Symbolic Illusions, Unlivable Realities: A Comparative Urban History of Twentieth-century Athens and Beijing

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May 10, 2024
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Abstract
Using a comparative and transnational framework, this paper examines similarities in the urban planning strategies adopted by Athens and Beijing throughout the twentieth century, as the two historic cities transitioned to modernity. It demonstrates the ways in which the ambitious centralized planning efforts of both cities largely failed to create functional, habitable urban environments, instead often resulting in unsafe or unlivable conditions for the majority of their inhabitants. It argues that the planning strategies of the two cities were driven by the desire to generate “symbolic images” (Lynch) that carry historic and political meanings. However, this process was complicated by conflicts and collusions between governmental and market forces, leading to a contradiction between the cities’ symbolic images and their physical forms.

Introduction
At 8:45 p.m. on August 13, 2004, after a 28-second countdown and a spectacular burst of fireworks, the televised opening ceremony of the Summer Olympics officially began in Athens, Greece. A global audience watched as performers dressed as classical sculptures paraded across the stage of a newly constructed stadium designed by the architect Santiago Calatrava. This was a glorious display of the city’s historic past, its roots in Classical Antiquity, and its abundant present — a composite image of Ancient Greece and what event planners termed “New Greece.” The conception of this new Greek national identity sought to symbolically remodel the country’s seeming backwardness in modernity through a grand narrative that underscores a gloriously pure and uninterrupted descent of modern Greece from Classical Greece. As part of the national agenda, the visual vocabulary of the new Athens Olympic Stadium appeared to be purposeful as well: with the addition of a mammoth arched roof that was unprecedented in Athens, the architecture visually spoke to a “new Greekness” strengthened by Europeanization and modernization. These symbolic messages were misleading, though. Culturally, they implied the rejection of those ethnic identities throughout Greece’s ancient and recent history that
were unrepresented in the ceremony as “non-Greekness”. They likewise carried connotations about the physicality of Greece and Athens: by filtering visual representations, they concealed the disorderly urban fabric of modern Athens which authorities deemed inappropriate for the international perception of the nation and the city as prestigious. In fact, the globally televised Olympic program left out the destitute settlements of immigrants on the urban fringe of Athens in areas such as Aspropyrgos and Agia Paraskevi, which perhaps more authentically mirrored Athens’s identity than the intentional image of the city seen at the Olympic Stadium.⁴

Four years later, in 2008, a similar spectacle unfolded on television screens worldwide. This time, at the Olympics opening ceremony in Beijing, China, dancers painted calligraphic forms on a white canvas while an array of movable type blocks displayed traditional Chinese scripts, celebrating the cultural achievements of Chinese civilization.⁵ Under the slogan of “One World, One Dream,” the host city Beijing utilized this opportunity to showcase to its international audience a new image of the modernity and prosperity of China, attempting to overhaul the impression of its turbulent twentieth-century history through the country’s cultural pride and economic accomplishments in the new era.⁶ Authorities in Beijing also incorporated the themes of globalization and universality into the national narrative, aiming to portray the city as illustriously cosmopolitan. The new Beijing National Stadium, which hosted the opening ceremony, exhibited its internationalized architectural style to the world and announced a new meaning of “Chineseness”, much like how the Athens Olympic Stadium redefined the Greek identity.⁷ Yet, this magnificent image of the physical city was again contradicted by those aspects of Beijing left unseen on television screens: the clusters of underdeveloped urban villages surrounding Beijing’s city core and many more of such backward neighborhoods of migrant workers that were demolished before 2008, contrary to the orderly and resplendent cityscape formed by the new Olympic venues, unveiled another side of Beijing’s true urban identity.⁸

Athens and Beijing would seem to be diametrically opposed, symbolizing the historic and modern cultural traditions of the West and the East, respectively: Athens is touted as the birthplace of Western democracy and all its foundational cultural associations, and it developed under a capitalist system in the modern Greek state; meanwhile, Beijing is a repository for the rich cultural history of Ancient Imperial China and, in modern times, was the cultural epicenter and political capital for the
Chinese Communist regime. Yet, despite these apparent differences in what each of the two cities symbolizes, what they share in common is the burden of symbolizing such weighty cultural and political paradigms in the first place. That is to say, the physical forms of Athens and Beijing are overdetermined by their secondary function as highly important “symbolic images,” to use Kevin Lynch’s phrase. As Lynch defined it, symbolic images refer to “the ideas and values that people attach to” a city, collected in a composite as an “expression of time, history, tradition.”9 A city’s symbolic images can be found in various media: advertisements from the tourism industry, such as a twentieth-century print travel brochure depicting grids of neoclassical architecture under the Acropolis in Athens; commemorative items, such as a postage stamp painting Beijing’s Tiananmen in red that celebrates the founding of the People’s Republic of China; and, of course, televisual spectacles, such as those broadcast by Athens and Beijing respectively at the Olympic ceremonies. These images are not fixed, nor are they entirely dependent upon the materiality of a city; instead, they are “partial, fragmentary,” and “ever-changing,” reflecting the iconic perception of a city combined with the subjective meanings that individuals and groups attach to it.10

This paper explores a shared pattern in the twentieth-century urban histories of Athens and Beijing by examining the relationship between the cities’ symbolic images and physical realities. It shows how, in each city, governmental agencies attempted to uphold and reinforce specific symbolic images through their official urban planning strategies. In particular, the aspirations of Greek nationalism sought to fashion Athens into an image of the revived Hellenic pride;11 the Chinese communist government, too, repeatedly strove to cultivate “the image of the capital (首都形象)” as befitting the new Chinese regime and Beijing’s historic legacy.12 In modern Athens and Beijing alike, the pursuit of such a symbolic image resulted in the creation of ambitious centralized masterplans to transform the cities into grand, modern metropolises. However, efforts to implement such masterplans would quickly prove them to be impractical if not entirely unfeasible. In both cities, the resultant collisions and collusions between government and market forces ultimately led to severe dysfunctions in the cities’ physical, habitable forms which greatly disadvantaged their residents. Hence, the seemingly magnificent symbolic images of Athens and Beijing — those projected on television screens at Olympic ceremonies, for example — were ultimately at odds with the actual urban environments in which their residents
struggled to live. This paper thus argues that the attempt to uphold symbolic images led to similar failures in the 20th-century urban planning strategies of both cities. It also reveals an implicit message: that whenever urban planning privileges the symbolic over the material city, it necessarily does so at the expense of the quality of urban residents' lives.

By employing a comparative, transnational framework, this paper seeks to interrogate the obstacles faced by cities carrying historic legacies when transitioning into modernity. As Nicholas Kenny and Rebecca Madgin put it, comparative, transnational urban history aims to discover “commonalities” from cities' seemingly great “diversity,” recognizing that while urban history is deeply rooted in local cultures, it should also be examined from a broader global context. As Jennifer Robinson acknowledged in 2014, it is greatly useful to “challenge or bypass Northern or Western reference points” in such comparative studies, given that the analytical framework of transnational urban history is still more commonly restricted to the European and American spheres. Even today, few scholars have endeavored to compare cities from opposite hemispheres, especially those as symbolically linked to their respective opposing traditions of West and East as Athens and Beijing. Such a comparison is exactly what this paper is attempting.

**Athens**

The modern understanding of Athens is inseparable from the city’s prominent historical evolution two millennia ago. Emerging as the quintessential Classical Greek city-state in the fifth century, the city achieved cultural and economic prosperity under a democratic political system. It developed a bicentric urban structure, divided between the port city of Piraeus and the city proper of Athens. Piraeus, located on the southwest of the plain of Attica, was established as a strategic harbor and commercial center and was connected to Athens' main settlement through the six-kilometer-long Long Walls. In fifth-century Athens, the Acropolis and the Areopagus towered above the Agora, temples, stadiums, and low residential buildings.

The Classical legacy of the city persisted well into the Hellenistic period, but its urban spatial structure was soon disrupted. Medieval Athens, ruled by the Byzantine Empire and later the Ottomans until the early nineteenth century, bore little resemblance to the Classical city of Athens. By the end of
the Greek War of Independence in 1832, as the once thriving harbor of Piraeus was reduced to a fishing town and the urban areas around the Acropolis experienced enormous population decline, the entire city suffered devastation. During its epochal transition into a modern city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Athens acquired a new urban identity that both inherited and differed significantly from its Classical past.

The Unrealized Ambition: 1830 to 1900

“The town of Athens is now lying in ruins. The streets are almost deserted; nearly all the houses are without roofs. The churches are reduced to bare walls and heaps of stone and mortar. There is but one church in which the service is performed. A few new wooden houses, one or two of more solid structure, and the two lines of planked sheds which form the bazaar are all the inhabited dwellings that Athens can now boast. So slowly it recovers from the effects of the late war.”

— Christopher Wordsworth, Athens and Attica: Journal of a Residence There, 1837

The modern urban history of Athens arguably begins in the early nineteenth century, as the Greeks defeat the Ottomans and establish the Kingdom of Greece, a new state formally recognized by the London Protocol in February 1830. As a center of military confrontations during the decade-long war, Athens was — as a visitor to the city attests in the quote above — “laid in ruins,” while Piraeus became largely uninhabited. The city, with a population of 12,000 before the war and only 4,000 in 1834, had to be rebuilt.

In 1831, Otto, King of Greece, dispatched two architects, the Greek Stamatios Kleanthis and the Prussian Eduard Schaubert, to study the topography of the city and develop a new master plan for its reconstruction. Their proposal, known as the Kleanthis-Schaubert plan, reflected Otto’s desire to transform Athens into a form that was at once recognizable historic and modern, harnessing the city’s Classical past while embracing its hopeful future as an archetypal nineteenth-century Western European city (Fig. 2). As Kleanthis recalled, the Greek government envisaged the new Athens to be “equal with the ancient fame and glory of the city and worthy of the century in which we live,” a new capital that merged its modern identity with the Classical past. Approved by Otto in 1833, the ambitious Kleanthis-Schaubert plan so perfectly captured the official vision for a modern Greece that it prompted the government to establish Athens as the new national capital later that year.

The Kleanthis-Schaubert plan evinced a certain grandeur, if not grandiosity, in its projections
for the future of Athens: Predicting significant population growth for the new capital, the plan stipulated Athens should be transformed on a monumental scale to support a population of almost 40,000 people. Formally, it is characterized by a distinctly Classical aesthetic — it is proportional, symmetrical, and regular. It organizes the city along a Hippodamian grid with a strictly symmetrical layout featuring a right triangle located on the plain to the north of the Acropolis hill. Piraeus Street, the main south-west axis, leads towards the port of Piraeus, while the other north-south axis, Stadium Street, points to the ancient Panathenaic Stadium of Herodes Attikos. The two were bisected by three north-south boulevards in the center, leading to the royal palace and its surrounding governmental offices. Public squares and vegetation were distributed evenly across the orderly geometrical structure, which consisted of straight and orthogonal streets and radial road networks. The grandeur of the plan evoked the designs of other contemporary European capitals.

In fact, the Hippodamian grid would be the common link between past and present: its axial boulevards, symmetry, and rational organization of the city perfectly aligned with the Neoclassical, Enlightenment ideals of modern Europe — and, at the same time, harkened back to the roots of those ideals in Classical Antiquity (and Hippodamus himself). Yet its superimposition on the city’s existing, irregular fabric also bespeaks an ugly, ethno-nationalist agenda of reviving the “Hellenic Nation.” Under Ottoman rule, pre-modern Athens had been built with curvilinear and irregular road networks and lacked proper infrastructure, an era commonly understood as an undesirable interruption in the city’s glorious legacy. (Fig. 1). The implementation of the organizing grid — a distinctly Western symbol of rationality and regularity — served to symbolically override an implicitly “Turkish” model of spontaneous urban growth and disorder.

The Kleanthis-Schaubert plan was an early sign of the heavy-handed, authoritative role that Otto and the Greek State would play in the process of urban planning. In sharp distinction to the policies of the Ottoman era, Otto, as an absolute monarch, oversaw the administration of all municipal matters; urban planning was no longer subject to local authority but to the central authority of the King. This authoritarianism is particularly evident in one official mandate, the Royal Decree “On sanitary building of cities and villages,” a detailed legal policy governing urban development issued in 1835. It stipulated that the orientation and width of streets must conform to the rectangularity of Athens as a whole and
directly intervened in private construction. The law specified minimum dimensions and division of plots, limited the height and façade of buildings, and even prohibited the use of vibrant colors such as white and red to maintain urban uniformity. The rigorous and exhaustive legislation aimed to enforce a consistent and universal adoption of Athens’ neoclassical architectural style — not unlike the Hippodamian grid of Kleanthis-Schaubert’s plan.

Otto’s ambitions for centralized control of the city’s development were not always feasible in reality, as time wore on. For example, the large area of wide boulevards and public squares stipulated in the Kleanthis-Schaubert plan required the expropriation of land from private owners. This proved difficult to achieve given the rising land price in Athens and the government’s inability to provide sufficient funds. The 1833 plan was therefore replaced one year later by Leo von Klenze’s plan, which adjusted the position of the palace and the administrative quarter but inherited the triangular layout of Kleanthis and Schaubert (Fig. 3). Most importantly, Klenze reduced the area of public spaces and narrowed the dimension of streets in an attempt to assuage landowners’ discontent and moderate the cost of land expropriation. Yet despite the revision of the plan, the state was still unable to publicly finance all of the major constructions.

In time, many of the cultural institutions proposed in Athens’ plans would be financed not by the state but by wealthy Greek businessmen of the diaspora, who injected large amounts of private capital into the city. The city’s Archaeological Museum was donated by Demetrios Vernardakes in 1856. Similarly, the Academy and National Library — significant civic projects constituting parts of the Athenian Trilogy — were funded by private individuals, Simon Sinas and the Vallianos brothers. The grand projects intended to emblematize and glorify the power of the state in fact far exceeded the state’s budget; overseas benefactors thus became the primary force behind Athens’ public constructions.

The Greek government adopted another strategy in an effort to finance its projects. Not only in Athens, but in other cities as well, the state sold nationally owned land—properties requisitioned from the Ottomans—to private purchasers to supplement its income. Initially, the land expropriation and compensation policy proved to be burdensome for a financially weak government to implement. In the long run, however, it was the residents of Athens who would suffer as the city largely fell into the hands of private landowners.
Otto’s vision for a centrally planned city thus ultimately went unrealized and was criticized for its overambition. The state’s authoritative decrees and grand architectural ambitions were at odds with its manifest failure to actualize them. Although nineteenth-century Athens maintained a relatively balanced urban structure, the conflict between private ownership and state control would eventually intensify, such that governmental building regulations would be repeatedly challenged by powerful investors. In the 20th century, as Athens’ population expanded, the city would slowly approach a point of crisis.

The Approaching Crisis: 1900 to 1940

While Otto’s interventions in urban planning repeatedly proved futile, the city’s real estate market, fueled by private interests, began to flourish in the nineteenth century. Once Athens was named the Greek capital in 1833, the city’s population grew, and its land prices rose accordingly. This led to a proliferation of private investors who put capital into residential construction, hoping to generate profits. Very quickly, the speculative real estate market became a powerful force in shaping the city, having an appeal not only to the rich bourgeois, landowners, and industrialists but also to the general population.

The profitable real estate speculation was at odds with the humanitarian needs of the inhabitants of Athens, especially the housing demands of the city’s surging working-class population: By the end of the nineteenth century, Athens and its port city of Piraeus emerged as prominent industrial centers that stimulated massive demographic growth. The city saw an influx of new inhabitants, most of whom were laborers, resulting in an extremely large proportion of the working class in these two city centers.

Unable to purchase residences from the land market dominated by the wealthy or to acquire building permits from the government, workers were left with few choices. A rare few, with a combination of fortune and skills, settled in the urban center by constructing their own communities. In the 1860s, construction workers employed in the renovations of Otto’s palace built dwellings on the northeast side of the Acropolis, forming the neighborhood of Anafiotika. The community was illegal due to its lack of building permits, and its architectural style contrasted sharply with the carefully planned urban scenery elsewhere in Athens. Anafiotika was thus marked by its difference from the
residential quarters of the Athenian bourgeoisie, from which it was both spatially isolated and visually
distinct, testifying to a contradiction between the symbolic image of Athens envisioned by the planning
authorities and the city’s material reality.34

Yet illegal workers’ communities like Anafiotika were the exception to the rule. More frequently,
workers were not granted the initiative to construct their own settlements but were forced into rental
agreements. Speculative developers created and monopolized a housing market that specifically targeted
workers in need of housing. Knowing that these renters would seek to reduce their transportation costs,
the developers built on sites that offered good proximity to industrial locations. They hastily constructed
poor-quality houses, aiming to generate profits not from the constructions themselves but from the land
values.35 Around city centers, these speculatively built workers’ settlements were overcrowded and
dilapidated. The alternative for workers was to settle on the urban fringe, yet constructions there were
of equally poor quality, accompanied by the troubles of underdeveloped infrastructure. And in all cases,
property ownership was out of the reach of the average worker, who relied on rent-paying.36

The Greco-Turkish War, fought between 1919 and 1922, resulted in a refugee crisis that
transformed the demographics of Athens and subsequently its urban landscape. Under the obligation
of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, minority populations were exchanged between Greece and Turkey.
This resulted in an influx of 1.1 million Greek Orthodox Christians from Turkey, which increased
Greece’s population by 18 percent.37 The exchange also contributed to Greater Athens’ rising
population, which almost doubled between 1920 and 1928.38 The refugee crisis heightened poverty and
unemployment in Athens, which experienced rising social tensions between the new settlers and the
natives and the polarization of social classes.

In 1923, a body was established to direct the permanent residential settlement of refugees. This
committee, known as The Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC), determined that the exclusion of
refugees from urban centers would alleviate racial and ethnic tension. The RSC accordingly developed
a policy that refugees were to be housed outside the city center, resulting in new satellite communities
of migrants erected on the urban fringe.39 From the perspective of land allocation, the “problem” of
housing refugees was indeed solved—however, the solution created further problems.

The policy on refugee settlement prompted spontaneous land development around the urban
centers that led to an unprecedented degree of urban sprawl. Unrestrained by planning regulations, built-up areas created by refugees expanded so swiftly that the two centers of Athens and Piraeus, which had developed separately before the 1920s, eventually became a single agglomeration. Refugees were soon incorporated into the secondary land market that was, before the refugee crisis, exclusive to impoverished workers struggling with housing shortage. Although land transactions with speculators granted refugees legal ownership of the land, they could not legally construct houses on it because construction on parcels reserved for agricultural purposes in the suburbs was restricted. Thus, the refugees resorted to a precarious, semi-legal strategy that cast them into a precarious mode of existence: Evading the regulations of local authorities, they built flimsy, impermanent residences. They thus became semi-squatters and contributed to the process of suburbanization around the city of Athens (Fig. 4). As the phenomenon of semi-squatting persisted, popular protests took shape. In 1925, groups of refugees even surpassed the illegality of semi-squatting to seize a series of dwellings constructed by the RSC by force, which the government failed to effectively resist. As Athenians challenged the regulative role of governmental agencies in urban planning, it appeared that the control over peripheral expansion was no longer in the hands of urban planners.

The ungovernable urban sprawl after the 1920s, however, was not solely associated with the error of the policymaking of the RSC but also the long absence of a practical master plan in Athens. Although there had been efforts to re-plan Greater Athens, they remained theoretical studies and made little impact on the city. The Ludwig Hoffmann Plan (Fig. 5) from 1908 to 1910 and the Thomas Mawson Plan (Fig. 6) between 1914 and 1918 were considered unfeasible, while those of Aristides Balanos from 1917 and Stylianos Leloudas from 1918 to 1921 were more realistic but never fully put into practice. Aiming to unify multifarious regulations into one unified master plan, the Committee for the New Plan for the City of Athens in the 1920s formulated a new proposal, but it was rescinded due the government’s financial shortfalls. The disorganization within Athens’ urban planning institution obstructed the implementation of regulations, engendering governmental tolerance for illegal construction that prevailed at the time. Reliant on outdated plans, the city was unprepared to cope with emerging challenges and had to adopt the impetuous RSC decision of social exclusion amidst the refugee crisis. Urban planning legislation was readily overwhelmed because it had never taken the
potentiality of future complications into account.

The Crisis: 1940 to 1980

From the 1940s onward, as the need for affordable housing grew and the speculative interest of landowners looking to exploit the land market followed, housing sprawl reached unprecedented heights. Although the Ministry of Social Welfare was responsible for providing housing for refugees and workers, its essential purpose after the Second World War shifted to the demolishing of illegal houses in refugee neighborhoods. The Ministry of Public Works also carried out planning, but its projects did little to increase the level of public housing. Without adequate governmental support to address the housing shortage, a great percentage of Athens’ population resorted to illegal housing for subsistence.

Unauthorized settlements in the suburbs of Athens were called _afthereta_, a modern Greek word meaning “arbitrary” (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). Often occupied by workers, refugees, and internal migrants, these settlements were arbitrary because they were subject to illegal uses, as stipulated by a 1923 regulation on planning and development. The Ministry of Public Works prohibited construction on plots under 0.4 hectares outside the urban area, where land was held as agricultural parcels. Although exceptions were made to permit temporary houses on smaller plots, the general residential buildings that covered over a hundred square meters were evident violations of the law. Yet because of the disparity between land prices in the urban center and the unauthorized rural land, illegal construction was economically attractive to the low-income population. While the value of urban plots around Greece swelled from 30 million to 200 billion drachmas between 1952 and 1963, the price of a typical plot measuring 100 square meters in agricultural areas only rose from 10 thousand to 60 thousand drachmas. Apart from the poor purchasers, the speculators who operated the market were even more responsible for the rampant growth of illegal housing. While landowners sold their parcels to the poor at profitable prices, a great number of others who did not hitherto own land quickly invested in agricultural plots. Compared to other forms of investment, the peripheral land around Athens yielded exceptionally fruitful gains. It typically proffered 200 to 800 percent profits or, if the owners subdivided plots to increase sales and awaited settlements to expand over years, even thousands of percent. When such tremendous profits were involved, it was even harder to crack down on squatting.
Although settlers could expect tax evasion and a lower cost of living, incessant fear and pressure characterized their confrontation with law enforcement. To avoid the demolition of their homes by the patrolling police, families labored hastily at night or when the police were otherwise preoccupied. They often began by building a small, roofed room made of cement blocks, or simply a roof without enclosed walls. The latter form of construction was so temporary that residents’ lives were effectively spent outdoors. When financial circumstances improved, families expanded the preliminary structure by adding more concrete cells or building a second story on top of it. Illegal dwellings were therefore constantly evolving, commonly taking over a decade to reach their final stage. Yet the long process of incremental growth was more precarious than promising. Some struggled with property rights facing the accusations of landowners while others suffered from multiple demolitions. Many settlers fought against the police to defend their shacks and sometimes, after multiple struggles, succeeded. The physical and psychological hardships of this process were not endurable for all. Families were eager to create the illusion that a house was inhabited even if it was in the initial stage of construction, but many were forced to desert the house to avoid any legal repercussions.

The rise of authorized construction was also as closely connected to the Greek legal system as to the dwellers and landowners. The building code, or Genikos Oikodomikos Kanonismos, revised in 1955, unintentionally favored private land development through legislative confusion. Without sufficient public funds, areas that were planned for public usage were instead transferred to the hands of private owners, thwarting the implementation of urban planning and encouraging the expansion of unauthorized land. Yet to cope with the disorder of unauthorized construction, the government also retrospectively legalized these dwellings and levied taxes on the residents. Retrospective legalization was a passive measure against housing sprawl but only encouraged speculators and dwellers to engage in the business, who became emboldened by the hopeful probability of succeeding in the legal battle. While it appeared that by stimulating spontaneous housing development the burden of popular housing was reduced for planning authorities, this approach was not beneficial to low-income residents. Legalization never generated the same benefits that a legitimate town plan would yield. Dwellers endured a low standard of living without sewerage systems, water supply, and even surfaced roads. The government, however, was not compelled to improve urban infrastructure in newly legalized areas.
Unrestrained, illegal housing expanded horizontally around Athens. From 1945 to 1969, the number of new unauthorized houses in Athens was 137,602, constituting two-thirds of all unauthorized buildings in Greece. In comparison, efforts to demolish these buildings only appeared ineffectual although their existence induced fear. Around 2,000 houses were demolished in 1964, yet even this failed to contain the surge of housing sprawl. From the 1940s to the 1960s, the growth of Athens was thus more pronounced in outward expansion than urban densification. Even with retrospective legalization, the growth of unauthorized residential areas still far exceeded Athens’ planned areas. While the area around Athens and Piraeus designated by the master plan was only 17,961 hectares, the actual built-up area was 27,127 hectares. This trend continued in 1971 when the total planned area was 20,702 while the built-up area reached 28,200 hectares. Authorities in Athens have entirely lost the initiative in urban planning. Being placed in the hands of those who were more concerned with private interests and subsistence, the city’s spatial structure was entrapped in a deep crisis.

The Problematic Legacy: 1980 to Present

Throughout the twentieth century, urban sprawl in Athens was an issue of great continuity that took different forms at different times. In the 1970s, when Greece was ruled by a military dictatorship, the housing sprawl dominated by the popular strata was gradually replaced by the suburbanization of the middle class. Whereas the urban center was troubled by traffic congestion and environmental pollution, the suburbs became attractive for the relatively affluent seeking to construct villas and enjoy a higher standard of living. Although several planning laws were announced after the establishment of the new Ministry of Regional Planning, Housing and the Environment in 1975, the progress was easily obstructed. The famous Planning Law 947/1979, for example, demanded the taxation of peripheral land that was incorporated into the master plan and obliged owners to contribute parts of their plots for the construction of urban infrastructure and public spaces and utilities. Confronted by the wealthy landowners and the middle class who now placed speculative interests in suburban land, the 1979 law was soon replaced by the Planning Law 1337/1983, which still aimed for public land development but on more lenient terms. The new law, however, was opposed as well. The former popular land market of migrants and workers that contributed to the housing sprawl was only
transformed into a more speculative market owned by another social class. The problem remained unsolved.

As the center of Athens underwent demographic decline and decentralization in the late twentieth century, the housing sprawl generated a spillover effect that stimulated growth in municipalities around Athens, forming new agglomerations in Mesogeia and Thriasio among others (Fig. 10). The new urban development trajectory, however, signaled the prolongation of urban sprawl. As a result of the new Attico Metro and the Attica Highway constructed in the 1990s and the new Athens International Airport completed in 2001, the Mesogeian Plain became more accessible from the urban center of Athens and attracted more residential settlements. Before the 2004 Olympics, the large projects of athletic complexes, exhibition halls, and entertainment centers, which scattered across the Attica, brought yet another wave of sprawling constructions in Mesogeia. Under an ineffectual building code and the tradition of a laissez-faire approach to urban planning, urban sprawl in Athens remained uncurbed.

Beijing

Just as Athens for centuries stood as the symbolic center of Western civilization, Beijing, the imperial capital of China, served as the archetypal Eastern city. The Yuan dynasty established the capital Dadu, the precursor of modern Beijing, in the thirteenth century. By placing imperial palaces in the geometric center and aligning residential quarters with a grid structure along a north-south axis, the city strictly adhered to the characteristic principles of ancient Chinese urban planning—centrality and cardinal orientation. In the early fifteenth century, during the Ming dynasty, Beijing enhanced its rectangular city walls and acquired the imperial palace complex of the Forbidden City, developing an urban configuration identical to its modern shape. The city’s intricate network of hutongs and siheyuans, or courtyard residences greatly expanded during the Qing dynasty, from 1644 to 1911.

Although the city experienced demolitions and reconstruction in the early twentieth century, its urban structure from the dynastic period was largely preserved until the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. After this point, changes came to the historic urban fabric of Beijing. Just as in Athens, the Chinese government’s attempts at implementing a master plan for Beijing would be
Radical Transformations: 1950 to 1970

The Communist Revolution demanded radical reforms and swift institutional transformations. Designated as the capital of the new Chinese state, Beijing necessitated government efforts to remodel the city’s urban fabric symbolic of its feudal and imperial past for a more progressive political order, as the authorities believed. In August 1950, the Communist Party stated the intention, “to transform [Beijing] from a consumption city into a production city, from an old, backward city into a modern city.” A new urban planning institution, the Beijing City Planning Committee, was established for this purpose.

The architects heading the Committee, Liang Sicheng (Vice Director) and Chen Zhanxiang (Senior Planner), approached their task well-informed by the recent history of various European capitals. They were mindful of the possibility that Beijing might see the kind of unplanned expansion and resultant urban congestion that had been witnessed in these European cities. They were also aware of Western experiments with urban decentralization which might help mitigate this congestion. Accordingly, they devised a polycentric urban plan that could accommodate various forms of urban growth around each of three programmatic nodes or “centers,” a strategy they termed “Organic Decentralization.”

The architects articulated their plan for Beijing’s “Organic Decentralization” in great detail in their 1950 Proposal on the Location of the Central Administration District of the Central People’s Government, a monumental work of urban theory and design. To “improve, decentralize, and readjust the urban areas of the old city” and avoid “the overcrowding of constructions within the old city,” the proposal located three foci or “centers” around which the city would take shape over time, as if growing organically: The existing Imperial or “old city” would constitute its own civic center. But, to protect and preserve its historic architectural form, the city’s modern growth should occur away from it, around two new centers: The first was to be a new administrative district, located roughly seven kilometers away from the old city, in an area between Gongzhufen (Tomb of the Princess) and Yuetan (Altar of the
Moon). A larger area of land to the south of the old city was to become Beijing’s third center, a business district that was expected to stimulate investment and infrastructural development around itself. The rest of the city’s architecture would consist of neighborhood units comprising residential dwellings and associated living services; these were designed as architectural continuations of the city’s existing, traditional courtyard houses, thus guaranteeing a consistent urban pattern.\textsuperscript{70}

The polycentric urban structure envisioned by Liang and Chen was never put into practice. Soviet advisors and other Chinese urban planners criticized their plan for “Organic Decentralization” as both economically unfeasible and politically inappropriate.\textsuperscript{71} Opponents of the Liang-Chen plan particularly argued that the old city centered in Tiananmen was the new regime’s political heritage and a symbol of the new Chinese state. They therefore found it unthinkable to establish an administrative district anywhere else. As Chen Zhanxiang related in a 1992 interview:

They raised a hue and cry about Tiananmen, arguing that Tiananmen could on no account be abandoned (as the heart of the administrative district) because Chairman Mao had proclaimed the birth of the People’s Republic on the Tiananmen Rostrum.\textsuperscript{72}

This was a case, then, of the city’s symbolic image — the historic image of Tiananmen Square functioning as a symbol of the People’s Republic — dictating its programmatic organization.

Ultimately, Tiananmen’s symbolic image would win out, taking priority over the functionality of the city. The rejection of the Liang-Chen Proposal foreclosed the possibility of Beijing’s “Organic Decentralization.” The plan ultimately ratified by the central government maintained Beijing’s singular center as the old city, expecting all urban growth to take shape outwards from this node. Titled the \textit{Preliminary Design for the General Urban Construction Planning}, the plan was first drafted in 1954 (Fig. 12) and again in 1958 (Fig. 13). Instead of separating new residential quarters from the old city, the ratified master plan called for the demolition of “about 100 million square meters of old houses” and the construction of “200 million square meters of new ones.”\textsuperscript{73} Its approach to the historic Imperial architecture of Beijing was the exact antithesis of the urban preservation proposed by Liang-Chen: To present a clear break with the past and eliminate all restrictions of spatial extension, the plan suggested broadening the avenues within the old city, demolishing its city walls and replacing them with a new ring road.\textsuperscript{74} Since the goal of the central government was to transform Beijing into an industrial center
During the first Five Year Plan, beginning in 1953, industrial constructions were encouraged both within and outside of the urban center.\(^5\)

By creating six dispersed suburban industrial zones around the old city and surrounding them with residential quarters, the plan sought to make the suburban sectors as independent from the city center as possible. It also allocated large areas of greenbelts to separate the industrial zones from each other and from the urban center. This pattern of scattered clusters was intended to keep the expansion of the old city under control and prevent spatial amalgamation on the urban fringe.\(^6\) The only problem, however, was that the principle of scattered clusters was difficult to realize. In contrast to Liang and Chen's proposal of “organic decentralization”, in which the three central districts—the old city, the new administrative center, and the central business district—assume complementary functions but are also interconnected within a reasonable distance for commute, the 1958 master plan never intended to link the decentralized suburban sectors with each other. At the same time, though, the economic development of the 1950s did not allow the dispersed zones to fully develop into self-sufficient satellite municipalities.\(^7\) Residents were thus left in an inconvenient position in which they were still dependent upon the public facilities within the urban center but had to endure the troublesome cost of commute. For residents who have already settled in the city core, the relocation into the countryside was even more difficult because of the economic attraction of the urban center and their inherent belief in the superiority of city life.\(^8\) The scattered zones, although accentuated in the governmental strategy, were simply not the natural location for both industries and residences. Decentralization thus remained a theoretical principle that was hardly reflected in the actual spatial pattern.\(^9\)

The greatest possible defect of the principle of scattered clusters was that the built-up areas in the suburbs and the central urban area would form an agglomeration if the expansion of the city core was not restrained. Instead of serving as a bulwark, this only expedited the process of urban sprawl. During the Great Leap Forward, a radical socialist economic campaign that began in 1958, the desire to reduce the disparity between urban and rural areas dominated the policy of urban planning. The planning authority increasingly emphasized the importance of scattered clusters in both industrial growth and agricultural production, aiming to make the suburbs just as functional and productive as the urban center of Beijing.\(^0\) These efforts, however, did not restrict the disproportionate growth of the
city core. As the central mass of Beijing continued to stretch, its boundary with the suburbs became more ambiguous. The six scattered clusters designated in the master plan were already merging with the urban center.\textsuperscript{81} The concentrated development in the northwestern outskirts, where universities and technology industries were situated, was also shaping the direction of urban expansion.\textsuperscript{82} The separation between the dispersed zones and the central built-up areas was more easily transcended than what the 1958 master plan expected.

As the Liang-Chen plan had predicted, the old city was incapable of sustaining its dual role as both an economic and administrative center over the long term. Ultimately, urban congestion would afflict Beijing, leading to disorganized sprawl which compromised the welfare of its inhabitants.

**Reforms and Sprawling Development: 1970 to 1990**

The Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976 briefly thwarted all decentralization efforts. Both the 1958 master plan and the planning authority of Beijing were revoked, resulting in a decade of disorderly construction that transformed the urban landscape and brought devastating consequences. A housing shortage plagued the old city, courtyard dwellings were divided and occupied by families of poor residents, who built flimsy structures within the historic courtyards and endured low standards of living.\textsuperscript{83} Under the slogan of “making use of every bit of land,” the occupation of space spread to the urban fringe, where plots originally planned as green space were seized by construction activities.\textsuperscript{84} Not only did urban congestion worsen inside the city core but the central mass of Beijing also rapidly expanded, obscuring its separation from the suburbs and obliterating the hope for scattered clusters. As the sprawling pattern continued, the area of greenbelts was significantly decreased.\textsuperscript{85}

Between 1949 and 1980, the total population of greater metropolitan Beijing more than doubled, and the population within its urban core roughly tripled; during these same years, developments on vacant land within the urban center also tripled.\textsuperscript{86} Urban congestion became extreme beyond belief, with space per capita reduced to a mere 4.55 square meters. This severe congestion resulted in dangerous conditions, including inadequate infrastructure, scarce public services, a housing shortage, and environmental destruction.

In 1982, a new master plan for the city was developed which reasserted the principle of
decentralization (Fig. 13). In an attempt to mitigate congestion, urban planners once again looked to the development of satellite towns. Given that the original six suburban sectors had essentially merged with the city’s central core, their new plan allocated ten additional constellations on the urban fringe, aiming to create the polycentric pattern that the 1958 master plan failed to achieve.\(^87\)

What the 1982 master plan was not prepared for, however, was the rapid economic growth that occurred in major Chinese cities after the 1978 economic reforms. With the rise of the market economy, Beijing witnessed a new impetus to urban construction, entrepreneurial development, and demographic growth. Unlike decades ago, Beijing in the 1980s was no longer identified as an industrial productive center but was presented with great opportunities from marketization. As the annual quantity of construction swelled from 4.5 million square meters in the late 1970s to 10 million square meters in the 1980s, the new pattern of peripheral constellations proved incapable of satisfying the city’s demand for growth.\(^88\)

This surge in Beijing’s urban expansion, which the new master plan did not anticipate, was inseparable from the economic initiative of local governments in land development. While decision-making in urban planning was always exclusive to the central government before the 1980s, the series of reforms introduced a reorganization of governmental institutions that favored the decentralization of the planning system. Although local planning authorities in Beijing were not empowered to directly make autonomous planning proposals, the district and county governments of Beijing were granted greater freedom in fiscal administration and could thus influence the course of urban growth within the new market economy.\(^89\) The economic power of local authorities was further enhanced by Chinese land use reform: the *Land Administration Law* of 1986 and the amendment to the Chinese constitution in 1988 greatly reduced state regulation of land use. While the state still maintained land ownership, the new system permitted individuals and developers to sell, lease and sublease, transfer, and mortgage urban land.\(^90\) Hence, local governments could lease their land to developers and encourage large development projects, which yielded substantial revenues. Consequently, development was largely driven by the market, directed by local governments — whose role was becoming indistinguishable from that of corporate developers.\(^91\)

From 1992 to the 2000s, around 26 development zones emerged in the suburbs of Beijing.
Executive departments within the State Council established some with relatively large planned areas, such as the Beijing Economic Development Zone and Zhongguancun Science Park (Fig. 14). Other smaller zones were the initiatives of the municipal and district governments, and sometimes even counties. While this reflected the decentralization of planning authority, it also revealed the problem of inconsistency introduced by the new land policy. Unlike the development zones administered by the state or the city, the zones under the governance of lower-level governments were often designated for technological, economic, or tourist purposes but merely for profit-making.\footnote{In the phenomenon coined “zone fever,” the construction of these for-profit development zones generated limited benefits for local economies and instead became a disruption to the city’s spatial order.} What was intended to be positive urban growth was transformed into a process of government-led suburbanization, characterized by a strikingly inefficient use of land and a lack of effective planning. This not only resulted in a reduction in farmland but also challenged the spatial structure that the municipal planning committee proposed. As suburban development zones expanded outwards, they inevitably intruded into the urban green space that served as a buffer against sprawling. Yet the area of greenbelts located between the urban areas and the peripheral constellations observed a population growth of 75.7 percent and a net increase in population density of 42.0 percent, two exceptionally high rates compared to those of other zones in Beijing.\footnote{The actual growth pattern in the 1990s thus contradicted the urban containment strategy of the 1982 master plan. The outcome was not rational planning but rather real estate speculation that generated a unique pattern of urban sprawl.} The profitable business of land development by local governments exacted a heavy cost on the farmers through the expropriation of farmland.\footnote{The land expropriation, though convenient for local authorities, could be detrimental to the livelihood of the farmers under the reformed legal system. In the face of governmental expropriation, farmers were also left at a disadvantage. According to the Land Administration Law, farmers would receive compensation of around three to six times their average agricultural production value in the preceding three years. With a low agricultural price in the past, though, the compensation for farmland loss was insufficient for farmers’ subsistence.} The economic loss was, for many farmers, inevitable. After the Chinese rural land reform in 1978, which instituted the “household responsibility system”, the ownership of farmland was transferred from the farmers’
collectives to individual families. Yet unlike urban residents, farmers were only granted the right to use their land but not to engage in land transactions, a measure to preempt non-agricultural uses of farmland and the further loss of arable land as the government alleged.\textsuperscript{97} Until their cultivated land was requisitioned, there was no other way to convert it into other forms of properties. The final strategy that peasants could resort to was illegally constructing additional dwellings on their residential land and holding them under lease.\textsuperscript{98}

This led to the emergence of semi-urbanized villages on the urban fringe, which further compounded urban dysfunction. Local farmers rented the dwellings to the itinerant population of migrant workers in desperate search of housing. The rental economy established between the locals and migrant workers resembled the suburban housing market in Athens that grew spontaneously after the Turkish refugee crisis. The only difference was that this phenomenon in Beijing was a direct consequence of governmental actions and the inadequacy of the legal framework.

Semi-urbanized villages especially prevailed on the urban fringe because the buildings rented out by the farmers were economically attractive to Chinese migrant workers. Before the reforms of the 1980s, the \textit{hukou} system, or the Chinese household registration system, maintained a clear distinction between rural residents holding rural \textit{hukou} and urban residents with urban \textit{hukou}. Under this regulation, migrants were prohibited from settling and seeking employment in cities. After the distinction of \textit{hukou} weakened in the 1980s, Beijing witnessed an influx of migrants who often became low-income laborers.\textsuperscript{99} Without the same housing privileges as permanent urban residents, migrant workers sought out the relatively inexpensive rental price of housing in semi-urbanized villages and its easy accessibility.\textsuperscript{100} But this form of development was inappropriate both for the living conditions of settlers and the spatial order of the city as a whole. As exemplified by Zhejiangcun, an urban village to the south of the urban center accommodating migrants primarily from the province of Zhejiang, these villages suffered from underdeveloped infrastructure, a lack of sewerage system, and poor sanitary conditions (Fig. 15). With only low-density dwellings available, the migrant population endured a crowded life. As the migrants’ demand for housing increased, more villages sprouted in the form of leapfrog sprawl. Although the government made repeated attempts to eradicate these illegal constructions, the phenomenon persisted because the housing issue for migrants was never resolved.\textsuperscript{101} The financial
rewards from land development diverted the attention of local governments, who neglected the welfare of peasants and migrants on the urban fringe. Meanwhile, the semi-urbanized villages worsened the sprawling pattern that was already manifest from the irrationality of development zones.

**The Sprawling “Pancake”: 1990 to Present**

Once the pattern of urban sprawl took shape, it could not be subdued with ease in a metropolis where the allure of land development was so great. With the failure of the design of “scattered clusters” in previous master plans, Beijing’s monocentric urban pattern from the 1990s onwards began to prevent the city from achieving greater positive growth. An evocative description of the city “spreading out like a pancake” became a familiar refrain. The building density within the city core increased through the redevelopment of historic and dilapidated neighborhoods while development in the suburbs sprawled outwards in an unregulated manner. The new development zones in the suburbs, instead of becoming new self-sufficient urban centers, encircled the center mass until the two merged into one gigantic piece of “pancake.” From the 1950s to the end of the century, Beijing saw a five-fold increase in urban development and found its urban population quadrupled. The direct consequence of the sprawling pattern—the deteriorating quality of urban life—became manifest. In the 2000s, air pollution, a deficient area of urban green space encroached by land development, a strained supply of water, and a dramatic reduction in cultivated land greatly troubled Beijing.

At the same time, the trend of suburbanization formerly characterized by government-led development transformed into market-oriented real estate development. Unlike the relocation projects in the past in which the government stimulated urban residents to resettle in suburban clusters to contain the swelling urban population, suburbanization after the 1990s was driven by real estate developers and residents themselves. Discontented with the congestion in the city core, many relocated to the suburbs in search of a better living environment. From 1990 to 2000, the population in the inner suburbs grew by an enormous margin, while the population in the city core decreased slightly. Unfortunately, the growth in the suburbs, much like the peripheral districts envisioned by the 1958 master plan, further complicated Beijing’s congestion rather than alleviating the burden of the city core. The model of revenue-enhancing development signified that developers were more concerned with the direct financial
rewards from the newly constructed communities than how the communities would actually function. These suburban communities, as a result, lacked adequate urban facilities, public space, and most importantly, work opportunities. Though often built with large areas, they served as nothing other than residential quarters and were entirely reliant upon the urban center to survive—as an example, the new neighborhood of Wangjing, located to the northeast of the city core, was planned to house 30,000 residents but only became a large-scale, lifeless commuter town (Fig. 16).105 By commuting between their workplaces in the city and their suburban residences on a daily basis, these people further exacerbated Beijing’s traffic congestion.106 The sprawl outwards thus contributed to the exact problem that it intended to address. With Beijing’s monocentric structure left unchanged, the “pancake” continued to sprawl, pushing the city and its residents into a vicious cycle.

**Conclusion**

In retrospect, the contrast between Athens’ and Beijing’s images of prosperity and the decrepitude on the urban fringe during the 2004 and 2008 Olympics is explained by failures in the two cities’ urban development. Resplendent symbolic images of the cities at their respective Olympic ceremonies were broadcast on television screens around the globe. Yet these symbolic images were only selective representations; their splendor failed to capture the grueling material realities of each city as experienced by many of its residents. The scenes of dilapidated illegal settlements, although antithetical to the grandeur of Athens and Beijing that the authorities would wish to publicize, are also an indispensable constituent of the real identities of the cities.

The conflict between the symbolic images and physical forms of a city, as this paper demonstrates through a comparative and transnational lens, is pertinent to cities as geographically, culturally, and politically divergent as Athens and Beijing. If one finds a comparison between Athens and Beijing to be adventurous at first, it becomes increasingly evident that this curious relationship between the symbolic and physical aspects of describing urban environments and narrating urban history unites the two cities. Symbolic representations, in both cases, functioned as political imperatives amidst epochal transitions. Of course, they served as cultural instruments that strengthened the nations’ identities in these times of upheaval. But they also concealed the truth of the city and ultimately
impeded its functionality. When symbolic meanings and grand narratives become overemphasized by urban planning authorities, the city risks marginalizing its residents and compromising its own livability.

Clearly, a city planned without regard for materiality can never prosper symbolically.

5 Boccia, “Aesthetic Convergences: Comparing Spectacular Key Audibles and Visuals of Athens and Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremonies,” 2268–70.
17 Papageorgiou, “Athens In Its Historical Setting,” 110.
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38,737 in Thriasio. See same pattern continued between 1991 and 2001, witnessing a population increase of 26,207 and 8,934, respectively from 1981 to 1991. Mesogeia's population rose by 26,207 and Thriasio's by 8,934. The urban area of Athens, from 552.9 hectares in 1879, almost quadrupled by 1920 (p 54). Industrial production in Piraeus began in the 1840s, even earlier than in Athens. In the 1880s, workers in Piraeus constituted 35 percent of all workers' population in Greece (pp 61–62). By 1920, 45,300 of the 297,176 residents in Athens and 24,600 of the 133,482 residents in Piraeus were workers, demonstrating an extremely large proportion of the working class in these two city centers (pp 54, 63).


See Leontidou, The Mediterranean City in Transition: Social Change and Urban Development, 72. The population increased from 453,042 in 1920 to 802,000 in 1928.


Romanos, “Illegal Settlements in Athens,” 143.

Romanos, “Illegal Settlements in Athens,” 147.


Romanos, “Illegal Settlements in Athens,” 142.


Romanos, “Illegal Settlements in Athens,” 144.

Romanos, “Illegal Settlements in Athens,” 140.


See Leontidou, The Mediterranean City in Transition: Social Change and Urban Development, 54, 61–63. Partly due to rapid industrialization, the population in the city of Athens increased from 65,499 in 1879 to 110,262 in 1889. The urban area of Athens, from 552.9 hectares in 1879, almost quadrupled by 1920 (p 54). Industrial production in Piraeus began in the 1840s, even earlier than in Athens. In the 1880s, workers in Piraeus constituted 35 percent of all workers' population in Greece (pp 61–62). By 1920, 45,300 of the 297,176 residents in Athens and 24,600 of the 133,482 residents in Piraeus were workers, demonstrating an extremely large proportion of the working class in these two city centers (pp 54, 63).


91 See Jun Wang, *Beijing Record: A Physical and Political History of Planning Modern Beijing*, 131. Along the way, concerns were raised about the financial cost of relocating the residential population and governmental institutions while also constructing new office buildings.


See Deng and Huang, “Uneven Land Reform and Urban Sprawl in China: The Case of Beijing,” 228. Of the total 15.65 square kilometers of land development in 1992, only 21.7 percent was utilized by business investment. In 1998, as the total area of development zones reached 46.94 square kilometers, the percentage increased to 39.6 but remained a low value.


See Deng and Huang, “Uneven Land Reform and Urban Sprawl in China: The Case of Beijing,” 228. In 1992 and 1998, the land expropriated from agriculture and incorporated into development zones respectively accounted for 22.8 and 63.9 percent of the total land development. This was equivalent to a total expropriation of 29.99 square kilometers of farmland in 1998.


Deng and Huang, “Uneven Land Reform and Urban Sprawl in China: The Case of Beijing,” 221.


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Illustrations
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