

The green whistleblower



The cliffs near Ta` Sarraflu in Gozo, where an illegal trapping hide scars the otherwise unbroken landscape. MEPA Enforcement have been notified of such developments and they are investigating. (Photo courtesy of Nature Trust, Malta)

Reading about the AX Group's 30th anniversary and the views of the newly-fledged duplex suites at Verdala (The Sunday Times, September 4), I could not help thinking that the real story behind all the gloss has been conveniently swept under the carpet. Such duplex suites have been recently rechristened Virtu Heights, as if to dispel any lingering bad impressions about them.

The saga of the Verdala duplex suites started way back in 1995 and is still not over, since neighbouring residents are still tied down by court proceedings against the developer, after the response they got from the Ombudsman (to whom they also resorted) turned out to be obsolete.

Despite strong objections from the Rabat council, from residents and even despite a strong recommendation of refusal from the Directorate, PA 8125/94, for the construction of the Verdala Mansions, alterations to the existing hotel, extensions to St Catherine's Street, slab extension, basement garages and the duplex suites was tacitly approved by the MEPA board.

In its recommendation of refusal, the Directorate mentioned the following valid points:

- The developed site lies outside the limits for development defined in the Temporary Provisions Scheme (TPS) for Rabat and are located in an area which should remain undeveloped and open - hence, the proposed duplex suites comprise an "unacceptable urban development".
- Structure Plan Policy 12 clearly states that ODZ development is permitted in the case of hotel extensions - however, the duplex suites certainly do not fall under such a category.

Also, among other things, the proposed development:

- conflicts with SP Policy SET 11, which does not permit urban development outside existing and committed built-up areas.
- runs counter to Policy PLP 20, which stipulates a blanket prohibition of any form of urbanisation outside areas specifically designed for urban uses".
- is of an excessive scale in terms of floor area, height, number of rooms and site coverage, and would lead to an overdevelopment of the site.
- is unacceptable in a residential area as it would have a deleterious impact on the amenity of the area.
- would detract from the traditional urban skyline (SP policy UCO 10).
- the height of the proposed duplex suites extension exceeds the maximum height limitation for Rabat.

In a nutshell, the approved site is completely ODZ; the site is a valley ridge; the approved footprint is much larger than the existing ridge - hence, impromptu debris dumping and excavation has to be carried out to 'extend' the ridge to accommodate the development

No EIA was carried out, despite the gargantuan nature of the development.

The Verdala duplex suites case casts a pall over MEPA and its operations that still refuses to be dispelled, as long as justice is not done once and for all.

MLPN golfing championship

Our histrionics-bound hoteliers should take exception to Jane Fannon's letter in The Times, (August 10), in which she rightly highlights the simple basics that would make our tourism industry much more competitive, such as the pricing and quality of hotels, food and service in general, rather than making preposterous proposals for a 'theme park' Malta, which is certainly anathema to the discerning visitor.

Such hoteliers certainly seem at a loss for ideas to improve the Maltese product - simply scouring the flood of tourist letters lamenting about the cacophony of farmers chasing away birds from their vineyards will surely provide some clues.

If tourists want theme parks, they have Spain, Tunisia and Cyprus to choose from, buoyed by their superior land resources; we are sitting on a goldmine of archaeology, history and culture. Croatia has certainly hit the nail on its head by marketing their country as a relatively pristine destination by limiting construction in coastal areas. It is very hard to imagine, however, how our politicians would agree to branding Malta as "the Mediterranean as it once was" with the pressures they continuously face from the construction industry to keep the mill going.

The PM's infatuation with the golf course is such that he was reported as even singing its praises during the meeting he had with children on Monday to address some of their concerns.

The Leader of the Opposition has jumped on the 'environmental opportunism' bandwagon by claiming that he will wait for the feedback from civil society to give his response to the Xaghra I-Hamra golf course proposal. Against such a scenario, is there any cause for optimism?

Biox int għix ahjar ('So you can live better') is the latest government slogan, accompanied by snippets of road projects, engineered landfills, sewage treatment plants, etc. No mention of a curb on further construction - OK, I can swim in clean waters, breathe in amenable air but where can I stretch my legs (not on a promenade or public garden, that is)? And for what purpose will the water from ix-Cumnija sewage treatment plant be used? Is such a slogan referring to the quality of life or to the standard of living? I suspect the latter, which has greater economic connotations.

I take exception to Stanley Farrugia Randon's letter (The Times, September 6), in which he exposes the public concern that NGOs are being enticed by the authorities into swallowing the pittance of managing the remaining areas of Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra. To give credit to these NGOs, these have spoken against the proposal for the site, albeit at a later stage than would have been expected - one only hopes that the same ironclad stance is still maintained, no matter how insistent government's coaxing becomes.

No amount of joint PRs by the MTA and MRAE is enough to conceal the real reasons behind the Xaghra I-Hamra choice... bucks! With its stake in the former Air Malta properties at Hal Ferh, the onus now is on the government to get the golf course approved and greatly bolster the value of its stake.

In addition, as a bait to possible developers of the project (whose names are well known), a substantial area of the same site at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra is earmarked for residential property development, a veritable new housing estate in the making - an area of at least eight hectares. The golf course PDS (Project Description Statement) calls it "ancillary urban development", which is required to "make the golf course financially feasible". I thought we could simply live off golf, in view of the plethora of positive statements by the powers that be.

The same PDS states that two of Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra's pluses are the good views the site offers and that it is well positioned in relation to tourist areas. While I beg to differ regarding the second point, I fully embrace the first point - the good views are one of the reasons why ramblers want to preserve the site as it is. The same PDS more or less writes off a possible extension to the Marsa golf course by saying that it is unattractive to experienced golfers, although the site is the most amenable, because it is near an industrial area.

After failing at its first attempt at real estate to develop a hotel, terraced club houses, pools, bars, disco, golf course, etc. on 5,500 metres square of land which is owned by the Government but managed (lease or emphyteusis) by Hal-Ferh Co. Ltd in 2003, Government is now trying to get a second bite at the cherry.

The Opposition has its own skeletons in the closet regarding the golf course proposal, it seems - they are now clamouring for the Pembroke site to be chosen (not White Rocks), despite a previous golf course application there being rejected in the past. Could it be that such a choice was made due to the number of properties that the MLP possesses in the Pembroke environs?

In reply to Marco Cremona pointing out to Chris Ciantar of WasteServ, on a local political TV station as to why the Sant'Antnin plant extension EIA was taking so long, Mr Ciantar rightly pointed out that certain procedures had to be adhered to when drawing up the EIA for such a major project - hence, the question is sacrosanct: why is the Xaghra I-Hamra golf course proposal EIA being rushed through in a clear case of two weights, two measures? How can such an EIA be drawn up in less than nine months when a decision is expected next May?

That the golf course venture is increasingly a half-baked one is also evident from the fact that the public gleaned most of the information concerning the same venture through the work of a

diligent reporter - Massimo Farrugia - in his article "Golf course impact assessment starts" (The Times, August 26). This is completely out of sync with the EU announcing that stronger rules enabling citizens in Europe to have their say before public authorities take decisions affecting the environment would become binding to all member states last June 25!

Laissez-faire at Mgarr ix-Xini

Visitors to the quaint cove of Mgarr ix-Xini in Gozo are surely familiar with a number of so-called 'boathouses' (-cum-improvised summer residences) huddling against the steep rock faces of the bay (see photos). According to correspondence (dated March 25, 1967) between the Director of Works and the Commissioner of Lands, two plots (measuring a total of 1,608 sq yards in total and straddling over the 'boathouses' shown in the picture) were detached from property belonging to Senglea parish church to be administered and held on perpetual lease for public use. I leave it to readers to gauge from the attached photos if the property is indeed being used for a public purpose.

The bottom line is... the squatters in Mgarr ix-Xini should be evicted from the properties in question which should be returned to the public domain. In the tightly-knit political web that is Gozo, I know that this is tantamount to wishful thinking.

The Mgarr ix-Xini situation is symptomatic of the general laissez-faire attitude prevailing in Gozo, with ODZ applications hailing from Ghasri, Gharb, Qala and Munxar/Fontana clogging the lists of planning applications published on Saturdays.

Rather than drawing a line at excessive development on Gozo, Minister Giovanna Debono brags about it all - "In fact, she continued, in the past six years, property sales in Gozo boomed from Lm8.3 million in value at December 1998, to Lm43.9 million at December 2004, and the number of contracts signed rose from 737 in 1998 to 1,764 in 2004 - an increase of 139% ("Government giving great importance to Gozo" - The Sunday Times, June 26).

Reminiscing about what has been lost

Tony D'Andria Hunt, a former Times of Malta reporter who was interviewed by Natalino Fenech (The Times, August 24), bluntly states: "On the negative side, there seems to be an excess of building development and large areas of Malta and Gozo have been lost". His words have an added punch, seeing that he left Malta in 1964, and hence can easily draw comparisons between then and today's urbanisation levels.

This contrasts starkly with the newer generation who do not bat an eyelid against the encroaching buildings just because they have no inkling of what has been lost to date.

Silver linings

HP recycled paper use - This month, HP certainly deserves the green biscuit for launching HP Office Recycled Paper in Europe, an initiative on offer in the US since 2001. The European launch of such a product was delayed to ensure conformity with the various environmental specifications of the various regions - now there's no excuse to cling to - top-quality recycled office paper is available on the market for the most profligate users!

SMS emission alert - despite criticism of the recent introduction of the 'SMS emission alert' service, one must laud such an initiative, which should keep those infringing the law on their toes - unfortunately, the Maltese can only be brought to heel when they have to pay. Let's only hope that the system, and a similar one introduced for littering offences, does not spell the end of fully-fledged green wardens.

Gudja scrapyards clearing - MEPA's Direct Action Team once again bit the bullet when facing the wrath of the occupier/owner of an illegal scrapyards in Wied Garnaw, l/o Gudja (see photo). The character at hand was so unsavoury that the police were needed to avoid skirmishes between himself and the press - MEPA estimates that the islands are plagued by around 50 illegal scrapyards!