

# TELL US A STORY

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the social impact of culture

## **Title of the project:**

UrbanDig Project: “Dourgouti Island Hotel”

## **Please describe your action/project**

“Dourgouti Island Hotel” is an “UrbanDig Project”, developed by the NPO “Ohi pezoume”, that combines performing arts with community mapping practices. The starting point as well as the festive finale of each UrbanDig Project is a site-specific performance born by the rich material that derives from a palette of collective actions.

For more than a year, we had been collecting the neighborhood’s “secrets”, attempting to “dig” under the visible urban mosaic towards its invisible layers and beyond the “formal” visible narratives. The emerging methodological tools of “UrbanDig Project”, hope to contribute to a bottom-up alternative reading of the urban space and its cultural capital.

Keeping the site-specific performance as a central sparkle and a final goal, many collective actions take place, organized with and by the neighborhood, cultivating a sense of community and activating horizontal cross-sectoral networks. Six methodological axes form six working groups: oral history; historical mapping; sensory mapping; skill/interests mapping; community aspirations/challenges mapping; mapping of cultural and sports activity. These six working groups employ parallel process tools, organising festivals, walking tours, workshops, creating a neighbourhood website and a walking tour app, making links to institutions, the academia, cultural foundations, international networks and the EU Culture program.

The data derives from the community and is reattributed back to it through processes (festivals, performance, archive, sustainability of working groups, renewable website) that encourage an opening beyond its limits, inviting visitors to become familiar and part of it.

## **Tell us something more about your project/activity:**

### **Content**

“Dourgouti Island Hotel” was an UrbanDig Project that “dug” into the urban space. It collected, evaluated and managed personal and collective narratives in order to construct a unique city *map* beyond the visible urban mosaic. Interestingly, this *map* soon received multiple notions in the sense that it served as a performative scenario, as an overlap of different images of the neighbourhood, as an historical archive, as a unique invitation to external visitors (walking tour app) and as a tool for community engagement for certain collective activism. In this sense, the project managed to create an inseparable combination among physical space, art and technology, providing different approaches to place making.

The space of action is the neighbourhood; its residents and communities. Artists, scholars, researchers, students and pupils interact with the community; revealing its social and cultural capital, creating a rich archive and active cross-sectoral networks. The newborn city-map is socially constructed by the skills, the actions, the inscriptions and erasures, the memory and oblivion of the local actors. The map’s spots, nodes and paths can be both real and imaginary, producing a new “geography”. This new “geography” is actually a “reading” from high up that lets art, urbanism, technology and other aspects go beyond their defined limits and enter the realm of collective space and action.

### **Duration**

from 08/2014/ to 11/2015

### **Location**

Dourgouti – Neos Kosmos, Athens, Greece

### **Field/discipline**

Performing Arts and Community Mapping

## **Tell us something about who did it: individual(s), organization(s), formal, informal, their numbers, their role/skills, etc.**

“Dourgouti Island Hotel” involved many and multiple actors within its actions. In more than 110 days of actions, more than 630 individuals took part in the activities, apart from the informal presence of the actions' audience. Moreover, a cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary network of people, who worked in mixed groups involved inhabitants, professors, artists, students, scholars and friends of the neighborhood. Additionally, research partners (university departments, scholars and the Clio Muse team for the walking tour app), artistic partners (e.g. Hotel Obscura) and foundations (e.g. EU Culture, NEON foundation, Kostopoulos Foundation) played a vital role in all steps of the project. Finally, in the site-specific promenade performance that constituted the project's festive finale, 67 performers and production collaborators took part, making this performance a unique experience for inhabitants and visitors. For more, regarding the UrbanDig and Dourgouti Island Hotel community, please see <http://www.dourgouti.gr/#!/community/coww>

## **Tell us something about the people who in your view received the most significant impact: who were they? How many of them?**

What was really significant in “Dourgouti Island Hotel” was the fact that it managed to involve actors of various age/discipline with different “motivations” and build improbable partnerships: From researchers to everyday inhabitants and from the international artists' group and the performers to the university students and activists. “Dourgouti Island Hotel” was not about a top-down “change”. Different actors managed to operate in an unbreakable whole, each for their own reason but towards a common research goal that was loosely shaped by the project and was specifically defined through each research group's process.

Between the 630 collaborators of the program, there were:

- a. many individuals not belonging in a group, a team or an association (40%)
- b. members of local community and informal groups (20%)
- c. members of private companies (9%)

- d. members of church (1%)
- e. members of public sector and academic institutions (30%).

Meeting with each other and working together, these artists, scientists, students, researchers or simply interested people created awareness of the multiple sectors and forms of action.

### **Selection of short stories carrying traces of the project's impact:**

- a. Two local cultural/community groups working with children, despite the proximity of their local offices (200 m) did not know what each does and first collaborated with each other during the program.
- b. A geographer expert in digital mapping continues collaboration with a local community group, after their partnership in a research group within the program.
- c. The project became mostly popular to people in the age range around 20's (university students), 40's and 70's, bringing these different generations on the same table.
- d. With the involvement of students from 4 universities, the project resulted in about 300 course projects including some master and doctoral thesis. Many of these projects were presented to the neighborhood who, for the first time, had a direct dialogue with academics on their issues, during a local conference organized by the program.
- e. 8 local high school students were invited to AltoFest, an art festival in Napoli, after impressing festival programmers who visited Dourgouti activities. Local primary and secondary school students presented their Dourgouti work in conferences, one impressing their professions for their presentation skills that are absent in the classroom.
- f. Residents of all ages expressed their views in interviews and collectively written articles about the neighborhood both in the press and in publications such as the Onassis Foundation Atlas of Athens where Dourgouti Island Hotel was invited to contribute.
- g. Residents of all ages worked with international scholars and artists during open workshops of the Dourgouti Island Hotel process (e.g. geographer Dr. Martin Phillips from Leicester University, artistic groups GK from France and Triage from Australia).

- h. The activities of the program took place both at public spaces rarely visited and in local cultural/sport organizations in need of more visibility which, through these partnership, was achieved.
- i. The local Oral History Research Group and a local community group dealing with current neighborhood issues were both initiated as a result of the neighborhood reactivation during Dourgouti Island Hotel Project.
- j. The neighborhood's cultural richness and current cultural activity was communicated in at least 12 cities worldwide either in conferences / workshops or through partners abroad, as an example of the dynamism of crisis Athens at neighborhood level.

## **Was the impact planned from the start?**

“Dourgouti Island Hotel”'s research phase constitutes of an array of field activities for cultural mapping, open workshops and improbable/innovative partnerships between residents, artists, scientists and researchers. It is against the project's philosophy to plan the impact, as the impact is on the hands of the participants of the project's bottom-up processes, workshops and groups formed in the project.

What an UrbanDig Project plans are the conditions to create a most fertile ground for fruitful and disruptive impacts.

## **Tell us something about the context: recent history, social, economic and cultural features**

Dourgouti is a “place of transit” in Neos Kosmos, Athens. It has hosted refugees and migrants from different origins and historical contexts since 1922 until today. The first to inhabit the neighborhood were Armenian refugees and refugees from Asia Minor, who lived in flimsy constructions, some of which gave their place to newly built Bauhaus blocks of flats in the 30's. Together with internal Greek migrants, these refugees composed a unique urban islet that hosted a diverse yet harmonic community. During the Nazi occupation, in 1944, Dourgouti became a place of resistance, 150 men were executed by the Nazi army there. The end of war and the new era for Greece changed the image of the neighborhood in the late 60's, when the military regime (junta) replaced the flimsy

constructions with 15 newly-built modern block of flats and dispersed the neighborhood and eliminated its dynamism through its re-inhabitation plan.

Dourgouti remains a “place of transit”, where people from Macedonia, Epirus and Pontus enriched the diverse population in contemporary times. Nowadays, economic migrants from the East give a new nuance to this unique “place of transit”, while Dourgouti turns over a next historical page within the urban context. This interesting farrago in terms of population, creates a small urban islet in terms of cultural and social features, too. An attractive urban web, full of memories, smells and sounds that becomes a unique journey in a labyrinthine yet warm environment.

## **Tell us what were your expected results and the actual ones**

The expected results of Dourgouti Island Hotel were:

- a. The production of a site-specific performance that people would connect with. Fortunately it was also an actual result.
- b. The creation of cross-field mapping/research groups. This was an actual result. Although not necessary, we would have liked that there was a higher score of sustainability of these groups (i.e that these groups would continue to exist after the project). One in three groups continued but a new group was formed, a community group dealing with current issues, that was not “an expected result”.
- c. The production of live/digital activities to present/collect information about the local cultural capital. The actual result far exceeded the expected one, as the number of activities produced were 400% in quantity of what was initially expected. This happened due to the increased involvement and creativity of people (much more than what expected).
- d. Place making: More than 4000 visitors came to the previously mostly unknown historically and culturally important neighborhood during the project’s activities. While this result was expected, the high visibility through press and through conferences was not expected and was largely welcomed in the process, as we largely turned it into a tool for local expression, for residents to express and present their own work.

## **Tell us something about the most relevant resource inputs of your project/action: human, financial, organization, time**

More or less, Dourgouti Island Hotel is a project based on voluntary hard work. Volunteerism was not asked for. The whole program was offered as a joyful / interesting past-time to the neighbors. Students, researchers and artists had each their own purpose and personal motive. A participants' skills/interests map was slowly created so as to increase efficiency of open calls for the various activities. The research groups that were most active in defining their own research agenda (rather than sticking to the general instructions from us) were those who carried the enthusiasm til the end of the program and beyond. Few sections of the program were financially supported by NEON and Kostopoulos foundations and the EU Culture program.

## **Tell us how you have attained the main change: challenges, innovation, obstacles, brilliant solutions, turning points, quantum leaps, etc.**

The need for art and the central motivation to conceive and realize a performance soon turned out to be a powerful key to unlock several doors and enter “personal space”. To put that simply, the artistic identity of the project was a trustful “answer” to the often anxious question “who are you?”. In this context, while the main challenge has been to engage the real actors of the neighborhood to the project, the artistic nature of our team managed to be the agent of trust and encourage people to embrace its process. However, nothing would have happened the way it did if we hadn't a constant presence in the neighborhood in order to build strong bonds with people and share their moments, memories and place. In this sense, community engagement has been a continuous open bet to win. Moreover, in the center of our philosophy has always been collective research through horizontally structured groups. This way, the vital bridges among multidisciplinary networks opened the floor to significant expertise and methodology. But to sustain horizontal structures is a complicated and long process that we could have spent more time and energy on.

Another crucial and fun challenge has been to form sustainable mapping processes throughout the 18 months of the program. We designed open activities (interactive walks and tours, interactive festivals and workshops) that always served a triple goal: to enrich the maps of local cultural capital, to demonstrate results to broader audiences (place making) and to be festive and fun. This triple nature was the innovative element of our research, the fuel of enthusiasm for the volunteers and an agent of sustainability of our

work's impact. Due to its fun nature, this field research process lasted longer and addressed more people (of all ages, backgrounds, languages etc.). It also created products (apps, festivals) that continue to exist.

Sustainability is a most interesting challenge. It is not our project's goal but it is definitely a desired outcome. All material has been reattributed to the community, while working-groups have the fuels to function independently after the end of the project. Community members are now in charge of the webpage showing these maps, of the content of these maps etc. Whether their involvement will last long and what UrbanDig can do to further support these community members who continue is always an issue.

**Tell us the main area of impact of your project, i.e. a permanent or long lasting change in attitudes, awareness, behavior, conditions, economic status, income, occupation, perception, practice, quality of life, self-esteem, skills, social relations, etc. and for whom.**

Apart from some stories that demonstrate the impact of the project, it is too early to safely measure impact in Dourgouti. It is safe to argue, however, that something has changed or better than some things are not the same. Basically, the neighborhood had the chance to experience collective action and tell its unique, mostly unspoken stories, creating in parallel a rich and open archive. Such a process functioned as a valuable "mirror" for those who wanted to see themselves in a collective context. In this sense, gathering, sharing, narrating and acting are some of the main points that define the area of our project's impact. Zooming-in, we could also note some more particular points. Firstly, Dourgouti has its own renewable archive that can be also shared and exposed in its renewable website. Secondly, a walking tour app and a community managed website give the chance to visitors to experience some of the neighborhood's stories. Thirdly, the oral history group, one of the local groups formed after an invitation by our program, has the know-how and the motivation to keep up the work and enrich their archive. Fourthly, a skills/interest map of the participating neighbors offers the chance to everybody to easily get in contact with their neighbor for future activities. However, the above can only be perceived as a fruitful yet germinal raw material. The ways this raw material will be further developed are open. In any way, one step closer to a sense of community has been made.



## **Which is the Big Idea behind your project/action?**

The Big Idea behind our project is to tackle the need for art, while suggesting that art is not a sterilised process but an ongoing, continuously unfinished “reporting from the front” of the (un-)measurable, the (in-)visible, the (un-)real. Realizing that, we employ our need for site-specific content to form the foundation of community programs researching the cultural capital of a neighborhood, bringing people from various ages, backgrounds and disciplines together. Not to put them into the artistic process but to simply offer them the platform to research and manage their own “wealth”. Our goal to use this material and experience as inspiration for our performance is as modest as each participant’s personal agenda into collaborating into this collective cultural mapping. The process and outcome can be of great importance as they suggest a bottom-up alternative to urban cultural capital management and mostly, as they create improbable/innovative bridges between artists, scientist, researchers, simple residents, students of all ages, people of all backgrounds. We, as artists, become the ambassadors of trust for this bridge-building. What can be more fitting for an artist to do nowadays beyond (or through) his/her art?

**Please, send this document to [stories@cultureactioneurope.org](mailto:stories@cultureactioneurope.org)**

**If you have photos, videos, documents, reports, data, presentations about the project and its impacts, send them to [stories@cultureactioneurope.org](mailto:stories@cultureactioneurope.org) (please provide summary English translation for material in other languages).**

Please note that stories can be about old/discontinued projects.

We appreciate mid-long term impacts.

Our ideal projects should involve a certain degree of continuity and duration.

At the present stage, we prefer not to include occasional and short events. We can consider short events if regularly staged (e.g.: a three-day festival or a special day that takes place every year in the same place).

We like success stories, but failure stories can also be very useful.

Significant differences between planned and unplanned impacts are also worth telling.

