

2. Athenian Urbanism and Urban Resilience

Path-dependent trajectories from the post-war era to the crisis and beyond

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Abstract

The paper attempts to relate the concept of resilience with urbanism. More than just the functions in buildings, mixed land-use and maintenance of public life in the streets, 'urbanism' is understood as a collective condition that shapes the production of built space and social relations formed around it. The article claims that deep understanding of urbanism in a particular place is crucial for urban resilience planning. This is discussed in the context of Athens.

Introduction

This paper explores the linkages between resilience and urbanism with regard to Athens. Urban resilience has become the new mainstream in urban policy discourse that is shaping urban planning agendas in the EU and worldwide. Resilient urbanism is associated with 'cities being conceived and designed to be resilient to natural hazards, economic booms and busts, to domestic and international challenges and with ability to respond to crisis through adaptation' (RESILIENT URBANISM 2018). But how does resilience make sense in particular urban contexts? Are the attributes that make a particular city resilient uniform? Can cities become resilient at once or is this something that is shaped over a long-term process?

The view adopted in this paper is that the key element that makes cities resilient is urbanism itself, meaning the collective condition that shapes the production of built space and social relations formed around it. For Urbanism can be no single definition given the broad meaning of the term that varies also depending on the context that is used. In this article we relate to the original 19th century tradition of 'making cities' that involved dealing simultaneously with aspects of land management, infrastructure planning, traffic, density, articulation of private and public space and urban form while operating within a context of capitalist urban development that acknowledges the need to produce economic surplus in the production of the built environment (see for instance writings of MORALES 1978). This art of 'knitting things' together, that was 'lost' after the Second World War and arguably rediscovered recently (HALL 2016), has shaped the social morphology of some European cities for as long as 100 years, as in the case of the Cerda plan of Barcelona. In this sense, urbanism is like an 'urban DNA' and it is related to path-dependent evolutionary processes. If resilience is to make any sense at all and have an impact, then it has to fit into that particular DNA. So a primary task for policy makers is to 'decode that DNA' and try to understand how it evolves.

The paper is addressing this problematic in the case of Athens. Athens has been identified in the literature as having followed a distinct urbanization path that differs from western urban development models (LEONTIDOU 1990). Its attributes were created in the context of locally specific conditions shaped in the period

of the post-war rapid urbanization. After the 1990s Athenian Urbanism has faced several challenges, exposure to neoliberal urban strategies in the context of staging the 2004 Olympics followed by the crisis afterwards. The paper first discusses the particularities of Athenian Urbanism trying to identify the raw elements that make it resilient. Then it goes on to see how Athenian Urbanism has evolved across the last decades and how it has responded to recent challenges. The paper concludes with an assessment of how the crisis has affected the resilience of Athenian Urbanism drawing conclusions for future policy directions.

Athenian Urbanism is shaped across four key stages which are subject to path-dependent evolutionary processes. The first stage is 19th century urbanism initiated in the 1830s when Athens becomes the official capital of the newly founded modern Greek state and seat of the appointed government and the King. Athens at that time has been a small settlement of 4000 inhabitants typical of the Ottoman period in the Balkans. The city expands below the Acropolis Hill with monuments of various historical periods forming an organic part of the vernacular urban tissue.

The particular path of Athenian Urbanism

The arrival of the Bavarian administration sets forth a new direction of western-oriented urban imagery which becomes a constant parameter shaping policy discussions about urban development and planning over the next two centuries. A new identity of Athens is promoted through urban planning and state-led urban development which involves extensive excavation of archaeological sites and construction of emblematic public buildings of neoclassical architecture which form today an important part of the city's architectural heritage. The Athens plan of Kleantes-Schaubert (KALLIVRETAKIS 2016) follows the principles of 19th century urbanism in organically integrating the modern regular urban grid of new boulevards with the Ottoman old town. This has ensured continuity in urban development and boosted urbanity.

The implementation of the plan initiates speculative development processes which are related with the interests of landed

elites that interfere in the process of plan implementation by changing the street layout and location of public buildings in order to get access to development rights. This practice of local elites is about to become a key characteristic defining Athenian Urbanism throughout its historical development over the next 150 years. It is supported by continuous population growth that creates conditions of constant demand for new housing and urban development throughout the entire 19th and 20th century. FOTEINI TOUNTA (1998) has documented the way that many peri-urban forests in Attica, that were public property according to the Greek Constitution, have been converted to developable land through a process of property and development rights transfers and land use transformations that is still ongoing, almost two centuries later.



Fig. 1. The development of Athens up to 1870s as depicted on the J. Kaupert plan published in 1881. Source: NATIONAL HELLENIC RESEARCH FOUNDATION

The next critical moment for Athens urban development is the mid-war period with 1922 being a key milestone associated with the Greek-Turkish wars (so called *Mikrasiatiki katastrofi*) which had as a consequence the arrival of 1.5 million refugees to Greece that settled mainly in urban centres of Athens and Thessaloniki. In Athens, the refugees settled where there was

available land, a fact that led to the formation of new neighbourhoods. The provision of housing for the socioeconomic integration of refugees presented a major challenge for urban resilience, to use today's terminology, given that most of the areas where the refugee population settled, lacked basic infrastructure and some were even susceptible to risks such as flooding. The refugee crisis of 1922 triggered planning responses, namely the adoption of the first planning act (Decree of 1923 'On planning and development of towns and settlements') and the launch of major state housing and land development operations that keep going on for several decades.

Meanwhile, however, the refugees brought positive energy to the vitality of Athenian urbanism by providing cheap labour force that boosted industrial development and led to the creation of new wealth. Western influences in architecture and urbanism are noted in the development of inner-city apartment buildings (Greek modernism) and suburbs with villas for the affluent local population which were planned according to the garden city principles (FILLIPIDIS 2006). The model of the typical multi-ownership condominium building (so called Greek *polykatoikia*) is born that will become the basic housing infrastructure and generator of the urban tissue over the post-war period. The population of Athens throughout this period almost doubled; from 453.000 in 1920 to reaching 802.000 inhabitants in 1928.

The third crucial period for the formation of the Athens urban development model is the post-war decades of 1950s-1970s. In this period according to writers and critics are consolidated the key defining features of Greek urbanism in terms of modes of production of the built environment, characteristics of urban form and associated social practices. The triggering factor of urban development is urbanization taking place at the national scale that leads to the concentration of internal rural migrant population in the cities, primarily Athens and Thessaloniki and abandonment of the countryside (MALOUTAS 2000). It is initiated after the end of the Civil War and is associated with policy responses to the acute housing crisis noted at the time. As MANDOUVALOU et al. (1995) point out, urban development policies in the post-war period served various functions, from

housing and welfare, to employment and promotion of consumerism, but also ensured political stability by dampening the appeal of Communism. According to them, the production of housing financed by small-scale private capital seemed at the time a choice that made sense as an economic policy but also a choice taken in the absence of other alternatives and other forms of investment capital. The production of housing is promoted indirectly by favourable regulation that supports the two dominant forms of urban development - formal and informal. The formal urban development takes place in already inhabited areas within the confines of statutory plans. Reconstruction is financed through plot based arrangements between individual constructors-investors and land owners (*antiparochi* system) favoured by increased building intensity. Informal development takes place at the urban fringe involving self-housing construction performed by rural migrants by their own means on land purchased from local farmers. State policy is favourable also in this case by tolerance of illegal construction practices and their subsequent legalization combined with incorporation within statutory plans after the 1980s. In this way, the value increase from the raised intensity is captured by primary investors.

Maloutas has stressed out the redistributive effect of these regulatory policies that resolved the problem of housing shortage and supported socioeconomic mobility in the Greek cities throughout the post-war period. Access to homeownership has been the main vehicle of social and economic integration of internal migrants (MALOUTAS 2003). This governance technology that created a multiplicity of owners became a stronghold of the resilience of Athenian Urbanism. MANDOUVALOU et al. (1995) argue that the participation in land development of a wide range of actors from many social groups, has contributed to creating social and political consensus around the various informal social practices and institutions constituting that process.

Resilience of Athenian Urbanism and the role of planning

The resilience of Athenian Urbanism as evolved throughout the above described evolutionary process is associated with a particular set of morphological and land use characteristics. The first one is the **small-scale**. This refers both to the size of the plots as well as the size of investments. Small plots mean

small investments, each plot being a separate investment. This made the process of housing development affordable to small-scale investors, thus giving them space to benefit from land rents. The second characteristic is **density**. High density made housing development profitable for land owners and constructors and created urbanization economies through proximity. The third characteristic is **mixity**. Relaxed land use regulations, particularly in central urban areas enabled a wide range of small-scale businesses, often corresponding to self-employment, such as small trade as well as services (doctors, engineers, accountants) to spread amid densely built residential areas. They are typically housed in the ground floor or in lower floors of *polykatoikia* buildings that are unattractive for housing. Besides land use mix, the polykatoikia enables also social mix through the renting of the least attractive apartments in lower floors to lower income groups and more recent migrants while the more affluent groups occupy the upper floors, (see concept of vertical social differentiation in MALOUTAS & KARADIMITRIOU 2001). This arrangement eventually enables coexistence of higher and lower income groups in the same area thus reducing social polarization. Mixity ensures urbanity and livability, elements that have been praised as positive attributes of the 'Mediterranean city' by LILA LEONTIDOU (1990) referring to Athens of 1980s in a period when other European and American cities were struggling with acute urban problems in inner cities and in the urban periphery related with deindustrialization and social segregation.

The fourth constitutive element of Athenian Urbanism is **uniformity**. Uniformity is the product of a particular land regulation policy of fixed maximum height and intensity applied uniformly to all plots in a given area. This policy can be seen as an ultimate expression of social equity and democratization in urban development as it ensures independent access to development rights to each individual plot. Meanwhile, however, it is also the ultimate expression of **individualism**. The pursuit of individual interests within the constraints of a normative regulatory framework (and often beyond that) becomes a widely legitimized social practice which disincentivises the pursuit of collective interests and provision of public goods. This has multiple expressions. One characteristic example is the infamous

shortage of open and green space in Athens and other Greek cities. Another example is the lack of regulations at the level of the building block which prevents the possibility to create unified facades, common use of courtyards at the interior of the block and other amenities. The lack of structures for collaboration represents a structural weakness which undermines the resilience of Athenian Urbanism in ways that became apparent much later when urban diseconomies settled in at the advent of the crisis. Before going into that discussion however, it is worth to comment first the role of planning and how it contributed to the particular conditions of Athenian and Greek Urbanism in general.



Fig. 2. Typical view of the urban landscape of Athens, where the main characteristics of Athenian Urbanism are distinguished. Source: Own photo

The international experience in Europe and elsewhere has shown that planning is conditioned upon the legal and institutional framework, as well as established norms and practices that differ across various governance contexts and are associated with the emergence of distinct planning cultures (KNIELING & OTHENGRAFEN 2015). The literature often highlights the weak character of planning in Greece (ECONOMOU et al. 2007). Despite pertaining to a large degree of truth, this statement risks however leading to oversimplifying judgments in rejecting the role of planning altogether claiming that in Greece there is no planning at all. Many critics would react strongly to that and would actually claim the exact opposite, namely that land and urban development in Greece is overregulated pointing to

the inflexibility and complexities of overlapping legal provisions that abide to land and property. The argument promoted in this paper is that planning cannot be separated from the specific institutional, political and economic conditions that nurtured the particular breed of Athenian urbanism. Below will be analyzed some key points of the culture of planning that illuminate the discussion about resilience.

A constitutive element of planning in Greece is related with its belated introduction. The legal framework of statutory planning is established since 1923 as mentioned already. In the 1960s vibrant discussions about the emerging Athenian metropolis contribute to the scientific development of planning but are interrupted by the advent of the dictatorship. They are consolidated after 1974 with returning professionals educated in other European countries. However, it is only after 1981 when Greece joins the European Economic Community (EEC) and gets access to European funds that urban planning is established as systematic field of public policy. By that time however, cities are already formed. The a posteriori introduction of planning in an already formed urban reality defines its de facto limited scope of intervention. The primary task of planning becomes thus the formalization and legitimization of the multitude of small-scale private developments rather than promoting the long-term collective interest in reshaping urban form and enabling the provision of public goods by constraining individual property rights. Another indication of planning weakness is related with the lack of value capture mechanisms in the allocation of development rights. Even when a fully-fledged planning system comes into effect which establishes some mechanisms for the participation of land owners in the cost of urban development (*eisfora se gi kai se xrima*), planning still does not replace the preexisting mechanisms that enable landowners to acquire development rights individually based on general regulations according to the size and location of the plot (*ektos sxediou domisi, domisientos orion oikismon*, etc). Planning thus does not constitute a break with previously established norms and rules of the operation of land development system but rather is introduced as a parallel way of allocating development rights that opens up new areas for speculative development, namely urban expansions (KARADIMITRIOU & PAGONIS forthcoming).

This distortion has profound significance for the social understandings of planning. Planning does not appear as a social claim to collective rights and public goods but as an understanding by social groups that benefited in the previous phase of unplanned land development that the mistakes of the past can be corrected not only without cost but also with significant benefits. This translates into very high expectations from planning regarding for instance improvement of the urban environment and quality of life without appreciation of the difficulties posed by the a posteriori intervention in already built-up areas and very low tolerance of the cost that these interventions could potentially have for individual property rights. The dilemma between individual and collective interest is not even posed. Collective rights do not affect individual rights but are partly added to them as subsidies. Based on this paradoxical notion is built the idiosyncratic planning culture of Athenian Urbanism.

***Challenges
faced by Athenian
Urbanism
in the recent
period***

Since the mid-1990s Athenian Urbanism has been facing major challenges with regard to resilience. These occur in two distinct eras. The first is related to the hosting of the 2004 Olympic Games and covers the period 1997-2007. The second is that of the crisis which is initiated right after around 2009 and evolves up today. Both eras have left clear imprints in the culture of planning and urbanism. Despite their differences, they present similarities in some key points and are characterized by continuities as discussed below.

The staging of the Olympics in Athens represents a major re-orientation of declared planning goals and policy discourse accompanied by major endeavours and realizations. For a planning system that was up to then geared towards fulfilling the regulatory function with limited experience in the management of public urban development projects, the Olympics mark an unprecedented momentum of complex planning operations. Within a relatively short period of time, the city absorbed a huge amount of public investment that was directed to metropolitan transport infrastructure, large scale facilities and urban regeneration projects as well as housing. This raised the feeling of civic pride and arguably boosted the city's competitiveness according to the proponents of the Games. Meanwhile, how-

ever, it exposed the city to novel challenges and risks. A major such challenge is related with coping with urban sprawl. Up to 1990s Athens was contained within the so called Athens Basin surrounded by mountains. The construction of the new airport with assorted road and rail infrastructure has triggered since the mid-1990s new urbanization dynamics in Messoghia plain, North Attica and Thriassion that gradually pushed the boundaries of the Functional Urban Area to the entire Attica region. Managing land use transformations and development control in such vast territory has been a major challenge for the local regulatory system with its noted deficiencies as pointed out by pertinent research (CHORIANOPOULOS et al. 2010). However, the resilience challenge with regard to sprawl is not limited to the loss of agricultural land and natural resources in the urban periphery but has affected also the urbanity of central urban areas by acting as a motive for households as well as businesses to relocate from downtown to the new development areas. The fleeing of middle-class groups followed by commerce and services from central Athens to the suburbs has been going on for decades. This has impacted the economic vitality of central areas, such as Kypseli and Patission, but was partially compensated by the arrival of new immigrant population that continued the filtering in process in the 1990s and early 2000th. This, however, changes in the more recent period as a result of a combination of factors that range from changing trends in global migration to local policies, such as a decision of the Greek government to relocate ministries and other administrative functions away from the centre (MALOUTAS & SPYRELLIS 2016). The combined effect of above factors exacerbated by the crisis after 2009 has affected strongly several areas creating a sense of abandonment, underinvestment and loss of urbanity.

Another aspect where continuities between the Olympics and the crisis are noted is related to governance. Critics have pointed out the over-centralized structure of decision making in metropolitan planning naming Athens 'a capital city governed by the state' (COCCOSIS et al. 2003). Throughout the last two decades this trend continues and is intensified. During the Olympics, the entire responsibility for Olympic planning and implementations is undertaken by the central government by

creating a separate legal and decision making framework that bypassed established procedures and directions of the Athens Regulatory Masterplan and Local Plans. In the period of the supervised administration (Troica) under the measures imposed by the Structural Adjustment Program, so called Memoranda, the entire planning framework is reformed in order to facilitate the process of attracting strategic investments directed to the privatization of state assets based on exemption regulations. The Athens Masterplan is characteristically revised to align to that policy. The most renowned case is the former airport of Hellenikon on the coast of Athens, the largest privatization scheme currently ongoing on a site exceeding 600ha, where the foreseen intensity has been almost doubled. The responsibility for the entire planning operation is undertaken directly by the Prime Minister Office and has involved up to now various national level controlled institutions, including a special purpose vehicle, several Ministries, the Constitutional Court and even the Greek Parliament.

The interference of exogenous factors in the operations of the land development system as a resilience challenge is noted also regarding the aspect of financing. Up to 1980s the land development system that nurtured Athenian Urbanism has been self-sustained funded by the surplus of household savings and small investors. After 1980s starts gradually the effect of external financing through the Structural Funds directed in urban infrastructure which act as indirect subsidy. After 2000 with the advent of the euro and liberalization of housing credit new funding possibilities are created through access to various forms of loan and mortgage products that are directed to land development. This period, according to critics, is associated with the creation of a bubble effect in construction and real estate sector marked by a characteristic rise of housing prices. Exposure of the local real estate market to the global financial system, however, made it susceptible to risks and dangers a fact that became painfully obvious with the burst of the global financial crisis that hit Greece in 2008 in the form of a public debt crisis that plummeted the construction sector (VLAMIS 2012).

The Olympics alone have had a major boosting effect in the land market on many levels starting from the construction of Olympic

projects themselves. It is a well-known fact that the Olympic projects of Athens, both buildings and road infrastructure, were awarded to Greek consortia of construction companies (DELADETSIMA 2006). Moreover, it should be pointed out that they were designed as projects entirely financed by the public sector either by state funds or through EU funding and loans. This is very unlikely to international experience related with urban regeneration schemes that rest on public-private partnerships as a form of sharing the costs and benefits of the investment. This option was rejected in the case of Athens, both for ideological reasons and due to lack of capacities, as this experience has been alien to local urban development. Instead, the entire cost of Olympic projects was covered by public funding and the public sector inherited as well the burden of managing the facilities after the end of the Games. After the advent of the crisis which marked dramatic cuts in public spending the entire portfolio of Olympic facilities, all state-owned, ironically ended up to the Privatization Fund (HRADF). Hence their destination is to be allocated to private hands at a reduced price, given that they are underused and badly maintained for over a decade.

The above discussion has attempted to highlight key features in the evolution of Athenian Urbanism and create linkages with the problematic of urban resilience. The key idea promoted in the paper is that resilience is not invented from scratch but rather builds on already established modes that are inscribed in local urbanism, namely the collective condition that shapes the production of urban space and social relations that are formed around it. The latter is unique for every city, like an urban DNA, which defines its capacity to deal with unexpected pressures and absorb stress caused by change.

The presentation has been brief, providing solely an overview of key themes but still it permits to draw some basic ideas for discussion. Athenian Urbanism is characterized by persistence and resistance to change, with some of its constitutive characteristics going back to the initial conditions formed at its birth in the beginning of 19th century. This constraints its ability to change and adopt new ways, the experience of Olympic planning and development being a characteristic example. Never-

Assesing the effect of the crisis in urban resilience and policy responses

theless, this resistance represents a strength that has helped Athenian Urbanism to endure the externally imposed stress of austerity governance. The crisis has undoubtedly weakened the urbanity of central Athens neighborhoods with regard to both range of commerce and social mix. However, the urban tissue has persisted and there is evidence of various forms of bottom up responses and solidarity initiatives. This is attributed partly to the dense network of informal relations that permeate the production of urban space and have traditionally favoured spontaneous responses to challenges rather than planned interventions.

A good example to highlight this point is the renewal of *polykatoikia* housing stock of central urban areas that was created in the 1960s and 70s and suffers from chronic underinvestment, fragmented ownership structure being the main obstacle. The lack of mechanisms for intervention in already built-up areas has been and remains a renowned weakness of local urbanism that has puzzled planners and policy makers since the mid-1990s when the first instruments for urban regeneration (*astikes anaplasteisis*) were introduced in the legal framework but were never implemented up today. After 2009, when the city centre became a focal point of urban policy, several initiatives of central and local government take place ranging from integrated area regeneration (SOAP) to large scale urban improvement (*Rethink Athens*) (PAGONIS 2013). None of them came to fruition. Instead, the key mechanism that is presently mobilizing small-scale capital investment in the renovation of the old housing stock is the Airbnb platform combined with the 'Golden Visa Program', namely a bottom up market response from a multitude of owners to a government regulation similar to the *antiparochi* in the 1960s.

However, the situation of today is a bit different. The recovery of urban land markets does not seem to generate uniform conditions of yielding from land rent, such as those formed in the post-war decades which favoured social and economic cohesion. Anecdotal evidence in the comparison of rents and land prices across different parts of Attica suggests the emergence of large disparities between some areas which turn into high end, most notably in the coastal zone, while the bulk of cen-

tral urban areas remain under the vicious cycle of the crisis. Increased polarization represents thus a new threat for the resilience of Athenian Urbanism.

Regarding the role of regulatory planning, it should be noted that not much has changed with regard to its capacity to constrain individual property rights and promote collective interests. As mentioned, recent reforms have focused mainly on creating a favourable institutional environment for promoting large scale investments while leaving the rest of the regulatory framework intact. Hence after seven years of reforms, the majority of instruments that ensure acquisition of development rights based on horizontal regulations remain in place while no new mechanisms for value capture have been created. The only reform that actually bore an impact on the system of land development has been the property tax policy that seized to be favourable for small-scale investors and owners thus breaking a policy tradition of several decades.

In conclusion, it can be said that the pursuit of urban resilience in Athens cannot be a short term objective nor a short sighted one. Rather it requires solid and global understanding of what has happened so far and why in order to target the causes that are responsible for the reproduction of problems and weaknesses. Moreover, it cannot be a goal pursued at the local level alone given that several characteristics which define the resilience of local urbanism depend on factors that fall under central government responsibility, such as the legal and institutional framework and other policies which impact on urban development. As the experience of Athenian Urbanism in coping with the crisis has shown, breaking with practices of the past is painful but also a learning process of self-understanding that is the base for moving on.

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