

"LAYERS": an archaeological workshop for people with mental illness

(EHDs 2022: Thessaloniki, 23-24 September 2022)

Coordinator: Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki Region, Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports

Research Partner: 1st Department of Psychiatry of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – 1st Aristotle University Psychiatric Clinic at General Hospital “Papageorgiou” (supervised institution of the Hellenic Ministry of Health)

Participating Organization: MOMus, Metropolitan Organization of Museums of Visual Arts of Thessaloniki - Museum of Contemporary Art (supervised institution of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports)

[...] le città di Marco Polo s’assomigliavano, come se il passaggio dall’una all’altra non implicasse un viaggio ma uno scambio d’elementi. [...] smontata la città pezzo per pezzo, la ricostruiva in un altro modo, sostituendo ingredienti, spostandoli, invertendoli.

“Mentre al tuo cenno, sire, la città una e ultima innalza le sue mura senza macchia, io raccolgo le ceneri delle altre città possibili che scompaiono per farle posto e non potranno più essere ricostruite né ricordate.”

Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, Einaudi, Torino 1972.

What kind of updated roles should Cultural Heritage, and in particular antiquities, take to serve sustainable development strategies in “the here and now”? How would these roles expand the concept of Sustainable Cultural Heritage beyond its survival dependence on climate change, but also beyond the great sustainability practices that the past teaches us about living in balance with the natural environment? To what extent do we understand the physiognomy, importance and value of this very environment we live in and which we are called to protect? Do we grasp it in its wholeness? How can we restore or re-establish our experiential connection with it, so that — apart from an institutional imperative — socio-economic and environmental sustainability also becomes a matter of individual responsibility?

How can Cultural Heritage contribute to the restoration of this connectivity and the (re)discovery of the core values that underlie our living environment? How would such a discovery affect the individual both cognitively and emotionally? Can an experiential understanding of our living environment through cultural heritage engage and motivate us to protect it as a form of ‘self-protection’? To what extent would such a perspective impact on individual and collective well-being?

Furthermore, what would the significance of experiential connectivity to the living environment through an archaeological perspective be? Could it trigger, as a stimulus, a response with a potential psychotherapeutic effect? For instance, how would contemporary urban environment be conceived if we consciously directed our attention to the archaeological landscapes and the way they are integrated within it? What if we wandered around the city and visually conceived the monuments through multiple fragmentary views and different angles or if we observed how the archaeological *loci* interact with other urban elements shaping the physiognomy of a historic urban landscape?

What if we were to conceive historic cities as complex entities of parallel and intersected temporalities or if we discovered that urban reconstruction lies inherently in decay? Finally, what if we set the archaeological perspective in a counterpoint dialogue with the psychotherapeutic process? Could we expect a synergistic effect from this interdisciplinary dialectic?

In the above framework, the two-day archaeological workshop for people with mental illness entitled "Layers" was held, as a continuation of last year’s similar event. It was organized in collaboration with the 1st Department of Psychiatry of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, along with the participation, this year, of the MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art. The workshop was attended by hospitalized patients, accompanied by scientific and nursing staff of the University Clinic, making up a group of fifteen (15) participants in total.

The activity comprised of four separate stages, with the first three having an archaeological approach under the axes of excavation, restoration and cultural landscape, and the final one being based on the national strategic recommendation of interconnecting Cultural Heritage and Modern Culture.

Day One of the workshop included a visit to an active rescue excavation, the archaeological site of the early Byzantine *villa rustica (agrepaulis)* in Palaeocastro, and to the Byzantine church of Metamorphosis in Chortiatis village, where architectural conservation works and landscaping of the immediate setting of the monument are being conducted. The aim was for the participants to experience the process of reconstructing historical memory through overlapping archaeological layers that are either excavated or imprinted as building phases over architectural structures.

At the excavated architectural complex, the observation of the overlapping archaeological layers and the successive building phases was sought, in order to understand the past as a progressive layering of construction, destruction and reconstruction. Processes such as the integration of ruins into a new structure, the transformation of old functions, and the attribution of a new meaning were also pointed out. Therefore, the archaeological 'history' of this excavated *villa* became evident as a procedure of constant readjustment of elements, re-interpretation of functional purposes and adaptability to emerging conditions and historical circumstances.

From a second perspective, i.e. through the presentation of the architectural conservation process of the aforementioned Byzantine church, we aimed to demonstrate the appropriate approach towards a building structure under restoration. Our focus was placed on the specialised care given to the building's structural maintenance, the level of understanding required for each step of interventions, the compatibility of the selected materials, the treatment of fragmentary sections and ruins, the consolidation of the masonry, the filling of cracks, the stabilization of the foundation soil. But also on the re-shaping of its immediate setting and care for the integration of the monument within the surrounding landscape.

At the same time, the conservation work on the murals provided an eloquent picture of uncovering overlapping layers of decoration, also noting the methodical effort and the time that has been required so far and is still required until the unveiling of the fragmentary 'authentic' mural layer.

On Day two, a promenade in the historic centre of Thessaloniki took place in the morning. The walk ended at MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art and specifically at the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art Collection, where the final stage of the workshop was held. This promenade focused in particular on this year's celebration theme of "Sustainable Heritage". Under the broad perspective of the UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) Approach about the sustainability of historic cities, we sought to approach the historic urban landscape of Thessaloniki from archaeological viewpoint.

Developed around landmark monuments included in the UNESCO's World Heritage List (Panagia Chalkeon, Hagia Sophia, Byzantine Walls), which constitute fragments of the underlying Byzantine city that appear in the contemporary urban space also in a sense of urban "voids", the promenade followed urban design axes drawn after the fire that almost completely destroyed the centre of the historic city in August 1917.

The so-called "Hébrard Plan" was a holistic planning proposal that served the vision for the economic development of Thessaloniki, also taking into consideration the historic past of the city as a design value. Thus, a modern urban landscape that was based on the historical identity of Thessaloniki was directly linked with the city's sustainability. In the redesigned urban fabric, the monuments that survived the fire are selectively incorporated as focal points, connected with grid axes and diagonals, and invested with new meanings. In terms of contemporary experience, these visually interconnected archaeological landscapes along with the historic urban axes ensure the spatial coherence and perception of the urban landscape through the dynamic synthesis of multiple partial or fragmentary views.

The hypothesis we determined was the following: experiencing the historic urban landscape through an archaeological perspective act as a stimulus with a potential therapeutic effect on the workshop participants' individual perception of their own psychic space and time. For this purpose, we specifically designed a walking route through the historic city — built around key monuments and their connecting axes, also including the identification of at least two archaeological reference layers to establish a historical line of sequence — to serve as a paradigm for the participants.

Our underlying belief is that the archaeologically legible layering of the transformations that the structure and landscape of a historic city has undergone over time due to 'traumatic' events such as earthquakes and fires, as a result of natural deterioration and collapse or due to intentional demolition, could serve as tangible evidence that reconstruction is an absolutely feasible process. The city can be recreated through the effective management of the elements of its past — retaining, incorporating or discarding them — and through their creative reassembly, along with the integration of new elements. In this sense, one could argue that the city 'self-actualises' itself in every temporality as a new historical whole.

In terms of our *in-situ* approach, the primary objective was to train the workshop participants to consciously observe the historic urban landscape and identify the archaeological and architectural layers that compose it. In this way, by 'listening' to the 'personal' narrative of the landscape, they could actively connect with it, potentially attributing interpersonal meaning to its layering and thus linking their own personal story to it. The point of reference was the eloquent distinction between the deep ground levels at the sites of the Byzantine monuments and the modern upper level of Thessaloniki's inter-war architecture. The interaction between these two layers was then emphasized. On the one hand, we asked the participants to observe the influence the Byzantine monuments had on the morphological features of many interwar architectural buildings, according to the meaning attributed to the city's Byzantine past at that time. On the other hand, we seek to highlight the existence of a reverse effect on the design of archaeological landscapes today, in response to the contemporary conceptions on the historic urban environment in which the monuments are incorporated and through which are also invested with a present-day meaning.

Throughout the promenade, the archaeological narrative was supplemented by references to layers of underground preserved antiquities excavated beneath existing buildings. At the same time, the *ad hoc* urban development in the post-war period was also mentioned. In that manner, we sought that the palimpsest landscape of the contemporary city be perceived as the intersection of an only partially visible archaeological underlying layering with a kind of vertical layering of modern historic monuments and contemporary buildings erected side by side. Particular emphasis was also placed on encouraging the participants to constantly shift their position in space in order to observe changes in views and perspective, and how this affects their visual perception of the landscape.

The archaeological walk ended at the MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art-Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art Collection, which has also been erected on an imaginary axis of the "Hébrard Plan". Moreover, the Museum building, which has incorporated excavated antiquities in its premises, represents a contemporary architectural layer over the area that served as the eastern cemetery of Thessaloniki from the Roman times until the 20th c.

At the Museum, the consolidation phase took place since the participants were expected to delve deeper into the archaeological observations made during the previous activities via the means of contemporary sculpture and photography. Specifically, a route through the Collection was designed in conceptual analogy with the preceding promenade through the historic urban landscape. While exploring the Collection, comprehension activities using contemporary artworks were carried out, also taking into account an analogical correlation with the archaeological argument of the workshop (see the attached report for further details).

In terms of the impact of the workshop, the participants' engagement was high. However, the daily length of the workshop (a two-day period including two activities per day) proved to be tiring for some of the hospitalised participants. Therefore, activities of limited duration might be more suitable for this particular group. Furthermore, running this archaeological workshop in the context of this year's EHDs helped us outline the key aspects of an archaeology-based proposal concerning people with mental illness, as it has emerged and evolved through the themes of the EHDs of the last two years. This proposal aims to develop as a pilot project exploring dynamics between cultural heritage perception and mental health amelioration.

Within the context of this perspective, the 1st Department of Psychiatry of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki designed and carried out an effectiveness evaluation. The assessed outcomes, as presented in the attached report, are encouraging to perform further research on the correlation between a meaningful experience of archaeological sites, monuments and cultural landscapes and a positive effect on mental health. Therefore, the workshop is planned to continue as a regular pilot project once a month until summer 2023, aiming primarily to explore and evaluate whether and how heritage-based activities could support mental health interventions. To this end, separate activities are to be designed for hospitalised patients, persons receiving mental health care and persons receiving psychological treatment and, also, for mental care practitioners, in order to demonstrate the appropriate approach for each group.

The ultimate goal will be the co-design of a research programme concerning people with mental illness, by the 1st Department Psychiatry of the Aristotle University and Institutions of both Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Culture of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. This project could ultimately serve the national framework of the "Cultural Prescription" programme, which aims to design and develop actions appropriate to be used as cultural prescriptions for all citizens.

To conclude, from our perspective, the "Sustainable Heritage" theme of the EHD's is related to the living environment and the intersection of Cultural Heritage and Well-Being in terms of both archaeology and mental health. Our workshop aimed to outline a conceptual framework that may serve as a baseline for a research project, while its argumentation can be summarized in the following starting-point question: Can Antiquities have a research-proven therapeutic effect on mental health?

CONTRIBUTORS OF THE WORKSHOP:

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Attached Documents:

a) Report on the workshop's activities held at MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art (6 pp.)

b) Evaluation report by the 1st Department of Psychiatry of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (3 pp.)

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