

P4 reflection

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Project title :

Drifting space: Mitigating the case of Athens

relationship research /design

Motivation for this project was the current refugee crisis in Europe, however (although) it is a fact that it extends to migration generally as a phenomenon. Many studies are researching the political, economic and social aspects of migration neglecting the spatial dimension, and more specifically the expression of migration in the urban fabric and life. Migration is a very complex phenomenon, thus, in order to acquire a basic understanding, all its aspects must be taken into consideration, despite the fact that main focus is the spatial dimension.

In my case, the final product, and to a certain extent, the whole theme of the thesis, stemmed from the research. It is rather appropriate to say that the synthesis of my whole process, of the final products as well as the analytical and theoretical framework, was not a linear process, because migration is not a linear phenomenon. Stepping from one scale to another, reading new theories and concepts every day, analyzing specific conditions and examples made my thesis rather challenging for me. Throughout the year I changed many times research question and problem statement because, every new approach I studied offered something new.

I started this graduation with project location the whole Europe and its migration flows. However, my research, both theoretical and analytical, led me to understand that migration should be viewed in a general level but analyzed in a specific context. I had to dive in the specifications of the small and almost architectural scale. Consequently, my end product is local, spatial strategies that evaluate and mitigate the frictions, the conflicts and the juxtapositions between locals and immigrants, in their daily life. Meaning, the design of flexible urban structures to deal with the various demands in housing, working and public life of the fluctuating residents' number, and the suggestion of urban tools for better governance and communication between the diverse actors of the area.

My research can be divided in two main parts, the theoretical and the analytical, even though the latter derives from the former and vice versa. The theoretical framework (diagram 1) was the tool to achieve the necessary level of comprehension regarding migration. It has four main categories, the migration theories, the socio-spatial theories, the spatial theories, and the theory that formed my approach. Migration theories, helped me understand the reasons for peoples' movement, the spatial theories

helped in identifying the characteristics of the urban fabric and the socio-spatial theories linked all the above together. They combined the social and spatial repercussions of migration and they gave me a basic understanding of the complexity that stems from the current migration flows. Finally, the theory that formed my strategy was Lefebvre's "Right for the city". In combination with all the previous theories, Lefebvre gave me the tools to explore the action/reaction between daily system and urban structures and suggest actions towards social and spatial inclusion.

The analytical framework is mostly divided through scales. In the European scale, I researched laws and regulations, the migration flows and history, as well as planning systems. In the national and city scale that, through international comparison, I understood similarities and differences in immigration clustering, the relation of immigrants population and basic structures, the ways that different cities are dealing with this phenomenon and of course the need for contextualizing. Then in the municipal and local scale, the research in both social and spatial structures of Athens, provided the specific problems and potentialities of the location.

Both the analytical and the theoretical framework provided an opportunity to go beyond the visible, to understand the deep social, political and spatial issues that compose the current situation, to finally link immigration with space in all the levels and to identify the key friction elements. Based on Lefebvre I studied in depth the daily system of the actors, the different spaces that they occupy and their tangible and intangible characteristics. Specifically I studied the "spatial practice", meaning the functions and the way that people use space, "The representation of space", the specific urban structures, the open spaces, the buildings and their morphology. And finally the "space of representation", the actual lived space and its symbolic meaning to the different groups and actors. The different meanings of the space are actually the friction factors for immigrants and locals, thus my strategy focuses on suggesting new spatial practices, like cultural spaces, temporary residence and joint business for immigrants and locals depending on the existing spatial structures. I am focusing in designing new flexible representations of space, like kiosks and pedestrian streets that can facilitate the needs of the different groups in order to create a new, collective space of representation.

Complex cities Migration and the case of Athens

"Complex cities" is a studio that encourages its students to explore dynamic and emergent processes in the urban environment. The current globalization processes in combination with the rapid urbanization that characterize the contemporary cities, compose an extremely diverse and heterogeneous cityscape. The mission of the studio, is to understand the spatial processes of a city from all the different perspectives (social, economic, political etc.) and propose spatial strategies to address the issues that can be generated by this new global reality.

Living in the era of complexity and connection, the flows of people, money and information create dichotomies, prosperity and development are very delicate and controversial issues that do not necessarily mean equality. The new reality is composed on one side, by numerous scales and actors that strive to fulfill their needs and on the other, by rigid urban structures and policies that fail to adapt in the new conditions. As a result, informality, poverty, socio-spatial segregation and decay of the urban structures became some of the major issues in contemporary cities.

In "Complex cities" studio, Urbanists, with their understanding and their knowledge about the spatial processes are called to act as mediators between the various stakeholders and as spatial organizers, in

order to ensure an equal future of all the different actors. Their role is to view and reflect on the processes, to link them in the different scales of planning and governance and suggest spatial structures that can adopt in the specific spatial, social and economic issues.

Migration as a phenomenon, is one of the reasons for this complexity. From the ancient times, the movement of people from one place to the other was sometimes a necessity. Today, with the evolution in information technology and new means of transportation, the flows of people are rapidly increasing thus altering cities in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural hubs. In this complex space the opportunities and the resources, human, economical or spatial, are unevenly distributed, resulting in great inequalities. Especially in the case of illegal immigration, in which the people are striving to deal with survivability problems and simultaneously facing the negligence or even the hostility of locals and state.

The city of Athens is a perfect example, that fits in this profile. Athens is a global city, that has high immigration and emigration flows. It is an arrival city for illegal immigrants while at the same time local are fleeing the city in a search of a better future. The current economic crisis in combination with one of the worst planning systems in Europe, has created problems in almost all of the aspects of life for the residents. Phenomenon that is exacerbating, by the conflict for the few resources that remain, from locals and immigrant alike. Athens, a heterogeneous and complex city, as a case study and immigration, a global and multilayered phenomenon, as the main focus, establish this thesis a "Complex city" project, even though its focusing in small/architectural scale.

Methodology of "Complex cities" and "Drifting space"

Three of the most prominent methods that are suggested by "Complex cities" studio are the spatial phenomenology, multi-layered mapping and cross-scalar analysis. The first one is about understanding the phenomena and extract conclusions based on them. The second is about identifying the dynamic layers/aspects that exist in a specific context and express them in their spatial form. Finally, cross-scalar analysis is about understanding the different networks and the relations that link elements in different scales.

My thesis is mostly phenomenological. My whole process is based on analyzing the various phenomena that engulfs migration and its spatial dimension (diagram 2). However, in every step I used the other two methods and the theoretical framework to verify my conclusions. As I have mentioned, my project started with studying migration in Europe, but my final product is in local scale. Gradually, after mapping the migration flows, the planning systems, the laws and the clustering of migrants in Europe, I separated the countries in three main categories, and I chose one city from each to analyze. At the same time based on certain criteria I identified the most vulnerable groups, thus focusing on them.

By a multilayer (social infrastructures, actors, policies, future plans, social conditions and morphology) and multiscale (National, regional, city scales) international comparison I selected my case study and according to my theoretical background I found the specific aspects (housing, working, public life) that my thesis is focused on. Even though, through my research I have a basic understanding of the metropolitan processes, the focus and the in-depth analysis stayed in the small scale, because the demands of the project didn't allow me to expand in other scales nor to multiple countries. As the project progressed, the research in Athenian context started. The immigration activity, the existing urban strategies and laws, the urban structures and the actors are the main of the researched factors in the case study. By mapping the networks, by analyzing the history and the demographics of the area as

well as with interviews from the residents and actors from the municipality. By understanding the small scales and their processes that link them with the existing urban planning tools, my strategy started to be formed. I am focusing in creating new collective associations that can help in the operability of the project, new mechanisms that correspond to the architectural scale and local strategies for the metropolitan center.

To conclude, the methods that has been used in the thesis are in relation with those from complex cities. They helped me deal with the complexity of the site both spatially and socially. To grasp the essence of the friction and to suggest strategic actions that can mitigate and evaluate the current and future situation.

“Drifting space” and the wider social context

Immigration as an issue is by definition social. Its most common results are segregation, racism and xenophobia, phenomena that can damage the cohesion and the prosperity of any society. Nowadays we are witnessing exactly those phenomena inflicting Europe as a continent and by extension Athens as a city. Terrorism attacks, fences around the borders and an underlying fear create a hostile environment for every immigrant. The reluctance of Europe to adopt in the new circumstances and the lack of flexible structures in the cities, made the “others” unwanted. Immigrants as a group not only they are being excluded but sometimes prosecuted as well. This climate, this fear is tearing apart the notion that EU was based on, like solidarity and equality, creating deteriorating social and spatial structures.

Especially in Athens, this fear is continuously raising. In the context of the economic crisis, locals and immigrants are struggling to maintain, or achieve respectively, a certain standard of living. In the case of immigrants it is common to have a poor living quality. Some of the immigrants’ societies lack basic infrastructures and amenities. Consequently they are pushed to criminality and to exploitation. They work most of the times in the informal sector, or in the formal sector as informal workers. Thus continuously trapped in a circle of poverty, with limited chance for escape it. On the other hand the locals having survivability problems themselves, are slowly turned towards the right-winged party “Golden Dawn” and to the notion that the root of their problems are the immigrants. Thus, either they abandon their neighborhoods and their public life, living empty structures and a decayed open space, or they express, most of the times violently, their frustration onto the immigrants in an effort to reclaim their former urban life. Those socio-spatial context in combination with the collapse of municipal and national governance from the weight those exacerbating problems, lead to tremendous frictions inside the society.

There is an urge to understand that immigrants can be a force of development. It is now a necessity need for creating strong platforms for communication between the diverse groups and actors and transforming the urban planning system and structures into flexible tools to facilitate and evaluate the needs for all them. Thought the participatory, actor based design that I suggest, all of the interest groups can start to interact in a different way, there is a dire need of awareness especially for immigrants and locals. With the design mechanism as well as the new functions that are composing my strategy, the official vision meets the needs of the locals and the immigrants, helping them to evolve in a social and economic way. The final product is an effort to connect the bottom up, emergent processes with the top down approach that exists in Athens currently, creating a new hybrid space that people can achieve a harmonic symbiosis.

Diagram 1

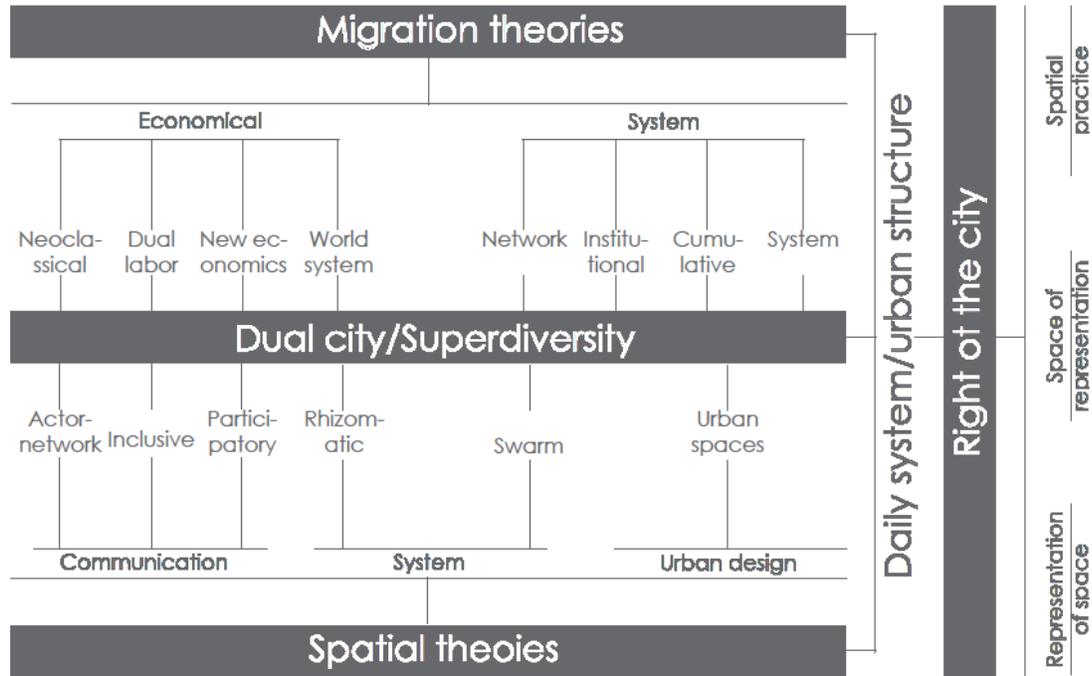


Diagram 2

