

Interview transcript for AnthonyP.

Project Title: *Defying Convention: Devising New Approaches to Heritage Values in Valletta, Malta.*

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(First/Second Spot) Lower Barrakka Gardens. Ball monument)

Where have we started from?

Okay this is the lower Barrakka in Valletta, and again for me it's a mix of personal ideas and professional.

That you chose this spot?

Yes, the reasons why I chose the Lower Barrakka, if you want to start, we can...as we go in the first footage that we should look at is the Ball Monument, the memorial.

Any particular reason for that?

Well personally I like neo-classicism a lot, its cleaner than Baroque, and in Malta we are used to, we are seated in Baroque, no? And this is, I think the first relationship between early British period cultural...hmm...I don't know is it imposition or interaction with Maltese culture.

So, this neo-classical design is a new feature of Valletta?

There is a reason why. The Maltese at the time were coming out of the blockade, two years of blockade with the French being locked in here in Valletta and the British surrounding the islands basically on the sea and in the hinterlands. So the Maltese wanted to build a sort thank you memorial to Ball, who was governor of the island at the time. And what happens then is, first there is Giorgio Pullicino, who apparently tried to make some design, they built a monument and then shortly afterwards, I would say after 1813, perhaps 1815, George Whitmore.

Do we know what the original monument looked like?

No, but this is basically a royal engineer, coming here with full textbooks.

Of design standards?

Of a British perspective on Neo-Classicism.

Did Neo-Classicism exist in Malta before the British arrived?

Some of it, you get traces of it in... some church architecture, but not a lot.

We still clinging to what?

To the Baroque, will still build baroque today. If you at the hideous church of St Venera for instance or...that's the most recent baroque.

What period is that church?

It's being built, its being used, but if you look at the back of it, its just a huge rectangle with no features, nothing. It's just the façade....

That is given primacy?

Yes.

Anyway, back to the story. Whitmore was the royal engineer and he said "no no we use our brand of neo-classicism not the continental one" because Pullicino studied in Rome, so his idea of the neo-classical was more Italianate. He came here, he never worked as an architect, and so the British wanted to redo the monument, so Whitmore redesigned the monument, he designed Bigbi, and this block over here (Points at social housing block) was meant to be the Anglican Cathedral. This is where it was supposed to be. The idea is that when you come through the opening (harbour) without the breakwater, you come into a maritime city enclave which consisted of Valletta and the Three Cities. And Whitmore's idea was to leave a Neo-Classical, Georgian stamp on the existing Maltese Baroque. The idea was that once you come in, you come up through Valletta's main gate, which today is called Victoria Gate, and as you come up you see the Cathedral in front of you. So, you come in your ship or whatever, you see neo-classical stuff and yes....

So, it is trying shape the city in an architectural language that was tied to Empire? Of the time yes. This building though is post-war, right?

This used to be the slave prison during the Knights, so it was already a bit of a mess.

Is this 70s though?

Slightly earlier, this is the war damage, the whole process of that time.

So, for me this is this interaction, this unusual interaction which I think you only find this in Corfu. Because that is where Whitmore then worked. He used to work there, they used to come and go.

I guess they had a similar colonial relationship.

They were, the British took the Ionian Island and they turned it into the United States of the Ionian Islands and it remained a British protectorate up to well after the Greek War of Independence. There were 7 islands and Governor Maitland used to commute, with George Whitmore, they built wonderful palace, using the same idiom, the same forms. If you look at that palace (in Corfu) and you compare it to Bigbi there are many, many similarities. And basically, their idea was to set up this palace, and that is where the Order of St. Michael and St. George was established.

So, you see this place a microcosm of Maltese history, in the physical sense?

It's really strange because, then craftsmanship is Maltese, and you see a stark difference between the finesse of the Maltese craftsmanship and what you see in the buildings of the Knights of St John. This is more refined stonework, in general terms. And these Maltese craftsmen also worked in Corfu, so they were the first people to unknowingly introduce neo-classical architecture in Greece, and then the Austrians took over and all this stuff. But basically my story here is that these (the monuments) were planted here on top of the fortifications because this is where the beautiful views are. The same for the British cemeteries on the other side of Valletta. The cemeteries are on that side, industry is on this side, but this is where you make your first impression on incoming vessels.

Is this garden the same age as Upper Barrakka?

They are more or less the same age.

I guess the first place you have chosen is something that attracts/chimes with the way you see the city, as a historical artifact and how it has changed or been manipulated.

Yes. And it's always this problem of how to deal with contemporary architecture and trying desperate to imagine it as the future heritage of this city. Then I will show some...

(Moving to viewing area overlooking Bell Monument)

So, every time I come here – sometimes I come here for a quick walk.

So you have a relationship with the place that is more personal

It's professional as well, it's a lot of things. I wrote a little monograph on George Whitmore and a paper on this guy as well so..

(Viewing area)

Here again we lose sight of, strangely we lose sight of the maritime context of Valletta and the Three Cities, for me it's one city, but unfortunately, we only refer to Valletta as "The City" mostly because it is the capital, and this juxtaposition has an old history. When the Knights finally moved out of Birgu to come and settle here, that is when it all started. And yet the harbour area was the heart of industry of commerce of trade of banking, literally it was in this area here. So, the idea was like, in Venice, once you come into the harbour, then you are there. And this is where you start your voyage, your business....it's still like that today. The technology has changed, but the not the principal essence of the city, of the harbour area. That is one reason why we are trying to put the other fortifications on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Because they form part of one system?

Yes, they are one philosophy, one objective. From I would say after 1565, that was the plan, that was the entire plan. And these areas still shape a lot of our politics today, what happens today. Most of it still happens here in this area. I think it is a pity that we don't value – the term is valorise- the setting itself. As perhaps other countries do.

Do you think it's too narrowly focused, like by the UNESCO listing criteria for example? Or is it a reflection on Maltese heritage outlooks? Is this a Maltese problem or is it an international one?

This is a Maltese problem, its different. There is a gap between what Maltese think is heritage and culture and the materiality of Cultural heritage itself. On the one hand Maltese are in general detached from, and they think that all this is good for tourism, but not necessarily for them. So, they give up on certain qualities of life because they think this is just a product which is there to attract tourism and that is where the money is made. This is putting it crudely. But there is this 'distacco' (disconnection) this.... they are divorced, Maltese seem to be divorced from their cultural setting and that creates a vacuum. And once there is a vacuum somebody will fill the vacuum. And from experience I can tell you that you don't need a lot of people – developers, commercial interests – you a lot of them to make drastic changes in a vacuum.

I guess especially if there is no resistance.

I mean should there be resistance, you know what I mean, should there be? This is the way they think. Whereas, I always think of this place as historic fabric which can actually be lived in – it has its own aesthetic – the place is beautiful in its own right. There are, believe it or not, at Bigbi alone, you can see at least three layers of architecture. There is the original Villa, 'Ta Bicci'. Then you have the 1829 building by George Whitmore, and then on the very edge there are the buildings which went up in 1901.

The extensions on the side?

Yes, when you look at them you see modernity itself, you see? So the middle Villa, that is Bigbi, then George Whitmore and then....

So, the central villa is original?

A bit modified obviously because of...

1901 is Queen Victorian's death, her passing, so when you look at it, it's happening here as well.

So where are we heading next?

I wanted to show you my old school, St Albert the Great College. I think here we have two things? Or one Place?

I would say its multiple, there is the monument and there is the setting right? This garden has featured 3 times in 11 interviews, for different reasons.

Ab ok. Excellent.

(Exiting Gardens)

You can switch it off right?

Yep, but I leave the camera running, to capture the walk too.

(Walking up St Christopher's)

So, you have a personal connection to Valletta in that you went to school here, not only have you worked here professionally for many years.

Yes, I did my typewriting lessons in this very building (**Social housing block**)

Not to date you or anything (laughs).

That's over 40 years ago, well over 40 years ago.

So what street are we in now?

This is St Christopher. My office was here, my last office was here.

Just noticed this development.

It's a beautiful house, its being redone.

Do you have any idea what it might be turned into? I think it's a residence, but I am not sure.

Do you see the plaque? Shoot it.

What does it say?

No, he is a different knight – look it up, it's interesting.

What is the appeal of the city to you? Especially as a heritage professional? Is that a correct way of describing you?

That's a bit complex, I guess.

You work in the city, right? So, you have a daily commute an experience of the city in the same way other people do, or is it different?

Well, it's very difficult to explain. I look at it differently. It's...for me it's.... it's an aesthetic which we should have made sure to preserve in other places on the island.

(Walking off St Christophers – up Republic Street to St Georges Square)

And in Valletta this has been preserved by a function of its abandonment or through direct action?

Some of us yes. There have always been a bunch of professionals who ultimately influenced government to allocate budgets, restoration budgets and that sort of thing. We did a lot of urban archaeology here as well. A lot of restoration when into...still a lot to be done. It's always a struggle to....

Valletta was abandoned for a while and there was an inability to bulldozer over a lot of Valletta – do you think this was a result of its UNESCO World Heritage status?

No, it wasn't popular, people wanted big houses. There weren't any schemes to put in lifts at the time. Which is still a consideration but less so.

(St George's Square)

So I think it's all about values, it's how....

(Main Guard)

So that is another piece of work by George Whitmore. And he plonked the Doric columns into a Knight's period building, which is the Main Guard.

Doric columns with the imperial coat of arms?

Yes, of British. Probably that is made by the Darmanin family.

You have this arrangement in Gibraltar as well. So, the governor would rule everything from here, all the civil service was in here, you would have the guards here.

It was converted into a Main Guard?

Yes.

And always the Doric, the order that's....

(Off Square onto Old Theatre Street)

So, we are on a street now which embodies Valletta as it's become.

*As it has become. As a kid I used to.... we used to have our scout meeting at school, and this was in the 70s before the British forces left. So, I remember these streets were no go (**Strait Street**)*

What year are we talking, late 60s?

From 1971-78. The military people used to park their vans here across this road, to trap sailors and the military people, the drunks. Throw them in the van and lock them up.

What sort of time was that?

Any time of the day.

It was still quite a "scene" then.

Yes, and then suddenly it died. I mean for us teenagers; it was strange and....

Was there a sense of excitement or was it alien?

It was alien and it was all difficult to grasp and understand why. And now everything has become like open street bar.

(Approaching crossroads of Old Theatre Street and Old Bakery Street)

This is my old school.

Same building exactly?

Yes.

How long were you there for, was it secondary school?

5 Years.

Now the reason I got you here, it's because, ok this is where I learned stuff. I wasn't into history at the time, but also.... then I came to understand that we had golden opportunities to have good reconstructions, but we went for a modernist, brutal....

This is from the early 60s?

Ok so this from war damage, you war damage on this side. I remember that building being built (points to social housing block further down Old Bakery Str.) That was turned into social housing.

I got into my heritage awareness from home. I was born in Siggiewi and lived there.

Was Siggiewi very rural at the time?

Of course. Going into catacombs near Mnajdra, running around in Mnajdra (Neolithic Megalithic complex).

It's a side of Malta that does not exist anymore, not even Siggiewi.

No, not anymore. I have a feeling that sort of rubbed off onto me, and without knowing, you live in an environment, both "green" and cultural.

I understand you mean because I grew up in a rural part of Malta and as a child, I was very upset by the development that started encroaching.

I think there was a lot of ignorance at the time, in my opinion, at academic levels. Because the idea at the time was to build something new which could be read as being different from the past, it had to be read as something new. But that in my opinion was incorrect, because at the time there was quite a bit of reconstruction in Europe, across Europe, and some places were beautifully redone. Replicas, good pastiche, but not this.

So, this is a building that has two emotions for you, one is memories of childhood, but also I take it you don't like these modernist intrusions.

No, I think you could still have a school here, but with a different aesthetic. Today we push the idea of the Baroque and the Baroque city, and we want Baroque festivals and whatever. But at the time we did not want that, somebody wanted to make a personal statement by building this. So again, for me it's personal and later it becomes professional.

So, one informs the other?

Yep, yep.

It still operates as a school though, and as one of my interviewees pointed out it has a roof top football pitch. So, for you there is a level of acceptable intrusion on the city but they should be bound by certain aesthetic constraints?

Yes, because really people want, deep down, beautiful places, but when you plonk something which is ugly on a beautiful setting.

Would you be ok with something which was modern but also beautiful?

You have to see the design.

Is it something you would be open to, it's not that something has to look like it's from the 16th century?

Well, there are two ways of looking at that. One is to say, ok let me see what the design is going to be. If it's acceptable, the test of that modern design is how will it age, how will Renzo Piano age? You know, within another 50 years or so. The other perspective is to treat it in the same way as you would treat a painting and you would create an aesthetic which is more in line with the scale and the beauty of the city.

Contextual restoration in other words?

Yes

I don't notice this building, and I live here, and I ask myself, why does it not bother me as much? And I think it is because a lot of this sort of aesthetic appears all over Malta, in towns and small villages, and perhaps I have become desensitized to it, as I feel that in some contexts it works. But as you point out, when you compare it to the other buildings it is very noticeable.

And you have the General workers Union (building) that's a modern building, it replaced one of the Auberges. You have the Embassy Complex, the Bank of Valletta.

The Law Courts as well

The Law courts, which is a bit of a mess. They try hard to design a Neo-classical courthouse, and I think it does not work, the scale is not right. For me a place, part of it is the aesthetic, if the aesthetic is not correct, if it's ugly, if it jars, if you have jarring. That hurts my perspective of how to look at the place.

The idea of perspective is interesting, because of the scale of change – looking from a building to changes to shopfronts and the street level.

Yes, for instance, the windows (of the school) are not aligned to the neighbouring buildings. So if that one has like French windows, the original French windows, these are just easy squares. Then eventually these lines are taken over by ACad (AutoCad Software) and all this modern stuff, which pushes you to use lines and..

We have time for one last conversation, where are we headed too?

(Continue down Old Theatre Street)

It's interesting that we discussed that modern building and now we have the newly restored theatre where the Baroque Festival happens.

Yes, yes. We had a huge argument here on whether to build the columns or not. And the actual plans, the original plans were inconclusive as to what was happening in the façade. So, this is now redone recently.

So, is this façade somewhat imagined?

Not exactly. It's a very intelligent pastiche, based on original plans and facades drawn. But we never know whether they were actually executed. So we had an archaeological dig to try to find the base of the columns and anyway. It's a good compromise.

The problem is you mustn't fossilize.

Is the city fossilized? Or is it the perception of the city is fossilized – some people might perceive the city as one patina, one phase.

No but I think, I think major problem could be the heritage people themselves because....

(Stop outside cathedral)

By the way I saw this being built as a kid, from school in the 70s.

..

(Heading towards St Paul's buildings)

For some reason I like this corridor, this is what I want to show you....

This is also a fairly recent building.

It's British period. It's a few years after Queen Victoria dies, a few years after the modernist buildings at Bighi were built and they are being used as a hospital and this is it, it's a beautiful... I like this, sometimes when I come here and shoot photographs of the perspective. It's so well designed, again this is one example of how good design finds its place.

So why is this successful and the college isn't? The reason is because here, the architect went into details, so it's all about detailing. Why? Because when you look at the scale of typical windows, balconies in Valletta they have particular sizes. So, you should design to replicate that rather than being bold and want to make a statement.

So, it's a sense of aesthetic harmony, all though different in the details it is still harmonious.

So, what is it with modern architects who want to leave an imprint on something which is beautiful?

Do you know if when the college was designed if there was an approval process?

There would have been a sort of equivalent the planning authority, but I think it's all this...

Do you know if there was a reaction to the building at the time?

No I think they just....

Do you think that that reflects attitudes post-war – when people needed buildings and services?

No, no, Warsaw was rebuilt, a lot of European cities were rebuilt in a beautiful way. And they had a far... on a much, much, much larger scale of problems than we had. So, it's no excuse. And it says a lot about the society we live in. I believe that ugly

– I want to be careful – ugly people, ugly communities create ugly places. So its evening more important for architects to design beautiful places, because psychologically a beautiful place would help raise a beautiful community.

I guess you mean having a social conscious when making alterations within the context of a city that has the added limitations.

And today we have all this planning philosophy, planning ideas and sometimes I look around me and it is not happening, it is not really happening. If you look at the policy statements in our planning laws, they are basically to contain as much as possible the land grab, and to rebuild what has already been built.

Rather than using up new land, and we both know that's not the case.

That is not the case, but is also say also, that if there are historic centres outside.... Remember parallel to the building of Baroque Valletta there is the building of Baroque villages. Those are being pressured into demolishing, losing their streetscapes their aesthetic.

I would think they are under more pressure; they do not have WHS to protect them.

Exactly. I am now, after all these years thoroughly convinced that a lot bad decisions have been made and are still being made, because certain individuals cannot be controlled. And there is a certain sense of entitlement here, “we can do whatever we want” and you can always talk to the right people and use the right networks...but at the end, some individuals will gain but in general we will all lose.

I guess this is why we might need heritage professionals that are able to engage wth all of these very thorny subjects.

Not only. You also need planners that actually believe in cultural heritage and culture, not just cultural heritage. You need architects who actually believe cultural heritage AND culture. You architectural courses here as in Italy which are really...they start off in a city like this to understand the problem of the city, its beauty, its social problems and how you can tackle these issues. After all communities here are entitled to live in a beautiful place as well, why not? And yet, places like Valletta initially – turn of the century and after the war as well – they turned into little ghettos and internal villages.

Has anything been written about that?

No, but you can understand the zoning, no? The Mandraggio; here, the 'Baveria' down there.... they are like different villages. You have St. Pauls Street, which is another place all together, and this is how it is. And now.... there was a mass exodus of people leaving Valletta to live in places like Sliema, Birkirkara, Balzan after the war. So again, there was a de-gentrification and today that is being replaced, ironically, by a different sort of gentrification.

A commercially led one.

Exactly, exactly.

(Time up)

If you think it is useful to have another place...God I love this place (St Paul's Building)

It's just...it reminds me of the "Stoa of Attalos" the reconstructed Stoa in Athens. That has this sort of perspective, this is really something.

A lot of flats in each block!

A lot of stairs! Remember these were built at a time when places like New York were being built – but there they started investing in elevators, here it's all steps.