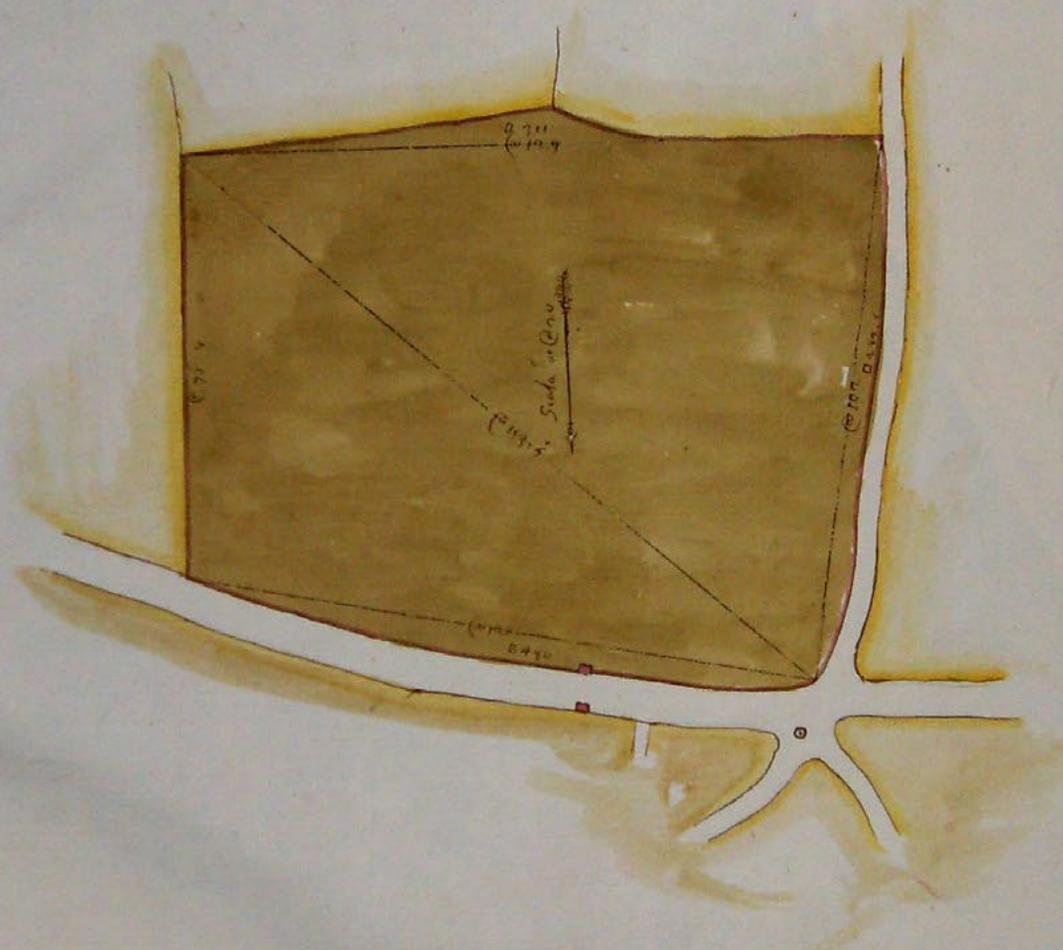


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THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOMESTIC SPACE IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS FROM THE LATE MIDDLE AGES TO THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



George A. Said-Zammit



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a person's level of material wealth and social status. The building regulations of Valletta discussed in the previous chapter (see **The phase 1565-1798** above) are a clear example of this notion. The size, the building quality and architectural style as well as the dwelling's location were all crucial indicators of class and material wealth. The interior of the urban elite houses was organized in such a way so as to separate the owners from their servants or slaves. Distinction of social classes was expressed, therefore, not only between the houses, but often within them too (see **The relationship between dwelling and class** in Chapter 9 below).

Outside the urban centres, the villages continued to expand, all at their own pace, showing a general trend towards an improved standard of living. During this period the proto-urban villages in particular became more market oriented and were inhabited by peasant families and the rural elite. The village centre, generally dominated by a sumptuous parish church, was usually the area where the local doctor, the parish priest and other members of the clergy, businessmen, skilled craftsmen and entrepreneurial farmers lived. It was also here where some of the urban elite established their second residence. The evidence shows that more primitive dwellings declined, while the number of peasant families occupying two-storey farmhouses increased. Similar to changes occurring in other parts of Europe (Catling 2013: 15-19), even within the local rural community of this period there were different levels of material wealth. The emulation of urban *palazzi* and aspects of town life by the rural elite from the 17th century onwards suggests that, in the proto-urban settlements, village and town life began to merge into each other, narrowing down the cultural barrier that existed between the rural elite and the peasants since medieval times. Apart from the fact that the proto-urban villages continued to expand in terms of size and population, an improved system of communication between these settlements and the urban towns made this phenomenon even faster (see Figure 178 (a)).

Land and house ownership was a symbol of material wealth, which reflected the person's quality of life. Our analysis has revealed that house ownership was not something that many families could afford. In the urban centres, those with limited financial means generally had no other option but to rent a small property in the underprivileged areas of the town, for example at the Manderaggio in Valletta. The observations made from the *Cabrei* and the house surveys concur with the figures acquired from the historical records, showing a sizeable urban lower class, a more substantial middle class, and a relatively smaller elite class. In the villages, there is evidence that many peasant families did not have enough income to own their land or dwelling. Those who did not own their house had to rent a property either from the Order, from the Church or a private landlord. Other poor

peasant families lived in cave-dwellings and possibly also in dry rubble hovels.

The distinction between the elite houses and lower class dwellings is evident in their exterior as well as in their internal organization. While the former were characterized by elaborate Baroque façades, the latter generally adhered to the vernacular idiom, thus having a simpler and an assymmetrical exterior. Our evidence has shown that only a few rural houses could afford a decorated door or a window frame in simple Baroque style. Regarding the interior, the elite houses became more complex with the addition of separating walls to create spaces with specialized functions. Lower class dwellings had limited domestic space, suggesting that their rooms were often multifunctional. Apart from class separation, the interior of the elite houses also permitted more individual privacy and gender segregation. For example, it was normal in these dwellings for men and women to sleep in separate bedrooms. In lower class dwellings, however, there was little room for privacy and gender segregation (see **Gender-oriented spaces in the house** in Chapter 9 below). The elite houses reflect the particular lifestyle of a section of the local population, who kept themselves abreast with current trends in Europe in terms of fashion, house architecture, interior design and domestic space organization. They had the financial means to alter and embellish their houses according to current fashion in Europe. However, lower class families, with their limited disposable income, could not afford to alter their houses according to fashion, so any changes in their dwellings were often minimal and sporadic. Therefore, through the different house types analysed in this section, it was possible to explore various aspects of the local society of this period within a Euro-Mediterranean context (Figure 131). This is, after all, the Maltese society which the Knights of St John had left behind when they were expelled from Malta in 1798.

Case study: Ange's Palace, Mdina (MHHS House No. 19)

Ange's Palace in Villegaignon Street, Mdina, is a mid-sixteenth-century *palazzo* with extensive eighteenth-century architectural modifications, carried out after the 1693 earthquake. Unlike Falson Palace, the history of this house is little known. For a particular time it belonged to a family of the local nobility, with the last owner bequeathing it to the Mdina Cathedral Chapter to become an alternative venue for the Cathedral Archives.

The palace is built over two floors with a small mezzanine in between (Figure 132). At present, the mezzanine belongs to another owner and it was not possible to investigate its interior spaces. Access to the mezzanine is through a separate doorway from the main street or else through the grand staircase, where a secondary doorway (presently blocked) leads to the same property. The symmetrical façade of Ange's Palace, approximately

Rural Settlements

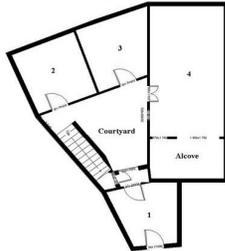
Urban Settlements

Palazzi and mansions in the village core; elite countryside residences



Palazzi and mansions

Peasant courtyard houses



Terraced houses (with a central courtyard or a backyard)

Windmills

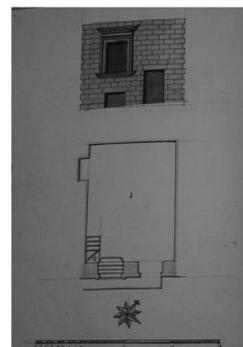


Single and two-storey *rieziet*



Windmills

Dry rubble hovels (single units or clusters)



Mezzanini, single-storey dwellings and cellars

Cave dwellings



FIGURE 131 – HOUSE TYPES IN MALTA IN THE KNIGHTS' PERIOD

16.5m wide, is typical of the Baroque period and consists of a monumental doorway at the centre flanked by two windows, one on each side. The small window located just above a larger one on the right-hand side of the main door belongs to the mezzanine. The upper section of the façade is dominated by an elaborate open balcony flanked by two large windows. The balcony rests on five elaborate stone corbels and lies exactly above the main door, the latter being embellished by elaborate mouldings. The door and the balcony give the house a sense of monumentality and grandiosity characteristic of the Baroque period. The façade does not bear any coat-of-arms, which could have provided an indication of its exact age or original owner.

The house is built over a plot of approximately 250 sq m area and has a south-west orientation (Figures 133 (a) and (b)). It has a rectangular plan and two entrances, one in Villegaignon Street (the main entrance) and a rear one in Gatto Murina Street. The latter entrance was widened by the last owner to fit a garage door. The ground floor consists of a spacious barrel-vaulted reception hall which leads directly to an L-shaped backyard (Figure 134). The courtyard is dominated by a water cistern embellished in typical Baroque fashion (Figure 135). The reception hall



FIGURE 132 – ANGE'S PALACE, MDINA (18TH CENTURY)
(MHHS HOUSE NO. 19)

gives access to two rooms on the left (1 and 3) and another two on the right (room 2 and another small one near the courtyard). Between room 2 and the courtyard an elegant staircase leads to the *piano nobile*. The reception hall is characterized by six stone benches, which suggests that this perhaps also served as a waiting area.

The ground floor rooms follow different dimensions. It is possible that rooms 4 and 5 at the rear originally consisted of a single room. In fact, if this room did not have a dividing wall it would have been almost identical in size to room 3. This room could have been partitioned into two smaller units to serve different purposes; eventually room 5 was utilized as a garage. The exact purpose of the ground floor rooms is unknown. It is possible that some of them were specifically concerned with the domestic activities, for example the kitchen, storerooms, or other service rooms. That these were possibly associated with domestic work is supported by the fact that:

- a. room 3 does not have any windows and therefore enjoys little lighting even though it has three doors;
- b. room 1 has access to a spiral staircase which was possibly used by the domestic servants or slaves, as suggested by Valentino (2006: 104);
- c. the rooms which could be accessed from the reception hall of the house all have separate doors, possibly to avoid the servants or slaves from being seen when visitors were present.

Needless to say that nothing precludes the possibility that some of these rooms, for instance room 2, could have been used by the owners for some particular purpose, for example for welcoming guests.

The mezzanine could have been used as living quarters for the domestic servants or as the family's private quarters (Valentino 2006: 87). The latter hypothesis is supported by the presence of a doorway located in the middle of the grand staircase which, before it was blocked, led directly to the mezzanine (Figure 136).

Storage space here is abundant. Apart from the rooms which may have been specifically utilized for storage, the space under the grand staircase was also an ideal storage area. It was noted that, at some point in time, possibly in the 19th or 20th century, the area under the upper section of the staircase was structurally modified to be converted into another storage place. Access to the latter is through a small oval opening covered by a small iron-framed glass aperture. The available documentation about this palace demonstrates that these storage rooms and spaces were intended for the household's needs and therefore, as suggested by Sabelberg (1983: 250-2), this house had a function similar to the show palaces of Sicily rather than the Tuscan economic palaces.



FIGURE 133 (A) – PLAN OF THE GROUND FLOOR OF ANGE’S PALACE (MHHS HOUSE NO. 19) (SCALE 1:250)
 (B) – PLAN OF THE *PIANO NOBILE* OF ANGE’S PALACE (SCALE 1:250)



FIGURE 134 – THE RECEPTION HALL OF ANGE’S PALACE. COURTESY OF THE CATHEDRAL ARCHIVES, MDINA



FIGURE 135 – THE L-SHAPED BACKYARD OF ANGE’S PALACE. COURTESY OF THE CATHEDRAL ARCHIVES, MDINA



FIGURE 136 – ANGE’S PALACE: A BLOCKED DOORWAY LOCATED IN THE GRAND STAIRCASE, WHICH ORIGINALLY GAVE ACCESS TO THE MEZZANINE. COURTESY OF THE CATHEDRAL ARCHIVES, MDINA

Rooms 1, 3, 4 and 5 were characterized by a higher ceiling than room 2 and the small one next to the backyard. It was also observed that the ceiling of rooms 1, 3, 4 and 5 rested on a series of transversal arches while those on the opposite side of the hall rested on a series of transversal wooden beams. While the rooms and spaces on the eastern side were approximately 3 to 3.5m high, the ones on the western part reached an average height of approximately 6m. The reason for this height variation is due to the fact that, on the right-hand side of the house, exactly between the ground floor and the *piano nobile*, there is the mezzanine. It was also observed that the internal and external walls of the house varied in thickness between 0.38 and 0.78m. The house layout permits good ventilation in most of the rooms and also a comfortable internal climate. The house was surveyed during the hottest time of the year; despite the unbearable heat outside, the rooms inside still maintained a comfortable room temperature. The high ceilings, the thick walls, the relatively large doors, the various windows and fanlights are all important features which contribute to a comfortable internal climate in the house.

The *piano nobile* consists of a *sala* (or hall) (room 9) and three adjacent rooms (rooms 6-8). It is possible that the contiguous rooms 6 and 7, both giving access to an open-air terrace, originally consisted of a single room which was partitioned in later times, possibly in the late 19th or early 20th century. The grand staircase leads to a corridor which, in turn, provides access to the *sala* and room 6. As Valentino (2006: 87) suggests for other contemporary townhouses, this type of layout ensured that the *sala* and the room facing the staircase enjoyed maximum privacy as they were both characterized by separate access points and lockable doors. The other rooms of the *piano nobile* (7 and 8) are reached through a set of interconnecting doorways (Figure 137). The interconnecting doors permitted free movement between the rooms without any need to pass from the corridor, except for when privacy needed to be ensured, in which case the interconnecting doors were simply closed. Assuming that originally rooms 6 and 7 consisted of a single room, one can deduce that the elegant room 8 was therefore the only one on the *piano nobile* which could not be reached directly through the passageway. In such a case, to reach room 8 a person had to pass first from the *sala* or else from room 6. When the latter was eventually partitioned into two smaller units (to become rooms 6 and 7), access to room 8 became even more difficult, because this meant that to reach that room a person had to pass first from rooms 6 and 7, if not opting to take the *sala* route instead.

Three large elegantly decorated windows located along the upper half of the staircase, which open onto the courtyard, provide light and ventilation to the *piano nobile*. Apart from their functional importance, these windows give to the *piano nobile* and the staircase area a sense of elegance and nobility. The open balcony is reached from the *sala*.

The rooms of the *piano nobile* are all characterized by a flat ceiling which rests on a series of transversal wooden beams. On average, the ceiling height of these rooms varies between 4.5 and 5.5m, while the thickness of the walls varies between 0.30 to 0.65m. It appears quite likely that the *piano nobile* contained some formal rooms where the guests were entertained. These rooms could have served as a salon, a dining room or a library. This is confirmed by the fact that the ceiling of the *sala* and that of room 8 rest on a series of transversal wooden beams with decorated side corbels underneath, a feature which is not usually found in more modest stately rooms (Figure 138). The reason why through time one of the rooms was partitioned into two smaller spaces is unclear. Presumably the owners wanted to add another room for a specific purpose, for instance a study or an office. It is also possible that, when the mezzanine was acquired by a third party owner, the rooms of the *piano nobile* were converted into the family’s private quarters, and therefore room 6 was partitioned into two smaller spaces to fit an extra bedroom. However, this is just an hypothesis since no original plans of the house have been identified so far.



FIGURE 137 – PART OF THE *PIANO NOBILE* OF ANGE'S PALACE, MDINA. COURTESY OF THE CATHEDRAL ARCHIVES, MDINA



FIGURE 138 – ANGE'S PALACE: THE CEILING OF ROOM 8 IS CHARACTERIZED BY WOODEN BEAMS AND ELEGANT SIDE CORBELS UNDERNEATH. COURTESY OF THE CATHEDRAL ARCHIVES, MDINA

Ange's Palace has all the characteristics of an eighteenth-century elegant townhouse. It is the aim of its present owner to continue restoring this house and to acquire the complete property by purchasing the mezzanine as well.

The houses of the Colonial Period

The Colonial Period had an indelible effect on the development of the Maltese house. The Knights had left behind them an island fortress, with various defensive systems spread in different parts of Malta and Gozo. The *palazzi* and houses previously occupied by the Order became vacant, which the Colonial government gradually converted into government offices or private dwellings occupied by British officers and their families.

The Baroque idiom remained entrenched in local architecture for many more decades during this period, reminiscences of which survived until practically the early 20th century (De Lucca 1988: 317). For instance, nineteenth-century churches had the tendency to emulate the Baroque counterparts of the previous period, while Baroque-style houses continued to be built in the centre of several major villages in Malta and Gozo, where the

rural elite normally lived. The main square of Nadur (Gozo) is still characterized by a number of nineteenth-century houses which have a symmetrical façade and ornate door and window frames typical of the previous century (Figure 139). The persistence of Baroque architecture hampered, in a way, the development of other architectural styles which were already in vogue in Europe, for example the Neo-Classical and Neo-Gothic styles (Hooker 1994: 294-311). In fact, these two styles were adapted locally from the second half of the 19th century onwards and remained popular until the early 20th century.

The reutilization of houses by the British meant that certain structural alterations were needed to meet the specific needs of their new occupants. The Victorian age, marked by the effects of the Industrial Revolution, affected the British living in Malta as well as the local community, particularly the Anglophile elite (Frendo 1988: 190). This period brought with it a great technological advancement, with the invention of new machines and communication methods. The late 19th and early 20th century witnessed a thread of great inventions such as the motor car, the electric current and