

The green-whistle-blower



Boathouses as Gnejna Bay.

Illegal development is already a scourge, and a common one too, as it is estimated that about 5,000 cases are awaiting direct action from the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (some of these admittedly refer to minor cases of illegality rather than to glaring cases). To add insult to injury, some choose to squat on the land of others, snug in the knowledge that they can.

A case in point is Gnejna, where myriad so-called 'boathouses' encroach onto both public (the elusive 'foreshore') as well as private land. In fact, vast swathes of land at Gnejna is in private hands, as an 'undivided interest', which prevents the land being divided between the owners.

The irony is that the owners rarely visit their property. As a result, landowners are actually obliged by law to remove illegal structures from their premises. This results in a vacant niche which others have deftly scrambled into. Mepa duly meted out a gargantuan enforcement notice - ECF 11/07 - under whose umbrella all illegalities at Gnejna are incorporated - instructing owners to take action before the authority did so itself.

Therefore, the landowners face the prospect of paying for dismantling illegal structures they have not committed themselves, but which have been exploited by indiscriminate individuals.

Another oblivious 'landowner' that is milked relentlessly is the Government itself. A number of illegal structures are placed on public land. The Lands Department is constantly in court to face enforcement action by Mepa, while the perpetrators get away with it. However, when Mepa identifies the people concerned, it sues them as well as the landowner. If, of course, the authority manages to find them. Which is not always easy.

The only way to deal with them effectively is to post enforcement officers close to illegal developments round-the-clock. This would guzzle Mepa's financial and human resources but must be adopted in some instances.

Within the same Gnejna area, a rusty gate bars access up the concrete path leading to Ras il-Pellegrin and Fomm ir-Rih. Besides thwarting vehicle access, the gate is also a hindrance to ramblers who need to clamber up on the 'boathouses' in order to gain access.

Those in favour of the gate contend that it has been there for at least 30 years and that it prevents vehicles from entering, which would ruin the area. While this is true to an extent (though hunters regularly drive up the concrete pathway with their jeeps early in the morning), provision should be made for ramblers to get through at the sides.

The Lands Department defends the right of individuals to protect their private property through the erection of a gate or wall. However, now it has emerged that the same gate was not erected by the owners of the land, but by those who want to keep prying eyes away as they have built illegal structures behind the gate.

This surely adds some weight to the call by Nature Trust, the Ramblers and Mepa for a narrow pathway to be carved out next to the gate to allow people up the concrete pathway towards the majestic Ras il-Pellegrin.

A country of vacant dwellings

The National Statistics Office recently published some sobering statistics which shed some light on the rape of our land: the construction frenzy and its implications.

Despite a surplus 53,000 dwellings (a staggering 25 per cent of the total count of buildings), prices show no sign of cooling off, an endorsement of the observation that property prices do

not follow logical supply-and-demand constraints.

The salient points from such a survey include the fact that almost one in two properties in Gozo is vacant, despite the incessant call for more faceless flats and apartments.

In Malta, the regions with the highest and the lowest percentage of vacant properties are the north and west respectively.

Contrary to popular belief, the number of vacant properties in the south harbour region, which includes Valletta and Cottonera, is below the national average, at 19.6 per cent. Currently, the most populated region of Malta is the north harbour area, comprising among others the localities of Birkirkara, Hamrun, Qormi, San Gwann and Sliema.

The largest rise in new properties between 1995 and 2005 occurred in the northern region of the island, comprising Gharghur, Mosta, Mellieha, Naxxar and St Paul's Bay, suggesting a migration to the north of the population, as predicted by local sociologists.

Between 1995 and 2005, a staggering 37,000+ new dwellings were constructed (an average of 3,700 per annum), of which almost half (17,000+) are still vacant.

Does any political force have what it takes to restructure the construction industry rather than bragging about the expansion of this untenable sector?

Statistics as per 2005 census

	Malta	Gozo and Comino	S.Harbour	N.Harbour	S- Eastern	Western	Northern
Total no. of dwellings	171,833	20,481	34,933	55,196	26,577	21,603	33,524
Occupied (%)	128,459 (75%)	10,791 (52%)	28,093 (80%)	42,610 (77%)	19,815 (75%)	18,104 (84%)	19,837 (59%)
Vacant (%)	43,374 (25%)	9,762 (48%)	6,840 (20%)	12,586 (23%)	6,762 (25%)	3,499 (16%)	13,687 (41%)

Silver lining:

Tal-Qortin dump turned into a park - the conversion of the former dump at tal-Qortin, Xaghra, Gozo, into a new family park deserves to be applauded, especially since it constitutes an example of environmental remediation. Hats off to the Environment Ministry and the Gozo Ministry. The green wind is certainly blowing!

34U

To celebrate World Tourism Day, the 34U campaign, together with Malta International Airport, Malta Tourism Authority, the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association and Kinnie organised a welcome party at the Arrivals lounge. Tourists visiting Malta were encouraged to plant a tree. Not only will one be contributing towards afforestation, but it would give them a reason to visit again.

E-mail: alpra1@mail.global.net.mt; alan.deidun@um.edu.mt