



# Question time

## Built in stone

### Why have Maltese houses been allowed to lose that distinctive look?

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Architecture, similar to other industries, reflects the social, technological and political contexts of the time. It is influenced by the international trends and evolves with technology. Architecture reflects the context and the society that creates it.

One could contend that nowadays local architecture is simply being influenced by that beyond our shores but in reality that has always been the case. During the British colonisation, architecture was influenced by various styles, mainly neo-classical and Victorian, as can be seen in some residences in Sliema. Before that, it was the baroque through the influence of Italian and French architects and engineers commissioned by the Knights of St John, mostly in Mdina and Valletta. Architecture has always reflected the time and its current context.

To answer the posed question, one has to first ask what makes a 'Maltese house'. It is probably a house built before the era of the above-mentioned formal architecture; a dwelling composed of a number of juxtaposed rooms built in local stone, possibly with a central courtyard, and small apertures – similar to what one would typically find in the rural areas or in village cores; a typical farmhouse which would have been built around 500 years ago.

One could say that the method of construction was driven by the climate and way of life, but it was highly influenced by our Italian counterparts and the Arab rule. Flat roofs, thick walls for minimum heat gain, and loggias for shade and cross ventilation well-suited our climate. Hence, possibly, a distinct Maltese home was actually a dwelling built for the lifestyle that suited its occupants at the time, influenced by the settlers, with the technology available.

The baroque period also had an influence on noble residences at the time, while humbler homes adopted motifs round their apertures and balcony corbels. However, stone balustrades and other decorative elements adopted within some of the post-war residences might have been a response towards that beloved period which had a strong impact on our built environment due to our major monuments, and also due to the length of such a period in our architectural history. This has resulted in an architectural contradiction due to the use of new technologies, spaces that functionally reflect the changed lifestyles but with the retained use of the baroque and neo-classical motifs for the décor.

Some of the local post-war architects tried to evolve their own style through the increased use of concrete, steel and glass reflecting the era along the lines of modernist architecture, while breaking away from the colonial architecture. Though the method of construction was influenced, there are only a few aesthetically true modernist residences. This was possibly due to the affection, nostalgia and romanticism towards baroque and neo-classical styles built during the previous centuries. Over the last two decades, there was a shift towards less-adorned aesthetic that respects more the architecture of its time.

The style, the class, the attention, and the importance given to architecture mirrors the society that creates it. "Architecture is an expression of values – the way we build is a reflection of the way we live. This is why vernacular traditions and the historical layers of a city are so fascinating, as every era produces its own vocabulary," says architect Norman Foster.

Newly-built Maltese houses have lost their 'distinctive' look in the same way other countries have lost theirs. It is not only natural, but positive; architecture has to shift, evolve and develop in parallel to its society, the lifestyle, economy and the technology available to reflect the era and form this new architectural vocabulary.

Innovative architectural design, along with good use of current technologies will continue to transform our houses and built environment as they have done over the past centuries. Architecture is a living art, and though our heritage should be highly conserved, one should yearn to produce architecture that reflects our time and similarly our ancestors, create a new historical layer for future generations.

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Going back in time from where we have started, caves, tents and huts served as a means of shelter to mankind. By time, a group of habitants formed societies which led to trade, economics, politics, traditions, religion and culture among others. All of these factors influenced the character of our buildings in time, simply because buildings were designed and built by men.

The translation of culture to stone-carved decorations, the play of light and shadows, the proper balance between different materials and space were getting entrenched in monumental buildings. Residential buildings, however, were not the exception. Time has created different eras in Europe as in the rest of the world which gave us an array of design styles ranging from the megalithic period to nowadays, the postmodernism era. Malta has never been an island on its own.

Mother Europe constantly nurtured its child with its nutrients. In fact, the Maltese can boast of various *opere d'arte*; the monumental prehistoric temples, churches and chapels of different styles and eras, houses of character, townhouses, farmhouses, detached and semi-detached villas, palazzos... and the list continues.

Technology, research, the internet and the modern methods of travelling have altered the taste of the cake in architecture. Information, as opposed to olden times, has become available in no time. Today some people argue that a hospital is "state of the art". Ironically, at the same time, some townhouses which have always been the true works of art are being gutted out from their unique identity; it is like forcing someone to change the inner spirit, beliefs, opinions, in other words its soul, for the sake of converting a townhouse into a block of apartments. Money and time have replaced the true ingredients of Maltese architecture.

However, whether we like it or not at some point we have to accept change simply because globalisation is making communication easier. Postmodernism is focused as well on using as minimal decorations as possible with great emphasis on energy efficiency. The talking point around the world is energy-efficient buildings and how to attain them, which put into discussion the key issues which need to be addressed even at national scale. By introducing different types of imported materials and by changing the form of our buildings may influence the character of the buildings in Malta.

The Maltese are now dreaming of high-rise buildings even though these have been on the market since steel and glass became two important building materials in construction technology; which in a way can be treated well if properly designed and located in their own paddock. Unfortunately, mushrooms have been ignorantly mistaken for high-rise buildings.

The urban set-up in itself has its own characteristics, history, functionality and all the ingredients mentioned earlier. Even a cherry on a cake has its own proportionality and taste.

Scientific studies including environmental impact assessments, geological studies, social impact assessments, studies related to the current infrastructure and traffic management should be carried out, discussed with all the stakeholders including the public and presented in the form of a master plan. Planning policies should also reflect the aesthetic enhancement of the area being designated for such buildings, not to mention the health and safety standards which need to be attained at design stage.

However the big question will always be: what is the definition of ugliness? One gets hundreds of different answers from a hundred different people. Good and bad have no definite parameters, but can be shaped through different opinions from the public.

Dialogue is important to shape the image of Malta and its functionality. That is why buildings are designed and built by men. Valletta says it all: "A city built by gentlemen for gentlemen." That principle derived from the capital city of Malta should always be kept in Maltese architecture whether designing the urban fabric, the urban layout and the buildings themselves. Let us give the present Maltese character to the people yet to come.

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