Impossible is nothing (unless otherwise stated): Balancing between memory and art in Parko Eleftherias and the Polytechneio

ABSTRACT
This article explores Parko Eleftherias ('Liberty Park') and Athens Polytechnic (Polytechneio), two historical places linked with the period of the Greek military Junta (1967–74), and their position in the urban life of contemporary Athens. Focus is placed on the limits of artistic expression tolerated in those two historical places, examining different attitudes towards them. We discuss the so-called public programmes organized in the framework of documenta 14 (d14) in Parko Eleftherias, aiming to an extent to bring the dark heritage of the EAT-ESA (Eidiko Anakritiko Tmima – Elliniki Stratiotiki Astynomia = Special Interrogation Centre – Greek Military Police) into light. In the second part, we contrast that case, where all performances were conducted freely and under legal permission, with the 2015 Polytechneio graffiti incident, when artists covered overnight the...

KEYWORDS
Athens
difficult heritage
memory
gentrification
street art
documenta 14
Twelve metres from your doorstep,
there is a fire in the Chimeio [chemistry department],
but you are stuck in the Polytechneio.
Shadows of revolution,
you wander in the square of EAT-ESA
(P. Sidiropoulos, ‘Of the National Reconciliation’ [1989])

They’ve aged us prematurely, Yorgos, do you realise?

The period of the Junta (the Military Dictatorship of 1967–74) is a popular historical subject in Greece but has been marginal in academic research (Antoniou et al. 2017: 281). Although the Ministry of Education officially commemorates the 17 November, and history textbooks dedicate a few pages to the event,1 the Junta as such is not adequately diffused in the formal educational system. Knowledge about that period is unequally divided between two extremes. On the one hand, the national commemoration of the Polytechneio uprising (14–17 November 1973), established by the PA.SO.K government in 1981, honours the revolt that ended with the breach of the Polytechnic School gate by a tank and the assassination of students by covert police agents. The day is honoured annually in schools while all political parties pay their dues in commemoration ceremonies, aiming to gain political capital from this (Dafermos 2013: 101). On the other hand, public memory concerning the Junta is fragmented, silenced and compromised (Antoniou et al. 2017: 288). Traumatic memories are repressed, and a regime of silence is adopted, overwhelmed by the Polytechneio as a symbol of resistance (Panourgíá 2009). This regime of silence either was enforced top-down, or was self-imposed due to grief, shame or fear of trauma transmission (Antoniou et al. 2017: 289).

During the Junta, the headquarters of the regime’s military police (EAT-ESA) were situated at Parko Eleftherias, in Athens. In 1969, the European commission on Human Rights took measures to expel Greece from the Council of Europe on the grounds of systematic use of torture (Kornetis 2014: 84). EAT-ESA was the major point of torturing individuals opposed to the Junta in Athens. In the first part of this article, we consider Parko Eleftherias as a vessel carrying the repressed traumatic memories of torture. In this sense, there is a sharp difference in the way Parko Eleftherias and the Polytechneio are treated by public history. The former military police headquarters were renamed to Parko Eleftherias exorcising the memories of torture through the selection of a name reminiscent of the freedom brought about after the fall of the Junta (and the advent of the Metapolitefsi – ‘regime change’), while the Polytechneio remains a timeless reflection of the values of resistance against oppression.
This antithesis creates fertile ground for comparison between the two historic sites and their role in contemporary Athens. We analyse the relationship of these two designated historical places with the contemporary artistic life of Athens, placing an emphasis on pointing to the limits of artistic expression, in relation to historical locations, memory and politics, as the two places have followed very different trajectories. Since collective memory is moulded by related representations evoking past events aiming always to shape the present (Stavrides 2006: 14), we question the extent to which art, in any form, performed in those places of memory, evokes the historic events and acts as an agent of remembrance. Collective memory attaches meaning to places (Stavrides 2006: 23) and the diffusion of such a memory defines the level of historical relevance a site has into the present. Furthermore, as places are understood in different temporalities within the present (Herzfeld 1991), we seek to understand the ways this consensus affects our research subject.

In order to do so, we follow similar approaches to both historical places. At a first level, we trace the development of their surroundings during the Metapolitefsi to evaluate how the different attitudes towards them may reflect their change. In the case of Parko Eleftherias, we have developed a small survey (200 samples), conducted while activities related to the art exhibition documenta 14 (d14) were taking place in the area, to determine the extent to which present-day visitors are aware of the area’s dark heritage. The body of data is presented in the Appendix, while some key elements are revealed in the course of the main argument. Although for the Polytechnεio we do not possess such a quantitative dataset, the multi-referential character of the building and the significant structural changes occurring at the area of Exarcheia, while this article is being written, offer a variety of different public testimonies which cover for this gap. Finally, we compare two very different expressions of art: d14’s presence at Parko Eleftherias and a piece of street art executed on one of the side walls of the Polytechnεio in 2015. They complement the set of oppositions between the two sites and create a fertile ground for the discussion of memory, monumentality and the limits of artistic expression.

**From EAT-ESA to Parko Eleftherias**

The historical buildings of EAT-ESA were initially part of the old military camp of the First Infantry Division, founded in 1877. This camp extended as far as Petraki Monastery to the west, encompassing also the area of the military hospital (Nosileftiko Ιδρυμα του Μετοχικου Ταμειου Στρατου – NIMTS). To the east it reached up to the American Embassy, in operation since 1961. The old 401 Military Hospital was part of the same complex, north of NIMTS, bordering with Deinokratous street. It functioned until 1971, when it was moved to Mesogeion Avenue (Iliopoulou 2007). The buildings of the old hospital align with the buildings of EAT-ESA, immediately to the right (Figure 1). Comparing this view with Figure 2, it becomes apparent that the military camp changed through time, especially after 1971 when the 401 Hospital was removed, and after the regime fell in 1974. Today, the northern EAT-ESA buildings have been replaced by the v-shaped Navy Hospital, inaugurated in 1954 and expanded in 1995. Furthermore, the lower part of the camp, that in Figure 1 appears as empty space, has given its place to the park of Megaro Moussikis (Megaron Athens Concert Hall), the Megaron itself (1991) and the American Embassy (1961) to the right, as seen in Figure 2. The remainders of the EAT-ESA block were listed as historic monuments (Fyllo Efimeridas Kyvernisis [F.E.K.] 753 B/28-8-1997; Figure 2). The Athens Municipality
Figure 1: The area of the military camp in 1945. The left annotated part is the old 401 military complex and the right the area transformed to EAT-ESA. Developed in QGIS 2.18, using basemap from Ktimatologio.

Figure 2: The area today. What is left of the old 401 Military Hospital is annotated on the top left. Below is the NMTS hospital and the remains of EAT-ESA to the right. Developed in QGIS 2.18, using basemap from Google Satellite.
Arts Centre and two museums operate in the premises: the museum of antidictatorship resistance and the museum of Eleftherios Venizelos, both under the auspices of the Athens Municipality. Furthermore, seven of the fourteen buildings belonging to the old 401 Military Hospital were listed as monuments last year (Council of State, decision 307/2018). This process was delayed because the former hospital passed in 1971 to the Greek Church, in exchange for a landplot in Varkiza (Iliopoulou 2007). The Council of State ruled out the motion of the Greek Church against the listing of its buildings, preventing thus a potential wholesale architectural gentrification.

Thousands of young people were interrogated and tortured in EAT-ESA, but their stories of torture, some documented and some silenced, are interconnected with the buildings of the old 401 Military Hospital, next door, where they would end up after suffering severe wounds or as dead bodies in the morgue. In many cases, torture even continued inside the hospital (Korovesis 2007: 71–77). Although untold, the storylines of the two complexes align when it comes to the Junta’s dark heritage, expanding westward, as it were, what is considered a locus of accumulated dark heritage.

After the regime collapsed, the area was transformed into a green and peaceful park in the centre of Athens, a city that suffers from the absence of open spaces. Today, Parko Eleftherias is valued as a panopticon of sorts, an observation point from which one can examine the different architectural movements that shape the Athenian cityscape, ranging from embassies and neoclassical buildings to modern ones with glass façades. The former place of torture and agony is today understood as green space for the youth, to enjoy the summer afternoons with a beer or a coffee in hand (Dimitriadi 2017b). It is also named in the top-three places in Athens to meet on a first date. Dimitriadi (2017a), a journalist working for the popular free weekly newspaper Athens Voice, advises her readers to relax on the grass, before they go towards Mavilli square, giving an urban twist to their flirt, while passing by the impressive building of the American Embassy, ‘the work of Walter Gropius’. According to the website trip2athens: ‘in the background of Parko Eleftherias lie old buildings, used for military purposes during the Balkan Wars and as detention centres during the Junta’ (trip2athens n.d.). Regarding areas of sightseeing, trip2athens highlights the Venizelos Museum and the Athens Municipality Arts Centre, omitting to mention the museum of anti-dictatorship resistance. Finally, according to Athinorama, the most popular online liberal cultural guide of Athens, the café-bar Parko.Ath, situated inside Parko Eleftherias, offers couches and tables beneath plane trees, with inspired dishes and a list of cocktails with ‘colonial aesthetic’ [sic] (Athinorama 2018). Another reportage compares this new café-bar with the small tropical islands of the Caribbean: ‘the natural landscape transforms the place into an exotic paradise’ (Georgaki 2018). In the context of torture topography, this café-bar is situated between the old 401 Military Hospital and the EAT-ESA headquarters, as it has replaced the hygiene building, where torturers used to take their showers (Panourgiá 2017). It is interesting to note that the ownership of the café-bar changed in 2018. The former café owner took part in our survey (see Appendix). When asked whether he is aware of the history of the place, his reply was straightforward, sharing his experience of former detainees visiting his café, crying in remembrance of the Junta atrocities. It is interesting to compare his response to the advertisements of the new café-bar, when in some cases even the name of the park is not mentioned in the promotion: Parko Eleftherias is replaced by the new branding of the enterprise, ‘Parko.Ath’.
As clearly demonstrated, the political and social connotations of the place have been drastically altered since the Junta: What was a place of torture has become a green, open space to enjoy city life, under a name of positive undertones – Liberty Park. The focal point of the site has also shifted from the buildings of EAT-ESA in the northern side, to the café-bar/restaurant in the East and the Venizelos statue to the South. The area has been fully repurposed, transformed into an open place mostly tailored for hipster culture, where difficult heritage is marginal both in terms of urban-planning and semiotics, overruled by a re-arrangement of space to fit neo-liberal development. This is achieved in two ways. The area is now subject to market rules, through the installation of a successful and ‘unique’ enterprise, and freed from the historical burden of oppression and torture that could negate the ‘end of history’ dogma (Fukuyama 1989). This post-iron curtain world-view goes beyond ideologies. Related conflicts belong to the past, together with their associated EAT-ESA difficult heritage, in favour of free market and metropolitan development within the context of liberal democracy. The ‘colonial cocktails’, the ‘exotic atmosphere’ and the romantic essence emerging from a green open space in the centre of the capital, establish a heterotopy, according to which middle-class, crisis-striken Athenians can enjoy the projected aesthetics and values of colonial Caribbean, under Athenian plane trees. The totality of space has become the decoration of capitalism, through urban development (Debord 1967: 169).

Parko Eleftherias and d14

The EAT-ESA urban development reveals a radical change in the area, that has affected negatively the visibility of its difficult heritage. In 2017, the organizers of d14 installed the ‘Parliament of Bodies’ series of events in the Athens Municipality Arts Centre inside Parko Eleftherias. According to the show’s curators, this Parliament ‘emerged from the experience of the so-called long summer of migration in Europe, which revealed the simultaneous failure not only of modern representative democratic institutions but also of ethical practices of hospitality’ (The Parliament of Bodies 2017: n.pag.). The introduction of this quasi-manifesto bore radical vocabulary and had set a high sociopolitical target for the events held at Parko Eleftherias. According to it, the endeavour was to act ‘against the individualization of bodies but also against the transformation of bodies into a mass […]’ (The Parliament of Bodies 2017: n.pag.). It advocated for political activism and it ‘inhabit[ed] sites of contested histories whose memories force us to question hegemonic and romanticized narratives of democratic Europe’ (The Parliament of Bodies 2017: n.pag.).

This Parliament, originally conceived by Paul Preciado (The Parliament of Bodies 2017: n.pag.) was designed to host 34 ‘Exercises of Freedom’ and a series of other events, placing Parko Eleftherias at the centre of d14’s Athenian part. The Exercises took many forms: almost half took the form of talks (i.e. informal lectures), given by established academics, early career researchers and activists (sixteen exercises). Six were performances, five were shows of various documentaries, two talks by activists, two DJ sets, one historical tour, one workshop, one discussion, and one a performance preceded by a talk. The rest of the events were co-organized by other societies, under the auspices of the ‘Parliament of Bodies’ and consisted of numerous talks, performances and workshops (34 Exercises of Freedom 2017).
The above context put forward by the organizers, was meant to enhance the importance of the place’s dark heritage. These high stakes on behalf of the international art organization, encouraged us to create a survey (200 samples) and assess the people’s awareness over the history of the place, while the Parliament of Bodies was taking place. A detailed discussion of this brief survey can be found in the Appendix. The most striking statistic of our research is the 75 per cent of documented ignorance regarding the dark heritage of the place. We believe this statistic mirrors the development of the area, as outlined earlier. Only two individuals engaged with our survey to a greater extent than just answering the questions. They had both studied in military schools and belonged to the age group of 61 years or more. They expressed the opinion that Parko Eleftherias is a memorial, created by the Left, in order to sustain the myth of torture during the Junta. This qualitative detail regarding the most argumentative segment of our sample, coupled with the ¾ of ignorance regarding the history of the place, allows us to suggest that the dark heritage of EAT-ESA remains controversial and contested in space, as a contested subject, through a comparative analysis of sub-altern immigrant and trans-gender bodies (Antoniou et al. 2017: 295), a pleonasm.

Considering the above, it is certain that the relation between d14 and the dark heritage of Parko Eleftherias, as well as the extent to which such an event enhanced the memory of place, is subject to many parameters. Only a few of the 34 ‘Exercises of Freedom’ were addressing the actual memory of place.

Number Six, a lecture given by Kostis Kornetis on the public memories of torture, following the lines of one of his previous articles (Kornetis 2014), was informative regarding the practices of torturers and the historical contextualization of the events. Lecture number Eighteen, addressed the relationship of music and torture (Papaeti 2017), while number Fifteen, an inspirational experience.

Figure 3: Neni Panourgiá delivering her talk in the museum of anti-dictatorial resistance. Screenshot from the video of the talk, uploaded in d14 official website. Photo © Neni Panourgiá.
talk by Neni Panourgiá, was delivered in the museum of anti-dictatorship resistance (Figure 3). Nevertheless, the official d14 website informs its visitor that the talk took place in the Athens Municipality Arts Centre (Panourgiá 2017). This event was praised by our three interviewees from SFEA (Syllogos Fylakisthenton kai Exoristhenton Antistasiakon = Association of Imprisoned and Exiled Partisans). They all stated that it was an excellent event that promoted the history of the place worldwide. One of them also stated that Panourgiá was the only d14 performer that thoroughly engaged with their association prior to the performance. Regarding most of the other performances, the opinion of SFEA members was divided. They agreed to collaborate with d14, after a majority vote was held. According to the president, this decision was important, as it brought more than 5000 visitors to the memory site. On the other hand, the opposition did not want any interference with d14 and one SFEA member expressed the will to trade all d14-related publicity with school visits, suggesting that his interest leans towards the effects of the dark heritage to the Greek public and not to a specialized world audience.

Selected d14 events and the values of place: An assessment

Talk, performance and ritual Exercise Twenty-Five, ‘An evening with Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens and Wet Dreams Water Ritual Annie Sprinkle’, an event dedicated to the freedom of ecosexual, contrasted quite sharply with the experiences of sexual oppression and rape culture that have delineated the nature of EAT-ESA’s difficult heritage. Prisons are institutions, which focus on the transformation of individual consciousness (Foucault 1980: 38). In the case of EAT-ESA, this transformation was related to political activism. The bodies of detainees became sites of political investment on behalf of an authoritative and repressive system (Kornetis 2014: 85). Those bodies suffered from physical and psychological tortures, highly related to sexual abuse, and their trauma is contextualized in the framework of political activism (Antoniou et al. 2017: 289). Therefore, trauma emerging from torture cannot be interpreted without the framework of political resistance.

Many former detainees have expressed their trauma in written accounts, such as Korovesis’s ([1969] 2007: 64) narration of sexual abuse when he describes his own rape or the relevant torture of a girl in the infamous terrace of Bouboulinas street (Korovesis 2007: 108), amongst other testimonies (see, e.g., Stefatos 2016). These people were never vindicated. In the trials of their torturers, verdicts seemed far from satisfactory: on many occasions, judges prevented victims from outlining their suffering in detail, since the narration of such traumatic events was deemed too ‘pornographic’ (Kornetis 2014: 85).

Event Twenty-Five was a performance promoting, according to its own blurb, ultimate sexual liberation and was delivered by a porn-star who became ecosexual after ‘having sex with approximately 3000 males, 100 of which were not so great’ (Sprinkle and Stephens 2017). This performative layer, added on top of the experiences of sexual torture, was ostensibly expected to disrupt audience expectations with a different sort of narrative on displacement, it failed however to reveal the dark history of EAT-ESA. On the contrary, this performance, placed in the framework of a series of events allegedly enhancing the history of the place, ended up looking rather superficial: one SFEA interlocutor expressed the view that this performance was an insult. Indeed, individuals sentenced to life imprisonment or death, seem to perceive love in very different terms than Sprinkle would have it with her self-styled ‘pornistics’
Impossible is nothing (unless otherwise stated)

(On these, cf. Bell 1994: 151; Harris 1999: 142) and quantitative measurements as communicated by this performance (Figure 4). For example, Missios (1988), a political detainee and member of the Greek Communist Party, recalls that it is impossible to grasp the feeling of sexual intercourse after having been given amnesty, while sentenced to death by a military regime. Experiences of this sort are different in context than Sprinkle’s pornographic explorations, where lust for freedom and anxiety for sex, which only manifests through countless masturbations while in detention (such as the case of Missios 1988), is reduced into pleasure measured merely by the uncensored frequency of sexual intercourse mediated through a top down performance. We might then argue that such a sharp contrast leads to the gentrification of a difficult memory, rendering it fresh, reborn, through a ritual of water, purified from pain, transformed into an experience where sexual pleasures are merely encouraged in cavalier fashion.

In his performance entitled ‘Civic Education’, the artist Sergio Zevallos suggested that ‘everyone is a civilian; even a soldier maintains a civil identity, if only on his or her sleep’ (Zevallos 2017: n.pag.). He also argued that ‘even as civilians we all become soldiers. We become soldiers while working in the context of a war economy’ (Zevallos 2017: n.pag.). Using bodies as the point of interaction between the two human identities, Zevallos follows a Derridean line of thought, reversing the identities of his subjects, transforming the behaviours of his performers from soldiers to civilians and vice versa (Figure 5). Embodied and performed, these identities blend to form an event that performed in any other locus would be received as thought-provoking. On the contrary, for reasons that were presented above, the performance in the context of the dark heritage of EAT-ESA becomes a vehicle for historical relativism, since the traumatized bodies of civilians subjected to torture by the military police in EAT-ESA never found justice in the context of Metapolitefsi.

Figure 4: Annie Sprinkle while showing her porunistics, according to which the height of the Empire State Building is equal to the accumulated length of male genitals ‘managed’ throughout her career. Screenshot from the video of the talk, uploaded in d14 official website (d14, Sprinkle and Stephens 2017).
Unless performances are regarded as a metaphysical ritual for forgiveness, this goes beyond any notion of historicity and does not offer solace to the victims.

At this point, it might be useful to investigate the role of the ‘citizen–soldier’ diptych within the context of contemporary Greece in crisis. The anagram between politis (civilian) and oplitis (hoplite/foot-soldier) has been used quite extensively in contemporary Greek political discourse by the Far-Right, including the organization of Artemis Sorras, now imprisoned for running a criminal organization and fraud, and the Golden Dawn political party, currently under trial as a criminal organization. The phonetic, optical and literal resemblance between the two words is considered, according to this chauvinist ideology, to be the two sides of the same coin, forming together the ‘immortal, diachronic Greek archetype’ (Golden Dawn 2013; Figure 6). According to this narrative, ‘the civilian today is a customer, an obedient citizen’ (Dimokratia Official Website, next to the banner) and the complementary second part of the diptych is absent; hence the Greek Nation has degenerated. It is the same bodies that, as has been demonstrated in the Golden Dawn Trial, either have sprung from the ranks of Junta’s loyal youth or are Junta nostalgists. These nostalgists, and their attitudes towards EAT-ESA and torture were represented in our EAT-ESA survey by the 1 per cent of denials of history (see above). Consequently, we believe that a performative discussion on the interchangeable identities of civilian and soldier, within the context of contemporary Greece in crisis, fails to become a fertile deconstruction and remains a futile empty-signifier that fails to enhance in any way the values of EAT-ESA dark heritage and relativizes the relationship between torturers and victims.

In the context of d14, Athens became an imagined space of resistance, as mediated through the events that took place at Parko Eleftherias. In this discourse Athens is no longer the neoclassical cradle of civilization, nor solely a place for one to contemplate ruins (Rikou and Yalouri 2017), but a conceptualized place with embedded values against oppression, to be consumed by a cosmopolitan audience that possesses the tangible means and intangible training to understand and enjoy it. A resistance that embraces the whole
world, from Negri’s account of radical left Italy (Exercise Two), to Kurdistan (Exercise Twenty-Eight), etc. A revolution that embraces all its forms: political; tribal; feminist; queer; sexual. As becomes obvious, this kind of events target and attract a niche audience, composed by middle- to upper-middle-class Greek citizens with the expected free time and related interests. It also attracts international tourists, similarly interested in the transgressive nature of these events while having the resources to travel to Athens for d14.

These events portray EAT-ESA as an idealized location given its credentials of resistance but talks and performances leaned towards top-down lectures with questions to follow and less participatory, marginalizing the actual victims and their organization located in Parko Eleftherias. Therefore we disagree with the assertion that ‘d14 made Parko Eleftherias a lieu de memoire for the first time’ (Antoniou et al. 2017: 298). Nora (1989: 19) argued that a lieu de memoire, in terms of its symbolic connotations, is a place of refuge, where one finds the living heart of memory. Under this definition, Parko Eleftherias became such, only because of Panourgiá’s initiative to perform inside the actual locus and actively engage with SFEA during the Thirty-Four Exercises of Freedom. EAT-ESA cannot be interpreted as a lieu de memoire in any other regard, as envisioned by Nora. It is not a narrative imposed by an authority and people do not attend but visit the detention centre with personal initiative.

Figure 6: The citizen - soldier diptych as interpreted by the Greek far right. Screenshot from Golden Dawn official website. © Golden Dawn official website 2013.
As Foucault (1980: 114) suggested, a positive countermeasure to the effect of structuralism (which evacuated the concept of ‘events’ from history) is not to accumulate all meaning to the level of events. Rather, the challenge is to realize the varying layers and different types of events that have different capacities to produce effects. Regarding history, the point of reference should not be language and signs but rather war and battle, because history has the form of war rather than language: relations of power rather than relations of meaning (Foucault 1980: 114). As inferred earlier, we argue that d14 used the dark heritage of EAT-ESA as a substrate, a trope, to stage the Parliament of Bodies and the Exercises of Freedom. In this context, the tortured and murdered individuals of the Junta lost their voice within the overwhelming lights of international resistance. The dark memories of EAT-ESA, gentrified in the context of urban neo-liberal planning, remained silent, since most events either excluded the victims from their narrative or instead focused on exploring the limits of personal experiences and pleasures, worldwide. Hence, the series of artistic events that took place in Parko Eleftherias are considered unable to render the place a lieu de memoire, with the exceptions mentioned above. Although d14 ostensibly tried to present a new narrative, mediated through art, it only managed to reaffirm the existing ones. Besides confirming the harshly familiar and deeply dehumanizing ‘crisis discourse’ of previous years (Plantzos 2019: 2), our given context points to the suggestion that d14 used not only ‘crisis tourism’ (Horner 2017), but also difficult heritage, as appealing tropes provided by the Athenian environment as means to generate added value for the international art biennale.

Art and the Polytechnio: Historical background and contemporary uses

The central building of the Polytechnio complex (Averof) was completed in 1878 (Filippidis 2000) and its cost exceeded the initial estimates, requiring further financial assistance beyond what the original benefactors had anticipated. The building is a mix of different architectural styles, and was criticized by its contemporaries, for both the cost and architectural style choices (Filippidis 2000). In 2006 all structures of the Polytechnio ensemble were listed as a monument, mainly due to the buildings’ historical significance, expected to be preserved in their present form, for future generations. This way, patrimony emerges as a new technology of immortality (Rancière 1991: 248). In terms of social functions, the complex in the past has briefly housed, beyond the University, the archaeological findings of Heinrich Schliemann excavations, the National Gallery and a hospital (Filippidis 2000). Most of the departments of the technical university were transferred away from the historical buildings to the new campus in Zografou and only the School of Architecture still uses the building.

The Polytechnio complex draws most of its historical and contemporary political significance from the student uprising of 14–17 November 1973. During the uprising, the complex was occupied by the students as a means of protest against the military regime. The uprising ended when a tank breeched the gate, followed by police firing towards the students and their supporters (Kornetis 2013). While most of the Junta historical context is not taught at schools, the events of the uprising are commemorated meticulously. In the image of the Polytechnio, the many victims of the Junta are officially recognized. It symbolizes the foundations of the new democratic regime, and

6. YA YPPO/DNSAK/922651/2601/7-11-2006 – FEK 139/AAP/24-11-2006 ‘The Polytechnio building complex is a point of reference for the city of Athens. It relates to the high-quality education and the historical memory of the Greeks and their struggles for freedom and democracy, freedom of thought and expression’. Translated by the author.
the feeling of hope and social rejuvenation that characterized Metapolitefsi, which contrasted sharply with the violence of the Junta Metapolitefsi, which contrasted sharply with the violence of the Junta. During the early years, celebrations were marked by massive civilian attendance met with brutality on behalf of the state, as for example in 1980, when police violence led to the deaths of Iakovos Koumis and Stamatina Kanellopoulos during that year’s protest rally to the American Embassy (see e.g. Editorial Group TVXS 2016), one year before the newly elected government of PA.SO.K. legalized the Polytechnio remembrance day. This legalization, however, did not put an instant end to police violence related to the Polytechnio celebrations, as can be verified by the violent death of Michalis Kaltezas in 1985 (Arvanitis 2014).

The annual tributes traditionally include the student unions. University students claim inspiration from the political struggles of their predecessors during the Junta and participate in a symbolic occupation of the complex. This event lasts three days, from the 15 to 17 of November. It ends with the annual protest march, starting from the Polytechnio and leading to the US embassy in Athens, passing by Parko Eleftherias. This ritualized commemoration of the values of the uprising seems more and more at a distance from the revolutionary spirit associated with initial events of 1973. ‘Every November there are many flowers, many speeches by politicians each claiming to represent [the dead] better than the rest of them, protest rallies to blow some steam, and then it’s either back home or go to a taverna to celebrate the victory of the people’ recalls Missios (1988: 128) in evident sadness. It seems that the remembrance of the protagonists in the neo-liberal context is unable to coexist with the recollection of their hopes, struggles and achievements, a viewpoint that has shaped the concept of left-wing melancholia (Traverso 2017: 10), the Greek version of which is substantially communicated through Missios’s work (specifically for the case of the Polytechnio see also Dafermos 2013). The Polytechnio commemorations aligned the values of anti-dictatorship struggle with what was perceived as the political conformism of the early days of PA.SO.K. government in 1981, to the shock of many survivors.

The Polytechnio uprising is thus integrated into the customary functions of the Greek state. The yearly commemorations and demonstrations have rarely been the target of police violence in recent years (see e.g. Savvidis 2016). When it comes to the Junta-associated places of interest, the Polytechnio has monopolized the state’s interest. This comes in stark contrast to the fate of other monuments, communicating experiences and memories related to dark heritage such as Parko Eleftherias. A modern Parthenon of sorts, the Polytechnio becomes a tangible site communicating the intangible, yet supposedly timeless, values of democracy that define the context of Greek Metapolitefsi, an imposed lieu de memoire, a ‘heritage place as an object of state power’ (after Silberman 2015: 33–34).

**The Polytechnio and its neighbourhood**

Situated in the centre of Athens, the Polytechnio lies on the edge of Exarcheia, one of the infamous neighbourhoods of the capital. This quarter carries a significant history related to the anarchist and leftist movements of the city and its current development, both in terms of touristification and gentrification, threatens to alter the character of the area. A recent proclamation describes the situation eloquently:
Exarcheia seems to be a lucrative land for the local capital, an attraction able to offer a unique ‘insurrectional’ experience. Airbnb housing and the abundance of shops established in the area provide some kind of ‘alternative’ consumerism for those who adopt an equivalent lifestyle or for tourists who just want to visit one more city-sight. Within this context, a certain rhetoric that targets criminality, drug dealing and lawlessness, is being unfolded, coinciding with gentrification. The rising property rents, the plan for a metro station in the area, the ostracization of immigrants and marginalized / ‘infectious’ subjects who threaten the ‘purity’ of the area, all constitute mechanisms used strategically for gentrification.

(Mpalothia 2019: n.pag.)

The case of Exarcheia – and with it, the Polytechnio – embodies many of the traits that are used to identify active gentrification processes, namely class polarization, investment increase and urban regeneration plans, as well as different forms of displacement, directly or indirectly (as outlined by Lees et al. [2015: 8]). The screenshot in Figure 7, taken from the area between the Polytechnio and the National Archaeological Museum, shows the number of Airbnb properties that claim to be within the two locations of huge architectural, intellectual and symbolic capital for the Greek State and culture (Figure 7). It is an image that reveals the changing dynamics in the city, linked with shifting tourist practices, a global trend for shared tourist lodgings, and consumerism. Furthermore, a recent research visualizing the number of Airbnb properties in Athens (Troboukis 2019) shows that the area under consideration contains the capital’s second highest concentration of such properties.

In that sense, the two locations studied in this article, form a set of antitheses. They are both associated with the difficult heritage of the Junta regime, as designated historical sites, but through separate trajectories. The heritage of the Polytechnio uprising is pivotal for the ideology of Metapolitefsi and highlighted in high-school textbooks, while the dark heritage of EAT-ESA has been pacified, the old barracks has been transformed to Parko Eleftherias and have now become largely gentrified. Although both sites have undergone a gentrification process, the case of the Polytechnio and Exarcheia is much more debated in the public sphere, while the transformation of a site of state-sanctioned torture to a peaceful urban park has been gradual and successful without triggering any significant public debates. In the following section, we analyse an artistic intervention from 2015 that attracted a lot of media coverage, to argue that the limits of what is allowed in the public space are relative, when it comes to different landmarks of the urban landscape.

The 2015 graffiti incident

Contrary to Parko Eleftherias, we find that in the case of the Polytechnio, there are multiple temporalities that define history on the foreground. Besides ‘monumental time’ (Herzfeld 1991), imposed by the state in the official annual commemorations and the symbolic value attached to them, the Institution is active in academic and sociocultural terms. Together with the entire area of Exarcheia, the building complex has witnessed the effects of the gentrification process that occurs in the inner city of Athens over the past decades. Alexandri (2015) pointed out that there are two drivers of transformation in the Athenian case: the state discourse, on the one hand, arguing for increased security and tidiness of public space, and the entrepreneurial trends
on the other, evident in the gentrification process of the Metaxourgeo area, among other neighbourhoods (Alexandri 2015: 22). Both are in motion in the case of Exarcheia. As Exarcheia is perceived by the mass media as an area of ‘anarchist’ rule, where the police cannot intervene, security discourses are interlinked with discussions over the academic asylum that the Polytechnio provides. In that sense, the building’s fate is intertwined with that of the Exarcheia neighbourhood. In Appadurai’s (1996) conceptualization, neighbourhood is used to refer to existing social forms in which locality is shaped. In that sense, the Polytechnio is part of the neighbourhood and the locality of Exarcheia that consists (amongst other segments) of collectivities, self-administered refugee shelters and middle-class occupiers threatened by the rise of real estate prices and touristification. For these units, the Polytechnio is valued in very different terms than the frozen ‘monumental time’ of 1973. Being a receptor of such forces of transformation, the neighbourhood of
Exarcheia has a very low ‘potential for reproduction’ (after Appadurai 1996: 179), together with the localities it produces.

Our second case study draws upon a clandestine and illegal graffiti painted by street artists, to contrast against the internationally acknowledged d14 intervention at Parko Eleftherias. On March 2015, the two southern faces of the complex were covered by a black-and-white graffiti of abstract art. According to Athens Voice, the artists were Icos&Case and they created their piece in three phases, during that night, with plastic colour instead of spray (Athens Voice 2015). This action was met with great hostility by mainstream media and the public, perceived as an act of vandalism towards a building with definite historical and architectural significance. The rector of the NTUA and the mayor of Athens agreed to remove the graffiti as soon as possible (Ta Nea 2015a). The campaign to remove the graffiti became an initiative to protect the public interest and property. It implied that street artists were part of the misguided youth, portraying them as dangerous vandals. The Deputy Minister of Culture linked the artwork with the rising level of disintegration of Greek society, treating it as an act of vandalism (Drakopoulou 2017: 162), while the Ministry of Education issued a statement declaring that youthful expression and spontaneity is subject to limits and regulations (Ministry of Education, 9 March 2015). A few voices had risen in support of the so-called vandalism. A demonstration against the graffiti’s removal took place (Ta Nea 2015b), while some artists argued that the dominant attitude towards the graffiti reveals the lack of aesthetics education of the Greek society: for them, to be unappreciative of this artwork revealed ignorance of the works of the likes of Jackson Pollock (Fikos cited in Provolisianos 2015: Figure 8).

The above discussion elucidates the different trajectories through which value is attached to monuments, as well as the various interpretations regarding the content of artistic expression and its limits. On the one end lie essentialist approaches, regarding art as an instrument for ‘the enjoyment of the people and not [created in order] to challenge them’ (Fasianos cited in Provolisianos 2015: n.pag.), on the other, approaches treating art as a vital body of the society, part of the political discourse, expressing the views and social agency of its creators (Athens Voice 2015). But this case goes beyond.

The authorities reacted swiftly, not only because the neoclassical aesthetics were vandalized but because the artwork went against the monumental and commemorative values of the Polytechnio as the idealized lieu de memoire of anti-dictatorship resistance. This very fact led to its interpretation as an effort to voice the voiceless ‘Others’, the victims of gentrification, silenced by the mainstream media (Drakopoulou 2017). It was perceived as a form of expression for the collective from-the-bottom-up consciousness of the Exarcheia neighbourhood, able to express its values better than a more mainstream, academically approved practice, while targeting the locality, as hinted by the

8. Alekos Fasianos, a notable Greek painter highlighted the need to protect the values of the neoclassicist architecture ‘the essence of the architectural work is to stay immutable and not to be destroyed by an act, if we presume that this (the graffiti) is art’. He went further to draw parallels between the street artists and jihadists (Fasianos cited in Provolisianos 2015).

9. Upon a site visit during that period (2015), I discussed with a Dutch artist who was amazed by the end-product. Over the past five years he was a permanent resident at Athens, and he was working as a tour guide in and around Exarcheia. He analysed his viewpoint regarding the artwork, its dynamic character and the ways in which it embraces the architecture. Furthermore, he went on to suggest scientific ways to safeguard it, in order to resist time and the Athenian weather conditions. He also suggested that such a graffiti would have a touristic impact in the area, since the ‘canvas’ is unique and the composition original (Moudopoulos Athanasiou, field notes, March 2015).
Impossible is nothing (unless otherwise stated)

selection of the façade upon which it is painted (Drakopoulou 2017: 164–66). Under this perspective, a few local stakeholders resisting touristification and gentrification expressed a bold claim through a clandestine, large-scale operation that would secure media coverage. It acted as an exercise in order to rekindle the discourse over the Polytechneio semiotics and its values of non-conformism, solidarity, democracy and political disobedience. In that sense, the action is more important than the, subjective, artistic value of the work. The Polytechneio façade became the canvas of a sociopolitical statement made by local actors in a neighbourhood undertaking diverse touristification and gentrification processes. Understood as an effort to voice those affected by these processes is quasi-analogous to the historical forces that led to the characterization of the building as a historic monument: a spontaneous act of disobedience. The historical case was set against the background of the Junta state apparatus, while the graffiti incident against the notion of legalized protection that safeguards the aesthetic integrity of a monument at the same time that its surroundings, neighbourhood and localities, are being severely altered.

The architectural symbol of anti-dictatorship struggle under its monumental interpretation is separate from the intangible historical context of resistance and self-organization, that used to be the main ingredient of its initial creation. It was transformed into a lieu de mémoire par excellence and this consensus has inscribed it into the collective memory as a static symbol of the state unaffected by the realities of different temporalities within the ‘social time’ framework (in contrast to ‘monumental time’ Herzfeld 1991). Although an active academic institution, the dominant discourses regarding this ‘heritage place’ exclude the language of the ‘Other’ from its body, erasing any
existing or emerging narrative depriving it from its monumental stability. Experience of space is integral to the creation of memory (Panopoulos et al. 2017: 79) and, regarding the Polytechnieio, history is absent beyond the official November commemorations, with the sole exception of the academic-led activities for internal consumption. Analysing the historical, architectural and commemorative values of the Polytechnieio, we are in front of a paradox. The authoritarian regime, against which students revolted in 1973, promoted a national identity having its roots in neoclassical ideals and the dominant political ideology of the Civil War period (1946–49). According to it, leftist and communist beliefs were banned, and dissidents were exiled in barren islands of the Aegean, such as Makronissos, forced to build theatres and miniature-sized Parthenons, as an instrument of conversion towards the Greek national ideal (see e.g. Hamilakis 2002). The fall of the Junta is commemorated through the protection of the integrity of a neoclassical building’s façade. Hence, the Polytechnieio becomes a commemorative vessel in order to celebrate the abolition of a regime that used neoclassical values as a means of conversion to the dominant ideology. Current legislation protects the essence of neoclassicist aesthetics instead of the intangible social values of uprising against oppression that the vessel of the Polytechnieio communicates.

**Concluding remarks: Art narratives and memory, between Parko Eleftherias and the Polytechnieio**

In this article, we have contrasted the development of two historical sites in Athens and investigated the ways in which art narratives interrelate with the notion of memory attached to them. Although both are the products of the same historical period, Parko Eleftherias and the Polytechnieio have evolved in asymmetrical fashion.

The headquarters of the military police, as a place of detention, interrogation and torture, have been assigned a new role in contemporary Athens. Transformed into Parko Eleftherias, the barren land of EAT-ESA during the Junta has become one of the most prominent green spaces of the capital. As suggested in the first part of this article, the focal points of Parko Eleftherias evolve around the café-bar and the open space near the Megaro Moussikis. This urban rearrangement has marginalized the historic buildings associated with the dark heritage of the Junta. Positioned in the background, the difficult heritage remains unarticulated, in the years of crisis, as our survey has suggested. D14 intended to re-introduce a notion of resistance in the area through the Exercises of Freedom. Nevertheless, these events reaffirmed the rearrangement of space, as they took place in the Athens Municipality Arts Centre. Performances such as those discussed above re-negotiated the notion of resistance, ending up – no matter their initial intentions – relativizing the power relations that led historically to the abuse of power on behalf of the Junta torturers. The memory of EAT-ESA, through the art narrative deployed by d14 was used in order to satisfy the need of contemporary avant-garde art to perform in places loaded with cultural meaning. Through this set of performances, the past remerges in the present as a literary trope, a basemap on which to plug various events, and not as lieu de memoire, reminding us that what was lived is distanced through a performative representation (Debord 1967).

In contrast, the Polytechnieio remains the definitive symbol of anti-dictatorship resistance. The student uprising added a layer of intangible value to
the architectural significance of the neoclassical building. Yet, the radical and revolutionary spirit of the uprising has been absorbed by the formalization of its own commemoration and focus is placed to the material remains, not the intangible ideas of the uprising. The 2015 graffiti in this context added a fresh meaning to the Polytechnio by shaking the set of dominant characteristics attached to it by ‘monumental time’. Until its removal, the clandestine artwork managed to act as a multi-referential narrative against austerity, different than the yearly commemoration of the initial Polytechnio uprising. The perception of the artwork as a sacrilege is associated with the contemporary relations of power and knowledge in the Greek state, according to which the Polytechnio, although expressing values of revolution, remains the symbol for the re-establishment of democracy. According to this logic, it must remain static, legitimizing and reproducing the current sociopolitical status quo. Therefore, any layer of art superimposed has to be removed, in an effort to reach the essential form, ostensibly reflecting the narrative endorsed by the state.

It is observable that the presence or absence of art, as a means of renegotiation of the Junta memories is dialectic. The ways different monuments are managed, reveal the dominant political, historical and aesthetic ideals. Through this process, ‘monumental time’ defines the enduring memories at the level of state. The past is redefined based on the present identity of the subjects, and the legacy that is envisioned for their future (Panopoulos et al. 2017: 65). The Polytechnio is a key element of this future, representing the transformation from Junta to Metapolitefsi. It therefore has to be preserved as is, for future generations although the neighbourhoods around it are drastically gentrified and localities are renegotiated because of the dominant forces of development, irrespective of the different directions democracy might take in years of crisis. To the contrary, difficult heritage related to torture, especially in the context of the Greek Junta and the fact that torturers were never severely prosecuted, has to be gentrified in order to nuance political and ideological conflicts, for the sake of the same future. The EAT-ESA urban landscape has been transformed into Parko Eleftherias and follows the trends of free market economy, while being regarded as an alternative spot to enjoy the cityscape.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank Dimitris Plantzos for the opportunity to participate in this issue and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft. We would also like to thank the members of SFEA for their time and Dimitrios Kastritis for his help with data collection during the survey days. This article is dedicated to Victor and Ligya in Sao Paulo and the research group Historia da Disputa, with all our empathy. Responsibility for any misinterpretations remains with the authors.

**Appendix: The Parko Eleftherias survey**

The survey was self-administered. It was designed to gather quantitative data and assess the public’s knowledge regarding the historicity of Parko Eleftherias and to examine whether d14 had an impact to the memory enhancement, a view supported by scholars in recent publications (as argued for example by Antoniou et al. 2017: 298). The questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions, which required short answers: (1) ‘what is the reason for your
visit?; (2) ‘do you know something for the history of the place?’, followed by three questions on the demographic aspect: (1) age segmentation; (2) level of education and (3) country of origin. This last question for the Greek segment was further divided between citizens of Athens or Eparchia (other areas than the capital). The sampling took place at the entrance of the park, ascending from the Megaro Moussikis metro station.

Demographics

The survey’s aim was context-specific, targeting the dark heritage of EAT-ESA (1967–73). Three different age groups were designed to reveal different levels of inference. The segment of 61 years or more represent those who witnessed the events first hand, at least as young adults. The second, between the years of 30 and 60, are people that were either children or born the decade after the junta downfall, but their parents would have a first-hand experience of the regime. Finally, people of 29 years or younger, might have heard the stories from parents or grandparents. The second demographics question addressed visitor origin. Likewise, the aim was to define if they had lived in Athens, obtaining thus a local perspective, originated from Greek provinces, having thus heard about the events through a spatial distance and foreigners, which happened to visit Parko Eleftherias for the d14 events or other reasons. Last demographic parameter considered was the educational level of the individuals, which was divided into four different categories: primary school; secondary school; military school and university (both graduate and postgraduate degrees fall under this category). The segment ‘military school’ has also qualitative connotations, in terms of potential ideological implications.

Reason of visit

Five segments were selected to portray the various reasons of visit. As mentioned earlier, Parko Eleftherias is immediately next to the metro station of Megaro Moussikis, one of the few green areas in the city centre. It is also a nodal point linking Vassilisis Sofias Avenue with the Nautical Hospital, situated at the North of Parko Eleftherias. Those basic planning parameters define the reasons of visit. The majority uses this space because of its values, as a green area, and its facilities (Cafeteria, or shortcut to the Nautical Hospital). The context specific segments of ‘work’ (at the café-bar or Police Officers in duty around the region) and d14-related activities are also present, in considerably lower percentage.

Knowledge of the history of place

In this section, we have created a mixed representation containing both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Erroneous answers and vague statements were recorded separately and together with another significant category will be discussed below. Thus, instead of two categories, separating those aware of history from those unaware, the sample is analysed in six different segments. Still, unawareness dominates the sample reaching 67%. Only 24% of the people answered positively and identified the Parko Eleftherias as a place of torture, headquarters of EAT-ESA during the Eptaetia, the seven years of the juntas’ control of the Greek state. 4.5% knew to an extent that the area was a kind of prison and 2.5% gave other answers, such as: ‘the park of Megaro Moussikis’, ‘the park of Venizelos’ and other similar ones referring to nearby
landmarks or public buildings. Two university students of history (1% of the sample) answered that the area was the headquarters of SS during the Nazi occupation of Athens, suggesting that the knowledge of the place is not dependent upon the field of expertise but subject to the absence of related history from any formal education.

**d14 and survey**

Further, we wanted to measure d14’s impact to the visitors, in terms of historical knowledge regarding Parko Eleftherias. All foreign visitors, 3% of the overall sample, came specifically for d14 and knew about the history of the place. They represent 11% of the total number that was aware of the historical narrative and originated in Italy (1%), the United States (1.5%) and Denmark (0.5%). Of the Greeks visiting d14 (4% of the overall sample), half of them knew about the history of the place. D14 visitors represent only a fraction (7%) of the overall Parko Eleftherias visitors. Except one case that had just finished high-school, all d14 visitors possessed a University undergraduate or postgraduate degree. These visitors informed us that they knew about the history of the place because of personal initiative to read the information provided by the organizers prior to visiting the place. Though the sample is relatively small, it points to the direction that events such as d14 seems to appeal to educated middle-class or higher middle-class individuals that have a relative knowledge of history and a specific interest towards performative arts. This d14 segment (7% of the overall sample), has a more elaborate understanding of history than the majority of our small sample.

The sample’s 67% representing unawareness is the loudest of the statistic. They are all Greeks, originating both from Athens and ‘eparchia’ (the Greek periphery), in a statistically irrelevant differentiation between the two segments. If we add to this sample the 2.5% of ‘other’ answers, the vague decontextualized assumptions (‘prison’ segment, 4.5%) and the 1% that mistook EAT-ESA for the Nazi SS Headquarters, the level of historical unawareness reaches a total of 75%. Having in mind that the history of Junta is not taught explicitly at school and only the memory of the Polytechneio is celebrated as a National Commemoration day, we may conclude that the awareness of the history of Parko Eleftherias is related more to individual initiative than analogous to the level of education. The reason is structurally related to formal Greek education, a fact that cannot be changed by a highly valued international event, such as d14. As the archives from the Junta period became only recently declassified, a change in the historical attitudes towards Eptaetia might still be underway.

**REFERENCES**


Dafermos, Olympios (2013), *Apo tin elpida stin apognosi* (From Hope to Despair), Athens: Gavriliidis.


———(2014), ‘Public history and the issue of torture under the colonels’ regime in Greece’, Ricerche storiche, 44:1, pp. 81–100.


Stavrides, Stavros (2006), Mnimi kai empeiria tou horou (‘Memory and of Space’), Athens: Alexandria.


SUGGESTED CITATION


CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Faidon Moudopoulos Athanasiou is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield. His research focuses on the early modern (Ottoman) Zagori, NW Greece, funded by the White Rose College for the Arts and Humanities (AHRC) and the A.G. Leventis Foundation. He holds a BA in history and archaeology from the University of Crete and MAs in Aegean Archaeology and Heritage Management from the Universities of Sheffield and Kent, respectively. His research interests range from post-medieval and early-modern archaeology to archaeological theory, the history of archaeology and cultural heritage management.

E-mail: fmoudopoulos1@sheffield.ac.uk

Dimitris Giannakis graduated from the Athens School of Economics and Business with a BA on computer networks and information theory. He is one of the founding members of the start-up Synaphea, with the mission to make blockchain technology more accessible. He has given a few entry level lectures on blockchain at the Harokpopio and Aristotle Universities and has participated in relevant international conferences and workshops.

E-mail: dmtr.giannakis@gmail.com

Faidon Moudopoulos Athanasiou and Dimitris Giannakis have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.