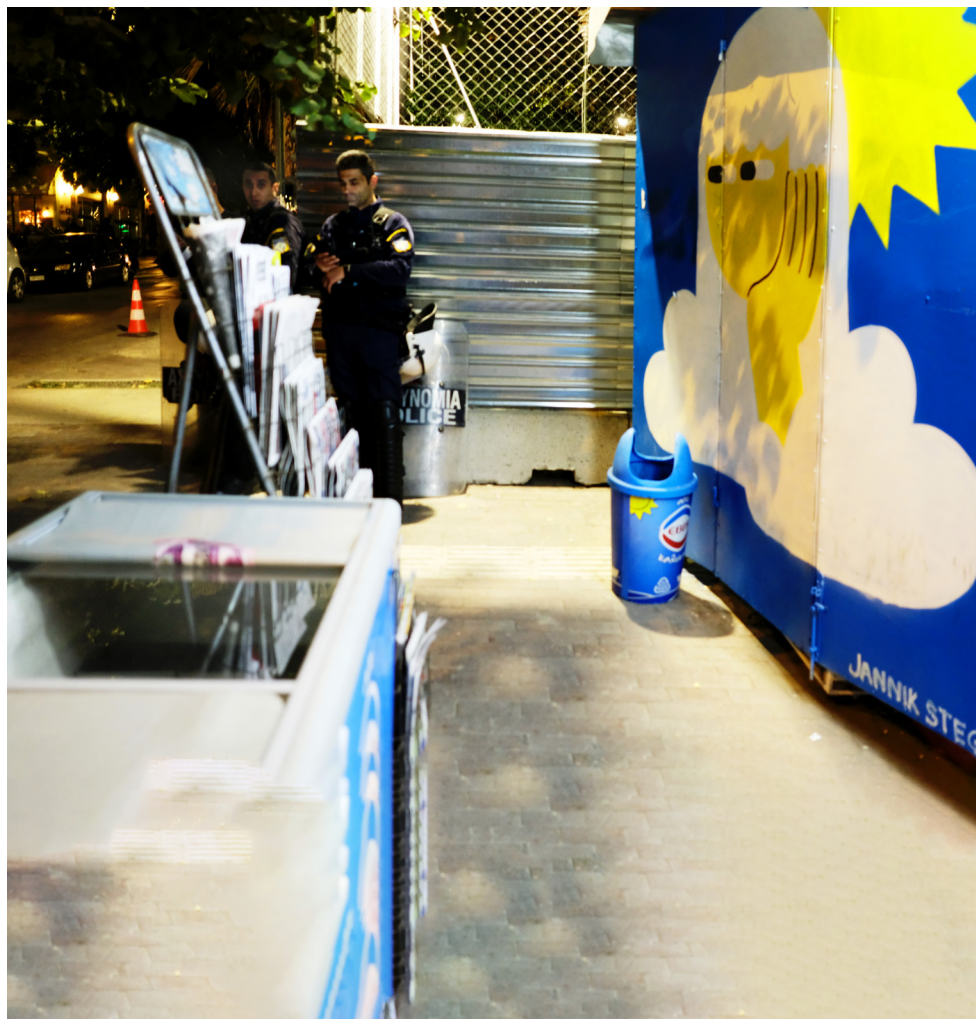

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Unfair and Square

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Contents

The end of the Exarcheia spatial contract and too-late capitalism	7
Day X	9
The known-unknown destiny of people	10
The known-unknowns of politics	11
Not-quite domination, not-quite hegemony	13
The known-unknown destiny of place	14
Against despair	18

A shorter version of this article was used in the author's keynote speech at the RC21 conference in Athens, August 24, 2022.

“I shall continue on the path of building more solid democratic institutions”.

– PM Konstantinos Mitsotakis, August 8, 2022

“The economic and military tyranny of today has been established”.

– John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear*, 2006

It is a moving occasion for me to be here in this room, because of *who* is here – please do not get me wrong, it is wonderful to know and feel we are finally among friends that we have not seen for a while, for reasons only too obvious. But it is also a moving occasion because of the *where* and then when we meet. The *where*, of course, we all know: we are in the historic campus of the Athens Polytechnic, right in the heart of the Exarcheia neighbourhood. And as for the *when*? We are here right when our neighbourhood is coming under attack. Those of you who made your way here through Exarcheia this afternoon will have surely seen that what was once its square is now a barricaded mass, a construction site for a new metro stop guarded 24/7 by scores of riot police. For those of you who have not visited Athens for a while, or those who may have heard so much about the neighbourhood’s past but only happen to visit now for the first time, this image must surely come as a shock. This is equally a shock to those who frequent Exarcheia more often: an unprecedented situation, and the reason why I have decided to dedicate this intervention to Exarcheia and its square in particular.

The end of the Exarcheia spatial contract and too-late capitalism

I have called this intervention “Unfair and Square”. The expression “fair and square” is used to denote something that is straightforward or fair, honest. But as I wish to show in the next few minutes, what is happening in the square, in the neighbourhood, in the city and in the country today is none of those things. What is happening right now in Exarcheia, in fact, can once again be seen as a reflection, as a symbolism of much wider systemic forces at play, this time of a wider wave of injustice engulfing the country – and much beyond it, of course: symbolic of the rapidly and deeply entrenching and systemic injustices of too-late capitalism as a whole.

When I talk of “too-late” capitalism I speak of two things. First, we clearly live at the tail end of late capitalism; the post-WWII epoch when capitalism saw its golden age expansionism particularly in Europe, where Greece is (just about!) located. And second, this is a too-late time in that some of the absurdities and contradictions created by the business culture seeping through our entire way of being are now everywhere; a seemingly irreversible trajectory that is bound to wreck even more havoc in the years ahead; a certain way of wrecking a particular kind of havoc, nevertheless, that is territorially bound in ways that perpetuate and exacerbate existing inequalities and help form new ones along the way.

Now, back to Exarcheia: I say “once again” when I talk of the neighbourhood as a mirror of the wider equilibrium of power in the country so far, because I believe that this is precisely the role it had previously played, say for the past half century or so. From the early post-dictatorial years (and even just before the fall of

the 1967-1973 dictatorship) the neighbourhood hosted the rebels, the outsiders of the city and the country at large. Of course, as the nature of the regime changed, so did the character of this “outsider” population – from cultural underground and the early days of post-dictatorial Greek anarchism to student radicalism and migrant haven, from bohemian to punk, from nihilist to intellectual and, more often than not, a fantastic mix of all these things: Exarcheia grew up along with the nascent Third Hellenic Republic, a naughty sibling that would never quite fall into line. But the role of Exarcheia was even more complicated: in the summer of 1974, Greece saw an agreed handover of power from the army generals to the politicians; the post-dictatorial democratic regime was established in continuity, not as a rupture from the dictatorial one. Even though the student uprising of 1973 preceded the eventual fall of the dictatorship by months, and even though the immediate aftermath of the uprising was the hardening of the dictatorial regime with a change in its leadership, the two (the uprising and the end of the dictatorship) have been imprinted in public discourse and memory as inseparable, as cause-and-effect. Since that time, from the 1973 student uprising onward, these uprisings, riots, protests and all kind of unrest have contested the post-dictatorial regime but at the same time they have been used as its democratic alibi: very useful for an otherwise ruthless and unforgiving regime that punishes and restrains, a democratic tyranny. A ruthlessness and brute force that lies in stark contrast to the democratic regimes of Northern Europe (and the Global North as a whole), which have instead offered themselves the veil of legitimacy allowed by welfare provisions. In short: since the end of WWII, the core of late western capitalism allowed itself the legitimising facade of the welfare state. But its Greek regional flavour had neither the capacity nor the intention to offer any such thing. Allowing-while-containing dissent in Exarcheia might have conceded territory, offering a brewing ground for dissent but it also offered an alibi and security valve for the nascent democratic regime. I have previously called this equilibrium a “spatial contract”. But as of August 9 2022, this equilibrium, this balance, is no more. What happened?

Day X

August 9 was day X. This was the day that the activists, anarchists, leftists and Exarcheia residents had long seen coming: the day when scores of riot police would descend upon the neighbourhood's square, along with the construction workers and all the building material to rip it apart and to begin on the construction of a metro stop exit, right there. Only a few years ago this would have been a laughable proposition: on an ordinary day the square was out of reach for the police, who would rather linger on Exarcheia's periphery and let neighbourhood's melting pot of delinquents simmer. But that was then and this is now, and on this day deep in the summer of 2022, riot police have started guarding 24/7 what instantly became the city's most controversial construction site. On that morning, I took the brief walk to the square as soon as friends alerted me that day X had finally arrived. The setting was eerie: except for half a dozen bemused residents, the square was now only occupied by riot police. Behind them, metal sheets fixed on concrete posts fully surrounded and obstructed it from view. At one side, at just one small part, a single piece of metallic wire mesh was protruding an additional two meters or so into the sky. On its own, this piece looked remarkably out of place. My momentary intrigue with this metallic sheet has sparked a line of thought that I will try to untangle below.

My obsession with the origin and the purpose of building environment materials has been going on for a while. I have been looking, perhaps for an embarrassingly long time, at buildings wondering when they might have built – not just as in the year, but the political context of their time, the social circumstances in which they were erected, and most importantly: how far ahead could their builders see into the future lives and uses of their creation? Would they want to even think about this, to foresee who would put them to what kind of use? Could it not be that a building erected to house an office or a family, for example, could turn out, over the course of its lifetime, to house a place of torture, a detention cell or else? And the other way round – could it not be that the grandiose luxury of colonial villas and staple administrative buildings would stay long after the colonisers were gone? Did the builders know at that time? Did they even consider the possibility, and did they even care? And what about smaller and even more mundane urban

objects – a street lamp, the stones that make a pavement, the wood that makes a bench – surely it is impossible for anyone (their own builders included) to foresee the use of these materials in the future. For Sennett, this matters little; what makes a craftsman is being “dedicated to good work for its own sake” (2008: 20). Of course, there has been a whole conversation around whether the craftsman knows, or ought to know, the reason why things are done. But what about their effect? How does knowing, or rather predicting, the effect of things that are done define the craftsman? What does this mean about their responsibility? Obviously, after a certain period of time this becomes little more than academic curiosity: surely a known unknown that we can do little about.

The known-unknown destiny of people

But let’s think together, now, about the parallel between the above (call it, perhaps, the known unknown destiny of things) and the known unknown destiny of people. When an excited twenty-something-old signs up for the police or the military they have no way of knowing, not exactly anyway, what kind of orders they will have to follow. A single cop, one of the scores that descended upon Exarcheia square that morning, seemed open to talk to one of the bemused residents, who appeared in turn to be genuinely concerned about the imminent chopping down of the square’s trees: “there goes”, he cried out, “another rare green refuge in our grey city”. The cop did seem open to conversation: “the trees will be replanted, and the metro station is badly needed for residents to move around”. What point was there to argue with him? Even if his orders were the exact opposite of what they were, he would have followed. Even if his orders changed every single hour, every minute, even if the orders coming in were entirely self-contradictory to begin with, he would have still done his very best to follow – the very nature, the very essence of the good cop is to follow orders, to always execute the known unknowns they might be asked to do, without much thinking, or at least without letting their thinking get into way of the ordered action. Of course, the police and the military stand at one very end of the spectrum of refusing responsibility for our present actions, let alone the known unknowns of their consequences. But what about the rest of us?

What about the craftsman, the bricklayer, what about the construction worker? Where does individual responsibility begin and when does it end? A few days before day X, and only a few meters up on Strefi Hill, another equally staggering tension was playing out (and continues to the present day). Local residents have been resisting the regeneration of the hill as agreed between the municipality of Athens and Prodea, a private real estate company that has “offered to sponsor” this regeneration, meaning they are conveniently surpassing any competition or accountability for being awarded this contract, all the while helping to gentrify the area and push prices up, which must surely be a good thing if you are a real estate company. Not so great if you are a local resident, and so local groups have been up on the hill every single day, directly confronting the mechanics hired by Prodea to survey the site. There is at least one anecdotal case of a mechanic resigning after hearing from the residents, learning about the project and how it would impact their neighbourhood. But there are also cases of others who have refused to do so even after hearing in detail about the ruin that the project would bring to the neighbourhood. There is an obvious – and important – question raised here about social consciousness and individual responsibility: how long into the future can we foresee the consequences of our actions, and up to what extent should we take responsibility for these?

The known-unknowns of politics

Let’s think of such known unknowns, now, at the political level. In the months that preceded day X, the conservative Greek government had been rocked by the seemingly accidental revelation that the head of the once-dominant social democrat party (PASOK) had his phone taped both by the Greek national intelligence service (NIS) and by the Predator spying software, ordered by purchaser unknown, the same software that has caused political earthquakes the world over, thanks to its capacity to spy with near-complete opacity and therefore, lack of accountability. A government already troubled by the cost of living crisis was now in the kind of trouble that would have been lethal in more ordinary times. A known unknown (something is always bound to be fishy in the echelons of power) had become a known known: the Greek government acted just

like any other mafia organisation. Greece is now a mafia state. But at a time when accountability and justice are in short supply, at a moment when the population appears, for its largest part, mesmerised and frozen by the consecutive blows to their livelihoods, let alone the incomplete freedoms that had come with liberal democracy, it seemed that even a scandal of this magnitude could be handled, dealt with, surpassed. A textbook reaction here would be to denounce both the enemy *within* and the enemy *beyond* (the country's borders). And for once, the government did not disappoint. In his televised address to the people on August 8th, the prime minister covered the latter – he spoke about the need to protect the national interest and “building more solid democratic institutions” after admitting to an unspecified deficiency in the operation of the intelligence service, the very same intelligence service that he made sure to put under his direct and personal command days after assuming his post. Only a few hours after his address, at around 4 a.m. the next day, construction crews and riot police began building their own, extremely solid democratic institutions-on-the-ground. Certainly, the questions of accountability, fairness or justice assume an honest and equal (or at the very least, egalitarian) relationship between the state and its subjects and one could argue this is either a historically and context-specific assumption, or one that is naive, fair and square. The preposition of this intervention is that so far we had live in this historical interlude between one state-instigated catastrophe and the next one, and even more so: a brief interval in the long lineage of human history as this has been built exactly on the premise that authority kills, constantly and absolutely. Exarcheia, in the early days of the Third Hellenic Republic, grounded this very interlude, it allowed for this brief, fleeting sense of a different kind of balance of power upon its territory, a more measured and variegated exercise of authority and a more empowered population that kept building on a place-based sense of resistance and autonomy. A few years earlier Exarcheia felt like a neighbourhood at the fringes of the Greek apparatus of power, just within – and at times just beyond – its grab. Whatever one thought of this particular arrangement back then, it would have been nearly impossible to foresee the current moment.

So, how did we reach this moment? How did we get to the point where, in the middle of the night, workers descend upon a square and team up with scores

of riot police to put up meters-high fencing to protect what is meant to be an infrastructure provided for the public good, for the good of the people? Exarcheia police station, went the old joke in the neighbourhood, was the first police station in the world tasked with protecting itself. The Exarcheia metro construction site might also be the first construction site that has equally thrust into existence with the task of guarding and protecting itself. And still it happened, that moment is here, the unfathomable has become reality.

Not-quite domination, not-quite hegemony

When we are faced with this unfathomable, the unforeseeable, the difficult situation, in any case, those among us with religious leanings might turn to our god(s), to what we hold sacred. Even if we ask the question, “why is this happening?”, I think this might be not so much by form of seeking an explanation, but solace. We don’t expect to hear back with any kind of detailed explanation as to why life has taken the course that it has, but we still utter the question because we want to find solace in the space that it forms, and within this, perhaps, to find the space and the time to process the events and to find an answer for ourselves. I am not a religious person, for good or for bad. Ever increasingly, when encountering the permanently unforeseeable of our present moment, I find myself digging deep into the work of beloved writers to help me explain these times. In trying to comprehend Exarcheia’s current moment I first thought that perhaps Jean Baudrillard would help me make sense of what was happening. Surely, at times as confusing as these, the equally confusing words of a French philosopher might actually make sense. Right? The elimination of spaces of dissent, I thought, is an obvious step toward the elimination of domination as understood by Baudrillard, and its replacement with hegemony: the former is inherently binary, or at least bipolar; it precludes and assumes a distinct master/slave relation but crucially, it assumes and allows space for both to exist. But the latter, hegemony, is all-encompassing. Here, every single member of the concerned population has eliminated all dualisms in favour of an integral reality: the integral reality of hegemony. This reality means there is not only no need, but literally no space for the existence of minority figures or the expression of opinions. Order becomes the

ordinary.

But there is still something missing here, as we never were fully in a state of domination, nor have we reached total hegemony. Baudrillard, in his usual comically magnified show of tendencies helps, he helps us in understanding the course and the direction of things. But in order to understand exactly what was happening, something more nuanced was of order. I figured turning to John Berger might help. I might very well be the only person in the room that thinks this make sense, and indeed I know this seems like a bizarre choice at first: after all, Berger was probably better known for being an art critic, not so much a political commentator, let alone an urbanist (though he would certainly reject all such labels). So yes, I don't think he makes quite the most obvious reference in a global converge of urbanists. But please bear with me.

The known-unknown destiny of place

In a fair and sensible world, Berger's Ten Dispatches About Place would have made it into any urban studies reading list. The brief intervention, four pages long, is a typical Berger masterpiece. He begins: *"Somebody asks: are you still a Marxist? Never before has the devastation caused by the pursuit of profit, as defined by capitalism, been more extensive than it is today"*. These words were written in the summer of 2005 – a very timid time compared to the summer of 2022. But here is where Berger's mastery lies: he links the personal (*"somebody asks"*) to the political (*"the devastation caused by the pursuit of profit"*) and in so doing he begins to tackle, heads-on even if he never quite utters it, the supposedly known destiny of people. The personal: are *you* still? And the supposedly known destiny: Are you *still* anything that you used to be – and the reason I am asking, may have been the continuation in the unknown interlocutor's line of reasoning, is because we are never really meant to still be what we were; the pursuit of profit, as defined by capitalism, includes the pursuit of the endless transformation; once you were young and now you are old, once you were radical and now, one would hope and expect, you are more moderate; the bold words of your youth must have surely given way to mute and unadventurous days flying by; once you were chirpy and

now you will probably be solemn, because so is life, and so is ageing, and so is the known destiny of people.

I am wondering if there is a similar thing to be said about the expected destiny of place as we morph from the post-war capitalist velvet glove to its too-late brute force. The destiny of places that once upon a time lied at the fringe of liberal capitalism are now expected to be fully integrated into its core; it is not simply that the capitalist reach is extending and expanding and that it should therefore absorb the places that were either within, or just beyond its periphery: the expectation for the destiny of place, the place of this kind, is that it becomes an integral tool in the capitalist machinery it had once defined. Old Marxists, when they are no longer *still* Marxists, do not tend to vanish into oblivion. Some do of course, but known-unknown destiny of some others is that they become indispensable parts in the machine; if you know what kind of clog can stop a machine, it is because you know each and every one of its parts so well. And that kind of knowledge is highly valuable in running the machine itself. Along a similar line then, the undisciplined place has built its very essence upon its opposition to discipline, to power. The spectacle-hungry too-late capitalism needs this kind of exciting other to integrate and to assimilate of course, to cash out on its otherness. That we know well, that is what recuperation is all about. But I am wondering if there is something broader to be said here, about the destiny of the once radical place in too-late capitalism. Might it be that the once radical place, or that any place lying outside the remit of the acceptable for that matter, is now meant to fall back into line. As too-late western liberal capitalism glimpses at the end of its historical lineage, it closes ranks. Its subjects are meant to obey without much fuff, be it for quarantine and compulsory vaccination guidelines, curbing their energy consumption or reading the situation in Ukraine or in Taiwan in a certain, uniform way; as liberal capitalism fights for its own survival, it becomes – understandably – nervous and less tolerant toward any contestation coming from within.

But this closing of ranks started a little while back. Berger wrote at the height of the anti-terrorist hysteria and offered a sombre yet sober glimpse into the ways in which this collective western paranoia would later on be used to twist and

distort familiar words: democracy, justice, human rights, terrorism. “Each word in the context signifies the opposite of what it was once meant to signify”, he forewarned us. Add to that words such as “health” or “freedom of movement”, and twenty-odd years on, even more words now signify the opposite of what they were once meant to. Lost in this collective hysteria of ours are freedoms – previously elementary freedoms, from hugging a loved one to moving around in a city, a country or beyond it. Even when we move, we now arrive at places that no longer have the gravity of our destination:

“every day people follow signs to some place which is not their home but a chosen destination... On arrival they come to realise they are not in the place indicated by the signs they followed. Where they now find themselves has the correct latitude, longitude, local time, currency, yet it does not have the specific gravity of the destination they chose” (Berger 2006).

I want us to briefly think about this gravity of destination. When the planners set out to design the metro in Exarcheia, they had a few options to choose from – including laying out the metro exit at the square or a few meters down the road, at the adjacent street corner, or even a further few meters over at the interval space between the Athens Polytechnic and the city’s renown Archaeological Museum. The latter option would facilitate movement to and from two of the main institutions in the neighbourhood with a lesser tampering with the neighbourhood’s character, let alone the eight-year long (the official and rather optimistic forecast) closure of its main square. Note “lesser” here: the new metro exit was proposed and nearly implemented during the brief interlude of a social democratic government of kind in the country, the Syriza years (2015-2019). This is an excellent spatial manifestation of the lesser, smoother application of liberal capitalism: still moving in the same overall direction of course, but in a more inconspicuous and gentle, an easier pace. Jogging, not running toward catastrophe. An Exarcheia metro station a few yards from the square would still cause the same kind of economic catastrophe, an intense touristification of the neighbourhood that would rip it apart, making it easy pray to the hotels and the airbnb businesses already coveting it. But it would do so in a gentle way, a prolonged and discreet blunting of its character.

The metro in Exarcheia is all about this kind of blunting. It has always been about a political, a material and also a symbolic trophy. What it has been the least about is transportation. In terms of transportation planning, another metro stop in Exarcheia is an overkill: the Omonoia Square metro stop is a ten-minute walk away; as is the one by Viktoria Square, as is that on Panepistimiou Ave. A metro right in the heart of Exarcheia square, not even in its outskirts as had been previously proposed, is an inherently violent political act. It aims to eradicate and to make uniform: it does not wish to bring all other places and residents to Exarcheia but to bring Exarcheia in line and in tune with the everywhere-nowhere of our democratic tyrants. Berger again: *“Their nowhere generates a strange, because unprecedented, awareness of time. Digital time. It continues for ever uninterrupted through day and night, the seasons, birth and death. As indifferent as money. Yet, although continuous, it is utterly single”*. If you wonder about this utter singularity, which I am sure you won't as we are in a room full of conscious and critical urbanists, you simply have to wander around Exarcheia already (let alone in eight years!) to marvel at the “hipster monoculture”, as a friend refers to it, that is quickly taking roots and flourishing here. In a sense, what is happening in Exarcheia is far from unique – it follows the lineage of delinquent neighbourhoods, from early post-war Soho to 1980s Lower East Side and nowadays seemingly everywhere. In a sense, Exarcheia is simply late to the gentrification party, and to the long string of urban spaces of resistance lost, from Ungdomshuset in Copenhagen to the once-vibrant squatting culture in London or Berlin. In one sense these were the unruly places condoned by juvenile liberal capitalism, its early youthful years allowing some kind of whimsicality, always within reason. But when you are at wits end, as the current liberal democratic system of order seems to be, there is surely no space for dissent, at least not within – there can be no fun and games when the threat gets existential. The known destiny of place in too-late capitalism, is to obey and to conform. It would be easy to grasp at this homogenising force, our racing toward a monobloc conforming culture, and to despair.

Against Despair

It would be easy to despair. And this is indeed another theme beloved by Berger: from the despair ultimately driving the acts of a suicide bomber to the people's despair in face of the eternal occupation of Palestine. This is the one theme of his that I will not touch today. Laying bare the injustice and unfairness that is now clearly integral to the Third Hellenic Republic (and all places of too-late capitalism, for that matter) should not lead us to despair. Why would it? These questions of ethnics and fairness have long been lingering over Greek society, at the long time during which this has been hammered by consecutive crises and uprisings: 2008 and its aftermath(s), the 2011-2012 uprisings, the Troika years, the migrant reception crisis, Covid and the war on people's health and their data and movement freedoms and now, Europe's war and the ensuing cost of living crisis. New year, new crisis! In essence this is a continuous, near-non interrupted lineage of crises that runs through the past fifteen years, if not longer; the gloriously carefree years of the 2004 Olympics are a distant memory for most: there are now adults who were not even born at the time. But remarkably, the injustice and the blatant unfairness of a mafia state has now met its spatial articulation. The rot, as a recent international media article had it, now lays bare for everyone to see. The visibility of it all is staggering – a metro right at the heart of Exarcheia square is a blatantly revanchist, deeply political act that aims to connect, further down the line, the nowheres of the rest of the city to the nowhere of what will share its longitude and langitude with Exarcheia today. It is bleak as much as it is blatant, but in this blatancy, in this transparency, now lies a hope and an opportunity. No-one can any longer claim they did not know, whether working for a company recklessly producing fossil fuels, building a digital surveillance app, or overseeing a construction site that is digging up our square. The dots have been joined and this transparency is at the same time an open and urgent invitation for us to act.

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