A Place to Call Home: An Interview with Tasoulla Hadjiyanni

September, 2018
by Amelie Hyams

Associate Professor Tasoulla Hadjiyanni (http://interior.design.umn.edu/faculty/THADJIYANNI.html) knows what it’s like to lose your sense of place. A refugee of war in Cyprus, she knows that losing your home is about much more than the loss of walls and a ceiling. This empathy is apparent in the work she does in Interior Design (http://interior.design.umn.edu/) in the College of Design (http://www.design.umn.edu) at the University of Minnesota.

Hadjiyanni came to the U.S. at 18, on a scholarship to study architecture. She describes her education as a “mind-sharpening experience.” However, during a graduate class it became clear to her that something was missing.

She describes the moment of her conversion. A fellow student recommended the book, Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment (http://www.amazon.com/Placeways-Environment-E-V-Walter/dp/0807842001/) (1988), about a man who lost his home. “After I read it . . . it was just unreal what was
happening inside of me. I came here to study architecture and how it could be used as tourist accommodations. I thought, Oh My God, what am I doing? I am a refugee. I lost my house!

This changed everything. Hadjiyanni immediately contacted her advisor and changed her PhD to focus on the experience of being a refugee, of losing her sense of having a place to call home. She interviewed 200 adult refugees of the war in Cyprus and children of those refugees, born after the war. This study became her book, *The Making of a Refugee: Children Adopting Refugee Identity in Cyprus* (http://www.amazon.com/Making-Refugee-Children-Adopting-Identity/dp/0275973972) (2002).

Hadjiyanni’s connection with displaced people continued as the center of her work with Hmong, Somali and Mexican immigrants, and others who have been displaced. She has advised politicians and community leaders on the need for culturally sensitive housing.

She explains how places, and how we use them, help people construct meaning in their lives. They help support family relationships, traditions, who lives with whom, religious practices and community relationships.

And beyond interiors, we need to consider: “what can be done on a community level to help position Minnesota for a successful and vibrant future?” Our communities need to offer people a place they can belong. This is especially important because studies predict that by the year 2040, 40% of Minnesota’s population will be persons of color. Half of those will be immigrants.

“I’m not the one who thought about it,” Hadjiyanni says. “I’m out in the community and I heard about it and thought, I’m the right person, I can help with that.” Now she works towards “culturally enriched communities.”

Hadjiyanni learns from people she meets in the community. “I find their stories intriguing and I’m touched by them.” She admits she doesn’t exactly have a plan for what she will achieve, just a desire to tell their stories and raise awareness. “I feel like I am becoming their voice,” she explains. And she carries their stories with her when she talks with community leaders and politicians.

A common thread runs through all of Hadjiyanni’s work. As she puts it, “I work with marginalized populations, primarily women and children.” In addition to culturally sensitive housing, she is working on housing and design issues for people suffering from mental health issues, another marginalized population. Sex trafficking also falls into her scope.

When Hadjiyanni attends Greater MSP Ahead, or one of the other large gatherings of policy makers, “nobody wants to hear about sex trafficking.” Minneapolis is one of the top 13 cities in the U.S. for sex trafficking (http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/cac/innocencelost/innocence-lost). We need housing for these victims, but according to Hadjiyanni, no one is comfortable discussing it. She talks about it anyway.

The average age of girls in sex trafficking is 13. “That means for every 16 year old, there is also a 9 year old.” Hadjiyanni learned about this issue a few years ago while watching CNN. She felt she had to do something about it.

She worked with the U of M College of Design identifying the places where sex trafficking is happening. “These are places everyone drives by – everyone knows.” A paper also led to a photo exhibit on this subject, funded by an Imagine Fund (http://www.artsandhumanities.umn.edu/) grant.

“Minnesota has a big problem but they are also a leader in the fight against sex trafficking (http://mnhhtf.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Statistics-about-Sex-Trafficking-in-Minnesota-and-the-United-States1.pdf).” She explains how the state has provided services and support for youth in transition out of sex trafficking. They need help in creating transition housing that is sensitive to victim’s needs.

“I don’t know what the solution is to sex trafficking and design is NOT the solution. But we can play a role in creating transition housing.” By designing places where victims will feel comforted and will want to stay, she feels she is helping an important yet vulnerable population.

Hadjiyanni feels strongly we must design for the soul, especially when creating transition housing for victims of sex trafficking. She knows there are those who will feel this approach is too religious, that different groups will have different understandings of the concept of the soul. She is ready to learn from these perspectives.
Explaining the importance of this idea to policy makers poses a few challenges. For this Hadjiyanni leans on lessons from philosophy. “Aristotle wrote about happiness . . . to politicians. He said that everyone who is a student of politics should study the soul.” And when Hadjiyanni considers transition housing for victims of sex trafficking she feels, “If there is anything left, hopefully it is their soul.”

Community-engaged work means building relationships, often with people who do not trust easily. In order to create positive change, Hadjiyanni believes we need to get out there and meet people in the community. “We need to shift our thinking and our approach to recognize and value it . . . it makes a huge difference, the fact that we are out there” . . . where they live.

None of these problems is going to be solved soon. “Anybody working on grand challenges need to know [that]” she advises, “that’s why they are grand challenges (http://strategic-planning.umn.edu/).”

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