THE SIGNIFICANCE OF USER PARTICIPATION IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN: 
THE CASE OF NICOSIA SOCIAL HOUSING COMPLEX

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Abstract
In both primitive and traditional societies, the user was directly involved in design and construction process of his dwelling, progressively being part of the whole process. However, together with the need to develop for masses of people; and the materialization of architecture as a professional act, the close tie between the individual and his own environment has weakened, creating a ground for little or no user participation, mainly leading to the emergence of passive users. However, in architecture it is extremely important that the end product satisfy the needs of users so that a sense of belonging can be created at long run. Otherwise, the consequences will lead to various problems at cultural, psychological and physical levels leading to a series of changes in the built environment and/or a abandonment of building on a permanent basis. The article focuses on a selected case study multi-story social housing schemes-delivered by the government of Northern Cyprus, in the capital city, Nicosia where transformation of user profile led to a series of changes in the built environment, causing the area lose its attraction over the years. Through environment-behavior research tools-focused interviews and observations of physical traces, the study analyses the utilization of open-spaces within the context of existing community texture to reach various arguments for the elucidation of the research problem. The article concludes with recommendations regarding the effect of user participation on place making at large scale social housing schemes.

Keywords
User Participation; social housing; environment-behavior research; place-making.

Introduction
In primitive societies everyone was capable of building their own house, usually through the act of repetition of a prototype that proved to be durable, economical and comfortable over a period of time. This archetype was developed and adapted to meet physical, socio-cultural and climatic needs of societies in traditional environments where craftsmen and client worked together to produce conventional building models. However, together with the introduction of necessary technology to produce for masses of people, new ways have emerged where buildings are designed and built. On one end there are cases where designer deals with individual clients who request styled, one-of-a-kind buildings. This is a situation where the level of user participation is high and helps toward the creation of responsible users who can make
decisions on their place. However, at the other end stands out a completely different case where designers have two clients: clients who pay for what is built and clients who use it (Madge, 1968). This situation presents designers with a problem: no matter how much they negotiate with paying clients, it is difficult to plan for needs of user clients who are neither well known nor readily available to plan with (Zeisel, 1986). Therefore, this gap between the designer and the end user creates a ground for no participation; facilitating the emergence of passive users who are unwilling to involve in any decision making process regarding the making of their place. This situation mainly leads to alienation of the user from his setting whether it is his personal space or communal spaces shared with others; in some cases causing impoverishment of the environment due to ill-use or lack of use of spaces.

Particularly the second case present a challenge for environment-behavior research studies as it requires in-depth analysis for a thorough understanding of the problem arising from the gap between designer, paying client and end user so that solutions can be developed. Therefore, the affiliation between designer, paying client and end user play an important role in the emergence of the type of user profile that help toward the creation of successful environments. It is highly essential that the end user should participate in planning, design and construction process as they are the first persons who will be affected by the designer decisions regarding their environment. In fact, the true experts are those who will live in and manage the dwelling, rather than architects (Reeves, 2005). That is why, within a real participation the architect is no longer the master of the project, rather the architect should understand himself/herself as one of the participants (Petrescu, 2005). According to Rapoport (1990), one of the hallmarks of man-environment research is the understanding that designers and users are very different in their reactions to environments; it is thus users’ meaning that is important, not architects’ or critics’.

In cases of mass housing, if there is community participation and therefore involvement in planning, design and evaluation stages of the project, then, there is a greater probability that the life span of the final product shall be extended. However, in the case of low-cost housing, community participation cannot be an end in itself. According to Lizarralde & Massyn (2008), in developing countries producing sustainable environments that can improve the quality of life of its inhabitants can be the ultimate end of urban interventions.

In parallel lines with above dialogue, the article concentrates on a case study in Nicosia, a city which had to reshape itself as two separate entities at the aftermath of 1974 war that permanently separated Greek and Turkish communities of the island. In order to house its immigrants, Turkish community initiated major housing developments in various parts of the country, including its capital city, Nicosia. A decade later, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was established, demanding new facilities such as hospitals, schools, government offices and social housing to accommodate government officials. This was coupled with the planning and construction of approximately 1500 residences multi-story and row type dwellings in between 1986 and 1993 at different parts of Northern Cyprus.

The article concentrates on the first multi-story housing scheme, built to house middle-income
government officials in Kucuk Kaymakli district in 1986, which after 25 years of its life span, have mostly been abandoned by its original users due to deteriorating condition of the cultural and physical environment, infrastructure, semi-private, semi-public and public spaces. These apartment blocks which were designed and constructed by the state without the participation of users are now mostly inhabited by low-income Turkish immigrants, and temporary settlers such as students. Associated with the change in demographic structure, the area started suffering from physical and social decay leading to non-participation of users in decision making process of the management of housing units and communal areas surrounding them.

The in-depth analysis of the case study through focused interviews and observation of physical traces in the environment puts forward certain user habits that give hints on the current state of affairs of buildings and their close environments. A synthesis of existing problems helps identify the profile of the users whose importance in participation is indisputable. Consequently, the article concludes with the significance of the correlation between participation/user involvement and the shaping of environment.

**Concepts on User Participation: Significance in Place Making.**

The importance of user participation in housing developments is undeniable, since shelter with affordable prices is one of the major demands of low-income citizens in many developing countries, including Northern Cyprus. When the user profile is low or middle income, the issues such as sustenance of buildings to future generations and quality of environment become major challenges to be met when the economical status of the user profile is considered. That is why the level of community participation in large scale housing schemes which can be best achieved by the mutual relationship between the designer and the user is important and form an inseparable part of the environment-behavior studies. To emphasize the importance of user participation, Lyndon, Quinn and Van der Ryn (2001), state that “We must ‘let in’ the user, not as a helpless occupant filling a chair in the ‘living room’ or ‘giving scale’ to the elevation, but as an active participant. He is the person who really defines what is ‘in’ the person who uses the architect’s clues to establish a world for himself”. In other words, participation is enabling people to work together in a spirit of collaboration and to make decisions about their own lives (Hassan, Hefnawi & Refaie, 2011).

Participation is not just a means to involve users more efficiently in the production of space, but also a means to redirect architectural culture (Jones, Petrescu & Till, 2005). Moreover, sometimes participation had been seen as means for tapping cultural pluralism, which in turn, has been considered to be a potential for achieving diversity of form in architecture (Albrecht, 1988).

Saleh (2006) states that the idea of participation can also be explained through the democracy concept where clients as service-takers and payers should participate in everything that influences them, as they are the first persons to be influenced by designer decisions regarding their environment. Therefore, they have the right to participate in decisions making regarding planning, designing, construction and evaluation process of their buildings. According
to the author, the participation idea must finally lead to a successful and integrated design. This success is associated with the user’s needs and preferences, which could be mostly achieved through participation. Participation especially, in housing projects plays an important role in empowering community members to become part of the general political process and to have a voice in decisions that shape the community (Davidson, Johnson, Lizarralde, Dikmen & Sliwinski, 2007). Democratic access to decision-making, however, is not granted by an imposed participation; rather participation should be understood as a progressive and evolving process that constructs itself reasonably (Petrescu, 2005).

The user’s feeling of self-confidence is another factor in facilitating the role of participation in design. This is because the user understands the design and participates in setting the proper solution; therefore, he/she accepts the design and preserves it. Moreover, increasing participation is an effective tool for avoiding social exclusion, which is often related to restructuring local economies and joblessness (Hassan, Hefnawi & Refaie, 2011).

However, for the user to be able to participate in the design process, Saleh (2006) suggests that the cultural level of community is also important. He indicates that spreading a high ratio of social, cultural and political awareness among individuals or at least among leaders who would affect decision-making within the community is an influential factor for community participation. Therefore, it is highly necessary to create cultural awareness on the significance of architecture, maximizing communities’ interest in working together with architects.

Apart from the cultural level of community, another important factor influencing community participation is the profile of the user. Accordingly, Hill (2003) argues that if users are detached from the commissioning, ownership, design and management of a space, it is more likely that unexpected uses shall be formed due to lack of a strong sense of responsibility for space. However, the owner users will have the opportunity to transform the space because of their control upon the project.

Till (2005) indicates that in all participatory processes there are various degrees of involvement ranging from token participation to full control of the process by citizen participants; while, Saleh (2006) divides level of participation into several sections according to issues below:

- The user; who is he / she? What is his age? Is he /she one or a group? Is he /she owner or not? What is his /her authority on the project?
- Is he encouraged to participate in planning, designing, construction, evaluation and management levels of the project or is he/she rejected? Does he have experience in participation? Does he/she know the methods or not?
- The project; what is the kind of project? Is it general or special? What is its size?
- The culture of the community and the democracy in the community.

**The level of non-participating:** The level of participation could be zero. In this level, the architect is the main controller of the project. This is usually the case when the paying client is a governmental authority such as municipalities and ministries.
The low level: The user participation is small and insignificant. The first controller on the project is the architect.

The equally-balanced level: The opinion of the user is equal to the opinion of the architect. The architect and the user work together to produce a project which expresses the culture of the user and community and architect’s style.

Yet, Wulz & Sanoff (1990) indicate that architect’s decisions can also be affected by other forces and factors that he cannot ignore. During participation process citizen influence changes from passive to balanced and then to an active one which dominates the architect’s authority.

The high level: The first controller is the user. The architect here acts as a guide and adviser only. This user group has the economic and cultural means to demand for the architect he/she desires. Yet, the high level form of participation also exists in the form of self-build and self-help where architect participates only as an advisor.

The-Top-level: The case where top-level participation exists; which in other words can be described as architecture without architects. Habraken (1990) indicates that user participation here means that the user has the decision-making power.

Consequently, it may be suggested that the economical condition, the progress, and the level of democracy in the community are determining factors for type of participation whether it is low, equal or high. The more people are aware of the concept of democracy and freedom, the more there is the chance of participation increasing.

Equally, the interest of the authorities to involve the community in the decision making process, and their likeliness to include this as a regulative policy at local level increases the probability of participation.

Amstein (1969) on the other hand believe that people need the power to be involved. He sees that in the most part, participation was simply a mean of manipulating public opinion. According to the author, participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the power-holders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of the sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo. Participation becomes meaningful only near the top, where some power is transferred. Regarding this matter, Jones, Petrescu & Till (2005) believe that in contemporary global politics, where issues of democracy are so challenged, true participation in the processes of change is becoming increasingly rare but at the same time is ever more needed. They continue by stating that if people are to feel a sense of belonging to their place, an involvement in the spaces they inhabit is a good starting point.

The term ‘place’, by definition, extends the focus of attention beyond geographic space to the experience people have of being in a particular landscape environment. This definition of ‘place’ is also mentioned by Proshansky (1983), who argues that primary function of ‘place’ is to gather a sense of belonging and identity. Based on the same gestalt psychological theory used by Kevin Lynch, Schulz (1980) explores the character of places on the ground and their meanings for people. Naturally, if there is higher participation, then the opportunity for
that ‘place’ to create a sense of belonging and identity over people increases. It appears that people react to environments in terms of the meanings the environments have for them (Rapoport, 1990). Consequently, for a place to be meaningful to people, their involvement in planning, design, construction, evaluation and management levels become unavoidable.

**Methodology**

The evaluation on defining the level of user involvement in Nicosia social housing complex involves the application of some environment-behavior research techniques such as focused interviews and observation of physical traces.

Instead of using a survey system where questions are posed with prescribed rigidity, the research makes use of focused interviews which describe respondent’s situation, feelings and intentions more deeply (Zeisel, 1986). Amongst 150 flats existing at Kucuk Kaymakli district, 60 units were chosen randomly and questioned on predetermined issues over a period of approximately one month. Focused interviews were run on three different titles: at administrative level, physical level; and behavioral level as specified below.

**Focused interview on administrative level**

1. Are you aware of your legal rights regarding the use-misuse of communal spaces?

2. Do you think that you are responsible for the non-existence of participation within the society?

3. If a team is formed regarding the management of communal spaces, would you like to contribute?

4. What kind of changes will you make in your semi-private, semi-public, public spaces?

5. Will you be interested in funding:
   - A project on rehabilitation of semi-public space in between the apartment blocks?
   - A project on rehabilitation of facades of the apartment blocks?
   - A project on rehabilitation of pavements in front of the apartment blocks?

**Focused interview on physical level**

6. Do you think that there are enough green areas and parking?

7. What is disturbing for you in the environment?
   - Cars
   - Dust
   - Lack of green area
   - Garbage
   - Sound pollution

**Focused interview on behavioral level**

8. Where do you park your car usually?
   - To the garage under the apartment block
   - In front of the apartment block on the pavement
   - To the open space in between the apartment blocks

9. Are you using the open space in between the apartment blocks? If yes, how?
   - Car parking
   - As a short-cut
   - Playground for children
   - As a place to throw my garbage

10. How do you think a passer-by perceives the open space in between the apartment blocks?
    - An alcohol drink corner for youngsters
    - A place to throw their garbage
A place to park their cars
- A place to bring their children to play

11. At what time interval do you go shopping to the shops on the ground floor of the apartment blocks?
- Everyday
- Twice a week
- Once a month
- Never

12. Do you find the types of these shops compatible with your living environment? If not, why?

The other method employed is the observation of physical traces around the semi-public and public spaces around apartment blocks. Observation of physical traces involves systematic analysis of physical surroundings to find reflections of previous activity. From these traces information is gathered on how people actually use an environment, how they feel toward their surroundings, and generally how that particular environment meets the need of its users. This analysis helps forming an idea of what people are like who use that place - their culture, their affiliations, the way they present themselves (Zeisel, 1986).

When looking for physical traces, By-products of use are investigated in detail which reflects what people do in settings - such traces as litter or worn spots left behind by someone who used, misused or failed to use a place.

**Case Study: Social Housing Complex in Kucuk Kaymakli, Nicosia**

The case study focuses on a multi-story community housing project in Kucuk Kaymakli district of Nicosia where 15 identical blocks are located around an empty plot originally used as a children’s playground area until mid 1990s (see figure 1).

![Figure 1: Front façade of Nicosia Social Housing Complex facing the main road (Source: Authors).](image)

These multi-story housing blocks were part of a larger scheme planned and built by the government of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in between 1986 and 1993. A total of 1,500 units -multi-story blocks and row type dwellings-were implemented of which nearly fifty percent was used to settle middle income governmental officers living in Nicosia (see table 1). These housing complexes were designed by the architects of the social housing department of the government and constructed in various phases. This was a prototype that was implemented in all major towns/cities of Northern Cyprus without considering environmental, climatic or any other aspects of design.

Generally, two types of units were offered by the government, 4 storey housing blocks offering two flats on each level and duplex type...
dwellings with small front and backyard patios. These prototypes were within maximum 120 m² and minimum 90 m² range offering spacious living room, kitchen, 2 WC (1 including shower facility), 3 bedrooms and front terraces/balconies. Throughout their application from 1986 to 1993, no major changes were made on the building types, including details such as selection of materials and color of façades. Yet, in latter phases of the dwellings, the units were reduced in size since the first phase was considered too luxurious for a social housing unit. Besides, some facilities such as the garbage store room on the ground floor were cancelled, less windows were used due to the reduction in the overall wall size, shops were excluded from the ground floor according to the context it was built.

However, all of these changes were implemented without consent of the users. During the design of the new phases, common needs of the users were not considered through
a questionnaire, a mutual dialogue, or any other tools. None of the original users participated in the project either during the design process or during the construction phase.

Forms of user participation have different stages and range between the extremes of no participation to top participation. However, it appears that in these settlements there were almost no attention to this issue. Although these housing complexes have been realized at different phases, no evaluation back-up had been received from existing users. The fact that almost all complexes were planned in major cities, near other functions such as schools, shopping areas and along one of the main traffic axes introduced problems as well as advantages. Acting as center of attraction for businesses, most of these housing complexes remained within the busiest areas of cities, causing the formation of insufficient car-parking areas, vandalism in the open areas and within the semi-private areas of multi-story housing blocks, excessive noise, and introduction of incompatible trade functions around the area. Naturally, these problems decreased the quality of environment within these neighborhoods, gradually leading to the abandonment of houses/flats to low-income settlers or temporary residents.

As it may be seen in Figure 2 multi-story housing blocks in Kucuk Kaymakli district suffered from similar problems.

Given below are the evaluation results of focused interviews and hints derived from the observation of physical traces around the area;

- Most of problematic issues in these complexes derive from the underestimation of climatic and cultural factors. The multi-story housing blocks were designed and located to the site without much consideration of climate and topography. Besides, cultural and societal needs of the community were not taken into...
consideration due to zero participation. This has resulted in the consumption of lots of energy i.e. users have to pay a lot, both for heating and cooling through long Mediterranean summers and winters. Although, these dwellings have been built for low-income families the end costs were not well considered.

- One of the negative design aspects that cause social segregation in these settlements is the creation of “no man land” in between the multi-story housing units. The empty plot in the middle of blocks now functions as a garbage dump with many traces of damage/vandalism (see figures 3-6).

Figure 3 & 4: Physical traces - a broken bench and a deserted climbing frame - from the semi-public space in the middle of the Apartment Blocks & designed as a children’s playground, the semi-public area now serves as a car park spot for the surrounding residents (Source: Authors).

Figure 5 & 6: ‘Litter begets litter’ Misuse of semi-public area (Source: Authors).
• However, after the first decade of completion of the project, although not designed for that particular use, this vacant plot of land was primarily used as a children’s playground area as it may be evident from left-over playing elements seen in figure 4. Although the playground area located in between the multi-story housing units was intended to provide a meeting place for the community, later it turned into a place for homeless dogs and cars and a hideaway point for alcohol and drug users. Although there is a limited use of this space during the day, the homeowners do not prefer to use the space during the night at all as the space provokes insecure feeling due to existence of no artificial lighting. There is no doubt that quality of life depends on the availability of leisure facilities as well. Otherwise, people cannot feel part of their community.

• Moreover, there was no consideration of segregation between private and public uses. The front facade of buildings acted both as a public and private interface and in time this had lead to the distraction of comfort of house owners and tenants. Inappropriate public functions such as busy restaurants on the ground floor caused many disturbances for the inhabitants. The attempt to mix shops and offices together within the housing scheme was to pay for the initial costs. However, inappropriate accommodation of facilities within shops created problems of parking as well.

• It is observed that each multi-story housing block, which consists of 8 flats and 3 shops use only two waste disposal units (see figure 7). Lack of a common sewage system causes severe problems such as leakage of wastewater

Figure 7: The passage between two apartment blocks which serves as a private garage entrance but now invaded by shop keeper on the ground floor (Source: Authors).
(overflowing) from the sewage tanks and this, creates pollution, and threatens health. Being a semi-public space behind the shops on the ground floor, this area is now invaded by the shop owners to dump their extra furniture.

• Another major problem seems to be lack of proper management, which is valid for almost all other social housing complexes too. Since users were not involved in the process of design and construction, occupants did not grow a sense of belonging to their environment. Coupled with the lack of an apartment management law to regulate multi-story living style, and due to the newly forming lifestyle of low-income and temporary tenants in these apartments, people do not feel attached to spaces outside their thresholds.

• Another significant issue that has caused the alienation of people from their environment at long run was the fact that they have not been given the opportunity to choose which floor or unit to live in. i.e. elderly people were not allowed the freedom of choosing to live on the ground or first floor.

• It is apparent that majority of tenants are not aware of their legal rights considering the use/misuse of communal spaces, although most indicated that they can support a leader in case of him/her leading a legal action against the occupation of their communal areas by the shop owners.

• Majority of tenants showed interest in the rehabilitation of their facades rather than the semi-public and public spaces stating that latter is the sole responsibility of municipality.

• Majority of tenants stated that initially they would consider making changes in their flats rather than other communal areas.

• Some were unhappy about the amount of dust piled up on their furniture; most indicated that they were discontented about not being able to find a second car-parking space. Majority were disturbed by the use of their front communal space by foreigners.

• Most of the users parked their car in the garages available at the back of the apartment blocks, but indicated that they use the empty land for car parking especially during lunch times or for temporary uses. Some stated that they use in-between space as they found parking at the garages difficult due to design of the semi-open car park. If they went to shopping, the empty land became a short cut for many but only few of them allowed their children play in this area. Many indicated that they threw garbage to this area in the past although they knew it was not a legal act.

• Passer-by replies indicated that there is an inclination to throw garbage on the pavements due to lack of bins. Some stated that they use in-between spaces to stop and smoke cigarettes.

• Most of the users indicated that they do not shop from the restaurants on the ground floor due to lack of hygiene. Many indicated that they will be reluctant to shop even if they were given different choices on shops.
Conclusion

The results of the case study have proven that inhabitants have a great deal to complain about their environment. Some of these problems can be solved through simple considerations or changes, however the origin of the problem lays in the fact that consulting potential users of the building throughout the design and construction process had been missed out.

Some of the issues such as problems arising from inappropriate function of the shops; and noise pollution created by the traffic on the main road cannot be solved easily and require regulative decisions at a higher level. However, creating awareness on citizen’s rights amongst users may help towards the creation of responsible users. Yet, change of shop functions from retail to office use can be an alternative solution for raising the quality of life for existing inhabitants. However, in a market oriented economy, this might not be realized easily.

The problem of management is directly related to the profile of existing users. Although there is a law on the use of communal spaces, the lack of awareness at citizen level and existence of large number of passive users stand out as a problem. However, through education users can be encouraged to take more active role in management of their environment, otherwise unhealthy isolation and antagonism will be created towards the environment, leading to the increase of social problems such as vandalism.

The environment-behavior research on the area demonstrates a reduction in the population of original owners, where there is a gradual increase in the number of temporary and low-income tenants. Although available original owners indicate that there were reactive and creative home owners living in the area previously, they claim to have been pacified by the influx of non-participating tenants. Due to high density of passive users, there is a ground for minimum knowledge and participation where remaining owners feel scared to protest against the misuse of their semi-public and public areas. However, it has been observed that there are second generation reactive users who inherited their leadership potential from first generations creative users. The existence of such a potential looks promising for the future in case of a regeneration effort.

For future planning of social housing schemes, the actual needs of people rather than requirements of ease and speed of construction should be considered. Since the users are anonymous to designers, there is usually a passive form of participation- architect’s capability of putting himself in his client’s place-existing in the design process. However, for the complexes that are built in different phases, a serious feedback from the community can be taken into account. Yet, an active participation of users through questioners and interviews would be a better approach and benefit users, architects and government agencies altogether.

References

The Significance of User Participation in Architectural Design: The Case of Nicosia Social Housing Complex

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