



Our curiosity is great, but it comes with a sense of restraint. We read and hear about the devastating forest fires; on a scale we've never experienced up close. About floods, often as a consequence of those same fires. We choose our base carefully: centrally located on the island, close to a river: the Lilas. A place that, we hope, will offer insight into how the landscape and its inhabitants are entangled.

The image of the empty riverbed lingers. A river that is mostly absent, but occasionally devastatingly present. It feels like a metaphor for more.

Our initial curiosity quickly turns into disbelief — and perhaps even anger — about the nearly collective belief that the fires were no accident. That they fit into a broader plan in which the needs of the local population are subordinated to economic logic: commodification, development, profit. All in the name of ‘progress.’

And so, ironically, in a place where climate change is most tangible, the climate crisis itself is gradually disappearing from view.

What we see and hear on Evia causes us to doubt. We observe two faces of the island. Not one old and the other new. Not traditional versus modern. Not small-scale versus large-scale, or conservative versus progressive. It goes much deeper than that: we see two fundamentally different ways of relating to a place and to life on that place.

Suddenly we recognise what the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss described in his book *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962). He contrasted two types of thinkers: the bricoleur and the engineer. The bricoleur works with what is at hand: materials, tools, knowledge accumulated over generations. They explore, experiment, adapt. Their work is rooted in place, cyclical, relational. The engineer, by contrast, works according to a plan, using abstract concepts. They design systems from a distance, aiming for control, efficiency, scalability.

This tension between the bricoleur and the engineer on Evia can also be understood through the lens of Greek philosophical concepts that speak to the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds: *Kató Kósmos* (the Lower World) and *Áno Kósmos* (the Upper World). *Kató Kósmos*, like the bricoleur, is grounded in the local, the immediate, and the relational. It is a world of subtlety, of cycles and rhythms that shape life on the island. It reflects the interconnectedness of all things: the soil, the seasons, the community. On the other hand, *Áno Kósmos*, akin to the engineer's approach, represents the upper realm of abstraction, structure, and design. It is the world of systems, of control and order, often imposed from above, disconnected from the organic nature of the place. Just as Lévi-Strauss' bricoleur and engineer are not simply opposing terms, so too are *Kató Kósmos* and *Áno Kósmos* two facets of a complex relationship with the world: both equal, yet fundamentally different in their approach and their way of seeing.

On Evia, we see exactly these two concepts emerging – and quickly clashing.

Take agriculture, for instance. In many villages on the island, the bricoleur's approach is still alive: pine resin is harvested, honey produced locally, olive trees have stood on the same soil for generations. These products are adapted to the landscape, the climate, and local needs or exchanges. At the same time, we hear calls for new crops driven by market logic: goji berries or insects, because there's a 'market' for them - internationally. Land once tied to community provision becomes part of global production chains.

We see something similar in construction: traditional homes and infrastructures shaped by experience versus 'masterplans' rolled out top-down, designed elsewhere, disconnected from local context or needs.

This is not about old versus new. Even in the past, engineer thinking left its traces on Evia: ancient marble columns scattered in abandoned quarries, monumental architecture from classical antiquity, all signs of large-scale design and planning. And more recently: the long conveyor belt slicing through the landscape from the mines near Mantoudi to a specially built port on the coast. Like a ruler imposed on a jagged terrain.

The contrast between bricoleur and engineer is not just a matter of style or preference. It reflects

fundamentally different ideas about the relationship between people and place — and precisely there lies a crucial entry point for addressing the climate crisis.

While the trees were still smouldering, plans for the reconstruction of Northern Evia were already being presented. In fact, some say they were ready even before the full scale of the disaster became clear.

The chaos left by the fires is answered with rigid order. A masterplan proposes a reconfiguration of Evia: tourism here, co-working hubs there, industry elsewhere. Where the landscape was once understood as an integrated whole of people, land, use and care, it is now being divided into functions and sectors.

Wind turbines arrive. Large, white, and efficient. They were not designed with the island in mind, but as a generic answer to the energy transition. Built by companies from Germany or Denmark, and as far as we could tell, without meaningful local involvement. The government even stated that outsourcing such projects to private parties was meant to make the process quicker and smoother, since these companies wouldn't be burdened by lengthy procedures. The electricity produced isn't for Evia, but for the national grid. Evia as the battery of Greece, as one resident put it.

For the islanders, this means: a loss of agency over their own environment. Their land is overtaken by infrastructure that serves distant interests. Their role shifts from co-creator to spectator.

During a conversation where we shared our observation about the many fences separating houses from public space, someone said: "The Greek is naturally a little mistrustful." And then added: "But maybe there's reason for that."

He referred to history: the world wars, a bloody civil war, a dictatorship that lasted until 1974. A long era in which families were split, neighbours turned against each other, and survival meant retreating behind thick walls. He described the image of a man, armed, peering through a narrow window in his stone house — always watching, never sure who was friend or foe.

Not everyone here on Evia shares that image. When we bring up possible mistrust toward outsiders, people sometimes refer to the 1990s, when many people from former Yugoslavia came seeking a better life in Greece. Others point to the rise of digital media and, with that, the decline of public space.

In any case: the closed-off homes, the walled gardens, the limited trust in government and institutions, they carry traces of both distant and recent histories.

Now there's mistrust in a government that failed to extinguish the fires in time — or rather, the suspicion that they were deliberately allowed to spread, to "make space" for development. That mistrust deepens when words like "synergy," "opportunity," and "progress" enter the conversation directly after the disasters. Words that, in many villages, feel like code for shifting power and resources away from the community. The early results of the rebuilding efforts — large-scale energy projects run by private companies — make it clear: this isn't about sustainability as a goal, but about sustainability as a business model. Often, it's the same companies that also run gas or coal plants elsewhere.

And yet, Evia is not defined by despair or helplessness. What struck (and moved) us most was the remarkable resilience of the people. In villages where the pine forests have vanished up to the last tree, we don't see victimhood, but resistance.

Communities organise. They form local committees, file objections in court, make maps, write letters, build networks. Interestingly, they partly use the same tools as the engineer: planning, documentation, legal structures. But perhaps their strength lies precisely in the combination of those engineering tools with deeply rooted bricolage: grounded in care for place, improvisation, and relational knowledge.

They use what's available. Not because they're against development per se, but because they don't recognise themselves in its current form. Their resistance isn't born from conservatism or nostalgia for a vanished past, but from a conscious choice for a way of life in which relationship to place is central, a relationship that is sustainable and does help in facing climate change.

What these communities defend is not just their land, their trees, or their view, but a different logic altogether. A logic in which care, time, connection and reciprocity take the lead. Where production isn't aimed at profit, but at use. Where work is tied to seasons, to family, to the rhythm of the island.

This attitude is anything but naive. On the contrary: it's a sharp, realistic, and often well-informed response to a system that undermines their very ground. Those who organize do not act despite better knowledge — but because of it.

What if 'progress' doesn't mean the same thing everywhere? What if we recognise that progress, sustainability, and development only gain meaning when rooted in the place they are meant for?

The paradox is painfully clear on Evia: on an island with modest energy needs, forests are cleared to make room for wind turbines generating power for elsewhere, often for the very places with the highest rates of overconsumption and waste. Meanwhile, those same forests once absorbed CO<sub>2</sub> and provided shelter, biodiversity, and security.

The “services” now being rolled out — energy, infrastructure, tourism zones — hardly serve the life taking place here. They’re detached from the rhythms, needs and potential of Evia itself. Instead of strengthening what already exists, the existing is replaced or overshadowed.

Thus, the bricoleur risks being displaced by the engineer, while their meeting could be precisely the most promising path forward.

Could there be another way? A shift in which engineering no longer distances itself from the bricoleur’s practice, but engages with it? Where design and policy build upon the knowledge, resilience, and networks that are already present locally? A collaboration in which the engineer and the bricoleur don’t exclude but complement each other? Where scalability is not a goal in itself, but only becomes relevant if the local remains intact?

What would the rebuilding of Northern Evia look like through the eyes of a bricoleur, or in other words, taking the Kató Kósmos concept as starting point? Not as a grand plan from above, but as a series of local gestures, rooted in experience and connected to place?

Perhaps it starts with the forest: not with fixed recovery plans imposed from above, but with choices made locally. Some residents advocate for replanting native species — carefully matched to soil, slope and water — in small plots maintained cooperatively. Others argue for natural regeneration: letting the forest return on its own, without intervention, but with close observation and protection where needed.

Energy comes from solar panels on roofs, not wind turbines on mountain ridges. When water flows, it powers a small turbine. Roofs and yields are shared.

Agriculture is primarily for local use: resin and honey, olives and figs growing as they always have. And footpaths are restored: not as an “experience,” but because they are connections: between villages, people, generations.

And tourism? It can never be the foundation for sustainable rebuilding. Tourism is a consequence of quality, not the starting point. If that principle applies anywhere, it is here on Evia. Without a connection to the soil, to traditions, to the landscape and between communities, the island remains vulnerable, even if labelled “touristically attractive.”

What’s missing in the plans for Evia is not ambition, but connection: to the land, to its people, to their knowledge, their rhythms, their concerns. What’s missing is an engineer who works alongside the bricoleur. What Evia needs now is not more blueprints, but the rebuilding of trust: trust that those shaping the future are willing to listen, to learn, and to act in dialogue.

The question isn’t whether the island will be rebuilt — but how, and with whom.



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