Urban planning and climate transition post COVID-19
A case study of Athens, Greece

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Abstract

This paper deals with the risk of the spread of infectious diseases through space, looking at how COVID-19 is becoming a concern in planning. To this end, it employs as a case study the urban development project “The Great Walk” by the Municipality of Athens, Greece. By doing so, it evidences the link between the response to COVID-19 and climate change at the local level in the EU.

Keywords

Planning, Climate Change, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), to be a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Richard Horton (2020), editor-in-chief of The Lancet, proposed to call it instead a ‘syndemic’ (the notion conceived by medical anthropologist Merrill Singer), to underline its social origins, rather than to see it merely as a comorbidity. There is no pharmaceutical intervention (vaccine or antiviral drug) for the prevention or treatment of COVID-19 with proven clinical efficacy to date (Maguire and Guérin, 2020). Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) have been deployed instead (Anderson et al., 2020). The responses have been disparate (Desvars-Larrive et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). They have been guided by mathematical models (Metcalfe et al., 2020). They have also been political (Bozorgmehr, 2020; Political casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020). There is differential exposure leading to increased risk of infection with COVID-19 (e.g., limited material circumstances or work-related exposure), differential susceptibility leading to increased risk of severe COVID-19 (e.g., poor general health and nutritional status or underlying chronic conditions), and differential consequences of COVID-19 (e.g., unemployment), including from the effects by both the imposition and lifting of containment measures (e.g., Burström and Tao, 2020; Flaxman et al., 2020; Ruktanonchai et al., 2020).

Geography, Urban/Regional Studies and Planning literature has ascended in the immediate moment to the geographical tracking of the spread of the disease (e.g., Kamel Boulos and Geraghty, 2020) and in time to other spatial–functional (land uses, mobility, and spatial allocation of related indicators), spatial–political (policy scale and spatial allocation of related indicators), spatial–economical (spatial allocation of development indicators), spatial–social (spatial allocation of demographic indicators), and/or spatial–environmental (land cover and spatial allocation of related indicators) aspects (e.g., Aalbers et al., 2020; Angel, 2020). This paper deals with how the risk of the spread of COVID-19 through space is becoming a concern in planning (e.g., Forsyth, 2020) in relation to public administration and public policy. To this end, it employs as a case study the urban development project...
2. Research background

Planning, public administration, and public policy link the delimitation of land use and land cover, and in general land policy, with that of administrative competence (e.g., Marshall et al., 2020; Lagopoulos, 2018; Schmitt and Wiechmann, 2018; Taşan-Kok et al., 2020). A theoretical and practical problem is the asymmetry between input, throughput, output, and outcome of an administrative act, an iteration of the problem of the asymmetry between the geographical jurisdiction of administrative division and policy impact, or, in general terms, the delimitation of spatial units for analysis and/or regulation (e.g., Freemark et al., 2020; Granqvist et al., 2020; Hirschl, 2020; Pan et al., 2020; Pistor, 2017; Sassen, 2018; Simone, 2020). Such asymmetries link to ‘territorialism’, the ideology of the hierarchical, political–administrative division of space, and the preconditions of it, geographical constituency and state monopoly on the use of force, and the absolute (in contrast to relative) conception of space as a container (in contrast to network) (Faludi, 2018). A project compensates for such asymmetries, not by aiming at resolving them (for example, in contrast to structural reform), but by prioritising them within a policy instrument mix (e.g., Capano and Howlett, 2020; Lascoumes and Le Galès). COVID-19 has
exacerbated pre-existing conditions, while projects have responded to it as an opportunity to propel pre-existing developments (e.g., Zukin, 2020).

The challenges facing the EU have been fragmentation (e.g., economic disparity), interdependencies (positive and negative externalities), and policy mismatch between, on the one hand, the geographical jurisdiction of political–administrative divisions of the EU Member States, and on the other, the spatial–functional impact of their policies (European Observation Network for Territorial Development [ESPON], 2019; see also King and Le Galès, 2017). The European Commission has proposed climate and energy transition (i.e. the climate-neutrality objective, COM(2019) 640; see also Rietig, 2020) to be central in the EU Recovery Plan, including the Next Generation EU for 2021–2023 and the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021–2027 (COM(2020) 441 final/2; COM(2020) 442 final; COM(2020) 443 final; see also Pellerin-Carlin et al., 2020). The EU member states, under the “Regulation on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action” ((EU)2018/1999, see also COM(2019) 412 final, COM(2019) 285 final, COM(2018) 375 final – 2018/0196 (COD), p. 14), are required to develop ten-year National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs), starting from 2021, to direct the MFF funding through policy integration. The European Commission has proposed the Sustainable Europe Investment Plan (2021–2027) within which the Member States will link their NECPs to the European Semester for economic policy co-ordination (COM(2020) 21).

In Greece reform of planning legislation and land policy (e.g., Karadimitriou and Pagonis, 2019; Tulumello et al., 2019; Vitopoulou and Yiannakou, 2020) has followed the policy conditionality both under the regular economic surveillance framework for euro-area Member States under the European Semester for economic policy co-ordination and under the enhanced surveillance framework (2018–2020), which succeeded the Macroeconomic Adjustment Programmes under the Greek Loan Facility (2010–2011), the European Financial Stability Facility (2012–2015), and the European Stability Mechanism (2015–2018). Morbidity and mortality of COVID-19 depends on a number of parameters among which, the previous state of health of the population, the infrastructure, the human resources and the preparedness of the health system, the densities in the living and working spaces, the percentage of the elderly (the demographic ageing) and the types of living of these people, intergenerational relationships (frequency of contact of people of different generations connected to each other), the intensity of interpersonal relationships and meeting places (private / public), the extent of vulnerable groups, the intensity of exchanges with countries with high morbidity, the time of onset of the pandemic (especially in countries with high tourism) as well as the time of reaction-taking measures (the NPIs) and the degree of their acceptance by the population (Kotzamanis, 2020). The particularities of the built form—polykatoikia, the most prevalent construction type, and the lack of open/green spaces—have to be highlighted, when looking at the NPIs (Leontidou, 2020), while also considering the confluence (and change) of the traditional (small-scale, self-financed) real estate development pattern and the contemporary (large-scale initiative, big private capital) pattern (Delladetsima, 2006) with the emergence of a new pattern, including short-term rentals, Golden Visa, and mandatory (online) auctions (e.g., Spyridonos et al., 2019), along with a growing, though yet to substantiate, influence of measures for climate change, climate and weather extremes, and related disasters (e.g., Serraos and Melissas, 2019).

Polykatoikia is a multi-storey shell close to the domino technique of a skeleton by reinforced concrete. The repetition of polykatoikia characteristics—pilois, flat whitewashed plaster roof, generic facade—has demarcated the city grid, and peripheral and generally residential neighbourhoods forming since the 1950s (e.g., Vaiou et al., 1995). The stereotypic built form of polykatoikia crystallises main factors that have defined city texture in Greece, i.e. late and low, compared to other north-atlantic states, industrialisation in general and professionalisation in construction more particular, strong ties with the countryside, and popularised homeownership via self-promotion of housing. Self-promotion of housing stems from rural traditions of self-provision and self-building. ‘Self’ refers to the reproduction of family and patrimony. This is the process, similar to the other Southern European nation states, that supported rural to urban migration in the 20th century. It is based on small property and low manufactured capital. It has developed collectivised forms of provision (e.g., a developer may be paid instead of money with ownership of an apartment after the completion of a construction) and adapted crafts
based practices (e.g., on site training of worker teams that dated back centuries in ottoman-occupied greek cities) to reinforced concrete skeleton buildings. This does not imply a system of low commodification, but rather, one of low defamiliarisation. Self-promotion of housing and property owning have been an investment against social risks in the absence of explicit family policy measures: difficulties faced by individual families have not been tackled via public mobilisation but through people’s private strategies, while care services within the family, have been allocated to females, and not externalised to the market except when (since the 1990s) outsourced to female migrants (e.g., Vaiou and Stratiigaki, 2008). The patterns of post war high social mobility (e.g., Tsoulouvis, 1996), based on the transformation of large numbers of internal rural migrants to urban homeowners, and social reproduction related to petty employers, self-employed and salaried workers in small units with family ties and resources (Small Enterprises SMEs) shift, and the most vulnerable segments of the population—traditionally the low wage and/or undocumented labor immigrants—expand. The metropolitan area of Athens (corresponding to the region of Attica) is a paradigmatic case of the confluence of the real estate and development patterns (e.g., Chorianopoulos and Pagonis, 2020; Maloutas and Spyrellis, 2020).

3. Methodology

The paper gathered evidence from administrative documents that are publicly available online through the Transparency Portal (diavgeia.gov.gr). All government institutions in Greece are obliged to upload their administrative acts and decisions to the Transparency Portal (Law 3861/2010). Administrative documents are not valid unless published online (Law 4210/2013). Each administrative document uploaded to the Transparency Portal is digitally signed and assigned a unique Internet Uploading Number. The paper used the advanced search engine of the Transparency Portal (diavgeia.gov.gr/search?advanced). Two search terms were used. The first search term was the exact title of the programmatic agreement between the Municipality of Athens and the National Technical University of Athens: “Traffic and Parking Standards in the Centre of Athens” (In Greek: Πρότυπες Ρυθμίσεις Κυκλοφορίας και Στάθμευσης στο κέντρο της Αθήνας). The document is available online from the Transparency Portal (diavgeia.gov.gr/doc/961O6M-XA?inline=true). The second search term was the administrative reference number (In Greek: Αριθμ. Δ1α/ΓΠ.οικ. 31688) of the Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) of the Ministry of Citizen Protection, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport “Imposition of temporary traffic measures and regulations in the area of the Centre of Athens to address the risk of the spread of coronavirus COVID-19”. The document is published in the Official Government Gazette (OGG) Volume B, Number 1970, 21–5–2020. It is available online from the National Printing House (et.gr). To determine the search terms, evidence was used from the official website of the urban development project “The Great Walk”(megalosperipatos.cityofathens.gr), and the decision of the Council of State (the Supreme Administrative Court of Greece) with reference number A1992/2020 and European Case Law Identifier (ECLI) ECLI:EL:COS:2020:1009A1992.20E1572, which cancelled the JMD (OGG B, 1970, 21–5–2020) on October 9, 2020. The reference period was September 2019 to September 2020. The research proceeded in three sequential phases. First, documents were accessed and catalogued in a chronological order. Second, they were categorised according to the administrative types referenced in the Transparency Portal (diavgeia.gov.gr/typesOfDecisions) and the public authorities that issued them. Third, they were reviewed. Themes were defined according to their subject.

4. Research results

In total, 38 documents were identified. 27 documents were from the first search term. 11 documents were from the second search term. The time period was from November 28 to October 10, 2020. 17 documents were programmatic agreement (first search term). 3 documents were budget approval (first search term). 2 documents were expenditure commitment (first search term). 1 document was expenditure approval (first search term). 1 document was payment finalisation (first search term). 5 documents were individual administrative acts (second search term). 2 documents were assignment of projects / supplies / studies (second search term). 2 documents were regulatory acts. 2 documents were contract awarding. 20 documents were...
5. Discussion and conclusions

The urban development project “The Great Walk” comprises a series of administrative acts. The “pilot phase” of the project launched in May 2020, while the rationale of the project had been set in November 2019, in the programmatic agreement for a research project between the Municipality of Athens and the National Technical University of Athens. That agreement defined the project in terms of “sustainable urban mobility”, linked it to the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan of Athens (svak-athina.com), and soft mobility (over pedestrianisation), while it demarcated two spatial units, the area of the intervention (within the city centre) and the area projected to be affected by the intervention (the area around the city centre), both areas within the geographical jurisdiction of the Municipality of Athens. The legal basis of the “pilot phase” had been provided by the JMD “Imposition of temporary traffic measures and regulations in the area of the Centre of Athens to address the risk of the spread of coronavirus COVID-19” (OGG B, 1970, 21–5–2020). In that light, “pilot” has meant an exemption from the procedures / instruments and administrative competence delimited in planning and administrative legislation with regard to the deployment of the urban equipment. Recently, that legal basis was cancelled by the Court of Appeal, which stated in its decision that the risk of the spread of COVID-19 does not justify this exemption. The idea behind the “The Great Walk” is not new. It dates back to the 1833 plan of Athens (by Kleanthes and Schaubert). What is new is the particular context, namely the three real estate and development patterns, within broader drivers, such as the consolidation of the new growth strategy of the EU through the European Green Deal. This paper has analysed the urban development project “The Great Walk” with respect to the administrative acts it comprises, through a novel use of the Transparency Portal. Future research, while evidencing the real estate and development patterns in Greece, could take a comparative look into related spatial contexts, drivers, and/or trends (e.g., Mitrašinović, 2006; Christiaanse et al., 2019; Gomes, 2020, Van Assche, 2019), and with regard to the resurgent scholarly interest in the urban core (e.g., Broitman and Koomen, 2020).

6. References


