

BUILDING UNIFORMITY, LIVING IN UBIQUITY: COMMUNAL SPACES VOID OF CONFLICT, VOID OF MEANING

Authors:

DR GEORGIOS ARTOPOULOS; DR JOHN A PISSOURIOS

Institutions:

THE CYPRUS INSTITUTE; NEAPOLIS UNIVERSITY PAPHOS

INTRODUCTION

In Cyprus, contemporary affordable housing, mostly led by developers, promises an antidote to the small spaces, small windows, lack of storage spaces and the reduction of common spaces to a circulatory minimal found in most contemporary residential blocks in urban environments. In Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean region, housing blocks for low income families, workers and refugees¹ have been criticised in the past as stark, dehumanizing, universal, sterile and mechanistic. Housing complexes were rendered responsible for many social problems, like social disintegration. This paper focuses on the design idioms and special conditions of mobility in Cyprus, and its aim is to study closer the architectural and social value of common spaces in housing projects. Today the development and establishment of processes that generate shared identities based on use of common spaces, is an important issue in contemporary architectural discourse about equal opportunities and sustainable interaction of multicultural societies in European cities.

These communal spaces in housing complexes are of varied typologies. They can be open, closed or permeable, have the form of courtyards, landscaped gardens, or amplified landings. They are perceived, sometimes successfully and others unsuccessfully, as spaces of social interaction, association and identification. In this context this paper considers open spaces in housing projects – beyond their primary function as circulation plateaus– not through the Modernist notion of public space (e.g., generic, empty space that is ‘flexible’ enough to accommodate variable uses), but rather as non-preprogrammed spaces; spaces that are ‘unstable’ and can be transformed by users.

THE HOUSING BOOM IN CYPRUS

The city of Paphos has a remarkable history, which can be traced back 2,300 years. The ancient town of Paphos was founded in the late 4th century BC by the last King of PalaiPaphos, Nicocles. PalaiPaphos was one of the most famous places of pilgrimage for the ancient Greeks and one of the city-kingsdoms of ancient Cyprus.² New Paphos was such an important town that by late 2nd century BC became the capital of the island. However during medieval times, New Paphos was reduced in size and its inhabitants gradually moved to a new residential area.

Unlike other Cypriot cities, Paphos spreads across two distinct geographic areas, which were developed in different chronological phases: the new Paphos and the Paphos town centre (Ktima) commonly referred to as Kato (Lower) and Upper Paphos, respectively. The economy of the city has grown rapidly after 1974 based on tourism and the construction sector mainly operating in Kato Paphos and the nearby areas. In parallel, and on a different scale, during the last four decades Cyprus has been transformed from an agriculture-based economy into an international provider of economic services. Significantly, together with the sector of economic services, the construction sector and tourism benefited the economic growth of the country: tourist arrivals have increased almost 600% in a decade and a half. Similarly, there was a threefold increase of the construction sector between 1995 and 2008.³

This proliferation of the construction sector should not be regarded as irrelevant to tourist growth, as Cyprus gradually became an international provider of holiday houses. The mild climate of the island and the low cost of living, as well as the low taxation and aggressive incentives for property ownership benefited significantly the real estate market. The construction sector grew 175% between 2000 and 2007, while the overseas market grew 2500%, from 450 houses sold in 2000 (3.6%) to 11,281 (53.1%) in 2007.⁴ This transition had a striking effect on the real estate market, as the average pricing of dwellings (euro per square meter) experienced an annual increase of 15% between 2000 and 2008.⁵ As a result, house ownership has been rapidly transformed from a social necessity of the local market to a commodity of the international real estate market. The impact of this change was severe, not only on the architectural quality of dwellings, but most importantly on the quality of the built environment.



Figure 1. Aerial view of Paphos that highlights the geological rim that separates the old part of the city from its Port and Kato Paphos.

SUBURBANIZING THE CITY

Of all Cypriot cities, this spatial transformation had the greatest impact on the urban space of Paphos. The seaside 2017 Cultural Capital of Europe is considered among the most contested urban environments having historically layered pasts yet perplexing present-day realities. The distinction between the old town and the UNESCO World Heritage Site in Kato Paphos, the social and spatial coherence of which is currently challenged by unplanned touristic developments, has created a sharp division in the city that is also reflected in their inhabitants' demographics, with local residents living in the old town and tourists being secluded in the sea front. The impact of this invisible division on the lived experience of the city is intensified by the topography of the landscape, with the old town stretching atop the hill while being separated from the World Heritage Site by means of the geological

rim (Figure 1). In particular this paper studies the Universal area (Figure 2), which exhibits all the typical characteristics of newly (after 1990s) built-up areas in most Cypriot cities, in order to rethink the relationship between the challenged built environment of Paphos and the complexity of its cultural landscape (home to British expats, Cypriots, Chinese, Russians, Georgians, Greeks and others).



Figure 2. Aerial view of the Universal quarter.

Both the central government and land developers considered the popularity of Paphos as a tourist destination an opportunity to enter the international market of holiday residence. To this end, successive, large-scale expansions of the city planning scheme were executed, which were highly disproportional to the real needs of the local communities. This expansion was pursued in order for land (and therefore housing) prices to stay low and be competitive in the international real estate market. The production of urban space though was restricted by the design of these housing developments, which were planned as low density residential areas with typical, universally appealing amenities and communal facilities that respond to the lifestyle of summer dwellers and their ephemeral stay on the island (Figure 3). Today these areas of the city are inhabited by even less residents than the low density of their city planning scheme was meant for, as: a) the oversupply of built up urban areas has led to their partial development, and b) only a fraction of their inhabitants is permanent.



Figure 3. Typical communal facilities to support the lifestyle of summer dwellers and their ephemeral stay in the housing complex.

HOMES ON A PERMANENT VACATION

Arguably, these conditions of the built environment defy the already challenged identity narrative and lived experience of Paphos. First, these residential areas became mono-functional as a direct result of the inability of non-residential (i.e., central) uses to emerge in areas with a low density of permanent population. Second, the numerous undeveloped areas and empty plots fragment the continuity of the urban space. As stipulated in the relevant planning legislation (*Town and Country Planning Law*), the construction of public amenities (including roads and open green spaces) is a responsibility of each private landlord and is a prerequisite for the acquisition of planning permission. Thus public amenities are constructed only after a landlord decides to develop the land. In the context of this kind of incremental procedure of urban space production, roads and pedestrian routes that have been designed by the central planning authority to connect to the existing circulation network are frequently leading to dead-ends, while open green spaces remain incomplete, reinforcing the fragmented hypostasis of urban space (Figure 4). In addition to this, the common use of a tree-structured network pattern in the urban planning of these areas –to achieve low noise pollution and pedestrian-friendly design– impacts the overall accessibility of built space (Figure 5). Significantly these design-led decisions limit daily transportation means to private vehicles. Third and most important, social interaction in these residential areas has been reduced to bare minimum as a result of the cumulative influence of low population densities, extensive use of private means of transportation, lack of central uses, limited accessibility, and incomplete open green spaces, on socialisation processes.



Figure 4. Dead-ends are very frequent on the circulation network of typical housing projects, as is the indefinable public space around these settlements.

Together with the challenged and fragmented structure of the urban space, the business model of these housing projects also affects the architectural qualities of the built up areas of the city. This is so because these housing projects are usually designed to be attractive to a *statistical mean*, as they are addressed to a universal clientele that comprises the potential market of buyers. The attributes of this market and the reasons for real-estate investment in this case are convoluted. First, the buyers of these properties may never live in Cyprus - a great deal of sales is taking place for citizenship and visa acquisition purposes only. Among other EU member states, Cyprus offers one of the most competitive and flexible citizenship and visa programs in Europe, which allows non-European people to work, travel, study and live anywhere within the European Union. Second, the socio-cultural characteristics of this target group vary greatly, and Paphos is already a multicultural place: 64% of the population is Cypriots, 28% are EU citizens and 8% are non-EU citizens.⁶



Figure 5. The common use of a tree-structured network pattern in the urban planning of these housing settlements results more often than not in isolating and fragmenting public space instead of facilitating, promoting and intensifying its occupation and use.

As the most profound products of these socio-economic particularities of Cyprus, the housing developments of Paphos are characterised by *ubiquity* and *uniformity* because they are designed and built to attract an audience as wide as possible. These design preferences are applied in practice carelessly, without respecting the identity of the place (Figure 6), and at the same time by ignoring the social and cultural sustainability of the city as a whole. In areas like the Universal quarter the dominant housing pattern is a particular type of housing complex – a divergent evolution of suburban housing.⁷ This *urbanized summerhouse* type is preferred due to its low construction cost and its capacity for accommodating amenities, like communal pools and small gardens, which facilitate the function of the dwellings as summer houses. This approach to integrating communal spaces in housing has a negative impact on the intensity of social interaction and opportunities for occupation of shared spaces, as it provokes the fragmentation and clustering of the latter into smaller, more private pockets of social interaction. Each owner controls the social interaction that is taking place on these private open air spaces and in doing so these spaces do not offer opportunities for surprise and unexpected encounters - the overabundance of sensual stimuli and the events that are typically fostered in an urban space and are usually attributed to the ‘vitality’ of the city.



Figure 6. New and old housing projects at the Universal quarter defy the context and identity of the place.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Unlike complex urban environments, contemporary housing developments lack the capacity to social adaptation and change. Fragmented territories contested by the rapid growth and unplanned tourist developments, like the Universal, offer no alternatives to the historic parts of the city. On the contrary, the lack of visual continuity and functional organization in the urban fabric weakens the relationship of new and old, natural and man made, communal and private. This fragmentation challenges the operation and support of cultural activities and the sharing of *common resources* of the city, like the networks of built and open spaces (e.g., roofs, courtyards, arcades, patios, pavements, squares and landscape), as well as networks of ventilation, natural lighting, shade, odours, and in general microclimate. As some of these spatial resources are scattered across the urban landscape, unassociated and inaccessible, they prevent their users (i.e., inhabitants and visitors) from orienting themselves, from reading the organization of public and open space - via cognitive structures - and eventually from 'making sense' of their environment.

Distinct from the sterile experience of these new, quasi-developed areas of Cypriot cities, multi-cultural urban environments of metropolitan areas offer a rich experience to their citizens, with their complexities, indeterminacy, and abundance of possible interactions that are accessible by the wanderer, local or tourist. Individuals in these places, through the action of walking, interfere with physical constructions, points of interest, points of stasis and complex situations of interaction. These places also offer to their users opportunities for communication and exchange of information. In doing so they act as a matrix of structured or sensual, uncertain, *thick* moments that alert or relax the body, distract the senses and disrupt continuity of movement. All these situations are socially defined by each individual actor's narrative and they depend on agency. Spatial agency and geometric configuration of the city can create opportunities for the emergence and continuous reconfiguration of the experiences mentioned above via the cognitive activities that are usually triggered by each user's passage through the cityscape.⁸

Staging a city's 'vitality' and/or offering the comforts of suburbanization?

In light of this, contemporary housing efforts in Cyprus should move away from the uniformity of their built environment and the ubiquity of the designated public space which instead of provoking stimulation, they receive their users' contempt. Concluding, through the analysis of the everyday realities of Paphos, this paper suggests that housing efforts in Cyprus should rethink the role of communal spaces, and the design of their respective infrastructure, in the context of the holistic development of the city they belong to - and at the same time reconsider these spaces' contribution to

the social and cultural sustainability of the place. Specificity, identity, contest, multiplicity, diversity, locality, playful engagement and autonomous interaction, inclusiveness and accessibility are only but a few qualities that new housing projects should pursue if they want to achieve successful, and therefore sustainable, integration in - and the re-activation of - the existing urban fabric of the Cypriot cities. Even in cases where the city paradigm is adopted in the development of a housing and mixed-use complex, there is a sharp distinction between the designated public space that celebrates the vitality of the city but is engineered as socially easy – simplified - space, and those places that foster the messiness, uncertainty and contested identity of “real” urban space. Yet in their best case scenario/implementation, the former are characterized by the mono-dimensional identity and lack of opportunities for the emergence of creative accidents that would add richness to the lived experience of occupying the shared territories of the city, and in doing so they feel like staged experiences that offer a simulation of the city’s vitality with the comfort of suburban housing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (2nd edition). Verso, 2009.
- Binnie, John, Holloway, J., Millington, S. and Young, C., eds. *Cosmopolitan Urbanism*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Browning, Gary. *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present*. Sage, 2000.
- Cilliers, Paul. *Complexity and postmodernism: understanding complex systems*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge, 1989.
- Duany, Andres, Elizabeth Plater-Zybeck and Jeff Speck. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York: North Point Press, 2000: 95, 137.
- Hall, Suzanne. *City, Street and Citizen*. Routledge, 2012.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House, 1961.
- Kasarda, John. "Comment on Elvin K. Wyley and Daniel J. Hammel's 'Islands of Decay in Seas of Renewal: Housing Policy and the Resurgence of Gentrification.'" *Housing Policy Debate*, Fannie Mae Foundation 10 (4) (1999).
- Maragou, Anna. *Paphos: Myth/Time/Place/People*. Nicosia: Municipality of Paphos, 2003.
- Mittleton-Kelly, E. "A Complexity Approach to Co-creating an Innovative Environment." *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution* 62 (3) (2006): 223-239.
- Neelam C. Poudyal, Donald G. Hodges, Bruce Tonn and Seong-Hoon Cho. "Valuing diversity and spatial pattern of open space plots in urban neighbourhoods." *Forest Policy and Economics* 11 (3) (2009): 194-201.
- Neill, William J. V. *Urban Planning and Cultural Identity*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Soja, Edward. *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso, 1989.
- Sorkin, Michael (ed.). *Variations on a Theme Park*. New York: Noonday, 1992.
- Squires, Gregory. *Urban Sprawl: Causes, Consequences & Policy Responses*. Washington: Urban Institute Press, 2002.
- Whyte, William. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Project for Public Spaces Inc, 2001.

REFERENCES

-
- ¹ Cf. *Open Debate and Exhibition* on ‘The refugee neighbourhoods under threat from the projects of “development” and refurbishment’, organized at the National Technical University of Athens (30-10-2000).
- ² Hadjidemetriou, Katia. *A History of Cyprus* (2nd edition). Nicosia: 2007.
- ³ Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus (2015). “Construction and Housing.” Accessed August 10, 2015. http://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf/industry_construction_62main_en/industry_construction_62main_en?OpenForm&sub=2&sel=2.
- ⁴ Cyprus Property News. “Cyprus property sales hit new record low in 2013.” Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.news.cyprus-property-buyers.com/2014/01/09/cyprus-property-sales-record-low/id=0016577>.
- ⁵ Pashardes, Panos and Savva, Christos S. “Factors Affecting House Prices in Cyprus: 1988-2008.” *Cyprus Economic Policy Review* 3 (2009): 3-25.
- ⁶ Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus (2014). “Table B7: Population enumerated by citizenship, sex, district and urban/rural area.” Accessed August 10, 2015. http://www.cystat.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf/populationcondition_22main_en/populationcondition_22main_en?OpenForm&sub=2&sel=2.

HOUSED by CHOICE HOUSED by FORCE - Homes, Conflicts and Conflicting Interests

Architecture_MPS; University of Cyprus; Cyprus Institute
21—22 January, 2016

⁷ Maher, Timothy and Haas, Ain. "Suburbanizing the City." *Sociological Focus* 20 (4) (1987): 281-294.

⁸ Awan, Nishat, Schneider, Tatjana and Till, Jeremy. *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*. UK: Taylor & Francis, 2011.