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## Review: Koukaki – A Neighborhood in Transition

*“The majority of the houses in Koukaki are rented through Airbnb”*

*“Airbnb has grown because it is much cheaper than hotels”*

*“The financial crisis made Airbnb more attractive”*

These are some of the concerns voiced, in a recent documentary film, by the locals residing in the Athenian neighborhood of Koukaki. Short, just under 10 minutes in length, *Koukaki* was produced in 2018 by the *Netherlands Institute at Athens (NIA)* and the *Athens Ethnographic Film Festival (Ethnofest)*. It was directed by Zilly Galdic, Ismini Gatou, Anni Valajärvi. The film brings a critical perspective on urban development, seen through the eyes of Athenian residents. Koukaki, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Athens, underwent significant changes once the giant Californian company, Airbnb, tapped into the area’s short-term rental market.

The film starts and ends in a visual loop; with a static frame capturing three locals chit-chatting on a bench. One of them carries a supermarket bag. One is petting a leashed dog. A third one swirls a pair of Greek komboskini, an orthodox prayer’s rope. Frame by frame, the footage moves from one local resident to another, filmed in their typical environment: smoking, talking, sitting in tavernas, while sharing their thoughts on the district’s transition. The film is much stronger conceptually than visually. The visual medium adds little to the story. There are a couple of long frames, which draw the viewers into the *feel* of the neighborhood, but generally, the camera jumps fast from the background roll to the interviewees, obscuring what exactly the film aims to emphasize and why. Oftentimes, the frames are unstable and some of the footage looks as if it was accidentally placed; for example, at minute 3:55, a resident asks if he should look at the camera, a part that could have been perhaps edited out; similarly, the footage covers the Fabrika Restaurant, one of the oldest tavernas in the neighborhood, yet it suddenly jumps to a general street-view of the neighborhood, making the viewer wonder as to why the camera stopped for a few seconds over the restaurant.

Due to its proximity to the Acropolis, Koukaki has changed from a low-key local neighborhood into a tourist hot-spot. The film attributes this change to the Airbnb’s expansion into the short-term rental market. Local opinions seem divided on the subject matter. Some understand this change as a positive development, as a sign of the society evolving; others as a phenomenon strongly connected with the 2008 financial crisis that subsequently propped the Airbnb industry. Simultaneously, some argue that Koukaki lacks sufficient hotels while others that the Airbnb provides cheaper accommodation. Indeed, in 2018, the year the documentary was filmed, Greece made the media headlines for breaking its all-time tourist record- over 33 million holidaymakers have visited the country (Kampouris, 2019). It is likely that most of these people did pass through Athens even if they were on the way to the islands.

A local resident describes Koukaki as underdeveloped, with about 70% of the shops in the area being empty. Towards the end of the film the viewer learns that this was the neighborhood’ outlook about 30 years ago. Nowadays, a different story unfolds; and the touristic expropriation of the local housing stock has negative impacts for the resident population: communication

becomes difficult for those barely speaking English; decade-long residents leave their houses to rent them through Airbnb; and residential apartments become unavailable for year-to-year leases. One resident is filmed speaking about a Cypriot investor that has purchased several flats in the area and requested an inadvertent viewing of her apartment.

Parallel cases of foreign investments are currently the norm across Athens. In the anarchist neighborhood of Exarcheia, similarly located in the central area of the city, a Chinese investor has allegedly bought over 100 flats to capitalize on the short-term leasing market (Souvlis and Bejan 2019).

The Airbnb topic is contentious in Athens. Data show that incorporated businesses operating multiple rental units comprise almost half of all the Airbnb listings in the city (Sideris 2018). In spite of the Airbnb's noble goal of supporting a shared economy, the Athenian short-term rental market has been exploited by large commercial actors withholding dozens of properties in their portfolio. In many neighborhoods, for instance in Exarcheia, political defiance against the Airbnb monopoly is taking ground. It is to be seen if Koukaki will undertake such forms of resistance in the near future.

*Koukaki* is a lively documentary film. It will most likely be useful to housing activists, researchers, urban planners and public policy makers focused on opposing gentrification and on developing affordable housing options.

### **Works Cited:**

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