The Journal of Public Space
ISSN 2206-9658
2026 | Vol. 11 n. 1
https://www.journalpublicspace.org

From Urban Safari to Becoming-Territorial.
Locality Perspectives of the Centre of Athens

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Abstract
This article examines how public space in central Athens is produced, evaluated, and contested under conditions of touristification, privatization, and neoliberal urban restructuring. In the wake of the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, dominant frameworks of public space quality - typically focused on safety, efficiency, and attractiveness for investment - are increasingly challenged. Public space emerges not as a fixed entity but as a dynamic and contested field where competing forms of value, use, and meaning are negotiated. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becomings alongside Ghassan Hage's notion of generalized domestication, the article conceptualizes gentrification and touristification as intertwined processes that produce a new "familiar" urban space. This is described as a domesticating pole, where public space is reshaped to accommodate tourism, transforming everyday life into a consumable and managed resource. In contrast, the article identifies a "wild" pole of public space production, driven by grassroots movements and informal collectivities. These actors cultivate alternative ways of inhabiting space based on care, coexistence, solidarity, and non-instrumental uses, challenging dominant urban rationality. Focusing on the territorial struggles surrounding Strefi Hill - a hill serving as a small-scale forest area in the Exarcheia neighbourhood in the centre of Athens - the article employs a comparative qualitative methodology to examine representations, discourses, and everyday practices of inhabiting public space as articulated by different actors. This methodological approach enables an examination of how divergent enactments of locality correspond to different evaluative understandings and criteria of public space quality, highlighting evaluation as a situated, contested, and politically embedded process.

Keywords: urban safari, domestication, becoming, urban movements, public space

To cite this article:
Loupetis, D. (2026) "From Urban Safari to Becoming-Territorial: Locality Perspectives of the Centre of Athens", The Journal of Public Space, 11(1), pp. 5-30. doi: 10.32891/jps.v11i1.1899.

This article has been double blind peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.

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Introduction: Strefi under siege

Strefi Hill, a small, forested elevation at the northern edge of Exarcheia in central Athens, has in recent years become a focal point of intense urban conflict. Despite its modest scale, the hill constitutes one of the few freely accessible green spaces in a densely built neighbourhood, functioning for decades as a site of everyday coexistence among residents, migrants, activists, and visitors. Since 2021, however, it has been at the centre of a contested redevelopment project promoted by the Municipality of Athens in collaboration with private real-estate investments. What was initially framed as the regeneration of a 'neglected' public space, quickly evolved into a broader struggle over who has the right to inhabit the city, under what conditions, and according to which values.

The conflict unfolded through a sequence of escalating interventions and responses. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the Municipality announced a redevelopment plan through a sponsorship agreement with Prodea Investments (a major real-estate company active in the area), presenting it as an act of environmental restoration and public benefit. Shortly after, fencing, construction works, and a permanent police presence transformed the hill into a controlled and partially inaccessible zone. From 2022 onwards, repeated police operations, identity checks, and violent dispersals targeted residents, assemblies, and everyday users, while self-organized spaces in the surrounding area were evicted. In parallel, local inhabitants and grassroots collectives organized assemblies, reappropriations, and continuous activities on the hill - from maintenance works to collective kitchens and cultural events - sustaining a persistent presence despite repression. In 2024, after 16 months of continuous struggles from local movements, multiple judicial proceedings and the election of a new mayor, Prodea Investments were forced to abandon the project and leave the hill. Still, policing remained constant, suggesting that what is at stake exceeds any single project, and concerns the wider reconfiguration of urban life.

The hill cannot be understood independently of its location within Exarcheia, a neighbourhood that occupies a singular position in the political and symbolic geography of Athens. Historically associated with student movements, anarchist and leftist politics, squatting, and self-organized infrastructures, Exarcheia has long been constructed both as a space of resistance and as a space of disorder. In dominant narratives, it appears as an enclave of lawlessness requiring immediate intervention, a representation that actively prepares the ground for its imminent transformation. In the context of post-crisis urban restructuring, where central Athens has become a field of intensified investment driven by tourism and real-estate speculation, such representations legitimize new regimes of control. Thus, core public spaces of the neighbourhood - such as Strefi Hill and its central square - are increasingly targeted by private capital and institutional policies for the release of their economic and touristic potential.

Within this framework, the redevelopment of Strefi Hill exemplifies a broader process through which urban space is rendered governable. The proposed interventions - reconfigured paths, new infrastructures, environmental improvement, surveillance - were justified in the name of accessibility and safety. Yet, for many residents, these measures signalled the imposition of a spatial order aligned with the transformation of Exarcheia into a consumable urban landscape. The installation of fences, the restriction of access, and the normalization of continuous police presence contributed to the experience of the hill as a space under occupation. What emerges is less a redesigned

public space and more a terrain in which inhabiting is progressively reorganized as a regulated and conditional activity, oriented toward circulation, observation, and consumption rather than open-ended coexistence.

In response, the Open Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill arose as a collective effort not only to oppose the redevelopment, but to reclaim the hill as a lived and shared space. Rather than limiting its activity to protest, the assembly developed practices centred on inhabiting the hill otherwise: regular assemblies, collective maintenance, cultural events, children's activities, and everyday gatherings. Through these practices, the hill is not simply defended but actively reproduced as a social environment grounded in care, co-presence, and mutual responsibility. The conflict thus unfolds at the level of everyday life, perceiving public space as a living terrain shaped by encounters, attachments, and collective experimentation.

This article approaches the struggle over Strefi Hill as an entry point into broader transformations affecting contemporary cities. Processes of gentrification and touristification do not only reshape the built environment but mold the ways in which urban space is perceived, inhabited, and made meaningful. In this sense, urban space appears simultaneously as a field of domination and as a terrain of struggle, making it central for understanding the dynamics of contemporary contentious politics, as well as the emergence of broader political alternatives (Lefebvre 2014). While the conflictual nature of public space has been explicitly linked with the framing of urban order as coercively produced (Mitchell 2003), existing literature on public space evaluation has often focused on criteria such as accessibility, inclusivity, sociability, comfort, vitality, and democratic participation (Low 2022; Madanipour 2010; Mehta 2014). While these approaches provide important tools for understanding the social production of urban environments, they frequently treat evaluative categories such as "safe," "successful," "vibrant," or "inclusive" as normatively self-evident. This article instead approaches evaluation itself as a contested political process through which different forms of urban life are rendered legitimate, governable, desirable, or disposable. Finally, the increasing importance of the local in articulating counter-narratives reflects also to what Wills (2013) describes as a *reterritorialisation of politics*, in which everyday spaces of life become key sites of collective subject formation. By tracing the conflict around Strefi Hill through discourses, representations, and practices, this article argues that such struggles reveal not only competing claims over space, but fundamentally different modes of inhabiting the city—between processes that seek to domesticate urban life and those that insist on keeping it open, relational, and irreducibly wild.

1. Locals, wilds, domesticated: Urban domestication and the production of familiar space

Within critical urban studies, domestication has often been employed as a macro-narrative describing processes through which cities are stripped of historically defining forms of public life. Zukin (2009) frames domestication as a generalized condition in which authentic public spaces diminish as "wilder" neighbourhoods undergo aesthetic upgrading through the arrival of establishments like Starbucks, reshaping local cultures and displacing longtime residents. Similarly for Bondi (1998, p. 195), gentrification functions as a process that "turns history into heritage, and untamed urban wilderness into domesticated urban landscapes," linking domestication to both the conquest and

management of urban uncertainty, while Allen (2006) examines Berlin's Potsdamer Platz as an insidious form of power underpinning new public spaces, though he identifies an inclusive yet "staged version of publicness" (p. 453).

Across these approaches runs a common thematic: the problem of relating to spatial otherness. The commodification of urban space is presented as coextensive with the management of uncertainty, aligning with concerns about securitization, pacification, ordering, disciplining, homogenizing, commercializing, and controlling contemporary public space. Stavrides (2024) further explores domestication as a process of taming the "wild" territories that constitute the city's *externality* to society, framing it as a process that "seeks to maintain urban ordering within the main imperatives of contemporary capitalism" (p. 21). Here, taming acquires a more ambiguous meaning. Rather than referring solely to pacification or homogenization, it points to a *shift in perspective* in which what was once external and threatening - such as nature - becomes something "that can be put into the service of the city" (Ibid., p. 23). In this sense, the "wild" refers less to qualitative value than to a social imaginary of the unfamiliar Other.

The question of *beneficiality* is central across other disciplines as well. Koch and Latham (2021) note that research in anthropology (Ingold 2000), media and technology studies (Berker et al. 2006), social history (Kasson 1978), and post-socialist studies (Stenning et al. 2010) converges in conceptualizing domestication as a process through which relations between humans and other entities - objects, ideas, or forms of life - gradually stabilize into arrangements experienced as useful or mutually beneficial. Domestication thus functions as an analytical concept, illuminating how initially unfamiliar or alien relations become familiar, routinized, and productive.

Yet the notion of mutual benefit is itself complex. Bökönyi (1989) observes that domestication presupposes cultural and morphological transformations, differentiating domesticated species from their wild counterparts. Consequently, the entity benefiting from domestication is no longer identical to its pre-domesticated form. In this sense, the experience of mutual benefit in domestication "does not stop it being a relation of power structurally grounded in the initial practices of capture and taming that initiated it" (Hage 2017, p. 69). While biological analogies are always dangerous, they highlight domestication as a mode of domination aimed to appear as non-domination, a struggle to make entities partake in the making of one's home, that simultaneously constitutes a mode of aggression and exploitation.

Ghassan Hage's notion of *generalized domestication* pushes this paradox further by reframing domestication as a *mode of existence*: a way of "inhabiting and deploying oneself in the world, that in the process of relating, creates the very world it relates to" (Hage 2017, p. 64). In this sense, domestication brings into being a world whose defining feature is that entities acquire meaning only insofar as they *exist-for* a domesticating subject. Central to this process is the *fantasy of viability*: the production of a meaningful environment allowing subjects to experience the world as inhabitable, stable, and worth sustaining (Ibid., p. 65). This fantasy simultaneously masks the extractivist nature of domestication that relies on: a) maximal occupation of space and imposition of the occupier's interests as its organizing principle, b) socio-spatial extractivism maximizing the domesticator's benefit, and c) construction of difference between domesticator and domesticated experienced as polarity (Ibid., pp. 71-80). Domestication can thus be understood as the ongoing project of creating and sustaining viable spaces, while simultaneously operating as a classificatory apparatus: a set of tools through which

societies identify, interpret, and evaluate difference as either threatening or beneficial, guiding processes of integration or exclusion.

In a broader sense, this understanding resonates with Camatte (2006), who argues that capitalist modernity produces a generalized domestication of human life itself. Domestication reorganizes existence according to the requirements of capital, so individuals come to experience imposed order as natural and unavoidable. Within this framework, gentrification and touristification can be conceptualized as two expressions of the extractivist logic of exogenous urban transformation (Sassen 2015; Panico 2020; Rossi 2022), oriented toward producing familiar, manageable spaces capable of sustaining the capitalist fantasy of urban viability: a coherent reality in which all events and relationships can be assigned a market value (Wacquant 2012; Vogl 2015). Sarah Schulman describes this as *gentrified thinking*: a dominant way of perceiving and inhabiting the city that "replaces most people's experiences with the perceptions of the privileged and calls that reality" (Schulman 2013, p. 161). Such logic produces a "strange notion of happiness" requiring denial of others' experiences, assessing everyone by their utility, and then acting accordingly (Ibid.).

Urban growth is thus narrated as de facto improvement (Brawley 2009), yet this sense of progress relies on erasing minor or marginalized experiences. Streets, squares, parks, and small public spaces are reshaped to align with globally circulating imaginaries of neoliberal urbanity, and channel leisure and consumption practices into the urban field, while pushing away forms of life associated with unpredictability (Boer 2023). Poverty, homelessness, social minorities, informal gatherings, and political contestation are penalized, legitimizing intensified surveillance, policing, and regulation (Smith 1996; Mitchell 2003). As the hegemony spreads, alternative forms of urban life struggle to claim space (Pettas 2018; Stavrides 2016), and counter-hegemonic practices are marginalized or rendered invisible by reducing exposure to radically different people, objects, and ways of being (Boer 2023).

Consequently, displacement and deterioration of neighbourhood social fabric (Sassen 2015), loss of well-being and affective discomfort (Łojewska 2023), commodification and consumption of alternative urban life (Zukin 2009; Maitland 2010) are not incidental, but integral to securing an urban environment functioning as a domesticated landscape for capitalist expansion. Within this logic, the tourist emerges as the central figure: transient, economically valuable, and requiring urban space to be rendered legible, safe, and affectively comfortable. If neoliberal urban transformation functions as a mode of world-making, the touristic experience becomes its privileged mode of inhabiting the city: a mode of relating that deterritorializes urban environments, only to reterritorialize them as consumable products.

2. Urban movements as anti-domestication imaginaries: inhabiting against classification

If generalized domestication describes a mode of world-making in which urban space comes to *exist for* the domesticator, then contemporary urban movements can be understood as practices that interrupt this process by contesting the very conditions through which urban reality is made viable. As argued in the previous section, neoliberal urban transformation produces environments structured to sustain a specific fantasy of viability, one that privileges familiarity, security, and economic usefulness, while

marginalizing forms of existence, assessed as non-beneficial or threatening for the reproduction of capitalist urban order. From this perspective, conflicts around gentrification and touristification (Rossi 2022), initiatives reclaiming public space (Stavrides 2016), or struggles against privatization and policing (Koopman 2010) cannot be reduced to disputes over planning or resource distribution, since they reveal deeper conflicts over the ways in which the city can be inhabited, and over who is allowed to participate in its production (Lefebvre 2014; Butler 2011; Stavrides 2016). Social movements and grassroots initiatives thus may possess the capacity to rearrange the "distribution of the sensible," in Rancière's (2010) terms, while actively reconfiguring the field of what can exist, affirming that "another possible is possible" (Escobar 2020). Approached in this way, struggles over territory can be understood as conflicts over possible urban realities (Stavrides 2019; Mauvaise Troupe Collective 2018). Territorial struggles simultaneously confront the capitalist social relations imposed by state and market (Stavrides 2019), while reconceptualizing territory itself as "a process that defines space through patterns of relations" (Brighenti 2010, p.57), as well as through the multiple meanings, symbols, identities, and representations of place and community that shape it (Arampatzi 2017). Within this understanding, minor or marginalized processes of reterritorialisation from below are able to challenge the legitimacy of dominant spatial assemblages, producing *territories-in-resistance* (Stavrides 2019): expanding and inclusive spaces-in-the-making that host specific collectivities of struggle while tending toward wider networks of solidarity and cooperation.

Such emergent spaces can function as familiar spaces of alternative urban ecosystems: laboratories for grounding, reworking, and negotiating broader political alternatives in everyday life contexts (Arampatzi 2016a). In turn, they produce *alternative social rationalities* (Stavrides 2019), based on mutual care and the recognition of interdependency (The Care Collective 2020), solidarity experiments and non-commodified means of social reproduction (Graeber 2011), practices of commoning and participation (Stavrides 2016), or forms of cooperation and coexistence (Mauvaise Troupe Collective 2018). To defend a territory is, therefore, also to defend what has been created there, what has been lived through while defending it, the traditions and forms of life that have taken shape there, and the particular ways of relating to environment, community, and everyday existence; what Escobar (2001) describes as *the politics of the defence of place*.

In this perspective, territory is not a passive container of social action, but something enacted through embodied practices that simultaneously transform those who inhabit and the space they inhabit (Escobar 2017). Feminist and decolonial approaches in Latin America employ the idea of *body-territory* to further emphasize this co-constitution, where the defence of nature, land, neighbourhood, or public space is inseparable from the defence of the forms of life inscribed in the body itself (Gago 2020). Anti-gentrification and anti-touristification struggles could then be identified as *anti-domestication movements*, contesting the life-as-asset logic of extractive capitalism while sustaining, through collective practices of coexistence, the social and ecological conditions necessary for the reproduction of life in local communities (Chaves 2021; Panico 2020). Emerging through this process is what Liguori (2026) calls *the common*: a shared field of potentialities — memory, language, land, resources, symbols, practices - that belongs to the many-as-such, cannot be seized by state or market through classificatory inclusion, and "invents forms of existence that do not coincide with the

institutions offered by the dominator." In this sense, urban movements operate as counter-classification forces, dismantling "the borders erected between those who may potentially share common worlds" (Stavrides 2019, p.75).
Building on this understanding, resistance to domestication can be approached not only as the production of alternative spaces, but as a transformation in the very relation between bodies, subjects, and territory. While generalized domestication operates by classifying identities and stabilizing spatial functions, insurgent forms of inhabiting unsettle this order by dissolving the distinction between subject and environment, giving rise to what can be described as the political ontology of *becoming-territorial*.
Understanding an uprising as a predominantly territorial phenomenon (Consejo Nocturno 2018), practices such as occupations, barricades, and collective reappropriations of public space can be read as processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, in which political subjects do not act upon space as external agents, but become inseparable from the spatial configurations they produce (Mauvaise Troupe Collective 2018). As suggested in the notion of *body-barricades* (Cervantes 2021), in metropolitan revolts the body itself becomes infrastructure of struggle, while space is animated through collective co-presence, generating affective relations, and compositions of movement that act as "the imprint of another form of organizing the world that is taking place." In Deleuzian terms, such processes can be understood as *becomings*: disjunctive syntheses that deterritorialize both subject and environment, producing new assemblages in which land, infrastructure, objects, animals, plants, and bodies enter in relations of reciprocal differentiation (Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Viveiros de Castro 2014). If to inhabit a territory is first of all to "experience ourselves territorially" (Consejo Nocturno 2018), then becoming-territorial is to belong to it as much as it belongs to you, to shape together an alliance, a pack, a herd, a multitude. Becoming-territorial thus names a mode of inhabiting that corresponds to what Liguori (2026) describes as a theory of *resistance as world-building*: a territorial experiment that suspends the cartographies through which urban space is rendered governable, in which forms-of-life enter into intimacy with the most sensitive parts of a territory, extending, multiplying, and taking shape through the gradual construction of alternative dependencies in the rhythms of collective resonance.

3. Domesticating and wild poles as analytical methodology

To approach the conflict around Strefi Hill, this article adopts a methodological distinction between the *domesticating pole* and the *wild pole* as analytical positions that allow the comparison of different ways of imagining, representing, and inhabiting urban space. As argued in the previous chapter, generalized domestication operates by rendering space predictable, governable, and oriented toward consumption, producing environments aligned with the needs of administration, security, and capital accumulation. Within this framework, gentrification and touristification can be understood as different expressions of the same *domesticating process*. As Panico (2020) observes, gentrification often entails radical reshaping of urban fabric through demolition, displacement, and redevelopment, whereas touristification tends to preserve and immobilize the image of place as authentic, maintaining built and social landscapes in a fixed, marketable guide through patrimonialisation, aestheticization, and multicultural commodification. Rather than opposing tendencies, these processes

function as complementary modalities through which spatial otherness is appropriated. The domesticating pole, therefore, operates as a double bind, oscillating between *extensive strategies of control* - regulation, policing, exclusion, spatial restructuring - and *intensive strategies of incorporation*, through which alternative forms of life are reframed as consumable difference. In this sense, characterizations like "authentic", "safe", "accessible", or even straightforward "touristic" are pre-decided as inherently positive evaluations of public space.

Opposed to this logic, the wild pole does not designate a symmetrical position, nor simply the negation of domestication, but a different mode of relating to spatial otherness that resists dominant classification. Following Halberstam's (2020) understanding, instead of being constituted as society's outside, wildness introduces a surplus of possibilities within it, opening access to what remains unknown, excessive, or disorderly in relation to established forms of governance. Co-extensively, the term wild is used to name a field of potentiality in which modes of inhabiting remain open to difference, rather than to evoke a natural state, absence of order, or a morally superior condition. From this perspective, the wild pole gestures towards an evaluation of public space that is inseparable from its capacity to sustain openness, to nurture coexistence, and to give birth to unpredictable forms of collective becoming. To operationalize this framework, the conflict around Strefi Hill is examined through the comparative study of discourses, representations, and practices between the Municipality of Athens, touristic platforms (such as AirBnB, TripAdvisor, GetYourGuide, etc.), and the Assembly for the Defense of Lofos Strefi. All three actors were selected as representatives of broader dynamics (state institutions, globalized market and social movements) involved in the production of locality (Massey 1994; Gupta & Ferguson 1997), each corresponding to a distinct mode of inhabiting the city. The comparative procedure examined how different materials articulated recurring themes related to safety, accessibility, authenticity, care, coexistence, urban value, legitimacy, openness, disorder, visibility, and publicness. Rather than coding materials through rigid categories, the analysis focused on how specific representations and practices gravitated toward one or the other pole, while also paying attention to moments where these distinctions became conflictual or contradictory. Public statements, promotional material, touristic descriptions, visual imagery, as well as practices of intervention, maintenance, occupation, and collective use are approached as elements of broader assemblages that constitute distinct collective imaginaries of what is felt, experienced and asserted as 'quality public space'.

The empirical material was collected between 2021 and 2026, during a period marked by the redevelopment of Strefi Hill, the construction of the Exarcheia metro station, the intensification of touristification processes, and the expansion of policing and securitization practices across the neighbourhood. The research draws on a heterogeneous archive consisting of approximately 33 public municipal statements and redevelopment documents, 128 tourism-platform descriptions and reviews, over 200 assembly announcements (social media posts, official website announcements and newspaper articles) and 86 assembly communiqués (posters, banners, flyers, leaflets), 38 visual renderings and promotional images, 22 photographs produced by the author, and repeated site observations conducted throughout the five-year period. Furthermore, the research incorporates a longitudinal timeline documenting at least 35 documented incidents of police intervention and reported police violence in Exarcheia and around Strefi Hill during the above-mentioned period, created by the author. The timeline was

curated through the examination of assembly archives, news reports, legal support documentation, publicly circulated testimonies, audiovisual material, and activist documentation, all of them framing policing as a constitutive dimension of the militarization of public space itself. Rather than functioning as a detached chronicle of 'gentrification incidents', the material gathered operates as a form of counter-archive: a situated attempt to render visible dispersed and frequently marginalized experiences accompanying both neoliberal urban transformation and neighbourhood resistance, that remain largely absent from official narratives of urban regeneration and public order.
The research is informed by the author's situated dual proximity to the field. Firstly, as a permanent resident of Exarcheia for the last 17 years, he possesses intimate, personal and extensive experience of the neighbourhood's urban and social change related to gentrification and touristification, as well as a critical understanding of its local ecosystem. Secondly, throughout the period examined, participation in assemblies, public discussions, protests, events, and collective activities connected to the defence of Strefi Hill and broader struggles around public space in Exarcheia was effectively engaged. This dual proximity enabled long-term observation of everyday transformations and access to ephemeral materials and practices that would otherwise remain fragmented or invisible. At the same time, it required continuous reflexive attention regarding political situatedness and interpretive positioning. The analysis therefore does not claim neutrality in a positivist sense, but adopts a situated perspective attentive to the conflicts, attachments, and forms of collective inhabitation through which urban space is continuously produced and contested.
All the photographs included in the article were produced by the author during public events, assemblies, personal walks, and everyday situations occurring in publicly accessible spaces between 2021 and 2026. Care was taken to avoid reproducing identifiable individuals without consent where possible, while platform-based and user-generated materials referenced in the analysis were anonymized where necessary.

4. Extensive domestication: Municipality of Athens and urban extractivism

In the conflict around Strefi Hill, the Municipality of Athens operates as the primary agent of the domesticating pole, seeking to reorganize the hill through extensive territorial control. The attempted redevelopment projects and intensified policing do not simply manage existing public space, but actively redefine the hill's function, who may inhabit it, and under what conditions. Official narratives present these interventions as necessary improvements in the name of safety, accessibility, environmental protection, and quality of life, emphasizing a supposed mutual benefit between authorities and residents. As former mayor Kostas Bakoyannis stated in January 2021 regarding Prodea Investments' "adoption" of the hill, the goal was to restore it to its "true" urban form and bring "forgotten" parts of Athens back into civic life (OTA Voice 2021), even though such neglect results from the municipality's years-long regime of *active carelessness* (Care Collective 2020). These narratives portray the hill as abandoned urban nature in need of activation, an "empty" space to be "filled" with economic and touristic activity. Beneath the language of care, such interventions reorganize territory according to external criteria of urban evaluation, while displacing or neutralizing existing forms of inhabitation.

A first step in this process is the production of a discursive field framing the hill and Exarcheia as problematic. The municipality's website describes this neighbourhood as a place where "rebels with, and quite often without, a cause have earned Exarcheia a reputation as the turf of anarchists and radicals" (Figure 1). Former and current mayors, as well as state officials, reinforce this framing by linking activist activity to obstruction and arguing that anarchists prevent the neighbourhood from reaching its "final form", as "there are those who are determined to keep certain parts of the region in a state of stagnation," while "the issue of order, social peace, and the rule of law in the region is non-negotiable" (LiFO 2025; Efimerida ton Syntakton 2024). Those who resist are presented both as 'minorities' and threats to the viability of the 'true' residents (Efimerida ton Syntakton 2022)." This discursive policy corresponds to Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira's (2014) notion of *territorial stigmatization,* where negative representations attach to specific urban areas, legitimizing exceptional control under the guise of protection. Through this polarization, resisting communities are stripped of locality, while the municipality's interests appear as its organizing principle.



Figure 1. Official description of Exarcheia from 'This is Athens', the official guide to Athens for visitors and residents, created and operated by the Municipality of Athens (This is Athens, n.d.)

Visual representations reinforce this domesticating discourse. Architectural renderings of Strefi Hill produced by Prodea Investments (Figure 2) depict a fully pacified, stylized environment inhabited by normative figures—families, couples, children—while conflictual or marginal presences are absent. Colors are playful, emotions harmonious, non-human entities absent, and materials standardized, creating an a-temporal and a-local atmosphere that detaches the hill from the spatio-historical processes that defined it as public space. As Latour (2002) notes, technical images produced within professional frameworks tend to appear as neutral descriptions rather than situated constructions, invoking a transcendent register of reason that shields them from contestation. These renderings aim to prefigure a completely pacified space, presenting a specific form of inhabitation as natural and desirable, while concealing the conflicts through which it is produced.



Figure 2. 3D renderings of Strefi Hill for the redevelopment proposal by Prodea Investments (OTA Voice 2021).

Gentrification never unfolds without violence, and the domestication of Strefi Hill makes this explicit. From the initial dispersal of residents on day-one of the constructions (Efimerida ton Syntakton 2022b), to physical attacks on parents (Efimerida ton Syntakton 2022a), prohibition of gatherings (Efimerida ton Syntakton 2022b) and blockade of children's events in 2024 (Avgi 2023), and the eviction of the Exostrefis squat in 2025 (The Press Project, 2025), policing repeatedly appears as something more than an issue of security management. Permanently stationed riot police forces and 24/7 surveillance produce a normalized *state of exception* (Agamben 2003) redefining presence as temporary, conditional, and revocable. Even after Prodea abandoned the project and after the election of the new, 'progressive' mayor Haris Doukas, police presence remained constant, indicating that repression secures the hill's development potential rather than the project itself. In this sense, policing unfolds as a repetitive spatial pattern through which domestication is materially enforced, utilizing fear as a tool of social cohesion that restructures the lived experience of the hill itself.

This regime reflects contemporary urban governance's reliance on spatialized repression. Graham (2010) argues that metropolitan power often operates through denial of access, controlled zones, and selective sovereignty, enforcing authority by regulating movement and presence. Random ID checks, face control, bans on gatherings, constant patrols, and targeted dispersals constitute a form of *active urbanism* (Ibid.) - a set of territorial practices through which repression stabilizes the conditions necessary for its redevelopment. Allan Paul (2024) describes this as *anaesthetic violence*: coercion presented as neutral, technical, and necessary, hidden behind rhetoric of safety and improvement. Police thus function as fluid urban infrastructure, cutting, blocking, and redistributing access in order to maintain controlled territorial occupation, revealing the colonial and extractivist character of the process.

Beyond policing, the occupation of Strefi Hill reflects a broader militaristic logic in which urban transformation requires neutralizing the material and symbolic conditions sustaining collective life. Following Hanafi's notion of *spacio-cide* (2012), destruction here is not a side effect of gentrification, but a primary lever of political pressure. The dismantling of watering networks, excavation of vegetation, damage to paths and public infrastructure, occupation by heavy machinery, fencing of public land, and removal of

self-organized structures, combined with the militarization of everyday life by police forces (Figure 3, Figure 4), constitute what Mbembe (2003) calls *infrastructural warfare*: the violent reconfiguration of the built environment aimed at disrupting the spatial conditions that allow collective life to emerge. The hill becomes both material and symbolic target whose control enables the reorganization of the surrounding neighbourhood according to dominant urban order. To take control of Strefi is not simply to renovate public space but to dismantle spatial supports of forms of life that exceed the capitalist vision of urban viability. Domestication thus extends beyond the hill, contributing to the wider domestication of Exarcheia, as the suppression of one central collective space destabilizes the social ecology that made the area a persistent site of dissent.



Figure 3. Pictures of the hill on August 2018 (three years before the project) and on June 2023, showing the ecological destruction caused by the Prodea Investments redevelopment project during the first year of its operations (Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.).



Figure 4. Left: Heavy machinery excavating the trails leading to the top of the hill. Right: Permanent police forces guarding the basketball court
(Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.).

5. Intensive domestication: consuming the Other and the urban Safari

While the previous section examined the Municipality of Athens as an agent of *extensive domestication*, operating through regulation, policing, and the material reorganization of

urban space, the tourism industry can be approached as a mechanism of *intensive domestication*, in which spatial otherness is not eliminated but reasserted as a consumable product. As argued in previous chapter, touristification depends on the preservation and stabilization of selected forms of urbanity, maintained as recognizable, authentic, and emotionally accessible, while conditions that could disrupt the fantasy of urban viability are displaced, neutralized, or rendered invisible. Following approaches in tourism ethnography and tourism geographies (Adams 2025), tourism is engaged as a situated mode of spatial perception and embodied encounter with locality, that utilizes representational, corporeal, and affective tools as place-making practices. With this in mind, touristic domestication is examined through the comparison of discourses, visual representations, and spatial practices of *tour-with-a-local* experiences offered to tourists by numerous touristic platforms (AirBnB, TripAdvisor, GetYourGuide, etc.). Although diffused within the urban fabric, these practices construct both Strefi Hill and Exarcheia as familiar environments for visitors, revealing how locality itself is produced as a field of economic, symbolic, and affective investment adapted to the requirements of contemporary urban capitalism.

Touristic domestication is first articulated through discourses that transform the unfamiliarity of the neighbourhood into a desirable experience. Alternative tours in Exarcheia, often described as "the Bohemian neighbourhood of Athens," promise access to a *different city,* inviting visitors to see Athens through the eyes of a local and discover places described as hidden, reclusive, or off-the-beaten-track, usually with the help of a guide who reveals stories and locations otherwise inaccessible (Figures 5). Verbs and phrases such as *step into, explore*, *discover*, *taste*, and *become* repeatedly used in tour descriptions, frame the active role of the visitor in shaping the tour-with-a-local experience, while urging him to be "not a tourist, but a traveller." User reviews reproduce the same narrative, emphasizing the excitement of exploring streets "you wouldn't find alone," discovering "secret spots," or seeing the "authentic city," presenting the experience as playful, surprising, and emotionally rewarding (Figure 6).

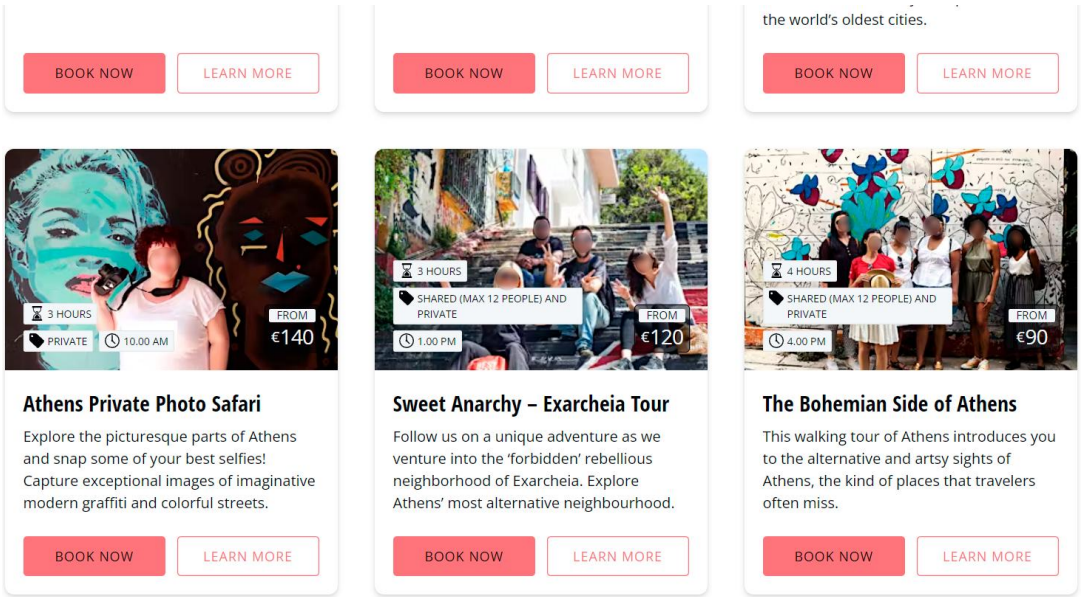


Figure 5. Various AirBnB Experiences organized in Exarcheia (AirBnB 2026a).

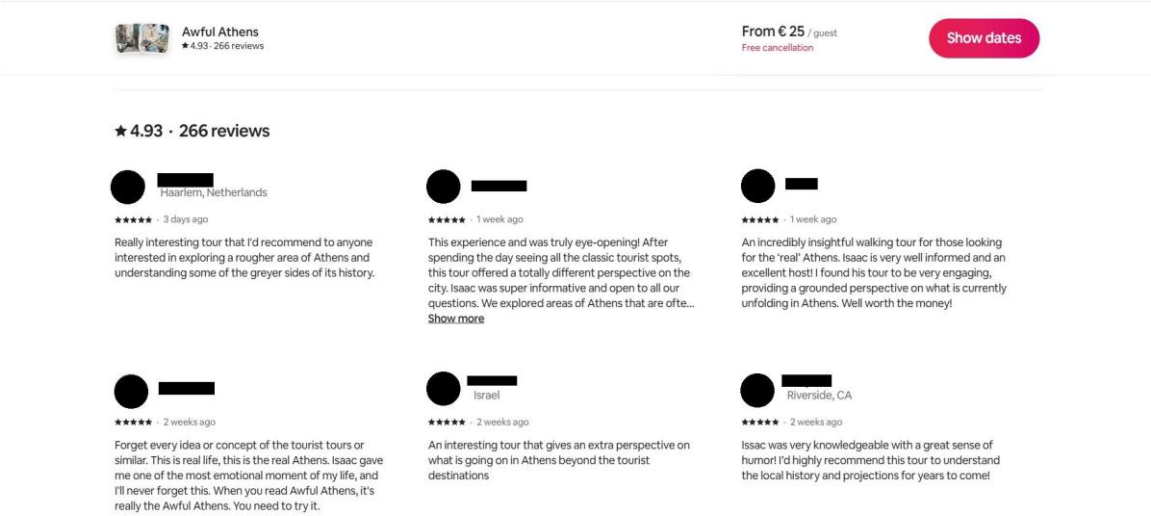


Figure 6. Reviews of the "Awful Athens" tour-with-a-local AirBnB Experience, describing it as an eye-opening experience (AirBnB, 2026b).

In this discourse, everyday life becomes a terrain of small adventures, by attributing aesthetic and emotional value to the ordinary, turning informal practices, social tensions, and everyday environments into objects of curiosity and desire (Urry 1990; Zukin 2009; Maitland 2010; Melchionne 2013). Through this affective economy, otherness is reorganized as an exotic commodity: the neighbourhood becomes attractive precisely because it appears unpredictable or transgressive, but with the promise that it can be approached without risk. Discourse itself operates as a domesticating mechanism, converting unsettling aspects of urban life into consumable narratives, that allow the visitor to enjoy the unfamiliar while remaining within the horizon of the capitalist fantasy of viability. The marketing motto "live your myth in Athens" then is less an invocation to Greek mythology, and more the revealing of the mythic properties of the touristic discourse itself: it doesn't hide or denies reality but distorts it (Barthes 1972).

Visual representations circulating through tour platforms, promotional material, and user-generated photographs play a central role in the domestication of locality, as they capture otherness while transforming it into a recognizable aesthetic quality. Photographs of guided walks, street markets, cafés, graffiti, and everyday scenes around Exarcheia and Strefi Hill present the neighbourhood as an aestheticized landscape of alternative urban life, where social diversity, informality, or even insurrectionary memory appear as picturesque elements rather than expressions of complex urban life (Petas et al. 2021). In this sense, the image operates as a classificatory device: by isolating fragments of everyday life and framing them as scenes of authenticity, it translates the unfamiliar into a stable visual code that can circulate within the expectations of the touristic gaze (Saito 2007).

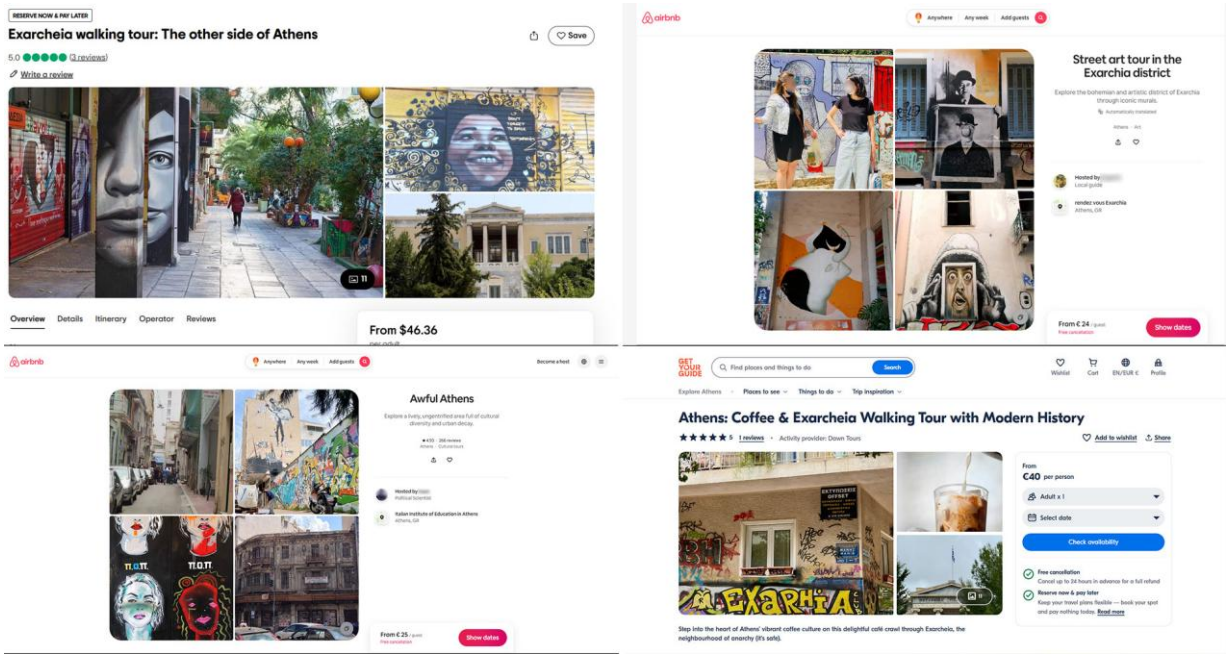


Figure 7. The aesthetic dimension of urban everyday life in Exarcheia as presented in tour-with-a-local experiences on various platforms (Author's screenshots).

These images do not only represent locality but verify the tourist's incorporation into it. Visitors are depicted walking, eating, or posing with guides and residents, presenting participation in ordinary activities as proof of belonging. Therefore, the photographic image functions as a kind of magic trace, produced in direct contact with reality and capable of influencing it; to be photographed as part of locality then, is to certify one's presence within it (Barthes 1981; Stavrides 2002; Azoulay 2012). The act of photographing becomes the means through which the visitor is temporarily inscribed in the multiplicity of the local, generating a new social geography in which tourism does not superimpose with the rest of the city, but it is incorporated to the daily dynamics of the urban realm (Cócola Gant 2015). From this perspective, the tourist becomes a new inhabitant of the city, a "resident on holiday" (Ibid.), and although its visit could last shortly, the presence of these temporal inhabitants is permanent.

Touristic domestication unfolds then through performative practices that organize an encounter with difference mediated by the market. In alternative tours around Strefi Hill and Exarcheia, these practices are staged so that the visitor experiences an embodied immersion into locality through a haptic connection to the urban environment. Walking, observing, cataloguing, and photographing the city resembles a form of urban tracking, where fragments of everyday life are captured and appropriated, turning the unknown into something tangible and finite. Borrowing Sontag's (1977) term, the recent touristic activity in Exarcheia can be understood as a form of *urban safari:* a guided tour into wild territory, where urban environment can be enjoyed as a living spectacle. The phone or the camera then functions as the intermediates for the construction of a fetishistic gaze, inscribing the diffuse nature of the everyday within the photographic frame, while simultaneously establishing a relationship of dominance over the photographed subject by maintaining a safe distance.

In the end, what is consumed is otherness itself. As Bell Hooks (1992) argues, consumption is not merely an action, but the dominant social relation of contemporary society. Consumer culture turns difference into a resource through which the subject can feel transformed while remaining unchanged, producing encounters with the unfamiliar Other that confirm, rather than challenge one's position (Ibid.). By encountering locals, tasting local cuisine and discovering hidden spots and underground vibes, the visitor can experience a temporary transformation into a local, while locality is reduced to a spatial product for mass consumption. Collectible like aerials on a postcard, the experience of everyday life as lived through the tour-with-a-local practices, is, in short, an experience of controlled encounter with otherness.

6. 'Strefi Free and Wild': locality, wildness, and the refusal of the domesticated city

If the redevelopment of Strefi Hill by the municipality and its touristic re-appropriation through urban safari practices both operate as mechanisms of domestication, the discourse, visual representations, and spatial practices of the Open Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill articulate an emancipatory spatial imaginary, condensed in the recurring motto "Λόφος Στρέφη ελεύθερος και άγριος" (Strefi Hill free and wild). Here, wildness does not signify abandonment, disorder, threat, or lack of care, but a positive condition of openness, multiplicity, and collective coexistence that resists the reduction of the hill to a controllable, profitable, and legible urban resource. As Halberstam argues, the wild designates forms of life that escape classification and exceed the normative structures that seek to discipline them (Halberstam 2020). Rather than be reduced to nostalgia for an untouched urban nature, the insistence on the wild character of the hill functions as a political affirmation of locality as something lived, produced, and defended through attachment, repetition, and shared presence. The wild thus emerges as the counter-pole of domestication: the possibility of a different spatial order, grounded in the ongoing production of locality through practices of inhabiting those bind bodies and desires to the territory.

In contrast to the celebratory language of redevelopment and the exploratory tone of touristic narratives, the discourse produced by the Open Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill is marked by a persistent sense of siege and urgency. Assembly texts repeatedly describe the transformation of the hill as an occupation carried out against the will of those who live around it, referring to police presence, fencing, surveillance, and construction works that render the space increasingly uninhabitable, as if "the hill is being handed over to investors while residents are pushed aside." (Lofos Strefi Assembly 2023; Athens Indymedia 2026). In these accounts, gentrification and touristification are not abstract processes but lived conditions that generate both material and affective loss of well-being. As these discourses reveal, displacement may occur even without relocation, when imposed spatial transformations produce estrangement from one's own environment and force residents to experience themselves as out of place within it (Łojewska 2023). Under such conditions, subjects may come to embody a socially produced otherness, perceived as incompatible with the controlled atmospheres of redeveloped space, a form of symbolic violence that penetrates everyday life (Ibid.). The communication of these emotions, as well the continuous documentation of the municipality's extractivist policies and contradictory

discourse, aim to serve as counter-narratives to the dominant rationality for public space. Yet, these same texts also operate as calls to collective resistance, repeatedly affirming the hill as inseparable from the lives - human or not - of those who inhabit and defend it. By claiming the space as common, free, and lived, the discourse actively produces the community it invokes, forming a political *we* that emerges through struggle itself, as the condition for the preservation of locality against its dispossession (Figure 8, Figure 9).



Figure 8. Left: Sign located on the top of the hill, May 2024. Right: Sign on the hill stating "The hill belongs to its tortoises", May 2024 (Author's pictures)



Figure 9. Left: Stencil in the streets surrounding the hill stating "AirBnB everywhere, neighbours nowhere", July 2024. Right: Flyer distributed during neighbourhood outreach campaign organized by the Assembly, June 2022 (Author's pictures).

The visual representations produced by the Open Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill depart radically from both the sanitized renderings of municipal redevelopment, and the exoticized realism of touristic imagery. Posters, drawings, and collages circulating in

calls for gatherings, festivities, and collective actions depict the hill as a dense and hybrid world populated by humans, animals, plants, and fantastical creatures, often merged in playful, or monstrous compositions (Figures 10). Rather than presenting the space as an ordered landscape to be improved or consumed, these images construct an imaginary of the hill as a living territory whose vitality exceeds the sum of its components. Such representations can be understood as counter-imaginaries that emerge in conditions of struggle, challenging dominant spatial narratives by appropriating and transforming their visual language through collage patterns, bricolage-type inventiveness, juxtaposition, and constant circulation in both physical and digital environments (Stavrides 2024). In this sense, they participate in what Latour (2002) describes as *iconoclash*, where images are produced not in the absence of previous representation, but in conflict with other images, exposing the instability of what is presented as reality. The recurrent appearance of these figures across posters, fanzines, flyers and announcements, sustains a shared urban imaginary in which locality appears as an innate quality of all forms of life inhabiting the hill, affirming a wild multiplicity that re-appropriates the production and sustaining of public space as a field of emancipatory potential.



Figure 10. Various posters and communication material of the Open Assembly featuring humans, animals, plants, hybrids, and the hill as a multitude
(Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.).

If the domesticating pole limits spatial engagement to controlled circulation, surveillance, and consumable experience, the practices developed around Strefi Hill multiply the ways in which the space can be inhabited. The timeline of actions organized by the Open Assembly reveals a dense rhythm of recurring activities: weekly assemblies, collective maintenance works, reforestation and anti-flood interventions, communal kitchens, picnics, concerts, children's games, sports tournaments, screenings, and open celebrations (Figure 11). Through this repetition, struggle becomes habitualized, not as an exceptional reaction, but as an everyday mode of relating to the hill. Such continuity can be understood through what Simone (2018) describes as *rhythms of endurance*, the capacity of urban residents to sustain forms of life through repeated, often modest practices that allow them to remain present within environments marked by pressure,

uncertainty, and control. At the same time, these activities actively re-signify public space as an *affective infrastructure*, sustained through relations of care, co-presence, and mutual interdependence, rather than managerial regulation (Kallianos & Karathanasis, 2021). Cooking together, repairing paths, planting trees, playing, or simply remaining on the hill, are practices through which residents renegotiate their attachment to the neighbourhood, and their position to the city as a whole. To inhabit then, constitutes a form of insurrectionary practice, as it effectively generates a plane of ungovernability, a binding, a *situating,* that entails the unfolding of an intimacy of experience between beings and territory.



Figure 11. Practices of collective reappropriation of the hill as a lived territory, organized by the Open Assembly. Left up: Collective kitchen, January 2026 (Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.). Left down: kids artistic workshop, January 2026 (Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.). Right up: Neighborhood basketball tournament, March 2023 (Author's picture). Right down: Event organized by the assembly titled "Public spaces for the needs of the people", April 2022 (Author's picture).

6. Conclusion: Evaluating Public Space Beyond Domestication

The conflict around Strefi Hill reveals that struggles over public space are not limited to disputes over management, accessibility, or competing urban functions, but concern

fundamentally different ways of valuing and inhabiting the city itself. To say it differently, the conflict concerns what kinds of presence, affects, temporalities, and forms of coexistence are considered legitimate within changing urban environments. On one hand, the Municipality of Athens and the tourism industry articulate a shared domesticating rationality, albeit through complimentary modalities. Extensive domestication, enacted through policing, redevelopment, and infrastructural intervention, seeks to stabilize space by eliminating uncertainty and imposing a singular vision of order. Intensive domestication, as expressed in touristic practices, does not erase difference but reorganizes it as spectacle, transforming the unfamiliar into a consumable experience. Taken together, these modalities also provide a broader framework for understanding gentrification and touristification as evaluative processes rather than merely geographic or economic transformations: they produce a city in which otherness is either suppressed or aestheticized, but in both cases subordinated to the reproduction of a capitalist fantasy of viability. Within this regime, evaluations such as *vibrant*, *alternative*, *authentic*, *safe*, or *accessible* do not operate as neutral descriptions of places, but as classificatory devices that predefine what kinds of urban life are considered desirable and economically efficient: public space becomes valuable insofar as it can be rendered governable, attractive, and compatible with circulation, investment, and tourist consumption.

It is at this intersection that the figure of the tourist emerges as the ideal subject of the domesticated city. Detached, mobile, and economically valuable, the tourist inhabits space through controlled encounters with difference, while the unfamiliar *other* is not eliminated, but rendered desirable as an exotic commodity, its potential threat neutralized through mediation, guidance, and framing. The city, in turn, is reorganized to sustain this mode of relation, as urban life is increasingly restructured as a smooth sequence of experiences, encounters, and images designed to be easily navigated, staged, photographed, and narrated. Public space is stripped away of friction, reduced to a choreographed performance of locality, a theatre of tamed otherness, an urban thematic park. In this sense, the urban safari is not simply a metaphor for embodied touristic practices but could be understood as *the dominant ontological condition of the domesticated city*: a mode of inhabiting in which otherness is sought out as resource, a way of being in space that transforms every form of contact into extractive relations with difference.

The dynamics observed at Strefi Hill, however, show that this condition is neither complete nor uncontested. The practices developed by the Open Assembly sustain a different relation to space, grounded in ongoing engagement rather than episodic experience. Through weekly assemblies, maintenance, shared activities, active participation, horizontal forms of decision-making, and continuous presence, the hill persists as a living territory produced through use, care, and repetition. Seen from this perspective, the practices on Strefi Hill do more than oppose a specific redevelopment. They sustain an alternative way of composing urban life. The hill takes form as a dense web of relations continuously produced through the realization of collective habits - cooking, repairing, gathering, playing, dancing, discussing. These rhythms do not simply defend a pre-existing locality, but actively produce it, reconfiguring the hill as a common space that evades capture precisely because it remains open, relational, and in continuous transformation. Public space, from this perspective, is evaluated according to

its capacity to sustain openness, solidarity, interdependency, unpredictability, and heterogeneous forms of life that challenge dominant market or administrative logics. If domestication positions space as something that exists for the domesticator, becoming-territorial effectively cancels this hierarchy. The subject no longer stands apart from the environment but becomes part of an assemblage in which agency is distributed across human and non-human elements, practices, material and affective infrastructures. Locality in this sense emerges as a relational condition, as the hill becomes intelligible as a collective formation in which humans, animals, plants, and natural elements participate in the production of a shared world. This relational dimension becomes particularly visible in moments where the distinction between subject and territory is suspended. During collective reappropriations in the first phase of the struggle, participants formed a human chain encircling the hill, "hugging" it as part of a day-long gathering (Figure 12). This is not a metaphorical gesture, but a political ontology in practice. To belong then, is to experience locality through active engagement, attachment, and sustained intimacy with a place, rather than granted through recognition by external authorities.



Figure 12. Instances from the action of collective hugging of the hill (Author's pictures)

Within this framework, domestication and wildness operate as analytical poles that organize different regimes of spatial evaluation and legibility, while urban safari and becoming-territorial designate corresponding modes of inhabiting through which these tendencies are lived, practiced, and reproduced. Furthermore, this process reveals the fundamentally speculative mode of evaluating public space. Urban environments are not primarily assessed according to what they presently are, but according to their potential capacity to become otherwise. Under neoliberal urbanism, this potentiality is mobilized through capitalist speculation: the neighbourhood is evaluated according to its ability to generate future economic revenue, attract investment, increase symbolic prestige, or produce consumable experiences. At the same time, however, the practices documented around Strefi Hill reveal another relation to urban potentiality grounded not in speculation and extraction, but in collective experimentation and emancipatory becoming. We could argue then, that conflicts over public space can be read as competing appropriations of urban potential itself, framing evaluation as a situated, contested, and politically embedded process.

Moreover, the analysis suggests that the domesticating pole cannot function through the elimination of wildness alone. On the contrary, processes of touristification and

neoliberal urban redevelopment appear to require continuous effort for the production, preservation, and management of certain forms of spatial otherness in order to sustain their own expansive agenda. Wildness becomes valuable precisely insofar as it succumbs to the law of the market, masked as atmosphere, aesthetic intensity, authenticity, danger without risk, or controlled unpredictability. The neighbourhood must remain sufficiently different from standardized urban environments in order to attract attention, desire, and investment, while simultaneously being reshaped into a space where this difference can be safely and efficiently consumed. We could argue then, domestication does not simply suppress wildness but continuously re-evaluates and reorganizes it according to the logics of circulation, profitability, marketing, and city-branding. Behind the guise of commodity, everything deserves a place in the sun; even political disobedience itself.

Yet, if domestication necessarily depends upon the partial preservation of wildness, then wildness also retains the capacity to exceed and destabilize the domesticating apparatus that attempts to contain it. Precisely because domesticated urban space can never fully eliminate unpredictability, excess, or the possibility of defiance, wildness persists as an immanent force capable of reopening stabilized urban environments toward new forms of sociality and collective inhabitation. In this sense, wildness does not only function as a method for re-evaluating spaces outside or not yet fully incorporated into neoliberal urbanism, but also as a potential force of re-evaluation emerging from within domesticated space itself. Public space therefore remains irreducible to its imposed functions, continuously exposed to processes of overflow, reappropriation, and becoming that exceed the evaluative frameworks through which it is governed. To defend the wild, then, is perhaps not to denounce evaluation altogether, but to open up to the possibilities of a different kind of evaluation - one that does not domesticate otherness but inhabits it.

Statement related to our ethics and integrity policies

This research received no external funding. The author declares no conflict of interest. The study is based on qualitative analysis of publicly accessible materials, field observations, and author-produced documentation collected between 2021 and 2026. According to institutional guidelines, formal ethics approval was not required. Care was taken to avoid reproducing identifiable individuals without consent where possible, and no sensitive personal data were systematically collected or processed.

Acknowledgment

The author used AI-assisted language tools, including ChatGPT and DeepL Translate, for language editing support, including translation, paraphrasing, and proofreading. All arguments, interpretations, and final editorial decisions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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