

RESEARCH

The Fluid Geography of Rubbish: An Analysis of the Patras Refugee Camp (1999–2009)

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The city of Patras, Greece, is a major station of contemporary refugee routes from Asia to Europe. Consequently, the city port frequently becomes a battleground between police and refugees trying to board the ships to Italy. Between 1999 and 2009, in a seaside area of the city, a large makeshift camp (of ~4000 inhabitants) was created by the refugees. This small ‘town’ had a square, streets and even a ‘mosque’. The building materials were found in waste from all over the city.

With the garbage of the city being the only source of materials for the refugees, (both for building and eating), a social debate started in the local media. Is it legal or illegal for rubbish to be used in this way? To whom does the garbage ‘belong’? Are the refugees ‘waste people’? Should the police organize a “clean sweep” operation to pick them up?

In this work, we analyze the geographical origin and spread of the waste sources to the camp. Through photographic analysis and geographic documentation, we identify the main categories of garbage used in the refugee camp. Furthermore, we attempt to analyze the public ideological debate on the concept of ‘waste’. In 2009, an arson burned down the refugee camp and the ruins were removed as rubbish. However, before the camp was destroyed, the concept of waste in the public debate had been extended in such a way that even some people, the refugees, were included.

Keywords: garbage; geography; Patras city; refugee camp; trashify; garbage town

Introduction

In the recent years, the concept of waste has been studied by technical sciences on one hand, and the social sciences and geography on the other. The former aim to analyze the role of waste in production (Norton 1989), the management of its residual value as a source of wealth (waste management) (Tchobanoglous et al. 1993; Wilson 2007), as well as the rational development of cities with zero waste load (recycling management) (Wilson et al. 2006). The latter study the fluid/shifting concept of waste through the spatial relations of the modern city (Lyons 2007), but also through its political/ethical dimension (Reno 2018). Waste is an ‘ideal type’ which cuts through the technical and social sciences: on one hand, because its management as an object (of value or no value), raises a host of legal, ethical and philosophical questions beyond the technical discussion, such as ‘to whom does waste belong?’ (Pongrácz & Pohjola 2004); on the other, because it consists one of the fundamental factors of exchange which form the grid of spatial relations in a city – in other words, it is an element of what David Harvey defines as ‘urbanization’ (Harvey 1996; 1990).

In the present work, we analyze some special cases of the concept of waste, and in particular the process of

‘Trashify’ (turning-into-waste), through a case study. The phenomenon which characterizes, the process that we call trashification, emerged acutely in the years of the world financial crisis, which broke out in the USA in 2008 (Crotty 2009) and spread to the rest of the planet. As we will see, the public discussion developed in the context of the recent crisis contributed to the expansion of the concept of waste upon objects which were hitherto not covered by it. Of course, the financial crisis is only indirectly connected with the topic of waste which we examine here. We consider these introductory remarks necessary a) because the crisis in the commercial real estate prices contributed to the development of a public vocabulary which extended the concept of waste to objects of high use value and b) because we trace a specific, economic aspect in the process of ‘trashification’, which we will analyze in the following.

The US housing bubble of 2008, which culminated with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers (Swedberg 2010), triggered a chain reaction: the inability of home-owners to finance the housing loans which they had received without sufficient guarantees, led to a rapid drop in the value of the Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs), which were financed by the money flow coming from the repayment of the aforementioned loans. This sent the value of the Credit Default Swaps (CDS) soaring and decreased the house market values which had been steadily increasing up that point. In this way, a ‘perfect storm’ was created,

since the houses were abandoned, not only by the owners who could not finance their loan repayments, but also by those owners who could pay. The latter had no interest in doing so, since the remaining loan value to be repaid was larger than the current market value of the house. This situation created myriads of idle modern houses with almost zero value (much lower than the cost of their construction), as oversupply pushed the prices down. In the public discussions of the time, both the finance-based CDOs as well as the houses themselves were routinely called 'trash' (Behera et al. 2010) or 'toxic waste' (Foster 2008), while even Alan Greenspan, the head of the Federal Reserve for decades, is rumored to have said (half jokingly) in a phone conversation with his successor Ben Bernanke that 'the housing market is full of garbage. There are too many houses and that is why the prices are so low. The government should bomb them'.¹ Consequently, a completely new vocabulary emerged worldwide, which broadened and transformed the concept of waste into completely new forms. One could claim that the use of the concept of waste in the vocabulary of the crisis is a simply a metaphor. As we will attempt to demonstrate, this is not entirely the case, as the term encapsulates a more 'real', material dimension.

The housing crisis experience created an interesting paradox related to the concept of waste. The rapid drop in real estate prices due to overproduction (Milios 1994), turned the houses themselves in to 'trash', despite the fact that their use value remained intact and the existence of millions of people in need of housing (potential demand). A second paradox is related to the concept of 'toxic waste'. The mere existence of such an object next to others is considered 'toxic' (a term borrowed from chemistry) because its presence in the market decreases the value of the other, 'non-toxic' (or 'healthy') objects. This is an oddity, since the new concept of waste, created in the crisis dictionary, does not agree with the traditional concept of waste, which could be summarized as follows: *waste is created when objects lose their commercial and use value due to their use, and only retain a residual value as materials*. For example, a used milk box or a cigarette filter turns into waste when their usefulness is exhausted. In the case we are discussing here, however, a fully usable object (the house) turns into toxic waste, i.e something that turns other houses into waste, simply because it loses its exchange/commercial value (and only that).

The concept of 'trashification' which we discuss in this chapter, describes a process which broadens the discussion around the concept of waste and can be summarized as follows: *trashification, the conversion of an object into waste, is a process during which the object loses (rapidly or gradually) its commercial/exchange value, but not necessarily its use value*. We claim that this process, which seems a bit paradoxical and yet obeys the rationality of the goods market, is not a deterministic process, but is also shaped by social and ideological factors, such as trends, stereotypes, racial prejudice, and so on.

To support this view, we will present the study of a case which we were fortunate to study with field-based

research: a migrant camp which gradually developed in the city of Patras (Greece) between 1999 and 2009.

Methodology and Data

To analyze the particular case and connect it with the contemporary concept of trashification, we applied the following methodology: we collected primary evidence from photographs, drawings and information from the refugee camp and the surrounding areas. We further tried to locate and record the origins of materials used in the camp. Through conversations with the refugees and members of volunteer organizations, we recorded the food supply sources of the camp. We recorded in detail the construction materials of the shacks, as well as the methods of their construction and the 'logic' of their functionality. Through the topographic survey of the camp, we attempted to study the design and functional logic of this small garbage-town. All primary material (photographs, drawings, information) was collected by us from 2006 to 2008 (a period during which we offered voluntary educational work in the camp) with the consent of the refugees. Supplementary photographic material was provided by the photographer George Poutachidis, and supplementary information, drawings and plans were provided by the architecture researchers Roula Kouvara and Ernestina Karystinaiou Efthymiatou.

To correlate the concept of waste and the development of public discourse, we indexed articles from newspapers and news sites of the city of Patras. For this purpose, we used the public newspaper archive of the Press Museum² (PM), the 'Peloponnese' newspaper archive (PNA), as well as the historical book of Vassilis Ladas (Ladas 2008, 2016) which contains a full list of newspaper titles during the period of our study.

In order to understand the correlation of the collected data, as well as the social character of the public dispute, with the refugee garbage-town, we deemed necessary a brief chronicle of the camp development. While this chronicle may seem rather 'journalistic' in style, we hope that it will help the reader understand the aforementioned correlations.

The goal of our methodology has been, on one hand to produce schematic depictions related to our case study (map of the camp, position relative to the city, spatial relationships, material routes, food supplies, shack drawings etc.), and on the other to draw conclusions on the evolution of garbage-related concepts through the temporal and spatial evolution of the public dispute about the refugee garbage-town.

Case study: the refugee 'garbage' town of Patras

The city of Patras is one of the main hubs (as also the alternative Balkan Route) for the migration flows from the Middle East towards Western Europe (Donini et al. 2016; Šantić et al. 2017) (**Figure 1**). Its cargo port (Pantouvakis 2006), through which hundreds of trucks and containers travel daily towards Italian ports (Bari, Brindisi, Ancona, Venice), consists one of the main passages of

illegal migration. The discontinuous flow of the trafficking networks, the blockage of alternative routers, as well as the increasing demand for transportation, create an accumulation of a large number of migrants around the port, who try to secretly slide into the trucks and ships (Spinthourakis 2011).

Already at the end of the '90s, a makeshift camp of ~200–300 inhabitants were created by migrants (mainly of Kurdish origin) in a marshland near the port. Most of them lived in improvised shacks made of carton and wood; and tried daily to enter the ships.

After the start of the war in Afghanistan (7/10/2001), a rapidly rising wave of Afghan refugees arrived in Europe in search for asylum (Schuster 2011). It mostly consisted of young men (15–30 years old) without particular

education, carrying very little money. Two of the main migration routes they followed (**Figure 1**) intersected at Patras. This resulted in a continuous increase of migrants in the city (Habit 2010). The small makeshift camp close to the port started to grow and reached a population of ~1500 inhabitants at its peak. Below we describe some of the main features of this settlement.

Location

For the their camp, the migrants chose a location next to the Milichos river (**Figure 2**) for several reasons. The first reason was the access to drinking water thanks to the river. Of course, the river flow is quite weak and has a high clay concentration, while it dries out during the summer months. However, this was the only place where migrants



Figure 1: Main migration routes from Afghanistan to Western Europe and Patra's location.

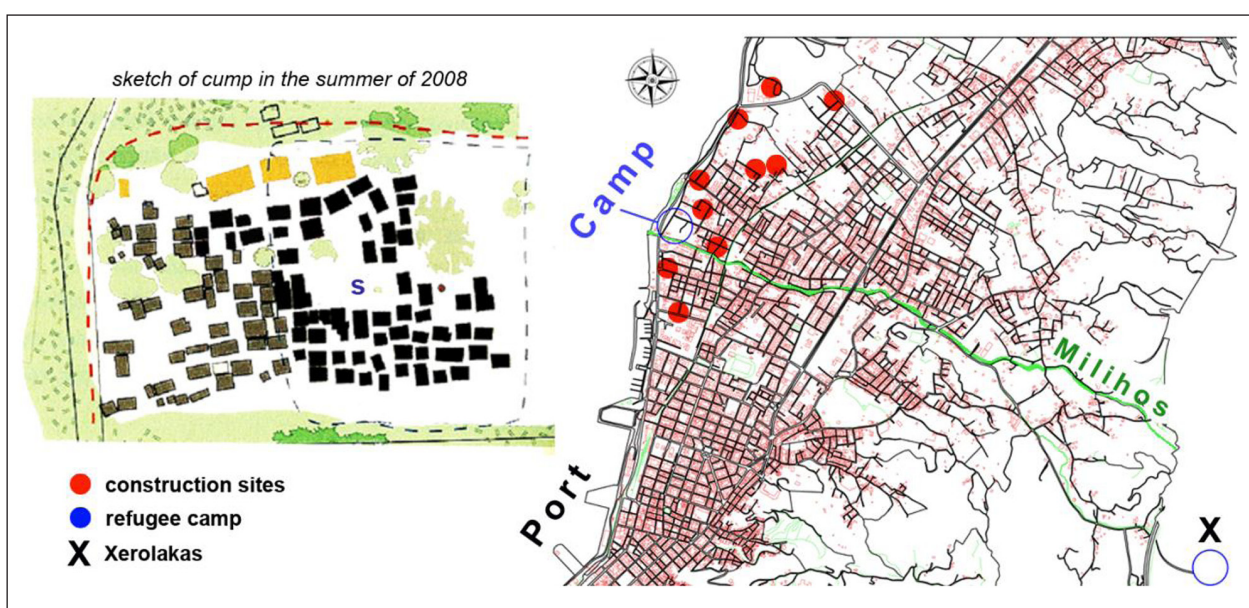


Figure 2: (right) Location map of the refugee camp beside the Milichos river (left) sketch of the arrangement of the dwellings in the summer of 2008.

could drink water and wash without paying. The second reason was that the area was only a few hundred meters away from the port, which was the main escape route of the migrants. The third reason had to do with the ownership status of the area. According to the urban plan,³ that plot of land was planned to become a public square. Therefore, there was no private owner to evict the migrants. However, there were owners and real-estate developers of newly built, modern apartment buildings nearby, who were protesting since they believed that the presence of the camp would contribute to lowering the prices of their real estate.

Construction materials

Up until the period when the camp construction began, the area it mainly contained night clubs, taverns and cafeterias. However, the largest part of the land remained unbuilt due to its marshy features and intense winter floods. In early 2000s, following the worldwide explosive development of real estate markets, luxury homes started to be built in the area. Nonetheless, many of these projects failed and the constructions were eventually left unfinished due to their high prices, the presence of the migrants, as well as a slump in demand, already evident since 2005 (Figure 2. red dots). The residual materials of these construction sites together with many objects collected from garbage, were used to construct the improvised shacks of the migrants.

The analysis of typical camp dwellings showed that they mainly consisted of the following materials: (a) wooden pallets used as foundation. The pallets were scavenged from nearby firms or scrapyards, from which they had been thrown away and abandoned. The pallets were used to slightly raise the shacks, as the camp area tended to flood in the winter. (b) wooden beams and boards taken from nearby construction sites which had been abandoned. In some shacks, old wooden doors scavenged from the

garbage were also found. The wooden beams were used as columns and beams of the constructions. The columns were founded at a depth of 50–80cm. (c) pieces of cardboard scavenged from the garbage and used as wall material. The cardboard was placed in multiple layers for insulation. Sometimes, other materials found in the garbage such as fabric etc. were also used for insulation. (d) remnants of nylon plastic sheets (smaller or larger pieces) found in the garbage, which were used to coat the whole shack and provide rain protection. (e) bricks and stones placed on the roof to help it withstand the wind loads. (f) carpets or blankets (also found in the garbage) which were used to cover the floor. For all of the above, see **Figure 3**.

Camp expansion

It is interesting to note the spatial development of the camp over time (**Figure 2**). Based on the analysis of satellite images (between 2001 and 2008), we can make the following observations: while the shack positions initially seemed random, some loose rules of spatial arrangement emerged over time. For example, a central square was formed (point s, **Figure 2**) where migrants gathered at certain times of the day, and which was also used for assemblies and celebrations (**Figure 4a**). With their spatial arrangement, the buildings looked as if they were protecting the central square from three sides, while the river was at the fourth. This created the impression of a protected, enclosed public space. In the same central square one of the camp buildings was turned into a 'mosque' (place of worship) (**Figure 4a**). Gradually, some clear passages (akin to streets) were formed, thus creating some basic traffic flows. An informal internal agreement within the camp population prohibited the construction of shacks on those passages. From the above observations, but also from our discussion with the camp inhabitants, there emerges a picture of a community-in-formation (informal internal debate, common space of worship, common rules), which

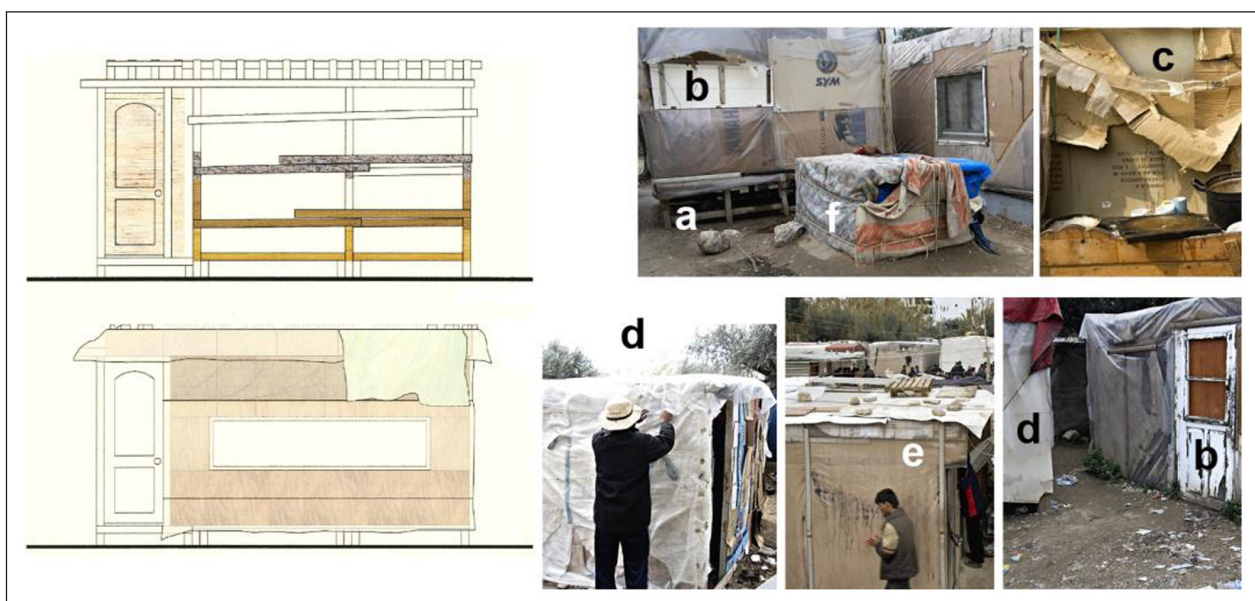


Figure 3: (left) sketches with the materials for a typical dwelling (source: Kavadas & Efthimiatis) (right) photos from the camp showing construction materials (Source: George Poutachidis).



Figure 4: (a) Image of an assembly of the refugees in Camping 'Square' (b) picture from inside the 'mosque' (c) image from inside of a dwelling (d) the work of the artist HIWA K. in Kassel, Germany (Source: Wikipedia commons).

was reinforced by two factors: 1) the ever-increasing length of stay of many camp inhabitants (reaching 2–3 years for some migrants after 2004) and 2) the intensifying police crackdown: starting in 2005, police raids in the camp area became a daily phenomenon. The camp interior, where police could not enter, created a refuge that acted protectively.

Supplies

The food, water and clothing needs of the camp were covered by several sources. The first was the small amount of money that each migrant was carrying, which typically lasted for 2–3 months. Those who carried larger amounts of money were saving it in the hope of paying human traffickers. A second source was created from donations and the mobilization of various NGO volunteers (Teloni 2011), although these actions were quite rare and covered clothing needs only in part. The basic and essential need for food remained difficult to satisfy. This is why the basic food supply of the migrants was leftovers found in the garbage, while their need for water was covered by the river. Of course, the quality of their nutrition was extremely poor, since garbage consisted of leftovers or expired products. On the other hand, the water was also of extremely poor quality: along the Milichos river there are runoffs from several illegal drainages, which the migrants had to use in the summer when the river ran dry. Consequently, most inhabitants of the camp were suffering from intestinal diseases, as we learned by discussing with a team of doctors from *Medicins Sans Frontiers*, who created a makeshift unit at the camp in 2007.

A 'garbage town'

As becomes evident from the above, the town constructed by the migrants was completely dependent on garbage. Their food, clothing and building construction were based on materials thrown away in garbage bins or left on the street. Despite intense complaints about burglaries in the local media, a 2008 police report refuted these allegations (Ladas 2016). Practically all supplies were exclusively sourced from items found in garbage. Even clothes collected by the volunteers belong to this category, since they were used items which their owners did not need any more. Thus, the objects used by the migrants had been 'trashified'.

The evolution of public discourse on garbage

Long before the establishment of the migrant camp, the city of Patras was facing an ever-worsening waste management problem (PNA).⁴ Recycling programs had failed and the city delivered its garbage to a single sanitary landfill, at the location of Xerolakas (point X in **Figure 2**), located close to the source of the Milichos river. Already since the mid-90's this facility had exhausted its carrying capacity, thus posing public health risks. Consequently, the inhabitants of the area were justifiably demanding the relocation of the landfill. However, thanks to several provisional upgrades, the landfill is open until today (PNA).

The public discourse on the issue of the migrant camp took a dramatic turn in 2006, with the gradual increase in the number of migrants and the worsening of the national economy. The public discourse in local media was dominated by complaints of various diseases carried by the

migrants, such as cholera and HIV (PM). Although this claim was not confirmed by the volunteer doctor examinations, as well as the *Medicins sans Frontiers*, the numbers of such publications kept increasing (Ladas 2016; PM).

Interestingly, the migrants gradually started to be accused of 'stealing from the garbage' (PM). Moreover, their camp, which was their only accommodation (there were no officially hosting facilities since no municipality in the area would tolerate their presence), was treated like a 'pile of garbage' which needs to be 'cleaned by a sweep police operation' (phrases in quotes come from first-page titles of local press. (PM; PNA). The use of linguistic terms connecting people with garbage became more common, together with terms connected with medicine and epidemiology. Some incidents are very characteristic: a local residents committee denounced a supermarket on the fact that migrants were eating cooked food portions which were thrown in the garbage at the end of every shift (since they were not consumed). The supermarket responded to these pressures by poisoning the food so that 'migrants do not gather there'. A correspondent from the residents committee stated to us that the migrants have no right to eat from the garbage, since they do not belong to them' (PNA; Ladas 2016). When a volunteer team from Thessaloniki visited the camp in the summer of 2008 and connected a few water faucets to the local water supply network, the local newspapers decried that the migrants are 'stealing the water' (PM) and the local water supply company rushed to cut off the connections (Ladas 2008, 2016). The main players pushing for a police 'sweeping raid' (PM) which would arrest and remove the 'garbage-migrants' were 1) a local residents committee called 'The City Has Fallen' (PM), which was headquartered next to the camp and 2) the mayor of the city, who had turned the matter into his personal political battle. The mayor would consistently talk publicly about the 'nightmare of the city' (Ladas 2008, 2016), while he denied any help to the migrants, as well as the creation of a camp for hosting them, instead demanding that the migrants leave the city.

On the opposite side of this negative attitude towards the migrants, a movement of local and international volunteers was created. Journalists, social scientists and ordinary citizens were assisting the camp (Teloni 2011). For example, a volunteer team constructed a small school which offered Greek language courses to those interested. Moreover, various events such as parties were organized at the square to facilitate cultural exchange, while the migrants organized improvised cricket and kite flying games (Afghan custom) (Ladas 2008, 2016).

Despite the mobilization of the migrants and the fact that no alternative hosting facility had been found, the camp was eventually torn down in the morning of July 12th 2009 during a coordinated 'sweep operation' of the police (Mogiani 2017; PM; PNA). The police had no permit for the camp demolition (although its forces were accompanied by bulldozers brought and paid for by contractors active in the area); and could only make arrests. The situation was 'resolved' when during the evacuation/arrest of the migrants and the supporting volunteers present in the camp, a blaze broke out and the largest part of the camp

was burned down (PM; PNA). After this incident, the fire-fighters and the bulldozers entered the space to clean up the 'garbage', which were transported to the Xerolakkas landfill (Ladas 2016).

After the demolition of the camp, the migrants of Patras had to cover their housing needs by moving into several abandoned buildings along the coastal zone of the city near the port. These buildings are remnants of factories, abandoned by their owners who had to close them down due to the financial crisis. Four to five hundred migrants live there today.

Conclusions and Discussion

The contemporary concept of 'trashification' which we introduce here is directly connected with the financial crisis. The rapid devaluation of real estate triggered a process in which a series of objects were turned into garbage, without having (completely) lost their use value. These objects were either abandoned in public space or thrown into garbage bins. The use of these objects from people whose subsistence is not mainly based on money, such as homeless, migrants or Romani people, was inevitable and gave rise to a public debate on the right of use of the garbage, as well as their property status. At the same time, a gradual shift in the concept of garbage was observed, which ended up including the migrants themselves. In other words, human beings were treated as garbage that needed to be 'swept away'.

One of the central arguments of the city's mayor (who led the campaign for the removal of the migrant camp) during the period covered by our study (2006–2010) was that the mere existence of the camp posed an obstacle to the development of the city. As David Harvey observes, after the mid-70's cities start to gradually turn into companies (Harvey 2016), while Goodman characteristically calls them 'the last entrepreneurs' (Goodman 1979). This perception is of critical importance for the concept of trashification. Just as Alan Greenspan is rumored to have suggested the absurd idea that the US government should bomb the 'garbage homes' to 'jump start the market', the municipal administration of Patras seemed indifferent about human survival in the face of the financial dimension of the camp issue. When the conditions for the survival of the economy come into conflict with the conditions of human survival, it seems that the first prevail. However, this could not happen without the process of trashification which, as can be seen, is not only of financial nature.

In the *Dokumenta* international exhibition of July 2017 in Kassel, Germany, the Kurdish-Iranian visual artist HIWA K. presented his work titled 'When We Were Exhaling Images' (Figure 4d). His construction was a pile of sewage pipes which had been symbolically turned into bunk beds. His visitors could enter and see the space. With this work, the artist was trying to represent the outdoor bedrooms of the migrants along the coastline of Agyia in Patras, next to the camp area. The artist himself had long slept there before the camp construction, next to no longer functional sewage pipes. His work, which caused a sensation, highlights two points beyond the dramatic living

conditions of the migrants. First, it shows how the re-use of trashified objects from people who need them changes their mode of use; and second, that modern art follows exactly the same process. A few years after HIWA passed through Patras (2000), the city was named the cultural capital of Europe. In this context, it hosted an internal model art exhibition with title 'What Remains Is Future'. In the last room of the exhibition one could find abandoned, scattered and piled up leftover materials from the construction of all the exhibits. The message of the exhibition was exactly this: garbage, the leftovers, is the future. Art thus achieved an interesting inversion with respect to the value of materials: what does not have exchange value any more, what is garbage, became its raw material.

As Olga Lafazani observes (Lafazani 2013), the garbage-town of the migrants forms a *heterotopia* in the sense implied by Michel Foucault. The heterotopia is a contrasted location which at the same time exists within and challenges the culture surrounding it (while also being challenged by it too). The migrants create their own space, their own community, their own urban plan. A social space developed within another, both inside it and against it, in order get protected by it. Expanding this concept, we can observe that the term 'toxic waste' defines such a heterotopia itself. This is a heterotopia which lives within the dominant 'healthy' environment, and this environment also tries to discard it. However, as we saw, the characterization of an object, place or social group as 'toxic' is not only metaphorical, but also completely arbitrary, as it is predetermined by prejudices, stereotypes etc.

Notes

- ¹ These words are dramatized in the movie 'Too Big to Fail' (2011).
- ² <http://www.mouseiotipou.gr> (Press Museum – PM).
- ³ <http://geodata.gov.gr/dataset/geniko-poleodomiko-skhedio-demotikes-enotetas-patreon>.
- ⁴ "Peloponnese" newspaper archive.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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