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Reclaiming Polytechneio

beyond binary interpretations of a black-and-white mural

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Reclaiming Polytechnio: beyond binary interpretations of a black-and-white mural

Abstract

The campus of the National Metsovian Polytechnic in central Athens (henceforth *Polytechnio*), which was constructed in the late 19th century, has been a significant cornerstone in the sociopolitical landscape of the city. Within the history of modern Greece, Polytechnio is regarded as a symbol of resistance against the Greek military dictatorship (junta) in 1973. The surrounding wall of Polytechnio has ever since functioned as a canvas for various kinds of political messages and artistic interventions. In March 2015 and during the times of austerity politics, the west wall of the Polytechnio was covered by a “black-and-white mural” (Tziovas 2017: 45). This paper examines *if*, *how*, and *why* this black-and-white mural has been discussed often controversially from different kinds of recipients, leading to an ardent public debate between local and international street art practitioners and graffiti writers, public and research authorities, communication media, and Greek public opinion. For our analysis, we use data from primary and secondary sources. Primary data sources include interviews and photographic documentation of the field. Secondary data sources include photographic material and newspaper articles circulated online.

Taking into consideration the blurred delimitation between street art and graffiti, we focus on the creation and erasure of this black-and-white mural through the lens of a triadic scheme: 1) urban and spatial semiotics 2) design and 3) cultural heritage. The first layer refers to spatialization of semiosis and semiotization of space and examines *if* and *how* this mural was integrated into the constructions and experiences of public space. The plasticity of the wall content bears the potential to change the city by making space for pluralistic kinds of aesthetic, dialogic, urban, political, social, and activist encounters (Halsey & Pederick 2010). The second approach implies the need of understanding design as a predominant axis of the human activity for meaning construal and includes all the practicalities involved for the fulfilment of this mural. Thirdly, the issue of cultural preservation, when applied in this case, illustrates the tensions between the institutional frameworks of cultural heritage on one hand, and the growing heritagisation of the street artworks on the other (Merrill 2015). Our goal is to avoid binary interpretations, and instead, to induce the significance of public dialogue, which this mural achieved to trigger.

Keywords

Polytechnio, crisis, street art, graffiti wall, semiotics, design, cultural heritage

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