

Prince Albert's concern over Malta's urbanisation



Due to unbridled development, seen here at Mellicha along Marfa road (digging into clay slopes) and along Tas-Silg road just outside Marsaxlokk, we are risking becoming `overcrowded` as Prince Albert of Monaco has warned. Plush villas being built at Tas-Silg will one day be adjoined to nearby Marsaxlokk.

The Games of the Small States of Europe (GSSE) early in June heralded greater benefits to the country than meets the eye. With everyone (and rightly so) harping on the Maltese athletes' success in these games, I will be one of the few to underscore what Prince Albert of Monaco said on his visit to the island for the games, expressing his concern that Malta could "get to be too much like other regions of the Mediterranean". He cautioned against "overcrowding the island" - sweet words indeed for our rapacious land developers and condescending authorities.

With a population density of almost 20,000 per km squared, Monaco knows a thing or two about overcrowding - quite predictably, however, Prince Albert's words will be dismissed by our authorities as nothing more than diplomatic and polite words of advice with no clout at all.

A case in point is the ludicrous statement by former Tourism Minister Michael Refalo in which he dismissed Prince Albert's statement by saying that "he should be told that more than two-thirds of Malta is purely virginal". Dr Refalo can certainly toy with tourist statistics but he is certainly no authority on land-use.

The State of the Environment Report 1998 states that only 22.5% of the Maltese Islands is covered with natural vegetation. I do not think that Dr Refalo is including the high percentage of agricultural land (above 45%) in his "virginal land" equation. Even if he does so, one cannot escape the fact that the Maltese figure of almost 25% of the total surface area being built up warrants no bragging as the EU average is much less than 10%.

Martin Scicluna, president of Din l-Art Helwa, must be reckoning that at least he has a friend overseas who embraces his sound land-use pedagogy in spite of the local criticism levelled at him for his outspoken stance against further development. Without being sucked up in the vortex myself, I want to point out that the enactment of the Planning Authority in 1992 was indeed a milestone of planning history in Malta, especially since it was replacing the puppet PAPB, but the time of resting on our laurels simply for this reason has long gone by.

The PA, now MEPA, is slowly losing its magic touch, with an increasing load of Outside Development Zone permits and sanctionings being granted. In addition, the Maltese fad of giving all issues a political tag is bogging down any progress on the issues - surely, the fact that two ex-ministers (Dr Refalo and Michael Falzon) were among those who took exception to Mr Scicluna's statements, with no contribution from the Opposition, raises some eyebrows - surely, no one in this country is able to view things from a completely apolitical objective perspective and not lambast anyone with valuable contributions to make?

Conflicting signs are being sent from MEPA - the Jekyll side drafts the "Green Point" section in The Times (incidentally, one such column states that two-thirds of all building development in our islands takes place on previously undeveloped land, with only one-third taking place on already committed land) and drafts a consultation document for the development of 500 households at Ta' Masrija in Mellicha, on a highly degraded site reclaiming part of the existent quarries in the area and laudingly replaces an initial proposal to locate industrial garages in the area, thus easing slightly the housing problem in this country.

On the other hand, the Hyde side, namely the Development Control Commission (DCC) grants ODZ permits and puts spokes in the wheels whenever someone seeks to gain information on individual cases. After all, not all information on such cases can be gleaned from the MEPA Website.

I will take the baton from Mr Scicluna himself in formulating the main points which I believe are needed to make any headway in the sober reality of land use in this country:

1. The Developing Planning Act (DPA) must be amended so as not to allow anyone to apply for a permit within an ODZ site (formerly called green area) except in cases of national interest (such as building of hospitals, etc) - the horseplay constituted by issuing enforcement notices for a developer illegally taking up an ODZ on some flimsy ploy who appeals any decision taken against him and then obtains the much sought after sanctioning must be stopped.

2. In support of AD's stance on the issue, I suggest that all those contributing financially towards the electoral campaign of all political parties in this country should be made known. The fact that building contractors are the real financial engines behind the top two political horses in this country is our best known secret - by publishing their names and contributions we would know where loyalties really lie.

3. Our courts must be made to realise that the timeframes for the hearing of development-related cases must be winnowed down as well as the endless saga of appeals which is leaving enforcement officers disillusioned as to the real effectiveness of their job.

4. The building industry should not absorb any more human resources and its gradual restructuring, with workers being channelled into other sectors, should be sought. With Malta teetering on the verge of a land availability crisis, it is ironic that we still flaunt increases in the building industry employment sector - why have all those different ETC apprenticeship training programmes then?

5. Division A of the DCC (responsible for outside development zone applications, villas and major projects) should be composed of more people from different walks of life, rather than being constituted almost 60 per cent by architects as at present - new blood and verve, such as people hailing from NGOs, naturalists, etc., should be injected into the DCC as surely architects are not the sole beacons of planning acumen in this country. Architects are responsible for submitting applications on behalf of developers to MEPA too.

Shameful ODZ applications

June has been marred like the other months with yet more disconcerting ODZ cases. Some of these, namely at Wied Ghollieqa, have already hogged the limelight, but others, such as at Bidnija, Wied Baqqiegha in Zebbug and near Ta' Pennellu in Mellieha, risk being subject to public oblivion.

Wied Ghollieqa experienced a veritable hue and cry whereby, after Nature Trust decried the sanctioning of a dwelling wall within the scheduled valley, MEPA officially claimed that the wall in question had not been sanctioned by the DCC but only minor alterations to an existing building, for which permits existed since 1960, were.

The whole mess could have been easily avoided had MEPA heeded NT's alerts about the site when such a wall was still being constructed in June 2001; however, MEPA (then PA) chose not to budge on the case, by simply issuing an enforcement notice in 2001 and leaving the developer free to carry on with his illegal construction.

Then what about the handful of developments within the valley, not dating back to the 1960s, which have been sanctioned within the valley on a systematic basis, such as the construction of a room, ramp and franka wall (enforcement notice 01266/98 and sanctioned in 2000), and the application (05153/ 01) to sanction alterations and additions to existing rural building (farmhouse)?

Quite abnormally, the latter property was sanctioned despite an initial refusal and recommendation placed on the MEPA board for the contrary. It is indeed hard to fathom how one can compromise the scheduling of a valley with the sanctioning of plush constructions. Applicants certainly have grown accustomed to the nitty-gritty of the process, conveniently masking the building of plush villas under "minor alterations and additions" - I let you decide for yourself if the property in question can be deemed to be a conventional rural building from the picture enclosed within this article.

NT volunteers alerted MEPA to yet another notable case of cheek whereby a bungalow (resembling a Hellenic building rather than anything else) was constructed on a vintage site at Bidnija high up on the hills above Burmarrad - such a construction is especially conspicuous from Targa Gap. One augurs that the necessary steps are taken by MEPA in this regard.

Yet another valley, this time little known Wied Baqqiegha in Zebbug (eventually opening into Wied Qirda), is currently in the limelight for the wrong reasons. Application 03375/01 refers to the proposed demolishing of an exiting building for basement garages and maisonettes to be built on top - at the same MEPA map server depicts a previously undeveloped green area quiet close to the valley, which has been hard hit already by development already with excavation works visible in the valley's rocky sides.

Yet another blatant case is provided by case No. 05213/02, whereby the applicant has called for MEPA to sanction the tennis courts and boundary walls illegally developed at Dahlet l-Blata, l/o Qala in Gozo. The Gozo and Comino Local Plan had identified the site for protection under Level 2 (ecology) and any sanctionings of such a property would mean that the same Local Plan would have been shunned for the whim of one developer. The tennis courts and boundary walls in question are located in an unspoilt part of Gozo, have a very large footprint and, by extending right up to the shore, are preventing public access to the coast.

To refer to a case of a few weeks back, in support of the stance taken by the Gharb council, Nature Trust (Malta) deplored the issue of a permit by MEPA for the construction of a fireworks factory close to the picturesque San Dimitri chapel. Despite incessant opposition by the local council and residents alike, the DCC of MEPA granted permission in June 2002 for the construction (application no. PA5224/00) of what is in fact the third fireworks factory in the area.

Especially galling is that the applicant has the cheek to apply with the same DCC for reconsideration of the conditions laid upon him in the permit - i.e. to limit the closing hours of the fireworks factory and to rebuild the damaged rubble walls in the area. DCC has already agreed to limit the closing hours of the fireworks factory as requested by the applicant. Priority should be given to residents' concerns when meting out development decisions.

How are we to expect that tourists and locals alike be encouraged to visit sites as the San Dimitri chapel when such hazardous ventures in its vicinity is given the blessing? It's no use bemoaning the fact that well under 60 per cent of tourists coming to our islands visit Gozo.

Please send any comments or pictures of sites to deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk or to info@naturetrustmalta.org. I would like to thank Annalise Falzon and Tony Staines for their precious help in compiling this article.