INTRODUCTION

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Landscape Architecture for Gozo,
Proposals by Graduate Students for a Vulnerable Island

The Islands of Malta, with their intriguing location between the European and African continents, have been attracting visitors for over seven thousand years. There are many reasons for choosing the Maltese Islands as a “Study Area” for introducing landscape architecture, but the breathtaking beauty of the islands is without a doubt the foremost reason that a German professor of landscape architecture would select Malta as a study site. It is, however, also the challenge of having students exposed to working in a European setting where landscape architecture as a profession has not yet been introduced.

Landscape architects today face the challenge of fast-paced, large, complex projects carried out by ever-larger teams of diverse specialists. University education does not often address these situations. Generally, a student works intensely as an isolated soloist. At Anhalt University, we had the chance to develop one alternative type of planning studio. Based on earlier cooperation with Prof. Carl Steinitz, an outstanding American landscape architecture educator, we developed a methodology for planning studios involving complex problems and varied groups. In this brochure we document the ideas developed during two separate semester-long studios. The project began with a ten-day field trip by students and their instructors to Malta and Gozo in October, 2003. The first semester work ended with a final presentation on 19 February, 2004 at the Ministry of Gozo. The next year a group visited Malta and Gozo at the end of October 2004 and will present their works at the Ministry of Gozo on 30 March, 2005.

Malta has an outstanding potential for a specific ecological- and cultural-based tourism, but being limited in space as islands, Malta is confronted with a dramatic pressure for land-use. It is the most densely populated area in Europe. Currently, the inner parts of settlements are partially being abandoned, with new houses sprawling on the fringes of the settlements. Small-scale family farming is declining rapidly, causing an increase in abandoned land and a further decline in the rubble walls which protect the slopes and have been the visual landmark of the open landscape of Malta. The last 30 years had been marked by a rapid spread of built-up areas, with a projected continuous growth of the population until 2015. While many western countries, including Italy, are suffering from a decline in population, Malta is experiencing an increase; with 1,200 persons per sq. km, Malta has the highest population density in Europe. The current Maltese population of 380,000 is estimated to increase to 396,000 in 2015 (Malta Year Book, 2003).

In order to analyze the effect of the built-up areas, Angela Soler dedicated her Master thesis in the MLA program on “Changes in Land-use Settlements in Gozo Island (Malta)”. She completed her thesis in February, 2005. The analysis of her investigation covers the time span 1966 to 1993, an area with tremendous building activities in Malta. The relation between the built and un-built environment today is unbalanced, thus losing the quality of the historical settlement pattern. Angela Soler could prove that the current state of non-managed land-use development is dramatic on Gozo Island. The land-use settlement in Gozo has experienced huge changes in the last thirty years,
witnessed in the growth of settled areas in terms of extensions. If the land-use settlement in Gozo continues its current development there will not be enough open land available for agriculture and nature in the years to come, (SOLER 2005).

The changes in land-use settlement have to be looked at in qualitative and quantitative terms. The changes of the spatial quality of settled areas, caused by external unmanaged influences, have turned the built environment into a ‘space in-between city and landscape’, a space with no particular characteristics of the vernacular culture. This has brought a loss of identity in an essential part of Gozo’s culture. The notion of the Gozitan territory: a place of “knowing each other” is changing (see also HAASE in this publication).

Only about 30,000 or 7.6% of the Maltese population live on the Island of Gozo. The overall population density in Gozo is therefore 422.8 persons per sq. km. This becomes significant if one considers that Gozo is only about 65.8 sq. km. Almost 70% of the population lives in the urban areas of Gozo; approximately 30% of the inhabitants live in the conglomerated settlement area of Victoria, Fontana and Kercem, whereas 40% of the inhabitants live in the separate settlements of Nadur, Xaghra and Xewkija. Recreational land is almost non-existent. It seems that this tendency and dynamic of city sprawl will continue intensely in the following years in Gozo (MEPA 2002).

The current settlement development in Gozo should not only be seen as consequences of the population growth. The development is also affected by global influences, such as tourism. Today, Gozo welcomes around 700,000 visitors each year. The immense number of visitors in combination with the intense use of the land for settlement purposes, defines specific problems for the sustainable future of the island.

Many other changes in the landscape can be expected because of the influence of the European market. The EU also offers opportunities for structural improvements. Quite a number of major projects, like the rebuilding of Mgarr Harbour or road improvements, have already been started. Funds were also raised for more ecological projects, such as the Dwejra coastal nature park or for restoring the traditional rubble walls. All these factors present a situation that attracts the potentials of landscape architecture.

Growing population, increasing development, increasing dependency upon tourism, lack of drinking water, widespread visual negligence of the landscape, infrastructure needs, increasing traffic, abandoned agricultural fields – the list of dangers to the beautiful island seems to be endless, and so the task for the students. A very useful source for the students has been the Gozo Local Plan, created in June 2002 by MEPA. As much as the Gozitans may resist a plan handed down from the national level, our view is that the plan is balanced and it earns our respect as an instrument to start the needed process of using the limited resources on Gozo to create a sustainable future.

The studio excursions asked a lot of our local planning partners, who answered our many questions. We thank the many people who met us on Malta and Gozo, accompanied us on our site visits, provided us with data, and gave lectures on topics related to our research:
From Malta University, for their generous advice and support we thank: Prof. Arch. Denis De Lucca, Head of Department of Architecture & Urban Design; Prof. Dr. Paul Gauci, Department of Architecture & Urban Design; Anna Katarina Callus, European Unit and Louis F. Cassar, Director of the International Environment Institute of the Foundation for International Studies (University of Malta). We hope to continue our cooperation in the future with joint student works. Additionally, from Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA), Frans Mallia, Christopher Attard and Carol Agius were instrumental in organising the introductory lecture series given by the MEPA staff.

For time spent with the students in October 2004, we would like to thank: Joseph Portelli and Ivana Farrugia, Ministry of Gozo; Godwin Vella, Heritage Malta; Joe Muscat, GTA Gozo Tourism Association; John Ebejer, MTA Malta Tourism Authority (now policy advisor at the Ministry of Rural Affairs and Environment); Vincent Attard and Mario Gauci, Nature Trust (Malta); and last but not least Mrs. Calleja of “On Two Wheels”.

Thank you also to the Reverend Joseph Bezzina of Gozo for providing both student groups with historical information and making arrangements with the Ministry of Gozo. He gave the key of basic knowledge in order to start to understand Gozo.

We are very thankful that some of our advisors were able to contribute to the introduction of the studio brochure, providing the necessary broader overview. After the “Introduction” with contributions of the Maltese and Gozitan experts and of the visiting lecturers of Anhalt University, the students’ works are presented in three chapters with different “levels of detail” and focuses. In “Conceptual and Regional Proposals for Green tourism on Gozo”, students’ proposals for the whole island are summarized. More ecological issues are documented in “Landscape Planning Suggestions”, and specific site design suggestions are described in the third group of project proposals, “Landscape Architectural and Sustainable Design Suggestions”. In the last two chapters the projects are described from the outside (coast) to the inside (city of Rabat).

The students’ work is overflowing with ideas and visions, and it is fortunate that the region is able to document this flood of ideas in a poster exhibition. The ideas of the international students are wide-ranging and free of the many constraints that the planner is usually subject to in his everyday work. The outcome is a result of the group process. All 31 students from 12 countries (Germany, U.S.A., Nigeria, Croatia, Columbia, India, China, Uzbekistan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Turkey and Japan) worked on the Gozo questions over a period of 12 weeks, while taking courses. Because of the time limitation, the student work stopped at the level of “conceptual design.” This is an appropriate level to discuss alternative futures. After decisions on these ideas, the projects would have to be taken to the “landscape design” level.

Our gratitude goes to the Honorary consul to the Republic of Malta for the State of Saxony-Anhalt, Mr. Detlef Bischoff, who has supported this studio since its inception. We are very thankful for the visas and many contacts he helped to provide. He kindly arranged the meeting with the past President of Malta, His Excellency Prof. Guido De Marco, on 8 October 2003 for the first group of students. His Excellency’s in-depth knowledge of landscape architecture
was particularly motivating for the students. We also would like to thank the Honourable Minister of Gozo, Giovanna Debono, for personally opening the presentation of the results.

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We also thank our collaborators at Anhalt University of Applied Sciences: Prof. Anemone Beck Koh, Landscape Architect, Korea and USA; Prof. Dr. Wolfram Kircher, specialist for uses of European plants for site design; Prof. Dr. Ing. Andrea Haase, Architect and City Planner; and Prof. Dr. Robert Off, Architect and professor for real estate assessment at Anhalt University. We are delighted to acknowledge that the design of the Gozo logo and poster layout for the exhibition was developed by Prof. Angelika Brzóska and Prof. Dr. Bodu Brzóska. The sketches contributed by Prof. Angelika Brzóska are an indication of how much she and her students enjoyed the excursion.

Special praise goes to the staff of the University: The studio had been prepared by Peter Jünemann in a preliminary study on the potentials for using Gozo as a studio target for the MLA program. With the help of this student, Kathrin Leo prepared and organized the first studio. We are very thankful for the work of both outstanding research assistants. Marcel Heins, Matthias Pietsch, and Christian Schulz provided the technical support. Anke Friedrich and Brandon Klug helped in the MLA office.

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We also would like to thank Prof. Dr. Dieter Orzessek, President of Anhalt University of Applied Sciences, and our dean Prof. Dr. Siegmar Brandt, for the academic support benefiting international students’ development and engagement.

Without these and many indirectly involved people, nothing would have been possible, so we would like to thank them cordially for their enthusiastic collaboration.

The primary purpose of this study is one of mutual education: for the students who are or will become professionals in landscape architecture, and for the people of Gozo, who may benefit from the insight and ideas developed by the students. We hope that the ideas of the students will be carried out on Gozo, helping it establish a sustainable future.

In the fall of 2005, the next group of students will continue the focus on issues in Malta. Please write us your suggestions for student projects in landscape architecture.

Bernburg, Germany, March 2005

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Text sources:

Malta Year Book 2003 by Editor : Stanley J.A. Clews

MEPA, Malta Environment and Planning Authority (2002). Gozo and Comino Local Plan : Draft land-use policies for public consultation. MEPA : Gozo