

MAIN SECTION

Rebranding Athens as the Creative City of European South. The contribution of Documenta 14 A Critical Approach

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ABSTRACT

The following article presents a very brief review of the impact of the art institution Documenta on the Athenian urban environment aims to give an answer to the question of how and why the art exhibition "Learning from Athens" gained such popularity in urban and economic developers, locally and globally, that has not yet led to enough critical discussion on the cultural, and political researchers. The article approaches two views on this impact. One linked to the Athenian urban ruins of the Greek economic recession through which emerged a new (exotic) touristic destination to the European periphery. And the other linked to the politics of the Creative City which function as the main strategy of the present Athens cultural-led gentrification including heritage and planning politics, real estate, touristic, entertainment, and creative industries. The article is setting up a number of important questions to cultural and political researchers about city rebrand processes and the generated change and innovation produced; the social inequalities in particular.

KEYWORDS

Creative City Athens, City Branding, Creative-Led Urban Renovation, Post Colonial Urbanism, Cultural Industries

PEER REVIEWED

<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2612-0496/13537>

ISSN 2612-0496

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Introduction

Since 2019, the city of Athens experiencing major regeneration processes. Along with the lavish renovations of Elliniko and Faliro bay, is taking place a series of inner-city structural changes, including plans such as the ambitious project of the Great Walk, which promises to connect the two main Athenian squares—Syntagma and Omonia—with a tree-lined avenue, the extension of metro in the neighborhoods of Exarhia and Kolonaki, the redevelopment of the Athenian hills, the converting of architecturally significant buildings into state and cultural venues, the opening of international galleries, the enactment of a range of artist-run spaces and art residencies in central districts are some examples of those ongoing gentrification processes.¹ The migration of artists that sporadically began in areas of downtown Athens in 2012 has evolved in an organized policy of rapid urban regeneration, having completely transformed the cultural geography of the city, causing the displacement of local creative activities from specific neighborhoods such as Exarhia, Kypseli or Koukaki.

Athens gentrification proclaims urban welfare through fostering collaboration and engagement among government, NGOs, the private sector, and individual citizens according to the strategic plan of “Athens Resilience Strategy for 2030”² launched by the Rockefeller Foundation, which was posted on 14 June 2017. ACRS Strategy involves various interdisciplinary groups of stakeholders from different governmental, academic, and non-profit institutions, covering a broad range of expertise led by the Mayor of Athens. In particular, “Athens Resilience through Culture Report,”³ commissioned by the British Council in collaboration with 100 RC, encourages the rise of cultural industries, the rebranding of Athens from a cultural perspective beyond its renowned monuments, and the development of Athens as a cultural destination, among others. As far as the city’s cosmopolitanism is concerned, the German institution of Documenta functioned as an urban gentrification forerunner, “creating a challenging but attractive environment,” as the ACRS report points out.⁴

In many respects, the art exhibition “Learning from Athens” in 2017 has expanded the notion of Athens’s urban cultural heritage, producing a new exotic destination in the European South “towards a tourism and real estate market that seeks local authenticity.”⁵ The art venture of

1 From the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 have appeared over twenty new art spaces in the broader center of Athens, a considerable number for a city that was not used to be an art boom, including new galleries or ranches of international galleries, self-managed art spaces, art residencies, generally, spaces that involve somehow with art domain.

2 Resilient Athens, *Athens Resilience Strategy for 2030: Redefining the City Report*. (Athens: Resilient Athens & The City of Athens, 2017).

3 Robert Palmer, *Athens City Resilience through Culture Report* (Athens: British Council and 100 Resilient Cities, 2018).

4 Resilient Athens. *Athens Resilience Strategy for 2030: Redefining the City Report*, 167.

5 Jamie Peck, “Struggling with the Creative Class,” *International Journal Of Urban And Regional Research* 29, no. 4, (2005): 747.

Documenta transformed particular localities into areas with a hipster atmosphere, ethnic diversity, and vibrant nightlife, pre-settling the creative capital needed to increase Athenian urban competitiveness amongst world cultural regions. Athens saw a “massive rise in short-term rentals (Airbnb) after 2017, triggering gentrification and touristification processes.”⁶ Thus the concept of creativity and innovation has become the driving force of Athenian urban development processes.

Using art as an agent, not a means of redemption but of “economic accumulation,”⁷ the new Athenian “creative districts” establish spatial classifications, defining particular roles and behaviors to their users. Athens’s gentrification policy has straightly connected with the promise of “restoring law and order,” which was one of the pre-election campaign themes of the current government of Nea Demokratia in 2018. Significantly, the Athenian redevelopment processes put an end to Athens’ experiment with the squats movement, estimated that housed over 1,500 immigrants, including the evacuation of the City Plaza Hotel in Victoria Square, the largest of its kind, forcing the inhabitants to move to the refugee camps. Under a program of inner-city beautification, has also been removed the graffiti that was for long the visual representation of social-political disinvestment and austerity of the Greek capital. Nowadays, graffiti in Athens has become officially commissioned art, “signalling the end of the financial and social crisis the city has gone through.”⁸

In many ways, the central areas of Athens have commodified access to its urban spaces, policing privileged access and soliciting the agency only of those classes held sufficient social and financial capital to enjoy the right to the city and all its associated resources and infrastructures. Rather than the cultivation of urban life, current urban strategies commodify the arts and cultural resources, transforming Athens into a revanchist city, where “the victors are increasingly defensive of their privilege, such as it is, and increasingly vicious in defending it,”⁹ as Neil Smith writes.

The following article intends to discuss the effects of the expansion of global cultural industries on peripheral cities, and their impact on the creation of a homogenized urban identity. The article will focus on socio-spatial changes occurring in Athens through a detailed interrogation of the curatorial tactics of the project “Learning from Athens” of the German Institution of Documenta, which may have enriched the global art industries, but mainly achieved the re-launching and the re-activating Athens through the “cultural touristification.” Indeed, Documenta 14 imported the corporate

6 Dimitris Balampanidis et al., *Informal Urban Regeneration as a Way out of the Crisis? Airbnb in Athens and its Effects on Space and Society*. (Athens: Polis 2021).

7 David Ley, “Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification,” *Urban Studies* 40, no. 12, (2003): 2542.

8 Dimitris Tziouvas, *Greece in Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Austerity* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 209.

9 Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revenachist City* (London: Rutledge, 1996), 222.

global art world into Athens, actuating a cosmopolitanism, but at the same time degraded the rights to the city “into narrower plans and exclusionary aesthetics.”¹⁰ In this regard, current Athens’s culture-run regeneration strategy is “characterized by spontaneity, fragmentation, and tolerance of speculation,”¹¹ as the geographer Georgia Alexandri pointed out.

Documenta 14 in Athens

From April to September 2017, the German institution Documenta formulated its public sphere in the urban space of Athens, mainly addressing the international art world. Documenta, which produces exhibitions at the forefront of contemporary art and theory every five years in Kassel, Germany, with stable financial commitments from public funders such as the city of Kassel, and Hessen as well as the German Federal Cultural Foundation, signals cultural, political, and aesthetic projects outside the art market despite that most of the time the participating artists are much known to this market. Continuing the curatorial tactics of overcoming its natural borders within Kassel that started Documenta 11 in 2002, recognized for its ambitious post-colonial geographical dispersion “which redefined the structure and meaning of art institutions according to a globalized and, potentially, decolonized model of art,”¹² the 14th edition of Documenta, under the direction of Adam Szymczyk, split into two parts taken place first in Athens and then in Kassel with artists to present works in both cities.

Szymczyk proposed, upon his election in 2013, that Documenta should manifest in the form of two autonomous, simultaneous, and related exhibitions in two very different cities “to express the dissolution of barriers separating those who lack the simplest means from those who are usually all too willing to give them lessons but seldom a hand.”¹³ Given the tension in the relations between Greece and German due to the austerity measures forced by the EU, spearheaded by German politicians on the Greek banking industry, the exhibition “Learning of Athens” worked as a connecting bridge between the two countries. Thus, the equal budget partition between Kassel and Athens was considered part of the German support for the Greek “bailout” plan experiment. In this sense, the exhibition of Documenta 14 was perceived as a “gift” to Athens, as mentioned by the local cultural stakeholders. However, the donation in the cycle of economic exchange can be assumed as debt and, therefore, cannot be

10 David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 408.

11 Georgia Alexandri, “Planning Gentrification and the ‘Absent’ State in Athens,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, no. 1, (2018).

12 Anthony Gardner, & Charles Green, “Post-North? Documenta11 and the Challenges of the “Global” Exhibition,” *On Curating* 33, (2017): 109-121.

13 Adam Szymczyk, “Documenta 14: Learning from Athens,” in *60 Years of Documenta: The Local History of Globalization* ed. Hans Eichel (Berlin: B&S Siebenhaar, 2015), 220-273.

considered an altruistic act, as Jacques Derrida has argued.¹⁴

If the division between Kassel/Athens symbolically referred to the division between benefactor/bankrupt, the working title “Learning from Athens” directly constructed alterity, predisposing to ethnographic practices of “observer-observed.” Although the curators assumed that “learning is unlearning” and thus “the great lesson is that there are no lessons,”¹⁵ the art event unaltered the demarcation between we/others into a frame of philosophical narcissism, leading to a range of assumptions and representations of ‘Other.’ Significantly, the curator of the Public Program of Documenta 14, Paul Preciado, exoticized the Athenian urban landscape as authentically indigenous and innovatively political. Preciado, through an article in *Liberation*, in 2016, recovered the old European-generated fantasies of Orientalism, exciting the Western imagination by displaying Athens as an irrational and unreasonable place inhabited by people with a hybrid Eastern identity.¹⁶ According to Preciado, Athens is the city of an endless superposition of monuments—archeological-historical—and modern ruins. Above all, these strata now rise to the new neoliberal ruins sown by the fall of Europe. Athens stands metonymically for the rest of the imperfect world’s “privileges,”¹⁷ according to Szymczyk. Thus Athens was vaguely exoticized with all the “Others” of the Global South. Precisely this distance from the West enabled Szymczyk to impose Athens as a working object from which the Western world has to learn.

In an irreproachably “leftist-inspired” curatorial narrative that exposed the contradictions and conflicts of neoliberalism, Documenta 14 promoted itself as an apparatus for resistance and rebellion against the financial and refugee crises whose epicenter was in Athens. According to Szymczyk, the exhibition would become “an agent of change and a transformative experience for its audience and participants.”¹⁸ In many respects, the exhibition promoted art as “a refuge from oppression; as a means of resistance; as a way to mobilize solidarity; as a response to crisis; as an adaptation to adversity.”¹⁹ Although the exhibition little approached the city as an everyday living organism without directly engaging in issues about the Greek crisis, the curatorial oratory produced its own political and theoretical notion about Athens. Based on contemporary art post-colonial sensibilities on diversity, the exhibition was related to questions of immigration, racism, or xenophobia, directly understood as democratizing

14 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

15 Hili Perlson, “The Tao of Szymczyk: Documenta 14 Curator Says to Understand His Show, Forget Everything You Know,” *Artnet*, (2017). <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/adam-szymczyk-press-conference-documenta-14-916991>.

16 Paul B. Preciado, “Athenian Revolts,” *Libération*, (2016).

17 Szymczyk, “Documenta 14: Learning from Athens,” 243

18 Ibid.

19 Andrew-Stefan Weiner, “The Art Of The Possible: With And Against Documenta.” *Biennial Foundation Magazine*, (2017). <https://biennialfoundation.org/2017/08/art-possible-documenta-14/>

art-curatorial practices. In this context, the promotion of diversity through artistic forms took on the responsibility of connecting emotions and experiences between artworks and audiences. Giving the message that the effects of neoliberalism started with the Greek situation and applied globally, the works of around 160 participating artists presented a range of readymade practices and concepts “from here” that could also be delivered somewhere else, which were intertwined with the general issues of global society, though avoiding the specific topics of the Athenian society.

Although the project “Learning from Athens” did not provide remarkable works concerning social-political realities in Athens, the display literally embedded itself within the city’s physical and cultural fabric. The artworks, apart from the public and private cultural venues, were spread across the city; in archaeological sites, universities, theaters, cinemas, parks, archives, squares, streets, clubs, shops, parks, paths, workspaces, apartments, and even Athens First Cemetery sometimes for only to find one single artwork, to listen to sounds, or to see a locked empty building.²⁰ Documenta introduced a range of heterogeneous arts-led place-making practices, transforming land uses in terms of artistic creativity. Thus, the exhibition guide functioned as a touristic guide, sending art viewers around in circles or to the opposite end of town to discover the obscure sites of the Athenian urban space. According to Szymczyk, “these places one should visit when coming to the city and not just go up and down the rock.”²¹ Following the strategy of the creation of cultural activities’ pockets, Documenta 14 imported new areas for real estate speculation (e.g., Exarhia, Koukaki or Victoria Square) except for the districts of Gazi, Keramikos, and Metaxourgeio where the gentrification process had advanced enough, having incorporated marginal gentrifiers and independent artists alongside more affluent professionals. And, although Athens cannot be compared with the traditional European art hubs such as London, Paris or Berlin, the project “Learning of Athens” fundamentally affected the Athenian urban transformation, putting the city into perspective for the production of trans-locality related mainly to global markets’ dynamics.

Rebranding Athens

On the occasion of the exhibition of Documenta 14, mainstream media, which already had played a vital role in the dissemination of stereotypes during the economic crisis through the attribution of the crisis’ roots to

20 It is about the work of Maria Eichhorn “Building as Unowned Property,” an empty Athenian Neoclassical building in Patisia acquired in funding from Zurich’s Migros Museum, aiming to turn it into art studios or residencies.

21 Deutsche Welle, “Documenta Art Director Warns Against Nationalism,” interview by Adam Szymczyk, (2017). <https://www.dw.com/en/documenta-art-director-warns-against-nationalism/a-38234426>.

Greek culture²² proposed Athens as the New Berlin first appeared in 2015 in the German newspaper «Die Zeit» under the title “Is Athens the New Berlin?,” while others like BBC and New York Times indicated Athens as the potential new arts capital of Europe. Although Berlin was, and is in a range of ways particular and shaped by framing conditions that are nowhere else to be found, the comparison between Berlin and Athens mainly concerned the availability of space in the center of Athens, which in many ways did not repeat Berlin’s history. The crucial role had the reunion of Berlin that, accompanied by an oversupply of abandoned buildings and outdoor spaces on the eastern side, produced alternative living conditions for creative professionals who transformed the city into one of the world’s foremost centers for cultural events, resulting the rise of creative industries, and cultural enterprises that contributed to the city’s designation as “Creative City Berlin.” Without any doubt, for the last forty years, “Berlin was a massive turnover of properties, brought markets to play a previously unheard-of role in new urban changes.”²³

In the case of Athens, creativity works mainly literary for culture-based place-making. The development of Athenian neighborhoods as new “creative districts” such as Exarhia, Metaxourgeio, and Koukaki for example, is based on the domination by new economic activities, new forms of work and employment patterns, as well as new land uses. Creativity, having the role of a strong marketing tool has become a new index for the appropriation of the Athenian districts by leisure, culture, and tourist enterprises. As the author, Eric Weiner, put it, “places such as ancient Athens, or Silicon Valley today, are creative because they attract smart, ambitious people.”²⁴

According to the media, Athenian creativity was imprinted on the walls of the vacant buildings, which were covered with tagging, graffiti, stenciling, and murals even though the streets were inhabited by a population of unemployed, homeless, immigrants, and drug users; i.e., the remains left behind the welfare state’s collapse. Thus, Athenian creativity is a result of the “Greek crisis.” Specifically, Athens was supposed to experience a cultural renaissance, becoming the new Mecca for street art. Athens was promoted as an ideal place of provocative aesthetics and political radicalization, while graffiti was considered an artistic tourist-worthy product full of anti-materialistic, anti-panoptic perspectives and disordered, and multicultural humanist sentiments. According to the sociologist Vassilis Vambakas it is about a “positive orientalist approach bearing signs of renewed classism that do not be interpreted by the usual schemes that

22 International media interpreted the economic Greek crisis as a crisis of the national identity: Greece failed to reform where necessary due to the domination of the traditional political culture that is to be blamed for the failed transition since to postwar European modernity. See: Hara Kouki, Antonis Liakos, “Narrating the Story of a Failed National Transition: Discourses on the Greek Crisis, 2010-2014,” *Historein* 15, (2015).

23 Matthias Bernt, et al., *The Berlin Reader: A Compendium on Urban Change and Activism* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013): 110.

24 Eric Weiner, *The Geography of Genius: A Search for the World’s Most Creative Places from Ancient Athens to Silicon Valley* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 29.

examine graffiti in terms of a counter-culture, but as a result of a social and politically volatile and disrupted situation."²⁵ In other words, the city's struggles with riots, the wide-reaching ramifications of the refugee crisis and the high unemployment rates having transformed urban space into a realm of radical tactics—protests, squatting, guerrilla gardening, and urban occupations—were considered the seductive realm of radical aesthetics by the media, and the global art world.

Indeed, the urban space of Athens, affected by the policies implemented during the economic crisis, stressed the concept of spontaneity within a range of mobilizations as a counter-discourse to the stigmatization of bankruptcy.²⁶ The emergence of a strong, diverse social movement turned Athens into a battlefield of conflicting interests, where grassroots dynamics played a significant role in the spatialization of resistance in the city's public space.

Those actions of reclaiming hegemony over state power, the capital, and the commons transformed Athens into a socio-political laboratory that attracted the attention of activists, researchers and artists, both local, and foreign. Putting into play the notion of colonialism in its literal sense, the inflow of individuals in particular Athenian districts produced creative poles that forced urban class domination over the inhabitants.²⁷ The "creative clustering" under the political vocabulary of purification and rationalization of the inner city, particularly in the area of Exarhia, which was considered a "ghetto" and "avato" intertwined with the broader Athens security problem, introduced versions of an alternative hype cultural lifestyle brought markets to play an unheard-of role of re-assessing property values. The setting up of the art professionals in the area was accompanied bundle of new social characteristics as well as new enterprises and amenities that redefined and reshaped the identity of the area, rendering it attractive to the "creative class."²⁸ In many ways, the German institution installed in Exarhia a cosmopolitanism that first met the desires of property developers, having created corporate forms of cultural homogenization.

Exarhia has a distinct role in Athenian urban space due to the student uprising at the National Technical University in 1973, which is situated on its borders, helping bring down the military dictatorship. Till 2017, Exarhia was a neighborhood of cultural improvisation where inhabitants interplayed and invented tactics aimed at consolidating and reinforcing common communitarian bonds through squats and community centers like the Social Solidarity Network, Navarinou Park, and "Steki Metanaston"

25 Vassilis Vamvakas, "Athens an Alternative City. Graffiti and Radical Tourism," in *Political and Cultural Aspect of Greek Exoticism*, ed. by Panayis Panagiotopoulos, Dimitris, P. Sotiropoulos (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 153-166.

26 Between 2010 - 2014, in Athens took place 6,266 rallies and mobilizations, according to the official estimates

27 Alexandri, "Planning Gentrification and the "Absent" State in Athens."

28 Richard, Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

(immigrant's center). Also, networks of Political and Social rights, such as El Chef or "Piso Thrana." Through the artists' clustering, Exarhia, which was under strict state surveillance, intertwined with the solution of forced repression, after the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos by the police, in December 2008,²⁹ absolutely has been transformed into a tourist zone that has changed its character from a residential area to a tourist accommodation area. Particularly, the emphasis of Preciado in Exarhia through "top-down" discourses such as "Exarhia is the schizophrenic daughter of a violent and dysfunctional family, permanently associating with a sense of conflict between anarchists and police,"³⁰ crucially depoliticized the radical political movements activated in the area, creating the product of a lifestyle bohemian anarchism³¹ that enriches the Athenian urban space with new codes and symbolisms besides its traditional classical heritage. Interestingly, Documenta 14 transformed local identities through the process of making space for entertainment and leisure.

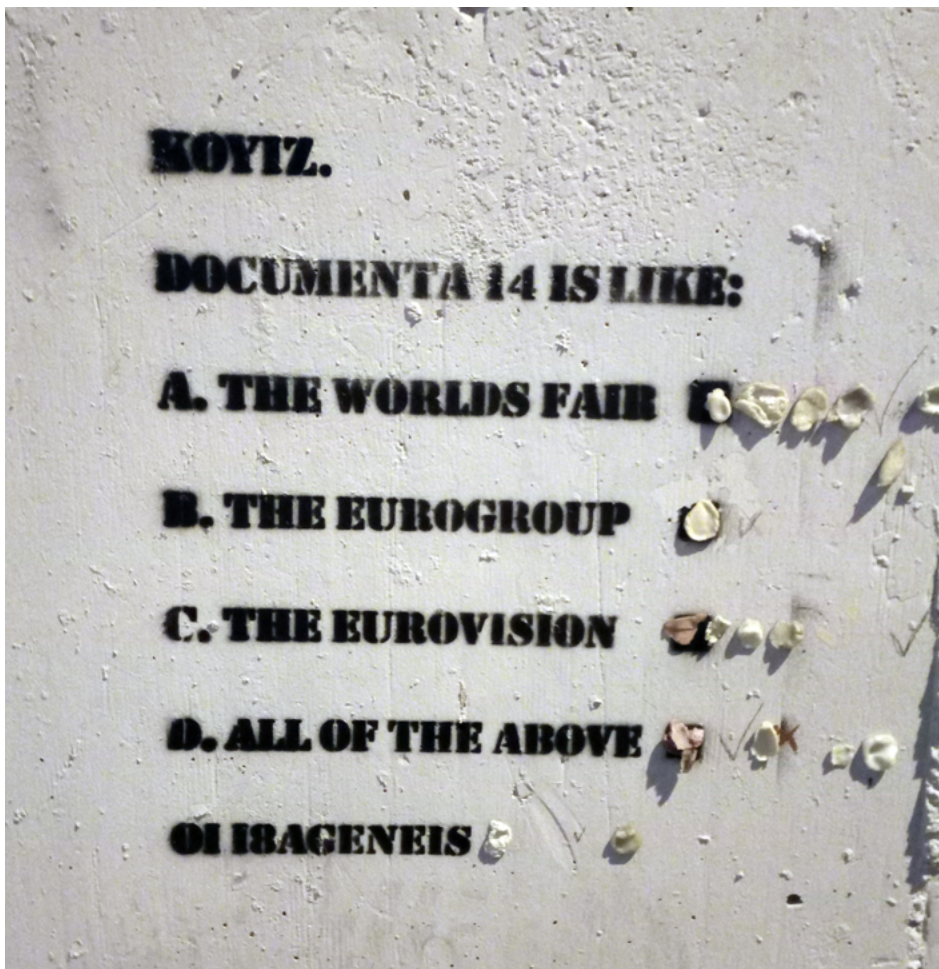


FIG. 1 "Stencil at Kallirois str. in Athens." Photo by Styliani Bolonaki (February 2018).

29 The murder of the fifteen-year-old by the police caused protests and riots in Athens that lasted three weeks and spread throughout Greece. These actions were not only a reaction against police brutality but a more general manifestation of protest against government corruption and its economic policy.

30 Preciado, "Athenian revolts."

31 Many travel companies identify Exarhia under the brand "Sweet Sins and Anarchy."

Documenta 14: Place-making Tactics

The project of Documenta 14 succeeded in creative place-making initiatives that worked as a strategy for Athens's urban renewal, resulting in the overcrowding of artworks in public spaces, which intensified social segregation by destroying integrated communities and creating segregated ones. The curatorial tactics of Documenta set the stage for extensive disinvestment in neighborhoods, communities, and coalitions, letting behind the needs of low-income households and communities of color in Athens.

For example, the Victoria Square Project, an empty store in a pedestrian street within a short distance of Victoria Square, was proposed as a "safe" and creative space for the area. Victoria Square Project, established by artist Rick Lowe in the exhibition frame of Documenta 14, calling his work "social sculpture," i.e. an evolving social and artistic experiment space offering contemporary art at the scale of the neighborhood, has established itself as the main stage for the cultural and social development of the district. The square, once the center of Athenian upper-class society, has been highly affected maybe more than other areas of Athens by the refugee crisis, having transformed into a crossroads for immigrants and refugees newly settled or passing through Greece. In 2016, migrant solidarity activists broke City Plaza's Hotel locks, giving 400 stranded people a home. Over the next year, City Plaza grew into the best-known of over a dozen squats that housed refugees in Athens.

Although the district is a diverse immigrant-rich, Victoria Square Project, in collaboration with the Municipality of Athens, and organizations such as Monumenta, Goethe Institute of Athens or Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, seeks the district "regain the glory of the past," under the wish of the Ministry of Citizen Protection and the Municipality of Athens. Thus, today Victoria Square Project and its commissions organize experimental curatorial projects, educational programs, gatherings, and walks around the neighborhood. Sometimes Victoria Square Project occupies the plaza with art installations such as the colossal work "We Apologize," in 2021, feeding the district with streams of art consumerism which gradually "expel migrants and poor to the social, cultural, and economic margin."³²

Creative place-making initiatives by Documenta shifted to the artist's role in building new communities and establishing a cohesive public space character, connecting arts and cultural experiences with urban revitalization. Such was the artwork of "Shamiyaana-Food for Thought: Thought for Change," by the artist Rasheed Araeen promoted as a gesture of hospitality. The work, in front of the City Hall of Athens, concerned a colorful Pakistan wedding tent that was exclusively inviting the audiences of Documenta to enjoy a Mediterranean meal. The work was under the scenario of a

32 Malcom Miles, "A Post-Creative City?," *Revista crítica de ciências sociais* 99, (2013): 124.

communal kitchen and free food being distributed under the auspices of an artwork. This socially engaged art practice was downgrading, concealing, and maybe mocking the strong social kitchen movement in Athens that was run by NGOs, parishes, local companies, and individuals, feeding those inhabitants who had difficulty coping with basic needs such as food or heating.³³ This kind of spatial commodification contributed to the creation of creative place-making patterns, in many ways enriching cultural tourism. On the other hand, those place-making tactics became opportunities for urban regeneration by “newcomers” and local wealthy-class suburbanites. Certainly, the embedding of art projects into the Athenian urban space did not concern either the residents or the local social movements, and art collectives, specifically when these movements expressed their contrasts against Documenta through a real bombing of tags and stencils in Athenian streets.³⁴ That made the creative dynamics of Documenta in Athens contradictory and ambivalent.

The curatorial strategies of Documenta 14 focused on creating new symbolic value in Athens and simultaneously displacing existing socio-political meanings of the Athenian space. For example, the twelve-day event of ‘Exercises of Freedom’ under the project “The Parliament of Bodies” curated by Preciado, took place in the Municipality Art Center and Museum of Anti-dictatorial and Democratic Resistance of Parko Eleftherias (Freedom Park). Within the context of the assembly, Preciado transformed a significant historic place into a meeting point for intellectuals, artists, and audiences to discuss the hot topics of the Western art curatorial context: biopolitics, violence, indigeneity, LGBTQI+ rights, and activist practices. The choice of Documenta to host its gatherings in a place used by Greece’s military dictatorship to interrogate prisoners during the 1970s junta some Greeks found provocative if not insulting. In general, activating regions where history was fragile and fluid, the approach of Documenta 14 to the Greek junta in many ways was nostalgic, sentimental, and confident, offering “easy meanings, emphasizing strong, charming images produced to captivate its international audience.”³⁵

Indeed, Documenta erasure and replaced much of Athenian historical narratives through a process that combined “forgetting” with historical

33 According to the curator Iliana Fokianaki, while the artwork Araeen was taking place, an invigilator was trying to explain to a hungry Greek pensioner that he had to stand up because this was not a food bank but an artwork. See: Iliana Fokianaki, & Yanis Varoufakis, “We Come Bearing Gifts,” *Art Agenda*, (2017). <https://www.art-agenda.com/criticism/240266/we-come-bearing-gifts-iliانا-fokianaki-and-yanis-varoufakis-on-documenta-14-athens>.

34 During the exhibition of Documenta 14 the art collective Artists Against Evictions/AAE was directed against Documenta, the Mayor of Athens, and the state policy on immigration through the international art magazine E-Flux, complaining about the evictions of occupations and the expulsion of refugees in Exarhia on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition. See: “Open Letter to the Viewers, Participants and Cultural Workers of Documenta 14,” E-Flux (2017). <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/open-letter-to-the-viewers-participants-and-cultural-workers-of-documenta-14/6393>.

35 Despina Zefkili, “Exercises of Freedom: Documenta 14,” *Third Text*, (n.d.). <http://thirdtext.org/exercises-freedom-documenta14>.

revisionism to privilege its group to promote new narratives for Athens and its places. The connotations of the creative place-making tactics of Documenta were that: no one project was responsible for social and political change. On the contrary, the curatorial objective was the creation of a village of like-minded people, artists, businesses, and policymakers to effect urban change. Thus, the creative place-making practices did not have a fixed structure being intrinsically linked to the specific characteristics of each location or neighborhood.

According to Jacques Rancière, “aesthetics of politics” comprises “forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ and ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community.”³⁶ In this sense, aesthetics, an integral of an art institution such as Documenta, produced seductive conditions, and instilled the desires of its global audience, creating spectacular exclusionary places, parallel displacing and disempowering the political meaning of those places.

In this frame a crucial artwork was “No Stopping, No Parking, No Loading—Unity Hall” by Ibrahim Mahama, who uses material-tattered jute sacks draped over buildings, concealing their features. In Athens, Mahama chose the location in front of the Greek Parliament, i.e., the central square of Athens, which has served as the starting and ending point for many assemblies and demonstrations. Mahama invited the Athenians to cover the square with jute sacks, organizing an art festival that exclusively addressed the art audience. The work depoliticized the meaning of a significant Athenian spot: Syntagma square, which from September 3, 1843, through today functions as the main spot of sociopolitical claims, and protests.

As the architect Aristide Antonas pointed out, today, indeed, we no longer deny this depoliticization. Under protocols—a keyword that has become quite banal in contemporary discourse as sovereignty—are co-created architectural projects as platforms of social potency. In a sense, that was the power of the place-making policy of Documenta. The German Institution, like the rest of global cultural industries today, used the post-colonial protocols of contemporary art to render creativity both as a naïve social-political concept and as an attempt of describing a new type of cultural power that replaces or displaces urban society to a functional caricature of society.

36 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. G. Rockhill, (London, New York: Continuum, 2004): 13.

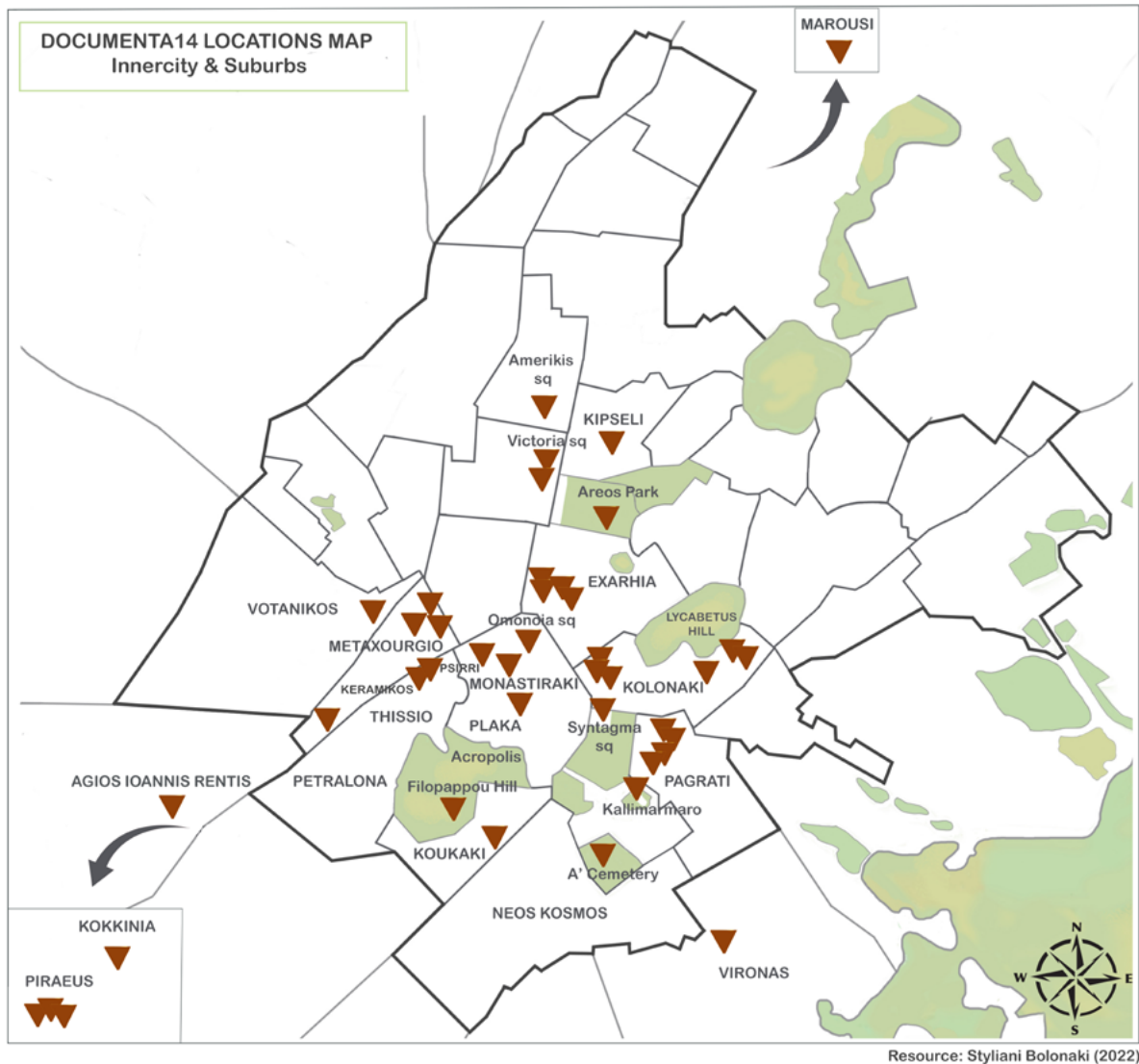


FIG. 2 "Documenta 14 locations map." Design by Styliani Bolonaki (2022).

Conclusion

The text narrates the roots of Athens's urban touristification, focusing on the exhibition of Documenta 14, "Learning from Athens," which functioned as a performative action into Athenian public spaces, changing its status quo. In solidarity with impoverished Greece, Documenta 14 shared its budget evenly between Kassel and Athens, within the veneer of a left-wing narrative against neoliberalism to a purely extractive neocolonial project framed as a gift to Greece, adding insult to injury. Even as the exhibition powerfully affirmed the ability of art to represent all injustices, Documenta as an art institution functions under contaminated conditions. Thus it cannot be separated from power and, therefore, from inequality, if not exploitation of the Greek crisis as an art product.

Documenta invited almost two hundred artists and thousand art critics, journalists, and art viewers to Athens to observe what was happening there under its view, transforming Athens both culturally and materially.

Culturally, the place-making tactics of Documenta transformed the milieu of Athenian places by downgrading local communities, marginalized ethnic groups, and other vulnerable populations by the newcomers who reinforced Athenian cultural cosmopolitanism. On a material level, the transformations of places in cultural infrastructure, the reused of public spaces, and the conversion of vacant houses and stores into art-run spaces and art residencies animated the urban space, rejuvenated the cultural structures and streetscapes, improved the local entertainment and leisure businesses, raised the short-term rentals, and brought the international art world to celebrate and be inspired by the exhibition, radically changing the future of Athens.

Eventually, Athens's re-branding and its management have built the foundations of new forms of exoticism for facing the current increasing cities' competition in the Global South regarding investment and tourism; the notion of the creative city, which considers creativity indelibly connected with the urban regeneration mechanisms significantly impacts on social-political physiognomy of Athenian districts. Athens's promotion as a creative cell formed a climate of newcomers clustering in the neighborhoods, recognized in this gathering the emergence of hype of an alternative subculture, which serves the tourism industry and the Airbnb platform, having already created problems for former residents of the middle and lower socio-economic classes who are forced to move to the Athenian suburbs due to skyrocketing rents in the inner city. The forced creative gentrification has also transformed Athens from a one-stop destination during the summer months into a city break destination for the whole year, affecting several changes in local activities such as the closure of stores that address the needs of permanent residents and the opening of stores primarily aimed at visitors. In many respects, when capital follows the artist into gentrified localities, it is assured of the economic future of the recreation and touristic infrastructures while the diverse local cultural businesses are being pushed out of the city. At any rate, creative city policy eliminates cultural diversity into the restrictive framework of one-dimensional and homogeneous commercial global culture, benefiting mostly the economic, social-political, and cultural elites in Athens. On the other hand, property speculation in Athens moves the still unsolved social problems that plagued the inner city out to the suburbs.

Thus, arguments on creative city mechanisms should enjoin related critical questions about the future socio-political sustainability of cities. The transformation of cities to creative should mainly prioritize in reduces inequalities through as much possible bottom-up urban politics of social care. From the moment segregation and exclusion are spread to societies, cultural-led urban innovations should face marginalization. Athens proves that urban policies that use art as the main urban transformation

apparatus create populations that are non-belonging anymore or belong nowhere. Currently, the social inequality between a hopeless society and the autocratic mechanism of urban control seems to be the future of Athens as well as the future of the cities in European South.

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