

Editorial: Gozo's Construction Mayhem

It is well known that construction activity has a number of economic benefits, including direct employment and income by persons employed in the sector. Beside construction generates indirect employment and income to those providing goods and services to complete the building, including apertures, tiling, bathroom fittings, and finishing. Construction also increases the stock of residences, office spaces and tourist accommodation. This activity also generates income to the owners of small properties that are purchased by developers in order to transform them into blocks of flats and other large scale developments.

However construction also has major downsides including environment damage (notably intrusions into ODZ and air pollution by emissions of dust and diesel fumes) and social discomfort, principally among the residents in the neighbourhood of a construction project. These downsides are especially significant in a small island like Gozo, with limited carrying capacity. In the case of Gozo, an additional downside relates to aesthetics when large projects degrade the islands' iconic landscapes, and disturb the harmony of village cores.

The environmental effects of construction may also have negative economic repercussions. Quality tourism, for which Gozo was renowned some decades ago, will continue to be undermined, as this depends on the very qualities that construction is destroying. The difference between Gozo and mainland Malta is increasingly being eroded. There is also the matter of the rising costs of public health, given that residents in Gozo are likely to be increasingly suffering from construction related pulmonary complaints, apart from the construction-site injuries.

Because of these disadvantages, many Gozitans are openly expressing their opposition to the growing construction activity on the island, accusing the Planning Authority and the developers that they are destroying "the diamond in the middle of the Mediterranean".

Pending development applications in Gozo indicate that hundreds of new projects are in the pipeline, a good proportion of which on ODZ land. From what we already experienced, the developers care very little for Gozo's unique landscapes, and tend to put aesthetic and proportionality on the back burner. Gozo therefore is in for a continuation of the so-called building frenzy.

The two major political parties in the Maltese Islands do not show any inclination to reverse the trend, possibly because they consider that construction is the main motor of the economy, and also, possibly, because they fear alienating major developers who are known to be important donors to these parties. In addition, many Gozitans are benefitting from the Annex 2 PA policy (called Annex 2) which allows a three-floor residence to be increased to 5 floors, as a result of which many Gozitans found themselves able to build extra apartments which can be sold off or rented out. It is likely therefore that in the foreseeable future Gozo will continue to be overbuilt, many of its beautiful landscapes will continue to be ruined, and many of its beaches will continue to lose their charm due to monstrous construction. In short, the uglification of Gozo is likely to continue unabated. The many Gozitans who want to see the end of the construction ascendancy are therefore not likely to see their wish materialise.

And to add insult to injury, the rapid increase in construction activity is not generally being supported by an improvement in infrastructural facilities, including the sewer system, and we all know what the likely result would be. There seems to be very little planning in this regard, and one wonders why the institution overseeing construction in Gozo is called Planning Authority.

Lino Briguglio