

Spectre of mega-projects looms again



Eyesore "ship's prow" at Triq il-Bullara, Xaghra - miniature dwelling or hunting lodge facing over the valley?

With tourism figures predictably on the downturn, authorities are now gripped by a frenzy to bolster confidence once more in the tourism sector - they are going about this task not by clamouring to save our vanishing natural areas, for example, to attract more ecotourists but by promoting a rat-race for mega-projects, reminiscent of the building boom of the Sixties and Seventies.

Once again, Gozo was chosen as the whipping boy when it comes to development - this time on adverts in several newspapers in which the government is inviting persons or organisations interested in carrying out a scheduled air service between Malta and Gozo to submit proposals to the Ministry for Transport and Communications.

AD's stance on the matter is laudable as it was the only organisation to ask for clarification as to whether the adverts referred to a fixed-wing plane service (hence, needing an airstrip) or simply a continuation of the existing helicopter service (to stop next April).

Most Gozitans, as evident from the 1996 election result, oppose such an airstrip, which would gobble up whole hectares of undeveloped land. A few, however, vociferously advocate the project, such as Franco J. Scicluna from Victoria, who argues that most of the land in question at Ta' Lambert is not farmed nor used but simply serving as a makeshift dump.

If Mr Scicluna is so concerned about budding dumps in Gozo (about which I have often written), why doesn't he take the bull by the horns and urge the authorities to clean up the area? Do we need an airstrip as an excuse to remove a dump when two square km of farmland are lost every year?

He also states that opposition to the airstrip stems from political motivations. Wrong again - Gozo will not enjoy any respite from development, whatever political force holds sway - PN: pro-airstrip: MLP: pro-golf course. Hence, to be a Gozitan environmentalist, you need to be apolitical (with due respect to AD).

Official figures have it that 1.6 million tourists (including Maltese) visited Gozo this year, up from 995,000 last year - evidently, long waits at Cirkewwa are not deterring people from crossing over - do we need an exclusive air service to cater for the high-heeled who don't want to wait with us commoners at Cirkewwa?

The last pocket of natural coastline at Qawra is the first to fall under the developer's scrutiny in the Qawra coastal leisure project, spearheaded by the construction of a giant aquarium.

Personally speaking, such a project evokes mixed feelings. Being involved in marine biology, I naturally welcome any initiative to bolster marine research facilities in our country. With a sea area that is 20 times the terrestrial area, our islands should be nurturing hordes of marine biologists, rather than the meagre numbers it is actually producing.

Also, I am buoyed by comments that the project will involve rehabilitation of the historical entrenchment wall and beachpost on site, safeguarding of the natural features of the coastline and of public access to the sea and the avoidance of unsightly development.

On the other hand, I suspect that what 'high-class' landscaping actually refers to are alien, exotic species planted in our wayside roundabouts and that the vulnerable coastal ecology of the area will be tampered with irreversibly through heavy-handed interventions.

Also, the mention of small-scale facilities on site also to further diversify the product offered also promise nothing rosy on the horizon. In addition, the fact that the whole project is expected to cost around Lm5 million is symptomatic of a large-scale project rather than one with a limited impact. The accent should be on preserving the coastal ecology of the site, especially since almost 82 per cent of the accessible coastline is already dominated by tourist-industry related development and another 14 per cent is occupied by maritime activities (a total of 96%) and since coastal ecosystems are so susceptible.

One hopes that new Cirkewwa terminal-style construction and management is not on the cards this time round. A suggestion to be made at this point could be to move the laudable aquarium project away from the Qawra site to a less pristine and more developed area, such as the Sliema-St Julian's area, so as not to sprawl over yet another part of unblemished coastline.

More sad news from Bidnija and Gozo

Scouring through The Times archives, I came across an interesting statement, with which I am in complete synergy, by Mark Causon of AD who stated that MEPA is 'losing control' over illegal building development in Gozo.

And still, the 'honeymoon' period statistics continue to be aired in Parliament, with Minister Giovanna Debono vaunting that more jobs were created in the construction sector in Gozo - no wonder no one bats an eyelid against illegal development in Gozo.

Developers in Gozo seem to have a predilection for eyesore buildings, chief among these is the one built at Triq Bullara in Xaghra, which verges on the valley below. As one resident aptly commented, the property in question resembles more a ship's prow than an actual habitation space. The property is covered by all building permits, issued for a kitchen/dining/living room at ground floor with a spiral staircase leading up to bathroom and bedroom.

Local residents are waiting to see if the building is actually occupied or not since the local grapevine has it that the same property is really intended as a hunting lodge - given its exterior looks, such a rumour is not so far-fetched after all.

But the kingpin of the most incredulous cases must surely be that of the Rapa Blocks ready mix/batching plant/tile factory site at Ta' Xhajma, l/o Xewkija, a case truly befitting an airing on Canale 5's Striscia la Notizia.

Application PA2430/94 for construction of a batching plant, concrete blocks manufacturing facilities, garage for vehicles, stores and offices and water reservoir was dismissed by the Appeals Board on October 30, 2000. Even before that, enforcement action ECF184/93 was issued on May 16, 1993, in view of a batching plant and tile factory without permit and the enforcement action is still pending at the Enforcement Officer's end.

To rub salt into the wound, enforcement action ECF52/99 was also issued in view of the batching plant having no permissions on site; the case was referred for direct action on March 11, 1999 and again still pending.

One realises that this case is the epitome of protraction, with Gozitan local councils unfortunately not showing the same mettle as their Maltese counterparts (in the notorious batching plant case when five local councils teamed up in a steering committee) and MEPA apparently being unable to budge an inch.

Going up the hill to Bidnija a few weeks back, I racked my brains as to how the small, quaint red-domed Bidnija chapel could serve the spiritual needs of all the residents of the former hamlet. In fact, the rate of building development within the same hamlet is ensuing at breakneck speed and soon the need for a new church will arise.

A property in question lies just off Triq Sagra Familja, Bidnija, the result of MEPA permit numbers PA 0015/99, PA 4578/00, PA 01109/02 and yet another one referring to a washroom construction.

Such a construction is punctuated with planning misdemeanours from start to finish. Firstly, it was built in an ODZ (Outside Development Zone) and within a rural conservation zone. The relevance for MEPA of such zones seems to have fizzled away.

Secondly, since such a building lies within a rural conservation zone, it should abide by some watertight conditions, some of which the building in question has flagrantly flouted. These include RCO 4 requiring that any development within a RCA should not detract from visual amenities of the surrounding open countryside (the same building is built a mere 2 m from the road and is higher than the maximum permitted 10.5 m above street level due to the recently built washroom).

It is understandable that neighbours have taken umbrage over this - what if they too decide to flout the law? Will Bidnija consist of eyesore buildings only? A precedent has now been created by MEPA in the area. Thirdly, a carob tree (supposedly, a protected tree species, at least on paper) was cut down to make way for the same property.

In the face of all this, the MEPA's Planning Directorate recommended approval of the same development - will they pull it down once they get to know of all the aforementioned infringements? Surely not, they will sanction it.

MEPA will now justify all this by saying that the property will now only cover half of the originally planned footprint - granted; but bottom line is that still an eyesore building in an ODZ area (formerly called a green area) has been allowed to sprout and yet another carob tree was cut down in the process.

Silver linings

Hats off to MEPA for finally moving in to stop illegal panel beating operations in the middle of a scheduled area - i.e. Xlendi Valley. The valley (Wied il-Lunzjata and the surrounding watershed) was scheduled as per notice to that effect published by MEPA in the Government Gazette on October 27, 2000 and notified to the owners by a circular letter of December 12, 2000, even though an eyesore concrete passageway was constructed recently over the lower part of the valley and a notorious discotheque located within the valley has numerous pending development cases (to be decided next January).

The panel-beating case (referring to a garage situated along the main road to Xlendi from Fontana/Munxar) hogged the limelight when on November 24 this year it was the subject of Parliamentary Question No. 3031. MEPA action was long overdue after it had vaunted that the same panel beater premises had been bricked up and included in its list of 150 enforcement notices carried out to date on September 3, when in reality the same panel beater was still operating on a somewhat subdued level.

Way back on April 6, 2001, an enforcement notice had been issued against the owner of this garage because of the illegal 'change of use of garage to panel beater and construction of walls without permit'. MEPA tried to enforce this notice in late June this year whereupon the owner filed a warrant of prohibitory injunction against it before the Gozo court to prevent it from carrying out its duties. The court rejected this request on August 4 for obvious reasons - the area had been scheduled since 1993.

A word of support

I wish to express my deepest support to the Pembroke council which single-handedly rose to evict squatters from the Pembroke garigue. After placing on-site notices about three weeks ago that the garigue was in fact public land, such notices/signs were uprooted in two days.

Rather than taking the cue from the Pembroke council, MEPA is considering turning a blind eye to the trapping hides near Mnajdra Temples, while other NGOs did not even support the local council's venture.

Nature Trust (Malta) actively supports Pembroke's valiant stance and urges the authorities to act on it.