

The good, the bad and the evil Athens: Quality of life in cities

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Foreword

My comments in this paper are based on some of my studies of Athens and contain some elements I deal with in a book project on Athens which has been resting for a few years due to other tasks coming in between.

The study tries to reveal some qualitative elements in the metropolis of Athens at the turn of the millennium, Good ones as well as Bad and Evil ones. I will shortly mention some of those. Athens as a city will not easily be given status as a success story, nor as an example to be followed by other cities. But maybe it still has some lessons of importance?

Introduction

Large cities and metropolises in our time are incomprehensible for most people as they are vast in extension, complex, conceived as chaotic and difficult to apprehend as "one thing." The mechanisms of the city are not transparent. What guides city development as well as the decision-making processes is not at all clear. The hows and whys are so many, resulting in only fragmented knowledge and apprehension. People living in a metropolis might learn to know the immediate neighborhood, a few routes and some of the most frequented places, but the city as such is to a little extent perceived, used or appreciated. The visitor or tourist will seek other paths to perceive and enjoy the city than the inhabitant, but will also lack the overall understanding of the metropolis, and thus not get full qualitative return.

My hypothesis is that most Athenians as well as the majority of visitors and tourists coming to Athens are in the described situation. The tourist or traveller normally has the Acropolis, other antiquities and the old Plaka district as their primary goal. The rest of the city is perceived as chaotic, confused, ugly and disturbing, due to the traffic, the noise, the pollution and the temporariness of many structures. Why not try to help the

inhabitants or the visitors to get more out of their stay, be it short or long, by giving them some clues to read the environment? My intention is to achieve this through giving information, and partial explanations into certain qualitative aspects, but also to raise questions, as not all explanations are singular or clear. As I am an architect/planner I find it fruitful to start the search for qualities in the material conditions and the physiochemical environment we can perceive but also the invisible but essential elements for our well-being, like the air we breathe.

Everything has a history, and to each facet of a city experienced there will be stories which, when told or revealed, will give us new insight. If we learn to see and learn to ask, the city and its people will come closer to us and a dialogue can start. We will discover many small or large organizations, dedicated individuals or groups who are struggling through their work and endeavors to make the city a better place to live in. We may also become aware of the influence of politics and bureaucracy for better or worse. And we will discover the counterproductive, negative elements that utilize the city as an arena for their speculative activities. The result can very often be read in the city environment.

Athens, more than the Acropolis – A short historic outline

Athens, the capital of Greece, is today a metropolis of more than four million inhabitants which is roughly 40 percent of the population of Greece. The nucleus of the city with the Acropolis in its center lies in a basin between mountains (Hymettus, Pendeli, Parnes and Aigaleo). The Athens Basin at times suffers from a combination of air pollution, adverse climatic conditions and inversion creating an unbearable smog, *to nefos* – the cloud. But the city today extends beyond the mountains. It is fair to include most of the county of Attica as the Athens Metropolitan area. Large parts of the metropolis face the sea, the main port being Piraeus, as in ancient times.

Athens, the cradle of democracy, has traces of habitation back to 4000 BC. Its glorious peak was between 500 and 300 BC, when democracy was introduced and established as the new political system. During this period the temples we can still admire today were built on the Acropolis. Although the city dwindled after this time, it remained a cultural center of the Roman Empire up until the 3rd century AD. The real end of the Roman epoch in Athens was in AD 529 when the schools of Aristotle and Plato were closed down by the Emperor Justinian. The glorious city had lost its power and greatness under Byzantium. From AD 1204 to 1456 Athens was more or less continuously under Latin dominance. Ottoman control

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and dominance lasted from the latter date till 1833.

Athens was an unimportant, sleepy town of 8 to 10 thousand inhabitants at the time of the Greek uprising and Revolution. Modern Athens was built from scratch after 1830-1831 which was when the Turks had to sell their properties to Greeks and foreigners. This was also the start of land speculation which has become an intricate part of the city development in the last two centuries and one of the important explanatory factors in it. In 1833 the Turks were forced to leave the Acropolis and in 1834 Athens was proclaimed the Capital of Greece.

The new city center got a spacious city plan with a neo-classic layout. This had to be changed after one year because of pressure from landowners who wanted a higher return on their land. Leo von Klenze was the author of the new adjusted plan, which set the pattern for development during the first decades. Later on extensions in a gridiron pattern were added in a piecemeal and partly coincidental manner.

By the turn of the century Greater Athens had a population of 200,000 inhabitants. The first automobile appeared in 1896. The beginning of the 20th century was a period of optimism and a new spirit. Many plan proposals saw the light, but none became reality.

The year 1922, when the Asia Minor catastrophe occurred, was a crucial one for the Greek capital. An increase in population of 76 percent (350,000) in the period 1920-1928, combined with continuous political unrest, was quite unmanageable. These years mark a shift from two distinct cities – Athens and Piraeus – into an emerging metropolis. Refugee settlements and other built-up areas spread out in the Athens Basin. “Building before planning” or uncontrolled settling outside the city plan area became the way for the less affluent to solve their housing problem, mostly by building illegally on land they had purchased legally. This kind of unauthorized development – *affthereta* – reached a peak between 1950 and 1970. Later on illegal ways of appropriating land, or unauthorized building, was taken over by the middle class and the rich. This shift is characterized as “From spontaneity to speculation” (LEONTIDOU, 1990).

Within the areas covered by a city plan, however, the system of *antiparochi* – an exchange arrangement between plot owners and builders – first applied in 1929 (MARMARAS, 1997), combined with an increase in plot ratios, made it possible to build blocks of flats in large numbers quite quickly. *Antiparochi* is when the landowner of each plot turned the property over to a building enterprise; the contractors built the block of flats, usually financing it by selling beforehand; and they gave part of it, one or more apartments, to the landowners according to the value of their land.

The city has struggled to get a master plan to guide development. The first one passed by Parliament in 1985 was named “Structural Plan and Program for the Environmental Protection of the Greater Athens Area.” This was based on Law 1515/85 specifically for the Athens metropolis. So far the Plan seems to have some effect as a guideline for development, but strong sectors or sudden shifts in political priorities can easily change the pattern or parts of it. However, several projects appear to be in contradiction to the environmental agenda of the structure plan. This can partly be explained by “unofficial planning” or para-planning (PHILIPPIDES, 1998). Philippides maintains that this unofficial planning influences the form of the city to a larger extent than official State activity, and this kind of planning acts as a middleman between the State and society. The State needs such an intermediary “because only then can social strife be atoned or powerful interest groups be served within a distributive political system” (PHILIPPIDES, 1998).

At the turn of the millennium the population of the Athens metropolis is somewhere above 4 million. In addition there are

several hundred thousand economic migrants and other refugees and tens of thousands not registered as inhabitants, Greeks and foreigners alike. There are 1.5 million registered working population and less than 1.3 million jobs in the formal sector in the metropolitan area. The Gross Domestic Product of the metropolis is stipulated to be close to 10 trillion Drachmas. The metropolitan area includes 117 municipalities of varying size – nine of them have less than 2,000 inhabitants and five have more than 100,000 inhabitants, of which the Municipality of Athens is the largest, with more than 900,000 according to some estimates (MAM, 1997/1998).

The built-up area of 500 sq.km consists of 65,000 building blocks, containing almost 2 million housing units and apartments of which 74 percent are owner-occupied in a fine-grained plot structure. The city consumes 700,000-1,000,000 cu.m of water daily and, on average, 750,000 cu.m of liquid waste is discharged daily.

Athens has more than one million private cars, 200,000 motorcycles and 16,000 taxis. The total number of person-trips per day is about 7 million of which about 30 percent is by public transport, 40 percent by private car and 10 percent by taxi. The extension of the Metro has been going on for several years and will be partly ready before the 2004 Olympic Games. The latter is one of the big projects for which the city has high expectations as pivotal for economic development. Another project is the new Athens airport, “Eleftherios Venizelos” in Spata, east of the Hymettus mountain, programmed to be in operation by autumn 2000.

The Good, the Bad and the Evil Athens

After this short historic outline, one may have some idea as to what kind of city Athens is. But one really does not know how it feels to be there. By focusing on qualitative aspects of the city and city life, I intend to convey some of my knowledge and my own reactions, explaining, to start with, that:

- Good is the city which offers opportunities or arenas for urban activity and life, serving its citizens and users;
- Bad I consider the phenomena that make life or movement in the city embarrassing, dangerous or peculiar in a negative way; the bad city or parts of it represent problems about which it should be possible to do something;
- Evil is the city or parts of it when quality of life is undermined so that irreversible distorted city development is created.

We are facing structural problems and it seems to be above the city council's or its leaders' ability to change the direction of development at least in the short run.

The Good Athens

What is a good city? Jane Jacobs (1961) considered street life and life on the sidewalk the essential quality of a city – wherever it functioned well. She put forward several factors which had to be added in order to achieve this, with very little empirical research to support her experiences, but still quite convincing. Other authors are attracted by certain architectural objects or public spaces of a certain character, their history and the atmosphere they create (RASMUSSEN, 1967 and 1994). Others will deal with the city as an economic force, the complexity of processes, of management and growth (HALL, 1966).

In my attempt here I consider mainly the city an arena as it is experienced and used. Some basics are essential: we need clean, good drinking water and air we can breathe in without health dangers; we need to feel safe in our homes and on the streets; the city will create economic opportunities; the city

may give us an opportunity to develop jobs or obtain services, to move freely and utilize all kinds of means of transport including our legs; of course the city as a meeting place is essential, a melting pot of ideas, services and commerce, cultural expression and just human communication. Each city is unique and should develop its uniqueness. So what is particular about Athens? Below are some of my proposals.

● **Dry lands, but excellent water for millions:** In spite of the dry climate of Attica, Athens manages to serve its more than 4 million inhabitants and industries with potable water of high quality – maybe among the best in the large metropolises of Europe. In order to achieve this, there has been a long and hard struggle. Today, the main water sources are Lake Mornos, 192 km from Athens in the mountains west of Delphi, before that Lake Yliki closer to Athens (since 1958) and before that Lake Marathon (1929) close to Athens. In ancient times, the most ingenious solution to the water supply system was created by the Emperor Hadrian and his successor Antoninus Pius who made an aqueduct running from the foothills of Mount Parnes at a depth of 30 to 40 meters below the ground, carved in semi-hard slate. This aqueduct lasted for 1,200 years!

Today the situation is quite good. Still, many consecutive years of drought may reveal that the system is not perfect. However, extensions to the supply system are under construction. EYDAP, the water and sewer organization, promise to deliver water to every household. This will have to be combined with the development of resource-friendly attitudes among people as well as the introduction of recirculation principles in the city's way of water housekeeping if Athens is to have a secure future.

● **The landscaping and the pedestrian roads to the Acropolis and the Philopappos Hill:** The Acropolis from the Classical period has been the main attraction for visitors from all over the world. It is a wonder that Athens has managed to keep some of the hillside and the nearby Philopappos Hill and the Hill of the Nymphs as landscape not encroached upon by buildings. Coming closer to or ascending the Acropolis, one will discover the timeless art of landscape planning which connects the Sacred Hill to its surroundings, where ancient and modern Athens blend in harmony. The master behind the landscaping and the pedestrian access roads to the Acropolis and Philopappos was the late architect and artist Dimitris Pikionis (1887-1968) assisted by a few students and several stonemasons and builders in the 1950s. The landscape has some of the ancient aura, since Pikionis decided that only native plants which were documented to have grown in the region for thousands of years should be planted. The main piece of art is the road system, mainly pedestrian roads and walkways paved in various patterns created on the spot, some seat arrangements and other elements, an addition to the old church of St. Demetrios Loumbardiaris and a small pavilion for refreshments. The blend of materials, marble, other stones and bricks, neo-classic building elements as well as concrete, the careful setting in the landscape, and the varied patterns all make this a rich aesthetic experience. Pikionis was searching for "the Greek Soul." Now, what is needed is repair, maintenance and care, a challenge for the capital of Greece.

● **The Greek kiosk, *to periptero*,** is an important part of street life in Athens as well as in other towns and cities in Greece. It was institutionalized around 1910. War victims or people handicapped during military service were given permission to run kiosks on the pavements as a form of "social security" supplementing a low income. Many of these people were not able to run the business so they were allowed to rent it to someone else. Most kiosks are open 20 hours a day. One can find all kinds of items, although cigarettes and newspapers normally

are the core (figs. 1 and 2). This smallest working place, which covers 1.50 x 1.30 meters (exterior), can have a high yield per square meter! In busy parts of the city a kiosk may well give a good income to three families! In addition to its usefulness as an all-day shop, the kiosk keeper will answer questions and keep clients informed. The open kiosk helps to keep the street or the square safe, since there is always a pair of eyes overlooking the area. The kiosk-keeper's eye on the street is a security factor even if he/she is not a policeman or employed as such. This is usually a person who knows the area and its people, so he may quickly react if some crime or other delinquent activity happens. In Athens it seems like the dense distribution of kiosks, combined with an extensive outdoor street life, makes people feel safe without much policing in the



Fig. 1: Athens – The old type kiosk at Eufranoros Street, Plastiras Square, Pangrati. (Photo: B. Røe, 1999).

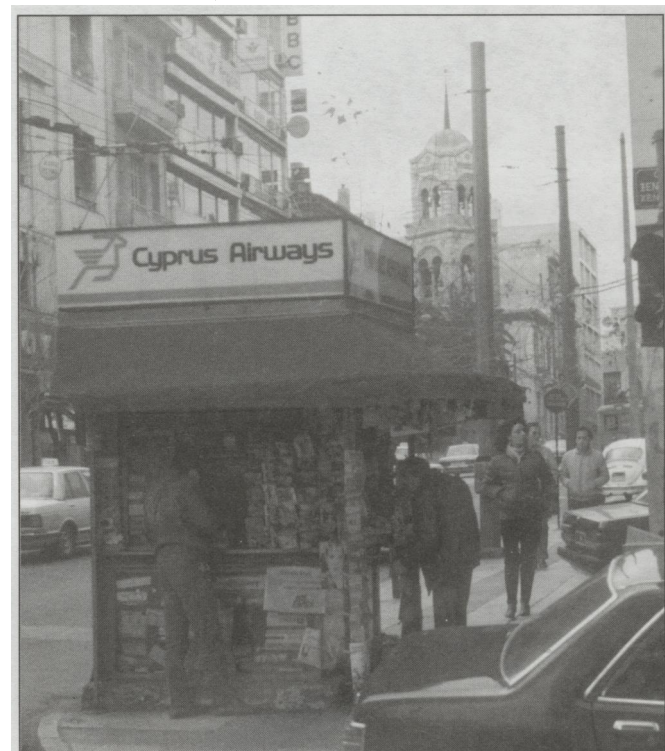


Fig. 2: Typical position of a traditional kiosk in Athens. (Photo: B. Røe, 1985).

streets. It is pleasant, humane and resource-saving. But most of us would not envy the workplace of the kiosk-keeper although his income might be good! The planning authorities have the obligation to regulate the space on the sidewalk properly so pedestrian movement will not be disrupted, whereas the kiosk gets a proper working environment. In the municipality of Athens there are more than 1,450 kiosks (*periptera*) and in all of Attica there are at least 6,500.

● **The popular street market, *i laiki agora***, is one positive phenomenon in Athens which has developed without the interference of urban planning. The special characteristic of the popular street market in Athens is that it is "mobile" in that one street in each part of the city is closed off to traffic and becomes a lively market one day a week, from 6 o'clock in the morning until 2 to 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The following day the market moves to another part of the city. Everybody in the district or neighborhood knows which days the nearest market is functioning. This possibility to create a proper environment for outdoor sales and shopping in otherwise busy streets filled with vehicles gives another air to the neighborhood. *I laiki agora* has fresh produce, mainly fruit and vegetables at reasonable prices. Rich and poor, housewives, maids and retired people alike, all go to the market to fill up their bags or trolleys for a week. It is also a lively environment for those who want to stroll, to watch and hear the vendors catching the attention of the customers. These street markets have existed in an organized manner since the 1930s (figs. 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7).

There are two groups of vendors, the producers who sell their own produce and the professional merchants² who sell produce they have bought at the central wholesale market early the same morning. There are clear rules for becoming a member and for the way each market is organized. In one day there may be 23 to 30 street markets at different locations in Athens, more than 200 throughout the week in the whole of Attica. Within the Athens Basin there are about 6,700 produ-

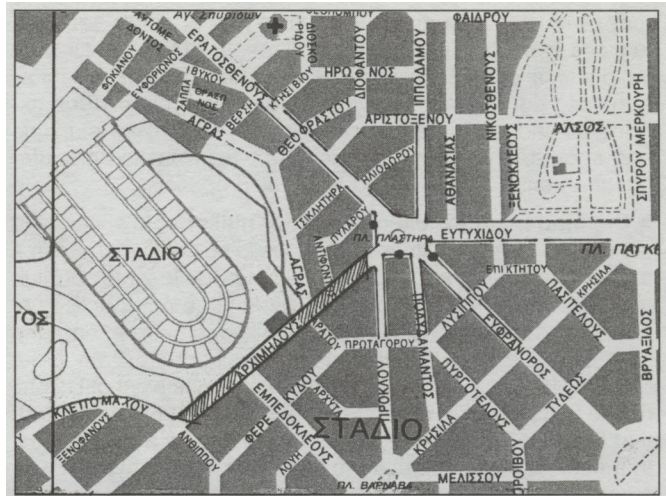


Fig. 4: Athens – The Friday popular market in the Stadium area in Pangrati (hatched) and the position of the three kiosks on the sidewalks in Plastiras Square (dots).

The popular market was obviously created because of a need for the producers to partly ensure that their produce reaches their customers as quickly as possible, at the lowest possible cost. In this way they control the process of the produce. The benefit beside economics is this direct feedback from the customers as a quality control. It also makes good sense for the community at large. The produce travels the shortest possible distance, making energy spending minimal. Agriculture close to the city may be retained and further developed. The city becomes almost self-sufficient with this kind of produce, but in order to manage this in the future, one will have



Fig. 3: A typical popular market in Athens – Fines of Drs 50,000 a day are devastatingly high for producers. (Source: *Magazino – o Paragogos*, April 1999).

cers and 2,200 professional merchants selling. As one will understand, this is an important part of the service economy of the metropolis as it secures fresh produce for the population at low prices and it gives the producers maximum turnover as there is no intermediary. It further secures the sale of the produce for the producers and minimal transport as the majority of the producers have their farms only a few hours' travel away.



Fig. 5: Around 6,700 places at popular markets in Athens and Piraeus have been given to producers. (Source: *Magazino – o Paragogos*, April 1999).



Fig. 6: Athens – The "Laiki" (popular market) every Friday when Archimidou Street behind the old Stadium in the Pangrati area is closed off to vehicular traffic. (Photo: B. Røe, 1999).



Fig. 7: Popular market in Piraeus. (Photo: B. Røe, 1985).

to avoid unfair competition from external products brought over a long distance by large-scale producers and distributors who violate restrictions on energy spending.³ For the consumers or the inhabitants the advantage is that they get fresh produce directly from the producers whom they may ask about the quality of the produce, or they can choose one of the many other producers at another stall in the same street if they prefer. Customers also look forward to the event once a week when they can fill up their refrigerators and their tables.

To me this is an outstanding example of benefits through real competition. To make the system function even better, society will have to supply clear direction and quality control as to the ecological soundness of the produce. In recent years the size of tomatoes, water melons, peppers, potatoes and several other products indicates that the use of fertilizers and even hormones may be quite extensive, which is contrary to the healthy policy the sustainable city should aim for. The planning authorities should just ensure that the present system functions, participating in the selection of suitable streets and facilitating the conversion of the streets selected for the *Laiki* every week. The Greek popular street markets suit the Ecological Efficiency model well (HALL and PFEIFFER, 2000).

The remarkable thing about the two elements described above – the kiosk and the open market – is that the planning authorities do not create these functions, nor do they plan or control them. Some kind of authority, though, has established the markets and the kiosks as phenomena, and established laws regulating them. New organizations have developed, and creative persons improve the organizations which work in cooperation with some national bodies as well as the municipalities.

Rethinking city qualities, we may find several similar and different ones which improve city performance in an ecological context as well as improving the perceived city life for the citizens. Urban, regional and city management, and policy development and planning could learn from these Greek examples.

Some further aspects of Athens that might also need careful assessment and be used in the search for future models for city development are the following elements:

- The balance between the formal and the informal, where Athens has a lot of the characteristics of the city of the less developed countries at the same time as it is a modern metropolis. How could such mechanisms be used wilfully and skilfully to solve challenges with which neither the bureaucracy nor the formalized private sector can cope?
- Athens, like Thessaloniki, has an interesting structure of industries with a very decentralized pattern of production units down to family enterprises and small-scale operations, which come into the city and create a mixed land-use pattern in the central areas as well as in predominantly housing areas (LEONTIDOU, 1997; VAIYOU, 1997).
- The 1933 Charter of Athens which was a result of the CIAM⁴ conference in Athens (and on board a ship from and to Marseilles) and later published by Le Corbusier was never followed in Athens, even if Modernism/Functionalism had its proponents in the city. So Athens continued to lay out the regular street patterns and the dense city blocks that were dismissed by the Modern Movement. Most European cities followed the modernistic layouts, pulled down parts of existing buildings and built free-standing blocks of flats, in flowing space, separated functions and gave high priority to the easy flow of cars. Athens achieved the development of a living city with plenty of activities on the streets, but also traffic and parking problems. The more “modern” cities got more air and green space around their housing areas, but segregation, monotony and a lot of traffic to and from places of work. Maybe it is time for some comparative research on these matters?

We have picked out a few success stories from Athens, where I believe this city has achieved something that many large cities should strive for, something which enriches the quality of the city for its citizens and at the same time reduces the demand for travel (*i laiki agora*) and energy use (RØE, 2000).

The Bad Athens

What is conceived as unpleasant, embarrassing, ugly or peculiar in a negative way for many or for certain groups is what is bad about a city. Most people will try to sort out qualitative elements from the city setting, which may be real problems, inconveniences or just a matter of getting used to. In my search for characteristics that I consider bad, I have chosen phenomena which may be changed if there is political will or if the community sees it as a problem and wants to do something about it.

● **Air pollution** is conceived through the respiratory system and allergic reactions but also in the eroding ancient marbles as well as in many other invisibles. Some years ago the following could be read in a scientific article: “The air of Athens is among the most polluted of the European cities. Inversion temperatures frequently occur over the city because of its exceptional geophysical surroundings and the special climatic conditions with many sunny days a year ... Exhaust gases are at high levels in all central streets and in combination with the inversion temperatures and calm days the photochemical cloud – *to nefos* – is present for 10-20 percent of the year” (KATSOUKIS and TSANGARIS, 1994). The last statement was based on measurements in 1988 and the previous years.

Obviously some improvements have occurred lately. Now the measurements show high pollution levels on less than 2 percent of the days in the year, and the European Environmental Agency reports that the air pollution of Athens is not the worst.

The three basic sources of air pollution in Athens are:

- transportation (the automobile-CO-lead-CH-NO and smoke);
- industry (SO₂-CH-NO-particulates and smoke); and,
- central heating during winter (SO₂-smoke).

In all of them fuel plays the major role in producing pollutants (PELEKASI and SKOURTOS, 1991). The kind, quantity and quality of fuels determine the type and intensity of air pollution. There is a general decreasing or stabilizing trend of air pollution in Attica attributed to several anti-pollution measures that have been taken:

- new technology in cars;
- enforcement of car emission certification;
- improved quality of fuels; as well as
- the anti-pollution action plan ATTICA SOS.

Still, at times there are high levels of NO₂ and smoke in certain areas. The ozone levels are too high in several of the measurement stations mainly in the northern suburbs (EARTH, 1998). The increasing numbers of cars and motorcycles are worrying. To conclude: the fact that in the last ten years of the 20th century the pollution level for each of the pollutants has improved significantly, may permit some optimism. However, the problem of the sum total is such that there is every reason to keep on being alert and continuously taking measures to improve conditions.

● **Lack of open public space** is claimed by many planners to be one of the most serious problems in Athens (RØE, 1998). This is a partial truth. In the central areas of Athens there is an abundance of green and open spaces and in some of the more affluent neighborhoods there are plenty of green areas, public or private, as well as open space for common use. However,

large tracts of the city – like Kypseli/Patission, Pangrati, Piraiki, and several other areas – have a perceived and real high density. Lack of open space and vegetation, plot ratios above 4.0 combined with the most heavily polluted parts of the city like in Patissia are unacceptable. These neighborhoods are urban, have mixed land use and plenty of activity, with up to 1,200 persons per hectare. But the environmental quality is low when the lack of open space is combined with absence of space for parking, so cars encroach on sidewalks and any open space. High built-up density is generally the result of plans produced by the authorities, on the basis of existing regulations – the so-called GOK (General Building Regulation) according to a planning law of 1923, a Decree of 1929 and later amendments. The quality of the plan is finally the responsibility of the Ministry of the Environment, Planning and Public Works. In such cases one is allowed to ask: why such a high density, and why the lack of common public space?

- High density is generally explained as a result of pressure from landowners towards the authorities in order to get maximum gain from their land.
- The lack of public space is usually explained as the result of a poor public economy so the municipality could not afford to buy or expropriate land needed for public purposes, which has to be done within six months from the date of the approval of the plan.

Simultaneously there was poor legal support for public interests in development prior to 1975, when Greece got a revised Constitution which gave power and responsibility to the State to plan, protect and develop the physical and cultural environment.

A recent study (MAM, 1999) shows great discrepancies in the distribution of common (public) spaces in some selected municipalities, ranging from 0.8 sq.m per person (Kallithea) to 76.5 sq.m/person in Papagou. Looking at the population densities combined with available housing space, aggregate data for the densest municipalities of Athens, Daphni, Hymettus, Kaisariani, Vyronas and Zographou are 627 persons/hectare, 18 sq.m house/person, 2.6 plot ratio, whereas the more wealthy northeastern suburbs have correspondingly 105 persons/hectare, 50 sq.m house/person, 1.2 plot ratio.

The high densities and lack of open public space create several kinds of discomfort ranging from climatic to crowding. Children cannot leave the house without supervision, there is no recreation space in the proximity, many schools do not have proper or sufficient space, no school yard for play and so on. When, in addition, most sidewalks are occupied by cars, the city becomes unfriendly – to say the least.

- Other aspects of the Bad Athens include problems related to liquid wastes, sewerage, flood control, garbage, disturbing mixed land uses and details without care, combined with lack of aesthetic considerations.

The Evil Athens

There are structural phenomena – some of which are deeply rooted in history, culture, politics, bureaucracy – which undermine the quality of life in Athens and create irreversibly distorted city development, and which seem to be beyond anyone's ability to change, at least in the short run.

Two Greek colleagues have given some explanations with regard to the "culture" supporting the devastating actions:

- "Under such circumstances town planning is but one more governmental function which is undermined through the network of family, extended kinship and political ties, and generally exploited for personal and political gains" (WASSENHOVEN, 1984).

- "The fundamental difference between legitimate and illegitimate is the cornerstone of the formation of built-up space in Greece ... a more satisfactory hypothesis is that there exists an informal parasitic agent, acting side-by-side with official planning procedures, emanating from the State. This agent is unofficial planning which could also be called para-planning" (PHILIPPIDES, 1998).

Let us see some examples.

- **Forest fires – Land for city expansion?** Greek forests are being burnt at an alarming rate. Most people, as well as mass media, claim that the majority of fires are arson – that is for land speculation mostly in coastal areas. The reason is the following: forests are protected areas, i.e. areas where general development and building activity is not permitted. However, there are specifications for exemptions. Arsonists set fire in order to gain easier access to land for building purposes, even if the law forbids building on "previous" forest land. The arsonists are rarely caught. If one cannot stop this way of city development, it is a qualitative trap. It seems to be a fundamental problem beyond resolution. The impacts are serious, as green "lungs" are scarce. They are needed in order to improve the climate, to sustain ecological balance and to reduce torrents and flooding during heavy rainfalls. The authorities have not found a solution to the problem. Laws regarding the issue go as far back as 1836. The main act now is Law no. 998/1979. Sometimes even leading political figures or some organizations are blamed for being involved in arson. However, nothing seems to stop citizens or other bodies from appropriating land or speculating for profit for land which should be left to nature or the community.

- **Afthereta – Unauthorized building and development** is another way of circumventing the laws. The traditional way of doing this was when people who could not afford to rent an apartment, or buy one within the city area (where the city plan existed), bought a parcel of land outside the plan area which was much cheaper but it was not permitted to build upon it unless the land parcel or plot was at least 4,000 sq.m. Their second step was to build on this small property, which was bought as agricultural land, usually not more than 100-250 sq.m. The bulk of this kind of *afthereta* took place from the 1930s to the 1970s, reaching a peak in the 1960s. This system of building before planning was a way for the lower income groups to get a house as there was no public policy to solve their problem. What I call Evil is not this kind of unauthorized building – which after all was the best possible solution given the circumstances. Evil is the kind of *afthereta* which is still quite widespread, synonymous with **speculation** used by all income groups, including the highest income, to get access to land in the periphery at a cheaper price. This may be illegal building of second homes or vacation houses (sometimes converted into regular houses), fancy villas, hotels, casinos, offices or industrial plants. All this may be combined with the appropriation of forest land or land near the coastline. Concerned citizens' groups try to organize against such development which is destructive towards nature and culture. Their aim is to influence public opinion and policies. But they seem to be fighting a hopeless war since so much of the establishment on all levels takes part in the game.

- **Parking and the pedestrian** is another combination that makes life complicated and for many people full of suffering. In large parts of the denser Athens, ruthless parking is obstructing a civilized life for people who walk. I consider this one of the strongest examples of lack of civic spirit and contamination of public space. The problem is due to the lack of a planning policy for parking, but it is also due to a rapid increase in vehicle ownership – four persons/car and 20 persons/motorcycle.

Most of all is the parking behavior which is deeply rooted in a *laissez faire* mentality and attitude. It is easy to blame the authorities for not making parking space available. On the other hand, people have not been willing to pay what parking space really costs, and they want to reap the benefits without spending by using public space which was not intended for this purpose, be it road or sidewalk. One may encounter cars parked in the most hopeless places, at bus stops, in pedestrian streets, on sidewalks and at intersections of roads so that pedestrians have no way of getting from one side of the street to the other. A recent study (MAM, 1998) confirmed that 22,000 cars were illegally parked between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. in the central areas of Athens on a working day. The police have given up. Rarely does anyone have to pay a fine.

The pedestrian in Athens is hunted game! For a young and vigorous person it is possible, but not pleasant to be a pedestrian, but for many people it is hell.

● **Other evils** in this metropolis include problems in parts of the traffic and circulation system, the bureaucracy, corruption and many others that lead to what we may call city stress. Some of this is "culturally embedded" and some can be explained as attitudes. To improve the quality of life in a metropolis like Athens one needs politicians who are willing to carry out "unpopular" decisions and to put the common good before their own "pocket." That might be the start of general changes in attitude all over. In that case it should be possible to steer this marvellous, but difficult metropolis towards a better and possibly sustainable future.

Conclusions

As I have lived in Athens at intervals altogether for almost eight years between 1963 and 1999, I have some experience as a short-term resident and have observed several changes in the city for better or worse. During my stays I have also had the opportunity to do research related to certain aspects of the city, its planning and development. I was lucky enough to be able to read, write and speak Greek which has proved a prerequisite for such work.

For the present study I have utilized mainly literature and historic sources but also quick field surveys, observations and interviews with people representing organizations, special interest groups, municipal or State sectors, etc.

My intention is to depart from a kind of "professional" language that is inaccessible to those who move around in large cities and try to communicate with them and help them conceive, understand and appreciate the great city in all its complexity. By "categorizing" and using my own evaluation as a basis for the three aspects of Good, Bad and Evil, I expect to arouse interest and hopefully some reactions from readers who disagree. Raising expectations or stirring people's emotions, but at the same time giving information about the problem city, I hope to get more alert and informed citizens and visitors. Reading a city, reading signs is an art. My intention is to go beyond reading the symbols to inform and raise questions about the factual reality and what makes quality of life in a metropolis at the turn of the millennium.

Notes

1. This paper was accepted for the conference "Quality of Life in Cities" which was arranged in Singapore by the National University of Singapore, 8-10 March, 2000.
2. The professional merchants are selected according to a social profile, allowing 30 percent of the applicants to be unemployed, 20 percent from families with many children, 10 percent people who have passed a program for treatment of problems related to alcohol or drugs, and 3 percent political refugees.
3. Today, several products are composed of components from all over the world, which makes transport a main ingredient. As most trans-

port of goods is by lorries or trailers on non-renewable energy (diesel and so on), the effect on global climate is worsening. Weizsäcker et al. (1997) demonstrate that one packet of fruit yoghurt produced in Germany may travel several thousand kilometers before ending up at the consumer in the same country. Cheap transport of raw material and products, centralized production and high cost of manpower are some of the reasons. But this is not sustainable!

4. CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) was established in 1928 by Le Corbusier, Sigfried Gideon and others. CIAM according to the Athens Charter of 1933 made clear the role of the modern movement in relation to the city and the housing problem.

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