

Awareness and Statutory Protection of Industrial Heritage in Malta

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Modernising Heritage Appreciation

Up to a couple of decades ago, many people in Malta considered Maltese history to have ended in 1798 with the departure of the Order of St John. They believed that anything after this date was not significant enough to deserve to be protected as part of Maltese patrimony. In the late 1960s the NGO Din l-Art Ħelwa was the first to take an active interest in managing minor heritage sites. In the 1980s the newly formed NGO Moviment għall-Ħarsien ta' l-Ambjent Storiku (MHAS, later renamed as Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna), launched a campaign to raise awareness and protection of buildings pertaining to the British period in Malta and other marginalised heritage, including industrial heritage. This initiative drew criticism from some traditionalists who did not consider such buildings worth preserving owing to their utilitarian nature, or because they were too recent or represented colonialism. However, connoisseurs of engineering, professionals, academics and amateurs praised and supported such initiatives through publications, lobbying and more recently, the creation of the NGO Fondazzjoni għall-Ħarsien Wirt Industriali.

Having observed and participated in this increased awareness since the 1980s, the author is of the opinion that our collective appreciation and acceptance of heritage has improved significantly. We are more analytical, academic and critical, and less biased. Although this is positive, it also brings about added burdens and responsibilities. What are we going to do, and who pays for all this heritage?

Industrial Heritage

The notion of industrial heritage emerged in Britain in the 1950s (Raistrick 1973, Cossens 1993). Many associate this term exclusively with the developments of the 18th and 19th century known as the Industrial Revolution. Perhaps a more appropriate definition is found in Raistrick (1973) as that heritage which encompasses the production of goods and services from ancient times to the more recent epochs of human history. Already in 1942 Gordon Childe pointed out that the Industrial Revolution did not start in the 18th century but in the Neolithic revolution, as the logical starting point for industry in humankind was the discovery and exploitation

of raw materials, their preparation and manufacture into products for specific use. Industrial heritage should not be limited to buildings and technological achievements, but should also be valued for its contribution towards providing work for the masses, boosting the economy and improving the lives of people. In fact, UNESCO recognised the contribution of the Industrial Revolution by declaring around thirty industrial sites and landscapes as World Heritage Sites, mostly in Europe. Several countries have declared their own lists of protected industrial heritage sites. Malta is not lagging behind in this as MEPA's Scheduled Property Register contains hundreds of items having industrial heritage value (<http://www.mepa.org.mt/schedschedulingsearch>).

The protection of Industrial Heritage in Malta

The industrial heritage of the Maltese Islands includes a wide range of buildings, some still complete or still possessing parts of their original equipment, ranging in date from ancient to modern. The windmills of Malta were amongst the first buildings of an industrial nature that were protected by Maltese law, through their inclusion in the List of Ancient Monuments in 1932. MEPA was amongst the first to recognize the value of industrial heritage by raising awareness about the need to safeguard this heritage through the local media, protecting representative examples and issuing permits and grants for the restoration and rehabilitation of such buildings. The Scheduled Property Register compiled by MEPA since 1994 includes a number of sites and buildings which contributed to the industrialisation of Malta through the ages, such as:

- Roman villas containing equipment for corn grinding, olive and wine pressing;
- wine-pressing rock-cut basins in Gozo;
- prehistoric to Early Modern quarries and cart-ruts;
- medieval *mtieħen tal-miexi* (beast-driven flour mills);
- Wignacourt's aqueduct;
- 50 windmills from the Knights' and British periods;
- underground power stations at Marsa and Crucifix Hill at Floriana;
- Blackley Bakery at Pieta';
- underground emergency flour mills from the Cold War era;
- as well as Muscat's automobile showroom at Gzira and Farsons Brewery at Mrieħel.

Other scheduled examples were the product of the Industrial Revolution which include:

- the railway station at Mdina and the tunnel at Valletta;
- the iron bridge at Victoria Gate and the Covered Market in Valletta;

- various British period cast-iron post boxes and telephone booths in Urban Conservation Areas;
- as well as the artillery pieces at Fort Rinella and Fort Delimara.

Scheduling and Permitting

In 1992 the Development Planning Act (amended in 2010 as the Environment and Development Planning Act - EDPA), was introduced to better control building development and land use in Malta. For the first time, the responsibility of protecting immovable heritage was integrated with development control through a number of national and local policies and guidelines in line with international conventions and charters on heritage and planning. In 1994 MEPA started an ongoing programme to schedule representative examples of immovable heritage to protect them from development impacts. Scheduling is carried out according to priority of historic relevance, representation of architecture, context, socio-economic values, overall significance, and risk. Consultations are held with the Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee (CHAC) and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage (SCH). The recommendations are presented to the MEPA Board for a decision and published in the Government Gazette, while the owners, if known, are notified and given the right to request a reconsideration.

To date MEPA has scheduled over 2000 buildings and archaeological sites, apart from natural habitats, cultural landscapes, as well as some underwater archaeological sites, and sixty-one Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs). The Farsons Brewery, for example, was scheduled as a Grade 2 building in May 2012. Other industry-related sites are under research for scheduling in the future, such as certain iconic buildings of the former Drydocks, and examples of salt-pans.

Any interventions on scheduled buildings require a planning permit from MEPA. Buildings scheduled as Grade 1 are of national importance, such as the windmills, where restoration is a priority. Alterations are strictly controlled and only allowed to keep the building in active use through minor adaptation to accommodate modern needs, such as sanitary facilities and access for all. Most industrial heritage buildings are scheduled as Grade 2 whereby adaptive reuse is encouraged and modifications are allowed as long as the external and internal homogeneity of the building are retained (Structure Plan 1990). Before the issuing of such permits, a restoration method statement is required, and consultations are held with the CHAC and the SCH. When a permit is issued, it stipulates conditions, including a bank guarantee to ensure compliance with approved plans, a restoration method statement and monitoring of the works by professional conservation officers.

Restoration Issues in Industrial Buildings

A main conservation issue in industrial buildings dating from the late 19th and 20th century is the variety of materials they employed. Steel and concrete were extensively used, and their deterioration often poses severe challenges. In recent years, several scheduled industrial heritage items were restored or are in the process of restoration and rehabilitation, such as:

- some windmills;
- Cold War underground flour mills;
- the Old Power Station in Floriana;
- Ex-Naval Bakery at Vittoriosa;
- several British period cast-iron letter and telephone boxes;
- Fort Rinella and its 100-ton gun;
- Farsons Brewery, Mriehel.

Need for further study

The study of industrial heritage calls for the combined effort of specialists and disciplines in various fields, as one specialist working alone may easily overlook certain aspects and details. In matters of industrial heritage, workers having hands-on experience and people who lived close to an industrial heritage site may contribute insights which would otherwise not be available through the archaeological or historical record. The ideal team should not be composed of academics alone, but should include people with direct experience.

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