

POLICY POSITION

Gozo's Urban Character

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GRDA Policy Position

Gozo's Urban Character

Following the publication of a Discussion Paper entitled '*Nurturing Gozo's Urban Character through Context-Sensitive Design*' in February 2024¹ and the subsequent consultation process, the Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) is publishing its official Policy Position on the subject of aesthetics and architectural design of the island's urban fabric.

Consistent with the *Gozo Regional Development Strategy (RDS)* published in September 2023², the GRDA emphasises that the preservation of the island's identity and its village heritage is crucial for improving the quality of Gozo's built environment. 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.

In this regard, urban design and development should be a tool to enhance the well-being of the community, rather than an end in itself. Consequently, spatial planning policies should serve as a means to enhance the community's quality of life, rather than being limited to regulate construction and real estate development. This requires planning policies that reconcile the social and economic claims for spatial development with Gozo's ecological and cultural functions. The primary objective should be 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. Such high quality design is very often a site-specific solution that must be worked within the specificities of the context. Therefore, policies need to adopt a more context-sensitive design, to achieve high quality design and ensure that Gozo's urban and architectural distinctiveness is maintained.

In line with the vision of Gozo an 'Island of Villages', this Policy Position Paper puts forward the following two main recommendations that should contribute to achieving architectural harmony and coherence within the island's urban fabric, and to the protection of the unique identity and distinctiveness of Gozitan villages and settlements.

¹ <https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Nurturing-Gozos-Urban-Character-through-Context-Sensitive-Design-WEB.pdf>.

² https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GRDA_RDS-Document_A4_VH_2023_Web-1.pdf.

I. Establishing a Gozo Design Advisory Committee

The qualitative aspects of architecture and aesthetics introduce considerable subjectivity when attempting to define what constitutes a high-quality façade or architectural design, that fits within its context. In this regard, a new institutional set-up, that incorporates expert advice into the decision-making process is being proposed, with the aim of achieving higher-quality architecture within the existing urban fabric while prioritising the preservation of areas of high conservation values.

It is being proposed that Gozo be designated as an area of special importance in terms of aesthetics and architectural 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 façade design in development applications in Gozo.

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

Setting up a Design Advisory Committee specifically to cover all of Gozo should promote a unified approach to the design of the island's urban fabric, emphasizing the significance of aesthetics and harmony not only in village cores and UCAs but also in the peripheral areas, typically characterized by more recent developments.

Recognizing 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.

II. Protect Terraced Houses within Government Housing Estates

In line with the strategic goals identified in the Gozo Regional Development Strategy and the presented vision of Gozo an 'Island of Villages', another proposal that advocated action towards the preservation of the island's village heritage and its distinctive urban characteristics is being put forward. More specifically, changes in the Gozo and Comino Local Plan are being proposed to protect the terraced houses that form part of the Government Housing Estates constructed under the Home Ownership Schemes of the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

The Government Housing Estates are characterised by a design that exhibit coherence. These zones are overwhelming characterised by rows of terraced houses, with their height in good proportion when compared to street width. These ratios and proportions give rise to streetscapes and skylines that fully respect the concept of an 'Island of Villages'.

In light of the architectural significance of these zones to Gozo's unique urban landscape, and considering the underlying legal and planning context associated with these Government

Housing Estates, it is being proposed that these areas of terraced houses be recognised and protected. It is being proposed that these zones of terraced houses that form part of the Home Ownership Schemes of the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, be designated as distinct areas within the Gozo and Comino Local Plan, similar to the designation of Urban Conservation Areas. The Home Ownership Schemes terraced houses, with their distinctive characteristics, should be considered different than other buildings, even if these are within the same building scheme.

This proposal to protect zones of terraced houses that form part of past Home Ownership Schemes, by recognizing these as a distinct building typology, represents a proactive approach to ensure that Gozo retains its identity and its distinctive village heritage. Furthermore, this recommendation aligns with GRDA's vision of preserving and enhancing Gozo's unique social and urban fabric, which not only strengthens its tourism appeal but also contributes positively to the local economy.

More details, including the rationale behind the proposal to protect the character of the areas built under the Home Ownership Scheme, are outlined in the *GRDA Note: Proposal to protect Terraced Houses within Government Housing Estates*, which is accessible on the GRDA website.³

³ <https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Note-on-Government-Housing-Estates.pdf>.



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