

They were once hamlets



Building goes on unabated in former hamlets like San Pietru in Gharb, despite the noble intentions of the Eco Gozo strategy.

Hamlets were given greater recognition in the recent reform of the Local Councils Act by, for example, giving them say over the way their local councils allocate their funds. But the location of some hamlets in pristine areas renders them alluring to property developers. As a result they have mushroomed into appendages of their mother villages and towns, one despicable example being Bahrija.

Within the list of former hamlets, one finds Manikata, previously only a haunt for farmers, but nowadays a mecca for people with considerable disposable income, judging by the plush properties spouting up. The population of Manikata is these days close to 600.

A stone's throw from Manikata, one finds Limbordin, flanking the fertile Pwales valley and dominating the approach to Mizieb. Here again, what was once a backwater with an outlandish name is fast emerging as yet another sizeable outpost of disproportionately large properties completely jarring with the rural surroundings.

Gozo is not spared the phenomenon of sprawling hamlets. The two hamlets of San Pietru and Birbuba, the forerunners to modern Gharb, have coalesced together as a result of the recent building frenzy, with a meshwork of residential areas intertwined with terraced fields.

Visiting these two former hamlets, the mind boggles as to the rationale behind the area's development as there is no coherent separation between built-up areas and farmland. The Madonna taż-Żejt chapel, once steeped in evocative surroundings, now risks being obliterated by a completely incongruous setting.

The two inlets of Qbajjar and Xwejni are bearing the brunt of ribbon development, with strings of holiday flats extending further north from Marsalforn towards the salt pans. At the same time, monoliths of glittering apartments across Marsalforn and Qbajjar lie idle for most of the year.

Eco Gozo indeed!

Gullible Maltese favour alien species

Alex Caruana Carabez took me to task some weeks ago for criticising the Environment Landscaping Consortium's practice of planting alien species in landscaped areas such as roundabouts. In particular, I had expressed concern about ELC planting the ground-creeping hottentot fig.

This is considered to be a highly invasive species, so much so that its eradication from the island of Minorca was sponsored by an EU Life project and was hailed even by the Directorate-General for the Environment of the European Commission.

The plant, which is native to South Africa, is being eradicated by programmes all across the EU (as far north as the island of Guernsey) and in parts of North America, but in gullible Malta we are planting (for example at the airport roundabout), ensuring it elbows out native and rare species under its carpet of succulent leaves.

Mr Caruana Carabez makes reference to the Nasturtium plant, which is a completely different plant that I also mentioned in this column. We Maltese tend to have a very anthropogenic view of what a desirable environment constitutes - native species are frequently shunned in favour of alien (and sometimes invasive ones) because the latter might produce more appealing flowers or because they spread at a faster rate.

This is a highly flawed approach - I have no qualms about manicured roundabouts, even though they impart a perception of artificiality. But the planted species should not pose a hazard to local biodiversity, especially since the spread of non-native (alien) species is considered to be one of the most serious threats for biodiversity worldwide. Incidentally, 2010 has been designated as the International Year for Biodiversity.

Of planning precedents

Architect Robert Musumeci was quoted as saying a few weeks back that Mepa planning decisions should be consistent, and that adherence to precedents should be a cardinal point of principle.

While the first statement is somewhat hard to refute, I am at odds with the second. If, as advocated by Musumeci, one were to abide blindly by the precedent constraint, as is repeatedly done by Mepa's appeals board, this would entail granting torrents of permits in Outside Development Zone sites where there is even a single approved permit.

Take, for example, Ġebel Għawżara, which does not ring a bell for many Maltese. The site is the hillock above Burmarrad, currently dominated by a development given the green light some years back and whose applicant was assisted by Mr Musumeci himself. The development in question is ostentatious and audacious indeed, being the sole property in the midst of rolling hills and valleys, and being visible, with its obtrusive ornamental palms, for miles around.

Going by the same yardstick that Musumeci proposes, anyone applying to develop sites adjacent to this property would be entitled to a positive consideration by Mepa. One shudders at the prospects that would unfold if Musumeci's proposal were to be adopted.

The issue of planning precedents should also be adopted from a different perspective. Architects, like Musumeci, who uphold the infallibility of the precedent doctrine, should put their money where their mouth is and strive to avoid setting precedents in the first place. Otherwise, such architects would only be colluding in the ruthless despoilment of our islands - assisting applicants to pioneer the development of ODZ sites and thus set precedents. And then assisting other applicants to develop adjacent sites in keeping with the precedent principle. Running with the fox and hunting with the hounds perhaps?

In defence of Lino Bugeja

In a recent edition of Xarabank, Victor Scerri took Lino Bugeja to task for purchasing an ODZ plot in Marsascala in 1968. Without getting into Scerri's Bahrija case, one cannot but condemn the fact that he conveniently omitted mentioning a very relevant snippet of information in Bugeja's supposed misdemeanour - that Bugeja never applied to develop the site, despite having ample opportunity to do so over a period of 40 years.

Ownership of land in ODZ sites does not always equate with speculation and development - it rarely does; otherwise all farmers, whose livelihood depends on ODZ areas, would be treated as building contractors.

Bugeja's environmental credentials are known to all, stretching far beyond any political motives or ulterior agendas that have been so cheaply attributed to him. Hence, any attempt to besmirch his credibility is worthy only of contempt.