

# A10



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# Maltese balancing act

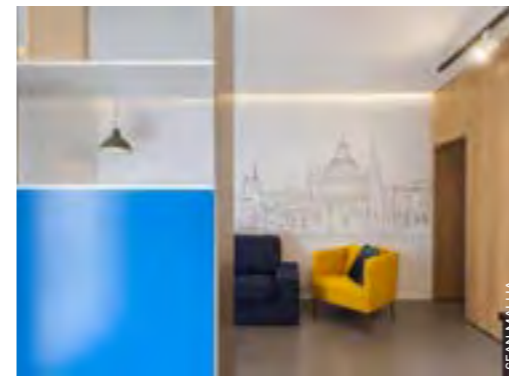
TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER



↑ Looking up the lightwell and solar chimney of the zero-energy family dwelling by Studjurban



↑ Interior design of rental apartments by ARCHi+



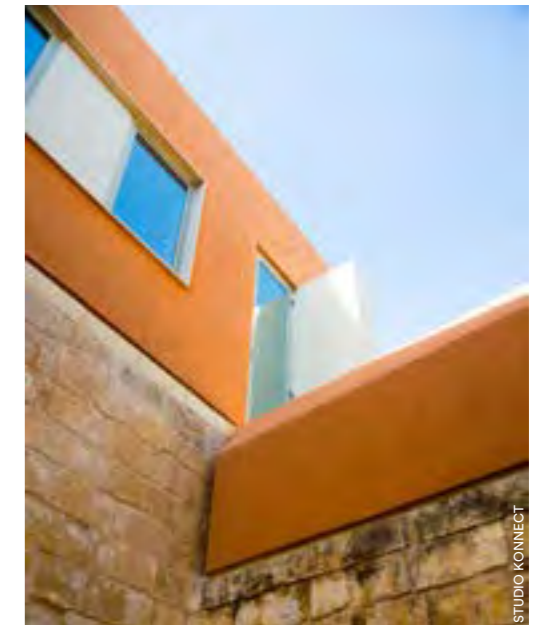
↑ Interior design of rental apartments by ARCHi+



↑ Ggantija Temples Visitor Centre by DTR



↑ Helena's Villa by Grech & Vinci



↑ Town house in Siggiewi by Atelier Maison



↑ Helena's Villa by Grech & Vinci



↑ Town house in Siggiewi by Atelier Maison



↑ Representing Malta's younger generation are Paula Agius, Antoine Zammit, Etienne Magri, Simon Grech, and Richard Borg

Despite the many cranes and all the building activity throughout Malta, it must be somewhat unrewarding to be an architect here. Not just because there are so many architects, but due to the dense urban fabric and historical context that require modesty – even invisibility – on complex plots. The most lavish apartments are hidden behind monumental facades; the most intricate floor plans go unseen behind blind walls. Yet there is also a lot that makes it one of the most exciting professions on Malta. The ingenuity needed to squeeze a full programme onto a small plot demands talent and craftsmanship. Themes like tourism, the environment, traffic congestion, and the upcoming Valletta European Capital of Culture (2018), which requires new cultural infrastructure that is now in development, place architects at the heart of political debate. 'The old generation of architects cannot solve today's problems.'

Since there is no official 'neutral' ground on Malta, like an architecture centre, the youngest generation of architects meet at the office of Architecture Project (AP) for a conversation about their practices and ideas. This is actually a very suitable location. Many of these architects started their careers here; AP's research into monumental architecture and the nature of its projects in general have made AP a moral compass to everyone present. Needless to say, they have since gone their separate ways, but still keep track of each other. Malta is not that big of an island, and they all followed the same course at the same university. They can define each other by their warrant numbers, which indicate the year of graduation. Simone Vella Lenicker, one of the guest editors who graduated in the late '90s, is number 398 (of all architects to have ever graduated on Malta). Paula Agius is 796, which is an indication that she graduated very recently (2012).

↑ Ggantija Temples Visitor Centre by DTR

As we talk about their take on contemporary architecture, it is evident that they like one another well enough. Etienne Magri of DTR Architects (founded 2002) is the most experienced at the table, one of their latest completed projects being the Ggantija Visitor Centre in Gozo. At the moment, they are finishing off the restoration of Fort St Angelo in Birgu, and are also working on the very prestigious MUŻA (National Museum of Fine Arts), to open in 2018 when Valletta celebrates its year as European Capital of Culture. Richard Borg is one of the founders of ARCHi+ (2010). With sixteen people, all in their late twenties, the office offers the complete package; commissions range from redecorating tourist apartments and private houses to managing the finishes of Renzo Piano's Valletta Parliament Building (an assignment that helped them specialize in co-ordination between structure, M&E, and finishes). Simon Grech is one of three partners at Grech & Vinci (2009), originally founded with Andrew Vinci, and recently joined by Alan Galea (2010). In the space of a few years, the firm has grown to nine architects with a view to expand further. They are currently restructuring to accommodate this growth and rebrand themselves as Model. The firm's expertise lies in maximizing light, space, and flexibility in their projects, and their philosophy aligns with the traditional *perit* (see p. 40), whose ambition is to approach architecture holistically. Paula Agius started Atelier Maison recently (2014), together with Katja

Abela, and focuses primarily on interior design and (life)style. Antoine Zammit works on urban design issues with Studjurban (2012), plus architectural projects focused on sustainable rehabilitation and zero-energy buildings. In his words, 'Everything here is fragmented. We need new ideas to integrate traditional knowledge into today's challenges, and to find new strategies.'

Building has become more complex in the last decade, they believe. Building heights require more technical knowledge of construction. The market is changing, too. Small inner-city houses become medium-rise apartment blocks. The traditional courtyard house model gives way to houses with front and back gardens. Zammit asks, 'How can we introduce this new typology in a sustainable way? Not only in terms of space, but also in relation to the local climate?' Grech agrees, adding, 'We can learn much from tradition regarding natural ventilation through high ceilings, small windows, and thick walls, for example. But that's not how we build today.' Zammit elaborates, saying, 'We need to be more context-aware. Even here, on Malta, where the cities seem one continuous fabric without end or pause, we have different contexts. If we don't adapt, we will only increase the number of vacant buildings, which is already rising here on Malta. To do so, we need good clients, and to keep them.' In a small society like Malta, it's not easy to contradict your client. Agius continues, 'We know how to maximize

every inch of space, to create "pockets of space" in unexpected corners. The most difficult is not to design the floor plans, but to convince the clients not to maximize on available space, but leave room for light and emptiness.' Magri adds that 'All sites here are awkward and small, and there are always the adjacent plots be take into consideration.'

The problem is not only in the clients. 'Many of us have been educated abroad (post-grad),' Borg explains. 'We have learnt a lot about new technologies and new approaches, but there is little room to implement our knowledge. Uneducated architects are always on the prowl to snatch commissions. The old generation of architects cannot solve today's problems. We are the ones that need to deal with them.' Better and more competitions, both from public and private clients, would be helpful. As Grech remarks, 'Piano & Rogers won a competition to build the Centre Pompidou when they were young, in their early thirties like myself. It is unthinkable that young architects today get similar chances.' Competitions could be a means to innovate and to integrate the latest technological knowledge into building practice. So far, the public authorities are not very supportive of that notion. The Valletta Design Cluster, projected near the new MUŻA in an old abattoir, will be executed by the government's Restoration Directorate. Guest editor Lisa Gwen Baldacchino explains: 'The public needs to be better informed when and how decisions are taken in terms of national infrastructure projects, including which projects are launched as competitions and how juries are selected.'

So what will the future look like? Filling portfolios is not the problem, but planning policy, the environment, tourism, and city planning need serious attention. 'To date we have had no urban design policy,' says Zammit. 'Approving high-rise projects within the committed infrastructure, without studying the immediate and broader context, generates more traffic

problems and destroys committed streetscapes by leaving the smaller houses perpetually in darkness. And we really need to pay more attention to the re-use of existing buildings and to environmental issues. Density is good, but only works well in mixed-use areas that have a good provision of public transport.' Gloomily, Borg adds, 'There is a lack of quality social housing.' Grech continues, 'Topography needs to be contextualized. It's telling that Valletta 2018 has integrated all other cities on Malta in the cultural programme. Malta is not one country, it is one big city, and needs an infrastructure to operate as such.' Agius interjects, remarking, 'Once we have acknowledged that efficient public transport is vital, we could make a start at fighting the crazy amount of cars on the island.' Borg elaborates, saying, 'Presently, we adopt a quantitative approach, not a qualitative and contextualized one. Most of the new building projects are speculative, and they are all about traffic and parking places. Valletta 2018 could take these problems as a starting point, if only to raise awareness.'

Which pretty much sums up the current balancing act of the new Maltese generation. New commissions potentially add a great deal to future urban problems. But what if there are ways to make architecture less obtrusive? For instance, by redoing old houses, redesigning urban plans and regional policies, or filling in impossible plots. Being an architect in Malta can be very challenging indeed. ◀