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Open Space

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In order to revitalise the city centre of Athens, public space has been spotlighted. Walkable and green open space will play a key role in the creation of a resilient centre.

A major step taken towards making Athens a walkable city by reducing traffic has resulted in newly gained open space, which can now be transformed into the vibrant, green and accessible heart of the city. A green framework will form a connection between boulevards and green spaces. This will contribute to the bio-climate and to carbon reduction, greatly improving Athens’ inner city climate and conditions for well-being.
“Sometimes, when it really is needed, we can create a miracle,” an Athenian woman said to me, strongly believing that our plan can change Athens. Our proposal to change Athens’ city centre and to create a focal area between Omonia Square and Syntagma Square brings hope to the people. Many cities face challenges, although it is no understatement to say that Athens needs the regeneration of its city centre as a way of fighting against the financial crisis, which has had a larger impact here than elsewhere.

For many visitors Athens is known because of the Acropolis, but on the other hand it also has the same issues, i.e. traffic congestion and severe air pollution, that many contemporary cities have. Other severe problems are a very high rate of unemployment, many vacant buildings (more than 30 per cent are currently empty), and a high crime rate. And its open space has been degraded: Omonia, a square that Athenians were once proud of, is now regarded as unsafe during evening hours. Environmental issues such as climate change are also important: Because the area of Stadiou-Academias is situated in the most urban part of the city and has only a small amount of green space, it is now relatively warm and suffers from smog.

“Re-Think Athens” is an approach that concentrates on reinventing the city centre in order to reverse the downward spiral and stop the decline of the city’s heart that has been ongoing since the 1980s. A regeneration of the public realm by creating a healthy and safe environment is needed to improve the daily life of Athenians. Walkable centre

Changing the heart of Athens into a true contemporary metropolitan city centre requires a transformation of the so-called city triangle into an attractive part of the city. First of all the idea of space needs to change, and not be limited to just removing six lanes of traffic on the central avenue, but shifting from vehicle-oriented space to pedestrian-oriented space. We have taken contemporary ideas about climate control, the reduction of vehicular movement, and programming the public realm one step further into an integrated proposal: Creating a resilient city centre that is not just confined within the project’s borders, but is linked to adjacent areas, turning it into a true catalyst for the city centre.

In Athens traffic will be rebalanced, changing it from private vehicular movement to public transport, cycling and walking. This will lead to pedestrian friendly spaces and larger sidewalks. This will create a better environment for pedestrians as well as a well-defined zone where life within buildings can encroach on the street, enlivening it with café terraces and outdoor stalls and shops.
creates continuity with regard to the walking experience. In fact, the Panepistimiou provides “shared space 2.0”, a combination of “flux” and “relax”. Integrating a cycling lane and making the new tramline clear and present and part of the grandeur of the space will contribute to the goal of increased cohesion.

Green placemaking in a resilient city centre

Key to the regeneration of the heart of Athens is to turn it into a resilient city, creating a green framework that includes specific attitudes towards reducing urban heat island (UHI) effects: natural cooling by greening, adapted pavement, earth cooling, and water storage. Planting more than 800 trees will reduce air pollution and have a positive impact on energy flow and consumption. Turning the city triangle into a green framework and connecting this green framework to the green hills around the city centre will mean that the mitigation of urban heat island effects will positively affect the metropolitan centre.

The greening strategy for Athens is combined with a water strategy, since healthy vegetation is crucial if heat is to be successfully reduced. Retaining water in a dry climate is even more important than storm water drainage, which is only required for extreme peaks of rainfall during the wintertime. A new standard for water solutions will be set for Athens, maximizing water storage and water infiltration on site. This is related to the goal of increasing the quality of the public realm and will be combined with normal systems to collect and transport rainwater. The result will be an example for other cities in the Mediterranean region: On the scale of a city centre it is possible to create a system that completely meets the city centre’s water needs for irrigation, and will even provide enough water for the streets to be cleaned several months of the year.

Theatre of 1,000 rooms

True change will take place once we create a public realm for the people. The intervention should generate new productivity and help repair the city’s damaged social fabric. To improve Athens’ city centre it is important to create a public realm that supports a wide range of local economic and entrepreneurial activities, such as through the provision of an attractive setting for informal work and meeting spaces that encourage the exchange of ideas and information. This project will be beneficial to a broad mix of users:
In order to activate the new city centre, which is called the theatre of 1,000 rooms, a vacant building strategy is being developed. Re-activated buildings and newly gained public space will help change the urban environment. After the major changes are complete, more people will be interested in living in the area and the new city centre will be ready for private initiatives.

today’s inhabitants of the central district, new pioneers, entrepreneurs, and tourists.

Given the amount of empty buildings, it is crucial to initiate the reuse of vacant buildings. Occupying and transforming ground floors, organising events, and shifting focal points will help create a vibrant new atmosphere. Inspired by old Greek tradition, we propose the concept of a “theatre of 1,000 rooms”. Initiatives bundled together in a cultural programme that offer an interplay of activities and mini-theatres both in the public realm and in vacant buildings, especially around Omonia Square. This cultural layer is a unique opportunity for Athens to link urban activation to ancient Greek philosophy, science, and drama, bringing a contemporary version of these powerful skills to the forefront.

In addition to the interim use of these vacant buildings, a programme for their use in a more flexible way will be developed, thus providing temporary housing and inviting urban pioneers such as students, temporary workers, artists, and app developers. In a way, this is all about linking the old economy to the new economy and to social networks, and about making a connection between the city and interactive media. The development of workshops and workspaces for urban pioneers will help initiate the regeneration of the district. Since most of these uses are temporary activities, they may move on. They will, however, leave traces of change within the city.

The idea of this theatre of 1,000 rooms extends into the public realm, where open space is designed to function as meeting places, as market spaces, and as stages. Activating the public realm builds on the relationship between programmes in buildings and public space. The fundamental basis for activities will be focussed upon normal daily uses, and extend these into the evening hours. With this in mind, kiosks and terraces will be important items. New Athens’ kiosks will not only focus on traditional selling, and some will provide facilities such as bars and information stands.

The public realm as a catalyst

Changing the heart of a European metropolis is a major challenge. We believe this project tackles anonymous space in the heart of Athens and demonstrates that urban vibrancy can be combined with the creation of green and pedestrian-friendly spaces, contributing to the quality of life in Athens.

The benefits are clear, and it is now or never in terms of realising this dream. Crucial to this success is the actual realisation of the project, a major task in itself. If it were easy, the city centre would already have been changed. The important aspect of the Re-Think Athens project is that everyone focuses on how to implement the project. From the moment the Onassis Foundation was asked by the Greek government to make it happen, they organised an international competition, funded all the necessary studies for implementation of the project, and managed the project. Within one year of the announcement of the competition result, planning permission had to be obtained in order to secure European co-funding.

A new horizon arises when everyone is aware of the fact that extra efforts are required and when everyone is also eager for these proposed changes to become reality. Many people have joined forces to work on a dream and to create a new city centre that will be enjoyable for residents and visitors alike.