

Need for radical change in Malta's construction industry

THE construction industry in Malta is in dire need of a total overhaul and modernisation. After a brief slump, the country is now seeing much going on in the way of both private as well as public projects. This healthy scene, though, does not reflect the reality of the situation, where demand is greater than supply.

This is the opinion of Mr. Angelo Xuereb, the well-known developer and managing director of a number of firms directly involved in construction, development and tourism.

Mr. Xuereb explained that anyone involved in construction in any way knew of the general lack of masons and skilled and non-skilled labourers. This shortage, he estimated, has raised building costs by about 20 per cent.

The reason for this shortage of workers is very simple, according to Mr. Xuereb. First of all, skilled workers prefer to take up employment with the Government, draining the construction industry of trained employees. To make things worse, each year more are being attracted to the tourist industry and manufacturing than to construction where, despite the greater earning potential, the physical hardship involved easily weighs the balance in the opposite direction.

This is borne out by the latest available official statistics. The number of gainfully occupied in the construction industry between 1984 and 1986 went down from 4,577 to 3,124 and, as a result, their wages and salaries also went down, from Lm9.5 million to Lm7.5 million approximately.

Building systems

Mr. Xuereb blamed this on the obsolete and very labour-intensive building systems still in use in the Maltese Islands. Maltese stone is a natural asset we should all be proud of and its use in façades and villas should be encouraged to give the environment a natural touch.

New technology and creative ideas in systems and architecture for industrial and commercial centres, as well as in densely-populated areas, are

needed to literally take a great load off the workers' shoulders and to make the industry attractive again.

This apart from the fact that new technology reduces the problem of long work schedules because a project can be finished in half the time, thereby saving money for all concerned, while guaranteeing better quality all round.

It is this which prompted Mr. Xuereb to try to introduce new methods of construction in Malta. He revealed that he has just finalised an agreement with a leading European company specialising in modular construction through pre-cast concrete elements. A joint venture is in the pipeline which is bound to leave its mark on the development of Malta's building industry, Mr. Xuereb said, although he would not give more details at this stage.

Mr. Xuereb feels that the problems which the building industry is facing today are similar to those which confronted agriculture some years back. But while much has been done by organisations and Government to improve the lot of farmers, little or nothing has been done for the building trade. There is virtually no formal training available for construction workers, and building skills are learned by experience.

No organisations existed to look after the interests of those gainfully occupied in the industry and illiteracy was still quite rampant among the workforce. "A few do receive some formal training but most of them, rather than using their skills in the construction industry, end up taking other jobs in a less laborious trade.

"The building industry is probably the only important sector of Malta's infrastructure where most contract work has no formal management pyramid or structure, no schools or training facilities for foremen and middle management", Mr. Xuereb said, adding that it was therefore not surprising that, as a result, quality was down and many contractors sometimes also had to "teach" their employees.

No classification

Malta does not have any classification of building contractors. Large construction companies still have to compete with small construction teams of, say, six persons. These small teams operate without any organisational set-up or overheads and probably do not care much about quality of workmanship or delays in completion, simply because they had no company reputation to safeguard.

On the other hand, the big construction companies have built a name for themselves and must ensure quality and efficiency by investing heavily in plant and equipment.

If Malta is to improve its construction standards, Government must introduce a classification system based on such factors as the company's workforce, equipment and track record, Mr. Xuereb maintained. This would allow the major construction companies to invest in worker training schemes.

Malta's building system generates a dusty environment. To control this problem, strict measures have to be taken, according to Mr. Xuereb. Building stone is normally taken by truck and dumped at the building site, damaging many of the stone blocks in the process and creating obstructions.

The dust problem is magnified when a stone dressing machine is used on site, spraying dust all over, and it is compounded further by the piles of very fine limestone powder (*xahx*) used for laying the building stone. One big load normally lasts for a long period and, when left unco-

vered on site, causes a good deal of it to be blown away by gusts of wind.

These problems, Mr. Xuereb felt, could be solved by rethinking the system for transporting building stone and limestone powder. Stone blocks could be transported on pallets straight from the quarry and unloaded on site by a crane, as is done with hollow concrete blocks. The size of the stone blocks could moreover be reduced to one-fourth of their present size, thus making them easier to handle. This would have the added ad-



WORKERS removing a reinforced concrete column framework and (right) erecting precast concrete elements during construction of AX House, Mr. Angelo Xuereb's new company offices in Mosta, inaugurated last Thursday. The use of safety helmets was standard during this turnkey project, which was undertaken by Contract Management Services Ltd. on behalf of Angelo Xuereb Ltd.

vantage of making the mason's work less strenuous.

Limestone powder could, on the other hand, be transported in jumbo bags similar to those used for cement, and handled on site by crane. Mr. Xuereb is sure these suggestions would work if proper controls are enforced.

Major projects

Malta today is on the threshold of much-needed modernisation, and many major construction projects are planned or already under way. "Yet", Mr. Xuereb asked, "What is going to happen without the proper structure of experienced project management?"

Very little or nothing at all was being done in this sector for turnkey projects, he said, and it was for this reason that he recently formed Contractors Management Services Ltd., in conjunction with other leading designers, suppliers and finishing contractors. He hoped that under the experienced management of Mr. Joe Vincenti, who has vast experience of project management overseas, turnkey projects entrusted to them will be produced and "delivered" to top standards, within deadlines and, most importantly, within budget.

The building industry in Malta

	1984	1985	1986
Employers	400	347	342
Employees	4,577	4,295	3,124
Gross output (Lm millions)	37,065	31,634	22,844
Net output (Lm millions)	19,009	17,055	13,550
Gross output per head (Lm)	8,089	7,365	7,312
Net output per head (Lm)	4,153	3,971	4,337
Value of materials used (Lm millions)	15,672	11,964	8,389
Wages and salaries (Lm millions)	9,410	8,925	7,467

Taken from the "Abstract of Statistics 1987" published by the Central Office of Statistics

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