

Pre-EU accession development race



The things we have to endure because of the filming industry - eyesore buildings on the scheduled clay slopes at Gnejna. Let's hope no debris is left after the filming.

Now that Malta's accession to the European Union on May 1 next year has become official, awareness that this will entail more stringent environmental criteria has started to suffuse in our land-hungry construction industry and land speculators.

This is easily evidenced by the plethora of outside development zone (ODZ) applications that are inundating MEPA. What amazes me is why the MEPA does not pull up its socks and adopt a completely different approach to such applications - for example, taking applicants to court and fining them for having the cheek to apply for an ODZ in the first place would certainly work wonders.

Shaming ODZ applicants in public (as they do in the UK for rape convicts) is yet another hardline, but probably effective, approach. Make hay while the sun shines - now that election time is at least five years away, it's the ideal time for our authorities to take drastic vote-alienating measures, such as this one.

Otherwise, MEPA is risking having law-abiding citizens wondering (and this is happening already) why the authority takes the trouble to declare a site ODZ (formerly 'green areas') or to schedule it through extensive scientific studies, etc., when loopholes for some individuals can be found all the time.

A case in point is the permit MEPA granted to develop a block of apartments along St Paul Street in St Paul's Bay (Application Case No. 00627/02) between Ghar Ghasfur and Irdum tal-Mahruq. The site, needless to say, has a high ecological value (forming part of the cliffs) and also a high landscape value.

The North West Local Plan stipulates that the site should be protected - hence, one wonders: why bother to draw up Local Plans and similar technical paraphernalia if we continually shun them on processing ODZ applications?

Yet another two notable ODZ cases are the Riviera Hotel and Wied Moqbol quarry. The former application deals with the demolition of the Riviera Hotel remnants and the subsequent construction of a two-storey building and multi-purpose hall (02994/98) - all this on supposedly scheduled land!

While I fully agree that the eyesore debris from the defunct Riviera Hotel should be removed, I certainly do not think that the best way to achieve this is to have yet another building in its place.

The most galling of applications must, however, certainly go to the one concerning the relocation of two hardstone quarries (No. 2 and No. 9) from Hagar Qim to Wied Moqbol, l/o Zurrieq (02700/00). Such a relocation would entail the cutting down of 50 carob trees and the loss of even more farmland. In addition, the frequently derided Church-State agreement states that the land in question should only be used for social purposes.

Another ODZ application is the one to build a dwelling house in Sannat, Gozo (01383/03).

With the advent of digital cameras, a new welcome phenomenon is being currently witnessed - more and more people are sending photos by e-mail to Nature Trust at deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk or info@naturetrust-malta.org asking for particular suspected cases of illegal development to be investigated.

Murky side of the filming industry

Filming in Malta, as long as it is carried out in contained conditions at Rinella or any other such committed site, can be a great sustainable money-spinner for our islands; however, the industry can also be a great source of environmental degradation if allowed to spill over in pristine sites.

A case in point is the Ras il-Pellegrin promontory near Gnejna, where the construction of a makeshift building for filming purposes on scheduled clay slope territory has raised many an eyebrow.

MEPA claims that the site is being monitored constantly; however, we have to endure the eyesore building in the midst of a previously picturesque place for now. As we have to endure the sporadic cordoning off of Blue Lagoon in Comino and of Ghajn Tuffieha for filming purposes - I think that the 'filming carrying capacity' has well been reached in our natural areas. Let's only augur that the authorities' claim that no debris will be left over from the construction after filming at Gnejna is completed is respected.

Majority are concerned

It's now official - the majority of the Maltese, as has emerged from a survey carried out by Professor Mario Vassallo for The Sunday Times last month, are indeed concerned over the dire state of our environment - one can only rue the fact that such a survey was not carried out just before the election to ensure that the environmental lobby becomes stronger than the hunting or construction industry ones.

On scrutinising the feedback from respondents to such a survey, one is generally buoyed by many of the answers given.

I was disappointed, however, by the fact that no reference was made in any of the survey's questions to illegal buildings or to over-development in our islands, the two greatest environmental threats in this country.

Even if such questions had been made, however, probably little importance would have been given by the public to these two issues, mainly because public perception of the 'real' environmental problems in this country is still too slipshod.

We Maltese generally think of the need to combat air and sea pollution and waste when we are asked of environmental problems, with Maghtab and Qortin having been firmly entrenched in the collection of local buzzwords.

In addition, the environmental awareness exhibited in such a survey peters out when a decision has to be taken as to where to buy property - in fact, few would not be taking the opportunity to purchase a property in some exclusive part of our islands, even at the cost of marring a pristine part of our natural environment.

More limelight needs to be shed on building overdevelopment in this country and the Maltese public needs to become more conscientious in its choice of building properties.

Silver linings

After repeated objections to the granting of yet another ODZ application - this time for the construction of industrial garages along Triq il-Ballut in Mosta along the periphery of Wied il-Ghasel (06497/02), MEPA refuted such a permit.

Our islands have once again a Ministry for the Environment and this is welcome news after it had been reserved only the post of parliamentary secretary and especially in view of the underdog status reserved to the environment vis-à-vis other ministries and departments within our country's administration.