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POINTS OF YOU

Settling the differences and enabling change: toward a more inclusive management of archaeological sites in Athens

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University of Southampton

Sometimes it seems as though archaeological sites are the children of divorced parents. On one side, you have the 'parent' with 'custody' of a site (aka: the archaeological service), which has been given exclusive authority to determine what is best for the 'child'. On the other hand, you have the other 'parent'—the site's neighbouring local community. Both 'parents' love the child, albeit in different ways. They both want to protect it and provide for it in the best way possible. Sometimes, visitation rights are limited, while in other cases they are not granted at all.

In Athens today, there are far too many cases of archaeological sites witnessing 'parental' battles. Taking into account the greater socioeconomic and political situation the country is in, this comes as no surprise. In recent years, a variety of organised residents' initiatives and movements have been reclaiming the city of Athens and fighting against its neoliberal reconfiguration, both politically and spatially, in diverse and creative ways. Most importantly, the manifestation of these local mobilisations demonstrates the need to create open public spaces in a city with rapidly decreasing ones. So what happens in a city chockfull of archaeological sites that are—for the most part— accessible to the public only certain hours during the day, with specific 'rules' of engagement?

Fortunately, there is hope.

In an important decision made by the Greek Council of State in late May of 2015, the public was granted access to the Western Hills of the Acropolis at all times, reversing thus the 2008 decision set by the then Minister of Culture, which would treat the Hills as an organised archaeological site with restricted access and an imposed entrance fee.

This decision is unique for a number of reasons. Firstly, it reveals the necessity to challenge and re-evaluate existing archaeological heritage management policies. It therefore marks a distinctive opportunity to allow for a change in the way the Western Hills—and subsequently other archaeological sites in Athens—can be managed. Despite the particularity of the case (the Hills' location, their archaeological and historical multitemporality, their environmental and architectural significance, their social use as a recreational space), the Council's decision can ultimately lead to a gradual change in the way we practice public archaeology in Greece. Moreover, it is a chance to enable alternative and more inclusive approaches to the management of archaeological heritage, while additionally providing new ways in which the public perceives and engages with archaeological sites and archaeology in general.

Changes in legislation can facilitate the reappropriation of sites while simultaneously revealing their vitality and organic nature. In addition, the further integration of archaeological sites in the public's daily lives allows for these to be 'reactivated' and re-used, as they have been for centuries before the establishment of the discipline of archaeology. It will create a new discourse, one that is more tangible for modern society and not alienating as it has been for so long.

It is time to get a better 'arrangement' for both 'parents' involved. Critical reflection and active collaboration is not an easy task, but one that is necessary.

There are no readily available models to organically change the way archaeological sites, such as the Western Hills, can be managed, but this opportunity can prompt a new discussion on how to do so. The importance of the decision made by the Council of State can set a positive precedent by providing the public the rightful opportunity to participate not only in the archaeological and decision-making processes involved, but also in the 're-creation' of the city. To create new forms of culture, different ways to interact and engage with the past in the present, to produce and reveal existing alternative interpretations and significations attributed to archaeological spaces by contemporary society. Most importantly, it affirms that the ability to be a part of the management and protection of a space, of any kind, is to enable a better quality of life for oneself and for those around him/her.

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