

## **SELLING SPACE AND TIME: THE CASE OF SEJJIEH DEKORATTIV**

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### THE CONTEXT

The Maltese countryside is a densely inscribed palimpsest of human activity. Even the contours of the rural landscape have been remoulded to suit the needs of intensive agriculture. The natural slopes of hills and valleys are broken into level terraces to reduce rain erosion and improve water absorption. An essential feature of this arrangement, which is widely diffused throughout the Mediterranean region is the use of retaining walls, built of closely-fitted but irregular masonry. These terrace walls, or *ħitan tas-sejġieħ* have characterised the Maltese countryside for many centuries, being an indispensable instrument for human subsistence in an often hostile environment.

During recent decades, the rapidly changing needs of the population have resulted in drastic shifts in patterns of land-use (Boissevain 1986; Sant-Cassia 1991). Large tracts of agricultural land have been developed for residential and industrial purposes. Many miles of dry-stone walling have consequently been dismantled, as the land they had embraced is reshaped yet again for some new purpose.

Sometime during the late 1980's, the weathered stones from dismantled or collapsed dry-stone walls started being gathered, and their outer surfaces were sawn away in laminae about an inch thick. Such laminae, weathered and rugged on one side, freshly cut and smooth on the other, were then glued side by side to the *facades* of newly-built houses. The neatly cut, white limestone ashlar masonry in which these facades, like most buildings in Malta, had been raised, was concealed beneath the collage of darkened and irregularly shaped slices of rubble. At first glance, the areas treated in this way had been transformed into a rubble wall!

Since then this rubble screening treatment has spread, becoming one of the dominant *motifs* of our streetscape. In the process, different varieties of weathered stone have been developed and new ways of integrating them into a facade have evolved. The result would, twenty years ago, have been considered quite bizarre: a case of what, like dirt, Mary Douglas calls "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966). Yet, it can now be seen on thousands of Maltese houses and it is still spreading rapidly. This physical mutation has been accompanied by a transformation at the level of consciousness. People no

longer wonder at the sight of a freshly built urban house being encased in rubble. The explanation appears obvious: fashions have changed. Eased on its way by this platitude, the whole process risks slipping into what Bourdieu (1977) terms the “realm of doxa”, or the “universe of the undiscussed”. In this realm, culturally specific facts and practices are effectively shielded from challenge, as it is not even possible to conceive of questioning them.

## QUESTIONING THE UNQUESTIONED

If, however, fashion is considered as something which has to be explained, we are led to ask certain important questions: What has made such a transformation in our streetscape possible? Does it represent a change in popular tastes and aesthetic values? May a change in lifestyles and perceptions be read from it? Should it be seen as a Maltese response to international trends or is its explanation to be sought in the internal dynamics of Maltese society?

Answering these questions is not easy, as this phenomenon seems ambiguous and inherently paradoxical. Even the name of these weathered stone facades reflects this tension and ambiguity. People are often at a loss what to call these rubble screens. One notice advertises the sale of *sejjeħ dekorattiv*, (decorative rubble) and this rather schizophrenic label will be employed in this article.

Paradoxes abound. The essential characteristic of *sejjeħ* (rubble walling) is that it is made of roughly cut and weathered globigerina limestone; yet *sejjeħ dekorattiv* is generally juxtaposed with overly modern, smooth and polished surfaces, such as those of aluminium window frames or marble slabs. Rubble walls evolved in an agricultural and rural context. Yet *sejjeħ dekorattiv*, in Malta, is mainly a suburban phenomenon. Rubble walls were an economic solution to practical problems and their appearance was largely conditioned by environmental factors. *Sejjeħ dekorattiv*, as the name implies, seems to perform an aesthetic and symbolic function. Moreover, it is usually restricted to the lower parts of houses, garage facades, driveways and garden walls.

In an attempts to grapple with these enigmas some ethnographic research has been conducted in San Gwann, a suburban village and Rabat, a small town. We explored several streets in these localities in order to obtain some understanding of the distribution of *sejjeħ dekorattiv* throughout the village or town, paying close attention to the role it plays in the context of particular *facades*. We also carried out fifteen informal interviews with a number of home-owners, aimed at eliciting their perceptions of *sejjeħ dekorattiv*. We approached the owners of houses displaying rubble cladding and asked them for their views on the spot. In these interviews, we asked a few basic questions, drawing on the apparent contradictions of the subject: Is *sejjeħ*

dekorattiv old or modern, rural or urban, utilitarian or aesthetic, Maltese or foreign? Is it suitable for all houses, or only for certain types of *facade*? Where on a *facade* should it be located and in association with which features? Why not let the stone acquire a weathered appearance through the natural process of aging? Whose aesthetic sense is *sejġieħ dekorattiv* aimed at? What sort of person would be expected to use it?

This article is the first result of an ongoing research project. Important issues, such as the trends which emerge from the overall distribution of *sejġieħ dekorattiv* throughout Malta as a whole have not as yet been tackled. We were helped by the fact that people are quite willing to speak about their *facades*. Such matters are clearly in the public realm and people were therefore more ready to speak to us than if we had been asking intrusive questions about private matter, such as family relations. Still, the observations which follow must not be seen as definitive. They should rather be seen as an attempt to initiate discussion and investigation of this issue.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our interviews confirmed that *sejġieħ dekorattiv* is primarily employed for aesthetic, symbolical, purposes. Some did claim that they used it in order to disguise the effects of water seepage on their facades and its widespread use on the lower parts of *facades* adds weight to the hypothesis that it is employed for these practical purposes. However, the majority of our interviewees referred to aesthetic criteria when asked to justify its utilisation. Also, other ways of damp-proofing exist and the effects of water seepage can be disguised by other available materials just as effectively as by *sejġieħ dekorattiv*. Even if there are important practical reasons for the utilisation of *sejġieħ dekorattiv*, this does not explain why it should be chosen in preference to other materials. This implies that a thorough investigation of *sejġieħ dekorattiv* must pay attention to the cultural meanings which are invested in it.

The symbolic load carried by *sejġieħ dekorattiv* is therefore a good point at which to begin our analysis. It seems that most people see *sejġieħ dekorattiv* as something which reminds them of the past. Time and again, our interviewees stressed that it was “something old”, or that it “had to do with the past”. Yet many of them seemed confused by this question, replying that it is in between (“*fin-nofs*”), or claimed that it was “old but fashionable.” The past which is evoked by *sejġieħ dekorattiv* is not a specific historical era, but an undifferentiated primordality.

In this regard two rather contradictory principles seem to govern its use on facades. On the one hand there is an attempt to associate it with other features reminiscent of “the past”, whatever their historical provenance. *Sejġieħ dekorattiv* is associated with farming implements, wooden window

frames (*persjani*) and redundant cartwheels. On the other, *sejjieħ dekorattiv* is contrasted with overtly modern features. It is found juxtaposed to aluminium windows, polished reflective surfaces and freshly-cut white stone. The basic concept here seems to be that of framing. *Sejjieħ dekorattiv* is used in order to frame modern architectural features, such as aluminium windows and it is itself presented as a sort of *objet d'art*, framed by freshly cut white stone, or with its irregular edges straightened out by a border of marble slabs. There is also a substantial consensus that *sejjieħ dekorattiv* evokes the rustic, although there was a minority of dissenters, who tended to be residents of rural areas. The majority opinion is represented by a woman in San Gwann who used *sejjieħ dekorattiv* on the roof area of her house, in contrast to the rest of her facade which was characterised by freshly cut white Maltese stone, balustrades and aluminium windows. She observed that *sejjieħ dekorattiv* made her think of the countryside and this in turn evoked images of a peaceful, relaxed and contented existence. In restricting *sejjieħ dekorattiv* to the roof and combining it with a pair of deck-chairs and a *ħasira* (covering of interlaced canes often used to provide shade), she explained that she was trying to create a refuge: a place to relax in. The use of *sejjieħ dekorattiv* in restaurant, hotels and other places associated with tourists also seems to obey the same logic. Often too, *sejjieħ dekorattiv* is found on the most “rustic” parts of the facade, such as the wall surrounding the front garden.

Strangely enough, these rustic associations do not prevent *sejjieħ dekorattiv* from being used in strictly urban contexts. Some of the most lavish examples of *sejjieħ dekorattiv* are to be found in urbanised areas, such as Floriana or the centre of San Gwann. When interviewed, the owners of these houses showed that they were aware of the rustic meanings embodied in *sejjieħ dekorattiv*, but did not perceive any incongruity in their attempts to recreate the countryside in an urban context.

There was less agreement about the specifically Maltese character of *sejjieħ dekorattiv*, although here too many seemed to view it as quintessentially Maltese. One working-class man in Rabat observed that stones are the only thing we have to be proud of in Malta and remarked that *sejjieħ dekorattiv* also provides something for tourists to admire. Many observed that while it was a Maltese phenomenon, it was also found abroad, particularly in countries such as Australia. While these different meanings can be analytically distinguished, they are often inseparable in practice. This is reflected in the names of these houses. Names such as *rustika*, *merill* or *la grotta* all evoke rustic and traditional connotations.

Our interviews left us with an awareness of the dynamic character of *sejjieħ dekorattiv* which often defies axiomatic definition. For instance, rubble screens tend to be found on the lower parts of house facades. Still, in a number of cases they encroach onto the the upper storeys. Further, while rubble

screens are most commonly found on terraced houses built during the last decade, one often encounters them on earlier buildings, even in historic urban centres like Valletta and Floriana.

## RECONSTRUCTING SPACE AND TIME

In spite of the widely differing contexts and the range of applications in which this treatment appears, and the often idiosyncratic interpretations and justifications proposed by its users, some common underlying factors have been noted. These are best conceptualised by reference to the basic categories of space and time.

At the heart of this phenomenon there is a preoccupation with space. Imitation rubble screens were invariably explained by their users in terms of their aspirations for an idealised space, rendering more tangible the idyllic place of their desires. Repeatedly, the rubble screen is used as a metonym for the Maltese countryside as an object of desire.

A fundamental inversion in Maltese perceptions of the countryside noted a decade ago by Jeremy Boissevain appears relevant here. While till recent times the countryside was perceived as “dangerous and uncouth”, and “associated with poverty and deprivation”, since the sixties it has become the sumptuous location for luxurious residences, and the last haven for “the few remaining full time farmers ... regarded benignly as living folklore” (Boissevain 1986: 70). The sixties and seventies, therefore, saw the centrifugal expansion of villages out into the open country, paralleled by a shift from introverted house design to outward-looking domestic space (Boissevain 1986: 63). Residing in or near the open country was no longer a thing to be feared, but a fashionable aspiration realised by many.

During the last decade, the emergence and spread of rubble screens has marked a new twist in this shift in perceptions of the countryside. The tendency of residential space to move out into the countryside has been overtaken by the attempted simulation of the countryside within domesticated space. Even as more tracts of the rural landscape have been taken up by new building development, the artificial rubble walls have been suffusing the established suburban and urban streetscape in reverse, penetrating the capital itself.

*Sejjieh dekorattiv* also represents a struggle with time. This takes the form of a tension between modernity and antiquity which is consciously maintained and reproduced. This was evidenced most clearly by a house-owner in Rabat, interviewed while gluing a rubble screen to part of his facade. When asked why he did not let his stone facade acquire a natural patina with age, he observed that rather than let this happen, he intended to sand down the exposed part of his facade. The image that is thus being sought is intrinsically ambivalent. The facade must evoke the old, but it must not itself

be mistaken for an old facade. It is not period replicas that we are dealing with here, but casually worn disguises, masks which are meant to be seen through.

There appears, then, to be a relationship between *sejjieħ dekorattiv* and changing Maltese perceptions of time and space. The next task is somehow to account for this transformation, which has led people to hunger for the previously despised countryside and to imagine they could travel backwards in time while remaining within the context of modernity.

## ANALYSIS

This suggests that we should look at the social construction of desire: at the manifold ways by which people are led to imbue material objects with new cultural meanings, and also the ways in which they resist this or themselves attempt to send political messages through what they consume and what they do not consume. The process of commodisation is also central here, as we are interested in the process by which different times and spaces are being packaged and sold to the consumer under the guise of a humble rubble screen.

The theoretical perspective adopted here draws heavily on Appadurai (1986), who stresses the social nature of demand and the process of commoditisation. He observes that the Marxist stress on relations of production has obscured the important role of relations of distribution and consumption in the process of commoditisation. To explain *sejjieħ dekorattiv*, therefore, we must explain the transformation in fashion by reference to developments in the Maltese social formation. As we are dealing with a recent phenomenon, the social causes which gave rise to it must also be relatively new.

Following a well-trodden path in Maltese sociological research, our first attempt at an explanation looks at the social significance of the Maltese family. It has been noted (Tabone 1987) that the family in Malta remains an important social institution. People aspire to form strong, durable families and the single life-style is stigmatised to a greater extent than in many European countries. Our preoccupation with houses is partly fuelled by this desire to create a solid and permanent familial base. Indeed, in discourse, people often use metaphors drawn from buildings to describe their family. They speak of a "solid" family and of "building a good relationship". Houses have also traditionally been the main safe and risk-free investment for the Maltese. For all these reasons, the symbolic value of houses is extremely high and they are invested with the task of expressing the value and identity of the families that own them. Sant-Cassia (1991: 10) has argued that this perception of houses as an outward sign of the invested capital on which a sense of social identity is founded, itself replaces an older perception of land as the symbolic, inalienable, source of identity. *Sejjieħ dekorattiv* is only the latest in a long

series of architectural features by which the Maltese have tried to signify the social importance of their families. People in Malta “say it with houses”.

To explain *sejjeħ dekorattiv*, however, we need to know more about Maltese society than the fact that houses are important media for the expression of social worth. The influence of exogenous factors in the shape of tourists, returned migrants, television images and foreign residents must also be considered. Boissevain ascribes the shift he charts in residential patterns and house designs to the impact of foreign residents. In order to realise their aspirations for a relaxed existence, closer to a mythical “nature”, these residents built their houses in the middle of the previously despised countryside. This pattern of residential inversion was copied by the Maltese and the country villa was soon firmly established as an ideal to aspire to.

It is also surely significant that some of the earliest and most lavish examples of *sejjeħ dekorattiv* are to be found in hotels and restaurants. As Inguanez (1994: 343) points out, one effect of tourism is increased awareness of cultural distinctiveness (also Salamonsson, A: 1984). To a certain extent, the Maltese look at their own country through the eyes of an interested foreigner. In the popular consciousness, a heap of old boulders is potentially a megalithic temple, and a hole in the ground may turn out to be the entrance to a Punic tomb. Stone is the common factor in most of the manifestations of Maltese distinctiveness. Temples and churches, cities and bastions are all constructed of quarried Maltese stone. In this context it is not surprising that the stone itself should be fetishised so that wrapping a house front in rubble suffices to evoke a host of historical and spatial associations.

Our inquiry is also informed by current discussions of the growth of consumerism in Malta. Indeed while the presence of markets has characterised Maltese society since time immemorial, there are important reasons for believing that recent years have seen an unparalleled increase in consumption, accompanied by the development of a consumeristic culture. Thus Sultana (1994) hypothesises that there has been a shift away from the values of “frugality”, “thrift” and “sobriety”, which Zammit (1984) had identified as the characteristic features of the traditional work ethic. He quotes official statistics which document an increase in the average propensity to consume and in the importation of consumer goods as from 1973. Another sign of this shift is the growth of shopping boulevards in many village and city streets and the expansion in annual trade fairs. Indicative, too, are surveys of household consumption which show that the Maltese are spending a greater proportion of their income on books, magazines, leisure activities, entertainment etcetera and less on basic necessities, such as food and clothing (Retail Price Index Management Board: 1993).

In this context, the focus of attention moves away from “basic needs” to an ever-changing, constantly increasing array of “manufactured needs”.

Images and display become increasingly important, as they are the means through which these new needs are inculcated. Increasing resort to the mass media means that there is increased emphasis on the visuals and the auditory at the expense of the other senses. Indeed, Sultana (1994: 173) observes that most Maltese advertising agencies have been set up in the last fifteen years.

Sultana explains these shifts by reference to a number of political and economic causes. He argues that in the seventies and early eighties the Labour Government managed to increase the income of the working and lower middle classes, giving them the means to satisfy their aspirations to a better standard of living. More women have jobs and they tend to keep them after marriage. Since 1987, the Nationalist Government has ended the wage and price freeze introduced by the Labour Government and liberalised importation. This has contributed to greatly increased aspirations, which have in turn induced many to take up part-time jobs in order to satisfy these needs.

While the theory that the Maltese have become increasingly consumeristic seems to have some grounding in social reality, there are a number of indications that the traditional value system continues to exist. The importance of the family as a social institution has already been noted. The trend of saving a relatively large proportion of one's income seems also to have persevered, at least among the older generation (Ministry of Finance: 1992). Abela's research (1991) indicates that many Maltese are still preoccupied with meeting basic material needs and they do not pay as much attention to leisure activities as might be expected. It seems that while there has been a shift towards a consumeristic culture, as evidenced by increased consumption and the growing importance of display, this trend is opposed by the traditional value orientation emphasising hardwork, thrift and the family.

Against this background, *sejjieħ dekorattiv* appears as a compromise between these opposing cultural trends. Increased material prosperity has resulted in higher consumption and an emphasis on items which transmit pleasing visual images. On the other hand, the traditional value orientation has channelled much of this consumption back into houses, those temples to the traditional values. *Sejjieħ dekorattiv* has to do with visual decorative display: with transient fashions. However, it is used to adorn the enduring reality of permanent stone houses, representing years of hard work and thrift in the service of the utilitarian needs of the family. *Sejjieħ dekorattiv* is therefore positioned on the same conceptual plane as luxurious bathroom suites or marble staircases. They are the ideal compromise commodities for those who feel confusedly that they would be betraying their values were they to indulge in overtly luxurious consumer items, such as a trip to the Caribbean.

The explanations we have so far reviewed serve to contextualise the consumption of *sejjieħ dekorattiv* within the framework of Maltese society. Thus, the influence of outsiders enables us to understand why rubble should



have attractive symbolic connotations, while the convergence of traditional values with an increasingly consumeristic ethos explains the visual and decorative aspects of this phenomenon and why it should be in such demand at this moment in time. It should be noted, however, that these explanations fall short of explaining the intentional ambivalence in the use of rubble cladding that we observed earlier. The conscious juxtaposition of the old and the new, the rural and the residential, remains a most enigmatic characteristic of this form of expression.

Such juxtapositions are by no means without precedent or parallel. The deliberate juxtaposition of symbols and images normally encountered in different historical and cultural contexts is an increasingly apparent characteristic of contemporary modes of expression, often associated with the condition of "postmodernity". Perhaps some consideration of the assemblage of concepts and processes often gathered together under this term may shed some light on this issue, putting *sejġieħ dekorattiv* in a broader context. The considerable latitude with which the label of postmodern has been applied and the consequent confusion need no deter us from pinpointing some relevant trends. One of the key characteristics of the postmodern condition is the contemporary immersion in the images which have been made available by developments in mass media technology and marketing. Images now flow freely across spatial and cultural boundaries, to be experienced in contexts far removed from those in which they had been generated. Furthermore, images from widely differing contexts and evoking very different experiences are often encountered in rapid succession or juxtaposition. Seen against this backdrop, the use of rubble cladding juxtaposed with overtly modern elements already seems less idiosyncratic. Is it possible that these new modes of experiencing reality which are emerging in the West are being refracted through the Maltese social formation to create indigenous expressions of these shifts in perception?

Harvey's (Harvey 1994) study of post-modern architecture in the American city of Baltimore seems particularly relevant here. Harvey observes that postmodern treatment of exteriors is being used to mask the growing divergence between popular aspirations and their realisation in practice. Tracing trends in the quality of social services and the standard of living in America during the 1970's and 1980's, he observes a correspondence between a decline in the prospects of the average wage earner and the more widespread use of postmodern techniques in the treatment of building exteriors. The evocative symbols which are mass-produced and employed to screen otherwise dull structures are interpreted in terms of an attempt by capitalist elites to disguise more difficult economic conditions at a popular level. In this interpretation one of the uses of postmodern facades is that of a *palliative*, which must negotiate the gulf between aspiration and reality.

In the Maltese context, by contrast, many conventional indices point to a steady increase in economic well-being during the last three decades (e.g. Tabone: 1994: 237). This economic vigour has been characterised by intensive building which has often overtaken sober long-term planning for sustainable development (Mallia: 1994: 685). As noted earlier, the growing demand for denucleated housing “in the country” during this period has paradoxically carried the frontiers of the urban sprawl before it, frustrating these aspirations. In one of the most densely populated and intensively built-up countries of the world, it should come as no surprise that this process has entered popular consciousness. The spread of concern over environmental issues, which in Malta are almost synonymous with land-use, may be gauged by the diffusion of the word *ambjent* (environment). A decade or so ago, this was a loan-word used only in limited circles. Today it has become one of the most widely and vociferously used (and abused) catchwords. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this diffusion is broadly contemporary with that of *sejjieħ dekorattiv*.

Here it is proposed, following Harvey, that rubble cladding may also be performing a palliative function. As the aspiration to the bucolic delights of a country residence is inevitably frustrated by the sheer density of people and buildings, the stage is set for more *ersatz* solutions. The rubble screen becomes a metonymic surrogate for the elusive and fast-disappearing countryside. Yet while in Baltimore this process is controlled by an elite using a formal architectural mode of expression, in Malta the use of *sejjieħ dekorattiv* seems to have sprung from the grass-roots: an unconscious and vernacular postmodernism.

This celebration of the rubble wall on our facades is not accompanied by any noticeable effort to actually preserve surviving walls in their context, or preserving the landscape that they characterise. The destruction of this landscape is widely perceived as necessary and inevitable; unbuilt land is almost fatalistically perceived as space with building potential (Sant Cassia 1991), which is bound to be realised sooner or later. It seems that the rubble screen can only commemorate this sacrifice. Indeed rubble screening itself contributes to the destruction of the countryside. In a discussion on the relationship between the colonising powers of the West and the indigenous cultures of the regions they colonised, it has been noted that:

... the West now mourns that which it has actively destroyed, and curiously enough, it is often the very agents of this destruction such as colonial officials and missionaries, who feel the loss most keenly (Rosaldo 1989 quoted in Redfield 1994). Moments after triumph afford the victors the luxury of wistfulness, regret, guilt, and glorification (Redfield 1994).

Analogously, *sejjieħ dekorattiv* seems to be a posthumous tribute to a landscape which had to be sacrificed to make way for new needs. It does not

represent an effort to camouflage the comfort or modernity of a new house, but is rather worn as a trophy. It is an attempt to capture lost times and spaces, reduced to commodities and subdued to a new ethos.

The rubble screen thus emerges at the point of intersection of many different worlds and processes. At the junction between traditional values and consumeristic ethos, poised on the fleeting moment of nostalgia marking the final demise of the countryside and charged with the energy generated by an island's love-hate relationship with the outside world, *sejjiċĥ dekorattiv* appears to us as the material embodiment of a particular historical moment. While we do not claim to have provided the definitive interpretation of this phenomenon, we believe that our research indicates that a closer consideration of this seemingly trivial activity may throw light on the critical social processes of which it is a symptom.

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