



The squares of Athens: The past and the new planning challenges

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Abstract

The squares of Athens have gone through a very special trajectory, in parallel with the equally special trajectory of the city's history.

From the initial concept of symbolic building in order to express the new role of the city, passed to the utility design coupled with a certain perplexity, and then to the mature modern era of architectural competitions and optimism. The pursuance of green followed as a reflection of the early sustainability challenges. Today we are in a peculiar post-modern phase of diverse legitimation and frequently pointless interventions. In an era where the city beautiful concept is challenged, such interventions of debatable architectural and urban design quality forms are the last elements required at the moment when a wave of contemporary urban outcasts has appeared and is conquering public space.

This paper attempts to examine the design of the Greek capital, through time, and take a stance in today's challenges facing the problems of the planning of the city per se part of which are the squares with whatever these might mean today.

1. The Greek Independence and the founding of the State - 19th century

After the founding of the Greek state in 1833 and the arrival of King Otto and Queen Amalia from Germany, Athens became the capital of the Nation (a village of 4,000 inhabitants), mainly for historical reasons, since other cities as Nafplio, Patra, Tripoli, Ermoupoli Aegina, etc., were socially and economically much more significant and developed.

This choice signaled the beginning of efforts for the development of Athens into a European capital. The most important of these efforts was the construction of one city under a new plan.

This new plan apparently comprised buildings and public places, and aspired to obey a certain style of urban design.

To achieve this, the first plan was conducted by St. Kleanthes and E. Schaubert whose main idea was the triangular structure of the central part of the new city composed of the three squares, Omonia Sq. (then King Otto Sq. –center) Klafthmonos Sq. (the same as today's Klafthmonos Sq.) and Kerameikos Sq. (near the Conservatory-Kerameikos), while plans were made for a fourth round square in the area of today's Syntagma Square (Biris K., 1966, published 1999: 26-39, Travlos, 1993). Due to reactions raised by land owners, and to economic hardship it was not possible to implement this plan and an

amendment of it elaborated by Leo von Klenze was realized (Biris K., 1966, ed 1999: 34).

In these urban plans German Romanticism and Neoclassicism urban morphological structures that generally characterized urban planning in Europe in the 19th century were evident.

According to Philippidis, "various projects developed in the 19th century by Greek or foreign engineers would rely more on the tradition of classicism having the city avenues planted as boulevards, showing calculated positions and uniform buildings, like the first draft of Athens (1833) of Kleanthis-Schaubert" (Philippidis, 1984:24), while the logic of design is that of G.Haussmann in Paris who according to Philippidis is a representative of the prescribed intervention in the city fabric aiming its very survival"(Philippidis, 1984:23).

Concerning the squares and parks-groves, the form of the proposed and realized squares follow the standard of their European likes showing plans based on the type of a royal park. The smaller parks and squares follow a "romantic" morphology of the English garden style. According to Travlos, "the tree planting of main streets and squares under Queen Amalia's auspices and the creation of Athens National Garden softened the bad impression of the capital during the early years after Liberation" (Travlos, 1993: 250).

European Romanticism - Neoclassicism (and later eclecticism) finds its natural place in Athens functionally and morphologically. The public space and square design regardless of its enthusiasm and magnitude was a combination of the new state power symbolism with the encountered significant obstacles in the realization process such as their acceptance by the local people. For example, there were controversies about the extension of the Constitution Square, prohibited for the fourth time in 1849 by residents while the residents themselves demanded a private land division of other city areas (Kapnikarea area).

The Liberty Square underwent the very first alteration after the public Nursery was built on it (Biris M., 1987, published 2003: 20), while the third square, never materialized as such. The People's Garden of Kleanthis and Schaubert was built after repeated interventions took place and finally became replaced by the building of the Municipal Theatre (Biris M., 1987, published 2003: 26). Other green areas were lost in order to create space for new constructions such as the Municipal Theatre (Biris K., 1966, published 1999: 85-86).

The 1860 plan, by the committee of Vouros, Petmezas, Kalkos, Scoufos, Boulanger, etc. included a proposed unification of archaeological sites (Roman & Ancient Greek Market), and of the Canning, Kolonaki, Monastiraki and Abyssinia Squares, while public buildings on squares were planned to be built. (Biris K., 1966, published 1999: 108-110). This idea was doomed to never be realized as a nonviable plan. The needs of the city led to continuous revisions of plans "for consolidation" which sometimes envisioned the opening of streets, but rarely created squares and green spaces as components of the urban fabric. Until 1900, "no serious care was taken by town planners to ensure spaces for public use. In the municipality of Kallithea only one square was planned in early seventies. Very few squares were designed and built. Green areas were almost totally ignored" (Biris K., 1966, ed 1999: 275).

According to Philippidis, "Haussmann's intervention became widespread in Europe in the last third of the [19th] century. The famous opening of Korais Street in Athens, for which lots of ink was spilled in the past, belongs to this consolidation plans by foreign and local planners" (Philippidis, 1984: 23).

The symbolic value of the design goals was self-evident in the naming and changing of names of squares. In 1862 (year of 'eviction' of King Otto), the "Square Otto" became Omonia Square, Ludwig Square became Liberty Square, and after a while Koumoundourou Square (Biris K., 1966, published 1999: 111). Omonia Square took the form of a 'neoclassical ensemble during the last two decades of the 19th century. Until then it was simply a dump square (Biris M., 1987, published 2003: 24 and note 32: 220).

Similarly, only during the last two decades of the 19th century the three sides of the Constitution square received an architectural finish including few hotels and homes of wealthy citizens (Biris M., 1987, published 2003: 29).

2. The period of the first half of the 20th century (early modernism)

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by wars that resulted in the expansion of the country, as well as in the 'Minor Asia disaster' of 1922. Attempts were made to solve problems of public space and some practical solutions were found, though not in a very inspired way. Nevertheless, especially the inter-war period was a particularly productive period in terms of ideas and projects. Simultaneously, this period was marked by a large expansion of all kinds of infrastructure networks which had already started in financially developed countries in the last third of the 19th century.

As for town planning, dozens of plans and proposals are recorded e.g. the basic literature (mainly K.Biris and D.Philippidis) mentions several projects by P.Bakas (1896), A.Georgiadis (1904 & 1908), L.Hoffmann (1908), Th.Mawson (1914-18) A.Balanos (1917) and E.Hebrard P.Kalligas (1919), St.Leloudas (1918) influenced by Geddes [1915] and Garnier [1917]. Philippidis regards most of the examples as an expression of aesthetic landscaping and Hausmann-like pragmatism in search of normality as a perfect solution for a European city (Philippidis, 1984: 121).

After the 'Asia Minor disaster' (1922) the housing need for more than a million refugees changed the priority setting, but the basic rationale of the proposals remained intact. The Kalligas plan (1922) proposed public buildings, squares, openings and new centers, but was cancelled by the dictatorship of Pangalos in 1926 (Biris K., 1966, published 1999: 284-286). During the same period the first drafts for garden cities were prepared, the conception of which however was closer to English suburbs than to garden cities.

Thus, plans by Sp.Agapitos for Ekali (1922), by A.Nikoloudis for Pschiko (1923), by A.Valvis for Heliopolis (~1925), and by I.Isigonis and Kremezis for Filothei (1931) were delivered. An exception to the endless street proposals were the interventions of the Mayor Spyros Patsis City Design Committee (1925-1929) which proposed the creation of highways (e.g. Acharnon) and the creation or the enlargement of neighborhood squares.

Leloudas in 1929 criticized the timidity of the state, despite the widespread claims of the public authorities for a real reform plan of Athens. His proposals ended up in the final plan in 1938 for the Athens Highway & Skaramangas Highway. An extension plan of the City of Athens (1934) was already at hand when City major was Sp Trikoupis. This plan was confirmed by a series of royal decrees during 1934-1939, in 1934-35 manifesting the "Technical Program of the City of Athens" (Biris K., 1966, published 1999: 297-324 and Philippidis, 1984: 202). According to Philippidis, however, the lack of funding for major interventions, finally limited the program to the embellishment of squares and open spaces (green areas in front of the Evangelismos Hospital, the Dexameni Square, the Cathedral Square and the Fokionos Negri Square).

During this period, the city plan and design did not follow a conscious choice as in the 19th century (when the new state embraced symbolic means of architectural expression), but extended the chaos and the arbitrariness in design as had started immediately after the proclamation of Athens as capital. There was a little and late efficacy of interventions, while some sort of competition between the Ministry of Communications (the Town Planning Office being subject to it) and the Municipality of Athens.

The latter managed to rescue two parks in the Alexandras Avenue from interventions of the Ministry (to convert to building space), while other parks and squares were lost due to Law interventions (Biris K., 1966, published 1999: 298 & 322). One may regard as relatively positive interventions the construction of the underground subway station in Omonia (which functioned as a bus terminal) from 1925 to 1930, the 1929-1930 construction of the monument of the Unknown Soldier and of the square in front of the Old Palace (which changed its use), the creation of the Pedion Areos as a park of Athens, in 1934, as well as the 1939 creation of the Field Infantry barracks park (on the foot of the Petraki Monastery) (Biris K., 1966, 1999 Edition: 302 - 21).

Such developments were certainly not irrelevant to the great social upheavals brought by refugee populations who flocked to Athens and established a territorial mobility. According to M.Biris, during the decade 1910-1920 Amerikis Square was a new venue for wealthy bourgeois who built their mansions around it.

"Neighborhoods - such as around the National Archaeological Museum, Vathis, or the axis of Piraeus Street (Omonia Square – Koumoundourou square) - which during the period 1880-1920 hosted upper and middle class layers, degenerated after years of dramatic changes in the central and western sector (trade, manufacturing heavy traffic, etc.) into a functional mixture that ultimately led to their final degradation. The same happened with private mansions of Patision Street, or cottages in the area of the Angelopoulos area and the Amerikis Square, etc. when new population masses flooded the entire area north of the capital during the inter-war period and after"(Biris M., 1987, published 2003: 26-31).

According to K.Biris after the 'Minor Asia disaster', "areas next to the Municipal Theatre and the Town Hall, the Varvakeion Demorateriou and Monastiraki Squares, of the crossing Aioulou and Plouton Streets were filled by wooden shops and stalls - in which everything was sold as food, utensils and clothing house tools, etc.,- small restaurants, cafes and bars". To address the need, the Athens City council created special shelters at the Varvakeion and Demopraterion Squares (Biris K., 1966, published 1999: 291-292).

The prewar period and the period of the war ended during the last years of the '30s, with the extensive debates about the Europeanisation or the Originality of Style (K.Laskaris, K.Biris, etc) (Philippidis, 1984: 202-3), under which the unfortunate demolition of the Municipal Theatre happened (in its present position Kotzia Square Post Office) in 1940-41, and while mainly squares and public spaces were demolished by the Ministry of Transport without any reaction from the Athens City Council (Biris K., 1966, ed . 1999: 291-292: 355). The modern movement became slowly accepted in public architecture and therefore in the public space and squares.

3. The post-war period (1950-90)

The period immediately after WW2 was a period rehabilitation and of reconstruction of the heavily damaged building stock. Yet, it was also a lost opportunity for the planning and redesign of Athens.

According to Philippidis, the Team X in the late '50s, [Smithson, van Eyck, Josic, Woods, de Carlo, Kandyli] worked largely in the urban scale, emphasizing the identity of architecture and urbanism, on an attempt to address the problems of urban space. "The philosophy of this new kind of urban interventions was to respect the existing, to carefully intervene to a limited extent, to revive the fabric of the city, to abandon the earlier technocratic town planning, and to promote advocacy planning that tended to avoid arbitrary interventions" (Philippidis, 1984: 42).

On Greek State level, the design of the capital initially was expressed by the (regulatory) "Reconstruction of the Plan of the capital [Athens]" (City Plan City of Athens [Kostas Biris]) (1945-1946) which foresaw, among others, a new satellite city of Athens named Megarida, and the Ancient Athens Grove (as a wider version of the later project "Unification of Archaeological Sites").

There was care for urban improvement but green areas and squares were not included in the plans made by Biris (see pp. 345-9). The project explicitly included the proposal of Panagiotis Aristofron for the Ancient Academy of Plato and the Ancient Public Cemetery. (Biris K., 1966, ed 1999: 345-9). The only thing that materialized were galleries (Philippidis, 1984: 265), while the plans for the Academy of Plato and thoughts for the Public Cemetery are still ongoing (2012).

A timid town planning practice and the choice of cheap and quick solutions immediately after the war did not enable any important interventions in public space or the creation of new spaces such as squares. The main concern was the opening and widening of roads.

K.Biris mentions that the plan envisioned a capital center free of vehicles not serving its own needs, thus not allowing the passage of cars connecting the Northern parts of town with the South. This kind of connection would be enabled by a ring surrounding the city in areas not yet developed" (Biris K., 1966, ed 1999: 406-8 & 407).

In the above, we can see large-scale design efforts using always as a tool axial connections. The design, of public space was realized by the creation of entertainment

centers in parks and squares (at Pedion Areos and at the National Garden), and by the redevelopment of squares such as the Omonia square (symbol of postwar Athens), the Syntagma Square, the Klafthmonos Square (Philippidis, 1984: 268), and finally of New Smyrni Square.

In the 80's, paved areas of squares served the political parties meetings. The underground surfaces started getting used as large parking lots (K Biris, 1966, published 1999: 410-13).

Adverse developments of the urbanization of the capital demanded new planning efforts. Thus, the Doxiadis Office in 1972 was entrusted with the Town Planning of Athens which resulted in the Athens 2000 Master Plan by the Ministry for Urbanism Housing and Environment, a final agreement plan, reconciling 5 different proposals (Philippidis, 1984: 330). While in the rest of the world the transformation of architecture through the application of the principles of modernism influenced urban design, the Athens Chart became inactive in the case of Athens and Greece as a whole region remained unaware of the very development of the relevant modern trends of thought. Architectural and planning thought stagnated between a generalized sociological criticism in the 70s and a certain list of non-realizable project (Philippidis, 1984: 44). In fact, throughout 1960-80 there was still no comprehensive planning. Showcase projects in public spaces made their appearance instead, such as pedestrian zones and public playgrounds (Philippidis, 1984: 330).

4. The post-1990 period: Europe and the Olympic Games. The quest of sustainability

The 80s were marked by the recommendations of the Athens Master Plan (minister Tritsis Plan) in 1985 and by the interventions to save the Plaka area (minister S.Manos). Many problems were identified during that period but were not sufficiently faced because of lack of resources. The "reconstruction planning business" was considered more important at national than at local level. Resources from the European Union towards the end of the decade and the beginning of the 90s enabled new attempts (e.g. unification of archaeological sites) and delivered very interesting results.

At the same time, a combination of resources from the Community Support Framework and the Programme for the Olympic Games (both of the proposals for 1996 and later in 2004) especially after the Greek Olympics assignment, triggered a series of projects in the wider Athens transportation network (metro, tramways, railway renovation, Attiki Odos urban motorway, New airport). These works, necessary for the operation of the city, came late and were overriding previous plans (1985 Master Plan).

Some smaller projects were realized, since new Metro stations gave the opportunity to create some free public spaces and places on their surface, such as Kerameikos Square / Metro Station built in 2000, as Kleantith imagined it as a third pole/square of the city. Instead of making large and substantial interventions (e.g. new public spaces - squares) the remaking of existing squares with unclear architectural - urban planning objectives

(e.g. New Psychico), was considered as an easy way to "absorb EU resources". Another initiative, as a result of the rapidly growing eco-environmental consciousness, sought to find and exploit new free public spaces for green. In this direction, small local initiatives were initiated to save space (and buildings) (the Fix plant at Patission str. and premises of the park at Drakopoulou str. in Ano Patissia, the old municipal market of Kypseli, etc).

The latest intervention set in the city had to do with a series of architectural competitions directly related to the Kerameikos Square (1990) and the Acropolis Museum in 1989 which were related to the award of the 1996 Olympics, and some smaller contests such as those for the squares of Koumoundourou, Omonia, Monastiraki, and Syntagma 1998-99. These competitions allowed individual architects to surface, since the corporate architecture took care of the big assignments. These competitions resulted into ambiguity and weak implementation of the winners design, a fact that reveals significant of the country in terms of administrative culture

In the case at Monastiraki Square, the solution was practically "non- architectural" because that square with the Ancient, Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern surrounding buildings functions like a courtyard and a summary of the history of these buildings. The case of the Omonia square is a typical case of a jury misled by trendy 3D graphic solutions as shown by the images of the international architectural journals. Naive symbolisms and fake semantics copying American or other European examples try to convince the modern Greek citizen how the new European urban landscape looks like. The overall results show that these interventions were undoubtedly useful but were once more insufficient attempts to solve the problem of public space in Athens.

5. Today: The post-Olympics era

The inability to use the accumulated organizational experience during the Olympics, the dissolution of intervention and creativity mechanisms with expertise, as well as the ongoing financial crisis after 2009 paralyzed any practical moves for the implementation of planning and design interventions in public space, which became occupied by social outcasts, the "marginal elements".

In order to 're-plan' Athens two major attempts were made:

- a) the Master Plan of minister Souflias (2009) and
- b) the Master Plan "ORSA-2021" (ORSA, 2012),

Some other proposals come from the Ministry of Environment, Planning and Climate Change, such as Athens 4x4 and the reshaping of Squares St.Nicholas, St.Panteleimon, Attiki and connecting walkways, the creation of a green axis from the Pedion Areos park to Plato's Academy, and the Panepistimiou ave. pedestrianization project. The City Council of Athens in 2010 appeared being more active in initiatives where European Community funding was highly possible, such as the redesign of squares to become bioclimatic, as well as to the recall of interventions at Plato's Academy and at the 1st Cemetery.

Of course, there are still pending interventions such as the public spaces in the greater Athens area (the Panathinaikos Stadium, the Elaionas urban region, the metropolitan park

of Goudi, and other small-scale housing interventions at Alexandras Ave and Panormou Street.

The new Master Plan of Athens (ORSA, 2012) correctly stays at the level of general guidelines and principles and does not foresee any specific free spaces within the urban fabric, but still its guidelines do not mandate planning for the creation of new public space.

The inability of planning, the lack of resources, political timidity, and financial speculations did not lead to genuinely free spaces for public use (and creation of new squares), but attempted the exploitation of existing sites through conversion. Nowadays, the economy crisis as expressed in Athens, has led to the decline of economic activity, while the flight of large portions of the population and professionals from the city center has led to massive degradation of the city and to its 'occupation' by legal and illegal immigrants and marginal groups. During the years 2010-2012 numerous projects by government agencies and private consultants have been presented with zero results though, while the Ministry of Environment, Planning and Climate Change has long insisted on design type approaches, culminating in the "pedestrianization of the Panepistimiou avenue". In contrast to the above, the City Council of Athens has already made a first and important attempt to develop a more comprehensive plan for addressing the crisis of the city which will however require a significant level of funding. This program contains elements of urban design as parts of a wider range of urban, social and economic interventions.

Conclusion

The public space in Athens today, hence the squares are parts of the crisis of space. The desperate search for identity through the European neoclassicism of the 19th century divides the former Ottoman Greek-Christian. The image of the urban area for the modern Greek citizen is pretty much a fantasy of the European philhellene to come into direct conflict with the Ottoman and Byzantine past.

The naming and the sculptural decoration refer to the ancient glory (Kondylis, P., 2007: 32). We have squares with ancient symbols and names. The modern movement in urban planning of the city does not come until after WW2. This modern movement has probably never been accepted apart from a small class of intellectuals and artists. The error is repeated with the contests by imposing images of globalization (electronic Monitors and abstract solutions, fashionable modern architectural sceneries, etc). In short, the squares of the Modern Greek capital reflect efforts of Hellenization in terms of modern imported trends.

The central government and municipalities lack the resources for effective qualitative interventions in the city, and the squares have become places of immigrants (illegal and non-) (see Victoria Square), or urban mega-recreation areas (Kerameikos).

The efforts for a new bioclimatic "landscaping" cannot answer the key issues in the public space that now escape from urban planning and assume a major social character. What is needed now is to understand that modern complexity cannot wait for the solution

of problems through urban design, or rely on it, but that urban design is merely one of the tools (as important as it might be) of comprehensive planning.

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