

INSTITUTIONS, VERSUS THE REAL WORLD: PLANNING GREEK METROPOLISES IN THE CRISIS TURMOIL

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Abstract

The paper suggests that in Greece (taking the example of Thessaloniki and Athens) the conceptualization of planning is related to the cycles of the economy, while at the same time it does not really observe planning regulations and laws. The complex, mazy and very detailed planning system is rigid and at the same time weak to protect itself from violations. The end result, the planning product, i.e. the cities, is facing a multitude of problems, due to these planning inadequacies and to the course the accumulation regime of the country has taken over the last years.

Firstly, the paper draws from the example of Thessaloniki, highlighting the inadequacies of planning tools, budget estimations, social concern, and lack of realistic public consultation, with the end result of a city with stagnant infrastructure projects, poor peripheral communities and serious inner city issues.

Secondly, it draws from the example of Athens which has lately become a dense and problematic city with uncontrollable, partly unauthorized, sub-urbanization and severe social problems in the Centre.

In both cases, the perennial Greek planning weakness became evident, i.e. the controversial co-existence of physical planning and economic-social planning Community Support Framework style. Planning, being not cohesive and having embedded institutional pitfalls, has been proven to be inadequate to face the rapidly accumulating problems.

A deeper understanding of this development calls for a complex answer to the problems, a kind of multi-tasking exercise, an integrative plan which would be strong enough to set the rules even for the City Master Plans. However, for this to happen the institutional environment has to be changed; to become effective it has to become simpler, more comprehensive and above all realistic.

Keywords: Athens, Thessaloniki, Metropolitan Planning

1. Introduction

The paper suggests that in Greece (taking the example of Thessaloniki and Athens) the conceptualization of planning is related to the cycles of the economy, while at the same time it does not really observe planning regulations and laws. The complex, mazy and very detailed planning system is rigid and at the same time weak to protect itself from violations. The end result, the planning product, i.e. the cities (though we cannot say that cities are products as they are subject to continuous change, therefore the notion of product should be relativized), is facing a multitude of problems, due to these planning inadequacies and to the course the accumulation regime of the country has taken over the last years¹.

Though I claim that the conclusion/ result of this paper has a diachronic validity and it is characteristic by and large of the theory and praxis of planning in modern Greece, for analytical reasons this paper focusses: a) on the scale of regulatory master plans of the major two Greek cities. These examples are more than enough in order to illuminate the argument; if I would go into the detailed level of smaller planning scales (physical city plans, etc.) the reader would be lost in a maze of legislative measures; b) on the two examples of Athens and Thessaloniki, drawn for the post 1985 period, as this was the year the only two regulatory master plans were passed in the parliament and became a Law; c) on big infrastructure projects of transport infrastructure as an example and not on all other aspects of planning, such as the development (evolution) of the urban fabric; d) on specific areas within the two cities that face problems which are related to the current crisis, namely on the centre of Athens and on the Lachanokipoi area in Thessaloniki.

The problems all Greek cities face are caused by the same reasons but of course have different yet similar manifestations. The problem of the cities lies in the rapid post war urbanisations caused by a complex set of primarily socio-economic but also political (related to the civil war 1945-1949) reasons. The result has been a rampant urbanisation of the major urban centres whereby most of the 52 prefecture capital cities are included in varying degrees. The country's administration, legislative system and formal economy were not in fact adequately prepared to face these waves, and the conclusion was the creation of large illegally built housing areas which planning laws and regulations were employed to legitimise in different waves of legitimisation over the years.

Apparently, this is a first historic picture of how any planning regulations were bypassed (and violated) by crude reality, the result of individual actions of big numbers of common people. Yet, this paper's concern, keeping this as a background knowledge, deals with the planning-wise second part of the post war period (as mentioned post 1985), as 1985 with the introduction of regulatory master plans and the establishment of ORSA and ORTH a new planning period was supposed to be inaugurated².

Firstly, the paper draws from the example of Thessaloniki, highlighting the inadequacies of planning tools, budget estimations, social concern, and lack of realistic public consultation, with the end result of a city with stagnant infrastructure projects, poor peripheral communities and serious inner city issues.

Secondly, it draws from the example of Athens which has lately become a dense and problematic city with uncontrollable, partly unauthorized, sub-urbanization and severe social problems in the Centre.

¹ For the (un-necessary) complexity problematic nature of the planning processes in Greece, see Economou, D., Coccossis, H., Deffner, A. (2005) and Lalenis, K. (2004).

² Law 1515/1985 for Athens and Law 1561/1985 for Thessaloniki

2. Thessaloniki

The diachronic attempt to plan the metropolitan area of Thessaloniki has only led to partial success and comprised fragmented projects, and lack of an updated regulatory plan that has not managed to appear to the parliament to be voted.

In terms of **metropolitan planning**, Thessaloniki being the major city of central Macedonia has a multidimensional impact on its national and international wider environment and develops a dialectical relationship with it. This applies to regions of neighbouring countries, for instance regarding the transport of goods from and to Thessaloniki's port, or Thessaloniki being a major shopping centre. Especially after the transition of the ex-socialist countries to the market economy (early 1990s), the aspiration of the Thessaloniki elite was for the city to become the capital of the Balkans.

These, in combination with the growing economy of the period and the CSF funds coupled with the accentuation of the cities' growing problems, were calling for a new wave of metropolitan planning. However, planning remained *in scripto* and actual planning was only done in the a-spatial context of the CSF programmes to utilize the funds coming from the EEC (and then EU). In this sense, numerous plans were elaborated and few were actually implemented (due to insufficient funds, unsatisfying appraisal, or lack of political determination). In this context the 1985 regulatory plan was not updated until the period of 2009-2012 when two new versions were consequently elaborated, but were removed and did not pass through the parliament in 2014 when the corresponding plan for Athens did.

In-between, a series of **transport infrastructure projects**³ were planned to be materialised, the most important of which were the metro of the city, the subsea tunnel, the outer peripheral ring (motorway). Out of these, the latter two were foreseen in article 14 § [3.1.7.] of the 1985 master plan and only the western part of the outer peripheral ring was materialised until May 2015.

The metro was stalled due to unsatisfactory appraisal in terms of cost that resulted into facing important budget problems. Minor changes of alignment, delays in expropriations, change of methods, archaeological findings, all caused significant time delays and cost increases and became major problems besides the general economic crisis problem that itself caused dramatic delays to the project. As a result, the metro was delivered in 2015 and is not going to be for a few more years. In addition the local community of Thessaloniki is very displeased because the Athens metro company which is responsible for the project does not have an office in Thessaloniki at a high level and all decisions are made in Athens; hence there are further delays and relative unfamiliarity with the local situation.

The subsea tunnel was never constructed due to unsatisfactory appraisal regarding the cost and the archaeological risk. Archaeological findings required the tunnel to be aligned deeper which would have rocketed the cost. In addition, several sides argue that the planning of this tunnel not appropriate because it links two parts of the coastline which should have been at a larger distance, as well as because the completion of the metro and the possibility of the completion of the ring road should actually bring new data as to whether this project is really required. Yet the cancelling of this project has already cost the state several millions of euros as compensation to the contractor who had won the tender.

³ For a general account of infrastructure projects in Greece, including Thessaloniki, see Skayannis and Kaparos, 2013.

The outer peripheral ring, leading to the area of the airport, was never completed (only the western part was), as the cost would have been huge because the missing eastern part requires several tunnels and bridges. It is not clear yet how this shall proceed.

A specific area which epitomises a series of problems that Greek cities face is **Lachanokipoi**, part of the (old) Western Entrance of Thessaloniki (WET) area. “This is practically a derelict space that could be considered as a brownfield. A number of significant old buildings, along with remnants of its industrial past, characterise the current image of the place that local authorities wish to regenerate. Plans that have so far been proposed have either been maximalist (especially if viewed in the light of the current crisis-ridden situation), or partial in their conception, being geared to one-sided architectural solutions” (Skayannis and Kyrtzakos, 2015). “The problems with the area are that: a) in this period of crisis⁴, development opportunities that can generate growth are urgently needed, i.e. investments and the promotion of economic activity that is, if possible, extrovert, innovative and with high added value. The WET area might offer the chance to host such activities provided there is a suitable and realistic plan in place; b) land is an asset that can be exploited to trigger development processes. Land in the study area is relatively cheap; and c) the area is dominant along the western entrance. Its current image as a derelict space is degrading the image of the city in an era when image is all-important for interurban competition” (Skayannis and Kyrtzakos, 2015).

“The various plans made over a lengthy period of time for the area can be divided into both state plans (originating from the central government) and local plans (originating from the municipality of Thessaloniki and/or the adjacent municipality of Menemeni). In terms of thematic object, we can differentiate between plans dealing with the general planning of the area and plans that specifically deal with the transport aspects” (Skayannis and Kyrtzakos, 2015). This is a clear indication that a series of institutions have taken planning action employing a corresponding number of planning tools (legislative instruments). But what was the result up to now?

As indicated in Skayannis and Kyrtzakos (2015), in a study scrutinising the most important 15 post 1985 plans made for the area, the planning of the WE and the Lachanokipoi area of Thessaloniki has faced certain major problems:

“a) planning tools were not adequate enough and planning was taking place whilst only partly facing the problems i.e. from a general land use planning perspective in combination with transport plans (in the best case with a certain compliance with each other)⁵;

b) though in some cases budgets were roughly calculated, the sources of the funds were by and large expected to be provided by external actors (besides the state, such as the EU), while the idea of fund leverage by private investors was not embodied into the planning processes;

c) questions of social concern, such as poverty, professions, etc., were not addressed under the understanding that ‘development’ will become a panacea and will solve the problems” (Skayannis and Kyrtzakos, 2015).

These interesting planning studies were placed in the historical context of the three planning eras within which they were carried out. “They all have tried to tackle the problems, suggesting series of measures on several domains. Yet none of them has gone into the appropriate detail, hence none has proposed composite measures for the very same area on a small local scale from different perspectives

⁴ In Greece the manifestation of the very significant public debt and budgetary crisis started in 2010.

⁵ This has generally been the case in Greece. As Skayannis notes, there has been a multitude of proposals to face the problems of the crisis ridden Centre of Athens, yet almost all were partial, either purely ‘sociological’ or ‘economistic’ or of solely an urban design nature, seeming not to comprehend the complexity of the problems hence the requirement for composite solutions (Skayannis, 2013).

(something which in official planning terms has now become possible with the SOAP tool). Consequently, the policies (if any) that have been so far rolled out over the area have not managed to revitalise/regenerate it. The ‘invisible hand’ of the free market, in the absence of a robustly articulated policy, has provided its own solutions, creating a mosaic of conflicting land uses and maintaining pockets of poverty and derelict spaces adjacent to red light services, two high class hotels and cultured recreation facilities” (Skayannis and Kyrtzakos, 2015).

According to this analysis, it would be reasonable to assume that though the WE of Thessaloniki was acknowledged to be a problematic area, did not become the focus of many plans, neither a special detailed plan was made for it. The problems were mentioned generally and proposals were made at a level of abstraction that could not provide specific interventions. On the other hand, whichever developments, besides an effort for the restoration of a few buildings, were not made after any plan in particular but rather in an emergent way by local actors.

Athens

The diachronic attempt to **plan the metropolitan area of Athens** has been (marginally) more successful than the one of Thessaloniki in the sense that at last a new regulatory plan, after the initial 1985 one and the withdrawn 2009 one, was passed in the parliament (Law 4277/August 2014). However, this was only a partial success, as prior to the regulatory plan of 2014 a series of projects were implemented (more successfully than in Thessaloniki) that were not foreseen (at least in the form they were accomplished) by the previous regulatory plan of 1985, and actually pre-emptying the 2014 plan. This is because these projects eventually became parts of the Community Support Frameworks and were accelerated in view of the then upcoming Olympic Games (2004). This 2014 regulatory master plan reflecting the new realities of the crisis managed to include “extensive consultation with various social actors and stakeholders. However it did not include an effective system of public consultation with individual citizens” and faced three sets of contrapositions (Skayannis, 2013), that led to its resubmission before being presented for approval by the parliament (August 2014).

Athens in most plans has been defined and designated to play the role of a major pole in the eastern Mediterranean, supported at the spatial level, amongst other interventions, by the mentioned **transport infrastructure projects**. These projects have been the Athens Metro (basic project and extensions), the Attiki Odos (Athens ring road, motorway level), the Tram, the Regional railway, the Athens International Airport (relocation of the previous one). As opposed to the Thessaloniki case all were materialised, primarily because of the urgency created by the upcoming of Olympic Games and the contractual interdependencies (e.g. between the ring road and the airport). “This materialization was over and above existing planning (in the sense of the master plan of the city). Special laws, such as Law 2730/1999 “Planning, Integrated Development and Materialisation of the Olympic Works and other provisions”, were passed in order to accelerate and legitimize pre-decided projects which did not exist in the master plan of the city” (Skayannis, 2013).

Despite these advancements, part of this construction planning, in fact those not foreseen or necessary for the Olympics, was left for later stages (e.g. the extension of the ring road, the connection of the area of the old airport with the new one, the connection of the Athens - Corinth motorway with the north- south motorway, the metro extensions, the decisions on the area of the previous airport), and later on suffered delays.

Besides the Olympics urgency, “this top-down and bottom-up by-passing and overlooking of pre-existing planning legislation was left to survive due to the fact that construction had been one of the major locomotives of the Greek economy, able to speed up or slow down the pace of the economy

(Skayannis, 1990). This was coupled by a planning governance that on the one hand would collect the opinions of formal stakeholders but on the other would disregard the opinions of ordinary citizens and their organizations, in essence a political choice of non-participatory planning of any sort that obviously faced the problem of applicability”.

Yet, while special attention was paid to the aforementioned infrastructure projects (with all the pitfalls and drawbacks), the major challenge in Athens became the deterioration of the conditions of the Centre of the city due to an explosive mix of impoverishment due to the crisis, to influx of excessive illegal immigration, and to the perpetuating and unsolved problems. ”

According to Economou, Skayannis, Deffner, et al (2012), the problems of the centre of Athens have their origin in the early '90s or earlier (e.g. lack of comprehensive city planning, high-density building, green space deficit, old building stock, low quality of public spaces, lack of the necessary urban infrastructure, urban sprawl and suburbanisation). Other problems are more recent (e.g. increasing criminality, drug trade and prostitution, illicit trade, closed shops, abandoned buildings, increase in the number of homeless on the streets and impoverishment of a significant number of the population). The latter have been caused either by heavy migrant inflows in the city of Athens or/and by the effects of the current financial crisis on urban population. The immigrants' problem has developed to a major concern, as has got out of proportion by all standards. This influx is a combination of two factors, namely the economic and political migration reasons and the fact that due to European legislation, immigrants are not allowed to be transferred to other European countries and are stuck in Greece. Low, unpaid and mostly black labour deprive the state from potential resources and result into low social welfare possibilities and danger for public health conditions. These problems pose manifold risks, primarily to public health and safety but also to entrepreneurship and property and to the quality of life as well.

As a consequence, over the last years, the inner city of Athens (the historic and commercial centre) has been changing in a rapid and hostile way, suffering from an increasing decline. Rising crime and lawlessness have reached “crisis proportions” in downtown areas, while the concentration of legal and illegal immigrants in some neighbourhoods has led to concern about the creation of ghettos in the heart of the city. At the same time, the economic crisis has led hundreds of stores to close down, to the increase of unemployment, and to the breakdown of social services and the degradation of the quality-of-life standards in many traditional middle-class districts (Economou, Skayannis, Deffner, et al, 2012), as well as allegedly to serious land speculation activity in view of a possible future gentrification process. This situation has triggered the activation of groups of the extreme right, something which has increased the fragility of the social tissue.

Given the above, there is a question whether the problems of the city –in crisis- would be reasonable to be faced with tools from the sphere of physical planning, especially of the urban design scale, or from those of socio-economic development planning.

However, in parallel to this plan, various agencies (Ministry, etc. with the tolerance of the Athens Municipality) were elaborating a major intervention to the city that was very vaguely foreseen in the 1985 master plan, namely the pedestrianisation of the major road axis (Panepistimiou, ave) in the very centre.

The various proposals (a total of more than seven sets of proposals) (cf Skayannis, 2013), diverse in nature and orientation, do not necessarily abide with existing planning, but do respond to different efficacy degrees to the urgent need to face the situation of the dilapidation of the Centre. The plans can be divided into two major groups: those that have architectural – design approach and those that have

a more development socio-economic orientation, being spatially aware (some are purely socio-economic and not directly referring to spatial matters). Yet it seems that planning so far was not able to face the problems in the context of such complexity and a new planning tool, SOAP, was devised that combined the spatial with the socioeconomic aspects. The plan, focussing on the city centre of Athens, was elaborated by our University of Thessaly team and makes a conscious effort not to violate the pre-existing planning at the metropolitan master plan level (at the time the on-going regulatory plan) but to make proposals in the context of this planning (being spatial but not intervening with the physical form and restructuring of the centre). In this sense, this planning tool and the plan that came out was aspiring to bring closer planning to the real world. But in order for this to happen, the plan has to materialize.

The materialisation of the SOAP plan requires resources and the incorporation of its provisions into the plans of the different ministries, while a co-ordination can be with one of the ministries (YPEKA) with a major contribution and involvement of the MA. This is a problem in the Greek legal and administrative system, and obviously endangers any plan of this nature to happen. At the same time, though, dealing the very centre of the city brings forward the need for a metropolitan municipal structure having the appropriate competences (and capacities) to deal with complex problems that directly or indirectly concern the whole of the metropolitan area.

Discussion - Conclusion

A very interesting issue is the real practice of planning, i.e. the attempts and the reality of implemented planning as opposed to the result of it.

There are two parallel universes: the universe of master-regulatory planning which is conceived and is partly implemented if at all, and the universe of the construction world which is planned and partly implemented.

In both cases we have the coordinates of conceived space (Lefebvre, 1991/1974)⁶ which is however not the same. In this sense we have two conflicting versions of conceived space for the same physical space, and two versions of the perceived materialised space which however does not conform to any of the two. The perceived space is a mixture of an ill implemented version of both not actually expressing any of the two. Yet it creates a lived space for the users with its own denotations and connotations.

The winner, yet in a pyrrhic victory, is infrastructure construction. This is possible to happen for a series of reasons: interests behind it are very strong, it comes to satisfy need of the wider population (e.g. modern transport), politicians use it because of its very direct visible and tangible results and nature in order to appeal to an equally wider electorate (electioneering purposes). In this way it is a win-win short term situation for the direct stakeholders involved. In the long run (besides all of us being dead – re: Keynes) a layer situation is formed which becomes a given in the city. This kind of development in a manner of distorted planning is to a certain extent organic, as players have exercised a role to produce an emergent environment that might not be completely non-planned but yet it is partially planned or plans are distorted by multiple interventions.

Firstly, in this whole set-up, institutions are at the same time present and absent, put differently, they face the real world being heavily undermined.

⁶ According to Lefebvre (1991), urban environment is constructed by three major factors, conceived, perceived and lived space, (in spatial terms: spatial practice, representations of space, representational spaces) (p.40).

In the case of statutory planning (master plans, regulatory plans, etc.) plans are undermined from inside. This is because they are unrealistic and with inadequate comprehension of reality. They are frequently caught into traps of windmills in the heads of planners (or policy makers) e.g. Thessaloniki being the capital of the Balkans, or of what is feasible and what is not. Frequently this is caused by a partial understanding of reality as plans are made by architects i.e. the socio-economic background of the plan is not enough or is not solid or is not taken fully into consideration because simply sometimes is not pleasant enough or does not fit with the preconceptions or ideological fixes of the planners - designers (or politicians). In this sense planning is made in the spheres of phantasy crystallised in phantasmagorical blueprints but having lost touch with reality.

In this situation, institutions are the ones that due to internal inefficacy are undermining themselves. So the product of the process of planning (the plan) is not standing properly on its feet. The plan then comes to the real world to be implemented. But the plan is weak because it is not realistic.

The second - antagonistic- constituent of planning is infrastructure planning (leaving aside the purely technical part). Locational decisions are here very important as well as the necessity of projects (in the sense of social opportunity costs- i.e. versus other projects of a different nature possibly more required by society, such as the case of the undersea tunnel). But even if these conceptual dimensions were left aside, institutions that plan infrastructure projects (even if ministries or similarly relevant authorities are considered) research in Greece has shown that they lack certain qualities: appraisal of projects is often problematic. The metro of Thessaloniki is a very good example as well as the possible problems from the undersea tunnel. Though I would by no means argue for the case of the iron triangle (time-budget-specifications fix) in the construction of large (if not mega) infrastructure projects, a considerable level of appraisal should secure the fortunate/ successful delivery of the project (of course in contextual terms, and taking into account what really would make it successful, i.e. the fulfilment – or a considerable effort to - of the four sustainability dimensions).

Part of the problem of the clash between plans and the real world is that plans are not discussed with the people they concern. Though in theory they have gone through the scrutiny of public consultation, this is organised and done in a way that the real recipients are unable to express radical (or even incremental) objections not even are they in the position to make proposals. Though before the conclusion of drafts various agents are advised or consulted these are by and large those of the official state, so they are in a sense part of the planning side. And if in planning this is the case (in part and to an extent also responsible for illusionary and partial interpretations of reality in an effort to combine opposing interests), the case is even more valid in the case of infrastructure planning especially as far as the social environmental impacts are assessed i.e. as far as the various sustainability challenges (all four) are tackled.

But the problem is not only that each particular constituent of spatial structuration at the level of spatial representation (conception) is coming into the picture with its particular problems. The problem is exacerbated because of the fact that the two sets of plans are not necessarily compatible (to say the least). Regulatory planning and master planning does not necessarily abide by what is planned by the other side (infrastructure planning and construction).

In this sense, planning as a form of conception and major component of conceived space is starting with a twofold deficiency. Institutions are not really performing in a way to guarantee an implementation of the plans that would be unproblematic. So implementation starts with problems.

That is, the institutional side, before even starting to implement a plan, i.e. to face the real world, has an intrinsic problem. It's like starting a war with defective weapons.

In the sphere of implementation, there are several deficient forcers that counteract the plans (besides the state itself with its bureaucracy and bad organisation). These come from two major sets of actors: a) civil society i.e. the various organised civilian interests and also individual opponents; basically his means for the case of Greek local organisations of inhabitants, professional groups, political organisations, etc.; b) organised economic interests major stakeholders with economic power who for 'some' reason did not intervene in the first place to influence the plans or were not successful in doing so. This frequently takes the form of court cases whereby the judicial power opposes the legislative and executive power of the state itself, thus bringing into the surface another dimension of insufficient preparation [this is not to oppose the distinction between the three powers as organisational base of the state securing the freedoms and counterbalancing contradicting societal forces].

And if this twofold problem is faced, then the even more real world is to be confronted; the world of real problems, barriers, be it technical or related to human resources, or other factors.

But there is something even more important when it comes to implementing regulatory plans: this is time.

Slow-moving procedures (due to a variety of reasons related to administration practices and culture, to other cultural dimensions, and to organisational capacity) often make (whatever) plans redundant. The reasons are a) objective reality: changes in modes of production and regulation, technical advancements, external forces, changes in the economic situation, etc.; b) subjective: this is when the attitudes of people are against 'the plan' (or the processes of planning), i.e. the changing values, expectations, assumptions, understanding of space, finally the changed (over time and because of time) lived space that produces different expectations for the future lived space. This counteracts the process of space production via interventions to the process of planning implementation whether planning regulations or infrastructure construction delivery.

In contrast to this, the new fast track regulations for investments, as a counter economic crisis measure (Law 3894/2010) and the practice of concession agreements for big projects also come often in contradiction to pre-existing planning. This is because the need for investments brings the state (from the side of planning authorities) to a weak situation *vis a vis* a prospective investor. As a result, existing planning regulations are relaxed, by utilising legal bypasses and special legislation.

In the cases analysed above, the perennial Greek planning weakness became evident, i.e. the controversial co-existence of physical planning and design with economic-social planning Community Support Framework style. Planning, being not cohesive and having embedded institutional pitfalls, has been proven to be inadequate to face the rapidly accumulating problems. A deeper understanding of this development calls for a complex answer to the problems, a kind of multi-tasking exercise, an integrative plan which would be strong enough to set the rules even for the City Master Plans. However, for this to happen the institutional environment has to be changed; to become effective it has to become simpler, more comprehensive and above all realistic and more communicative.

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