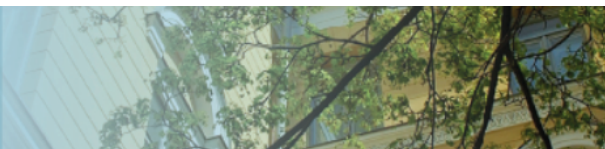*Language and the Scientific Imagination*
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Physical and Virtual Urban Landscapes. City Image Transformations on the Occasion of Great Events

1. Introduction

Athens, with a population of more than 4 million inhabitants is one of the main metropolitan centers of Southeastern Europe. Its urban development was determined by the conflicts that the socioeconomic evolution of Greece met during the past decades. These conflicts and contradictions constructed a metropolitan conurbation of various functional and morphological complexities drifting towards a degradation of its cultural identity as well.

2004 Olympic Games were a great opportunity for the city to overcome its consolidated handicaps and build a new identity by transforming its image and revealing its attractive character[1]. For this reason, and further to the new sports venues and the great infrastructure improvements the "Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens" was destined to be a key project affecting on the whole city's life.

In this context the term unification (in Greek "enopoiisi") means the creation of a continuous fabric of public spaces, parks, and facilities for culture and recreation, which will incorporate and link all the significant cultural landmarks of Athens, including its principal monuments and archaeological sites. The unification program aims to restore

the historic continuity of the city, and to create poles of attraction for its residents, but also providing a better quality of life in an overall space with upgraded environment and various functions, including culture. The desirable result will led to the harmonious coexistence of various city elements associated with its modern growth but also with its cultural history revealed thought the highlighted historic physiognomy of Athens[2].

Our study is trying firstly to outline the evolution of physical and virtual images of the project through investigating the reports of the electronic press.

2. The "Unification" process

The area of the project covers the core of the metropolitan centre of Athens, a place collecting parts of the city history of almost every age. It includes significant archaeological sites such as Acropolis, Agora, Kerameikos, Philopappou, Olympieion that attract a wide range of visitors; the medieval fabric of Psyrri, Plaka and Thiseion, famous for its recreational character , and the 19th century expansions of the neoclassical "Commercial Triangle", dominated by retail and other central activities. This Metropolitan center area was always under the jurisdiction of various policies, regarding urban tourism, city marketing, cultural insights, etc[3].

A number of studies concerning the restructuring of the metropolitan centre were never implemented because, among other difficulties, there was not a responsible agency for monitoring the whole effort. This problem was eventually resolved. EAXA, standing for Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens S.A. was founded in October 1997 and

is a Societé Anonyme type company owned entirely by the Greek ministry of Culture, and the ministry of the Environment, Planning and Public Works. The articles of incorporation provide that the Agency will operate for ten years. The Agency's founding goal is to implement a program for unification of the archaeological sites of Athens, as detailed in the specific plan that includes physical projects and other interventions. It was the first time that an urban renewal project of such extent was assigned to an independent agent outside the consolidated administrational hierarchies.

In that context, the particular goals of the Agency, as they are stated in its website are, to:

- Organize and enhance the archaeological sites of Athens.
- Create an upgraded network of pedestrian roads linking the archaeological zones of Athens, restoring the patterns of ancient pedestrian traffic, in a feasible level.
- Create public plazas and planted parks that will traverse and unify the various parts of the project. This will increase the public and green spaces along the pedestrian roads and new pathways created by the program.
- Restore and maintain monuments and buildings (restore facades, eliminate billboards, etc.)
- Draft suitable legislation including architecture regulations for the program area.
- Reduce building density in districts that affect the character of the zones unified under the project.

- Draft traffic and parking regulations in conjunction with the public transport system. Create a tramway serving the central pedestrian roads.[4]

Today, almost five years after the Games, many of the above goals seem to be achieved while most of the works are already completed with a number of big or small changes in their initial plan. Although the biggest part of the project was ready before the 2004 Games, EAXA has extended its existence for five years more in order to complete the project entirely. As expected, the whole project emerged as a basic reference for the media and attracted a lot of comments from the printed press and from almost every formal or informal report website.

3. The relation of the physical and the media city image

Even though the Unification project was taking gradually place on the physical space, we consider that nowadays the web and the other electronic press construct a contemporary arena of shaping images and beliefs for the mass and for the "special public" as well. The web press, as any other contemporary media, focuses on issues adopted as crucial also for its public. The process of building a new cultural identity is nowadays crucial for every European city[5] while citizens are widely involved in this process.

Our investigations focused initially on the official website of the Agency for the Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens, EAXA[6] and at the same time on the references of the daily web press for the period 2001-2008. We have chosen to

investigate the official electronic press because it evaluates and filters information more subjectively and thus it has exactly the capability of influencing the apperceptions of the mean citizen. 113 reports from the archive of two highly visited electronic newspapers[7] were collected evaluated as the hot spots of the total number of reports.

The aim of the intervention, according to what is written in the official website of EAXA[8], is to bring out the historic physiognomy of Athens. Furthermore it was promoted as a well organized attempt to reveal the memory elements that are strongly connected to the city history, to make them more familiar to the inhabitants and the visitors of Athens and to link them on the creative procedure of constructing a new culture identity for the city.

A preliminary conclusion which appeared in almost every press report is that this aim is tending to be materialized in a huge extent, at least regarding the first part of the above description which it is more clearly expressed. This conclusion could be seen as a first approach outlining the media city image.

Any imaginary or virtual image could never be expressed if there were no material basis. If we accept that web press builds an alternative city image, then how is the above conclusion related to the spatial narratives of the examined web pages?

4. Inquiring the media city image

The web image of the city is transiting in time series as the project is constructed on the ground. The initial reception that the intervention had was not positive indeed. The first references of the period 2001-2004 (before the Games) are expressing some rather negative critiques for several aspects of the Unification project. In Table 1 we can notice that 66% of the web publications of this period were facing the project under a negative point of view.

The issues on which the critiques of the period 2001-2004 are concentrated are considering mainly: the ability of the society to adjust on the new regulations; the cuts of the initial plan by the removing of programmed works and actions stacked on various dead ends; and, more over the conflicts caused within the procedure of the architectural competitions (Figure 1). Thereby, a fear is expressed that the changes might be ephemeral, while the image of an uncompleted intervention or of an intervention that cannot be embedded in the city remaining superficial and reversible is indirectly (or sometimes directly) roughed out.

Period	Positive Reports	%	Negative Reports	%	Total
2001-2004	22	34%	42	66%	64
2004-2008	25	51%	24	49%	49

2001-2008	47	42%	66	58%	113

Table 1. Positive and negative reports during the period 2001-2008 (source www.enet.gr, www.kathimerini.gr)

The problem of how the people is getting adjusted to the new regulations is considering the observance of the new limitations in the vehicle and the pedestrian circulation; the respect of the public space and the protection of urban equipment in general; but also as regards the issues of abusing space from different social groups and organizations. The occasion for these worries was given on one hand, by the dynamic actions of a central neighborhood residents (Philopappou) against the enclosure of the archaeological park with rail fencing and on the other hand by the use of the grand promenade axis (Areopagitou) for open exhibitions and crowded festivals. These agitations seem to be reasonable since the city has transformed the limitations and the liberties of the citizen on public space.

An intense criticism is expressed in a lot of cases for the "discounts" on the initial plan. By this, it was detected a fear for the future of the total completion of the concept (for example the decision of non pedestrianising Athena's, a historic retail street, was a serious decline from the published master plan). The "New Athens" appeared as a precious, fragile, an almost utopian place, not yet recorded on the collective subconscious.

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At the same time the reports, considering the issue of removing the arbitrary billboards from the building facades, are appearing in a persistent and in a high frequency. Even though this matter does not seem to be adopted as a priority, it is stating, in our opinion, a wider suspense for the effectiveness of planning against large or small private interests. The issue of removing the billboards is perhaps the only one that cuts across all the eight years examined. Anyone that reads these references could feel the notion of a city threaten all the time by the arbitrariness of the private interest and by the disability of the state to protect the public space.

Figure 1

"Architecture is molested in squares. Plans for Omonoia, Syntagma and Monastiraki are amputated"

Source:

http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/_

w_articles_civ_100005_09/03/2003_56603

The conflict on who controls the city has also another aspect, this of the critical procedure and of course the substance of the architectural competitions. Web press does not focus every time on the moral aspect of the administrational or institutional procedures, as much as for the final output and certainly about the delay in the completion of these

projects. When for example the Central Archaeological Board blocks the progress of

Monastiraki square due to objections for its architectural design, project architects are

faced rather with an affinity, while on the contrary the architects of Omonoia square, a

completed project that attracted extremely negative criticism from various parts of the

Greek society, do not seem to be handled on the same way.

During the period 2004-2008 there is a positive turn on the city descriptions (Table 1,

51% positive publications than 34% during the previous four years) that might has its

basis on the successful performance of the Olympic Games during the summer of 2004.

This turn was not entirely affecting all the interventions related to the Olympic Games[9].

The issues that the critiques of this period focus on are mainly considering the analysis

and the positive assessment of the effective procedures and practices. A new culture of

effectiveness was welcomed. At the same time it was also performed an anxiety about the

future evolution; a relief from the completion of works being in a delay; and finally the

permanent issues of criticism on the "rehabilitation" of the billboards are keeping on

from last period.

In the end of 2004 some web publications are quoted that evaluate the mechanisms and

the results of EAXA in a positive way and ask the generalization of this scheme in a

wider program of urban upgrading. There are also some positive references on the quality

and the aesthetic level of the place sprawl, while is missing any negative criticism on

these issues. At the same time there were several essays found that explained the

contribution of the project in specific strategic goals of metropolitan planning, as for example the upgrading of the city's image and the attraction of urban tourism.

It is also stressed that the web publications relevant to the phase of the works construction are much more than those referring to the phase following the completion. The transition procedure within the city as it should expected motives the society while at the same time feeds the web pages with more information. The image of the "city as a building site" is always more attractive for the media. The apogee of this attitude is the expression, at the end of 2007, of an anxiety about the future of the "Unification Agency" and the possible extension of its operation for another five years. One can conclude that a deep will for the entire completion of the project is expressed.

5. How time affects the convergence or the decline of these images?

It is a matter of course that great urban interventions generate critiques, comments and descriptions that decline or converge with what is really taking place. In our case, i.e. the Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens, it initially seemed that an image of constructive dispute for the planning intentions and goals was generated. This dispute has progressively been displaced by the impatience of the expansion of the interventions in a more expanded area. The delays were quoted demonstratively but in the end web publications are positively enriched by the impressions of the function of the physical space. Physical city image is influencing the web or the virtual image through the web spatial narratives.

The gradual conversion of the web publications from the distrust and the dispute towards the positive assessment is basically connected to the completion of the works, the spatial function of the physical space and the eventual generation of live experiences. The distrust was so deeply settled that even after the completion of each work the most important arising issue is the fear of a possible reversal. This is of course a legacy from deadlocks of ambitious projects of the past decades and the forwards and backwards of the Greek reality. In our case study web media narratives, as the determinants of virtual images, are changed over only by the pleasant experiences the society gains through the urban spaces' daily life.

The "New Virtual Athens", as presented by the web press, while at the beginning stands as the forecast of a pessimistic view for the "unification's" future evolution, in the end is moderately based on the material results of the project.

6. Acknowledgments

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