

Discussion Paper

# Nurturing Gozo's Urban Character through Context-Sensitive Design

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**GOZO REGIONAL**  
DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY



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# Nurturing Gozo's Urban Character through Context Sensitive Design

## Abstract

*Over the years, a notable increase in apartment dwellings has become more evident in Gozo, reflecting the changing socio-economic reality. Such changes, combined with a general lack of focus on quality and coherence, impacted Gozo's semi-urban character.*

*This Discussion Paper aims to address this perceived lack of quality (and harmony) in Gozo's built environment by focusing on achieving stylistic congruity between existing and new constructions. Given the fact that Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs) have generally been well preserved and managed, this Discussion Paper builds on such a concept and seeks to promote a discussion on how best to adopt a context-derived design. This in turn should generate additional momentum towards preserving Gozo's distinctive urban characteristics, in line with the Regional Development Strategy for Gozo.*

*Building on current legislation and existing policy documents, this Paper outlines a number of recommendations, presenting them in a context that add value to the concept of Gozo as an 'Island of Villages'.*

*For the purpose of advancing the discussion, the most critical design considerations and recommendations were categorized into three distinct thematic areas. These areas are the design considerations related to topography and built form, the criteria related to architectural features of buildings, and the regulatory aspects pertaining to the design and the aesthetics of buildings.*

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Godwin Agius is an Architect and Civil Engineer, having spent the first phase of his professional career in leading roles of private architectural firms whereby he was responsible for the design, implementation and project management of several residential, infrastructural, commercial, hospitality, and industrial projects. More recently he has taken on managerial roles in major national companies and has provided technical advice and expertise to Government entities on property valuations, project management, and the implementation of infrastructural and commercial ventures. He is currently serving as Senior Project Manager at the Gozo Regional Development Authority and serves chairmanship roles at Interconnect Malta and the committees responsible for the licensing related to the Construction Industry.

### **George Cauchi**

George Cauchi holds a first degree in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Malta. He spent over three years working in industrial and manufacturing engineering at a leading semiconductor company in Malta, working mainly in process optimization, quality control, and data analysis. Currently, he holds the position of manager within the Project Management and Implementation Unit at the Gozo Regional Development Authority. During his tenure, he played a significant role in drafting various documents pertaining to the Regional Impact Assessment Study related to the proposed Gozo Rural Airfield.

### **Mario Borg**

Mario Borg is an Economist, having worked for several years in the field amongst others at the Economic Policy Department as a Senior Economic Analyst, as a Director of Economic and Business Statistics at the National Statistics Office (NSO), and as an Economic Consultant at MIMCOL. He currently serves as the Chief Executive Officer at the Gozo Regional Development Authority. Over the years, he contributed to several technical and strategic public documents as well as published papers on socio-economic issues. He holds a first degree in Economics and a master degree in Small Island States from the University of Malta and a master degree in Economics from the University of York (UK).

# Nurturing Gozo's Urban Character through Context Sensitive Design

## 1. Introduction

The Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) has been set up to formulate, streamline, and help in the implementation of regional policies to help Gozo's socio-economic development. This socio-economic development needs to reflect and enhance the long-term needs of Gozo taking into consideration its social fabric, its economy structure, and its man-made and natural assets. To successfully attain such role, the GRDA plays a proactive role, including the piloting of public discussions on an array of areas including spatial planning and the use of land. As part of this role, the GRDA on a regular basis conducts and publishes a number of studies focusing on different subjects, including the construction and real estate sectors in Gozo. These studies have provided research material the Authority used to propose a number of policy recommendations, including the fiscal incentives on stamp duty applicable to real estate transactions in Gozo.<sup>1</sup>

Through this Discussion Paper, the GRDA aims to encourage a discussion among key stakeholders on the subject of architectural design and promote action towards more aesthetic harmony and coherence within the urban setup in Gozo. In doing so, the Paper builds on the concept presented in the Regional Development Strategy for Gozo, that of Gozo being an 'Island of Villages'. This directly implies Gozo having distinctive characteristics, both physical and social, that need to be valued and protected.

### 1.1 Background

Over the last few years, a notable increase in apartment dwellings has become increasingly more evident in Gozo. Official figures from the Planning Authority (PA) show that approved annual apartment permits increased from 50 in 2015 to 266 by the end of 2020. Another notable difference noted over the years, also outlined in GRDA's note on the *Construction and Real Estate Development in Gozo*<sup>2</sup>, was the increase in the number of apartments per every approved permit. The increase in construction of apartments has been driven by increase in demand for residential dwellings, reflecting strong economic growth, which in turn attracted a significant number of foreign workers in Gozo as well as an element of speculative demand. The underpinning economic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Outlook-Pre-Budget-Document.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/A-Note-on-the-Construction-and-Real-Estate-Develop-in-Gozo-09.11.21.pdf>.

factors behind this increase in both the supply and the demand for residential units in Gozo were examined in GRDA's notes on the *Construction and Real Estate Development in Gozo* and on the *Demand side of the Construction and Real Estate Industry*.<sup>3</sup>

Gozo, like mainland Malta, traditionally boasts a high rate of home ownership. According to the latest census of population and housing, conducted in 2021, Gozo exhibits a home ownership rate of 83.2%, which is marginally higher than the 81.9% overall home ownership rate in Malta.<sup>4</sup> This statistic is significant when compared with the Euro Area average of 66%, and particular European countries like Austria and Germany, where home ownership rates stood at 54.2% and 49.1% respectively, in 2021.<sup>5</sup> The large share of home ownership in Gozo contributes to a sense of community and attachment to the Island. However, it also gives rise to different preferences and a lack of homogeneity in terms of building styles. This is evident across the Island where adjacent properties or properties within the same street exhibit different styles and materials, reflecting the owners' preferences.

This individualised approach to land use, combined with the diverse and complex landscape of home and land ownership, is a limiting factor, which poses a significant challenge and hinders efforts to achieve congruity and harmony in building design and streetscapes. This decentralised ownership model in Gozo contrasts sharply with other regions or cities where consortiums, developers or government entities control significant land areas used for real estate development, and consequently it is easier to attain harmony and continuity in architectural styles and urban design. For instance, Berlin, which is considered as a city that embodies a mixture of history and innovation, as well as modern and postmodern architecture in a harmonious context, has a home-ownership rate of 15.6%.<sup>6</sup> This relatively low home-ownership rate in Berlin contributes to centralised control when it comes to urban design and architecture, making it easier to attain harmony and continuity in its built environment.

Still, despite of these limiting factors and the aforementioned increase in apartment dwellings, Gozo has over the years managed to retain a more rural dimension compared to mainland Malta and is often regarded as having a distinctive built identity. Its villages still preserve a traditional dimension represented through a strong traditional architecture characterised by limestone façades, wooden, ferro battuto or masonry balconies and centrally located village squares, with generally a highly visible church at the centre of the village.

Such characteristics are key to maintain Gozo as a distinctive destination and are a potential source for generating social and economic value. These characteristics are predominantly evident in Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs). The latter are areas of architectural or historical importance, which have been demarcated as special zones that require protection and preservation. These areas constitute approximately 32% of the total development zone in Gozo, which in turn represents around 13% of the Island's total land area, with the remaining area being designated as area Outside Development Zone (ODZ). The proportion of land within the development zone compared to land outside the development zone in Gozo is illustrated in Figure 1, while approximate values are provided in Table 1.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Demand-on-Construction-Doc.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> NSO Census of Population and Housing 2021 – Dwelling Characteristics.

<sup>5</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/home-ownership-rate?continent=europe>.

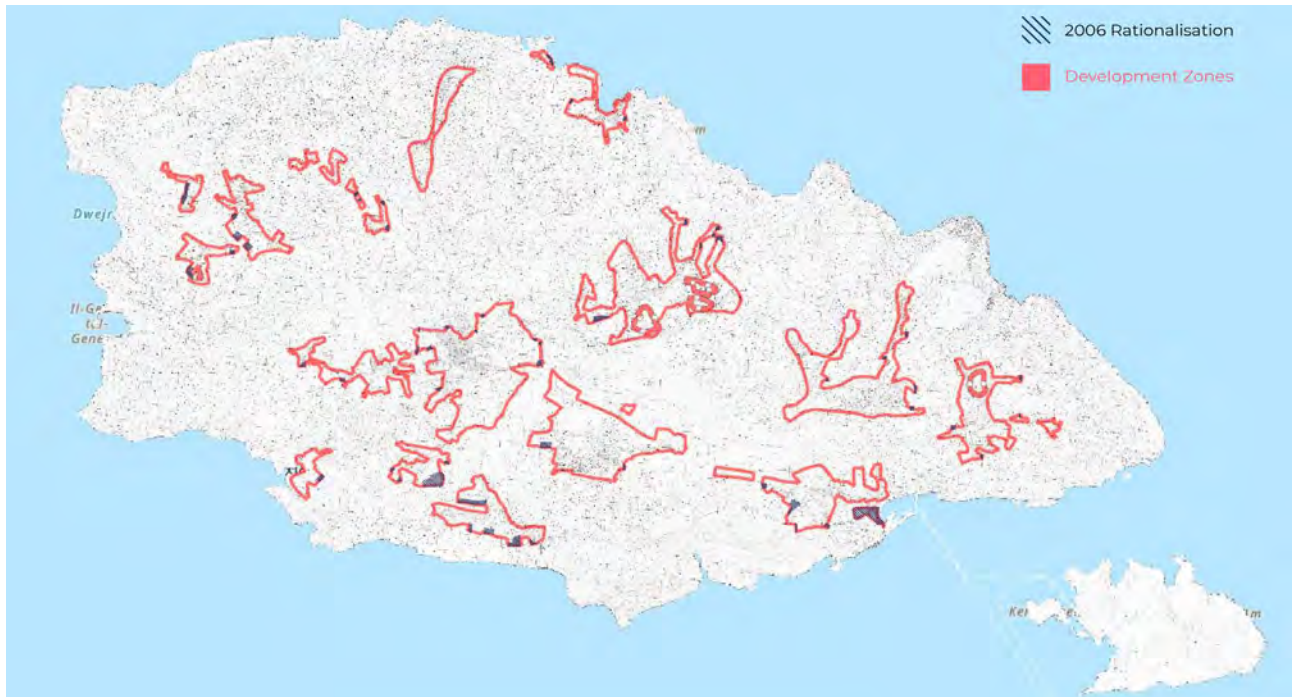
<sup>6</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Home-ownership-rates-across-German-federal-states-left-and-NUTS-3-districts-right\\_fig2\\_280037199](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Home-ownership-rates-across-German-federal-states-left-and-NUTS-3-districts-right_fig2_280037199).

**Table 1: Land area typology: Area of Development and Outside Development Zones**

| Land Area Typology              | Area (m <sup>2</sup> ) | Area (% of total land area) |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Development Zone</b>         | 8,607,389              | 13%                         |
| <b>Outside Development Zone</b> | 58,492,611             | 87%                         |
| <b>Total land area</b>          | 67,100,000             | 100%                        |

Source: GRDA workings.

**Figure 1: Development zones in Gozo (including 2006 rationalisation)**



Source: GRDA.

It shall be noted that the development zones delineated in Figure 1 include the land areas which were added to the development zone through the 2006 rationalisation exercise. This land added to the development zone constitutes an area of approximately 220,000 m<sup>2</sup>, which is approximately equal to the development zone of Munxar (215,000 m<sup>2</sup>), as illustrated in Table 2.

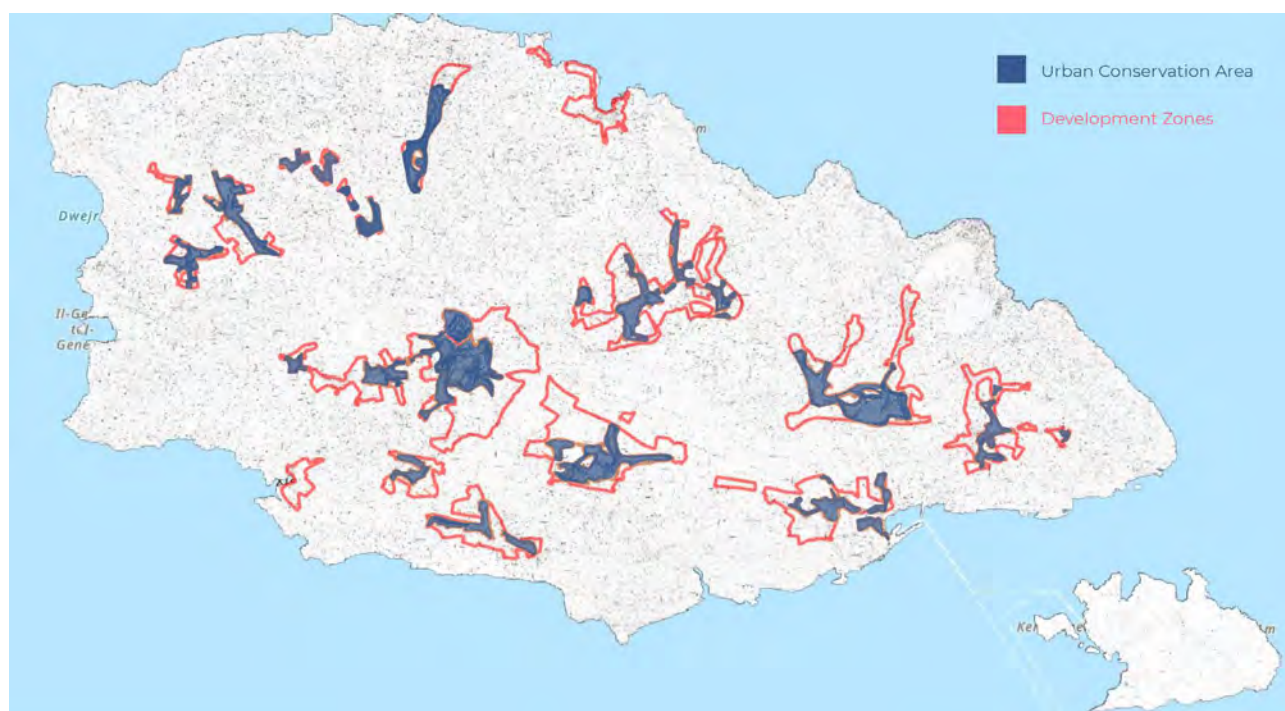
The extent of each locality's Urban Conservation Area compared to the development zone is also illustrated in Table 2, as well as in Figure 2. From Figure 2, it is clearly evident that a significant portion of the land within the development zone in Gozo is designated as Urban Conservation Area, especially in particular localities such as Żebbuġ, Għasri and San Lawrenz, whose Urban Conservation Area constitute more than half of the development zone.



Table 2: Size of Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs) and Rationalisation Areas (as approved in 2006) in Gozo, by locality

| Locality              | Development Zone (m <sup>2</sup> ) | UCA (m <sup>2</sup> ) | UCA (%)    | Rationalisation (m <sup>2</sup> ) | Rationalisation (%) |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Għajnsielem           | 689,413                            | 143,258               | 21%        | 7,980                             | 1.16%               |
| Għarb                 | 442,944                            | 213,937               | 48%        | 26,850                            | 6.06%               |
| Għasri                | 188,194                            | 127,546               | 68%        | 2,280                             | 1.21%               |
| Kerċem/Santa Luċija   | 378,081                            | 110,531               | 29%        | 1,780                             | 0.47%               |
| L/O Victoria - Kerċem | 0                                  | 4,362                 | N/A        | -                                 | -                   |
| Marsalforn            | 235,965                            | 0                     | 0%         | 725                               | 0.31%               |
| Qbajjar               | 21,648                             | 0                     | 0%         | 2775                              | 12.82%              |
| Mġarr                 | 38,428                             | 38,428                | 100%       | 38,428                            | 100%                |
| Munxar                | 214,742                            | 68,193                | 32%        | 34,500                            | 16.07%              |
| Nadur                 | 987,843                            | 420,716               | 43%        | 4,080                             | 0.41%               |
| Qala                  | 545,295                            | 101,420               | 19%        | 1,950                             | 0.36%               |
| San Lawrenz           | 181,186                            | 90,789                | 50%        | 9,200                             | 5.08%               |
| Sannat                | 465,800                            | 121,892               | 26%        | 42,850                            | 9.20%               |
| Victoria/Fontana      | 1,470,899                          | 434,303               | 30%        | 7,520                             | 0.51%               |
| Ċittadella            | 0                                  | 110,034               | N/A        | -                                 | -                   |
| Xagħra                | 1,155,929                          | 298,265               | 26%        | 26,400                            | 2.28%               |
| Xewkija               | 1,153,847                          | 328,818               | 28%        | 10,620                            | 0.92%               |
| Xlendi                | 130,175                            | 0                     | 0%         | 1250                              | 0.96%               |
| Żebbuġ                | 307,001                            | 182,942               | 60%        | -                                 | 0.00%               |
| Total                 | <b>8,607,389</b>                   | <b>2,795,433</b>      | <b>32%</b> | <b>219,188</b>                    | <b>2.55%</b>        |

Figure 2: Extent of each locality's Urban Conservation Area compared to the Development Area



Source: GRDA.

The policies and design approach adopted in Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs) promote the preservation of traditional architecture and other distinctive characteristics. This approach has proved

valuable in attaining architectural harmony within these areas. Moreover, such an approach, which prioritises architectural homogeneity and aesthetics, increases the value of residential buildings in these areas. This has been proven in various studies conducted in different cities, which confirmed that homogeneity among neighbouring homes increase the value of residential buildings. One such study was conducted for the city of Rotterdam. Based on data-driven measures for architectural similarity and property transaction prices, the study estimated a price premium of approximately 4 percent for row houses within very homogeneous ensembles over buildings facing heterogeneous neighbours.<sup>7</sup>

However, whilst policies adopted in UCAs managed to preserve these areas and attain architectural harmony, incongruence in design has increasingly become more evident in areas within the development zone not designated as UCAs, mainly due to a gradual shift towards more urbanisation over the past years. This shift coupled with an increased use of contemporary construction design is altering Gozo's character and streetscapes and risk compromising the ambition of preserving Gozo as an 'Island of Villages'. The consequences include a loss of identity and a less conducive environment for sustainable socio-economic development of the Island.

## 1.2 Scope and Intent

This Discussion Paper aims to address some of the above-mentioned concerns by focusing on achieving stylistic congruity between existing and new constructions. Since UCAs have proved to be well preserved and managed, this Discussion Paper builds on the concept employed in such areas. It seeks to promote a discussion on how best to adopt a context-derived design in these areas, which in turn would help ensuring that Gozo's distinctiveness and its unique urban characteristics are preserved.

This Paper builds on the current legislation and recommends good-practice design guidelines, some of which are already presented in past official documents issued by other competent authorities. These recommendations and guidelines mainly focus on the design of façades, emphasising on the relationship of buildings to streets and the surrounding context.

The GRDA believes that this Discussion Paper is an important step forward in terms of moving towards a more context-derived design in villages. However, it acknowledges that this Discussion Paper takes a partial view of a more complex issue and thus has a number of gaps. Therefore, the GRDA encourages regulatory authorities, including the Planning Authority (PA), the Building and Construction Authority (BCA), and important stakeholders such as Kamra tal-Periti to participate in this discussion and help address the gaps.

## 1.3 Methodology

This Discussion Paper reviewed several policy documents and guidelines. The main documents are the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development, and the Development Control Design

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<sup>7</sup> Thies Lindenthal, *Beauty in the Eye of the Home-Owner: Aesthetic Zoning and Residential Property Values*.

Policy Guidance and Standards 2015. In the first part of the Paper, the research adopted a PEST (political, economic, social, and technological) approach in order to obtain an understanding of the factors in play. After reviewing the policy documents, the Paper attempted to interpret the most relevant policies, in a regional perspective, presenting them in a context that add value to the concept of Gozo as an 'Island of Villages'. It is important to reiterate that the Paper limits itself to design and the aesthetic criteria of urban development in Gozo.

The Discussion Paper follows the principle of practicality to ensure the proposed actions are practical and achievable in the short term without creating undue uncertainty, the principles of consistency and coherence both within the document itself and with other notes and studies published by the same Authority, and the principle of sustainability to ensure that any proposals and recommendations contribute towards sustainable use of resources.

## 2. GRDA's Vision for the island of Gozo

The Gozo Regional Development Strategy (RDS) presents Gozo as an 'Island of Villages' that has distinctive characteristics, both physical as well as social, that form part of Gozo's heritage and identity. The preservation of the village heritage is crucial to a long-term strategy for improving the quality of Gozo's built environment. This requires a holistic spatial planning approach that reconciles the social and economic claims for spatial development with Gozo's ecological and cultural functions. Their preservation, enhancement, and promotion, out of concern for their intrinsic value and uniqueness for present and future generations, is key to a long-term strategy.

This necessitates greater protection to Gozo's heritage and its distinctive characteristics. The vision for Gozo as an "Island of Villages" has three main thematic areas, which consist in promoting sensible use of land and the environment; the realignment of economic growth with well-being; and the revaluation of Gozo's identity. The preservation, enhancement and promotion of Gozo's identity need to be at the centre of any discussion that regards Gozo. To enhance this identity, distinctiveness in policies must be present. Gozo needs to apply specific policies that do not necessarily replicate what is already being implemented on the main Island.

Within this background, the Gozo RDS promotes *Designing According to Context* as an initiative aimed at achieving the goals related to spatial planning and sustainable urban development. More specifically, the Gozo RDS states that:

*"Gozo's identity is a strength and its distinctiveness from the main island is a source of value added. Urban and architectural design play an integral role to preserve and enhance these features. The preservation of such characteristics is not compatible with low-quality urban and architectural buildings that impose a negative impact on the community in terms of both visual and social terms. To ensure that Gozo's urban and architectural distinctiveness is maintained, policies need to adopt a more context-derived design. This approach includes, but is not limited to, the contextual delivery of both residential and commercial properties and should seek to*

*incorporate sensitive contemporary interventions within heritage urban fabrics in a way that ensures long-lasting, high quality urban environments; whilst prioritising the preservation of areas of high conservation.”*

### **3. Urban Design and Aesthetics**

Based on the vision for the island of Gozo, this Discussion Paper is presenting a more focused approach on urban design and development in Gozo that centres on the notion that development should be a tool to enhance the well-being of the community, rather than an end in itself. Consequently, planning policies should be regarded as a means to enhance the community's quality of life, rather than being limited to regulate construction and real estate development. The primary objective is to create liveable environments that preserve the existing architectural and urban context, while also respecting the long term needs and interests of the residents.

To enrich the overall living experience, the Island's urban environment needs to move away from low-quality buildings that impose a negative externality both in terms of architectural values as well as social and environmental. Thus, key to improve the living experience and preserve Gozo's urban character is to achieve an architecture that is based on higher quality design that fully respects the streetscapes and skylines. As defined in the Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards 2015, high quality design is very often a site-specific solution that must be worked within the specificities of the context. However, such site-specific solutions should always be done in an intelligent manner, driven by a genuine desire to improve the general architectural and aesthetic value of the area.

#### **3.1 Design According to Context**

This contextual approach to design being encouraged in this Discussion Paper is not easily defined, being a concept, which evolves with technology, people, and time.

Contextualism is being defined as an inclusive concept, where design is guided by every component found within a particular context. This approach aims to produce buildings whereby the design suites the specific physical characteristics of their surroundings. It is not tied to any specific architectural style but rather a set of values or criteria that help define the architectural work, both within the immediate context and the regional context. In this regard, several different criteria have been propounded to help determine if a building fits its context.

In relation to the above, this Discussion Paper identified three main criteria that determine if a building fits its context. These are: People, Site, and Materials. The first criterion entails understanding the people who will use the building, and how the building interacts with the community and the culture. The second refers to the physical environment where the building is located, defined by the physical site conditions such as land topography, urban morphology,

and climate. The third criterion, “materials”, represent any building material used in construction. Borrowing from vernacular architecture, which is defined as a type of local or regional construction, using traditional materials and resources from the area where the building is located, this criterion is intended to enhance the building’s contextual fit by promoting materials that are locally available. Based on these criteria, contextualism in this Discussion Paper is meant as how the building connects with the people, the physical environment (site), and the construction materials used (materials/vernacularism).

By applying this definition and utilising already established national policies and guidelines, this Discussion Paper attempts to define what and how contextualism applies to Gozo.

### 3.2 Policy Context

Stylistic incongruity and incoherence between contemporary buildings and older, more traditional styles is becoming more common in Gozo’s semi-urban environment. In some case, it is even threatening to alter the distinctive character of the Island.

Despite the recent surge in interest on this topic in Gozo, such discussions are not novel at a national level. In fact, context-derived design is one of the main objectives of the Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards 2015 (DC15), and is also one of the urban objectives of the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development (SPED).

The SPED provides a long-term spatial strategy for the environment and development and provides direction on how the spatial strategy is to be achieved. The SPED incorporates several objectives, a number of which are focused on urban areas. Among these objectives, *Urban Objective 2* aims: *“To improve the townscape and environment in historic cores and their setting with a presumption against demolition of property worthy of conservation by”, among other measures: “Adopting a context driven approach to the control of building heights within Urban Conservation Areas.”*

*Urban Objective 3* of the SPED also focuses on the character of distinct urban areas. It aims: *“To identify, protect and enhance the character and amenity of distinct urban areas by”, among other measures: “Carrying an appraisal of the value of the character, amenity and distinctiveness of urban areas.”*

In line with the SPED, DC15 emphasises *“A contextual and street-based approach to design”* as one of its key objectives. This approach lies at the centre of DC15’s architectural vision, which stresses that *“Context should constitute the starting point of any architectural and urban design intervention, from which predominant parameters should be defined.”*

Another key objective on which DC15 has been structured focuses on respecting the street as an important spatial scale, with the aim of creating successful streets. Indeed, DC15 advocates that: *“Every design project must be seen within the totality of its immediate context, which in the majority of cases constitutes the street”*. Designing with the street in mind implies an acknowledgement that every architectural façade is not only an architectural project in isolation but is also an urban design intervention with a public interface. In relation to this objective, DC15

also includes a chapter dedicated to urban form, which incorporates policies aimed at achieving successful streetscapes.

Despite being an important objective of the SPED and being one of the pillars of DC15, meant to regulate and guide urban development, context-based design has often been treated as a secondary consideration. Decision-making processes have not adequately considered the design and aesthetics of buildings, especially in terms of street context and congruity with adjacent buildings.

Notwithstanding the recognition of context-based design's significance, there is broad acceptance that insufficient emphasis is being given to the concept of context-based design especially with regards building height. An example which illustrates this relative lack of clarity is the recent court of appeal sentence, *Case Reference 75/2022*, which revoked the permit for a five-storey block in an area in Santa Luċija (Malta) characterised by two-storey terraced houses.

## **4. Design According to Context: An Application to Gozo**

This Discussion Paper identifies a number of contextual parameters and recommendations that should contribute to achieving context-sensitive design that protects the unique identity and distinctiveness of Gozitan settlements. For the purpose of advancing the discussion, this Paper categorises the most critical design considerations and recommendations into three distinct thematic areas, outlined below. These areas are focused on design considerations in relation to topography and built form, criteria related to architectural features of buildings, and regulatory aspects pertaining to the design and the aesthetics of buildings.

### **4.1 Topography and Urban Form**

Topography and urban form are an important consideration in the pursuit of context-sensitive design. Gozo's urban landscapes are distinguished by dynamic topography, marked by significant level changes. In this regard, this thematic area outlines key design considerations and recommendations that underscore the importance of seamlessly integrating new developments with the existing topography, respecting visual cues provided by landmarks, and harmonising with the natural landscape. This section outlines specific aspects such as the impact of side and back elevations, the visual significance of roofscapes, the role of façades and projections, and the careful consideration of building heights. Each of these elements contribute to the creation of a built environment that not only respects the unique identity of Gozitan villages but also enhances the overall visual coherence and aesthetic value of the urban fabric. The following points delve into the detailed design considerations and recommendations within this thematic area, shedding light on their significance in achieving a well-balanced and context-sensitive urban design approach.



Gozo's typical topography and urban landscape

### **i. Topography**

Many of Gozo's urban settlements are characterised by level changes, often relatively sharp. Respecting context also implies having a close regard to changes in level. The design should fit within the existing topography, such that important visual lines are maintained, the natural landscape is followed, and the skyline is adhered to, particularly with regard to maintaining existing visual cues provided by landmarks. This also applies to buildings that are located along sloping streets or lying between streets characterised by sharp level changes – a situation that is commonplace and that is envisaged to increase as more opportunities for comprehensive re/development of multiple buildings/sites occur.

### **ii. Side and Back Elevations**

In certain cases, a development's side and/or back elevations might be equally, and in some cases even more visible than the front elevation due to topographical variations or varying building heights. Such scenario can arise when the site falls within a series of back elevations characterised by consistent planimetry or typology. Other cases where side or back elevations might be particularly prominent and visible, include instances where the site lies within or adjacent to an Urban Conservation Area, lies close to a scheduled property, or faces a public open space or a green enclave. Instances where a site abuts a different zone type, or lies close to a Development Zone boundary could also produce prominent side or back elevations.



Incongruous back façades



Back façade in harmony with adjacent buildings

Therefore, it is imperative that side and back elevations are given due consideration during the design process. As outlined in Policy P42 of DC15, the design of the side and back elevations needs to be of high quality. In particular, back elevations of new constructions or additions within UCAs or overlooking UCAs or ODZ areas should be well designed to harmonise with architectural characteristics.



### **iii. Roofscapes**

Roofscapes are not only visible at street level but have long-distance implications, contributing to the character and visual identity of an area. This impact extends beyond the immediate surroundings, potentially altering the outline and aesthetics of the town. When assessing the context for designing new buildings, it is important to accord special attention to both the roof of an individual building and the collective roofscapes that define the streetscape and the town's visual tapestry. In this context-driven design philosophy, the composition of building forms should incorporate the roof as an integral component rather than an afterthought. The roof's design can contribute significantly to the building's overall articulation and visual appeal.

### **iv. Façade Proportion and Façade Projections**

Terraced developments are defined by vertical and horizontal lines that compose the basic façade proportions. These proportions create a consistent and harmonious rhythm within the streetscape, even if individual façade compositions differ in terms of architectural details. To achieve high quality design, the façade proportion within a specific context should be respected. As outlined in good-practice Guidance G16 of DC15, to provide rhythm within the streetscape, the prevailing façade frontage should be established from streetscape analysis and street photographic survey.

Furthermore, as outlined in good-practice Guidance G23 of DC15, the external design of all new developments should seek to provide visual interest, enriching the quality of the context within which they are located. Such interest may be derived from parameters such as façade proportion, fenestration composition, and solid to void ratios. Similarly, articulation through projections and/or setbacks of the buildings could also contribute to a positive visual aspect both in the short range as well as in the long range. The projection or setback of a building's front façade may contribute to the visual interest and variety in a streetscape and may provide articulated features on buildings. Thus, in line with Policies P43 and P44 of DC15, due regard must be given to the use of façade projections and setbacks during the design of new buildings. Façade projections and setbacks, incorporated in a building design, should fit within the existing context, and must respect the building alignment, such that important visual lines are maintained, and the façade design complements the streetscape.

### **v. Building Height**

The building height is a fundamental parameter that should be established during the design process. The building height of any proposed developments in Gozo is governed by the Gozo & Comino Local Plan, and Annex 2 of DC15. In addition, other policies and good-practice guidance are aimed at achieving building heights that respect the context, including Guidance G2 of DC15, which emphasises that the impact of any proposed development on the skyline should be taken into consideration.

In this regard, this Discussion Paper is advocating that more attention be given to the allowable height of new buildings in order to achieve uniform streetscapes of high aesthetic value. The height of buildings within a streetscape should be considered as an important parameter in the design process, to achieve high quality contextual design. In line with good-practice Guidance G2 of DC15, the GRDA emphasises that as a fundamental step in the design process and its assessment, the impact of any proposed development on the skyline should be taken into consideration.



**Uniform streetscape respecting the skyline**

This approach being encouraged by the GRDA was reinforced by the Santa Luċija (Malta) court sentence. In this case, an apartment block of five levels was proposed within a development zone, where the maximum allowable height is 16.3 metres with basement, according to the Local Plan and Annex 2 of DC15. This height limitation translates to a maximum of five levels from street level. Based on these policies, the proposed development was recommended for approval by the Planning Authority's Case Officer, but the Planning Commission refused the development application, based on Guidance G2 and G3 of DC15. This decision taken by the Planning Commission (Planning Authority) was later overturned by the Environment and Review Tribunal (EPRT), which based its decision on the height limitation, regulated by the Local Plan and Annex 2 of DC15. The development permit granted as a result of the EPRT's decision was later revoked by the Court of Appeal (Case Reference 75/2022)<sup>8</sup>, where it was determined that as noted by the Planning Authority's Commission, the proposed development, which was a comprehensive development within Housing Estate characterised mainly by terraced houses with a predominant height of two storey buildings and an area of low density facing ODZ, was in breach of Guidance G2 and G3 of DC15 and also the SPED Urban Objectives 3.2 and 3.6.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://ecourts.gov.mt/onlineservices/Judgements/Details?JudgementId=0&CaseJudgementId=137664>.

## 4.2 Architectural Features of Buildings

The architectural features of buildings are another important consideration in the pursuit of context-sensitive design. In this regard, this thematic area outlines a range of architectural features that significantly contribute to the overall appearance and cohesion of the built environment. From the design of openings, including considerations of positioning, orientation, rhythm, and proportion, to the thoughtful integration of balconies that fit with the urban design characteristics, each element plays a crucial role. The Discussion Paper underscores the importance of retaining or incorporating key architectural elements that define the character of a particular streetscape, emphasising an approach that avoids direct replication. Furthermore, the choice of exterior materials, with a preference for locally sourced limestone, and the careful consideration of exterior finishes and colours are identified as important architectural features that contribute to the visual harmony of the streetscape. Additionally, through this thematic area, the Paper addresses the challenge of integrating essential building services, with the aim of minimising visual clutter on the urban skyline. By delving into these considerations, this thematic area provides recommendations that contribute to the discussion on how best to adopt a context-derived design, which would help ensure that Gozo's distinctiveness and its urban characteristics are preserved.



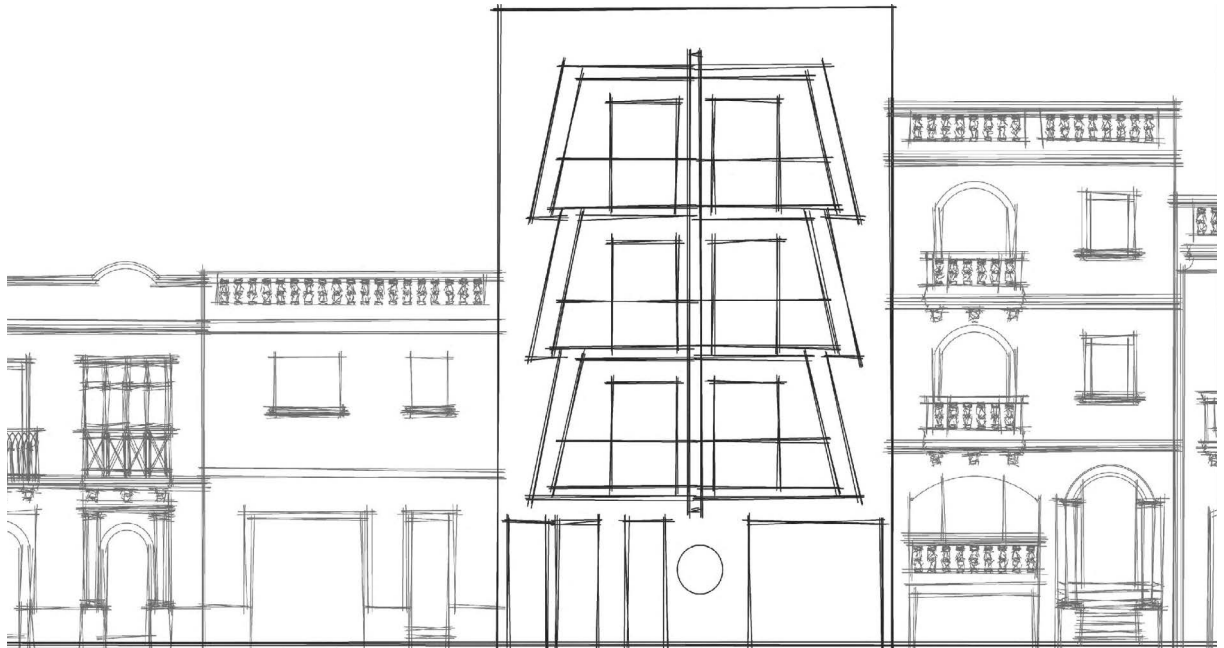
Architectural features in new building that complement the streetscape character

### i. Openings within a building façade

The design of apertures within a building façade has a significant impact on the appearance and character of that building, as well as the neighbouring buildings that compose the entire streetscape. For this reason, apertures and openings should be well-designed such that these relate well to both the entire building façade wherein they are located and the openings within the surrounding context. In this regard, in line with good-practice Guidance G43 of DC15, this

Discussion Paper emphasises that the following factors be given more importance when designing apertures or openings within a building façade:

- a. Positioning, in relation to visual, amenity, and environmental implications;
- b. Orientation, that is whether apertures are vertical or horizontal;
- c. Rhythm and organisation in relation to the frequency of apertures and whether their arrangement is in vertical or horizontal bands; and
- d. Proportion and sizing, which dictate the solid to void ratio of a building's façade and have important visual, as well as amenity implications.



Apertures and façade incompatible with surrounding context



Proportionate apertures and façade that complement the street context

The identified factors, which define the composition and arrangement of openings within a building façade, contribute to a specific context and the characteristics of a street. For instance, it would be undesirable to have large horizontally oriented openings that contribute to a low solid to void ratio within a building façade located in a UCA, that tend to be characterised by vertically oriented openings and façades with a high solid to void ratio.

Thus, apertures should be well designed with regards to positioning, orientation, and size by considering the prevailing characteristics within a particular context. For instance, in more traditional villages and UCAs, narrow opening widths that produces façades with a high solid to void ratio are preferred.

## ii. **Balconies**

The design of balconies within a building façade has a significant impact on the appearance and character of that building, as well as the neighbouring buildings that compose the entire streetscape. For this reason, balconies should be designed such that these relate to the overall architectural design and details used on the façade of the building of which they form a part and should be respectful to the context within which the building is situated, in accordance with the area's urban design characteristics. In this regard, in line with good-practice Guidance G46, and Policy P51 of DC15, the Discussion Paper highlights the following factors when designing balconies, and emphasise their importance:

- a. The form and proportions of a balcony have important visual implications, and consequently, these should be respectful to the context within which the building is situated;
- b. Apart from security and safety implications, the height and positioning of a balcony also have visual implications, and thus, these factors should be given due consideration in the design process; and
- c. The projection of a balcony impact the appearance of the building's façade as well as the streetscape. When establishing balcony projections, the existing balconies within the street as well as the existing street width, should be considered, as outlined in Policy P51. This ensures that balconies enrich the streetscape and fit within the building's surrounding context.

With regards to balcony projections, this Discussion Paper proposes that the projection or cantilever on the uppermost floor does not extend beyond the building line. The removal of this element, which cannot be utilised as a balcony according to today's policies, offers significant benefits, further contributing to the overall enhancement of Gozo's urban design. Apart from enabling the creation of a streetscape that feels notably less constrained, this proposed guideline would play a pivotal role in minimising the impact on the skyline. When balconies on uppermost receded floor do not protrude beyond the building line, the building's elevation appears more compact and harmonious with the surrounding architecture. This creates a pleasing and unobtrusive silhouette against the skyline, which is particularly vital in preserving the overall aesthetics and scale of Gozo's urban landscape.



Balconies and façade design incongruous with adjacent buildings



Balconies and façade design that fit with surrounding context

The benefits of limiting balcony projections in Gozo's built environment are multifaceted. Compact yet intricately designed balconies, integrated into buildings, enhance their visual appeal without obstructing the streets. By drawing inspiration from other cities with similar urban challenges, Gozo can strike a balance between functional design and aesthetic appeal.

### iii. Architectural Elements

Architectural elements play a vital role in establishing a unique sense of place and character for the settlement. In this regard, in line with good-practice Guidance G33, this Discussion

Paper emphasises that such architectural elements be retained or incorporated in any new development. As outlined in Guidance G33, the approach to incorporate predominant architectural elements or features should not necessary be that of directly replicating the features in any proposed development. Indeed, the broader relevance of such elements/features to the streetscape should first be studied; following which the optimal manner with which such elements and/or features should be interpreted may be determined. Moreover, any elements incorporated within a building's façade should be in proportion and harmonious with the overall building design, as well as taking the surrounding context in consideration.



Architectural elements that contribute to the Island's unique urban character

#### iv. Exterior Materials

Exterior building materials, as well as materials used for apertures, balconies, and architectural elements have a major impact on the appearance of a building façade as well as the streetscape, and thus, these should be given due consideration in the design process. Regarding materials utilised for the exteriors of buildings, the Discussion Paper emphasises that material design should consider aspects of form, proportion, and colour, ensuring their suitability within the surrounding context.

Consistent with the principles outlined in Guidance G49 of DC15, the Discussion Paper outlines the importance of utilising locally sourced limestone for constructing building façades. Considering the prevailing context of Gozo's built environment, the use of unrendered local stone, recycled stone, and other natural materials is preferred for building exteriors. Given that local limestone is a finite resource, the use of this material should be prioritised for building exteriors, while more environmentally friendly and thermal resistant materials be used for the interior of a building.



Exterior building materials that do not fit with the surrounding context



Exterior building materials that harmonise with adjacent buildings

Furthermore, considering the prevailing context of Gozo's more traditional built environment, the use of painted/sprayed iron for the railings of open balconies is recommended. For both materials, i.e., the facade finish and the railing material, in specific cases, such as buildings in proximity to the sea, alternatives to traditional materials may be more suitable, such as rendered façades and glass railings.



**v. Exterior Finishes and Colour**

Colour plays an important role in the overall external appearance of a building and actively contributes to the visual and aesthetic qualities of the broader urban environment wherein such building is located, with streetscape and townscape implications. These implications may be experienced both in the immediate (as with the case of a street) and in extended perspectives (as with seafront developments, buildings on ridges and/or medium- and high-rise developments).



**Exterior finishing and façade conflicting with streetscape**



**Façade in harmony with adjacent buildings**

The Discussion Paper encourages building colours to be limited to a list of natural earth or pastel tones, with specific building elements having complementing darker hues of the same colours, monochrome hues, or primary tones that could also contrast the main façade colours.

In Urban Conservation Areas and scheduled buildings, balconies and aperture colours should be limited to a list of traditional primary colours, such as dark green, navy blue and dark red. Similarly, colours used for apertures and balconies in areas outside of UCA should be limited to a list of colour tones such that the overall colour scheme be harmonious and contribute to unifying different building elements together. Fluorescent colours should not be deployed within any colour scheme.

#### **vi. Utilities and Services**

Buildings are required to cater for several services, including water tanks, satellite dishes, air conditioners, standby generators, Solar Water Heaters, and Photovoltaic (PV) panels. Most of these services have traditionally occupied the roof level of a building, often resulting in a visual clutter that significantly impacts the urban skyline and the roofscapes within a street. In this regard, as outlined in Policy P52 of DC15, building services should be designed integrally with the rest of the building, such that there are no visible services on the front elevation or any other elevation of the building which is visible from a public space. Provision for concealing these services should be made in the design of the building façade. Whenever possible, services such as extractors, drain pipes, and cables, should be located internally. Otherwise, the design should ensure that unsightly features are properly screened. This consideration is particularly important in certain areas with high quality urban fabric and urban characteristics.

### **4.3 Institutional Aspects: Gozo Design Advisory Committee**

The qualitative aspects of architecture and aesthetics introduce a considerable subjectivity when attempting to define what constitutes a high-quality façade and/or architectural design, that fits within its context. In this regard, in addition to the design guidelines outlined above, the Discussion Paper is proposing a new institutional set-up, that incorporates expert advice into the decision-making process. This aims to steer the sector towards achieving higher-quality architecture within the existing urban fabric while prioritising the preservation of areas of high conservation value.

In line with the GRDA vision, the Discussion Paper is proposing Gozo to be designated as an area of special importance in terms of aesthetics and design, with an ad-hoc Design Advisory Committee for the entire Island. This Design Advisory Committee shall serve as a dedicated body responsible for making recommendations with respect to development applications in Gozo. Its primary function shall encompass providing professional and expert advice to the Planning Board in relation to aesthetics and design in development applications in Gozo.

A similar committee is already covering all Urban Conservation Areas in Malta and Gozo. This approach has proved successful in attaining architectural harmony within these areas.

Setting up a Design Advisory Committee specifically to cover all of Gozo should steer development in the direction outlined in GRDA's vision, and guide a building's design according to the principles, and design criteria highlighted earlier in this Discussion Paper.

This recommendation promotes a unified approach to the design of the Island's urban fabric, emphasising the significance of aesthetics and harmony not only in village cores but also in the peripheral areas, typically characterised by more recent developments.

Recognising Gozo's regionality is a fundamental principle underlying this recommendation. By establishing a Design Advisory Committee solely focused on Gozo, the region's unique identity would be acknowledged and respected.

## **5. Way Forward**

The formulation of the Gozo Regional Development Strategy is an important step in promoting the regionality of the island of Gozo and for re-valuing Gozo's characteristics. Along with its role of overseeing the implementation of this Strategy document, which aims to be a central tool in the development of Gozo, the GRDA is committed to take further concerted action, including publishing papers and documents that are used to encourage discussions.

The drafting of this Discussion Paper is the initial step to make the case for Gozo to have distinct design guidelines and policy, aimed at preserving the Island's unique identity. This Paper incorporates GRDA's vision concerning urban design and aesthetics in Gozo, identifies a set of parameters that help to define architectural design that respects and relates to its context, and re-emphasizes good-practice design guidance.

This Discussion Paper should serve as the basis for discussion with key stakeholders, ensuring that any insights and/or recommendations are focused. This enables a more consistent approach to address issues within the existing urban fabric, such as the lack of aesthetic harmony and coherence between the new and existing urban fabric. Discussion among key stakeholders would seek to establish what constitutes good quality contextual design. It also aims to steer discussions towards potential institutional solutions that strengthen the regionality of Gozo.



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