

A CULTURE OF CONSTRUCTION AND WELLBEING IN GOZO

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Malta has been taken over by construction, and Gozo is quickly following suit, with more and more new buildings popping up around the once idyllic countryside. A recent study from the Faculty for Social Wellbeing highlights just how much Gozitan quality of life has suffered under the new status quo and what needs to be done to save Gozo's green spaces.



The cluttered skyline of the Church of St John the Baptist (Xewkija Rotunda) in Xewkija
Photo by Kristov Scicluna



A view of the Cittàdella, Victoria
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

With open, rocky fields, a winding coastline, and comfortable nostalgia nestled in the old limestone houses, Gozo has always been seen and marketed as a place preserved in time. While Malta has lost much of its green space to rampant construction and expansion, Gozo has, for the most part, preserved its natural beauty. Its open terrain and quiet atmosphere are some of its main attractions, bringing in those who seek a respite from the urban sprawl. However, Gozitans have come to realise that the landscape of their island is rapidly changing, and the sounds of nature are being drowned out by the screech of cranes and diggers as new buildings are erected faster than the island can sustain.

A new study commissioned by the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) and conducted by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing has unveiled just how much these changes have impacted Gozitan quality of life and how Gozitans perceive construction as a detriment to their wellbeing that is destroying the livability of Gozo. Faculty

Dean Prof. Andrew Azzopardi and the study's leading researchers, Dr Mary Grace Vella and Ms Graziella Vella, sat down with **THINK** to highlight how over-construction impacts our personal space and what needs to change to maintain Gozo's natural integrity.

COLLECTING THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

The study emerged from ERA's desire to review its policy and match its vision and strategy with the needs of the Maltese community. It will be used in relation to the updated State of the Environment Report by 2025, the implementation of the National Strategy for the Environment to 2050, and ongoing projects for open and green spaces. 'The research was basically on wellbeing and what makes wellbeing – environmentally, socially, and economically – so it was very much in line with the mission and vision of the faculty,' Dr Vella explains. With an ethos that values the power of knowledge, Azzopardi says, 'I have always dreamt that this country does not act in a knee-jerk reaction anymore when it comes to developing policy, strategy, or services. Our idea was

to provide local entities with solid, empirical, evidence-based, scientific data which they can use before building legislation and services.'

Armed with the desire to capture the social perspective, the researchers set out to collect their data. To pull off a representative sample of how the general population feels about the environmental changes happening to their country, they used a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools, from interviewing people in various localities around Malta and Gozo to conducting focus groups and even launching a nationwide survey. What emerged was a comprehensive look at how people's lives have changed as a result of losing green spaces and how people have adapted to this new way of living.

WHAT ARE GOZITANS SAYING ABOUT CONSTRUCTION?

This study took the temperature of civil society's view on over-construction and loss of green spaces, and the voice of the people rang loud and clear. 'The study has captured, in a more academic way, what the people out there are saying: Enough is enough. We don't ▶



Poor visibility of Tas-Salvatur Hill (Tal-Merżuq Hill) near Marsalforn
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

want to live in polluted areas. We don't want our lives to be determined by over-construction. We don't want to wait hours in traffic to go to work,' Dr Vella vehemently expresses. The study illustrated what people and environmental activists have been saying for a while: over-construction negatively impacts the individual's everyday life and even our social connections and relationships with the people around us.

People are no longer surrounded by natural spaces but are suffocated beneath busy construction sites and towering apartment buildings. Traffic jams pack the island's narrow roads, pollution grows as more and more cars fill the island, and the safe green spaces children once played in have been lost to new buildings. With both qualitative and quantitative research tools, the study revealed that in Gozo, high levels of dissatisfaction were reported in connection with this culture of construction.

Gozitans already face challenges in accessing resources, services, and opportunities, so the issues that have emerged from over-construction, such as congestion, pollution, and the loss of green spaces, add an extra layer of disillusionment to Gozitan quality of life. 'It's an added factor, and it makes life even more challenging because of the traffic and hours of commuting daily or weekly and coming back to a locality that is becoming more and more similar to Malta in terms of density, traffic, cost reduction, and buildings,' Ms Vella states. These burdens have greatly impacted the physical and mental wellbeing of Gozitans and have changed the character of the island. 'It's almost blasphemous,' Azzopardi professes, 'when you are literally uprooting what makes Gozo Gozo: the rural villages, the greenery around them, the ability to live in Gozo. This has been taken away, apart from being immoral and unethical.'

Beyond over-construction changing the traditional character of Gozo, the study found that the community ties that once bound people together are becoming undone. 'This is not the Gozo that we know; it's changed so quickly and probably at a quicker rate than Malta itself,' Ms Vella says. Localities no longer look or feel as they once did, and the connections people had to their local communities have dissipated. Friendships between neighbours dissolve when substandard building regulations put people at odds with each other, and distrust builds when the community places more value on status and wealth than the wellbeing of its people.

'There is a culture that has grown on us, that what matters is how much money we have, how much estate we have, and how much status we have,' Azzopardi says. 'We seem to be drawn by the Pied Piper of this false Maltese dream of making money.' Buying land in Gozo is cheap, and it's not just developers who want to cash in on high demand; many Maltese have benefited from generational wealth, being left land in Gozo by parents and grandparents. This inherited wealth is undoubtedly appealing, and the commerce that comes with population growth and the tourism boom has hyped the desire to cash in on Gozo's green spaces. But as the study has shown, there are consequences to the rush of overbuilding, and the Gozitan community has been influenced by the changes within its traditions, culture, and atmosphere.

A stark divide has appeared within the community. Limited sanctioning and regulations from governing bodies has allowed developers to step over the line. Society's rampant drive to capitalise on Gozo's natural wealth has nourished this culture of construction. People want to boost their economic



A pedestrian-level shot of Republic Street, Victoria
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

and social status, and understandably so; we live in an expensive world. Yet at the same time, people must contend with the loss of Gozo's idyllic countryside and, with it, the sense of community and belonging.

PAVING A GREENER WAY FORWARD

Azzopardi, Dr Vella, and Ms Vella agree that there is only one way to put an end to the divide construction has caused within our national space. A line must be drawn in the sand that prohibits illegal and unregulated construction and puts an end to the culture of overbuilding that has run wild in our country. 'In my personal opinion, there should be a total moratorium on new buildings on our island,' Dr Vella says, 'We already have enough buildings.' Azzopardi agrees with this and continues that the only construction that should be allowed is that which supports local heritage and allows older buildings to be restored to their original design.

The Dean also believes that we need to have more conversations about the dependency of our economy on the construction industry. 'The construction industry has made our economy so dependent on it,' he says, 'so we need to start thinking about alternative routes and ideas on how to develop our economy. We need to diversify our services to make up for it. It's a complicated issue, but there is no conversation about it. We only talk about it for a day when someone dies on a construction site, and then that's it.' These discussions need to become ingrained within our governing systems to sanction unnecessary and unsafe construction and monitor how much developers, stakeholders, and private landowners are building on our island. We have to begin moving away

from a culture of status and build a renewed appreciation of our open green spaces, making them more available and accessible for people to recharge and get back to nature.

While the study revealed how construction is severing individuals' ties to the community, Maltese locals and Gozitans are still hopeful that these connections can be renewed. 'People still have an affinity to their locality, despite everything. They want their locality to be better. They still feel this sense of connection to their community. The social connections and closeness to family and community are still there,' Ms Vella says. More and more people are standing up and speaking out about over-construction and the negative impact it is having on their lives and on Maltese culture. And with more visibility and voice added to the conversation, society has the opportunity to undo the damage over-construction has caused. When people become active about the issues that impact their lives, it demonstrates to others that community matters, and when there is value in belonging, people care more about their social spaces.

'Community doesn't just happen,' Azzopardi asserts. 'Community has to be developed. It doesn't just fall from the sky. And the way we are living our lives, completely immersed in making money, leaves very little time for consideration towards other people.' This means putting more value on connections and community, showing kindness and compassion to the people around us, and seeing our national space as an extension of our personal space. Our national spaces become safer, cleaner, greener, and more accessible for all people when we put the emphasis back on society's wellbeing rather than individual or national wealth. **T**