Architecture and Modernity in Cyprus

Situated at the southeastern edge of the Mediterranean, Cyprus has a rich architectural history which can be traced back to the Khirokitia Neolithic settlement (approximately 7,000 BC), through the fascinating remnants of the Chalcolithic, Bronze and Iron ages, and to traces of Phoenician, Assyrian, Egyptian, or Persian rulers. In Cyprus one encounters significant Classical, Hellenistic and Roman monuments, as well as remnants of a rich medieval past that includes Byzantine churches (many of which are listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites), Gothic and Venetian monuments, Ottoman mosques, hans and mansions. Testimonies to the turbulent history of Cyprus, all these compose a multilayered mosaic of architectural histories. Lesser-known and largely understudied is the architectural history of modern Cyprus, which is entangled with the histories of colonialism and decolonization, nation-building, socioeconomic modernization, and identity politics - the latter usually being framed in terms of tensions and anxieties about the coexistence of the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities on the island.

Modern architecture in Cyprus was initially intertwined with the island’s experience of colonialism. Cyprus came into British hands in 1878 when the British rented it from the Ottomans, hoping for military and economic gains from the island’s strategic position (notably its proximity to Suez and the Silk Road). Consistent with colonial practices, the British implemented a full topographical survey followed by a population census, with the ultimate goal of commanding knowledge and producing tools for control. When it came to managing the occasional bi-communal tensions between the Greeks (the majority on the island) and the Turks (the last ruling community), the colonial power opted for keeping its distance, to avoid interfering. This state of affairs changed after the full annexation of Cyprus in 1914, the grant of colony status in 1925, and the uprising of the local population due to economic hardship in 1931. At that point, the British rulers introduced a series of reformist projects in the areas of law and infrastructure, launching a process of economic modernization and urbanization.

The ideas and practices of architectural modernism began to be introduced to Cyprus in the 1930s, when an increasing number of professional European-educated architects established their practices on the island. Institutional and residential architecture began to echo a rational aesthetic, which often also sought...
to establish ties with the local vernacular preferences. After the Second World War, stronger urbanization trends also introduced the aesthetic of “corporate modernism,” frequently manifested in the Cypriot landscape through concrete-frame apartment buildings and office blocks that began to spread out of historic city centers. After Cyprus gained its independence in 1960, modern architecture became more important as a symbol and an instrument of both decolonization and modernization. The new building boom came not only as a result of the transition to Cypriot statehood but also as a result of the booming tourist industry. The construction of new schools, office buildings, markets, banks, factories as well as hotel complexes and tourist kiosks reflected an awareness of the postwar rethinking of modernism, by contemplating architecture’s non-functionalist and expressive dimensions through the use of exposed concrete, brise-soleil, broken volumes, and sculptural overhangs. Postcolonial Cyprus—having emerged in the midst of the cold-war period—was not without political tensions. Bi-communal conflicts of the 1960s led to the violent division of the two main communities in 1974 that has until today left Cyprus with an unresolved political conflict and an open wound that is vividly reflected in the built environment, despite the rapid
modernization of many aspects of life.

Here we present a series of vignettes from Cyprus’s twentieth-century architectural history, ranging from British colonial rule to the construction of a post-independence nationhood in the 1960s. Far from pretending to give a comprehensive overview, the images and short descriptions below offer a flavor of the complexities of the history of modern architecture in Cyprus, which has been intertwined with changing national goals, transforming socioeconomic realities, cultural anxieties, political debates, and other factors.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, NICOSIA

One of the earliest architectural projects of the British colonial power was the archaeological museum in Nicosia (1908-24). The construction of the museum went along with the implementation of a legal framework to control excavations and the trade of archaeological artifacts. The museum was to become the main place for showcasing and storing the numerous archaeological findings that had no home up to that point. The British architect and “Curator of Ancient Monuments” George Jeffery designed the museum as a series of galleries organized around a central open courtyard. Understood literally and metaphorically as “containers” of history, the museum’s galleries were experienced in a linear sequence, as though to establish a continuity on the island’s otherwise “fragmented” cultural history. As a symbolic gesture, a Pentelikon-marble portico was designed, cut into pieces and shipped from Athens to Nicosia where it was assembled on the spot and literally attached to the building. The portico was in direct contrast with the colonial style of the rest of the building. From a colonial point of view the neoclassical portico provided a symbolic reference to the island’s historic origin that justified colonialism as a cultural project and as a return to the country’s classical past.

FANEROMENI HIGH SCHOOL, NICOSIA

The British attempt to maintain a distance from local politics was exemplified in their educational policy, which left issues of education, heritage and identity in the hands of the local communities. Close ties with Greece and Turkey, and the economic and cultural support of the wealthy and powerful religious institutions, placed schools at the heart of nationalist discourse of the time. Especially in the case of the Greek-Cypriot community which saw British rule as an opportunity for
VIRTUAL TOUR
Twentieth-Century Cyprus

Andreas Fotiades, Faneromeni High School, Nicosia, c.1920, front elevation
Photograph: Petros Phokaides, 2008
the de-ottomanization of the island and union with the newly formed Greek state, school buildings—from urban high schools to rural elementary schools—became a privileged site for experimentation with neoclassicism, which codified and projected a nationalist imagery onto public space.

Faneromeni High School, designed by Andreas Fotiades in the early 1920s, is named after the Christian Orthodox Church that stands in front of it. Its façade, constructed out of local sandstone, echoed European rationalism while it simultaneously alluded to contemporary state schools and other public buildings in Greece. Within the dense urban fabric of Nicosia, and not far from the Archaeological Museum, the Faneromeni School introduced neoclassicism with a different meaning attached to it: it turned the colonial space at the city center into an arena of ambivalent identity projections and formations.

ENGLISH SCHOOL, NICOSIA

In contrast to the ethnic schools of the two communities that were spatially integrated into the urban fabric, the so-called “English School” (1936-39) was constructed on an empty site, outside Nicosia’s walls and just opposite the Governor’s House. A sizable area around the school was confiscated and used for sport facilities, while it also served as a buffer zone, separating the school and the Governor’s House from the city and the surrounding suburbs. At the same time, the building program introduced a new concept of spatial organization in educational institutions that combined classrooms and the library with a public hall, dormitories and sport facilities.

The project architect was the Greek-Cypriot Odysseas Tsangarides, while the colonial Public Works Department (PWD) was in charge of the construction and the supervision. The form and decoration of the main building of the complex, in particular the tower-like entrances and the classroom typology, referred to traditional British schools and colleges; at the same time, it adopted elements from local colonial architecture, such as the arched porticos and certain building materials such as the yellow sandstone. The English School expressed a somewhat neutral stance towards ethnic and religious dichotomies, while it also proclaimed a persistent commitment to the colonial center and the British government.
O. Tsangarides, English School, Nicosia, 1936-39, front elevation
Photograph: © Public Information Office

O. Tsangarides, English School, Nicosia, 1936-39, view from first floor
Photograph: © Public Information Office
GENERAL HOSPITAL, NICOSIA
SANATORIUM IN KYPEROUNDA, TROODOS

In 1939, a series of ceremonies celebrating the opening of new public buildings took place. In these ceremonies architecture was a backdrop for military parades and public speeches, thus transferring colonial discourse into public space. Along with the English School, the government inaugurated the General Hospital of Nicosia (1936-39) and a sanatorium in the Troodos mountains (1936-40). Both buildings were designed by the Greek-Cypriot architectural firm Michaelides Bros and were constructed by the colonial Public Works Department. In these cases, the colonial government was assuming the role of a modernizing agent that imported innovation from the West into the colonies. The government’s decision to construct a new hospital building and replace the old and outdated medical facilities was accompanied by particular debates on technological progress and innovation, as well as healthy, clean and functional hospital spaces. These kinds of debates became the focus for the General Hospital—rather than the identity politics mentioned above. The hospital, a two-story building standing on pilotis, echoed interwar modernism’s universalist aesthetic and its valorization of scientific progress.

LYKAVYTOS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, NICOSIA
PALLOURIOTISSA HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIRLS, NICOSIA

The period after the Second World War was characterized by an intensified urbanization process, creating the need for a large number of school buildings which were constructed under the auspices of district educational councils. These schools were placed on the periphery of the urban core, inside residential areas. Independently, such schools continued to be the primary social and urban elements for each community.

One of the first modernist school buildings is Demetris Thymopoulos’s elementary school in Lykavytos, Nicosia, constructed between 1955-57. The architect distributed the building program in distinct volumes in a “form follows function” manner, and also introduced expressive elements, such as brise-soleil, and local materials, such as local sandstone. Other schools at the time—many of them by Thymopoulos, like his Pallouriotissa High
Michaelides Bros, Sanatorium in Kyperounda, Troodos, 1936-40
Photograph: Petros Phokaides, 2008
School for Girls, Nicosia (1962)—were designed in a similar manner; these established a new building type, which was reproduced extensively after the island’s independence in 1960—although in the postcolonial period, the same vocabulary carried different social meanings.

SULEYMAN ONAN HOUSE, NICOSIA
NEOPTOLEMOΣ MICHAELIDES HOUSE, NICOSIA
ALEXANDROS DEMETRIOU APARTMENT BLOCK, NICOSIA
GRECIAN PARK HOTEL, FAMAGUSTA

After independence in 1960, new political and social conditions produced a totally different context for architectural production, which became a key tool for addressing the local society’s aspirations for decolonization and economic development. In 1961-63 Ahmet Vural Bahaeddin designed the house of Turkish-Cypriot lawyer Suleyman Onan. The Turkish-Cypriot architect designed mainly private residences for the elite, who typically played important political and social roles in the postcolonial period. Bahaeddin’s use of modernist vocabularies, materials and furniture attempted to introduce a cosmopolitan note in domestic life. Moving in the same direction, the work of Neoptolemos Michaelides has interesting similarities and differences. His work for private residences is
Ahmet Bahaeddin, Suleyman Onan House, Nicosia, 1961-62
explicitly modernist but has particular vernacular references. Both in terms of the typology and in terms of the transitional spaces he introduced, Michaelides formulated a creative architectural response to local climatic conditions. The architect’s formal exercises through the use of reinforced concrete are illustrated in the design of his own house in 1965 as well as in larger structures, such as the Alexandros Demetriou apartment building (1963-65) and Grecian Park Hotel (c. 1965) constructed in Nicosia and Famagusta, respectively. In the creative attitude of N. Michaelides and of the other unmentioned architects of the postcolonial period one can witness an undercurrent of 1970s brutalism.

Cyprus changed drastically yet again in 1974, when a series of dramatic political changes including a coup d’état by the Greek Junta of the time and a military invasion by Turkey led to a violent division of the island and the uprooting of its people according to rather artificial ethnic lines. The built environment of Cyprus bears testimony to the open wounds of the country—through refugee settlements, military buffer zones, and borders that slice through the capital city and the entire island. Even if grand architectural projects of more recent years—such as Zaha Hadid’s design for the central Eleftheria Square in Nicosia, Hopkins Architects’ proposal for a Cultural Center, and Jean Nouvel’s project for a university library—might aspire to a hopeful future, the military checkpoints and other scars on the physical environment are a constant reminder of an unresolved political conflict that shapes today’s Cyprus and its architecture.

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Neoptolemos Michaelides, Alexandros
Demetriou apartment building, Nicosia, 1963-65
Photograph: Petros Phokaides

Neoptolemos Michaelides, Grecian Park Hotel,
Famagusta, 1965
Photograph: authors, from the Greek
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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


LINKS FOR ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURE IN CYPRUS

General information on Nicosia and Cyprus

Municipality of Nicosia: http://www.nicosia.org.cy/
Cyprus Tourism Organization: http://www.visitcyprus.com/wps/portal

Museums and Cultural Centers

Marfin Laiki Group Cultural Centre: http://www.laiki.com/web/w3cy.nsf/ViewContentDocsByID[ID-23821A6B963FE50FC2256B7A006CFA3F]

Architectural Organizations and Institutions in Cyprus

Docomomo Cyprus Working Party, contact address: docomomo.cyprus@gmail.com
Cyprus Architects Association: http://www.architecture.org.cy
Department of Architecture, University of Cyprus: http://www_eng.ucy.ac.cy/ARCH/

Books and Periodicals on Cypriot Architecture


Bookstore with a large selection of books on Cyprus, including architecture, art and archaeology.