

FABRICATING
SPACE:
REIMAGINING
THE ECOLOGY
OF THE URBAN

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Rain in the air has also the odd power of letting one see things in the round, as though stereoscopically. The rays of light, refracted through the moisture in the air, bend round the back of what I am seeing.

—Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 2014

If you ask, “Why is Thekla’s construction taking such a long time?” the inhabitants continue hoisting sacks, lowering leaded strings, moving long brushes up and down, as they answer, “So that its destruction cannot begin.”

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1997

In architectural terms, the urban fabric encompasses the arrangement and organisation of streets, buildings, public spaces, and infrastructure that together create the distinctive character and functional framework of an urban environment. When we speak of the urban fabric, we are referring to more than just the individual components of a city; we are considering how these elements interweave to create a cohesive whole. This fabric speaks to the historical, cultural, and social dynamics that have shaped urban space over time. It also has implications for the lived experience of a place. It influences how people move through space, connect with one another, and perceive their surroundings.

Urban Fabric is also Malta’s response to the London Design Biennale 2023, erected in the central courtyard of Somerset House, an iconic neoclassical building situated along the northern bank of the River Thames. Malta’s pavilion inhabits an atemporal space, evoking a sense of continuity, as if belonging simultaneously to the past, present, and future. It considers the enduring relevance of certain ideas and forms; it creates a bridge between different times while resisting the confines of temporal categorisation. The concept and design of the structure set out to balance form, materiality, context, and innovation.

Urban Fabric seeks to instil sensibility and awareness in regard to sustainable architectural practices. It originated as a call for action, a symbolic resistance to the urban sprawl that is fast eradicating traditional village cores on the tiny Mediterranean island of Malta. Its main objective is to explore designs and materials that advance this pledge while minimising the impact on the environment and also taking into account the short span of the biennale. Borrowing from the urban fabric of old Maltese villages, the project re-appropriates multiple places and juxtaposes them together until any distinction between them no longer remains traceable. In Timothy Morton's (2010, p. 8) words, "[a]rt forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can make us question reality" and that is exactly what this hypothetical village sets to achieve.

The installation does not recreate an existing village; it makes (a) new one(s). However, as Morton suggests, "[o]ther times and other places are part of this 'here'" (2010, p. 55). Conceived as 'soft' architecture, the aim is to erect a structure whereby inside and outside may be reversed (Bachelard 1994, p. 218). The choice of materials resonates with the overarching theme and the overall ethos of the large-scale project.

It is the first time that Malta is participating in the London Design Biennale, where it has been allocated a most prominent space in the central courtyard of Somerset House. The huge open space poses various challenges; however, it also allows for unlimited creative possibilities. The massive footprint emerges as an attractive yet intimidating proposition, vast and wide open, overlooked by imposing architecture all around. A place within a place that can be approached from various angles, versatile but also constrained. The open enclosure is exposed to the natural elements; it must embrace the winds and the rain, bask in the sunshine and sleep under starry and cloudy skies. As a multidisciplinary team, Open Square Collective has embraced the challenges and translated them into creative opportunities and possibilities for unique collaborations. *Urban Fabric* is the product of a solid alliance between different creative fields and the natural elements. It sets out to challenge the stale dichotomous distinction of nature and culture (Ingold 2011, p. 16).

It was decided, from the very beginning, that *Urban Fabric* would have to work in tandem with nature. The natural elements breathe life into it, turning it into a dynamic ever-changing work, neither still nor predictable. They *become Urban Fabric*, inseparable, enfolded between the creases of the purple fabrics, wrapped around the corners, prancing and dribbling across the central *piazza*. The fabric will inevitably weather out in an almost ephemeral manner; it will become undone constructively, embodying processes of decay and disintegration, highlighting the transient nature of existence. The aesthetic of decay can be beautiful as it can also be seen as a process of accumulation rather than degeneration. Decay constitutes piled up layers of time, writing superimposed on earlier writing. *Urban Fabric* embraces entropy, allowing natural processes of decay and change to influence its final outcome. The solution is not to start afresh but to conserve what is left.

An eco-critical narrative weaves its way through the fabric; it penetrates and moves along fictitious streets. It takes the audiences for a walk, encouraging encounters with the real and the imaginary fabric of a secreted village, where every corner embraces distinctive stories waiting to be re-told. In the realm of art and design, eco-criticism brings a critical perspective that challenges makers to rethink and reshape their practices to align with sustainability and

ethics. Ecological sensibility encourages looking beyond traditional aesthetics, questioning certain methods, provoking critical design-thinking, and exploring more ecologically meaningful trajectories. The environment is not an afterthought but an angle of departure, a priority, and an objective that we, as artists and designers, strive to uphold and safeguard. Environmental considerations have been integral to every stage of the concept and development process; they have been deemed a necessity. The project entwines artistic practice with eco-criticism, whereby the creative process becomes a channel of activism, a call for action.

To encourage the pavilion to converse with nature, it was deemed important to delve into biomimicry. At its core, biomimicry is about learning from nature's time-tested patterns and strategies to create solutions that are innovative and complementary. Certain considerations during the initial stages of the project were key to ensuring that sustainability and the aesthetic attributes of the project remained complementary. The original concept emerged from a historical narrative dating back to the Phoenician period; inevitably, one of the first ports of call was the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta. Eco-criticism values stories emerging from artistic practices; it intensifies poetic aspects to raise but not resolve questions about aesthetic choices (Clark 2019, p. 76). This involves designs that tell a story about their materials, origins, or impact, helping users connect more deeply with the ecological aspects of the products used. Nature informs the shapes and structures of the work, suggesting what materials can be used to maximise efficiency and function. Beyond physical forms, biomimicry also instigates processes and systems, creating works that interact with their environment or adapt over time, much like how living organisms do.

To locate the project in a historical framework, we looked at the history of the Maltese islands and researched specific artefacts and practices dating back to the Phoenician period. The Phoenician purple dye tradition became one of the central themes of the project and all the pieces of fabric used were literally immersed in this pigment. The hallmark trade was imported to Malta in ancient times and now also into our project. Throughout history, the Maltese islands, due to their strategic position at the centre of the Mediterranean sea, attracted leading maritime powers including the Phoenicians (Busuttil 1971, p. 305). Ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE) wrote that the island of Melitē (Malta) had been a Phoenician colony, its natural harbours were used to give shelter to their ships as the island served as a place of refuge; a safe haven (Busuttil 1971, p. 305; Bonanno 2005, p. 12). Gozo, the second biggest island in the archipelago, used to be known as Gaudos or Gaulos, the latter denoting a type of Phoenician trade ship with a rounded hull, powered by a huge quadrangular sail and around 20 oars. This information proved very useful; it helped shape the narrative of *Urban Fabric* and move it forward. The sails that powered the Gaulos across the seas transported us into an expansive creative territory soaked in history and culture. Inevitably, as soon as the Phoenician sails appeared on the horizon, fabric gained more currency, subsequently all the creative exchanges we had revolved around it.

The rich purple pigment, also known as Tyrian purple, was one of the most significant and coveted colours in ancient history. The dye was produced by the Phoenicians, probably as early as 1200 BCE, from the mucus of marine snails, particularly the species *Murex brandaris* and *Murex trunculus*. The snails were harvested from the Mediterranean Sea and the dye was considered as a royal colour; it was potent and long-lasting. Tyrian purple became a symbol of



wealth, power, and prestige, primarily due to its rarity and the complexity of its production. The dye's intensely rich colour, which could range from a crimson to a deep violet depending on the production process, had a profound influence on the art and culture of the ancient Mediterranean. For *Urban Fabric*, the chosen suppliers resorted to completely different means of fabric dyeing. Material outsourcing was based on the need to minimise impact on the environment; it did not matter if it would fade or stain, as long as those results were nature's doing.

Choosing the right fabric helped reduce resource consumption, minimise waste, and promote a more sustainable and responsible approach to design; therefore, a lot of research went into identifying appropriate fabrics for the project. The objective was to encourage design-thinking that contributed to broader cultural shifts towards sustainability that involved products, systems, and practices that considered sustainable habits and values. Undoubtedly, one of the major challenges in producing an installation that was to be exposed to the outside elements was to strike a balance between functionality, safety, and sustainability—a tight rope that was definitely not easy to traverse. We had to consider not only the short term aesthetic and structural aspects of the installation but also the long-term impact on the environment. Following lengthy discussions, we resolved to utilise organic materials as much as possible while also ensuring that the structure could withstand the climatic conditions for a whole month and also blend in with the historic architecture of Somerset House. In this sense, *Urban Fabric* brings together history, culture, contemporary art, design, and architectural practice. It juxtaposes spatial design with temporality while also blurring any distinctions between natural and manufactured materials. The installation is made to advance and foster a deeper connection between people and their surroundings, thus encouraging an emphatic approach that takes into consideration the characteristics of the place.

The project furthers a critique of overdevelopment in Malta, which has been driving unsustainable design and building practices for a relatively long time. It promotes the use of appropriate technology—solutions that are not only environmentally friendly but also culturally and contextually suitable, avoiding the pitfalls of imposing one-size-fits-all architectural fixes. The elegant and sensitive structure is made to enhance the space where it exists and play out along existing narratives to allow newer ones to emerge. The work takes a political stance; it constructs fictions by rearranging signs and images, connecting the seen and the said, what has been made with what can be done (Ranci re 2013, p. 35).

An important organic element that supports the overall structure is wood. The use of wood is kept to a minimum; skeletal and raw, it is left uncoated, retaining its original finish and colour. The organic material is meant to age with time and, similar to the sail-like fabric, it converses with the natural elements; it is always disposed to change and evolve into something else. The openness of the space and the air currents forming inside the Somerset House courtyard demand stability and strength in the structural build. A lot of research went into building a stable and safe structure that could withstand the momentum generated by the various weather conditions. The playful collaboration between nature and structure could turn rough at times. The spatial characteristics of the courtyard were carefully studied so as to ensure compatibility with the overall structure and to facilitate visitor flow.

As the installation is modelled upon a hypothetical Maltese village, it includes a network of narrow streets leading to a prominent central *piazza* which is essentially an open square. A Mediterranean *piazza* is a type of public square or open space commonly found in towns and cities throughout the region, particularly in southern Europe. The concept of the *piazza* is central to the social, cultural, and architectural life of Mediterranean communities. People congregate in these social spaces and, similarly, the *piazza* at the centre of the installation has been designed to entice visitors to explore, experience, and interact with it. The public is invited to make use of this space, transforming it into a hub of activity through social and cultural interactions. Flanking the purple fabric walls, there are four signature pieces, made by each of the four artists constituting Open Square Collective. The signature pieces evoke specific Maltese symbols through contemporary art and design practices ranging from sculpture, 3D printing, and hand-embroidered text. Visitors may also interact with the installation through various QR codes, where more digital content can be accessed and shared, including Maltese poems, virtual objects, historical information, and images related to the Maltese village context. In this way, the project establishes a village that is both inside and outside, juxtaposing the physical square at Somerset House with a symbolic and vibrant village-core community space.

As one approaches the structure, an assemblage of firm and fluid forms is gradually revealed. The layout resonates with the ageless narrow streets of Malta's older villages, delineated by limestone buildings generally not exceeding two floors. The topography of the hypothetical village translates into a slightly variable elevation across the entire footprint of the assemblage exuding a consonant sense of space. The ubiquitous village limestone has been replaced by the various shades of purple fabric, spontaneously generating intricate textures that permeate the pathways in between. A frenetic interplay of light and shade produces random irregular projections that infiltrate the conjectural streets with phantom-like appearances. On the inside, the cobbled ground, awash with purple tones, makes for a vibrant atmosphere that invites the audiences to wander and explore, search and discover. A quest for a nostalgic past within the present with a glimpse at the future. Like a heterotopia, the assemblage exists in between; it connects places, it relocates a place into another, opening up portals leading to real and imaginary locations, both close and far. *Urban Fabric* is a theatre of dreams, making the unreal possible or more unreal. It is a space to consciously lose and find oneself in; a space of reflection, contemplation, an intimate maze that a visitor has to navigate, where multiple entry and exit points both complicate and facilitate passage. In Rebecca Solnit's (2017, p. 13) words, getting lost at times "seems like the beginning of finding your way or finding another way".

Urban Fabric creates a space for stories. A space where people can walk and talk, mingle or avoid each other. A visitor can follow others or choose to run away from them, lose them in the labyrinthine structure, to meet again at another point or not. In the middle or on the periphery. Stories are made and exchanged at every juncture of the assemblage. As De Certeau (1984, p. 81) writes, these are not stories that limit themselves to "telling about a movement"; they make it. There is a poetic language drifting through this maze, generating waves of newness that open up the whole structure to multiple expressions and experiences (Bachelard 1994, p. 222).

The assemblage is continuously in a process of un-making, evolving from within. Similar to a Baroque courtyard, brimming with trees and vegetation, it is open but enclosed within the



palace walls. It is exposed and yet concealed, veiled but penetrable. Old villages were built as safe havens, where people could live, work, and socialise within a sheltered space. Vernacular architecture based on local needs, materials, and traditions, often develops over generations and is deeply rooted in the culture of a specific place. It is an architecture that evolves almost naturally, shaped by the environmental conditions, available resources, and cultural practices of a community. *Urban Fabric* is stripped of excesses, fashioning itself out of bare essentials through a less is more approach. Its grand scale is intended to make a forceful statement about simplicity while inviting a deeper interaction from the viewer. It suggests that by removing the extraneous, one can reveal the profound, the essential, and the universal.

The first ever Malta Pavilion at the London Design Biennale emerges like a prominent sail on the horizon. It is neither stationary nor constant; it is in the middle of a crossing, gradually moving, in all directions. The structure is built on shifting ground; it is delicately solid but embraces its fragility as a major strength. The work is a sign of endurance, a marker of resilience, always in a state of unfolding. To unfold is to increase, to grow (Deleuze 1993, p. 9). *Urban Fabric* invites us to wander and interact with the world, kindly and with respect.

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