

BUILT HERITAGE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Many of us have learnt to appreciate our Baroque Heritage, and there is now a general awareness of the value inherent in the restoration and rehabilitation of our baroque monuments.

It is however still rare that a work of architecture dating post 1800 is considered part of our built heritage with any value worth preserving. This is especially true in the case of more recent, post-war constructions.

It is generally acknowledged that much of what has been built in recent decades is regrettably of little architectural quality. There are however a few 20th century examples of fine buildings designed by local architects that are indeed worthy of being preserved as fine expressions of the aspirations and achievements of Maltese society during the past decades. It is hoped that recent publications like that by Conrad Thake and Quentin Hughes' (Malta, War and Peace, an Architectural Chronicle, 1800 – 2000' Midsea Books, 2005) will assist in raising our appreciation of the works of these later centuries.

During the post war period, Malta participated with other European countries in the search for a new way of living, a renewed spirit of the times, together with the accompanying struggle to find a new idiom in architecture more expressive of a modern society. This was most notably evident, locally, in the efforts dedicated to developing new schools. These modernist schools are found throughout the islands, from San Lawrenz in Gozo, to Marsascala in the south, with several other villages and towns in between.

When in 1946 the Education Act came into force, education became compulsory for all, leading to a building boom in schools from 1954 onwards in an attempt to provide at least one school for each town and village where, in the spirit of the new age, children of the locality could go, regardless of their social status.

Contrary to the tendency towards more monumental school buildings during the pre-war years, the architects of the new schools (local architects, employed with government agencies) were concerned with providing spaces with high standards of lighting and ventilation. Their approach was to create spaces to which the students could relate. Hence there was a distinguishable informality in the layout of the classrooms, a general tendency for their subdivision into smaller clusters to cater for the different age groups, and a better integration of the buildings with the surrounding open space. Some of our finest purpose-built school buildings date back to this period, true expressions of a short lived modern movement in architecture on the islands.

This exceptional group of schools include amongst others, the earlier schools of Msida and Floriana built in the early 1950s, the remarkable school in Qala dating from the early 1960s and its predecessors in other Gozitan villages, as well as the later Marsascala school (completed in 1969).

In recent years there has been a renewed effort to upgrade our schools in an attempt to provide better facilities and provide larger buildings to accommodate the demands of a new curriculum and growing student populations. The intention is commendable, though the interventions have had varying degrees of success.

The *Kamra tal-Periti* has followed the process and would like to express its concern about the manner in which these mid 20th century schools are being refurbished and restructured, in some cases with little regard for the architectural merits of the existing buildings.

In particular we would like to draw attention to the rather inappropriate interventions on some of the school buildings found on the islands, including the Marsascala Primary School, the Corradino Secondary Technical School, and the Boys Secondary School in Zebbug.

In the case of the Marsascala school, a rather crude extension at second floor now occupies the whole of the roof area of the original block below. This rather forlorn addition pays scant attention to the proportions, rhythm, or scale of the well proportioned original two storey elongated main block of the school complex designed by Joseph Borg Grech (1929-). Situated on a slope facing Marsascala creek, the extension is no more than an unwanted intrusion, and detracts from the unique and ingenious masonry *brise soleil* (solar shading device) on the south facing façade of the main school block.

A similar *brise soleil*, though in concrete, was until recently found on the south facing façade of one of the buildings of the Corradino School Complex in Paola. In 1993, a permit was issued allowing the complete elimination of the *brise soleil* and its replacement with an unimaginative, solid stone wall punctured with typical hole-in-the-wall windows.



In a similar fashion, works have recently commenced on the Boys Primary School in Zebbug, on the main piazza. The original primarily glazed facades have not, as one would have hoped, been restored and repaired. Instead, the original character of the building has been completely eradicated, and a typically historicist stone façade applied incongruously to the modernist building.

“The change in façade has no impact on the existing adjacent uses”, said the development report prepared by MEPA for the application. *“The proposed new façade respects the character of the surrounding streetscape and it is an improvement on the present façade which is in a deteriorated state”*. So concludes the discussion prior to the recommendation for the issue of a permit for the works.

The proposed works to the Qala Primary School in Gozo, go one step further. Designed by Joseph Huntingford (1926-1994) who was responsible for the design and construction of several government schools in Gozo between 1950 and 1961, the school is one of the finest examples of modern architecture on the islands.



Exceptional in its layout, the Qala school comprises a series of finger blocks perpendicular to the street, linked by open covered walkways, the classrooms organized on two storeys with their own resource room, and open courtyards. The finger blocks are separated by landscaped gardens.

In the new proposals, a large portion of the school is to be sacrificed to make way for a new Institute of Tourism Studies training hostel. A new single storey block will replace a large part of this modernist landmark, the new intervention being an ordinary characterless building bearing no relation to the existing property. The Heritage Advisory Committee, and the Integrated Heritage Management Team at MEPA advised that the building ought to be retained as part of our artistic heritage, restored and adapted to accommodate the new use. Regrettably MEPA ultimately gave in to pressures, and approved the proposals.

The uniqueness of the Qala school is worth acknowledging, and it is truly disappointing that no effort has been made to restore the property rather than demolish it. It would have been more appropriate for the ITS training facility to be housed in a building of true character, a manifestation of the ingenuity of local talent, rather than in a common insignificant block. It should not have been too difficult to conceive how the original building could have become a modern training facility for the ITS, one that would have set a standard for similar institutes. This is certainly no new idea. The remarkable *paradores* in Spain, the *pousadas* in Portugal and elsewhere are some of the most sought after lodging houses in their territories.

A similar situation arises in the more recent application for the demolition of part of the Ghajnsielem Primary School (PA 01141/04) also designed by Joseph Huntingford, though not as accomplished as his Qala school. The removal of an original covered walkway and its replacement with a new block to house an extension for the Art and Craft School is recommended for approval. In the Development report for the case, there is the usual mention of parking standards, of height limitations and accessibility issues, yet no mention of the existing building's architectonic qualities and despite the opposition of the council of the Primary School, which occupies a large part of the property, the recommendation is justified on the grounds that the structures are 'dangerous'.

Visitors to our islands seek out what makes us truly unique. Despite ample talk about sustainability and the need to protect and upgrade our environment (both built and natural), even if only for the sake of a seemingly insatiable tourism industry, in a somewhat misdirected drive to modernize, we fail to recognize the errors committed by not conserving what is truly representative of our culture. We face a communal reluctance to acquiring a knowledge of, and an appreciation for what is worthy of preservation.

Rather than identifying those monuments which reflect our nation's achievements, our authorities ask that we accept the sacrifice of our historic village cores to new, substandard developments with little aesthetic or architectural quality. We are expected to approve that prime tracts of unique countryside are irretrievably lost to the presumed needs of our tourism industry, and that fine buildings are brutally disfigured if not



simply demolished. Regrettably, the existing planning process seems incapable of preventing the rot.

The *KTP* believes that planning procedures need further refinement. The planning process requires a new vision, an overriding drive for quality, and an awareness that only the best will do for our nation. Projects of a certain scale and import ought to be assessed on the basis of their contribution to the social as well as spatial environment, and on the quality of their design. Furthermore, our authorities needs to invest as early as possible in a process leading to the extension of the list of protected properties to include our most notable buildings from the twentieth century and earlier, so as to protect those few noteworthy monuments still left intact.

With this in mind, the *KTP* is also pushing for the early drafting and implementation of a National Policy on Architecture which will help promote quality in our buildings and raise awareness in the need for wider investment in good, creative design.

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