

Towards Better Protection of Modern Twentieth Century Architecture in Malta

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Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the need to promote more awareness of the value of twentieth century buildings in Malta and to intensify their protection. What to keep and maintain is debatable and depends on which philosophies of restoration are adopted. Heritage protection institutions, such as ICONOMOS, UNESCO and the Council of Europe intend to afford the same protection to modern architecture previously reserved for much older buildings. In Malta the legal framework has long been set up to protect the architectural heritage that has been classified and scheduled according to the guidelines of these institutions but the emphasis is on pre-1920's buildings. Unless the list is updated regularly to include examples of architecture of later periods there is the risk of losing these in the frenzy of the rapid development occurring at present. Educating citizens to value these buildings and even any architectural features and interior décor inspired by this period, should hopefully lead to a higher level of protection. As an example, the lens will be focused on the Gian Frangisk Abela Junior College.

Keywords: *modern architecture, conservation theory, Malta.*

Introduction

Architecture is considered as an art in its own right with the visual arts such as painting and sculpture developing in its context. Its primary aim has always been to fulfill man's basic needs of shelter and security but it is now accepted that buildings also have spiritual and intellectual roles expressed not only by the structure itself but also by its interiors together with the relationship between the two and their surroundings. Even though not all buildings are prestigious or impressive, they are a reflection of the spirit of their time, the people involved in their design and the social context when they were built (Gympel, 1996). For these reasons architecture of different periods in history without exception need to be conserved as destroying any period or style completely would sever the chain that has made us what we are today.

The destruction of historic monuments and vandalism that occurred during the French Revolution led to the development of conservation theories when the cultural heritage began to be appreciated. Historic monuments began to be classified, included in an inventory and subsequently restored and conserved. The idea that every citizen had a moral responsibility in this equation began to take ground and also the idea that conservation had to happen not only for the present generation but also for future ones. Heritage began to belong to the common people too who began to be represented by commissions set up for this purpose. Italy and Greece followed France and since then it has become every country's duty to conserve their Nation's cultural heritage (Jokilehto, 1986).

The question that has always been so difficult to answer is how to classify and define a historic monument or building, which buildings to value and why. In Malta, most twentieth century architecture is regarded as not old enough to merit protection. There are areas like the town centers that are protected and specific buildings that are graded, with some buildings being added to the list periodically but not many that were constructed in the twentieth century. For the purpose of this paper, modern architecture will deal with buildings of the twentieth century as inspired by the movements in the first half of the century and are in danger of being eradicated completely. By destroying them and getting obsessed with the new contemporary architecture that will give us greater monetary value there is a danger of losing a part of our cultural heritage, because these buildings tell us a story about the society that built them.

Modern Architecture

The political scenarios and events that occurred in various parts of the world from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards influenced the emergence of the various modern movements both in the art scene and in architecture. The other factor that influenced such enormous change was the acceleration of industrialisation and the fast social change it brought about that led to the need for many more buildings in urban areas to accommodate workers that ended up being just inhuman and unnatural spaces. The need to rebuild both literally and metaphorically occurred after the two world wars but this time technology was embraced. Architecture stopped being perceived as the organisation of space just for shelter but more attention started being given to the exterior with how light infiltrated the building and the reaction of the individuals who occupied the space. Some important new constructional techniques based on technology included: a) the use of steel structures and concrete frameworks to replace walls as the architectural elements that support and separate; b) the use of much lighter and less bulky materials such as hollow bricks, synthetic materials or light weight pumice concrete to build the remaining walls; c) the reduction in size of the supporting elements as a result of a better and

more accurate knowledge of tensile and compressive strengths of the materials used; d) the construction of much larger openings to the outside resulting in much more light streaming in; e) the use of glass as an integral part of the structure and f) flat roofs that opened up more design possibilities in the interior (Gropius, 1965).

It was Walter Gropius in 1919 with a famous proclamation that started the Bauhaus movement that exposed the most influential ideas. Design and craftsmanship were to be merged together and different disciplines were to be united to construct a final superior form that in his words would, “rise one day towards heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith”. It also dealt with architects being encouraged to have fantasies and not to limit themselves with technical difficulties. Most of these could be overcome with the great advances in technology and the use of different materials like concrete, glass and steel, in construction (Frampton, 2007). The architects of the Modernist movement wished to speak of the future through their works reflecting the advances in democracy, science and technology that were occurring. There was a romantic and theatrical vision with a strong aesthetic interest even though they prided themselves that the focus was strictly technological (De Botton, 2006). Their main target was mass production but aimed to construct type-forms that not only met the technical and commercial demands but the aesthetic ones too (Gropius, 1965). It was a very special time in the history of architecture and this is why it is of superlative importance to conserve any example of architecture in Malta that is an expression of this philosophy and the new application of technology and building techniques since these establish the link between the way buildings were constructed before the exposition of these ideas and the way they are now. For these reasons good quality buildings inspired by this movement need to be restored and conserved.

Values in Conservation Theory

When one attempts to apply the theories of conservation to modern architecture, the same challenging problems are encountered. Whenever rules are established their interpretation and hence their enforcement will always be problematic. The diverse theories which are still applicable today prioritise different values. Choay, the French architectural and urban historian and theorist, in her famous work, ‘The Invention of the Historic Monument’, attempted to list and analyze the values that were given importance at the time the theories of conservation were being developed. And even though what is written was meant to apply predominantly for older buildings, seeing that construction carried out during the twentieth century needs to be protected too, one may also apply the same arguments on this occasion. She tackles the national, cognitive, economic and the artistic values and also refers to, what she calls, the piety value in relation to the ‘consecration phase’ occurring between 1820 and 1960.

The national value is considered as the most important and is the starting point of all that followed, but also of great importance is the cognitive value that regards historic buildings and monuments as carriers of knowledge and as witnesses of what was occurring at the time, be it political, or related to custom, or the art and techniques used for construction. Buildings are a living memory of the sentiments of people and a symbol of their civic duty. The economic value cannot be underestimated either, as many historic buildings were ultimately conserved because they fitted into a financial model and could be used for cultural tourism or else with a change of use utilised for other functions. Although this idea might not be applicable to twentieth century buildings, demolition to rebuilt blocks of apartments should not be the only financial model considered, a more idealistic vision of future uses need to be taken into consideration in the evaluating process. The fourth value, the artistic value was the hardest to define and was considered as an imprecise and vague concept as many question the artistic quality of modern architecture. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and for many, modern architecture is not considered as worth protecting, as they do not find it aesthetically pleasing and even strange. But does this justify pulling these buildings down? (Choay, 2001). Closely linked to the piety value, the English art and architecture critic John Ruskin in his most popular book 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' discusses the memory value as one of the seven principles of architecture that he linked with seven moral attributes inseparable from design. When speaking about this memory value of architecture he said, "We may live without, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her" (Ruskin, 1849:162-182).

Keeping all the above values in mind, what was meant for historic monuments and buildings of the time may be seen to be also applicable to twentieth century architecture that will soon become the historic buildings of the future. These buildings should be considered of national importance too, awareness about them needs to be stepped up through education and their aesthetic qualities highlighted so that more people appreciate them. They are also very important for our memories and to keep a complete picture of the history of architecture. Demolishing them in the name of development would be unpardonable.

Charters and Conventions

During the twentieth century, the theories, philosophies and the values that were unmasked led to a trend towards the strengthening of cultural ideology resulting in several charters and conventions that focused on the conservation of historic monuments and buildings. These were not meant to protect buildings that were being built during that time but older ones. Now, half a century later the same documents need to be applied to what was then considered as modern architecture and not meriting protection as these too have now become an essential part of

our history and culture. Although not legally binding, the charters are still very important to consult before any administrative actions are taken, policies decided upon and legislation enacted.

The Athens Charter adopted at the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments of 1931, besides dealing with the proper care and restoration of monuments, focuses also on the identification of these by architects. At the same Congress seven main resolutions were agreed upon, the 'Carta del Restauro', that experts and practitioners were expected to follow and also calling for Governments to adopt (Mifsud Bonnici, 2008). Thirty-three years later at the Second Congress, in Article 1, The Venice Charter specifically referred that, "this applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time". Implying that as time goes on, other modest buildings and monuments acquire cultural significance, it should become imperative that these will be included in the list to be protected. This Charter in Article 5 acknowledges that for permanent conservation there might be the need for the change of use of a building for a social purpose but prohibits the change of layout or decoration of the building. This too needs to be taken into consideration (The Venice Charter, Articles 1, 5.).

Then, during the 'European Architectural Heritage Year' of 1975, the 'European Charter of the Architectural Heritage' was signed by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and among the considerations that were emphasised were that Europe's Architectural heritage not only has a priceless cultural value but that it gives people the consciousness of their history and their future. It encourages independent organisations to arouse the public interest and educational programs about the cultural heritage to be disseminated with the younger generation especially in mind. It emphasises that for buildings to be worth conserving, they need to be of high quality. It ends by referring to 'the new buildings of today' that will become 'the heritage of tomorrow'. Thus, quality buildings of the twentieth century have already become part of our heritage and need to be protected too (The European Charter of the Architectural Heritage, 1975).

Various conventions including the 'Convention for the Protection for the Architectural Heritage of Europe' by the Council of Europe, the UNESCO 'Convention for safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage', the UNESCO 'Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression' and the Council of Europe 'Framework Convention on the value of Cultural Heritage for Society' to which Malta is signatory came in quick succession. They continued to build on the main ideas with emphasis on future legislation, enforcement and the social and educational aspects. The 'International Council on Monuments and Sites' (ICOMOS), the non-governmental International organisation that is the official advisor of UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee in article 2 of the 'Ethical Commitment Statement' outlines one of the main obligations of an ICOMOS member, to advocate conservation retaining the cultural identity as evidence of the past (Mifsud Bonnici, 2008).

Since then, countries, including Malta have legislated to protect their cultural heritage in similar ways based on these conventions, charters and treaties that were agreed upon. Specific cultural protection at international level has been slower to develop. Deciding which buildings to preserve is still problematic especially with buildings of the past century. Deciding what is to be considered historic and what is not, or whether a building has aesthetic value is not easy. But considering the other values too, such as the cognitive and the memory values, should facilitate the decisions to be made in the interest of future generations.

Modern Architecture in Malta

Famous examples of modern architecture in Europe built by famous modern architects are nowadays well protected. The works of Swiss-born architect and city planner Le Corbusier, for example, went beyond utility and 'style' to embrace the expression of an emotional relationship between man and his surrounding. He used raw materials, higher mathematics and intellectual speculation to distance himself from the customs that in his opinion stifled architecture and expounded his technical and aesthetic views. His ideas were expressed in a compilation of articles entitled 'Towards a New Architecture' (Le Corbusier, 1986). So influential was his work that seventeen of his works found in seven countries are today classified by UNESCO as 'World Heritage Sites'.

In Malta there are no examples of buildings of such fame but there were architects inspired by Gropius, Le Corbusier and other influential architects, who build good quality structures in this style and followed the same ideology about light and the relationship of the inside of a building with the outside. Light is especially important when evaluating architecture. Different impressions may be created by the orientation and size of its openings giving more importance to the quality of natural light than the quantity (Rasmussen, 1964). Since the majority of architecture built in the twentieth century in Malta did not fully embrace the International Modern Style but have elements of the Baroque period and the local vernacular, it is even more important to protect the works of those architects that embraced it.

Architect and civil engineer Joseph Huntingford, for example, was instrumental in contributing to many high quality buildings when he was put in charge of the design and construction works of many of the schools and public buildings in Gozo between 1950 and 1961. One of the best examples of his work was the Qala primary built in the International modernist style. In 2006 this was converted to house the 'Institute of Tourism Studies'. In the process, parts were demolished and though change in use is acceptable, destruction of any part is unacceptable (Schiavone, 2009). Other architects who embraced the International Modernist Style were Joseph M. Spiteri (ex. Modernist Villa built for Laurence Xuereb in Ta' Xbiex), Joe Consiglio (ex. Technical School in Kordin) (Thake, 2014) and Jo Tonna (ex. Daniel Micallef's Temple

House in Tal-Virtu) (Tonna, 2004). There are still a number of humble buildings in Malta and Gozo that merit protection before they are demolished. Some are still not scheduled and others have been but are in a bad state. A case in point is the run-down corner house at the crossroad between Naxxar Road and Francis Xerri Street in B'Kara (definitely a familiar landmark in most Maltese nationals' memory).



Fig. 1: Photograph of a twentieth century house at the crossroad between Naxxar Road and Francis Xerri Street in B'Kara. (Photo credit: Sandra Mifsud Bonnici)

Praxis and Gian Frangisk Abela Junior College

An appreciation of this period in the history of architecture where buildings began to be seen as having the potential to transform and inspire people has become of utmost importance. One needs to look out for these buildings and what they stand for and for the influence they have on present and future contemporary architecture. To give a practical example, the spotlight will be turned on the Modernist building 'Gian Frangisk Abela Junior College' in Msida, previously the 'Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology', built between 1962 to 1966, and now catering for thousands of post-secondary students. Victor Anastasi who was a draughtsman with the Public Works designed it (Muscat, 2016). At first glance the building is a plain one but with a very wide, almost grand staircase leading to it. Two extensions on either side of the main front building have been recently added, co-funded by the European Union.



**Fig.2 Photograph of Gian Frangisk Abela Junior College in Msida.
(Photo credit: Sandra Mifsud Bonnici)**

One enters into the atrium and finds a bold masterpiece, a modern installation made of several paintings on canvas by Harry Alden hanging opposite the entrance 'framed' by the architectural features of pillars and beams, recently painted with contrasting colours. The two original four story wings have typical rows of windows. At the back of one of these wings lies a one-story extension that houses the Junior College Chapel: a small jewel in the Modernist style. The north-facing wall, almost completely open to the outside, still has the original wrought iron doors and windows with other wrought iron decorative frames fixed to the outside for added security. The architectural details outside the north-facing wall are decorative with squares 'cut out' in a vertical piece of concrete supporting a horizontal slab that creates shade. The sun infiltrates the space throughout the day from the smaller windows on the south-facing wall. The interiors are almost untouched since it was built. The floor is covered with black tiles with large grits of peach, grey and black marble, a typical floor used in up-market buildings in Malta during this period and the ceiling is covered with a wooden-grid soffit incorporating the light fixtures, a very rare decorative feature on the island. Originally designed as a students' common room, its use was changed to a catholic chapel and is still being used in this way to date.



Fig. 3 Photograph of the Junior College Chapel. (Photo credit: Sandra Mifsud Bonnici)



Fig. 4 Interior of the Junior College Chapel. (Photo credit: Sandra Mifsud Bonnici)

We come now to consider the values discussed above to this chapel. It is not only a good example of 1960's architecture and interiors but one must consider the memory value of the all the activities, masses and celebrations that happened there. A particularly special example of its use was the baptism of a newborn during the Easter celebration in March 2007. Throughout the past years mass was said twice a day during the week, adoration of the sacrament takes place daily. Prayer groups are organised and the Christmas and Easter functions have also been celebrated there. In November 2018, a quick count of individuals attending 7.00am and 12.30pm masses was carried out. Figure 5 shows the attendance of the number of persons attending each mass. When considering that this chapel is servicing around 3000 individuals between students and staff, the attendance is comparable if not better than that of other churches in Malta and Gozo. Thus, plans to demolish this building (currently provisionally shelved due to lack of funds) to house a larger library that admittedly is needed, should be revisited when other than the economic value of the land it stands on, one should also consider its national value, its artistic value, its cognitive value and as a place of worship, the piety and memory values. Change of use is discouraged when dealing with a building type connected with religion such as chapels, churches mosques and other places of worship and if carried, the strict rule is that the space must be kept unified (Guggenheim, 2013). All religious buildings have an important role in the history of architecture by filling spiritual needs of people, giving them hope of a higher justice and offering them comfort (Gympel, 1996).

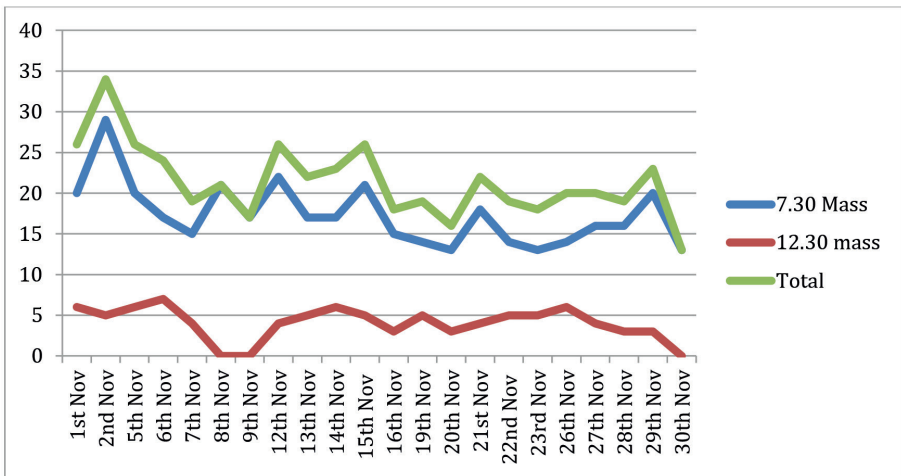


Fig. 5 Graph showing attendance at mass during the month of November 2018 at the Junior College Chapel. (Statistics compiled by the author)
Y axis should be labelled 'Number persons per mass'.

Conclusion

There are many small gems, similar to the Junior College Chapel mostly found on the outskirts of the towns and villages around Malta. The list of twentieth century buildings to be protected needs to be regularly updated so that this type of architecture representative of the modernist style is protected. The new techniques used to build them forms the link between previous construction techniques and those now used in contemporary buildings. One cannot go to contemporary high rise buildings and five to eight story blocks of flats, without conserving some examples of modernist style buildings as these too are cultural artifacts and will become more valuable as time goes by. It is not just rows of terraced town houses, 'auberges', 'palazzos' and fortifications that need to be protected. The evolution of architectural conservation began from that of individual buildings for educational, inspirational or even romantic and nostalgic reasons to a broad discipline that encompasses historic centers backed by governmental and non-governmental organisations and subject to various documents as mentioned above. Across the centuries, conservation has spread to include historic gardens, industrial archaeology, domestic architecture and now even the Modern Movement (Rodwell, 2007) and in Malta we need desperately to embrace this.

Education and a greater appreciation of what is classified as modern architecture and its value needs to be stepped up. Giving value only to monetary models is wrong, instead one needs to find alternative uses for such buildings so that they are kept and may be enjoyed. Everyone has responsibilities, the nation has the obligation to save and conserve these buildings for future generations at the cost of offering schemes to compensate owners who have these types of buildings for their loss in monetary value, the architects of our time need to take into consideration the moral conscience when planning contemporary buildings knowing that in the future they too will acquire importance if quality buildings are constructed, and finally Maltese society needs to become more aware and to fight to conserve twentieth century buildings as they contain the stories of the individuals who lived in them and give important snapshots of our story as a nation.

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Charters and Conventions

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- Convention for safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO.
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression, UNESCO.
- Ethical Commitment Statement, ICOMOS.

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