

Rethinking the local and horizontal characteristics of the green and open space city movements in Athens.

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Open Spaces in Athens

In Greece, urban and rural land uses, as well as protected areas are not well defined and managed. This is also the case in Athens. It is heavily built, and green areas in which the public has access are only 0,06 sq. meters per capita¹. In overall, open spaces and green areas are 2,55 sq. meters per capita². The proportion of built/unbuilt urban space is not monitored³. There is constant worsening of all urban indicators which refer to the quality of life.

- There are no policies for the increase of urban green. Various existing urban and economic tools⁴ are not used to this purpose.
- There is no official inventory of the open spaces of the Athens’ Basin.
- There is no adequate legal and managerial framework for the protection of the open/commonly used spaces. Many open spaces are built⁵.
- There is a continuous building of small lots of downtown and other densely populated areas.
- There is no unified management of urban green of the Capital.
- The urban green is scattered and there is no effort for creating green corridors and green network in the city and its surroundings.
(Gianniris 2011)

During the last decade, legislation, funding and various conditional adjustments were oriented to serve the post-modern phase of Greece; the private sector, particularly the construction and real estate sectors, were aided through long term programming (3d CSF⁶ 2007-2013, Olympic Games of 2004) and disposal of public land. The Open Space and the Green were the victims of this political orientation.

Local city interventions obtained priority in the place of comprehensive planning.

In these conditions the Athens’ Coordinating Committee for Open Spaces (1996-2011⁷) successfully managed to coordinate various local movements aiming in protecting various neighborhood public/commonly used open spaces.

The Coordinating Committee excluded municipal and national parties as members. Its members were representatives of the citizens’ groups and associations. The political orientation of the representatives was indifferent because the priority was given to the common local interest of protecting the Open Space. There was no room for party or private interests. The Committee had no legal form and was functioning on a voluntary basis. All decisions for common action were decided unanimously (there was no majority rule) after discussion. The Committee meetings were held monthly or bi-monthly. It is estimated that during these 15 years there were at least 1.400 meetings, 70-90 public activities and contributions, about 20 press conferences and more than 400 press releases. The Committee also collaborated with the professional associations of lawyers, architects, planners, with labor unions, Universities, municipalities. The Committee also published a low cost journal for a decade (2000-2010-27 issues). All local movements as well as the pedestrian movements, the bike movement, the mobile anti-antenna movement

¹ Year 1997. Source: <http://www.urbanaudit.org>. Stockholm (SE) 96,23, København (DK) 52,15, Amsterdam (NL) 35,31, Berlin (DE) 27,39, Roma (IT) 15,08, Bruxelles / Brussel (BE) 12,97, Vilnius (LT) 0,29, Bucuresti (RO) 0,25. European average of Capitals 7 sq. meters per capita.

² Year 2005. Including fenced open spaces, as is the archeological sites. Greek legislation norms (Ministry of Environment) refer to 8 sq. meters per capita. (Belavilas-2010).

³ The evolution of this proportion is dramatic. From 6 sq. meters per capita in 1965, it dropped to 4 in 1977 and 3,1 in 1990.

⁴ Recently, the newly founded Green Fund was disposed by 95% for the public deficit.

⁵ Contemporary forms of urban management (governance, territorial governance, territorial cohesion, participatory democracy, participatory budget) were systematically neglected. The classic managerial forms of government were followed.

⁶ In order to carry out the 3d Community Structural Fund, public land was used as part of the funding (Source: newspaper Sunday ELEYTHEROTYPIA of 5-9-1999).

⁷ The need for coordination became apparent in the mid 90’s, during the preparations of the government proposal for the Olympic Games of 1996.

etc, felt that they had a precious ally and soon the Committee became the center of information for city movements, journalists, active citizens, students and young groups⁸.

The Observatory of Open Space, an internet site which was created to support the Committee of Open Space reached about 127.000 visits in 2007 and was constantly above 25.000 visits per year for at least one decade.

Operationally, there was a 3 member secretary to coordinate the Committee, with rotated members every 6 months, and an alternating editorial team each year for the edition of the journal "Open Spaces" (27 issues). The longevity of the Committee is due to its organizational principles and functioning.

Pursuing a creative and active citizen had its price. The political parties were indifferent to these city movements since they could not infiltrate and control the Athens' Coordinating Committee for Open Spaces. In addition, very frequently the object of the Committee (the Open Space), confronted to big private intertwining interests often directly connected with the major Greek media (press, radio, TV). Despite the journalistic interest very few were published in the mainstream media. In addition there was an Olympic Games embargo to information concerning the impact of the Games⁹. Also, local authorities tried to avoid the city movements.

The Committee of Open Space in Athens had an important social influence in city movements and has even influenced the city politics for Open Spaces. This influence was apparent in the local elections of 2006 and 2010¹⁰.

Several success stories and various local defeats oriented the social movements. Important experience was gained both locally and through the Olympic Games of 2004 and its aftermath¹¹.

As Petropoulou writes,

"...the successful organization of the Games created several problems¹². Athens turned to extreme centralized growth, with correspondingly negative consequences for the growth of other Greek cities and to the neglect of its own sustainable development. It also absorbed the lion's share of the Greek budget (and the income generated by European funds). These changes also extended to other Greek cities and regions, since land appropriation and real estate became the crucial factors in economic development. The privatization of public land followed the established route of selling public institutions and goods. Many green public spaces became de facto private spaces and their use changed..."

(PETROPOULOU 2010).

The issue of what is "public interest" and how it is served, was raised.

Privatization-commercialization of Open Space was helped by incremental planning prevailed in the place of comprehensive planning. This was associated with the effort of creating a new type of citizen, a "false citizen" or "appropriate citizen", who conforms with the emerging entrepreneurial city¹³. Fencing parks and public places, fencing the streets, installing hundreds of cameras, police pogroms against minorities, social control legislation, police presence everywhere in downtown, police brutality, became commonplace.

After December 2008 and the assassination of Alex Grigoropoulos by the police, new attitudes appeared in social movements¹⁴

"The cross-fertilization of urban uprisings with other movements may radicalize the latter, turning them into urban social movements... for example, social movements that, while opposing the meaning of a given spatial structure, test out new urban functions and new forms. They are different from mobilizations of citizens organized purely around protest. ... In Greece, before the 2008 uprising, local urban movements did not necessarily show these characteristics. Networking efforts started before the Olympic Games but they were always confronted by the divergent political tendencies internal to each movement, which essentially disrupted their networking ... The influence of the Greek youth uprising on urban social movements seems also to have created

⁸ "According to the map of Attika's Observatory of free spaces, by 24 May 2006 a total of 73 social resistance initiatives were registered. By February 2008 their number had risen to 111 (Gianiris, 2008) and by February 2009 the number of registered initiatives was 138." (PETROPOULOU 2010).

⁹ By Wikileaks it became known that the Organizing Committee of the Games was renowned for paying journalists in order to publish favorable stories. (Observatory-2011)

¹⁰ In the municipal elections of 2006 the issue of Open Space was first in the agenda of all parties. In the elections of 2010 several majors were not re-elected (Athens, Salonika, Zographou etc). In the opposite, some majors, who were in the same line with the city movements, were re-elected (Hellinikon, Kalivia).

¹¹ The Games of 2004 were used to innovate all economic and fiscal tools in favor of the real estate and land capital for privatizing and commercializing all public property, not only the land which was involved in the Games.

¹² The Olympic Green program for trees was less than 5% and it is characteristic that not even one bikeway was planned for the Games of 2004.

¹³ The same was observed in the case of post Olympic Barcelona, as was analysed by Venetia Chantzi (Chantzi-2010)

¹⁴ CHRYSSANTHI PETROPOULOU "From the December Youth Uprising to the Rebirth of Urban Social Movements: A Space-Time Approach", **International Journal of Urban and Regional Research**, Volume 34.1 March 2010 217-24

a new issue: claiming and practising the exercise of free expression in open spaces at the level of everyday life¹⁵. In the era of globalization the importance of social struggles at this level is crucial...” (PETROPOULOU 2010)

We agree with the findings of Petropoulou that

“...there seems to have been a kind of osmosis between this uprising and existing and new urban movements.”

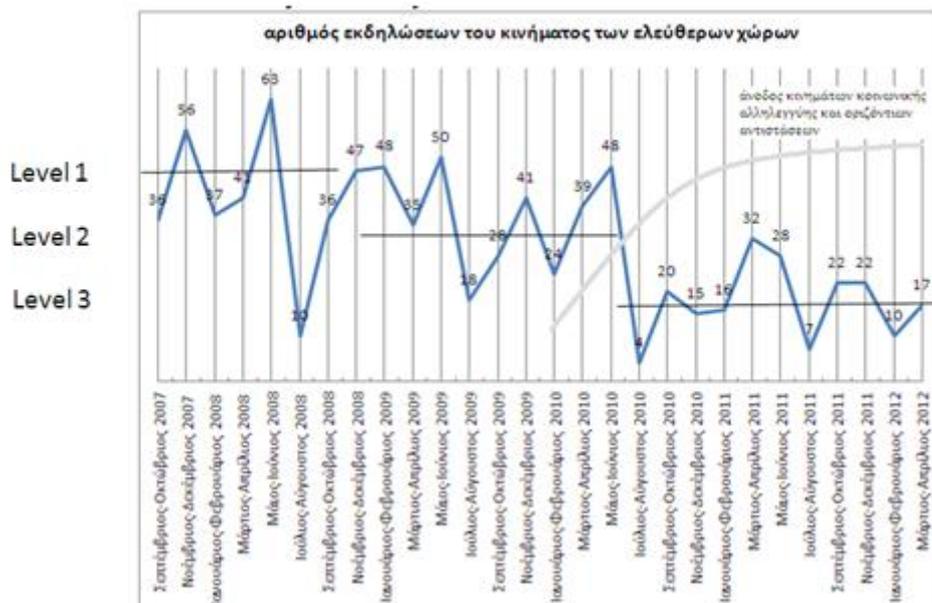
(PETROPOULOU 2010)

After 2010, new politics (troika memorandums) had as result new urban movements, of thematic and horizontal character, such as:
 the movement of “Plateia”,
 direct exchange of goods between producers and consumers (the movement of potato),
 the movement of “no pay” (Den plirono),
 collective cuisines,
 social pharmacies,
 social groceries,
 antiracist events etc.

These new movements, often manipulated by SYRIZA, did not necessarily derive from the existing localities of the past decade. Many new urban localities emerged to host the new activities. In parallel, many collectives of Open Spaces, which were members of the Coordinating Committee of Athens, were also absorbed by these new horizontal activities. The citizens who were previously involved in the Open Space movement had undertaken new duties and there was no time left for the movement of Open Spaces. Their priorities shifted. In 2010 and 2011, there were several unsuccessful calls for the monthly assembly of the Committee.

After 2011, the Athens Coordinating Committee for Open Spaces is practically inactive, although several neighborhood and local movements continued to struggle against the increased pressure on the deprivation of the public character of open spaces¹⁶. New issues appeared which were left unanswered, such as the derailment of the Green Fund, the speeding up of the demolition of forest legislation and forest protection, the rising propaganda for a new constitutional reform and the amendment of the article 24 of the Constitution, the legalization of illegal constructions in buildings and illegal housing all over Greece for money gathering.

Evolution in the number of activities and events of Open Space movements (Sept 2007- April 2012)



¹⁵ The post 2008 activation of the youth in issues involving Open Space opened new fields and possibilities, as show several cases [Navarino Park (Exarchia), Galaxias (Nea smyrni), Gardenia (N. Smirni), Tritsis Park, Votanical Garden of Petroupolis, urban gardens (Elliniko and other places) etc.]

¹⁶ The Elliniko case became worse as it was expanded to the privatization of all the Saronic Gulf. Three new football fields are planned as a pretext for huge shopping centers close to the centers of Athens, Piraeus and northern Athens. Antennas for mobile phones in neighborhoods (e.g. Terpandrou in Neos Kosmos).

Facts and perspectives

A discussion must open among city movements about the strategy needed in this new environment. The intellectuals involved in urban movements should play a crucial role.

So far, the adaptation of urban movements to the evolving reality seems to be spontaneous and insufficient.

New social initiatives emerge.

Recent changes in the physiognomy of urban movements seem to threaten a precious heritage obtained by earlier urban movements.

Political instability, social disintegration, the impact of a prolonged crisis, all these obviously lead to a fall of the viability of the city.

It is raised the issue of what is “public interest” and how it is served.

Local urban movements use networking. They apply the principles of Governance and frequently adopt direct democracy. Participatory democracy depends on the political orientation of the local, regional and national government, and to the adoption of governance by the representative bodies.

Labor Unions, professional associations and political parties use representative democracy and by their nature are selective in other entities which operate in a different way. Many radical, networked, direct democracy movements are outside their scope. The urban movements should not exclude in their actions the demand of help and/or cooperation to Labor Unions, professional associations and political parties.

The quality of democracy becomes a main issue. Crisis is used as a neoliberal tool of consciousness assimilation and social automatism

The voluntary depart of many youngsters from the city environment to the countryside or abroad is not assessed. First estimations refer to an urban exit of several hundreds of thousands of urban population. New social dynamic conditions emerge in the countryside.

New bridges are created between generations, between social strata, between the city and the periphery.

New networks are needed (a) between urban movements of various cities in a country, and (b) between countries.

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