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The prospects for building development

An esoteric and interesting statistic to know would be the change over the years in the footprint of local properties. I can certainly jump the gun in this case by saying that such a footprint is always on the increase, symptomatic of more opulent lifestyles.

Properties at San Pawl tat-Targa, Madliena and Marsascala bear testimony to this. As emerging from demographic studies by MEPA, there is an increasing population shift towards the north with growing demand for properties in Naxxar, Attard and especially in Mosta, so that a new urban conglomeration has been created in central Malta.

It would also be interesting to know how many disused quarries have as rehabilitated for other purposes, such as agriculture, water storage facilities or even ecotourism.

Current benchmarks indicate that property speculation is also on the increase. A total of 43,526 properties worth Lm1,127 million changed hands over the past four years, Infrastructure Minister Francis Zammit Dimech announced, a figure more than double the value of property that had changed hands in the previous four years.

Being an advocate of EU membership myself, I find the following quite sobering indeed - "the construction sector was expected to experience the biggest growth with EU membership" - according to a study commissioned by the Malta Business Bureau.

In this cauldron of pessimism, it is heartening that, according to Andrew Gatt, operations director at Dhalia, over the past 10 to 20 years, there has been an increase in demand for plots (already built up sites, rather than vacant sites) and for sites for redevelopment (i.e. to demolish and rebuild). This is an expected ramification of the decrease in available 'free land'.

Another rare silver lining was provided by Tourism Minister Michael Refalo who warned Government that a sharp increase (by 10,000 more beds should all current projects be approved) in tourist beds would be unsustainable. Obviously, the minister has not taken this stance due to some green credentials but upon economic considerations, but the end justifies the means in this case.

The way forward

Reports drawn up by MEPA, such as the Minerals Subject Plan and the Demography Topic Paper, and others such as the Waste Management Implementation Strategy (ex-Ministry for the Environment) should be implemented to the full rather than being shelved or trimmed under pressure from some stakeholder.

Suburban development in the many 'hotspots' such as Bahrija, Bidnija, Wardija, Il-Kuncizzjoni, Tas-Salib, Landrijiet (the latter three in the environs of Rabat) and Ta' Zokrija (just outside Mosta) should be restricted to farmers' families, rather than opening the mesh also to property speculators.

Since the carrying capacity for tourism has undeniably been reached (tourist arrivals were down by 3.5 per cent last year and revenues down by Lm 5.8 million), further hotel projects (especially those in vintage sites, such as at Qala) should be stalled.

Owners of vacant buildings should also be prodded, through adequate incentives, to rejuvenate their ailing properties and make them available on the market.

The building industry should be incentived to focus on the rehabilitation of existing buildings, rather than on the building of new ones. Recent MEPA figures indicate that a third of our residential units were built before 1946.

One would presume that work on these buildings, which have grown quite long in the tooth, would provide some solace from a decreased demand for new buildings.

As rightly outlined in the second State of the Environment Report (2002), the monitoring of all the quarrying sites in daunting due to the sheer number of operations and sites. Hence, one uniform monitoring regime for all quarrying sites, having adequate manpower, is needed, especially since flouting of the law within such sites is rife.

The establishment of an ecotourism venture in a disused quarry at Siggiewi should be an eye-opener and a suggestion for similar disused quarries. The latter could also serve for the dumping of inert waste or for reclamation schemes for agriculture (as was practised widely, as at Swatar) or for building purposes (as at Iklin) after reclamation.

Government efforts to this end have been strenuous but hampered by the lack of co-operation from quarry owners - is there no stance for some legislation to get over this hurdle for the public good? More accurate estimates from aerial photography and other means are needed.

Din l-Art Helwa president Martin Scicluna was understandably concerned when he outlined a seven-point plan for Malta to conserve its heritage and countryside. Such contributions, from so-called workers in the vineyard, should be taken as verbatim by our authorities in implementing national policies since they express hands-on experience in the field.

I beg to disagree with Building Industry Consultative Industry (BICC) chairman Robert Musumeci who said just before a BICC-MEPA conference that economic indicators have long shown that our economy still depends very much on the construction industry.

Just 2.8 per cent of our GDP depends on the construction industry, and this is steadily declining. Especially controversial is his claim that unwarranted restrictions are undoubtedly a factor which one could safely attribute to a slow economy.

Safely attribute and unwarranted restrictions? One quarter of our islands is under concrete and he wonders why we are so concerned about our remaining free spaces? While I concede that it is important to have members of decision-making boards with a grasp of planning policies and situations (i.e. architects), the reigns of power and decision-making should not be left solely in their hands, since the potential for veritable conflicts of interest is high.

I agree with Mr Musumeci that both the BICC and MEPA can operate together, as long as BICC does not exert undue pressure on the latter, especially since MEPA is not there to 'ensure economic influx' only.

There are some feeble signs that our authorities are finally biting the bullet. Early this month, work started on the demolition of a group of dilapidated buildings in the area known as Balzunetta in Floriana and the construction of 33 new Housing Authority apartments.

Floriana, together with the Cottonera area, Marsa and Valletta are all in dire need of social housing and if the steady pace of the facelifting of the urban core of these centres is not maintained, the flow of residents seekimg new plots elsewhere will not be stemmed.

Hence, the rehabilitation of our already committed sites should be encouraged, especially in the Grand Harbour area. Also laudable is the current move towards the regeneration of historic urban cores.

To put you in the picture...

About 2,300 new dwellings are added each year to our building stock - an area equivalent to the size of Valletta

Around 30,000-35,000 of our buildings remain vacant (20.6% of the total stock of residential units in our islands - i.e. 169,610 in 2000)

From the early Seventies to the late Nineties, the portion of built-up Malta mushroomed from five per cent to almost 25 per cent in a breakneck urbanisation drive. The European average for urbanised land is around eight or nine per cent of the total land surface.

There is an average of 2.4 square metres of urban recreational space per person in Malta, which is well below the standards of other countries.

There are 80 active and licensed quarries in Malta and 14 in Gozo (hence, excluding those operating illegally) for a total surface area of over 1.1 million square metres.

Current permitted soft stone and hardstone quarrying stocks are estimated to last for 34 and 38 years respectively. However, MEPA has identified gargantuan potential stone stocks that would last for 600 and 233 years respectively, spread out over 26 different areas, thus exacerbating the quarrying footprint problem even further.

Around 85 per cent of all waste within our dumps is generated by the building and construction industry (excluding all the building rubble dumped in our countryside).

Although the number of people employed within the construction industry is relatively large (4,200 in 1998), that employed by the quarrying industry was down in 2001 to 241 from 325 in 1990.

Our population is set to balloon to 400,840 by 2005 and to 434,260 by 2020 (using baselines from the National Population Projections in the revision of the Structure Plan report on demography).

While the population of the most densely urbanised area of the Maltese Islands (i.e., the Grand Harbour Local Plan area) is set to decrease from its current 25,000 to 13,800 in 2020, that of all other local plan areas is set to increase, especially in the Central Malta, South Malta and North West Local Plan areas - these effectively means we are moving ever more into new building pastures.

Although the factor cost contribution to our GDP by the building/construction industry is always increasing from year to year, the percentage of our GDP contributed by the same industry is on the decrease - down to 2.8 per cent in 2000 from a high of 3.6 per cent in 1995 (SoE report, 2002).

There are 62,000 people in these islands in the 'elderly' category but only 3,000 units in elderly people's homes - one might expect more projects for such homes to be in the pipeline.

Around 90 per cent of our business entities are constituted by 'micro-enterprises' - these can rub shoulders with much larger enterprises within our industrial zones/parks. Hence, more land will have to be committed in the future to cater for their needs (e.g. at T'Alla u Ommu).

Between January and October 2002, tourism earnings per capita declined by Lm5.8 to Lm206.3 from Lm212.1 a year earlier, the National Statistics Office said.