

Wedding halls in the countryside



Scores of cars in an ad hoc car park in a field next to a recently built wedding reception hall at the foot of Saqqajja Hill, Rabat. Approving the hall's development at a previously committed site seemed harmless enough, until one realises that the stated aim of screening the approved car park has failed miserably.

The accompanying photo is an example of the encroachment and spillover of commercial activities in rural areas in Malta. Planning application PA 04019/07 sought 'full development' permission for the change of use of a 50 to 60-person conference hall (approved through PA 1438/05) to a multi-function hall to cater for conferences and receptions, including wedding receptions.

The site lies at the foot of the Saqqajja Hill, Rabat, where the wedding hall approved in 2014 triggered the development of a parking area in a predominantly rural context, besides increasing in building's footprint of almost 200m² over two floors. The approval came after the dissenting voices of the Environment Protection Department, Din l-Art Hełwa and the Light Pollution Awareness Group were largely sidelined.

The development of the car park outside the wedding hall was considered objectionable for the following reasons: "The proposed site formalisation is not considered as being in keeping with the rural character of the area. The area proposed for conversion into a car park is relatively constrained (in terms of space and configuration), such that commitments vis-à-vis functionality of the car park are likely to introduce eventual pressures for additional interventions, such as removal of trees, modification of field boundary walls, excavation of glacis under existing rubble walls..." Din l-Art Hełwa's objections quoted several Structure Plan policies that went against the proposed development.

The case officer's report listed various extenuating factors that softened the criticism and it effectively lost track of the wider picture, namely the rural context of the site.

For instance, the Planning Directorate countered the Environment Protection Directorate's valid observations, by stating: "Mepa's prime concern is to effectively screen the car park [which] will be located in a wasteland, which is being screened by landscaping and new rubble walls.

"The car park is listed as a legitimate inclusion in the non-urban scene, referred to in Structure Plan Policy SET 11. The advantages of having the parking area catering to the reception hall overrules the blanket prohibition of any such development in ODZ."

In truth, the car park is not located on arable land, although I would be hesitant to describe it as 'wasteland'. Tree loss might have been minimal (in fact, allegedly, only prickly pears and an alien eucalyptus tree were uprooted in the process, with the planting of oleander trees), but a length of rubble wall was still lost in the process and cars are effectively being parked in open countryside.

The advantages of having the parking area catering to the reception hall overrules the prohibition of such development in ODZ

- Planning Directorate

Mepa's stated aim at the time to screen the car park has failed miserably, as the attached photo shows – the ad hoc parking lot is an eyesore, anyway you see it.

Once again the voice of reason did not prevail.

The elephant in the room

The environment is consistently ranked as a major concern in surveys conducted to identify priority issues among the Maltese population. This is hardly a revelation given the many environmental problems facing the Maltese islands.

So the relative paucity of pro-environmental measures in the Budget for 2017 is surprising. In fact, the Budget was shorn of any measures to bolster the environment except for the pledges in favour of environmental policing by local wardens, of vertical gardens in urban areas and of the proposed Inwadar Park at Żonqor.

One may argue that the raising of taxes on construction materials such as cement may be classified as a pro-environmental measure, although most probably the main motivation behind it was to generate revenue for the government rather than environmental. Moreover the measure is not expected to dampen in any way the current construction bonanza in the Maltese islands, as acknowledged in the Budget speech itself.

The environmental ministry's capital and recurrent budget was slashed, along with that of most other ministries (bar those of tourism and the economy), by almost €5 million.

Although the Budget paid extensive lip service to the environment (the term 'ambient' was mentioned 39 times in the Budget speech), it should have been bolder in its pro-environmental drive by, for example, discouraging further private car use through fiscal means and by pledging funds for more effective management of protected, natural and recreational areas.

Although the Budget taxed sugar-laced drinks, such as soft drinks, it lost a golden opportunity to tax bottled water. Local bottled water producers, bar one, all exploit groundwater or springs, presumably at minimal cost, since the latter is probably associated with the extraction/tapping process rather than on the basis of the volume of water exploited.

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