

Dennis De Lucca

## The Architecture of Valletta



Armoury entrance in the Magistral Palace, Valletta Source: Denis de Lucca, Carapeccchia, 1999

An understanding of the architectural fabric of Valletta necessarily involves a detailed analysis of the principal historic factors responsible for the foundation and eventual growth of this unique town situated on what was formerly considered to be an isolated island situated in the centre of the Mediterranean.

Although it is possible to draw analogies with quite a few fortified towns in Sicily and Southern Italy (Syracuse, to quote one example, had, prior to modifications carried out in the 19th century, a quasi-identical fortification layout (Triglia, 1981) in no part of the Mediterranean can one appreciate an entity combining the functions of a capital city, a fortress and a sizeable urban dwelling space which is designed in so admirable a fashion and which so accurately interprets contemporary 16th century thought on what a city should incorporate within its fabric.

The question is therefore immediately raised—is it possible to isolate the formative factors which were ultimately responsible for the unique architectural character of Valletta?

### Chronological considerations

Although the foundation stone of Valletta was laid in March, 1566 by the Grand Master Jean de La Vallette (Hughes, 1970) it would appear from the documentary evidence that the proper building of the town, or to be more precise, the building of its broad essentials, occurred in the 1570s after the

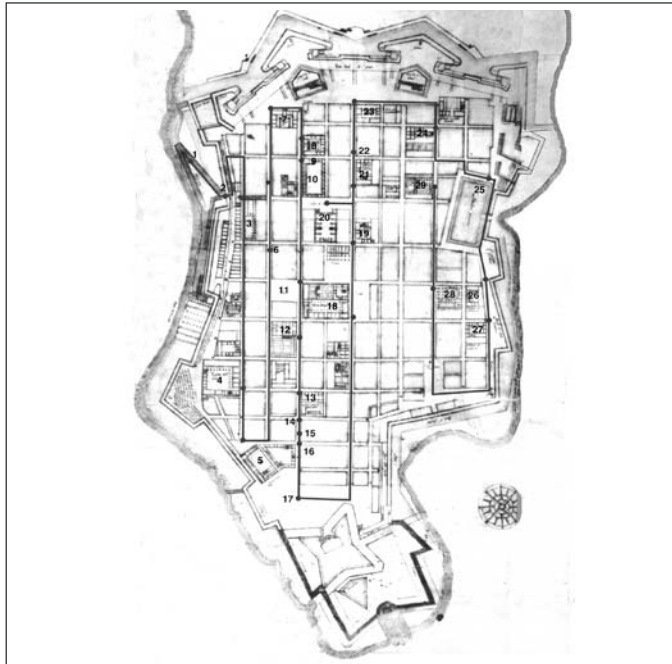
rectilinear layout of the new city had been established by the Italian planner Laparelli (Ellul, 1970).

Chronologically this was an important occurrence as a contemporary European architecture was then experiencing that period of flux which characterized its transition from Renaissance gyratory to baroque axial concepts of space and architectural form. At this point in time several European architects and their patrons seem to have been getting increasingly dissatisfied with the Renaissance achievements of introducing patches of symmetrical order into environments which were still basically medieval so that these same people started thinking in terms of new towns like Valletta which could incorporate in their totality contemporary ideals of town planning and architectural design.

By far the most important concept of the new baroque town was the so-called “fortress” concept implying the subservience of the built fabric of the town to a vast, ever-expanding system of fortifications which essentially constituted an impenetrable physical barrier between an overpopulated urban zone and a relatively uninhabited countryside.

In this respect it is not hard to understand why the militarized zone of Valletta, in common with the situation in other planned European towns, occupied a good 20 percent of the overall land space and necessarily conditioned an architectural strait-jacketed format possessing a significantly vertical character which in times of an increased birth rate could easily degenerate into one vast slum area as happened with various zones of Valletta after 1650.

Over and above land waste and vertical development the fortress concept



An early seventeenth century drawing of Valletta Source: Denis de Lucca, Baroque Malta, 2004 annotated by Giovanni Battista Vertova

of the baroque ideal implied the establishment of what one can define as an “order” of the urban design based on a strict geometry meant to facilitate the accommodation, assembly and rapid movement of armoured knights defending the various bastions so that building types and spaces which are unknown in earlier medieval settlements like Mdina suddenly appear on the scene - a centrally placed magisterial palace to serve as the headquarters of the Grand Master, auberges to serve as glorified barracks establishments, piazzas for the quick assembly of rank and file, straight streets for the rapid transportation of soldiery and cannon, a large hospital for the quick recovery of troops wounded in battle, a conventual church to symbolize the power of Christianity versus Islam and last but not least a gunpowder factory (*polversita*), a foundry (*ferraria*), a bakery and an intricate system of vital water supply cisterns all strategically distributed within the fortification network for the smooth functioning of an organised defence inherited from centuries of experience in the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem. The chronological sequence, therefore, indicates clearly that the above mentioned “essentials” formed the *foci* of architectural development in Valletta between 1580 and 1650. The space that was left over was devoted to solve the acute problem of housing an ever-increasing population varying between 10,000 in 1600 and 21,000 in 1800 (Blouet, 1972).

One must therefore necessarily conclude that the building of Valletta indicates firstly, that the plan of the town was a block achievement laid out at a stroke

#### The city of Valletta

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|---|---|
| 1. Our Lady of Liesse church<br>(Eglise de Notre Dame de Liesse)                                    | 16. St. Magdalene convent<br>(Convent des Filles de la Magdelaine)    |
| 2. Del Monte or marina gate<br>(Porte de Saint Sauveur)   | 17. Grain silos (Magasins)  |
| 3. Franciscan monastery<br>(Convent des Recolets, appelle Il Giesu)                                 | 18. Magisterial palace<br>(Palais du Grand Maistre)                   |
| 4. Slaves prison (La Bagna)   | 19. Auberge of Auvergne<br>(Auberge d’Auvergne)                       |
| 5. Grand Hospital (Infermerie)  | 20. Conventual church and priory<br>(Eglise & Prieure de Saint Jeans) |
| 6. Church of St. Paul<br>(Eglise de S. Paul)  | 21. Auberge of Provence<br>(Auberge de Provence)                      |
| 7. Auberge of Castille<br>(Auberge de Castille)   | 22. Franciscan church<br>(Eglise des Cordeliers)                      |
| 8. Church of St. Catherine and Auberge<br>of Italy (Eglise de Sainte Catherine<br>Auberge d’Italie) | 23. Artillery factory and<br>foundry (Grans Arsenal)                  |
| 9. Church of St. James<br>(Eglise de Saint Jacques)   | 24. Auberge of France<br>(Auberge de France)                          |
| 10. Palace Chancellery<br>(Palais de la Chancellerie)   | 25. Jouvin’s Amphitheatre<br>(maisons paroissent en amphitheatre)     |
| 11. Market square (Place du marche)   | 26. Auberge of Germany<br>(Auberge d’Alemagne)                        |
| 12. Jesuit college and church<br>(Eglise & College des PP. Jesuites)                                | 27. Auberge of Aragon<br>(Auberge d’Aragon)                           |
| 13. Church of St. Dominic<br>(Eglise de Saint Dominique)  | 28. Carmelite monastery<br>(Convent de la Madone del Carmine)         |
| 14. All Souls church<br>(Eglise neuve ‘delle Anime)   | 29. Augustinian monastery<br>(Convent des Augustines)                 |
| 15. Palatial residence (Grand Palais)   |   |

and thereafter fixed by the Military Engineer Lapparelli, secondly that the town was primarily designed as a fortification with the city fitted into the straitjacket created by the various crucial points of the defence system and, thirdly, that the different building types enclosed within the fortifications were closely related to the needs of defence which were considered to be crucial for the survival of the town.

Chronological considerations likewise indicate that in the second part of the 17th Century and throughout the 18th century, building development within Valletta was primarily undertaken to provide “frills” to the essential that had been laid prior to 1650 - to provide, in fact, administrative, recreational, cultural and commercial facilities which were practically in the original fortress.

#### Legislation

To alter the ultimate form of Valletta as it emerged in the 1700s, to introduce fresh elements of another style, is to break what the French philosopher Descartes describes as the “aesthetic backbone of the baroque city...” Up to a certain extent, the final form of the building of Valletta, based as it was on the principles that Descartes (Mumford, 1966) and Alberti before him advocated was enforced by a special commission known as the *Officium Commissariorum Domorum*, which as early as , 1569 finalised a set of 12 precise regulations designed to control all non-military fortifications of Valletta (Sammut, 1970).

Although the first of these regulations, enacted specified the formation of a Rhodian type *collacchio* for the exclusive use of the Order, this outdated concept seems to have been tacitly abandoned at an early stage presumably due to the need to defend the long stretch of fortification walls in an efficient manner which by consequence necessitated a wide distribution of the different auberges in close proximity to the appropriate sections of the defence network. The remaining regulations were fortunately enforced with a varying amount of give and take so that they were by and large responsible if not for the Renaissance-baroque style of the buildings, at least for the overall aesthetic effect of the new town.

The regulations in their final form can be broadly classified into three categories - the first category intended to produce a centrally-located group of main streets and squares which contained all the important state buildings and architectural features and, by logical consequence, the dwellings of the upper echelons of contemporary society; the second category intended to regulate the appearance of streets which thus assumed all the symbolic values of contemporary baroque towns in Europe and, particularly in Spanish American colonies; the third category meant to ensure a reasonable level of health standards within the town based on an excellent system of sewers laid beneath the streets and on an accurately plotted network of storage of rainwater (Manuscript 195, National Library, Valletta).

From the Order's point of view the first two categories of regulations resulted in all that was by contemporary standards considered to be praiseworthy in the new fortress town; the concentration of the most costly and therefore elegant buildings along and on either side of the main street then known as Strada San Giorgio (implying a typically baroque class-conscious society), the lack of gardens, courtyards or any other form of external works projecting onto the pavements bordering all streets (implying an uninterrupted straight line of vision along the different thoroughfares); the careful consideration given to ornamentation of corner sites and door openings (implying not merely an emphasis on the fundamental baroque principle of integration of all the arts but also the use of ornament as a means of communicating the importance or otherwise of the building or street concerned); and finally the speed at which the different buildings were erected within a few months of the land purchase (implying the important principle of baroque design that a new town had to be laid out as quickly as possible, in accordance with a master plan so as to ensure uniformity of concept and aesthetic appearance without extraneous influences).

To all intents and purposes, therefore, the legislation enacted by the Order



Plan of the Grand Harbour fortifications drawn under the supervision of Marshal Vauban in 1694 Source: Denis de Lucca, Carapeccchia, 1999

when interpreted in association with contemporary city-building philosophy was to a large measure responsible for much of what was good in historic Valletta. In association with the clean geometry of the layout, its role was to clarify and to guide - something that was in fact indispensable for the orderly evolution of a baroque city but absolutely unnecessary for the disorderly growth of the medieval settlement of which Vittoriosa, situated on the opposite side of the Grand Harbour, provides a glaring example and Mdina another.

### Baroque symbols

In his celebrated treatise on town planning, Leon Battista Alberti stated that the streets of a town will be more "noble" if all the doors are built on the same model and if houses on either side of the street stand on an even line, none higher than the other. At a rather later period Descartes emphasised the statement of the great Italian theorist when he advocated the principle that all town buildings which are planned and executed by a single architect are in general more elegant and commodious than those which several have attempted to design. On these lines of thought which were nothing else but the very basics of baroque town planning theory, developed the principal symbolic constants of the different streetscapes of Valletta - the straight street and pavement, the unbroken and clearly defined roof line, the use of steps to solve the problem of a considerable change in level, the repetition of such uniform elements as the arch, lintel, window moulding, pilaster and column and finally, the lavish use of sculptural ornament initially concentrated in the area of the main entrance as in the Auberge d'Aragon but gradually spreading like a cancer over the whole façade until it reached its epitome in the Hosiel de Verdellin and the Auberge de Castille.

These, then, are the symbols of the baroque tradition in Valletta as they



Main altar section of the church of St. Catherine Source: Denis de Lucca, Carapечchia, 1999 of the Langue of Italy



are revealed in an intelligent analysis of the different palaces and churches contained within the fortifications. Yet there is more to this symbolism than actually meets the eye for the earlier category of palaces, designed by the Roman-trained Gerolamo Cassar and his disciples in the period 1570-1650 betray strong influences of local vernacular traditions which were apparently left to co-exist with the importations of baroque design at this stage mainly confined to doors, windows and corners but entirely absent in the masses of blank walling which dominate the facades of these earlier palaces.

In this respect one can define the essence of pre-1650 palaces and town houses in Valletta such as the auberges of Aragon, Auvergne and France, as being the preference for an asymmetric and massive form of design loosely punctuated with elongated windows thereby revealing that long after the coming of the Order, an established vernacular tradition of building based on heavy stone cubic masses was still struggling to achieve parity with the more fashionable concepts of design imported by the knights from the main European cultural centres.

After 1650, however, this two-way rapport stops suddenly and one finds such architects as Romano Carapечchia, Francesco Zerafa, Domenico Cachia, and others using a form of baroque design which is infinitely more three-dimensional, subtle and lavish in its score than that manifest in the earlier buildings. In this respect, the principal value of such later buildings as the Caslellania, the *Casa di Citta*, the Auberge de Provence and, the finest monument of all, the Auberge da Castille. lies not in their baroque expression which is clearly South Italian in its inspiration, but in the fact that their architects channeled the elements of their design into the vernacular tradition developing in the Maltese villages so that, for the first time in Maltese architectural history, in 1700 or thereabouts

one finds the principles of European baroque design influencing significantly contemporary village architecture in Malta.

This represents a major contribution of Valletta to the development of Maltese architecture. An interesting aspect of this phenomenon occurred in the field of building construction where medieval concepts of house-building were in the late 17th and early 18th centuries replaced by a more scientific approach so that in his Valletta palaces, the Maltese architect Francesco Zerafa (Manuscript 565, Notarial Archives, Valletta), used a vocabulary which included careful provision for damp proofing (by using hard as opposed to soft limestone for the first six courses of the ground floor): for the use of materials (particularly in so far as design features, beams and external woodwork including balconies were involved) and for the careful handling of such internal elements as ceiling arches, vaults and, especially, grand balustraded staircases which by this date had become the most important single element in the large town house.

Towards the close of the 17th century, the design of the ideal baroque palace had become a highly specialised affair. In his *Compendio Architettonico* of 1690 (Manuscript 81, National Library, Valletta), the Italian architect Romano Carapечchia who practiced extensively in Valletta, elucidates four cardinal principles of contemporary building philosophy namely (a) spatial investigation involving the use of curvature, perspective artifices and proportional mechanism to relate the interior of the building organism with the exterior facade and, more importantly, the facade with the streetscape so as to render this space dynamic and in an "infinite" state of development, (b) concentration on "collective" values involving the appreciation of the potential which a building has to enrich the urban scene if its facade is conceived on a basis of dialogue with, surrounding buildings, (c) integration of all the Arts involving a harmonious fusion of architecture, sculpture and painting based on the criterion that the end result will please one's sensibilities even if it does not adhere to the classical norms of composition, (d) communicative force implying the power of the baroque building not merely to express but also to communicate the doctrine and mystery of Catholicism in the Church; the refined taste, wealth and, detachment of nobility and absolutist politics in the palace and, lastly, the newly found prosperity and the popular/vernacular tastes of the bourgeoisie in the townhouse.

Palace architecture in Valletta after 1680 demonstrates all the above qualities. The corner treatment of the Caslellania in Merchants Street, for instance, demonstrates a lavish splay which contrasts significantly with the comparatively primitive quoin treatment which is found in Gerolamo Cassar's earlier palaces - a display which not only betrays the characteristic baroque preoccupation

with street vistas but which models the corner of the building into a meaningful relationship with the street pattern. Similarly the facade of the Hostel de Verdellin in Archbishop's Street demonstrates a design which is literally throbbing with overdone ornamentation so that it is remarkably close to the baroque ideal of total integration of architectural sculptural and decorative elements associated with the work of such celebrities as Borromini, Bernini, Fontana and others.

Finally, Valletta provides an excellent manifestation of the communicative force of baroque design in the form of the Auberge da Castille, which, in common with other large 18th century buildings in Valletta, replaced an earlier palace on the same site. With its sumptuously decorated windows, panel treatment, powerful cornice and sculptural doorway approached by a carefully planned sequence of steps, Castille represents the epitome of baroque design not only in Valletta but in all Malta. In its isolated majesty Castille was designed to communicate to the residents of Valletta the pretensions and absolutist philosophy of Grand Master Pinto - to emphasize this message the architect not only included a bust of the Grand Master over the doorway in strict conformity with international baroque but literally cluttered the whole building with Pinto's insignia based on the crescent moon. To all intents and purposes, this auberge, with its show of exuberant detail, embodies all the aspirations and trends that characterised architectural development in Valletta since 1570.

Insofar as Malta was concerned, the methodical town planning and palace architecture of Valletta served an important purpose - conjointly they provided a clear indication that baroque architecture at least as it emerged in the 17th century, embodied within it two very contradictory elements of the age. On one side there was the mathematical and methodical element expressed to perfection in the rigorous street plans and carefully studied palatial facades; on the other hand there was the sensuous, rebellious, extravagant side expressed not only in contemporary fashions of dress and statecraft but particularly in the sculpture and other forms of ornament that were so often fused, with what Alberti calls the *struttura* or architectural body of the building. Although the different palaces and town houses of Valletta collectively hinted at this continuous struggle of approach, of science versus liberal expression, it is mainly in the sacred architecture of the town that one can fully understand the full significance of this conflict.

When one considers, for instance, the Conventual Church of St. John's which together with Our Lady of Victories formed part of the earlier phase of the church building activity within Valletta, one can appreciate that the orderly straight sweep of space which forms the basic feature of this church, is immediately contradicted on all enclosure planes by the liberal profusion of

ornamentation that graces the marble floor, the sculpted wall surface and lastly but not least the magnificent painted vault which was designed by Mattia Preti to co-ordinate the different dynamic elements of the interior so that they could be appreciated in their totality.

At a rather later stage in the development of Valletta's sacred architecture one encounters the continuation of the above mentioned contradiction in a new phenomenon which soon started, like St. John's barrel vault, influenced village parish church design. This phenomenon was the emergence of the centrally-planned church based on the octagon as in the church of St. Catherine of Italy, the circle as in Notre Dame de Liesse and the oval as in St. James and St. Barbara.

The origins of the centrally-planned church in Valletta can be traced to the second half of the 17th century when the few remaining disposable plots in the city were small in size and worse still, were cramped between large buildings thus calling for a solution which saved precious space and which at the same time accommodated the maximum number of people. Under these circumstances the obvious answer was the centrally-planned church which in Italy and Sicily had achieved a certain measure of popularity due to the experiments of Borromini and his archrival Bernini. But there was more to the centrally-planned church than just dimensional limits - its entire concept relied heavily for effect on a skilful integration of various artistic disciplines - architecture, free-standing and relief sculpture, painting, decoration and, most important of all, the autochthonic form of lighting emanating from a crowning dome which represents the logical way to enclose the strictly geometric space beneath.

Insofar as baroque symbolism was concerned, therefore, there was no better medium to communicate the concept of the dynamic integration of the arts than the centrally-planned church where an audience hitherto accustomed to the austerity of earlier spaces could now at one glance appreciate a single environment literally studded with all the trappings of baroque design. The only other place where they could do this was perhaps a unique building type in Valletta - the Manoel Theatre built in 1731 to the design of an unknown architect who possibly could have been Carapaccchia (De Lucca, Carapaccchia, Malta, 1999).

Like the centrally-planned churches the building of Malta's only 18th century playhouse was not an isolated phenomenon but was closely related to contemporary European practice. To all intents and purposes it was an entirely self-sufficient environment based on Fontana's Tor di Nona Theatre where an audience was seated according to rank and ability to pay and in which, from



Typical Valletta streetscape

Taken in Valletta during the excursion in November 2005



the comfort of their seats, they were suddenly transformed into the passive spectators not of Catholic liturgy but of a drama seen, as it were, through a transparent shop window.

#### **The contribution of the prince**

"The prince", wrote Castiglione in his classic treatise *The Courtier* "ought to be very generous and splendid and give to all men without reserve because God, as the saying runs, is the treasurer of generous princes".

In conclusion one can say that the architecture of Valletta, the city designed by gentlemen for gentlemen, owes much to Castiglione's Prince as embodied in the person of the Grand Masters who provided the security, stimulus and resources necessary for the growth of the town over a period of three centuries. If one compares the handsome geometry of Valletta with, say, the informal layout of one of the larger Maltese villages, one becomes immediately aware of the fact that the contribution of the Prince to the architectural development of Malta was indeed considerable. For the first time in the island's chequered history, a stage setting was created where men and women dressed in the fine clothes of the period, could admire a rich architectural background possessing the highly-prized qualities of renaissance composure, mannerist dynamism and Baroque formalism.

These three great international movements of art history, closely linked together in one long chain of development starting with Brunelleschi's founding hospital in Florence and ending with Juvara's Stupinigi Palace in Turin, are all subtly integrated in the build environment of Valletta so that the impact of the finished

town on the Maltese, accustomed as they were to living in closed village clusters of a predominantly medieval character, must have been indeed considerable. Herein, therefore, lies the significance of Valletta's architecture - to all intents and purposes, the built evidence after 1650 indicates that it provided the much needed model which eventually led to the overall improvement of the environment of many a Maltese village where several buildings end spaces started emulating the form if not the spirit of Valletta's architecture.