

## Remodelling church facades: two case studies from Malta

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### Abstract

Malta presents various cases of urban restructuring from different periods. A country with a strong Roman Catholic society, churches played an indispensable role in the formation of urban space. This paper analyses the works of two architects, one Italian and one Maltese, who remodelled the facades of existing churches: Romano Carapeccchia (1668-1738), resident military engineer of the Order, restructured the church of St Catherine of Italy, Valletta in 1713, while Francesco Saverio Sciortino (1875-1958) remodelled the church of SS Peter and Paul at Nadur, Gozo (1907-15).

### Keywords

Remodelling, multilayering, superimposition.

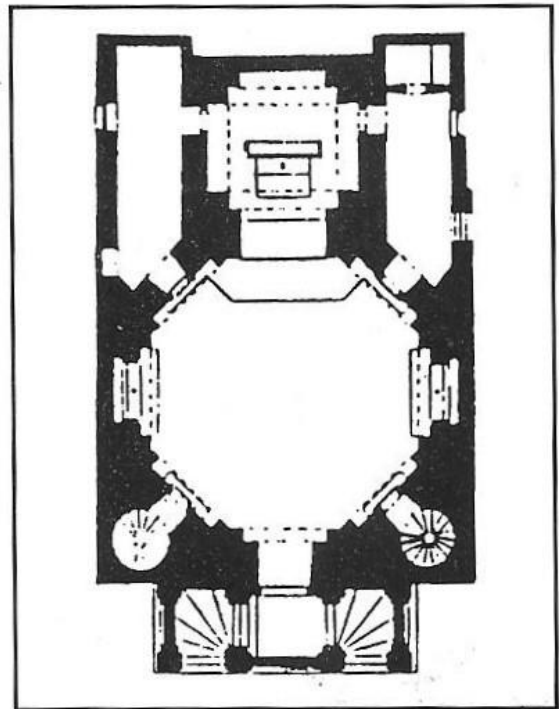
### Introduction

This paper considers two case studies relating to the remodelling of two church facades, that of St Catherine of Italy in Valletta and the parish church of Nadur in Gozo. Although almost two centuries separate the two projects, there are common themes and challenges. There was an expectation in both projects of creating a façade that is not only expressed in a more contemporary architectural language but is more dynamic, monumental and scenographic in its appearance. Besides these purely aspirational and aesthetic aspects, there was also the technical and engineering process of constructing the new façade whereby the architect and master builder in charge had to engage with the thematics of remodelling, multilayering and superimposition. Both case studies offer insights on this intricate process of navigating through a myriad web of aesthetic and technical challenges.

### 1. Romano Carapeccchia and the restructuring of the church of S. Catherine of Italy, Valletta

The church was built in 1576 by the Italian knights of the Order of St John. It physically adjoined the Auberge d'Italie and was intended to cater for the spiritual needs of the Italian langue. The original church was built to an octagonal plan by the Maltese architect and civil engineer, Girolamo Cassar (c.1520-c.1592). By the late-17<sup>th</sup> century, the building fabric was severely compromised due to the natural elements and even more so, by the 1693 earthquake that had caused considerable structural damage. Guglielmo Sannazzaro, acting in his capacity of the chaplain of the church, appealed not only for a thorough restoration programme but also for the remodelling of the church to cater for a suitable sacristy, the relocation of the main altar and the construction of a choir for the organ [Antista 2014, 92].

The natural candidate for this architectural project was the Italian architect Romano Fortunato Carapeccchia. In his formative years, Carapeccchia had studied at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, under the tutelage of Carlo Fontana (1638-1714). In 1706, Carapeccchia was lured to leave his modest practice in Rome and join the Order of St John in Malta whereupon he was invested as a knight and appointed *Architetto della Sacra Religione*, with the subsidiary post

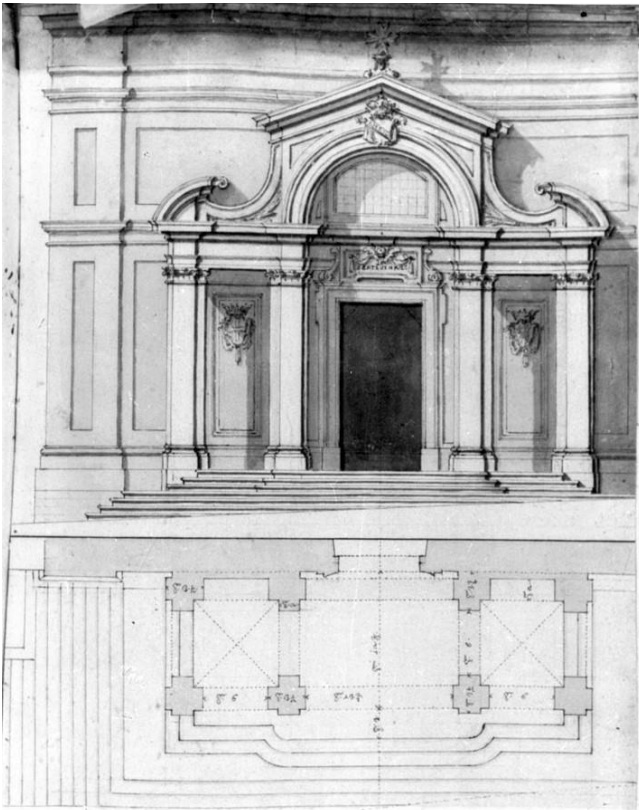


1: Romano Carapecchia, Church of St Catherine of Italy, Valletta, remodeled c.1713.  
2: Plan of St Catherine of Italy, Valletta.

of *Fontaniere* (water supply engineer) [Tonna, De Lucca 1975, 7]. During his career with the Order he undertook several prestigious commissions including designing several churches in Valletta specifically, St James church (1710), St Catherine's nunnery and church (1714), Our Lady of Pilar church (1718), the Municipal Palace (c.1720), the Manoel theatre (1732), the church of St Barbara (1734 completed by Giuseppe Bonnici) and the entrance portal to Spinola palace, Valletta (1737) [Tonna, De Lucca 1975, 38-39]. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Carapecchia was the chief protagonist in injecting within Valletta a strong dose of Roman-derived Baroque which exuded an aura of urban sophistication and refinement, in comparison to the spartan and academic mannerist works of Francesco Buonamici (1596-1677).

Carapecchia commenced his remodelling around 1713. He not only intervened within the interior of the church but was also responsible for the design of the imposing Baroque façade. Carapecchia's primary objective was to transform the external façade of St Catherine into a dynamic and scenographic stage-set that would mark the maturation of the Baroque architectural style in Valletta. He achieved this by creating an independent façade superimposed onto the original one by Cassar, consisting of well-proportioned projecting panels and recesses that are surmounted by an entablature that supports a raised centre-piece to which is affixed a marble plaque with a Latin inscription announcing the restoration and remodelling of the façade. A low-segmental pediment caps the centrepiece and sinuous scrolls adorned with stone carvings of festoons link the outer corner capitals to the central element. The porch projects even further as an additional physical overlay to the pre-existing façade, in the process imparting a strong outward movement emanating from the centre.

Carapecchia's major innovation is his finely-detailed and well-proportioned porch that boldly projects from the façade into the public open space. The porch is intended to serve as a



3: Romano Carapicchia, *Elevation and plan of St Catherine of Italy, Valletta, Courtauld Institute, London.*

transitional space between the church interior and public street, and on a symbolic level signifies the passage from the secular to the sacred realm. The porch is an ingenious design solution in integrating the interior sacred space with the external space. This at a time when the public realm assumed a heightened significance in the enactment of external religious ceremonies and rituals.

Tonna and De Lucca, in their pioneering monograph on Carapicchia, describe the façade of St Catherine 'as a highly inspired solution to that problem. It does not owe its success to an uncalculated coincidence: an analysis of the elevation would reveal that the bold three-dimensional volumes and spaces of the porch are echoed in outline and proportion by the vaster, two-dimensional façade behind it. It is all remarkable for the fact that the façade was built around a number of survivals from Girolamo's Cassar's original façade such as the squat corner pilasters, panelled into an approximation of orthodoxy by Carapicchia' [Tonna, De Lucca 1975, 22].

Furthermore, as Carapicchia had himself asserted in his notes in the section entitled

*Avvertimenti*, that forms part of his *Compendio Architettonico* «the architect must adopt a logical approach to his problems and must base his decisions on the nature of the building he is designing»<sup>1</sup>.

The façade of St Catherine church reveals Carapicchia's adherence to the classical principles of the Orders and his predilection for architectural decoration. It is a self-assured statement of Baroque design principles that is deeply influenced by the works of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680). It ranks as one of the most refined Baroque church facades to be built in the capital city. Carapicchia was not only a versatile architect of churches and public buildings, but he was a versatile and prolific designer of interiors and decorative artefacts. His cabreo of drawings at the Courtauld Institute contains several designs of altarpieces, fountains, tombstones, candelabra, chandeliers, decorative arrangements for banquets and other architectural ephemera [Bartolini Salimbeni 1992, 9-16]. It is therefore not surprising that his sophisticated decorative language was not only limited to the carved architectural elements but also in the wrought-iron grills and gates which he fitted in the lower part of the façade. The delicate forms and creative invention provide a superb contrast to the boldness of the architectural forms.

Pascoli in his *Vite de Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti*, dedicated an entry to Carapicchia stating, «disegnava a maravigli, ed avea capacità, benchè con poca fortuna» [Pascoli 1736, 549].

<sup>1</sup> The *Compendio Architettonico* was written by Carapicchia in 1690 when he was still at the Accademia di San Luca, Rome. The manuscript is in the Archives of the Order, National Library Malta, Valletta.



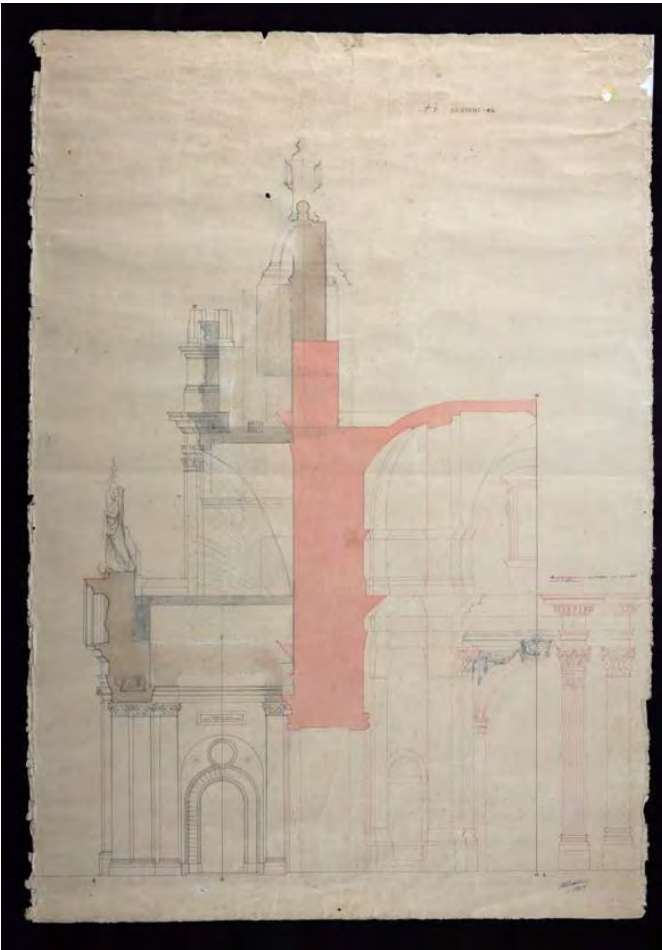
4: Francesco Saverio Sciortino, Façade and dome, Parish church of SS Peter and Paul, Nadur, Gozo, 1907-1913, Photo by Martin Attard ©.

Carapeccchia's artistic versatility and creative invention permeated his works. His approach of remodelling the church façade of St Catherine was one where Baroque scenography and the visual enhancement of the urban realm were prime considerations.

## 2. Francesco Saverio Sciortino and the remodelling of the Basilica of SS Peter and Paul at Nadur, Gozo

The second case study dates to the early years of the twentieth century, when the gifted Maltese sculptor and architect Francesco Saverio Sciortino (1875-1958) [Sagona 1999, 49-68] was commissioned to remodel the already-existing eighteenth-century parish church dedicated to SS Peter and Paul at Nadur on Gozo, Malta's sister island. This extensive remodelling was the most artistically-significant ecclesiastical architectural project to be undertaken in the Maltese Islands in the opening years of the century. It not only produced a work that came to dominate the skyline of Gozo, but it also brought to the island a sophisticated architectural language that would transcend its geographical limits and provincial limitations. Sciortino's architectural, sculptural, and decorative solutions also injected the Maltese context with a greater international flavour.

This project primarily consisted in extending and remodelling the earlier church, originally built by the architect and military engineer of the Knights of St John, Giuseppe Bonnici (1707-79) from 1760 onwards [Thake 2018, 23]. The resulting whole is one of perfect symbiosis between the old and the new, and an excellent example of the concept of the city as palimpsest.



5: Francesco Saverio Sciortino, Drawing showing section through proposed new façade, old façade (in pink) and part of nave, 1907, pencil, coloured ink and watercolour on paper, Nadur Parish Archives, Gozo, Photo by Martin Attard ©.

Sciortino's additions left the older structure virtually intact and parts of it played an important part in his superimposition of layers. Glimpses of the old fabric in between the new additions play an important role in the conversation that is created between the old and the new. This can also be experienced in the general arrangement of masses, especially in the way the façade interrelates and integrates with the two bell-towers, also belonging to Bonnici's late-eighteenth-century invention.

The Nadur parish church, especially the façade, is an outstanding example of an architectural project which is richly multi-layered but at the same time consciously sculptural. One has to keep in mind that Sciortino was an accomplished sculptor working in various media including stone, stucco and marble. His art is continuously born from the sculptural stimulus which invariably plays a controlling role in his work. At Nadur, the old was revisited and richly dressed in a new attire which typically belongs to the turn of the twentieth century. It is immersed in the eclectic idiom which had dominated the continent throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Looked at holistically, the Nadur parish church presents to us the endeavours of two architects: Bonnici and Sciortino: the

metaphorical eighteenth-century manuscript has been partly superimposed by Sciortino's intervention. This is an architecture which draws on the plasticity of sculpture and on the amalgamation of styles that marked eclecticism throughout Europe, rooted in the Revivalism which characterised the age. It is stylistically evident that Sciortino drew from Second Empire architecture, which was popular in France under Napoleon III (1852-70), itself based on a revival of Italian and French Baroque [Thake 2018, 43].

The precociously talented Francesco Saverio Sciortino hailed from an artistically-gifted family that counted among its members his own younger brother Antonio (1879-1947), educated and active in Rome from 1900 to 1936, and also, their cousin, the painter Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932), also educated in Rome, precisely at the Accademia di San Luca between 1870 and 1874. All three artists left an indelible mark on the development of Maltese Art. Francesco Saverio Sciortino had started his career as a student in the classes of decoration and ornament led by the Italian decorator Vincenzo Cardona (active c.1880-1916) in the Technical and Manual School at Strada Levante, Valletta. Between 1897 and 1902 he moved on to Rome where he studied at the *Regio Istituto di Belle Arti* [Ellul 2008, 65]. Before returning to Malta in 1903, the artist had spent around one year in Milan where he enrolled at the Accademia di

Belle Arti di Brera<sup>2</sup>. In the following decade, entirely spent in Malta, he worked on various projects of sculpture and decoration but it was at Nadur that he was to leave his only architectural mark, before migrating to Canada in 1913. Working in Montreal, New York, Philadelphia and Cuba among others, in 1939 he returned to Malta staying until 1954, before finally moving back to Quebec where he died.

The Nadur parish church project was born when the artist crossed paths with the young priest Rev. Martin Camilleri, the future parish priest of Nadur. Camilleri was, like Sciortino, furthering his studies in Rome and had taken up lodgings in a room adjoining that of Sciortino. In an autograph document written in 1953, Sciortino narrates the genesis and development of the commission which dates to 1904<sup>3</sup>, in which Rev. Camilleri had asked Sciortino to inspire himself from the churches that they had visited together in Rome. Sciortino's architectural scheme and invention can be followed through a corpus of beautifully-detailed drawings, preserved at the Nadur Parish Archives, most of which bear the date 1907. It is abundantly clear that Sciortino was very careful to use Bonnici's fabric as the basis to which he applied his new accretions. In any appreciation of Sciortino's remodelling, the eighteenth-century church is a force to be reckoned with since it is the skeleton to which Sciortino's architectural structures and sculptural decorative passages are appended.

Sciortino's reutilisation of a previous fabric as a springboard for his architectural invention was not entirely new in the rich architectural history of the Maltese Islands. A similar context is, for example, present at the parish church of St Nicholas at Siġġiewi in Malta. Originally built by Malta's greatest Baroque native architect, Lorenzo Gafà (1639-1703) in the late seventeenth century, it was remodelled by the architect and designer Nicola Zammit (1815-99), the champion of eclectic decorative arts on the island [Sagona 2014, 133-153]. Undertaken by Zammit in the years around 1862 [Vella 2001, 30], the Siġġiewi case was certainly known by Sciortino and could have also been a source of inspiration.

Sciortino's project at Nadur comprised the construction of a new façade, new side-aisles, and the erection of a monumental dome to crown the entire structure. Sciortino also undertook the remodelling of the interior, in particular, by changing the order of architecture. By juxtaposing his façade onto the older one, he intelligently created a narthex flanked by two entrances into the aisles. The screen-like façade is a pyramidal amassing of structures, generally classical in inspiration, which gradually build up to a climax. Two square domes, crowned by flaming finials, flank the central structure and lead up to a central square dome capping the façade. This creates a visually exhilarating backdrop to the central sculptural group of *Faith, Hope and Love*, inscribed within the parameters of the original window on the previous façade. This captivating tiered effect also results from the plastic, multi-layered quality, magnificently elucidated in a drawing showing a section through the old and the new, and also indicating part of the new interior decoration<sup>4</sup>.

One of Sciortino's primary artistic interests lay in the subtle balance between decoration, sculpture and an architectural quality which can be appreciated throughout his entire oeuvre. Here, decoration is strategically placed to accentuate and articulate architectural members and spaces in between. Decoration takes the form of carved reliefs within pediments with the iconography of SS Peter and Paul, of fan-like motifs crowning dados and cornices, at times

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<sup>2</sup> Nadur (Gozo, Malta), Parish Archives, Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Testimonial on the enlargement of Nadur parish church*, 1953, f.1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Nadur (Gozo, Malta), Parish Archives, Francesco Saverio Sciortino Drawings, *Drawing marked No.7 Sezione KL*, 1907.

amalgamated with the winged-cherub head, of shingling to cover the body of the square-domes, of frilled acanthus forms that inhabit the capitals of columns and pilasters, of festoons, ribbons and flutings. It is a decoration which harmoniously enhances the visual appeal and which is conceived as an integral part of the building fabric.

All the carving on the façade was produced by the little-known sculptor Paolo Falzon (1885-1971), a brilliant decorator who was also responsible for the interior stone carvings of the dome, working from drawings by Sciortino [Sagona 2018, 89]. The façade was effectively completed many years later. In 1945, Sciortino carved, in Maltese limestone, the sculptural group of *Faith, Hope and Love*. Its scaled-down eight-part *modello* in Plaster of Paris is preserved in the parish collection. It signifies the change that Sciortino's art had undergone in the timespan since his departure to Canada. Another noteworthy drawing by Sciortino in the Nadur Parish Archives is for the wrought iron gate which closes off the narthex and which was only realised as late as 1995 [Sagona 2018, 162].

## Conclusion

The phenomenon of urban remodelling and superimposition is timeless, and transcends many boundaries. The urban space transforms itself into the palimpsest on which multilayering occurs, becoming significant for its subsequent art-historical analysis. The inventions of Carapeccchia and Sciortino, produced two centuries apart, are fine paragons of discerning architectural design in which sculpture and decoration play a significant role.

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