Nicosia: Its Space and its d-Visions

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Abstract

The city of Nicosia on the island of Cyprus is presently divided in two, with the Turkish Cypriots living in the north and the Greek Cypriots in the south. The two halves are kept apart by a United Nations controlled buffer zone which can only be crossed at specific points. This paper examines the spatial dimension of the problematic relationship between the two communities as this is manifested in the city of Nicosia and discusses the efforts made to have a common plan for the city so that it can organically function when unified back into one urban entity.

1. Introduction

A relationship relatively less researched is that between the political and the spatial, especially regarding cases which are not yet historical in the sense that they are still unresolved. This is of course due to the problems such an undertaking naturally entails. Not only is the subject sensitive but the gathering of data may be difficult. The latter was actually the reason the initial intention to analyze the spatial characteristics of the crossings from one side to the other in the divided city of Nicosia had to be abandoned; the taking of photographs is forbidden, while the maps available are, for obvious reasons, not updated after the armies of both sides as well as the United Nations Peace Keeping force have all carried out works which modified the area.

Rather than giving up on the topic altogether, the angle through which this is examined is instead changed, allowing for a broader discussion on the divided city of Nicosia. The importance of the spatial dimension as an active ingredient rather than a mere effect in a situation such as this is brought out in Hillier's concept of 'virtual community' and Lefebvre's claim that any revolution cannot succeed if it does not produce its own space. A historical introduction is followed by a discussion regarding the joint efforts to deal with the urban consequences of the political situation.

1.1. A preliminary note from an indigenous ethnographer

In view of the sensitive subject of the paper, it is only ethically as well as scientifically proper to describe my role as an indigenous ethnographer. I am a Greek Cypriot who believes that the two communities, if left alone, can overcome the political obstacles which now keep them apart. It is clear to me that the parties involved, the two communities as well Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom (the three guarantor powers) all made mistakes. Quite naturally, these mistakes were proportional in magnitude to the power each party had regarding the specific aspect the mistake was made. And even though the purpose of this paper is not to discuss the political dimension but to begin to examine the
spatial expression of the changing relationship between the two sides in the capital of the island Nicosia, a deeper investigation of this topic would surely be greatly enhanced by a collaboration with a fellow researcher from the Turkish Cypriot community. Perhaps, the presentation of this first attempt will lead to such a joint effort.

2. The historical background

Nicosia becomes the capital of Cyprus in the 10th C AD during the Byzantine period when due to the raids by the Arabs, the population moved away from the coastal areas. During the Middle Ages, the city becomes the capital of the Lusignan feudal rule (1192-1489). During this time, the city developed into a western medieval metropolis where nobles, merchants and clergy resided. Nicosia remained the capital of the island during the Venetian rule as well (1489-1570). The walls still standing today were built during this period by the famous Venetian fortress engineer Giulio Savorgnano in an effort to protect the city from the Ottoman attacks. The only entry points into the city during this period and the three centuries of the Ottoman rule which followed were the Giuliana Gate, the San Domenico Gate and the Del Proveditore Gate (today known as the Famagusta Gate, Pafos Gate and Kyrenia Gate respectively). These gates would open at sundown and close at sunset.

It was during the British rule and by the end of the 19th C that the moving of the colonial administrative offices outside the walled city triggered the first land division for creating building sites around the core. Bridges linking the old city with these new areas outside were soon opened. The first one was built in 1882 at what is today known as Eleftheria Square. What was gradually created was an important urban north-south axis on which commercial activity naturally flourished.

Nicosia remained the capital of the independent state of Cyprus established in 1960. Unfortunately, problems in the provisions of the new constitution seemed to encourage the segregation rather than the integration of the Greek and Turkish population of the island, creating problems and mistrust between them. By 1963 paramilitary forces in both communities participated in an inter-communal confrontation which then led to the spatial segregation of the two communities. A British initiative to achieve a truce resulted in the creation of the dividing line-the Green Line-in Nicosia which remained as a permanent dividing line between Greeks and Turks, limiting freedom and prohibiting movement. The Turkish Cypriots withdrew into separate geographical areas or enclaves and established their own administration. The United Nations resolution (March 1964) provided that a United Peace Keeping Force should be created and stationed on the island and a UN Mediator appointed for the purpose of promoting a peaceful solution to the problem. The United Nations Force was to control and protect the Green line formed.

In 1974, a coup by the Greek Junta to overthrow President Makarios was followed by a Turkish invasion which resulted in the present division of the island, with the Turkish Cypriots (18% of the population) on the North (38% of the island) and the Greek Cypriots on the South. As the map of Cyprus with the pre-1974 distribution of the Turkish and Greek villages shows (Figure 184), the two communities were not spatially separated before 1974. This was of course even more the case before the formation of the Turkish Cypriot enclaves in 1965 which was the first attempt to give a spatial form to a political problem.

The Green Line (Figure 185) now 185 km in length and of varying width (from a few meters at some points in the walled city of Nicosia, to 5 km in some rural areas) was
Figure 184: The pre-1974 Greek and Turkish villages over the island (source: Hunt, 1990). The dividing line running east to west has been added by the author.

extended east and west, thus dividing the whole island into two.

The most recent attempt to resolve the political deadlock came in the form of “The Annan Plan” which was presented by the Secretary General of the United Nations to the two communities in a referendum in 2004. The Turkish Cypriots voted for the proposed settlement while the Greek Cypriots voted against it.

3. Recent developments

Despite the failure to solve the political problem, an encouraging development is the decision taken on April 23rd 2004 by the Turkish side to open a crossing which allows each community to visit the other side. This was solely a decision of the Turkish side since the Greek side, considering the dividing line not as a border between two countries but as a temporary arrangement, allows free movement for all the Cypriots and visitors who have entered the island from an internationally recognised point of entry. The crossing points thus established are Ledra Palace and Agios Dometios in Nicosia, and Pergamos and Strovilia, both controlled by the British Bases on the island. Apart from diplomatic cars, United Nations vehicles and ambulances, the Ledra Palace is only for pedestrians, while the other crossing points are for vehicular traffic as well. Even before, the Ledra Palace point was actually open to tourists who wished to visit the north.

As one approaches the crossing point from the south, one begins to notice the parked cars on every inch of, legally or not, available ground. This is partly due to the fact that the specific passage is only for pedestrians, but also due to the nearby courthouse. There is no evidence of any commercial activity taking place on this end of the crossing except for the taxi drivers sitting under a tent talking, drinking coffee, or playing backgammon while waiting for the next customer. There is a small sandwich venue and a small coffee shop as well.

The banner warning about the illegal status of the north, a renovated structure housing the municipality of Kyrenia, a town in the north, and the large panels with pictures of killed and missing persons, all reveal a strong need to inform the potential crosser about what has happened. In order to continue the journey, one has to pass between these
enlarged images, photographs turned into mosaics by the action of the sun and the rain on the vinyl reproduction for decades. These serve as a visual curtain which stops the crosser from having any information regarding the spatial, or other, setup beyond this point. On the right, an old house and a temporary structure houses the Greek Cypriot police (Figure 185, point1). It is not required of someone to report to this station in any way when crossing to the north, but those returning to the south need to prove that they are indeed Cypriot citizens, or if not, that they have entered the Republic of Cyprus legally.

On the left of the road that is revealed after one has passed through the described visual block, one sees the Ledra Palace Hotel (Figure 185, point 2) which, as already mentioned, now houses the United Nations Headquarters. This is where many by-communal meetings take place, including many of the talks aiming at a solution to the political situation. Being the tallest building in the area, and placed at the point where the passage bends slightly, it commands and surveys the entire length of the crossing route which gradually reaches the lowest level of the moat and gently rises again, bringing one to the check point on the north (Figure 185, point 3) which conveys the message that this is a border. Interestingly enough, this message is attempted through literal signs but one may observe that the whole setup seems less formal than that experienced a few minutes back on the south side. The natural question in someone’s mind regarding his/her fellow travellers is whether they are Greek or Turkish Cypriots.

While crossing this distance of about three hundred meters, one seems conscious of his/her own body moving through a space meant only for passing and nothing else. The eyes want to examine the scene on the sides of the road, or stop and look more at specific points but there is a feeling of silence and surveillance, a presence. One is here reminded of Lefebvre’s account of how space speaks:

“That space signifies is incontestable. But what it signifies is dos and don’ts - and
this brings us back to power. Power’s message is invariably confused - deliberately so; dissimulation is necessarily part of any message of power. Thus space indeed ‘speaks’ - but it does not tell all. Above all, it prohibits. Its mode of existence, its practical ‘reality’ (including its form) differs radically from the reality (or being-there) of something written, such as a book. Space is at once result and cause, product and producer; it is also a stake, the locus of projects and actions deployed as part of specific strategies, and hence also the object of wagers on the future - wagers which are articulated, if never completely” (Lefebvre, 1991, p.142)

Just before reaching the check point, one passes by a notice board with announcements regarding cultural events from the local Turkish Cypriot population and from Turkey. The check point for entering the north is composed of three buildings with two routes between them. The route between the left and central building is for entering while the other route is for those returning to the south. There are signs declaring the line as the border of the ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’, while two horizontal metal bars do not allow vehicular traffic through.

Unlike its counterpart on the south, there are not many cars parked close to the check point while commercial activity starts immediately. Restaurants, carpet shops, and a car insurance agency all advertise their goods or services to the visitor who gets the feeling that he has suddenly entered into another living urban entity. The first shop encountered is called “the Border Shop”.

Interestingly enough, the Venetian walls which were built to protect the city are now used, at least the moat surrounding them, to keep it divided since the distance between the Turkish and Greek communities is increased by making the crosser go around the walls, going down and up the moat.

There is now talk for the establishment of more crossing points, perhaps one at Astromeritis village and the other at Ledra Street (Figure 186), (Figure 185, point 4) in the heart of the walled city. If the latter does open, then the commercial centres of both halves will be practically reunited, establishing again the north-south axis which runs from the Eleftheria Square in the south to the Kyrenia gate in the north. Such a development would change the spatial and consequently overall relationship between the two communities.

4. In search of a common vision

Even though the war of 1974 totally separated the two communities, the need to continue the construction of a common sewage system demanded a coordinated management and planning for the divided city.

“In 1977, the Mayor of the semi-occupied capital, Mr Lellos Demetriades, with the help of the United Nations Development Programme, came to an understanding with the ‘Representative of the Turkish Cypriot community of occupied Nicosia’, Mr Mustafa Akinci, and for the sake of the correct running and interests of the city, decided to cooperate to install the sewage system. This sector was chosen because installations for the system had already been made in the occupied Nicosia prior to the invasion, while the machinery for its operation was in the government-controlled sector of the city. It was in this way that the first contacts with Turkish Cypriots took place, in meeting at the ‘Ledra Palace’ - once the jewel of Nicosia, now located in no-man’s land (Marangou, 1995, p. 97)”

The creation of the Nicosia Masterplan was an important outcome of the success of this initial collaboration. This is a body that attempts to coordinate the city planning
between the two halves of Nicosia so that it can function as a whole when reunited.

According to the Diagnostic Report presented by the Nicosia Master Plan Team during a workshop held at Ledra Palace in September 2004, despite many efforts, all major indicators of regeneration, such as population and employment show serious decline, the number of vacant housing units and those in poor condition has increased while comparatively few buildings have been restored. Clearly, the main problem to be fought is the division of the city which keeps the two parts separate while stimulating an outward growth away from the Core, with the private sector turning to the suburbs which have become the centres of population and employment growth, diminishing further the sense of centrality and unity. With a predominantly regulatory approach, the planning authority on each side thus produces a separate Local Plan with varying degrees of closeness to the principles and approaches of the Nicosia Master Plan. Consequently, the Report warns that further loss of centrality and opportunities for regeneration create a major risk of further degradation. It goes on to stress that what is thus urgently needed is a comprehensive bi-communal “Vision” and the establishment of a new apparatus for all planning, financial, implementation, management and other government functions necessary for the conservation and welfare of the area.

After exploring alternative “scenarios” (“Social Regeneration”, “Business regeneration”, “Integrated Regeneration or Focus on Multiple Activity”) for the revitalization of the Core of Nicosia, a “Strategy for Urban Heritage-based Regeneration” was selected as the most promising one since it “adopts cultural tourism and education as the ‘prime movers’ to stimulate future residential and commercial activity”. The absence of a “prime mover” was the main reason given for rejecting the “Integrated regeneration- Focus on Multiple Activity” scenario since that would “necessitate a much improved public sector urban management system and vastly increased public resources”. The choice made is justified as follows:

“The Walled City, despite its present problems, is above all a cultural area. Cultural heritage and its physical landmarks are the comparative advantage of the Walled City, and, by proximity, of the Core Area. In many cities cultural landmarks attract visitors and
‘external’ spending power. Linking the rich heritage of Nicosia to cultural ‘special interest’ tourism and the education sector is a Vision for future change with multiple opportunities for sustainable development. This Vision focuses on the outstanding cultural monuments and traditional buildings in the Walled City to attract external sources of demand for the area and its buildings, such as specialized tourism and education. The focus is on turning the history of the Walled City into a sustainable development resource, acting as the ‘prime mover’ for further residential and commercial investment. The outer business core will be a ‘beneficiary area’ whose commercial viability will receive a major boost. The area of the Buffer Zone can offer space for tourism and education facilities and thus ‘gluing the Walled City according to the Nicosia Master Plan vision.” (New Vision for the Core of Nicosia-Summary Report September 2004, p. 12)

Clearly, the selection of the specific vision does not mean that the desired effects of the rejected alternatives will not be pursued as well. Still, focusing on the cultural heritage of the city rather than dealing with the situation in a configurational frame of thinking may lead to problems. After all, “places do not make cities. It is cities that make places.” (Hillier, 1997, p.151) Furthermore, concentrating on specialized tourism or even educational institutions which will presumably be attracted due to the special historic character of the area may be one of the moves but it may be more an effect rather than a “prime mover” as it is hoped it will be. What is first needed is an organic relationship with the rest of the city. For such a result, as Hillier explains, the focus should be on the relationship between space and movement:

‘...socio-economic forces shape the city primarily through the relations between movement and the structure of the urban grid. Well-functioning cities can therefore, it will be suggested, be thought of as ‘movement economies’. By this is meant that it is the reciprocal effects of space and movement on each other (and not, for example, aesthetic or symbolic intentions), and the multiplier effects on both that arise from patterns of land use and building densities, which are themselves influenced by the space-movement relation, that give cities their characteristic structures, and give rise to the sense that everything is working together to create the special kinds of well-being and excitement that we associate with cities at their best.’(Hillier, 1997, p. 152)

Furthermore, space is also the medium which provides the possibility for co-presence and co-awareness, both important for the existence or emergence of what is referred to by Hillier as “virtual community”, the raw material for communities to develop: ‘spatial configuration influences patterns of movement in space, and movement is by far the dominant form of space use. Through its effects on movement, spatial configuration tends naturally to define certain patterns of co-presence and therefore co-awareness amongst the individuals living in and passing through an area. Co-present individuals may not know each other, or even acknowledge each other, but it will be argued that this does not mean to say that co-presence is not a social fact and a social resource. Co-present people are not a community, but they are part of the raw material for community, which may in due course become activated, and can be activated if it becomes necessary. However, even without conversion into interaction, patterns of co-presence are a psychological resource, precisely because co-presence is the primitive form of our awareness of others. Patterns of co-presence and co-awareness are the distinctive product of spatial design, and constitute, it will be argued, the prime constituents of what will be called the ‘virtual community’ (Hillier, 1997, p. 186).

As already commented, each of the scenarios considered by the Nicosia Master Plan group does not have to be seen as excluding the others. Realizing that the spatial con-
figuration of the city is actually the common denominator in all of them helps in getting rid of this conceptual packaging which creates the artificial dilemma of having to choose between them.

It is quite clear that any political or other differences between the two communities were reinforced and exaggerated by spatially separating one from the other. If reconfiguring space can encourage such negative effects, then dealing with it differently may indeed help bring more desired or positive results as well. Irrespective of the politics on each side, what is sought after by both communities is reunification and a peaceful co-existence. With all that has happened, what may be actually needed is some form of joint revolution. According to Lefebvre, any such attempt needs to produce its own space:

“A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space - though its impact need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas.” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 54)

Literature


