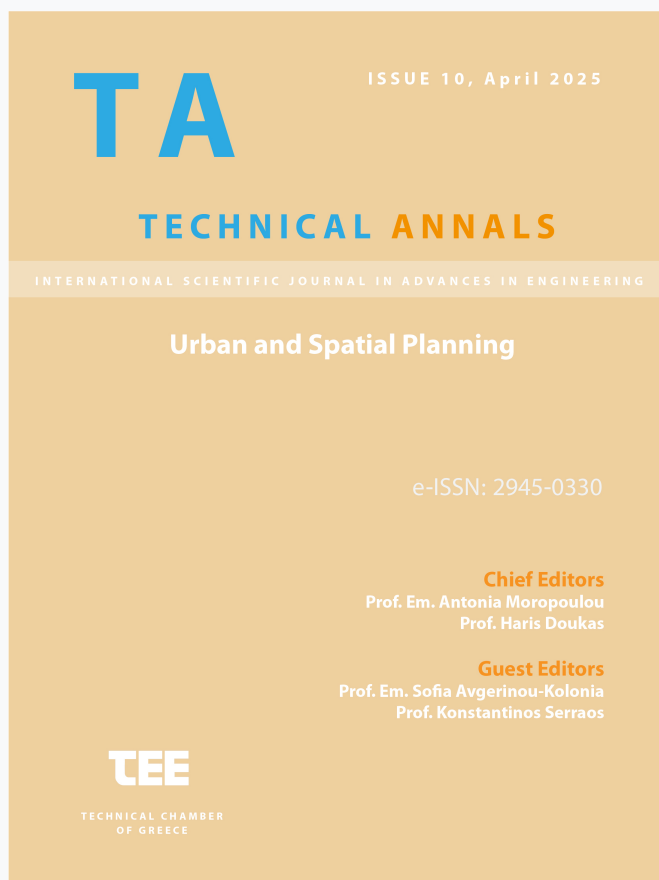


## Technical Annals

Vol 1, No 10 (2025)

Technical Annals



### Athens as Symbolic Space: Spatial Representations and the Conceptualization of the City through Narratives and Urban Plans

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doi: [10.12681/ta.40785](https://doi.org/10.12681/ta.40785)

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### To cite this article:

Demertzi, A. (2025). Athens as Symbolic Space: Spatial Representations and the Conceptualization of the City through Narratives and Urban Plans. *Technical Annals*, 1(10). <https://doi.org/10.12681/ta.40785>

# Athens as Symbolic Space: Spatial Representations and the Conceptualization of the City through Narratives and Urban Plans

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the dynamic interplay between urban narratives and spatial policies in shaping contemporary Athens' identity, tracing significant transformations from the early 2000s to the present. Drawing from Lefebvre's representational spaces and Barthes' myths, it illustrates how dominant narratives and spatial policies mutually construct and reshape each other, reflecting evolving political, economic, and social contexts.

Initially, Athens' identity aligned with the global aspirations symbolized by the 2004 Olympic Games, projecting the city as an international metropolitan center. The subsequent Greek financial crisis radically altered these narratives, recasting Athens as a space of decline, unrest, and socio-political activism. Movements such as the "Indignants" protests transformed public spaces into symbolic arenas of resistance and cultural expression, reshaping global perceptions of the city.

Since 2017, Athens experienced another narrative shift emphasizing cultural revival and increased touristification. International events like Documenta 14, and strategic media portrayals rebranded the city as resilient, creative, and culturally vibrant. These optimistic narratives, however, intensified urban inequalities and accelerated gentrification processes, highlighting tensions between symbolic representations and residents' lived realities.

Strategic urban planning practices under neoliberal governance reinforced these narratives, shifting from state-centered managerialism to entrepreneurial frameworks prioritizing investment attraction and commodification of urban spaces. Despite the proliferation of participatory initiatives, governance practices became increasingly fragmented and less democratic, sidelining genuine social equity, inclusion, and spatial justice.

**Keywords:** Spatial Planning, Urban Narratives, Athens Identity, Urban Governance, Urban Policies

## 1 Introduction

Athens is considered a historic city with metropolitan characteristics and has historically functioned as a symbolic space where spatial representations and urban narratives shape and continually reshape its identity. The hypothesis being examined here is that

Athens' spatial policies have interacted with shifts in public discourse and have been shaped by austerity urbanism and neoliberalization (Koutrolidou et al., 2025).

This hypothesis is unfolding through three topics: i. how Athens' spatial policies and urban governance have evolved in reflection with historical turning points and events, ii. whether and how public discourse via media and dominant narratives influenced these policies and governance and iii. what dynamics were derived from those transformations.

By conducting a retrospective review of sources – including bibliography, policy documents, mass media, and legislation – this study explores whether, and how, spatial policies, strategies, dominant imaginaries, and public discourse collectively shape the city's identity both as spatial representation and as an image of the city that is communicated. In other words, this work explores how this identity materializes in real life through actual spatial reforms.

Drawing on Lefebvre's concepts of spatial representation and representational space (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]), and Soja's notion of secondspace (Soja, 1996), this work aims to articulate the processes through which both urban imaginaries (Zukin et al., 1998) and spatial policies are constructed in post-Olympics Athens.

Transitioning from cities of production to cities of consumption (Jayne, 2005) new symbols are created beyond the material space of the city: the arts, food, fashion become key elements of the city's showcase "aestheticizing everyday life" (Featherstone, 1996) Consequently, cities are promoted as innovative, attractive and entertaining places.

Tangible and intangible symbols—such as a city's cultural heritage, iconic architecture, or landmark buildings—along with narratives about the city and its cultural expressions (e.g., residents' everyday life, local music, racial and cultural identities), are transformed into economic and commercial values. As a result, local cultures, identities, and specific characteristics are instrumentalized to serve the city's competitiveness and its efforts to attract investment. In this way, the collective symbolic capital, or the distinctive features of a place, act as a magnet for investment interest in global capital flows (Harvey, 2012).

We argue that throughout different historical phases—from Pericles' Golden Age to the contemporary urban metropolis—Athens has been consistently associated with specific myths. Based on Barthes (1979), these myths are not just stories that survive over years, but constitute semiological systems transforming reality into seemingly neutral, timeless narratives, detached from their historical context. Athens, in its recent history, has been extensively studied across various disciplines and literature has long engaged with the urban and socio-spatial transformations of Athens.

Key issues include post-war urbanization and internal migration (Burgel, 1976; Kyrizaki-Alisson, 1998; Kapoli, 2014), the impact of reconstruction (Mantouvalou, 1985), and the distinct patterns of Athens' Mediterranean character as a metropolis (Leontidou, 1990). The decline of the city center and the suburbanization of the upper classes (Chorianopoulos et al., 2010; Maloutas, 2018), as well as the political dimensions of spatial planning (Maloutas et al., 2013). Furthermore, research has explored the dynamics of urban sprawl (Sayas, 2016) and the role of Athens as a gateway for refugees and

migrants, particularly since the 1990s (Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001; Kandyliis et al., 2012; Papatzani and Knappers, 2020).

Each different context was grounded on the spatial field, always followed by a ‘myth’, an ensemble of signs, connotations, narratives and beliefs that construct its identity. Within this framework spatial policies, strategies, dominant imaginaries, and public discourse operate as myth-making mechanisms. Urban policies and planning documents, alongside media narratives and cultural productions, contribute to a system of meanings that encode specific values—such as modernity, creativity, or competitiveness—into the city’s spatial form. These meanings are not neutral; they carry implicit connotations and power dynamics, framing what is visible, what is desirable, and what is excluded from the urban landscape (Barthes, 1979; Zukin, 2001).

Notably, the shift from urban vision and grandeur associated with the 2004 Olympic Games to the profound socio-economic crisis, the subsequent rise of cultural activism and to today’s touristic storytelling have significantly altered the city’s image and narratives. Strategic spatial planning in Athens has been critical in reinforcing and enabling these dominant urban narratives, making the city a representational space. Within the context of neoliberal urbanism, planning has undergone considerable transformation, rescaling the state’s role and facilitating the emergence of new governance actors such as private and non-governmental actors.

This shift reflects a broader neoliberal reorientation, consistent with urban entrepreneurial strategies (Harvey, 1989), where cities transition from managerial approaches to more market-driven, competitive frameworks. This transition aligns closely with aspirations for global visibility of Athens, yet simultaneously raises issues related to social equity, policy fragmentation, accountability, and the commodification of urban spaces and experiences.

## **2 A Genealogy of ‘Myths’ for Athens**

### **2.1 From the Olympic Vision to the State Bankruptcy**

At the onset of the 21st century, Athens was on the threshold of preparing and hosting the 2004 Olympic Games<sup>1</sup>. Both policies and narratives revolved around the significance of the event as of “major national importance” figuring its double role in fostering economic growth and investing in the country’s international profile, glow and attractiveness. The strategic objective explicitly and officially outlined Greece’s competitive stance within the international, European, Mediterranean and Balkan contexts which positioned Athens as a metropolitan capital with metropolitan and European appeal, featured by high-quality services and leading business activities<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, the international and domestic press crafted Athens’ profile as a city symbolizing the Olympic Games. Its global and European visibility was emphasized, while not neglecting

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<sup>1</sup>“Athens in 2010 AD”, To Vima, 02-05-1999, <https://bit.ly/4cnVHHG>

<sup>2</sup>Law 2730/1999: “Planning, Integrated Development, and Execution of Olympic Projects and Other Provisions”. Government Gazette of the Hellenic Republic, Issue A 130/25-6-1999, Article 1

references to concerns about escalating costs and potential long-term economic burdens from these extensive infrastructural projects<sup>3</sup>.

Not many years after the Games, at the beginning of the global financial crisis, and following the police killing of a teenager (Vradis, 2009), Athens once again found itself in the center of international attention. The ensuing youth movement represented across international media as a generation actively demanding their "right to the city." For the first time the streets of Athens' inner city were transmitted globally, breaking into the international spotlight (Mavrommatis, 2015, p.435).

The 2010 Greek debt crisis period significantly reshaped Athens' image and spatial dynamics. International narratives portrayed Athens negatively, labeling it as the capital of an unreliable nation marked by economic mismanagement and inadequate governance<sup>4</sup>. The city's frequent social unrest was often depicted internationally as violent "riots" and disruptions, intensified perceptions of urban decline and disorder (Leontidou, 2012). At the same time, locally, dominant discourses stigmatized poverty and social exclusion as primary causes for urban degradation, shifting attention from deeper structural issues (Koutrolikou and Siatitsa, 2011).

## 2.2 Crises, Movements and Resistance

Between 2011 and 2017, Athens was associated with the deep debt crisis and social upheaval following Greece's inclusion in international bailout programs, while dominant narratives about poverty, marginalization, and social unrest gained momentum. Public spaces, notably Syntagma Square, transformed into symbolic arenas of mass demonstrations, grassroots activism, and radical political movements, with the "Indignants" protests at Syntagma square drawing millions in 2011 (Gaitanou, 2016). Concurrently, Athens witnessed the rise of self-organized solidarity networks, grassroots social initiatives, and an independent cultural scene. These movements challenged dominant narratives and reshaped urban public spaces from zones of protest into areas of community-building, resistance, and hope (Pettas & Daskalaki, 2022, p.11).

International media coverage during this period ranged from portraying Athens as a chaotic space of social disintegration to a vibrant center of creative resistance and cultural innovation. Street art and graffiti became core elements of Athens new image, embedding political critique and collective expression against austerity (Tulke, 2021; Tsilimpounidi and Walsh, 2011). Foreign press narratives transmitted this artistic explosion, framing Athens as "new Berlin," a hub for DIY culture and street art born out of socio-economic adversity (Legewie & Eichinger, 2017, p.16). Despite underlying

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<sup>3</sup>"Greece's Olympic bill doubles", BBC News, 12-11-2004,  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4007429.stm>

"Workers in peril at Athens sites", BBC News, 23-07-2004,  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3920919.stm>

<sup>4</sup>"Greeks protest against austerity measures", CNN, 05-05-2010,  
<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/05/04/greece.bailout.protests/index.html>,

"Greece presses 'help' button, markets still wary", Reuters, 23-04-2010,

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-idUSTRE63MILV20100423>,

"Athens, Berlin Spar as Bailout Takes Shape", Wall Street Journal, 24-02-2010,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704089904575093232431641628>

social inequalities and urban challenges, these narratives significantly contributed to shaping Athens contemporary identity as a city characterized by resilience, creativity, and cultural revival amidst profound crises.

### **2.3 Alternative cultural scene and touristification**

The period from 2017 to 2021 marked a significant shift in Athens urban narrative and identity, primarily shaped by two intertwined dynamics: the emergence of an alternative cultural scene and the intensification of touristification. Central to these developments was Documenta 14, titled "Learning from Athens," which took place in 2017, marking the first occasion the renowned international art exhibition was hosted outside Kassel, Germany. Positioned at the crossroads of Greece's ongoing economic austerity and the escalating refugee crisis, Documenta 14 aimed to symbolically engage with and artistically "heal" the city's socio-economic trauma, drawing parallels with Kassel's post-World War II devastation and reconstruction (Campbell & Durden, 2017). The exhibition attracted significant international attention, with over 300,000 visitors exploring artistic installations dispersed across public and private spaces within Athens. However, despite its ambitious goals, Documenta 14 faced critical scrutiny for what many saw as limited and surface-level engagement with Athens real socio-economic issues, inadvertently reinforcing narratives of exoticism and commodifying local struggles, thus fueling further gentrification in neighborhoods such as Exarcheia and Koukaki (Bolonaki, 2022; Dimitrakaki, 2017).

Subsequently, Athens began to gain publicity as an emerging alternative cultural and tourist destination, promoted as a city worth visiting for its cultural vibrancy, creativity and grassroots energy. International media narratives played an influential role in redefining Athens from a city marked by austerity and crisis to one characterized by creative resilience and cultural vibrancy. Renowned international publications, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Vogue*<sup>5</sup>—highlighted Athens as an exciting, culturally rich destination. These narratives celebrated Athens street art, grassroots initiatives, and independent cultural practices that emerged organically from the crisis environment. This portrayal significantly impacted tourism patterns, shifting the city's image from a troubled, marginalized capital to a revitalized urban hub ripe for cultural and touristic consumption (Gourzis et al., 2019; Pettas et al., 2021).

Consequently, Athens newfound cultural prominence, along with the accompanying surge in tourism, revealed deeper contradictions—between international branding strategies aimed at commodification of culture and economic revitalization which led to the exacerbation of local inequalities (Bolonaki, 2022; Pettas et al., 2021).

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<sup>5</sup>"Why Downtown Athens Is Basically Brooklyn by the Sea", *Vogue*, 06-06-2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/downtown-athens-brooklyn-hip-travel-guide>

"Athens, Rising", *The New York Times*, 18-06-2018, [nyti.ms/3W4JfqN](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/travel/athens.html)

"Athens city guide: what to see plus the best bars, hotels and restaurants/ Tour classical sites with locals and discover the guesthouses, restaurants and bars being opened by young entrepreneurs in a city buzzing with creativity", *The Guardian*, 27-08-2018, <https://www.inkl.com/news/athens-city-guide-what-to-see-plus-the-best-bars-hotels-and-restaurants>

### **3 Representations of Athens through Urban Planning**

#### **3.1 The articulation of Myths and the neoliberalization of the Regulatory Strategic Spatial Planning**

Under neoliberal institutional transformations, spatial planning went under significant shifts globally affecting planning methodologies, governance structures and tools (Hadjimichalis, 2019; Olesen, 2014; Peck et al., 2012). Beginning in the mid-1980s, a transition from managerialism to entrepreneurialism reshaped spatial policies, emphasizing decentralization and local economic competitiveness (Harvey, 1989). This institutional turn not only alternated the strategic character of planning but also redefined it as a tool for economic growth rather than a mechanism for spatial and economic redistribution. Brenner (2004) conceptualizes this transformation through the idea of governance "beyond the state," where planning responsibilities are increasingly shared among a diverse set of actors, including private and non-governmental actors. This shift implies a transformation from traditional state-centric governance towards collaborative, networked forms of decision-making and implementation, wherein multiple stakeholders negotiate and share authority, while considering cities and regions as key drivers to the economic development strategies.

In Greece, spatial planning historically emerged as reactive, primarily legitimizing pre-existing informal urban expansions such as post-war unauthorized construction or suburban sprawl driven by private micro-property reproduction (Mantouvalou, 1985). During this process, spatial planning acted as a follower of "faits accomplis", such as the "antiparochi" system (a form of private urban development) and the informal, unplanned expansion of the city. It was implemented at a central level, under bureaucratic terms, and in conditions that served smaller or larger vested interests (Alexandri, 2018).

Greece's accession to the EEC and the need to align spatial policy with European standards transformed the model of spatial planning, which until then had been implemented exclusively at the level of central government. In 1985, the first Regulatory Metropolitan Athens Plan (Law 1515/1985) was enacted, with its main objectives being to curb the growth of economic activity in the capital (Asprogerakas, 2018), to reduce the size of the city, which was seen as disproportionately large compared to the rest of the country (Tsadari, 2019), and to promote the city centre through the qualitative upgrading of its neighbourhoods (Alexandri, 2014). The plan aimed to mitigate these issues by promoting decentralization, improving environmental conditions, and enhancing the historic and residential character of the city.

The plan established core objectives, including the revitalization of Athens historic identity, improvement of living conditions, and reduction of spatial inequalities. It emphasized the redistribution of economic activities in regional centers while maintaining the administrative and commercial significance of the historic core. The 1985 metropolitan plan also prioritized urban renewal, the expansion of green spaces, and the relocation of disruptive industrial and commercial activities outside residential areas.

From the 1990s the Greek planning system, influenced by international shifts, witnessed a gradual reconfiguration. Amendments, such as Law 1955/1991 and Law 2730/1999, introduced modifications to accommodate infrastructural projects,

including the new Athens International Airport and Olympic venues. The 1999 revisions reflected an increasing alignment of spatial planning with large-scale investment projects and urban development tied to international events, setting a precedent for market-driven planning interventions and planning “by exception” (Klabatsea and Tsampra, 2014).

The Greek planning system in which decision-making authority extended beyond state institutions to involve market-driven planning frameworks or even private planning. In Athens, this evolution became particularly evident during the 2004 Olympic Games, as planning practices embraced flexible regulatory frameworks and special investment-driven urban projects aimed at enhancing global competitiveness.

A major paradigm shift occurred with the enactment of the updated Metropolitan Athens - Attica Regulatory Plan (Law 4277/2014). This plan moved away from the previous focus on decongestion and environmental restructuring and adopted a growth-oriented model. The emphasis was placed on enhancing the international role of Athens, fostering economic competitiveness and attracting investment. The plan reinforced the city’s branding as a global economic hub, advocating for strategic specialization in tourism, culture, and business clusters.

The shift in urban planning during the crisis extended beyond the integration of sustainability principles, urban resilience, and heritage conservation; it also reflected the broader neoliberal trend of using spatial planning as a mechanism for economic recovery. The abolition of key regulatory agencies such as the Organization for the Regulatory Plan of Athens (ORSA) marked a shift toward rescaling in planning, raising concerns about selective implementation and transparency (Vaiou, 2014; Iliopoulou and Mantouvalou, 2017).

It was within the framework of the crisis and the broader neoliberal shift that urban planning flexibility at the national level were introduced, transforming urban planning into a growth factor explicitly designed to attract investment (Chorianopoulos et al., 2014). This approach embedded market-driven, investment-oriented strategies, emphasizing deregulation, project-led development, and the facilitation of private-sector involvement in spatial governance. In this context, urban planning became less about balancing social and spatial equity and more about leveraging urban space as a vehicle for financialization, land valorization, and speculative development, reinforcing the role of Athens within globalized investment circuits.

The spatial planning reforms introduced under Greece’s bailout programs aimed to facilitate private investment by simplifying and accelerating licensing procedures, enhancing flexibility in land use, and streamlining planning processes. These reforms were part of a broader strategy to improve the business environment and support a new growth model focused on investment and exports, rather than consumption. Overall, the crisis-context reforms positioned spatial planning as a key instrument for economic recovery, linking policy changes directly to market-friendly objectives (Giannakourou and Stamatiou, 2024).

A key element of this approach was the widespread adoption of “fast-track” planning tools at the national level (e.g. Special Spatial Development Plans of Strategic Investments in 2010 - in Greek: ΕΣΧΑΣΕ, Special Spatial Development Plans of Public Assets in 2011 – in Greek: ΕΣΧΑΑΑ, Special Urban Plans in 2014 – in Greek: Ειδικά



Πολεοδομικά Σχέδια)<sup>6</sup> facilitated targeted investments, but also led to the fragmentation of planning authority among multiple stakeholders, including ministerial, regional, municipal and private actors.

### 3.2 Representations of Athens through development planning

Athens urban development over the past decade has been shaped by a multiplicity of strategic frameworks, often developed in response to EU funding requirements rather than as part of a cohesive vision. These plans, including the Smart Specialization Strategy (RIS3)<sup>7</sup> or the Integrated Urban Intervention Plan - IUIP (in Greek: ΣΟΑΠ<sup>8</sup>), have operated in isolation, rarely complementing each other, forming an integrated strategy. Instead, they have largely functioned as preconditions for accessing funding, with short-term implementation periods and limited long-term impact.

A key example is the IUIP for central Athens officially approved in 2015. Rather than emerging from a comprehensive urban planning vision, IUIP was a reaction to the economic and social crises that intensified in the city center. It framed urban planning as a tool for crisis management, prioritizing security, investment incentives and cultural entrepreneurship while excluding public participation from the decision-making process. Urban policing and property market restructuring took precedence over inclusive planning, making IUIP more of an emergency stabilization tool than a framework for long-term urban transformation.

Similarly, the Athens Operational Programs (Municipality of Athens, 2012-2015 & 2015-2019) conveyed strategies and visions towards making Athens more attractive Athens. The “Re-launching Athens” initiative alluded to a renovated image of a city” that suffered a lot but now can be lived, visited, invested, despite or above the socio-economic crisis”.

The shift towards a resilience narrative was further reinforced by the Athens Resilience Strategy 2030, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities program (Municipality of Athens, 2017). While presented as an innovative approach to urban sustainability, the concept of resilience was largely appropriated as a vehicle for attracting investment. Rather than addressing structural inequalities, it functioned as a branding strategy, positioning Athens as a city that could adapt to crises while remaining open for business. Critics argue that resilience became a depoliticized buzzword reinforcing existing power dynamics (Kandylis, 2017).

The increasing role of private actors in shaping the urban agenda was evident in projects such as the Athens Partnership’s “Adopt Your City” program, which encouraged corporate sponsorship of urban interventions (Koutrolidou et al., 2025; Kapsali, 2024; Πούλιος, 2020). This reliance on private funding for public projects, including the redesign of Omonia Square and the failed redevelopment of Strefi Hill, underscored the growing privatization of urban planning. Such initiatives frequently bypassed

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<sup>6</sup>For a detailed review and documentation of the successive changes in Greece’s spatial planning and the contradictions between regulation and development during the period of Europeanisation of the Greek planning legal framework, see also Karadimitriou and Pagonis, 2019; Papageorgiou, 2017

<sup>7</sup>Smart Specialization Strategy, Attica Region, 2015, <https://bit.ly/4mwobVn>

<sup>8</sup>Joint Ministerial Decision 1397/2015. Government Gazette B’ 64/16.01.2015

democratic decision-making processes, raising concerns about transparency and accountability<sup>9</sup>.

The Athens “Triangle” revitalization, funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation<sup>10</sup>, exemplifies this trend. While aimed at improving the public realm through micro-interventions—such as graffiti removal and pedestrian-friendly redesigns, the project operated far off addressing structural urban challenges. It functioned as a short-term beautification effort aligned with the broader narrative of Athens as an attractive city hub.

The broader urban strategies of Athens increasingly positioned the city as a global tourism and business destination. The Athens 2020 Integrated Territorial Investment Strategy (ITI)<sup>11</sup>, largely structured around EU funding priorities, funneled resources into tourism, cultural heritage, and business innovation. The 2021-2027 version<sup>12</sup> expanded to include climate adaptation and digital transformation yet retained a primary focus on investment attractiveness. Similarly, initiatives like “This is Athens” and the Athens Convention & Visitors Bureau further entrenched the city’s image as a competitive metropolis, aligning with global trends in experiential tourism<sup>13</sup>.

In order to trace all the dimensions that construct myths and narratives about Athens through policies, it is important to also focus on policies that were proposed but were either rejected or not implemented.

The “Rethink Athens” project<sup>14</sup> launched with grand aspirations, as a comprehensive effort to revitalize the city center, promising a green, accessible and vibrant urban core. It was funded by the Onassis Foundation after a 2012 Cooperation Agreement with the Ministry of Environment, facilitated by a legal amendment allowing private funding for public purpose studies. The project’s core proposals—pedestrianization of Panepistimiou Street, the creation of shaded public spaces, and the activation of abandoned buildings into cultural hubs—were framed as essential steps toward making Athens a model metropolis. The rhetoric of resilience, accessibility, and cultural vibrancy dominated the project’s narrative, yet its underlying mechanism relied on attracting private investments and high-end commercial activity. Ultimately, despite extensive promotional campaigns and public exhibitions, the European Commission rejected the funding request (Kalantidou, 2018) citing its status as a “showcase” project rather than an infrastructural priority. Nonetheless, “Rethink Athens” marked the first urban planning initiative in Greece that was driven by the private sector, while being supported and facilitated by the state.

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<sup>9</sup>The “Adopt your city” program by the City of Athens is addressed to anyone who is interested to “adopt” a street, a tree, a park, a square, a playground, a sport facility, a neighborhood, to make them more luminous, greener and friendlier for citizens and visitors’, 2022 <https://adoptathens.gr/en/>

<sup>10</sup>‘The Commercial Triangle beats the heart of Athens: Here lie the most important buildings and monuments of our modern architectural and cultural heritage, here operate key institutions of the local economy and the tourism market, and here every street and corner is a piece of the city’s living history.’, <https://www.cityofathens.gr/who/anavathmisi-emporikoy-trigonoy/>

<sup>11</sup>ITI 2014-2020. 2018. *Athens 2020: Sustainable Development for Tourism, Culture, and Innovation*. <https://bit.ly/3ZxOAbd>

<sup>12</sup>ITI 2021-2027, 2018. “*Athens 2030*”, <https://athens2030.gr/o-ch-e-athina-2030/>

<sup>13</sup>‘This is Athens –Official visitors guide’, <https://www.thisisathens.org/>

<sup>14</sup>‘Rethink Athens’, <http://www.rethinkathens.org/eng/project>

Following “Rethink Athens”, the so-called “Great Walk” (in Greek: Μεγάλος Περίπατος) was introduced in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>15</sup>. Presented initially as a temporary health measure to facilitate pedestrian movement, it was later reframed as an ambitious urban intervention to reconnect Athens historic districts and improve public space. However, its abrupt implementation, lack of public consultation, and underdeveloped traffic management plans resulted in widespread criticism. Being supported by the activation of a Special Urban Plan (in Greek: Ειδικό Πολεοδομικό Σχέδιο), the initiative suffered from poor execution, prolonged delays, and strong public and institutional opposition. Due to the objections raised and the failure of the municipal authority that proposed it to be re-elected, the project was not completed and dismantled altogether.

Another paradigm of austerity urbanism and the rescaling of planning is reflected in the policies of the Greek state concerning Athens. It is crucial to examine how, during the crisis period, governmental policies were proposed and implemented in the city, aiming to suppress social protests and contestation, and to “sanitize” the urban center through measures of securitization and discipline in public space. In the post-crisis era, this shift paved the way for policies oriented towards the touristification of the city, promoting economic recovery through cultural branding, flagship projects and the commodification of urban space. The Greek state historically oscillated between selective large-scale urban interventions and ad hoc deregulation, fostering a duality in planning approaches (Karadimitriou and Pagonis, 2019).

In 2010, the Minister for the Environment, Energy and Climate Change, Tina Birbili, presented the “Athens-Attica 2014” plan, described as “a set of actions and interventions for the upgrading of the metropolitan area and the improvement of the quality of life of its residents,” aiming to continue an effort that had “remained suspended after the Olympic Games, as the developmental opportunity of the Games could not be fully utilized and completed” (Ministry for the Environment, Energy and Climate Change, 2010). The program, recognizing the major problems caused by the crisis (unemployment, business closures, a decline in tourism, etc.), “perceived” in Athens the potential to confront the crisis by leveraging its comparative advantages. Therefore, it proposed “investments in upgrading projects that act as catalysts for the mobilization of private capital while large-scale interventions became attractive for public-private partnerships” (ibid.).

Simultaneously enabling the privatization of public space while maintaining tight control over areas deemed in need of security measures exemplified by the 2011 “Pangalos Plan” (Deputy Prime Minister’s Office, 2011) which framed the city center as a security concern requiring policing and urban renewal incentives, so that Athens would become a “safe, sustainable, attractive, and vibrant” city (ibid.). In terms of urban planning specifically, the plan envisaged the “activation of existing and the establishment of new tools for the comprehensive restructuring of areas through the demolition of buildings or entire blocks, by formulating Special Integrated Programs, which will include the necessary measures, actions, interventions, guidelines, and procedures of an

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The Great Walk of Athens: One of the largest urban interventions in the history of the capital begins’, May 2020. <https://www.cityofathens.gr/o-megalos-peripatos-tis-athinas-mia-apo/>

urban, social, residential, and special architectural character” (ibid, p.16), as well as the “legislative regulation for designating areas as ‘Special Regeneration Zones’, [...] where in extreme areas suffering from severe social, economic, and environmental degradation, special economic provisions with tax and other incentives may be approved for a limited period. [...] The objective was to retain the “healthy” population that remains, and attract new residents, while at the same time activating market mechanisms to ensure a functional system” (ibid).

In the post-crisis phase of “development,” the governmental policies shift from austerity urbanism to a neoliberal, speculative spatial logic. These choices promoted the facilitation of investment, the touristification of central neighborhoods, and the reconfiguration of urban functions, often under the rhetoric of revitalization, modernization and sustainable growth.

The decision to relocate nine government ministries from central Athens to the former PYRKAL industrial site epitomizes a top-down, opaque decision-making process with profound urban implications (School of Architecture, NTUA, 2024). Presented as a flagship urban regeneration project, the relocation was justified in terms of “efficiency,” “consolidation,” and “revitalization” of underutilized industrial land. However, it triggered strong opposition from municipal authorities, local communities and scientific agencies<sup>16</sup> that denounced the lack of consultation, the disregard for the city’s existing spatial dynamics and the potential hollowing out of the city center’s institutional character. The relocation risked accelerating the expropriation of central urban functions and the displacement of public services, contributing to the transformation of the city center into a tourist and consumption-oriented space rather than a civic and administrative hub.

Similarly, the case of the Exarchia metro station – near the center of Athens serves as a telling example of contested urbanism (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2025). Despite sustained local resistance, mass mobilizations, and expert warnings about the socio-spatial consequences of the project, the government pushed forward with the construction of the station, framing it as an accessibility and public transport improvement measure. For many, however, the metro station became a symbol of an imposed transformation designed to erase the neighborhood’s counter-cultural identity and to pave the way for gentrification, commercial redevelopment and the sanitization of urban space in the service of tourism and real estate interests. The project exemplifies how state-led interventions, framed as “modernization” or “accessibility” improvements, often mask a deeper agenda of reconfiguration of urban space to fit into the post-crisis economic model of a touristified, consumption-driven city.

Ultimately, Athens urban policies reflect a cycle of ambitious yet disconnected interventions, driven more by political and financial imperatives than by a genuine commitment to cohesive urban development. Each new plan introduced grand narratives, or ‘myths’—resilience, competitiveness, cultural vibrancy—but in practice, these

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<sup>16</sup>“Government Park at PYRKAL, Municipality of Dafni-Ymittos: Evaluation Report on Urban Planning and Environmental Impacts”, NTUA 2024, (GR), [https://www.arch.ntua.gr/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/pub\\_40322\\_Pyrkal\\_Axiologiki\\_Ekthesi.pdf](https://www.arch.ntua.gr/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/pub_40322_Pyrkal_Axiologiki_Ekthesi.pdf), Announcement Following the Joint Press Conference on the Relocation of Nine Ministries from the Center of Athens to PYRKAL, Municipality of Dafni-Ymittos, <https://bit.ly/4cOfyAe>

projects actually served as vehicles for investment attraction rather than inclusive urban transformation. The city remained trapped in an ongoing cycle of planning announcements, incomplete interventions, and shifting governance frameworks that prevent a holistic, socially conscious urban future, from taking shape.

#### 4 Conclusions: Myths and Reality

This concluding section reflects critically on the interplay between myths, narratives and spatial policies in Athens, arguing that the city's urban development has been shaped not merely by material interventions but also by the systematic construction and reproduction of selective spatial imaginaries. The relationship between narratives—whether in the press, official strategies or public discourse—and concrete policies is neither linear nor transparent; rather, it operates as a feedback loop where certain representations of the city are amplified, legitimized, and ultimately materialized in space. In the case of Athens, the construction of urban *myths*—such as the narrative of global appeal during the Olympic Games, the rhetoric of resilience during the crisis, or the image of the creative, tourist-friendly metropolis in the post-crisis years—has consistently served political and economic agendas. These *myths*, far from being neutral stories, constitute semiotic systems (Barthes, 1979) that frame and naturalize selective visions of the city while obscuring the social inequalities and contestations embedded in the urban fabric.

The analysis has demonstrated that spatial policies and governance frameworks in Athens have systematically adapted to these dominant narratives, producing a fragmented and often contradictory urban landscape. From the Olympic-led infrastructural boom of the early 2000s to the crisis-driven austerity measures and the recent strategies of resilience and tourism promotion, Athens has been repositioned in global flows of capital as a competitive, market-oriented and consumable city. This trajectory has been accompanied by significant governance shifts: the erosion of public planning institutions, the rise of private-led interventions, and the selective use of spatial planning tools by exception (such as Special Urban Plans for Strategic Investment Schemes) as mechanisms for facilitating investment and land valorization. The myth of "reclaiming the center" or "restarting Athens" has underpinned a cycle of incomplete, project-led interventions, often disconnected from broader social needs and implemented through top-down, non-transparent processes.

Each period in recent urban transformation of Athens—whether the Olympic vision of 1999–2009, the austerity urbanism of 2010–2017, or the post-crisis touristification and speculative development from 2018 onwards—has been marked by a dominant myth that justified and legitimized specific policies and spatial strategies. These myths operated as symbolic frameworks for attracting investment into key sectors aligned with Greece's position in the global economy: tourism, real estate, cultural and creative industries. Narratives of cultural identity, lifestyle, and resilience have been instrumentalized to promote Athens as a competitive destination, often masking social dislocations, inequalities, and exclusions embedded in these processes.

The review of urban policies in Athens reveals a persistent pattern: rather than fostering a cohesive, democratic and socially inclusive vision for the city, spatial strategies have oscillated between selective large-scale interventions, deregulation, and ad hoc project-based planning. What began as planning “by exception” in the context of the Olympics and the crisis, has now been normalized as standard practice. The abolition of key institutions such as ORSA, the reliance on private and hybrid governance bodies (e.g., Athens Regeneration SA, Athens Partnership) and the use of legal instruments like Special Spatial Plans have collectively facilitated a mode of governance characterized by opacity, selective participation, and prioritization of economic interests over social equity.

In the post-crisis period, the state has shifted from austerity urbanism to a neoliberal, speculative logic: promoting investment-friendly policies, facilitating touristification in central neighborhoods, and reconfiguring urban functions under the guise of resilience and sustainable growth. Projects such as the relocation of ministries to the PYRKAL site, the Exarchia metro station, and the “Great Walk” illustrate how strategic planning continues to operate as a vehicle for transforming the urban fabric into a landscape of consumption, often at the expense of public services, civic functions, and local communities.

Ultimately, Athens urban development trajectory reflects a cycle of ambitious yet fragmented interventions, driven more by political imperatives and the pursuit of global visibility than by a coherent, socially grounded vision for the city. Each successive plan introduces new myths—resilience, competitiveness, creativity—but these remain largely disconnected from the lived realities of residents, reproducing a pattern where spatial policies serve as instruments for investment attraction rather than mechanisms for equitable urban transformation. The persistent gap between the symbolic narratives and the material outcomes of spatial planning in Athens underscores the need for a critical reassessment of urban governance, one that recognizes the contested nature of spatial imaginaries and prioritizes the collective right to the city over the commodification of urban space. Despite rhetorical commitments to preserving the cultural “DNA” of Athens, no substantial policy measures have been implemented to mitigate these effects, illustrating the persistent gap between strategic narratives and spatial realities.

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