

Shops pop - is there a stop?



The rural tranquility of Safi and Kirkop has literally been auctioned off to the highest bidder

After the approval of a proposed supermarket one of the most tranquil of Maltese villages - Safi - I wonder if a supermarket in Mdina might well be a prospect in a few years' time.

In an article in The Times of July 15, 2002, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority's Structure Plan Review (SPR) team had mused about the observed upsurge in retail activity. It said that although the combined local retail activity amounted to a staggering 640,000 square metres (or 25 football pitches), Mepa approves an annual 60,000 square metre surge.

Before that article, the Retail Topic Paper had been issued, as part of the SPR process - such a paper had also prophesised that ad-hoc retail development within existing centres and continued expansion of the supermarket and showroom sector is likely to continue.

What the paper failed to predict was that Outside Development Zone (ODZ) areas would be rampantly pillaged as a result. In fact, one of the three main guidelines of the same paper was that new retail development would as far as possible be located within existing town centres.

The windfall from positive planning decisions taken in this country (e.g. the Ulysses Lodge, Xagħra I-Hamra cases) is indeed ephemeral, as it is inevitably counterbalanced by a spate of dubious decisions, such as the ODZ petrol station at Ta' Buqana (Mosta/Rabat) or the most galling of all - the ODZ supermarket in Kirkop by the same construction magnate with countless infringements and planning applications.

It takes quite some invective to try to grasp the reasoning behind the decision taken by the Development Control Commission to approve such a project, as it was contrary to the recommendations of the Planning Directorate, the agricultural authorities and the local plan.

The DCC stated that the proposed development does not run contrary to agricultural policies, and will have no impact on traffic and offers no essential service to the village. Probably none of the DCC members hails from Kirkop since, otherwise, they would be aware that the land in question was tilled and ploughed until recently. Therefore, developing it will further sour the statistic of a loss of two square kilometres of agricultural land every year. The site is already bearing the brunt of heavy school-related traffic and it is a prized, open green area, known by locals as il-Karwija and popular for a stroll or for jogging.

Safi council, it now transpires, planned to reserve the area as a belvedere, for public enjoyment. Is this is not an essential service in itself? Must we pin an economic value to all amenities? What about saving green buffers for posterity, to avoid the coagulation of the villages of Kirkop and Safi (as happened with Naxxar and Mosta, Lija and Balzan, and so on) and to retain their distinct character?

If his desecration of the rural environs of the Kirkop-Safi area perpetrated at his hands were not enough, the contractor in question has a pending application for an elderly people's home in yet another ODZ site in Safi.

One might label the antics of Alternattiva Demokratika, involving the placing of candles and an epithet to epitomise the 'death' of agricultural land in Kirkop, limits of Safi, as excessive. However, elaborate gestures sometimes need to be used to stir compassion in some individuals, who are oblivious to the loss of agricultural land and to its socio-cultural ramifications in a rural area like Safi-Kirkop,. What would anthropologist Prof. Jeremy Boissevain say upon seeing the unloading of merchandise and the honking of gridlocked traffic right in the middle of the quaint old village he used to love?

The DCC board further justified its despicable decision by stating that "Prior to issue of permit, architect to submit a landscaping scheme providing a row of trees along the southwest part of the site and other landscaping within the site" - a landscaped supermarket in the middle of a rural area is little solace indeed. Will the same site now witness the mushrooming of supermarket-ancillary activities, such as innumerable expansions to car parks and car wash?

Those in power fail to make the simple connection between our rates of obesity and supermarket proliferation as cited by the Scientific American, September 2007 issue:

"In country after country, companies such as Wal-Mart, Carrefour and Ahold have opened giant stores offering a wide variety of cheap snacks and soft drinks. Scientists have not yet quantified the impact of replacing traditional village markets with megastores, but the few studies available suggest that the new way of shopping encourages the consumption of processed foods, particularly products with added sugar."

The next time a munificent-looking politician comes knocking at your door should you pose the following question: "Why does our political class bend over backwards for construction magnates in this country?"

Needless to say, their instinctive (albeit unspoken) reply would be "supermarket approval makes good political sense, as it bolsters the feel-good and affluence sensation among the population."

A smirk comes to my face when I reminisce about the passionate ways some people defended the scheme rationalisation process, stating that the additions would be equivalent to just 2.4 per cent of existing development boundaries - had they factored in the Tal-Buqana petrol station, or this new monstrosity in Kirkop?

Wasn't the rationalisation exercise meant to champion the local plans - why were they snubbed this time round, too? Wasn't the premise that the rationalisation exercise was meant to preclude further ODZ development widely taunted? Wasn't the 2.4 per cent cast in stone?

Thanks

This column recently scooped up the Moral and/or Environmental Leadership Award of The Young Outstanding Person series, organised by the Junior Chamber International. I personally wish to thank the former editor of The Sunday Times, Laurence Grech, and the current editorial team for the unstinting trust shown in this column's potential throughout the years, and the JCI for empowering so many young people.