

URBAN OBSERVATORIES. GAZING AT THE CITY.SNAPSHOTS AND ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE URBAN LANDSCAPE OF ATHENS

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Abstract

The urban landscape of Athens, characterized by a complex interplay of metropolitan experiences, cultural layers, diverse encounters, historical memory, social transformations, and aesthetic impulses, serves as a focal point for observation. Urban observatories have been established in various locations, including Ymittos, Omonia Square, Kifissias Avenue, the electric railway lines, Alexandra's Avenue refugee camps, Kerameikos, and the dwarfs of Petroupolis, among others. These small-scale architectural interventions propose supervisory trails and pathways, curate Athenian imagery, and function as sites for reflection on the urban imaginary for residents and visitors. Experimental and alternative structures populate the urban public space, transcending the mundane and repetitive nature of busy urban areas. These structures, whether viewed from above, in close proximity, or from a distance, engage with the city and contribute to its mythology through the introduction of new spatial narratives and representations. By fostering embodied presence, they expand the domain of visual culture, facilitating the recollection of monuments and guiding physical contemplation, particularly in relation to emerging technologies. Furthermore, they establish prototypical models for interpreting the materiality of urban spaces, unearthing forgotten fragments of the city's discontinuous, ambiguous, and indistinct identity, while revisiting the memory of historical events and socio-political ceremonies.

The graduate student designs of architectural structures, aimed at observing urban life and public spaces, present unique chronotope narratives of Athens' urban character. This city is marked by diversity, contradiction, and unpredictability, where its historical essence, mythological roots, and archaeological landmarks converge with its contemporary, fluid, and chaotic identity. These designs provide both analogue and digital panoramas that explore historical and cultural, geographical and urban, as well as anthropological and psychographic attributes and variances. They seek to decode the random, the quotidian, and the familiar aspects of urban life and identity.

Key words: *Spatial narratives, urban observatories, supervision, architectural design, public space, architectural panoramas, memory.*

Introduction

The urban landscape of Athens, a tapestry of metropolitan experiences, cultural deposits (Eco, 1998), multifaceted encounters, historical memory, social transformations, and aesthetic impulses, becomes a subject of observation. In Ymittos mountain and Omonia Square, above

Kifissias Avenue and over the tracks of the electric railway, alongside the refugee camps on Alexandra Avenue, at Zappeion or Kerameikos, and in the neighbourhoods of Petroupolis and beyond, urban observatories are established. These small-scale architectural constructions propose curated view sequences and pathways, collect Athenian imagery, and serve as fields for reflecting the urban imagination, inviting the experiential involvement of both residents and visitors. Experimental and alternative structures populate the urban public space, rising above the mundane and repetitive. They are inscribed in bustling urban areas, in squares where human flows are dense or in the peace and tranquillity of the mountains. From above, up close, or from a distance, they ‘look at’ the city and enrich its mythology with new spatial narratives and representations. Through embodied presence, they expand the realm of visual culture, aiding in the recollection of monuments and guiding physical contemplation, particularly in relation to new technologies.

This paper explores how spatial narratives shape cultural heritage, the role of urban observatories in contemporary city planning, and the interweaving between public space and architectural design. Observatories create interpretive frameworks to interpret the ‘materiality’ (tangible or intangible) of urban spaces, seeking out forgotten fragments and ‘deposits’ of their discontinuous, vague, and indistinct physiognomy while evoking memories of historical events and socio-political achievements. The students’ proposals for the design of architectural structures, which involve targeted observations of city life and outdoor public space, constitute unique narratives of the urbanity of Athens. A city that is diverse, contradictory, and unexpected, where its historical character, mythological origins, and archaeological monuments intertwine and intersect with its current porous and chaotic image.

Organizational architectural thinking, through analytical and compositional processes, seeks to provide form and a tangible shape to the concept of the observatory as a cultural intervention within the urban landscape - urbanspace. The observatories captured in the student studies connect the architectural shell with human practices. They offer both analogue and digital panoramas that explore historical, cultural, geographical, urban, anthropological, and psychographic qualities and diversities. These panoramas manifest and embellish the random, the everyday, and the familiar. They evoke dominant fantasies, obsessions and desires of citizens, intertwining distinct urbanities of the metropolis. They approach the distinct urban experiences and the connotations of urban life and identity, revealing “the spirit that emerges from the places”, as Pikionis (1987) states.

Looking at the city “again”

“The knowledge of cities is linked to the deciphering of their dreamlike, expressive images”
(Kracauer, 1931)

“The city shifts over time, it’s not a fixed image.
It defines itself through contrasts, it yearns to explode.”
(Wenders, 1988: 37)

The captivating character of multifocal, multifaceted and historically rich cities, such as Athens, arises from the concentration of diverse elements and overlapping layers. The amalgamation of infrastructure, buildings, antiquities, monuments, landmarks, urban myths, micro-histories, collective narratives, spatial snapshots, and sensory stimuli creates a heterogeneous tapestry that underscores the city's historical trajectory and reveals its spatiotemporal depth. The unique essence of Athenian city is synthesized through the interplay of reality and myth, the present and the past, as well as memory and history by means of apparent or hidden cultural and collective deposits (Moira, Makris, 2024a).

The observatory, both as a structure and as a vantage point, positions the viewing body at a specific location in space, allowing for meaningful interaction with the environment. It fosters a context rich in significance, as observing the world constitutes a revelation and manifests its essence, facilitating a negotiation and decoding of the elements that comprise its totality. The image of the place is not merely a reflection or a simple mirroring of its form on the observer's retina. The image of the place is not merely a passive contemplation; rather, it involves an understanding of its secret, invisible, and enigmatic laws and entities. In experiential perception, the view of a place can evoke memories, provide enlightening in terms of the factual information, elicit sensitivity and excitement. This occurs when the researcher-architect successfully identifies new and significant formal, syntactic, and structural relationships, and to devise the means by which to render the character of the landscape or the observed object, including its invisible aspects (Moirá et al, 2024b: 152-158).

The perception of a city's image, the contemplation of its urban form, the observation of its bustling and complex nature, and the immersion in its cultural content are the focal points of study for the urban observatory. The observatory aims to establish a new reference point for the city. It challenges stereotypes and reflects on the evolving condition of habitation and residence in Athens, as well as the renegotiation of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Its goal extends beyond mere observation; it aims to stimulate vision and provide an experience that uncovers the indistinct and overlooked urban character that is often obscured by the hurried and superficial perceptions of daily life. The conception of observatory's form and function depends on the context in which it is integrated, the architectural design that serves its functional needs by defining relationships and activities, and, most importantly, the narrative focus and the type of surveillance experience it aims to ensure. At times the proposed view is strictly defined to guide the gaze in a single direction and shaping the viewing angle and cone of vision, or to turn sequentially and selectively in more directions, orienting the viewer's gaze to the wider urban landscape. Subjective experience and observation, which are proposed, can also be peripatetic, evolving through space and time, organizing a specific path from one point to another or serves a process of wandering in multiple directions, depending on the impression the observatory wants to create.

In this scenario, the viewer engages with a sequence of images by manipulating the heterogeneities, scale, metric relationships, and proportions that constitute the syntactic structure in space. Walking observation enhances the experience through selected, fragmentary, and discrete images of the city, or through a continuous sequence that evokes a cinematic quality in the viewing process. In this manner, a condition is established in which the body and movements of the subject are in constant interaction with the environment. The world and the self continuously shape and redefine one another. The perception of the body and the image of the world are transformed into a singular and continuous existential experience. There is no space that is not connected to the unconscious image of the perceived self, (Pallasmaa, 2022: 96-97).

Siegfried Kracauer (1995) writes of the “experience of the city as a labyrinth of fragmented signals”. In his article ‘Strassen in Berlin und anderswo’ he makes a clear distinction between images of the city. He writes: “One can distinguish between two types of cityscape: those which are consciously fashioned and those which come about unintentionally. The former spring from the artistic will which is realized in those squares, vistas, building ensembles and perspectives which Baedeker generally sees fit to highlight with a star. In contrast, the latter come into being without prior plan.” (Kracauer, 1964: 40). Therefore, the architectural design of each urban observatory has the potential to shape, control, submit or even impose specific observational conditions, thereby revealing intriguing perspectives of the urban landscape and its timeless political and cultural evolution. In the observatory, the gaze is directed to penetrate cracks, skylights, and openings. This approach aims to unveil

enigmatic and imperceptible images—what Kracauer refers to as the grey images of the city. These images, being indistinguishable and illegible, are often overlooked and bypassed by the observer.

The experience of the observer is guided by the spatial design of the observatory, as users follow directional cues within the environment of the design proposal. This interaction can be self-directed, allowing individuals to navigate selectively through space or adhere to specific instructions, such as walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. The observer's gaze can encompass the urban landscape in a full 360 degrees, akin to a periscope, enabling a comprehensive view of the city or focusing on particular segments of the urban panorama. They can examine the space from various perspectives—top to bottom, inside to outside, or from ground level to the sky—immersing themselves in a multi-sensory experience that integrates the urban landscape with their own perception or their virtual integration.

De Certeau (1984) argues that spatial narratives are constructed through the everyday actions of individuals navigating urban landscapes. This perspective reframes public spaces not merely as architecturally designed zones, but as lived arenas of micro-resistance and adaptation. Thus, cultural heritage must be understood not only as a static historical artifact but as a dynamic, evolving spatial text. With the introduction of the distinction "voyeurs or walkers", Michel de Certeau introduces the distinction between two distinct categories of urban imagery. On one hand, there are the panoramic views that observe the city from above, providing a distant perspective that offers the viewer an urban panorama—a representation of the city-map from a vantage point. These images engage in myth-making, transforming the intricate fabric of the city into a visual artifact and positioning us, the viewers, as voyeurs. On the other hand, urban observatories are being invented that symbolically or tangibly engage the observer with the life of the city, including the flow of cars and trains, as well as the daily movements and activities of its ordinary users. At the height of this gaze, diverge images emerge that are often unreadable and hermetic, encapsulating the dark and poetic spatiality of the inhabited city. This city is shaped by fragments of urban imagery, each containing echoes of the past, leaving it to the observer to synthesize these elements and form their own interpretations of the unstable, chaotic, and fluid nature of the contemporary city, characterized by multiple fragmentary signs. Not merely the singular, normalized image of a postcard city, but rather its facets that remain unseen due to habit and saturation. This palimpsest of subjective experience illuminates the tensions, densities, discontinuities, ruptures, and intersections within the urban continuum, revealing the invisible nuggets of urban, political, historical, and social culture that define cities.

The urban landscape, as noted by Moraitis, "is the quintessential public place whose configurations reflect, throughout the entire range of our known urban history, the different expressions of the cultural and political identity of societies" (Moraitis, 2024: 311). In this context, student studies of urban observatories are designed to serve as focal points of public reference. This approach allows for urban porosity—a concept introduced by Walter Benjamin and Asia Lacis (1925) in relation to Naples—where new cultural associations can emerge. These associations have the potential to enhance the public character of the city, facilitate the networking of places, promote the exchange of ideas, and ultimately contribute to the formation of the Athens' cultural landscape.

Choosing the location, the design, and the narrative of the urban experience

"The worth of cities is determined by the number of places in them devoted to improvisation."
(Kracauer, 1964:50)

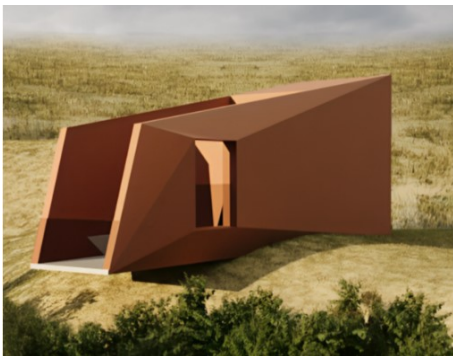
Architecture, when it seeks a simultaneous and unified understanding of place and action, possesses a performative character, as noted by Kotionis. Architecture includes within its

jurisdiction the very organization of life itself, encompassing all actions and achievements that enable individuals to inhabit their familiar spaces, while integrating both the visual and performing arts. “It is not a matter of first establishing the place and then introducing an action within it; rather, there exists an interaction that co-constitutes both the content and dynamics of the place” (Kotionis, 2024: 690). Athens, as described by the artist Sevastakis, is “a fragile city.” He notes that “the violent urbanization multiplied, to the point of suffocation, both in terms of area and height, the built environment and adopted a harsh construction language with absolute geometry, which rather contradicted the great encroaching and structural anarchy that enveloped the city of hasty and unstable habitation. In the traces of fluid installations, the modern city was erected in a very short time” (Sevastakis, 2024:140). A disguise of irregularity and improvisation did not lead to aesthetic, structural, class, or cultural formations; rather, it resulted in a simplistic interpretation of modernist ideals and the deductive logic of the Athenian apartment building. The urban observatories designed by the students are intrinsically connected to the cultural, socio-political, and environmental characteristics of the urban landscape. They aim to transcend the overt elements of the image and uncover the hidden identifying features of Athens. The urban observatories designed by the students reflect an effort to understand the city of Athens as a broader, multidimensional, and complex spatial and cultural imprint on the natural environment.

De Certeau noted: “Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, (...) there is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can “invoke” or not (De Certeau,1984: 108). The studies focus on significant geographical landmarks, enigmatic points of tension, and areas of historical and social densification, such as historic squares, allowing observers to perceive the city “again” and in new ways. The proposed urban observatories unveil their chaotic complexity and enigmatic allure and always mutating forms. According to Ingold, (2000: 188) “building is a process that goes on as long as people live in an environment. It does not start with a plan we have conceived in advance and ends with a ready-made object. The ‘final form’ is only fleeting.” Both the built and the natural landscapes are elucidated and unveiled through the interconnection of diverse objects and subjects that engage with its environment. In the current framework, the exploration of the depth of matter-form relations in urban landscape contemplation examines how spatial narratives and perception models influence the understanding of urban environments. Research in this field often examines how anthropogenic imprints, or traces of human activity, manifest in architectural spaces and how they contribute to collective memory (Schulz, 1980). Emerging methodologies, such as digital reconstructions, participatory urbanism, and sensory mapping, help analyse how past human activity leaves enduring marks in architecture. These inquiries often utilize experimental perception models to explore urban transformation, historical layering, and spatial interpretation. (Picon, 2018). Many studies address the visibility of historical and material traces in contemporary settings, offering insights into how cities encode past narratives within evolving landscapes (Anderson, 2015).

Urban observatories are situated at the city's periphery, along the boundaries of the natural landscape, or within its historical centre—areas characterized by a rich presence of cultural deposits, archaeological resources, and social interactions. These observatories play a vital role in emphasizing and critically analysing the city's cultural identity. In terms of form and structural composition, these constructions can be categorized as either small-scale enclosed structures—such as capsules and uniquely designed shells—or as open installations that are still in development. The latter feature an aesthetic appeal and provide free access, functioning as balconies, platforms, scaffolding, or towers.

Ymittos one of the four mountains which delineates the boundary of Athens' basin, rivals Athens' natural observatories, Lycabettus and the Acropolis hill, as a prime location. It is selected as an ideal site for proposed observatories that capture distant panoramas, situating Athens within the broader context of the Attica region and the Saronic Sea, thereby providing geographical insights. The proposed observation installations, simultaneously, evoke a sense of secret and hidden shelters within the mountain's body, which manage the past and the present, through new architectural structures or structures for the regeneration of dilapidated buildings. The observatory, which appears to precariously perch on the mountain's edge, evokes the notion of a refuge—a sanctuary equipped with openings for surveillance that provide selective views of the city. At night, a light fixture embedded in the ceiling emits bright signals into the sky.



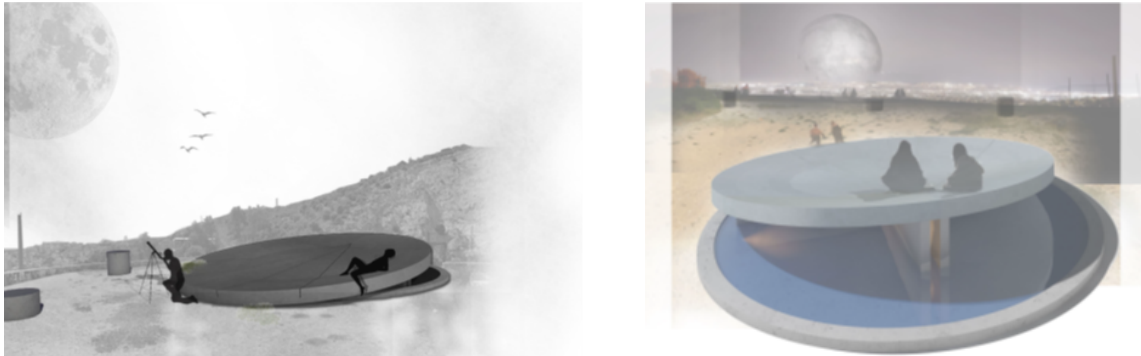
Cases from student designs. 'Spatial Narratives' Studio, Spring 2024

For instance, the stone tower of Anthousa, ancient beacon tower (fryktozia), is resurrected from obscurity with a slightly perforated metallic structure that frames and accentuates it, allowing visitors to navigate safely alongside and around it while enjoying the surrounding natural and urban landscapes. The observatories are designed interventions that facilitate the revelation of landscapes through interaction. The regenerating ruins attract attention and draw people to specific, perhaps underutilized or transitional areas, creating new focal points for interaction and the emergence of unexpected cultural associations, thereby facilitating the networking of places. The Anthousa project is exemplary, the new metallic structure actively interacts with the historical trace (the fryktozia), not erasing it but framing and allowing navigation around it, revealing its presence and context within the surrounding natural and urban landscape through this designed encounter.



Cases from student designs. 'Spatial Narratives' Studio, Spring 2024

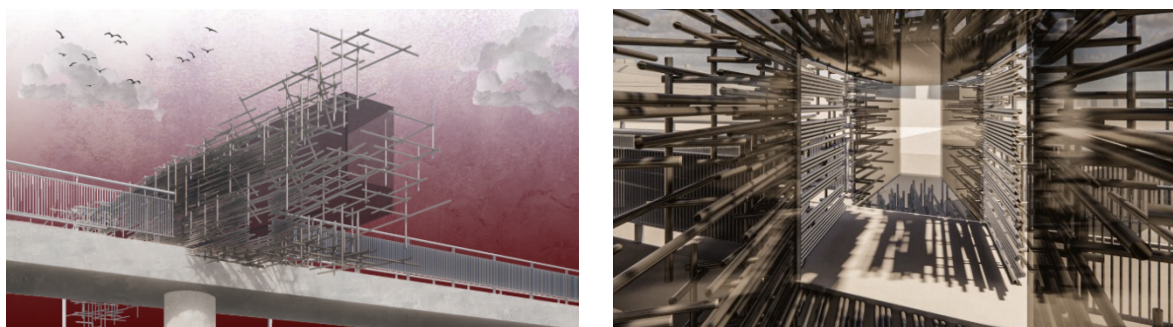
On the opposite end of the city, the observatory has selected the Petroupolis Dam as its site for integration, provides a stunning view of the city, Ymittos, and the moon rising behind it from a disc that has landed on the mountain. This inclined circular platform offers visitors a captivating perspective of the cityscape against the backdrop of a starry night sky. The Petroupoli observatories explicitly contrast the natural landscape with the urban sprawl, allowing the observer to physically inhabit this boundary. using design to amplify this location as a topos of maximum tension. The design (e.g., the disc seeming to 'land' from the sky) accentuates this juxtaposition.



Cases from student designs. 'Spatial Narratives' Studio, Spring 2024

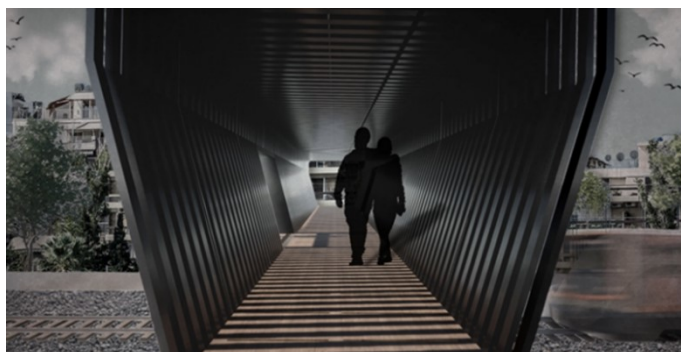
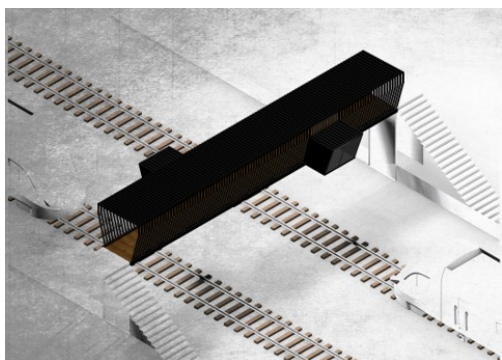
Other observatories are strategically installed at central, emblematic locations throughout the city, including intersections, squares, pedestrian bridges, and above electric lines overseeing the city's traffic, publicity and cultural landscape. They serve as poetic multisensorial allegories for the continuous flow of people and transportation, highlighting the impassable roadways and the relationships between the city's disparate spaces. These observatories represent cross-sections, interstices, and intermediate zones suspended in the void. They oversee transitions and passages of the crowd, transforming the familiar, everyday practices of citizens into a transient ritual—such as safely crossing from one side of the city to the other—while fostering a new perception of urban time and space.

The first observatory above Kifissias Avenue is a sculptural installation composed of dense, discontinuous tubes resembling a construction site or an unfinished structure. This design creates an enclosed, permeable structure that appears to float in the void, extending transversely toward the pedestrian bridge and heightening the unsettling, unfamiliar sense of 'danger' above the river of cars below, to provoke awareness of the infrastructure's scale/speed. The physical sensation of being suspended above traffic in the Kifissias structure profoundly shapes the perception of that space through bodily vulnerability.



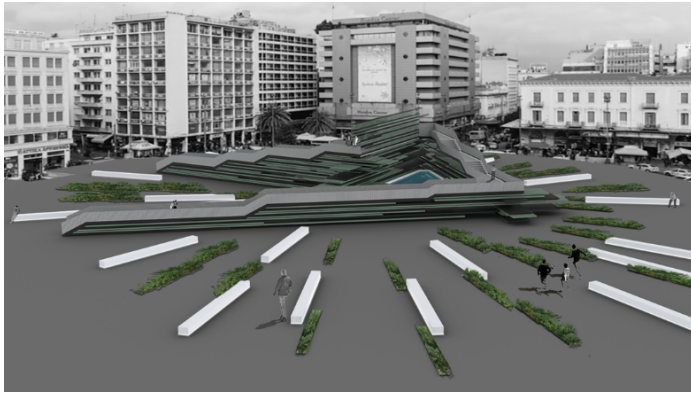
Cases from student designs. 'Spatial Narratives' Studio, Spring 2024

In contrast, the second observatory situated above the train lines takes the shape of a tunnel formed by identical frames aligned parallel to the pedestrian bridge. This structure includes two enclosed balconies that provide views of the trains moving in opposite directions. the openings in the Kifissias or the structure near the train lines wouldn't just offer panoramic views but deliberately fragmented glimpses of the underlying chaos of traffic or the repetitive motion of trains, revealing the "unconsciously fashioned" cityscape Kracauer (1995) contrasted with monumental planning.



Cases from student designs. 'Spatial Narratives' Studio, Spring 2024

Omonia Square, the second most recognizable historic square in Athens after Syntagma Square, serves as a significant urban focal point. It is a place that is both central and marginal, timeless yet ephemeral, changeable yet stable and unchanging over time. The observatory, located in Omonia Square, extends like a pathway that branches out in a triangular arrangement, developing in a staggered manner in height with ramps and corridors. This design provides an unobstructed view of the Acropolis, the iconic neoclassical buildings—including the historic Bagion and Alexandros hotels, which serve as informal gateways to the traditional city, as well as the Neon Cafe—and the surrounding roadways. The structure primarily consists of iron, featuring overlapping glass surfaces and complementary radial luminous prismatic elements along its perimeter. The observatory re-manages and reinterprets the concepts of memory (as exemplified by the Zongolopoulos fountain and the Varotsos sculpture 'Runner'), multiculturalism - reflecting the enduring presence of internal migrants and refugees at the edges of the square and at the metro exits. It also refers to the centripetal dynamics of urban syntax, specifically the avenues that converge at the centre. The Omonia observatory is placed within a square embodying contrast (Wenders, 1988) (central/marginal, historical/contemporary, grandeur/neglect). Its design, with branching paths and varying heights, likely forces encounter with these conflicting elements – the view towards the Acropolis juxtaposed with the immediate reality of the square's complex social dynamics. The square serves as a hub and crossroads, acting as both a starting point and a point of convergence for various historical periods and cultural characteristics. The Omonia observatory, while offering grand views, likely incorporates moments where ramps or corridors frame narrow, specific sightlines towards neoclassical details or the mundane activity at street level, forcing a focused gaze that decodes these less obvious, "dreamlike" elements Kracauer (1931) spoke of. The act of walking, climbing, and turning, choreographed by its architectural design, becomes integral to the observational experience, aligning with Pallasmaa's focus on embodied, existential perception (Pallasmaa, 2012).



Cases from student designs. 'Spatial Narratives' Studio, Spring 2024

An observatory, which is part of Kerameikos, is located at the intersection of Ermou Street and Piraeus Street. It aims to become a metaphorically panoptic, tree-shaped tower designed as a bisected square, serving as a new urban epicentre for the city. Rising at the streets' intersection, it resembles a luminous screen-eye that observes its surroundings while simultaneously collecting and displaying images of crowd movement on digital screens. Thus, it functions not only as an observatory for the wider area but also as a transmitter and receiver of digital images.

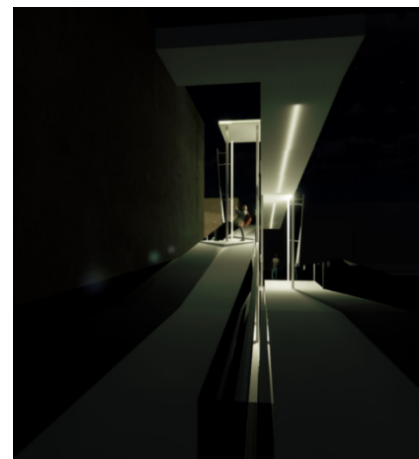
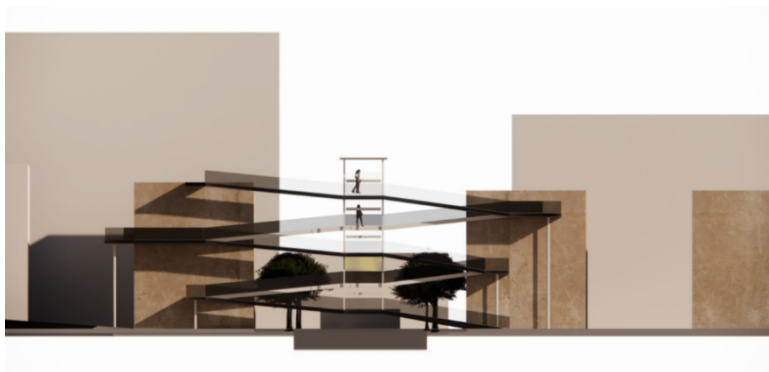


Cases from student designs. 'Spatial Narratives' Studio, Spring 2024

The Kerameikos tower offers both the potential elevated ("voyeur") view and the ground-level digital screen reflecting the "walker's" domain (the crowd), creating a complex dialogue between the two modes. This observatory is interconnected with another identical observatory which is proposed for construction in Shibuya, Japan. The two twin observatories

will relay a continuous stream of real-time snapshots from their respective urban environments and vice versa. The Kerameikos “screen-eye” directly materializes Kracauer's (1995) “labyrinth of fragmented signals” by not only observing but collecting and displaying digital snapshots of crowd movement, transforming the ephemeral flow into a tangible, albeit fragmented, representation of urban life.

Finally, the observation scaffolding that is suspended and parasitizes next to the refugee buildings in Alexandras Avenue serves as a cultural intervention. It references the ongoing management of the historical significance of the iconic modernist structures and the role they played in accommodating the refugee influx following the Asia Minor Catastrophe. The buildings, inaugurated at the beginning of the 20th century, serve as a historic and emblematic example of social housing, architectural design, and urban planning, reflecting the principles and values of modernism. Simultaneously, they represent a site of exclusion and degradation. Situated along a road axis of major urban thoroughfare with significant traffic, these structures are at the heart of a diverse urban environment. They are adjacent to high-intensity public facilities, including a football stadium, hospital complexes, metro stations, police headquarters, and courts (Areios Pagos). Additionally, the surrounding area features a variety of shops, cinemas, theatres, and restaurants. The observatory seeks to evoke the collective memory embedded in the space, the buildings, the cultural activities, and the enduring aspirations of its inhabitants. The design features a symbolic upward trajectory, incorporating ramps that allow for the observation of the surrounding area from high up on the rooftops of the buildings. The Alexandra Ave ramps offering views from the rooftops allow observation of the surrounding urban fabric – often messy and unplanned – from an unusual perspective, unveiling the “indistinct” character often obscured by ground-level perception. At the same time, it includes a screen that displays scenes from the city's past and anticipated future, literally and figuratively projecting images such as photographs from the significant demonstration in December 2008, films, and contemporary artistic actions and installations.



Cases from student designs. ‘Spatial Narratives’ Studio, Spring 2024

The observation structure within the Zappeion Park holds significant symbolic value, representing the timeless emblematic promenade of Athenian citizens throughout the history of the Greek state, as documented in literary, visual, and historical records. Additionally, it serves as a destination for visitors, as the area offers a privileged view of the Parthenon is a tourist destination, as it is an integral part of the broader archaeological and cultural landscape. The observatory proposes a parallel route to the open outdoor space of the Zappeion through a playful and clearly defined passage. A curved structure, resembling an arch, composed of superimposed parametric frames creates a threshold, a passage through space like the 19th-

century arcades. It is designed to impose its own rhythm on movement, placing particular emphasis on the entry and exit of the spectator-visitor. This creates a symbolic urban arcade, but devoid of a commercial character, allowing visitors to traverse the Zappeion's space without distractions while enjoying the interplay of fragmented city images turning the act of passage itself into a “hybrid ritual” of perception, a modern, non-commercial flânerie. This unique tunnel facilitates contemplation and signifies the beginning and end of a journey-experience in both space and time.



Cases from student designs. ‘Spatial Narratives’ Studio, Spring 2024

Conclusions: synthesizing the role of Athenian urban observatories

“The same town, when looked at from different places, appears quite different and is, as it were, multiplied in perspectives.”
(von Leibniz, 2014: 25)

The exploration of urban observatories in Athen’s landscape, as conceptualized through the described student proposals, presents a compelling argument for the value of targeted, architecturally defined interventions in fostering new modes of urban perception and understanding. The architectural form enables and directs the action of observation, making the place (the observatory structure) and the action (gazing, reflecting, moving) inseparable, co-constituting the unique experience. The core contribution lies in positioning these observatories not merely as passive vantage points, but as active interpretive engines embedded within the city's complex fabric—structures that do not merely observe but actively participate in shaping urban experience. This study has highlighted how architectural design, spatial narratives, and participatory methodologies can transform urban observatories from static observational platforms into dynamic, spatialized forms of urban knowledge production. These observatories do not just document the city of Athens; they mediate, reveal, and reframe it—challenging dominant urban discourses and fostering new spatial imaginaries that are rooted in lived experience, memory, and engagement. The following are the key analytical insights. *Mediating Complexity*. The projects successfully grapple with Athens’ defining characteristic: its layered, often contradictory nature – a palimpsest of history, myth, modernity, crisis, and everyday life. The observatories act as mediating devices, offering focused lenses (both literal and metaphorical) through which this complexity can be navigated and comprehended, rather than being overwhelming or ignored. *Beyond the Visual*. While inherently tied to the act of “gazing,” the more potent proposals described implicitly push beyond mere visual consumption. Concepts like peripatetic observation, multi-sensory engagement (implied through presence in diverse environments), and the evocation of memory and narrative suggest a move towards a more phenomenological and embodied understanding of urban space, aligning with thinkers like Pallasmaa. *Narrative Construction*. The observatories are framed as generators of novel spatiotemporal narratives and representations. This highlights their potential role in cultural production, actively shaping the

city's evolving identity and mythology, challenging dominant or stagnant narratives (e.g., the purely classical vs. the solely chaotic). They function as potential sites for contesting and re-inscribing meaning, as suggested by De Certeau's distinction between the strategic view from above and the tactical paths from within. *Critical Engagement*. Several proposals (e.g., Kifissias Ave, Alexandra Ave refugees' buildings, Omonia square) demonstrate a capacity for critical engagement with the urban condition – addressing infrastructure's dominance, historical memory and trauma, social marginalization, and the dynamics of central public spaces. They aim to make visible the often “indistinct and overlooked,” echoing Kracauer's interest in the city's less obvious, yet revealing, facets. *Architectural Agency*. The analysis underscores that the architectural form itself is not neutral. The design choices – framing, enclosure, materiality, pathway sequencing, height, orientation – are presented as deliberate tools for shaping experience, directing attention, and provoking specific reflections or emotional responses. This affirms architecture's performative capacity, as noted by Kotionis, in organizing not just space but also perception and interaction.

Epilogue

The observatories scattered across Athens serve as unique venues for site-specific art, transforming unconventional locations such as overpasses, mountainsides, repurposed structures, and central urban squares into immersive spaces for artistic expression. These settings provide context-rich backdrops for installations, performances, and experimental happenings, engaging directly with the surrounding environment and its layered narratives. Furthermore, the observatories, with their meticulously framed views, architectural compositions, and striking juxtapositions of urban elements, inspire artists—including photographers, filmmakers, writers, painters, and musicians—encouraging the creation of new works that capture the visual and spatial essence of the city. As a result, these structures serve as catalysts for the reinterpretation of Athenian landscapes. At the same time, these sites function as platforms for dialogue and debate. Positioned in socially or historically significant locations such as Omonia and Alexandra Avenue, they serve as focal points for public discussions, workshops, and cultural events addressing pressing urban issues, social memory, migration, and development. Through curated programming, they foster civic engagement and collective reflection on the evolving urban landscape.

Embracing contemporary digital culture, these observatories have the potential to integrate interactive technologies, incorporating digital screens, augmented reality (AR) choices, and locative media projects. This convergence of physical and digital realms allows for dynamic explorations of urban narratives, data visualizations about the city, and the presentation of digital art, bridging past and present through immersive, technology-driven experiences.

Their visual presence within the cityscape also positions them as emerging cultural nodes. Beyond their primary function, they become informal landmarks, generating movement and interaction while anchoring small-scale cultural activities, spontaneous gatherings, and social exchanges. In doing so, they redefine public space and contribute to a more vibrant, participatory urban experience. In parallel, these structures play a critical role in re-contextualizing heritage. By framing specific viewpoints, they juxtapose iconic landmarks—such as the Acropolis seen from Zappeion or Ymittos—with contemporary urban realities, infrastructure, and overlooked historical layers. This perspective fosters a dynamic understanding of heritage, emphasizing its continuity and transformation rather than a static, monumentalized past.

Moreover, they shed light on often-overlooked or intangible aspects of heritage. Directing attention to industrial archaeology, modernist social housing, the evolving social

history of public squares, or ancient infrastructure traces, they make the invisible deposits tangible. These interventions challenge conventional heritage narratives, revealing the layered complexity of Athens' urban fabric. Crucially, these observatories introduce an experiential mode of heritage interpretation. Rather than relying solely on informational panels, they invite visitors to engage physically—climbing, looking through apertures, or navigating curated pathways—transforming perception into an embodied experience that deepens historical and spatial understanding.

By acting as storytelling devices, they empower artists, and community groups to construct narratives that weave together different historical periods, sites, and social experiences. This narrative-driven approach makes heritage more accessible, engaging, and relevant to contemporary audiences. These observatories encourage a critical engagement with heritage. Rather than promoting passive consumption, they invite reflection on issues of preservation, representation, power dynamics, and the role of heritage in contemporary urban life. Through this lens, visitors are prompted to question and reinterpret the built environment around them.

Ultimately, Athenian observatories act as cultural acupuncture points, directing focused attention to specific locations to stimulate broader awareness, artistic response, and a more nuanced appreciation of both contemporary culture and the city's richly layered history. By fostering dialogue, creativity, and re-interpretation, they offer a proactive means of engaging with Athens' identity, interweaving its past, present, and future into an evolving urban narrative.

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