

## **'Modernist Monochrome Malta' by Marika Azzopardi and Lisa Gwen Baldacchino**

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*The Chamber of Architects and Din l-Art Helwa have taken the initiative to showcase modernist Maltese architecture in a monochrome exhibition of photos and a publication. **Lisa Gwen Baldacchino and Marika Azzopardi** delve deeper into this architectural legacy.*

There exists in Malta a spate of highly interesting, if somewhat ambiguously 'different' buildings, mostly the result of a construction frenzy spurt that took the country by storm post World War II until the mid-1970s. Most of us do not deign so much as a second glance at the majority of these buildings. Yet, if we had the chance of rediscovering their beauty and understanding the concept behind their creation, we would learn much about the wealth of our architectural heritage that is sadly, and much too frequently, being slowly left to disintegrate, if not worse.

Alberto Miceli Farrugia, curator of the exhibition, co-editor with Petra Bianchi, of the *Modernist Malta: the Architectural Legacy*, and outgoing chairman of the committee for the Built Environment of the Chamber of Architects, speaks about this exhibition: "This project sees the Chamber of Architects and Din l-Art Helwa join forces to help raise public awareness of the more exceptional of these buildings. The exhibition will allow the viewer to appreciate the scope and beauty of modern movement buildings in Malta and Gozo. Unfortunately, many of them are not acknowledged and are not considered noteworthy to the point of being demolished and to make space for new constructions. This is a great pity and a huge loss for our local architectural and cultural heritage."

These buildings belong to an interesting historical and artistic era when architecture in Malta, was increasingly reflecting a change of direction coupled with experimentation. This followed the wider continental trend in what came to be called the international style. Breaking away from the art nouveau and neo-classical styles, so dominant on the islands up until World War II, the modernist projects in Malta were inspired by the works of early masters of the modern movement in Europe – Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and the Bauhaus. What emerged was an eclectic combination of considerable aplomb which flaunted a stark honesty in design and a belief that our landscape could and should finally steer clear of stale and over-stretched baroque ennui.

"The oldest surviving building of this genre that we know of, is a lovely little villa constructed as early as the the second half of the 1930s – the house of Salvatore Ellul, known as Villino Ellul. This is a landmark property on the Ta' Xbiex waterfront, and after having been practically abandoned for a number of years, it is being slowly revived to its former glory."

After the war, modernist buildings were the ones which allowed enterprising architects to experiment with new materials, ideals and technologies. A miscellany of government schools sprouted during the 1950s, some more impressive than others. Earlier prototypes integrated open colonnades of slender concrete and structural members, open landscaped spaces, screened from the interiors by large areas of glazing, or impressive arrays of brises soleils (shading screens) of diverse materials and forms which partially protected the open air passages from the elements.

One of the first schools to be built in this idiom was the Msida Primary School, constructed in 1955 by architect Renato Laferla. It is typical of the genre – a wealth of open recreational spaces created in full respect of the natural terrain and vegetation found on the site. Interestingly, the more audacious and publicly-funded schools of the time are found in Gozo – San Lawrenz, Gharb and Xewkija – where the architects, in particular Joseph Huntingford (1926-1994), were given freer rein to their inventiveness. Perhaps the foremost example is the Qala Primary School, where outdoor and indoor spaces are confidently and successfully integrated in a way that respects environmental concerns as well as students' educational and recreational needs.

The old part of the University of Malta constructed between 1963 and 1970, largely entrusted to the British firm of architects Norman and Dawbarn with the assistance of local firm called Mortimer and Degiorgio, is another case in point. There was the impressive decorative screen that adorned the university's library building before being removed late last year.

The modern movement was, however, not solely about academic buildings. Some of the earliest works of the movement belong to Richard England's early phase and include his earlier hotel projects, the likes of Paradise Bay Hotel in Cirkewwa or the Ramla Bay Hotel in Marfa.

The modern movement was all about expressing the joy of a new aesthetic. The book *Modernist Malta: the Architectural Legacy* partly funded through a grant from the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts and the financial backing of HalMann Vella, includes insightful articles by Conrad Thake and by the book's co-editor, Dr Bianchi, director of DLH. In its last section, the book lists a large number of the more significant buildings and projects of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> that reflect the ideals of the international style.

**Marika Azzopardi**

Black and white. Yin and yang. Opposites attracting, repelling, complementing, contrasting and setting each other apart. Somehow the purity of a black and white or monochrome image evokes more, attracts more than one in colour. The clarity, the nuances and in-between shades are void of the distractions created by a multitude of colours and tonalities interacting, reflecting, feeding off each other.

Yet the absence of the colours of the spectrum nowhere near implies monotony or rigidity; rather, the play of shadows reveals patterns, textures, positive and negative shapes and spaces. This makes black and white photography particularly apt for subjects such as nudes, for which it is generally preferred. However, black and white photography also lends itself well to the depiction of architecture, even more so if the buildings and residences shot belong to the modernist era.

The word modernist somehow jars in relation to Maltese architecture, simply because there is so much of all that is baroque around, that the knowledge of the existence of other prototypes comes as a bit of a surprise and concrete examples don't come to mind with the readiness of more historic buildings. However, the Chamber of Architects together with Din l-Art Helwa have taken the

initiative of organising and setting up an extensive exhibition targeting modernist architecture in Malta dating to the period between 1930 and 1970, which is accompanied by a handsome publication shedding further light on the subject. This project comes shortly after the publication *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, the concluding chapter of which deals with postmodern proposals of Maltese contemporary architecture. Therefore, the latter essay, together with KTP's publication provide quite a thorough and extensive overview of 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century architecture in Malta – subjects and periods which had been somewhat neglected.

The exhibition, currently underway at St James Cavalier's main hall, features the works of five leading photographers: Patrick Fenech, Darrin Zammit Lupi, Matthew Mirabelli, Alexandra Pace and Sergio Muscat. These photographers, chosen by the KTP's organising committee, were given a list of some 35 to 40 buildings which they have included as those "worthy of recognition" and which constitute Malta's more recent architectural heritage.

The photos themselves are simply breathtaking, and most of them hide the flaws of the general lack of maintenance some of these buildings have suffered as a result of the harsh weather elements gnawing away at their precious facades and exteriors. Despite this, however, the strong, clean lines, the simplicity and efficacious design of the buildings remains unhindered.

The photographers have moreover eliminated all unnecessary detail from the equation: there is hardly any trace of human presence, save for the odd car here and there. Even the shots taken on campus are practically void of students, which is quite a feat to achieve outside holiday months.

As a consequence, the frames present desolate, vacant spaces and the sights are as alien as the evacuated New York City in *I Am Legend*. The 'spirit' of these photos also reminds me of David Pisani's recent collection of works depicting buildings and architecture in Dubai, exhibited at the Intercontinental Hotel.

However, the exhibition per se is somewhat cramped. Even though the hanging and the visual continuity created by the plain black frames follows the lines and split levels of the main hall, there are too many works for the designated space, and some are too close in proximity to their next-door-neighbours. The individual works need more breathing space to be appreciated in their entirety. I feel the exhibition would have been better spaced out and distributed had St James' upper galleries been preferred.

The photographs require individual attention and focus, even though some are rather minimalist in expression. The nature of the black and white photograph is so striking that it commands the viewers' attention, even out of the corner of their eye. The subject matter and handling is also similar so there is the risk of scanning the entire collection swiftly without taking in the works properly. This notion is further enhanced by the fact that some of the individual works do not portray single photographs, but are rather subdivided into sections showing multiple angles, of the interior and/or exterior of any given building or residence. This is the case with the views of Buskett Roadhouse and the Floriana School, both by Mr Zammit Lupi.

The medleys of shots have been conjoined in such a way as to denote a quasi intentional pattern –

almost like a new architectural fabric. This idea is often utilised by Mr Fenech, who has chosen to deliver single images, which are nevertheless impeccable yet which come as a surprise when and if compared to his most recent work. Ms Pace is not new to black and white photography, and especially after the collections she presented to launch her Valletta gallery – no.68 St Lucy Street – the images presented here further reinforce her abilities outside the fashion realm. **Mr Muscat's works, on the other hand, are the most abstract of the bunch – his 'details', his chosen views of modernist spaces and structures are teasers: he leaves spectators to fill in the blanks and conjure up the bigger picture.** Mr Mirabelli seems to be truest to his subject – his interpretations accurately follow the lines and contours dictated by the buildings themselves.

**Lisa Gwen Baldacchino**