

DESIGNING BEYOND THE VISUAL

ANN DINGLI INTERVIEWS
VALENTINO ARCHITECTS, AN
EMERGING MALTESE ARCHITECTURE
PRACTICE THAT IS WINNING
AWARDS AND CARVING OUT AN
ELEGANTLY MEASURED APPROACH
TO CREATING ENDURING
ARCHITECTURE ON THE MALTESE
ISLANDS.

Photography by Joanna Demarco



“

he whole island will be obliterated by buildings. And this will take very little time”, said scores of social media warriors, as saga after saga of local development travesties blotted their news feeds. Or, projected the architectural critic over 50 years ago in a special edition of the *Architectural Review*. By now, we’ve all been more or less reminded of Quentin Hughes’ assessment and it has become wildly convenient to quote accepted authorities for the purpose of criticising collectively mourned problems. But the wanton bootlegging of their prophetic wisdom doesn’t make it any less relevant and many people in Malta believe that we are standing not at the precipice, but in the boiling hot centre of what Hughes once predicted would happen. ▶

◀ But meanwhile, amidst the raging – and largely legitimate – complaints, there are a few people trying to shine a light on what is good and what can get better. Enter Valentino Architects, a young practice that is quietly carving out a design approach based on the belief that Malta needs more than buildings that cut a good commercial figure. They were recently awarded the *Premju Emanuele Luigi Galizia* by the Chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers of Malta (*Kamra tal-Periti*) for best interior project, and emerging architect; accolades they equate with recognition from their peers within the architectural community, and a mark that their practice has established itself seriously within that very community.

Speaking at the presentation, Professor Richard England – who, after Malta became independent created a style of architecture that helped define the national identity of the Islands – said of the award: “This is exactly what Malta needs at this particular moment. Architecture seems to have lost its spirit and degenerated into what I term ‘construction’”. His own generation of architects is well-versed on the dangers of hyper-development as a result of a swift economic upturn and the subsequent boom in building. It has already happened – in the 1980s, which was when people first started waving their fists and quoting Hughes. We seem to be back there again: at a loss as to what comes next or what might be the solution; scrambling to understand if we can fix what has gone wrong or whether it’s now too late.

Peter and Sandro Valentino’s evaluation of the situation is more calm than cross, more careful and less reactionary than might be expected of two young designers who – along with their fellow *Premju Emanuele Luigi Galizia* winners – have been described by Professor England as ‘the future of Malta’.

When asked how they negotiate their own viability in a building boom landscape, their answer is that it’s all about playing the long game. “The beauty – and challenge – of architecture is that your work is around for many years,” they say, “creating the backdrop for different encounters in life. We operate on the notion that building good work is a long-term investment in our studio’s sustainability, because when the building boom is over, who will remain afloat?”

So far, Valentino Architects’ work has mainly been in the form of small to medium-sized domestic and commercial projects that are characterised visually by elegant economy – of scale, colour and material. Their interiors befit the style of the contemporary Mediterranean professional that has not yet even been discovered. Their buildings resist stereotypical solutions to planning projects and, instead, return to the idea of working with the Islands’ unique temperature,

landscape and size. They are also working to secure work abroad in order to broaden their experience. “International work is the next step in our studio’s development, be it through architectural competitions and/or commissions. We are currently working for a local client on the design of a hairdressing salon that will be situated in a prestigious hotel in Budapest, which we are quite excited about.”

Despite the attractiveness of the studio’s architecture, theirs is an approach which they describe as ‘going beyond the visual’. “We shouldn’t be talking about a specific aesthetic when assessing quality in architecture. Quality architecture seeks to offer solutions to problems, to create relationships between natural and man-made, to work within its context, to be inherently sustainable, and so on. It is these ‘hidden’ aspects which truly deliver quality.”

So, is looking further than skin-deep the answer to Malta’s seemingly out of control construction scenario? Valentino Architects would bank on it. But they also insist on maintaining a level of perspective amidst the apparent construction panic. “If you look back at the last 40 years [in Malta], there has consistently been an equal number of good and bad projects,” they assert. “The situation is no different today. What is different is the density of the built environment, so every mistake – and triumph – is highly pronounced. Malta needs to realise that the policies being implemented now will shape the built environment we live in for many years to come and this places a big responsibility on the architectural community and on society at large. But we must be careful not to only point fingers at planning policies.

“One very rarely receives an architectural commission to build beautifully for the joy of building beautifully, but rather, we work in a culture of ‘I will only invest in x, if I get x + y in return’. This is not necessarily bad at every level, because projects do need to make financial sense. But when such a large part of the economy is rooted in construction then the repercussions are clear. The Taj Mahal would not have been so beautiful if the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan had requested three quotations and decided on the lowest. In an economy as

bustling as ours, where have these projects gone?”

Without entirely realising it, Valentino Architects have answered their own question in the form of their built portfolio. Their answer – within this supposed apocalyptic context – is to build buildings that confidently look beyond it: to design buildings that look good and perform well without there being an overt demand for them to do so. When asked to describe Malta’s current architectural wellbeing, they say: “It’s on a knife’s edge” – that it could go either way. But if their long game maintains its stylish stamina, they may well tip the scales in the right direction. ■

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Photo by Alex Altard



SYMMETRICAL AND SLEEK

DESIGN NOTES BY VALENTINO ARCHITECTS FROM THEIR WORK
ON CASA ELLUL'S SUITE NINE AND RISETTE.

View of the suite from the WC. A black slate wash hand basin is shared between the WC and the wet room behind the dividing mirror. Mirror was also used on the ceilings to heighten the feeling of space. *Photo by David Zammit*



A timber panelled wall on a black slate stepped plinth conceals three identical doors – one which leads to the suite’s entrance, one to the WC, and one to the wet room – designed to add an element of discovery to the end user’s experience of the suite. The dark spaces behind the panelling were designed to contrast with the bright bedroom. *Photo by David Zammit*



The slate clad wet room, positioned on the hotel’s façade. The use of mirror on the walls and ceiling were designed to heighten the feeling of space. *Photo by David Zammit*

Walletta boutique hotel Casa Ellul was originally designed in 2014 by Chris Briffa Architects. More recently, Valentino Architects was tasked to design an extension to the hotel, in the form of a new hotel suite as to organise the hotel’s ground floor layout to accommodate a restaurant; the elegant Risetta. Inspired by the work that was already present, Valentino Architects reintegrated the design focusing on symmetry, contrasting colours and space. ▶

Bianco Carrara floor and extended headboard in Suite Nine – dark green curtains were chosen to complement the dark red Persian rug beneath the custom made bed by *camilleriparismode*. *Photo by Alex Attard*





The ground floor annex to Casa Ellul, designed to mirror the space previously occupied by the hotel's reception across the hall. A golden upholstered bench with a planter behind was designed to contrast with the dark, formal space. *Photo by Alex Attard*



Narrow beam spotlights provide lighting which is focused on the Bianco Carrara table tops, making the food the focal point of the dining experience. *Photo by Alex Attard*



View of one half of Risetite from the entrance hall, characterized by the dark timber panelled walls which mirror the design of Casa Ellul's original reception across the hall – now re-purposed as the other half of Risetite, and by the iconic Gebruder Thonet Vienna bentwood chairs. *Photo by Alex Attard*

SUPPLIERS

Halmann Vella was the main contractor of the Suite Nine and Risetite project. The joinery works were contracted to **S.A.W. Ltd**, whilst **camilleriparismode** carried out the fabrics work.