

Life Within the Venetian Walls of Nicosia

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Once representing protection, military defence and safety, have gradually evolved into a symbol of sustainability and integration with modernity, surrounding a city at the heart of the island – Nicosia, Cyprus.

Between 1567 and 1570, the Venetian Walls came to life under the expertise of two military engineers Giulio Savorgnano and Francesco Barbaro aiming to protect and defend the city and its people from the Ottoman invasion (Goran, 2017).

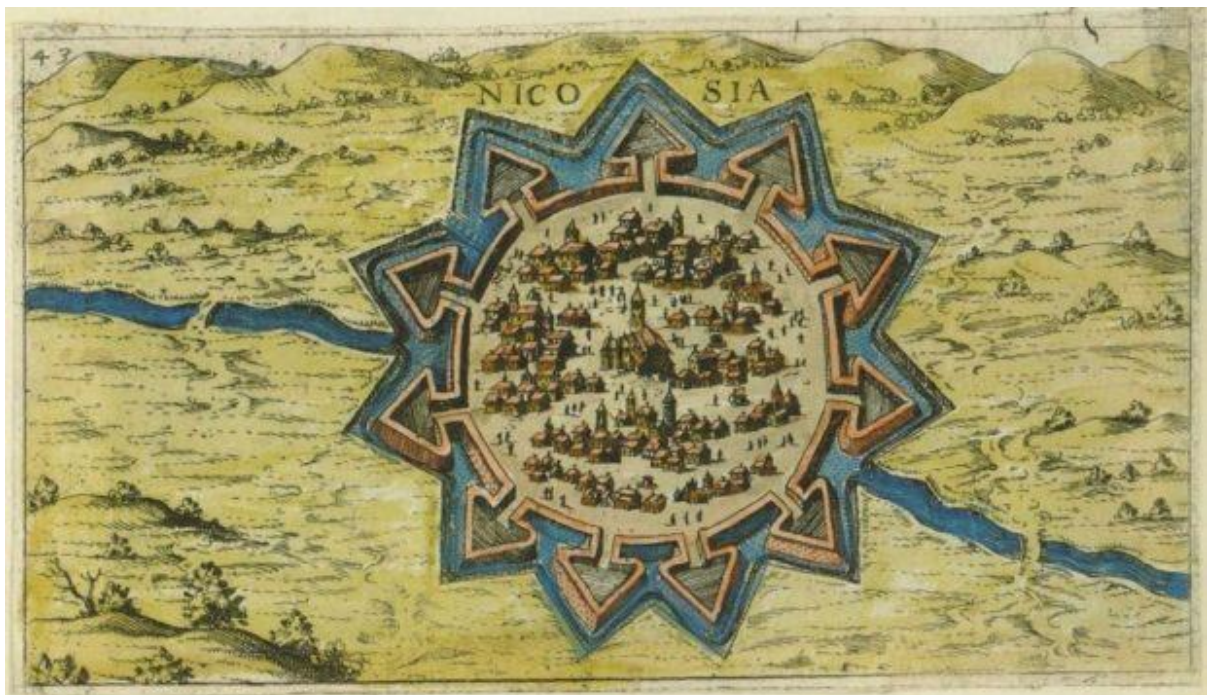


Image 1 - The Venetian Walls (Goran, 2017)

Consisting of eleven arrow - shaped bastions as shown in Image 1, each about eighty meters in width and constructed from mud bricks; each bastion is named after families of the Italian aristocracy which have funded towards the construction of the walls (My Cyprus Travel, 2018). The fortifications were constructed using building materials procured through demolition of houses, churches and civic structures within Nicosia by the Venetians (Goran, 2017).

Historically, the city of Nicosia has been inhabited and influenced by many communities since the sixteenth century, including the Ottomans and the British. The

city walls have long been distinguished as shared heritage by diverse groups that have shaped Nicosia over the centuries (Bressan et al, 2023).

Today, Nicosia stands as the only divided capital in the world – A lasting result of the island's history and Turkish illegal presence and occupation. Despite its division, the walls still symbolise cultural heritage along conflicting communities of Cyprus (Bressan et al, 2023).

The “historic centre of Nicosia is situated inside the emblematic Venetian Walls” (Osman, Moropoulou and Lampropoulos, 2023, p1). This significant setting serves the inspiration for this article, with the aim to explore life within the Venetian Walls.

Division within the Walls: Buffer Zone

March 4, 1964 – a milestone in the history of Nicosia. A day where the United Nations established a 180km temporary demilitarized zone to maintain peace between Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities passing through the walls (UNFICYP, 2015). Yet, 61 years later the zone remains in place; a physical and symbolic divide that “stubbornly reshaped the city's urban fabric as well as the lives and livelihoods of those who call Nicosia home.” (Durham University, 2019)

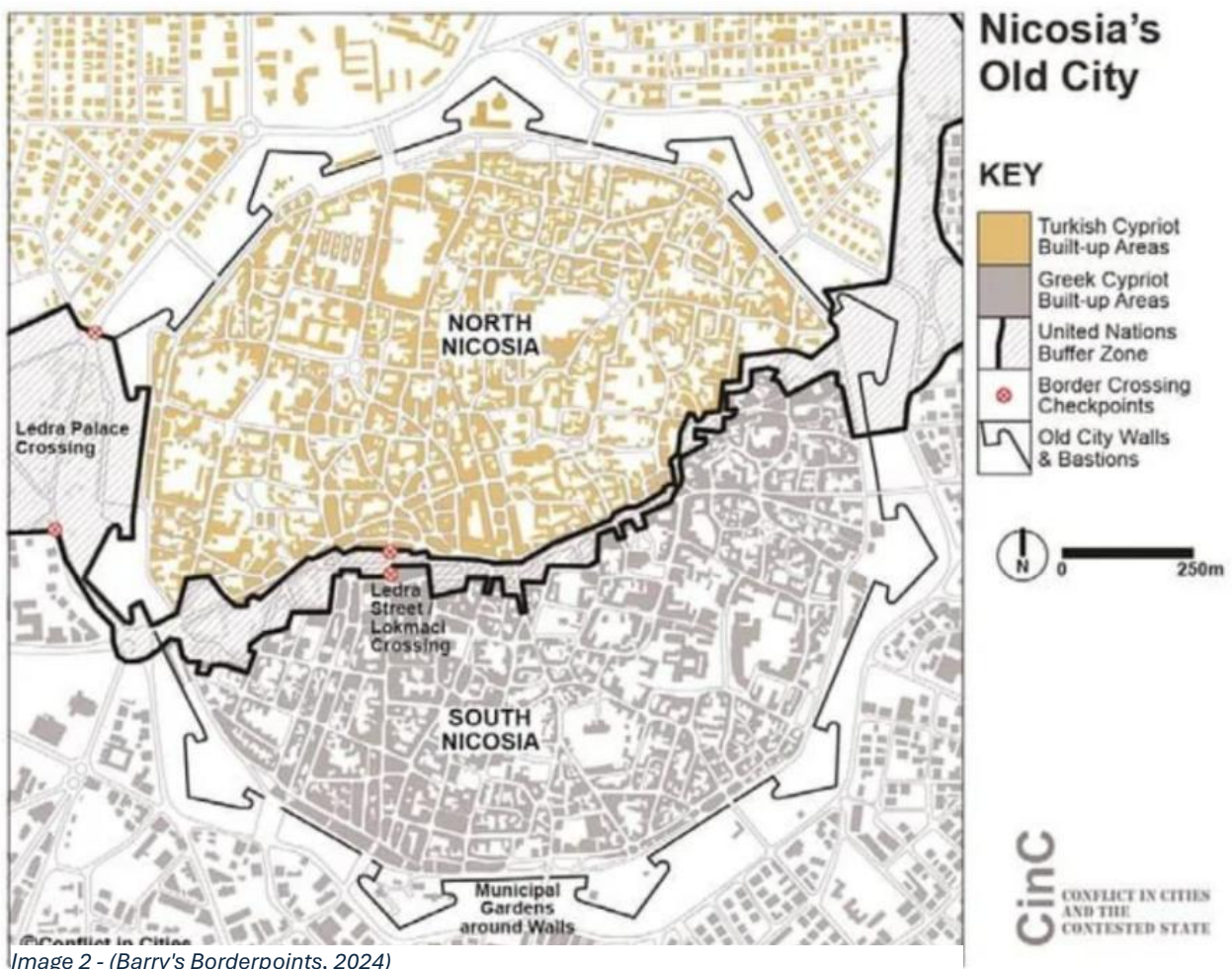


Image 2 - (Barry's Borderpoints, 2024)

Image 2 – a satellite image of Nicosia’s Venetian Walls, clearly depicts the North and South Nicosia separated with a buffer zone, also known as the “Green Line”. Within in the buffer zone, the city remains untouchable since the 1974 war illustrated in the images below, earning the label as a “no man’s land” or a “dead city” among many scholars (Foka, 2020).



Image 3- Interaction between the Buffer Zone and the walls (UNFICYP, 2021)



Image 4- The town of Nicosia in the Buffer Zone (European Heritage Awards Archive, 2022)

Once a loud and joyful neighbourhood has now transformed into a “ghost city”.

Limited human presence has allowed nature to gradually reclaim the space, turning it into an unintended nature reserve (UNFICY, 2015). Recognising this transition the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus works on conserving this unique environment, by preventing illegal dumping over the area.

“NEKPH ZQNH” translated into “DEAD ZONE”, is displayed with bold capital letters on signs through Nicosia, as shown in Image 3. The image not only illustrates the relationship between the Venetian walls and the buffer zone but also conveys a sense of absence as the sign emphasizing that access to this area is strictly prohibited, excluding military personnel; reflecting both the impact of the war and people’s lives that once called that area their home.

An even more emotional and powerful depiction is viewed in Image 4. The streets, the houses, the pubs and restaurants that were once full of life are now standing abandoned, decaying in a dead segment of the city. Residents were not only forced to migrate and leave their settlements and lives behind, but now most of them are confronted with the sight of the houses they built with such care and effort standing abandoned.

These signs and the buffer zone act as a constant reminder of the separation of Nicosia to its people, evoking feelings of anger, sadness, discomfort and loss daily.

Public Spaces within the Walls: The Old Town of Nicosia

From an architectural perspective, the old town of Nicosia has character, tradition and culture. Although the architecture shares a similar essence, the different bright colours and materials used to construct these building differ; bringing light and life to the city.

Architecture in Nicosia is known to be a “reflection of History and Innovation”, as each building shares a story and a mark of civilization (Cyprus Conferences, 2024).

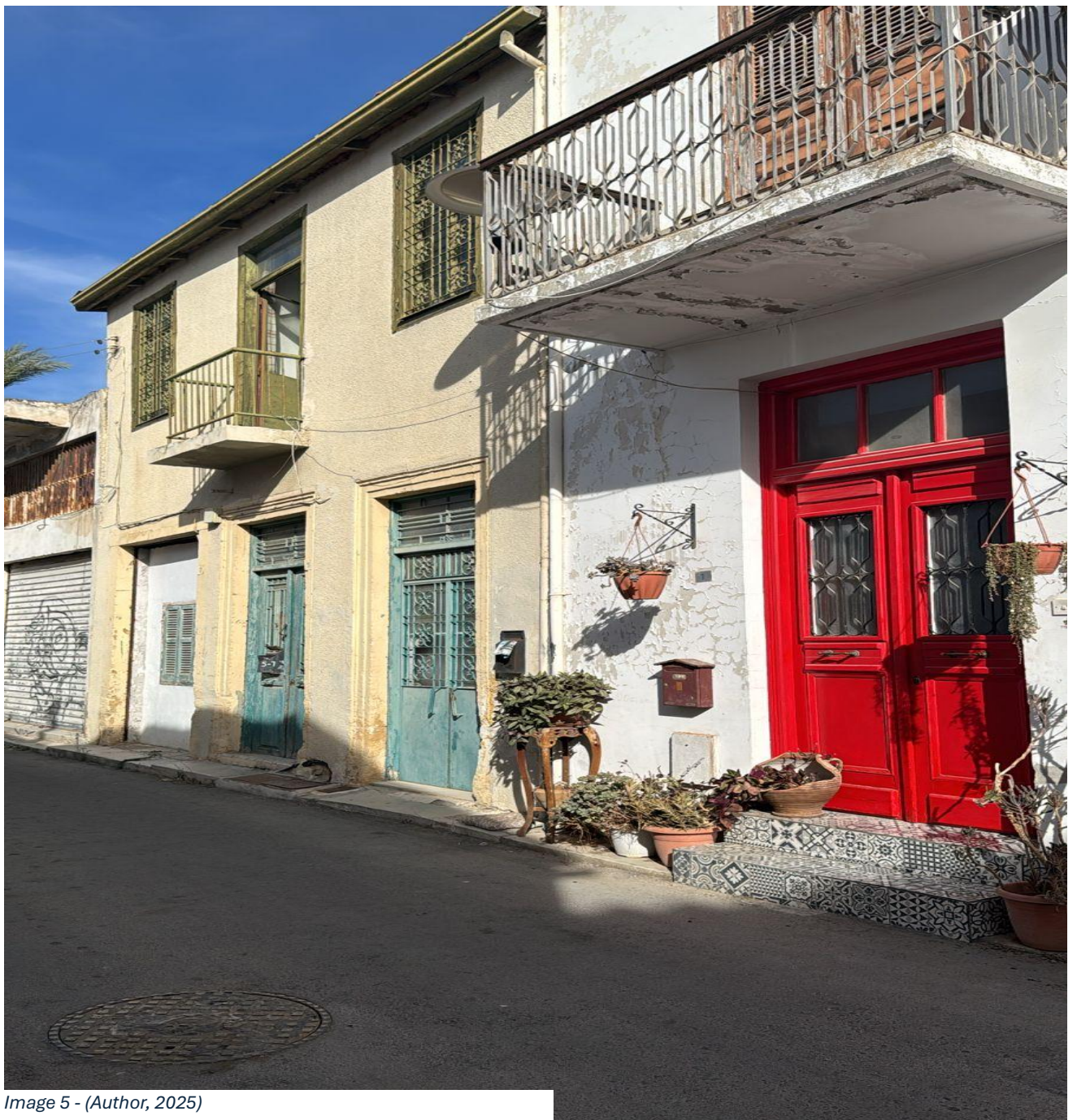


Image 5 - (Author, 2025)



Image 6 - (Author, 2025)

The bright colours, the old doors, the unique patterns on each front step, the large windows and the small balconies define the architecture of old Nicosia. The buildings share identity similarities, yet each has its own charm. The vibrant details in combination with greenery fill the city, creating a sense of calm and joy for anyone walking through them. There is a prevailing sense of tradition, simplicity - a sense of a “simple life”.

Around every corner of the old city, exceptional street art can be found, filling the streets with both colour and meaning, as shown in Image 7 and 8.



Image 7 – Saint Europe (Author, 2025)



Image 8 – My Keryneia (FIKOS, 2025)

Scholars have argued that its not just about street art itself, but how people interact with it daily (Nomeikaite, 2023). Papers have concluded that street art reduces negative well – being measures like anxiety and negative mood but at the same time “It seems that both art and cultural engagement may be specifically better targeted at decreasing negative feelings while not as effective at increasing positive ones.” (Mikuni et al, 2024, p11).

In the context of old Nicosia, wall art is symbolic to the division of the city and deepens the political perspective of citizens. Residents use street art as a way of expression and desire to end the division and transfer history through art to people walking by. As Böhme specifies, is a way to old life in the city in the form of politics, culture and poetry. This is supported by Nomeikaite, as he argues that the relationship between street art

heritage and people is an embodied and political experience rather than a division (Nomeikaite, 2023).

This political desire is shown in both Images 7 and 8. The art piece in Image 7 is known as “Saint Europe”, since Europe symbolises a saint – figure for Cyprus during division, war and history. Image 8 is an even emotionally stronger art piece called “Κερύνεια μου” meaning “My Keryneia”, referring to a city called Keryneia in the Northern Cyprus which has been under Turkish occupation since 1974. The girl holding the candle with chains symbolise hope, prayer and loss. Yet, both art pieces transfer a powerful meaning to people walking in these streets, making sure they don’t forget about the history and have hope to get back the lost land.



Image 9 - Peace (FIKOS, 2025)

Image 9 is not primarily about remembering but is about peace, where it also took its name from - “Ειρήνη”. On the side a Greek poet is written meaning that “Peace is the human soul; she is the smile of God in the human being”, expressing healing and unity. This artwork represents peace as a divine, human which creates a feeling of calmness and hope.

Integration with Modernity: Sustainability approaches

The city has preserved its traditional identity through the maintenance of its historic architecture. At the same time, modernity has been introduced through one of the most contemporary and ambitious interventions in the old city; a grand project known as Eleftheria Square meaning “Freedom Square”, designed by architect Zaha Hadid (Cyprus Island, 2022) shown in image 10.



Image 10 - Eleftheria Square (Konstantinou, 2023)

At first glance, Eleftheria Square appears as a powerful symbol of progress, cutting through the walls of Nicosia. The layered bridges, water fountains, ramps and the cafes contrast sharply with the rigid geometry of the Venetian Walls surrounding the space, while promoting accessibility and movement for everyone. This contrast, rather than replacing the historic fabric, proves that old and new can coexist within the same frame, giving the space its narrative power.

It is often assumed that the integration of modern architecture into a historic city produces a sense of incompatibility with local culture (Turner, 2020). In the case of

Eleftheria Square, these tensions are not hidden but visible. Although the space is named after freedom, it remains physically enclosed and trapped within the walls that once served as instruments of defence and control. The design therefore embodies a paradox where the space is dedicated to openness but situated within a landscape shaped by enclosure.

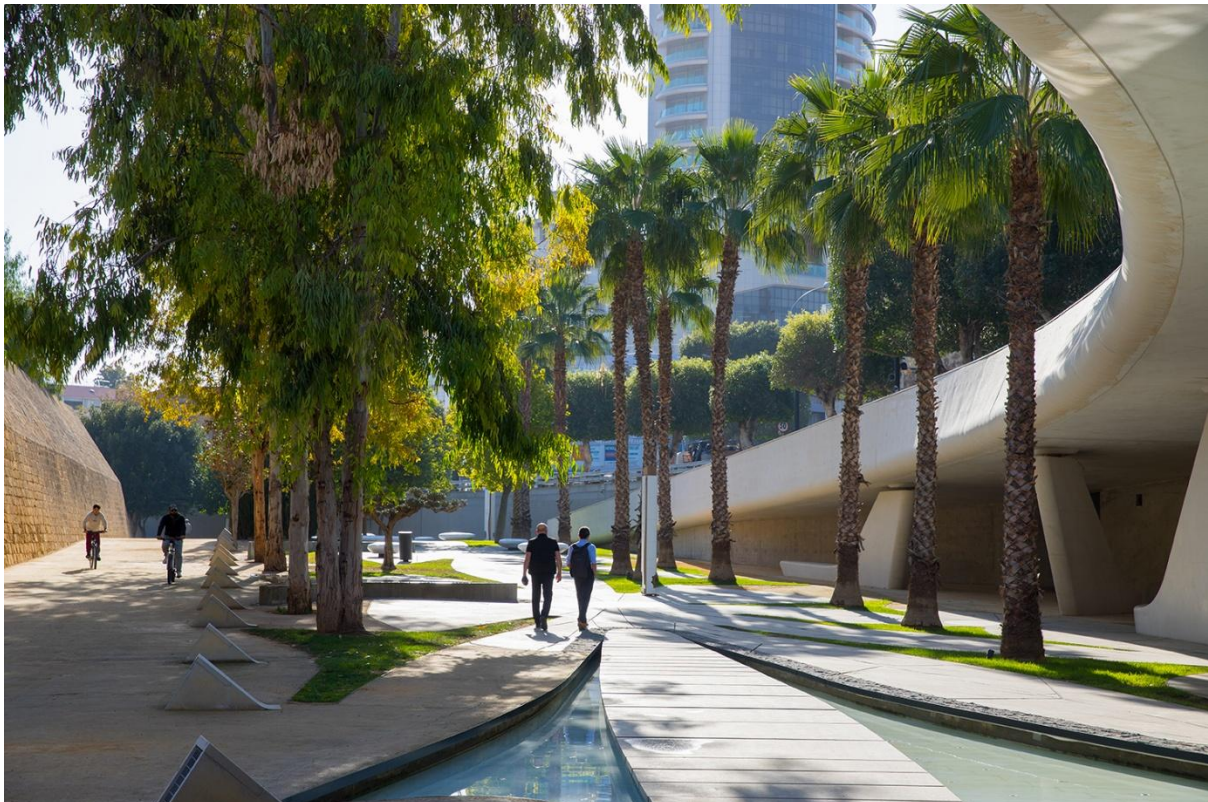


Image 11- Eleftheria Square (Konstantinou, 2023)

Nicosia is a city defined by borders and division. Within this context, Eleftheria Square can be presented as a testing ground for Nicosia's future raising critical questions about whether freedom and modern life emerge within a landscape, will they remain marked by memory? Described as “a bridge between the old and the new, between past scars and present hopes” (Cyprus Island, 2022), the image does not simply show a new public space, but a negotiation on how to move forward without erasing and forgetting the past.

Sustainability is not only expressed through technology, but through landscape. Making cities sustainable is about increasing desirability for the population to live there (Arnold, 1993). Since ancient times, it has been a necessity for greenery to be integrated within a city (Virtudes, 2016). Nicosia's recent development aims to transform surrounding

areas into green and public spaces (Bressan et al, 2023). As shown in Image 11, trees and shaded walkways soften the hard surfaces and encourage everyday use by residents. Especially during the weekends, Eleftheria Square sparks with life and becomes a transformed place filled with people enjoying their weekends under Cyprus's sunny weather, suggesting that sustainability is also measured through social life and public engagement.

More developments are emerging in the old city of Nicosia, with the most significant project now underway. In the heart of the old city, the historic Faneromeni School – shown in image 12, will be transformed into a School of Architecture under the University of Cyprus – the highest ranking and most historic university on the island. As seen in the image, the building exemplifies traditional Cypriot architecture, characterised by the old windows, the wide door and the building materials. This transformation is expected not only to attract students to the area but act as a catalyst to further urban development, investment and economic growth.



Image 12 - Faneromeni School (Herstoryproject.eu, 2017)

Together, these developments prove that modernity in Nicosia is not imposed through replacement but through negotiation. The city does not and will not abandon its past, instead it layers new meaning for the future.

Conclusion

Nicosia has been a home, a territory and a historical focal for many Cypriots over the centuries. As a capital the areas outside the Venetian walls, reflect vibrancy and modernity; while inside the walls the atmosphere is peaceful, traditional and calm as many older residents continue to live there. The phrase “Δεν Ξεχνώ” (“I do not forget”) has grown into a guiding sentiment from generations who have lived through those who inherited the memories of this separation.

From an architectural perspective, the integration of history and modernity presents signs of sustainability, change and innovation. It offers a way to move forward while remaining mindful of the past. The evolution of green spaces developed around Eleftheria Square demonstrate modern interventions can coexist with history and culture. Yet, despite development, culture remains irreplaceable and it will continue to shape the identity of the city as long as it is integrated with modernity and not replaced by it.

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