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Simulating the Lost Homeland: Refugee Identity, Placemaking, and Translocal Subjectivity in AEK FC

Kayıp Vatanın Simülasyonu: AEK FC'de Mülteci Kimliği, Mekân İnşası ve Yerel Ötesi Öznellik

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Abstract

Aim: This article investigates placemaking through the case of the Hagia Sophia Stadium (ALLWYN Arena) of AEK Football Club, focusing on how the stadium cultivates belonging and emotional attachment among AEK supporters. Founded by Greek refugees from Istanbul, AEK embodies a history of displacement that continues to shape its identity.

Method: Using a qualitative interpretive approach, this study combines historical, spatial, and visual semiotic analysis of fieldwork photographs and visual materials from the ALLWYN Arena. The analysis examines how symbolic and spatial representations contribute to placemaking and the construction of collective refugee identity.

Results: The analysis demonstrates that the stadium functions not merely as a physical infrastructure but as a powerful simulacrum of lost homelands, sustaining a sense of continuity and identity for the descendants of displaced populations. Through symbolic elements such as emblems, architectural design, gate names, and a refugee-themed museum, the stadium operates simultaneously as a memorial site and a lived social space where history, memory, identity and fandom intersect.

Conclusion: In a globalized context where locality is increasingly fragmented and reconstituted, both AEK FC and its new stadium exemplify a form of "translocal subjectivity"—anchored in ancestral memory while continually evolving across new spatial and emotional geographies.

Keywords

Placemaking, translocality, AEK FC, Hagia Sophia Stadium, hyperreal

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Öz

Amaç: Bu makale, AEK Futbol Kulübü'nün Ayasofya Stadyumu (ALLWYN Arena) örneğinde mekân inşası (placemaking) sürecini incelemekte ve stadyumun AEK taraftarları arasında aidiyet ve duygusal bağ oluşturma biçimlerine odaklanmaktadır. İstanbul'dan Yunanistan'a gelen Yunan mülteciler tarafından kurulan AEK, kimliğini şekillendirmeye devam eden bir yerinden edilme geçmişini bünyesinde barındırmaktadır.

Yöntem: Bu çalışma, nitel ve yorumlayıcı bir yaklaşım benimseyerek ALLWYN Arena'da gerçekleştirilen saha çalışması kapsamında elde edilen fotoğraflar ile görsel materyallerin tarihsel, mekânsal ve görsel semiyotik analizini bir araya getirmektedir. Analiz, sembolik ve mekânsal temsillerin mekân inşası (placemaking) süreçlerine ve kolektif mülteci kimliğinin inşasına nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu incelemektedir.

Bulgular: Çalışma, stadyumun yalnızca fiziksel bir yapı değil, aynı zamanda kaybedilen anavatanların güçlü bir simülakrı olduğunu ve yerinden edilmiş toplulukların torunlarına süreklilik ve kimlik duygusu sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Amblemler, mimari tasarım, kapı isimleri ve mülteci temalı bir müze gibi simgesel unsurlar aracılığıyla stadyum, hem bir anma mekânı hem de tarih, hafıza, kimlik ve taraftarlığın kesiştiği yaşayan bir sosyal alan işlevi görmektedir.

Sonuç: Yerelliğin giderek parçalandığı ve yeniden tanımlandığı küreselleşmiş bir dünyada, hem AEK FC hem de onun yeni stadyumu, "yerel ötesi bir öznelik" biçimini temsil etmektedir. Bu öznelik, atalara ait belleğe köklenirken, aynı zamanda yeni mekânsal ve duygusal coğrafyalarda sürekli olarak yeniden şekillenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Mekân inşası, yerel ötesilik, AEK FC, Ayasofya Stadyumu, hipergerçek

1. Introduction

This paper explores the practice of placemaking, specifically how the Hagia Sophia Stadium, officially known as the ALLWYN Arena (previously OPAP Arena), fosters a strong sense of belonging and affection among the fans of AEK sports club. In the context of our increasingly globalized world, the definitions of concepts like place and locality have become increasingly ambiguous. Today, many individuals are displaced, either as migrants or refugees, and communities are becoming less tied to specific spots on Earth, also existing in virtual spaces through internet technologies. The old parochial way of understanding locality is no longer applicable since it focuses particularly on the place itself (Massey, 1993, p. 144). Under these circumstances, locality was redefined.

AEK is an abbreviation for the Athletic Union of Constantinople in Greek. It was founded by Istanbul[1] origin people living in Athens and Piraeus on April 13, 1924. Following the Turco-Greek War (1919-1922) and the subsequent displacement of peoples during and after the war and the eventual Protocol concerning the Exchange of Populations, people having origins in Anatolia, Eastern Thrace and Black Sea regions felt an attachment to refugee clubs like AEK in Greece. The uprooted people, officially the refugees, were settled in newly founded villages and districts in big cities. Nea Filadelfia, where the old and new AEK FC stadiums are located, was one of those districts.

This article discusses the new Hagia Sophia Stadium, the ALLWYN Arena (previously OPAP Arena), that opened its gates with a spectacular inauguration in 2022. With its design as a memory site, architectural elements, museums, and conscious purposes, this stadium truly deserves attention and discussion. This paper makes an analysis of the memorial elements in the stadium through concepts like locality, translocality and hyperreality. Arjun Appadurai articulated the concept of locality in a dramatically delocalized world through relational and contextual frameworks rather than scalar or spatial definitions (2005, p. 178). Circulating populations reproduce certain localities in the new places they settle, which we can refer to as translocalities (2005, p.192). Reproductions, simulations or extensions of certain localities might become hyperrealities, as defined by Jean Baudrillard (1994). It occurs when a simulation is no longer the abstraction of a locality, resulting in lost reference and connection during placemaking. It is a simulacrum, an intricate imitation that exists independently, lacking any true original to reference.

The section following the methodology provides the historical context of AEK, highlighting its close association with Asia Minor refugees and the symbolic importance of the Nea Filadelfia neighbourhood in the formation of the club's collective identity. The second section outlines the theoretical framework, emphasizing the evolving notion of locality in the contemporary world. The third and main section focuses on the author's observations and interpretations

[1]Istanbul and Constantinople and Izmir and Smyrna are used interchangeably. Greeks use Constantinople and Smyrna in their native language; so in Greek sources, even if they are in English, Constantinople and Smyrna are more common. Where I deem necessary to employ the original usage for the text, I did not change it. Istanbul is also referred to as the City (Η Πόλη, I Póli) in Greek as it is considered to be the queen city of the world.

of the stadium's symbolic features, showing how they express refugee heritage, reflect continuing ties to Anatolia, Byzantine Empire and Orthodox Christianity, and ultimately contribute to the stadium's transformation into a form of hyperreality.

2. Methodology

For the study, fieldwork was conducted at the ALLWYN Arena in June 2024. During the site visit, visual data were systematically collected through photographic documentation. Apart from one aerial image obtained from the club's official website, all photographs were produced by the researcher. During analysis, the photographs were not treated merely as illustrative material but as primary research data. Their production was guided by the study's central research question concerning how placemaking is constructed through symbolic and spatial elements within the stadium environment. Visual data collection focused on four categories: (1) architectural features, (2) symbolic objects such as emblems and statues, (3) spatial naming practices including gates and entrances, and (4) commemorative elements such as murals, memorials, and museum spaces. Additionally, image selection followed a purposive sampling strategy. Rather than documenting every aspect of the site, the study focused on visual elements that most clearly reflected recurring symbolic references to Asia Minor, refugee memory, Byzantine heritage, and collective identity. This approach enabled the identification of analytically significant examples of meaning-making within the stadium landscape.

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive epistemological framework. Interpretive approaches seek to understand how social meanings are constructed, represented, and experienced rather than identify causal relationships or establish generalizable laws (See Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, pp. 8-10). In line with this perspective, the study examines the ALLWYN Arena as a site where collective memory, identity, and historical narratives are materially and symbolically embedded within the built environment. To explore the relationship between placemaking and identity construction, the study combines historical analysis, spatial analysis, and visual semiotic analysis.

Historical analysis situates the development of AEK within wider historical processes associated with forced migration, displacement, and refugee settlement. Secondary sources were used to reconstruct the historical background necessary for interpreting contemporary symbolic representations. Spatial analysis examines how meanings are embedded within the physical organization of the stadium. Particular attention is paid to the spatial arrangement of monuments, memorial sites, architectural features, and symbolic routes within the stadium complex. The analysis explores how spatial arrangements guide visitors through a narrative landscape that reinforces collective memory and identity. Visual analysis considers photographs as primary data and examines them through a semiotic lens, focusing on how visual elements function as signifiers that generate and convey meaning. The analysis draws on a semiotic understanding of visual signs and meaning-making of Daniel Chandler (2004) while following Gillian Rose's (2016) visual methodological framework for the interpretation of visual materials. Semiotics examines how meaning is generated through signs and representations (Chandler, 2004, p.17). Following this perspective, visual elements within the stadium are understood as signifiers that communicate broader cultural and historical meanings. Statues, architectural motifs, emblems, inscriptions, and commemorative spaces are therefore analyzed not only in terms of their physical presence but also in relation to the symbolic meanings they evoke. Attention is paid to denotative meanings (what is visibly represented) and connotative meanings (the broader cultural and ideological associations attached to those representations). The study also draws on Rose's (2016, pp.24-47) visual methodology, which treats images as cultural texts embedded within social and spatial contexts. Rose argues that visual materials should be interpreted in relation to the circumstances of their production, their representational content, and the meanings they generate for viewers. Following Rose's critical visual methodology, visual elements are treated as cultural texts through which meanings, identities, and historical narratives are constructed and communicated. The analysis therefore focuses not only on the content of visual symbols but also on their role in producing narratives of refugee memory, belonging, and place identity. Attention is given to symbolic references linked to Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and collective refugee memory.

By combining historical, spatial, and visual semiotic approaches, the study provides a multi-layered understanding of placemaking as both a material and symbolic process through which refugee heritage and collective identity are continuously reproduced.

3. A Brief History of AEK

Following the Turko-Greek War (known also as War of Independence in Türkiye, 1919-1922), a vast number of Greek Orthodox origin people left Anatolia[2] with the retreating Greek Army due to the violence perpetrated in the

[2]Asia Minor and Anatolia are used interchangeably in the text. Greek sources often use the former.

context of war. These people were refugees. During the Lausanne negotiations, in the very beginning, the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations, according to which Greek nationals of Turkish origin and Turkish nationals of Greek Orthodox origin were to be exchanged, was signed. There were already around one million Greeks who flew from their ancestral homelands. With the Convention the remaining people were also forced to leave except for Muslims in Western Thrace and Greek-Orthodox people in Istanbul and the islands *Imvros* (Gökçeada) and *Tenedos* (Bozcaada). In the end, more than one million two hundred thousand Greek Orthodox and around four hundred thousand Muslims forcibly left their hometowns to permanently settle in the neighboring country (See Hirschon, 2008, pp.8-9).

In Greece, the refugees were usually misbehaved by local people and were socially marginalized. The antagonism between local Greeks and refugees became visible in sport field as well. Mutual insults continue even today. AEK fans in Athens are mostly categorized under "Turkishness" by the fans of Panathinaikos and Olympiakos. I recall experiencing a sense of unease upon encountering the inscription "knives for the Turks" (*mahaíria stous Toúrkous*) on the walls of Galatsi district of Attica. My Greek accompany clarified that the term "Turks" in this context was a colloquial reference to AEK supporters. The deliberately used labels, such as "Turks" (*Toúrkoi*), "Turkish ladies" (*hanoúmisses*), and "Turkish seeds" (*Tourkósporoi*), present the dark side of football fanaticism. These designations not only reflect the fervent nationalistic sentiments associated with the sport but also reveal deep-seated biases that can be characterized as both sexist and racist. Handling such terminology beginning from the first encounter with the locals, the refugees developed a distinct refugee identity. Their disappointment by locals was observed by Renée Hirschon (2008, p.12) as such in her field study in a refugee neighborhood in the 1970s:

> The newcomers perceived locals as narrow-minded, ignorant, and uncouth, a view which became entrenched as time passed and disillusionment grew. This early sense of disappointment was undoubtedly significant in the process of adjustment and in development of their separate identity…By calling themselves *Mikrasiátes* (people of Asia Minor), they conveyed a particular cultural endowment associated with place of origin and their unique heritage.

Emplacement studies highlight people's bonds with specific places. Emplacement can also be described as aspects of our connections to both natural and social worlds that do not stem from choice but arise inevitably from the very conditions of living and being in the world. It is equally crucial to recognize that emplacement should not be understood as inherently positive. The exclusionary dimensions of belonging, and the similarly negative possibilities that accompany emplacement, must be acknowledged (Gressier, 2018, p. 16). Read through this lens, these dynamics show how the Asia Minor refugees' emerging identity was shaped not only by chosen affiliations but also by the unavoidable, and at times exclusionary, conditions of emplacement that structured their new lives.

Kostas Katsapis (2011) listed the conditions through which the refugee identity was formed: first, the stereotypes of the local Greek people concerning the new inhabitants of the country, second, political orientation of the refugee people in accordance with their refugee status, and third, the formation of memorial places, symbols and institutions in line with their particular homeland in Asia Minor (As cited in Baltas, 2023, p. 2). In line with the third point, thousands of refugee sport clubs were established in Greece. One of those was the Athletic Union of Constantinople, better known by its Greek acronym AEK, founded on April 13, 1924, by the sport lover Istanbul origin people living in Athens and Piraeus. The team aimed at preserving the memory of place of origin (Baltas, 2023, p. 9). Like many other refugee sport clubs, the Byzantine double-headed eagle became the team's emblem (Baltas, 2023, p. 13). The double-headed eagle, a powerful symbol of identity, transcends origin and is inscribed in the ideological-political sphere, in the sense that it signifies a certain use of the Byzantine past (Tsoumas, 2024, p. 79). Black and yellow, referring to the Byzantine capital, were chosen as the colors of the team jersey (Baltas, 2023, p. 13). Recognizing the Athletic Association of Peran (Beyoğlu Sport Club today) as their mother club, AEK and PAOK (Pan-Thessalonikian Athletic Club of Constantinopolitans) were two of the most powerful and substantial associations of the exiled leadership of the Greeks of Istanbul during the Turko-Greek War (as supporters of Venizelos who sent troops into Anatolia in 1919)[3] in Athens and Thessaloniki respectively (Wilks, p. 46).

The establishment of AEK confirms the intention of its founders to establish a new public sport space in Athens and to develop a series of activities and practices that will make refugee communities visible and harmonize their social and cultural life with progressive ideologies cultivated by the elites of Istanbul (Tsoumas, 2024, pp. 62-63). The members of the first board of directors of AEK in Athens, in 1924, were the president Konstantinos Spanoudis, the

[3]During the Armistice Period (1918-1922), the leaders of the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul led their community to support the irredentist aims of the Greek national ideology and helped turning Istanbul into a "state within a state". Within this framework they also organized sport events having strong nationalist content (Baltas, 2022, p. 176).

vice president Nikiforos (Nikos) Eleopoulos, the general secretary Konstantinos Dimopoulos, the treasurer Timoleon Tagaris, Menelaos Karotzieris and Miltiadis (Miltos) Ieremiadis (Tsoumas, 2024, p. 66). They were all urban elite, while their social and political activities made them influential or leading figures in the Greek Orthodox community of Istanbul, with clear cultural characteristics and a liberal political orientation. This group's interest in sports, among other things, reflects their intention to shape a new public identity and to claim their hegemonic role in the management of refugee issues (Tsoumas, 2024, p. 72).

AEK has been projecting certain ideas, symbolisms and meanings in the sport field from the very beginning. These are "Constantinople" as a place of origin, the beginnings of the Greek state and its Great Idea, the place of Byzantium in Greek history, the relations of the national center with the Greek Orthodox centers of the Ottoman Empire, the identity of the "redeemed" to that of the "refugee", and the position of *Romiosýni*[4] in relation to Greekness. For this reason, they are recruiting a landmark (usually the City—*Η Πόλη,* Constantinople) as a symbolic element for shaping individual and collective identities, establishing networks and relationships, through which they give meaning to the new reality and their place within it. The preservation of the memory of the place of origin and the consolidation of symbolisms becomes more important in the case of AEK, as it is obvious that they are renegotiating a new and once again prominent position for the "queen of cities" in the national imaginary (Tsoumas, 2024, pp. 77-78).

3.1. Nea Filadelfia

AEK was founded in a refugee neighborhood called Nea Filadelfia (New Filadelfia), named after Filadelfia (Alaşehir of Manisa) where there was a substantial Greek Orthodox population in Ottoman Turkey. Following the Exchange of Populations, because of the acute crisis that the Greek government of the time was facing, the League of Nations authorized the Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC) to take care of settlement problem. Over 2000 villages were created and on the outskirts of the cities refugee neighborhoods were established. In Athens, Kaisariani, Vyronas, Nea Ionia, Nea Filadelfia, Kallithea were the refugee settlement areas (Hirschon, 2008, pp. 39-41). Concerning Nea Filadelfia, construction work on the refugee settlement began in November 1924 and the beginning of the application process and the conditions for acquiring housing in the newly built settlement were announced in May 1927. The refugee houses were granted to the refugees without immediate payment, but with an interest-free loan (Makris , 2024, pp. 213-215). According to the 1928 census, 6,337 people (2,691 men and 3,646 women) were living in Nea Filadelfia. Despite what the name suggests, the first inhabitants did not originate from Filadelfia in Anatolia, but rather from diverse regions- primarily from Izmir and its surroundings, as well as from Istanbul, Urla and Cappadocia (Makris, 2024: 216). Nea Filadelfia falls into that category of refugee settlements, in which generally wealthy refugees settled, who were able to provide for their own housing, by building, buying or renting their homes (Makris , 2024, pp. 217-218). With its substantial number of residents from Anatolia, the neighborhood has many streets with the names from refugee homelands such as *Attaleia* (Antalya), *Ikonio* (Konya), Adana, *Sinopi* (Sinop), *Nigdi* (Niğde) and so on (See Geographic.org, n.d.).

Finding places to contact sporting activity was a vital issue for refugee sport clubs. Initially, they were housed in temporary spaces, but when it gradually became clear that there was no hope of returning to Asia Minor, they sought permanent solutions. Obviously, for this next step, state assistance was essential, either through the allocation of land or through the financing of construction projects. The ties that refugee sport clubs had with members of parliament from the Liberal party played an important role, in a period - the first interwar decade (1922-1932)—during which the party was in power (Makris, 2024, p. 226). The network of these relationships was more than obvious, especially if we examine the course of the refugee sport clubs in the political arena. The creation of AEK stadium in Nea Filadelfia also falls within this framework (Makris , 2024, pp. 226-227).

The origins of the creation of the AEK stadium can be traced back to 1926, when, on the initiative of the then member of the Central Committee for the Rehabilitation of Refugees, Ioannis Chrysafidis, a tree-covered area in South Filadelfia was granted to the Central Committee for the Housing of Refugees, which was designated as a gym for the children of refugees. This area, in 1928, at the initiative of AEK fans, was cleared of trees and bushes in a few evenings and the first football field was created, so that it would not be occupied by the residents (Makris , 2024, p. 227). The stadium was inaugurated on November 2, 1930, with a football match between AEK and Olympiacos (Makris , 2024, p. 228). For almost eighty years, from 1926 until its demolition in 2003, the Nea Filadelfia Stadium, known as Nikos Goumas Stadium, was the home of AEK fans. Due to the destructive earthquake of September 7, 1999, Gate 3 had to be closed for safety reasons. Following that, ideas of destruction began. After the demolition of

[4]Romiosýni (Ρωμιοσύνη) originate from the term Rómios, the vernacular form of the original medieval word Roman, which referred to the people of the Eastern Roman Empire. Until the 19th century, it was commonly used to denote Orthodox Christians.

the Nea Filadelfia Stadium, AEK was hosted from May 2003 until October 2004 in various grounds, until it moved to the renovated Olympic Stadium in October 2004 (Our Old Home “Nikos Goumas”, n.d.).

For AEK fans, Nea Filadelfia is “synonymous with their beloved team”. The relationship between the neighborhood and the sport club is two-way, with AEK being an important part of the neighborhood’s history and everyday life, but also the neighborhood constituting an important chapter in the club’s history (Makris , 2024, p. 209).

Figure 1. ALLWYN ARENA (Source: AEK FC Official Web Site)

4. The Context of Locality and Placemaking

In the early 1990s, Arjun Appadurai explored the concept of locality as something relational and contextual, rather than merely scalar or spatial. He emphasized that locality is closely tied to social connections, interactive technologies, and the varying contexts in which it exists. Similarly, neighborhoods can be either physical or virtual; what truly matters is their reality and potential for social reproduction (Appadurai, 2005, pp. 178-179).

Locality comes from neighborhoods and may belong to a physical, place-based community, a virtual one, or a blend of both. In other words, a neighborhood can simultaneously exist as a tangible geographic space and as a site of connection for individuals engaging with it via the internet (McKay & Brady, 2005, p. 91). Neighborhoods generate meaning to the extent that they are imagined, created, and contrasted with other places. The process of production and reproduction of neighborhoods involves ongoing construction and discourse, and local individuals cannot exist independently from their neighborhoods (Appadurai, 2005, pp. 184-185). Today the leisure industry creates tourist locations, professionals work as expats in countries of economic opportunity, and people have mixed marriages. Accordingly, locations form complicated conditions for the emergence of locality, these are what Appadurai calls translocalities (Appadurai, 2005, p. 192). As a contribution to his idea, Conradson and McKay coined the term translocal subjectivities. They do not employ the term transnational because one’s nationality comes second where their identity is concerned in everyday experience. For a Filipina nurse working abroad, she is from the Philippines if her colleagues from work ask but at the level of everyday experience among her conational friends she is known as a person from a particular locality, named by village and province. Thus, the life of a Filipina migrant abroad is formed by an emotional geography that is intertwined between economic success abroad and affinity at home (Conradson & McKay, 2007, pp. 169-171). Therefore, sometimes new forms of local place are produced extending across long distances and distinct topographies (McKay & Brady, 2005, p. 89).

Places possess identities and they are inherently interdependent. This was true in the past, in times when the world was less globalized. “English” cup of tea could not emerge if there were not the East India Company and the sugar plantations in the Caribbean (Massey, 1993, p. 145). Likewise, in today’s immensely globalized world identities of places are both interdependent and flowing. People have feelings for the places. A sense of a place differs from person to person. It is highly possible that there is more than one “sense” of any place (Massey, 1993, p. 145). For instance, Eglinton claimed based on her field work that New York was marked by inequality for many New Yorkers in

the early 2000s but the youth adopted a specific sense of the city through hip-hop culture on one hand and on the other hand New York's physical and social conditions, which was a post-industrial context served also well for the birth of hip-hop (Eglinton, 2013, p. 68). Distinct senses developed by different persons or different groups of people of a place might live together without any problem through different coping mechanisms such as mutual ignorance, negotiation, or they simply contradict or race with each other. In fact, all places are crossroads of social interaction or "nets of social relations" (Massey, 1993, pp. 145,148).

As places have identities, people's identity is connected to places. Yi-Fu Tuan (1990) coined the term *topophilia* to refer to the affective attachment that individuals or communities develop toward specific places. In this sense, *topophilia* illustrates how environment and culture mutually shape the formation of values, producing place-based emotional bonds that are integral to the organization of social and cultural life (pp.1-4). For example, the farmer's *topophilia* is shaped by a deep physical intimacy with the land, a material dependence on its productivity, and the recognition that the landscape serves as a repository of personal and collective memory (Tuan, 1990, p. 97). Places play a significant role in one's understanding of the self because places provide a relatively stable social, material and natural environment. When a person decides to leave a place, there appears a new prospect for new forms of subjectivities and positive and negative emotions to emerge. Thus, the self will be reshaped via new relations in the new setting (Conradson & McKay, 2007, p. 168). This aligns with what has already been identified as translocal subjectivities.

Therefore, locality is a major part of one's identity. People tend to grow emotional attachment to a particular locality. In our case study, this is Asia Minor, a place that exists beyond its territorial limits, a place resided in hearts of the uprooted people, a place of romanticism and nostalgia. It is a place continually recreated. A place that first took shape in the newly built refugee neighborhoods in Greece from 1922 onward, such as Nea Filadelfia, and later reimagined in Hagia Sophia Stadium. It represents a locality that transcends its physical site, even becoming detached from the place itself like a simulacrum, an independent construct shaped by repetition and symbolic association. According to Jean Baudrillard (1994), simulacra are not copies of the real but representations that generate their own reality, in other words, hyperreality.

Hagia Sophia Stadium is a perfect example of placemaking in the sense we employ the term. Placemaking is defined by McKay and Brady as such: "the ways that people create a sense of place for themselves from networks of exchange, webs of affection and material landscapes" (2005, p. 89). As will be discussed in the upcoming part, this is what happens in Hagia Sophia Stadium. A football team's stadium was constructed on translocal subjectivities. A locality was created abroad by uprooted people of Asia Minor. It is an "imagined world" in the sense that Appadurai used the term. Influenced by Benedict Anderson, Appadurai coined the term "imagined worlds" referring to historically set imaginations of people and groups spread around the globe (Appadurai, 1990, p. 6). Likewise, Hagia Sophia Stadium was meant to fulfill an emotional need of the Asia Minor origin AEK fans. With every detail in its construction, the ancestral homeland was symbolized. It is meant to be a representation and an extension of Asia Minor. However, its referential meaning has faded over time.

5. Hagia Sophia Stadium

AEK FC returned to its home when the Hagia Sophia Stadium with its old official name indicating its former sponsor, the OPAP Arena, opened its gates in 2022 in the place of the old Nikos Goumas Stadium in New Filadelfia (Figure 1). As claimed in its official web site, the new stadium of AEK is not just a stadium but also a center for sports, memory and culture. For this reason, it hosts two museums: The Museum of Refugee Hellenism and the Museum of History of AEK. According to its official web site, "the objective of the AEK FC with this complex is not only to show the achievements of the team for a century but also to pay due tribute to the greatness of Hellenism of the City, Asia Minor and Pontus" (Museums, n.d.). Guided by Rose's (2016) critical visual methodology, this section analyses how visual and spatial representations contribute to placemaking by invoking Byzantine heritage, preserving refugee memory, constructing collective identity narratives, and cultivating a shared sense of belonging.

Hagia Sophia Stadium, also understood from its name, was designed like a football temple by the architect Athanassios Kyratsous**.** It is an architectural demonstration of how individuals actively produce and transform places, particularly under conditions of displacement, and how they express their sense of belonging (See Lems, 2018, p.4). The elements and details in its architecture refer to the old Byzantine capital where the team originated. The stadium takes its name from the Great Byzantine cathedral Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom). When viewed from the outside (Figure 1&3), the small windows located just below the roof covering the spectator stands remind us of the small windows that provided light in the original Hagia Sophia. In front of the main entrance (Figure 2), where the museums

are located, a double-headed Byzantine eagle statue created by the Hungarian sculptor Gábor Miklós Szőke, which is also the symbol of the club, welcomes the visitors. The stadium's name and architectural vocabulary transform a contemporary sports venue into a site of layered historical reference. In placemaking terms, this is not merely aesthetic imitation but a symbolic strategy: the borrowing of forms—such as the small windows beneath the roofline that recall the upper windows of Hagia Sophia's dome—creates an architectural dialogue between past and present. Through these references, the stadium positions itself within a broader civilizational narrative associated with Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Constantinopolitan heritage. The double-headed eagle (Figure 2) operates as a dense semiotic sign that condenses layers of Byzantine imperial heritage and Orthodox identity. From a semiotic perspective, it functions not merely as a decorative emblem but as a carrier of historical continuity, reinforcing collective memory through visual symbolism.The gates are named after refugee hometowns in Anatolia with the biggest VIP gate attributed to two big cities Istanbul and Izmir which had a great number of Greek Orthodox people before "the Asia Minor Catastrophe"[5] (Figure 3&4). Each gate bearing the name of a lost homeland symbolically reterritorializes displacement, allowing what was geographically severed to be re-inscribed in the present landscape. The stadium thus functions not only as a sports venue but as a reconstructed geography of memory. Naming the VIP gates "Constantinople" and "Smyrna" carries layered symbolic meaning that goes far beyond geographic reference. It is a deliberate act of spatial hierarchy within the framework of placemaking. In architectural and spatial terms, VIP entrances are associated with prestige, centrality, and ceremonial importance. By attributing this elevated status to Constantinople and Smyrna, the design spatially prioritizes these cities within the collective narrative. Istanbul (Constantinople) was an imperial, religious, and cultural capital of Orthodoxy and Izmir (Smyrna) was a cosmopolitan hub of Asia Minor Hellenism. The naming of gates after refugee hometowns reflects a process of symbolic reterritorialization, which can be interpreted within Appadurai's concept of translocality, where displaced identities reconstruct locality beyond geographic boundaries. Gate 21 is an exception since it honors Original 21 fan club. The small chapel inside the stadium, which is named after Hagia Sophia and Hosios Loukas, is covered with the icons of Asia Minor origin saints such as St. Chrysostomos of Smyrna. There is also a mural depicting the Great Fire in Izmir in September 1922, with saints of Anatolian origin in the foreground (Figure 5). This chapel symbolically links Byzantine sacred heritage with the lived memory of Asia Minor. Through this dual dedication, the stadium transcends its function as a sports arena and incorporates a liturgical dimension, merging civic gathering with spiritual remembrance. The presence of saints of Asia Minor origin, most notably Chrysostomos of Smyrna, anchors the narrative in martyrdom and suffering. Chrysostomos, killed during the events of 1922, has become a powerful symbol of the loss of the Greek Orthodox presence in Smyrna. His depiction transforms historical trauma into sanctified memory. The mural of the Great Fire of Smyrna (September 1922) further reinforces this sacralized narrative. By placing Anatolian saints in the foreground of the burning city, the artwork visually intertwines catastrophe and sanctity. The disaster commonly referred to as the Asia Minor Catastrophe by Greek historiography is not represented solely as political or military defeat; it is reinterpreted through religious imagery. In placemaking terms, this reframing elevates collective trauma into a moral and spiritual touchstone, embedding it within a sacred visual language. This spatial configuration also operates through what can be understood as a form of translocality, where sacred and historical references are no longer confined to their original geographical settings but are re-embedded in a new spatial context within the stadium. In this sense, the chapel produces a layered geography that connects contemporary Nea Filadelfia to lost Anatolian homelands, generating a symbolic continuity across displaced spaces. At the same time, it can be read through the logic of hyperreality, as the represented Asia Minor is not a direct reconstruction of historical space but a mediated and intensified version of it, shaped through iconography, memory, and selective visual narration. The result is a spatial assemblage in which historical rupture is visually sutured, and the stadium becomes a site where real and imagined geographies overlap.

[5]A term used in Greece to describe the defeat of Greece in the 1919-1922 Greco-Turkish War and the subsequent displacement of the Orthodox Greeks from their homelands in Anatolia.

Figure 2. Double-Headed AEK Eagle (Photograph: Author)

Figure 3. The VIP Gate named after Constantinople and Smyrna (Photograph: Author)

Figure 4. Gates 12 and 14 named after Nikaia (İznik) and Amaseia (Amasya) respectively (Photograph: Author)

Figure 5. The Mural depicting the Great Fire in Izmir in September 1922, with saints of Anatolian origin in the foreground inside the St. Sophia Chapel (Photograph: Author)

As Tuan (1990, p.99) discusses within the concept of *topofilia*, being displaced from one's home removes a protective layer that shields individuals from the uncertainties of the broader world. A sense of history strengthens place-based loyalty, which is why landscapes frequently incorporate monuments that render the past visible and meaningful. In our case, the memory of Anatolian cities remains central, prestigious, and foundational to communal identity.

Another important point to be stressed is the opening ceremony of the Hagia Sophia Stadium which took place on September 30, 2023. With the parade of refugee origin people in their traditional costumes of their Anatolia hometowns, with traditional Pontic dances, and with a pantomime of their ancestors' displacement from Asia Minor, the inauguration was a "bombardment" of memory.[6] Architecture, costume, music, and performance converged to overwhelm the spectator with symbolic references. Thus, the inauguration ceremony can be read as a performative reconstruction of memory, in which displacement is not only narrated but enacted. In this sense, the event exemplifies how placemaking operates through embodied and affective practices, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging.

Hagia Sophia Stadium embodies an identity shaped by origin, religion and history—namely, Asia Minor, Greek Orthodox Christianity, and Byzantine Empire. Within this sports complex, a form that symbolically spans the Aegean Sea, "an imagined world" emerges, constructed through the historically grounded imaginations of its people, (Appadurai, 1990, p. 6) whom were replaced by force from their ancestral homes to a kin country. Although identities appear to draw on a historical past to which they still seem connected, they are in fact concerned with how history, language, and culture are used in an ongoing process of becoming rather than in a fixed state of being (Hall, 1996). Thus, the stadium operates not as a static monument to the past, but as a living site where identity continues to be reimagined and rearticulated. From the moment when the first emigration took place, Asia Minor was no longer a cartographic site; it was produced and reproduced in many ways by the people who deserted there. This is what Appadurai called translocality (2005, p. 192).

The Asia Minor refugees recreated their ancestral towns in neighborhoods like Nea Filadelfia; and their grandchildren constructed Hagia Sophia Stadium as a memorial. As discussed above, the meanings of the terms such as place, locality and neighborhood are not self-evident anymore. All of them refer to something beyond the physical existence of a particular surface on Earth in our migrant world. They are related to migration (in our case forced migration), memory, identity, technology, information and so on. The construction of Hagia Sophia Stadium as a memorial is an intentional activity that aims to create belonging, nostalgia and "sense of place" among the fans.

Hagia Sophia Stadium was meant to be a translocality, an extension of Asia Minor, the ancestral homeland, a place where a second and third generation refugee people have not experienced living at all. They have been experiencing simulations in refugee neighborhoods like Nea Filadelfia and in stadiums of the refugee origin sports clubs. There is a possibility that such simulations have become more real than the place itself. A symbolic object may diverge greatly from what it represents yet still maintain a meaningful link to it through a kind of encoded mystical or magical association. When this relationship is examined more closely, it becomes evident that symbolism is inherently tied to notions of magic (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 144). In this way the stadium functions as a magical surrogate for an unreachable homeland, sustaining a sense of continuity where lived experience can no longer do so. Jean Baudrillard (1994, p.1) names it "hyperreal" when a simulation is no longer the abstraction of a region, a referential entity, or a substance. Instead, it represents a reality produced by models that lack original context. In this situation, both the reference and the connection become lost in the process. From this perspective, Hagia Sophia Stadium can be seen as a hyperreality*;* it exists as a reality in its own right. Initially, it had a connection to a specific cartographic location, but in the process of evolving into a reference point, that original connection has vanished. Baudrillard (1994, p. 2) asserts that reality is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices and memory banks – essentially, control models—which can then be reproduced an infinite number of times. As such, the refugees, their grandchildren and the fans of refugee sports clubs with the same emotional materials they brought from their ancestral hometowns, reproduced continuously sites of memory. Their reference, however, blurred in time. The memory site became a simulacrum.

Ultimately, the Hagia Sophia Stadium stands as a placemaking practice. It is meant to be a translocality, a simulation, an extension of a particular locality. However, it has become hyperreality, a living testament to the power of displaced communities to recreate localities through collective memory. It offers the AEK fans a sense of belonging, an identity. It is a neighborhood that provides a setting within which actors find meaning. It is an imagined world that provides invisible bonds among people. It is a unique place where the bonds with the past are created connecting the place with a national and nationalistic context. It reveals how uprooted identities may become rooted again —not in the

[6]For a concise visual impression of the inauguration ceremony of OPAP Arena, the following video may be consulted: Event Plus. (2022, October 1). *OPAP Arena inauguration ceremony*. Retrieved December 3, 2025, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYLICRT7GEI

soil of ancestral lands, but in newly constructed spaces charged with memory. Hagia Sophia Stadium, therefore, exemplifies the production of locality not through territorial continuity, but through symbolic reinvention– a reality without a singular origin, yet no less authentic for it.

6. Conclusion

The case of AEK FC's Hagia Sophia Stadium vividly illustrates the transformation of locality in a globalized world. Far from being a mere football venue, the stadium stands as a complex cultural artifact –a physical and symbolic reconstruction of a lost homeland. Through architecture, symbolism, iconography, and fan engagement, it functions as a site of memory that reanimated Asia Minor in the heart of Athens. It is a space born not only from nostalgia but from the active, collective will of displaced community to assert identity, continuity and presence.

The stadium embodies what Appadurai (2005) calls translocality: a context in which local attachments are no longer rooted solely in geography but in shared history, social ties, and cultural reproduction. For the descendants of Asia Minor refugees, many of whom have never set foot in their ancestral lands, the Hagia Sophia Stadium is both a memorial and a medium of identity formation. The architectural references to Byzantium, the symbolic naming of gates after Anatolian cities, and the inauguration performances testify to a community's effort to preserve and perform memory across generations.

The performance of memory and identity, however, does not merely reconstruct the past—it transforms it. As Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperreality suggests, the stadium becomes more than a reference to a historical place; it becomes a reality in itself. In its hyperreal form, Asia Minor is no longer a cartographic location but a lived, reproduced, and emotionally charged presence. This shows how memory, culture, and identity can be materially and emotionally re-inscribed into new localities, producing realities that are felt as authentic and lived—even when their geographic referents have faded.

The example of Hagia Sophia Stadium highlights the capacity of special practices and material culture to anchor transgenerational memory, and to redefine what and where "home" is. As such, the stadium is not only a monument to the past but a living, dynamic site of identity—making in the present. Placemaking, therefore, is achieved not only through architectural form but through symbolic naming—transforming the stadium into a lived cartography of displacement, identity, and enduring communal memory.

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Özet

1990'ların başında Arjun Appadurai, yerellik kavramını salt mekânsal bir kategori olarak değil, ilişkisel ve bağlamsal bir süreç olarak ele almıştır. Ona göre yerellik, bireylerin sosyal ilişkiler, teknolojik araçlar ve farklı bağlamsal koşullar aracılığıyla kurdukları bir inşadır. Yerellik yalnızca fiziksel mekâna bağlı değildir; mahalleler, göçmen topluluklarının diasporik bağları veya sanal etkileşimler de yerelliğin kurucu unsurlarıdır. Bu bağlamda, bir mahalle aynı anda hem coğrafi bir alan hem de ağlarla örülü hayali bir topluluk olabilir. Günümüzde turizm, göç, karma evlilikler ve ekonomik hareketlilik gibi süreçler, yerelliğin ortaya çıkışı için karmaşık koşullar yaratmaktadır. Appadurai'nin "yerel ötesilik" kavramı, bu çok katmanlı ilişkiler ağına işaret eder. Yerellik ve yerel ötesilik, kimlik ile mekân arasındaki bağı yeniden düşünmeye olanak sağlar.

Mekânlar yalnızca coğrafi varlıklar değil, kimliklerin inşa edildiği ve yeniden üretildiği bağlamsal zeminlerdir. Mekân, kişilerin benlik anlayışında rol oynar; çünkü topluluklara istikrarlı sosyal, maddi ve doğal bir çevre sunar. Bu teorik çerçeve, yerinden edilmiş toplulukların mekânla kurdukları ilişkiler üzerinden somut bir şekilde incelenebilir. Küçük Asya örneği, bu bağlamda dikkat çekicidir. 1919-1922 yılları arasında gerçekleşen Türk-Yunan Savaşı (Türkiye'de Kurtuluş Savaşı) sonrasında Anadolu'da yaşayan Rum Ortodoks kökenli nüfusun büyük bir kısmı, Yunan ordusunun geri çekilmesiyle birlikte Anadolu'dan ayrılmak durumunda kalmıştır. Lozan Antlaşması müzakereleri sürecinde imzalanan "Yunan ve Türk Nüfus Mübadelesine Dair Sözleşme", Türk kökenli Yunan vatandaşları ile Rum Ortodoks kökenli Türk vatandaşlarının karşılıklı değişimini öngörmüş ve böylece yüz binlerce insan yerinden edilmiştir.

Bu zorunlu göç hareketiyle Yunanistan'a gelen mülteciler, yerel halkın önyargıları ve dışlayıcı tutumlarıyla karşılaşmıştır. Bu sosyokültürel gerilimler, gündelik hayatın yanı sıra spor alanına da yansımıştır. Tam da bu bağlamda kurulan AEK (Athlitiki Enosis Konstantinopouleos) Spor Kulübü, mülteci topluluklarının kolektif hafızasını ve kimliğini görünür kılmak için önemli bir toplumsal girişim olmuştur. 1924'te Atina'da kurulan AEK, kısa sürede hem spor hem de kültürel bir kurum haline gelmiştir. 1926'da inşa edilen ve daha sonra Nikos Goumas adını alan Nea Filadelfia Stadyumu, yaklaşık 80 yıl boyunca AEK taraftarlarının evi olmuş, mülteci kimliğinin yeniden üretilmesine aracılık etmiştir.

2003'te yıkılan stadyumun yerine 2022'de açılan Ayasofya Stadyumu (resmi adıyla ALLWYN Arena), bu kolektif hafıza ve kimlik inşasının devamı niteliğindedir. AEK'nin resmi söyleminde yeni stadyum yalnızca bir spor mekânı değil, aynı zamanda bir bellek ve kültür merkezidir. İçinde barındırdığı iki müze—Mülteci Helenizm Müzesi ve AEK Tarihi Müzesi—bunun somut kanıtıdır. Stadyumun mimarisi de bu hafıza politikasını yansıtır: Bizans başkentine ve Ayasofya'ya yapılan

göndermeler, toplulukların kaybettikleri coğrafyayı yeniden kurmalarına olanak tanır. Böylelikle stadyum, sadece futbol karşılaşmalarının oynandığı bir saha değil, geçmişle bağ kurulan bir hafıza mekânı haline gelmiştir.

Ayasofya Stadyumu, Küçük Asya Felaketi'ni, göç yollarını ve kaybedilen toprakları temsil eden simgesel ögelerle donatılmıştır. Ancak bu ögeler, artık özgün bağlamlarından kopmuş, yeniden üretilmiş ve yeni kuşakların deneyimlediği, Jean Baudrillard'ın değimiyle bir "hipergerçeklik" halini almıştır. İkinci ve üçüncü nesil mülteciler, hiç yaşamadıkları bir coğrafyaya dair aidiyetlerini, bu tür simülasyon mekânlarında kurmaktadırlar.

Sonuç olarak, Ayasofya Stadyumu örneği, yerellik, yerel ötesilik, hafıza ve hipergerçeklik arasındaki ilişkilerin somut bir kesişim noktasını sunar. Bu mekân, yalnızca bir futbol sahası değil; köklerinden koparılmış toplulukların kendilerini yeniden var edebildikleri, aidiyet geliştirebildikleri ve kimliklerini pekiştirebildikleri bir toplumsal sahnedir. Appadurai'nin yerelliği ilişkisel ve bağlamsal bir inşa olarak tanımlaması, bu örnek üzerinden açıkça gözlemlenir. Baudrillard'ın hipergerçeklik kavramı ise, bu yeniden kurulan mekânların gerçeğin yerini nasıl aldığını ve topluluklar için daha "gerçek" bir deneyime dönüştüğünü anlamaya olanak sağlar. Ayasofya Stadyumu, mekânın kolektif hafızayla nasıl yeniden yaratıldığını ve bu yeniden yaratımın topluluklara yeni bir kimlik ve aidiyet sunduğunu gösteren eşsiz bir örnektir.