UrbanDig Project:

Sport practices and artistic interventions for co-creating urban space

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The paper argues that sports and art can compose a common cultural language that operates as a tool for communities to co-create urban space. In particular, we present the research/ artistic/ community platform 'UrbanDig Project', based in Athens, Greece. The platform employs artistic and sport practices as a means to activate and bridge local communities, collect stories, call for participation and action and finally narrate, re-imagine and even re-construct urban space. We choose to discuss certain moments of the platform's projects, as fruitful examples of its social impact. Within the conceptual framework of the production of space and the sports-art representations, we discuss how sport and artistic practices can intervene in the urban space, map the communities' aspirations and lead to collective decision-making as an alternative grassroots participatory-planning method.

Keywords: urban space, sports, arts, UrbanDig Project, community engagement

Introduction

The 'UrbanDig Project' (hereafter UDP) is an artistic/ research/ community platform, developed by the not-for-profit organisation "Ohi Pezoume Performing Arts Company", based in Athens, Greece. Behind the project lies the motivation to compose and present a site-specific performance as a final festive finale of a rigorous period of research and community engagement based on the cultural wealth of certain neighborhoods. The selected neighborhoods thus become the setting for the deployment of a systematic and elaborated methodology that allows genuine interaction and involvement of the community and the urban space (both public and private). In this way, the performing arts of theatre and dance exit their typical setting, the theatrical scene and the pre-constructed plot, in order to meet urban space, local communities and physical activity in a real life/ material environment. Although primarily an arts-based platform, the UDP's work unfolds through the use of a methodology in which sport is among the

key tools used during the projects' development as well as in the final site-specific performances.

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that sports and the arts can sharply complement each other, intervene and contribute to co-producing urban space. The UDP exemplifies this hypothesis as, through the combination of artistic and sport practice, a common language is created that operates as a tool for communities to co-create urban space.

Sport and the arts

The worlds of sport and the arts are usually separated in approaches of academic inquiry, professional practice or policy development. As a result, the number of sources existing in this field is rather scarce and limited. The most common discussion on sport and the arts is actually whether sport *is* art.

Is Sport an art?

As both are characterized from fluidity in their definition and encapsulate multiple dimensions and meanings, some have argued that sport can legitimately be regarded as art. However, as Platchias (2003) has emphasised, this should by no means lead to assumptions that everything could be art or everything could be sport. The conceptual link between the two is mostly drawn on the pronounced parallels they both share such as institutionalization, or the fact that sport and the arts can be performed on stages, or arenas, presented for a public. At a theoretical level, common characteristics between these two concepts mostly refer to the aesthetic and to the artistic (Reid, 1970, 1980; Edgar, 2013; Lacerda, 2012; Wright, 2003), as for example in the analysis of

Elcombe (2012) who sees in sport the aesthetic experience and in the arts the ideal embodied metaphor. Some theorists argue that sport can be legitimized as art (Platchias, 2003; Wertz, 1985); others strongly disagree (Best, 1985); while others offer a flexible interpretation that in some ways sport is art and in some other ways it is not (Cordner, 1988).

Although the debates around the question 'is sport an art?' raises interesting philosophical debates and merits investigation, they are rather abstract and theoretical with little information about the kind of relations that sport/ arts allow, (re)produce or constrain. The following non-philosophical discussions found in literature demonstrate more how these two worlds can intersect and influence each other's spaces.

Sport representation in the arts/ arts representation in sport

The edited collection 'Fields of Vision: the Arts in Sport' (Sandle et al, 2013) is one of the limited resources that depict sport-arts representations. Within this publication, Morpeth (2013) expresses his sporting experiences as a fan into artwork such as 'Kick it Out' in order to raise awareness about racial issues in sport. Stansbie (2013) also brings her open-air swimming experiences and narratives into her art (sculpture, photography, drawing and film). Thomas and Stride (2013) analyse the role statues of club heroes play in stadiums for the symbolic identity of the club, the fans' beliefs, culture etc. O'Mahony (2013) examines how the sporting moment of the Black Power salute in the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games has become a transgressive piece of art featured in the statue erected in their university, the San José State University in California. Long (2013) introduces us to John Innes, 'the Opera Man', who has become part of the match-day entertainment for

the British rugby league team Leeds Rhinos. Another intersection of sport and the arts is their use in pedagogy. Adams and Palmer (2013) explore how artistic assessments have helped their sports studies students to think more creatively, while Digby and Stirling (2013) consider the connection between sport and the arts as a unique opportunity for educational interventions that use both the arts and physical movement.

In the Olympic context, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, had seen a deep educational value in the 'marriage between sport and the arts'. Today the Olympic Games constitute one of the most recognizable terrains of both sport and engineered cultural industries (e.g. global iconic stadia, urban regeneration projects; the Cultural Olympiad; cultural opening and closing ceremonies). Chatziefstathiou and Henry (2012) have identified the Olympics as a fluid environment of athletic embodiments which relate to the physical/ material moment of perceived space; of ideals and dispositions combining sport, culture and education such as the philosophy of Olympism and the Olympic values, relating to the ideational moment of conceived space; and of spectatorship and community programmes at local, regional, national and international levels, which refer to the moment of lived space. Such a community programme was 'imove' in the lived spaces of Yorkshire as part of the Cultural Olympiad activities in London 2012, aiming to transform peoples' lives through their moving bodies (Gordziejko, 2013).

Beyond the Olympics, any event is a terrain of social action and collective behaviour that finds expression in rituals and staged performances (Turner, 1969, 1974). Schechner (2003) considers performance as a key process of transformation and that theatre and rituals are influencing social interactions. A community event with its

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festivities and collective interventions becomes a social space that (re)creates the audience's relations and multiple identities. Although the role of performance and dramaturgy has been explored well from a cultural perspective (Handelman, 1990; Turner, 1969; Azara and Crouch, 2006), it is largely unexplored in the sport events literature. Among the few studies in this field the work by Ziakas and Costa (2010) analysed how theatre and sport harmoniously co-exist in an event called *Water Carnival*[1] at the rural community of Fort Stockton in northwest Texas.

In this context, we introduce another key factor in the existing debate regarding the art-sports intersection: urban space. As already stated, we argue that sport and the arts can compose a common cultural language that can operate as a tool for communities to co-create urban space. To be more specific, we elaborate on the example of the UDP where the arts and sport create synergies in public discourse with a positive impact on the social capital and community development of the participants. Arts and sport practices are deployed as means to imagine and re-construct urban space. Before entering into the case study itself, we dedicate the next section to our perception of the production of urban space, in order to complete our two-fold conceptual framework.

The production of urban space

Space is much more than a concrete three-dimensional model composed by axes, distances and points. On the contrary, it is a system that combines multiple spatial moments: firstly, there is material space, referring to the physical environment that can be

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1 *Water Carnival* is a community celebration that presents a staged show surrounded by many festivities, wherein sport is featured as a core activity.

quantifiably measurable, which Edward Soja (1996) calls the *Firstspace* linked to Lefebvre's ([1974]1991) *perceived space;* secondly, there is *Secondspace* or Lefebvre's *conceived space,* referring to the imaginary space of mental constructions 'entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies' (Soja 1996,79); thirdly, there is *Thirdspace,* 'a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange' (Soja 1996, 5). Lefebvre calls it *lived space*, which is the significant spatial moment of action, lived experience and the 'spatialisation' (Shields 1999) of social life.

Introducing this conceptual triad, we underline the need to define a broad umbrella, under which all real and imaginary perspectives of space are dialectically united, producing what Henri Lefebvre would define as a social space:

> [S]ocial space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 73).

Within the urban context, we suggest a *space,* in which social relations are being produced and reproduced, while producing space, in a process, where the production and the product cannot be separated: "[t]he social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence" (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 129).

Verifying the spatial existence of social relations of production, our proposed conceptual approach introduces the *spatiality* of actions, concepts and practices. Spatiality becomes actually an approach to both emerging notions and certain case studies. It is the *spatial approach* that brings to the surface new, yet interesting, aspects of social life, dissociating them from 'the realm of verbalism, verbiage and empty words'

(Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 129), in order to give the *image* of what Fredric Jameson (1990) calls the 'unrepresentable' world. On the other hand, spatiality offers critical hints of the production of space itself; space is not produced in a social vacuum by any means. Christian Schmid (2008, 28) puts it precisely: "space 'in itself' can never serve as an epistemological starting position. Space does not exist 'in itself'; it is produced".

Within this understanding, we aim to elaborate on how sport and the arts can sharply intervene and contribute to co-producing urban space. To make our statement clear, we argue that both sport and the arts carry our proposed conceptual triad, as:

i)   they both operate in material space, requiring materiality, or else *physical presence and activity.* The *body* constitutes the vehicle that lets "appearance manifest reality" (Arendt [1958]1998, 50), since bodily conditions (labour, pain, etc) let the individual exit his/her private space towards the public realm;

ii)   they both develop within the realm of imagination, ideals and mental constructions. They both carry the seed of utopia;

iii)   they can both be unique vehicles for community engagement and participatory action, contributing to alternative experiences of urban space and life.

Case study: 'UrbanDig Project'

The methodology

The central philosophy of the UDP is that art can be the sparkle to start improbable encounters and co-operations among stakeholders of a particular area and

beyond. Locals (either native or migrants), researchers, academics, artists, shop-owners, public administration representatives, etc. sit round the same table, having a common aim: to unearth bottom-up narratives of the area's past, present and future. Using qualitative research, artistic interventions and community actions, the platform manages to create a large pool of data, open to the community for the creation of multiple outcomes. With respect to qualitative research, different processes include oral history, semi/un-structured interviews, focus groups and mapping processes[2] (historical mapping, aspirations mapping, sensory mapping, skills mapping). Regarding artistic interventions, the platform's artistic team employs quick performances, workshops and especially one-to-one live art in order to collect material in an alternative, entertaining and stimulating way.

Finally, referring to community actions, each project employs neighborhood festivals, assemblies and collective decision-making processes[3] in order to cultivate a sense of community that shares its stories, aspirations, myths, agonies and desires. The synthesis of these three methodological pillars and their various methodological tools, create different working groups and a rich program of actions for each project. During the different processes, a large pool of data is being created that leads to three main outcomes: i) a site-specific performance that operates as a festive finale, ii) raw and curated material in the hands of the research community, the neighborhood and broader audience, iii) material for broader knowledge-sharing, with respect to UDP's cooperation with external partners (e.g. the Municipality, private foundations etc.). Thus, we have to

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2   for more, see: https://www.urbandigproject.org/single-post/2016/10/25/UrbanDig-Project-Trailer-1-1

3   for instance, World Café and Open Space Technology

note that, for UDP, sport is perceived as a palette of activities that require physical labour and embodied expressions and allow interaction.

> "Our performances are based on the archive and especially the relations we build in each place we go. These relations are created through collaborations among inhabitants, researchers, students, artists, etc and activities for all ages and nationalities. We publish all gathered material, we use it for our performances and we support any further initiatives as much as we can. We are mostly interested in the newborn relations during our projects." (Sachinis Giorgos, director and co-founder of UDP)

Embodied expressions

Sport practices and physical exercise are critical in most UDP performances. For example, in *Mockob Celim[4]*, a performance based on the novel of the Greek author Georgios Vizyinos about the life of a Turkish soldier who feels rejected from his father, the critical and theoretical resonances between physical rigour, sport and theatre intersect and exemplify the actor's presence on stage to convince his father that he is a 'manly man' despite the fact that his mother is forcing him to wear skirts. Mockob employs intense physical drills to prove his masculinity. The stage features a circus arena that highlights the extreme theatricality that the actor demands of his own body as a means of proving to the audience (i.e. his father) his male gender.

The *Marathon Dam[5]* performance was organised as part of the festivities for World Environment Day (2010, 2012). The dam was created between 1926-1929 for the primary purpose of the municipal water supply for Attica, the wider area around Athens. The tall wall (54 metres) of the dam becomes the main theatrical stage. A fighter from the

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4   for more, see: https://www.urbandigproject.org/copy-of-mockob-selim-mid

5   for more, see: https://www.urbandigproject.org/marathon-dam

future is climbing down the wall (Figure 1) in an effort to find any water resources as everything had dried-up. The fighter has a strong muscular body and engages in physically demanding battles, endeavours and actions in his despair to survive the environmental calamity. The aim is to make the individual and collective conscience of the audience aware of the environmental threats through sharp images of embodied metaphors.

<<Figure 1 about here>>

In addition, social and political issues close to drama and theatre are also embodied in sport-related themes in other UDP performances, such as, for instance, Caligula, where swimmers appearing in changing rooms embody the decline of the Roman Empire[6].

On another level, during 2014-2015, the UDP platform developed a community project in a former refugee neighbourhood in Athens, called Dourgouti. The community project *Dourgouti Island Hotel*[7], combined all three aspects of UDP's conceptual and methodological framework, i.e. qualitative research, artistic interventions and community actions. Among other processes, Dourgouti Island Hotel introduced embodied expressions and narrations of local stories. For instance, Capoeira martial art, performed by the local capoeira school (Figure 2), was employed in order to narrate Dourgouti's history during the period of Nazi occupation.

<<Figure 2 about here>>

Additionally, yoga practices had taken place in the neighborhood's public space

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6   for more, see https://vimeo.com/52018251

7   for more, see: https://www.urbandigproject.org/dourgouti-island-hotel-project

(Figure 3) in order to provide alternative and sport-related experience of Dourgouti's squares and openly engage with locals and visitors in an activity that was performed jointly and allowed interaction, besides being a silent, 'individual' and 'esoteric' physical activity.

Regarding the final site-specific performance, theatre and dance intertwined with

<<Figure 3 about here>>

sport practices re-introducing the neighbourhood's history and spaces to its inhabitants and the wider audience. For instance, during the "immigrant's escape adventure", the performer practices parkour in the streets of Dourgouti in order to escape from those who chase him (Figure 4).

<<Figure 4 about here>>

Xouthou Street @Omonia Square

This section demonstrates a different deployment of the arts and sport, not only as *performances* but also as playful instruments for community building and grassroots participatory-planning in urban space. To be more specific, it refers to a part of the UDP at Omonia Square in the heart of Athens. Omonia square, the main square of Athens, was the focus of activity for UDP from October 2015 to June 2017. Throughout this period, a programme of research, artistic and placemaking activities open to all was organised focusing on the square and the surrounding area's diminishing public space, while involving a community of artists, researchers, visitors and local users.

The specific intervention in Xouthou Street was organised in summer 2016 in the framework of the Omonia UDP's activity 'Hotel Transit - homes on the move'[8] that explored communities in transit and their relation to local urban space. It was conceived and organised in the framework of the TANDEM Europe[9] cultural exchange programme between the organisation Ohi Paizoume/ UrbanDig Project from Athens and Ideas Factory from Sofia (February 2016 to January 2017). 'Hotel Transit' built on UDP methodologies and explored the socio-spatial versus the individual stories focusing on urban spaces through multiple notions of 'transit' and 'home' in times where perceptions of migration and transition redefine societies. For 15 months the two organisations worked together on a project building on the resilience of urban communities on the move in both Sofia and Athens, while trying to serve as a tool to influence advocacy by 'humanising' and 'empathising' policies and decision-making processes involving migrants and people in transit.

Xouthou Street is a small pedestrian street a few metres from Omonia square. The reason why it was chosen as a space of intervention is that it served as an ideal 'metaphor' for the co-existence of different communities in contemporary cities. On one side of the street there was a hotel used as a temporary home for families from Afghanistan and Syria and managed by a humanitarian organisation. On the other side, there was an empty plot that the municipality was planning to use for a major building.

8   for more, see: http://www.tandemforculture.org/collaborations/hotel-transit-homes-on-the-move/

9   Tandem is a cultural collaboration programme that strengthens civil society in Europe and neighbouring regions co-created by the European Cultural Foundation and MitOst. More information at:

http://www.tandemforculture.org/

The area had been the focus of activity of another civil society organisation, Alternative Tours of Athens, that had undertaken research and had interacted with the local residents in order to gather their opinions about the future of this empty plot, in a participatory decision-making exercise. UrbanDig as a project and as a platform proposed an activity that would link the work of the two starting points of Xouthou Street and bring together the organisations and people that work on the different realities of the same material space to create a bridge between the two different worlds that are located at the different sides of the streets: the temporary residents and the local residents.

Perceived space

The first step towards this goal consisted in an exploration and understanding of the physical/ material space through wandering around the area, involving different teams from the organisations' members, but also visitors and other people interested through open calls. Sensory mapping, taking notes on how the space makes us feel, what kinds of interactions are encouraged and discovering the usual 'users' of the space were the elements that sparked the activity. This step also included the organisation of a number of workshops with children of refugee and immigrant families hosted in the hotel (Figure 5). Although workshops were thoroughly planned, the limitations of language in the communication exchange caused the facilitators/ trainers to seek refuge in the most easily accessed and understood tools: the arts and physical activity. This step was necessary in order to build trust. The real material space though is experienced through the actual contact of the body with the space. Sensory mapping, thematic tours and oral history are a few of the methodological tools that the UDP deploys when working in a specific neighbourhood. They all require the physical presence of the "errant" body that opens up

and uses its senses to explore, 'dig' and experience the material space, a *sine qua non* exploration which becomes the starting point for any intervention.

<<Figure 5 about here>>

The conceived/ imaginary space

The second step consisted in organising a public activity where the local residents and the refugee communities would interact and spend a day together. Despite their physical proximity in the material space, these communities rarely interact. But on this occasion they were asked to share their aspirations on the possible uses of the empty public space through a physical game. By using pantomime and their body (Figure 6) as the only tool, they had to transfer a sense of utopia and to bring 'life' to the empty space by imagining how it would look if it were a playground, a basketball field or garden. Migrant families mingled with locals and used the imaginary space accordingly. The collective activation of the mental construction of a conceived space was achieved through the use of the body, regardless of whether this can be seen either through the lenses of an artistic method (pantomime/ arts) or a physical activity (game/ sports). It is also interesting to note that among the potential uses of the space, the ones linked to physical activity (basketball field or playground) were the ones mostly appreciated in this collective imaginary of the ideal use of this empty space, since physical activity made them easily portrayed.

At the end of the activity, participants were asked to vote and collectively/ democratically decide on what would be the best use of this space. Activating conceived interpretations of the material space through a collective exercise is not a self-evident

process. Nonetheless, the actual interaction, the artistic approach and the physical activity and presence of the body, especially through the use of pantomime activated the realm of imagination and the social construction of a conceived space that is worth articulating collectively.

<<Figure 6 about here>>

The lived/ community activated space

The aim of the project proved quite ambitious. It did however mark a step towards drawing a meta-map of a 'temporary home' collectively co-created and helped explore the way different communities in transit experience home, neighbourhood, togetherness and interaction with local communities. Furthermore, a year later the municipality decided to withdraw initial plans for a major construction in the area and to transform the public space into a garden as a result of an enhanced coordinated effort in cooperation with other stakeholders[10]. This was also the winning result of the pantomime game.

By giving a voice to migrants and refugees through using their body and artistic and physical expression, the activity allowed them to be treated as equal citizens and translate their motivations and aspirations beyond their 'temporary' situation. Most importantly, language is not a barrier any more. The activity involved them in participative decision-making processes and connected individual aspirations to city policies. The process and outcome of such processes gain importance as they suggest a bottom-up alternative to urban cultural capital management, and most significantly they

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10 The organization Alternative Tours of Athens (ATA) took the lead for this.

create improbable/innovative bridges between the arts, sport, science, research and between residents and 'temporary' residents and users of the public space of all ages and backgrounds. The arts and sport through the deployment of the human body become the facilitators of trust for this bridge-building and introduce a unique vehicle when working with diverse communities since they facilitate genuine human interaction and authentic connection. Such activities are important and urgent because understanding, documenting and giving voice to the issue of vulnerable communities can help educate consciousness and reverse prejudices. It also gives food for thought to policy makers regarding the contribution of these people to the identity of different city spaces.

Conclusions

As a conclusion, UDP is a multidisciplinary platform that suggests and tests methods inspired by the art-sports cultural intersection in order to engage individuals and communities in certain processes as well as in order to narrate gathered material in performative ways. It explores a site-specific artistic expression as well as a community-led co-creation of urban space. Therefore, the production of urban space is critical for both its conceptual framework and the way it approaches certain case studies.

Urban space *receives* everyday actions. History and contemporary transformations within the physical space leave their mark, linking the past to the present referring to both socio-spatial co-existence and segregation. Additionally, urban space *represents* and is being *represented.* It interacts with the individual and collective imaginary becoming a space of stereotypes, habits, encounters, avoidances and crossings, continuities and discontinuities. While being represented by the everyday actors through

their perceptual systems, it concomitantly represents their memories, traumas and emotional involvement. Finally, urban space *reproduces*. Being a social product, produced by social relations, its restructuring is linked to the broader restructuring of social life, turning the *right to the city* into a clear demand to reclaim a common space for all.

Sport and the arts can be the key to unlocking forms of this common space for all. For instance, the deployment of both the arts and sport during the Xouthou activity was a demonstration of the powerful connection of these two human expressions. The notion of playfulness embedded in them gave a festive element to this community engagement activity. Finally, especially interesting is the potential sport and the arts have when working with communities from diverse backgrounds since they rely heavily on the use of the body and its connection to the space rather than verbal language that requires de-coding interpretation efforts.

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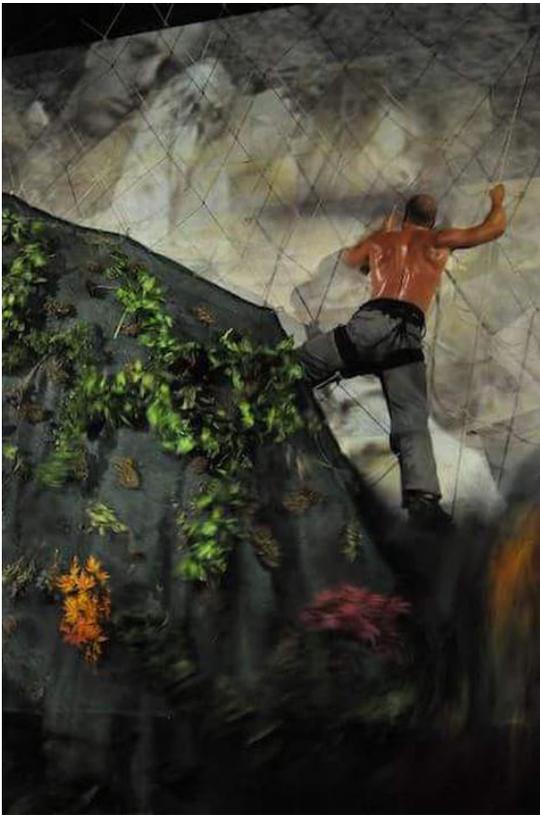
Figure 1. The climber is climbing down the Marathon Dam

Figure 2. The local capoeira school performs the neighbourhood's history

Figure 3. Yoga in the public space

Figure 4. Parkour in the streets of Dourgouti

Figure 5. "Laundry", together with child refugees