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Socrates Stratis, Guide to Common Urban Imaginaries in Contested Spaces

Berlin, Jovis, 272 pp. – 2016

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Socrates Stratis, *Guide to Common Urban Imaginaries in Contested Spaces*, Berlin, Jovis, 272 pp. – 2016. Paperback: € 29.95 - ISBN 978-3-86859-420-1
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1 The urban designer works in a continuum. Projects might have start dates, but the city is an open ended system, driven by history and memories. The city is also inherently messy. It has multiple clients, often with differing needs and objectives. When architecture engages with the city there are rarely any clear boundaries or agreed agendas. Consequently the practitioner has to be constantly aware of the possible consequences of his/her actions. This inevitably takes the architect into an arena that is overtly political in nature; one in which choices and therefore value judgements have to be made. There are rarely simple routes to implementation. Political and financial externalities exert a critical influence, turning the architect into a broker, a choreographer, an impresario and a diplomat.



- 2 All cities have their internal barriers, rich and poor areas business zones and disruptive infrastructure. In extreme cases these become enclaves and gated communities, ghettos, 'townships' and no go areas are created. Armed conflict, however, adds another dimension altogether. Recently cities such as Mostar and Aleppo have been torn apart by war. But it is the 'peace' process, in effect a period of protracted low intensity conflict that entrenches the political divide into urban stalemates as witnessed in cities like Berlin, Beirut and Belfast.
- 3 The political schisms of divided cities are manifested spatially. The Berlin Wall, the Green Lines in Beirut and Belfast were urban voids, no mans lands. The purpose of these *intentional* voids, unoccupied buffer spaces, is *non occupancy*. But these spaces are not actually empty. They are inhabited by memories, trauma and hatreds. Eventually in these city spaces memory is erased, a condition explored in Wim Wenders' 1987 film *Wings of Desire*, where an old man walks through the no mans land by the Berlin Wall, confused, and recalling the lines of shops and tram stops that were once Potsdammer Platz.
- 4 I first visited Nicosia in 2010 and observed the 'Green Line' and the ugly violence of a city divided in two by war and an intractable peace process. An architect whom I met offered to take me to Kyrenia for the day, later admitting he had not crossed over the ceasefire line for 25 years. Later that evening on our way back we got lost in Nicosia and it took us three hours to find the crossing point. What struck me forcibly was that he had absolutely no mental geography of the northern part of his own city. Furthermore, the numerous people who we asked for directions similarly had no idea where the crossing point was either. For them the southern part of their city had been forgotten. I had spent time in Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s and had visited Beirut and Belfast. What was different in Cyprus was that the divide had, like a mental trauma, become deeply embedded in the psychology of the city. Nicosia was suffering from a form of collective amnesia. The Berlin, Beirut and Belfast peace processes had been

driven in part at least by a collective memory of the pre-divided city. Where would a peace process start in Cyprus?

- 5 There is a growing body of work examining peace building from a bottom up perspective. This challenges the top-down paradigm of international interventions by third-party actors. The book “Guide to Common Urban Imaginaries in Contested Spaces” documents an initiative in Famagusta and uses this to develop a guide to spatial interventions that can operate in the contested spaces where conflict has been suspended but peace has yet to be achieved. These architectural interventions act to create a stage for local initiatives, shared spaces for chance encounters where tentative conversations may begin. This approach challenges the conventional liberal market led models of city reconstruction such as Potsdammer Platz and Solidere.
- 6 There are parallels for this work in the genesis of the peace process in Belfast, the Mothers of the Plaza di Mayo in Argentina and in the locally negotiated ceasefire points in Aleppo. These are citizen led initiatives that can become the building blocks of peace or reconciliation. The interest in the *Hands on Famagusta* project is that architecture is used as a medium for this dialogue.
- 7 In his work Socrates Stratis and his colleagues develop architecture as urban practice, a means to construct places and dialogues between communities, across the void. These common urban imaginaries are both beacons of hope and prototype spaces for a future that becomes imaginable. They are creating transformative spaces, turning the ceasefire zones from dangerous places into safe havens. This is subversive architecture that invites citizens to challenge the military status quo and not just imagine, but enact alternative futures. This is about re colonization of military space for civic purpose with architecture acting as the medium for local accommodations. Significantly their work challenges divisive narratives and offers alternative approaches upon which long term, stable political settlements might be built. The book contains seven stories each a form of transferable methodology. In one counter mapping techniques are explored in order to construct alternative representations of space. In another a digital archive is constructed. All of these are tangential examinations of boundaries and thresholds that suggest that these self-imposed borders are in fact porous, urban commons where social forms of exchange can recommence.
- 8 This work is important as it takes architecture out of the studio and into highly contested arenas, places where it can be relevant and potentially transformative. In a world where conflict is spreading and divisions are deepening architecture can, if it chooses, play a key role in bridging the divide.

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