OLIVE VALLEY SLOW AGRICULTURE
Olive Valley
Slow Agriculture

The semester started with the question: What is “countryside”? We intuitively decided to define it as an environment with interwoven agriculture and production. We refused the idea of a bucolic idyll and started with understanding better the main characters which play a central role in its definition.

Our attention was focused on Alfeios Valley, a semi-mountainous area in western Peloponnese, between the Arcadian villages and Pyrgos’ seaside. The preconception that organized production could shape the identity of this countryside was constantly on our minds, but the fourteen-days-long field-trip showed a much more ambiguous reality, where informality and confusion characterised both the object and the method of study.

Alfeios Valley turned out to be exactly the opposite of a generic industrial agricultural landscape. As a matter of fact, our frame of study revealed a heterogeneous patchwork, in the words of Gilles Clement, a ‘third landscape’—the leftover space consisting of forests, bushes, abandoned paths and fields, mixed with the olive orchards.

Topography shapes the physical and the social elements of the territory. The physical elements such as the streets, the villages, the fields and the mills—in a word, the productive chain of agriculture—resist mechanization and stay slow. The social elements mainly refer to landowners—old, permanent population (agriculture workers, state employers and public facility workers) and seasonal ones (land owners and manual workers from the cities). Even if we say that a general decline in different production aspects took place from the 1960s onwards, this area still stays alive.

We learned that it is not possible to separate countryside from urbanity and vice versa. We experienced the striking beauty of living in a “non-comfortable” environment.
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Slow Agriculture: 
Why so Slow?

Topography and household farming practices give rise to conditions far removed from the ones we are used to in the cities.

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The Street: 
Off-Road(s)

The street network acts as a slow buffer rather than a fast connection.

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The Village: 
A City Fallback

The villages appear virtually as islands in the landscape of the countryside. Villages are empty throughout the most of the year, except for summer and harvest months when people from cities come here for retreat.

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The Field: 
A Diverse Ground for Production

Once vineyards and nowadays olive groves, scattered fields of the Alfeios Valley appear as ‘rooms’ in the landscape.

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The Mill: 
A Public Facility

The mill exists independently from the village. During harvest months it becomes around-the-clock public space.

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Slow Agriculture: 
The Elements of the Territory

Slow streets and shrinking villages, disconnected one from the other, scattered fields and the olive mill, acting as a public place among them, form peculiar conditions in the Alfeios Valley.

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Eleopolis: Working & Living in the Olive Groves

In Eleopolis, we see slowness as a potential.
Slow Agriculture: Why so Slow?

Topography as a Constraint for Agriculture...

Topography, together with soil quality and climate, is the major factor that influences the agricultural production. High altitude areas (above 600m) that are slope steeper (15%) are usually considered less favourable for agriculture. These regions are highly resistant to mechanization and require tough and often complicated handwork. Because of this, EU provides additional subsidies to encourage farmers to keep working in these scarcely profitable, but still highly diverse and rich areas.

In the Region of Peloponneso

The agriculture sector, and in particular, the cultivation of olive groves, represents a major resource for the economy of Peloponneso. In spite of its major share in olive production (39% of the national production), Peloponneso doesn’t benefit completely from this potential. The scattered nature and small-size of the olive fields discourages any considerable investment in the development of infrastructure. Additionally, the idea of olive oil being a family business fails to inspire entrepreneurship.

International Composition

At present, 60% of the Greeks and 90% of the Spanish olive export is supplied in bulk to big Italian companies, who are rebranding them for the international export as fine products.


The Peloponnesian topography can be classified into three different categories, with dominant cultivable systems: fruit trees in the higher plateaus, olive groves in the semi-mountainous areas, and berry trees, orange trees and vegetables in the places where most of the inland water is present.
In Attica Valley, the olive groves represent the most common cultivation form. A series of nine cultivation types, such as pomegranates, corn, and walnut, are situated close to the seaside.
Athens Valley contains different topo-agricultural conditions. Areas are classified into three types: areas located above 500 meters, that physically define the valley's perimeter; low-lying areas; and an extensive flat remeibda.
The Street: Off-Road(s)

The road network in Afitos Valley operates as a network of slow connections, mainly used for movement between the villages and the agricultural fields. There are only two main roads providing a connection to the seaside and to the mountains.

Highway
110 km/h

There is only one existing highway in Pelion Peninsula, the Monasa motorway leading from Athens down to Kalamata. It was opened in 1982. Another highway leading to Kalamata from Athens through Petras is planned. These roads are in good conditions and are able to provide a secure and fast way of moving around.

Main Road
60 km/h

Two main roads connect the Afitos Valley to the cities like Pyrgos and Tripoli. One in the north through Vassiliki, the other one in the south passing Kallithea. These two roads are safe and well maintained.

Tertiary Road
20 km/h

Tertiary roads are not accessible by any type of vehicle. These are mostly dirty roads leading to the small farms and huts in the fields. Tertiary roads are still maintained in order to provide access for the farmers.

Secondary Road
40 km/h

Mostly with a single lane, these roads lead from the two main roads towards the smaller villages in the valley. One has to always be aware of possible obstacles like livestock, stones or bushes on their way. In these hilly landscapes the roads can become very steep and curvy inhibiting fast driving.

Path
5 km/h

Paths are unofficial connections between small fields, accessible only with a tractor. They usually mark the borders between two properties and provide connections with individual olive fields.
The street network gathers different levels of accessibility: from the villages that can be easily accessed via the main street to that of the smaller villages, accessed only by foot or by tractor.
The Village: City’s Failback

The settlements in the Attica Region struggled for a long time with the problem of an incredible population shrinkage. From the 1940s onwards, the inhabitants started leaving their native villages in order to move to the big cities like Athens or Thessaloniki and even further afar. This process of migration continued until the 2008 financial crisis broke all the hopes of success in the larger cities of Greece. Some young people even returned after studies, hoping to build up their own business in the countryside. Mostly, it was the retired people who moved back to their home villages searching for a calm and decent lifestyle away from the bigger cities. Most of them own some olive fields from which they are able to earn a living. Although ready for retirement, these men continue to work in their fields with the help of their younger family members from the cities. This seasonal movement is an important factor in the villages, where, during the summer and harvest months, the population doubles and fills the entire village. On the other hand, these villages are half-empty during the off-season. The only place where you can find some public life at this time is the cafe. This is something you can find in nearly every village. It is where the old village folks come together to discuss over a cup of a good Greek coffee.

Dependency on the City

These villages are still dependent on the nearby cities of Pirgos and Zarioni. Hospitals, high-schools and other cultural amenities like cinemas and concert halls are only accessible in a minimum one hour car drive to the closest town. Additionally, a lack of efficient public transport connections is apparent. This is the major reason why younger people leave for the city. The strong orientation towards Pirgos, doesn’t allow for more effective sharing between village clusters. Considered not attractive, the residents have always assumed that there is no reason to go to the other side of the valley. Could the model of the “Ring cluster” be applied to a larger scale in order to redefine the relations between the “Heads villages’? In this case, would new public programs be necessary to make this form of organisation functional?

Two Cluster Typologies

These villages offer a lot in their infrastructure and number of inhabitants. Some of them are bigger, have more facilities and are better connected to the main roads. Others consist of only few houses, being completely dependent on the bigger villages.

Centralized Cluster: The Fishing Hamlet

A hamlet is an settlement that is unable to sustain without a head village. The people from the hamlet are mostly farmers living close to their fields or to the sea. In addition to their regular earnings, they receive subsidies from the European Union to maintain their farms. These settlements do not have public facilities like restaurants and markets. Food or medicine could be found only in the closest main village. The accessibility is hereby very low and the long walks on bare feet or even donkeys are usually short and rough. In case someone takes up to 25 minutes of driving to reach the next main village.

Centralized Cluster: Resisting the Head Village

A head village is a settlement that has a high mobility level. Major facilities like markets, restaurants, doctors and schools are provided here. Very rarely, donkeys and horses are seen in the city. Even if most of the inhabitants are already retired, there are still young people who work or live in these villages. We meet people working in gastronomy, craft or even informatics, showing a wide diversity of occupations. Head villages are well connected by main roads and there are even buses that can take you to the city in less than one hour.

Seasonal Demography

Seasonal Demography in Historical Timeline

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Mr. Mikalas GT: Retired

What do you do for living?

Since I don't earn much through the rent, I still work on my farm. I take care of the sheep, some crops and olive trees. For me and my wife, this is a full-time job and quite tough for our age.

Do you receive any subsidies from the EU?

For my olive trees and the sheep, I receive about 1000 euros of subsidies per year from the European Union. Of this amount, I have to directly pay 300 euros in form of taxes to the Greek government. Without these subsidies, it would be difficult to survive here.
Mr. Kostantinos (55), Retired

What was your profession?

Until my retirement 30 years ago, I was working regularly in the olive fields. I was helping with the harvest, cutting trees during the off-season and from time to time I worked in the olive mill. At this moment, I own about 100 hectares of olive fields. Every harvest, my family comes to help me. My children work in the city, but they come to visit here. Kallithea is considered one of the best spots in the region.

What is your favourite place here in Kallithea?

The Kallithea spring was just sitting in, for sure. This is where we all meet together and drink some nice Greek coffee.
Mr. Voulis (55), Farmer

What is your profession?

Since many generations, my family is in the olive oil business. I have over 200 acres of fields which my employees cultivate for me. I support the oil directly to Italy and Adriatic.

Do you enjoy living here in Lofos?

I have a nice house here in the forest where my whole family lives, the olive fields are in the area and I have some good old friends living just next door. Being here is just perfect for me.
The different characters of the villages in Afkule Valley impose different relations they have among themselves and with the city. The most developed villages are those that are surrounded by urban hinterland, like Pyygos and Zacharo, while closer inspection reveals a movement from the peripheral hamlets to head villages like Kathinos, Dianada and Tzavatali. The group of villagerial complexes in the valley makes an exception.
The olive fields characterise the image of Afkios Valley. The cultivation in the area remained quite traditional throughout the years, without use of pesticides and following the cycles of soil regeneration. The incredible biodiversity of natural species remained with the image of a landscape “en mouvement”, reminding of Gilles Clément’s concept about gardens. Apart from the fire of 2007 that strongly changed the relation between forest and olives in favor of the latter, very slow and small changes can be observed over time: densification of olive plantations, refinement of field perimeters through small paths, and a general shift to organic agriculture. Terraces are the traces of a previous cultivation type that is not anymore visible nowadays: a vineyard. Even if they facilitate the movement through steep fields, they don’t allow the water to flow away. Topography, of course, plays a central role in the distribution across fields and accessibility that is far from being comfortable. What appears from the outside as a unified pattern of cultivation, is actually highly fragmented through different areas defined by natural limits like cliffs, rivers, and forest. In addition to this, a chronic parcellization, obtained due to downies and heritage, makes field property very small and thus not so profitable. Nonetheless, the non-intensive agriculture approach makes the trees of the Koroneiki olive variety the best olive producers in the country.

Abandoned Huts

Afkios Valley once had a very different appearance than the one we associate with it nowadays. Vineyards were the main agricultural typology in the area, while small huts for the storage of agricultural tools and equipment dominated the landscape. Gradually, people started turning their fields into olive plantations, and the huts lost their utility mostly turning into ruins, and newly into wood storage spaces.

Formalizing Ownership

Greece does not have a very precise cadastral map. In order to receive subsidies from the European Union, they use something called ‘the olive catalogue’. In this catalogue every farmer marks their farm on a Google Earth basis. Through this, the government can ascertain the exact ownership of every farm and avoid farmers claiming a bigger share than they are actually entitled to.

Small & Scattered Land Property

The Olive Grove has many smaller valleys that run perpendicular to it. The areas between these valleys are defined by groups of olive producers and are accessible through roads and paths. There is almost no physical connection between these groups due to the presence of trees and dense forests.

Natural Barrier Group

The fields of cultivation in our area are especially small and scattered. It can happen that a farmer has more than ten different fields scattered in a wide area, with each not bigger than 10ha. Some of these fields have only few trees and make harvesting and maintenance more complicated. Additionally, this dispersion discourages farmers from investing into technology, keeping the agriculture in this area on the level of traditional handshake.

The Olive Grove

From Trifilia to Small Fields

After the fall of the feudal system introduced by the Ottoman Empire, the farmers claimed the land they were cultivating. Due to the bad harvests and the fact that the plots are becoming smaller, the farmers find it economical to log one as their ancestors, bring a certain level of resilience among the farmers. This resilience reflects farmers from exchanging or selling fields in order to have more efficient cultivation.

From Vineyards to Olive Groves

Vineyards once represented the high-agriculture type in the Afkios Valley. Since Greece entered the European Union, agriculture in the area started, resulting in olive grows and the rise of the olive grove as a cultivation type.

Olive Catalogue

In 2003, the first internet catalogue was published to the catalogues of the Afkios Valley, such as Mattheou. Among the many olive groves, 1500 ha were protected as centuries-old olive groves. With this tool, farmers documented their groves and started, resulting in olive groves and the rise of the olive grove as a cultivation type.

Barnard Landscape

Throughout the summer of 2007, a series of fires broke out in several areas across Greece. The most devastating, that 30 years ago destroyed 70% of the olive groves, started in Koroneiki and spread to the whole west of the island. The fire progressed in less than a day from its southern part, destroying all the vegetation in the forests. The river flowed as a lead to the spread of the fire. Then, where the fire is active, the vegetation becomes visible, showing northern side as more wild and southern side as more green with olive trees dominating the forest.
The olive fields in Jaks are organized in a regular grid spreading all over the plantation. In Kalamata, the grid is also present, but the interior plantations can be seen as well. The olive content is quite different, the fields are randomly organized, there is no planned grid and there is a significant presence of the forest between the fields.

The forest has an important status in the Akhova Valley. Dense trees with fields are appearing only in the form of the ‘roosts’ in the forest, especially on the northern side.
Abandoned Huts

Until the late 1960s olive yards were the main agricultural cultivation type in the area. In order to take care of the grapes, many storage units were built. Nowadays, most of them are abandoned or occasionally used to store wood. These buildings represent the only built typology in the fields and are accessible by camels.
Natural Barrier Groups
Olive Groves

There is a significant presence of steep, rather flat
from sheer boulders between
the olive fields.

Topography and stream
network shape and serve
precise areas of the olive
production.
View from a hill - field and forest

Steep valleys are forming clear borders between the olive fields.
The Mill: A Public Facility

From the informal ground of cultivation to a formal receptor, the cultivated olives are brought to the olive mills for processing. Here the olives are pressed, then the raw oil is separated from water and refined through a centrifugal process. The farmers bring their olives to the closest mill where they pay for the service through shares (10-12%) of the produced oil, instead of paying in cash. The portion of oil that the farmer doesn’t need for himself, is sold to the mill usually at the rate of about 2-3 euro per litre. A well-equipped mill then brands the oil and sells it across Europe. However, the most of the mills in Attica Valley, instead just sell bulk oil to Athens and Italy, making less profit in the process. The mills occupy the built environment as structures independent from the dynamics of the villages. Five out of eight mills in Attica Valley area are located along the two main streets that cross parallel to the valley and connect the Arcadian mountains to the coast of Pyrgos. This is done in order to ensure accessibility for the large number of people that visit the area during the harvest period. In the past, the mills used to lie closer to the river to take advantage of the mechanical power from the water flow, but due to the frequent floods of the river, they are more often relocated higher up towards the villages.

Family-Business Mill

Most of the mills present in the Attica valley were founded in the 1970s. From then on, the successive generations took up the activity of their ancestors and implemented it with new machinery, provided through the EU subsidies. Subsidies would usually cover up to 50% of the total investment. Still, the owners needed a secondary off-season revenue stream. This is the reason why you can seldomly find mills with construction material storages, solar panels or gravel digging in this area. During harvest, these spaces of production transform into round-the-clock working spaces.

Bio Mill: a Model

In 2014 a new olive oil mill opened up in Klestera, a bigger village close to the Attica Valley. In addition to the conventional machines that mills normally own, it also has a machine used for extracting energy out of olive kernel, as well as a laboratory for bottle labelling. Meetings organized with farmers where knowledge about bio-cultivation is shared, represent important activities in the process of production. As a matter of fact, in order to compete abroad, these mills need quality certifications from the EU. Being able to export its own branded olive oil not only means that most of the profit stays local, but also that these companies compete on a market, different than the one where big industrial companies rely more on quantity rather than quality.
Mr. Pappasopoulos of MI owner

What is your profession?

I am the owner of an olive mill since 2007. The mill belonged to my father since 1972. Prior to this, I ran a small business with solar energy. I built my solar panel in my garden with the help of 60 volunteers. I sell the electricity produced through the solar business to the state of Crete. It helps in earning some extra money during the off-season.

How much oil do you produce and who do you sell it to?

I press olive oil for about 1,000 families in the area of Akrotiri Valley and they pay me with 10% of their harvest. I also sell back to these farmers who sell to the olive oil mill and the rest of the oil is sold to top companies in Athens and Italy.

Did you ever think about creating your own olive oil brand?

As you probably know, the investment for your own brand is really high. You need raw materials, packaging, marketing and promotion, just to name a few. Because of this, I prefer to keep my mill how it is for now and stay out of trouble.
Bio Mill, a Model

Mr. Papadopoulos (38), Mill Owner

What is your profession?

After studying economics, I worked for a big olive oil company based outside of Athens. Some years back I decided to return back to my hometown Kalandra and open my own mill in 2012. Since then, this has been my full time job.

How much oil do you produce & who do you sell it to?

I press olive oil for about 600 hectares in Attica Valley. I work at home organic farm and take good care of their plants. I brand this oil in my mill and sell it directly to Europe and America.
Slow Agriculture: Territorial Elements

The villages of Afelos Valley face an uncertain future. Hamlets are perishing and the main villages are still dependent on the major cities of Pyrgos and Zacharo. Even when the street network is in a slow but stable condition, there is no public transport which would encourage the exchange between the villages or provide a faster connection to the cities. The fields that are grouped around the access streets and shaped between the valleys do not benefit from cooperative thinking or common infrastructure. Every farmer takes care of their own field and their own machines, they only share the public access to streets. The olive mills, which are mostly well positioned next to the main roads, do not profit from their location. They are mostly enclosed industrial buildings which do not reveal their function openly to the people passing by.
Working & Living in the Olive Groves: Eleopolis

Having started with a series of problems concerning our study framework, we decided to keep using those problems as productive tools rather than questions to answer. We imagine the countryside as an environment where ‘slow living’ can both resist urbanisation and be fortified by fast digitalisation. In a time that allows us to be connected through the internet and quickly move from one place to another, a physical, static presence in the city is not needed anymore. Therefore, we think that the countryside can develop, not as an alternative but rather as a condition for itself, where living and working are no longer separated. We tried to tackle this issue in our case-study with a strategy that can be roughly divided into three parts:

—initiate a local structure independent from the city. In this constellation, head villages are emphasised and their role is enhanced through implemented public facilities
—Rethink connectivity so as to support a local network and connection to big cities
—A new modus for living and working: with a coexistence of agriculture activities with a new pattern of living.
Agronica aims to overcome the gap between the city and the countryside, allowing agro-ecological systems to exist side by side in a sustainable way. By merging agricultural territory in which a system of architectural infrastructures (poles, walls, platforms) come together as a system. This way, a new urban-agricultural territory is created, with the city being structured as a non-territorial cultural site conditioned without creating permanent configurations.
The four main villages of Katheias, Diasella, Vassiliki and Loutara do not have any shared infrastructure. Even if big squares like the one in Diasella or terraces like in Katheias do exist, most of the time they are not used and are lying empty. In order to strengthen the local connections of the place and make inhabitants less dependent on the city, we propose a cultural hub in each village using simple architectural elements like a public roof.

**Public Programs for a Self-Sustained Urbanity**

Based on the specificity of each of the villages, we would like to come up with a unique character for each of them. Katheias, with its beautiful views, specially restaurants and festivals and big sea, attracts many tourists. In Diasella, the big public square of the centre of the village on which we imagine a public roof to support the market, Vassiliki has a well positioned olive mill next to the main street. And since providing a public forum for cultural activities, the mill could be more open to the public in order to attract clients and share knowledge with them. Loutara is post oak forest, a dense forest, an existing bath and the presence of a river near it. All these do potential in becoming a village for leisure.

**Fast City Line Bus**

To make the living in the fields possible, one needs a fast connection to the main cities of Pyrgos, Petrum or even Athens. We propose a first city line bus which would make a loop from Loutara, passing by Katheias, Diasella, Vassiliki and back to Pyrgos. Through this connection, big institutions like hospitals and high schools could be accessible to the people from remote regions. It would be imagine able to live in the fields of Athens today while working in Athens city like Pyrgos or Zographos.

**Allecos Local Bus**

In order to get workforce from the valley to benefit from the new public programs, like market, the villages need a good connection with each other. A slow, bus reliable, bus connection would make the transport happen.

**Self Drining Tartik**

People who live in the fields need a proper connection with the village. In order to get workforce from the village to the field area, we propose small, dry cars that are ordered via the internet, and can pick you up from your doorstep. These autonomous Tartik could potentially be ordered through the internet as another added value to the sustainable and friendly environment.

**Hiking Map**

In order to connect different olive groves, we imagine a hiking path which interconnects the Allecos valley. This trail would use existing paths in the fields and would need only small interventions at spots where it crosses hedges or streams. This path is drawn down as a hiking map and help visitors to discover the areas by foot.

**Working and Living in the Olive Groves**

The dependency on a car to move around makes life difficult, especially for the younger people in the area. An efficient public transport system is a basis for strengthening the existence of Allecos valley as an entity. Keeping pace with the friendliness towards the environment, we imagine these vehicles to run with electric motors and solar energy.

Not everyone wishes to live in big cities anymore. More and more people are looking for a calm and simple way of life like the one they can find in the countryside. A diverse set of professionals like information scientists, artists or even architects could potentially live in areas like this. Fast digital connections enable people to work in their gardens while the actual office is based far away.

**A Prototype for a New Way of Living**

The house in a fields should not provide a luxurious living. The size and function of these architectural hubs should be kept at a minimum to avoid the emergence of big infrastructures. Through restricting them to come-up only on esiting structures or ruins, the house are placed respectfully in the landscape. Solar panels and walls provide the heat resources for the house.

**Public Storage for Agricultural Equipment**

To strengthen the local agriculture production, a public storage in form of shelters is provided in these, one can find farming machines, tools, and water supply for the fields. This facility is not private, but an open source and available to all the farmers. Next to the storage we propose a cultural program which connects the local farmers to the new inhabitants. People could meet for a coffee or trade their farming products.
Working and Living in the Olive Groves
Working and Living in the Olive Groves