

Housing Rehabilitation as a Means of Urban Regeneration and Population Integration

Andreas L. Savvides

Abstract—The proposed paper examines strategies whose aim is to counter the all too often sighted process of abandonment that characterizes contemporary cities. The city of Nicosia in Cyprus is used as an indicative case study, whereby several recent projects are presented as capitalizing on traditional cultural assets to revive the downtown. The reuse of existing building stock as museums, performing arts centers and theaters but also as in the form of various housing typologies is geared to strengthen the ranks of local residents and to spur economic growth. Unlike the examples from the 1960s, the architecture of more recent adaptive reuse for urban regeneration seems to be geared in reinforcing a connection to the city where the buildings often reflect the characteristics of their urban context.

Keywords—Public Housing, Building Rehabilitation, Urban Regeneration, Population Integration

I. INTRODUCTION

SINCE the late 1980s the encouragement and assistance given by the European Union to both economic and cultural development has benefited city-regions, as representative sites for the European common heritage and inheritance – many of these displayed idealistically for local residents, as well as tourists, business and leisure and cultural activities [1]. A focus then on the process and practice of holistic planning in dealing with the segmented city has to be on its ability to turn its cultural core to comparative advantage.

Many cities that have succeeded in using the cultural and economic value of the historic core are emulated and looked to as successful proponents not only of culture-led regeneration, but more generally of urban regeneration and social reintegration. Cities in many European countries have sought to understand the dynamics of cities in the United States, which have triggered regeneration through their waterfront and downtown redevelopments. The celebration of American urban arts and regeneration was promulgated in Europe in the late 1980s, while writers such as Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs have been influencing these initiatives since the early 1960s [2, 3 & 4]. Jacobs, in particular believed that the practice of braking with the past had caused disservice to the city and its natural sense of order and space. Twenty years down the road, the opportunity to rethink urban regeneration in Nicosia to both create a cohesive and unified perception of the city, but also to accommodate an influx of new residents has become a necessity that cannot be ignored further. This may be seen in terms of integrating the preservation of the architectural heritage of the historic city and the need to accommodate the socioeconomic needs of a migrant population as a strategy for urban renewal and housing rehabilitation where others have failed.

Andreas L. Savvides is with AIA AICP LEED® AP Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture University of Cyprus, PO Box 20537, 1678 Nicosia Tel: +357-22892967 | Fax: +357-22660834 | als@ucy.ac.cy

II. DEVELOPING A CONTEXT-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR URBAN REGENERATION

A strategy for a public-private partnership to promote urban renewal and housing rehabilitation in a city's under-utilized and under-populated core should ask whether it should be broadly defined as a plan to find contextual value by utilizing and reinforcing the culture of that place [5]. It is also imperative to have the critical population density to make it more than an interesting destination and to transform it to a desirable mixed-use residential community where people live, work and entertain themselves. Some plans are deemed successful by integrating the cultural importance of their fabric with issues of economic development, quality of life and spiritual and human development.

These issues are now being recognized in many cities as vital and rely on integrated and inclusionary planning as a way to bring this about [6]. But with heritage and other forms of cultural tourism fast multiplying in many cities, historic towns and natural heritage sites [7], these urban clusters should remain aware that of the experience of many actual local economic development efforts over the 1980s. The lesson learned is that it pays to realize the potential benefits of consolidating the segmented dynamics of a historic core by coupling the induction of a pioneering migrant population with a city's plans to restore, conserve and advance a roadmap for a productive future that includes contextual renewal and good quality housing.

Differing approaches to urban renewal and housing rehabilitation through cultural development depends in part on the obvious social and political differences that pertain to the influence of cultural heritage and symbolism inherent in cities. Forces of cultural convergence suggest that the factors leading to culture-led or at least culture-influenced city regeneration are largely common [8], while the nature and scope of cultural city formation is also influenced by not only cultural preferences and levels of participation in planning, but also perceived political stability.

In Nicosia, Cyprus, the tragic events of 1974 have culminated in the physical partition of the city and the island in general. The buffer zone splits the downtown into two separated urban parts that have been developing independently of each other, thus causing the disintegration and segmentation of the city's entity. The division of the city provoked the abandonment of the central area adjacent to the buffer zone, which lost its identity as the city's residential and commercial epicenter and its capacity to attract investment and activities. The decay of the housing stock and the socio-economic decline of the walled city have also been direct results and the extensive urban sprawl which characterizes the outskirts further intensified both the actual as well as the perceived segmentation of the city (Figures 1 & 2 below).

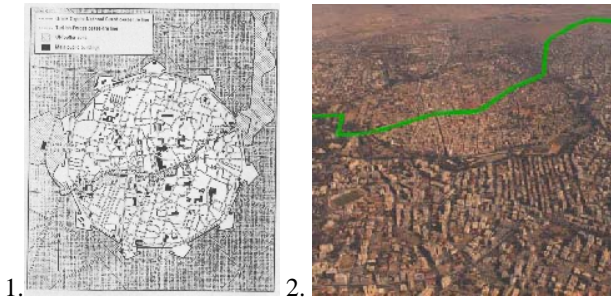


Fig. 1 Plan of Nicosia Walled City & Historic Core
 Fig. 2 Oblique Aerial Photo of Capital Region

Despite deeply felt differences, Nicosia's two communities established a close cooperation in the late 1970s in order to address the problems, which have emerged as a result of the transformation of the structure of the city. In 1978 the representatives of the two communities agreed to work together for the presentation of a common sewerage seeking to increase and improve the city's services and in 1979, they agreed to extend this collaboration to the preparation of a common Master Plan aiming to improve the present and future living conditions of all the inhabitants of Nicosia, both the traditional ethnic groups, as well as the influx of migrants and immigrants.

III. THE NICOSIA MASTER PLAN AS A BASIS FOR URBAN RENEWAL AND HOUSING REHABILITATION

The Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) is an ongoing bi-communal project, which began in 1979, under the umbrella of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The NMP and the Nicosia Sewerage bi-communal projects apart from the benefits towards the improvement of the existing and future living conditions for all the inhabitants of the city, led to the development of an entirely new strategy towards peace building [9]. In times when political and inter-communal tension still marred relations between the two major communities of the island, the people of the NMP team had meetings on a regular basis, in order to promote the realization of the Nicosia Master Plan. The meetings took place twice a month and the members of the team were generally exchanging opinions and experiences on the various aspects arising from the implementation of a series of projects.

During the preparation phases of the NMP, as well as during the implementation phase, a number of study tours to foreign countries were organized by the United Nations Operations (UNOPS), in order to help the technical team of the NMP to gain experiences from divided and re-united cities around the world. In 1993 members of the team again visited the re-united city of Berlin, where the experience of the unification of this divided European capital stands as an excellent example for the people of Cyprus in general.

Consequently, a general development strategy was proposed, based on the need to concentrate and consolidate the city and which supported land-use policies for housing, industry and education, green and open spaces; the structure of the Central Business District (CBD); the revitalization of the walled city, giving priority to the rehabilitation of old

residential neighborhoods, to community development and population increase; and the siting of major institutional and cultural facilities and regional and town parks and other areas of leisure.

IV. THE HOUSING SITUATION IN THE CITY CENTER

The very essential issue of providing a good standard of mixed-use residential infrastructure to adequately cover the needs at the core of Nicosia's swelling population is still at its early stages and the more the decoupling or housing rehabilitation and development from urban renewal remains in place, the bigger the opportunity loss of maximizing the social and economic benefits of their combined dynamic (Figures 3 & 4 below).

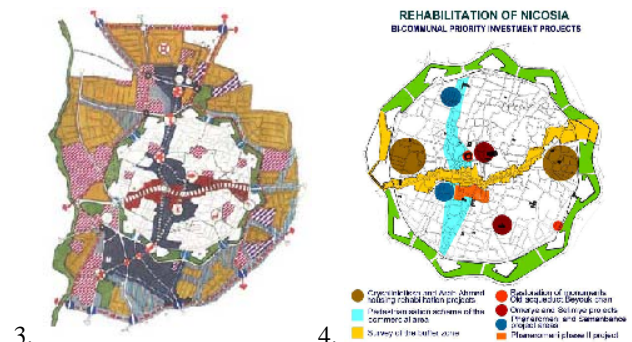


Fig. 3 Strategic Plan of Nicosia Downtown
 Fig. 4 Priority investment Areas in Walled City

Residents of the walled city are currently facing problems in relation to the quantity and quality of their accommodation and overcrowding, overcharging and poor quality living conditions [10] are the norm. In this regard, the governments in the European Union in general are in the process of setting up common housing standards, which would try to improve living conditions both for local residents as well as for migrant and immigrant populations and to strengthen the control of inspection services. In the context of migrant workers, the Cypriot employer is obliged to provide accommodation of adequate standards and conditions to the foreign worker and is allowed to deduct up to 10% of the salary for this costs [10]. However, because of overcharging, as mentioned above, many people tend to crowd into limited quarters in order to save money. Moreover, while the Ministry of Interior is responsible for housing policy, Social Welfare Services (SWS) of the Ministry of Labor also get involved in the provision of certain housing and support benefits, such as rent allowance for recipients of public assistance [10]. In the case studies identified below and forming part of the initial phases of housing stock rehabilitation in the area, the refurbished housing units have indeed been offered to indigenous residents and to families of refugee status and these communities show healthy signs of development. However, the segmented nature of refurbishing certain neighborhoods together with the existence of dilapidated quarters and the separation and clustering caused by prevalent ethnic divides of both indigenous and migrant and immigrant populations has prevented a holistic understanding of the actual housing needs

of the area. Furthermore, the fragmentation of efforts, though significant in the silo in which they take place, has prevented the efficient and cohesive treatment of the existing housing stock and the potential for mixed-use residential infill. Lastly, these unilateral efforts have failed to recognize the benefits of the comprehensive coupling of cultural and residential development strategies.

V. HOUSING REHABILITATION IN SELECTED NEIGHBORHOODS

Under the auspices of UNDP [11] and within the framework of the Nicosia Master Plan [12], reports were prepared delving on physical, cultural and socioeconomic aspects of the city. The most severe urban redevelopment problems include physical decay and decline; abandonment due to light to the suburbs, a confusing vehicular traffic pattern causing accessibility problems to the historic core and unsafe pedestrian movement coupled with lack of open green spaces related to the housing stock.

Consequently, the Nicosia Master Plan team advocated a series of integrated priority projects to be initiated as the "Walled City Revitalization Policy." As part of this effort the first steps were taken – in the Selimiye Neighborhood improvement project, the Arabahmet Neighborhood improvement project and the Chrysaliniotissa Neighborhood improvement project – to put emphasis on housing stock rehabilitation, the upgrading community facilities and services, the induction of landscaping and traffic management (Figures 5 & 6 below).



Fig. 5 Before Renovation; Fig. 6 After Renovation

While these projects contribute directly to the revitalization of these old residential neighborhoods they are also geared towards a reintegration with the commercial core of the city [13]. It is to be stressed that these projects must be supported by development controls and the application of a variety of incentives for private development and participation, so that these combined efforts may culminate in establishing a conservation and rehabilitation program in which both the public and private sectors will participate.

In light of the socio-economic status of the walled city it is evident that the conservation policy should be based on an integrated planning approach with emphasis on the social structure of the area, defining its potential to ensure a productive future for the neighborhoods below:

A. The Selimiye Neighborhood

This is the traditional center of the Walled City where the Selimiye Mosque (St. Sophia cathedral) and other important monuments and historic buildings are located, covering a space of eight hectares mostly used for commercial purposes.

The area south and west of the Selimiye Mosque, being traditionally a commercial center, was developed in oriental fashion with one-storey shops bordering narrow streets full of activities. In addition to refurbishment of the housing stock and ensuring the live-work potential of the existing, as well as proposed typologies, the project includes the rehabilitation and pedestrianization of adjoining streets to facilitate linkage and redevelopment therein and across to empty lots and infrastructure on the eastern border of this area [9]. Additionally, accessibility has shown improvement as a result of a major bus depot and the incorporation of municipal parking.

B. The Arabahmet Neighborhood

This is a fairly compact neighborhood (mahalle) at the western part of the Walled City. It is one of the few parts of the historic core which preserved its original street pattern, urban fabric and architectural and environmental character and disposition. It consists of blocks of two-storey, mixed-use residential buildings with integrated courtyards enclosed by high walls and auxiliary buildings, such as kitchens, laundry areas, lavatories and / or bathrooms. The fabric dates back to the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. There are 60 separate structures, accommodating 71 housing units, with 200 inhabitants and 1670 sq.m. of commercial and light industrial space. 80% of that building stock is in very poor structural condition and there is a lack of private owners' interest to invest in their properties [9]. Proposals could include doubling the usable floor area by increasing density through the incorporation of additional floors and infilling of empty plots with new mixed-use housing units that respect the existing typology.

C. The Chrysaliniotissa Neighborhood

This residential is one of the oldest and most characteristic of the Walled City of Nicosia. It has been selected for implementation of "integrated conservation" of an area that covers some 2.5 hectares. It is located at the eastern edge of the walled city, it borders the buffer zone to the northwest and it is adjacent to the Famagusta Gate, with a current population size of about 350 people. Usually the migrant households, of which there are several in the quarter, are low-income and of small size. The indigenous households in the area are owner-occupiers. The low-income situation of both owner occupiers and tenants, the relative neglect of this area by the property owners and its proximity to the buffer zone, have been the main factors contributing to the general deterioration of the buildings and the overall residential environment. The total housing stock in the study area is 162 units out of which 120 are occupied [9]. Many of these houses are listed because of their architectural or environmental value, but more than half of them are in very poor structural condition and most of the rest are only barely above standard. The suggestion is to promote an integrated approach to the rehabilitation of the area, based primarily on positive public activity and investment with strict development controls and appropriate incentives.

Maximum emphasis has been given to housing rehabilitation as a means of improving the residential environment, attracting younger and economically active households, stimulating owner occupation and increasing the population of the area [13]. This may be achieved through the acquisition of vacant sites for new public housing development (about 17 units), the acquisition of vacant houses for rehabilitation (27 in all) and the provision of housing grants covering about 50% of the total cost of about 108 houses of significant architectural value. The overall objective is to increase the occupied housing stock from the present level of 120 to 162 housing units so that the population could be increased from its present size of 350 to about 600 residents [9]. An additional proposal would be to provide basic community facilities and services – through public investment, including the necessary land acquisition – such as a kindergarten, a community center / medical center / old people’s center, a hostel and a municipal market, so as to encourage development and integration of the expanding neighborhood with the rest of the urban fabric and the neighborhoods beyond the Walled City. The provision of open space should accompany improvements to the existing public garden and the open space that might be created in the backyards of the Ayios Kassianos housing block, whose central location will function as the main social meeting point for the area. The traffic problem may be resolved by peripheral access loops linking the area with the primary road. Linked to these access roads, three parking places are proposed with a combined for about 92 cars, while the rest of the area may be pedestrianized.

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the post-industrial world, a vibrant historic district has come to take on the significance as a profitable factory with a big production line or an airport terminal. By becoming both a venue of gainful socioeconomic production as well as a destination in and of itself, urban renewal and housing rehabilitation in a city’s historic core may be perceived by entrepreneurial administrators as a means to gain a competitive advantage over their regional and global neighbors [14]. More than testaments of civic pride they are more realistically seen as the new residential districts of choice and as job creators in the local evolving economies.

However, one should safeguard against the piecemeal development of a regeneration zone [8], as this may lead to fragmentation of effect and it may result in an architectural cacophony that is lacking the cohesion and harmony that a well conceived master-plan brings to the table. Given the experience and evolution of planning for the Walled City of Nicosia within the framework of the urban regeneration era, it is important to ask how far this experience has informed current policy and practice and where the master-planning effort will progress next in terms of professional, institutional and cultural interests in the divided City of Nicosia. It is also important to understand the dynamics of the stakeholders in the city’s core, but rather to translate and customize strategies of urban renewal and housing rehabilitation into the local reality.

A comparative framework may be provided by the growing number and longevity of cities experiencing the regeneration and repositioning of their economic base as a result – in part at least – of the adaptive reuse of their cultural stock. Consequently, a more holistic approach may be demanded to measure the impact of regeneration initiatives on urban and economic development. Urban regeneration, in one important sense, may draw parallels with community planning approaches – assuming more inclusionary policies and resource allocation processes, both through a spatial and environmental focus. In doing so, it may rely less on the promising potential of cultural heritage and the arts and more so on the dynamic aspect of an exceptionally diverse and driven community that occupies the rehabilitated housing stock.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgments and sincere thanks for their support and sharing of a wealth of information go to the personnel of the Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) at the Nicosia Municipality and to NMP’s InfoBox and to their colleagues at the Office of European Affairs.

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