Reclaiming the urban landscape, rebuilding the civic culture:

Online mobilization, community building and public space in Athens, Greece

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> "The greatest promise of a new language of space resides in offering communities new ways to deliberate about and forge communal identities around reimagined visions of space […] Place can function as the most powerful organizing theme of shared meaning. Street corners and neighborhoods, parks and schools, monuments and memorials — these are not just spots on a map. They are what hold the abstraction of social life together". (Gordon & Koo, 2008, p. 205)

During the last few years, Greece has experienced an economic, social and political decline the velocity of which is possibly unprecedented. Since 2010, successive Greek governments have implemented radical austerity measures as part of bailout agreements with international lenders. With soaring taxation, unemployment and poverty on top of pre-existing problems – such as increased crime rates and the lack of an effective mechanism for the controlled entry and integration of immigrants and asylum-seekers – the social fabric of urban communities in Athens has faced repeated ruptures.

The normalization of a populist rhetoric of blame, victimhood and violent revenge well before the onset of the economic crisis indicate the existence of underlying weaknesses to the country's civic culture (Gerodimos, 2013a; 2013b), which have had a direct effect on the urban landscape. From the vandalism and riots of far-left anarchist groups, to the bombings of terrorist groups, to the racist and homophobic attacks by neo-Nazi militias, to the massive demonstrations and gatherings by mainstream protesters, the public space of Athens has become the central arena of political interaction and struggle, and new media have often been used by groups seeking to challenge, occupy or even destruct public space. In a city known for its rich architectural and cultural heritage, mixed-

use city center and wealth of small enterprises and family shops, the impact of the crisis and community attempts to overcome it are immediately visible: sculptures, statues and shop displays have all been subject to a constant process of vandalism, decline and regeneration.

During the same period, the city has also witnessed the flourishing of a civil society of activists, volunteers and concerned residents who have mobilized so as to rebuild the urban landscape, to preserve memory, and to reconnect with others and with their own past. The Atenistas, which organizes small-scale interventions by residents and volunteers – such as cleaning, redecorating and transforming a school, local park or pedestrian walk at a time – as well as organizing street happenings and gatherings, was the first such group that mobilized in 2010. Other similar groups include Monumenta (cycling tours across predetermined cultural or historical trails); Every Saturday in Athens (group visits to museums, galleries, historical sites and thematic walks across the city); the Tatoi Friends Association (which campaigns and fundraises for the sustainable preservation of Greece's former palace at the national park of Tatoi); and the Facebook group for the creation of a 'Central Park' in the facilities of the Olympic Athletic Center of Athens (which also organizes regular clean-ups). Once again, in all of these cases the Internet and social media in particular appear to have an instrumental role in facilitating the formation of movements and communities that have reclaimed or created public space in a civic culture that has traditionally been seen as notoriously individualistic or, at most, functioning on the basis of kinship.

As of August 2013 there are approximately 120 online communities and citizen groups organizing activities or promoting urban causes in Athens alone. Such is the extent of the growth of these groups that the Mayor of Athens recently appointed an advisor on civic networking aimed at supporting and promoting these initiatives; to that end, they are using a web application with mash-ups (http://www.synathina.gr/) that allows citizens to browse and join the causes or events that are closer to their community or interests (Rigopoulos, 2013).

These developments mirror similar patterns of online mobilization and community-building across many parts of the world and, especially given the city's historically charged role in terms of democracy and participation, make Athens an important case study of how cities are struggling with, and adapting to, the challenges posed by globalization, mobility, emerging forms of connectivity and intensified flows of information. The proliferation and increased presence of new media in our daily lives has given rise to an extensive literature on the impact of digitization on public space, communities and civic participation. For example, the multiplication of personally owned media and the availability of entertainment and information sources at home may have contributed to the withdrawal of children and young people from public, communal and familial spaces and into the more private and individualised space of the bedroom (Bovill &Livingstone, 2001). However, a key factor for the emergence of this 'bedroom culture' may be the failure of society to offer young people social opportunities for experimentation and exercise (Livingstone, 2005), including a welcoming and stimulating urban public space.

Furthermore, the recent shift towards mobile devices (laptops and especially smartphones, tablets and e-readers, as opposed to desktop computers) has introduced further complexity and nuance to this discussion: "People increasingly use mobile social networks to transform the ways they come together and interact in public space" (Humphreys, 2010, p. 764). Digital devices may encourage us to spend more time outdoors, interacting with others and engaging with the urban landscape; or, they could be contributing to a culture in which commuters are constantly glued to their personal screens, oblivious of their surroundings (see Wilken, 2008).

The potential of digital media to contribute to community building and empower citizens by providing them with the tools for awareness, voice, mobilization and action is clear (see Scullion, Gerodimos, Jackson & Lilleker, 2013). By creating virtual public places, new technologies can allow for both synchronous and asynchronous dialogue among citizens and between citizens and decision-makers in local communities (Aurigi, 2005). Social media can also play a crucial pedagogic role "in

producing a formative culture that makes social action possible" (Giroux, 2011, p. 22). However, many have questioned the extent to which new forms of mediated interaction and engagement retain vital components of the traditional civic culture – such as the sense of commitment, loyalty, solidarity and civic duty (Gladwell, 2010). While these debates often take place at the abstract level of theory and conjecture, in reality they represent, and are pertinent to, important technological and cultural shifts that can be observed across many urban communities across the world.

This chapter focuses on the city of Athens and how communities of local citizens and civil society activists have utilized new media to reclaim the city's public spaces – and how, through that, they may have contributed to rebuilding a civic culture that has been facing its biggest crisis in generations. Employing case study data and semi-structured interviews with six experts on the public space and urban communities of Athens, including award-winning architects and the founders of Atenistas and Every Saturday in Athens (see Appendix, Table 1), this chapter will examine some of the claims that have been put forward regarding the impact of media and mobile networks on public space, as well as the main challenges facing both the mediated and the urban communities of Athens.

A new peripatetic culture: utilizing media to explore the city and preserve collective memory

One of the most contested effects of digital media is related to the ways in which we experience and move through the city in our daily lives, which has broader implications for our engagement with the physical space and with the collective culture. Recent studies show that mobile and GPS technologies lead to more habitual routes where the emphasis shifts from the journey itself to the final destination, essentially restricting our interaction with the urban landscape: "Students in the US and the UK reported that through using a mobile GPS, they experienced less exploration of possible alternative routes, less effort to memorize landmarks *en route* and generally less mental map construction" (Leyshon, DiGiovanna, & Holcomb, 2013, p. 599).

At the core of this concern lies the claim that our dependence on mobile phones reduces our multisensory experience of space, hence leading to the loss of a "peripatetic sense of place" (Adam as cited in Wilken, 2008, p. 44). However, the fact that fewer young people explore on foot could also be attributed to the lack of pedestrian-friendly environments, the fear of being in open spaces and the convenience of driving (Leyshon et al., 2013).

The increasingly ubiquitous sight of silent, detached commuters being absorbed into their personal devices might certainly seem like a legitimate cause for concern regarding our relationship to the urban landscape. Yet, it may be the case that this phenomenon is a *symptom* of a declining public space:

> Maybe people focus on their smartphones and disengage from the surrounding space because the latter is just not as interesting – because what a smartphone offers is more interesting. Should we perhaps go back to our studio and rethink and reinvent architecture, look at the mirror and create something that is worthy of society's gaze? (D. Mihas, interview with the author, April 4, 2013).

Viewed from that reverse perspective, mobile phones have arguably created new uses for transitional spaces, such as bus stops and train stations, by enabling commuters to engage in a variety of activities, including chatting and play – with cameras and mobile media art being particularly crucial to our renegotiation of such spaces (Wilken, 2008). This takes us directly to the heart of the discussion on what are the key qualities of the space that we want people to engage with. The architects interviewed for this project agreed that a sense of freedom and openness is crucial, not only in terms of enabling access and participation, but also in those of enabling users to develop *their own uses* of the space. John Karahalios (interview with the author, August 31, 2012) notes that allowing for the creation of emergent phenomena is a fundamental function of public space; when designing urban communities one has to give such phenomena the space to develop: "public spaces have quality to them when you let them open to different potentialities." Mara Bitrou (interview,

September 1, 2012) concurs that a beautiful urban landscape "allows for the potentiality of the unexpected," which could involve interacting with a stranger. Bitrou views socialization as one of the two key roles of urban public space, the other being relaxation and subsequently the self-reflection that comes with it. According to Myrto Kiourti (interview, August 30, 2012), a prerequisite for both elements is the liberation of the body: "architectural design should liberate the user so that they can enjoy the experience of use".

One way this can happen according to Bitrou is by creating a space or sense of community that enables users to experience situations that, when they are recalled in memory, create a pleasant feeling. That is to say, the process of liberation and empowerment of citizens within urban communities is intrinsically tied to memory, both individual and collective, which is also a key feature of civic culture. Therefore, public space plays a dual role by, on the one hand, enabling individuals to experience situations of social interaction and relaxation, while on the other hand incorporating all these incidents into the collective memory, which is then projected back onto the place itself. Hence, citizens become co-producers of the community's historical narrative and get emotionally attached to it.

Social media and mobile networks can affect this process in a number of ways. The extent to which we allow mobile devices to liberate (or, indeed, enslave) us largely depends on our ability to realize the potential of media and achieve a state of mindfulness about our community. As Wilken (2008) notes, networked mobility has changed the ways in which meetings are arranged in urban space, making landmarks much less crucial to this process. However, Nikos Vatopoulos (arts and culture editor for Greek newspaper Kathimerini) notes that "public space emits signals, which are not necessarily loud or visible" (interview, April 10, 2013). Even if one is absorbed into their own thoughts on their way to a meeting, their mind is still registering the surrounding environment: "unlocking a commuter's consciousness may reveal an emotional torrent about their relationship to the city."

In October 2011, Vatopoulos founded Every Saturday in Athens (ESIA) – a Facebook group organizing cultural visits and thematic walks – in an attempt to promote a sense of individual responsibility and co-ownership of urban public space amongst citizens at a time when major retailers and organizations were abandoning the heavily damaged urban landscape of Athens. Three hundred people attended the group's initial meeting in January 2012. Since then, ESIA visits and tours have taken place every single week (usually two or three times a week) and the group now has more than 12,000 members, with more than 1,000 of those having showed up for at least one of the group's events.

The success of ESIA is indicative of a silent revolution taking place amongst Athens' urban communities, i.e. the emergence of a new peripatetic culture, which rather than being hindered by new media is actually facilitated by them. Groups use Facebook and other applications to map thematic walks, prepare guest lists for group entries into museums and organize follow-up group meals at local restaurants. These initiatives aim at enabling residents to step outside their daily routines and reengage with their local communities as tourists, i.e. with adequate levels of familiarity and discovery, making the sites meaningful through cognitive dissonance (Gordon & Koo, 2008).

Vatopoulos credits this spring of community engagement to the success of the Atenistas – the first grassroots initiative to achieve both a critical mass of supporters and a robust track record of interventions via online media. Dimitris Rigopoulos (co-founder of the group) argues that, in addition to a shift in mentalities and culture, during the last few years Athens has in fact also seen a significant increase in its public spaces (interview, April 12, 2013). The unification of the city's main archaeological sites in the context of the 2004 Olympics created culturally charged walking trails. At the same time the city of Athens and the Greek government, with support both from private foundations and from the European Union, have launched an unprecedented regeneration programme for the coming years. This extends from the seafront in the southwest suburbs, where the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center will provide the city with a new cutting edge national library

and opera hall designed by celebrity architect Renzo Piano, to the renovation or building from scratch of major cultural centers (such as the National Museum of Contemporary Art at the site of the old Fix brewery, the building of the new Goulandris Foundation Modern Art Museum, and the extension of the National Gallery), to the 'Rethink Athens' project, funded by the Onassis Foundation, which aims to transform the city centre by creating an extended pedestrian and green area on Panepistimiou Steet, the most central avenue in the city. Mihas notes that "this could end up being the biggest urban cultural axis in Europe," with the potential to revitalize growth and cultural education.

Therefore, while media may challenge our established habits and routines, they also create new ways of coming together and experiencing the city, which may be equally meaningful. A key question is whether and how these new forms of socialization and engagement contribute to the civic culture by facilitating interaction across demographic, socioeconomic and cultural boundaries. The narrative of regeneration ought to be crosschecked against the daily realities of the city's different communities of residents and users, including those facing marginalization and exclusion. As Elinoff (2014, p.195) notes, a "city may triumph but that triumph will not simply result from economic growth, but rather from long-term political engagements—local, national, and global—that force both a reimagining of urban space and a redistribution of access to it".

Negotiating the balance between community and diversity

Perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of urban space – as opposed to towns, villages and rural space – is diversity: "Cities are typically characterized by diversity along nearly almost every social axis: race, class, religion, sexuality, education, political ideology and even temperament. Thus sociality in urban public spaces can occur between people of very different backgrounds" (Humphreys, 2010, p. 765). All interviewees concurred that the ability of a city, and in particular of a metropolis, to enable that co-existence is the most critical test for its survival and success, defining urban space as "that space in which infinite differences have to coexist while ensuring the maximum

level of liberty for everyone" (M. Kiourti, interview, August 30, 2012). It is worth noting that, without being prompted, all interviewees in their own way extended that to the aesthetic level, i.e. arguing that it is that diversity and coexistence itself that grants an urban landscape its distinct beauty.

If diversity is the foundation of cities, and given the fact that large crowds have to coexist within limited urban space, then the way a society manages that coexistence is the most important feature of its civic culture[1]. Central to this process, which includes an inherent element of coercion, is the regulation of individuals' behavior. Myrto Kiourti notes that the urban (civic) culture of Western Europe was founded on the progressive suppression of the body, citing the seminal work of sociologist Norbert Elias (e.g. *On the Process of Civilisation*) who examined the development of table manners in the Middle Ages. The purpose of that social coercion, however, is not to *control* an individual's public behavior for the sake of control itself, but in order to actually enable and encourage the process of social interaction with other people, including those from different backgrounds, which is at the heart of urban diversity. When asked to describe the ideal urban public space in Athens, interviewees cited the *plateia* (i.e. a plaza or public square usually featuring benches, trees and open space, often surrounded by shops or kiosks as well as residential or commercial buildings, but always embedded at the heart of an urban community, which uses it as a point of reference) as the quintessential example of such a space. Karahalios argues that these squares are crucial for the civic culture "because they force you to coexist. A *plateia* puts you in the process of coexisting even with people that you haven't chosen. The key factor is the *coercion* of citizens to coexist, i.e. *the lack of choice*".

It is precisely that lack of choice that distinguishes communities that are rooted only in physical space from situations and relationships that partly or wholly take place in virtual environments designed around the concept of user choice. Human beings' innate tendency to seek the comfort of familiar narratives, viewpoints and likeminded people is considerably augmented in

digital spaces not only by the very nature of new media, but also by the increasingly pervasive practice of web personalization. Using sophisticated (but invisible, indeed secretive) algorithms, social media, search engines and other major providers of information filter content and manipulate the user interface so as to deliver what they consider to be the most relevant and potentially enjoyable experience based on each user's profile and previous interactions. Apart from the questionable ethics and paradoxically cyclical logic of this phenomenon (Gerodimos & Gray, 2013), web personalization creates "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011), which potentially narrow the diet of ideas, viewpoints, stories and people that we encounter online.

At a time when negotiating the balance between community and diversity (hence avoiding either conflict or ghettoization) will be one of the principal challenges for cities in the 21st century, we have to carefully consider whether digital media are simultaneously facilitating *both* community *and* diversity, or whether they are, in fact, contributing to segregation and parochialism. Using Dodgeball as a case study of how a mobile social network can facilitate parochialization – or indeed to hamper it – Humphreys (2010, p. 769) found that "[t]he same information exchanged through Dodgeball could be used to facilitate meeting up as much as it could be used to avoid a particular person". His study "raises important questions about the potential social insularity" (p. 775) that may be caused by mobile social networks. Furthermore, Guvi found that "virtual contact facilitated interaction in physical (public) spaces but that one result 'may be the re-emergence of racial boundaries as [people] organize to meet in physical spaces" (as cited in Leyshon et al., 2013, p. 589). The argument is that – contrary to the afore-mentioned need for public space to allow for, if not actively encourage, the unexpected – digital media allow us to minimize our interaction with people or places that are not material to our predetermined routes or routines.

This effect could be particularly applicable to the case of communities of activists or citizens that depend heavily on digital media for the recruitment, interaction and mobilization of their members. The question of whether civic media and online movements can only reach and motivate

the "usual suspects" has long been at the center of scholarly attention. However, the evidence from my case studies does not support this somewhat dystopian perspective. When asked about the demographic composition of the communities that they have been respectively involved with, both Nikos Vatopoulos (ESIA) and Dimitris Rigopoulos (Atenistas) remarked on the diversity of their members. Moreover, they were both convinced that new media can help mobilize people who would not normally engage ("I have seen it happen," said Vatopoulos), while a bandwagon effect may also be at play.

Furthermore, the process of community-building itself and how it ultimately spills over from the online to the offline world is also fascinating and revealing about the synergies of the two spheres. Vatopoulos firmly believes that "if you are open-minded enough [these communities help you] to become a stronger, better person, to shape your needs, to open your ears and become interactive." Recounting his own experience as founder and manager of ESIA, which he likens to a "psychological urban experiment," Vatopoulos notes that:

> There is a great range of personalities, characters and idiosyncracies [in ESIA] and, having observed the evolution and change in many people's behaviors, it is absolutely clear that the impact of new media in enabling people to open up in public is critical; [observing] the improvement in their behavior is amazing. I have seen people transform and become mellower through social interaction in public spaces – by sharing experiences with others at the same time in the same place […] You notice how the community, the group [is formed] – people who are just a name on Facebook become [three-dimensional] personalities and then the community becomes something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

While reassuring in the sense that it partly credits social media for the creation of successful and sustainable urban communities, this insight also underlines the importance of physical public space as the definitive agent of social interaction. This is reiterated by the literature on urban geography,

which stresses the impact of our experiences with and within places – including complex social interactions – on the relationship between the self and the place (Leyshon et al., 2013). Taking this one step further, and contrasting the vertical development of major American cities to the highly restrictive planning regulations of certain European cities, Karahalios argues that the city plays a crucial developmental role, providing children with a sense of scale that partly shapes their aspirations and mentalities.

Therefore, the urban landscape clearly is an agent of socialization affecting one's perception of the self, as well as how that self fits (or does not fit) into a broader social structure. This is a temporal process, as much as a spatial one, as our acquisition of – and contribution to – collective memory is critical to the shaping of our identity. Once again, the impact of the media on this process seems to be mixed and possibly contradictory. The culture of accelerated communication and news cycles, fragmented interactions and constant access seems to favor presentism to the detriment of a more mindful and historically informed experience of place. Vatopoulos notes that "we tend to make judgments according to our own lifespan and this is a big trap […] The city exists and functions in a timeframe that is outside of [one's] own timeframe. You have to step outside and become detached so as to be able to calmly observe and judge." Yet, it is social media and mobile networks that also enable us to engage in innovative ways with space and history (Hardey, 2007) – from mash-ups and geotagging, to crowdsourcing and flash mobs, users are continuously inventing new ways of using, exploring and appropriating space.

Every Saturday in Athens is only one of several civic groups utilizing digital media to reengage with the history of the city, through guided tours, thematic walks and cultural trails, such as the architectural cycling tours led by Monumenta (http://www.monumenta.org), which also joined four other groups for the creation of the "Let's go for a walk" project (http://www.pamebolta.gr/) that directly engages local residents by encouraging them to share their personal stories and memories of buildings and communities. These recollections are digitally recorded and posted on the project's

website, thus acquiring a dual media literacy role both as content and as process. In addition to being freely accessible and quite popular, all these activities unlock the architectural and cultural "secrets" of buildings and sights, often enabling citizens to learn about the history of Athens' ethnic or religious communities that have traditionally been marginalized.

Athens is often described as a dirty and ugly city – especially by those who live in it. Chronic challenges, such as a significant exodus of middle class residents, major retailers and businesses away from the city center (a suburban sprawl that started in the 1980s and peaked in the early 2000s), criminality, vandalism, riots and lack of a feasible strategic plan for the protection and extension of the city's green spaces has meant that Athens has not managed to capitalize on its rich archaeological, cultural and architectural assets. However, most of our interviewees pointed out that the beauty of the city stems from its diversity and openness, including social and class mobility that is much more fluid in comparison to other European cities. This allows for the survival and continuing presence of a huge range of human characters, social groups, family businesses and small shops that are so fundamental to the fabric of the communities and the urban landscape itself.

These assets have undoubtedly been threatened by the severe economic crisis, which has created a climate of insecurity and fear, while also exposing underlying problems in the city's (and the country's) political culture, an example of which is the successful penetration by the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party into neighborhoods that have been affected by crime and by illegal immigration and trafficking, such as Agios Panteleimon. The next section examines how communities have used digital media to overcome these problems and how this process of empowerment often blurs the boundaries between public and private space.

Community innovation as a way out of the crisis

The crisis in Greece has had a massive impact on the retail and leisure industries, which are important pillars of Athens' economic and social life. The rapid decline of disposable income has

meant that many people withdrew from the city's commercial center, spending more time at home. The knock-on effect on shops, businesses and local communities signifies a considerable failure of the paradigm of consumption upon which both the Greek economy and contemporary lifestyle depended. Alluding to the rapid increase in homelessness and the common sight of people of a middle class background searching through rubbish bins for scraps of food and other materials, Mihas notes that as soon as people stopped consuming and acting as a resource, they were pushed to the margins of the community.

While the existence of strong familial support networks may have ameliorated the impact of the crisis for many, the crisis exposed tensions regarding the use, accessibility and ownership of public space; tensions that relate to class as well as age. These issues are by no means exclusive to Athens and have been at the focus of urban studies literature for many years. The ongoing privatization of public space, through the creation of corporate plazas, guarded malls and gated communities leads to "numerous struggles over the definitions of, and public access to, urban space" (Breitbart, 1998, p. 307). Furthermore, in a globalized urban culture that places significant burdens and expectations on youth in terms of educational achievement and social status, and which prioritizes supervised activities in closed spaces, it is often the case that poorer children depend on their local public spaces for vital amenities (Laughlin & Johnson, 2011).

In a move that aims to begin addressing that need, while at the same placing the country's libraries at the cutting edge of media literacy, nine public and municipal libraries in Greece are joining the Media Labs network of libraries, as part of the Future Libraries project funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, which is also funding the building of the new National Library of Greece that will act as the central node of the network. These libraries will offer state-of-the-art networked and multimedia facilities, as well as specially trained staff, enabling visitors to produce media, surf the web, share ideas or rest in a welcoming environment. The main target groups for this project include teenagers, young professionals, the unemployed as well as immigrants (Sanoudou,

2013) – hence offering crucial public amenities in an urban setting. Project such as these subscribe to the vision of public and school libraries as media literacy learning commons for the 21st century, as opposed to mere repositories of information (Mihailidis & Diggs, 2010).

Another powerful way of using digital media to empower and engage citizens with their local communities is the use of interactive applications, games and virtual reality environments that mirror, relate or directly feed back into the urban landscape through users' active deliberation, participation or content production (e.g. Gordon & Manosevitch, 2010). One such as example is City of Errors (http://cityoferrors.com) – an experimental and participatory online platform that combines documentary-making, games and civic engagement with the aim of encouraging citizens to identify urban trouble spots as well as come up with appropriate solutions. According to its creator, City of Errors aims to mobilize people who might not necessarily fit into the profile of the urban activist (Abravanel, 2013). Another example of experimental digital and urban literacy projects is the Hybrid City workshops organized by the Frown project in May 2013 (http://frowntails.blogspot.gr) which allowed non-expert users of social media to create networks, applications and mash-ups in order to control information flows.

This hybridization of creativity and participation through different media has long been at the heart of urban environmental education through the use of public art, design work and performance, which have multiple benefits both for the young people involved (including benefits in terms of personal development, attitude shifts and increased political socialization) and for the broader community (Breitbart, 1998). It is that process of articulating and expressing one's voice, needs, vision and personal story – and the sense of liberty and connection with others that come with it – that is so fundamental to civic empowerment. A common characteristic of oppressed groups is that they are usually framed and perceived as both invisible and as different (Iveson, 2000). Hence, urban planning ought to aim towards a unifying – albeit not homogenizing – civic culture that not only

acknowledges and respects social difference as Iveson argues, but also uses difference as a tool of pedagogy and socialization.

It is upon those exact principles that the Human Library (http://humanlibrary.gr) is based. Part of a global network originally launched in Denmark, Human Library Greece is an innovative platform that breaks down barriers of time, space and background: acting as a mobile library, which carries human stories on its "shelves," it enables volunteers from vulnerable or oppressed communities to put themselves "on loan" so as to be "read" by visitors at local events. This process of recounting one's life story and exposing the self to the community creates a climate of trust and empathy enabling a candid dialogue about sensitive topics – from disability and sexuality to race and religion – that have the potential of breaking stereotypes and fighting prejudice. Rather than seeking tolerance that is forced upon people through social conventions and political correctness, participants achieve engagement that – regardless of difference – is based on mutual respect, communication and understanding of others, i.e. valuing others as co-citizens (Bannister & Kearns, 2013).

Previous studies have demonstrated the empowering effect of oral histories. Breitbart and Worden (1994) observed that:

> People were pleased to talk about their lives, often sensing that their stories might help to break down the isolation many felt within their urban neighborhoods. Some felt that the extraordinary quality of many ordinary lives might put to rest the unremitting, negative stereotypes of urban America generated by the media. (p.83)

Hence, the *process* of producing oral histories itself emerges as a valuable media literacy tool as it not only allows those involved in the creation of narratives to acquire and exercise multimedia storytelling skills, but also to contest narratives that are dominant in broadcast media. Nikos Vatopoulos notes that fear – which has often been the predominant frame through which media represent Athens as a dangerous, derelict city – is one of the two main challenges facing coexistence in the city (the other being unemployment). Perhaps one of the most significant unintended

consequences of the activities that the digital communities and civic groups of Athens have engaged in is the presentation – through first-hand accounts, photos and videos on social media – of alternative narratives that challenge the narrative of apathy and despair. By producing visual evidence that making a positive and tangible change to the urban landscape is possible, they create a virtual circle of efficacy that is a crucial prerequisite of civic engagement (Gerodimos, 2012).

Pointing, once again, to the function of the urban landscape as an agent of socialization, Vatopoulos argues that a devalued public space brings people down and makes them devalue themselves: "it leads them to erratic actions or extremist behaviours – or to apathy… and apathy is also an extremist behaviour." Having reported on the communities, art and spaces of Athens as a professional journalist for decades, he notes that even a small improvement to public space – such as installing a sculpture that the passers-by may not even consciously pay attention to – sends out a positive message, the aggregate of which creates a culture and ambience that is very hard to quantify.

Having said that, the common characteristic of all these civic activism projects outlined here is the belief in the power and responsibility of the individual citizen to make the effort of improving their lifeworld. According to Dimitris Rigopoulos, the economic crisis – and in particular the failure of the paradigm of hyperconsumption – acted as a shock that allowed people to view things from a different perspective, opt for an alternative lifestyle and seek creative ways out of the crisis. A case that represents the essence of digital networks and crowdsourcing, and their potential to provide applications that address real market needs, is Cookisto (http://www.cookisto.com) – a web platform launched in Athens and currently being rolled out in London that brings together amateur cooks and busy city dwellers who are looking for ready-made homemade food. Using a live map of locally available products, as well as a reputation system that enables users to rate each other, Cookisto has essentially created a peer-to-peer community around food, which has created a win-win situation for both sides, as prices are considerably lower than that of restaurants or professional delivery

companies, while amateur cooks, in addition to the monetary profit, get a range of social gratifications.

Viewing the crisis as an opportunity for creativity and reengagement, Kiourti also cites the recent trend of amateur theater companies or groups of young actors in Athens who, lacking the resources and space required for a professional production, stage performances inside people's homes – either in the context of private parties or in that of events that are open to the local community.

These emerging phenomena, which blur the boundaries between public and private space, act as a reminder that distinguishing between the two spheres can be a daunting challenge, especially in a city that has historically understood and defined public space (*agora*) as something universally accessible and free – a point where all citizens meet to exchange views, trade goods and make decisions. Scholars have long argued about the boundaries of urban public space and whether, for instance, such space includes malls, shops, bars or other establishments that require the purchase of a ticket or a product (Giroux, 2011; Humphreys, 2010; Laughlin & Johnson, 2011). Rigopoulos argues that in today's world, and given the complexities and particular characteristics of cities, that distinction between public and private space is problematic: "social life often takes place in private spaces while using [or extending into] public space"; excluding these spaces from the definition of public space in Athens would limit the former to a tiny fraction of what it is in reality. Nikos Vatopoulos further challenges this distinction and argues that the internet is changing the way we move through the city, as "you can trigger events as part of a continuous feedback loop": organising an ESIA activity at a tea salon via Facebook, and gathering dozens or hundreds of community members into that space, turns a private space into a public one.

Still, the invisible and long-term implications of digitization on the boundaries of public space ought to be further examined. This is especially true in the context of an increasingly dominant paradigm of architecture, urban development and digital innovation that often treats cities and

residents as “interchangeable coordinates on a flat economic plain” (Elinoff, 2014: 195), overlooking the effects of systemic exclusion and economic marginalization.

From online to offline, and back: the era of user-driven community

The blurring of the boundaries between public and private space does raise important questions regarding the transparency, accountability and openness of communities, as well as the role and protection of individuals within them. However, one of the most salient concerns regarding the impact of digitization on the civic culture is the disempowerment of communities, organizations and collective forms of mobilization whose existence or coherence is dependent on a clear sense of place (Van Dijk, 1999). The shift to a networked society that favors the virtual over the physical may have created significant dysfunctions and deficits in the civic culture – from a digital divide between those who can access and utilize new technologies (whether across age, socioeconomic background or other structural or cultural factors) to our withdrawal from public spaces to the impossibility of designing a functioning democratic model that has neither a finite *demos*, nor those hierarchies of spatial control that are required to maintain it.

Despite these limitations, the evidence from my case studies concurs with Gordon and Koo’s (2008) view that networks “need not degrade, nor merely coexist with, but can augment the capacity of a place to form meaning” (p.208). Both interviewees who were involved with the founding and management of civic communities in Athens were unequivocal that these initiatives could not have taken place without the Internet. According to Dimitris Rigopoulos, the Atenistas “wouldn’t exist without it – it just wouldn’t have happened or it would just have remained at the level of ‘word of mouth’”. Other civic communities that are deeply rooted into a particular place, such as the Tatoi Friends Association, which campaigns for the preservation and sustainable development of the former palace and forest in the outskirts of Athens is using the web to raise awareness, recruit members and fundraise. The lowering of logistical and marketing costs associated with fundraising

efforts through social media have allowed groups such as this to create mediated communities that may not necessarily be located *within* a finite space, but are *about* a particular place.

My study also underlines the importance the platform, and in particular of Facebook's interface (as opposed to other social media such as Twitter or Instagram), in facilitating this kind of community. According to Vatopoulos, the public posting of members' own photos on the group's Facebook wall is a key part of community-building as it strengthens the ties amongst members: "it is important to encourage people to publically expose themselves in the sense of externalizing one's preferences and taste; and unless you externalize your taste you will never cultivate it." In other words, making one's aesthetic codes the subject of interaction and negotiation (even reflectively just with oneself) means that one opens up to the community allowing both parties to be changed.

Subsequently, and given both groups' dependence on Facebook for community building and dissemination, the issue of the digital divide – especially across age groups – was acknowledged as a real one. Dimitris Rigopoulos noted that in its early stages, the Atenistas often faced the challenge of enabling non-Facebook users to follow its activities (ESIA seems to have a more mixed demographic including more seniors, although the Atenistas attracts more families with children).

While the digital divide is a major issue whose implications should not be overlooked, perhaps a 'universalist' position, which requires the co-presence of everyone for a community to exist, is unfeasible or even normatively problematic. As discussed earlier, young people are often structurally marginalized or disenfranchised in urban communities. Creating opportunities for voice expression and participation can only be seen as a positive step in redressing that imbalance. This touches upon a broader question regarding whether *public* space is synonymous to *common* space. Creating alternative spaces that protect and facilitate the existence and development of alternative cultural practices and multiple identities is very important because "not all needs are met by the provision of other spaces that are ostensibly for 'everyone'" (Iveson, 2000, p. 228). In that sense,

digital communities can provide the means and space necessary for the expression of those identities and practices or, as Livingstone (2005, p. 177) puts it, “new forms of connectivity”.

Having said that, all the interviews and case studies examined in the context of this research demonstrate that ‘online’ should not be antagonistically conceptualized as an alternative to ‘offline’ but as a way of augmenting the physical experience and enriching urban communities. In fact, the flows of tensions, interactions and resource implications between the virtual and the physical aspects of these communities demonstrate their organic interdependence. An obvious such issue is scale – and resources – especially in the case of communities that have seen a steady growth in members and activities, such as Every Saturday in Athens. Nikos Vatopoulos, who personally manages the community and organizes the events in his spare time, reflected on the life of the group (which at the time of my interview in April 2013 had approximately 7,000 members) noting that “sometimes you can be a victim of your own success […] I’m not sure if the group were to reach 12,000 members whether I would be able to do this on my own [or] whether there should be subgroups or whether we should do things differently” (as it happens, the group did reach that number and Vatopoulos did appoint a second administrator of the Facebook group).

Commenting on the implications of scale and management models, Rigopoulos warns that “the utopia of participation that we have can [lead to] dysfunctionality.” He believes that the fact that ESIA is run by one person “simplifies things a lot” and recounting on his past experience of co-managing the Atenistas he notes that “even with only five people running it there were still tensions… let alone when there were 100-200 people [in the room].”

In addition to facing challenges and limitations that are inherent to any social organization regardless of format, civic projects or communities aiming to successfully utilize the web must put emphasis on graphic design and acquiring an attractive visual presence that blends multimedia with content that is spatially relevant to potential visitors or members. Two such examples of best practice in Athens include Athensville (http://athensville.blogspot.co.at/), a slick blog that through photo-

essays and a distinct style has gained a following of thousands; and Metropolis (http://www.metropolispress.gr/), which in 2012 launched Mstories – a series of short films about Athens available on YouTube that cover a range of urban and cultural developments through features and interviews in the style of a magazine.

However, based on the insights shared by the interviewees in this project – and by a review of the cases of digital innovation and community that have succeeded so far – the most critical factor of all may have little do with technology and everything to do with the ability to emotionally, aesthetically and practically engage the user/citizen. As I have argued elsewhere (Gerodimos, 2012), this can be done by producing emotionally intelligent storytelling that the user can associate with; a narrative or opportunity that relates to the user's lifeworld or experiences, ideally allowing them to feel that they can become a co-creator and stakeholder.

When asked to reflect on the role of media in public space both generally and more specifically in terms of their own practice of architecture and urban design, the architects interviewed for this project rejected a superficial incorporation of information and communication technologies into the space (e.g. through screens, booths in tickers in public space – or through applications that work with mobile devices in order to augment reality). Karahalios argues that the shelf life of these technologies is so short that they soon become irrelevant and end up becoming "aestheticized as decorative elements." This echoes scholarly critiques of the 'Digital City' and of top-down e-democracy or civic commons projects that have failed to engage the local community precisely because they subscribe to a technologically deterministic paradigm, one that assumes the technology on its own is sufficient to empower people and communities (Aurigi, 2005).

In their own ways, all interviewees alluded to a new paradigm of planning that encourages individuals to reflect on their own needs, responsibilities and role within urban communities. Myrto Kiourti calls for a public space that acts as "a mirror in which people can look at themselves and self-

criticize"; a form of a psychoanalytically informed autobiography that enables people to examine their own cultural and familial baggage and how these distort their perceptions of the self and of the Other. Dimitris Mihas cites the concept of parametric architecture, which, like other emerging phenomena such as 3D printing, has the potential to empower consumers to become creators and may lead to "an era of digital craft-making." Given the increasing integration of digital media into the fabric of our daily experience, the speed and potential reach of such technological developments calls for a substantive investment in the theory and practice of media literacy, so as to ensure that digitization empowers, rather than segregates, users.

Concluding reflections

During the last five years, the urban landscape of Athens has faced major challenges in terms of social cohesion, crime, economic deprivation, immigration, racism and continuous disruption and destruction. The city includes a cornucopia of vibrant, contested and dormant spaces, as well as a diverse range of groups and active citizens who have utilized digital tools, social networks and media literacy in order to come together, cross boundaries, preserve memories, disseminate knowledge and encourage participation. The survival and longevity of the digital communities, civic groups and initiatives mentioned in this chapter remain to be seen. The fact that by the time this book is published some of these websites or groups may be defunct or may have significantly altered their appearance or mission is itself a key trait of digitization and would be a reminder of the accelerated pace and short lifespan of online communities. Overall, however, there is robust evidence across time of peripatetic exploration, historical awareness, urban activism, digital innovation and community formation that may indicate a cultural shift. In conjunction with an unprecedented creation, expansion and regeneration of cultural and public spaces, Athens has the potential to use this crisis as an opportunity for transformation.

New media constitute an instrumental enabler for this shift. However, the boundaries of virtuality and disembodied community, and the merits of physical interaction with space and with other citizens ought to be carefully considered when rethinking the role of public space in the preservation and nurturing of civic culture. *All* of the examples of communities and civic initiatives discussed here retain a fundamental attachment to the physical public space and to communities around Athens. While the architects and community organizers interviewed acknowledged the crucial role of the internet in facilitating this culture of engagement, one after the other they all returned to deeper historical and cultural issues facing both the city and the Greek society as a whole – issues to do with failed institution-building, repressive familial structures, an unhealthy relationship with the state, a failed lifestyle of hyperconsumption and, above all else, a problematic relationship with the self.

Furthermore, our assessment of how communities are utilizing technology should not overlook the role of inequalities, divisions and patterns of exclusion stemming both from established paradigms of urban development, as well as from emerging paradigms of technological innovation. Digital spaces and networks should not be hailed as a panacea for the problems of the city's communities and neither should they be seen as competitors or alternatives to local place. To the extent, however, that media literacy can encourage citizens to revisit, share and reappraise their personal life stories, as well as critically engage with their own media habits and uses, there is the potential for a paradigm of community building that is conducive to urban diversity and coexistence.

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Appendix

Table 1

Profiles of interviewees

Date	Name	Profession / Organization
Aug 30th, 2012	**Dr Myrto Kiourti**	Architect & Partner at *Kiourti Techniki*
Aug 31st, 2012	**John Karahalios**	Architect & Partner at *Plaini & Karahalios*
Sep 1st, 2012	**Mara Bitrou**	Freelance Architect & Artist
Apr 4th, 2013	**Dimitris Mihas**	Architect at *ADL Engineering Consultants*
Apr 10th, 2013	**Nikos Vatopoulos**	Arts & Culture Editor at *Kathimerini* newspaper Founder & Manager, *Every Saturday in Athens*
Apr 12th, 2013	**Dimitris Rigopoulos**	Journalist & Athens Editor at *Kathimerini* newspaper Co-Founder, *Atenistas*

Footnotes

[1] Interestingly, the Greek word for 'urban' and 'civic' is the same (*αστικός*), the Greek word for 'civilisation' and 'culture' has the city at its root (*πολιτισμός)*, while the words 'politics' and 'police' are themselves rooted in the Greek word for the 'city' (*πόλις*), demonstrating the intrinsic and historic ties between the concepts of urban community, civility and regulation.