

MATINA MAGKOU* - KATERINA PROTONOTARIOU** - EIRINI ILIOPOULOU***

SITE-SPECIFIC ARTISTIC PRACTICES AS POTENTIAL WAYS OF URBAN CO-EXISTENCE AND TRANSCULTURAL DIALOGUE: THE CASE OF TWO ATHENIAN SQUARES

Abstract

In Greece during the last decade, in a context of crisis and precarity, artistic practices significantly increased their presence in public space often aiming at engaging the social base and touching upon the inclusion of different communities. Athens became the epicenter of such practices. The main objective of the paper is to explore grassroots arts and culture initiatives' role in stimulating community-engaging practices in intensively diverse public spaces, thus contributing to transcultural dialogue and urban co-existence. The paper employs two different artistic urban projects, UrbanDig_Omonia and Victoria Square Project on two Athenian squares, Omonia and Victoria, as case studies in order to elaborate on the contribution of artistic interventions and transcultural dialogue in 'difficult places'. This is realised on two interrelated levels: *i)* through community-based artistic interventions, that serve as the 'ice-breaker' for transcultural dialogue to diverse communities of 'locals' and 'foreigners'; *ii)* through continuous community engagement practices that serve as evaluation praxis and provide evidence-based reflections that could feed into cultural and social policy making. It further points to the role of artists and cultural managers as mediators among cultures.

Keywords

Artistic practices; public space; community engagement, transcultural dialogue; Athens; immigration.

ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200_000150

Licensed with CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

1. INTRODUCTION

In Greece since the last decade – in a context of fear, crisis and uncertainty – artistic practices have significantly increased their presence into the public realm, interrupting the 'Us' and 'Them' discourse and touching upon the co-existence of different communities. Athens became the epicenter of such practices. Through a study of artistic urban projects in two squares of Athens, we aim to explore how grassroots artistic practices in public space, by bringing together refugees, migrants and host communities, serve as an 'ice-breaker' and as critical tools for transcultural dialogue. Central in our exploration

* University of Côte d'Azur – mmagkou@gmail.com.

** Technical University of Athens – katerinaprotonotariou@hotmail.com.

*** Panteion University – irene.iliooulou@gmail.com.

is the notion of *site*, of the shared public space. We observe that the community engagement practices put in place by such artistic initiatives, turns into an evaluation praxis in itself, both in terms of serving an artistic research process, as well as of giving feedback on their relevance. Such community engagement processes remain an unexplored body of knowledge that could be informative for cultural and social inclusion policy-making.

Following this introduction, part two reviews the literature in relation to the notion of the Self and the Other in a process of identity formation and introduces the concept of space as an backdrop to the interpretation of transcultural encounters. Part three sets the reader into the socioeconomic context of Greece during the last decades to better understand the emergence of site-specific artistic practices and of power rhetorics on the 'Us and Them' spectrum due to an extended period of crisis. Part four touches on our methodology and introduces the two case studies of site-specific artistic practices unfolding in two squares in the city of Athens. Before our conclusion, part five discusses our findings, where we suggest exploring further such practices to inform evidence-based cultural and social inclusion policies.

2. THE 'SELF' AND THE 'OTHER' ON SITE

In contemporary public spaces, as squares, where human interactions are territorially situated, 'Us' and 'Them' co-exist on site. As Bromley¹ puts it,

The 'there', the 'then', and the 'them' have forced their way into visibility by becoming 'here', 'now' and almost, but not quite, 'us'.

Otherness can be seen as a form of social exclusion and symbolic value². Necessary for the production of meaning and the formation of culture, they are often considered a threat and a source of hostility or aggression. This 'divided legacy'³ of otherness makes difference so important. While 'interactions of a new order and intensity'⁴ imposed by globalisation have enabled a new era of 'neighborliness', in most cases co-existence is still not a lived experience. Authors talking about a cultural turn⁵, a conviviality turn⁶, a cosmopolitan turn⁷, a mobility turn⁸, a diversity turn⁹, have all touched upon the ways the intensification of encounters has changed profoundly the way we approach our iden-

¹ R. Bromly, *Narratives of Forced Mobility and Displacement in Contemporary Literature and Culture. Studies in Mobilities, Literature and Culture*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 35.

² L. Romero-Rodriguez, S. Civila, I. Aguaded, "Otherness as a Form of Intersubjective Social Exclusion: Conceptual Discussion from the Current Communicative Scenario: Conceptual Discussion from the Current Communicative Scenario", *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, 19, 1 (2021): 20-37. Accessed February 20, 2022. DOI: 10.1108/JICES-11-2019-0130.

³ S. Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage Publications: Open University Press, 1997.

⁴ A. Appadurai, *Modernity At Large*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 27.

⁵ K. Nash, "The 'Cultural Turn' in Social Theory: Towards a Theory of Cultural Politics", *Sociology*, 35, 1 (2001): 77-98.

⁶ A. Wise, G. Noble, "Convivialities: An Orientation", *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 37, 5 (2016): 423-231. Accessed February 20, 2022. DOI: 10.1080/07256868.2016.1213786.

⁷ U. Beck, E. Grande, "Varieties of Second Modernity: The Cosmopolitan Turn in Social and Political Theory and Research", *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61, 3 (2010): 409-442.

⁸ T. Faist, "The Mobility Turn: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences?", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36, 11 (2013): 1637-1646.

⁹ M.-L. Berg, N. Sigona, "Ethnography, Diversity and Urban Space", *Identities*, 20, 4 (2013): 347-360. Accessed February 20, 2022. DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2013.822382.

tity and that of the ‘Other’. Most importantly, intense mobilities lie ‘at the centre of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the microgeographies of everyday life’¹⁰ and lead to an asymmetry in power relations. Researchers have studied the discursive construction of the ‘Other’ on a square¹¹, or how commonplace diversity is performed in super-diverse contexts¹² and there is a wide literature on everyday encounters with difference and intercultural conviviality¹³. Other studies examine the role of artistic practices in public space, such as graffiti and street art¹⁴, in articulating *outsidered* aesthetics and communicative culture that challenge power systems, or performing arts and urban sport in the public space from the migrant performance’s perspective¹⁵. They all point to power struggles over the definitions of place and culture and the constitution of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’¹⁶.

In our current study, space becomes important as we examine practices and social performances triggered by artistic practices on two squares in a prolonged crisis-hit Athens. We see squares, as ‘common places of social diversity in which difference is not essentialised, but rendered a routine and unremarkable feature of everyday encounters’¹⁷ in the public space. They are the ‘physical meeting spaces of cultural, political, economic, social and individual trajectories’¹⁸ and spaces where negotiations of relations among different groups take place¹⁹. In a previous article²⁰, we argued that sports and art can compose a common cultural language that operates as a tool for communities to co-create urban space, especially among culturally diverse groups. Here, the notion of *site*, of space offers a stage to understand artistic practices as facilitators of experiences ‘in which borders between languages, communities and cultures are transcended, transgressed and transformed’²¹. We approach transcultural encounters encouraged by artistic practices on public spaces, as part of the *lived space* – in Lefebvre’s²²

¹⁰ T. Cresswell, “Mobilities I: Catching up”, *Progress in Human Geography*, 35, 4 (2010): 550-558.

¹¹ C. Dyers, F.J. L. Berg, N. Sigona, “Ethnography, Diversity and Urban Space”, *Identities*, 20, 4 (2013): 347-360. Accessed February 20, 2022. DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2013.822382. T. Cresswell, “Mobilities Wankah, “‘Us’ and ‘Them’: The Discursive Construction of ‘the Other’ in Greenmarket Square, Cape Town”, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 12, 3 (2012): 230-247. Accessed February 20, 2020. DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2012.659186.

¹² S. Wessendorf, *Commonplace Diversity: Social Relations in a Super-Diverse Context*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

¹³ G. Noble, “Cosmopolitan Habits: The Capacities and Habitats of Intercultural Conviviality”, *Body and Society*, 19, 2-3 (2013): 162-185. Accessed February 20, 2022. DOI: 10.1177/1357034X12474477.

¹⁴ M. Christensen, T. Thor, “The Reciprocal City: Performing Solidarity-Mediating Space through Street Art and Graffiti”, *International Communication Gazette*, 79, 6-7 (2017): 584-612. Accessed February 20, 2022. DOI: 10.1177/1748048517727183.

¹⁵ C. Corviano, C. D’Angelo, A. De Leo, R. Sánchez Martín, ‘How Can Performing Arts and Urban Sport Enhance Social Inclusion and Interculturalis in the Public Space?’, *Comunicazioni sociali*, 1 (2019). Accessed February 15, 2022. DOI: 10.26350/001200_000050.

¹⁶ D. Massey, P. Jess, *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹⁷ A. Baker, A. Crawford, N. Booth, D. Churchill, Everyday Encounters with Difference in Urban Parks: Forging ‘Openness to Otherness’ in Segmenting Cities, *International Journal of Law in Context*, 15, 4 (2019): 495-514. Accessed on February 15, 2022. DOI: 10.1017/S1744552319000387.

¹⁸ S. Santos Cruz et al., “Inquires into Public Space Practices, Meanings and Values”, *Journal of Urban Design*, 23, 6 (2018): 797-802. Accessed February 19, 2022. DOI: 10.1080/13574809.2018.1525289.

¹⁹ A. Madanipour. *Public and Private Spaces of the City*, London: Routledge, 2013.

²⁰ D. Chatziefsthathiou, E. Iliopoulou, M. Magkou, “UrbanDig Project: Sport Practices and Artistic Interventions for Co-Creating Urban Space, Sport in Society”, 22, 5 (2019): 871-884. Accessed September 20, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2018.1430485.

²¹ W. Baker, C. Sangiamchit, “Transcultural Communication: Language, Communication and Culture through English as a Lingua Franca in a Social Network Community”. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 19, 6 (2019): 471-487. Accessed February 15, 2022. DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2019.1606230.

²² H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

terms – , which is ‘a place of critical exchange’, a significant spatial moment of action and ‘spatialisation’²³ of social life.

3. ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND PUBLIC SPACE IN A COUNTRY IN CRISIS

During the last fifteen years, Greece has been confronting two significant and prolonged crises: the financial crisis and the refugee and migration crisis. The financial crisis that began in 2008 forced the country into fiscal adjustments, extensive reforms and austerity measures. Unemployment also hit high numbers. At the same time, the large-scale arrival of refugees in the mid-2010s, in which Greece operated firstly as a transitory country and then as host country, posed an additional challenge to Greek society: that of identity confrontation, through constructions of narratives of otherness and xenophobia. The term *crisis* used to refer to the migration flows, has been criticised²⁴ for being ‘instrumental in specific contexts for specific actors and about specific migrant groups’²⁵, often to legitimise other (political) actions responsive to this ‘crisis’²⁶ and its ‘asymmetrical pressures’²⁷. Here it is used to encompass a series of interrelated events that explain the contemporary reality in Greece where we ended up ‘discussing money when the question was about xenophobia- and vice versa’²⁸.

Contemporary migration towards Greece started more intensively in the 1990s when populations from the post-communist states of the Balkan region started moving to Greece. In the 2010s, refugees from the world’s conflict zones, including Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, replaced these populations. A peak moment was during 2016 when – following a gradual restriction of access to the Balkan route – hundred thousands of people entered and crossed the country. Many of them began to occupy the urban centre of Athens ‘to remain less visible often ending up in situations of extreme poverty and precariousness’²⁹.

The presence of immigrants on the Greek public space resulted in a direct encounter with the ‘Other’. The far-right party Golden Dawn injected to a large extent anti-refugee and ‘othering’ narratives accentuating a perceived sense of threat from migration that found many followers and produced a number of confrontations within Greek society. Although a big part of the Greek population demonstrated solidarity and compassion with migrants³⁰,

²³ R. Shields, *Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*, USA, Canada: Routledge, 1999.

²⁴ S.A. Aguiton, L. Cabane, L. Cornilleau, eds., “La fabrique et le gouvernement des crises”, *Critique Internationale*, 85 (2019).

²⁵ C. Cantat, H. Thiollet, A. Pécoud, *Migration as Crisis. A Framework Paper*, 2019, MAGYC available at: <https://www.magyc.uliege.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/D3.1.-Migration-as-crisis.-A-frameworkpaper.pdf>. Accessed February 14, 2022.

²⁶ E. Blanchard, C. Rodier, “‘Crise migratoire’: ce que cachent les mot”, *Plein droit*, 111, 4 (2016): 3-6. Accessed February 10, 2022. DOI: 10.3917/pld.111.0003.

²⁷ I.-P. Karolewski, R. Benedikter, “Europe’s Refugee and Migrant Crisis. Political Responses to Asymmetrical Pressures”, *Politique européenne*, 60, 2 (2018): 98-132. Accessed February 15, 2022. DOI: 10.3917/poeu.060.0098.

²⁸ M. Drymioti, V. Gerasopoulos. “Entangling the Migration and the Economic ‘Crisis’: Claiming What’s Rightfully Greek”, *Entofoor, Race-ism*, 30, 2 (2018): 49-69.

²⁹ D. Dalakoglou, “The Crisis before ‘The Crisis’: Violence and Urban Neoliberalization in Athens”, *Social Justice*, 19, 1 (2021): 24-42 (24).

³⁰ C. Cantat, *The Politics of Refugee Solidarity in Greece. Bordered Identities and Political Mobilization*, Working paper series 2018, 1. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336022821_The_Politics_of_refugee_solidarity_in_Greece_-_Bordered_identities_and_political_mobilization. Accessed 20 September, 2021.

often the public opinion has been that immigration has been bad for Greece, has contributed to the decline of the living standards, costing the welfare state and draining resources that could be spent on Greeks. The ‘Us’ (Greeks) and ‘Them’ (non-Greeks/ foreigners) dichotomy was presented as a great threat to Greek identity, especially due to the fact that migrants are mainly non-Orthodox. Anti-migrant rhetoric and racist violence was transformed in official political and media discourse³¹. For example, in their analysis of newspaper articles of different political affiliation during the period around the Greek general elections in 2012, Lees and Alfieris³² observed that Greek *public space* was often in juxtaposition with and under threat of ‘people from the fringes of the society’, ‘people in the margins, specified mostly as foreigners’.

During these years, there was a boom in the creative scene³³. Artists became more productive, proactive and provocative in the ways they express themselves³⁴. Especially Athens became the epicenter of such practices³⁵ that would fall under what is described as ‘community arts’³⁶, ‘participatory art’³⁷, ‘socially engaged art’³⁸, and ‘social practice’³⁹. Several initiatives were bottom-up and rather ephemeral. Others emerged into cultural spaces in areas of the city. In a spirit of setting the conditions for such initiatives to thrive, the City of Athens’ adopted an urban policy agenda, supporting bottom-up and participatory responses to crisis, through solidarity movements⁴⁰, social and solidarity economy⁴¹, creative entrepreneurship⁴² and participatory placemaking⁴³ through a number of projects⁴⁴.

³¹ A. Triandafyllidou, H. Kouki, “Naturalizing Racism in the Center of Athens in May 2011: Lessons from Greece”, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 12 (2014): 418-436. Accessed February 15, 2022. DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2014.932477.

³² C. Lees, A. Alfieris, “Racist Discourse in the Years of the Greek Financial Crisis: Evidence from the Greek Press”, *Journal of Greek Media and Culture*, 5, 1 (2019): 45-67. Accessed September 20, 2021. DOI: doi.org/10.1386/jgmc.5.1.45_1.

³³ S. Tsiara, “Contemporary Greek Art in Times of Crisis: Cuts and Changes”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 14, 2 (2015): 176-181. Accessed September 15, 2021. DOI: 10.1177/1470412915595587.

³⁴ Z. Zontou, “UrbanDig Project: Theater for Neighbourhoods (in Conversation with George Sachinis)”, in *Re-Defining Theater. Communities: International Perspectives on Community-Conscious Theater-Making*, edited by M. Galea and S. Musca, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020.

³⁵ E. Hamalidi, “Public (?) Art in the Urban Area. Some Thoughts about the Greek Example with Emphasis on the City of Athens”, in *Art-Space-Views of Development in Greece of the Crisis*, edited by A. Loukaki and D. Planzos, Athens: Limon, 2018 [in Greek].

³⁶ A. Goldbard, *Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, New York: The Rockefeller Foundation, 2000 and Id., *The New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, Oakland, CA: New Village, 2006.

³⁷ C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012.

³⁸ F. Matarasso, *A Restless Art. How Participation Won and Why It Matters*, Lisbon-London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2019.

³⁹ S. Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, New York: Routledge, 2011.

⁴⁰ D. Vaiou, A. Kalandides, “Practices of Solidarity in Athens: Reconfigurations of Public Space and Urban Citizenship”, *Citizenship Studies*, 21, 4 (2017): 440-454. Accessed September 10, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/13621025.2017.1307605.

⁴¹ A. Arampatzi, “Social Solidarity Economy and Urban Commoning in Post-Crisis Contexts: Madrid and Athens in a Comparative Perspective”, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 2020. Accessed September 16, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/07352166.2020.1814677.

⁴² M. Lavanga *et al.*, “Creative Entrepreneurship and Urban Space: Exploring the Location Preferences of Creative Professionals in Athens during the Economic Recession”, *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 153 (2020): 5-36. <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.22340>. Accessed 20 February, 2022.

⁴³ N. Karachalis, “Temporary Use as a Participatory Placemaking Tool to Support Cultural Initiatives and Its Connection to City Marketing Strategies: The Case of Athens”, *Sustainability*, 13, 4 (2021): 1652. Accessed February 15, 2022. DOI: 10.3390/su13041652.

⁴⁴ A first example of such projects was *This is Athens-Polis* (2018-2019), a placemaking initiative that invited citizens and creatives of Athens to co-create the city through temporary interventions in the public space and the reopening of closed shops in abandoned areas of the city. One of the areas of intervention was

4. METHODOLOGY

Our methodology builds on the case study approach⁴⁵, used with an instrumental purpose in mind. We explore two “site-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site-responsible, site-related”⁴⁶ cases to understand how grassroots artistic practices in public space cultivate transcultural encounters and urban co-existence. The choice of the selected artistic interventions, UrbanDig_Omonia and Victoria Square Project, was motivated by their relevance to the subject matter, as the locations where they took place are representative of a larger pool of challenges experienced by the city as explained above.

4.1. *UrbanDigProject_Omonia*

UrbanDig Project (UDP) is developed by the performing arts company, Ohi Pezoume, established in Athens in 2004. UDP consists in an interdisciplinary platform that uses research, community and artistic practices to provide ground for people’s interaction in the city with the aim to (co)-create a site-specific performance that constitutes the festive finale of a complete UrbanDig Project.

The public cuts in support to creative initiatives after 2008, resulted in the organisation examining ‘how co-creation could open up powerful new ways of making art at a time of insecurity and suffering’⁴⁷. *Dourgouti Island Hotel Project*⁴⁸ was one of the first showcases of the collective’s work in this direction. Omonia, which in English stands for ‘Concord’ – is a square located in the center of Athens that has been the subject of a large palette of urban development experiments and reconstructions throughout the years. It is often referred to as a place of filthiness, aesthetic failure and danger. With *UDP_Omonia* the collective placed itself between 2015 and 2017 on the square, exploring the spatio-temporal context of the last decade marked by economic crisis, increased migration flows and social unrest.

4.2. *Victoria Square Project*

Victoria Square Project (VSP) defines itself as a ‘social sculpture’⁴⁹. It is a venue and project initiated by the artist Rick Lowe, an American artist who became known with his Row Houses where he transformed an abandoned African-American neighborhood

Theatrou Square, a ‘home’ to various immigrant groups. A second project was Curating the Limbo, a EU funded project in the framework of the Urban Innovative Actions programme that aimed in actively supporting refugees to exit the ‘limbo’ state caused by long-time inactiveness and uncertainty through participatory activities bringing them also closer together with other Athenians.

⁴⁵ R.E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995.

⁴⁶ M. Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002: 1.

⁴⁷ Matarasso, *A Restless Art. How Participation Won and Why It Matters*, 180.

⁴⁸ D. Chatziefstathiou, C. Ananiadis, G. Sachinis, “Dourgouti Island Hotel Project: An UrbanDig Project”, *Universal Journal of Management*, 6, 3 (2018): 91-97. DOI: 10.13189/ujm.2018.060302. Accessed September 12, 2021.

⁴⁹ In the '70s, the German artist Joseph Beuys defined ‘social sculpture’ as an art practice that takes place in the social realm, requires social engagement, and leads to the transformation of society through the release of popular creativity.

in Houston, Texas into a land of artistic and social experiments. VSP is located a few meters from Victoria Square, a ‘low-key crossroads for people of myriad nationalities, newly settled or passing through Greece’⁵⁰.

What started as an ephemeral project upon invitation to Lowe to participate in documenta14, the international art exhibition that was hosted in Athens in 2017, developed into an artistic space of belonging within a community in Athens that has become polarised in response to the refugee crisis. A few decades ago, Victoria was one of the best and most sought after neighborhoods in Athens by the bourgeoisie at that time, but slowly lost its past glory mainly due to its abandonment by its original inhabitants and its ‘occupation’ by various ‘tribes’⁵¹. In 2020, amidst the Covid-19 crisis, dozens of refugees continued to sleep rough at Victoria Square following a Migration Ministry decision to bring thousands of successful asylum seekers to the mainland in an effort to decongest the island camps.

For the UDP case the paper builds on material collected during the period 2015–2017 as part of an extended artistic research process around the square which included thirty-six semi-structured interviews to ‘users’ of the square and participants in the UDP activities, as well as focus groups, historical/ aspirations/ sensory and skills mapping processes and artistic activations in an artistic-research and community engagement experiment. The process can be seen both as an artistic research and as an arts-based research retro-alimenting each other along the way⁵². Authors, as members of the UrbanDig collective, had been involved in the UrbanDig_Omonia project, both as researchers and data collectors, as well as facilitators, and performers. All three authors of the paper, in their research capacity complemented the artistic research work of the collective. This resulted in various outcomes, including an unpublished master thesis⁵³ exploring Otherness and co-existence in Omonia and a commissioned research project⁵⁴ on the dynamics of resilience that emerge on the square.

The second case study, that of Victoria Square Project, remains a bit less explored in terms of data collection, however it complements the fieldwork to offer a different illustration of the subject matter. The exploration is also more recent. The data explored include the results of a participatory mapping exercise undertaken by the UrbanDig team on Victoria Square in December 2018, complemented by semi-structured interviews conducted during July–September 2021 with two members of the VSP staff and one free-lance project manager.

⁵⁰ More information available at: <http://victoriasquareproject.gr/>. Accessed September 12, 2021.

⁵¹ D. Athinakis, “I gerasmeni plateia Viktorias kai oi fyles tis”, 12.12.2017 *Kathimerini*, December 12, 2017. Accessed September 23, 2021. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/938866/i-gerasmeni-plateia-viktorias-kai-oi-fyles-tis/> [in Greek].

⁵² N. Carpentier, J. Sumiala, “Introduction: Arts-Based Research in Communication and Media Studies”, *Comunicazioni sociali*, 1 (2021): 3–10. Accessed February 15, 2022. DOI: 10.26350/001200_000125.

⁵³ K. Protonotariou, *Towards a Pilot Grid for a Vibrant City: Artistic Practices as Potential Enablers of Co-Existence through the Case Study of UrbanDig Omonia*, Unpublished master thesis for the master programme on Architecture and Design, National Technical University of Athens, 2018 [in Greek].

⁵⁴ UrbanDig Project, *Urban Resilience Indicators: Defining Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats in the case of Omonia Square and Market*, Athens: 100 Resilient Cities, 2017 (unpublished document commissioned in the framework of the Athens Resilience Strategy).

Image 1 - *Miss Omonia* (photo by Irini Vosgerau)



Image 2 - *Omonia Station 1* (photo by Irini Vosgerau)



5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1. *Constructions of Otherness and co-existence*

Our research showed that both squares are representative of the construction mechanisms of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ imaginary in the backdrop of a crisis-hit Athens. Omonia is seen as a place of transit and of merged identities within a high acceleration of everyday life and exchange. In the collective consciousness Omonia is a hangout and a crossroad, a meeting place and a hideout⁵⁵. If Omonia is associated with the public imaginary as a place of *transit*, Victoria square became a (temporary and permanent) *home* for thousands of immigrants during the last years. Poor infrastructure on and around the squares and fear of the ‘Other’ have been the two elements that were highlighted by most informants during our research.

The first one (poor infrastructure) is related mostly with the material space. Omonia is described as dull and dirty: “*There are no clean toilets. People piss on the streets. The whole atmosphere makes you feel dirty. Unbearable in gloomy days*” (worker of mobile telephone company on Omonia square). The harvesting of a participatory mapping run by UrbanDig project on Victoria Square in December 2018, revealed similar findings: “*abandoned shops*” and “*degradation*”. At times, a comparison between the two squares was also attempted *it is nice to sit and feel safe, a meeting point with friends, many immigrants but it is better than Omonia* (immigrant working on Victoria square). This understanding of the material space contributes to a construction of fear by the dominant public discourse (state, media, land market) and the construction of stereotypes both as a product and as producers of social behaviors nurtured by certain concepts (criminality, migration, terrorism, drugs, death, etc.) and institutions (state power, police, media etc.).

The second one (fear of the ‘Other’) confirms what we have explained above: the wide feeling of uncertainty and precarity among Greek society resulted to a sort of ‘cultural trauma’ on collective memory and identity, self-image, as well as on the image of the Other⁵⁶. Migrant communities are blamed for this ‘bad fate’ of the autochthon population, especially unemployment. The discourse of informants during our research was also revelatory of this aspect. A Greek young man that took part in the participatory mapping on Victoria Square said, “*there are no many jobs for others than people from Pakistan and Bangladesh*”. Socio-spatial stereotypes create feelings of ‘desirability’ and ‘avoidance’ towards specific components of an urban area. These feelings can propel stigmatised regions into a vicious circle of public disinvestment, social degradation, and more stereotyping⁵⁷. Visitors to the final performance of UDP_Omonia that were questioned as part of the evaluation of the event as well as participants of the community mapping in Victoria Square, reproduced mostly the stereotypical public discourse and dominant narratives regarding the dangerous city center and the ‘Other’. Fear is not only observed among Greeks, but also on different immigrant groups. “*We only go around*

⁵⁵ T. Andriopoulos, “Omonia Square as a Limit and a Narrator”, *Athens Social Atlas*, 2015. Accessed September 13, 2021. <https://www.athenssocialatlas.gr/en/article/omonia-square/>.

⁵⁶ A. Monnier, “La crise grecque sous l’angle du ‘trauma’?”, *Mots. Les langages du politique*, 115 (2017): 73-88. Accessed February 22, 2022. DOI:10.4000/mots.22956.

⁵⁷ S. Matei, S. Ball-Rokeach, S. Ungurean, “Communication Channels, Spatial Stereotyping and Urban Conflict: A Cross-Scale and Spatio-Temporal Perspective”, *Journal of Dispute Resolution*, 1 (2007): 195-204.

Omonia, because we are afraid of the foreigners on the square. [...] I am afraid even though nothing ever happened to me" (Bulgarian woman).

We observe that trying to understand Self/ Other nexuses⁵⁸ is a process of negotiation between the self (conceived as a reflexive agent), the Other (who comes as a demand for care and responsibility) and the established structures of social, cultural and economic recognition. A Syrian refugee on Omonia said *"I am a guest here. And as such I honor my hosts. We know we are among abnormal rogues sometimes, but we feel there is nowhere else to go"*. *"Greeks don't mingle"*, say some Pakistanis on Omonia square, while the owner of a small restaurant argued that *"In the past all professionals were friends. Nowadays, I don't think so any more, since things became hard for all of us"*. It seems that the different communities are used to each other's presence, but there is not a meeting point. A shop owner on Omonia square mentioned: *"Most of them are foreigners that don't have anywhere else to go [...]. Syrians, Iraqis, you know [...]. They are waiting [...]. They are quiet, they don't enter into trouble [...]. They often buy from our shops that we have cheap things"*. A Greek shop owner in one of Omonia's galleries mentioned: *"Inside the gallery it is like if you were in a village, in a small community, we all love each other"*. One could say that the 'locals' on the two squares – both Greeks and immigrants – tolerate each other in a unique 'ecosystem of survival'⁵⁹.

5.2. Artistic practices as the ice-breakers

Our research showed us that the need for art and the central motivation to conceive and realise a performance or another artistic activity, turns out to be a powerful key to unlock several doors and enter the 'personal space' of the community. To put that simply, the artistic identity of the projects is a trustful 'answer' to the often anxious question 'who are you?'.

For example, 'Miss Omonia' was a dance performance inspired by 'mapping' through community engagement processes what is 'beneath the visible' on Omonia square. The intervention consisted into an interaction between a trumpeter, 'resident' of Omonia that collects the voices of visitors in a 'tent of silence' and a wandering woman looking for a new home in the public space of Omonia and trading her voice for this. It caused a certain 'shock' unfolding interrelations among the locals and between them and the 'strangers'. 'Trobadoirs' was a data-mining method gathering narrative interviews from shop owners around Omonia of various cultural backgrounds in return for the composition of a story-specific song. 'Hotel Transit' on Xouthou Street, a small pedestrian street few meters from Omonia Square activated through an aspirations pantomime and artistic installation on the street engaging Greek and migrant communities.

All these activities facilitated interaction and engagement- often non-explicitly intentional. To exemplify this, we explain one of the processes that took place in Omonia. During the preparation phase for the last performance, there were rehearsals taking place on the square. During this time, young immigrants mainly from Pakistan and Afghanistan contributed, by their own initiative, as they could: they took care or carried things from one place to another, helped with putting together the scenography etc. The continuous presence of the UrbanDig team on the square allowed the cultivation of

⁵⁸ I. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.

⁵⁹ UrbanDig Project, 2017.

human relationships. One of the shop owners offered water everyday to the members of the artistic group, as a gesture of gratitude: “*You are here doing theater everyday for us for free*”, he said.

It is this continuous presence on site that cultivates the relationships and facilitates the encounter. In VSP case, the existence of a physical space a few meters from the square and the variety of activities organised, mobilise the wider neighborhood but also visitors. VSP is currently running a curatorial programme under the title *Who Is the Contemporary Athenian?* as an attempt to ‘identify concretely the elements that define an inclusive Athenian society today beyond labels like ‘immigrant’, refugee, first or second generation, Greek etc, but under the common ground of the neighbors and co-citizens⁶⁰. Other activities deploying artistic means include the educational programme Victoria NOW, an interdisciplinary program of modern creation familiarising different audiences with immigration, identity and co-creating collective works that reflect the contemporary identity of the neighborhood, or the #Next Stop Victoria project that ran in 2020. Aiming to contribute to the formulation of a new collective narrative in Victoria, the project brought together different communities, with local history and cultural heritage as a vehicle, taking as a starting point the imprints of Greek-German relations preserved in the urban landscape and the collective memory of the region. VSP has recently also started an artist-in-residency programme and curated an exhibition of a public artwork at the end of 2021 by Albanian artist Adrian Paci on the square under the title ‘We apologize’⁶¹. These projects and presence on the square produce the curiosity of neighbors and passers-by. The projects and production coordinator explained that when she started working for VSP, often those passing by were asking “are you a place for refugees?” and she said:

“no, we are a place for everyone [...]. It was a concept that was not so familiar. But little by little I realise that there has become a kind of a reference to the neighborhood and that themselves want to be in a place that is part of accepting different groups in the neighborhood” (interview with VSP projects and production coordinator).

5.3. Performing utopia

In both initiatives, often the artistic interventions, aim to represent the multicultural community, giving the possibility to all those involved throughout the artistic research process to express their needs and aspirations in relation to society⁶². On the Victoria Square community mapping, participants were asked what would they wish to see on the square. Besides infrastructure and safety related improvements, answers included “*children on the square on a creative co-habitant*”, “*a community library and co-work-*

⁶⁰ Taken from project description available at: <https://www.victoriasquareproject.gr/2020-2030>. Accessed September 12, 2021.

⁶¹ It is interesting to read the disclaimer of the exhibition to understand the way these artistic initiatives respect the public space and its inhabitants: “Please accept our sincere apologies for any inconvenience that may arise from the presence of the installation in Victoria Square. We understand that even a small shift from our everyday itinerary and routine may be annoying, and we acknowledge the difficulty in coexisting with what is ‘new’, ‘other’, or ‘unknown’ – qualities that may indeed challenge the things we take as given in our everyday lives”. Consulted on <https://www.victoriasquareproject.gr/post/we-apologize-by-adrian-paci>. Accessed February 22, 2022.

⁶² G. Verschelden, E. Van Eeghem, R. Steel, S. De Visscher, C. Dekeyrel, “Positioning Community Art Practices in Urban Cracks”, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 31, 3 (2012): 277-291.

ing spaces for artists”, “*common activities, multilingual and multicultural*”, “*more union*”, and “*things like the ones you do to bring people together*”. On Omonia square, those shop owners that participated in the Troubadours activity, were emotional that their story was sang. When interviewed to share their impressions after the end of the project, they used words as “*satisfaction*”, “*I was touched*”, “*my phycology changed*”, “*I felt again as a child*”, “*the opinion of people on the area improved for the better*”, or “*the dull colour of Omonia changed for a while*”.

In the same time, the artistic interventions introduce other Athenians, other visitors, to the multicultural character of those corners of the city. As Giorgos Sachinis, the director and co-founder of the performing arts company and of the project has put it⁶³:

We train ourselves in employing our artistic tools and vocabulary to introduce a community-in-the-making to each other, to inspire trust, to un-lock empathy, perception, imagination about a neighbourhood.

Visitors (16 people, 11 women and 5 men, all Greek) that assisted to the final performance of the UDP in Omonia, were asked whether their opinion about Omonia changed after the performance. Sixty three percent of them had replied that their vision of the square was negative to very negative. After the performance, thirty-seven percent of them replied that it shifted to a more friendly and safe vision: “*I saw some corners through a different perspective*”, “*dynamic, not dangerous, friendly*”, “*empathy*”, “*familiarisation*” were some of their answers. All of them had identified the multicultural aspect of the square as a negative element prior to their visit.

Our research showed that by using public space as a surface for interaction and communication, artists and cultural initiatives create alternative spaces in the city that operate in *material space* requiring *physical presence and activity*, they develop within the realm of *imagination*, facilitate ideals and mental constructions and become vehicles for community engagement and participatory action across cultures. Artistic initiatives in multicultural sites unlock empathy, perception and imagination and create the conditions for urban co-existence. They open doors to the community and engage with it, as people and communities trust the project’s modest artistic mission and are responsive to it. At the same time, they create bridges, sometimes ephemeral, others more lasting, where different stakeholders come together who perhaps wouldn’t collaborate if it weren’t for a ludic and artistic process and/ or result. Thirdly, they empower communities, especially the less privileged and collaborate to turn the people’s *perceived and lived* notions of space into something that will be viewed and heard by many (stories, temporary architectural interventions, performance). In such a framework, artists and cultural operators become mediators of global realities, bridging ‘everyday otherness’ in a community, while art is not a sterilised process but an ongoing, continuously unfinished reporting from the front of the (un) measurable, the (in-)visible, the (un-) real.

⁶³ Zontou, “UrbanDig Project: Theater for Neighbourhoods”.

Image 3 - *Mapping practices on Victoria Square by UrbanDig project*



5.4. Continuous community engagement as evaluation praxis

There is little ‘evidence’ – in Belfiore’s⁶⁴ critical understanding of the word – about how participatory and socially engaged arts practices, such as the ones described in our case studies, are being evaluated and assessed-especially in relation to their contribution to transcultural dialogue – and on whose terms⁶⁵. Keeping in mind that the cultural and artistic sector has been confronted with questions of ‘integration’ and the ‘intercultural opening’ of establishments, especially in the context of refugee movements⁶⁶, it is necessary to look for the right tools and evaluation frameworks. We claim, however, that it is the community engagement mechanisms deployed by such initiatives on the ground themselves, which serve as an *evaluation praxis*. Community engagement as evaluation praxis allows the organisations to understand the impact of their activities on the populations addressed and to re-orientate their work if needed to make it more relevant. At the same time, data gathered during the community engagement processes could serve

⁶⁴ E. Belfiore, “Is It Really about the Evidence? Argument, Persuasion, and the Power of Ideas in Cultural Policy”, *Cultural Trends*, 2021. Accessed February 22, 2022. DOI:10.1080/09548963.2021.1991230

⁶⁵ S. Hope, “Cultural Measurement on Whose Terms? Critical Friends as an Experiment in Participant-Led Evaluation”, in *Making Culture Count*, edited by L. MacDowall *et al.*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015: 282-297.

⁶⁶ A. Moser, “Cultural Management and Policy in the ‘Migration Society’. Inequalities and Starting Points for a Critical Reorientation”, *European Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, 10, 1 (2020): 4-18.

as the ‘evidence’ needed for cultural policymaking, as well as wider strategies of social cohesion and inclusion.

Community engagement of such artistic initiatives as evaluation praxis goes beyond an accountability paradigm of evaluation. It consists in a practice embedded in the unfolding of events and activities that guarantees continuous feedback and nurtures the evolution of projects. A community engagement officer is appointed by both UDP and VSP as part of their work on the ground. In the case of UDP, the community engagement officer appointed for the duration of the project has the responsibility to connect with the local communities, cultivate them and create spaces of exchange and encounter and keeping quantitative records, e.g. numerical data of participation and cooperation in the activities or data on the profile of those engaged, as well as the diversity of those addressed through a skills and interests mapping that puts together the ‘anthropogeography’ of the project. Evaluation-related elements that are being explored throughout the community engagement practices include knowledge transfer (what’s new?), appropriation (what changed regarding feeling of comfort, active participation, desire to continue?), networking (have improbable and cross-sectoral bridges been constructed?), and special purpose (finally, has the action succeed in its specific local goals?). The evaluation methods deployed serve both as evaluation and community engagement methods and include facilitated discussions for feedback (round tables, one-to-one interviews, world cafés, assemblies), mapping processes (production of maps with reference to certain questions: e.g. mark your favorite spot before and after the action to measure both familiarisation / appropriation with public space) and also the behavioral effects of knowledge gained about the space through the action, thus constituting an element of artistic research in the same time.

The difference in the case of VSP is the existence of a physical space that is the base of operations for the organisation’s work. Interviewees explained that documenting their projects development enters into a dialogical relation with residents and users.

“We document the process by observing and interviewing residents. This has often made us change ideas. Our progress is documented daily in the project’s diary. It is a relational process for us. When you are about to position an art piece on public space, you are an invader – it may be relevant to some while to others no. And you need to know” (interview with VSP General Manager).

The existence of a permanent operations space allows VSP to have a more long-term approach to their community engagement work. A staff member dedicated to community engagement has been appointed during the last years to work exclusively on this and all the ‘evidence’ collected serves both to inform the artistic processes but also understanding their relevance to the community.

“This person does constant research in the public space when we want to take action. We don’t want to create a firework, we want to understand the audiences, how to approach them, their needs, their age groups, and to cope with this multicultural aspect [of the neighborhood] by structuring our approach and in the same time nurturing our own artistic practices” (interview with VSP projects and production coordinator).

Although the potential complementary value of the third eye perspective of an appointed external evaluator was acknowledged by one of the co-initiators and project man-

agers of #Next Stop Victoria as a missing part in their internal evaluation exercise⁶⁷, the empirical knowledge of those implementing and being engaged in the project was underlined by most interviewees as of utmost importance. The same interviewee also suggested that the best way to capture the impact of the project is to collaborate with community representatives themselves, turning them into *actors* and not *subjects* of the evaluation praxis.

6. CONCLUSION

Through the above two case studies, we have explored how artistic initiatives have been inviting to see the space, the site as a source of imagining alternative ways of being in the city, beyond those defined by existing relations of power, contributing to turning Athens into a ‘museum of possibilities’⁶⁸. Through a process of re-negotiating the public space as common good and a space of participation and concord, these artistic initiatives familiarise audiences to ‘Otherness’ and catalyse new relationships with space, guided by what the ‘locals’ (both Greeks and non Greeks) reveal about public space as *lived space*.

What distinguishes grassroots artistic practices in the public space is that they seem to seek something more than attracting audiences: they aim at engaging the social base and targeting ‘difficult places’, here meaning places semantically charged with notions of migration, crisis, violence, and abandonment. Art’s ‘ice-breaking’ potential in engaging with space, different communities and different stakeholders is still to be further explored, however the two case studies offer an entry point to this. Within this framework, new responsibilities arise for those who work in culture, especially in a city where no formulated cultural policy or strategy has been articulated, mostly due to ‘a failure of successive city administrations to recognise the important role of culture in the economic and social wellbeing of the city and to the city’s pluralistic identity’⁶⁹. Although trying to ‘find new ways of communicating and programming, and to involve new players with different cultural backgrounds in cultural institutions’⁷⁰ has been a topic of discussion, the potential of the encounters on urban public space and their mobilisation through artistic practices are underexplored into cultural policy discourse. While, as Wessendorf⁷¹, suggests, although such ‘encounters in public associational space do not necessarily enhance deeper cultural understanding, the absence of such encounters can enhance prejudice’, therefore a better understanding of their contribution to transcultural dialogue is needed.

⁶⁷ I. Gratsia, A. Angeliki Tseliou, *Seeking German Traces in Victoria Square. Methodology – Tools – Outcomes*, 2020. Available at: https://bc8080c8-277e-49ee-b767a3c140d54b0e.filesusr.com/ugd/871fc3_ec602db8e4354738bf01741e7010da24.pdf. Accessed September 30, 2021.

⁶⁸ M. Mouliou, “Athens as a Museum of Possibilities: Reflections on Social Innovation and Cultural Production”, *Museum International*, 71, 3-4 (2019): 16-27. Accessed September 13, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/13500775.2019.1706943.

⁶⁹ R. Palmer, *Athens City Resilience through Culture. British Council and 1000 Resilient Cities Report*, British Council: Athens, 2018. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.gr/en/programmes/arts/athens-resilient-city>. Accessed September 30, 2021.

⁷⁰ B. Mandel, “From ‘Serving’ Public Arts Institutions to Creating Intercultural Contexts: Cultural Management in Germany and New Challenges for Training”, *ENCATC Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, 6, 1 (2016): 5-12 (9).

⁷¹ S. Wessendorf, “Being Open, but Sometimes Closed. Conviviality in a Superdiverse London Neighbourhood”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17, 4 (2014): 392-405.

Approaching diversity constitutes a challenge for every contemporary city, raising the question of how resilient the city is. In order to tackle this question there is a need to involve in the debate all relevant actors and their different perceptions, while turning ‘neighborhood tensions into opportunities for meaningful interaction and social change’⁷². The contemporary city calls for a more systematic and comprehensive ‘culturally sensitive’ approach that recognises that culture is a driving force for peaceful co-existence.

⁷² L. Crane, “The Arts as Community Citizen: The Value of Being a Good Neighbor”, *Building Communities, not Audiences. The Future of the Arts in the United States*, edited by Doug Borwick Winstons-Salem, 2012: 87.