

YIMBY, rather than NIMBY - Alan Deidun



St Aloysius' College and PARKS have forged an alliance through which students and teachers have been given stewardship over land in Swatar for the next few years for tree-planting purposes. Seen here is David Azzopardi, mastermind of the initiative.

The pejorative 'Not In My Backyard' (NIMBY) acronym, putatively coined in the 1950s, is commonly used in today's narrative to refer to skin-deep environmentalism whose sole aim is to spare one's immediate environs from undesirable development. The acronym is normally adopted by critics of individuals who are very selective when voicing their opposition to development, generally kicking up a storm when the development is within their milieu but caring diddly-squat when the same development is proposed little more than a stone's throw away from their area of concern.

As evident from one of the accompanying photos of a field in a rural area in Safi, some are ready to welcome and even solicit incompatible development in their own 'backyard' if incentivised financially, in an uncanny warping of the acronym into 'Yes In My Backyard' (YIMBY). Soon after the photo had been posted on social media a minority of users, including a local councillor, vehemently defended the owner's decision to allow the plonking of scores of rental company cars in his field, using the argument that one is entitled to complete discretion regarding the use of their private land.



Despite being privately-owned, this field is no place to hoard scores of rental cars. But some people have no objection to such an incompatible use of land, as long as it pays, a classic example of YIMBYism.

Such a misconception about the unfettered use of one's private land is the root cause of many planning infringements on these islands, including the abusive extension of buildings or the unabashed hoarding of waste, resulting in impromptu rubbish dumps and scrapyards in ODZ areas.

The Planning Authority and Environment and Resources Authority have a tall order on their hands in attempting to change this mindset by explaining to the public that land ownership does not absolve one from abiding with the designations applicable to the land concerned, or from going through the mainstream planning process to effect any changes. In the Safi case, for example, a 'change in use' of the field in question should have been applied for. This by virtue of the Vehicle Hire Services Regulations (LN 88 of 2010) which stipulate that "every hired vehicle shall be parked in premises whilst not hired out or on lease".

Furthermore, the same legislation states that the address of the said premises should be provided, with the premises being permitted by planning authorities and with an architect indicating the floor space to be utilised for the garaging of vehicles in the said property.

In the Safi case, it is not just the owner of the field who deserves the spotlight but also the rental car industry in general which, as a result of a flagrant lack of forward planning, is seeing its permitted car hoarding facilities at Malta International Airport reach saturation, with the consequence that parcels of former agricultural land in the vicinity of the airport are being encroached upon for car parking purposes.

Some are ready to welcome and even solicit incompatible development within their own 'backyard' if incentivised financially

Judging from the legendary Maltese penchant for frugality, one might assume that the YIMBY phenomenon is much more widespread in local mindsets than one might assume at face value, especially when the contravenor stands to gain financially from the farming out of his property.

Echoes of Burmarrad in Qormi

One of the four pending planning applications for a fuel station involves a site along Qormi Road, Luqa. This case follows the precedent established by the recent approval of the Burmarrad fuel station almost to a tee. For instance, although the application declares a total built-up area of three tumoli (3,000 square metres) so as to be consistent with the maximum footprint permissible according to the relevant policy, the total footprint of the site is actually 4,500 square metres.

Other legitimate reasons as to why this fuel station should not be permitted include: (a) this is not a relocation of an existing fuel station from a residential area but rather the development of a spanking new one complete with tyre servicing facilities, an ATM machine and even a shop; (b) the same road is already serviced by two other fuel stations and a staggering six other fuel stations are to be found within a 2km radius of the same proposed area; and (c) the land in question is ODZ and not within a site of containment (these are disturbed sites found along the periphery of the development zone), with the policy stating that ODZ areas should be the last resort to host fuel stations.

Has the applicant made a genuine effort to find alternative disturbed sites for his development or will he use the tried and tested argument that this is the only plot of land that he owns? One augurs that the same blatant mistakes committed at Burmarrad are not repeated at Luqa.

Giving land stewardship, not just planting trees

There have been numerous afforestation initiatives on these islands, all with the aim of increasing tree cover. The success of such initiatives has been chequered, mainly due to a lack of commitment following the actual tree-planting itself, such as a failure of sustained watering. Against this backdrop, PARKS have recently forged an alliance with St Aloysius' College whereby a number of tumoli of government-owned land in Swatar was bequeathed to students and teachers from the school, who have been entrusted not just with the tree-planting but also with the stewardship of the area for at least the next five years.

Bestowing such a sense of ownership can not only guarantee a greater success for the afforestation effort but also engenders a greater sense of belonging and scope in those involved in this laudable initiative, championed by veteran arborist David Azzopardi.