

It is a truth universally acknowledged that any city that will become a European Capital of Culture must be in want of new buildings. In Malta, it was decided that the activities leading up to Valletta's turn in 2018 should include the entire country, and not just the capital city alone. For this reason, we took the opportunity to learn more about the architecture scene of this island nation. Guest editors Lisa Gwen Baldacchino and Simone Vella Lenicker explain more about its history and recent projects, opportunities and threats, and why every Maltese architect is assigned a number.

## Maxing out Malta

TEXT: SIMONE VELLA LENICKER

In a special edition of the *Architectural Review* published in July 1969, Professor J. Quentin Hughes, architect, historian, educator, author of three books on Malta, and at the time Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering at the University of Malta, wrote:

'Malta is a test case of whether our generation, with its increasing leisure, mobility and taste for foreign travel, is capable of dealing sensitively and intelligently with an environment it takes over as a playground, or whether it only knows how to exploit such an environment commercially until its charm and character have gone, and then move on to do the same elsewhere. There is still time to save Malta, though only just; and the first step towards saving it must be to value what there is to be saved. If the various authorities on the island, the developers who hope to profit from its new role and the visitors who come to it from abroad, were fully aware what a unique and wonderful place it is, public opinion would begin to build up in favour of intelligent conversation and control against the short-sighted exploitation; for a strong public opinion is the basis of all successful official action... the architecture of the Maltese islands has just time to recover from its rather unstable beginning, and to eradicate its initial mistakes, which have largely been due to inexperience. The search must continue for a valid architecture of today... which will meet without disaster the enormous, indeed explosive, building programme necessary for Malta's future economy.'

It is fitting to use this as the starting point for this discussion on Malta, as it marked a turning point in the state of its built environment. The nation's newly achieved independence in 1964 brought with it the need for affordable housing, new infrastructure, and a

focus on tourism, which has since grown into one of the country's most important economic sectors. The built environment is a reflection of the mood of society, and this struggle for growth is evident in our urban landscape. On the one hand, there has been an increasing awareness of the value of Malta's immense corpus of historical buildings, from the pre-historic megalithic temples which are claimed to be the oldest free-standing structures in the world, to its fortified 16th-century capital city, Valletta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to the period between the 1940s and the late 1960s, which left a significant legacy of buildings in a local interpretation of the modernist and international architectural idioms. On the other, while there have been a number of contemporary works worthy of note, some of which have also achieved international recognition, economic concerns have, more often than not, had the upper hand, with large construction projects that have been mostly devoid of architectural quality. Many would, in fact, argue that Malta has collectively bowed its head to the lust for economic growth, with little or no attention being given to the quality of our urban landscape.

This is certainly not an experience which is unique to Malta, however, this must be seen in the context of its population density; with just over 423,000 inhabitants occupying an area of 316 square kilometres, Malta is the smallest and most densely populated of the EU member states; it is more comparable to a small city in this sense. Over-development is evident, eating away into open spaces and countryside, with newer streetscapes appearing haphazard and chaotic, the infrastructure stretched to its limits and historic cores threatened by insensitive development on their fringes, and sometimes even within. This year saw the largest ever pro-environment national protest

take place in Valletta, instigated by a series of political decisions over the last decade which have facilitated further exploitation of our limited resources and resulted in the uglification of significant areas of our towns and villages.

This drive for economic growth has also manifested itself in the professional sphere. The *perit* is an architect and civil engineer by training. It is indeed telling to note that between 1945 and 1988, the number of warranted *periti* totalled 230; this total nearly doubled to 423 by 2001; and has again more than doubled to over 850 today, resulting in an average of two *periti* per thousand population, the third-highest concentration in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The growth of the profession is a clear and natural manifestation of the growth of the construction industry. With this, specialization has also increased, and legislation is about to be amended to create separate registers for civil engineers and architects, thus further defining the role of each within the profession.

In 2007, the *Kamra tal-Periti* (Chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers) embarked on a quality agenda and successfully managed to place architecture on the national agenda through its seminal and award-winning publication, 'The Urban Challenge – Our Quality of Life and the Built Environment', which constituted an urgent call for a vision for a more sustainable development of the built and rural environment, and to endorse the need for quality in design as an essential tool for the nation's economic and social development. Nevertheless, it also acknowledged that real commitment to this cause would have to start with the profession recognizing its own faults that have also led to the current situation. This document received recognition from the three main political parties, and albeit slowly, some of the issues highlighted therein are being addressed.



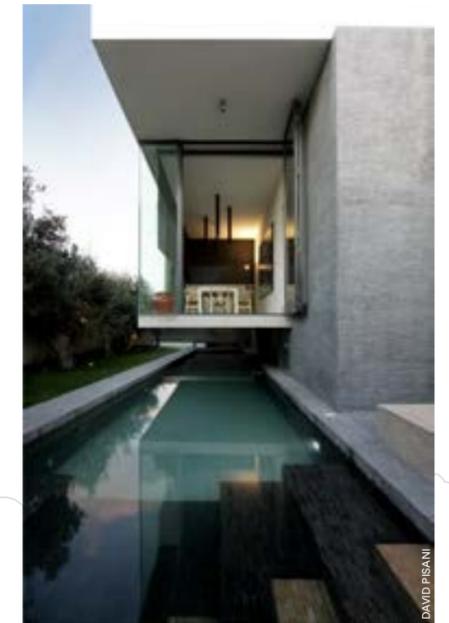
**LISA GWEN BALDACCHINO**  
Lisa is an arts manager and cultural operator currently heading the Malta office of the Creative Europe programme in Valletta, which is hosted by the Culture Directorate. Having a background in History of Art and Cultural management, she has been involved in the organization of several large-scale events, such as Malta Design Week. Formerly a writer and sub-editor at *The Times of Malta*, she continues to write about contemporary culture and the visual arts. She mostly gravitates towards the roles of editor and curator, perhaps because they are somewhat interchangeable: each deals with space and its distribution, with aesthetics, design, interpretation, and experience. Both 'create' images and visuals, and deal with strong narratives.



**SIMONE VELLA LENICKER**  
Simone is a *perit* (architect and civil engineer) by profession. Since 2007, she has been actively involved in the *Kamra tal-Periti* (Chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers) and has held the posts of Vice President and Honorary Secretary, as well as leading various committees and working groups. For over seven years, she has been the editor of its quarterly journal, *The Architect*. The mission of the *Kamra tal-Periti* is to support members of the profession in achieving excellence in their practice of architecture and engineering, in the interest of the community. It is also delegated with the duty of ensuring good professional conduct by all *periti* in Malta.



↑ Still Kinetic is a residential project by MJMDA comprising a fully detached villa conceived as an integrated design icon fully connected to the mobile devices and vehicles we use, itself becoming a docking station and a metaphorical spaceship. A sleek mass floats atop the lower levels. It sits still, but whirls through the cosmos.



→ Hanging Home was designed by Chris Briffa Architects. Built on a tiny plot of 250 m<sup>2</sup> with only 40 per cent permissible development, this semi-detached home was an exercise in juggling strict urban planning regulations – its cantilevers were deployed to gain considerably more space and provide much needed shade during the hot summer months.

Last year, for example, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) published a draft Design Policy,<sup>2</sup> which places urban design policy and guidance at its core, while simultaneously producing a manual of good design principles in terms of quality-oriented and energy-conscious design. The regard to the existing context and its enrichment constitutes an important initial premise, coupled with the respect for the street as a critical spatial scale and a regard to qualitative performance criteria, as opposed to a quantitative-based approach. This was also the first time that a planning policy document has been drafted with the involvement of academics and professionals. In parallel, it has demanded that government and the MEPA take a firm stand against those development typologies or characteristics that have to date been detrimental to our streetscapes. Albeit at the time of writing still in draft stage, it promises to result in significant positive changes which will hopefully begin to be manifest over the next decade or so, if implemented well.

Valletta will be hosting the title of European Capital of Culture in 2018, together with a partner Dutch city, Leeuwarden. The title covers the entire Maltese territory, which should presumably be participating in the cultural programme, thus involving as many communities as possible. The advent of this milestone has already set in motion a number of initiatives, such as the Cultural Mapping project, which aims to create an information database on the cultural use of public and private spaces across the islands, in the form of an interactive online map and an academic publication. The Valletta Design Cluster is set to be established within the Old Abattoir, in the midst of a thus far neglected residential area of Valletta, and will involve the creation

of a creative industry cluster, addressing the needs for business development, legal support, collaboration, and capacity building. Various aspects of the individual interventions are being closely followed by an Evaluation and Monitoring Steering Committee, which has embarked on a five-year research programme together with the involvement of academia analysing, among other matters, the socio-spatial impact resulting from these projects.

Individual public projects have also been important in the regeneration of various areas that were crying out for investment, although there is a lot to be said about Malta's complete lack of design competition culture and a public procurement process that is entirely focused on cost rather than competence and quality. Public projects have formed an important part of the political parties' electoral manifestos, each promising to embark on a programme of works which will bring more employment and better amenities to various localities. There are numerous projects in the pipeline, including the renovation of the old Valletta Market, the establishment of the Malta International Contemporary Art Space, and MUŻA, the flagship project for the European Capital of Culture title, which involves the creation of a new museum of fine arts.

One cannot but mention the Valletta City Gate Project by Renzo Piano Building Workshop, officially inaugurated earlier this year. Fraught with controversy, it brought to the fore the innate Maltese nostalgia for preserving the past and rejecting that which may appear, at first glance, to be alien to the general perception of what is acceptable in our historic centres. Yet, while looking back is essential, decision-makers and architects should do so with an alternative eye. There is so much to learn on our very doorstep.

Humility, balance, restraint, sympathy, allowance for greenery, and our hallmark limestone are all important elements to retain from the past. Of course, this does not call for pastiche pseudo-styles, blatant copies, or more revivals, however, an appreciation and perhaps inspiration from buildings built back in a time when architecture simply had good manners would not be amiss. The young generation of architects seems to have understood this, and is striving to achieve these ideals.

Back to Hughes, who together with Peter Richardson, then also a lecturer at the Faculty, concluded the AR special with an essay called 'Malta, Future', and closed by making a statement that is as equally relevant now as it was then. 'This survey is concerned with ways in which Malta can be preserved, because what it has now is its greatest value and quite unrepeatable. The unthinkable alternative is that Malta should choose to neglect her heritage and join the development rat race. Yet she is already trying to do this. If Malta accepts laissez-faire development, the whole island will be obliterated by buildings. And this will take very little time. It will happen unless the planners, architects and the legislators take action very soon. Malta could lead Europe into a new era of environmental and cultural re-evaluation, or it could become, through a laissez-faire attitude, just another blighted area of exploitation.'

The author would like to give special thanks to Dr Antoine Zammit and Perit Edward Said for their contributions.

<sup>1</sup> According to the 2014 Sector Study carried out by the Architects' Council of Europe, Italy has 2.5 architects per thousand population, Portugal 2, and Denmark 1.8, down to Slovakia with 0.3 architects per thousand population. One must, however, keep in mind the quality of the profession in Malta as opposed to the survey which reports primarily on architects.

<sup>2</sup> Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards, published by MEPA in collaboration with Dr Antoine Zammit.



↑ This Sliema post-war town house renovation project (2012) was carried out by Valentino Architects, one of the youngest firms established this year. The brief called for an extension of the living quarters and the addition of an art studio at roof level, whilst at the same time satisfying the client's preoccupation with natural light and ventilation.



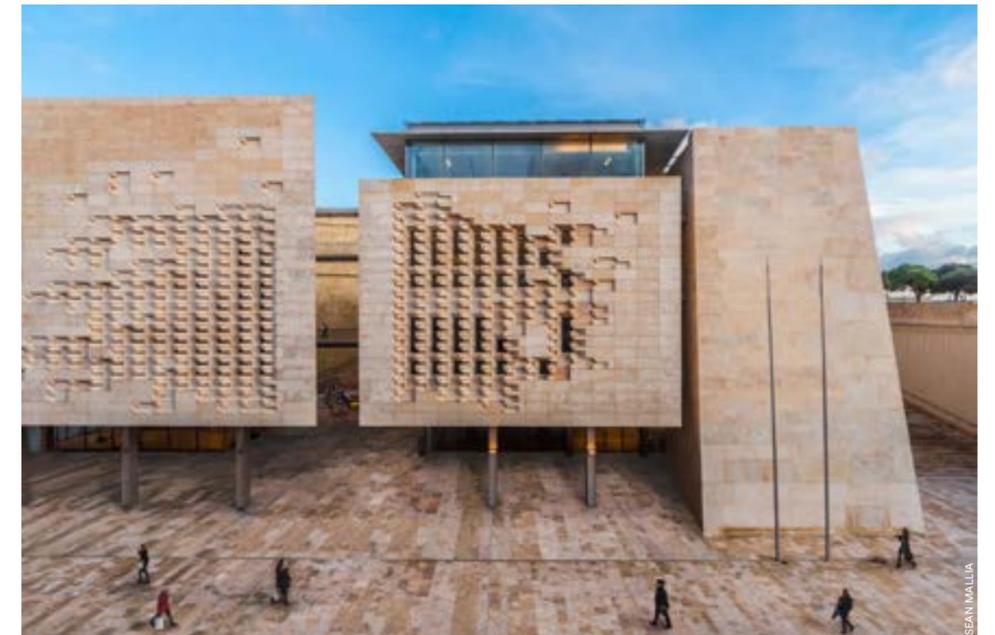
↑ X-House (2011–2014) by Forward Architects is set on a south-facing promontory, encompassing panoramic views from east to west. Occupying a minimal footprint, yet maximizing internal space, it consists of three storeys: an underground level is carved out of the rock of the hilltop, while the two storeys above ground mirror one another across a sliding parallel plane, outlined with exposed steel trim, raw set concrete, and the namesake 'X'.



↑ Rediffusion House (1958) in Gwardamangia, designed by Carmelo Falzon, was one of the first public buildings to embrace modernism. In 2006, the board of the Public Broadcasting Services (PBS) submitted an application to demolish the building, to be replaced with a residential and commercial development. The *Kamra tal-Periti* objected publicly, describing it as an important modern building which should be saved for future generations to appreciate. Responding to this pressure from the architects, the government withdrew the application.



← St Joseph Church in Manikata (1962–1974) is one of Richard England's most iconic works. Designed in 1962, and pre-empting the requisites of church design as laid down in the Second Vatican Council, Manikata was visualized as a symbol of a new spirit. Its innovative forms, however, still recall its origins and spirit of place, making it a church for today, designed on the foundations of yesterday – a form of continuity within change. Its departure from traditional baroque forms caused havoc with the ecclesiastical authorities, which initially refused to accept the design. England's intention was to produce a building that was to read as a house for the community rather than God's residence.

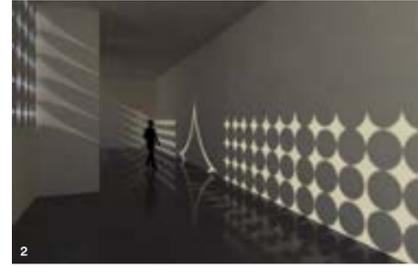


→ The Valletta City Gate project (2009–2015) by Renzo Piano Building Workshop takes in the complete reorganization of the principal entrance to the Maltese capital of Valletta. The project comprises four parts: the city gate and its site immediately outside the city walls, the design for an open-air theatre 'machine' within the ruins of the former Royal Opera House, the construction of a new Parliament building, and the landscaping of the ditch. The Parliament, shown here, is made up of two massive blocks in stone that are balanced on slender columns to give the building a sense of lightness, the whole respecting the line of the existing layout of streets. Creating a porous urban block was at the forefront of the building's volumetric design. The two blocks are separated by a central courtyard, which also serves as the main entrance to the building.

# Underneath the surface

TEXT: KATRINA GAUCI

The European Architecture Students Assembly (EASA) workshops in Malta were a complete manifestation of exchange and collaboration. From all over Europe, architecture students defied heavy rains, sleep deprivation, and comfortable beds to create thought-provoking installations in the vaults of Valletta, which were opened up exclusively for this event.



Linking Malta

Linking Malta

**1**  
**ROPE PAVILION**  
The aim of this workshop was to build a pavilion related directly to Malta's maritime history, reinterpreting the sail form with typically used rope and simple forms that float with the wind. Linking present and past, the original idea was to reuse rope that has already travelled on the sea, giving it a second life by exposing it as a memorial of sailing culture. People from around the world connected through the workshop by linking these ropes and a hexagonal base structure together. Working with large sections of wood, it was important to achieve cohesion in the crafting of this pavilion at the end. The rope was eventually woven through six inclined eight-metre columns, tensioned by a central chain and wire cables at each column.

Tutors Rémi Buscot (FR), Willem Coenen (BE), Delphine Levy (FR)  
Info [www.facebook.com/Rope-Pavilion-1383971928568465/timeline](http://www.facebook.com/Rope-Pavilion-1383971928568465/timeline)

**2**  
**PARADOCS**  
This workshop went in search of the spatial and cultural implications of the landmark of today. Valletta is a cultural heritage site in its entirety. All aspects of architecture – thinking, designing, building – are framed by conservation laws and policies that protect the built environment. How can the city grow, and what would be its new point of reference? Through a series of discussions and design exercises, the workshop explored the link between respect for the old and the need and excitement for the new. It allowed participants to create a future for Valletta by questioning its current stance on the monumentality of buildings and the validity of monuments as a whole. 'Paradocs' collaborated with a local organization, Valletta Design Cluster, in considering the future of the Biċċerija in Valletta. Using the building as a case study, the workshop was given the chance to directly influence the future of the space, and ultimately impact the city's urban landscape.

Tutors Anastasija Spasovska (MK), Sorcha Maguire (IE), Gordan Vitevski (MK) Info [www.facebook.com/weareparadocs](http://www.facebook.com/weareparadocs), [youtu.be/05u-sYdKB04](http://youtu.be/05u-sYdKB04)

**3**  
**INVENT**  
INVENT a shape and uses. The workshop began with a discussion between participants and tutors, a brainstorming that focused on the spaces within which they wished to fabricate and install inflatable structures. This phase also attempted to introduce participants to the fundamentals of computational design, in order to create customized forms that could then be created on site. INFLATE it! Once decisions were taken on what to create, the team moved on to the details, starting production on-site by cutting the pattern resulting from the geometries and shapes, taping it together, and finally inflating it using the main tool, air. INHABIT inflatables. All installations aimed to be a catalyst for interaction, inside or outside of it. The team and users were inspired by the surroundings to all interact together in new spaces.

Tutors Paul Poinet (FR), Fabrice Wack (FR) Info [www.facebook.com/InventInflateInhabite](http://www.facebook.com/InventInflateInhabite)

**4**  
**PRESS PLAY**  
The act of playing, whether considered as an art or a sport, has always been a crucial aspect of social life. The Romans played Ur, Snakes and Ladders originated in India, and the Chinese invented playing cards. Similarly to architecture, games are a sociocultural manifestation of an epoch. Cooperation, communication, strategy, and interaction are terminologies which exist in both gaming and architectural discourse. This workshop sought to animate public spaces across the city, both metaphorically and literally, through the creation of interactive installations and architectural performances which embody the spirit of play. The world of interactive design was introduced to participants from a very practical perspective. Thrown into the deep, students learned about physical programming using the Arduino open-source platform, a microprocessor used by hobbyists, developers, architects, and designers, as it provides a quick and easy way to prototype kinetic installations (pictured here is 'The Gibberish Machine'). The workshop was amongst a number of technological workshops powered by MITA.

Tutors William Bondin (MT), Chris Leung (UK), Francois Mangion (MT) Info <http://www.interactive-architecture.org/press-play-interaction-design-workshop.html>

**5**  
**INFO STRUCTURES**  
The disciplines of construction, programming, and structural performance were the focus of this workshop, to produce a parasitical installation that provided a sensorial and intimate architectural performance through the audio-visual representation of energy in the immediate environment. A series of tensegrity modules were combined together to form a permeable wall at the top of St. Andrew's Trench. This used intelligent sensor nodes which could convert mechanical movement (wind) into energy and information, subsequently creating a structure that moves and lights up of its own accord. The workshop was tutored by alumni from the IAAC (Barcelona) and exposed students to an entirely different form of architectural education, combining three cornerstone researches together with the three key roles of energy enhancement, sensing, and audio-visual output.

Tutors Robert McKaye (CT), Ramin Shambayati (CT) Info [www.facebook.com/infostructures2015](http://www.facebook.com/infostructures2015)

**6**  
**AN UNEXPECTED ATLAS OF VALLETTA**  
Valletta is a city which was new to most EASA participants. Although online information can give a first impression, it is necessary to travel through and observe the city to truly understand it. The goal of this workshop was to map this missing, slightly subjective and sentimental information, and produce EASA's very own unplanned and unexpected atlas. This workshop saw the culmination of several artistic interpretations by the participants in a final book. The purpose of the exercise was to create a newly mapped Valletta through unorthodox means. The mapping was not intended to be accurate, but was instead tailored to the direct individual experience of each participant. Together, the group created new perspectives of the city, based on what they saw, heard, and experienced in the various spaces around the grid.

Tutors Jolein Bergers (BE), Sofia Devriendt (BE) Info [www.facebook.com/anunexpectedatlas](http://www.facebook.com/anunexpectedatlas)

**7**  
**BETONBOOT**  
This design and construction workshop allowed participants to produce their own concrete boat, learning the theory behind concrete shell construction, the spatial qualities and requirements of such a structure, its behaviour in the water, and the loads it can carry. The boats were constructed in a ditch using sand for formwork, a specific concrete mix, and chicken wire for flexible reinforcement. This hands-on experience gave the students the perfect opportunity to merge theory with construction. Five boats with varying forms were ultimately launched at Marsamxett Harbour.

Tutors Melchior Hoesli (CH), Guillaume Stark (CH) Info [www.facebook.com/betonboot](http://www.facebook.com/betonboot)

**8**  
**ANTIROOM II**  
'Antiroom II' is a floating space, an unreachable surface, accessible only by swimming or by boat. The wooden structure creates a space that is separated from the vastness of the unlimited sea, its centre defined as a small, secure pool of water. Islands have always had a great cultural significance, creating a refuge space. The workshop interpreted this by creating a space where one can lie and feel at home, while being light and gentle as it floats, with instability, on the water. One can enter it, and contemplate its structure. It is a physical symbol to welcome and accept anyone. All cultures without exceptions. It can float and move slowly away, as a new isolated world, in the sea.

Tutors Ahmad el Mad (BG), Matteo Goldoni (IT) Info [www.facebook.com/Antiroom](http://www.facebook.com/Antiroom)

**9**  
**AMSTERDAM EXPRESSIONISM**  
This workshop was inspired by the international expressionist architecture of the Amsterdam School, with a vision to apply its concepts of masonry construction in a very different environment, using an alternative material. Students worked closely with Maltese *għebja* (stoneware) and local sculptor Antoine Farrugia, who taught them how to shape and work with limestone. The workshop's challenge was to produce a stone pavilion compatible with a historically important, not just from a practical perspective, but also socially, spatially, and conceptually. Ultimately, a 2.5-metre-high watchtower with an elevated internal platform and light-permeable walls was produced in Hastings Garden. A reflection of the Gardjola, the design merges Valletta's military past with the city's modern architectural interventions. Aided by a local builder, the students worked for two weeks cutting, shaping, laying, and levelling each stone. The workshop was made possible by the support of the Works Department and Hal Mann Vella Ltd.

Tutors Christian Sluijmer (NL), Carlyn Simoen (NL), Frank Reitsma (NL) Info [www.facebook.com/amsterdamexpressionism](http://www.facebook.com/amsterdamexpressionism)

**10**  
**KNITWIT**  
This workshop produced a tensile shading structure using circular knitting machines and yarn. These knitted, hourglass-shaped components varied in length, width, height, density, and translucency. Each component was connected at both ends to form a cohesive double-curved unit. The final piece became a space-filling geometry that linked various levels of the counter-guard together, strategically placed to maximize its three-dimensional presence. 'Knitwit' is the brainchild of alumni from the ITKE in Stuttgart, and it applied learned principles and design strategies to a practical exercise within a limited time. One of the prototypes from this workshop can be seen outside the MEPA offices in Floriana. The workshop was sponsored by Lang Yarns and Addi (DE).

Tutors Ansis Sinke (LV), Yuliya Baranovskaya (RU), Annie Locke Scherer (US) Info [www.facebook.com/knitwiteasa015](http://www.facebook.com/knitwiteasa015)

# Maltese balancing act

TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER



↑ Looking up the lightwell and solar chimney of the zero-energy family dwelling by Studjurban



↑ Interior design of rental apartments by ARCHi+



↑ Interior design of rental apartments by ARCHi+



↑ Ggantija Temples Visitor Centre by DTR



↑ Helena's Villa by Grech & Vinci



↑ Town house in Siggiewi by Atelier Maison



↑ Helena's Villa by Grech & Vinci



↑ Town house in Siggiewi by Atelier Maison



↑ Representing Malta's younger generation are Paula Agius, Antoine Zammit, Etienne Magri, Simon Grech, and Richard Borg

Despite the many cranes and all the building activity throughout Malta, it must be somewhat unrewarding to be an architect here. Not just because there are so many architects, but due to the dense urban fabric and historical context that require modesty – even invisibility – on complex plots. The most lavish apartments are hidden behind monumental facades; the most intricate floor plans go unseen behind blind walls. Yet there is also a lot that makes it one of the most exciting professions on Malta. The ingenuity needed to squeeze a full programme onto a small plot demands talent and craftsmanship. Themes like tourism, the environment, traffic congestion, and the upcoming Valletta European Capital of Culture (2018), which requires new cultural infrastructure that is now in development, place architects at the heart of political debate. 'The old generation of architects cannot solve today's problems.'

Since there is no official 'neutral' ground on Malta, like an architecture centre, the youngest generation of architects meet at the office of Architecture Project (AP) for a conversation about their practices and ideas. This is actually a very suitable location. Many of these architects started their careers here; AP's research into monumental architecture and the nature of its projects in general have made AP a moral compass to everyone present. Needless to say, they have since gone their separate ways, but still keep track of each other. Malta is not that big of an island, and they all followed the same course at the same university. They can define each other by their warrant numbers, which indicate the year of graduation. Simone Vella Lenicker, one of the guest editors who graduated in the late '90s, is number 398 (of all architects to have ever graduated on Malta). Paula Agius is 796, which is an indication that she graduated very recently (2012).

↑ Ggantija Temples Visitor Centre by DTR

As we talk about their take on contemporary architecture, it is evident that they like one another well enough. Etienne Magri of DTR Architects (founded 2002) is the most experienced at the table, one of their latest completed projects being the Ggantija Visitor Centre in Gozo. At the moment, they are finishing off the restoration of Fort St Angelo in Birgu, and are also working on the very prestigious MUŻA (National Museum of Fine Arts), to open in 2018 when Valletta celebrates its year as European Capital of Culture. Richard Borg is one of the founders of ARCHi+ (2010). With sixteen people, all in their late twenties, the office offers the complete package; commissions range from redecorating tourist apartments and private houses to managing the finishes of Renzo Piano's Valletta Parliament Building (an assignment that helped them specialize in co-ordination between structure, M&E, and finishes). Simon Grech is one of three partners at Grech & Vinci (2009), originally founded with Andrew Vinci, and recently joined by Alan Galea (2010). In the space of a few years, the firm has grown to nine architects with a view to expand further. They are currently restructuring to accommodate this growth and rebrand themselves as Model. The firm's expertise lies in maximizing light, space, and flexibility in their projects, and their philosophy aligns with the traditional *perit* (see p. 40), whose ambition is to approach architecture holistically. Paula Agius started Atelier Maison recently (2014), together with Katja

Abela, and focuses primarily on interior design and (life)style. Antoine Zammit works on urban design issues with Studjurban (2012), plus architectural projects focused on sustainable rehabilitation and zero-energy buildings. In his words, 'Everything here is fragmented. We need new ideas to integrate traditional knowledge into today's challenges, and to find new strategies.'

Building has become more complex in the last decade, they believe. Building heights require more technical knowledge of construction. The market is changing, too. Small inner-city houses become medium-rise apartment blocks. The traditional courtyard house model gives way to houses with front and back gardens. Zammit asks, 'How can we introduce this new typology in a sustainable way? Not only in terms of space, but also in relation to the local climate?' Grech agrees, adding, 'We can learn much from tradition regarding natural ventilation through high ceilings, small windows, and thick walls, for example. But that's not how we build today.' Zammit elaborates, saying, 'We need to be more context-aware. Even here, on Malta, where the cities seem one continuous fabric without end or pause, we have different contexts. If we don't adapt, we will only increase the number of vacant buildings, which is already rising here on Malta. To do so, we need good clients, and to keep them.' In a small society like Malta, it's not easy to contradict your client. Agius continues, 'We know how to maximize

every inch of space, to create "pockets of space" in unexpected corners. The most difficult is not to design the floor plans, but to convince the clients not to maximize on available space, but leave room for light and emptiness.' Magri adds that 'All sites here are awkward and small, and there are always the adjacent plots be take into consideration.'

The problem is not only in the clients. 'Many of us have been educated abroad (post-grad),' Borg explains. 'We have learnt a lot about new technologies and new approaches, but there is little room to implement our knowledge. Uneducated architects are always on the prowl to snatch commissions. The old generation of architects cannot solve today's problems. We are the ones that need to deal with them.' Better and more competitions, both from public and private clients, would be helpful. As Grech remarks, 'Piano & Rogers won a competition to build the Centre Pompidou when they were young, in their early thirties like myself. It is unthinkable that young architects today get similar chances.' Competitions could be a means to innovate and to integrate the latest technological knowledge into building practice. So far, the public authorities are not very supportive of that notion. The Valletta Design Cluster, projected near the new MUŻA in an old abattoir, will be executed by the government's Restoration Directorate. Guest editor Lisa Gwen Baldacchino explains: 'The public needs to be better informed when and how decisions are taken in terms of national infrastructure projects, including which projects are launched as competitions and how juries are selected.'

So what will the future look like? Filling portfolios is not the problem, but planning policy, the environment, tourism, and city planning need serious attention. 'To date we have had no urban design policy,' says Zammit. 'Approving high-rise projects within the committed infrastructure, without studying the immediate and broader context, generates more traffic

problems and destroys committed streetscapes by leaving the smaller houses perpetually in darkness. And we really need to pay more attention to the re-use of existing buildings and to environmental issues. Density is good, but only works well in mixed-use areas that have a good provision of public transport.' Gloomily, Borg adds, 'There is a lack of quality social housing.' Grech continues, 'Topography needs to be contextualized. It's telling that Valletta 2018 has integrated all other cities on Malta in the cultural programme. Malta is not one country, it is one big city, and needs an infrastructure to operate as such.' Agius interjects, remarking, 'Once we have acknowledged that efficient public transport is vital, we could make a start at fighting the crazy amount of cars on the island.' Borg elaborates, saying, 'Presently, we adopt a quantitative approach, not a qualitative and contextualized one. Most of the new building projects are speculative, and they are all about traffic and parking places. Valletta 2018 could take these problems as a starting point, if only to raise awareness.'

Which pretty much sums up the current balancing act of the new Maltese generation. New commissions potentially add a great deal to future urban problems. But what if there are ways to make architecture less obtrusive? For instance, by redoing old houses, redesigning urban plans and regional policies, or filling in impossible plots. Being an architect in Malta can be very challenging indeed. ◀

# An architectural playground

TEXT: LISA GWEN BALDACCHINO

↓ Barrakka Lift, Valletta (2013)



— Farsons  
Brewhouse,  
Mriehel (2012)

↓ Rehabilitation of the Valletta Waterfront (2007)



↓ Pool Pavilion (2006)



↓ Rehabilitation of St Barbara Bastion, Valletta (2011)



↓ Restoration and extension of Casa Perellos, Zejtun (2005)



When I was a child, a playground simply constituted a gravelly plot of vacant land. Swings, slides, or merry-go-rounds were rarely an option. I don't recall any landscaping, nor any benches for accompanying parents or child-minders – just dust, plus a few weeds and wildflowers. Back then, it sufficed.

It takes me a couple of days to realize why I have been carrying the images of my childhood (non-) playground everywhere I go. As with any meaningful conversation, you carry it along with you. And this is the analogy drawn from a recent chat with two of the founding partners of Architecture Project (AP), David Felice and Konrad Buhagiar, and its CEO, Tom Van Malderen.

Stories are best told from the start. Especially when those beginnings are somewhat Cinderella-like, in which a four-man team working from a garage transforms itself into a cluster of multi-skilled professionals working in a multi-level town house cum open-plan studio and laboratory space.

Ultimately, AP's humble inception reflects the Maltese cultural context as well as the sociopolitical environment in which their practice was launched. When AP was formed in the early 1990s, there was little by way of good contemporary architecture, save a few modernist builds dating from the 1950s and '60s. So much so that, from the onset, the firm's endeavour was precisely to work with, discover, introduce, and discuss architecture. Architecture was the project in itself: *un progetto di architettura*.

In this respect, architect Richard England plays an important role in the preamble to this story. England's own practice married international architecture with local/vernacular architecture at a time

when Malta was trying to establish its identity, in its post-independence, post-British period. 'Richard always spoke about the mystery of Architecture with a capital A... Architecture for him was about mass and proportion, light and shade, mystery, that which you do not see....' England was both a mentor and driving force in the firm's formation; he also introduced them to the interdisciplinarity of architecture.

It was, however, not until the late 1990s that AP began to establish its brand. Roughly around the same time, its Valletta office was acquired, and has since been the firm's home of ideas, base to an ever-growing 'cluster' of creative individuals, some of whom, irrespective of education or background, have flourished within an environment which fosters the quest for knowledge and quality.

The word 'cluster' comes up on several occasions during our informal chat. From the start, it was important for AP to be able to build its acumen with people from different schools and nations, yet all possessing a like-mindedness and common passion for architecture and design, which fosters an environment of collaboration. It has maintained a more or less stable size of roughly 50 people from a wide variety of backgrounds for a number of years; it has, however, employed over 300 individuals and numerous interns in a little under 25 years. 'Many moved on to other projects or other commitments, however, the contribution of each and every employee has been valuable and has been treasured.' This is one of the driving forces behind AP's support of the European Architecture Students Assembly 2015 – precisely because it believes in fostering curiosity, in being a platform for debate and innovation, in being

a melting pot of ideas. Interestingly, a number of the participants of EASA 1998 (the first time the assembly took place in Malta), joined AP over the years that followed; some of them are even still in Malta.

David Chipperfield's theme for the 2012 Architecture Biennale – 'Common Ground' – serves to illustrate the weight and importance AP gives to collaboration and internationalization, which ties in nicely with their invitation to participate in last year's edition; the first instance in which Malta was represented in the 'most important architectural exhibition', to use Chipperfield's words.

Participation on international platforms and forums is an added asset for any architecture firm, and something which decidedly sets them apart. Yet what truly distinguishes AP from other architecture firms? David seems to have an explanation. One of AP's first important clients said that he chose to work with AP for three reasons: because they were young, passionate about design, and shared a serious interest and knowledge of heritage and restoration. Those three qualities have, ultimately, defined the direction the office has taken.

In fact, a lot of AP's work is concerned with the preservation and reuse of historic buildings, some dating back over four centuries. They draw much from history, to an extent that AP almost approaches history in a contemporary manner. In its new-build works, it is conscious of the fact that these are not merely buildings for the future, but buildings which will form part of our collective heritage; buildings which become part of the past as soon as they are complete and brought into use. This is the case with the Valletta City Gate project, for instance, where

younger generation of architects, particularly in their communicative skills, as they are closer to the social make up of how a client operates, and can therefore be more in tune with their needs and aspirations. Architects provide clients with an opportunity to build their dreams, however, in this age of information clients often come with a pre-established image of what they want to achieve, a sort of off-the-shelf architecture, where the architect merely becomes the agent through which the client gets what he/she wants. They question whether architects have abdicated their role; whether there is still trust and faith in the profession, and whether they can still create magic through their work.

AP did not start off with a 25-year plan, or a strategy – a lot of its success is down to circumstance and linked to economic growth, the newfound freedom of the '90s, the desire for new things... Nevertheless, AP always wished to leave a legacy, hence the decision to name the firm AP, rather than, for example, something based on any one of the individuals who created it. It wasn't an ambition of theirs to have a big office; it wasn't about size. And yet, today, it has a strong international team of architects and professionals.

AP was once described as a community of thinkers. Whilst younger firms and practices describe them as a 'debating centre' and a 'moral compass'. Does this mean that AP has become a mentor to the younger firms? Has it come full circle, from being mentored by Richard England to mentoring a cluster of architects and budding architects? AP will only be of inspiration to those with whom it shares some common ground. Young firms must develop their

own identities and not emulate AP's work, but the basis is there for all to tap into and transform into their own personal practice.

AP is a vessel in which life and architecture happen: where multiple generations work under one roof; where the digital natives coexist with the cardboard cutters; where vacant plots of land turn into architectural playgrounds. ◀

↓ Architecture Project's studio in Valletta

