

AX Group turns 30

Group planning to build business hotel in Libya

A WEEK before getting married, a young, inexperienced Angelo Xuereb ran a classified advert in a newspaper for people needing small construction works. The phone rang and a client asked for a washroom in a house in Sliema.

Mr Xuereb got married on a Saturday and agreed to meet his first clients the next day. "You are young!" was the first thing they said. Mr Xuereb was only 22, but already very determined to start his own business.

Founder and chairman of AX Holdings, Mr Xuereb, now 53, is a charming man with an admirable flair for business. He was the eldest of a family of 11 and his father, who was in the construction business, was against his son following in his footsteps. He always thought business was too risky and often dissuaded him from venturing into the construction industry.

Business prevailed and his headstrong son couldn't imagine being anything but a businessman. One week after getting married, he quit his job in his father's company and never looked back. Construction was and still remains his baby, but his creativity has made him savour new markets.

Over the years, the group has grown and expanded in other fields, like the hospitality industry, as well as other major development projects as sole owners or in partnership. AX Holdings is now celebrating its 30th anniversary.

"The group, which has been involved in development and has built a number of prestigious properties, is now looking at international growth," Mr Xuereb told *The Sunday Times* last week. Mr Xuereb said the group was continuously searching for new projects and ideas, one of its very latest being a 90-room business hotel in the heart of the business area in Tripoli, Libya, although "we are treading very carefully after our bitter experience in Albania".

"Libya is an emerging country, which is changing and developing, and I think this project will be a success," Mr Xuereb said.

The Diplomat Hotel marks the start of overseas operations for AX Holdings. An agreement has also been signed with the Libyan authorities for the construction and operation of this four-star hotel, located in the diplomatic quarter. The 12-storey hotel, which is being designed by architects Martin Xuereb & Associates, will be equipped with conference facilities and a number of executive suites.

"We're also trying to come up with new techniques to speed up the construction process as our targeted period of completion is 15 months from when we receive clearance," Mr Xuereb added.

The group has made a name for itself in the construction industry with its rich portfolio of prime developments, like the Valletta Waterfront, Verdala Mansions, Capua Palace Hospital, General Precast Concrete Ltd, the first major local manufacturing plant of precast concrete and prestressed elements, and Hardrocks Ltd, established in 1982, one of the largest hardstone quarries on the island providing top quality sand and gravel to the building industry, the

AX Group has come through 30 years of hard work in three core sectors – the construction industry, the hospitality market and design and development. SIMONNE PACE meets the group's dynamic founder and chairman **Angelo Xuereb**, whose initial personal creativity has now led him to break new ground with the building of a four-star business hotel in Libya.



A THREE-DIMENSIONAL SKETCH of what the Diplomat Hotel in Libya will look like. Right: Mr Xuereb on one of his first construction missions.

first of its kind with an original concept for washing aggregate for better cohesion.

Capua and General Precast Concrete Ltd no longer belong to AX Holdings.

The group is also a leading shareholder in VISET Malta plc, developers of the Valletta Waterfront, and the promoter of this massive project.

Across the harbour in Cottonera, the group was involved in a major restoration project, when the partly demolished 200-year-old Scamps Palace building was restored as the site for the Casino di Venezia franchise.

Here, particular attention to detail was required, stones were recut to original sizes to create a turnkey achievement in only four and a half

months.

"After eight years in the construction industry, I practically ran a one-man show. I used to pick up my employees at 5.30 a.m. every day and supervise around seven different construction sites concurrently. I never kept a diary but never missed an appointment. I was one of the leading building contractors but I wanted to diversify my investment in other sectors," Mr Xuereb said.

Tourism was always the group's second major sector. Right from the early Eighties, it was felt that the group had the best location for a seaside hotel in Qawra and invested heavily in Mr Xuereb's first hotel, the Sunny Coast.



Originally a self-catering operation, the resort is now a holiday ownership club. This accounts for 80 per cent of its operation, with the remaining 20 per cent being tour operator clients.

The Sunny Coast's target market has always been families and its 92



superior apartments are supported by catering and relaxation facilities as well as a sports and leisure centre with its own private lido, outdoor and indoor pools, sun deck, jacuzzis and water sports centre.

The Suncrest Hotel, a few hundred metres down the same coast road, followed closely in 1987. The 458-room hotel, the largest and the only one of its kind at the time, cost Mr Xuereb a total of Lm5.5 million.

The Victoria Hotel is another success story for AX Holdings. Formerly the site of the Capua Court Hotel, a rundown block of apartments, the land was bought by Mr Xuereb in the Nineties.

This elegant boutique hotel in Sliema is currently undergoing construction to double its capacity to 275 rooms. Extension works have already started and will be completed in two years.

"It will be one of the largest hotels in the Sliema area," Mr Xuereb said.

Encouraging a better life for the elderly is also on Mr Xuereb's agenda. He came up with an original concept whereby an elderly person is encouraged to live in a small apartment within a peaceful and comfortable complex, purposely designed for the elderly.

The 230-unit Sheltered Residential Complex for the Elderly in Naxxar will have a huge underground parking area, a clinic, a small area for those who are dependent, a mini-market, a workshop, and a shuttle service to Naxxar centre for those who may require it will also be offered.

This year, AX Group also inaugurated Verdala Mansions in Rabat, consisting of 36 luxury apartments measuring around 300 m² and four penthouses with large terraces, designed for people with extraordinary lifestyles in mind.

Built to the highest standards, these exclusive residences form part

of the Verdala Hotel Complex and offer breathtaking, spectacular views of landscaped gardens and of most of Malta.

The Verdala Hotel Complex was originally planned to be a luxury five-star hotel with adjacent apartments. Mr Xuereb bought the Verdala Hotel in 1994 and applied for an adjacent championship golf course, which was refused. However, new plans for the complex now include redeveloping the hotel building.

"We have decided to go for a smaller, more exclusive hotel – the Royal Hotel, also incorporating Verdala Terraces, aimed to attract the middle class. Finished to excellent standards, these apartments enjoy panoramic views and make use of the leisure facilities of the hotel, as well as 8,000m of landscaped areas," Mr Xuereb said.

The project still awaits planning approval.

Mr Xuereb owes much of his success to his creativity, efficiency and determination. Today, AX Group employs around 550 employees and is still going strong.

"With these ingredients, you'll definitely make it..." Mr Xuereb said. With only Lm90 in his pocket 30 years ago, he made it to the top.

And, of course, he must already be thinking of countless projects he could do in the coming 30 years.

THE VICTORIA HOTEL in Sliema, which is currently being enlarged to double its capacity. Below: the impressive Verdala Mansions in Rabat and the Sunny Coast Resort under construction in the Eighties.

