

Charity to sanction illegalities?

To the Maltese mindset, so easily impressed by largesse, Montekristo Estates represents the lifelong feat of a successful entrepreneur. Despite the occasional spoke in the wheels thrown in by entities such as the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and those nagging NGOs, Charles Polidano, also known as iċ-Ċaḡnu, has managed to succeed. The company even collects money for charity and makes provisions for amenities in short supply on the island, such as zoos, antiquity and vintage car museums. Many will refer to the entrepreneur's prodigious number of employees and to the magnanimous way he routinely financially assists all those in dire straits who seek his help. All well and good, but this does, and should, not atone for the illegal development at Montekristo.

People with such an easily impressionable mindset, who probably do not read articles such as this, are completely oblivious to the staggering unregulated development at Montekristo. This includes a smattering of enforcement notices covering anything from the wedding hall to the cafeteria to the shanty animal zoo and the replica of a De Redin tower, spreading over a sprawling 64,000 square metres.

The Montekristo Estates website proudly asserts that the site has the stunning, sprawling Siġġiewi Valley as its backdrop; it is probably referring to the valley the estates have encroached upon and in which sand slurry is regularly dumped. Since when has the valley become an asset worth preserving for Montekristo?

Enticed by the promise of funds for the Community Chest Fund, President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca recently officially opened il-Fiera il-Kbira at Montekristo. What higher seal of approval could one hope for? The claim by the fair organisers that their activities did not extend to the illegal parts does not hold water since Montekristo is marketed as one integral facility.

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The attempt to add a veneer of legitimacy to the fair was evident from the way the organisers stressed that over 200 'respected' local companies would be peddling their wares at such a fair.

In the same vein, just three days ago, the Malta Developers Association organised a fundraising dinner at Montekristo.

Equally blinkered and wrong was the decision to hold an edition of L-Istrina at the Montekristo premises in 2008, which, together with the organisation of a number of social activities by candidates during political campaigning, further gives the premises an aura of approval.

The strategy is simple... Polidano knows that, the more positive limelight his illegality-dogged Montekristo Estates get as a venue for charity fundraising, trade fairs, political candidate activities and such, the more legitimacy it earns in the public perception which, ultimately, will condition greatly any future action Mepa may take on site.

Mepa must realise once and for all that the message that permeates down to John Citizen is not that contained in optimistic press releases but that emerging from tangible actions on the ground.

Since such action has so far been thin, restricted to a token show of force last year, a court prohibitory injunction and Polidano's melodramatic apology to the government (he should have apologised to the whole country), the indelible perception out there is that he is too powerful for Mepa and that a raft of sanctionings (jargon for white-washing) will invariably follow.