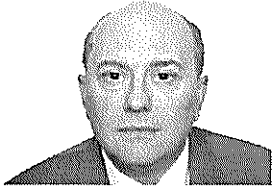


Debate & Analysis

Malta: one large construction site – How the Planning Authority ruined Malta



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When in 1992 the Development Planning Act was enacted and came into force, many thought that the development permission process was being depoliticised as it would no longer be the politician – normally a government minister or Parliamentary Secretary – who would have had the ultimate say on the issuing of development permissions.

The Structure Plan and the Explanatory Memorandum together with the establishment of new structures – the Planning Authority, the Development Control Commission, the Planning Directorate, and the Planning Appeals Board, amongst others, brought with them a very much needed, indeed indispensable, breadth of fresh air.

We all hoped that development planning would have been set on a professional basis, that planners would have taken over the entire development planning process, including decision-making, and that all development permissions would be processed in terms of approved plans and policies by experts in the field with total application of, and regard to, approved plans and policies that aimed solely at the common good of society. We thought these structures would be totally independent from government interference.

How far we were from the truth!

Thirty years later, the planner



has remained totally extraneous to the development planning process. S/he contributes at the initial stage of the process yet decisions are not taken by persons well versed in planning but by persons of dubious planning qualifications, even though they might possess qualifications in other non-planning related disciplines, who are appointed by politicians and who are answerable not to parliament but to the government of the day.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is obvious that, overall, the main achievements of the Planning Authority have been: inculcation in development planning of the culture of impunity, over-development, uglification, disregard of plans and policies, a shrinking countryside, destruction of arable land, more overdevelopment, proliferation of buildings outside the development zone, the destruction of the natural and cultural heritage, together with total disregard to the wishes of environmental non-government organizations, residents' associations, and local councils.

This is, and continues to be, the legacy and unwritten policy of the Planning Authority that remains controlled by politicians directly, as in the case where Cabinet decides itself development permission applications – the worst abomination we can get – or indirectly as where decisions are taken by government in the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Development Planning, or through political

pressure that is exercised by ministers and their entourage on Planning Authority board members and employees.

When one therefore takes stock of the situation between Malta of 1992 and Malta of today – thirty years later – the only legitimate conclusion that one can possibly and reasonably arrive at is that the Planning Authority has – overall – been a complete failure, that it has let us down and brought the country in the despicable mess we are in: the writing on the wall is to the effect that proper planning policies that existed in times gone by are being erased from the planning system as with the total disregard to height limitations, a proliferation of buildings outside the development zone, total disrespect to the cultural and natural heritage, including NATURA 2000 sites, and the destruction of the little that remains of the urban village core through over development and excessive height. All these have been substituted by one new planning policy: a thirst for greed.

One doubts who really is in command in this sector, whether it is the planners or the developers. In all probably it is the politicians in cahoots with the developers. This is the impression one gets when reading Planning Authority decisions or setting foot outside one's residence. The environmentalists have no decision-making power in the planning system.

Clearly, the Planning Authority's lethargy in effective enforcement

has exacerbated the problem, its solution to illegality being the adoption of measures that run counter to the rule of law: either to resort to amnesties, or to change plans and policies to regularize illegalities, or to allow the possibility of submission of a development permission application to regularize illegal development with the infliction of a derisory fine – one solution worse than the other!

Hence, we are in a really desperate predicament, one from which there is no hope of recovery or redemption – as perhaps there might have been thirty years ago when the Planning Authority was established – that allows us to move out of the morass we are in. The new god of planning – greed – has replaced all the laudable principles of development planning in Malta that are written on paper though frequently unimplemented. Sustainable development, environment protection, pollution reduction, recourse to the precautionary principle etc. have attained the status of buzz words that, in concrete terms, mean nothing.

Unless political interference of all sorts is halted within the development planning process, there is no chance that Malta will ever change for the better. What is really needed is an injection of professionalism and the banishment of politicians, developers, and their entourage from the planning process. The indications, however, is that there is still worse things to come to as-

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suage the blood-thirsty aspirations of the new mammoth of planning – Greed! Gozo and Comino are next on the environmental destruction list.

Malta has lost its character. Residents are disillusioned. Environmental organizations are up in arms. The Planning Authority has forgotten the basic values of planning. Malta has become one big building block – the skyline is dominated by cranes and marred by ugly high buildings. We are now seeing the smallest of sites being developed that are not appropriate to house dolls, sanitary regulations that allow complete roofing of building yards so that there is no space between one building and another and/or no adequate ventilation and light, excessively high buildings that overtax the drainage system, destruction of open space and arable land, proliferation of disastrous planning policies to appease developers, overdevelopment of Gozo and soon of Comino, spurring of buildings outside the development zone, etc. etc.

Environmentalists apart, all seem to be happy with this situation – the environment minister and the Environment Protection (in name only!) Authority who are conspicuous by their absence in effective environmental protection, the development prone minister responsible for planning, Cabinet ministers some of whom benefit from the development amnesties and spree ... This is the Malta that we live in thanks to government and the Planning Authority. There is only one word how to express all this utter discontent with government's inaction in environmental protection: Xebbatjuna!

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