

HERITAGE IN PERIL - A TALE OF TWO BUILDINGS

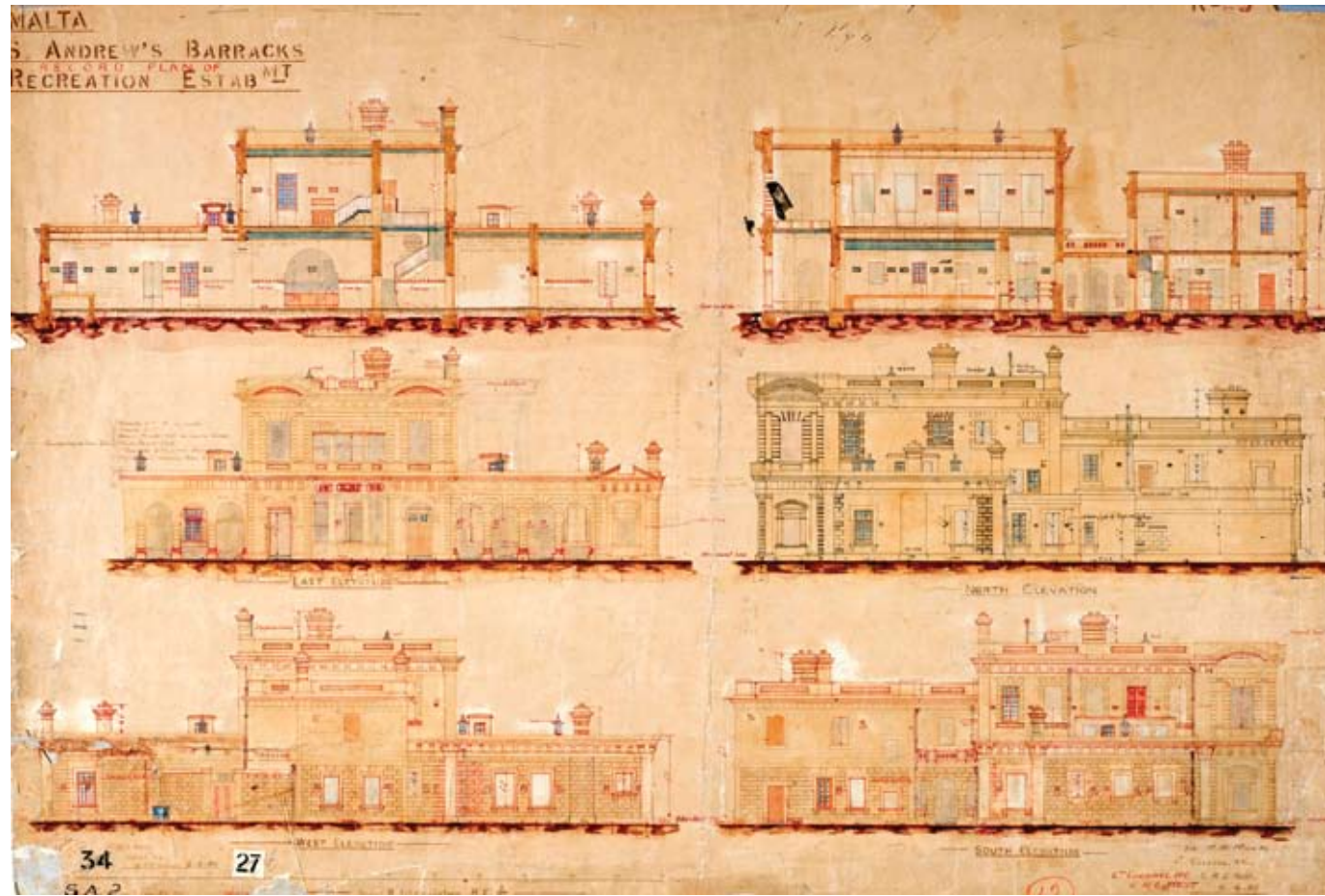
HERITAGE IN PERIL

HERITAGE IN PERIL

BY PERIT DR CONRAD THAKE

This is the story of two colonial-period buildings in St Andrew's, Pembroke, designed and constructed by the British military authorities during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Recreation Establishment building, better known as the ex-Raffles building, and the former Australia Hall, were both conceived to cater for the social and communal needs of military personnel stationed in St Andrew's barracks. They were certainly not spectacular from an architectural point of view but were dignified and imposing buildings, primarily utilitarian in their external appearance. Both buildings exuded the spirit of rigour, discipline and attention to building construction detail - all hallmarks emanating from the drawing office of the Royal Engineers. For several decades they served their purpose well, as vintage photographs testify.

During the course of my research at the drawings section of the National Archives at Santo Spirito, I came across a hand-drafted drawing of the Recreation Establishment which delineated in meticulous detail all the floor plans, elevations and sections. The bottom right-hand corner of the drawing bears the signature of the Royal Engineer Lt Col. C.R.E. West and is dated 1901. The level of detailing specifying precise dimensions, building materials and services is impeccable. Chimney flues, rainwater drain pipes, staircase balustrading, soffits and ventilators



Recreational establishment - hand-drafted drawing by Royal Engineer Lt Col. C.R.E. West

are drawn to the minutest detail. The building was efficiently constructed as per plans within a year, as the date 1902 incised in the stone pediment over the main entrance porch proudly testifies.

Fast forward to the early 1980s when following the closure of the British military base, the building was converted to a discotheque and nightclub, popularly known as Raffles. This was the era of glamour pop and disco

music, as patrons swung their hips on the dance floor gyrating to the tunes of John Travolta's Grease and Saturday Night Fever. I even recall one particular evening when the guest of honour was the former British pop singer and model of The Sun page 3 fame, Samantha Fox. What a transformation from the recreational clubhouse of British soldiers and officers to Samantha Fox being ogled by hordes of young men as she sang her number one hit "Touch Me (I Want Your Body)". One fateful night in the late-eighties it all went up in flames.

For the past two decades the building has lain in a derelict state, targeted by arsonists, graffiti vandals, drug pushers and squatters. Parts of its roofs have caved in and collapsed, walls blackened by soot and covered with graffiti, and broken stone slabs, glass and syringes strewn all over the floor. It is a pitiful carcass of a once dignified building that has



The Recreational Establishment today

been totally abandoned and purged from our collective historic memory and responsibility. Apparently the building, together with Australia Hall, had been granted on perpetual emphyteusis to the Labour Party and is currently the subject of a protracted and complex litigation case in court. In the meantime MEPA have scheduled the building as a Grade 2 building but given its current pitiful state I cannot comprehend how the building is being actively protected. Various parliamentary questions and official statements have not been particularly revealing as to when one can realistically expect a breakthrough to this impasse.

In the meantime, literally a few metres away, a similar historic building which used to serve as the Canteen building of the British services has been rehabilitated and is currently used by the Luxol Sports Club as a combined restaurant/bar and administrative offices. The ex-Raffles building is crying out to be restored and rehabilitated to a use which would serve the needs of the local community. This begs the question as to how long all parties involved will continue to close a Nelson's eye to this shambolic situation.

The former Australia Hall has also suffered a similar fate to the Ex-Raffles building. During World War I (1914-1918), Malta had a special role to play as a nursing station within the Mediterranean where several hospitals and convalescent camps were set up to tend to the casualties of the war. Australia Hall was built in 1915 by the Australian Branch of the Red Cross who raised funds to finance a com-

binated recreation centre/theatre building that would serve to entertain wounded soldiers belonging to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). In its heyday the hall could accommodate up to two thousand men as stage productions, dances, and other forms of recreation were regularly held there. Later a library and reading room were introduced and around 1921 a projection room was added to the structure so that the hall could also be used as a cinema. When the British military facilities in St Andrew's Barracks were closed down in 1978, it was returned to the Maltese government and transferred to the Labour Party in exchange for other property.

In December 1998, an arson fire gutted the hall's entire roofing system of metal trusses and sheeting. Only the external masonry shell has survived. Today the roofless carcass of the building is subject to the natural elements and vandals have left their marks on what remains of the building.

The Ex-Raffles building and former Australia Hall were important landmarks in the military camp of St Andrew's. Not all colonial buildings in Pembroke have met this fate. The former soldiers' barracks accommodation just down the road from Australia Hall has been restored and converted into an English language school for foreign students and an

IT educational facility. They are thriving environments which are relevant to the needs of contemporary society.

Public consciousness and awareness of the need to safeguard our historic architectural heritage has increased notably in recent times. However, I suspect that our appreciation for buildings and structures dating to the time of the Order of St John is distinctly greater than that of British colonial architecture, this being even more so in the case of military architecture. British military buildings and complexes have explicit political associations loaded with the trappings of colonial rule. In asserting our identity as an independent island-state we appear to have unconsciously rejected the legacy of our former colonial masters. In this regard it is fitting to acknowledge the contribution made by the NGO *Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna* under the dynamic stewardship of Mario Farrugia in appropriating and embracing colonial military architecture as an integral part of our heritage - Fort Rinella being the flagship project that has challenged and subverted the trend of expunging such buildings from our collective memory. One hopes that this new consciousness also permeates the Pembroke scene. Hopefully, the two highlighted buildings will rise phoenix-like from the ashes.



Australia Hall interior



Australia Hall was built in 1915 by the Australian Branch of the Red Cross



Australia Hall today

