



# New designs for better streets

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Urban development in Malta has undergone an exponential growth in the past decades. This is a growth that has often been imposed indiscriminately within long-established and tightly knit streets, and worsened by a lack of urban design approaches by investors and politicians alike. The Maltese planning system has only reacted to economic and market conditions instead of trying to foresee them, and consecutive governments have simply sought to stimulate the construction industry further. In addition, none of the policies produced by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) have to date been urban design-oriented. The planning system has been overloaded with a plethora of policies that however fail to consider the street—arguably the most important spatial scale within the Maltese urban environment.

We experience the richness of any settlement through its streets. The human scale responds to building proportions within the street environment, the street's enclosure, and activity. Instead, closed street-level garages line our streets, medium-rise blocks coexist erratically, with lower buildings exposing high stretches of blank walls which overshadow lower structures, and 'template'-designed apartment blocks litter the edges of villages.

In order to improve urban environment quality, in 2013 MEPA entrusted me to review a key policy document called *Development Control Policy and Design Guidance 2007*. The authority set up a working group that included practising

architects (*periti*), decision-makers, and experts in sanitary law, transport, and conservation. Instead of simply refining the policy document, the working group saw this as an opportunity to formulate a new document altogether. The result is the *Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards 2015* that sets a new approach for Malta in urban design by departing from planning-and-architecture-focused policy-making. Its basic premise is that better urban environments must start from better streets. This is a simple principle with deeply rooted implications for design approach and assessment.

The document facilitates the understanding of important urban design principles for designers and assessors by focusing on qualitative performance criteria, which involves looking at how important values may perform in reality. For this reason, it contains a mix of design regulations/policies, good-practice guidance, and technical standards. The document is strategically structured to include more policies in the initial critical parts that form the basic streetscape structure and more guidance towards the end of the document that may result in multiple design solutions. The aim is to strike an important balance between homogenising the street structure and creating a nonetheless varied and interesting streetscape.

Arriving here has not been easy. It required challenging blinkered, insular attitudes towards design and construction, oscillating between varying public and private interests, political pressures and commitments. That, however, is another story altogether. [T](#)