

## From promenades to petrol stations, some things don't change - Alan Deidun



Rabat: Sacrificing swathes of this evocative and ecologically-important valley simply to widen the road for promenade building purposes (complete with street furniture) is irrational and should be opposed.

The development of promenades, complete with street furniture and ancillary facilities, is a gentrification tool frequently resorted to by politicians and administrators in general, given the feel-good factor that such infrastructure normally brings. Given that promenades promote pedestrianisation within areas of scenic appeal, they are in general very popular with vast swathes of society.

The whole promenade glaze is somewhat sullied when earmarked sites for the promenade development are environmentally sensitive. For instance, planning application PA04647/18 proposes the lateral extension of the existing Triq it-Tabija, meandering down from the Roman Villa towards a number of Rabat hamlets, in order to accommodate a promenade, paving works, street furniture and even additional parking spaces.

The road in question skirts the evocative Wied Gherixem, which is a yawning gulf separating Mtarfa from Rabat and Mdina. It is intensely farmed in view of the extensive soil depth characterising such a valley and by virtue of a number of freshwater springs which bolster the productivity of the area.

The chequered agricultural patchwork within the valley features vineyards, fruit orchards as well as fodder crops. The roadside slivers of the valley, however, support dense stands of fig trees, specifically some of the largest local specimens of the Bajtar ta' San Ġwann variety, besides having conservation importance.

For instance, local botanists have recorded over the years a slew of infrequent indigenous floral species from the area, generally characteristic of aquatic habitats, dry valleys or abandoned fields. These include *Apium nodiflorum* (Fool's water cress, Karfus ta' l-ilma), *Lepidium graminifolium* (Grassleaved Pepperworth, Buttuniera wieqfa), *Potentilla reptans* (Creeping cinquefoil, Frawla salvaġġa), *Stellaria neglecta* (Greater Chickweed) and *Veronica anagallis-aquatica* (Blue speedwell, Veronika tal-Ilma).

Project advocates will contend that none of these species are protected by law, even though most of these species are infrequent and not widely distributed locally given the deficient nature aquatic habitats on these islands. Affording protection to sites simply on the occurrence of protected species or habitats is done oblivious to the fact that frequently overlooked species are important for additional ecosystem services, such as acting as a food source for important pollinating species.

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And the archaeological value of the area cannot obviously be understated given its location within the immediate Rabat environs.

In testimony of the current surge in the proactive mindset of this country, an online petition objecting to the promenade proposals has been set up and is available at the website of Movement Graffiti.

The current groundswell in favour of mature roadside trees testifies to the importance that such urban trees have assumed for the public. The same groundswell has coaxed Transport Malta to revise plans for the gargantuan Central Link project linking Rabat to Attard in order to curtail the number of trees facing the chop.

Jeopardy for roadside trees, however, arises from multifarious sources, including fuel station applications. For instance, PA033547/16 proposes more of the same – i.e. a fuel station and the usual paraphernalia (vehicle repair and maintenance area, car wash, etc) verging on the 3,000 square metres, for a site along Triq Valletta in Mqabba.



Mqabba: More mature Aleppo pine trees will face the axe if a proposal for a new fuel station along this iconic road leading into Mqabba is approved.

Truth be told, the earmarked site, consisting of a levelled concrete platform, bears the hallmarks of decades of human disturbance and thus holds no agricultural, ecological or landscape value. The real issue here is the proposed felling of 11 mature Aleppo pine trees (znumber) lining the road, simply to allow access into the proposed fuel station and, presumably, to allow appropriate visibility to the same site as well as to mitigate the potential fire hazard that these trees can pose.

Those familiar with the area will attest to the fact that the same avenue is a signature landmark of the wider area given its dense tree coverage, and that the proposed tree felling will constitute a detrimental fragmentation of such dense cover. In a country with one of the lowest national tree coverage figures in the EU, and probably with one of the highest fuel station densities in the world, the proposed sacrifice in mature tree cover is simply inconceivable.

It would be highly ironic if the applicant in this case proposes landscaping to screen his development when, in the same vein, he is proposing to do away with the natural landscaping constituted by the mature Aleppo pine trees to be chopped down. But probably these considerations will be stifled by the single most important consideration of all (at least for those on planning boards) – whether the proposal is in synch with the current fuel stations policy.

Despite the disparity in the type of roadside developments being proposed, they all have one common denominator – further land uptake and/or felling of mature trees. When will we seriously start considering restoration projects only rather than detrimental (to the natural environment) ones?