

The RECorder: proposal for the rehabilitation of Famagusta in Cyprus

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Famagusta was declared dead in 1974 after its separation from the living force of its inhabitants. What remains ever since are the city's decaying carcass and a series of tourist postcards reminding of its most untimely death, right at the peak of its development.

The Turkish invasion in Cyprus, on July 20 1974, disrupted the evolution of one of the island's busiest ports and most renowned tourist resorts, which surrounded by vast orangeries and adjacent to a wide sandy beach with high-rise hotels erected in the sixties, emitted a very particular, cosmopolitan air. At the east end of the green line, a no man's land zone dividing Cyprus in half, Famagusta remains fenced and deserted for thirty-six years: an inapproachable ghost-town abandoned in the forces of time and decadence. Around the fence and inside the walled part of the old town, where Shakespeare is said to have located his Othello, Turkish-Cypriots and new inhabitants of Turkish origin that moved there after the invasion go on with their lives. While the multi-storey concrete structures are reaching their limits exposed to the corrosive sea air, the city's inhabitants live on, elect a Mayor every four years, have a local football team and hold on, incessantly, to the prospect of return.

The project presented under the title "the REcorder" is based in the hypothetical event of the return of Famagusta to its former inhabitants and addresses the issues of the private properties settlement, the building fabric's state evaluation and the touristic waterfront's iconic figure reinterpretation. While dealing with these aspects, the project takes also part in a broader dialogue about parametric urbanism, negating the reduction of its use as a form finding tool and asserting its function as a collective intelligence medium constantly negotiating the city at all levels, proposing guidelines and referenced multiple micro-transformation possibilities.

The project's point of departure is contemplation on one of the dominant schemes in the history of philosophy and religion, the "Body-Soul" Division, implying that in order for life to be preserved the material needs to be inhabited by an immaterial activating force. Facing the prospect of Famagusta's re-inhabitation one cannot but wonder: Can the dead be brought back to life?

The REcorder builds up on a vast imaginary of return that consists of numberless different personal fantasies on the city's future life. With time being the catalyzing factor, two phases are proposed that deal with both the refugee's rehabilitation and the city's following change and growth. At this stage there is a mounting gap between the evolution of Famagusta's inhabitants' needs and desires and its material infrastructure, since the deserted city's measures of time have long ago ceased

coinciding with the life cycle of its population. Time will have obviously rendered some properties uninhabitable while life will have produced new needs and desires: families will have grown or perished, and the detached construction of memory in younger generations will have altered the relations of intimacy and rephrased the issues of identity, continuity and return.

This tension is used as the intervention's starting point. Instead of proposing an externally imposed system, the project seeks within the existing the tools for its change, recognizing the decisive function of three time-related processes: Memory, Need and Intention. Using as triggering points the questions of the relation of personal narrations with the construction of collective memory, the bridging of the mounting gap between the evolving city's population and its decaying building fabric and the negotiation/settlement of conflicts and interests, the qualitative alterations that the city's troubled history has brought in these three "variables" are evaluated.

This evaluation / critique, results in the construction of the intervention's conceptual scheme which uses the "PLAY – PAUSE – RECORD" metaphor to propose a re-inhabitation model that takes a critical position in this sequence of alterations and acts as a catalyst between the city's past and its unpredictable future.

The pre-1974 period corresponds to the "PLAY" phase when city and its inhabitants evolve synchronously. During this time, Memory is a combination of an unofficial and an official narration, a meeting point of individual mnemonic constructions taking place through human interactions within the urban infrastructure and the collective acceptance of established schemes, icons and symbols. With the city being almost by definition a field of unresolved tensions, needs and intentions are settled in multiple levels, through a constant (more or less successful) feedback between the material and immaterial city substance.

The "PAUSE" of 1974 (since the hypothesis of rehabilitation rules out the "STOP" scenario) turns Famagusta into a frozen frame. Definitively ruptured from experience, Memory is produced through a deterritorialized procedure, an amalgam of the undeniable indices of the iconic waterfront images and of the refugees' multiple narrations, where reality and projection of future desires are blurred in numberless personal universes. As far as Need is concerned, the discontinuity between the population's evolution and the static, decaying urban mass becomes increasingly apparent. Famagusta, even as its ghost, does not fade into oblivion as one may expect but becomes the

expression of rivaling interests and intentions that remain idle but would be expressed in full growth should the city's inhabitants be allowed to return.

Properties claimed by many, inhabited areas for more than one generation outside the fenced premises belonging to the exiled population but also the issue of the future development (by who and for whom) of a city with a great potential that stopped the clock three decades ago... What follows this scheme is not a new "PLAY" but a "RECORD". The tape is broken so there are only two choices, either "write" and "play" a new one, or press "record" and let this uniquely intense condition mark its presence in a course that accepts the unpredictable and preserves change as a programmatic condition.

The REcorder is the "infrastructure" for the creation of a "machine of becoming" that potentializes the relationship between the city and its inhabitants, balancing between the common and the personal desire. The REcorder, considering that memory is by definition a possessive movement in the past that offers an appeasing sense of continuity and reference playing a central role in the construction of identity opens the ground for a re-territorialized memory construction through constant interaction resulting in new, random and ever-changing monumentalizations and desecrations.

Setting the point zero at the time when the rumors for the return commence, a large part of the intervention is placed in a preparation period of needing, intending, desiring, hoping, declaring, arguing in order to record a/or some/ virtual Famagusta(s) using as modules the individuals with their local utopias and wishful thinking and providing them with an interaction platform, an intermediate tool to express, negotiate them and re-evaluate them in a flexible system, where the local constantly interacts and retroacts with the global.

The REcorder calls for an urbanism slightly out of control and sets as its primary goal to function as an intermediate, a tool for developing both a more conscientious personal position and a collective intelligence mechanism incorporating the local in a flexible whole. Having created the preconditions for the maturing of the return process and the emergence of tendencies, critical points, as well as future "players", a series of "intelligent" tools are applied for the negotiation of change and growth in a system where the actual and the virtual coexist.

As soon as the prospect of rehabilitation appears, a website is launched where the previous property holders and their descendents that wish to return to Famagusta are invited to register. This

website apart from collecting statistical data on the current state of the refugees and remapping them on their old properties, gives them the possibility to declare whether they desire to claim these properties or not. At this initial stage and until it is decided that the website can open to “external interests” those who do not have a direct relationship with the city can login as guests, navigate the site and view the collected data.

As far as the website structure is concerned, three “chapters” are proposed corresponding to the successive steps of the user’s participation. The first step “A. User Information” collects and visualizes statistical data, such as the users’ new municipality of residence, their age group or their descendants. In the second “B. Property Data” category the users are asked to locate their properties on a virtual model of Famagusta, to define their property status and to describe the potential existence of a property conflict. “C. Intention Declaration” is the final and most important stage of the process, where the variable of Desire is inserted. At this point the owners can decide if they wish to claim their property or if they wish to relocate in another area of Famagusta (either to an existing part of the urban fabric or to a proposed extension). After the largest part of the population has already declared their intentions “visitors” are also allowed to enter the procedure and to “locate” their interests on the city’s virtual model.

The most important part of this procedure is that it is not a static collection and mapping of data but an open, dynamic process. From the beginning of the procedure each owner’s decision has a very specific impact on the virtual city model permitting the visualization and the evaluation of the produced result. The model of Famagusta provided in the website is not a graphic representation of the city but a system of local relations mapping and expression. While the Internet enables the users to express their desires, the programming tools applied in the process allow them to manage and negotiate them. A 5*5*3m normalization tool is applied to the existing built fabric providing a pixilated model of the city (with an acceptable level of abstraction). Therefore, in stage “B.” the owners select adjacent pixels that approach the plan of their property, while in stage “C.” and in the case that they choose to relocate, they zoom out and select the desired new area or specific building, while their old property left empty enters an “undefined”, virtual state until a new state is attributed to it.

After the final step of the “Intention Declaration” each 5*5*3 “pixel” obtains a specific state in the binary scheme “claimed” (closed space) or “unclaimed” (virtual space-state to be defined). Once

each decision is made a life-like Cellular Automata algorithm is applied to arrange the open and closed spaces of each level, through a set of adjacency rules taking into consideration parameters such as the desired porosity of the building according to its location in the urban fabric, or a ratio of open and closed spaces by level in order to provide the desired spatial values. After the application of the Cellular Automata these “virtual” pixels become either new closed, habitable spaces, open spaces or maintain their “virtual” state if there is not yet enough data for their state to be decided.

Each “Intention Declaration” is thus followed by a local agitation and the production of a new spatial configuration according to the Cellular Automata set of local rules. This way the users visualize the impact of their decisions and develop over time a conscience of the effect that the expression of their desire has in the built space as well as its interrelations with the intentions of their neighbors.

The application of the Cellular Automata rules in the city fabric produces spatial differentiations within the existing structural infrastructure that are expressed with mass customized components, avoiding the formal uniformity of the pixel. The produced voids are either dedicated to public space/greenery or to energy/water storage, according to a second subset of local rules. The Cellular Automata also results in the creation of closed spaces, with predominantly residential use. Although the state of each pixel block is a result of the parametric system operation, its final form and design is left to the inhabitant's desire, allowing for the expression of subjectivity and the production of variety. Although these mass customized components do not follow a prescribed geometry, their bounding boxes are preserved to simplify their attachment to the existing building or their assembly with adjacent component

The ability provided to the REcorder's users to alter their decision as many times as they wish according to the evaluation of this data, creates a virtual city in constant motion which does not only serve as an educative tool of understanding one's position in the whole but also creates a virtual Archive of Imaginary Cities, a sequence of Desires and thus an active mechanism of Memory inscription before Famagusta's actual rehabilitation.

As previously mentioned the REcorder does not only deal with the transformation of the existing but also accommodates desire, closely linked with growth, either in height or in width. The function of the mechanisms of Memory, Need and Intention inscribed in the concept of desire are expected to strongly influence the individual's decisions to such an extent that if no regulatory

mechanism was applied some parts of the city would become unviable (maximization of coverage and height in specific areas that are considered more privileged). A crucial question is thus posed at this point, concerning the relation of the local with the global planning procedure. Is the application of the local rules enough to provide a viable urban configuration?

Considering the fact that growth is allowed in a vertical and a horizontal axis and subjects to local rules arranging open and closed spaces using a similar pixelated system, one could assume that alterations of these rules would be enough to safeguard a sustainable growth (e.g. increase of open spaces as one moves upwards “green towers”, decrease of coverage in new city parts “needles” etc). However, the proposal does not insist in the hegemony of the “local” as a counterpart of the “global”, top-down decisions of traditional planning, but seeks a system where the local and the global are in a constant state of interaction and feedback.

The expression of the initial inhabitants desires (the collection of the statistical data and the intention declaration before the application of any algorithmic system) provides a set of height, coverage and density “Desire Diagrams”, while at the same time the study of a series of environmental characteristics (direction of winds, sea breeze, sun direction etc) provides another set of diagrams including the “critical” values of the same parameters ensuring the sustainability of the urban system. The overlapping of the desire (bottom up) and the sustainability (top down) diagrams indicates the areas where the unregulated expression of individual wishes would be perhaps problematic.

A key point in the RECorder’s function is exactly the utilization of its control tools: instead of inserting a series of “do’s” and “don’ts” it serves as a medium for the negotiation of these desires. According to the statistical data collected in the first step of the website (age group, family status etc) and the taking into consideration the areas that have not yet exceeded their critical values and can support a potential growth, new data is inserted in the website. New uses that act as “intelligent” attractors motivate the overpopulated area “target group” to rethink their initial intention declaration and creating thus the ground for a progressive shift of desires. These uses are interconnected parts of larger educative or recreational public organisms (libraries, schools etc), micro-architectures with swarm-like behavior, strategically placed in the virtual image of Famagusta in order to regulate the “desirability” of certain areas.

Through this process and as the time of the actual rehabilitation approaches a collective intelligence concerning the city in its whole is expected to have been developed through an endless process of negotiations, conflict settlements and micro-transformations that will make this reunion of the old city “body” with its “soul” less violent. Being by definition a negotiation platform, when Famagusta is finally returned to its inhabitants, this virtual collective intelligence digital space of the REcorder is materialized and dispersed in the city fabric, providing a network of physical monads (commons) that foster an open dialogue on the settlement of the urban space.

The city's development is liberated from a definitive design process and orientated towards the construction of an “infrastructure” enabling Famagusta's inhabitants to participate actively in its change and growth through their immediate decision-making. Urbanism is handled as a dynamic, collectively driven design process, responsive to the users' needs: it ceases its effort to predict or prescribe the future and is instead invited to speculate on the use of the control tools it possesses and their relation with the unpredictable tendencies emerging in any urban configuration. The city is transformed into an open information exchange system functioning in multiple scales and levels and allowing for an increasingly interactive relation between the built environment and its users. A system in constant motion fuelled by the ever-changing life it fosters.