

A tribute to local mature gardens



The dense green pocket of the gardens and field surrounding Villino Chapelle in St Paul's Bay.



In recent years there has been an excessive number of planning applications proposing to develop or part-develop local mature gardens, stretching from Balzan and Attard to Ghaxaq (Villa Mekrech) to St Paul's Bay (Villino Chapelle), to Sliema (Villa Bonnici) to Ġnien il-Libjani (formely, Ġnien Gaddafi) in Paola.

Success in safeguarding these green oases in an otherwise drab concrete backdrop has been chequered – the development of the Balzan gardens is a fait accompli, the level of scheduling for some gardens, such as Villa Bonnici, has been downgraded while other gardens, such as Villino Chapelle have been spared any form of development, at least for now.

The true physical extent of these mature gardens can only be appreciated from the air as they are mainly enclosed within existing buildings. For instance, many may be surprised to learn that

Ġnien il-Libjani extends for 70 tumoli, or seven hectares, which is equivalent to 10 full-size football pitches.

Similarly, the rich biodiversity harboured in these gardens eludes many. I will hereby summarise the findings of two broad ecological surveys conducted in the grounds of Ġnien il-Libjani and Villino Chapelle by two local biodiversity enthusiasts, Arnold and Jeffrey Sciberras, so as to open up to the public the gardens' natural assets.



Some of the numerous indigenous trees characterising the huge Ġnien il-Libjani in Paola.

In 2008, development application PA 03425/08 was submitted for the construction of a three-storey secondary school, gymnasium and football pitch, spread over 4,200 square metres at Ġnien il-Libjani. The permit for the proposed development was granted last July on condition that no trees are uprooted and that any landscaping on site does not wreak damage to rubble walls or rocky garigue areas.

The mesmerising diversity of tree and shrub species calls for the use of velvet gloves when developing any parts of the gardens

Despite the area in question not being designated as having ecological, archaeological or landscape value (in fact, the Environment Protection Department not to object to the permit approval), according to the report by the Sciberras brothers, it contains a total of 1,668 mature trees. Of these, a considerable number (around 50 per cent) are citrus trees, mostly donated by the Italian government or by Muammar Gaddafi himself, who even planted one such commemorative tree.

Other indigenous trees in the gardens include olive trees, oleander, Italian cypress, pomegranate, fig and even a few specimens of holm oak, Judas tree, carob, Aleppo pine and lentisk. A wide range of non-indigenous trees are also found in the gardens, including Canary date palms, Japanese cheesewood, the Chinese Banyan Tree, Australian pine, different species of Acacia and the Ngaio, along with considerable numbers of ornamental shrubs.

A number of protected faunal species, mainly reptiles and mammals, were also recorded in the gardens. The mesmerising diversity of tree and shrub species calls for the use of velvet gloves when developing any parts of the gardens.

Villino Chapelle gardens in St Paul's Bay are much smaller than those in Paola but still extend for a significant 2,700 square metres. But the Sciberras report found at the Villino Chapelle gardens a mix of indigenous trees, such as lentisk, almond, Mediterranean dwarf palm, olive, pomegranate, fig, Aleppo pine, tamarisk and mulberries, and non-indigenous tree species, including Pecan, Norfolk Pine, Jacaranda, Indian lilac and Brazilian pepper trees, besides a diverse array of ornamental shrubs. A small number of Norfolk Pine and Pecan trees have reached amazing heights, higher than the surrounding buildings.

The gardens also appears to be a favourite haunt for various protected animals, including several bat species, which even used to roost on site up to a few years ago.

Both these gardens represent a patrimony of mature trees, albeit in a heavily disturbed environment. The sheer diversity and density of trees in Villino Chapelle should be given priority over the unnatural state of the rest of the site when decisions are to be made over the long-term future of the said gardens.

A role model for MEPs

The Economist recently named Uruguay as the Country of the Year for 2013. The South American country is a backwater to many but it's led by a visionary President – Jose Mujica. He made headlines when he donated 90 per cent of his far-from-opulent presidential salary of US\$12,000, and refused to transfer himself and his wife to the lavish presidential palace, opting instead for the austere surroundings of his wife's farm on the outskirts of Montevideo.

With an MEP election round the corner, local candidates could take a leaf out of Mujica's book. In fact, one of the most prevalent public perceptions of MEP candidates is that they contest the election simply because they wish to join the gravy train by landing the plum job with its attractive salary.

The perception might be unfair on some MEP candidates who genuinely wish to make a contribution to their country but it is fuelled by some compelling numbers – if one takes into consideration the annual salary of an MEP, along with all allowances granted (except the travel allowance), one would arrive at the grand total of €147,060.

One way that the public perception could be dispelled is for all MEP candidates, whatever their political affiliation, to publicly pledge to donate say, 10 per cent of their pay to a social development fund back home. Such a move would also help endear to a greater degree the European Parliament with EU citizens, whose trust in EU institutions is always relatively weak.

If we were to crunch some numbers, the suggested 10 per cent would translate into roughly €14,000 per year per elected MEP, or €70,000 from the each candidate over their five-year stint at the European Parliament. Multiply that by all six Maltese MEPs and you get almost half a million euros.

I am sure there is a list of pressing social development causes clamouring for such money in Malta, from the purchasing of properties for the homeless, to introducing more facilities for the physically impaired to purchasing a plot of land in an urban area that lacks open spaces in order to convert it into a public park. The possibilities are endless. Who will be the first take up the cue to take the plunge and make the proposal? A cross-party consensus on such an initiative would obviously be ideal.

Sharks paraded in gruesome spectacle

A video clip recently making the rounds (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GpwXbuDRcc>) shows two (male and female) mature bluntnose six-gilled sharks (*Hexanchus griseus*) caught in Gozo. The species is commonly encountered at the Valletta fish market at this time of year.

Although the species is found all over the world, it is listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s Red List as Near Threatened, and is listed in Maltese legislation as a species of national interest whose exploitation might be subject to management measures.

It is ironic that while some people in Malta are engaged in the conservation of shark species (such as the recent release of two nursehound sharks by the National Aquarium and Sharklab at Ċirkewwa), others find it fit to parade the killing of mature sharks.

According to the IUCN, shark populations in the Mediterranean have plummeted in recent years as a result of their life strategies, which revolves around a low rate of reproduction, and thus they cannot survive for long if they are exploited by man.

alan.deidun@gmail.com

www.alan.deidun.eu