

# Tagging a WWII detention centre in Athens

## Drawing biographies on/of the walls

**Konstantinos Avramidis**

### Tagging Beyond

The Nazi troops enter Athens on April 27, 1941.<sup>1</sup> A few days later they commandeer several governmental and institutional edifices in the city centre. Among them is the imposing National Insurance Company headquarters building at 4 Korai Street, the air-raid shelter of which is turned into a Detention Centre. The Centre develops in two levels, six meters below the ground. It has four rooms on the upper level and three on the lower, the walls of which are covered with numerous well preserved graffiti written by the inmates: poems and songs, beloved and heroic figures, familiar landscapes and everyday life scenes, and, prevalently, dated signatures and names.

This short paper offers a design – and, therefore, incomplete and subjective – reading of this surprisingly underexplored space (cf. Minos, 1991). It is framed by and positioned in relation to other studies of extensively written war spaces (Backer, 2002) and prison graffiti (Wilson, 2016). The paper critically re-examines a series of architectural drawings of the Centre's dark-grey surfaces which were produced as part of my by-design doctoral thesis (Avramidis, 2018). The goal is to reconceptualise the meaning and function of the writings and the walls that host them (see also Brightenti & Kärrholm, 2019) whilst offering a design methodology to study tagging beyond the New York style expression of this repetitive mark making practice (see also Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017; Ross, 2016). The paper focuses on both the *content* and *form* of the drawings of the writings, and reflects on the methods followed for their production. It begins with the form of the drawings which raises the idea of the panorama and then moves to the content of the writings that is linked to the movement in space and the passing of time. The concept of presence – and, by extension, absence – is a central subject in the paper given its indissoluble link with tagging and writing more generally (cf. Avramidis, 2014, 2015).

### Rooms with Panoramic View

In order to document all the inscriptions of the Detention Centre, I photographically 'scanned' each room separately, as a singular continuous surface (See [Fig. 1, middle strip](#)). When I started drawing the walls, I initially used conventional architectural sections. It quickly became obvious, however, that the sections could neither show all the walls nor communicate the sense of confinement in each space. These restrictions lead me draw each room separately and represent it as an 'interior panorama.' The drawings make one wonder whether the writings aimed to transform the interior surfaces of

Konstantinos Avramidis is a Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Portsmouth. He holds a DipArch from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, an MSc in Architecture and Spatial Design from the National Technical University of Athens with distinction, and a PhD in Architecture by Design from the University of Edinburgh. He co-founded the architectural design research journal *Drawing On* and is the principal editor of *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City* (Routledge, 2017).

[konstantinos.avramidis@port.ac.uk](mailto:konstantinos.avramidis@port.ac.uk)

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to acknowledge his indebtedness to Ms Frini Papageorgiou and Ms Marianna Georgaki from the 'Korai 4: Space of Historical Memory' for providing access to the basements and the inspirational conversations we had over the course of my visits.

each room into panoramic decorative wallpapers. Of course, wallpaper panoramas are made of vivid colours and depict natural landscapes in a very realistic manner to give an illusion of the outer world. I feel that the inscriptions of the detention centre are, somehow, serving a similar purpose: they attempt to bring the outside world inside and cancel the very nature of walls.

Visual studies scholar Giuliana Bruno, in her book *Atlas of Emotion*, discusses how wallpapers in late-18<sup>th</sup> century Europe transformed the experience of interior spaces. For Bruno, panoramic wallpapers “reframed the inside as an outside” and, in a sense, they made the exterior interior (2002: 166). At the same time, these visually inviting panoramas break the limits of the walls transforming them into “windows and screens” (2002: 169). Inhabitants not only can view and experience the outside from the comfort of the inside, but are also able to project their desires on this interior universe while having the feeling they ‘own’ the exterior. As Bruno argues, this leads to the collapse of the enclosure of the interior, as the resident could be both physically inside and also mentally outside.

Bernard Comment, in his detailed study that examines the history and development of panorama structures (1999), argues that since its invention the panorama has been associated to entertainment through the illusion of escape it provided. Even though it seemingly sought to be an accurate painterly representation of reality, in fact idealised reality. The image of the outside is reinvented and reconstructed to serve the needs of the inside. Is this not what the Centre’s inscriptions try to achieve? Create a more attractive version of the outside world and bring it in? Or even, permit detainees to travel outside without leaving the dungeon? That’s the reason why inmates draw, despite their graphic abstraction, natural landscapes and idealised representations of the everyday life in Athens.

The themes of most writings are not war-related. Yet, some figurative ones depict images of the dramatic everyday life in occupied Athens: a house on fire, battleships and frigates, tanks and fight aircrafts. Prisoners also draw on the walls domestic animals (e.g., rabbit, chicken, dogs, etc.) which are extinct in occupied Athens as they are killed to be eaten by the starving population. Others carve the bright side of the world on the surfaces: blossoming flowers, portraits of their beloved ones, the places they used to live or always wanted to visit. Some others feel that the situation overwhelms them and turn to God; they pray while asking for help and forgiveness. In the Detention Centre, human needs are magnified. Inmates miss intimate erotic life, and draw nude silhouettes to keep them company. Some other prisoners, however, ‘censor’ and deface these images when they find them insulting – these often depict nude women or phalluses.

As Comment asserts, the panorama abolishes the traditional painterly frame in favour of a comprehensive, uninterrupted area of representation which aimed to “transport the spectators to different places which they took to be reality” (1999: 102). Of course, the ‘panoramas’ of Detention Centre are not giving the illusion of the whole; they are more like collages of carefully and idiosyncratically chosen parts of the outside. The inscriptions transform the walls of each room into a spontaneous series of images: a fragmented, yet no less comprehensive, representation of occupied Athens. While the shut doors and windows create an inescapable enclosure, the intimate scribed images create a new visual landscape which provides the much needed anchors for mental escapes.

Prisoners use everyday imagery of the outside world and bring it onto the walls to appropriate these spaces. This is perhaps the most basic way to resist to captivity. In so doing, the different surfaces of each room become a continuous, self-sufficient one. Yet, this does not mean that each room is isolated; quite the contrary. These ‘panoramas’ connect the interior surfaces with a series of other surfaces out there: the exterior Athenian walls, the walls of other detention centres and so on, thus suggesting a complex network.

The inscriptions transform the spaces of confinement to rooms with an idealised, invented panoramic view of occupied Athens.

## Biographies on/of the Walls

When I started examining the content of the inscriptions on the walls of the Detention Centre, I felt that I had to transform my photographic images into texts. To do so, I digitally typed the word over each inscription I could identify and decipher. I used the same font because I treated all individual writings as a collective one, but I changed the size and boldness of each word or letter in an attempt to register the dynamism of the inscriptions. Also, each word was rotated in order to grasp the trajectory of the physical inscription.

This process resulted into seven oblong (one per room), landscape format, sheets with digitally 'searchable' texts that look like concrete poems (See [Fig. 1, bottom strip](#)). In all the sheets I made a search for each individual surname and the 'texts'

started revealing association primarily within each room and, sometimes, across the spaces of the Centre: a hidden choreography of movements. In a sense, these recurring texts suggest, or rather register, peripatetic experiences in each room, which also have constant reference to the city outside. When one connects the 'dots', drawing lines between the places where the same person has left one's marks, a sort of celestial atlas reveals itself (See [Fig. 1, top strip](#)). It is as if the movements in place present the passing of time in the cell. Space and time collapse into each other: what we are left with is an unrepeatable, imagined trace. In this condition of confinement, the rooms become micro-cosmoses and the traces allow us to read the movement of time by visually reconstructing the movements in space.

On top of the photographic study, I have chosen to trace over the inscriptions while doing the same for other signs and architectural elements as well. These drawings registered the material traces of past presences and revealed the blatant absence of writings in Rooms I and II, which were not used as detention spaces, but as Nazis offices. This emphatically demonstrates that the occupiers ensured that no traces of their presence would be left behind. This is in stark contrast to the ones from the other Rooms where the traces of the inmates' existence are overwhelming. The urgency of absence of graffiti in this underground world of graffiti is more significant than the graffiti themselves.

Regardless of their content and theme, all writings are characterised by brevity. Images and graphisms, scribbled letters and misspelled words, personal names and dates, or rather, all kinds of personal stories, were inscribed on the walls. Poems, names of betrayers, wishes and requests, all co-exist on the same surface. Some prisoners aggressively offend the Occupiers and the centre's guards (e.g., "Damn those who made me be on the streets, and forced me to suffer the German laws"), some express despair about detention conditions and ask for help, while others who feel forgotten express their loneliness (e.g., "There are no friends any more, and everyone forgets you – G. Karousos").

By way of travelogues, many writings inform the viewer where do their authors came from, and how they ended up in these basements: the district – often, an Eastern one where the National Resistance Movement was very active – or the street where one got caught, and sometimes, even exact home addresses are inscribed on the Centre's surfaces (e.g., "Anastasopoulos Kostantinos, Caught 26-4-44, at Skaramaka District, at Sapotas St.") weaving a network of places, times and personal stories with constant reference to the outside world.

Prisoners invent stories with vivid colours and smells in an attempt to mentally escape from the harsh conditions of incarceration (e.g., "D. Moraitis, 24 hours without food and water. Just smelling jasmine"). In Room V – where most of the inscriptions written in foreign languages appear – inmates

*These tagged names acquire a different meaning in the context of incarceration, let alone when captivity takes place in a war situation, in a condition of occupation and, thus, of defeat*

take advantage of their time in dungeons to learn the Greek alphabet and/or train how to spell their names in Greek, thus breaking their daily routines. In the same room, others inscribe music scores and notes. In the absence of music instruments, the music can be performed only mentally.

The writings evince that all sort of people are held in the Centre – people of different age, social status, political orientation, nationality and gender. For example, it is shocking to read the inscriptions of prisoners who are juveniles, or even kids (e.g., “Tripodis Kosmas, 14 years old”). Also, some names of famous Athenians stand out. For instance, two small pencil writings that appear on two different walls in Room VI read “Petros Poulidis, War Photojournalist, 14-7-1944.” The inscriptions mirror the literate level of the times, which seems to be relatively low – except for some rare occasions of educated people with particular societal status (e.g., “Mavrikios N. Malevris, Medicine Graduate”).

The most prevalent group of writings consists of tags. In these inscriptions, we witness the primary instinct to mark presence and the primitive urge to create. In all these instances the aim is the same: stating one’s presence and marking temporality; let others know that ‘I was here’ while also measuring time in captivity. These signatures are often accompanied by other personal information (e.g., dates or places of birth, home addresses, etc.) and, even more often, followed by the dates, and even exact times, when the person enters and leaves the prison basements. These tagged names acquire a different meaning in the context of incarceration, let alone when captivity takes place in a war situation, in a condition of occupation and, thus, of defeat. By recognising specific daily routines, the detainees use walls to count their days in prison so as not to lose the sense of time. Carving the days and crossing them is key here: it is a daily marking, a marking of temporality. This repetitive, albeit always historically unique, gesture is the rawest way to categorise and document daily experience. In these basements where the notion of time is erased, the act of inscribing gives a completely new meaning to time.

## **Beyond Tagging**

Beyond their own state of confinement, the detainees dissent against the very fact that somebody occupies Athens, seizing the Athenians’ architecture to hold them within it and using architecture to restrict them from having a voice. In a detention centre where you are allowed to say nothing else besides what you’ve been taught to say when being interrogated, the margins of manoeuvre are very limited. Since you cannot say anything, what you are left with is solely your (nick)name – the tag becomes a tactile vocality embodied within the structure of the building. So, the matrix of architecture is being abused, and graffiti is bursting out of the scenes of architecture, because it has to. By writing on walls, the inmates not only mark their presence but also reconfigure their architectonic space.

Ultimately, the walls of the Centre act as both diaries – where biographical notes and personal stories are inscribed – and guest books – where ‘guests’ write when they check in and out, leaving behind a record of their experiences. In contrast to the absolute absence of traces of existence by the occupiers, these writings represent the desperate attempts of inmates to mark their presences; a single line hastily inscribed on the dark surface stands as a sign of a whole human existence – ‘I tag, therefore I am’.



## References

- Avramidis, K. (2014). Public [Ypo]graphy: Notes on Materiality and Placement. In M. Karra (Ed.), *No Respect* (pp. 85-96). Athens: Onassis Cultural Centre.
- Avramidis, K. (2015). Reading an Instance of Contemporary Urban Iconoclasm: A Design Report from Athens. *Design Journal*, 18(4): 513-534.
- Avramidis, K. (2018). *An Atlas of Athenian Inscriptions: A Book of Drawings of Writings and Writings on Drawings* (PhD Dissertation). Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Avramidis, K., & Tsilimpounidi, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City*. London: Routledge.
- Baker, F. (2002). The Red Army Graffiti in the Reichstag, Berlin: Politics of Rock-Art in a Contemporary European Urban Landscape. In G. Nash & C. Chippindale (Eds.), *European Landscapes of Rock-Art* (pp. 20-38). London: Routledge.
- Brighenti, A.M., & Kärrholm, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Urban Walls: Political and Cultural Meanings of Vertical Structures and Surfaces*. London: Routledge.
- Bruno, G. (2002). *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Minos, N. (1991). Space of Historical Memory, 1941-1944 [Horos Istorikis Mnimis, 1941-1944]. Athens: National Insurance Company. [in Greek]
- Wilson, J. (2016). Prison Inmate Graffiti. In J.I. Ross (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (pp. 61-77). London: Routledge.
- Comment, B. (1999). *The Panorama* (A. M. Glasheen, Trans.). London: Reaktion.
- Ross, J. I. (Ed.). (2016). *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. London: Routledge.