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Green Connections: A Tale of Three Cities

BY ANNA GRICHTING

How do Nicosia, Berlin and Boston relate to each other? Disregarding their differences in form, scale and geographic location, we can position them on lines of transition. Boston, on the eastern edge of the United States, bridges European and American traditions in urbanism and is beginning to heal the wounds of its central arteries. Berlin, former war-torn metropolis and city with two heads on the capitalist/communist fault line, has progressively restitched the rift. Nicosia, capital of the divided Mediterranean island of Cyprus, marks the end of Europe. And, as we step across the border into North Nicosia, we enter the territories of the Middle East.

Aside from these liminal and bridging identities, we can also highlight the linear landscapes that have interrupted their historic cores. The Rose Kennedy Greenway in Boston, the Berlin Wall Green Belt and the Green Line in Nicosia are all situated on highways or military infrastructures that have been or, in the case of Nicosia, could be reclaimed as backbones for restructuring new developments, thereby transforming the negative discontinuities into positive spaces that reconnect dislocated urban fabrics and segregated social links.

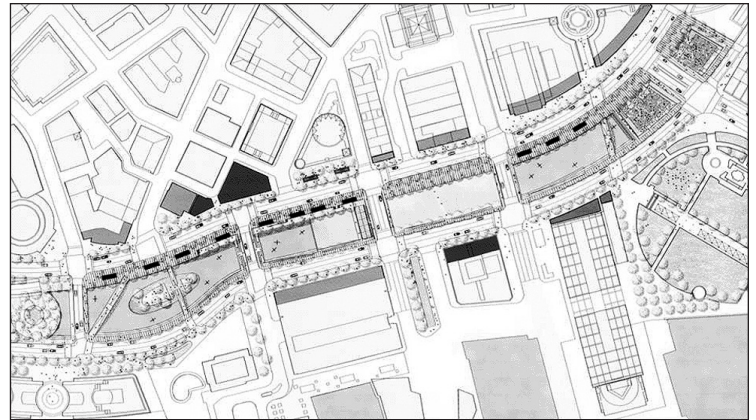
The liberation of an obsolete military or transport infrastructure opens up exceptional opportunities for the city to restructure and reinvent itself in its centre. The Ring in Vienna with its string of public institutions, Fritz Schumacher's plan for green rings around Cologne in 1920 and the elevated railway running through the center of Berlin, all illustrate how in 19th- and early 20th-century Europe, new institutions and transport infrastructures were inserted in place of the city walls. Transitioning between the historic city and the

emerging metropolis, these projects also inscribed a structural imprint of the fortification on the urban fabric. In Schumacher's general plan for Cologne, the inner green necklace was composed of a chain of autonomous but inter-related public gardens, surrounded by new housing and public buildings, while the outer green belt (acting as a buffer between the urbanized city and its peripheral industrial functions) was to be converted into public parks, playgrounds and sports fields.

Redefine and Reshape

Whether it is in Boston, Berlin or Nicosia, we are not advocating for the integral preservation of the void that has been created. Rather, we are suggesting that the space be redesigned – along the lines of Schumacher's plan – as a string of interconnected public spaces accompanied by pedestrian and bicycle paths, while offering alternative modes of transport to the automobile. The question as to whether the spaces be developed or not, as well as the final programming of the parcels, should result from a detailed and concerted study of the contiguous neighborhoods, one that examines how this new line of urbanization could redefine and reshape the surrounding fabric.

The "Big Dig" central artery project currently under construction in Boston can be viewed as one of the most ambitious and visionary urban design projects in the United States today, and one that could profoundly transform the city in the future. An elevated highway, which was carved out of a fine-grain historic tissue in the downtown area during the urban renewal projects of the 1960s, will be replaced by a "greenway" composed of public gardens



A rendering of a proposal for the North End parcels by the Civitas firm (with Moshe Safdie + Assoc., Jean-Paul Viguie, ICON architecture, Selbert Perkins Design, CMS Collaborative, SAR Engineering, LIM Consultants and Judith Nitsch Engineering).

and buildings. In conjunction with the regeneration of the waterfront into a series of riverside parks and promenades, it will create a unique network of urban landscapes in continuity with the Emerald Necklace and park system designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 19th century. With the ongoing cleansing of the Charles River, possible new developments in water transport (electric or solar-powered water taxis) and new pedestrian and cycling paths, the city will also re-qualify its relation to the water.

As suggested in a recent lecture by the urbanist Antonio Di Mambro, the edges of the greenway should be defined or redefined, while temporary occupations could be installed that would operate as reserves of constructible land in a progressive reurbanization. The act of greening the central artery could also permeate the buildings of the greenway, with sustainable architectures, smart materials and green roofs that would compensate for the built figure ground, creating an aerial continuity with the public parks.

The Berlin Wall fell on Nov. 9, 1989 and former proprietors, multinationals, local inhabitants and nature progressively claimed or reclaimed the no-man's land between the two Berlins. In this landscape of memory, certain actors were seeking to conserve and remember, while others strove to paper-over the cracks and forget.

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Environmental organizations lobbied to conserve the boundary surrounding Berlin as a ring of green spaces, while the inner-city boundary separating East and West Berlin was proposed (by the author) as a canal and linear park crossing the city from North to South. Linking the various segments of the wall, it was to operate as a means of reconnecting the surrounding urban tissue while registering the scar of the urban rupture.

Projects to preserve the entire Berlin Wall territory were never implemented, but selected segments escaped development and were transformed into a series of urban landscapes, including parks, an urban farm, a centre for the preservation of nature and various memorials to the victims of the Wall and Holocaust (Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews is situated within the former Berlin Wall territory). Tree-planting by local residents and cherry trees donated by a Japanese TV firm also contributed to the greening of the Wall, while remnants of the patrol path still remain as a pedestrian and cycling trail. In the center, where real estate values soared after 1989, the Wall disappeared in a seamless merging of the two

sides to later reappear (in response to curious tourists seeking traces) as a line of copper marking the former boundary. In a recent article in *Architectural Design*, "Berlin's Empty Heart," Howard Watson describes the architectural showcase of the Potsdamer Platz – a central and symbolic location on the Berlin Wall – as an "emotional vacuum," an "amalgamation of the worst of both eastern bloc and American planning ... Once a remaining section of the wall has been examined, the cultural purpose of the Platz itself – a celebration of the reunion of East and West – dissipates."

Nicosia proudly markets itself as "the last divided capital city in the world" and its trademark has become the Green Line traversing through its centre. This boundary cuts through the historic city, breaching the circular Venetian Walls, enclaving the abandoned airport on the outskirts and extending east and westward across the fertile plains toward the sea. Established by the United Nations in 1974, this buffer zone is the outcome of communal clashes following the end of British rule in 1960 which partitioned the island into two states, separating the Turkish Cypriot from

the Greek Cypriot communities. The future potential of this Green Line to be transformed awaits a forthcoming peaceful solution to the Cyprus problem, but nevertheless requires foresighted planning. We should therefore not wait for the wall to fall, but rather examine how we can learn from other cities like Berlin, Beirut or Boston.

The first step is to recognize the Green Line as a singular landscape – to see it as a space that can address the physical division and attempt to resolve the mental fractures of the torn city, to allow it to engage the Cypriot population in a new narrative of reconciliation centered on a common, sustainable future rather than divisive territorial claims. A comprehensive and sustainable master plan for the Green Line, as proposed by me, can be viewed as the spine of a new landscape that will become the structural matrix of a reunified Nicosia. As well as operating as a symbolic space of memory – one that could accommodate new bi-communal institutions necessary for the reconstruction of a multicultural Cyprus – it could serve as a natural unifying element for all the citizens for the first time in many decades. ■

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