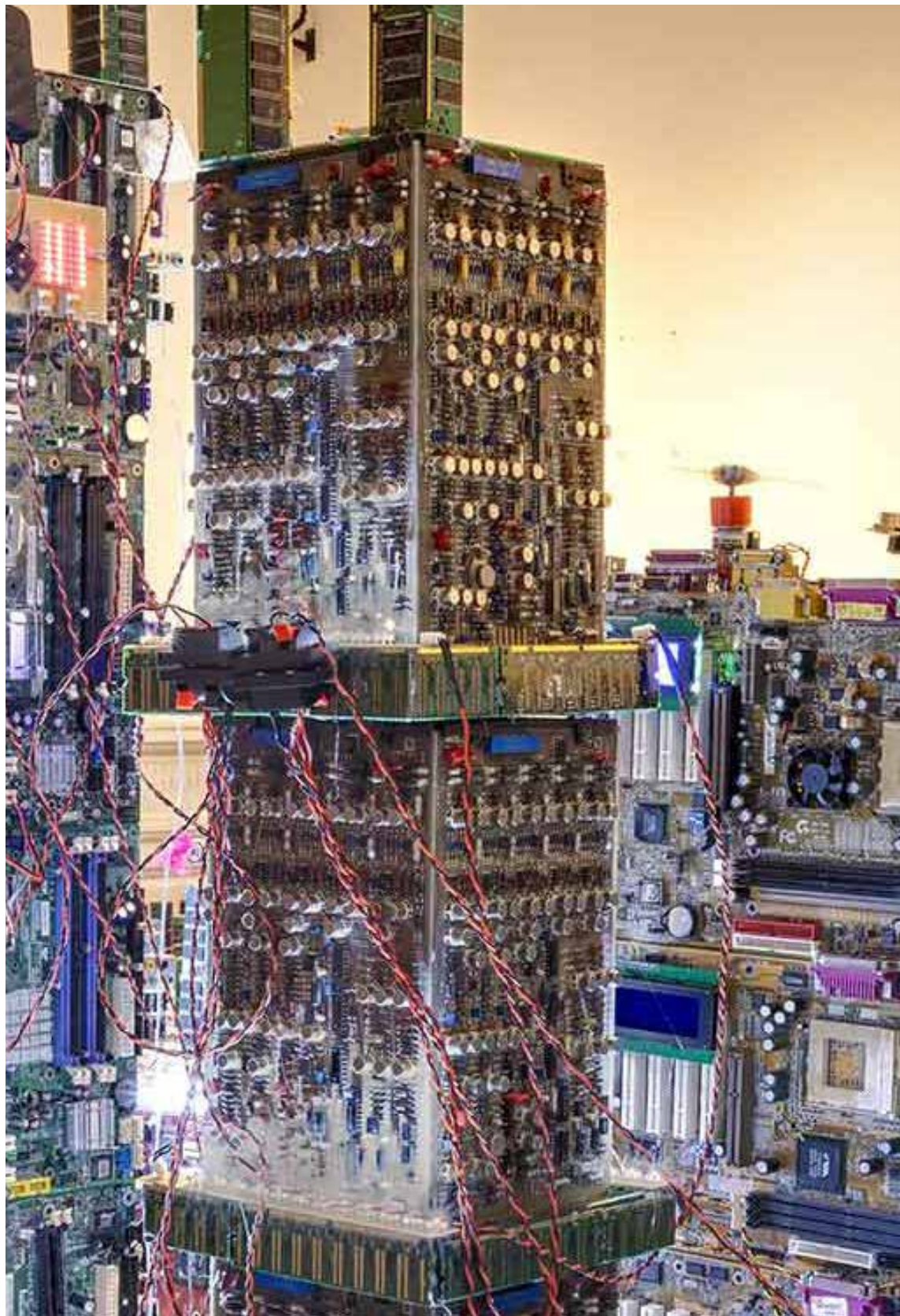


Explorations in Space and Society  
No. 39 | March 2016  
ISSN 1973-9141  
[www.losquaderno.net](http://www.losquaderno.net)

**Know-space.**  
Exploring the flows of know-how

# 39 Lo sQuaderno



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# Urban knowledge as social practice

## Athens in-between the Rhetorical and the Visual

**Panagiotis  
Bourlessas**

### **Social spatialisation as spatial knowledge**

What is central for the rapid changes brought about by a socio-economic crisis, what holds all alterations in a legitimate togetherness, is a major, often radical shift in the overall cultural system. Shifting perceptions, beliefs and meanings constantly represent and signify a revised society. A dominant 'culture of crisis' – societally diffused through political discourse and the media – enciphers specific ways of *seeing* (Berger 1972) and ways of *acting* in response. In the in-between space in which politics lays, 'reality' is imagined in novel ideological terms, which dictate our knowledge of it.

Places are inevitably and actively involved in such processes since they become the locations where crisis articulates itself. Merging the conceptual with the physical, places are created through what Rob Shields (1991) has called 'social spatialisation'. Specific processes, orchestrated by specific social groups, construct locations and channel the related social imaginations through specific ways. Imaginations will then invite corresponding actions. In social spatialisation, places turn into 'place-myths' which ground the cultural system of ideology and practice. Discourse thus shapes places and gives birth to 'opposite' places, according to binary relations that privilege certain ideological sides and cultural practices vis-à-vis others.

This article deals with how the city of Athens is 'known' by socially spatialising it. Specifically, we zoom in on a peculiar location and investigate how the knowledge of a place is selectively constructed and visually practiced.

### **The Big Picture. Rhetorics, practices and the in-between imagination of Athens city centre**

The Greek socio-economic crisis renders the city centre of Athens a terrain for renewed rhetorical claims. The established imaginaries are now vulnerable to an altered 'reality' seen and presented in novel ways, as if the whole centre has now become 'minoritarian', i.e., spatially central yet socially peripheral. A contradictory positioning of central locations emerges, whereby they seem to be pushed towards social marginality. After the 2004 Olympics, the city centre has been pictured as a dark zone, a homogenised place of anomy, a ghetto of migrants, refugees, drug addicts and homeless people. Such descriptions are juxtaposed to nostalgic narrations about a romanticised past. The ghetto discourse is employed to stigmatise specific areas (Arapoglou *et al.* 2009). The contrast between, on the one hand, such a negative visuality and, on the other, the spatial and symbolic centrality of the area, adds to the city centre a quality of 'in-betweenness', transforming it into a constructed urban interstice (Brighenti 2013).

The political and ideological stigma (Maloutas *et al.* 2013) is best revealed once we

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bring to the fore the rhetorically legitimated actions. In 2012, the by-then Prime Minister symbolically marks the official, explicitly political rapture in a polemic declaration: 'We must reoccupy our cities.' Such a call for 'reoccupation' of the city is a major shift in the public knowledge of the centre that mirrors the interests of several different actors ranging from large-scale public projects to small-scale entrepreneurial moves, from grassroots movements to the brutal racist enterprises of the extreme right against foreign residents.

This direct link between representations and policies demands an investigation of the

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'iconography' of social problems (Vaiou 2010). When such iconography refers to places, it may result in the production of allegedly grounded social worlds through the activation and manipulation of a geographical imagination (Atkinson, 2005). The condition of

in-betweenness is defined by the existence of a possibility occurring as a correction to what was previously known as minoritarian. In other words, the creation of an in-between place automatically and structurally creates an opportunity that calls for its seizing. Therefore, and within the political space that unfolds in this possibility, verbal and visual imaginaries are formed. Declaring a place 'minoritarian' thus signifies a power issue (Brighenti, 2013, p.xvi). What the by-then Prime Minister's announcement reveals is nothing more than the direct link between rhetorics and action, between culture and politics. Like the interstitial city centre, places in general — even when they are decentralised, marginal or in-between — become the real terrains for this linkage to be activated and practiced, reproduced and contested. The examination of the ways in which places are imagined and hence known can reveal power relations 'in place' together with cultural meanings, perceptions of (non)belonging and conflictual senses. Like 'small snapshots' within the 'big picture', fragments of the city are re-discovered, re-known and re-activated. Here follows a tangible example of this process.

### **A Small Snapshot. A visual de-construction of the Gallery of Merchants**

Located in the cultural city center of Athens, the 'totally inactive' and 'lifeless' Gallery of Merchants (GoM) has been described as in 'state of decay' to be countered by appropriate actions to 'reactivate a dead zone of Athens'. Within an 'urban regeneration' framework, the project Traces of Commerce (ToC) has involved creative practitioners, cultural events, scheduled workshops, artistic installations and ateliers.<sup>1</sup> The ToC project is a Latourian 'panorama' aimed at projecting a 'coherent scenery' (Latour, 2007, p.198). Because visuality constructs vision (Rose, 2012), cultural visual codes and practices shape our ways of seeing. And because visibility is 'a metaphor of knowledge' (Brighenti, 2007, p.325) what is seen becomes equal to what is known. Consequently, GoM is now identified through a massive production of images that contribute to an overall knowledge-shaping discourse.

Nevertheless, and beyond visual representations, an *in situ* exploration of GoM reveals a human presence that lays invisible in new image of the place — an unknown presence. Before the project's implementation, a homeless man has appropriated the arcade using it as shelter. A socially sensitive visual analysis of the official imaginary can thus be attempted. The visual is essentially employed in the process of social spatialisation, whereby a specific poiesis makes contradictory coexistences invisible. A close analysis of ToC reveals that material objects — either as discrete agents or as objects of human activity — are its predominant elements. In the context of urban regeneration, materiality stands for actual transformation.

<sup>1</sup> See the [project's official website](#).

Similarly, the use of tightly framed pictures further stresses the importance of material alteration. Matter is anything but naïve: material forms are objectified human values (Miller, 1998). Aesthetical forms are the shell of cultural worlds and function as tools of ‘camouflaged’ politics. Material items seem to have a direct link to reality, thanks to their tactile nature and their persuasive, photographic representations (Berger, 1972). The emphatic representation of objects thus frames a situation as the ‘real one’.

Furthermore, materiality is accompanied by a bold depiction of human activities. This correlation may signify the role of people as active agents of change. New users appear to be active actors who work with their own hands. Such a bodily engagement may legitimise their presence there. It marks their involvement in the new identity of the place and simultaneously establishes a sense of belonging. Symbolically as well as physically, humans and non-humans collaborate in the formation of a new knowledge – as if matter itself and its transformation had paved the way for human insertion; as if altered matter becomes the symbol of altered users. The new, emphasised presence of people comes to correct what has previously been – officially – imagined as a place of absence, lack of activity, lack of life.

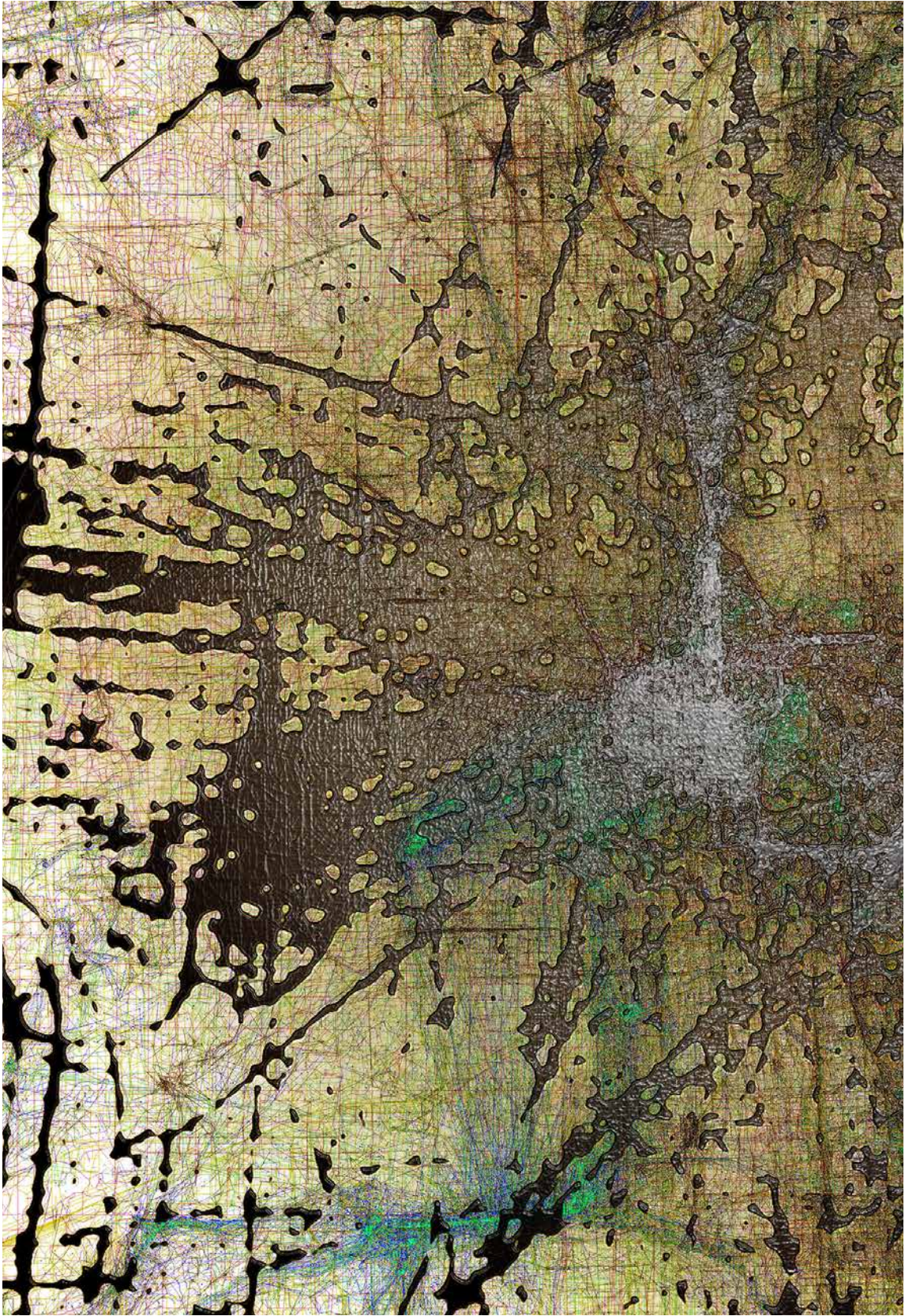
However, we know that inclusion has to be seen in relation to exclusion. Because ‘the invisible is intrinsic to the visible, is what makes it possible’ (Brighenti, 2007, p.328), we must also consider what is omitted from the frame of representation. We must seek for ‘visual mutations’. According to Rose (2012, p.66), ‘something that is kept out of the picture may nonetheless be extremely significant to its meaning’. Here, what remains invisible and excluded is the presence of the homeless person. Non-depiction has social consequences and shapes expectations about who is legitimate to be present, who really belongs there. In the social spatialisation of GoM, the homeless man can be visually erased and therefore socially neglected as a unknown element.

### **‘There is no virgin gaze because, in case there was, it would not be called gaze’<sup>2</sup> – Spatialising knowledge through visuality**

The conceptual moulding of in-between places activates a sort of Aristotelian *entelechy* within them. It is a *political* entelechy. After their minoritarian description, central-marginal places create the conditions for the orchestration of change in the name of specific interests. Guggenheim (2011, p. 19) uses the word *détournement*, originally introduced by Debord, in order to interpret change from a cultural perspective: seen as ‘antagonistic and ultimately selfish’, change has the potential to disrupt ‘an object according to one’s own cultural tastes and strategies’. Knowledge accompanies and legitimates change, with the crucial, structural collaboration of visuality. Places become the physical backgrounds that host and invite social knowledge. Through social spatialisation, they become actors that actively contribute to a selective shaping of knowledge. They include and exclude according to ideology, linking the visual and the conceptual with the social and the practiced. The discursive gaze ought to be analysed in order to discover which social knowledge is being conveyed and which successive practices are called for. The discursive gaze can make real social problems invisible through selective visual and geographic distortions.

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<sup>2</sup> Costis Papagiorgis, *Siamese and half-blooded*.



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