RESTORATION NEWS FROM CYPRUS

Restoration of Ancient Monuments (declared as Ancient Monuments under the Antiquities Law) in Cyprus is primarily undertaken by the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus (DAC) and seldom by contractors in the private sector, which are then supervised by the DAC. The listing of Monuments is done under two categories: (i) State properties are listed under Schedule A and (ii) private properties are listed under Schedule B. Even in cases when the Monument doesn’t belong to the state the DAC can still carry out the restoration, or supervise works, funding by approximately 50% of the cost. This motivated a lot of owners in the private sector to proceed with the restoration of their properties.

However, the restoration of Ancient Monuments is only a fraction of the restoration work carried out in Cyprus. There are a lot of villages that came back to life through the restoration of vernacular rural houses. Funding for the restoration of listed traditional buildings is given by the Ministry of Interior through the Preservation Sector (PS) of the Department of Town-Planning and Housing under the financial incentives scheme for listed buildings. The scheme offers a grant to listed building owners up to 40% of the restoration cost in urban areas and up to 50% in rural areas in combination with the sale of building rights.

Many people prefer to live in the quiet and clean environment of a village, especially if the village is only a 20-30 minutes drive from the town and their work. So they take advantage of their grandmother’s house or they buy a traditional house. In some cases people, Cypriots and other nationals, buy traditional houses and restore them to have a country house for their vacations. The new holiday type, agro tourism, provided motives for business people to buy traditional houses restore them according to the regulations and operate them as hotel units.

Additionally, major restoration projects have been implemented in the historic walled city of Nicosia under the bi-communal Nicosia Master Plan project which began in 1979. A multidisciplinary team was formed comprising Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots and international experts to develop an integrated planning and conservation framework for the historic core and

HOUSE AT TOCHNI VILLAGE

HOUSE AT KALOPANAYIOTIS VILLAGE

HOUSE AT SIA VILLAGE
future development outside the Venetian walls of Nicosia.

Rehabilitation of the historic center of Nicosia was a primary goal especially since it was largely abandoned by families after the conflicts of 1963 and the war of 1974. The center was depopulated; workshops and other inappropriate uses moved in or buildings were abandoned. Architectural heritage was severely damaged through time and in a lot of cases became dangerous. Nicosia Municipality created industrial zones and gave funds to move workshops. The Chrysaliniotissa and Arab-Ahmet rehabilitation residential projects expropriated housing units and restored them to be used by young couples in low rate rents. Other private houses were restored by their owners taking advantage of the listed building funds. Through the Nicosia Master Plan project major restoration and infrastructure projects have been implemented on both sides of the buffer zone the last thirty years aiming at regeneration of the historic core. Also, public authorities have restored historic buildings and use them for their offices and private companies have bought old mansions to restore and relocate their business.

However, there is still a long way to go since workshop tenants are protected by the rental laws and they have been there for decades. Some refuse to go away and it is very difficult to take a court’s decision for eviction, even if the building is in a very bad condition.

All over the island traditional schools are being restored. In these cases the Ministry of Education and Culture issued additional regulations, following the principles set by the DAC and PS. Some of the schools are listed Ancient Monuments as well. In Limassol for example a new University has been established a few years ago and a lot of old traditional buildings, used by governmental authorities or expropriated, were vested to the University. A lot of these buildings have been restored and some of them are currently under restoration.
In all these cases Consultants and Contractors comply with the Principles for Restoration that are enforced by the DAC and the PS. These follow the internationally approved and recognized charters and recommendations. During past years the involvement of an engineer to study the level of safety and recommend structural interventions was not compulsory. After the damages that developed by earthquakes of ’95 and ’99 authorities revised their original approach and started to ask for a structural evaluation of the traditional building in order to issue a building permit. They realized that the fact that some of these buildings have survived for decades don’t mean that they fulfill safety requirements and that their existing condition should be evaluated.

This triggered a debate between architects, structural engineers and the authorities since structural interventions should follow the local laws and regulations (Euronorms) on one hand and follow the preservation guidelines on the other hand. There are many cases in which requirements for safety and preservation principles don’t reach a common solution. Especially when it comes to schools and university buildings the requirements for higher live loads and earthquake return periods bring problems. For simple houses the law, for the time being, is not that strict. It requires that the owner is fully informed about the earthquake problem, the probable cost of works for improving the performance of the building and the related risks and leaves the final decision on his shoulders. Approximately half of the owners choose to implement the works, which is a very good step forward.

The debate however continues with the authorities for the State owned Ancient Monuments and listed Traditional buildings. For example in some cases terms and conditions included that the buildings should be designed for a return period double the one usually used for other buildings at the area and additionally use a high importance. This increased the base acceleration very much. It was impossible to achieve such a level of improvement without deviating from the preservation principles. The original materials traditionally improved and repaired and with adding reversible works to improve the earthquake performance could upgrade the safety level up to a reasonable point, which was approximately same with the level of any other new usual building at the same area, but not to the level specified by the terms. Finally, the authorities accepted that this is a reasonable and adequate level of safety and revised their original requirements.

During the debate between authorities and consultants the ISCARSAH recommendations are always brought to the table together with the rest of the charters for Restoration of the Architectural Heritage. The 2006 meeting of the Committee in Cyprus and the Workshop held in a Monument more than 700 years old made people understand that there are many ways of approaching the solution to a problem. Knowledge, experience and resourcefulness usually help in finding the appropriate solution but sometimes compromises are also necessary, as long as the risk is assessed and other measures are also taken into account.

In April 2008 prior to the commencement of direct talks the leaders of the two communities, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot formed a number of bi-communal Working Groups and Technical Committees to achieve confidence building measures. Therefore, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage was formed and has been in operation since then. The mandate of the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage included the development of a mechanism for the protection and restoration of the immovable common cultural heritage in the whole of the island. With the help of UNDP-PFF (United Nations Development Program-Partnership for the Future) four monuments are about to undergo emergency support interventions, a further list of the next ten monuments will undergo study for
restoration interventions and a full inventory and mapping of monuments and sites, “The Cultural Heritage Study in Cyprus” has been completed through UNDP-PFF.

Important and extensive restoration works are also carried out by the UNDP-PFF (United Nations Development Program-Partnership for the Future). A series of Monuments on both sides of the buffer zone are under study, tender and or under restoration. Bi-communal or international multidisciplinary study teams have undergone the study of monuments such as Bedestan, the Nicosia old Market, Othello tower, upgrading facades and infrastructure of Phaneromeni, Samanbahce, Selimiye areas and others.

The upcoming years are very difficult due to the local and international financial crisis. Funding already faces difficulties. Works in buildings under restoration sometimes are delayed since owners have already spent their part of the budget and are expecting the grant funds to finish works. The crisis reduced the turnover of the restoration business during 2011 - 2012. Same conditions or even further reduction is expected in 2013.

Michael Pittas, Civil - Structural Engineering Consultant
Athina Papadopoulou, Conservation Architect
ICOMOS Cyprus Section