

## 9. Chewing Gum and Graffiti: Aestheticized City Rhetoric in Post- 2008 Athens

*Ginette Verstraete and Cristina Ampatzidou*

### Abstract

The post-2008 austerity measures imposed on Greece made public space in the city of Athens the prime target of economic development and city marketing. These processes are based on aesthetic strategies of 'cleaning up' and imposing a certain visual order while disposing signs of deprivation and exclusion in the streets. Referencing the works of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière and illustrating a series of cases, we demonstrate how this exclusionary 'police order' of neoliberal consensus confirms and reinforces the borders between the visible and invisible, acceptable and unacceptable. This is, however, contested by a more democratic aesthetics of redistribution, based on difference, which emerges as soon as the implemented order meets the world of complexity, boundaries and resistance.

**Keywords:** post-2008 Athens; civic participation; aesthetics; post-politics; public space

### Introduction

Undoubtedly the event that most significantly marked the economic and political landscape of post-2008 Greece was the signing of the 'Memorandum of Understanding' between the Greek Government and the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank in May 2010. Since then, the crisis has turned into an established and inescapable condition, which simply needs to be tolerated for the good cause.

---

Dibazar, P. and J.A. Naeff, *Visualizing the Street: New Practices of Documenting, Navigating and Imagining the City*, Amsterdam University Press, 2018

DOI 10.5117/9789462984356\_CH09

This rhetoric of the inevitable has been supported by the subversion of the traditional roles of the Right and Left in politics and the formation of one technocratic and a series of coalition governments with parties from traditionally opposite ends (Nikolopoulou, Psyllakou and Tsachli, 2012). Official politics has focused on management of conflict through a broadly conceived consensus around necessary austerity measures and the production of a specific subject-citizen willing to participate and assume responsibility in a deteriorating public space.

This political consensus within a neoliberal setting has gone hand in hand with carefully constructed processes of representation (Τσέκερης / Tsekeris, 2008) through various media and an appeal to accountability in the field of image-making. In an effort to sell a positive image of Greece and attract tourists and investors, for instance, the National Council for Radio and Television issued a formal recommendation to media outlets to discourage the transmission of images depicting the negative effects of the crisis and of police prosecution in January 2013 (Εθνικό Συμβούλιο Ραδιοτηλεόρασης / Greek National Council for Radio and Television, 2013). This is obviously a form of censorship that makes no sense in terms of its application. Even if all conventional TV channels and newspapers would refrain from publishing images of 'social deprivation and poverty', nothing would prevent such images from finding their way to independent blogs, social media or even the international press. But this recommendation does serve as an indication of the importance of hiding the negative reality and actively constructing a story of success and recovery.

More disturbingly, this particular manipulation of and through official media images falls within a broader state-supported discourse on the need to 'clean' the public space and maintain a 'proper appearance'. Politicians talk about the necessity of 'broom operations': areas that are 'hygienic bombs', in which people who are 'dirty' and constitute 'threats to public health' have been removed. The reinstatement of normality after 2008 starts with the elimination not only of disturbing media images, but also of garbage and unwanted individuals, such as the homeless, prostitutes and immigrants. This desired cleanliness of a homogenized public space is closely linked to the *Theory of Broken Windows* (Kelling and Coles, 1996), wherein the image of disrepair (the broken window) can trigger criminal behaviour and hence increase the disturbance of public images and spaces.

Thus, we see that Greece's problematic neoliberal measures imposed by its creditors – decisions that have increased poverty, homelessness, and violent protests – have been accompanied by strategies of homogenization and removal of conflict: displacement of political opposition in Parliament,

the erasure of disturbing images in official media outlets, and the actual brooming operations in the streets by civil servants and inhabitants alike. In light of the central theme of this edited volume, this chapter will focus on how these acts of ‘cleaning public space’ are best seen as modes of depoliticization. How does aestheticizing the public domain in contemporary Greece function as a depoliticized value system of consensus without space for strife or alternatives? How can we re-politicize public space by revalorizing the noise and conflicts happening in the streets and parks everywhere? With reference to the works of Chantal Mouffe (2008) and Jacques Rancière (2009), we will argue for the need to bring back ‘the political’ by redrawing the boundaries of what is considered clean and acceptable. Could it be that, when reconsidering the aesthetically pleasing public appearances promoted by official politics from a slightly different angle, the interruptions by the political occur and the involvement of unruly publics becomes visible? How can we ‘visualize the streets’ in that disorderly sense?

## Post-Politics

Of all the cities in Greece, Athens in particular is undergoing an intense process of neoliberalization, in which redistributive politics has been replaced by policies aiming at economic development, inter-city competition, market-driven creativity and entrepreneurialism. As the public space is where the image of each city is primarily constituted, it is precisely this space that gets the most attention when it comes to attracting capital. Nowadays, urban design and the quality of the built environment are consciously used as the means to, instead of the product of, economic growth (Gospodini, 2002). Public space is embellished, cleaned and redeveloped not as the result of prosperity, but as an instigator for financial investment. Simultaneously, however, activist groups and civil society initiatives, which have flourished in the post-2008 period, also use public space as the primary arena to contest its privatization and beautification. But those conflicts are rearticulated – erased – as delay of ‘progress’ monotonously seen as growth. For a city such as Athens, operating in the EU-based financial and economic framework, public space is where post-political strategies determine what is made visible.

In *Planning against the Political*, Jonathan Metzger (2015) draws on the work of Chantal Mouffe to offer a way out of the deadlock in which Third Way politics – with decades of emphasis on governance, public-private partnership and consensus-building – has manoeuvred itself in the face of increasing disenchantment among citizens. Instead of dominant (neo)

liberal forms of democracy and spatial planning run by managers with common-sense decision-making qualities, Metzger defends an agonistic open space where fundamental political differences can be played out in democratic forms. Mouffe, writing from a post-Marxist perspective, is the philosopher who has insisted the most on the need to produce political forums in which political antagonism can be made heard and visible:

Mouffe highlights the aforementioned 'political difference' as the founding moment of the political, distinguishing 'politics' in the ontic sense from 'the political' in the ontological sense. The former refers to the concrete everyday practices, procedures and institutions through which the social is ordered and organized into societies (governance so to speak), while the latter refers to the antagonisms that are constitutive of the social. Mouffe's substantial argument is that the political is an ever-present ubiquitous feature of society which risks exploding into violent confrontation at any time unless recognized and constructively engaged with. (Metzger et al., 2015: 9)

Situations in which the democratic state no longer has any power to confront and deal with social antagonism productively – turning antagonism into agonism – because serious debates are avoided or decisions are taken in financial dealing rooms, Mouffe calls self-destructive, 'post-political' and dangerous. Not only does democracy thus lose its legitimacy, but existing conflicts will also become more violent and be played out in other spheres of society, such as those of immigration. The solid basis for a truly democratic political system is the hope that comes with recognizing the contingency of a given hegemonic order and the possibility of alternatives. In another context, Mouffe has argued that critical art practice (such as that by Barbara Kruger or Nancy Fraser) and public activism (such as reclaiming the street protests) can challenge the *mise-en-scène* of a dominant consensus and restore an agonistic public space (Mouffe, 2008).

Aside from Mouffe, Metzger honours Rancière, who has also written on the distinction between police order and politics in terms of consensus and dissensus, the former designating the established social order, the latter the dispute over the partitioning and distribution of that order. While the police order is the symbolic realm wherein social positions are divided and legitimate voices and sensibility are fixed, the political order is post-foundational or contingent, and concerns the production of the no-part in the partitioning of the sensible – what is not audible, visible, sayable. 'There always is and will be a no-part or void, a group of bodies that do not

participate in the police order [...] Politics entails a process in which the police order is ruptured and disturbed by those that have no part in it at present' (Metzger et al., 2015: 11). To the extent that the logic of distribution in the police order is countered by the ideal of equality, disruptive and transformative effects in the former are felt and new political subjects can emerge. Of course, this way of putting the system to the test by those who are excluded will always be avoided or made irrelevant by those who have a say in what presents itself or can be seen and said in public space. But that abolishment paradoxically offers the means of resistance through which to reconfigure 'the territory of the visible, the thinkable, and the possible' (Rancière, 2009: 41).

Rancière has put the politics of aesthetics centre stage: for him, politics is about the necessary dis-identification that comes with the erasure of disputes over how things are ordered, names ascribed, sensible facts instituted. Politics is about the intervention in the public order of perception, in what presents itself to sense experience and thus determines what is common or not and who has a part in saying and picturing things. Interestingly, Metzger translates these insights into spatial planning and raises the question who has the right to be legitimately concerned about how we go about drawing maps, making plans and deciding on the territory that those visualizations are said to represent. The political potential of spatial planning lies in its capacity to open up space and produce visions of another future, which is implemented while taking into account the necessary friction between the plan and reality, the promise of openings and the necessity of some closure. Unfortunately, in our neo-capitalist cities, the politics of planning has been displaced:

The commitment of planning to difference, disagreement and openness sits alongside a necessary requirement for closure, silencing and 'we'. Yet, planning, like other forms of governance, has been encouraged and has moved towards a blurring of politics and the political through the search for consensus rather than, as Rancière (1999) has put it, the dislocation of the police order or, in other words, the questioning of the given order of things [...] There is little room for questioning the bigger framework of the dialogue, e.g. the pro-growth or economic competitiveness agenda that dominates many planning discussions. Participation is circumscribed and does not allow for new political subjects to emerge. (Metzger et al., 2015: 14)

Following Rancière, however, we would like to conclude from this observation that it is precisely in this circumscribed participation that the opening

for a dis-identification and disenchantment with the hegemonic social order emerges, not necessarily in the vicinity of the drawing table, but among those people in the street who feel displaced by it. How do these subjects, put at arms' length by tunnel visions of economic competitiveness, embody and visually render new relationships between the visible and the logic of sense-making? How does their 'scandalous' redistribution of the sensible stage a return of the political – not in a utopian but a heterotopian sense? Let us return to present-day Athens to make our point. We will first give two examples of the police order of zoning, development and cleaning up space and then open up a liminal space from which the political may emerge.

## Visual Strategies for a Clean Urban Life

### Rethink Athens

In 2012, the Onassis Cultural Center in Athens launched an international architectural competition for the pedestrianization of Panepistimiou Street and the redevelopment of Syntagma and Omonoia Squares, two of the most symbolically charged squares in recent Greek history and also important traffic distribution nodes for the Athenian city centre. Panepistimiou Street itself is a major artery around the historical centre, diverting a large load of the traffic to the port of Faliro. It is also a monumental urban axis hosting the University, the Academy, the Municipal Library, the Athens Cathedral, the former Mint, the Chamber of Commerce and several banks. The private initiative was supported by two Ministries (Environment, Energy and Climate Change; and Transportation and Networks), the Metro Corporation, the Athens Municipality, the Prefecture of Attiki and the Organization for the Master Plan and Environmental Protection of Athens. Academics and scientists participated in the advisory committee and the jury. The launch of Rethink Athens was attended by the Prime Minister himself, who testified to the competition being part of a large privatization and development project extending several kilometres beyond the city centre.

As stated in the brief, the aim of the competition was the creation of a new city centre in Athens along the axis of Panepistimiou Street, with the objective to transform the city centre into

a destination for the public instead of a traffic area for motor vehicles; the functional, aesthetic and environmental upgrade of the city center, the re-enhancement of commercial, administrative and financial activities



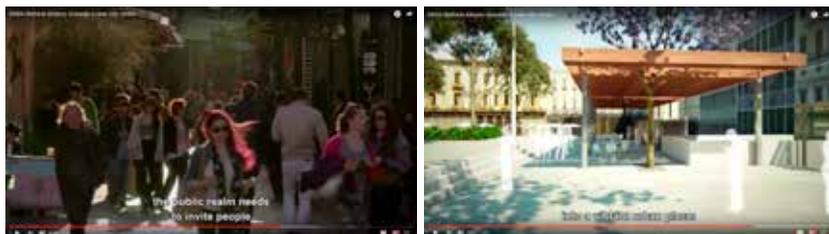
Fig. 9.1: View of Omonia Square without car traffic; there are many trees and water ponds. Visual: OKRA.

in the city, the repopulation of the city center, the highlighting of the historical and cultural identity of the capital, the improvement of quality of life for all citizens. (Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, 2012)

How are these noble goals to be actualized? Watching the promotional video of the competition,<sup>1</sup> one gets the impression that opening up the streets for pedestrians and cyclists instead of cars happens first by drawing a map, then changing the pavement, whitening houses, evacuating people and cars, building straight lanes and adding many trees. In the opening shots of the video, we move straight from the drawing table to a bird's-eye view of a generic street, lined with white buildings and full of small white cars. As the camera descends towards a more human perspective, the cars are gone and the street is miraculously repaved to become a pedestrian green area with tram stops and rails, while trees pop up and a handful of abstract white people walk and cycle along. The colours white and green dominate the sterile urban landscape.

The video of the competition's winning entry by the OKRA team does not significantly depart from this sanitized view. The project focuses on enhancing the microclimate of the city through removal of car traffic and the planting of trees with smart irrigation systems (Figure 9.1). But also vacancy, poverty, and safety in public space will be addressed by increasing 'vibrancy' and filling empty buildings with cultural activities that honour the traditions of the ancient Greeks: performance, debate and reflection in public space.

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POSNg-87v-8>



Figs 9.2 and 9.3: Screenshots of the winning proposal presentation video: a public space visibly full of people (left) 'needs to invite people' into a vibrant urban place' (right). Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92Y153Jrc8I>. Accessed 17 September 2018.

These are presented as ways to address the crisis. Ironically enough, the video repeatedly confronts real-life stereotypical images of Athens bursting with people, cars and especially tourists, with futuristic images of the city in which the presence of people – and their debates – has been replaced by computer-generated views of maps, networks, infrastructures and lots of sanitized streets and squares full of green. The voice-over narrator confirms the real city's 'urbanity and social life', only to introduce the slick, glowing, futuristic images of deserted open spaces and networks and finally declare the need to 'invite people into the public realm' in order to restore vibrancy (Figures 9.2 and 9.3). This gets visualized by a handful of individuals in a generic urban space.

The project images circulated in the press reproduce the idea of a clean, homogenized public space, where everything is kept in order thanks to the computer-generated evacuation of cars, people and city life in general, while liveliness is suggested by the colourful balloons flying above a smooth, futuristic Omonoia Square. All that is considered annoying – too many cars, people, vacant buildings – has no place in the proposed clean, green and monumental space reserved for cappuccino-drinking inhabitants, tourists, potential investors, philanthropic foundations and managerial governments.

The *Rethink Athens* competition builds on a long history of using aesthetic planning instruments to project a particular image. Panepistimiou Street is the product of an early nineteenth-century vision in which neoclassical architecture and modern planning were used to construct an idealized past and future identity for the newly established Greek capital (Issaias, 2013). Athens was framed as the cultural and political image of modern Greece through the generic visual instruments of the time, such as orthogonal grids, city squares and straight streets. At the same time, the visual language of neoclassicism – including the invention of typologies and ornaments with references to Greek antiquity – was added to ignore the existing medieval

socio-spatial organization of the city and attest to Athens' age-old historical position within a Western European cultural sphere (Issaias, 2013). The contemporary project for the city centre may seem high-tech, but it clearly builds upon this nineteenth-century tradition of combining the old and the new.

This stereotypical vision, delivered by a machine-based drawing, is implemented in a top-down fashion by the competition organizer, the state institutions and the winning team, excluding a priori any other potential parties that may have a political stake in the visualization and the actual planning, as if the way the problem was formulated or scripted in the brief already predicted its own solution. Forrester (1988) warns against urban planning being expected to deliver immediate solutions to wicked social problems, when, in reality, it is merely used to displace them and make sure they are hidden from sight. What is clearly missing from the visualizations put forward both in the competition brief (the problem) and in the winning entry (the solution) is the debate around social issues such as homelessness, drug-dealing and petty crime. At most, these vulnerable social groups are not addressed as people with rights and needs, but as problems to be removed from the scene.

Interestingly, the aesthetic transformation of public space in Athens is not only considered the affair of large-scale public-private urban interventions such as these, they are also made the responsibility of small groups of citizens actively cleaning the streets of Athens. What we will argue next is that visualizations of a homogenized public space go hand in hand with visions of a circumscribed participation by the people that is less political in Rancière's sense than it reproduces the same commercial logic of cleanliness and beauty. How do the aesthetics of *Rethink Athens* become the daily affair of DIY interventions in the streets?

### Atenistas

Atenistas is an open group of citizens who proclaim themselves to be 'Athenians in practice'. Formed in 2010, soon after the first signs of the crisis started penetrating everyday life, the group is a product of the local expression of a culture of self-organization that attempts to bypass the state and other forms of organized social agency (Giddens, 1991). The actions the group performs include creating pocket parks, cleaning abandoned plots of land and other public spaces, placing information signage around the city, creating wall paintings and other similar beautifying interventions. Activities are spread all over the city and are organized through public calls; small teams work in advance to prepare the event, which is then executed within

short periods of time by the volunteers. Aesthetically, the interventions aim to clean and manage the spaces – for example, by removing garbage from empty plots or public beaches – but they also create possibilities for the use of these spaces – for instance, by constructing gardens, benches and playgrounds. Despite their differences, the momentary enterprises have a visually coherent language and share the use of low-key material – euro palettes, old barrels, and car tires – all painted in bright colours. This is the universal language of the pop-up.

Atenistas also carefully document their actions and use a coherent, visual communication strategy.<sup>2</sup> Colourful posters and carefully designed social media images are produced to announce each action and, once an intervention is completed, several beautiful pictures are uploaded to the group's platforms, documenting step by step the process of the aesthetic transformation of space and the final result. Joyful pictures and clips that summarize the day dominate the scene. The recurrent element in this documentation is people: colourful volunteers at work and groups of smiling people participating in the action and celebrating afterwards. Hardly surprising, then, that the booking site TripAdvisor has inserted a link to Atenistas as a tourist attraction in one of their pages on Athens.

Atenistas represent an emerging understanding of citizenship based on a principle best described as 'each one for himself and all together' as they 'claim their share of responsibility in improving the image of their city' (<https://atenistas.org/>). The actions of this group are confined to issues that do not insult anyone, that are widely agreed upon as 'positive' (e.g. clean streets), and that contribute to the objectification of public space through palatable differentiation. Although driven by honest intentions, these interventions contribute to the branding of the city, disguised as apolitical collaboration and community-building. Not only do the participants stay within the limits of what can be aestheticized, they also claim to assist authorities – such as the municipality, the state or other bureaucracies – either by demonstrating what needs to be done or by substituting them and assuming individual responsibility. As time passes and the crisis deepens, such voluntary groups become an institutional body which municipalities turn to while seeking steady collaborations.

Removing chewing gum from the street (Figure 9.4), painting stairs (Figure 9.5), washing walls or adding beautiful graffiti before the ugly ones arrive might make the street look cleaner for a couple of days but these gestures do not improve the system of public space maintenance or

2 <https://atenistas.org/>



Fig. 9.4: Cleaning chewing gum from Stadiou Str. in 2011. Photo: Konstantinos Flamiatos / Atenistas.



Fig. 9.5: Painting the stairs at Marasli Str. in 2013. Photo: Atenistas.

challenge the social and cultural situation that leads to the degradation of the urban environment in the first place. This becomes very clear once these participating citizens transgress the given social-economic order by cleaning or painting *too much*, thereby neglecting the borders of what can be normally aestheticized. For instance, when, in November 2013, the group started painting a public staircase in an upper-class area in central Athens, inhabitants contested this type of intervention and called the police to intervene. Despite having secured a verbal permission from the municipality and the support of a local citizen group, Atenistas were seen as disturbing the distribution of cultural capital. While inhabitants of poorer areas are expected to accept the interventions of groups like Atenistas with gratitude and without voicing their preferences, wealthy inhabitants claim their right to decide upon the aesthetic qualities of their environment and are more suspicious towards a visual statement that comes with an ideology of civil society voluntarism. In other words, it is fine when Atenistas take the initiative to paint the walls of neglected or poor areas, but the group should not aesthetically equalize neighbourhoods inhabited by different classes. Unwittingly engaging in a ‘redistribution of the sensible’, they ran against the limits of the system they supported and the political seeped through.

## Reintroducing the Political

As argued, Metzger defends an understanding of politics as located in situations in which the given order of things is questioned; when those whose voices are only recognized as noise by the police/policy order claim their right to speak, acquire speech and produce a redistribution of the sensible that permits exercising this right (Daryl, 2014). If the above-mentioned examples dominate the official media and represent the dominant culture of Athens amidst the crisis, it is also true that many pockets of resistance are emerging across the city, claiming their 'right to the city'. In the pre-crisis period, autonomous spaces of protest were highly territorialized and operated as enclaves surrounded by a hostile capitalist environment. Autonomy was practiced by entering a circumscribed area, clearly defined by its opposition to the outside (Stavrvides, 2014). Nowadays, with the crisis hitting everywhere, the borders between inside and outside are increasingly contested and streets get revisualized in different, often contradictory, ways. In this latter part of the article, we will demonstrate how, counter to the developments sketched above, 'unruly publics' take issues into their own hands and exert their roles in co-articulating what is at stake in present-day Athens.

### National Technical University Building

In March 2015, the central building of the National Technical University of Athens – located in the Exarchia district discussed below – was covered with a huge black-and-white graffiti (Figure 9.6). The action happened overnight and took both passersby and university authorities by surprise. The intervention sparked a fierce public debate on whether the graffiti was a piece of art or mere vandalism, whether it symbolized the deep turmoil in which Greece finds itself or whether it was the 'familiarization with the worse' (Βατόπουλος / Vatoopoulos, 2015), as a journalist of the conservative newspaper *Kathimerini* put it.

The artistic duo Icos & Case, considered responsible for the graffiti, are very experienced and recognized in the graffiti scene of Athens and acted stealthily and methodically. Their choice of the building could not have been accidental. This was the epicentre of the violently suppressed student uprising against the military dictatorship that governed Greece in the 1960s and 1970s, which triggered the regime's eventual demise in 1974. In this sense, this particular building carries a heavily symbolic meaning as a space of struggle for political freedom. It is declared a protected monument



Fig. 9.6: The National Technical University of Athens seen from the corner of 28is Oktovriou and Sournari streets on 5 March 2015. Photo: Takis Spyropoulos, from the book *EX-ARCHIA uncensored*.

for this reason, but, as the premises of the Faculty of Architecture, it also maintains a daily university function.

The ensuing discussion was highly polarized. While advocates supported the appropriate use of this particular building to generate discomfort, most condemned the ugliness of an unsanctioned act, the desecration of a heavily symbolic building and the inability of a public institution to secure its premises. Bold media titles went as far as to announce the ‘death of civic democracy’ (Ζαμπούκας / Zampoukas, 2015) and welcomed the eventual removal of the graffiti a few days later with equally bold statements such as ‘the graffiti gets erased, the University is restored’ (Vatopoulos, 2015b). But the University Dean himself refrained from condemning the graffiti at first and declared his inability to position himself against something for which he does not have the means to prevent, as the 70 percent reduction of the funds for maintenance and security makes managing the institution increasingly difficult (Πρυτανεία ΕΜΠ / NTUA Office of the Dean, 2015). To him, the disruptive act witnessed to the inefficiency of ‘the police order’ (to use Rancière) and the necessity to discuss the effects of the austerity measures on public institutions such as the university. The Minister of Culture recognized that the graffiti indeed successfully depicted the crisis in the country and in the city of Athens in particular, but also condemned the unsanctioned act (Μένεγος / Menegos, 2015).

The graffiti was washed away a few days after its appearance by the coordinated efforts of the University authorities, the Municipality of Athens and the Ministry of Education, which were met with a limited demonstration that did not prevent its removal. The publicly celebrated 'restoration' of the building to a previously clean state was, if nothing else, at least fictitious. For, as a symbol of resistance, the building has been covered in posters, tags and slogans for years and it is precisely these messages that were uncovered with the cleaning. Thus, the recent official displacement of protest on the walls of the university staged a return to previous moments when such protests were still tolerated! To put this differently, the government's elimination of a visual sign of conflict at the heart of Athens opened up a space of critique of this hegemonic act, as well as a visible reminder of different times, when alternative views of things were matters of discourse.

Despite its short life, the black-and-white graffiti is a visual statement in itself, by proposing a rupture in the dominant rhetoric of cleaning up public space while bringing to the fore the dark state in which Athens finds itself: the official intolerance of unsolicited interventions in public space, even when this concerns an iconic monument of democratic resistance against such intolerance. Should the façade of the university building remain an intact demonstration of a past glorious moment defined by the government? The graffiti and the layers of protest beneath it seem to suggest that, on the contrary, the building should resist these attempts to control the distribution of the sensible and instead continue to provide the stage for political struggles by students, artists and other citizens. Only then will it retain its symbolic value.

### Navarinou Park

A few blocks away from the National Technical University, Navarinou Park is located on a former parking lot in the Exarchia district in the centre of Athens. Traditionally an area of students and intellectuals, Exarchia has also been a place of counterculture and a meeting point of the Athenian left and anarchist scenes. Exarchia came to prominence in December 2008, when a policeman's murder of teenager Alexis Grigoropoulos over a verbal dispute led to widespread riots all over Athens and Greece, largely reflecting the broader frustration over rising socioeconomic problems, unemployment and corruption.

The history of this park extends far back. In 1990, the Technical Chamber of Greece attempted to transfer the ownership of the plot to the Municipality of Athens for the creation of a park. The transaction did not go ahead and the plot was leased as a car park until the end of 2008, when the parking leasing

agreement expired. In March 2009, the local neighbourhood occupied the plot and transformed it into a public park in the midst of a public celebration.<sup>3</sup> The Navarinou Park collective is one of several citizen movements that were established in reaction to heavy privatization and unsustainable development. Their aim is to protect open spaces from being developed, to put forward claims of use value and quality of life and to expand civil political influence (Kavoulakos, 2015). At Navarinou Park an assembly was formed from the start, with the goal to facilitate democratic decisions on issues of use, maintenance, design and planting. Activities are decided on by direct voting in the weekly meetings.

The visual design and appearance of the park are in constant fluctuation, as the space is not only the setting but also the means to experiment collectively with alternative forms of social organization. Plenty of events are organized that cater to a variety of publics. These include film screenings, theatre plays, radio shows, concerts and parties, cooking sessions, flea markets, treasure hunts, debates and round table discussions, and the weekly Sunday meetings for the maintenance of the space. Because of the fluid way in which decisions over the park are made, facilities and spatial arrangements are added or removed incrementally. For instance, immediately after the occupation in 2009 the first plants were planted; in 2012, a playground was constructed; and in 2014, an urban farm was developed which was directly related to a seed bank focused on conserving traditional varieties of local vegetables (Figures 9.7, 9.8, 9.9 and 9.10).

At first sight, there is little that aesthetically separates the looks of Navarinou Park from a typical intervention by the Atenistas; both rely on low-tech, easy-to-find materials and manual labor. However, where Atenistas intervene methodically all over the city in a fleeting pop-up fashion sanctioned by the municipality, Navarinou Park has a longer history and is the result of a continuous appropriation of an occupied space to local living conditions. Its visual appearance is under constant renegotiation by a diverse set of engaged citizens.

Navarinou Park is an example of what Stavrides (2014) terms ‘threshold spatiality’, a heterogeneous space with porous boundaries that operates as a metaphor for a different social and spatial organization. It emerges as a different public space, running counter to the dominant media-space of simulated participation. It is literally permeable not only by the community that shares it, but also by those who do not. That implies that the openness of this spatiality allows everyone to intervene and transform its function

3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfprE-plgOM>



Figs 9.7, 9.8, 9.9 and 9.10: The gradual transformation of the park over 6 years. From top left: in 2008 when the lot was still leased as parking; in 2009 soon after the occupation; after the first planting (photo: Giorgos Vitsaropoulos); and at bottom right in 2012 when the playground was constructed. Photos courtesy of the Navarinou Park Assembly, <https://parkingparko.espivblogs.net/>.

and its image. As an agonistic place where political difference is practiced through direct democratic procedures, the park stages an alternative to the dominant police order. Far from a utopian place of consensus, the park is a site of difficult negotiations. Indeed, the composition of the assembly has often been a matter of confrontation, as groups that lean towards different political ideologies have occasionally become more influential (Avdikos, 2011). Within the discussions, the Navarinou Park assembly has often been confronted with dilemmas related to the protection of the space while preserving its openness. Issues such as drug use, public urination, noise and misbehaviour have often been raised during the assembly meetings, as they have a negative impact on the image of the park and result in people complaining and avoiding the park. Inhabitants of Exarchia, for instance, have created a blog<sup>4</sup> that documents misbehaviour in the park and its vicinity, such as graffiti, burned cars, incidents of violence and so on, and have called for the Municipality of Athens to take over.

The Navarinou Park has also frequently been the target of police raids and violent attacks that have destroyed parts of it in an effort to discourage

4 <https://odos-exarcheion.blogspot.nl/>

people from going there and to identify the people who do go there as members of extremist groups. During one of the many police raids in September 2009, policemen entered the park screaming 'We are taking back Exarchia', assaulting passersby and inscribing their mark on the door '04/09/09 ΕΛ.ΑΣ.' (Avdikos, 2011). How to define this violent intervention at the entrance if not as a symbolic reclamation by the police order that has by now become part of the turbulent history of the park?

This continuously changing visibility of the park is important precisely because it is the stage at which the internal and external conflicts intersect. These have left their marks in the continuous redesign of the space in processes of destruction and reconstruction, and in the images of occupation, intervention and – less spectacular – of daily life that have been distributed through media channels. The park exists as this heterotopy to the extent that its difference is continuously claimed, protected and renewed by a dynamic continuity of use reflected in the changing activities, the changing publics and the changing spatial and aesthetic configurations.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that, in post-2008 Greece – in the aftermath of stringent austerity measures imposed by the EU – Athens is subject to aesthetic interventions for the sake of economic development and city marketing. Public-private approaches to urban design, mediated by digital images of branded open spaces and neoliberal social occupations (of tourism and consumption), are imposed on the Greek capital such that its conflict-ridden urban geography marked by poverty, displacement and protest is made invisible. This image-based strategy of cleaning up in the field of top-down urban planning has gone hand in hand with the production of engaged citizens volunteering to dispose of the signs of deprivation and exclusion in the streets of Athens. Removing chewing gum from the streets and painting derelict stairs and walls in bright colours in an organized pop-up fashion all over the city, these Athenians contribute to what Rancière (2004) has called an exclusionary 'police order' of neoliberal consensus, in which the borders between the visible and invisible, acceptable, and unacceptable are confirmed.

An important insight drawn from both Rancière and Mouffe has enabled us to lay bare political moments of 'redistribution of the sensible' at the very heart of this commodifying preoccupation with aesthetic attractiveness. For if, as Rancière suggests, the logic of the police order involves classification

and the assignment of a proper place to things and people, this also leads to a political dis-identification for – and disruption by – those who are excluded. A more democratic aesthetics of redistribution, based on difference, emerges as soon as the general urban plan or vision is implemented and meets the world of complexity, boundaries, and closure. We saw this political moment at work when Atenistas unwittingly cleaned too much and ran against – and made visible – the class-based limitations of their public actions. Another political instance of disruption occurred when the authorities washed away the black-and-white graffiti of protest, only to uncover previous layers of resistance on the walls of the university – ones that were tolerated as long as they remained largely unnoticed. Finally, we interpreted the continuously changing visual design of Navarinou Park as the appearance of a democratic ‘threshold spatiality’, in which inside and outside intersect while what is acceptable is under constant (re)negotiation by unruly publics.

All this does not mean that these aesthetic moments of political difference have the same weight as the currently dominant fashion of visualizing the streets of Athens for the sake of tourism and investment. But we hope that our analysis at least points to *the manner in which* these grand visions of the future are built on conflicting foundations that carry within themselves the potential for radically questioning the order of things.

## Bibliography

- Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (2012) ‘Competition Notice Summary,’ <http://www.rethinkathenscompetition.org/competition.php#CompetitionNotice>. Accessed 2 April 2015.
- Avdikos, Vasilis (2011) ‘The Political Closeness of Open Public Space; Reflections from Parko Navarinou in Athens,’ International Critical Geography Conference, Frankfurt.
- Daryl, Martin (2014) ‘Translating Space: The Politics of Ruins, the Remote and Peripheral Places,’ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38.3: 1102–1119.
- Forrester, John (1988) *Planning in the Face of Power*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Giddens, Anthony (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gospodini, Aspa (2002) ‘European Cities in Competition and the New “Uses” of Urban Design,’ *Journal of Urban Design* 7.1: 59–73.

- Greek National Council for Radio and Television (Εθνικό Συμβούλιο Ραδιοτηλεόρασης) (2013) Υπόδειξη υπ' αριθ. 1-2013 με θέμα: Μη προβολή εικόνας α) προσώπων ευρισκομένων σε κατάσταση κοινωνικής εξαθλίωσης ή ενδείας άνευ ρητής ή σιωπηράς συναινέσεως αυτών, και β) προσώπων οδηγουμένων ενώπιον των δικαστικών ή εισαγγελικών ή αστυνομικών και λοιπών αρχών άνευ ρητής ή σιωπηράς συναινέσεως αυτών. ΕΣΡ, 22 January 2013, <http://www.esr.gr/arxeion-xml/pages/esr/esrSite/file-get?arx-files-disposition=attachment&arx-files-entry-id=c59b09da28f41e7e83571826e98263e5>. Accessed 24 February 2015.
- Issaias, Platon (2013) 'The Absence of a Plan as a Project: On the Planning Development of Modern Athens: 1830-2010,' in Pier Vittorio Aureli (ed.) *The City as a Project*. Berlin: Ruby Press, 302-343.
- Kavoulakos, Karolos Iosif (2015) 'Public Space and Urban Movements: Scope, Content and Practices,' December 2015, <http://www.athenssocialatlas.gr/en/article/urban-movements/>. Accessed 9 October 2016.
- Kelling, George, and Catharine Coles (1996) *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in our Communities*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Menegos, Panagiotis (Μένεγος, Παναγιώτης) (2015) 'Το Γκραφίτι που Πληγώναμε,' *Popaganda*, 15 March 2015, <http://popaganda.gr/graffiti-gate-polytexneio-sizitisi/>. Accessed 20 October 2016.
- Metzger, Jonathan, Phil Allmendinger and Stijn Oosterlinck (eds.) (2015) *Planning against the Political: Democratic Deficits in European Territorial Governance*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mouffe, Chantal (2008) 'Art and Democracy: Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space,' *Open* 14: 6-15.
- Nikolopoulou, Aikaterini, Eleni Thodora Psyllakou and Maria Tsachli (2012) 'Media Discourse within the Context of the "Economic Crisis" in Greece: a Critical Analysis from the Perspective of Identity Formation,' RC22 Political Communication Conference, Brno, International Political Science Association.
- NTUA Office of the Dean (Πρυτανεία ΕΜΠ) (2015) 'Ανακοινώσεις Πρυτανείας,' 6 March 2015, [http://www.ntua.gr/announcements/rector/uploads/2015-03-06\\_956673\\_announcement.pdf](http://www.ntua.gr/announcements/rector/uploads/2015-03-06_956673_announcement.pdf). Accessed 30 September 2016.
- Rancière, Jacques (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (2009). London: Continuum.
- Stavrides, Stavros (2014) 'Emerging Common Spaces as a Challenge to the City of Crisis,' in Jaya Klara Brekke, Dimitris Dalakoglou, Christos Filippidis and Antonis Vradis (eds.) *Crisis-scapes: Athens and Beyond*. Athens: City at a Time of Crisis project, 209-214.
- Tsekeris, Charalampos (Τσέκερης, Χαράλαμπος) (2008) 'Δημοκρατία και Επικοινωνία: η αισθητικοποίηση του πολιτικού,' *Intellectum*, March: 27-34.

- Vatopoulos, Nikos (Βατόπουλος, Νίκος) (2015a) 'Πολυτεχνείο, η εξοικείωση με το χειρότερο,' *EKathimerini*: 6 March 2015, <http://www.kathimerini.gr/806135/article/politismos/polh/polytexneio-h-e3oikeiowsh-me-to-xeirotero>. Accessed 25 March 2015.
- Vatopoulos, Nikos (Βατόπουλος, Νίκος) (2015b) 'Σβήνουν το γκράφιτι, αποκαθιστούν το Πολυτεχνείο,' *EKathimerini*, 17 March 2015, <http://www.kathimerini.gr/807588/gallery/epikairothta/ellada/svhnoun-to-gkrafiti-apoka8istoy-n-to-polytexneio>. Accessed 25 March 2015.
- Zampoukas, Andreas (Ζαμπούκας, Ανδρέας) (2015) 'Θάνατος στην αστική δημοκρατία,' *Protagon*, 7 March 2015, <http://www.protagon.gr/epikairothta/ellada/thanatos-stin-astiki-dimokratia-3990100000>. Accessed 25 March 2015.

## About the authors

**Cristina Ampatzidou** is a Rotterdam-based researcher and writer with a background in Architecture and Urbanism, and founder and editor-in-chief of *Amateur Cities*. Currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Groningen on the topic of gaming and urban complexity, she has previously worked as an embedded researcher for the Amsterdam Hackable Metropolis project, a collaboration of the University of Amsterdam, the Mobile City Foundation and One Architecture. Cristina has been a collaborator with the Play the City! Foundation and the Architecture Film Festival of Rotterdam, as well as a guest teacher at the TU Delft Faculty of Architecture. Her work has appeared in *Uncube*, *Conditions*, *Bettery*, *Post Magazine*, *CARTHA* and *Azure Magazine*.

**Ginette Verstraete** is Professor of Comparative Arts and Media and former Head of the Division of Arts and Culture at the VU University Amsterdam. She has written on cultural studies, media and globalization, intermediality, and mobility. Among her publications are: *Media Globalization and Post-Socialist Identities. Issue of European Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol. 12.2 (May 2009); *Tracking Europe: Mobility, Diaspora, and the Politics of Location* (Duke UP, 2010); and *Intermedialities: Theory, History, Practice. Issue of Acta Universitatis Sapientiae. Film and Media Studies* Vol 2 (2010). Her articles have appeared in a wide variety of journals such as *New Formations*; *Theory, Culture & Society*; *Space and Culture*; *Arcadia: International Journal of Literary Studies*; *Cultural Studies*; *Annals of Scholarship*; *European Journal of Cultural Studies*; *NECSUS-European Journal of Media Studies*; and *Image [&] Narrative*.