

## FAA insists experts did decide on St John's museum extension



Filmkien Ghal-Ambjent Ahjar has uploaded on its website - <http://www.faa.org.mt> - experts' reports related to the proposed underground extension of the museum of St John's Co-Cathedral.

The NGO insisted that the experts did decide on the St. John's project. Years ago, the MEPA heritage experts stated that: "The concept of excavations in the vicinity of the cathedral would not be favourably considered due to the risk these might pose to the structure of one of Malta's foremost monuments and the art treasures within."

Geologist Peter Gatt, who was consulted by the FAA, reported on Valletta's soft rock (globigerina limestone) : "Tension cracks in rocks (joints) would be expected to be common at the top of Sceberras Hill where St John's is located. If excavation exposes a sizeable joint oriented in a particular direction, an entire wedge of rock may fail, causing catastrophic damage to the Cathedral [similar to the] excavation of the Sliema car park, and St Paul's Bay, when two women died buried under rubble."

"Globigerina Limestone is a soft rock which may deform in a brittle as well as ductile manner. Even if we are spared mass failure, creating a void will alter stresses in the rock and cause slow deformation which will increase damage to the Cathedral structure in the form of tension cracks (*kunsenturi*) in the Cathedral. This may ruin Mattia Preti's vault paintings."

He also wrote that: "The excavation will alter the local hydrology ie. pathways taken by rain water in rock and may result in a localised temporary build up of water along the

walls of the completed (damp sealed) underground structure. This increase in humidity will be disastrous for the Cathedral, causing increased salt crystallisation."

The FAA said excavations carried out beneath the Monte di Pietà building resulted in serious and widespread tension cracks (*kunsenturi*) along the walls. This was also the reason why excavations of the car park next to the Mosta Rotunda were immediately ruled out and not allowed to go to EIA stage.

The website also features reports by Joe Magro Conti, head of MEPA Integrated Heritage Management, Dr Albert Ganado and architect Michael Ellul, chairman and deputy chairman respectively, of MEPA's Heritage Advisory Committee.

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## Comments

J Busuttil (2 days, 13 hours ago)

@ Charles Sammut. You do not have the courage to say that MEPA is useless and so leave major projects at ministerial whims. As for your examples as to where to place Parliament your places are not suitable and they need major alterations to heritage places. The most adequate place is to build a Parliament and a cultural place in the hole as you enter Valletta. It does not mean that because there was a theatre that place should be reserved for another theatre when we have MCC.

L..Galea (2 days, 15 hours ago)

Astrid Vella, don't be discouraged by the negative comments against you posted by the Gonezipn apologists. I dedicate the song "I did it my way" to you for you really deserve it.

C. Scerri (2 days, 23 hours ago)

Without going into the merit of the case, but this is a very bad precedent. Basically a very small lobby group (not more than 1500 persons) have succeeded in pushing a minister (in this case the Prime Minister) to take a decision that was not his to take. I think that we had got rid of ministerial decisions as regards the environment 20 years or so ago!! This is really a number of steps backwards, I hope that most of us realise this

Marvin Farrugia (2 days, 23 hours ago)

If the government is so weak to be blackmailed by these few people from sliema we should have new elections and at least we can vote for Astrid and her group then we see how many people supported faa , Just like last election when alternattiva were saying they will get 10000 votes , and look what the results were. Btw I am convinced that this is AD way of controlling this country by enrolling its members with FAA and putting pressure on PN.

Daphne Caruana Galizia (3 days ago)

I have read the so-called report by the geologist, which is no more than a collection of hypotheses and no facts to back them up. I was embarrassed while reading it. Frankly,

it shows that the FAA are in right over their heads. They have no idea what this kind of report should be like. Mrs Vella dismisses environmental impact assessments the size of coffee-tables as 'flawed', and then she puts forward something like this as evidence. To my great amusement, when the FAA's heritage report was brandished at me with triumph, I found that it was written by my university colleague Joe Magro Conti, who is as qualified to give an opinion as I am, given that we studied together. But of course, his opinion is 'expert' and mine is not. You have to laugh.

Astrid Vella (3 days, 1 hour ago)

Vince Peresso & J Busuttill: Re alternative locations, I point you to MEPA's reports which state that there is still under-utilized space within the St John's complex. As we have repeated interminably, further space can be created by moving offices and smaller collections out to one of the nearby palaces - which are up for sale, I hasten to add before you allege we are suggesting requisitioning. MEPA also backed this suggestion WHICH WOULD NOT REQUIRE STRUCTURAL CHANGES, before you allege that too. @Winston Schembri: the experts are the MEPA-appointed members of the Heritage Advisory Committee, some of the most highly respected authorities on the subject, as is Peter Gatt on geology. Since you are interested in contributing, do send an email listing your qualifications and experience to [contact@ambientahjar.org](mailto:contact@ambientahjar.org), that is if, like the rest of us, you are ready to work unpaid.

David Zammit (3 days, 1 hour ago)

What ignorant and anti-democratic to say that FAA "did not allow" the planning process to take its course! FAA objected strongly to the project as was its democratic right. At a certain point, the Prime Minister and the Archbishop decided to drop the project, purportedly because it was "dividing the people". They could have decided to drop the project either before or after the planning process had run its course. For reasons of their own, probably not unrelated to an imminent parliamentary debate, they chose to drop the project before the planning process had run its course. That's all there is to it.

Astrid Vella (3 days, 1 hour ago)

@Joe Micallef, our case is built on this very clear clause of the law which leaves nothing to doubt: "Grade 1: Buildings of outstanding architectural or historical interest that shall be preserved in their entirety. Demolition or alterations which impair the setting or change the external or internal appearance, including anything contained within the curtilage of the building, will not be allowed. Any interventions allowed must be directed to their scientific restoration and rehabilitation" The Foundations plans illegally proposed changing both the external appearance and the structure of St John's, & were not intended for restoration or rehabilitation of the Cathedral. There are no two ways to interpret it, just as examples from around the globe have no bearing. Terms of reference were given however thanks to the 2007 revision initiated by George Pullicino they can never be as solid as rock given that the same Ministry included a clause saying that developers can always have 'inconvenient' terms of reference eliminated after the public's submissions! It is for these reasons that the public has no faith in the planning or EIA process, but we are trying to do something, attending interminable consultations and submitting reports, instead of just sitting throwing mud like you

Wistin Schembri (3 days, 1 hour ago)

Claire Bonello is right. Prime Minister, please do away with MEPA. Please appoint Claire Bonello and Astrid Vella in its stead. At least there are 1,480 persons who trust them.

C Galea (3 days, 1 hour ago)

Astrid, Don't worry obviously VERY FEW are trying very hard to make you give up. It just shows that some people do not like the idea that public opinion has to be honoured. In fact this project attracted the most registered objectors in MEPA's history. Doesn't this mean anything?. Everyone knows that what you and FAA did was to SAVE St. John's cathedral. Does anyone remember when a trench was dug up in Sliema and the church had alot of cracks in it. And it only because of a simple trench. No one has mentioned the tunnels under Valletta aren't they of any importance? As mentioned already EIA's are not very reliable since they are paid for by developers. A few that have been commenting in these blogs in these last days are known that they are mainly worried about their pocket and that is why they are critisizing your achievement. WELL DONE ASTRID You have alot of people behind you because we know for a fact that you are doing this from the bottom of your heart and not for your pocket.

Dr Emmy BEZZINA,LL.D.,B.A.,S.Th., (3 days, 1 hour ago)

The Prime Minister must get it into his head - he must OUT with RCC:WE THE PEOPLE DO NOT WANT HIM TO BE INVOLVED WITH THE TOP JOBS THIS COUNTRY CAN OFFER BOTH IN OUR MALTA [ IN WHICH HARDLY ANYONE IS AWARE OF WHO HE IS!]& IN BRUSSELS. TO THOSE WHO KNOW HIM OR ARE ACQUAINTED WITH HIM,THEY EITHER STAY MUM OR SIMPLY DECLARE THE SOONER HE HAS GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH OUR COUNTRY,THE BETTER. Mr.Prime Minister DO NOT RECOMMEND RCC for Commissioner - JOE BORG MADE A GOOD JOB OF IT,AT BEST KEEP JOE BORG THERE - BUT OUT WITH RCC IN EVERY CAPACITY INCLUDING THAT OF PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE FOR WHICH ASSIGNMENT THE PEOPLE NOT IN THE KNOW DO NOT HAVE AN INKLING AS TO WHY HE OCCUPIES THAT POST. RCC HAS JUST INSULTED THE PEOPLE OF MALTA BY HIS IDIOTIC COMMENTS RELATING TO THE OUTCOME OF THE ST JOHN'S PROJECT:MORE ON THIS PROJECT HAS TO BE REVEALED TO COMPREHEND THE HEIDIOUSNESS OF WHAT WAS ABOUT TO BE PERPETRATED.THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE PREVAILED - LET US NOW MOVE AHEAD RE OTHER VITAL DECISIONS!

Matthew Fenech (3 days, 1 hour ago)

@C.Bonello If EIA are biased as well then Mepa Should start asking NGO'S for their EIA as well Paid by them So we can see both sides of the Supposedly "Scientific views" which these environmental groups use, Because what FAA wants is basically veto power on any private or public project without seeing any scientific proof or mepa discussions . Malta has given Veto Power to 200 to a max of 1000 ppl and i am being

very generous that's what these groups are composed of. We are now officially in an environmentalist dictatorship where some people have 10 times the say of the rest. (1 vote in Sliema is worth 10 votes in the rest of Malta)

Charles Sammut (3 days, 2 hours ago)

@ J Busuttil

How can you have faith in MEPA when we have seen how pressure is brought to bear so that certain projects are approved?

There have been various suggestions as to where to hang the tapestries. Move parliament to Auberge de Baviere or Castille or St Elmo or the Main Guard and hang the tapestries there, in the Palace. But even if no suitable place were to be found, risking damaging the Cathedral can never be justified.

Claire Bonello (3 days, 2 hours ago)

To all those bemoaning the so-called lack of technical expertise/expert opinion on the project - it should be noted that FAA have quoted several well-qualified experts who have shown that the excavations could threaten the structural stability of the Cathedral. As for the planning process, the EIA is paid for by the applicants, so it is highly improbable that the persons drawing them up will write an unfavourable one. In fact only 17% of the EIAs drawn up have indicated misgivings about the projects. The EIA on Fort Cambridge did not include a traffic assessment, the one for Smart City did not make any reference to the huge amount of energy the place will need. So, it is no wonder that there is not much faith in the planning process or EIAs

Wistin Schembri (3 days, 2 hours ago)

Can Astrid Vella kindly indicate when the call for 'experts to decide on St'John's projects' was issued?

May I would have been interested to contribute.

Or was it a self appointed judge and jury?

Joe Micallef (3 days, 2 hours ago)

@ Astrid Vella

The reality is that you have fought a battle on dangerous governance grounds, building your case on the spirit of law and dated studies and opinions, but no indisputable fact. On the other hand I have a different reading of same law and can bring multiple examples from around the globe which contradict your argument base as I sincerely believe that this was a very valuable project which has no real feasible alternative. At this stage it would have been one opinion against the other and to which both of us, I hope, are entitled.

Your battle should have been to secure that the terms of reference of the EIA need to be as solid as rock given what is at stake – I would have been all square with you on that as would have been all – I mean all Maltese who as much as you treasure the Cathedral. Not only but this was a golden opportunity to take procedures to a higher level securing a better future for Malta.

You failed to do that. I would like to believe that this was not a concerted effort but all parallel happenings point to that direction.

J Busuttil (3 days, 2 hours ago)

Mrs Astrid Vella if you do not have faith in MEPA say so. And then we(the Maltese) will dismantle MEPA and leave projects to ministerial whims. FAA did not allow MEPA to do a complete job and this is bad for our country.Now FAA has to be proactive and tell us the EXACT palazzo where to place the tapestaries. Tell us or leave us in peace.

Johnny Tanti (3 days, 2 hours ago)

i have no idea who this guy is... but when you see words like "would not be". "these might...". "If...", "may result in", etc. one is led to believe that this is just conjecture unfortunately, a proper EIA was not allowed to be carried out... these self-appointed guardians of anything which is proposed need to take a reality check...

Charles Sammut (3 days, 2 hours ago)

@ rene joseph

The shameful campaign being mounted against Astrid Vella & FAA is the work of a miniscule number of self-styled opinionists who have long ago become a national joke. If anything, their jibes confirm that what FAA is doing is right.

Astrid Vella (3 days, 3 hours ago)

@JoeMicallef – your demands would be very reasonable but for these factors:as we keep repeating the Cathedral is Grade 1 scheduled,meaning that by law no structural or aesthetic changes can be made.How can Church and State authorise an EIA for a project that proposes to break the law of the land?Or are our laws only applicable to some and not to others?

Secondly,EIAs are paid for by developers.No recent EIA has cancelled a project or even ordered a change of site so what faith can one have in EIAs as truly independent assessment tools?

EIAs can also be inadequate re damage limitation in a case like St.John's.As geologist Peter Gatt stated,no studies can presently identify rock cracks at a depth of 4or5 floors,so the EIA could give the go-ahead and subsequently we would still see cracks all the way up St John's,or worse.

We know all about the fallibility of EIAs from cases like that of FortCambridge where the EIAclaimed that the project would not cause grave problems of dust and vibration.Ask the residents who have been choked by dust and whose furniture has fallen off their cracked walls due to the strength of the vibrations.

rene joseph (3 days, 3 hours ago)

a shameful campaign is currently being mounted against Astrid Vella and the FAA and whoever tries to object to any governmental project. This kind of bullying in a democratic society should not be accepted.

The FAA had any legitimate reason to show their concern as they based on evidence provided by expert opinions in their respective fields.

All this nonsense about the FAA should stop.

Indeed, the reasonable person should try and see who is behind this current character assassination campaign.

tony abela (3 days, 3 hours ago)

Can Mr Richard Cachia Caruana mention one expert he consulted before recommending this project to the Cathedral Foundation.

Can any member of the Foundation declare that they were acting on experts' advise. Are'nt the Church Patrimonial Commission not formed by experts? They were against this project.

Are'nt the MEPA Integrated Heritage Management composed of experts in this subject? They were against this project too.

Can Mr Cachia Caruana clearly state who were the experts he expected to decide on this project.

Joe Micallef (3 days, 4 hours ago)

So the question is obvious. If this opinion is worth its salt (and I am not saying it does not as contrary to Vella I do not pretend to be an expert) why did Vella not want the EIA to be carried out.

You see it is a simple question of processes and governance which you have so dangerously dented.

Vince Peresso (3 days, 4 hours ago)

I will not go into the merit of who among FAA and the Foundation are in the right. The situation is now that a project has been stopped. It is clear from previous updates in this saga that there is a need to find a different location or setup for the treasures housed within the St John's Cathedral Musuem. Now it is up to both entities but especially to FAA to provide an alternative solution. Otherwise Malta will be the loser in the whole affair. So rather than trying to justify its action the FAA must put their heads and minds together and give a valid proposal> In this way they will move forward from just a pressure group and become a credible group among the majority of the Maltese.

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