

## \Re/Think Athens

A lot of discussion has been taking place lately about Re-think Athens, the European architectural competition for the redesign of the center of Athens along the axis of the pedestrianization of Panepistimiou Street, one of the major streets in the city center of Athens. Panepistimiou Street is connecting two major squares of Athens, Syntagma square and Omonoia square. It is one of the three avenues of the center of the city that form the so-called commercial and historic triangle of Athens. It has a very important role in the life of the city in terms of public and private transportation as well as in terms of historical, commercial and entertainment context. Although all these different roles of the street usually follow one another and in the long run every age has a different predominant role, Panepistimiou Street remains always a crucial artery of the city.



Image 1 The historical and commercial triangle of Athens (Source <http://galaxy.hua.gr/~landscapesatlas/index.php/2010-01-21-16-47-29/landscapescat/34-attica/110-athens-centre.html>)

The launching of the competition revealed the political will to make massive changes in the city center of Athens and as a result caused a lot of conflict and discussions among citizens and also architects and urbanists.



Image 2 Panepistimiou Street in early '50s. (Source [http://bill-files.blogspot.com.es/2013/05/blog-post\\_7040.html](http://bill-files.blogspot.com.es/2013/05/blog-post_7040.html))

Image 3 Panepistimiou Street today (Source <http://www.skai.gr/news/environment/article/248436/exasfalistike-i-hrimatodotisi-gia-tin-anaplasti-tis-panepistimiou/>)

Image 4 Panepistimiou Street today (Source <http://www.greekarchitects.gr/gr/%CF%83%CF%85%CE%BC%CE%BC%CE%B5%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%87%CE%AD%CF%82-2012/%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B9%CF%80%CF%84%CF%8E%CF%83%CE%B5%CE%B9%CF%82-%CE%B1%CF%80%CF%8C-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CF%80%CE%B5%CE%B6%CE%BF%CE%B4%CF%81%CF%8C%CE%BC%CE%B7%CF%83%CE%B7-%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82-%CE%BF%CE%B4%CE%BF%CF%8D-%CF%80%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%AF%CE%BF%CF%85-id7985>)

With this text, I am trying to view this attempt for changing the city, in a wider context keeping in mind that it is affected by a series of social and economic transformations and vice versa.

### **City(centre) in Crisis**

The metropolitan area of Athens is hosting almost 4 million people as the capital of a country with less than 11 million. This means that there were some years during which a very large part of the rural population of Greece moved massively to the cities and especially Athens. As a result of this movement, the center of Athens suffered from a high increase of population and building density. During the early 80s, the introduction of private vehicles in the streets of Athens, allowed a gradual evacuation process of the city center by its inhabitants who left in search for a better urban environment and quality of life. The settlement of these populations in areas far from the city center, in its turn now demanded a new kind of urban infrastructure.

During the 90s, new roads to serve the ever-growing number of cars have been designed and constructed. Highways and interchanges have managed to make all the distances shorter in terms of time. However this infrastructure that connects two different areas of the city so fast, at the same time it separates in two different parts the residential areas they pass through. The same is happening in the city center where the majority of the highways lead. The nineties in Athens create a city center that is getting more and more convenient for cars and less for pedestrians. Probably this is the age when the internal structural crisis of the city center of Athens has begun. Although not so visible those years, the percentage of inhabitants actually staying in the so-called historic triangle of Athens has been significantly decreasing while even the commercial use of the same area lost a big part of its capacity as the new suburban residential areas absorbed its dynamics.

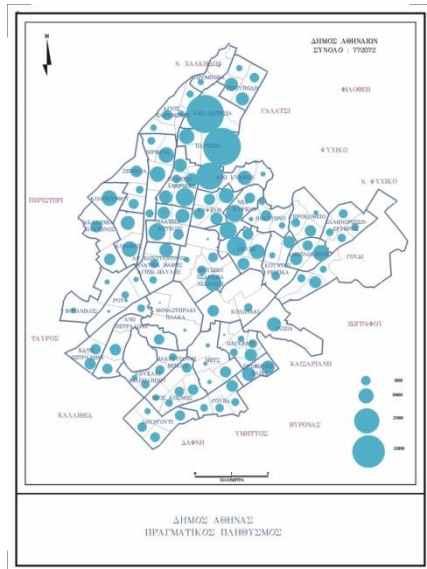


Image 5 The actual population of the municipality of Athens in 1991. As you go nearer to the historic triangle the circles get smaller. (Source <http://www.demography-lab.prd.uth.gr/ddaog/edu/case/3/athens/APOPUL.jpg>)

The process previously described created a lot of unused space and a considerable decrease in the value of housing in the area. As a result, it was the ideal place for immigrants to settle legally or illegally. This way a kind of zoning was applied on the whole area, with “grey” zones that are almost completely inhabited by immigrants. Now the crisis of the city center is also reflected as a crisis in the social composition of the population.

The twenties for the city of Athens came with a realization of the situation. I see this process as a circle that all big European metropolises have been through. Downtown areas are getting deteriorating and people with a higher income move to the suburbs to achieve a better quality of life. So the process of re-inhabiting the center is one that has happened in almost every city. But incentives have to be given for it to happen.

In Athens, a lot of projects are trying to stop and reserve the flow away from the city center. The new master plan of 2011 for the city of Athens clearly states the return to the city center. The important axes of the city are gradually getting transformed to pedestrian streets. At the same time, the metro stations, a very recent addition in the city of Athens, are trying to create new centralities and access points in the city grid.

### **Re-think Athens**

The Re-think Athens project belongs in the same context. What I consider as a very interesting fact in the winning proposal of the contest, is that the whole design does not include any attempt to impress by suggesting a complicated format for the city. On the other hand, it proposes a city that is beautiful and full of people. Someone could say that the architects tried to minimize the impact of their design on the city so that the urban space is dedicated totally to the citizens. Probably, this way the citizens feel that they actually own the urban space and belong into it.

Although the central axis of the undergoing transformation is Panepistimiou Street, the project includes a much bigger range of public spaces to be redesigned. As the city is

characterized by both flows and structures, these public spaces include some of the major squares of the city and have a proximity to important archaeological sites.



Image 6 The winning proposal by OKRA (Source <http://www.archdaily.com/338001/re-think-athens-winning-proposal-okra/>)

As a conclusion, I realize that the city is a living organism. It is a constantly dynamic system and we as architects need tools to contemplate and understand its functions. Maybe one of the most important things that we have to remember is that any area of the city is part of a broader set of potentials with elements that are constantly transformed in space and time.