

## Learning from Failures: Architectures of Emergency in Contested Spaces (Pyla, Cyprus)

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### A successful moment of publicness in a contested space

- Get a van.
- Park it in the main square during a late summer afternoon.
- Use it as a reference point for the community and as a critical volume for the workshop.
- Project a video inside the van about Siamese girls trying to wear a coat with background music of a piano lesson performed by a child. (Visual artist: M. Loizidou).
- Put chairs and tables close to the van.
- Send invitations to all the local inhabitants, ten days in advance.
- Invite people to try on a real size Siamese coat and walk around the square and in the coffee shops.
- Invite people to fill in questionnaires and draw mental maps of their community's possible future.
- Spread the workshop to the coffee shops around the square, encouraging people (who will probably be suspicious) to participate.

(Excerpt from the 'Architectures of Emergency' project text)

This is a discussion about a mobile workshop set up by the 'Architectures of Emergency' initiative in the central public space of the community of Pyla, Cyprus. [figs. 1 and 2] The square is actually a parking lot, with the Turkish Cypriot coffee shop located on the west side, in front of a mosque. The Greek Cypriot, right-wing political supporters' coffee shop is situated at the north edge of the square,

in front of a Greek Orthodox church. The left-wing supporters' coffee shop is located further north, just off the square. On the ground floor on the east side of the square are some restaurants, with the United Nations (UN) observation tower on top.

In fact, nothing has changed here for the last thirty-nine years, ever since the 1974 Turkish invasion. [fig. 3] Pyla's inhabitants, Greek Cypriots (GCs) and Turkish Cypriots (TCs), do not share much in public, not even their coffee. They live in a comfort-conflict zone, waiting for a general resolution of the Cyprus problem to take place, having already rejected all plans for the community initiated by the UN.

The mobile workshop held a successful afternoon of publicness in Pyla's main square back in the summer of 2007, when a significant part of the square had been reclaimed and the parked cars displaced. It was one of those rare moments in which the main square had been animated by the participation of both GCs and TCs. The mobile workshop was the first tactic of an informal project introduced by the 'Architectures of Emergency' initiative to assist in making the Pyla Master Plan.<sup>1</sup> The author participated in both projects.<sup>2</sup> The initiative successfully managed to bypass all formal representation procedures in order to get information directly from the local inhabitants. Many of them joined the event, offering the study team the opportunity to access valuable information. It became apparent that people from both communities were very concerned

about health and exercise in their daily lives, especially the younger ones.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, in contrast to prevailing official narratives from both communities, they did not mind the idea of sharing an internet café, a gym, or even a kindergarten for their children. Thus, it became evident that both GCs and TCs did not share the opinions of their elected representatives. In addition, although both the TC and GC youth had different points of view from the adults about the use of public facilities for everyday life, their views were sometimes similar to those of the youth of the other community.

What is unique about the community of Pyla is that it is one of the very few inhabited communities within the demilitarised cease-fire zone separating the north from the south, controlled by the UN since 1974. What is even rarer is that Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots live together. In 1973, the GCs in Pyla numbered 586 and the TCs 488. By 2007, the GCs were around 1,000 and the TCs 500.<sup>4</sup> Despite their physical coexistence, there are no institutions that enable joint decision-making for community issues; they do not even share a coffee shop. The reason is that the GCs' local authority operates under the Republic of Cyprus and the TCs' operates under the non-recognised (except by Turkey) Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. In addition, the state of exception caused by the community's geographic location in the demilitarised zone has contributed to the stasis of community public issues.

In societies where contestation of ethno-religious basis prevails, as it does in the case of Cyprus, the absence of a common institutional framework that could assist the co-existence of the communities in conflict should be addressed.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Cyprus, this absence has meant an enduring, ethnically geographic segregation between the majority of Greek Cypriots (GCs) in the southern part of the island, and the minority of Turkish Cypriots (TCs) in the northern part, an effect of the 1974 Turkish

invasion when 200,000 Greek Cypriot refugees were forced to flee to the southern part of the island and 65,000 Turkish Cypriots (TC) to the north.<sup>6</sup> In fact, this segregation had already started during the 1963 inter-communal conflicts, which led the TCs to take refuge in enclaves, mostly located in the island's major cities. Consequently, one of the main disputes is about the properties the refugees left behind. So far, the unwillingness to share any common vision for the island has kept the members of each ethnic community entrenched in their own unwelcoming spheres, profiting from the comfort zone of the actual non-violent conflict.

In spite of all these difficulties, it is urgent that architectural and planning practices contribute to the process of reconciliation between the two communities, even with a high risk of failure. One way is by encouraging publicness as a useful tool for creating frameworks for co-existence between the two communities in conflict. Such publicness could be engendered by creating shared imaginaries about the future and devising the means for communicating these ideas amongst the members of both communities, encouraging them to leave their private spheres and face the 'other' community in public, even if they do not agree with each other.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, an increase of shared reality within a micro-context could become momentarily possible, demonstrating the basis for a negotiable public domain.<sup>8</sup> The initiative taken by the 'Architectures of Emergency' has introduced moments of success in a formal and an informal way by generating the kinds of publicness that took place during the making of the Pyla Master Plan. However, the master plan was bound to fail as a tool for reconciliation, as we shall see further on.

### **Architectural and planning practices in a divided Cypriot context**

It is true that architectural and planning practices do not have the power to significantly change the



Fig. 1

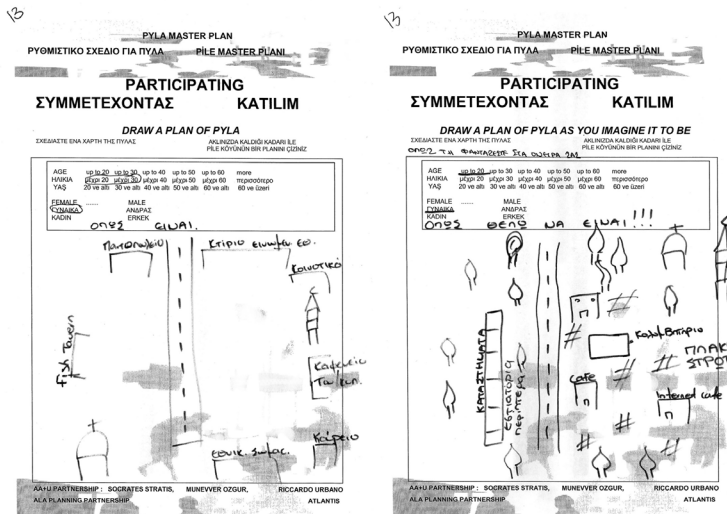


Fig. 3

Fig. 1: The mobile workshop. © author.

Fig. 2: Filled in questionnaires during the mobile workshop, of Pyla as it is and how it could become

Fig. 3: Panoramic view of Pyla's main square. © author.

status quo in Cyprus. The sovereignty of contested spaces, coupled with the total ethnic segregation of the island between a Turkish Cypriot north and a Greek Cypriot south, diminishes the possibilities for a joint effort among practitioners in the two communities, especially in architecture and planning, which are directly linked to territory and property, the already-mentioned heart of the conflict. It is also true that any stance taken by such practices is extremely political, even if this is not made explicit.<sup>9</sup>

Another difficulty to overcome in Cyprus is the absence of a highly developed civil society, which would be an ally to architectural and planning practices willing to contribute to reconciliation processes. As a result, the empowerment of citizens is rather limited, restricting their decision-making regarding their future. This is the case in both ethnic groups across the divide. In other words, people are entrenched in their own ethno-religious based territories. This entrenchment is determined by an implicit political position: that the best position to take is to do nothing but wait for the overall political resolution to take place first. The advantage of this attitude is that nobody risks getting caught on the other side of the trench. The disadvantages are, however, alarming, since no preparation is allowed to take place for any kind of reconciliation between the two ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, a recent and increasing number of architectural and planning practices can be witnessed that contribute to the process of reconciliation. These adopt a spatial agency approach to doing architecture.<sup>10</sup> Such practices aim to infiltrate and change, even partially or momentarily, the status-quo created by the prevailing inactivity.

One such practice is the Nicosia Master Plan, which is about the development of the city of Nicosia across the divide. Under the auspices of the United Nations, the GCs from the southern part of the city and the TCs from the northern part

have reassembled to form a planning body that excludes any state representation. Such exemplary reassembly has its advantages since it allows collaborations to address Nicosia as a whole. Possibilities for unified visions were already permitted to emerge during the 1990s. However, there are also disadvantages: the adoption of a twin project approach, where each side separately implements similar projects, does not embrace the possibility of joint ventures or of increasing collaboration on common projects, which in any case would be difficult to orchestrate.<sup>11</sup> However, this difficulty seems to have been overcome by a recent inter-communal initiative by historians who are working on rewriting the history textbooks on Cyprus in both communities. With the assistance of a group of architects, and funded by international aid, they have succeeded in renovating a run-down building located in the Nicosia UN buffer zone.<sup>12</sup>

Another characteristic of an architectural reconciliation practice is to operate below the radar of official narratives, encouraging meetings across the divide between associations of practitioners and interest groups on specific subjects, such as architectural heritage. In this case, the physical meeting itself becomes equally important. In some cases, initiatives have succeeded in going even further, especially after border crossing was enabled in 2003. One example is the Kontea Cultural Heritage Foundation project, on which the GC refugees from a community located in the northern part of the island decided to work together with the actual TC inhabitants of the community, in order to restore the mosque, the church and the main square, despite the fact that the GC refugees could not regain their homes. An architect from each ethnic group, Charalambos Pericleous and Fevzi Ozersay, were the successful facilitators. Another ongoing project aims to reconcile the inhabitants of Karpasia, comprising mainly Turkish settlers and Greek Cypriots, through a joint cultural website for tourists, facilitated by Archis Interventions Cyprus.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the 'Architectures of Emergency' initiative, we can see similar objectives to those of the above-mentioned cases, but also an additional layer of contribution to the reconciliation process. This layer addresses the question of how actual official planning tools that sustain the status quo – such as a master plan that does not respond to contested spaces, as in the case of the Nicosia plan – can be urged to address reconciliation. The 'Architectures of Emergency' project was inserted as a parallel project of an informal character into the process of developing the official one. As a result, some stages of the Pyla Master Plan process were affected by 'friction genes', a concept coined by the study team, referring to an increased shared reality between the project actors.<sup>14</sup>

In this case, the field of operation was unfortunately neither as friendly as that of the Kontea project, nor as official as in the Nicosia Master Plan. Because of this, the survival of such initiatives depends on their 'emergency' character, and employing 'first-aid' modalities of action. Introducing tactics becomes a valuable practice, knowing that it is impossible to overcome dominant hostile conditions.<sup>15</sup> Similarities in approach can be found between 'first aid' architecture and 'Architectures Sans Frontières', but also with a kind of guerrilla architecture.<sup>16</sup>

Further on we will see how the study team succeeded in inserting this informal project into the process of making the Pyla Master Plan, thus encouraging the emergence of moments of publicness, and demonstrating to the master plan client, albeit with the risk of failing, how to work bi-communally in order to create possibilities for envisioning a common future for the island.

### **A project within a project: 'Architectures of Emergency' during the making of a master plan**

The Pyla Master Plan's terms of reference, as initiated by the Republic of Cyprus, which is under the

control of the GCs, ignored the location of Pyla within the UN buffer zone. Moreover, the unresolved Cypriot political problem, together with the persistence of Pyla's Turkish Cypriots in operating under the internationally unrecognised 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus', controlled by Turkey, prevented TC involvement.

With that in mind, the master plan study team introduced its informal project within the actual official one. The informal project, consisting of a series of 'friction genes', was able, in fact, to augment the awareness of the presence of the 'other' within the process of making the master plan. Suffice it to say that the study team were well aware that the power to take any final decisions rested with the GC community council and the representatives from the Republic of Cyprus. It was also clear that the minority TCs had the power to prevent the implementation of any of the proposals formulated by the master plan, given that these had been tailored for inter-communal collaboration.

The informal project was based on two tactics: the first was to enrich the project actors' pool with those left out of the process because they belonged to the other ethno-religious group; the second tactic aimed to bypass the narratives of the representatives from both ethnic groups. The first tactic took the form of the mobile workshop mentioned above, set up to symbolically activate the dormant central square, and to be used as a 'base' for the project volunteers to access Pyla's inhabitants. The second tactic included a series of informal meetings with TC representatives, such as the TC local authority and those responsible for the Muslim property located around the mosque near the square.

The creation of an inter-communal study team decisively helped such tactics. Munevver was the Turkish Cypriot architect of the master plan study team, and Fevzi, her husband, effectively supported the rest of the team at some crucial moments,

especially during the mobile workshop. Munevver and her assistants were some of the 'friction genes' inserted into the process of making the project.<sup>17</sup> 'Who are they? Who do they represent?' were the first wary comments the Greek Cypriot local council members addressed to the study team [fig. 4]. Luckily, things settled down over dinner when they understood that the inter-ethnicity of the study team might open up the potential for collaboration between the two communities for the sake of Pyla. Unfortunately, this did not last until the end of the project.

The inter-ethnicity of the study team was decisive in applying the second tactic – that of informally introducing left-out project actors from the Turkish Cypriot side into the process. The informal meetings that took place with both the TC Muslim Land Administrators (Evkaf) and the TC local authority, allowed the study team to readjust some of the master plan's priorities, especially regarding the property around the mosque. Unfortunately, the meetings with the TC local authority were not as fruitful as those with Evkaf; altering its members' entrenched views about Pyla's future proved impossible. [fig. 5]

**Successful moments of reconciliation in a story of failure, or broadening the role of architectural practice as a spatial agency**

The content of the Pyla Master Plan was relatively rich in proposals promoting reconciliation.<sup>18</sup> In fact, there were ten such proposals at different levels; for example, sharing neighbourhood public space reclaimed from cars to use as children's playgrounds, holding an open-air market in the main square, and creating a space that would link the two ethnically segregated elementary schools. Other proposals dealt with shared athletic infrastructures and a memorial museum, and finally a large-scale project concerned ways of co-managing an ecological park to be created on a natural rift that

surrounds the community. Information gathered at the meetings with the 'left-out' project actors, and from residents who had participated in the mobile workshop, aided the study team to work towards these goals. Nevertheless, the proposals failed to be implemented for two major reasons. The first has already been mentioned and concerned the overall, unresolved political problem and the refusal of any kind of collaboration between the two ethnic groups, who were, in fact, fearful of being disempowered by their adversaries. The second reason was the inability of the study team to access any of the community actors' networks and gain alliances, which the Kontea project and the 'Home for Cooperation' in Nicosia had succeeded in doing. In fact, as was said before, the absence of a developed civil society played a decisive role in the failure.

Almost six years have passed since the Pyla initiative took place. In retrospect, one can link the failure of the operation to a question of implementation. Each ethnic group persists in implementing their own segregated projects in the absence of an overall political resolution. Admittedly, this effort failed to achieve the desirable results of reconciliation, in contrast with some of the examples mentioned above. However, the challenge in this case did seem to be wider: firstly, it attempted to resist an official, urban modus operandi and to shift its objectives towards reconciliation, though without success. The second challenge was to maximise gains from the process of making the Pyla Master Plan in order to assist the creation of a sense of publicness: in other words, to increase the shared reality among the inhabitants of the communities in conflict. Such publicness did occur between members of the temporarily formed groups; for instance, during the mobile workshop in the central square, which allowed some reconciliation to take place.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

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Fig. 4: The initial meeting between the study team and the members of the Greek Cypriot Community Council.  
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Fig. 5: The discussion between the study team and the members of the Turkish Cypriot local authority. © author.

One moment of reconciliation occurred among the members of the study team by allowing the possibility of envisioning a common future through architectural and planning practice. By creating images of the possible, the team members were urged to listen to the other side's reality and readjust theirs. As a result, a strong bond was created, which has allowed them to continue with similar projects.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the Pyla Master Plan process has become a reference for architectural practice in contested areas such as Cyprus.<sup>20</sup>

The initial acceptance of an inter-communal study team by the project actors from both communities can be considered a success. The study team provided them with the opportunity to place on the table concerns common to both communities. For example, the Evkaf administration entrusted some of their ideas to the master plan proposals, which were not rejected by the rest of the actors, even though they were never implemented.

Another moment of reconciliation occurred among the volunteers during the mobile workshop. Young students of architecture from both ethnic groups had the rare chance to collaborate, as well as to mingle with Pyla's TC and GC inhabitants, both old and young, encouraging them to fill in the questionnaires. Their access to information about the inhabitants' everydayness, which seemed to contradict official narratives, was an accomplishment.

A further moment of reconciliation was the symbolic activation of the main square with the mobile workshop, and the interaction with some of the local inhabitants. For the study team, it already represented a success just to persuade all the actors involved that such a workshop was possible in the first place. Moreover, through the mobile workshop the participants had the chance to dream, though very briefly, of possible future scenarios for their community. The fruitless discussion between the study team and the TC local authority was

considered a success by the Turkish Cypriot team members because TCs and GCs had sat around a table and had enabled the discussion of some common concerns – a very rare occasion indeed in the divided Cypriot context.

It is evident from this article that architectural and planning practices in contested spaces have an important role to play by readjusting their tools, as well as their approach, within their field of operation. By broadening the role of architecture as a spatial agency, the political dimension of space becomes a priority, contributing to change in the status quo, while always bearing in mind the limited power available. Such practices need to manage citizens' conflictual priorities, which are not limited to contested spaces created by ethno-religious division, but expand to any kind of divided territory in contemporary urban environments.<sup>21</sup> Through the making of the Pyla Master Plan, the 'Architectures of Emergency' initiative has introduced a useful design tool; namely, inserting alternative practices into official *modus operandi* that designate the urban.<sup>22</sup> Such tools increase the strength of the public domain in order to emphasise its role as a platform for bridging differences and providing possibilities for negotiating conflictual priorities. Although it failed to engage Pyla's inhabitants in terms of implementing the master plan proposals, Architectures of Emergency has shown how to create moments of increased shared reality through certain practices, despite the inability of these to confront ongoing segregation.

## Notes

1. The author coined the concept 'Architectures of Emergency' in a project presented at the 2006 Venice Biennale of Architecture. The project involved the design of an escort device for assisting both Greek and Turkish Cypriot refugees. It was a critique of the absence of any institutional support during the refugees' return trip in April 2003 to visit their homes after



- twenty-nine years. Project Team: AA & U (Stratis, Loizidou).
2. The client was the Department of Planning and Housing of the Republic of Cyprus and the Pyla community council consisting of Greek Cypriots (GCs). Study Team members: Stratis, Ozgur, Ozersay, Loizidou, Urbano, Caramondani. Mobile workshop volunteers: Acar, Angelidou, Ari, Michaelidou, Ozgur, Pasadakis, Theodosiou.
  3. Issues about health were introduced in the questionnaires after a discussion between the study team and Papadakis, an anthropologist who worked on the Pyla case. Yiannis Papadakis, *Echoes from the Dead Zone - Across the Cyprus Divide* (London; New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2005).
  4. Source: Department of Statistics, Republic of Cyprus.
  5. Frank Gaffikin, Mike Morissey, *Planning in Divided Cities* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 3.
  6. Source: UNHCR.
  7. Socrates Stratis, 'Architectures of Encouraging Publicness', *Journal of Urban Planning and Design* 01 (2011), pp. 104-19.
  8. Richard Sennett, 'The Sense of Touch: Tracing Architecture', *Architectural Design Review* (1998).
  9. *A Civilian Occupation*, ed. by Eyal Weizman and Rafi Segal (Israel, London: Babel, Verso, 2003).
  10. Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011).
  11. Socrates Stratis, 'Nicosia Master Plan', in *Bauwelt*, 43, 10 (2010), pp. 51-4.
  12. Chara Makriyianni, 'H4C - Home For Cooperation', in *SEE! Urban Transformation in Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Kai Vockler (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2012), pp. 90-4.
  13. Esra Can Akbil, Giorgos Psaltis, 'Sebnem Hoskara, Towards a Third Space: Dipkarpaz / Rizokarpaso', in *SEE! Urban Transformation in Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Kai Vockler (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2012), pp. 108-13.
  14. Munevver Ozgur, Socrates Stratis, 'The Pyla Master Plan Project', in *SEE! Urban Transformation in Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Kai Vockler (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2012), pp. 84-9.
  15. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
  16. Roemer Van Toorn, 'The Architect as Public Intellectual', in *Visionary Power, Producing the Contemporary City* (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2007), pp. 272-78.
  17. The names of the Turkish Cypriot architects: Munevver Ozgur and Fevzi Ozersay, assistants: Avi and Acar.
  18. For details on the content of the Pyla Master Plan, see Ozgur, Stratis, 'The Pyla Master Plan Project', p. 86.
  19. 'Imaginary Famagusta' is an initiative consisting of GCs and TCs and the author, which aims to create a common ground between the two ethnic groups regarding the future of Famagusta, Cyprus.
  20. MunevverOzgur, Socrates Stratis, 'The Pyla Master Plan Project'.
  21. Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation: Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 70.
  22. Socrates Stratis, 'Process Paths Alterations', in *Public Spheres*, ed. by Kaye Geipel (Berlin, European, 2008), pp. 52-5.

## Biography

Socrates Stratis is Tenure Track Professor in the Department of Architecture, University of Cyprus. He has a doctorate degree in Urban Studies-Planning from the University of Paris 8, France, and a Bachelor and Master Degree in Architecture (Urban Design) from Cornell University, USA. He is one of the founders of the agency AA & U For Architecture, Art and Urbanism. His work has been exhibited and published internationally, including the Venice Architecture Biennales in 2004, 2006 and 2008.

