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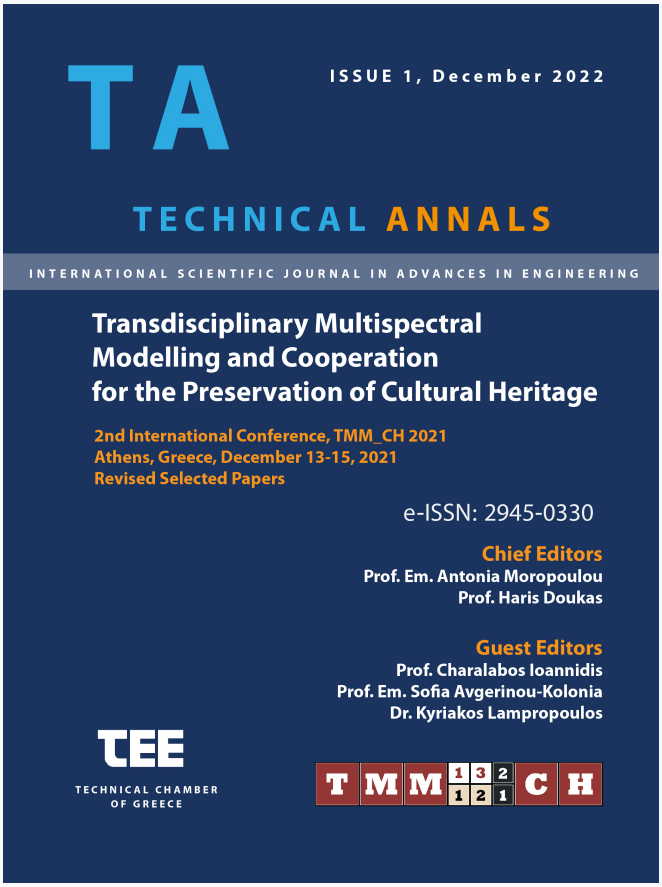

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Smart cultural and political narratives in urban and peri- urban landscape

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Abstract. Urban space constitutes in general the historical, cultural and political environment, the important 'cultural landscape', correlated not solely to material indices but, moreover, to immaterial, intangible mnemonic references. The possibility to present this multifaceted info-sense tissue to visitors is usually assigned to guides personifying the description of the city, in a time and space restricted way, delimiting the volume of information and proposing a preconfined number of guiding narratives only. Furthermore, these conventional guiding itineraries are usually directed to tourists, or to specialized didactic and presentational events; they are not offered to the immediate desire of knowledge or to the game-oriented tendency of the urban 'flâneur', of the urban stroller. Behind a conventional guiding tour, extended libraries, or galleries may be concealed, many hours of musical references; differentiated 'ontologies' of information, of semantic sequences which could be reorganized and reconnected again and again.

Our effort presented in three different projects of urban landscape design, has to do with the correlation of this enormous quantity of interconnected information with real space visiting itineraries, associated to virtual digital guidance as well. The scope of the projects presented is the same in all three proposals. It has to do with the importance of public urban and peri-urban space as a generator for social identity and cohesion. Considering that identities are basically formed through socializing among members, as well as by exposing collective affiliations in public, the primary role of public space and the extended offer of cultural, historical and political information in such a process, is easily understood.

Keywords: Cultural Urban Landscape, Virtual 'Smart' Digital Guidance, Cultural Historical and Political Identity

1 Virtual 'Smart' Guidance, important for the coherence and promotion of the place identity in general

It seems rather needless to explain in detail the informative value of virtual digital guidance in sites of specific historic and archeological value, in Acropolis hill or Kerameikos ancient cemetery in Athens, in Forum Romanum, in Pompei, or in Jerusalem.

What we should further insist on is, however, that urban space in general, in every possible city of the world, constitutes an important cultural and political environment, a 'cultural landscape' par excellence, being correlated to the mnemonic past references of its population, as well as to their historic future to come. Didactic narratives, concerning the presentation and promotion of the urban identity, is thus crucial not only for the touristic development or for consummative proposals but, moreover, for the development of the cultural and politic conscience of the city inhabitants; for the acknowledgment and the coherence of their collective identity, which has to be preserved, promoted and developed.

Conventional didactic approaches, through lectures, conventional material expositions, printed booklets, seem to be necessary. Nevertheless, it is in many terms strictly organized and usually enclosed in spatial terms. ***Virtual communication, on the other hand, offer a game-like continuous possibility of approach that does not stop even when we leave from the specific 'real' urban space of reference, going back home, moving to another part of the city, or to another city, or even to another part of our extended geographically and geopolitically world.***

1.1 'De-territorialization' and 're-territorialization' of concepts

It is in this technologically updated way that we may translate and reform Gilles De- leuze's and Félix Guattari's concepts about 'deterritorialization' and 'reterritorialization' [1]. According to them, immediate experience is intimately correlated to earth bas-relief, to the material extension of earth. Out of this material substratum, our morals, ethics, ideas of general reference, abstract notions, concepts of 'epistemic' and precise scientific formation, are produced. Afterwards, however, they may return to the earth material receptacle, to the cultural landscape, in order to be rematerialized; in order to produce material constructions and through them modes of social behavior and everyday expression. Real places, real landscapes, urban or periurban, are undoubtedly the immediate presupposition of our existence. They do not exist isolated, in their tangible expression solely. Reality and 'mater – reality' are always escorted, nourished and reproduced by intangible mental conditions; memories, fantasies, desires or even phobias, symbolic or semantic expressive formations.

1.2 "After all, the penis is only a phallic symbol:" the intangible symbolic presupposition of inhabiting space"

"After all, the penis is only a phallic symbol" [2]. The previous provocative phrase, attributed to Carl G. Jung, insists on the fact that material, real eroticism, cannot exist outside a symbolic, immaterial, intangible approach. In an analogous context, a clo-

serto us psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, proposed the metaphor of the 'Borromean Knot', 'Noeud Borromien' in its first French appellation; a nodal structure of three interlocked rings. The first of them represents 'reality', the second one the 'imaginary', and finally the last one the 'symbolic' formation [3].

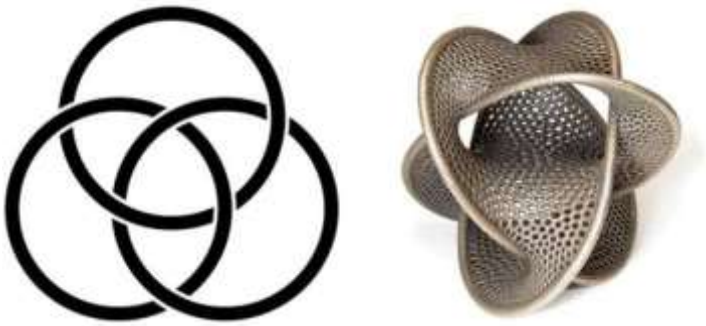

Fig. 1. The *Borromean Knot*; three inseparable rings, in a continuous topological correlation representing the inseparable fusion between the 'real', the 'imaginary', and the 'symbolic': no 'real' condition could be experienced without the 'virtual' association to the imagination and the 'symbolic', the semantic organization of meanings.

The three rings are correlated in a topological continuous coexistence; if one them is cut off, the triple association collapses. Then we may accordingly accept that we can- not reach reality, materiality as well, outside the intangible projection of its immaterial approaches; of our desires and fantasies concerning the possible transformation of the real, material existence. However, this reality-imaginary association cannot be expressed outside the symbolic order that is to say without the semantic expressive organization of our volition for intervention to the real. Reality does not exist isolated; it never exists outside our immaterial, in many ways virtual mental projection. Virtual immaterial condition is not solely a matter lately introduced by 'smart' electronic technology. Moreover, it always participated as a constitutive part of our correlation to reality; constitutive part of our effort to understand reality, abstract it and create schematized conceptual formations; finally attempt to expressively synthesize our possible future intervention upon real conditions.

1.3 Quantitative and qualitative 'smart' organizational chances

What 'smart' electronic technology offers to contemporary culture seems to refer principally to an 'augmented' organizational possibility of the 'intangible', 'immaterial' information offered, an augmented possibility for its management and publicizing. We could thus suppose in a simplistic way that virtual guidance, in correlation to real space references, is principally of cumulative, quantitative value. Let us augment the field of information, in association to a multiplicity of possible, previously unpredictable interfaces, of previously unpredictable interconnectivity that may be established in the future. Then the value of virtual guidance in the extended informative field of the web, may reach a qualitative prestige of rich cognitive validity. Multi-

referential associations do not solely offer a larger amount of information but, moreover, they may offer the chance of new ‘ontologies’, new semantic structures reorganizing the overall approach of previously distant or disarticulated informational particles. They may thus recreate the extended ‘symbolic order’ and, in correspondence, the specific ‘signified’ meaning of every isolated ‘signifier’.

We shall further remark that digital information networks may contribute a multisensorial and multi-level ‘rhizomatic’ apperception in contrast to an ‘arboreal’ preorganized narrative. [4] They may thus produce an augmented sensation of temporality, going back and forth in time, in a way extending real body synaesthesia. They consequently do not solely augment our already inscribed knowledge, but moreover lead to previously unpredictable conceptual associations, to a continuous multiplication of cognitive formations.

1.4 Smart virtual guidance, is cultural in its essence

Supporting further our previous arguments, we may describe smart virtual guidance, as cultural in its very essence; even disassociated from specific historic, cultural environments. It is cultural because it strongly invigorates and expands the realm of intangible cultural formations. It is in this context that we present a number of proposals having to do with the virtual smart presentation of the urban and peri-urban cultural identity. In our examples, cultural, historical and political references partly forgotten, or partly diminished in value are ‘excavated’. They are extracted out of the not-clearly visible past and promoted again, in search of a new place identity. They may be even partly ‘invented’, at least in relation to the form and the narrative of their presentation, expecting to recreate both the denotative image of the space and its connotative meaning.

2 Design of a ‘smart’ historic and cultural itinerary in the centre of the city of Trikala, in Thessaly, Greece

Our first example is correlated to the architectural proposal for the redesign of two interconnected central squares in the city of Trikala, in Thessaly Greece [5]. The two squares, the orthogonal one, the square of the ‘National Technical University Heroes’ and the triangular one, the square of the ‘National Resistance Heroes’, may be described as the ‘heart’ of the city, in correlation to important public and commercial buildings and various entertainment functions. They are, moreover, associated to Lytheos river, a significant environmental element of the city landscape.

However, this urban landscape is neither solely natural, nor restricted to its apparent material formation. It is, in addition, a cultural and political landscape of extended historical depth, going back to the very beginning of the Hellenic legendary past. According to the Hellenic mythology, Thessaly the territory where the city of Trikala is located was the initial natal place of Greeks.

There, in Thessaly, Deucalion and Pyrrha, who survived after a disastrous flood, were throwing stones behind them and a new race, the Creeks, out of the stones, was born. It was in the same territory, in the ancient city of Trikke that the initiator of the

medical science, Asclepius was born, according to the ancient tradition; Asclepius a legendary character, hero and semi-god. References to this remote mythological past could be equally seductive for the possible visitors of the city as well as for its inhabitants. It could be presented as historically transmitted knowledge, or as a sequence of cultural metaphors; it could describe the power of the agrarian development in the fertile plain of Thessaly, where a new race could be fed - or, it could also describe the transformation of the agrarian culture to an organized civilization, able to produce the first ancestor of the scientific medical knowledge.

Fig. 2. The two central squares of the city of Trikala: the orthogonal one, the square of the 'National Technical University Heroes' (on the left) and the triangular one, the square of the 'National Resistance Heroes' (upper part on the right). A third square, the circular Rigas Ferreos square is also depicted (bottom right), at the other side of Litheos River.

Fig. 3. From left to the right: *Deucalion and Pyrrha* – *Asclepius*, the initiator of medical science – Rebetico Singers – and, the statue of the Hellenic Resistance hero, *General Sarafis*.

Could we offer those fragments of information to the visitors of the city and its inhabitants as well, in a seductive game-like way? Could we continue and present the history of Trikala during the Byzantine and Ottoman period? Could we proceed and

refer in our narration, to the creation in the city of an important part of the neoteric Greek folk culture; to the creation of important trends of the Rempetico song? We could even enrich our narration with sound documentary, with Greek folk music, equally attractive for foreigners and locals.

It was in the same territory of Thessaly that strong military resistance, against Nazis was manifested, during the German occupation of Greece. The memory of this heroic past is already presented in the place of our intervention, through the monumental statue of General Stefanos Sarafis, a legendary Greek Resistance leader.

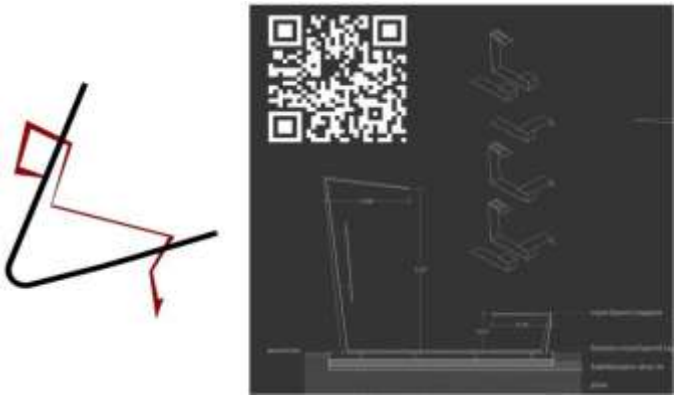

Fig. 4. The red zigzagged promenade, driving the visitor form the first square to the second (on the left), and the metallic indicative structures used as points of reference, through QR codes printed on them, to the virtual 'smart' narration (on the right).

The decision of the architectural team that designed the reformation of the two squares was not to limit its proposals to conventional material intervention. It further decided to articulate all possible historic and cultural references, in a sequential presentation narrated at the length of a continuous itinerary inscribed on the surface of the two squares, in the form of a red zigzagged promenade leading the visitor from the first square to the second. On the length of this visually indicated route, metallic emblematic structures were used as points indicating virtual 'smart' narration, through QR codes printed on them.

3 A 'smart' garden dedicated to the historic landscape of Thessaly, Greece

Our second example presents a pan-hellenic architectural competition proposal, for the design of a 'Mnemonic Botanical Garden' under the name 'Deucalion's Cycle', in the city of Larissa, again in Thessaly [6]. The name of Deucalion was used, in refer-

ence to the legendary description of Thessaly as natal place of the Greek race, a refer- ence already presented in our primary example.

Fig. 5. A 3D presentation of a mnemonic botanical garden' under the name '*Deucalion's Cycle*', in the city of Larissa, again in Thessaly (on the left) and the metallic structures with the inscriptions of QR codes inavting the visitor to enter the digital, virtual 'smart' itinerary (on the right).

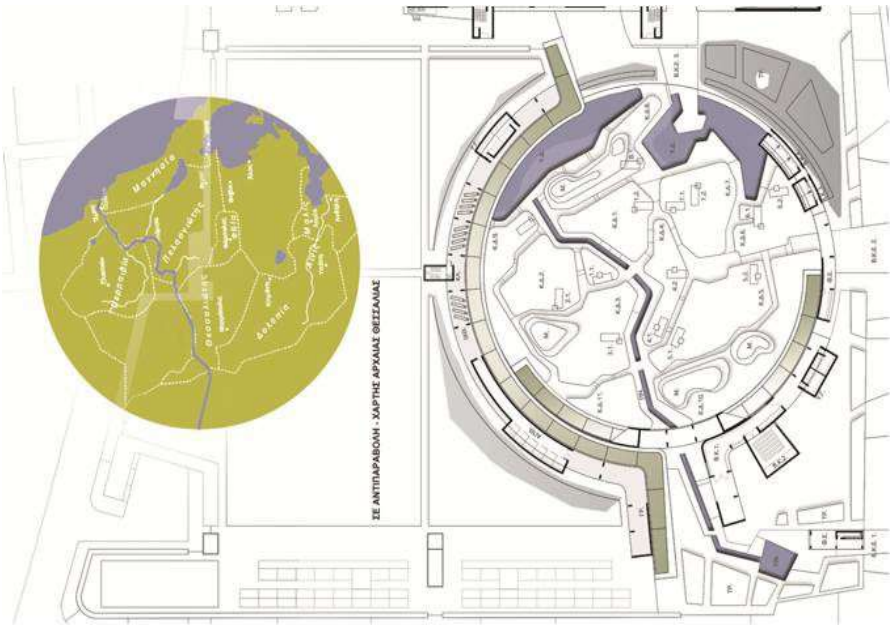

Fig. 6. The map of ancient Thessaly (on the left), and the master-plan of the mnemonic botanical garden' (on the right). An artificial lake on the upper part of the master-plan represents the Aegean Sea.

The intention of the architects in this second project, had to do with the presenta-

tion of the cultural landscape of ancient Thessaly, depicted as the correlation of its constitutive natural elements with its cultural elements; geo-morphology and the endemic plantation of Thessaly, interconnected with its important ancient cities and historic places, and possibly, with its intangible cultural and historic references, which could also be narrated through virtual 'smart' guidance.

It was in this context that the master-plan of the garden was organized as a map, articulated in accordance to the important principal parts of ancient Thessaly. A line of water was crossing the map formation of the botanic garden, connoting Pineios River of Thessaly, while in every part of the garden, a corresponding plantation was proposed, as described by the ancient historic sources, or even by the myths. Moreover in every spot of the map, corresponding to an important ancient city or other historic place, a metallic structure was located. There the visitor could discover as in our primary example, the inscription of a QR code, inviting him to enter to the realm of a digital, virtual 'smart' itinerary.

4 Design of a 'smart' guidance network and a 'smart' historic map, at the municipality of Kaisariani in the periphery of Athens

Our last example refers to the municipality of Kaisariani in the periphery of Athens, in the vicinity of the important environmental zone of Mount Hymettus. Our architectural approach, [7] in the case of Kaisariani, refers to the proposal of strategies, promoting cultural heritage in correlation to the contemporary exigencies of urban life. In this context we insisted on: 1: The proposal and design of visiting itineraries, in the interior of the urban tissue, interconnecting places of recreational interest, through a network of important open-air public spaces, as squares and urban parks. 2: The integration, in the above designed recreational and social network, of places of historic, cultural or political interest. 3: The extension of the previous urban landscape network to the peri-urban cultural landscape, in association with green visiting pathways and nodal places of natural or historic interest on Mount Hymettus. 4: The enforcement of the previous real space network through the parallel creation of a virtual informational network, offered to the real space visitors or to an extended public, able to come in contact with the cultural landscape in question, through virtual navigation principally. Such a virtual visiting network could offer a continuous data mining able to enrich both the offered virtual touring structure and the future use of real space as well.

The principal square of the municipality is located at the center of Kaisariani, constituting a place of trans-local recreational activities, for the whole Athenian metropolis. The square is recently under a re-design condition, aiming to offer to visitors, besides everyday amusement, the possibility of a virtual narrative of the historical and cultural past of the surrounding territory. The re-design of the square and the organization of the virtual narrative were inspired by the still vibrant historic traces of the municipality. Kaisariani was founded by the Greek government in the 30's, in order to provide housing for as many as possible Greek refugees from Anatolia, deriving

mostly from the areas of Smyrna, Cappadocia and the Black Sea. It was in this prospect that the surface of the square was designed as a map depicting the eastern part of the Aegean Sea and the west coastal zone of Minor Asia. On this map, metallic signs inlayed on the floor of the square offer to the visitor QR codes calling him to a virtual navigation through the history of the Minor Asia Hellenic communities.

Fig. 7. The surface of the central square of Kaisariani, was designed as a map depicting the eastern part of the Aegean Sea and the west coastal zone of Minor Asia. On the surface of the map, metallic signs inlayed on the floor of the square offer to the visitor QR codes, for digital virtual navigation to the history of the Minor Asia Hellenic communities.

5 Concluding

It is clear that the basic concept transcending all three proposals presented, recognizes the importance of public urban space as a generator for social identity and cohesion. Considering that identities are basically formed by socializing among members, as well as by exposing collective affiliations in public, the primary role of public space in such a process is easily understood. What we have to remark in addition is that virtual presentation of information concerning this valuable publicity, of cultural, historic and political information could be a great help for the invigoration of community conscience. It could be a valuable help for the formation and promotion of place identity, the organization of cultural affinities, the people's sense of connecting to the place, exceeding simplistic managerial formation of a touristic oriented 'place branding strategy'.

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7. The project was designed by 'Arsis Architects' (A. Chelidoni, V. Koliaki, K. Moraitis, E. Theodorakoglou) in collaboration with Alcon Consultants Engineers Ltd and the Municipality of Kaisariani.

Figure References

Figure no. 1 partly created by the authors and partly provided by the designer of the figure. Figures no. 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 are drawings created by the authors. Figure no. 3, is a collage using an authors' photograph and images of the Public Domain.