

A future for Athens

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Introduction

Here are some thoughts on the future of Athens, the capital of Greece, sketching a desirable and even probable perspective of its future development. I attempt to explain why I do not believe contemporary Athens allows us to harbor radical visions and why we should just cultivate what I would describe as a modestly hopeful outlook.

Visions, especially of a town planning nature, have been in the past the product of particular social and historical conditions and circumstances. Thus:

- Early social reformers like Campanella and Thomas Morus, as well as advocates of social planning utopias in the 19th century such as Godin, Fourier and, recently, Le Corbusier, were responsible for a number of unprecedented and intellectually stimulating visions which never materialized and can more plausibly be described as intimations of a desirable future state of affairs rather than images from an inventory of feasible possibilities.
- Resoluteness coupled with extensive political power always provided a rather solid prerequisite for the design and execution of the seemingly impossible. Such is the case of Peter the Great who, in the 18th century, during the time of the so-called "enlightened autocracy," was seized by a vision of Russia's new capital in the form of a city on the Baltic swampland, a location which was to secure the country's opening to the west. The founding of St. Petersburg nevertheless represents the imposition of a vision by force at great cost to common sense and financial prudence.
- The effects of natural disasters upon cities, such as earthquakes and fires, very often led to regeneration as a means of affirming historical continuity. These conditions may at the same time form the basis for a radical reorganization and revitalization of the urban fabric: thus the planning of Thessaloniki in 1917 represents a unique urban vision in contemporary Greece which to a certain extent came to fruition. Here, once again, we see a vision being transformed into reality through the collective will and the expediency of breathing life into the urban wasteland of the great fire.

Contemporary Athens

Contemporary Athens is a totally different story. Some features contribute to the uniqueness of the circumstances that make up the Athenian setting, and do not permit the elaboration of visions:

- the existence of a pluralistic society allowing for a variety of conflicting interests which acts as a bulwark against the imposition of paternalistic or authoritarian solutions;
- a trend towards an immediately gratifying consumerism accompanied by a preference for directly accessible gains; in this context, proposals in favor of long-term planning are likely to fall on deaf ears;
- the absence so far of major natural disasters which could have led to comprehensive changes (although overpopulation and its consequences for the city are potentially disastrous).

And yet we continue to speak in terms of visions for Athens



Fig. 1: Athens downtown in 1937: Panepistimiou (University) Avenue and the classicist "trilogy" of the National Library, the University and the Academy, acting as a cultural forum for the capital.

despite the absence of conditions which are conducive to any radical urban regeneration. But more must be said on this point:

- a number of well-meaning but rather naïve architects still indulge in radical concepts, apparently not realizing that transforming a metropolis is unlike changing the façade of a building;
- more or less charismatic political figures often express their belief in large-scale infrastructure works which will extricate Athens from the grip of its present calamities; such measures as the underground, the Stavros-Eleusis urban highway and the new airport undeniably belong to this category but may only draw attention to the difference between visions and functionally necessary projects;
- few town planners have been bold enough to propose the creation of a new administrative center for Athens outside the historical nucleus, George Candilis and C.A. Doxiadis being the last ones to do so 40 years ago. Here we do have "vision" but of the utopian variety, since it is unthinkable to abandon the existing historical nucleus of a metropolitan area as long as the latter survives.

In recent times town planners in Greece have been rather more reserved with their "visions," opting for what is known as *Detached Incrementalism*, i.e. preference for localized step-by-step interventions.

I would like at this point to focus on the notion of "gradual incremental improvements" which is implicit in the concept of *Detached Incrementalism*.

I begin by asking the following question: Assuming that visions of any kind are part and parcel of different social and historical preconditions than those prevailing in Athens today and given the traumatic experiences of past decades, what after all

can Athenians justifiably believe in?

The answer lies in the direction of a gradual and circumspect process of improvement through changes affecting primarily our attitudes, as opposed to interventions related to physical planning. The culturally detrimental results of the increase by twelve-fold of the income per capita in Greece within a single generation (a startling increase, even by Japanese standards, in the level of material wealth) are well known. This form of growth is inversely proportional to the quality of life in the metropolis. What *does* need to be examined however is whether this has led to a corresponding improvement in the course of action and the attitudes that the majority of the urban population is prepared to adopt. I consider this to be intrinsically connected to the issue of whether there can be reasonable ground for hope, although I do not believe that we have, at this point, the willingness to switch to qualitatively sounder ways of living. Nevertheless, we have recently come to realize that it is not large-scale projects that lead to improvements in urban life but a shift in the choice of our priorities and objectives.

Evolution trends and signs of hope

In recent decades the town of Athens has been subjected to an almost uncontrollable building frenzy – euphemistically called "development" – which, surprisingly enough, did leave a number of distinctive features of the Athens Basin intact. These features, which were either fortuitously or instinctively preserved, make it possible to outline a number of rather optimistic perspectives in relation to a more harmonious life in the city. Thus:

- The building that has taken place within the Athens region has not caused irreparable damage. Construction has mostly



Fig. 2: The dense urban fabric of downtown Athens. In the center, on the left the National Museum and on the right the complex of the Polytechnion (Technical University).

occurred at the periphery of the metropolitan area and luckily enough projects such as the high-rise buildings of the Phaleron seafront and the out-of-scale cathedral (a Greek *Sacré-Coeur!*) that was to be built on the Tourkovounia hills never materialized. A relatively inoffensive architectural scale with areas of uniform building heights prevails. Important landmarks such as the Ilissos river or the Phaleron coast have already been sacrificed in the name of some self-annulling notion of progress. However, the first attempts to repair the gaping quarries following their closure are encouraging signs of what may follow.

In general terms: the growth of this gargantuan city has not obscured the harmonious skyline which can still be seen from the Saronic Gulf and the hills within the Athens basin. In anticipation of the sense of bafflement that a discourse on skylines may cause, I would like to qualify the above by saying that the readability of the cityscape is an existential imperative of the utmost priority.

- The configuration of hills – planted and bare ones alike – represents a construction-free zone within the basin. This is a double advantage,

- firstly in that it creates an articulation of the otherwise extremely dense mass of built space; and,
- secondly in that it allows an overview of the whole of the metropolitan area from interesting vantage points.

These hills, in combination with parks, cemeteries, alleys of trees along the central axes and the reafforested slopes of the surrounding mountains, are crucial elements of a future green belt system in a city with a grim environmental record. This mosaic of green areas is the result of the praiseworthy work of some inspired individuals over the past century. It is my belief

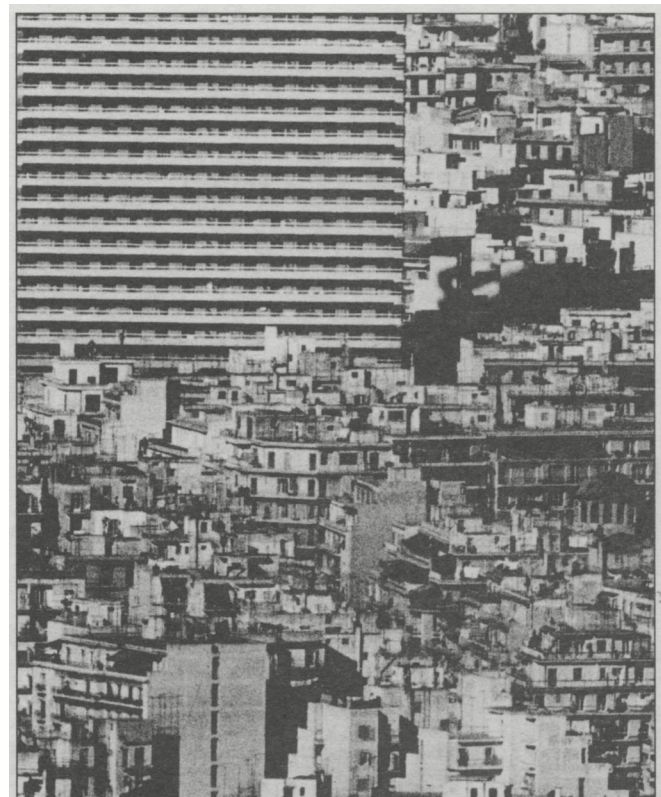


Fig. 3: A few high-rise buildings on the periphery of the inner city which are in sharp contrast with the uniform, 5-8 storey-high, built volume of Athens.

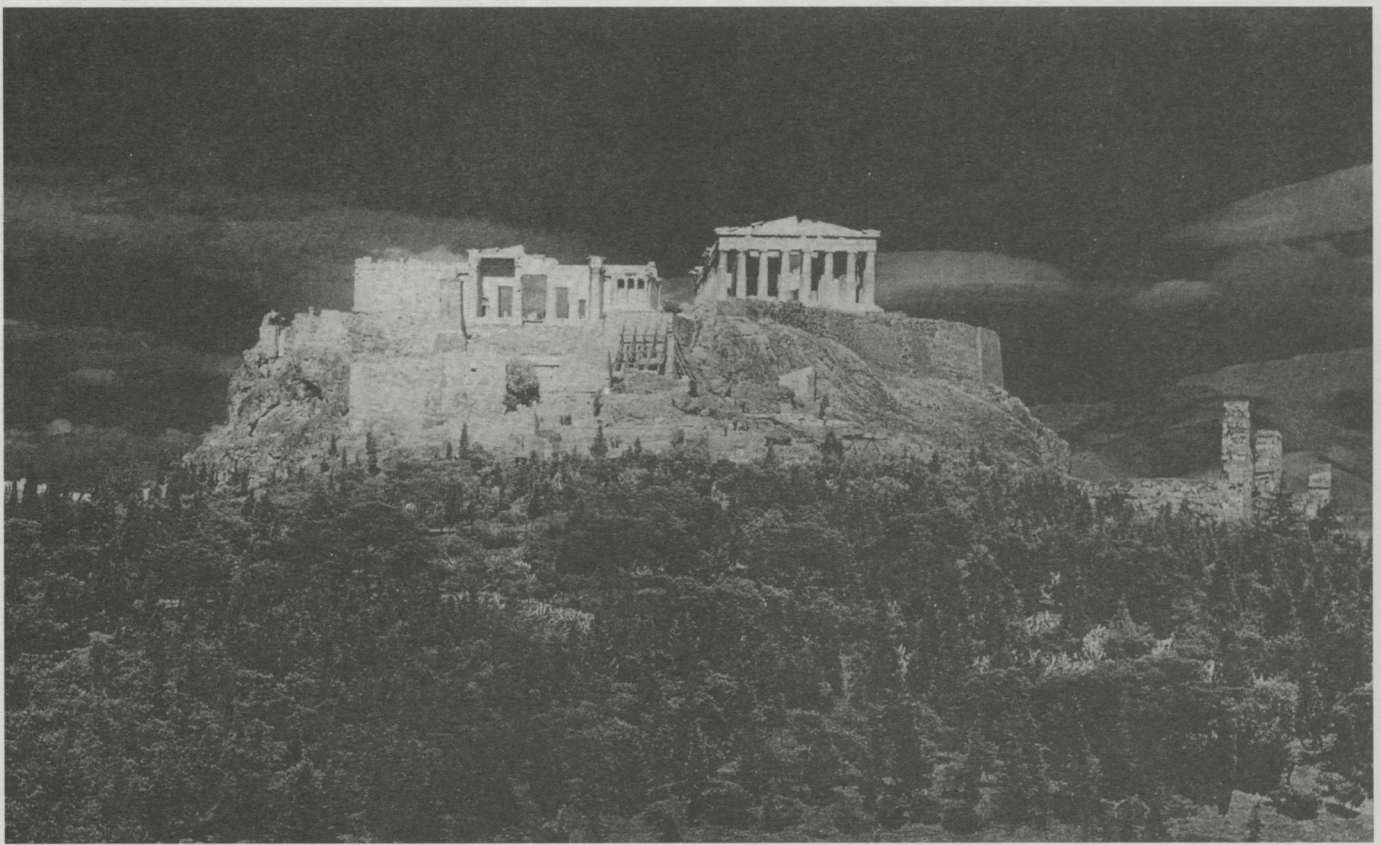


Fig. 4: A dramatic frontal view of the Acropolis from the west.



Fig. 5: The broadest avenue of the capital: Vassilissis Sophias (Queen Sophia) Avenue next to the old royal palace (today's Parliament) and the National Gardens.



Fig. 6: Aerial view of the Acropolis, the Ancient Agora excavations, the Olympeion and the Plaka, Athens old town.

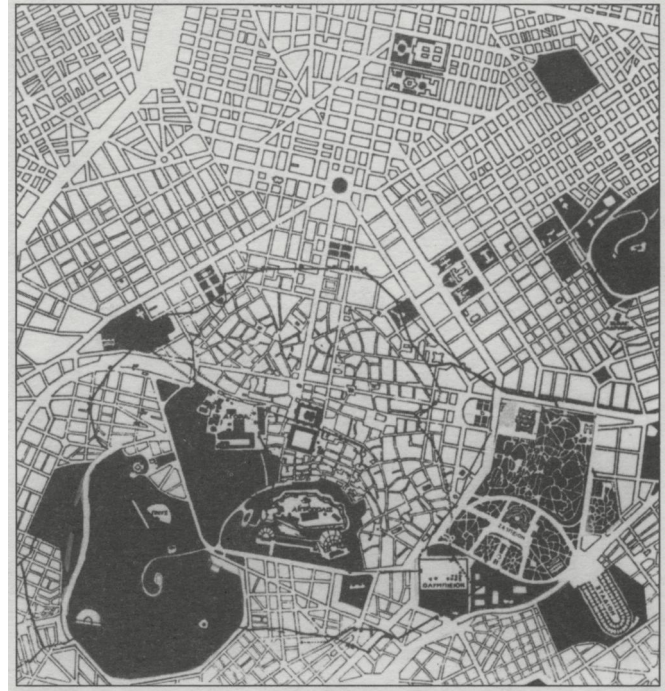


Fig. 7: Athens city center – In black: area of public parks and reforested hills.

that it should be preserved and developed as an essential part of the city's structure.

- Building within the city has created an extremely dense fabric of built volumes up to 10 stories high. This manifests itself both in the floor-area ratio of up to 7 (!) and in the extreme concentration of inhabitants (up to 1,000 persons per hectare). Needless to say, the implications of this in terms of the quality of life within the city are disastrous. Nevertheless, there is some compensation in the form of the prevalent style of architecture and the overall urban image whose dense configuration luckily does not contain any disproportionate morphological extravaganza. Historical landmarks such as neoclassical public buildings and numerous archaeological sites are surrounded by a bland and innocuous architecture of white cubical forms. Things could have been much worse! Athens was spared the architectural randomness of multiple forms, colors and materials which make up the dubious modernism on the outskirts of cities such as Madrid and Rome. Planting of trees, diligent maintenance of façades and making the most out of the numerous narrow internal courtyards represent ways in which the potential, inherent in the city's development over the past four decades, can be emphasized. This would be consistent with an initiative that has emerged over the past 10 to 15 years concerning the reorganization and the improvement of urban public space, as well as the preservation of buildings of historical significance. This spontaneous reaction represents, at the same time, an expression of a collective sense of dissatisfaction on the part of Athenians who have come to realize that this type of resoluteness may be the only available means of halting a continuous process of urban decay.

- From a functional point of view, a trend leading to an hierarchical development of sub-centers in the overall metropolitan area is under way. Its aim is to alleviate the historical center through the creation of a polycentric network of secondary nuclei. This is a challenge that so far no master plan – of which we have seen four in recent decades – has managed to meet. The first phase of this development has been particularly de-

manding in terms of expenses and effort coordination on the part of the state, which has supplied social and technical infrastructure works in the approximately 60 municipalities within the greater Athens area. Market forces, the desire to conserve the particular identity of suburban municipalities and, of course, Greek business acumen subsequently led to the creation of local markets and community centers within the periphery of the basin. This transformation of the amorphous urban body into a multi-centered metropolitan area has a clear affinity to chief planner Prokopis Vasiliadis' proposal in 1972 for the creation of "cities within the city."

- There is lastly the historical heritage of Athens to be taken into account, the symbolically laden topography of archaeological sites, the focal points created by the Acropolis, the Olympeion and the reconstructed Stadium, as well as the vernacular nucleus of the old city, the "Plaka," on the northern slope of the Acropolis. The cultural identity of Athens, which places it in the league of cities such as Rome and Constantinople, is apparent in the unmistakable aura which the city possesses. It is a feature which many central European cities have systematically tried to emphasize in connection with their cultural heritage and which has been bequeathed to Athens with its beneficial effect in recent history of bringing about the re-emergence of the city as the capital of the Hellenes.

Discussion concerning this notion of cultural identity has in recent years been shallow and ineffectual. It has included a rather nebulous intention to "unify" archaeological sites, parks, historical monuments and reforested hills for the purpose of creating a "Cultural Park," an idea which is put forward with considerable persistence and in ignorance of the fact that it is anything but new. This vision – the term is appropriate here – which consisted in the idea of a park-like historical space at the heart of the city around the Acropolis, was inherent in the inspired work of those responsible for the first city plan in 1832 (the architects Stamatios Kleanthis and Eduard Schaubert, both pupils of K.F. Schinkel), only to be lost in a quagmire of uncontrollable profiteering. The idea was then revived, with slight



Fig. 8: The rebuilt (1951-1955) ancient portico of Attalus in the Agora.



Fig. 9: The eastern part of the inner city's green belt: Olympeion, Stadium, Zappeion and National Gardens.



Fig. 10: Map of the urban pattern (built/unbuilt areas) of the Athens municipality area – In the center the Acropolis and on its northern slope the old city of Plaka and the classicist expansion of the city in the 19th century.

variations, on three occasions in the 20th century: by Thomas Mawson in 1919, by Constantine Biris in 1946 and by the Alexander Fotiadis group in 1980.

The main idea behind the creation of a Cultural Park is to display the architectural heritage whilst enabling Athenians and visitors alike to familiarize themselves with the lattice of parks, archaeological sites and older parts of the city. This combina-

tion of aims is, in principle, plausible. Its implementation does however come across a number of obstacles compared to which problems having to do with town planning (underground pedestrian passages, expropriation, issues pertaining to the formation of parks) are the least difficult to solve. The main issues such as the accessibility of archaeological sites and recreational areas to visitors are connected to the need to

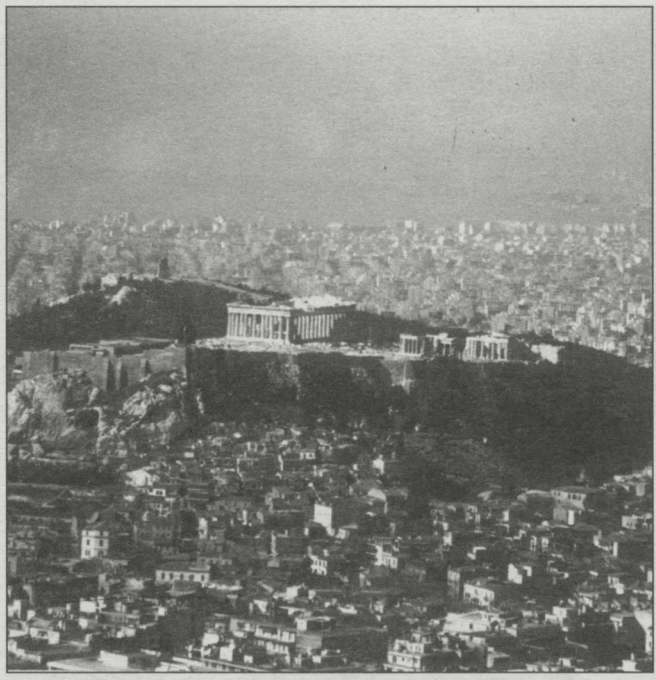


Fig. 11: The Plaka and the Acropolis from the northeast – In the background Phaleron Bay.

protect these sites – which total 350 hectares – as well as to a need to ensure that the conditions for a personal and contemplative approach to the monuments remain compatible with the presence of a large number of visitors. The eminent Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis has spoken convincingly and memorably on all these issues. It is clear that facile and populist proposals, such as the “opening” of all archaeological sites, from the Roman Agora to the theater of Dionysos on a 24-hour basis to an often disrespectful public, cannot even be thought of as a solution to the problem.

The creation of the Cultural Park does indeed represent an objective, albeit one that will be attained only through a corresponding, possibly time-consuming process of modifying people’s attitudes and sensitivities as urban dwellers. The past 150 years have seen the emergence of the necessary conditions for such a unified archaeological site through random initiatives rather than through a planned process. It is necessary for institutions and official bodies to avoid vacuous and ineffectual promises as they carry out their concerted work. This aim, possibly the only one that comes as close to being a vision, cannot be attained within 5 or 10 years but only through assiduous and inspired work over a longer period of time.

Conclusion

I have pointed out a number of conducive conditions and trends, hopeful signs of an inherently self-controlled pattern of

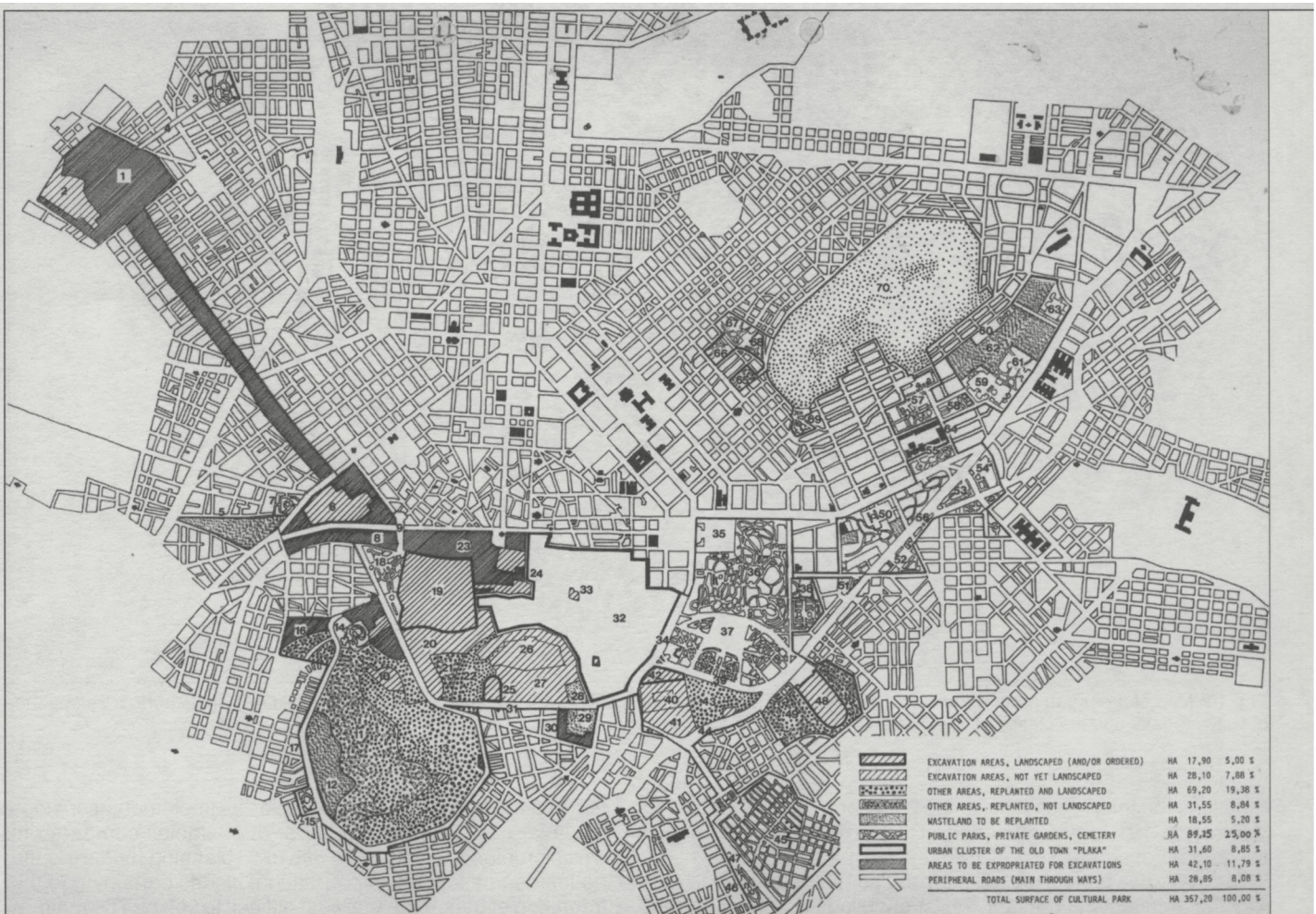


Fig. 14: The area of the cultural-archaeological part of Athens (in the process of gradual realization) – Treatment of the various areas with regard to landscaping and/or urban design.

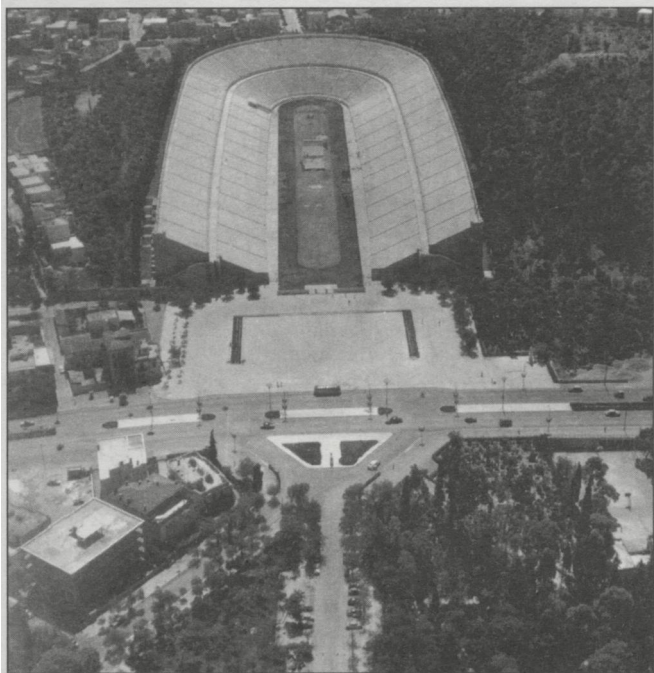


Fig. 12: The rebuilt (1896-1902) Panathenaic Stadium of Herodes Atticus.

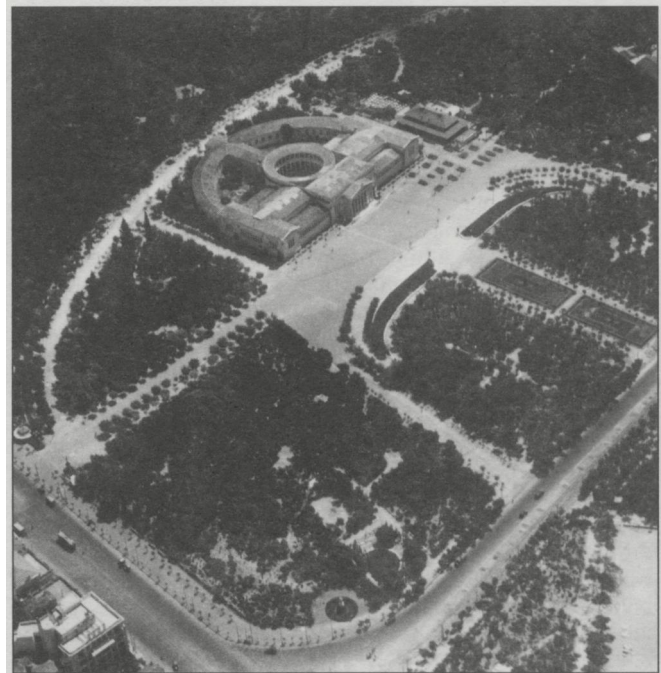


Fig. 13: The Zappeion exhibition hall and the nearby National Gardens.

The twelve sectors of the cultural-historic area – Denomination and extent by item in ha

Sector 1: Kolonos Hippios, Academy area, Dipylon-Academy road; Areas 1-4		
1. Areas to be expropriated	23.70 ha	
2. Archaeological excavations	4.00 ha	
3. Kolonos Grove	1.90 ha	
4. Kolonos Hippios-Academy road	<u>0.60 ha</u>	
Total	30.20 ha	
Sector 2: Kerameikos excavations and vicinity; Areas 5-9		
5. Area of the former gas plant	3.75 ha	
6. Kerameikos excavations area	3.50 ha	
7. Small park on Peiraios St.	0.90 ha	
8. Areas to be expropriated	6.00 ha	
9. Main roads	<u>2.40 ha</u>	
Total	16.55 ha	
Sector 3: Hill of the Nymphs, Pnyx hill and Mouseion hill; Areas 10-17		
10. Ancient monuments and sites	1.60 ha	
11. Planted, not landscaped area	22.60 ha	
12. Not planted area	5.00 ha	
13. Planted and landscaped area	18.40 ha	
14. Hill of the Nymphs	1.60 ha	
15. Small park in the Petralona district	0.70 ha	
16. Areas to be expropriated	4.40 ha	
17. Main roads	<u>5.20 ha</u>	
Total	59.50 ha	
Sector 4: Agora excavations, the Roman Agora, the Areopagus, the Acropolis with upper slopes; Areas 18-31		
18. Theseion park	2.70 ha	
19. Agora excavations	9.00 ha	
20. Areopagus and the Areopagus-Pnyx valley	5.50 ha	
21. Acropolis west slope, western section	1.70 ha	
22. Acropolis west slope, eastern section	2.80 ha	
23. Monastiraki area to be expropriated	7.00 ha	
24. Roman agora and Library of Hadrian	2.00 ha	
25. Odeion of Herodes Atticus with approach	0.90 ha	
26. Acropolis, plateau	3.00 ha	
27. Acropolis upper slopes	7.00 ha	
28. Odeion of Pericles area	0.75 ha	
29. Makryanni lot	1.25 ha	
30. Makryanni lot expropriation area	1.00 ha	
31. Main roads	<u>3.75 ha</u>	
Total	48.35 ha	
Sector 5: Plaka, the old town of Athens; Areas 32-34		
32. The old town	31.60 ha	
33. Small excavation areas	0.40 ha	
34. Peripheral roads	<u>2.00 ha</u>	
Total	34.00 ha	
Sector 6: National Garden, Zappeion Gardens, Presidential Mansion; Areas 35-39		
35. Parliament Building (formerly Royal Palace)	2.70 ha	
36. National Garden (formerly Royal Garden)	16.20 ha	
37. Zappeion Gardens	11.40 ha	
Sector 6 (cont'd)		
38. Presidential Mansion (formerly the New Palace) and garden	2.20 ha	
39. Main roads	<u>4.20 ha</u>	
Total	36.70 ha	
Sector 7: Olympeion area with the Ilissos river banks; Areas 40-44		
40. Olympeion	2.40 ha	
41. Excavation area S. of the Olympeion	2.20 ha	
42. Excavation area N. of the Olympeion	1.00 ha	
43. Athletic installations	3.70 ha	
44. Peripheral roads	<u>2.00 ha</u>	
Total	11.30 ha	
Sector 8: The First Cemetery of Athens; Areas 45-47		
45. The First Cemetery	18.00 ha	
46. Small park	1.40 ha	
47. Main roads	<u>2.20 ha</u>	
Total	21.60 ha	
Sector 9: Ardettos hill and the ancient Stadium; Areas 48-49		
48. The ancient Stadium	3.50 ha	
49. Ardettos hill and Northeastern hill	<u>6.50 ha</u>	
Total	10.00 ha	
Sector 10: The Athens Cultural Complex; Areas 50-56		
50. Cultural Center, so-called	8.70 ha	
51. Truman Memorial Grove	0.20 ha	
52. National Research Center	1.50 ha	
53. National Gallery and nearby planted area	2.20 ha	
54. Hilton area	1.40 ha	
55. Evangelismos Hospital park	1.00 ha	
56. Main roads	<u>5.30 ha</u>	
Total	20.30 ha	
Sector 11: Lycabettus lower east slope; Areas 57-64		
57. American School of Classical Studies, British School of Archaeology at Athens, Gennadius Library and their gardens	3.30 ha	
58. Petraki Monastery with garden	1.00 ha	
59. Army Hospital and garden	2.40 ha	
60. Navy Hospital and garden	1.00 ha	
61. Venizelos Grove	1.80 ha	
62. Concert Hall and vicinity	7.80 ha	
63. American Embassy and garden	1.10 ha	
64. Main roads	<u>1.20 ha</u>	
Total	19.60 ha	
Sector 12: Lycabettus, the replanted areas; Areas 65-70		
65. Schisti Petra Rock Garden	0.75 ha	
66. French School at Athens	0.80 ha	
67. Peftakia Grove	1.30 ha	
68. Pikiionis School	1.00 ha	
69. Dexameni Reservoir and planted area	0.85 ha	
70. Lycabettus, main replanted area	<u>44.30 ha</u>	
Total	49.00 ha	
Total surface of the cultural-historic area		357.10 ha

Fig. 14 (cont'd).

development of the metropolitan area of Athens despite all the technical inadequacies and the mediocrity of planning initiatives so far.

I believe that if these tendencies are strengthened and maintained we may see a slow but steady improvement in the quality of life within the metropolitan area. This is a hope we can harbor whilst keeping an eye on the task of bringing about gradual improvements. One of the necessary conditions here is familiarization with both the historical and the physical setting of the 60,000 hectare Athens basin, two thirds of which constitute the built-up area. Younger people, in particular, seem unable to appreciate the unique historical and topographical character of the area, as well as the way in which these are exemplified in the region's intrinsic nature, absorbed as they are in the "here and now" creed of indifference to the wider context. This too is one of the things that must change.

One must therefore be suspicious of the "visions" leitmotiv! But if I must conclude with a vision, a personal vision about Athens, I would like to do so by saying that it is one according to which the population within the Athens basin has decreased by one million people – both feasible and possible within the next 100 years by means of decentralization – and involves the kind of daily activity that one sees nowadays during the month of August. In such comforting future circumstances, I believe that we will be able to speak not only of visions but also of miracles!

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