

# A case for preserving the

by Dr Conrad Thake



*St Therese of Lisieux Sanctuary,  
B'Kara (1975-1985)  
Architect: Giorgio Pacini  
Photograph: Alexandra Pace*



Public appreciation of modern movement buildings in Malta has generally been lacking as modern architecture has been associated with the unfortunately all too frequent shoddy and nondescript aesthetics of rampant building speculation. In recent years a number of iconic modern architectural works have been demolished or severely compromised with the blessing of the authorities. One can mention the Qala Primary school, the MIRA building in Gzira, Villa La Maltija in Naxxar and several hotels designed by Richard England dating to the 1960s. Others, such as the former Joinwell showroom in Sliema and the former British Servicemen Married Quarters (the ex-White Rocks complex) in Bahar ic-Caghaq, are also in manifest danger of demolition.

Official scheduling of buildings and monuments by MEPA affords a degree of protec-

tion against demolition or substantial physical changes to the building fabric. However, the vast majority of scheduled buildings date to the time of the Order of St John or the British colonial period. To my knowledge the number of post-Art Nouveau buildings that have been scheduled can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Very few, if any, post-Second World War buildings have been scheduled and technically speaking, modernist icons such as England's Manikata parish church and Emvin Cremona's residence in Attard are not formally protected by the scheduling process.

Internationally the organisation DOCOMOMO lobbies for the documentation and conservation of buildings representative of the Modern Movement. It has been very active in raising awareness, particularly amongst public authorities, of the need to preserve the best examples of modernist architecture which until a decade or so ago were deemed to be disposable.

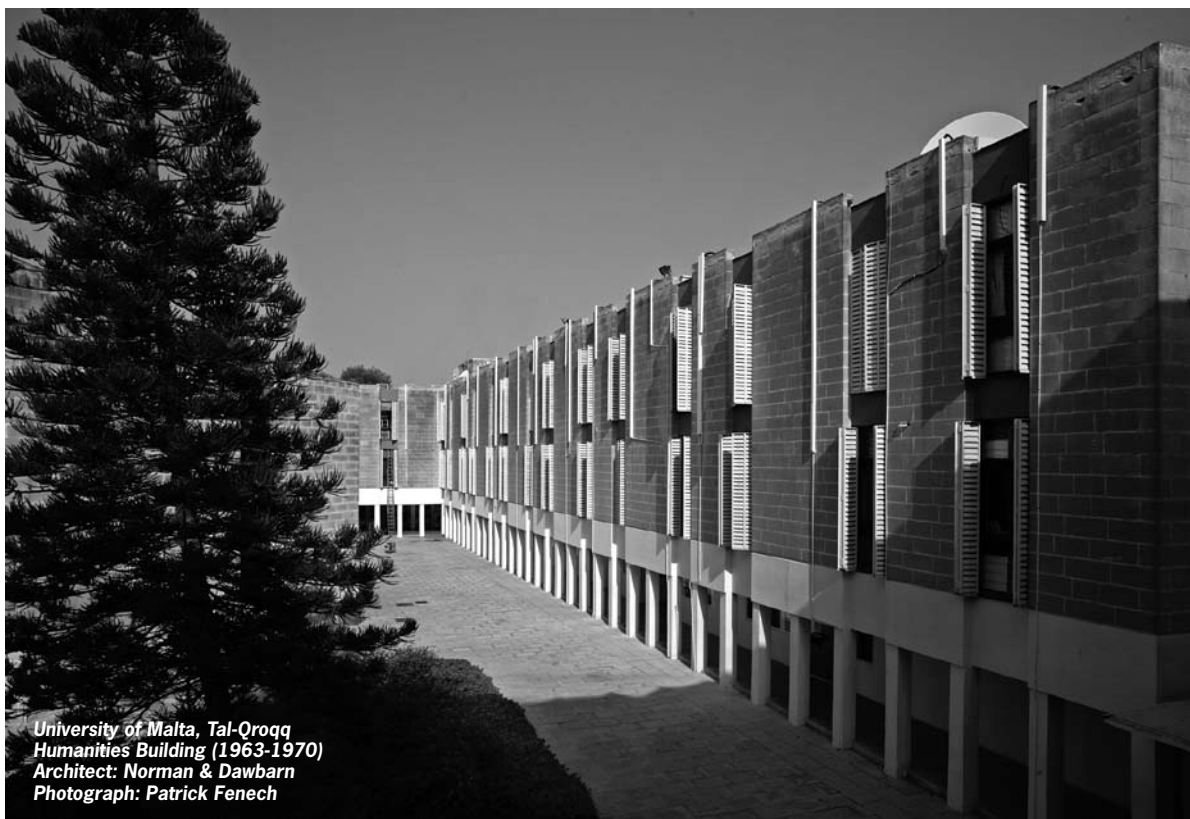


*The Mellieha Holiday Centre, Ghadira  
Bay, Mellieha (1975-1979)  
Architect: Hans Munk Hansen  
Photograph: Sergio Muscat*

# modernist legacy



*Floriana Primary School, Floriana (1960)*  
 Architect: Renato Laferla  
 Photograph: Darrin Zammit Lupi



*University of Malta, Tal-Oroqg  
 Humanities Building (1963-1970)*  
 Architect: Norman & Dawbarn  
 Photograph: Patrick Fenech

There have been a few shocking examples of lack of appreciation even from North America with the demolition of Richard Neutra's masterpiece the Samuel and Luella Maslon House in Palm Springs, California and Arthur Erickson's pioneering Graham House in British Columbia. DOCOMOMO has also lobbied hard against the physical neglect and whole scale demolition of a number of important early twentieth century Soviet-era buildings in Moscow. With its network of individual country committees DOCOMOMO has succeeded in raising a world-wide awareness of the need to preserve the finest examples of modern movement architecture. In 2005 DOCOMOMO published in the periodical 'Japan Architect' a listing and visual documentation of the country's 100 most important modern buildings constructed during the period 1920-1970.

Since the Qala primary school debacle a

few years ago there have been a few positive signs. Since then Malta has established its own national committee within DOCOMOMO international. An appeal by the Kamra tal-Periti to save the ex-Rediffusion building in Gwardamangia from redevelopment did not fall on deaf ears with the Prime Minister intervening to halt and abort the project. Yet, it has to be admitted that architects aside not all sectors of the general public could appreciate the need to preserve such a building. Unfortunately, the debate on architectural conservation has all too often been reduced to a simplistic and subjective argumentation on the aesthetic value of the building.

The need for preservation goes beyond superficial considerations of style – buildings are products of their times and it is only fitting that we endeavour to preserve buildings and structures that are best representative of their times. The ex-Red-



*De Giorgio Residence, St Julian's (1954)*  
 Architect: Mortimer and Degiorgio  
 Photograph: Matthew Mirabelli

diffusion building is certainly one of Malta's pioneering modern movement buildings where a modernist design was deemed fitting for a broadcasting station keen on projecting an image of technological progress and modernity. Some of our government schools built in the 1950s and 60s are worthy examples of modern architecture. They merit conservation and to be dealt with in a sensitive manner when subject to expansion or alterations.

The scheduling of the best examples of modern

architecture although an indispensable process should not be an end in itself. There should also be financial incentives in the form of tax rebates and grants that permit the restoration and re-adaptation of prime modernist buildings when relevant. Both the government and ecclesiastical authorities are duty bound to set an example by conserving those modernist masterpieces within their jurisdiction.

The recent photographic exhibition on modernist architecture organised jointly by the Kamra tal-Periti and Din L-Art Helwa, has further contributed to disseminating public awareness and appreciation for an architectural period which has all too often been understated and undervalued. Architectural conservation knows no boundaries in time. The message is that we owe it to future generations to also preserve the best buildings dating to the second half of the twentieth century.