

DISRUPTING DOMINANT DISCOURSES: THE ROLE OF MAPPING IN UNDERSTANDING NICOSIA'S CONFLICT OTHERWISE

Abstract

This study examines the role of mapping in visualizing hidden aspects of geopolitical conflicts and influencing their interpretation. Focusing on the divided city of Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, this paper investigates how alternative cartographic representations can challenge dominant power dynamics and reveal overlooked narratives within divided urban landscapes. Traditionally, maps have been tools for colonial powers to assert territorial claims, often depicting rigid geopolitical boundaries. However, they can also be utilized to uncover the dual nature of Nicosia's division — characterized by both permeability and impermeability. This paper uses maps to highlight aspects of the conflict often overlooked, such as spaces for grassroots peace actions and other elements of the divided urban environment that shape the city's spatial, societal, and bi-communal dynamics. The research aims to explore mapping as both a tool and a method for understanding the division and its manifestation on the ground. It posits that maps are active mediators capable of conveying intention and transforming perceptions of urban conflicts and their spatial representation. These new representations enable a holistic comprehension of the on-the-ground conditions, potentially leading to transformative action in addressing the conflict.

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Introduction

Historically, maps have served as power instruments, predominantly used by colonial forces to enforce territorial claims and geopolitical divisions. They often draw lines and establish boundaries, which we consider canonical, shaping our worldviews. In Cyprus, maps have been instrumental in delineating and projecting divisions onto the island, reflecting specific perspectives of the land and its coexisting social groups. However, the role of maps can extend beyond these traditional confines, particularly in socio-spatial conflicts. They can reveal the complexities of urban space and its production, influenced by various actions (e.g., for peace), minoritized narratives (e.g., by women and migrants), and power dynamics (e.g., between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots).

Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus and one of the world's last divided capitals is an exemplary case study for this work. Its division transcends a mere line on a map, existing as a lived reality experienced differently by the city's diverse social groups. Since the buffer zone's opening in 2003, communities across the divide have interacted after nearly three decades, making the division more porous than before. This duality — permeability and impermeability — reinforces a complex socio-spatial dynamic, demanding new cartographic strategies to represent and understand it fully. The goal is to visualize aspects of urban space and its division — social, cultural, political, ecological, subjective, etc. — to deconstruct the colonial image of the divided city.

Conventional mapping techniques often oversimplify Nicosia's division, emphasizing the divide and portraying the buffer zone as an "empty" or "inanimate" space. The buffer zone is typically depicted as a double-thick line, symbolizing a void. This paper challenges such depictions by focusing on the physical elements that create this spatial division and the social events that contest it. In particular, it maps spaces where bi-communal activities promoting peace, equity, and solidarity occur. Recognizing the buffer zone's rich socio-cultural landscape and altering its representation can shift the visual narrative. This is a critical step towards fostering critical imagination and developing new peace-building and conflict transformation approaches.

Mapping as a Tool and Methodology

This paper is part of a larger thesis project, (Re)Mapping Nicosia, Women's Agency in the Contested Walled City, completed as part of my master's in design studies at Harvard Graduate School of Design. The thesis argues that grassroots movements, particularly those led by women and marginalized groups, are pivotal in challenging nationalist ideologies in Nicosia that foster hatred and fear across Nicosia's divide (Kotsoni, 2023).

I have chosen to analyze the divided spaces of Nicosia through the lens of mapping, drawing inspiration from Jane Rendell's concept of "critical spatial practices." This approach involves not just describing but actively transforming space, incorporating elements of social critique, self-reflection, and the instigation of social change (Rendell, 2006).

Mapping can transcend its traditional role as a geographical representation tool, evolving into a methodology that critically visualizes, interrogates, and reconstructs socio-spatial realities. This shift recognizes that maps, far from being objective, embody selectivity and bias, thus holding significant political dimensions. Historical colonial mapping

practices, for instance, delineated territories aligned with colonizer interests and often erased communities from the cartographic narrative. These practices exemplify how maps have been instruments of control, reinforcing power dynamics (Cosgrove, 1999).

Contemporary mapping integrates aspects such as temporality, relationships, and oral histories, offering a more intricate portrayal of spaces. In the "Agency of Mapping," James Corner emphasizes this transformative aspect, arguing that mappings do not merely represent but actively shape geographies and ideas (Corner, 2011). Laura Kurgan uses digital spatial technologies to critically assess and deconstruct the underlying assumptions of digital cartographic tools like Google Maps (Kurgan, 2013). Nishat Awan challenges conventional cartographic methods for their lack of embodiment, advocating for a mapping approach that intertwines both abstraction and lived reality (Awan, 2016). Finally, Elizabeth Grosz extends the concept of "the real" extends beyond mere representation, encompassing our world of prehension (Grosz, 2000).

In essence, contemporary mapping emerges as a multifaceted tool and methodology. It goes beyond the simple depiction of physical spaces, taking on roles as both a mediator and an agent of transformation. This evolved understanding of mapping challenges traditional cartographic norms and facilitates a deeper, more inclusive examination of the complexities inherent in divided urban environments like Nicosia. This approach heralds a new era in cartography, where maps are recognized as representations of reality and active participants in shaping that reality.

In the context of Nicosia, I argue that mapping can ignite the imagination and think the conflict otherwise. It provides a critical lens and agency in depicting, analyzing, and understanding the conflict. For example, mapping can amplify diverse experiences across geographies, cultures, and communities, stimulating discussions about the city's built environment and its potential future amidst physical division.

This research began with a literature review and involved engaging with academics and design practitioners in Cyprus to understand the current state of the conflict and perceptions at the grassroots level. I then spent three weeks in Nicosia conducting fieldwork and exploring archives.

My exploration covered the walled city and its surrounding areas, involving walking, observing, and conversing with inhabitants, visitors, and scholars. To document Nicosia's characteristics and division, I employed various methods, including sketching, mapping, photography, video, and sound recording. I dedicated equal amounts of time to both sides of the divide. Most of my meetings and semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders, residents, and academics took place in the buffer zone and at the Home of Cooperation, which served as a neutral space.

While walking and observing in Nicosia, I recorded my route using Strava and later analyzed the collected data using ArcGIS Pro. This method resulted in a detailed analysis of my routes, including walking speed, stops, the exact time spent in each area, and the spaces I deliberately avoided for safety reasons while navigating the city alone. For instance, I consciously avoided areas where I encountered male or military gazes. Following each day of fieldwork, I converted my sketches and text notes into annotated maps or diagrams, some of which are featured in this paper.

Upon arriving in Nicosia, I had already developed a preliminary map highlighting people, places, and activities advocating for peace. The valuable insights from my fieldwork and interviews allowed me to discover and finalize a more intricate constellation of activities and organizations bridging the city's divide. These groups actively challenge and reshape the colonial narrative and perceptions of the division by using the urban space as a shared and common territory. Throughout this journey, mapping proved to be an invaluable tool for fostering critical dialogue and uncovering potential paths for transformative action in resolving the conflict.

Nicosia's Division — Then and Now

Nicosia, an ancient walled city and the capital of Cyprus, stands today as one of the world's last divided capitals. Historically, Cyprus has been a prime target for conquerors, which placed the island at the forefront of international politics. Fortification walls were constructed during the Venetian era (15th to 16th century), symbolizing Western heritage. From 1878 to 1914, Cyprus was under British protectorate, a period that emphasized ethnicity in Cypriot political affairs and granted Church leaders decision-making authority over the majority (three-fourths) of the population (Calame, Charlesworth, and Woods 2011, 126). In 1879, the first breach in the Venetian walls marked the beginning of the city's expansion beyond these barriers, transforming several nearby villages into the suburbs of a much larger city.

Between 1914 and 1960, under British occupation, the 'Divide and Rule' strategy resulted in the division of the island into two main communities: the Greek Orthodox Christians, constituting 75% of the population, and the Turkish Muslims, making up 18%. These communities largely lived in mutual cultural isolation. The British administration favored the Greek Cypriots, aligning more with Western culture. In 1930, the Greek Cypriots pressured Britain to endorse 'Enosis' or the union of Cyprus with Greece, which led to severe conflicts between the two communities in subsequent years. Tensions escalated further in 1955 with the formation of EOKA (Ethniki

Organisios Kyprion Agoniston, 'National Organization of Cypriot Struggle'), a Greek Cypriot nationalist movement seeking to end British colonial rule and achieve 'Enosis.' In 1957, the Turkish Cypriots established their paramilitary group, TMT (Türk Mukavemet Teskilati, 'Turkish Resistance Organisation'), to counter EOKA. Despite these intense interethnic relations, both Turkish Cypriots (T.C.) and Greek Cypriots (G.C.) shared a common objective: gaining independence from Britain (Calame, Charlesworth, and Woods 2011, 130).

The initial physical division of Nicosia occurred in 1956 under British colonial rule (Drouiotis 1998, 200-204). British authorities, capitalizing on ethnic differences, facilitated violence, leading to the creation of a barbed wire barrier known as the Mason-Dixon Line. In 1958, prolonged interethnic violence escalated over disputes regarding separate municipalities in a future independent Cyprus (Papadakis 2006, 2). By 1959, Greek and Turkish Cypriots united against British rule, resulting in the Zurich Agreement in 1960, establishing Cyprus as an independent republic. This agreement explicitly excluded the possibilities of Enosis (the political union of Cyprus and Greece) and Taksim (division or partition). It granted considerable administrative powers to the Turkish Cypriot minority under guarantees from Greece and Turkey. Britain retained two substantial areas as sovereign military bases.

After Cyprus gained independence in 1960, rapid urbanization and social changes led to Nicosia's expansion. In December 1963, tensions over a Greek Cypriot proposal to amend the constitution escalated into violence, prompting British soldiers to erect the first temporary physical barricade, eventually evolving into the current buffer zone. This unrest led to the resignation of Turkish Cypriot government members and the establishment of a separate Turkish Cypriot administration (Wolleh, 2007). The United Nations Security Council established the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) in 1964. A spatial division in Nicosia followed, aligning with the original 1956

partition line. The northern part of the city became the largest Turkish Cypriot enclave (Foka, 2015, 5).

In 1974, a more definitive division of Cyprus was established, creating a heavily armed cease-fire line that still exists today (Figure 1) (Papadakis 2006, 6). This division was a consequence of Greek and Turkish interventions, including a coup d'état orchestrated by Athens against the President of the Republic of Cyprus and a subsequent military invasion by Turkey. These events precipitated the island's bifurcation and led to population exchanges, making each side nearly ethnically homogeneous (Papadakis 2006, 2). This division, which persists to this day, acts as a buffer zone and has separated municipalities, commercial centers, institutions, facilities, and services. This buffer zone is not officially recognized as a border. It is also known as the Green Line and is patrolled by the UNFICYP. The division is most apparent in Nicosia (or Lefkoşa in Turkish and Lefkoşia/Λευκωσία in Greek).

Between 1979 and 1985, a collaboration of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot town planners, architects, engineers, sociologists, and economists worked together on the bi-communal Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) under the U.N.'s auspices, which included documenting and assessing the heritage within the buffer zone. The NMP has shared planning and development policies for the broader Nicosia area and specific projects targeting the revitalization of the walled city. As a framework, the NMP guides the overall planning strategy for Nicosia. It recognizes the buffer zone as a crucial 'gluing' area for the functional integration of the city. Its development aims to restore its original role while enriching it as a hub of activity benefiting the walled city and Nicosia as a whole. Therefore, the preservation, revitalization, and functional integration of the buffer zone's historic urban fabric and architectural heritage are paramount to the city (Nicosia Municipality - Urban Development, 17). Other plans, such as the New Vision Plan (NVP), emerged in response to diagnostic analysis of the NMP, reevaluating its achievements and shortcomings (New Vision Final Report, 2004; Foka, 2020; Constantines and Ozen, 2004).

During the period between NMP and NVP, significant demographic shifts occurred in the Walled City. Despite the urban fabric's degradation, the allure of low rents attracted economic migrants, revitalizing lost vitality. In the southern region, young Cypriots also returned, establishing a vibrant alternative scene that did not align with the NVP's preferred social profile. However, these marginal groups became primary targets of gentrification processes initiated by NMP and NVP projects and policies. Consequently, the Greek Cypriot sector of the Walled City transformed into a hub of cafes, restaurants, and other tourism-related facilities. The New Vision marked a significant shift in bi-communal planning practices in Nicosia, introducing a distinct cultural focus on the historic character of the Walled City and its potential to drive economic growth through commercialization. As a leading force in regeneration efforts in Nicosia, heritage was envisioned as a unifying factor for the two communities, both spatially and socially. However, achieving this necessitated a redefinition of heritage, moving away from divisive ethno-nationalist connotations towards the concept of common or shared heritage (Foka 2020, 13-14). Despite the optimistic message of coexistence conveyed by the openings of crossings in 2003 and 2008, the reality is that Nicosia's Municipality still believes the buffer zone, although partially accessible to locals, remains lifeless

and largely inaccessible (Nicosia Municipality - Urban Development' n.d., 21).

However, during my fieldwork, I found that women and minoritized groups and individuals actively use the buffer zone to discuss, create art, and protest for peace. Facilitating access to the buffer zone could act as a unifying force, building bridges of communication between people from different communities (Ministry of the Interior, Department of Town Planning & Housing, and Nicosia Municipality 2008, 23).

Mapping Nicosia Otherwise

Conventional maps typically depict Nicosia's division as a simple line or a pair of lines with a gap in between (Figure 2). This representation, however, fails to capture the city's complex social, environmental, and cultural landscapes, all of which merit a more intricate portrayal.

Since 2003, the opening of nine crossings in the buffer zone, mainly due to the efforts of the Turkish Cypriot Left and liberal forces led by Rauf Denktaş, has significantly altered the city's socio-political landscape. Notably, two of these openings are located in the walled city of Nicosia. These developments have reinvigorated the city's multiethnic character, facilitating interactions between individuals from both communities. Despite a militaristic presence characterized by barbed wire and warning signs, these crossings have become conduits for understanding and reconciliation. They play an essential role in fostering a vision of a unified future for Cyprus (Demetriou 2007; Hadjipavlou 2007; Hatay, Mullen, & Kalimeri 2008; Jacobson, Musyck, Orphanides, & Webster 2009).

Against this backdrop, marginalized peace initiatives have become essential in challenging and reshaping the narrative of Nicosia's division. Often overlooked in conventional mapping, these initiatives have turned the walled city and buffer zone into dynamic centers for peace activities, including arts festivals, conferences, and forming solidarity groups. The active involvement of women and other marginalized groups in these spaces, advocating for peace, antiracism, antiomophobia, and more, offers a critical perspective for understanding the conflict's transformative nature and the potential impact of bi-communal efforts.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that aspects of Nicosia's division are poorly represented in conventional maps. The buffer zone, often depicted as a single line, actually comprises over twenty streets obstructed with barbed wire fences, sandbags, and oil barrels. It cuts through the heart of the city's walled area, encircling medieval churches, neoclassical buildings, traditional houses, schools, shops, and workshops — all deteriorating due to neglect. However, conventional maps typically depict this area as a void, simply dividing the north and south of Nicosia's walled city.

Moreover, despite bi-communal efforts to unite Nicosia through infrastructural projects and shared master plans, many established maps continue to present the north and south as separate entities. However, identifying elements of architectural and urban space common to both sides of the divide — such as religious spaces, coffee shops, and rooftops — reveals a less obvious division. For example, the soundscape of sacred spaces is not confined by the border but instead permeates the spatial division. Similarly, the visual connections from accessible rooftops create a

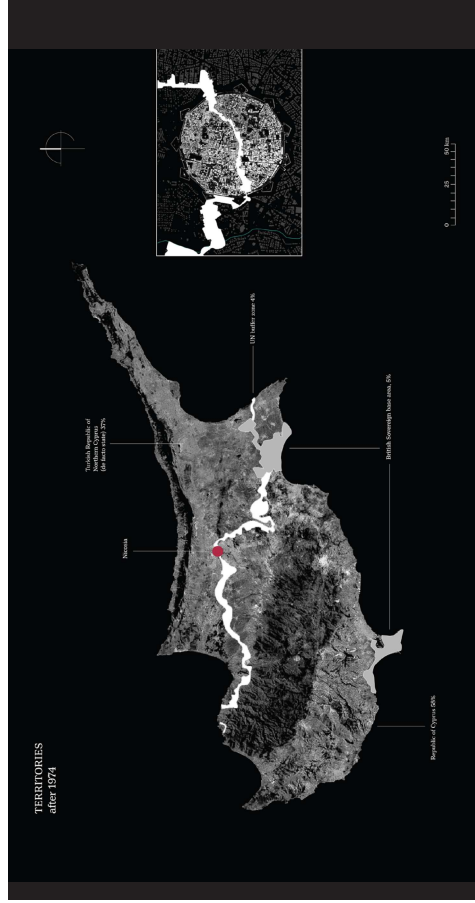


Figure 1: The current division of Cyprus and Nicosia. (Source: Author.)

coherent landscape, making the division less perceptible. In some areas, the division is not even visible from above (Figure 3).

Discussion

The division of Nicosia, a legacy of colonial powers, continues to be evident in its physical spaces, originally designed to control the land and population and to mitigate tensions. This division led to the creation of segregated spaces, which are today being actively redefined by the ways in which marginalized individuals and communities use them. Their efforts are challenging and deconstructing the enduring legacies of separation, fear, and control. This scenario poses a critical question in the field of decolonial urbanism: How can designers, planners, and decision-makers in Nicosia integrate the current usage of urban spaces by inhabitants to rethink and redesign them, ensuring they reflect the values, needs, and cultures of these communities?

Furthermore, providing voice and agency to these groups is essential for reclaiming space and identity. Empowerment by local governments can address the social inequalities rooted in colonialism. This might involve creating or supporting inclusive public spaces, celebrating shared heritage, and ensuring equitable access to urban resources.

Addressing economic disparities is also crucial, particularly given the uneven development and exploitation of resources between the north and south of Nicosia. Finally, amplifying marginalized voices and promoting peace initiatives can transform governance structures, making them more inclusive, participatory, and reflective of Nicosia's unique contexts and histories.

Conclusion

This study redefines the understanding of Nicosia's division by utilizing mapping techniques to reveal socio-spatial complexities often overlooked in traditional maps. It challenges the conventional perception of Nicosia as a city bifurcated by a buffer zone seen merely as an empty space, uncovering instead a dynamic socio-cultural urban landscape marked by both permeability and impermeability.

Mapping emerges as an essential tool for visualizing the movements and spaces of diverse social groups within this contested environment. This approach aligns with Peluso's (1995) view of mapping as a communicative language for planners and decision-makers. By focusing on elements such as blocked streets and zones of peace activities, these maps accomplish more than just altering the physical representation of Nicosia; they also transform perceptions of its spatial divisions, acting as catalysts for social change.

Ultimately, this research redefines the visualization of urban divisions in conflict areas like Nicosia and emphasizes the importance of critical mapping practices in fostering a more inclusive understanding of urban conflicts. The insights gleaned from this study have far-reaching implications, suggesting that similar methodologies could be beneficially applied in other divided cities around the globe.

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Figure 3: Alternative maps of Nicosia. (Source: Author.)

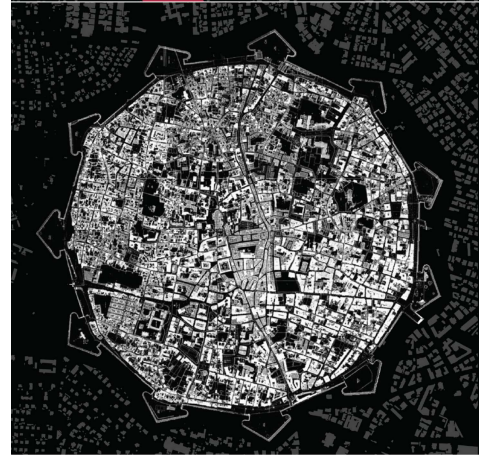


Figure 2: Conventional maps of Nicosia with and without the buffer zone. (Source: Author.)

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