

Can't get no satisfaction



Certainly a building with a view, built precariously right on the edge of the ridge at Il-Palma, in the Ta' Mrejnu area, l/o Mgarr. The site is ecologically important, and the building is an eyesore.

I took the liberty of borrowing the title of Michael Shermer's article in this month's Scientific American, since the author inadvertently draws the line between quality of life and standard of living, an issue I have been harping on for the past few months.

In the article he quotes the findings of a study conducted by London School of Economics economist Richard Layard, which shows that people are not happier even though average incomes have more than doubled since 1950 and "we have more food, more clothes, more cars, bigger houses..." (the last two are especially relevant to us Maltese).

According to Layard, once average annual income is about \$20,000 a head, higher pay brings no greater happiness. So why do certain individuals indulge in a "never-ending hedonic treadmill that paradoxically leads to misery"? Workaholic local contractors, with their retinues of architects and endless development applications, immediately come to mind.

The answer might be found in the witty quipping given by H.L. Mencken (also quoted in the same article): "A wealthy man is one who earns \$100 a year more than his wife's sister's husband." Hence, the race to build more so as to rake in more profits is simply fulfilling the urge to go one better than your neighbour.

Our islands are paying more than their fair share to quench such an urge, in terms of land space. These considerations make one feel snug in the conviction that development tycoons, of whom we have quite a few, get little or no satisfaction from the millions they rake in annually since they have grown oblivious to the meaning of the term 'appreciation'.

Election doldrums

It may not be official yet, but it seems an election steamroller will start soon. Indications include the increasing backlog of 'hot' decisions, which have been put on the back burner so as not to upset any applecarts at this stage. Such a backlog includes decisions on the airstrip extension in Gozo, the Hondoq ir-Rummien yacht marina, the Manikata road project, etc. Is the fact that such decisions have been postponed an indication that these unsavoury decisions will be announced after election day?

Once politicians start campaigning and knocking on doors, I will let them in, offer them a coffee and then ask the following questions:

Will you and your party propose the publication of party sponsors? ("The only way they (politicians) can break free from the influence of the building industry is if they agree to carry out a reform in the financing of political parties... What is certain is that the present laissez-faire situation is conducive to corruption and political patronage, and should be reformed." - Edward Fenech, AD, February 4)

Will you and your party pass legislation effectively prohibiting sanctioning of ODZ illegalities? It has now transpired that Environment Minister George Pullicino's avant-garde proposals (first announced last May 11) to clamp down on ODZ illegalities are being resisted at Cabinet level.

It would be interesting to know who the ministers opposing such proposals are - do they dare come out in public? On second thoughts, however, little imagination is needed to guess which ministers are presumably opposed to such laudable proposals, since certain ministries have repeatedly had MEPA enforcement notices issued against them.

Will you and your party commit yourself to opening up public pathways in the countryside rather than simply meeting up with ramblers as a PR exercise?

Will you and your party work on a WhistleBlower Act to safeguard the integrity of gutsy individuals who expose acts of corruption, an idea first floated years back by Dr Eddie Fenech Adami?

Will you and your party take a stand against land development simply for speculation, for example by passing legislation decreeing that all newly developed property should be inhabited within six months of completion?

Predictably, the hapless aspiring politician will be at a loss to reply, since he cannot commit himself to such obviously unpopular decisions. That is why I can confidently claim that the two main political parties have nothing to offer, aside from cheap rhetoric.

From Castelnuovo (Naples) with love

I am an avid watcher of *Le Iene*, the satirical Italian TV show. I was gob-smacked last week when hearing something that occurred in a suburb of Naples, Castelnuovo, which has about 50,000 inhabitants.

A staggering 70 blocks of apartments, comprising about 450 apartments, have been developed illegally on formerly agricultural land, with some already acquired by unsuspecting buyers. Now that all the blocks have been confiscated by the Carabinieri, all eyes are on the communal authorities who, believe it or not, claim that, at no stage were they aware that such illegal structures had gone up.

As rightly noted by the feisty journalist, 70 apartment blocks are hardly visible, after all! The scourge of illegal development appears to be endemic to the Mediterranean region, with our islands certainly affected too.

Surveys galore

Two surveys were conducted recently by Xarabank (TVM) and by The Sunday Times. The former's results are somewhat heartening since, when asked what their major concern at the moment was more respondents (5.1%) chose the environment than unemployment (4.3%).

The latter's results were, on the other hand, more anomalous. In fact, while 37% agreed that construction for speculative objectives should be halted, a similar percentage (38%) disagreed, despite the rampant urbanisation of the islands; some solace is provided by the 71% who disagree with the replacement of hotels with apartment blocks in scenic sites and by the 83% who agree that the 1939 rent laws should be overhauled.

Gozo airlink saga

Rumour has it that some of the more vehement Gozo airstrip extension proponents have more justification for their stance than meets the eye. Rather than solely being preoccupied with Gozo's economy, some of them apparently are bent on opening flying academies to pursue their pastime once the airstrip has been extended. One hopes that such rumours are unfounded since they would otherwise constitute yet another case of conflict of interest.

Mario Saliba (*Malta Today*, February 18) states that when the Gozo ferry is suspended, Gozo is completely isolated. Can Gozo Channel or the Gozo Ministry (such a staunch proponent of the airstrip extension) tell us how many times during the past few years the ferry service was actually suspended? I have a gut feeling that such occasions were very few indeed, and surely cannot be latched on by those calling for the extension.

Still reaping dividends

Angelo Xuereb's suggestion in the Classified section of *The Sunday Times* last week that construction (C&D) waste should be disposed of at sea to create an artificial island on Hurd's Bank is food for thought indeed, especially since it comes from one with 30 years' experience in the construction industry.

To advocate land reclamation so insistently is to throw in the towel and admit that we, as a nation, are unable to manage our C&D waste on land, probably because of the disproportionate amounts of such waste we are producing.

Our marine resources already have to run the gauntlet of countless yacht marinas, untreated sewage, port activities, fish farm activities, thermal pollution, dredging, trawling, etc. Should we also add land reclamation to the list?

Even more eyebrow-raising is that the construction industry is pushing the concept through - is this a case of first having made a buck through various activities which generate C&D waste, such as quarrying and construction, and then still making a buck by applying for tenders for projects that dispose of such waste? There is a conflict of interest somewhere along the line.

Leading contractors are already reaping the benefits of being involved at the other end of the process by renting out their heavy machinery for ongoing works at Maghtab, for example.

Property prices ruckus

Last week's Xarabank again brought the property prices debate to the forefront when an individual present in the studio rightly interjected that exorbitant property prices were currently the leading cause of marriage separations (quoting from an article in Malta Today).

Such a cri de coeur was met with an unimpressive quip from the PM, who replied that there was very little the government could do, apart from issuing 200 social housing units (a pittance).

Such resignation to the situation might play very well into the hands of those with a vested interest in the construction industry. In fact, it is hardly surprising that the chairman of the Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC), architect and mayor Robert Musumeci, warns that any government intervention to control property price hikes or further development will spell economic disaster (The Sunday Times, February 4).

Despite his article's title, 'How will property prices go down?', Mr Musumeci provides readers with very little insight into his strategy for keeping property prices in check but rather tries to justify his pro-development stance. If property prices are not cooling off with 40,000 vacant dwellings, will they with 50,000 or 60,000 vacant ones?

Supermarket hype

Malta frequently gets the wooden spoon for its green credentials (e.g. along with Cyprus, it is the only EU country to rely solely on fossil fuels for its energy needs). However, it does get a silver spoon from time to time, albeit for dubious 'merits'.

For example, we have the highest tourist density in the world and we could soon be on our way to having the most supermarkets per square kilometre. Despite the recent upsurge in supermarket developments around the island, a well-known local contractor/developer has applied to build three supermarkets in ODZ sites (Zebbug, Luqa/Gudja and now even in Mosta). This developer is currently embroiled in court proceedings to prevent the descheduling of Balluta, which would impede some of the sea views from his hotel (a veritable case of the kettle calling the pot black), who has proposed yet another beach extension/nourishment at Marfa (after the same beach was, according to the Ombudsman, unlawfully blocked to the public by an iron gate and for which development, the same contractor is refusing to carry out an EPS), who has had massive planning infringements sanctioned at Hal Farrug, whose own architect is also MEPA deputy chairman and whose misdemeanours at Xemxija are conveniently being allowed to fade into oblivion.

Defying rationalisation?

The same contractor has the cheek to apply to develop an area that lies just outside the redrawn development boundaries in Mosta; he is blatantly defying the very rationale behind the recent rationalisation process (excuse the pun) - i.e. that development boundaries would be sealed once and for all.

Will environmentalists who said that boundaries will be redrawn in the near future and that the rationalisation process was simply a temporary measure that would create further loopholes be vindicated when the Wied I-Isperanza (Mosta) ODZ supermarket is given the green light, or will Minister Pullicino and MEPA see to it that the very premise behind the rationalisation process be retained when this brazen application is refused? Only time will tell.

Wishful thinking

It is salutary to dream since dreams detach us momentarily from the sombre reality around us. However, even dreams can be far fetched. A case in point is the recent statement by Din I-Art Helwa's executive president, Martin Galea, who at the end of the NGO's annual general meeting yesterday week stated that politics should move out of the planning process.

Fat chance, in an insular society like ours! It's like trying to stop lemmings in their suicidal intent! Both political parties are keen to keep their toes on MEPA boards since the construction and property market are their main sponsors.

Silver linings

Ombudsman's decision - The Ombudsman, Joseph Said Pullicino, recently recommended to MEPA that whenever minutes of board meetings are taken they should be given to anyone objecting to the development concerned as soon as possible. The Ombudsman further recommended that MEPA should draw up procedures to establish precisely how minutes are to be taken and what should be registered in them.

Green procurement - As the largest consumer of products and services, the government has published a draft green public procurement (GPP) policy guideline for the public sector to consider the impact of its purchases on the environment. This is one of the many green initiatives the public service has embarked on since the establishment of green leaders.

Tata revolutionary car - India's Tata Motors has signed an agreement with MDI of France for application in India of MDI's path-breaking technology for engines powered by air. The MDI Group is headed by Guy Negre, who founded the company in the 1990s in pursuit of his dream to pioneer an engine using just compressed air as fuel - which may be the ultimate environment-friendly engine yet. Besides, the engine is efficient, cost-effective, scalable, and capable of other applications like power generation.

EU ban on trade in wild birds - The trade in wild birds will be permanently banned throughout the EU because of fears for human and animal health.

The ban, agreed in Brussels on January 11, should come in force on July 1, and means that up to two million wild birds will be saved from the pet trade, which has caused the decline of species such as the African grey parrot, the yellow-naped Amazon parrot and the white-fronted parrot.

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