

'We need to slow down the pace of development'

Taking the helm of *Din l-Art Helwa* from Simone Mizzi, newly appointed president **MARIA GRAZIA CASSAR** tells **Kim Dalli** that the government is risking altering Malta's landscape irreversibly by introducing numerous policies on fast forward.

The three Bills on the Mepa demerger have put environmental NGOs, including *Din l-Art Helwa*, in a race against time to sift through the complex details of 400 pages of legislation which will define the island's development and environment.

Presented on July 3, the government offered a deadline until the end of the month for the public to present its written submissions. After it was pointed out that this was illegal under the Aarhus Convention, the government extended the deadline to four weeks but adamantly refused to postpone the parliamentary debate until after feedback had been received.

"Since the new government was elected, everything has been rushed through," newly appointed DHL president Maria Grazia Cassar says.

"It's all about change for change's sake. We are irreversibly changing the shape of our country through all these policies.

"Let us not change our country to the point of no return"

"What worries me most is the speed through which the changes are unfolding. We feel like we're in a tennis game - we have a racket and we're constantly trying to reach out to strike at consecutive tennis balls."

The harm was there in the last legislature when the Nationalist Party decided to extend development boundaries. But the current government is spearheading a string of policies in a hasty manner which does not adhere to its pledge of transparency.

A case in point was the inclusion by stealth of Mriehel as a high-rise zone in the approved policy regulating tall buildings.

Malta was too small for high-rise buildings, Ms Cassar says, explaining that the looming towers will affect our lives physically and psychologically. Soon enough, there will be no place to which a person could retreat to escape the vista of high-rise buildings.

"Also, have we ever asked ourselves whether we really need them? Most of these high-rise buildings are not even for residential use - they're hotels or offices.

"Before rushing into further development, let us stop and evaluate. Let us take buildings such as the Portomaso tower and conduct a study - who is using it, how much revenue is it generating?"



Maria Grazia Cassar: "We come into regular contact with a number of tourists. They all say that they visit Malta for its historical sites and lifestyle." *Photo: Chris Sant Fournier*

The problem was that a large number of buildings have mushroomed for purely speculative reasons. A shift in attitude was needed whereby existing buildings were used creatively to generate profit.

Currently completing her Masters in Cultural Heritage Management, Ms Cassar persuasively argues for the rehabilitation and conservation of existing forts.

She hails the Valletta Waterfront as a "good, honest way" of restoring, regenerating and making money out of a historic site.

"These are the sort of projects we should be looking at. Unfortunately, it's a slower process. Building gives you fast revenue. We must slow down the pace of development. That doesn't mean slowing down

our earnings but concentrating on cleaning up our act."

It was much easier to build new projects from scratch, on a clean state, rather than restore and rehabilitate existing ones.

"But from experience, I can tell you that the rehabilitation of historic buildings approximates the same cost as that of building a new one. And we gain a monument."

She referred to the sail-makers' loft in Cospicua's Dock 1 and the Santa Margherita Lines as "crying for restoration". Through proper restoration, they could be put to good use by attracting foreign investment and regenerating the area.

"And by 'restoring', I mean restoring in the true sense of the word, not like what has

been done with The Point in Sliema." Describing The Point as a "farce", Ms Cassar points out that the structure merely kept one façade of the historic building - "hanging on for dear life" - with no reference to its original context.

Unfortunately, that was also what was being planned for the 40-storey hotel in Sliema, which will form part of the Fort Cambridge complex.

The artist's impression indicates that only the façade of the barracks will be retained as an arcaded screen against the new skyscraper, with the historic building being gutted by the new structure mushrooming from within it.

The proposed American University of Malta could easily be situated in a built-up area, including the large but dilapidated Fort Delimara.

Two one hundred-tonne guns were still inside - rotting away in a metre of dried excrement, left over from when the fort was used as a pig and rabbit farm.

Reference to the new university takes her to two "worrying" clauses in the Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (SPED), which will replace the current Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands.

The clauses state that where no other feasible alternatives exist in an urban area, development may be permitted in outside development zones. Furthermore, projects which are of a sustainable nature can be permitted outside development zones "as a last resort where it is essential for the achievement of sustainable development".

"They are very loose policies and lack definition. What is 'sustainable'? Is it economic sustainability? We have called upon the government to define these words but so far we have not been answered."

The NGO would like to see long-term structure plans which were not changed following the election of every new government.

Plans are based on studies and not on people's point of view, she says, stressing the importance of not rushing change.

As DLH, the NGO is responsible for running a number of forts, including the Red Tower, Comino Tower and Wignacourt Tower.

"We come into regular contact with a number of tourists. They all say that they visit Malta for its historical sites and lifestyle.

"They don't admire the high-rise towers. They might praise our hotels but many are opting to stay in boutique hotels.

"Let us not change our country to the point of no return."

Malta rating holds as S&P delivers positive outlook

Ratings agency Standard and Poor's has revised its outlook on Malta to positive from stable while maintaining the BBB+/A-2 rating.

The agency said it expected the economy to grow by close to three per cent annually between 2015 and 2018, outpacing the eurozone as a whole.

Economic growth was attributed to investments in the energy sector, including the interconnector and the building of a liquefied natural gas terminal and power station.

S&P said economic diversification after 2016 into information and communication

technology and medical tourism, could boost investment.

Growth was also expected to be fuelled by domestic demand on the back of "stronger private consumption" as a result of utility tariff cuts.

"Consumption trends are being supported by rising real wages and, more importantly, broader female participation in the labour market," the agency said.

S&P noted that while the low corporate tax rate was an attraction to foreign investment in the banking, insurance, and gaming sectors, the economy would be "sensitive" to potential pressure for a eurozone-wide stan-

dardisation of corporate tax regimes. The agency forecast that debt was to decrease to 55 per cent of GDP by 2018 but it commented on fiscal risks posed by debt guarantees issued to State entities like Enemalta and Air Malta. These debt guarantees totalled 16 per cent of GDP at the end of 2014.

But S&P warned that without further reforms in the pension and healthcare systems, public finances would become strained in the medium term.

The agency also warned that nominal unit labour costs have been increasing at one of the fastest rates in the euro area, posing risks for competitiveness.

An increase in non-performing loans held by core domestic banks - 9.1 per cent of total loans in March - was "a challenge" for the economy. Almost half of these loans are in the construction and commercial real estate sectors, S&P noted.

Finance Minister Edward Scicluna welcomed the report, adding it recognised government's efforts to reform certain sectors and diversify the economy.

"Standard & Poor's decision to upgrade the outlook to positive re-affirms the solid performance of our economy and prospects for the upcoming years," Prof. Scicluna said.