

**More Athenian sociospatial injustice in the works?
Creating a metropolitan park
at the former Hellinikon International Airport of Athens**

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More Athenian sociospatial injustice in the works? Creating a metropolitan park at the former Hellinikon International Airport of Athens

Polina Prentou¹

Abstract

Hellinikon is the largest, publicly-owned, urban, coastal area in Attica (626 Ha), as well as one of very few such areas left across the European urban coasts. It is the only remaining large-scale open space of Athens that can be used to address the shortage of green open public spaces, provide public access to 3.5 km of the urban waterfront, and supply an existing and extensive building stock for necessary social uses. By employing a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods with cross-disciplinary data at multiple scales, this paper has three objectives: a) to decodify the ways in which the current privatization processes spatialize not only intensifying inequalities and injustices, but also intensifying opposition by urban social movements; b) to document the importance of creating the Metropolitan Park of Hellinikon, by demonstrating why it is indispensable, feasible and inexpensive; and, c) to propose a basic strategy for the immediate protection of public ownership of the area and the creation of a Green, Culture & Recreation Park, by outlining a set of phases with short-and long-term concerted actions. Thus, in the midst of “no alternatives” discourses, it presents a realistic counterproposal to the privatization plans and mega-projects for Hellinikon and other public spaces across Athens and across other European cities.

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Introduction²

Hellinikon, the area of the former international airport of Athens, is one of the last available, publicly owned, large-scale and prime urban coastal sites of Europe. It has been presented as “the largest planned real estate development project in Greece” (Hellenic Center for Investment, 2004) and it is currently promoted for privatization as the “largest urban development project of Europe” (Mitropoulos, as cited in HRADF, 2012, para 3). It is also an area with several unique assets of significant importance to the Greater Athens Area residents. It is 14 minutes away from the Syntagma square, 30 minutes far from Egaleo, Peristeri and Piraeus, and less than an hour far from almost the whole metropolitan area, by using the existing fixed rail, metro and light rail systems. Measuring a total area of 626 Ha, 528 Ha of the former airport along with 98 Ha of the coastal zone, it is the only remaining large-scale open space of the Greater Athens Area that can address the dramatic shortage of green, open and public spaces in Athens, albeit partially, being just 1/10 of the green area that the Greater Athens Area needs by domestic and European standards and laws. It is, also, the only remaining coastal zone of Athens that can provide public access to 3.5 km of the Athens waterfront, where more than 20 km are inaccessible or accessible only by paying user fees. Hellinikon is an area with a total stock of 480 buildings, many of them of technical, historic or architectural value. More than half of the area (56% or 250 Ha) can open to the public immediately, while the rest can open in phases after the necessary institutional arrangements.

The paper develops in three parts. First, it examines the history of the Hellinikon area since the closure of the airport in 2001, and especially the process towards its privatization since 2010. Second, it describes urban social residents' movements against the privatization of the area. Finally, it presents a counter-proposal for creating the

² This paper is based on the research project “Basic planning & design principles for the creation of the Metropolitan Green Park at the former Hellinikon International Airport of Athens”, conducted in 2009-2010 by the National Technical University of Athens, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Urban Environment Lab for the Local Union of Municipalities & Communities of Attica and the Cities of Alimos, Argyroupoli, Glyfada and Hellinikon. Research team: Dr. Nikos Belavilas, architect-planner, associate professor NTUA (head of the research), Konstantina Soureli, architect engineer AUTH, phd student in urban planning UCLA (research coordinator), Polina Prentou, architect engineer NTUA (research coordinator), Dr. Fereniki Vatavali, architect-planner NTUA, Maria Kalatzopoulou, civil engineer-transportation planner, researcher NTUA, Paschalis Samarinis, architect-planner, researcher NTUA, Evaggelia Hadjikonstantinou, architect-planner, researcher NTUA, Vasiliki Vallindra, architect engineer NTUA, Marina Theodorou, architect engineer NTUA, Theodora Hadji-Rodopoulou, architect engineer NTUA, Thomai Christopoulou, architect engineer UTH, and George Papathanasopoulos, civil engineer NTUA. Research advisory team: Vaso Trova, MSc architect engineer, associate professor UTH, Phaidon Georgiadis, urban and regional planner, and Dr. Yiannis Psycharis, economist, associate professor, Panteion University of Athens. The summary of the project (in English) is publicly available at: <http://courses.arch.ntua.gr/fsr/135952/NTUA_2010_Hellinikon_Metropolitan_Park_Summary_En-1.pdf>.

Hellinikon Metropolitan Park, which is the concluding part of a research project conducted in 2009-2010 by the NTUA Urban Environment Lab.

1. Brief history of the area and of the current privatization processes

The area of Hellinikon was the International Airport of Athens until 2001, when the new airport at Spata started to operate. Law 2338/1995 specifies the terms and conditions for the relocation of the Athens International Airport. Further, regarding the future use of the former airport area, it outlines its conversion into mainly a Metropolitan Green Park. Former PM, Kostas Simitis, at the inauguration ceremony of the new airport emphasized that Hellinikon would become the largest metropolitan park of Europe. As Simitis (2009) mentioned, “It will become a metropolitan green area, a large park. I believe it will be the largest park of Europe” (Simitis, as cited in Kemanetzi, 2009). Despite the inaccuracy of this pledge, given the a number of existing larger parks in European cities, subsequent prime ministers also pledged for the creation of a metropolitan green park in Hellinikon (Papandreou, 2010).

However, about a third of the area was used for Athens Olympics infrastructure with *ad hoc* pre-Olympics regulation, in conflict with the regional plan of Athens and the aforementioned law. Law 2730/1999 permitted, without a regulatory plan, the development of Olympic games infrastructure inside the area. Many of the Olympic works were presented as temporary but they still exist in the area. After the closure of the airport, academic-research institutions, the state and the private sector presented projects and proposals regarding the future of the area. The proposals vary widely in terms of the social, environmental and economic priorities that dictate the potential development directions of the Hellinikon area.

Despite pledges by three subsequent prime-ministers to make Hellinikon a metropolitan green park with zero new construction, the efforts of the state have focused, since 2010, on the privatization of the former airport area (Table 1).

The current plans for the privatization of the area are officially launched in September 2010, when the Greek government started investigating possibilities of attracting funds from Qatar. The Memorandum of Understanding signed between the government of the Hellenic Republic and the government of the state of Qatar, acting by and through the Qatar Investment Authority, mentions the establishment of a joint committee of cooperation concerning joint investment activities. Despite these actions, the negotiations with the State of Qatar came to a halt a few months later, in spring 2011. While there are no official statements confirming or denying the end of negotiations, press articles note that the main reasons were the lack of a business plan for the area and disagreements on the terms of investment. Further, according to the European competition regulations, the Greek government had to make an open call for investments, and not to grant a single potential investor privileged status (Tsitsas 2011).

Table 1: Basic steps of the process towards the privatization of Hellinikon Area.

Process towards privatization	
2012 May	Four shortlisted. U.K.-based London & Regional Properties, Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Co., Israel's Elbit Systems Ltd. (ESLT) and Greece's Lamda Development SA (LAMDA)
2012 April	New Regulatory Plan of Greater Athens under published for public consultation, did not pass as a state law End of the first phase of the expression of interest. Nine expressions of interest were submitted
2012 February	L. 4062/2012 for the development of the Hellinikon Area passed
2011 December	Invitation to submit an expression of interest for the acquisition of a majority of the share capital of HELLINIKON S.A. Eviction notices to public bodies and companies located in Hellinikon
2011 July	Hellinikon in the list of the state-owned assets of the privatization program (L. 3986/2011) Establishment of Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (L. 3986/2011)
2011 June	Presentation of Acebillo draft strategic urban model
2011 May	Establishment of Hellinikon S.A.
2010 September	Memorandum of Understanding between the government of the Hellenic Republic and the government of the State of Qatar

In May 2011, Hellinikon SA was established in order to manage the area of Hellinikon, to accelerate the development processes, to deal with technical and legal “obstacles” of the area and facilitate the negotiations between the Greek government and potential investors. As Hellinikon SA CEO Spiros Pollalis (2011) states: “We [Hellinikon SA] won’t tell them [the investors] ‘this is our plan, take it and implement it’. We will give them the guidelines and tell them that they will be judged according to the business plan and the development plan they will propose” (as cited in Papachlimintzos, 2011, para. 2-3).

A subsequent move towards the privatization process is the presentation of the Acebillo/Barcelona Urban Systems strategic urban model in June 2011. Former Greek PM, George Papandreou, invited Josep Acebillo in 2009 to make a proposal for Hellinikon area. Acebillo was involved in the negotiations with Qatar in 2010 and presented an outline of a strategic plan in 2011. According to Acebillo (2011), this is a first proposal, not a complete master plan, for the creation of a mixed-use area in Hellinikon. His proposal includes the construction of new building stock totalling

2.000.000-3.000.000 m² and the demolition of most of the existing buildings. It proposes the creation of 6.200-6.500 m² of housing units and 980.000 m² of residential areas on the coastal zone characterized as “mediterranean villages” and several “neo-tertiary” uses such as a financial and governmental district, a university and R&D district, live-work artists' dwellings, and one or more malls (Acebillo, 2011, p. 1).

A month later, in July 2011, Hellinikon was included in the list of the state-owned assets of the privatization program that was launched with law 3986/2011 of the Medium-term Fiscal Strategy established by the Greek government, the EU, the IMF and the ECB. Also, with the same law, the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF) was established, in order to manage the privatization programme. All state-owned assets that would be privatized are transferred to the Fund and the revenues of the privatization program will serve the stated primary goal of the fiscal strategy, to reduce state debt.

In December 2011, the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund announced the invitation for submissions of expressions of interest for the acquisition of a majority of the share capital of Hellinikon SA. The invitation includes the whole area, both the former airport and the coastal zone, and allows the investor to create a mixed-use development without any restrictions regarding land uses, with the exception of manufacturing. It allows for the development of up to 2,500,000 m² of new building construction. Further, it allows the complete demolition of the existing building stock of more than 470 buildings, including the Olympic games infrastructure and excluding just four designated buildings. At the same time, there is no specific plan for the creation of a park and public spaces. The first phase of the expression of interest ended in April 17, 2012 with proposals from investment and real-estate companies from the USA, the UK, Qatar, Israel, Spain, Cyprus and Greece. As the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (2012) announced:

Nine (9) expressions of Interest were submitted, indicating strong competition for this unique asset. The participation of 9 strong groups in this complex and long-term development project is particularly encouraging. Arguably this is currently the largest urban development project in Europe and it is strategically significant for Athens and Greece. (para. 3)

Out of the original nine who had expressed an interest, the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund chose four groups to participate in the second phase of the tender to buy Hellinikon SA. As *kathimerini* (2012) reported, “U.K.-based London & Regional Properties, Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Co., Israel’s Elbit Systems Ltd. (ESLT) and Greece’s Lamda Development SA (LAMDA) are the four groups that will compete to buy Hellinikon” (*kathimerini*, as cited in Tugwell, 2012)

At the same time, in December 2011, all public bodies and private companies located in the Hellinikon area have received eviction notices by Hellinikon SA, and thus have been ordered to evacuate their facilities within one to five months, with no relocation

provisions (Lialios, 2011). Until May 2012, none of the total of more than 50 public bodies and private companies located in the area left their facilities.

In February 2012, L. 4062/2012 was passed for the development of Hellinikon area, after being in the phase of public consultation for only five days. The law provides a flexible plan for the investor of the area to create a mixed-use development that would include housing units, a research and educational centre, leisure and cultural activities, a business and administrative centre as well as recycling facilities and cemeteries. The park would be at least 200 Ha, including green and open spaces, leisure, sport, cultural and social activities, streets, as well as the open spaces of private developments urban infrastructure.

In February 2012, the new draft Regulatory Plan for the Greater Athens Area was also in the phase of public consultation for six days. Although the draft plan adopted some of the critical dictates of the Medium-term Fiscal Strategy regarding the privatization plans and real-estate development of the area, it did not eventually pass as a state law. Despite the fact that the plan lacked planning and economic documentation for the development directions, land use decisions, or local and regional costs and benefits of the Hellinikon development prescribed, it proposed a rather specific mixed-use development program for the Hellinikon area. This would include a metropolitan public space area, not less than half of the total area, of which 250 Ha would be a green park. In the rest of the area the plan proposed a mixed-use development that would include education, research, culture, tourism, sports and business activities, housing units and a business center.

The projects and laws presented so far on the privatization process of Hellinikon area indicate that a highly selective and step-by-step process of deregulation and re-regulation has been adopted. In order to attract investments, new laws are passed and new agencies are established, to ensure flexibility in land uses and building regulations. Also, well known architects, urban planners and experts, such as Acebillo and Pollalis, are mobilised to promote the project and devise the privatization strategy in collaboration with major financial institutions and law firms that serve as international advisers. What is common to all these proposals is that there are neither estimates, nor provisions for the long-term social, environmental and economic effects of the proposed urban development project on Greater Athens Area. Further, it should be noted that as of May 2012, there has been no accurate and detailed topographic plan of the area and no business plan for the proposed development and the viability of the various land uses in the current conjuncture. Similarly, there are neither analysis of immediate needs of the residents of Greater Athens Area, nor provisions for ways in which the proposed project is expected to address these needs.

2. Local and regional resistance movements, coalitions and initiatives against privatization

A coalition of residents, organizations and local and regional authorities have been opposing the privatization process of the area and demand the cancellation of plans for the privatization of the area, as well as the creation of a Metropolitan Green Park, with compatible social uses in the existing building stock. There is a long history of struggles of the residents for the protection of the public character of the area, starting with the closure of the airport in 2001 and the associated law. These struggles have culminated in a stable and growing regional coalition that has organized a series of initiatives, especially since 2007, when a rather milder privatization and development plan by the state had to be withdrawn (Table 2).

In 2007, residents of the City of Hellinikon and of the Greater Athens Area demolished illegal barriers and fences to reappropriate a part of the public coastal zone that was illegally occupied by nightclubs. The City of Hellinikon, which has responsibility to maintain and clean the beach, installed ADA infrastructure for the first time on public beaches of Greece (Antonopoulou, 2009). The mayor of the City of Hellinikon, Christos Kortzidis, supported the movement with a 24-day hunger strike. In January 2008, the coalition “Common action” was established by the four mayors from the cities that include the airport in their administrative boundaries. The coalition organised the three-day forum “Three days for a life” with discussion panels on the development of the area, with participation of academics, researchers, archaeologists, historians, engineers, architects and planners and a series of organizations and institutions. As part of the forum, local and regional authorities, institutions and residents from the Greater Athens Area, as well as students, planted 10,000 trees in the former airport area (City of Hellinikon, 2010). In June 2010, City of Hellinikon, organizations and residents demonstrated against the illegal occupation of the beach and illegal operation of nightclubs and other uses.

Facing the current privatization processes, the Initiative for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park was created in March 2011 by citizens and groups of people from the Greater Athens Area. Their initiative works aims at promoting a different direction for the development of Hellinikon area, addressing the needs of the residents of Athens. 76 local and regional initiatives, including the Initiative for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park, signed the “Open letter to the greek government, to the troika [IMF-EU-ECB], to the emirs and to whom it may concern: Hellinikon is not for sale!” declaring their opposition and mobilizations against the privatization of the Hellinikon area. The Initiative for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park launched the Festival of Resistance and Creativity for a Metropolitan Park in May-September 2011, with exhibition events, concerts and cultural activities. In May 2012, 20 greek artists gave a concert against the privatization plans of the area. In June 2012, social initiative “Iliosporoi” organised a picnic for ungrowth with the participation of Serge Latouche.

Table 2: Resistance movements against privatization (2007-2012)

Resistance movements, coalitions and initiatives	
2007 June	<p>City of Hellinikon in collaboration with a variety of civil society organizations re-appropriate the illegally occupied Agios Cosmas beach by nightclubs, by dismantling the fences, restoring public access, and initiating a program of maintenance and cleaning, including ADA infrastructure for the first time on public beaches of Greece.</p> <p>Mayor Christos Kortsidis on a 24-day hunger strike supporting the re-appropriation of the illegally occupied beach.</p>
2008 January	<p>Coalition “Common action” established by the four mayors of the cities that include the airport area in their administrative boundaries.</p> <p>Coalition “Common action” organise three-day forum “Three days for a life”</p> <p>10,000 trees planted by local and regional authorities, schools and institutions from across Athens</p>
2010 June	<p>City of Hellinikon, organizations and residents demonstrate against the illegal occupation of the beach and illegal operation of nightclubs and other uses.</p>
2011 January	<p>Autonomous Urban Farm established in 0,3 Ha lot, with residents and organizations starting planting of local vegetables and fruits, courses and networking with related initiatives in Greece and abroad</p>
2011 March	<p>Initiative for the Hellinikon Metropolitan Park established. 76 local and regional initiatives sign the “Open letter to the greek government, to the troika [IMF-EU-ECB], to the emirs, and to whom it may concern: Hellinikon is not for sale!” declaring their opposition and mobilizations against the privatization of the Hellinikon area.</p>
2011 April	<p>Former employees of state Olympic Airways create the Aviation Museum with Olympic Airways historic items at the former West Terminal.</p>
2011 May-September	<p>1st Annual Festival of Resistance and Creativity for the Metropolitan Park of Hellinikon:</p> <p>Concert by 20 Greek artists against the privatization plans of the area.</p> <p>Forum “Picnic for de-growth” with the participation of social initiative “Iliosporoi”. Visit and talk by Serge Latouche</p> <p>“Full moon freedom beach party: Reclaim the beach 2 stages festival against the sell-out of ex-airport of Athens” by the Void Network, with more than 2,500 participants.</p> <p>300 artists create visual and multi-media works of art for the protection of Hellinikon. One-month free exhibition in former Olympic Basketball building.</p> <p>Concert by Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis against the privatization of Hellinikon and for the creation of a Metropolitan Green Park.</p> <p>Four discussions and roundtables on the privatization of state assets and</p>

urban social movements and initiatives against it.

2011 December	Metropolitan Social Health-care and Social Pharmacy established serving patients from the region with limited or no access to the health care system. Psychological support services for people facing hardships and unemployment.
2012 March	1,100 olive trees planted by more than 3,000 residents and institutions from Athens, with the support of the Autonomous Farm. Regular gatherings for maintenance and irrigation by participants. Initiative for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park organises demonstration at Syntagma square against the law for the development of Hellinikon area
2012 April	1st Metropolitan Semi-Marathon organised by five runners clubs from the surroundings cities of Hellinikon and the region Initiative for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park organises demonstration at the HRADF offices against the privatization of the Hellinikon area 27 bodies and institutions located at Hellinikon sign petition against the privatization process and their displacement

In July 2012, the collective Void Network organised a full moon beach party and concerts with more than 2,500 participants. In September 2012, composer Mikis Theodorakis gave a concert against the privatization plans and for the creation of the Metropolitan Greek Park. Also, in September 2012, 300 artists participated in a month-long free art exhibition in the former Olympic Basketball building. As part of the festival, four discussions and round-tables were organised to discuss the privatization of public assets and the coordination of social movements and initiatives against it. The Initiative for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park also supported the initiative for an Autonomous Urban Farm inside the area that was created in January 2011. The farm measures an area of 0,3 Ha and produces local vegetables and fruits covering part of people's needs. As Totsikas (2012) notes: "From the first time, it is clear that our initiative is part of the protest against the privatization of Hellinikon area" (para. 16). The initiative has also connected with other initiatives and networks and has co-organised joint courses and workshops.

In April 2011, the former employees of the formerly state-owned Olympic Airlines run an Aviation Museum at West Terminal. They have collected items, as well as airplanes, from the history of Olympic Airlines and from the Hellinikon airport. In December 2011, an initiative of doctors, with the support of local authorities, established the Metropolitan Social Health-care Centre and Social Pharmacy, catering to patients from the region with limited or no access to the health care system, as part of emerging solidarity networks across Athens addressing pressing social needs. In March 2012, more than 3,000 residents and institutions from Greater Athens Area planted 1,100 olive trees inside the area of the former airport (Totsikas, 2012). In April 2012, five runners

clubs from the surrounding cities of Hellinikon area and the region organised the first semi-marathon inside the former airport area.

The Initiative for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park organised two demonstrations against the privatization process and the law for the development of the area, at Syntagma square and at the HRADF offices, in March 2012 and April 2012 respectively. Also, the Coalition of Architects issued a statement against the law for the development of Hellinikon area. What is more, 27 bodies and institutions located at Hellinikon signed petition against the privatization process.

The proposal for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park, as it is shaped by the NTUA Urban Environment Lab research team in collaboration with the Local Union of Municipalities & Communities of Attica and the Cities of Alimos, Argyroupoli, Glyfada and Hellinikon, was endorsed by local and regional movements, initiatives and coalitions, professional bodies and research institutions as a fact-based, feasible and inexpensive counter-proposal for the area. The basic approach of the research and its strategy is presented in the following section of the paper.

3. A counterproposal for creating Hellinikon Metropolitan Park

The discussion on the future of Hellinikon centers on critical issues facing cities and regions under conditions of cumulating crises, as articulated across spatial scales. The conflict over Hellinikon expresses variegated approaches regarding the functions of city space, urban development and more broadly the production of space, not only in intensifying or mediating various sociospatial inequalities and injustices but also in transcribing on the ground potential alternative sociospatial practices.

Hellinikon can be considered an exemplary case of how this discourse is set on the ground, especially because of the unique assets of the area for various actors, including the residents, the state system and domestic and international financial institutions and developers, the scale of the financial interests and states involved, and the symbolism embedded in the development of Hellinikon as a top priority and precedent-setting model of planning and privatization increasingly across Europe. In various debates on particular issues, what Hellinikon stands for, and for whom and what it is to be used, remains a defining difference of a range of approaches to space and justice. On the one side, Hellinikon is treated as a precious real estate asset for development, directly attached to objectives of debt and deficit reduction. On the other, Hellinikon is treated as a city space contributing to the city, which can partially address ongoing injustices and set a precedent for alternative development priorities and directions against the production and intensification of sociospatial injustices. While approaches that proclaimed to take a more in-between and nuanced stance were being occasionally presented over the past decade, the rapid developments and the continuous changes in the dominant discourses on the future of Hellinikon have tended to lead to a polarization

of various viewpoints. In addition, persistent demands for disclosure of the underlying priorities of various proposals are increasingly made in debates, critiques and public events.

In 2009-2010, given the shifting terms and means of the particular debates taking place regarding Hellinikon and facing the plans to address the intensifying crisis in Athens, the NTUA Urban Environment Lab was invited to collaborate with the four cities surrounding Hellinikon and was commissioned to conduct research on the area. This research seeks to answer the extent to which adopting alternative scenarios for Hellinikon is justified on sociospatial and economic grounds, to examine the feasibility of these alternative scenarios based on economic data, comparative analysis of case studies in various countries and documentation of the area along with an examination of its relations to the Greater Athens Area, and to propose feasible strategies forward. The rest of the paper provides a brief presentation of the specific questions addressed and the strategy proposed by the research team.

3.1. Hellinikon is indispensable for Greater Athens Area

Athens demonstrates a dramatic lack of urban public open and green spaces. Athens provides just 2-2.5 m² of green space per resident, and it has wasted 1.23 m² of publicly-owned open space per resident for the 2004 Olympic Games infrastructure and the subsequent private developments.

According to comparisons of indicators among 15 cities by the Hellenic Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works in 1994, Athens displayed the second lowest rate of green space per resident (2.55 m²/resident), while Paris (8.5 m²/resident), London and Rome (9 m²/resident), Zurich (10 m²/resident), Berlin (13 m²/resident), Warsaw (18 m²/resident), Wien (20 m²/resident), Amsterdam and The Hague (27 m²/resident), Rotterdam (28 m²/resident), Bonn (35 m²/resident) and Washington DC (50 m²/resident), demonstrated 3 to nearly 20 times higher rates (MEPPPW, 1994).

This extraordinary lack of urban public open green spaces in Athens suggests, as an immediate action, the protection of all the existing spaces across the Greater Athens Area, as well as the conversion of other remaining open spaces at various scales into public open green spaces. The allocation of the whole area of the former international airport and the coastal zone and the creation of a green metropolitan park would add just 1.98 m² of green space per resident to the Greater Athens Area, resulting at best to nearly 4.5 m² of green space per resident.

Further, as it is prescribed by Greek planning standards and laws since the 1980s, it is not just the 626 Ha of Hellinikon Area that the city needs. About ten-times more green space is needed in order to acquire what might be called schematically “acceptable level of green space” in Athens i.e. green space approximating the levels prescribed by

planning standards and legislation.. Further, this standard does not take into account the current state of Greater Athens Area. It was established well before the successive expansions of the city with the production of urban sprawl across former forest and agricultural lands in Mesogeia, in Thriasio and on the slopes of the surrounding mountains. Also, it was established well before the accelerated loss of urban open spaces, either designated by law or potential green spaces, especially since 2004 for the Olympics infrastructure and the subsequent post-Olympics private developments. And, last, it was established well before the 2007 extensive and destructive wildfires of Attica. Therefore, even the adoption of such “acceptable level of green space” would remain significantly lower than the European mean.

What is more, the creation of Hellinikon Metropolitan Park will provide public access to 3.5 km of the Athenian coastline, while about 20 km are inaccessible or accessible only by paying entrance and user fees.

3.2. The park is an inexpensive project

The creation of Hellinikon Metropolitan Park is an affordable project, despite a series of statements to the contrary since 2003, by successive governments and planning authorities. The Hellinikon Metropolitan Park project has been continuously presented as an excessively expensive project, with a projected cost amounting to a range from €400 to €700 million, with respectively high operational and maintenance costs. During the period 2003-2007, the Greek state launched an international ideas competition, planning an extensive urban redevelopment project under the title “Hellinikon Metropolitan Park and Urban Development” and the creation within the park of a small luxurious city with floor areas ranging in the final 2007-2008 proposals between 1.300.000 m² and 1.450.000 m². This was an excessively expensive project both in terms of its building construction component and in terms of the infrastructure and design of open and green spaces. But although the projected costs were used to shape the justification of these development directions, there has never been a business plan or feasibility study to back these numbers.

Thus, the excessive estimated cost of the Hellinikon Metropolitan Park, as it has been presented over recent years, constitutes a choice rather than a documented necessity. This choice and position is problematic in three main respects. First, there is no justification for the need to construct a luxurious small city with high infrastructure costs on social, environmental or economic grounds, except for catering almost exclusively to a very limited subset of the economic sector of development, as well as a very limited set of consumers as beneficiaries, with potential adverse effects even on their counterparts. Second it presents impressively overestimated and overpriced construction and operation costs. There is no explanation for the construction cost of 76,000 euro/m² and its deviation up to 16 times from e.g., Maurice Rose Airfield project in Germany (4,500 euro/m²). Last, it constitutes a choice to systematically display exorbitant costs as

unavoidable, in order to justify plans for privatization and concessions of the whole area or parts of it, the construction project or its subsequent management and commercial operation.

In contrast to the aforementioned estimates, the research indicates that the construction of a park with mild interventions and high quality construction is affordable, based on analysis and comparisons of construction costs in Greece and in Germany, taking for example the new parks at former airports of Berlin and Frankfurt. The estimated cost amounts to just €50 million for the area readily available today to begin major green works and restore building and technical monuments restoration and reuse – distributed in phases over a 10-year horizon. The total cost is just €100 million for the whole project – distributed in phases over a 20-year horizon. The estimated cost for annual operations, based on comparisons with the multi-year and detailed operation costs of parks such as the Royal Parks of London, amounts to €5 million annually upon completion of the first phase, and to €10-12 million for the completed park.

The cost needed for the construction and operation of the park could be covered by utilizing the revenues of less than a decade since the 2004 Olympics, from the existing infrastructure and leasing and concession contracts of the area. As our findings point out, according to economic data submitted to the Hellenic Parliament in 2010, the total revenues from leasing and concession contracts of the Olympic facilities of the area amount to €75.8 million, while the realised revenues amount to €35.7 million. That €40-million gap is due to the fact that the private companies which have signed mostly long-term concession contracts with the state-owned companies stopped their agreed-upon rent payments to the Greek state from 2008 onwards.

To conclude, the actual realised revenues of the Olympic facilities, if they had been used for the area, could have already financed more than the half of the construction of the park. If the total revenues were used, they could have financed about 75 percent of the park.

3.3. The park is feasible

For the creation of Hellinikon Metropolitan Park, the NTUA Urban Environment Lab research project proposes six immediate actions.

First, critical prerequisites for the creation of a Metropolitan Park are the cancellation of real estate development plans for the area. That is, the cancellation of sales, privatization, and concession plans for the entire area or parts of it; the abandonment of the questionable in many respects and excessively expensive plans to develop exclusive planning unit developments; and the cancellation of the environmentally detrimental, anti-urban and excessively expensive highway infrastructure construction projects along Poseidon and Alimos avenues.

Another critical prerequisite that has to take effect immediately is the removal of internal fences as well as the removal of the prefabricated exhibition pavilions in the surrounding area of the former East Terminal. This will help prevent a further fragmentation of the area, which would render future interventions even more difficult. It will also help reverse the image of abandonment and decay of the area.

In the coastal zone, it is necessary to implement the Presidential Decree on the coasts in effect since 2004, and control the permits and operations of businesses of sanitary interest, in addition to canceling administrative selective exceptions from the laws granted by the former Ministry of the Environment (e.g., Greek Church-owned cape along the coast with a concession contract for a nightclub).

Also, it is possible to immediately allocate 56 percent of the area to public uses and safeguard free public access. This could happen by the immediate opening to public access and use of 170 Ha of the southern part of the area, and of 180 Ha of the northern Olympic Pole, with the removal of fences. The remaining 44 percent of the area can open to the public gradually, by making the necessary institutional arrangements with the various public stakeholders (e.g., Ministry of National Defense, Aviation).

A relocation of the transportation facilities that occupy 19 Ha of the area is considered unrealistic and unjustified in planning and economic terms. This part, occupied by the Tram, ETHEL, KTEO and Attiko Metro, can be exempt from the public use of the park, as long as further construction or expansions are prohibited.

The gradual restoration and reuse of the existing building stock can provide a socially, environmentally and economically sound, as well as effective, solution to integral and complementary uses of the park that seek to address needs of the Greater Athens Area residents. Based on the documentation and evaluation of the building stock conducted in 2009-2010, out of the 480 existing buildings with a total floor area of over 490,000 m², 241 buildings with a total area of 366,160 m², or 75 percent of the existing stock, can be reused for low-intensity uses, mainly social in nature and scope, and with the exclusive use of all realized or expected revenues for the creation, operation and maintenance of the park.

Regarding new uses in the existing buildings across the park, the research project proposes the adoption of a strategy “from the ground up” based on the existing assets of the area, rather than the treatment of the space as an “empty lot for development.” Toward these ends, the aim must be the democratic and active involvement of society, its citizens, its organizations and local institutions in planning and implementation of what is socially beneficial, rather than the search for an investor who will implement a private development project. As noted above, a series of concrete examples along these lines have been developed in the area since 2010.

Following the aforementioned immediate actions that constitute prerequisites for devising a medium- and long-term strategy for the area as a whole, the NTUA Urban Environment Lab research project proposes a 5-axis strategy by area for Hellinikon Metropolitan Park (Figure 1).

It proposes the creation of an Open Metropolitan Sports & Recreation pole. This pole can be created by relocating the facilities of Agios Kosmas within the existing Olympic pole in the former airport. This relocation relieves the coastal zone from some of the recent construction. The creation of an Open Sailing Center in the Olympic Marina can cover the needs of local recreational, sports and sailing clubs, and further relieve the northern part of the coastal zone.

It proposes the full removal of the illegal mass entertainment uses from the coastal zone, the restoration of free unobstructed public access and the comprehensive redesign of the waterfront in compliance with the Presidential Decree on the coasts. The existing structures of the coastal zone have to be reduced significantly so that practically free public access and its natural features are restored immediately and for the long run. This objective requires demolishing the illegal entertainment structures, moving some of the sports facilities of the coastal zone as well as the complex of the Hellenic Center for Marine Research (HCMR) eastwards inside the former airport, and banning further construction in the Olympic Marina. In the open zones that will result from these actions, the research proposes the restoration and regeneration of the natural coastline, along with the protection of the archaeological sites, as well as the streams, the sandy beaches and the Agios Kosmas cape. Enhancing green spaces and creating an extensive pedestrian way and bike path network will improve the area and its public access, and will connect it to the rest of the Saronic Gulf coastline, north and south.

It proposes the creation of a Center for Culture, Education & Research in the area of the former West Terminal. The research proposes the development and integration in the park of the Hellenic Center for Marine Research along with the creation of a Scientific & Educational Aquarium, and, the restoration and protection of the coastal and marine antiquities, along with the restoration of the natural coastline. It also proposes the expansion of the existing archaeological storage spaces, the enhancement of the conservation and restoration laboratories, and the creation of an Archeological Museum exhibiting the large collections of the Saronic Gulf and Mesogeia, along with developing museological, educational and cultural programs. The historic civil and military aviation material that is preserved within the former airport can constitute the core of an Aviation Museum, housed in the historic hangars. It should be noted that the aforementioned proposals are already supported and promoted by related institutions and organizations. A small aviation museum already operates in the West Terminal building, with an exhibition curated by the former employees of state Olympic Airways.

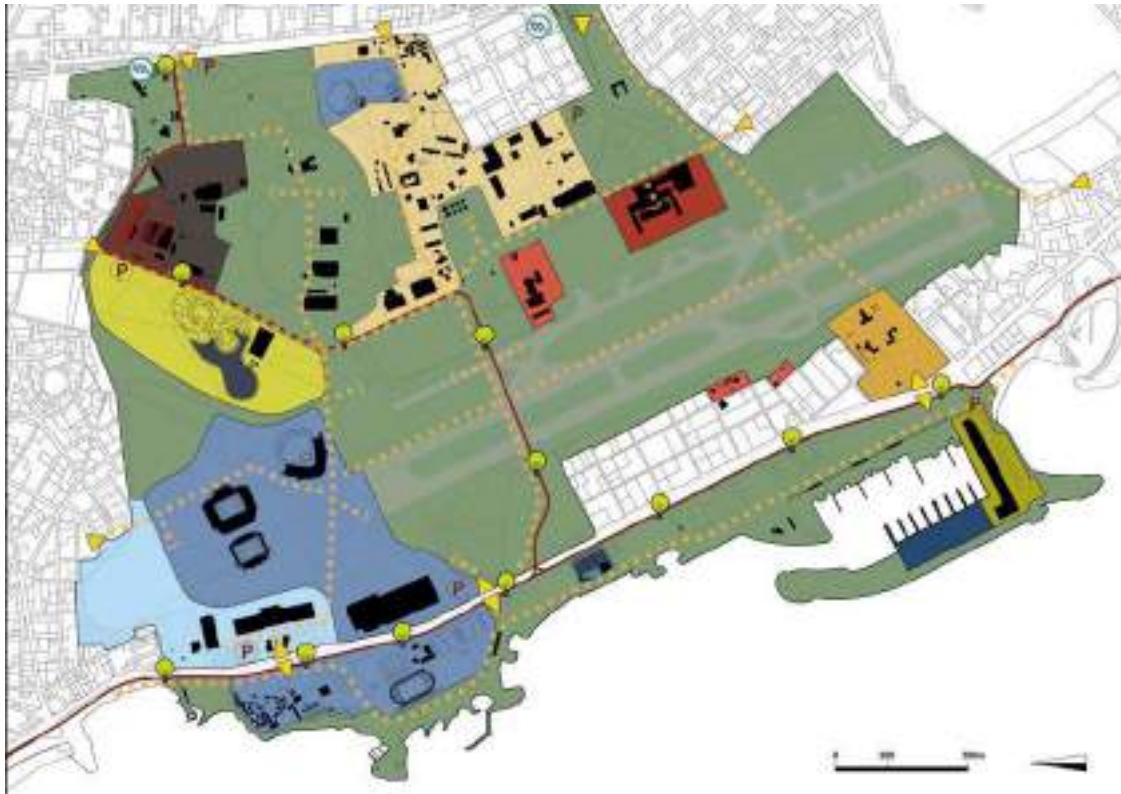


Figure 1: General Master Plan of Hellinikon Metropolitan Park. Source: NTUA Urban Environment Lab research, 2010.

It proposes the creation of a Local Center with Social Uses, with the reuse of many of the existing buildings on the premises of the former USA base, with social welfare, education, culture, recreation and small-scale retail and entertainment uses. It is possible to also incorporate local administrative uses.

It proposes, finally, the restoration and reuse of the large designated building of the former East Terminal as a Metropolitan Node with compatible metropolitan uses (such as exhibitions, conferences, scientific and artistic events) under specific terms of operation. This large designated building, designed by architect Eero Saarinen, displays a metropolitan identity and through its size and symbolism can acquire a metropolitan role, if its uses and their scale are compatible with the preservation of the building and the operation of the park. Its proximity to the new metro station of Hellinikon can further enhance this possibility. Uses considered as compatible are uses with specific terms of operation that do not affect the building and the functions of the park, along with a ban on further construction, expansions or use of extensive areas for supporting

activities (such as outdoor parking). The term that the revenues from any operation within the park are allocated to the construction and operation of the park, namely the social, environmental and cultural uses and activities within it, applies to these uses and activities as well. By meeting these conditions, the aforementioned metropolitan uses can further enhance the social character of the park. Examples of incompatible uses are mass commercial and entertainment uses (e.g., malls and multiplex cinemas), because of their intensiveness and their incompatibility with the architectural complex and the overall role of the park. Large-scale administrative or educational uses (e.g., ministries or universities respectively) are also incompatible with the East Terminal building because of their architectural and functional requirements.

4. Conclusions

The discourse and debates for Hellinikon have focused, the past decade, on the creation of a metropolitan park. Despite the series of actions and initiatives to the opposite ends described herein, government proposals and pledges aimed at the maintenance of the open public character the area, or the largest part of it, by establishing free access and developing public uses in a metropolitan park it. The debates the area have revolved around practical issues, variegated theoretical and political assumptions about the city and, often, around scientifically unsubstantiated myths. The key issues of the debates have been the size of the park and its necessity to Greater Athens Area, its relation with Athens residents' needs, the construction and operational cost of creating a metropolitan park. Since 2010, the discourse on Hellinikon has focused on the unique characteristics of the area for attracting development projects. It is presented as a precious real estate asset for development, which could potentially serve the Medium-term Fiscal Strategy goal of debt and deficit reduction. The plans and state laws for the privatization of Hellinikon area allow for the construction of a new city inside the area, with no documented benefits on the social, environmental and economic conditions for the Greater Athens Area and its residents, and no estimates of costs, adverse effects and negative externalities.

This research seeks to address the key issues pointed out on the discourse and it proposes a feasible strategy, with short- and medium-term actions to create Hellinikon Metropolitan Park. Basic priorities of the strategy proposed is to maintain the public character of the area, to allow the public access to the coastline, to reutilize the building stock to cater for social needs, and to address the shortage of green spaces in Greater Athens Area. This counter-proposal has been endorsed and promoted by local authorities, local and regional coalitions, initiatives and movements reacting to the privatization process of the area. These initiatives and movements have already demonstrated how they protect their urban public space with concrete initiatives on the ground.

In conclusion, urban development appears to take center-stage in the proposed macro-economic remedies for the crisis regardless of its uses in the production and reproduction of crisis and restructuring, or its geographical diffusion across spaces and scales. A major approach focuses on mega-urban development as usual; asserting that it is through space again that macro-economic stability will prevail. At the same time, opposing approaches question its assumptions and premises for cities and regions and even for macro-economic stability per se, while exposing its potential effects in intensifying inequalities and injustices. Hellinikon can be considered as a prominent example through which to de-codify and analyse current debates and struggles over space, its production and its use across spatial scales and its effects over urban life, citizenship and justice. The directions and results of current developments on the future of cities and regions across Europe remain to be seen. But as the Hellinikon case appears to be increasingly demonstrating, a significant change of course in spatial development towards sociospatial justice, as every day process with concrete outcomes, is an idea whose time has come.

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