



Towards a political economy of violence: Property and revanchism in West Thessaloniki

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Abstract

Encompassing data from a year of field-based work in the neighborhood of Ksiladika, Thessaloniki in Northern Greece, I uncover a campaign of vigilante evictions of migrant squatters by local property owners. To contextualize this vigilante violence historically, I point to the distinct trajectory of the Greek property regime, carved by the minimal involvement of the state in welfare provision, the role of the family as a welfare substitute and a valorized norm hybridizing familism with a *laissez-faire* ethos linked to the possession of (residential) assets. Geographically, I marry Wacquant's conceptualization of *advanced urban marginality* with *rent gap theory* to unearth the specificity of Ksiladika, a space at once relegated yet loaded with the promise of revaluation. I suggest that this violence is linked with what local impoverished landholders perceive as an opened rent gap that drives their pursuit to reorganize space according to the dictates of the markets as a way to secure, valorize and restore their property with its attendant meanings vis-a-vis the social reproduction squeeze brought about the economic restructuring of the Greek economy. Advancing Wacquant's conceptualization of *advanced urban marginality* as an effect of the neoliberal *state crafting on a global scale* I suggest (i) that within the schematization of a neoliberal Janus-like centaur state that performs liberalism for the privileged and punitive paternalism for those at the social bottom, its punitive aspects are no longer reserved for the marginalized due to the expanding zone of precarity and (ii) that neoliberal governing is attained not merely by the penal apparatus of the state, but via a diversified repertoire of state responses, including the governing through the precarized subjects who internalize the postulates of the ideology of self-reliance mediated through possession of (residential) assets in times when the resource is scarce.

Keywords

Greek property regime, vigilante violence, urban marginality, precarization, rent gap



Let's say your brother's close to you
 But if there's not enough for two
 He'll kick you smartly in the face.
 You think that loyalty's not disgrace?
 But say your wife is close to you
 And finds she's barely making do
 She'll kick you smartly in the face.
 And gratitude: that's no disgrace
 But say your son is close to you
 And finds your pension's not come through
 He'll kick you smartly in the face.
 And so will all the human race.

The Threepenny opera, Bertolt Brecht

Introduction: Circumventing the margins

Property is essentially viewed as an unmediated relation between an individual owner and a thing; yet to speak of property is actually to speak of power, of the categorization of space and of the rules of interaction by which space is to be used (Blomley, 2003, p. 1997) as well as the attendant behaviors and actions deemed (im)proper. The power to define property relations serves the needs of capital for profit extraction from the built environment and the need of the state to extract consent by ordering space and distributing uneven subject positions in it.

Residential property¹ ownership is significant not simply for its intrinsic use and exchange value, but also symbolically in terms of the message it transmits about the social position of its owners (Flint, 2003; McKee, 2011; Roy, 2003). However, housing systems, property regimes and property cultures differ due to their diverse historic trajectories, affecting the gravity property ownership holds in augmenting or diminishing a person's sense of security and socially sanctioned 'worth' (McKee, 2012; Smith, 2008).

In the explanatory framework of the paradigmatic turn in most (North) European countries, described as a rolling back or redeployment of the state (Harvey, 2005; Wacquant 2007; 2012), Greece is an outlier. The Greek property regime, marked by the longstanding statist *strategy of minimal involvement* (Emmanouel, 2007, p. 81) rests upon the family (Allen et al., 2004; Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou, 2018; Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2013), emerging as a substitute social security institution. In this *asset based welfare avant la lettre*, linked to the plethora of the conditional proletariat inflating Greek cities, possession of residential assets secured by the working members of the family was key for subsistence and social safety. It was also an aspirational yardstick and the nodal medium distinguishing the 'worthy' from the 'unworthy', crowding out the 'excess' to the margins of social and physical space.

Property ownership became key in ordering and governing a population marked by the wounds of the civil war by dispersing an ethos of self-reliance and extracting compliance by granting or denying access to resources that could congeal in a more or less safe and valorized position in the tenure system. Yet, after the financial and ensuing economic collapse of 2008, the costs of the crisis were externalized to the family, pulverizing the infrastructure underpinning the familistic model of social reproduction and its attendant values. This had

¹ Hereinafter referred to as 'property'.

serious repercussions on populations differentially exposed to (the probability of) homelessness due to debt, unemployment and limited or no access to any formal or informal safety net.

Like in other urban centers of Greece, the crisis left a heavy mark on one of central Thessaloniki's stigmatized neighborhoods, Ksiladika, considered a landfill of 'redundant' spaces and 'excess' people, yet retaining its valor as a 'promise land'. Commercial activity was stalled, construction came to a halt and many properties remained half-built, vacant or abandoned. In the gap that opened in between the ebbing of economic activity and the refugee flows of 2015, many of these vacant properties transformed into informal dwellings occupied by undocumented migrants. The promise of re-institution of the propertied individual faded, culminating in vigilante campaigns to 'clean' the neighborhood of people and uses perceived as impediments to land valorization.

The aim of this paper is to read the drives of this vigilante violence—understood as the enforcement of subjectively perceived 'law and order' by actors who act autonomously from governmental power—by placing it in its historical and geographical context. The initial questions: Why violence? Why in Ksiladika? Why now? turned into the following two: What were the transformations in the broader political economy that created the conditions of possibility for violence in Ksiladika? Can this violence be used as an indicator of the destabilizing of the Greek property regime?

I try to unravel this vigilante violence by drawing on Wacquant's (2012) conceptualization of *territorial stigmatization* and *urban marginality*, described as stemming from the neoliberal tilting of the state from welfare to punitive modes of governing socio-spatial marginality (Wacquant, 2007). The neoliberal turn, for Wacquant, entails the retreat of the welfare state, combined with housing and labor market restructuring and its replacement with the wedding of the 'invisible hand' of the market to the 'iron fist' of the penal state (Wacquant, 2012). This neoliberal shift coalesces with the self-responsibilizing harangue blaming the poor for their poverty, revamping incarceration as the 'catchall solution to all social problems' (Gilmore, 2007, p. 2).

In opposition to scholars who, according to him, overemphasize the role of the markets in driving the restructuring of capitalism (Harvey, 2005) as well as scholars of the governmentality framework who suggest that neoliberalism relies on a diffused non-state logic aiming at imposing calculative practices of the self (Hilgers, 2011; Ong, 2006), Wacquant (2012) underscores that neoliberalism is a state crafting process and that state authority holds the primal position in the triadic relation of state, market and citizenship in driving the neoliberal shift from above 'by harnessing the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third' (Wacquant, 2012, p. 66). This is distilled in his metaphor of a neoliberal *centaur state* (Wacquant, 2012), which, like the mythological creature, holds two natures. One distributes benefits for those at the top of the social stratum and the other enforces a punitive 'double regulation' of marginality through supervisory workfare and prisonfare upon those at the socio-spatial nadir (Wacquant, 2010).

For urban scholars studying stigmatized places in diverse contexts, Wacquant's work has been central to understanding the structural causes of socio-spatial inequality and injustice (Sisson, 2021). Yet, caution is needed before unreflectively replicating a diagnosis

which is embedded in a ‘Western’ and ‘Northern’ experience, to the workings of starkly differing marginality in contexts marked by the deepening and widening of precarity.

In view of the massive precarization following the economic collapse, instead of a centaur state dualizing society and polarizing the city, I point to the uncannily diverse, Cerberus-like, repertoire of responses of the Greek state. These span seduction to coercion, reconstituting property relations to manage the precarized mass, tame behaviors and extract compliance. It reserves indifference and invisibilization for the ‘excess’ population, deemed ‘not worth being exploited’ (Fraser, 2013), relegated into the margins of social and physical space. It stratifies the new poor according to their differentiated proximity to the valorized moral norm of self-reliance. It thus turns precarization into a new mode of governance (Lorey, 2015), mediated through the promise of access granted to (residential) assets in conditions where access to this resource is slim.

I introduce one geographic condition to the amalgam of factors that made such an unapologetic violence possible. The territorial stigma of Ksiladika is inextricably linked to the formation of its rent gap (Christophers, 2021; Smith, 1979). The rent gap, meaning the difference between the economic return available on a site and the return that is expected to be captured under the site’s ‘best and highest use’, was coined by Smith (1979), arguing that gaps may turn wide enough to justify the capital costs of closing it. The literature that orbits around the state’s role in the formation and closure of rent gaps refers to the centrality and necessity of institutional processes, as deregulation decrees (Teresa, 2019), land upzoning or investment in public infrastructure (López-Morales et al., 2019), rent decontrol (Fields & Uffer, 2016), and debt leveraging mechanisms in social housing (Kallin 2021), which liberate potential rent from previous constraints (Grey, 2022).

I try to advance this discussion through the lens of Ksiladika, by pointing not only to the concrete materiality of economic and institutional processes, but the symbolic power of the state that retracts the dominant meanings around property, revamps the property culture in conditions when the resource is scarce and inflames the promise of reinstitution of the propertied individual. This generates a ‘growth network’, as precarized landholders cling to the project of market making and work to exploit and close Ksiladika’s rent gap at the expense of the ‘excess’ held responsible for devalorization.

I start by expounding on the historical role and gravity property holds in ordering Greek society. Delving into the well-recorded trajectory of the Greek property regime and housing model unearths its main components: minimal involvement of the state in welfare provision linked to a familistic model of social reproduction, and a widespread hybrid ethos merging familism with laissez-faire in the domain of property ownership. These components become key to understanding the severity of the social reproduction squeeze after the eruption of the economic crisis in 2008. Then I turn to the research design of my qualitative endeavor. Through field data collected in Ksiladika, I rummage the conditions of possibility that turned non-state actors into vectors of violence, then dialogue with Wacquant’s thesis on the emergence of advanced urban marginality as an effect of the neoliberal state crafting on a global scale. I argue instead that in contexts marked by widespread precarization, the implementation of neoliberal policies is no longer attained merely by the deployment of the penal apparatus of the neoliberal Leviathan but has been diversified and is attained likewise

through precarized subjects who internalize the postulates of the ideology of self-reliance mediated through ownership of property in times when the resource is perceived as scarce.

The trajectory of the Greek property regime

Familistic hypertrophy vis-a-vis administrative atrophy

To consider the role of property in the different strategies and the effects of the work of naturalization that the Greek state produced in order to legitimate its institutions and actions (or lack thereof) and its divergence from most European countries in welfare provision, I turn to the historical labor of which social divisions and the subjective perceptions of these divisions are the product.

The trajectory of the normalization of outright homeownership in the Greek context is well documented. After WWII (1939-1945) and the ensuing Civil War (1946-1949), the state power to grant or deny access to property was defining for the reordering of society to position the Greek state as part of the ‘West’ in an arbitrarily divided geopolitical terrain as such. The state did not take active part in the reconstruction process. Instead, it supported the urbanizing population to build their houses by themselves (Kalfa, 2019; Leontidou, 1990; Maloutas et al., 2020) through a technology of *aided-self-help* (Kalfa, 2019: 12; Kwak, 2015). Aided self-help became the main tool through which *a whole country negotiated its transition to modernity* (Kalfa, 2019, p. 92), was deployed in the name of freedom, albeit technical, both in terms of governing practices (minimal involvement of the state) and in terms of ethical technologies (the dominant moral substance of self-reliance) for constructing new subjectivities (Rose, 2017). This interspersed and normalized a hybrid ethos of familism and laissez-faire attitude for gaining access to residential assets (Balabanidis et al., 2013).

This in turn translated into two systems of self-provision: the system of *self-promotion* and the *land-for-flats* system (*αυτιπαροχή*) that replaced it. Self-promotion involved illegal construction on legally acquired plots of land previously divided by their landowners, and was favored by the state through different retroactive managerial and administrative possibilities (Isaias, 2017; Maloutas et al., 2020; Mavridou-Sigalou, 1988). Self-promotion was later replaced by *αυτιπαροχή* (land-for-flats system) (Leontidou, 1990; Maloutas & Karadimitriou, 2001). Based on arrangements between landowners and building promoters who joined their labor and capital force to produce building blocks, the promoters saved themselves the cost of buying land by giving landowners a share of the constructed units once completed (Antonopoulou, 1991; Maloutas et al., 2001).

These systems constituted an effective housing policy for the integration and secure tenure of a rapidly urbanizing population, without much state spending on infrastructure and welfare. They effectively made way for the over-reliance on the family institution as a welfare buffer (Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2013); it emerged as a substitute social security system vis-a-vis the strategic atrophy of the administration (Leontidou, 1990). It serviced at once the double role of extracting value and of extracting political consent from the plethora of

the *occasional proletariat* (Leontidou, 1989), by turning them into *propertied* individuals. In this asset-based welfare *avant la lettre*, a person's or household's social security and 'worth' was decisively dependent on their position in property relations and heavily reliant on the working members of the family and mainly the figure of the male breadwinner (*nikokiraios-voroxvogalos*), benefiting from good employment opportunities during his active years and from a significant pension in retirement (Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou, 2018).

Access to *property* and assets turned into key tools for ordering subjects according to their behavioral proximity to the *proper* norm of self-reliance, rendering (in)accessibility to residential assets the yardstick mediating categorizations between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' subjects. It was a central add-on to governing practices stratifying society *by design, by default* or *by proxy* on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, ableism. If the systematic and explicit exclusion of dissidents from resources and opportunities necessary for their reproduction, precisely on the basis of their convictions, constituted an *exclusion by design* on behalf of state authorities (against the communists in the aftermath of the war), the trajectory of the property system attained an implicit capacity to *exclude by default*, whereas the family institution was a lever for an *exclusion by proxy*.

By consolidating a familistic asset-based welfare, the state invested in the ethical norm of *proper householding* and set the valorized practices according to which all subjects were to be measured. Security was provided with strings attached, since any members belonging to the internal circuit of the family considered incompatible with household goals could be faced with the eventuality of their expulsion—what I call *exclusion by proxy*. The migrants arriving to Greece on the other hand, having no access to the informal circuits of welfare, were *excluded by default*, pushed to un-contracted, highly exploitative labor positions and to the undesired and inexpensive fissures of the built environment, translating social inequality to spatial inequality expressed vertically or horizontally.²

Social reproduction squeeze

In the 1990s bank credit became crucial for preserving the purchasing power of households, bolstering the property regime and housing model, yet exacerbating housing inequalities. Homeownership increased among higher occupational groups but decreased for manual workers with limited access to credit (Maloutas et al., 2021), especially immigrants deprived of access to informal welfare and assets that other manual workers usually possessed.

An abrupt halt to this trajectory came with the policy prescriptions imposed on Greece by the TROIKA (ECB, EC, IMF) after the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008. Premised on both the country's 'exceptionality' sketched as a weak link in the stable EU chain, and on the (self)orientalizing claim of the unfinished or even unattained Greek modernity (Rakopoulos, 2015), the 'modernizing' structural adjustments imposed led to a recessionary spiral, downscaling GDP by about 30% (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2018).

² Coining the term *exclusion by default*, does not mean in any case that I ascribe a passive role to the state, far from it. State authorities could either retroactively play the role of the benevolent supplier of conditional welfare or painlessly perpetuate the invisibilization and voicelessness of the already invisible and voiceless.

This outsourced the costs of the crisis to the institution of the family to tackle state deficits. In tandem, over-indebtedness of households had a negative knock-on effect upon the three key pillars of their members' social security: employment security for households' primary earners; pension adequacy; property and home ownership (Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2013; 2018). Unemployment rates skyrocketed, property taxes sextupled (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2018) and mortgage arrears swelled from 4% to more than 45% (Balabanidis et al., 2013). The annual disposable income of households fell by 37.6% between 2010 and 2016, with 18% of the population at risk of poverty in 2019 (Hatziprokopiou et al., 2020).³ Housing costs went through the ceiling (Figure 1), reflected in the difficulties faced by a significant proportion of households in meeting rent or mortgage payments for their dwelling (30.4%), paying fixed utility bills (32.6%), or being able to afford adequate heating in winter (17.9%).⁴

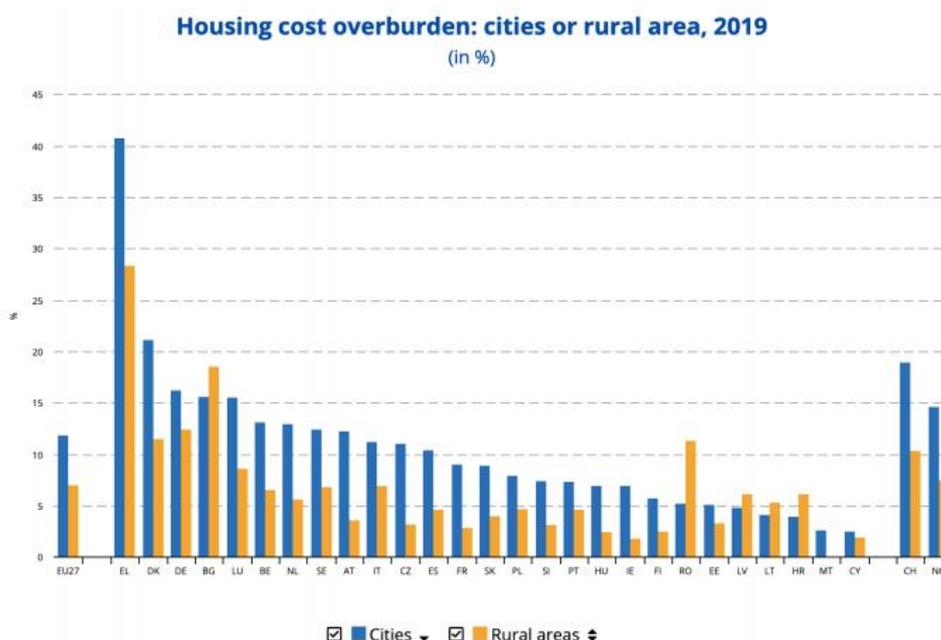


Figure 1

Housing cost overburden: cities or rural area, 2019

Source: Eurostat, 2020

In a country where homeownership was traditionally valorized as the only pathway to ‘progress’, the reverberations of the crisis on the family led to a moment of dislocation.⁵ Yet

³ In the Region of Central Macedonia, where Thessaloniki is located this rate was about 2.5% higher than in the country as a whole.

⁴ The geography of housing cost overburden is indicative: the vast majority of properties off the electricity grid are located in the Western entrance area of the city (Hatziprokopiou et. al., 2020), where the neighborhood studied here is located.

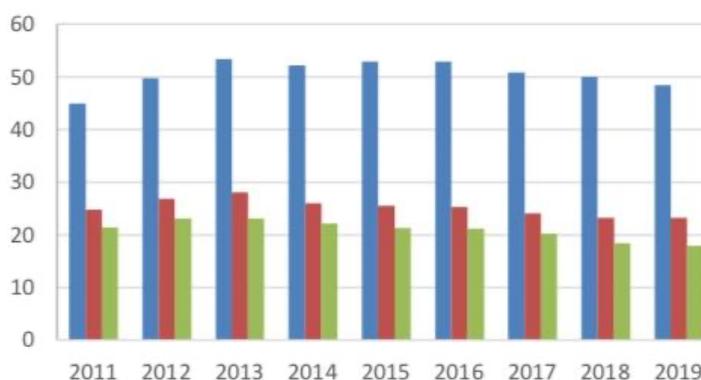
⁵ On the backdrop of the financial collapse in Greece emerged a passel of cultural products, later quartered under the moniker ‘weird wave’, critiquing the *unbounded family* (ανοριακή οικογένεια) (K.Alexandra, 2020).

the family endured as the *primary shock absorber* (Karamesini, 2008; Papadopoulos & Roumbakis, 2013, p. 207) where intra-familistic social transfers and the domestic redistribution of pensions remained central vis-a-vis insignificant social benefits provided by the state (Figure 2). By encoding the familistic property culture and entangling it with national progress, homeownership as an aspirational yardstick for social safety and as an enduring *behaviorial legacy* (Blackwell & Kohl, 2019) is still considered the bedrock of Greek modernization, distilled in the figure of the householder:

In this tiny, poor country, the householders were the first ones who settled in apartments with central heating and elevators; they struggled to heal the wounds of the Civil War... Conservative in their worldviews, religious with a deep-rooted patriotism in their hearts: they wanted the country they would bequeath to their children to be better than the one they were born into...to abridge the distance dividing our *ψωροκώσταινα*⁶ from the modern states of the West (Theodoropoulos, 2018).

Figure 2

Percentage of the general population at the risk of poverty, before and after social transfers.
Source: Hatziprokopiou et al., 2020



The figure of the householder

Levering property as a technique to manage the population by ordering space, by allocating households in space, by organizing subjects in households, by inducing moral norms in subjects, the state minimized responsibility for securing social reproduction and welfare for the population and canonized its absence. This self-regulated nucleus institution of the household, safeguarded by *the householder*, allowed for a governing by proxy, using the power to evict morally and physically, stratifying deviances according to their relative proximity to the norm and their capacity to be reintroduced to the norm of the performing subject.

The indigenous term *nikokiraios* denotes the normal, responsible, risk-averse, autonomous and orderly family man, who coordinates the members of his family to make the most of their collective labor force, savings and assets for them to blossom and move up

Yorgos Lanthimos' movie 'Dogtooth' (2009) is considered the inaugural and probably the most iconic product of this wave. Dimitris Papanikolaou (2018) describes the transition from the pre-crisis ideal depiction of the 'family as a portrait' (*οικογένεια πορτραίτο*) to the post-crisis depiction of the 'family as a short circuit' (*οικογένεια-βραχυκύκλωμα*).

⁶ A pejorative term used to denote the insignificance of the Greek state when compared to its European partners.

the social ladder. Its pejorative connotation point to the debased *pater-familias* guided by self-benefit offering a sense of security that comes with strings attached for family members. Yet, householding as a plastic but always domestic ethos of self-reliance posited a *model norm* gravitating people and actions to attune with *models of good governance*.

At the onset of the economic crisis, the conservative-liberal front made the invocation of *nikokiraios* central in the development of its moral vocabulary of motivation and social classification, veiling the structural causes of the economic impasse, self-responsibilizing the impoverished, contrasting 'the mass of neo-rebels, debt-addicts, over-indebted households and reckless consumers' with 'the 'Greek householders' who avoided toxic debts, turned a deaf ear to the sirens of ruthless consumerism and always fulfilled their obligations towards the state and society' (Stamos, 2014).

The construction of a social division between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' households revamped a truculent view of the Greek *trajectory to modernity*, construing its recent history as a collision between social actors compatible with national progress and residual forces of regression impeding the reintroduction of Greece into the company of 'normal' states. The contradictions inherent in this process through which normality was to be restored by pulverizing the conditions sustaining the reproduction of the 'normal' subject, was destabilizing for the efficiency of the state to lever property as a technique to accrue capital and social consent. The plea to the *nikokiraios*, should be seen not merely as an attempt to draw a nonelastic dividing line between worthy and unworthy subjects, but a reminder of the standard norm according to which the level of deviance was to be measured as well as a gravitational force to restore 'normality'.

The disturbance of the unaided performance of the *laissez-faire* ethos, through the redistributive policies of the newly elected left wing party of SY.RIZ.A led to its denouncement as contradicting the sanctified, behavioral legacy of self-reliance. The plea to 'the householder, the successful, hard-working, law-abiding average Greek family man, the backbone of society, the basis of progress, the hope for the future.... who is infuriated when he sees his money being turned into allowances for the so-called vulnerable — true or phoney' (Andreou, 2017), indicates that redistribution, even in scant form, is conceived as entailing the dangerous seeds of a shift, violating the moral subjective foundations of the Greek variant of capitalism-liberalism. It also indicates an affinity to the survival of the fit. A household's likeliness to perish or survive is framed primarily vis a vis the subject's ability to perform according to the moral standard, to evade its moral eviction, rather than the states' ability to apportion social support.

After a decade of political turbulence, the political party of New Democracy returned to government in 2019 with a promise to restore 'normality', accompanied by a policy package combining the silencing of social demands deemed 'unproductive' and the creation of favorable investment conditions to match markets with fitting subjects. The pledge of restoration stumbled across the contraction of access to objects, opportunities and credentials that intermediate the realization of 'normal' subjects: possession of residential assets; access to good employment and pension opportunities.

Yet, what is distinct is the tactility of this normalization; what needs to be tamed is aberrance as mirrored in space, taking form in the figures of subjects who perform wrong

uses of space, hindering the order requested by markets seeking profit in the built environment. An indication of the prescriptions to deal with the different variants of ‘aberrants’ can be found in one of the very many rants prescribing the economic, judico-political and notably spatial aspect of good governance: ‘Orderliness, lighting, cleanliness, redesigning our security strategy with a collective culture of lawfulness’ (Veroutis, 2019). What is also distinct is that *nikokiraios* is no longer the figure who reaps the benefits of good governance but rather the very vector of it: ‘When the householders come, the outlaws leave’ (Konstantakatos, 2019).

The state now summons a repertoire of diversified governance strategies to extract compliance by reserving fury for the racialized subjects who were denied entrance to means for their sustenance; invisibilizing those under hidden homelessness who are dependent on their impoverished households; offering minimal aid for the new poor relegated as ‘unworthy’, ‘unskilled’, ‘unproductive’; causing precarized householders to tune to the project of market making; and revamping vocabularies to consolidate a community of ‘moral’ subjects to be connected up with the hegemonic conception of ‘good governance’ (Rose, 2017)—in this case the hard-working, resilient, self-reliant *householders* who strive to manage themselves and their households against the odds.

The retreat of the prospect of homeownership from the horizon of possibility—despite its persistence in the horizon of desire—jeopardizes the reproduction of these subjectivities and the ‘pending’ *civilizing process* of Greece. Through its workings in Ksiladika, I illustrate how this normative project colors the main drives of impoverished local landholders who try to approximate the moral norm by revaluing their devalued properties, culminating in vigilante actions, aiming to pave the way for markets to close the rent gap and thus for their property to yield its anticipated value. Subjectivities are to regain their positions in the spectrum of normality, by contributing to closing its ‘moral’, reputational (Kallin, 2021) and rent gap through stamping out ‘impediments’

Methodology

BelAmi, a vacant former brothel turned into a stealth squat by undocumented migrants subsequently evicted through a series of vigilante campaigns in the neighborhood by locals, became the springboard for my ethnographic venture to test my hypothesis on the interlinkage between the emergence of violence and Ksiladika’s double character, at once a relegated neighborhood of the inner city and a land of promise. My attempt was to shed some light on the role, desires and motivation of agents, who turned into vectors of violence or supporters thereof in their attempt to ‘clean’ Ksiladika up from homeless, hawkers, prostitutes, cartoneros, all deemed as ‘impediments’.

During my research, I tried to identify how location and rank shape the perceptions of locals as well as their receptiveness of others. The approach is indebted to the ontological and methodological lens of reflexive sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2003) aimed at establishing knowledge of the relation between the points occupied by agents within space and their viewpoints on the latter, which play a part in the reality and evolution of that space.

Agents are thus seen not merely as wielders of symbols but as creatures of flesh and blood (Wacquant, 2015) whose corporeal and positional experience in physical and social space shape their symbolic universe (Wacquant, 2015, p. 8).

Marcos, the leading figure of vigilante violence, became my key informant. I followed him during his patrols and saw him applying his repertoire of methods to 'bring progress' in the neighborhood and to harness its 'potential promise'. I constellated Marcos' socio-spatial position with a diverse range of accounts by locals, including residents, renters, shop-owners, street workers, a developer and local representatives.⁷ I mapped locations and buildings in Ksiladika described by my informants as 'problems' or 'barriers' and used them as the basis of my field work.

In an attempt to advance debates on comparative urbanism and the entanglement between precarization and violence, and to understand how 'socio-spatial structural context' shapes (counter) movements (Martinez, 2020), I situated Marcos' grammar and actions in specific geographic and knowledge traditions. I became immersed in the social setting in mid-2021, conducting a series of semi-structured interviews that juxtaposed the aspirations, cultural tropes, shared norms and conventions of my interlocutors with their positions in social (ethnicity, age etc) and physical space (location, proximity to squats etc.) and in the field of power defined by property (squatters, renters, homeowners, developers). This account selects instances and actors that best illustrate the link between orphan desires and violence.⁸

Ksiladika

Demarcating Ksiladika

The few strollers on the sidewalks of west side Thessaloniki next to 26th October Street, on reaching the threshold dividing the first from the second district, can look up to see the ominous billboard hanging in front of the premises of the criminal, neonazi organization of Golden Dawn (Figure 3, 4).⁹ Turning west, straight towards the heart of the second district, lies the neighborhood known as Ksiladika.

⁷ In addition to Marcos, 26 additional interviews with follow up discussions were conducted. The sample consisted of 25 men and 15 women; 36 were Greeks, 3 were Albanian and 1 was Georgian. My material was strictly codified according to the triad: (i) social position of interlocutor, (ii) position in the local property field (iii) location in physical space.

⁸ For a full account please see: Vrantsis, N. (2021) 'The unsettlement of the Greek property regime and the emergence of vigilante violence in Thessaloniki's West End', (Urban Studies Department, Malmö University), Available at DiVA, id: [diva2:1567704](https://diva2.org/1567704)

⁹ The wider area is replete with local branches of fringe far and extreme right-wing parties.

Figure 3

The pins on the map correspond to numbers in the text. Their correspondence intends to provide a snapshot of the studied area.

Source: Google Maps, Author

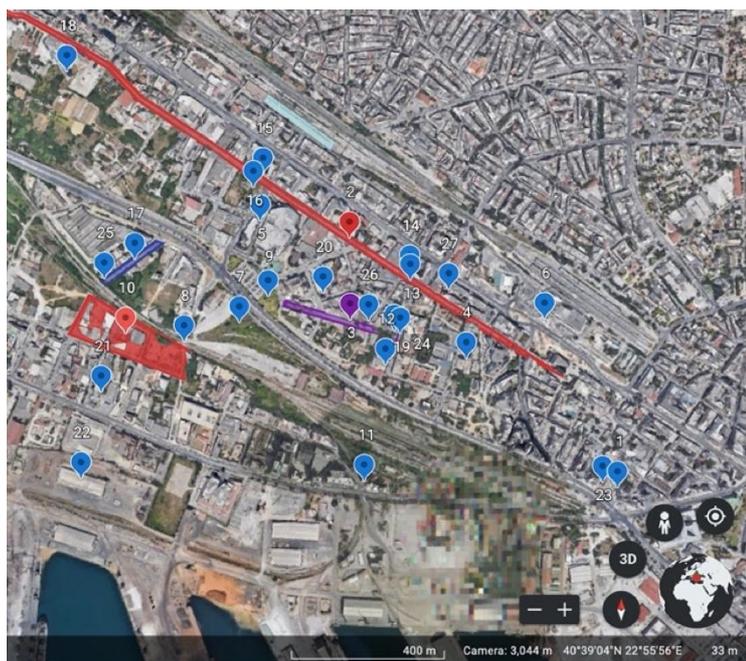
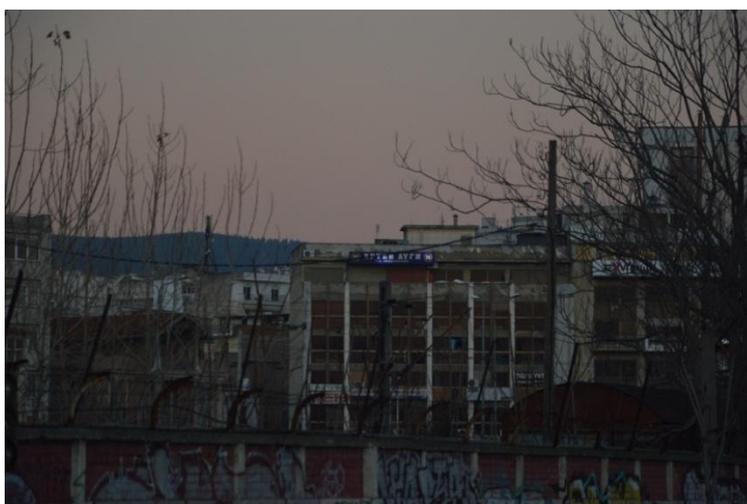


Figure 4

The premises of the neonazi party Golden Dawn, looming over the neighborhood

Source: Author



Some of its older residents call it the *Old Station Area* (Παλαιού Σταθμού). The city’s first train station stood here, neighboring a densely populated Jewish settlement decimated during the Nazi Occupation. Between the Old and New station stands Giannitson Street (Figure 3 pin 2)—a commercial artery that at nighttime mutates into a notorious strip of harlotry—and its smaller sibling, Tsorlini Street (Figure 3, pin 3) that, in a remarkable spatial division of nocturnal labor, is reserved for streetwalking of homosexuals and transvestites. The vast flatland of the ‘Agios Christoforos’ cooperative (Figure 3, pin 4) sets the easternmost side of Ksiladika, while on its west side looms the recently built mall of *One Salonica* (Figure 3, pin 5). The post-crisis ebbing of commercial and construction activity at fault for the patchy look and the glut of dilapidated properties that mark Ksiladika’s built environment converges with the in-migration of people with no access to already scant formal accommodation options or the exclusively familistic social protection system that exploded since 2015.

The rise of a vigilante

When Marcos, a young and conservative family-man, lost his job as a lorry driver in 2016, he turned his hopes towards property he owns in Ksiladika following the trodden path of asset-based welfare so engrained in the mindset of the *householder*. Overburdened with the high costs of house rent, with no stable profession and limited access to property, he confronted the grim eventuality of his social and symbolic downfall. As a corrective measure, he committed himself to secure his upwards mobility through shares he owns in the undeveloped parcel of land as part of the construction cooperative ‘Agios Christoforos’: ‘This is a φιλέτο...¹⁰ It belongs to me and my children. And I will let no one appropriate what is mine.’

The coop’s land-for-flats deal with the promoter had stalled for almost two decades when Marcos was appointed to the cooperative’s board to help relaunch the agreement. Conditions seemed auspicious—labor costs were low, the rent gap in Ksiladika wide open, the central government as well as local administration run by the conservative party of New Democracy applying a policy package merging economic liberalism and social chauvinism. When Marcos found that hundreds of undocumented migrants—whom he calls *mousafirides* as a pejorative term to describe an unwanted and uninvited person occupying a property—had created a shanty town on the property, he charged himself with the duty of evicting them so that construction could continue uninterrupted.

He started his campaign by hanging a pig’s head from the ceiling of the main structure in 2017: ‘They are Muslims and I thought this might discourage them. But it was futile.’ He shifted strategy. Every night, at 2:00 sharp, he was up, out of bed, to cut the migrants’ tents open wide in the cold, beating them up and evicting them in the middle of the winter. He impeded the workings of solidarity vans providing assistance to the homeless, his attempt to fulfill the promise of personal revaluation that required what he calls a ‘correction’ of the property and literally pave the way for an ensuing fourfold revaluation: (i) of Ksiladika, (ii) of his property in Ksiladika, (iii) of his family in his property and (iv) of himself in his family and society.

Vigilance unlocks local rage

Marcos’ actions were widely celebrated, resulting in his metamorphosis to an informal local warden. He was the one to whom the owner of the former brothel BelAmi turned to in order to get the migrants out of his property (Figure 3, pin 11). In 2011, after restricting land use to residential construction and designating a new red light district (Figure 3, pin 10), BelAmi was abandoned. Though mortgaged at the bank and with debts accumulating it nevertheless didn’t remain peopleless. When in early 2020, Christos, the owner, received a four-digit financial penalty for illegal use of electricity, he was referred to Marcos, considered a veteran in evictions. A few days later, they cut the connection to the power grid, filed a complaint to the Police and entered the property, then Christos announced to squatters that they would need to leave.

¹⁰ Φιλέτο means filet, a term indicating the tastier part of meat, used regularly as a spatial metaphor to indicate a privileged location.

Embedded in his three-square-meter kiosk, actively gesturing in frustration, Dimitris invites me to take a look at recent burglary attempts recorded by hidden cameras installed on top of the kiosk and on his brother's restaurant next door, monitoring every movement on the pavement. He repeats the local rant ad verbum: 'it's not rocket science. This is a shitty neighborhood' or in the words of a longtime resident 'this is a neighborhood for those that cannot leave...Only the elders who are trapped here, stay here', harking at the struggle of property holders to deter devaluation and those perceived responsible for it.

A discarded urban zone marked by a reputational rent gap, Ksiladika turned into a testbed in which subjects in social insecurity, having internalized the postulates of self-reliance yet finding it hard to assimilate the resources that would secure their social position (a house and a good profession), banish the completely bedraggled people considered 'surplus' in a self-regulated revanchism in order to increase their chances to enter a safe-zone mediated by (outright) homeownership.

Marcos's personal campaign tapped into this local ambience of rage that eventually got him elected to the local council and inaugurated as the person-in-charge of the Local Committee for Migration. Since then he has neither stopped nor formalized his activities, but in contrast intensified them: 'out of [his] love for this place'.

Placing vigilance in the order of promise

When Petros arrived from rural Edessa to Thessaloniki for his studies in 2010, he diverged from the common renting tactic and bought an apartment on Giannitson street with a mortgage: 'The apartment is perfect, warm, good insulation, parking spot, nice view...the location was ideal.' His idealization of the location capsized once a resident there: 'I came with a promise to have this land turned into a park; there is no sidewalk, no place to ride a stroller, only organized crime.' Now he entertains the idea to sub-let it and move 'where one can raise a family.' Identifying the importance of owning a home as an essential asset and a credential conferring material and symbolic gains to its holder, echoing the heavily loaded householding ethos, Petros considers the contradiction of owning a credential in a stigmatized surrounding.

His exposure to chronic betrayal caused him to enroll in the now inactive committee of local residents, signing petitions to the local government for the relocation of the prostitutes: 'It is not their fault but they need to go'. He then refers to every activity not compatible with his view of upgrading: 'we need the State to create the conditions for a new circle of life in the hood when this one is closed...I have a great home in a shitty surrounding [that] has to get corrected.' Yet the promise property can confer does not subside as he draws a mental map on the curb to point to an inevitable future: 'the city is packed here (the east), here (the north). This is the only direction the city can expand to. And then you 'll see how rents will spike'. Despite the longstanding stigma of Ksiladika, the promise of its upgrading has not withered. Its long-standing relegation, the pause of construction and its pending modernization after the economic breakdown have all accentuated the rent gap. The revamping of the promise and the potential revaluation of Ksiladika's ground is crystallized in the site of the station of the belated Tube, expected to be completed in 2023, and the site

expected to host the long-awaited construction of the Holocaust Museum. A new condo is currently being constructed (Figure 5) after a decade of inactivity.

Figure 5

One of the new condos under construction, indicating the reinitiation of construction activity in the neighborhood
Source: Author



Mr. Pliatsikas is a building promoter, responsible for many new condos in Ksiladika. The belief that the neighborhood will acquire its full potential after being corrected resonates in his mindset. While the guard of the construction site holds a different opinion: ‘I think he is actually building it for hoes and faggots, they are the only ones here’, Mr. Pliatsikas considers streetwalking will ‘wither away when things start picking up’. The line separating a promise maker from a believer is thin, and Mr. Pliatsikas is one ring in a long chain:

I am not all saying. I am a doer...there was a lull during the crisis, but now it is picking up. I have already sold 4/5 of the apartments in this condo and it is not even finished. You should be blind not to see what is coming. Yesterday Dimand, invested 35 millions in the area (Figure 3, point 21).¹¹

The restoration of promise is mainly due to the local and central government. During a day of fieldwork, I was invited by Marcos to meet Thessaloniki’s mayor and his team to look at their venture to evaluate parcels of municipal land in the Second District. When asked about his administration’s intentions for the neighborhood, the mayor disarmingly responded:

We must put a stop on the wrong uses of buildings so that the right people can come in. This is why we drove CISCO here.¹² This is why we ceded Villa Petridi (Βίλλα Πετριδης) to the Greek-German Youth Institute¹³ despite strong opposition. We want to send a message that this is the part of the city to come to.

Marcos added: ‘the development of our property will help towards this direction.’

¹¹ According to news published a day prior in the local and national press ‘Dimand acquired land on 26th October Street for the construction of the first Business Park ... in an area that is expected to turn into a Business Hub for Thessaloniki’ (Tsireka, 2021).

¹² The International Center for Digital Transformation in collaboration with Cisco was ceded the unused industrial premises of ‘Σφαγεία’... According to the mayor, the project was supported by the Ministry of Development and Investment as well as the Ministry of Digital Government (Stefanopoulou, 2021).

¹³ On 12/4/2021 the City Council decided by a majority to concede the building on Anagenniseos Street called Villa Petridi to the *Greek-German Youth Institute* until December 31, 2027.

The role of the state in the hierarchy of promise is pivotal, by: (i) upzoning; (ii) leasing properties to international investors or those considered the ‘right people’; (iii) privatizing public assets; (iii) uplifting local infrastructures to domesticate it; (iv) conferring negative designations to ‘those making bad use of buildings,’ through the self-responsibilization of state-instituted exclusion; (v) by perpetuating a strategy of minimal involvement in welfare. There is a consensus among major and minor players ranging from big capital to local administrators and precarized subjects turned vigilantes and their supporters: Ksiladika needs to be introduced into a therapeutic process of domestication and normalization so that property can yield its full material and symbolic value for those already present and for the ‘right people’ to come in. The further down one goes on the scale of capital holder(s), the thinner the line separating the promise makers from the believers.

Marcos, a believer of the promise bestowed on Ksiladika and bent on contributing to closing the rent gap, has quite an acute understanding of what is to be done against anyone obstructing the process of revaluation. He evicted the migrants squatting his property; he reports on street walking; he jeopardizes some of his political capital gained from his vigilante action to side with the construction of the Holocaust museum although this is at odds with the antisemitic sentiments of some of his supporters; he scorns and reports on those who are homeless regardless of ethnicity. His dominant criterion relates to the perceived impact that others have upon property values, this seeps through the local perception towards the marginalized. His vigilance is neither residual to nor competitive with the state’s monopoly of the means of legitimate violence (Castelli-Gattinara, 2019), but is complementary in taking different routes to similar objectives (Jarman, 2008, p. 336).

What about a Cerberus in Centaur’s stead?

The unapologetic physical violence against the ‘excess’ indicates the polymorphous role property holds as a social relation, an ideology and a behavioral legacy, yet that it remains first and foremost a medium to exert power, a key resource to reorder society not only by catering for the needs of capital but by forming a ‘moral community’ of ‘deserving’ subjects.

The time and location of its emergence and success is crucial. It follows a crisis that translated into a social reproduction squeeze limiting access to property, destabilizing the property regime and its attendant valorized moral norms, precarizing large swaths of the population (including Marcos and his family). It is tuned in to the invocation to the householder as a vector of good governance to be expressed in urban space. It is manifested as a grassroots extension of a broader logic linking the restoration of propertied subjectivities with market making. It takes place in the long repudiated neighborhood of Ksiladika, a landfill of ‘redundant’ subjects, buildings and uses marked by an open rent gap and by the festering of a pending promise of redemption. It explodes against the strati of the ‘excess’, pushed to the fissures of social and physical space, marginalized by design, by default, by proxy, now perceived as threats against the realization of the promise for revaluation. It yields political capital, since it is embraced by all those demanding local security and those craving property revaluation.

Lapsing into Ksiladika, I encountered a common lexicon and a repertoire of action, replete with the ideological mantra of self-responsibility that seemed to dominate the collective local consciousness, albeit omitting the pivotal role of the state as a classifying mechanism unevenly distributing blemishes and credentials internalized and reproduced by locals.

Wacquant diagrams neoliberalism not as state retrenchment but as state crafting, redeploying the state as the core agency that actively fabricates subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to making the fiction of markets real and consequential (Wacquant, 2012, p. 68). Thus, the state tilts from the protective pole of poverty management to the disciplinary pole of the bureaucratic field. The marginalized poor—cast out in the urban zones of advanced marginality, suffering endemic unemployment and rampant precarity—are treated through a double regulation converging the virile arms of workfare and prisonfare acting together.

While paying dues to this conceptualization, I argue that in the context studied here, the centaur-like schema of a divided society has given way to a more complex working of the state that resembles the multifaceted Cerberus. It has turned precarity into a basis for social regulation and an instrument of governing (Lorey, 2015) that is no longer outsourced to the socio-geographical spaces of the periphery where it affects distant others but characterized by subjects who fear social downfall. Despite the wave of structural adjustments and reduced public spending in the years after the eruption of the financial crisis, in contrast to the image of receding social safety (Wacquant 2012, p. 67) in the Greek case it has not necessarily required an operation to reduce an already atrophic welfare state. What was squeezed was familism as a welfare buffer.

Thus the carceral state with its dual punitive and benevolent characteristics is replaced by one distributing and diversifying strategies for the management of an increasingly accelerated marginality which shakes the objects and scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy. Precarization affects even those parts of the population previously finding themselves in the safe zone of the social stratum. Hence, the carceral capacities do not remain locked in a hierarchical schema of distribution, but are diffused into a diversified set of state strategies of governing subjects, turning precarity itself into a mode of governance (Lorey, 2015). This governance through precarity is attained not merely by the normalization of workfare and the penal apparatus of the state (Wacquant, 2007; 2011), but also via a governing through subjects who internalize the postulates of self-responsibility and the ideology of self-reliance and coordinate with state actors at the expense of the subordinate classes deemed ‘surplus’ and not worth being either exploited nor governed.

The current accelerated restructuring of the economy pulverizes not only the promise of an undamaged stream offering abundant access to material and symbolic assets mediating valorized morals, but also reduces the capacity to fulfill expected promises. Attached to these morals, mediated by the same objects and attained via self-help, agents turn into vectors of their restoration, self-charged with restoring normality by helping close rent gaps. This is what makes violence an additional strategy to valorize the scarce resource of property and to reinstitute normality through the norm-laden figure of the *householder*.

Vigilante violence, driven by subjects like Marcos who take law into their own hands to compensate the penal deficit in a way that synchronizes with a state-instituted property-centered rationality, turns into a passage to social security and source of political capital. It is rewarded as an adequate response on behalf of petty property holders, themselves insecure, who perceive the propertyless as devaluators of the objects ensuring safety in the Greek asset based welfare. Vigilance grows as an asset-based welfare revanchism, a product of the discrepancy between the decimated material resources of the family—caused by the state—and property ownership aspirations—inflamed by the state. Authority is not imposed through commands, but is wielded without having to be wielded, because representations and practices, partially a product or effect of infrastructures, become embodied, undergo a relatively autonomous development and are deployed in a way that continues to affect the structures that produced them (Hilgers, 2012). Yet, they explode under favorable conditions, in a geography where the closing of its reputational and rent gap fleshes out the moral gap.

Conclusion

Compared to other (North) European countries the Greek property paradigm followed a differing trajectory marked by the administrative atrophy of the state and the key role of the family as a welfare buffer. Despite the social reproduction squeeze meted out by the financial collapse of 2008, subjects continue to rely on their past life experience, while the personal investment in self-sponsored homeownership and the reliance on the resources of the family hold strong.

The state summons a repertoire of diversified governance strategies to recast society and extract compliance: invisibilizing racialized subjects, silencing hidden homelessness, tuning precarized householders to the project of market making, revamping vocabularies to consolidate a community of ‘moral’ subjects to be connected up with the hegemonic conception of ‘good governance’. The longstanding valorization of property ownership as a medium of social safety and status is approximated best by the figure of the *householder* who is glorified as the foundation of national progress and a key figure for the restoration of normality, yet operates in a period when the material capacities for its reification have turned scarce. Combined, these processes create the ideological ambience that feeds the transformation of precarized subjects internalizing the postulates of self-reliance into vectors of violence in a revanchist attempt to close what they perceive as a ‘moral gap’ through the closing of the rent gap against the ‘excess’, as so starkly evident in Ksiladika.

The instances of vigilante violence here are examined as a latent, future-facing, self-instituted ‘correction’ mechanism aiming at transforming a territory to allow locals to harvest expected symbolic and material value through an instrumental erasure of perceived ‘stigmata’ and to narrow the gap between the promise and the materiality that property can lend.

Were phenomena of violence recurring in Thessaloniki dismissed as temporal, residual or racist acts, the structural conditions triggering them would be elided. Such incidents of vigilante violence are messengers of future occurrences in contexts where property and ownership undergo stress. Considering the transformations in the political

economy of places in which vigilante violence occurs, looking into the mediums and processes demarcating 'ethical' subjects could yield academically relevant and politically useful research outcomes.

I consider what might be perceived as a fringe phenomenon of violence in a distinctive context can unspool the invisible, objective violence that might be inscribed in the contradiction between the persistent aspirations related to ownership and the incapacity to reify them, a discrepancy that generates desires and leaves them orphan. Hence, I suggest that a comparative analysis of the mediums that filter orphan desires and the contradiction between aspirations and the incapacity to reify them in different contexts can be our entry point to deepen our understanding on the one hand of the rise of vigilante violence and its kinship to the rise of the far-right. It can serve to challenge the prevailing social relations that encourage the dominance of a possessive model of private property, as the only viable narrative on notions of property and housing.

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