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### **Does scale affect the presence of the urban-rural interface? Managing this interface on a small island state: the case of Malta**

The Maltese Islands offer an interesting, albeit complex, urban scenario. As settlements grew and their older inner cores spread outwards (at times sporadically and, more recently, speculatively), neighbouring localities fused together. Rampant post-war development changed the face of the urban-rural fringe that had existed up till then, and contributed to establishing Malta as one of the densest countries worldwide. Today, these fringes have almost disappeared; rural areas have become peri-urban areas and it has become almost impossible to distinguish the different scales and interfaces that compose the urban-rural spectrum. Where it happens, the urban-rural fringe is simply an urban extension for speculative property and further urban sprawl. Unfortunately, international knowledge on the subject is not always applicable to small states such as Malta, primarily due to different scale definitions. This paper starts by identifying the limitations of international case study application, and attempts to answer the questions "How do you reconcile urban and rural when their fringe does not exist?" and "Is the urban-rural fringe a conservation zone to be protected, a transition zone or a distinct zone in its own right?" In Malta's case, this debate demands looking at the urban design aspects of the built environment and the architecture that characterises urban-to-rural.

Urban design plays a limited role on the Maltese planning agenda; numerous urban design policies, principles and elements are absent from site-specific Local Plans (at the macro scale) and the building-based Development Control Policy and Design Guidance documents (at the micro scale) produced by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority. The results of this deficiency in the Maltese planning system are reflected in the ever-increasing incompatibility of environments, as the dense urban fabric becomes more complex with increasing projects and continues to spread outwards to the detriment of both the inner urban and the surrounding rural structures. The paper asks whether the urban-rural fringe should in fact be a transition zone of architectural typologies. Also, what should this architecture reflect – should it follow on from the inner urban or outer rural area or should it be a distinct archetype? Thirdly, how is the current planning system shaping this debate?

Can we therefore establish some pointers for the future? How can we rethink our current policy-making? Does this discussion have wider implications on the planning system *per se*? And how can a small island state contribute to the wider European debate on the urban-rural interface?