The development of domestic space in the Maltese Islands from the Late Middle Ages to the second half of the Twentieth Century

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Chapter 11

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MALTESE HOUSES SINCE THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

"*... the house comprises a combination of sign systems, which aim at communicating functional, typological, socio-economic and symbolic trends, according to the perceptions of society*"
(Sigalos 2003: 1)

11.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the development of the built environment in the Maltese islands during the last half a century, from the late sixties of the 20th century until recent times. It examines the effects which current legislation has had on town planning and urban development and explores the main factors which contributed to the evolution of the Maltese house as we know it today. Another objective of this chapter is to serve as an eye opener for present and future architects and policy makers regarding the various aspects and issues that need to be considered in the planning of houses and settlements.

11.2 The causes and effects of the building boom

Chapter 2 has referred to the effects of the Second World War on the Maltese islands (section 2.4.4 above). Apart from the fact that many people lost their lives, hundreds of dwellings were damaged or completely destroyed. One of the areas that were particularly hit by enemy attacks was the Harbour district, where the British military had its strongest presence. The immediate post-war governments embarked on various projects to reconstruct heavily damaged residential areas or build new ones to accommodate families that had ended up homeless (Tonna 1985: 71-74).

The economic situation that developed in the post-war years, when the British reduced their military presence in Malta, also had a remarkable effect on the country. This resulted in high unemployment, followed by mass emigration to other countries (Busuttil 1988: 162). However, emigration did not completely solve the issue of housing shortage, because the baby boom that characterized the immediate post-war years (1946 – 1950) led to a dramatic rise in population, which began to mitigate only in the sixties (Figure 4.7). This demographic rise, therefore, resulted in a higher demand for decent accommodation.

The shift from a fortress economy to one based on the manufacturing and service industries, particularly tourism, was perhaps one of the main reasons which led to the evolution of the existing settlements in the way we know them today. Comparable to

what had occurred in other European industrialized countries, the emancipation of women in society and the world of work, more emphasis on gender equality, the diversification of employment and compulsory education, were among the main contributors which in the last fifty years influenced the morphology of settlements as well as the evolution of the Maltese house.

The post-Independence years were characterized by a period of economic boom, which saw the rise of new industrial areas and tourist zones in different parts of the islands (Busuttil 1988: 162). Stretches of unbuilt land were developed into industrial areas, while places like St. Paul's Bay and Sliema became prime tourist attractions. This period of economic prosperity also saw the rise of new settlement areas, for example Santa Luċija and San Ġwann, and the extension of existing ones, for instance Ħamrun and Msida (Tonna 1985: 67-68) (Figures 11.1(a) and (b)).

Before the last decade of the 20th century town planning and building legislation in Malta were completely inadequate. This, coupled with the fact that the country lacked professionally trained town planners, led to land speculation in various parts of the islands. Consequently, building permits were sometimes issued in areas that fell outside development zones. The building of new arterial roads, the purpose of which was to mitigate car traffic congestion in the village centres and to act as a boundary line for further development, encouraged the building of more houses on both their sides, leading to further urban sprawl (Tonna 1985: 91-92) (Figure 11.2).

Land speculation led to vast areas of arable land being sacrificed in the name of progress, consequently several towns and villages ended up merging into each other, losing the autonomy they had enjoyed for several centuries (Tonna 1985: 92) (Figure 11.3). Road widening projects also occurred in a number of village centres, while traditional village houses were sometimes demolished to make way for new buildings. As a result, a number of villages also lost part of their traditional identity, since certain narrow, winding streets were converted into wider and straighter ones to facilitate car traffic in the village core (Tonna 1985: 91). New houses built in the village centre were not always in conformity with the traditional character of the local village, since their style was alien to Maltese vernacular architecture.

Another reason which led to the development of new urban and suburban areas is the transformation of the old town centres into areas of commercial and business attraction. This phenomenon was particularly widespread among the young generation, who sought less densely populated residential areas in other parts of the country.

11.3 Housing for all

The second half of the 20th century, particularly between 1960 and 1980, was marked by the commitment of subsequent governments to eradicate the problem of housing shortage and to reduce the number of families living in substandard accommodation. In fact, the late fifties saw the emergence of the earliest housing estates, consisting of apartment blocks rented out at affordable rates to low-income families. The original idea was to build a housing estate in each electoral district, but by the seventies the

government decided to expand these low-cost apartments to most areas of the Maltese islands (Tonna 1985: 105, 108). These apartments included the most basic services, and usually consisted of a sitting room, a bathroom, a kitchen with a dining area and two or three bedrooms (Figure 3.102).

To further ensure a fair distribution of living accommodation among the Maltese the government, through the Housing Act of 1949, used its powers to requisition (or confiscate) houses, which were then handed over to homeless families at a very low rent. Usually houses requisitioned under such legislation were properties that had been left vacant by their owners for a long period of time. Through a separate piece of legislation, which regulated rented residential properties (the Re-letting of Urban Property Ordinance of 1931), the government also sought to protect tenants through the provision of security-of-tenure and the imposition of maximum rent rates. However over the years, as the local economy grew and the social conditions of the Maltese improved, rental controls became increasingly prejudicial to property owners (Tonna 1985: 107-109; Buttigieg 1990: 38-45). Tenants, on the other hand, benefitted from very low rental fees in comparison to the value of the property they enjoyed. As a result, until this legislation was revised and updated in the late 20th century, the local rental market collapsed, leaving a large number of residential properties empty and in a dilapidated state.

To mitigate housing shortage the government also embarked on various national schemes to sell building plots at affordable rates. These were known as Home Ownership Schemes (HOS) and Building Development Areas (BDA) (Tonna 1985: 103). The building plots were government property or else were expropriated by the State from private owners specifically for development (Buttigieg 1990). Although these initiatives were commendable in principle, for they boosted the local building industry and encouraged more families to become home owners, they certainly had an adverse effect on Malta's natural environment, particularly when considering that a number of houses were built outside development areas. The lack of a proper legislation and building regulations continued to aggravate the situation, and whole districts of agricultural land were consumed to make way for new residential areas (Figure 11.4). Instead of developing this land for apartment blocks to accommodate several families, the government granted permits for the building of terraced houses, semi-detached houses and corner houses, which could only accommodate a family each (Tonna 1985: 110-12). This was certainly more desirable for many prospective house owners, particularly those who had the financial means, since they could afford to plan their house and design its interior according to their specific needs.

Home ownership was also facilitated by the local commercial banks, which issued various loan schemes at subsidized interest rates. Such schemes gave first time buyers the opportunity to buy their own property and to furnish it as well. Houses usually consisted of two floors, with a garage at street, semi-basement or basement level. The ground floor generally included a sitting room, a living area, a kitchen and a bathroom, while the first floor incorporated the bedrooms and another bathroom (Figure 11.5). This new generation of houses interacted with the Maltese car owner society, with

these dwellings becoming focused on the garage for the car (or cars) owned by the family.

From an interview the author had with a local leading architect, it transpired that the plan and space organization of these houses were often determined with a strong influence from the young couple's parents (Patrick Camilleri 2012: personal communication). It is interesting to observe as well that the owners of these houses were generally couples of the same generation. Today, after a period of almost thirty-five years, these residential areas are characterized by families whose grown up children are getting married and moving out to live elsewhere, to where property is more affordable. Many owners have already reached their pensionable age, with others being on the way to retirement. Recently this has led to a situation where several owners are selling their property for re-development, whilst opting to live in smaller dwellings in the same area or even somewhere else (see section 11.5 below).

11.4 Planning legislation

The first piece of proper town planning legislation in the post-war period, known as the Town and Country Planning Act, was approved by Parliament in 1969. This legislation, drafted by the British expert on town and country planning law, Sir Desmond Heap, however never became operative and was, eventually, repealed by Parliament when it passed the Building Development Areas Act in 1983. In 1992 a new law, known as the Development Planning Act, came into force. This established the Planning Authority, the regulatory body entrusted for the future town planning of the Maltese islands. Through the Environment Protection Act of 2001 this national organization, now renamed Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA), became responsible also for land use planning and environmental regulation. A recent development in local planning legislation occurred in 2015, when Parliament enacted three new legislative bills (the Environment Protection Act, the Development Planning Act, and the Environment and Planning Review Tribunal Act), leading to the demerger of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority into two separate entities: the Environment and Resources Authority and the Planning Authority.

With stricter building regulations in place land speculation was brought more under control. Since building permits outside development zones were more difficult to obtain, land became less available for building speculators, and consequently more expensive to acquire. The price of the building materials and salaries increased, which made real estate not easily affordable, at least for low and average income families. This situation, marked in particular by the scarcity of land available for development, affected the way houses were planned and their spaces organized, as the following section demonstrates. The soaring property prices induced commercial banks to provide young couples and first time buyers with more attractive and flexible loan schemes.

11.5 The effects of urban regeneration

The new building situation which unfolded since the last decade of the 20th century resulted in an urban regeneration in different parts of these islands. Several high class residential areas, previously occupied by villas, bungalows and terraced houses, were gradually converted into areas of apartment blocks to accommodate more families (Figures 11.6 (a) and (b)). Figure 11.7 illustrates a block of more than twenty apartments in the place of a former luxury villa with an extensive back garden.

Urban regeneration was also permitted in some of the older urban areas, for example Sliema, where many late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century terraced houses and villas were demolished to make way for more modern apartments. Unfortunately, this has resulted in a situation where an integral part of Sliema's architectural heritage has been wiped out almost completely.

To maximize profits and revenues, the developer made the best use of the available building area. For instance, rooms became smaller in size, while corridors were substituted for open-plan living areas. The common areas of these apartment blocks, for example the staircase, became narrower to include an elevator. Another important change was the disappearance of the flat roof, which was replaced by the penthouse. The basement of an apartment block usually serves as a garage, but this does not always accommodate all the owners' cars, because there is not enough space or it is expensive to acquire. To maximize the use of space, building plans sometimes also include apartments at semi-basement level (Figure 11.8). Other apartment blocks also include one or two ground floor maisonettes, each with a separate entrance.

The effects of urban development on these residential areas have been significant. Apart from the fact that it has led to a higher population density, these areas also became more polluted, particularly with the increasing number of private cars that circulate every day through their streets. The presence of more private cars has resulted in various car parking problems for the residents as well as for the visitors (according to recent statistics, each household in the Maltese islands has an average of three cars).

11.6 Building materials

Technological progress, the improvement in tools and machinery and better quality building materials permit faster urban development. Nowadays, a five storey apartment block is likely to be built and finished within less than a year. The use of prefabricated building materials, for example bricks instead of local limestone and concrete blocks for ceilings and floors, has further contributed to this rapid development. Double walls have been eliminated, while the covered timber balconies were replaced by open balconies protected by aluminium railings. The use of timber in contemporary houses is usually confined to the main and interior doors. Aluminium balcony doors and exterior windows are usually double-glazed for insulation and to reduce the amount of ambient noise.

During the building boom it was customary to create the façades of houses completely in stone (Figure 11.9). When prefabricated materials gradually replaced the local building limestone, particularly from the early years of this century, the façades of new buildings started being decorated in different colour schemes, which certainly hinder consistent streetscapes. This is further increased by the fact that high-rise buildings are characterized by different elevations, making them quite incompatible with each other.

During the building boom, when one's property was still considered as a once-in-a-lifetime investment, there was more emphasis on the owners' personal tastes. Domestic spaces were organized according to the couple's particular needs, while the façade was embellished by certain architectural features to make the house different from all the others. Such features included balustrades, columns and decorated corbels. Another popular feature was the closed stone balcony with aluminium windows. Therefore, at that time the house was a showcase of one's personal tastes as much as it was a mirror of a person's economic wealth. However, when in more recent years real estate became less affordable, particularly for first time buyers, the domestic style and layout had to be limited to what was readily available on the market and to the person's financial means.

11.7 The organization of domestic space

As discussed in section 11.5 above, an average contemporary Maltese house is characterized by less surface area than one of the previous generation. As occurred in other industrialized countries during this period, rooms became smaller in size, while certain spaces which were previously considered as fundamental were now absorbed by more functional units (Attfield 1999: 73-82). A typical contemporary single-storey dwelling usually consists of two main sections:

a) a living area to include a kitchen, combined with a dining and sitting area, and
b) a private area which includes the bedrooms and a bathroom or shower.

While the living area is generally situated close to the main door, the private area is usually located at the rear side of the house to ensure the residents' privacy, particularly when visitors are present (Figures 11.10 – 11.12). The number of rooms depends on the building plot's area. More spacious apartments could incorporate a large living area, three bedrooms, an extra bathroom or shower, and sometimes even a study area.

It is evidently clear that the average contemporary Maltese house lacks extra space. The value of a house depends mostly on its surface area, apart from the locality. Therefore, the organization of domestic space has been restricted to what is absolutely essential for the average contemporary Maltese family. The configuration of domestic space also reflects the mentality of contemporary society. An improved system of compulsory and inclusive education has led to a diversification of employment opportunities, especially among the young generation. As happened elsewhere in Western Europe, for example France and Italy, the emphasis on more gender equality, equal employment opportunities and the rising cost of living has led many women to retain their job even after getting married and having children. Through various fiscal

and social measures the government encourages women to stay in employment. An example of such measures is the opening of various free childcare centres in different localities. This situation has resulted in different family practices. For instance, for the contemporary family the house has become a place where its members meet and socialize only after a day's work. During a substantial part of the day the house is usually empty, since both parents work, often on a full-time basis, while their children are at school or being looked after by someone else.

The contemporary Maltese family considers the house from a functional perspective, unlike the previous generation which looked at it as a lifetime investment and also with a sense of pride. At that time, a couple sought to ensure that their residence was different from all the others, both in style and layout. In recent years the situation has changed, particularly among the young generation, since many first time buyers and young couples do not have the luxury to build their house according to their own tastes, but have to accommodate these to what is readily available on the market. Many young couples today are not interested in embellishing their dwellings with elaborate furniture, instead prefering to invest their money in the latest technology equipment and in travelling abroad.

This shift in mentality has also led the Maltese contemporary family to become more mobile. The concept of a house as a once-in-a-lifetime investment has changed, and people acknowledge that, after all, the house is not everlasting. Mobility is particularly evident among the young generation. A family or a couple can decide to change residence for various reasons, for example the need for a more spacious dwelling or the desire to live in a different locality. However, low-income families are generally less mobile and usually tend to live in less popular residential areas, for example at Ħamrun, Marsa and Birżebbuġa, where dwellings are relatively more affordable.

11.8 Farmhouses and houses of character

During the building boom vast areas of agricultural estates were built over and many vernacular structures were demolished to make way for new development. Others were abandoned, since their owners had left the country or found employment and residence elsewhere. The village core also experienced a similar situation. Apart from the number of houses which became vacant, others were demolished due to road extension works or to make space for new dwellings. For a time in Maltese history our vernacular architecture experienced a period of general neglect. In the absence of proper legislation and despite the various concerns raised by non-government organizations, many vernacular houses were demolished in the name of progress.

The earliest interest in the conversion of farmhouses for habitation purposes was registered in the late seventies of the previous century. The country's particular climate, coupled with various tax concessions and property investment opportunities, attracted retired foreigners to buy and convert houses of character into charming properties (Boissevain 2013: 23, 27-28).

This increased interest in houses of character was further complemented by more awareness among the local population to protect and appreciate the village core (Figure 11.13). Conversion projects are expensive, and for several years this market was chiefly accessible to those with above-average personal financial resources. However, in more recent years commercial banks started to provide flexible house loans to render this market more attractive for a wider spectrum of potential clients.

Farmhouses, for example, offer various advantages. Apart from being situated in quiet locations, they offer a lot of potential, particularly when they are bought with some adjoining lands, which can be ideal for property extension or to be converted into private gardens and/or a pool. Certain farmhouses are also characterized by elaborate rooms and spaces, which therefore allow more comfort.

In this context, one needs to refer as well to the type of conversion that is usually conducted on these houses. While several owners bring these dwellings back to their former glory, others carry out so many structural alterations that the original interior character of the house is completely lost. For example, spacious rooms may be partitioned into smaller spaces or, conversely, dividing walls of adjoining rooms may be removed to create more spacious units. In other cases central courtyards, or parts thereof, are roofed to create extra living space. All these changes result in different house plans and space configurations. Apart from that, such structural alterations lead to a different microclimate within the dwelling.

The Planning Authority assesses all applications for the conversion of farmhouses and houses of character. Permits are granted on condition that conversion projects leave the least possible negative impact not only on the internal and external character of the building itself, but also on the surrounding landscape or streetscape. Strict measures are used when buildings are of great historic and/or architectural value. For instance, the use of aluminium doors and/or windows on the façade or in areas which are visible from the exterior is strictly prohibited. In the case of townhouses and houses of character, the government and the former MEPA have from time to time launched also various initiatives to provide financial support for the restoration of traditional covered timber balconies. These projects, which have taken place in various town centres and villages, are crucial for the preservation of Malta's vernacular heritage.

11.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an outlook on the development of the local built environment in the last fifty years. It has analysed the effects of the building boom (1960–1985) and how this affected settlement development, particularly with the rise of new urban and suburban areas, tourist resort centres and industrial areas in different parts of the islands. However, the lack of proper town planning legislation and building regulations before the last decade of the 20th century and the absence of professionally trained town planners led to land speculation in various parts of the country and to many traditional villages losing their autonomy by which they had been characterized

for several centuries. It was with the Development Planning Act of 1992 and more recent planning legislation that urban development became more regulated.

The demographic and social changes that occurred in Malta and Gozo in the last fifty years also had a remarkable effect on the Maltese house and the configuration of its domestic space. Our analysis has revealed that during this period there was a tendency among the local inhabitants to live in more comfortable dwellings. More employment opportunities, the emancipation of women and more gender equality, a higher level of education especially among the young generation as well as various home ownership and bank loan facilities were among the main causes which led a wider section of the local community to enjoy a better quality of life and live in more comfortable houses, even low-income families. The house became more family oriented and its domestic space was structured according to the needs of the family.

When urban development became more regulated and building permits more difficult to obtain, especially in outside development zones, building plots became less affordable, especially for young couples and first time buyers. This led to an extensive urban regeneration programme in various parts of the islands, where many terraced houses, villas and semi-detached houses were demolished to make way for new apartment blocks. This implied that a building plot that was formerly occupied by a single house, therefore by a single family, now ended up being inhabited by various families who lived in separate apartments. The house value depended mostly on its surface area, apart from the locality. Given the restricted area by which many building plots were characterized, together with the financial profit that the developer wanted to maximize, domestic space in many contemporary Maltese houses has been limited to what is absolutely essential for the average income family. In contrast to the dwellings of the previous generation, the kitchen, the living room and the dining room are often integrated into a single space, while corridors are substituted by open-plan living areas. This development in domestic space reflects the social and demographic changes of the last fifty years, which were part of a wider phenomenon that characterized many post-industrial countries in Europe and beyond (Booth 1999: 133-56; Lawrence-Zuñiga 1999: 157-76). Unfortunately, however, although the contemporary Maltese house is built in a way to ensure comfort and individual privacy for its residents, in the last twenty years it has lost some of its traditional characteristics, for example the flat roof and the balcony.

The urban regeneration of the late 20th century was primarily intended to safeguard the remaining green areas in the Maltese islands. However, the rise of apartment blocks on building plots previously occupied by villas or terraced houses, has led these urban areas to be more densely populated as well as more congested and polluted.

But this chapter also looks at the future of the Maltese house. It is an undeniable fact that this will continue to evolve to satisfy the needs and aspirations of future society. In this period of economic development, high technology boom and social changes, the pace of progress cannot be slowed down.

However, society needs to strike a balance between its past, present and future. Progress does not mean the eradication of the past, and Maltese society cannot afford to repeat the same mistakes of the post-Independence building boom. On the contrary,

the local society should feel a sense of pride towards its built heritage, whilst ensuring its preservation for future generations. Striking a balance between the past and present is crucial to ensure a future sustainable development. This can be achieved through various means, for example by proper legislation and law enforcement, national educational and awareness campaigns among children and adults, adequate financial support and the continuous professional development of trained personnel responsible for the preservation and conservation of the country's heritage.

Building regulations and planning policies should aim at the sustainable conservation of the village core and ensure that any development occurring in the village or town centre will have the least possible negative impact on the traditional streetscape and general environment. Thus, for example, the widening of roads in the village core to allow more car traffic circulation should be prohibited, favouring instead the development of pedestrian zones. Likewise, the restoration of existing structures in the village or town centres, particularly with the use of traditional building materials, is to be commended. Enforcement officers need to continue monitoring restoration or conversion works to ascertain that these projects conform to the building permit.

It is of paramount importance that the relevant authorities ensure for posterity the existence of a representative sample of houses which belong to different historical periods, including the post-Independence era. In this way no part of Malta's architectural heritage or history is left behind or lost forever. The experience of the building boom that characterized the country's industrial period is certainly one that should never have occurred. There is a risk, however, that with the urban regeneration that has taken place in many localities in Malta since the late 20th century the same story may repeat itself. Many villas and houses built between the early sixties and the late eighties have been demolished to make way for more modern buildings. This may lead to the loss of a whole generation of architectural history. Official policies and guidelines for the scheduling and protection of historic buildings need to be regularly updated, published and explained to the public in a simple language.

To tackle the issue of long time vacant or dilapidated property, especially in the town or village core, the government can consider the possibility of encouraging owners to put their houses for sale or for re-development through various tax concessions and fast-track restoration and/or re-development permits issued by the Planning Authority. These concessions are likely to encourage the reutilization of building plots, whilst contributing to less pressure on the islands' remaining green areas.

The development of new urban areas in the last fifty years has resulted in the reshaping of the traditional settlements and in various villages losing even their natural boundaries. Had there been proper building and town planning regulations as well as qualified and experienced town planners at the appropriate time, Malta and Gozo would have saved vast stretches of green areas from being lost forever. The evolution of local settlements would probably have been also quite different. Therefore, it is crucial for the authorities concerned to discourage more urban development in the last remaining green areas of the Maltese islands.

Legislation, official policies, building regulations and guidelines are important, but are certainly not enough. Educational awareness campaigns among children and adults are required to make citizens more aware of their architectural heritage. It is high time that the core history curriculum in schools contain more specific reference to the local built environment, including contemporary architecture. Educational visits and fieldwork are a further means to sensitize children about their country's historical and cultural heritage. The media, including the internet, can be a useful means to educate the general public. Success stories of house restoration projects should be commended and publicized in the local media.

The financial support that for the last years the government has provided to various private individuals to restore house façades and timber balconies is certainly an excellent incentive. Perhaps one may also consider the possibility of extending this support for the restoration of house interiors, especially for private houses having a particular architectural or historical value.

The training and re-training of professional personnel to acquire new knowledge and skills in building conservation and restoration is of paramount importance to ensure that any future restoration/conservation works are conducted in conformity with the highest scientific and international standards. It is likewise crucial for town planners and architects to keep themselves abreast with current knowledge and practices. For example, training courses in Space Syntax at graduate and post-graduate level at the University of Malta would be of great benefit for the country in the planning of new urban areas and to improve the transport network within and between settlements.

Ensuring sustainable development is an holistic approach that requires the commitment and active participation of every citizen, adults and young alike. Laws and official policies are undeniably important for the preservation of our natural and built-up environment, because they serve as a deterrent and guidance at the same time, but education probably has a more lasting effect on the community. It is through this holistic approach that we can truly safeguard our long time heritage which, after all, forms an integral part of Malta's national identity.