

## Urban Design as a Tool for Preservation and Adaptive Reuse of Public Space in Historic Districts

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### 1 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 or 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 manned by diploma students from the University of Cyprus. The presentation is organized around a historical background and theoretical framework for development, followed 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.

### 2 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 (Haughton and Hunter, 1994).

Much of this debate is based on a distinction between those resources that are critical and those that are replaceable (ARUP, 1995; Strange, 1996). The former relates to resources, either natural or manmade, that cannot under any circumstances be lost, while the latter refers to resources for which a loss is acceptable as long as they are replaced or substituted. These changes are justified on the grounds that a policy of growth would support wider regional regeneration, prevent the loss of job opportunities, but also regulate the development of commercial and office stock in architecturally important designated areas, such as the historic areas of a city (Strange, 1997).

There is a long history of interest in the conservation of the built environment (Larkham, 1996). 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 (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 1990; Slater and Shaw, 1988). In relation to the public interest in the preservation of the built environment, early movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> 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 (Slater and Shaw, 1988) 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 (Ford, 2000). 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 (Cooper Marcus and Francis, 1998).

## **2.1 Decline of Public Space**

Indeed it is doubtful that the medieval city could have functioned without town square. However, some contemporary scholars argue that the privatization of infrastructure has made obsolete the function of such central public places (Chidister 1988), especially after middle and working class people moved to the suburbs, where they built new private buildings and outdoor spaces. Chidister claims that aspects of development such as the ones described herein have changed the way people live and use public space. On the functional side, individual travel in automobiles has diminished the life of the street and commercial strips and malls have replaced the historic open spaces as settings for communal life (Carr et al., 1992).

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” (Habermas, 1989) 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 (Banerjee, 2001). Individual orbits of this public life are shaped by a consumer culture and the opportunities offered by the new “experience economy” (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

## **3 THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC LIFE**

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 (Mitchell, 2003). He also argues that cities are necessarily public and therefore places of social interaction and exchange with people who are different. “Moreover, 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 (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]). The right to the city is therefore 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 (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]).

In addition, resisting the hegemony of “abstract space” is to produce what Lefebvre calls “differentiated space,” a struggle for rights which is a determinate of the actual social content, of the dialectic between abstract and differentiated space. It is this struggle which results in the production of public space and the way in which it is used and transformed within cities (Lefebvre, 1991). Similarly Carr states that a basic premise is that public spaces should be responsive in their design and management to meet the needs of their users, accessible to all groups and providing freedom of action. They should also be meaningful in ways that allow people to make strong connections between the place, their personal lives and the larger context. Accordingly, when designs are not grounded in social understanding, they may fall back on simple geometry, a fact that negates the responsibility to understand and serve the public good (Carr et al., 1992).

### **3.1 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, the emphasis given to each one and the values they express help to explain the differences across settings, across cultures and across times (Carr et al., 1992).

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. 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.

### **3.2 Cultural Forces Shaping Public Life**

Three main cultural forces that shape public life may be identified according to Carr: 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 (Carr et al., 1992; Low, 1988).

By observing other people and their activities and participating with them in shared tasks, the existence of a community can be perceived, enabling people to feel that they participate as part of a larger group in an active manner. 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 (Carr et al., 1992). 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 spiritual settings or places for meditation and relaxation will emerge as well (Rivlin, 1987). Squares are designed to include various combinations of trees, flowers, plants and grass because these elements tend to soften the quality of the spaces they occupy and attract the passerby.

## **4 REPRESENTATION OF PUBLIC LIFE**

Representation, whether of oneself or of a group, demands space and while it is true that human beings have no choice but to occupy a space, it does not follow that such a space allows for the full, adequate and self-directed representation of human beings, either to themselves or to others (Smith, 1994). Implicit in the public sphere is the assumption that the provision of an adequate space and democratic control of that space will guarantee a vibrant public life. The erosion of such places is likewise often argued to be crucial to the closing down of public life. But in the end, what makes a space public is its ability to fulfill the need of some group to appropriate space and through its actions to make it public (Mitchell, 2003). The very act of representing one's group to a larger public creates a space for representation, which both demands space and creates space. It is therefore fundamental for the product to relate to that particular need and to be spatial.

### **4.1 Public Space as the Place of Performance**

If cause and effect and influence are weak descriptions of the relation between public life and the public place, there is a logical relationship between the stage and the street. This logical relationship has four parts (Sennett, 1977). First, this informal “theater” shares a problem not with society in general, but with the city. The problem is one of audience – specifically, how to arouse belief in one's appearance among a milieu of strangers. Second, there can arise in a city rules for making believable appearances before strangers that have continuity in rules that govern response to the stage at the time. The audience can then play a common role in both realms. Third, a public geography must be produced. Fourth, to the extent a public geography exists, social expression should be conceived as a presentation to other people. The four structures typified are then those of audience, of continuity in rules, of public geography and of expression (Sennett, 1977).

### **4.2 Public Space as a Platform for Observation**

Many people just want a place to sit and watch the crowds and there is no doubt that such places have enlivened whole sections of cities, by being perhaps the modern equivalent of the street market. The importance of such pedestrian environments in the city is far greater than simply their aesthetic appeal or even the fact that they may provide an opportunity to spend some time outdoors (Cooper Marcus and Francis, 1998). Quoting psychotherapist Joanna Poppink, “Spending time in an outdoor café or bustling shopping street is more than just a pleasant diversion, it is a necessary element of healthy urban life. It is important to leave the house and get to see people of different ages, different ethnicities and different

relationships that one can observe firsthand” (Morgan, 1996). These encounters can help to build a sense of communality and tolerance that in turn provides the underpinnings for thriving urban life in an otherwise underperforming historic center.

### **4.3 Public Space as Common Ground**

Public space may also be perceived as the common ground where people carry out the functional and ritual activities that bind a community, whether in the normal routines of daily life or in periodic festivities (Carr et al., 1992). There is an increased recognition that public space is also used for “private” purposes – for buying or selling things, for gardening, for self improvement through exercise or for simply finding a place to exist.

## **5 RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACE IN THE HISTORIC CITY**

If, however, one looks away from these particular social trends and examines the urban environment itself, a different picture emerges, one where many cities are struggling to reclaim their historic cores and their old industrial sites for public access and use and with the aim of jump starting urban regeneration. The open spaces that adjoined town halls and churches, together with the old markets, became the natural meeting grounds for contemporary society.

Stephen Carr holds that as public life evolves with the culture of the place, new types of spaces may be needed and old ones discarded or revived. He sees a need to learn how to create and maintain places that are appropriate to their users and context (Carr et al., 1992) and to propose strategies for improving the design, management and use of public places in underutilized city centers. He also sees public space as the stage upon which communal life unfolds and the streets squares and parks as the elements of a city that shapes the ebb and flow of human exchange. These dynamic spaces are an essential counterpart to the more settled places and routines of work and home life, providing the channels for movement, the nodes of communication and the common ground for play and relaxation – and not just places to be crossed on the way to somewhere else (Carr et al., 1992). Public space should not be contingent upon motion in a way that it becomes a derivative of movement (Sennett, 1977), as this would parallel the relations of space to motion produced by the private automobile. As public space becomes a function of motion, it loses any independent experiential meaning of its own.

Another pair of scholars, Clare Cooper Marcus and Carolyn Francis, agrees that there are pressing needs that public space can help people to satisfy, significant human rights that it can be shaped to define, to protect and to best convey special cultural meanings. The commons and squares typical of the various cultures that left an imprint on the landscape offer important lessons that enhance the diversity of public life generated in the dense, highly centralized medieval city (Cooper Marcus and Francis, 1998). In both positions stated above, what seems to be needed are the density to appropriate these underutilized historic cores, the rehabilitation or additions of physical infrastructure to contain new uses and the socioeconomic structure to sustain the effort of regeneration.

### **5.1 Preserving Buildings and Space between**

On a different note, in many a historic core, as older buildings are left to decay and collapse and are removed from the urban fabric, the littered landscape of backyards sets the spatial tone in many neighborhoods and becomes the behind the scenes informal theatrical set of the city. Parts of buildings that were never meant to be seen are being viewed from unplanned spaces carved out from an earlier version of the city. Dishevelment results from growth as well as from decay, from the impact of building construction as well as building demolition (Ford, 2000).

From observations in the field, the picture emerges that while the number of underutilized ground-level spaces is greater in neighborhoods experiencing the removal of buildings, chaotic vistas become common in areas where new buildings are going up. As land values increase and some property owners tear down older buildings in order to construct new facilities with expanded and more efficient footprints, uneven and ragged horizons begin to appear. The reverse would have been perhaps to trust and enhance the context of the existing historic fabric, well integrated and functioning efficiently in its neighborhood to house those establishments likely to claim the space between buildings at different times of the day (Ford, 2000).

## 6 APPROACHES TO PRESERVATION

Change in the form of preservation, redevelopment and adaptive reuse is therefore subject to patterns of restructuring that make its 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 (Strange, 1996). Moreover, any regulatory measures developed locally through the creation of a capacity framework are likely to be effective only when complemented by measures formulated and implemented at other 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. One is through stewardship of the designated stock, another is based on investigation of the related space, a third relies on visual consumption and yet a fourth deals with issues of economic exploitation (Urry, 1995). These conceptualizations of the relationship between humanity and the environment relate well to the often-hidden rationales for urban conservation (Strange, 1997).

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

In the case of investigation of the related space, the environment is portrayed as an object of investigation and in need of regulation and intervention, as in the case of land-use planning and its concerns over the need to develop sustainable development strategies both for 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 aesthetic appropriation (Urry, 1995). 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 (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 1990).

The reconstruction of a visually pleasing historic landscape through conservation has become increasingly important because what is conserved addresses a process of representation of history and packages the historic product as a commodity for the consumption of an increasingly demanding tourism market. In places where the exploitation of conserved history is a major contributor to economic growth and vitality, the impact of these tensions on the pattern of growth and development assumes even greater significance (Strange, 1997).

In the case of economic exploitation, the instrumental appropriation of economic benefits from conservation strategies seeks out exploitative opportunities (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 1990; Strange, 1997). First, conservation planning may be used to justify the appropriation of historic buildings as a commercial resource to be marketed and sold for new economically productive uses. Second, the historic parts of a city and their cultural heritage may be marketed on the basis for generating economic growth, investment and tourism income (Newby, 1994; Strange, 1996; Ashworth and Voogd, 1988).

Consequently, the distinctiveness of particular places is significant in securing both financial investment and human capital (Urry, 1995). 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. Cities 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 (Strange 1997).

### 6.1 Capacity for Growth

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 (ARUP, 1995; Building Design Partnership, 1994). 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, against the withdrawal of investment, which could be equally damaging (Strange, 1997).

## **7 SETTINGS FOR PUBLIC LIFE**

The settings for such public life are not necessarily public spaces. According to Ray Oldenburg, such settings can be called “third places,” as opposed to the first place of home or the second place of work or school (Oldenburg, 1989). These are places such as bars or taverns, beauty salons, pool halls, sidewalk cafés and the like. There are culture-specific third places – the pubs of England, the sidewalk cafés of France and the beer gardens of Germany, for example – that have been historically associated with the culture and urbanism of different cities. Today, Starbucks’ coffee shops, Barnes and Noble or Borders bookstores, health clubs and various combinations thereof have become the icons of the third place in many cities (Banerjee, 2001).

### **7.1 The Role of Streets**

There is a growing literature on the role of streets in defining the quality of public life and space. A number of authors have emphasized how streets and sidewalks can be captured for social purposes (Appleyard, 1981). Yet in conventional land use planning, the design of streets is still dictated by traffic flow and parking standards and treated mainly as a part of the circulation element of the general plan (Banerjee, 2001). In recent years street improvements and pedestrian amenities along existing bus or light rail transit corridors have advanced the cause of streets as convivial public space, with users finally becoming aware that transit systems, including transit stations, can be an important element of the public realm of public space.

Clare Cooper Marcus and Carolyn Francis addressing similar issues of public health (Cooper Marcus and Francis, 1998) in opportunities afforded in redeveloped historic areas, quote Michael Fever: “In a far flung city, too frequently we lead anonymous lives, isolated, confined to our cars . . . there’s a hunger for pedestrian life. People are looking for ways to get out of their cars and live on a human level in an urban center” (Morgan, 1996). Of course, in most traditional cities, before the common use of vehicles, the street was an extension of the buildings that faced it, where people sat in chairs in front of their homes and businesses displayed goods on rugs and tables in the street.

### **7.2 The Role of the Outdoors**

There is also a fundamental need for social contact and life in the outdoors. It is quite likely that the demand for parks, playgrounds and urban open spaces will continue to increase, especially in inner-city neighborhoods with increasing numbers of school-age children and senior citizens (Banerjee, 2001). Whether local governments will be able to meet the demand for such public spaces through comprehensive planning remains uncertain. Chances are that in the absence of appropriate local government responses, such demands will be met through grassroots initiatives, through the nonprofit sector or even the private sector or through owner participation agreements in exchange for the transfer or purchase of additional development rights.

## **8 THE CASE STUDY OF THE HISTORIC DISTRICT OF STROVOLOS**

The diagram below (fig. 1) outlines the challenges and opportunities facing the municipal authorities and the local stakeholders who are involved in the preservation and adaptive reuse of the historic center of Strovolos, a suburb located directly to the south of the capital city of Nicosia, in the Republic of Cyprus. Urban design, 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 Theater to the east of the Pedieos stream with its adjoining linear park; the local elementary school (which doubles up as a lifelong learning center in the evenings); and Panagia Chryseleousa Church and Co-Operative Center 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 center 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.

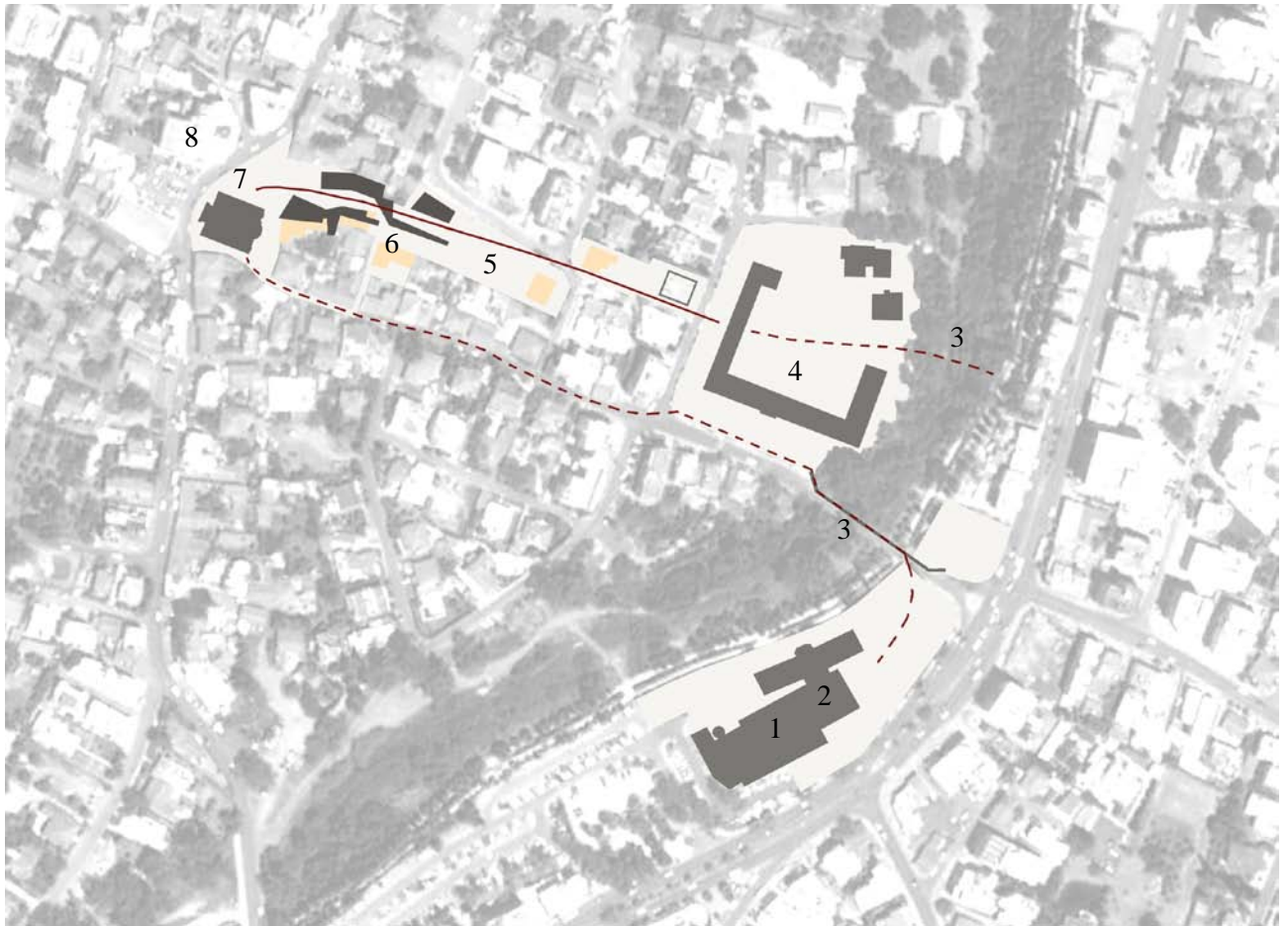


Fig. 1: Strovolos Historic Center Redevelopment Area (1. City Hall; 2. Municipal Theater; 3. Proposed and Existing Pedestrianized Roads and Paths; 4. Elementary School & Lifelong Learning Center; 5. Public Park; 6. Program Spaces (in new and adaptively reused fabric); 7. Panagia Chryseleousa Church;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

## 9 CONCLUSION

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 (Gans, 1962; Carr, et al., 1992). 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 (Carr et al., 1992).

The spatial restoration strategies of many contemporary public spaces have been criticized (Whyte, 1988) and oftentimes it is being said that that the designs rely too much on inappropriate models, lacking relevance to local context. Designs that relentlessly advance an abstract concept of a particular formal style can sometimes create a hostile environment with no apparent social purpose (Carr et al., 1992).

The goal of environmental restoration is closely related, because trees and greenery are also considered by most people to be aesthetically as well as psychologically important. It is likely that the growing public

consciousness of environmental degradation – and of how human settlements relate to the larger ecosystems of which they are a part – will create political and economic support for more sensitive urban redevelopment and regeneration, emphasizing preservation and enhancement of natural landscapes and the built fabric, as well as the creation of new open spaces and the greening of existing environments (Spirn, 1984).

Economic development is another common motivation for creating open space. Spaces designed for enjoyment and relaxation, with supports for informal performances and other interesting activity, can attract people who may then become good customers for retail business (Carr et al., 1992). These spaces may also be used to encourage new commercial development. Indeed, image enhancement is normally an unstated goal of most producers of public space. Adjacent successful public spaces will also increase and protect the value of building investments. Local government can benefit from projects that help improve the image of the city and create points of pride. The underlying natural qualities of a place must be supported and opportunities for creating rich local ecologies must be pursued (Hough, 1984).

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 (Banerjee, 2001). 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 (Holston, 1995; Sassen, 1995). Members of these communities can respond to the changing demands of increasing diversity of the urban population (Banerjee; 2001), 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 (Loukaidou-Sideris, 1995). 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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