoes and sarcophagi

Over the years the Crypt had sustained severe deterioration and several areas were in a fragile state. Large areas of the fresco painting had detached from the plaster support and were at risk of collapse. The limestone sarcophagi of the grand masters sustained extensive damage caused by the same conditions which resulted in the powdering of the stonework. There was extensive stone de-cohesion and loss. The frescoes were covered with salt efflorescence, biological growth and dirt that obscured the wall paintings. Studies into the causes and mechanics that triggered the deterioration showed that the main deterioration was salts related due to rising damp, fluctuating humidity and temperature levels in the atmosphere. Conservation measures were taken to save this significant monument and diagnostic investigations were carried out to identify and address the causes of deterioration.

The surfaces of the monuments were obscured by a layer of dirt, the thickness of which varied according to the tomb's position and its material. Particularly in inaccessible areas it was evident that the dirt had accumulated over

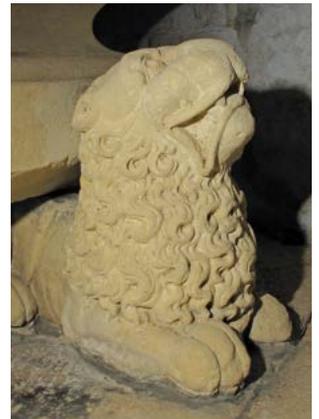
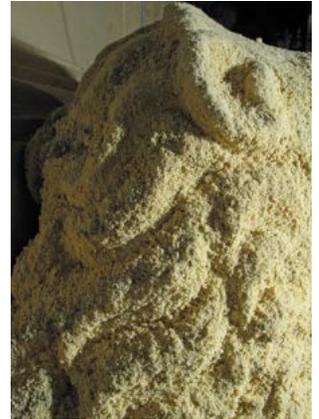
many years. On some tombs where the stone and/or paint layer were detached, cleaning was carried out in conjunction with consolidation, to prevent further losses of the original material. Generally, the excess loose dirt was removed by brush and captured by vacuum, and the monuments were lightly cleaned with deionized water with a variety of application methods including swab and natural sponge.

The multiple layers of painting on the altar and its surrounding columns were flaking. In the light of analytical and archival evidence, the upper (modern) layers of painting on the altar and columns were removed and the lowest potentially original layers, where possible, were retained. Occasionally, deeply embedded fungi (black) remained within the structure of the stone. These could not be removed without damage to the original stone and were treated with a low concentration of biocide.

Conservation

The restoration project commenced with scientific investigations and the monitoring of the environmental conditions within the Crypt. Measures were taken to stabilise the environment before restoration commenced. The condition of the Crypt was studied and documented in order to investigate the serious ongoing losses of both the limestone monuments and wall paintings.

Diagnostic investigations proved that salts were the principal cause of deterioration, de-cohesion and loss of original material.



Above: A stone detail before (top) and after (below) restoration.



The cleaning process with the natural colours emerging.

The scientific research demonstrated that it was the adverse environment in the Crypt which triggered the salt-related deterioration. Remedial conservation treatments were therefore postponed until the causes and mechanisms activating the deterioration were identified and brought under control. This was achieved after testing various approaches to create the required stable environment. The Crypt was sealed in 2009 to prevent air exchange with the exterior of the church and a temporary control system was installed to maintain the relative humidity and temperature values 70-72%RH and 18-19C. The values were calculated as a result of the trials and found to be optimal for the preservation of the paintings and the monuments. Analysis of the original and non-original material was carried out prior to conservation in order to establish the treatment and scope of the interventions. When the environment conditions were brought under control, the salt related damage ceased, and treatment could begin.

The restoration method focused on the conservation of the limestone and the decorative surfaces, keeping in mind the general criteria of minimal intervention, reversibility and compatibility in order to preserve the original materials and their significance. All the materials used for the treatments were tested in advance and considerations were taken to keep the same characteristics of the original materials and technique.

The stability of the environment was important to achieve long-term conservation of the consolidation of the stone surfaces since environmental fluctuation would cause salt related deterioration. In this regard, attention was taken to minimise the use of consolidant that would create a hard layer on the surface of the tombstones. Considering this condition, a consolidant that was compatible with the original materials that provided suitable cohesive effects was selected to treat the limestone monuments.

Treatment interventions

The monuments are mainly composed of globigerina limestone for the body, and marble or metal for the commemorative plaques and effigies. There is considerable variation in the quality of the limestone material. The monuments exhibit different degrees of deterioration which can be correlated with stone type and location in the Crypt. Stones that are softer, situated on the ground, and closer to

the window (the monuments of Fra Pietro del Monte and Fra Villiers de L'Isle Adam, and the eagle on the monument of Fra Jean de Valette) exhibit more dramatic de-cohesion than those which are harder, raised, and closer to the west end. In addition to the intrinsic properties of these stones, environmental factors also seem to contribute, such as proximity to the flow of air exchange from the open window, and proximity to the floor. The marble monuments also exhibit some deterioration.

The de-cohesion of the stone can be attributed to cycles of crystallisation and deliquescence of salts (composed of sulphate, chloride and nitrate ions), due to the adverse and fluctuating environment in the Crypt. It is not possible to remove salt-forming ions which are present throughout the original stone. Therefore, maintaining a stable environment is critical for the long-term preservation of these monuments. Remedial treatments were carried out to stabilise the remaining material and to prevent further loss.

The globigerina parts of the monuments were repaired to minimise the appearance of losses. Most of the past restoration interventions made on the monuments were carried out in stone, such as the eagle's feet on Jean Parisot de Valette's tomb. Other structurally sound and compatible repairs were retained. New interventions were made to areas of losses where it was considered that a positive aesthetic improvement would be achieved. An example of this type of intervention was made on the tomb of de Valette. An opaque resinous material had been applied to some of the monuments to adhere repairs to the supporting sculpture; an example of this form of repair was detected on the claw of the eagle on de Valette's monument, the paws on the lion on Villiers de L'Isle Adam, and the paws of the lions on La Cassière's monument. This material was extremely hard and difficult to remove and where possible, it was mechanically reduced. The repairs were lime-based, and several mixes were made depending on the area with varying proportions.

Nanotechnology

The consolidation and conservation of these historic monuments required materials which were compatible with the components originally used. The application of nano-lime offered this possibility. The product used was lime nanoparticles that are stable when dispersed in different alcohols. The particles

Over the years the Crypt had sustained severe deterioration and several areas were in a fragile state. Large areas of the fresco painting had detached from the plaster support and were at risk of collapse.



Consolidation (left) and restoration (right).

have sizes ranging between 50 and 250nm. Typical concentration in such dispersions were between 5 and 50g/l. Ethanol was used as a solvent. Treatment of the limestone powder with nano-lime occurred after evaporation of the alcohol took place and resulted in the formation of solid calcium hydroxide. The dispersion contained nano-sized particles of calcium hydroxide (50-300nm) which converted in a way like traditional lime mortars, to calcium carbonate on exposure to atmospheric carbon dioxide. The solvent evaporated without leaving any unwanted residue. It was used at various concentrations, up to 50g/litre. The consolidant was applied to the de-coherent surface with syringes which enabled slow and controlled delivery drop by drop. The powdered material could then be gently pressed back to the sculpture body. Following consolidation, the surface remained in a delicate condition, but the results were stable.

Environmental control system

A temporary environmental data system was installed during the restoration period. The system recorded the fluctuation of both relative humidity and temperature levels throughout the seasons to determine when the deterioration caused by salts and biological growth, which were the primary cause of damage, occurred.

After a year of study, it resulted that the external climates and cycles of salt crystallisation and deliquescence were

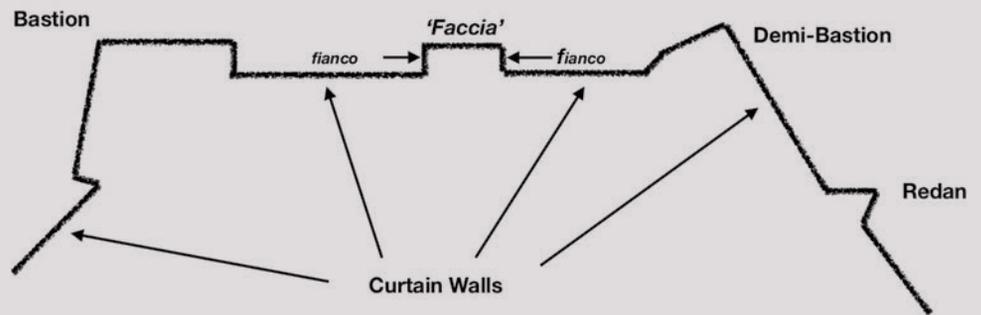
the cause of damage to the frescos and stone surface. Once the problems were understood temporary controls were undertaken. This had produced striking results in controlling the microclimate. However, the long-term survival of the Crypt and mitigate damage depended on the permanent control of the environment. This could only be reached if the Crypt was closed and sealed and the environment mechanically controlled. Once the values were determined, specifications were drawn to design the environmental control system. The system consists of a custom-made unit which includes heating and cooling, dehumidification and humidification.

The works concerned were all carried out by experts in the field of restoration. The delicate masonry and marble works were carried out by the Foundation's masons and restorers. The intervention was kept to a minimum, with as low an impact as possible, especially considering the benefit of the proposed system for the Crypt, which is now equipped with a state-of-the-art environmental control system which will minimise further deterioration.

The restoration of the Grand Masters' Crypt has ensured its long-term preservation whilst the custom-made glass door has made viewing possible. The Crypt is now accessible for the knowledge of thousands of visitors, the majority being tourists. It is now possible to avail the information and history of the knights and grand masters that came from the most important aristocratic families of Europe giving it an unprecedented European dimension. ■



Cynthia de Giorgio is curator of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation



Uncovering old ENTRENCHMENTS

By STANLEY FARRUGIA RANDON

After settling in Birgu and later on in Valletta, the Knights of St John started constructing towers to defend the coast in other parts of the islands. Batteries and redoubts were also constructed to further defend the bays which were mostly accessible to enemy fleets. Another form of defence was the building of free-standing walls. Old maps distinguish between two forms of these walls: *trinceramento* (entrenchment, or *trunciera* in Maltese) and *cortina* (curtain wall).



Spinola Battery (left) built by the British behind the Spinola entrenchments built by the Order of St John.



Above: Naxxar entrenchments.

were dismantled during the development of roads and their stones were reused to build dry walls around fields or as foundation for the same roads.

A curtain wall is essentially a simple wall serving as a shield for defenders to hide behind it and to wait for an enemy attack. They were not armed with cannon. Curtain walls had a weaker structure and we do not have any surviving examples. They were not built to last and their stones were recycled.

In 1833 Fr Felic Cutajar drew a map to show the location of surviving towers, batteries, redoubts, entrenchments and curtain walls around our islands as well as the number of cannon present at the sites. No cannon was present in any of the entrenchments and curtain walls. In this article I will be using this map as a reliable source to list the entrenchments and curtain walls erected in our islands and which survived till 1833. From other details mentioned in this map and which can be double-checked from other sources, I think that it is a very reliable source.

Most entrenchments were dismantled during the development of roads and their stones were reused to build dry walls around fields or as foundations for the same roads.

Other manuscripts were also studied. However a number of manuscripts and plans held by the National Library in Valletta also refer to works which were to be constructed but which were probably never completed or even started. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, experts in the field of defensive strategies had different ideas. The fact that in some places entrenchments were built but the trenching in front of them was not completed, shows a lack of incentive to complete them. Cost was another problem. The kilometres of entrenchment walls proposed also needed a workforce which could not be found in our islands. Above all, these walls had to be defended and guarded with men and cannon but the island could not meet these needs.

In Marsaxlokk, Fr Cutajar reported entrenchments at the point of entrance to Marsaxlokk Bay, and curtain walls at Tal-Għżira (close to the Pinto Battery or Kechakara Battery in Birżebbuġia), San Giorgio (St George's Bay), Ta' Krayl e degli Ebrei (I could not find any reference to this place name), and a curtain wall Del Pescatore or Del Fango (close to the Del Fango Redoubt). A manuscript describes entrenchments in Marsaxlokk which started in 1763 and which stretched from the Benghisa tower built in 1659 up to St Lucian Tower. Parts of entrenchments in Birżebbuġia still exist in the area between the salt pans and the Freeport. These have embrasures for cannon.



The entrenchment at Xrobb l-Għagin was incorporated within the tower which was one of the thirteen built during the reign of Grand Master De Redin. Unfortunately both the tower and the entrenchment are in ruins.

At St Thomas Bay, Fr Cutajar reported the presence of an entrenchment. Very few remains of this wall remain on the side of the bay where the Maħsel Battery once stood. In Marsascala he noted an entrenchment in the bay and a curtain wall Ta' Wied il-Għajn.

A continuous wall was planned between Fort Ricasoli in Kalkara, including the De Redin Triq il-Wiesgħa Tower in Żabbar, down to Żonqor point. Works started in 1763. The designs consisted of a number of bastions and platforms for cannon but were never fully completed.

The map of Fr Cutajar also noted the presence of curtain walls at St George's Bay, at Madliena Bay and at Qalet Marku. According to designs at the National Library, lines of entrenchments were planned between Madliena and Tigné Point but only parts of this line were actually built. These were to include Madliena Tower, St George's Tower and St Julian's Tower, all built by Grand Master De Redin. Some remains of this stretch of entrenchments still exist. Part of the wall enclosing the Dragonara Hotel is actually an entrenchment, and a gateway was opened in it. Old photos of Spinola show the Spinola Battery built by the British behind the entrenchments



built by the Knights. Today this site is occupied by the Portomaso Marina. Parts of this entrenchment still exist in St Julian's Bay.

The map of Fr Cutajar does not include the Naxxar entrenchments as he limited himself to the coastal defences. Although they built towers, batteries and redoubts along the coast, the Knights of St John still felt that Valletta and the whole Grand Harbour would be vulnerable should a fleet land in the northern area of the island and advance towards the south. It was therefore decided to build a number of entrenchments along a natural barrier on

Top: Mellieha entrenchments.

Above: Surviving part of Qawra entrenchments.



Above: Supporting arch forming part of Mellieha entrenchments.

high grounds called the Great Fault and which runs across Malta from Kuncizzjoni/Fomm ir-Rih to Madliena/Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq. Work on entrenchments along this line started after 1715 at Torri Falca and San Pawl tat-Tarġa. These were eventually incorporated into the Victoria lines which were started during the British Period in 1874. The entrenchments of the Knights period included redans.

In the Salini area, Fr Cutajar encountered a curtain wall as well as a house which was entrenched and served as a curtain wall. An entrenchment was erected close to the Qawra Tower and the foundations of this wall are still visible. Fr Calleja did not note the entrenchment in St Paul's Bay, and he did not even record the presence of the Qawra Tower.

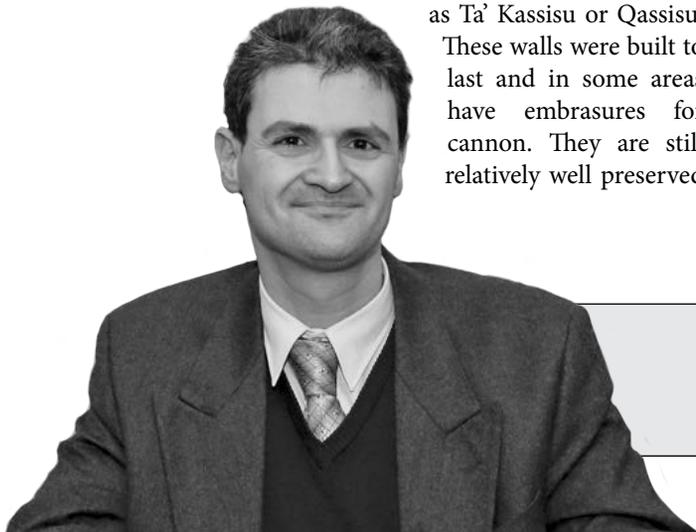
Fr Calleja reported the entrenchments of Mellieħa which are known as Ta' Kassisu or Qassisu.

These walls were built to last and in some areas have embrasures for cannon. They are still relatively well preserved

although they require restoration. A ditch was excavated along part of this wall.

In the l-Aħrax tal-Mellieħa area, he reported a curtain wall in the large bay (probably referring to Armier Bay), one at Carriera (not sure where he is referring to here) and another at Wied Musa bay. The Louvier entrenchments, so-called because they were constructed between the De Louvier redoubt and Crivelli redoubt, can still be seen partly covered by the numerous boathouses in the area. They have a bastion and a demi-bastion, but the ditch which had to be excavated along all the walls was only partly completed.

On Comino, Calleja reported a curtain wall in Santa Marija Bay. In Gozo he noted a curtain wall and an entrenchment at Ramla Bay, an entrenchment at Marsalforn Bay, a curtain wall which he reported as being called St Paul's Curtain Wall (close to St Paul's chapel), and a curtain wall at Xwejni. Little of these walls exists. Field studies at Żewwieqa in Mġarr Harbour report the presence of remains of an entrenchment wall, but I personally failed to find them. ■



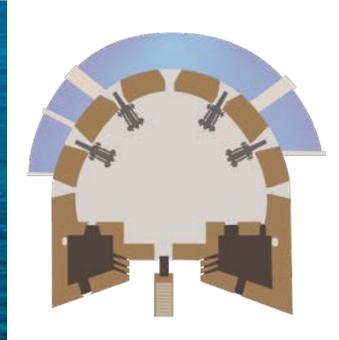
Stanley Farrugia Randon is a medical doctor and a Council Member of Din l-Art Helwa



WAVES &

Qbajjar Battery on the rocks

By DANIEL CILIA • Photography © DANIEL CILIA



Qolla l-Bajda Battery (or Qbajjar Battery) was built by the Order of St John in 1715-16. Constructed by French engineers Jacques de Camus d'Arginy and Bernard de Fontet, the building cost 823 *scudi*. It was built on a peninsula which lies between the bays of Qbajjar and Xwejni along the northern coast of Gozo. Right next to it is the hillock known

as il-Qolla il-Bajda (thus the name). A small redoubt was also built on the other side of the hillock to defend Xwejni Bay. This does not exist anymore.

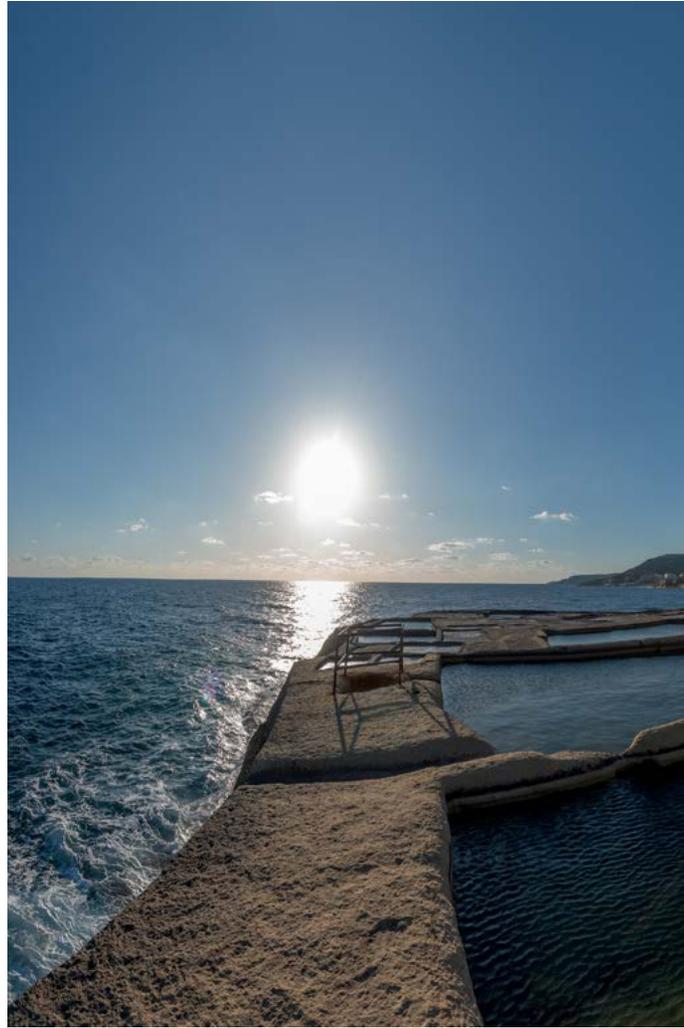
VANDALS



Qbajjar Battery 1927 - © Private Collection.



Qbajjar Battery interior 1927 - © Private Collection.



On the seaward side, Qbajjar Battery has a semi-circular gun platform on a high defensive wall with a moat which is usually filled with seawater from the storms that hit the area. On the land front, the battery has two blockhouses which had musketry slits to defend the battery from that side. Like most of the Knights' towers, there was no doorway at ground level. The main entrance on the first floor was reached by a set of steep steps and a drawbridge in the centre of the façade.

In 1770 the battery had an armament of four 6-pounder iron cannon and it had a store for gunpowder. The battery was used as an observation post (N° 5) during World War II.

The government leased the battery to Francis Vella in 1978. Three years later, the lease was passed on to Rooks Ltd. In the 1980s the building had several extensions added, and modifications were made to it when it was converted into a disco and night club. In the 1990s the battery was refurbished and used as a restaurant.

In 1999 the Malta Environment and Planning Authority issued an infringement notice as construction works without a permit were carried out on the battery. These consisted of building extensions on the first floor, walls built with concrete blocks, stone pitting and the removal of the slab stones on the ground floor.

For the last twenty years, this Grade 1 building has been abandoned to the elements and left in a dilapidated state. Its present ground floor entrance, although closed off with concrete blocks, has been opened many times and the interior modern structures of the battery have been vandalised. In September 2013 graffiti were sprayed on the façade. This was removed soon afterwards.

In October 2005 the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage suggested to the Lands Department that the battery should be passed over to Din l-Art Helwa, for the building to be maintained properly, to have all the illegal additional constructions removed, and to open the battery to the public.

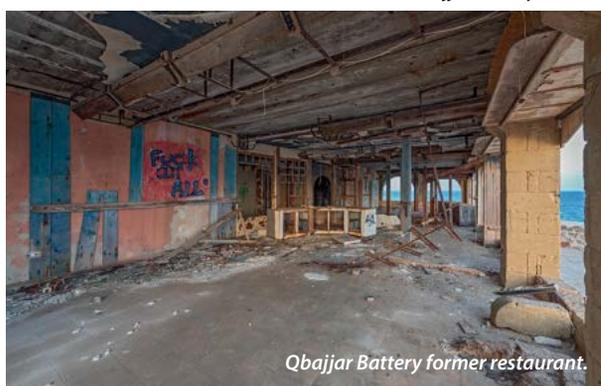
In October 2005 the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage suggested to the Lands Department that the battery should be passed over to Din l-Art Helwa, for the building to be maintained properly, to have all the illegal additional constructions removed, and to open the battery to the public.



Back wall of Qbajjar Battery.



Qbajjar Battery interior.



Qbajjar Battery former restaurant.



Qbajjar Battery entrance corridor.



Qbajjar Battery with sunrise and luzzu.

The original lease of the battery to Mr Vella (and transferred to Rooks Ltd) had expired in February 2003. Rooks Ltd was served with an eviction order by the government in 2007. Rooks Ltd insisted that the eviction order infringed their fundamental rights since they did not get a fair hearing before an independent court which could decide if they should be evicted or not. The lessees insisted that when the lease had expired the Commissioner of Lands did not object that they continued to hold onto the battery and use it as a bar and restaurant if they wanted to. The Lands Department had claimed at the time that the rent had not been paid since the expiry of the lease in 2003.

The department also claimed that the occupants had left the building in a dilapidated state. By law, as lessees they were responsible for the upkeep and restoration of this Grade 1 building. The lessees insisted that they had invested a lot of funds to take care of the battery.



Why is the court case taking so long? Isn't it time for such an important and beautiful building to be given its proper historical value and to be taken care of?



*Qbajjar Battery
with modern
extensions in red.*

The case has been before the Gozo courts since 2007, twelve years ago. The battery is in a very bad state. I have seen (and tried to stop) people who were making a bonfire for a barbeque right under the wall of the façade. In summer many people use the area for picnics and rubbish is left all over the place. I have

seen bonfires lit on the gun platform of the battery and youths organise parties in it and sometimes sleep over.

How is it possible that a Grade 1 building is left in such a bad state? Parts of the façade and walls are eroded and crumbling away. Why is the court case taking so long? Isn't it time for such an important and beautiful building to be given its proper historical value and to be taken care of? Who will be responsible if during a winter storm part of the battery collapses? ■

**Daniel Cilia is
a professional
photographer and an
avid contributor to
Din l-Art Helwa**





The restored balcony.

BAROQUE BALCÔNÏ

at 34, Main Street, Lija

by Jean-Pierre Attard, David Ellul and Edward Said

Wandering through the mazy and organic street network of the village of Lija, you will stumble upon a fine example of High Baroque balconies in the Maltese Islands, situated along the erstwhile *Strada Reale* (Main Street), the main processional route of the old casal.



Historical background

Little is known about the history of the building itself, apart from the fact that it was annexed to a large garden at the rear. Approaching the property through the small doorway up a few steps, the visitor's attention is drawn towards the fluted cushion-console springing from the keystone.

This holds the base of the curved *gallarija* at the centre of which stared out a bat-winged *mascherone* mockingly sticking out its tongue, not unlike a gargoyle, seemingly prohibiting any misfortune to infiltrate the residence, as it is known in historical folklore belief. Although this sculpture is grotesque in its form it also gives a sense of a mystified expression, as if the sculpture as a whole evokes the inverse of an angelical figure that is elevating the balcony, forming the focal point of the entire composition.

A pleated cartouche brandishing the Marian monogram is sculpted within the balcony, centred alongside a low stone balustrade sitting on a pulvinated base. Additional space in the balcony was provided by a recess enclosed in an *arzella* archivolt, flanked on either side with quaint oval-framed bas-reliefs depicting scenes believed to be mythical, though inspired by roof-top views as seen from a once-pastoral Casal Lia.

The designer's expression of beauty is seen in its intricate architectural details and ornamentation. By studying the composition of the balcony of 34, Main Street, and the intricacy of the mouldings, it can be noted that the balcony is almost disproportionate in size and detail to the rest of the diminutive, staid façade. Yet, the overall ensemble is one of harmonious artistry celebrating the dexterity of local sculptural craftsmanship.

Crowning this *opera* is an exquisitely executed molluscular broach itself a quintessential Rococo motif which provides the only break in symmetry almost in a bid to give the viewer a hint at the timing of its creation.

Quentin Hughes and Conrad Thake wrote the following about this work: ‘The stone-carved mask of a human face decorates the underlying support to the balcony and a floral clasp motif engages the extrados of the arched opening to the plain wall surface of the façade. The balcony conveys the image of a miniature version of an external theatre-box, serving as a viewing gallery to activities taking place within the public realm.’

The architect

Although its designer is unknown, the balcony recalls other prominent similar examples such as the ones at 131, Main Street, Naxxar and 125, Marina Street, Pietà, both attributed to *capomastri periti* Salvatore Xerri (1777-1830), himself a resident of Lija, and Giovanni Sammut (1784-1841).

On the other hand, the wispy Rococo ‘clasp’ indicates an earlier vintage more akin to the style of Andrea Belli (1703-72) who only recently was suitably acclaimed for designing some of the leading examples of Maltese High Baroque and Rococo including the Casa della Madonna di Manresa in Floriana (present seat of the Archbishop’s Curia) with its exquisite chapel built in 1749; Casa Miari in Valletta (formerly the Museum of Fine Arts), the staircase of which is one of the finest sculptural architectural creations in Malta; the Auberge de Castille built between 1741 and 1745; Palazzo Bonici on Strada Forni, Valletta

and in this case, the most pertinent of all the Augustinian Priory in Rabat, Malta with its splendid *balcone*.

Conservation rationale

Although the balcony is estimated to be circa 250 years old, it was noted that severe erosion of the central sections has taken place over the last eighty years. Consequently, much of the *mascherone*, balustrade base and Marian cartouche were back-weathered, resulting in the advanced loss of material and serious structural instability. This severe degradation was possibly caused by the accumulation of water and its absorption into the balcony’s flooring.

The southwest orientation of the balcony also inherently implies rapid drying and wetting cycles, which consequently resulted in the increased weathering of the delicate stone fabric. Most importantly the proprietors were keen on not only commissioning the project but also being actively involved in the decision-making together with the authorities.

Intervention

The replacement of stonework was limited to those severely weathered elements in the balcony structure, whereby every attempt was made to retain the elements which were in sound condition. In this regard, all balcony elements which had to be taken down were catalogued and all parts which had to be replicated were carefully profiled. Replication of such elements was meticulously undertaken using extensive photographic evidence available and the engagement of Joseph Micallef, a seasoned stone sculptor and restorer.



Above: details showing extensive weathering and corrosion to the surface and deeper levels of the limestone.



The damage undergone by the balcony over the years, as seen in the 1930s, '50s and '80s.



Above: the model of the mascherone prepared by Joseph Micallef.

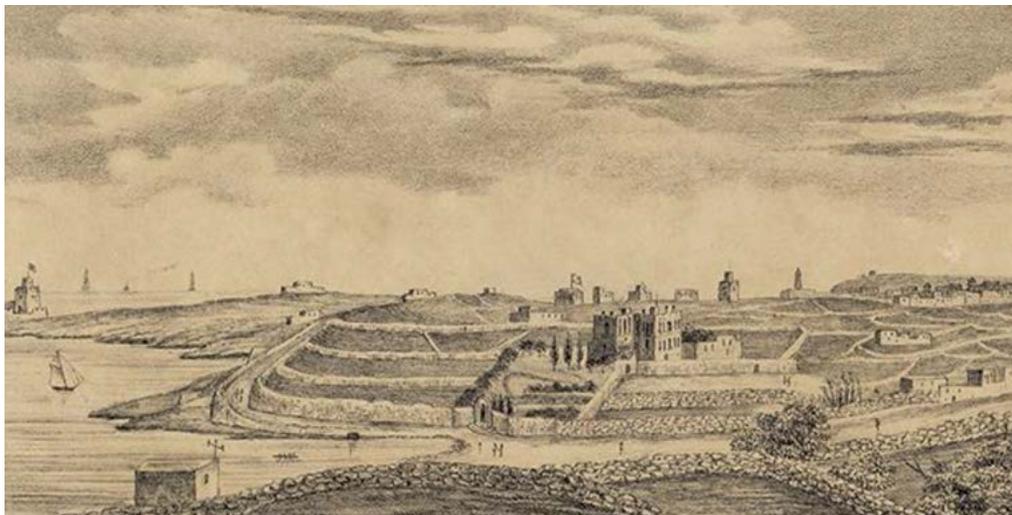
Accurate reinstatement by means of substitution with new stone incorporating fragments of sound quality, in line with best trade practice. From the finished product, one can easily understand that particular care was taken in reproducing the designs for the Marian cartouche and mascherone to ensure that these matched the original as closely as possible. In addition, further restoration techniques were employed to superficially clean the dark markings along the exposed horizontal ledge and soften the deep-set stains of the rain-sheltered sections of the balcony, mainly around the mascherone.

Conclusion

The façade of 34, Main Street, Lija, following rigorous intervention techniques and a sensitive conservation approach, has safeguarded its associated historical and architectural values, resulting in a homogenous and stately property. Thus, the intervention on this balcony is a clear illustration of the extent of heritage preservation that is possible, regardless of the degree of deterioration of its present state.

The meticulous and skilful intervention upon the balcony, has not only saved and restored what was lost, but has also rightfully underscored the prestige of the façade once again. ■

Jean-Pierre Attard, David Ellul and Edward Said are architects.



DRAWINGS & DESCRIPTIONS

Villa 'Belvedere'

in Balluta

By PETRA CARUANA DINGLI

Thomas MacGill wrote a book for visitors to Malta in 1839, describing St Julian's as 'a favourite place' which has 'within but a few years, become an extensive straggling village, where several English families have villas'.

Valletta was the centre of political and commercial life. Yet from the earliest days of the British presence in Malta, those who could afford it also sought houses with gardens outside the city, elsewhere on the island. One of the earliest popular 'resorts' among British residents was the bay of St Julian's. At this period, St Julian's was a small hamlet and fishing village, within the parish of Birkirkara.

Among the residents of St Julian's was Nicholas John Aspinall and his family, who lived at Spinola Palace in the 1830s and also had a house in Strada Mercanti in Valletta. Aspinall came to Malta from England as a young man in 1811. He established himself as a merchant when trade was flourishing on the island, although it suffered a setback following the plague outbreak of 1813. In the early years of the British presence in Malta, besides colonial government officials and

naval officers, merchants flocked to the island seeking trade opportunities.

In 1818 Aspinall took the bold step of marrying Marianna Galizia, aunt of the Maltese architect Emmanuele Luigi Galizia (1830-1907). The growing trend of 'mixed marriages' between Catholics and Anglicans was then the subject of considerable controversy in Maltese Catholic society. This cut both ways, as Protestants also did not approve of marriage with Catholics.

Aspinall was an active and prominent member of society. He was appointed on the first Council of Government in Malta in 1835, remaining a member until the Council was dissolved in 1849. Following the completion of St Paul's Anglican church in Valletta in 1844, he participated in raising money for the endowment of the Anglican Bishop of Gibraltar together with numerous leading English residents in Malta including Sir John Hookham Frere.

In the 1850s, the Aspinalls moved 'into the country' in the parish of Tarxien. Nicholas John Aspinall died in 1857 at the age of 71 and was





Top left: Early 19th-century view of Balluta bay with 'Belvedere' (G. Muir).
Above: Columns above arcades at 'Belvedere.'
Top right: 'Belvedere' today.



buried at the Protestant cemetery in Floriana, the Msida Bastion garden today managed by Din l-Art Helwa. Professor Nicola Zammit wrote an obituary for Aspinall and recorded that he spoke several languages, loved literature and had a passion for the fine arts, and that he loved Malta. He was a good friend of the British painter Charles Allingham, who lived and worked in Malta from 1818 to his death in 1850.

Villa Aspinall in Tarxien has been restored as offices and this project won a Din l-Art Helwa architectural heritage award in 2011.

In his guidebook of 1839, Thomas MacGill made it a point to note that the most impressive house on the other side of St Julian's bay was that owned by John Watson. MacGill and Watson were business partners and shared some investments. Like Watson and Aspinall, MacGill was part of the British mercantile community residing in Malta, settling on the island in the first decade of the nineteenth century. He had investments in various enterprises, and was also consul for Greece.

John Watson's house at St Julian's was the large property named 'Belvedere', which in the early nineteenth century stood alone in the landscape, on the hillside overlooking Balluta bay from the Sliema side.

Watson had moved to Malta in the first decade of the nineteenth century. He was involved in trading activities, and in the late 1820s he acquired the site at Balluta where he built his villa 'Belvedere', with extensive gardens, stables, a coach room, fields and outhouses. MacGill notes that Watson intended to cultivate the Brazilian cotton plant there, introducing it into Malta.

The site stretched from 'Kirxa hill' on one side, to Balluta bay below, and a substantial length along Old College Street today. Part of this site was later cut across and excavated for Prince of Wales Road (Manwel Dimech Street), leading directly from the Sliema ferries to Balluta bay, built by Emmanuele Luigi Galizia as government architect in the 1860s.

Another well-known property with extensive gardens dating to the same period is Villa Frere in Pietà, home of British diplomat Sir John Hookham Frere (1769-1846). Villa Frere was recently awarded the highest level of scheduling protection by the Planning Authority.

By 1837 John Watson's wife Elizabeth, née Pilkington, had passed away and in 1844 he and his seven sons and one daughter sold 'Belvedere'. The reasons for this decision are unclear, but it is possible that it may have been prompted by financial concerns.

His daughter Elizabeth, then married to Captain George Griffin RN, stipulated that the sale should not include a particular enclosure of land called 'tal Ballut', bought for 400 *scudi* from Dr Luigi Caruana Dingli in 1832, as she wanted her father to continue to have it for as long as he remained in Malta.

As things turned out, John Watson remained on the island until his death in 1848, when he was residing at St Venera. Like Aspinall and Frere, he was also buried at Msida Bastion cemetery in Floriana. Some of his sons resided abroad, in Calcutta, Constantinople and elsewhere, while others stayed in Malta for longer.



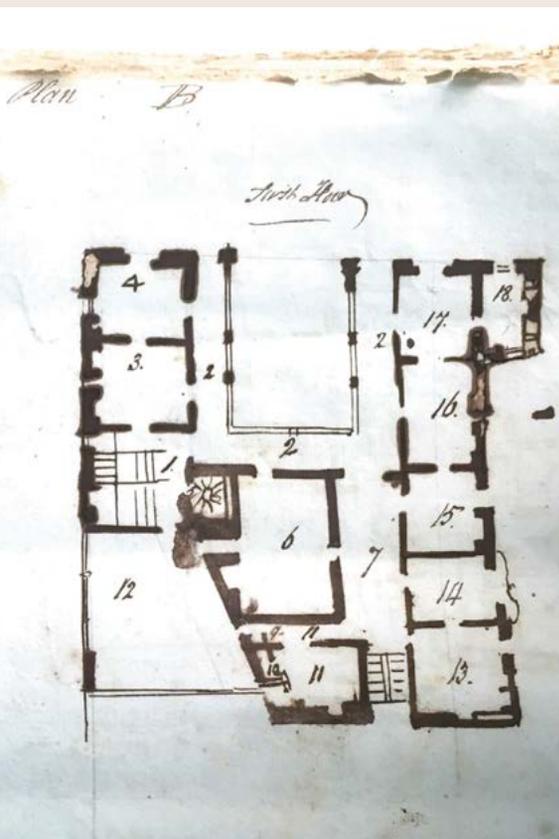
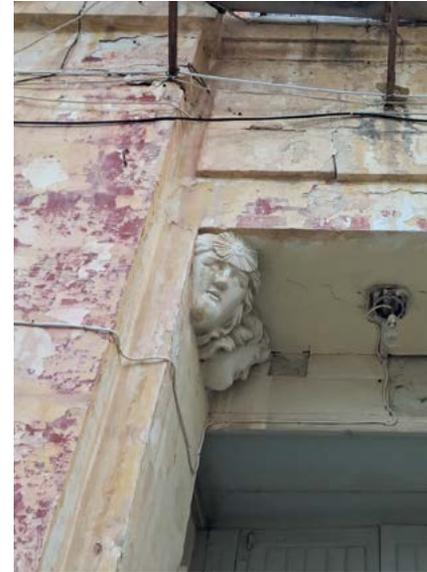
'Belvedere' was sold by the Watsons to Lachlan Mackintosh Rate in London in 1844, for the sum of 2,500 British pounds, or 30,000 Maltese *scudi*. The keys were handed over by the beginning of 1845 and it was rapidly converted into a Protestant college. In the 1870s it was resold and in 1877 it was turned into a Jesuit college and renamed 'Villa St Ignatius'.

Plans of the property as it was when owned by the Watsons, survive in the notarial archives in Valletta together with details of the interior

of the house, gardens, fields and tenements. These drawings and descriptions were drawn up by *perit* Paolo Attard on 4 October 1844. They include measurements of each space within the grounds.

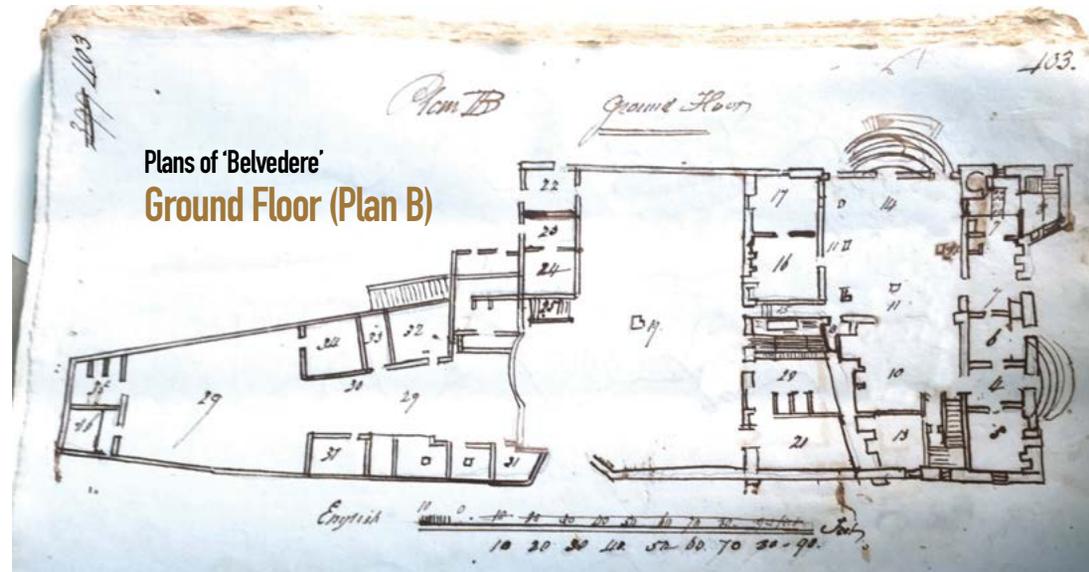
An outer door at a point close to what is now Scicluna Street led into a small portico supported by two columns. This led towards the main house through a bower with fourteen columns, across a parterre with some trees and a water system.

Top left: Courtyard with arcades at 'Belvedere'.
Above: Architectural detail.



Plans of 'Belvedere' First Floor (Plan B)

- 1 – landing place with small iron balcony leading to rooms and arcade.
- 2 – arcade with balustrades, within walls supported by nine columns and two pillars.
- 3 – room with two cupboards.
- 4 – another room with cupboard, iron balcony and awning.
- 5 – winding staircase on landing place leading to store room, small closet and roofed passage leading to terrace and small staircase leading to signal tower.
- 6 – parlour with chimney.
- 7 – large corridor with staircase leading downstairs.
- 8 – passage leading to water closet.
- 9 – water closet.
- 10 – small closet.
- 11 – room with cupboard.
- 12 – terrace.
- 13 – room with chimney and cupboard.
- 14 – room with iron balcony overlooking parterre.
- 15 – room with cupboard.
- 16 – room with two cupboards.
- 17 – room with another balcony overlooking garden.
- 18 – small room with two cupboards



Plans of 'Belvedere'
Ground Floor (Plan B)

Below the house was a garden with orange trees, vines and flowers, and another bower with columns and water canals. At the back, the house had another entrance with a small portico and columns. Here there was a coach room and stables, leading into a spacious yard with store rooms, cellars, hens and cattle.

A gate opened from the courtyard onto the road, which led to the main route towards Valletta and Birkirkara. This road, today Old College Street, must have been realigned further back from the house when adjoining buildings, including St Ignatius chapel, were added behind 'Belvedere' later.

The house itself had spacious rooms on the ground floor, with a dining room and kitchen, and a basement including a wine cellar. The rooms were arranged around a balustraded court yard with arcades on three sides and a view over Balluta bay. The principal rooms were on the first floor, with a parlour, bedrooms, balconies and a large terrace on the Sliema side. The house had main staircases near both entrance doors on the ground floor, and winding staircase led to an intriguing 'signal tower' on the roof.

Beyond the garden, the property stretched down the hill over various fields with almond trees, vines, orange trees, pomegranates and other fruit. A door and round staircase led to the road at Balluta bay below.

The villa's surrounding land was built up over the years, and the Protestant and Jesuit colleges in turn added substantial buildings to the house. Yet despite the accretions and its dilapidated state today, the main original structure of Villa Belvedere still survives. But it is under serious threat.

4 – roofed entrance with staircase of seven steps from parterre, leading to passage.

5 – lateral room with chimney, two windows and cupboard.

6 – lateral room with all windows looking into parterre, and a sink.

7 – kitchen divided by arch supported by two pillars with stoves, oven, tank, sinks, two cupboards and three windows, and staircase leading to pantry with two windows, one looking into garden and the other into court with stone table in the middle under part of the kitchen.

8 – servants room above staircase.

10 – dining room with chimney and 'side board place' in wall and door leading to arcade.

11 – arcade.

12 – staircase leading to upper floor from passage, with pantry underneath.

13 – room with cupboard and small closet with water cock to convey water from cisterns on terrace.

14 – court with arcades on three sides, a balustrade parapet, and staircase with iron railings leading to garden.

15 – another entrance with small portico on south side, supported by columns,

with staircase leading to cellars and upper floor. Wine cellar underneath.

16 – room with chimney and cupboard. Cellar underneath with southward window, two chimneys and two stoves for washing.

17 – room with cupboard. Cellar underneath with two windows one southward and one northward.

18 – small closet.

19 – another court with tank, pump and several trees, and large gate leading to road.

20 – stable with scaffold for fodder, fitted up for three horses, and cupboard.

21 – coach house with scaffold for fodder adjoining stable.

22, 23, 24 – three rooms.

25 – staircase leading to three cellars under rooms 22, 23, 24.

26, 27, 28 – another staircase leading to small storeroom and privy.

29 – courtyard.

30 – store room for fowl.

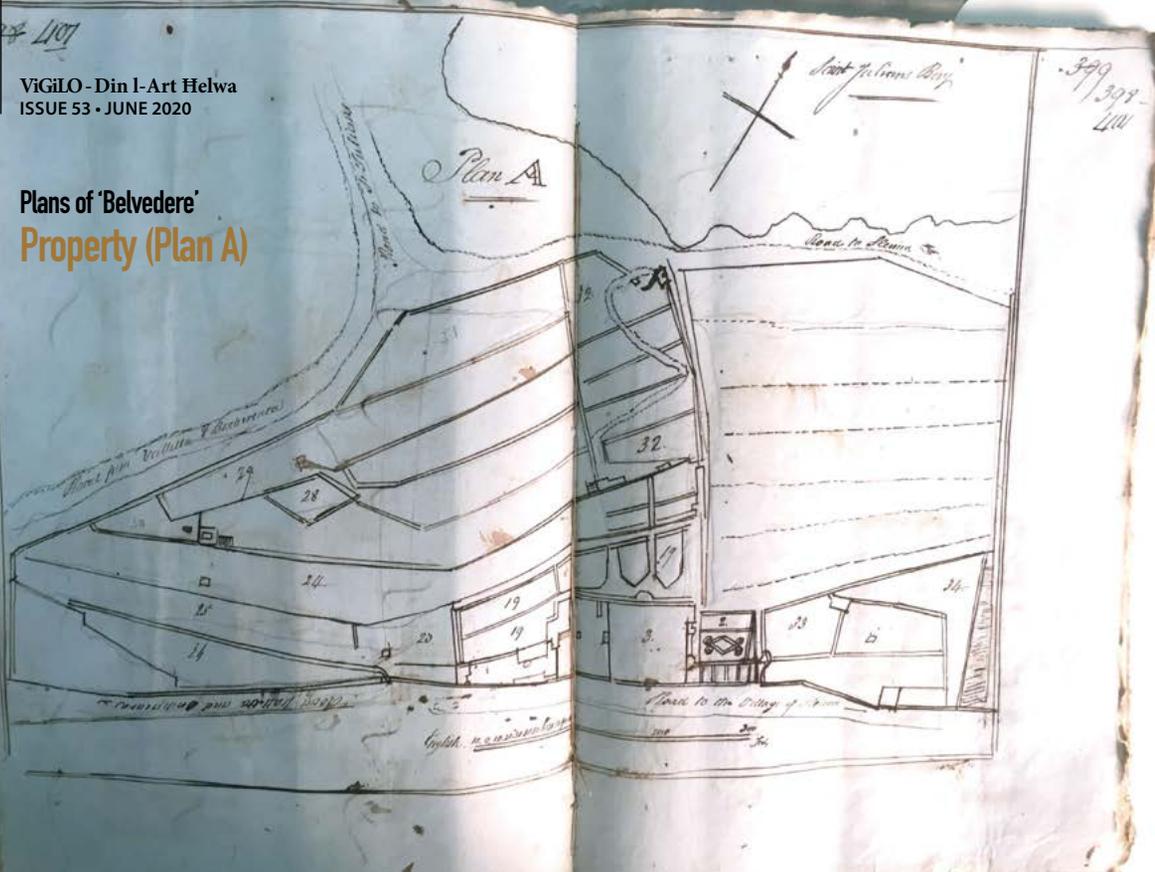
31 – several small stone hen roosts.

32, 33, 34 – three small cattle stables.

35 – another stable.

36 – small store room.

Plans of 'Belvedere' Property (Plan A)



Developers have cast their eye on the old villa as a lucrative site for a block of apartments, and in 2018 they started demolishing part of the structure illegally. Din l-Art Helwa filed a case against the Planning Authority for not acting to stop that demolition at the time, and there is also a law suit filed by the Court against the developer and a Planning Authority official for contempt of court linked to this incident.

Din l-Art Helwa has asked the Planning Authority to schedule and protect the villa, but this request was refused. An appeal before the planning tribunal is ongoing, requesting a reversal of the PA's decision not to schedule. Meanwhile, the Superintendent for Cultural Heritage issued a protection order, and the developer has filed a suit to revoke it.

All these legal actions are still pending and their outcome is uncertain. The house has significant historical and architectural importance, and should be protected. Like Villa Frere and Villa Aspinall, 'Belvedere' survives as a valuable example of Malta's cultural heritage of the nineteenth century. ■

The author thanks Dr Franco Vassallo for his assistance. Photographs of 'Belvedere' today courtesy of Edward Said and Jean Pierre Attard. References: A. Ganado, 'John Watson's Belvedere and the Maltese Protestant College' Sunday Times of Malta (11 March 2018). Plans at Notarial Archive of Valletta, Not. J. Assenza, 19 September 1844; Not. C. Curry, 10 September 1851.

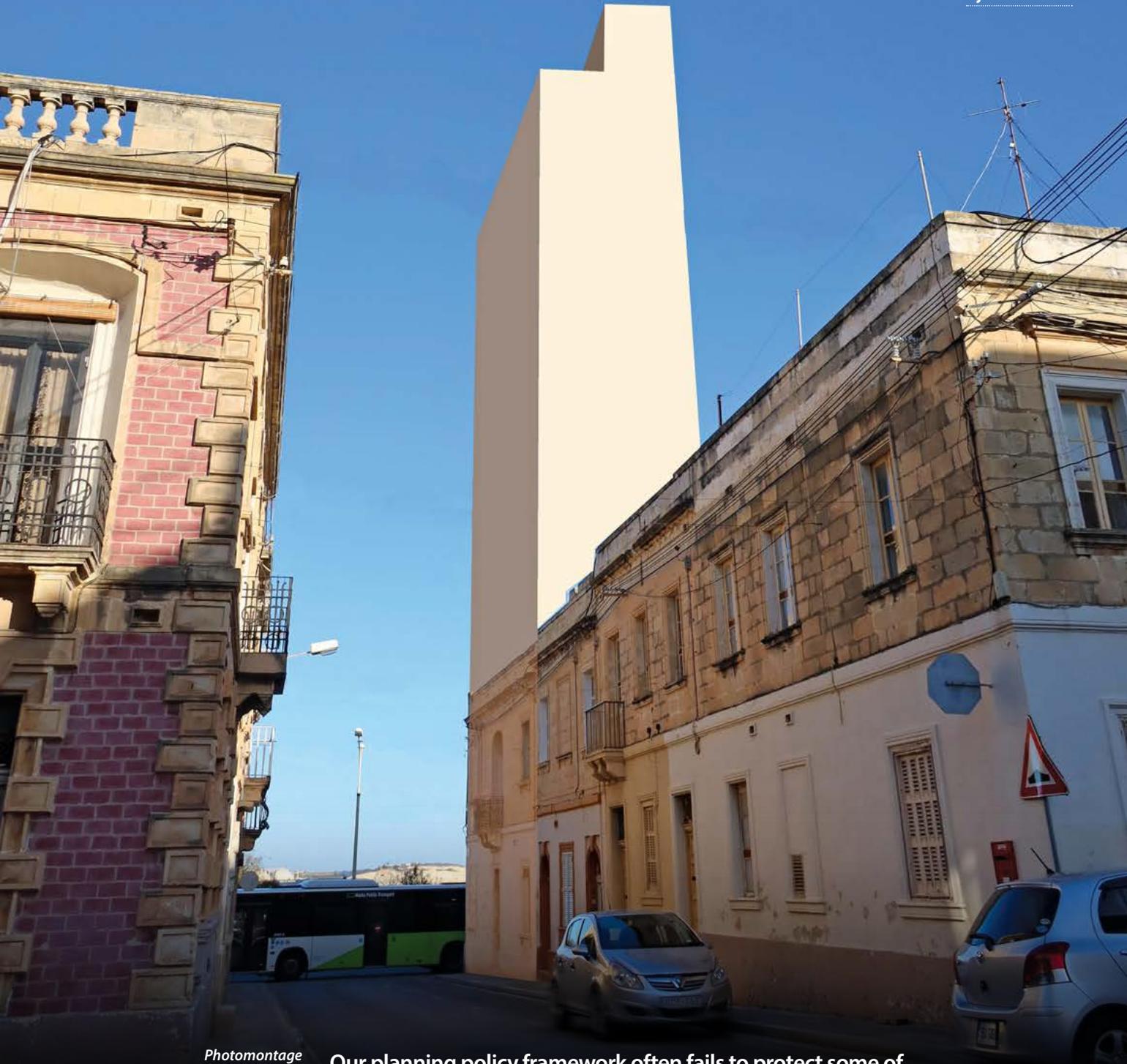
- 1** – outer door with small portico supported by two columns leading to house through a bower with fourteen columns.
- 2** – parterre crossed by bower, with trees mostly vines, rainwater tank with pump, and small built cistern to water trees of parterre and garden through canals.
- 3** – house.
- 19** – garden with orange trees, vines and flowers, divided by walks, including bower with twenty-two columns, and stone canals for watering.
- 20** – water closet.
- 21** – small room for garden implements.
- 22** – staircase leading to trench for manure.
- 23** – small adjoining garden with orange trees, pomegranate trees, and vines.
- 24** – door leading to field, with large tank, staircase and water course to convey water from the road, and canal to water gardens.
- 25** – field with almond trees.
- 26** – field.
- 27** – field with fig trees.
- 28** – field with small adjoining garden.
- 29 & 30** – field.
- 31** – field with door leading to road.
- 32** – vineyard divided into five enclosures, with winding walk, well, door leading to road with round staircase and diverse trees, small closet with small cupboard, staircase with stone seats and door leading to garden.
- 33, 34** – garden and adjoining enclosure, with fruit trees, tank, passage, small room, and room leading to the road.

Petra Caruana Dingli is senior lecturer within the Edward de Bono Institute at the University of Malta, and Council Member of Din l-Art Helwa



The vanishing streetscapes of **BIRZEBBUĠA**

By Tara Cassar



*Photomontage
of proposed
development. This
is schematic and
only indicative of the
approved volume.*

Our planning policy framework often fails to protect some of Malta and Gozo's most distinct and characteristic traditional urban areas. Changes to the planning system implemented in recent years have only made the situation worse.



Take the case of the area surrounding Triq San Filippu in Birzebbuga. This very distinct part of Birzebbuga dates back to the early 1930s. The street is defined by undisrupted rows of two-storey townhouses that continue onto the seafront on Triq San Patrizju through Triq San Frangisk Saverju.

Although the surrounding area continued to be developed in different building typologies at varying building heights, the properties along these three streets still retained their distinctness. This is partly due to the fact that the 1994 Local Plan had designated the area as a *Design Priority Area* and limited development to two floors, only increasing to three floors further away from its distinct centre, and then to four floors along the seafront.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the 1994 Local Plan is that it prioritizes the safeguarding of historical context and visual integrity over the maximization of a site's development potential. This is evident in the policy concerning building height limitations, which specifies that although a development request may observe the height limitation, it may still be refused if the proposal is seen to detract from the character and pleasantness of an area, by for instance creating a negative visual impact or result in bad neighbourliness.

The Local Plans of Malta and Gozo were revised in 2006. Most neighbourhoods characterised by two-storey terraced houses, were allowed an additional floor. Over time a further recessed floor (the famous penthouse level) was also allowed, paving the way for four-storey developments along these two-storey streets.

The Marsaxlokk Bay Local Plan, that includes Birzebbuga, did not form part of this mammoth exercise. This means that the 1994 Local Plan and all its policies still apply to this day. The omission of Birzebbuga as part of the 2006 review could indeed be the reason why the area retained its uniqueness and authenticity, at least up until recently.

In 2015, the Planning Authority seems to have opted to avoid revising all Local Plans in order to increase building heights and instead do so by applying a blanket increase across the board. This was implemented through an interpretation document presented in the form of a short table annexed to the *Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards* issued in 2015. The table provides a numeric interpretation for all building height limits. Through this seemingly trivial document, streets zoned for three floors plus semi-basements (above which a recessed floor may

*Above and top right:
Streetscape along
Triq San Filippu in
Birzebbuga.*



“The faults behind this case go beyond the need to fight for the preservation of our heritage. It is about holding the Planning Authority to account, to ensure that planning policies are respected and adhered to by all, and not applied arbitrarily to appease profit-driven interests.”

also be included) could be developed up to 17.5 meters. Since five floors could easily fit within 17.5 meters, the overall height was effectively increased by an additional floor.

This interpretation document was introduced in parallel with a growing indifference towards vernacular historical buildings and townhouses. The practice of demolishing early twentieth century properties and retaining only their façade, somehow became the new norm. Maximizing a site’s development potential at whatever cost, became the new priority.

The case of Birżebbuġa perfectly illustrates the impact of all this on our built environment. The Planning Authority recently approved two developments in the area of San Filippu that stand to permanently distort its historical distinctness. One of the applications pertains to a townhouse along Triq San Filippu, the other to a corner property fronting Triq San Patrizju and Triq San Franġisk Saverju. Both developments will result in buildings that far exceed the heights of these existing traditional streetscapes.

Let’s consider the latter.

The two-storey corner townhouse dates back to the early 1930s. Its façade is by no means typical, having unique art nouveau detailing both in the stone and iron work. The 1994 Local Plan designates the site for a maximum of four-storey development.

Through the interpretation document introduced in 2015, four floors are translated to the numeric value of 19.9 meters, within which six floors could easily be built.

As if replacing a two-storey townhouse with a six-storey apartment block wasn’t enough, the developer had the audacity to apply for a further floor over and above the already-inflated building height attained through the interpretation document, and instead proposed a 23.5 meter high seven-storey block.

The two-storey corner townhouse shares its streetscape with a cluster of highly distinct heritage buildings, each protected as scheduled properties. All the properties along both sides of the street, including the scheduled buildings, together form a continuous row of two-storey townhouses.



As explained above, under the 1994 Local Plan, a proposed development that observes the building height limitation could still be refused if it is considered to negatively impact the surroundings. In this case, it is clear that given the sensitive historical context, even at four floors, a development would have a detrimental visual impact on the area, let alone a towering seven-storey block permanently deforming this historical skyline and completely obliterating the visual integrity of this streetscape.

Despite all this, the development was approved. Years of safeguarding the area’s historical character and distinctness were thrown out of the window through this single decision.

By approving the application the Planning Authority did not only dismiss the 1994 Local Plan that prioritizes a site’s context over its development potential, but to add insult to injury, went so far as to dismiss even the already-inflated building height limits attained through the 2015 interpretation document.

In doing so, the Planning Authority brushed aside fundamental planning principles meant to at least be ensuring the most basic form of development control.

Din l-Art Helwa is appealing the Planning Authority’s approval of this development. The faults behind this case go beyond the need to fight for the preservation of our heritage. It is about holding the Planning Authority to account, to ensure that planning policies are respected and adhered to by all, and not applied arbitrarily to appease profit-driven interests. The appeal will now be decided by the Environment and Planning Review Tribunal. ■

Tara Cassar is an architect with a special interest in planning policies and legislation. She forms part of Din l-Art Helwa’s Heritage and Environmental Protection Team.



INTERVIEW WITH THE HON

Aaron Farrugia

*Minister for the Environment,
Climate Change and Planning*

The beautiful, natural open spaces of Malta and Gozo are under constant threat of being encroached upon by development.

Do you have any specific proposals or ideas on how to counteract this trend?

I am proud of the beauty of Malta's natural environment and the outstanding landscapes it is endowed with. Likewise I am proud of the progress that this country has been registering in the standard of living and welfare of the Maltese people. We must admit that with its small size and high population density, Malta's urban and rural fabric is tightly knit. And often, this results in a perceived trade-off between growth and development on the one hand, and the need to protect our natural capital.

In this context our Prime Minister has declared from the outset that the environment is a priority for this government but at the same time there is the need to drive the nation forward. There is no scope for a country without a healthy natural environment but there is also no scope for a country without development. My role is to work hand-in-hand with my Cabinet colleagues to ensure that we strike the right balance between the two. The placing of both the planning and the environmental dimensions under the responsibility of the same Minister together with climate change shows the government's

willingness to strike this balance. This alone is a major positive step as it creates synergies and robust cooperative practices that push for the right equilibrium between opposing forces. I can assure you that this has already started to bear fruit. Suffice it to mention the review of the Fuels Stations Policy that has been lauded by many. This was the direct result of the synergies being created. The review of the Rural Policy and Design Guidelines is another case in point. The Planning Authority, the Environment and Resources Authority, and my ministry are working closely together to ensure that the right balance is again achieved in this major policy area that has long been criticised as causing undue pressure for encroachment on unbuilt areas.

The message is clear: the time has come to recalibrate urban living, so as to include a more harmonious interaction with nature, increased innovation, better ideas, to foster a greater sense of community, and to leave a lower carbon footprint.

On a more strategic level the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development (SPED) is also a very important tool for the attainment of sustainability principles in the use of land and sea resources specifically addressing the environmental and development spatial policy framework. Within the first weeks of taking office I asked the Planning Authority to initiate the review of SPED with a view of ensuring that it addresses, in a holistic manner, the issues

and challenges of environment and planning on our islands. As I stated elsewhere before, the review is a unique opportunity for all to be involved in the real change in mentality that the country needs in order to plan our future. I believe that we can make a positive leap forward which can not only radically change the value of design, architecture, and the building industry, but also improve everyone's lives and foster wellbeing.

Having said this, Malta has already carried out extensive work to determine and assess its biodiversity status and upon which protected areas were declared in terms of the EU nature and habitats directives. We recognize that maintaining good quality of our biodiversity requires stepped up efforts in implementing measures to better conserve these protected areas. Ambient Malta is committed to continue working in this vein and will strengthen its implementation process through further actions including removal of invasive alien species, restoration of habitats, and improved access for the public.

Besides rural areas, our urban areas are also in need of more greenery. Is this on your agenda?

Green and blue infrastructure and resilient ecosystem services are essential to provide improved urban wellbeing and the creation of improved microclimates that offer better air quality, appropriate management of water, and sustainable landscaping within the Maltese context. This has been identified as one of the key challenges within the upcoming National Strategy for the Environment (NSE) in order to address the resilience of urban areas whilst nurturing and providing access to natural open landscapes to contribute to a better quality of life.

Trees found in urban public open spaces are now protected irrespective of species, thereby giving due regard to the social element that trees provide to urban areas. Another important change promulgated by local regulations is the requirement to have licensed tree specialists carry out interventions on protected tree species and on trees located within urban public open spaces. These individuals will be required to attend specialised courses focusing on Maltese trees and woodlands, the identification of species, arboriculture, and other related matters, thereby ensuring that pruning and other interventions on trees will be done in a diligent manner.

We need to be courageous to find creative ways to create more green open spaces within

our urban communities. Equipping urban areas with green and blue infrastructure does not mean the planting and upkeep of trees but a much wider and more holistic concept which this government is committed to implement through various initiatives, engaging also other public entities and institutions, local councils, and eNGOs. It is a design concept which should be factored in as plans are being drawn up for submission for planning approval and not merely as an afterthought. We shall be kicking off this process through the installation of green walls at a site on the new Hamrun bypass, for instance. Furthermore, in collaboration with Malta Industrial Parks we shall be financing the 'greening' of a number of industrial areas whilst also finalising more collaborative agreements with local councils to green our communities.

It is interesting to highlight that the Planning Authority has a fund purposely for this: to fund urban community projects proposed by local councils and NGOs. One of the objectives of this fund is to create more green open spaces in our urban areas. There is over €25 million in this fund for local councils and NGOs to propose projects that will improve the quality of life within their locality. From our end, we will be prioritising the concept of the installation of green and blue infrastructure within the proposed projects as priority disbursements of this fund. We need to provide professional infrastructure and design assistance to our local councils for them to dream bigger and more meaningful projects that are beneficial to the wider community.

When you were appointed to your new position earlier this year, the environmental and planning portfolios were reintegrated under one ministry. What do you consider to be the main advantages of this move?

The government's vision to strengthen environmental policy implementation is clear in the Electoral Manifesto 2017 as the government promised to step up efforts in relation to compliance and enforcement in the area of environment.

Putting the two portfolios under one ministry offers the perfect opportunity to strengthen our work and to synergise the implementation of different legislative measures. Both Authorities play an important role. I am committed to ensure that the physical development needs for a prosperous Malta take into account natural environment considerations during the pre-decision stage.

What do you currently consider to be the main challenges in the environmental sector, and how do you propose to address them?

The increased population growth experienced in the last couple of years has unfortunately also led to an increase in our carbon footprint and the amount of waste generated. These anthropogenic activities are known to eventually lead to environmental degradation. Consequently, the major key challenge is the need to shift to more sustainable consumption patterns through more environmentally conscious choices in our daily lives. Furthermore, we need to instill a culture of environmental responsibility in each and every Maltese citizen and visitor to ensure that basic civic duties such as refraining from littering and separating waste at source into its organic and recyclable fractions.

There are also cross-sectoral challenges. The environmental sector is made up of various inter-linked thematic areas, which each merit their own specific attention and resources. Due to our small scale and inherent geophysical characteristics, there are challenges that are difficult to overcome such as increasing knowledge on our rich marine and terrestrial biodiversity, scientific assessment of our air quality and research and innovation capacity for more circular economic models.

In the latest State of the Environment Report (SOER 2018), ERA carried out an extensive analysis of seven years' worth of data for nine environmental sectors – namely driving forces, biodiversity, marine and fresh waters, resources and waste, land and coast, ambient air, environmental health, climate change and policy responses. This review had assessed trends on the quality of our environment and determined that there was progress in various fields, such as 35% of our seas declared as marine protected areas, we have issues to address in freshwater (high nitrate levels in groundwater and inland surface and transitional water bodies) and that over 90% of bathing water quality reaches excellent quality. In waste, we have seen progress where there is waste management infrastructure, but yet we still need to address the fact that we produce more waste than the EU average. The same applies in other sectors.

We should be pleased with the results achieved in various sectors, but also remain focused to address where we are lacking. The way forward is to use our resources in a more sustainable manner by transitioning



to a circular and decarbonised economy. In a circular economy resources are kept in the economy for the longest time possible by ensuring industrial symbiosis where the waste of one sector becomes the resource of another. In the field of waste management we shall be cementing this principle through the building of an organic waste treatment facility complete with pasteurisation so that municipal waste is converted into a soil conditioner for use in agriculture. We encourage the private sector to take the lead in permeating industrial symbiosis within the various industrial sectors. Through decarbonising our economy, we plan to bring down our emissions significantly thereby contributing to improved air quality. Our drive to establish a cut-off date for the importation of ICE vehicles is one of the boldest steps we are taking in the field of climate action and which should contribute to a considerable decline in emissions attributed to traffic movements.

What do you consider to be the main challenges in the planning sector, and how do you propose to address them?

One of the biggest challenges is related to foresight planning when it comes to devising planning policy – that is, the integration of passive architecture principles and green and blue infrastructure into the design of buildings and spaces submitted to the planning system. It is useless promoting ways to live in a greener lifestyle if we do not have the policies, regulations, frameworks, and skills available to plan and design for greener, sustainable and resilient buildings, and spaces. We intend to focus on integrating green and blue infrastructure in our planning policies in order to facilitate the choice to the consumer for greener practices and ways of living. ■

“We need to instill a culture of environmental responsibility in each and every Maltese citizen and visitor”

Reflections upon the FUTURE

By Alex Torpiano

Precious open spaces

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Malta's economy in a way that requires us to reflect upon future economic models. The tourism industry, one of the main economic drivers, with nearly three million tourists per year, practically came to a complete stop, impacting hotels, airlines, restaurants, taxis, guides, heritage sites, etc., but also relieving the burden on our infrastructure, and especially giving a breather for nature to recover. Over the last few years, the expatriate community grew to between 70,000 and 100,000 (estimates vary), supporting our economy, but also drawing sustenance from it – nearly two-thirds of new jobs created in Malta were taken by expatriates. A significant number of these have now lost their jobs, or decided to go back to their home countries, impacting the domestic and office rental market.

In its small way, Din l-Art Helwa was obviously also affected; during the first half of the 55th anniversary year, all its activities had to be completely curtailed, and the heritage sites, kept open by its volunteers, had to close. The dearth of tourist visitors inevitably led to the drying up of the few sources of regular income that Din l-Art Helwa has to support its recurrent expenses. The future, even as the country, and the world, tentatively re-opens, will not be the same as the past, at least not any time soon.

During this period, the construction industry continued to operate, even if applications for new development dropped by about 30%. It was almost as if the industry felt immune to what was happening around. Applications for inappropriate development, within and outside the development zones, barely blinked – an enormous high-rise hotel instead of the Jerma, another hotel in the heart of Xaghra, the DB towers at St. George's Bay, and so on. The pressure of the industry, as a driver of the economy, was such that



the Planning Authority was one of the first governance structures to go on line, and to offer virtual sessions for the determination of applications – much earlier than even the courts responsible for the administration of justice! Such are priorities in Malta. But how will the industry address the inevitable surplus of hotels, offices and high value residences, as our economy re-calibrates?

This month Richard Le Brasseur published an article on CNN Architecture, entitled ‘Parks matter more than ever during a time of sickness’. The article highlights one of the direct effects of Covid 19 on people’s lives in urban areas in many countries, namely the closure of public parks to respect social distancing rules. Le Brasseur explains how the history of public parks in big cities reflected an early response to the stress of city life, parks offering a ‘soothing and refreshing sanitary influence’. During the recent restrictions, the countryside in Malta was, thankfully, not locked down, and many people rediscovered the joy of wandering through remote areas

of the countryside, without worrying about social distancing. The value of untrammelled countryside, even in pure economic terms, of the open countryside, was made clear. It is widely recognised that stress impacts health, which impacts economic development.

The future well-being of our citizens demands that this ‘health/stress’ safety valve is enhanced, and not, in any way, curtailed. It is necessary that the government completely abandons the idea that public access to any part of the countryside, for example l-Ahrax and Miżieb, could, in any way, be restricted to a minority interest. On the contrary, a government with foresight should be working to ensure that countryside ‘leisure/tourism’ is enhanced, for example, by active planning for, and managing, ‘beauty’ in the countryside; and investing in the infrastructure for walking and cycling in these areas. This should completely exclude fake ‘agri-tourism’, which developers, exploiting loopholes in our planning legislation, are touting. Our countryside is too small and too precious, for our ponderous

“A government with foresight should be working to ensure that countryside ‘leisure/tourism’ is enhanced, by active planning for, and managing, ‘beauty’ in the countryside”



Ongoing roadworks
eating into rural spaces in
Attard, May 2020.

tourism industry machine to be allowed anywhere near our untrammelled countryside. Examples are trying for everywhere: Dwejra in Mgarr, Bingemma, and even Hal Ferh, (the latter, now in the typical second phase of such projects –the development of permanent residences!).

One related theme of the current crisis is, arguably, the importance of food security, especially food that is grown and sold closer to citizens. We need to seriously look at enhancing and supporting Malta's food producing communities. This would require a completely different vision for our rural landscape – and, of course, a completely different rural policy to be conceived within the Planning Authority.

As a small island, the issue of urban density in Malta is a difficult and relevant one. Urban density is useful, since it is one of the most important engines of economic growth. However, urban density is not necessarily the same thing as simply building higher; over the last decades, the Planning Authority has obsessed on height limitation relaxation, to the exclusion of any other urban design considerations. Our planning models certainly do not promote self-sufficient neighbourhoods, with shopping, leisure and countryside, work facilities, and education facilities within walking distance of each other, to reduce the need for commuting. On the contrary, the main tool for development seems to be to transform our rows of terraced houses to rows of terraced apartment blocks – and nothing else.

When vehicular traffic declined during this crisis, the quality of our air improved tremendously; we now know what it is like to have cleaner, fresher, air. However, it does not seem as if there is any intention of slowing down the construction of overhead bridges and underpasses. It is as if we envisage traffic to keep on growing – or, rather, as if we are planning for our traffic to keep on growing. Before we blindly revert to past models, it might be worth reiterating the importance of urban greenery, that is trees and hedges in urban areas, and along our highways, if nothing else to filter atmospheric pollutants, and to shade our buildings. Many cities around the world have already learnt this lesson. As

pointed out by Michael Safi, 'Coronavirus will reshape our cities' (*The Guardian*, May 2020), cities are already taking steps to change urban living, especially to give more space to the pedestrian. Paris is planning for a network of urban forests, to complement its programme of mandatory green areas and roofs launched in 2014. Other cities are banning private vehicular traffic from central urban areas, widening pedestrian pavements, introducing bicycle lanes, encouraging green roofs, etc.. Indeed, also in Paris, the reduction of private vehicular traffic has led to the abandoning of the 1970s mandatory two car-parking spaces per apartment (in Malta, we still believe in this mantra), and since underground car-parking spaces therefore became redundant, they are now being used for other things, including urban agriculture.

Malta's recipe for preparing for the future is rather different. We have cut down trees along our highways (and re-planted them away in the countryside, where they do not bother drivers), and replaced them with bill-boards; we have removed as many trees as possible from our urban squares, lest our houses receive some shade, and lest we have problems with nesting birds and falling leaves; we have converted many of our urban public gardens into sterile 'playgrounds' with artificial turf and play equipment; we have allowed private green enclaves in our towns and villages to be transformed into building sites; we have allowed our front gardens to become paved forecourts for our restaurants and shops!

Nevertheless, a new Minister for the re-conjoined Planning and Environment, who is contributing to this issue, appears to signal a re-think of the relationship between building development and the natural environment, which may give us also some time to consider the significance of Covid-19 on the future of our rural and urban areas. We can only hope that this re-think will be radical and timely. ■

Alex Torpiano is an architect and the Dean of the Faculty for the Built Environment at the University of Malta. He is the Executive President of Din l-Art Helwa.



Reconnect with OPEN SPACES

By Martin Galea



In these extraordinary times many have been taking to the countryside to get some energy, to relax and take away the stress of these past few weeks, perhaps to reconnect with nature, and the beauty of our countryside and get some inspiration. Looking around one can see how spectacular nature is, the colour and variety of the wild flowers, possibly the blue sea as a backdrop, the craggy rough topography and the quietness, the vast open space accentuated after being cooped up at home.

Perhaps you may have thought that you should do this more often. You may also have been struck how these open spaces are being diminished, encroached by buildings, farms, countryhouses, warehouses, hunters hides. How areas have been cordoned off, pathways blocked, or cars driving through these pathways with the passengers choosing to drive rather than walk and enjoy nature, as if they are watching a film – passive voyeurs.

The importance of our open spaces has never been more evident. But make no mistake they are under serious threat and continue to diminish as their importance has been downgraded by politicians, a planning process largely in the hands of speculators, and the population at large tragically ignoring the problem.

The Prime Minister shocked many when he said that construction should lead the recovery of the economy. This seemed to follow his announcement that the government was considering handing over two huge natural areas for the exclusive use of hunters (at least during the nine-month hunting season).

These two announcements seem to place the thoughts of the new administration firmly on the same path of the old. Unbridled development, a party in thrall of a strong speculative construction industry, and a hunting lobby determined to take for itself a huge nature park.

I could argue from the environmentalist point of view, that we need to protect open spaces, that poorly planned development in towns and villages had deteriorated our quality of life and that most of us now live in shabby, ugly soulless neighbourhoods. Loss of biodiversity, lack of protection of fauna and flora including birds, and increasing noise and air pollution, traffic and smog, paint a depressing picture of the development and ‘progress’ Malta has enjoyed these past years.

However the environmental arguments have no resonance with a large part of this country and so I will try to use other arguments.

Some companies in the construction industry have been linked to alleged corruption in obtaining permits, low cost land transfers, extremely poor health and safety standards, poor



“I would not single out construction as the industry which should lead Malta out of Covid 19”



The Prime Minister should be looking at a strategy which will improve the quality of life of the people of this country. Higher skilled, better paid jobs. Looking to exploit technology, education and health. Indeed, in the latter case Malta has proved very competent in fighting the pandemic.

quality design, lack of respect to neighbours including the now infamous occasions where neighbouring properties were destroyed, but also noise, dust and inconvenience, a low-paid work force, many of which are immigrants on the minimum wage (if that) and highly exploited.

Construction and development is necessary and will remain so. But it is high in noise and dust pollution, creates huge waste problems, and requires a high volume of unskilled workers. In Malta it is largely unregulated or the regulations ignored. The industry constantly pushes for planning regulations to be relaxed, as indeed they have been, and therefore the take up of ostensibly ODZ and urban streetscapes has been appalling. I would not single it out as the industry which should lead Malta out of Covid 19.

I do accept this is a sweeping statement, however looking around one can see the result of poor development, and as to health and safety, building and aesthetic standards the results, are self-evident. The Planning Authority has totally failed in its brief, aided and abetted by the political class.

The new administration should look ahead and plan for the industry to lead us forward as tourism, clothing, financial services, aircraft services, and even gaming had done so in the past. Development and construction may be required but this should be regulated and safe with a low impact on the environment.

So when the Prime Minister says he wants the construction industry to lead the economy post Covid 19, I am very worried.

In this way, we can hand over to future generations, the precious little open space left, as well as clean seas, less polluted urban areas, and a more pleasant environment for them to enjoy.

Most countries are looking at how to adapt to the new economy, post the epidemic. The EU is launching the Green Deal which provides incentives and a roadmap to boost the efficient use of resources by moving to a clean circular economy, to restore biodiversity and cut pollution. Greater use of technology, more home working, less office space, more online purchases, and so forth.

And perhaps as we reconnect to open spaces we should take the opportunity to extend the national parks to ensure their protection for all to enjoy and not hand them over to a small vociferous club for their members' exclusive enjoyment. ■

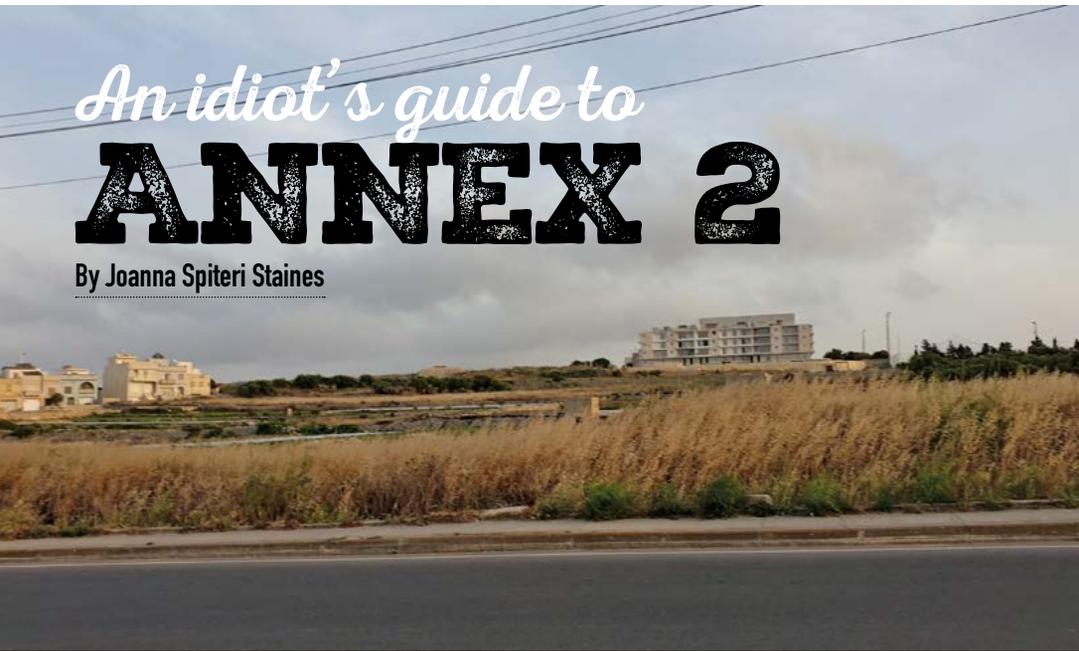
Businesses are re-evaluating their strategies to adapt and seek out opportunities in the new world. Few think of going back to the same model as before. There are green opportunities, which may be cheaper and more efficient. Home working can reduce traffic and be more efficient, cost less and reduce pollution, for instance. Not all companies can do this but many will now look at the option of having a proportion of their staff at home, perhaps on a rotating basis.

**Martin Galea is a
Council Member of
Din l-Art Helwa**



An idiot's guide to ANNEX 2

By Joanna Spiteri Staines



There is a Facebook page called *Ugly Malta* – it is not the most flattering mirror of the face of Malta and certainly does not cheer us up. However, it does reflect what is being built around us in both Malta and Gozo – and it is not pretty.



Above: Over-sized building overlooking Skorba temple site. Three floors + basement became five floors.

Left: One of the many horrors that now surround the rural village of Zebbiegh.

Take one of its more recent pages that illustrates an aerial view of Zebbiegh, Malta. This rural town, (ironically *Zebbiegh* means 'to beautify') has become a nasty conglomeration of concrete blockwork buildings of five floors and higher. This part of Malta is rural, historic and used to have rolling country views but it is now disfigured by these monsters that tower over the rural buildings that once dotted the countryside and the two story buildings that characterised rural towns and villages.

I am often asked: 'Why is this allowed to happen?'. I give a two-word answer "Annex Two"!

What is Annex 2?

Let us roll back to 2014-2015 and the government-mandated review and update of Malta's planning guidelines, including the *2007 Policy and Design Guidance*. The result of this review, the *Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards 2015* (known as 'DC15'), was issued for public consultation in 2014 and published on 6 October 2016.

We are told that 'the policy document heralds in a new contextual design framework which distinguishes between different qualities and elements that comprise urban and architectural design.' The document also

3.2.3 Building heights

BUILDING HEIGHTS



A building shall not exceed the permissible height as established in the Local Plans, which shall be interpreted according to Annex 2 of this document. Such height shall be measured from the pavement level along the frontage of the building at the highest street level and

Extract from page 106 of DC15.

states that on page 35: ‘The document vision translates into three key objectives that double up as the basic framework on which DC 15 has been structured’:

- a - A contextual and street-based approach to design
- b - Respecting the street as an important spatial scale
- c - Integrally-designed, energy-conscious, quality architecture

The policy makers really did want to create a document where all future planning permits would be rooted in the contextual setting. The DC15 Work Group behind this policy, with the lead author being Dr Antoine Zammit, dedicated significant care and effort to developing a coherent set of policies and guidelines that would benefit our environment. The Work Group was chaired by the highly-respected planner Perit Victor Sladden and comprised Dr Antoine Zammit, Perit Annamaria Attard Montalto, Perit Raphael Axiaq, Mr Joseph Magro Conti, Ing Joseph Farrugia, Perit Joseph Bondin, Perit Christian Spiteri and Perit Colin Zammit.

So, one rightly asks, how is it that a document which is 214 pages long and has as its overarching vision ‘contextuality’ result in horrors such as those in Zebbiegh? One of the key answers is the current interpretation and use of Annex 2. During the public consultation process, there was little awareness of the importance of ‘Annex 2’ – the final page of the document, seemingly added almost as an afterthought. Moreover, I do not believe that the

implications of this Annex 2 were ever clearly understood by the public, up to today.

Building heights rewritten

Effectively, what Annex 2 does is to override all the established building heights that were approved by Parliament in the Local Plans of 2006 with this single and seemingly innocuous table at the very end of a 214-page document, an Annex that is only referenced – and then very briefly – three times in the body of the document.

The crucial reference to Annex 2 is P35 (on p. 106) that states: ‘A building shall not exceed the permissible height as established in the Local Plans, which shall be interpreted according to Annex 2 of this document.’

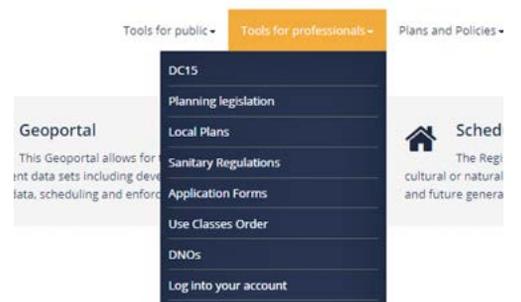
So what does this mean to the ‘man in the street’ – and perhaps more significantly, to the developer and their knowing architect? Well, if you thought you lived in a street which had as a maximum building height, three floors, then probably without you knowing, Annex 2 overrides the building heights approved by Parliament and by magic, allows five floors.

Referring to Figure 3, if your Local Plan states that you have ‘three floors’ as your allowable maximum height in metres ‘without basement’, then Annex 2 allows 15.4 metres in height. And you if you do the simple calculation of dividing 15.4 metres by three metres as an average floor, you can secure five floors! And if your Local Plan states that you have ‘three floors’ as your allowable maximum height in metres ‘with basement’, then you are gifted five and a half floors.

Annex 2: Interpretation of Height Limitation

Height limitation shall be interpreted as follows:

Number of Floors	Allowable Maximum Height in Metres Without Basement	Allowable Maximum Height in Metres With Basement	Allowable Maximum Height in Metres With Semi-Basement
1	7.70	8.60	9.80
2	11.40	12.30	13.50
3	15.40	16.30	17.50
4	19.90	20.80	22.00
5	22.90	23.80	25.00
6	26.90	27.80	29.00
7	29.90	30.80	32.00
8	33.40	34.30	35.50



Left: The now infamous Annex 2
Above: How to find DC15 on the home page of the Planning Authority.

And if you are super lucky – or otherwise - and in the Local Plans the site is marked as ‘three floors’ in allowable maximum height in metres ‘with semi-basement’, then hey-presto you get six floors. A case in point is PA 8392/17 which has only recently mushroomed in the ‘Area of archaeological importance – Mgarr/Zebbiegh NW 0458 AAI Grade A’. Its height limitation as per the North West Local Plan was termed as an area of three floors + basement. As a result of Annex 2, this became a five-floor building which also looks elevated above the ground level. It was recommended for approval since it satisfied the policies, see extract from the DPAR: ‘Zoning and Height limitation: The proposed development will retain the residential use approved in PA 3912/16 hence it remains in conformity to the designations of the North West Local Plan. The proposed development respects the relative allowable height and street facade height in metres in line with policy P35 and as interpreted in Annex 2 of the DC15’.

Whilst some photomontages were proposed, none were requested or provided which illustrated the negative effect this monster would have upon an archaeologically important site and the outside development zone outside Mgarr.

Destroying streetscapes

So while the clearly stated Vision and Objectives of the new Development Control Design Policy Guidance and Standards 2015 is based upon ‘regard to existing Urban Grain and Built Form’, the processing of applications has resulted in disregarding the context and allowing blocks of apartments to tower over the existing streetscapes.

Annex 2 has shown itself to be a ‘smart move’ that is robbing us of our pleasant streetscapes and urban landscapes. The buildings under construction that we see everywhere mushrooming above the predominant height of the existing streetscape in fact do the exact opposite of what DC15 sets out to do. They completely disregard the existing urban grain.

Joanna Spiteri Staines
is an architect and a
Council Member of
Din l-Art Helwa.



Increasingly frequently Annex 2 is being applied to grant permits for these developments, even though the proposed development results precisely in what DC15 was set out to achieve: ‘Through the above considerations, it is hoped that DC 15 may encourage and stimulate urban and architectural design that is respectful of, and that enriches, its existing context while also being forward-looking, quality-oriented and energy-conscious (see the preamble by Antoine Zammit, DC15, p. 26).

Going back to the examples of Zebbiegh and Mgarr, we can clearly see that Annex 2 has fuelled a type of development of the worst kind, a typology that does nothing for the context, but completely ignores and destroys it.

Overnight, our homes and properties have become potential sites for developers to buy and speculate on. The value of a two storey house in a street including such development is devalued and for those of you who have to live near or next door to such horrendous buildings have to suffer the construction and a building and traffic density which far outweighs the carrying capacity of your street or village corner.

The Hamrun building collapse victim Miriam Pace who lost her life on 2 March 2020 and others who have suffered from loss of their homes all lived adjacent to developments which were fuelled precisely because of this Annex 2.

One final question that I would like to pose is: if the revision of Local Plans required public consultation for six months and parliamentary approval, surely a change of building heights as ushered in by Annex 2 should have been accompanied by the same process?

If we are to reverse Ugly Malta, if we are to preserve the context of our villages, then the continuing highly adverse impact of Annex 2 must be immediately reversed. ■

Development in Gharb, Gozo, illustrating the interface of ODZ with building heights as per Annex 2. The picturesque village is transformed into a mutilated patchwork of oversized apartment blocks and building sites.

If we are to reverse Ugly Malta, if we are to preserve the context of our villages, then the continuing highly adverse impact of Annex 2 must be immediately reversed.



Heal our landscape

The 55th Annual General Meeting of Din l-Art Helwa was held on 29th February 2020 at 133 Melita Street, Valletta. The meeting was addressed by Din l-Art Helwa's executive president Professor Alex Torpiano, and treasurer Martin Scicluna. A report by secretary general Simone Mizzi, giving an overview of the previous year's activities, was also presented.

Six resolutions were approved, highlighting some of the most pressing challenges ahead in the heritage and environment sectors.

Amend the Constitution

The first resolution was Din l-Art Helwa's demand that the principles of protection and preservation of natural heritage, as in Article 9 of the Constitution of Malta, should be unequivocally extended to include built heritage, as an obligation on the State. Din l-Art Helwa also proposed that the Constitution should be amended to introduce a mechanism enabling civil society to monitor and enforce the consistent implementation of the principles enshrined in the Constitution, in the interest of all citizens of Malta.



Restructure the Planning Authority

Second, Din l-Art Helwa demanded a complete review and radical re-structuring of policy-making and decision-taking at the Planning Authority, not least to ensure transparency and freedom from partisan political involvement. It also demanded that the Environment and Resources Authority and the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage should be strengthened, to make them fully capable of participating in the drafting of spatial development policies. Moreover, the voice of the community should be heard at inception stage, rather than be forced to react to development proposals which have already been submitted.

Din l-Art Helwa declared that the Planning Authority has failed in its mission to guide spatial development on the islands while protecting our fragile environment and our built heritage. Instead, in recent years it has concentrated on making its approval processes faster, irrespective of the quality of proposals, and blindly encouraging poor quality development. The social and economic well-being of our country depends on careful planning processes which husband our limited resources, and which should only allow development which adds to the country's beauty.



Stop building up the countryside

Din l-Art Helwa also demanded that all existing policies allowing development in rural areas, including agricultural activities and infrastructural projects, should be repealed and replaced with rules based on the primary, and sole, objective of preserving, healing and enhancing the natural landscape of Malta and Gozo, which is an irreplaceable and valuable resource for the citizens of this country. Moreover, any proposals for development in rural areas should be assessed against the criteria of absolute necessity of the proposed activity for the common good, and the impossibility of accommodating that activity within committed zones. In any case, the impact of the development on the landscape must be minimized and mitigated.

In a country with limited land resources, there may be activities which cannot be accommodated within the existing zones for development, yet existing rural development policies have been abused to justify wholesale encroachment of the countryside.

Reduce greenhouse gas emissions

Din l-Art Helwa urged the government to be more proactive in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by implementing the European Union's clean air policy; working to have efficient and free public transport with the aim of reducing the use of personal vehicular transport; discouraging the use of high-powered private motor vehicles through specific road tax measures; encouraging the introduction of electric vehicles and the phasing out of fossil-fuelled vehicles; and banning cruise liners that are not equipped with technologies which

reduce air pollution caused by exhaust systems.

It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed global warming since the mid-twentieth century, and that the largest human influence has been the emission of greenhouse gases.

Encourage restoration of buildings

Din l-Art Helwa also urged the government to take steps to change the culture of demolition and new build in existing urban areas in favour of a culture of retention, rehabilitation, and restoration of existing buildings. It also pushed for the prohibition of out-of-scale developments within buffer zones around urban conservation areas, in order to ensure that existing communities, environmental qualities, green areas, vistas and skylines are preserved and enhanced.

Over the last decade, development policies have drastically changed the appearance and urban quality of entire villages, such as by encouraging the building of additional floors on existing buildings, even in areas immediately adjacent to urban conservation areas.

Protect the quality of the Maltese language

Finally, Din l-Art Helwa urged the government and the responsible authorities to take effective action to improve the standard of the Maltese language, particularly in the media, in order to properly preserve and retain our unique language. Our native language is a very important expression of our culture, history and identity, yet the standard of spoken and written Maltese has declined over recent years, especially in television and radio transmissions and in the printed media. ■

Existing rural development policies have been abused to justify wholesale encroachment of the countryside.

RESTORATION REPORT

Stanley Farrugia Randon

None of the towers built by Grand Master Martin de Redin were designed to resist an invading enemy fleet. Their use was primarily intended for signalling purposes, so their height was more important than their volume. The watchmen in the towers communicated by using red flags in daylight, and bonfires were lit at night to raise the alarm.

All these coastal watchtowers have a broadly similar plan. They are built on two floors with a turret on the roof. The walls consist of an outer and inner 'skin' of masonry with a solid infilling of carefully graded rubble. The external skin is coralline limestone (*tal-qawwi*), which is relatively resistant to weathering, while the inner skin is globigerina limestone (*tal-franka*). The latter is less resistant to weathering, but as it is easier to cut from the quarry than the harder coralline limestone, it was used to build the inner unexposed skin of the wall. Globigerina limestone was however used for alterations or restorations carried out in the past on the façades.

In 1681 these watchtowers were described as being in a deplorable state and the Università was asked to pay for their upkeep since the Order was not directly responsible for coastal defences.

During the first fifty years of British government in Malta, the Royal Engineers

Office regularly sent engineers to inspect the state of the coastal towers. The general opinion was to try to maintain these towers and to block the entrances of those not in use, while the coastal batteries and redoubts had to be abandoned in order to decrease the expenses needed to maintain them.

The most importance was given to the harbours of St Paul's Bay and Marsaxlokk, and inspections by engineers were mostly conducted on St George's Tower, Mistra Battery, St Paul's Tower, Ghallis Tower and St Lucian Tower. Towers to be kept for civil purposes, such as anti-smuggling, were to be paid for by the local government in Malta, while the few which were deemed essential for the military defence of the island were paid for by the central government in Great Britain.

This shows that the Ghallis Tower was considered to be the most important of the De Redin Towers.

In 1681 these watchtowers were described as being in a deplorable state and the Università was asked to pay for their upkeep since the Order was not directly responsible for coastal defences.

Below: Detail of Ghallis Tower.
Right: Ghallis Tower main entrance.



► GHALLIS TOWER

This tower is still a prominent landmark on the coast road from Salini to Baħar-iċ-Ċagħaq. In 2017 Din l-Art Helwa applied to the Planning Authority for the restoration of the external walls. The tower is around 12 m high and 9 sqm at the base.

Din l-Art Helwa has obtained the necessary permit to conduct the works, although we are still seeking funding in order to commence. This will include pointing of the external walls and, if needed, the changing of some stones.



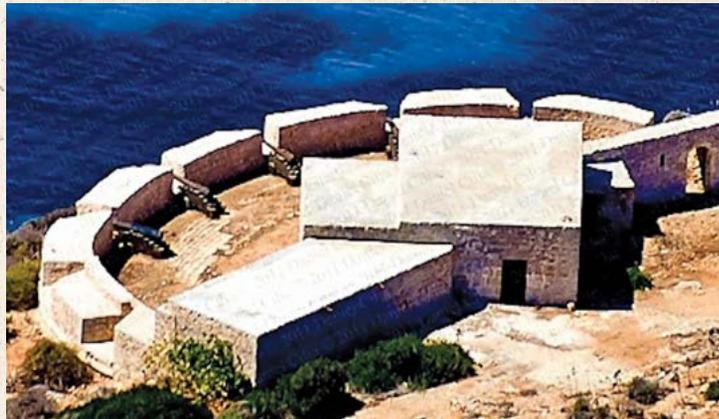
► THE RED TOWER ► COMINO BATTERY ► DWEJRA TOWER

RESTORATION REPORT

Thanks to EU funding, the Malta Tourism Authority is currently restoring the Red Tower. After the internal walls were cleaned of their old cement plastering and the parquet flooring was purchased, electricity works were laid below the parquet and glass panes were integrated in the new flooring to show visitors the rough original flooring. Plastering of the external walls is complete and the painting of the tower in red is nearly finished.

The restoration of Comino Battery has been completed and the restoration of Dwejra Tower will follow, utilising the same EU funds.

Below: Red Tower (left) and Comino Battery (right).



► DELIMARA LIGHTHOUSE

The lighthouse at Delimara was commissioned by Governor Richard More O'Ferrall in 1850, but was initiated in around 1854 and it was functional by 1855. A plan of the site to be acquired for the construction of this lighthouse is dated 1854. This is the only lighthouse in Malta equipped with Fresnel lenses.

By summer 2005, the lighthouse had not been in use for several years and was facing abandon. Din l-Art Helwa approached the then Malta Maritime Authority, now Transport Malta, and offered to manage and restore it. This request was met with approval and the lighthouse was officially devolved to Din l-Art Helwa soon afterwards and restoration commenced.

Ten years have passed since this tower of the lighthouse was restored. Since then the pointing, plastering and the paint layer underwent deterioration. Reasons for this include the strong winds prevailing in the area, the close proximity to the sea and exposure to sea spray, and the constant changes in temperature leading to expansion and contraction of the fabric as well as wet-dry cycles of water contaminated with salt due to the close proximity to the sea.

Din l-Art Helwa applied for Xlokk Action Group Foundation Funds. This Foundation is a local action group, chosen to implement the LEADER programme for Malta (2014-2020) in the south east of the Maltese Islands. The aim of the Foundation is to help improve the quality of life and economic prosperity in the south east rural areas in Malta. The Foundation accepted to support the restoration of the maritime painting scheme of the Delimara Lighthouse tower. Restoration commenced after certified scaffolding was erected around the tower.



The tower of Delimara Lighthouse will be restored.



photo by Joe Attard

► WHITE TOWER

Work on the White Tower has continued. The sanitary facilities downstairs have been completed, which will be accessible to people using a wheelchair. Din l-Art Helwa also installed further external apertures and the tower is now closed and secure. We have also installed a lightning protection system as the tower was hit by lightning causing some damage to the electrical system and to some stones of the room on the roof.

Din l-Art Helwa recently received funds from the Malta Tourism Authority to conduct works on the immediate surroundings of the tower, including the flooring as well as the passing of conduits and drains underneath it.

Din l-Art Helwa acknowledges the principal lead sponsors, HSBC Malta Foundation, and corporate sponsor Atlas Insurance PCC Ltd, as well as the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation, the Parliamentary Secretariat for Youth, Sport and Voluntary Organisations, the Ministry for Finance and National Lotteries Good Causes Fund and the Ministry for the Environment, Sustainable Development and Climate Change whose support is making this challenging restoration project possible.



Above: Passing of services around the White Tower. Right: The White Tower with its external apertures.



GUARDING COMINO WATERS

By Joe Attard



Din l-Art Helwa has successfully concluded its third restoration project on the eighteenth-century Santa Marija Battery on Comino. This battery, situated in a very remote area in the east of Comino, was built by the Order of St John in 1715 to protect the Malta-Comino channel.

Din l-Art Helwa had made its first intervention on this battery in 1996. It had suffered immense damage over the years, as it is exposed to the elements and close to the sea. Kemmuna Ltd, then owners of the Comino hotel, had sponsored the works at that time.

A second round of restoration works took place in 2002, again led by Din l-Art Helwa. This time, the emphasis was on the internal rooms and the floors. An additional room built later by the farming community was also restored. The works on this phase were sponsored by P. Cutajar & Co.

In 2018, Din l-Art Helwa managed to secure funds made available through the European Regional Development Fund Operational Programme I for 2014-2020. This paved the way for yet another restoration project at the battery.

The Product Development Directorate within the Malta Tourism Authority provided valuable assistance with both the co-financing as well as the implementation of this project, called 'The Northern Coastal Watch' and which also includes the restoration of the Red Tower in Mellieha and Dwejra Tower in Gozo.

Restoration architect Edward Said was engaged to inspect the condition of the battery and with preparing the tender for the remedial works. Camray Ltd were eventually chosen as contractors and CP Partners acted as project managers.

This time round, the works undertaken included pointing and stone repair of all areas, internal, external and roofs; the carting away of quite a substantial amount of rubble accumulated over the years including material gathered in the well; repair to the internal cement floors and laying of new stone slabs; restoration



on all wooden apertures; replacement of on-site information panels, which were either missing or vandalised; and the full restoration of four cannons and their timber carriages.

Missing stone slabs from gun platform

“As with nearly all restoration projects, one intervention reveals the need for the next.”

As with nearly all restoration projects, one intervention reveals the need for the next. During the removal of soil and gravel from the paved gun platform, it was noticed that the vast majority of the paving slabs were dug out and missing. Further investigation revealed that most of these slabs were removed and used to build an additional room to serve as a pig sty.

This was during the times of Arthur Zammit Cutajar, who was given the lease for Comino in 1926. It is also known and documented that a certain Karmenu Portelli, known as ‘ix-Xuger’, a stocky built man with a fair complexion, lived with his wife Pawla at the *trunciera* way back in the thirties. They had eighteen children of whom four still survive to this day.



Gun carriages after restoration.

Din l-Art Helwa feels privileged to be tied to Comino and to this gun battery. Thanks to the timely interventions and to the support received, this well-preserved battery lives on for many generations to come. ■

**Joe Attard is a
Council Member of
Din l-Art Helwa**

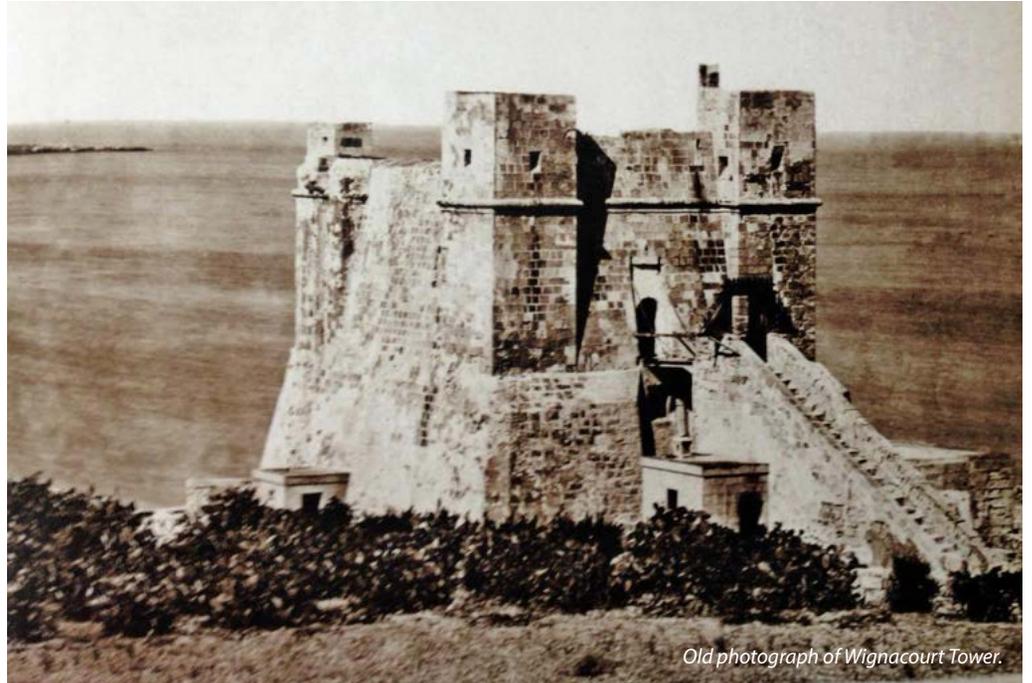




FIRING THE CANNON

The Wignacourt Tower

To commemorate the 410th anniversary of the laying of Wignacourt Tower's first foundation stone, a weekend of activities was organised on the grounds around and inside the tower. On 8th and 9th February 2020, the re-enactor group Show of Arms held sword duels and musket-firing displays. Tower tours were also organised for visitors by Din I-Art Helwa.



Old photograph of Wignacourt Tower.

The cannon was officially fired, after centuries of silence, on 10th February 2020 to mark the 410th anniversary of the construction of the tower.

The anniversary day was 10th February. The activities began with Holy Mass celebrated by Rev. Dione Cutajar at St Paul's Shipwreck Sanctuary in St Paul's Bay. This was followed by a re-enactment of the laying of the foundation stone ceremony, based on the actual events held 410 years before, as detailed in the National Library archives. Immediately afterwards, the highlight of these events was reached. The cannon located on the tower's roof was officially fired, also marking the completion of its restoration. Special thanks go to the voluntary group Show of Arms who ran all the events in a highly professional manner.

The cannon at Wignacourt Tower

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Malta became a British colony, many

hundreds of cannons were still located on bastions around the island. These were muzzle loading cannons, which were eventually superseded by the breech loading type.

The muzzle loading cannons were sadly removed from the bastions. Most of them were placed half-buried in the ground around Malta's harbours to serve as mooring points for the British Navy and merchant ships.

A closer look at the cannon located on the roof at Wignacourt Tower in St Paul's Bay reveals that this cannon probably passed through this same inglorious fate. The back section of the cannon's barrel shows evident signs of corrosion, as it was the part not inserted in the ground, while the rest has much less corrosion because it was not exposed to the elements, having been inserted in the ground.



Date and foundry marked on cannon at Wignacourt Tower.





Cannons, half-buried in the ground around Malta's harbours.

The year 1782 is marked on the cannon's left-hand trunnion, while on the right one there is a foundry marking, AB, tracing it to the Swedish foundry Akers Bruk. This is a four pound cannon. Originally two six pounders were deployed on the roof and three eighteen pounders on the ground floor battery.

In 2019 volunteers from the re-enactment group Show of Arms, together with Wignacourt Tower curator Martin Vella, restored the cannon to firing condition. The cannon was officially fired, after centuries of silence, on 10th February 2020 to mark the 410th anniversary of the construction of the tower and is now regularly fired during re-enactments. To date, this is the oldest original firing cannon in Malta.



The tower

Wignacourt Tower is presently the only coastal tower in Malta which has an original cannon in firing condition located on the roof. This is only one of the unique historical features of this tower. It was the first coastal tower built in Malta in 1610.

The first floor served as the

living quarters of the soldiers, with access to a well, a cooking area and a toilet, all considered as luxury facilities which in those days were only found in houses and palaces of the nobility.

Another singular feature is the original wooden entrance door at first-floor level, complete with the original lock and key. This tower is the only defence post dating back to the early seventeenth century which still retains these original features.

On the ground floor, a permanent exhibition on the history of major fortifications built in Malta can be viewed by visitors to the tower. ■



Martin Vella is the curator of Wignacourt Tower



COPING WITH CORONA

Din I-Art Helwa closed all its properties to visitors from March 2020 onwards, in line with social distancing guidelines imposed throughout Malta and Gozo due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Meetings were shifted online, and Council Members continued to meet virtually on a regular basis.

Online meeting of the Din I-Art Helwa Council, 15th April 2020.

From top row, left to right:
Joseph P. Farrugia,
Professor Luciano Mulè Stagno,
Maria Grazia Cassar,
Martin Scicluna,
Kenneth Micallef,
Simone Mizzi, Joe Attard,
Professor Alex Torpiano,
Professor Anthony Bonanno,
Dr Stanley Farrugia Randon,
Martin Galea,
Ann Gingell Littlejohn,
Dr Petra Caruana Dingli,
George Camilleri.



HISTORIC GARDEN ON YOUTUBE

A new short film presents the history of the Msida Bastion Historic Garden in Floriana, also known as the 'Garden of Rest'. The film is available in eight languages and provides an introduction to the history and monuments of the garden. This historic site is managed by Din I-Art Helwa. It was established as a Protestant cemetery in the early years of British government in Malta in the first half of the nineteenth century. The film is directed, filmed and edited by Anthony Ellul. The script is written by Paolo Ferrelli, warden of the Msida Bastion Historic Garden. In the film, individuals dressed in period costume roam the garden and create an alluring sense of the time. The re-enactors are Antonio Bartolo, Martin Degiorgio, David Mallia and Annabel Mallia. Thanks are due to the Historical Re-enactment Group of Malta, and Ralph Rashley. This ten-minute video clip is available on YouTube.





Maria Grazia Cassar explains the work that was carried out at the tower to The Hon Julia Farrugia Portelli, Minister of Tourism, and MTA Chairman Dr Gavin Gulia.

NORTHERN COASTAL WATCH AT THE RED TOWER

Restoration works nearing completion

Photos courtesy of the Department of Information - Reuben Piscopo.

The ongoing restoration works at the Red Tower are now reaching their final phase. On 22 April 2020 the Hon. Julia Farrugia Portelli, Minister of Tourism, visited the Red Tower in Mellieha to view the project. The Hon. Stefan Zrinzo Azzopardi, Parliamentary Secretary for European Funds, as well as Dr Gavin Gulia, Chairman of the Malta Tourism Authority, also attended and everyone expressed their satisfaction at this successful collaboration between the MTA and Din I-Art Helwa. As can be seen in the photos, everyone on the day was conscious of social distancing requirements due to the Covid 19 pandemic! Incidentally, the Red Tower had played a crucial role in protecting Malta against quarantine-breakers during a plague outbreak in 1675-76. Today the Red Tower is managed by Din I-Art Helwa.

This restoration project was made possible through a grant under the European Regional Development Fund within Operational Programme I (2014-2020) awarded to 'The Northern Coastal Watch' project, which includes the restoration of the Santa Maria Battery on Comino, and Dwejra Tower.

Maria Grazia Cassar, council member of Din I-Art Helwa, thanked the Minister and the Product Development Directorate within the MTA, whose director architect Kevin Fsadni was also present, for the assistance received with the co-financing of the project as well as its implementation. Din I-Art Helwa Hon Treasurer Martin Scicluna and council member Dr Stanley Farrugia Randon showed the visitors around the tower.

The Red Tower had played a crucial role in protecting Malta against quarantine-breakers during a plague outbreak in 1675-76.



The Hon Julia Farrugia Portelli, Minister of Tourism, Parliamentary Secretary Stefan Zrinzo Azzopardi, Chairman of the Malta Tourism Authority Dr Gavin Gulia, Product Development Directorate Architect Kevin Fsadni, Mellieha Local Council members Annabelle Brincat Stellini and Ivan Castillo, Din I-Art Helwa council members Maria Grazia Cassar, Martin Scicluna and Dr Stanley Farrugia Randon, adopting social distancing outside the tower.

STORMY WATERS

In February 2020, country singer Marty Rivers contacted Din I-Art Helwa to enquire about the possibility of filming a video at Wignacourt Tower for his new release "Stormy Waters." Tower curator Martin Vella met Marty Rivers at the tower. The lyrics of the song narrate St Paul's shipwreck which occurred, according to tradition, in the vicinity of this tower. *The video is now available on the YouTube page <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOS5GJqEaWQ>*



BID TO WIN BACK TIP AT DAHLET IX-XMAJJAR

Din I-Art Helwa is trying to recover a piece of land formerly used as a dump.

This land lies in a Natura 2000 site, close to the White Tower at Armier. Indigenous African Tamarisk trees were planted in the area by HSBC employees last year, as part of their involvement in the White Tower restoration project of which HSBC is a major sponsor. Din I-Art Helwa volunteer Martin Vella co-ordinated the project and oversaw the planting. These trees are well adapted to harsh and saline conditions and will help consolidate the ground with their roots. Other coastal plants are also taking root and it is planned that more trees will be added in the near future.



The landscaping and regeneration project around Ta' Xutu Tower at Wied iz-Zurrieq has been completed. This project was carried out with the support of The Malta Airport Foundation. The exposed aggregate paving gives the area a natural feel, and informally placed cubes provide seating while echoing the existing rocky outcrops in Prof. Ruben Paul Borg's design. Immediate past president Maria Grazia Cassar co-ordinated the project on behalf of Din I-Art Helwa, aided by the Ta' Xutu team of volunteers who participated actively in the planting of indigenous plants in the regeneration of the area. *(Photo courtesy of Chiara Cassar)*

ViGiLO
People

People

*Matthew Axisa*

Ever since I was a child, I always enjoyed the architectural heritage of my home town, Haż-Żebbug. From the young age of eight years old, I used to go to the beautiful small chapel of St Roque with my late grandfather Michael Bonnici, who served as its custodian for many years. As a young adult, I then chose architectural studies and obtained a bachelor's degree in construction engineering.

I joined Din l-Art Helwa when my grandfather passed away, which left a big void in my life as I have so many fond memories of him, and I succeeded him as custodian of the chapel. Continuing in his footsteps I approached Din l-Art Helwa on the renovation of the exterior of the chapel, and these works were completed in March 2020.

My voluntary work as the custodian of this chapel gives me great satisfaction in keeping the heritage of Haż-Żebbug alive, as it serves as a small museum with an exhibition on the history of the locality. My mission is to keep the chapel well-maintained for future generations, and also to follow my grandfather's example of becoming a respectful and hard-working resident of the local community of Haż-Żebbug.

Matthew Axisa is the custodian of St Roque chapel

Paolo Ferrelli

I love history and so it was only obvious for me to join an organisation involved in safeguarding Maltese heritage.

Being a warden of a property is a really big commitment, especially in a place like the Garden of Rest that needs a constant presence due to the tasks related to the garden. I really like sharing my time with the other volunteers. I am part of a very nice team of more than twenty persons. Spreading knowledge of the garden amongst our visitors is the most enjoyable part of the task.

Recently we worked hard to present an introductory video (available on YouTube) to visitors. It is in eight languages and it was quite an effort to get it done since all was done on a voluntary basis! Presently I am coordinating another project creating audio guides for visitors who want to go around the garden by themselves. On a personal note, I am also writing a book which will illustrate the garden in depth.

I am a young, retired man – I served the Italian Army for thirty years having been posted overseas in the Middle East, Africa and finally in Malta where I served as an embedded military instructor within the AFM Third Regiment Plant Troop in Pembroke. In the three years when I resided in Malta, I also met my Maltese wife. After having resided in Italy for almost ten years, we moved back to Malta five years ago.

Paolo Ferrelli has been the warden of the Msida Bastion Garden of Rest since 2016



Tara Cassar

Last year I joined Din l-Art Helwa's Heritage and Environmental Protection team. I was already familiar with Din l-Art Helwa's efforts, after having been a youth volunteer in the past. As an architect with an interest in planning, I felt I could contribute further to these efforts through my profession.

As one may imagine we face many challenges on the planning front. The work undertaken varies from fighting individual cases of particular concern, to taking on a more proactive approach by proposing key policy changes since many issues we face today generally stem from having a flawed planning system.

Of course, our principle aim is to safeguard the country's heritage and improve the state of our natural and built environment. There's a lot that needs to be done to achieve this. Addressing at least some of the major flaws and loopholes that our planning system is riddled with, would certainly be a good place to start.

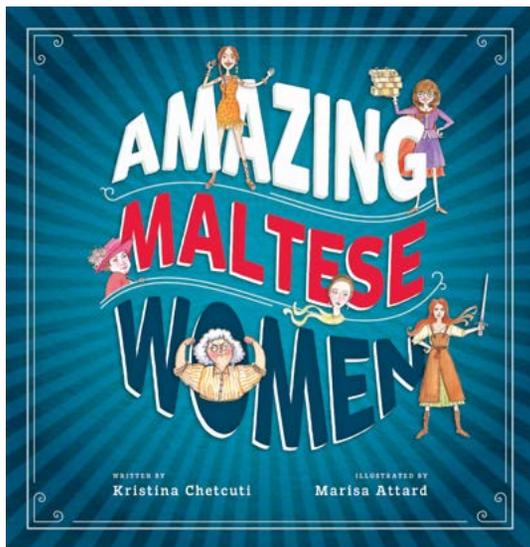
Working with an eNGO like Din l-Art Helwa is an opportunity to do something tangible against the destructive impact of the barrage of over-development that has sadly gripped Malta and Gozo.

It's encouraging to be able to carry out this work with a group of like-minded professionals who are equally committed to doing all they can to provide Malta and Gozo with the planning system it needs, as well as ensuring that our heritage and environment are given the protection they deserve.

Tara Cassar is an architect with a special interest in planning policies and legislation.

A LIGHT COATING to a Serious Message

By Clare Vassallo



There is a trend in literary fiction focused on putting women back into history. Last year Madeline Miller's *Circe*, and this year's *A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes (shortlisted for the 2020 Women's Prize for Fiction), follow in the wake of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*.



Kristina Chetcuti,
Amazing Maltese Women,
with illustrations by
Marisa Attard, Merlin
Publishers, 2020, pp. 40

All of these novels address the ancient Trojan War and its aftermath, that is Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* as they re-tell those events from the point of view of the women – those women who were left out of the telling of those events, of those stories which shaped Western culture. Yes, we hear about Helen and her beauty, Penelope and her patience, Circe and her wicked spells, and the nymph Calypso and her charms. But we can only know them from the outside, from the perspective of those who look at the women.

These novelists have made the women speak from their own points of view and what they say is subversive in that it turns the tales around and gives us another angle on those 'historic' events.

Just as the silenced women of the Trojan War and Ulysses' Mediterranean encounters are given voice, so are the women of Malta granted presence and visibility through the recent book written by Kristina Chetcuti, illustrated by Marisa Attard, and published by Merlin Publishers in 2019. *Amazing Maltese Women* brings women back in where they belong – firmly within the history of Malta.





“using words and images to name those women of the past ... and to put them back within our joint history where they belong. This book goes some way towards filling in those gaps in our Maltese history books.”

They say history is written by the victor. The fact that women have been written out of our history makes us think of the relationship between the sexes in Malta in terms of war – but who would want that?

Men had the power of the word, and women were generally denied it. If women don't speak for themselves, it seems, they will be written out of history. So, here's the answer. Two Maltese women today using words and images to name those women of the past, to give them a voice, to shine a light on their achievements in a range of spheres and to put them back within our joint history where they belong. Chetcuti and Attard have done precisely that.

This book goes some way towards filling in those gaps in our Maltese history books. It also provides young girls with real role models from our own past, role models from every sphere of life, from politics and newspaper editing to sports and medicine. It also tells our boys that women have had the courage and conviction to swim against the tides of the times to be able to achieve their ambitions.

The message is certainly important, serious and timely. However, the mode in which it is addressed is deceptively light-hearted. The visual presentation with comic-like speech bubbles and Marisa Attard's delightful drawings brings these women to life in an amusing manner. It is the sort of format that appeals to children, who are its intended readers, as it looks like a graphic novel or comic strip. Yet, with a blend of skill, humour and creativity each of the pages is filled with detail that goes beyond the unfolding of each of these lives.

Kristina Chetcuti brings in so many historical contextual details that the readers take in much more than they realise – Joan Abela's work in the Notarial Archives, for instance is elaborated with interesting details about the documents that notaries produce and the lives they describe, Mary Ellul and the lives she saved in WWII where the reader gets to see her as a sort of super-woman is embellished with all sorts of details about the war, the Air-Raid Siren, the shelters, and so on, added in.

‘The more we understand our past, the better we can make our future’, says Tina, the ‘Prehistoric Maltese Woman’, born 5,600 years ago. The arrangement of the book is interesting. The authors decided against a chronological development and in fact we don't encounter Tina, the first Maltese woman, until somewhere in the middle of the book.

This is a good idea as each woman inhabits her double-page spread according to her own particular achievement. And the selection of skills, talents and ambitions that each of these women brings is inspiring – from Mrs Manfrè's dressmaking which led her to create her own fashion business, to Princess Poutiatine Tabone's role in bringing Ballet to Malta, to Esther Azzopardi as the first Maltese person to referee a FIFA U-17 World Cup game, to Agatha Barbara the first woman President of Malta, Amy Camilleri Zahra a prosthetic user turned activist for Disability Rights, Karmen Azzopardi a highly acclaimed actor ... joined by a medieval blacksmith, a Baroque artist who was a nun, a WWII undercover agent, an important newspaper editor, an amazing opera singer, a welfare doctor, a hospice creator, and a journalist. Sadly, Malta's most outspoken and fearless journalist, Daphne Caruana Galizia, who appears on the last page was silenced for writing about governance and corruption.

What is it that made these particular Maltese women not just important, but ‘amazing’? This deceptively light-hearted book answers that question in full. And, I suspect, if it ever goes into a second edition it will surely include another double page spread on Malta's amazing Superintendent of Public Health, Professor Charmaine Gauci. ■

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**LOOKING FOR A
WEEKEND BREAK
SOMEWHERE
SPECIAL IN MALTA
THIS SUMMER?**



The historic lighthouse at Delimara was built in the 1850s to offer safe passage to Malta's harbours, to ships coming to the island from Suez and North Africa.

It has been restored by Din l-Art Helwa and today it offers visitor accommodation with an excellent location over the sea and close to the fishing villages of Marsaxlokk and Marsascula.

Originally, the building was lived in by the lighthouse keepers and it had space for two families. Today it is divided into two apartments that can accommodate up to ten persons separately or together. It has stunning views from its roof and the surrounding coast offers excellent bathing waters nearby.

This heritage property was entrusted to Din l-Art Helwa by its previous owner the Malta Maritime Authority, and the first restoration took place around ten years ago with the support of GasanMamo Insurance. More recently, further necessary restoration works were supported by Xlokk Local Action Group Foundation.

For further information and bookings
contact the Din l-Art Helwa offices on
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