

GRIT PALIMPSEST

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Abstract. The paper presents the preparation for the implementation of the PALIMPSEST (Post-Alphabetic, Interactive Museum using Participatory, Space-Embedded Story-Telling) project, funded by the *GRIT*-Interreg EU program. The presentation of the research group SindeFin is followed by an overview of PALIMPSEST and the theoretical background on which the project is based, making special reference to the post-alphabetic approach. The partnership involved and the multidisciplinary team are also presented as important assets of the project. Open challenges as well as specific issues and considerations regarding mainly the first phases of the project are also explained.

Keywords: Archive, Map, Urban, Museum

1 Short description

SindeFin is an open-structured research group, interested in how contemporary technologies affect the subject's relation to its surroundings. This relationship between the subject and its surroundings, which was primarily mediated by architecture in the past, is the foundation of this architecturally oriented research group. SindeFin intends to reposition and redirect architecture and its role in the contemporary world of imperceptible, constant and immediate mediations. In order to achieve this, our research group applies architectural thinking, knowledge and experience to this changing condition where relational aspects have not always been properly considered. SindeFin members are primarily academics from different disciplines and countries, as well as postdoctoral researchers and PhD candidates. The group is based on the Democritus University of Thrace, but as an open structure, as a web of dissimilar although occasionally coincident and interlinked nodes, it is a post-geographic group. [1]

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SindeFin's activity includes research programs, architectural competitions, publications, exhibitions and the organization of multidisciplinary seminars, workshops and various events.

Lately, SindeFin is involved in the implementation of PALIMPSEST, a GRIT INTERREG project, funded under Priority Axis 2 – Integrated Environmental Management. The project focuses on how cultural heritage assets can be reinserted in the city through digital technologies, storytelling and artistic interpretation. It is focused on the regions of Epirus, Greece and Puglia, Italy. PALIMPSEST addresses the common challenge of promoting tourism in less-developed areas by animating the public space in urban areas and recuperating cultural heritage assets through bottom-up, participatory procedures and artistic interventions.

PALIMPSEST will develop an in-situ, localized archive of story-telling assets, which will lead to an interactive and immaterial open-air museum experience in the public space of the city.

The project is set out in separate but interconnected phases. As a starting point, cultural heritage assets regarding the city's stories and legends will be gathered by transgenerational participation, as elementary school pupils will seek information from elder people, whose knowledge of the past is on the verge of becoming extinct. The next phase is about the creation of a MAP in an APP format, which will pinpoint the previously collected data and will support any further collection by online participation. The elaboration of the collected material will then lead to artistic installations that will be implemented in the city and will be activated by visitors creating a dreamlike atmosphere.

PALIMPSEST aims to transform the experience of public space in urban areas into a museistic, story-telling, interactive, thematic condition, which will revive the city and attract high quality tourism.

2 Overview

PALIMPSEST is based on a theoretical understanding of our post-alphabetic era, described by McLuhan [2] decades ago. Digital technologies alter the alphabetic understanding of our world, which is based on vision and control, and bring about an immersive, multi-sensorial, participative approach, which is nevertheless distinct to the pre-alphabetic one, as the traces of the alphabetic era are still present and its characteristics still remain operative in a certain level. Our post-alphabetic world is a hybrid, where dipoles are no longer distinct and separate, where control and regulation is no longer possible, but at the same time, where immersion is actually the re-immersion of a long-separated and previously detached subject.

¹ Post-geographic, as no longer having a geographical basis and as described by William Gibson in "Pattern Recognition"(2003), when introducing the fictional agency Blue Ant (Chapter I, p. 6): "Relatively tiny in terms of permanent staff, globally distributed, more post-geographic than multinational, the agency has from the beginning billed itself as a high-speed, low-drag life-form in an advertising ecology of lumbering herbivores."

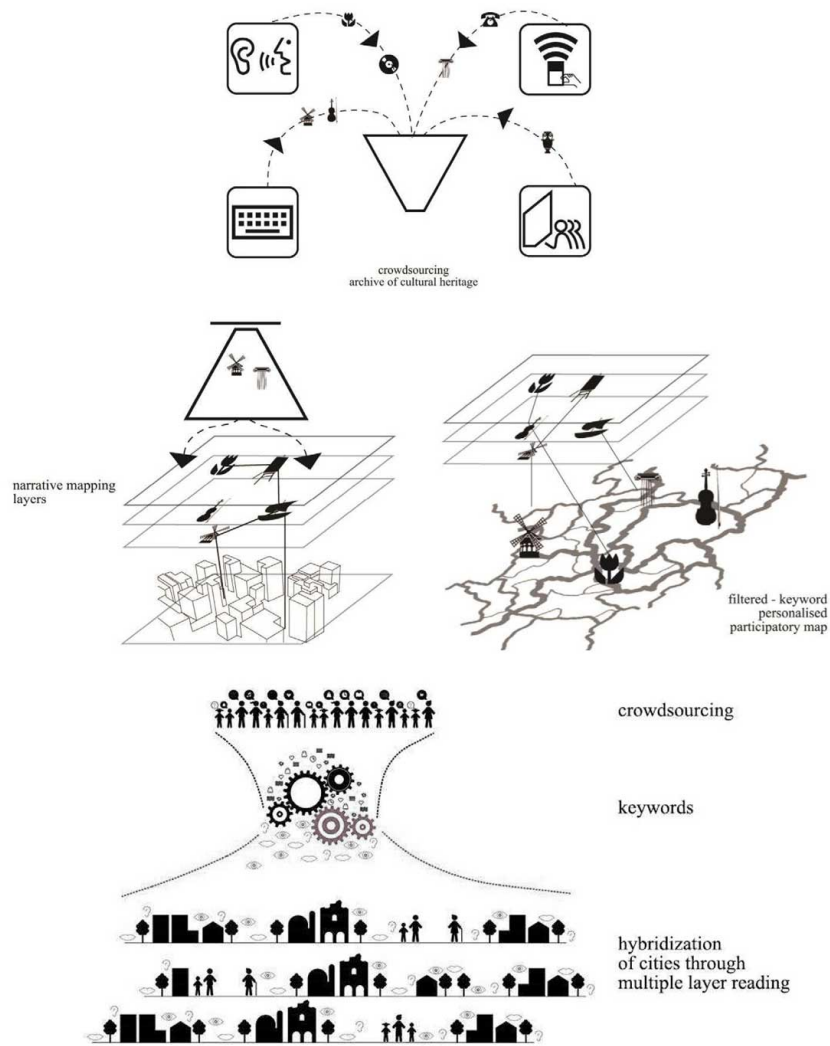
Therefore, PALIMPSEST attempts a hybridization of the public space of the city, using cultural heritage assets; this hybridization webs together dipoles previously understood as opposite and creates a new condition where past and present coexist, where digital and physical coincide, where scientific truth and fiction intermingle, where spectators and protagonists can constantly interchange roles. The palimpsest of the city is a metaphor for the layers of data of the pasts that have been buried and concealed. The people will be able to engage with the museum through participatory practices. All the data collected through these practices will be used in different interpretations of the city. These interpretations will undoubtedly be one-sided and biased, as in the post-alphabetic world no unique historic truth and no objective reality can be possible.

PALIMPSEST rethinks the Museum as an architectural typology of the modern, alphabetic era that places the subject in front of the world; and it proposes, instead, an interactive, immersive experience, where the subject, both activator and actor, is the initiator and part of the non-static, non-frontal, non-objectified, surrounding scenes. The previously passive subject in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* [3] has progressively been accustomed in a predefined interaction through social media and gaming. In PALIMPSEST the experience is augmented, as physical and digital coexist and as the bodily perception and interaction is included allowing the subject to live a more holistic and complete experience.

PALIMPSEST has a thematic approach, it creates a spectacular experience of the city, but at the same time it engages artists who instigate and reinterpret situations, in which the visitor is not a passive recipient but a participant, an agent. Along the same line, PALIMPSEST is a hybrid between spectacle and thematization practices on one hand and on the other, an art-driven, situationists' approach regarding the subject and its relation to the city

PALIMPSEST aims to re-engage the city's habitants by collecting and organizing, or, in other words, interpreting information about the city's past. It is focused on the informal history of the city, a history which is told through personal descriptions and subjective story-telling. The representation of the city in the MAP and APP format recreates the layered representation of the actual palimpsest, which every city has as a base, although it is often ignored and forgotten. Consequently, the reactivation of the palimpsest in the MAP and APP changes the habitants' mental representation of the urban public space. It offers a possibility to strengthen the connection among past and future generations through sharing common experiences. As a result, it enhances the experience of public space, which as Hannah Arendt observed is configured as what we share with those that came before and those that will come after [4].

Schematic Diagrams of the three stages



3 Partnership

The University Of Ioannina School Of Fine Arts is the lead beneficiary of this project. The cross-border partnership includes the Region of Epirus as beneficiary, the Municipality of Ioannina as Associated Partner and also involves two Italian partners as beneficiaries, the University of Bari and the Province of Lecce.

The team includes members from different fields of study, such as installation artists, architects, graphic designers, computer engineers, educators and ethnologists, who have to work together, go beyond their area of expertise and, at the same time, bring along their particular vision in the project. Because of the multidisciplinary nature of the team it is important to establish unobstructed and open communication but also to ensure a common language where nothing is taken for granted, to achieve a level of understanding of each other's interests and also to reach a certain grade of sharing of envisioning and of the responsibility for the project.

So far, it has been noted that there are certain difficulties in the interaction among those who have the *know-how* and those who *know-what* and have to apply this *know-how* in order to realize it. The lack of programming knowledge on behalf of the majority of artists and architects deprives the group of a common language upon which to build their interaction. Nevertheless, other languages are used for intragroup communication; the story-telling capacity of the members in charge of content, as well as their capacity to produce images that depict the foreseen implementation, serve as cushion that mitigates other deficiencies.

The diversity regarding the team members' backgrounds and areas of expertise can bring about difficulties that the group must overcome; at the same time, this diversity is crucial to achieving a positive outcome. The lack of common ground in regard to methodologies and working procedures gives the opportunity to re-think and re-invent processes that were, up until now thought as self-evident and taken for granted.

Having public administration sectors as partners in both countries can also prove to be a very fruitful experience. It is not a rare occurrence for academic researchers to drift away from practical, pragmatic and utilitarian approaches, and public administration partners can aid to refocusing on implementation and therefore enrich the project and facilitate its growth. It is needless to say that when it comes to these types of partnership it is, once again, crucial to establish a common language and a mutual understanding of priorities regarding actions and courses of action.



4 Open challenges

PALIMPSEST has just started and at the moment, there are various open challenges. First of all, the partners are determined to work together closely and avoid a rather common practice in this sort of cross-border collaborations, which is to work in parallel but independently in each country. Joining forces instead of dividing tasks, even if there are practical complications, seems to be a more intelligent approach, allowing interaction and mutual growth. Administrative and procedural divergences constitute a first level of obstacles that has to be tackled.

Moreover, as described above, the multidisciplinary of the group raises certain challenges. The main challenge is to configure an open-ended, authentically hybrid approach, where collaboration is not based neither in entirely discretizing tasks and responsibilities nor in totally mingling them, but rather in finding ways to create pervasion without dissolution.

Since orality is an important characteristic of the post-alphabetic approach of PALIMPSEST, language is one of the issues that have to be considered. The oral testimonials are expected to be in the maternal language of the habitants. The APP should work in both Italian and Greek, in order to be accessible to habitants of both countries, but also in English, since PALIMPSEST is destined to work primarily for tourists, especially in relation to the implementation of artistic installations in the city and the open-air interactive Museum. Interpretation is a key-concept for the overall approach and, as a consequence, translation is not only a conceptual, but moreover a rather practical problem.

Along the same line, the tagging and layering of the collected information is also an important issue. At the very beginning of the project, a certain framework will be provided. This framework will be based on layering time periods and content. In a later stage, users will have to be able to upload their own content, tag it and pinpoint it on the map. On the other hand, using the information collected by the engaged public in a successful and satisfactory way depends a lot on the selection of proper aggregating tools. Administrators are understood as an obstacle because they represent a level of control to the immediate, orally created archive; still, there is a need for regulation of the infinite tagging options and the consequent layering, which has to be limited by the aggregators used.

Open access in the MAP and APP may also present issues of content control, which cannot be tackled easily and may undermine the accessibility and the openness of the database. Maintenance is also an important issue as the MAP and APP should continue existing after the program has ended. At the moment, it is argued that maybe the engaged public could progressively gain an administrator's role after having demonstrated responsible and efficient involvement and even form some kind of collectivity, which will work together with the local government in order to regulate the MAP and APP in the future.

The selected strategy of collecting data engenders this sort of issues as, on one hand, it is aimed to be free and completely open to all but on the other, it represents a certain institutional understanding of what is proper and adequate for publishing and sharing and what should be limited, excluded and even banned. The oral, immersive, pre-alphabetic world and the written, theoretical, alphabetic world coexist in the post-

alphabetic world, which, as a hybrid, sometimes hosts struggles for perseverance. PALIMPSEST opts for this post-alphabetic approach, this blended condition where dipoles coexist but not always peacefully, acknowledging that balance and harmony, in other words, relational union (from the Greek word «αϋμός»), is not always easy to achieve.

Issues regarding the implementation of the open-air Museum in the city have not yet been confronted, but are expected to be focused in three distinct aspects: security, transparency and avoidance. Security issues concern the placement and the installation of equipment in the public urban space in such a way that there is protection from vandalism and appropriation, as well as protection from weather related or other damage. To assure the protection of the equipment from all possible dangers, it is important that the equipment is placed in secure sites and that it remains inaccessible and even invisible to the public. Transparency is therefore important for the security of the equipment but it is also crucial for the suspension of disbelief [5], a critical issue for narratives and story-telling strategies. The equipment must be invisible and transparent for the engaged public in order to allow the experience of a dreamlike atmosphere without revealing its existence and therefore suspending the suspension of disbelief. Avoidance is also an important issue, since on one hand the residents should not be exposed to constant encounters with the installations and on the other, visitors are not supposed to experience the same scenes repeatedly. Therefore, it is important that the engaged public will only be able to activate the installations using the APP, using geolocation systems. This way, the installations will remain fully invisible and seemingly non-existent for those who are not participating. Still, certain low-tech details, the ones that will not be easily distinguished from everyday reality in the city, might remain operative, as a kind of teaser for the overall experience.

Finally, the overall issue to consider is the uninterrupted construction of a common, fluid atmosphere that will include the artistic installations in the city and the representations of the city as a MAP in the APP. It is imperative that this world-making is coherent and efficient in order to allow visitors to live their experience of immersion in this hybrid condition intensely. It is also imperative that this dream-like condition is periodically but constantly renovated and not stabilized and fixated in order to avoid becoming a historical, non-operative, frozen palimpsest where there can be no more inscriptions and therefore continuance. Grit, as tenacity but also as perseverance is a vital and determining issue for PALIMPSEST, which is planted rather than implemented in the city and which depends on its grit in order to continue accumulating new layers and inscriptions.



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