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K A M R A T A L - P E R I T I

*To support members of the profession in achieving excellence in their practice of architecture and engineering in the interest of the community*



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## PBS Building, Gwardamangia,

KTP and DOCOMOMO Malta

### Appreciation

The Kamra tal-Periti applauds the Government's recent decision to withdraw the Development Application for the demolition of what was formerly known as Rediffusion House in Gwardamangia.

A recent planning application by the governmental agency PBS (Public Broadcasting Services) calling for the demolition of an integral part of the complex was withdrawn by PBS on the instructions of the Minister for Education, Culture, Youth and Sports, Mrs Dolores Cristina after consultation with the Prime Minister, Dr Lawrence Gonzi.

The move comes as a refreshing foresight that breaks the recent trend adopted by MEPA that the conservation of much older buildings, irrespective of their historical or architectural merit, tends to take precedence over the preservation of contemporary buildings, some of which are iconic examples of excellence in local architecture. Undeniably, in the fast developing societies of today, buildings need not be older than a century to deserve preservation. Indeed the reasons why we preserve our built heritage depend on more important criteria, certainly not the gravely misguided notions of nostalgia.

Had this planning application been accepted, it would have led to the irretrievable loss of one of the pioneering examples of twentieth century modern architecture in Malta. This institutional building represents a milestone in the development of architecture in Malta in its historic progression from the Baroque to Neo-Classicism to Victorian-era Eclecticism to the Modern Movement.

### The Modern Movement

The ideals of the Movement, were inspired by the design ideals and philosophy of the 1930s Bauhaus school, based in Dessau, Germany. The dissemination of Modernism in various art forms was promoted by the leading protagonists of the time, including the internationally-acclaimed architects Mies Van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, and artists such as Itten, Kandinsky and Moholy-Nagy. With the coming to power of the Nazis, the Bauhaus school was closed as it was considered to be subversive and incompatible with the vision and ideology of the Third Reich. Most of its leading protagonists were later forced to leave Germany and immigrate to the United States.

In the aftermath of the Second World War and the massive reconstruction program, the Maltese scene was not particularly conducive to the introduction of the Modern movement. It was only during the late 1950 and 1960s, that Modern architecture was gradually introduced to the island. The intensive drive to build various government schools at both primary and secondary levels was perceived as a golden opportunity to promote and adopt modern architecture so as to reflect the aspirations of a modern and progressive society.

## Rediffusion House

The former Rediffusion building complex in Gwardamangia is a pioneering work in the introduction of the Modern architectural movement in Malta.

After 1935, radio broadcasting was operated in Malta by a company called Rediffusion (Malta) Limited. It had been given the power and authority by the Government of Malta to operate sponsored as well as ordinary commercial radio programmes. It had, until 1960, a complete monopoly of broadcasting; of news, features, music and entertainment, and enjoyed as much monopoly in Malta as the BBC had in England.

The ex-Rediffusion building complex was one of the first institutional buildings beyond the realm of educational facilities to embrace modernism. The adoption of a modern architectural idiom was consonant with a future-oriented vision of broadcasting, alluding to technological progress and being in tune with the international community. Just over 50 years ago, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1958 the Rediffusion building was inaugurated by the local Governor General Sir Robert Laycock.

Rediffusion was widely disseminated amongst the local population with some 50,000 subscribers to the service. For the special inauguration of the building complex, the chairman of the company Mr F.J. Belchambers attended the ceremony. The complex was designed by the late architect Carmelo Falzon, who was one of the leading architects in private practice at the time. The complex, which included various studios, control rooms, offices and libraries had cost the then princely sum of 150,000 pounds. (Joseph Bonnici and Michael Cassar, *A Chronicle of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Malta 1900-1999*; Book Distributors Limited, Malta, 2004, p.250)

Some of the more salient features of the broadcasting building complex include the iconic transmission tower with its quaint circular portholes on the elevation, the cantilevered winged canopy over the main entrance to the building, and the distinctive strip horizontal windows that run the full length of the façade and that were promoted by the international modern movement. The modern movement promoted the use of a uniform white colour aesthetic as a unifying visual element.

## Buildings of the Modern Movement

Over the last decades, locally and elsewhere, the architectural heritage of the Modern Movement has appeared to be at a higher risk than buildings of any other period. The architecture of the Movement typifies the glorification of the dynamic spirit of the Machine Age and the machine aesthetic.

In Malta, we have quite a few example of buildings of the late Modern Movement but unfortunately buildings of this period are little understood or appreciated, and for decades now, many of these masterpieces have been demolished or remodelled beyond recognition so that a re-evaluation of our approach to conservation of the built heritage in light of this, is long overdue

In terms of artistic significance, Modern architecture broke away from established and predetermined (generally Classicist and/or Revivalist) styles, and saw leading architects display new and masterful uses of space, light and volume. Moreover, from a technical point of view, these buildings often produced some of the most innovative and thoughtful responses to construction.

In our case, vernacular building techniques were generally absorbed into the design programmes to create a local strain of the Modern Movement.

When compared to other countries, particularly throughout Continental Europe, the Maltese Modern Movement started off relatively late. It reached its culmination during the 1960s, particularly with the pioneering works of a number of architects trained overseas, and who were keen enough to introduce the principles of Modernism in Malta.

These include architects like Joe Huntingford, Joseph Borg Grech, Joseph Spiteri and Joseph Consiglio, who designed some of the most architecturally-progressive and modern schools on the islands. Huntingford was responsible for many schools in Gozo. Residential examples are Joseph Spiteri's Santa Lucia housing estate for instance. Others examples include the University of Malta Campus Buildings at Tal-Qroqq (architects Norman and Dawbarn), the Manikata Church (architect Richard England) and the Simonds Farsons Cisk Brewery in Mriehel (architect Lewis V. Farrugia), as well as a number of villas throughout central Malta (particularly in Attard and Ta' Xbiex) and Gozo, based on designs of both Maltese and foreign architects.

Our heritage of truly valid modern architecture is limited in terms of numbers. To date little or no protection has been afforded to the few surviving examples of post-war modern architecture.

Good architecture is timeless. It bears no relation to the age that made it and though desirable, issues relating to practicality, convenience, purpose and usefulness should not determine if buildings are allowed survival or destruction. The values ascribed to cultural heritage have as much to do with artistic as well as historic qualities. Sadly, recent years have witnessed the demise of some very good examples of contemporary Maltese architectural heritage.

The demolition of part of the school in Qala and the sorry state of the award-winning Kennedy memorial in Qawra are witnesses to this. The demolition of MIRA building in Gzira, one of the first concrete frame commercial buildings on the island, and the wanton ransacking of the ex-British services accommodation (known as the White Rocks complex) are testimony to our lack of appreciation towards this architectural period. It is important that we secure the fate of the few remaining iconic modern buildings for future generations to appreciate.

## **DOCOMOMO Malta**

**For this reason, in 2005, architects Mr David Felice and Dr Conrad Thake expressed an interest in forming a DOCOMOMO Working Party here in Malta, through the assistance of Prof. Dennis Sharp of the UK register.**

DOCOMOMO stands for the International working party for the DOcumentation and COnservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the MOdern MOvement. The organisation is composed of national working parties and international specialist committees, including an international register project currently containing over 800 buildings worldwide pertaining to the Modern Movement. Its International Secretariat is presently located in Paris.

**The Maltese committee was officially established just less than two years ago, at the International Conference in Ankara (Turkey), with the formal backing of the Working Parties of Denmark, Estonia and Finland. Malta's request for membership was submitted by architects Dr Jevon Vella and Mr David Pace.**

**Since then, DOCOMOMO Malta has instituted an indefinite partnership with the Kamra tal-Periti in order to promote the awareness of Modern Architecture in Malta. It enjoys the backing of the International community, in the documentation and conservation of the modern movement heritage of our country and operates in accordance with the principles of the DOCOMOMO Constitution.**

**A noteworthy observation is DOCOMOMO's interdisciplinary nature; it is one of the few organisations where different professionals are brought together including historians, academics, conservationists, architects, urban designers, town planners and public authorities. Since its creation, DOCOMOMO International has witnessed a rapid growth. It has established itself as a major player not only in the realm of conservation, but also in the broader field of architectural culture. The pluralist, interdisciplinary dimension of DOCOMOMO International has been a strong asset. At present, DOCOMOMO International includes 49 working parties and over 2000 members, from Europe to Japan and Australia, to North and South America. In their variety of cultures and experiences, the working parties represent the true richness of DOCOMOMO International.**

## **Concluding petition**

The Kamra tal-Periti and DOCOMOMO Malta augur that Government's gesture is in the right direction; that our contemporary heritage will finally receive the attention and protection that it undoubtedly deserves.

A final appeal to the decision makers at PBS: please do go back to the drawing board and do celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of this modern masterpiece by committing to conserve and restore it in a sensitive manner for all of us to enjoy. In doing so you would be rendering a sterling service to the nation.