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# Why isn't Urban Development Sustainable? An Institutional Approach to the Case of Athens, Greece

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## ABSTRACT



*Despite the rise to prominence of sustainable planning, the state of urgency and the pressure imposed by the extreme competition between metropolitan territories reduce sustainability to a market-oriented doctrine for deregulated urban development. The aim of this article is an exploration of the current Athenian urban crisis, by centring on sustainable urban development plans, territorial planning institutions, and urban policies. To this end, the phenomenon of urban crisis is explained as a derivative of the failure of sustainability reforms. By establishing a link between the institutional framework governing urban development and the success or failure of sustainability reforms, this article seeks to contribute to the discussion around the attainability, scope and impact of sustainable urban development plans. Through the hypothesis that as long as territorial planning is used as means towards speculative urban development, it will only be equivalent to that of a real estate facilitating mechanism, it is argued that the urban development model of Athens, as well as the role that institutions have in its shaping, is incompatible with any notion of sustainability. The main contribution of this article is to potentially help towards developing a critical reflection on how projects, plans, territories and sustainability should be approached.*

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Focus

Currently, the answer to the global economic and ecological crisis, along with its social and political implications, appears to be sustainable urban development. Sustainable urban development has become a portmanteau term including a wide variety of heterogeneous notions. In this regard, several critics emphasise that sustainable urban development has nowadays become a caricature of more serious consideration (Koolhaas, 2014), as well as a polished term for the

alarming practice of providing growth to declining economies through speculative urban development.

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Consequently, despite the rise of sustainable territorial planning both as a fast-developing industry and as a policy priority, they suggest that to this day, it has provided us only with some relatively isolated urban experiments that cannot be scaled up to ensure the sustainability of an entire metropolis and have aggravated "urban greenwashing" and environmental segregation (Davis, 2006). In this article, I attempt to support the thesis that sustainable urban development attempts have often resulted in a series of profound mutations affecting urban societies deeper than the broader crises at the source.

## 1.2. Background

The diffusion of planning guidelines, technical formulas and management techniques has rendered what literature describes as "sustainable territorial planning" a decisive factor that mutates metropolitan territories. Contemporary planning policies set sustainable urban development plans, as well as flagship development and infrastructure projects as the regulatory mechanisms that are called upon to unify profoundly heterogeneous spaces and to organise them towards attaining social and ecological sustainability (Rogerson & Boyle, 2000). Consequently, these tools are gradually becoming the ordering mechanism of the urban field (Waldheim, 2016) and the main parameter of the contemporary urban condition (Graham & Marvin, 2001), prejudging the possibilities and the methods with which sustainable territorial development is soaked (Easterling, 2014).

However, if the lack of appropriate sustainability tools impedes the sustainable rebalancing of territorial organisation, their existence alone does not guarantee the regulated transition of territories towards sustainability either (Rodrigue et al., 2013). In this regard, as the transition towards sustainability is undertaken under the urgency and pressure imposed by the extreme competition between metropolitan territories, it is speculative real estate development that materialises the material and immaterial global flows (Ascher, 1995). Thus, sustainability is reduced to a market-oriented doctrine for deregulated urban development (Dawson, 2019).

## 1.3 Aim

Although institutional actors admit the existence of a generalised urban crisis as a result of real estate speculation and deregulated urban development, they also advocate that it can be treated as a temporary crisis that shall be resolved through targeted technical and policy measures that fall under the umbrella of sustainable urban development. However, the complexity of contemporary metropolitan territories requires an approach that can address the numerous economic, ecological, technological, and cultural

links between urban development and sustainable planning (Karvonen, 2011). In this regard, even though environmental concerns about the sustainability of metropolitan territories are typically addressed by implementing technical and policy solutions, they are also deeply dependent on and interwoven with social, economic, cultural and political considerations (Bijker et al., 1987).

In this article, I aim to concentrate on an exploration of the Athenian urban crisis that is centred on sustainable urban development plans, territorial planning institutions, and urban policies. To this end, I attempt to explain the phenomenon of urban crisis as a derivative of the failure of sustainability reforms. By illustrating how path-dependent institutions hinder policy change, I seek to highlight how and why a long-term vision of urban development based on the principles of sustainability appears difficult to achieve in the case of Athens. In a broader context, I also wish to contribute to the discussion around the attainability, scope and impact of sustainable urban development plans.

## 1.4. Hypothesis

Both institutional actors and a substantial number of academics agree that Athens has been facing an urban crisis since at least the beginning of the Greek financial crisis of 2009. This discourse is often conducted by resorting to technocratic and aesthetic arguments, and through a purely financial and architectural spectrum (Dragonas, 2011). I hypothesise that as long as territorial planning is used as means towards speculative urban development, it will only be equivalent to that of a real estate facilitating mechanism. Instead of trying to explain how the urban crisis in Athens is an unfortunate by-product of the last decade's breaking down of the Greek economic development model, I argue that in fact, the urban development model of Athens has always been essentially the same. Moreover, this hypothesis suggests that the production and the consumption of urban space as a real estate commodity is an inherent characteristic of the prevailing urban development in Athens. Lastly, by pointing to the recurrent crises in Athens under the current development model, I attempt to highlight the ways that this model, as well as the role that institutions have in its shaping, is incompatible with any notion of sustainability.

## 2. Main Part

### 2.1. Disciplinary Approach

The interdependent urban systems composing Athens are created by a complex array of structures and agents, and take into account several and varied agendas (Varnelis, 2008). Institutional theory can highlight the overarching systems of values, traditions, norms,

and practices that shape or constrain territorial transformation, providing analytical assistance to the understanding of the direction, objective, and meaning of the processes unfolding on metropolitan territories (Peters, 1996). The identification of critical junctures and link sequences as conditioning factors of the urban development path of Athens (Karidis, 2008) facilitates the understanding of how the institutions that currently direct sustainable policies in Athens have been shaped. These institutions have been forged through a long path-dependent accumulation process of rules, laws, norms, incentives and social relations, as well as contradicting responses to prior critical junctures (Connolly, 2018). As a result, some structures are more conducive to sustainability transitions than others (Hansen & Coenen, 2015).

The involvement of international organisations and private actors in the planning process of Athens has also resulted in policy transfer, which encouraged specific mechanisms for dealing with urban processes. In this regard, the failure of policies that set sustainable urban development as the way to achieve sustainability goals in Athens can be attributed either to the incomplete implementation of such policies without considering local sensitivities and inherent institutional drift (Torfing, 1999) or to the choice of an inappropriate solution, which path-dependent institutions could not implement (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

## 2.2. Methodology

By making use of historical institutionalism, I attempt to identify and examine the critical junctures in the urban history of Athens, as well as the link sequences that have shaped the urban development path of Athens. To this end, I explore and compare the ideas, challenges, narratives and discourses of formal and informal actors at a national and local level. This includes not only the official version of the Athenian urban history but also its informal version and aspects. In addition, I examine whether and to what extent a process of -coercive or imposed- ideological transplanting occurred, mainly by analysing the predominance of international organisations and global economic factors and actors to the detriment of national and local agendas (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996). Furthermore, I investigate the adoption and advocacy for specific urban policies and legal frameworks as “best practices”, as well as the development of new planning bodies and mechanisms (Moran, 2010). To this end, I assess institutional interdependence and global policy networks by examining specific sustainable policy adjustments and reforms (Stone, 2004) at all levels of territorial planning in Athens, as well as the role that these policies accord to urban development. These are in turn juxtaposed to the recurrent and

prevailing practices of urban development in the metropolitan territory of Athens, throughout its urban history. The limitations of this article impose mostly a synthesis and juxtaposition of data gathered by secondary sources. However, primary sources have been used when and where it was necessary and feasible.

## 2.3. Findings

Athens amasses over one third of Greece's population and half of the country's industrial and tertiary production (Leo Van Den Berg et al., 2016). However, its economic, political and cultural hinterland roughly coincides with the rest of the Greek state. Athens is therefore a Dynametropolis, whose pressures accumulate people and activities spatially and materially while polarising international, physical and symbolic flows (Doxiadis, 1968). This has resulted in a peculiar landscape of densely packed suburbs, seasonally occupied exurbs, seaside touristic units, infrastructure space along with the main networks, industrial and tertiary enclaves and exclaves, and speculative agricultural installations, extending for tens, or even hundreds of kilometres from the city centre (Burgel, 2002). Oddly enough, up until the early 2000s, Athens had been credited also with one of the lowest competitiveness indicators in Europe, due to what was considered a variety of endemic factors.

Often portrayed in negative colours, the urban development of Athens has been characterised as “unplanned”, “wild” and “spontaneous”, permitting the creation of an enlarged middle class and bridging the social, ideological and cultural differences of the interwar period (Theocharopoulou, 2017). Contrary to these preconceptions implying the lack of a higher-level agency and the employing of a random procedure, the urban condition of Athens may be explained better by the antithesis between the tactics employed by societal agents in their attempt to claim their right to participate in the transformation of the city (Lefebvre, 1996) and the obligation of authorities to adopt and implement coherent sustainable planning policies. It is also characterised by the pivotal role that has been accorded to infrastructure as a key regulating mechanism ensuring the sustainability of territories but also as a tool facilitating the deregulation of territorial development by normalising the application of market rationale (Cluzet, 2010).

Athens became the capital of the Greek state in 1834, largely serving symbolic, political and economic motives that necessitated the existence of a distinct centre, which could exercise control over the Greek territory. The Ottoman town grew rapidly into a large Balkan city with its references to the West, despite the internal turmoil, expansion wars and bankruptcies that occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The political and economic instability

that was the main characteristic of this period is considered to be the principal reason discouraging investment in productive sectors and turning private investors towards the construction sector. At the same time, however, these same conditions limited the financial capabilities of the Greek state and the city would not acquire adequate urban infrastructure until as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the first city plan of Athens that was drafted by the architects Kleanthis and Schaubert might have predicted and provided for extensive green areas and a large archaeological zone around the Acropolis, however, the aggressive reactions from the landowners whose properties and speculative interests were affected led to it never being implemented. Shortly after, a new, more modest city plan by the architect Klenze was approved based on the earlier version, only for it to never be implemented in its totality, as well (Karidis, 2015). The critical juncture establishing Athens as a metropolis was the effort to integrate a large number of the Asia Minor refugees in 1923, which resulted in almost doubling its population. The Interwar period saw the implementation of a broad urbanisation operation aiming at their integration into the Athenian society, which prompted the first successful effort to equip the city with industrial installations. The introduction of reinforced concrete, already from the beginning of the century, as well as its progressive generalised application in the wider sector of construction, facilitated and steadily promoted the construction of multi-storey buildings. In 1929, the enactment of a specific law advancing the institution of horizontal ownership and vertical segregation of buildings permitted rights of co-ownership of the entire lot for the first time and gave birth to the first apartment blocks (Government Gazette, 1929b). The first State Construction Code, which went into effect the same year, significantly impacted the morphology of the structures, by introducing a strict standardisation in the organisation of the storeys and of the facades (Government Gazette, 1929a). This resulted in the distinct typology of the Greek version of the apartment block, the "polykatoikia" that would be multiplied all across the Athenian territory. At the same time, the institution of the "antiparochi", a uniquely Greek arrangement, whereby the owner of a building plot or smaller building was compensated with new apartments instead of payment for the land that he relinquished to the contractor who built a "polykatoikia" on it, was responsible for the massive explosion in the built environment and the ultimately speculative increase of land value. However, this extremely productive period for the private construction sector could not be met by the necessary infrastructure projects due to the inability to secure funding during the Great

Depression (Skagiannis & Kaparos, 2013). Therefore, the implementation of metropolitan planning was abandoned, by tolerating the already existing laissez-faire attitude (Karidis, 2015). The 1950s found the country ravaged by a brutal foreign occupation and a disastrous civil war. The Greek authorities sought to ensure internal political stability, while having to address the reconstruction of almost the entire pre-war infrastructure and the depopulation of large parts of the Greek countryside, with a crumbling post-war economy. Immediately after the war, US officials supported and coerced Greek governments actively into applying some kind of "aided self-help" programme on several occasions. American consultants and experts involved in the Greek reconstruction "experiment" did not only expect the restoration of the destroyed settlements but also the internal stabilisation of the country, the diffusion of free-market norms and policies, and eventually the smooth integration of Greece into global post-war capitalism. Therefore, the role of the capital city as the control centre of the country was consolidated predominantly by allowing an informal and self-regulated urban development process to materialise in Athens (Heidenreich et al., 2007). This occurred through the extensive expansion of Athens using arbitrary and often illegal settlements, called "affthaireta", that was a posteriori legalised and incorporated into the city. Once officially recognised and incorporated into the urban fabric, the "affthaireta" would acquire legal planning rights and could be further densified, in most cases, by applying the institution of the "antiparochi". The increasing housing needs were met without a welfare programme and no serious social housing programmes were ever undertaken, even though almost a quarter of the pre-war housing units had been destroyed. This resulted in the massive reconstruction of Athens and the consequent rapid economic recovery of the country happening with minimum state intervention (Paschou, 2008). In less than three decades, Athens tripled its size and population but lacked a coherent metropolitan planning policy. What became clear during the post-war wave of construction, was the emergence of a new branch of the Greek economy, that of the construction capital. The construction sector became the most significant part of the economy, often being labelled as "Greece's heavy industry", indirectly implying that it made up for the lack of an actual heavy industry, as well as the "locomotive" of the Greek economy, mainly because it set the rhythm of growth of the national economy.

By the end of the 1970s, Athens had achieved a 65% ratio of owner-occupied dwellings, leaving the renting of the property only to tertiary students and newly-arrived immigrants (Emmanuel, 1995). Several inhabitants of the extremely dense inner-

city embarked on the first wave of suburbanisation that could not be accompanied by public transportation infrastructure, thus depending solely on car mobility. The introduction of regulatory planning mechanisms and the first regulatory plan for the region of Attica in the early 1980s, as well as the investment in large infrastructure projects across the country and the institutionalisation of sustainability in the late 1990s, attempted to halt the alarming population growth of Athens. This soon proved to be detrimental to both the city centre and its periphery, as it favoured an intense phenomenon of sprawling of the already existing Athenian population. Conversely, the Athens 2004 Olympic Games encouraged the shifting of national and regional policy towards the objective of raising the competitiveness of Athens and modernising its infrastructure (Economou et al., 2001). The allocation of significant funds for the realisation of flagship development and infrastructure projects, as well as the amendment of the metropolitan planning framework with fast-track methods, aimed at overcoming the lack of a National Cadastre and of a Forest Registry while minimising delays in the planning implementation processes. However, this also triggered an even more deregulated, third wave of diffused urbanisation whereby construction either preceded planning or speculatively followed public investments (Chorianopoulos et al., 2010). Similarly, the economic crisis that Greece is currently experiencing provides a pretext for employing a strategy of deregulation and exceptional measures, with permanent rather than temporary characteristics (Gunder, 2010). Despite facing unprecedented levels of vulnerability to forest fires and flash floods, planning processes and infrastructure projects in Athens either ignore or bypass altogether the required environmental impact assessments, by giving much greater weight to the word "development" rather than the word "sustainable" (OECD, 2009). The institutional system of urban planning in Greece is currently defined by the segmentation of urban planning actors and the fragmentation of urban decision-making within a strongly centralised administrative context bound to conform to EU strategic planning and environmental legislation. Moreover, the informal intervention of social actors in the urban planning process is significant, which renders the official procedures of public consultation auxiliary or even irrelevant (GIANNAKOUROU, 2003). Over the years, this has increasingly favoured speculative urban development to detriment to any notion of sustainability. At least 77% of the settlements in the country are estimated to be unplanned, while 11% among them are situated still beyond any regulatory consideration. From 1983 till 2013, at least four laws "legalising" the "afthaireta" have been introduced, each and every time declaring

the "temporary" and "final" nature of these legal provisions. The last law is still in force today, having been extended for the seventh time (Government Gazette, 2013). These laws have poured billions of Euros into state treasuries, in order to repay the national debt, and their constant extension showcases that putting an end to the urban anarchy is not their primary goal. Moreover, the ratification of the New Regulatory Plan for the Athens-Attica Region characterised a series of existing woodlands as metropolitan parks, where new planning regulations could be applied, permitting sports, cultural and leisure activities inside the parks. At the same time, in the Hellinikon former airport site, which was initially supposed to become a large metropolitan park, the construction of 10,000 new housing units for 25,000 inhabitants, 7 hotels, 2 shopping malls, a casino and a convention centre has been approved (Government Gazette, 2014).

These contradictions introduce a peculiar approach to the regulation of space, whereby "obsolete" regulatory mechanisms and plans are kept in force and are modified through ad hoc procedures in order to accommodate infrastructure and development projects (Stathakis & Chatzimichalis, 2004). The literature has attributed the peculiar conditions that shape the sustainable planning institutional framework of Athens to the ideological and cultural clash between the persistence of traditional practices and the call for modernity (Prévélakis, 2000), the implementation of a peripheral model of capitalism based on the accumulation of capital through speculative land development (Sarigiannis, 2000), as well as to the socio-political similarities of the Athenian urbanisation process to those of cities in other Mediterranean (Leontidou, 1990) and Latin American countries (Petropoulou, 2011). The recurrent theme in the literature is that of an interaction between formal and informal institutions, which materialises in the mobilisation of the territories around Athens through policy and infrastructure (Burgel, 1976).

### 3. Conclusion

In this article, I attempted to complement and address a gap in the existing literature, by examining the Athenian process of territorial development in relation to the objectives, methods and shortcomings of the Athenian planning policy mechanisms. Contrary to the limitations of the past, primary data have now become easily accessible, thanks to technological advances, digital platforms and the digitalisation of public data and archives, which are now accessible to the public. With the aid of specialised software, a large quantity of these data can be filtered, compared and synthesised, within a more reasonable timeframe. Moreover, several educational and research institutions have

contributed to the pool of secondary data, while investigative journalism and reporting, as well as specialised academic conferences, have significantly improved the development of critical discourse around the research question. This means that potential researchers of the Athenian urbanisation process may find it easier than before to conduct their research on the topic.

Despite the more favourable settings under which this research was conducted, my principal goal in this article was limited to identifying and clarifying the general context under which the success or failure of sustainable planning in Athens occurs. This goal, however, is part of a broader objective that attempts to illuminate the relation between planning policies and factual urban development, as well as to assess its territorial impact in terms of sustainability. In an even broader context, this objective has the potential to help develop a critical reflection on how projects, plans, territories and sustainability should be approached. In this regard, further future research on the subject will enable the adoption of a critical approach in the study of sustainable territorial planning, by making use of a broader methodological toolset, and by expanding the analysis to more than one case study.

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### Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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