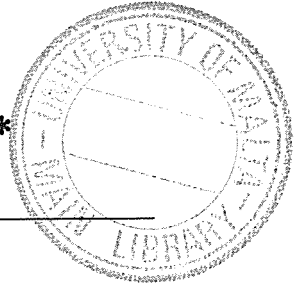


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# RESIDENTIAL INVERSION: THE CHANGING USE OF SOCIAL SPACE IN MALTA\*

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**T**HE use of space for residential purposes is dynamically related to the physical and social environment. Changes in that environment affect the utilization of space. Changes in the man-built environment resulting from shifts in the pattern of utilization of space affect social behaviour. I would like to illustrate the symbiotic relation between the social and the man-built environment by looking at the changing use of residential space in Malta, especially since 1960.

## **Malta in space and time**

The Maltese islands lie mid-way between Gibraltar and Lebanon. The southeast tip of Sicily lies just 60 miles to the north, Tripoli 220 miles to the south and Tunis a little over 200 miles to the west. Malta has thus always formed a natural port of call between Europe and North Africa. Both the Christian and Muslim worlds have contributed cultural traits which the Maltese have adapted to their own use. The language is basically Semitic and related to North African Arabic. The flat-roofed houses with interior courtyards are more reminiscent of North Africa and the Middle East than of Southern Europe. In spite of this, the main features of the cultural and social organization of the Maltese are more European than North African.

Malta, the largest and southernmost of the three islands which form the Maltese archipelago, is 20 miles long and nine miles wide.

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\*This paper was first presented to the Euromed Conference on "Perception and the use of space and non-verbal communication in European and Mediterranean societies", Maastricht, 11 - 12 January 1985. I am extremely grateful to Jojada Verrips and Joe Friggieri for helpful comments. Denis de Lucca, Conrad Thake and Jan Ter Haar helped with the Naxxar Maps.

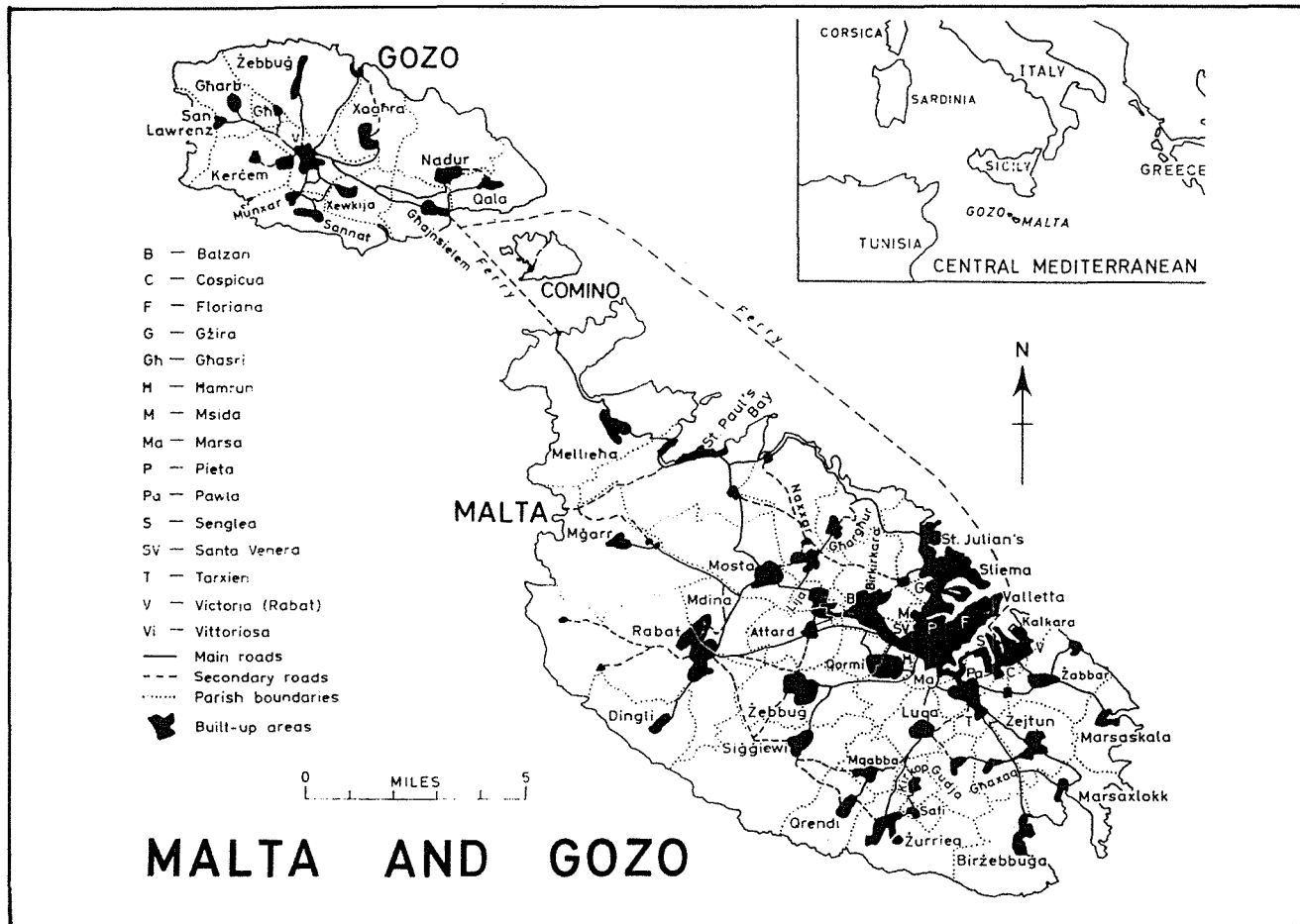


Figure 1. — Malta and Gozo 1960.

Gozo, the main sister island, is only nine miles by five (see Figure 1). The little island of Comino lies in the channel which separates the two main islands. Altogether the archipelago has a land area of only 122 square miles (316 km<sup>2</sup>). Since the islands have a total population of about 330,000 Malta has a population density of 2,700 per square mile (1,045 per km<sup>2</sup>). In spite of the intense crowding there is considerable open land away from the industrial conurbation which has grown around the harbour. There are more than 50 villages and towns which range from just under 1,000 to just over 15,000 inhabitants.

Malta's strategic location and its large sheltered deep-water harbours have influenced its history in no small measure. Until it became independent from Britain in 1964 it belonged to a succession of major Mediterranean powers. The Maltese themselves regard the visit of St. Paul following his shipwreck in A.D. 60 as their most important historical happening. They are intensely proud of the apostolic origin of their religion. The legacy of its colourful history is still very much evident: relative prosperity, a high degree of centralization, the power of the Roman Catholic church and the dynamic way in which its inhabitants adapt to new economic, political, and cultural influences. Malta's relative prosperity is very much a result of its traditional fortress economy. First the Knights of St. John and then Britain provided funds to construct and then man the island's massive fortifications and its many public buildings. Maltese were employed as masons, soldiers and sailors, bookkeepers and servants and, later, as skilled engineers and technicians to service the fortress. Times of international armed crises, such as the first and second World Wars, were boom periods. Thus independence in 1964 came to a country with a developed infrastructure and a modestly prosperous population which had acquired technical, social and cultural skills, including a knowledge of English, by servicing its military overloads. These were resources used to develop light manufacturing and tourism. Tourism in particular has become a major industry. Since independence the annual influx of tourist arrivals increased from 38,000 to a peak, in 1981, of 728,000. Since then it has declined to 480,000 in 1984.

### **Social space**

Nature and culture of the past and present have combined to form a dynamic continuity in Malta. This is no more evident than in the location and form of villages. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century Maltese villages and towns were located well away from the coast on inland hills or around the fortified Grand Harbour. Houses were tightly clustered around enormous cathedral-like churches. This

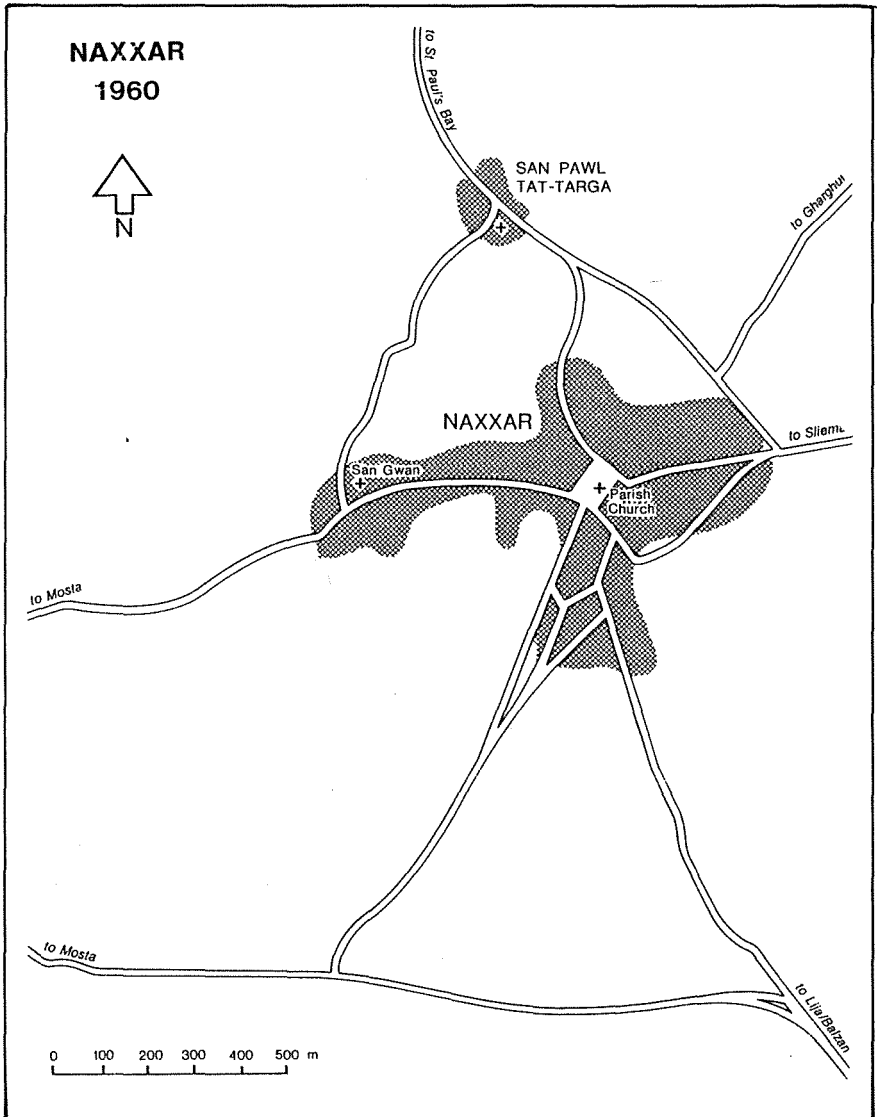


Figure 2. – Naxxar 1960 showing built-up area.

settlement pattern was common in much of the European Mediterranean. It dates from a period when inhabitants sought shelter from marauding pirates and Muslim corsairs and from the malaria that flourished in the coastal marshes.<sup>1</sup> Since the early nineteenth century the central Mediterranean has been pacified and seaborne dangers have ceased to threaten villagers. Consequently the coastal parishes were established during the past 150 years (Mellieħa 1841, Ġhajnsielem 1855, Sliema 1878, Marsaxlokk 1897, St. Paul's Bay 1905, Birżebbuġa 1913, Marsascalea 1949).

The parish church is very much the symbol of a village, for it is the hub around which community life has revolved for centuries. Every village is a parish; some towns are divided into two or more parishes. The *village (raħal)* as a place of residence has no official leader, owns no property, conducts no activities, and does not even have a clearly defined territory. But as part of a *parish (paroċċa)* it has a leader in its parish priest, a clearly demarcated territory, clear membership rules, and a busy programme of ritual activities which bind its members together. The territory of the parish is more extensive than the village and may include several hamlets. (There is no Maltese word for hamlet.) The parish owns valuable property, the most important of which is the parish church. This building is more than a central place of worship. It is usually located near the geographical centre of the village, which has grown up around it. Its gilded ceilings and silver altar fronts, its embroidered vestments, its damask tapestries, its ornate statues and precious votive offerings represent the parish's collective history and wealth amassed over centuries via the savings, work and bequest of generations. The saint to whom the church is dedicated is the patron of the parish and the symbol of the village. It is not surprising therefore that most of the important associations, shops and residences traditionally clustered in and around the square in front of the church or in the streets leading to it. The pattern of residence was thus concentric. It reflected the distribution of economic and political power. Those with the highest status tended to live nearest the church and those with the lowest status farthest away, in little alleys that backed on to open fields, or in rural hamlets. Residence in the village centre conferred prestige for, like elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the built-up village has been associated with the

1. Anton Blok, "South Italian agro-towns", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XI (1969), 121 – 35.

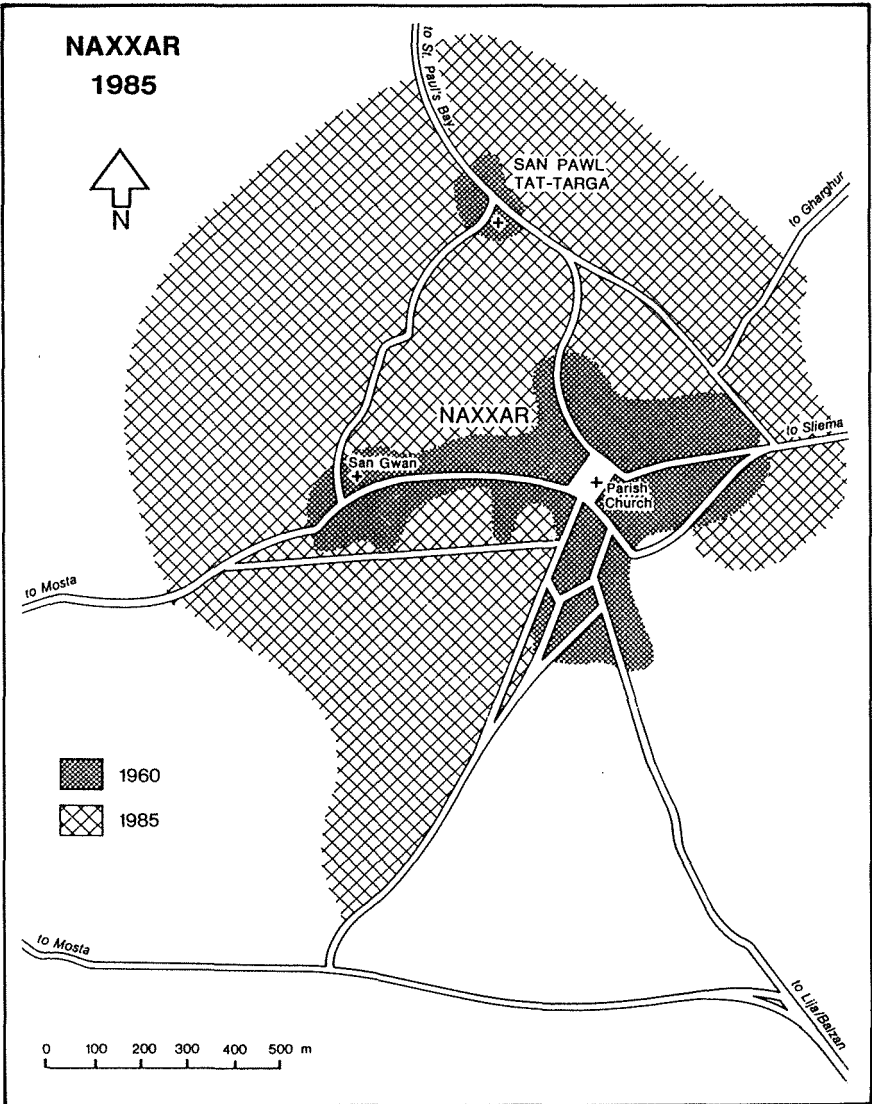


Figure 3. - Naxxar 1985 showing area built up since 1960.

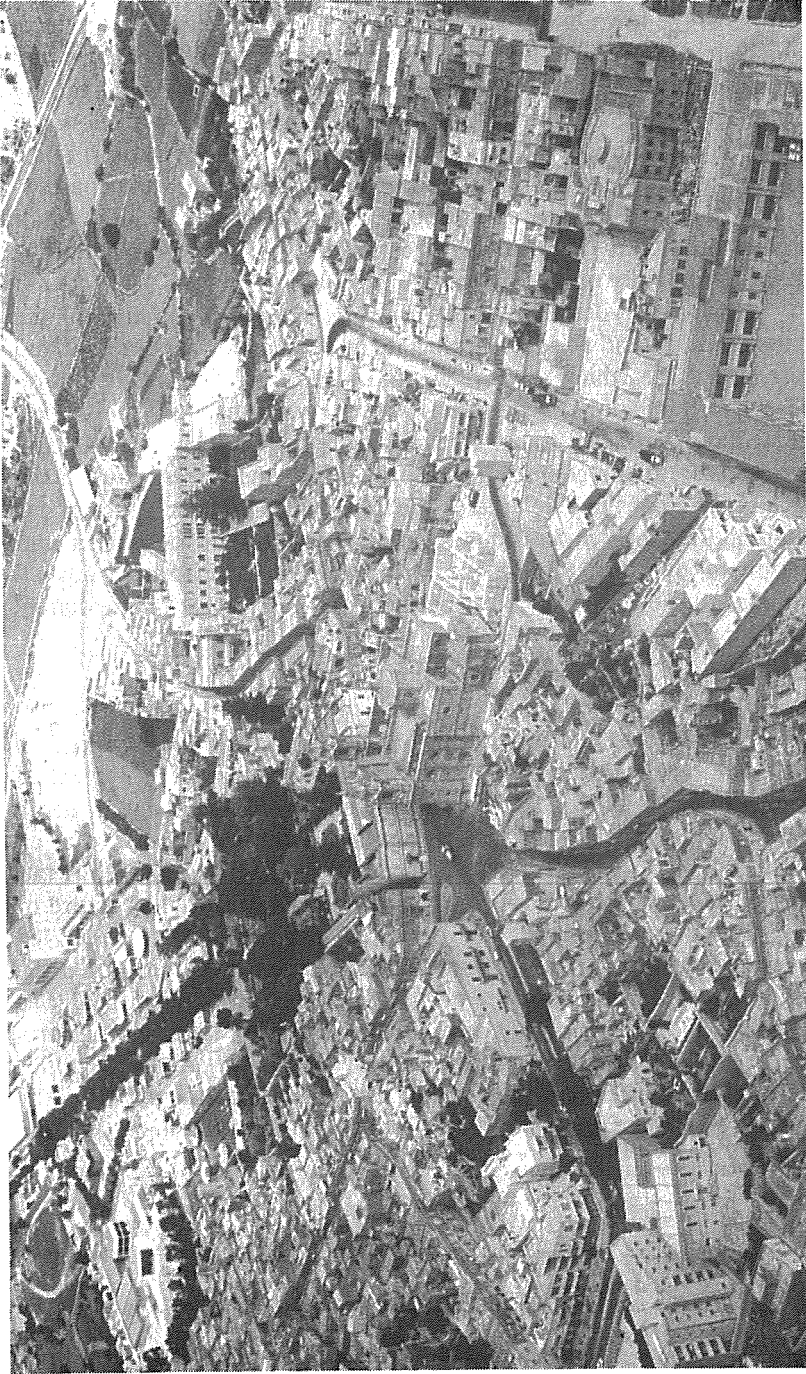
culture of the town, with 'civilization' .<sup>2</sup> The periphery of the village, which shaded off into the fields, was associated with the country and agricultural work, which in Malta, as in many other Mediterranean countries, had very low status, for it was associated with poverty, physically punishing work and cultural and social deprivation. Some of those who lived at the edge of the village or in the adjacent countryside were persons whose reputation had been destroyed by immoral or violent behaviour. Figuratively and physically they were outside the moral community of the village.<sup>3</sup>

A Maltese village was thus inward looking, focussing on the parish church and the intense social, political, economic, ritual and ceremonial life which takes place in and around the central square. The many religious processions which pass through the streets immediately adjacent to the central square helped to weave this core area closely to the church. These processions, as it were, linked the secular space of the elite area of the village to the sacred space of the church. Religious processions did not pass through the poorer and peripheral quarters, though the parish priest made efforts to link all families to the church by blessing them and their houses immediately following Easter.

### **Naxxar**

Naxxar, the ancient hilltop village (the parish was founded in 1436) on which this study focuses, was in many respects typical of Maltese villages. In 1961, when I first set foot in the village, it had a population of 5,000.<sup>4</sup> The village of Naxxar formed the centre of an extensive parish which in 1961 included three hamlets, San Pawl tat-Targa, Maghtab and Bidnija. The social and residential structure of the village was concentric. The village's five most important streets led into the spacious square in front of the church which constituted the social and cultural if not the geographical centre of the village (See Figure 2 and Plate 1). On the square, or no more than two minutes walk from it, were situated the house of the parish priest, the police station, the houses and premises of the notary and the chemist, the houses of four of the village's dozen or so priests. the palace of the

2. Sydel Silverman, *Three Bells of Civilization: The Life of an Italian Hilltown*, (New York, 1975).
3. Jeremy Boisevain, "The Maltese Islands" in *Face Values*, ed. Ann Sutherland (London 1978), 128.
4. Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*, London, 1965.



*Plate 1: Naxos 1977. At centre is Parish Square with Labour Avenue leading into it from the left.*



Marquis Scicluna and, adjacent to that, Scicluna's bank. Four of the town's butchers, three of its five wineshops, four of the six grocery shops, the village tailor, the two barbers, a silver smith and several household bazaars were located there. Moreover, all the important voluntary associations were housed in this circle. These included the Peace Band Club, the Victory Social Club, several parish lay associations, the football club and, last but not least, the Malta Labour Party and the Nationalist Party clubs.

The small chapel of St. John, one of the village's five chapels, located at the westward edge of the village, formed the focal point of the poorest neighbourhood. In 1961 two wineshops and a grocery were located there. Most residents in the San Ġwann neighbourhood were semi- or unskilled industrial or government labourers. Many farmers also lived there, and several commuted to their farm houses in Magħtab in the plain three miles northwest of the village, returning to their 'town houses' for weekends and feast days.

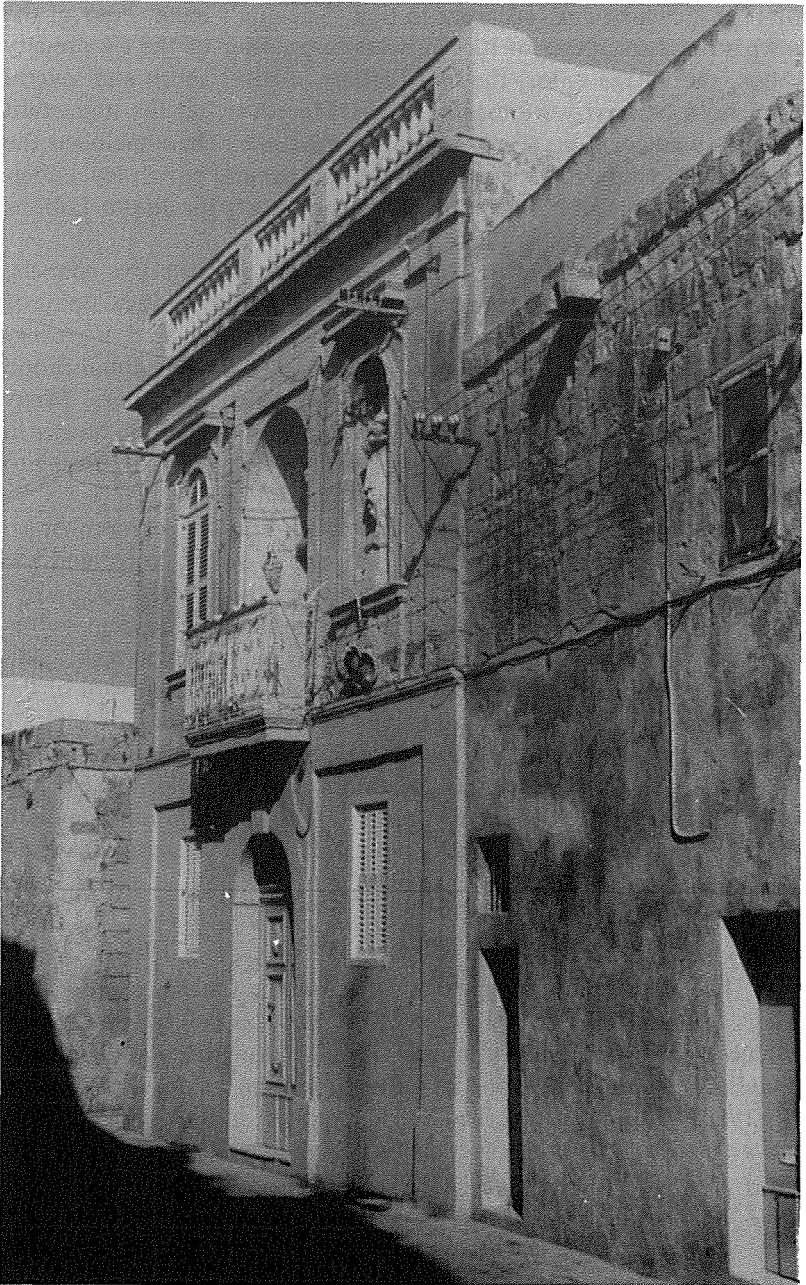
About half a mile north of the parish church, a dozen or so houses and villas clustered around an ancient watch tower and the chapel of San Pawl tat-Targa 'Saint Paul of the (geological) Fault'. St. Paul reputedly rested there after climbing the escarpment on his way to Mdina, the Island's capital, following his shipwreck.) San Pawl tat-Targa, located on the ridge overlooking the northwest of the island, is an elegant residential hamlet. Several members of Malta's nobility own houses there, as does the British High Commission.

To summarize then, Naxxar in 1961 was a large, relatively isolated village residentially and socially focussed inward on its soaring parish church. This concentric pattern, replicated in all Maltese villages in 1961, has changed markedly since then.

### Change

Three developments have taken place within the past twenty years which have radically affected the utilization of social space in Maltese villages: government programmes to build new roads and housing estates; rising prosperity; and an influx of foreign residents.<sup>5</sup> From the late 1950s until the present the government has continuously expanded the network of roads. New roads were laid across open country to

5. Boissevain, "A Causeway with a Gate: The Progress of Development in Malta", in *Perceptions of Development*, ed. Sandra Wallman, Cambridge, 1977; *id.*, "Tourism and Development in Malta", VIII (1977), 523 - 38.



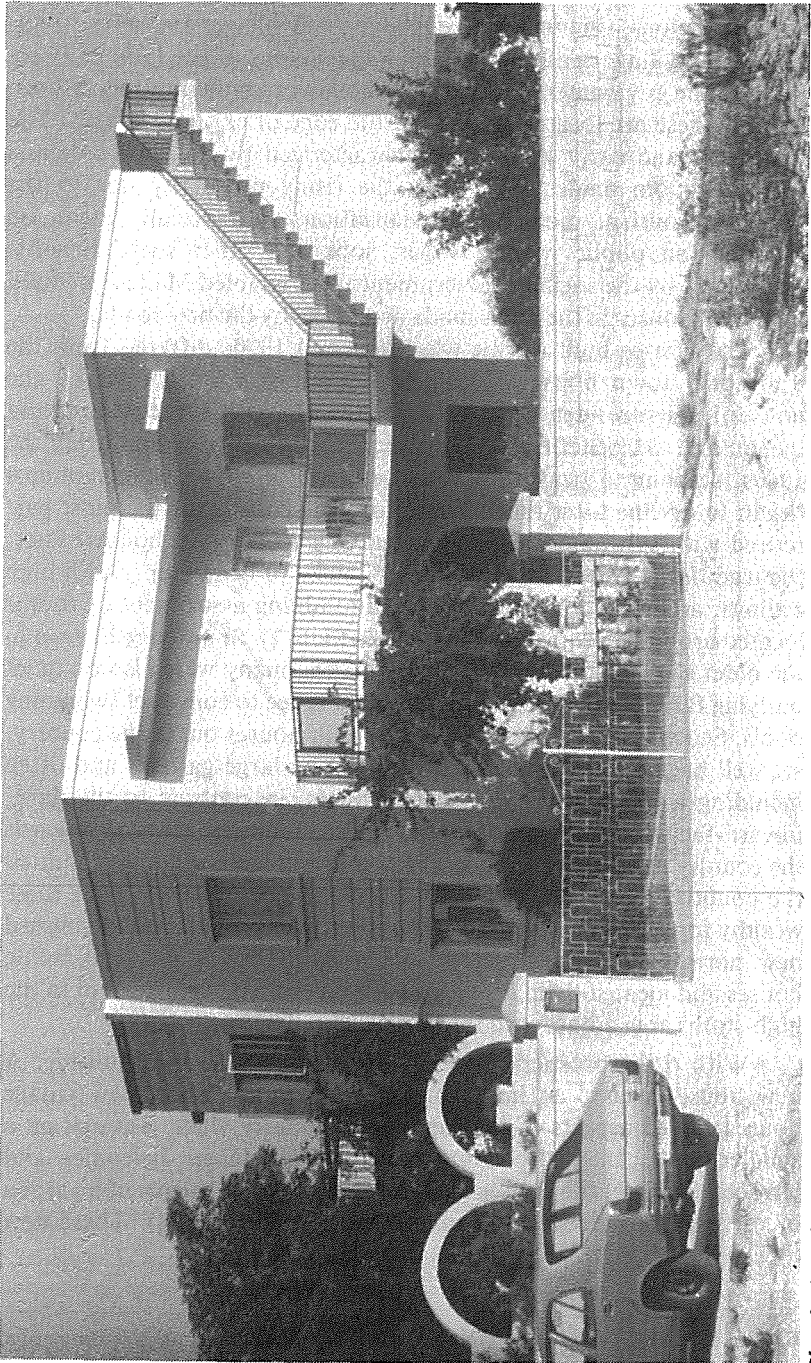
*Plate 2: Traditional sheer-fronted inward looking town house, St. Lucy Street, Naxxar. House on left has 18 doors and windows opening on to the interior courtyard.*

connect regions, ring roads were built around villages and access roads thrust into village centres. Following the victory of the Labour Party in 1971, the government began systematically to build housing estates. Usually these are located in areas at the edge of existing villages. The late 1960s and early 1970s were characterized by an unprecedented building boom made possible by the rising prosperity due to the growth of tourism, modest industrialization and, especially, increased spending on public works, wages, jobs and other social benefits introduced by the socialist government. This enabled Maltese to build their own houses in the areas made accessible by the new roads.

The houses built during the 1960s and 1970s differed from the traditional town houses. The new houses were influenced by the houses foreign residents had built for themselves. Attracted to Malta by sun and tax benefits, many foreigners settled in Malta during the 1960s, reaching a peak of 4,500 'settlers' in 1971. Their numbers began to decline after that.<sup>6</sup> These foreign settlers, for the most part retired with substantial capital, acquired two types of houses. First, the traditional, sheer-fronted, dark 'houses of character', with high ceilings, arches, wooden beams and a rambling assortment of rooms located around a central courtyard (See Plate 2). Some were located in the older sections of the towns and villages, many were also on quiet outlying farms, where there was sufficient space to construct swimming pools. Second, other foreign residents built houses out in the country, set well back from the road, surrounded by large gardens and often including a swimming pool. These houses, in contrast to the dark, inward-facing, traditional Maltese house, looked outward, towards the country. A series of terraces, balconies and large windows admitted the country views and, especially, sunlight (See Plate 3). Thus these wealthy foreign settlers introduced a new style of housing and established new norms. They constructed immensely-expensive outward-facing houses and located them in the low status countryside instead of in the high-status area adjacent to the parish churches.

With rising prosperity the Maltese sought improved housing. A new house became an important status symbol. These new village houses copied aspects of the sumptuous country villas. Though on a smaller scale, they also began to construct larger balconies and terraces. They set the houses back from the road by means of a garden or, at least, an alcove or a railed terrace (See Plate 4). These new

6. Loek Esmeijer, *Marginal Mediterraneans. Foreign Settlers in Malta* (Amsterdam, 1984), 26–7.



*Plate 3: A modern country villa with sun balcony and open surrounding gardens built near San Pawl tat-Targa circa 1970.*

houses were also located along the new avenues and roads well away from the traditional high-status residential zone adjacent to the parish church.

The utilization of space in Maltese villages and the social rhythm associated with it thus have changed dramatically in the past twenty years. These changes can be illustrated by developments in Naxxar.

### **Developments in Naxxar**

The developments in Naxxar were not only typical of events that took place in other Maltese villages. In many respects they also formed an example. Naxxar's hilltop location meant cooler summer breezes and panoramic views. These, together with its chic residential hamlet, San Pawl tat-Targa, attracted some of the first foreign residents to live in and build outside a village. Since Naxxar was only accessible via steep winding roads, it was also one of the first villages to receive a new access road. For prestige reasons, other villages demanded similar roads. Let us look at the steps in the building of post-war Naxxar.

The first post-war development took place around 1950, when new streets were laid out in the area immediately behind and to the west of the parish church. This was followed by the new access road, Labour Avenue, built by the Labour government in 1958, which connected the island's main traffic artery directly to the heart of the village, for it opened out onto the village square. Construction of Labour Avenue was in many respects a political act, for its access to the church square involved the destruction of a small chapel and the house of the father of the notary, a former Nationalist cabinet minister. When we came to the village in 1961 the only new residential area was immediately behind the church (to which the notary's father had moved). There were no houses along Labour Avenue (See Figure 2).

When we returned on holiday in 1966 Naxxarin were busy constructing smart new houses on the western side of Labour Avenue, building out from the village square. We visited friends who had just moved there. They had been our neighbours in the alley where we lived in 1961. They had sold their little alley house, which they shared with the husband's mother, to an English property company, which had then resold it at enormous profit to a retired English couple.

In 1974, when I again returned to the village briefly for research, considerable further changes had taken place. The most impressive was a new road from just below the parish square to the neighbouring village of Mosta. This new road, XXI September Avenue, had been built by the Nationalist government (1962–1971), and formally



*Plate 4: Town houses and apartments built along 21st of September Avenue, Naxxar, during the 1970s had larger balconies and were set back from the road by means of a sidewalk and small gardens or railed terraces.*

opened by the notary, who had again become a cabinet minister. It was named to commemorate Malta's Independence, achieved under the Nationalist government. I lived in one of the new flats built along the north side. More houses were under construction. Both sides of Labour Avenue had been built up and construction was still taking place farther down hill. Much of the building along the XXI September Avenue and in the newly-developing areas behind the church were being undertaken by a local contractor, in partnership with the notary. Many luxury villas had been built between the village and San Pawl tat-Targa, along the escarpment overlooking the northwest of the island. Many of these were built by foreigners, but wealthy Maltese increasingly constructed villas in the same area.

When we again lived in the village, in 1978, the countryside around San Pawl tat-Targa was filled with villas. XXI September Avenue was built up on both sides and government and private housing estates were under construction to the south of XXI September Avenue.

By 1985 the old village of Naxxar was connected to San Pawl tat-Targa by a continuous series of town houses and villas. The old core of the village had been surrounded by a periphery of expensive new houses. XXI September Avenue had become the commercial centre of the village. New hardware shops, chemists, boutiques, furniture shops provided shoppers, and their automobiles, with comfortable access to a range of modern consumer goods. Naxxar in 1985 was a very different place from the isolated hilltop village we first knew in 1961 (See Figure 3).

## Discussion

Like all Maltese villages during the past twenty years, Naxxar had become more heterogeneous, much of its centre had shifted to the periphery and the rhythm of life had altered perceptibly. These developments were partly influenced by the changes in the man-made environment which have been described.

First of all, and perhaps most obviously, Naxxar had lost much of the closed character it had twenty-five years before. Labour Avenue then had already eviscerated the village. What had once been a closed, intimate square had been opened to the outside, almost as though the living-room of a house had had one of its walls sliced off to expose the intimate events taking place there to the stares and winds of the outside world. Older villagers lamented this change to us in 1961. But the square then was still crowded.

By 1985 the village had become crowded with strangers. When we first lived in Naxxar, all non-Naxxar born were married to locals, though a few local entrepreneurs rented flats to several British military families. By 1985 some 2,500 newcomers with no roots in the village had moved in to occupy the modern new housing in the government estate and the commercial developments. The sense of community which had existed in 1961 between neighbours and fellow villagers (all of whom were at least distant relatives or friends of friends, bore village nicknames and lived in households of which at least one member was local) had altered perceptibly. Many neighbours were now strangers whose kinship and friendship links were with persons in other parishes.

The parish priest was concerned about the influx of foreigners which had swollen his parish. He took conscious steps to integrate the newcomers and the new residential areas, where many Naxxarin now also lived. In the late 1970s he re-routed some of the band marches preceding the annual *fešta* of the village's patron saint, the Birth of Our Lady (celebrated on 8 September), to pass through some of the new streets behind the church and, especially, the new residential estates south of XXI September Avenue. He also tried to tie this area more closely to the parish by holding an open air mass there before the *fešta*. He and his assistants of course bless the families and their houses annually following Easter.

In 1985 the parish church drew the new peripheral residents to hear mass on Saturday evening and Sunday morning. The parish square was then crowded with their parked cars and, after the mass, with people to-ing and fro-ing. The village square has continued to function as the central stage for the solemn pageantry of the Good Friday procession and the exuberance of the celebration of the parish's patron. These rituals also drew people in from the periphery, for Naxxar puts on a good show. The clergy have consciously developed this pageantry and the scale of these celebrations has been increasing. It is also through taking part in the weekly and seasonal cycle of religious rituals that newcomers can become participating members of the parish and hence of the village as a community. These rituals have helped them established new roots.<sup>7</sup>

7. Boissevain, "De groei van volksrituelen op Malta", in *Feest en ritueel in Europa. Antropologische essays*, ed. A. Koster, Y. Kuiper, J. Verrips, Amsterdam, 1983; *id.* "Ritual Escalation in Malta", in *Religion, Power and Protest in Local Communities The Northern Shore of the Mediterranean*, ed. E. R. Wolf, Berlin, New York, Amsterdam, 1984.



If in 1961 the residential and commercial focus was inward, on the main square, this was no longer so in 1985. Upwardly mobile villagers no longer lived or aspired to live on or near the square. They had moved to the periphery. Though the leading butcher shops, cafés and clubs were still located on the main square, as was the weekly market and the bank, a new commercial centre had grown up along XXI September Avenue. The shops that had sprouted up along XXI September Avenue were new to the village. They provided a range of goods previously available only from the large towns or the city of Valletta. Televisions, fridges, pets, wedding presents, jewellery, dresses, and the latest European newspapers could now be obtained in the village. This generated a new and very important source of wealth for many locals. This source is located outside the village's centre.

The rhythm of village life in 1985 had also changed. Apart from mass and *festa* traffic, the square was no longer crowded as it had been in 1961. Then, on summer evenings, it used to be filled with men sitting on the parvis and steps of the parish church. From there they could watch much of the social traffic that flowed across the square in and out of the cafés, clubs and parish associations. In 1985, many villagers lived too remote from the centre to be able to stroll to the square to meet friends.

Not just the activities in the square had changed. The streets at the centre of the town were also less populated. There were no longer as many people passing through them or sitting in front of their houses on summer evenings to catch the cool air. This change can partly be explained by the move out of the centre to the periphery. There were fewer people living in the village centre than twenty years ago. Moreover, many of the traditional "houses of character" in the centre were occupied by foreigners or wealthy young urban Maltese who were not accustomed to spending time on their doorsteps chatting to passersby or to each other. There were also other reasons why the centre of Naxxar seemed more deserted in 1985 than when we first lived there.

By 1985 every home had television. Located, as Malta is, in the windshadow of Sicily, the average Maltese had access not only to Maltese T.V. programmes, but also to a range of Italian channels. Television, in short, also kept men off the streets and out of the clubs and cafés, which twenty years ago were where they went to watch television.

A final factor that contributed to the change in the rhythm of the village was the tremendous increase in private transport. Virtually every village family in 1985 owned a car. People were thus able to

leave the village when they wished. They were no longer tied to the bus from the main square. This enabled people not only to leave when they wished, but, more important, to return later, for the last bus returned from Valletta just before half past ten. Those with cars could stay away longer. Many, especially in the summer, remained until after midnight by the seaside to escape the stifling heat that builds up in the village. Many Naxxarin had also bought seaside houses in or near St. Paul's Bay. This also drew them away from the village on summer evenings and weekends.

To summarize then, the changing settlement pattern in Maltese villages, epitomized by the developments in Naxxar, reflected increasing outside involvement. As more people worked and married outside the parish, as more strangers moved into the village retaining linkages elsewhere, as public and private transportation became more readily available, as the grip of television on leisure time grew, people were less dependent upon neighbours for work and leisure. They looked increasingly outward, beyond the parish limits. The shift from a village-centred to a village-outward orientation was reflected in the way people had re-oriented their social space. The community of interest and activity was no longer primarily the village. The structure and location of the houses that had been built in the last twenty years mirrored this. They no longer were exclusively inward looking, and no longer faced the parish church.

### **Conclusion**

The orientation of residential space in Malta has changed quite radically. The village periphery, once socially marginal, and beyond that, the open country, once stigmatized, have become sought-after residential areas. A ring of villas and housing estates have encapsulated the old periphery, which elite couples seeking traditional houses have in part gentrified. The outer walls of houses, once sheer and fortress-like, have been pierced by numerous apertures. The traditional periphery has lost its ambivalent, liminal character. Since the open country has been populated by wealthy Maltese and foreigners, and is no longer associated with poverty and deprivation, since the few remaining full time farmers are regarded benignly as living folklore, it no longer threatens. Consequently, the village's new periphery is no longer an area of sharp transition between the dangerous, uncouth countryside and the high status, urbane centre of the village. These changes have affected both the style and location of residence and the rhythm of village life.

These developments bear a strong structural resemblance to the

way in which the Maltese coast lost its ambivalent, liminal status during the nineteenth century, following the pacification of the hitherto dangerous sea by the Royal Navy.

During the past 150 years an inversion has taken place that has affected the traditional inward orientation of residential space in Malta. The direction of change has largely been from outside to inside. First the sea was pacified, then, related to that, the countryside. Shoreline, countryside and village periphery, social thresholds between unknown – thus dangerous – areas, and known protected and familiar areas, have lost their role as zones of transition.<sup>8</sup> Thus they became less ambivalent, more permeable. Just as villages spread along the coast, new settlements were built in peripheral areas and the walls of houses were pierced by larger windows and balconies.

Our conclusion is then that the concentric pattern or inward orientation of residential space in Malta was a function of the interplay between physical and political forces. As danger from without decreased as a result of political developments, various thresholds lost their significance as transitional zones. The inward orientation of residential space became divorced from practical utility. The inversion of social space in Malta reflects this.

8. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé, Chicago, 1960.