Neither ordinary nor global: a reflection on the ‘extra-ordinary’ expansion of Athens

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As part of the debate on Mediterranean urbanities in between ‘ordinary’ and ‘global’ cities, the present paper proposes a reflection on Athens’ long-term expansion seen as a paradigmatic example of urban development in southern Europe. The article debates economic restructuring, demographic processes, and social changes taken as determinants of the shift in the city’s morphology towards urban dispersion. By reconnecting socioeconomic dynamics into a multidisciplinary perspective, the author engages in a debate on the future of large Mediterranean cities in between settlement expansion and crisis.

Keywords: urban morphology; compactness; economic restructuring; social change; crisis; southern Europe

Introduction

To contrast large urban regions such as Barcelona and Cairo, Naples and Tunis, Istanbul and Tripoli, Tel-Aviv and Algeri may indicate, as Kayser (1996) suggests, a range of candidate cities in the prototypical representation of Mediterranean urbanities. Within this range, Athens could embody the image of an ‘average’ city revisiting the role of a territorial mediator in between the north and the south of the Mediterranean basin (Salvati, 2011). Although the recent debate on socioeconomic transitions of European cities ranks Athens in a marginal position, the expansion of this city was a unique case for studying ‘peripheral’ development paths in a territorial context which can be referred neither to ‘global’ nor to ‘ordinary’ cities (Couch, Petschel-Held, & Leontidou, 2007).

Athens’ expansion is the result of the stratification of direct causes and latent factors. A decisive role was played by demographic processes including the massive immigration from Turkey in the early 1920s, the demographic boom in the 1950s and 1960s, the internal migrations from rural areas or the islands and, more recently, immigration from abroad (Leontidou, 1990).

Economic factors (the abandonment of fringe cropland, industrialization and the recent shift from traditional services to a more innovative economic structure based on financial, research and development services) and geopolitical aspects (e.g. state centralism, the restricted autonomy of local authorities, planning deregulation) also contribute to characterize Athens’ case as a prototype of the complex development path observed in several Mediterranean cities (Leontidou, 1996).

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Interpreting Athens’ expansion was complicated by the recent economic crisis affecting the social, political, and productive local context. The present study thus aims at identifying keys to interpret the socioeconomic processes observed in the Greek capital as an example of urban development in the Mediterranean region (Leontidou, 1996). The discussion arising from the narrative proposed here intends to reconnect local and regional dynamics into a multidisciplinary interpretation. The concluding section tries to indicate the characteristics of the future development path not only for Athens but for other Mediterranean regions suspended between urban growth and the economic crisis.

**Not so compact, not yet dispersed: towards an original model of urban expansion?**

Athens’ growth was characterized by consecutive cycles of settlement concentration and diffusion, in which different agents contributed to socio-determine spatial patterns reflected in a peculiar morphology (e.g. Burgel, 1975). The interaction among different social classes in the urban arena led to the consolidation of a dense urban fabric consisting of a microcosm of settlements morphologically compact but functionally independent (Maloutas, 2007). The city’s evolution was driven by a fine (and subtle) balancing of the interests expressed by three population segments: the working class, progressively less industrialized and more precarious; the petty bourgeoisie in search of a new identity; and the upper class, with its relation – in some respects unique – with the city (Arapoglou & Sayas, 2009). The need to defend unique prerogatives together with the common right to ‘global’ commodities (e.g. safety, wellness, space, technology, access to infrastructure) permeated all social classes contributing to the slow transformation of a emerging city (Petsimeris, 2008).

Urban development showed two distinct phases in the aftermath of World War II: the first phase, encompassing the time interval between the 1950s and the 1980s, was characterized by dense and compact growth, in line with the expansion observed in other southern European agglomerations; the second phase, observed from the early 1980s, was based on population and economic deconcentration determining ex-urban development, combined with a shift from manufacturing to services. This produced a change in the spatial distribution of high-level economic functions on a local scale. Economic restructuring in turn influenced settlement form (Figure 1) stimulating a medium-density growth on the fringe rather than a low-density sprawl (Gargiulo Morelli & Salvati, 2010).

Although the increasing distance from the past development was reflected in the weaker population density gradient observed after the 1980s, the latest development wave has not promoted (except in some restricted areas) discontinuous and low-density settlements. In fringe areas a slow densification process driven by settlement informality and ‘spot’ planning altered, in the years following the Olympic games, the originally sprawled landscape of Athens’ suburbs (Salvati, 2011).

**Demographic growth, economic restructuring, and social change**

The transition from a city based on two growth poles (Athens and Piraeus) towards a more polarized area based on a third pole established in the ‘Olympic’ municipalities north of Athens did not significantly alter the location pattern of industrial and tertiary activities. In fact, this process has been observed since the 1970s affecting only moderately the spatial distribution of the economic activities in the whole region (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004). The progressive withdrawal of manufacturing from the center of
Athens coincided with the decline of the policies towards industrial concentration in Athens region (Kourliouros, 1997). The suburbanization of the economic activities involved the two main plains surrounding Athens (Thriasio and Messoghia) and resulted in compact, mixed residential–service settlements interconnected with dense urban fabric.

Figure 1. (a) A map of Athens’ metropolitan area with the boundaries of local municipalities and the names of selected urban centers in the region (arrow indicates the position of the core city); (b–e): Athens’ expansion (1948–2010).
The transition of the economic structure towards advanced services has led to a moderate redistribution of the urban functions on a regional scale (Delladetsima, 2006). The consolidation of commercial functions in Piraeus and of administrative functions in Athens was accompanied by a progressive specialization in financial intermediation and business services in the neighboring municipalities. Despite progressive depopulation, the historic centers of Athens and Piraeus have preserved an economic role in the metropolitan area (Gospodini, 2009).

The most important urban change, however, was the gradual reorganization of the northern districts (Maroussi, Kifissia, and Chalandri, among others) brought about by the Olympic infrastructures (e.g. the Attica highway, a suburban railway connected with the underground, the new international airport). Firm headquarters and shopping centers have colonized this area and their buildings represent, with modernistic shapes and technology, the evolution of the traditional Athenian manufacturing landscape into one of advanced services (Gospodini, 2006).

Complete saturation of the urban voids has definitely changed the cityscape of this area, where only 10 years before the cultivation of vineyards and olive groves was the dominant use of land. The speed with which this new central business district (CBD) developed was rather impressive. Being functionally oriented towards telecommunications and high-tech productions (Gargiulo Morelli & Salvati, 2010), this CBD forms a new ‘city within the city’ perpetuating a process driven by national and foreign investments stimulated by the 2004 Olympics.

At the same time, this process seems to maintain connections with the characteristics of Athens’ long-term development path including the mixité of functions evoked by Leontidou (1990). The consolidation of a CBD with mixed urban functions contributed to medium- and low-density expansion in the surrounding areas, which have seen land values increase significantly more than others.

Following economic transformations, socio-spatial restructuring is more evident on a regional scale, with the weakening of the east–west class gradient highlighted by Burgel (1975), and with the formation of a more fragmented pattern, in which ‘island settlements’ tend to generate enclaves of wealth and poverty (Maloutas, 2007). In a (only supposedly) homogeneous urban landscape, the legacy of the past informal development had created a social structure dominated by the proletarian class and, subsequently, by the petty bourgeoisie (Vaiou, 1997). In other words, the actors at the base of the urban growth appear the same as 30 years ago (Leontidou, 1990), reflecting a social geography that alternates segregation, fragmentation, and homogeneity in a rather entropic manner (Figure 2).
The legacy of the urban gradient

Restructuring processes have established a rather cohesive morphology in a metropolitan area that shows modest deconcentration processes, except in limited areas of the city center. There is no denying, of course, the impact urban diffusion exerted on the fringe; it would seem, however, that this process will still refer to a model that reproduces the characteristics of polarization and contiguity observed on a regional scale (Figure 3).

Athens’ sprawl should be thus ascribed to a broader development process which is still supported by a moderately growing population. Such a phenomenon is evident in the peri-urban area that benefited from improved accessibility. What role attractors such as the international airport or the neighboring port of Rafina will have is an issue still under debate. These areas will probably represent a sort of ‘development laboratory’ with a few emerging satellite towns.

Instead of referring to Athens’ sprawl as a stable concept, it might be possible to evoke, following Minca (2004), the metaphor of the ‘horizon’ to witness an evolution that has not yet reached a mature stage, with boundaries that no longer coincide with the borders of the metropolitan area (Coccossis, Economou, & Petrakos, 2005).

While urban development in Athens is creating progressively scattered settlements rather than a moderately polycentric spatial structure, the main urban centers maintain centrality and create further polarization within a development path that, in the rhetoric of (missed) planning choices, is reducing the center–periphery gap too slowly. This pattern, however, could have implications for the containment of sprawl, contributing to the conservation of natural landscapes in disadvantaged and marginal areas caused by lack of entrepreneurship and political inertia (Giannakourou, 2005).

When prefiguring the future urban diffusion, we should mention areas progressively further away from Athens. In these areas, made increasingly more accessible through new roads and railway infrastructures, a discontinuous expansion – even in a time of economic crisis – was observed as driven by the speculative second-home market and the removal of urban functions from the neighboring satellite towns of Messoghia and Thriasio. Planning contributes to the sprawled development of these areas promoting tourism-specialized settlements.

However, it seems clear that the most rapid economic and socio-demographic processes remain in the urban area (Chorianopoulos, Pagonis, Koukoulas, & Drymoniti, 2010), confirming the hypothesis that Athens’ metropolitan area is still growing and
consolidating according to a mono-centric model. This shows continuity with the expansion of the past and reflects the development path observed in other Mediterranean cities (e.g. Barcelona: Dura-Guimera, 2003).

Conclusions

The urban transition discussed in this study pointed out the complexity of the development path observed in Athens since World War II. This transition was characterized by distinct expansion modes alternating concentration/polarization and deconcentration/depolarization waves that determined the morphology and spatial configuration of contemporary Athens (Gargiulo Morelli & Salvati, 2010). The growth of two core cities (Athens and Piraeus) in the nineteenth century, the rapid expansion of deregulated settlements in the early decades of the twentieth century, the bias in the evolution of the city at the turn of World War II due to massive immigration from Turkey, followed by a mild depolarization of the central areas, are the most representative stages of a process acting at the urban scale, without the ‘scale jump’ typical of sprawl (Indovina, 2009). This suggests the importance of past development when interpreting actual growth and imagining development scenarios for the future (Cassano, 1996).

How the Olympic games have affected the most recent development stage is an issue still under discussion. Such an event has certainly been an economic driver able to (re)bring the city to the fore. However, despite some efforts in decentralizing urban functions, the Olympics have remained primarily an event concentrated in Athens’ core (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004). Moreover, even for the (sometimes rhetoric) purposes that characterized the Greek society and politics in the years before the Olympics, that time has represented only a relatively efficient but brief parenthesis compared to the largely ineffective planning experience of the 1980s and 1990s (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004).

The ‘message-in-the-bottle’ that post-Olympics Athens offers is based on both the moderate urban renewal and infrastructural development and the coexistence of peculiar settlement characteristics as the result of a chaotic and uncontrolled expansion. Urban regeneration and the coexistence of old styles, convergence to Europe coupled with Balkan magnetism, commitment and transgressions in the new urban landscape are the candidate hallmarks of the new Athens region (Zagorianakos, 2004). This process also reflects the deregulated use – mainly for commercial purposes – of peri-urban areas (Delladetsima, 2006). It was positively affected by the regeneration of the waterfront along the southern coast, although it does not achieve the outcomes observed in Barcelona (Gospodini, 2001). It definitely creates a new consciousness in considering the effort of the Olympics as a starting point in a process of relocation fueled by postmodern trends in the economy and society (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004).

The open questions on the future expansion of Athens and, more generally, of southern European cities can be still answered by citing the past development as an expression of the fundamental characteristics of a society (Leontidou, 1996). Great challenges await the new Athens’ region, moving away from the infrastructural and ‘rhetorically modernist’ legacy of the Olympics: (1) to mitigate the impact of spatial segregation and consolidate the redevelopment of the historic center, coming back to the ‘popularity’ and ‘spontaneity’ characteristics that still remain the most colorful and effective representation of the Mediterranean city; and (2) to reflect on the role of urban centers and reorganize them by promoting the use of empty spaces hampered by informal growth (Chorianopoulos et al., 2010).
To rethink a new socioeconomic role for the whole metropolitan area is necessary in the framework of the crisis that has had great impact on the Mediterranean urban areas. Existing infrastructures should be managed and new infrastructures planned as a tool for sustainable development. Priority should be given to the protection of green areas by reconsidering the role of the urban region in a broader process of polycentric development on a national scale. These appear as potentially useful measures for the cohesive and spatially balanced development of Athens’ metropolitan area. The future of Athens (and perhaps of other Mediterranean cities) is definitely shaped by the uncertain outcome of these developmental trajectories suspended in between planning and informality (Martinotti, 1999).

Alternatives to this *impasse* depend on how the city will be able to recover the most attractive urban landscapes, avoiding the temptation to reproduce planning solutions derived from ‘northern’ experiences (Amin & Thrift, 2005; Hall & Pain, 2006; Longhi & Musolesi, 2007). Despite the changes taking place in the last decade, the past urban growth emerges as the most important trait of the city. The (supposed) ‘resistance’ of the Mediterranean city to models developed in different urban contexts (e.g. Sassen, 2001; Scott, 2001; Secchi, 2005) should be considered as a positive trait ensuring social cohesion and maintaining environmental sustainability.

Density and contiguity are still the main features of a Mediterranean urbanity suspended between the anxiety about tomorrow and a relentless pursuit of the past. Especially settlement compactness may be seen as an element to contrast landscape fragmentation, urban disintegration and the degradation of the suburban spaces (Bruegmann, 2005). To reinterpret compactness as the distinctive trait of the Mediterranean urbanity, rather than an indicator of backwardness, could be the key point of this strategy.

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