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Double Bordering of the Nicosia Historic Centre: Contested Heritage, Divisions, and Attachments of the Walled City¹

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Abstract

Nicosia is a place of double bordering where the Venetian wall surrounds the old city and simultaneously the Green Line cuts through its historical nucleus and separates it into two distinct administrative parts, a north and a south one. Authorities in the Greek Cypriot (GC) and Turkish Cypriot (TC) communities exercise policies that use the division of the city in order to construct and promote ethnocentric narratives. Similarly, heritage management and use are driven by ethnocentric political aims, based on a national heritage perception framework that fortifies and regulates national identity. Ethnocentric heritage discourse is challenged by a universalist framework that tries to foster reconciliation through bicultural projects. Although this framework produces significant collaborative heritage projects, it is criticised for promoting externally imposed universalism. Alternatively, recent heritage theory and local practice in the historic centre of Nicosia stress the significance of inclusive approaches to heritage that would further encourage the involvement of local heritage communities, increase the sense of heritage ownership, involve underrepresented communities, and open a dialogue on dissonant heritage.

Keywords: Nicosia, heritage management and use, heritage discourse, bordering, Cyprus conflict.

Introduction

Nicosia is one of the many walled cities in the Mediterranean. Its existing fortifications, built in 1567-1570, is a star-shaped, circular wall of 5 kilometres perimeter (Petridou, 1998), it includes 11 pentagonal-shaped bastions, 3 gates, a 80-metres wide moat (Republic of Cyprus, 2007) and encloses the historic city centre. In December 1963 the armed conflict between the TCs and GCs resulted in the division of Nicosia by a Buffer Zone/Green Line, a dividing line running across the walled city. Consequently, the Green Line expanded and demarcated 6 enclaves inhabited by TCs between intercommunal violence of 1963–64 and 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus. The Buffer Zone extended after the August 1974 Turkish invasion. Currently, it stretches 180 kilometres from the east to the west of the island. The zone cuts through the centre of Nicosia, separating the city into two sections by an interposing demilitarised space. Most of the Nicosia Buffer Zone consists of crumbling, abandoned buildings, growing flora and fauna, and metal gates, concrete blocks, and barbed wire deadends. Oil drums, sandbags, and UN observation towers complete the picture of a dead zone.

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Overall, Nicosia is a space which has historically experienced bordering practices (a barbed wire fence put between the Greek and Turkish Quarters in 1956 preceded the Green Line) (Military Histories - the First Demarcation Line, n.d.).

The Double Delineation/Bordering of Nicosia

Given the above, in Nicosia a double border occurs where the city is delineated, on the one hand by its Venetian fortification, and on the other by the Green Line. The former poses challenges similar to the ones faced by all walled cities regarding balancing preservation with modern infrastructure, integration of historical structures into contemporary urban landscape, and urban growth and expansion. The latter is an impediment to the continuity of the city in function and development. First, the Green Line keeps the GC and TC (and other Cypriot) communities of Nicosia apart. It splits the town into two separate urban parts, which have been developing independently of each other, thus causing the transformation of the city's structure and the disintegration of its entirety. Sociopolitical conditions and suburbanisation have negative effects on economic and living conditions. The existence of the Buffer Zone, which runs through the middle of the city and its historic centre, has undermined its centrality and turned it into a “frontier” town (Petridou, 1998).

As a result of the city's division, “place” is officially constructed on the two sides of Nicosia in line with the political objectives of the Cyprus conflict adversaries. In a way, the historical centre of Nicosia is the place which joins together and at the same time divides presumed clear divisions such as Greeks and Turks, Christians and Muslims, East and West, civilisation and barbarism and all other totalising, binary clichés which often accompany such formulations (Papadakis, 1998). Moreover, both GCs and TCs exercise policies that utilise the division in order to promote ethnocentric narratives. A typical example is the use of maps. Based on Benedict Anderson's argument on the imposition of control through three institutions of power the census, the map and the museum (Anderson 1991), GC and TC Cypriot communities fling themselves in a contest of territorial ownership which is reflected in the reproductions and revisions of maps, revealing through, selective depictions and alterations, the dominant narratives proposed by each community (Zesimou, 1998). Furthermore, the existence of two National Struggle Museums (a GC and a TC) in divided Nicosia reflects the difference of Greek and Turkish nationalisms, and the similarity of the historical representation of the past as a continuous national struggle (Papadakis, 1994) and a narrative of victimisation of the own community (Farmaki and Antoniou, 2017).

Ethnocentric Heritage Discourse and Use

Heritage management and use connected to the division of the city, is based on a national heritage perception framework that is called the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), as introduced by the Australian archaeologist Laurajane Smith (Smith 2006). AHD focuses on material objects, sites, places, and landscapes that the group must protect in order to be bequeathed to future generations in order to educate them and forge a sense of common identity based on a common past (Smith 2009). This discourse regulates and legitimates historical and cultural narratives in maintaining or negotiating certain societal values and hierarchies (Smith 2012). Thus, the concept of heritage and the ways it is understood constitute a means of fortifying and regulating national identity. National consensus in the understanding of history is reinforced and symbolised by material objects, places, and buildings. The AHD not only stresses national but also so-called universal values of heritage that often obscure its ethnocentrism and downplay the local and other diverse expressions of human historical and social experiences (Smith and Waterton 2012).

Following the division, the management of the urban heritage of Nicosia is realised through a dual approach between the GC and TC municipalities. Duality is manifested in the historic built environment of the city, which in turn affects public engagement and perception (Pieri, 2023). Both communities instrumentalise heritage in order to legitimise claims and support policies concerning the Cyprus Issue (Pasamitros, 2022; 2024). According to Pieri (2023) a very tangible example is the buffer zone boundaries used by the GCs (south) and TCs (north). In the south, temporary barriers (barrels) are accompanied by national and religious symbols and surrounded by ongoing facade restorations. In the north, permanent barriers (concrete walls) disrupt streets. The result reflects antagonistic nationalisms and aspirations of temporality and perpetuity respectively.

The question of what is considered heritage and what is worth preserving and promoting varies dramatically between the two communities (Stylianou-Lambert and Bounia 2016). In the south, cultural heritage management focuses on the GC identity and narrative, highlighting the Hellenistic and Christian periods. GC authorities prioritise the restoration and preservation of Greek Orthodox and Byzantine sites in Nicosia, churches, monasteries, and other historical buildings that reflect GC identity and claims of historical continuity. such as Agios Ioannis Cathedral, Panagia Chrysaliotissa church, the Archbishop's Palace, and Faneromeni church. In the north, cultural heritage management reflects TC nationalist narratives by emphasising the Ottoman and Islamic history of the island. TC authorities focus on preserving sites that reflect Turkish and Ottoman heritage (mosques, baths) and other buildings significant to the TC community such as Selimiye Mosque, Büyük Han, Dervish Pasha Mansion, Arabahmet Mosque, and Kumarcilar Han.

Contestation regarding heritage in Nicosia revolves around memory and oblivion. Daily life is marked by concrete and symbolic signs of what does or does not belong to GC or TC space. The city centre is full of symbols of conflict that demarcate division, and in turn demarcate the conflict in the imagination (Bakshi, 2012). The urban landscape is a complex historical space that hosts both the political issue of division and the memory of a shared past (Bakirtzis, 2017). Population displacement and interception of free movement has disrupted the relationship between place and memory. Efforts towards oblivion are supported by official concealment of common heritage or shared accomplishments of the communities.

Heritage management in Nicosia is complicated for 3 main reasons: recognition/non-recognition, detachment in management, and physical division. The north part of the island remains internationally unrecognised, thus contributing to the economic decline of the TCs (Balderstone 2007). The 2 municipalities address heritage management independently from each complicating project coordination. Lastly, the Buffer Zone runs through the heart of the historic urban core of Nicosia, cutting through neighbourhoods thus interrupting the functional continuity of streets, resulting in the “mirroring” of activities on both sides. This “mirroring” demonstrates the fragmentation and abrupt interruption of the city’s-built environment and institutions responsible for its development (Pieri, 2017).

Certain neighbourhoods are subject to bicultural restoration and others remain neglected. For example, the Arab Ahmet, the former Armenian neighbourhood, is now controlled by the Nicosia Turkish Municipality and is inhabited by low-income immigrants. The absence of representation of a distinct Armenian memory within the GC ethnocentric heritage use uncontestedly leaves it to identity resignification and heritage reuse by the TC community through the prism of the Ottoman era. Another example is Ledra Palace Hotel which is located inside the Buffer Zone and constitutes an architectural heritage landmark signifying both division and rapprochement. Once a glamorous hotel, it hosted the UN peacekeeping forces, has held bicultural and conflict resolution meetings and carries the heavy legacy of the Ledra Palace battle and the hopeful existence of the homonymous crossing since 2003 (Hatay, 2017; Heraclidou & Stylianou-Lambert, 2023).

Universalist Heritage Discourse and Use

In contrast to the AHD, the universalist heritage framework is based on the concept of the “Outstanding Universal Value”⁴. The universal significance of heritage is connected to the inscription

⁴ According to the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention:

of heritage elements by national authorities of member states in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In the universalist framework, heritage is perceived as a means for intergroup reconciliation. This view is evident in the strategies of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) active in the field. This framework is tied to the notion that certain aspects of heritage are seen and practised as world heritage without necessarily being decoupled from local, national, or ethnic understandings (Daugbjerg & Fibiger 2011). In Cyprus, the universalist heritage framework which strives to preserve cultural heritage and promote intercommunal cooperation is promoted and supported by the United Nations (UN), the EU, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and other intergovernmental, international, and non-governmental actors.

The most prominent bicultural action for the preservation and management of the heritage is the Nicosia Master Plan (NMP). The NMP was the first bicultural cooperation project led by the two mayors of Nicosia, and was planned and implemented by GC and TC professionals (Europa Nostra, 2019). Its aim was to deal with the planning challenges of a divided city. The NMP established an interdisciplinary, bicultural team of scientists supported by UN experts (Municipality of Nicosia, n.d.) and was based on the agreement that the historic centre constitutes common heritage for all communities of Nicosia. In the context of the NMP, several urban and infrastructural upgrading was conducted in both sides of the walled city through the collaboration between technical teams (UNDP, 2013). Despite the challenges, the plan achieved the improvement of the urban environment on both sides. Its legacy is a framework that continues to influence urban development in Nicosia. Further efforts to enhance public spaces, restore buildings, and improve infrastructure continue to be influenced by the NMP guidelines and its spirit still drives joint projects in terms of bicultural cooperation.

Inclusive Heritage Discourse and Use

This brief argues that heritage management and use of the historic centre and the walled city is in need of alternative, out-of-the-box perceptions and practices. In Nicosia, where people are subject to constant bombardment with nationalist narratives (ethnocentric discourse) and at the same time there is an overabundance of reconciliation activities (universalist framework) there is a need for a different heritage discourse which would be open-ended and inclusive. The concept of the Inclusive Heritage Discourse (IHD) as outlined by Višnja Kisić might be appropriate.

“Outstanding Universal Value means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole.” (UNESCO, 2019, para. 49).

The IHD builds upon the Faro Convention and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and aims to transcend the limitations and shortcomings within these conventions (Wollentz, 2020). It is based on the argument that although recent frameworks hold that they promote reconciliation through heritage, their assertion is devoid of meaning with little substantial contribution to how heritage is managed (Kisić 2016). Moreover, the IHD challenges the approach where experts determine the significance of heritage (top-down) and acknowledges other heritage stakeholders and communities (bottom-up) with a focus on the perspectives of locals who live with heritage in their everyday life (heritage communities) (Wollentz, 2020). More importantly, there is a differentiation in perception and approach. Unlike the AHD which is based on a positivist and universalist paradigm and its policy approach is democratisation of culture, the IHD is articulated on the constructivist and pluralist paradigm, representing cultural democracy as a policy approach. Also, in contrast to the AHD which sees heritage as static, consisting of material remains with innate value, the IHD perceives heritage as the dynamic elements of the past, (re)constructed for present purposes. Therefore, its value is extrinsic and instrumental for numerous identity-based, political, economic, social and cultural goals (Kisić 2016).

An example that could constitute the basis for such heritage work is the Home for Cooperation (H4C), a community centre located in the Ledra Palace area. It was established in 2011 by the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, is funded by the European Economic Area Grants and acts “as a bridge-builder between separated communities, memories and visions through its physical presence and its peacebuilding programs benefiting from the transformative power of arts and culture.” (About Us – Home for Cooperation, n.d.) The H4C, through its programmes and projects, supports a transformative approach which touches issues of intangible culture, heritage, memory, and identity.

Conclusions

Arguably, contemporary global trends influence Nicosia with increased involvement of the public in the field, appropriation of heritage by communities, acceptance of heritage as public commodity (Araoz 2011), decentralisation of heritage-making processes from the experts to multiple stakeholders, and involvement of more disciplines in the study, promotion, and management of heritage (Siandou, 2018). However, it is also important to address heritage dissonance. The IHD offers the framework to acknowledge dissonance and recognise the possibility for different voicing, create the space to confront different perspectives and articulate diverse meanings, try to understand them, reconsider current positions and possibly construct new outputs (Kisić, 2016).

In terms of heritage vis-à-vis conflict the IHD could emphasise equitable recognition and support of diverse cultural expressions. Given that Nicosia has been subject to ethnocentric and universalist interventions based on a bicultural logic, local involvement and ownership of communities should create platforms for underrepresented groups including all officially recognised communities; Maronites, Armenians, and Latins and the unrecognised Kurbet community and their heritage in Nicosia. When it comes to peace-through-heritage work, the conflict transformation approach would be more purposeful, sustainable, and compatible with the IHD than externally driven reconciliation practices.

In brief, cultural heritage management and use in the historic centre/walled city of Nicosia shows that:

- (1) GC and TC communities in Nicosia use heritage to feed and perpetuate ethnocentric narratives that promote in-group unity and sustain bicultural division and conflict.
- (2) Intergovernmental, non-governmental, and international organisations support heritage and heritage-related projects that on the one hand, promote bicultural reconciliation and joint heritage preservation but on the other, apply externally imposed practices that neglect the active involvement of heritage communities and acquisition of local ownership.
- (3) Most of heritage and heritage-related activities in Nicosia are bicultural and as such perpetuate the dichotomous logic and underplay alter groups and communities.
- (4) Nicosia historic centre heritage suffers from double bordering and even in the cases where it is preserved and (re)used, the division of the city overshadows heritage efforts.

Current theory and practice suggest that in order to promote sustainable heritage management and heritage use vis-à-vis conflict transformation are to:

- (A) Incorporate the IHD in order to develop inclusive approaches for heritage communities and stakeholders and foster efforts that bring together separated communities in terms of equity (like for example the H4C).
- (B) Utilise the heritage of the common past of the people of Nicosia instead of nationally authorised discourse of separation and strife.
- (C) Create platforms and activities that include underrepresented groups and communities and their heritage (including Maronites, Armenians, Latins and Kurbets) in order to transcend the dichotomous concept of biculturalism towards a logic of Cypriotness.

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