

Public Space as Social Infrastructure for Urban Wellbeing: Transformation and resistance in Protomagias Square, Athens under persistent austerity

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Abstract

Under ongoing multiple-crises conditions, urban transformation threatens public open spaces in Athens, Greece, with commodification, supported by persistent 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012) reflecting broader patterns of uneven geographical development. This paper analyses socio-spatial dynamics in Protomagias Square at Pedion tou Areos park, examining how these interconnected spaces emerged as pivotal sites for contesting socio-spatial inequalities. The study focuses on the square's transformation since 2023, when Attiko Metro S.A. unexpectedly fenced off one-third of the public space for metro construction, storage, and office facilities, shrinking already scarce public space and constraining social life of inhabitants. Through qualitative analysis, the research demonstrates how grassroots resistance creates possibilities for democratic city-making approaches. Findings reveal how public space enclosure represents institutionalised violence against urban commons, while community mobilisation asserts alternative values prioritising care over profit and collective wellbeing over private accumulation.

Keywords: public space, spatial justice, care infrastructure, urban wellbeing

1. Introduction

Southern European cities have been severely impacted by economic austerity, climate-related events, migration flows, and socio-sanitary damages during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this multiple-crises context, public open spaces in Athens become sites of transformation and resistance under ongoing commodification, supported by persistent 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012) reflecting broader patterns of uneven geographical development (Brenner et al., 2010). Since 2010, privatisation and deregulation of planning processes (Gemenetzi, 2021) have impacted public spaces whilst simultaneously catalysing forms of civic engagement and collective action for social inclusion, environmental and spatial justice.

The multiple crises affecting urban communities have created deeper discrimination and inequalities in cities. Neither state nor market policies offer solutions; indeed, substantial scholarship argues these institutions are responsible for generating such inequalities (De Angelis & Harvey, 2014). Due to this accumulation of social, economic, cultural and political crises, the concept of commons and commoning has regained wide acceptance, often incorporated ambivalently within administrative and institutional discourse. De Angelis and Harvey (2014) argue that "in general terms, the commons are social systems in which resources are shared by a community of users/producers, who also define the modes of use and production, distribution and circulation of these resources through democratic and horizontal forms of governance." However, they emphasise that these commons "exist and are produced vis-à-vis a social force, capital, that often demands their cooptation, if not enclosure."

The struggle over Protomagias Square crystallises fundamental contradictions between neoliberal urban governance and collective rights to the city. This public space, situated between Pedion tou Areos park and the former Evelpidon Military Academy complex, has become emblematic of broader processes of urban commodification operating through seemingly progressive cultural programming. Local citizens' initiatives and grassroots organised groups expose the insidious commodification and privatisation dynamics transforming the park, denouncing how private energy corporations and philanthropic foundations appropriate public spaces to advance their "sanitised" vision of urban culture whilst systematically denying permits and support to autonomous citizen-organised cultural proposals.

During crisis conditions, Protomagias Square was profoundly appropriated and transformed by users into a site of collective care, political organisation, and social reproduction essential for community survival. Since 2000, each crisis period—Olympic preparation, austerity-driven renovation, migration management, and pandemic

response—has been mobilised to advance spatial control whilst community resistance has consistently emerged to defend collective use and autonomous organisation.

The case study focuses on the latest transformation since 2023, when almost one-third of the public square was unexpectedly fenced off by Attiko Metro S.A. for construction of the new “Dikastiria” metro station (Line 4), as well as for storage and office space, further shrinking already scarce public space and disabling social life, particularly of disadvantaged inhabitants. This enclosure represents more than technical planning decisions; it constitutes “institutionalised spatial violence”—the systematic appropriation of public space undermining collective well-being whilst serving private and state interests through familiar patterns of crisis-driven privatisation.

This paper demonstrates how the defence of Protomagias Square by the local citizens' initiative *‘Εμείς στο Πεδίον του Αρεως’* (We at Pedion tou Areos) represents concrete assertion of the right to the city, challenging dominant planning rationalities whilst prefiguring alternative forms of urban governance based on care, solidarity, and collective self-management. Drawing on theories of socio-spatial justice (Soja, 2010) and biopolitics (Foucault, 1978), the study contributes to understanding how public spaces shape and are shaped by daily negotiations of transformative urban changes under restrictive conditions despite facing what Madden (2022) terms “systemically induced fatigue.”

2. Theoretical Framework: public space, care, and urban commons

The theoretical foundation for analysing Protomagias Square builds a coherent argument through four interconnected analytical layers: first, understanding public space as commons through commoning practices; second, examining care as both practice and infrastructure essential for urban life; third, analysing spatial justice and the right to the city as frameworks for understanding urban struggles; and fourth, contextualising contemporary enclosures within broader patterns of capitalist accumulation. This integrated approach demonstrates how public spaces function as essential infrastructure for collective life whilst revealing their vulnerability to appropriation under neoliberal urban governance.

2.1. From public space to commons: commoning as collective practice

Rather than accepting the traditional public-private binary, this study follows Harvey's (2012) insight that commons are defined by relationships where “the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as a common shall be both collective and non-commodified.” This understanding moves beyond legal ownership categories to focus on social relations and practices. Urban space and public space are shaped by social relations as products of human activity, constructing spaces for social, economic and cultural activity whilst simultaneously shaping social relations through embodied space. Harvey (2014) points out that to think of an alternative form of urbanization, it is necessary to build possibilities for an anti-capitalist turn, through recognizing the common and its potency and by starting from a convergence between the microcosm of the body and the macro space of globalization, both as arenas of enactment of the capitalist neoliberal model of production and reproduction

Stavrides (2020) advances this conceptualisation by defining commoning not simply as space-sharing but as “a set of inventive practices and imaginaries that explore the emancipatory potentialities of sharing.” These practices create “life in common” through three interconnected dimensions: projective practices pointing toward possible futures, expressive practices articulating shared values, and exemplary practices demonstrating alternative social relations exceeding dominant sociality models.

2.2. Care as infrastructure and political practice

Building on this commons foundation, the analysis incorporates feminist care theory to understand how collective reproduction occurs through spatial practices. The Care Collective's (2020) definition of care as “any labour directed at maintaining or enhancing another's freedom” establishes care as fundamentally political rather than merely personal or domestic, encompassing “social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life.”

Feminist scholars including Silvia Federici (2012), Nancy Fraser (2016), Donna Haraway (2016), and Joan Tronto (2017) reveal how capitalism systematically appropriates and commodifies care work whilst rendering it invisible. Fraser's (2016) analysis of capitalism's "crisis of care" demonstrates how social reproduction becomes a site of struggle, whilst Federici's (2012) examination of primitive accumulation shows how commons enclosure specifically targets spaces and practices of collective reproduction.

Berlant's (2016) concept of "affective infrastructure" bridges care theory and spatial analysis by revealing how spaces become "formative of collective life through their material and relational capacities." This framework illuminates "threshold spaces" and "contact points"—intermediate scales of intimacy and encounter enabling experimentation with embodied urban sociality based on care rather than commodity relations.

2.3. Spatial justice and the right to the city

The third theoretical layer establishes spatial justice as the lens through which urban struggles can be understood. Lefebvre's (2016) conceptualisation of the right to the city encompasses both access to urban space and participation in its production, establishing spatial rights as fundamentally democratic. Harvey's (2008) interpretation emphasises this right extends "far more than individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city" through collective political action.

Marcuse's (2009) critical urban theory reveals the right to the city as simultaneously "a cry and a demand"—addressing both immediate material deprivation and broader aspirations for human development. This definition connects survival needs with transformative politics, providing analytical tools for understanding how different groups mobilise spatial issues. Hence, the 'right to the city' assumes a role of resistance to neoliberal urbanism and a transformative potential toward alternative paradigms of production and reproduction of urban space.

Stavrides (2023) advances this framework by arguing that "to reclaim the right to the city means to reclaim the city as a common good, that is, to reclaim the emancipatory power of collective creativity." This understanding positions common space as both domain of urban commoning and formative factor—performed rather than permanently established, existing through sustained commoning practices.

2.4. Enclosures and contemporary capitalist accumulation

The final theoretical layer contextualises contemporary urban enclosures within broader patterns of capitalist accumulation. Drawing on Marx's understanding of primitive accumulation as ongoing rather than historically bounded, Harvey's (2005) concept of "accumulation by dispossession" reveals how "wholly new mechanisms of dispossession" operate through privatisation, commodification, financialisation, and asset manipulation in contemporary contexts.

Christophers's (2018) analysis of land privatisation processes illuminates systematic patterns of disinvestment, devaluation, and eventual private transfer—processes understood as "institutionalised spatial violence" particularly affecting marginalised communities dependent on public infrastructure. Peck's (2012) analysis of "austerity urbanism" reveals how fiscal constraints justify dismantling public services through deliberate disinvestment creating conditions subsequently used to justify privatisation.

In the Greek context, Gemenetzi's (2021) identification of systematic privatisation and planning deregulation since 2010 exemplifies what Klein (2007) terms "disaster capitalism"—exploiting crisis conditions to advance neoliberal reforms that would otherwise face political resistance.

Interpreting Protomagias Square as relational space enables understanding of socio-spatial practices of care, its material and immaterial importance for urban dwellers, especially the most vulnerable, whilst revealing how capitalism extracts value from everyday life through commodification and reconfiguration of social reproduction and its spatial expressions (Fraser, 2022).

3. The Transformation of Protomagias Square: from marginalization to care infrastructure

3.1 Historical context and crisis-driven transformation

Protomagias Square was constructed in the 1980s following urban redevelopment that moved Moustoxidi street underground, creating pedestrian space between Pedion tou Areos park and the former military complex. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the square was primarily used by marginalised communities—migrants, youth, and local residents—for informal activities reflecting broader dynamics of urban marginalisation, where public spaces in central Athens were either heavily commercialised or relegated to use by excluded populations.

The historical trajectory of Pedion tou Areos park reveals systematic patterns of crisis-driven transformation illuminating broader processes of neoliberal urban governance and community resistance. The 2000-2003 period marked a critical turning point when the park became subject to an “urban renewal program” developed for the 2004 Olympic Games, initiating the first phase of systematic enclosure and control. This intervention included installation of barriers, tree cutting, spatial division into four sections, and reduction of entrances from sixteen to four—changes that provoked massive resistance and broad community opposition extending beyond immediate neighbourhood residents.

The 2008-2010 renovation, financed through 10 million euros of European and Greek public funds, represented a second phase of “sanitisation,” transforming the park into a liminal space that was “no longer an open space, but not a private space either”—making the park progressively less accessible through gradual exclusion rather than immediate privatisation. The 2013 “cleansing operations” during right-wing and conservative administration exemplified how crisis discourse enables spatial violence, as authorities relocated marginalised populations to Pedion tou Areos under the banner of creating a “clean Athens,” effectively using the park as a site of invisibilisation.

However, the 2015 refugee crisis revealed the park’s capacity to function as essential infrastructure for collective solidarity when immigrants arriving from Aegean islands established spontaneous encampments in the absence of emergency housing solutions. This period generated positive community mobilisation despite precarious conditions, as local solidarity networks emerged alongside organised security against fascist attacks. The spatial centrality was crucial: *“many local people who were not aware of the situation of the exiles started to get involved” precisely because marginalised populations were too visible in a space located in the centre of Athens.* (Anna, local resident, 2025)

During that year and the next one, Plateia Protomagias, became an affective space, where local inhabitants established relationships with immigrants and among them, appropriating the public space for solidarity and sharing everyday life, stories, material and immaterial elements. The processes of appropriation of that public space, among others, is understood as a process of creating spaces and conditions for life-sustaining, imagining and materialising everyday care infrastructures.

The 2018 banning of the annual autonomous and self-organised Indie Free Festival, which had operated for thirty years without official permission, alongside the deployment of “philanthrocapitalism” (Richen and Lola, 2022) with the arrival of Onassis cultural foundation programming, intervening in the Pedion tou Areos Park by using the spaces for artistic installations, represents the most recent phase of transformation where direct state repression combines with cultural programming to neutralise autonomous organising whilst maintaining the appearance of progressive public programming.

3.2 Spatial configuration and zones of activity

Based on field observation, the square’s spatial configuration enables diverse simultaneous uses through four distinct but interconnected zones facilitating different forms of collective activity and care:

The Central Open Plaza constitutes the largest area, featuring wide concrete paving appropriated for various sporting activities. This space has been regularly used by South Asian migrant communities for cricket matches,

representing cultural territorialisation that challenges dominant uses of urban space whilst creating visible presence of multicultural community life. The same area accommodates football games by local youth, children's cycling, and gatherings during political events or cultural celebrations.

The Elevated Northern Terrace sits at a higher level adjacent to the Hellenic National Defence College, accessible by wide concrete steps functioning as informal theatre seating. This elevated position provides overview of the entire square whilst creating natural gathering space for larger assemblies, political meetings, and cultural events, accommodating both formal presentations and informal socialising. Moreover, the stairs and ramps that create the various levels of the space are extensively used by youngsters for parkur.

The Platanus Grove features several old platanus trees surrounded by built-in concrete benches that have become the focal point for (mainly) Albanian migrant community's and elder peoples' daily social life. This area has been enhanced through community personal contribution in moveable furniture—plastic and wooden chairs and small tables stored nearby or left there and assembled daily to create flexible seating arrangements for domino games, meals, and extended conversations. Depending on the time, this area is used by different people, including also younger groups usually in the evening. The trees provide essential shade whilst creating a semi-defined area and distinct ambience that facilitates intimate social interaction.

The Southeastern Amphitheatre consists of a small concrete structure with tiered seating, as well as an elevated terrace connected to the amphitheatre, serving multiple functions including casual gatherings, celebrations, and political assemblies. This feature has become particularly important for grassroots political organisations seeking unmediated spaces for collective action, with architectural form enabling both speakers to address audiences and participants to engage in horizontal discussion. This space is highly used by all city dwellers, frequenting the square, especially appropriated by socio-cultural groups organizing various open and free-access events of public interest.

The "corners" along the fenced area separating the playground with the square, there is a corridor with a slightly elevated concrete wall, where informal vendor was demonstrating his products for sale. On the other side as well, right next to the southern entrance from Pedion tou Areos to Protomagias Square, there is another informal vendor, taking advantage of the spatial configuration and creating a "vendor's vitrine" to show his goods.

3.3 Public space as affective infrastructure

After the experience of 2015, Protomagias Square became once again an important point of reference for the local vulnerable and oppressed dwellers. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the square's social dynamics when Greece imposed strict lockdown measures in March 2020, including closure of commercial socio-cultural activities and temporary restriction of access to Pedion tou Areos park. Protomagias Square emerged as one of the few remaining accessible public spaces in densely built central Athens, creating conditions for socio-spatial transformation.

The square began accommodating diverse populations across age, cultural, and class lines. Physical activities—soccer, cricket, boxing, walking, running—occupied major portions of the square, whilst social gatherings, discussions, spontaneous concerts, and political assemblies created what residents describe as "collective everyday togetherness." (Anna, local resident, 2025)

Diverse everyday practices transformed the square into infrastructure for collective care and political organisation encompassing multiple interconnected dimensions: **embodied care** through collective physical activity, such as play, parkur and dancing, essential for maintaining mental and physical health; **social care** through regular gathering patterns enabling residents to maintain connections across cultural differences; **material care** through community maintenance of shared spaces and furniture; **cultural care** facilitating intercultural encounters, music events and knowledge exchange; and **political care** encompassing assemblies and solidarity events addressing local and broader social justice issues.

4. Enclosure as institutionalised spatial violence

4.1 The mechanics of patial appropriation

Due to construction works for the new Line 4 extension of Athens Metro, "Dikastiria" Station (Government Gazette D'306/2021), part of public space in front of the Evelpidon building was occupied by Attiko Metro S.A. since 2021 as temporary construction site. The project was undertaken by the AVAX-GHELLA-ALSTOM consortium, to which 8,880 sq.m. of public "free space" where offered, whilst the contracting authority is Attiko Metro S.A., a private law legal entity established under Law 1955/1991 as a public limited company.



Figure 1. Initial fencing of Plateia Protomagias, source: Official facebook page of the citizens' initiative, published 17 June 2023

Since May 2023 the consortium has been trying to start the enclosure of the public space, serving for the construction site without previous notice (Figure 1). On December 21, 2023, residents were confronted with sudden fencing of the square's largest section using concrete bases and temporary plastic mesh. As the citizens' initiative 'Εμείς στο Πεδίον του Αρεως' (We at Pedion tou Areos) declares "HELLENIC METRO, without any public consultation and with the support of the police, proceeded to fence off the square." The enclosure relates to occupation of spaces in Protomagias Square by Attiko Metro S.A. for installation of offices, car parking and material storage spaces serving company needs. The projected duration coincides with final completion of the project, with current announced projections estimating line delivery in 2029-2030, although member of the local citizens initiative, as well as an engineer working in public infrastructures sector in Athens doubt it "considering the delays and rhythm of construction site this is quite improbable". Although the legal owner of Protomagias Square is the Municipality of Athens, its management falls under the Directorate of Parks and Groves of the Attica Region. However, Regional services were not informed about construction work commencement and fence installation, evident from their allocation of space for summer 2023 events during which Attiko Metro S.A. planned to install permanent sheet metal fencing.

As the D'306/2021 indicates the spaces to be occupied temporarily by the company to serve the construction site are the following (the topographic plan -Figure 2- is part of the official document published by the Government Gazette):

- area 1-2-3-4-1 (total area = 315 sq.m.) on Evelpidon street and Manica street intersection
- area 5-6-7-8-9-10-11-11'-17-18-19-20-21-22-23-24-5 (total area = 5.190 sq.m.) located on the intersection of Evelpidon street and Moustoksidi street
- area 11-12-13-14-15-16-17-11'-11 (total area = 3.375 sq.m.) located on the intersection of Evelpidon street and Moustoksidi street

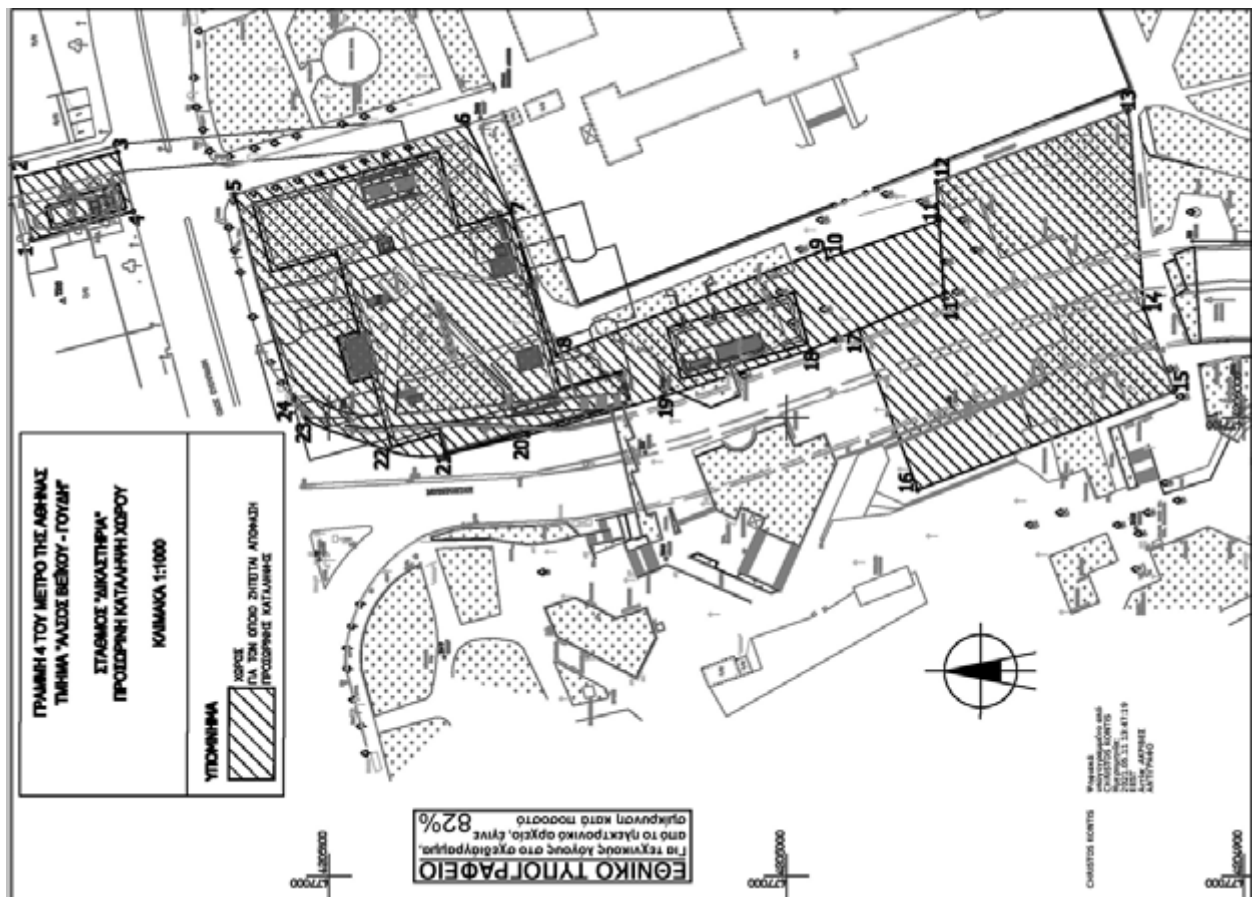


Figure 2. Official topographic plan indicating temporary occupation for the construction site of Metro Station "Dikastiria", source: ΦΕΚ Δ' 306/01.06.2021, gov.gr

As the initiative announces (03/04/2024), all these activities are not directly related to the construction works (excavations, etc.) of the specific metro station, they pertain to the general logistical support area for the company instead, including extensive office spaces that could have been housed in any of the many vacant office buildings in the area and beyond. The same issue for the parking, as there is an existing underground parking, serving the Court. This is evidenced by the fact that the fenced-off space is set to remain for the entire duration of the construction project, not only for the period during which works take place at the Dikastiria station. Furthermore, the contract allows for an extension of the fencing period (upon request) in case the project timeline is extended. In Figure 3 the uses in the extended enclosure are indicated: A. rebar processing area, or "ironworks", is one of the heaviest uses planned for the site. B. provision of 8 parking spaces for conventional cars, C. This passage occupies over 200 sq.m. within the fenced area of the square. However, it will not be used permanently for construction purposes; instead, it will remain vacant, merely to be opened once or twice a year to allow military vehicles to pass or park, D. offices of the contractor company 30X8m., E. storage area for materials and equipment.

The initial Environmental Impact Assessment Report provided for the occupation of more than 4,000 sq.m. beyond the original fenced area, including a section of the courtyard of the National Defense School Evelpidon, which is located above the square. After the army's reaction, that section was quickly released, and thus the Government Gazette (ΦΕΚ) for the occupation specified 3.300 sq.m. Following the mobilisations of the citizens another 1.300 sq.m. was freed, reducing the total to about 2.000 sq.m. "In each of these phases, HELLENIC METRO presented the area it intended to occupy as absolutely necessary." (initiative 'Εμείς στο Πεδίον του Αρεως', 2024)

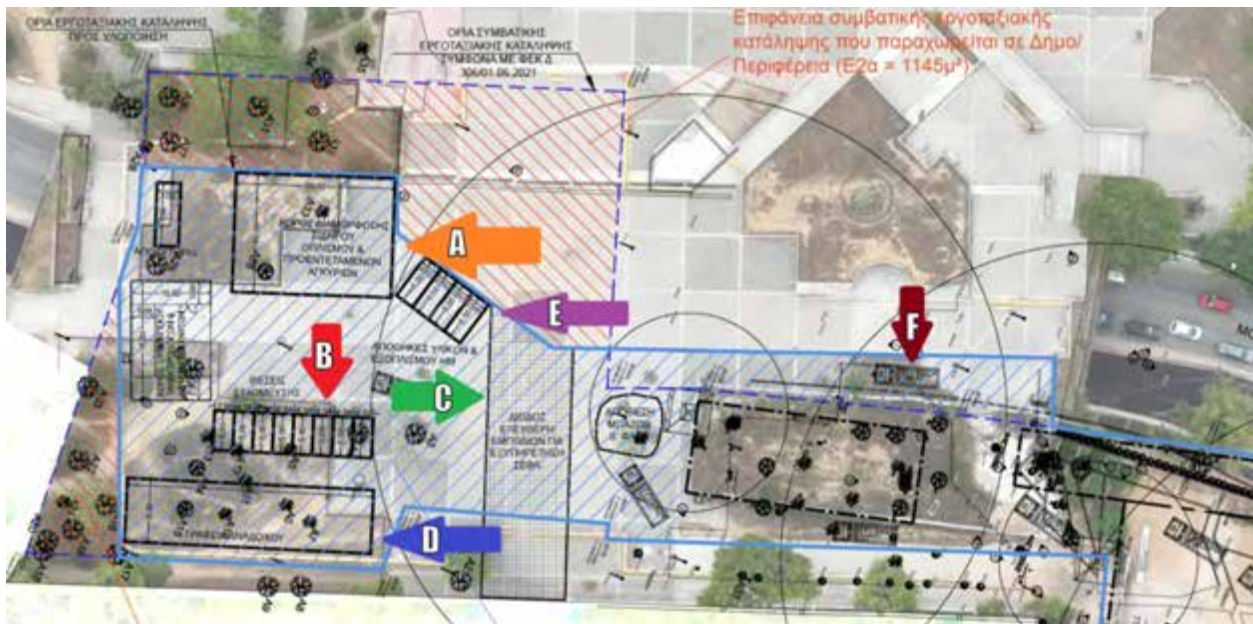


Figure 3. Uses in the construction site, source: Environmental Impact Assessment Report, official page 'Εμείς στο Πεδίον του Αρεως', author's elaboration

Document analysis reveals significant discrepancies between legally authorised construction areas specified in Government Gazette D'306/2021 and actual space appropriation. As published by the group 'Εμείς στο Πεδίον του Αρεως' (2023), the plan (Figure 4) confirms the contractor consortium exceeded legal limits of enclosed area (indicated area with orange line), appropriating vital square portions, "fenced off with unaesthetic and particularly psychologically aggressive metal sheets", for non-essential uses including private vehicle parking despite available underground facilities, material storage accommodatable elsewhere, and temporary office space serving corporate convenience rather than construction necessity.

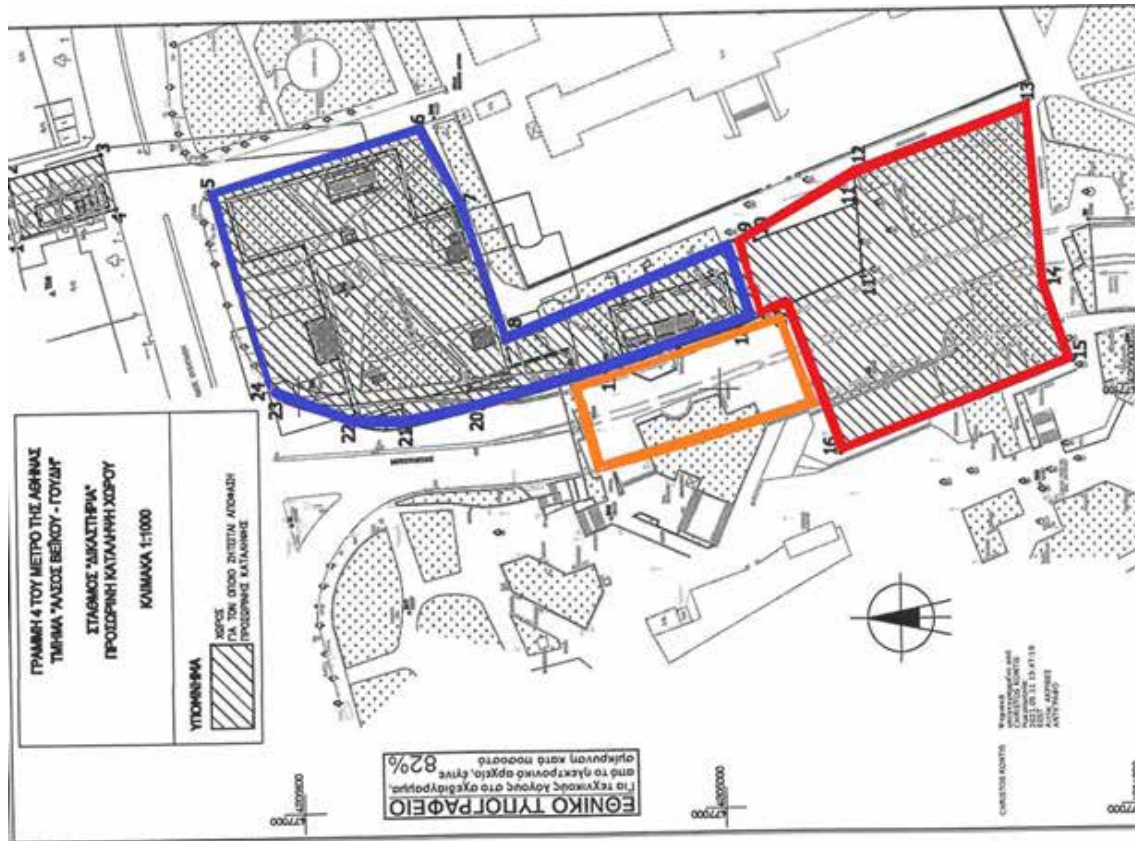


Figure 4. Topographic plan elaborated by the citizens' initiative, showing in blue the initial construction site (since 2021), in red line the area designated in the Government Gazette (ΦΕΚ), in orange line the non-authorized enclosure established on May 2023

Furthermore, personal field observation (Figure 5) and measurements on May 24 and 25, 2025, of the site, after the partial removal of the fence from the unauthorised enclosed area, reveal that several minor adjustments to the localization of the fence have been deployed, and the public space remaining inaccessible complies with the normative. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that if comparing the submitted plans of the architectural project, which won the public competition (second prize, by "Tense architecture network" studio) for the metro station "Dikastiria", the area of the station and the respective second entrance are limited to the plots 1-2-3-4-1 and 5-6-7-8- 20-21-22-23-24-5, which do not include the spaces of Protomagias Square.

The above process of public space appropriation illustrates how public-private partnerships enable space appropriation whilst diffusing accountability across multiple institutions, exemplifying Harvey's (2005) concept of "accumulation by dispossession" where public resources transfer to private actors through administrative mechanisms appearing as neutral technical decisions.

4.2 Legal violations and democratic exclusion

The appropriation process reveals fundamental problems in planning procedures enabling space appropriation whilst excluding community participation, representing democratic deficit by design. The selective enforcement of regulations—strict control over community uses whilst permitting corporate appropriation of public space for private parking and offices for Attiko Metro S.A. —reveals the class character of urban governance under neoliberalism. The same authorities that prohibit informal economic activities and regulate community gatherings permit systematic appropriation of public space for private commercial convenience without legal challenge or public justification.

4.3 Destabilising care networks and social infrastructure

The enclosure (even temporary) disrupted “care infrastructure”—spatial arrangements and social networks enabling collective wellbeing and mutual support during the pandemic and beyond. This destruction operated through multiple interconnected mechanisms revealing the inherently violent character of neoliberal space appropriation. The enclosure process, fencing off more public space than the legal and necessary, reveals how spatial control operates as a mechanism for broader social and political exclusion, reinforcing the democratic deficit of the local authorities and the uncaring attitude towards a common good, such as public space. The most affected urban dwellers—migrants engaging in cultural practices, political activists organizing assemblies, families using children’s play areas, elders—represent populations whose presence challenges dominant narratives about appropriate uses and urban decorum (order and aesthetic) of central urban space, while their displacement “sanitises” public space for consumption by more privileged populations.

The elimination of cultural spaces displaced practices essential for community identity and social reproduction. The cricket field used by South Asian migrants was eliminated, disrupting cultural practices that had created belonging and provided visible representation of multicultural community life. Reduced open space for children’s activities eliminated essential infrastructure for family life, whilst partial enclosure of the Platanus Grove disrupted access to maintained shared furniture and forced relocation of daily social activities.

The extensive fencing created blind-spots and uncomfortable spatial conditions particularly affecting women’s safety through creation of narrow, dark, isolated passages between construction barriers and surrounding fencing. As residents report: “The narrow passage between the construction site fencing and the perimeter wall of the National Defence School forms a dark area with no visibility, in an urban area where attacks on women and LGBTQ+ individuals have increased.” (initiative ‘*Εμείς στο Πεδίον του Αρεως*’, 2024)

5. Resistance and democratic alternatives

5.1 Citizens’ initiative organisation and democratic practice

The response to spatial appropriation by the citizens’ initiative ‘*Εμείς στο Πεδίον του Αρεως*’, along with the official and practical support of local associations, such as the Union of Secondary Education Teachers and the Association of Graduate Architects from Higher Education Institutions, demonstrates how communities can mobilise to defend spaces of historical and socio-political significance whilst asserting alternative models of democratic governance based on care, solidarity, and collective participation.

Emerging from longstanding community networks organised around park care and public space defence, the citizens’ initiative represents continuity with earlier resistance to privatisation attempts whilst developing new strategies appropriate to current conditions of crisis and state retrenchment. The initiative’s organisational structure reflects principles of horizontal democracy and inclusive participation, with regular assemblies held in remaining accessible areas and decision-making processes prioritising consensus over majority rule.

Membership encompasses diverse constituencies including long-term residents, recent migrants, parents with children, elderly users, political activists, and university students, reflecting the square’s role as space of encounter across social and cultural differences. Actual participation of users from different backgrounds — especially those more precarious— in a horizontal process, enables intersectionality and shows how defence of public space can tighten social relations and create solidarity across difference whilst challenging dominant models of political organisation.

5.2 Strategies of resistance and rights assertion

The initiative employed multiple interconnected strategies and alternative practices to assert rights meaningful to the community, even when these conflicted with dominant legal interpretations. Their persistent presence and reaction in public space, although tiring, proved to be an effective form of action. By engaging with representatives of local authorities and the regional administration, the citizens’ initiative succeeded in validating community claims regarding procedural violations and established important precedents for protecting public space from

arbitrary appropriation. Direct action and physical re-appropriation compelled the contractor consortium to reduce the originally planned fencing by 1,000 square metres, demonstrating the effectiveness of organised resistance in influencing state-corporate decisions. Public education and solidarity-building efforts further exposed the illegality of appropriation while connecting local struggles to broader issues of spatial justice and democratic participation.

Moreover, beyond the attempts to approach local and regional responsible authorities, social mobilisation, by the citizens' initiative 'Εμείς στο Πεδίον του Αρεως', since the enclosure of the Plateia Protomagias space, was actively organised through various activities and events, informing public opinion, disseminating, reclaiming and reappropriating the right to public space. The frequent occupation of the public space with bodies, politically and socially aligned (Butler, 2018) remains the most powerful act of creating new relational space, caring for and with others for our common goods and demonstrating alternative ways of conviviality, more just and humane.

5.3 Towards alternative urban governance

Regarding the most vulnerable social groups, universal rights such as health, accessibility to water, food and adequate housing, education, an economic activity and participation to the local community life are basic aspects that should be fulfilled through an effective "local governance" (ONU, 2000), based on the decentralization of the administration and the active involvement of the people in the definition and realization of programs of socio-sanitary and financial support. While Athens has seen some efforts to improve local governance, including reforms like the Callicrates program, it still faces challenges related to centralism and the need for greater citizen participation. As Karvounis (2021) identifies "of the most important problem is the democratic deficit of the first level of local governance system" which remains highly centralised – especially after 2019 – in contrast to international trends towards more participatory and accountable local institutions.

The citizens' initiative's response demonstrates concrete alternatives to technocratic planning based on community participation, collective care, and democratic decision-making. Rather than simply opposing inappropriate development, the initiative actively demonstrates alternative approaches to space governance prioritising use value over exchange value and collective wellbeing over private profit.

These practices prefigure what Friedmann (1987) terms "radical planning" that challenges professional expertise with community knowledge whilst asserting collective rights to participate in urban development decisions. The initiative's organisational practices—horizontal decision-making, inclusive participation, consensus-building across difference—demonstrate democratic alternatives to both market mechanisms and bureaucratic hierarchy whilst suggesting possibilities for broader transformation of urban governance.

6. Conclusion: public space, care, and urban transformation

The struggle over Protomagias Square reveals public space as a critical site where fundamental questions of urban governance, social justice, and collective wellbeing are contested. The square's transformation during the immigration crisis and even more during the pandemic into essential social infrastructure demonstrates public space's capacity to function as "affective infrastructure" enabling collective navigation of crisis whilst maintaining social solidarity and political engagement across difference.

The subsequent enclosure by state authorities and private contractors represents systematic appropriation of resources essential for collective reproduction in service of private profit and administrative convenience. This appropriation operates through patterns of disinvestment, devaluation, and privatisation characteristic of austerity urbanism whilst revealing the fundamentally exclusionary character of neoliberal urban development prioritising exchange value over use value and private accumulation over collective wellbeing.

However, organised resistance by the citizens' initiative demonstrates collective capacity to challenge space appropriation whilst asserting alternative approaches to urban governance based on care, solidarity, and democratic participation. Through legal mobilisation, direct action, public education, and alternative

programming, the initiative exemplifies concrete practices of spatial justice asserting collective rights to urban space and its democratic governance whilst prefiguring possibilities for more just and collective, community-based approaches to city-making.

The case reveals how struggles over public space can illuminate and challenge broader patterns of urban inequality whilst creating possibilities for transformation based on alternative values, such as care over profit and a strong sense of conviviality. The right to the city becomes manifest through collective practices asserting these values whilst demonstrating concrete alternatives to dominant urban governance through everyday practices of care, solidarity, and democratic organisation.

The transformation of Protomagias Square during the pandemic demonstrates how public spaces can serve as essential infrastructure for collective reproduction, particularly for communities lacking adequate private space or excluded from commercialised venues. The practices of care that emerged—from informal childcare and elder support to cultural expression and political organising—demonstrate how public space can support “interdependent” rather than individualised approaches to urban life (The Care Collective, 2020).

As cities worldwide confront multiple intersecting crises, the defence of public space becomes essential for building more just and sustainable urban futures. The lessons from Protomagias Square suggest that grassroots mobilisations around spatial justice can serve as laboratories for developing alternative approaches to urban governance that centre collective care and democratic participation whilst challenging the systematic commodification of urban life under neoliberal capitalism. Such experiments in spatial democracy offer crucial insights for building urban futures based on collective wellbeing rather than private accumulation, care rather than competition, and democratic participation rather than centralised technocratic control.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the residents and the activists of the ‘Εμείς στο Πεδίο του Αρεως’ initiative for sharing their experiences and insights.

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