
THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN THE CITY OF ATHENS DURING THE INTER-WAR PERIOD (1922-1940)

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This paper focuses on the relation between the economic, political and social integration of migrants and refugees, the re-organization of the state, the legislative modernization and the economic policy during the interwar period in Greece. In 1922 Greece, a state of 5 million inhabitants received a wave of refugees, the Greeks of Diaspora from Asia Minor, of such a scale (1.5 millions) that it overturned every population balance in the country. In this context Athens rapid urbanization created economic, social and governance challenges while simultaneously strained city's infrastructure. The key question of the research is in what different ways and procedures a city can be transformed under emergency conditions, such as that of the massive inflow of refugees and immigrants. The paper interprets and works with historical analysis, focusing on policies, economic structures, planning policies and the actual physical urban transformation of Athens, combining methods from architecture and economics. It examines how the new urban structure of Athens adjusted in order to redress social, economic and urban imbalances. Based on comparative analysis of Athens urban resilience we can identify concepts that will be used to begin to understand case studies of other cities in the modern era.

Keywords

resilience, Athens, refugees, urban fabric, state policies, construction industry

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

The research of the transformation of Athens, the policies and procedures followed in order to create a resistant city to the shocking conditions of the inter-war period, is approached by a multidisciplinary direction which emphasizes aspects relating to interactions between demographic, economic and urban changes. Based on an interdisciplinary approach, which combines methods from architecture and economic, this article seeks to discuss the capacity of the city to survive and to adapt to radical changes. From the understanding of the ways the city of Athens responded to a crisis situation, such of that of the massive population movement during the inter-war period, raises the question if a city can develop those mechanism and resilience approaches which will make it able to cope, to adapt and finally to transform itself after a plausible hazard.

The article opens with a historical survey of the major socio-economic and demographic development in the period under review. In order to open the door for interpretation of national integration or polarization of the moving populations, section 2 discusses how the state policies dealt the massive urbanization and the intensive urban migration. Section 3, the core of the paper, examines the effects of economic and demographic changes on urban structure of Athens. It begins with the analysis of the development of the city center and the commercialization of housing. The exploration of the urban development of the city's periphery and the impact of the refugees and internal migrant's inflow on the massive city sprawl follows. This paper closes with a discussion of the framework developed in order to understand the resilience of Athens and the concepts that can be used to understand case studies of other cities.

GREEK INTERWAR PERIOD: THE DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT, THE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE WORKS

THE PERIOD AFTER THE GREAT CATASTROPHE AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

The Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922 started when the Greek army reached the outskirts of Istanbul, which was still under the Allied occupation. Instead of the Constantinople, the English protecting their interests in control of Middle East's oil, turned the Greeks against Smyrna and during the expedition abandoned them to their fate. The Greek military expedition failed, and in the summer of 1922, its retreat quickly turned into a rout. It was the prelude of the Asia Minor catastrophe.¹ In September, the Greek headquarters in Smyrna were evacuated and a day later the Turkish army entered the city, launching a massacre of the city's Christian population and setting the city's Christian sections ablaze. Thousands met a terrible death on the quays of Smyrna in full view of an international fleet anchored just outside its port. After a lot of negotiations between Greeks and Turks a massive population movement stemmed from the "Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations" signed at Lausanne Treaty on July 24, 1924². The Anatolian debacle, known as the Asia Minor Catastrophe, gathered for the first time the majority of Greek populations within the national borders while the leadership was forced to abandon its cosmopolitan and expansionist ambitions³, known as the "Great Idea".

The arrival of more than a million refugees was a tremendous challenge for the Greek state. This was a massive influx that took place in the aftermath of a devastating military defeat, with the country financially exhausted after many years of continuous war.⁴ The number of refugees amounted to 1.200.000 and represented about 20% of the country's population. Their geographical distribution and settlement was based on their origin. 53% of Greek refugees had urban origins and 47% rural.⁵ The geographical origin also determined their social origin: self-employed representatives, craftsmen and workers arrived from major cities of Turkey, bourgeois landowners from small towns and farmers from the countryside. The wealthier refugees brought funds saved from the catastrophe, crafts previously unknown in Greece and they were all determined to succeed, even in professions never undertaken before.⁶



FIGURE 1 Smyrna citizens trying to reach the Allied ships during the Smyrna fire, 1922. The photo had been taken from the launch boat of a US battleship
Source: “Greek genocide”, accessed March 13, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_genocide

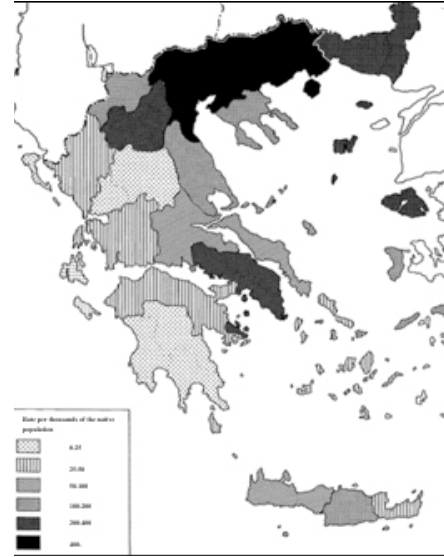


FIGURE 2 The distribution plan of the refugees during the interwar period
Clogg, Richard. *A Concise History of Greece*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 130

The bulk of the refugees created a great demographic pressure and offered an abundance of cheap labour force. At the same time the worker immigration control implemented by the USA after the global recession of 1921 and the failure of the land reform program contributed to this turmoil and caused a massive movement of internal migrators. The forced rallying of the Greeks within the boundaries of the Greek state paved the way for the implementation of a highly ambitious modernization effort that altered the nature of the Greek state in fundamental ways.⁷

ECONOMIC POLICIES AND THE RISE OF THE INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

The period between 1928 and 1932 stands out as a time during which the modernization drive gained substantial momentum. Under the premiership of Venizelos, the Greek government sought to implement an extremely ambitious internal restructuring program turning the state into a much more forceful and proactive economic actor.⁸ But Greece’s resources were limited and therefore extensive investments were required.

The European economic recession during the decade 1920 and 1930 and the inability for large profitable investment led foreign capital to Greece, a country which had great capital needs after the Asia Minor disaster. Foreign capital flew in in many forms such as loans for the solution of the refugee problem, funding in public works, loans to private enterprises and creation of independent manufacturers.⁹ External borrowing was necessary in order to address the refugee problem, the military reorganization of the country and the economic growth, which was not possible without external assistance. According to the economic policy of Venizelos, the constant external borrowing was the only way in which the Greek state could finance large development projects.¹⁰ For the implementation of his ambitious program, Venizelos took out from 1928 to 1931 four major loans, which were granted in enslaving conditions for Greece. The country’s economy deteriorated dramatically. Revenues collapsed and the external debt reached the 150% of GDP.¹¹ In 1932 Greece not being able to pay its debt obligations declared bankruptcy, which terminated the era of high external borrowing but solidified even more the state interventionism and the commercial protection policy on import substitution.¹²

After the crisis the mobilization of resources for industrialization based on the domestic market was so great that even foreign capital turned to Greece to take part in the development of this unique situation. The economic stabilization, which resulted in the monetary stabilization and the consolidation of the banking system, was the main argument that convinced the foreign investors to invest in Greece. The market development and the positive investment climate in Greece, attracted foreign private capital.¹³ The inflow of foreign capital was facilitated by Greek governments with high interest rates policy, three or four times higher than the rates in western countries. While European rates were falling because of the international crisis, in Greece they were raising. The high interest rates and the extremely favourable capital exploitation conditions underlay the foreign capital inflow to the country.¹⁴ This meant that corporate profits were kept relatively high and that the country was facing phenomena of excessive capital supply which led to capital inflation.¹⁵ The mobilization of the industrialization and that of the domestic production structures was mainly due to the foreign capital accumulation.

Greek capitalism depended on the international capitalism for much of its funding. The recession of the international system contributed to an introverted development. As a dependent agro-commercial economy it was forced to become a relatively self-sustaining industrialization and development. The Greek economy turned to itself and sought to exploit to the utmost the domestic resources for its development. Geographically it was doomed to assemble all its forces within the country's borders.¹⁶ Liberal economy seemed outdated, and thus more centralized economic management forms were employed, with the state acquiring a prominent role. In 1933 Greek economy showed an impressive recovery that lasted until the end of the 1930s. However, the recovery didn't solve the economic problems of the country and so the state efforts turned to the examination and adoption of a new development model.¹⁷

The government intervened by imposing a series of protectionist policies. This program provided expropriations of land for industrial use, certain tax exemptions on industrial shares, tariff exemptions on imported capital machinery, etc.¹⁸ The capitalist growth due to the state intervention measures and reform along with the favourable ground for capital accumulation, created by the "national clustering" of 1922, exceeded all previous records. Industrial production increased during 1921-1931 by 80%.¹⁹ Due to the protectionism of the domestic market the total country's external trade was limited and the foreign trade balance was better equilibrated.²⁰ The high growth rates of Greek economy and especially of industry led to a rapid increase of direct investment in industry.

THE FOREIGN CAPITAL AND THE GREAT URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Important progress was made in order to address the issue of infrastructure network projects, which ravaged the capital since its foundation. Attention was focused on the perennial issues of water supply and sewerage, provision of telephone services, road-building, public transport and the development of urban parklands. These problems, for the most part, were resolved by large-scale economic and technical contracts with foreign companies that were drawn up in the years between 1924 and 1930.²¹ Foreign direct investments in infrastructure were particularly important in interwar Athens. Major works in several services and utilities networks were based on the contracts between the Greek public sector and the foreign capitalists and investors.²² One of the first was the assignment of a contract between the Greek state and the Bank of Athens, in collaboration with the Athens water company, to proceed with the relevant water supply works. The following year the Greek government and a group of Greek bankers who collaborated with the English firm Power and Traction Finance Company Ltd. reached an agreement which gave them the concession to generate and distribute electricity in the Athens area, as well as control of the tram and local rail services. In 1930 contracts were signed with the German company Siemens & Halske to cover telephone communications.²³ In the next few years British and American capital vied for road-building and other infrastructure projects, and by 1927 the British Commercial Attheche was expressing concern at the scale of foreign lending to Greece.²⁴ These contract assignments had as a result to further deepen country's dependence on international capital.

STATE POLICIES AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION

MASSIVE URBANIZATION AND INTENSIVE HUMAN MIGRATION

Greece by 1920, almost doubled both its territories and population. On the one hand, land redistribution, which took on really massive proportions, expropriated 1.724 large estates and settled 130.000 landless families.²⁵ On the other, the arrival of refugees and the movement of the internal migrants created an intense urbanization in Greece. In 1928 when population movements stopped, the distribution of Greek urban population was formed as follows: locals 39%, refugees 27.7% and internal migrants 33.3%.²⁶

In 1907 the urban complex of Athens numbered 250.000 inhabitants. In 1920, their number had surpassed the 450.000, while the census of 1928 showed 802.000 inhabitants. In 1940, moreover, the complex of the city exceeded the 1.2 million inhabitants. These impressive population increase, especially considering the rate and the short period of time at which it occurred, made it unbearable for the country's economy but also for the local communities to deal.²⁷

Athens urban explosion was not solely due to the refugees. The very rapid average annual growth rate of 7.4%, was created 4.4% by the refugees and 3.0% by native populations. It seemed that the populations of the poorest provincial cities turned to capital for better job prospects, as the safety valve of transatlantic migration had closed for ever.²⁸ Athens grew thanks to these marginalized populations, who sought for work. The urbanization factors had ceased to be political and became mainly economic.

	1920	1928	1940
Greece population	5.022.000,00	6.205.000,00	7.335.000,00
Athens population	453.000,00	802.000,00	1.124.000,00
% of Greece population	8,19	12,93	15,30
% of Greek urban population	40,15	43,30	46,50
% average annual capital population growth rate		7,30	2,80

TABLE 1 Greek Urbanization (1920-1940) ΓΣΥΕ (1930,1939), ΕΣΥΕ και Στατιστικές Επετηρίδες της Ελλάδος, 1963, 1976, 1985.

SOCIAL, URBAN AND ECONOMIC POLARIZATION

The contrast between the New Lands and Old Greece was accentuated by the establishment of the refugee populations. An opposition which however, overcame geographical constraints and became a key element for the social and political division of the country.²⁹ Local land conflicts reinforced ethnic polarization between refugees and natives. The presence of the refugees was considered as a potential source of risks for the social status. The ruling classes feeling the threat of the dangerous classes withdrew to their exclusive neighbourhoods.³⁰ Intense and informal social divisions were developed in urban space and were expressed by the urban polarization between the centre and the periphery of Athens city. The upper class and the bourgeois dominated the central areas, while the refugees and the lower-working class were settled on the outskirts of the city.³¹ In the meanwhile the economic growth constituted a dramatic consequent of the moving populations and masses. The methods chosen by the authorities to assist the refugees and the moving populations to adapt to the country's economic conditions contributed to a rapid growth of small companies, independent craftsmen and tradesmen. In this way the Greek economy structure was determined by a process of economic polarization between big business and the plethora of small workshops.³² The economic polarization found response to a kind of formal and informal economic polarization. Greek government and operators not only recognized but also directly and actively supported this kind of economy.

URBAN CITY STRUCTURE AND HOUSING PRACTICES

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY CENTER AND THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF HOUSING

The organized central city sections constituted an exception to the entire Athenian built environment. They were built mostly by the private initiative and located near the palace, which remained purely an urban area filled with embassies, government staffs, offices, hotels, expensive shops and hospitals, surrounded by houses of the wealthy upper classes. The lower classes were excluded from these neighbourhoods. The Greek bourgeoisie was particularly sensitive to social segregation and tended to be located at great distance and optical isolation from the refugee and working class neighbourhoods.³³

In comparison with the first twenty years of the twentieth century the construction activity in interwar Athens was clearly bigger of that during the years 1910-1921. It is estimated that the average annual number of new buildings was 508, while during the period 1922-1939 was 2028. Specifically in the 1930s the average annual number of new buildings reached the number of 2380.³⁴ A series of measures favored private residential development and particularly the multi-storey building. They quickly dominated the new building activity and experienced an unprecedented growth when the housing legislation regulated the architectural characteristics and the state of ownership of high-rise buildings. The involvement of high-rise buildings in the new housing stock of Athens increased from 3% in 1928 to 14.2% in 1937, or 13% and 31% respectively of the new building number.³⁵

	1 STOREY HOUSES	2 STOREY HOUSES	3 STOREY HOUSES	MULTISTOREY HOUSES
1928	70,00%	20,00%	7,00%	3,00%
1937	65,80%	12,60%	7,40%	14,20%

TABLE 2 The structure of the new housing stock in Athens 1928-1937

The first five-storey and six-storey apartment buildings were built in central aristocratic areas destined for the high incomes. They were created in accordance with the requirements of modern architecture, offering modern amenities, constructed by expensive building materials. During the 1920s, multi-storey apartment buildings were built exclusively by the upper class, and only since 1932 the middle class began to enter this type of housing market. They were occupied and financed till then by funds of wealthy locals and expatriates capital investors. The intensification of the expatriates flow in Greece after the Asia Minor Catastrophe functioned as an essential factor in the development of the phenomenon of multi-storey buildings reconstruction in Athens after 1922, in the sense that the expatriates returning to Greece faced a double problem, on the one hand their housing rehabilitation and, on the other, the safe investment of their capital.³⁶

The general context of Athens urbanization favoured the trade activity in the building industry. The residential capitalism created new business opportunities. The profit from the construction process aroused from the best usage of the property location, the low wages of the workforce and the exploitation of the increased demand for modern housing in the city.³⁷ Opportunities for speculation were also offered by the looseness of the building and planning legislation, the few restrictions, the possibility of unlimited building construction, the tax exemption and especially the urgent need of housing of the constantly increasing population of the capital city.

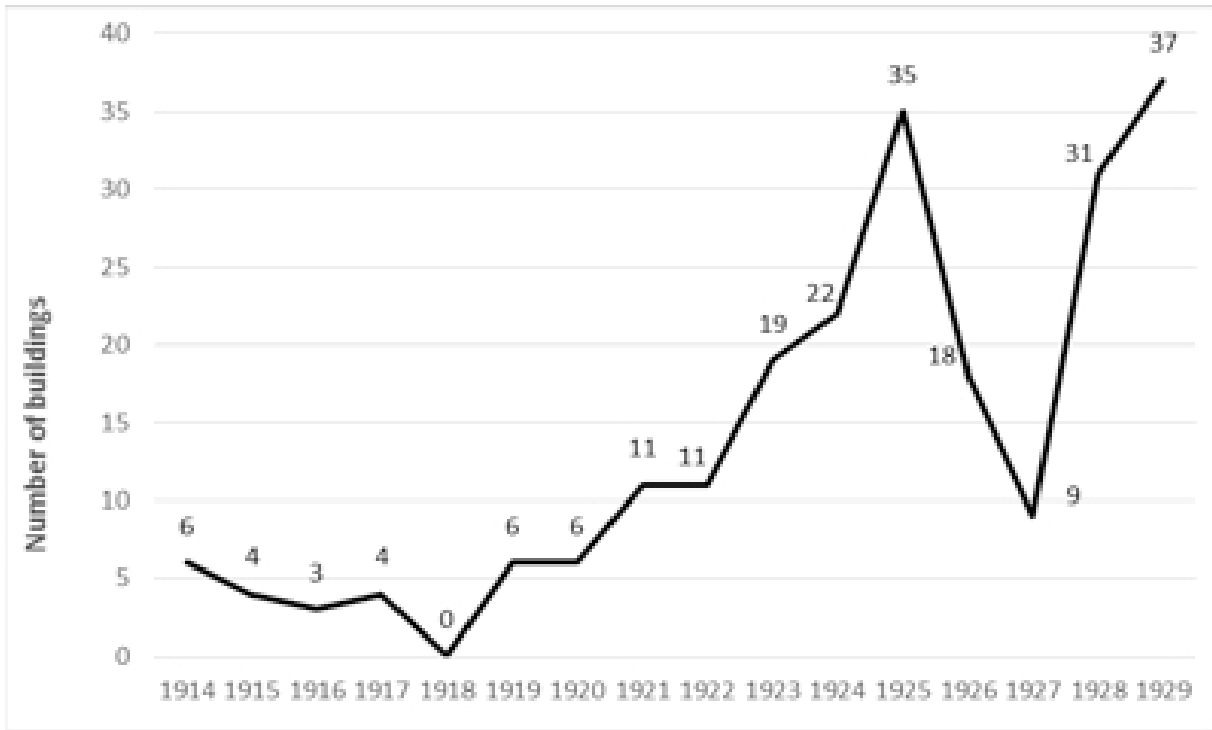


FIGURE 3 Development of the number of multi-story buildings (1914-1929) Rigas, M. “Νομοθεσία –Στατιστική”, Μεγάλη Εγκυκλοπαίδεια, τόμος ΙΔ [“Legislation –Statistics” in Great Encyclopaedia, Volume XIV], 118

THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY’S PERIPHERY AND THE IMPACT OF THE REFUGEE INFLOW ON THE MASSIVE CITY SPRAWL

The urban expansions at the periphery expressed by the garden cities, the refugee settlements and the illegal housing of the lower classes, dominated as the most practical and effective tool for controlling the large scale urbanization. On the one hand, the expansion process of the bourgeoisie from the city center to the outskirts of Athens followed the morphological mode of “garden city” planning concept, and on the other, the settlement of the refugee and migrant masses was distracted from the city plan due to available land, but mainly in accordance with the general policies for better control and prevention of possible social unrest.

The “garden cities” were not only born of wealth and power, but also of the influence exercised by the bourgeois in planning legislation and in city’s infrastructure. The bourgeois and later the middle class controlled almost all land in the city centre and directed their residential dispersion in areas with better infrastructure. The bourgeois congregated tightly both in garden cities and in apartment buildings, excluding financially and with urban rules, other social groups.³⁸At the same time the work for the refugees’ settlement was huge. Number of foreign charitable organisations rushed to help. In 1922 the Greek government founded the Fund for Refugee Assistance (FRA) of which the operation could be considered as the first state housing policy. In 1924 the rehabilitation of refugees was regulated by the Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC), a typically autonomous supranational organization, but operated under the direct supervision of the League of Nations in agreement with the Greek government. The funds were channelled to the comprehensive, definitive and irreversible rehabilitation of the refugees,³⁹ which was compulsory realized under the pressure of the urgency of the situation and organized in an empirical and arbitrary manner.

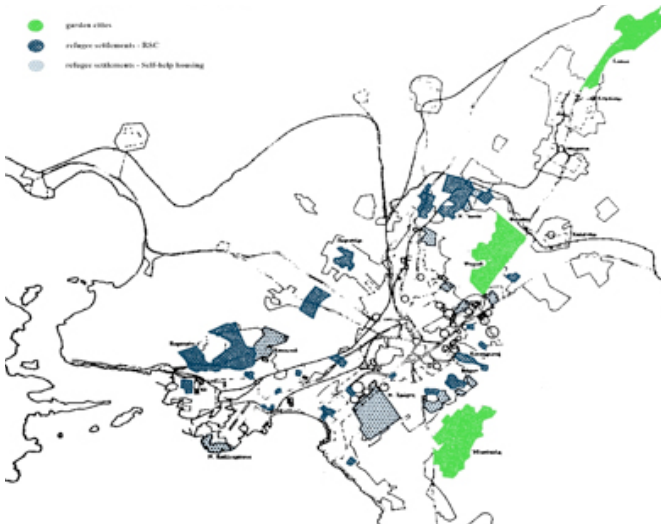


FIGURE 4 Refugee settlements, self-help housing and garden cities 1922-1940. Leontidou, Lila. *Πόλεις της σιωπής, εργατικός εποικισμός της Αθήνας και του Πειραιά 1909-1940*. [Cities of silence. Working-class colonization of urban space, Athens and Piraeus 1909-1940]. Athens: ETVA, 1989, 208

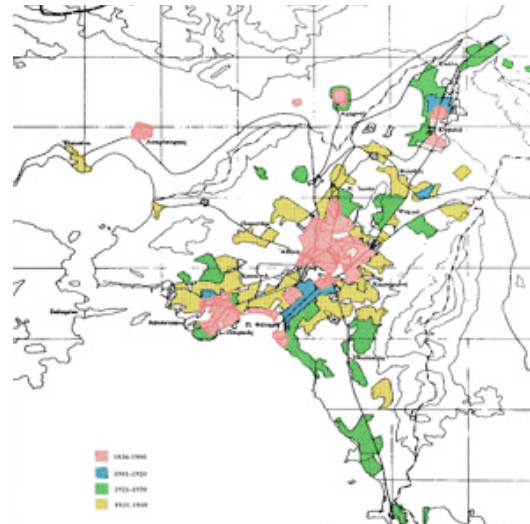


FIGURE 5 Expansion of the city plan, 1900-1940 Leontidou, Lila. *Πόλεις της σιωπής, εργατικός εποικισμός της Αθήνας και του Πειραιά 1909-1940*. [Cities of silence. Working-class colonization of urban space, Athens and Piraeus 1909-1940]. Athens: ETVA, 1989, 207

The need for immediate gratification of the mandatory housing needs of the refugee populations led to a radical change of urban policy. The main concern was the immediate housing restoration and not the proper urban planning.⁴⁰ The trend towards the scattered residential development, which later on was generalized by the working class of the city, began in 1924, when RSC decided not to build in the city centre, but to continue to create “satellite” communities on the outskirts. In other words, the exclusion and the geographical separation of refugees was premeditated, wilful, intentional and designed by the RSC, the State and by the initiators of the “garden cities”.⁴¹ It is noteworthy that the state policy for the housing rehabilitation of the refugees in Athens, didn’t turn to the reconstruction of high rise buildings in the city centre, but preferred the establishment of settlements on the city extension close to the temporary locations of the refugees,⁴² so as to ensure the isolation of the refugees in order to avoid social and political turmoil of the accumulation of unemployed, homeless and dissatisfied populations.

The housing policy of the interwar period created two categories of solutions, the designed refugee settlements by the RSC and the self-help housing areas, a usually illegal method. Self-help housing was a method that essentially exempted State from the full responsibility for settling the refugees since land was granted for free along with building permission, technical supervision and a small financial support.⁴³ There were two types of self-help housing, the poor refugees who built slums and the more affluent, who were settled in more central areas where they purchased the land from the RSC.⁴⁴

While a great part of the refugee population was settled, many internal migrants were facing housing problem, which they also tried to solve with self-help housing. Equally effective seemed to be the illegal building that eventually was generalized with the tolerance of the State. On the city limits and outside of it, segmented private ownership land was illegally sold. The demand for cheap land resulted in the intensification of the illegal segmentation and sale of the land and in the illegal building around the city plan limits and outside the refugee settlements.⁴⁵ The working classes bought small parcels of which the ownership was legal while the use for residence was illegal. The land transactions expanded in areas where building was prohibited. The legalization of these illegal buildings constituted one of the main ways to integrate the lower classes.⁴⁶ Thereby the housing problem was treated inexpensively, without the social and technical infrastructure, while simultaneously relieved the social and political turmoil that caused the homelessness.

When small capital served the housing sector, the development of small property and the proliferation of small, cheap and unhealthy buildings was inevitably favoured. The absolute need for building acquisition led to the construction of mostly illegal buildings without specific typology, street plan and hygiene conditions.⁴⁷

This intense housing and building activity ensured the expansion of the city and strengthened the regime of the unregulated and uncontrollable development. The financial facilities that were given to building construction during the great crisis of housing were not combined with any urban program but simply aimed to increase the building number.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper showed that Athens rapid urbanization during inter-war period created economic, social and governance challenges while simultaneously strained city infrastructure and housing problem. The state, economic and social actors, with their different visions and goals, in parallel with the development of the city, demonstrated the complexity of relationships that exists between the built environment and the social and economic context that allows the achievement of what we call today a resilience process. In this sense the city achieved to adapt and develop through the urgent and shocking conditions that the massive refugee and migrant's inflow caused. The government policies both in the field of economy with the foreign loans, the financial facilities and the creation of the informal economy, and also in the building sector with the settlement policies of social groups, the housing measures and the tolerance of illegal building, were closely related to the city development and they largely affected the social, economic and urban context.

This paper intent was an attempt to understand the different forces and their search of meeting their needs, fighting for the city space, within the context of Athens during the inter-war period. In a crisis situation, people require interventions that bolster their ability to overcome the worst impacts of the crisis and return to a path of sustainable prosperity. Athens resilience represents a paradigm shift in the response to the crisis by combining economic and urban development capacities. In conclusion, the use of economic and architecture tools can provide the disaster recovery from the demographic forces and the economic and social conditions that a crisis can cause.

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