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# Imaging the materiality of a diaspora

## Recording the biographies of Greek Orthodox church buildings in London

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The materiality of world diasporas – in every form, from landmark features to everyday objects – is a relatively modern approach towards studying the diasporic relationship with both homeland and hostland. This article examines the ways that ethnic Greek Orthodox communities have altered Western denomination church buildings in London to serve their spiritual and community needs.

The presence of migrant ethnic Greeks (Greeks and Greek Cypriots) in Britain can be traced back to the 15th and 16th centuries (Harris 1995). History has preserved the names of Andronikos and Alexios Effomatos, two craftsmen from Istanbul, who settled in London during the reign of Henry VI (1421-1471) and Peter de Mellian from Crete, who worked as a tailor for Thomas Cromwell (1485-1540). But one cannot speak of an organized Greek community – and by extension Greek diaspora – in Britain prior to the late 17th century (Chatziioannou 2009; Harris 2009), which is roughly when the first, albeit short-lived, Greek Orthodox chapel was built in Soho (1667).

Since then, religion has continued to constitute a pillar of Greek Orthodox identity in Britain, as exemplified by the monumental church of Aghia Sophia in Bayswater, built in 1879, which later became the cathedral of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain.

With the exception of the aforementioned church in Bayswater and a recently built church in Harrow, all of the 21 other Greek Orthodox churches in London are hosted in church buildings originally built by Anglican, Catholic and other denominations. These buildings differ greatly from typical Eastern Orthodox churches in terms of architectural form and have thus been modified to serve the spiritual and cultural needs of the diasporic communities they serve. Most of the clergy in the early history of these churches had to emigrate from Greece and Cyprus, but in recent decades a significant number of priests have been ordained in Britain or are ethnic British converted to Orthodoxy.

This article explores how, since the 1940s, ethnic Greek Orthodox communities in London have altered Anglican, Catholic and other Christian denomination church buildings to serve their own spiritual needs. In addition to exploring the alteration of the buildings, we also briefly examine certain Greek Orthodox traditional practices, opening a window into the church traditions of an unexplored religious and ethnic minority in London (Fig. 1).

Photos are employed as a metanarrative to communicate the special characteristics of Orthodoxy in London and the identity challenges that Greek Orthodox communities face. Based on Ingold's (2000) theoretical realm of taskscapes – active landscapes that embrace people's actions – church buildings can be seen to create a landmark and, simultaneously, an enclosed landscape within which Orthodox diasporic activities take place.

The relationship between built heritage, objects and human actions becomes relevant in a post-modern theoretical climate that promotes intersectionality in diaspora studies. In this context, materiality offers a unique path towards exploring the ways that artefacts, mementoes, everyday utilitarian objects, architectural elements or even decorations can act as anchors of identity in diasporic settings (see e.g. Basu & Coleman 2008; Crang 2010; Fortier 2000). By metaphorically and physically encapsulating an aspect of migrants' past lives, social relations and experiences, material artefacts offer a tangible connection to what the migrants conceptualize as 'home' or the 'homeland'.

They are therefore deeply connected to the ways diasporic populations perceive themselves and their emotional ties to the homeland on a personal and communal level.

The intersection between diaspora, mobility and material culture has been receiving growing attention over the past 15 years. A noteworthy part of scholarly research has focused on the belongings of first-generation immigrants at the time of their migration and the role these play in deliberately or unintentionally maintaining emotional connections to the narratives, traditions and landscapes of a pre-migration past. A characteristic example is Burrell's (2008) study on post-socialist Polish migration to Britain which analyzed aspects of the materiality of travelling and travel spaces and demonstrated that the experience of migration is embedded in material processes. Similarly, research conducted on the travel trunks and glory boxes of post-WWII Italian and Greek migrants to Australia (Agutter et al. 2013; Palaktoglou et al. 2014) has shed light on the symbolic, cultural and emotional significance of the items migrants select to accompany them to their new country of residence.

Objects relating to religious practices, such as house shrines, icons or other artefacts with religious iconography have also been identified as important when analyzing the diasporic journey, not so much with regards to the spirituality of their owners, but as a means of constructing a sense of home and belonging. Papanikolas (2002), for instance, shows how amulets, which were among the few belongings brought by early Greek migrants, symbolically embodied the beliefs and traditions the migrants carried with them and envisioned they would live by in America.

Tolia-Kelly (2004) shows how religious spaces in the homes of Hindu women in London served simultaneously as representations of sacred landscapes and as symbols of India, while also forming reference points, not only for spiritual purposes but also for accommodating objects relating to family history. Meanwhile, Glenn et al. (2017) found that religious objects in the homes of Greek and Italian migrants in South Australia in the 1950s and 1960s not only functioned as focal points for religious practices – which later influenced expressions of faith outside the domestic environment – but also provided a tangible connection to the place of origin and played a dynamic role as pillars of cultural identity.

It is, however, particularly notable that the materiality of communal spaces and practices – such as formal places of communal worship or patterns of consumption on a collective scale beyond the contained environment of the home – are very rarely explored in the scholarship of diaspora. A representative example of this perspective is the study of Indian grocery stores in San Francisco and their role as nodes of circulation of imagery, cultural products and commodities between India and the diaspora (Mankekar 2002). This is a central topic to which the present article aims to draw attention by discussing how public religious art and architecture are intertwined with the solidification of diasporic identities and function as beacons of visibility for the entire diasporic community in the hostland.

All 21 buildings in London have followed similar paths in their transformation from Western denomination churches to Greek Orthodox ones. The most important alteration of a building for it to be able to serve Orthodox needs is the erection of a tempon or iconostasis. *Iconostases* (or *tempon*; -a in plural) have thus been installed in the London churches – mostly bought and transferred from Greece

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**Fig. 1.** Good Friday procession of the Orthodox Epitaphios (Tomb of Christ) in front of Camden Road station bridge. Orthodox practices not only change the interior taskscapes of church buildings in the UK, but occasionally the urban landscapes as well.

**Fig. 2.** Fr Vassilios Papanastasiou, delivering his sermon at the monthly English language Orthodox Divine Liturgy Mass at the Holy Cross and St Michael church in Golders Green. The small chapel has been fully decorated with Byzantine-style wall paintings and an iconostásis has been added. One can see the stained glass in the window behind the altar, which has been preserved. There is no stained-glass tradition in the Greek Orthodox Church.

**Fig. 3.** In the *ierón* (sanctum) of the Holy Cross church in Golders Green, the old altar area has been covered by a large icon of the Virgin Mary. However, the old Anglican altar decorations have been preserved and incorporated within the new.

and Cyprus (Fig. 2). Additionally, mobile Byzantine-style icons and wall paintings have been commissioned to serve the needs of Orthodox spiritual expression. However, not all traces of the Anglican churches have been erased: many pre-existing elements which also have a place in the Orthodox typicon have been kept. Thus, pulpits, statues, Western art wall paintings, icons, altars and pews remain in use unmodified (Fig. 3). Inscriptions relating to the history of the buildings and any previous practices within them are also preserved and displayed (Fig. 4).

The Orthodox altar is free-standing at the *ierón* (sanctum), the space behind the *iconostásis*. In the majority of the converted church buildings in London, the old altars, which, following the Western tradition, were standing against the back wall, have been moved forward. Besides the practicality of reusing these old materials, there is a spiritual aspect too, which highlights the longevity of the holy space and enhances the lifespan of these buildings as churches even after a change of user community. The preservation of previous art on the altars is evidence of the continuity of the sacred space and provides a sense of religious belonging in the hostland (Fig. 5).

Orthodox, Byzantine-style artworks have also been created, such as wall paintings and mobile icons, to place in the churches (Fig. 6). In some cases, the wall paintings have been designed by a variety of artists using a wide range of techniques, all following post-Byzantine styles and forms. Indeed, decorating converted churches continues today. Notable is the case of St Demetrius in Edmonton (Fig. 7). The church building, dating from 1909 and designed by E.L. Warre, was originally erected as the Anglican church of St Martin's to serve as a missionary parish in the Lower Edmonton area. The way that Greek Orthodox iconography has been modified to be accommodated within the Anglican architecture is noteworthy as the iconography has to follow the neo-Gothic architectural elements of the building.

Orthodoxy in Britain may have flourished in the post-WWII era as a direct output of Greek immigration overseas. However, several Orthodox Greeks in the UK today believe that the churches should serve an apostolic/missionary role. Fr Petros Georgiou of St Barnabas church in Wood Green, for example (Fig. 8), argues for Orthodoxy to be the 'church of the land' – as it was before the East-West Schism of 1054. Still today though, the majority of the churches function as spiritual and cultural hubs for ethnic Greek Orthodox communities. Vassiliki Papanastasiou still makes the traditional food 'kólýva' every week to serve at commemoration services ('*mnmósyna*') for the departed in Camden Town. Fr George, the priest in charge of All Saints Cathedral, sometimes participates in the procedure (Fig. 9).

In addition to accommodating spiritual and cultural needs – notwithstanding Fr Petros' ideas about the apostolic/missionary role that Greek Orthodox communities should play in Britain – most of the churches continue to operate as educational centres for second and third generation ethnic Greeks. In church libraries, it is thus usual to see religious publications stacked alongside books on Greek history and language.

Photo narratives demonstrating the interconnectedness between diasporic communities and their material culture – in this case the church buildings in London – also provide an insight into the challenges that these communities face regarding the loss of homeland identity among second and third generation migrants, and the role this material culture can play if that loss occurs. In the case of the London Greek Orthodox communities, photos illustrate the significance of material objects not only for passing Greek Orthodox identity on to following generations, but also for introducing new people to Orthodoxy. ●



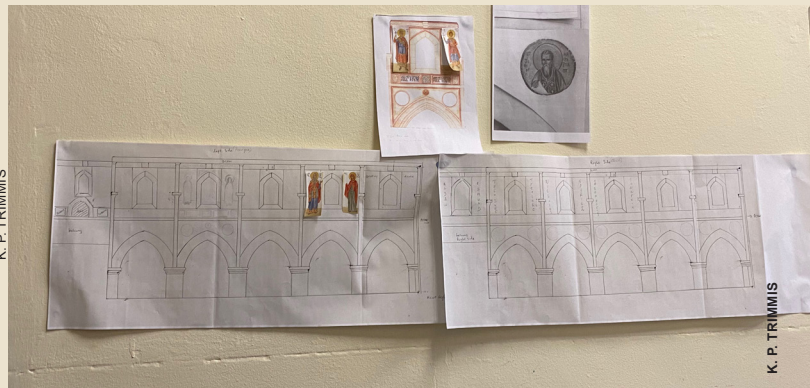
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**(From left to right, above to below)**

**Fig. 4.** The iconostasis of St Anargyroi church in Gospel Oak that was brought from Cyprus in 1977/78.

**Fig. 5.** The altar at St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Kentish Town. Originally an Anglican church dedicated to St Barnabas the Apostle, built in 1884-85 by Ewan Christian (Architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners from 1851-95).

**Fig. 6.** Detail of a neo-Byzantine-style wall painting at St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Kentish Town. All internal walls and ceilings of the church were decorated by Michael Akalestos, a master iconographer from Athens, in the 1990s.

**Fig. 7.** The plans for wall paintings at St Demetrius church in Edmonton has been a prominent place in the priest's office. The way that Greek Orthodox iconography is modified to be accommodated within the Anglican architecture is noteworthy.

**Fig. 8.** Vassiliki Papanastasiou making kolyva to be served at the mnemósyna – commemoration services for the departed – in Camden Town.

**Fig. 9.** Vassiliki Papanastasiou makes, weekly, the traditional food kolyva, served for the commemoration services mnemósyna for the departed in Camden Town.

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