

The Transformation Opportunities of Cypriot Vernacular Houses under the Scope of Tourism

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Abstract

A unique vernacular architecture has developed in Cyprus through history. The Cypriot house, which has its own peculiarities, bears some differences according to its rural or urban position. While the preferences of the ruling powers influence the urban vernacular, the local characters and values are important in determining the rural ones. The environmental, production and cultural factors gain importance in the shaping of these local identities and divergences.

The richness in the vernacular architecture of Cyprus, as observed in Mediterranean architecture, can be considered as one of the main assets for tourism. Although sometimes, the demands in tourism might be regarded as a threat for the vernacular environment, tourism itself might be based on the local factors as in the case of ecotourism.

Under this scope, the Cypriot vernacular architecture bears potential for cultural tourism with its own peculiarities such as environmental, architectural, production and way of life. In this paper, it is aimed to discuss the transformation and adaptation opportunities of the vernacular Cypriot house for the growing potential of cultural and ecotourism in Cyprus.

1 Introduction

The sustainability of the natural, cultural, and local built environment due to the impacts of tourism demands is one of the important issues of today's architectural heritage discourse. The potential threat on the issue is obvious. Under this mentioned threat, the sustainability of cultural and natural identities appears as a challenge, especially in the case of Island of Cyprus, which owns a rich variety of natural and historical heritage besides its unique local cultural characteristics.

The vitality of tourism in Cyprus, being an island in the Mediterranean basin where tourism is the crucial sector, cannot be ignored. However, the heavy demands of tourism sometimes dictate new identities in the built environment: there are some cases where tourism can be utilized as a factor promoting the sustainability of local character.

In this respect, tourism can be considered as means of satisfying not only enjoyment and leisure activities, but also a medium to ensure the promotion and participation of the natural and cultural peculiarities of a certain place as well.

In this study, it is aimed to discuss the potential of transformation and adaptation of the natural and built environment of Cyprus under the scope of tourism without any sacrifice to local identity.

2 Rural Tourism Potential of Cyprus

In the last five decades, Cyprus has emerged as a major Mediterranean summer-sun destination. Especially in the southern part of the Island, the successful growth of tourism provides remarkable socio-economic development. [1]

Besides the mass market / package-type tourism mainly concentrating on sun, sea and sand, the rich cultural heritage of the Island provides new opportunities in future tourism planning, which consequently has a direct relationship on the built environment planning. In recent years, to achieve a more balanced, and sustainable approach to tourism development, diversification attempts have aimed to include rural tourism that is both rural / traditional in terms of location and experience, instead of coastal / modern. [2&3]

Rural tourism is seen as an effective means of achieving not only the regeneration of declining rural areas but also promoting the cultural values and satisfying the more environmentally appropriate forms of tourism. As rurally oriented ecotourism has grown in popularity, which is believed to be the fastest growing tourism segment, its definitions have been expanded to incorporate ideas about ecotourist responsibility, environmentally friendly destination management, profit linkages to conservation efforts, and the sustainable development of local populations [4] and their productions.

It is clear that Cyprus has great potential for ecotourism in addition to its summer-sun oriented mass market tourism. Unique traditional Cypriot lifestyles, artifacts and agricultural products provide an opportunity for the realization of rural tourism in the Island. However, rural tourism should not be considered as an alternative to traditional rural lifestyles or occupations, but rather as a supplementary income.

A similar scope is adapted in the development of an agro-tourism program for the rural areas of Southern Cyprus by the Cyprus Tourism Organization [5]. Some of the aims and objectives of this program are: to revitalize rural areas; to provide more tourism income directly to rural communities; to

diversify the Cypriot tourism potential from the mass summer-sun tourism to new specialized segments; to promote Cypriot hospitality; to develop a uniquely Cypriot product based on traditional rural culture; to protect and conserve existing natural and built environments; and to preserve and strengthen traditional lifestyle and culture.

Achievement of socio-cultural contact and exchange is essential in the scope of rural tourism. In this respect, the restoration of the demographic layout of the rural areas, the sustainability of rural customs and cultural identities and the revitalization of local arts and crafts, and local agricultural products should be observed. The immediate threat on the sustainability of the rural Cypriot lifestyle, and consequently the continuation of arts and crafts and traditional products, appears as the most important problem to solve. This has a direct relationship with the deterioration of the rural, natural and traditional built environment. Specific items on this issue will be discussed along with the transformation and adaptation of the rural vernacular built environment. The authentic Cypriot products which might be incorporated with tourism can be studied under two groups, namely household and traditionally manufactured products. A special emphasis should be put on the relationships between product, lifestyle and built environment in the rural Cypriot culture. Product-based development in the vernacular built environment including housing and industrial building is a factor affecting the natural, physical and tourism planning. Within this context, great variation and multiplicity can be achieved within rural tourism.

In order to achieve a better understanding of the opportunities for the eco/agro/cultural production-based tourism, the identification of the Cypriot rural vernacular architecture appears to be a crucial issue.

3 Rural Vernacular Architecture of Cyprus and Its Transformation / Adaptation under the Scope of Tourism

The uniqueness of vernacular architecture of the island is based on the richness of the divergences of the traditional built environment. The vernacular architecture of the island is investigated under two fields, namely urban and rural vernacular. Although geographical, topographical, climatic parameters and availability of building materials generally denote the similar characteristics, certain differences are clearly observed in the building activity of both fields [6].

The urban vernacular architecture of the island is mainly influenced by the prevailing cultures and the imported lifestyles. Consequently, the built form in urban areas changes continuously according to urban needs; while uniqueness or authenticity loses its importance. In contrast rural vernacular forms were developed according to the response of the agrarian lifestyle, available local building materials and climatic conditions. In spite of religious, ethnical and regional (or local) differences, the agrarian way of life and economical production have been the primary determinants of shared rural traditions and the consequent rural vernacular architecture of the island [7]. For ages, rural house form remained consistent under the permanent environmental factors of the island which brought the authenticity. This unique character of the rural vernacular architecture of Cyprus can be considered as an asset in tourism planning.

3.1 Continuity and Change in the Cypriot Rural Vernacular Environment

The rural built environment in Cyprus is on the threshold of its vitality between continuity and change, due to the modern needs. A reciprocal action between the rural tourism and rural built environment is seen as an opportunity in sustaining authentic rural Cypriot identity. The Cypriot house is the focal point of this rural Cypriot identity with its lifestyle, mode of production and use, and of course peculiar typologies.

3.1.1 Cypriot Agrarian Lifestyle/Mode of Production and Rural Tourism

The Cypriot house should not be considered as only a shelter to rest but a series of places which accommodate particular household productions. The change in the mode of production dictates the lifestyle as well as the built form. Moreover, the mode of production can be utilized as a participation feature for rural tourism. The diversive characteristics of these agrarian products and the uniqueness of household arts and crafts can easily be an attraction point for the visitors (both from the production and purchase point of views).

The daily activities in this agrarian way of life mainly take place in the transitional space (semi-closed) alongside open and closed spaces. The suitable climatic conditions support the outdoor and semi-closed space activities in the rural Cypriot houses throughout the year. [8]

While some of these rural activities based on agrarian production are taking place within the privacy of the house, others, mainly the seasonal activities which bring ceremonial approaches along with them, are held publicly.

Although some activities of the rural life are performed within the household, they also bear ceremonial/ritual characteristics that are always shared by the rural community. Besides the potential of active participation of tourists in these production processes, they also bear opportunities for experiencing such unique social events within the rural society. The mutual interaction between rural society and ecotourists within the framework of production enriches the mode of tourism in the island. Furthermore, this approach ensures the continuity of these rural traditions. Cereal and grape harvesting, olive and carob collecting can be considered as the most important collective activities in the rural life of Cyprus. These activities are usually concluded with seasonal local fests which are very important in Cypriot rural life.



Figure 1: Annual Grape Festival in Galatia (Mehmetcik) Village

On the other hand, some activities are continuously carried out in the household throughout the year. Bread cooking in the earth ovens, and local cheese and grape products processing outdoors, are the major activities that are possible to produce independently in the rural house. Even a daily series of activities related to the oven which is located on the front garden of the house, can be considered as a ceremonial activity by itself. Baking fresh bread, preparing various oven cooked dishes including desserts mostly end up with a great dinner table in the garden during the night time which turns out to be an inner house festival, sometimes joined in by the neighbours and other relatives. One of the many other household products, the production of “sucuk” thickened grape juice sweet with walnut/almond core lined on a string, is a traditionally unique fest on its own. The production and drying process of “sucuk” provides visual feasts with the huge spherical cauldrons, vertical linearity of the hanged products and the movement of family members circling around. The gathering of elderly and very young female members of the village to produce the handmade embroidery, which is very special for Cyprus, is also a social phenomenon which might be open to the contribution of tourists. These and similar traditions may provide attraction points for rural/ cultural tourism in an agrarian society.



Figure 2: The production and drying process of “sucuk”- local grape product

Apart from the household activities, wine and olive oil production is a powerful feature as in most Mediterranean settlements, in which the tourists could easily participate.

It is very obvious that the flexibility of the adaptability of traditional rural life is important within the context of the topic. However, the existence of a similar flexibility in the rural built environment is also important, and should be investigated.

3.1.2 Rural Vernacular Architecture and Rural Tourism

Traditional vernacular architecture is mainly expressed through the rural house of the island. It has kept its basic characteristics constant for several hundred years. These characteristics were the responses to the needs of the organic, pragmatic and utilitarian dwellings. Rural dwelling was adapted and influenced by the social, economic and historical conditions of different periods. Forms and shapes, sizes and dimensions, and also locations and orientations of the units were specially generated according to the answers to environmental, climatic, economic and socio-cultural aspects of the regions. [9]

Each village has a church or a mosque or both, a school, a cobbler, a blacksmith, a couple of shops and a number of coffee shops [10]. The village square is a prominent part of the village and the heart of all public life. The school, the religious building and the shops, especially the coffee shops form a core in the village [11]. The coffee shop is the only place for gathering beside the mosque or church. It offers a multitude of services. In the formation of the settlements, the religious buildings played an important role where a mosque or a church was the focus of the nucleated settlement pattern. Mostly, the development of the settlements began and continued as a diffusion around the religious buildings: the two communities always side by side, but not completely mixed. [12]

This unique character of the rural settlement of Cyprus provides an opportunity for tourism as well, with minor transformations and adaptations especially in the center of the village.

The typological classifications of the Cypriot rural vernacular houses are based on the modular combination of the structure. The modules are evaluated by their spatial features, their structural types, their constructional techniques and their construction materials. [13]

The formation of the main living units of the rural house arises from two spatial elements, which are enclosed and semi-open (transitional) spaces. In the rural vernacular house, fundamentally the transitional space or ‘hall’ is the major determinant of the identification and classification of the house type. The existence of the hall with its position among the main living units and also its nonexistence form the backbone of the classification of the rural house type. [14]

The rural vernacular house type of the island is primarily divided into three groups [15]. They are:

- Single unit / units without hall,
- Those with outer hall,
- Those with inner hall.

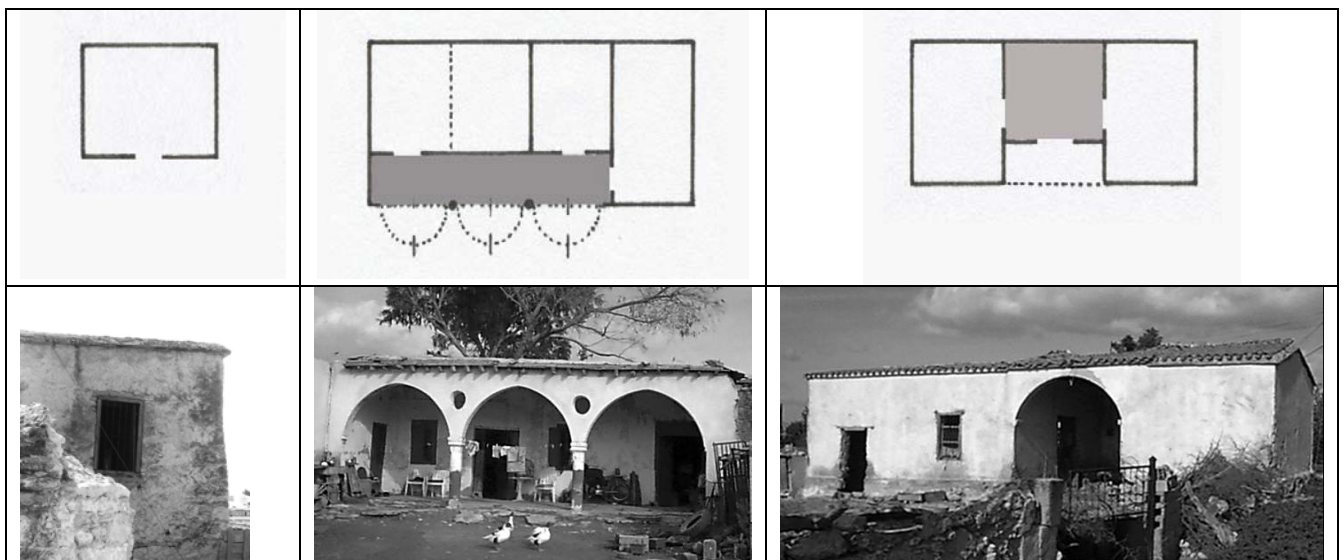


Figure 3: Three main rural vernacular house types of Cyprus [16]

However, the geography of the island naturally bears different characteristics in accordance with regions. Consequently, to identify the rural house types, it is vital to understand the nature of the three

main house types on the mountainous regions, which are largely the coastal and inner highlands of the island. The flexibility and modularity potentials of the main rural house types provide the appropriate development in conjunction with the socio-economical, cultural and physical needs.

The rural vernacular house, besides being a shelter for the family, also includes spaces for livestock, housing for implements, and storage space for products. The space quality, orientation and dimension of the shelters and storage are mainly determined by the occupation of the villagers. [17]

The rural house is formed according to the mode of production, besides the lifestyle held by the family. The adaptation of the rural house according to the needs of tourism can easily be achieved if the type of tourism is predetermined.

Here, a form of tourism based on participation in the rural agrarian lifestyle, culture, and product is suggested which will bring an ease of adaptation and transformation without any sacrifice to the authenticity of the Cypriot village.

To understand the possibilities of the adaptation and transformation opportunities in the house itself, it is wise to concentrate on the typology-use in the rural house.

The modular growth in the space organization appears to be a flexible feature in the adaptation of these houses, according to the needs of multi use accommodation. The original three to five modules growth in the house can be expanded according to changing needs, taking into consideration the modular growth. The differences to the dimensions of existing volumes of space provide the opportunity to adapt to different needs in terms of accommodating tourism.



Figure 4: Modular pattern of the Cypriot rural vernacular house

The existence of a hall, whether central and/or the peripheral parts of the dwellings, provides a multi-functional atmosphere, which is the stimulus for all domestic activity. Besides all these, the hall is also the circulation spine for the house as it connects all other spaces. The presence of transitional space in the rural vernacular house that cannot be neglected, can easily be transformed as a backbone joining the units and services in the transformation. While doing so, it is important not to lose the unique, iconic image of the rural house which gains its characteristics from this transitional space in the form of an arcade. [18&19]

The texture of a rural settlement is a composition of village square, organic streets, cul-de-sacs, high garden walls, the front and back yards of the houses, earth ovens and housing masses. It is vital to preserve the composition of villages especially in the steep landscapes.

4 Conclusion

The challenge between continuity and change (in the case of tourism) appears to be paradoxical. Mass tourism generally dictates its own physical, social and economical requirements by forcing an existing environment to change in all aspects. On the other hand, the natural and cultural identity can only survive through continuity. In many cases, where mass tourism took over, the deterioration of the environmental identity has been a consequence in order to satisfy the global demands of sun, sea and sand tourism. However, there are cases, where the needs of both continuity and change can be merged. This merging point is reflected in the different types of tourism that have emerged in recent years such as agro tourism, eco tourism, cultural tourism, belief tourism, etc.

In the case of our study area, Cyprus vernacular, the sustainability of local identity in terms of physical, natural and cultural values, is of great importance under the threat of mass tourism. Rural tourism is considered to be opportunity to maintain this sustainability. While sustaining the locality, contribution to global culture is also possible through tourism. In this respect, balanced harmony can be achieved between sustainability and change. The expansion of global culture is observed by means of an introduction of local values, identities to the wider value/ identity systems.

In the rural environment of Cyprus, a peculiar way of life dependent on agrarian products and the authentic built environment still prevails. In order to prevent the disappearance of this unique identity of Cyprus vernacular, sustainability should be maintained. However, the obstacle of tourists' demands of comfort and attractions against sustainability can be solved by means of participation in agrarian lifestyle, production process and local understanding of the built environment.

Finally, while satisfying the need for tourism, the sustainability of local identity gains importance. The identity which is achieved by means of the natural and cultural environment is totally reflected in the built environment. Any loss in this built environment will change rural Cypriot identity. In this study, it is proposed to observe sustainability while transforming and adapting the rural built environment according to the needs of rural tourism.

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