

# Walking in Athens's historical center: Experiencing memories in public space.

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Over the past two decades, the center of Athens has become a construction site of several pedestrianization projects aiming to uphance the classical heritage and revitalize the cultural and economic life of the modern capital. Public initiatives target mostly central public spaces, in order to boost the touristic image of the city. Squares in decline and congested avenues are redesigned, revealing the volision of the authorities to interfere drastically in public space in order to respond to a growing economic and social regression. Official discourse promote pedestrianizations as an urgent goal towards preservation of city's memory.

After the 1990s, structural investments in the transport system along with mega-projects of pedestrianization aimed to redefine the image of the centre as a competitive destination in the European touristic-cultural market. Coffee terraces started to flourish next to traditional leather shops, creating a mixed ambience environment for walkers. Beyond investments to improve material conditions in the walking environment, authorities little explored walking *per se* as an everyday practice linked with city's history. Flagship projects, born from a blueprint approach and a bird eye view promote an homogenous image that risks to neglect the variety of public spaces created by everyday practices through time. On the same time, small streets, porticoes, plots and common places are putted in the shade during planning decisions even if they are, in fact, major witnesses of the city's past. How could public space planning further explore the notion of *memory* by linking it not only to a past worth to be conserved but also to a present weaved through everyday experiences of public space ?

It is the aim of this study to question Athenians and examine how they aprehend city's memory by experiencing public space during their itineraries. The methodology oscillates between phenomenological analysis and ethnographic input. Seeking a vocabulary to enunciate individual experience, the study opts for a bottom up approach which aims at decoding the dual essence of memory linked with public space: as an action which takes place in a material layout and as a social embodiment. Walking with eleven citizens - during their everyday walkabouts - searches to reveal how senses, thoughts and temporalities weave the corpus of memory both personal and collectif. Looking closely the daily itineraries of eleven Athenians showed that walking is an experience of public space that surpasses the issues of comfort or sensitive. The narrative of the participants reveals opinions which would be hardly captured through questionnaires and do not often have the opportunity to be heard in the public sphere. Investigate walking when the latter takes place highlights a plethora of ways by which people interact with historic space. The path, becomes a continuum of interactions with the Urban and a way of living in it. Memories, social relations and emotions are all constructive elements of the sequences of the walk. The plurality of walkers' profiles brings out a plurality of *ways to walk*. This polyphony enriches the official or dominant *image* assigned to places or conveyed by them. Understanding how people experience walking and give meaning to their city, allows decision makers and researchers to better understand the transformation and use of public spaces through time and to better interpret how the latters can be designed. First insights from the study suggest that pedestrians compose their trajectories based on a delicate 'emotional evolutive trail' that combines cultural beliefs, common representations and sensitive stimulus. How people feel, act and enonciate their experience in public, could lead planners to explore city's memory as a constantly produced narration from the ground. Having access to the function, the image, the ambience of public places gives inhabitants the acces to the city's memory and implies that the latters have the freedom of appropriating it. Based on empirical maps transcribing the itineraries and the discours of eleven athenians, the stydy foreground walking as the cornerstone in creation of city's collective memory. Walking in public escapes the limits of 'witnessing' or 'memorising' history. It is about ways of dwelling in the city and feeling capable of interfering in it by (re)defining in this way it's memory.

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