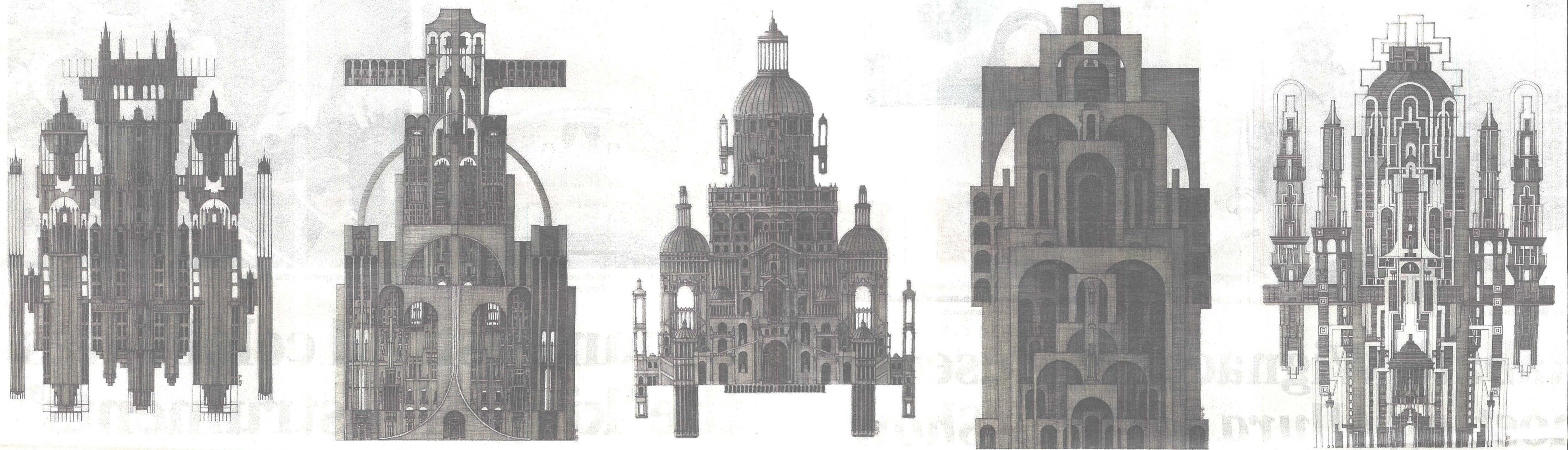


ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT ARTS



Ideas and visions of architectural forms

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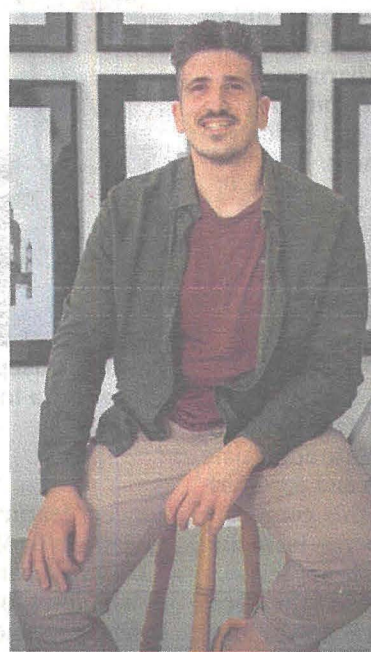
In the history of world art, one comes across artists who were inspired by the architectural fabric that surrounded them. Some of them, like Malta's own Richard England, were both visual artists and accomplished architects. Through his art, England interpreted Maltese vernacular architecture and endowed it with surrealist and 'improbable' architectural elements. This oeuvre evokes that of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), who regarded himself as an architect, and Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972), who pursued architectural studies but abandoned them in favour of a career in graphic art.

Piranesi's labyrinthine creations of fantastic interiors originated from his love of classical Roman architecture and that of other classical civilisations like the Greek, the Etruscan and the Egyptian. However, at times, the

Italian artist refrained from these flights of fancy and dedicated himself to painstaking architectural detail. Escher's distortions and his flights of stairs seem to reach everywhere and nowhere. He once remarked: "The staircase is a rather sad, pessimistic subject, as well as being very profound and absurd," thus defining himself as more of an existentialist, rather than a surrealist.

DOCUMENTING ARCHITECTURE AS AN ART FORM

Glenn Ellul's world thrives in this milieu that Escher and Piranesi co-inhabit. The Maltese artist's fascination with our country's vernacular architecture, its idiosyncrasies and the baroque nature of it is amply demonstrated in his ornate creations. In the past, he has used identifying elements such as balconies, doors and niches as building blocks of his composi-



Glenn Ellul. PHOTO: RENÉ ROSSIGNAUD

tions, thus coming up with original work that is far removed from the strictly architectural but is ultimately representative of other aspects of our culture.

The artist seems to suggest the elements that identify us as a nation are deeply interlinked at a very basic level, like strands of DNA. The repetition of motifs is weaved, moulded and blended to create a new narrative, an architectural one in the case of this exhibition. Ellul's past references have at times nodded towards the pop-cultural and the prehistoric; Pastizz, *The Sleeping Lady* and *Haġar Qim* are such examples which however are not presently exhibited.

The title *Structures of the Mind* eloquently infers that these creations are not documentation of actual edifices adorning our streets and squares, although they do originate from these everyday realities. The artist manipulates these concrete, existing structures as possibilities of the subconscious, therefore defying the 'structure' of the physical and the empirical. In his masterpiece *Invisible Cities*, novelist Italo Calvino describes this malleable, oneiric property of such conglomerations,

"Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else."

"The architecture experiences a loss of identity, an impermanence that defies facile categorisations"

Ellul's world is not too far removed from this. He detaches features such as church domes and steeples from their accepted context and reassembles them as disorientating high-rises that are unrooted; they seem to float effortlessly like Victorian insect specimens nailed to a board. This imagined architecture is of a mesmerising beauty and

evokes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's definition of it as frozen music. Ellul's creations have a strong musical and lyrical quality to them, reaching out to the heavens above and displaying gothic sensibilities. The pointed and ornate arches, large windows and vaults, and untethered buttresses of gothic architecture have been reinterpreted by the Maltese artist through the rearrangement of the Malta's architectural DNA into a gothic/baroque hybrid.

THE AESTHETIC NON-FUNCTION OF BUILDINGS

In his introductory essay for the exhibition catalogue, curator Roderick Camilleri insightfully remarks: "These large refined and delicate pen drawings illustrate what might seem familiar with intriguing unfamiliar and remarkable characteristics. Their unique compositions bring to mind fictive contrap-

tions or machines, or even somewhat outlandish yet appealing mobile futuristic aircrafts, which are able to drift or hover in space from one time frame to another." These works by Ellul elicit different reactions in the viewers, due to their property of non-belonging. They do not refer to actual geographical locations that could be visited or photographically documented. This adds to their otherworldly characteristics.

In this collection of pen drawings, the architecture experiences a loss of identity, an impermanence that defies facile categorisations that we ascribe to a cathedral, a palace, a theatre, a majestic historical building.

The drawing-board original intentions of them as places of worship, of governance, of community or of leisure are lost. The new 'edifices' as proposed by Ellul retain morsels of their role as collage-like memories, or maybe, preconceptions.

However, their inherent monumentality is augmented as their function straddles all probabilities in our collective subconscious – a Maltese cathedral can be transformed into an intimation, a suggestion of the 'Taj Mahal', of the 'Empire State Building' or of an intricate gothic spacecraft taking off into deep space.

The importance of architectural function is a post-modern trait of only relative relevance for Ellul, as form and aesthetics take absolute precedence. In a country such as ours in which function has rough-trodden over aesthetics, an exhibition such as *Structures of the Mind* reminds us of the value and beauty of architecture; in Malta's sorry case, even as an improbable dream-like alternative.

Structures of the Mind, curated by Roderick Camilleri, is hosted by Floriana's Hotel Phoenicia until November 29. COVID-19 restrictions apply. For more information and opening hours, visit the event's Facebook page.

