

Fawwara - turning into yet another Bahrija?



Fawwara, limits of Siggiewi, is yet another picturesque area falling under the clutches of developers who, with the complicity of their architects, mask their constructions under several pretexts. The bottom line is that MEPA is helpless in front of such gerrymandering.

Developers have a knack of swooping on pristine areas. The latest scalp to be added is Fawwara, limits of Siggiewi, where horseplay is certainly not in short supply.

Within Triq San Lawrenz alone ten different planning applications have been filed. As a prelude, I start with application number 2821/97: a number of requested sanctionings and alterations, all of which were refuted by the MEPA Board, were approved by the Planning Appeals Board.

The most blatant example of the complete lack of consistency between the MEPA and Planning Appeals boards is the case of Panda Farmhouse (or rather, Panda megaproperty, since the farmhouse is long gone), the subject of development application 05707/98.

This relates to the sanctioning of the demolition and subsequent re-erection of a farmhouse overlying a basement. The MEPA Board ardently refused to approve since it is yet another ODZ (Outside Development Zone) property.

The decision was strangely rescinded by the Planning Appeals Board. The PAB's motivations included:

▫ Paragraph 11.20 of Structure Plan (supposedly, the mother document of Maltese planning) Policy AHF 5, which states that to be eligible to have a residential dwelling in the countryside one should be a full-time farmer or animal breeder or be tilling at least 20 tumoli of dry land. Obviously, this is not the case here as the applicant is a notorious Opposition MP. I have serious doubts over the same MP being engrossed in farm work!

▫ S Plan Policy PLP 20 states that complete demolition and reconstruction is not acceptable - this is exactly what happened here.

▫ S Plan Policy RCO 4 states that within Rural Conservation Areas, areas of scenic value will be protected and enhanced. The case in question adversely affects a previously pleasant panoramic view and undisturbed skyline, with the new building being etched in a completely different style and manner.

▫ Circular PA 2/96 states: "When existing building development on a site is wholly or partly illegal, the DCC will not consider a development permit application relating to new development on that site unless the development is regularised." Rather than the PAB imposing a hefty fine for the applicant for deciding to demolish the existing farmhouse of his own accord, they gave carte blanche. Speechless!

One of the core Structure Plan strategies comprises a blanket prohibition of any form of urbanisation outside areas specifically designated for urban uses. Hence, the property in question is exacerbating urbanisation in a previously pristine area. How can you bypass this fact?

The last straw must surely be the new building's footprint - a massive 187 m², way above the maximum footprint of 150 m² permitted under the law. The previous farmhouse demolished by the applicant had a footprint of just 55 m². It seems that the land-use acumen of our forefathers has long been lost!

The applicant even got to include a games room in his new dwelling - where a farmhouse once stood! So while some bureaucrats are painstakingly compiling Structure Plan policies, others are busy undoing them and finding loopholes in the system.

One day it may dawn on the Maltese public that the PAB's decisions are undermining the welfare of our countryside and open spaces. Only then will the implications of the various properties it sanctioned or granted permission to in pristine areas around the Maltese Islands sink in.

La legge è (or dovrebbe essere) uguale per tutti - MP or not! When will we learn this axiom? When will MPs behave as MPs when it comes to choosing their dwelling locations? With what moral authority do they claim to be fighting illegal development in the islands?

Bahrija - twinning project with Death Valley

The bedraggled valley of Bahrija is once again hogging the limelight - for the umpteenth time, for the wrong reasons. In scenes reminiscent more of Death Valley in California, the valley has again been burnt to a cinders, exacerbated too by the profuse presence of empty herbicide bottles along the valley bed.

When will the authorities wake up and finally start introducing green wardens and installing the much-publicised CCTV cameras at sensitive places? Only then can we solve such recurring problems - papering up cracks, such as through the monitoring of the valley during the San Martin November fair is utterly obsolete.

One need not reiterate the ecological importance of the valley - even though the periodic cutting down of reeds is recommended to safeguard against the drying up of watercourses (a practise commonly pursued at is-Simar at Xemxija). This should be carefully monitored and controlled by MEPA officials, who establish communication with local farmers to conduct joint reed controlling spates.

Cheek of the month - the hunters' one

While writing this article, I faced a dilemma on whether or not this item should be the joke of the month. I decided not to mainly because of the sobering thoughts, rather than hilarity, that it provokes.

The Federation for Hunting and Trapping nominated a candidate, Lino Farrugia, for the forthcoming European Parliament elections to act as a bulwark for the tradition of hunting in Malta and Gozo. As if this was not enough as a show of cheek, the same federation went on to lament the recent demolition by MEPA of illegal hunters' hides at Pembroke.

Since when has an association objected to the enforcement of the country's law? But the cherry on the cake must surely be reserved to the statement by the same federation that the demolition of hides at L-Ahrax tal-Mellieha is to be deplored since it is detrimental to local trees planted by the same federation!

This comes against the backdrop of the thousands of exotic trees, like Acacia and Eucalyptus, planted over the years by hunters all over our islands (and still being planted today, such as at Ras il-Pellegrin near Gnejna and all over Gozo) and of all the native garigue plants cleared away by the same hunters. It pays for the federation to pass itself as green sometimes.

Mr Farrugia should take a collection of photos depicting all the swathes of land colonised by the illegal squatters he aims to represent with him to Brussels, or the unattended trapping nets they leave in the countryside, serving as a ubiquitous hazard to those visiting the countryside or to the swathes of garigue they degrade.

One only hopes that the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Environment, George Pullicino, under whose yolk MEPA also falls, does not buckle under pressure being made to bear by the same federation on the illegal hides that were demolished at Pembroke and other areas.

Otherwise, all the sterling work done by the Pembroke Local Council, which has strived to evict these illegal squatters, would have fallen by the wayside. Such demolitions and evictions should not stop and should proceed to others areas, especially along Dingli Cliffs and Migrah Ferha.

Bahar ic-Caghaq caravan site

The Lands Department should be lauded for the initiative it embarked on to remove the permanent concrete platforms for the siting of caravans at Bahar ic-Caghaq, a location that recently developed into a quasi-shanty town.

Such settlements should be nipped in the bud to prevent a carbon copy of the Ahrax and St Thomas Bay scourges, both of which have failed to be cleared by the authorities.

Occupiers have become so entrenched at Bahar ic-Caghaq that they even constructed a small niche to be dedicated to a saint, amid the many cooking stoves (complete with chimneys) that punctuate the landscape.

An application has been submitted to MEPA for part of the same site. One only augurs that no green lights are given for the permanent scarring of the area, the hinterland of which has already been committed to a major tourism project at White Rocks.

Updates from Gozo

Here are some updates from Gozo:

Zebbug - in the case referring to the opening of a road and basement down the first part of the cliff side and the accumulation of building debris just a stone's throw away from

Annunciation Square, enforcement notices ECF 579/03 and ECF 668/03 are pending for Direct Action.

Nadur (Dar ix-Xemx) - a site inspection by the DCC is on the cards for this vintage construction at the heart of so many Gozitans to verify the state of the building. "Architect to amend plans for site to be processed as internal developments" indicates that the architect in planning should adhere to the internal policy design guidelines as established in the DC 2000. So, the sage for this building is certainly not over.

Mgarr ix-Xini - the pillage of the blissful Kalanka ta' Mgarr ix-Xini environs ensues with plush dwellings springing up like weeds along the cliffs. When will MEPA finally decide to stamp its foot down on further development on site?

Dwejra - The Times Gozo supplement of the same week featured an in-depth analysis on Dwejra and how this could be made more attractive to tourists through some very valid points, such as the demolition of the recently added second floors to boathouses on site (will boats be transported to the second floor of these purported 'boathouses'), their piers and flights of stairs (a boat going up a flight of stairs?), and introducing bicycle tours and solar-powered boats.

The supplement also mentioned the setting up of a Dwejra committee by the Gozo Ministry. All of this is certainly laudable but no mention was made anywhere of the NGO NatureTrust (Malta), which was granted substantial funds under the EU's LIFE programme and were designed as managers of the site - I believe the Brussels people would be slightly perplexed, to use the understatement, that the managers of the Dwejra site are not consulted or not even mentioned in what should be an in-depth article on Dwejra.

All of the previously mentioned proposals for the site have been included by Nature Trust in a management plan for the area - it helps to hear it straight from the horse's mouth!

The greatest silver lining of all

Hats off to the PN's newly elected leader Lawrence Gonzi for stating in no uncertain terms that the environment and waste disposal would be his government's top priorities. Let's hope that waste management alone does not take the lion's share of government effort in the environmental field, but other aspects such as illegal development and urbanisation are also addressed.

Chapeau also to opposition MP Evarist Bartolo for highlighting the plight of cart ruts and other archaeological paraphernalia at Tar-Raghad, Mgarr, which were bearing the brunt of illegal development. MEPA assured Mr Bartolo that action was being taken to safeguard the remains.

Crux date

Tomorrow the hearing for the proposed elderly people's home on the fringes of Wied il-Ghasel in Mosta, so hotly opposed by the Mosta Local Council and residents alike, will be held. We will wait with baited breath the outcome.

The author would like to thank Ms Sylvana Debono (MEPA PRO), Ms Veronica Aquilina and Mr Martin Galea DeGiovanni for their help in compiling this article.

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