



Daniel Xerri

OPINION

Daniel Xerri is an educator

Seeing beauty in a dumpster fire

RECENTLY construction mogul Michael Stivala said that Malta is more beautiful now than it was 20 years ago. Understanding why a supposedly quick-witted businessman is capable of such a spectacularly moronic gaffe is worth the effort, at least in so far as it helps to shed light on why certain things are as bad as they are in this country.

One indication of how out of touch Stivala is with people's perceptions of the current state of the country is the amount of flak he got on social media and news portals. People ridiculed his comment for its vacuousness, myopia, and irreality. For some it was a clear example of a powerful person peddling an alternative fact, while many others accused Stivala of living in a parallel universe. The truth might be somewhat more unpleasant, though.

Stivala seems to be cultivating a penchant for making ludicrous statements that display how insensitive he is to the harm that is being caused to the country by the frenzy that developers have whipped themselves into. Just last April he said that Malta needs more construction, more foreign workers, and more tourists.

That statement enraged people because they could clearly interpret what Stivala meant. The kind of construction he and his cronies at the Malta Developers Association seem to favour consists of the pencil developments that have marred the aesthetics of most towns and villages. Or else the towers that are cropping up in different places, spoiling historical skylines and views. Or even the demolition of buildings featuring traditional Maltese architecture so that ugly modern apartment blocks can be raised in their stead.

For Stivala this construction frenzy is vital in ensuring continued economic growth. The reason why he mentions it in the same breath as the need for more foreign workers is that low paid third country nation-



Michael Stivala

als are instrumental in maintaining the momentum. What he fails to mention though is how often these people are being exploited. The CEO of Identità recently flagged the rise in cases of non-EU workers persuaded to work illegally and paid in cash, as well as cases involving broken employment contract conditions.

As for Stivala's reference to the need for more tourists, we can assume that he is the type of businessman who is overjoyed by this year's record-breaking number of inbound tourists. Even though hordes of tourists running amok on densely populated islands should not be seen as synonymous with the idea of sustainable quality tourism, for him high numbers make it easier to justify the need for further construction. Whether Malta will become a victim of its own success as a tourist destination does not seem to bother him in the least.

The beautiful country that Stivala appreciates seems to

be one featuring rampant construction, shabbiness and litter on most streets, a massive population overburdening the country's inadequate infrastructure, ever-diminishing green spaces where families can relax, and 43 newly licensed vehicles being added to the roads on a daily basis. That is not what the rest of us understand by 'a more beautiful country'.

Stivala might be seeing beauty everywhere he looks because construction in Malta is a gift that keeps on giving. Money is gushing into developers' pockets; everywhere they turn their attention to there is more to be made. Every field, street or building is a potential gold mine that can be exploited to their satisfaction. While it is undeniable that there are still pockets of beauty in Malta, these are constantly under threat by those who are determined to milk the cash cow for all it has and for as long as they can.

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The government seems incapable or unwilling to rein in the bottomless appetite for uglification that developers have built over the years. One might be excused for thinking that politicians seem to share the developers' aspirations for Malta. In both cases, there seems to be a complete disregard for what kind of country future generations will inherit. All that matters is now.

The Michael Stivalas of this country want you to think that they are turning Malta into an even more beautiful place than it ever was. What they really want from you though is to keep your mouth shut so that they can continue lining their pockets. While they might give you the impression that they are deluded, they very well know what they are up to and what motivates their interest in turning this country into one entire construction site. The ones they want to delude are you.

While occasionally developers like Stivala encounter some resistance from those brave enough to stand up to them, protests in Valletta and petitions are as ineffectual as lone voices in the wilderness. They treat everyone like dummies because they are convinced they can get away with the pillage they have been systematically subjecting Malta to for far too long.

They know that wealth makes people blind; as long as the economy is prospering, they can seek to make you believe that you should be happy with the dumpster fire they have transformed this country into. For all you know, they will even expect you to nominate them to the Xirka Ġieħ ir-Repubblika.

Beauty might truly be in the eyes of the beholder, but Michael Stivala needs to get his eyesight checked or his memory tested. At the very least, he should stop treating all Maltese citizens as dunces. Some of us can see his actions for what they are.