

Divided Nicosia's Walled City - A Shell of Memory

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Abstract : This essay explores the nature of memory in divided Nicosia and its expression in urban space. It focuses on the old city, contained within 16th century Venetian Walls and divided by the United Nations Buffer Zone, as a symbolic location in the Cypriot imagination, and as a prime example of the manner in which the Cyprus Conflict is remembered and forgotten. It investigates the way in which the old city is used, on both sides of the divide, as a symbol to represent both the conflict as well as the unity of the nation(s). This paper argues that the walled city has become a *shell of memory*, and seeks to question the manner in which its location in the imagination, as it is remembered from the outside, is affected by changes that occur inside of this place; a space dense with personal manifestations of memory and with the lived experience of division.

The capital of Cyprus like the island itself has been divided since 1974. Dissent and intercommunal violence between the two main ethnic groups, the Turkish Cypriots in the north and the Greek Cypriots in the South, began in the 1950s, and by 1974 they were divided by the United Nations Buffer Zone, which runs through the heart of the city. This line of division neatly bisects the perfect geometry of the city's 16th century Venetian Walls, and the historic center that they define. Many refugees had to leave their homes and move either north or south of the new border. From 1974 until the checkpoints first opened in 2003, people were unable to cross over to the other side; their old ways of life and the neighbourhoods that housed them suddenly inaccessible. Their home city of Nicosia now transformed into the Turkish Cypriot *Lefkoşa* or Greek Cypriot *Lefkosia*. This inability to access their ancestral lands has resulted in the intensification of many aspects of memory related to this land including yearning, nostalgia, remembrance, and imagination. Over the last several decades this disconnection has resulted in the development of memories of the united city that once was, and imagined constructions of the lost part of the city, on the other side of a border that was inviolable. The fact that Nicosia is now the capital city of two newly born nations, which use the space of the city to assert their nationhood through symbols and representations, results in a condition where the new official histories, legends, and myths of the nation find expression in the urban fabric.

Cypriots have memories of many aspects of the conflict - of people, of objects, of identities - but memories about place are especially potent. Places and cities offer a stable and concrete armature upon which memories are emplaced. In the case of Nicosia, the imaginings of the city, of the unbroken Venetian Walls and the Buffer Zone, offer an image of unity and division that passes easily into the imagination. Places in their materiality can represent that which has been lost; a former homeland, a peaceful past, a way of life that is gone forever. The link between memory and place is a strong

one, and this link is ever more fortified in the context of divided cities. The divided city presents a physical border, a border thicker than an imaginary line in space, where the two sides are able to confront one another with their own representations and assert their national imaginings through symbols in the landscape. (*see figures 1-2*)

The Walled City

The walls that define the historic core are an excellent example of Renaissance military architecture, built by the Venetian rulers in 1567. This massive stone structure, consisting of eleven heart-shaped bastions surrounded by a moat, has been neatly divided in two, with five bastions falling in the north, five in the south, and one that has been incorporated into the Buffer Zone. Once contained entirely within these walls, the city of Nicosia now sprawls with suburbs that seep into Cyprus' Mesaoria plain. After the Venetians were overthrown by the Ottomans in 1571, the city remained ensconced within, with the newly settled Turkish population generally living north of the old riverbed, and the Greek population settling into the south. With the arrival of the British in 1878, the development of the city began to extend outside as the Venetian walls began to be punctured, with new openings to link the new city to the old. Nicosia remained largely concentrated within the walls until the process of suburbanization led to the development of new areas outside of the city starting in the 1950s.¹ (*see figures 3-4*)

With the building of the Venetian Walls in 1567 the city of Nicosia was based on an ideal form, a geometrical abstraction, but division distorted its natural geometries and the center became instead two peripheries, and the periphery splintered off into several fragmented centers. The urban form of the city today, the uses and residents in the walled city, are the result of this dramatic rupture. (*see figures 5-6*) The division of the city and concerns about security served to add fuel to the fire of suburbanization as Cypriots to the north and the south left the old city. While Ledra Street, the main north-south commercial artery in the walled city, is well used, the more popular neighborhoods are in the new parts of the city, and few residents have been enticed to move back into the old city despite extensive rehabilitation of several neighborhoods.² In fact, the old city is populated mostly by migrants, with 80% of the population in the north coming from Turkey, while in the south the population is 55% migrants.³

While the Cyprus Problem is a complex one, involving the Cypriots as well as international actors such as Greece, Turkey, and the United Nations, many aspects of

¹ Attalides, 1981

² The recent rise in property values in old Lefkosia suggest that this is changing, with the walled city increasing in popularity.

³ UNOPS, 2004

this conflict have become encapsulated into a very small space - the three-mile circumference of Nicosia's walled city. Historically the Ottoman Turks and Greeks shared this space, living in separate neighborhoods yet coming together at the seam line of the city - a space of cooperation which ironically enough has now been incorporated into the Buffer Zone, becoming a line of division. As Nicosia is the capital city of two peoples, divided through its historic center by a swath of inaccessible land, the use of space in this fractured heart has incredible resonance and is politically and symbolically loaded. In fact it is only the antiquated Venetian Walls, neither Ottoman nor Hellenic in origin, that both sides have been able to agree upon as common built heritage.

The Venetian Walls appear to be universally recognized as the symbol of the unified city, always rendered as an inviolable whole, which is how they appear in *both* municipality's logos. In the north Lefkoşa's logo consists of the Venetian Walls encircling a segment of a Mevlevi tekke⁴, a symbol of Nicosia's Ottoman past. 1958, the date of the official founding of the separate Lefkoşa municipality, is written below the tekke. This logo contains an ethnic and religious symbol, yet ironically houses them within the unbroken city walls, which are themselves the symbol of the unified city. Lefkosia's logo again shows the Venetian walls, but this time the center is occupied by a dove, said to represent a desire for peace and reunification. The municipality's website exhibits the words "The Last Divided Capital in Europe" below this logo - again using the symbol of the unified city.⁵ The image of the walls is to be seen everywhere - in a number of logos for organizations and clubs, promotional literature, and even in advertising campaigns. (*see figures 7-14*)

The harnessing of cultural identity in order to foster loyalty to the national community or state has been well researched and documented in many countries such as the US, UK, France, and Japan.⁶ In particular Rudy Koshar has traced how the formation of a German national identity in the late 1800s was nourished by the sale and circulation of images of historic sites in the form of photographs, mugs, and playing cards. The creation of this common language of historical imagery was intended to unite "Germans" from different backgrounds to their Kaiser and to each other.⁷ Neil Leach has discussed the role of buildings as "the vehicle through which the fantasy structure of the homeland is represented," where the nation symbolically projects itself onto a screen embodied in the environment, and then sees itself reflected back in this environment.⁸ However, in

⁴ A tekke is a gathering place for members of a Sufi brotherhood known as the Mevlevi order.

⁵ See Papdakis (2006, p.3.) for a more detailed discussion of these municipal logos as well as of other nationalist symbols in the city.

⁶ Koshar, 2005; Kammen, 1991

⁷ Koshar, 2005 p.25.

⁸ Leach, 2002 p.88.

the case of Nicosia the same physical embodiment of cultural identity, the cultural heritage of the walls, is being appropriated by two different nations. The use of the walls in the logos of both municipalities begins to raise some interesting questions about the nature of memory in divided cities.

A Shell of Memory

It is not surprising that the position of the Venetian walls as probably the most important historic monument in Cyprus has been maintained. Historically city walls have always provided a space of transition and mediation where the city connected out to the world beyond. Rather than being rendered as solid impassable objects that keep the world out, they were created as permeable entities that allow movement, while at the same time symbolically structuring urban life.⁹

Nicosia's Venetian Walls form a perfect circle punctuated by regular bastions, a star shaped Venetian fortress in the model of that exemplified in the nine-pointed star built at Palmanova. This city model was implanted in the Eastern Mediterranean¹⁰ when the threat of Ottoman invasion became imminent, ironically falling to those very forces only three years after their completion.¹¹ In this type of ideal city, the walls - which define an ideal form - have another symbolism as well. "Under the influence of this new Renaissance aesthetic, the architect-philosophers turned their backs on the formless, haphazard pile of the medieval city, grown in depth with the accumulation of refuse and in breadth with the expansion of trade, to embrace a city-state ideal *all'antica*, in which one of the fundamental geometrical shapes embedded in man's consciousness was given supreme example - the mystic circle."¹² At Nicosia, the Venetians constructed their perduring walls around a living town, in existence since pre-Roman times – creating a new shell to protect and contain the existing town center. There is an interesting tension, in existence since the conception of the walls, between the container and that which is contained; between the planned and the informal. Thinking of the Venetian Walls then as a *shell* provides a useful metaphor with which to examine the containment and expression of urban memory in divided Nicosia.

The unique topography of Nicosia's city center, contained within this shell, contributes to its iconic position in memory. Originally a structure of fortification and protection, these walls now serve to isolate and divide the center from the rest of the city. The moat, now

⁹ Pepper, 2000; Pullan, 2004

¹⁰ See Rosenau (1959) chapter three for a discussion of the development of the Renaissance ideal city, especially the influence of Leone Battista Alberti and Filarete.

¹¹ Coldstream, 1993; Perbellini, 1994.

¹² Manuel & Manuel, 1979 p.161.

taken over by a winding border of parks and parking lots, again separates the center. (See figures 15-16) This dense and thick mat of memory that is the old city is encircled by the walls, which act as a container, holding a range of memories in this one particular place. It has become the default location for memories that people can choose not to deal with, giving form to that which is invisible in other parts of the city. Here the ignored, the uncomfortable, and the forgotten find expression.

It bears emphasizing that memory is largely informed by forgetting. The two have long been associated, from Freud's discussion of the involuntary yet purposive forgetting of early childhood memories to Nietzsche's notion of "active forgetfulness," instituted in order to avoid remembrances that would be painful. Like the ancient Greek mythical pair of Mnemosyne and Lesmosyne, these two processes *require* each other.¹³ Opposite yet interdependent, this fulcrum of memory that is the walled city is for many Cypriots a complete void. The old city is populated mainly by foreigners, and many Cypriots rarely venture there. Their memories are informed by the iconic location of the imagery of the broken circle of the walls; it is recognized as symbolically important, yet they do not participate in the lived experience of the division of the city - largely unconnected to the reality of the divide outside of their suburban context.¹⁴ We are reminded of the fact that memory is divided in many ways. There is not only the division of official memory between the north and the south, but also the division of the memory of the city as a symbolic space as compared to the lived memory of division that is created by being physically aware through the senses. This raises some interesting questions in relation to Nicosia's walled city and its settlement by people without memory of the conflict. Is it possible to change memory from the inside - or does it only matter how the walled city is remembered from the *outside*, as a symbol? Is the nature of this symbol changing, and do these changes in meaning leak out from the shell and into the wider Cypriot imagination?

For Freud, who was interested not only in what memories reveal but also in what they hide, *screen memory* operates as a substitute for memories that are too difficult or disturbing to recall. He even goes as far as to relate this concept to the reconstruction of a nation's past; comparing the writing of history to childhood *screen memories*.¹⁵ Marita Sturken applies this to a discussion of cultural memory, which she sees as being

¹³ Casey, 1997 pp.7-12.

¹⁴ The opening of the Lokmaci Crossing at Ledra Street has made an impact on Cypriot's use of the old city. It must be noted that while 57% of Greek Cypriots said that they visit the old city more frequently since the opening, only 34% of Turkish Cypriots reported the same. (Jacobson et al., 2009 p.17.) There is much more ambiguity on the part of the Turkish Cypriots who feel that the old city is being "colonized" by "settlers" from Turkey. See Bryant & Hatay (2008) for a discussion of Turkish Cypriots reluctance to live in the old city while at the same time nurturing a deep nostalgia for it.

¹⁵ Leach, 200 p.86.

“produced through representation – in contemporary culture, often through photographic images, cinema, and television. These mnemonic aids are also screens, actively blocking out other memories that are difficult to represent.”¹⁶ There is an interesting parallel here between the “screen” and the “shell.” The wall, as the symbol of the whole city, also acts as a screen memory. It is the image of the walls that is remembered, while the shell contains that which remains forgotten.¹⁷

The City as Monument

The Venetian Walls have been appropriated as arguably the most salient symbol of the cultural heritage of Nicosia, if not Cyprus. What is less obvious is that the entire walled city has become the most significant *monument* of the Cyprus conflict, containing images and symbols that modulate memory of the continuing conflict. (see figure 17) First stated explicitly by John Ruskin, cities have long been thought of as monuments; though not intentionally built for this purpose, capable of engaging with and containing living memory, rooted in time and space.¹⁸ The walled city is a space that is both a shell of memory as well as a void, or a screen for forgetting. It is necessary to consider for a moment the relationship between memory and commemoration, examining the walled city within the framework of the *monument*, in order to then come back around to the issue of urban memory in a divided context.

Much of the recent scholarship on monuments and memorials has been critical of their capacity to displace remembrance and enable forgetting. According to Young, “once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden.”¹⁹ Similar arguments are made by several other contemporary scholars, but perhaps the most vociferous critics of monuments are Pierre Nora and Paul Ricoeur. For Nora, *lieux de memoire*²⁰, realms of memory, including but not limited to commemorative sites, serve to freeze memory and create something that is fixed and static in place of changeable and unstable memory; “...the most fundamental purpose of the *lieux de memoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to

¹⁶ Sturken, 1997 p.8.

¹⁷ This notion of mass forgetting has been dealt with by many scholars. Freud posited that there is such a thing as “cultural forgetting” and “cultural repression.” (Olick, 2008). Ernst Renan’s often quoted work deals with the relationship between forgetting and nation building; “the essence of a nation is that its people have a great deal in common, and also that they have forgotten a great deal.” (1990, p.11.)

¹⁸ Choay, 2001 p.121.

¹⁹ Young, 1993 p.5.

²⁰ The 1993 *le grande robert* dictionary has defined *lieux de memoire* as “a meaningful entity of a real or imagined kind, which has become a symbolic element of a given community as a result of human will of the effect of time.”

establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial...”²¹ Ricouer is also particularly hostile to the “evil of patrimonialization.”²² Sarah Farmer’s study of the manner in which the Nazi massacre of the French town of Oradour-sur-Glane is remembered and commemorated goes a long way towards illustrating the “inherent impossibility of arresting time and memory,” in a monument.²³ It is this static encasing of memory that continues to be problematic.

There is no major intentional monument to the Cyprus conflict, rather, this position is occupied by the walled city which is simultaneously the Monument of the Unified city and the Monument of the Divided City. At the same time it’s form has become the symbolic representation of Lefkoşa and Lefkosia, used even as a national symbol for the two republics. Cypriots use this symbol to identify with their past and with the ongoing conflict. Nicosia’s Venetian Walls have become a *shell of memory*, and like a shell can be either empty or full, containing memories while at the same time embracing forgetfulness. How does the notion of the Monument of the Walled City change as this dense, alive, thick, and mutable city changes internally? How does this change the symbolic placement of the Monument? What is the potential of this monument as a space in which to confront and process memories of cooperation and conflict, both as an iconic symbol of the imagination, as well as the lived experience of users of the walled city?

²¹ Nora, 1989 p.19.

²² Ricouer, 2004 p.406.

²³ Farmer, 2000. The 642 residents of this village were murdered by the Nazis in 1944, and soon thereafter the empty ruins of the town were designated as an historic monument and a new town was built nearby for the eighty odd residents who survived the events of that day. The ruins of Oradour were encircled by a low wall which held the remaining shells of the burnt out and bullet-shredded buildings and rusting cars which were left there as a memorial. Farmers account discusses the impossibility of freezing time, as the ruins have been washed clean and softened by the forces of time and nature.

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