The Division as a Common Heritage – Nicosia Case.

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Abstract

Since 1963, Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, has been divided between the Turkish and Greek communities due to political conflict, creating a buffer zone monitored by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). This research investigates the historical, social, and environmental aspects of this buffer zone, proposing its transformation from a symbol of division into a shared cultural heritage site fostering reunification. Despite disrupting urban connectivity, the buffer zone has evolved into an ecologically significant area, hosting diverse flora and fauna while preserving cultural landmarks.

The study employed a qualitative methodology, reviewing scholarly articles to understand the historical context of the buffer zone, followed by an in-depth analysis of the Nicosia Master Plan (NMP). Additionally, global heritage frameworks, including the Culture in Urban Reconstruction and Recovery (CURE) strategy by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and conservation guidelines from the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), were examined to guide reflections and inform the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis.

The SWOT analysis highlights the buffer zone's potential. Its ecological regeneration and conflict-mitigation capacity are notable strengths, while urban stagnation and neglected heritage sites are critical weaknesses. Potential redevelopment initiatives, such as eco-tourism and cultural hubs, represent key opportunities, although unresolved property disputes and political sensitivities remain threats.

The proposed framework emphasizes inclusive planning, environmental conservation, and cross-community participation. Joint investment in ecological and cultural heritage projects, coupled with transparent governance, could stimulate economic growth, strengthen social ties, and create a sustainable urban model for reconciliation. Nicosia's buffer zone could thus transform into a global example of peacebuilding and heritage-driven urban renewal.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, the island of Cyprus has been governed by numerous civilizations. Its strategic location in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and at the crossroads of three continents has made it a desired territory.

During the period of Ottoman rule from 1571 to 1878, the Greek Orthodox community was granted the right to manage its affairs under Ottoman governance. This era was marked by relative tranquility between the Turkish and Greek communities[1].

In 1878, administrative control of Cyprus was transferred to Britain, which formally annexed the island in 1914. Cyprus was then officially declared a British colony in 1925[2].

The main sections of the manuscript are "introduction", "method" "results" "discussion" and "conclusion" and they should be written in 10 font size, justify, bold and capital letters.

In 1959, an agreement known as the London and Zurich Agreements was reached between Turkey, Greece, and Britain. The Republic of Cyprus was

subsequently recognized by the United Nation (UN) in 1960 as a state based on cooperation between Turkish and Greek Cypriots, leading to Cyprus gaining its independence [3]. However, this cooperation lasted only three years. Disagreements between the two communities led to violent conflicts in 1963, resulting in numerous casualties. The escalating tensions culminated in the physical separation of Nicosia, the capital city, by the Green Line border. In March 1964, the conflict was addressed by the UN Security Council, which decided to establish a UN Peacekeeping Force on the island [4].

On December 27, 1967, the Turkish community in the northern part of the island formed administrative assemblies to manage daily affairs. This evolved into the Provisional Cyprus Turkish Administration, later renamed the Cyprus Turkish Administration in 1971, [3]. Following multiple rounds of conflict, a Voluntary Exchange of Populations was agreed upon in 1975, facilitating the relocation of Turkish and Greek Cypriots to their respective areas with UN support. On November 15, 1983, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was declared [3].

Following the formal division of Cyprus Figure 1, physical barriers Figure 2 were established to separate the urban centers into two distinct parts These barriers manifested in the form of a buffer zone, designed to act as a neutral area between the opposing sides. The buffer zone, often referred to as the Green Line, effectively created a no-man's-land that prevented direct contact between the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities. This separation not only divided the city of Nicosia but also disrupted the social, economic, and cultural continuity of the island.
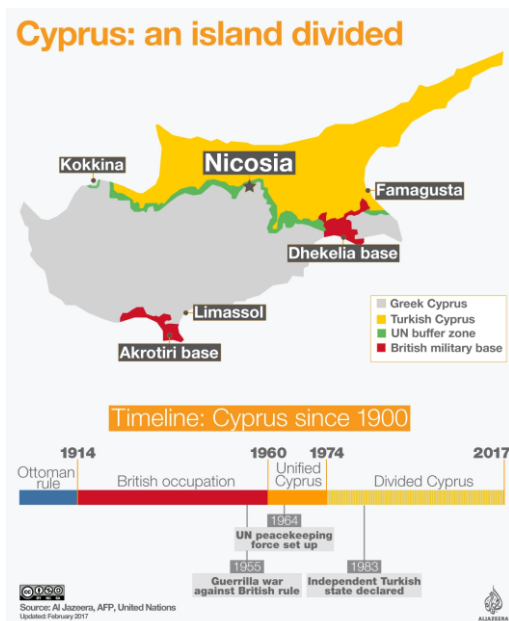

Figure 1. Boundaries map and history line of division. [5]

For decades, the buffer zone remained a stark symbol of division, with limited interaction between the two communities. However, in 2003, significant progress was made when crossing between the two sides was permitted through formal checkpoints [6]. This development marked a pivotal moment in the island's history, as it allowed people from both sides to pass through the divide for the first time in nearly 30 years. These checkpoints facilitated greater interaction and communication, fostering a sense of cautious optimism about the potential for reconciliation and reunification.[7]

Figure 2. A young woman stands near the barricades of the U.N. buffer zone in the Greek-Cypriot part of Nicosia. [8]

The reopening of crossings has had profound implications for the daily lives of Cypriots (a native or inhabitant of Cyprus [9]). It has enabled the resumption of social and economic exchanges, allowing families to reunite, businesses to operate across the divide, and cultural ties to be rekindled[10]. Despite these positive steps, the presence of the buffer zone continues to serve as a reminder of the underlying political tensions and the challenges that remain in achieving a fully unified Cyprus [11]. The ongoing efforts to bridge the divide reflect a complex interplay of historical grievances, contemporary realities, and future aspirations for peace and cohesion.

It being called by different names, The green Line, The Dead Zone and No Man's Land; the Buffer Zone is 180 Kilometers long and spans an area of 346 square kilometers (134 sq mi), fluctuating in width from less than 20 meters (66 ft) to more than 7 kilometers. [12]

10,000 people live in different villages within the Buffer Zone, they work on farms located within the zone; the village of Pyla is famous for being one of the few left villages in Cyprus where Greek and Turkish Cypriots still live side by side. Other villages are Deneia, Athienou, and Troulloi. [12]

United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) pays careful consideration to protection of the natural environment, and to the prevention of improper dumping of waste in the buffer zone [12][12]. Civilian activities (construction, farming, work and short-term access) are possible within the Buffer Zone, but subject to UNFICYP pre-authorization. After the crossing point creation in 2003 [12]. A change in local socio-spatial practices had been noticed around the edges, the crossing had allowed for human interaction between the two sides and on the edges, with an impact on the physical barriers.

Part of the Buffer Zone areas are unharmed by people intrusion and stayed a refuge for vegetation and wildlife. [3]The buffer zone has been re-claimed and restored by Nature. Many scientific articles are written about the flora and fauna regeneration in the buffer line, and extreme opinion by some biologists to defy Cyprus division to protect natural environment [13], [14].

Figure 3. An endangered Mouflon sheep runs in the forest near abandoned village of Varisia, inside the U.N controlled buffer zone. [13]

1.1. Global Guidelines For Heritage-Based Reunification.

As cities around the world strive to overcome the consequences of division caused by conflict or political separation, frameworks developed by global organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) have become critical guides. These guidelines emphasize the role of cultural heritage as a powerful tool for healing divided communities, fostering reconciliation, and supporting sustainable urban recovery. Heritage plays a dual role—not only in preserving the historical identity of a place but also serving as a foundation for future development and social cohesion.

1.1.1. The CURE Framework: Culture in urban reconstruction and recovery.

The CURE (Culture in Urban Reconstruction and Recovery) Framework, published in 2018, offers a comprehensive strategy to restore cities affected by conflicts, disasters, or socio-economic crises. The framework encourages a people-centered, culture-based approach to urban recovery, ensuring that local identity and cultural heritage remain integral to redevelopment efforts. It recognizes that sustainable urban regeneration requires not only the restoration of physical structures but also the revival of the social fabric through cultural expressions, shared spaces, and inclusive participation [15].

Key Principles of the CURE Framework:
1. Cultural Identity and Social Cohesion: CURE prioritizes cultural landmarks, public spaces, and intangible heritage as instruments to reconnect communities. By emphasizing shared cultural practices, it aims to foster mutual understanding and rebuild trust between groups previously separated by conflict or crisis.
2. Inclusive and Participatory Planning: A core tenet of the framework is the engagement of all stakeholders—government institutions, civil society, private entities, and local communities. Public consultations, open surveys, and workshops ensure that the needs of all groups, especially marginalized communities, are addressed. Participation helps cultivate a sense of ownership, essential for the success of long-term urban recovery efforts.
3. Sustainable Economic Development: CURE promotes the integration of cultural heritage into economic activities, such as tourism, arts, and local crafts, to stimulate economic growth. This approach aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), by fostering job creation and promoting sustainable tourism [16]. This strategy not only revitalizes the economy but also helps preserve and promote the cultural identity of the area.
4. Integration of Heritage in Urban Planning: The framework emphasizes that cultural heritage should not be treated as an afterthought in recovery planning but as a core component of urban redevelopment. Embedding cultural heritage within the urban framework ensures that both tangible (monuments, historical buildings) and intangible (traditions, arts) elements are preserved and leveraged to create inclusive, resilient urban spaces.
5. Long-Term Peacebuilding through Culture: Beyond physical recovery, CURE sees cultural projects as tools for promoting peace. Public spaces revitalized with cultural activities—such as museums, festivals, and exhibitions—can act as platforms for dialogue, reinforcing social cohesion and preventing future conflicts.

1.1.2. ICCROM and ICOMOS Guidance: Post-Conflict and Post-Disaster recovery.

The ICOMOS and ICCROM Guidance on Post-Disaster and Post-Conflict Recovery and Reconstruction for Heritage Places of Cultural Significance and World Heritage Cultural Properties [10], complements the CURE framework by focusing specifically on the conservation and restoration of individual heritage sites. It addresses how communities can manage trauma associated with the loss of heritage and rebuild their identity through the recovery of culturally significant landmarks.

Key Aspects of the ICCROM and ICOMOS Guidance:
1. Comprehensive Damage Assessment and Risk Mitigation: The framework encourages rapid yet thorough assessments to evaluate the damage sustained by heritage sites, prioritize

interventions, and mitigate further risks. These evaluations are essential for developing targeted conservation strategies that are sustainable over time

2. Technical Assistance and Capacity Building: The guidance provides tools and training programs for local authorities and heritage professionals, ensuring that they have the knowledge to restore damaged sites. This includes the use of traditional materials and construction techniques alongside modern technology to maintain the authenticity of restored sites.

3. Collaborative Recovery: Like the CURE framework, this guidance emphasizes the importance of collaboration. Local communities, governments, international organizations, and private sectors are encouraged to work together to rebuild both the physical and social aspects of heritage.

4. Using Heritage as a Tool for Trauma Recovery: The guidance recognizes that the destruction of cultural heritage can cause significant emotional and psychological harm. Restoring these landmarks helps communities come to terms with loss, rebuild social cohesion, and recover from trauma.

5. Sustainability and Preparedness for Future Risks: The framework encourages cities to adopt risk management strategies to protect heritage sites from future disasters. This proactive approach ensures that heritage recovery efforts contribute to long-term resilience and sustainability.

While both the CURE Framework and ICCROM-ICOMOS Guidance emphasize the importance of cultural heritage in post-crisis recovery, they focus on different scales and priorities. The CURE Framework addresses the broader urban environment, integrating heritage into urban planning and social recovery. It aims to reconnect communities through shared cultural spaces, fostering long-term peacebuilding. On the other hand, the ICCROM and ICOMOS Guidance zeroes in on individual heritage sites, providing detailed technical advice on conserving and restoring cultural properties damaged by conflict or disaster. Both frameworks align on the need for inclusive participation and international collaboration to ensure the success of recovery efforts.

Together, these global frameworks offer comprehensive tools for cities striving to overcome division and crisis. The CURE Framework provides a holistic strategy for urban recovery, emphasizing the role of cultural heritage in fostering social cohesion, economic revitalization, and sustainable development. Meanwhile, the ICCROM and ICOMOS Guidance offers specific methodologies for conserving individual heritage sites, ensuring that these cultural assets remain integral to recovery processes. Applying these frameworks in divided cities like Nicosia can transform buffer zones into shared spaces that symbolize reconciliation and unity, setting a powerful example of how heritage-based recovery can rebuild not only cities but also communities and identities.

1.2. The Nicosia Master Plan.

The Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) is a bi-communal project initiated in 1979, aimed at fostering collaboration between the two communities of Nicosia to create a better city for all its residents. This initiative, specifically focused on the city of Nicosia, represents a hopeful step towards potential unification and future cooperation. By bringing together Greek and Turkish Cypriots to work on shared urban development goals, the NMP serves as a model for reconciliation and collaborative planning in a historically divided city.[17]

A significant aspect of the Nicosia Master Plan is dedicated to addressing the future of the Buffer Zone within Nicosia. This part of the project was sponsored by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through United Nations Development Programme/ United Nations Office for Project Services (UNDP/UNOPS), highlighting international support for the initiative. The objectives for this area include several key goals [18]:

- Documentation of Architectural Heritage: Creating a comprehensive record of the architectural heritage within the Buffer Zone.
- Architectural Survey: Preparing detailed architectural surveys of the facades of 265 buildings to assess their condition and historical value.
- Emergency Intervention Measures: Proposing urgent intervention measures to save buildings at risk of collapse.

These efforts are critical for preserving the unique historical and cultural landscape of the Buffer Zone. By documenting and protecting the architectural heritage, the NMP aims to create a foundation for future urban regeneration and foster a shared sense of history and identity among the city's residents. The project underscores the importance of heritage conservation to bridge divides and promote a unified vision for the future of Nicosia.

2. Method

This research employed a qualitative approach to examine the buffer zone in Nicosia as a potential heritage site for reconciliation. The methodology incorporated:

1. Historical Analysis: Archival research and historical documents were reviewed to understand the socio-political evolution of the buffer zone. Key sources included reports from the UNFICYP, and scholarly articles on the Cyprus division.

2. Review of Recent Bi-Communal Planning Projects: The Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) was analyzed as a case study of collaborative urban and heritage planning.

3. The research involved reviewing global frameworks, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Culture in Urban Reconstruction and Recovery (CURE) Framework, and the International Centre for the

Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property/International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICCROM/ICOMOS) Guidance. This review aimed to understand the latest international guidelines on cultural heritage management and post-conflict recovery. Insights from these frameworks helped shape the strategic approach proposed in the study and guided the development of well-founded conclusions on heritage-driven reconciliation and urban renewal.

4. SWOT Analysis: The methodologies outlined above, including the historical review of the buffer zone, analysis of the Nicosia Master Plan (NMP), and evaluation of global frameworks, collectively informed the development of a comprehensive SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. This analysis provided a multidimensional perspective on the ecological, cultural, and socio-economic aspects of the buffer zone, forming the foundation for strategic recommendations in the study.

3. Results

This study sheds light on the unique and complex nature of the buffer zone in Nicosia. While it stands as a stark reminder of division, it also holds immense potential as a space for connection and shared heritage. By exploring its ecological richness, cultural significance, and the social dynamics it influences, the results reveal both the challenges and opportunities in transforming this zone into a unifying space. Insights from the SWOT analysis, recent planning efforts, and global heritage frameworks offer a clearer picture of the steps needed to bridge past divisions and build a more inclusive future.

3.1. SWOT Analysis

The findings of this research highlight the multifaceted nature of the buffer zone, both as a site of division and a potential heritage asset. A SWOT analysis was conducted to systematically evaluate the zone's ecological, cultural, and socio-economic aspects, revealing the following:

❖ Strength
• Flora and Fauna regeneration.

The buffer zone has become a sanctuary for wildlife, with diverse flora and fauna flourishing in the absence of human activity. This natural regeneration offers a unique ecological asset that can be preserved and integrated into the urban landscape [19].

• Reduce physical confrontation:

The presence of the buffer zone has significantly reduced direct physical confrontations between the two communities, contributing to a more peaceful coexistence over the years[20].

❖ Weaknesses
• Creation of Dead Spaces in Urban Centers:

The buffer zone has led to the creation of dead spaces within urban centers on both sides, disrupting the continuity of the cities and reshaping their urban fabric[1].

• Freeze of all types of human interaction:

The buffer zone has effectively frozen all forms of human interaction, leading to a loss of social, cultural, and economic exchanges between the two communities[21].

• Neglection of the historical building within the buffer zone urban area:

Many historical buildings within the buffer zone have been neglected, leading to their deterioration. This neglect not only impacts the physical landscape but also erases significant cultural and historical narratives[22].

❖ Opportunities
• Leveraging Biodiverse Life for Future Integration:

The rich biodiversity within the buffer zone presents an opportunity to create a neutral natural area that can bring people together. This green space could serve as a symbol of unity and a venue for joint activities[19].

• Creating New Centers Representing All Sides:

The buffer zone can be transformed into new urban centers that symbolize reconciliation and represent both communities. These centers can foster a sense of shared identity and collective ownership.

• Increasing Interaction to Build Trust:

Facilitating increased interaction within and around the buffer zone can help build trust between the communities. Over time, this increased engagement can lay the groundwork for deeper cooperation and integration.

❖ Threats:
• Risk of Re-Creating Conflicts:

The re-management and development of urban centers within the buffer zone carry the risk of reigniting conflicts. Careful planning and inclusive decision-making are crucial to ensure that redevelopment efforts do not exacerbate existing tensions.

• Ownership Disputes:

Legal uncertainties regarding property rights within the buffer zone pose significant challenges to restoration and development efforts.

This SWOT analysis outlines the current state of the buffer zone, laying the groundwork for strategic recommendations to leverage its strengths and opportunities while addressing its weaknesses and threats.

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[1] Personal observation from a trip to Nicosia in 2023.

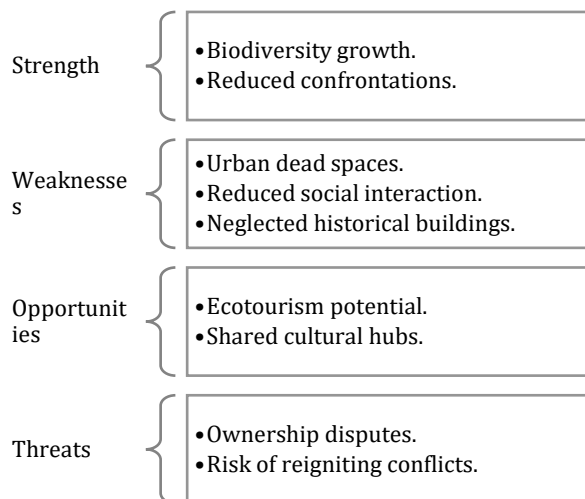| Strength | • Biodiversity growth.
• Reduced confrontations. |
Weaknesses	• Urban dead spaces. • Reduced social interaction. • Neglected historical buildings.
Opportunities	• Ecotourism potential. • Shared cultural hubs.
Threats	• Ownership disputes. • Risk of reigniting conflicts.

Figure 4. Summary of the SWOT analysis.

4. Discussion

Transforming the buffer zone in Nicosia from a symbol of division into a shared heritage site requires a comprehensive, multi-layered strategy aligned with global guidelines such as UNESCO's CURE Framework and ICOMOS's/ICCROM's post-conflict recovery guidance. Both frameworks emphasize the importance of cultural heritage in post-crisis recovery through inclusive planning, stakeholder collaboration, economic revitalization, and environmental stewardship. This chapter outlines the proposed steps to turn the buffer zone into a positive heritage space, leveraging both built and natural assets to foster reconciliation, unity, and sustainable development.

1. Documentation, Analysis, and Risk Assessment.

Building on the recommendations from ICCROM and ICOMOS, the first step is to conduct comprehensive documentation and analysis of the existing built and natural heritage within the buffer zone. This involves detailed architectural surveys, ecological studies, and mapping of significant historical buildings. In parallel, risk assessments should be carried out to identify structures at risk of deterioration and natural areas requiring protection. This inventory will serve as a foundation for all subsequent planning efforts, ensuring that both tangible and intangible heritage assets are preserved for future generations

2. Legal and Ownership Framework for Sustainable Reuse.

Inspired by ICOMOS/ICCROM's guidance on post-conflict recovery, the strategy must address legal complexities surrounding ownership and property rights within the buffer zone. Clear regulations need to be established, resolving ownership disputes and defining frameworks for the reuse or redevelopment of abandoned properties. This legal clarity will facilitate restoration efforts and prevent future conflicts, ensuring that the built environment can be sustainably integrated into the reunified city.

3. Conservation of Natural Heritage and Biological Diversity.

The buffer zone's natural areas, untouched by extensive human activity for decades, present a unique opportunity for both conservation and sustainable development. In alignment with the CURE framework [16], these spaces can be leveraged as shared ecological heritage to promote environmental education and cross-community collaboration. Preserving and revitalizing these natural areas not only protects biodiversity but also serves as a powerful tool for fostering reconciliation by creating common ground between divided communities

The framework emphasizes the integration of ecotourism and environmental stewardship into urban recovery efforts. Joint eco-tourism ventures between the two communities could highlight the ecological significance of the buffer zone while generating sustainable economic benefits. These initiatives offer practical models of cooperation, as they provide employment opportunities, enhance environmental awareness, and promote a sense of collective ownership among previously separated groups.

To ensure long-term sustainability, conservation strategies must also include educational programs focused on biodiversity and environmental management. Schools, community groups, and environmental organizations from both sides of the divide could participate in conservation efforts, transforming the buffer zone into a space where knowledge and responsibility are shared. These activities foster not only ecological awareness but also trust, encouraging mutual respect and dialogue through collaborative environmental projects.

Conserving the buffer zone's natural heritage goes beyond environmental preservation. It is a key element in reconnecting communities, promoting peacebuilding, and creating a sustainable future for Nicosia. Through careful planning and inclusive ecological initiatives, the buffer zone can become both a thriving natural habitat and a bridge between the city's two communities.

4. Joint Investment in Ecological and Cultural Projects.

Joint investments between the two communities can leverage the buffer zone's natural and cultural assets. These projects might include eco-tourism, community farming, and conservation initiatives. Collaboration in these areas generates economic benefits while building trust and creating new connections between the communities.

5. Inclusive Decision-Making and Governance.

Ensure that decisions regarding the built environment in the buffer zone involve all relevant stakeholders, including public, private, international, and governmental sectors. This collaborative approach is essential for determining appropriate actions such as preservation, restoration, demolition, or rehabilitation of structures. This collaborative approach ensures that actions align with the collective vision for the zone.

6. Public Engagement and Participatory Planning.

The success of recovery efforts depends on community involvement. Public consultations, open surveys, and participatory planning processes are essential for fostering trust and creating a shared sense

of ownership. This engagement ensures that the transformation reflects the aspirations of all stakeholders and contributes to long-term reconciliation.

7. Economic Revitalization Through Markets and Cultural Hubs.

Revitalize markets within the buffer zone to serve as economic, cultural, and tourism hubs. Developing these areas can stimulate local economies, create jobs, and promote cultural exchange. These markets could showcase crafts, foods, and traditions from both communities, further bridging the divide.

This strategy aligns with the recommendations of global frameworks, offering a path to transforming Nicosia's buffer zone into a shared heritage site. By documenting heritage, resolving legal issues, conserving natural assets, and fostering inclusive governance and public participation, the buffer zone can become a symbol of unity and sustainable development. If successfully implemented, this transformation would stand as a testament to the power of heritage-based recovery, providing a model for other divided cities worldwide.

5. Conclusion

Transforming the buffer zone into a positive heritage site is anticipated to yield several significant benefits for Nicosia and its communities.

First, the creation of vibrant markets within the buffer zone will bolster the local economy. These markets, serving as commercial hubs, will provide business opportunities for vendors from both communities, thereby fostering economic growth and cooperation.

Second, the buffer zone will become a shared space, symbolizing unity and mutual respect. This shared environment will help to bridge the historical divide, promoting a sense of collective identity and purpose.

Third, increased interaction between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots is expected. By providing a neutral ground where both communities can engage in social, cultural, and economic activities, the buffer zone will facilitate dialogue and understanding, reducing long-standing tensions.

Finally, the development of new areas within the buffer zone will offer a unique way to present and reinterpret the island's history. These areas can serve as educational and cultural sites, showcasing the rich heritage of both communities while highlighting the progress towards reconciliation and unification.

In summary, the transformation of the buffer zone into a positive heritage site promises to enhance economic vitality, foster unity, promote interaction, and offer new perspectives on the island's shared history, contributing to a more cohesive and prosperous Nicosia. If this initiative proves successful, it will serve as tangible evidence that humanity can find its way back to unity after years of separation. This success story could inspire other divided regions around the world, demonstrating that reconciliation and cooperation are possible even after prolonged conflicts.

Author contributions

Haneen Abu-Mahfouz: contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, conducted the primary research, and performed the data collection and analysis. **Salah Hajısmaıl:** supervised the research process, provided critical feedback on the study design and methodology. Prof. Hajismail also reviewed and revised the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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