One Island, Many Histories: Rethinking the Politics of the Past in Cyprus
PRIO CYPRUS CENTER

‘Divided Memory and Architecture in Nicosia’

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Abstract

Nicosia will soon face serious questions about how its history will be represented in the urban form of the city, especially in terms of preserving, removing, or otherwise synthesizing the differing spatial representations of historical narratives as presented by the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. This paper will propose an approach to the architectural legacy of Nicosia’s divided past based on the recent work of several historians with the concepts of “error” and the creation of historical legend or myth. Rather than finding inconsistent tales “wrong,” historians, such as Alessandro Portelli, argue that they are valuable in that they allow us to understand the interests, fears, and desires of the tellers. Just as historians are incorporating these “divided memories” into their historical texts, this paper proposes that there is architectural and social value in incorporating these divergent expressions of historical narrative in the future spatial form of the city.
1. “Errors”


3. The Reunified City?

4. Conclusion

Introduction

This presentation will propose an approach to the architectural legacy of Nicosia’s divided past based on the recent work of several historians, and the potential relevance to an approach to city. Beginning with a discussion of the work of historian Alessandro Portelli, in particular two of his key concepts of the value of “error” and “myth” in historiography and the use of oral history to create a dialogue between the informer and the historian, these terms will be examined in terms of their potential relevance to the work of planners and architects. In The Reunified City several possible future scenarios of what may happen to the space of the Dead Zone in the future will be discussed, outlining a suggested framework that might offer another way to approach this space.
The Order has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome
- Allesandro Portelli

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“The Order has Been Carried Out”

Errors, Legends, and Myths

In *The Order has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, Allesandro Portelli goes back and reexamines an event that occurred in Italy during the Second World War, and then rewrites its history by putting together differing accounts of what happened. He interviewed over two hundred people, and from these interviews has created a “multi-voiced narrative, a montage of fragments of varying length.” Throughout this process he is fascinated by the “pervasiveness of erroneous tales, myths, legends, and silences.” This work takes a critical look at how historical consciousness is created through individual and collective means. He engages in a thorough investigation of how the Nazi massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine was misremembered by outlining the establishment of a widely believed mythology regarding this event.
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“It isn’t a matter of ignorance, but one of perception and imagination. At a high-level training seminar for foreign service diplomats, I asked the same question, and the answers ranged from 2 days to 6 months, averaging 2 weeks. It was less than 24 hours. This expansion of time in popular belief is the most fascinating memory construct concerning these events. Its most immediate consequence is to reinforce the belief in the partisans guilt, by imagining that the Nazis had time to publish an appeal.”

Perhaps a good way to illustrate this would be to look at how Portelli unearths the distortion of time; time – in the sense of chronology - generally being considered a quantitative, not a qualitative ingredient of history. He examines how people mentally separate the two occurrences that constitute the massacre, the partisan attack on the Nazis at the Via Rasella by an Italian anti-fascist group in which 33 German soldiers were killed, and the consequent retaliation by the Nazis in a mass murder of 335 men and boys, who were not involved in the attack, at the caves of the Fosse Ardeatine. The retaliation took place after less than 24 hours, but as Portelli was collecting oral histories he discovered that most people believed that it occurred somewhere between three days to a few months after the attack.

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The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue
- Alessandro Portelli

This is one example of the way in which “errors” in the way that people misremember quantitative fact serve to unearth and elucidate more qualitative details about how people were affected by historical events. In the example illustrated above the “errors” in the informants’ account reference what is a “response to a deep necessity” to make sense of an unintelligible situation by allocating responsibility to the partisans for the massacre by believing that the Germans had allowed them time and opportunity to turn themselves in, in order to avoid such a random mass killing, while in fact they had not – the shocked citizens of Rome, including the partisans themselves, had first word of the retaliatory massacre the next morning.

Portelli’s other books present a series of examples from his work with oral history which also illustrate the rightness of wrongs. So Portelli leaves us with the concept that errors made in the telling of history should not be discounted because they actually tell us a lot about the events, people, and societies involved. He puts it plainly, stating that “we also know by now that a great deal happened really inside people’s minds, in terms of feelings, emotions, beliefs, and interpretation. For this reason, even errors, inventions, or lies are in their own way forms of truth”.

Another perspective on the “truth” of the remembrance of historical events is presented by Antjie Krog in her book Country of my Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limit of Forgiveness in the New South Africa, documenting her experience as a journalist covering the entire duration of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings from 1995-1998. She writes:

“If [the TRC’s] interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not the truth, but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people’s perceptions, stories, myths, and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense.”

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“It is asking too much that everyone should believe the Truth Commission’s version of the truth. Or that people should be set free by this truth, should be healed and reconciled. But perhaps these narratives alone are enough to justify the existence of the Truth Commission. Because of these narratives, people no longer can indulge in their separate dynasties of denial.”

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Both these statements from Portelli and from Krog begin to touch on the elusive nature of “truth”. In these cases, truth is a much more subjective element, one that is allowed a more evasive outline, when the goal being pursued is something much more complicated than simply pinning down what happened when and where. Oral sources, both in terms of compiling histories or as testimony, have been criticized for exhibiting selective memory and presenting untrue facts. Rather, it can be argued that a deeper understanding of the relevance of historical events to the people involved can be gleaned by stepping away from the precise confines of Truth, quite impossible to define anyway, and learning from the way in which people remember events. This has particular relevance when the events in question are of a traumatic or contested nature, as at the Fosse Ardeatine and the many incidents testified to before the TRC.

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HISTORY : excerpts told by the informant / kept in the original voice

If we are able to now accept Portelli’s assertion that “errors” are another form of truth, and were to to examine the city of Nicosia and the tales embedded its urban fabric in the same way that Portelli has painstakingly examined the oral histories that he has accumulated, we would find similar “errors”. First and foremost we can look at the entire region of the Dead Zone as such an “error.” With the building of the Venetian Walls the city 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. So one might call this resultant form an architectural or urban design error, but what makes the Dead Zone an error in the same sense that Portelli uses the terms “error,” “legend” and “myth” in his discussions of oral history?

In this presentation, I am not asserting that the UNBZ is an error in the literal sense of the word. While one could make the case, and many have, that it was a mistake to draw a line, completely separate two communities, and create an artificial no-mans land in the middle of the city, I am not using “error” in that sense for the purposes of this discussion. Rather, it is important to clarify the nature of the correlation that I am drawing between the use of this term to bridge between historical and architectural discourse.
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**HISTORY**: excerpts told by the informant / kept in the original voice

**CITY**: authenticity of the urban interventions that have arisen as a response to the imposed condition of partition of the city

For Portelli, in work with oral history the term “error” refers to something told by the informant in the original voice. His argument is that this “error” has value and should be included in the work of the historian, along with the facts, because they reach beyond Fact to arrive at Meaning. **What I am referring to here as Nicosia’s “errors” in spatial terms is the authenticity of the urban interventions that have arisen as a response to the imposed condition of partition of the city – the architectural feedback of the residents to those who created the borders around their lives. These “errors” take diverse forms, from architectural propaganda used for broadcasting slogans to new uses given by residents to spaces in or near the BZ.**
there is value in keeping *some form* of these authentic spatial responses to partition, in “original voice”, in the future reconfiguration that will become a reunited Nicosia. Some of these responses are more ad-lib than others, some being planned by the state, with others being spontaneous and informal responses that have allowed people to cope with division and manage their daily lives in the context of boundaries.

So now that we have a definition in place for the term “error” in relation to historical work and its relevance to the urban sphere, it is possible to now begin to examine the city within this framework and begin to pinpoint the location of urban “errors,” “myths,” and “legends.”

These include buildings and spaces that have been created by the state authorities. One of the most prominent and noticeable of these would be the large scale Turkish and TRNC landscape flags created on a mountainside in north Nicosia, located so as to be visible to the Greek Cypriot residents on the other side of the BZ. The Greek Cypriots had used the prominent and loaded space at the end of Ledra Street, an important commercial access bisected by the Green Line, to display a photo exhibit of the Greek Cypriot missing of 1974. Until it was demolished recently, this was also the site of an observation platform used by tourists to look over to the other side across the BZ. Subsequent to the removal of this platform there has been the creation of a

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In addition to state sponsored propaganda such as this, there are numerous ad-hoc spaces that have sprung up along the BZ as a response. One such site would be the “Buffer Zone Café,” owned and operated by G-Cs which, up until the early 1990s, served UNFICYP soldiers monitoring the BZ. There are also areas located inside the Buffer Zone where farmers, from both sides, have continued to cultivate their land. One of the most important spaces located in the Buffer Zone is the Ledra Palace Hotel, now HQ for UN. This site has importance as a bicomunal zone, as well as significance as a site of division, where one’s world came to an abrupt end.

What will happen to these sites when the UN moves out of the Ledra Palace Hotel and when the city is slowly reunified? While they were not necessarily planned for, they are now real facts told by the informant (the city) to the historian (planner or architect). If we look at discussions of other cities, Berlin being an especially good example of a city once divided and now reunited, we may be able to generalize and pull out two opposite attitudes and approaches on the extreme ends.
One would say that the Buffer Zone is a mistake, and that when the city is reunified it should be extirpated, bulldozed, and redeveloped to create a new bicomunal space in the city. This new space could take the shape of a pedestrian zone full of cultural amenities and renovated heritage buildings, or it could be a developer driven space for consumption – similar to Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. On the other extreme would lie the position that the Buffer Zone is a valuable part of the history of the island, and that it should be embraced and preserved in its entirety. This space could be museumified like at the French site of Oradour-sur-Glane, a village preserved in ruins with a functioning new town beside it, is an example of this approach taken to its extreme conclusion.

Both of these two alternatives have had their own set of problems when applied in the past, both at Berlin and Oradour-sur-Glane. Perhaps there is an alternative way to approach the reunification of the city of Nicosia. If we view the city within the framework outlined above, one where the words of the informant and the historian are synthesized to create a history that is inclusive of memory, we may we able to navigate between these two extreme positions, and find another way to approach the planning of the UNBZ in the future.
“A fearful symmetry structures this hierarchic separation between the interviewer’s ideas and the informant’s account. The fiction of non-interference turns the dialogue into two monologues: informant’s supply a monologue of brute facts, while historians and anthropologists will supply – later, from the safety of their desks – a monologue of sophisticated ideas that the informant never hears about.”

The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue
- Alessandro Portelli

While such accounts may outline key facts, giving chronological data and some information about the players involved, they do not tell us that much about the desires, dreams, and intentions of the people involved. Work with oral history differs from this in that, as Portelli explains, the informant and the oral historian participate in this process together, engaging in a dialogue rather than two monologues. An excerpt from Papadakis’ Echoes From the Dead Zone perhaps is a good way to begin to illustrate the connection between monologue/dialogue in oral history and how this relates to Nicosia.

7 Portelli, The Battle of Valle Giulia 11.
“One day, I stumbled upon the two [slogans] confronting each other in capitals across the Dead Zone. “I DON’T FORGET” in Greek was inside Lefkosia, while in Lefkosa the reply in Turkish went: “WE WON’T FORGET THE SLAUGHTER EITHER.” They were meant to be read by those on the other side, but since each was written in a language which the other side no longer understood, the effect was largely lost. Two desperate screams that remained unheard. A wall reflected them back.”

_Echoes From the Dead Zone: Across the Cyprus Divide_ - Yiannis Papadakis

He also draws a comparison between the Greek Cypriot Museum of National Struggle, and the Turkish Cypriot Museum with the corresponding name. In this quote he describes similarities in the way that the two museums communicate their histories, without ever communicating to each other.
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“EOKA was spelled out with the photos of the dead heroes on one side, TMT at the other. Old guns EOKA fighters used were shown here to draw the contrast with the modern ones the British and their Turkish collaborators had access to; hand-made guns Turkish Cypriots used in contrast to real ones Greek Cypriots employed were shown in the other. Beyond their common name, the two museums echoed each other in other ways. History was always a history of war; of men; self-centered; our heroes, their terrorists; no mention of others suffering; nothing about people killed by people of their own community; nothing about people also living well”

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What Papadakis describes here are two monologues inscribed in space, broadcast on elements of the urban structure across a spatial divide. When one considers the definition of monologue as “a prolonged talk or discourse by a single speaker, especially one dominating or monopolizing a conversation”, it is clear to see how the above examples could fit into such a definition. Each dominates the conversation by narrating a history that makes no attempt to engage with the other side, not only the other side of the buffer zone, but also with other groups within each side.

There can be no dialogue between them because the wall in the middle that delineates the Green Line reflects them back. At the present moment, this line is drawn in the political and physical space that separates two communities. What would happen to this distortion if this line were gone? If this does indeed become the case, then can the Dead Zone become a space for discourse? Just as the practice of oral history as described by Portelli operates with a process that results in a multi-voiced dialogue, can designers and planners in Nicosia attempt to do this as well? Not by erasing the two monologues, but rather, through a process of synthesis, transform the relationship between them. Is it possible to take architectural and urban structures, thickly embedded in the national historical narrative of their respective sides, which currently speak at each other, and create a dialogue between them?
Although possible reunification is not clearly in sight, it is important to ask these questions now; to formulate a strategy about how to deal with the constituent elements of the anticipated future dialogue so that these elements are not just swept away by a broad hand clearing the board for a new “community” space in Nicosia, such as the proposed design for the nearby Eleftheria Square where smooth concrete forms temper the existing Venetian walls and moat.

There will be significant questions about how to commemorate the legacy of partition of the island, in fact Greek Cypriot president Christofias recently announced that there are plans to erect a monument to the missing of 1974. Monuments have often been accused of invisibility, most famously by Robert Musil who stated that “there’s nothing as invisible as a monument.”

Oftentimes the debates surrounding their creation can be more stimulating and engaging than the actual monument itself, which may fade into the background of everyday life. In fact, James Young suggests that the monument may not be necessary at all; “it may also be true that the surest engagement with memory lies in its perpetual irresolution. In fact, the best German memorial to the Fascist era and its victims may not be a single memorial at all – but simply the never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end.”

The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning
- James Young

11 Young 21.
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A monologue can be easy to ignore, yet as Young suggests, a debate and a dialogue is something that demands attention, and more importantly, engagement with the memory work itself. Perhaps we can look for a way of allowing the existing urban errors contiguous to the Dead Zone and the commemorative architecture on each side of the Green Line to begin this dialogue.

So how do we deal with the open question of how to approach the Dead Zone in the future? Will it be developed in a manner similar to Eleftheria Square? Or transformed into a consumer space and site of intense commemoration as in Berlin? Or reformulated as a heritage zone? If we look at the experience of other cities in whose form conflict had manifested itself, we can imagine possible scenarios for a future reunited Nicosia. The first would be a scenario similar to a 1989 post-reunification Berlin which saw, at the main zone / point of conflict, the development of an internationalized space for consumerism, as at the formerly divided square of Potsdamer Platz, which erases points of reference to the recent conflict. These are manifested at other former points of contact, distributed along the line of the no longer extant border line, whose trace is at best suggested intermittently, as “open wounds” on the landscape, such as at the Topography of Terror, and points of intense and concentrated memorialisation such as at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.
Berlin offers an interesting example as the rush to thoroughly dismantle the Berlin Wall, which once ran for a stretch of 155 kilometers, has been regarded as a mistake by many Germans. A Berlin pastor, Manfred Fischer, had been the head of the Parish of Reconciliation until it was demolished because of its location in the “death strip,” or no-man’s-zone near the wall. He became well known in 1990 for physically chasing away the bulldozers that came near his Parish’s former location to demolish the wall remnants there. This is because he felt that these leftovers would be needed by Berlin’s citizens to come to terms with this history. Due to his efforts, the Berlin Wall remains in this particular area are well preserved. Another advocate of preserving this heritage was well known British architect Richard Rogers, who was a member of the post-wall Berlin planning committee. Although he advocated that this “historically unique” structure should be considered as an important element in future planning, his advice was ignored. Berlin’s experience with post-conflict reconstruction suggests that hasty decisions about destroying the architectural legacy of partition may merit more consideration.

The destruction and rebuilding of architecture is one media that allows for the execution of the project of re-inventing the past in order to build a future based on the interests of the present. Of course, one knee-jerk response to reunification is to erase traces of the architectural legacy of partition itself in order to rebuild a less divisive past. Yet removing those authentic traces of the human reaction to the constraints and pressures of partition may result in a loss that may not be immediately recognizable, since while the new city must look to the future, it must deal with the past as well. In fact it was not until the 1980’s, some thirty odd years later, that young Germans became increasingly interested in the history of National Socialism and its legacy. Only then did a movement begin to, literally, unearth this history at the site of the former Gestapo Headquarters at the Topography of Terror. Because the site “for this second generation stood for those memories, social hauntings, of a traumatic past that could never be known to them personally. The name [Gestapo Terrain] signified the second generation’s emotional search for a past that would always be unknown...”
Another possible route is one where the revitalization of heritage has been used to create a new urban space, one that hearkens to a more distant past and does not directly address the more recent conflict. The current strategy for urban heritage-based regeneration embraced by the Nicosia Master Plan Team, with rehabilitation projects in several old city neighbourhoods such as Arab Ahmet and Crysalinotissa, suggests that this may be a direction that Nicosia may head towards. While placing value on historical buildings and protecting traditional urban fabric is a more than worthy endeavour, it by itself may not be enough to deal with the ghosts of a more recent past. And this is not an inheritance that the city can afford to ignore, but rather the city is the forum in which historical disturbances and discord can be processed. Likewise, the extirpation of the Dead Zone in the future, in order to make room for community space that is commercially driven, may not provide the answer either.

Conclusion

Much has been written about how the destruction of architecture and cultural heritage is used to physically erase the memory of a people and a community having existed; the eradication of Jewish synagogues by the Germans, of Palestinian mosques by the Israelis, of Muslim heritage by the Serbians, of Armenian architecture by the Turks, of Tibetan architecture by the Chinese. These attacks on built heritage were an important component of a plan to erase the presence of the history of a people from the land. Indeed this has been documented as occurring in Cyprus with the vandalization of many of the 502 Greek Orthodox churches located in the north. Fortunately, this orientation has shifted under the framework of the Nicosia Master Plan with the regeneration of several historic areas of the city mentioned above.

On the other hand, what has not been the subject of such scrutiny is the post-conflict destruction of the architectural legacy of partition itself. While this has been somewhat explored in the case of Berlin, especially in terms of the regret of the loss of important sites and the excavation of the Topography of Terror site, it does merit further study since it is clear that the phenomenon of divided cities is not behind us. Some thought should be given to developing an approach to this unique urban condition, and perhaps techniques used by historians in relation to oral sources can begin to give architects and planners some direction towards such an approach.

When dealing with troublesome heritage there may be two extreme responses, ranging from complete preservation and museumification on the one hand, to a desire to get rid of this awkward heritage all together in order to build a future where that trace of the past is not so present and tangible. This issue is of course one that historians have dealt with quite a bit, and the work of historians like Portelli seeks to address this by piecing together a history that includes testimony in the original voice. Architects and planners can borrow from this approach to history in terms of the value of including “error” in the original voice and working towards a “dialogue” between the informant (city) and the historian (architect). This approach may allow a manoeuvring away from these extreme responses in order to find another more appropriate way to address the planning of the Buffer Zone in the future, planning that does not immediately and irrevocably remove traces of a partition that has been the significant and formative factor in the development of the city.

In the recent past it has become increasingly difficult to find a language for commemoration and there has been a growing general dissatisfaction with monuments and memorials. This “monologue” of commemoration, encapsulated in the traditional monument, is problematic. Perhaps the approach of oral history, inclusive and interpretive of “error”, can offer a new language for commemoration that is a “dialogue” of urban memories of Nicosia.
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“There was one place left where one could stand with one’s feet on the ground, still inside the island, not on one side, nor on the other, yet in touch with both: the Dead Zone.”

Echoes From the Dead Zone: Across the Cyprus Divide  - Yiannis Papadakis

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