As part of the media partnership with Spazju Kreattiv, we have interviewed the documentary photographers Joseph P. Smith and Therese Debono who created the exhibition Spaces in Suspension. For this project, they took up the role of contemporary archaeologists with the objective of documenting and preserving one of the most iconic hotels in Malta in the 70s, the Grand Hotel Verdala.

- **What is the inspiration behind Spaces in Suspension? What moved you to adopt the role of contemporary archaeologists?**

We are both documentarians and we are inspired by the aesthetic of decay. Our initial idea was to document four ex-hospitality buildings that are currently left in a state of abandon in Malta. However, when we set foot in the Grand Hotel Verdala, it was clear from the start that this building was still alive. The objects that we found lying around in disarray and abandon were part of a bigger narrative of this hotel’s past function. The abundance of visual triggers in this place left us no choice but to focus on just one out of the 4 chosen locations. Going through the hotel, room by room, space after space, made us feel just like archaeologists, exploring slowly and meticulously the eerie spaces and the discarded artifacts, trying to weave the narratives that they were relating to us.

- **Why the Grand Hotel Verdala? What about it drew you to it?**

We chose this hotel out of the 4 chosen locations because this was the one hotel that still had strong traces of human use and function. Joe is from the town of Rabat where the hotel is situated. During its hey days, Joe used to frequent the hotel’s nightclub on weekends. On the other hand, I (Th)h ilf h fH Z bb hi hi l R b O
other hand, I (Therese) hail from the town of Haz-Zebbug, which is close to Rabat. On my way up to Rabat, I (Therese) always saw the Grand Hotel Verdala, which is not only an iconic building in its design but also in the way it stood out in my collective memory. I recall it always being there standing proudly on the hilltop overlooking her childhood town. The fact that this hotel has been closed since 1997 was always puzzling. The fact that it was difficult to get into and its overpowering footprint on the horizon is what drew us to get the permits to access the site and start the project.

Spaces in Suspension Exhibition in Valletta, Malta

- Could you please share your experience trying to document a space that was basically suspended in time, awaiting its next fate?

Documenting this hotel was a unique experience. When we got to this place and slowly started uncovering its history through the interpretation of the found artifacts, we immediately realised that our approach had to be different. Photography alone was not going to cut it, so we sought and obtained permission to borrow some of the found objects so that we could include them in the exhibition. This way we could strengthen the narrative and produce a more immersive experience. The fact that we were amongst the last photographers to have access to document the spaces did impose a sense of urgency in us – the big need to document as much as we can, since the hotel’s end was near. In fact, its demolition started on 24th August 2021, and it was still ongoing during the exhibition’s opening on 29th October 2021.

- Was there anything particular about this project that set it apart from your previous experiences?

The found objects, the space, the suspense… these were all factors that enhanced our experience and helped us document and deliver this project. The assistance we received from the new owners, the anecdotal interviews with ex-employees together with their on-site portraits proved invaluable and indispensable in our effort to enhance the connection of past, present and future.

- How did the two of you come to collaborate with each other? Have you worked together in the past?

We knew one another before. Joe was my (Therese) mentor when I first started photography 14 years ago. We ended up following an MFA in Digital Arts at the University of Malta where our love for the abandonment and documentary photography, brought us together so this was the perfect opportunity to work on a collaborative project. Even though this was our first collaborative project together, we have often worked side by side during events such as the Malta Jazz Festival and other cultural events.
What were your most meaningful takeaways and challenges while undertaking this project?

Challenges were few and we would not even call them challenges. Takeaways were many, amongst them the importance of documenting buildings such as the Grand Hotel Verdala who's fate we cannot stop, but at least through our work we can give one final salute to the hotel before it takes its final bow. The biggest takeaway was the tribute to this once iconic building that employed and entertained a big number of locals and foreigners alike, but which will disappear from the landscape for good.

Did the pandemic affect your creative process during this project? How did it specifically impact the project in terms of challenges and the overall experience?

The pandemic did not halt our creative streak. On the contrary, it provided the stimulus and inspiration to get started on a few projects. In fact this documentation started during the early days of the pandemic, and it was the fuel that we both needed to stay motivated and active during such a difficult time. To a certain extent, the narrative of the project matched the real-life scenario – the abandoned objects were waiting in silence for their demise, the building served as a hospice for the objects until they took their final breath. The pandemic was also a reflective phase in the photographers’ lives, and this project served as a reflection on the repercussions of the pandemic but also provided the opportunity where the artists could take refuge in a silent space that had a lot to tell.

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