

# A new home for Joinwell

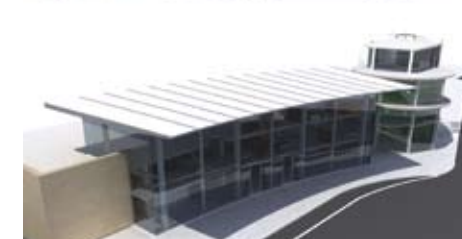
One of the more recent projects to grace the local scene is the completion of the new Joinwell showroom in Qormi. A break from the more mundane, and dare one say traditional, approach to the design of commercial and industrial buildings, this showroom employs innovative technologies and approaches in its design and promises to stand out as an iconic building for years to come. 'the Architect' got in touch with the team at De Micoli and Associates and explored the various aspects of the project.

The origins of the well-established company of Joinwell can be traced back to just after the Second World War when in 1947, with the amount of reconstruction work needed in the aftermath, the late George Galea saw a business opportunity and set up a small company producing fixtures, being joined later on by four of his brothers, Albert, Joe, Vincent and Louis, as well as Maurice De Giorgio. The company grew rapidly and prospered in the economic expansion soon after, ambitiously undertaking the production of the then pioneering range of furniture following the G-Plan designs of the UK company E.Gomme Ltd of High Wycombe as well as an increasing number of in-house designs. This necessitated the construction of the factory and offices in Mill Street, Qormi, designed by Perit Edwin England Sant Fournier, which when completed in the 1950s stood on a grand total of 23,000 square metres and was

huge by the standards of the time. Soon enough this development in turn called for a more centrally located showroom space in which to display the company's products besides their furniture. Joinwell was the first company to produce mattresses locally and also delved into the production of the steel frame window fixtures so commonly used at the time. Joinwell this time commissioned Edwin England Sant Fournier's son Perit Richard England to design what is now the iconic building in Tower Road, Sliema which was completed in the 1960s, and as Vincent Galea often reminisces with a smile, opened for "business as usual" without much fuss on an ordinary Monday morning, helped by a splash of holy water from the local parish priest. The two buildings complemented each other and made complete business sense then, evidenced by the company's steady growth

in the next three decades of operation. Aided by the construction boom and admittedly also by the legislation protecting the local industry at the time, Joinwell was fitting out some of the island's top hotels single-handedly and had taken a firm grip locally, becoming a household name and employing more than three hundred skilled workers at its peak. However, the subsequent relaxation of importation legislation, changes in market trends as well as a global shift of production techniques towards mass production and increased automation all contributed to a cut down in Joinwell's workforce in the 1990s and early 2000s combined with a staggering increase in imported goods. These forces simultaneously led to a decrease in the space needed for local production and an increase in that needed for the display of merchandise. Suddenly, the showroom in Sliema was

becoming more and more inadequate for its purpose whilst at the same time more of the factory floor space in Qormi became unutilised. It was at this point that Joinwell, now led by Vincent's son Martin Galea, decided to appoint the architectural firm, De Micoli and Associates, entrusting the team to find a solution for this growing imbalance in spatial needs. Initially, a different site to the one chosen was considered and studied to make



Sun path analysis. Day: 15 August. Time (from top): 9am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm



way for a larger showroom; however, it soon became increasingly obvious that it made more sense to actually make use of part of the existing factory. What started off as a simple, quick and cost effective idea from the clients to merely partition off the space required from the part of the factory closest to the main roads in order to accommodate the showroom space led to Perit Ray De Micoli typically taking things to a new level and eventually convincing the clients to increase the height of the front part of the new showroom to the three storey building height limitation imposed by the area's Local Plan. In his mind, the new

intervention had to appear as lightweight and transparent as possible, with the passer-by being able to practically look up through and across the floor plans into the open sky behind the upper floors during the day and at night have an ethereal internal glow that would highlight the products on show. The first part of the design exercise concentrated on orienting the display elevation for maximum visual exposure to people travelling up and down Mill Street as well as others driving past at an elevated level on the bridge leading to and from the Mriehel Bypass nearby. After numerous drive-bys across the bridge taking countless photo-

graphs of the site and its surroundings it was decided that, instead of pasting the new structure onto the front of the existing structure, it was imperative, albeit at the expense of valuable developable land, to maintain the present setback. This could only be made possible by demolishing the front two bays of the factory but allowed a visual depth to the main façade and maintained a sense of openness at the foot of Mill Street. Ray De Micoli also strategically decided to give the main display façade a gentle curve in plan so as to further embrace the view of those passing by and also because he felt that it just felt right in relation to the focal point set by the windmill located in front. This curved façade would then join up and round off visually with a geometrically simple glass circular tower at its end partly housing the new administration offices. With the extent of glass envisaged and the orientation of the main façade pointing south east, a shading device in the form of a huge cantilever canopy was introduced into the architectural design. The overhang created was not just aesthetic but also dictated by studies using sun paths simulated through computer-generated renders. This ensured proper shading of the glass but not at the expense of detracting from the building's transparency made possible by the use of a structural glass curtain wall. On the other hand, translucent recycled U-glass was used in the tower section due

to its use allowing a more elegant handling of smaller radii without appreciable visible segmenting and also due to total transparency in the tower not being a requisite. In addition, the U-glass outperformed clear laminated glass in terms of thermal performance by virtue of its translucence and the creation of an air cavity between its inner and outer skin by its method of installation thus eliminating the need for shading. The requirement for a slim structure, as well as the urgency to finish the main showroom space in a very tight timeframe, led to an early decision to go for a steel frame structure with bolted connections which could be easily fabricated off-site and assembled on site. Pre-cast concrete floor panels with a power-floated structural topping were put in place later in preparation for the final floor finish. Structural masonry walls were kept to a minimum both internally and externally in order to maintain a high degree of transparency with most of the internal space being kept open plan in accordance to the designs of Perit Chris Briffa who was separately commissioned by Joinwell to execute the interior design of the project.

Keeping in line with the overall high finish of the structure a cladding system composed of painted galvanised steel panels was both fabricated in-house and installed by the same contractor responsible for all the steel and glazing works, and was used to treat the solid parts of the new façade that framed in and accentuated the glass entities of the showroom curtain wall and the tower. Immediately after moving the plant and machinery located in the part of the factory to be demolished and the additional area immediately behind this which was to be absorbed into the showroom space at ground level, internal partition walls cutting off the production floor were erected and the demolition of the existing structure started on the 01 October 2007. After nine often hectic but highly rewarding months, the showroom doors were then opened to the public in the first week of July 2008.

**Project Location:** Joinwell Showroom, Qormi  
**Client:** Joinwell  
**Architect:** De Micoli & Associates  
**Design Team:** Ray De Micoli, Andrew Vinci, Annett Lakatsch, Karl Micallef, Anne Marie Pisani  
**Interior Design:** Chris Briffa  
**Photography:** Alan Carville  
**Steel and Glazing Works:** JS Dimech Ltd  
**Other Construction:** Tarcisio Galea Ltd

