

Quiet room with a view that comes at a price - Alan Deidun



A posh resort is being proposed for the ex-Pulvich explosives factory at Dingli. Rather than using it to host a higher structure, why don't we simply return this sensitive site to its natural state?

A pall of cynicism and resignation seems to have settled on the populace at large when it comes to making their voice heard about environmental matters, what with the incessant construction mill and the relentless encroachment upon our open spaces.

But throwing in the towel is simply not an option at this stage, as it simply plays into the hands of the development mongers. This column will review in detail the legitimate reasons which should spur us into making an online representation on a proposed development in close proximity to Dingli Cliffs within a designated Natura 2000 site.

PA 05732/17 proposes the demolition of the existing, licensed Pulvich explosives manufacturing factory (mainly servicing the quarrying industry) and its re-development into an eco-resort and spa.

Nothing untoward at face value, one might conclude, given that re-development of an already committed site is on the cards. Only that one has to contend with the high sensitivity and conservation value of the site in question, located within a designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC) of International Importance, managed within the EU's Natura 2000 network.

The rupestral (cliff) location of the site in question at Triq il-Qaws in Dingli falls, in fact, within the confines of the Rđumijiet ta' Malta – ir-Ramla taċ-Ċirkewwa sal-Ponta ta' Bengħisa (MT0000024) SAC. In testimony to such site sensitivity, a slew of previous planning applications submitted following site closure, proposing the conversion into a store, centre for educational agriculture, a residential unit and also a fireworks depot, were all consistently refused permission by the competent authorities.

The Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA) duly commissioned and conducted by the applicant's consultants justify the development in terms of a "niche tourism market" catering for "upper-bracket, high-spending" tourists and locals in search of "a relaxed holiday with an exceptional experience in a unique and tranquil environment away from large crowds".

This sounds more like the aspiration harboured by the vast majority of the Maltese populace who increasingly have to contend with cooped-up conditions in cluttered urban centres rather

than that harboured by a select few. The major hurdle for the 'common people' to be able to partake of this slice of bliss along Dingli's cliffs is the price tag, which renders this experience the sole preserve of the parvenu with deep enough pockets.

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Truth be told, the EIA and AA reports don't shy away from underscoring the multitude of adverse ecological impacts that the proposed development – which will rise to a maximum of 1.8m above the height of existing buildings – will have. Some of these impacts are direct and thus obvious to identify, including impact on the integrity of the hosting Natura 2000 site in question, as well as the footprint of the development itself.

The SAC in question has been declared as such by virtue of two habitats of high conservation value – namely Mediterranean pre-desert scrub and cliff garrigue. The consultants' reports bluntly acknowledge the fact that it is virtually impossible to mitigate these two impacts, which are thus described as being 'residual' in nature.

The landscape and visual impact of such a development, sited at a high altitude, also spring to mind, although mitigation is expected to kick in once perimeter landscaping sets root after a few years. The demolition of rubble walls and the uprooting of indigenous trees on site is not expected to cause much consternation given the envisaged rubble wall re-building and compensatory tree-planting.

It's more tenuous to anticipate other, more indirect impacts which will, nonetheless, invariably arise. These include the impact of HGVs (Heavy Goods Vehicles), part and parcel of any major demolition and construction project, as they wind their way through narrow, meandering country lanes which are definitely not congenial for the passage of such hulks. Despite underground parking on site being contemplated in the design, increased vehicular access to the area will obviously carry the usual baggage, including possible future widening and surfacing of country lanes, besides increased noise and emissions.

Given the backwater location of the site, there is no government electrical supply apart from single-phase. Neither is the site connected to the sewerage system. Providing the site with three-phase electrical supply will further extend – and not insignificantly – the footprint of the proposed development due to the proposed construction of a substation. This is besides the possible extensive trenching (if the further installation of electricity poles is to be avoided) to connect the site to the government electrical grid at Dingli.

Conversion works are expected to last one full year, and despite the battery of mitigation measures which have been contemplated, it is feasible to assume a massive input of extraneous noise, at least during the demolition phase, in a place that is normally characterised by extremely low levels of background noise.

Conversely to the anticipated noise pollution levels, the mitigation of light pollution through the installation of down lighters and dimmers is expected to be more effective, since, unlike the YOURS correctional facility at Mtaħleb, no floodlights will be used.

The applicant is proposing a compensatory rehabilitation of a second alternative site which is currently 'degraded' and of corresponding dimensions, given that the land uptake aspect of the development is unavoidable. This, in turn, betrays the current sobering reality within which rehabilitation of 'degraded' sites can only potentially happen in return for the approval of development elsewhere, since there is no incentive to conduct such rehabilitation for its environmental sake rather than simply as a bargaining chip.

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This is a Times of Malta print opinion piece