



Explorations in Space and Society  
No. 53 | September 2019  
ISSN 1973-9141  
[www.losquaderno.net](http://www.losquaderno.net)

Neighbourhood Portraits

53 Lo sQuaderno

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Neighbourhood Portraits

*a cura di / dossier coordonné par / edited by*

**Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Cristina Mattiucci & Andrea Pavoni**

*Guest artist / artiste présentée / artista ospite*

**Enzo Umbaca**

*Editorial*

**Chima Michael Anyadike-Danes**

*You've got to be there to know it. Experiencing LA's Koreatown*

**Sara Bonfanti**

*Walking along in Southall. Changing frames of a fabled ghetto in greater London*

**Fuad Musallam**

*A Hamra Crossroads. Particular Histories in the Historic Neighbourhood*

**Nick Dines**

*Stop Pasolini. Excavating the social underbelly of a gentrifying neighbourhood in Rome*

**Serena Olcuire**

*Quarticciolo, the perfect dimension. Decay, coexistence and resistance in a roman ecosystem*

**The Housing History Collective**

*Tiny events. Tales of urban domesticity from Lingotto, a former working-class neighborhood in Turin*

**Alessandro Coppola**

*The differentiation of the trivial. The bars in NoLo (Milan) as micro-publics in the age of urban super-diversification*

**Lucia Baima & Angelo Caccese**

*Urbanism from within. An oblique gaze on Lavapiés*

**Plácido Muñoz Morán**

*Imagining the future of Vallcarca. An ethnography of urban materials and their politics*

**Luca Onesti**

*Da Tatavla a Kurtuluş. Storia e memoria di un quartiere greco di Istanbul*

**Miriam Tedeschi**

*Multiple neighbourhoods. Affective manifold spaces in Turku*

**Valeria Raimondi**

*'Free zone Exarchia'. Narratives of an antagonist neighbourhood*

**Ilektra Kyriazidou**

*Complex intimacies in a Thessaloniki refugee neighborhood*

**Giuseppina Forte**

*The Neighborhood in the Morro. Heterogeneity, Difference, and Emergence in a Periphery of the Global South*

# 'Free zone Exarchia'

## Narratives of an antagonist neighbourhood

**Valeria Raimondi**

*It is midnight when the first explosion is heard. "The boys started on time tonight", says a man at the bar, sarcastically. The Greeks sitting at the tables watch indifferently the scene, a show that has often been repeated for years. Some of the (few) tourists go away alarmed, others take refuge inside the cafés on the side of the square to watch the show cautiously, impatient to tell their friends, once returned from vacation, they have witnessed a real urban riot. Until the tear gasses convince them to take a taxi and return to the hotel. Others, instead, readily take out masks and gloves from their backpacks and, despite the smoke and the bodies moving rapidly, try to understand how to reach for Molotov cocktails and stones. They are the anarcho-tourists: young people coming from all over Europe to Exarcheia to experience the thrill of clashes. In general, few really understand what is happening and the reasons behind the skirmishes.*

A peculiar neighbourhood in the centre of Athens, Exarcheia is internationally known as an anarchist and leftist area, whose resistance identity is recognisable in the numerous political squats and autonomous centres that compose its space. Characterised by a long history of subversion and antagonist practices, Exarcheia constitutes a sort of 'free zone' for the activists who live there – an area ideally free from police and any form of authority, fascism and xenophobia.

In purely spatial terms, Exarcheia is located in the centre of the Greek capital, about one kilometre away as the crow flies from the Acropolis. With approximately 22,000 residents in a land area of 0.9 square kilometres, it is a densely populated neighbourhood, inhabited mainly by lower-middle class workers and young people. The neighbourhood develops around a central triangular square, from which short city blocks radiate, lined with small shops, bookstores and cafés. For its capacity to bring together political activists, artists and troublemakers, the neighbourhood has been defined a 'magnet of dissent' (Vradis 2012). Depicted in public discourses as a delinquent neighbourhood, Exarcheia historically represents the fulcrum of political and intellectual life in the city, thanks also to the presence of several bookstores and publishing houses.

The antagonistic activities that nowadays shape the neighbourhood's multicultural and politically radical urban fabric originate from its past. In the 1970s, when the military dictatorship was toppled in Greece, Exarcheia was already a hotbed of resistance. The presence of universities made it the epicentre of student revolts, the most famous being the anti-dictatorial uprising of November 1973, centred around the campus of the Polytechnic School. The students' struggle had a lasting effect on Greek activism, and resulted in the spreading of anarchist and leftist ideas and practices in the neighbourhood and all over Greece.

Today Exarcheia is still considered the 'backbone of social and political resistance in the city' (Kritidis

Valeria Raimondi is a PhD candidate in Urban Studies at the Gran Sasso Science Institute, Department of Social Sciences, L'Aquila, Italy. She has a Master degree in Geography and Territorial Processes (University of Bologna). Her dissertation, titled *Countering the European border regime: migrants' strategies of self-organised reception in Athens*, investigates migrant squats as instances of border struggles in the urban context. Her interests include autonomous practices of self-organisation and anarchist geographies.

[valeria.raimondi@gssi.it](mailto:valeria.raimondi@gssi.it)

2014, 90). Characterised by 'porosity', the neighbourhood is a theatre of emancipating practices and expressive acts of encounter of multiple subjectivities (Stavrides 2016): in Exarcheia all voices are potentially audible, and different identities merge in the struggle for claiming rights. Students, migrants, homeless, LGBTQI+ activists, precarious workers and unemployed take part in the life of the neighbourhood, increasing the strength and visibility of the social movement and resulting in a sort of hybridisation of the struggle. The contentious character of the neighbourhood also finds expression on its walls. In Exarcheia walls are filled with posters, scrawled with writings and decorated with graffiti,

constituting a sort of urban memorial landscape. Writings in Greek, English, Arabic and Pashto narrate a vision of a post-border future, while street art and murals bear witness of recent (traumatic) memories related to political activism – as the graffiti on a wall of the Polytechnic in memory

*In Exarcheia all voices are potentially audible, and different identities merge in the struggle for claiming rights. Students, migrants, homeless, LGBTQI+ activists, precarious workers and unemployed take part in the life of the neighbourhood*

of Pavlos Fyssas-Killah P, a political rapper assassinated by the fascists in 2013, and the commemorative plate in Tzavella street for Alexis Grigoropoulos, shot by the Police in 2008.

The antagonistic politics that takes place in the neighbourhood define both its space and its time, as daily life in Exarcheia is marked by a rhythm that alternates daytime serenity with nocturnal turmoil (Vradis 2012). Generally, the neighbourhood's life is characterised by a normalisation of radical tactics – i.e. riots, squatting of spaces and use of violence – mainly aimed at preserving the 'free zone' by gaining visibility and constantly laying claim to the territory. The 'Saturday night riots' and the 'annual riot rites' are important components of Exarcheia's life. The latter represent moments in which the memory of traumatic events in the history of activism in Athens is remembered in a contentious form – an example is the massive mobilisation that takes place every year in December since 2008. On 6 December of that year, the killing of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos, shot by the Police in a street close to the square, unleashed a series of student demonstrations that from Exarcheia quickly spread throughout Greece, lasting almost a month. On a smaller scale, the practice of spontaneous 'everyday riots' has become part of the neighbourhood daily rhythm since 2004, after the Olympics. The *pesimo* (Greek slang for 'assault') consists in small hit-and-run attacks, usually occurring on Saturday nights and mainly directed against the Riot Police.

*The air of Exarcheia on Saturday night gets heavy, saturated with tear gas and smoke from burning rubbish bins. Stournari street, next to the Polytechnic, is a battlefield. The rioters run back and forth from the square, where others fill glass bottles with gasoline. The barricades of burning bins and motorbikes seem more than symbolic, small bulwarks erected against an austerity that has been corroding the country for a decade now. On one side, young people, students, unemployed, migrants, anarchists. . . Nothing gives the idea that there is a political ideology behind those barricades but, more than anything, the need to show that they are there, that (at least) that space is theirs – the anger as well, and probably it is worth much more. On the other side, at 28th October street, hundreds of policemen in riot gear await the signal that invites them to intervene. After a week getting bored parked in the buses along the boundary of the neighbourhood, they can finally get into action. They almost never reach the square. They could, but the game would end right away. . .*

The geography of political activism in Exarcheia is negotiated between different groups: on the outside, with the police and far-right groups, from whose dangerous intrusions the space must be preserved; on the inside, between the different political assemblies that contribute in the production and reproduction of the neighbourhood's antagonist narrative. The space is not only a scenario that hosts the struggle, but the conquest of the space itself is a main objective of the struggle. In the

anarchists' vision, one of the main purposes behind the struggle for the creation and preservation of the 'free zone' is to dismantle the idea that the space of the city belongs exclusively to its own inhabitants, erasing the discriminatory boundaries between those who 'properly belong' and those who do not (A.K. 2018).

To safeguard the neighbourhood's internal security, a so-called 'security team' has been established, which is mainly acting against drug-dealing and petty theft. Composed of activists belonging to different political groups, this civilian militia has self-appointed to maintain order in Exarcheia, marching throughout the neighbourhood, especially at night, chasing away drug dealers and using violence, if needed. The controversial presence of the 'security team' along with its ambiguous practices cause clashes between different groups, constituting one of the major political contradictions of Exarcheia in the last years. Moreover, if at the beginning its formation was well received by the inhabitants, in recent times episodes of intolerance towards its work are more and more frequent. While consolidating Exarcheia's resistance identity, the production of conflictual urbanity and the strategies of opposition to institutions and capitalism lead to a closure vis-à-vis the outside. Defining the physical and conceptual boundaries of Exarcheia as a free and autonomous zone implies a double process, that results in the enhancement of the divide with the rest of the city and the consequent isolation of the neighbourhood. The revolutionary spirit that characterises Exarcheia is described in mainstream public discourses as a condition of social unrest and perpetual violence. This external vision frames it as a 'no-go zone', producing 'geographies of fear' and exception (Koutrolikou 2016), which offer the ground for discourses and policies of criminalisation of political activism.

Since 2008, when the phase of austerity and neoliberal reform started in Greece, the fertile socio-political context of the neighbourhood provided the ground for the development of a network of grassroots experiences in the effort to establish antagonistic modes of social existence to face the humanitarian crisis. Following the occupation of Syntagma square 2011, several autonomous spaces were opened in Exarcheia, such as self-organised 'anarchist' canteens, healthcare centres, social centres and community assemblies. The result is a sort of solidarity economy within the neighbourhood, which proved essential when, in the summer of 2015, thousands of migrants arrived to Athens. Initially camped in squares or public parks, migrants were welcomed in Exarcheia with the opening of dozen of squats to house people in transit, adding an important new component to the neighbourhood's life. In addition to support structures, migrants found a safe space in the neighbourhood, where the risk of xenophobic and police attacks is minimised. Moreover, the spatial location of Exarcheia in the centre of Athens along with the practices and politics that take place in it help giving migrants significant visibility as well as political agency, which are denied to them in the institutional reception facilities. Migrant squats, along with all the political squats, are under a constant threat of eviction, a threat that has become more serious with the victory in the May 2019 administrative elections of the centre-right party Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy), which called to clean up the neighbourhood from all forms of dissent.

However, the threat to the neighbourhood and its political life does not come only from the institutions but also from internal challenges. Far from being an ideal space, Exarcheia as a socio-political environment is not without problems and contradictions, and solidarity and trust are not always evident. The local space is disputed daily by divergent political groups struggling to affirm their 'supremacy' on the territory, often in a violent way. Drug-dealers take advantage of the 'anomy' of the area, making the neighbourhood unsafe. To counter this trend, the 'security team' acts in an increasingly fierce manner, implementing ambiguous practices that resemble those of the Police, including the unilateral decision to violently evict a migrant occupation in May 2018. Meanwhile, Exarcheia is targeted also by attempts of external interference, which are changing its physical appearance and threat to compromise its political spirit. As in other cities, Airbnb and touristification in general

are raising the cost of living, forcing students to move to other areas further away from the centre. Also international volunteers, activists and artists play a role in this process. Going to Athens with the explicit ambition to live in the neighbourhood, they stay a few weeks or some months, and their increasing demand of short-term accommodation contributes in raising the cost of rents.

After being considered for years a dangerous area by many, Exarcheia suddenly appears in international tourist guides as 'one of the coolest neighbourhood in Europe'. Guided tours are organised to visit 'the most alternative neighbourhood in Athens,' strictly in the daylight hours, leaving only the most fearless the decision to stay in the area after dark. Instead, the anarcho-tourists (as defined by the anarchists themselves) come specifically to experience the political life of the 'anomic neighbourhood,' which very often results in joining the riots. Mostly, they come to take part in specific event: on December 6, 2018, for instance, for the tenth anniversary of the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos, dozens of activists came to town from all over Europe. Finally, the project to build a metro station in the Exarcheia square along with the new interest in the bohemian area is attracting foreign investors, who buy entire buildings at a low price starting a process of redevelopment. Overall, the hypothesis that the government will intervene with an urban regeneration strategy, with the objective of eliminating the area's 'dangerous riotous character', is increasingly likely.

*The clashes on Saturday night go on for some hours. As long as there are breath and bottles to throw. Anger and adrenaline allow the bodies to continue their race, despite the gases that choke the breath and cloud the view. A powerful small-scale resistance system, perfected in fifteen years of struggle. Then the show ends. Perhaps from the other side came the order to retreat: it lasted long enough. In any case, even this Saturday we won, the enemy was expelled and the space is still ours. The next morning everything looks normal, the scene is cleaned up, ready for the next performance. There are only a few carcasses of cars and black marks on the ground to bear witness of what happened the night before.*

## References

- A.K. (2018). Positions Proposal Framework of the Anti-authoritarian Movement. [www.antiauthoritarian.gr](http://www.antiauthoritarian.gr) [Accessed 1/7/2019].
- Koufopoulos, N., Agathos, N. (2018). Exarcheia. Free zone calling. From 1850 to nowadays. Athens: The Colleagues' Publications.
- Koutrolikou, P. (2016). Governmentalities of Urban Crises in Inner-city Athens, Greece. *Antipode*, 48 (1), 172–192.
- Kritidis, G. (2014). The rise and crisis of the anarchist and libertarian movement in Greece, 1973–2012. In *The City Is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe from the 1970s to the Present*, edited by Van der Steen, B., Katzeff, A., and van Hoogenhuijze, L., 63–94. Oakland: PM Press.
- Poulimenakos, G., and Dalakoglou, D. (2018). Hetero-utopias: squatting and spatial materialities of resistance at times of crisis in Athens. In *Critical Times in Greece: Anthropological Engagements with the Crisis*, edited by D. Dalakoglou, and G. Agelopoulou, 173–187. London: Routledge.
- Stavrides, S. (2016). *Common Space. The City as Commons*. London: Zed Books.
- Vradis, A. (2012). Patterns of contentious politics concentration as a 'spatial contract'; a spatio-temporal study of urban riots and violent protest in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, Athens, Greece (1974–2011). Unpublished PhD thesis, LSE.