

Remap KM and the displacement of the residents in the area of Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio by Eleni Tzirtzilaki

(<http://www.nomadikiarxitektoniki.net/remap-en.html>)

The following text was the introductory presentation on the occasion of the open discussion about the Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio neighbourhood, organized by the Nomadic Architecture Network on Thursday 1-Nov-2007 at 19:00 pm in the bookstore of futura editions (15 Victoros Ougo St.)

What I read in the white on black booklet with the title ReMap drew my attention: "Remap constitutes a multifaceted artistic project that operates alongside the 1st Biennial of Athens, in the area of Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio. It aims to provide another layer in the thematic and methodological framework of the "1st Athens Biennale", titled "Destroy Athens," through an exploration of the identity of the particular area and a revision of the mode of use of private and public spaces."

I thought that at first look, it appeared as an excellent idea that an artistic project explored, as it claimed, the identity of the locality of Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio "revising," furthermore, "the mode of use of private and public spaces" in the area.

We have come to know Metaxourgeio and its residents through explorations undertaken for several years by our group "Urban Void"; later on, through the Nomadic Architecture Network we have looked into the conditions of habitation there through initiatives such as the one involving local children from the 87th primary school in an action titled "An empty residential lot as an opportunity for dialogue, construction, activation" in 2006.

Through the Nomadic Architecture Network, we began to encounter for the past three years the issue of the residents' displacement by investors in this locality. Apparently, the residents of buildings are forced to leave willy-nilly for other Athens areas or even, in the case of certain Muslims, to return to Komotini (Thrace). The case of homeless immigrants is even more to the point: We have known that immigrants, as well as others, had found temporary shelter in several abandoned houses as well as a well-known squatters' building; these squatter immigrants are now basically driven to the streets.

Indeed, an artistic project that would work with these groups of residents--and work with them to redesign spaces--as has been the case with projects in other cities of Europe, appeared especially interesting.

Further on, the leaflet stated "it is an experiment in psychogeographical maps that are created through transitional spaces the aim is to create a variety of possibilities of linking the tangible world of the buildings, streets, and urban spaces with applications of modern art, social networks, means of communications."

Walking around these spaces, which are impressive as they are imbued by recent traces of habitation, we found the works of the artists oddly disconnected. Art works stand in strangely empty lots or buildings, located as they are among the brothels, the immigrant stores, and the habitations of Metaxourgeio. Every time we stepped out we met with looks that seemed to pose unanswerable questions about the nature of these spaces and our role in them. Certain basic questions occurred to us, as well; questions such as, "What use did these spaces have before?" "What happened to their inhabitants?" "Where did they go?" "Why are they all empty?" "What is going to happen to these spaces afterwards?" "Who are the owners?"

A new angle to the issue was introduced in the meeting with Manray on Wednesday night at the Biennial premises in Gazi. Manray had spent the morning walking around the area and

asking insistently to find out what was going on. Being well-acquainted with the Kreuzberg neighborhood in Berlin, he soon realized that something was seriously amiss. He persistently asked what the architects were doing in relation to the area, what the relationship of the spaces was to the Biennale, as well as how the artists addressed this issue. One artist told us that when he first went to the area that he had been allotted, he found some immigrants there; however, when he returned, they were gone. Some others said that so as to force the people who lived in the buildings to leave, their electricity was cut off.

In order to get an immediate answer to all this, it occurred to me to phone Chloe Vaitso who, according to the booklet, was the artistic director and coordinator of the program.

She said that she was leaving for London in two days and that she had no time to talk. As I found out later, the project is part of an Investment program in the area of Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio. The buildings have been bought by an investor and the displacement of the residents took place so that the buildings could be empty for the beginning of the Biennale in Athens.

What did the residents do? They couldn't react since, as we found out, their electricity was cut off and so they were forced to the streets. It appears then that they were violently displaced so that Art could invade their spaces.

No doubt this is not an uncommon occurrence when investments in and renovations of areas take place. However, the ideal situation is different since the renovation of an area should concern first and foremost its inhabitants. The artist as an avant-garde agent can stand by their side and help in this direction, a direction taken by many site-specific art projects.

What is incredibly annoying, in bad taste, and suspect, is that an investment program is presented as an Artistic event -even an avant-garde one -alongside the 1st Athens Biennale and is mixed in with ideas such as psychogeographical maps and social networks, that is, with ideas that have worked and are working in exactly the opposite direction, defending the city and those that inhabit it.

This text is the first in a series to follow and will open a discussion on issues regarding the role of Art in an area of resident displacement. For instance, what do "situational map" and "ReMap" mean? What kind of "redefinition of uses" are we dealing with in the area of Metaxourgeio? What is the role of the Municipality, of the Investors, etc.

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