

A leap from academic theory into practice – the developers' and contractors' experience

ARCHITECTS and engineers learn what they have been taught during their educational phase. Lecturers change from time to time and this would reflect in the performance of the student.

Furthermore, God has given different talents to all of us. Some of us perform better in planning, some in structural engineering, some in architecture, etc. After leaving university everyone would develop their own style of implementing what they have learnt coupled with their added personal input.

All these facts put together will lead to the generation of a different attitude between certain architects or engineers. The result is that most architects and engineers work in a different ways.

I have many different experiences when, for example, the reinforcement in a standard concrete beam was designed very differently by individual engineers. This is mainly due to the safety factor adopted by the engineers.

The same applies to architectural design and detail. Some architects give great attention to the design element of the elevations and planning, while others take the simplest and easier route and do not bother with the details. Others give a lot of attention to making more money rather than to taking pride in their product. Some are not efficient and cause delays in the completion of projects.

A professional architect should be impartial in case of a dispute between the developers and the contractors but in most cases the architects are acting on the instructions of the client or the developer. Therefore it is inevitable that they are biased towards them.

Some architects take all their projects seriously and make sure they pay frequent site visits during the construction period. Others carry out only one or two site visits in a span of six months.

Many architects try to carry out all

the building services in-house. There is nothing wrong in that as long as the organisation has all the capabilities in-house. But very often this is done for the sake of getting more income, without due care to the standards employed by different specialists. Others are more cautious and appoint dedicated, specialised, professional service providers.

Architects present various types of contracts at the tender stage. Some adopt a contract with strict conditions, including a long list of preliminaries. After the award of the contract some follow rigid adherence to the contract, and others just do not follow the conditions.

This is unfair to the contractor at the

university either directly or through one of these organisations to discuss the needs of the industry. Ten years ago we had set up a joint committee between the university and FOI but, unfortunately, this was dissolved due to lack of co-operation from members appointed by the university – maybe it is time to revisit this idea!

I have been saying that the University needs to produce construction managers, qualified project managers, construction site-supervisors, landscape architects, quality controllers, road construction engineers and more quantity surveyors in various forums.

Currently, qualified architects are occupying these roles in the absence of appropriate qualified persons for such specialisations.

Most of the professions just mentioned require different educational courses from those provided for architects.

The remuneration may be different according to the status of the qualification. But we all know that certain students find it hard to attain the standard required for the diploma/degree of an architect or an engineer, while students might find themselves more comfortable with a more suitable course, for example that of project manager.

A good project manager can end up with a better income than an architect because his/her skills are vital to the successful completion of projects – on time and without the need for 'after completion' trouble-shooting. Project management plays a vital role in the development of a project.

Are architects meeting developers' expectations?

Unfortunately, we have a tradition where penalties for delays are applied only against the building contractors. Normally, developers appoint an architectural firm or an architect as consultant and do not bind the architects with timeframes and penalties ensuring they adhere to an agreed programme.

There can be excessive delays caused by the architects in preparing the necessary drawings. This creates delays in presenting the building application to MEPA, which will result in further delays in the processing of the building application and then even further delays in preparing the detailed drawings.

During this period the developer will be incurring heavy financial costs mainly in the form of interest on capital employed. They also run the risk that a competitor can develop a similar project that would take away the competitive edge.

Consequently, after these preliminary delays, the developer is forced to instruct the issue of the tender for construction with a very short construction period and with heavy penalties for delays.

In most cases, the detailed drawings are not available at the tender stage. This in many instances creates confusion and disagreements between the contractor and the developer. This is created because the architects are more supportive of the developer since he appointed them and is paying them.

On the other hand, the contractors have to try to safeguard the interests of the architect, as the latter is responsible for issuing the payment certificate.

On many occasions the architect would end up finding an excuse to try to please everyone involved. In real



terms the developer has to fork out the additional financial costs! It is therefore imperative that architects carry out their assignments diligently and efficiently and on time.

If necessary, when architects cannot handle all the works assigned to them, they can either refrain from handling the project, or sub-contract parts thereof such as structural engineering, detailed drawings, the preparation of the BOQ and tendering documents. But an architect should never sub-contract his or her most important role: the planning concept and the architectural features.

Own architectural design

Architects should be as original in their design as possible. We must accept that locally we have certain limitations because of the building plot sizes and height limitations. By dedicating some more time, especially to the design of elevations, architects can come up with original features that could drastically improve the quality of a development.

In this regard architects have to be firm with their clients and commit them to spend some extra funds on the façades. Unfortunately, one will find small developers or new homeowners who insist on saving every possible lira that they can, including on the façades.

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tendering stage as some contractors will tender taking into consideration all the conditions, whereas others may have inside information and do not feel the need to give attention to all the details and will price their tender accordingly.

Is the University meeting the construction industry needs? In my opinion there is a sad lack of consultation between the construction industry and the University. I am the president of FOBC (Federation of Building and Civil Engineering Contractors) and I have been a council member of BICC (Building Industry Consultative Council) for the past seven or eight years.

I am also a council member of FOI (Malta Federation of Industry) representing the construction sector.

I have not been approached by the

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Façade design

(Continued from page VII)

Sometimes clients come up with their draft plans or sketches including elevations. Architects must be firm. They should try to realise their clients' dreams but should also give them alternative options. Each building will form part of an architect's portfolio. So architects

should try to do their best on every project, whether small or large.

The public will talk about it and the designs will generate recommendations if people approve of them. This is the best way for an architect to market the profession. The large number of unaesthetic façades scattered all over the islands are in my opinion

a disgrace and the architects who approved them should be ashamed.

By incorporating some inexpensive features a design can be vastly improved, and the difference speaks for itself. To convince a client to invest some more money, architects should prepare a rough estimate of additional costs to construct a more attractive façade and compare the costs as a percentage on the overall investment of the complete development including the land cost. I am sure that the additional cost would not be more than one per cent of the total.

The future of our building practices with local stone

The use of globigerina limestone is declining mainly due to hardship in the construction industry. Its heavy weight is discouraging new masons from joining the trade. To make matters worse, foreign workers who do not have experience working with local stone find it difficult to erect walls with stone blocks, as is our tradition. Naturally this leads to less use of

local soft stone and is definitely leading us to introduce a smaller size of stone cut to a manageable weight of around 20 kg, which can be transported on packed pallets similar to floor tiles or concrete bricks.

The change in size of stone will bring along various other changes, the loading characteristics: the use of party walls; the insulation factor; architectural features and the use of more frame structure buildings, etc. This has its advantages and disadvantages, but for example we are moving towards more use of stone cladding.

As years go by, more buildings will be constructed much faster with concrete block-work and dressed with stone cladding with stone as a finishing feature. This will allow the use of various sizes and shapes of stone as well as the mixture of soft and hard stone.

I used this system successfully in the construction of Capua Hospital in Sliema. We made use of the soft stone cladding 50 x 50cm placed on grid lines while using hard stone cladding at intervals of every three metres in height. I am sure that the new architects' creativity will lead them into a new era of design and creative use of local materials.

Importance of a master plan and practicality

I have come across a number of plans that were prepared without much thought as to how other trades would be fitted in. For example, air conditioning outdoor and internal units, the size of internal shafts, to include plans for placement of the services pipes, water reservoirs, etc.

One needs to start with a number of draft master plans and then choose the best one, focusing on each room or area at a time. Keep focusing on details before any works commence on site.

This is important since I have experienced many instances where a large number of variations had to be made to accommodate these changes.

This leads to going over budget, and the client can then face a shortage of funds. Disagreements result and may tarnish the relationship between the client, the architects and the contractor. In preparing a master plan it is important to be practical and avoid complication.

This University building is an example: it is nice from the architectural point of view but very bad in planning and practicality. The construction and finishing is shabby. It is very hard to conceive the idea of having a circular hall having very bad acoustic levels, or the many steps that apart from confusing you waste circulation space. Besides, the building is not accessible to all. In my experience I have to say that sometimes common sense is not so common with certain persons.

The challenge of the future

When one considers that Malta already has around 20 per cent of its land built up, you may ask, how is there going to be enough work for all of us? It is a common question that has been asked by generation after generation.

I shall quote what an architect who is now over 70 years old told me. When he was a student at the University, in the 1950s, he was approached by a senior architect who told him that there was then little point in graduating as an architect because Malta was already built up!

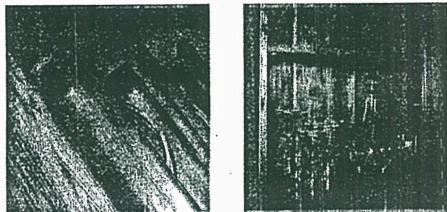
Can you imagine what the senior architect would say if he saw the expansion of development that has taken place over the past 50 years?

Just take a look at Sliema or Naxxar, and compare the expansion of buildings.

I am not envisaging that the sprawl of buildings will continue in the same way. But we shall have to concentrate on demolishing existing

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Being a winner requires hard work

buildings and replacing them, probably with taller buildings and possibly some high-rise buildings in areas that can accommodate them.

In the near future, more projects would be commissioned on a 'turnkey' basis; this means a more challenging role for the architects and engineers.

But, yes, construction will continue since it is one of the motors of Malta's economy. There are many other trades and professions attached to it, from notaries to window cleaners. The European Union will also bring along more challenges.

Foreign architects may be competing with local architects, but we Maltese may also have more opportunities to practise in other countries as well. As we say, "competition is healthy".

One of your main challenges would be to create a balance between development and environment. Both are important. I consider Malta as the unpolished jewel of the Mediterranean. The job of polishing this jewel shall be in architects' and engineers' hands! They should treat it carefully and not spoil the jewel in the process!

Achieving success

My 30-year career not only as a contractor or developer, but also in my business life has led me from very modest beginnings to become one of the country's leading entrepreneurs. I am a firm believer in the following four factors to achieve success, which are: creativity, efficiency, challenge and determination. I say this because I believe that creativity generates change, change generates challenge, challenge generates efficiency, efficiency generates growth and growth generates wealth.

To keep the link with this chain for success, one needs to be determined to achieve one's objectives. Problems and obstacles are bound to be encountered along the way, but with strong determination one will achieve one's goals.

I am also a firm believer in the

following phrases: winners aim to achieve success, losers aim to avoid failure, winners talk of solutions and take action, losers talk of problems and do nothing to solve them. Being a winner requires hard work, being a loser requires no effort whatsoever.

"Kites fly highest against the wind, not with it", said Sir Winston Churchill.

Many ask me how I cope with so many different entities and with the respective problems that they generate, combined with my other commitments on various boards. My answer to that is simple: manage your time well and you will realise that you will also find time for leisure, which is so important in life.

If you cannot manage your time you may end up being late in everything you do. A day has 24 hours for every human being, from the American President to a street cleaner. The challenge is how to make the best of every hour. I believe that if you make time you will find time but if you do not make the time you may never find the time!

To be more successful than a competitor one must put in that extra effort. An athlete beats his opponent by a few centimetres or by the split of a second. It is always that extra effort which makes a winner.

Allow yourself enough time to think then aim high and try to be original in your ideas. Reap the rewards for that extra effort before your competitor catches up with you.

Be efficient remember that action moves faster than words, and be practical. Try not to complicate matters when you face a problem or a task, look for practical ways of solutions. Remember that to be a talker is much easier than to be a doer. Be informed on what is happening in your line of business or career worldwide, so that your ideas will be fresh and attractive.

Mr Xuereb is a building contractor and developer with 30 years of practical experience in dealing with architects and engineers.

A first for Plumelec Ltd

PLUMELEC LTD will this year be taking part in the Property, Construction and Home Improvements Fair for the first time.

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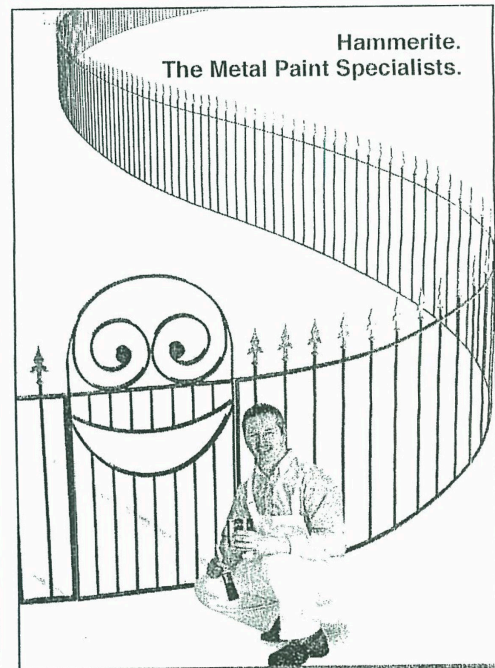
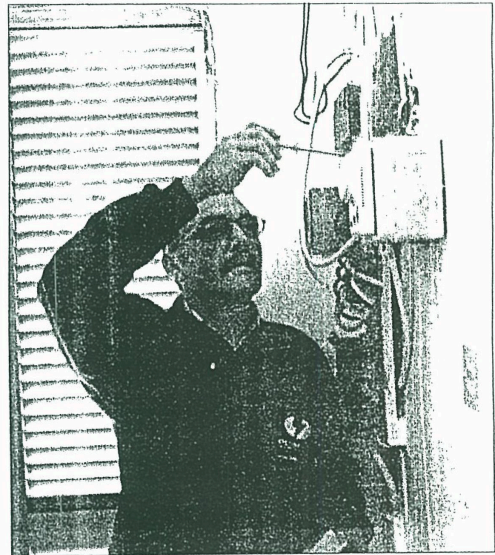
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For further information contact Miguel Cachia, Plumelec Ltd, 3, Triq il-Qaliet, Marsasкала, tel: 2163-6418, 2144-4408 or 9926-8730, fax: 2163-3912, or visit www.plumelec.com.mt, or send an e-mail to mail@plumelec.com.mt.

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