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ARCHITECTURE, CIVIL ENGINEERING, ACADEMIA AND DIPLOMACY: A COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW OF THE WORK OF LINO BIANCO

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Abstract. The practice of building bridges has been attributed to the profession of architects and civil engineers. The theory underlying their design is reserved to researchers mainly in academia. Metaphorically, bridge building is a term used to establish communication and, in particular, to develop friendly relations between parties, a role played by diplomats, especially ambassadors. A contemporary professional who is an architect, an academic and a diplomat is Lino Bianco, the present ambassador of the Republic of Malta to the Republic of Moldova. Based on literature available at the library of the University of Malta and on the internet, the article presents a comprehensive overview of the professional and academic work of Professor Bianco, work which has been acknowledged at both academic and diplomatic levels. It concludes by arguing that he is essentially a renaissance man.

Keywords: *academia, Bulgaria, contemporary architecture, diplomacy, Lino Bianco, Malta, Moldova, Romania.*

Rezumat. Practica construirii de poduri a fost atribuită profesiei de arhitecți și ingineri civili. Teoria care stă la baza designului podurilor este rezervată cercetătorilor, în principal din mediul academic. Metaforic, construirea de poduri este un termen folosit pentru stabilirea comunicării și, în special, pentru dezvoltarea relațiilor de prietenie între părți, rol jucat de diplomați, în special de ambasadori. Un profesionist contemporan care este arhitect, academic și diplomat este Lino Bianco, actualul ambasador al Republicii Malta în Republica Moldova. Bazat pe literatura disponibilă la biblioteca Universității din Malta și pe internet, articolul prezintă o privire de ansamblu cuprinzătoare asupra activității profesionale și academice a profesorului Bianco, activitate care a fost recunoscută atât la nivel academic, cât și la nivel diplomatic. Se încheie argumentând că el este în esență o personalitate renescentistă.

Cuvinte cheie: *mediu academic, Bulgaria, arhitectură contemporană, diplomație, Lino Bianco, Malta, Moldova, România.*

1. Introduction

The professions of an architect and a civil engineer have long been associated with buildings, whether they be edifices or engineering structures such as bridges. There are

countless number of contemporary architects and engineers who are practising either or both professions whilst in academia. but it is not common that such professionals share also a diplomatic posting. Such is Lino Bianco who is educated in architecture and civil engineering and practises the professions, teaches these disciplines at centres of excellence and is at the same time a non-resident ambassador.

Professor Bianco is a resident full-time academic at the Department of Architecture and Urban Design of the University of Malta where he teaches and directs research on the history and theory of architecture [1]. Although not a diplomat by career, he is the ambassador of the Republic of Malta to the Republic of Moldova as from 2018 [2]. He is also the ambassador of his motherland to Romania [3] and the ambassador emeritus to the Republic of Bulgaria [4]. This article gives a biographical outline and an overview of milestones in his work. To compile this article, several sources were used: the principal ones with respect to his professional and academic work are the website Lino Bianco and Associates [5] and the Online Access Repository of the University of Malta [6] respectively.

2. Biographical note

After completing his secondary studies at The Archbishop's Minor Seminary, Lino Bianco took his post-secondary education at St Aloysius' College, both in Malta [7]. His pre-university education spans several subjects from sciences to arts to commerce to the classics although, in the Maltese system of education, one follows one of them. He obtained the General Certificate of Education at Ordinary level (MQF Level 3) [8], primarily from the University of London, not only in the typical disciplines studied at school but also in subjects such as astronomy, ancient history, Arabic, Russian and Greek literature [7, 9]. His General Certificate of Education at Advanced level (MQF Level 4), mostly from the Associated Examination Board of the United Kingdom, were in pure mathematics, applied mathematics, physics, philosophy and religion [9]. Besides reading architecture and civil engineering at the University of Malta (MQF Level 6), and earning his PhD in architecture and politics from the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia (MQF Level 8), Lino Bianco read philosophy and humanistic studies at the Institute of Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (MQF Level 6), geology at the University of Leicester (MQF Level 7) and history of architecture at the prestigious Bartlett Graduate School of Architecture at University College London (MQF Level 7) [1].

In his studies in philosophy he majored in logic with a dissertation based on the applicability of Aristotelian logic to Buddhist thought which work was under the direction of Peter Serracino Inglott, Malta's principal contemporary philosopher and later rector of the University of Malta, and Vincent Riolo [10]. At the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering, where he was taught by Malta's leading architect Richard England, he majored in steel structures under the tutorship of Miloslav Tocháček, a Czech pioneer in the plastic design of steel structures, and wrote his dissertation, qualifying to MQF Level 7, in concrete technology [11]. Some weeks after completion of his studies, he was awarded a prestigious scholarship by the Office of the Prime Minister of Malta, to study and undertake research in the geology of the building limestones of Malta under Martyn Pedley and Anselm Dunham [12]. His studies in architectural history at The Bartlett, covered by a British Chevening scholarship, were undertaken under the mentorship of architectural historian Adrian Forty [13]. In Sofia, he completed his doctorate on the development of Sofia under the supervision of Veselina Troeva [14]. Professor Bianco holds a warrant to practise as a "perit" from the

Republic of Malta [15], a warrant to practise as an architect from the Republic of Bulgaria [4]. Lino Bianco has a title of EUR. ING. from the Fédération Européenne d'Associations Nationales d' Ingénieurs (Brussels). He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (London) and of the Geological Society (London)[1, 16].

3. Architectural practice

Professor Bianco set up his professional practice *Lino Bianco and Associates* in 1997 to offer consultancy services in architecture, urban design, and environmental management and planning [17]. His philosophy of architecture is outlined in the website: “We perceive architecture as an expression of life and as a natural extension to our environment, in which technology, construction material, settings, purpose, detail and methods of construction are unified. We merge shape, colour, space, light and time with contextual sensitivity and design, while exploiting the uniqueness of the site’s characteristics. Thus, our starting point with each project lies in exploring new ways to concatenate functionality, style and aesthetics. We integrate our work in connection with culture and the place’s historical and geological importance, while accentuating sustainable building and site development as key to creative and quality design” [5]. A selection of his works is shown in a screenshot from the website (figure 1).

Selected Works

Architecture



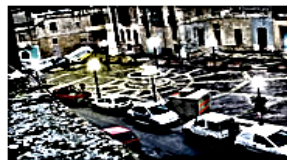
Residential

- Apartment at Qormi
- Apartments at Hamrun
- Alterations and extension to a house of character
- Apartments at Nadur
- Control room at Bulgaria



Commercial

- Small shop
- Shopping complex
- Extension to an operating discotheque
- Wine-bar
- Agrarian farm



Public

- Interpretation facility
- Entrances to WWII shelter
- Restoration of disused quarry
- Redesign of library at the public registry
- Redesign of the Grand Harbour breakwater



Major Projects

- Artisan Urban Hub, Fez
- Grand Harbour Network Initiative
- Malta Millennium Project
- Upgrading of caravan and bungalow site
- Grand Harbour initiatives

Environmental Planning and Management



- Environmental Impact Statement / Traffic Impact Statement
- Extension of a new hospital
- Tuna penning farm
- Rehabilitation facility and day hospital
- Malta Millennium Project
- Construction of a destination port



- Environmental Planning Statement
- New hardstone quarry
- New softstone quarry
- Extension to an existing dairy farm
- Establishment of a new dairy farm
- Rehabilitation of a disused softstone quarry



- Project Description Statement
- Mgarr ix-Xini Regional Park
- Fagar Qim and Mnajdra Temples Conservation and Interpretation Project
- Rehabilitation facility and day hospital
- Proposal for a desalination plant
- Gozo biological treatment plant: A critique



- Other
- Socio-cultural initiative for the locality of Xagħra
- Agrarian and arboreal assessment
- Interim engineered landfill
- Waste transfer facility at Ial-Kus
- Corradino fuel depot

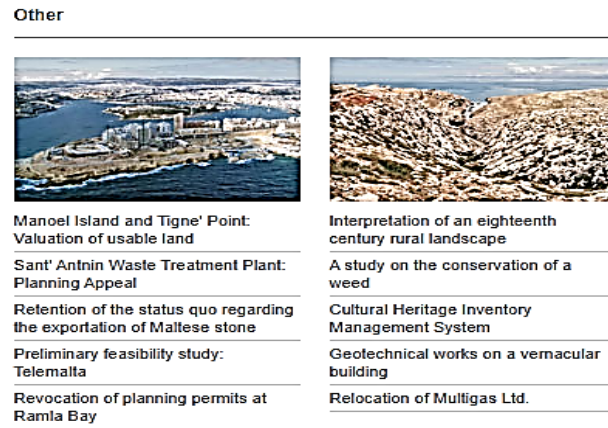


Figure 1. Lino Bianco and Associates (online version is in colour): **Selected works** (© <http://www.lino-bianco.com/selectedworks.php>) [5].

They are classified under three headings: architecture; environmental planning and management; other. Residential designs include the alterations and extensions of traditional houses in Zabbar (figure 2) and Nadur (figure 3), both in Malta, which were winning entries at InterArch2012 [18] and InterArch2015 [19] respectively. Major projects include the entry competition for an artisan urban hub in Fez, Morocco (figure 4), and the upgrading of a caravan and bungalow site in Malta (figure 5). Other competition entries included the redevelopment of Via Roma, Agazzano [20], the upgrading and restoration of the “Boutilliere” in Cogne, Valle d’Aosta [21], redevelopment of the Parco della Rimembranza, Rapino [22], all in Italy, and the design of public spaces for Station Ceva Champel-Hôpital, Genève, Switzerland [23]. A comprehensive list of projects is given in table 1.

Lino Bianco is a strong proponent of values in architecture. His approach to environmental protection is innovative [25]. He is pro-development but against speculation [26]. Part of his consultancy includes challenging developments which have negative impact on heritage. For him, cultural and nature are linked. An example is his successful challenge of the multimillion touristic development of Ramla l-Ħamra, a site attributed to Homer’s Calypso, which led to the revocation of its planning permission [27-29]. In parallel to running his practice, Professor Bianco was chairman of the Planning Council (Malta), member of the Planning Appeals Board (Malta), member of the Board of Directors of the Housing Authority (Malta), member of the Board of Directors of WasteServ Malta Ltd, and member of the General Services Board (Malta) [1, 24].

4. Academic research

Besides teaching in Malta, Lino Bianco held a number of teaching posts in Italy (Sapienza Università di Roma), Russia (Moscow Institute of Architecture), Bulgaria (University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia), Romania (Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism), Georgia (Georgian Technical University), Moldova (Technical University of Moldova), and the Philippines (University of the Philippines). He is a professor of the International Academy of Architecture [30] and a visiting professor in history and theory of urban design at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia [24]. Professor Bianco is a scholar on the architecture of the Bulgarian Capital Sofia and on Georgia, specifically on the development of poetics of architecture in this former Soviet Socialist Republic.

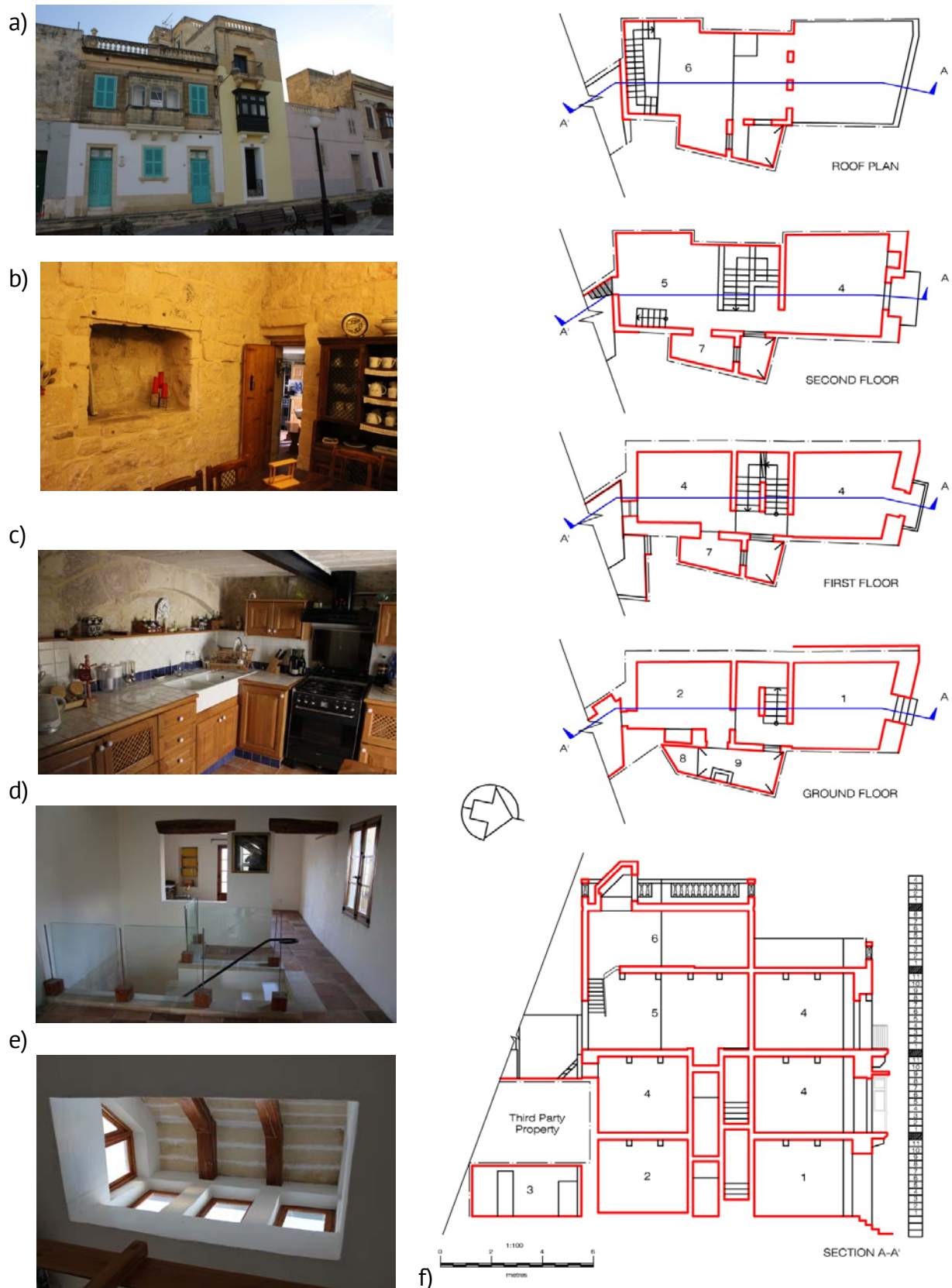


Figure 2. House of character, Zabbar (online version is in colour):

- a) street elevation with additional third level; b) dining room; c) kitchen; d) additional floor;
- e) north lights at roof level; g) plans and section: 1- sitting room, 2- dining, 3- kitchen, 4- bedroom, 5- living room, 6- washroom, 7- bathroom, 8- toilet, and 9- shaft [18].

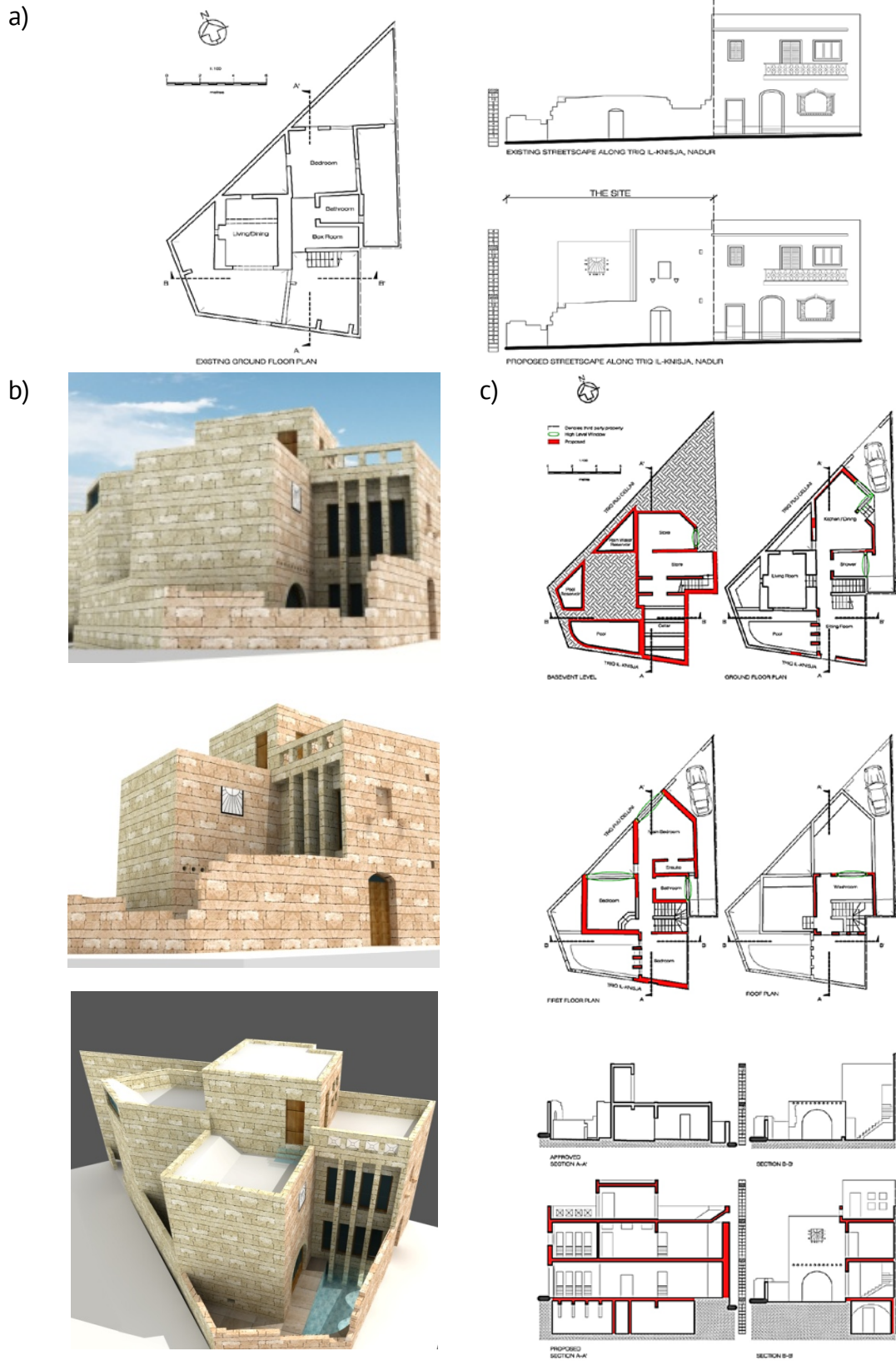


Figure 3. House of character, Nadur (online version is in colour): a) original plan, original and proposed elevation; b) computer generated models; c) design interventions [5].

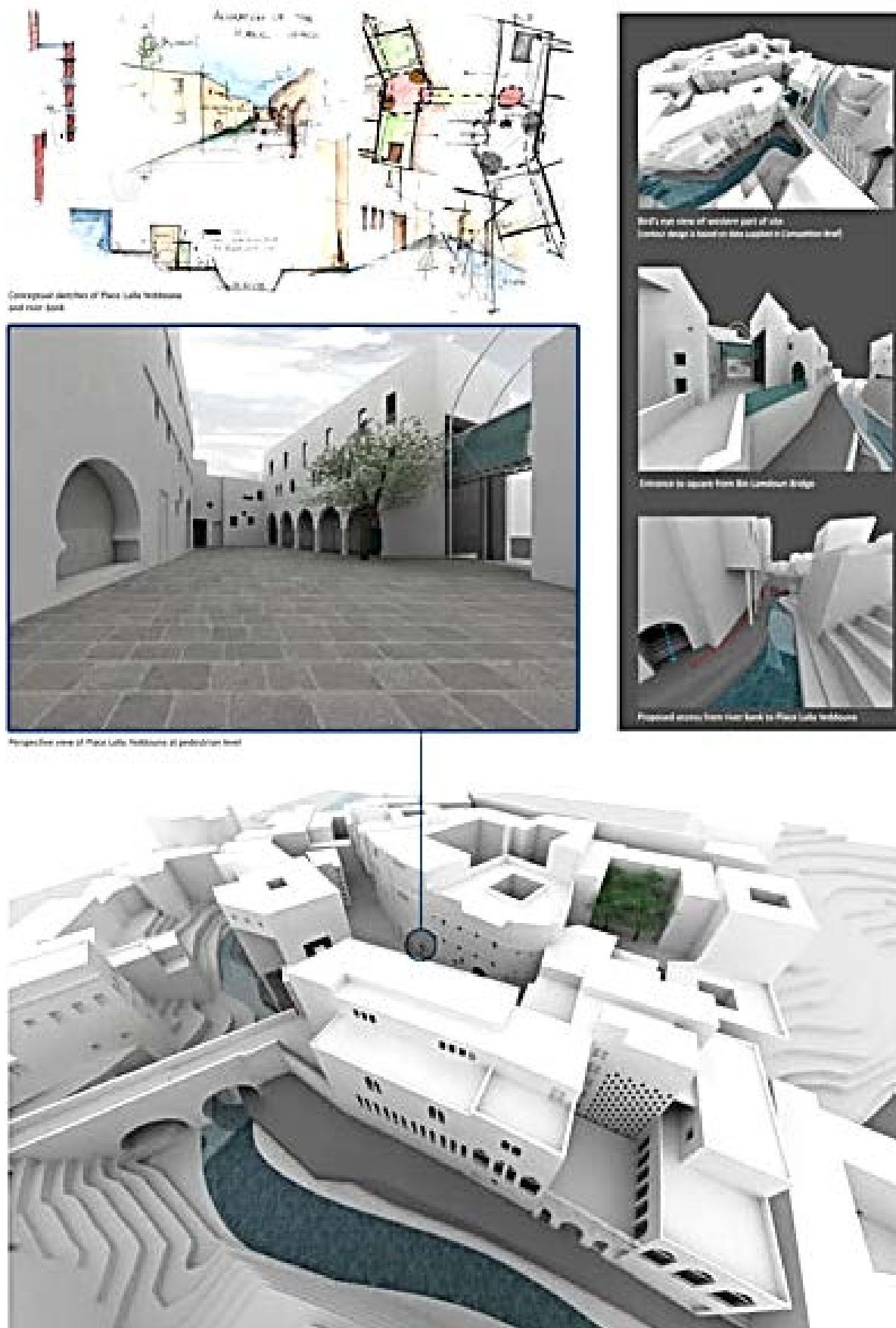


Figure 4. Artisan urban hub (online version is in colour): Competition entry for Place Lalla Yeddoune, Fez, Morocco [5].



Figure 5. Upgrading of caravan and bungalow site in Malta (online version is in colour):
 a) concept sketches; b) computer generated 3-image of proposed development of the site;
 c) typical outdoor space to proposed units [5].

In recognition of the latter, he was appointed reviewer of the doctoral education programme at this university, the only PhD programme in architecture offered in the country [31]. His academic peer-reviewed publications fall under three broad categories: (I) history and theory of architecture, (II) philosophy and humanistic studies, and (III) geology.

Table 1

Participation in design projects: A selection [24]

Typology	Design project
Residential projects	1. Apartments, Nadur, Gozo (2009).
	2. Single unit residence, Marsasclala, Malta (2009).
	3. Alterations and extension to a house of character, Zabbar, Malta (2008).
	4. Block of two apartments overlying commercial premises, Birkirkara, Malta (2008).
	5. Apartments, Ħamrun, Malta (2007).

Continuation Table 1

	6. Semi-detached corner dwelling, Nadur, Gozo (2006-2015).
	7. Alterations and extension to a house of character, Zebbug, Malta (2006-2015).
	8. Block of apartments, Xgħajra, Malta (2006-09).
	9. Row of residential units, Xewkija, Gozo (2003-04).
	10. Alterations and extension to a house of character, Zabbar, Malta (1998-2001).
Commercial projects	1. Design of wine bar and cellar, Zabbar, Malta (2010).
	2. Rehabilitation of residential unit into a shopping arcade, Paola, Malta (2008).
	3. Redesign of a retail outlet into a catering establishment on a restricted site, Valletta, Malta (2007).
	4. Alterations and conversion of substandard bachelor residence into shop, Qormi, Malta (2006).
	5. Igeia clinics, Ħamrun, Malta (2005).
	6. Offices and apartments at Rue D'Argens, Msida, Malta (2004-08).
	7. The Limestone Heritage, Siggiewi, Malta (with Alex Torpiano and Louis Borg) (1999-2002).
	8. Redesign of an established night club into a discotheque and pizzeria, San Gwann, Malta (1999).
	9. Shop front for a class 4 shop, Gzira, Malta (1999).
Public projects	1. Interpretation facility at Ta' Blankas, l/o Xewkija, Gozo (2008-2014).
	2. Design for Grand Harbour Breakwater, Valletta, Malta (2008).
	3. Redesigning access to Second World War shelter, Zabbar, Malta (2005-06).
	4. Redesign of library at the Public Registry, Valletta (1998).
	5. Landscape restoration of a disused open-pit quarry, Għarb, Gozo (1997).
Major projects	1. L-Arka ta' Noe' Therapeutic Zoo, Siggiewi, Malta (2014-2017).
	2. Bamiyan Cultural Centre, Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan (Competition entry, 2014).
	3. Architectural design proposal for a gastronomical living museum, Valletta, Malta (2013).
	4. Public spaces for Halte CEVA Champel-Hôpital, Geneve (Competition entry, 2012).
	5. Upgrading and restoration of the "Boutilliere", Cogne, Valle d'Aosta, Italy (Competition entry, 2012).
	6. Redevelopment of Via Roma, Agazzano, Italy (Competition entry, 2012).
	7. Grand Harbour Network Initiative, Valletta, Malta (2011).
	8. Design proposal for an artisan urban hub, Place Lalla Yeddouna, Fez, Morocco (Competition entry, 2010).
	9. Upgrading of caravan and bungalow site, Għadira, Malta (2009).
	10. Grand Harbour Initiatives: Twenty architectural design projects for the socio-economic regeneration of the littoral along central Malta (2008).
	11. Design proposal for a boutique hotel, Xagħra, Gozo (2007).
	12. Design proposals for the Malta Millennium Project at Mercury House and adjacent lands, Paceville, Malta (1997-1998).

With respect to the history and theory of architecture, a number of research themes are present: values in architecture [32-34], geocultural sensitive [35, 36] and sustainable [37-40] architectural design, poetics of architecture in Georgia [41-45], geocultural activity in seventeenth and eighteenth century Malta [46-49], the study of the Mosta Rotunda, one of the largest masonry domes in the nineteenth century [50-52], and the use of limestone in London [53-55]. Other themes are related to urbanism: philosophical approaches [56],

participatory engagement [57], and urban planning in Sofia [58, 59] and in Malta [60-62]. Other studies range from Roman architectural practice and the funding of public buildings [63], prefabrication, aesthetics and the welfare state in Britain [64] to housing and resettlement of young offenders [65] and the peculiarities and impacts of airports [66] in Malta. His multi-disciplinary arguments can be read in his papers on the history of architecture with topics ranging from Hegel's notion of gothic architecture [67], to Wolfflin-Frankl-Giedion tradition in the study of Baroque [68] to the use of masonry in Modernism [69] and to the architecture of Jovan Stefanovski [70]. His versatility in holistic approach to interpreting architecture spans a broad spectrum: from reading universal design as an applied science [71] to mapping out the cartography of an orphic life-in-death in Renais's film *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* [72].

Philosophical themes which Lino Bianco addresses vary from classical issues such as the notion of courage and wisdom in Plato [73] to Aquina's notion of the eternity of creation [74] to the application of Aristotelean logic to Buddhist thought [75]. He reads the creation narrative in Genesis as a case of environmental monitoring and audit [76]. Other publications relate to Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius* [77, 78], the celebration of the legacy of Cyril and Methodius under the patronage of the President of Malta [79-81], biographical notes of contemporary Thomistic scholars [82, 83] and Content and Language Integrated Learning [84-85]. Other occasional papers focused on the Mediterranean environment within a human rights context [86], the significance of gift exchange in Malta [87], pyrotechnics as sustainable intangible heritage [88] and parenthood post-marital failure [89].

The main topic of his geological research is the geology of the Maltese islands with his earliest paper dating to 1995 [90]. The principal theme is the Lower Globigerina Limestone, the main building stone of Malta since the Neolithic period. A comprehensive study was published in 2021 [91]. Other publications focused on (I) the techniques to determine the provenance of limestone [92] and the importance of optical microscopic investigation in such a study [93], (II) bio-retexturing in limestone [94] and (III) limestone replacement in architectural restoration [95]. His study addressed also the blue lenticular patches occurring within the Globigerina Limestone Formation [96, 97] and the outcropping of this formation at one of the most picturesque sites in Malta [98].

5. National and international acknowledgments

Professor Bianco holds a number of official acknowledgments: academic and political. He was a candidate for the Party of European Socialists (Malta) for the European Parliament elections of 2014. His political ideas stressed toleration in various contexts. He emphasised national unity in diversity [99, 100]. Other political themes on his agenda were irregular immigration [101] and the environment [102].

In recognition for his contributions in the development of architecture, the International Academy of Architecture elected him professor [1, 24]. The Georgian Technical University conferred upon him Professor Honoris Causa for his contributions to architectural practice and education [103]. At InterArch2012, his project "Home for an architect" in Malta, received a special prize for innovation in traditional architecture [18, 104]. Three years later, at InterArch2015, he received a special prize for his project "A Home of Time and Memory" [19, 105]. The submission for the proposed redevelopment of Via Roma, Agazzano, Italy placed third [24].

Lino Bianco's academic standing can be judged from the numerous scientific committees and advisory boards on which he sits. He is a member of the editorial board of several peer-reviewed academic journals which include *European Journal of Science and Theology*, *Open House International*, *Heritage and Sustainable Development*, *Urbanism–Architecture–Constructions*, and *Proceedings of Southwest State University* [1]. He is also a member of the advisory board of *The Journal of Baroque Studies* and of the scientific committee of International Experts for Research Enrichment and Knowledge (IEREK) [1]. Furthermore, he is a reviewer to a number of journals which include *European Journal of Science and Theology*, *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, *GeoJournal*, *Geographia Technica*, *Heritage Science*, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, *Materials*, *Minerals*, and *Space and Culture* [1]. Further to his appointment as reviewer of the doctoral education programme at Georgian Technical University [31], he was invited by the Consejo de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior, a public constitutional body of the Republic of Ecuador, to review and evaluate publications relating to architectural history issued in the country [106].

The Order of the Madara Horseman (First Class) was awarded to him by the President of the Republic of Bulgaria for significant involvement in the advancement of friendly relations and bilateral cooperation between the Republic of Malta and the Republic of Bulgaria [107, 108]. This award was given in the presence of the President of Malta [109]. He was bestowed the Cross of Commander “Pro Merito Melitensi” by the Sovereign Military Order of Malta [110], and appointed Member of the Order of Merit by the President of the Republic of Malta for working towards a better environment and planning practice [16, 111, 112].

6. Concluding comment

The humanistic, multi-disciplinary education of Lino Bianco marks his approach to the work. Rather than being a monomath which is typical in contemporary society, he is a polymath with expertise in a number of disciplines. Although he did not follow a particular course in the liberal arts, he studied various subjects from a number of disciplines which he followed at pre, and during, university education. His pre-university education demonstrates that he is significantly self-taught. He has a wide-ranging knowledge in a number of disciplines supported by academic degrees from recognised universities. As a Renaissance man, he bridges various professions to generate ideas and apply them, thus ideas acquired through his philosophy studies are applied to architecture and geological sciences. His varied publications demonstrate the versatility of his scientific reading, intellectual gymnastics in practice. Professor Bianco is cultured not only as a result of this education but also by means of his various commitments both at centres of learning and as a diplomat. His various professional appointments are a witness to his holistic approach which pushes the typical boundaries of the individual occupation. He bridges his occupations without any effort, intellectual gymnastics in action.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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