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Spatial co-transformation through socio-cultural resilience strategies in post-conflict divided Nicosia

Huriye Gurdalli *

Department of Architecture, Near East University, Nicosia/TRNC, Mersin 10 - Turkey

A B S T R A C T

When the political and ethnic conflict results with the division of cities, the issue of urban resilience is more than everyday debate. Nicosia has been reputed as the last divided capital city in Europe where the Buffer Zone formalized in 1974 by the UN control, broke the social and spatial integrity. Although the political solution is not achieved for a united Nicosia, the initiative founded jointly by the professionals from north and south sides created a unique solution for the city. However the physical planning strategies achieved by the Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) were still limited as the city was far from being shared socially and culturally by the citizens. The opening of the Ledra Gate on one of the main axis of the urban core in 2008 was accepted as a milestone. The freedom of movement made the citizens feel as if they belonged to an urban unity. With the hope of developing socio-economic daily interactions, NGOs on both sides have stepped to the arena to strengthen the physical success of the NMP. This paper explores the re-production of urban space concentrating on the efforts of professionals and citizens rather than the states for the resilience of a once contested space. The analysis is based on verbal and visual records. It focuses on the process where a divide is turned to be perceived as a shared space and by exemplifying the unique example of Nicosia, aims to put out an insight into post-conflict spatial and social transformation.

1. 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 risks. Contrasting with engineering resilience which showed up as a concept much more earlier (Matyas and Pelling, 2015) where the focus is on a single state of equilibrium or stability which a resilient system would revert after a change (Holling, 1996), the resilient ecological system is not really expected to turn to the previous condition.

Hence the theory of resilience has evolved from a measurable descriptive concept (Folke, 2006) to a way of thinking which is increasingly applied to a growing number of areas including urban systems consisting ecological, political, social and technical issues within it.

When adaptation to change is required for a resilient urban system, transitional, incremental or transformational alterations may all be relevant (Pearson and Pearson, 2014) as the temporal and spatial scales of its subsystems; governance networks, urban form and infrastructure, social and economic dynamics may all need different attitude. A dynamic socio-spatial adaptation and transformation atmosphere is created when citizens along with governing authorities and international actors work together for the conditions of appropriate spaces.

Breaking up of the social and spatial urban unity mostly resulted by the political and ethnic conflict is not considered a lasting solution. When the time for reunification comes, generally by top-down decisions, the walls were demolished or areas were demilitarized, the terrains were used to plan infrastructures, parks, urban gardens educational and cultural institutions responding to the needs of the city.

Hadrian's Wall, the Great Wall of China and the Iron Curtain were all transformed from being the edges/borders of Empires to green lungs, backbones of cultural and educational facilities, ecological tourism and sports activities. The Korea Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas has

been described as a Garden of Eden or Walled off Paradise as the area was closed to the reach of humans and a wild nature has evolved consequently.

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' (Oswald, 2013). 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 manner. 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 weaknesses (Calame and Charlesworth, 2011).

This paper is focused on planning history of divided Nicosia and the Buffer Zone, exploring the planning strategies that have 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.

2. 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 m (Fig. 1) (Hadjipavlou, 2007; Papadakis, 2006).

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 Rule (Demetriades, 1998) 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 two (Papadakis, 2006). 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 again by the green pencil line drawn on the map. 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 villages (Attalides, 1981).
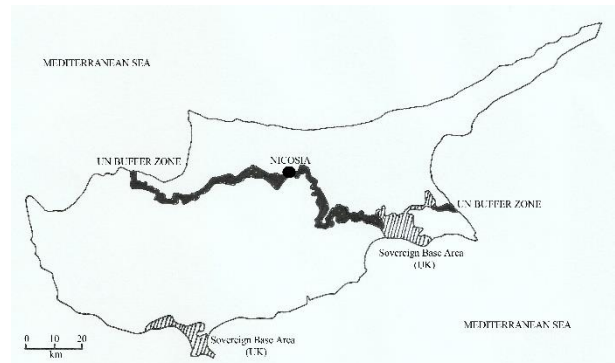

Fig. 1: Buffer Zone, stretching from east to west of the island

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.

3. The conscience of space

Once the central and most vivid area in the city with the traditional Market Place was loaded with historical and visual meaning. Currently the elongated scar of the Buffer Zone contains no appealing place for people to gather and has lost its value as a community focal point. The loss of the centre physically in a way of neutralized the city space geographically (Sennett, 1999). The missing features confuse citizens and they confront with problems in mapping the city. On the other hand although the Greek and Turkish Cypriots live in two states having different environmental qualities at the same time they share a common future of the same country. Thus the current oddly divided arrangement may usefully be described as a heterotopia. As Foucault defined the term, it is a state of simultaneous juxtaposition the near and the far, that which is side by side and that which is scattered. Dealing with heterotopia this position can

be articulated with Foucault's words: "I find myself absent from the place where I am, in that I see myself in these" (Foucault, 1997).

If a place is inaccessible, it becomes isolated and the people who live there can feel physically cut off from surrounding areas. Thereafter, the way they live can evolve in a different manner and at a different pace than it might otherwise have done. Islands are natural places of isolation. However on some occasions, places are isolated purposefully, by placing barriers between locations to protect those on one side from 'the others/abnormal' on the other side. According to Foucault disciplinary oversight included physical separation from other human beings as well as intensive surveillance and control. These two trends slowly came together in the 19th century where power used for disciplinary partitioning was applied to space to create places of exclusion (Foucault, 1997).

The actors who dominate socio-spatial relations may have crucial effects on city spaces. Space forms people, but also results from their patterns of interaction. An urban space can become a centre of revolution against the established distribution of power and privilege. Space can be a means of production and also of control, and thereby of power. But social and political actors cannot master space completely (Lefebvre, 1991).

Considering the broader context of contested and divided cities, Bollens (2001) examination of urban planning techniques and tactics in a number of conflict ridden cities, suggested that a relevant context for the examination of Nicosia would be that of other sites such as Beirut, Sarajevo, Jerusalem, Belfast, Delhi, Hong Kong or Algiers. While all cities and capitals contain divisions and boundaries (such as those of race, class, gender, ethnicity etc.) this will differ greatly between cities. As has been stated by Papadakis (2006), Nicosia's particular predicament places it within a context of ethno-national conflict where groups posit competing claims for state sovereignty or secession that may implicate a divided city or capital.

The continuing division of Nicosia is central to many of the city's on-going problems. The division restricts development and imposes common framework. The division has, among other things, stimulated a process of outward growth away from the old leading to an underlying neglect for housing areas in the historic core and their social value. There is also a lack of effective economic, financial and legal-administrative instruments for supporting sustained project implementation and bringing about necessary changes.

Where the approach to planning is concerned, a strong private sector and a market-driven economy prevail in both sectors of the island. The local plans lack the proactive and integrated planning approaches necessary to anticipate and entice market forces towards spatial development harmonising private sector involvement with sustainable urban management.

4. Social and spatial features 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' 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 is encountered the eyes of a soldier (Fig. 2).

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.

Fig. 2: Centre of nicosia becoming the new edge

Division also meant the partitioned restructuring of Cypriot administrative zones and authorities as well as the dissolution of Cyprus' ethnic mosaic. This new era also led to emergence of new architectural posturing in ethnically divided urban space. A transformation of political symbolism occurred through the erection of new monuments and signposts, and economic and socio-cultural spaces of the two communities were partitioned (Kliot and Mansfield, 1997). The space of the city was subjected to different urban planning and architectural practices on either side of the divide. The attitude by the political decision makers attached to existing buildings changed, especially after the foundation of the administrative bodies of the Turkish Cypriot community in the north (Gurdalli and Koldas, 2015).

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.

Interestingly the first need for a holistic planning of the divided Nicosia came from underground. The pressing need of the implementation of the saturated sewage system forced the representatives of Nicosia from both parts of the divide to look for a solution (The sewage system renewal project was already there before 1974). With the mediation of UN, a bi-communal technical team was established which was mentioned clearly that the formation of team has 'no legal standing' and 'outside the political process' (UNOPS, 1995). Hence this infrastructural plan played an important factor in resilience in the sense that it integrated the city in an unseen way.

4.1. 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 Akıncı and his Greek Cypriot counterpart Lellos Demetriades, under auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (Bollens, 2001) 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 city.

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 on-going 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 in 1981, Omerye-Selimiye in 2003, and Phaneromeni-Samanbahce in 2004 (Petropolou, 2001). 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 (Fig. 3).
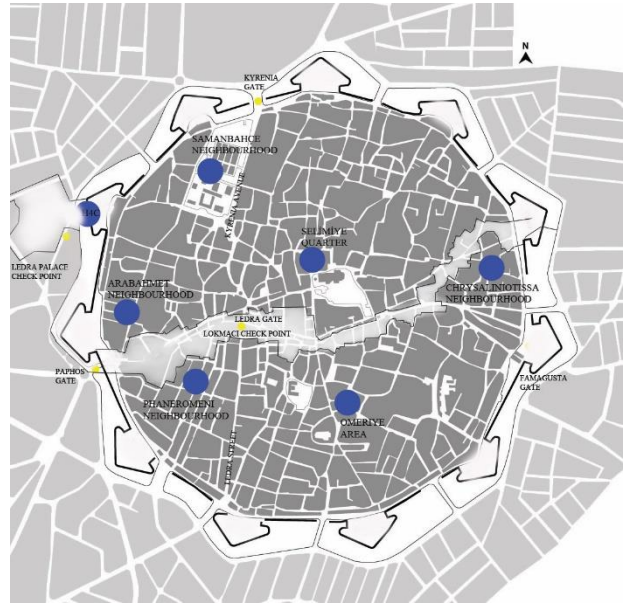

Fig. 3: The urban interventions funded by EU through UNDP-UNOPS

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 (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: North-western part of the Walled City Nicosia along the Buffer Zone, Arabahmet Quarter

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 (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: The Church of St. Nicholas dating back to VIth century, Bedesten after restoration

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 north (Oktay, 2007).

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 note. 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.

4.2. 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 1984. The 'Cultural and Culture-related Regenerated Vision' was accepted as the most promising amongst those suggested. 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 strategy (Petropolou, 2001). 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 (Fig. 6). 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.

Fig. 6: Restorations and renovations implemented through the Nicosia Vision Plan

4.3. Home for cooperation (H4C)

It was in 2005 that the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR- The NGO for dialogue on history education in Cyprus founded in 2003), 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 (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Home for cooperation, re-uniting citizens of Nicosia

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 them (Foka, 2015). "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 Makriyanni as the president of the AHDR. 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".

5. Conclusion

Certain locations in a city will create a stronger foundation for cooperative autonomy for the establishment of legitimate security practices and thus for resilience. In particular, urban locations that have the capacity of bringing together the residents with commercial and cultural facilities whose co-existence fuels dense foot traffic are fertile sites for focusing policy and initiating and implementing projects.

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.

The transformation of the Buffer Zone, through spatial practices with the funding of the relevant authorities and the control of the UN, remains the collaborative result of the communicative planning efforts with the civil society for healing the urban scar in divided Nicosia.

Post-conflict divided cities and societies embody 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 on-going process through NMP, NVP and H4C provides awareness that may yield insight for the planning through socio-cultural resilience strategies in post-conflict cities.

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