

Profitable partnerships

WE should be proud that we live in a country which has over 7,000 years of history. Malta has one of the oldest standing structures on earth. We have so much history on our very small island that makes us unique on this planet when considered ratio wise.

With our wealth of heritage, the Maltese islands as a whole could well be considered as a world heritage site. The unfortunate fact is that we have so much of this wealth that in general we are not appreciating it. We are living in history and to a certain extent our parents' traditional way of building with stonework could become a part of our history in the very near future.

One can imagine what the US would do if they had a fraction of our heritage sites. Their core history dates back only 200 years. An old typewriter or an old adding machine has become part of their historic collection.

We Maltese need to wake up and take the bull by its horns and act now. We cannot just continue to argue and complain on our shortcomings. The clock is ticking and today never comes again. As we speak, more damage is being done to our heritage sites. We cannot continue to manage by crisis and try to ignore the facts.

We all know that restoration and maintenance of these sites is a huge task and, naturally, any political party in power would tend to dedicate public funds towards other social projects.

On the other hand, the private sector comes up with more innovative concepts on how to create sustainable development by integrating heritage sites with business opportunities that would guarantee sufficient funds for their maintenance. A practical solution to mitigate the situation on these issues is to form a partnership between the public and the private sector – the so-called PPP.

There are various forms under which

Angelo Xuereb



the public and private sectors can work together. The easiest and most practical way is that the government puts in its share by way of transferring a heritage site on long lease while the private sector would put up the funds and manage the project. This would take place by way of a public tender whereby entrepreneurs, architects and other consultants would team up and come up with innovative ideas on how to put these places to good use and create a win-win situation. Naturally, these sites would have to be restored under a comprehensive brief by the government or MEPA. By doing so, apart from generating economic activity, these heritage sites would be restored, maintained and well kept without need of governments funds.

The private sector always puts its money where its mouth is, which means the entrepreneur will have to be creative and efficient to generate a sustainable and viable business.

There are various ways of applying the PPP concept. One such type is the BOT form – built, operate and transfer. Under this system the developers would invest the necessary funds, manage the project for a number of years, say 50 or 99 years, and then pass it over to the government together with all the improvements and goodwill that would have been achieved over the years.

One can also adopt the BOO form that is build, operate and own. The same principles as BOT apply but instead of

operating for a number of years the project would be owned perpetually.

Another form is the DBO, or design, build and operate. Again, the same principles apply but in this case the design element is included.

Another partnership could be in a form of a joint venture. The split of the percentage of the shareholding in a company would depend on the nature of the project. But the principle would be to run the business on proportional risks between the government and the private sector.

Some projects are already based on the PPP model. We have the restoration of the 300-year-old Pinto Stores which have been integrated with the sea passenger terminal project and is being developed by the private sector on a commercial basis on the BOT form of partnership. The government not only did not fork out the restoration costs but has a handsome income from the project's revenue, apart from the multiplier effects.

Fort Manoel and Fort Tigné should also be restored by the developers responsible for the development of Manoel Island and Tigné Point.

Fort Rinella has been very well restored by *Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna* with most of the works being carried out on a voluntary basis. Other sites, like Selmun castle and a number of towers, have also been restored.

These are the first steps towards the mammoth task of tackling the large amount of similar possibilities.

Here are a few ideas of how the PPP concept can be adopted in the future.

Take, for example, Fort St Elmo, in Valletta. Its location is excellent for a tourist attraction integrating the derelict buildings within the fort. There are then the Mediterranean Conference Centre, and its vast underground structures, the Evans Buildings, which has to be demolished and turned into a com-

mercial building, the examination halls, the wheat cellars and the restoration of the bridge over the breakwater. All these could be integrated into one sustainable project that could guarantee a decent income to maintain such heritage sites grouped in one area. Such a project would be a mammoth challenge for the right consortium.

Both Fort Delimara and the nearby Fort tas-Silg are currently being used as a farm and dogs' home. I feel that with some creativity they could be restored and converted into a commercial site located outside the residential area.

The area within Fort Campbell, in Selmun can be turned into a well-organised camping site. The external dilapidated buildings can be converted into small living quarters for short stays and the underground tunnels and rooms can be cleaned up and used for related activities. The surrounding areas can be landscaped using local natural features.

Although the Salina salt pans are protected under schedule 1, the production of salt is definitely no longer commercially viable. The result is already evident – look at the destruction of the old timber salt sheds and the blocking of the surrounding water channel. The salt pans can be used as a marina for small seacraft, incorporating the Kennedy Grove and the area on the other side of the road as a family park. The channel, once cleaned, can also be an ideal setting for canoeing. Other pans could become part of a water playarea for young children.

Malta now has a number of yacht marinas for medium sized boats but not a single one for small seacraft, such as speedboats. The development could incorporate a hard standing area for wintering.

It is a fact that some small openings have to be created within the outer walls of the salt pans, which means that some damage will occur, but sometimes one has to balance out and sacrifice certain features in order to ensure a sustainable and viable project.

We all know that many small seacraft are occupying garage spaces within the residential areas during the winter season or occupying berthing spaces that could be used by larger vessels. A marina in Salina should generate enough funds to maintain an organised family park, maintain the sea walls and the timber sheds that could house a club house or other facilities.

There are many other possibilities where the private sector could take the lead to restore and manage other heritage sites. The fact remains that there is a practical solution of how to put such places to good use without the full financial burden falling on the government. I am sure that should Malta join the European Union, there would be special funds to restore many of our heritage sites.

Allow me also to make a few comments on the architectural aspects of new buildings.

Developers and architects have committed major mistakes in town planning, new developments, architecture and land-use since the boom of the 1960s. If our forefathers or the knights were to take a glimpse of what we have built over the last 40 years, I am sure they will be shocked when they compare such new structures with the stone heritage bequeathed to us.

Young architects and civil engineers do indeed have a big challenge before them. The Malta Environment and Planning Authority goes into a lot of detail and lays down certain restrictions so as to ensure better development.

Some shortsighted individual developers seek to save as much as possible on structures.

Very soon our system of stone construction has to go through a radical change. The hardship endured in stone handling is almost similar to that of the slaves era. In this modern world we just



cannot expect a worker to carry kilograms on his shoulder. The average weight lift worked by a worker is 25 kilograms. I cannot see the new breed carrying heavy lifts. In a few years we shall be using smaller slabs.

Smaller-sized stone would be a change of design attitude, but a natural or architectural. Party not be built of 23cm thickness; both parties.

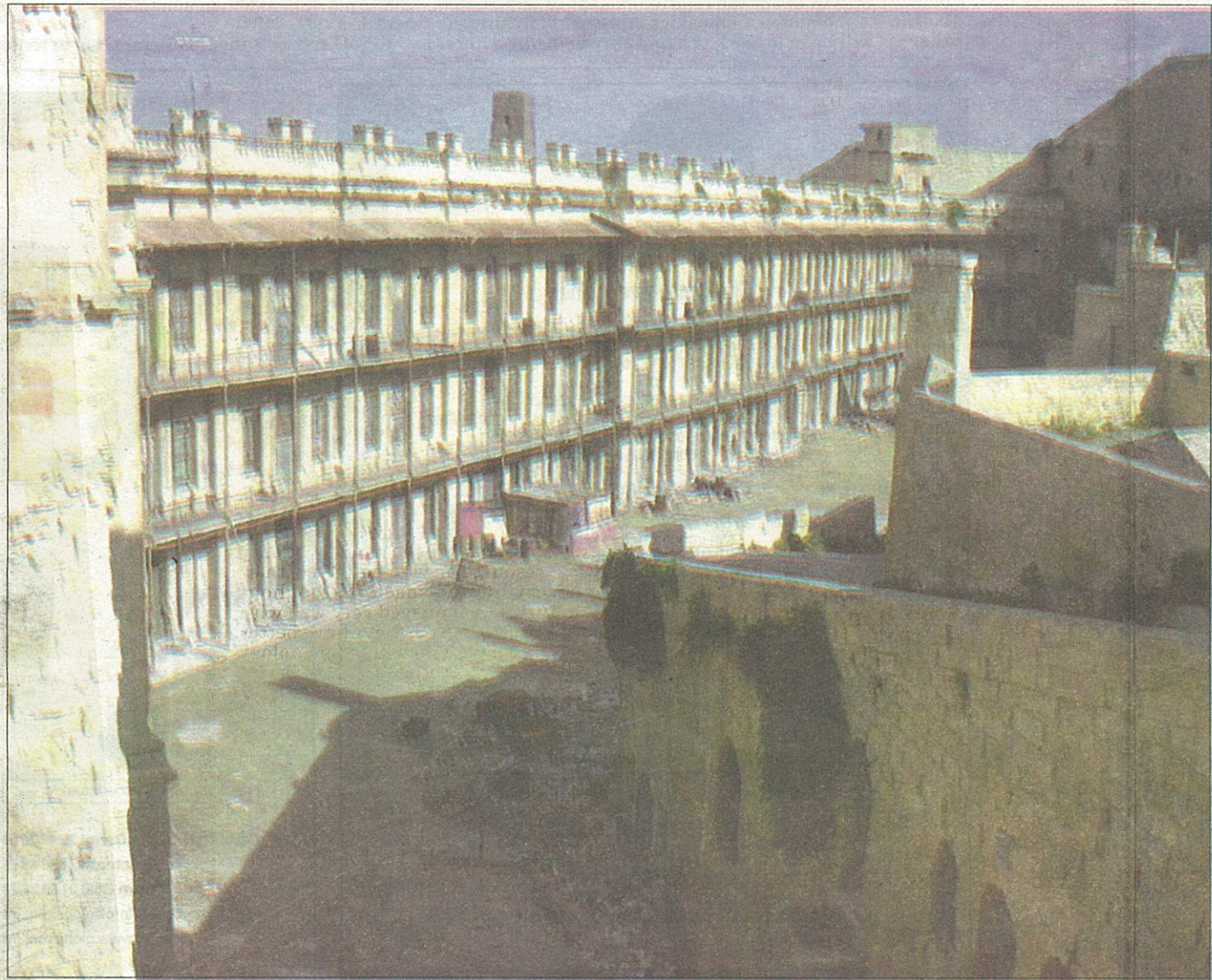
If the stone is smaller, then of the stone would also have which means you have to start elevations differently. We more frame-structured building concrete block partition wall weight partitions. This, in a give architects and civil engineering opportunity to be more creative design in stone cladding by using hard stone and soft stone. I them the advantage of design cladding in various shapes and sizes.

Malta is full of hidden treasure no raw material except for a constant demand for a better of living has and will continue more pressure on architects needs to make the best use of a natural resource as well as that of our very limited space. The centuries we managed over these limitations. Today, we have tools and equipment, better and these should help us develop buildings.

Let us learn from past mistakes use our strategic innovation sustainable developments that admired by the future generations.

I refer to our country as a polished jewel of the Mediterranean. Together we can easily polish will shine again to be admired Maltese and by the millions who shall visit us.

Highlights from an address by Xuereb, chairman, AX Holdings workshop held by the Society of Architecture and Civil Engineering



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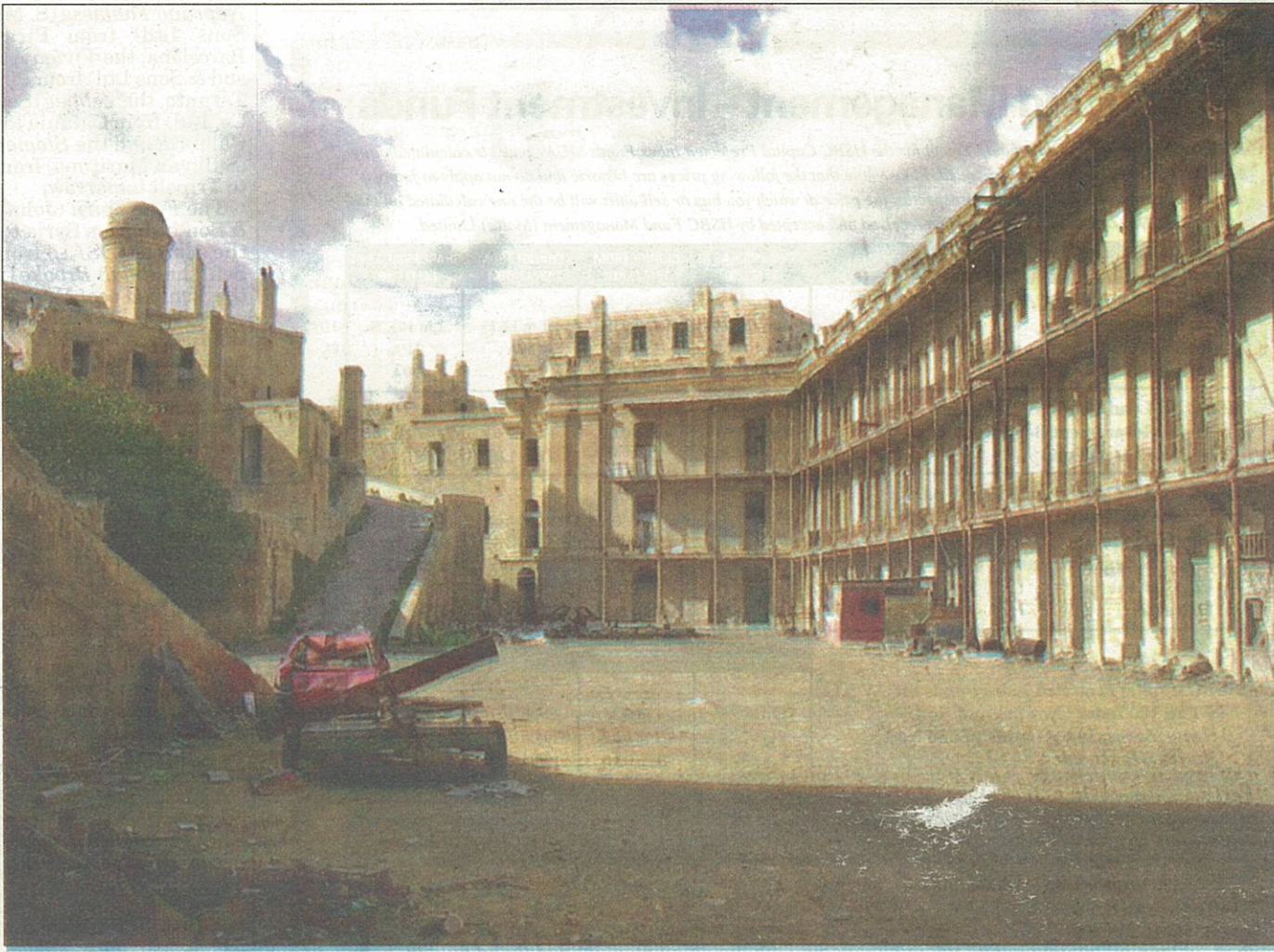
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