ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to examine the possibility of designers serving as mediators between the civil society and the national and local governments. The research focuses on the unoccupied side of the walled city of Nicosia, Cyprus, and it examines notions and socially engaged design practices of place-making and co-existence in contested public spaces (F. Tonkiss 2013). The public realm of a city is often considered to be a ‘contested space’, on the grounds that in all contemporary cities there are disputes around the domestication and privatization of the public space, and in most cities there are debates regarding equality in class, gender, age and ethnicity. However, a divided city like Nicosia, which deals with these debates on a daily basis, is set to negotiate at the same time issues anent of the claim of territory and of national belonging (F. Graffikin et al. 2010). The paper will assay the characteristics of the ‘contested space’ and of the ‘public space’ through the analysis of a chosen case study: Phaneromeni Square. The analysis will reveal the need for active co-existence in Phaneromeni Square. The social tensions in and of the space will be analysed through two temporary spatial interventions that were designed and delivered by the author, and took place in the Square in Spring 2014. These interventions aimed to encourage ‘active co-existence’ between the various users of Phaneromeni Square. During the two interventions the designer acted as a mediator and encouraged the participants to become makers and simultaneously co-creative methods for the urban design were tested.

Keywords: co-creation, contested space, conflict, co-existence, place-making, redevelopment of neighbourhoods

1 INTRODUCTION

For the last decade there has been a participatory ‘turn’ in urban planning, place-making and architecture. Following a long period of impassivity coming after the 1960s and 1970s, citizen participation in planning has now grown into an eloquent movement in Europe (J. Stenberg, 2013). This paper aims to examine how the designer, through the practice of socially engaged design, can become a mediator between the active civil society and the local and central governments in order to be able to achieve successful place-making and active co-existence in contested public spaces. Through the analysis of Phaneromeni Square, in the unoccupied walled city of Nicosia, Cyprus, as a case study of a highly contested public space within the south side of the walled city we will examine the importance of an engaged civil society in the co-creation of the urban and more specifically in the redevelopment of contested public spaces. Moreover, we will discuss the notion of socially engaged design and how co-creation and participation are key elements of its process.
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The south side of the walled city of Nicosia, a recently gentrified area, now forming the city centre is a complex site. The city has been divided since 1963, and is currently the last divided capital of Europe. Although a master-plan was initiated in 1979 at a meeting between the Greek–Cypriot and Turkish–Cypriot communities of Nicosia under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and it is still running, the area has been sporadically developed by private investors resulting in gentrification. The centre of the unoccupied walled city has become a Mecca of coffee shops, restaurants and bars, which has fomented conflicts between the residents, the shop owners, the local authority, the users of the public space and the Church. This paper is set to examine to what extent can healthy coexistence be achieved in the redeveloped public spaces of the unoccupied walled city of Nicosia, by analysing the case study of Phaneromeni Square, one of the most gentrified public spaces within the walls.

2 THE CASE OF PHANEROMENI SQUARE: A CONTESTED PUBLIC SPACE

Pheneromeni Square is situated in the south side of the walled city of Nicosia and links the two main arteries of the walled city. The square has been named after Phaneromeni Church, which is the largest Greek Orthodox Church within the city walls and owns shops, offices and other buildings in the area (K. Keshishian 1978) (Figure 1 & 2).

Figure 1. Map of Nicosia and location of Phaneromeni Square. Source: map by author, 2013.
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Prior to the Turkish troops invasion in 1974 the Square acted as the city centre. Nicosians and residents from the near-by cities would shop on the main commercial streets, which surrounded the Square. The area of Phaneromeni, with the Square as a focal point, has been through dramatic changes over the years, especially from the 1950’s onwards, both in terms of infrastructure and identity, and has been consistently connected to socio-political developments and conflicts. The word conflict is defined by the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1992, pp 294) as a "[…] serious disagreement or argument about something important", or as a "[…] serious difference between two or more beliefs, ideas, or interests, which cannot be reconciled." In the context of Phaneromeni Square the word conflict could be interpreted to mean both, as throughout the history and the present of the Square there have been physical conflicts and arguments that rooted from the difference of political beliefs, ideas and sometimes of [spatial and political] interests between either i) Nicosians and the local authorities, ii) Nicosians and business owners of the area, iii) Greek-Cypriot activists and nationalists iv) the residents and the local authorities, v) Nicosians and the Church.

Since 1974, and as the commercial and leisure centre of Nicosia shifted to Eleftheria Square, the area of Phaneromeni became a ‘back’ area (Deepa & Trenton, 2010, pp. 209). This begun to change in the late 1990s, when an urban sub-culture emerges, following the opening of a café in the area. Young people who frequented the coffee shop also spent time in the Square, mainly under and around a tree, which they named ‘Manolis’, after a Greek children’s song, because of the circular bench that was at the time bolted around the tree. This signified the beginning of an ever-growing sub-culture that used and still uses
the Square as a functioning public space for leisure, exchange and expression of social and political views. The sub-culture that had developed in the area (young people with anarchist, anti-authoritarian and activist views) and used Phaneromeni Square as their hang-out spot brought frustration to the elderly, mostly churchgoers and shop owners, who begun to feel unsafe. In 2010, Ionas Nikolaou (at the time MP and Vice President of the right-wing party DISY) described the Square as the ‘Exarchia’ of Nicosia. The comparison to the troubled neighbourhood in Athens, Greece (where many socialist, anarchist and antifascist groups are accommodated and which is perpetually policed) resulted in negative connotations to the area of Phaneromeni and cultivated fear amongst the locals. At the time the media regularly mentioned the area and formal discussions took place regarding the safety of Phaneromeni. Moreover, the area was perpetually policed and conflicts between the activist groups and the rioting police would often take place. The negative connotation for crime in the area has driven the local authority to gentrify it in an extremely fast pace, in order to chase away any type of what is considered antisocial behavior. An action that urban sociologist Sharon Zukin calls ‘pacification by cappuccino’, or ‘domestication by cappuccino’, in order to describe public spaces, which have been recaptured by middle class at the expense of other users (S. Zukin, 1995, D. Harvey, 2008). Over the past two years three new coffee shops have opened in Phaneromeni Square, and the two neighbouring main streets, Onasagorou Street and Ledra Street have been filled with new cafés, restaurants and bars; as a result the influx of Nicosians in the area has risen dramatically.

The activist groups, who gather in the Square, often hang banners onto the walls of the surrounding buildings that express their opposition to the ongoing development of the area (Figure 3). Van Melik et al. (2007, pp. 25-42) discuss how the citizens’ needs regarding to public space change as their behaviour and living conditions change and how the growing distinction of lifestyles can result to conflicts between users of public space. Moreover, Ali Mandanipour notes that public spaces are subject to serious competition between the stakeholders in a neighbourhood, as each group tries to dominate and appropriate the space. The group of activists and anarchists are raising concerns in regards to the area’s continuous development, highlighting the fact that in the near future the Square (and their hang-out spot) will exist no more, as the coffee shops have taken over most of the public space with their furniture.

Figure 3. Banners hang in a central point of the Square by activist groups. Source: Picture by author
The Municipality in an effort to limit the coffee shops from taking over the public space of the Square has drawn a red dashed line across Phaneromeni Square and the two main arteries of the area, Onasagorou Street and Ledra Street; the coffee shop owners are required to keep their furniture within the red line. With this action the Municipality of Nicosia has created a new type of border, in the already divided walled city. In the main arteries of the unoccupied centre of the walled city the private space is now physically separated from the public. Jane Jacobs points out the active characters of borders in the city, and goes on to stress how physical borders do not simply indicate divisions in space but help constitute them (F. Tonkiss, 2005). Similarly, public benches, which were left on the same side as the coffee shops, were removed soon after the establishment of the red line and replaced by the coffee shop furniture. David Harvey (2008, pp. 32) indicates that, “we increasingly live in divided and conflict-prone urban areas”, whether that means economically and class divided, gender divided, or ethnically divided (F. Graffkin et al, 2010).

Besides the socio-political conflicts, taking place in the Square, conflicts anent ownership and the use of public space also fuel the contestation. The battle over the Square between the many stakeholders and the citizens is creating further social tensions and conflicts and one could argue that this has resulted in a division between Nicosians; a different kind of ‘buffer zones’ as urbanists and theorists recently have begun describing it (Politis Newspaper 2013). David Goldberg described the notion of ‘buffer zones’ in cities as the way to segregate and defuse urban space (F. Tonkis, 2005). This analysis draws upon the metaphoric use of the word ‘buffer zones’, and upon Devid Goldberg’s definition, in order to stress out the social segregation in the area. At present it seems that the citizens who live in or visit the area are divided between different types of groups.

3 ABOUT ‘ACTIVE CO-EXISTENCE AND PLACE-MAKING’

The new ‘bufferzones’, that have been created in Phaneromeni Square, as a result of its recent gentrification raise the question of coexistence: How can these different groups coexist in one Square without any conflicts? When Hannah Arendt in her 1958 book, The Human Condition (p. 180), defined the notion of ‘publicness’ she wrote:

“The revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness. […] Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.”

Lefebvre (1996) noted that the city can appropriate political, religious and philosophical contexts through the buildings, monuments, streets, squares and chance encounters, which may take place within the urban. Cities allow [chance and/or intentional] interaction and connection between people. Public spaces or civic spaces cannot be static (C. Cumbrerlidge et al. 2007) and must be able to make room for debate, exchange and multiplicity. Planning is, therefore, central
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to a conflict’s resolution in the city, as space may facilitate the overall conflict, and planning is the main instrument for social shaping (Graffikin et al., 2010). Bollens (2012) discusses how urban strategies and policies that can improve the city experience, could assist manage conflict in polarized cities and help create a mutual co-existence between the citizens. The term co-existence is defined as the state of existing together usually peacefully (C. Couild, 19887, C.Cumberlidge et al., 2007). Co-existence may well be passive, a basic form of urban sociology, which may appear as dissociation (F.Tonkiss, 2005), that allows us simply to co-exist without interaction, with the large amount of other citizens using, passing through the same space as us. This paper uses the term ‘active co-existence’, rather than simply co-existence, as it examines ways that the urban and more specifically the public spaces can facilitate interaction and happenstance between strangers.

Going back to Phaneromeni Square, and the fear of the privatization of the public space, due to the recent café creep and the incidents of public furniture removal by the local authorities, this paper would like to point-out the close connection between place-making and active co-existence, and how when the first is successfully achieved can accommodate the latter. Mandaninpour (2010) stressed how public spaces can bring people together and help improve the quality of life in a neighbourhood that is, when the design responds to the users’ needs and can be used for different purposes. Lynch (1960) defines place as an environment which is well organised and at the same time poetic and symbolic. Lynch’s notion of place accommodates the individuals and their complex society, as well as their aspirations, culture and historical tradition. Lynch points out that when a sense of place is achieved, it enhances every human activity and encourages its development based on personal narratives and memories. Such sense of place is achieved through the successful combination of the physical environment and lived culture, the heritage of an area, the local values of the community and the deposit of memory trace. Therefore, sense of place and identity can lead to successful place-making (C. Cumbererlidge et al. 2007).

3.1 THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER

Designers can act as key actors in creating a dialogue between the users and the local authorities, in order to achieve successful place-making and therefore active co-existence in conflict prone areas. The author of this research, uses the term socially engaged design, and understands it to be a field of design that addresses and engages with current social issues. Reaching beyond solely designing or reshaping the urban, public services and policies, socially engaged design has as a mission to contribute in a positive manner towards the improvement of social structures and interactions and plan for future societal challenges. Its process and implementation is participatory and requires in-depth engagement of the civil society in all its stages; from research through to design, production and evaluation, and this is its main difference from similar fields such as social design, or socially responsive design (A. Thorpe & L.Gamman, 2011). At the same time, in contradiction to Papanek’s (1984) notion of socially responsible design, the author understands that design does not have the power to shape the environment and the society on its own. Nevertheless, the designer can act as facilitator in order to bridge the civil society and the local and national governments, in order to produce socially engaged environments.
In Spring 2014 two interventions were designed and executed by the author, in Phaneromeni Square. The aim was to understand the audience and investigate and interrogate the possibility of active co-existence and interaction between the diverse groups that use the Square. Moreover, the role of the designer as a mediator between the active civil society and the local and central government was tested. The Municipality of Nicosia was informed and granted permission to the author to hold the interventions in the Square. Although the Municipality expressed interest in being informed of the outcomes they did not attend the events. The two interventions focused only on two of the groups, the coffee shop visitors and the groups using the Square (anarchists, activists, antiauthoritarians). The first intervention was designed based on findings acquired from extensive interviews with the different groups identified earlier in the text, and it aimed to:

1. Introduce the project to the audience;
2. Find out the audience’s needs and thoughts on the Square;
3. Interrogate the habits of the cafe users; why do they not use the public space instead?
4. Investigate if a friendlier appearance of the Square would encourage cafe users to use the public space for leisure instead of the cafés;
5. Investigate and interrogate the possibility of active co-existence and interaction of the diverse groups that use the Square (interaction within the group of café visitors, further interaction within the group of young people who already frequent the Square, and interaction between the two different groups).

During the first intervention, entitled ‘Re-Design Phaneromeni’, Nicosians were asked to re-design and create their ideal Square. A three-wheeled bicycle was used for the purpose of this intervention, inspired by the independent Cypriot food-stall holders. This allowed the first intervention to be less threatening to the visitors of the Square, as it did not appropriate one specific area and it moved around Phaneromeni Square (Figure 4).
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The audience was asked to leave their ideas on an A3 sized black and white Square panorama, using the technique of collage (cut-outs of trees, benches and canopies). In addition, the audience was able to sketch, doodle and share their thoughts or stories on the panoramic pictures (Figure 5). Most of the audience, both coffee shop users and anarchists, activists and anti-authoritarians, in contradiction to the Municipality’s actions of removing the public benches from the Square, drew or noted that they would like to see more public seating in the Square, also more greenery, more colour and the possibility for play.

Following the results of Re-Design Phaneromeni’, the second intervention was
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designed and named sit.move.play. Intervention No. 2 aimed to:

1. Investigate if a friendlier appearance of the Square would encourage cafe users to use the public space for leisure instead of the cafés.

2. Investigate and interrogate the possibility of the healthy coexistence and interaction between the diverse groups that use the Square (interaction within the group of café visitors, further interaction within the group of young people who already frequent the Square, and interaction between the two different groups).

Inspired by the tree in Phaneromeni Square that is named ‘Manolis’ after the Greek children’s song and game, ten traditional coffee-shop chairs were placed in the middle of the Square, following the pattern that the chairs are set-up for the game ‘musical chairs’ (Figure 6). This particular game was chosen for Intervention No. 2, as the set-up is something familiar and recognizable to everyone. Each chair was given a colourful speech bubble, which said: "Welcome to Phaneromeni. You can move me around, follow the sun or the shade. But you can’t take me home with you. Oh! And don’t forget to make a mark of my new position with the chalk that you can find in the envelope hanging on my back”.

![Figure 6. Intervention No. 2 set-up. Source: picture by author.](image)

The chalk drawing created a physical diagram on the Square, of the flow of the chairs and at the same time provided a sense of play to the intervention. The intervention was overall a success, as many passers-by stopped, read the speech bubbles and either decided to move them and draw on the floor and then move on, or use them in order to sit and enjoy the sun. Mostly children found quite amusing to move the chairs and draw on the floor the new position that they would give them every time. During the intervention some of the participants were approached and introduced to the project further and were
asked why they chose to sit on the chairs and what they thought of the intervention. Most people said that they wanted a place to sit in order to eat, read, or enjoy the sun and the chairs were in the right place at the right time. It is necessary to note that the chairs acted as a medium of interaction between the Square visitors and users as people would ask each other about the intervention and the ones who were sitting there for some time would explain to new-comers (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Participants conversing between them. Source. Picture by the author.

It is important for the entire neighbourhood to be accommodated in Phaneromeni Square and all the different groups that have formed over the process of its revitalisation to be able to co-exist. The second intervention proved that by giving the audience a simple tool such as a seat that they can move freely around the Square, without payment, could become a base for co-existence between the many different groups that use the Square. These parallel worlds define the Square’s identity. How can the identity of Phaneromeni survive without the sub-culture that has been there for over a decade to move because they don’t have any square left to hangout, or the residents having to relocate due to the fact that they cannot handle the overflow of visitors? Moreover, how can the revitalisation of the Square be sustained over the years, and not be overthrown by any economical or political changes that will take place on the island. A third intervention will take place in December 2014, taking the form of a round table discussion where the participants will be members from the group of activists, anarchists and anti-authoritarians and café users. A representative from the local authority will be invited to participate. During the round table discussion the above questions will be discussed and the role of the designer in the process of the redevelopment of public spaces will be analysed.

4 CONCLUSION

Bollens (1999) discusses how “places of conflict are points of departure for innovative practice, viewing conflict and contested areas as opportunities to rethink intervention and urbanism, to ‘radicalize the local’ so we can see through to the political – economic logics of power and advantages that lie behind urban forms and processes.” The redevelopment of the public spaces of the unoccupied old city of Nicosia should be used as an opportunity for innovative practice in
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urbanism in Cyprus. The designer can act as a ‘trigger’ and facilitator for community engagement and co-creation. Manzini (2014) discusses the importance of a designer and how they can act as ‘triggers’ to start new social conversations; designers can operate as key factors by designing with and designing for communities. Through the use of creativity designers can ‘make things happen’, and therefore further develop and sustain the social conversation in place-making and developing the urban.

Using Phaneromeni Square as a case study of a public space, which accommodates socio-political conflicts and deals with issues about ownership and of privatization of public space, this paper examined how the civil society can be engaged in the process of the redevelopment and of managing conflict in contested public spaces. This paper examined the practice of socially engaged design and how it can enhance active co-existence and place-making. Civil societies can be activated through the mediation of designers in order to co-create the urban public spaces that they inhabit, but they can also contribute to the creation of policies in regards to place-making.

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