Pyria has always been a mixed village inhabited by Greek and Turkish Cypriots (1967). It is one of the very few communities with an ethnic mix in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. This small community, located in the United Nations buffer zone in the Larnaca District (Cyprus), remains one of the areas on the seashore, which is also part of Pyla's territory.

The Pyla Master Plan

The Pyla Master Plan is a part of the general policy of the Cyprus government to divide and plan the buffer zone areas under the United Nations buffer zone, a result of the Turkish Invasion of Cyprus in 1974. It is one of the very few communities with an ethnic mix, where Turkish and Greek Cypriots live together, ever since the war. However, they are socially and politically segregated due to the profound instigated ethnic segregation, which peaked during the 1974 war. Greek Cypriots were forced to move to the southern part of their island, while Turkish Cypriots went north in the same area. People没法 draw and plan the buffer zone areas under the United Nations buffer zone, a result of the Turkish Invasion of Cyprus in 1974. It is one of the very few communities with an ethnic mix, where Turkish and Greek Cypriots live together, ever since the war. However, they are socially and politically segregated due to the profound instigated ethnic segregation, which peaked during the 1974 war. Greek Cypriots were forced to move to the southern part of their island, while Turkish Cypriots went north in the Pyla Master Plan Project

Interview with Munevver Ozgür and Socrates Stratis

How and when was the Pyla Master Plan first proposed and established? What do we know about its inception?

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Another “friction gene” we developed was to make public presentations in both Turkish and Greek using translators. It is, in fact, like a very common-sense practice, but, believe me, it is not. Our aim was to create the best conditions through which a practice of active coexistence between Turkish and Greek Cypriots could take place. Listening to a public presentation in Turkish and Greek is one of the rarest things one could do here in Cyprus, even if it sounds obvious to us. It was in fact, a sort of indirect critique of the given terms of reference, which did not address such issues. Well, you can’t imagine the difficulties that confronted us. Even choosing a space for the presenta- tion was impossible. How to choose an equally inviting place for both Turkish and Greek Cypriot? That is why we chose the main square for the final presentation, thinking that it was neutral enough to give us the chance to get a message across. It turned out to be a disaster … Not very many people showed up. The atmosphere between the local authorities and the study team was not very nice, because I think we tried a little bit too hard to get our point across; maybe we became very defensive, seeing all our efforts come to nothing. Moreover and I were accused of not being patriotic enough about the island, of not considering their ideas enough during the preparation of the master plan. Going back to the importance of the process itself, a positive result of the project is that the study team came out much stronger than it was at the beginning. In fact, the study team came out much stronger of not considering their ideas enough during the discussion. It was in fact, a sort of indirect critique of the kind of context of such discussion, I’ll mention an ‘informal’ interrogation we had to go through at the coffee shop, conducted by an officer of the Turkish Cypriot secret police, who was trying to understand what the hell we were about.

Regarding the actual content of the final proposal of Pyla Master Plan, the aim was to emphasize projects that might collectively engage Pyla inhabitants of any origin, both on a very small scale and a very big one. Yianna Papadakis, an anthropologist who worked on Pyla, suggested we use cases aspects of everyday life, such as health care and exercise, for example. We were aware of the limits of architecture as a cultural tool, and so we therefore aimed to encourage those messages to happen, rather than to patronize residents or force them.

Ten projects were proposed, relating to the specific context of the community. Some of them were about activating voids in the community; either strategically placed empty plots, programmed for ephemeral uses, such as open-air cinema, for example. Other cases had to do with residual space gained by new traffic management of private cars, which is a real separator of neighborhoods. For example, a network of playgrounds was proposed, profiling from the ethnic mix of neighborhoods, and encouraging kids to come out of their houses and play. We named it the K.A.A. project (The Kids Are Alright). A negative reaction from a member of the local Greek Cypriot council was that people don’t allow their kids to play in the streets, because of safety issues. It sounded to me like a sort of middle-class, suburban logic of “all inclusive residences,” where people go from house to house, bypassing any public space.

For the main square we proposed an open-air market, since Pyla had been rather notorious for all sorts of markets, plus it could become a real space of exchange based on commerce, which could hopefully lead to productive transactions between the two ethnic groups. A series of links were proposed to re-establish physical connec- tions to the adjacent mosque, church, and the Venetian tower. Such links were proposed with minimum means attempting to get maximum results: Discreetly connecting the beautiful mosque garden with the square, replacing a building of rundown shops located at the edge of the same garden in front of the local Greek Cypriot council building. Plus, as I mentioned already, moving the Greek Cypriot national- ity’s coffee shop, allowing space for the very old Byzantine church.

Another project proposed was a Memory Museum: the creation of a people’s archive of personal experiences, giving an alterna- tive voice to the present. The museum will be located in the former police station, which would symbolically show the shift from police control to people’s self-determination, which will hopefully be possible sometime.

At the other extreme, a very large-scale project was proposed, an “elephant project,” as Münevver called it. This proposal was a joint venture, involving the entire community, for the development of a park in the main square. We presented most of the projects, without any significant reaction from the audience. When we arrived at the presenta- tion of the Ignition project involving the main square, which was to draw over existing asphalt lines to create playing fields for different sports, so that young people could play there, the president of the local Greek Cypriot council reacted rather badly, rejecting this kind of idea, being scared, as he said, of cultural estrangement between Turkish and Greek Cypriot youngsters playing against each other, and possibly turning the square into a violent zone. My interpretation of that reaction, which might be wrong, is that the immediacy of such a project forced people to show their real position vis-à-vis this kind of common project. It becomes much easier to put long-term projects away in a drawer, using excuses such as budget issues, acceptance from the inhabitants, etc. In the case of the ignition project, all such excuses were waived, leaving no other way to confront it, except with a sincere reaction, such as the one from the president of the local Greek Cypriot council.

What is interesting is that all our proposals have been approved by the central government and the local Greek Cypriot authority. Our proposals include the EVKAF ideas about developing their property close to the mosque. It remains to re-engage Pyla’s inhabitants of any origin in a different manner, trying always to avoid the conse- quences of the large-scale politics hovering over the community.

So how did the story with the asphalt lines end up? Did they accept it at the end? Or better, has anything—even a small ignition project—been implemented?

M: No, not yet. After the project was submitted, we did not hear from them. I vaguely remember that one day I read some news in the newspaper that the local Turkish council reacted rather badly, rejecting this kind of idea, being scared, as he said, of cultural estrangement between Turkish and Greek Cypriot inhabitants.

S: As mentioned already, our proposals were officially accepted both by the local Greek Cypriot authorities and the Planning Department. But nothing has been on the shelf, labeled as old attempts. We didn’t have the courage to go back with Münevver and try to push any of the ignition projects forward. Maybe we will get the courage soon, hopefully. But, as Münevver mentioned some time just after we had submitted the project—and she was right—we were not able to create some allies within the community who could encourage us to go on, who could also push the things. Of course, it was evidently very difficult. Maybe that is how we should start over.

With whom did you work after the project was initiated; who supported it, and in what way?

M: As Socrates mentioned before, we tried to cooperate with as many parties as possible: e.g., the village community, local authorities, EVKAF, the UN, etc. EVKAF was the most neutral of all the parties involved. They, too, were technical people who concentrated more on the qualities of life and space, rather than on national, econom- ic, and power relations. The thorniest path of communication was the one leading to the local authorities. Even though they were polite, they were very suspicious of us, our moves, motives, ideas, and, most of all, they were both surprised and scared by the human bonds we had among us as a team. We somehow did not fit into their percep- tions of scenarios of life.

A very critical incident was the telephone call I received from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the north. I was cross-examined, with questions like: What are you doing there? Why are you involved? How did you get involved? Did you get any permission? Who is supporting the project, economical- ly? Very annoying. Very unpleasant. I kept cool and answered politely. They were satisfied. Misunderstandings were cleared up … Obviously there was no threat … Just a pointless suspicion.
What kind of impact could the project have on the village in a social, political, economic, and cultural sense?

M: I could say that, socially, the project might function as a “secure communication milieu”–in a metaphorical way–where open space could be created to bring in villagers’ voices and choices. For example, the swimming pool project or the kindergarten project ideas were based on very basic human needs, such as getting refreshed in hot summer days or taking care of your children. Different stages of the design process for such projects mean that one has to discuss very human details. Or the environmental research center! Why not focus on environmental global problems, rather than being stuck with local problems, which cannot be solved momentarily.

In a political sense… what a great political stand, and what another it is, being able to say, “Look, these are our projects. We, as the people of Pyla, want to go forward with them.” It is political strategy originating from the people on the inside toward those on the outside. Just the opposite of what has been happening to Pyla so far.

The other political mission the master plan might have carried out could have been the formation of a pilot project, on proof that there can be done together. In other words, instead of concentrating on the demographic differences, the people of Pyla could have been evidence of the fact that, by concentrating on our human similarities, a lot can be done. Maybe it is a dream, but it’s a nice dream. Cypriots bringing their own projects into life. What a huge positive step toward the solution of the Cyprus problem! What a nice and colorful source of hope!

In an economic sense? I do not know. I was never very good with money issues! In my view, we did not take into account the people who are condition of ours. Has it become clear to our team that one has to understand how the architecture of the procedure itself is crucial for the partial success of a project, but maybe it is not clear to the other parties involved. Our team itself, with all of the people involved—architects, planners, students—became a creative space of exchange and of creation of trust and respect. We sort of created our own micro-environment, which was then thoroughly tested in Pyla, but, on the other hand, it was thanks to the Pyla project, the kind of environment that such an experience was created at all.

Our proposals were approved and they incorporate ideas from some parties that were, unfortunately, not involved in the process like EVKAF. Our productive cooperation, as Minever mentioned. They liked the ideas with remembering worth using and in conjunction with another base of cooperation.

And the obstacles?

M: People. People themselves! Bureaucracy. Mediocrity. “Too many cooks spoil the broth”: the UN, the police, local authorities, church, mosque, coffee shops… The villagers had almost no voice even if they had any. It was hardly audible! And the local authorities… the tension between them… inequalities, both social and economic…

S: At the moment you realize that you are in a “Truman Show,” and that everybody is watching your every single move—which is the case involving Pyla and the rest of Cyprus—then things begin to happen. First of all, you continuously test to see if people are watching you, by creating small crises that intensify and contaminates the “people watching you.” As I mentioned before, a lot of such instances of micro-conflicts start large-scale political conflicts and vice-versa. That was one of the main obstacles.

Then, the terms of reference of Pyla Master Plan project were not taken into account the people’s condition of ours. And that we have proposed are like seeds: a new source of life; richness; energy, and work opportunities. The happier people feel—and hence, they are happier the people feel—and hence, they are.

What can possible future initiatives learned from your experience? What is your advice?

S: Keep trying, even if you know you will fail. Failure has become a means of learning, especially for us as a study team. I like Minever’s metaphor of The Truman Show, with all the inhabitants being in The Truman Show, while the diverse authorities surveyed and control them, instead of representing them. Where we were situated throughout the process, we were in the “Truman Show” city in several ways, but maybe it was too hard to sustain our efforts. People might not be used to being asked for their points of views about their environment. A lot of work needs to be done there.