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**PROJECT**

# Design Perspectives

## Placebeing on an Island in the Mediterranean

**Spyros Bofylatos, Helen Charoupia, Vasiliki Nikolakopoulou  
& Paris Xintarianos-Tsiropinas**

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### Keywords

Placebeing, Place-Making, Tacit Knowledge, Community, Introspection.

### Abstract

This paper probes the implicit dimension of the experiences of four design researchers living on an island of the Mediterranean. Through introspective methods, their points of view begin to uncover areas of convergence and divergence pivoting on themes of culture, community, and tacit knowledge. We aim to explore how the *topos* informs design and how it is shaped in turn.

Doing research on the island of Syros, we shared our perspectives as we navigate the associations among the means of artistic expression, networks of diffuse creativity, history and heritage, social relations and limitations of our own practice struggling to find words to describe them. To achieve this we engaged in textual, reflective introspection of our research, we discussed each other's texts and identified the key themes that were clustered. We posit that this reflection of our work will enable us to act as a feedback loop for both our practice as well as our daily life. In addition, we hope to engage in story-sharing with other embedded practitioners in order to discursively build a common language of *placebeing* in the Mediterranean and beyond.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we will explore how an embodied and experiential sense of place; what we call placebeing, connects the practice of four designers. All the authors are early career researchers, designers, activists working and living in a remote corner of the east Mediterranean. Through our work and everyday life, we holistically embody this elusive specter that we are yet unable to put into words. An island, a discreet landmass surrounded by the sea - the South Aegean in our case, is a unique place to live. There is a mystery to being an islander known only to those who live an insular lifestyle.

We hope to better understand how design works with the *topos*, what the *topos* is and how the process of negotiating it works in relation to artistic, social, and applied research as well as the creation of sustainable lifestyles. The research hypothesis here is that the way we conduct research on an island is shaped by the island, parts of this influence are tacit and as such necessitate the adoption of introspective methods to grasp. To understand this, we separately wrote about how we feel the *topos* influences our work, also we selected a photo that embodies the feeling of the text. Having these texts, we collectively critiqued them in an attempt to delve deeper and confront the tacit dimension of place in our research.

The central themes in each text were highlighted to understand the type of framing each of us adopts to talk about place-research relations. We adopted a first-person perspective for the

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1 Spyros Bofylatos is responsible for the paragraph 2; Paris Xintarianos-Tsiropinas for the 3rd; Helen Charoupia for the 4th and Vasiliki Nikolakopoulou for the 5th. The introductory paragraph and conclusions, were jointly written by the four authors.

texts that present our thoughts, feelings and ideas, and a third person perspective when discussing in the context of scholarship and academic research. This enables the reader to easily differentiate between our view and the literature.

Additionally, this juxtaposition of the two aims to underline our reflexive approach (Ripamonti et al. 2015) in critiquing contemporary positions on the matter place-center creative production. Critiquing Heidegger, Malpas (2012) argues that “philosophy begins in wonder and begins in place and the experience of place. The place of wonder, of philosophy, of questioning, is the very topos of thinking”. To become a place (*topos*), space acquires values, such as character and identity filled with humanized forms, functions, aspirations, feelings, and meanings. To understand a place, one can reflect on the social and cultural dimensions of its built environment. How can the people of Syros, a *topos* settled more than seven thousand years ago, still create a novel dimension of culture? Through participatory action research (Bilandzic & Venable 2011; Fassi et al., 2013), digital applications, and community storytelling, we explore how the sense of a place can be reinforced by acknowledging its heritage in a dynamic way. Through this line of thought, the idea of being in a place, place-being emerged. This notion points to the holistic experience of an embedded practice that shapes and is shaped by a place. This cultural constellation mirrors the nodes of an archipelago of creative communities. Pivoting on notions of co-design with locals, while honoring nature’s limits we explore the connection between the natural environment and making. Engaging in conversation with the inhabitants of the island we witness the osmosis of indigenous cultural practices with initiatives spurring within the presence of a multidisciplinary University.



This beacon of alternative values acts as a facilitator of the diffuse design capacities of the society surrounding it.

## 2. The Mystery of the *topos*

In the context of religious practices, a mystery is something like a one-way mirror. Those who participate in the mystery know what it entails, while for those on the outside it is a non-sensical thing. As most of the planet's population becomes more and more urbanised, the places we inhabit become less personal, larger and co-experienced by millions of souls. The notion of *topos*, the tacit essence of a place, cannot exist within a metropolis in the same way it does in a remote place. As cities grew they ate up all of the surrounding villages in a cultural grinder. Cities like London, New York, Shanghai are city states with their own culture, style and mysteries, they can become nonplaces without any kind of specific essence of place.

My research in the past decade has been centered around tacit knowledge in relation to Making and Design. In a nutshell I am trying to understand and communicate what this indescribable thing does, how it's used, and whether it is a fundamental part of human existence. Michael Polanyi introduced the tacit dimension in 1966, describing it in the sense "that we know more than we can tell". This refers to ways of knowing that grow through experience and craft but are personal and out of reach of explication or analysis. His argument is that the explicit parts of such knowledge are the tip of the iceberg.

Tacit knowledge lacks specification and articulation (Polanyi, 1966). According to Ingold (2015) tacit knowledge is a living embodied thing that turns lifeless and inert when pinned down and explained. What I found to work, both in my own personal re-

search projects and through my readings in the same field, is that it's more effective to talk, to reflect and to engage in introspective practices about experiences informed and shaped by tacit knowledge. The topos is a shared experience, and introspection combined with autoethnographic practices is a way for experience driven design research (Xue & Desmet, 2019) to flourish.

The essence of a place can be dismantled into its constituent parts, but as anything that is complex it cannot be put back together. Something gets lost during the butchering into bits, and that's my main motivation for doing this, for trying to reflect on what the *topos* is or how it changes, shapes and engages in a dialogue with the people who experience it. There are intrinsic and extrinsic factors to this (Jung & Walker, 2018) but there is something more, something personal and elusive, something that demands that you engage in an authentic experience with the topos, to witness it, to be part of that holon.

The fact that Syros is an island makes it easier to differentiate it from other localities. Insular communities, be it on islands or mountains, such as Zomia (Scott, 2009), are fighting to put distance between themselves and the states that wished to engulf them. Living on an island is synonymous to bounded freedom, to collaboration, to solidarity. In addition, the beautiful experiment that is the Department of Product and Systems Design added a novel, young tribe to the quiet aging population of Syros. The creative cell that grew on the island has challenged the dusty envelope of tradition that kept everything in check and created a new colorful disruption full of unrest. For Syros, a place in flux since it was inhabited in 5.000BC this is an additional layer of transcultural capital and a new tension between the different stakeholders.

I believe that the thing that helps is scale. The island is part of a holon called Cyclades which is part of a larger archipelago of the Aegean and so on. The opportunity to experience all the layers of human life in an explicit, unescapable way is what makes this a great place to do research. There are dimensions of this Mediterranean topos that are shared throughout mare nostrum yet some peculiarities unique to Syros. One is the constant demographic change with new refugees, expats and migrants increasing the plurality with each generation. Another constant is respect, any who come hoping to engage in cultural imperialism will be met with stiff resistance while those who acknowledge and work with the people of the island will be met with open arms (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Daybreak at an all-night student party at the Department of Product and Systems Design Engineering. All rights: Sotiris Patronis, Xronis Potidis and Fani Panagopoulou.

### 3. Cultural production within the topos

In this age of globalized information, universal connection and the implementation of a common lifestyle – a pattern of behavior, work and entertainment for most of the humankind, the small islandic place – *topos*’ offers a different way of life (*tropos*). In an area surrounded by the sea, the rhythms and requirements of everyday life differ from those of a large city or a capital, even if Syros is called the capital of the Cyclades. On this island, the farthest distance does not exceed 20 km. The tallest building has no more than four floors. The most unknown person is an acquaintance of a friend.

Islanders have at least one thing in common with each other, but also with the other islanders of Greece: the sea is everywhere around them. On most of the islands of the Greek archipelago, the sea is a daily spectacle acting as the frame of everyday life. But is this perpetually moving liquid element the only substance that characterizes these limited spatial territories as a special place to live?

For some of them, no. While some of the Aegean islands present a social structure and cohesion similar to that of the villages – small population, limited education and work options, deep connection to concepts such as tradition, family and religion – others, such as Syros, could be characterized, even today, as independent city-states (*poli-kratos*). In archeology the term is used as a reference to any social and political group which is composed of a major urban center and its region, which has achieved a high degree of independence and a clear cultural identity. “city-state” (Darvil, 2009).

Obviously, this term does not give a literal meaning to the term independence. The term cultural identity, on the other hand, characterizes and differentiates the islands from each other, to the extent that nowadays, the visitor or the future resident of an island chooses a more frantic, glamorous and fun way of life by going to Mykonos, one closer to nature, with a strong religious and artistic spirit like the one presented by Tinos, or one with more intense urban elements and more options in work and entertainment all year long, such as Syros.

The cultural heritage is part of the daily life of the people of Syros. Even a simple stroll in Hermoupolis brings a person into juxtaposition with art and architecture, reminding them of their debt to conserve and restore the environment around them like a gardener adding to the flourishing ecosystem more than was taken. And indeed, there are many who have taken the responsibility to record, preserve and add to the cultural capital. This fact that explains the existence of numerous festivals e.g., Stray Art Festival, International Rebetiko Festival and more<sup>2</sup> events that strengthen this identity and bring people together.

Some of these people choose Syros as a permanent residence from a young age and earn their salary living away from the big urban centers at a time when work and physical presence are no longer interconnected. But what they gain most is the quality of life offered by the environment. Nature, the sea, the short distances, the gaze into other people's eyes, are conditions and springboards for creativity. Whether it is a mural, a theatrical

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2 <https://www.syrosisland.gr/en/syros-the-island-of-festivals/>.

play, a festival or a research process, everything is created by including a piece of the energy of this environment - this is what makes them stand out from the mass and the prefabricated. For an artist-designer like me, what life on a small island ultimately offers is the journey to the inner self. This journey, in addition to inspiration and creation, makes me understand my place in the world, humanity's granular scale in relation to the vast universe. Realizing that you are not unique is liberating. Life in Syros rewards me with the importance of scale. After all, all human actions, from a research process to a festival and from a play to a painting, are nothing more than stories. Even Design is storytelling (Lupton, 2017). Syros tells us how we will narrate it. In conclusion, place (*topos*) creates the way (*tropos*) (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** A small portion of the murals and artworks created at the Athletic Centre Dimitrios Vikelas of Syros during the Stray Art Festival 2018 All rights: Tatiana Kasimati.



#### 4. Emergent Conversations between People and Place

Contributing to this patchwork of reflective introspection, my perspective arrives from a place of gradual immersion to a rhythm, a climate, a culture, and a way of being in place, in Syros. The way I see it, this island invites its inhabitants to make a home of it. Having grown up in a city like Athens, that never sleeps and rushes through you in the form of loud cars, busy people and close to zero community relations, finding myself in this place was intriguing to say the least. For the first few years, the entropy generated by 19 years under the shadows of tall apartment buildings urged me to return periodically to smell the exhaust fumes and feel like a stranger. Admittedly, this is not the experience everyone has in a place like Athens, and it was slowly revealed to me that people are what a place is made of - rather than simply the elements of its architecture or the weather forecast. Come to think of it, a place is not made just of people, either, but the experiences that are co-created with them, the place and - admittedly - me, you, us.

And so, in the embrace of the sea and a newfound community created by the Department of Product and Systems Design & Engineering, my visits to the big city got shorter. Settling into a new scale of interconnectedness, the university was the first node from which I tried to make sense of this place. The courses that I took, especially in my last years of study, opened new ways of knowing, relating and being with(in) the world. By understanding the role of design as that of a mediator of our realities, a myriad of underexplored facets of this discipline unfolded before me. Through coming in contact

with a wide array of subjects, methods, techniques, schools of thought and praxis, a sense of curious exploration started to blossom within me. An exploration that would question how design could be enacted with the place, its people and its environment, embracing its complexity, systemically and collaboratively creating with(in) it.

Having this in mind, I started noticing the multitude of initiatives that had already taken root on the island of Syros, realizing the potential of this small node of creativity in the midst of the Aegean archipelago. A tight knit network of interpersonal bonds between the peoples of the island, indigenous or not, has been woven through the relationships that exist between families, university groups, communities or action-based initiatives. These entanglements generate a continuous conversation between the people, the space they live in and the place they want to manifest for themselves. From this dialogue creative communities (Meroni, 2007) are emerging, forming grassroots actions through which participation, organisational autonomy and co-design are encouraged, without necessarily being named as such. From a place of deep knowing about the island, its ebbs, and flows - of winter streams or summer tourists, the inhabitants have cultivated an understanding that guides designed initiatives into bloom.

Some examples of relational services (Cipolla & Manzini, 2009), created in the midst of the community of the island include the actions of Apano Meria, a social cooperative enterprise (Apano Meria, 2020). Guided by local and expert knowledge, this initiative aims to cultivate a praxis of sustainment



(Fry, 2004) for the primitive lands of the island, all the while encouraging better communication of the needs of the *topos* to its people. In an effort to find the way, or the *tropos*, with which we can relate to the environment and its inhabitants, an island in the Mediterranean such as Syros could -through the tangible and intangible stories that it embodies- provide the rhythm and the know-how with which we could manifest creative, just and sustainable futures.

All in all, in a world in the midst of several crises, systemic and collaborative design seems like the ideal kaleidoscopic lens through which humanity can engage in pluriversal (Escobar, 2018) problem framing. Discovering the multiple perspectives through which other entities experience this world, might help us tap into a collective wisdom that will guide us, more steadily, forward (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Walking through Apano Meria with the locals: discussing, exploring, understanding, and connecting with people and place. All rights Authors.

## 5. Embeddedness in Cultural Placebeing

My perspective stems from the research on the space-place relationship and how people of a historic city can collectively create a digital dimension of cultural capital by acknowledging and preserving their architectural heritage. This investigation became more focused when I moved to Syros, after a 2-year training on digital cultural heritage's practical implications and doing research abroad, mainly Cyprus and central Europe. Doing research on the island and travelling around eastern Mediterranean, unraveled a more experiential way to reflect on my observations, especially the differentiation between space and place.

Space is a hypothetical condition. It becomes identifiable the moment human presence and activity concretize it. Then space has become a place (Stefanou & Stefanou 1999). Buildings constitute a key element of understanding a place because they reflect the expression of society (social) and the people (cultural) who made them. Therefore, a place's identity is not only integrated into built space but also in cultural practice. The community of concern acts upon the built heritage of its city and transforms it. At the same time, it keeps up with these transformations and the stories associated with them, thus making a collective activity. Could it be like a network, forming communal roots and identity (Han et al., 2014), thus representing a city's cultural heritage?

Inspired by my team's (HERMeS, 2019) vision and observing most of Hermoupolis' built heritage slowly declining, we decided to engage with the citizens through Participatory Action

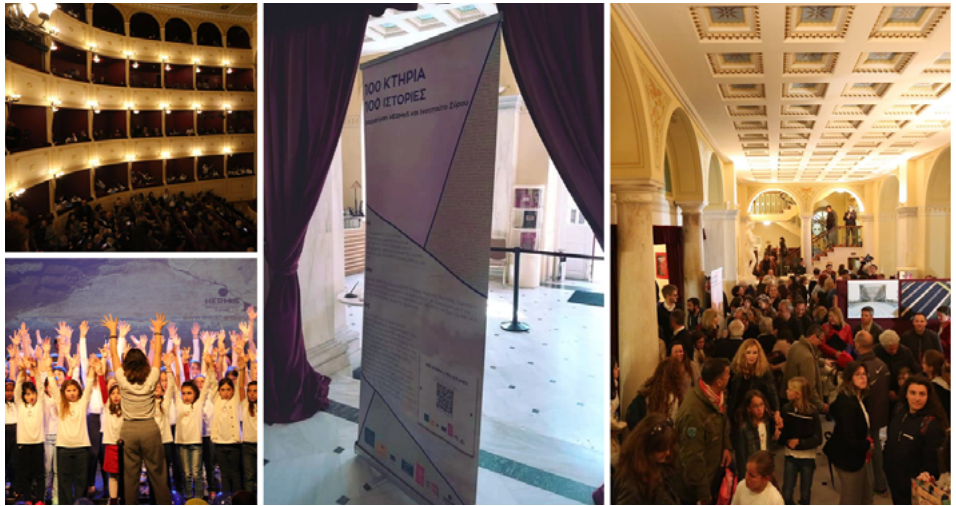
Design Research (Bilandzic and Venable 2011; Fassi et al., 2013) Building upon an existing digital heritage management and preservation system (Chatzigrigoriou & Mavrikas, 2013) for Hermoupolis' endangered buildings, we aimed to integrate the stories of those buildings into the system. We assumed that citizens could provide this qualitative dimension that the system was lacking. I was surprised by their response to our call (Figure 4). Turns out that story-sharing affected all 'kinds' of citizens, since everybody has a story to tell about a building or how they relate to it. Even citizens that did not tell a story came to the project's ceremony. It appears that this type of fragile heritage communicating, primarily raised among citizens a feeling of belongingness, rather than awareness, whereas in this case buildings became a mere communication medium. The outcome of this project was the creation of a network containing 100 buildings and their stories (*100 buildings/ 100 stories*) open to further additions and the action's continuation via the establishment of a similar annual ceremony welcoming the participation of all citizens.

Drawing on the above, our research motivation became even more profound. We now seek to digitally bridge the communication gap between the tangible (built) and intangible (stories) heritage of a place beyond the borders of Syros. Our current space is Aegean.

In my research travels to three Aegean settlements with globally recognized intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO Know How of cultivating mastic on the island of Chios, 2014; UNESCO Mediterranean diet, 2013; UNESCO Tinian Marble

Craftsmanship 2015), I was faced with another *sense of place*. I observed that there is another way to consider cumulative involvement and its footprint on space. The settlements of Pyrgos (Tinos), Agia Paraskevi (Lesvos), and the mastic village of Olympoi (Chios) are places; spaces that are already occupied and nothing could displace them. Only entropy and decay could affect their built, tangible environment. During the travels, I endeavored to reveal the intangible manifestations of the built surroundings and conceptually interpret them to the rest of the design team (Vosinakis et al. 2020; Chatzigrigoriou et al. 2021). My travels lasted about ten days at each settlement. It took me days to settle and feel I was part of these places; I was being *placed* in the specific space (placement). Returning to Syros and Hermoupolis, I wondered if this city's cultural heritage has determined the relationship between place and people as in these three settlements. It seems that Hermoupolis is a differently determined place which forced me to think about why I chose to permanently settle there. Therefore, my reflection on the idea of placement raised the question “how much of my, your, our placement in the specific space can affect or already affects the place, and how much the place can influence or already influences our ‘being’ in this space?”

The last quotes stem from a Heideggerian observation on the space-place-human relationship. Concerning Heidegger's concepts on the topology of being, J. Malpas (2008) demonstrates how the notion of “emplacement” became the pivotal answer for Heidegger: how anything can exist and become what it is, including human beings. For Heidegger (J. Malpas, 2008), the concepts of “being” and “place” are unseparated.



**Figure 4.** Celebrating the story-sharing initiative, ‘100 buildings / 100 stories’, at the local historic theatre of Apollon, Hermoupolis. All rights Authors.

In our research approach, we extend Heidegger’s concept of placebeing and search for digital interactions among citizens and buildings highlighting the notions of place- *belonging*, *acting*, and *making*, thus focusing on the cultural expressions. Through such an approach one can suggest the *thinking through the place* which, eventually, indicates a way (*tropos*) (Fig. 4).

## 6. Conclusions

We set out to author this paper aiming to better understand and illustrate the tacit dimensions of the *topos* as they become entangled with our research in an embedded Mediterranean setting. Each one has a different level of experience with introspective methods and that was perhaps the biggest challenge. Breaking the rules of scientific convention and academic writing and engaging in this type of writing feels wrong at times.



Undertaking this process as a collective made it more manageable as we pushed each other to elaborate more what each text was about... The texts overlap in some central notions pointing to some common characteristics of our tacit understanding of topos.

To better understand the common ground, we each did a rough theme analysis (King, 2004) in each other's texts. We created an affinity diagram in an online platform and mapped the connections and overlap between our perspectives (Fig. 5).

This map was illustrated as a *xerolithia*; a drystone wall found throughout the Mediterranean that has been added in UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage catalogue in 2018 (UNESCO Art of dry-stone walling, knowledge, and techniques, 2018). The *art of xerolithia* is termed to describe a construction made by stones without any binder. It involves the placement of heterogeneous pieces of rock: a transmission of knowledge passed from one generation to another and rooted in the feeling of belonging to a community, be it the family or the rural community of a place. It represents another influence on our way of thinking and conducting research shaped by the island. As the craftspeople of *xerolithia* do, we collectively placed the pivoting notions stemming from our texts and created a stronger whole without beating the pieces to place (Fig. 6).

The affinity diagram's sequence reflects our approach to connecting the dimensions of placebeing considered by each. We have passed from the unknown to the uncertain regarding the common threads in our research.





**Figure 6.** Authors, Xerolithia Theme Representation – Creating a stronger whole by combining our contributions All rights Authors.

Some emergent ideas that act as undercurrents connecting our experience and practice include the notion of temporality of space and place. Degrowth (Giacomo D'alisa et al, 2015) calls for decentralization, living on a scale that allows the place to exist. There is a rhythmical flow to the place that is connected to the climate, the mitigations of humans and non-humans and all aspects of it. The wet cold of winter brings us closer to protect us while the hostile August sun pulverises those who steer away from the embrace of the sea. Another dimension is how the Networks evolve to Nets, the common nodes in the constellation of activists, artists and scholars capture the minds of any adventurous souls that happen to pass through the Cycladic Archipelago. Finally, we extend an invitation to our readers to come and experience and engage in a dialogue on placebeing in the Mediterranean, this type of work is only the beginning.



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Using participatory action research she aims to explore the ways in which tacit knowledge can emerge, be understood and leveraged to better design relational services for sustainable futures. This exploration will pivot on the ways of knowing that emerge from the process of design, craft and co-creation as well as on the indigenous practices at the local level. Her research aims to enable the emergence of a new design epistemology, based on concepts like post-humanism as well as on feminist and indigenous theoretical frameworks. This will be accomplished with small groups of people, within which co-creation will occur, following processes of participatory design.

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In his research he intends to analyze representational and transformative technologies as tools to communicate and market a product or a service. In addition, he studies to understand how photography could become a means of analysis and study for design, becoming historical memory of ancient craft values and material knowledge.

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The work is carried out in close connection to the regional manufacturing sectors as part of a complex system of relationships which aims to disseminate innovation, develop new technological paradigms and new, more sustainable production scenarios. Scientific Director of MATto, innovative materials archive open to Piedmont SMEs, since 2018 she is Vice Rector for Quality, Welfare and Equal Opportunities at the Politecnico di Torino.

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One of his main lines of research concerns the valorization of that design dialoguing with craftsmanship, strongly anchored to territories of the country, and capable of supporting the Made in Italy development, that is what he names "Handmade in Italy." About this, he is the national coordinator of the ADI Thematic Commission "Handmade in Italy," which he founded in 2017. Since 2020 he is Scientific Committee member of SYMBOLA Foundation for Italian Qualities.

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Since 2006 she founded and coordinates the Hybrid Design Lab ([www.hybriddesignlab.org](http://www.hybriddesignlab.org)), the design laboratory dedicated to mutual relations between design and science with particular attention to the experimentation of biomimicry in design and the integration of designers in the development processes of new materials to which the specific Designer in lab project is dedicated.

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