



“Supra-Political Aesthetics” in Cyprus? Tracing the Origins of an Architectural Postwar Modernism

Abstract

In Cyprus the last decades of the British colonial period (1878-1960) and the early postcolonial years of the Republic (between 1960 and 1974), were characterized by intensifying internal conflicts between the Greek- and Turkish Cypriots. Scholars interpreted the debates around the design of new government offices in the capital Nicosia (1973) and, based on the case of the Golden Sands Hotel (1973), the development of a modern hotel “leisurescape” in Famagusta-Varosha between the mid-1960s and 1974 as a reaction to the intercommunal conflicts. A new “supra-political aesthetic”, an international post-war modernism without references to the supposedly discredited colonial past and to the vernacular, is seemingly seen as a purely postcolonial element of Cypriot nation-building, intended to express the “shared nationhood” of a modern independent Cyprus. This paper aims to re-assess this notion and therefore to trace the beginnings of a “neutral” architectural post-war modernism in Cyprus, focusing on public and residential architecture, including examples of New Brutalism. It is based on a thorough literature review and architectural surveys in major Cypriot towns. The emergence of an international post-war modernism with “supra-political aesthetics” began already several years before the independence of Cyprus from colonial rule. This is evident by approximately 20 designs and/or executed buildings, among them no less than 11 public buildings. A few multi-unit residential complexes, built both by private and public developers, go back to the second half of the 1950s while several private residences with these aesthetics date back even to the late 1940s/ early 1950s. Therefore, the notion that a “neutral” modern architectural vocabulary with the potential of expressing “shared nationhood” is a postcolonial development is misleading. Moreover, an instrumentalization of this architectural language through colonial authorities for the very same reasons is highly likely.

Keywords

Cyprus, Architecture, Modernism, Post-war

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Introduction: The British colonial period and (architectural) modernization

Since the beginning of the colonial period in Cyprus in 1878, institutional and legal improvements were made in the administration, education and health systems, transportation and communication networks, agricultural policies, and urban and rural development. Early architectural practices mainly covered construction of public buildings in different cities with similar architectural characteristics, materials, and details, thus establishing an Early Colonial architectural style as an expression of the new administration throughout the island. The character of those early period government buildings was classical-historicist, expressed through solutions such as symmetrical organization in plans and facades, cut stone as building material, framed openings, and the use of semi-open, round-arched facades at entrances, or, conversely, emphasizing the facade by projecting outward.¹

After World War I, during the Intensive Improvement Period, architectural practices—including both public and residential examples—increased. Public buildings were generally characterized by monumental massing, façade compositions, and architectural details that resulted in a representative and authoritative appearance.² Furthermore, the variety of users encountered in civil servant housing projects resulted in different plan types, which became the first steps toward standardization.³

In the final period of the British administration, which began before World War II, efforts to ease tensions between the two communities, the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, continued, along with attempts to guide decisions regarding the island’s future. The desire to preserve the progress achieved over many years in areas such as agriculture, industry, education, urban development, and heritage conservation remained strong. During the last decades of British rule in Cyprus, the laws regulating architectural practices were revised, and significant initiatives—particularly in the field of urban planning—were undertaken. Architectural activity had nearly come to a standstill due to shortages of building materials and the economic difficulties brought on by the Second World War. Later, with mass housing initiatives aimed at meeting basic needs, many qualities valued in earlier periods were abandoned, giving way to entirely different priorities.⁴

The last period of architectural practice under British rule in Cyprus presents a remarkably pluralistic stylistic landscape. This pluralism—encompassing modernist and classical-historicist/totalitarian architectural styles as well as regionalist tendencies—parallels contemporary trends in Europe.⁵ Architectural works under the control of the administration began to be designed according to the conditions imposed by the war. The economic and functional concerns that emerged in many European countries after the war were also reflected in Cyprus. The colonial administration’s approach shifted toward the use of modern construction techniques and a simplified stylistic expression. Housing projects, the first group of which had been strongly emphasized in the previous period, included civil servant housing, while a second group consisted of mass housing developments aimed at low-income residents.⁶

This paper aims to trace the beginnings of a “neutral” modern architectural modernism in Cyprus. It focuses on public and residential architecture, and is based on a thorough literature review and architectural surveys in major Cypriot towns.

Post-independence “supra-political” aesthetics?

The term “supra-political aesthetics” was introduced by Petros Phokaides and Panayiota Pyla in relation to their interpretation of design debates around the Golden Sands Hotel in Famagusta (1973), the unrealized New Government Offices, and more generally around Famagusta’s modern “leisure-scapes” of hotels, most of which were constructed after the independence of Cyprus, from approximately 1965 to 1974, the year of the Turkish military intervention.⁷

1. Asu Tozan, “Urbanization and Architecture in Cyprus as an Example of Colonial Modernization (1878–1960),” Ph.D. diss., Istanbul Technical University (2008), 59–60.
2. Tozan, “Urbanization and Architecture,” 93–94.
3. Ibid., 117
4. Ibid., 124.

5. Tozan, “Urbanization and Architecture,” 156.
6. Ibid., 145.
7. Petros Phokaides, and Panayiota Pyla, “Leisure-scapes and Conflict-scapes: The Famagusta Modern Coastline,” in *Adaptive Reuse: The Modern Movement towards the Future. Proceedings of the 14th International Docomomo Conference (6–9 September 2016)*, edited by Ana Tostoes and Zara Ferreira (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2016); Petros Phokaides, and Panayiota Pyla, “Peripheral Hubs and Alternative Modernisms: Designing for Peace and Tourism in Postcolonial Cyprus,” in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Meeting of the European Architectural History Network*, edited by Hilde Heynen and Janina Gosseye (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 2012); Panayiota Pyla, and Petros Phokaides. “Ambivalent Politics and Modernist Debates in Postcolonial Cyprus,” *Journal of Architecture* 16, no. 6 (2011), 885–913.

Phokaides and Pyla assess the 1960s modernist “leisure-scapes” of Famagusta through the lens of the design process of the Golden Sands Hotel of 1973 while describing Famagusta’s hotel development as key to the local Government’s policy for postcolonial nation-building.⁸ The neutral “supra-political aesthetics” of the Golden Sands Hotel (which was commissioned by the government to the British office of Garnett, Cloughley and Blakemore, and supported by the local office of Philippou Brothers), in effect displaying a post-war modernism without links to the seemingly discredited recent British colonial past and to the vernacular, is interpreted to be a more or less direct consequence of the intercommunal conflicts on the island.⁹

Similarly, Pyla and Phokaides argue in relation to the international design competition and debates for New Government Offices in Nicosia (1968–1973) that their modern architectural language was meant to symbolize the commitment to “shared nationhood”.¹⁰

The potentially misleading impression these scholarly interpretations leave behind is that during the British Colonial period no ambitions existed to transcend the colonial, local, and vernacular, and to reach to a neutral international architectural language which would possibly aid in expressing a “shared nationhood”. The following presentation of evidence proves that at least ambitions to design along international modern trends did exist prior to Cyprus’ independence.

International modern aesthetics before Cyprus’s independence: the evidence

International modern aesthetics is evident by approximately 20 designs and/or executed buildings, among them eleven public buildings.¹¹ The following cases have been selected from both, the public and private sector, offering a representative range of examples including standardized and non-standardized detached residences, multi-unit apartment projects, row-houses, and buildings of public function, in order to display the extent of an international modern aesthetic in pre-1960 Cyprus.

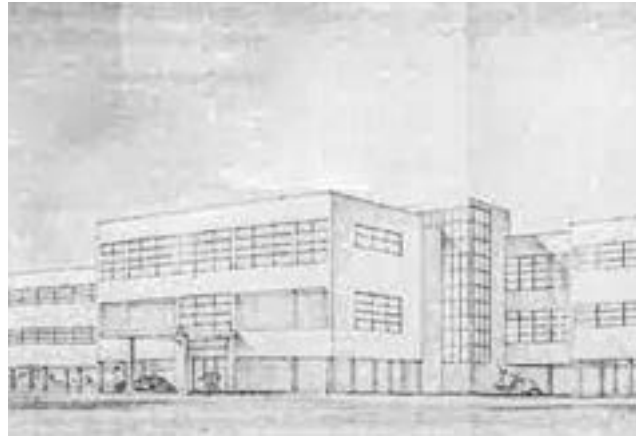


Figure 1. Polis Michaelides, Nicosia General Hospital, isometric drawing, 1936. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 56.

Public buildings

Nicosia General Hospital (1936): Although the design of the building by Polis Michaelides dates back before WWII it represents international modernist language. Le Corbusier’s influence can be seen in, for example, in its pilotis¹² and in its machine aesthetics. (Figure 1)

Public Information Office, Nicosia (1955): The Public Information Center, designed by Costas Christofides, represents a slightly more decorative approach, that is an Art Deco influence, compared to the previous example. Yet, its simple architectural character overall, particularly its asymmetrical façade, distinguishes it from previous public buildings which display an apparent historicist-colonial vocabulary, and connects it with the international Art Deco trend. Five years after its construction, the building became the House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus.¹³ (Figure 2)

Pallouriotissa Female Gymnasium, Nicosia (1957-1962): The project was designed and completed in four phases in the period 1957-1962 by the architect Demetris Thymopolous. The complex is organized in a centrifugal arrangement and consists of four wings of different floor height, housing teaching rooms, a multipurpose room, an administrative space and a theatre.¹⁴ The modernism of this rational design is of an international character, with its brise-soleil

8. Phokaides and Pyla, “Leisure-scapes and Conflict-scapes,” 118–120. This subject is analyzed similarly in Phokaides and Pyla, “Peripheral Hubs”.

9. See also on this aspect Marko Kiessel, “Famagusta on Cyprus and the Sea: Hotel Architecture, Urban Development and Tourism during the British Colonial and Early Postcolonial Period.” In *Famagusta Maritima. Mariners, Merchants, Pilgrims and Mercenaries* (Brill’s Studies in Maritime History, Volume 7), edited by Michael J. K. Walsh, 289 (Brill, 2019).

10. Pyla and Phokaides, “Ambivalent Politics”, 2011.

11. Kiessel, “Famagusta on Cyprus”, 289-90.

12. Stefanos Fereos, Aimilios Michael and Irene Hadjisavvas-Adam (eds.), *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern: European Heritage Days* (Department of Town Planning and Housing/ Cyprus Architects Association, 2009), 56.

13. Kenneth W. Schaar, Michael Given and George Theocharous, *Under the Clock: Colonial Architecture and History in Cyprus, 1878–1960* (Bank of Cyprus, 1995), 108; Tozan, “Urbanization and Architecture,” 148; Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage*, 3.

14. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage*, 69.



Figure 2. Costas Christofides, Public Information Office, Nicosia, 1955. Tozan, "Urbanization and Architecture," 149.



Figure 3. Demetris Thymopoulos, Pallouriotissa Female Gymnasium, Nicosia, 1957-1962. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 16.



Figure 4. Dionisis Toumazis, Famagusta Municipal Hall, design 1957. Author's photo.

sunbreakers connecting it with examples of modern architecture in hot climates. (Figure 3a-b)

Famagusta Municipal Hall (design 1957): The project, designed by the architect Dionisis Toumazis, was the outcome of an architectural competition in 1957.¹⁵ Its triangular layout at the corner of two streets and its being lifted off the ground by V-shaped Niemeyer-esque pilotis create the dynamic impression of a ship floating towards a better future.¹⁶ (Figure 4)

15. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage*, 147.

16. Marko Kiessel, and Asu Tozan, "The Motif of the Ocean Liner in Modern and Contemporary Cypriot Architecture," in *7th International Cyprus Studies Congress (4-6 November 2009)* (EMU Publications, 2010); Marko Kiessel, and Asu Tozan, "The Passenger Steamer and the Cypriot Modernism (1930-1970)," *Prostor: A Scholarly Journal of Architecture and Urban Planning* 19, no. 1 (2011), 224-225.

Atheniou Municipal Market (mid 1950s): The project was built by Neoptolemos Michaelides. Its exposed concrete structural frame allows the abundant access of natural light through the glazed surfaces between the structural elements.¹⁷ (Figure 5)

Residential buildings

Residence for expatriate officers (designed 1946): The project is a design of the Public Works Department. The ground floor contains the kitchen, service, servant rooms and garage, and the first floor is equipped with living, dining and bedrooms. While this project lacks information about its designer, it reflects an essentially modern architectural approach with its flat reinforced concrete roof and plain façade.¹⁸ (Figure 6)

Theodotos Kantos Residence, Nicosia (1949-52): Neoptolemos Michaelides' first residential building design comes with separated wings and an exposed structural system.¹⁹ This design is extraordinary for Cyprus at that time and displays an avoidance of the right angle, a feature common for many of Hans Scharoun's postwar buildings. (Figure 7)

Eftapato Building, Limassol (1958): The seven floor apartment block designed by office of Colakides, Economou & Hadzicostas has a T-shape plan organization,²⁰ and is with its rational exterior an example of the International Style. (Figure 8a-b)

Police Flats, Nicosia (1958): The Police housing complex, designed by architect Costas Christofides and built in Nicosia, consists of three separate blocks. Pedestrian bridges connect the blocks with an elevated street concept. The duplex design of each apartment

17. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage*, 155.

18. Tozan, "Urbanization and Architecture," 159.

19. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage*, 57.

20. *Ibid.*, 133.



Figure 5. Neoptolemos Michaelides, Atheniou Municipal Market, mid-1950s. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 155.



Figure 1b. Polis Michaelides, Nicosia General Hospital, plan, 1936. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 56.

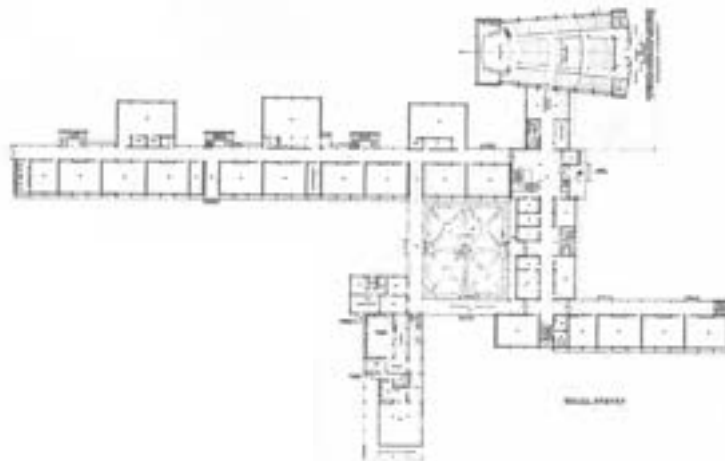


Figure 3b. Demetris Thymopoulos, Pallouriotissa Female Gymnasium, plan, 1957-1962. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 16.

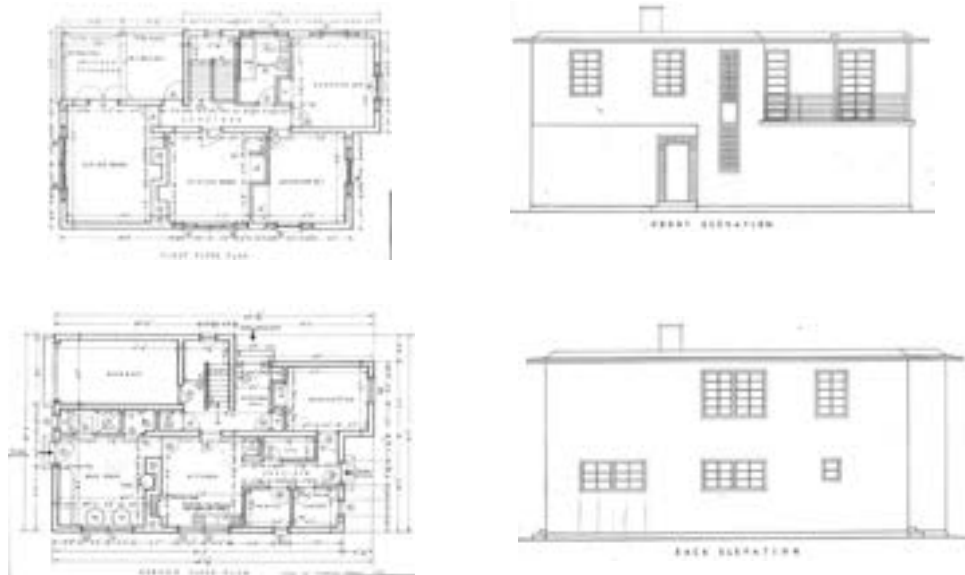


Figure 6. Public Works Department, Residence for expatriate officers, 1946. Tozan, "Urbanization and Architecture," 159.



Figure 7a. Neoptolemos Michaelides, Theodotos Kantos Residence, Nicosia, 1949-1952. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 57.

is inspired by Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation. The pedestrian bridges are very probably inspired by the Golden Lane housing design in London.²¹ However, the Smithsons' Golden Lane project remained unbuilt, and their proposals for blocks connected by elevated bridges were only realized by Lynn and Smith in Sheffield in 1961.²² (Figure 9a-b)

Famagusta Municipality Housing (1956-1958): In 1956 projects were launched to meet the housing needs in the Greek and Turkish neighbourhoods of Famagusta old town. Due to social unrest the project in the Turkish neighbourhood stalled. Two-thirds of these row-house residences were completed, but work did not resume in 1958 because the contractor (whose workers were mostly Greek) was pressured to abandon the project. The unfinished residences in the old town were settled by Turkish immigrants.²³ The project is low rise and composed of two separate floors at each block. There are six to nine units on each floor, while the rows are arranged perpendicular to one another as well as back-to-back, creating an open space between the rows. The units on the first floor are accessed through open stairs at either side of the blocks and are linked by an open corridor at the back of the row. The units on the ground floor have direct access to the street, while the units on the first floor have balconies that overlook the street.²⁴

21. Tozan, "Urbanization and Architecture," 173; Asu Tozan, and Günkut Akın, "İngiliz Sömürge Dönemi ve Sömürge Sonrası Kuzey Kıbrıs'ta Kent ve Mimarlık (1878-1960)," *İTÜ Dergisi/a Mimarlık* 8, no. 2 (2009), 57-68.

22. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture, A Critical History* (Thames and Hudson, 1992), 273.

23. Tozan, "Urbanization and Architecture," 175-176.

24. Yara Saifi, Hülya Yüceer, and Betül Bilge, "Flexible Social Housing as an Alternative to Mass-produced Housing in the Walled City of Famagusta," *Journal of Applied Sciences* 12 no. 17 (2012), 1876.

Although the project aimed at sheltering low income people with basic living requirements, it displays an international modern language by the exposed structural system and usage of sun braking elements. And once more the communication between tenants, achieved by connecting corridors and access galleries as in Brutalist projects, is apparent in this housing design. (Figure 10)

International modern aesthetics before Cyprus's independence: discussion

The presented evidence above proves that ambitions existed at least to design along international modern trends prior to the end of the Colonial period in 1960. If those ambitions were part of a wider conscious policy of Colonial authorities to express something like shared or "coherent nationhood",²⁵ meaning if utopian aspiration was a driving force, cannot be fully proven but a few examples can be interpreted in this direction:

The first example is the Nicosia General Hospital of 1936 (Figure 1a-b). It marks the earliest beginning of International Style aesthetics and of abandonment of the colonial and the vernacular in Cyprus.²⁶ The possibly intended symbolic effect of its International Style architecture in the capital of Cyprus is the promise of a modern public health system for the healing of a shared modern Cypriot society under British administration. The expression of utopia through modern architecture in connection to health and hygiene is of course an international phenomenon in itself, especially in conjunction with motifs which connote the modern steamship or passenger steamer and which are interpreted to function as metaphors for "rescue" and "healing".²⁷

25. Pyla and Phokaidis, "Ambivalent Politics," 909.

26. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage*, 56; Kiessel, "Famagusta on Cyprus," 290.

27. Kiessel and Tozan, "The Passenger Steamer," 217, 225, with further sources.



Figure 7b. Neoptolemos Michaelides, Theodotos Kantos Residence, plan, 1949-1952. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 57.

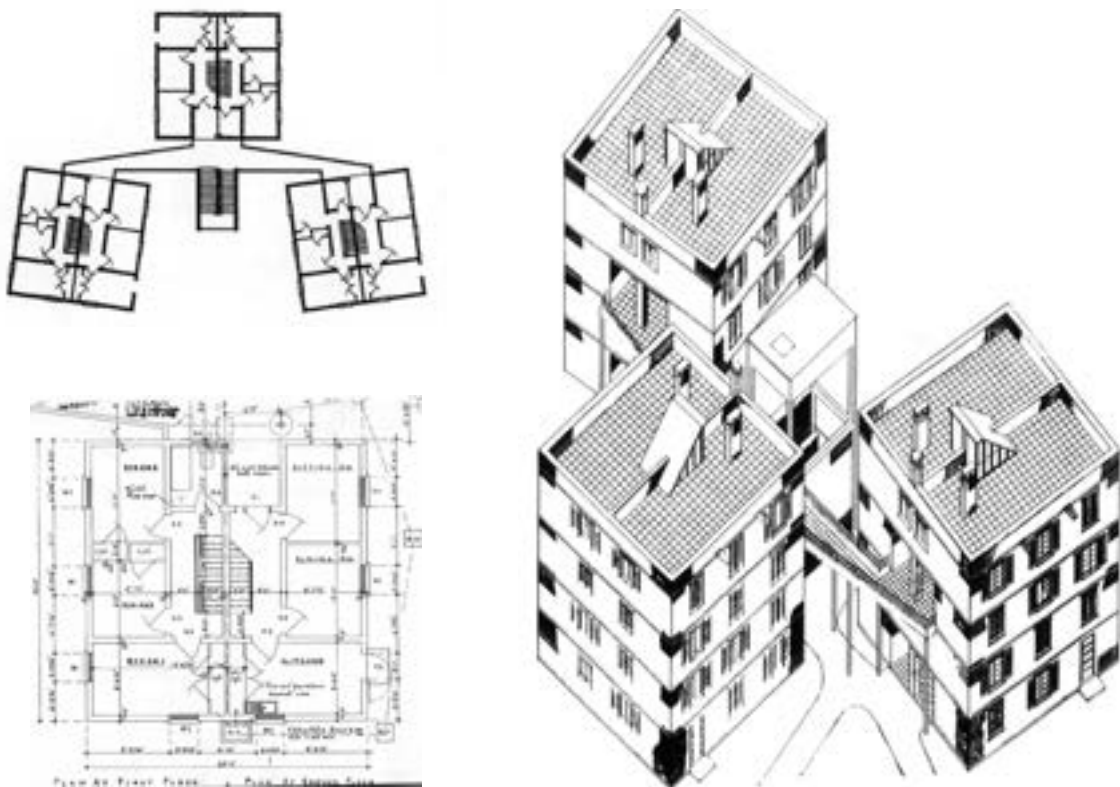


Figure 9a. Costas Christofides, Police Flats, Nicosia, drawings, 1958. Tozan, "Urbanization and Architecture," 174.



Figure 8a. Colakides, Economou & Hatzikostas, Eftapato Building, Limassol, 1958. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 133.

The Public Information Office (1955) is another example (Figure 2). It stands out as one of the most significant public buildings during the Last Period of the British Administration. And it reflects an international modern (Art Deco-) aesthetic. This project demonstrates that the building's primary function—information—aligns with contemporary developments in communication technologies, and thus it was constructed in an international modern style as a symbolic means of expressing the British administration's innovative and progressive attitude in Cyprus.

As mentioned above the Famagusta Municipality Hall (1957) creates the dynamic impression of a forward-moving or floating (steam-) ship (Figure 4). Ship metaphors in architecture have commonly been interpreted as having the potential of expressing utopian aspirations. A modern steamship is a moving transport vehicle, but also a "machine for living in" in Le Corbusier's sense – which also provides communal besides private space. Therefore, a steamship is ideal for expressing aspects like "moving to new shores", "future", "community" and of "shared space".²⁸ Which metaphor could possibly better convey the utopia of moving towards a better shared future for the community of Famagusta's citizen?

Similar to the case of the Nicosia General Hospital the Pallouriotissa Female Gymnasium in Nicosia (1957-1962) (Figure 3a-b) and its modern architecture appear to visually project the promise of a modern education for a modern (new) society, contrasting with the typical Neo-Greek classicism and other historicist approaches

of Cypriot school buildings of earlier decades.²⁹ The expression of utopia through modern architecture in connection to education is of course an international phenomenon in itself, as the modern society is shaped to a large extent in school buildings which function as "social condensers" – and which are sometimes also equipped with ship motifs that probably refer to the communal aspect of education.³⁰

Finally, the modern architectural solutions for the Famagusta Municipality Housing (1956-1958), a project aimed at providing accommodation for both, Greek and Turkish Cypriots, may be understood to convey the utopia of new forms of living for common people within a modern shared Cypriot society (Figure 10).

This means, several public buildings of the 20 cases of pre-1960 buildings with truly modern aesthetics can be plausibly connected with utopia based on an interpretative analysis of this paper's author. However, the existence of a coherent (governmental) policy cannot be traced down or proven.

Similarly, it has been pointed out that the design of the Golden Sands Hotel (1973), on the basis of written documents of the architect Patrick Garnett, and the international competition design of the New Government Offices (1973) can be interpreted as ambitious projects to find a neutral "supra-political"

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29. Diana Markides, "Nicosia under British Rule," in *Historic Nicosia*, edited by Demetrios Michaelides (Rimal Publications, 2012), 356, 359, 361, figs. 60-63.
30. Natasa Koselj, "Education for Everybody: The Role of Education in Relation to the Modern Movement," *Docomomo Journal* 40 (2009), 14-15; Kiessel and Tozan, "The Passenger Steamer," 225, with further sources.



Figure 8b. Colakides, Economou & Hatzikostas, Eftapato Building, Limassol, isometric drawing, 1958. Fereos et al., *Learning from the Heritage of the Modern*, 133.

28. Kiessel and Tozan, "The Motif of the Ocean Liner"; Kiessel and Tozan, "The Passenger Steamer," 217.



Figure 9b. Costas Christofides, Police Flats, Costas Christofides, Nicosia, 1958. Tozan, “Urbanization and Architecture,” 175.



Figure 10. Famagusta Municipality Housing, 1956-1958. Author’s photo.

architectural language.³¹ However, while Varosha’s outstanding role in the process of architectural modernization and nation-building is surely correctly assessed, Phokaides and Pyla’s suggestion that the modern aesthetics of Varosha’s “leisure-scapes” as a whole result from the same claim for “neutrality” might be a conclusion too far-fetched.³²

Conclusion

The emergence of an international postwar modernism with neutral “supra-political aesthetics” began already several years before the independence of Cyprus from colonial rule. Therefore, the notion that

a “neutral” modern architectural vocabulary with the potential of expressing “shared nationhood”, meaning for expressing utopia, is a postcolonial development is misleading. Moreover, the deliberate instrumentalization of this architectural language through designers and/or public authorities for conveying utopian aspirations is very probable in the case of projects/buildings discussed and referred to in this study. However, it appears that the expression of utopia through modernist architectural language is rather exceptional, and it cannot be ascertained if its expression in those few cases is based on a coherent policy.

31. Phokaides and Pyla, “Leisure-scapes and Conflict-scapes”; Pyla and Phokaides, “Ambivalent Politics,” 898: “...even as the competition for the government complex (and the state’s proclaimed desire to build a unified state) successfully reached out to the international arena, the competition process failed to transcend the socio-political boundaries inside the small country.”

32. Kiessel, “Famagusta on Cyprus,” 289.