

## PITHARI, FILLING A RESEARCH JAR WITH LANDMARKS AND EVERYDAY STORIES

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“Space is nothing without the people that inhabit it. Even the architectural composition of our neighborhoods is derived from human action, defining the space where the traces of peoples’ movements and thoughts, creativity and memories, interactions and feelings are woven into”. This is the opening phrase presenting our pilot project “Pithari” in the blog, as one of the most “romantic” projects we have run, in the historical district Exarcheia in Athens. We dare to call a project romantic because it was launched from a vision and a wish, without actually being the area of our expertise. Its vision and its aim were to identify the landmarks of a city district from /through?people’s stories and memories and to find the answer to the question: do people connect with the spots of the area that the heritage experts define as landmarks?

Let us, however, take some steps back to explore how a team like ours, working on heritage conservation, designed a project that studies/explores not just historical buildings and areas but also contemporary elements, stories and memories, and, in a way, people. As most of you that have followed our steps from the beginning may notice, we do “honour” our name! Diadrasis in Greek stands for interaction, and we keep growing and evolving with the collaborators that come to us at different moments, with their new ideas and professional points of view. Last year in /thanks

to the Tandem project “Whispers of a Common Past”, we interacted with the science of ethnography and were enchanted with the power of people’s stories and memories in preserving the intangible heritage of lost lands. Right after, at the conference in York<sup>1</sup>, we discovered the Architect Krupa Rajanngam’s community based research projects in India “neighborhood diaries”<sup>2</sup>. And to complete the picture, that same year we had /hosted? one intern of Urban Studies and two of Heritage Management, who were so enthusiastic to developing a project where people define the landmarks of our days; landmarks that, if preserved, they could become tomorrow’s heritage.

The idea being so clear, the next step was to find a district to try it in. Exarcheia, in the center for Athens, was the ideal candidate. It is not a large area, but it is full of history and still quite contradictory as often happens with areas of dispute. Widely known as the “riots cradle” of the city, it also has a very strong neighborhood character from the presence of old Athenians but newcomers too, and it is very much loved by students, change-makers and artists. Other than that, it is also the area of the National Archaeological Museum (Epigraphic and NTUA), where we could assess if and how such a big landmark is important for the users of the area. Choosing Exarcheia also helped us name the project. Until the end of the 19th century

<sup>1</sup> *Engaging Conservation: Communities, capacity building and conservation practice: Centre for Conservation Studies, University of York, 11-13/7/2014*

<sup>2</sup> <https://neighbourhooddiaries.wordpress.com/>



Fig. 1. Interview. Image by DIADRASIS.

Exarcheia was called “pitharadika” after the pottery workshops that could be found everywhere in this district. Pithari in Greek stands for the pottery jar in which people would store their everyday necessities; so in our project, Pithari became a “space for collecting memories” of a neighbourhood.

Once the objectives and the area were defined, we could finally design a methodology ad hoc. Once more, we did it “with a little help from our friends”. With the scientific guidance and supervision of Dr. Panagiota Pantzou, experienced in ethnographic research, the training by Elisavet Tapini on qualitative and quantitative analysis methodology, and the contribution from the MONUMENTA NGO and her coordinator Irini Gratsia that shared their experience, we could trace our own path in five distinctive steps:

- Study and Planning: studying existing literature, ongoing activities, organizations and associations



Fig. 3. Street market. Image by DIADRASIS.



Fig. 2. The ethnographer-owl. Image by DIADRASIS.

of the area; making the call and the training of the volunteers

- Comprehension: mapping with the locals the spots of interest through interviews and questionnaires.
- Elaboration: the team of experts analyzes the collected data and designs tools for dissemination
- Implementation: organizing an open event, calling people that contributed in the research to celebrate and discuss the results
- Dissemination: sharing the results and promoting their dissemination and use by the wider public

For us one of the biggest rewards of this project was the response to our call for volunteers. When publishing the call, we were very skeptical as to the response of the public. After all, we are just a small NGO and we were not even certain that anyone would be interested in the specific subject of our research. Surprisingly there were quite a few! We received 12



Fig. 4. The Phitari team. Image by DIADRASIS.



Fig. 5. Pithari logo. Image by DIADRASIS.

applications, 7 of which at the end formed the dream-team that conducted 100 interviews and helped us make another 100 online. I will never forget the fun at our fortnightly gathering, where we would share each one's progress in the research, any problems or simply stories. And that is another reason we love pithari: we have met and worked together with wonderful people from various fields. Marina, Dimitra, Maria, Katerina, Eva, Chrysa, Myrsini have filled our pithari with great enthusiasm and have made our project so vivid.

This project was yet another innovation for Diadrasis. It was the first to be designed and coordinated entirely by our interns. Maro Magoula, Theodora Tsitoura, Myrevi Nassiou, Lisa Wollmannstetter cooperated in an exemplary way, sharing tasks and responsibilities, turning the romantic idea into a solid research project. After a year of work, we had 19 landmarks of Exarcheia at hand along with so many stories as to make them live a hundred lives. You can discover them all in the Pithari blog, <https://pitharistories.wordpress.com/> created by the next generation of interns, Lydia Drollia and Eleftheria Karra. And for those that actually visit Athens, we are very happy to invite you to discover the results of this research in the mobile application Clio Muse<sup>3</sup>. Clio Muse team supported the idea of our project, offering us their platform to upload are stories. More interaction brings more outreach!

In conclusion, the community based research project "Pithari" searched for the heritage, culture and social landmarks of Exarcheia, adopting a "bottom up" research approach. Starting from the people's views and stories by which they identified cultural landmarks

and their role both in everyday life and in formulating contemporary history, we wanted to give the opportunity to people who live in Exarcheia to expose what they themselves think is important and valuable in their neighbourhood. By Bringing the research/ designing a project? for the people to the people, we supported the feelings of pride and participation of the locals encouraging them to promote their living heritage and culture. Linking faces and everyday stories to spots of a controversial district, has highlighted its other side, completely different to the prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions. Finally, giving voice to the people is a means of not only identifying spots, but also promoting local initiatives while supporting the safeguarding of these landmarks as local 'brands'/ iconic landmarks which are highlighting the unique character of each city district.

<sup>3</sup> <https://cliomuseapp.com/>