Questioning urban myths

P5 Reflection

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Project title
Questioning urban myths: In search for co-existence and integration in Athens

Aspect 1: The relation between research and design

Through demographics, socio-economic, ethnicity and density maps, as well as through societal trends and notions, there have been identified parts of the city as segments with special characteristics. They are separated as “rest” or “non active city parts”. These parts of the city are often represented in debates and media as obstacles of urban security and order. Such perceptions form a barrier to the urban community’s social cohesiveness. These “clusters” are the parts of the city where urban myths find place. They may be seen as gaps or holes in the city’s structure but they cannot be considered as voids, empty of uses and users as the research evinces.

This project aims in socio spatial integration of minority groups by making the reality of the centre of the city obvious to everyone and strengthen its potentialities. The long-term vision of this project is that of co-existence in the centre of the city, considering all the possible groups as part of the same society and questioning existing social “myths”.

The strategic planning framework proposed along with the design proposal-interventions in the specific location tries to reconnect the socio-spatial fragments to the rest of the city. Through actions that require partipatory and collective planning and base on the recognition of the existing conditions of the area, the proposal bases in small scale interventions in public space using the potentialities of the area.

Aspect 2: The relationship between the theme of the studio and the subject/case study chosen within this framework (Gerani cluster)

The theme of the graduation studio which is under the Explore Lab is: “Fear and Loathing in Athens: Shifting Perspectives of Space”. It focuses on assymetries arising in the city of Athens as an aftermath of the widespread crisis along the Southern Europe. Therefore, there has been selected a part of the city centre of Athens as an area to be researched along with the studios approach. Each of the five students chose a more specific location which in my case was the area “Gerani”, a cluster right in the city centre. The selection of the location, has to do with the need to forward the studio’s statement which is the “Fear of Otherness and social segregation in Athens” into a concrete proposal that addresses this issue recognised. Therefore, by identifying the specific urban fragment and reconnecting it to the rest of the city, there is proposed a specific method to approach the rest city-fragments, and try to answer to the main statement of the studio.

Aspect 3: The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the studio and the method chosen by the student in this framework

For my graduation studio the methodical line of approach of the studio refers to a collective analytical framework of how to approach the main topic of the studio, while the methodology used to proceed with my
individual project is a set of tools and instruments that try to answer the personal research questions. First of all the key method is research through time. A timeline that starts from the creation of the Modern Greek state (1832) until now, trying to unpack the existing situation in Athens. As part of a collective research we see which events during history affected directly or indirectly the form of the physical space. As a second step, we tried as a studio to focus on the materiality of the existing situation in Athens, based in investigating the central part of the city that shares asymmetries. There have been selected specific public spaces of the city centre (case studies) to be analyzed and compared according to their use (and users), historical or monumental reference, location in the city, accessibility form of public space and urban characteristics around them. Literature study plays an important part on this part of the research as we should define the meaning of public space in the case of Greece and Athens, and see the transformation of public space because of the crisis. In the same time, in order to be able to understand the socio-spatial character of these spaces there have been interviews of various people (users, citizens, stakeholders) as well as discussions with people that are dealing with the current situation in Greece in a academic, research or professional level. As far as the methodological line used to approach my individual project, it seems to goes along with the second step of the second part of the collective method used for the studio. Mapping the existing conditions of the specific location chosen, literature studies to base my theoretical framework-base for my main hypothesis, data research to engage the maximum of the information possible for the current situation, and observations to achieve a better understanding of the socio-spatial needs, demands and character of the area.

Aspect 4: The relationship between the project and the wider social context

The economic crisis of Greece and events related to it, forms a part of an ‘ongoing financial crisis’ that depletes many European countries with those of the South Europe being affected the most. Political decisions, austerity measures and bailout programs are being constantly updated in order to deal with the crisis. In the same time the financial crisis is having political and social consequences: unemployment, poverty, immigration, drug trafficking, rise of extreme right parties, violence and homeless people and many more.

All of these issues are expressed in the city centre and have direct effect to the physical space. In Athens, as described earlier, the decay of the urban environment is increasing and there is an intense societal demand to provide strategies as solutions that address these phenomena. The society is expecting policies and ways to reconsider and improve the environment of the city centre that is in decay. This project addresses public spaces in the city centre through planning and proposing alternatives to bring quality to the urban environment in terms of diversity in uses and users.

For these reasons we can claim that this project relates to the current needs of a society whose reality is being shifting and challenged constantly.

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1 Wikipedia for the “European sovereign-debt crisis”: The European sovereign-debt crisis (often referred to as the Eurozone crisis) is an ongoing financial crisis that has made it difficult or impossible for some countries in the euro area to repay or re-finance their government debt without the assistance of third parties (Last access 12/01/2013)