

**“Citizen’s participation in urban governance in crisis-stricken
Thessaloniki (Greece): post-political urban project or
emancipatory urban experiments?”**

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Abstract

Within the context of the “more-than-financial” crisis that inflicted on cities since 2008, a number of urban experiments in neighbourhood and city scale emerged, varying from urban knitting and cleaning initiatives to guerrilla gardening and social groceries. Tactical urbanism and creative initiatives emerged as useful tools for mayors and policy-makers in the context of neoliberal creative (re-)development. In parallel, a plethora of urban experiments attempted to challenge the existing social, political and spatial framework and re-appropriate the urban space and the everyday life. The type, the characteristics and the impacts that participatory practices have on urban space as well as their relation to the local government vary significantly and depend upon diverse factors.

This paper engages with the issue of participation as a mode of urban governance and as a core concept of urban experiments in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in crisis-stricken cities of the European South. The paper is organized in three parts. First, we establish the basic theoretical tenets, bringing together the literature on urban governance and civil society on the one hand and neoliberalization and creative development on the other. Participation in urban governance, is constituted around two different and in many cases contradictory concepts: efficiency and empowerment. Hence, it ought to be understood as a continuous challenge, covering the ground between a de-politicized technocratic method and a strategy for social change. Here, we argue that participation in the production of urban space should be re-posed in a broader social and political context and be understood as a never-ending political process that encourages a real and active citizenship, based on equality, freedom and social justice.

In the second part, we draw some insights on the epistemological issues that underpin the research and analyze the research methods employed. In the third part of the paper, we ground our analysis on participatory urban governance and its relation to citizen-led initiatives in Thessaloniki (Greece), since the breakout of the 2008 crisis. In doing so, we explore the ways in which urban creativity and participation are incorporated in the hegemonic discourse of the municipality and we seek to chart the variety of expressions of the civil society that have emerged in the city in the context of crisis. Moreover, we attempt a critical evaluation of these citizen-led initiatives that place various aspects of public space at the centre of their agenda. Some can be seen as post-political forms of urban entrepreneurialism and individualism, while others present more composite agendas and attempt to produce urbanities based on emancipation, democracy and equality.

Introduction

From 2008 onwards, cities of the European South are being hit by an unprecedented turmoil which affects every aspect of the everyday life of their inhabitants. This “more-than-financial” crisis gives birth to a series of new imaginaries, discourses, spatial configurations and subjectivities. Within the crisis-ridden urban restructuring new synergies are built between different urban actors while new actors also emerge. Urban space becomes the focus and the backdrop of newly constituted initiatives, experiments and projects. Their nature and ideological affiliation vary significantly; they challenge existing power relations, interact with existing formations, open cracks and create conflicts in and through the urban space. Thessaloniki, just like Athens and other crisis-stricken cities, is at once a unique case and an exemplar of most general processes. In fact, Thessaloniki constitutes a living laboratory wherein a plethora of urban experiments in neighbourhood and city scale emerge. In a period that the welfare state of the previous era is diminished and the functioning of the state is changing, civil society takes multiple roles to cover the ground. So, there is a novel tendency for civic engagement and an interest on behalf of citizens to take matters into their own hands.

This paper engages with the issue of participation and creativity as a mode of urban governance and as a core concept of urban experiments in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in cities of the European South. In particular, we critically examine and evaluate newly emerging citizen-led and civil society initiatives and their organization in and through urban space. In doing so, we argue that participation and civic engagement should not be seen as a panacea but should be understood as a continuous challenge, covering the wide ground between a de-politicized technocratic method and a strategy for social change.

The paper is organized in three parts. First, we establish the basic theoretical tenets, bringing together the literature on urban governance and civil society on the one hand and neoliberalization and creative development on the other. In the second part, we ground our analysis on participatory urban governance and its relation to

citizen-led initiatives in Thessaloniki, Greece, since the breakout of the 2008 crisis. Finally, we attempt a critical evaluation of these citizen-led initiatives that place various aspects of public space at the centre of their agenda.

Space production through participatory urban governance

During times of changing socio-political and cultural conditions like the current crisis, new mechanisms and processes of governing and space production rise to the surface. Indicative of these processes are new innovative forms of urban governance that have emerged over the past two decades, challenging the traditional state-centred forms of decision- and policy-making processes. This transformation brings on the surface new mechanisms of negotiation, participation and conflict between state, private actors and the civil society and reposes the discussion around political participation and democracy.

The basic axes around which these arrangements are established are their presumably horizontal organization and relations of trust and inclusion, despite the sometimes conflictual interests (Swyngedouw, 2005). The participatory arrangements of governance-beyond-the-state are often presented as 'empowering, democracy enhancing and more effective forms of governing compared with the sclerotic, hierarchical and bureaucratic state forms that conducted the art of governing during much of the 20th century' (Swyngedouw, 2005:1992). When civil society enters the political terrain as a key actor of cooperation, empowerment is thought to be the desirable outcome. Conversely, when the private sector is involved, efficiency is supposedly the benefit (Moulaert et al., 2003).

What is ironic but indeed very interesting is that while these arrangements are mobilized by civil society groups like NGOs or other social groups with an agenda on social exclusion and issues of power they often fail to recognize that they themselves might be instruments of neoliberalization, reproducing existing power relations, through self-responsibilization, individualization, self-managed risk and other ways (see for instance Dean, 1995; Burchell, 1993). So, within our analysis we understand

them as Swyngedouw (2005) proposes, i.e. as Janus-faced forms of urban governance, emphasizing their contradictory nature, between, on the one hand, the objective for democracy and citizens' empowerment and, on the other, their undemocratic character, complying with the neoliberal urban restructuring.

These innovative forms of participatory governance are undoubtedly expressed in and through urban space. Besides, urban space is the pivotal terrain for the emergence of experimentation both through processes of neoliberalization and control and through emancipatory practices. Urban space is always under an open process of continuous re-definition, the "space of appearance" (Springer, 2011) and the "space of encounters" (Merrifield, 2013).

The recent decades have witnessed an upsurge in academic and activist interest in small-scale citizen-led initiatives that are often -yet not always- temporary and cheap initiatives, such as guerrilla gardening, social groceries, creative interventions in abandoned buildings, pop-up shops and others. The synergies created in order to initiate such participatory projects include a variety of actors from municipalities and politicians to citizen initiatives and private companies (like restaurants, bars, etc.). The point of departure of such interventions is often the desire to intervene in the urban space without passing through the traditional processes that are often bureaucratic, long-lasting and sclerotic. This comes as a result either due to a lack of action on behalf of the urban authorities or in order to give a new character and "unique" characteristics to a neighbourhood or space (Hou, 2010).

Such initiatives are part of the broader discussion on the "creative" city and the shift towards entrepreneurial forms of urban governance. The basic idea behind such experimentations is that urban space – especially on the neighbourhood, street and building scales - can change, becoming more vibrant, safe and "cool" (Lydon et al., 2012). Contemporary debates on such participatory practices and experimentations have put them under diverse terms in the contemporary literature such as DIY, guerrilla, participatory, everyday, grassroots or Tactical Urbanism (Iveson, 2013). Yet, their particular features analyzed above and the scale of intervention makes them particularly interesting. Nevertheless, these rather disparate activities that differ both

politically and aesthetically cannot be analyzed as a totality as this could lead to homogeneous and misleading approaches.

What these initiatives bring on the forefront is a re-newed discussion on the meanings of urban space. They are often linked to the re-appropriation of urban space and to the idea of the right to the city, as they present themselves as interventions that could make cities more democratic and inclusive places. The multiple agents involved or the participatory arrangements that are formed in such processes aim to build alternatives to the existing urban reality, putting an emphasis on a shared objective. As Alisdairi (2014) explains, tactical urbanism initiatives involve a rhetoric on a re-appropriation of everyday spaces, something that resonates to Lefebvre's analysis on everyday life. People engaging with TU initiatives attempt to create alternative structures in the urban realm through a variety of methods seeking to challenge existing forms of governance and to build alternative ways of life (Alisdairi, 2014). It is through such initiatives that an inviting and liveable city is created which encourages its citizens to engage with the urban space - to "be active".

Nevertheless, many researchers point out the paradoxical nature of tactical urbanism. While it represents a call for action and creativity, it is 'divorced by its citizenry and activist ethos and fast becoming the latest iteration of "cool", creative urban policy language' (Mould, 2014:530). Yet, we should keep in mind that even the right to the city does not constitute a radical claim per se. Since the conceptualization of the right to the city by Henri Lefebvre, and especially during the last decades, it has been a popular and fashionable slogan for the emergence of a reformist discourse by international agencies, municipal authorities, political parties, NGOs and others.

Citizen-led initiatives as part of a participatory model of space production in Thessaloniki

Since 2008 and the implementation of the structural adjustment programme in Greece, phenomena like poverty, inequality and exclusion have spiked. After entering the "supportive" mechanism of the Troika, Greek governments imposed severe

austerity measures that affected the everyday life of the population. The austerity urbanism of the period was coupled with a reinforcement of the rhetoric on competitiveness and entrepreneurship, which were projected as a means to transgress the crisis and to achieve the “major national goals” such as the debt pay-out and the attainment of growth (Vatavali and Kalatzopoulou, 2013). However, this process was differently choreographed in each city, as it is contingent upon the historical, cultural and social background of each context.

Thessaloniki is an important urban centre of Greece, attaining the role of the cultural and youth centre of the country since decades. During the period of its economic development (1990s), it hosted and organized many cultural events such as the European Cultural Capital (1997) and invested in cultural infrastructure. Even during the crisis Thessaloniki is projected as a centre of youth and culture and becomes the site for neoliberal experimentation. These are based on the adoption of an entrepreneurial form of urban governance where culture and creativity are used as important assets for the regeneration of the city. Yet, given the limited economic possibilities, new models of urban governance and space production are adopted, based on the ideas of participation and cooperation.

Nowadays, local authorities tend to establish more synergies with agents such as NGOs or citizen-led initiatives than the previous administration. A basic axis in this is the collaboration between different stakeholders, such as private actors, NGOs, citizen-led initiatives, etc. (Christodoulou, 2014). Besides, civil society organizations have attained a key role at the rhetoric and practices of the municipality of Thessaloniki. The municipality aims to promote a participatory form of urban governance where the state will not operate as the ‘state-father’ deciding for the needs of the city’s inhabitants but where the citizens will have the power to raise their voices and decide about their city (Liakou, 2014). As Yannis Boutaris, the city’s mayor, points out, ‘the role of the municipality is not to do things in itself, but to enable citizens to take initiatives for their city. This is exactly the difference between volunteerism and participation’ (Boutaris, 2013). Since the first pre-electoral denunciations of the current municipality, the active participation of groups, initiatives

and individuals in urban governance has been set as a priority. This participatory governance is based on four axes: (i) the activation of citizen's groups; (ii) the support of the existing initiatives of the civil society; (iii) the organization of neighbourhood assemblies and consultation committees; and (iv) the support of structures of social entrepreneurship (Liakou, 2014). So, the new model of urban governance adopted by the municipality of Thessaloniki entails a strong involvement of civil society organizations and especially citizen-led experiments.

Meanwhile, the welfare cuts, the destruction of the safety nets and the increasing turbulence of the crisis period have precipitated responses from diverse civil society actors. Urban movements, citizen-led initiatives, neighbourhood networks of solidarity, social groups and a variety of urban experiments of social organization attain increasing dynamics. These experiments tend to put at the core of their agenda the urban space, which during the crisis emerges as a dynamic terrain of negotiations and conflicts. The "deterioration" of the public space and the quality of life that come as results of the crisis mobilizes a great number of "active" citizens. Here, we do not intend to interpret and evaluate all emerging experiments but to focus on questioning and problematizing them on the basis of their politics. These citizen-led initiatives could be categorized according to their special focus as follows:

- (i) Groups working on issues related to the urban green, such as the Fighters of the Green Thessaloniki, Green Routes group, Friends of the Green, Green Volunteers of the municipality of Thessaloniki, etc.;
- (ii) Groups working on issues related to the public space, such as the Los Lampicos, the Friends of the New Waterfront, Thessaloniki Allios, Thessalonistas, etc.;
- (iii) Groups working on issues related to urban mobility, such as the Cyclists of Thessaloniki, the Union for the Rights of the Pedestrians, etc.; and
- (iv) Groups with diverse targets, such as Reuse Salonica, Saving Food-Saving Lives, Dynamo Project Space, etc.

The first three categories are active at the public space of Thessaloniki and many times cooperate with each other. Moreover, a crucial step towards the interrelation of

these initiatives is the organization of a webpage from the municipality, which has been announced recently. This webpage will give the opportunity to active citizens, organizations and groups to present their activities and connect to each other (Synthessi, 2015).

Engaging in a thorough analysis of all these initiatives moves beyond the purposes and length of this paper. So, we focus on two characteristic examples that are both working on issues related to public space (category ii). The first one is the citizen-led initiative called *Los Lampicos*, which operates at the city's waterfront and the other is *Thessaloniki Allios'* project at the western side of the city. This choice has been made based on the following criteria. First, both of these examples form particularly popular and well known initiatives in the context of Thessaloniki and are actively supported by the current municipality. Second, these two initiatives share the same vision for the city but operate in different, although sometimes overlapping, ways. Hence, these examples allow us to unpack the variety of practices taking place in Thessaloniki, their political and spatial imaginaries and the conflicts that arise as a result of their actions.

The 'Los Lampicos' group: individualizing responsibility

Thessaloniki's waterfront has always been a significant public space, a terrain of negotiation and conflict and a space of high material and symbolic importance for the city. The regeneration of the waterfront that was completed in 2014 is one of the projects that were put at the epicentre of the entrepreneurial agenda of the municipality and other actors. For the municipality the regenerated waterfront constitutes an important asset for the branding of the city on the national and international level. At the same time, the waterfront is the terrain where many citizen-led initiatives take place, such as the *Friends of the New Waterfront*, the *Los Lampicos* or the *Thessaloniki Allios* group.

The *Los Lampicos* specifically, is a group of –self-proclaimed- 'indignant' citizens that was formed in December 2011, aiming to keep the city's waterfront clean. As its founding member, Souzana Kailari, says in an interview, they are not an NGO or an organized group but they prefer to present themselves as friends, 'the ghostbusters of

the smudges' (Zafeirakis, 2015). The members of the group first gathered on the occasion of the graffiti and tags made by ARIS's (a football team based in Thessaloniki) fans in the recently regenerated waterfront during the celebration of the teams 100th birthday. Since then, they meet every Wednesday to take action and clean Thessaloniki's waterfront from the 'non-artistic' graffiti, as they call it. According to them, their target is not the graffiti in general, as it forms an artistic expression, but what they call smudges, such as tags or slogans by political, athletic or other groups and people (Lampicos, 2015).

What is interesting though is that, according to them, their central role is not to merely clean the New Waterfront, but more importantly to problematize and to raise awareness on citizens' responsibility (Zafeirakis, 2015). As they support, they aim to re-think the way that we use urban space, referring to everyday attitudes such as tags on walls, litters in streets, posters etc. (Los Lampicos, 2014). The *Los Lampikos* group states that 'volunteerism is the utmost expression of democracy' (Korikis, 2014). Their area of intervention is mainly the waterfront but they have also intervened in other places, such as the building of the Society of Macedonian Studies, the ancient Roman agora and other monuments (Zafeirakis, 2015). As they characteristically state, 'based on the fact that city's space is our space and that the ugly image of the city could not provide a way out of the crisis and become a generator of economic growth, it is a matter of civilisation to keep it clean'.

The connection with other social groups, the private sector and the municipality is a central priority for them, both for the acquirement of the equipment and the materials needed for the cleaning process and for the broadening of their interventions (Karathanou, 2014). They sometimes cooperate with other groups that are active at the waterfront, such as the *Friends of the New Waterfront* (Zafeirakis, 2015). Here, it is useful to mention that the group obtains the necessary equipment and materials for the cleaning process through donations from private stakeholders (mainly cleaning supplies corporations) (ibid.). The group was initially formed through a call posted in the social media through which they still organize their actions and come in contact with people interested in participating or with people wishing to

donate (ibid.). However, they point out that they aim not only at the participation of more people in their group but also at ‘the development of the idea of the necessity of active involvement in the commons of the city’ (Los Lampicos, 2014).

West Side Story by Thessaloniki Allios: a creative artistic initiative or a project of displacement?

West Side Story is a project organized by the *Thessaloniki Allios* group, on the occasion of its 4th birthday. *Thessaloniki Allios* is an initiative launched in the context of the *Parallaxi* free press magazine, inspired by ‘the desire to move a step beyond the criticism on the city’s public issues and to propose through actions what [we/they] think about it’ (Parallaxi, 2014b). The basic axes of intervention are public space, culture, social actions, the environment, the rediscovery of Thessaloniki’s “hidden treasures” etc. *Thessaloniki Allios* is one of the most active “urban experiments” in Thessaloniki, posing centrally at its agenda issues of participation, creativity and urban space. The core group consists of 10 people who are supported by a large number of volunteers. Indicatively, 150 thousand people have participated at the events until today and 3000 agents have engaged in the organization of the actions (Parallaxi, 2014b)

The *West Side story* project was part of the European Youth Capital 2014 celebrations and actions and aimed to raise awareness on the areas issues by provoking a discussion on them (Parallaxi, 2014b). The programme included a variety of artistic and creative interventions by “creative” groups (music, theatre, dance, design, architecture, graffiti, etc.) (Parallaxi, 2014a). Talking about the project in an interview, Giorgos Toulas (the director of *Parallaxi* free press), mentioned that Western Thessaloniki is ‘one of the most deprived and unexploited neighbourhoods of the municipality. We shed light on its darkness, we film a documentary on the situation there, we renovate the yard of a problematic school and we organize a discussion for the first time on this neighbourhood and a big festival based on the co-existence of the communities of immigrants and the citizens’ (Toulas, 2015).

There are a number of problems that can be identified in this statement and in this project which are related to the adopted homogenising narrative on Western Thessaloniki that describes it as a derelict neighbourhood and projects only the sides that fit the story that is being told. Leaving aside all these, otherwise very significant, issues, for the purposes of this paper we focus on a documentary on the life in Western Thessaloniki that was filmed in the context of the West Side Story project and the events that followed. According to Thessaloniki Allios the “A neighbourhood on the verge” documentary, ‘constitutes a realistic record of the everyday life of the area through images, data and testimonies by people who live, work or find shelter in the neighbourhood’ (Parallaxi, 2015a). In the context of this documentary the occupation by immigrants without papers of a privately owned building complex (former Agrotiki’s Bank warehouses) in this area of the city was brought to light. In the documentary, but also in Parallaxi’s articles, this was projected as a modern time favela (sic) next to Thessaloniki’s city centre, that no one else in the city new about.

Following the screening of the documentary, the present owners of the aforementioned building complex decided to “clean” the area from the people who were living there. These people were forced to relocate, but no organised solution was given to their problems. The sole objective of the intervention that was seemingly handled privately and without the implication of the municipality or the state was to clean the building and block access inside. However, it is interesting to note that until now no specific plans for the redevelopment of the complex have been announced (Parallaxi, 2015b). Hence, the only objective of this intervention was the eviction of the people living there. Writing about this process in the Parallaxi free press, a journalist mentions that while the issue of homelessness grows, the existing social support structures are fewer than ever and do not meet the increasing needs. It is exactly here that we identify the deadlock.

Concluding remarks

The above exploration could provide important answers to the question set at the title of the paper: are the urban experiments such as the aforementioned emancipatory or do they constitute part of the post-political neoliberal agenda? The two urban citizen-led initiatives that were examined above assist us to develop an understanding of the broader situation and to understand how they are incorporated in a post-political neoliberal urban project: the first through the individualization of responsibility, which is totally different than solidarity and empowerment, and the second through the aestheticisation of poverty which has the exact opposite results that the expected.

The *Los Lampicos*, as mentioned above, is just one of the many groups of “active exemplary citizens” in Thessaloniki. Within the post-political neoliberal urban restructuring, privileged groups of citizens organized in “grassroots” organizations are now undertaking the previously conceived as “public” responsibilities and celebrate their autonomy from state’s authority (Newman, 2013). One of their basic characteristics is what Newman (2013) calls the “do-it-yourself” surveillance of urban space. From now on, citizens take active part in the reproduction of a spatial regime of control and assume responsibilities normally associated with the state. In this context, the exemplary citizen does not claim anything from the state, but becomes the “businesswoman/man” of her/himself. She/he thinks individualistically, strategically, operationally and antagonistically (Athanasidou, 2012). Moreover, these groups of active citizens employ practices and language that ‘valoriz[e] neoliberal notions of managerialism and entrepreneurialism’ [20] and consequently de-politicize the social and political conflict over space.

Within the context of the *West Side Story*, a flexible, creative and participatory process is organized. Yet, the type of participation that is incorporated within this project, produces, on the one hand, an exclusive group that participates and, on the other, other groups/individuals that stay outside. The homeless and the migrants are projected as an aesthetic image. Their poverty is aestheticized and a novel relation is built between the viewers and the viewed which is anchored at the reduction of politics to aesthetics (Bhan, 2009). As Bhan notes, studying the case of Delhi, an

aesthetic representation of a poor neighbourhood reduces it to a flat image without history and detached from its socio-cultural context. In line with this, in Thessaloniki the problems come to be re-articulated through such a narration which does not include a discussion of inequalities, exclusion and marginalization or of the inhabitants' own cultures and ways of survival. As a result, the city is anew polarized because while culture- and creative-led initiatives are being put in practice in certain areas of the city, the other parts still experience the same problems (Chatterton, 2000).

There is no doubt that both of the citizen-led initiatives analyzed above manage to create a well-connected network of people engaging with urban space. Notwithstanding the "good will" of the people involved, if we examine them on the basis of their politics many deadlocks emerge. While most of them claim that they create networks that aim to the re-appropriation of the urban space and the "open" and "horizontal" organization of everyday life this can be questioned as they often adopt an elite-led agenda. For instance, while the *Los Lampicos* do not have an apparent hierarchy, the Parallaxi magazine is led by a group of "experts" who organize the events and decide on the framework adopted and a bulk of volunteers who participate under the framework set beforehand. Hence, these initiatives are far from constituting emancipatory and transformative experiments.

It has been well established that within the context of the neoliberal urban restructuring and austerity urbanism the state continuously transforms and changes its characteristics. During this process of self-transformation, new kinds of alliance and collaborations emerge between the state, the private sector and the civil society. In light of the current crisis, the social reproduction of a large part of the population has been subjected under threat and citizen-led initiatives come to cover the ground left behind by the collapse of the social welfare. Yet, the scale of these initiatives as well as their other characteristics lead to a post-political understanding of producing urban space that re-enforce existing power relations and prelude any possibility of genuine participation. It is here that lays the great challenge. If we are to move beyond actions and frameworks that reproduce power hierarchies, neoliberal urban politics and the production of public space choreographed by them and towards emancipating and

transformative modes of production of the urban space, the need of moving beyond practices such as the ones described above is immanent.

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