

Case study ID

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VICTORIA SQUARE PROJECT

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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VICTORIA SQUARE PROJECT

Case Study at a Glance

The Victoria Square Project (VSP) is a cultural initiative that's all about community, nestled in the heart of central Athens' Victoria Square. Launched in 2017 by artists Rick Lowe and Maria Papadimitriou during documenta 14, VSP has developed into a lively social sculpture (as its creators call it) – a living piece of art that encourages intercultural dialogue and brings people together through creative expression.

Located at 13 Elpidos Street, this project breathes new life into a repurposed storefront in a neighborhood that has faced its share of challenges. It acted as a welcoming space for local residents, including migrants and refugees, offering a range of free, engaging activities like workshops, dance classes, art exhibitions, language lessons, and cultural events. These programs are designed to empower individuals, foster social connections, taking into account the rich tapestry of cultures in the area.

VSP believes in the transformative potential of art within urban environments, turning empty spaces into bustling hubs of creativity and community spirit. By teaming up with local businesses, institutions, and artists, the project played a crucial role in rethinking what public spaces and civic engagement can look like. In 2023, after 6 years, the project concluded.

Case Study Profile

Topic

- ☐ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☒ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☐ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☐ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☒ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☐ Metropolitan / city region
- ☐ City scale
- ☒ Neighbourhood scale
- ☐ Block scale
- ☐ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☐ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☒ social & cultural resilience
- ☐ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☐ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☐ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☒ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☐ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☒ Local government
- ☒ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☒ Private sector
- ☒ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☐ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☐ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☐ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☒ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☒ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☒ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☐ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☒ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☐ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☒ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☒ Empowerment
- ☐ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

The Victoria Square Project (VSP) was a cultural initiative focused in community co-creation, located in the heart of central Athens' Victoria Square. Launched in 2017 by artists Rick Lowe and Maria Papadimitriou during documenta 14, VSP has developed into a lively social sculpture (as its creators framed it)—a living piece of art that encourages intercultural dialogue and brings people together through creative expression.

The project breathes new life into a repurposed storefront in a neighborhood that has faced its share of challenges. It acted as a welcoming space for local residents, including migrants and refugees, offering a range of free, engaging activities like workshops, dance classes, art exhibitions, language lessons, and cultural events. Such programmes were designed to empower individuals, foster social connections, taking into account the rich tapestry of cultures in the area.

The VSP, engaged in community engaging activities revolving around, visual arts, theater, photography, storytelling, and crafts workshops, often facilitated by local and international artists, along with local groups and the local community, emphasizing co-creation and a culture of sharing.

As part of the case study, we conducted a total of **two interviews**:

- **One interview with a representative of the initiating artistic/cultural organization.** The interview mainly revolved around the timeline of the intervention, its original mission vision and the key moments that defined its course. Particular attention was paid to the intersection of aesthetic practices that defined the point of departure for the project and the efforts towards empowerment and inclusion of the neighborhood's diverse community. In addition, a significant portion of the discussion focused on practical day to day challenges that emerged throughout the interaction with various stakeholders.
- **One interview with a local participant who followed the project closely.** The interview focused on the grassroots experience related to the project's development through the viewpoint of a participant that held a consistent relationship to the project. Key points of the interview focused on the reception of the group's activity by the local community, its impact on day-to-day life in the neighborhood, as well as on assessing the perceived significance of individual educational, cultural or community bonding activities.

Compendious summary

Introduction

The Victoria Square project may be classified as a social and cultural resilience project. Described as a ‘social sculpture’, it was conceived and implemented by the artist Rick Lowe, as part of Documenta 14 in Athens.

The sculpture represents the result of an extensive process of collaboration and dialogue with the diverse communities of Victoria Square. This effort brought together local initiatives, businesses, institutions, municipal authorities, and artists, all working closely to highlight and celebrate the cultural and historical significance of this important intersection in Athens. Through their unique perspectives and contributions, each participant played a role in uncovering and amplifying the layered narratives – cultural, historical, and political – that define the area. In doing so, the project not only produced a work of art but also fostered a deeper collective understanding of the forces that have shaped, and continue to shape, Victoria Square.

Neighborhood challenge

Victoria Square (Πλατεία Βικτωρίας) in Athens is a historically and culturally significant public space, known for its layered social dynamics and changing urban character over time. Located in the center of Athens, Victoria Square is just a walk away of the Omonia Square and serves as a key transit and meeting point. For a large portion of the 20th century, it was considered a middle-class neighborhood. From the 2000s onwards, the demographics of the neighborhood shifted. The influx of new residents has given the square a distinct multicultural identity. Halal butchers, African hair salons, South Asian grocers, and multilingual signage are all part of the everyday fabric of the neighborhood. For many, Victoria Square represents a space of opportunity and belonging, especially for those who face marginalization elsewhere in the city.

However, this shift was not without challenges. From the 1980s onward, the area experienced sharp urban decline due to nationwide economic shifts and an increased influx in migration. In the 2000s and 2010s, it became associated with social tensions, including homelessness, drug use, and xenophobia. Those developments altered the area’s perception, which made headlines as a field of contestation. Famously, Victoria Square, the neighborhood where Villa Amalias once stood (a well-known squatted building), lies adjacent to Agios Panteleimonas — an area with a large immigrant population that, in recent years, has been targeted by the far right Golden Dawn movement in a series of racist attacks. Public space in Victoria is contested and negotiated daily — used as a playground, an informal job market, a gathering space, a site of protest, and sometimes, a refuge. The square’s central fountain, once emblematic of Athenian bourgeois life, now serves as a backdrop to conversations in Urdu, Arabic, Amharic, and Greek.

Beyond the greater scope of enhancing community relations, and bringing arts closer to the neighborhood’s everyday life, VSP sought to address this field of tensions aspiring to turn Victoria Square in a site for public art, community-based projects, and grassroots interventions aiming to reclaim

and reimagine the space, in collaboration with local residents, migrant communities and local art institutions.

Response to the challenge

The project was initially conceived as part of the documenta 14 exhibition in Athens by the artist Rick Lowe, later joined by M. Papadimitriou. The initiators set the basic parameters regarding the general characteristics of the projects. Victoria square was selected as the projects location, due to its unique characteristics: close proximity to the city's center, rich intercultural demographics, challenges in terms of poverty, inclusion etc. In spatial terms, the VSP attempted to:

- Reclaim Public Space not as a place of transit but as a site of community, culture, and dialogue, through street-level engagement and public art
- Revitalize Vacant Urban Fabric, by reusing a formerly abandoned storefront, which it converted into a welcoming cultural hub. This adaptive reuse model demonstrates how abandoned spaces can be activated to generate social value and community ownership, fueling thus, bottom-up regeneration processes.
- Create an Intercultural Landscape, by facilitating cross-cultural exchange through participatory workshops, events and artistic acts.
- Embed Art in Everyday Life, by claiming space, telling stories, and resisting erasure, contributing to a sense of collective memory and ownership.

The VSP's history can be divided in two phases. During the first phase it was mainly concerned with co-creating, that is building a space of interactions between various groups and individuals through collective production. In the second phase (2020-) it focused on bringing artistic production closer to the everyday life of the neighborhood.

Some important moments are the following: The 'We Are City Plaza' Exhibition (2018) showcased a collective photographic display that documented the self-organized refugee community residing at the City Plaza Hotel. This exhibition emphasized the resilience and unity of refugees and activists, as portrayed through the perspectives of the residents themselves. Additionally, VSP facilitated hip-hop workshops titled 'An Album from Our Square,' (2021) which aimed to produce a hip-hop album that presented narratives from the Victoria Square area. Participants were involved in collecting oral histories and music production, resulting in a collaborative audiovisual act that honored the neighborhood's diverse cultural heritage. Furthermore, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, VSP adapted by implementing a hybrid programming model that integrated both in-person and digital activities. This strategy enabled the community to maintain connections through virtual workshops, exhibitions, and cultural events, thereby ensuring ongoing engagement during these unprecedented times.

Methods of citizen engagement:

The VSP, engaged in community engaging activities revolving around, visual arts, theater, photography, storytelling, and crafts workshops, often facilitated by local and international artists, along with local groups and the local community, emphasizing co-creation and a culture of sharing. More specifically these include:

- Educational Initiatives such as language classes (e.g., Greek for migrants and refugees), homework help for children, and life skills and crafts training, with emphasis on intercultural learning: promoting understanding between migrant and local communities.
- Public Art & Urban Interventions such as community-led artistic interventions in public spaces – such as murals, installations, and performances in Victoria Square – aiming to reclaim and reimagine public space. These interventions would often address themes of migration, identity, displacement, and belonging.
- Neighborhood Mapping & Storytelling. Residents co-create maps and narratives that reflect their experiences, cultural roots, and visions for the neighborhood, such as creating and developing feminist mapping practices. These practices include digital storytelling, oral histories, and creative archives that document the neighborhood's evolving identity.
- Public Dialogues, forums & acts. VSP would regularly organize lectures, film screenings, open discussions and community dinners that bring together different groups to talk about shared challenges and possibilities.
- Collaborative Art Projects. Those include collaborations with institutions like the Athens School of Fine Arts, Onassis Foundation, documenta 14, and grassroots networks as well. Those projects attempted to make visible multilingual, multigenerational, and intercultural aspects, reflecting the diversity of the neighborhood.

Stakeholders

The project was initiated during documenta 14 which took place for the first time in Athens. In terms of funding, it was initially supported as an integral part of documenta 14. However, since the project was set to remain in place after the exhibition's conclusion, the need to create sources of external funding appeared. At first, this was covered through international artistic donations, while in the latter years a portion of funding was secured through domestic private institutions as well (e.g. SNCF). Due to scarcity in structural funding, donations were linked to specific acts, events or programmes planned and executed by the project's team.

Relations with local government remained complicated, as –per usual- there is little institutional support for artist run spaces and independent initiatives. Interactions with public actors, mainly revolved around questions of permitting and security regarding parts of the public programme.

In terms of community involvement and community participation, it should be noted that the VSP was primarily conceived as a social co-creation space. In that light, local community was the subject-matter of the project. Beyond opening the space to the community, it sought to bring their stories to the forefront through amplifying their experiences, personal stories and narratives. Moreover, it focused in needs of specific groups (e.g. language training, crafts etc.) Regarding interactions between local population, NGO's and the private sector, the VSP seems to have acted as a mediator, between those stakeholders.

Due to the project's nature and the neighborhood's demographics, the VSP profoundly focused in migrant communities, elaborating thus in issues of urban inequality, uneven development, inclusivity in education and employment, as well as multicultural exchange. It follows that beyond inclusiveness, the

VSP sought to bring forward issues of urban contestation, address public space as a field of tensions and highlight aspects of spatial and social justice.

Case study findings and lessons learned

In the organizer's view a long-lasting impact is difficult to trace, since following the space's closure, no visible impact may be traced on the neighborhood level. However, in their opinion, what remains is relations between people involved, especially children from migrant background, who had the opportunity to create meaningful bonds within the project's safe space and to interact with people, methods of thinking and visual experiences through their interaction with contemporary art, that would be difficult to attain otherwise.

Similarly, the VSP seems to have highlighted the relevance and urgency of community engagement public cultural experiment not only as ephemeral places to get together, but also as a paradigm altering way of engaging with the contemporary arts. Moreover, it should be mentioned that in the organizers' perspective, the approach that characterized the project may as well fuel future programmes, initiatives and interventions in Athens and beyond, as well as potentially contribute towards the creation of a cultural policy agenda and strategy for the city. Since the VSP, was a public-oriented project initiators sought ways to engage with local authorities in order to foster relations of collaboration and coordination, as well as create processes that would enhance the presence of artistic artifacts in their immediate neighborhood and the city.

One of the key events was the 'We Apologize' installation placed in the middle of the neighboring Victoria square, created by Adrian Paci, an Albanian born, Milan based visual artist. It consisted of a sequence of neon-lit letters reading 'We apologize for the stress and discontent this may have caused you'. The project made headlines in the press, provoking the outrage of anti-immigration citizen's groups, while also garnering support by others on the grounds of its vague yet reconciliatory message. In this way the project sparked a vivid conversation, bringing forward relations of contestation and negotiation of public space.

On challenges: The project was conceived initially as a "social sculpture", that is as a collective project which would proceed in common with those willing to engage. Though interest on the project by external groups and individuals remained constant, cooperation with and support by local government structures was not devoid of bureaucratic obstacles. At times, the VSP team faced skepticism or even outright hostility by certain groups of local residents citing concerns over the project's alignment with migrants and refugees support and integration.

Conclusion

To the writers' assessment, VSP contributed to urban resilience in ambiguous terms. Firstly, the project:

- Created meaningful relationships of mutual understanding and everyday solidarity between different stakeholders, artists, researchers, local residents, migrant communities, civil society.

- Tried to inform urban policies on the regulation and protection public events, installations on public space, open education practices, through establishing channels of communication between government actors and services involved.
- Achieved to present an alternative paradigm of public-oriented and outwards looking organization, that offered its vitality to the city's visual arts scene.
- Sparked civic dialogue on contemporary issues such as identity, inclusion, integration, functioning as a threshold for interactions.
- Contributed in non-formal education practices, especially involving children from migrant background.

Though the project displays unique contextual characteristics in terms of locality, timing and focus, its replicability would be reliant on its methodology rather than its specific programme. In that sense it opens up a field of potentialities regarding how an interface between urban communities and the artistic scene could be structured in the future. Such examples could be emphasis to community engagement, public-oriented programme, education, while insisting on aspects of quality and coherence.

Attachments

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