

ΠΡΑΚΤΙΚΑ ΣΥΜΠΟΣΙΟΥ

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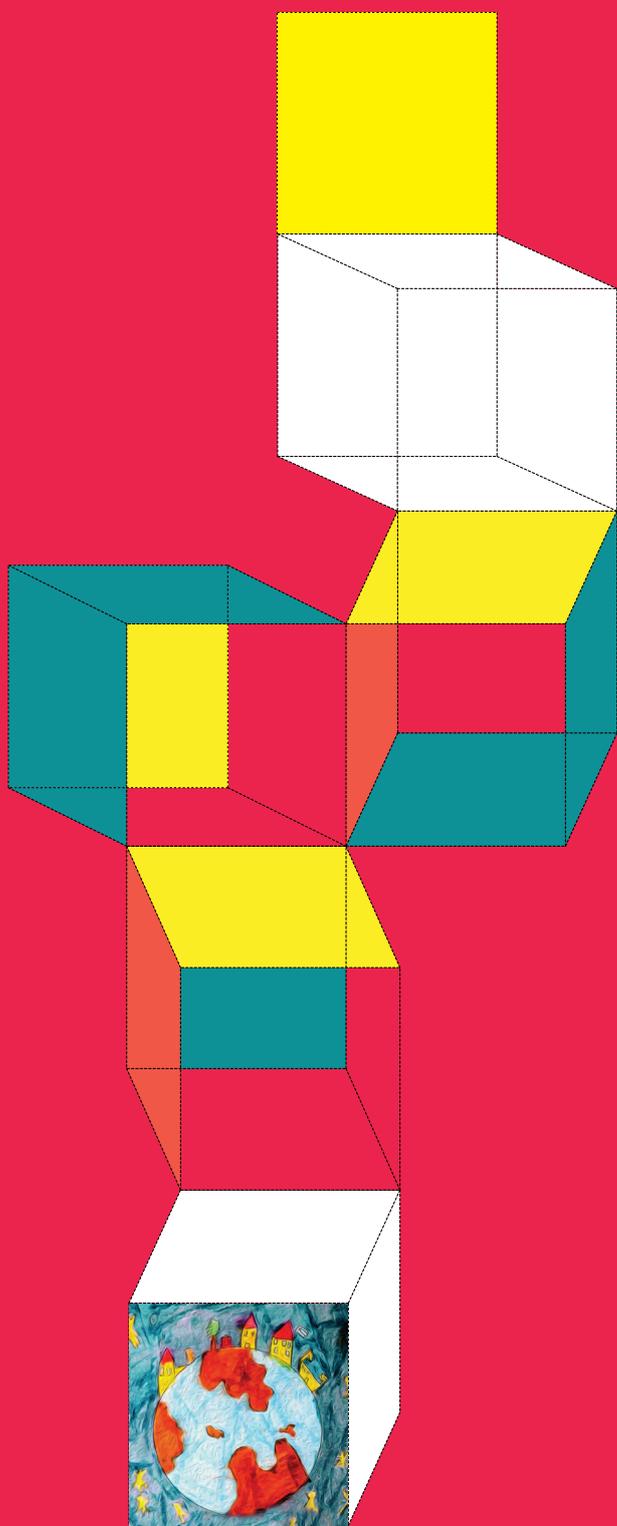
Επιμέλεια Δημήτρης Γερμανός, Μαριάνθη Λιάπη

SYMPOSIUM PROCEEDINGS

WITH INTERNATIONAL PARTICIPATION

**Places for
Learning
Experiences:
Think,
Make,
Change**

Edited by Dimitris Germanos, Marianthi Liapi



‘Like the palm of my hand’: Children and public space in central Athens.

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Abstract

Urban public spaces, just as the external physical environment in general, are well acknowledged in relevant literature as highly important for children, and yet as highly contested, regarding their accessibility and their use by children. Children’s accessibility to and perception of public space is very relevant to issues of children’s citizenship rights, and may provide the ground to raise questions as part of an ongoing, longitudinal and cross-national study into children participation in public life, the Connectors Study. In this paper I discuss some of the uses of public space that children make in central Athens, and how this may transgress both the limitations that are set forth by the schemes of urban municipal planning as well as the imagined borders between the public and private spheres. Drawing from a case study of a 10-year-old boy living in Exarcheia, I explore the mismatch between his and officials’ views of the neighborhood as well as Iason’s actual playful, creative and often transgressive relation to the public space. In addition, and since the focus is on the district of Exarcheia, where indeed strong activist and solidarity initiatives are at work, it provides a valuable opportunity for a discussion of how the issue of children’s participation is treated not only in official municipal urban planning, but also in alternative, citizen-led initiatives, and as such, allows us to consider children’s participation within wider processes of social change.

Keywords

Public Space; Children’s Participation; Children’s Citizenship; Athens; Activism.

1. Introduction: Children's Participation and the Urban Public Space

Public space can be seen as an early and significant, if not uncontested, entry point of children's participation into the public sphere. Indeed, as a number of studies carried out in urban settings suggest, children consider out-door places to be highly meaningful (i.e. Elsley 2004; Horton et al. 2014; Skelton 2000; Morrow 2001; Chawla 2002; Percy-Smith 2002; Worpole 2003). Despite of the importance placed by children on the outdoors, their accessibility to it in urban environments is generally characterized as very limited, contested and precarious (i.e. Cahill, 1990; Elsley, 2004; Malone, 2002; Percy-Smith, 2002; Valentine, 2004). In this respect, children's limited accessibility to the outdoors in urban environments could be seen as resonating the difference between the views of adults and those of children. The voices of the latter are not heard, and this could be interpreted as reflecting a failure to include children's views into the formation of that vague notion of the 'urban outdoors' and how public space should be used by children. As such, the issue is very relevant to the wider problematic of children's participation in decision-making that affects them¹.

Children's participation in public life and decision-making, has become a central thematic of childhood studies in the last quarter of the century, following the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child (1989), where in Article 12 is stated that children have the right to be listened to and to be consulted on decisions that affect them. In the field of childhood studies, there has been an early (Hart, 1992; 1997) and lively response to this declaration, expressed by an interest to de-code, assess and evaluate the proclamation made by Article 12 and its actual effect on policy making and children's inclusion (Cockburn, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2012; Thomas, 2007).

Despite repeated assertions that children's capacities increase in contexts where they are active participants (Barretta & Buchanan-Barrow, 2005; Lansdown, 2005; Thomas, 2007) and despite many institutional attempts to include children's views in policy making (i.e. Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Nolas, 2015), only little steps have been made towards achieving actual children's participation in public life and debate. Logically then, much of the literature produced over the past twenty years on the subject, spells out a multi-faced critique to policy makers and to the UNCRC for failing to fulfill their proclamations. According to those critiques, at best, attempts for participation and inclusion of children end up in mere consultation, with doubtful results (Cockburn, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2012; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Thomas, 2007).

Scholars identify a set of problematic points in the attempts to include children in decision-making. For instance, according to Thomas (2005, 2007), public debate still focuses more on children's 'needs' (however defined) than it does to their desires and wishes. According to Cockburn, one of the main difficul-

1. I am working on an ERC funded research project based at the University of Sussex – the CONNECTORS study (Nolas, ERC-StG-335514), which is a qualitative, cross-national and longitudinal study focusing on children's participation in public life. Starting in 2014-2015 we are following a small group of 6-year-olds and their families in Athens, Hyderabad and London, over the next four years to understand how an orientation towards social action forms in younger children. We maintain a blog where we regularly post on the progress of the study, and where more information about the project can be found: <https://connectorsstudy.wordpress.com>

2. This interaction, and the possible conflicts that it entails, should however be approached in their material dimensions too. Christensen and O’Brien comment that: “living in the city is as much about negotiating relationships with other humans as it is about living in material places and spaces.” (2003: 1) Similarly, Askins and Pain call for attention to the materiality of social interaction and the physical nature of encounters in fostering or foreclosing interaction (2011).

ties is that of ‘the labels that are attached to children by adults’ (Cockburn, 2005: 110). Begg criticized children’s councils in Norway on the grounds that those are not designed and conducted on children’s terms, but, ‘[i]nstead, children are praised when they behave like small adults and put in their place when they do not’ (2004: 131). Percy-Smith (2005), in addressing children’s participation in neighborhood planning, points at a number of difficulties that emerge, such as the failure to reach a diversity of voices, to the ‘tension between children having the responsibility for decision making and enjoying their childhood’ and to the fact that ‘children’s voice often doesn’t reflect the reality of their place experiences’ (2005, 1; see also Percy-Smith, 2006) Instead, active participation, according to such critics, should move beyond ‘adults allowing children to offer their perspectives’, and it should also involve young people confronting adult authority and challenging adult assumptions about their competence to make decisions on issues that concern them (Percy-Smith, 2005; Thomas, 2007). According to Woodhead (2010:xxii), if we are to develop fully the potential for children and young people to participate in society, we may need to focus more directly on the meaning of participation in everyday life and on how young people (can) practice active citizenship.

Within the context of the Connectors Study, we consider that the conceptual framework for childhood and participation is highly relevant to children’s relationship to public space (see also Elsley, 2004; Percy-Smith, 2005). Christensen and O’Brien (2003) highlight that children and adults are continually involved in a process of negotiation in the cities, from where to play to planning and land use. These processes of negotiation, that reflect the conflict between adults and young people over the use of neighborhood space is a common feature of many neighborhoods² (Cahill, 1990; Elsley, 2004; Malone, 2002; Percy-Smith, 2002; Valentine, 2004). Public spaces are regarded as highly important by children themselves, as places to meet and hang out with friends, to simply walk, to play or engage in various activities (Elsley, 2004; Horton et al., 2014; Skelton, 2000; Morrow, 2001; Chawla, 2002; Percy-Smith, 2002; Worpole, 2003).

For adults though, the use of the ‘street’ by young people, and their presence in non-specifically-designated spaces may be seen as a threat and a nuisance (Percy-Smith 2002, 2006; Valentine 2004). In an uncanny enactment of adult’s fears – or their desire to provide the best for their children (O’Brien et al., 2000), children in urban contexts are often outlawed from public spaces and effectively corralled within institutions specially designated for them (Ennew, 1994:127). Such sets of restrictions and contexts of control mitigate against children being regarded as autonomous citizens in public spaces (Valentine, 1996). Nevertheless, the study of the processes of negotiation between adults and children over the use of public space, makes also evident that ‘children’s skills and competence in their use and understanding of public space have been underrated and that children’s spatial activities often extend far beyond their parents’ awareness’ (Elsley, 2004:156; see also Hart, 1979; Matthews, 1992). This prescribes the ‘potential mismatch’ that Elsley notes, between adult ideas on children’s relationship to public space and children’s actual experiences (Elsley, 2004:156).

According to this view, the collision between adults and children’s shared environment is inevitable when respect is not given to children’s perspectives and it is therefore important that children’s and young people’s experiences and views on public space are explored within the context of their agency (i.e. Elsley, 2004). In order to try out this framework, it is interesting to consider how do children perceive and feel, how do they imagine and see, access and are denied access to public space in overpopulated, lively and highly contested urban spaces. An exemplary place to address such questions is the district of Exarcheia in Athens.

2. The Exarcheia district in central Athens

Exarcheia is a renowned district in central Athens which hosts today an estimated twenty thousand residents. As well as being an area of high population density, it is also an area of limited, and highly contested public spaces. Furthermore, it has a reputation for being a rebellious and semi-autonomous district, a place where traditionally, leftists, anarchists and underground cultures of Athens take shelter and find inspiration³. Both, its history as well as its present everyday life, attest to that.

Following the uprising against the Dictatorship in 1973, that took place in university buildings located in this area, the latter has attracted leftists and anarchists, as well as several of the underground cultures of Athens, ‘bohemian’ artists and intellectuals, and it has been an almost stereotypical hangout for junkies – and sadly so, for drug dealers. All parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left-wing parties have their headquarters there; the district also hosts several squatted buildings, leftist and anarchist publishing houses, cafes and bookstores, rock clubs and several other autonomous spaces. It was there that in November 1985, the murder of the 15-year-old Michalis Kaltezas fired a large wave of revolts; similarly, in this same area, in December 2008 the murder of the 15-year-old, Alexandros Grigoropoulos, literally set the city on fire, as it gave way to a huge outbreak of protests and riots (Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2011; Karamichas, 2009; Mentinis, 2010; Sotiris, 2010).

The area has very often been the site of violent clashes between the police and protesters/anarchists, but the district’s radical political character cannot be defined merely by these conflicts⁴; neither the grotesque and exoticised representations perpetuated by the mainstream media do justice to the lively cultural and political life that is significant to the district’s residents. Because, the locals are indeed concerned about and engaged with politics, in several ways. The district has very powerful local ‘residents’ committees’, as well as several autonomous groups and spaces, for just about any social issue. There are several occupations, co-operative cafes, a volunteer-run hospital, many groups of ‘peer-education’, offering seminars and theory-reading sessions, a self-organised open-air cinema, a citizen-run weekly fair, regular open assemblies in the main square, and, a citizen-run park: the ‘self-managed, anti-hierarchical, anti-commercial’ Navarinou Park, of which I am going to talk a little later.

As such, the neighborhood lends itself well to an enquiry into the issue of central concern: on one hand, children’s perceptions of and relations with a very limited and ‘dangerous’, in adult’s eyes, public space, and on the other, how does the intense activist presence affect this relation. Our interest in the Connectors study is to investigate how children participate in the public sphere, not just within institutional contexts but rather in their everyday interaction with their environments (Nolas, 2015; see also Clark & Percy-Smith, 2006). The focus on the district of Exarcheia, where indeed strong activist and solidarity initiatives are at work, provides a valuable opportunity for a discussion of how issues of children’s participation and active citizenship are treated not only in official municipal urban planning, but also in alternative, citizen-led initiatives, and as such, allows us to consider children’s participation within wider processes of social change (Nolas, 2015). The Greek context, where in the course of the past few years several grassroots movements have emerged (within and) as responses to the financial crisis (Kaika, 2012; Sotirakopoulos & Sotiropoulos, 2013), appears to be a very interesting setting to address such questions.

In the next sections I will present and discuss data collected and produced in a research session with Iason, a boy of 10 years. The session included a child-

3. I have discussed the neighborhood of Exarcheia in an entry in the Connectors Study blog, and most of the information provided in this subchapter originate from it (as do the particular information on the Navarinou Park in the following subchapter): <https://connectorsstudy.wordpress.com/2014/09/11/a-very-particular-kind-of-park/> (Varvantakis 2014).

4. Many Greeks consider the district as being on the edge of an independent zone, a no-go area, where the police and the municipality have no real access, and where violence is an everyday phenomenon. To an extent this might be true, and to an extent this may also have happened intentionally, in order to create an ‘inverted state of exception’, that would serve the purpose of keeping all the radical elements of the society in one place. For a discussion see: Vradis 2012.

led walk in the district, where he took me through his favorite places, the making of a map, the use of photography and drawing, as well as an open interview/discussions.

Iason grew up in this neighborhood and exhibits a striking familiarity with it. He knew each street by heart, and rarely thought twice about how to get around. He told me that sometimes he experiments and walks for a while with his eyes closed. But I was particularly struck by how often he would use his hands to connect to his surroundings. Literally and metaphorically while talking about his environment. He very often touched and felt things with his fingers, such as posters, trees and leaves, or benches’ surfaces. He repeatedly used metaphors like ‘I know this neighborhood like the palm of my hand’ or ‘I play the streets on my fingers’ –expressing a metaphorical existential bodily connection to the environment he inhabits (Taussig, 1991, Varvantakis, 2011, Gebauer&Wulf, 1992).

As such, this makes Iason’s case, embedded as he is in the richly connected neighborhood of Exarcheia, suitable for an in-depth exploration of the connections between children’s participation, public space and the public sphere. In this way, I attempt to explore what Elsley understands as the mis-match between children’s and adults/societal views and use of public space (2004), and to bring forth a child’s own understanding and ways of relating to his environment, which hints on an often invisible, children’s geography and allows us to address questions of actual children’s citizenship (Cockburn, 2013; Woodhead, 2010).

3. Iason’s Exarchia

Figure 1 depicts what is the ‘official view’ of Exarcheia. It is a good starting point in order to present the difference between the views of Iason and that of the municipality. A first remark to be made relates to the main square of Exarcheia, which is considered to be a green spot in the map (Figure 1), as well as in other documents, signifying a small park. Indeed, in the past, intense efforts have been made by the municipality to redesign the square into a park. In his own map, Iason preferred to paint it yellow (Figure 2) and then to use a blue sheet to draw a detail of it. When I enquired about this, and told him that there are some trees in the square, he told me that they are not worth mentioning. He used different colors of stickers to signify the multi-faced character of the square. He remarked that ‘it’s a lot of things, but not a park.’

In contrast, the park that appears on Iason’s map, and of which he is particularly fond of, is located in Navarinou Str. It is the aforementioned self-organized park and, it is worth remarking here briefly that the spot where the park stands, is regarded by the municipality as an illegally occupied space; I will return to this point in more details later. Furthermore, in the first map (Figure 1) purple color on the streets signifies public space, that is, pedestrianized streets. By sharp contrast, Iason, in his own map acknowledges just one street as a pedestrian street: Themistokleous str. (Figure 2)

When I asked him about the pedestrianized streets, he re-assured me that this is the only one. I pointed out some other streets that are clearly paved for pedestrians. He counter suggested that, although not paved with asphalt, these are not real pedestrian streets as motorbikes, even cars, continue to pass by, as well as park, there. In reality, Themistokleous street is the only pedestrianized street. Themistokleous street is on a hill and has many stairs, which make it practically impossible for automobiles to cross. Iason’s perspectives thus challenge both official designations of pedestrianization as well as the materials used for pedestrianization (the paved street). His own view remains truthful to the phenomenological reality he experiences: if cars cross a street, it is not a pedestrian street.

But apart from the contradictions and mismatches that emerge regarding pedestrian streets, we ought to look also at his appreciation of the only pedestrian street he recognizes. He told me several times that he likes this street very much. In his own map, he chose a different color to signify that it was a different, a special road (a pedestrian one.) At first, he chose the red marker. But when he started drawing the road, he suddenly stopped and told me that he should use another color, not red. I asked him why and he answered that: ‘red is kind of forbidding. Like in the traffic lights, or in the stop signs. And a pedestrian street is anything but [forbidding]...’ He finally chose orange, just because it’s his favorite color.

Indeed, during this tour of his neighborhood that Iason offered to me, we hung out a lot at Themistokleous street. We talked a lot about the street’s graffiti and posters - and Iason didn’t find the graf-

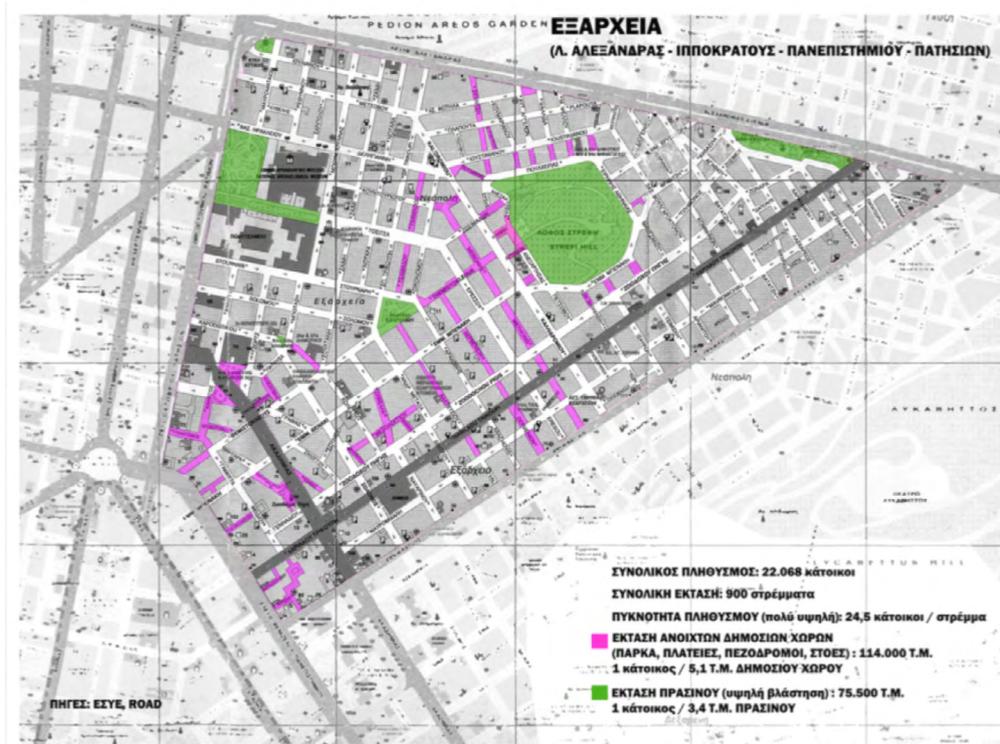


Figure 1.

Map of Exarcheia. (Made by Exarcheia citizen's initiative, drawing on data from ESYE (Greek National Statistic Agency) and ROAD. Accessed at <http://exarchia.pblogs.gr/2008/09/kaioia-stoiheia-gia-ta-exarcheia.html>)



Figure 2.

Map of Exarcheia drawn by Iason.

5. Nevertheless, Iason mentioned one incident when they were trying to force open the window of a house that they thought empty and there was someone living inside after all, which led to a lot of trouble.

6. Most of the data presented in this section, about the history and present of Navarinou park are collected throughout my research there. I have been contrasting my own findings to the park’s blog, run by the Exarcheia Residents Initiative (<http://parkingparko.espivblogs.net/english-french/about-the-park/>). For additional resources on the Navarinou Park see also: Iordanidou 2011, Varvantakis 2014.

fiti disturbing. He likes some parts of the street a lot, he just wishes that it was more taken care of. I asked him what he meant, and he brought the example of the leaves falling from the trees; he thinks that it would be much better if someone would brush away the leaves every once in a while. When I asked him who should be doing that, he told me the neighbors. I asked about the municipality cleaners, and he said that yes, perhaps them too, but the neighbors can do it by themselves.

At some point he showed me an empty house that he and his friends had once broken into. He told me that, his friends and himself sometimes enter empty houses. He is very good in picking locks and so on – it’s his ‘special ability’, he told me. I enquired more about entering empty houses, and he told me that he considers it to be real fun. It’s one of his favorite games, because of the exploration and the mystery. I enquired about permissions to do so. He responded that he knows that he is not supposed to, but doesn’t consider it to be a problem actually, because these houses are empty. In his view, they don’t disturb anyone⁵.

During our ‘tour’, Iason wondered around in an idiosyncratic manner. For instance, as we walked on the pavement, he would climb the first steps of a building’s entrance, or walk over a short wall, playfully. He told me that he always walks like this; that he likes to go meander in unusual ways. He would walk around an entire square, just to avoid going ‘through the same road again.’ I encountered a characteristic example of his alternative ways of walking/being on the street at Strefi hill, a green hill near his home. On the outskirts of the park there is an open basketball court. He told me that, quite often, he comes with his friends here to play when there’s no training taking place. However, they play “kinigito” (a chase game), or football, rather than basketball. Yet, he told me that the court is usually locked when there’s no training, but, there is an opening in one side of the fence, so they get inside through this opening. He drove me there and he entered and exited a couple of times to demonstrate the alternative access to court. As we walked further, I noticed that actually the door of the court was not locked, but indeed open. I didn’t say anything.

4. A Self-organized park and the question of active citizenship.

The place Iason really likes in his neighborhood is the Park on Navarinou Street. This is how he introduced it to me; actually, that was the first place he brought me to, when I asked him about his favorite places. Since the beginning of the 20th century, at the spot where the park is today, there used to be a clinic, which closed down in the seventies, when the Technical Chamber of Greece bought the property and later demolished the building⁶. Despite the promises of successive governments to build a park on that spot, the space was instead rented half-illegally to an individual who paved it and used it as an open-air parking lot. In the aftermath of December 2008 riots, when strong and determined activist and solidarity groups began to emerge in the city (Petropoulou, 2010; Rakopoulos, 2014), the open-air parking was occupied. This happened in the spring of 2009 by the ‘Exarcheia Residents’ Initiative’, an initiative of people determined to take action and make a park on the spot. They initially invited residents in several open assemblies where they discussed the future and actions to be taken. They also occasionally defended the space against riot police who was trying to drive them away –using tear gas on some occasions. Eventually, resident led work began in order to turn the open space into a green park and playground, where today music concerts, workshops, theater performances, film screenings, children’s parties and other activities take place. Local residents do all the watering and gardening and they hold open assemblies to plan and discuss issues, activities and the cultivation of

the park. What needs to be clarified, however, is that the park is an on-going, unfinished project, that changes day-by-day.

This park is made by the people, Iason explained to me when we got there, and he went on to explain how the people, took over the place and created the park; how they built the benches and planted the trees; how they were working to create the playground; how they had to work hard to maintain and expand it. He had many stories to tell, about several sights and plants, stories from the times that things were in the making, stories about how things have changed and so on. He talked a lot about gardening, and after Iason finished explaining the fine details of caring for the plants, we played for a while in the playground and then we rested in the shadow of some huge trees located at the edge of the park. I remarked to Iason that those trees, the big ones, must have existed before the creation of the park, before the residents’ initiative had planted new trees. ‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘but the new ones will also grow.’

I asked him why he liked the park that much. He told me that he likes it because he goes there sometimes to play. He also told me that he celebrated his birthday there, as did many of his friends and other children in the area. He also told me that he likes gardening the park himself –but only sometimes, not always. Sometimes, he enjoys participating in other jobs. He particularly emphasized the ‘mosaic’ on the surface of the benches, something he especially liked. He explained that it is made by breaking and re-using old tiles. He found the process fascinating and he remarked that someday all the benches will be decorated in that way (there were still many parts of the benches standing bare at the time). I asked him whether he has made some parts of the mosaic himself. He told me, turning a little shy in the process, that ‘he tried, but the result was not good.’ He repeated how beautiful he thought it was, running his hand over the surface of the tiles.

Several activities for children take place at the park and a local parents’ association has embraced the attempt and jointly with the Exarcheia Residents’ Initiative organizes activities, parties, etc. Yet, the degree of children’s participation in the process of making, designing and decision-making regarding Navarinou Park is unclear. In order to evaluate their involvement, we need to keep in mind that the whole project is a grassroots attempt in designing public space, which is on-going and open. Iason’s participation is limited and informal –it occurs playfully and at his own terms. His relation to gardening evokes the point made by Percy-Smith (2005) regarding the tension between children having the responsibility for decision making and enjoying their childhood. Additionally, Iason’s relation to the making of the mosaic benches resonates with Elsley’s commentary (2004) that participation should occur within children’s agency.

What was different however, and I think this is the reason why the park is appealing to Iason, as well as to other children I’ve talked to in the neighborhood, is the fact that they were and are present in the making of the park. Iason’s preference and indeed attachment to this park-cum-playground –as opposed to other parks and playgrounds in the area, may be explained on the grounds of it not having been remotely designed, built behind construction site signs and later just unveiled to the citizens; rather it has been a continuous, open work-in-progress run by neighbors. The process of the park’s making, open and accessible, gave Iason (as well as other children) the opportunity to be around in his free time, to connect to the park’s making, to come and go, playfully as desired by him, in accordance with his mood and wishes. Such flows of movement, while falling short of more formal definitions of children’s participation and inclusion, are finely tuned with Iason’s overall relation to his environment.

Perhaps the de-institutionalised character of the park, the open and improvised ways in which it was scaffold into being, its anti-hierarchic and organic character, might just be what makes the space so appealing for a child to hang around; it might be what enables children's playful inclusion, taking place at their own terms, different and less formal comparing to those of usual policy-makers and institutions. In this sense, and via such ways of participation, the park affords to Iason multiple connections to the public space and public life. As such, such encounters may be a fitting point of departure in order to re-think and enquire into actual and lived 'active citizenship' in childhood (Woodhead, 2010:xxii), instead of merely be based upon the institutionally initiated and often artificial invitations to voice opinions (Cockburn, 2013, James, 2010; Nolas, 2015; Woodhead, 2010).

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