

## Spatial Planning Governance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: how Malta inspires debate amongst the spatial planners of Europe

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The ECTP-CEU is at the fore-front of many debates about planning across Europe. Whatever the circumstances of different countries, there are many problems that are ubiquitous to us all. In May 2023, The Malta Chamber of Planners hosted a conference entitled 'Spatial Planning Governance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' which included addressing the role of planners in society.

Malta is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe. With just 320 square kilometres on three islands, it has a population of 518,000. The jewel in the crown of Malta is its outstanding Unesco World Heritage Sites, of which it has three, including spectacularly, Valletta, the smallest capital city in Europe. Malta has a long history and one of its greatest challenges in spatial planning is to conserve and respect its historic buildings, whilst accommodating a rising population, enabling growth in the economy, and ensuring that the population is served by infrastructure and affordable housing. Like many other countries, Malta is also seeing a rise in in-migration, some of which is creating new pressures.

This year, the Malta Chamber of Planners is celebrating 30 years of planning in Malta. Its president, Bjorn Bonello, explained that there remains an urgent need for planning in Malta, and recognising the importance of the history of Malta, he reinforced that *humans are merely temporary custodians of their environments for future generations*. This gives a particular responsibility to governments and an even greater need for spatial planning,

especially in such a crowded land area of an independent small island state. The consumption rate of land for urban purposes has increased dramatically over the last 30 years, but he regrets that the desirable and well-meaning planning policies devised over the last 30 years have not always been adhered to. Self-interest and neo-liberalism have often won out in the development of the island of Malta. Whilst Malta has conserved its heritage assets to very high standards, the density of new development and the greed that dominates renewal produces some very worrying urban landscapes. Increasingly,

high rise buildings are dominating areas, including in some unexpected inland rural areas, and there is increasing demolition of older buildings outside the World Heritage Sites. The Commissioner for Environment and Planning (Perit Alan Saliba) regrets the decline in the quality of the residential units, but his Ombudsman's Office is confident that with the support of politicians and a functioning spatial planning profession, there is still time to protect the good of Malta. Many commentators in Malta express concern about an economic model that demands constant growth, which results in over-development,



Fig. 1. View from Mdina to Mtarfa with fragments of rural landscape (credits: Markus Hedorfer).

excess levels of land-take, and an increasing need for foreign workers. This puts massive pressure on the housing market. Comparing Malta with other European states granted the conference the opportunity to hear from keynote speaker Natasha Day, the Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration in the Government of Jersey, Channel Islands. Jersey is a similarly densely populated island, with an unaffordable housing market, an economy that relies on tourism, especially in summer alongside agriculture from its rich landscape. With a land area of 120 square kilometres, it has a population of 120,000, which rises seasonally. Unlike Malta, only 20% of its land is built upon, and it has managed to retain 50% of its land for cultivation. This an important aim of the new plan for Jersey, known as the Bridging Island Plan.<sup>1</sup>

Natasha Day explained to the conference that her first step in writing a new plan was to gain buy-in from the politicians and communities before the plan was published. In other words, the politicians gave their approval for the concepts of a new plan before it was written. The term Phase Zero commonly used in other disciplines, is being applied to this initial stage in plan preparation. It is argued that planners are the strategists in the planning of places – planners survey the present, look forward and predict the future, take into account the public interest and the social justice of a new plan; lay down the principles of location for new development; outline how the economy can grow; how the urban and

rural environments can be developed with regard to environmental concerns; and how the planning of place can meet sustainable objectives. An important part of Phase Zero in spatial planning is the need to gain the public and political support for the concepts and policies of strategic policy-setting. Like many plans in 2023, the Jersey plan was conscious of tackling policies for re-constructing society and economy following the pandemic, but in Jersey, there is an added problem of leaving the EU. Brexit is causing untold problems for the economy of the UK and Jersey is suffering because of the uncertainty that this has imposed upon it. The plan was produced in a very short time, and the conference attendees highly commended it for producing policies for immediate implementation - something that is expedient in this period of uncertainty. It is built on objectives of conserving natural beauty; and that any new development must provide for the *orderly, comprehensive and sustainable development of land in a manner that best serves the interests of the community.*

Plans made in the UK and including in Jersey are policy-led. They are not encumbered by the necessity to create legally binding zoning plans to accompany the more strategic plans. Consultation of community and stakeholders assists in setting out the objectives of the consultees and enables earlier acceptance of a plan than might otherwise be the case. For example, where sites for development will be required, an

early call for ideas helps in acceptance of new development.

The inspiration of planning in Jersey led to constructive discussion about governance in planning. Three issues emerged during the conference. One has already been alluded to – that policies and plans need to be accepted and adhered to by politicians and communities. Politicians must demonstrate commitment to planning. The way that the Jersey plan was prepared and adopted offered some exemplary ideas for how this can be adopted – gaining early support for the plan. A second issue is the need for the education of professional planners. To this end, Anthony Ellul, the General Secretary of the Malta Chamber of Planners, explained that a Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands was adopted in 1992, which led to the establishment of the Malta Chamber of Planners and the setting up of the University of Malta's first planning course for the education of planners. Together, they establish, maintain, and enhance professional standards in planning. Finally, it is of the highest concern for the ECTP-CEU that planners are recognised by our respective countries as the persons best qualified to assess the needs of, and plan for the population and the use of land. All countries have a different approach to this – some require registration and without it, no-one can call themselves spatial planners. Other countries accredit education courses and require examination for entry to a regulated profession. Regrettably, in many countries, other professions adopt the skills and knowledge of qualified planners and perform their role without recourse to the real experts in the field. The ECTP-CEU is working hard to co-operate and work with other built and natural environment professional disciplines, in the knowledge that multi-disciplinary working produces the best outcomes for our society and environment.

That all these issues were discussed in the Malta conference on spatial planning governance demonstrates that together we can exchange ideas, learn from each other, and feel uplifted by the confidence we find in our profession of spatial planning. ■

#### Footnotes

1 <https://www.gov.je/PlanningBuilding/LawsRegs/IslandPlan/pages/bridgingislandplan.aspx>



Fig. 2-3. From the left: traffic is a problem in Malta, including in well-conserved areas (credits: photo taken in Valletta by Markus Hedorfer); tourism puts great pressure on historic areas such as the World Heritage Site in Valletta (credits: Janet Askew).