



'Heritage is just not a renewable resource'

Philip Leone-Ganado

The secretary-general of Europe's leading heritage organisation has called for creative solutions to safeguard not only important heritage buildings but entire landscapes from overdevelopment.

"In Malta there are still a number of extraordinary ensembles of vernacular - not spectacular - buildings. What is spectacular that the whole ensemble is still there; whole quarters have retained their historic character," Europa Nostra secretary-general Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailovic told *The Sunday Times of Malta*.

"This sense of place and the distinctive character of places is increasing in value. People don't want to see the same thing wherever they go. It's a critical moment: there is a tendency to want a new Dubai everywhere, but people who want to go to Dubai will go to Dubai. The ones who come here want to experience the distinctive character of this place."

Ms Quaedvlieg-Mihailovic was in Malta this week addressing a conference on cultural diplomacy and a board meeting of Europa Nostra, Europe's largest and oldest heritage network, with more than 250 member organisations in 50 countries, including local NGO *Din L'Art Helwa*.

The organisation is active in promoting heritage - including intangible heritage such as folklore, arts and traditional skills - on a policy level, as well as recognising success stories through a widely-respected awards programme.

"Europa Nostra is a real expression of a civil society movement that has grown up into a force," Ms Quaedvlieg-Mihailovic said. "Our ambition is to be listened to and followed, just as the environmental movement succeeded in becoming mainstream."

Having worked with Europa Nostra for 25 years, the secretary-general has seen a vast improvement in the level of heritage awareness, but also a "regression" in recent years, due to the pressures of globalisation and over-development.

And at a time when Maltese NGOs are fighting a renewed assault on traditional village cores, Ms Quaedvlieg-Mihailovic called for a renewed mobilisation of those working in heritage to reach across to architects, businesses and government and create a new "integrated approach" to heritage protection.

"We have to develop plans that think beyond the next election," she said. "Whoever is in a position of power has to realise that once something is lost, it is lost forever: heritage is not a renewable resource."

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Ms Quaedvlieg-Mihailovic pointed to success stories, among others, in The Netherlands, where the reuse of existing buildings has been raised to policy level. This, she said, had led to examples of industrial heritage buildings being regenerated not only for purely economic use but into new creative hubs and public spaces.

"When you are measuring the value of heritage, you cannot limit it to how many jobs it creates. There's no doubt that it brings jobs, but it also has an important impact in the social domain, the environmental domain and the cultural domain, which all come together to create sustainable development."

With 2018 being designated the European Year of Cultural Heritage - as well as Valletta's stint as European Capital of Culture - Ms Quaedvlieg-Mihailovic also highlighted the opportunity to connect heritage groups across the continent and showcase the importance of the movement as a whole.

"The value of heritage cannot be reduced to a commodity," she said. "It is something which is so fundamental to the quality of life and sense of identity of the people here. It has to have an intrinsic value related to the kind of society and living environment you want to create. Obviously tourism is an important source of income, but there is a way to develop that tourism in a sustainable way to preserve the way of life."

A lot of people in Malta feel helpless when they see the over-development that's going on. Do you have any advice for organisations and individuals on how to make their voice heard?

"Thanks to social media and the many existing networks and organisations, it's easier than ever to make your voice heard. We have to call people to engage because ultimately we are all the owners of our heritage. We have a shared responsibility."

"There are a lot of threats, but there is also a momentum, particularly among young people. It's simply not true that young people don't care. Of course they don't want to just preserve something dusty for the sake of the past, but they want to give it a future. They don't want to live in places without meaning."

"When people get together and get organised, work on their arguments, articulate them and communicate them in a constructive, positive, way, it works. Always engage with a proposal, however small. Lots of small scale actions will ultimately become a strong movement. Save a fountain, save one building, and it will influence the next decision, and the next."

"There's no quick fix. There has to be a larger plan for how to preserve the totality and the context. You can't end up with a beautiful world heritage site at Valletta but then a new Dubai on one side and a new Abu Dhabi on the other."

AD challenges government on development

Alternativa Demokratika has again voiced concerns on overdevelopment and the taking up of more agricultural land for buildings, during a press conference next to Cumbo Tower on Mosta's periphery yesterday.

"The last census held in 2011 had identified that out of 8,359 residential units in Mosta, 16.2% were vacant and an additional 3.2% were only used occasionally. Then why do the authorities continuously encourage massive development?" asked AD deputy chairman Carmel Cacopardo.

He drew attention to a piece of land of around 38,605sqm. The Planning Authority will tomorrow decide what type of development will be permissible on it.

This land was included as developable in 2006 when the then government had included it in its rationalisation exercise. Labour, then in opposition, voted against the proposal in Parliament but the Nationalist Party voted in favour.

The Planning Authority will now consider an application for three floors and a semi-basement, with a building height of 17.50 metres above street level. The land in question is sub-divided into 93 plots.

MUMN insists on negotiations

The Malta Union for Midwives and Nurses said it is not prepared to prolong negotiations on a new sectoral agreement.

The union said that even though it sent - 15 days ago - a notice to the Health Department for negotiations to start on a new agreement it did not receive a date to kick off these discussions.

The MUMN said the last agreement was signed more than four years ago.

"Nurses and midwives were waiting anxiously for this new sectoral agreement for various reasons mostly as it addresses the shortage of nurses, professional development, salary adjustment and health and safety issues," the union said in a statement yesterday.

28 groups get cash

Twenty-eight voluntary organisations are benefitting from a €850,000 fund supervised by the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation, President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca said yesterday during a signing ceremony of contracts for the beneficiaries.

The contract binds the NGOs to carry out social projects, which are tied to the UN's sustainable development goals, over a period of two years.