

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2025)

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PS

PERFORMANCE & SPACE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

Edited by

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University of the Peloponnese

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

2025

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.8008](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.8008)

The "CATography" of Ano Syros. A Different Narration

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Abstract

With the consensus view that the cats are considered as a powerful and recognisable element that can actively contribute to the promotion and acceptance of projects in which they participate, an "alternative" mapping of the landscape of the settlement of Ano Syros (Syros Island, Greece) with cats as protagonists was created. This study was conducted by the authors for the 7th Interdisciplinary Seminar on Sustainable Development, Culture and Tradition at the Syros Institute. To the reasonable question "why cats?", the answer is: "Because in Ano Syros, cats are everywhere! Here, cats are not considered as stray cats, they are practically roommates with the inhabitants of Ano Syros and can easily break the threshold between public and private space".

A cat count map was created showing the population density of cats on specific routes in Ano Syros. In addition, a map was designed showing the most frequently visited/preferred posts of the most recognisable cats in Ano Syros. Snapshots taken from various landmarks in the settlement are then used to create a cute narrative of the landscape through the eyes of the cats themselves, with the cats as the main characters. An approach, with these popular tourists - residents as the main characters in the photographic composition, can highlight the peculiarities of the region with humour and unexpected clarity. In addition to providing insight in to the local atmosphere, it also helps raise awareness of the importance of preserving and promoting the island's cultural and architectural heritage. Also, it can contribute to the protection and care of this precious domestic animal.

It is essentially a creative game of exploration and discovery of Ano Syros, inviting the spectator and, at the same time, potential visitor, to follow, study, discover or rediscover and, ultimately, fall in love with Ano Syros.

Place marketing consists of strategically designed processes that rely on a deep knowledge of place image and place identity (Deffner, 2012). Against this background and

accepting that cats are an inseparable part of island life and landscape, together with the dynamics of these adorable and popular pets, the development of innovative digital applications that promote Ano Syros with a fun and playful spatial performativity can play an important role in place marketing and certainly constitutes one of the ultimate aims of this work.

Keywords: Cats, Ano Syros, landscape, psycho-geographic mapping, spatial performativity, narration.

The "CATography" of Ano Syros. A Different Narration

Places have primary ontological importance as centres of physical activity, meaning and emotional connection for people. The meaning of place is based on the existential or lived consciousness of the *locus* (Tilley, 1994). Thus, the place is not only its spatial data but also "its temporalities and the Discourse and the Legend that its people create as well as their activities and works" Stefanou (2017, personal communication).

The ways of the body's existence in the world are the senses, which act in an overlapping way. We do not perceive the environment by sight alone. All the senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste) participate in this perception. We are talking about warm and cool colours, hard and soft sounds, and we are essentially transferring qualities from one sensory domain to another. The experience of the senses is holistic, as it is the whole that prevails.

Landscape is a multidimensional concept, which is characterised by a particular variety of approaches and meanings in different sciences and countries. The definition given by the European Landscape Convention in Florence (2000) allows the necessary differentiation to be made between landscape and geographical space. Landscape is the collective perception of a place. It is the set of forms, patterns, colours, sounds, living or non-living beings that interact with the cognitive and emotional experiences of humans, leading to the creation of feelings, appreciation, enjoyment, recall of memories, etc., through a process of in taking of impressions and combining all the above elements. A necessary condition is the presence of an observer, who perceives the parts that make up the landscape as a whole, using the senses, memory, perception and emotion (Lynch, 1962).

The cartography of the landscape constitutes the "image" of the meaning of the landscape, through which the contact of humans with the place is made (Bachelard, 1958). It is not a simple representation but the map becomes a tool to explain situations in space.

This project aims at an alternative mapping of the landscape of Ano Syros with cats as protagonists (Figure 1) in a double role. Cats as "narrators" become the new, different, "eyes" to discover the place, but also as its basic biotic element they are an independent part of its mapping.

Figure 1

The World Is a Cat...

Source:

https://files.brightside.me/files/news/part_34/340760/preview-14760910-650x341-98-1497874087.jpg

**Performance of Anthropomorphism in Animals**

Humans tend to enrich the real or imagined behaviour of non-human entities with human psychological or physical characteristics, such as emotions, intentions, motivations, etc. The above process is called anthropomorphism. From ancient times to the present, the animal, as a concept and as a form, has been a favourite source of inspiration in art and literature. Throughout time in art, animals often acquire thought and speech, interact with humans or possess anthropomorphic characteristics. Sometimes they are the medium for projecting moral thoughts and behaviours, while other times they are negative examples, symbolising something dangerous, terrifying and inferior to human.

Since prehistoric times, people have been re-enacting scenes from hunting animals in caves. In *Aesop's Fables* (*Beast Fables*), for didactic and fictional reasons, animals take on human characteristics and behaviours. In the performing arts and literature, the animals are often treated as speaking subjects who are assigned exemplary moral behaviours, such as providing selfless help to all, including humans, or contributing to the smooth coexistence of all beings.

Animal anthropomorphism can take many forms, from depictions of animals with human characteristics and emotions in mythology, literature, art, and even everyday speech used to describe the behaviour of pets and other animals.

Domestic animals show a higher level of anthropomorphism, as they are often referred to as human companions. At the same time, living with animals seems to influence the performance of emotions, mainly secondary ones, in them (Morris *et al*, 2012). Whereas, in a study of similar content, it is mentioned that the greater number of emotions are attributed to pets (Berry & Wilkins, 2017).

The anthropomorphic use of animals is widespread even today. It is not only limited to artistic depictions, such as cartoons, comics, fairy tales, motion pictures, plays, songs and

literary texts. It also appears in advertisements, in company names or logos, seeking greater appeal to the buying public.

The Cats in Literature and Art

In *Aesop's Fables (Beast Fables)*, cats are symbolic characters. In the classic fairy tale *Puss in Shoes (Le Maître chat)*, with the help of the cat, its poor master becomes king.

There are many artistic creations with cats as protagonists in Modern Greek literature, as *The Story of a Cat* by Emmanuel Roidis (2018¹) or in Greek poetry like *Monogramma* by Odysseus Elytis (1974²) and "The cats of trucks" in the poetry collection *Marabou* by Nikos Kavvadias (1990³) or in Greek songs, such as *Serenata* by Arleta (1984⁴) and *The Cat* by Perpiniadis⁵ & Mathesis (1937⁶).

¹ Emmanuel Roidis (1836-1904) was an important Greek writer and essayist.

The Story of a Cat was written in 1893 and refers to the memories of Emmanuel Roidis, when he was a boarder at the Evangelidos High School in Syros. His nostalgia for the unjustly killed *Semina*, the brilliant boarding school cat who kept him company in his childhood, inspired him to compose a hymn about the virtues of the sweetest felines.

² Odysseus Elytis (1911-1986) was a Greek poet, man of letters, essayist and translator, regarded as the definitive exponent of romantic modernism in Greece and the world. He is one of the most praised poets of the second half of the twentieth century (*The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*, 1997) with his *Axion Esti "regarded as a monument of contemporary poetry"* (Haviaras, 1991). In 1979, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The first edition of the poetry collection *Monogramma* took place in 1971 in Brussels, in a limited number of copies. The third edition (second in Greece) was published in 1974 by Ikaros.

³ Nikos Kavvadias (1910-1975) was a Greek poet, writer and a sailor by profession. He used his travels around the world, the life at sea and its adventures, as powerful metaphors for the escape of ordinary people, outside the boundaries of reality. His poems are widely regarded as belonging to symbolism and he has been characterised by some as a *poète maudit* (a poet living a life outside or against society) (Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NikosKavvadias>).

The poem "The cats of trucks" is found in his first poetry collection, *Marabou*, which was published for the first time in 1933 by Kyklos publishing house. Since then, it was published 4 times by Galaxias publishing house (1961-1971), 16 times by Kedros publishing house (1975-1989) and, from April 1990 to June 2000, 13 times by Agra publishing house. It contains 22 quatrain poems (written with 'a methodical combination of part paroxysmal and part woven rhyme). The poem gives a taste of the harsh and lonely life of sailors.

⁴ Arleta (1945-2017) was a Greek musician, author and book illustrator.

The song *Serenata* with the theme of the separation of a couple is included in the album *Peripou (Approx)* (1984) with composer Lakis Papadopoulos and lyricist Marianina Kriezi.

⁵ Stellakis Perpiniadis (1927-2003) was a Greek folk singer, composer and bouzouki player.

⁶ Nikos Mathesis [a.k.a. Crazy Nick] (1907-1975) was a Greek rebetiko musician. He is considered as the father of Rembetika music and the first great rebetiko lyricist.

The song *The Cat* by Stellakis Perpiniadis from the year 1937 in lyrics by Nikos Mathesis and composed by Stellakis Perpiniadis from the album 78 turns. (Source: <https://www.artsandthecity.gr/stixoi/η-γάτα-2/>)

We can, also, find cats in world theatre like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, an American three-act play written by Tennessee Williams (2004⁷), the musical *Cats* by Andrew Lloyd Webber (1981⁸) and more.

The author Alison Nastasi⁹ (2015) has said:

I think artists and cats are kindred spirits because they are often mythologised. They are both often stereotyped because of their supposed reputation as aloof or even self-centred' and perhaps not unfairly. We could say that cats have human behaviour. They do not have the loyalty and giving of dogs, they are bold, stubborn and independent with frequent changes in their behaviour (p.2).

Hydra Island has one of the most photographed and perhaps most famous cats in the world. Gabriela Staebler (2015), a world-renowned wildlife photographer, has published the book *Hydra, Island of Cats*, with photographs exclusively of the island and the life of the cats there. Emma Baus (2015), a well-known journalist, created the documentary titled *Kittenhood* filmed in France, Japan and Hydra, showing the life of cats in these three places. Both creators, depending on the perspective they each approached the cats, showed with their works that the cats are inextricably linked to the life and landscape of the island.

Syros: The Island of (for) Cats

Syros is an island with a large number of cats. It is indicative of many of the inhabitants' love for those stray cats that's have their own "Café," which serves croquettes and fresh water (Figure 2). The veterinarian from Syros, Manolis Vorrissis together with other volunteers offers his services and fine treats to the stray cats of the island for many years. Also, in selected places, wooden feeders have been placed, which are fed by trained people and their cleanliness has been undertaken by the Municipality.

⁷ The play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was published and produced in 1955 and won a Pulitzer Prize. The play exposes the emotional lies governing relationships in the family of a wealthy Southern planter of humble origins.

⁸ *Cats* is a sung-through musical with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. It is based on the 1939 poetry collection *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* by T. S. Eliot. The musical tells the story of a tribe of cats called the "Jellicles" and the night they make the "Jellicle choice" by deciding which cat will ascend to the Heaviside Layer and come back to a new life. As of 2022, *Cats* remains the fifth-longest-running Broadway show and the seventh-longest-running West End show.

⁹ Alison Nastasi is an arts and culture journalist, author, and artist living in Los Angeles. Her writing has appeared in *Angelus News*, *Darling Magazine*, *Gizmodo*, *Fandango*, *MovieFone*, *MTV*, *Pitchfork*, *RogerEbert.com*, and more. She was a longtime editor for the website *Flavorwire*. Alison is the author of the popular books *Artists and Their Cats* and *Writers and Their Cats* from Chronicle Books (Source: <https://www.alisonnastasi.com/about>)

Figure 2

The Vaporia Cats Café in the Homonymous Beautiful Neighbourhood of Ermoupolis, Syros Island (Archive of G. Eleftheraki & G. Tzamalís)



Mr Vorrís, on the occasion of the Netflix documentary about the “Syriani Cat,” spoke on SKAI TV and on the show, *I Love It* (2020) about his efforts and the efforts of his “collaborators” are making, in order to include this beloved animal, in the society of the island. He referred to the awareness-raising actions of the local community, both through the education spaces, and with other activities in order to have a global approach to cat protection, through adoptions, but also the sterilisation program that has been implemented in Syros for many years.

Why Cats?

In Ano Syros, you find them everywhere ... in the picturesque stone streets... in the squares... in the small yards... on the thresholds of the houses... on the terraces... (Figure 3). Proud, with a sparkling look and bushy tail, they claim the attention and caresses of residents and travellers. Cute, mischievous, playful and friendly, they roam confidently or lie loosely showing off their shiny fur. Their number “competes” that of permanent residents. This, of course, remains to be proven when their registration/ identification is completed in the continuation of our research. Most have specific points that spend most of the twenty-four hours. The combination of protection from the weather and the generous offer of water and food by the residents make them feel like they are at “home,” they appropriate the space; make it their “own”. Friendly residents take care of the necessary vaccinations and sterilisations. The cats in Ano Syros are not stray animals, they are essentially people's roommates and comfortably break the boundaries between private and public space.

All this makes them ideal for the double role of observer/observed in the context of this alternative mapping. It is equally important that the cat, as an extremely beloved and popular animal, contributes positively to the promotion/acceptance of the ventures in which it

participates. It is no coincidence that in September 2016 a group of creative people filled London tube stations with photos of former stray cats from Battersea Dogs & Cats Home and Cats Protection shelters. They did it because they took it for granted that people love cats and want to see them, so they could more easily communicate the message that “when people want to, they can join forces to change the world.”

The presence of cats can enhance the dynamic of even the most famous landmarks. The case with the “famous cats of the Hermitage” is typical. It is one of the largest and most recognisable museums in the world, and the presence of its cats not only contributes to its stronger publicity, but is a powerful attraction in itself. In the same way, the cats of Ano Syros can become its symbol and its best ambassador worldwide.

Figure 3

An Aegean Cat in Ano Syros (Archive of G. Eleftheraki & G. Tzamalís)



The Cat and Wandering in the Landscape of Ano Syros

From the first moment someone (passer-by, visitor, and traveller) finds himself in a place, he takes in a multitude of stimuli with his five senses. Corresponding feelings are created, inevitable comparisons are made with similar earlier experiences, perception is formed and finally the overall impression from the combination of these is registered in the memory, which will be added to the pool of memories.

Vision may be considered the dominant sense, but the final product results from multisensory processing. In several cases, a sensation takes centre stage: the smell of wet soil, the noise at a busy road intersection, the touch of warm sand on the beach in summer, the taste of a good wine. In other cases, the senses compete with each other on equal terms.

The observer is subjective to a very large extent, so any attempt to record/ capture/map a situation, a place, always contains subjective elements, despite any established standards that are followed. The conclusions can be very different, even for two people who

experienced wandering in the same space together. Even the same person can form a different opinion depending on his temporary emotional state and mood, interpreting and evaluating the same (theoretically) aesthetic stimuli.

The highlighting of this diversity and the approach with a “different look” is achieved in the present project by mapping (through) the cats of Ano Syros in selected routes. In this unusual approach, the cats of the settlement who are actually lawful permanent residents play the dual role of observer and object of observation. Through their multisensory stimuli, the cats become the new “eyes” for rediscovering the place, result in gin a description of the landscape from a new perspective. At the same time, however, they form an independent part of that cartography as a basic living element of the landscape.

Since cats are presumed to have high instincts and un biased emotional intelligence, using all five senses to understand their surroundings, the multisensory mapping becomes more objective by using the cats as the observers. Having the cats as the protagonists provides a more pure and primitive perspective. In addition, the existence of cats changes the urban and rural landscape and is an integral part of people's daily lives. Accepting them as equal “roommates,” provides more opportunities to describe the landscape (Hampshire County Council, 2012) and to disseminate information to the public.

Around in the Picturesque Landscape of Ano Syros

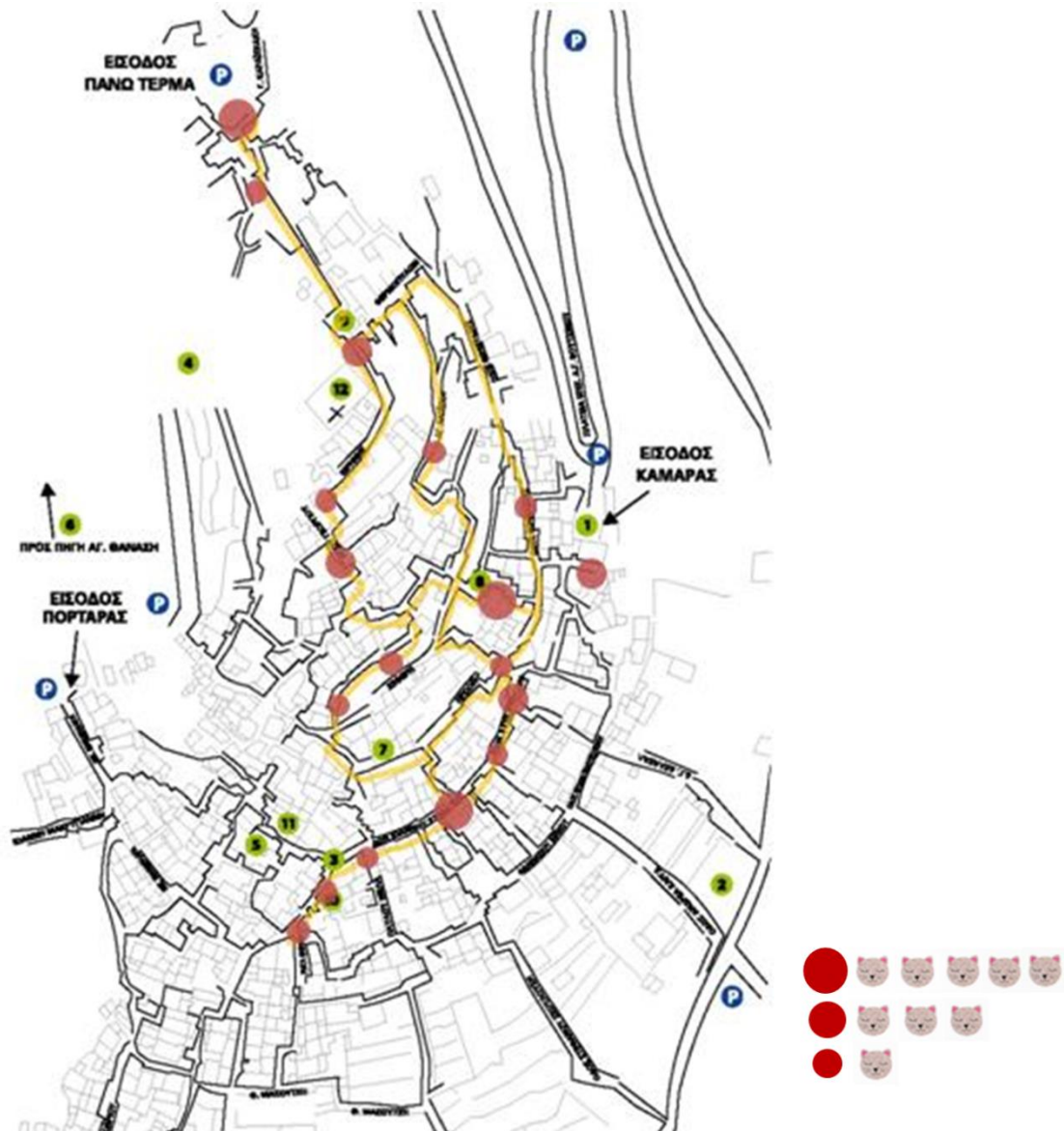
A cat count map was created showing the population density of cats on specific routes in Ano Syros (Figure 4).

The Strolling of the Protagonists and Participants

A map was designed showing the most frequently visited/preferred posts of the most recognizable cats in Ano Syros (Figure 5).

Figure 4

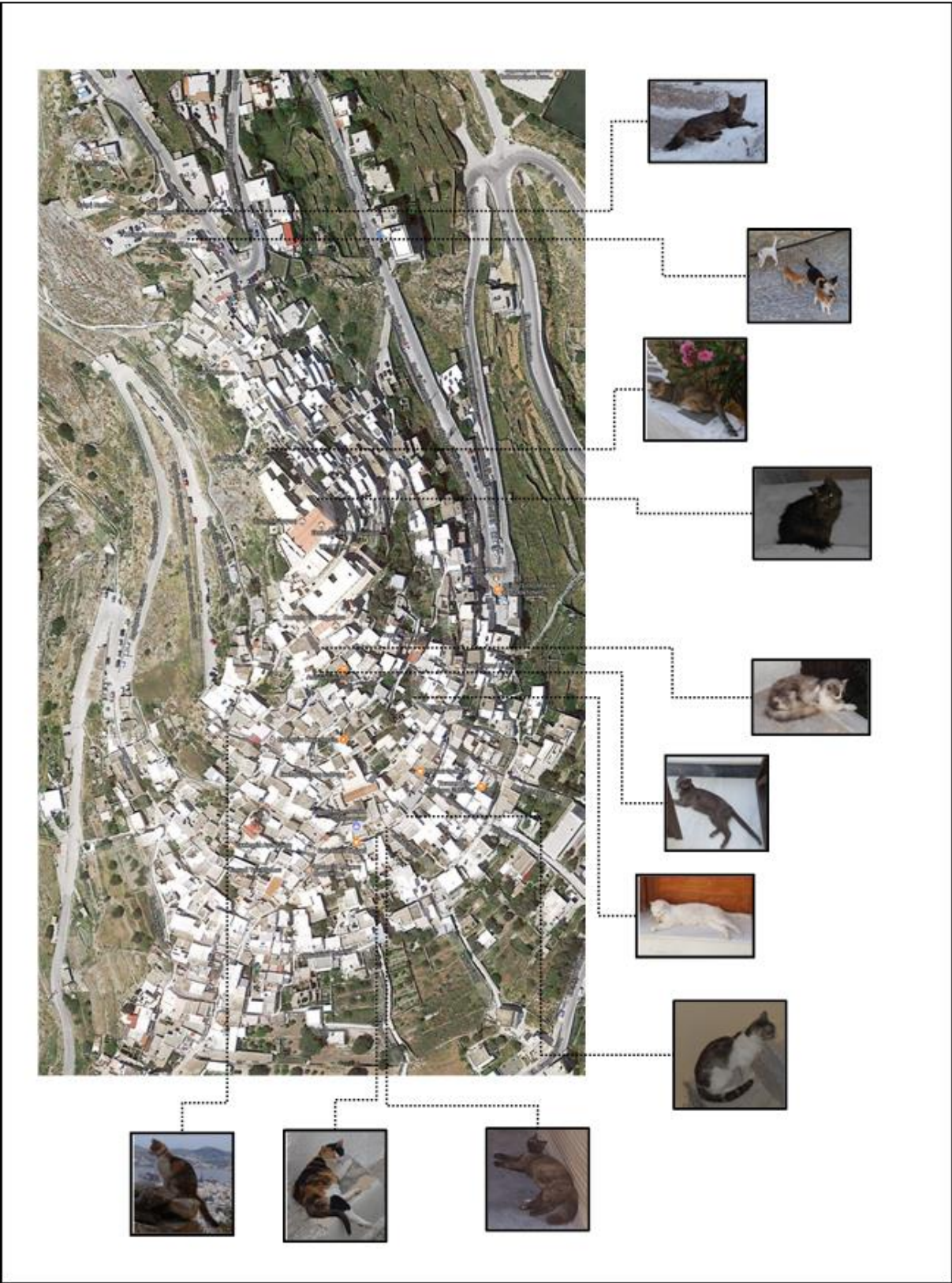
Map of cat's concentration on selected routes in Ano Syros¹⁰ (provided by the authors)



¹⁰ Map background: http://www.syrosagenda.gr/2012/07/blog-post_1899.html#.Wh8YrdJl_cs.

Figure 5

Map With the Most Frequently Visited/Preferred Posts of the Most Recognizable Cats in Ano Syros (provided by the authors)



The Cats Narrate the Landscape of Ano Syros on a Hot Day of June

According to Suzanne Keen (2011), anthropomorphism as a human possibility appears to be able to enhance our empathy for non-human beings. Empathy in turn is the basis for developing an attitude of sympathy towards other animals. It could potentially develop a multitude of ethical reflections on the way we deal with everyday issues related to the environment, nature, flora or fauna.

Figure 6

Poster: *The “CATography” of Ano Syros. A Different Narration*



In this context, snapshots taken from various points of interest in the settlement of Ano Syros are then used to create a cute narrative of the landscape through the eyes of the cats

themselves, with the cats as the main characters (Figure 6). We created very short illustrated stories, giving anthropomorphic elements to cats. In these stories, the cats of the settlement describe what they perceive with their senses, such as the coolness of the breeze to the north part of the settlement. They talk about their feelings created by the contact with the human space, such as feelings of enjoyment, during a hot summer day, in the small shady courtyard of a residence of Ano Syros, the bliss from seeing the peaceful landscape of the port of Hermoupolis during the afternoon, the joy they feel because they will play with the other kittens, the peace of silence and much more.

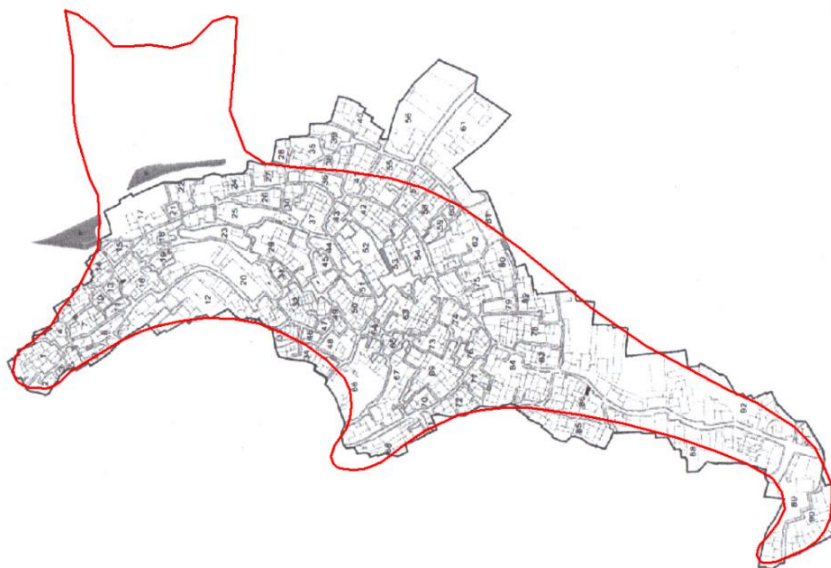
An anthropomorphic approach, with these popular tourists – residents as the main characters in the photographic composition, can highlight the peculiarities of the region with humour and unexpected clarity. In addition to providing insight in to the local atmosphere, it also helps raise awareness of the importance of preserving and promoting the island's cultural and architectural heritage. Also, it can contribute to the protection and care of this precious domestic animal.

Epilogue

This different narration is essentially a creative game of exploration and discovery of Ano Syros, inviting the spectator and, at the same time, potential visitor, to follow, study, discover or rediscover the *Genius Loci* (Norberg-Schulz, 2009), the physiognomy of the place and, ultimately, fall in love with Ano Syros.

Figure 7

Design Representation of The “CATography” of Ano Syros by G. Eleftheraki & G. Tzamalís



Place marketing consists of strategically designed processes that rely on a deep knowledge of place image and place identity (Deffner, 2012). According to Porter (2016, inside cover) "The Landscape – incorporating tangible physical space as well as intangible concepts, narratives, images, and experiences of place – is constructed by a number of creative industries". Against this background and accepting that cats are an inseparable part of island life and landscape, together with the dynamics of these mass adorable and popular pets, the development of innovative digital applications that promote Ano Syros with a fun and playful spatial performativity can play an important role in place marketing and certainly constitutes one of the scopes of this project.

"The real journey of discovery does not include looking for new landscapes but having new eyes" Marcel Proust Quotes. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved March 26, 2024, from BrainyQuote.com Web site: https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/marcel_proust_107111.

Acknowledgments

Warm thanks to Prof. Emer. Josef Stefanou from the School of Architecture, National Technical University of Athens, Honourable President of the Syros Institute/Institute of research for Sustainable Development, Culture and Tradition and many thanks to the members and collaborators of the Urban Planning Synthesis Laboratory of the School of Architecture NTUA for the beautiful experience of the seminar and the knowledge they offered us and inspired this project.

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