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Case Study

Reclaiming Political Urbanism in Peace Building Processes:
The Hands-on Famagusta Project, Cyprus

Socrates Stratis and Emre Akbil

Cyprus is a divided country where ethnic conflict has been domesticated for the last 42 years. [Fig. 1] Any debate on the island's potential reunification through peace building processes seems to go hand-in-hand with the dominant 'techno-managerial' paradigm of consensual economic activities, which depoliticises the practice of urbanism.¹ Moreover, it turns urbanism into an agent of territorial distribution that keeps ethnic enclosures, such as the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot ones, intact. Our aim, through the *Hands-on Famagusta* project, is to reclaim a political form of urbanism before the potential Cyprus reunification by enhancing 'agonistic' collective practices across the Cypriot divide.² Consequently, we may contribute to opening up of ethnic enclosures and resist the perpetuation of the 'techno-managerial' logic.

The *Hands-on Famagusta* project³ positions itself where architecture and urbanism contribute to assembling the 'political'⁴ to transform antagonisms fueled by ethnic conflict thus provide 'new forms of spatialisation'⁵ for emergent collectives. By virtue of the material and immaterial technologies devised by the 'Hands-on Famagusta' project, architecture and urban design acquire agencies that transform divisive representations of the contested territories of Famagusta into territories-of-common-concern. *Hands-on Famagusta* introduces an agonistic paradigm for reconciliation, making a shift from consensus to 'dissensus'.⁶ Such an approach

opposes techno-liberal paradigms that neutralise conflicts and impose *laissez-faire* mechanisms of reconstruction. The project introduces the notion of creative conflict by interrelating regeneration and reconciliation processes. More precisely, *Hands-on Famagusta* operates as a critical spatial practice employing design as a potential political tool to achieve democratic, social and economic change towards the city's commons.

Famagusta is a contested city grounded in ethnic conflict driven by geopolitical actors interested in the larger Eastern Mediterranean area. A consequence of British decolonisation in 1950s, the conflict started as inter-communal turmoil and resulted in war with Turkey in 1974 which caused the *de facto* division of the island into two ethnic parts. The Greek Cypriots, including the Famagustian inhabitants, were forced to flow to the southern part of the island while Turkish Cypriots moved into the northern part, which is exposed to neocolonial strategies of Turkey. Each part is further fragmented by military enclaves, camps and buffer zones. Famagusta is at the intersection of many borders and buffer zones and is composed of isolated urban enclaves, such as the uninhabited fenced-off part of the city, named the 'ghost town', the port area, a medieval old town surrounded by Venetian fortifications, fenced military areas extending along the coastline, industrial zones, a university campus and ecological sites. [Fig. 2]



Fig. 1

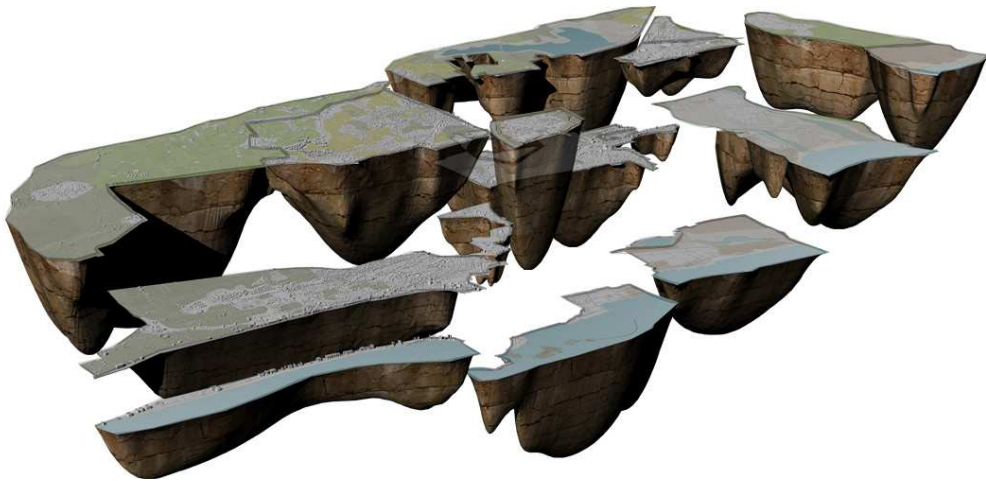


Fig. 2

Fig. 1: The trips of the 'Imaginary Famagusta' group across ethnic enclaves, military enclosures and ceasefire zones, courtesy of *Hands-on Famagusta*.

Fig. 2: Famagusta: a multi-enclaved urban territory for common concern among the communities in conflict, courtesy of *Hands-on Famagusta*.



Fig. 3: The portable physical model as a material agent for reconciliation, courtesy of *Hands-on Famagusta*.

Transforming ethnic conflict into urban commons

The *Hands-on Famagusta* project participated in the 15th Venice Biennale of Architecture, at the Cyprus Pavilion entitled *Contested Fronts: Commoning Practices for Conflict Transformation*.⁷ It has contributed to the creation of an open source archive for conflict transformation through three kinds of commoning practices: 'Counter-mapping', 'Creating Thresholds' and 'Introducing Urban Controversies'.⁸

Firstly, 'Counter-mapping' aims to challenge dominant divisive narratives by creating alternative representations of the urban contested spaces. The aim is to transform the representation of territories of ethnic conflict to that of territories-of-common-concern, recognising a departure point for agonistic. Secondly, 'Creating Thresholds' encourages practices of exchange across edges, which in turn open up territories of exclusion to the commons of the city. It embodies strategic and tactful actions, based on transformative themes for urban regeneration and hands-on actions for reconciliation.⁹ Thirdly, 'Introducing Urban Controversies' is the unfolding of creative conflict within the political realm of production of urbanism and architecture where urban actors are in a continuous process of alliance and disagreement. Thus disagreements with regard to the role of the commons during post-conflict reconstruction or urban regeneration could be structured to create arenas of creative confrontation among urban actors with divergent agendas.

The material agents of the 'Hands-on Famagusta' project play a prominent role in these commoning practices. Some of them are: an interactive web-platform (www.handsonfamagusta.org), a roundtable workshop series, a portable large-scale city model, a cardboard 'action dove' logo stencil, a visual matrix of enclaves printed on A1 sheets of paper, and a large colour-printed isometric view that emphatically distorts the 'exclusive parts' of the city. [Fig. 3] All these objects are documented in the

Guide to Common Urban Imaginaries in Contested Spaces as well as in the Cypriot Pavilion of the Architecture Biennale in Venice.¹⁰

How to sustain agonistic urbanism?

The *Hands-on Famagusta* project has associated the word 'collective' with materialities, technologies and temporary communities across the Cypriot divide, but not yet with institutions and policies, because the hostile environment of the Cypriot division and the absence of resolution regarding the reunification of the island makes this impossible. The challenge is to maintain a role for enabling an agonistic production of urbanism despite the actual hostile status quo of division and the eminent neo-liberal urban transformations. The ability to transcend antagonistic conflict depends on re-evaluating daily practices and behaviours and creating spaces of contestation and disagreement. Such an approach may enhance the foundation of new institutions and procedures based on policy changes and the enrichment of practices. Otherwise, the productive and creative domain of conflict remains intangible, and thus risks remaining frozen or falling back into a cycle of violence and turmoil.

Notes

1. Erik Swyngedouw, 'Insurgent Architects, Radical Cities and the Promise of the Political', in *The Post-Political and Its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticization, Spectres of Radical Politics*, ed. Erik Swyngedouw and Japhy Wilson, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 169–87.
2. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically*, (London: Verso, 2013).
3. Project leader: Socrates Stratis; project team: Emre Akbil, Esra Can Akbil, Chrysanthe Constantinou, Munevver Ozgur Ozersay, (Imaginary Famagusta group, AA&U (for Architecture Art and Urbanism), L.U2.CY (Laboratory of Urbanism, University of Cyprus)).
4. In *Agonistics*, Chantal Mouffe makes a distinction

between 'politics' as the established institutional form of social organisation and the 'political' which is a conflictual and democratic form of pluralist engagement.

5. Stavros Stavrides, 'Common Space as Threshold Space: Urban Commoning in Struggles to Re-Appropriate Public Space', *Footprint* no. 16 (2016): 9–18.
6. Jacques Ranciere, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: A&C Black, 2010).
7. Socrates Stratis (curator), collaborators: AA&U for Architecture Art and Urbanism, Imaginary Famagusta 'IF', Laboratory of Urbanism University of Cyprus 'L.U2.CY': Angeliki Koutsodimitropoulou, Chrysanthe Constantinou, Emre Akbil, Esra Can Akbil, Maria Loizidou, Munevver Ozgur Ozersay, Andreas Petrou, Marina Constantinidou, LightBlack, Studio Folder.
8. Socrates Stratis (curator), *Contested Fronts: Commoning Practices for Conflict Transformation*, exhibition leaflet, (Venice, 2016).
9. Ibid.
10. Socrates Stratis, ed., *Guide to Common Urban Imaginaries in Contested Spaces*, (Berlin: Jovis, 2016).

Biographies

Socrates Stratis (www.socratesstratis.com) is Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Cyprus. He has a Doctorate Degree in Urban Studies-Planning, University of Paris 8 and Bachelor and Master Degrees of Architecture (Urban Design) from Cornell University. Socrates's research focuses on the political role of architecture in uncertain, and also contested contemporary urban environments. He is one of the main founders of the agency AA&U, (www.aaplusu.com) and part of the I.F. (Imaginary Famagusta) team. He is the editor of the *Guide to Common Urban Imaginaries in Contested Spaces*, (Berlin: Jovis, 2016). He curated the Cyprus pavilion at the 15th Venice Biennale of Architecture.

Emre Akbil is an architect based in Nicosia and Famagusta, Cyprus and a PhD candidate in Theory of Architecture at, Faculty of Architecture, Eastern Mediterranean University. He is also part of the I.F. (Imaginary Famagusta) team, a think-tank for contested urban spaces. His work focuses on agency of architecture, which is not reduced into its spatial dimension but also informs about strategies and processes empowering autonomous collectives while reflecting on theories on subjectivity, power and politics.

