

Safeguarding Gozo's Cultural and Environmental Heritage

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Gozo has long been considered as a tranquil island, sought for its natural beauty, heritage and calmness which provides a break from the fast, busy and noisy everyday life in Malta. Tourists from all over the world flock to the jewel in the middle of the Mediterranean for a holiday consisting of a mixture of cultural, geographical and gastronomical experiences.

Besides historical buildings such as the Citadel and the various churches around the island, tourists are in particularly attracted to the naturalistic aspect of Gozo, such as Dwejra, Ramla and Wied il-Għasri, and are awed by the countryside through which they pass to reach their destinations. Whilst roaming the streets of Gozo's villages, they are charmed by the traditional buildings and their decorations such as the wooden balcony and the various sculptured decorations found in a number of facades on the island.

Malta prides itself on its natural heritage and VisitMalta makes use of it to promote the island as a destination, rightly so. However it is a shame that not enough effort is being made to safeguard it. The poster below (Figure 1), showing Xewkija church, clearly illustrates the irony behind VisitMalta's promotional poster and the actual reality due to lack of planning and enforcement.

Up until March 2017, it was unthinkable that one visits Gozo and not gaze upon the natural wonder of the Azure window. The disappointment following its collapse gave us a bitter taste of what we were to experience in the years to come, only that currently, we are losing our natural heritage not via 'acts of God' but through a combination of local developers' disregard of the natural heritage and the permissive manner in which the National Planning Authority is dispensing construction permits. Furthermore,

we are also risking losing a part of our identity due to the fact that developers are opting for high-rise concrete structures, at times replacing or dwarfing elegant existing houses, as can be clearly seen in Figure 2, showing changes in Triq il-Qbajjar, Marsalforn between 2016 and 2020.



Figure 1: The irony of a VisitMalta billboard.



Figure 2: Triq il-Qbajjar: Marsalforn 2016 vs 2020

Worrying Statistics

According to figures presented in Parliament, since 2017, over 666 permits for construction outside development zones (ODZ)¹ in Gozo have been issued by the PA.² Of course, certain projects were essential and include agricultural structures. However, there were permits issued for several controversial buildings which, besides ruining Gozo's countryside, definitely do not conform with the ambience in which they are located.

Considering that Gozo's population is only around 37,000 people, it is quite worrying that besides construction within development zones, a large number of permits in green areas have been issued. Xaghra has witnessed the largest number of these ODZ permits, as can be seen from the table below. The village with the oldest free-standing temple in the world, Ġgantija, is now home to a fleet of cranes.

A Gozo Planning Authority

In order to maintain Gozo's charm, any approved construction designs should reflect the character of the island. However, for some reason, current decision-makers deem it acceptable that structures, including high-rise buildings, which would be given the go-ahead in St. Julian's or in Sliema, should also be allowed to be erected in Gozo.

Locality	ODZ permits
Fontana	6
Għajnsielem (includes Comino)	54
Għarb	45
Għasri	37
Kerċem	47
Munxar (includes Xlendi)	23
Nadur	60
Qala	47
San Lawrenz	41
Sannat	32
Victoria	29
Xagħra	114
Xewkija	56
Żebbuġ (includes Marsalforn)	51
projects spanning multiple localities	24

Table 1: The 666 permits issued since 2017 by locality

1 ODZ refers to rural or green areas.

2 This information was requested in a Parliamentary Question made by Gozitan MP Kevin Cutajar.

For such examples, one must only look at how the once picturesque fishing villages of Xlendi and Marsalforn have been transformed with blocks of concrete. Another example is the manner in which a townhouse was converted into a boutique hotel in the heart of Victoria and resulted in apertures within the Citadel walls. This is ruining Gozo's heritage and its uniqueness, as a result of planning mistakes, intended or otherwise, which mostly satisfy the interests of the developers. It is specifically for this reason that serious consideration must be given to the possibility of setting up a new body: a Gozo Planning Authority (GPA).

It is admitted that this would not be easy. For starters, it is very much doubtful whether the PA would be happy to relinquish its powers over about 25% of the Maltese Islands' land area. Secondly, with Gozo being a small island where nearly everyone knows each other and thus the notion of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' would be much easier to fulfil, there remains the million-dollar question as to how to avoid corruption and greasing of palms. Perhaps one way to mitigate this would be through a provision that no board member of the GPA should hold office for more than a term of 2 or 3 years, should not be affiliated to a band club or political party and should be a Gozo resident.

A member of the Local Council of the town or village where the development is scheduled to take place should also form part of the committee approving development permits. One would think that a councillor who wishes to get re-elected from votes from that same locality would not dare go against the well-being of his/her locality. A representative of an accredited environmental NGO and another of an accredited cultural NGO should also form part of such a committee.

One may ask as to what is the point of establishing a new body if policies to safeguard Gozo's character could be adopted by the existing National PA. The main reason is the existing Planning Authority has often allowed construction that blatantly degrade Gozo's environment and disregarded its cultural heritage. It is the view of the present author that setting up of the GPA stands a better chance of safeguarding the environment and the cultural assets of Gozo.

The GPA would need to adopt building policies which would comply and safeguard the Gozitan character and charm. There ought to be more encouragement to restore abandoned buildings rather than build new ones, and if new ones are to be built, there ought to be schemes – besides the ones already in place – that entice, and possibly compel, developers to respect Gozo's heritage. In addition, such a body could also lead to a reduction in the excessive influence that developers seem to wield at present. Furthermore, such an authority might ease worries that Gozo will just become an extension to Malta if the tunnel between the islands is indeed realised.

Other Reforms

Apart from the Gozo Planning Authority there need to be other changes to ensure that both locals and visitors improve their quality of life. For example, during the summer months, all but essential construction work (not just excavating works) should be halted in sea-side villages and certain rural areas such as Xlendi, Marsalforn, Dwejra, San Raflu, Ramla and San Blas just to name a few. The Local Councils should be given the power to enact bye-laws to enforce such restrictions, in collaboration with the police.

Malpractices in construction should also be reined in, by giving more power to Local Councils. At present we often see dust and debris being emitted from construction sites, damage to pavements and village roads, by heavy construction vehicles, muddy tyre marks on nearby streets, and illegal parking, with parking spaces being occupied by heavy objects such as loose bricks. Empowering Local Councils to enforce bye-laws, in collaboration with other competent authorities, should reduce such malpractices.

Another matter that needs to be controlled is the blatant abuse by restaurants and bars who occupy pavements and public areas (including streets). Stricter enforcement must be adopted as these establishments seem to be uncontrollably taking up every piece of concrete or tarmac surrounding their establishment. Again in this case, Local Councils need to be given effective power to enable them to enforce limits to the number of tables and chairs that may be placed on pavements and within the

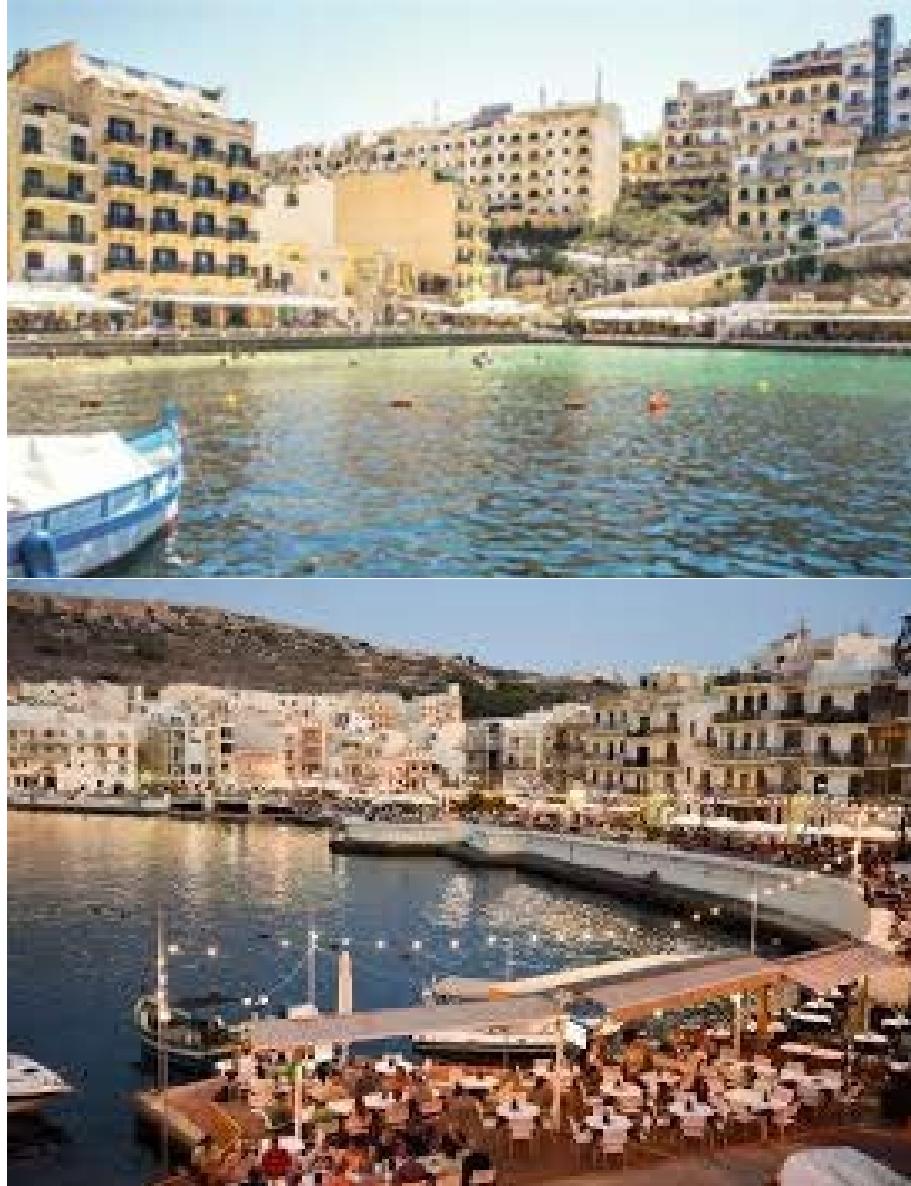


Figure 3: The promenades of Xlendi and Marsalforn.

street, especially in village squares and on seaside promenades. Although these establishments are important for the economy and recreational purposes, a balance must be sought between the issuing of these permits whilst leaving room for pedestrians to walk safely on pavements and to enjoy a stroll in the area.

Conclusion

Many residents in Gozo are not happy with the way the national PA is acting in Gozo, with little or no regard being given to the island's environment and its cultural heritage. A GPA might put a stop to such abuse if it works competently within clear parameters of safeguarding the environment and protecting the cultural heritage. As argued, Local Councils, and environmental and cultural NGOs

should form part of the decision-making structures of such an authority.

However, setting up the GPA would not be enough in this regard. Local Councils must be enabled to enforce control of construction malpractices and abuse, as well as the use of public spaces by business concerns.

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