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The role and different aspects of urban design in Athens urban growth

Introduction

Industrial cities, as the cores which provided the prosperity in developed countries, were shaped or reshaped, by a rational planning, which formed the base of their socio-economic functionality and their social contract.

In semi-peripheral countries, a different social contract, defined the urban contexture by the predominance of spatial self-regulation, urban dualism and broad socio-spatial discrepancies. The planning was materialized by an illustrating form, mainly on the city centres.

Certain approaches, have shown thoroughly the incompatibility of rational planning with urban growth in the cities of semi-periphery, specifically in Greece[1][2]; furthermore, the nature of their illustrating design, is linked to approaches pointing out to the incapacity of European colonial cores to reproduce itself on the urban extension[3], to the promotion of national ideologies through the image of capital-cities[4], to the need but also the distortions of progress imitation[5] and to the structural and consolidating usefulness of self-proving the legitimacy and convergence of semi-peripheral nations with developed world, with an illustrating mixture of the national and universal narratives of modernity[6].

During the post-industrial era, the decline of productive role of cities, leads worldwide to the recession of urban rationalisation, for a strategic planning, focused to the urban illustration mainly of centres, mixing post-modern expressions of the local, the national, the global and seeking to increase the attractiveness of cities towards the factors and the investments of global post-industrial economy. At the same time, the rise of urban socio-spatial discrepancies becomes also a global symptom.

This global post-industrial urban experience and its approaches[7] helps to a wider understanding of the nature of illustrating urban design of Athens: as it is argued in this paper, the tracking across the time of its urban evolution, confirms not only its semi-peripheral contexture, but also the presumption that the strategic use of illustrating urban design by the state and the capital, for the increase of attractiveness of cities to the international economy is not a recent practice.

The illustration on 19th century

The planning of the 19th century's neoclassical Athens was shaped by king Otto's power and carried out rapidly and with effectiveness, in the base of an illustrating urban design, by the guidance and the financing of the Greek bourgeoisie of Diaspora, while the peripheral space of city was left in the speculation and self-regulation[8].

This illustrating urban design of Athens was the product of the consent and synergy of state and the bourgeoisie, in an era of ideological, cultural and economic extroversion of Greece that simultaneously was the first period of economic globalisation[9].

By this illustrating design, the state acquired a capital-city that epitomised

optimally the national ideology, expressed by the dipole "classical Greece and European progress"[10] for its imposition to the country and its projection abroad. The bourgeoisie of Diaspora, witch's the role was to serve the European trade in the Eastern Mediterranean region, acquired a national identity and settlement, historical justification, prestige, security and the prospects of a future extension.

The periphery of Athens, where the terms to form such consent did not exist, was left in the speculation by the local landowners and the lower middle class who formed the social base of the permanent uncontrollable urban extension[11].

The illustration of dreams

The period from the end of 19th century until 1922, is marked by an abundance of illustrating planning projects for the reshaping of Athens to a great capital-city, which despite a wide long-lasting publicity, remained barren, in a time of rapid, uncontrollable urban growth.

In the economic sphere, the international geopolitical transformations oriented the investments of the Diaspora in Greek territories[12][13]. Thus result to transform the Diaspora to a national bourgeoisie, witch's vital economic space was Greece itself, and this fact was interrelated with the wars that led to a spectacular extension of the Greek territory and population, followed by some great expectations of development.

In the context of a new introvert national ideology[14], as Greece, attempted to became a European power, Athens did not represent anymore the common place of "classical Greece and European progress", but the candidate capital-city of "the five seas and the two continents", foreshowing then an abstract, idealistic urban form, equally uncertain to the overweening national ambitions: so the real value of the utopian urban visions for the transformation of Athens to a great European metropolis, was the promotion of the national vision for a "Great Greece".

The city itself, was already absolutely controlled by the bourgeoisie and lower middle class, which speculated heavily in the economy, the land and housing[15][16] especially of the instable, floating and feeble proletariat, which's special nature led to keep it out of demands and struggles for urban reforms[17].

The time of introversion

The lack of illustrating urban design and the failure of rational settlement for over half a million of the Asia Minor refugees marks the period from 1922 to 1940.

The international and local economic conditions, led the urban illustration to be useless: the destruction of overweening national ambitions, by the 1922 defeat, left the unaccomplished illustrating urban design of previous period meaningless, while the collapse of international economy, that had led to closed national economic systems[18] thwarted the expectations of foreign investments, keeping the role of Athens as the common place of country with the West, inopportune.

Either by the urban illustration or the rational planning, the motives to increase the attractiveness of the capital-city were vanished. During this time Athens, in a mutually supplied process of explosive endogenous economic growth[19], monopolized the field of Greek investments and the prosperity aims of the crowd of refugees and internal immigrants. In this process, the high priority of state and the bourgeoisie was to control the flood of popular classes, who presented a major political threat. Thus the urban policy was focused on the one side to the protection of the housing areas of the middle and upper classes[20][21][22] and on the other, to the territorial isolation[23] and to the political

incorporation of popular layers, by the promotion of self-housing[24] and small size third economy.

Post-war extroversion and illustration

Post-war Athens, became the field of an explosive, self-regulated and self-financed urban growth, while its centre was rapidly reshaped with effectiveness, through an illustrating urban design.

The post-war geopolitical position of Greece shaped the official national ideology, which placed the overall identity of Greek people in the West. As the quick rise of international economy[25] attended the free mobility of people, goods and money, the objective of a rapid economic growth, as the prerequisite for the political stability in a ruined and divided post-war Greece, involved the creation of conditions to attract investments and tourism from abroad and workers from the Greek periphery, who already had the alternative to immigrate abroad.

So resulted therefore, the need of a territorial pole -that fatally was Athens-which in functional level, would combine, the advantages of developed West with the advantages of country for the foreign capital, the tourism and Greek workers and in the level of image would promote Greece in the West, the West in Greece and the cultural and political unity of both sides, everywhere. This context resulted to a strategy combining the urban illustration and a land and housing policy.

The illustrating urban design was assembled by a sum of local projects[26] that in combination with new "high level" architecture[27] promoted for another time after 19th century, the dipole of "classical heritage and modern progress", leading to transform the centre of Athens to a CBD for the modern service sector, promote the tourism and the constructions economy.

The housing and land policy promoted the self-regulation, self-financing and self-construction, which in combination with the illustrating design led to a flood of interior immigrants, a rapid economic growth based mainly on constructions, a wide social incorporation and peace, but also increased seriously, the chaotic urban reality of interwar[28].

A series of ambitious programmes aiming to the urban rationalisation of Athens area proposed that period, did not have any chance[29][30] as they did not find any political or economic bases.

Deindustrialisation, introversion and decline

By the middle of '60s up to the end of '80s, the illustrating urban design of Athens' centre was abandoned. This period is marked by successive waves of institutions, programs and studies for the rationalisation of Athens area and the regional development of Greece, while the urban growth continued to evolve through the self-regulation, illegal and marginal construction, clientalism and land market speculation, worsening the urban crisis.

The intensive, adventitious urban growth, was led to the accumulation of functional and social problems[31][32] that resulted to threat the political stability[33] and rise the cost of industrial production. Thus initially, the idea of decentralisation emerged as the optimum choice to secure political control and economic growth, foreshowing for the capital-city a new executive economic role[34]. However, from 1973 the international economic crisis, rendered useless the efforts of regional industrialisation, cancelling the executive prospects of Athens, which was already in a track of decline.

In the same period, responding to the increasing popular demands for urban space reforms[35][36], emerged a wide debate, followed by new institutions of

planning, studies and projects, for the territorial rationalisation of Athens area[37].

As in the interwar period, the international crisis coincided to a new cycle of economic and cultural introversion in Greece. In a process where the capital was withdrawn and the state, after 1974, was roughly forced to undertake its roles, the debate for Athens' urban future, after an almost twenty year's old course of fermentations and pronouncements, led to an ambitious, radical institutional frame. This frame, based on the dipole of regional decentralisation and urban rationalisation of Athens, was presented as a national wide mean of social transformation[38].

Although in a time of international, industrial and urban crisis, the economic, tourist and demographic discharge of Athens was an easy job, the target of rational planning did not achieved as the central idea shaped a contradictory and illusory dipole: the target of decentralisation, was incompatible with the rationalisation of Athens, that would render it more attractive for people and investments in a time where almost the only investor was the state, seeking for the regional development. This contradiction, meant that the failure of the rational planning of Athens[39][40][41][42] was due.

Globalisation, extroversion and illustration

From 1990, the entire institutional frame of territorial rationalisation of Athens and the idea of decentralisation was informally transmuted to an urban design, focusing in a high degree to the image of the capital-city, achieved with impressive rapidity and effectiveness. This planning virtually restored the ideological dipole of "classical heritage and global progress" in two levels, both having a major symbolic and illustrating value: the preparation of Athens for the Olympic Games in metropolitan level and the "unification of the archaeological sites" in the historic core; furthermore, this process is accompanied by an unprecedented for Athens blossoming of international high architecture, financed so much by the state what by the private sector.

The '90s entered Greece in a new cycle of economic extroversion, coming mainly from the wide awareness of threats and opportunities created by the post-industrial era and the economic globalisation. This context assembles a wide consent to introduce the country with favourable terms in the global economy, witch according to the semi-peripheral character of Greece (weak civil society etc) instead to be transformed to multilateral consents, widening the viable socio-spatial and economic upgrade, formed a unilateral partnership between state and capital. This partnership, seeks to profits from the regional leading role opportunities, and the urban development, aiming to transform Athens to a Global City[43] according to the neo-liberal urban doctrines[44][45][46][47]. This is why this strategy could be arguably accused for lack of viability, namely for ignoring the possibilities, the dynamics and the demands of local societies, focusing to the land speculation and the advantageous areas of city, ignoring the downgraded urban areas and their populations, increasing the socio-spatial discrepancies etc. Furthermore, from this viewpoint, the ideological (globalisation, multi-trans-culturalism) and legitimising (modernisation, European convergence) role of this strategy appears necessary and obvious.

Conclusion

The illustrating urban design in Athens is linked exclusively with the times of economic extroversion that depend from the rising phases of international economy, seeking to increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of capital-city in the international market.

As the "fund capital" of Greek independence, was the classical heritage, the election of Athens as capital-city was the first step of its planning; classical heritage was the major element, of its urban design which illustrated the national ideology, through the dipole of "classical Greece and European progress". Thus modern Athens became since then the "common place" between Greece and Western world and this property was permanently embedded to the image of its city core.

So, every time that the rise of international economy creates in Greece expectations of profits, rekindling the economic extroversion, then the illustrating urban design in Athens, undertakes the mission to feature this ideological dipole with the following targets:

o To the abroad, expressing the bonds and the commitment of country to the West, creating simultaneously the conditions of attracting investments and its representatives or carriers, seeking for the Greek capital-city, a role in the international economy.

o To Greece, combining different interrelated ideological, legitimising and developmental objectives, accordingly time and place: (a)the proliferation of the predominant national ideology (b)the propagation of the social values of dominant socio-economic components (c)the increase of the Athens' attractiveness for working people, attempting a local illustration and condensation of progress and (d)the direction of development in special urban areas.

The essential similarities of post-industrial planning in Athens -witch appears inspired by recent international approaches and practices- with comparative previous experiences of the city, shows that illustrating urban design, keeps to sub serve the same historical needs of economic extroversion, leading as well to a presumption: foretime's modern narratives were promised the convergence of planning of semi-peripheral countries with the rational planning of developed world, but maybe finally the direction of this convergence is in the opposite sense.

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