Seven reasons why the Paceville masterplan should be scrapped

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Several commentators have made the case for the Paceville Masterplan to be scrapped. I add my voice to these calls. My main arguments are based on major flaws in the process that led to the preparation of Masterplan.

Reason 1: There was no analysis of existing environmental and social conditions of the area. The plan preparation process should start with a careful analysis of the physical, environmental and social conditions of the area. Consultations at an early stage with people who live or work in the area are essential.

Reason 2. The planning approach adopted for the Masterplan is incorrect. The Masterplan takes as its ‘baseline’ nine major development proposals that were submitted, formally or informally, to the Planning Authority. This imposition by the Planning Authority is not justified by any study or analysis. The Masterplan consultants developed their proposals around, and broadly in accordance to, the requirements of the nine ‘baseline’ proposals. This is turning urban planning on its head. Instead of a plan used to evaluate development proposals, we got a Masterplan which is determined and shaped by the development proposals.

Reason 3: The Planning Authority’s imposition of the ‘baseline’ developments on the Masterplan signifies endorsement, in principle, even if the eventual details would have to be worked out. The ‘baseline’ developments are being endorsed by the PA without a proper assessment of each. Moreover there is no justification based on the local plan or of any other policy documents. If the Masterplan is eventually approved as is, the PA would have short-circuited the planning process, a process to which it is legally bound to adhere.

Reason 4. There is no strategic justification for the substantial increase in floorspace that will result from the nine ‘baseline’ developments. The Masterplan proposes a sharp increase in the number of luxury apartments, in office and retail floorspace and in the number of hotels rooms. These will be
over and above other developments that are and will be taking place in Paceville and elsewhere in Malta and Gozo. There is no identifiable demand for this massive increase of floorspace, be it residential, commercial or hotels. Taking retail for example, there has been a steady increase in retail in Malta in the last decade and there is no way that we can sustain further substantial increases. Decisions that will have long term economic and social impacts are being taken in a vacuum.

Reason 5. The Masterplan ignores the Floor Area Ratio policy. The Planning Authority’s abandonment of the Floor Area Ratio is a grave error. The FAR is a mechanism with which a public space is created over part of a large development site. In return, the developer gains additional building height from other parts of the site. The FAR provides a measure with which the PA can take decisions on major developments. Without the FAR, the PA will have to make highly subjective decisions on building heights, based on equally subjective assessments of skyline. It will boil down to negotiations with each individual developer, based on subjective criteria. As soon as one developer is granted some kind of concession, the next developer will immediately ask for more.

Reason 6: The Masterplan includes proposals that will require the forced acquisition of private property. Since the 1990s, public authorities have avoided expropriation of private property, except when essential and unavoidable, like for example when a traffic road needs widening. Over the years, I have seen dozens of local plans, action plans and development briefs and never have I come across any planning document that advocates the expropriation of private property, other than for infrastructural needs. Infringing on people’s enjoyment of their property in this manner is unacceptable. In the Masterplan, the situation is made worse: the owners find out that their property is being considered for expropriation through a document issued for consultation.

Reason 7. The Masterplan is not doable. There are two factors that make it unachievable. The first concerns the requirement of forced acquisition of private property for important elements of the Masterplan to be achieved. The expropriation will give rise to cumbersome legal procedures making it possible for any one of the private owners to block the process, or at the very least to delay it significantly. The second factor concerns public funding. For the plan to be implemented significant sums of public funds will be required. As a minimum 150 million euros will be required for the expropriations of private property and anything between 50 and 100 million for the public spaces and the infrastructure. Anyone who works in the public sector knows how difficult it is to get additional funding from the Finance Ministry; it is like drawing blood out of stone. Then there is the issue of equity. Is it fair that these extraordinarily large sums of money are spent in one area
(primarily to cater for the nine ‘baseline’ developments) when there are other areas which are also in need of investment for upgrading and regeneration?

For these reasons, the Masterplan is fundamentally flawed and should be scrapped.

There are other matters which are of concern. First, when the Planning Authority receives proposals for development, it normally carries out a preliminary assessment based on the local plan and other policy documents. In this case, instead of a preliminary assessment, the PA simply passed on the nine proposed developments to the Masterplan consultants, imposing them as ‘baseline’. For these ‘baseline’ developments, it seems that the PA did not carry out a preliminary assessment. A case in point is the proposed development at Cresta Quay. For many reasons, development on this site is a non-starter. It is on the rocky foreshore, it is a very restricted site and it would remove the last remaining natural rocky water’s edge around St. George’s Bay. The right thing for PA to do would have been to advise the developer that a high rise building on that site is not acceptable.

Second, the Masterplan completely disregards a development brief that is legally binding on one of the nine ‘baseline’ sites. The Masterplan does not provide for an open space in the Mercury House site. This is in conflict with the development brief for Pender Place and Mercury House. Development briefs are commitments which bind the authorities as well as the private developers. In a sense, they are also the authorities’ commitment to the public and to nearby residents. The Planning Authority should show more respect for development briefs that are in vigore, because when the goal posts are shifted, the Planning Authority would be backtracking on the commitments it made to the public. It is also peculiar how the Masterplan recommends expropriation of private property to create open space in Paceville but then allows for the removal of one open space that is readily available within one of the major development sites.

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