

# THE USE OF SCENOGRAPHIC INTERVENTIONS FOR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN CONTESTED PUBLIC SPACES: THE CASE OF THE SOUTH WALLED CITY OF NICOSIA

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## Introduction

In March 2017, design academics Ezio Manzini and Victor Margolin, wrote an open letter to the design community inviting us to “stand up for Democracy”, and to recognise the strong convergence between democracy and design. These convergences were listed through four distinctions:

*1. design of democracy, improving democratic processes and the institutions on which democracy is built; 2. design for democracy, involving issues of access and transparency, allowing more people, especially using technology, to participate in the democratic process; 3. design in democracy, including projects that help to bring about conditions of equality and justice; 4. design as democracy, whereby the equitable and inclusive principles of participatory design set a stage on which diverse actors can come together to share constitutive power in shaping the present and future world we live in.* (Manzini, Margolin, 2017)

*Design in Democracy* refers to all the design initiatives that are particularly responsive to the goals of democracy. In previous writings Manzini (2013, 2015) discussed the importance of a designer and how they can act as ‘trigger’ to

start new social conversations; designers can operate as key factors by designing with and designing for communities. Through the use of creativity designers can 'make things happen', and therefore further develop and sustain the social conversation in place-making and developing the urban.

For the last decade most of the 'public places' that have been built in Europe, are private, based on shopping, coffee-shop culture, finance centres and apartments (called POPs, an abbreviation for Privately Owned Public spaces), with clear rules about who is, or is not allowed in, and what they can do there (A. Minton, 2009). However, the public space that I am focusing on, Phaneromeni Square, a square in the south walled city of Nicosia, is more complex than the POPs found in Europe and in the USA. Although Phaneromeni Square, shares many characteristics with POPs, has recently been affected by the gentrification process that the wider area has undergone, and is now exhibiting characteristics of privatization (see practice component), is also part of a complex urban milieu. This is due to its strong socio-political history linked to the ethno-national conflict in Cyprus, its unique position within the divided city of Nicosia and its proximity to the buffer zone (Figure 1).

When Sharon Zukin (1995) discussed the importance of public spaces, she pointed out that they are the primary site of public culture. They are the places where strangers meet but they also constitute an arena for continual negotiation of the boundaries and markers of human society. Public spaces constitute the social and political arena for different groups to become visible and heard, thus essential to the functioning of democracy. The availability of such space is under threat, and by overlooking the need for public spaces where democratic performance can be exercised, we run the risk of undermining some important conditions of democracy in the modern world (Parkinson, 2012). The privatization of public space entails increasingly alienation of people from the possibilities of inherent social interactions and increasing control by powerful economic and social actors over the production and use of space (Mitchel, 1995).

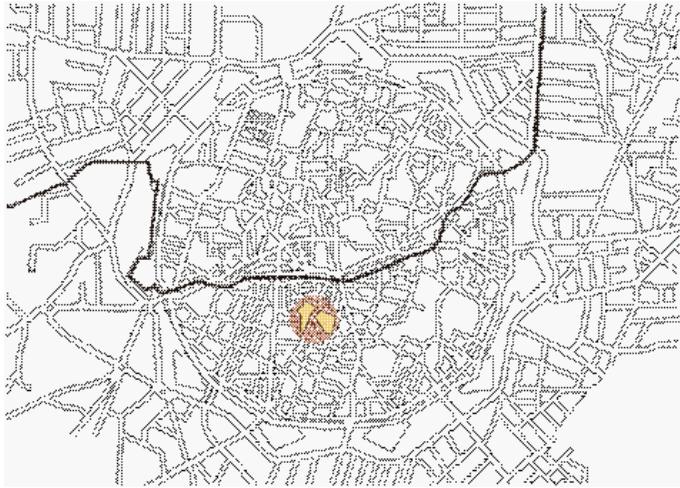


Figure 1. Map of Walled city of Nicosia, demonstrating location Phaneromeni Square and buffer zone.  
Source: author

### 1. Phaneromani Square

In order to acquire a better understanding on the complexity aforementioned we should look at the ethno-national conflict which took place in Nicosia during the previous century. Following the inter-communal or ethno-national conflicts in 1963, the walled city was divided by the United Nations, in Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot quarters with a buffer zone, or what is called the 'Green Line' in the middle. As a result of the Turkish troops invasion and occupation in 1974, the walled city fell into decay and the centre that was the most vibrant and commercial area turned into a no man's land. The citizens felt unsafe to be near the green line and developed their businesses in the northern and southern outskirts of the city respectively (Calame et al., 2009). Following the first three decades after the Turkish invasion the unoccupied old city was mainly inhabited by immigrants and rarely frequented by the majority of Greek-Cypriot citizens. In 1979 a master-plan (Nicosia Master Plan) was initiated at a meeting between

the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities of Nicosia under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) aimed at the revitalization of the walled city and to help plan the city in a way which would lessen the urban sprawl. Although the NMP is still running, the south side of the walled city of Nicosia has been sporadically developed by private investors resulting in gentrification. The centre of the unoccupied walled city has become a Mecca of coffee shops, restaurants and bars, which has created conflicts between the stakeholders and the users in the area, with Phaneromeni Square forming one of the strongest examples in the area.

Phaneromeni Square is situated within the medieval walls of Nicosia, linking Ledras Street and Onasagorou Street. The square has been named after Phaneromeni Church, which was built in 1872 on the ruins of an ancient Greek Orthodox nunnery. Panayia Phaneromeni is the largest Greek Orthodox Church within the city walls and it owns shops, offices and other buildings in the area, with the most important being the extensive square block of shops and offices within Ledras, Liperti, Phaneromeni and Nicocleous street (Figure 2), (K. Keshishian, 1978).

The area of Phaneromeni, with the Square as a focal point, has been through dramatic changes over the years, especially from the 1950's<sup>1</sup> onwards, both in terms of infrastructure and identity, and has been consistently connected to socio-political developments. In the contemporary history of Cyprus, the area of Phaneromeni is strongly linked to important political moments of the history

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<sup>1</sup> In 15 January 1950, a referendum took place where 95,7% of Cypriots (Greek-Cypriots, Turkish-Cypriots and a minority of Armenians) voted for the unification of Cyprus with Greece. The referendum was not taken in consideration by the British colony. (A. Pantelidou et al., 2002). In 1955 the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA), a Greek-Cypriot anti-colonial movement was formed and in April 1955 a guerrilla war against the British colony commenced, which lasted until 1959. The British recruited Turkish-Cypriot police officers in order to contain the EOKA attacks. In 1956 the first serious conflict between the two communities took place when a Turkish-Cypriot officer was killed by EOKA. As a result the Turkish-Cypriot community formed VOLKAN, a paramilitary group, which was later reformed as the Turkish Resistance Organization (TMT) (J. Calame et al., 2009).



Figure 2. Pictures of young people using the public space of Phaneromeni Square. Source: pictures taken by author, March 2013

and socio-political conflicts that took place in the Square. In 1996 a coffee shop by the name Kala Kathoumena opened next to the Square. After the opening of the coffee shop an urban sub-culture began to develop in the area. Young people who frequented the coffee shop also spent time in the Square, mainly under and around a tree, which they named 'Manolis' after a Greek children's song, because of the circular bench that was at the time bolted around the tree. This signified the beginning of an ever-growing sub-culture<sup>2</sup> that used the Square as a functioning public space for leisure, exchange and expression of social and political views (figure 2).

When this site was initially chosen it was at the centre of attention with regards to its future as a public space. Following the regeneration of Phaneromeni Square in 2004, by Nicosia Master Plan, the extensive use of the space by the anarchist,

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<sup>2</sup> Young people with anarchist, activist, antiauthoritarian and antifascist views.

anti-authoritarian and antifascist groups begun to frustrate the administration of Phaneromeni Church, the elderly, mostly churchgoers and shop owners, who begun to feel unsafe. In 2010, Ionas Nikolaou (at the time MP and currently the Minister of Justice of the Republic of Cyprus) described the Square as the 'Exarchia' of Nicosia. The comparison to the troubled neighborhood in Athens, Greece (where many socialist, anarchist and antifascist groups are accommodated and which is perpetually policed) resulted in negative connotations to the area of Phaneromeni and cultivated fear amongst the locals. During that time the area was regularly policed. The negative connotation for crime in the area has driven the local authority to gentrify it at an extremely fast pace, in an effort to dispel any type of what is considered antisocial behaviour, as it is thought that crowded places tend to come across as safer places (Van Melik et al., 2007, pp.25-42). An action that urban sociologist Sharon Zukin calls 'pacification by cappuccino', or 'domestication by cappuccino', in order to describe public spaces, which have been recaptured by the middle class at the expense of other users (S. Zukin, 1995). Following the course of gentrification: renovated housing, new spaces of consumption and middle class residents (F. Tonkiss, 2005), over the past eight years, new coffee shops, restaurants and bars have opened in Phaneromeni Square and the two neighbouring main streets, Onasagorou Street and Ledra Street (figure 3).

The rapid changes that took place in Phaneromeni Square created a series of conflicts between the different actors of the Square (Politis, 2011). Both the local authority and the church administration were accusing the groups of activists, anarchists and anti-authoritarians for vandalisms in the area and for not respecting the Church. The activists, anarchists and anti-authoritarians criticised the local authority and the Church for handing over the public space to the coffee shop owners and at the same time felt that they had been secluded and chased away from a public space (<https://cyprus-mail.com/2014/03/15/war-breaks-out-over-phaneromeni-square/>). The young people from these groups believed that the sudden development of the Square was a result of the local



Figure 3. Pictures of Phaneromeni Square following the opening of cafes and bars. Source: pictures taken by author, 2013

authority's effort to move the group away from the Square. In April 2014, the local authority went on to remove the public benches from the Square (some of which were returned following an outrage on social media and the local press, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2014/04/06/the-battle-of-the-benches/>), the Church begun closing its gates<sup>3</sup> at night and in 2017 it raised its railings, in order to prevent young people from climbing into the Church yard at night.

The anarchist, anti-authoritarian and antifascist groups have now moved away from the Square. Currently, there are only a few young people hanging-out in the Church yard, and the public attention has moved to two other public spaces within the city, Eleftheria Square and the old Municipal Market. Nevertheless, it is still pertinent to question the publicness of Phaneromeni Square and interrogate the role of the performance designer and how active co-existence

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<sup>3</sup> The Church yard is traditionally a public space in Cyprus.

between the different actors can be enabled and maintained through the changes that take place in the Square. I briefly define the term ‘active co-existence’ as the accumulation and constructive interaction of citizens in public spaces. Cities allow (chance and/or intentional) interaction and connection between people; Tonkiss (2013, p.54) sees them as “(...) excellent communication networks, with a great capacity to relay and to amplify what they circulate, whether this be information, germs, viruses or riots”. Therefore, the city and more specifically public spaces can act as tools for interaction and for ‘active co-existence’ of the civil society.

Returning to Phaneromeni Square, and the fear of the privatization of the public space, due to the café creep and the incidents of public furniture removal by the local authorities, this paper argues that there is a close connection between temporary place-making and ‘active co-existence’, and how when the first is successfully achieved can accommodate the latter. The following section will discuss how performance design methods can be used in order to achieve active co-existence.

## **2. The role of the Performance Designer**

Dorita Hannah and Olav Harsløf define *performance design* as:

*(...) a loose and inclusive term that asserts the role of artists / designers in the conception and realisation of events, as well as their awareness of how design elements not only actively extend the performing body, but also perform without and in spite of the human body. (...) In harnessing the dynamic forces inherent to environments and objects, and insisting on a co-creative audience as participatory players, it provides a critical tool to reflect, confront and realign world views. (2008, p.13)*

It is on the interdisciplinary character of performance design that I chose to stand, in relating to what Helguera (2012) notes:

*(...) artists who wish to work with communities, for whatever reason, can greatly benefit from the knowledge accumulated by various disciplines—such as sociology, education, linguistics, and ethnography—to make informed decisions about how to engage and construct meaningful exchanges and experiences.*

Through its interdisciplinary character performance design can enhance the perception of place and shift socio-spatial conditions through a unique dramaturgical approach of creating temporal-spatial design. With the use of temporary scenographic interventions, I maintain that the performance designer can become a trigger for active co-existence and shift socio-spatial conditions within the urban realm.

In this section I will discuss two scenographic interventions designed and executed for the purposes of my practice-based research, in Phaneromeni Square. Following an extensive site analysis of Phaneromeni Square, through desk research (history of site, newspaper articles), photo-documentation and a series of semi-structured interviews, a series of interventions were planned and executed, through an iterative process. Beer et al. (2018) suggest that embodying or enacting eventfulness through interventional means is seen as a vital component of participatory engagement. The intervention entitled *sit. move.play*, was designed to question and challenge the publicness of the square, but it also aimed at enabling active co-existence between the different actors that used the square. This intervention, was comprised by ten traditional coffee-shop chairs placed in the middle of the Square. Each chair was given a neon yellow speech bubble, which said: “Welcome to Phaneromeni. You can move me around, follow the sun or the shade. But you can’t take me home with you. Oh! And don’t forget to make a mark of my new position with the chalk that you can find in the envelope hanging on my back”. The chalk drawing created a physical diagram on the Square, of the chairs’ flow in the square, and demonstrated the possibilities of use of space. The chairs became a tool for conversation between



Figure 4. Pictures taken during *sit.move.play*. Source: pictures taken by author

the Square visitors and the users, as people would ask each other about the intervention and the ones who were sitting there for some time would explain to newcomers (Figure 4).

The next intervention took the form of a round table discussion, by appropriating a public bench that had just been re-installed in the Square by the local authority. The participants of the round table discussion were both members of the group of activists, anarchists and anti-authoritarians and café users (Figure 5).

The aim of intervention No. 3 was to discuss the following:

1. How can the identity of Phaneromeni survive without having the sub-culture that has been there for over a decade to move because they don't have any square left to hangout, or the residents having to relocate due to the fact that they cannot handle the overflow of visitors?
2. How can the revitalization of the Square be sustained over the years, and not be overthrown by any economical or political changes that will take place in the



Figure 5. Picture taken during *Round-table*. Source: pictures taken by author

island?

3. Can the designer act as a ‘trigger’ for social engagement and ‘active co-existence’?

At the round-table discussion there were 5 participants: three coffee-shop users (photographer, age 29, architect, age 29, lawyer age 30), and two members of the anarchist, antiauthoritarian and antifascist groups (member of Utopia Collectiva, age 31, Teacher and member of Utopia Collectiva, age 31). When all the participants arrived and were seated, introductions took place, where each one stated their name, age, profession and relation to Phaneromeni Square. Following introductions, I presented briefly the two first interventions and their outcomes, the aim of the third intervention and the discussion topics. The discussion was audio recorded. The participants were engaged throughout and some insightful topics derived from the discussion, which allowed the thought process of this investigation to progress. The main topics and worries that were brought up

by the participants were that following the development of the Square and the opening of the cafés, the group of anarchists, anti-authoritarians and antifascists have been chased away, and once again marginalized. The group expressed their worries of social segregation due to these changes and also blamed the Church for these developments, as it is the biggest stakeholder in the area, who rents property to the coffee shop owners and also has increased the security by closing its gates during evening hours. Moreover, the group discussed about their fear of privatization of the public space due what has been listed above.

### **Epilogue**

In this paper I discussed how the performance designer can work outside the theatrical orthodoxies and trigger a dialogue for the publicness of the urban realm. Through the scenographic interventions the performance designer is seeking to maintain the notion of agonism within a public space in order to avoid homogeneity, and enable the actors of a public space to maintain their cultural identity, social roles, opinions and positions. Identifying performance design as an expanded field that can engage with current social issues, reaching beyond solely creative placemaking, performance design can contribute in a positive manner towards the improvement of social structures and interactions and plan for future societal challenges, and by effect contribute towards the socially engaged practices. Its process and implementation should be participatory and require in-depth engagement of the civil society in all its stages; from research through to design, production and evaluation. At the same time, it does not promise radical changes but works towards initiating local changes.

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