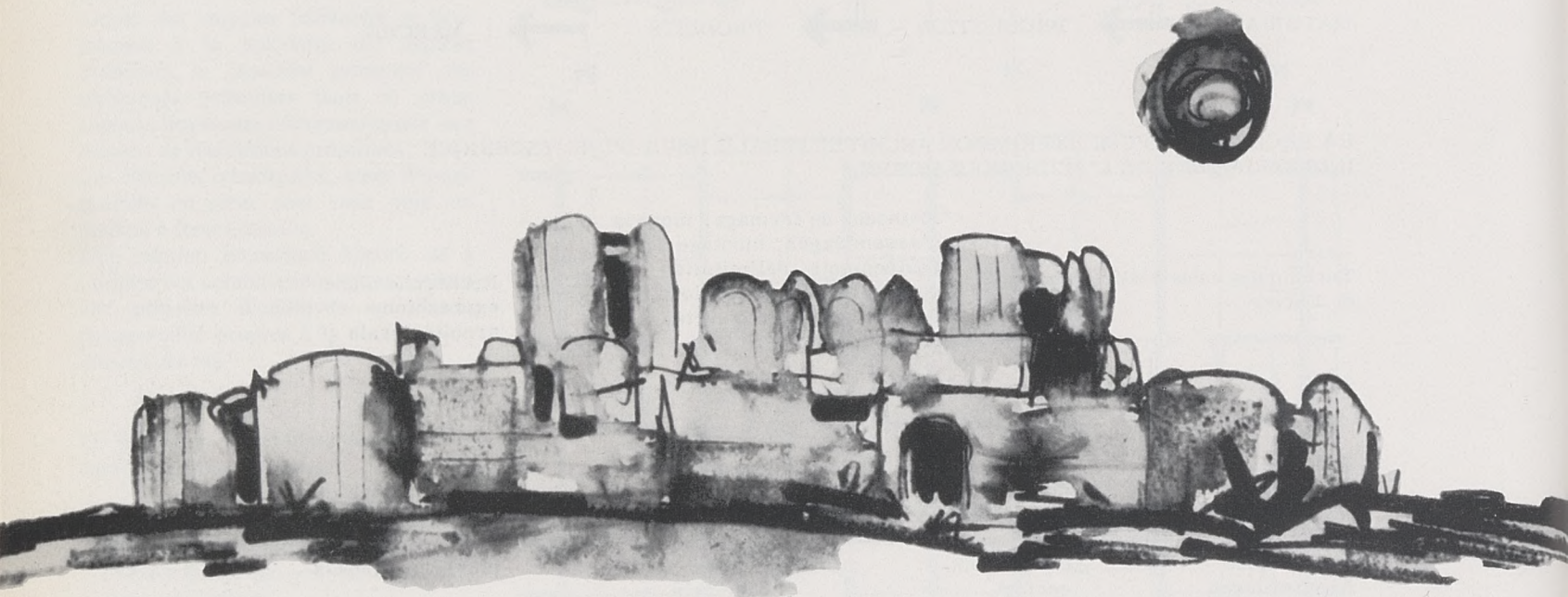


A modern Vernacular in Malta.



RICHARD ENGLAND
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The Architecture of the Maltese Islands

Richard England

The historical tradition

Before examining either of the two subtitles, it would seem necessary to briefly outline a description of the island's chief building material—its local stone.

It is with the use of this remarkable material that Malta has produced an architecture of the highest possible order. The stone from which all constructions—from the most primitive to the most sophisticated—are built, is a soft limestone known as 'Globigerina Limestone'. It is easily quarried, dressed and moulded. On exposure to the air, it tends to harden, mature and darken in colour.

The earliest architectural remains on our islands are also without a shadow of doubt our finest. It has been written that 'even if Malta had nothing to show but its stone age temple structures, the island would be worth a trip'.

The precision of the works, carvings, and joining of the giant slabs have to be seen to be believed, even more so when one remembers that the builders were not familiar with the use of copper or bronze. 'Hagar Qim' and 'Mnajdra' sites, grouped as a higher and lower temple site, as in most cases, are the only group one can study in relation to an open landscape. Undoubtedly, the finest architectural achievement of this period is the subterranean 'Hypogeum'. Here, a series of rock-hewn chambers combine in an almost perfect spatial concept to form what must indeed be defined as one of the greatest works of art of all times.

Although Phoenician and Roman remains exist, none of these periods can in fact produce examples that can rank with either the Megalithic periods or the next glorious era—the occupation of the islands by the Knights of the Order of St. John. Odd also is the almost complete lack of Arab remains, although the islands were occupied by them for several centuries.

It is interesting to note that with a few exceptions, all the buildings of importance erected during this period were designed by Maltese architects, most of whom were sent to train in Italy by the Knights themselves and then held in the highest of esteem on their return to the island. This period culminates in the erection of the complete city of Valletta, a unique example of overall plan as well as high quality individual buildings.

Throughout the occupation of the islands by the Knights, buildings of the highest order were erected, including that superb example of theatre architecture (built during the reign of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena), the Manoel Theatre. Also completed during this period, though started as a fortified city, centuries before, by the Arabs during their period of occupation of the island, was the city of Medina.

After the period of occupation by the Knights, the island was offered to the British in 1814. Compared with the legacy left by their predecessors, the British contribution fails miserably. However, it has been the habit of most people to wholly condemn the total contribution, which in the author's opinion, is a gross mistake. The British builders, erecting mostly barracks and hospitals, contributed a straight forward functional (in the materialistic sense) architectural expression which, however, is readily and intelligently associable with Malta, and its particular environment. Constant use of local stone and local building habits and trends are evident, with the net result, if not producing individual buildings of outstanding merit, at least turning out clusters which fit in happily and easily into their surroundings.

Besides the important and historical buildings erected in Malta during the occupations at various stages of the island's history, the island possesses a unique and particular primitive vernacular, which has managed throughout the ages to keep free from foreign influencing factors.

This highly individual expression is echoed strongly from the isolated farmhouse buildings to the complete village clusters. This indigenous, spontaneous, architectural expression offers to the onlooker a rugged, earthy inter-relationship of the basic form used throughout; the cube.

Having spoken briefly of the village cluster, we may now glance at the local individual farmhouse construction, which with its again predominantly simple cubic element in composition, is a remarkable expression of sincerity, clarity and rigorous thinking.

The problem was one of survival, and the solution offered is a straightforward and successful one. There is such a complete natural blending (as in the cluster groups) with surrounding landscape, that

there seems to be no distinction between what is natural and pre-existent, and what is in fact man-made.

Spaces are carefully articulated, construction difficulties are overcome with remarkable ingenuity, climatic conditions are dealt with incredible clarity and the whole points to a simple straightforward way of thinking which is characteristic of all primitive vernacular architecture.

This heritage although often ignored is without a shadow of doubt of the utmost importance and may above all be probably considered as the most typically and actually Maltese and indigenous of all our abundant architectural tradition.

We have seen briefly the golden background that Malta possesses, a heritage unique and unforgettable to all who have seen it.

The contemporary situation

Within the last three or four years, the Maltese islands have surged to an almost incredible demand among tourists and potential settlers, that the position as it stands today seems hard to surpass, yet with the advent of the future, it may yet swell to even greater limits. Welcome as this influx is for the obvious economical stability that it brings with it and for a young nation like Malta, the whole mainstay of its economy is dependent on this tourist and residential development; from the architectural point of view it requires a deeper and intenser investigation. Undoubtedly, Malta is passing through its largest building period ever and the final visual and aesthetical product will depend on the quality of the architecture and buildings erected during this period. With an architectural background and living environment which, as we have seen is of the highest order, the new architecture should promise much; so far, however, possibly due to the mad speculative rush, the new era has produced little of worthy note. However, one element which is of the utmost importance, if not of great architectural consequence but at least visually pleasing, is that a lot of the new buildings reflect a certain amount of traditionalism, both in the use of materials and also in the external designs.

Perhaps a training more specific and relative to our environment, with special reference to our vast and peculiar tradition, will help to produce architects

who in turn will design with more sympathy to our surroundings. This in Malta is just about perhaps to start happening. With the building of the new University, the faculty of Architecture is to undergo violent changes. There is strong talk of a prominent architectural figure taking charge and then eventually perhaps over a period of five years passing over to a complete local staff. This course with probable affinity to the R.I.B.A. will produce architects who besides their standard training may be specifically orientated to working and designing in a particular Mediterranean environment.

The author of this article has in his modest way been searching for a valid contemporary architectural expression which may be readily associable with the Maltese tradition. The author firmly believes that the search must be arduous and necessarily difficult, but most of all it must be a sincere one, free from 'clichés' and foreign influences.

In industrialized countries, it is likely that when an architect uses primitive construction methods, he does this to produce a certain effect but his aim is only decorative and marginal to the main architectural trends. On the other hand, in developing countries like Malta, adopting advanced methods is difficult because of lack of skilled labour.

Malta's solution should not be conducted merely as a 'dress-up' solution but rather as a much deeper thorough soul-searching research into various local existent conditions, which may be briefly outlined as: climatic conditions, locally available materials and local environmental surroundings. Local climatic conditions have always and will always effect and control to a certain degree architecture, and Malta is no exception. We have seen in our traditional buildings an almost complete predominance of solid over void—a condition directly dependent on the fact that the openings are small—this being a direct result again of an attempt to keep the fierce summer heat out of our ancestral homes. Thick walls abound not only due to structural necessities, but rather again to guard against the heat. Patio dwellings predominate in our vernacular, giving much needed shelter from both scorching sun and blowing winds. Local materials influence our whole heritage. The final cube-like structure is only a direct result

of the building module used. Arched openings are due to limitations of our building material. In fact, the whole of our traditional building is a direct consequence of the material used in its construction. Local environmental surroundings also influenced our architectural solutions in as far as site conditions have always and will always initiate the whole architectural concept.

The general tendency currently in vogue in tourist development all over the world, seems to be 'Arty-Folk' reconstructions, a dangerous aesthetic regression which removes all validity from a contemporary architectural solution—as it disposes of that one essential asset in artistic creation: *originality*.

The author sincerely hopes that Malta will not follow in these footsteps, but rather assimilate all her glorious tradition in such a way as to help mould and formulate a *new original* and modern expression which though encompassing the problems and solutions of traditionalism will essentially be a young, virile and contemporary one.

The author's own works reveal a search verifying this belief, in establishing a link with local tradition, maintaining a Mediterranean character, without renouncing the implication of a modern rationalism. His church projects of St. Joseph at Manikata and the second, a chapel design, are inspired from the basic forms of the Megalithic temples and also from the local primitive tool-sheds built of dry-wall construction, often found in the Maltese landscape.

They follow the traditional position in the placing of the church at the highest point of the village and also in their baroque shape, in contrast with the cubic structures of the village. The structure of the Manikata Project remains unfinished due to lack of funds, while the other is still at project stage.

In his villa 'La Maltija' at Naxxar, there is a strong visual 'rapport' with the island's primitive architecture ranging from the Megalithic dolmens to the less tutored farmhouse vernacular. A highly articulated series of spaces produce an interesting composition of exterior volumes, which come to vivid life under the forceful play of light and shade.

The external screen walls to the balconies of the Ramla Bay Hotel, on the northern part of the island, a further development of his Paradise Bay Hotel are directly

inspired from the well head lintel found in the local vernacular, although much attention has been paid to the transition of material 'concrete instead of stone' and scale.

His Dolmen and Cavalieri Hotels, recently completed, reveal studies to amalgamate both buildings with their respective existent surroundings, the former around 2500 B.C. Megalithic remains, the latter next to a typical Maltese seaside village cluster. Most of the author's work is an attempt to produce modern contemporary solutions which are directly related to the traditional architecture of the island, and therefore indirectly related to the pre-existent surrounding character and environment.

His villa 'S.C.' at Rabat repeats the articulated cube structures found in the vernacular with the use of the R.C. frames holding the cubes, the possibility of raising the unit to the first floor and obtaining a covered patio with pool under becomes possible; thus giving scope to a greater freedom of visual movement and composition.

Current interesting projects either in the state of construction or at planning stage include Norman and Dawbarn's University Project at Msierah, Julio Lafuente's Cliff Hanging Hotel at Ta'Cenc, Gozo, and numerous other hotels and tourist schemes, by both local and foreign architects.

This, of course, does not mean that Malta has not got its architectural troubles. A quick look round the island reveals an unfortunate trend to divide land into numerous repetitive building plots (indeed the greater the number, the happier the speculator will be): which will eventually house monotonous box-like buildings.

Stricter control on this type of development is required and collective clusters leaving wide open landscaped communal spaces should be encouraged. Some of our new hotels have been sited in unfortunate positions even sometimes marring sites of extreme historical interest.

Valletta's new Kingsgate is a most unfortunate contribution which one hopes will not be allowed to spread to the surrounding Opera House areas.

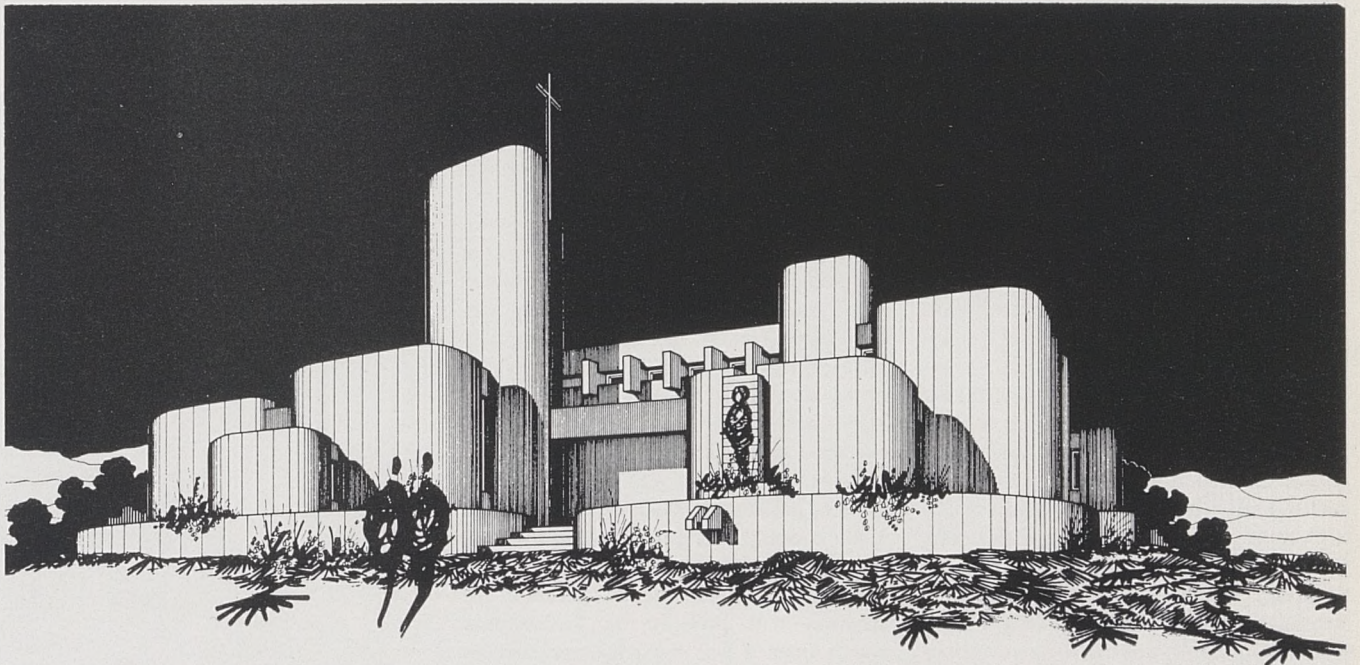
The whole picture at present, however still, points to an ever increasing demand and one sincerely hopes that what



A traditional construction with dry stone walling which gave the author inspiration for his church project and for the church he built at Manikata.

Construction traditionnelle en pierre sèche qui inspira l'auteur pour son projet d'église et pour son église de Manikata.

Traditionelle Bauart aus Steinen, die den Autor für sein Kirchenprojekt sowie für seine Kirche in Manikata inspirierte.



Quentin Hughes wrote in his book about the buildings erected during the period of the Knights will also hold true after the complete fulfilment of the present demands: 'It is remarkable that so small an island, under constant sub-servience to a foreign Government, should have produced an architecture which is essentially Maltese in spite of passing fashions.' One hopes, even more so today, that Malta has attained independence, and therefore its right to exist as an individual nation, that her architects will pursue the course of their work, along the paths of their intuition, with fidelity to their land and culture and to their ancestral efforts, in their creations scaled to our particular landscape, they may yet seek out the universal values of the qualities of our land and race; for they are a patrimony we must learn to conserve and evoke.

The position of the architect in Malta as a relatively new nation surging forward to find her feet, is today of the extremest importance.

For it may well be said that the Maltese architect and planner today finds himself in the position of holding the key to the future of his land in not only an architectural sense but in a far more important and total one. For the architects create the environment both for work and pleasure. The environment helps man to produce a better output. A better output will produce a higher all round standard of living, which in turn means general all round beneficiations to all concerned.

With this in mind, a contemporary architectural expression in complete harmony with the existent characteristic town and landscape will be achieved and thus a logical evolution and indeed continuation of our glorious tradition will be maintained and a far more ultimate and important aim achieved.

Malta's solution, in the author's opinion, lies in the search for an architecture (born from within) particular to our country, an architecture which since it was created for its particular environment, will of necessity be Maltese, for it has been created to fit into an existent Maltese 'condition'. If the problem is essentially a particular Maltese one, there is no reason why the solution, if logically reached and arrived at, should not also be essentially Maltese. Having our own characteristics, our own heritage as we have seen and our own tradition, it is

now up to us to produce an indigenous expression which can be considered unique to Malta.

The logical outcome of all this is that various designs or figurative features are evolved and since these are the characteristic visual elements of the local architecture, a typical aesthetic is evolved.

This basically may be defined as an earthy, rugged, predominantly solid architectural appearance with liberal use of arches, patios, verandas, covered walkways and small openings. But let us not think of mere façade treatment, but rather let us remember that if we think, anew sincerely, thoroughly and honestly and search to solve our problem almost as one would say from first principles, our new architecture will logically amalgamate with our existent environment.

The whole feeling and creation of a work must evolve as a particular solution to the problem of living in Malta, under very particular and specific conditions—requirements (materialistic), structural limitations, use of local materials where possible (local stone weathers very badly next to the sea), consideration of climate and site conditions form a combination of thought process which should produce a final expression that again should be as unique and individual as the problem itself. The architect, therefore, in his supreme moment of creation will produce an architecture which since it was created under similar requisites and conditions, will of necessity pertain to our land, and, therefore, also, to its poetic, glorious and incomparable building tradition. **Richard England**

The cubic volumes of traditional architecture can be seen again in the apartments 'Mariners Court'. Architect Richard England.

Les volumes cubiques de l'architecture traditionnelle se retrouvent dans les appartements «Mariners Court». Architecte: Richard England.

Die kubischen Volumen der traditionellen Architektur können in den «Mariners Court»-Wohnungen wiedergefunden werden. Architekt: Richard England.





The 'Dolmen Hotel' which shows the influence of a megalithic temple. Architect Richard England.

Le Dolmen Hôtel influencé par un temple mégalithique. Architecte: Richard England.

Das von einem megalithischen Tempel beeinflusste «Dolmen-Hotel». Architekt: Richard England.



The traditional arch used for the 'Ramla Bay Hotel'. Architect Richard England.

L'arche traditionnelle utilisée pour le Ramla Bay Hôtel. Architecte: Richard England.

Der traditionelle Bogen wurde für das «Ramla Bay Hotel» verwendet. Architekt: Richard England.

