

# Learning from traditional built environment of Cyprus: Re-interpretation of the contextual values

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## Abstract

Last century witnessed the tragic results of ethnic separations between Turkish and Greek Cypriots, which were the two main communities of Cyprus Island. Both communities; that used to live mixed together on the same geography, shared the same history, culture, lifestyle and moreover the future. Nowadays, the bi-communal efforts on the Island, encouraged by the international society, provide the opportunity to union and heal the traces of the traumatic division. The new century promises a rapid increase in the welfare of Cypriots parallel to the solution of the political dispute. The sudden change in economical structure can increase the threat on the unique traditional environment as a result of unplanned and inevitable developments for fulfilling the rising demands. For the sake of having a contemporary living milieu, the traditional environment as the common architectural heritage of the Island can be revitalized, besides developing new appropriate architectural solutions in the light of the natural and cultural context. The Island's housing tradition bears the opportunity to be learned from the tried and evolved architectural solutions. Evaluating these values parallel to today's discourse, sustainable identity can be achieved by emphasizing especially the locality. In brief, this study tries to define the appropriate design principles for the contemporary housing developments and finds the ways of sustaining existing unique traditional patterns.

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## 1. Introduction

Cyprus as one of the largest islands of the Mediterranean basin is distinguished with her unique traditional architecture from the rest of the surrounding environments. Parallel to the recent changes in socio-cultural, economical and political conditions of the Island; a rich system of traditions and customs as well as beliefs and values are struggling for validity [1]. In this respect, the physical and cultural continuity in the traditional architecture seized to develop in the mid of 20th century. These years coincided with the importation of foreign values and understandings as well as building materials and techniques into Cyprus. Since then, the traditional built environment was neglected and the traditional houses were mainly left to deteriorate over the time. It is upsetting to observe that Cyprus

traditional architecture as a heritage of thousands of years is undergoing such a deterioration period. The early years that modern materials and techniques were imported to Cypriot architecture witnessed many successful modern building forms.<sup>1</sup> However, after 1960s these improvements were replaced with mainly inappropriate designs in the cultural and natural context within the pluralistic approach.

Besides the above-mentioned changes due to the influences of global trends and developed construction technologies, which are commonly experienced throughout the world with different intensities, Cyprus also struggles with other vital difficulties. The Island is faced with a political dispute that toughens the revealed problems resulting with the severe threats on her unique traditional architecture. As a result of the conflict for over 50 years between the two major communities; Turkish and Greek

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<sup>1</sup>Modern architectural developments in the Island were thoroughly investigated in several research studies [2,3].



Fig. 1. The traditional rural settlement pattern of Cyprus.

Cypriots,<sup>2</sup> the Island suffers serious demographical changes. Since the financial activities of the Northern part were out of the international interests, the developments in the economy and consequently built environment remained limited. In this respect, the traditional fabric of Northern Cyprus comparatively preserves the unique character (Fig. 1).

Nowadays, after 30 years of international efforts, the Cypriots discuss the reunification of the Island seriously.<sup>3</sup> The discussions about the future of Cyprus expressed the reciprocal interaction between politics and architecture. The discourse points out two important architectural developments; one of them being the demand for new housing stock due to the border alignment of the two new states; Turkish and Greek, causing possible internal migration and obligatory massive replacement and the other one is the growing potential of tourism [4] (Fig. 2).

Due to the possible internal migration, the traditional settlements are expected to experience serious user/demographic changes once more. Also, it is probable that there will be a demand for new housing stock for these immigrants. As a result of these changes, the designers are expected to develop culturally and physically sustainable, and locally conscious, peaceful environments. This can be achieved through highlighting the tried, developed and evolved design solutions which can be applied to the contemporary living milieu. Under this scope, the importance of the glocal understanding, particularly for the case

of Cyprus, comes forward both for the cultural continuity and for the international impacts.

Now, it is an opportunity for designers to develop appropriate solutions in terms of physically and culturally sustainable architecture both for the existing traditional and proposed contemporary built environments. In this respect, learning from the shared values and images is vital for creating “peaceful environments” and reflecting the “common Cypriot identity” that has been mutually developed by communities for over centuries.

## 2. An overview on the traditional settlements of Cyprus

The importance of Cyprus Island comes from her location being in the heart of cultural and economical routes of the Europe, Asia and Africa. By her strategic position, the Island has been attracting the interest of prevailing rulers throughout the ages. Certain world powers such as Phoenician, Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Helen, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Frankish, Genoese, Venetian, Ottoman, and the British, respectively, ruled and settled in the Island. After the British colonization period, the Greek and Turkish Cypriots held the chance to rule themselves independently for only three years that ended up with a political dispute that still exists.

Multicultural accumulation of different sovereignties was reflected mainly in the urban areas of the built environment [5]. The dominant influences of the prevailing different cultures on the formal architecture in terms of administrative, religious, public and militaristic structures in the forms of Egyptian, Hellenistic, Roman, Islamic, Byzantine, Gothic, Renaissance, Ottoman Turkish and British Colonial Styles. On the other hand, domestic architecture in the urban context was moderately influenced by the mentioned styles. This context mostly represented the medieval-Ottoman synthesis<sup>4</sup> [6–8].

The expression of the ethnical origin through the house form was widely observed in the urban fabric [9]. Furthermore, the religious buildings acted as the heart of

<sup>2</sup>In history, Cyprus is ruled by different prevailing powers of the world. The vague identity of inhabitants underwent various cultural and ideological impacts of these rulers. Since 16th century, two major communities have been living on the Island. These are Turkish and Greek Cypriots that Turkish Cypriots are Turkish speaking Muslims whereas Greek Cypriots are Greek speaking Orthodox Christians. After 1974, two communities were separated into two parts of the Island; Turkish Cypriots to North and Greek Cypriots to South.

<sup>3</sup>It is the general discourse that any proposal for the reunification will be in the same framework with the Annan Plan which was generated by and named after the UN Secretary-General and consequently approved by the UN Security Council but rejected by the majority of the Greek Cypriots. By the help of the international society, the reunification efforts are restarting in the close future. An increase in the international interests is expected by considering the tourism potentials of Northern Cyprus especially after the call for international investments by the UN Secretary-General in his report following the referenda.

<sup>4</sup>The harmonious togetherness of the Lusignan arches on the ground floor with the addition of Ottoman jutting oriel (or so-called *cumba*) on the upper floor of the same building is not surprising for any street. Particularly the capital city, Nicosia was structured with organic streets that were strongly defined by the houses in the Ottoman Turkish style.

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