

Field trip 2 - Centre of Athens: ethnocultural Identities and Space

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In this field trip we focus on the question of the relation of city space to various ethnocultural identities and groups, which can be found in many central areas of Athens. In each stop, we will deal with a different ethnic or cultural group and we will witness their presence in each of the city areas we will visit.

Ethnocultural Identities: A journey into the meaning of urban space

In theory, a map depicts a city as a field of potential journeys. In practice, however, some of these journeys come into existence only occasionally for some people, while for others such journeys are their everyday reality; yet, for others they might as well not exist at all. Even foreigners, who arrive in a city for whatever reasons, will endeavour to locate points of reference, target-areas, as well as potentially dangerous places, implicitly or explicitly relating to their embodied cultural capital. In other words, they try to read between the lines of the map for prompts and warnings.

Contemporary metropolises are supposed to be a kind of urban landscape in constant movement. For some people moving is a matter of choice, while for others a necessity; for some it is a prospect, for others a sentence. For some people, being in motion is accompanied by conquests (whether travel trophies or business successes), whilst for others it is accompanied by repeated losses (refugees are uprooted, immigrants are forced to part from their loved ones). Consequently, certain people live in this city and not somewhere else because they are taking advantage of the possibilities offered by a globalised market; others have settled here because this selfsame market has forced them, directly or indirectly, to leave their own countries. Thus, although the former even in the city of their most permanent residence can behave as tourists, hunters, and consumers of impressions, the latter, no matter which city they find themselves, often remain exiles.

If wandering is enforced, searching for stable ground under your feet often becomes a primary survival reflex. In spite of the literature on generalised nomadism or cosmopolitanism, few can actually be described as modern nomads. For immigrants and refugees in particular, longing for stability and 'a place in the world' is an often encountered desire. That is why, more often than not, they do everything within their power to recapture it in secret pockets within the body of a city that does not accept them. They create their own hangouts, their own points of reference, in which their distant motherland is recaptured or, to be precise, recreated in its absence. These pockets of "immobility" in a world that urges everyone to be in constant motion create a sense of a collective hearth, although in true fact they end up symbolising the consequences of a common fate.

In the centre of Athens immigration exists in its multiple facets; legal, illegal and in-between; settled in work spaces, houses, formal or informal faith centres, community centres and public hangouts; being part of, sharing space with or trying to avoid the 'existing' prostitution and drug dealing.

Nevertheless, immigrants no longer go unnoticed in Athens. On one hand, some lead clandestine lives in their odd ghettos of basement flats, trying to establish their own, humble hangouts. On the other, many immigrants have come out into public space, not only in their efforts to find places to live, work and play, but also whilst embodying a special, common life on public squares, playgrounds and parks, or in their

own coffee-shops. Their presence in public spaces is imperceptibly transforming the city, which in some occasions would be empty without them. Even more, some have claimed recognition and visibility in the public sphere through political organisation and mobilisation.

‘Ingenious adaptation’ sometimes leads immigrants to form their own practices of inhabiting public space - an impromptu barbecue grill put up in the open air or a park bench often turn into encounter points. In August, for instance, when Athens is deserted en masse by anyone able to leave, immigrants develop unexpected practices of claiming public space. Young children are seen again playing in the streets of certain neighbourhoods, grown-ups sometimes sit and play cards on the sparse lawn of municipal parks, young men and women stroll up and down their own open-air hangouts, recreating the all too familiar “promenade” of the Greek countryside.

By asserting their presence in public space through specific actions, immigrants are redefining their relationship to the here and now. They do not merely escape into a fantastic “there”, discreetly enduring the impermanence of their residence in the euphemistically called “reception country”. They elaborate a *modus vivendi* that turns them into agents of inhabitation; in other words, they create the space of the city in their own unique way. If inhabitation is essentially an act of creation, meaning that inhabitation does not simply take place in space but brings space into existence as a social construct and occurrence, then the immigrants’ manner of inhabitation is literally producing part of the space of contemporary Athens.

Despite pressures (racism, exploitation, alienation and the rest) the immigrants’ manner of inhabitation doesn’t confirm to the boundaries that separate “locals” and “foreigners” and often lead to the development of ghettos. On the contrary, by asserting their presence in public space and developing life networks in the city that criss-cross with networks of other social or cultural groups, immigrants essentially create a prospect of a city governed not by boundaries but by front-door steps, i.e. encounter points.

Athens’ urban fabric and housing conditions as well as the lack of coherent welfare and integration state policies and the accompanying - and infamous - informality of state and non-state actors are all factors that might have contributed to the current situation.

Despite the ongoing mistrust shown to refugees and immigrants (in Athens as well as in the rest of Greece) neighbourhoods of Athens were strongly shaped by immigrants’ cultures and needs - thus creating hybrid spatial and social environments. An ongoing process that embodies new groups, the same or new neighbourhoods and constantly reconfigures Athens spatial and social relations. At the same time, as usual, other neighbourhoods become pillars of Greekness or enclaves of exclusivity.

Should we then perhaps look at the contemporary mega-city of Athens as situated on a potential crossroads, as it indirectly and stealthily acknowledges the fact that it is a multicultural city? Should we not be glad for the formative effect of those who have been temporarily cast ashore on the neighbourhoods of this city by globalisation? And should we not imagine a city where exclusions will be cancelled as soon as they arise, thanks to the multifariousness of heterogeneous inhabitation practices, diverse encounter points, doorsteps between communities, between hangouts, between the private and the public, but also between the “here” and “there” of one’s place of origin.

Programme

Stop 1

Kypseli area - KASAPI school established by the Philippine community in Athens

Stop 2

Patmou and Karavia squat

Stop 3

Athens central market area (Omonoia - Euripidou - Koumoundourou - Pireos - Athinas)

Meetings with members of the Sudanese and Bangladeshi communities

Stop 4

Elaionas area - Albanian-Roma ragpickers around local factories