

# The Green Whistleblower

## Blowing the construction industry trumpet



As this photomontage (seen from Mdina) indicates, the proposed mega-tent at Ta` Qali is quite obtrusive, to put it mildly. The photomontage was prepared by AT Design using the latest CAD technology.

A report on the new property tax in the Classified section of The Sunday Times last week inadvertently continued to blow the construction industry's trumpet by stating that 20 per cent of the country's output comes from real estate and construction and that 9,000 permits were issued for property developments last year.

Odette Chetcuti (The Times, March 18) aptly captures the mood out there: "Gozo is committing suicide. We claim that tourism is our main industry. What tourist would want to visit an island full of concrete boxes? We are eroding the countryside."

### Malta still a laggard - EEA

Recently, the European Environmental Agency (EEA) published its fourth report for 2006, titled "Priority issues in the Mediterranean environment". Malta always gets the wooden spoon in such reports. In fact, the EEA report states that urban effluents and coastal urbanisation are major problems in Malta, while oily effluents, urban solid wastes and industrial effluents are medium problems.

Even more sobering is the fact that, of the 190 km of coastline, 43 per cent is heavily utilised and the remaining 57 per cent is inaccessible; 24 per cent is built up. And yet we have applications such as for golf courses at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra, extension of the Splash and Fun park, etc.

### Polidano animal park

Has anyone heard of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), within which tigers are classified under Annex I and hence their trade is strictly prohibited unless they are bred in captivity? Has anyone heard of the plethora of planning and dumping infringements (duly covered by enforcements but never acted upon) hovering over the Hal Farrug site mentioned in the same article, carried recently in The Times, about the Lm8 million leisure venture being undertaken by Polidano Brothers?

Quite ominous are the phrases "tigers are on order" and "No sooner had he (the project manager) told Mr Polidano about his plans than the excavators moved in" I came across in the article. Does this imply that where certain individuals are involved, we should expect a 'touch-and-go' planning, at the whim of a magic wand and a glossy title (leisure venue) which brushes away all commitments made by Malta and all planning infringements on site?

Have the lessons learned from the Xemxija bypass incident (site excavated by the same contractor) already been forgotten?

### "Works should be compatible with the environment"

The Times last Wednesday quoted Minister Ninu Zammit as saying that "the role of an architect was not just to plan, design and supervise construction works but also to ensure that what they designed was compatible with the environment, climate and the country's architectural style."

Does the Works Division, currently responsible for the rumpus at Wied Babu, always keep this 'compatibility with the environment' as its mantra in its modus operandi? Or is it simply a case of baying at the moon and not practicing what it preaches?

### An even more toothless tiger?

Michael Falzon ("Tying ourselves in knots", The Sunday Times, March 12), as well as Lawrence Zammit ("Shooting ourselves in the foot", The Times, February 24) highlight the fact that the

balance between rigour and laissez-faire is certainly elusive in many regulatory bodies, such as MEPA - where the need to carry out EIAs is waived in major projects while a welter of glitches sprout with minor projects.

While not expecting foot-dragging (especially for business investments not harming our natural resources), erring should be on the side of caution - this column always decried calls for a watering down of MEPA made by some politicians of both sides (with a few elements of the ruling party blaming MEPA for the party's current political woes). The autonomy of MEPA and other such regulatory bodies should be entrenched in our ethos. Our land resources are too limited to afford any experiments - in the case of minuscule Malta, a frequent 'no' to planning permission should not raise too many eyebrows.

## Objections

The Outside Development Zone (ODZ) applications mill shows no signs of abating, wasting the resources of those who care to object on a weekly basis to the current onslaught our open spaces are facing. This column is in fact dedicated to such conscientious individuals, namely Annalise Falzon from NTM and the Environmental Committee of AD led by Mark Causon. Here's a sampler:

March 4 applications - PA 00172/06 (site at Ta' Milord, Bidnija, which has become synonymous with ODZ applications), referring to the sanctioning of a constructed villa and landscaping works carried out. On the same site, a farmhouse was demolished - such temerity!

March 11 applications - PA01155/06 (Site at Triq Dun Frangisk Sciberras, Mellieha), referring to the erection of a dwelling in an ODZ and scheduled site; PA07064/05 (site at Ta' Tomna, Mellieha), referring to the construction of a micro-enterprise park, close to a proposed Natura 2000 site (currently an SAC of international importance) due to the significant population of Sandarac gum tree the area holds. One cannot fathom how such a park is to be cited in Mellieha (due to restricted accessibility - to cater for Mellieha operators only?) when large swathes of unused land lie idle in our industrial parks.

PA01090/06 and PA00795/06 (referring to two sites along Triq id-Dahla ta' San Tumas, Marsascula) for the construction of dwellings in ODZ sites; PA01141/06 (site at Ta' Buqana, Rabat) referring to the development of a petrol station, a development which should warrant the carrying out of an EIA; PA01028/06 (site at tal-Marga, Bahrija), referring to the construction of a dwelling in an ODZ site, within a Natura 2000 site, and for which a number of previous refusals were meted out; PA01010/06 (site at Tal-Handaq, Qormi), referring to the construction of warehouses for SMEs, along a valley, in an ODZ site adjacent to an SAC of international importance! The Mriehel industrial estate (a couple of kilometres away) is replete with vacant spots!

## Hamri Street update, Mgarr, Gozo

It seems that, despite the four-metre height limit effective on Hamri Street environs in Mgarr, Gozo, the Grand Hotel extension is encroaching higher than this upper limit, sprawling over the belvedere and Mgarr Valley below.

One wonders how the extension permit was granted in the first place when the construction below street level has severely jeopardised the integrity of a public street (Hamri Street) and the retaining wall extends to the middle of the street.

One also wonders what the outcome of the police investigation on the carob tree pruning by the developer will be. One hopes that such an outcome is made public and the whole affair is not swept under the carpet.

## Hunting - a lost opportunity

YOU could say it was a foregone conclusion, but it's now official - there will be no ban on spring hunting this season. Foregone, since we all know the political clout wielded by hunters in this country.

What made my jaw drop, however, was the sight of hunters rejoicing (The Times, March 21) and some of the statements made by the FKNK secretary Lino Farrugia. As is customary with many hunters' press conferences, the meeting actually turned into a rally, with the hunters present spurring on their representatives, who in turn felt obliged to treat journalists present to some pearls of wisdom.

In fact, Mr Farrugia stated that he would not allow the government to use the risk of bird flu as an excuse to stop spring hunting. Who's pulling the strings, may I ask? This latest statement jars with the following one made by Mr Farrugia last Monday: "The Environment Minister did not give in to any pressure from any quarter. The ministry made the most logical, sensible and rational decision required at the time."

Yet another disputable statement was that "those who go out only to kill cannot be called responsible hunters," as if there is some romantic interlude in hunting besides the killing.

Further gall came however with subsequent contributions from Mr Farrugia, in which he stated that "this is indeed a very healthy pastime and definitely the envy of those who do not have this or any other similar passion." (The Times, March 27). How presumptuous of him to believe that I aspire to be a hunter or that non-hunters have an ingrained envy!

Mr Farrugia also stated that "the front page article (The Times) that appeared on Monday "pre-announced" a victory against local traditional hunting and Maltese, Gozitan, and European hunters. Better luck next time!" The last sentence stinks of infantile taunting - one expects a more professional approach from a leading representative of a hunters' association.

Government would do well to take a page out of the Times poll on the hunting decision, in which a staggering 83.15 per cent stated that they did not agree with Government's decision. A respondent aptly belled the cat - he described the "decision as another fine example of the government giving in to a powerful lobby".

With Government caving in and the Opposition failing to muster any congruent position, we are left in a customary quagmire with the helpless lot of politicians that we have.

Once again, one mostly takes exception not to the senseless killing of birds in this country (which is despicable enough) but to the sheer arrogance of those who practise it.

## Quotable quotes

Martin Galea (president of Din l-Art Helwa, The Times, March 28) - "It is a heavy and onerous responsibility to sit on the planning boards at MEPA. With them lies the protection or destruction of Malta's natural and cultural heritage. We ask them to tread warily. Presumption should be against development on historical properties of such importance. It should be remembered the developer always has the right of appeal, while heritage has not!"

George Mallia (March 27) - "Do you get listened to only if you own a gun, here in Malta? Will the government go on listening only to the vociferous and ignoring the silent majority and its right to enjoy the fresh air, the open spaces and the beauty of the land which God gave to us all? If it does so, the bitter medicine administered a few days ago may be repeated in larger and even more bitter dosage, come 2008."

Lino Bugeja (March 21) - "By all means let us develop our popular beaches; they are a great asset for the locals and tourists alike. But why is the government ignoring our repeated pleas to give back to the people secluded beaches which by birthright belong to the nation?"

Eddie Aquilina (The Sunday Times, March 26) - "It is evident that the construction industry has little respect for people" and "Developers have been having it good for so long. It is only right and fair that they adopt construction site practices which are more in keeping with the standard adopted in Europe".

## Silver linings

Environment protest - If you have your diaries ready at hand, pencil in this date - on Saturday, April 22, an environmental protest is being planned in Valletta. This promises to be an umbrella under which different grievances can be incorporated, such as the current ODZ onslaught or the assault on our heritage houses or a protest against golf courses, etc.

Organisers are inviting NGOs to participate, as well as the public, to send a clear unequivocal message to politicians that paying lip service to the environment is no longer tenable. Those interested should contact Astrid Vella at [astridvella@net4u.net.mt](mailto:astridvella@net4u.net.mt)

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