Worth their weight in land

The new property in the centre of the photo should supposedly constitute alterations and additions to a disused farmhouse, while further down in the photo, on the opposite side of the road, a scrap yard is still illegally operating in broad daylight, despite an enforcement notice being sent to the perpetrators.

One cannot but applaud the retrospective approach of some members of the public who, rather than allow the hogwash they get through the media to sink in complacently, actually revolt against it and take pains to reply.

A case in point is the letter by Aldo Manara of Sliema ('The Foreigners of Malta', The Times, March 14) who replied to an earlier opinion piece by Frank Salt ('Worth their weight in gold', The Times, March 3).

With the third highest density in the world (over 1,200 people/km²), with the highest density of tourists in Europe (and possibly in the world), with a high number of émigrés returning to their Maltese homeland and with almost 25 per cent of the total surface area lying under concrete, one would have expected a property stalwart like Mr Salt to be more judicious in his influential column.

In his Talking Point, Mr Salt almost wants to exhort the authorities to bring over more of these "permanent tourists", as he calls them, oblivious to the fact that certain parts of Gozo, notably Gharb and Ghasri, have become suffused with an almost 'Bavarian' overtone.

He might also choose to ignore the fact that demand for 'exclusive' properties in Gozo, fuelled by those wishing to retire in our islands, is in turn fuelling a construction boom there, which is churning far more properties than are actually needed on the local market.

Quoting from Mr Salt's contribution: "The only cost to our country is a social cost, to ensure that we make them feel very welcome so that they will wish to stay here and recommend Malta to their friends and families."

Daydreaming appears to be the prerogative here since the cost indicated by Mr Salt certainly blinks in comparison with the valuable land resources they guzzle - hence, it would have been more appropriate to state that such 'permanent residents' are "worth their weight in land".

No xenophobia is intended here but, under Malta's unique circumstances, with little elbow room available when it comes to land resources, our authorities showed laudable acumen in obtaining derogations from the European Union to limit the number of foreigners taking up residence in the islands.

After launching the environmental CD-ROM for schools, Mr Salt's latest foray is certainly a case of a non sequitur. Delving into the French reality can shed further light. Northern France, specifically Brittany (and, to a lesser extent, also Normandy) are currently experiencing an influx of English people who are shunning their native land (due to a plethora of social reasons, such as high crime rates and ethnic displacements) and buying property in this corner of France.

Due to this influx, property prices have skyrocketed with many locals being nudged out of the equation and property dealers are left free to beef up their kitty. Now this might seem far fetched for our island at the moment, but the bottom line is that property dealers are the primary recipients of what Mr Salt is explicitly proposing.

The inalienable truth is that many construction and property magnates usually opt to spend their time unwinding abroad, since they can afford it, with Sicily and many of its pristine satellite islands becoming a coveted destination. Hence, after despoiling Malta, they opt to abandon ship.
Some of the high-heeled individuals who buy plush dwellings do so to speculate - anyone is invited to take a stroll in the Fawwara/Tas-Salib environs (l/o Siggiewi) to take note of the gamut of properties with 'Owner leaving island' affixed to it.

This gave me the cue to call on our authorities again to start issuing permits only once evidence is provided that the property in question is to be inhabited in the near future, rather than ending up as a pawn in the speculation game, which is giving us vacant plush dwellings and committed open spaces.

And the ODZ rot continues

The following section was compiled with the generous help of Annalise Falzon.

In the short span between February 26 and March 19 (four weeks), a full 13 ODZ applications have been filed.

Qala, Gozo - two applications: 7049/04 and 05707/04 (site at Triq Wied Simar) - both situated on a ridge and hence with high potential to impinge on the landscape value of the area.

Kercem, Gozo - one application: 626/05.

Munxar, Gozo - one application: 00302/05 (site at Triq Landar, off Triq il-Munxar) - proposed dwelling house with swimming pool in what should be an ODZ and along the side of a very sensitive and protected valley listed as a SSI by DPA - GN 721/95, AEI by DPA - GN 856/00, and AHLV and an International SAC by DPA/EPA - LN 257/03 GN 877/03. How further can one legislate against speculation?

Mellieha - two applications: 00977/05 (Site at Ix-Xaghra tar-Rabti, Mellieha) - proposed agricultural land reclamation through dumping of debris and topsoil - same site is subject to ENF 43/05 and does not support cultivated land (as aptly exposed by the name 'Ix-Xaghra') and 00720/05.

Mosta - three applications: 790/05; 00789/05 (site at Triq Sir Arthur Borton) for the proposed construction of industrial garages on the fringes of what should be the protected nature and tree reserve of Wied I-Ghasel; 00092/05 (site at Ta’ Xkora) for the proposed sanctioning of existing garage used as a wood joinery and (as if this was not enough) for the proposed extension to the same garage.

Wardija - one application: 364/05.

Birzebbuiga - one application: 00633/05 (site at Ta’ Salvun, Hal Far) - for the proposed construction of garage, workshop and open storage site, despite the same site being the object already of enforcement action! (ENF 396/98).

Mgarr - one application: 00996/05 (site at Ta’ Mrejnu, Triq Ghajn Tuffieha) - for the proposed construction of eight residential units and garages in a largely undeveloped area - is such a building spree justified by a sudden upsurge in our farming or overall population?

Swieqi - one application: 00697/05 (site at Triq Pedidalwett) for the proposed construction of maisonettes, garages and washrooms in a valley (Wied Mejxu) protected by Structure Plan policies.

Mtarfa and Siggiewi as showcases

While waiting for David Pace’s long overdue reply to my queries (I am as eager as a beaver to read today’s letters section), I wish to expose two cases of blatant shortcomings on behalf of the MEPA DCC Board/architects involved (I am getting befuddled as to who I should point the accusing finger at, with so many scapegoats: who is accountable for all this?).

These two cases come hot on the heels of the Triq it-Turretta, Dingli, case, which should have caused some blushes to DCC members.

Siggiewi - site at Triq Ta’ Blat il-Qamar, Ta’ Bur il-Kbir (application no. 07203/04), for reinstatement of existing agricultural building with additional constructions and sanctioning of part of a construction.

The ‘usual’ mundane reasons not to grant planning permission existed, namely that the site is ODZ, which should remain undeveloped and open (and, quoting verbatim from the case officer’s report, the proposed application represents unacceptable urban development in the countryside), there is no justification for the development of the site as required by Structure Plan policy SET 12, the proposal infringes Structure Plan policy UCO 13 and that the building in question has a high architectural value (vernacular identity) to which no accretions should be made.

No wonder then that the Planning Directorate duly recommended a refusal. What leaves me slack-jawed, however, is that according to the Agriculture Department, the applicant is not registered as a farmer, but is a renowned academic.

No prizes for guessing that the DCC granted permission for all this. And also no prizes for guessing why case officers and those in the lower rungs at MEPA are feeling disillusioned at seeing their work undone by the ‘enlightened’ ones higher up in the pecking order.
Mtarfa - site at side street off Triq l-Imtarfa, Mtarfa (application number 1100/03). The applicant originally applied for alterations and additions to a disused farmhouse/tool shed in this ODZ site (illustrated).

When MEPA granted the permit for this development, little inkling did it have of the massive construction that would supersede the original one, de facto giving the once disused tool shed a facelift and turning it into a plush dwelling/villa.

Anyone with some form of wits around him is free to learn that purchasing an old, dishevelled tool shed or farmhouse can reap more than expected results.

Just a stone's throw away from this same site (literally opposite it), a pending enforcement action at St Paul Farmhouse (ECF 1123/01) seems to have lost its clout since the dumping of material on this highly picturesque site just below Rabat and Mdina, which has been converted to a veritable scrap yard, is still ensuing.

Our comatose tourism authorities should be the ones to blow the whistle here!

Silver linings

Wied Garnaw - despite its many lacunae, MEPA does indeed manage to get it right sometimes. A case in point is a proposal to construct workshops, an underground car park and industrial/commercial facilities at Garnaw Valley, l/o Sta Lucija and Gudja.

In the decision report by the DCC, it was rightly stated that one of the structure plan policies prohibited any form of urbanisation outside areas specifically designated for urban uses while the site had not been identified as adequate for small and medium enterprises.

The same site had a "characteristically agricultural landscape". Ominously enough, however, the DCC's decision can be appealed - one only hopes that this does not turn out to be yet another déjà vu, with the Appeals Board overturning a rare, commendable decision by the DCC.

Church Environment Commission - the Church Green commission is certainly not shirking from its self-appointed responsibility of increasing environmental awareness among its faithful by issuing a set of in-depth guidelines regarding its green initiatives. Salient points from such guidelines, compiled in a publication by Dr Paul Pace, include: launching an internal audit to establish how the Church's operations can be made more sustainable;

on a regular basis, the Church should be ready to face the music and take a proactive stance in current environmental hot potatoes, such as hunting, land speculation, cruelty to animals during religious festivities, etc. (the Church should denounce any misdemeanours, even if coming from the top brass of the country... ground-breaking indeed!);

the inclusion within parochial activities of hikes, walks, camping, etc., held jointly with NGOs, to bolster environmental awareness among the public;

the adoption of abandoned chapels as centres for environmental education;

the curbing of practices, like the use of olive tree braches in Holy Week festivities, the cutting of Narcissus flowers, etc., by parishes;

and much more. The same publication was kickstarted with the following vision statement: "Christians live in harmony with creation and with themselves, according to God's plan and thus find their place in creation and realise their stewardship role in protecting it."

NGO legislation - at long last, the first draft of the Bill on NGOs has been approved by Cabinet and will be available for public consultation in the coming weeks. People involved with NGOs have been clamouring for such legislation for two reasons - to don NGOs with a legal status, thus enabling them to apply for funding from abroad and also to separate the wheat from the chaff (i.e. to distinguish between 'proper' NGOs, backed by a statute approved by a Council and numbering at least more than a few handful of members, and the rest).

ALE and hunting - the hunting season has started in earnest but so has the sterling work of the ALE (Administrative Law Enforcement) section of the police. Such a diligent unit is to be lauded for sending out a crisp message to hunters - that shooting on any bird aside from turtle dove and quail between March 25 and May 22 will not be tolerated.

And it seems that the ALE has drawn a line in the sand, with already 16 hunters being apprehended this year for shooting in the closed season, while over 360 hunters were apprehended last year over hunting-related offences. In addition, police officers have been posted over the Gozo channel to permit the safe migration of ducks as well as on the Ta' Cenc cliffs.

San Gwann Local Council initiative - this LC is certainly to be commended for organising walks for pupils in the locality's primary schools in the reserve of Wied Ghollieqa, in conjunction with the NGO Nature Trust (Malta). In the age of technological paraphernalia, students are rarely given the opportunity to savour nature at first hand, especially in urban strangleholds like San Gwann.

Energy efficient lighting - the Green Leaders within every ministry have been instructed to start drawing up a census of neon tubes within their premises, to eventually replace them with energy-efficient ones.
Green thumbs up - MEPA’s PR Office for dealing with planning queries with astonishing speed; all the members of the public who, in the shadows, actively support this column.

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