

## From fields to car showrooms



Wayside fields are being increasingly targeted as impromptu car showrooms and depots, encroaching on surrounding rural areas and pushing the precincts of our urban areas even further into the countryside.

The total footprint of built-up areas in the Maltese islands, considered to hover around 30 to 35 per cent, is a statistic frequently bandied about when advocating a tighter control on further uptake of outside development zone (ODZ) areas on the islands. The figure is disproportionately higher than corresponding ones for other EU member states.

One wonders, however, if the calculation of the statistic factors in 'informal encroachments/disturbances' which, though not constituting built-up areas per se, still represent areas where the former agricultural use has been lost. Such a loose category would include tolerated abuses which generally affect roadside areas (by virtue of their ease of access) such as unlicensed (since many actually are) boatyards, scrapyards, billboard platforms and, most recently, de facto car showrooms.

While within urban areas, second-hand car vendors plonk their vehicles in any available parking space, much to the dismay of irate residents who fail to find parking spaces within walking distance from their residences, in rural areas the phenomenon involves simply using roadside fields. The more sophisticated abusers go as far as depositing a thin veneer of asphalt on the previous soil cover.

The end result is that informal urbanisation ploughs deeper into the fabric of agricultural areas, with some roadside stretches being converted into monotonous drives past car showroom after car showroom. As if the Qormi-Żebbuġ stretch was not already notorious enough for this phenomenon, a field next to an eminent car agent has recently been annexed for more of the same. Incidentally, no planning application for the change of use can be found for the site, leading one to assume that the change has been conducted unilaterally.



Similarly, in Burmarrad, a former field with an evocative rural backdrop of undulating hills and chequered fields has been colonised by numerous cars on the same site earmarked for one of the three petrol stations (yes, you read right) proposed for the hamlet. This infringement was reported to Planning Authority enforcement staff months ago, but still the fields have not been cleared of the unsightly hordes of cars.

Besides the visual impact of plonking a large number of cars in a rural context, one has to consider the more tangible environmental impacts, including the

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compaction of the soil surface through destruction of the crumb structure, making it more prone to erosion as the wind blows away the fine soil and dust particles. There is also the possible contamination of the soil and even watercourses further afield through spillages or leakages of oils and fuels. Putting it bluntly, fields should be used to grow crops, not for promoting the sale of second-hand cars, even if agriculture is unfortunately no longer very lucrative.

*depositing a thin veneer of asphalt on the previous soil cover*

Our appreciation of unbroken and unspoilt views and landscapes is such that a conversion of fields into car showrooms does not nudge us into action very much, even though this still effectively represents a further uptake of ODZ areas in the same way that the granting of an ODZ development permit does. The notion of 'wilderness' is unheard of on these islands, where we are tolerant of a spill-over of human activities onto adjacent rural areas.

## **The 'appeal' sham**

The fact that no entity eligible to do so actually submitted an appeal to the recently granted Gharghur fireworks factory extension in the relatively pristine Wied id-Dies is testimony to the flaws of the appeals process.

First there is the question of the eligibility of prospective appellants. Only Gharghur local council was eligible in this case, while the Swieqi one was not, despite the fact that the permit granted moves the fireworks production facility closer to the Swieqi residential area. Only registered objectors are eligible. So if you missed the 30-day objection period granted after the publication of any planning application, you are effectively excluded from filing an appeal once the case is decided.

In the case of Gharghur, a hunter was the only registered objector, showing no interest in proceeding with the appeal. If environmental NGOs miss the objection window, they are similarly excluded from appealing, as was the case with Gharghur. That only leaves the Environment Resources Authority and a rarified circle of other entities, such as the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage, effectively restricting the appeals process, whose virtues are so extolled by ODZ permit champions such as architect Robert Musumeci.

Fees to lodge an appeal amount to five per cent of any planning application fee, and may thus run into several hundred, or even thousands of euros, further denting the usefulness of the appeals tool.

## **Ocean literacy initiative**

Over 60 abstracts of presentations have been submitted to the organising committee of the EMSEA Malta conference being organised by the University of Malta from October 7 to 10. Of these, 28 have been selected for oral presentations during the five thematic sessions being held in parallel during the conference.

EMSEA ([www.emseanet.eu](http://www.emseanet.eu)) is the European Marine Science Educators Association, which focuses on promoting a greater awareness of the oceans and seas and the role they play in human life (Read the seven principles of ocean literacy at <http://oceanliteracy.wp2.coexploration.org/>). A registered non-profit organisation acting as a platform for ocean education, EMSEA was founded by three leading marine science institutions in Europe – VLIZ (Bruges, Belgium), the University of Gothenburg (Sweden) and Plymouth Marine Station (UK) – following the footsteps of the corresponding organisation in the US – NMEA – which was founded in the 1970s.

The EMSEA 17 conference is being held on October 9 and 10 at the Valletta campus of the University of Malta, while a teachers' seminar is being held on October 7 at the Malta National Aquarium. Registration for the conference and the teachers' training seminar is still possible through <https://www.um.edu.mt/events/emsea2017/registration>.

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