

Architects get a lashing... finally!



Once a picturesque village, Mellieha has been ravaged by blanket development encroaching on the very steepest of cliffs and hillsides, especially in the Tas-Sellum area - massive construction sites in the Ghajn Zejtuna area will probably spell the end for a large number of carob trees close by.

Minister George Pullicino certainly deserves praise for his lambasting of the architectural profession at the Malta Financial and Business Times Radisson SAS Bay Point Resort business breakfast of July 21. His scathing criticism of architects is even more significant, since it comes from a fellow architect.

The erosion of the country's social fibre and morals is a fact, and nowhere is this more evident than in building and property, where no place is deemed too sacred to be spared the developer's axe. From the long string of ODZ (Outside Development Zones) applications published in *The Malta Independent* every Saturday and the even longer string of sanctionings appealed by the MEPA board or the Appeals Board, it is evident that very few architects feel any qualms at all - I can't imagine an architect trying to dissuade his client from applying for a permit to develop part of a pristine valley simply because he feels some pangs of conscience.

Architects who can influence the rest of their colleagues should start lobbying for a drastic revamping of the Planning Developing Act so that, for example, ODZ applications are rejected outright and the applicant fined for wasting MEPA's time by submitting such a barefaced application.

Also, as hinted to by the minister, the Faculty of Architecture should start thinking out of the box and rather than using the annual thesis projects' exhibition as a showcase of mega white elephant projects (unrealistic for a small island like ours), start using it to market sustainable projects, especially in terms of land use. Ethics and good practice tenets should be given more prominence in the architecture course.

Trees bear the brunt

It seems that the death-knell is sounding for many trees in our islands. A case in point is the construction of a new road near the Mosta Technopark to serve as a ringroad around Mosta, which entailed the uprooting of no fewer than 25 carobs. Such trees are supposedly protected under LN 12 of 2001 but this did not stop ruthless road contractors from uprooting them - this did not raise the same hue and cry as the Kalkara development but is no less serious.

Will our authorities try to cover such a crass misdemeanour by planting some exotic, alien species, such as the Regional Road palms? So much for the Trees for People and other similar campaigns.

Behind the fanfare that goes with newly-announced road construction projects, environmentalists feel a sense of dread - this case, the T'Alla u Ommu and Burmarrad ones, along with a welter of others, explain why.

Enemalta's plans to move its fuel storage facility from Birzebbuga to the existing one at at Has-Saptan, l/o of Gudja, should raise many an eyebrow. While one can concede that the Birzebbuga site had to be closed off for public health reasons, one cannot fathom how Has-Saptan, out of the other alternative sites that Enemalta has (like Kordin), was chosen.

With its dense olive grove, Has-Saptan is highly vulnerable to fire incidents - in fact, numerous fire incidents have been reported on site already - this might be wild guessing on my part but are such fires being used to pave the way for a greater fuel storage facility at this site? If Enemalta cannot accommodate such fuel in an alternative site, it should give watertight assurances that the integrity of the hundreds of olive trees at Has-Saptan will not be affected by its plans.

After the palaver in the media that the early 17th century Mriehel aqueduct will be finally restored, in sets in the cold reality of conservation work à la maltaise. Workers were dispatched to stretches along the aqueduct and they cut down all trees along the same stretch most shoddily.

Although I feel no qualms about the alien eucalyptus trees cut down near the Libyan Embassy, I certainly do not approve of the way in which oleander trees were literally butchered. In addition, cut branches were allowed to fall in a lackadaisical manner on the aqueduct below, even chipping off small limestone shards from the historical monument, while sawdust and cut branches were left strewn right in the middle of the road.

Public service and private contractor workers should urgently be versed in some basic tenets of conservation, both environmental and historical, and the government should see to it that this is done.

Gozo: Chambray and airstrip

Gozitan businessmen have again insisted with Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi during his visit on July 30 on the building of an airstrip for fixed-wing aircraft, on the need for more yacht marinas and for cruise liner facilities!

No, we are not talking about Sicily or any other large island - we are talking about minute Gozo! Gozitan businessmen are oblivious to one simple fact: the Maltese visit Gozo for its relative tranquillity and unobtrusive views - surely, a negligible increase in the number of foreign visitors to the island cannot compensate for the potential losses in local tourism. The overpowering argument for "the need for more jobs" was used during the talks - I would put that into a more realistic perspective and say "the need for more profits".

The recent change in the mantle ownership at Fort Chambray raises hopes that this development, often seen as a scar on the historical fabric of Gozo, could contribute towards reducing the pressure on land resources in the island.

In fact, the new owner, Dr Caruana, did not reveal too much about his plans when he stated that the new development, once completed, would benefit the whole of Gozo. A certain proportion of the 246 constructed apartments will certainly be earmarked for the exclusive parvenu market - however, one augurs that another proportion will be earmarked for local residential purposes and that the proposed hotel, still in its incubation stage, never materialises to avoid obliterating the dying historical embers of Fort Chambray. In fact, MEPA has issued six stop notices on site after that part of the previous development impinged heavily on this historical gem.

Public access to foreshore - raising the stakes

With the mass exodus of holidaymakers to our coasts in summer, the thorny issue of public access to the coast and to the countryside in general comes to the fore. The Times is to be lauded for its hard-hitting editorial of July 6 on land ownership and right of way - will the following challenge made in the editorial be taken up by the somnolent Lands Department?

"Compulsive hikers and ramblers would welcome the issue by MEPA or the Lands Department of a definitive map of public paths in the Maltese islands as well as the restoration to public use of all the land that has been illegally appropriated."

In addition, Alternattiva Demokratika again this year condemned the abuse of public lands in that the public is expected to pay to enjoy local beaches with umbrellas and deckchairs encroaching even further on our beaches. The party rightly harped on the fact that MEPA laid down that the public has a right of access to land up to 10 metres from the shoreline.

A tale of two dunes

I am cursing myself for not saving a copy of an article published in this newspaper a couple of years ago on how children from a particular school embarked on the clean-up of the sand dune remnants at Gnejna. Should such schoolchildren again visit the same site today, they will be amazed to see that a great part of the dune has been bulldozed to widen the car park even further.

In fact, soil and debris have been dumped onto the dune remnants, smothering everything underneath - what's left is then stifled by cars parked haphazardly on the steep dune sides. So,

we teach our children one thing and then do another - soon dune flora and fauna will be appreciated only in their textbooks.

Recent surveys of dune extents, like the one by Cassar and Stevens (2002) need some reappraisal after these recent developments - I wonder, was such action taken in conjunction with the Mgarr council or what is some off-the-cuff action embarked upon by some macho permanently colonising the area?

Exponents from the National Commission for Sustainable Development (NCSD) should visit the area to have an inkling of the scale of the problem our islands are facing, with the area literally peppered with cars since Maltese citizens abhor walking a short distance to the beach but want to install their barbecue paraphernalia right on the seashore.

The makeshift car park on the beach should be closed off, even if this will irk the boathouse owners, and people should walk some distance to the beach, as is the situation at Ramla (Gozo).

Nature Trust (Malta) and MEPA have stretched every sinew in keeping campers off the dune at White Tower Bay, despite the range of tents hemming the dune from all sides. With the sea daffodil (*Pancreatium maritimum*) in full bloom, some moron decided to install an impromptu drainage facility on the dune itself.

Luckily, members of the ALE and MEPA's NPU and PCCU units were quick to make amends on site once alerted.

The camping scourge will hopefully be mitigated next year with the opening of the long overdue camping site at Dahlet ix-Xmajjar - authorities should then request campers to use such facilities.

Silver linings

MEPA has extended its emergency service so they will now cover practically the entire day - from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. Illegal development reports can be made on 9926-9926 for Malta and 9924-9924 for Gozo. Environment protection issues can be reported on 7946-6320 (nature protection) and 9921-9991 (pollution control).

Everyone with a knack for environmental conservation and the right to access public information will have heaved a sigh of relief with MEPA PRO Sylvana Debono's clarifying statements published in this newspaper last Sunday that "as a public authority, MEPA is accountable to the public and open and responsive to public scrutiny".

Environmental correspondents, NGOs and conscientious citizens will keep their eyes peeled to make sure that the Aarhus Convention (enshrining the right of access to information) is abided by. For now, MEPA will be afforded the benefit of the doubt but pending enforcement cases will be expeditiously revisited time and again.

The human carrying capacity of these islands has long been reached, in my opinion - hence, news that the population increase is finally grinding to a halt is welcome news.

Our islands could well do with fewer humans around; no need to worry about that.

Nostalgia of the month

Sammy Bartolo's song roughly ran "jekk f'Malta hawn xena sabiha, din il-bajja tal-Mellieha" extolling the beauty of Ghadira and its environs. I leave it to your discretion, after viewing the accompanying three pictures, to judge whether this still holds true.