

URBAN SUSTAINABILITY: NOTES AND PARADIGMES ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL IMPROVEMENT OF PLACE

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Abstract

The proposals to be presented originate in a principally environmental prospect concerning the organization and the enforcement of the 'emerald necklace' of the Athenian metropolitan territory. They refer to the description of possible 'green porosity' of the Hellenic capital, to the way that an extended network of green urban corridors and parks could be organized. Nevertheless, this first organizational proposal may be invigorated by two additional ideas concerning a second project, a second proposal.

This second design effort refers to the need for active participation of the inhabitants of the Hellenic capital in a bottom-up approach to a dreamed environmental regeneration. An analogous approach was introduced in a diploma thesis in the School of Architecture N.T.U.A., a thesis under the irritating title 'Plato's Gardens,' concerning the organization of a collective urban agricultural area in the territory of Plato's Academy in Athens. This second paradigm clearly stated, besides its natural environmental accomplishment, that no landscape intervention in the Athenian territory could be historically and culturally neutral. This was a first, an additional crucial idea for our concept of the green Athenian porosity. On the contrary, analogous interventions could be culturally significant and present the possibility of multicultural references nowadays. This could be a second, additional significant idea concerning the socio-cultural porosity of the Athenian territory. Plato's collective gardening area could thus be offered not solely to native Greek inhabitants but also to immigrants or refugees installed in the vicinity of the historical territory of Plato's Academy.

Throughout post-Renaissance and neoteric Western history, landscape proposals in urban or peri-urban contexts were scarcely restricted to limited environmental and 'functional' denotational value. They were also empowered by symbolic references that reflected the cultural and political identities of the corresponding societies. Could we offer our present interventions analogous connotational meanings?

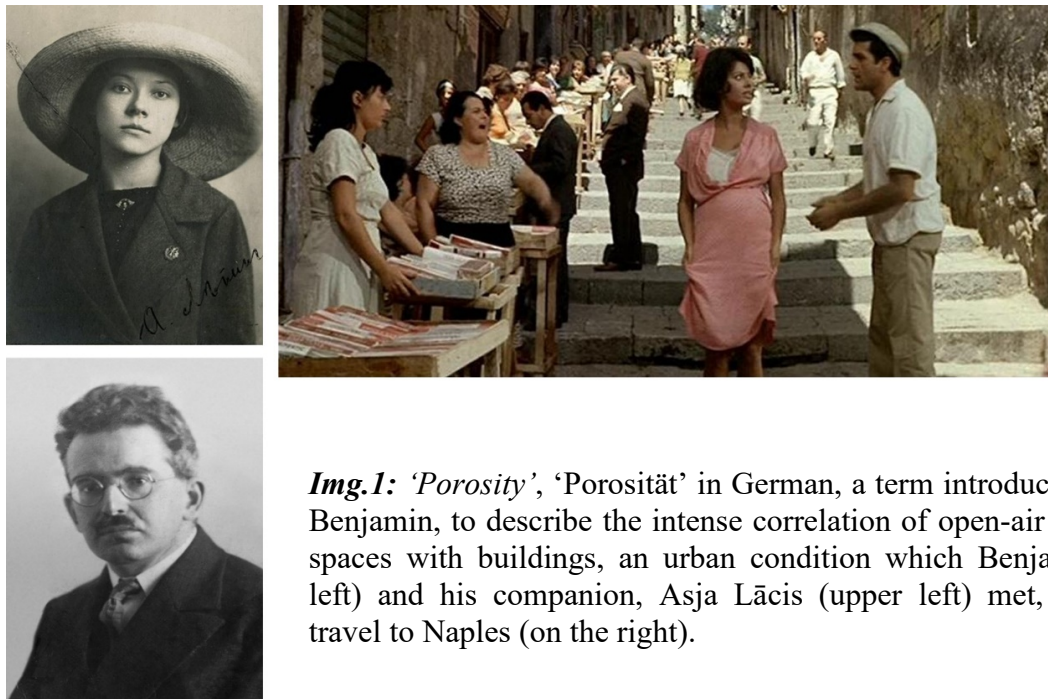
Keywords: Green Athenian porosity, Plato's Academy, Plato's Gardens, collective urban agriculture, urban multi-cultural co-existence and collaboration, socio-cultural porosity.

Ecological approaches of combined natural, cultural, and political validity

I shall begin my presentation with the statement that I shall refer to urban sustainability, to urban ecological approaches of combined natural, cultural, and political validity.

The proposals to be presented originate in a principally environmental prospect concerning the organization and the enforcement of the 'emerald necklace' of the Athenian metropolitan territory. 'Emerald necklace', a metaphoric description to which we shall repeatedly refer during our presentation. 'Emerald necklace' of the Athenian metropolitan territory, the description strongly refers to the possible 'green porosity' of the Hellenic capital, to the way that an extended network of green urban corridors and parks could be organized.

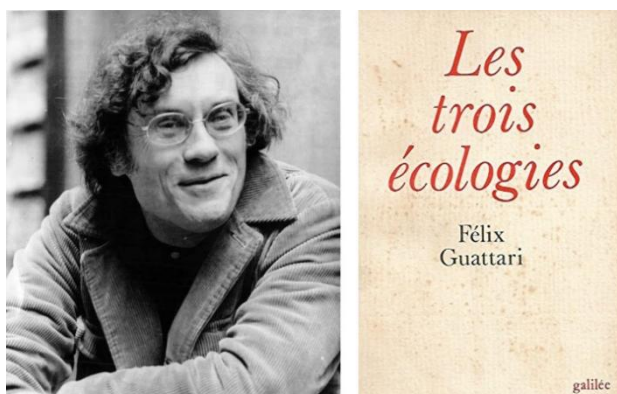
'Porosity', 'Porosität' in German, a term introduced by Walter Benjamin, to describe the intense correlation of open-air urban public spaces with buildings. In our case, the concept of porosity, of 'green porosity', is used to describe the correlation of urban hardscape formation with green urban landscape. 'Green porosity', a condition surely extremely important for the natural sustainability of cities (Buck-Morss, 1989 - Demetz, edit. 1986 – Moraitis, 2024a: pp.306-368).



Img.1: 'Porosity', 'Porosität' in German, a term introduced by Walter Benjamin, to describe the intense correlation of open-air urban public spaces with buildings, an urban condition which Benjamin (bottom left) and his companion, Asja Lācis (upper left) met, during their travel to Naples (on the right).

Nevertheless, in the initial usage of the term by Benjamin, porosity was strongly associated with the social and political importance of the exterior, open-air urban spaces that invade the interior of buildings. Porosity could thus be regarded as a material and social quality as well. Furthermore, it is in Félix Guattari's book *The Three Ecologies - Les Trois Écologies* (Guattari, 1989) that the author insisted on the idea that the ecological approach is not restricted to a natural-oriented tendency solely. It must be associated, furthermore, with a conceptual ecological approach, with the social conscience of the importance of ecosophic thinking (Drengson, 1999) and, even more, with a third ecological approach, that of political ecological volition.

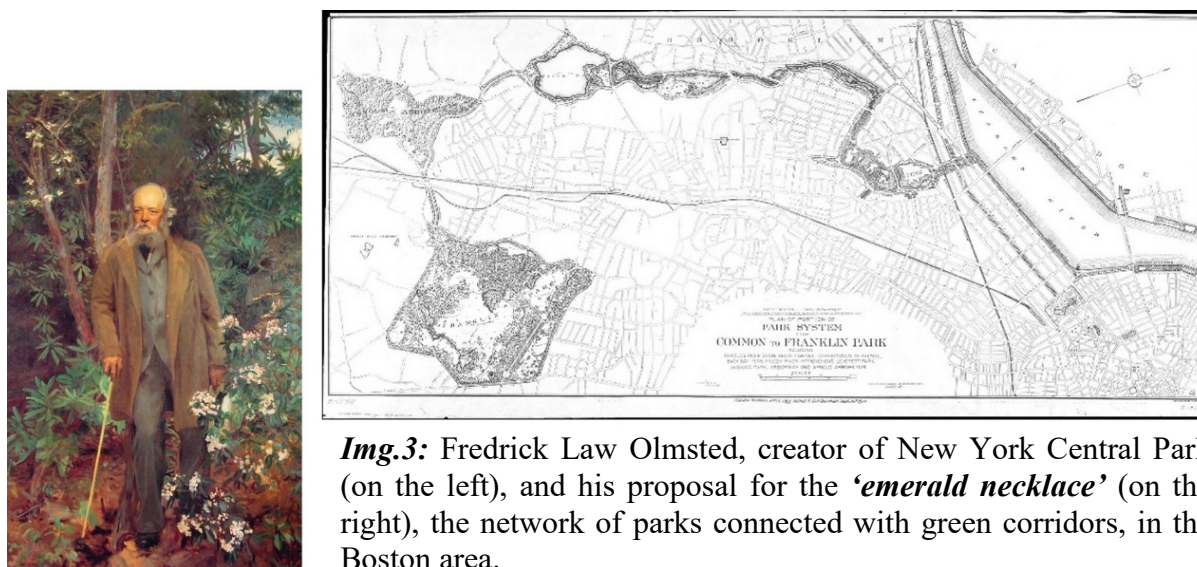
It is in this context that we shall strongly support the statement that we may not have urban sustainability by promoting material environmental improvement solely. We must extend our demand to cultural and political improvement, as well as cultural and political sustainability.



Img.2: Félix Guattari, in his book *The Three Ecologies - Les Trois Écologies*, emphasized that the ecological approach is not limited to a natural-oriented tendency alone.

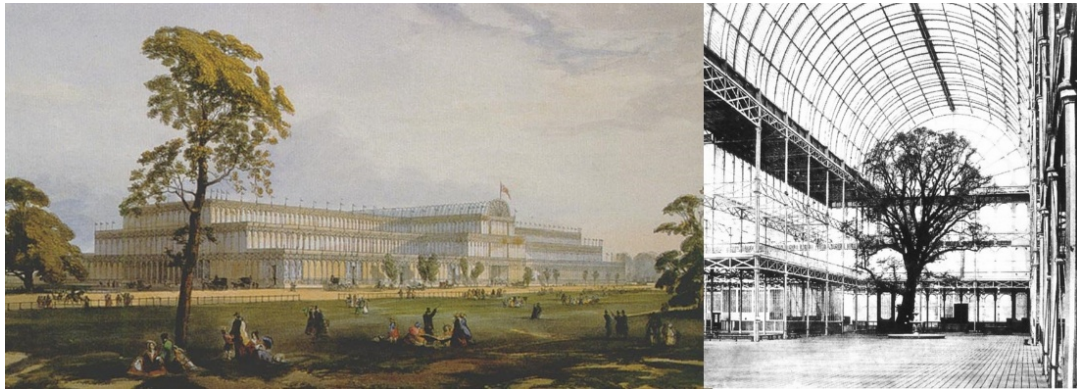
Interventions of functional approaches combined with the promotion of political identity

We have presented an approach that seems to express important previous paradigms of garden and landscape art, characterizing the urban transformation of important Western capital cities at the end of the 19th century. According to Fredrick Law Olmsted, creator of New York Central Park, positive environment and landscape formations in urban and peri-urban contexts must be considered as a matter of political demand, as a matter of the democratic amelioration of public life in the late 19th century (Beveridge - Rocheleau, 2005). His approach, expressed in many landscape and garden art projects, was intensively presented in his idea of the green enrichment of the Boston area. In this ambitious project, a green network was created, not a park solely, but a network of parks connected with green corridors, a green network metaphorically named ‘emerald necklace’; emeralds are precious stones of green colour.



Img.3: Fredrick Law Olmsted, creator of New York Central Park (on the left), and his proposal for the ‘*emerald necklace*’ (on the right), the network of parks connected with green corridors, in the Boston area.

Olmsted’s urban amelioration efforts are just a part of the 19th-century urban landscape interventions in the Western world. Big Western cities, for example, London or Paris, had to be environmentally transformed to express their ‘capital’, superior cultural and political quality, and to face the unbearable conditions of living in the quarters of the working-class settlements. To face those unbearable conditions, for example, the continuous epidemics, and in association with them, the political reactions of the impoverished citizens, governmental planning had to react. It was in this context that landscape and garden art reached the status of central cultural and political activities (Chadwick, 1966). In the late 19th century, England presented the formation of the first public parks, the Arboretum of Derby by John Claudius Loudon, and Birkenhead Park, the latter by the famous gardener Joseph Paxton. We must also mention Loudon’s proposal for a garden city, in the 1840s, forty years before Soria y Mata’s proposal, in 1882, and sixty years earlier than Ebenezer Howard’s proposal in 1902. Paxton, Joseph Paxton was also the creator of the Crystal Palace, a huge greenhouse in a huge urban park, in Hyde Park; a huge greenhouse, a cast-iron and plate-glass structure, that housed the Great Exhibition, the international exhibition of 1851 that had to promote the political, economic, and cultural status of the Great Empire, Queen Victoria’s Britain.



Img.4: The Great Exhibition, the international exhibition of 1851, was housed not in a regular 'hard structure' building, but in a huge greenhouse in the interior of a huge urban park. Landscape architecture seems to be culturally and politically central.



Img.5: The *Peterloo Massacre* (upper left), against impoverished protestors, took place at St Peter's Field, Manchester, on Monday, 16 August 1819. In his *Maps Descriptive of London Poverty* (upper right), Charles Booth offered, in 1889, a social mapping approach of the living conditions of the English capital's population. A mapping approach describing the lower classes' housing zones with black color.

Nevertheless, British splendor had to face the political reaction of the lower parts of society, the Peterloo protest and the Peterloo massacre of the protestors, to face the *Condition of the Working Class in England*, as described in the homonymous book of Friedrich Engels (Engels, 1987), or in Charles Booth's *Maps of Poverty*, or in Gustav Dore's engravings of the 'dark' *Pilgrimage to London*. It was in the British capital city that, in a Gothic horror novel by Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson, the honest Dr. Jekyll was transformed, during the night, into a criminal personality, Mr. Hyde (Stevenson. 2024). In an analogous dark, fictional voyage, in a metaphorical narration of urban agony, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* reached England (Stoker, 2008), bringing with him the plague (Moraitis, 2024b).

Was a landscape reaction a political reaction against those social calamities? In France, Napoleon III had to face urban and social deterioration. He had to face political reaction and repeated revolutionary movements. It was in this negative socio-political context that he had to react and support an urban reform organized and realized by his official Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, a radical urban renewal program that offered Paris a network of important parks.

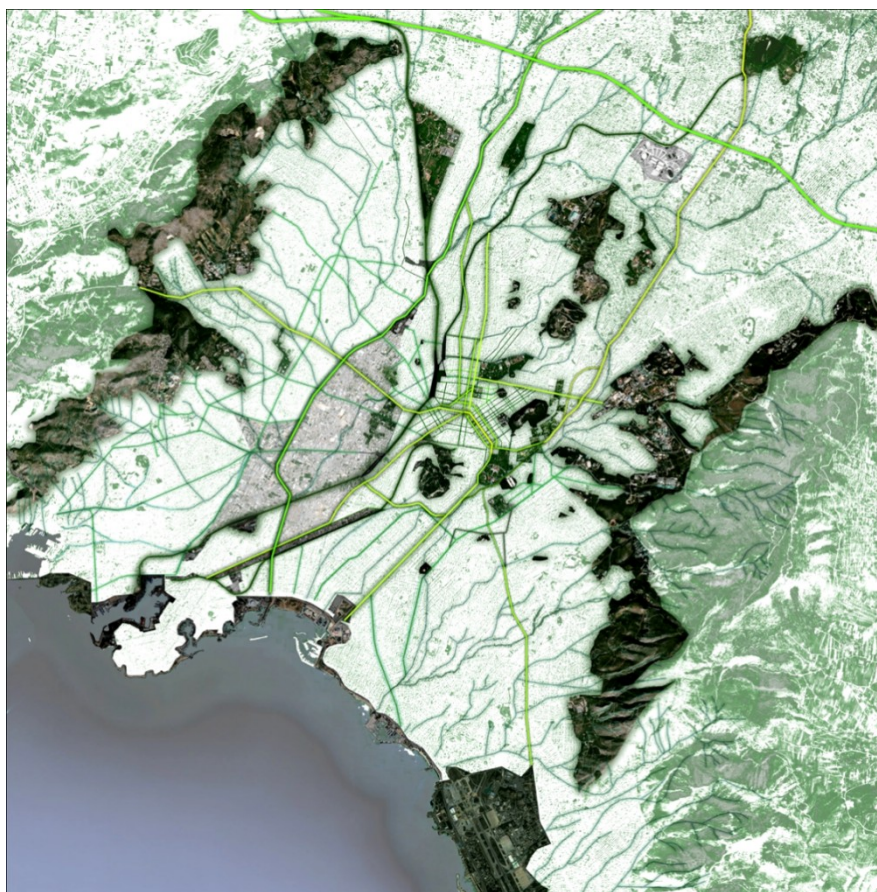


Img.6: In France, Napoleon III had to face urban and social deterioration, political reaction and repeated revolutionary movements (upper right, executed citizens during the Paris Commune). It was in this negative socio-political context that he had to react and support an urban reform organized and realized by his official Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (upper left, Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann), a radical urban renewal program, that offered Paris a network of important parks, as the Boulogne Park - *Le Bois de Boulogne* (bottom image).

Were the previously described landscape interventions in England and France, and in the United States as well, limited to functional, material transformations? Do they also possess a high cultural and political symbolic value (Howard, 1902 - Burlen, edit 1987)?

Athenian green porosity and its cultural and political, symbolic validity

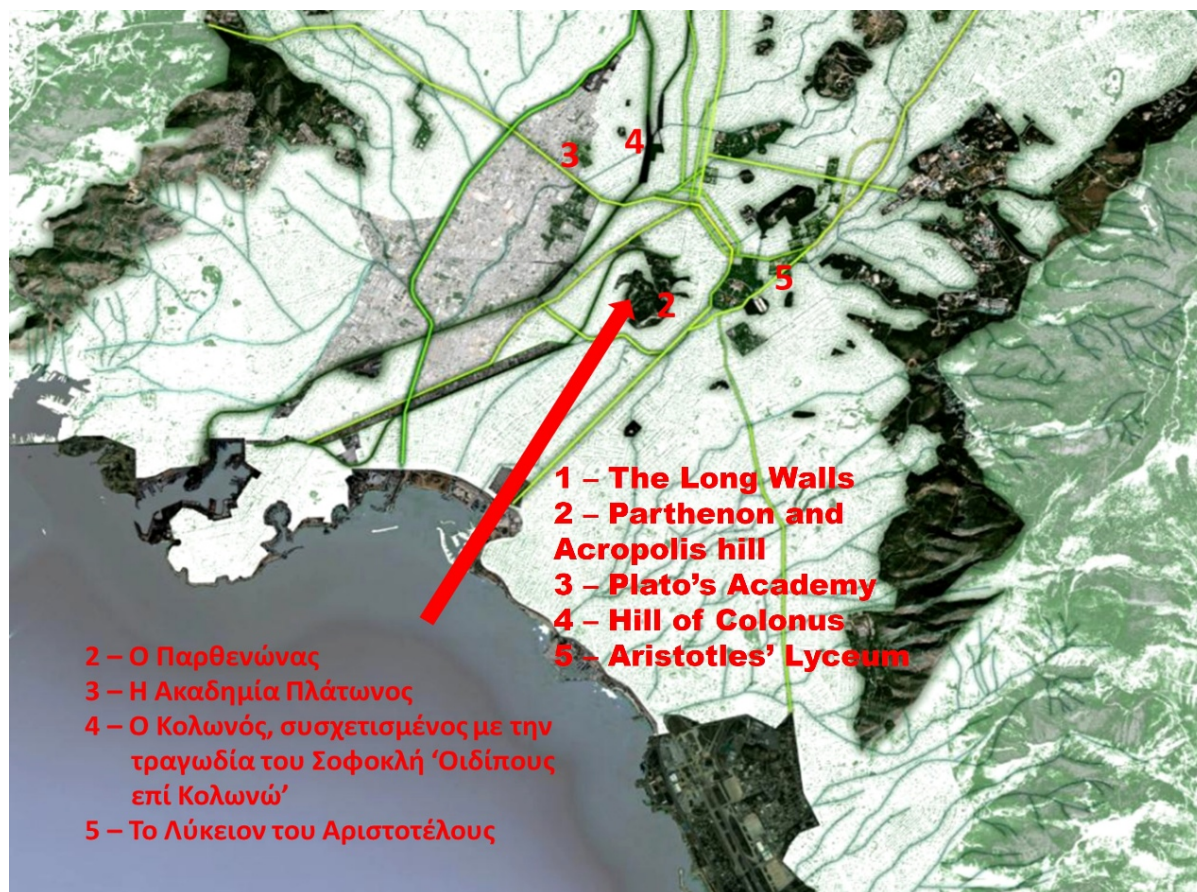
The proposals to be presented originate in a principal environmental prospect concerning the organization and the enforcement of the 'emerald necklace' of the Athenian metropolitan territory. They refer to the description of the possible 'green porosity' of the Hellenic capital, to the way that an extended network of green urban corridors and parks could be organized.



Img.7: The research program “Changing Characters and Policies in the Center of Athens and Piraeus,” organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change, proposed a network of green places, existing parks or open-air planted spaces that could be transformed to parks and could be interconnected with green lines, ‘green corridors’, green planted corridors.

The first of them was correlated with an extended research program carried out by the School of Architecture of N.T.U.A., a research program concerning the “Changing Characters and Policies in the Center of Athens and Piraeus,” that was organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change. In the context of this research program, we have tried to organize a network of green places, existing parks or open-air planted spaces that could be interconnected with ‘green lines, green corridors’, green planted corridors. Analogous green linear connecting places could be provided by the open-air urban railroad route that could be conceived as a linear extended urban garden, or by a planted network of streets, or, according to a proposal of high environmental validity, by the uncovering and re-naturalization of the numerous urban rivers and streams that have been covered during the recent history of the Athenian landscape. This last dreamy urban desire would surely offer, if

brought to reality, a radical climate amelioration of the complex of the Athenian basin. Nevertheless, the Athenian rivers and the streams are not solely material geographic elements. There, the ancient gods were coming down to feel the blessing of the running water, and the nymphs used to flaunt their charm.



Img.8: 'Landscape urbanism' in the case of the Athenian basin does not refer to its natural identity solely. It must also refer, emphatically,...

...to its cultural and political identity to all these important historical places (on the left)

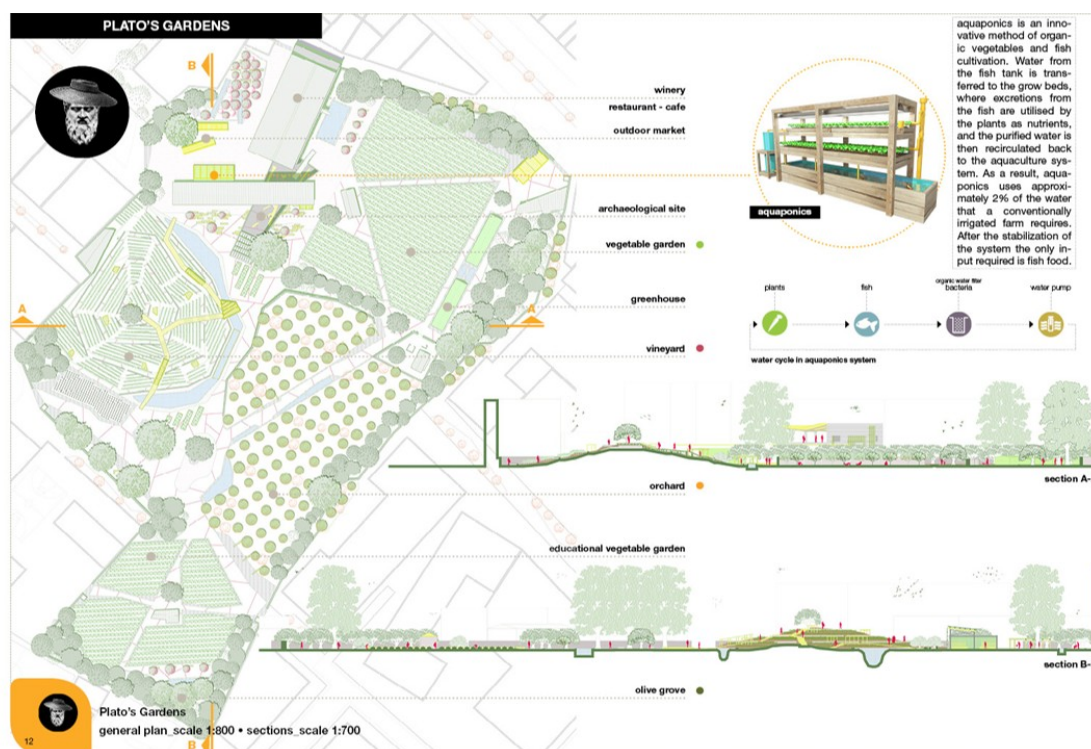
On this oneiric voyage, the contemporary visitor could be guided, visiting the Parthenon together with the ancient procession of Panathenaea, visiting together with Plato or Aristotle, Plato's Academy or Aristotle's Lyceum. Together with Oedipus, he could ask mercy from the gods on the nowadays strongly planted hill of Colonus. He could, our contemporary visitor, walk down to the Hippodamian Piraeus, to the first urban-designed port of universal history, using the ancient itinerary of the fortified Long Walls, today a possible planted corridor in the heart of the densely built city. I need to remember the Funeral Speech of Pericles. I take pride in this first description of the democratic regime. I feel proud of speaking a language related to the one Pericles spoke, and I would like to emphasize the sustainability of this pride, which is also linked to the environmental sustainability of my city. Athenian green porosity, the sustainability of the Athenian environment, must be associated with the cultural and political, symbolic validity of the Hellenic capital and its peripheral territory.



Img.9: Could we meet again nymphs at the Athenian Illisus River? Could we revitalize it again as natural and cultural landscape? The river Illisus and Stadion Bridge, ca. 1900 (bottom middle), the only nowadays un-canalized part of the bed of the river (upper right) and the ‘mummified’ part of it at the territory of Moschato (bottom right).

Landscape interventions and the socio-cultural porosity of the Athenian territory

Moreover, the previous first organizational proposal may be invigorated by two additional ideas concerning a second project, a second proposal.



Img.10: “Plato’s Gardens”: Green urban porosity and the formation of focal places of collective urban agriculture – a graduate diploma thesis in the School of Architecture NTUA, by Chr. Golemi.



Img.11: “Plato’s Gardens”: 3D descriptions of the gardens (on the left) and reference to the proposed hydroponic activity (on the right).

This second design effort refers to the need for active participation of the inhabitants of the Hellenic capital in a bottom-up approach to a dreamed environmental regeneration. An analogous approach was introduced in a diploma thesis at the School of Architecture N.T.U.A., a graduate thesis under the irritating title ‘Plato’s Gardens,’ concerning the organization of a collective urban agricultural area in the territory of Plato’s Academy in Athens (Moraitis, 2024a: pp.359-363). This second paradigm clearly stated, besides its natural environmental accomplishment, that no landscape intervention in Athenian territory could be historically and culturally neutral. This was an additional crucial idea for our concept of the green Athenian porosity. We shall insist on the fact that collective urban agriculture, socially active urban landscape interventions, could be culturally important and could present, moreover, nowadays, the possibility of multicultural references; this could be an additional significant idea, concerning the socio-cultural porosity of the Athenian territory. Plato’s collective gardening area could thus be offered not solely to native Greek inhabitants but also to immigrants or refugees installed in the vicinity of the historical territory of Plato’s Academy.

Were the previous proposals associated with neoteric urban landscape interventions or with present proposals solely?

Throughout post-Renaissance and neoteric Western history, landscape proposals in urban or peri-urban contexts were scarcely restricted to limited environmental and ‘functional’ denotational value. They were also empowered by symbolic references that reflected the cultural and political identities of the corresponding societies. Could we offer our present interventions analogous connotational meanings? In Renaissance Italy, Tuscan gardens reinterpreted Roman and Greek antiquity, and the redesign of the Capitoline Hill, the Piazza del Campidoglio, symbolized the papal reestablishment of Roman grandeur. In the Baroque Versailles Gardens, the place formation glorified the royal sovereignty of Louis XIV, the Sun King – Apollo, in Stowe Gardens of Britain, the landscape architecture referred to the British political quality in comparison to the ancient Greek political paradigm. In this overall context,

the American Boston park network, described by Frederick Law Olmsted as democratic, as a political right of the urban population, must not be regarded as culturally isolated. The difference between Olmsted's statement and the previous historically connotational, symbolic approach of the previous landscape intervention paradigms was not a difference between connotational and non-connotational, solely denotational approaches, but a difference between the exact socio-political orientation of those approaches.

Closer to us, the important paradigm of the Parisian Les Halles re-design projects, Bernard Tschumi's awarded competition proposal, as well as the proposal by the OMA architects' team, presented not solely environmental landscape interventions, not even functional proposals restricted to the use of Les Halles Park. They, moreover, presented proposals related to the historical background of the place and of the history of the landscape and architectural design. Both previous proposals, presented in the Les Halles International Architectural Competition, insisted on the newly emerging tendencies of the cultural and expressive theory of the era. They both insisted on the newly emerging tendencies of post-structural theory and, in many ways, on the denial of the all-encompassing, stable, everlasting meta-narratives. Nevertheless, we need to create new structures of expression and important cultural and political narratives, bringing into contact our "archeology of knowledge" and our present cultural and political identity in our urban formations.

Conclusive remark

It is in this context that the previous proposals concerning the Athenian metropolitan area, and especially the territory of Plato's Academy and the newly formed multi-ethnic and multicultural formation of the city, may present interesting paths towards urban sustainability: environmental, cultural, and political sustainability.

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