

Greece 132'000Km2 * Inhabitants 11'260'000
Urban Region 3'800Km2 * Inhabitants 4'000'000

Athens on the metropolitan stream

In the public imaginary Athens has both a famous and an infamous identity. A city immersed in history and philosophy, as locus of social and political struggles, famous for its high density, pollution, ugly buildings and a -depicted as chaotic- metropolitan everyday life.

Athens is also a well-known tourist destination, though mostly visited as a transit to the famous Greek islands. Few visitors come to Athens to stay (although this might be changing since it has gained popularity among tourists from the Balkans). Its peripheral geographical position, but also the intense, not very tourist friendly everyday life might contribute to this.

The concentration of almost half of the 11 million inhabitants of the country, as well as most of the governmental administration, services and economic activity within its urban region, make Athens an important metropolitan centre. During the last years, the demographic growth of the city has been continuous, attracting also the majority of economic migrants. Until recently, real estate and land values have also been steadily rising, though this is likely to change because of the economical crisis.

Greece's housing production system (small fragmented ownership, self-promotion, loose planning system etc) along with the promotion of home ownership (since the 50s) and the role of family networks, has managed - until recently - to respond to the housing needs of locals and to incorporate the newcomers. However we might foresee an emerging housing crisis, since the number of homeless and inadequately housed people is soaring and the mortgage market is very unstable.

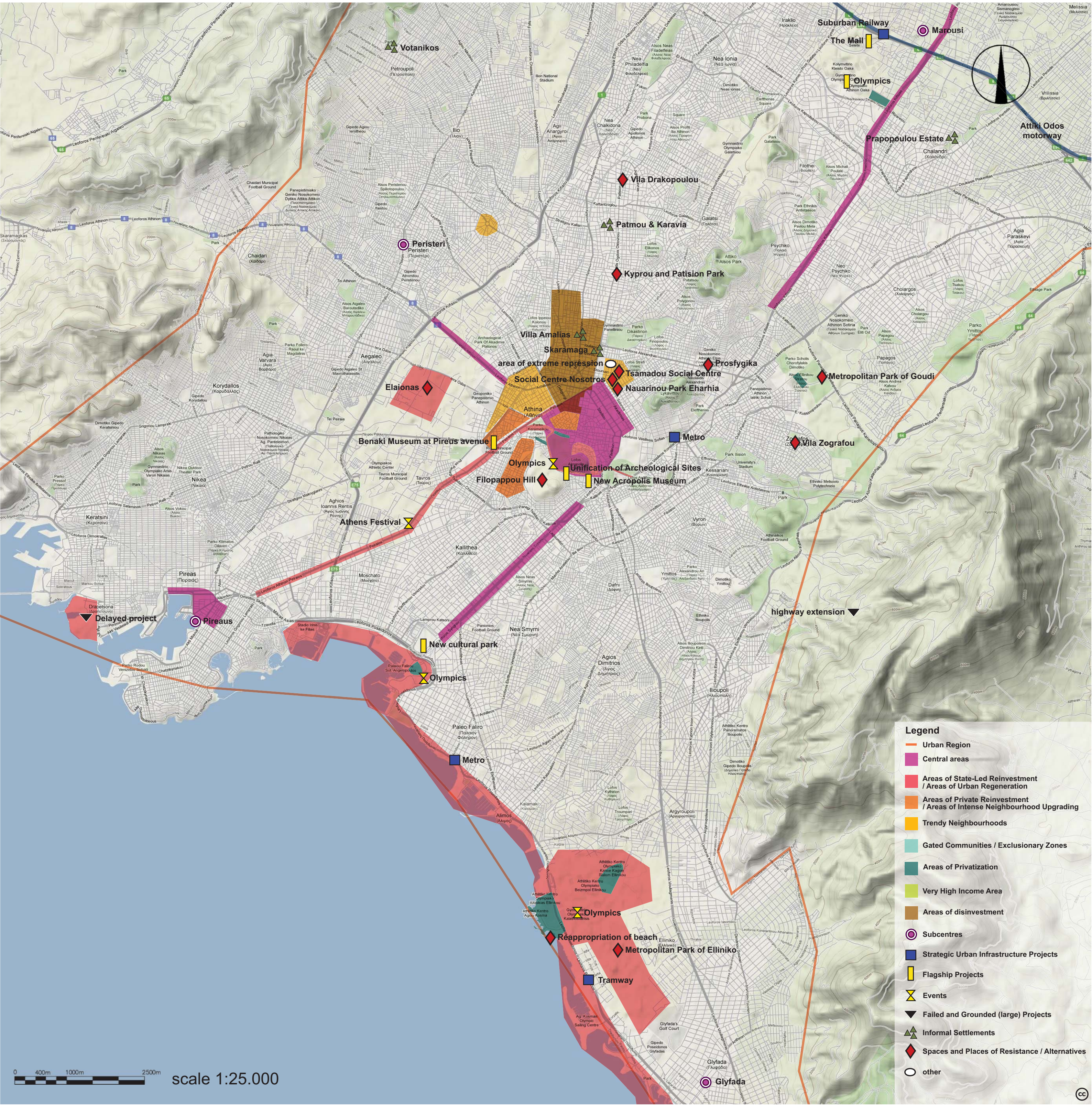
Greece has a centralized planning system and this is even more so in the case of Athens (given its size and centrality). State regeneration projects have mostly an arbitrary role, coming ex post to take advantage of market trends or trying to mobilize private investors, rather than being integrated (multisectoral, coordinated etc) interventions. A process of institutional restructuring the local administration is under way, aiming to create a regional –powerful (?)– level of political representation.


The 2004 Olympic Games were the closest attempt of applying the NMM discourse in Athens, with the intention to "place Athens on the global competition map" and exciting the imaginary both of its inhabitants and of specialists (architects, urbanists, artists ...). The Olympics provided the context for basic in-

frastructure improvements (Attica highway, new airport, public transport, reconstruction of central squares etc), but also the pretext for wasting many "urban reserves" (urban land or public infrastructure) and economic resources over other urban and/ or social investments needed.

A positive legacy of the Olympics was the proliferation of local movements and active citizens groups around issues of public, open, green spaces and the environmental awareness of public opinion, very much needed in an environmentally very downgraded city. Urban everyday life in Athens, that follows the "mediterranean outdoor living model", has been revitalized lately by the presence of different migrant communities in public spaces of the centre.

The recession period the country is entering is expected to trigger significant changes for the city. On one hand, the financial crisis will be the motive for further privatization of public assets and on the other, poverty, inequalities and social exclusion will increase, with many implications for the city life. The other side of neoliberal urban policies is harder repression and control. December's 2008 uprising maybe gave us a glimpse of the future social reality.





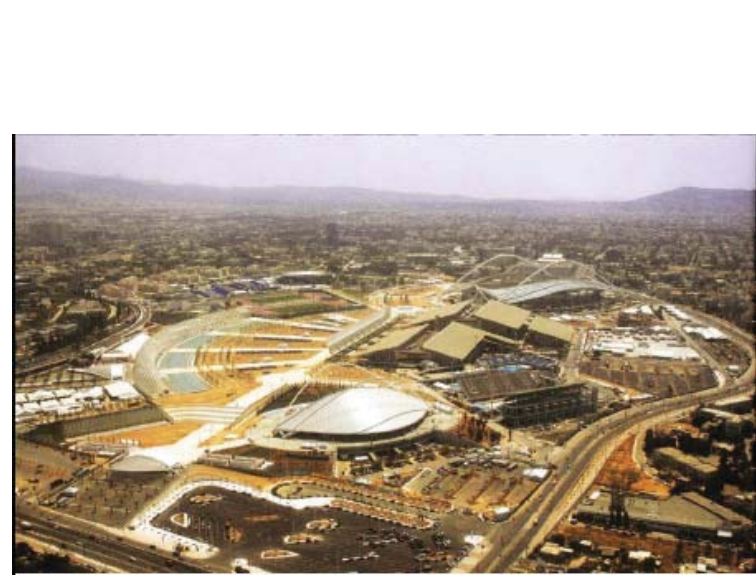
Mega Event:

Olympic Games 2004 (O.G.)

Purpose : Athletic mega-event, athletic venues, infrastructure projects, mixed use megaprojects

Projects costs: not easy to calculate, approximations say almost 20 billion €

Architects: various, most known Santiago Calatrava for the Olympic stadium



Description / Reason for this choice / Background context

The O.G. infrastructure, both in Athens and in various other cities in Greece consisted of 57 major projects and a number of small and medium scale projects. In Athens these were: sports facilities, telecommunications facilities, road and transportation infrastructure, and the housing projects of the Olympic and media villages. The choice for the urban arrangement of the Olympic facilities was to disperse them in various areas, mostly in large public plots or in renovated existing athletic infrastructure.

Significance for New Metropolitan Mainstream

The OG was the most integrated attempt to apply the NMM "dogma". According to the Committee," it was a chance to solve Athens' main urban problems regarding the quality of life, the environment and the traffic". It was, also, expected that the Games could contribute in promoting the city "as a high-level service and innovative business activities center".

A very ambitious and costly programme of cultural events (with emphasis on the use of outdoor public spaces) was supported, especially during the days of the OG, transforming downtown Athens into a very vivid and playful milieu, attracting thousands of visitors and Athenians.



Stakeholders, interests and deals

For the Greek State (organizing committee, governments, media) this was a "national bet" for the "Olympics coming home" but also as a unique developmental opportunity for Athens – and Greece. An extensive ideological campaign was waged, demanding consensus, volunteer commitment or silent support for the success of this "national bet". For the economy it was a chance to direct an enormous amount of public investments (that otherwise could be social funds) to the construction, tourist, media and telecommunications sectors with a "pro-growth" and modernization rhetoric.

Athens's competitive city strategy and especially investment strategies have been largely shaped by the traits of the Greek construction sector –a sector that has been historically crucial for the Greek economy. After a period of severe recession, the OG was the chance for the modernization of its entrepreneurial resources and the introduction of procedures that favor the entry of big capital in constructions (eg. PPPs). Finally a number of international companies related with the Olympic security, telecommunications and other, had interests in the implementation of the project.

We can say that the Olympic Games were prepared within a framework that resembles to a regime of emergency. The state played a determining role in securing the completion of the projects, by imposing ad hoc planning/building legislation that violated the existing -since 1985- master plan of Athens and relevant building codes and labour regulations.

Impacts

It is clear today that the enormous costs undertaken by the Greek state for the organization of the OG have a direct link with the current economic crisis.

But there are a number of other effects:

On an economic level: an important restructuring of the construction sector, formerly dominated by small and medium size companies, took place mostly through the concentration of capital and creation of big consortiums.

On an Urban level: there has been significant improvement of basic infrastructure (large or small scale) in Athens. On the other hand, most of the dispersed Olympic facilities (mainly the athletic ones) were never handed to local neighbourhoods for public use. With the excuse of the quite expensive future maintenance most Olympic assets (that had exploitation potentials) were transferred to a public with private status company (Olympic Properties SA) to manage them. Some of them, the most profitable (marinas, former media centre) have already been leased to private investors. Shopping, convention, leisure centres and amusement parks are the expected and permitted land uses of the Olympic venues. Today the remaining Olympic assets are top priority on the privatization list of the government.


Finally one of the positive impacts of the OG was the resistances that emerged against the violations of the normative framework and against the privatization of public spaces. The anti-olympic movement, although not very massive at the time, initiated the proliferation of social movements and active citizens groups and helped for the greater awareness of Athenians regarding issues of urban development, environmental protection and quality of life.



Synthesis over all four projects and outlook

Since the 90s the modernization rhetoric and request (introduction to Eurozone, Olympic games etc) has gained wide acceptance and political legitimization. The urban fabric of Athens has been the privileged terrain for the implementation of policies and projects of a "new" type. Certain aspects of this picture resemble a lot with familiar neoliberal schemes (growth of real estate and banking sectors, low interest rates etc). However in a city, like Athens, with weak planning tradition and institutions, lacking the political structures that could balance and control (to an extent) these restructurings, and especially now in the period of financial crisis, the improvement of everyday life, as well as the promotion of the city, fails.

The NMM discourse that accompanied the 2004 Olympics continues to underlie state policies concerning Athens' future development (see for example the New Spatial Plan, the new local government legislation). Yet, it doesn't have the same impact on the imaginary of its citizens or on the discourse of urban lifestyle (i.e. inner city living). In this Southern European context the NMM discourse is introduced rather as a legitimization of existing trends rather as a concrete development option.



Urban Regeneration Project:

Eleonas Regeneration Project

Name of project: "Double regeneration": Votanikos district (Eleonas)- Alexandras Avenue

Purpose of the project: a redevelopment plan for two areas of Athens

Project costs: 230.000.000 €

Project management: public-private consortium (Ministry, Municipality, Private investors)



Description / Reason for this choice / Background context

Initially Eleonas project involved the redevelopment of a non-urbanised yet area with the construction of a new football Stadium for Panathinaikos athletic club with another smaller stadium and other facilities, a new Town Hall with commercial uses, new private Shopping Mall and the demolition of the existing Stadium in the centre of Athens (Alexandras) to regain the land for green spaces.

Eleonas is an area of total surface 9 km2 that extends among 4 Municipalities, with the characteristics of a derelict brownfield, informal economic activities and housing of low income and excluded social groups; a historically invisible "backyard", where "dirty" activities (small industry, transport etc) were located and functioned – at times, successfully, in a non-planned fashion.

Declared intention was to attract large-scale, business, commercial and entertainment investors and activities. Plans include the construction of the new Panathinaikos sports complex (53.000 m2 buildings), the new Town Hall building with commercial uses (!?) (42.500 m2), the central Bus station of Athens, large commercial centres etc. An asset that according to existing master-plans (since 1985), was designated for public green open space is transformed rapidly, in a piecemeal fashion, without the presence of empowered inhabitants (few/poor) and businesses ("outdated") able to directly oppose those plans.

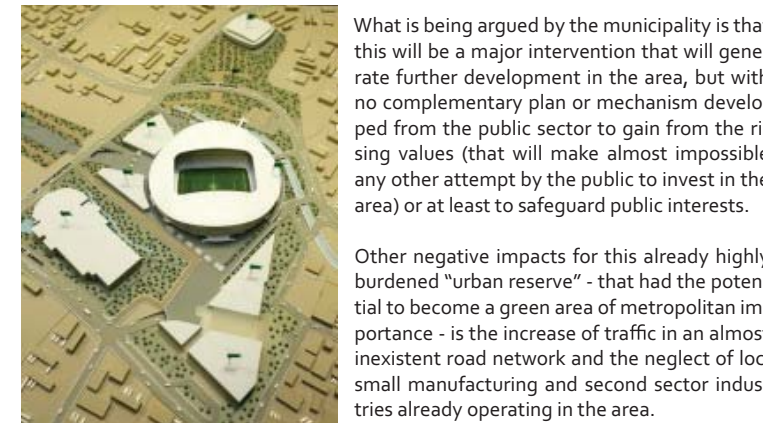
Stakeholders

The football team of Panathinaikos that wants the construction of a new stadium. The conservative municipality that hopes to make this project a "success story" during its time in office and at the same time wishes to have a new town hall constructed with a PPP arrangement. The private investor, owner of a large construction company with strong lobbying connections, that placed himself in the deal by making a "right on time" investment on the plot to be regenerated. Other private investors in the area waiting for the domino effect. Disempowered local society, supported by the committee "save-Eleonas" that documented and campaigned against the environmental and social impacts of the project.

NMM deals

The "double regeneration project" was presented as an innovative and ground-breaking regeneration plan, that will improve, "in one act", two deprived (at least of green spaces) areas of Athens.

What is "innovative" about this project however is the new developmental model that it introduces: A special public agent (with private status) was formed, to manage the implementation of the project. The whole project was regulated through an ad hoc legislation, for the partial urbanisation of the area of Eleonas and the simultaneous demolition of the old stadium in Alexandras avenue. With this legislation, the old mechanisms and institutions of planning where again bypassed, and different uses and more building surface in the relative plots were permitted.



After an "Appeal to the Council of State" by a group of citizens, activist and left party members, the project was blocked by this supreme court, as it was judged illegal for deteriorating the environmental conditions of the area, even though the construction works for the shopping mall had started.

Since November 2009 the new government is trying to negotiate a new deal with the management of Panathinaikos, the private investor and the recommendations by the Supreme Court to advance the project.

...In the era of economic crisis, recent rumors say that the stadium may not be built at all, but we will have the shopping mall...



During the last decades many significant urban investments took place, though most of them –larger or smaller– violate existing regulatory plans and take place via ad hoc and obscure processes. As a result, their implementation is often fragmented, partial and/or short-term, while democratic processes of consultation or even public information are abolished through a 'state of exception' pretext, generating reactions and mobilizations from citizens groups.

Athens presents a double, often contradictory face. On one hand, it doesn't appear to have a coordinated urban policy, which, in conjunction to its lack of coherent social housing policy and practice, has a significant impact on the broader issue of urban regeneration. Yet, on the other hand, the role of the state is crucial for mobilizing investments and initiating private sector-led urban restructuring. There is almost no case of private capital implementation of large scale urban investments without the state's direct or indirect assistance and provision of resources and assets (i.e. through legal instruments, transfers of land and/or buildings, loosening of building and planning regulations).The state remains a crucial 'enabler' for urban interventions. Albeit, an enabler that sets no or limited socially-oriented targets (i.e. for social development or housing) and has no claim for redistribution.



Flagship Project :

Unification of Archeological Sites (UAS)

Unification of Archeological Sites

Purpose: (a) to highlight and connect the monuments and archaeological sites , (b) to promote the redevelopment of the centre of Athens through interventions

Dimensions: about 4km (100-300m large) and about 50000m2

Projects Costs: 100 bilions € (announced in 2000)

Investors: the Greek state and the EU (co-funded by the EU programme "Culture")

Architects: Several



Description / Reason for this choice / Background context

The unification of archaeological sites started in 1998 and goes on until today. It mainly consists of several public spaces redesigning projects. Initially the programme also included transport proposals as well as studies regarding the social development of the surrounding areas, though none of which were implemented. For the project's implementation, a public company (EAXA) among the Ministries of Environment and Culture was established in order to ensure independent (less bureaucratic) action. The pedestrianization of D. Areopagitou St. and Ap. Paulou St. underneath the Acropolis (first part of the programme) paved the path (and defined the choice of the location) for the development of the New Acropolis Museum.

The idea for a New Acropolis Museum that would replace the small one which was located on the rock has been discussed since the 70s. Its present location was defined in 1976 and several competitions later (and after a discovery of an ancient residential area underneath the plot of land) the construction of the building started and was completed in 2009.

Significance for New Metropolitan Mainstream

Both projects were presented by the media and the institutions involved as the main flagship projects of late '90s - early '00s. The pedestrianization would "change the image of the city"; for the tourists it would enhance their strolling along the archaeological sites, while it would also provide a pleasurable walk in the city centre for the residents. This part of the overall project is considered particularly successful and became the starting point for several –mainly beautification– interventions in the centre of Athens. The establishment of the specific public company for its implementation, can be seen as a move that added further significance to the whole project.

Being the result of lengthy consultations and negotiations, the new Acropolis museum is the only important architectural/design project of the last years. Beyond its significance as an international cultural space, it has also a strong symbolic dimension related to the return of Parthenon's marbles from abroad. However, due to its topics and to the permanence of its exhibits, it cannot become a cultural point of reference for the city's residents. Moreover, the cost of its construction was immense and as a result it absorbed a large sum of the existing cultural funds that could be better used for supporting other cultural spaces and/or events.

Stakeholders

Unification of archaeological sites: The company (EAXA), the ministry of Culture, the ministry of Environment; the Municipality of Athens who wanted to promote a different image of the city; the archaeological agency since it is located in an area of archaeological interest and protection; the residents of nearby neighbourhoods that were interested in the other associated projects besides the main pedestrianisation.

New Acropolis Museum: Ministry of foreign affairs for the return of the antiquities; Ministry of culture and tourism for tourist promotion; the archaeological agency which was interested in protecting the ancient findings at the site but also in the museum's exhibits; the architects' union since it was interested both in the building and in the competitions that took place; local interest groups (residents together with architects and others) which were/are trying to keep the surrounding listed buildings from being demolished and are also interested in the protection of the surrounding area.



On the contrary, the new Acropolis museum has been a contested issue among the various stakeholders. For example, there were objections regarding the competition process and results (closed competition, excessive size that competes with Acropolis, form and material foreign to the morphology of Athens); regarding the multiple alterations to the winning proposal due to objections by the archaeological agency and due to profit-related uses (i.e. restaurant on the upper floor, closed surrounding space); regarding the construction cost. Moreover, there were strong disputes between citizens' and architects' movements and the organisation responsible for the museum's construction regarding the demolition of listed and other surrounding buildings and the museum's integration within the broader neighbourhood.

Impacts


Unification of archaeological sites: Its impact on the areas involved differs. Some areas have become extremely expensive, others were just put on the map, while it turned most of the areas involved in attractive central locations for business, entertainment and new residents. The pedestrianisation of such a big and central axis without the necessary complementary transport measures and in conjunction to the number of tourist buses visiting the area, created significant traffic problems in the surrounding areas. Moreover, while the pedestrian street works as a platform for cultural activities, a large part of it serves the interest of private businesses (cafes, restaurants etc.).

Comments

To an extent, both projects can be considered as 'facelift' projects rather than project that enhance the city's everyday life. The unification project is limited to the – useful – redesign of spaces and lacks programmes of broader urban regeneration. Nevertheless, the remit of the company has expanded and it nowadays includes the whole region of Attica as well as the possibility of 'upgrading' archaeological sites in the whole of Greece. At the same time, it recently announced its new role as a member of the agencies concerned with regenerating some of the deprived parts of the centre of Athens. This even newer remit is not related to archaeological sites but with the city centre in general and besides projects of redesigning some squares it also talks about adding some social programmes.

Well, let's wait and see how this will evolve...

On the other hand, the new museum is a project of greater symbolic and national significance and appeal, but it has been less important for the city and its everyday life (either for residents or for tourists)



Alternative:

Navarinou Park

Name of project: «your parking, our park»

Purpose of the project: create a self-manged, open green space for locals

Dimensions: approximately 100x200m

Project costs: self- sponsored by solidarity funds

Architects: designed and constructed by the open management assembly



Description / Reason for this choice / Background context:

Navarinou Park (or the Park) was formed on 7th of March 2009, at the site of an unused parking site in the area of Exarcheia in Athens. It is an open, self-organised and self-managed park established with the initiative of several individuals and groups. Originally the site belonged to the representative body of engineers (TEE), who wanted to build there its new offices. However, this never happened and TEE offered the site to the municipality of Athens in order for it to become a square and in exchange it asked for more beneficial planning regulations for another site it owned and wanted to develop (1990). Due to delays and planning complications this change never actually took place and the site remained rented as a private parking. With the end of the parking lease, the discussions about the future of the site re-emerged and coincided with the period marked by December's 2008 events. Although the park project was an idea that was discussed for some time, it was Athens' insurgencies in December 2008 and the period after that inspired a critical mass to come together, to occupy the particular site and transform it into a park.

This dense urban area suffers from a lack of open spaces of substantial size. Thus, the aim of this initiative was to claim the already promised site and transform it to a square / park where residents and visitors alike would go and spend their time – without any consumption obligations –, where they could bring their kids and have fun and where the neighbourhood could create its garden. Moreover, the Park wished to be an open space for gatherings, discussions, events and debates as well as a place where people could play an active role in decision-making and shaping.

As mentioned, the park is "a place of creation, emancipation and resistance, open to political, cultural, anti-consumption and other actions (...) a neighbourhood garden that hosts part of the residents' social life beyond the logic of profit and ownership" The whole process of transforming the asphalted site into a park was an open participatory process involving local residents and sympathisers, who cleared, planted, designed landscapes, street furniture and playground objects and participated in myriad other ways the parking to park process. From the beginning, the park is managed by open meetings that collectively decide on the activities that take place there, while there are also specific interest teams.

Significance for New Metropolitan Mainstream:

This particular project represent what we called 'resistances' to forces of privatisation and control and is simultaneously an anti-NMM and an NMM project. Although in other cities, processes of participation are more widespread, this is not the case in Athens. However, it is not solely the participatory (creating and decision-making) element that makes this project significant.

In symbolic terms it represents one possible outcome of December's 2008 drives and hopes. In NMM and urban development terms it shows the potentialities that unused urban spaces have if a critical mass of decisive people organise themselves in order to improve their (collectively) living conditions. In practical terms, it attracts many residents and visitors and is still going strong after its first year. From yet another perspective, it represents a rupture in the exclusively surveilled neighbourood of Exarcheia.

As can be imagined, this particular project has not gone down well with the police and various related bodies who saw it as an attempt of expanding 'anarchist/anti-authoritarian' grounds under the pretence of residents. Thus, there were several times that the police raided the park (and the surrounding places) as well chased people with every possible excuse – actual or fabricated – that people from the park attacked them.



Stakeholders

Besides the institutional bodies involved in the management of the site (TEE and Athens' municipality) which, in the end played a marginal role in the whole process of park creation, the main stakeholders were all the people that were inspired by the idea and participated in the development of the Park; namely local residents, visitors and sympathisers to the idea (architects, gardeners, welders, and other people with construction / technical knowledge), political activists and various political groups, youth, and children. Unfortunately, another, more obscure stakeholder is police (and the relevant administration from the Ministry for the protection of citizens), who frequently try to intimidate people and constrain them from going or hanging around in the park.




Nevertheless, this bleak picture has some bright moments to present; moments that have managed to challenge and reverse decisions and to mobilize and unite – even temporarily – a diverse population. From the Olympics onwards, and even more after December's 2008 events, there has been a wealth of local movements demanding a better urban environment, a greater saying in decision-making and –possibly – an alternative to the Neoliberal Metropolitan Mainstream.

Can we ask, also from other cities experiences, that those anti-neoliberal, metropolitan mainstream reaction and resistances (movements, squats, claims and alliances) form an integral part of the broader NMM and wish to avert it from becoming a Neoliberal Metropolitan Mainstream?

Urban Region

This area doesn't correspond to an administrative boundary or division of Attica region. It describes the Athens - Piraeus metropolitan complex along with recent expansions of residential areas and its surrounding multi-functional areas. It consists of the broader region of a vast metropolis which gathers almost half of Greece's population. Thus, it is a mono-centric urban region with an over-concentration of functions in its central areas.

 **Subcentres** in this case, are central areas in peripheral suburbs of Athens or in smaller cities around Athens which function as local reference .

Trendy Neighbourhoods

Our identified trendy neighbourhoods fall into two categories.

First, those at the margins of gentrification, where primary gentrification and processes are visible but gentrification hasn't yet started, and second those neighbourhoods that bear a particular cultural/political identity and are attractive to residents and newcomers without being gentrified.

The neighbourhoods of **Metaxourgeia** and **Votanikos** fall into the first category of pro-gentrification – with Metaxourgeia being a primary example – where new bars, cafes and restaurants constantly emerge together with designer apartments or 'lofts' but where rents are still affordable to low, large percentage of the migrant residents still remain and the majority of the new flats remain empty. Both areas can be considered as areas of reinvestment, facing a rise in property values but without any significant influx of actual gentrifiers.

The neighbourhoods of **Exarcheia** and **Mpournazi** fall into the second category of trendy but not exactly gentrified areas. They have a distinct cultural identity, they can be considered as areas of reinvestment and have experienced an increase in property values. However, gentrification-led residential displacement hasn't been significant.

Exarcheia, with its strong political identity, represents a particular case since it is often depicted (in the media) as a no-go area, while it is also a very trendy area particularly among students, activists and various politically-minded people. At the same time, besides its appeal some of its residents are moving out, especially if they have children, due to lack of family supporting infrastructure (i.e. pavements, parks, nurseries) and due to the pollution (mainly the extreme use of tear gas etc by the police).

Very High Income Area

Due to the urbanization model of Athens (fragmented small property, multistorey housing buildings, self-promotion etc) there is a high degree of mixity amongst different income social groups. Although there is a historical clear division (east (high income)-west (low income)) of the city, and there are areas of very high income, these are not exclusive.

Areas of Privatization

Areas of privatisation fall into two categories. First, privatisation through ownership or management transfer such as many of the Olympic games buildings that were handed to private investors for exploitation. Second, a widespread privatisation through semi-(in) formal occupation of public spaces particularly by bars, clubs and restaurants and their 'tables-and-chairs' ("trapezokathismata"), transforming public space into a space for private consumption.

Areas of Private Reinvestment / Areas of Intense Neighbourhood Upgrading

Among others, **Ano Petralona** follows a more 'typical' gentrification processes where older residents and marginal gentrifiers are getting displaced while there is a high influx of entertainment businesses (bars and restaurants) in the area as well as of new residents.

Areas of State-Led Reinvestment / Areas of Urban Regeneration

State-led re-investment was (and is) a key element of urban development and restructuring in Athens, mainly taking the form of pedestrianisation and redevelopment of squares. They exclusively deal with physical redevelopment, failing to address social, cultural or economic issues and incorporate relevant measures into their strategies. The only relevant programmes are those initiated under the EU 'Urban' programme (which again, in practice, dealt mainly with space than anything else). On the other hand, state-led re-investment has been significant and took various forms (from providing development incentives and public support to land and/or funds transfers and changes of legislation). The selected projects described below try to illustrate this.

Piraeus Avenue is the historical axe that connects the centre of Athens with the port of Piraeus. It mainly housed industrial and manufacturing uses, which gradually closed down. The regeneration of Piraeos Av. aimed at transforming its character through the introduction of new cultural uses, the re-use of existing industrial buildings and the promotion of its associated archaeological sites.

Urbanisation and Regeneration of former airport of Eliniko

With the transfer of Athens' airport, its former area, Eliniko, was designated as a primary area for redevelopment, and during the last years there have been strong debates about the way to it. The adjacent municipalities and citizens' groups ask for a large metropolitan green area with athletic, cultural and leisure facilities and fight against the announced plans for the development of a luxury residential and business / commercial district.

Regeneration of the former fertiliser industry of Drapetsona

Drapetsona's 'Fertilisers' is a brownfield site of a former chemical fertilisers factory, located on a strategically placed coastal plot at the entry of the Piraeus port and was part of a wider nowadays declined industrial zone that hosted a big number of heavy industries. The specific area of 245.000 m2 belongs to the National Bank of Greece. Today there are highly speculative real-estate plans for its redevelopment consisting of new housing construction together with commercial and business complexes. Local citizens fight these plans and ask for the development of a big public park with green areas that will guarantee the access to the seafront for their neighbourhoods and will contribute to the environmental upgrading of the area.

Areas of Disinvestment

Many of the areas of critical disinvestment are part of Athens' central neighbourhoods. The areas around **Omonia** square have become infamous as areas of severe urban decline (often depicted as ghetto), hosting a range of illegal activities (street prostitution and drug-trade), with a building stock in bad condition which houses only migrants (poorer and often without papers), and with high crime incidents. Rumours have it that several of the buildings have been bought en mass, waiting for 'clearance' operations and gentrification.

Away from the spotlight, there are other **central neighbourhoods** that can be identified as areas of disinvestment (Ag. Paulos, Axarmon, Liosion). These neighbourhoods have a significant migrant resident population and shops, some light manufacturing and car repair businesses as well as other activities such as prostitution and drug use/trade. In the past, these were more or less lower-middle class neighbourhoods whose residents left to the suburbs after the gradual decline of the city centre.

All these neighbourhoods have witness the rise and actions of the far-right as well as some 'clearance' operations.

Flagship Projects

There have been few – if any – flagship buildings in Athens during the last decades, mainly due to lack of funds or investment interest. We could add the roof that Calatrava designed for the Olympic stadium, but this was an addition on an Olympics related space, which is neither significant for the everyday life of the city nor works as a tourist attraction.

The new Acropolis museum, a flagship project per se, is a special case (see poster 2). We consider the Unification of Archaeological Sites as a flagship project mainly because it was presented as such by the media and the institutions involved but also because of the effect it had for the urban life around the acropolis.

Two specific /controversial cases:

New Cultural Park: Almost three years ago the charity foundation "Stavros Niarchos" (Greek shipping magnate) announced its offer to fully fund a project for the construction of the new National Opera house, the new National Library and a Cultural and Educational park. The project is estimated to cost 300 million euros and the architect Renzo Piano has been commissioned to design this cultural park. According to the official proposal the complex will be "unconditionally (!?) handed over to the State on completion.

The Mall: The Olympic Games 2004, provided the pretext for building the largest illegal construction in Europe: "The Mall". What makes a flagship project of this otherwise common in all cities commercial investment, is that a huge "propaganda" -by the media and governments- was launched during its construction in order to cover the scandalous way the investor (one of the biggest tycoons of Greece) gained access to the plot and permission to build. The "largest shopping mall of the Balkans" has been judged illegal by the Council of State.

Strategic Urban Infrastructure Projects

Attiki Odos is a privately-owned toll motorway in Greece forming the outer ring roads of Greater Athens Metropolitan area. Since the last ten years – after the construction of Attica road and the new airport- there has been a rapid suburbanisation of this area, following the well-known "Greek planning system" (flexible planning framework, lack of urban infrastructure, weak land use and construction control etc).

Important Events and Festivals

There aren't many established cultural events with international appeal taking place in Athens. Various cultural festivals (eg. "Athens festival", Synch festival etc) have gained an international reputation, although few international audience can afford the high travel costs to Athens. It is of some importance to mention, a number of smaller cultural or political events taking place regularly every year and attaining popularity among local people (like the anti-racist summer festival, b-fest anti-authoritarian festival etc).

Again the organization of the 2004 Olympics marked the urban cultural life of Athens with an extensive and intensive cultural programme on various scales. During the 15 days of the games almost every public space, empty space/building or other experimental setting was used for exhibitions, performances, concerts etc. giving the chance for people to experience the city in different ways and attracting many visitors. This has been forged on the Athenians imaginary as a long lasting party, a continuous event with an end date (like all nice things). Maybe a legacy of this period has been the emergence of alternative or bottom-up events, as the development of an alternative music scene or the multiplication of street performers and small theater groups. However their potentials are limited because they receive limited or no state support.

With regard to the institutional efforts to develop a cultural agenda, the attachment to history (antiquity – Byzantium) continues. There seems to be no actual intention of strengthening and promoting local traditions or practices / projects related to contemporary city life, like youth or migrants cultures. Many open air markets and bazaars were banned or stopped, while most events undertaken by the municipality have a rather commercial character.

Failed and Grounded (large) Projects

The plans for the extension of the **Peripheral road of Ymittos** with long tunnels through the mountain Ymittos towards the Mesogeia plain were rejected by the new government after strong opposition by citizens groups, environmental organisations, technical and scientific institutions and affected local administrations. It was considered as another infrastructure work with very high cost, that prioritises private car over public transportation.

Spaces and Places of Resistance / Alternatives

The demand for open green spaces and against all big construction projects that constantly repeats in almost all local mobilisations that take place in Athens the last years should be understood taking into account that Athens is a very densely built city with very few green areas and public parks. The "new" type of urban projects introduced since the Olympic Games, involving big capital but also undemocratic procedures in their implementation, have triggered local citizens reactions. Another important turning point has been the extensive fires on peri-urban mountains in 2007 that affected very strongly the public opinion in Athens, turning the demand for open/public green spaces into a very strong and widely approved claim.

The last years a number of alternative self-organised projects in various city spaces have emerged, addressing issues of democracy and quality of life.

Other: area of extreme repression

Rather, following Bern's notion of 'restricted areas' where surveillance and safety measures are very important, we consider Exarcheia a 'restricted area' due to the immense surveillance and policing of the neighbourhood, resulting – at times - in a near police take over of its public spaces and intimidating control measures.

During the last years, Exarcheia are under "special status with daily presence of armed police officers and with very frequent stop and searches to 'suspicious looking' people. Particularly during periods of social unrest, like in December 2008 but also more recently, the police raids local houses, social centres and cafes and often ends up hassling or pre-arresting people.

Other:"Aythereta": dispersed informality of the middle and high classes

From urban expansion through informal settlements for housing the working classes and urban poor, to urban informality as a dispersed horizontal practice for all social strata. As A.Roy points out informality is a differentiated process that does not involve exclusively poverty. This is the case in Athens where slow planning procedures and very loose control allows for the widespread violation of urban regulations (building with no permission, building bigger buildings than allowed, building in non urbanised areas...etc). Especially after the completion of the Attica road, which enabled the urban expansion of housing areas at the Eastern part of Attica (Mesogeia Plain), in some communities the percentages of informality reaches the 70% of new built houses.