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Nicosia and Its Division: A Character-Generating Role For the City

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Abstract

The city of Nicosia, the last divided capital in the world, is a crucial case study to understand how a division influences a city pattern and character. The aim of this paper is to catch the perceptive feelings, in stressing the symbolic element of the division and the Buffer Zone; to interrogate and assess conservation issues and symbolical values of this area of the city; to recognise the division as a generator of character in the city recognisability; to investigate how a particular space, the one of a divided city, can influence the local population's perception and behaviour in the urban space.

Asking what the division bring, or which social and spatial phenomena occurred in Nicosia from the division, spatial behaviour of the local population will be assessed through direct interviews with local population, local stakeholders, and on-site studies. Investigating the perception of the division and the image of the city, it emerges how the Buffer Zone and the division is rooted in the mind of the interviewed as a place for memory, or better, as a generator of the psychological structure of self-identification in the city, as such, as a generator of the city character.

Thus, the city of Nicosia is seen as a palimpsest, representing a potentially endless circle with continuous and constant modification, either in an additional way – superimposition, extension - or in a subtractive way – demolition, removal, or dismantling. This subtraction can be intentional, but it can also be disruptive and unplanned. The division of Nicosia brought an extra element to the city and modified its character ex-post, meaning that the event's modifications – i.e., the division - assumes a memorial, historical and symbolical value, in function of the perturbation, thus shaping how the city is now perceived and giving the division a character-generator role.

Keywords

Divided City, Nicosia, Urban Space, User Perception, User Behaviour

Introduction

The city of Nicosia, the last divided capital in the world, is a crucial case study to understand how a division influences a city pattern and character. The aim of this paper is to catch the perceptive feelings, in stressing the symbolic element of the division and the Buffer Zone; to interrogate and assess conservation issues and symbolical values of this area of the city; to

recognize the division as a generator of character in the city recognizability; to investigate how a particular space, the one of divided cities, can influence the local population's perception and behaviour in the urban space.

Asking what the division bring, or which social and spatial phenomena occurred in divided Nicosia, spatial behaviour of the local population will be assessed through direct interviews and on-

site studies. Investigating the perception of the division and the image of the city, it emerges how the partition is rooted in the mind of the interviewed as a place for memory, or better, as a generator of the psychological structure of self-identification in the city, as such, as a generator of the city character.

Thus, the city of Nicosia is seen as a palimpsest, representing a potentially endless circle with continuous and constant modification, either in an additional way – superimposition, extension - or in a subtractive way – demolition, removal, or dismantling -. This subtraction can be intentional, but it can also be disruptive and unplanned. The division of Nicosia brought an extra element to the city and modified its character ex-post, meaning that the event's modifications – i.e., the division - assumes a memorial, historical and symbolical value, in function of the perturbation, thus shaping how the city is now perceived and giving the division a character-generator role.

What is a Divided City?

“The undivided city is a myth and a utopia at the same time”, as Richard Van Kempen (2006) stated, is a common understanding in analysing a city: a city is always divided in several ways, both for banal district boundaries, zip codes, but also for other aspects: the economical level, with à-la-page district for high-income residents and popular low-income suburbs. A city, as a dynamic element in the social and morphological landscape, is a growing and moving collection of objects and individuals, and always rearranges and replaces itself.

But in some cases, the divisions and the tensions that always undergo a city development can emerge at a breaking point, with unexpected outcomes and results. Thus, the definition of “divided city”, as a breakage, a rupture in the city history and life. There are several attempts at providing a definition of a divided city: The broadest one, from A. Casaglia (2010), states:

“Divided cities are defined as a territory where one or more borders, symbolic of material, divide ethnic, religious or national groups in conflict” (p.44)

It is a very general definition: it can be obvious to say, but it is important to state for clarity that every divided city emerge from a

conflict. There is always a certain moment in time or a certain chain of events who led to the impossibility of further coexistence on the same territory of two or more groups of individuals.

Another point of view is expressed by J. Calame and E. Charlesworth (2012): in their analysis, they start considering a divided city as something off-track compared to the idea of city:

“A divided city may represent a departure from the regular development and structuring of urban environment, and therefore it may even be considered dysfunctional, compared to a healthy city in which unity guarantees its adequate functioning” (p.18).

One of the most visible aspects for which a city ends up divided into two parts is clearly the feeling of belonging to a specific ethnic group. As J. Nagle (2013) said:

“Divided cities are defined by a violent conflict of ethnonationalism and characterized by semipermanent ethnic cleavages, high levels of endogamy and social segregation.” (p.1).

It is already possible to see some common factors in defining what is a divided city. There is the presence of a conflict, a breaking point in history. There are ethnic tensions. There is an adaptation in behaviour and development in cities like those, an input towards reorganization that shift from the general concept of a city. There is the matter of religion, a crucial part of life for several individuals, and the spark for many conflicts. There is culture, in the sense of habits, intangible heritage, with its specificities and its peculiarity belonging to each group and dividing it from the other.

Nicosia and its Division

“Although the largest communities, the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, have shared the island of Cyprus for the last four centuries, at no time have they integrated on a large scale, owing mainly to differences in language, culture and history” (p.232).

This sentence, as expressed by D. Oktay (2007), sums up the factors of division that insisted, and still insist, on the city of Nicosia and the whole island of Cyprus. Its physical manifestation is clearly the Buffer Zone: from Kato Pyrgos, in Tylliria, surrounding the small enclave of Kokkina/Erenköy, runs a line until Famagusta, dividing completely the island, and its

capital. This division formed two ethnically homogeneous entity, on the two sides of the island, with two parallel and different government bodies, in a duplication of institutions typical of divided cities. This also brought along a different economical level, manifested in the different purchase power of the different currencies, Euros and Turkish Liras. The hard border also presented a strong social separation, with segregated spaces for both communities; this reflected in the cultural division, helped by a different language, Greek and Turkish – and a different alphabet, too -, and a different religion; nevertheless, it is recognizable in both sides of the island a common background of folklore, traditions, and habits.

General Methodological Approach

The investigation of the urban modification and the social changes that the division brought to the city is the aim of this contribution. The chosen methodology for the analysis runs on two different aspects. On one side, through the use of the Space Syntax software, the morphological shifting of urban fabric will be address; through this software-run analysis, it will be possible to understand how the city centre of Nicosia moved from being the symbolic and character-generating core to an urban periphery, even if situated at the very centre of the urban conglomeration;

furthermore, it will be visible that the division created two “twin cities”, with two different and recognisable “centres” and a shared border/periphery, the Walled City and its part comprised in the Buffer Zone.

The analysis of segregation and integration of urban fabric, which will be described in the following paragraphs, will be then matched, and compared with a sociological analysis. The division, in fact, also brought a modification in urban behaviour and social customs for the inhabitants of the city. In paragraph §4 this analysis will be introduced, consisting in a series of on-site semi-structured interviews performed by the author; extracts for those interviews are reported in this paper and summed up in common themes, to understand the behavioural modification of the local population.

Finally, the two analyses will be compared to find a match between the urban segregation and urban fabric modification, and the social changes that happened in the divided city.

Morphological and Network Aspects

The situation did not really change significantly from the initial division to the situation nowadays. A strong political division is felt and perceivable, and the physical and cultural boundary are present.



Fig. 2. Axial map of the degree of integration of each road in Space Syntax in 1991 (elaboration of the author)

The social division probably is on the healing path thanks to the opening of the border crossings in Ledra Street and in Ledra Palace, thus avoiding a complete severing of the city and a sort of dynamic mix (Broome, 2005).

Morphologically, there is great interest in analysing how the city got modified by the division: in fact, such a strong modification of the urban space creates a deep and crucial effect on everyday life of Nicosians and forms a premise for the perceptive and socio-morphological analysis.

In Fig. 1 it is visible a map of the city of Nicosia in 1991. The maps are realized by using the Space Syntax software, using as a main factor the measure of global integration and segregation of a segment, in this case representing a road, or a path, in the city. In this first image, representing the two halves of the city completely divided, is recognizable how the division did not affect the city growth: having a hard border at its centre, the city sprawled to the south, in the southern part, and to north-east and north-west in the north side.



Fig. 2. Axial map of the degree of integration of each road in Space Syntax in 2019 (elaboration of the author)

The hard border gave anyway another interesting result: the appearance of two different city centres in both part of the town: the southern part kept the already established triangle of road - Makariou, Stasikratous, Evagorou – next to Eleftheria square, while the northern part established its core in Kyrenia Gate, astride the walled town. As C. Kypris (2019) stated:

“The division caused the south sector of the

town to expand southwards and the focus of the urban life shifted outside the walls around Makarios Avenue [...], nowadays the south-part of Nicosia is still expanding towards the perimeter integrating existing suburban areas” (p.2)

The map in Fig. 2 represents Nicosia in 2019. The southern part of the city kept sprawling; the northern part is expanding too, even if at a slower pace compared to the other. This map is still useful

though, because it shows the different circulation and integration after April 2003 opening of the checkpoints in the downtown. It is a slight modification, but it shows how the old town gained new interest and new attractiveness (H. Gurdalli, 2016).

It is not by coincidence that usually, those highly integrated segments are the busiest road, the ones that define the city centre and the commercial or business core. Poorly integrated roads are usually peripheric areas, cul-de-sac, and mainly residential zones. This analysis is even more poignant in the case of divided cities because it shows the radical transformation that a divided city undergoes: main roads now lie in the buffer zone, former city centres now found themselves at the edge of the city. And new perceptions emerged in the citizens' life.

Perception and Behaviours in a Divided Urban Space

After the morphological, the social aspect is cardinal to have a base for the investigation of the city character, and to identify if the division is a generatrix of character in Nicosia; the analysis of needs, changing, hopes and perspective of local population is directed to the final aim of understanding the perceptive feelings, in stressing the symbolic element of the division.

The initial point of the sociological analysis, the perceptive analysis, and the symbolic character of the division, is also the final point of the analysis, dealing with the identification of the local population in a city that is characterised by the division. It is a circle, a recurring question, a perceptive analysis not only as a function of the individual, but as a general widespread symbolic-valorial aspect: a new optic of analysis, in this case meaning *tout court* the attribution of a generating role.

To sum up, the research question at the base of the analysis is how space influences and is influenced by the action of the subject, and, specifically for this case study, it investigates how a particular space, the one of divided cities, can influence the local population and its perception and behaviour in the urban space.

The Research Question: What did the Division Brought to the City?

The first step on which to base the analysis is asking, through a deep analysis of the people perception, what the division brought to the city of Nicosia, to understand consequences and strategy, both in the general population and in the historical memory. The research question helps to understand how spatial transformation affect and modify behavioural aspects of the people, and vice versa (P. Corbetta, 2015). It clearly states the dialectical relationship between space and users, both self-influenced by each other, and both generators of transformations: space and users are both agents and subagent, in a non-deterministic process. The layering of tendencies and fluxes is the crucial part for this research because it shows how spatial and behavioural modifications affect the perception of an urban environment, analysing the consequences on space and subjects, on citizens and places. To sum up then, the investigation is about which social and spatial phenomena occurring in Nicosia, from the division up to nowadays, led to a modification of the spatial behaviour for the users of the city.

Methodological Remarks for the On-site

Interviews

To assess and to gather data about the perceptive feeling of the division, the used method is a campaign of in-depth interviews to users of the city, carried on in a period from October 2020 to March 2021. During the interviews, the local population was interviewed through a semi-structured script. The main investigation area of the campaign of interview was the personal experience and perception of Nicosians, divided into residents – inhabitants of the Walled City of Nicosia or its vicinity, including the neighbouring municipalities forming the urban conglomeration of Nicosia – and commuters – people moving daily to Nicosia for work and/or study -. This division in subcategories is helpful to understand the different perception and “use” of the city by the different interviewees, to be considered for the elaboration of desiderata and for the final comparative analysis between people's perception and urban fabric modification.

The interviewees distribute themselves in nine Turkish Cypriots and thirteen Greek Cypriots residents, and four Turkish Cypriots and six Greek Cypriots commuters, which in total sum up as thirty-two total interviewees. The interview script focused on the perception of the division, the image of the divided city, the foreseeable future of the city division and the perceived level of communality and cooperation. In this contribution, the first two main aspects will be analysed and considered, to try and give an answer to the question of the character-generating role of the city.

Desiderata, Outcomes, and Analysis

In this general analysis all the data will be considered, without any distinction of age, sex, and nationality. The aim is to have a general idea of the tendencies and the ideas of the public, keeping in mind the differences in the perception according to the different population group. The analysis is subdivided in macro-themes.

The Perception of the Division

The division of the city is felt like a scar for most of the interviewed, and only a very few percentages of the total of the sample is happy with the way the city is performing, or at least seeing the positive side of the division, such as the development of other areas of the city:

“In all senses, and it is hard for us to accept the occupation on our island... so also emotionally the people feel overwhelmed [...] On the urban and architectural point of view I will say that we tried to reborn, you know? To develop our cities and reborn from the crisis of the war... To find new chances for our people”

G.A., Greek Cypriot, commuter, 18-30

“There are two cities now, probably now even too different.”

I.H., Turkish Cypriot, commuter, 31-45

What was once a single identity of a city is now split into two, with their own characteristics, even though similar and recognizable from both sides. Half of the interviewed still consider Nicosia as a single city; the majority anyway considers “its” city only the part perceived everyday:

“I am bound to think about the Greek side because is the one I am living in.”

M.M., Greek Cypriot, resident, 31-45

“No, I don’t think in this city there is any wall or something... I don’t prefer to divide it or call it “parts” or so... I am looking at it as one.”

A.S., Turkish Cypriot, resident, 18-30

This is a sign of the ongoing detachment of the two sides, but it clearly shows a pattern which will be expressed further on: to identify themselves into the city, and thus recognize the characteristics and the character itself of the city, the “genius loci” of the place must be experienced and lived, with continuity and stability. In the case of Nicosia, the division and the checkpoints prevent the perception of the “other half” of the city by the respective groups of citizens, and so they only recognize as “their” city the perceivable part:

“Obviously [the checkpoints] they are creating black points, you know, like the areas which are not in use because the checkpoint is not there”

U.E., Turkish Cypriot, resident, 46-65

“I’m jealous from other cities that they can live in their city on the whole city, you know? They don’t have to stop some somewhere... because here you always stop somewhere... you know, I can go for a walk with my dog literally in just few steps I am in Agia Sofia [Selimyyie Mosque]. But then I must go around!”

N.P., Greek Cypriot, resident, 31-45

And this character is given to the city by its division, thus assuming a “generating” role in the character development.

The Image of the City and the Identification of the Character

It is important to express what is the “character” or the “image” of the city. This expression refers to what in Latin is called “genius loci”. As stated by Christian Norberg-Schulz (1976):

“Every ‘independent’ being has its own genius [...] this spirit creates and give life to people and places, and stays with them from birth to death, determining their character or essence [...]. The genius represents something that ‘exists’ or that ‘wants to exist’, to use Louis Kahn’s words” (pp.36)

It can be considered as the sum of all the characters of the environment someone lives into. It is then partially the natural or artificial environment, but also the actions that the man had on the territory. And moreover, it is a factor of culture, of social life, of habits, of customs and of traditions. It is then clear that all those factors create the genius loci, but also that the genius loci express those factors, in a circle. Quoting the same scholar, it is possible to say:

“The two implicit psychological functions in inhabiting a place can be called ‘orientation’ and ‘identification’. To acquire a sense of security and belonging in a place, the man must orientate itself, so it must know where he is, but it must be able to identify itself with the environment, so it must know how a certain place is. [...] The identification means becoming ‘friend’ with the given environment” (pp.87)

This means that the identity of a person, and thus the identification of that person with a place, its function of the relation that said person develops with the space and the things composing it. And so, the person identifies to the place he perceives he belongs to via certain aspects, or characters. All those aspects, clearly related with Norberg-Schulz (1976) theory, emerged in the interview, when discussing the “character”, now identifiable with the “genius loci”, of the place:

“I mean, I cannot distinguish any part or not of old Nicosia as a monument compared to others, because every layer adds something to its character. So, for me, the whole old city, it’s a monument on its own.”

O.F., Turkish Cypriot, commuter, 31-45

The old city of Nicosia is identified as the unification factor between the two realities, due to its undoubted historical importance and similar character across the divide, but it can be considered a deviated narration: in fact, if older generations keep in mind an image of the united city, the younger ones are born without the

possibility of experiencing the other side of the divide, and thus can only get a second-hand narration; even in case of a direct perception, the long decades of division now are prone to make people feel like “outsiders” in the other half of the city:

“We were born and raised in a place that was always secluded by its neighbour, where the city you live in is not actually perceivable, or better, where you can perceive only half of your city: the other half is still there, only few metres away, but it feels like it is the other side of the world.”

A.G., Greek Cypriot, resident, 18-30

It is an everyday situation for new generations, and it is a difficult memory for older generations: it is a matter of historical memory, of the conflicts and the division. Many of the older inhabitants of the city have very polarized views: for example, some of them hope for a complete elimination of the Buffer Zone from memory, in case of a rapprochement:

“[I would like to see a] rehabilitation, keeping examples of design and construction, of course, as it is a vital part of the city... I just don’t want the Buffer Zone to be permanent and to be remembered.”

K.A., Turkish Cypriot, resident, 66+

“I don’t know how it would work the best in political way [the unification] but adding the buffer zone to our life again would be perfect, it is an odd situation and a waste of space.”

Y.G., Turkish Cypriot, resident, 66+

“Apart from movement, it is painful... [the division] it is a reminder of the past... and a monument to the refusal to find a solution!”

K.A., Greek Cypriot, resident, 66+

It is important to keep in mind that the topic is delicate and that for several interviewed, especially those from the older generations, the division is a traumatic point, because it reminds them of intercommunal clashes, refugees’ issues, and property reclamation from both sides within the Buffer Zone. The Buffer Zone itself, then, became an open scar in the urban tissue, in the historical memory and in the psychological perception of the city: it brings back the negative

aspects of historical stratification, such as war, destruction, drama and abandonment. One interviewee summed it up harshly:

“Or it stays like that [the buffer zone] or, if we find a solution, we rebuild everything, and our people go back to live there.”

P.T., Greek Cypriot, resident, 66+

Memory and Identification of the Character

The theme of historical memory is broad and deeply rooted on a psychological, personal level. When examining different case studies is fundamental to act in a respectful manner and to understand the decision-making process behind each of them.



Fig. 3. Young Cypriot at a café next to the Buffer Zone (picture of the author)

A concept to introduce, it the palimpsest. In fact, all cities follow a path, or better, they are a palimpsest, during their “history” and “life”. From the Greek words “*palimpsestos*”, from *παλίν*, “again” and *ψαω* “scrape”, it literally represents the act of writing and then cancelling to write again on a papyrus, a parchment, or a scroll (. It is a very evocative figure, that represents the passing of time, layers and materiality (N.Aksamija, C.Maines, P.Wagoner, 2017). It can be summed up as three phases: writing, scraping, and writing again.

In the case of Nicosia, considering the “writing” part as the city in its history, the “scraping” happened with the division and the conflict, but the “writing again” consists of the new morphological and perceptive elements the division has brought to the city and its inhabitants.

There is a difference from the traditional palimpsests’ definition: in fact, the act of writing and scraping in an endless circle presupposes an intentionality, a decision behind the modification. In case of disruption and temporary-punctual modification of the expected life of a city, it is possible to say that the new modifications can bring a new value ex-post, not only ex-ante the event: a new character then emerges despite historical layering, but due to an abrupt event. The division in Nicosia is such a character, that now defines and shapes the city.

In other words, a character that was before not present, and not even foresaw, can then become the main element to describe the city and to identify it, as a perceptive value, or better, a memorial, of the event that caused its own appearance.

The Psychological Instance and the Genius loci

As anticipated before, this is the concept of the “*istanza psicologica*” (psychological instance) formulated by Roberto Pane. He worked mostly in the reconstruction of monuments and buildings in Italy at the end of the Second World War, and his theorization is fundamental to understand the value of such a character, as important as the partition of the city in Nicosia’s case, in the psychology of its inhabitants. To quote the same scholar, R.Pane (1987):

“[...]inside the spaces of the past we feel dilated and enclosed in the forms that surround us, for the very reason that they are an extension of our body. Historical layering is profoundly vital and not extrinsic: it is the generatrix - at the same time remote and actual - of our psychic structure, and thus necessary to our most favourable future evolution” (pp.103)

The idea expressed by Pane is that the image of the city, or its character, is an extension of the “body”, here intended as the mind, and thus shapes the mindset of someone. It is clear the parallel with the concept of Shultz’s genius loci, in shaping the identity: Pane pushes the theory further, expressing the idea that the historical stratification is not only a way to “shape” someone’s mind, but it is directly generator of the psychic structure, thus being a vital force for the advancement and the evolution of thoughts.

Conclusion

The two analyses – urban-morphological and social - carried out in this paper are the result of the application of two distant methodologies, but they may identify the same trend and come to the same conclusion. It is a difficult task to assess the character of the city: a living being, the city and its urban landscape are the result of the integration of morphological and social aspects. In this way, it can be possible to tackle part of the significant aspects of the division that define the city of Nicosia, such as the visible aspects - physical, cultural and ethnical division -, the semi-visible aspects – economic and social division -, the underlying aspects - historical and political division- (M.Zorko, N.Novak, 2019).

Morphologically, it was demonstrated that the city shape changed and modified after the partition, and moreover, the places of gathering, the places of commerce, and the real cores of the city shifted from the centre to other areas of the cities. The centre was now a peripheric area, a *cul-de-sac* too close to the border to work efficiently of as the centre of a capital.

The use of Space Syntax showed how the global integration within the whole city shifted after the division, creating segregated areas where once there was the urban core, and creating new centres in other parts of the city; moreover, as already stated, the division created two twin cities, with very few contacts between them (see Fig. 1); if the opening of checkpoint in Ledra Street started to invert the trend (see Fig. 2), the rapprochement of the two sides is still far from coming. But the use of the Space Syntax tools to perform a brief historical *excursus* of the urban fabric, is also useful to understand the link between the urban morphology and the social significance of the urban environment in the collective perception. to quote the work of N.Charamboulos and I.Geddes (2015):

“The engagement of space syntax research with historical comparative studies of urban form has opened up possibilities for studying the relationship between urban development and social phenomena through time.” (p.81)

And in the case of Nicosia, the division is the common denominator between urban modifications and social aspects. It can be said that the division, a breaking point in the history of the city, shaped the physical and perceived

landscape for the Nicosians. As stated, for older generations, perceiving the division is clearly a painful experience, remembering the united city and now witnessing the depletion and the disruption of the urban fabric. For younger generations, it is everything they always perceived, and thus it will be inaccurate to dismiss the division as a mere accident and not as something that had a deep and profound effect on the city.

The character of the city is not a static aspect, but it is a result of an historical stratification that created the city perceivable nowadays; it is a dynamic element derived by the same dynamic nature of the city as a device in the territory. The main difference is that the character is a shared subjective aspect, as detailed in paragraph §5, and thus it includes the action, and the reaction, of the population that perceived, and it is invested by it: the character is both the genius loci, allowing the identification of the person within a certain space, and the psychological instance, generating and shaping the forma mentis of the population.

The historical layering that happened in Nicosia are extraordinary. The division is the last one of it; it is a radical change that modified the morphology of the city, the social gathering areas, the cores in the urban fabric, and the perception of the city. It is another historical layering, of capital importance, steering the helm of the image of the city and becoming a generator of character.

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