

Developers react to UNESCO threat to revoke Valletta's world heritage status

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Reacting to reports that Valletta's UNESCO world heritage status may be threatened by the development of luxury apartment blocks on the other side of the harbour, developers of the two main projects on the Tigné peninsula have insisted they are abiding to permits issued by the authorities.

"We are completely in order," said Albert Mizzi, chairman of the Midi Consortium, when asked for his reaction to the reports.

Mizzi insisted that the Midi development has never been mentioned in any UNESCO report, and said he "challenged anyone" to prove otherwise. "You spend millions and this is the thanks you receive," Mizzi scoffed, referring to photos of Tigné Point from Valletta, published in the press.

Mizzi even denied his project had had any impact on Valletta views. "Our development has no impact on Valletta whatever," he categorically stated.

On his part, Fort Cambridge developer George Muscat – whose development will go up to 20 storeys – put the onus on MEPA for approving the project. "We are building according to the permits issued by MEPA and according to the law of the country which foresaw a 16-storey development on the Fort Cambridge site."

Muscat insisted the 20-storey development will still respect the 16-storey limit, which MEPA set in its development brief: "One can fit any number of storeys as long as one fits them in the height of 16 storeys," Muscat said.

When asked whether his development will have an impact on the Valletta skyline, he acknowledged that any development has an impact.

"This is not just the case with Valletta but with many other developments in other places. It would be wrong to worry only about Valletta... Malta was more beautiful 50 years ago but the world has changed," Muscat told MaltaToday.

Following a complaint received from Malta about the construction of a 16-storey building on the Tigné peninsula, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee concluded that information submitted by the Maltese government was insufficiently clear to allow an

understanding of the impact of the building on the streetscapes of Valletta.

Both the Midi and Fort Cambridge developments have been approved in the absence of a buffer zone protecting the Valletta skyline, as recommended by UNESCO.

In an interview published in 2004 Mizzi recognised the historical value of the Tigné site. “They are prime sites and the people would hang me if I ruined the area... and they’d be right to do so.”

And in their bid for a tender, awarded in 1993 for the development of Tigné and Manoel Island, magnate Albert Mizzi’s consortium had proposed 200 apartments at Tigné point, a hundred less than the amount envisioned in the 1992 development brief.

Yet over the years MEPA allowed residential development rising up to eight storeys and increased the volume of residential development.

“I discussed the project with three governments in all. We had to be sure that we agreed on everything, with an outline permit and details on everything from services to height limitations to the footprint,” Mizzi had said in an interview.

Not a finger of protest was ever raised. Referring to the national consensus on his project, Mizzi had claimed it was “the only project in Malta that was approved by parliament without a division because we discussed at length with both sides of the house.”

MIDI is still awaiting a permit for a 12 to 14-storey office block in Tigné. MEPA is currently formulating a master plan for this part of the development, but has already approved the car park beneath the proposed tower.

The Fort Cambridge development was controversially approved last year when MEPA allowed the construction of 20 storeys, as long as these occupied the same height as 16 storeys. MEPA had originally issued an outline permit for 23 storeys in the absence of an environmental impact statement.

But following the intervention of the European Commission, an environmental impact assessment (EIA) was conducted and the development downsized to abide to original 16-storey height. The MEPA Appeals Board is still hearing an appeal presented by the Sliema local council against the Fort Cambridge development.
