

The city tourist of the 21st century. Mapping cultural memory. Experiential tourism and literary representations in the example of Omonoia Square

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper proposes the historic Omonoia Square as a starting line and point of departure for a series of alternative journeys in search of the polysemous nature of the city of Athens. Using prominent texts of Greek literature as guides, the city tourist is prompted to experience the “e-motion” that may be obtained from the experiential perception and personal interpretation of the distinct identity of the place.

Keywords: cultural tourism, experiential tourism, cultural memory, literary urban narratives

1. INTRODUCTION

The visitor who overcomes the shock of Omonoia Square will come upon six different roads opening up before him. All six of them lend themselves to a stroll.

(Markaris, 2013)

Historic European cities, such as Athens, constitute a complex, open and extremely interesting field for the development of alternative experimental models of experiential urban tourism. The present paper focuses on the possibility to search for the particular idiosyncrasy of the city and the charm of its discovery by means of specialized, custom-tailored offerings in tourist targeting. The possibility to develop and offer choices beyond mass facsimiles, in the form of a customized navigation through the urban landscape and historic time. A tour, guided by literature, that shall be based on empirical and experiential rather than just visual perception.

In an age of flux, mobility, and perpetual acceleration, but also of widespread standardization in consumer products and services, as is notably the case in the sector of mass tourism, there is ample room for identifying and employing a multitude of different types of approaches to the characteristic idiosyncrasy of a city on the part of its casual visitor. Literary narrative is particularly apposite to constituting a guide for a multidimensional urban touring-reading of the city, as it provides an overview of urban space made up of a multitude of different angles of observation. It identifies significant city landmarks on the map, indicates sites worth stopping at and suggests alternative routes for the visitor. Making use of both literary spatial representations and modern-day navigation and information processing systems, the “transient stranger” is in a position to actively and vigorously manage a series of distinct narratives and, thus, briefly inhabit not the stereotypical image of a postcard-city but the “lived” city, tracing the footprints of lived time on the palimpsest of the city’s material surface.

2. CITY TOURING FROM THE 19th TO THE 21st CENTURY

Travelers visiting Athens in the 18th or 19th century, such as Edward Dodwell or Count Otto Magnus Baron von Stackelberg, had available to them all the time necessary to get to know the place they were visiting in depth, gathering information, experiences and evidence of its history and human geography. The duration of their journey allowed them to discover all aspects of this bizarre and diverse city, to familiarize themselves with its particular character, which combined the city’s classical past and its Byzantine heritage with Ottoman buildings and the superimpositions that the Bavarians effected after the establishment of the modern Greek State.

Urban sites offer today’s traveler an equally fascinating field for exploration, new experiences and knowledge. Even during the brief time of their visit, today’s visitors of modern historic cities of the 21st century, in this particular case of Athens, inadvertently come across the complex nature of the city. The limited time they have at their disposal is an insurmountable obstacle in effectively “reading” the palimpsest of the living city. Thus, their perception of the city is largely based on *viewing*, more specifically, on hastily and haphazardly viewing the city, instead of *living* it, on mass-consuming a plethora of images instead of coming into contact with the substance and the spirit of the place. In this way, modern-day visitors tend to obtain a fleeting,

voyeuristic spatial impression of the city, due to the inevitable inability to manage and interconnect the abundance of visual fragments and information they collect (De Certeau, 1980).

Modern-day mass tourism is characterized, in the overwhelming majority of cases, by programs that are pre-scheduled to even the

smallest of detail. The predetermined duration of travel, coupled with information obtained in advance from travel ads, brochures and websites, make for a rigid schedule largely based on being ensnared by the alluring appeal of images rather than on making informed choices or venturing into random exploration. Visitors experience a place through its visual representation and position themselves in this image. Thus, any special feature of a place is neutralized and defused as standardized exoticism and the visitor is converted into a collector of images and impressions (Stavridis, 2002: 138).

In the section “On tourism” of the chapter “The town” in *Species of Spaces*, the essayist Georges Perec aptly quips, “Rather than visit London, stay at home, in the chimney corner, and read the irreplaceable information supplied by Baedeker (1907 edition)” (Perec 1997: 64), thus describing the schematic way in which a visitor attempts to acquaint him- or herself with a city without really trying to get to know or, better yet, inhabit it.

You know how to get from the station, or the air terminal, to your hotel. You hope that it isn't too far. You'd like to be central. You study the map of the town with care. You locate the museums, the parks, the places you've been strongly recommended to go and see.

You go and see the paintings and the churches. You'd love to stroll about, to loaf, but you don't dare; you don't know how to drift aimlessly, you're afraid of getting lost. You don't even walk really, you stride. You don't really know what to look at. You're moved almost if you come across the Air France office, on the verge of tears almost if you see *Le Monde* on a news stand. There's nowhere that lets itself be attached to a memory, an emotion, a face.

(Perec, 1997: 63–64)

3. CITY AND LITERATURE

“The uniqueness of any city lies in the specific arrangement, form and function of its spaces and the intersection between these spaces and individual and collective experience. In other words, it is in the idiosyncratic coincidences of time, space and culture that individual urban identities are forged and the rhythms of city life created” (Stevenson, 2003: 73). The territorial reality of the city is not exclusively defined by the constructs and form of its built environment. The city is not like its map; quite the contrary – the city is characterized by a stratification of architectural material, collective memory and history.

In attempting to capture and render the “portrait” of a city and contribute to the art of urban imagery, literature brings to the fore the living city and its historicity as opposed to notional or idealized images of a city-theme park or a city-postcard. It recomposes the image of a “fragmented world” revealing contrasting parameters, indiscernible socio-political aspects and overlooked qualities of the city’s personality. As noted by Eco, “it is easy to understand why fiction fascinates us so. It offers us the opportunity to employ limitlessly our faculties for perceiving the world and reconstructing the past” (Eco, 1994: 131).

Literary representations can serve as cultural intermediaries offering the source material for a substantial reading of the city. They prompt us to stimulating departures for the discovery of the city’s idiosyncrasy, not by means of seduction, but by means of a critical perception of the city. With fiction as their tour guide, the travelers’ wandering through the city, through this garden of emotions, spares them from an emulative accession to a stereotypical image of the city. The walking navigation extracts them from the paralysis of “posing” in front of recognizable monuments, not because it provides them with clear instructions on how to “use” the space provided, but because it allows them to develop their own stimuli in discovering the identity of the place. The uncertainty visitors feels when faced with the unknown is not lifted by ‘taming’ a place. The experience of heterogeneity is not conquered through luxury and comfort or by welcoming travelers into familiar surroundings that remind them of their own home country or places they know very well, such as multinational chains of hotels or restaurants; instead, it is conquered by offering travelers the opportunity to place themselves inside their surroundings and develop their own personal compass to roam about the city.

Where, then, does one set out to get to know a city? How does one infiltrate the ‘body urban’? This question has concerned many writers over time, as each one of them had to choose his or her own starting point when setting out to ‘draw the portrait’ of the city; to create their individual spatial representations in order to render the city readable and comprehensible to the reader.

4. OMONOIA SQUARE: A SYMBOLIC CITY HUB

Omonoia is a lake receiving the flow of multiple rivers.

(Ioannou, 1980)

City squares function as condensers and capacitors of urban experience. They are popular public spaces of social interaction, focal points of urban life and identity, memory spaces representing the historicity of a city and capturing the cultural changes and variations occurring over time. Unfolding in the space squares delineate, almost as if in the form of a theatrical act, is the city’s network of meetings, relations, events, and incidents. This is where the inspection of urban life is enacted and new ideas and trends are tried out, where the conformations of morals and the popularity of novelties is being put to the test (Moira, 2011: 340).

Omonoia Square, the second most recognizable square in Athens after Syntagma Square, is an important city hub; a place both central and liminal at the same time, both timeless and ephemeral, both flexible and yet stable and unchanged over time; a junction and a crossroads, a starting point and a point of convergence for six transport routes (even after its latest overhaul, which suspended the circular flow of pedestrians and vehicles). Omonoia Square is graced with significant historic buildings of various periods and architectural styles affording the area a diverse, multimodal and, more importantly, un-museum-like character.

Over the course of the city's long history, Omonoia Square has witnessed a variety of configurations and changes. First it was simply an open space covered with scrub and gravel on the rim of the inhabited part of the city, the wider vicinity almost a wilderness featuring streams and vineyards and fig trees and pens for sheep and cows. In the urban plan designed by Stamatios Kleanthis and Eduard Schaubert (which was never implemented), the square was vested with a monumental character, intended to become the city center, as the plan situated the Palace and other public buildings at the site. In subsequent plans, following the relocation of the Palace, the square became smaller, yet maintained its focal position in so far as it evolved into a space for walks, entertainment and meetings. During the early decades of the 20th century, Omonoia Square was completely linked to the changes in the city brought about by modernity. The site of several cafés, music clubs, hotels and theaters, hangouts for night-owls, journalists, actors and writers, it was the most vibrant part of the capital, attracting all the cosmopolitans of the time. Up until World War II, Omonoia Square had a middle-class air, an attribute about to change once and for all after the war, as the district became a working-class, blue-collar neighborhood (Giochalis & Kafetzaki, 2012: 536). To this day, Omonoia Square maintains its bustling, multicultural character and a prominent position in the public sphere and the political scene, constituting a meeting point, a destination, but also a point of departure for all sectors of the city, for residents and visitors alike.

Athens had two centers. Syntagma Square and Omonoia Square... These two centers paradoxically survived to this day because their functions have been strictly distinct. Syntagma Square is the political and administrative center of the country... On the other hand, Omonoia Square and the surrounding streets comprise the great shopping center of Athens.

(Markaris, 2013: 113–14)

Demarcating the boundaries of Omonia Square is rather hard because the surrounding building blocks in all directions are considered an integral part of it. As a result, the boundaries of its perceived reach essentially meld into the urban fabric. In its territory, distinct pieces of the urban fabric meet and intertwine, this encounter and fermentation producing an atmosphere particularly dense in meaning and sensations. The traditional oriental city of rich sensory stimuli, polysemous and unpredictable, vibrant and multifaceted, bustling and colorful, featuring the Central Market of Athens (fruit and vegetable market, meat market and fish market), the smells and the sounds, the small shops, the handicrafts and the haunts of various ethnic groups, meets the

capital of 19th-century modernity with its broad avenues, the prominent neoclassical buildings and the western-type rationalist urban planning. A case in point are the historic twin hotels Bageion and Megas Alexandros, which form a peculiar gateway at the beginning of Athinas Street towards Monastiraki and the Acropolis: "...a kind of gateway that is not marked by the presence of a gate or tollbooths, but by the change of atmosphere" (Ioannou, 1980: 100). A fact also noticeable on the city's urban planning map, where a triangle can be drawn with Omonoia Square at its peak.



10. Figure 1: The backdrop is a 1875 map of Athens by German topographer and cartographer Johann August Kaupert

The area surrounding Omonoia Square is the most labyrinthine part of Athens, the one featuring the greatest contradictions but also the only remaining one still featuring an oriental color.

(Markaris, 2013: 115)

The square is not only buzzing with the rhythmic ebb and flow of crowds moving in intersecting trajectories as they walk in all directions, but is also a site where people stop to look at shop windows, a rendezvous and, generally, a site of communication and interaction among people from all social strata. The boulevards fanning out from the square, a typical element of modernist urban planning, are long and wide, highlighting the extravaganza of stores and noteworthy public and private buildings. Thanks to their plotting and geometry, these urban axes offer the public a view and a spectacle, while also allowing for the staging of multitudinous political rallies and demonstrations, public exposure and theatricality of movement (Spyropoulou, 2010: 125). To this day, Omonoia Square is packed with cafés and restaurants, some big and renowned and others not so much, nestled in secluded alcoves or hidden nooks, along the surrounding boulevards and populous arcades, mostly men's hangouts and watering holes, as well as refuges where internal or external migrants can meet with their peers from the same village, town or country.

Its undeniable power of attraction may most likely be attributed to its central location and the tremendous size of the crowds continually coming and going. All these people think of Omonoia as a cusp – and that is what it essentially is.

(Ioannou, 1980: 14)

The flow of the city's residents is so dense and continuous that the seasonal gatherings of tourists cannot alter the regular composition of the crowd. In addition, dense throngs ascend to the square as they come up out of the underground, seeing as Omonoia is one of the most central stations of both the Athens Metro and the Electric Railway, connecting the West End of Athens with the west coast of Attica and the port of Piraeus with the northern suburbs all the way to Kifisia.

Radiating out from the square's nucleus are six boulevards demarcating six distinct routes: Athinas Street takes the visitor to the "traditional" downtown section of Monastiraki, the Acropolis and Plaka. Pireos and Agiou Konstantinou Streets are conduits to the port of Piraeus and the sea (west coast of Attica). The twin channels of Panepistimiou and Stadiou Streets lead to the institutional neoclassical center of the modern Greek state, the conceptual offshoot of German Romanticism, with its government buildings and monuments: the Parliament, the Palace, the



Zappeion, and the Stadium. Finally, the 3 September Street leads to the Archeological Museum.

Figure 2: The backdrop is a 1875 map of Athens by German topographer and cartographer Johann August Kaupert

Thus, the visitor who follows the routes fanning out from Omonoia Square can gain a comprehensive and thorough picture of Athens, seeing as the sense of the urban condition, according to Lynch, is directly linked to "the apparent clarity or 'legibility' of the cityscape" (Lynch, 1960: 2).

5. CONCLUSIONS: STARTING OUT AT OMONOIA SQUARE

The ever faster pace of life and limited financial capabilities of our day force the majority of tourists to take short vacations of only a few days. At the same time, however, there is an increasing demand for interesting breaks from the workaday rut providing experiences that are markedly "different." There is widespread interest for city tours characterized by the experiential perception of the particular identity of a place instead of the mass consumption of a standardized tourist product. The combination of literature, with its anthropocentric approach, and modern digital media, with the unique cartographic and navigational capabilities they offer, can literally take the

visitor-tourist by the hand for a stroll around town, offering him or her the opportunity to combine city walks with history, myth and cultural memory.

Omonoia Square is an iconic landmark of Athens and, at the same time, a place combining a multitude of stimuli laden with high emotional charge. A multifarious hub that can serve as a starting point for the modern traveler who wishes to get to know the city's particular personality following in the footsteps etched by literary narrative. Setting out from Omonoia Square, the visitor can recompose the image of 21st-century Athens, not as a passive receiver of information, but as an active subject exerting his or her choice, desires and actions.

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