

The sordid side of Maltese planning

My grievances are directed towards MEPA decision-taking facilities and not towards its ranks of dedicated staff who most often have no bearing on the final decisions taken.

Dr Beryl Palmier (The Sunday Times, January 4) justly laments the pillage and neglect of our architectural and historical heritage, especially Fort St Angelo. However, such a pillage is foreshadowed in microcosm every few days all over the islands with MEPA apparently failing to stop the rot.

A case in point is that of two vintage farmhouses along Ramla Road in Nadur (one facing Ramla Bay and the other facing Bingemma Valley), which were exquisitely built of corbelled stone and had even a rock-hewn staircase leading up to their entrance. As from July 18, 2001 (to be even more precise, at around 9 p.m.), they have been replaced by an ignominious mound of rubble.

The owner of the two farmhouses knew that a permit to replace the vintage buildings with a block of flats would never be granted so, going one step further than MEPA, the two farmhouses were manually dismantled.

What is puzzling is that conscientious citizens did phone up MEPA on July 6, when the first signs of monkey business were observed. MEPA did carry out a site inspection and works did stop temporarily, only to resume a couple of days later, with a *fait accompli* on the 18th. Hats off to the efficacy of MEPA action! It seems that these nighttime bravadoes of farmhouse-demolition cannot be stopped by MEPA.

To add insult to injury, rather than fining the applicant for her cheek, a permit was granted to construct blocks of flats (about 40 in total) on the foundations of the old farmhouses - the flat-driven noose around Gozo is tightening even further. One can only speculate at the ages of history to be buried under trifling flats!

MEPA's inability to enforce

MEPA's inability to enforce was again highlighted in the scheduled Lunnzjata Valley in Xlendi where a panel beater is still illegally operating in flagrant defiance of MEPA and the law. All this despite the fact that the same case has already triggered a parliamentary question and despite the fact that MEPA included the "sealing of a panel beater garage in Gozo" among its 150-strong list of enforcements it announced on September 3, 2003. One can hardly embrace the efficacy of such a 'sealing' when parked cars can be regularly observed outside the same panel beater, who sometimes has the decency of resorting to working behind ajar doors.

Despite my lifting the lid on November 30 on the budding dump next to the Kenuna Tower in Nadur, it seems that dust has again settled on the whole issue once more as no authority has moved a finger to have it cleared away. The only component of the dump which could reap financial dividends - i.e. soil - was quickly trucked away and sold but as for the rest, a melancholic status quo is to be reported. Long gone the days of the Clean Up the World Campaign!

Marsaxlokk

With all the hype about Gozo, Malta is no stranger to planning gerrymandering. An application in question (7095/03) caught my eye for the schemes resorted to by the applicant. In fact, the application refers to the proposed demolishing at Triq Axtart, Marsaxlokk, of an existing store and tool room and the reconstruction of the same structures together with a three-metre front garden and water cistern underneath.

Prime facie, the application should not raise any eyebrows, until one speaks with local residents who state that there was no store nor tool room in the area and that the present walls were built illegally during the summer.

Hence, they expressed surprise that the valley site in question is riddled with carob trees and that one of these has been excessively pruned to make way for the illegal wall and that the final nail in the carob's coffin will be driven once the application is granted.

One only hopes that MEPA has photographs of the site to be able to substantiate residents' concerns and take the necessary action.

Mosta

When it comes to incredulity, the prize should surely go to the proposed construction of an old people's home at Mosta (Case No. 03882/02). The proposed home will be literally a stone's

throw from the established Casa Arkati, as it will be just opposite on the edge of Wied il-Ghasel.

From a layman's point of view, it is also inconceivable to site a new old people's home opposite an existing one, due to traffic congestion problems and the risk of segregation from the rest of society. In addition, the chances of finding an alternative site elsewhere in Mosta are substantial.

Residents in the area are understandably livid about the matter and have put their misgivings in writing to leading personalities. The proposal was rejected in a DCC meeting on December 17, and predictably, the applicant appealed.

The objections put forward by residents and their legal representatives are watertight indeed. More than 60 per cent of the proposed development is designated as an ODZ (Outside Development Zone), hence not complying with Structure Plan Policies SET 8 and SET 11. In addition, the proposed development would rise above the height limitation of the area (i.e. three storeys), rendering such a building on a valley-side incompatible with Structure Plan Policy BEN 2.

Structure Plan Policy RCO 29 gives an apt, hard-nosed statement: No new physical development will normally be allowed on the sides of valleys and especially on valley watercourses except for constructions aimed at preventing soil erosion and...

Yet another printed authority which risks being snubbed in this case is the Central Malta Local Plan (CMLP). The plan states that the Limits-to-Development Boundary passing through the site is to be changed (i.e. moved further inland) so as to better safeguard the valley, with the result that 100 per cent of the proposed development would encroach on an ODZ under the proposed scheme.

The same CMLP hints at the setting up of the Victoria Lines Heritage Trail and Valley Walkway Route which weaves through the four valleys of L-Isperanza, Gjananu, Is-Sir and Wied il-Ghasel - giving the proposed development the green light does not do well for the proposed walkway.

In the light of so many planning policies which risk to be infringed, it is augured that MEPA applies rationale in its final decision-taking.

Qalet Marku

Our foresight, when it comes to coastal management, was again manifested at Qalet Marku where a truckload of building debris was dumped on rocky coast to act as paving giving vehicular access to the small sandy beach on site (just in front of the scheduled saline marshland).

Such roughshod action has resulted in yet another stretch of the rocky coast on site (among the most pristine in our islands, already marred in some areas by splotches of concrete to allow vehicular and windsurf access) being smothered just for beach cleaners and fishermen combing through the beached seagrass debris to gain easy access to the beach. Again, doubts are cast over the efficacy of the scheduling system. Will such debris be removed?

Second Environmental Prayer

Recommendations put forward by the Church's Green Commission have yielded yet another bimonthly environmental prayer to be read out in churches all over the islands today week. The subject tackled this time is waste generation and management (prepared in collaboration with WasteServ), with a prayer soliciting a human endeavour not to waste resources and the necessary acumen to come to grips with the waste problem, while giving snippets of information about it.

The initiative seems to have gathered further momentum since 60,000 copies of the environmental prayers will now be printed, as opposed to the 30,000 printed two months ago. In addition, about half the parish priests (the ultimate recipients of the prayers) have replied to the Green Commission in an evaluation exercise, with many of these also giving axioms as to how the initiative can be bolstered even further.

The Commission has also embarked on sending background information about the addressed topic to parish priests to further endow them with the acumen needed to deliver a green-tinged litany. The next prayer is scheduled for the end of March.

Redressing the tree balance

Tree-planting campaigns have established themselves on the local environmental calendar and they are especially numerous in January. Arbor Day is celebrated on January 16 in Malta and Nature Trust (Malta), to mark the occasion, plants a significant number of indigenous trees at its nature reserve of Wied Ghollieqa in San Gwann.

A number of private and public entities have taken up the cause and are actively participating in the campaign, including HSBC, Maltacom, Portomaso, ST Microelectronics, Soroptimists and St Aloysius College, who will leave their footprint at the valley on Saturday. The latter have also embarked on the laudable initiative of planting a tree for every class.

Also worth an accolade is the Federation of Industry, which last year at Yuletide opted to donate money to the 'Trees for People' campaign organised by the Ministry for Rural Affairs

and the Environment.

In this context, this quotation from St Bernard seems appropriate: "You will find something greater in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters."

A special hats off!

Congrats should again go to Chev. Maurice Mizzi who repeatedly spares a thought for the former hamlet of Bidnija in his monthly gardening column in The Sunday Times. A collective well done should also go to those behind the renaissance of Gozo's Green movement, who conscientiously and regularly report on Green misdemeanours in the sister island.

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