

# Making Homes in a Nursing Facility in Athens

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Photos by Silas Michalakas

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## Abstract

This Photo Essay seeks to visualise the room-homes of the residents in one of the largest semi-public nursing homes in Athens, Greece. Unlike in other facilities, residents are given the opportunity to intervene in their individual rooms, to change and fill the space with objects from their past lives and the houses they lived in, such as furniture, curtains, carpets, computers, crockery, or flowerpots. They also bring and live through photographs of their previous lives. I focus on the room-homes people create in this nursing home, the worlds they build. I conceive this visual ethnography as an account of the process of ‘house-ing’ (Biehl and Neiburg 2021, 540), ‘charting how forms and figures of dwelling constitute the house as a sensorial archiving machine of sorts, shaping affective pasts and the stories and trajectories of tomorrow’ (2021, 544).

## Keywords

Nursing homes, Ageing, House-ing, Photography, Visual ethnography.

## Introduction

This Photo Essay illustrates the process of making a home in the context of nursing homes in Greece. It focuses on the particular case of the oldest semi-public nursing home in Athens, known in Greek as *Girokomio Athinon* ('Athens Nursing Home'). Residents arrive at the nursing home without serious health problems to live out the rest of their lives under the care of the staff in spacious individual rooms. Unlike in other Greek care facilities, residents are given a degree of control over their individual apartments. They are allowed to change and fill the space with objects from their previous lives and the houses they previously lived in, such as furniture, curtains, carpets, computers, crockery, or flowerpots.

I focus on the room-homes that these people create in *Girokomio Athinon*, and the worlds they build through these practices. I follow João Biehl and Federico Neiburg's coinage of the process of 'house-ing' (2021, 540), that is, 'charting how forms and figures of dwelling constitute the house as a sensorial archiving machine of sorts, shaping affective pasts and the stories and trajectories of tomorrow' (2021, 544).

When I as an anthropologist and Silas Michalakas as a filmmaker started our research in the nursing home, I noticed how the residents' room-homes were full of photographs, furniture and objects from their old homes and traces of their past lives. In particular, the private photographs of the residents and their family albums seemed to play an important role in the lives of these people, ultimately transcending their materiality (Kalantzis 2019, 10), 'narrating' their lives, 'speaking' and feeding their memories (Kalantzis 2019, 10). I then thought of using some of Michalakas' photos to visualise the relevance of this materiality and memory, and to convey the sense of orality that pervades them. The thoughtful albums and framed photographs that people make themselves and that 'are intertwined with emotional currents and a sense of living in a good way' (Drazin and Frohlich 2007, 74) are the focus of this Photo Essay.

The *Girokomio Athinon*'s history dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. Set in 55 acres of pine and olive trees, it has 12 stone wings, of which only three are still in use. There is also a playground, a church, a theatre and many communal areas including a restaurant, a sitting room and a lounge. Although initially I went there (April–July 2022) to investigate the impact of COVID-19's pandemic measures on the lives of both residents and staff, in the face of the pandemic and the difficulties they experienced, the residents showed me much more about their lives, their sense of time and place, their rooms and the memories they carry.

The residents transform the rooms with the materials that they bring with them, that they have left over, in similar ways to how people all over the world rebuild shelters, homes and living spaces after situations of crisis, disaster and forced

displacement (see e.g., the inhabitants of Amazonia, in da Costa Oliveira and Fausto 2021). And is not the transition to old age for some people, to a greater or lesser extent, a time of crisis and profound change? The attempt to preserve the memory and sense of home and biography through the reconfiguration of their rooms follows Janet Carsten's (2018) insight that 'houses are not only embedded in the biographies of their inhabitants and vice versa, [but] they embody the interconnections between individual trajectories, kinship and the state [ . . . ] they encapsulate traces of lives previously lived and reveal how these are forged in the shadows of wider structures' (103). The home, the household, is a dominant 'condition for the "completion" of the gendered self' in Greece (Papataxiarchis 2013, 218; Salamone and Stanton 1986). Having a home, an organised house, conveys that its inhabitant belongs somewhere. Making the new room-home in the nursing home an extension of their past home and their past life through these material practices displays a continuity in their home; it demonstrates that there was once another home, a family home perhaps, and a life full of meaning there.

In the nursing home it was immediately clear to me different residents' social backgrounds; whether they had lived with a wide network of relatives; whether they had lived comfortably or not; what their positions had been in their previous social lives. 'Such vestiges', as Janet Carsten argues, 'are embedded in the imaginations and personal biographies of the inhabitants who carry them, sometimes unconsciously, from one site to another' (Carsten 2018, 114). The room-homes revealed memories of affinities and connections, whilst others gave a sense of loneliness and disconnection. But all of them had something that reminded their residents of who they were: flowerpots, photo frames, family photo albums, an armchair from their old living room, a blanket, a shawl knitted by their grandmother, a glass or a cup from their old pottery; traces of past lives mixed with pills, injections, nurses coming and going, and the smell of the sterile room.

## **Tatiana: Creating a home**

Tatiana Alexiou is 94 years old and has been living in the nursing home for three years.<sup>1</sup> Having lost both her children and her husband in the years prior, she decided to move when her last friend died, at a time when various health problems required more and more constant monitoring. The room-home she has created in the nursing home is one of the most well looked after, full of furniture and objects from her previous house, as well as numerous photographs. 'It is important to go well from this life,' Tatiana told me as she showed me around her room, trying to tell me that she created a familiar place to die in. 'I wanted the room to have something of me, to remind me of home, to be home.'

1 Pseudonyms are used throughout this essay.



Tatiana's room-home. January 2024.



Little objects from Tatiana's old house around her room-home. January 2024.



A corner with furniture from her old house, reflecting its style and character. January 2024.



Tatiana in front of her family photos in her room-home. 'All my favourites are here.' June 2022.



A gravure and a clock that belonged to Tatiana's mother are now in her room-home. June 2022.

'Now I am completely alone. I've lost them all. I'm too old now and I needed care and companionship', she tells us in an interview.

I came here and made a home here, I have my things and I remember my life, the people I loved and I lost. I have lost two children, two husbands. I look at the pictures every night, I think about it every night, I remember it all. I have wedding anniversaries, death anniversaries, christenings. And I remember them all. In my opinion, if we stop remembering our past, it's as if we're dead. Don't you agree? Now I belong to the past, but the past is also beautiful. (Tatiana Alexiou, June 2022.)



## Petros: Living through memories

Petros Karpouzou, 93, has lived in the nursing home for ten years. He has lost his wife and one of his two sons. He has lived alone for years; and has lost his last friends recently. He sees his other son, who lives in London, two or three times a year. To his room-home he brought from his previous home a personal computer, his favourite literary books and a small wooden bookcase, his desk, two armchairs from his old living room, various other souvenirs from his travels around the world, many photographs, and a poster from his friend, photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, whom he used to know from his time working and living on the Greek islands. On his balcony he has many flowers which he tends to, one of his favourite pastimes.



Petros in his room-home. His telephone and computer are means of communicating with the outside world. May 2022.



Petros in his bed next to a poster of Henri Cartier-Bresson. January 2024.



Petros' library, and the chairs from his old house. January 2024.



Petros with a photograph of a wedding anniversary celebration. 'My hands show the years, my dear,' he said. May 2022.



Petros' balcony, full of flowers and with a Greek flag. May 2022.

When my wife died of cancer, I made her a very nice photo album of her life. It's beautiful, from when she was a baby to when she died. Our whole life is in there. That's it, the pictures, our whole life. A friend of ours told us, 'Life is a dew, a wave.' This is our last photo in 2005, 50 years together. This is our whole life. In America, in France, all our lives. The sea, how we loved the sea. I was an athletic sailor, the sea, our life, we had been around the world. I was very happily married. What does cancer do to a man? Now they're all dead. The trajectories of our lives, of a whole family you're left alone at the end . . . and I got too old, 93 is a lot. (Petros Karpouzou, May 2022.)

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In *Girokomio Athinon*, elderly residents' rooms are full of their intention to create a home of this new space, one that continued onwards from their past and their previous houses, their biography, but also points to the future in which they imagine themselves, a familiar and affective space (Biehl and Neiburg 2021, 541), a home within the nursing home.

## Authorship statement

Eirini Papadaki authored the essay and Silas Michalakas took the photographs.

## Ethics statement

The research and photography were carried out with the written consent of the participants.

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