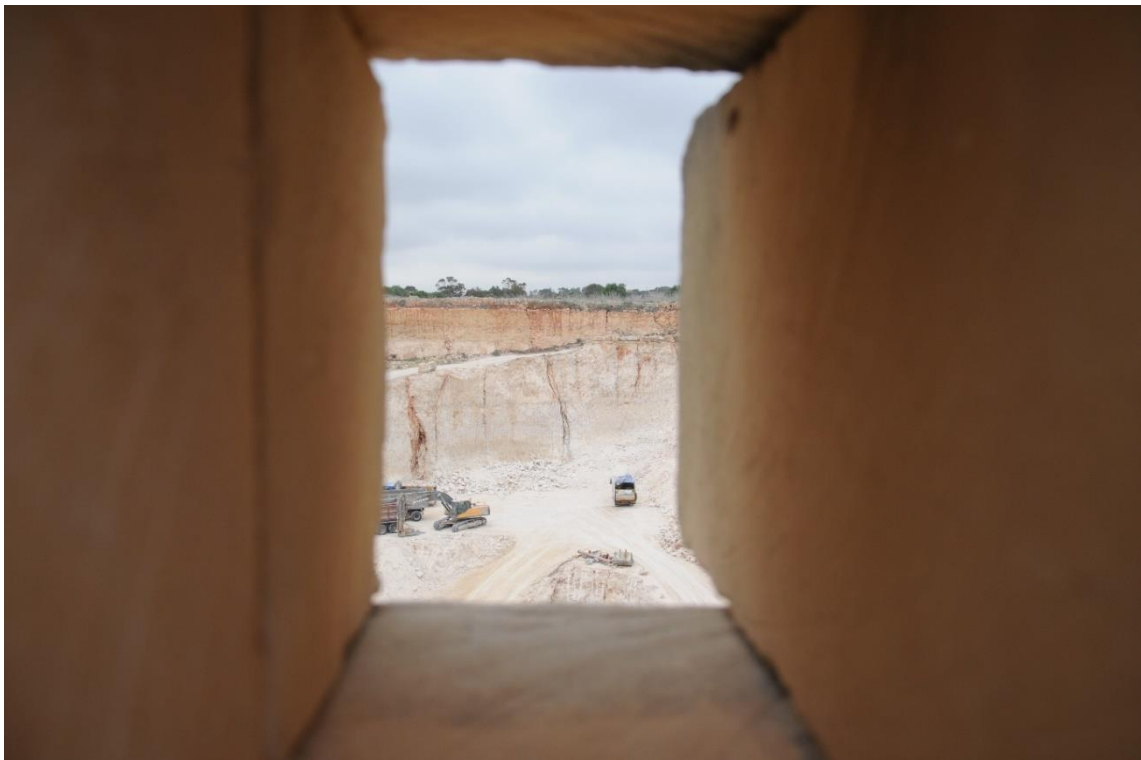


A Big Hole in the Ground

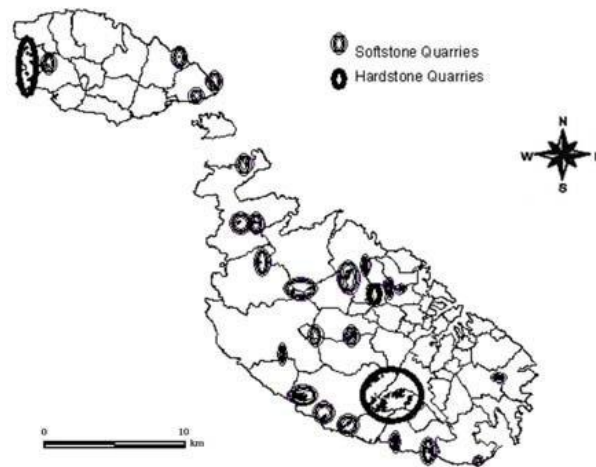
During these coronavirus days I have taken time to jog around the countryside of Hal Far. It never fails to amaze me that just in the most pristine views of the cliffs, you get a massive hole, a gaping toothless massive grave. I saw a farmer chugging along in his tractor, where he remained during the whole conversation. He (Angelo) turned out to be a part time farmer living on a farm just up the winding road. His full time employment is in the construction industry and this is what I managed to obtain as information:



Malta: Limestone country

Limestone is the only mineral resource that can be exploited in Malta. It has been quarried and used for construction since the beginning of time: look at the oldest temples in the world and to the dry stone rubble walls outlining fields. Most Maltese buildings (churches and houses) are constructed out of the softer Globigerina limestone, giving the country its characteristics golden colour.

As can be seen from the figure below, the quarries are situated mainly in the central and eastern areas of Malta.



<https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-of-softstone-and-hardstone-quarries-in-Malta-and-Gozo>

What stops the quarrying industry from expanding is the lack of territory and the limited rock resources. Operators are often obliged to work near residential areas with possible environmental impact. As a result, the extractive industry operates under firm rules, in relation to the protection of its workforce, the respect for the wellbeing of the local residents, the respect for the natural environment and the restoration of the quarry sites. But are these enough?

How do quarries affect people? Malta's special set of problems

An architect (Leonard) who lives in the vicinity gave me this information. People tend to regard the extractive industry with distrust and fear its effects on the local environment. It is associated with increase in noise, vibration, lime dust and destruction of ecology in quarried areas. Specific regulations were enacted to protect the environment.

(Information taken from <https://era.org.mt/en/Pages/Quarries.aspx>)

For example:

- Malta bans the export of quarried stone, thereby restricting further expansion of stone quarries;
- Maltese quarries are restricted from excavating anywhere close to the water table;
- Malta has a moratorium on the opening of new quarries;
- Permits for quarry extensions are full of red tape.

Planning for quarries

Malta has similar problems to other small territories where the availability of land for quarrying is restricted. Many quarries have nearly exhausted the rock resources within their permitted boundaries, and new quarrying sites are not permitted.

Land-use planning in Malta is the responsibility of the Planning Authority. It has recently published a Minerals Subject Plan which formulates policies for quarrying.

Within a European context, the Maltese quarry industry represents a special set of problems. The islands' size is a mere 316km squared, where 30 quarries and some 60 stone quarries presently supply the local construction industry with quarry products.



Another full-time farmer (Ġuzeppi), whilst tilling the earth, said a lot of interesting facts about quarries and their effects. He pointed out the dust that was ruining the environment. Flowers were covered with a fine whitish powder. Then he pointed to the carob trees which were half white and half green. He explained that the green part is never hit by the dust. Some very old buildings/farms were falling apart due to the vibrations effects. “And those are protected by law as they are from the time of the Knights of Malta”. He also exclaimed that until some years ago dynamites which were used in the excavation process caused a lot of noise pollution and mini earthquakes. “It was like an earthquake, it was. Thank God that dynamite is no longer used!”. He confessed that there was an ongoing court case in which the owners of a nearby quarry were trying to steal his outside development zone agricultural land citing public necessity.



Another farmer (Marjanu) said that the quarry owners wanted to enlarge the current quarry to five times its size even expropriating other fields not belonging to them. If it is enlarged then pollution would move from the suburbs to the city centre which is very near. Fortunately, this case was won by the farmers/owners of the agricultural land in the vicinity. “Look! It

is all white. Before our children used to go to school reeking of the landfill, now our children are asthmatic!”



A young mother confirmed this while she was pegging her clothes to dry in the breeze. She said that besides the rain she has to watch out when it is windy because of the dust which clings to clothes.

Another old retired farmer (Gianni) who still visits Hal-Far daily to tend to his animals and fields told me that when he was a child he used to go fishing through a valley which leads to the sea. When I asked where the valley is he answered that it no longer exists and pointed out a barrier and another eye sore covered by large carob trees. He said that the nearby quarry had been extended up to the sea and has even demolished part of the cliffs. The excavated stone and debris not needed was dumped in this valley and today no one can enjoy this prime site, the only place in Malta where one can find the Maltese pear (langasa Maltija), endemic to the region.

The future lies in our hands.

We need to choose between a Maltese villa or an eyesore in the middle of agricultural land. It seems that the answer depends on whether you are a farmer in love with your work or a developer in love with the money that construction breeds.

