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## THICKENED PRACTICES: SEEING, DRAWING AND DESIGNING (FOR) AN ATHENIAN GROUND-GARDEN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper — presented in three parts, and a prologue — proposes a multiple reading of the arboreal and marble materialities of two Athenian sites: Syntagma Square (once Garden of Muses) and the National Garden (once Amalia's Garden) as complex and animate matters. Through a series of representations that draw attention to the current disengagement of the two sites from the broader urban and natural Attic terrain, we reimage and reimagine Syntagma Square and the National Garden as a thickened ground-garden, and propose six speculative and situated architectural design briefs that activate that thickness.

In the prologue, we revisit Robert McAnulty's notion of "thinking thick" presented in his article 'What's the Matter with Material?'. McAnulty rereads Robert Somol's and Sarah Whiting's article 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism' — a theorisation of post-critical "projective practices" that reconsiders the relationship of theory to architectural production. Following McAnulty's (and Somol's and Whiting's) critique on design creativity, the paper then unpacks our architectural production: this includes a collection of analogue photographs and image indexes of Syntagma Square and the National Garden in Part 1; a selection of maps, mappings and letters describing different (hi)stories of the two sites in Part 2; and a series of speculative drawings, physical models, digital projections and design briefs for the two sites in Part 3. Put differently, Part 1 takes the form of an immersive first-person account as we engage in an idiosyncratic photographic record of the two sites — this is a visual retelling accompanied by a textual narration, recreating our experiences of visiting the sites in July 2023 and January 2024. Part 2 returns to the two sites, offering a way of revisioning Syntagma Square and the National Garden through a historical(-fictional) and cultural lens — this part is read as an episodic recollection of the formations and fabrications of the ground of the two sites, anchored around the presence of the building of the Royal Palace, today's Greek Parliament. Part 3 presents our drawing and design practices for translating and working with the two sites as a thickened Athenian ground-garden.

## PROLOGUE: A DISCOURSE ON "THINKING THICK"

In 'What is the Matter with Material' Robert McAnulty advances an understanding of material thickening (or of matter's effects) as a way of rethinking "the designed world in which we find ourselves immersed," echoing Robert Somol's and Sarah Whiting's theorisations of post-critical 'projective' practices (or performances).<sup>1</sup> Architecture's role is the production of material effects, McAnulty writes, and these material effects "arise out of the relations it [architecture] constructs between the forms it finds materialised in the world — out of its organisation and reorganisation of matter."<sup>2</sup> The dynamic organisations and re-organisations of matter, naturally embedded in ecological structures, restructure materiality into new 'figureless-yet-configured' forms that matter insofar as "they thicken our experience by deepening our sensitivity to resonant relations."<sup>3</sup>

In 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism' published in *Perspecta* 33 three years earlier — which McAnulty follows closely to posit the importance of "thinking thick" for architectural design production — Somol and Whiting present their critique of the dominant views of criticality within the discipline of architecture (or of a critical, creative architecture).<sup>4</sup> Written as a response to what the authors recognised as problems of architecture's relation to critical theory, Somol and Whiting distance themselves from the discursive and textual practices, particularly associated with the writings of Michael Hays and the design practices of Peter Eisenman.<sup>5</sup> Grounded in oppositions forced upon architecture, disciplinarity within architecture "has been absorbed and exhausted by the project of criticality," Somol and Whiting argue, and note that "disciplinarity is understood as autonomy (enabling critique, representation and signification)" instead of "as instrumentality (projection, performativity, and pragmatics)." Counter

1 Robert McAnulty, 'What's the Matter with Material?' *Log*, No.5 (2005), pp. 87-92 (p. 87).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 92

4 For other scholars engaging with theorisations of the 'post-critical' see George Baird, "'Criticality' and Its Discontents", *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (2004), pp. 16-21; Stan Allen, 'Introduction: Practice vs Project' in *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation* (Routledge, 2009), pp. xi-xxiii; Michael Speaks, 'Theory, practice and pragmatism', *A+U*, 372 (2001), pp. 19-24.

5 See, for instance, Michael Hays, 'Between Culture and Form,' *Perspecta* 21 (1984), pp. 14-29 and Peter Eisenman, 'Autonomy and the Will to the Critical,' *Assemblage* 41 (2000), pp. 90-91.

6 Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, 'Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism', *Perspecta* 33, *Mining Autonomy* (2002), pp. 72-77 (p. 75).

7 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

to the dominant paradigm of ‘criticality’, but not presenting it as an anti-theoretical paradigm, Somol and Whiting put forward an understanding of post-critical architectural ‘projective practices’ that describe disciplinarity as reflective and interrogative. According to their theorisation, ‘projective practices’ encompass and engage with the complexity of our world by refocusing the attention on “the effects and exchanges of architecture’s inherent multiplicities: material, program, writing, atmosphere, form, technologies, economies, etc.”<sup>6</sup> The provisional and the ephemeral also acquire an active role in the rethinking of a projective architecture, as Somol and Whiting return to W.G. Sebald’s novel *The Rings of Saturn* to explain that:

Each one of us experiences moments [...] where echoes of other experiences [...] and encounters affect current ones. Such momentary echoes are like tracks out of alignment, hearing and seeing out of phase that generate momentary déjà vus, an overlap of real and virtual worlds.<sup>7</sup>

McAnulty’s description of his conceptual model “force-reaction-reorganization” — a continuation of Somol’s and Whiting’s observations — seems to suggest a way of addressing and activating the multiple experiences, effects and exchanges (the ‘stuff of materiality’ and the ‘stuff of the thick’) of our ‘designed world’.<sup>8</sup> McAnulty’s triadic model reminds us of Gregory Bateson’s ecological definition of epistemology formulated in *Mind and Nature*, which was framed around a similar triadic model expressed as “stimulus, response and reinforcement.”<sup>9</sup> Bateson’s

three components illustrate an interplay of active processes necessary for the formation of knowledge (epistemology): the reinforcement as ‘response’ reinforces ‘stimulus’ and the ‘reinforcement’ reinforces ‘response’, and so on.<sup>10</sup> The manner of the search for knowledge, Bateson continues, “is plain to me and might be called [...] multiple comparison”—an overlay of an image of the world with a tautologous one cannot intensify knowledge, or make one come to terms with any material complexity.<sup>11</sup>

By revisiting, and also reappropriating McAnulty’s (and by extension Somol’s and Whiting’s) and Bateson’s formulations, the architectural production presented in this creative paper seeks to ‘force/stimulate’ a more complex understanding of the materialities of Syntagma Square and the National Garden. Through a series of photographic surveys, presented in Part 1, and an architectural retelling of the historiographies of the two sites, described in Part 2, we propose a way of ‘reacting/responding’ to our understanding of the material thickening of the two sites, as well as to their current disengagement from broader Attic urban and landscape sensibilities. This ‘reorganization/reinforcement’ of knowledge, expressed through a redrawing of the two sites and the proposals of a series of speculative design briefs, introduced in Part 3, offers creative possibilities for animating this designed Athenian world as thickened. (Figure 1).

8 Robert McAnulty, ‘What’s the Matter with Material?’, p. 88.

9 Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (E.P. Dutton, 1979), p. 134.

10 In defining epistemology, Bateson writes that “[a]s science, epistemology is the study of how a particular organism or aggregates of organisms know, think, and decide. As philosophy, [...] is the study of the necessary limits and other characteristics of the processes of knowing, thinking, and deciding.” *Ibid.*, p. 228.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 87.



Figure 1. Maria Mitsoula and Eirini Makarouni, Designing (for) a thickened Athenian Ground-Garden (2024), Photograph of an architectural model by Maria Mitsoula.





Figure 2. On the top step of the nineteenth-century white marble staircase of Syntagma Square, Maria Mitsoula, Analogue photograph, July 2023.

## PART 1: IMAGE INDEXES, IN TWO SCENES AND TWO SITES

*Syntagma Square, Athens, July 2023*<sup>12</sup>

With my back to the Greek Parliament building, I stand on the top step and off-centre of the wide nineteenth-century white marble staircase of Syntagma Square. A marble jardinière that houses the ornamental plant *Dracaena trifasciat* is in my immediate vicinity, partially obstructing my view of Ermou Street in the background. At the lower, sunken level of the square, the water at the marble fountain that architect Ernst Ziller designed in 1872 is running, while a carpet of square white marble tiles (that have been destroyed several times and always replaced with identical ones) radiates heat, under the strong sunlight of this hot Saturday afternoon, as another heatwave hits Athens. In my peripheral vision, on both the left and right side,

two patches of different ground — two shaded and sheltered areas with soil and cypresses, oleanders and citrus trees — have unsurprisingly attracted the people who either stay in the square or cross it, like pack-donkeys meandering “to gain a little shade.”<sup>13</sup> The two opposite gardens are delineated with low walls, also dressed in white marble, and rows of marble and timber benches. I pull the ripcord of an (ultra-)lightweight plastic camera, a Lomography SuperSampler, with four small Japanese lenses all arranged in a row, and the first photograph of Syntagma Square is captured — I am not sure how the scene I see will be translated into the film (Figure 2). The multi-lens camera I hold, loaded with a black and white 35mm Lady Grey film with ISO 400, does not have a viewfinder, and the focus is fixed. I know though that the resulting image will consist of four consecutive pseudo-panoramic images, all held in one frame.

<sup>12</sup> The narrator here is Maria Mitsoula.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase refers to Le Corbusier’s description in *The City of Tomorrow*, as quoted in: Catherine Ingraham, ‘The Burdens of Linearity: Donkey Urbanism’ in *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity* (Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 62-86 (p. 66).



Figure 3. Image index with the analogue photographs taken at Syntagma Square in July 2023, Maria Mitsoula and Eirini Makarouni.



This first composite is taken in 0.2 seconds (or 0.05 seconds per photograph); I aim to capture four identical images, presented one next to the other. I pull the ripcord again, as I walk around the perimeter of the square. After two rolls of film (and 72 exposures), I prepare for another photographic documentation of the site of the square, this time with a camera with no lens but with a tiny pinhole on the front that allows light to pass through. The medium format Holga Pinhole camera, which I hold — loaded with the same black and white Lady Grey film (but the 120mm version) — requires a longer exposure time of several seconds for each shot, and thus a tripod, a cable release and a timer. Setting the scenes for the twelve 6x6cm shots is less impulsive; framing each view through the viewfinder at the back of the camera implies a more careful and considerate act of looking.

When the digital scans of the developed films arrived, an (unexpected) spectral quality was apparent in both the sliced samples (top index of Figure 3) and the long exposures (bottom index of Figure 3). Similar to X-ray images, the sense of depth in these photographs seems to have dissolved, and strange material effects have been created between the different materialities of the square—all rendered in a rich array of grey tones, with higher contrast for the ones where the radiant marble surface of the ground creates a

‘thickened’ horizon line of harsh white light, and a more subtle contrast for the ones where the horizon line disappears within the shade of the trees. Each of the four sequential (portrait) shots, a slice of the same scene, suggests a thickening of the space of that scene in time. The temporal thickness present in these sliced samples challenges the longer exposures created with the pinhole camera, in which a still scene also holds the spectres of its moving subjects.

Moving away from the sharp, high-resolution images that would have been produced if a digital camera was used, but also from those single postcard views associated with the “tourist’s gaze” — that tend to create a distance between the viewer and the scene — the fragmentation and repetition that the sliced samples portray and the blurring of action the longer exposures enfold suggest perceptual shifts that unsettle the viewer’s precise position in that (multiple) world and our relationship to its materiality (Figure 4).<sup>14</sup> This disjointed reading of the site, as captured through our unconventional photographic recordings and recreated through the image index, seems to direct our senses to the material entanglements that construct each scene and have formed this marble ground.

Figure 4. A ‘sliced sample’ and a ‘long exposure’ of Syntagma Square taken in July 2023, Maria Mitsoula and Eirini Makarouni.

14 For an elaboration of the term “tourist gaze” see John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (Sage, 1990).

*The National Garden, Athens, January 2024*<sup>15</sup>

It is now winter, and six months later, as I approach the main entrance of the National Garden on a warm Friday afternoon. I pause for a moment to grasp the 15.5-hectare piece of land, which once was Queen Amalia's private arboreal oasis. I take a sharp left turn and pass through the marble gate, installed in 1920 when the garden opened entirely to the public. I find myself behind a set of carved balustrades, looking down into a square-shaped courtyard. At its centre lies a sundial, an antique astronomical clock made of rusty steel and marble. In the backdrop, the monumental twenty-two meters tall *Washingtonia filifera* (palm trees), brought from Egypt in 1842, are spread along a fifty-meter path. I pull out the Holga Pinhole camera (loaded with that same black and white Lady Grey film) and place it on the balustrade. I press the shutter release and count to seven. Underneath the Washingtonians, I ponder which labyrinthine paths to follow. I choose a narrow path that leads deep into the garden, and search for the fragments of marble ruins scattered between a *Rosa banksia*, a *Chamaerops humilis*, a *Celtis occidentalis*, a *Sphaeralcea umbellata*, four out of the 520 tree species housed here — of which only 100 are native to Greece. I arrive at the northern end of the garden, after creeping through some arias, cypresses, casuarinas, elms and canary palms, where an ancient Roman villa mosaic floor is located, decorated with geometric shapes of plants and leaves. I position the Holga carefully between some metallic filigree columns and press the shutter. I then turn to the rest of the ancient marble ruins, found within a densely planted grove a few meters away. Two large base columns are the remnants of the historic portico of Hadrian's Aqueduct. I walk towards the southern side of the garden where the 'queen of palm trees', Queen Amalia had installed a 'throne': a hexagonal metallic white bench on top of a rugged rock with a white marble podium. Amalia sat there in the mornings, surrounded by *Agave Americana*, to

write letters to her father, informing him of matters of the garden — while gazing upon the Acropolis, the Philopappou Hill and the Phaleron Bay. Struggling to set the Holga onto the uneven ground, I reach for the Lomography SuperSampler (also loaded with the Lady Grey film), and point the camera towards her 'throne'. Climbing down the rock, I notice a long stone wall, running through the dense vegetation and foliage, carrying modest amounts of water. It is part of the Peisistratus Aqueduct, the ancient forty-meter deep well that still irrigates the National Garden with a daily rate of about 1200 cubic meters. I retrace my steps back to the Washingtonians for my last exposure, before I make my way through the western gate, towards Syntagma Square (Figure 5).

Seeing Syntagma Square and the National Garden through the two 'toy' cameras afforded a different way of observing and interacting with the two sites, but also of visualising and translating a context, which was familiar to both of us. Gathering and presenting the analogue photographs in the form of two image indexes — arranged in a simple photographic collage that echoes the choreographies of our visits to the two sites — suggested the beginning of a methodology for the reenactment of the material complexities of the two sites. This reenactment does not rely on enhanced panoramic representations of the two sites, although in the image index of Syntagma Square, the presence of a continuous horizon hints at a panoramic reconstruction of the site. The image index of the National Garden moves even further away from the practices of the panorama. Here, each photograph seems to render an "individuated fragment" of nature that is torn away from nature's indivisible wholeness, as Georg Simmel's theorisation of landscape reminds us — the notion of landscape holds a paradoxical condition for Simmel: an alienated, bounded segment of nature and simultaneously a condensation of nature's totality activated by one's vision.<sup>16</sup> We begin to read the image indexes, and the fragmented presence of the marble

16 Simmel writes,  
*By nature we mean the infinite interconnectedness of objects, the uninterrupted creation and destruction of forms, the flowing unity of an event that finds expression in the continuity of temporal and spatial existence... As far as landscape is concerned, however, a boundary, a way of being encompassed by a momentary or permanent field of vision, is quite essential... To conceive of a piece of ground and what is on it as a landscape, this means that one now conceives of a segment of nature itself as a separate unity, which estranges it from the concept of nature.* See Georg Simmel, "The Philosophy of Landscape", translated by Josef Bleicker. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24.7–8, (2007[1913]), pp. 20–29 (pp. 21–22).

15 The narrator here is Eirini Makarouni.

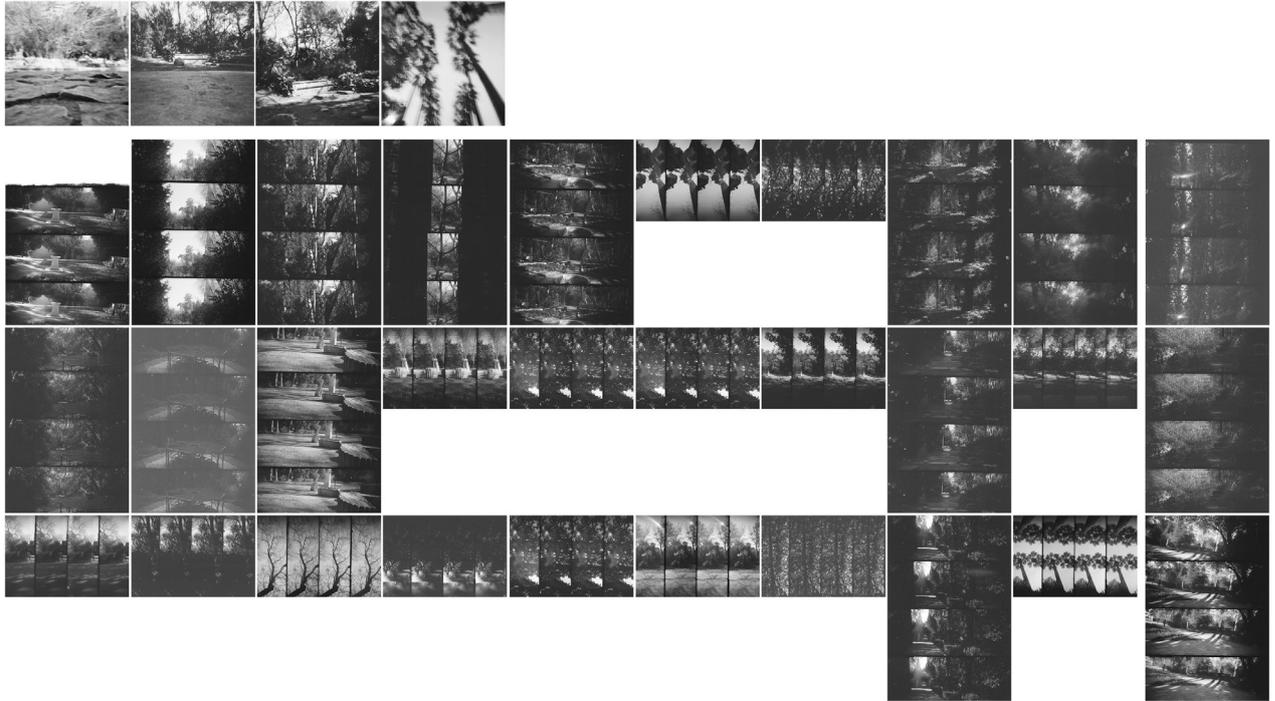


Figure 5. Image index with the analogue photographs taken at the National Garden in January 2023, Maria Mitsoula and Eirini Makarouni.

and the trees in them, like the photographic documentation that architect Cesare Leonardi developed in 1963, for which Leonardi arranged 16 different photographs—views of every scene (in his case of an individual tree) in a four-by-four grid. For Leonardi the gridded compositions containing the black and white photographs were originally seen “as ‘works’ in their own right,” Sylvia Lavin notes, before being translated to detailed re-drawings of each scene (each

of the species), later represented in *The Architecture of Trees* as a series of measured surveys.<sup>17</sup> Those translations from photography to drawing offered an enrichment of spatial vision for Leonardi, which we also set out to explore with our creative practices.

## PART 2: AN (EPISODIC) HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE GARDEN OF MUSES AND AMALIA'S GARDEN

In 1835 — five years after Greece became an independent country — a piece of land, measuring 250 x 140 metres, was expropriated from private owners. Along with the foundations for the Royal Palace (today's Greek Parliament building), a square was carved out of the sloping ground. A few years later, a white marble staircase was added to the square, connecting the ground of the square with the higher level on which the Palace is situated, echoing the design principles and aesthetic values of a North European imaginary of classical Athens that has now returned as a kind of *heterotopia* to its natural Greek environment.<sup>18</sup> During those early years of King Otto's reign, the square (or Garden of Muses as it was then known) was perceived as the recreational garden of the Palace. However, the imposed monarchy, the foreign state governance enforced by the Allies and the country's desire to establish a constitution (following the Ottoman occupation) stirred a series of tensions that eventually escalated during the uprising of 1843 — depicted in Hackenwill's oil painting *Revolution of September 3rd, 1843: The gathering at the Palace Square* (Figure 6). When the first Greek constitution was granted and the transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one materialised, the square was renamed Syntagma (translated as Constitution) Square, and the recreational garden of a building became the political ground of the city.

Amalia of Oldenburg settled in Athens in 1836, as the wife of King Otto and Queen of Greece, and until 1853, she regularly wrote letters to her father expressing her partial views of those charged political events. These letters become a record of a projection of her world vision onto a piece of land adjacent to the Garden of Muses, which would become the Royal Garden. The garden was Amalia's private affair, celebrating her governance of it without any constitutional restrictions. Amalia manages the garden's finances, importing seeds and soil from various countries around the world, and receiving gifts of trees from the Empress of Brazil and the King of Spain. With over 15,000 species of



Figure 6. F.C. Hackenwill, *Revolution of September 3rd, 1843: The gathering at the Palace* (n.d.), oil on canvas, 36 x 45 cm. ©National Historical Museum.



Figure 7. The Royal Palace (top) and Panorama of the Royal Garden from the south side of the Royal Palace (bottom), etchings published in Marinós P. Vretos, *Modern Athens. Collection of Illustrations of the Main Monuments of the Greek Capital along with Descriptions Dedicated to Amalia, the Queen of Greece* (Firmin Didot Press, 1861).

18 Archaeologist Dimitris Plantzos argues that the architecture of modern Athens “was from the outset conceived as a heterotopia of Hellenism, a Foucauldian ‘other space’ devoted to Western Classicism in view of the Classical ruins it preserved.” Dimitris Plantzos, ‘Behold the raking Geison: the new Acropolis Museum and its context-free archaeologies’ *ANTIQUITY*, 85 (2011), pp. 613-630 (p. 613).

plants and animals (including imported peacocks, ducks and turtles), Amalia's vision is materialised in the form of a botanical museum–monument: a world that speaks of an outside, another world, a world that Amalia passionately cared for and controlled. In one of her letters to her father, she writes:

*Athens, 19/31 December 1845*

I praise God that the Constitution does not prevent me from planting palm trees, so my own kingdom is well organized and governed with the monarchic system, a thing that also constitutes a shining argument in favor of absolute governments, even though I have a very stubborn prime minister (the gardener), it becomes what I want, and this coward is forced to find the courage and, bon gré mal gré, trust himself to work with the liquid element that he so much detests.<sup>19</sup>

The 1:1000 scale coloured lithography *Plan du Jardin Royal à Athènes*, drawn by horticulturist Francois Louis Barauld in 1854 represents Amalia's "own kingdom" (Figure 8) — it is also a representation that bears a close resemblance to the contemporary layout of the National Garden (with the only absent elements being the sundial, and Amalia's palm trees and pergola). Annotated and ornamented with labyrinthine paths, ponds, and decorative plants, Barauld's drawing builds on earlier depictions of the garden (for instance, Antoine-Marie Chenavard's *Plan d' Athenes*, 1843 or Friedrich von Gärtner's *Plan of the Royal Garden*, 1836) which, although they delineate smaller secluded spaces as the limits of the garden, are all driven by the design aesthetics of the nineteenth-century naturalistic Picturesque Movement. These formal, natural-looking representations also capture the battle between the garden's ground as a symbol of royal power (linked with the troubled collective identity of the modern city of Athens) and the garden's ground as an idealisation of nature.

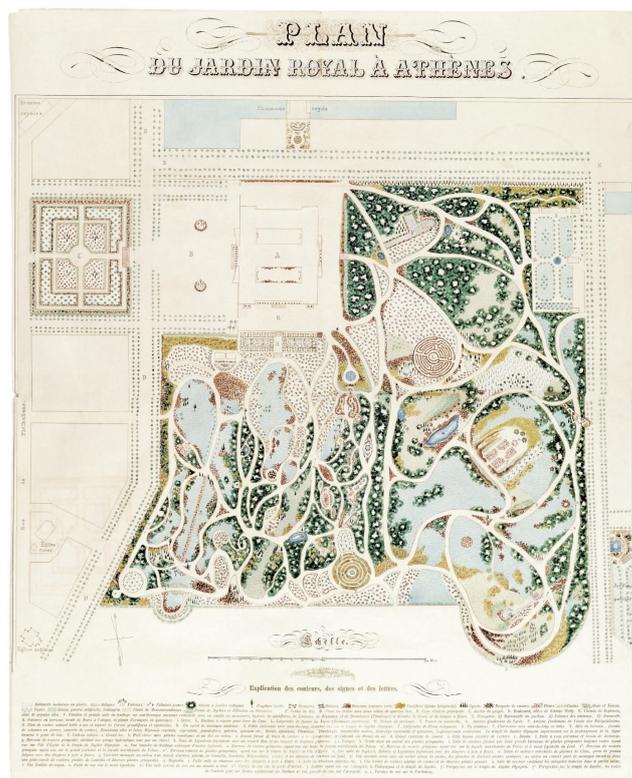


Figure 8. Plan du Jardin Royal à Athènes où sont capturées toutes ses caractéristiques morphologiques (sentiers, bassins, pergolas, plantes etc.), Francois Louis Barauld, 1854. © Otto König von Griechenland Museum Ottobrunn.

Zooming out, looking at earlier representations of the wider Attic landscape, we start to develop a different perception (and paradigm) of the nature and terrain within which the Royal Garden and the Garden of Muses were positioned. The first set of historical maps, the *Plan of the Environs of Athens, for the Travels of Anarchasis* together with the *Plan of Athens, for the travels of Anarchasis* (Figure 9), drawn by French geographer and cartographer M. Barbié du Bocage between 1784–1785, bring together the topographical landmarks of Athens during the 4<sup>th</sup> century bc with three ancient Greek gymnasia: Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lykeion, and Epicurus' Kynosarge, used for education and military training.<sup>20</sup> The three gardens

19 Amalia (Queen of Greece), Unpublished Letters from Queen Amalia to her father, 1836–1853, ed. by Maria Kairi and trans. by Michel Busse and Vana Busse, 2 vols (Estia, 2011), pp. 889–890.

20 The two maps were included in the fictional work of Jean-Jacques Barthélemy's *Voyage du Jeune Anacharsis en Grèce, dans le Milieu du Quatrième Siècle avant l'ère Vulgaire* (Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece), first published in 1788—one of the first historical novels and imaginary travel journals.



were inward-looking enclosed sections of ground that nevertheless acknowledged the natural topography of Attica, as all three were developed in sacred groves found along Athens's three rivers: Eridanos, Kephissos, and Illisos — all lost and hidden today.<sup>21</sup> Five years later, the *Map of Athens under the Ottoman Rule* drawn by Coubault offers a representation of the Attic landscape where the land was primarily understood in economic terms as a cultivated ground. The Attic landscape is thought and represented here through the categories of wetlands, grasslands, arable and pasture farmland. We would argue that Dimitris Tsoumplekas' recent digital photographic collage *The Metropolitan Park* could be seen as a radical visualisation of that paradigm—and undoubtedly, a critique “towards the present reality.”<sup>22</sup> (Figure 10)

Figure 9. (top) M. Barbie du Bocage, Jean Denis, *Plan of the Environs of Athens, for the travels of Anacharsis*. (1785), 17 x 22 cm. David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries. (bottom) M. Barbie du Bocage, *Plan of Athens, for the travels of Anacharsis*, (1784), 22 x 32 cm. David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

21 Carroll, Maureen, 'Gardens in Gymnasia, Schools and Scholae' in *Gardens of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 185-198.

22 Fabiano Micocci, *Athens by Collage: The Representation of the Metropolis between Realism, Intervention and Autonomy* (Anteferma: Conegliano, Treviso, 2021), p. 47.



Figure 10. Dimitris Tsoumplekas, *The Metropolitan Park* (2004), Archival Inkjet Print, 96 x 106 cm. From the series *Future Athens*.

### PART 3: DRAWING AND DESIGNING (FOR) SYNTAGMA SQUARE AND THE NATIONAL GARDEN IN ATHENS

With the knowledge that comes from shifting our theoretical position (and vantage point) —working between the historiographies attached to the maps, mappings, letters and panoramic representations (Part 2), and the immersive storytelling that accompanied the photographic survey and the image indexes (Part 1) — the process of engaging with a drawing translation of that form of knowledge begins. Tracing, depositing, layering, and three-dimensional modelling are initially the creative practices we employ for drawing the ground of Syntagma Square and the National Garden as thickened, within the continuous topographical and hydrogeological characteristics of the Attic terrain. This re-drawing and material thickening of Syntagma Square and the National Garden focuses on a series of past political, aesthetic, economic, social, cultural, historical and fictional layers as well as on the formations and fabrications of their common ground: an imagined, forgotten or lost ground on which our projected design futures are formed. This ‘figureless-yet-configured’ drawing of the thickened ground-garden of Syntagma Square and the National Garden becomes a speculative and exploratory drawing study for grounding six speculative architectural design briefs — six provocations, the programmes and siting of which address and respond to present issues of the two sites. (Figure 11)



*Brief 01: A Bridge (with a View) and an Amphitheatre*

The bridge, spanning over the fragrant blooms of the citrus trees of the square, and the (loud) conversations of a young group of travellers who sit around a temporary timber amphitheatre (they are only visiting Athens for this day), “encourages the eye to inter-relate parts of the landscape just as in practical reality it encourages bodies to relate with one another.”<sup>23</sup>

*Brief 02: Ernst Ziller’s Marble Fountain, Hidden in the Garden*

A walled garden provides a secluded space for Ernst Ziller’s marble fountain. The garden is stepped, rocky and filled with the delicate little pink flower *Micromeria acropolitana* (rediscovered recently after being considered extinct for a hundred years). The pigeons of the square are present in the frequent festive ceremonies celebrated here.

*Brief 03: Above Ground and (Under)Ground*

The archaeological substrata of the square, the site’s deeper historical layers, are activated, above ground: these contain the views of and visions for Athens of Peisistratus, Pericles, Hadrian and King Otto. A Roman public bath, a foundry for bronze classical statues, the bed of the Eridanos River and (a section of) the Peisistratian aqueduct, a cobbled street, three Byzantine columns, two sarcophagi, and the ancient gate of the Valerian Wall are re-surfaced and re-distributed along the new piers and promenades (or stoas) of the square.

*Brief 04: The Archive of Forgotten Futures and Lost Landscapes*

The west entrance of the garden is open at all times, with traces of a marble balustrade left behind. In the archive chambers of a perforated circular structure with a tall impermeable tower — as high as the Washingtonian palm trees at the entrance—architectural drawings of the garden and of Athens co-exist with an encyclopaedic display of a dried foliage collection (from over 500 varieties of plants, rehoused from the garden’s neglected Botanical Museum).

*Brief 05: An Ecological Field Station within the Ruins*

At the centre of the formal garden, a research institution gathers information on the underlying geology, the soil consistencies, the air humidity and temperature, the tree and plant species, and some alternative plant propagation techniques. The data is collected and recorded through a network of sensors that sense, observe, filter and probe the ecologies of this environment. The remnants of the Roman baths and the Peisistratus aqueduct (still in operation, after 2,500 years) support the station’s structure, next to the fragment of a lintel from Hadrian’s Reservoir.

*Brief 06: Scenographies of Care for Skilful Gardeners*

The hexagonal metallic bench on top of the rugged rock with a white marble podium is built to offer moments of delight and contemplation. But the new, and very skilful, gardeners project a different world vision to this part of the garden: they install a series of kitchen gardens that ignore the views to the Acropolis, the Philopappou Hill and the Phaleron Bay. The scenographies of care they construct are not (just) for aesthetic pleasure — they do not abstract the land; they work with it.

Figure 12. Situating A Bridge (with a View) and an Amphitheatre (top left); Ernst Ziller’s Marble Fountain, Hidden in the Garden (middle left); Above Ground and (Under)Ground (bottom left); The Archive of Forgotten Futures and Lost Landscapes (top right); An Ecological Field Station within the Ruins (middle right); and Scenographies of Care for Skilful Gardeners (bottom right) within a thickened (by design) Athenian ground-garden, 2024, Maria Mitsoula and Eirini Makarouni.

23 Michael Kaern, ‘Georg Simmel’s The Bridge and the Door’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 17.4, (1994), pp. 397-413, (p. 408).



The programmatic focus of each design proposition, described in the six briefs above, is reflective, interrogative, and specific to each situation. Together, these six proposals aim to engage a broad range of issues (social, cultural, political and environmental) that seek to redirect and redefine the ways the marble and arboreal materialities of Syntagma Square and the National Garden are perceived and performed. Their role is not therefore one of passivity (in the sense that the architectural program becomes a placeholder for merely formal design explorations)—and hence, different from architectural practices in which the genesis of architecture strips architecture of its broader concerns.

Our drawing and architectural design practices however echo the recent exploratory mappings of Shaun Murray and, to a certain degree, the groundworks of Peter Eisenman (also known as artificial excavations that Eisenman explored in the 1980s as he was moving away from the previous pursuits of an autonomous manifestation of architecture).<sup>24</sup> Writing about Murray's drawings and his creative practice as an "editor of situations," Robin Wilson evokes Charles Rennie Mackintosh's topographic imageries of the early 1920s, which have influenced Murray's multi-layered architectural constructions. In Mackintosh's representations, everything "has 'equal presence'," Murray notes, "rendered at the same weight of delineation and solidity (rock, vegetation, shadow, water)," and this "amounts to a project of 'world-shaping' (a re-forming of the external reality according to a visionary and utopian project of renewal and transformation)."<sup>25</sup> In a similar manner, at the core of Eisenman's groundworks is an exploration of the complex materialities of the site as figures: a selective collection of historical, topographical, geographical, urban and fictional figures that become a graft, Eisenman writes — or "a [new] site that contains motivation for action—[and] that is the beginning of the design process."<sup>26</sup>

In our design processes and practices, although each design proposal becomes responsive to the drawn language embedded in the speculative drawing of the site, of Figure 11 (similarly to the way Eisenman works with the site in his groundworks projects or Shaun's drawing practices work with a series of layers as an exchange of ideas), these designs are also responding to the programmatic intricacies and implications of each design brief. Crucially, the six situated design proposals are not to be perceived as conclusive — on the contrary, through this concluding image we provide a way of not only further translating and visualising, but also animating the material thickness of the ground of Syntagma Square and the National Garden. (Figure 12)

We present here the six architectural design proposals within the thickened (by design) ground of Syntagma Square and the National Garden. This is a reality constructed by a selection of the analogue photographs presented in Part 1, now projected onto four matte white marble surfaces/screens, or a 40 x 40 cm white marble lightbox. Working in a darkroom and using two slide projectors, the projected photographs are disrupted and deformed by the placement of six 3D-printed models within the lightbox — the six models are representations of the six architectural design briefs that we set up as a response to the readings of the two sites in Part 2. Each photograph, captured with a digital camera, dissolves and fades into the other, into the 3D-printed models and the white marble surfaces of the lightbox. The resulting "syncretic images"<sup>27</sup> render the arboreal and marble materialities of Syntagma Square (once Garden of Muses) and the National Garden (once Amalia's Garden) as complex and animate matters, and might "allow us to see the world anew—if only momentarily."<sup>28</sup>

24 Moving away from the autonomy of the architectural object and the linguistic operations of the housing propositions of the 1970s, known as 'cardboard architecture', Eisenman's 'artificial excavations' of the 1980s became grounded on the materialities of the site. In these latter projects, the site, its particularities and diversities, is palpably present. For a detailed description of Eisenman's 'artificial excavations' projects see: *Cities of Artificial Excavation. The Work of Peter Eisenman, 1978-1988*, ed. by Jean-François Bédard (Canadian Centre for Architecture and Rizzoli International Publications, 1994).

25 Robin Wilson, 'World-Shaping, Choreographies of Mapping and Construction', *Architectural Design*, Vol. 92, Is. 04, (July/ August 2022), pp. 70-77 (p. 74). See also Shaun Murray, 'Drawing for Potential' in *Drawing Architecture: Conversations on Contemporary Practice*, ed. by Mark Dorrian, Riet Eeckhout and Arnaud Hendrickx (Lund Humphries, 2022), pp. 90-97, 112-113.

26 Peter Eisenman, 'The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End', *Pespecta*, Vol. 21, (1984), pp. 154-173 (p. 168).

27 Goldring describes her "syncretic images" or "foto-projections" as "alterations in the surface of things," explaining that "by changing the sky, the shadows, the scale, or the proximity of the viewer — I can alter one's experience of the place" and expose to view "aspects of the place in a way that a single snapshot can't. When the projections work, they [...] creat[e] a credible, if implausible world." Lean Davis Alspaugh, 'Recombinant Approaches: Talking with Nancy Goldring', *The Hedgehog Review*, 7 July 2014 <<https://hedgehogreview.com/web-features/thr/posts/recombinant-approaches>> [accessed 12 June 2024].

28 Robert McNulty, 'What's the Matter with Material?', p. 92

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