
PROSTITUTION SPATIALISED:

Cyprians then and now

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Christos Hadjichristos
University of Cyprus

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Christos Hadjichristos
*Program of Architecture, 75
Kallipoleos Str P.O.Box 20537,
1678 Nicosia Cyprus
hadjichristos@ucy.ac.cy*

Abstract

Prostitution, a phenomenon in many societies since the beginning of time, involves two quite basic and universal activities: exchange of services for money and some kind of sexual act. Still, the actual forms it has taken through time reveals and reflects the social, technological and other developments that take place in the culture they are found. The present research discusses the different forms of prostitution in Cyprus in the last fifty years or so, focusing on the spatial component of each setup. Apart from the information available through the limited bibliography on the topic (regarding prostitution in Cyprus), informal conversations with a variety of people have been supplemented by visits to places and spaces where prostitution, in one form or other, was or still is, taking place. It can be concluded that the forms prostitution takes keep increasing in number and complexity, where a variety of sex workers cater to the needs of ever more client types or groups, in a plethora of spatial setups.

Introduction

Quite appropriately, Graham and Annette Scambler (1997) caution against observations which take prostitution to refer to a single trans-historical, transcultural activity, pointing out that the prostitute-priestesses of cultures flourishing around 3000BC had great political and economic power, something not true for their putative counterparts in Britain in the 1990's. Xenophon's fifth-century treatise *Oeconomicus*, clearly naturalizes and spatializes gender, opposing male mobility in the exterior to female stasis in the interior. Alberti's text in the 15th C closely follows Xenophon's treatise (Wigley, 1992). Furthermore, Alberti sees marriage as a form of friendship rather than an erotic relationship, a friendship which needs to resist sexuality rather than house it (Wigley, 1992). The female body poses a problem in such an undertaking since it is seen as full of openings and thus in need of another enclosure, the house (Wigley, 1992). Ornament is also associated with the female and sexuality.

The task of architectural theory becomes that of controlling ornament, restricting its mobility, domesticating it by defining its "proper place" (bondage to the ground, faithful representative of the presence of a building) in opposition to the impropriety of the prostitute (mobility, detachment from the ground, independence, exchangeability) (Wigley, 1992).

In the 16th century Italy the control of women took the form of containment within the various categories of buildings - convents, brothels and private homes, and was understood as a means of maintaining public order, an order defined by, and supervised by the men. The controlling of prostitutes included three components: temporal, spatial and dress (Ghirardo, 2000). Jane Rendell, in *Serpentine allurements: disorderly bodies/disorderly spaces*, looks at the bodies and spaces of prostitution in early nineteenth century London and interprets the spatiality of prostitution in relation to the work of Luce Irigaray, in particular her notion of the 'exchange of women'. She finds the paradigm of the separate spheres 'problematic because, as a patriarchal and capitalist ideological device, it perpetuates certain assumptions regarding sex, gender and space, and prioritises the relation of men to the city' (Rendell, 2000).

Quite interestingly, the women encountered by the Rambler in the public spaces of the city were referred to as 'Cyprians'. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term was applied to prostitutes since Cyprus was famous in ancient times for the worship of Aphrodite, the Goddess of love. 'The term Cyprian described women occupying public space as prostitutes, whether or not they were exchanging sex for financial benefit' (Rendell, 2000).

Movement for women held moral connotations...walking in the public streets, especially lingering rather than hurrying, and wearing revealing or conspicuous clothes, was suggestive of a woman's immorality.

The Cyprian was an urban peripatetic-a nymph of the pave (Rendell, 2000, 255)

Prostitution in Cyprus

'Sacred Prostitution' seems to have indeed flourished in Cyprus during the Classical period (Roberts, 1992). Young girls would serve as priestesses to the Temple of the Goddess, or roam the coast offering themselves to willing customers in the name of the Goddess, thus collecting money for their dowry. The island's fame attracted local and overseas travellers creating a rather specialised type of 'tourism'. And while totally removed from anything remotely associated with organised religion, the main form of prostitution in Cyprus today is still female prostitution, with the term *ierodoulos* (sacred slave) referring to the woman who offers sexual services in exchange for money.

According to Kiatipis, the housing of women, predominantly Cypriot, in specific known spaces where the male client could have sexual intercourse with her, what he calls 'traditional prostitution' (Kiatipis, 2004), started weakening in the 1980's since young Cypriot women did not replace the ones growing old. He argues that this was the main reason behind the large import of young women from different countries of Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Arab countries. He calls this 'imported prostitution' (Kiatipis, 2004).

Two of the most known streets for prostitution in Nicosia have been Soutsou and Tempon. In Limassol, the corresponding area is Platia Iroon (Heroes Square). According to some old shop owners in the neighbourhood of Soutsou Street, only an old prostitute and a transvestite are still living and working there. During a morning visit,

apparently a time just before starting work, I saw these two persons watching their dogs play in front of their houses while on an early evening walk the older female prostitute was sitting in the entrance hall and had the door ajar. The passer-by is thus given a privileged view of the comparatively brightly lit interior while he is not visible since the street is dimly lit.

In Tempon Street, an old prostitute can still be found, living in inhuman conditions in a barrack, incessantly smoking and greeting every passer-by at all times of day and night. Another group of four women, three older and one younger, occupying the same house are also located on the same street. It seems that the three older women live there while the younger one may be staying somewhere else. The building is a typical early 20th century urban Cypriot house: a double front door opens to a central living space flanked by rooms, usually two on each side, and a yard at the back. The central space is where clients would wait their turn, and where the prostitute would sit with the door open hoping to attract business in less busy periods. I was allowed to visit the two front rooms which serve as bedrooms, but when I asked what the function of the two back rooms, was the older woman told me that there was nothing of interest there. I assume that these rooms are also bedrooms since the central space is used for cooking (one of the three older women was preparing dinner there during my visit), while some type of toilet must be found in the back yard. The front bedroom on the left is clearly the main space where the younger woman practises her trade: an old double bed, a large mirror and a poster of a young naked model on the opposite wall, a dresser on its side with some condoms and roles of toilet paper, and a washing basin in another corner.

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Figure 1:

Three older and a younger woman living and working on Tempon Street. The entrance hall/living room/kitchen/dining room/waiting room. The bedroom: the dresser, the setup for washing, the mirror with the poster, the bed



Tempon Street branches out from the longer Pendadakilou Street which also had a number of prostitutes until recently. A couple of years ago, the families living just off Pentadactilou Street in houses renovated by the municipality in an effort to revitalise the walled city, were upset by the news that a prostitute and her boyfriend rented a

Figure 2:

Temporary work place; the red painted trailer in an empty lot in the walled city of Nicosia near the Green Line

house there for professional purposes. Before the house was sufficiently renovated the woman would stand on Pendadactilou Street alone or with an older prostitute friend keeping her company (in the colder winter nights they would sometimes have a portable oil heater with them), pick up customers and use an abandoned trailer in an adjacent empty lot to offer her services.



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Figure 3:

Red arrows direct clients to the new place of work. Covering the arrows with black paint by protestors

When the rented building was finally brought to an acceptable state, the prostitute painted red arrows on the walls of adjacent buildings, installed two red lanterns and would sometimes put a naked mannequin on the street just outside her building to direct her customers from her until then pavement post to her new accommodation. The people living in the area kept protesting to the authorities but with no avail. The only physical action taken by them to somehow remove the evidence of the prostitute's presence was to try and paint over the red arrows using black spray paint this time.



Two forms of entertainment establishments closely linked to the development of prostitution practices on the island are the Cabaret and the Tavern. Both had live music and served food. The cabaret eventually evolved into two types depending on whether food was served or not. Those serving food (and were also frequented by families) eventually disappeared since to be profitable they needed to be quite spacious and full all the time, something that was difficult considering the small urban societies of the island. The type of cabaret which did not offer food was frequented only by men who thus needed dance partners. This was not the case with the taverns since men could dance to the type of Greek music played there alone or in groups. Prostitution started being an important feature of the cabaret when clients would pay for the companionship of specific dance partners for the whole evening and when live music was replaced by an electronic music system (Kiatipis, 2004). With live music gone, dancing by the clients eventually stopped as well while the variety shows were replaced by strip-tease and sex shows.

The accommodation of these women, which is the responsibility of their employer are of different types: one or two star hotels, registered tourist apartments, non-registered apartments or houses and hostels. While hotel rooms are used by these women for prostitution during their free time, the apartments are usually not, since there are four or five women staying in each room and because their employers do not allow visitors anyway. Despite the terms of the contract, in many cases these women are not free to go anywhere even during their free time but are instead guarded, and in some cases locked up, in their rooms (Kiatipis, 2004). In complexes rented exclusively to bar owners for the accommodation of these women, some rooms are always kept vacant so that they can be used for prostitution in the afternoons (Kiatipis, 2004).

There are yet more choices to the interested male. In 1992 the police arrested a man, a pimp, who had a notebook containing a list of names of married women in different cities who were practicing prostitution, and a list of apartments rented by him for that purpose (Kiatipis, 2004).

Another option is young women from China who are registered as students at private colleges in Cyprus. These are picked up in known streets of Nicosia by Cypriot men in their cars. Yet another option is women predominantly from Sri-Lanka or the Philippines working in private houses. These are picked up by interested men during their day off, Sunday, mainly outside the Catholic Church of the city or the municipal park, or by drivers while they walk on the street. The encounter may vary from full intercourse in a private space or in the open fields just outside the city, to something quick in the car.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that, compared to the rather set arrangement of 'traditional prostitution', the new scenarios offer more choices and consequently create the potential for many different and sometimes unpredictable and/or undesirable outcomes. It could be said that this complexification is caused by the breaking up of large 'packages' or entities into ever smaller parts, increasing the potential combinations between them. Arrangements may be rearranged, agents may change roles, and assemblages may break down.

This complexity is naturally reflected in the spatial parameters of the setup; from a clearly defined space for a clearly defined act between agents who knew exactly what their role was in the 'transaction', to a space, and an act, which are segmented, stretched, deformed, layered, involving more agents who act out unclear roles, dressed up in all sorts of costumes, weakening any assumed correspondence between function, space and form.

And yet, these assemblages are not random. However ephemeral, transitory or dynamic, they are configured, like machines, to serve a purpose or offer potentialities and outcomes, and are parts of larger machines, imaginary or real, natural or cultural, all of which have complex syntaxes and structures.

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