

Better by Design

Perit David Pace talks to Vanessa Macdonald

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Legislation will be introduced in the near future that will affect the whole construction industry, in particular EU directives aimed at improving the energy-efficiency of buildings.

“I do not think that we are ready in Malta. There should be a campaign to make not only architects but all those involved in the construction industry aware of what the implications,” the Chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers (Kamra tal-Periti) president David Pace said.

The KTP is ready to play its part in the awareness campaign.

“Good architecture is not only about aesthetics but also about the environment. In the EU, there is a very strong drive towards reducing energy consumption and as from next year an energy audit will have to be carried out on buildings to ensure that they comply with standards of insulation, lighting and so on. The building must be certified as being compliant with set standards”

Mr Pace said the new legislation would require major shifts in everything from attitude to the materials used. The aim is to save energy, through the efficient use of materials and good design which will in turn result in savings, possibly by returning to the basic elements of design, using traditional principles - like small south-facing windows - that were lost when air conditioning made it possible for people to install large picture windows.

Another aspect of legislation - or lack thereof - is the seismic certification of buildings, a topic that has cropped up regularly in recent years.

“Current thinking is that it is safe here, but not as safe as we used to think. If there is even a slight possibility of having a jolt, then it is our responsibility to take that into account. We are holding a series of lectures on seismic-resistant structures as part of our continuing professional development programme, and are also having discussions with the insurance market.

“If stronger structures are needed, in the interests of society, then I think this should be put into the legislation. Bear in mind that you have to persuade a client to spend more to make his building earthquake-proof. Extra protection always comes at extra cost.”

Mr Pace sees the Building Industry Consultative Council as the driving force.

“BICC, as an umbrella body for the construction industry, should commission an analysis on whether there should be legislation. If the study concludes that there should be, then it can present the study to the administration to push for legislation.”

Mr Pace, who was elected last December, does not believe that the KTP's role should be limited to legislative requirements. He firmly believes there should be a vision for architecture and, with the backing of the council, is lobbying for a national architecture policy.

“This would be a roadmap aimed at increasing the quality of our architectural output, increasing awareness among the public of what good architecture is, having a well informed press to encourage debate... in short, the policy would make architecture not just an intellectual subject for the few but something people talk about and appreciate since it affects their lives.”

The concept is hard to get across.

“People tend to assume we are talking about construction. But of course, it is much more. It is a very dispersed activity, falling under several ministries, with no single one having overall responsibility.”

It is also not just about historic buildings, although Heritage Malta would obviously have a role to play.

“In a nutshell, we want to promote the idea of ‘today’s architecture, tomorrow’s heritage’. Heritage is very important but it is also important to ensure that what we do now will one day qualify as heritage.”

The KTP's proposals are based on a publication by the Architects Council of Europe entitled Architecture and the Quality of Life, which lists 21 targets. It has already been presented to the President, and will soon be presented to the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition and other politicians.

Malta would certainly benefit from a more adventurous approach, especially with regards to public buildings. Little is spent on public buildings beyond restoring baroque ones. There is no money being spent on museums, for example, which are so often architectural attractions in their own right. And consensus is not always possible, or even desirable. After all, some of the most talked about buildings overseas are hated by half the population.

“If you have a strong public opinion, I think you will also have strong decision-makers. If they get good advice at an architectural level, the results can be positive.

“France has a very advanced flair for design. They do not balk at putting modern buildings right next to historic ones in Paris, for example. But the level of public appreciation of architecture ensures that more often than not, they get it right.”

There could be a number of interesting projects coming up that could provide inspiring architecture - especially if the design is chosen by a competition.

“We are keen on the culture of competitions, as they bring out the best ideas. In the long run, you get a better result. And foreigners could compete, just as local architects compete in international competitions.”

The number of projects this could apply to ranges from City Gate and the Opera House, to Dock One.

In the meantime, however, KTP is concerned that good architectural features in existing buildings are not appreciated.

“Even large, privately-owned garages dating back to the 1950s can be worth saving! If they belong to the British period, we tend to overlook their importance and value.”

The KTP singled out the Qala school as being worthy of conservation. It is one of several schools in Gozo designed by the late Joe Huntingford in the 1950s. The government is planning to build a branch of the Institute of Tourism Studies using EU funds, which will mean demolishing a good part of the school.

“We think every effort should be made to spare it and to integrate its use with the existing school. I understand that there might be some compromise required, but at least we should try,” Mr Pace pleaded. The design of the school reflects the trends of the period. It is well detailed with a canopy supported by slender columns.

“We were told that the open passages are very windy and inconvenient for users, but as you go past it, you immediately realise that it is quite different to the run-of-the-mill featureless blocks. The site could itself provide a theme for a competition to sensitively rehabilitate the building.”

The planning application is currently at an advanced stage.

Conserving buildings is more complex when it comes to private buildings: The owners cannot demolish the building to make way for more lucrative development - and are also expected to foot the bill for its maintenance and preservation.

“Abroad if you must conserve your building because it is listed, you are given incentives to do so. When your children inherit it, they are not faced with a massive inheritance tax bill,” he said.

Mr Pace appreciates that taxpayers might balk at the idea of their tax money being given as a grant, but feels that this would be one of the aims of the architecture awareness campaign.

“You should be willing to pay for it because the money is being used to ensure that you have something beautiful to look at and appreciate. This is all part of the same argument: We need to appreciate architecture.”

In the meantime, the KTP and the Malta Environment and Planning Authority are striving to improve the planning system by reviewing MEPA's policies and legislation .

“We feel that some comments by Mepa chairman Andrew Calleja (The Times Business, February 10) – about where cases get held up in the application process – were a bit defensive. There are cases where the architect does not respond to requests for information from MEPA, but in some cases, the “chess-clock” on MEPA's side does not start ticking as soon as the reply is received. Until the case officer tackles the reply, it still looks as though it is pending.

“Let us acknowledge that both sides might be partly at fault. We understand that MEPA has a lot of problems and does not get as much cooperation as it should from, for example, government entities.”

Mr Pace's concern is not limited to the delays in applications, but also to the impact of the application process on architecture in general.

“If you look back at the past 12 years, you may find that design is aimed at getting through the approval process, rather than at producing something that looks good and works well.”

Another problem stems from inconsistency – real or perceived – in approvals.

“We advise our clients what is feasible and what is not, in our opinion, based on the policies and the structure plan. If the client then comes up with an example of someone who was given a permit for a development similar to one we feel is not feasible, it puts us in a very awkward position.

“We can only advise the client. It is their decision in the end – and their expense. You cannot deny anyone the right to apply – or even to appeal.”

Mr Pace believes the only way to reduce such problems would be to have as little subjectivity as possible in the process.

“For example, if a series of decisions establish a new policy, or a change of policy, then it should be publicised. Mepa might worry that this might lead to a lot of changes and confusion. But for us, the most important thing is for decisions to be consistent. We find ourselves in the awkward position of trying to explain to a client why his application is recommended for refusal when approvals for development similar – if not identical – to his, are granted regularly.”