

Sheer cheek at Qala



Despite an enforcement notice being meted out for the infringement on site back in 2002, we are this year witnessing roughshod beach reclamation at Ramla tal-Bir at Marfa by the Riviera Hotel.

With stories like the Mistra and boathouses controversies, the hotel extensions at Ghadira and the Lidl supermarket development clogging the headlines, we thought we had seen it all. We thought that the ensuing hue and cry would preclude developers from embarking on similar feisty forays. Well, we have yet again been proved wrong, as the cheek of some seems to know no bounds.

Like most cases, it is Gozo which possesses the greatest pariahs. In the once tranquil village of Qala, two planning applications have been filed - (PA04724/07 and 07697/06), which refer to the proposed construction of five houses with swimming pools and of an apartment block with basement garage, both in outside development zone (ODZ) sites along Triq il-Kunċizzjoni, Qala.

One of the applications was filed by Karkanja Ltd, one of the leading developers in Gozo, while another applicant seems to have a penchant for ODZ approvals. In fact, days before the last election, he managed to obtain approval for a partial ODZ development close by.

Now, he is trying his hand at it once again. Both applications have earmarked fields at the upper reaches of the valley known as Wied Marga - in fact, locals can testify how these fields are regularly flooded in winter since the area is an important water catchment area, which slows down the flow of water before its descent towards Fhondoq ir-Rummien bay.

Therefore, developing such swathes is tantamount to sheer madness, as it can possibly compound flooding in the area. The proponents of the development have already advised tenant farmers in the area to stop tending to their fields, even though both cases are still being evaluated by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority. Do the applicants have an insight into things to come? The Qala council has vociferously denounced the two applications, even writing officially to Mepa.

In addition, PA 07810/06 has been submitted, referring to the proposed construction of dwellings with swimming pools and the proposed construction of additional facilities at first floor level and basement parking. Nothing untoward so far, you might contend, especially since the application refers to an existing development - Xerri's Complex - albeit in an ODZ area.

Despite a refusal being rightly recommended by the Mepa Directorate, the case was deferred on April 29 to a later date. Anyone familiar within the area in question, right over Żewwieqa Bay, flanking Mġarr Harbour and commanding views of the port high up on hill - knows that any additions to such a development, are bound to have a negative impact on the landscape value of the approach from the sea to the harbour. Try justifying the development to all the tourists approaching the island on the Gozo ferry.

Closing off access at Ta' Ċenċ

The recent spat between the owner of the Ta' Ċenċ hotel and the adjoining land and villa owners in the Kantra area, overlooking Mġarr ix-Xini, have boiled over. Concrete blocks (purportedly forming a wall of sorts) closing off access to Mġarr ix-Xini from Ta' Ċenċ are being erected illegally - the same wall apparently closes off access to some public pathways.

An enforcement notice (ECF282/08) has been issued in connection with the case - one hopes that, while land owners have the right to cordon off their land, Mepa will vigorously uphold the rights of the public in the area by ensuring public access is maintained.

Is the same wall constructed a veiled threat by the owner that he can close off access to the area any time he wishes? Has the erection of the wall anything to do with the fact that his pending development application has been put on ice for the moment?

Boathouse poetic histrionics

My jaw dropped when someone forwarded me a poem written in the L-Ahrax boathouses lobby periodical Mil-Bajja by one of the squatters.

Reading through what is a veritable tragicomedy, one encounters such phrases as 'We, the owners of the boathouses, will soon witness a change for the better, since we shall benefit from new premises instead of the old ones'.

So now the squatters on public land have become owners and feel so emboldened through their meetings with exponents of both political parties that they aspire for more.

Such barefaced cheek was stoked by successive administrations which have regaled the squatters with amenities such as electricity and water. Why not connect them to the sewerage system too?

Further snippets from the 'poem' include: 'Some rooms at Armier have been standing for 40 years... we shall have all the amenities, as though we were in our homes.'

The boathouses are, therefore, through self-admission of their occupiers, just a summer residence replete with all comforts, including satellite TV in some cases, and are therefore nothing more than illegal summer residences on public land.

By allowing such illegalities to fester, our politicians are simply giving more power to the squatters.

The poem ends in a fitting way - by thanking all those who have helped their cause; in other words, most of the political class from the early 1970s until now.

The bottom line derived from such a 'poem' is that the boathouse people have become so ensconced in their illegality that they are fully convinced of their divine right to take over public land and develop it for their own benefit.

The poem is also reminiscent of the placards held aloft in a march organised by the squatters some years back, which read 'We do not go to Paceville' or 'The boathouse keeps our children off the streets and away from drugs'.

The Church's environmental credentials

The Church Environment Commission has been setting the pace where environmental awareness is concerned. For the past few years now and last month it embarked on a series of public dialogues aimed as fostering further the Christian green ethos.

Such dialogues explored aspects such as the environment and development, environmental responsibility and environmental education, and were chaired by Prof. Salvinu Busuttil. Speakers included, among others, Prof. Victor Axiak, Dr Paul Pace and Vince Caruana.