Akçiçek Village Regeneration Project

January - May 2008
This is a brief report on the work undertaken by the students on the MA International Architectural Regeneration and Development programme of Oxford Brookes University, UK in the 2007-08 academic year. The project was undertaken in collaboration with the Eastern Mediterranean University and the group of 19 students and three members of staff visited Akçiçek in January 2008.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our partners at the Eastern Mediterranean University for their continuous cooperation throughout the project and the North Cyprus Department of Museums and Antiquities for their generous support. We were greatly assisted in our work and made very welcome by the residents of Akçiçek and we thank them wholeheartedly for their warm and enthusiastic welcome and support for the project.

What we offer is a series of illustrated ideas for the regeneration of Akçiçek developed by the students working initially in groups and then individually. The proposals must be accepted as student work, but we hope they will stimulate discussion and future ideas and projects for the area and indeed other villages in the region. In effect it is a small contribution towards the preservation and development of the region’s unique architectural heritage and character for the benefit of present and future generations.

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- Dr Marcel Vellinga
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- Azin Aminoleslami
- Eyad Hilal
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- Nooshin Rabet Eshaghi
- Sally Buckby
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The village of Akçiçek is situated in the inland foothills of the Kyrenia mountain range in northern Cyprus. Formerly inhabited by Greek Cypriots, much of the village has been deserted since 1974, when the political partition that followed the Turkish intervention saw Greek Cypriots leave en masse for southern Cyprus. Although the village has been inhabited by Turkish Cypriots and immigrants from mainland Turkey since then, much of the village today stands empty, many of its traditional houses having lost their function and most having fallen in disrepair. The ongoing process of abandonment and dilapidation means that only about twenty-five percent of the traditional buildings in the village are today inhabited.

The belief that the traditional architecture of Akçiçek and other villages in North Cyprus constitutes an important part of a common (Greek and Turkish) Cypriot heritage is shared by representatives of the Turkish Cypriot government and academy. But how can this heritage be safeguarded or revived within the context of a complex political situation and the rapid economic development that has taken hold of North Cyprus in recent years? In the case of Akçiçek, the abandonment and disrepair of the buildings is complemented by a number of political, social, economic and environmental challenges that deserve urgent attention. The small population size of the village, the lack of ownership of the buildings, and the absence of public spaces and conveniences like a coffee shop, a shop, public transport, garbage collection and disposal, and healthcare provisions are a major concern to the villagers – as are the environmental impacts of the nearby stone quarry.

How can we safeguard the traditional built heritage of the village within this challenging economic, social, environmental and political context? How can the re-use and regeneration of traditional buildings or the sensitive design of new buildings rooted in tradition and place play a part in our efforts to address the social and economic challenges identified by the villagers?

Creating culturally vibrant, environmentally sustainable and economically viable villages whose inhabitants look forward but maintain a link with the past is the challenge facing all those concerned with the rural development of North Cyprus. It is also the challenge that was set to the students. The student work presented in this report offers a glimpse of the many ideas, suggestions and proposals that resulted from their conversations with the villagers, their measurement and recording of the buildings, and their detailed studies of the social, cultural and economic context. Taken together it indicates the important part that the sensitive regeneration of the inherited built environment can play in the development of the village.

Dr Marcel Vellinga, programme leader
Akçiçek is situated in the inland foothills of the Kyrenia mountain range. Nucleated and organic in settlement form, but lacking a clearly defined centre, it is easy to reach by road and relatively near to the towns of Lapta, Girne and the capital Lefkoşa. However, transport depends on private cars as pubic transport is not available and restricted to two school buses.

The area is developed but does not experience the same amount of construction as the coastal areas around Girne. The majority of buildings, including four churches, are in various states of disrepair and ruin, caused by destruction during the conflict of 1974 and subsequent re-use of materials and abandonment. Most inhabited buildings are located along the main road. Most buildings are old and traditional and have been built by the former Greek inhabitants of the village.

From the village one has good views, all the way to the Troodos mountains, Lefkoşa and the sea near Lefka. The population of the village is small: in 2006 there were 48 men and 47 women, a total of 95 people. This number probably includes Turkish immigrant workers, though some seem to have arrived after the census.

Many villagers are retired or nearing retirement age. There are some young families, but most leave the village for Lefkoşa and other places because of the limited social conveniences and job opportunities in Akçiçek.

Nonetheless, a fair number of young people visit Akçiçek during the weekend and holidays, indicating the strength of family connections.

Those villagers that have a job mainly work in Lefkoşa or Greek Nicosia, as builders, for the government or in service industries. Most families add to their income obtained through retirement or work by looking after small gardens and animals in the vicinity of their houses. Some of this produce is sold to people from elsewhere, including Lefkoşa.

There is a distinct absence of public space, and there are no public conveniences like a coffee shop, restaurant or shop. Shopping is done in the nearby village of Şirinevler or, particularly, in Lefkoşa. There are no schools in the direct vicinity and health care is restricted to a monthly visit by a doctor to the village of Şirinevler.

The houses have electricity and water tanks. However, coordinated waste collection does not take place in the village, which has resulted in much garbage being left throughout the village and surrounding landscape.

A stone quarry is situated close to the village, some 500 meters away. It provides work to some of the villagers, but it also creates much dust, noise and tremors and has had a detrimental effect on the natural environment, human health, water courses and the buildings.
Building condition
Despite the abandoned and dilapidated appearance of Akçiçek, there is a strong sense of community among the villagers, the vast majority of whom are related by descent and marriage. The villagers emphasise the many advantages of their village, including the strong sense of social connection and solidarity, the beautiful natural environment, the fresh and healthy climate, and the panoramic view across the Mesaoria plain. They also recognise the value and potential of the traditional building heritage, emphasising in particular the environmental appropriateness and aesthetic qualities of the buildings. Regarding the traditional architecture as a crucial link to the past and a valuable reminder of important cultural traditions, there is agreement among the villagers that the dilapidation of the traditional architectural heritage in the village should be halted and reversed. Our research identified the following challenges and opportunities.

**Challenges**

Many of the historic traditional buildings of the village are abandoned or are in a poor condition.

Non-ownership within the village of these properties adds to the problem.

The small population of the village doesn’t create sufficient critical mass for basic services like a shop, bus service or refuse collection.

There is a notable absence of stable economic activity within the village with a high dependence on outside jobs.

Environmentally increasing water shortages and the impacts of the quarry are a concern.

There is little knowledge and understanding of traditional construction methods or proper methods of conservation and repair.

**Opportunities**

Close family relationships between villagers, resulting in a strong sense of community, social connections and solidarity.

An attractive and tranquil natural environment, with a fresh and healthy climate and a panoramic view across the Mesaoria plain.

A strong recognition among the villagers of the value and potential of the traditional building heritage and a desire to conserve and safeguard it form further dilapidation and disrepair.

Interest among the villagers in potential conservation and regeneration projects and a strong wish to participate in them.
Improving community spaces and facilities

Most of the groups identified the absence of a coherent centre for the village, especially as more recent housing had shifted away from the older ones and the church is of little relevance to the present day community. Several of the area-wide strategies recommend a new centre and focus to the village creating a hub around its main transport axis.

Project recommendations in this area range from revitalising the coffee shop and extending the traditional buildings to create new retail units looking onto the road (Sean Roberts) to a new community centre linked to the road and the agricultural terraces below (Tom Elliott).

The third project in this sequence by Azin Aminoleslami proposes a three stage approach to developing a complex of community facilities and units that could be let out for residential purposes or for small business, depending on demand and potentially generating an income for the villagers.

The final project by Andrew Hudson is a proposal for a bus stop that is also an amenity space through a series of terraces.
Revitalised coffee shop and new retail units  • Sean Roberts
“A 4m x 4m grid inspired by the structural rhythm of the local vernacular buildings is superimposed on the landscape. The proposed structures can be adapted and inhabited in the future, while the new contours produced by the grid emerge as a modern interpretation of traditional agricultural terraces”
New production spaces

One of the issues identified for Akçiçek was the limited work and income generation opportunities that were available in the village. Several projects investigated ways in which infrastructure could be improved to provide villagers with space and opportunity to set up small production business that could reach markets beyond Akçiçek.

The first project by Andrew Greenhalgh proposes a complex of buildings, some new, others restored existing buildings which can be flexibly used for a wide range of productive uses from handicrafts to food production. The spaces can be extended and adapted over time as businesses develop or new ones emerge while the central open space acts as both amenity and an extension of the work spaces.

The second project by Adam Darby is concerned with extending and diversifying agricultural production by using the landscape as a force for regeneration.
A new centre for the development of small scale local industries - Andrew Greenhalgh
Extending the traditional terraces to create new spaces for agricultural production - Adam Darby
Tourism is a significant industry for North Cyprus and although Akçıçek is not on any of the major tourist routes its traditional character make the proposition of agro-tourism a possibility. The rationale for this project is given overleaf.

Conservation and tourism development are linked through stages of development. In the first a derelict building is used as a demonstration project for traditional building skills thus enabling the conservation of other buildings and their use for local families with additional rooms that can be let out to visitors. This forms the first stage of visitor accommodation that is integrated with local use and can therefore be easily maintained. Once agro-tourism initiatives prove to be successful then a second phase of new tourist accommodation in a design that combines traditional methods with contemporary style.
1. Redefining the street

Currently the village lacks visual coherence and complexity, this may work within a very small settlement, but as the population increases and the village expands this could dilute the character of the village. By focusing buildings and community facilities along the one main street we aim to create a sequence of active edges running right through the centre of the village and therefore create a vibrant, bustling public domain. Focusing the public domain within one main shop in this way simultaneously helps maintain a quieter atmosphere in other areas away from the street that may prefer it, such as the residential, agricultural and tourist areas.

2. Creating a community focal point at centre of village

The existing village is lacking in any sort of community facility or social place. The proposed public square at the centre of the village would act as a focal point for community activity. It’s location set back off the main street opens up the public domain to views across and out of the village while reinforcing the vibrancy and activity of the street. The public square will include a majority of the key community facilities asked for by villagers including coffee shop, mini market, children’s playground and gathering places for men and women, thus maximising the use and social interaction that happens within the square and reinforcing its importance as the focal point of the village.

3. Diversity of activity

The village as existing mainly consists of housing and residents have to travel out of the village for employment, entertainment, educational needs as well as for the majority of their provisions. A diversity of areas of activity within the usage aims to maximise the variety and move the usage out of its stagnation. The introduction of tourism to the village aims to act as our key catalyst for regeneration by bringing more people, money and jobs to the area. Therefore the introduction of tourism occurs side by side with an increase in the community facilities, population and vibrancy of the village.

4. Utilizing existing built resource

A significant amount of the village is currently in a ruinous state which is a waste. To house the increasing population and facilities in the village we plan to make maximum use of the areas existing built resource. We propose doing this by repairing and adapting most of the original but currently disused ruinous buildings within the village and giving them a use once more. By reusing existing buildings we are aiming to revive the village’s character and sense of identity.

5. Re-interpreting the vernacular

Most of the village’s modern additions seem to have been built with a total disregard for the time learned practices and knowledge of the area. Where new buildings or interventions are made to the village in future we would aim to do it based on a sound knowledge of what worked well in the past, whilst also re-interpreting it with contemporary needs and desires in mind.

A more attractive and vibrant village to live, work and visit.

Clare Nunnely, Charlotte Dunne, Rosa Simpson
Restored building for building craft centre and new buildings for guest accommodation - Clare Nunnely
New housing

One of the primary reasons for the limited amenities and services in Akçiçek is its small population. Increasing housing density is seen not only as a means of attracting new residents but also a way of encouraging younger generations to stay on in their village.

The next series of projects examines options for new types of housing in the village starting with a mixed development aimed at local families and new comers (Nooshin Rabet), a high-end eco-house that can be adapted to different family sizes and located across the village (Sally Buckby) and a proposal for courtyard houses cut into the rock to make use of the environmental benefits (Rakiran Munde). Finally Eyad Hilal investigates ways in which environmental solutions such as solar panels can be incorporated into new and old housing clusters.

All projects incorporate stone as a building material based on its local availability and predominance in the traditional architecture and determining character of the area. It is however interpreted in a contemporary manor and combined with other materials.
New housing development amongst the existing traditional buildings - Nooshin Rabet
“Built into the hillside the housing units feature a private courtyard and ‘heart’ and benefit from wind walls to capture cool breezes”
Community Conservation Plan

Many of the historic structures in the village have been abandoned or at best inappropriately repaired. Yet they are not only an important part of the islands cultural heritage but also a key asset in the realisation of many of the regeneration recommendations made here.

How can this information be best communicated to the locals and most importantly how can they be best informed of appropriate repair techniques? A Community Conservation Plan developed by Akbar Modan, starts by identifying the significance of the village and its cultural heritage. The Conservation Plan is then developed as a step by step illustrated guide covering structural repairs, material conservation and adaptive re-use options.

Although the Conservation Plan was developed specifically for Akçicelik, much of its content is equally relevant to other similar villages in the region and the traditional architecture of Cyprus in general.
Excerpts from the Conservation Plan - Akbar Modan

Crack pattern clearly indicates that roof overloading is the main causes of wall damage.

Diagonal thrust from roof to wall resulted in surface cracks.

Partial collapsed wall

New concrete staircase supported on the perpendicular wall. Creating horizontal loading on the wall, it has created overturning movement in the room.
This unique international and multi-disciplinary programme has been established in the belief that the regeneration and development of the historic built environment is an essential component of sustainable development. The course draws on two established areas of expertise at Oxford Brookes University, combining an interest in international vernacular architecture studies with that in architecture in regeneration. Focusing on both rural vernacular traditions and historic urban centres, it promotes the re-use and integration of existing buildings, technologies, skills and knowledge in contemporary design and development, taking into account the wider political, cultural, economic and environmental context.

The aim of the programme is to provide students with the knowledge, skills and tools that will enable them to recognise the potential of and contribute creatively to the reuse, regeneration and development of the inherited built environment in countries around the world.

The programme aims to develop a critical understanding of the complex and dynamic relationship between the built environment and its economic, social and cultural values. It promotes an interdisciplinary approach that combines critical thinking and analysis with creative design, using a teaching and learning programme grounded in theory, field research, master classes, workshops and design studios.

The international field work is an integral part of the International Architectural Regeneration and Development programme. The objective of these visits is to experience first hand reuse, regeneration and renewal projects to observe different levels of intervention and associated outcomes in different cultural contexts. The field study develops and enhances the content and learning outcomes of the first semester taught modules. The fieldwork is undertaken in collaboration with local partners and the objective is not only for students to benefit from a real or live project situation but also to provide useful feedback to the process.

On return to the UK students build on the study visit findings and working in groups develop area based regeneration proposals and then work individually to develop building reuse projects or propose new buildings and/or urban realm improvements in accordance with the regeneration objectives set out in the group work.

Programme leader: Dr Marcel Vellinga

Course tutors: Dr Aylin Orbasli, Geoffrey Randell, Prof. Paul Oliver, Prof. Rod Burgess

More information on the programme and Oxford Brookes University can be found at: http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/be/architecture/postgraduate/iard/index.html