

# Third floors and high-rise

## Angelo Xuereb hails beginning of new era in building design

ANGELO XUEREB, the president of the Federation of Building and Civil Engineering Contractors believes MEPA's new guidelines will herald a new era in building design and planning for Malta's building developments and constitute another milestone towards a better standard of living.

Asked by MaltaToday whether the new guidelines will boost the construction industry Xuereb explained that "the demand for additional development is generated from progress and everyone expects that progress will continue over the coming years. Construction activities move hand in hand with demand. If there is demand for further development, it is only natural that this demand will boost up the construction activity. This means that it is not these policies that will boost the construction activity but the demand."

"Demand naturally leads to more developments and unless height restrictions are eased with caution and only in appropriate areas, then it is difficult to control the sprawl of further horizontal development. This means that more virgin land would have to be sacrificed, and we all agree that this would be as a last resort."

According to Xuereb: "The new policies that allow penthouses to be erected on the third floor of a building, a setback third floor in urban conservation areas and the reduction of footprint for high rise buildings are all moves in the right direction for better land use. This can also be considered as an attempt to control the ever increasing land values which in turn are escalating the final price of a development."

The developer behind several hotels and a failed golf course proposal told MaltaToday: "The concept of high rise development built on a plot ratio basis has many advantages. This may encourage developers to purchase adjoining properties in order to have a more attractive building. It will allow for better planning since most rooms shall have outward facing windows and other openings. Rooms will have more direct natural lighting, more privacy to residents and more open spaces at ground floor levels surrounded with landscaped open spaces or gardens, this depending on the size of the plot. The architects will have a more challenging time in designing the elevations since presently they are very restricted in their creativity when working

on a small frontage. This is very easily noticed on Tower Road in Sliema where the whole streetscape has very similar looks resembling pigeon holes when viewed from a distance apart from the fact that the buildings here also have different heights which represent the year in which they were developed.

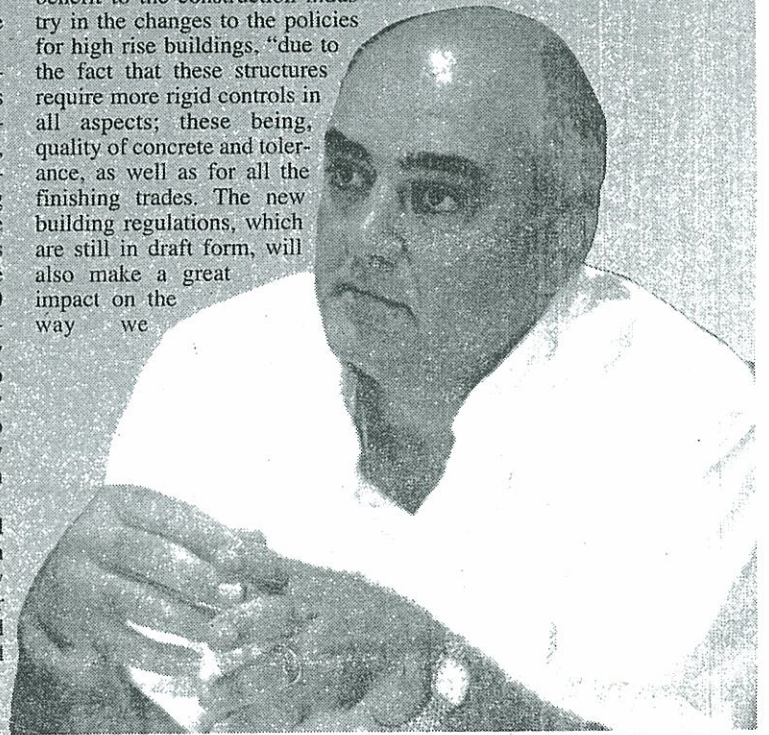
"I can still remember very clearly when during the late 70s I was constructing a five-storey apartment block on the Sliema front, and many were those who considered the building as being excessive at that time. Today, we all know that a 5-storey building is considered to be very low for the Sliema front. After a period of 30 years, many now seriously consider buying these relatively low buildings for redevelopment into higher buildings. Naturally enough, persuading all owners to sell is not easy and probably they would only sell at a very high price."

Xuereb believes Tower Road could have been turned into a high rise area: "Should this new policy have been enforced in earlier times, then, probably we would not have ended up with such bad planning for Tower Road, where the buildings on the front are all

over-shadowing those behind. We would have had a better neighborhood and also still be enjoying it today, with landscaped openings in between the blocks of apartments."

Angelo Xuereb sees the main benefit to the construction industry in the changes to the policies for high rise buildings. "due to the fact that these structures require more rigid controls in all aspects; these being, quality of concrete and tolerance, as well as for all the finishing trades. The new building regulations, which are still in draft form, will also make a great impact on the way we

construct and the way we calculate the noise and thermal insulations. These regulations will also lead to another step forward in having properties valued on the basis of the regulations."

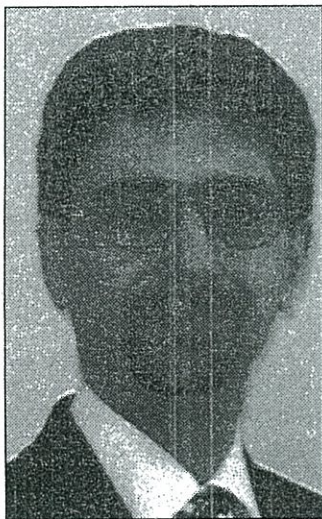


## Nature Trust supports high-rise and third floors, slams penthouses

NOT ALL environment groups see the MEPA guidelines in the same way. The president of Nature Trust, Vince Attard told MaltaToday: "First of all I consider the smaller floor ratio on high rise buildings to be a positive step. Today high-rise buildings are occupying a large footprint on our precious land space. With land use being a prime problem in the Maltese Islands we agree with high-rise trends however we cannot allow these buildings to occupy an even larger chunk of land."

Vince Attard also welcomed the setback third floors in Urban Conservation Areas: "This will help keep the desired air space in our fast developing towns which are often ending in a sort of architecture competition rather than a town planning exercise. If ever we want to plan forward for sustainable development and consider the use of alternate energy such as solar energy for example, such developments should reflect this as today buildings seem to compete with which building will manage to capture sunlight."

Attard echoed minister George Pullicino on the decision to allow third floors in small houses in town centres: "This can also perhaps solve the problem of people seeking to change houses for the more needed space. Maybe it will also encourage more people to retain their house rather than sell their property to seek new housing which again is having an



Vince Attard

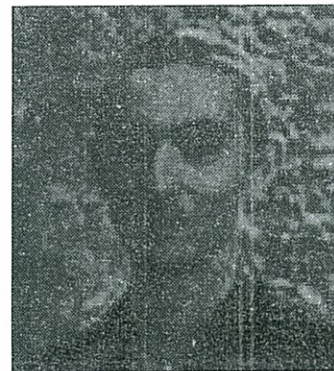
impact on land use."

It was the penthouses that caught Attard's ire: "One cannot but note with disappointment that penthouses seem to get a high feature. Roof space should not be sacrificed to give up the potential use of alternate energy uses such as the use of solar energy in residential areas. We feel that solar energy should be given a higher boost in our fast growing energy consuming country and rather than try to solve the issue by increasing the power being provided by our power stations we recommend the use of solar energy on every household. Penthouses take up precious space that could be used for solar energy production."

## Friends of the Earth: more construction cannot be justified

FRIENDS OF the Earth (Malta) coordinator Martin Galea de Giovanni believes the new MEPA guidelines will increase environmental pressures and told MaltaToday: "At face value, one might imagine that these measures will decrease the environmental pressure created by new constructions. Yet, this is far from the truth as the solution to curb urban sprawl lies in taking other more effective measures, such as reforming the rent laws. The general idea given by MEPA's document seems to provide further thrust to the construction industry which has grown out of scope and proportion. Considering that Malta has about 40,000 vacant dwellings, further construction initiatives can hardly be justified as a way to solve land related issues."

Galea de Giovanni warned that



Martin Galea de Giovanni

independently of how many new penthouses are built, an ever-increasing property value will only encourage landowners to speculate on more open land, where in applying for a permit the sustainability and necessity of such constructions is not even questioned by MEPA.

He insists the rental market must be reformed: "Reforming the property market will prove to be both environmentally and socially just, even if such a bold step would upset developers and estate agents who currently prosper in a 'law of the (concrete) jungle' environment."

The FoE coordinator told MaltaToday that one of the reasons for allowing penthouses on fourth floors could be related to the number of illegal penthouses all over the islands.

"One asks if this is just a sneaky alternative to regularise these illegal constructions at one simple stroke of a pen. This move will definitely make the tenants or owners happy, but the same cannot be said about the neighbour who one fine day woke up to find a plain white wall instead of a sea view."



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