THE (MASTER) PLANS OF ATHENS AND THE CHALLENGES OF ITS RE-PLANNING IN THE CONTEXT OF CRISIS

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Abstract
In the current economic crisis, cities face significant problems and planners strive for solutions. Athens, especially its Centre, faces immense problems both because of the crisis and of a series of local problems that to a great extend are related to its planning historical background. The planning of the Athens area has a long and troublesome tradition and has resulted in a very dense and problematic city with uncontrollable, partly unauthorized, sub-urbanization and severe social problems in the Centre. The traditional way planning took place, i.e. physical planning, has been proven to be inadequate to face the rapidly accumulating problems. This crisis has become a trigger for deeper consideration of the social problems of the city as especially (and spatially) expressed in the Centre. The paper goes through the various historical stages and milestones of the planning of the city progressively focusing on the current problematic, to finally raise the question on the path that the planning of the city should follow in the context of today’s challenges.

Keywords: Athens; spatial physical planning; regulatory master plans; economic crisis; city center.

INTRODUCTION
The current economic crisis affects the cities, as these are the loci of the majority of the population and of economic activity worldwide. According to Burkhalter and Castells (2009), “the urban dimension of the crisis is not peripheral but central to the model of social and economic organization” (Burkhalter and Castells, 2009: 1). The economic crisis is transformed into a spatial crisis through channels such as the real estate market, housing foreclosures and financial debacle of urban areas other mechanisms (Cohen, 2011).

The spatial side of the crisis acquires localized dimensions, such as those related to local economies and is differently expressed in different parts (cities) of the world (Cohen, 2011). The several kinds of impacts include unemployment, business mortality, closure of important large companies, local housing markets fall-out (Rivas, 2010), urban poverty, financial crises of local governments (Cohen, 2011).

According to Rivas, Cities have no formal plans to respond to the crisis, but they do set political priorities and defensive measures including assistance to the unemployed, social housing policies, supporting SMEs and the local consumer markets (Rivas, 2010). Yet, Cohen argues that some cities (such as Rotterdam and Newcastle) have developed plans or programs intended specifically to face the crisis and, generally, plans include measures targeting human capital, training, and urban innovation. In parallel, he questions the power local governments have to combat the crisis in comparison to other more powerful forces and actors, but insists that measures should be pursued actively and responsibly (Cohen, 2011).

Burkhalter and Castells (2009), arguing that the crisis reveals a shift of life style, especially related to the way people choose to live and communicate, propose a “rescue plan” based on new transportation and land use policies as well as soft measures especially related to public space. Among the measures they propose are three tier roads, and change of building
regulations and land use permissions related to urban design at the level of neighborhood (Burkhalter and Castells, 2009).

Marcuse (2010), in doubt of the capacity of planning to combat the crisis, argues for a series of mitigation measures focusing on the protection of the most vulnerable parts of the population and on the intervention of planners through their connection and influence upon the decision making centers rather than through their plans as such. He maintains that “while planners are neither significantly responsible for the present economic crisis nor have the power to affect it significantly, they do have some influence on it, and more than they are now exercising” [p.9] (Marcuse, 2010).

Under such a problematic is that the crisis of Athens, especially of the Centre is discussed. The international economic crisis has hit Greece and Athens most. The city is affected by the immense national economic problems (budget deficits and fiscal crisis) accentuated by the Greek particularities (lack of transparency, corruption, tax evasion, etc.). If local, spatial and social, parameters are added such as high density in the Centre and urban sprawl to a large extent based on unauthorized construction, or high concentration of poor immigrants in the Centre, all resulting in impoverishment, social exclusion, endangered social cohesion, decline of economic activity, redundancies, closures, etc., the situation becomes precarious and the impact on the built environment severe.

From the point of view of planning, the efforts to plan the city in the spatial context of its wider area have been going on for many years, yet today are more necessary than ever. The question is what sort of planning is mostly required under today’s circumstances and to what extent can it have a positive impact on the city. In order to answer such questions, one would have to see as part of today’s problematic the historical background both of planning and the discussions on it, and of the several contradicting forces related to it.

Thus, this paper goes through the history of the master planning of the city identifying several periods by and large on the basis of drafted or tacit plans a) from the establishment of the city as the capital of Greece (1834) until 1985 when the first somehow comprehensive master plan was adopted, b) the next period from 1985 to to the Olympic Games (2004), c) from the Olympic Games to the current crisis (2010), d) in the context of crisis the new Regulatory Master Plan of Athens-Attiki 2021, and finally e) amidst the crisis the staging of a series of proposals for intervention to the city center.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE MILESTONES OF THE ATHENS (MASTER) PLANS UNTIL 1985
Since Greece’s independence (1830), numerous attempts have been made to draft and implement spatial plans for the city and the wider area of Athens. Yet, plans were only partially implemented with delays and usually after various degrees of confrontation.

The first plan was carried out by St. Kleanthes and E. Schaubert as early as 1833 (fig.1). Due to reactions raised by land owners, and to economic hardship it was not possible to implement this plan. Instead an amendment elaborated in 1834 by Leo von Klenze was realized (fig.2) (Biris K., 1966, ed 1999: 26-39 Travlos, 1993). Since then, there have been numerous attempts to make plans for the city though mostly targeting specific sites such as opening of roads and planning of squares. Biris K. (1966) and Philippidis (1984) mention dozens of plans and proposals in the first half of the 20th century. The population of the city increased by 245,000 (+52%) in 1922, after the influx of about 1.2 million refugees in the country and a population exchange with Turkey that followed the defeat of the Greek army by Turkey in Minor Asia. Despite the obvious pressing needs and the numerous plans proposed during the course of the first half of the 20th century, the lack of funds and occasionally the resistance of private interests have resulted only into a series of limited changes in the city (cf. Sarigiannis, 2012). As stated in Skayannis and Kanarelis (2012) for the first half of the 20th century, 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. WW2 found the city
already amidst a series of problems such as the giving up of various public spaces and with no major city plan under implementation.

Skayannis and Kanarelis (2012) argue that 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. In this context, several grand ideas were proposed the most significant being those of K.Biris (fig. 3) and K.Doxiadis (fig.4). The first included the construction of a new city (Megaris) at the west of Athens, and the second introduced the concept of Ecumenopolis proposing the broadening of the city and the creation of a continuum with the neighbouring cities of Halkis and Corinth. Yet, none of these was implemented. Instead, a timid town planning practice and the choice of cheap and quick solutions immediately after the war became dominant and no important interventions in public space or the creation of new spaces such as squares were achieved. Still, the main concern, as the private car was taking the lead, was the opening and widening of roads.

These adverse developments of the urbanization of the capital, once again demanded new planning efforts. In this context, 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, including those of the team of Ministry of Public Works which divided Athens into nine large districts. This plan, according to Sarigiannis, proved rather inapplicable as it was of the “old style of regulation of land uses on a series of maps” and was not facing the required legal complications (Sarigiannis, 2000; 2012). As it was never realized, it would be reasonable to argue that throughout 1960-80 there was still no comprehensive planning. This among other things, in combination with the post war rampant urbanisation (graph 1) resulted into a new generation of unauthorised buildings (housing) that accentuated the need of planning Athens. Yet, as Philippidis argues, showcase projects in public spaces made their appearance instead, such as pedestrian zones and public playgrounds (Philippidis, 1984: 330)\(^1\).

The scenery in terms of regulatory master planning changed with the first (to be legislated) regulatory master plan of Athens (1985), a serious attempt for change with which the next part of this paper deals.

![Graph 1: Athens Urban Area Population 1833-2011](image)

**FROM THE 1985 REGULATORY MASTER PLAN TO THE OLYMPIC GAMES**

The latest regulatory master plan of the city was carried out in 1985 (Law 1515, 1985) when A. Tritsis was the minister of Planning Housing and Environment (the later YPEXODE) of the PASOK\(^2\) government. With the same Law, the Organization for the Regulatory (Master) Plan and the Environmental Protection of Athens/Attiki (ORSA) was founded and was assigned the responsibility to monitor the implementation of the plan and to advice for all planning issues related to its area of competence. That regulatory master plan reflected an optimism regarding Greece’s accession to the European Union, but with yet unclear the benefits that this might entail. Among its basic targets, in a period succeeding the rampant urbanization of the post war era, were the reduction of the population in Athens and the general restructuring of the economy in favor of the peripheral regions of the country, which were still considerably lagging behind. As a result of this plan, the expansion of the city was gradually intercepted but the pressures persisted and no provision for organized expansion was foreseen. Consequently, arbitrary and unauthorized building in the outskirts never stopped. In this sense, the provisions of that plan

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\(^1\) For the same period, see also Sarigiannis, 2000.

were still conservative, not saying much about the future major restructuring of the city. It is worth noting that this plan faced a major contradiction, as also did much of the succeeding legislation of the governments thereafter. The contradiction is between planning and implementation. The chances for the latter are frequently constrained by lack of funds, and often revealing the inadequacy of the state machinery to deal with the realization of complex plans. This does not only apply for the plans per se but also for the various political decisions and announcements.

Figure 5: The 1985 Regulatory (Mastr)Plan of Athens-Attiki
(Source: Sarigiannis, 2012).

It is indicative that though the metro of Athens was on the agenda, the PASOK government changed the agenda announcing the construction of a tram, instead, as they were unsure whether financing would be available for the metro. Possibly for the same reasons, the 1985 regulatory master plan did not include detailed provisions for forthcoming projects such as roads and trains. The physical planning of that period was more or less not comprehensive and to a certain extent arbitrary.

In addition, this master plan similarly to the previous ones subdued economic planning under the umbrella of physical planning. This reflected the temporal balance of a long lasting antagonism between two different approaches to spatial planning, one coming from the socio-economic sphere and having a very general spatial dimension, and the other coming from the traditional town planning stream having a more physical-technical dimension. This antagonism also reflected the one between two ministries (Planning and Economy) as well as the lack of political will to give a solution.

In the following years, thanks to the EEC/EU, the first financial possibilities were realized by the Integrated Mediterranean Programs and later, and most importantly, by the four consecutive Community Support (and National Strategic Reference) Frameworks (CSF)\(^3\). In the new context, the traditional 5-year economic development plans (general policy statements and lists incoherent not sufficiently interlinked projects), were gradually replaced by programs, divided into axes, measures, actions, etc., within time schedules and restrictions, budget lines regulated by financing guidelines, regulations (Skayannis, 1994). Contrary to the previous 5-year economic development plans they had specific spatial references, thus coming closer to physical planning. The question of planning adaptation was also one of paradigm shift in planning, to a merged planning exercise whereby ‘economists’ and ‘architects’ would have to collaborate. This however, was not followed by an equally drastic change in the comprehension of modus operandi by the

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administration. So the ministry of Planning and the ministry of Economics remained separate and competing with each other, producing a chaotic situation regarding the priorities and the philosophy.

In addition to the above, two major developments characterized the eighties and the early nineties: on the one hand, the Greek construction capital that had been very active in the Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East due to a variety of reasons (see Koutsoyannis, 1984) was “returning” and seeking for investment opportunities within the country and in the Balkans that were just undergoing the first stages of their transformation from centrally planned to free economies. On the other hand, the prospect of the 2004 Olympic Games and the construction projects foreseen in the CSFs provided such an opportunity.

Thus, a series of expectations for new projects started. However, these were planned and materialized, due to the special circumstances, over and above existing planning (in the sense of the master plan of the city). Special laws, such as Law 2730/1999 “Planning, Integrated Development and Materialization of the Olympic Works and other provisions”, were passed in order to accelerate and legitimize pre-decided projects which did not exist in the master plan of the city.

This “official” by-passing of the law (of the existing regulatory master plan) was coupled by the traditional common practice of arbitrary/unauthorized construction of housing (by and large of building on own property without permission, more rarely on public property, and very commonly by provocatively violating planning regulations). It has to be mentioned that it was not merely the lower income classes that sought refuge to such a practice due to the higher expenses of legal construction, but the upper classes as well including - allegedly - high rank politicians, even ministers.

This top-down and bottom-up by-passing and overlooking of pre-existing planning legislation was left to survive due to the fact that construction had been one of the major locomotives of the Greek economy, able to speed up or slow down the pace of the economy (Skayannis, 1990). This was coupled by a planning governance that on the one hand would collect the opinions of formal stakeholders but on the other would disregard the opinions of ordinary citizens and their organizations, in essence a political choice of non-participatory planning of any sort that obviously faced the problem of applicability.

In this sense, the major planning achievements of the Olympic Games in Athens (parts of the “Olympic” program, or triggered, or accelerated by it) were the construction of a series of transport projects (Athens International Airport, Ring Road of Athens, two new Athens metro lines, the tram lines, improvement of some parts of the road network), the construction of athletic installations including the Olympic Village and the press center, and other minor projects. Most of these were not included in the existing master planning of the city or of the wider area and were decided and imposed top-down over and above any different opinions of the residents. In certain cases, some court decisions accepted the cases against the state, such as the case of the peripheral road of mount Hymettus (part of the Athens Ring Road) that was raised by the American College in Athens, and the state had to modify the plans. In other cases the local communities managed to negotiate for free spaces with the contractors thus increasing the prestige of certain mayors. Yet, at the field of environmental concerns, this sort of fast track planning did not leave much space for effective public consultation. Skayannis and Kaparos (2010) note that though there is a legal provision for inspection of the environmental assessment studies for the big projects, the time provided is limited, the volume of the studies very big, and the knowledge required very specialized. Therefore the objective conditions are not that favorable for raising objections from the part of interested parties let alone the chance for a substantial debate that ends up being carried out through the media and frequently becomes a caricature.

**FROM THE OLYMPIC GAMES TO THE CURRENT CRISIS**

During the post-Olympic Games period (2004-2010) Athens did not take full advantage of the Olympic projects and what is more of the Olympic experience. The new government of the New...
Democracy party\textsuperscript{4} (as of March 2007) seemed in the beginning insecure to proceed with public works, let alone planning. Yet at a later stage it seemed to catch up with the Olympic momentum and to start the procurement of new mega transport projects, once more not in alignment with the up to then master planning of the city. There was a point when re-planning the strategy for Athens was becoming an inescapable requirement.

In this conjuncture, in April 2009 a new regulatory master plan prepared under the supervision of ORSA was presented by the minister of YPEXODE G.Souflias (2009) (fig.6). According to this plan, the main goals were a) sustainable spatial development from the environmental and cultural point of view, b) balanced economic development, competitiveness and strengthening of the international role of Athens, and c) Improvement of the quality of life in a cohesive and friendly city.

As in most master plans, such general goals are widely accepted but the “devil is hidden in the details”. The plan was accused of, while advocating for the concept of compact city, it was incorporating into the city an area of more than 200 mill sq. m. Even the ministry of Agriculture thought that this plan was not environmentally sound (Hadjigeorgiou, 2009). As new elections appeared in the horizon, the law draft was never produced for vote in the parliament\textsuperscript{5}. In October 2009 new elections were held and the New Democracy government was replaced by PASOK.

In-between, a basic change was the slow continuation of some of the post-Olympic projects (e.g. the extension of the metro lines). This situation eventually accentuated. As the economic crisis approached, projects were gradually abandoned (Thessaloniki submerged tunnel) or held back (Athens metro extensions). During this period, the city and especially the center started to undergo an unprecedented crisis, as the main economic crisis deteriorated. Post 2010, this crisis has brought about changes in the social structure of the center with multifaceted consequences.

According to Economou, Skayannis, Deffner, et al (2012), the problems of the center of Athens have their origin in the early ’90s or earlier (e.g. lack of comprehensive city planning, high-density building, green space deficit, old building stock, low quality of public spaces, lack of the necessary urban infrastructure, urban sprawl and suburbanization). Other problems are more recent (e.g. increasing criminality, drug trade and prostitution, illicit trade, closed shops, abandoned buildings, increase in the number of homeless on the streets and impoverishment of a significant number of the population). The latter have been caused either by heavy migrant inflows in the city of Athens or/and by the effects of the current financial crisis on urban population. The immigrants problem has developed to a major concern, as has got out of proportion by all standards. This influx is a combination of two factors, namely the economic and

\textsuperscript{4} New Democracy: a liberal democratic conservative party founded in 1974 by Konstantinos Karamanlis.

\textsuperscript{5} Regulatory (Master) Plans of Cities in Greece pass as Laws in the Parliament.
political migration reasons and the fact that due to European legislation, immigrants are not allowed to be transferred to other European countries and are stuck in Greece. Low, unpaid and mostly black labor deprive the state from potential resources and result into low social welfare possibilities and danger for public health conditions. These problems pose manifold risks, primarily to public health and safety but also to entrepreneurship and property and to the quality of life as well.

As a consequence, over the last years, the inner city of Athens (the historic and commercial center) has been changing in a rapid and hostile way, suffering from an increasing decline. Rising crime and lawlessness have reached “crisis proportions” in downtown areas, while the concentration of legal and illegal immigrants in some neighborhoods has led to concern about the creation of ghettos in the heart of the city. At the same time, the economic crisis has led hundreds of stores to close down, to the increase of unemployment, and to the breakdown of social services and the degradation of the quality-of-life standards in many traditional middle-class districts (Economou, Skayannis, Deffner, et al, 2012), as well as allegedly to serious land speculation activity in view of a possible future gentrification process. This situation has triggered the activation of groups of the extreme right, something that has increased the fragility of the social tissue.

Given the above, there is a question whether the problems of the city –in crisis- would be reasonable to be faced with tools from the sphere of physical planning, especially of the urban design scale, or from those of socio-economic development planning. This problematic and contradiction was unavoidably transferred to the next plan for Athens that was to be elaborated quite soon.

THE NEW REGULATORY MASTER PLAN OF ATHENS-ATTIKI 2021 (RPA-2021)
The new government (from October 2009 onwards), as all governments do, changed the Minister appointed members of the executive committee of ORSA. The new committee set out to prepare a new regulatory master plan that was completed in 2011.

While maintaining the same goals as the previous plan though highly emphasizing the concept of the compact city, the new plan included different, some new, specialized goals which were: the promotion of the image of Athens as a Mediterranean capital with emphasis on civilization, policies for social cohesion, reconstruction of the production structure, restriction of unauthorized building, strengthening and redistribution of development resources, establishment of green belts and ecological corridors, urban regeneration with recycling of land and housing stock, vivification of centrality, strengthening of sustainable mobility, valorization of the sea front, and improvement of the system of spatial planning and governance (ORSA /YPEKA, 2011).

Some of these goals, certainly reflecting the new realities of the crisis, were less conventional than those of previous plans, while the procedure for the preparation of the RPA 2021 plan included extensive consultation with various social actors and stakeholders. However it did not include an effective system of public consultation with individual citizens. Despite the fact that all such proposals at some stage have to be publicized in the internet and that there is a provision for the general public to electronically submit their opinions, this never happened with this plan, as the ministry proved indecisive to proceed with it due to contradicting pressures from the various stakeholders.

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6 Out of the seven members of the executive committee of ORSA, four are appointed by the Government and three by the local authorities (municipalities, etc.).
The plan faced three sets of contrapositions. The first was by several planners, the second by the municipalities involved, and the third by various stakeholders.

Regarding the first set of differing opinions these were mainly related to the size of the document in relation with the detail that a regulatory plan should go into, given that the planning system in Greece foresees strategic city plans that go into more detailed planning and are guided by the regulatory master plans. In this sense, a detailed regulatory master plan becomes mandatory and pre-empts the subordinate planning levels (which is not supposed to do) at a level that would have required extensive spatial analysis and more detailed proposals, as well as extensive time consuming new legislation. Consequently, a second domain of concern for the planners were several fairly detailed proposals such as the pedestrianization of central city corridors, or the question of how the plan dealt with the extension of the city in relation with a new Law on unauthorized building (Law 4014/2011), as well as the conception of gentrification apparent in the proposals of the plan for the rehabilitation of the city center. Besides, an additional concern was that the plan would require a series of requirements for a series of Presidential Decrees and other legislative actions in order to be implementable, something that would take a lot of time by Greek administrative standards.

The second set of differing opinions came from the local authorities. According to their views (e.g. municipalities of Athens and of Piraeus) the plan went into much detail in issues that they wanted to have the discretion of planning themselves, or they had already differently planned, using as tools the subordinate planning levels and other by-Law regulations.

Finally, the third set of counterarguments originated from the various stakeholders. For example, the association of Industries argued that RPA 2021, posing restrictions, did not leave enough room for the private entrepreneurs to move as freely as they should in the city, in terms of foreseen land uses. A more serious issue however was raised regarding those urban motorways that were not proposed in RPA 2021. As opposed to the previous plan that proposed a set of urban motorways (with the obvious intention to vivify the construction sector)\(^7\), RPA 2021 kept only one of those proposals (a north-south short motorway linking the Athens to Thessaloniki motorway with the Athens to Corinth motorway, bypassing Athens from the west) and opted for more sustainable transport solutions.

Under these pressures, RPA 2021 was not forwarded by the ministry for approval in the parliament with the additional argument that because of the then forthcoming May 2012 elections it should be the new government the one to decide for its future. Given these circumstances, the president of ORSA and the rest of the state appointed members (i.e. 3 out of 7) of the executive committee of ORSA resigned on March 13, 2012\(^8\). One of the arguments for their resignation was

\(^7\) [http://www.dealnews.gr/epixeiriseis/item/43236](http://www.dealnews.gr/epixeiriseis/item/43236) (accessible 04/04/2012).

\(^8\) One member had previously resigned for different reasons and the 3 remaining members are representatives of the local authorities and had no reason to resign.
the delay of the ministry regarding the procedures for the RPA 2021 and the fragmentary interventions often of outmost importance, made by the ministry disregarding the provisions of the regulatory plans. The most important of those interventions, according to the letter of the resigned ORSA members was the ministerial proposals for the area of the old airport.

NEW CITY CENTRE INTERVENTION PROPOSALS
Though RPA 2021 is an important tool for the planning of Athens (in principle the most important), other tools are also being employed and a series of actors are carrying out plans and submit proposals for the city. These proposals are not on the spatial scale of RPA 2021 and generally belong to two different trends, reflecting the two different planning traditions mentioned so far: the spatial physical planning, and the socio-economic developmental tradition. Further on, these proposals reflect the interests or the specializations of the various actors and differ in the degree of social, economic or spatial elements they include, and in the corresponding rationale. Yet all of them share the opinion that the Athens center is undergoing an unprecedented crisis (as referred to above).

The most important of the proposals publicized are the following:

- The Ministry’s of environment energy and climate change (YPEKA⁹) which is forwarding proposals for the pedestrianization of a major corridor in the center of the city (Panepistimiou avenue), the refurbishment of certain squares, a regeneration scheme for a set of blocks (Gerani area), and other interventions. These plans have been criticized by planners on the more holistic/comprehensive side of not tackling the problems in depth and of not being able to provide real solutions.
- The program (set of measures) of the ex vice-president of the government Th.Pangalos. This program mainly focuses on the establishment of law and order in the city center assuming that a healthier environment for economic activity will prevail as a result. This plan though including several interesting proposals has been criticized of being too much pre-occupied with the ‘law and order’ dimension while a more developmental approach could yield even better results.
- The proposals of various actors and stakeholders reflecting economic interests. For example the Athens - Attiki Hotel Association has made proposals for a set of regulations that would revitalize the center, as their business faces severe problems.¹⁰ These plans, though realistic and productive, in the sense that they are concrete, have obviously the weak side of partiality and should be integrated into a more comprehensive approach.
- Plans of committees for special areas, such as for the area of Goudi, or of Elaionas which foresees: i) the construction of a new stadium for the Panathinaikos football team, of shopping centres, and of other facilities and ii) the simultaneous demolition of their old stadium and the creation of a park in its place. However, the most important plan is the one for the exploitation of the area of the old airport of Hellinikon (8,500,000 sq. meters). In fact there have been several plans and proposals for this area. During the last period (2011), the PASOK government that established Hellinikon SA asked them to launch an international tender for the exploitation of the area. The terms foresee an area of green, and cultural and entrepreneurial activity. The perennial debate about this area has mainly concentrated on the percentage of green area and the kinds of land uses. A point of debate has been whether funds made available from the valorisation of the area could be channelled to other parts of the city so that severe problems could be faced and interventions made possible.

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⁹ YPEKA is the new name of YPEXODE after the 2010 elections.
¹⁰ See for instance the press release of the 42⁰ General assembly of AHA (November 30, 2011) where the dramatic dimensions of the problem are exposed.
• Proposals of private investors for certain parts of the city that frequently require changing of land uses coming in conflict with existing planning regulations. These are divided into the ones that require point changes and to those that require greater interventions and a set of changes. In both cases such interventions have to come to terms with the fact of the necessity for the revision of the strategic city plan of Athens. Such plans have been criticized that are leading to an uncontrolled gentrification process which will make lower social strata worse off, while favouring those who have exploited the situation sometimes at the verge of legality.

• Proposals (or objections to proposals) from various local, neighbourhood etc. communities of the city, and from political or municipal parties. These are normally focussing on partial issues of the related interested parties. In this sense they easily fall into the trap of ‘city beautiful’ or naïve romanticism and fail to face the overall complexity of the city.

• Proposals from the city planning department of the municipality of Athens ordered by the municipal council, or the mayor, regarding special areas for which interventions are sought, or redesign is required. While such plans are more comprehensive (contrary to other plans), they face the problem that the municipality of Athens faces, i.e. lack of full competence for their implementation, as this municipality has far less rights for the area of Athens than the government ministries.

As becomes evident, the proposals for the city vary and several planners have raised the objection that the proposals are partial and many are more of an urban design nature rather than of a planning one (esp. those of the ministry YPEKA !!!), at a time when the city needs deep structural interventions. Undoubtedly, several of these proposals are worth serious consideration. They reflect genuine interest from several parties or entrepreneurial pursuits, but have an obvious common denominator: they are not comprehensive. Thus, except of a part of the RPA-2021, and even more recently of an initiative of the mayor of Athens (Economou, Skayannis, Deffner, et al, 2012) no new provisions for comprehensive planning have been made.

In parallel, several of the plans are formally discussed (for approval, dismissal, or for amendments) at the district level under a procedure that is foreseen by the law. However, the question is how such plans are carried out with essential participation of the community they concern, and the general plans (for the entire city) with a considerable and meaningful public debate with all stakeholders concerned and individual citizens. In such a debate, the planners are not supposed to have finalised their opinion and try to sell the plan but are expected to be receptive of the valuable knowledge articulated in the consultations.

Instead of this, public debate has acquired two faces: a) interested parties are invited to express their opinion about an intervention or a plan. Frequently, this becomes a formality. There is never enough time to study a proposal or a plan, and the interested parties often have no expertise or the resources to deal with it (Skayannis and Kaparos, 2010). b) In other cases of a more localized nature, local communities do have and express an opinion, which up to a certain extend is taken into account. Most of the times these opinions concern local demands, and frequently these demands are related to electioneering purposes and aims of local politicians (Skayannis and Kaparos, 2010). c) Frequently, special entrepreneurial interests are expressed and exercise pressures for measures and regulations, yet these are not harmoniously linking to the more general approach of a plan.

Yet in all cases planning is by and large top down. In this top-down context, planners usually ask the opinions of stakeholders during the planning process and selectively utilize it, but in most cases one could reasonably argue that there is no substantial collaborative or participatory planning.
CONCLUSION

In the unprecedented absence of funds and of political will, the situation for the moment seems precarious and the future uncertain. The course that planning has taken in Athens, has revealed a series of problems and contradictions:

a) The contradiction between the traditional 5-year socio-economic development plans succeeded by the various Community Support (and National Strategic Reference) Frameworks [NSRF] and the spatial physical plans coming from the tradition of ‘urbanism’.

b) the contradiction between the comprehensive planning approach and what one would probably name the urban design architectural approach. This is related to the understanding of the nature of the problems of the city and what is the appropriate methodology to face them in relation with the possible tools. Planners think that architects are naïve when trying to solve major structural problems with merely physical interventions sometimes at the micro scale, while architects argue that the form of space leads to behaviours and uses that make a difference and lead to change.

c) the contradiction between the planning approach in general and the project oriented interventions ad hoc planning (similar to the previous era). This is a double facet phenomenon. First, big projects have been proposed contrary to the draft of the regulatory master plan. Second, top down interventions for change of land uses regarding specific buildings, and for change of land uses and planning regulations for specific areas (e.g. switching from manufacturing to services land uses).

Most of these contradictions are not ‘methodologically’ resolved, in the sense that besides from what falls under specific law provisions (for which cases law gaps are sought in order to justify interventions stemming from political pressure), other things are dealt with on a more or less ad hoc basis. Yet a common denominator is the lack of an organised public debate leaving space for both stakeholders and citizens to express their opinion. The ‘Open Government’ internet based consultation system established in 2010, is by all means an immense progress towards this direction, yet insufficient as deadlines are short and several issues are not discussed since only drafts of Laws reach the system. In any case it, functionally, serves more as a tool for gathering different opinions rather than as a discussion platform. The limited public debate hence transparency, leads to the challenge whether planning is needed at all.

In the context of contemporary neo-liberal economies, as economic planning is not considered to be needed in the economy per se, the necessity of spatial planning is contested. Indeed, economy, society and planning are interlinked.

New production modes based on tertiarisation and flexibility with a parallel switch to smaller enterprise scales make firms more footloose. As argued in Skayannis 1998, “Central authorities, cannot plan the way they did before, as the economic space has become fluid. In addition, under the new wave of neo-liberalism that has been sweeping Europe since the mid-eighties the values of planning have been put under question as planning was accused of limiting the scope and frontiers of entrepreneurs. In this sense, indicative or non-planning practices have prevailed” (p.3). Faludi has argued that in the disjointed - incrementalist mode, the programmes considered by any one planning agency are limited to a few which deliberately do not exhaust the available action space, and ... action space is itself ill-defined. The disjointed - incrementalist mode of planning represents an atomistic image of society (A.Faludi, 1973: 155-6).

Is this part of what we are facing in contemporary Athens? And if this were the case, then what would it take to secure that planning is there to regulate the built environment so that public interest and the weaker parts of society are secure? Do citizens have a say for developments regarding their own city, or should this be left to the pressures of contradictory economic interests? To what extent could the good old recipe of democracy (nowadays enriched with transparency) be helpful to achieve better planning results?
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