
(UN)HEALING THE URBAN SCAR IN NICOSIA: SPATIAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN POST CONFLICT DIVIDED CITIES

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Urban separation of cities mostly resulting from political and ethnic conflict is not considered a lasting solution. When a political solution cannot be achieved, which is mostly seen as a necessity for cooperative urban and social infrastructure, the temporary solution for the city's divided landscape and everyday life becomes permanent. Hence, divided cities are arenas where issues around urban resilience and (re)production of space under contested states are more than everyday debate. Nicosia, widely known as the last divided capital city in Europe, serves as the capital of Turkish Cypriots in the north and Greek Cypriots in the south. The United Nations (UN) Buffer Zone formalized in 1974 as an emergency measure against inter-communal clashes bisected the Walled City Nicosia, separating its citizens and breaking the urban unity. The union of the two communities in Cyprus were broken up and the continuity of space became a past. Nicosia Master Plan (NMP), the cooperative planning initiative of the professionals that had been managed before political consensus was reached, created a unique solution for the city. The success of NMP in physical terms stayed limited as the division continued. The opening of the Ledra Gate within the Walled City in 2008 had a symbolic meaning as it would make the two communities feel as if they belonged to the united urban texture and had the potential of encouraging new socio-economic developments and daily interactions. Civil actors from formal and informal groups have gradually stepped forward to strengthen the positive effect of the NMP, bringing life to the Dead Zone of the city. Recent spatial and social transformations along the divide of Nicosia are scrutinized in this paper. It explores the policy and planning responses that are being proposed in divided cities and the solution efforts that are promoted by professionals, citizens and NGOs rather than the states. The analysis is based on qualitative data; the visual and verbal records centred on activities and actions of NMP and NGOs on the field. Within this context the paper focuses on intentions and concrete steps where the Buffer Zone is perceived as a shared space. It also aims to point out an insight into social and spatial (re)production in post-conflict divided cities.

Keywords

urban resilience, buffer zone, Nicosia, NMP, NGOs

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of resilience with respect to urban planning has been the focus of researchers and political decision makers within the framework of environmental, socioeconomic and political uncertainty, hazards and risks¹. Contrasting with engineering resilience which showed up as a concept much more earlier² where the focus is on a single state of equilibrium or stability, the resilient urban system is not really expected to turn to the previous condition³. Hence the theory of resilience has evolved from a measurable descriptive concept⁴ to a way of thinking which is increasingly applied to a growing number of areas including urban systems where dynamic socio-spatial adaptation and transformation atmosphere is created when citizens, governing authorities and international actors work together.

Divided cities are arenas where issues around urban resilience and (re)production of space under contested states are more than everyday debate. Partition represented by overt signs, walls, and checkpoints represent a clear process of distinction and a conscious choice by one or both parties to establish access restrictions between the 'other'⁵. Cities and capitals can be partitioned with boundaries of race, class, ethnicity, etc. The divisive context for Nicosia is the ethno-national conflict where both groups claim for state sovereignty. Although the reason of division greatly differs between cities, analysing the planning techniques would suggest a relevant context. In Northern Ireland for example, planning was very much integrated to the peace process and used as a tool to manage conflict where in Palestine, it has been used by Israel as a tool to pursue partisan goals and planning is deployed as a means of political control. On the other hand in Beirut the reconstruction after war was carried out by a private company in an elitist manner⁶. Planning and implementation processes realised in these post-conflict and/or divided cities, international policy makers, UN agencies, private contractors have played their roles. However the role of the citizens and NGOs seem underestimated. Preparing plans for buildings and the urban fabric have been the primary goal. Segregation is typically taken like other forms of urban catastrophe without considering the specific economic pressures and social weaknesses⁷.

This paper is focused on planning history of divided Nicosia and the Buffer Zone, exploring the planning strategies that has been implemented after partition. It uses the analysis of the involvement of citizens and NGOs to the planning process to highlight the unforgotten dimension when social and spatial (re)production within the context post conflict urban resilience.

BUFFER ZONE AS THE URBAN SCAR

The Buffer Zone in Cyprus stretches from east to west crossing different landscapes of the island. In rural areas the width of the dividing line is 7 km wide while in Nicosia it narrows as thin as 3.3 m⁸⁹. (Figure 1)

Nicosia was accepted as their capital city and administrative core when ruled by the Lusignans, Venetians, Ottoman and British Empires. The first division of the city took place in 1956 under the British Colonial Rule¹⁰ during a period in which the British were able to exploit inter-ethnic differences that led to inter-ethnic violence and the erection of a barbed wire fence known as the 'Mason Dixon Line' that divided the perfect geometry of Venetian Walls into two¹¹. Between 1960 and 1963 Cypriots experienced the citizenship of an independent state, the Republic of Cyprus, for the first time in their history. However, in 1963 inter-communal and inter-ethnic violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots led to a division of Nicosia again¹². The Green Line disrupted the image of unity meandering along the main commercial axis, formerly the bed of the Phedios River. Although movement from ethnically separated north and south was relatively free between 1968 and 1974, almost none of the Turkish Cypriots withdrawn into autonomously administrated enclaves returned to their original villages¹³.

After Turkey's military intervention in 1974, the Green Line was formalized as a border called the Buffer Zone, the 'Dead Zone' which was controlled by a UN peacekeeping Force and divided Cypriots limiting the freedom of movement for citizens in both communities. Cut through the historical centre by the Buffer Zone, Nicosia became the capital city of both the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus, 1975 (later the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 1983) in the north as Lefkoşa and the Republic of Cyprus in the south as Lefkosia. (Figure 2)

SOCIAL AND SPATIAL FEATURES AND FUTURE OF DIVISION

After 1974 communication between the two communities was almost impossible. Nicosia came out to be the place in Cyprus most affected by the partition because the divide became an everyday experience among citizens both socially and spatially. The architectural and environmental quality of Nicosia's historical centre gradually declined. Many dead ends were formed where the streets stopped at a 'wall'¹⁴ and continued on the far side. The centre became the edge and lost its capacity to attract investment and public/civic services. As a result, urban areas began to expand towards the north and south respectively. Some sections showed signs of past violence; a bullet hole or military graffiti. Nonetheless, the wall's purpose was clear, when one wanted to look at the other side from a break or take a photograph, he/she encountered the eyes of a soldier. (Figure 3)

During the late 1970s and early 1980s many Cypriots moved from their ancestral homes in the walled city, which were not regarded safe because of their proximity to the border, to new homes and apartment blocks in the emerging suburbs of the city. This abandonment of the central area resulted in a large number of vacant housing spaces which attracted lower wage foreign workers and settlers.

Division also meant the partitioned restructuring of Cypriot administrative zones and authorities as well as the dissolution of Cyprus' ethnic mosaic¹⁵. The space of the city was subjected to different plans and practices of urbanization on either side of the divide, as the political power attached to existing buildings changed, especially after the establishment of the administrative bodies of the Turkish Cypriot community in the north¹⁶.

Hence, the union of the two communities on the Island was broken up and the continuity of space became a past. Since 1974, UN-led negotiations have continued for a unified Cyprus. In 2004 the Annan Plan was proposed to the two communities but rejected by the Greek Cypriots in the referendum. The European Union accepted the Republic of Cyprus to be a member state as a de jure whole polity but a half territory. Within this frame the Buffer Zone became the border of EU and Nicosia was branded as the only divided capital of an EU country. The lack of official recognition and legitimization of the North meant that foreign aid and investment was channelled to the Republic of Cyprus, leading and leaving Turkish Cypriots to feel neglected and repudiated by the world.

THE NICOSIA MASTER PLAN (NMP)

The Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) had been developed in the early 1980s following on to a 1978 agreement for the preparation of the common sewage system and a meeting between representatives of the two communities in October 1979. The plan commissioned by the Turkish Cypriot mayor Mustafa Akıncı¹⁷ and his Greek Cypriot counterpart Lellos Demetriades, under auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)¹⁸ had aimed to secure "the improvement of the existing and future habitat and human settlement conditions of all the inhabitants of Nicosia" by coordinating infrastructural issues and ensuring adequate urban development in both parts of the city¹⁹.

In the first phase, 1981-84, formulation of a general planning consisting of historical analysis, surveys of the buildings and public spaces, projects for emergency support and restoration and a large digital record (a database for future projects) are prepared. In the second phase 1984-85, preparation of a detailed operational plan for the city centre was the priority for NMP team. The rehabilitation of the historic centre was confronted as a multi-dimensional process incorporating architecture, planning, social and economic objectives.

From 1989 to date the implementation phase has been ongoing with emphasis on the improvement of traffic circulation, pedestrianisation scheme, landscaping, and the upgrading of the historic buildings together with the public spaces. The planning approach intended to connect the historic city centre with the developing areas outside the Walled City.

One of the priorities identified in the NMP was the revitalisation of traditional residential quarters within the city centre; Chrysaliniotissa-Arabahmet (1981), Omerye-Selimiye (2003), Phaneromeni-Samanbahce (2004). These twin pilot projects were launched to show that the asymmetrical power relations were clearly avoided and like the Sewage Project it is emphasized that the NMP was a bi-communal attempt counting on a non-political attitude. (Figure 4)

These traditional residential neighbourhoods suffered from a sharp decline in population, which accelerated the deterioration of the buildings due to their proximity to the Buffer Zone. As well as preserving both the buildings and the historic charm of these areas with their traditional street patterns, these projects also intend to give impetus to private investment, give sense of belonging in the district, and to attract younger and more economically-active households into the area. (Figure 5)

With the restoration of buildings with historical and architectural value like the Bedesten from it is also aimed to bring social and cultural life back to the neighbourhood. (Figure 6)

The NMP team formed by Greek and Turkish Cypriot professionals has also paved the way for permanent collaboration between the Town Planning and Housing Departments of the governments and municipalities of both sides. The Department of Antiquities and Museums was also included in this network in the north²⁰.

Both the infrastructural upgrading project and the historical renovations enacted in 2001 were approved by UNDP and United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS-Habitat). The revitalization of the central area is found to be an important factor in resilience as the commercial areas may hold together potential than residential areas for civil autonomy to sustain against local and international politics. The NMP was even a recipient of the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2007 where the Plan's capacity to bring together the 'other' through urban and architectural renovations "to build a shared space for all people and all faiths" was emphasized as a jury note²¹. In 2011 the architectural Heritage of the Buffer Zone in the Walled City of Nicosia received the Europa Nostra Research Award. However, although the physical recovery was widely recognised and awarded, the formation of the bi-communal movement, participating in the activities and events to meet, interaction and construction a relationship of trust were still limited. Sporadic bi-communal meetings started in the 1970s and 1980s but it was in 1990s that they turned out to be regular activities. Various conflict resolution workshops and bi-communal activities were organised under the control of UN and support of international actors to create a medium for Turkish and Greek Cypriots to understand each other's fears and hopes for a future reunification. Yet, it was still a small group of individuals sharing this experience until 2003. In 2003 travel restrictions across the Buffer Zone were eased with the opening of the border gates through the Buffer Zone. The Ledra Gate, at the periphery of the Walled City, allowed pedestrian circulation for daily interactions, giving civil initiatives a chance to form.

MORE OF THE NICOSIA MASTER PLAN (NMP) - THE NEW VISION PROJECT (NVP)

The NVP was an incentive of bi-communal effort to assess the achievements and shortcomings of the NMP that was in action since 1984²². The 'Cultural and Culture-related Regenerated Vision' was accepted as the most promising amongst those suggested²³. Both communities showed their will to put out a New Vision for the Core's further regeneration and overcome the shortcomings of the NMP. After the results of a socio-economic survey carried out by the bi-communal team, the new vision project was decided to be re-constructed with urban heritage-led regeneration strategy²⁴. Cultural activities, workshops/seminars, exhibitions, as well as the representation of local community on management boards were promoted as part of the participatory plan. With all the dynamism that the project aimed to bring to the area, the intention was to create a desire for locals to return to the central Nicosia and to recover the Buffer Zone to be Nicosia's urban core once again. (Figure 7) The project was founded on the basis of the lessons learned from NMP experience. The public participation seemed vital for the success of the project and development of appropriate participation mechanisms and tools was the new challenge.

HOME FOR COOPERATION (H4C)

It was in 2005 that the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR)²⁵, initiated an inter-communal educational centre in the Buffer Zone. The financial support from the European Economic Area Grants and Norway Grants (major donors are Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, Sweden, Switzerland and the Republic of Cyprus) made the concept of the H4C project possible. In 2011 the H4C was founded as a multifunctional cultural and educational activity centre in the Buffer Zone offering library and archive, offices, conference and exhibition space and a café for the NGOs and local people of Nicosia. (Figure 8)

With the Ledra Crossing open, H4C transformed the Buffer Zone to a bridge, facilitating interaction and connecting the citizens from both sides instead of dividing them²⁶. "We came up with an idea of looking for a house in the Buffer Zone, somewhere neutral. This will be the first inter-communal building that promotes research and dialogue and issues regarding history education. To be able to take the perspective of the other is a development" says Chara Makriyanni²⁷. The core objective of the initiative was to provide opportunities for NGOs and individuals to design and implement innovative projects, which will help to build the foundations for empowering civil society and build lasting relationships island-wide. The Europa Nostra Conservation Award came to the project that symbolizes the effort of the Cypriot communities working together in collaboration with the international community in 2014. The jury stated that "it constitutes a substantial contribution to the revitalization of Nicosia's United Nations Dead Zone as well as to the wider peace making procedure"²⁸.

CONCLUSION

Synergy initiated and implemented by the civil society can be unpredictably more than the intended. As more people are involved in the bi-communal activities at bridging places, the lines of the dividing border become blurred if not removed. The formulation of the Nicosia Master Plan have produced significant physical conditions improving both communities' capacity for bi-communal action for the revitalisation of Nicosia as a whole. The Buffer Zone remained at the centre of all the infrastructural projects, urban and architectural renovations and social and cultural activities. It has been reinterpreted, and socially and spatially transformed to a shared cultural heritage, a shared space for today and shared hopes for future.

Through spatial practices, the transformation of the Buffer Zone to be a shared space, with the funding of the relevant authorities and control of the UN, remains the result of the combined efforts of the civil society to try to heal the urban scar in divided Nicosia.

Post-conflict divided cities and societies embodies a challenge when planning is considered as a tool of reconstruction; the process is unpredictable and volatile. The Nicosia Master Plan, the first common project initiated by the two communities has managed to sustain despite the political consensus is not reached. When this unique planning history is scrutinized, the experience indicates that social and cultural issues are the crucial components of spatial (re)production and transformation. The deep understanding of the ongoing process through NMP, NVP and H4C provides awareness that may yield insight for the planning and peace building strategies in post-conflict cities.

Endnotes

- 1 The etymological roots of the word resilience come from the Latin word *resilio*, meaning 'to bounce back' as noted in Klein, Nicholls and Thomalla, "Resilience Towards Hazards", 35-36.
- 2 Matyas and Newell, "Positioning Resilience for 2015: The Role of Resistance, Incremental Adjustment and Transformation in Disaster Risk Management", 1-5.
- 3 Holling, "Engineering Resilience Versus Ecological Resilience", 31.
- 4 The resilience of ecological systems is defined as the system that continues to function or to persist when changed has been cited as the origin of modern resilience theory as noted in Folke, "Resilience", 253.
- 5 Oswald, *The Social and Spatial Dimensions of ethnic Conflict*, 110.
- 6 Suri, *In-conflict/post-conflict: A Role for Planning in Building Peaceful, Inclusive and Resilient Cities*.
- 7 Calame, *Divided cities and Ethnic Conflict in the Urban Domain*, 49
- 8 Hadjipavlou, "Multiple Stories" 53-75.
- 9 Constantinou Papadakis, "The Cypriot State(s) in Situ", 125.
- 10 Demetriades, "The Nicosia Master Plan", 169-176.
- 11 Papadakis, "Nicosia after 1960", 1-5.
- 12 By the green pencil line drawn on the map
- 13 Attalides, *Social Change and Urbanization in Cyprus*, 58.
- 14 The walls composing the empty zone gave the impression of quickly built separators made of different materials; briquette walls, sandbags, barrels and barbed wire fences in rural areas.
- 15 Kliot and Mansfield, "The Political Landscape of Partition", 507.
- 16 Gurdalli and Koldas, "Architecture and Power and Urban Space in a Divided City", 142.
- 17 Mustafa Akıncı has been elected as the president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in April 2015.
- 18 Bollens, "City and Soul Sarajevo, Johannesburg, Jerusalem", 170.
- 19 NMP Final Report.
- 20 Oktay, "An Analysis and Review of the Divided City of Nicosia, Cyprus and New Perspectives", 241.
- 21 AKA 10th Cycle, 2007, 132.
- 22 New Vision Final Report, 2004.
- 23 New Vision Outline Plan, 2005.
- 24 Eleni Petropoulou, *Revitalizing a Historic City – The Case of Nicosia, Legal Instruments and Planning*.
- 25 The NGO for dialogue on history education in Cyprus founded in 2003.
- 26 Foka, "Shared Space in Conflict Areas".
- 27 President of the AHDR
- 28 Europanostra.org/awards/126.

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