

Regenerating Public Space: Urban Adaptive Reuse

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Abstract This paper looks into frameworks which aim at furthering the discussion of the role of regenerative design practices in a city's historic core utilizing the tool of urban design to jumpstart urban revitalization in the context of historic preservation and adaptive reuse in historic city centers. The main prong of investigation will consider the effect of proposed changes in the physical infrastructure and fabric of the city and the management of public space, 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 city center, which includes both buildings and the space between buildings. It also looks at the notion of a community's right to the public space and the public life of the target areas as well as the potential contribution and participation of its population in 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, and uses a local case study to illustrate the potential application of preservation and reuse strategies in the historic core of the Nicosia suburb of Strovolos on the island of Cyprus. The data for this study is being collected and organized as part of an ongoing urban design and development workshop at the University of Cyprus. The presentation is organized around a historical background and theoretical framework for development, followed by concluding thoughts that address sets of actions that may have a positive impact on future projects conceived along similar lines by educators and practitioners in comparable regional initiatives.

Keywords Urban Design, Public Space, Adaptive Reuse

1. Introduction

European Union programs and international directives try to raise awareness of the need for an integrated approach towards the need for preservation of the historic parts of cities and the need for urban redevelopment and regeneration. These two aspects tie together the principles of sustainability with the principles of planning and urban design, which stretch from purist approaches that stress that the preservation of both natural and human resources is secondary to continued economic growth [1].

There is a long history of interest in the conservation of the built environment [2]. It is a history shaped by both private concerns over the physical fabric of the city and public interventions to preserve the historic components of places [3, 4]. In relation to the public interest in the preservation of the built environment, early movements in the late 19th century sought to protect architecturally significant buildings and monuments while later efforts concentrated on the adoption of area-based measures concerned with the preservation of specific historically important places.

This latter aspect became part of planning and housing legislation in many post war constituencies [4] and it is

significant because it does not only deal with particular structures, but rather it takes into consideration the public space, which constitutes the surrounding context to these structures. It is a fact that in their own memories of times past and while growing up, many urban dwellers can draw pictures in their minds of familiar surroundings, often not of the buildings themselves, but of spaces adjacent to, beside, behind, in front of and even on top of buildings, in short, the spaces between buildings [5]. In most cases, the coupling of these two components that constitute the historic milieu seemed to be integrated and connected and not just space divorced from buildings. Instead, building components, such as stoops, porches, stairs, gates, patios and decks, were seen as items occupying the zone of public-private interaction between individual buildings and the public spaces related to them.

According to Richard Sennett, though the importance of considering historic precedents has been established in the study and theory of urban form, much less attention has been paid to the historic precedents of urban functions or to the interplay between form and function. An example is the medieval town square. This was often the heart of the city, its outdoor living and meeting place, a site for markets and celebrations and the place where one went to hear the news, buy food, collect water, talk politics or watch the world go by [6].

Such is the potential for the area around the location of the Panagia Chryseleousa Church in located in the historic core of the Nicosia suburb of Strovolos. Figure 1 constitutes

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an area plan of the site in question, while Figure 2 exhibits photographs from west to east and presents the site as it exists today, with marginal uses such as parking and unofficial storage serving nearby businesses and residences.

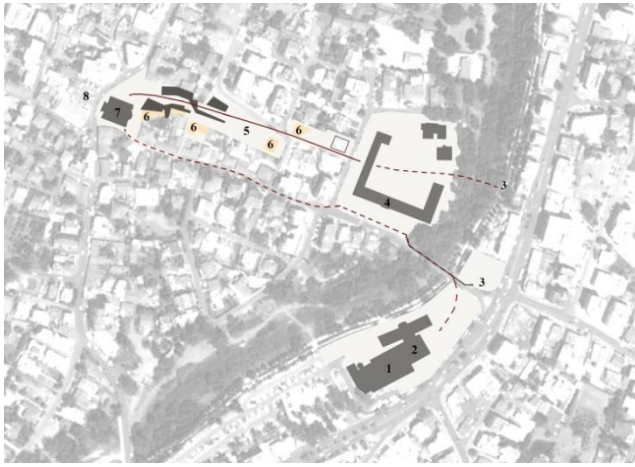


Figure 1. Strovolos Historic Center Redevelopment Area (1. City Hall; 2. Municipal Theatre; 3. Proposed and Existing Pedestrianized Roads and Paths; 4. Elementary School & Lifelong Learning Centre; 5. Public Park; 6. Program Spaces (in new and adaptively reused fabric); 7. Panagia Chryseleousa Church; 8. Multipurpose Cooperative Society Building)



Figure 2. The site as it exists with marginal uses, such as unofficial parking and storage

Consequently, there is a collective sense of loss, of a missed opportunity to create vibrant public space in this area otherwise characterized by abandonment and decline. The sense of loss associated with the perceived decline of public space assumes that effective public life is linked to a viable public realm. This is because the concept of public life is inseparable from the idea of public life or a “public sphere” [7] and the notion of civil society, where the affairs of the public are debated in public places. But there is another concept of public life that is derived from our desire for relaxation, social contact, entertainment, leisure, and simply having a good time [8]. Individual orbits of this public life are shaped by a consumer culture and the opportunities offered by the new “experience economy” [9].

2. The Right to Public Life at Strovolos’ Historic Core

The figures presented above outline the challenges and opportunities facing the municipal authorities and the local stakeholders who are involved in the preservation and adaptive reuse of the historic centre of Strovolos, a suburb located directly to the south of the capital city of Nicosia, in the Republic of Cyprus.

Consequently the proposed analysis of the site in question focuses on the incorporation of cultural production

related to an experience economy, as an injection of public life. It uses the tool of adaptive reuse to animate inactive edges and boundaries that characterize the site today. For this to occur, the surrounding area adjacent to the site has been analysed in order to tie the proposed corridor to existing routes that may be fed into the site, as indicated in Figure 3. Moreover, compatible architectural program is planned for the site so that it complements and enhances public life in the area, based on this new experience economy. Cultural venues and performance arts locales are proposed for the site in question, in the manner of an “open air theatre” affording stages for official and unofficial settings that serve planned and unplanned performances along the new thoroughfare.



Figure 3. Existing thematic routes as they occur in the neighbourhood surrounding the site in question are noted and mapped and are then funnelled in the new proposed cultural corridor

Urban adaptive reuse, adhering to the strategies suggested above, has been used as a tool to integrate the nodal points on the broader site and to ensure synergies between them. The key nodes include: the City Hall and Municipal Theatre to the east of the Pedieos stream with its adjoining linear park; the local elementary school (which doubles up as a lifelong learning centre in the evenings); and Panagia Chryseleousa Church and Co-Operative Centre to the west.

The area is currently underutilized and functions as a parking lot and the proposal shown includes rehabilitation and reuse of the urban fringe at the existing buildings and the addition of a cafeteria, an actors’ workshop, a health centre and a farmers market. The vision for the open space between the buildings is that of a catalyst for public life, which will refocus the collective activity of the local and expanded community on this location. The pedestrianization of streets and planned permeability of the immediate site will channel vital pedestrian flow through the site and of a sufficient density that will allow it to meet

financial and social expectations and to jumpstart additional development in the surrounding area.

Out of this collective effort new modes of public life and habitation are reinvented. “The right to the city” is a slogan closely associated with French philosopher Henri Lefebvre who makes the argument that the city is a work in which all its citizens participate [10]. It may be argued in the case of the redevelopment of the historic core of Strovolos that the new space that is created is necessarily public and therefore a place of social interaction and exchange with very diverse people who will live or work adjacent to the proposed project. Moreover, according to Lefebvre “this right is related to objective needs, such as the need for creative activity – and not only for products and consumable goods – but also for information, symbolism, imaginary and play. It is also related to the right to freedom, to diversity in socialization, to habitat and to inhabitation – and perhaps the implied right of participation and appropriation [11]. The right to the city, as is the case of the historic core of Strovolos, is therefore the right to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of moments and places [16], thereby emphasizing the intended theatricality of the proposed concept.

3. Approaches to Urban Adaptive Reuse

In the case of the historic core of Strovolos, changes in the form of preservation, redevelopment and adaptive reuse are subject to patterns of restructuring that make their adoption, acceptance and impact – on the local discourse of development – contingent on a variety of factors, such as, firm closures, the relocation of capital, the need to attract new capital and the proliferation of the tourist economy, which may compromise the ability of historic cities to produce strategies that will regulate economic and physical growth within specified limits [12]. Moreover, any regulatory measures developed locally by the Strovolos municipality, aiming at creating a capacity framework, are likely to be effective only when complemented by measures formulated and implemented at multiple spatial scales.

According to planning scholars such as Urry, it is possible to identify specific measures in which societies have approached the issue of historic preservation and adaptive reuse for urban regeneration. For the case of the proposed project at Strovolos this is expected to happen in four main ways: one is through stewardship of the designated historic and listed building stock, another is based on the investigation of the propagated space, a third relies on visual consumption emanating from the theatrical nature of the proposal, while a fourth deals with issues of economic exploitation [13], especially as the proposal relates to the services and amenities provided by the more contemporary civic complex and municipal theatre. These conceptualizations of the relationship between community and the environment relate well to the often-hidden

rationales for urban conservation [14].

In the case of stewardship, the principle relies on the management of resources for the future of the historic core and it provides a strong justification for conservation.

In the case of investigation of the propagated space, the spatial condition is portrayed as an object of investigation and in need of new programming, regulation and intervention, as in the case of land-use planning and its concerns over the need to develop sustainable development strategies both for the historic buildings and their related space.

In the case of visual consumption the landscape or townscape is preserved and / or redeveloped not just for production, but also for its theatricality and its aesthetic appropriation [23]. Again, area conservation is important here because one of its rationales is the maintenance or recreation of a place's visual attributes. Areas are designated according to “the contribution of the townscape of buildings, streets and spaces” perceived holistically [6] as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Adaptively reused listed buildings, streets and proposed spaces of collective use contribute to the production of culture in the proposed townscape promote the site's unique visual attributes to the stakeholders

The reconstruction of a visually pleasing historic landscape through conservation of the listed stock in Strovolos has become increasingly important because what is conserved addresses a process of representation of the history of the place and it presents the historic product as a commodity for the consumption of an increasingly demanding market made up of locals and visitors. In elsewhere, here too the exploitation of conserved history is a major contributor to economic growth and vitality, so that the impact of these tensions on the pattern of growth and development assumes even greater significance.

In the case of economic exploitation, the instrumental appropriation of economic benefits from conservation strategies seeks out exploitative opportunities [3, 14]. Conservation planning has been used here to justify the appropriation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings as a commercial resource to be marketed and sold for new economically productive uses. Second, the historic parts of Strovolos and their cultural heritage are to be marketed on

the basis of generating economic growth, investment and income generated by both locals and visitors [15, 12, 16].

Consequently, the distinctiveness of this particular proposal places great significance in securing both financial investment and human capital [13]. This helps to explain why the promotion of historic cities through heritage conservation is necessary for local stakeholders as they seek to retain a competitive advantage over similarly historic places. Consequently, municipalities such as Strovolos that promote and market their cultural identity are more appealing to those with capital seeking investment opportunities in distinctive locations, as well as to visitors bringing in tourism income [14].

4. Cultural Forces Shaping Public Life



Figure 5. “Theatrical” components are proposed for the development site so as to allow for the shaping of public life between the existing and proposed townscapes through the adaptive reuse of buildings and new shared animated passages

Based on observations by Carr, one may identify the tree main cultural forces that will shape public life in the Strovolos proposal: The first is predominantly a social one, served by multipurpose spaces with various activities, but mainly focused on the social life of the community. The second is a functional form of public life serving the basic

needs of a society – flows of people on the paths and streets, obtaining food for the household, providing shelter against the elements for themselves and for the collective. The third is symbolic public life, which develops out of the shared meaning people have for physical settings and rituals that occur in public. They are the spiritual and mystical experiences that occur in a society, the celebrations of past and memorable events that forge connections amongst people [17, 18]. By observing other people and their activities and participating with them in shared tasks in Strovolos’ historic core, the existence of a community can be perceived and made use of in the design proposal so that people feel that they may participate as part of a larger group in an active manner, as shown in Figure 5.

However temporary this may be, for the time it occurs there is a direct sense of sharing for some of those present, an immediate if perhaps short-lived participation in an event that can best be experienced with others. The development of a social-symbolic life close to home, as well as the settings to support it, may be required [17]. It may be necessary to create gathering places such as the churches and their courtyards, as seen in medieval towns. The modern equivalents are likely to be recreational ones, for sports, shopping and walking, but perhaps some settings for meditation and relaxation will emerge as well [19].

5. The Importance of Public Life

The existence of some form of public life is a prerequisite to the development of public spaces. Although every society has some mixture of public and private settings, the emphasis given to each one and the values they express help to explain the differences across settings, across cultures and across times [17]. According to Carr, “The public spaces created by societies serve as a mirror of their public and private values as can be seen in the Greek agora, the Roman forum, the New England common and the contemporary plaza, such as the one proposed for Strovolos. When public life and public spaces are missing from a community, residents can become isolated from each other and less likely to offer mutual help and support.

Commissioned studies in similar cases have been recommended to establish how near a particular city has come to reaching its limit of expansion and to discover the extent to which any potential growth (capacity for growth and the future pace, scale and pattern of development) may be made consonant with the maintenance of that city’s historic fabric [20, 21], not unlike Strovolos’ historic core. In this case there exists a considerable scope for change and controlled growth in the target area without damaging those things that make it. More often than not, one has to balance the pressure for development, which can be harmful to the historic fabric if it is not carefully managed [14], against the withdrawal of investment, which could be equally damaging.

6. Conclusions

For contemporary society, opportunities for public space and public life may be found in the old “urban villages” the historic nodes, such as the one in Strovolos, with their social support systems – as necessary a relief from crowded living and working environments as it is an essential setting for social exchange [22, 17]. In the process of choosing the spaces for their public lives, people in the community will be able to choose to experience other social groups in settings that are conducive to relaxed exchanges. Additional motives for making or remaking public spaces may also include issues of health, safety and welfare of the community, spatial restoration, environmental restoration and economic development.

Public space can help define public “health, safety and welfare” by being a setting for physically and mentally rewarding activity, such as exercise, gardening or conversation. In public space people can learn to live together. The spatial and environmental restoration motives come into play in satisfying people’s needs for passive engagement, discovery and meaning. User participation helps the stakeholders understand fully the social context of a space, to strike the right balance among various claims on its use and meaning, to manage conflict and to adjust to changing public life over time [17].

Despite local planning boards being entrepreneurial about effecting change, expressions of frustration over a lack of local control, increasingly lead to mobilization at the local and neighborhood level. As such initiatives occur, it can be expected that much of the interest will focus on improving the livability of local streets and neighborhoods and the shared public realm [8].

In some cities, community activism helped convert abandoned or vacant lots into vest-pocket parks or neighborhood playgrounds. In some of the historic city cores in all major cities (including the ones in Cyprus), immigrant communities have brought street life back into the neighborhood [23, 24]. Members of these communities can respond to the changing demands of increasing diversity of the urban population [8], while recent immigrants (to Cyprus as well) have brought with them new shopping habits, leisure behavior, uses of informal economy and a new dependency on the public realm and they constitute now the major users of city parks. A new revival of street life is noted as well as an increasing popularity of flea markets, farmer’s markets and street markets. Lastly, there is also a general growth in the neighborhood-based grass-roots initiatives and nonprofit groups that are taking charge of community improvements – from affordable housing to small business development and open space design.

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