

# CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT



ANGELO XUEREB has spoken publicly of the need for a sensible compromise between progressive development and protection of the environment. Here he expounds some of his views on the subject.

MUCH is being said about the environment. In reality, it means different things to different people. Unfortunately, for most of us it is simply the countryside and we often find that many criticise any new development, without analysing the pros and cons of the project.

I always say actions are louder than words — it is easier to be a talker than to be a doer. Care for the environment should start in the area where one lives (habitat). We should re-embellish our towns and villages, and keep Malta clean, while trying to control the sprawl of further new development to an acceptable level to fit the environment. I believe that our country is an unpolished gem and, if there is the will from all sides, together we can make Malta the jewel of the Mediterranean.

Progress can never stop. The population is on the increase (which means more homes and more industrial or commercial buildings to work in). The standard of living of the Maltese family is improving at a high rate. Tourism has to upgrade, and this requires further new development. Industrial projects have to increase. All these in one way or another would affect the environment.

We need to find the right balance between development and environment. Thankfully, we all have the right to criticise, but some criticism would be appreciated more if it included proposals for constructive solutions to generate creative ideas for the decision-makers.

Now that the Structure Plan is ready and the body to carry out the Environment Impact Assessment formed, things should move faster and smoother. I hope we will make use of these two important 'tools' to achieve a balanced progress. If Malta is to join the European Community, which is likely, we must aim to improve our environment and achieve sustainable development.

## Embellishing our villages

I read with interest the articles on the environment in *The Sunday Times* (March 15) by De La Salle College students, Anne Zammit and Architect Robert Paul Cachia and would like to compliment them on their views. In this article, I intend to put forward a number of proposals for solving some of the problems raised. I will also propose some more ideas which could help the environment in general. Space

does not permit me to go into all aspects of the subject.

In general we do not appreciate the beauty our villages offer from a tourist point of view. Unfortunately, due to inadequate sanitary and residential conditions, coupled with the continuous improvement in living standards, we are seeing many villagers moving out to new buildings on the outskirts, resulting in more vacant premises.

If we do not take action immediately, our villages may experience the same fate as Valletta which, during the past ten years, lost a third of its population. The government's incentives are not attracting enough families to renovate town and village houses.

These houses are ideal for young, married couples who can devote more time and use their imagination to transform an old house into an attractive, sweet home at a much lower cost than building a new house. The rent laws also need to be changed to encourage renovation by tenants and landlords. But this topic would require a separate article.

I agree with the interesting article written by Architect Cachia. My only concern would be that the planner has to be careful that all present owners of land qualifying for building should be compensated in some form.

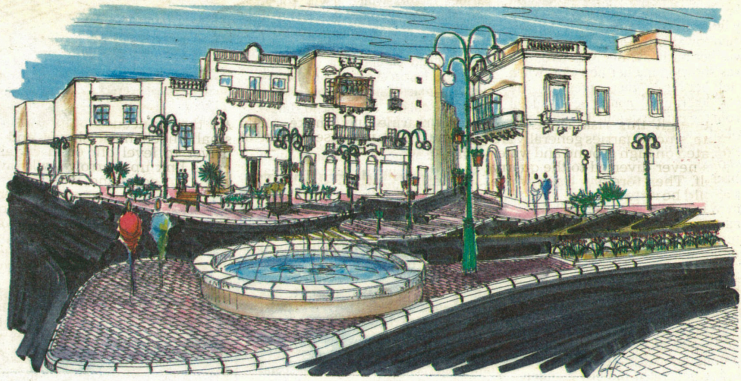
One crucial requirement is to upgrade the village image by adding some embellishment: install street furniture, trees and containers with flowers in balconies and windows. One could start this scheme with the main village square, then go on to the main street leading to the square, followed by the alleys, open areas, and other parts. These could be further enhanced by floodlighting of the parish church and any other important structure or attraction.

The Environment Steering Committee of the Chamber of Commerce intends to initiate this concept, followed eventually by competitions between villages. The best three would be awarded substantial prizes, to be re-invested in their own villages. The first year could be for the best piazza, the following year for the best alley or open space, and so on.

By doing so, we would be creating a sense of civic pride. A sub-committee could be set up in every village to create a different design theme in each village, giving them separate identities. These embellishments could be funded by the village residents themselves.

A village committee would be

formed, composed of representatives of the parish priest, the local political clubs, band clubs and the village residents. An independent member could act as chairman. The committee would be responsible for preparing a plan and artist's impression of the area to be embellished, and



AN ARTIST'S impression of Naxxar village square. The houses are well maintained, the fountain is included on the centre strip and even the lighting poles have plants attached to them to add colour.

discuss it with all concerned for approval.

The government should also impose restrictions in cases where village buildings need to be demolished. In such cases, the original façade should be retained. The interior could be rebuilt as necessary.

## Controlling rubbish

It is a well-known fact that we Maltese keep our homes immaculately clean but few care about public areas. On the other hand, I ask: Is it easy to get rid of bulk refuse? Are there strict controls for those who are caught dumping in public areas? I believe both points have to be looked into in greater depth.

I believe that each town or village should have at least four waste skips, depending on the number of residents. Their rent could be sponsored by companies who would paint the skip with their logo and colour of their preference. The government would only be responsible for transport costs.

The company owning the skips would be responsible for their maintenance and regular clean-

ing. There would be no need for enclosures around the skips if these are equipped with a steel shutter or cover.

These skips would be located in appropriate areas within, say, one kilometre from any residential home. Nowadays almost every family has a means of transport and could easily arrange to deliver bulky refuse to these skips.

As soon as enough skips are introduced, there would be no more excuse for dumping along countryside walkways, roads and in public areas. Also, the access to dump heavy materials using trucks should be adequate so as not to discourage them from dumping in sites indicated by the government.

Heavy penalties should then be introduced for those caught dumping in unauthorised sites. Fines should be around Lm30 for each offence payable on the spot. If the offender cannot pay immediately the police officer or, eventually, the environment warden, should be equipped with wheel clamps to immobilise the vehicle until payment is effected.

Few persons would then risk the penalty or time wasting. Such measures are taken in other developed countries and I do not see why they cannot be implemented here too.

Until quite recently, building schemes (especially for government housing) were extended to areas where good quality rock existed. The result was that eventually residents started complaining about the inconvenience that such quarries bring.

Let us hope that we have learnt from past mistakes and that such a situation will not be repeated. I think that a practical solution could be found.

Once the quarry is excavated to its limit, the owners' main interest would be to refill it with material and eventually trees could be planted to create an orchard.

The government has a major problem: where to dump building debris. The dumping material consists of 90 per cent building debris and industrial debris, and 10 per cent is domestic refuse. Although the latter is not the main problem, in the near future it might be wise to introduce three different colours of refuse plastic bags to identify the type of contents.

The government has just completed a solid waste recycling plant which could handle more than half of Malta's total domestic refuse. Toxic waste could contaminate the water table if dumped without control.

## Quarries

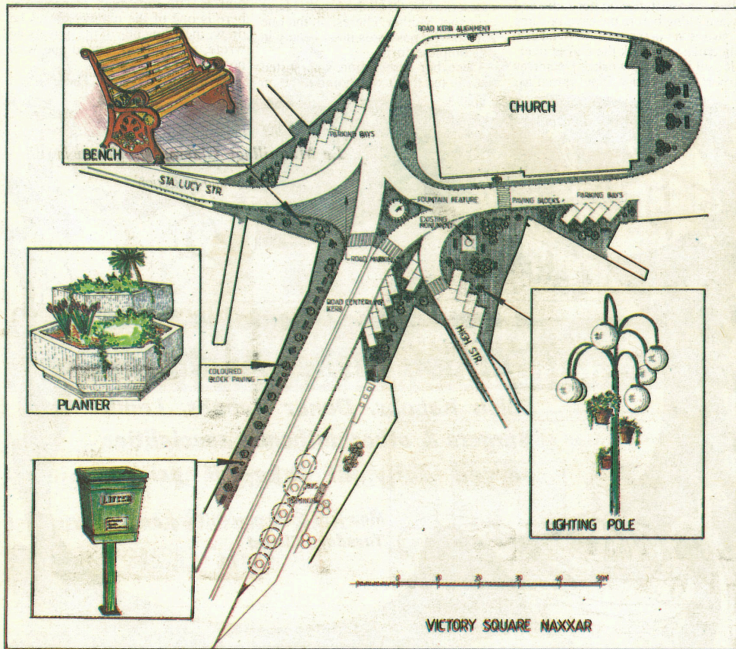
We have heard much criticism of quarries leaving a scar on Malta's landscape as seen from the air. We have to understand that the only raw material our country possesses is stone — either globigerina limestone (building stone) or the coralline limestone (stone for concrete).

Either type is located in specific areas (not anywhere as many of us may think). We cannot re-locate these areas and we cannot run away from facts: this situation has to continue if Malta is to progress.

## Solutions

Building debris (under supervision) could be dumped in used quarries which would then be filled with soil and passed back to their owners, who could then transform them into orchards.

Toxic industrial waste can be deposited in old quarries situated as close to the sea as possible or in used quarries which are lined up with large rubber sheets, as in other countries to construct man-made streams or lakes. These rubber sheets prevent any possible damage to the water table.

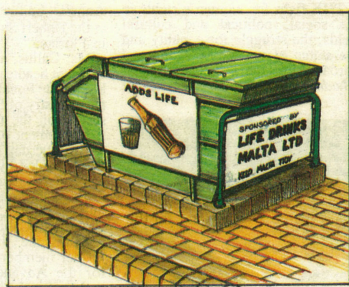


A PLAN of Naxxar village square with ideas of ways to embellish it with benches, planters and a fountain on the centre strip.



ENCOURAGING PEOPLE to get close to nature by building park-style groves where they can have barbecues or picnics and their children will have open spaces where to play, relax and enjoy themselves.





CAUGHT RED-HANDED: an artist's impression of a truck with its wheels clamped after it was caught dumping unwanted household objects. Right: a skip with a sponsor's logo. At least four of them should be placed in every town and village.

(Although this risk is very remote, since quarries generally are located on high ground and water was never diverted to the quarry itself. Therefore any toxic waste would be untouched).

The building debris could be sorted by a simple grading system in, say, three used quarries in Malta and one in Gozo, to reduce the distance as much as possible and to be away from residential areas as far as possible.

The material could be graded in various sizes: say, boulders which normally would be over 60cm in diameter, lower grade up to 20cm, another up to 5cm, and anything below this would be graded by mechanical vibration. Once the various grades are separated, this would leave a large quantity below 1cm which normally contains a high proportion of soil.

This fine material could be mixed with the compost that the solid waste recycling plant will be producing shortly. The result would be similar to our natural soil, enabling us to cover more barren land with soil and make Malta greener.

The end result definitely would mean an eventual reduction in the so-called scars on the surface of our land. On the other hand, we could grow more fruit, resulting in savings on foreign currency.

**Palletising building stone**

The concept of transporting building stone on pallets, which I had explained in detail (*The Sunday Times*, August 5, 1990) is likely to be introduced soon. This system would reduce drastically the amount of dust and debris on construction sites, it would help reduce laborious work in the stone industry, and eliminate wastage of damaged stone.

**Sewerage**

The only sewage treatment plant is very small and thus 90 per cent of all the pumped water from the reverse osmosis plants and from the water table goes back directly to the sea as sewage without any filtration.

Sewage water is contaminating our coastal shores. Development has increased drastically with the result that the main sewerage pipes are now undersized. We do not have a second class water system.

A quarter of our country's energy is required to generate the reverse osmosis plant to turn sea water into drinking water. To have Malta greener we need more water which is scarce.

**Proposed solution**

Technology has enabled sewage treatment plants to be compact and handle large volumes of sewage water which is filtered to produce good quality water within minutes. These compact sewage filtration systems could operate within relatively small, enclosed buildings.

These plants could be located next to each town or village, depending on the population. They could produce two types of water: water for agriculture, which requires less filtration; and another type of second class water for industrial or domestic use.

The result would be: to introduce second class water for irrigation, industrial usage, and for new housing development areas; introduce two rates of water; obviously the second class costing less; save energy; remove the need to enlarge existing main sewerage pipes; lessen pollution around our coastal shores; add

more marine life; make Malta greener; and increase output of vegetables and fruit.

**Countryside walkways**

The natural landscape, complemented with the beautiful sea, all along Malta's south-west coast (from Zurrieg to Paradise Bay) could become a pleasant countryside walkway. To appreciate the beauty one has to experience it personally. The main obstacle is that many areas are not so easily accessible.

It does not require large sums of money to carry out such works.

All that is needed is to utilise a small mechanical shovel and a driver to level off, or in certain cases link up, narrow walkways along the coast and, where possible, provide an open space where families could park their cars. There is no need for any asphalt-ing or concreting.

The levelled off ground would soon harden sufficiently to blend with the natural landscape.

The same concept could be applied in certain valleys in the grove in the northern part of Malta, where large quantities of trees were planted in the Sixties. With careful planning and atten-

tion we could create pleasant picnic areas which could be utilised both in winter and summer.

The word 'environment' comprises many other important factors within our way of life, such as transportation, road-works, signs and billboards, cleanliness, industrial and commercial buildings, working environment and so on. We have to respect the environment we live in because the image we give is the way all other nations see us.

Gozo is already a step ahead of Malta in this respect. We have to understand that Malta's heritage belongs to each one of us, and as we keep our homes clean we must keep our country clean. If our country achieves meaningful

progress, this would mean more wealth to be shared by all of us. We all must foster and cherish a sense of civic pride and personal concern for Malta's future prosperity. Yes, together we can make Malta the jewel of the Mediterranean!

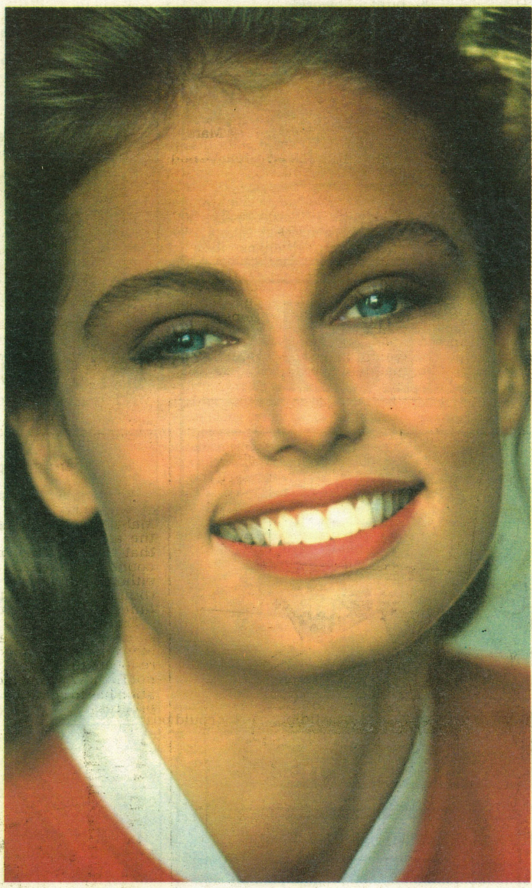
John F. Kennedy's immortal words remain valid in this case: Do not ask what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country.

Angelo Xuereb is well known for his involvement in the fields of construction, civil engineering, real estate development, hotels and tourism. He is a council member of the Malta Federation of Industry and chairman of the Environment Steering Committee of the Chamber of Commerce.

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