Privatizing European coasts by design?
A fact-based counterproposal through the case of the former Hellinikon International Airport of Athens

Konstantina Soureli, Urban Environment Laboratory NTUA
Abstract for EASA 2011, Cadiz Spain

What can we do with cities, coasts and public spaces in response to a rather deepening crisis, and an intensifying process of urban & regional European restructuring? How does the cross-scalar state system attribute a critical new space to finance? And what does this have to do with the workings and prospects of cities and regions? Are the 1980s-1990s paradigms of megaprojects across Europe becoming relevant again, or something new is taking shape? Does the case of Athens set a precedent for other European cities and regions to follow, or a counterexample to avoid?

The former International Airport of Athens is the largest, publicly owned, urban, coastal area of Athens (626 Ha) and one of the few such areas left along the coastline of Europe. Since the closure of the airport in 2001 and an international ideas competition in 2003, contentious debates regarding the creation of the Metropolitan Park of Hellinikon ensued. The resulting government plan in 2007 included demolition of most existing buildings, highways, and 1.450.000 m^2 of construction for a new luxurious city. It was strongly opposed by a regional coalition of local authorities, urban social movements, as well as professional and educational institutions. However, over 2011 Hellinikon has been selected as the top priority of a massive €50 billion privatization plan of state-owned real estate assets and enterprises.

In this lecture, we present the findings and proposal of a research project on why and how to create the Metropolitan Park of Hellinikon. This research was conducted by the National Technical University of Athens, Urban Environment Lab.* It was commissioned by the Local Union of Municipalities & Communities of Attica, an association of 122 local authorities of the Greater Athens Area, serving 4.5 million citizens, as well as the four Cities that include the former airport area in their administrative boundaries.

Against the backdrop of the recent developments, this lecture has three objectives: First, to demonstrate the reasons why the Hellinikon Metropolitan Park is indispensable for the residents of Greater Athens, as well as feasible and inexpensive. Second, to propose a basic strategy for the creation of the park that can start taking place immediately: a) by restoring public access to the illegally occupied coast and broader area; b) by reusing an exceptional and extensive building stock of 360.000 m^2 for necessary social and cultural uses; and, c) by proceeding with high-quality, mild, open-space interventions, at inexpensive, i.e. European-level, costs—which could have been covered already by revenues from the existing post-Olympic operations within the area. Third, to analyze the ways in which the debates about Hellinikon in the public sphere shifted over the past decade and especially over the past year: Over the past decade, reflecting variegated approaches to cities, urban studies and the public interest. And over the past year, culminating in an explicit demise of the established, if still inadequate, premises of public space and planning processes to serve the public interest against sociospatial injustices.

By drawing insights into the case of Hellinikon as well as the accelerating privatization plans for other coastal areas in Greece, we aim to demonstrate why and how these unprecedented decisions, applied as a short-term remedy to socioeconomic and political crises, constitute a major spatial strategy for years to come. We contend that this spatial strategy is highly questionable on sociospatial grounds and *a priori* counterproductive on the very macro-economic grounds it employs as its justification. Contrary to the promotion of this strategy as "the only way forward", our findings and proposal indicate that this is by no means the only choice available, neither for Athens nor for other European cities. Rather, and especially under today's "exceptional" conditions, there are indeed critical, realistic, feasible alternatives for the long run that architects, urban designers and planners can help promote in the interest of cities and regions across Europe.

Bio

Konstantina Soureli is a doctoral candidate in urban planning at UCLA, and a research coordinator of *Basic planning & design principles for the creation of the Metropolitan Green Park at the former Hellinikon International Airport of Athens* at the National Technical University of Athens, Urban Environment Lab.

She holds a diploma in architecture from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and a master in urban design with distinction from the University of Michigan. As a Fulbright fellow, she worked on a Fannie Mae research fellowship at the National Low Income Housing Coalition in Washington DC, where she conducted research on low-income housing and domestic migration patterns across the country's metropolitan areas. At UCLA, she has assisted with undergraduate and graduate courses on the political economy of urbanization, histories & theories of urban planning, urban design, and community development. She has served on the editorial board of *Critical Planning* from 2006 to 2009. She has been awarded the Harvey S. Perloff scholarship and fellowships/awards from Siegfried W. Ulmer, Vanessa Dingley, David & Marianna Fisher, the Wasserman, Gerondelis and Greek State Scholarships foundations, the UCLA Department of Urban Planning Advisory Board, the UCLA Graduate Division, the UM Taubman College & the Technical Chamber of Greece.

Her research interests are in critical studies of cities and regions with a focus on contemporary urban centers of the EU and the USA, regarding urban restructuring and the state system, public space and housing, the politics of urban redevelopment and spatial justice. She is co-author (with A. Loukaitou-Sideris) of *Cultural tourism as an economic development strategy for ethnic neighborhoods* (Economic Development Quarterly, forthcoming); co-editor (with E. Youn) of *Urban restructuring and the crisis: A symposium with Neil Brenner, John Friedmann, Margit Mayer, Allen J. Scott, and Edward W. Soja* (Critical Planning, 2009); and, co-editor (with M. Kanai) of *On critical planning education* (Critical Planning, 2008).