

COMMENTS AND LETTERS

Defining a new and sustainable built paradigm

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It goes without saying that we are living in the strangest of times. As the early weeks of this pandemic go by, we are already familiarising ourselves with a new normal.

We have had to reprogramme our understanding of comfort, security and routine, each doing our best to build intimate new worlds inside our own homes. Two weeks ago this felt insurmountable, but we are adapting.

The learning curve is steeper for some than it is for others. For architects specifically, the shift is stark – our work is built on idea exchange, collaboration, and spatial understanding. Not to mention hands-on, practical site work.

Confinement is not a happy scenario for us. But despite a lack of precedent for this huge adjustment, this period of relative pause could be an opportunity to take a serious look at the future of our built environment.

Before this outbreak took hold, the exercise of trying to find ways to live more conscientiously was already an urgent one. The current COVID-19 context now presents itself as a moment to step our environmental action up a gear. The aggressiveness of this indiscriminatory virus is clear, and its global toll feels as alarming as it does unrelenting.

But air pollution, biodiversity erosion and depletion of open space have also had long-standing and demonstrable impacts on our ability to survive and progress. Without downplaying the seriousness and suffering that this pandemic has and may continue to bring, we must still maintain perspective for human priority and required action. Our climate remains a rapidly warming one. The future of architecture should respond directly to that context.

Malta specifically is perfectly placed to embrace a new wave of sustainable design. We have a large amount of existing building stock at our disposal, and every opportunity to use it to create architecture that meaningfully enhances well-being.

Sustainable design is about creating buildings and places that respond not just to the planet's health, but to our own. It is about creating spaces where life can flourish – spaces that are well ventilated, naturally bright, thermally



Sustainable design is about creating buildings and places that respond not just to the planet's health, but to our own. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

comfortable, and generally promote joyful living.

The COVID-19 scenario has forced us inside our homes, with many of us feeling the pressure of enclosure not just on our mental state, but also on our physical well-being.

Now more than ever we understand the importance of being able to live in homes that function efficiently, produce minimal waste, and somehow enable us to feel connected to the outside world despite being inside.

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There are proven negative impacts to living and working in spaces that don't accommodate this connection.

Conditions such as 'sick building syndrome' – which also brings about headaches and respiratory problems – are evidence of how unfit environments can lead to adverse health effects. There are very real consequences to unsustainable and poorly designed spaces.

This period of social distancing has made it clear that our domestic environments must function as net providers, rather than mechanisms for depleting resources. Embracing a holistic sustainable building approach will allow this to become more achievable. That, in turn, will have an impact on the wider built environment.

If we work to design buildings that enable meaningful self-sufficiency, our individual impact on our planet's resources will reduce, our personal carbon footprint will decrease, and our mental and physical health will inevitably improve. So, building sustainably is not just a means to addressing climate crisis, it is also a method for designing happiness. The two are distinctly connected.

It has become clear that the choices we make around how we occupy this

planet have serious, life-affecting implications. Now is the time for architects, construction workers, planners, developers and emerging practitioners to change the way we envision our built future.

Embracing a new paradigm of sustainable design does not have to be complicated. It simply means that we start designing for people and planet as opposed to profit.

It means favouring function and efficiency above ostentation, and developing systems that enable healthier, happier lifestyles. None of these measures are outlandish or unattainable.

If the COVID-19 crisis has taught us anything, it's that we can be nimble, adaptable and resourceful – and that we can do this collectively. A more sustainable future is ours for the taking, we just need to open our eyes to it and shift our thinking.

The first step is happening right now – the act of looking around our own homes and analysing the way we actually want to live.

The next step will be to design and build for that reality. There is little doubt that we ultimately will emerge from this exceedingly challenging period. What the world looks and feels like once we're out, is up to us.