

## 7,000-year-old Ta' Ħaġrat temples within the sights of developers



Can you spot it? The rare square corbelled hut (girna) in Wied l-Ghasel Valley, Mosta, has been screened from view such that it is now effectively lost in oblivion as a result of the development on this site.

Researching through Wikipedia, I came across the following information on Ta' Ħaġrat Temples at Mġarr:

"The Ta' Ħaġrat Temples in Mġarr, Malta, is recognised as a Unesco World Heritage Site, along with several other Megalithic temples. They are among the most ancient religious sites on Earth.

"The larger Ta' Ħaġrat temple dates from the Ġgantija phase (3,600-3,200 BCE); the smaller is dated to the Safiġni phase (3,300-3,000 BCE)."

Upon reading these facts, one would expect that the local authorities would afford these temples the highest degree of protection, not just on paper but also through tangible means.

Well, you guessed it... no place is too sacred for applicants on these blessed islands, it seems.

A planning application (PA 00357/13) was submitted to demolish an existing building along Triq San Pietru in Mġarr and its redevelopment, complete with swimming pool, pump room and garden. Nothing untoward, at face value, you might think; only the proposed development is right next to Ta' Ħaġrat temples. 'Right next to' means well within the buffer zone of the temples.

*Was all this shenanigan a ruse by the applicant? Did he purposely aim preposterously high in the hope or conviction that if he were to scale down the proposal at a second stage, a permit would be granted?*

Reading the case officer's report (which, by the way, recommended that the application be refused), one finds the following recommendations, which the board of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, in all its wisdom, seems to have conveniently ignored:

"The application is recommended for refusal for the following reasons:

"Part of the site lies outside the limits for development defined in Map 51 of the North West Local Plan and so it is located in an area which should remain undeveloped and open.

"The proposed vehicular development through the Outside Development Zone would run counter to this scheme and would represent unacceptable urban development in the countryside, thus running counter to Structure Plan policies SET 11 and BEN 5.

"There are no reasons from a planning point of view why the proposed garage cannot be accessed from the schemed road without encroaching Outside Development Zone.

"The proposal thus runs counter to Structure Plan policy SET 12, which requires valid justification from a planning point of view why development which can be located within scheme is proposed Outside Development Zone."

The Mġarr council laudably objected to the proposed development, rightly pointing out that it could jeopardise the development of an interpretation centre right next to the temples to enhance the experience of visitors.

In addition, the local council rightly pointed out that the proposed development lies within the Strategic Open Gap between Mġarr and Żebbiegħ.

The Superintendence for Cultural Heritage, which was also very critical of the proposal, pointed out that the development would entail extensive surface disturbance and soil removal and would inevitably intensify urbanisation in the vicinity of the temples.

The permit was granted on September 15 after the applicant submitted revised plans, in which the swimming pool and the ODZ footprint of the development were trimmed out, such that the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage dropped its initial objections, and after all its conditions, as well as those of Mepa's Environment Directorate, were taken on board.

It might be speculation on my part, but was all this shenanigan simply a ruse on the applicant's part? Did he purposely aim preposterously high in the hope or conviction that if he were to scale down the proposal at a second stage, a permit would be granted?

## **More lidos planned for Sliema's coastline**

It seems there is no stopping the further development of Malta's coast, whether it is through the boathouse phenomenon, or the selling of prime coastal sites in St Julian's for hotel development for a paltry sum, or illegal kiosk development, or the irregular parking of caravans.

In the early 1990s, Anderson and Schembri, in the first comprehensive landmark survey of Malta's coastline, estimated that over 90 per cent of the accessible coastline in the Maltese islands (that is, where one can walk down to the sea, as opposed to cliffs) was committed in some way or another (to construction, industry, and so forth). The figure has most probably cranked up even further since then.

Take Sliema, for example. With its quintessential urban character and intrinsic links with the anything maritime, Sliema would be the last place one would link with fresh development along the coast. And yet, last March, a development and a planning application (00014/13 and 02601/13 respectively) was submitted for the erection of structures for leisure activities... in another words, another lido of sorts.

One can go one step further and say... more of the same, since the earmarked rocky stretch is hemmed in between two other lidos. Not all of the existing lido structures appear in shipshape condition... hence, why apply to encroach on even more coast rather than investing to upgrade existing facilities?

Private developers should be barred from encroaching on even more coastline. About five or six years ago, a few hundred meters away from the earmarked site, the Jumbo Lido was dismantled in a move that championed the public right to the foreshore.

If the proposed coastal site is developed, this would somewhat reverse this victory, however small it might have been.

Sliema council is rightly objecting to the proposed development. I hope environmentalists kick up the same dust storm they rightly do when other assets of Sliema, such as its built heritage, face the axe, especially considering that its coast lies within the public domain.

I highly recommend reading anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain's work (set in Malta, by the way) – Contesting the Foreshore. The book is available online.

## **Germany gets its way on car emissions**

For many people, Germany may be synonymous with prodigious efforts to safeguard the environment through massive investment in waste management and renewable energy generation. This is mostly true, but Germany's green image was somewhat tarnished recently when EU environment ministers caved in to Germany's demand to postpone by four more years a capping scheme on emissions from the car industry.

Last June, the same EU ministers had agreed to cap carbon dioxide emissions from all new cars to 95g/km by 2020. Prompted by its three major car manufacturers – BMW, Daimler and Volkswagen – Germany asked for more flexibility so that the caps are introduced in 2024. Only the UK and Poland supported Germany's stance, while other countries, notably France, Italy and Belgium, did not.

EU Climate Commissioner Connie Hedegaard did not mince her words when she rightly said that Germany's demand to delay implementation of car emissions caps by four more years was unacceptable.