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K A M R A T A L - P E R I T I

To support members of the profession in achieving excellence in their practice of architecture and engineering in the interest of the community

THE URBAN CHALLENGE: Small = Tall? ***An informed debate on the demand and impact of Tall Buildings***

A recent article in the prominent European Architecture magazine A10 focused on the changing development priorities within European cities. Entitled *Beyond Building*, in line with the theme for this year's Venice Architecture Biennale, it argues that ecological and demographic changes will alter the way we are called to intervene in the urban environment. As birth rates across Europe fall and migration into the major cities on the continent drops, a growing number of European cities are starting to experience a growth slowdown or even a decline in their population. The article argues that now that cities have reached their upper population limit, urban development emphasis must, of needs, shift from the need to provide more housing space for urban populations and further roads for their cars to the consolidation of the city within its established boundaries through an investment in the quality of its environment.

The article also argues that our approach to development will also need to change in the light of other factors, such as new energy performance criteria underscored by increased fuel prices, the need to conserve resources by reusing rather than demolishing old buildings and the need to cater for ageing populations. The article highlights the need for a more sustainable, quality-based approach to urban development; it recognizes that this requires a cultural change beyond building for building's sake and towards a better quality built environment and does not shirk controversy when it makes the statement:

'That less construction might be the most logical conclusion of ecological and demographic trends seems obvious but it is still denied by property developers and authorities who are unable or unwilling to extricate themselves from the automatic reflex of growth and expansion, and who will continue to build as long as the money is there or can be borrowed, on the assumption that supply can create demand.'

Malta's situation is not dissimilar to the one described above. The post-war migration from the historic inner harbour towns to the expanding suburban settlements around the outlying towns and villages which resulted in the rapid transformation of our townscape and landscape has now largely occupied the defined urban development zones. The limits to the horizontal extension of our towns have, in the past, raised comparisons with higher population density situations such as those of Hong Kong or Singapore, and have prompted an interest in tall building development that has spawned a number of tall building developments, outside of a formal planning policy. According to NSO statistics published in July of this year, Malta's population is one of the few in the EU which is still increasing, and it is expected to peak to 424,028 by 2025, from 410,290 at the end of last year, but to start decreasing again, to just over 400,000 by 2050. It would appear plausible to assume that the large proportion of vacant property should be sufficient to accommodate the medium term population increase and in this light the current slowdown of certain sectors of the housing market raises questions about the type and quality of development that Malta requires.

The quality of the urban environment was the key focus of the Kamra tal-Periti's document *The Urban Challenge: Our Quality of Life and the Built Environment*, which was published late last year. *The Urban Challenge* argues that lasting sustainable development which offers our citizens a better quality of life can only be achieved by defining an appropriate vision for Malta where the social, economic and environmental objectives work together harmoniously. The document expresses concern at the often controversial approach to debate on urban issues and highlights the need for a more informed debate on key urban issues in the Maltese Islands.

The Urban Challenge makes specific reference to tall buildings and asks key questions about their development: What are the benefits that are to be had from the development of tall buildings, other than the obvious financial benefits for the developers through the provision of properties with stunning views? Will tall buildings in our local context provide any positive impacts to the built environment and, given that their potential negative impacts are universally well-established, how do we ensure that these are mitigated, and that our tall buildings are of the highest quality design and construction possible? What are the real costs involved in building good quality towers? Given the high proportion of vacant property, should we not be encouraging available investment to be directed elsewhere (new manufacturing and or servicing industries perhaps)? What will be the impact of vacant (or worse still, uncompleted) towers which, designed to meet specific briefs, tend to be difficult to convert to other uses? And how do we ensure that the nation gains should it select to adopt a policy favouring the construction of tall buildings?

Malta currently has a draft tall building policy (based on the application of a Floor Area Ratio mechanism). The policy has never been formally adopted, suggesting a certain reluctance from the authorities to take forward a document which may not be the most suited to our current circumstances. On the other hand it is not yet clear whether and how that draft will be replaced. Certainly in the current scenario, it is difficult to deal with tall building development in a strategic manner. Strategic forward planning coupled with innovative thinking is however essential if tall buildings are to add value to the country's social and economic offering.

It is undeniable that recent years have seen a growing interest in tall building development on the islands. The ongoing construction of a number of tall projects as well as the submission of several applications for planning permission for the construction of towers, some reaching up to heights of over 30 storeys, bears testimony to a dizzying aspiration for height. There is still, however, little knowledge of the specific urban planning, design, construction and environmental aspects of tall buildings, giving rise to growing concerns as to the suitability of their further promulgation within Malta's urban context.

Taking the work of *The Urban Challenge* forward, the KTP is organising a public conference on tall buildings which will feature experienced international speakers from industry and academia to provide a knowledge platform to inform the current and future debate and eventual decisions on tall building development. The speakers include: the Malaysian expert **Dr Faridah Shafii**, the Director of The Centre for Sustainable Construction and Tall Buildings, Institute Sultan Iskandar of Urban Habitat & Highrise, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, presently the Country Leader for Malaysia on part of The Council for Tall Buildings & Urban Habitat, USA; **Prof. Riccardo Bedrone**, associate professor of Urban Planning and Technique in the Architecture Faculty at the Turin Polytechnic, and president of the XXIII World Architecture Congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA) recently concluded in Torino; and **Lora Nicolaou**, Director for Urban Strategies in the London office of the renowned global consultancy firm DEGW, who has directed a number of tall building strategies for Rotterdam, Dublin and London.

The Conference entitled: *The Urban Challenge: Small= Tall?* will be held on the 21st of November 2008 at the Le Meridien Hotel in Balluta and will deal with a range of issues covering strategic planning, sustainability and design evolution. For further information visit www.ktpmalta.com or write to tallbuildings@ktpmalta.com.