

Ellis Galea

A Maltese Maverick

An Interview by Kirsten Y. Gunter

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Photo: Kirsten Y. Gunter

A small plaque reading *Ellis Galea Consultants Ltd.* is affixed to the door of a St. George Street office as unassuming as the person herself. Every inch of space is occupied by filing cabinets or drawing tables. If there is nothing evidently unusual about this office, there are two clues which tell the observant visitor that there is nothing *ordinary* about its owner. Side-by-side are two designs. One is an intricately-detailed drawing of a church on very old parchment, dating back more than a century. The other, more than seven feet high, gives a bird's eye view of an almost futuristic vision of a city; its complexity of detail seduces the eye. The former, Ellis proudly announces, "is my great-grandfather's first rendering of a church he designed and built in northern Italy." It was a gift to Ellis from her family when she became an architect. The latter, her own design, was the first-prize winner out of 403 submissions in the Shinkenchiku International Competition, "Style for the year 2001."

Long past office hours, Ellis Galea has traded her business suit for the comfort of a cosy track suit. Despite her flagging energy, she will work for several more hours with two different associates, before calling quits to her sixteen-hour day. Her passion for her work, evident even at this hour, seems to be all the sustenance she needs. As she sits in her turquoise flannel apparel, dark hair piled in a chignon on top of her head, it is difficult to reconcile this relaxed young woman with the high-powered architectural consultant presented in the company.

Her face breaks into a delighted grin. "You can't miss the Mediterranean image with me. Here I am with big brown eyes, a Cheshire cat smile, and a very animated face. I don't fit the image of the rational, very directed business person. But that's to my advantage."

Born in Malta, a product of two very ancient Maltese families, Ellis accompanied her parents to Canada when she was two years old. Today she maintains a strong sense of the ancestry which so marked her upbringing:

My family is a very very old Maltese family. My mother's family were the newcomers to Malta and they settled in the thirteenth century. The Galea family can be traced back to the year 800. Although I came here when I was very young and I am very proud to be Canadian, I was raised within the Maltese culture.

It becomes very evident in conversation that there is nothing average about Ellis.

Born to a family of over-achievers (one uncle is vice-president of the European Economic Council; another is a Vatican theologian who writes on the affairs of the church and state), Ellis is certainly more than holding her own in such illustrious company. Her *curriculum vitae* lists sufficient achievements to make one wonder if it is physically possible to have achieved so much in thirty-one short years. She attributes much of her success to attitudes and a philosophy which were instilled in her by her parents while she was still very young: "I remember when I was young, whenever I would say 'I want this,' my father would answer 'Well, figure out how to get it, if that's what you want.' That was it. He wasn't going to give it to me. If I wanted something I had to find out how to get it."

Growing up, quietly going about deciding what she wanted and how she was going to achieve it, was not always easy in the company of her peers. For the girl whose bedside stories were contained in two volumes, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* and those of Edgar Allan Poe, her decision to go to university had been, from the beginning, more of an assumption: the family placed a great deal of importance on education and, during her formative years in Toronto, this set her apart from her friends:

Most of the friends I grew up with never wanted to go beyond high school — friends who were generally from ethnic backgrounds (Italian or Jewish). Many wanted to get out and work and make money. In terms of my peers, going to university and, in particular, into a five-year programme was an unlikely choice. But in terms of my family it was taken for granted that that would be the course to take.

One of the first things that strikes you when Ellis speaks is her matter-of-fact self-confidence. She demonstrates no false modesty, nor is she coy about her talent. She is a self-assured go-getter who is very much aware of her abilities and her potential. This sense of security is in no small part due to the close-knit supportive home life in which she grew up:

One time my father said something I never forgot: "You really have to see life as a race." Now one would say that that is a very competitive view of things, except that he went on to tell me that there was no one else running in my race. In fact, that there was no one else running in my direction. That I just had to remember where I was trying to get, whether I ran or walked. And if I saw anyone else, it was just because they

happened to be passing at the same time.

In the 1960s Toronto was not yet as multi-ethnic as it now is. The passage through adolescence during the era of mini-skirts and ultra-thin women gracing the pages of magazines reinforced Ellis's ability to distance herself from the norm:

I grew up when blondes had more fun and the era was Twiggy. Here I was little Sophia Loren at sixteen, with olive skin and definitely not blonde hair. The choice was either to be intimidated by that model or ignore it. I learned to ignore the general conventional society. I often felt like an observer; trends had very little impact on my personal choices.

Ironically, her scholastic strength was the source of some confusion for Ellis when the time came to pick a university programme:

I just went into sciences because that was what I was obviously skilled at; but I couldn't help but feel a little hollow about what I was doing. Although I enjoyed the sciences, there was something missing for me. I think it was probably the creative aspect. But my father had always said if you don't know what to do, do something.

So Ellis did something. She floated through two different universities, unsure of what she would do with her life — before she discovered that U of T's architecture programme was what she'd been looking for. To the surprise of some of her friends, who by this time had pigeon-holed Ellis as a perpetually indecisive student, Ellis graduated from U of T with top honours. Looking back, her period of indecision was not without benefits:

I think I learned then the importance of intuition and of following one's instincts. It's part of that gray area that is so hard to explain. Intuition is not a lack of logic. It's just more difficult to analyse when you make a decision based on intuition. I have decided that the intuitive process is as rational as the logical process.

After five years spent in finishing her Bachelor of Architecture and in working with architectural firms, Ellis began to find that working with design studios could be quite prescriptive. It became apparent that her working day would allow her few opportunities to investigate those areas she was interested in sitting down and working out. The chance to pursue her personal vision came in the form of a scholarship to Harvard's prestigious graduate programme in Architecture:

I got the scholarship to Harvard, and just for one moment I thought, "I'm not getting any younger; I'm a woman in the profession; I'm interested in the design and development side." Now, there are very few women in the development side — which is very hooked into the financial end of things. That's very much a boy's club. I had doubts as to whether, at the age of twenty-seven, I should intern myself once again in school. I was afraid I would be seen as an eternal academic. But getting a full scholarship to Harvard isn't something you turn down.

It was while doing her Masters degree at Harvard and working at the same time on some of the most exciting and high-profile projects in North America that Ellis's architectural philosophies crystalized:

People appreciate an architecture of ideas—ideas that represent the spirit of the time, as well as have an international or classical representation that goes beyond time. We are surrounded by mindless retinal stimulation. Buildings which are put up for sheer expediency and the quick return on the dollar — buildings that are irresponsible acts of architecture. When we come across something that sings "Oh! Look here!" — it may just be a little tug on the shoulder — we are reminded of something called cultural memory. All of a sudden it has meaning for you. The biggest kudos I have received, more satisfying than my awards and scholarships, have come from my clients. Their pleasure in my designs signifies that they have meaning for them. That for me is the biggest prize.

Of growing concern for Ellis — and something which eventually became a major aspect in her Master's thesis — was the concept of the "liveable city in today's development world." This was a culmination of ideas Ellis had carried around and worked on for several years. Two months after graduating from Harvard, Ellis found out, through some friends, about a major international architecture competition entitled "Style for the Year 2001." It was a centennial competition in Japan, exactly on the subject which was so dear to Ellis's heart. It's not surprising that Ellis has many friends who are convinced that she has a lucky star following her in the profession.

We seem to not be able to combine the romantic notions of the liveable city with the unfortunate and real ideas of density building. The designs I submitted to the Style 2001 competition — one a design for a commercial centre

and the other a design for a civil residential area — were just one way to approach the problem.

I drew these designs on a linen that I had to order specially — it's the kind of linen architects used to draw on centuries ago. I drew with a pen, which you can't erase, as a kind of statement about the easy way in which we put down lines without thought and the ease with which architects move things around. Because ultimately those lines put down thoughtlessly are what gets built.

When I sat down that one day in 1984 and drew those designs in one sitting, it really was a kind of culmination of my thoughts and ideas on cities. It was what I thought should be built instead of malls, because malls are such aberrations — introverted entities of middle-income commerce. You don't find the variety and extremes that you find in the downtown of a consumer society — the Creeds and the Holt Renfrew, right down to the curio shops and used clothing stores. Now I'm not worried about the Creeds or the likes thereof, but I am worried about not finding the stamp collector's shop or those things which really speak of the peculiarities and the diversity of our society. That's why places like Queen Street or even downtown are so interesting in general — because they have preserved the extremes. So far we have been lucky in Toronto that we have managed to maintain a healthy balance, despite all the megalomaniacal entities that have come down to try and develop us.

Though Ellis doesn't directly attribute her sensibilities as an architect to her Mediterranean heritage and the fact that she is a woman, she does admit that these things have helped to shape her perceptions:

I never made the choice to be Maltese; to come to Canada; to be a woman. Yet all those things influence my work and are part of my fabric and fibre. For instance, I don't design like a Maltese; I don't not design like a Maltese. Malta has been inhabited by so many peoples that it is difficult to pinpoint what is and what is not Maltese.

If Malta's image holds no obvious stereotypes, the same could be said of Ellis. She is so firmly atypical and so wholly true to herself that she resists all attempts to fit her into the Mediterranean mosaic. Her parents, always a strong supporting unity in the background, have wholly applauded her decision to put

career ahead of marriage and children:

They don't feel I'm missing out on something because I've chosen not to marry and have children right away. They are both talented artists in their own rights — perhaps that's also why they understand. They're both phenomenally progressive people. My parents didn't come to Canada for economic reasons, but to find the kind of ideological freedom that North America offers. Don't forget that Malta is a country that has been occupied by other people for centuries. So, you see, my parents couldn't be prouder of me. All that my parents expect of me is that I be true to myself and use my talents to the best of my abilities. With that aim, the only thing they said I would need to succeed in life were brains and a sense of humour — because without the second, the first one can get you into a lot of trouble.

Though she is by now quite impervious to the biases still inherent in her largely male-dominated profession, she did anticipate experiencing some sexism during the course of her career. She is happy to report that so far it has been minimal:

Once during university I did experience some very real sentiments of hostility from a professor. But for that exception, any antagonism I have felt has not been due to the fact that I am a woman: it has always come from people who are insecure and my feeling is that they would have been just as insecure had I been a man. It was my abilities which frightened them. Funnily enough, all the things I thought I would come across, fortunately have not happened.

She pauses, and then adds with a chuckle, "unless of course, you count the reaction a Texan developer had when he read my c.v." Drawing herself up to her full height, Ellis puts on her best Southern drawl, "Well, little lady, y'a read like a man. Y'a sound like a man. Y'a done what a man has done. But honey y'a sure don't look like one."

Sitting next to this petite workaholic with the disarming smile and a wacky sense of humour, it is difficult to imagine anyone less intimidating. But that is perhaps her greatest asset:

I look like a Mediterranean and I look like I have a Mediterranean temperament. But I am probably the most patient person you have ever met when I want something. I just keep going after it. In my approach I am probably more Canadian than Maltese.