

Encountering Gerani (LSE Dissertation, 2011)

This is a postgraduate dissertation project I worked on from May to September 2011 for the LSE Cities Programme. Inspired by SARCHA's Gerani pilot project, I focused my research on the inner-city area of Gerani and the incidence of transit migration in Athens to examine the relationship between the social and spatial production of urban space. Drawing from my research and SARCHA's project, I organised the discussion around the figure of the 'unbuilt', the 'semi-built' and the 'built' as affording different spaces of association, opportunity, enclosure, and sometimes danger. As such, the spaces of Gerani proved to incorporate phenomena which transcend the area's geographical and national borders, highlighting the complexity and variety of processes that shape and link contemporary cities.

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Liminal Worlds: transit migration in Athens

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Abstract

Transit migration is a relatively new concern within the political and scientific debate on human mobility. However, the phenomenon appears to have significant implications at various levels, as transit migration routes come across a broad geographical range and interrelated sociopolitical and economic fields. Crucial points of these routes are the cities; those of origin and destination as well as the cities of transit countries. The latter, as intermediate stations, play an important role in determining the course of migration while are simultaneously affected by the same flows - which are often stemmed at this point. Thus, transit cities, hide glimpses of various spatial and social realities that migration flows bring or generate within their urban fabric. These realities become distinguishable when one gets into the same rhythms and follows the urban processes that create them rather than drawing conclusions from afar. This paper focuses on the city of Athens/Greece and draws on narratives of transit immigrants who inhabit spaces of 'liminality' within its urban core. Based on the Athenian urban context, it researches the spatial and social processes of appropriation to their new environment, to question the relation of place, space and the sense of belonging.



Figure 1

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I am indebted to Dr Maria Theodorou, Architect and Director of the SARCHA¹, and the whole team for the information about Gerani.

I am also deeply grateful to Mr Apostolos Veizis, Head of Programmes Support & Institutional Relations/*Doctors without Borders*² and Ms Natassa Vourtsi, Social Worker/*The Greek Council for Refugees*³ who generously gave me their time, information and guidance.

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¹ SARCHA (School of Architecture for all), <http://www.sarcha.gr/>

SARCHA's research team worked in Gerani (a neighbourhood contained between Omonoia Square and Athinas, Euripidou, Epikourou and Peraios streets) from July to November 2010, exploring the urban accumulation of city resources. It collected data on people and their activities, buildings and un-built spaces, the area's smells, natural ventilation and sunlight conditions. The data was classified in three categories - human, physical and natural resources- and transferred onto multilayered maps to facilitate complex searches.

The Gerani pilot study was commissioned by the Hellenic Ministry of Environment, Energy & Climate Change. (<http://sites.google.com/site/ccrpkpgerani2010/>)

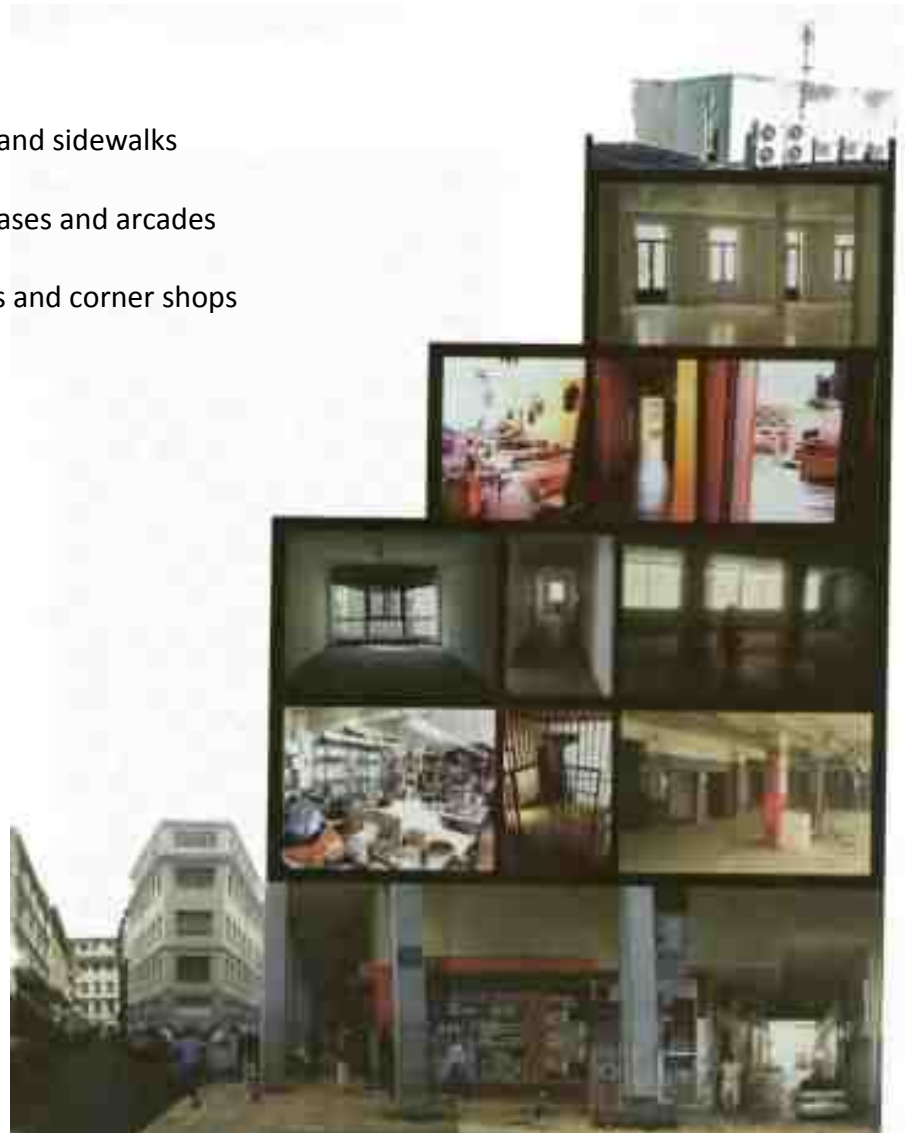
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Liminal worlds: transit migration in Athens

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[Word count: 10.560]

Figure 2

Introduction: The city from above

Moments come when for some unpredictable reason we find ourselves on rooftops or even higher taking views of the city. Outside the streets' daily grasp, the urban totality becomes seemingly visible. From above, Athens seems much larger than it is, as the dense and complex urban structure makes its urban core and suburbs disappear into a seamless blend of concrete sprawling across the Attica Basin from the feet of its surrounding mountains to the sea. The uniformity of the landscape is slightly broken by few large archaeological sites and green hills. Descending a level, my optical tour is continued from the summit of a hotel café in a central point of Athens, close to Omonia Square. Standing in the middle of the 'urban island' (Certeau,1984:91), this overlying world made of urban rooftops looks like a new ground; a continuous terrain, spreading at almost thirty meters above ground level. The narrow, labyrinthine character of the Athenian streets leaves no scope to the ground; a few major highways traverse the expanse, leading to the main city's exits, including the port of Piraeus. The din of streets remains a distant murmur, yet the view of the city's outskirts is gone and glimpses of urban life become more detailed. The atmosphere is hot and smoggy, black soot covers the multistorey blocks that stand tall and close together, dominating the landscape within a large radius from my vantage point. A dense mixture of apartment and office buildings, the majority looks abandoned and dilapidated. On their rooftops and upper balconies, improvised structures and slums occupy the space, witnessing an abundantly populated interior; sporadic reflections of their underlying world.

Standing on the Athenian rooftops, the observer can read in the urban text a world in constant change. Athens is the locus where half of the population of Greece is concentrated, a capital of almost five million people. A city with a heavy past is currently undergoing another major transformation period. One of the grounds for its change is that it has become a transit station for a large number of immigrants traveling to Europe, mainly from Africa and Southern Asia. Its urban core in particular is witnessing rapid changes in its population, which is growing and becoming more diverse, transforming it into a melting pot of people and influences. However, the limited assimilation of the newcomers due to ineffective and incoherent migration policies at different levels puts them in a permanent 'transit' state. Moreover, the increased insecurity and unemployment rates caused by the economic downturn, has inflated crime, xenophobia and deterioration in many already devalued neighborhoods of Athens, leading to phenomena of social and spatial decay within its urban context and adding to their negative connotation.

Yet, as in de Certeau's (1984:93) urban walks, the ordinary practitioners of the city live below the level at which this illusionary visibility begins; their walks unconsciously writing the urban text and their bodies making use of spaces that cannot be seen. Taking a closer view to these neighbourhoods, this immigrant population - which is often treated as a mass and addressed as one of the city's pathologic conditions - reveals its complex character: an increasingly diverse crowd redrawing boundaries in space and time in order to adapt to their new environment and gain a sense of belonging. By sharing space for leisure and social integration or informal labour exchanges, people 'on the fringe' heavily depend on socialisation in the public realm for their identity-building and economic survival. Thus, daily practices transform the urban scene as spatial access is negotiated within migrant groups and among migrant groups and host society over time. Moreover, same practices are used to shape coherent personal biographies as immigrants build in space their own points of reference in a world that urges them to be in constant movement. In these interpretations, the defining of space and place as well as their interrelation is also negotiated and questioned.

Often, social groups who represent 'undesirable' social elements and perceived to be 'polluting' or threatening the mainstream, become imbued with a level of unreality. These are liminal beings, non-corporeal inhabitants of an in-between space (Katz,2011:20). While outlining the marginal phase of initiation in tribal cultures, Arnold Van Gennep (1960:74-75) describes the notion of liminality as a condition that is characterised by ambivalence; the



Figure 3: Views of the city from the Acropolis hill (left) and Omonia Square (right).

‘initiated’, or ‘liminal’ is neither what one once was, nor yet what they will be. The temporary stage plays a considerable role, however the cut-off from the past is permanent and the journey to a future, constrained condition, inevitable. Victor Turner (1987:8-9) asserts that liminality, which represents the structurally ‘invisible’ (though physically visible), is the seedbed of both negative and positive structural assertions. It is not my purpose here to engage in a study of the many permutations of liminality, but the above two perspectives of the concept are often addressed in this essay.

Methodology

This work is based on interviews with immigrants who live or have spent a period of time in Gerani, a central area of the city of Athens. It draws on their narratives to research on their means of appropriation in the urban environment. I focus specifically on newcomers undocumented immigrants from Africa and Asia. Sampling for this work relayed on social networks and key contacts with which I conducted unstructured interviews. Information has also been achieved through interviews with immigrant organisation officials and an architectural team⁴ who has previously researched on and mapped the area.

The analysis begins with a brief overview of transit migration and migration policies in the European, Mediterranean and the Greek context. Then it moves to the level of the city to connect specific sites from Gerani with the immigrants’ daily practices and the integration states they come across during their stay in Athens. These sites are either visited and observed during a three-week fieldwork or are based on interviewees’ descriptions. Several points of connection between these populations and the dominant society are also briefly demonstrated in the end. Throughout the journey this work aims at coming to conclusions about place identity and the sense of belonging as it is formed in cities through social spatialisation under the particular conditions of mobility.

⁴ SARCHA (School of Architecture for all), <http://www.sarcha.gr/>

The Mediterranean passage

“Once on shore, political organs dilute the sea’s raw democracy, as if secretly wishing for the end of politics or a delivery from the sea’s unknowns. Land and sea again appear to be a pair or two halves of a single world. Yet the site of this contemplation is the shore, the interface between raw democracy and political organization ... As interfaces between worlds, they form a perpetual wilderness with limitless surface area – always newly minted, and often underexplored. However rough they may be, these seas are also spacious, mixing different waters and different political constitutions” (Easterling,2005:71).

The Mediterranean Basin has always been a natural global border managed differently according to historical periods and geographically embedded power relations. The sea’s functioning as a common space for trade, warfare, colonisation and free-will migration exemplify Braudel’s conceptualisation of the ‘Mediterranean as a human unit’ (in King,2001:2-3); while the various historical patterns of intra-migration around and between its coasts confirm the long tradition of pan-Mediterranean mobility.

However, as Russell King cites (2001:2-5), the above reality mainly corresponds to migration patterns before and since the early postwar decades: Subsequently, between the 1950s to mid 1970s, the Mediterranean Basin transformed to a reservoir of migrants supporting the labour needs of the big cities and major industrial zones of northern Europe. Following this transitional period, a new configuration of Mediterranean migration sets the basis of the current trends in the area. The EU accession of southern European countries and the collapse of communist regimes in the early and late 1980s renewed and intensified alternative migratory routes from this point onwards. Incomplete migration control policies and the Schengen Agreement in the 1990s reactivated the number of northward migration flows from the Middle East, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa transiting the Mediterranean.

King also highlights (2001:4-11) that apart from its geographical location, the southern European crossroad faces increased migrant movements due to the nature of its boundaries, the tradition of its regions and the recently changing economic and demographic context. Even within the Basin, short stretches of water separate societies with significant gaps in material wealth, opportunities and quality of life, which increased with the ‘Europeanisation’ of the Mediterranean states. Moreover, the long coastlines, mountainous external borders and a vital maritime trade and tourist industry, imply the continuous movement of people and goods making the Mediterranean by its nature a much more complex frontier to monitor and control.



Figure 4

However, the demand for immigration into the EU is increasing and remains at much higher levels than the existing opportunities for legal entry. The growing unrest in the Middle East and Africa during the last decade, as well as the recent political turmoil in Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria, intensified mobility around the basin and by the mid-2000s, migrants headed for southern Europe accounted for more than 60% of the continent's new arrivals (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula,2010:15-35;Itano,2010). The flexibilities of mobilities in the area contradict conventional definitions of migration. People move back and forth, through and onward the Mediterranean stopping for shorter or longer periods. Migration flows that fluctuate and policies that shift to adapt at a European, national and local level, form a dynamically changing socio-economic geography (King,2001:9-12). The Mediterranean remains in a stranded, mid-way position between the 'advanced' societies of the north and the less developed parts of the world at its doorsteps. When considering north-south imbalances in a globalised world, it represents one of the most active friction-planes hosting sharp contrasts and phenomena deriving from global inequality and instability (Ribas-Mateos,2001:22; Nicolaidis,2007:126).



Figure 5

Transit migration through Greece

Transit migration is a phase that cuts across various categories rather than a distinct type or policy area; it refers to the condition of 'transit' within which migrants, asylum seekers and refugees may find themselves at some point. In fact, it can be defined as a

process and a contingency that plays a central role in determining the course of migration, challenging the traditional linear view of distinct phases between departure and integration (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008:4-5).

Greece is a transit hub, primarily due to its geographical position. According to UNHCR (2011:8) it was the sixth most popular destination for asylum seekers in the industrialized world during 2007. However, the Greek asylum policy is extremely restrictive, and the serious deficiencies of reception infrastructure and migration policy understate the opportunity for effective provision of protection and settlement. Nevertheless, a long established informality in economic activity and social networks, and the existence of small-scale enterprises create an environment that absorbs and sustains undocumented labour, semi-legality is tolerated and survival is possible (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula,2008:48).

According to Apostolos Veizis⁵, the number of undocumented migrants arrested and retained at the Greek-Turkish borders has doubled since 2005; inward flows have significantly risen since Spain and Italy intensified their border patrol policies⁶ putting additional pressure on Greece which receives today a 75% of immigrants travelling to Europe:

“The burden is heavy, and even if a part of it is shared with the EU through common policies, most of them are still in the making and fail to address real problems. The current Greek system for the allocation of funds does not reflect the need’s real dimensions and bureaucracy does not help either. Frontex⁷ provides support and surveillance at the borders, yet it is questioned whether increased measures can safeguard human rights. Most people have survived long and perilous journeys, hiding in crammed trucks or crowded boats. Lacking legal ways to enter, many had to use the services of smuggling networks. Once they arrive in Greece, they are systematically detained in overcrowded facilities without discrimination, up to 18 months. We try hard to find resources to support sanitary conditions and healthcare” (Interview: 19/07/2011).

The Greek legal framework for asylum and migration has started to develop only recently. Until 2001 issues were regulated by a 1991 law, not responding to the current reality. The two additional laws of 2001 and 2004 changed the perception of migration as a mere security to a home issue, yet did not manage to overcome long-standing problems,

⁵ Mr Apostolos Veizis is the Head of Programmes Support & Institutional Relations/ *Doctors without Borders-Athens/GR*

⁶ It refers to the border fences that have been constructed between Morocco and the Spanish cities of Melilla and Ceuta in 2005 and the ‘friendship treaty’ between Libya and Italy in 2008, which allows for immediate repatriation of illegal immigrants arrested by the Italian coastguard.

⁷ Frontex is the European Union agency responsible for coordinating the Member States’ actions in the implementation of Community measures relating to the management of the external borders. It started to be fully operational in 2005. [Ref: <http://www.frontex.europa.eu/>]

such as the duration and flexibility of residence and work permits (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula,2008:50-51).

“Only a 0.3% of asylum seekers obtain a permit today, the great majority of illegal immigrants’ remains undocumented and deportation is not an option. People come back after a while and past experience has shown that temporary migration most often becomes permanent” (Interview: 19/07/2011).

The population group arriving in Greece is characterized by great diversity. People originating from Eastern Europe and the Balkans⁸ arrived during the 1990s and are well settled as migration happened gradually and is now stabilized. Most Africans and Asians arrived after 2000:

“There are great numbers of refugees from Morocco, Algeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Kurdistan – mostly young men -fewer women come on their own or with families from Iran, Somalia and Ethiopia. Many are heading to Norway and Germany, but it depends on their networks. Usually plans change. Migration routes are also changing constantly. For instance, with Bulgaria joining Schengen area we expect a new shift” (Interview: 19/07/2011).

According to information from Ms Natassa Vourtsi⁹, there are many different categories of immigrants and cases of refugees but are rarely treated according to their differences. In the common sense, illegality is usually identical with the lack of papers. Authorities too, fail to distinguish between those who actually need asylum and protection and immigrants who entered the country with tourist visas and remain undocumented. Thus, refugees are left alone to deal with the situation:

“The majority does not lodge an asylum application in Greece, in order to obtain one easier in another European country. But this accounts for those who manage to skip border control. Lately, due to Frontex, most are declared when entering the country and according to the Dublin II regulation¹⁰ they must apply within 30 days or go back. Then, they should renew their pink card (provisional permit) every six months. Today we have 45.000 applications pending for even 10 years. There is a new law to tackle the problem since 2010. Yet capacity is still low. Settlement is not enough, not even for half of them. Without an address they are not eligible for any kind of social provision. A large proportion declares false identities to be treated favorably when at borders. Thus, they get trapped in an

⁸ Usually from Albania, Georgia, Romania, and Bulgaria

⁹ Ms Natassa Vourtsi is a Social Worker with The *Greek Council for Refugees* in Athens

¹⁰ The Dublin Regulation is a EU law that determines the EU Member State responsible to examine an application for asylum seekers. It does not contain any mechanism to ensure that responsibilities are shared in a balanced or equitable manner. It was adopted in 2003.[Ref: Kok, Laura (2006),“THE DUBLIN II REGULATION A UNHCR DISCUSSION PAPER”, [Online] Av: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/4445fe344.pdf>]

institutional gap, in a situation between legality and illegality. Today a 40% of this population lives in Athens” (Interview: 20/07/2011).

Gerani

An Icarian fall follows my flying above these waters, to the mobile and endless labyrinths of the city far below, “into the dark space where crowds move back and forth” (Certeau,1984:92). Walking around this part of Athens can be challenging. Most pavements are cracked, sidewalks are parked and littered and traffic is heavy. Yet the overlapping of archaic, ottoman and modern pathways make every corner surprisingly interesting. Omonia Square has historically been a main transport hub; its role as meeting point of routes and flows throughout the city justifies its cosmopolitan character. I begin mixing with a diversity of ethnicities, a bustling, colorful, crowd passing by or loitering on the square and the street corners around it, inhabiting the city in its own unique way. Behind the traffic maelstrom, overcrowded conurbations accommodate the majority of this population. Gerani is one of these neighbourhoods, an area adjacent to the traditional commercial triangle in the historic core of the city of Athens.

Although still a nascent phenomenon, Athens is starting to show signs of ghettoisation in places of its urban core (SARCHA:2010). It is the city’s urban form, bound to its traditional, small property construction and mixed-used urban development that leaves no place for socio-geographic distinctions to consolidate (Leontidou,1990:8-23). Thus, entering Gerani does not imply the crossing of any spatially disguisable boundaries. As in every



Figure 6: Omonia Square

Athenian neighbourhood, small squares are scattered along appropriate sections of the main thoroughfares and you can easily lose yourself amid its narrow streets. Yet another aspect of the city reveals itself with closer observation: shadowy figures huddling in semi-secluded places, homeless begging or sleeping on building's stoops and illegal street vendors at every step. A smell of human waste and other filth mixes with the smell of spices from the open markets while deteriorated buildings and doors behind iron bars stand next to crowded kiosks, small bakeries and textile merchandise displayed on sidewalks.



Figure 7: Gerani



Figure 8



Figure 9

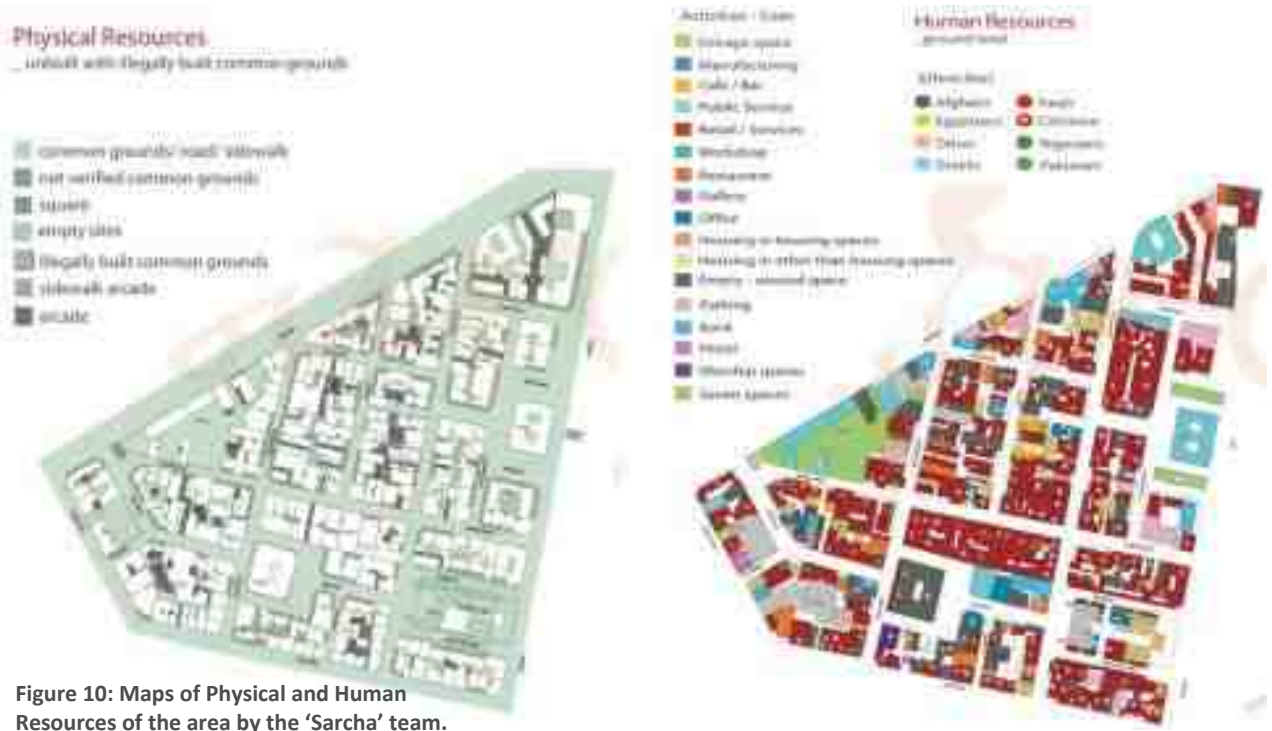


Figure 10: Maps of Physical and Human Resources of the area by the 'Sarcha' team.

Undoubtedly, the area is a well-evolved cluster. People from multiple origins gather here to gain access to services and information, seize employment opportunities and share accommodation. According to Achmet Moavia¹¹, the city centre has become the life of the immigrants. Whether or not someone lives there, they will eventually have to pass by at some point, to use a service or cover a need:

“There is a whole new form of life growing in these neighbourhoods, one on its own. It seems - and it is - chaotic and complex, even though this is merely perceived as a mass of immigrants by public opinion. Even for the state, which does not help much; on the contrary, authorities’ actions increase problems. In some cases, when crimes or other sort of events are published, they intervene, but usually to increase policing or dislocate groups. Interestingly, the informal activities that have sprouted over time actually cover pieces that are missing and should be formally addressed. When a structure is missing or cracked, the gap will somehow be replaced.”

In relation to the rest of the city, Gerani is a leftover or marginal place, dominated by immigrants, crime and poverty. Rob Shields (1991:3,4,276) suggests that being ‘on the margin’ indicates an exclusion from ‘the centre’; yet relations which bind peripheries to centres – be it economic, social or political – do not allow for complete disconnection rather than keeping these two together in a series of binary relationships. Peripheries here are not necessarily geographical. Marginal places can be those on the periphery of cultural systems or the sites of illegal or disdained social activities; and as such, their marginal status occurs only through a complex process of cultural work and social activity. Similarly, Stallybass and White (1986:2-3) suggest that in the European context, cultural categories as social and aesthetic and those of the physical body and geographical space are constructed within dependent and interrelated hierarchies of high and low. This is a process of categorisation through simple binary oppositions, within which, nevertheless, further classifications can be made. In that sense, the focus on marginal places, can provide critical insights into the conditions of the economic and cultural centres to which they are linked, rather than just constituting “*a voyeuristic tour of anomalies and limina*” (Shields,1991:276), while the interaction of the liminal with the entrenched creates the possible conditions of reconfiguring socio-cultural entities and space.

¹¹ Achmet Moavia is the President of the *Greek Migration Forum* in Athens. His interview was part of a conference entitled *Another City is Possible*, which took place at the Benaki museum, Athens, on March 15, 2011. [Reference: *Sarcha-Gerani Pilot Project Blog* [Online], Av: <http://vimeo.com/22362536>, Accessed:04/08/2011]

Space and place

At this point it is crucial to highlight the importance of the spatial to any study of culture and social action. The spatial is an integral part of our notion of reality, truth and causality as culture remains an unclear abstraction until actualized in a particular site or situation (Shields,1991:7). Relph (1976:78) notes the inseparable relationship of individual and place and defines it as an unconscious involvement, a continuous dialectical interchange where a person seeks to identify with and through their environment. Incorporating Heidegger's idea of 'place' and 'dwelling' (in Shields,1991:15) he associates people's 'deep' empathy with their dwelling with instincts and attitudes of domination and control over the environment. By place, therefore, a stricter determination of space is often attempted. Broadly defined, place usually expresses human encounters with particular locales and a spatial setting of recognisable and persistent social and cultural meaning. It can pertain to a territory of significance with particular environmental qualities, distinguishable from others. In any case, place implies something about somewhere – like scale, social context, cultural or spatial attributes (Relph,2009:24). That is why place is associated with the sense of familiarity, as it partly addresses the desire of fixity and for security of identity against mobility and change (Massey,1994:149-151).

The flexibility of the notion of 'place' allows it to embrace a wide range of possibilities, contrary to 'space' which is – in relation to place - regarded as a uniformly arranged assemblage of geometrical elements that might structure, constrain or generate certain forms of movement or interaction. Thus, usually space constitutes the pre-condition (material and geometric properties) or the opportunity, for the production of places (human activity) (Relph,2009). However, when Massey (1994:146-156) describes the unique character of Kilburn, she claims that there is a non-static side of this 'sense of place' and an ongoing linkage between a place to the rest of the world through memory and imagination. Similarly, she (1994:153) doubts the connection of boundaries with the concept of place and the possibility of its identification with a 'community' within an exact geographical region. Eventually, she implies the existence and interplay of many places within a broader space and a blurring of physical and conceptual boundaries. Bill Hillier (2007:15-20) ascribes both physical and social attributes to the concept of 'space': the spatial and the physical inherently include a social value and provide further elaboration of this value through their transformation. Human activities themselves constitute spatial patterns and space is more than a neutral framework. Hence, when it comes to moving from the simple space to the intelligible, it is the process that counts for more. This passage toward the configuration of

space, although inclusive of the 'primitive', cannot be fully explained by natural law or biological 'imperatives' such as 'territoriality', since it is based on a far more complex relational scheme (Hillier,2007:18,69).

So place and space are both products of embodied social practice. Yet, they are more, as far as their interconnections are concerned. I suggest that their difference, though, may lie on different systems of social practice in relation to scale and time. Thus I focus on the notion of spatiality – as the act of relating, involving and understanding the structures of the spaces we encounter. It is highlighted in Certeau's concept about the unconscious practices through which people appropriate space and cultural products and make them their own. These processes, as he puts it (1984:97,117) imply "*relations among differentiated positions*", and spatial tactics as walking and wandering – thus 'space' is a 'practiced place' composed "*of intersections of mobile elements*".

The following case histories of immigrants in the neighbourhood of Gerani link the material and the abstracted, socio-spatial aspects of their practices of adaptation to the new environment. Specific spaces - or a combination of spaces - are used as a setting for the narratives to unfold. Here, the 'unbuilt', is a spatial attribute, not freed from its physical fixation and symbolic form. Its inherent fluidity, though, allows for differentiations in relation to the restrictions that can be imposed at all levels: from unbuilt to built, unused to used, illegal to legal. Thus, the 'unbuilt' and its variations addresses both physical attributes and social patterns in space.

The unbuilt: squares and sidewalks

Amar is from Senegal and Sadeh from Afghanistan. They are in their mid-twenties. They both travelled for months, less than a year ago, to escape poverty, racism and strict authoritarian regimes. They have obtained the Greek pink-asylum card. Sadeh belongs to the race of the Saharas and he was able to communicate fairly well with Mammon who arrived in Athens from Bangladesh, following the same routes through the Greek-Turkish borders. Mammon introduced me to Sadeh and helped me communicate with him as he is now familiar with the Greek language. Amar, on the other hand, took the sea-route to Greece. He was detained for three months on the island of Mitilini, before he made his way to Athens and subsequently to the neighbourhood, following instructions from those who had preceded him. All three came from different places but dream of similar destinations, have common memories and share the same spaces; yet with the distinct ways their personal experiences imply.

I met them one afternoon in Eleutherias Square. It took me sometime to get there, observe the flow of the passersby, and gain a sense of familiarity. For Sadeh, though, this sense seemed well-developed; the square furniture arrangements and the concealed corners between the trees create a sense of privacy, while simultaneously offer a direct open view to the rest of the area. It is more often Sadeh, Mammon, and immigrants from Asia who gather there to meet friends, socialise, and get information about jobs. They also use the Theatre square, a few blocks away, around which there are several services they use in order to call or send money back home. And sometimes, usually on Sundays, they meet at Omonia Square; the latter is considered a broader meeting point, where everyone gets an insight of the immigrants' flows and a chance to "get an idea of the new arrivals and where the oldest stand" (Interview: 22/07/2011). Yet this is not a space that 'belongs' to a certain majority apart from particular corners that diverse groups use. Continuing my research I discovered



Figure 11: Eleutherias Square

that there is an established 'square network' around the city centre where each one serves a certain purpose, for the different migrant groups. Africans, on the other hand, like Amar, mostly use the sidewalks as a terrain of social exchange, as they are usually involved in the informal selling of cheap Chinese imports and spend a lot of time on the streets as vendors.

Amar, Sadeh and Mammon's narratives express a transitional relationship between individual and place. In the beginning of their journey, they considered Greece to be a transit station, not a destination. Movement to them was equal to achieving a desired trajectory to a dream nation somewhere in Northern Europe. However, a series of untoward and arduous incidences followed their journey and culminated with their arrival, placing them upon another threshold. Thereafter, movement is redefined through their common practices, and becomes constitutive of a new space they all share. The idea of a fixed place is erased or shifted into the realm of memory. Descriptions of activities and everyday practices substitute any place reference and movement continues to be tantamount to their fate.

But their 'placeless' movement in the city is more than a vague practice; it actually creates places by defining spaces. According to Hillier (2007:113), movement is the basic correlate of the spatial configuration: it notably dictates the configuring of space in the city while at the same time is largely determined by spatial configuration. This relation coincides with the one between urban form and function. As people stop to talk they define a space by their group activity. The spaces individuals occupy can be represented as points on a map – and this is a convex shape in mathematics (Hillier,2007:115), as it offers the potential for people who occupy the convex space to see each other and have direct contact. As we move through the cityscape, such shapes vary and change our spatial experience; so urban space is



Figure 12: Euripidou Street.

practically a set of potentials made by describable shapes and ways of using them. The immigrants' routes are inscribed in space by a continuous process supported by the long-term temporary character of migration. More than any other user of the city, they exploit the space potentials driven by their need to create their own points of reference and establish a social network with a common protection strategy and closely related economic activity.

From my observations and the immigrants' narratives, it becomes apparent that there is an inner logic to the seemingly disorderly grid made of their 'convex' spaces. If drawn on a map, it would be made up out of lines linking these spaces together, often several at a time. Sometimes these links are direct or get through built spaces; in either case, though, there is the creation of a new space within which lies a structure intelligible from the point of view of movement (Hillier,2007:116). The most important quality of this functional shaping of space is the potential that movement gives for creating co-presence. I am not implying here that the lines of this grid do not interact with the activities of the local people or older immigrant groups that have established economic or social activities. Certainly, there is a level of integration, yet the specific nature of this 'map' is that it needs to be hidden; thus, it always remains detachable, connectable, modifiable and reversible with "*multiple entryways and exits*" (Deleuze & Guattari,2004:23).

Amar and Sadeh – both working as informal street vendors – share their daily routes and experiences with their friends, those who work at the same or overlapping sites, or those who meet to pick up goods or to sell. On the streets and sidewalks, particular spots are associated with particular groups. Thus, Amar mostly frequents with his compatriots at the sidewalks of Euripidou, Sokratous and Geraniou Street, while Sadeh meets with other Afghans and Bangladeshis at Eleutherias square and its surrounding streets. In Korinis Street as well as in Menandrou and Sofokleous there are also several cafés where the latter often meet. Afghans usually gather at Amerikis Square to pray, but participate in rituals in Agios Panteleimonas or Kotzia Square with other groups. On the streets, they adapt common avoidance strategies and ways to warn each other in case of danger, either through signals or mobile phones. This process of spatial negotiation between the different groups happens gradually and silently over time. Along with movement, there is a deep relationship between body and space. It seems bodily gestures and postures - the way they pray, sit in public or gather for their interpersonal communication - play a significant role in the spatialisation of their culture and differentiates among immigrant groups. Their everyday practices become a form of 'embodied memory', by which bodies are taught the correct performance of roles and routines as if their movements spell out the letters of a secret alphabet across their territory (Shields,1991:261; Sinclair,2003). The selection of distinct



Figure 13: Kotzia Square

spots is made in relation to the goods they sell, the activity of the street and several spots are also related to immigrants' organisations that are settled in nearby buildings. In many cases, though, considering the fact that most of these spaces are used for loitering and meeting friends, it happens intuitively and is not rationally justified. The relocation of these spots is an equally ordinary process. The city for Amar and his friends is a place built of danger zones, hiding corners and opportunities.

“I spend a lot of time out here; it doesn't feel good when I'm in the apartment. It is crowded, dark and I don't like being hemmed inside. I just know that I will meet my friends there. I knew about it since I first arrived here - where to find my people, everyone does. But we change often, because the place changes, the police drive us off and we try to avoid them” (Interview: 24/07/2011).

The creation of these thresholds of communication is favoured by the area's urban fabric which is dense and complex, multileveled, with many abandoned sites, a vivid commercial character and a lot of open markets. The labyrinthine character of the streets facilitates their



Figure 14: Agios Panteleimonas Square.

'invisibility' yet their own symbolisms are set collectively through determining their own networks in space. I would suggest that by picking specific spots, they try to eliminate distances or maintain a linear connection – or one made of numerous linear links – in order to maintain a direct visual contact between most parts of their spatial network. This structure provides them with the possibility to contact more than one person at a time and sufficient levels of encounter to warn each other and take evasive action when necessary. They seem to have developed strong navigation skills within the city and a remarkable knowledge of the area, to be able to coordinate so effectively. They hardly speak the language and cannot read street signs with ease, yet they know many unofficial Greek names and move with comfort. Their activities matches Hillier's description (2007:155) about children discovering the potential of space when playing games, like 'hide and seek': when given the opportunity to explore, children discover the most integrating lacunas in the natural moving system and create "*probabilistic group territories which then attract others*".

These networks are their 'localities' and the space shaped by immigrant groups is one of multiple, overlapping networks. As individuals, too, they belong to numerous networks, according to race, nationality, activity, age, gender and so on - and these networks have particular ways of occupying public space. The shaping of their communities is based initially on spatial patterns of co-presence and co-awareness which form a 'raw material for community' that has the potential to be activated in due course and when needed; the certain obvious property of this virtual community is density and the less obvious the existence of a fixed structure (Hillier,2007:141). The lack of this specificity is due to the mutable nature of the community and its inherent spatial and contextual fluidity. Apparently, though, there is an underlying mechanism that generates and preserves its existence, despite the fact that the former attributes remain stable in time.

First of all the community offers help to the newcomers to cover basic physical needs and enhances their informal support networks at a social level; it is a buffer for the individual against a hostile environment. Moreover, it cradles their expectations and reinforces their dreams - about continuing their journey – dreams that fade in Athens as time goes by. Clearly, what takes place is a symbolic construction of a community identity; a social level of 'imaginary geographies', as Shields (1991:262) notes, which transcends the polyphony of individual controversies. Myths and images of a dream world function as insider stories for individuals to identify with their close circle but also to affirm community, regional or national identities and coalitions; spatialisation enters and underscores the perceived unity of communities at every scale (Shields,1991:262). Empathy is another force to bring the community together. Suffering brings members closer and informs their collective actions.

Kleinman (2000:227-238) points out that both structural violence (as for instance extreme poverty, homelessness and a shared fate of misery) and everyday violence deriving from the interaction of changing cultural representations, social experience, and individual subjectivity result in strong “sociomatic interconnections” between local worlds and people who live there.

Thus, the members of the community share a common history and experiences and develop a unifying knowledge, action and sense of reason. However, the community, as it will be shown, is only a place wherefrom immigrants pass through; it does not constitute the final point in their process of appropriation, rather than a state or a neutral territory between a world that is left behind and a new one (Genep,1960:19;Turner,1987:4).

The semi build: staircases and arcades

Upon arriving in Athens, Sadeh spent a week in a small shack under a subway. Later, with two other newcomers he found a place to settle, in a derelict building close to Gerani. The same happened to Faruq, who came from Syria. An abandoned, two-storey, half-ruined house accommodated his first months in the new city. Similar houses can often be seen in the area, either standing on their own beside quiet alleys or mixing with the multi-storey residential blocks of the 60s and 70s. For almost the last four decades, these buildings are like ghosts, their front entrances are heavily locked and pieces of stones have crumbled on their facades. The shuttered details of their beautiful neoclassical architecture witness their glorious past, when they represented the newly established national freedom and the rising bourgeoisie of the mid-nineteenth century. The climbing plants which trail in a regimented



Figure 15: abandoned buildings in Gerani (Dipyliou Street).

way against their walls cover their broken windows and permeate the remainders of the faltering rooftops, giving the only signs of life in these places – which, lately, though appear to have multiplied. Faruq discovered an opening on the side of the house and a place to sleep on the ground level, under the main staircase with the rusting, decorative rails. He shared the place with three people from Afghanistan who slept on the first floor. This was a secure place for Faruq; it was hidden from the traffic while he had a good view of the street, through the building's half-ruined walls.

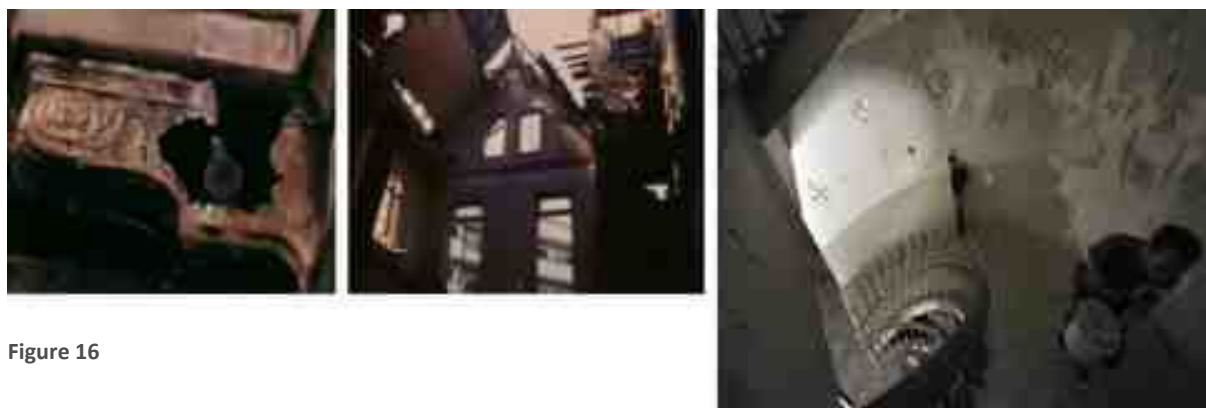


Figure 16

Faruq is in his late twenties and he is Kurd. He has chosen to be called Aris in Greek and claims that his real name means someone who can find truth in life. He has lived in Greece for the last two years, he speaks the language and he is friendly. He now rents an apartment in Gerani with two of the friends he met when he arrived. He works informally for a creamery in the central market near Kotzia Square, and for a small textile manufacturer, located on the other side of Omonia square. He still frequents with his fellows on the streets, he takes part in the immigrants meetings and activities and he guides newcomers in the same way he was guided when he first arrived. However, he is now socially mobilised and interacting with other networks, either those of local Greeks or more established immigrants even in other parts of the city. He often thinks about the possibility that his next refugee permit renewal could be denied. His life in Athens has gradually become one of insecure permanence and he seems to fluctuate between the thought of it as a space of transition and a place where he could settle down. The myth of an ideal destination that accompanied him throughout his journey has passed to a state of redefinition swayed by his newly achieved, increasing sense of control and his still vivid traumatic memories.

“I was sleeping inside an arcade near Omonia Square, and then under a staircase for three months; I suffered before settling properly. Now I can afford a place to live and the people I work for treat me well even as an informal labourer; if you work hard there are opportunities. I still dream of a better life but many of my friends who moved to north

Europe did not have better luck. They call me and tell me to stay and make what I can of the situation. Another friend of mine managed to reach France and after a few weeks he was brought back. It is painful to think I have to go back to travelling this way, maybe later...” (Interview: 26/07/2011).

Added to the perpetual memories of his trip to Athens, the first images of the city occupy a strong place in Faruq’s narratives. And the steps that made up every walking tour with him were simultaneously real and imagined; a crossroads of characters, thoughts and memories bonded with a distinct relationship with space. Squatting ruins, sleeping under staircases, subways or arcades; conditions of homelessness and despair that bring to mind reflections of cities during natural disasters – when space is all that is left and the architectural boundaries that help define ourselves are missing (Lara,2008:57). Under these conditions, one has to deal with the real dimensions of space and time; the full weight and hardness of the built environment; the cold stone; a body in pain; the weight and materiality of the wall that now matter. Distance is also crucial; Fernando Lara (2008:57-59) describes it as follows: *“the next bridge might be too far, the lights are off and yet under the stairway, down the street, on rooftops...you start to see that you’re living amid a world of people...Where were they before?”* – capturing the state of ‘distracted perception’ which one experiences when architecture falters, the city is thrown into disorder and nasty injustices are exposed.



Figure 17

Same kinds of injustices have lately come into light in Athens. They gather, though, and hide well in shady corners, like closely packed nests which expand to occupy what is left abandoned. Or they secretly burrow into narrow passages when silence starts to fall. Listening to Faruq’s narratives, about the way undocumented immigrants move and occupy places through the city makes it easier to realise that everything is associated with the experience of space insofar as it is not possible to talk about ourselves except by using relational terms as ‘here’ and ‘there’ or ‘beside’ and ‘inside’, no matter what our cultural

affirmations may be (Shields,1991:266). For the sense of place, apart from being culturally molded and patterned, is also a synthesis of sensory inputs; and our perceptual worlds are a function not only of culture but of relationship, activity and emotion (Hall,1969:181).

Along with the old neoclassical houses, Faruq talked about the role of the area's arcades in his life: as the place he once found shelter, the place of the homeless, the one that had been sealed with iron bars by the Chinese to accommodate their illegal trade. As for the city, the role of the contemporary Athenian arcades had been to support the commercial character of the area for more than a century. Some link the inside of building blocks to the streets and others are made of glazed roof and steel bones covering the outdoor markets, following their European predecessors. A third kind is based on the ancient pattern and accompanies the passerby's leisurely stroll while its colonnade - standing by the roadside - supports the building's projected facades. Sennett (2002:50) describes the ancient Greek *stoa* as an essential part of an urban form which is based on a direct analogy between body and building; that is, to include cold and hot, sheltered and exposed dimensions, encourage social relations and define space. In this sense, arcades constitute a unique architectural component, one that simultaneously belongs to the city and the building, linking the public to private and comforting movement. However, the once vivid commercial arcades are now experiencing a sharp fall in activity as the majority of their small businesses is closed; many of them have become dark, partly or fully isolated spaces, and these in turn – like the old neoclassical houses – have acquired new guests.



Figure 18, from left to right: arcade near Eleutherias Square, arcade near Omonia Square (Eirinodikiou).

Together with undocumented immigrants, diverse marginal groups share the space of the arcades; and like social space explorers, as Hillier (2007:155) puts it: *“junkies and methsheads, like children...use space to create and form localised social solidarities”*. Here again, like on the streets, there is a reverse process of ‘learning’ and using the formal properties of

space. It is one of rediscovery based upon a 'manipulation of the world and its objects', which is what Piaget (in Hillier & Hanson, 1984:47; Martin, 1976:8,24) in his developmental studies calls topological: a spatial relationship lying primarily on the concepts of proximity, separation, enclosure and contiguity rather than on topological equivalence, order, and continuity which evidently develop later. Thus, the direct analogy and interdependence of the terms 'inside' and 'outside', which implies the creation of spaces, is blurred. The spatial configuration by drawing boundaries - or naming a category both inside and outside - is redefined and better expressed by the looseness of a term like 'formations' rather than 'structures' with all their implied stability, hierarchies and rationality (Hillier, 2007:15; Lévi-Strauss as quoted in Shields, 1991:32). When a subway turns into a shelter or an arcade becomes a dwelling, it is apparent that spatial relations are very puzzling entities and they seem to exist 'objectively' as Russell (1967) points out, in an independent world which can be understood by thought but cannot be rationally created.

Hence, space is not merely an outcome of causal forces; it is also causative. And it is spatialisation - as the possibility of rearranging spatial components and reshaping the space's inheriting 'multifunctionality' - which accounts for the causative nature of the spatial. I would agree with Shields (1991:57,261), who points out that it is the human agent behind all these processes and spatialisation has a mediating effect in the sense that it channels or expresses causation; yet, since the spatial is charged with emotional content, community symbolism and myths rather than empirical nationality, the relation between the social and the spatial is not a mere set of dialectical causalities and the spatial becomes the prejudice of people making decisions.

Spatialities may be constitutive of narratives of self. Walter Benjamin (cited in Pile, 2002:114) inter-weaves memory and the city to indicate that walking the streets allows for memories to flood in; more than that, the streets organise and produce more experiences. For each new angle could produce another memory and the past, the present and the future, as well as memories of different places, are combined and recombined at the same space. Space to him is not just a scene where dramas of memories and forgetting take place; it has the capacity to invade the body and mind and thus 'autobiography' is a matter of time and sequence as a natural consequence of life. It is also a matter of myths and utopias: in 1984's Paris, Benjamin (2002:21; 1935, 1939) describes the city's iron-and-glass covered arcades as small worlds wherein old and new epochs coexist through traces and dreams. He sensed these spaces signaled transformations that were still being felt a century after the advent of industrial capitalism, scribbled on the middle-class culture growing in and around them. For his flâneurs the city was a landscape, they strolled like hidden figures totally at home in the

urban milieu and had a strong capacity to read the city, including the faces and the crowd, combining observation and watchfulness on one hand, while preserving their incognito on the other (Frisby,2001:37). From a different parallel, they, too, were lingering on the threshold condemning the political status quo and exposing the relativism of cultural identities, places and epochs. In the postmodern moment, there is a similar loss of identity – a simultaneous centrality and marginality (Shields,1991:274).

Faruq is at a state of moving beyond the collective by gradually assembling essential elements to put him on the track of social mobility and redefine a new kind of movement. While companionship and the sharing of a common fate will always attract him back and enable him to be a member, the option of stability lessens his suffering and simultaneously opens a new chapter in his life, mobilising aspects of it that have remained stagnated for long. As a unique node in space he collects new experiences and memories but struggles to redirect them in relation to his past expectations, memories of places of origin and visions of dream destinations. Without having necessarily achieved a coherent identity, extending himself into his milieu, physically and socially, his environment, emotions and memories become tied to smells, sounds and names of places forming those within which his own autobiography will be developed. A sense of intimacy between memory and the city begins to add. Shields (1991:268) describes this individual as one possessing multiple identities; he also ascribes to it a degree of agency capable of investing in scenes where identities can be released, actualizing and deforming structural codes rather than being a passive body or an actor grasped in a structurally determined social arrangement. Similarly, Faruq tries to discover and reconfigure his new spatial realities, literally producing part of the space of the city. As Steve Piles (2002:124) asserts, it is through an intersection of a multiplicity of stories, inherently historical and spatial, that memories and cities are made; these times and spaces can be both coherent and persistent, but they can also be fragmented and lie in visible or less visible ruins.

The built: mezzanines and corner shops

Mammon has lived in Athens for more than six years. After spending one and a half years in Gerani, he moved to an area in the southern part of the city. He is able to rent his own place, is accepted by his neighbours and works around the area at three different places: as a carrier in a local cellar and a grocery store in the morning, while in the afternoon he earns an extra income in the nearby gas station. He does not visit Gerani often anymore and he has chosen to engage with other parts of the city and its people. However, he has kept his

old contacts and he visits his old neighbourhood to attend the common rituals in the Mosque in Sofokleous Street, participate in the meetings of a local Bangladeshi haunt and spend time in Eleutherias Square. He has not obtained a Greek resident permit, has no papers and works without insurance. He claims that this has now become a way of living.

“I cannot follow legal procedures any longer, it takes time, I never have what they ask from me, they always deny it and there is no point fighting. No, I would not go back. I left Dhaka when I was seventeen, travelled for three months, paid a lot for this trip and now, at least, I have something. I can send money back to my family and they are proud of me. Back home I could not work. I am not a refugee but I was looking for a better life. Sometimes I also miss travelling. I would like to visit my family, too. But how am I supposed to come back? I also think that I could buy a property here, build something stable, even pay taxes. Well, this is not possible, too, but you know... it is Greece that loses from this fact, don't you see where the situation is driving us all now?” (Interview: 14/07/2011).

Before moving, Mammon spent a year in an apartment in one of the old blocks in Gerani, sharing it with seven more people from Bangladesh. Amar now lives in a similar block, in one of its abandoned workshops on the mezzanine with ten more people. Sadeh has recently found a corner in a space shared by twelve more Afghans in a multistory office building; their landlord is a Chinese man. Overall, landlords are either Greeks who live elsewhere in the city or other immigrants who sublet. Many floors in the office buildings are rented and used by the Chinese as warehouses for the illegal textile trade. Others are also used as ‘immigrants’ hotels’, where someone can find a place to sleep or have a bath for two or three Euros. Sadeh mentioned two other ‘Afghan Hotels’ in other parts of the centre; one of which is in Victoria square, sheltered in a three-floor residential building. The two unlicensed mosques of Gerani are also accommodated in old-block flats. So are emerging immigrant organisations and cultural spaces. Several ‘visible’ signs of the multicultural activity of the area, like transaction centres or ethnic restaurants, occupy the ground levels. The majority of these multi-storey blocks were massively built from the 60s’ to 70s, to accommodate the increasing rural-urban migration of the time. Their design, based on vertical differentiation and a high-building factor, was made to accommodate retail activities on the ground and residential uses on the top floors. Today, these functional definitions are partly proved dishonest. The new socio-economic realities they shelter have put them into a ‘transitional state’. By any means, there would be no reciprocal relations to define them; their structural components hold their properties by virtue of the function they fulfill within a broader system of interconnections (Bourdieu, 1968:682).



Figure 18: Buildings in Gerani.

Despite his frequent visits to Gerani, Mammon has withdrawn from the everyday activities of the migrant community, the economic ties and the rationale of his old group. He has certainly developed a critical view of his situation and the relationships he is making; and he has a very good knowledge of the political conditions, the institutions and the people of his new environment. To make his way successfully through the challenges and hazards he learned to anticipate opportunities and constraints, regulate his behavior accordingly and he is comfortable with pursuing a new, most independent journey. That is not to say that Mammon or the other undocumented immigrants did not possess a degree of reflexive subjectivity at previous stages; on the contrary, they chose to be a part of the collective, perform their roles and coordinated activities insofar as an efficacious collectivity had been evolved and maintained (Bandura,2001:16).

Nonetheless, the collective was a space that generated reactive rather than proactive behaviour to human agents; that is, it operated as a social structure which did not provide enabling recourses and adequate opportunities to promote given psychosocial changes and levels of functioning (Bandura,2001:15-19). Therefore, over time and while gaining experience through relating with 'external' structures - institutional, physical, real or mythical - the individual exits the group or acquires a new relationship with it. Accordingly, any analysis of the social structure-agent division should go beyond dualisms

(Shields,1991:273) as social spatialisation includes the construction and legitimation of relations between various elements. This multiplicity is also highlighted in Bourdieu's (1968:684-685) conceptualisations about mediating factors transforming 'methodically established' relations; his 'habitus', too, involves a continuous modification by daily routines and a vague, changeable relation between the individual and structured regulations (Bourdieu & Nice,1977:16,72). Consequently, the concept of the self as 'a hybrid sum of institutional and discursive practices' (Stam cited in Shields,1991:273) is closer to the gradual process of immigrants' social spatialisation. Entering this state of hybridity, Mammon has moved further, towards more extensive arrangements by realising and coordinating his multiple identities, accepting his situation and emphasizing his creative action and individual initiative.

However, barriers continue to be built in Gerani and not all of them can be crossed. The iron bars and heavy locks that divide the common corridors of the building blocks and seal the apartment doors of the locals multiply. Similarly, Mammon is confined within institutional gaps and a deeply territorialized state. His life has been the product of a clash between international migratory flows and local histories which, no matter his desire to embrace and build upon, he will have to reconstruct everything the minute he transcends their geographical borders. In that sense, his life and that of the other undocumented immigrants who have chosen to stay, is in a constant state of 'traveling' without moving; in practical terms that means leaving a non-fixed financial footprint, remaining alert to evanescent economic opportunities and avoiding state agents. The degree, to which they will blend with the local society and grow roots, is different for each of the undocumented immigrants and though it is partly happening unconsciously, it also depends on their personal aspirations as shown before.

Between the flows and interconnections that constitute their trip, undocumented immigrants are placed in a weak position. Within the 'power geometry' of time-space compression, as Massey (1994:149) puts it, it is not merely the issue of moving itself, rather than the possibility to be 'in charge' of the process and turn it into advantage. Different social groups have a distinct relationship to this mobility; on the two opposite sides are those who initiate international flows and movement even when standing still, while others are imprisoned by it, despite the fact that they have come half way round the world. So this is not even an account of travel for Mammon, as this would imply movement between fixed positions and the knowledge of an itinerary; it would also intimate a potential return, an eventual homecoming (Chambers,1993:5). It entails, though, another sense of home and being in the world; it is about inhabiting time and space not as if they were fixed or closed

structures, but as if they were open and always mutable (Chambers,1993:4-5), challenging the components that our sense of identity, place and belonging are built upon. The rearrangement of these fragmented parts, either physical or imaginary, takes place inevitably, no matter what the difficulties are; to constitute, for each individual, a story that makes sense.

.....

Kostas is Greek. He owns a small corner shop with spices on Euripidou Street and he lives in the nearby neighbourhood of Kipseli. Being born and raised in Athens, now in his late fifties, his attachment to Gerani is intertwined with the memories of his grandfathers from whom he inherited his business and the transformation of the area as he experienced it during the last decades. His thoughts express ambivalence toward a past he feels obligated to preserve and his current life. He claims that small Greek businesses in Gerani are threatened by crime and deprivation as well as from the cheap Chinese products. Yet the relations he has developed with immigrants in the neighbourhoods he lives and works makes him hold a more open and objective stance:

“It is true that many local residents are frustrated with the situation. They are afraid to reach their apartments at night. This area has almost been vacated by locals who headed toward the suburbs the last three decades and now the situation is worsening. Those who stayed, including me, look back with longing on the good old days. But we cannot always blame the immigrants. I agree that something must be done about crime, laws and migration policies. But it is also about us. We are a little Eastern and Southern as well, Greeks, maybe a little European, too. And we have also been immigrants, for long. There is a young man from Egypt in my block in Kipseli. He has built a small garden outside his dark basement, in between the blocks at the back. There was nothing there before, only litter. Then I come here and I’m worried about my business, the future, the recession. Maybe real Hellenism and our sovereignty is a myth after all. We are all in the same boat and it is cracked” (Interview: 26/07/2011).



Figure 20

Since the arrival of the massive migrant inflows, flags and symbols of national identity can be found hanging on shop entrances and balconies, even tied at the back of public benches. And Greeks began to claim public space in an unprecedented way. According to recent reports (Leontidou,2001:5), Greece evidences the densest incidences of xenophobia in Europe while those of racism are low and sporadic and decline with age group. In the urban core of Athens, though, racist incidences have been intensified lately, often leading to violent conflicts both between natives and immigrants and among immigrant groups. The recent turbulence in Agios Panteleimonas Square¹² underscores the rise of social unrest in the urban environment. But the atmosphere in the city was thin with tension long before these events appeared. The EU incorporation was followed by a decade of urban competition and renewal for the attraction of mega-projects and global tourism and of a sudden financial crisis. A situation built over and beyond the needs of urban inhabitants and a long-established dysfunctional state apparatus, created polarisation and disadvantaged vulnerable populations bringing unemployment and poverty back on the agenda (Leontidou,2010:1194). Violent riots originating from urban neighbourhoods have been spreading across the city.

Yet, these socio-political transitions also manifested a generative impact on public consciousness, leading to the regeneration of grassroots urban social movements and the emergence of groups of activism in the urban space. Moreover, they inspired a period of broad reconsideration of self and place during which the existential qualities of citizenship began to be renegotiated; and there was an understanding that security and political being was now relative to a changing topography, rather than a mere matter of nationalist discourse and imported global phenomena (Alexandrakis,2009). The coming together of small urban groups – not necessarily about actively protesting – enhanced micro-scale social activity and established a general consensus. Many of the ‘unconventional’ citizens entered the political civic space through participating in these activities (Kalyvas;Leontidou,2010). Apart from the crime and illegal occupations, many of the undocumented immigrants are members of flourishing social networks and their important role in the regeneration of the labour market is well recognised (Arapoglou,2006).

Certainly, the effects of unconventional citizens in reshaping the Greek civil society are a subject for further research. What I want to focus on here is that these ‘invisible’ groups may hold tangible and evolving implications in social and spatial reproduction. Through their direct or indirect action, citizenship is expanding and democracy becomes de-nationalized and redefined in urban public space. For what makes a place public is when

¹²A central city square where citizen patrols use violence to repel the immigrants during the last three years. [Ref:“Battlefield”, in *The Prism: GR2010* [Online] Av: <http://www.theprism.tv/home5.php#&panel1-2>]

Lefevre's (cited in Mitchell,2003:26-35) cry and demand for the 'right to the city' takes space, can be heard and seen: the right to housing becomes the right to inhabit; the right to occupy public space, gather and protest become forms of appropriation of the city and the struggle for rights produces space. In that sense, the in-depth examination of these processes may be crucial when considering issues related to broader socio-political change.

Borders and barriers that keep us in enclosed safe and familiar territories can also be prisons when defended without reason or necessity, as Chambers (1993:2) rightly argues. The stranger is a presence that like a ghost lives within all of us, questioning our present and being; and this is how the familiar is turned around and by becoming unfamiliar for a while, it generates unexpected and sometimes magical spaces (Chambers,1993:16).



Figure 21

Conclusions

Space is a critical component of migration. During the time of adaptation, social spatialisation as a practice involves a continual appropriation and re-affirmation of the world as a structured socio-spatial arrangement (Shields,1991:52). This goes beyond the notion of place - the place as a specific context within which people and their means of appropriation could be examined as a set of relations with the existing locales, their interpretation with fixed boundaries and their behavioral responses drawn from existing cultural settings. Under conditions of constant movement, though, spatialities seem to be produced from within through lived experience and embodied action, rather than being imposed and defined from external codifications. People actually generate spatial forms and articulate spatial experiences. In this case spatiality becomes the means to interconnect structures that relate the places we encounter so as to build new ones.

Through the narratives it became apparent that while in the process of appropriation immigrants pass through a number of phases that take diverse forms of engagement and spatial expression. These are not fixed, rather than multiple and fluid, indicating that there

is not a unique path to integration. Due to the lack of political recognition, their feelings of spaces are not expressed through limitations of socioeconomic or political conditions rather than through their appreciation of activities in places that acquire meaning in time; as unconventional citizens, they physically enact belonging in the city and become agents. By using the city in different ways, physical forms, functions and conventional symbolisms of space are challenged and reconfigured and space is reproduced through lived practice. At this point, the causative role of the spatial was highlighted and justified by its inherent capacity to channel causation and by having the possibility to be recharged with emotional, mythical or symbolic content. Thus, even if space was defined merely as a set of arrangements of geometrical components and mathematical relations, these are not contingent; they include normative perceptions acquired by everyday practices. However, this structure is not fixed; it is continuously challenged by reality.

I also emphasized the role of the creative agency to conceive and assert new spaces of belonging in their everyday lives, as a form of engagement with the city. Every new state of integration, though, entails the breaking of a previous pattern of use (i.e. the immigrant community). And since these facets of identity which are spatially expressed in different ways change, so does the way they use the city. Nevertheless, each of their previous facets is not erased or totally replaced by the new one. On the contrary, in their daily movements through the city they carry their myths with them. Myths that are no more signs of origin but traces mixed with other histories, episodes and encounters (Chambers,1993:19). It is important to underscore that given the obstacles, the insecurity and suffering they are facing, it is not surprising to remain at this liminal state and there are many who refuse any kind of further integration than their closed community. Space and mobility create opportunities but cannot obliterate the gap between the forced movement, expatriation, poverty, racism or slavery and the privileged channels of movement, media, technology and consumerism.

Nonetheless, as it was shown, the struggling for rights also produces space; a space that often overlaps with the 'established', putting local communities in a process of questioning their own fixity and perceptual boundaries. In an urban life already standing on shaking ground the 'margins' become hidden political actors, and lay a new ground for possibility to flourish. A space must be left open – an indeterminacy to be kept (Chambers,1993:17) – for questions to emerge and political action to be sustained. Now, in that opening and beyond conventional and abstract identifications as tradition, nation, race and religion, we are all destined to live, as Arturo Islas puts it, in a 'border condition' (cited in Chambers,1993:17). For Simmel (1971:143-144), the apprehension of truth comes from the cognitive freedom

achieved through the ‘critical distance’ of the marginal stranger. When it comes to matters as migration policies and active citizenship at every scale, an urban flâneur, one moving between social classes, local and global realities and converging spatialities rather than totalities (Routledge & Cumbers in Leontidou,2010:86), could possibly bridge the gap.

A critical distance is also useful when considering the relation between ‘society’ and the spatial. It has been argued that space production is a natural constituent of situating oneself in a physical environment. Yet, the creative act of spatial practices that characterized immigrants’ daily forms of engagement exceeds structural limitations and, though not always achievable, the sense of belonging derives from collectively and individually accumulated experiences of spatial behavior and representations of space, histories, and imagination. Hence, the social-spatial linkage is not strictly a dialectical oscillation but a meeting point of tensions that defy any distinctive synthesis (Shields,1991:261). On the discourse of thinking, designing and using space, we should think and test more than counting and analysing, for there are no universal norms about spatial behavior and how it could be channeled through specific special arrangements. Places are not local things, they are moments in large-scale things we call cities; it is cities that make places and not the opposite and what we need is a deeper understanding of their physical and spatial function (Hillier,2007:112).

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My walk ends with a sense of ‘rediscovering’ a part of the city. Leaving behind Gerani and heading towards the ancient cemetery of Keramikos, the smell of lemon trees on the sidewalks and the sounds of the clinking glasses from a nearby café bring back something of the old familiarity. Our relationship with space lies in a continuous process of rediscovery which is never complete to be mapped as we also change along the journey. Around me, layers of history upon ruins witness the constant re-writing of space; a hidden script, which has definitely not been revealed yet. Robust, dynamic shapes, with a life of their own. The only underlying principle I can distinguish is that this has always been the case.

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