Athens: The transformation of a Mediterranean Metropolis: problems and perspectives after Olympics 2004

1. Introduction

Athens is one of the small metropolises in the world and on the European continent (with a population of 3,500,000 in 2001) and its problems therefore can be solved, despite the difficulties which naturally exist in such cases. The particular features of Athens's case are on the one hand its internal disorganization and, on the other hand, the disproportionate size of its population as well as other factors, in relation to the rest of the country, compared to other European metropolises. However, its relative importance as regards to Greece does not ensure it a comparable place on an international scale. According to all studies done on sorting and classifying European cities, the Athens urban conglomeration is merely a regional metropolis of small international importance (VERHILLE, P., et al 1995).

During the last ten years the metropolitan area of Athens, has been the place of a tremendous urban development mostly due to the preparation of Olympic games of 2004. In this regard, great efforts have been made, focused, on the one hand, on the successful organization of the games, and on the other on the over all restructuring and reshaping of the city in order to achieve a higher level of operation as a new emerging regional metropolitan center in South East Europe and Mediterranean.

In this framework and provided the urban development practices established in Greek cities during the post war period (see next chapter 2), the main question which is raised today is the following: Will those implemented projects –on the occasion of Olympics- be strong enough to change the image of the city, to improve urban life in all its quantitative and qualitative aspects, to influence traditional political and cultural attitudes and serve as an antidote to the socio-economic fragmentation of Athens ? The paper is trying to answer to this question by examining the utilization of the new infrastructures and installations (after the games) and formulating suggestions for the Greek capital taking into account its role in Mediterranean basin in the near future.

2. Postwar urban development in Athens

Even though Athens has been the capital of the Greek state from the beginning of the 19th century it has only been growing into a metropolitan centre mainly after the post-war period (second half of the 20th century) during which Greece achieved high economic growth rates. Thus in the last decades Athens constitutes an urban metropolitan centre, excessively large relatively to the size of the country, that dominates with its hegemonic presence the Greek urban system. About 35% of the country's population is concetrated in Athens while its special influence on the economic, cultural, social and technological growth is of course much bigger.

This city's giantism is mainly based on the socio-economic conditions that prevailed straight away after the Second World War and the Greek civilian war that immediately ensued. Big currents of internal immigrants from the rural regions were assembled in the basin of Athens while the state, the public institutions and the local government did not manage to organize their housing settlement in a rational way. Thus, during that period, there is a series of facts/problems such as the implementation of a big scale urban extensions, the dramatic increase of the building coeficient and of the height of buildings and the appearance of

illegal construction at the fringes of the built-up area, which accomodates mainly people with low incomes. Precisely at those areas begin to establish not only big industrial units but also smaller industries and sweatshops that become spots of pollution and trouble with harmful effects for the residents. On the one hand the state mechanism –also undermined and worn down by the political party cliental system– is unable to plan for sufficient housing programs for labour residence and, on the other hand, it is incapable to control the illegal buildings that spread everywhere. Generally the city grows in an anarchic way to all directions.

Overall, the city's structure and operation (as well as its internal spatial divisions) do not create suitable working and living conditions according to the European models. As a result, since the mid 70's the quality of life is increasingly downgraded, giving rise to atmospheric pollution and other environmental problems (unsuccessful solid and water waste management). The urban landscape resembles that of a third world country's. The architecture of multistoried buildings and blocks of flats dominates the scenery and it is monotonously repeated along the breadth and width of the whole urban tissue. At the same time with the settlement of new internal immigrants it starts the creation of a spatial segregation that expresses a distinct and explicit social segregation. People with low income occupy the western part of the basin, whereas people with high income occupy the eastern part. As a result the city is divided into two parts: Eastern and Western Athens expressing two different worlds. Apart from the centre where public spaces and tertiary services of high quality are situated, the remainder of the urban tissue is made of a pastiche or a stitching together of 'urban villages' in juxtaposition, an urban patchwork equipped with primitive transport systems, and insufficient infrastructure and social services.

Only after the fall of the dictatorial regime (1974) it begins a serious effort to control that situation and to start an urban policy planning that is based on the country's new Constitution that involves basic changes and introduces new innovative institutions and policies regarding land use and residential areas. The 70's and 80's is a period of planning interventions that come as a result of the country's economic growth but also of its integration in the European Communities. The Master Plan and the Environmental Protection Plan for Athens are drawn and legislated. Despite that, the results are less than those expected by all competent authorities because the land speculation system continues being powerful, while the general social attitude acts as an accomplice, which leaves no margins for improvement and rationalisation. Thus we reach the 90's where the wish of undertaking the Olympic Games, together with the implementation of European Union's policies and the associated financing, lead to new urban interventions that signal a third important development period for the urban region of Athens (see Table 1).

Table 1: Main Periods of Urban Planning Development in Athens

Duration	*Type of urban planning development*
1st period 1950-1974	'Wild' and uncontrollable urban development
2nd period 1975-1995	New inventive legislation for spatial planning policy
3rd period 1996-2004	3rd CSF projects and Olympic Games preparations
4th period 2005-	4th CSF projects- post-Olympic period

3. Urban Interventions in view of the Olympic Games

Given the aforementioned development and the possibilities made available to the political, administrative and social system, from the mid 80's the authorities in Athens began to think and to program the undertaking of the Olympic Games, initially by placing –without success– a candidacy in 1996 (marking the end of a century since the modern Games started in1896). Then, in the 90's (in 1997) it was agreed that the Olympic Games were to be organized in Athens, in 2004 and preparations began in earnest ('planning under pressure').

With regards to financing, that period is favourable because the government has decided to allocate for the Games a large sum of money from national resources (the budget of which is continuously revised higher and higher reaching to around 5 billion Euros). It also ensures significant Community resources from the 3rd Community Support Framework (CSF) from which will be drawn large sums of money to be used mainly for transport infrastructures. As it appears from Table 1 more than 50% (2,605,490 Euros) were spent on urban intervention projects. It is true that without the undertaking of the Olympic Games 2004 Greece nevertheless would have proceeded in the construction of many infrastructures that were planned in the 3rd CSF. However it is equally true that the Olympic Games provided a tremendous impulse accelerating the construction and completion of many projects that would have otherwise remained on the Greek calends! On the other hand the submission file of Athens's candidature compelled the Greek administration to proceed with infrastructure works of urban transport as well as the city's embellishment so that it was suitable in order to host the Olympic Games. An illustrative example of the pressure applied by the International Olympic Committee to Greece is the construction of the tram in Athens (which begins in 2002 only two years before the Games) and the suburban railway, so that the Olympic athletic installations be connected to a rail transport system (Teloglou 2004). The conscious objective of all city's institutions (public and private) is that the city should be profited, given this opportunity, on the one hand by promoting its position and role on the international scene and, on the other hand, by recovering the lost public spaces in order to improve the quality of life of its citizens and visitors. That is to say, an effort was made during planning to leave certain urban advantages to the city.

The major problem presented at the start was of course not the financial –as one would have expected– but the problem of organization and co-ordination of the activities of the involved institutions. Once more, it is shown that planning (and not finance) is the basic-decisive factor for the realization of large urban projects. In this connection it should be noted that in the process of constructing the urban interventions and projects, pertaining to this article, the institutions responsible were mainly the Games Organising Committee, the Ministry of Culture with its specially consisted Olympic Games Secretariat in addition to the already existing Secretariat of Sports, the Ministry of Environment Planning and Public Works (YPEHODE), with its Secretariat of Public Works that undertook the largest load, and the Ministry of Transports with its various organizations and services. Of course there was also participation of other secondary institutions. It should be noted that in order to carry out the very big projects and infrastructures, such as the Metro or the new Athens Airport, special institutions were created in the shape of companies controlled by the state, because obviously it was impossible for the usual administrative and technical services of ministries to carry them out given their lack of essential know-how and experience but also their inflexibility to employ personnel on bigger wages than those in the public sector. As a conclusion there was a problem of governance and of coordinated management.

Subsequently there was planning for purely athletic projects directly related to the Games, and also for other projects indirectly related to them, which improved the city and the urban environment where they took place. According to the Master Plan (see Map 1.), the basic

poles of development of athletic and non-athletic uses as well as urban interventions (projects) in the basin of Athens were: the city's historical Centre (C) , the Faliron bay (F) at the seafront, the central Olympic installations (O) in Marousi, the Olympic village (V) in the northern part of city at the roots of mountain Parnitha, and the space of the former airport in the municipality of Elliniko in the basin's southern part. Three of these poles were connected via a ring shape transport system that ran through the main trunk of the urban tissue. Of course there were other installations outside the basin's metropolitan area in the wider region of Attica (Marathon, Marcolpoulo etc).

Map 1: Master Plan of Athens Olympic Games
Source: (TEE 1997)

Among the studies of strategic planning, concerning the projects that should have been completed so that the city's 'image' were to be changed, we note the one assigned by the Organization of Athens Master Plan (ORSA) to the department of Urban Planning at the University of Thessaly. This forecasted the realization of a series of urban rehabilitation/renewal projects, at a small and medium scale, of a total cost approximately 300 million Euros. Of course there were other projects that emerged from the cadidacy and all of those that came along the way. Needless to say that each project often went through qualitative and quantitative modifications depending on the problems and the difficulties that were presented.

In conclusion, during this decade (1996-2004) 60 major urban and architectural projects have been lunched in order to solve traffic and environmental problems, to improve quality of life for all inhabitants, increase competence within international economic milieu and achieve sustainability. These projects were of three types or categories (BERIATOS, E. – GOSPODINI, A. 2004):

a) 'Conventional' projects concerning the improvement of functional dimension of urban space (new metro and tramway network, express ways, interventions embellishing open public spaces, etc).

b) Projects aiming at the enhancement of the built heritage such as conservation of historic buildings, integration and unification of monuments and archeological sites of the city center in combination to a network of pedestrian roads in order to create a 'cultural' itinerary in the heart of the city.

c) Projects based on an innovative design of space at architectural or urban scale (in particular the projects based on the design outcome of a contract with an architect-planner of national and international reputation (e.g. Calatrava's designs) or the winning schemes of national/international competitions).

Table 2: Classification of projects and investments

Project category	Total number of projects	Total investment (in million Euros)	Percentage of total investment
a category	21	127,35	4.89 %
b category	25	1.577,17	60.53%
c category	14	900, 97	34.58%
Total sum	60	2.605,49	100%

Source: BERIATOS, E. – GOSPODINI, A. (2004) (adapted by the author of this article)

As it emerges from Table 2 (classification of projects and urban interventions), from the total of 60 projects that where totally or partially realized in the Athens Basin, 46, that is to say the overwhelming majority, concern the enhancement of built heritage (=21) and innovative design (=25), which are used as modern 'weapons' for the so called *city marketing* (competitive projects) while the remainder 14 are projects indifferent with the international competition of cities (not competitive projects). Indeed, architectural heritage and innovative design, showed great possibilities to enhance the tourist economic growth of cities and the 'local identity', and so, have been considered the as basic 'tools' in the strategic urban planning of cities aiming at the improvement of a city's positioning on the international scene.

4. The legacy of 2004 Games and the new challenges/prospects

The future of the athletic facilities

The main question concerning the Olympic legacy is whether the Olympic projects –athletic and non-atheletic– have contributed in the city's needs. Which projects conform to the objectives of the present Master Plan and which do not. Also which projects (whether they existed in the initial file of candidacy or not) should have been carried out and they have not (e.g. the Eleonas -'olive grove'- area) (see picture 1). Without doubt there have been mistakes in planning as well as a lot of changes and of course the final result contains both positive and negative aspects. Today it is a common ascertainment that in this effort's gains are recorded the improvement of the city's transport infrastructures, the construction of

many buildings that can be used for athletic and other uses, as well as the renovation of public spaces and the restoration of buildings' façades even by clearing them from the illegal and unaesthetic billboards (see Picture 2). In the negatives are documented, among others, the loss of free terrains, the failure to increase the urban green spaces, the failure to enhance the seafront in all its extent, the non-exploitation of the modern technological possibilities thanks to one *ex nihilo* construction of the Olympic Village (that is to say a small city of 15,000 residents) etc. There were litteraly important opportunities for the city that went to waste (Romanos 2004).

Picture 1. The 'Eleonas' (olive grove) area in Athens agglomeration.
Source : Ministry of Environment and Planning (YPEHODE) 1997

At this point there are two important issues. First, a lot of permanent and 'heavy' structures were built, particularly for specialised sports, while it was known that they would be used only once. In other words, there has been no use of provisional architectural structures which would have had a small cost and they would have been removed after the Games. Second, there is a huge difficulty to discover new uses of the permanent and specialised building infrastructures. On this issue it should be noted that at present there is under way a process of public competitions for the exploitation of the Olympic real estates. Responsible for this process is the 'Olympic Real Estates AE' (a special institution established exactly for this purpose). According to the company's information only private companies and businessmen have expressed interest whereas other social institutions such as municipalities, prefectures, athletic associations and federations are absent from these competitions. Based on the proposals received so far, an indicative report in the proposed new uses that the existing structures-shells will assume (of course undrgoing modifications), are the following: the Ministry of Health in the Media centre, a Commercial centre and the Sports Museum in the Radio-Television Centre, Bowling and Cinema Centres in the roofed stadium, University installations (laboratories etc) in the Weight Lifting Centre, a Conference

Centre in the Tae Kwon Do roofed gym, Concerts and spectacles in the Badmington Roofed Gym, etc.

Picture 2. Buildings' façades and advertising billboards (before and after restoration)
Source: EAXA 2003

Urban mobility and Mass Transit Systems

Concerning the infrastructures of transports, it should be stressed that particularly the public transport (underground, tram, suburban railway) constitute the 'heavy heritage' of the Games. The residents of Athens that up to 1999 were mainly commuting by bus and trolley have already in their disposal a new network of public rail based transport connecting the city with the airport. However the beneficial effect of this network does not appear to be important still because there is only a small increase of residents using public transport. Another reason is that, two years after the Games, essentially there has been no serious effort to extend the Metro and Tram network, mainly to the direction of the neighborhoods of Western Athens that is the most downgraded region of the metropolitan area. Also, there has been no real increase or improvement to their equipment (wagons, etc). Moreover the unification between the two networks, those of the Metro and of the old Electric Railway has still not been realized whilst their management is done by two different companies.

The Urban Environment

Concerning green spaces, Athens lost a unique opportunity to acquire an environmental and ecological identity/appearance even though there were available the economic resources and the technology for the application of new practices and innovative solutions in the management of water and solid waste. Also there was inactivity in the exploitation of alternative sources of energy in comparison to Australia's Sydney where 40% of the Olympic's village energy consumption had as its source the sun and the wind! Furthermore, there was no use of ecological vehicles running on electricity or natural gas, as in Syndey where there was a fleet of 240 such vehicles. Finally, the thousands of trees and bushes planted during the period of the Games (temporarily changing the urban landscape, and that only in certain areas) have already dried out! In this case too, either there was wrong planning (plants needing plenty of water were used in city with semi-dry weather) or certain

programs for planting the appropriate plants for the city's weather were not applied. Generally, with pretext the time pressure and the tight time-schedules, practices were followed and projects were done that are not compatible with the vision of a Green Olympic Games.

The New Challenges

In Athens –due to time pressures but also due to particular administrative and social conditions– a 'scattered model' and a strategy of 'multi-nuclear urban reshaping and regeneration' where chosen which, unfortunately, have not yet shown their effectiveness. The planning model adopted was of course different from that of Barcelona, where all the efforts were focused in the upgrading of a large downgraded area in the city. In the case of Athens –even though there were downgraded areas– the projects that were connected, directly or indirectly, with the city's preparation for the Games, are found scattered in the entire urban tissue. However, according to international experience, the positive repercussions from the new type of interventions for the urban development of a city are multiplied when the investments in projects of cultural infrastructure, spaces of recreation and sports etc, are focused in a specific place. The aforementioned ascertaination for the ' scattered model of Athens, as well as the lack of early –before the games– planning, leads to a different handling and strategy of exploitation of the Olympic's legacy at the post-Olympic period. Thus the main axes of priority should be the following:

- Continuation of the urban interventions that began but were not completed to the extend still needed by the downgraded city (mainly rail-based infrastructures: tram and metro), as well as unification of archaeological sites and green spaces, which facilitates the living and working conditions of residents. (All Olympic cities that did not abandon urban planning after the super-effort of the Games benefited from it. This is the key-tactic).

- Systematic effort utilizing certain installations with new ideas concerning their specific uses in the future, which fall mainly into three categories: (a) Those that will remain for athletic needs (e.g. the central installations), (b) those that will be used exclusively for cultural or related activities such as conferences, etc, (c) those that will constitute poles of attraction for new modern commercial and economic activities (international exhibitions, etc). At those poles the private sector's contribution could be decisive. (For example all the large cities in Italy have their Fiera, a large urban exhibition and commercial complex. A corresponding Fiera does not exist in Athens).

- Possibility and opportunity for a model of urban re-organization of neighborhoods with high quality build environment, ensuring continuity and improvement following the examples of the Olympic village and the village for the people of the press (in the latter private investments could play a very important role).

5. Conclusion: Towards a polycentric metropolis for tourist and cultural services

It appears that the post-Olympic Athens is following the way of metropolitan growth that has as a peak the services of tourism, recreation, culture and trade. The Olympic Games certainly gave a new impetus to the growth of the building construction sector as well as to the tertiary activities and, mainly, to tourism. The importance of the tourist sector in the Greek economy is confirmed in the fact that it constitutes the 16% of GNP and the 18% of employment. Greece occupies the 15th place in the world classification of arrivals: in 2004 it accepted 13 million tourists, 90% of which were from European countries. However, the high rates of tourist growth observed in Barcelona related to the Olympic Games were overwhelmingly superior. Inspite of all these, in Greece the rate of increase of tourist

movement in 2005 (in relation to 2004), at 7.5%, is considered satisfactory. Also, according to data from the Institute of Tourist Researches and Forecasts, in 2006 the increase will still be higher and it will reach the 8%, while the number of tourists will reach roughly to 14 million presenting thus a steady rising.

Athens as the country's major tourist and cultural destination has a need from infrastructures that will strengthen its position and image in the Mediterranean and European space. This however needs a series of interventions in order to acquire an attractiveness and a qualitative urban structure and function. Thus the urban projects constitute an important tool in this direction. The dilemma between the policy of expansions and that of renewals appears to be surpassed as the international experience considers them as parallel processes with the condition that they are connected and they have qualitative targets. In this spirit, the spatial development strategic plan that was prepared recently by the National Technical University of Athens (EMP) proposes: organized renovation of the centre, development of large green and recreation spaces, creation of supralocal centres of services and trade. Also an essential element of proposals that concerns territorial arrangements should be the set up of a structure of metropolitan governance that will restore organazational unity and contribute to a single and integrated management of the Athenian metropolitan center.

Finally it should be added that any growth and modernization of the city should take advantage of the resources of the 4th CSF and should have an interrelation with the national policy of spatial planning and of polycentric development for the whole country. This is particularly important as Athens demographicaly constitutes half of the country and economically and socially comprises the two thirds of the country. Therefore any and every intervention to the Athenian centre has direct ramifications to the Greek periphery.

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