

A VIEW FROM THE FUTURE

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If Gozo is allowed to develop haphazardly, according to off-the-cuff decisions and ephemeral contingencies, it would end up, in a generation, by losing the character of its landscape and its social fabric. This would destroy not only a unique ecological-historical-cultural niche, but would also impoverish our national heritage. Gozo is not another peripheral district of the country but a viable regional centre of the nation. To assert the obvious, Malta is not an island but an archipelago, however Lilliputian.

Being modern may mean solely to mount the roller-coaster of history on a fast track of incessant growth and exploitation. Being enlightened, however, demands meditation and judicious choices. This applies not only to national planners; Gozitans need to awaken from their slumber and reflect on what kind of community they seek rather than supinely following Maltese models of development. After languishing for centuries in a backwater, stagnating in the peripheral field of vision of the central government, it is natural for Gozitans to hanker for equality with the Maltese. It is essential, though, to side-step a major fallacy: to mistake equality with similarity; Gozo should demand parity not identity with Malta. This calls for a separate strategy of development and the targeting of specialised goals.

Due to certain historical reasons (mostly dictated by geography and natural, physical features) Malta has been developing along the lines of the traditional, industrial model with well-known characteristics:

- maximal growth is relentlessly pursued as a top priority;
- the environment is blighted by insensate building and urban sprawl;
- ribbon development has savaged the landscape and

wiped out swathes of redeeming countryside between population centres;

- explosive tourism figures are flagged as laurels of triumphant success, without an in-depth assessment of the resultant degradation of the environment and historical sites;
- the allure of investment projects wins out every time over potential pollution risks;
- the social fabric and value-systems are undermined and a life-style flourishes maniacally oriented towards more and more income, spending and consumption;
- intense and frenetic development, involving the mobilisation of all resources (human and natural) may result in glittering statistics but also entail a steep decline in the quality of life; again and again, planners seem to be oblivious of the maxim that no social or ecological system is capable of infinite development.

Perhaps, it is time to stop dead in our tracks, take stock and reflect; are we set on creating in Gozo a mirror image of Malta? Would that be wise for Gozo and for the country? A substantive debate on this issue is urgent because time is running out.

Gozitans themselves have to participate actively in this soul-searching. If all they want is to have in Gozo a little Malta, they can sit on the fence and let things run their course. If, as it is being suggested, they opt for a distinct development, they need to wake up and take an interest in their future. The past, after all, we inherited from history and nature; the future, it is being contended, we have to invent.



What is being proposed is that Gozo makes, for lack of a better term, a "green option", a commitment to create an eco-zone. There is no doubt that the co-existence of multiple models of development enriches national life. Such a shift in paradigm calls for audacity and a harmonisation of popular will and the imagination of national planners. Political will alone will not suffice; one needs a campaign of education aimed at re-examining the icons of popular culture. It is vital to guard against the misconception that such a scenario is a nostalgic throw-back, a choice of primitivism, where Gozo remains entrenched in pastoral under-development. On the contrary, the project demands sophisticated strategies and choices to achieve specialised development.

It is not the intention of this article to present a complete blueprint; more modestly, it is intended to submit several hallmarks and features of this scenario to form the basis for a public debate. First and foremost, one must stress that the future lies in our hands we build it, blow by blow, by our choices. Secondly, Gozo could and should have a separate development.

- Gozo deserves a specific Structure Plan and an ad hoc Planning Authority because the criteria and parameters set nation-wide would irreversibly

deface the particular Gozitan topography.

- The incessant pressure on land has to be halted. Vast stretches of land and charming landscapes are being brutalised and engulfed by a fungal growth of nondescript buildings.
- The dialectical tension between the freedom of the entrepreneurs and the common good has to be weighted heavily in favour of the latter.
- No quarter should be given to wanton land speculation because no social practice is just or justified if it serves to enrich the few at the expense of national heritage.
- Vast cyclopean buildings have spoiled the aesthetics of small scale of the Gozitan landscape spawning a ruinous desolation. Such projects should be interdicted unless a rigid case is made for their need.
- An Aesthetics Board, stipulating and enforcing the highest standards should be established. In Malta, we have an aesthetic catastrophe where sheer, unadulterated ugliness has swamped the Island. The interior design of a house may be a private affair the outside is a public concern.
- A Gozitan Chamber of Architects should be set up and urged to lead and pioneer a regional commitment to high aesthetic ideals.
- The goal should be set to renew, re-animate and re-inhabit the old historical centres of towns and villages rather than be seduced by the temptation to fan out, radially, encroaching more and more on precious empty land.
- Ribbon building, wiping out the country-side between population centres, and building dripping down from the plateaux, should be strictly forbidden.
- If Gozo is to prosper as an eco-zone, tight control of air pollution should be practised; factories have to comply with scientific recommendations. Public

transport could gradually be converted to electric motors. Silence zones should be declared, especially at certain times of the day and night. Prospective factories and industries should be vetted with regard to their environmental impact. A campaign could be launched for private and commercial establishments to adopt energy-saving devices, like solar energy.

- A program of afforestation and urban embellishment should be initiated.
- The area of agricultural land in use is slumping; idle land climbed from 24% to 47% from 1971 to 1983. This decline in use and productivity should be arrested. The public perception (or mis-perception) of agriculture as a backwater activity calls for urgent correction. With proper investment in science and technology, fair pricing and proper funding, agriculture can prosper. Agriculture can not only be a viable economic activity but contribute to the preservation of the wide open spaces in Gozo. The School of Agriculture should be strengthened to offer high-grade scientific courses to prepare a generation of well-prepared and motivated agricultural workers and agri-businessmen.
- Gozo should seek to attract International Agencies and Foundations (cultural, academic, diplomatic) to set up house on the island. This would not only put Gozo on the map, but serve to host a specialised, high-quality tourism. In this context, national and, eventually, international cultural festivals could be organised; for example, a modest beginning could be to plan a National Festival of contemporary Maltese art, poetry and music.
- New beaches could and should be created.
- The intensified use of the sea has two sides to it. Aquaculture and fisheries should be promoted to offer employment and create wealth; at the same time, a Marine Station should be set up for the scientific study of the seas: pollution, fish stocks, quality of water, bio-diversity, currents, etc. and a data-base drawn up to underscore

sustainable development.

- Gozo is poor in natural indentations and Mgarr is practically the only serviceable harbour. It is time to think of building a man-made harbour to take the intense passenger and cargo traffic and preserve Mgarr for what it is, a national amphitheatre of unique beauty.
- Regrettably, the concept of space in our country is that of a hole; it is there to be filled. Space is an essential ingredient of the architectonics of a place. The conservation and creation of space (especially by the extensive use of underground location of services and facilities) should be the absolutely top priority for Gozo.
- If Gozo is to retain its charm, certain views and landscapes should be declared national monuments and saved from the rapacity of land speculators.
- Gozitans should be warned in time not to succumb to the temptation of becoming mere caretakers (servicemen, caterers, drivers, builders) for an increasingly omnivorous tourist industry. If they are to survive as a viable community with an identity of their own, they have to conserve traditional skills and cultivate new ones to meet the challenges of the future.
- Gozitans and national planners could do worse than examine and explore the architectonics and principles of an ideal garden city. The ideal may be beyond reach but it could fecundate the imagination and instil inspiration.

What has been said above may not convert Gozo into a beehive of industrial and commercial activity. It would, however, factor into the equation of development the coveted quality of life. Such a scenario would be a challenge to our ability, vision, innovativeness and an expression of a maturing civilisation.

(Note: Most of the ideas explored in this article were tentatively presented by the author in a talk in a series of lectures organised by the Gozo Centre of the University of Malta.)