

Strategic Development for a Diverse Population in the Urban Core

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Abstract—These This paper looks into frameworks which aim at furthering the discussion of the role of regenerative design practices in a city's historic core and the tool of urban design to achieve urban revitalization on the island of Cyprus. It also examines the region's demographic mix, the effectiveness of its governmental coordination and the strategies of adaptive reuse and strategic investments in older areas with existing infrastructure. The two main prongs of investigation will consider the effect of the existing and proposed changes in the physical infrastructure and fabric of the city, as well as the catalytic effect of sustainable urban design practices. Through this process, the work hopes to integrate the contained potential within the existing historic core and the contributions and participation of the migrant and immigrant populations to the local economy. It also examines ways in which this coupling of factors can bring to the front the positive effects of this combined effort on an otherwise sluggish local redevelopment effort. The data for this study is being collected and organized as part of ongoing urban design and development student workshop efforts in urban planning and design education. The work is presented in graphic form and includes data collected from interviews with study area organizations and the community at large. Planning work is also based on best practices initiated by the staff of the Nicosia Master Plan task force, which coordinates holistic planning efforts for the historic center of the city of Nicosia.

Keywords—Urban Design, Urban Development, Urban Regeneration, Historic Core, Cultural Planning.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Nicosia and the Issue of Cultural Heritage

THE issue of cultural heritage is a controversial one in Cyprus, especially when juxtaposed to the influx of migrant and immigrant communities to the historic core of the capital region. However, once more it is clouded with misconceptions. There is oftentimes noted concern with migrants and immigrants as “. . . carriers of different attitudes, principles and values . . .” who have the potential to “. . . exert influence on social institutions . . .” that seems to be widespread and widely exaggerated [1]. This is probably due to a failure to contextualize the issue within a broader social reality of globalization in its current stage. Moreover, the sensationalism inherent in the reporting of events by the media to an information-saturated society has a lot to do with perceived reality rather than the more influential cultural forces that shape reality.

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The coupling of these two issues – the segmentation caused by physical and societal segmentation juxtaposed to the need to adequately accommodate the influx of migrants and immigrants to Walled City – could however provide a recipe for the revitalization and regeneration of the underutilized and rapidly deteriorating historic core. Add to that the strong wish of the municipality and the central government to infuse new life into it and to provide incentives to the indigenous population to move back into the city and possibilities begin to arise.

To counter this process of abandonment, several recent projects are presented as capitalizing on traditional cultural assets to revive the downtown. The reuse of existing building stock as museums, performing arts centers and theaters but also as in the form of various housing typologies is geared to strengthen the ranks of local residents and to spur economic growth. Unlike the examples from the 1960s, the architecture of more recent adaptive reuse for urban regeneration is designed to reinforce a connection to the city where the buildings often reflect the characteristics of their urban context [2].

Sometimes, however, the proponents of these projects, both abroad and on the island of Cyprus, failed to address the human dimension of the local community and associated culture-led regeneration projects did not always benefit the residents. On the contrary projects created negative physical impacts in these zones in the mid-1980s, which saw an expansion of institutional and multicultural facilities that were integrated neither with the city's cultural plan nor with broader solutions to the urban decline caused by an over-concentration of government activity and land-use [3], in what are in many cases divided cities with a suburban drift occurring in the periphery.

II. NICOSIA'S HISTORIC CORE

Under the auspices of UNDP / UNCHS (Habitat) and within the framework of the Nicosia Master Plan, reports were prepared delving on physical, cultural and socioeconomic aspects of the city. Due to the historical character of the city, the reports emphasize the importance of the Walled City urban fabric and they were designed to accommodate an area scheme for the central area of the capital region, as well as designs for special projects for early implementation on the basis of an investment program [4]. The most severe urban redevelopment problems include physical decay and decline, abandonment due to light to the suburbs, a confusing vehicular traffic pattern causing accessibility problems to the historic core and unsafe pedestrian movement coupled with lack of open green spaces.

Consequently, the Nicosia Master Plan team advocated a series of integrated priority projects to be initiated as the "Walled City Revitalization Policy." As part of this effort the first steps were taken – in the Selimiye Neighborhood improvement project, the Arabahmet Neighborhood improvement project and the Chrysaliniotissa Neighborhood improvement project – to put emphasis on housing stock rehabilitation, the upgrading of community facilities and services, the induction of landscaping and traffic management.

While these projects contribute directly to the revitalization of these old residential neighborhoods they are also geared towards a reintegration with the commercial core of the city [4]. It is to be stressed that these projects must be supported by development controls and the application of a variety of incentives for private development and participation, so that these combined efforts may culminate in establishing a continuous conservation program in which both the public and private sectors will participate. In light of the socio-economic conditions of the walled city it is evident that the conservation policy should be based on an integrated planning approach with emphasis on the social structure of the area, defining its potential to ensure an efficiently productive future for the neighborhoods.

III. ESTABLISHING AN URBAN IDENTITY

Vernacular urban clusters possess unique qualities and a character that results from the intervention of local inhabitants in their natural environments [5]. Spatial observations of vernacular land use that informs social space may allow an increased understanding and explain the apparently haphazard arrangement of building clusters. It may also decipher the spontaneous use that is made of certain spaces especially as they relate to cultural activity and social interaction, such as play areas, meeting areas and other areas of social interactions within the urban cluster.

This has been the result of the various vernacular influences on the local landscape that has been influenced by and has evolved as a result of both natural and cultural factors [6]. The patterns of these clusters with their interconnected social spaces that flow from one open area to another reflect the intimate communal and result is unique spatial conditions whose architectural characteristics enable them and blend and be successfully integrated in the urban fabric of the historic city core.

According to definitions introduced in the deliberations around the concept of critical regionalism, an important aspect of it is the resilience expected against the uniformity and homogenization that may result from universal use of common materials and methods of construction and from common product manufacturing that comes with affordability extended by economies of scale. This often leads to the concept of the universal city unhampered by the local condition [7]. The antidote is a way of planning that encompasses spatial methodologies for urban and architectural design and construction with the capacity to express the uniqueness of the region [8].

The spatial aspect of planning and urban design should support an expression of sociopolitical identity and in the process clarify spatial identity, while also translating and associating any imported cultural influences according to a local and vernacular set of ideals [9]. Distinctive cultural landscapes are characterized by the patterns and components in the physical environment that are governed by the control of the local population. These are often attractive to tourists and are prime nodes of cultural consumption [10]. However, in such instances the concern is that what makes them unique may be subsequently changed both physically and perceptually by tourist activity.

Many cities particularly in Europe now reinterpret their historic fabric as a two pronged strategy that strengthens a new urban economy and as a distinctive cultural amenity and revenue producing tourist attraction. A number of problems characterize these historic cores and Nicosia's historic core is a typical case, is that they are often underutilized, neglected, ran down and oftentimes dangerous even to their traditional residents. This viewpoint has led the political leadership of these cities and their planning professionals to seek new ways to enhance and project the uniqueness of their identity and to utilize the historical references of the physical environment to jumpstart programs that will rehabilitate the urban fabric and expedite urban regeneration.

A first step towards attaining this goal may be to inject some dynamism into the local economy by re-colonizing the historic center with activities and developments in adaptively reused existing urban fabric. Moreover, this prescription may be further accelerated by attracting and hosting projects and events of an international reputation by talented contemporary designers that have the ability to produce iconic cultural landscapes. In this way one may proceed to sensitively integrate and re-stitch old and new building stock that interweaves the vernacular attraction of the past with the dynamic confidence of the present and future.

The planning framework created in such instances may incubate the development and harmonization of new redevelopment philosophies to instigate change and regeneration in the historic core. These regenerative attempts are used as a means to develop consensus and dialogue among the many different actors who collaborate in the holistic engagement towards rehabilitation, regeneration and preservation of historic city cores. They are the result of the adoption of an integrative approach that seeks both physical and socioeconomic transformation via the physical reorganization of key urban clusters and vernacular landscapes.

Moreover, a number of strategic proposals for measures that influence and promote a partnership between public and private actors are seen as emanating from these specifications [11]. In parallel, local plans – or in this case the joint Nicosia Master Plan – may be updated to apply these broader principles in a series of cultural projects that will benefit the historic city while curbing urban decay.

These may include the revitalization of underperforming spaces, the reclamation and integration of corridors linking areas of development within and outside the historic core, etc. These new modes of delivery are based on public-private collaboration and the propagation of high quality design which will transform the built environment as it will also safeguard against oversimplified notion of an unbalanced distribution and apportionment of resources and leadership in the process to the private collaborators whose priorities and cost-benefit frameworks may not be in tune with those of their public partners.

These projects demonstrate the need in contemporary city for urban planning, design and delivery processes that not only structure the evolution of overall urban form but remain flexible enough to support and encourage strategic urban projects at the local scale so that they incorporate value elements of their sites in the process of their redevelopment. In order to leverage the whole process of urban redevelopment and regeneration and to meet the aspirations and concerns of the community, urban projects are advised to have to concentrate on the low fruit amongst their identified key sites. Of equal importance is the concurrent identification of peripheral sites that when developed may be able to relieve the pressure on the historic city center and to create new links between it and the new development sites in the periphery of the historic core. Consequently, the emergence of a reinvigorated urban economy is based on actions that are combined to attract a diverse range of activities and industries that rally to support the underutilized historic core.

IV. IDENTIFYING THE HISTORIC CITY DWELLERS

As indicated in the national labor statistics of Cyprus there is an increasing number of foreign-born participants in the labor market. Currently, around 18% of the known labor force is foreign-born, with most of these workers residing in the Walled City [4] and employed in relatively low-paid sectors – private households, hotels and restaurants, construction – and unlike the local population, they may not always have a strong family network to depend on for support (CY/EMN, 2009). With unemployment expected to increase to over 6% in 2010 due to economic slow-down especially in tourism and construction sectors, the risk of housing exclusion and possible problems of availability, accessibility and quality of housing faced by migrants and immigrants needs to be monitored carefully.

Now, given that the political and economic frameworks are in place to accommodate planning for increased provisions of refurbished and new housing units, it is important to examine the issues of accessibility to these mechanisms and potentials issues of exclusion that may arise. In Cyprus, people from certain social backgrounds and specific vulnerable groups – such as large families, low-income families, people with disabilities and immigrants – are prone to a risk of housing exclusion, which is addressed to some extent through the array of SWS support schemes mentioned above.

Available indicators, however, do not segregate data by nationality, country of birth, or residency status [12]. As such, it is difficult to assess whether the immigrant population is facing a relatively higher risk of housing exclusion due to their vulnerable status in the labor market.

As Cyprus has not traditionally experienced housing exclusion, there are no national or regional regular reporting structures in practice. There is also no evaluation or study carried out regarding the policies addressed to housing exclusion. However, considering the changing demographic composition of the Cypriot population – which impacts upon the traditional reliance on family support structures in society – monitoring and evaluation instruments may need to be developed to pre-empt possible problems of housing exclusion before they begin to occur, especially among vulnerable social groups [12].

V. DEVISING A COMMON LANGUAGE AMONGST STAKEHOLDERS

Ethnic diversity is rising and requires increased attention to diversity in the developing world. Professionals engaged in local planning and face expectations of cultural competency and integration so as to promote more inclusive decision making [13]. This becomes visible in the ways that planners handle the dynamics of power amongst stakeholders. The opportunities and challenges in collective interactions require heightened sensitivity when planners handle disadvantaged areas. Accordingly, the tools developed to facilitate these situations form part also help shield the process of community development and cultural planning from irrelevance (Briggs, 2007) resulting from chaotic communications.

In observed cases of growing economic inequality, one also notes increased social diversity, which focuses attention on public participation and a political process that engages local planning and decision making. So to redefine effective planning, consensus building tactics underscore the role of communicative action [14 & 15] to reduce the loss of activities and that engage the local population [16 & 17]. In fact, renewed efforts target the foundation of local social cohesion or social capital [18] to empower the local community and to increase community capacity. As such, community planning is synonymous with neighborhood planning that is the effort by which residents and others in a spatially defined area, often working in tandem with planning professionals, seek to develop a blueprint for their collective future [19]. This protects their current assets and initiates actions that improve their life quality. Furthermore such planning efforts help establish effective communication between residents and the technical teams engaged in the community planning process [20]. It is important to have and to perceive trustworthy and transparent communication amongst all process participants if one is to ensure long-term sustainability of this effort.

The process of community planning, especially in the last two decades, is therefore commonly suggested as a catalyst for the revitalization of low-income urban neighborhoods and the attainment of a higher quality of life in such neighborhoods, though oftentimes the political leadership and their technical staff are wary of local proposals that may derail the prioritization of other planned projects in the rest of the city.

But these efforts may face some stumbling blocks [20] that arise from the difficulty in defining the proper communication parameters that help frame the comprehensive aims of the community. In this case, it is important for the planning team to be able to decode community aspirations and to encode their own proposals in a way which is clearly understood by the community and provides them with useful feedback. Otherwise the problem is that miscommunication may lead to different mental pictures once the dialogue begins during the visioning stage that may alienate the stakeholders and threaten a hard-earned trust.

Given the above, it is imperative that planners establish an effective language for exchanging ideas and work collaboratively with the community so as to promote valuable exchange of ideas and to nurture the attainment of collective knowledge. They will also want to safeguard project objectivity and respect diverse views, while steering discussion in ways that inform their work and bring to the surface unstated intentions and agendas. Assumed factual exchange in community planning and policymaking is hard to achieve and planners need to work on increasing their awareness of real needs and seeing their way through the layered agendas of the stakeholders. Community encounters may be organized along multiple dimensions stressing social, cultural and economic issues as well as spatial aspects relating to urban design. Certain tools, such as codes and scripts, may be of help in such instances [19]. Scripts may be conventions or expectations that the various stakeholders introduce to the communication framework, while codes pertain to use of verbal and/or body language in a particular social setting that may be a product of ethnic, fiscal or social background or of any other social traits that affect the aforementioned scripts and codes and may lead to unexpected confusion. On the other hand, in homogeneous settings it is less likely that scripts and codes become confused in similar circumstances. Discussions about acceptable conventions become part of the normalization that groups do preliminary to collaborating [21] or the focus that is called for in mutual sense making [22].

If the planning team and the community fail to engage in a range of cultural assumptions and to ask clarification questions, the communication framework may become uncomfortable and even combative [23]. Similarly, if these scripts and codes, though they may be common, remain obscure and at times even invisible to the process participants then all sides may read hostile intentions during deliberation of the issues at hand [24]. Where decoding is concerned in defining meaning to various layers of information, it is critical to pause and ensure that all concerned are on the same page. These oftentimes unrecognized dynamics are important for reasons of effectiveness and legitimacy of the planning process, while insufficient attention to the links among communication, culture and power reinforces the stereotype that policy makers and their technical staff work top down in diagnosing social problems. Rather, one should disseminate communication scripts and codes in power relations, especially in multi cultural settings, for responding with tools that promote collective learning [25] and due consideration needs to be extended to local knowledge, values and culture.

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

From the point of view of a practicing urban designer and urban design instructor the tradition of relating planning to the urban product and its historical morphology is a powerful and useful one in education and training. Within this planning context, culture has the opportunity to be an important organizing idea and framework and the technical planning team should operate in an interdisciplinary environment aiming to coordinate and integrate inputs across the range of diverse stakeholders involved [26]. Similarly, the strategic planning and marketing for cultural consumption of these major heritage sites has significant implications for the utilization and perception of the built environment not only as part of the cultural heritage of entity, but also as a destination where marketing and financial gains are cumulative.

In developing a practical and accessible approach to planning and designing for the cultural dimension for the benefit of planning students, educators practitioners Young, referencing Lefebvre's ontological categories [27], developed a planning methodology with related categories of cultural expressionism that aim at translating fairly abstract concepts into everyday readings with direct applicability to practical planning. These are defined as Geography and the Environment, History and Intangible Heritage and Society and Ways-of-Life [26]. He notes that this multiplicity of understanding and the richness of its crossovers and thematic interweaving may benefit the practice of planning for culture and may offer the possibility of organizing and promoting relevant themes surrounding hybrid forms of cultural diversity, which in turn help develop an inherent connectivity.

Following a perspective such as this, culturally oriented actions for urban regeneration that unlock synergies and jumpstart cross-fertilization amongst dynamic processes within the planning framework can begin, regardless of geographical scale or social or economic sector. And this at a time when the culture based differentiation amongst regions greatly affects their spatial relevance, their competitiveness and their socioeconomic survivability. Within this context an important position is also maintained by the tourism dimension, it being the world's biggest industry and consequently a factor not to be underestimated. Thus, beyond their potential for heightened cultural and financial gains, important heritage sites demonstrate an opportunity for greater situational awareness, mutual connectivity and as a nexus for the creative society to foster innovation and advancement while respecting and reinvigorating their historic urban stock.

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