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**Public space and its evolution: Athens' example of political spaces and urban  
movements.**

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## I. INTRODUCTION.

### General scope

*"Public sphere for man constitutes the territory where human can experience freedom through the collective, the event of being together with other human."* [Arendt, *The human condition*, 1958]. Hannah Arendt in her book 'The human condition' written in 1958, emphasized this importance of the public space, directly relating it with the political action, the "ability par excellence of man": "*Man is by nature political, that is, social.*" [ibid.]

It is a fact that the character of public space has gone under major transformations through the centuries. *"Public space is being transformed slowly and steadily – sometimes quickly as well- but it reflects in a multidimensional way the structure of society and the way society perceives its public self."* [Tournikiotis, *Architecture in contemporary era*, 2006] The scope of this essay is to observe these transformations concerning the relationship of public space and politics and attempt to give an interpretation of what can be a political space in modern urban condition, using the example of contemporary Athens and its spaces that trigger collective action.

### The importance of 'polis': Hannah Arendt and the Greek public space.

Hannah Arendt's view on publicity is considered of mere importance first of all because she refers to the example of ancient Athens' organization of public space and its function as such. But most importantly because she directly links collectivity and creativity aroused in public space with political action, which is also the link this essay attempt to focus on in contemporary condition.

Going back to her description of ideal public space, she brings the example of the organization of Athens in the classic years, using the space of the *agora*. *"Ancient Agora is an archetypal public space for the European city and its architectural plot has become a subject of many interpretations and influences."* [ibid.]

---*"The ancient 'agora' in classical years of Pericles [479-431 BCE] was the place where the Athenian citizen spent his day. It was a part of the building program held under the direction of Pericles. Stones were placed at the perimeter of the territory, while vases for the purification of the body were placed on every entrance. **The Athenian walked, talked to peers, discussed events, debated political issues, and transacted business. It was the pulse of city life and the center of human experience and creativity.** Athenian women did not move about freely. Citizen women were revered as the link to the future because they had children and were kept in seclusion to keep them pure. Metics, the Greek word for foreign born, or women of the lower classes had more freedom in the agora. Athenian men spent the entire day conducting business; hearing law cases and making political decisions regarding fees for public service, reconstructing temples destroyed by the Persians and eventually made the decision to fight Sparta. A written constitution granted all free male Athenian citizens the right to make decisions, speak about issues and vote. **More than a right, participation was expected.***

*Democracy in the Athenian meaning, centers on trying to give political power to those affected by political action, so democrats have always been committed to expanding political participation. In Athens, all voters decided every issue. Slaves and metics were excluded from political decision making and voting, though they could live in Athens and take part in business. In Athens, the functions of daily life were grouped and centralized. The public spaces Acropolis, Agora and Pnyx hill assembly described*

*the urban political system of the city-state that is today known as the Greek 'polis' and its characteristics have been widely discussed as an archetype in modern political philosophy.*" [Michaud, *Ancient Athens: Public spaces. Three distinct public areas for religion, commerce and government*, 2007]]

Arendt emphasized on the Greek public space as political territory, where all functions considering basic needs took place inside the private sphere –household- while the public sphere was the place of excellence, of speech and action. As Michael Knox Beran puts it, *"for Arendt public sphere was a metaphysical arena in which people realized their individual potential. What presupposed the possibility of public life was **the abolishment of work in the sense of surviving everyday's necessity.** They escaped necessity's pinch, though a 'sharing of words and deeds'"* [Michael Knox Beran, *Can the polis live again?* 2009]. This was the tradition of the Greek Polis. *"The polis was supposed to multiply the occasions to win 'immortal fame', that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness. One, if not the chief, reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens, as well as for the hardly less surprising swift decline of the city state, was precisely that from beginning to end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence of everyday life... In other words, men's life together in the form of the polis seemed to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made 'products', the deed and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable. The organization of the polis, physically secured by the wall around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws is **a kind of organized remembrance.**"* [op. cit. Arendt]

*"Arendt believed political deeds are the greatest achievements of which human beings are capable of. She insisted on the idea of publicity as a means of transcending biological necessity and leading to true freedom. For her political deeds [defining man as a 'zoon politicon'] are the highest forms of action, the 'one miracle-working faculty of man'."* [op. cit. Beran] *"Men are free as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same"* [op. cit. Arendt]. For this specific characteristic of freedom, Arendt attributed so much importance to the public sphere, concerning it the stage on which these actions take place and recognized **the ancient polis as an archetype of political activity:** *" 'Action is never isolated. It realizes itself in the common public sphere, just as freedom is not something inner, private or personal, because we only realize it in the company of other people.' She admired the man of action who had the 'courage' to enter public space and defend himself against aggressors. Courage for Arendt was the political virtue par excellence."* [op. cit. Beran]

More than anything else, what is important concerning the Athenian system of direct democracy -which has however been harshly criticized as an administration model- is **the perception it gave to people about the use of their collective space,**

no matter where or what this place is. They had the opportunity to **create, re-invent their own space**, based on their collective actions. *“The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. “Wherever you go, you will be a polis”.* [op. cit. Arendt]

### **The decline of publicity in modernization era.**

It has been a major discourse about the evolution of public space from the model Arendt describes to the contemporary condition. It appears that the characteristic of public space as a territory of collective political action has been degraded as centuries passed by and socio-economic conditions shifted drastically. P. Tournikiotis notes: *“The pass from 18th to 19th century, was subversive for the whole structure and experience of public space. Its formation changes. People who move within it and their activities but also the building type change, as well as the city scale, the number and relationships of people, their means of transport, subverting forever the notion of place towards the vast urban space. Exactly this transformation is described by Richard Sennet in his book ‘The Fall of the Public Man’, ending to the conclusion that, on the one hand, the word public took from the 18th century its modern meaning, stating something much more than life outside the private borders of family and on the other, **that public space is already from the 19th century “an environment of strangers, where people more and more look alike but they do not meet each other.”** In the 19th and later in the 20th century metropolis, public space is the architectural scenery of everyday spectacle of public life, whose now a crucial part is the phantasmagoria of the commodity object-as W.Benjamin puts it. The public space of modernism is becoming more and more the place of the lonely man, the place of mere functional processing.”* [op.cit. Tournikiotis]

The decline of public space’ is considered since the political procedures- in the sense of collective action- do not take place there anymore. Though publicity with the Greek meaning bears huge power for the human and, as Arendt pointed out, could be the means of exaltation and progress, it seems that today we observe the complete degradation of public spaces not only politically, but even as a place of social interaction and educational territory. Modernization brought along a new sphere- the emerge of **society and the political form of nation-state**. Arendt believes this birth of society became responsible for the transformation, because action was replaced by the generalized and restricting code of behavior. *“Private and public sphere have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city state. The emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-*

state.”... *“With the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength. Behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship. Our capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and the private.”* [op. cit. Arendt] This phenomenon led to the decline of the public space as the territory of social interaction and individual excellence.

What is crucial for the character of the public sphere to change were always the productive relations that are able to liberate or not people from work and therefore give them the possibility to restore their social relations. With the rise of the capitalistic system the human relations and consequently the character of the space were formed in a certain way, serving the purposes of capitalism’s effectivity of production. Criticizing the effect this could have to the relationship between people, Gilles Deleuze observes that in capitalism people find themselves trapped in a situation of constant move, under the domination system of control. *“We’ve gone from one animal to the other, from moles to snakes, not just in the system we live under but in the way we live and in our relation with other people too”.* [Gilles Deleuze, *Postscript on the societies of control*, 1990]

**The issue of the isolation of the urban man** due to the changes brought by the massive urbanization of the world was raised by several theoreticians, pointing out the phenomenon of the ‘lonely crowd’ in modern metropolis. The new condition involved a lot of new situations the citizen of the metropolis had to deal with- some of them being the vertiginous progress of technology, globalization, the feeling of flux and uncertainty of living a life in constant move. Guy Debord in his ‘Society of Spectacle’ notes: *“The reigning economic system is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn; all goods proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system as it strives to reinforce the isolation of “the lonely crowd”... With the advent of long distance mass communications, the isolation of the population has become a much more effective means of control. But the general trend toward isolation, which is the essential reality of urbanism, must also embody a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. Such integration into the system must recapture isolated individuals as individuals isolated together.”* [Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1994] In Antonio Negri’s words: *“Residents of the metropolis close themselves off to avoid encounters with others, walk silently past without seeing one another, erecting invisible walls in a common space, hardened to contact as if the skin had become callous, numb, mortified”.*[Antonio Negri, *De Corpore 2: Metropolis*, 2009] If we have to make a general conclusion, the metropolis became a social factory where people’s lives were determined by the

production and as the separation of the productive process went on, relationships between people become more and more mediated and behaviorism the instrument of social control. A proclamation found on the Athenian streets on December 2008 perfectly describes the phenomenon on its contemporary context: *“Through a brainstorming of commercials and misrepresentations, people are hold down to a couch, to a job, to a school, keeping a passive and uninvolved behavior towards the common/public affairs but also towards their own life. Life and intercourse on the street, demonstration and reaction are dominated by the idea of vanity... Every ‘self’ is not at all a unit but a multilayered world, a starry sky, a chaos of forms, situations and levels of abilities and possibilities. It appears that it has become for all of us a necessity as urgent as food and air to consider this chaos as a unity and speak about our self as if it was a one dimensional, completely separate and established phenomenon.”* [Rebels’ proclamation, Athens, 2008]

A crucial point to understand the shift, and especially the effect of economic transformations, is the trend toward the commodified perception of public spaces in cities. **Today the space functions as commodity object** in the sense that one becomes obliged to pay in order to obtain the right to use, consequently the citizen becomes a customer. This automatically excludes certain groups of people from public space and at the same time imposes certain rules to which the citizen-customer has to obey; therefore public space is sterilized by any freedom or democratic character. *“The attack of the neoliberalism to the city was proclaimed with a generalized questioning of public space. The centers of cities and municipalities are obtaining a commercial-consuming character, sterilized from the presence of unemployed, low-income youth or immigrants. They are being transformed into centers of financial activities and exchanges, into places where politics is not present. The city is not perceived as a public good, but as a commodity. Public space does not have any more its value of use, but its value of exchange. It is sold, bought and re-sold, being destructed and rebuilt according to the financial profit and not to its collective use by the inhabitants... These changes affect not only the material aspect of the urban space but also the social relation, as well as it reforms the notions of political rights and citizenship. Into the centers and squares of contemporary metropolises that are transformed in shopping centers the citizen is being identical to the customer- consumer. The person who has right to the public space is becoming the one who can pay to enjoy it. While whoever does not meet the financial requirements, whoever attempts to use the public space in a different way is being expelled from it...It is a system that is being based on the combination of the complete privatization of public space and the suffocating police’s surveillance. By expelling certain social groups form the public space, the gathering of the large masses in order to act politically is no longer possible. The right of political action is being substituted by the ability of buying and consuming. The civilian rights are substituted by the consumer’s rights. The shopping center is a suitable field for the*

*reproduction of the dominant political system. This is the political vision of the free market.” [Transcript from the documentary *The right to the city, about urban movements and squatting spaces in Athens*, 2010]. A space which best describes this condition is the contemporary shopping mall.*

### **Seeking for an alternative to the decline of public space.**

Considering the contemporary condition described above, of a ‘public’ space devoid of its public character, it is crucial to research the possible solutions for subverting this situation that has led to the decline of our cities both in a spatial and social manner.

In her book, *“Arendt encourages us to recognize the value and loss of something we took for granted, some part of our humanity which is a condition for the potential to create a common public space within which we can communicate and discuss issues and opinions that are vital for our everyday life, and therefore, initiate changes.”* [Monica Bokinieć, *Is Polis the answer? Hannah Arendt on democracy*, 2009] Her ideal proposal of the direct participation in democracy as the political system that leads to this ultimate state where political action transcends human necessity was strongly criticized as utopian, impossible or even naïve. *“Opinions can only be held by individuals, and no such thing as an opinion of society can be reached, because opinions are formed in free interactions and will always differ among individuals. “The lost treasure of revolution” would be this hope for a transformation of the state, for a new form of government that would permit every member of the egalitarian society to become a participator in public affairs. Arendt’s distrust towards mass society of anonymous people, who are an easy target for totalitarian ideologies, is understandable. What remains indisputable about her work is the fact that although she recognizes the impossibility of a system of council as a system of administration for larger groups, she postulates **the necessity of such spontaneous level actions and associations as a safety valve for the society.** [ibid.] Antonio Negri himself, pointing out the importance of the metropolis not only as the place of the encounters but also the place of organization and politics, admits: *“It is not easy to form with others a new relationship that promotes communication and cooperation that creates a new stronger social body and generates a more joyful common life.”*[op. cit. Negri]*

Therefore, it seems that the perspective of **a new form of social movements** is the only possibility for the revitalization of cities today. In spatial terms, it appears that it is time to attribute to the cities a new characteristic: the one of the **common space**. Debord had already foreseen the need for this redefinition of space: *“Individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history. By virtue of the resulting mobile space of play, and by virtue of freely chosen variations in the rules of the game, the independence of places will be rediscovered without any new exclusive*

*tie to the soil, and thus too the authentic journey will be restored to us, along with authentic life understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.”* [op.cit. Debord] And Negri confirms: *“The metropolitanization of the world does not necessarily just mean a generalization of structures of hierarchy and exploitation. It can also mean a generalization of rebellion and then, possibly, the growth of networks of cooperation and communication, the increased intensity of the common and encounters among singularities. This is where the multitude finds its home.”* [op.cit. Negri]

Put in a spatial context, S. Stavridis –NTUA professor of Architecture–claims: *“Those who take advantage of the profit of urban developments claim that they upgrade the level of public space and at the same time they motivate the market... Therefore public space is a common good and should not be part of the market speculation, it should be formed with completely different criteria... People who use these spaces should be able to demonstrate on them their needs and dreams of everyday life. We need at last those structures and practices which will allow them to do so...Public does not mean governmental. It means that it is available to the public, with rules that do not exclude but involve the users themselves to its management.* [op. cit. documentary]

It is well understood that these new spatial practices that derive from the new-collective movements are crucial and define a form of action that is possible to stay intact from the exploitation of the market. This is the birth of what is called today ‘urban social movements’ and is already taking place in cities around the world. *“Even more important, the existing political and economic leadership cannot run the country just the way they want; there is serious resistance from classes and groupings whose interests are not served by existing arrangements; from working people, poor people, members of minority groups, women, and **those intellectually critical of the restrictions on their potentials created by a capitalist society.** In the urban arena, anti-displacement activities, rent control battles, progressive city electoral results, and the movements for environmental quality and historic preservation all reflect **political limits to the presently prevailing patterns of unbridled spatial change** and its consequences. They all represent moments in the development of what have been called “urban social movements”: movements involving masses of people, often engaging in quite **radical direct political action and protest.** The protest is in many ways akin to strikes and workers’ action, but focused on issues of consumption rather than production.* [Peter Marcuse, *Do Cities have a future? The Imperiled Economy: Through the Safety Net, Union of Radical Political Economists, 1988*]

What could be the matter of investigation considering the spatial transformations that this situation may induce for the public sphere is how the actions of these ‘urban movements’ are being expressed in the built environment. In other words it is an attempt to identify on the one hand the places in the city that function as poles of

the collective, triggering the political action, and on the other how these actions actually transform the space. A social event of the collective can lead to the spatial transformation of a site and its establishment as an urban artifact. Aldo Rossi notes: *“When a new architectural artifact is established that is alien to the urban aesthetics, corresponds usually to a reformist or revolutionary movement”*. [Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the city*, 1966] What could be **the urban artifacts defined by the political action of the collective** in the contemporary metropolis? And last but not least **is there after all another way to produce public space?** To this response, some voices sound optimistic: *“We can give birth to spaces which will not be necessarily the products of an enlightened or delegated avant-garde which creates spaces and later attributes them to the society. Spaces can be created by the society itself... The very interesting result of those initiatives is that on the one hand they do not only claim but also act and on the other that by acting and discussing for their actions they produce new forms of political involvement and political consciousness... The space is not only produced by its physical elements, but constantly born by the people who dwell it.”* [op.cit. documentary]

## II. POLITICAL SPACES, PROTESTS AND URBAN MOVEMENTS IN ATHENS.

### Spaces as social collectors that trigger public interaction.

The example of the Greek capital in the contemporary era is chosen to describe the transformations of public spaces through actions that acquire political character such as the riots. It is also an attempt to identify the parameters that generate these expressions of the common. **Demonstration is a form of action deriving from the collective** and in favor of the collective and has the potential to generate radicalities. Athens is a city which has experienced several times during the past and until recently phenomena of social struggle that have left their traces on the image of the city. In Greece- being a country with turbulent political history and till today with major problems in its political life and welfare state- the practice of protest in several ways is very common. It is what is mentioned as the ‘Greek tradition of protests’, when international media is referring to the phenomenon.

The act of protest itself generates certain characteristics. **Demonstration arise solidarity among the singularities.** It is an instantaneous breakthrough of the metropolis isolation when people find themselves gathered together in the public space and unite towards a common demand. In a way it spontaneously creates new relationships between people and therefore, attributes a new meaning to the space so that one could claim that the event of protest is an action against the decline of the public space. These historical times, instead of obeying to behavior, the crowd becomes tolerant in spontaneity and non- behavior and experiences the power of public life to give the sense of immortality. *“We are here, we are everywhere, we are an image of the future”*, was the slogan written on the Athenian walls during the

riots against the police violence on December 2008, a period of extremity for the Greek capital when a vast number of the historical buildings of the city were set on fire.

This Athenian specificity of 'tradition in protests' has also obtained spatial expression in the city through the years. The use and perception of certain public spaces in the center is directly linked with its political heritage. These specific spaces-squares, streets, public buildings- bear the historical traces of social struggle and at the same time they constantly generate new interaction of several types among their users. Their description as social collectors through time is crucial for the understanding of their role in the city.

### **The role of the universities and the asylum network as propelling element of the riots: The history of the National Technical University and its contribution.**

What should be pointed out in the first place, is the role of the academic buildings to the generation of political organization and social struggle as immaterial production of the collective, not only of the students but also of the social groups that activate themselves in the urban center.

One of the most predominant *urban artifacts* in Athens directly linked with the social struggle is the Polytechnic school. It is a neoclassical building group located in the center of the city, gradually constructed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and today houses the faculty of architecture.

*--- The Averof building, as it is today called the central, two-storey building of the Polytechnic complex in Patission street, together with the two low buildings that frame it symmetrically have been designed by the architect Lyssandros Kautanzoglou. The original plan was made in 1859 and the building was accomplished in 1878. The completion works for the whole complex went on until the beginning of the 20th century. The central building, during the first period of its history, except from its function as a technical university, housed several exhibitions, part of it was used as hospital and finally also housed the National Gallery that was roofless at that time. But also subsequently and till today is being constantly modified and adjusted to the new needs, like the adding of amphitheatres and the restoration of the reception hall. [Manos Mpiris, The building complex of the Polytechnic in Patission Street, 2007]*

This building complex in 1973 became a symbol for the modern political history of the country and until today it concentrates around and inside it a major number of political and artistic events of the city. *"The National Technical University of Athens has always been a place of vibrant political life, being closely associated to the Greek student movement and the struggles for peace and democracy in Greece. NTUA students participated in popular struggles, with highlights the National Resistance under the German occupation (1941-44) and the struggle against the Colonels' dictatorship of 1967-74. During the Axis occupation of Greece, NTUA, in addition to its function as an academic institution, became one of the most active resistance centers in Athens...The Athens Polytechnic uprising in 1973 was a massive demonstration of popular rejection of the Greek military junta of 1967-1974. The*

*uprising began on November 14, 1973, escalated to an open anti-junta revolt and ended in bloodshed in the early morning of November 17 after a series of events starting with a tank crashing through the gates of the Polytechnic.” [citation Athens Polytechnic Uprising, Wikipedia]*

After this bloody experience of the difficult political times, **the spaces of the universities were understood to be the ones that should secure the freedom of speech and action**, the places where the generations of ideas should remain without censorship no matter what. This perception became so strong among the Greek people that on 1982 they established the law of the academic asylum that is until today a universal originality of Greece. This law forbids the intervention of the government authorities inside the gates of any academic institution of the country, and establishes these institutions as self-regulating organizations. *“Greek academics enjoy perhaps far wider freedom than most of their colleagues in the West. They face no restrictions whatever either within or without the university and there is no legal framework, or set of rules from institutions, limiting their freedom of expression – apart from the usual provisions of libel and slander...Greek academics are also free, in fact morally obliged and encouraged, to participate in the management and the direction of their university through general assemblies, departmental meetings and trade union activity. Moreover, they are entirely free to participate in protests, marches, demonstrations and any other kind of mobilization in pursuit of their legitimate rights as teachers and citizens, without suffering loss of pay or having any other kind of punitive measures taken against them.” [Makki Merseilles, Greece: unlimited freedom- for now, 2008]*

Since that time and through the following years, this building block has become synonym to the collective action, both political but also artistic. Due to the asylum law -but also because of its neighboring with Exarheia district which is considered to be since the 60's the center of the underground artistic production and anarchist movement in the Greek capital-it functions as a shelter for different groups-political, social, artistic- that express themselves collectively inside the area of the Polytechnic. The school of Architecture is the only faculty that still functions inside the old building block, contributing also by its artistic nature of work to the sense of the collective. **The students themselves organize their working spaces**, sometimes even opposed to the University's administration. The decision making for the academic community is being held by the general assembly in the sense of direct democracy. Although one could not claim that this is a situation that functions without problems or disadvantages, it is therefore a place where the participation and the common production are encouraged.

Together with the technical university a number of academic buildings still function in the central area -the Law school, the University of Economics, the Deanery building and the Academy of Athens- forming a **network of asylum spaces** around which the protests of students but also workers and other citizens' groups take

place. It is understood that **the presence of the student community in the center is the one that contributes to the character of social struggle and political organization.** What proves this fact is the intention expressed by the government to remove the universities from the center and relocate them in campuses in the periphery so as to neutralize the phenomena of violence. It is true that several times the academic buildings have been subject to destructions by the rebels, have been squatted to protest for several political issues by anarchists and leftists and generally have been used as a means of pressure by political and social groups, as the authorities have no right to intervene. It is at these moments when the borders between freedom and its abuse become indiscernible. But so far, the academic community but also the public opinion has opposed to this plan of 'gentrifying', recognizing the importance of the presence of the universities and their revitalizing role to the city life.

### **The street as battlefield of social struggle: Patission street.**

If inside the University gates there is the place of 'freedom' of ideas and creation, the streets that surround it is the territory of conflict and destruction. Here takes place the direct collision with the authorities and remain the traces of rage. The buildings that surround these open spaces of gathering are subject to fire and vandalisms. The space of the street is the place where the crowd gets together and expresses its discontent against the status quo in several ways, from just the presence there to the most extreme destructive actions of public -and non public-property." *For in the destroyed and pillaged streets of our cities of light we see not only the obvious results of our rage, but the possibility of starting to live.*" [Occupied London, Voices of the resistance, 2008]

One of the most important streets of Athens' center which is also one of the places the riots take place is the part of Patission street from Victoria square to Omonoia. Several notable buildings stand on this street: except from Athens Polytechnic, the National archaeological Museum and also the University of Economics and business. The history of the street is also closely connected with intense social activity.

*--In 1841, with the decision of the municipality of Athens, begun the construction of the street that was connecting Athens with the village called Patissia. The location of the street was on the trace of the ancient one. During the 19th century, Patission due to its provincial character and the public cafes located on it was for the Athenian citizens the best Sunday walk and public entertainment place, not only of the middle class, but for the servants and workers as well. In 1860 the Patission and Aiolou junction becomes the core of social and political life of Athens. In its multiple cafes huge political debates took place on a daily basis, considering the civic system of the country and the night that the eviction of king Othon was decided, the celebration of freedom began there. Throughout the 20th century, Patission became a main transport artery, and the several entertainment places, hotels and theaters but also public buildings located on its axis together with its neighboring with Omonoia square maintained and enhanced its central and social character. [Aristea Papanikolaou-Christensen, Patission Street, 1999]*

Patission Street functions usually as the axis of the protests, from where riots can find shelter from the rage of the police at the universities nearby. It is often transformed into battlefield, where the rebels build spontaneous barricades to fight with the armed policemen. If the Polytechnic school is the core of youth collective inside the city, Patission Street is the field of rage and destruction. *“Tonight, like in the two previous nights, the rest of your wild, loyal children were at play. We wouldn’t let you alone; we wouldn’t let anyone alone anymore. I walked out on Patission Avenue to an unforgettable sight. I knew you were proud on that moment, I could feel it. Thousands and thousands of your children were there. This was no called-for demonstration, no official gathering, nothing to even come to resemble some negotiation with normality, with their murky order. This was a fool’s feast, a delirious mass, a popular lighting up of the streets.”* [op. cit. Occupied London]

### **Public space as theater of the multitude: Omonoia square.**

If the transformation of space is an expression of the changes of the social structures through history, Omonoia square in Athens could be a representative example of describing these transformations of Greek society as it consist one of the most characteristic central spaces of the Greek capital, bearing a long history of shifts and phenomena of coexistence.

*---The first neoclassical master plans of Athens after Greece’s liberation [made by Klenze and Cleanthis-Schaubert] indicated the place of -at the beginning- Othon’s square as one of the corner squares in the basic triangle. In 1846 began the construction of the square. Being the center of Athens’ new city layout and through its neighboring with the open-air cafes that were the social places of the time, the new square gradually became the theater where political discussions and conflicts took place. It was directly linked with the revolution against Othon’s monarchy and for the first time in modern years a public space acquires political importance. After the eviction of Othon in 1862 the name of the square changes to Omonoia [ομόνοια=concord] representing clearly the meaning of the site for the common consciousness. In the decades to come, the area around the square attracts residential uses as well as commercial and social functions that made it gradually the center of the social life of the city, while at the same time it becomes an interurban transport node. The region gathers also cafes for the middle class where the social interaction continues to take place. Another fact that enhances the publicity of the site is the numerous cheap hotels around the square which make the area the ‘reception gate’ for the Greek immigrants arriving to the big city from the province as well as foreign visitors. Passing from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the character of the square is determined mainly from its location at the center of an area at the western part of the city that attracts lower social classes. Its relationship with this wider part of the city affects the functions around the square so it is perceived as a unity. Its role as reception for the newcomers in town is reinforced and it is now established as the central public space of the lower class majority as numerous places of commercial and social interaction function there. At the same time, many theaters are constructed around the square, adding a cultural importance. From 1910, a remarkable number of pharmacies in the area obtain an unusual social importance as they become the rendezvous point for the visitors from the province. To sum-up, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Omonoia square has obtained a strong public character for the lower and middle classes and gathers around it a variety of commercial and social uses that enhances social interaction of all kinds.*

*Talking about the contemporary image of the square, it should be marked that the site has been through multiple changes in its architectural form, as well as in its functional and social organization*

during the time. Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Greece faced a lot of transformations in the socio-political territory, which had as a result a great mobility of populations. Since the beginning of the century, immigrants from the province arrived to the capital in search of a better future. During the last decades, economic immigrants from foreign countries also arrived in Athens and settled themselves around Omonoia where the accommodation was cheap and they could find a job in the local manufacturers. Gradually the immigrants became so many that they create national communities around the area, which mingle with the local citizens and traders and revitalize the square region. The contemporary social image of Omonoia is now a collage of people from Egypt, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, China and Greece. These different national groups keep their habits and lifestyle. They socialize outdoors, giving to the area a strong multicultural identity. Except from these national groups, multiple other social groups find themselves on the square every day. The Greek middle class may not live in the area anymore but they work in the numerous public services and offices that function there. Other social groups that characterize the place are the marginalized people, the ones that show delinquent behaviors. Prostitutes, drug addicts and dealers of stolen goods, tarlatans and beggars of all kinds gather on the square every day. [Evaggelia Therianou, "Reading" the center of Athens. Readings of urban phenomena and forms, search of terms and conditions of living in the region in the region of Omonoia, 2008]

It is maybe one of the few places in the Greek capital where someone can observe such a huge diversity of people and activities. Due to the co-existence of these low-class social groups, the area has often been characterized as degraded and even dangerous from the authorities and the bourgeois-causing several phenomena of racism and xenophobia- but one cannot deny that remains one of the most vivid and even interesting places, which represents not a beautiful, clear and civilized capital but a really honest image of a capitalistic metropolis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Apart from this everyday heterogeneous mixing, the condition that completes the public character of the square is that since the establishment of the Greek Republic, Omonoia has become the theater of protests and demonstrations, the space where political conflicts and social claims take place in a massive way. The "right to assemble", has been kept there. Demonstrations and riots -often bloody ones-, as well as huge national celebrations [e.g. for a Greek football victory] almost traditionally take place in the square. The buildings of the area have often experienced destructions and fires due to the rage of the riots, and bear the signs of this social struggle.

### **The contribution of rioting to the consciousness of public spaces. The 'urban movements' in Athens after December 2008.**

Coming to the issue of the political action triggering new practices for the public space as mentioned above, it is clear that the last years such phenomena emerge more and more frequently in Athens. A crucial point is considered the events of December 2008, where vast numbers of people protested all around the city in a way that even for Athens was without precedent, and for several days could not be controlled.

--"The 2008 Greek riots started on 6 December 2008, when Alexandros Grigoropoulos, a 15-year-old student, was fatally shot by a police officer. The death of Grigoropoulos resulted in large protests and

*demonstrations, which escalated to widespread rioting, with hundreds of rioters damaging property and engaging riot police with Molotov cocktails, stones and other objects. Demonstrations and rioting soon spread to several other cities. Newspaper Kathimerini called the rioting "the worst Greece has seen since the restoration of democracy in 1974. While the unrest was triggered by the shooting incident, commentators described the reactions as expressing deeper causes as well, especially a widespread feeling of frustration in the younger generation about specific economic problems of the country (partly as a result of the global economic crisis), a rising unemployment rate among the young generation and a perception of general inefficiency and corruption in Greek state institutions."*[citation Greek riots, Wikipedia]

After the 'Greek December', a number of *urban movements* emerged in Athenian neighborhoods, consisting of citizens that reclaimed their right to the use of the public space in various ways. This was considered as a side effect of the dynamics and solidarity the rioting aroused to the citizens. *"Mass media will describe the facts of last week as an expression of nihilism. What they do not grasp is the fact that **during the insult and harassment of reality, we experience a superior form of community and sharing, a superior form of spontaneous and joyful organization that sets the foundation of a new world.**"* [op. cit. Rebels' proclamation]

---*"In Greece there is no strong tradition of 'urban movements. The roots of the contemporary 'urban movements' in Athens could be traced in the invasion of radical youth in certain central squares the period right after the subversion of Greek dictatorship. These squares emerged to be the urban centers of resistance. Exarheia square still maintains some of these political characteristics. Moreover, there have occurred several building squats during the 80's mostly by the anarchist movement. **But the contemporary movements emerge at the beginning of the 2000's, setting the issues of creation, preservation and management of public space by the citizens. They reflect a global trend.** In a way, either referring to the Zapatistas in Tsiapas and the revolution in Oahaka or to the squat and management of a park in the center of Athens, there is a common speculation: how we can transmit to the urban space political practices that can contribute to the shift of the society, of our lives."* [op. cit. documentary]

The transformation of a parking lot to a green park by the residents, the squat of the National Opera with artistic performances and actions open to the public inside and outside the building, the re-use of an old café to a social center for the community are only few examples of the actions occurred to the Greek capital the last period. *"The experience of December riots is multidimensional but what is important is the fact that affected the relationship with the city. It provoked movements toward the reclaim of urban space. Its crucial difference with riots of other times is that was spread throughout the city, to areas that had never experienced collective actions before, neighborhoods, schools, to several cities of Greece. It took several expressions, from peaceful demonstrations to explosions of violence, with not an only center of coordination. December transformed the way through which the city is related with publicity. It established a completely different use of the streets, the squares, the public buildings. A different cultural contact with the space. We observed the multiple squats of city halls, schools, universities and the national Opera... The Greek December gave a new perspective to the 'urban movements'. And more than that, the demand of the right to the city became one of*

*the basic demands of the revolt itself. The riot youth invaded the cities' centers and re-claimed built and unbuilt spaces, resetting their content and their functions towards a common interest. It was the perspective of a democratic organization of space.*" [op. cit. documentary] It is true that in case of the Athens' center, there are still possibilities for such interventions, as it hasn't suffered yet a procedure of entire 'social clearance' – as a direct consequence of spatial capitalistic exploitation-, and is still characterized by the multiplicity of various social groups and activities. In a completely **'gentrified' center, that is, in a center of controlled encounters and hierarchies**, it is probable that such gestures would be discouraged or even impossible to occur. In a city like Athens, where the green open spaces are literally under distinction in an overbuilt center, such movements are more than important not only for strengthening the collective consciousness but also because through this consequently they contribute to the transformation of the city deriving from the common.

### **Conclusion**

A general overview to all the above could show that it is possible to generate new forms of public space through collective practices- in this case of political essence- and by using existing propelling elements of the city. If I have to make a conclusion for what the phenomena described attribute to the urban space and life, there are no better words than these produced collectively by the citizens: *"The real meaning of the 'urban movements' is not merely the demand for more free public spaces, but the question of the "right" of the state authorities and private capital to manage these spaces. The actions of the 'urban movements' aim to the political practices of self-regulated spaces from the residents' themselves. Through these procedures emerge new 'bottom-up' consciousnesses and collective practices of managing the urban space.*" [op. cit. Rebels' proclamation]

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[see also : *Exarheia-culture shock* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkC-BWxBM2E>]