

Echoes of the 2006 rationalisation



Before: The scenic site in Rabat before the start of development, with Verdala Mansions appearing on the right.

I have repeatedly harped on the ramifications of the scheme rationalisation exercise conducted in 2006, through which a number of sites that were previously in Outside Development Zones made it into the development boundaries through a revision of the local plans.

These ramifications are being amply felt today as the owners of these sites have started capitalising on this decision and developing them, some of which are in highly sensitive areas.

The granting of this permit reflects disrespect for the integral identity of the Rabat area

- Alan Deidun

Pride of place among these infamous applications must surely be reserved for a site in Rabat, off George Borg Olivier Street (PA 0397/04, for the erection of two semi-detached villas and a detached one) which should raise eyebrows for various reasons.

When the application was first submitted way back in August 2004, no fewer than five entities (Nature Trust, Din I-Art Helwa, Grupp Arkeoloġiku Malti, Rabat council and Alternattiva Demokratika) submitted an objection to the development.

The slew of objections raised by these entities were valid, including the hydrological importance of the area, the visual and landscape impact of the development, which was sited just below an escarpment, the historical context of the built environment in the area, the presence of many mature trees in the earmarked area and its putative archeological value.

The latter has understandably raised most concerns, with archeological findings made in adjacent areas hinting that the area to be developed might hold assets of its own.

In fact, tombs unearthed in the area yielded Greek pottery, and several scholars, including Caruana, Bonanno and Sagona, had commented on the archaeological importance of the wider area in general.

Luton House, lying a stone's throw away from the development, is a typical early 20th century Maltese house, complete with loggia, large cellar and mature garden with pathways, which also houses a small archaeological exhibit, in testimony of the rich patrimony of the area. In addition, Punic remains and the first floor of a Roman villa were purportedly recorded in adjacent properties.

Hence, it is no wonder that a hefty bank guarantee of €150,000 was imposed on the developer to guarantee the safeguarding of any artefacts found on site and to ensure compliance with the 15 permit conditions laid down.

However, the detailed permit conditions, which included the need to landscape the development, to have the facade in local stone and to excavate a water cistern, are little solace as they are actually seeking to mollify the permitted desecration of the site.

The area in question had long been in the sight of developers, with the first development applications being submitted in 1994.

After being handed two successive refusals in 2002 and 2003, the developers did not give up, and in 2004 their perseverance paid off with the granting of an outline development permit, which was further confirmed in 2008.

The case officer's report claims that extensive consultations were held with the Superintendent of Cultural Heritage and the Integrated Heritage Management who initially voiced concerns over the development and insisted that preliminary investigations be held to ensure that no artefacts are to be found on site. When investigation trenches did not yield any artefacts, these two entities gave the thumbs up to the development.

Against this backdrop, it is legitimate to ask whether the preliminary archaeological investigations conducted were extensive enough to completely exclude the possibility of artefacts being found on site? Also, were the investigations held on the footprint only on the area to be developed or did they extend beyond?

The case officer's report on the development is comprehensive enough, listing five Structure Plan policies relevant to the development, and most of which ironically were flouted by the granting of the permit.

For instance, policy SET 11 states that "No form of urban development will be permitted outside existing and committed built-up areas".

Advocates of the development might counter that the site is no longer ODZ by virtue of the scheme rationalisation exercise although the latter simply shifted the goalposts, rather than making a watertight case for demoting the ODZ status of the same sites.

Policy RCO 4 is even more overt: The Planning Authority will not permit the development of any structure or activity which in the view of the authority would adversely affect scenic value. The above photos of the site give a snapshot of the strategic location of the site to be developed and its intrinsic scenic value.

In the commotion and hubbub surrounding the 2008 election, many of the granted permits evaded comprehensive scrutiny by NGOs – hence, although one might be almost four years late, the granting of this permit reflects barefaced temerity and downright disrespect for the integral identity of the Rabat area.

Archaeological artefacts aside, the very location of the area from where topsoil is currently being removed, perched high up along the Rabat plateau and overlooking vast swathes of chequered fields, literally cries out loud for conservation. Common sense alone should suffice as a buttress to ward off further development of the area.

Vertical agriculture?

Vertical agricultural as a possible, albeit radical, solution to the unsustainability of current agricultural practices worldwide, which are resulting in massive loss topsoil leaching of fertilisers in water bodies and habitat loss in the tropics, and to food shortages is gaining increasing traction.

In fact, vertical agriculture is being branded as a call for the third green revolution (after the green revolutions of 10,000 BC and of the 1970s).

The concept is simple – growing crops through hydro-ponics (soil-less, fluid-based) in the same multi-storey buildings we inhabit or in neighbouring once at most, thus cutting down on transport costs to being crops to urban areas.

So far, just two such vertical agriculture ventures exist, an experimental one in South Korea and a commercial one in Japan, with plans to have more such facilities in Manchester and in the US.