

achieving quality in the built environment

“A fully functional, quality and well-managed built environment has a motivating effect on society, it sustains its identity and propels it to excellence in all of its undertakings.” (from Architecture and Quality of Life, Architects’ Council of Europe, 2004)

Last November, the Kamra tal-Periti launched its position paper entitled “The Urban Challenge – Our Quality of Life and the Built Environment.” Two of the main scopes addressed by this document are the presentation of the vision of the Kamra for a more sustainable development of the built and rural environment, and the emphasis of the need for quality in design as an essential tool for the nation’s economic and social development.

Two aspects of the design process that require attention and that are gaining in importance are the energy efficiency of our buildings and the issue of accessibility for all. Far too much of recent construction is inadequately built, with a general absence of attention to detailing both in the design, as well as in the implementation stages of the project. The principal issues are two, namely an inadequate response to the local climate, and insufficiency in detailing and workmanship to meet requirements and standards

Our buildings’ ability to retain heat in winter and prevent solar gain in summer and to deal with water ingress and humidity are commonly debated facts. So too is the quality of our construction and its longevity. As the cost of land

and hence the cost of property spirals upward, the quality of our construction has remained relatively unchanged (with evident exceptions). A large proportion of our recently built properties however, are affected by the familiar problems arising from inadequate detailing and bad workmanship. They are wasteful of energy, over-dependent on fuel resources for heating and cooling and ventilation. They also require constant, frequent and costly maintenance programmes to keep them in adequate condition.

The recent transposition of the EU Directive on the Energy Performance of Buildings into local legislation through the recently issued “Document F, Technical Guidance – Conservation of Fuel, Energy and Natural Resources (minimum requirements on the energy performance of buildings regulations)”, is a positive step in principle, though it highlights the Kamra’s concerns that the introduction of regulations is not always carefully thought through. All regulations should be backed by adequate research and funding to ensure that they truly provide value for money to society (e.g. although these regulations have been published, there is no relevant data on local construction materials against which to benchmark the performance of new buildings).

Another set of guidelines that has now become a standard item in every design office is the “Access for All Design Guidelines”. While these were met with resistance upon their introduction,

it is now felt that genuine attempts at achieving buildings and urban spaces that are accessible for all are being made, though not always with the best possible outcomes. It is possibly now time to start talking about what is referred to as universal design, which strives to be a broad-spectrum solution that helps everyone, not just people with disabilities. Moreover, it is an approach that recognises the importance of aesthetics.

The introduction of any regulation needs to be accompanied by a widespread education campaign to provide professionals with adequate knowledge to implement them and to alert the public to the value of the investments they will be required to undertake. The proper training of other stakeholders in the construction industry to ensure that they too understand their responsibilities and obligations is also critical. Together with architects, developers, contractors and clients all share in the responsibility for quality in construction and for the adherence to regulations.

In an attempt to address these issues and to provide a platform for consumers and professionals to discuss the issues at hand, the Kamra tal-Periti, in collaboration with the Chamber of Engineers, the Services Division (Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs), and the National Commission Persons with Disability is organising two seminars as part of the FEED 2007 program.

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