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## **Planning the Public: visions, policies and public space projects in the post 1970s Greek capital**

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### **Référence à la session / reference to the session**

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### **Résumé / Summary**

By the first years of metapolitefsi (the turning point in Greece's contemporary history representing the passage to a multiparty democracy), public space planning in Athens remained the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Works and that of the Technical Services of the Municipality. By the middle of the 1970s, a significant turnover took place in public space planning policy, which by this time was instructed by a rather small group of public servant civil engineers. After 1975, the design of the Athenian public landscape outstrips the function-oriented approach that had prevailed in previous years. Several blueprints and studies that start to emerge during this period focus on the promotion of pedestrian-friendly environments and on preservation issues, specifically in central districts, but also in several that are peripheral to the historical centre's residential neighbourhoods.

This change in perspectives is accompanied by a profound restructuring of decision-making teams within public services responsible for public space planning. At the beginning of the 1980s, the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Housing began employing a new generation of architects and town planners, who brought fresh ideas and methods to fieldwork operations. An architectural department is inaugurated within Athens' municipality technical services, which had up until then been preoccupied mostly by road infrastructure projects. The department was initially responsible for pedestrian streets' design and square rehabilitation projects. These changes took place in a context of strong political will related to the preservation of the historical character of the city centre and the valorization of 20th century architecture.

Within the first period of projects that were deployed between the 1970s and 1990s, planners focused on the development of a pedestrian network within the historical centre's perimeter (an administrative limit approved by a 1979 law). Central squares were reconstructed and several streets in residential 19th century districts were equipped with playgrounds, pavements and green proximity areas. However, despite the proliferation of

master plans and visionary reports, the studies presented during these years are merely framed by a global strategy or regulatory framework. In fact, the ministry focused on the upheaval of archaeological site zones, while the municipality urged solving small-scale problems in public spaces by interfering in less 'famous' areas within highly compact urban fabric neighbourhoods.

By the 1990s and with a view toward hosting the Olympic Games in 2004, Athens enters the arena of economic and tourist competition of European capitals. In 1993, the Greek State decides the foundation of a new public entity assigned to trace and follow the implementation of an integrated master plan permitting the restoration of the historic urban landscape. In reality, the objectives of the Office of Unification of Archaeological Sites of Athens outstrip the task of enhancement of archaeological sites and monuments. The Office, financed by several ministries and EU funds (SA) also aims to improve underprivileged neighbourhoods and resolution of the intensification of land-use in central areas.

During its time of operation, several mega-projects are inaugurated in the capital. The Office elaborates in a quite autonomous manner, hiring staff external to national competition for civil servant positions, elaborating expropriations and technical studies and proceeding in operations using a system including the direct award of contracts.

After 2004 and the consolidation of Athens as a city break destination, public space planning enters a new economic and social context of lasting crisis. Poor public finances lead to the retirement of local authorities from their protagonist role in public space planning; at the same time, private sponsors and charity foundations appear on the public scene, claiming the conceptualization and the coordination of long-term projects in central public spaces. Among several studies, the international competition, Rethink Athens, stirs the waters by proposing a bold intervention (tramway, pedestrianization) at Panepistimiou Street, an avenue of great economic and political weight, located at the very heart of the historical centre.

This study aims to highlight the historical evolution of the set of actors interfering in public space planning. At the same time, it attempts to question the impacts of implemented or announced policies on a city's public space geography. Avoiding a Manichean approach, the study opts for a comparative approach through 40 semi-direct interviews, which aims to unveil the diverse facets of a public space's complex group of actors. Initial insights indicate that post 1970s, public space planning policies led to studies and projects that present interesting contradictions, and that merit further analysis. Despite their scattered implementation within the city without a global framework, early pedestrianization of the 1970s and 1980s led to grounded interventions at a detailed urban scale and to strong alignment with neighbourhoods' needs and citizens' visions. Likewise, despite their 'top-down' character, mega-projects of the 1990s and 2000s begin to succeed, within an economic and social context of crisis, in extending the public debate concerning open collective space aesthetics overriding the urgency of restoring its social role.

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