FEMINIST ECOLOGIES IN CYPRUS: EXPLORING A CONTESTED LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

What if the architectural object were revealed to be something closer to a thing among other things, operating necessarily in ecological relation, apt to emerge only to decay.

Hélène Frichot, Creative Ecologies: Theorising the Practice of Architecture (Bloomsbury, 2018), 7.
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Studio Invisible Cities has this year been exploring the idea that architecture is contingent, and part of a broader and richer ecology. We have been working in the context of Cyprus, a complex and contested island. Situated politically and culturally within the European Union yet geographically located near the states of Turkey, Israel, Lebanon and Egypt, the island has been and remains between west and east, with its strategic location making it subject, over the centuries, to occupation by a number of world powers, including Britain.

Philosophical thinking from the seventeenth century onwards casts nature as an object of study, a blank place to explore and a force to be controlled. During the British colonial period, the media of art, custom and language were used as instruments of “civilisation” and, as late as the early-twentieth century, the British both violently and insidiously exported their particular brand of “nature perfected” through literature, landscape painting and garden design to the island of Cyprus, transforming its landscapes.

As Tiffany Kaewen Dang writes: ‘As a discipline, landscape not only reflects social and political power relations as a symbolic aesthetic medium; it is itself an instrument and agent of power.’ In this context, the studio asks: How can we begin to intervene within a contested landscape?

Our starting point was to critique “landscape as an idea” within our local context in Sheffield. We investigated key landscape types – garden, park, allotment, common – analysing their histories, the versions or visions of nature they espouse, and the politics and methods of survey and design that made them. Drawing on Hélène Frichot’s book Creative Ecologies we worked together to develop a set of counter methods for reading these landscapes to reveal hidden or latent ecologies.
Preparation for our visit to Cyprus in November 2022 continued through a number of conversations, initially with Emma Cheatle, who shared ideas from her emerging research into migratory stories of the un/common local ecologies in Cyprus, introducing us to her collaborator Angela Kyriacou Petrou, from the University of Nicosia. Esra Can and Emre Akbil shared tools and tactics that they had developed through their ‘Hands-on Famagusta’ project, designed to support practices of commoning as a ‘transformative framework in negotiating urban contestations.’

The stories and insights shared by our friends and collaborators from the island, both personal and political, challenged us to rethink our flawed assumptions about Cyprus, to engage with its complexities and to reimagine our role as designers.

Building on diverse and collective methodologies of design practice such as mapping, ethnography and creative writing, the students searched out stories of resistance, creativity, joy and ambition. From the wider territories of the British Airforce base RAF Akrotiri to the more compressed landscape of the UN instigated Green Line in Nicosia, students explored and situated themselves within Cyprus’ flora and fauna, its borderlands and horizons, its complex histories, infrastructures and institutions.

The initial ambition behind the studio was to explore the notion that “good architecture” does not begin and end with a building, that informed decision making and design sees architecture as part of a broader and richer ecology. Working within Cyprus’ contested landscapes has opened up rich seams of possibility. In seeking to learn, rather than to solve, the projects and approaches that have emerged from the studio have been joyful and diverse.

2 Esra Can, [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/architecture/postgraduate/phd/phd-research-students/esra-can](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/architecture/postgraduate/phd/phd-research-students/esra-can) [accessed 28 June 2023].
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Manifesto // Ella Murrell

Figure 7 (left): Nurseries for Nicosia, Ella Murrell
Figure 8 (right): Stitching the Buffer Zone, Ella Murrell
Figure 9 (next page): Rewilding the Buffer Zone, Jasmine Howarth