

The present and the future of the Greek urban landscape

B. Ioannou & K. Serraios

School of Architecture, National Technical University of Athens

Abstract

This paper investigates the basic parameters that affect the transformation of urban forms, focusing on the elements that define the image of the contemporary Greek city. A first important group of such parameters is connected to the endogenous dynamic of the socio-economic content of the Greek cities. It is true that the mixture of gradually added layers, or piles, of the urban fabric, keeps a differentiation or diversity to an extent in an internal aspect, but also, compared to the typical sense of “European city image”, as well. A second group of parameters is connected to the recent trends and inflows from the European and international reality, which are considered to lead to a certain homogenization of the urban landscape. A main aim of the present work is to investigate this trend on the Greek paradigm. This paper adopts a case studies’ approach, organized in two stages: Initially the motives and effects which have shaped the Greek urban landscape during the past decades are described and then, in a second phase, there several recent parameters are initiated which lead to visual inputs and newer structures of the urban fabric. Finally an estimation of the size and the quality of the existing Greek fabrics’ alteration is attempted.

Keywords: urban fabric, urban landscape, Greek city, urban transformation, globalization, regionalism.

1 Pre-existing structures in the Greek urban space

1.1 Urban evolution

The basic period of the intense urbanization in Greece is located between 1950 and 1980, where the largest part of the currently functioning fabric was



produced. The image of the Greek city, as it is perceived today, has been shaped, among others, under a number of weaknesses of the Greek social and economic structures and the emerging of a planning and building control framework, as a specific routine of these structures. Especially several crucial parameters, connected to the above procedure, considering among others; the dominance of small private ownership, the high level of urban land segmentation (as a result of the uncontrolled attempt to increase land profit [7]), the urgent need for housing for the new urban population coincident to the inexistence of a correspondent, organized public intervention, and finally the particular private initiative activation, led after 1950 to the investment of significant part of GNP to the construction industry.

The biggest part of the building mass has consequently developed in a short period of about 30 years. The procedure of “antiparoché”, obviously connected to a narrow-minded demand of profit maximalization through land exploitation, was (and still is) so strong, that prevails any intension to prevent architectural or design quality in a level of each building unit and in a level of urban fabric, as well (the procedure of “antiparoché” is an institutional directive based on a deal between small property owner and constructor, according to which, the first offers his land, while the second constructs the building on his own expenditure and care, obliged, in exchange, to transfer a part of the building to the land owner).

A first output is related to the problematic building forms. The predominant building type, resulted from the above, is the “postwar polykatoikia” [2], a multi-storey apartment building, having a variety of uses beyond residence, set in touch with the neighbor buildings producing a continuous fabric (Fig. 1). The general image of an array of such buildings is characterized by fragmentation and, at the same time, homogenization constituting a “neutral” background, on which a well-aimed design, in one aspect, could give the opportunity for land marks or other identity elements to be revealed [9].

The public space narrowness emerges as a second determinant of the Greek city, connected both with the rabbit urban expansion [11] and the absence of a long-term, foreseeing urban planning. It is a fact that the planning contribution, during the 20th century, was in most of cases limited to well manage the progressive addition of a number of areas in the City Plan, just setting only their initial shapes on the urban canvas, with the minimum private property “waste”. The produced outline of the urban blocks and the streets usually ignored completely the physical characteristics of the specific areas (unfolding, streams, forest land etc) [2].

The above determinants shape a basic aesthetic and functional problem of the postwar urban fabric, the disarticulation of scales. The sense of neighborhood, as a connective element between the inhabitant and the place, is extremely weak, lacking in visible boundaries or identity and differentiation elements. Consequently, conurbations fall in a structural anarchy and a parallel reduction of spatial hierarchies’ presence in the every day image and the function of the city.



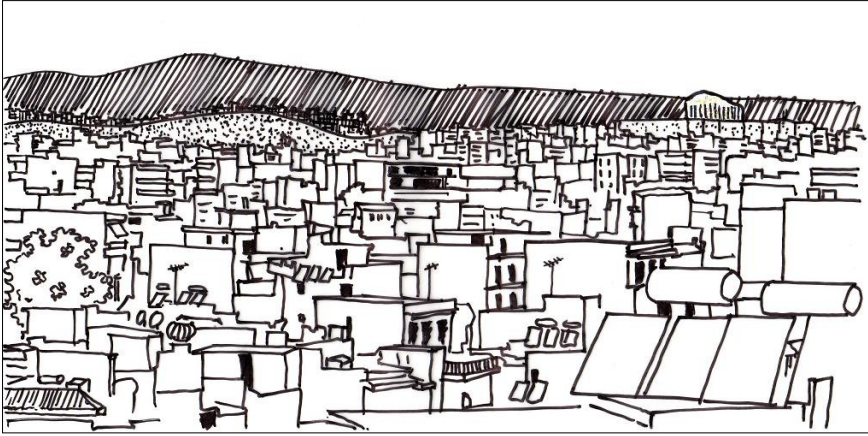


Figure 1: Characteristic view of “postwar polykatoikia” urban areas (here from Athens center). Its typical signs, among others: the recesses at the facades of the higher levels, the narrow balconies passing through the whole facade, tents (for sun protection and privacy creation), un-designed and un-used terraces, blind mid-walls, the abandoned construction skeletons and the almost completely absence of color.

1.2 Social interaction

The image of the postwar urbanization is also closely connected to the idea of the “unsolicited action” of several social groups or individuals. This is mainly expressed through the arbitrary building (individual illegal constructions) for covering housing needs. In already built areas is often revealed by slight of heavier decline from the valid building regulations (for example, floor additions, turning of open balconies to internal spaces, etc) [11, 7, 12].

More intense forms of arbitration in the urban space are occurring by encroaching upon public or private land stream or forestry or other protected zones etc, by illegal building, in or outside the City Plan.

Today, the expansion of the primary housing, arbitrary areas of mainly domestic immigrants, around the boundaries of the conurbations, is limited today compared to what happened in the past. Most of these areas have been legalized and entered the city plan, under strong social pressure, after urgent and handy planning and design procedures, considering today a huge proportion of the total urban areas’ surfaces. These areas have progressively got several basic infrastructure networks, but their legalization and the ex-ante planning and design did not manage to cure problems, on the contrary helped the increase of building densities through the replacement of small arbitrary houses by multi-storey apartment buildings on the disarticulated and problematic plot and block patterns, reproducing the lack of public spaces and social infrastructure as well as other basic amenities.

1.3 Physical landscape

Physical landscape image, enclosed or surrounded by urban areas, is a very characteristic and unique identity element for each area of the Greek city, marking in this way its form, leaving at the same time several future possibilities for further improvement of its total image.

Especially, the physical unfolding and the geophysical formations of the Greek land, normally present a specifically interesting diversity, while at the same time, offer significant virtues considering human scale and the permutation of images and impressions within the conurbations (Fig. 2).

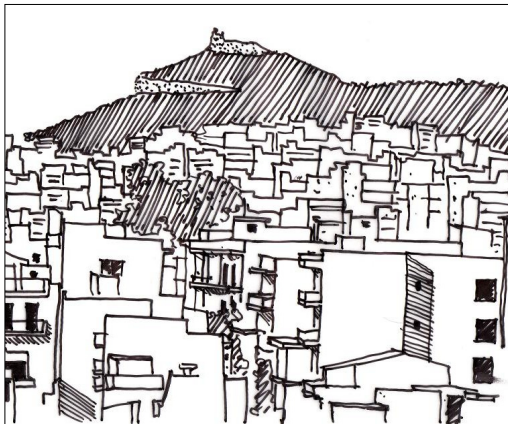


Figure 2: Athens center (left): Interesting physical elements of the Greek cities and towns contribute to the urban and aesthetic quality of the built environment. The cityscape leaves open views to the mountain and the seafront.

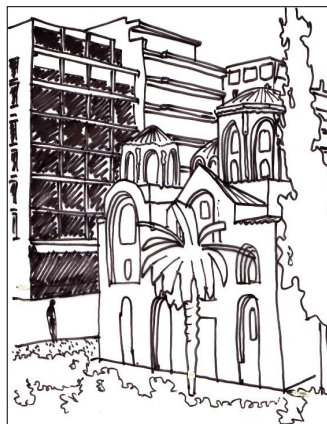


Figure 3: Byzantine Temple of “Panagia ton Chalkeon”, Thessaloniki (right): The existence of significant historical monuments spread in the urban fabric, marks city image.

The coastal landscape, equally, plays a significant role for the image of the Greek city in general, since a lot of Greek cities are identified with their seafronts. Today, is a common belief that the Greek city shall regain its relation with the sea through its seafront, [3, 8], since today an aesthetic and a functional “dialogue” between the city and the sea was in general problematic, as a result, among others, of the insufficiency of the public policies for protection, design and integration of this element as a part of the urban life.

1.4 Historic landscape

Historic sites and archaeological findings are spread over or expanded in extended parts of the build areas, while in a lot of cases, the historic fabric coincide with the contemporary traces. The image of the urban landscape is thus closely connected with the remaining of the history of each place [4] (Fig. 3), which retains its initial view completed only in a few cases of preserved historic centers.

Despite the fact that historic centers contain, normally, elements of an intense aesthetic affect and quality, marking the image of a wider urban landscape and increasing its urban and aesthetic value, the vast rebuilding procedures have vanished large parts of historic neighborhoods. This seems to make the searching for unifying, visual, functional or symbolic junctions, between the old and the new city parts, more necessary. The need, of reconnection with the past, it is more located at the urban and suburban districts of the periphery of the conurbations and at the contemporary entrances of the city as well.

2 Current trends: recent shifts

2.1 The continuous indigenous dynamic

Through the examination of several relatively recent urban expansions in Greece, we may easily realize that the implemented planning and design model, for the 21st century neighborhood, is still, the known since decades, City Plan (in Greek “Rymotomiko Schedio”, exact translation: road-cut plan). This is a result of the extremely delayed approval and implementation of these plans (due to a number of external factors or due to bureaucratic, internal processes), leading current, new-built neighborhoods to develop on 1980 designed, or earlier, fabric traces.

Simultaneously, any renewal or regeneration attempts on dense urban areas are normally limited in ineffective arrangements/ redesign of public space, avoiding more radical interventions (as for example building demolition) in favor of the public space and the revealing of the historical identity of the city [5].

Also, considering the form of the building shells, the predominant type is still “polykatoikia” and even if it has been improved in an aspect of structural, functional, aesthetic and architectural quality, responding to the contemporary dwellers’ or users’ demands, in an urban scale, especially considering the result on the city image, does not managed to achieve remarkable changes or improvements, beyond some color or morphological experiments, sometimes interesting. Some new elements, which in most of the cases were caused due to building regulation changes, consider among others, the creation of pilotis at the ground floor (mainly for covering parking needs), the balconies enlargement as well as the addition of “semi open-air spaces”, which are most of the times inelegantly and illegally closed.

2.2 Urban character shifts

The considerable improvement on urban and regional transportation infrastructure, basically, by the interventions on older, and the construction of



new, road axes, junctions and public transport means, combined to the increase of the private vehicle ownership, has benefited the development of new residential urban areas on the periphery or outside the conurbations, this time institutionally covered. Especially the non-continuous satellite developments constitute a new state of order declining from the “traditional” character of the Greek city, distinguished for its continuous and dense building fabric. A lot of the new housing areas could logically be described as low-density semi – urbanized zones of mixed residential and agricultural use, or very precisely “urban-rural fringe” [1]. Unfortunately in a lot of these cases the high densities, as well as the legal, or not, maximalisation of the plots’ building capacity, forms new residential nuclei, in which a kind of urban density is reproduced, without any sign of the advantages the “traditional” fabric has and losing the sense of compact urbanity. The implemented and still valid institutional framework, allows building outside of the city boundaries (in agricultural or uncultivated land), being certainly an additional significant reason encourages this type of development.

Urban sprawl is consequently a dominant element of the “new urbanity” of the Greek cities, that is normally located in areas surrounding important urban centers, along main road axes (for example Mesogeia – Attiki, Attiki motorway) and in secondary or vacation residential areas. Specifically the last ones, and in cases where they border with big urban centers, they eventually by mass transformation, turn into primary residential areas, which most of the times are lacking in substantial urban infrastructure. In each of these cases there are unfortunately reproduced the known weaknesses of the older fabric, with main characteristic the narrowness of the urban space and the absence of any organization in a functional and an aesthetic aspect.

The perception of “addition procedure” consists for the Greek reality an other typical phenomenon met not only in building unit scale, but very often considers wider, urban scales. Most of the recent interventions (new road axes, junctions, etc) are indeed additions, out of the familiar forms, look as they are planted in a satiated dense fabric without any care of their urban or morphological embodiment, further intensifying in this way the sense of narrowness and suffocating neighboring.

Finally, more common and intense are the alterations caused by the use of private vehicle, in the image of the contemporary urban fabric (Fig. 5). The accelerated spread of private vehicles, during a period in which Greek urbanization has reached and overtaken its core point, found a large part of the Greek cities not prepared and designed to serve the new need for increased circularity and parking. So, the already narrow public space was burdened with circulation and parking sharpening the sense of narrowness. The street, as the largest surface of public space in the Greek cities, is covered by parked vehicles, a lot of times in a proportion beyond 50% of its useful surface. Even just the simple pedestrian passing is prevailed from parking, while the image of the street is synonymous the well known image of endless rows of parked vehicles surrounds residential blocks creating an impenetrable wall between pavement and the asphalt (Fig. 4).





Figure 4: Athens/N. Smyrni (left): Differentiated «international style» of the ground floors in contradiction to the upper floors.

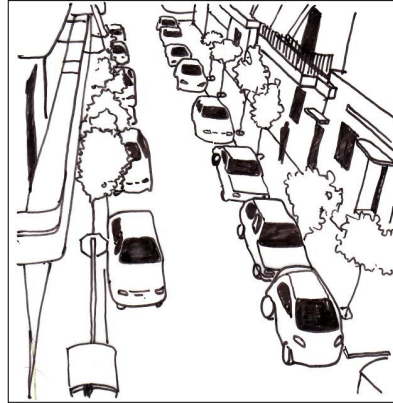


Figure 5: Athens/Keratsini (right) The endless rows of parked cars surrounding blocks.

2.3 The latest social and cultural effects: globalization and urban image

If the period before the '80s decade was characterized by a domestic migration and a late urbanization process, in our days, the strong flow of foreign economic immigrants, is a new fact for the Greek city, even if it is not yet accompanied by particularly visible manifestations within the urban space (for example neighborhoods with a special cultural of ethnic character). Meanwhile, the presence of several activities as restaurants, retail, etc, belong or attend to immigrants is spread over almost every corner of the big conurbations. Their high sprawl level could be given, among others, to their embodiment, in an extent, in the urban fabric [6]. Besides, the capability of embodiment social groups is a structural agent of the Greek case, because the contemporary urban space in Greece was never until today distinguished in clear and well-defined sub entities of a special cultural or ethnic character.

Nevertheless, the global dimension, is imported strongly in the urban space as an international style, emphasizes in several types of architectural forms (private office buildings, shops, shopping malls or multi-use complexes, etc), causing visible changes in the current form and image of the Greek city. This phenomenon is located, normally, along the basic urban roan axes (for example Kifissias avenue at Athens) attempting via "postmodern" architectural forms (glass buildings, high-tech figures etc) to promote and reveal each building unit by itself. These zones seem to be, at a perceptual level, completely disarticulated and detached from several fundamental characteristics of the rest of the fabric, as they have been described before.

At the same time, buildings that belong in a more local morphology, they get, through renewals, elements of a global language (additional or movable equipment), hosting in parallel, globalized functions as fast food restaurants, banks, services or franchise shops, etc. This interaction creates a lot of time a dual street perspective; at the pedestrian level the ground floors are characterized by light signs, glass shop windows, furniture and other equipment of an international or global style, whilst the upper floor facades retain the image of the known “polykatoikia” which is still predominant (Fig. 4).

This impression of this dual image as a simultaneous reveal of the present and the past of the city does not exist in the case of the completely new build huge shopping and recreation malls, allocated in areas with large plots (de-industrialized zones) and next to significant road arteries (for easy access by private vehicle). There is constituted an artificial urban environments detached from the image and the function of the rest of the urban space. Even though the presence of such centers in big Greek cities is already considerable, altering enough a number of benefits of the “traditional” urban life (for example open space unsolicited activities, uses and social groups mixture, etc), it is expected (based on the European experience) that the demand for such infrastructure will be turning increased during the next years.

2.4 Physical and cultural cityscape

Someone could claim that the physical landscape and the historical cityscape in the Greek cities is relatively difficult form now and on to suffer from alterations or radical changes since it is evaluated in the society’s conscious as exploitable but non-renewable resources. Nevertheless, in a local level, normally with the exception of metropolitan centers, a lot of physical and historical significance elements are still set in a second priority by the local communities, being continuously under “developments” threat (groves, interesting geological sites, streams, archaeological findings, historic ruins, etc). In any case proposed interventions consider functional integration in the urban space combined with different sorts of economic benefit. In the recent years such efforts have been done through central actions about urban design (for example Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens), but also on behalf of local authorities, in the extent that it can express citizens willing. Interventions mainly include historic sites, monuments and open public spaces. A special emphasis was given over the last years to the case of Athens, because of the Olympic Games of 2004 organization.

3 Epilogue: homogeneity, diversity and future agonies

An obvious conclusion of the above short analysis is the acknowledgment of the fact that inputs, affects and new elements in the Greek city image, during the last twenty years have not affected in the extent of constituting a vast alteration or overturn, neither a radical and determinant improvement. On the contrary a successive transformation on the city image emerges, which keeps insistently



past elements, while producing new additionally, through normally the older types and forms evolution. Additionally, the Greek city image shows to have, currently, consolidated several of its basic determinants, while most of the inputs or the new elements are not yet significantly, spatially distributed.

So, today, in a local comparative level, the image of the postwar urbanization still keeps a strong sense of homogeneity, whilst all the new inputs (footprints of globalization and multiculturalism or results of transportation infrastructure advance), be being spread, are composing by the moment the new urban diversity. But, if someone stands in a supra-local comparative level (compared to other cities of the European or global space), then it is obvious that a reverse logic that wants the above new inputs to be elements of aligning the Greek city image with the global image of the western metropolises. This is a conclusion derives also from all relevant opinions of researchers in the international level [1, 12, 14, 15].

Beyond the analysis of the recent Greek city image transformations some crucial arguments are connected with its future perspectives. It is un-doubtable that during all almost recent past (at least of the last thirty years), it is found out that the ongoing urban expansion (as the reflection of several socioeconomic needs, and in an extent the result of an increased “prosperity”), is so vast and intense that “covers” older settlements, coastal areas, forests, protected areas, etc. The consequence of this evolution on the image of cityscape is obviously overturning. Furthermore, some other agents as functionality, structure and organization, as well as the image of the city, are emerging in our days, since cities are contesting in an international competitiveness arena, in order to attract power and investments, making a lot of the need improvements indispensable. So, our future agonies are many, related with the issues of the form and the image of the urban space and the issues of the structure and the development mechanisms, as well. In this framework we could briefly set the following questions:

- Will the Greek society manage to define some minimum demands about the form and the image of the urban space?
- Will the above demands be able to be embedded in the urban planning procedure?
- Will urban planning manage to play a directive and substantial role in the procedures of the urban space evolution, stop acting patchy?
- Could our belief about “prosperity” redefined and be detached from the narrow economic benefit?
- Will we finally achieve, as citizens and social entity, to develop mechanisms of “environmental”, “planning” and “design” ethic, with the hope that the city will obtain “self-regulation” capacity?

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