

# Storytelling and Urban Collective Consciousness: An Organic Brew of Participatory Creativity

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper examines how a cohesive urban collective consciousness and an all-embracing awareness of the multicultural oral heritage of a city can be achieved through storytelling. Borrowed from Narratology, storytelling is treated as an instrument to initiate and manage intercultural mediation within the urban transitory environment as well as to get the diverse local communities enthused with their creative engagement and participation in the cultural production-consumption process. Storytelling is argued to feed social interaction, enliven domesticity, harness the creative capital, and through an intercultural approach to communal interaction to contribute to an art-led urban regeneration. In telescopic logic, storytelling is seen as an artistic platform of oral nature for people to explore, re-create and re-enchant the city altogether.

## Keywords:

Storytelling  
Social psychology  
Urbanism  
Intercultural  
mediation  
Creativity

## Introduction

This paper attempts to investigate whether and showcase how the collective's perception and consciousness of the multicultural nature of a city, that of Thessaloniki in Greece, can be positively influenced and reinforced by storytelling. The principal hypotheses are two:

- I. Is it possible for the art of storytelling to encourage and add to the cohesion of an urban collective consciousness about and a perception of the multicultural nature of Thessaloniki?
- II. Is it possible for the diverse communities within an urban transitory environment to pro-actively converse about oral heritage and creatively participate in the making process of such a collective consciousness?

The structural body of the hypotheses' analysis includes five subsequent concepts: i. Storytelling can feed social interaction and empower the function of social networks between multicultural communities; ii. The reciprocity and exchange of ideas depends on the social networks' ties or else the transfer's intensity and density; iii. Through experience and sense making, emotional arousal and imagination-activation, the image of the city is impregnated with familiarity which nurtures domesticity; iv. Adhering to the principles of mediation, the participation in the sharing of stories and in the co-creation of such fosters communication and an understanding of diversity; v. The cohesion of a collective consciousness of the multicultural nature of a city becomes an organic brew of interaction and creativity which brings people closer to one another and closer to the city as well. At first, it is important for cultural policy-makers in Greece to acknowledge storytelling as an asset to performing arts for intercultural mediation. Secondly, storytelling can shape images for and give voice to the issues that concern the collective of an urban multicultural environment and it can contribute to its art-led regeneration. For such regeneration, academics, stakeholders and cultural practitioners ought to comprehend and invest in participatory creativity which invites the ideas of the collective, challenges them and nurtures them to fruition.

## Historical framework: what is storytelling?

Beyond all longitudes and latitudes whether they belong to the realm of reality or whether they swing in segues of extreme hyper-realities, stories travel. Stories speak volume about human motivation, contact and behaviour with either simple, trivial or allegorical vectors spotlighting the communication of significant messages. They transcend substance, style and structure and they x-ray the human heart. Arthur Ransome (1909) claimed that "in the beginning storytelling was not an affair of pen and ink. It began

with the warning examples naturally told by a mother to her children, and with the embroidered exploits told by a boaster to his wife or friends; [...] [storytelling was] generated by the vanity of man and the exigencies of his life" (6). Undoubtedly storytelling originated from oral narratives and mythology strongly connected with folk tradition and legends, carvings and symbols. "Myths –stories of the gods, of heroes, and of great cosmic events- are told in all of the world's many cultures. [...] Myths began as tales told around the fire, [...] later, with the invention of writing, people began to write their myths down and adapt them in new ways turning them into plays, poems, or novels" (Wilkinson, 2009:6).

Its origins are connected with religious rituals and sung poems such as the *epics* in ancient Greek Mythology narrated by the *rhapsode*. The *rhapsode* and the bards famous during the Celtic and Shakespearean times were the first professional storytellers. One of the most striking figures is the Bard of Avon or else William Shakespeare who mastered the art and experimented with structure and style. The style is of particular interest because it adds to the symmetry and the harmony of the text due to the rhythmic and mnemonic effect of the simultaneously production of two sounds of different frequencies resulting in a pleasant acoustic stimuli which assists the memorization, improvisation and delivery of the piece. The melody created balances the narrative language with the dramatic language and navigates the ear from line to line, scene to scene, rhapsody to rhapsody. This is a flagship to the birth of the art of storytelling because at that time the storyteller wove the words while playing his lyre as sound and meaning dictated.

An important benchmark in the modern history of the art is the stories of the two German brothers, Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm. Their work entitled *Grimms' Fairy Tales* is a collection of nearly two hundred stories which proposed the set up environment for folklore studies because of the detailed methodology of collecting, recording and documenting stories mostly of oral nature. Additionally, the immeasurable contribution of Hans Christian Andersen and Lewis Carroll aka Charles Lutwidge Dodgson cannot go unnoticed. Both storytellers and theorists produced collections and diaries of fairy tales discussing content and methodology too. Equally and notably valuable to the contemporary scientific analysis of the art was the work of Milman Parry who studied oral tradition and discovered formulas and patterns in the epic poetry and particularly in the work of Homer. *Storytelling: An Encyclopaedia of Mythology and Folklore* published in 2008 (ed. Josepha Sherman) is a definitive study about storytellers from all over the world and documentations of folkloric and mythic art.

Storytelling pertains to the logic and principles of Narratology with fictional and non-fictional narratives as structures for the transfer of values and concepts. Because codes operate on an abstract level, the content of a narrative is essentially imagistic,

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a mental phenomenon relying on the people's imagination and perception brain mechanisms. Stories are semiotic structures carrying autonomous signifying entities which communicate meaningful messages. “A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way [...] through semiotic media: written or spoken language, visual images, gestures and acting, as well as a combination of these” (Onega & Landa, 1996:3). Amy E. Spaulding argues that storytelling “is part of the legacy of being human” (2011:7) and that “it is a form of giving” (2011:8) hence it requires communication and interaction. Varying in design, length and content stories have been carved, scratched, painted, printed or inked onto wood, paper, canvas and other textiles, recorded on film and later on stored electronically in digital formats.

When people engage with narratives either masqueraded as storytelling or as a dramatic piece, stories become the powerboats that carry semantically and emotionally bound values; these values reflect social beliefs and ethics, concepts about life, cultural qualities and tendencies. By fleshing out characters and by breathing life into the narrative, the performative nature of storytelling sets up a compilation of themes and channels to capture the attention, challenge the mind and elevate the soul. The instruments employed are the plot, the characters and the point of view with the embodiment of these elements to present flux densities and velocities. For the author, storytelling (the term is used interchangeably as the “art of storytelling” or the “storytelling art” or “stories” throughout the paper) signifies the conception and the performative delivery of a series of events put together in the set up/ confrontation/resolution structure with a number of characters who present a dramatic need or/and an attitude therefore some action, narrated from a specific point of view and through semiotic media. The people who get involved into the processes of creating, processing and delivering a story attempt to venture into the hinterland of abstraction and to return to the coastline of description armed with designs, shapes, patterns, symbols, sounds and/or words to communicate their messages to others. When these messages get across, the tale is spread far and near because ultimately the tale is fun to hear.

### Contemporary storytelling practices in Greece

In Greece, storytelling is mostly associated with education and teaching purposes with weak ties to cultural heritage. Although more and more people express interest in it, it is an art fairly acknowledged and far associated with mythology, oral heritage and theatre studies. For instance, there is the Olympus Storytelling Festival (5<sup>th</sup> edition took place in 2012 in Kallipefki), the European Mobility Folktales Programme (took place in 2011 in Cyprus with Greece and other countries involved), a Summer School of Storytelling in the UK with some courses taking place in Amari, Crete as well, and a few other local events around the country which head for the preservation and promotion of the storytelling art quite successfully, but there are no specific cultural policies to maintain, safeguard and cultivate its technique. Academic research is at its beginnings and the transfer of knowledge is not facilitated. What is more, storytelling is not yet perceived as an instrument in the hands of stakeholders, cultural professionals, artists and amateurs to empower participatory creativity and intercultural mediation.

It is argued by the author that storytelling should be warmly embraced as such in order to preserve the diversity of the oral cultural heritage in Greece and in the Balkan region and in order to create a strong interdisciplinary network of practitioners and researchers who work collaboratively. This premise of the success ideology is an offspring of the blind faith in the tenets of a fading tradition in the cultural market that advocates that masterpieces are born out of talented individuals; an ideology which encompasses the belief in the potential greatness and glorification of the individual effort and accomplishment leaving participatory creativity out of the spectrum. But what is proposed here is to feed the empowerment of the cultural practitioners to rebel against the asphyxiating frames of individual greatness and to embrace the creativity of the collective. By listening to the voice of the collective puzzled by multi-ethnicity, by enabling people to utter their stories and share them, it is expected to conserve cultural heritage, maintain cultural diversity and establish a pro-active cultural

citizenship. This is particularly important nowadays when the arts are approached in an interdisciplinary manner; when the sustainability, prosperity and liveability of the cultural sector go hand in hand with the people's participation and depend on community awareness and animation.

## Conceptual framework: the structural body of the analysis

In order to understand the linkages between the five concepts and draw conclusions about the two hypotheses, at first it will be explained how storytelling can feed social interaction and empower the function of social networks; then how experience, sense making, emotion and imagination activation create strong connections between the people and the urban space; and later on it will be discussed how it is possible for the diverse communities to creatively participate in the making of a collective consciousness of the multicultural nature of Thessaloniki.

The social networks theories can show us the power of stories to unite and unify audiences. Stories are told to be heard making the bonding between the storyteller and the listener a Gordian knot unthinkable to untie. Portages between storytelling and the social network analysis help us understand how a simple story can rustle the people's attention up and bake miracles with connected minds and souls. There is the premise "that people are connected in vast social networks" and "the key to understanding people is [to] understanding the ties between them" (Christakis & Fowler, 2010: xi). In other words, "everything we do or say tends to ripple through our network, having an impact" on us and the network itself (Christakis & Fowler, 2010:28). Social networks are social structures made out of people, individuals or in groups, connected/tied by specific types of interdependency, relationships of any kind. The network's density depends on the nodes like the scheme of a tree on its branched leaves. Nodes can

be people, organizations, countries etc. and they shape paths of communication; relationships depicted as the ties in each network. It is through these ties that information, ideas, feelings, experiences, memories, etc. move around and bond people.

When the storyteller addresses the listener, the communication between them grows deeper than just an exchange of information. Sharing a story involves live communication, interaction and responsive engagement. People experience stories and share them with one another empowering the network effect. The network effect is the backbone of social networks because it promotes social and cultural awareness and most importantly it can cultivate social engagement and active participation. When people interact, they create content, ideas and share personal information. Through the connections that they build with one another by dialogue or/and any kind of communication, they influence the opinions, perceptions and behaviours of other people inside the network. The communication patterns can be algorithmically measured but the effect depends more on inter-and-intra-personal relationships affecting and affected by mindsets, moods, personalities, etc. which are difficult to translate on socio-maps.

The interaction in aggregate circulates ideas, images and concepts among networked people and there are responses, actions and reactions, approvals and disapprovals. Through the ties that govern their behaviour, an idea, an image, a feeling conceptualized by the story's form or content, is possible to root itself in the mindset of the listener and stay there until it is communicated to another person. There is an exchange of cultural information and alongside the flow of narrative there is a flow of idea-making that influences consciousness development. The spread and flow of ideas are very important to the formation of a collective consciousness. How ideas are instilled and travel from mindset to mindset is the cartography of which ideas are more likely to achieve that and which not; of which ideas have the dynamism to influence the flow and which not. This depends on the

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FIGURE 1. THE OVERLAPPING, COMPLEMENTARY AND MULTIFACETED ROLES OF URBAN STORYTELLERS

nature of the ties between the network whether there are strong ties or not. When the ties are strong, communication is facilitated, creativity is reinforced and diversity safe-guarded enabling mediation, exchange and deeper appreciation.

Stories and social psychology are bound by a common principle, the principle of engaging with emotions, feelings and images. Experience and sense making are key issues to our understanding of the charm of storytelling. Paul Ekman (1994) studied the nature of emotions and argued that emotions are responses to stimuli energizing appraisal mechanisms which operate almost automatically in order to respond to events. Emotions operate in interrelation with behaviour and several cognitive states. Bower and Gilligan (1984) researched cognition and emotions and stated that “emotions are units or nodes in a semantic network, with numerous connections to related ideas, to physiological systems, to events, and to muscular and expressive patterns”; “emotional material is stored in the semantic network in the form of propositions or assertions”; “thought occurs via the activation of nodes within the semantic network” and that “consciousness consists of a network of nodes activated above some threshold value” (10-11). Because emotional contagion fosters interaction and reciprocity, it is important for the audience to engage with the storyteller and to work with him/her along the way.

Because “emotions can spread between pairs of people and among larger groups” (Christakis & Fowler, 2010:35), oral stories which endure emotion

excitation and imagination activation with language, imagery and multi-sensory stimuli carry the dynamism to unite people, intrigue them, challenge their thinking process and motivate them. Therefore, when the storyteller lives the experience and shares it vividly, the people participate both physically, emotionally and spiritually. Neuroscience is demonstrating that the human brain organizes, retains and accesses information most effectively in narrative form. Actually, narratives serve as travelogues where language teams with stories in embryo form and serves as the motorboat for the telltale signs to travel inside the neurons and create vivid images and sensations. Storytellers as artists, entertainers and educators manage to pull people into the process almost gravitationally thanks to the powerful effect of indulging into the emotional experience.

Interaction inflates the experience with liveliness and because it is a shared vivid experience, people get emotionally attached to the urban space since they create meaningful images and interpretations about it in the story worlds. In order to examine why a shared experience brings people closer to a place, one should detect the connections between people and the place and how these are created and operate in everyday encounters which include narratives. Making meaning about the city derives from having cultural experiences of, about and in the city. Tony Hiss (1990) wrote about the experience of place that “sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of touch and balance, as well as thoughts and feelings” work in interplay stimulating our “simultaneous perception [which] helps us experience

our surroundings and our reactions to them, and not just our own thoughts and desires” (3-4). “Through one system of perception we see ourselves as observers of an environment composed of separated objects, but at the same time, through another system of perception, equally active, we look for ways in which we are connected to or are part of our surroundings” (Hiss, 1990:22). Thus, “city-making is a sensory, emotional, lived *experience*” calling us to think, perceive, feel, understand and recognize the dynamics built in the organic relationship between a city and its people (Landry, 2006:2-3). These dynamics can undoubtedly be expressed in urban stories.

One should connect with the transitory, multifaceted and often multicultural place, experience it and respond to it. Storytelling favours this idea and offers an opalescent palette of mottled instruments to achieve this artistically and creatively. The teller is the cartographer of urban tales. The teller can be anyone who walks the city both mentally and physically. Through physiological, emotional and psychological elements, they depict the dynamics of the city and influence behavioural social statuses. Yi-Fu Tuan’s (1974) theories are very useful to the notion of such connection with the urban space, familiarity and domesticity because he claimed that a place can be impregnated with meanings, feelings and emotional statements. Domesticity gives ground to deep interpretations and close encounters. “Our connections –partly shaped by our genes but also profoundly influenced by our culture and our environment- are made and remade every day” (Christakis & Fowler, 2010:250). How people connect with the city and with each other is influenced by and influences their social behaviour and their cultural, artistic, creative or innovative expressions/interventions. “Our culture shapes how we create and make our places, from the physical level –from the design of street furniture to icon buildings- to how we feel about ourselves and the place” (Landry, 2006:246). Our perception is bound by experience in the *habitus* and physical encounters *in situ*. Therefore, giving meaning to a place and shaping a consciousness about it requires experiencing and learning it physically and mentally.

It is also important to contribute to the meaning-formation by participating creatively to such processes. Storytelling calls for imaginative explorations and readings of the city and motivates people to re-assess and re-enchant the city. With respect to what Semir Zeki states “that seeing consists not of the passive reception of a scene but of the active construction of that scene” (Barry 128), the collective’s participation in the cultural production-consumption process is prominent to an art-led regeneration. In a multicultural city like Thessaloniki, the participation in the sharing of stories and in the co-creation of them invites the diverse communities to pro-actively converse about oral heritage and the advocacy of equal respect to their cultures. It is essential to maintain cultural diversity whilst promoting

participatory creativity and a pro-active artistic engagement in the re-imagining, remapping and regeneration of urban public space.

## Aims of investigation:

### *I. Minor field research as an indicator for theory generation*

To meet the purposes of this paper, a minor field research was conducted in Thessaloniki in August, 2012. The project was a one-day event, a workshop which took place at the city port. The aim of this case study was to observe, document, evaluate and serve more as an indicator for theory generation and less as a theory testing instrument. Particularly, the workshop included semi-structured interviews, storytelling and closed questionnaires conducted by the fifty participants. The outline was to detect how narrative shapes our impression of the city space and gives shape to our fleeting interpretations of everyday life merging myth with reality.

The collected data from the questionnaires and the evaluation of the qualitative work showed that the positive responses to the two principal hypotheses outnumbered the negative ones. In detail, the positive responses to the first concept which argues that storytelling feeds the “me-to-we” encounter fostering the transfer of ideas among diverse communities were 88%; to the second concept which argues that the exchange of ideas depends on the social networks ties’ intensity were 52%; to the third which argues that sense-making, imagination activation and experience-making create strong connections between the people and the city making it more familiar, the positive responses were 94%; to the fourth concept which argues that co-creating urban tales fosters communication and mediation between multicultural communities were 48%; and to the fifth concept which argues that a collective consciousness of the multicultural nature of Thessaloniki is interwoven with an understanding of diversity, a meaningful interaction and a creative engagement in the process of meaning-and-image-making about Thessaloniki were 86%. The generated theory was that it is possible for storytelling to encourage and enhance the cohesion of an urban collective consciousness and that it is feasible yet a delicate matter for the communities to creatively converse about their stories and heritage.

Even though the percentages responding to whether the storytelling art intensifies social interaction and strengthens the ties of the social networks are high, the percentages responding to whether participatory creativity feeds intercultural mediation and reciprocity are low. This shows that even though people believe in the powerful role of storytelling to bring people closer to one another, they seem not to believe that this engagement can handle sensitive issues of Interculturalism. It was seen that people are eager to listen to someone else’s story and open up to intercultural dialogue. But co-creating stories was something that troubled the participants who were not

ready to sit together down and co-create working on cultural diversity, intercultural creativity and mediation projects. This result is not to be taken lightly. The willingness of the people to listen is not enough to handle integration, social cohesion and prosperity based on diversity. Thessaloniki is a city with rich diversity in population and cultural heritage; a Balkan city where everyone can fabricate storyboards about each building, each neighbourhood tracking down every cornerstone in the behavioural models of the locals.

and develop an awareness of the urban multiculturalism and if yes, can we participate in the making process of such awareness by sharing stories and co-creating new ones? For the countries in the Balkan region, this question is highly significant and relevant to local and international cultural policies. Therefore, testing to confirm or reject these theories can be a very useful instrument in the hands of stakeholders and policy makers who handle the delicate issues of intercultural mediation, arts and urban public space management.

**II. Major research for theory testing is proposed**

This data may be relevant for theory generation and useful for our analysis nonetheless fairly poor in measurable entities. For that reason, a major research for theory testing is proposed. The research should involve more participants from the Balkan region and the methodology should include more in-depth interviews and workshops with content-selected urban stories to rethink and re-evaluate the ways people perceive the multifaceted, diverse and multi-flavoured character of their city. The cities involved could be Thessaloniki, Tirana, Skopje, Sofia and Istanbul and further on Podgorica, Belgrade and Bucharest as well. It is suggested to work upon different aspects of urban life such as transport, architecture, arts, education and/or health and discuss how stories impregnate the space with qualities of multicultural value. How it is that storytelling can add to the cohesion of a collective consciousness urging people to participate in the process, in the character-building of their city, and creatively converse about heritage and diversity.

To investigate and test these ideas with reliability and validity, the research team has to select the stories with specific criteria, plan thoroughly the interviews and conduct the whole in a coherent, well paced, organized and credible way. To acquire explicit knowledge and competence in the methods, the thrust of the thesis question should be clearly defined as such: *Do stories help us perceive*

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**Amending the cultural policies of oral heritage and mediation in Greece**

Storytelling can be the link for intercultural art projects between Greece and other Balkan countries. It is an art which can imprint socio-cultural meanings upon an urban space and it can make people consciously perceive the place’s multicultural nature and attach to it. Stories are born when emotions find their thoughts and thoughts their wording. Stories about the city which people remember, sustain, and retell, stories which people create on the spot, deconstruct and reconstruct, and stories which people share with one another, become assets of cultural urban heritage. Any forms of intangible traditional culture such as verbal expressions: stories, epics, legends, poetry, dances, ceremonies, rituals, etc. which are products of creative intellectual activity whether individual or communal, are part of a community’s cultural and social identity and heritage<sup>1</sup>; and therefore, should be maintained, preserved and protected. Dragan Klaic (2007) argued that “intangible cultural heritage covers

skills, cultural practices, and forms of cultural memory such as languages and dialects, songs and music, traditional dances, legends, proverbs, rituals, ceremonies, feasts and festivals” and that “communities have been accumulating, preserving and transforming these artefacts of human creativity throughout the centuries as a resource and a distinct

<sup>1</sup> The *Traditional Cultural Expressions/Folklore for the Protection of Tradition Knowledge* framework recognizes the value of respecting, safeguarding and promoting cultural diversity whilst empowering communities to support their customary practices such as storytelling.

marker of their collective identity” (31). For that reason, oral heritage is to be safeguarded with the utmost attention and is to be enlivened in programmes, projects, festivals and events which combine creatively the habitual with the alternative, the familiar with the unexpected.

“A culture is an active, dynamic, living organism only because of the active participation of its members in its codes of communication” (Fiske, 1990:82) and nowadays we are much accustomed to interactivity and any art that reflects such reciprocation and proactive involvement resonates deeply in our minds. Participatory creativity calls for bouncing ideas back and forth, stimulations, conversations, experimentations and collective inspirational and motivational imaginative explorations overflowing. Getting creative with storytelling is more than coming up with novel ideas and forming a structure of continuity; it is about communicating these ideas and embellishing them via interaction; it is about contributing to the ideas’ generation, adding to their form and playing with the variety of their delivery. Mediation policies should “foster a spirit of participatory collaboration designed to encourage new ideas to emerge from the group’s conversation” (Sawyer, 2010:370); a spirit which is remarkably handy when we talk about the multicultural nature of Thessaloniki and the ways people who belong to diverse communities perceive and understand and sometimes creatively others not,

converse about that part of the city’s identity.

“Every city has many stories. Every story a city tells itself anchors its sense of self and possibilities. Stories describe where a city has come from, how it sees itself now, where it might go, its personality and its perspective on life” (Landry, 2006:326). Urban stories help the citizens imagine, improvise and invest in the dynamics of the environment. “It is an exercise in telling a possible story about the city and how to get there. It energizes and provides direction. [...] The skills of the storytellers need to include an understanding of the various dynamics that make cities work” (Landry, 2006:300). The storyteller as part of a collective should understand, feel, accept and nurture these dynamics. Telling and “retelling the urban story is not about eradicating the past, but about building on it and using the elements of past stories to help us move forward. In doing so, we should examine honestly the myths that sustain us and give us our identity” (Landry, 2006:328). Milena Dragičević Šešić (2007) in *Culture as a resource of city development* argues that myths and stories, memories developed throughout the centuries are part of the city’s cultural identity and heritage. It is claimed that how people live, become conscious and behave, is an amalgam of different intra-and-inter-personal relationships bound by cultural diversity. Collective consciousness is a pervasive and important force in urban life because it empowers people to self-observe and take responsibility for their actions which permeate, portray



FIGURE 2. THE OVERLAPPING, COMPLEMENTARY AND ENCHANTING REALMS OF URBAN STORIES.



and challenge societal relationships. Collective consciousness depends on the meanings people as a whole entity associate and attach to their experiences based on their experiences. This kind of societal awareness of the multicultural image of the city is shaped by the events, the physical and mental processes that occur in the city.

Urban stories encapsulate the physical activity of the people, the mentality, the ideology, the routinized civility, the incarnated memories, the dreams and hopes, the neglected or over-expressed fears, the contemplated projection of their life. To understand how the people in the city feel and live is to understand the character and flavour of the city. Brecknock (2006) introduced cultural literacy as the capacity to understand, to appropriate and to develop the meaning of the city structures, city icons and city elements, such as neighbourhoods and public spaces, seems to be an important part of contemporary city cultural capital. "Cultural literacy is the ability to read, understand, find significance in, evaluate, compare and decode the local cultures in a place. This allows one to work out what is meaningful and significance to people who live there. We understand better the life cycle of the city in motion. We understand more what we see, feel, smell and hear" (Landry, 2006:245). We understand more when we energize our senses, stimulate our minds, open up our ears and grasp the insight from the stories the city narrates. We surely understand more when we tell our stories and communicate them to others. Story-making and storytelling help people dive into the local creative wisdom of characters, landscapes and plots found in tales.

The storytelling art can break through barriers and initiate a dialogue on folkloric arts, mythology and performing arts. It is significant for intercultural mediation in the Balkans to establish a communicative network of professionals and practitioners who engaging with storytelling in their work and art can witness the different nuances in the art between the countries, document the unique aspects, elaborate on the common concepts and collaborate on preservation and promotion of cultural diversity. Šešić and Dragojević (2004) comment that "the customs and everyday life of people in this region are in great part characterized by similarities, rather than differences" (11). The similar practices of living are traceable in the stories that the Balkan countries have. The challenge is to share them. The Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires left behind a mosaic of religions, languages and lifestyles where the Orient and the Occident meet. Stories can bridge the generations and show how people share the same emotions and difficulties. By doing so, xenophobic attitudes are weakened because there is direct contact and enlivened communication transferring knowledge about the tradition and cultural heritage of all within a multicultural collective. Storytelling for socio-cultural animation can help with fighting stereotypes and prejudices and with setting up mediation channels to ensure communication. Cultural policies ought to

enhance cooperation, partnership and active participation via legislation and strategies of advocacy and public outreach which cement a deepened way of regional artistic creation and development. Protecting the stories of a community means protecting the quality of artistic value, and investing in the enrichment of the storytelling art means investing in the empowerment of cultural communication understanding diversity and bringing people closer to one another by shared experiences. Cultural policies in Greece should focus on genuine cross-cultural collaboration based on partnerships and combined expertise axed by a highly participatory process of mutual decision-making in terms of strategy, programme and finance.

Also, there should be established a coordinated alliance with urban policies and policies of space management focusing on long-term visions on how to develop urban culture locally and beyond implementing the creativity of the civic society. To experience cultural diversity through the arts inspires people to collaborate and be active. Investing in participatory creativity especially in storytelling is an invitation for the citizens of Thessaloniki to exercise their cultural rights productively empowering creative societal relationships and intercultural mediation. The idea is simple: *enable*, *educate* and *engage*. To resuscitate urban spaces via participation to intercultural activities calls for honest communication about the realities of migration and diversity in the city, for open debates about cultural conflict and for freedom of artistic expression protected by agreements and programmes between the EU and the Non-EU countries.

Thessaloniki struggles with a variety of space management and policies issues such as the demise of century-old marketplaces, the misuse of streets and parks, the aging monuments and infrastructures and so on. To revitalize the neighbourhoods and recreate public-spirited areas, the communication between the professionals, the habitants and the stakeholders is essential. It is essential to treat the cultural differences of race and ethnicity, class, economy, aesthetics etc. not only as physical parts of the city, but also as public events, as the nervous system of the urban organism. Through storytelling that communication is facilitated because it is an art that cultivates and strengthens the ability to listen to other people's stories. Listening is irreplaceably necessary for any kind of prosperity and development. Listening empowers people with knowledge and awareness and instils in them empathy and appreciation for diversity. "Bringing together different points of view and trying to create a shared understanding among all stakeholders can lead to new insights, new ideas, and new artefacts" (Fischer et al, 2002:1). Jack Zipes (1995) in *Creative Storytelling: Building Community-Changing Lives* claimed that mythmaking can "create a home or community" (7) because "storytellers are not just performers; they may perform, but they are first and foremost listeners and animators; they listen to tales before telling or performing them; they listen to

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IMAGES OF THE URBAN LIFE.”

phenomena, experiences, and conditions, and they observe; then they share experiences and animate people to learn something from the shared moment of the telling” (7).

Storytelling can be a valuable engine of city and civic renewal by bringing closer and investing in the participatory creativity of diverse communities and by envisioning new images of the urban life. Open to the public storytelling practices can profit community-building and imbue people with a deeper understanding of the creative potential of this city allowing art to better the human condition. To better the urban life means to become aware of the identity and structure of the city and to being able to articulate and picture alternative images which train the eye of the observer, stimulate the imagination of the *flâneur* and secure the imageability of the city which as Kevin Lynch (1960) wrote in *The Image of The City* “facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment” (9) which invite the observer to “absorb new sensuous impact” (10). Creative cities do not just pop out of nowhere. Imagination, dedication and care are as much needed as high-quality designs and fundraising strategies. The storiness of a communal lived materiality, the consciousness of a multicultural storyboard imbued with meaning and experience ought to be penciled in the design papers.

## Conclusion

This research paper opts to have accentuated the significance of storytelling for an all-embracing awareness of the multicultural oral heritage of Thessaloniki and a collective creative response to it through mediation projects. It is strongly recommended to heighten public awareness of these issues providing a deeper sensitivity and a pro-active critical analysis of Interculturalism. It was explored how storytelling empowers social networks in the multicultural city of Thessaloniki; how social

psychology, experience, imagination activation and emotions influence the consciousness people have and shape about the urban wide-ranging society; how the co-creation of urban tales weaves the image of the city and how participatory creativity can enliven domesticity and foster intercultural mediation between diverse communities while preserving oral heritage. Stories were and are created to represent, make meaning of and convey various sentiments about human nature and culture as well as to represent imaginary worlds and abstract concepts. Stories manage almost unconditionally to bring magic into our lives and carry a dynamism that can set our emotional baggage free and inspire us to revisit our perspective. When it comes to storytelling, there is a lot to be learned, earned and dreamed.

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