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Blurring boundaries: the Mall and the City

Abstract

This paper will focus on the evolution of shopping malls in Athens. It will try to describe the two basic dominant typologies of Greek shopping malls and it will investigate the multiple and controversial factors of the spatial and social context within which malls are located. The paper will argue that a decade ago events such as the 2004 Olympic Games have created a spatial background suitable for locating oversized boxes (the typical suburban type) while the degradation of the city centre has created a spatial background for the development of the urban mall connected to the public transport system.

In both cases malls are trying to create urban substitutes by providing multiple cultural events, various entertainments, by constructing certain urban ambiances and by trying to associate with the landmarks of the city. In this context a hybrid situation is being constructed where the boundaries between the mall and city life become indiscernible.

Keywords: Shopping mall typology, Athens, urban conflicts

1.Introduction

Shopping malls have appeared in Greece quite late compared with the rest of Europe. The first systematic analyses and market researches exploring the capabilities of the Greek market have been conducted in 1998 by Sonae Sierra, one of the world leaders in shopping mall development. That market research had argued that Greece presented limitless opportunities for shopping mall developments for two main reasons.

The first referred to the fact that in 2004 the mean shopping centre floor area was 26 sqm per 1000 inhabitants considerably lower than the respective European mean of 250sqm per 1000 inhabitants. In 2003 apart the usual superstores in the Athens city centre, there was only one complex which could be described as a shopping complex. Escape Centre Ilion was a rather small in size shopping centre, comprising shopping and entertainment. One has to consider that Athens has a population of 4 million people; therefore it's obvious that the results of the market research were more than accurate.

The second reason was attributed to the Greek culture which was considered to create most favorable conditions. A. Portela, managing director of Sonae Sierra, in an interview in 2004 (Theodoratos, 2004) was quoted to say that “ *Greeks use to spent even more than they can afford and they like to spent time out of their house socializing*”. For Portela Greeks seemed to be the ideal clients for what he called the “modern shopping centers” which combine shopping and entertainment.

2. Location makes the difference or the post Olympic kick off

The 2004 Olympic Games took place in Athens. For the efficient operation of the Games new

infrastructure was constructed to provide sport halls to accommodate the various venues and other buildings for supportive services.

Contrary to the dominant model of the Olympic Games which tends to concentrate all activities and facilities to one location for safety, control and ease of visitors' access to the various events, the 2004 Olympic games masterplan has been structured as a beady ring spread across the city (Fig.1). The various locations were highly accessible by both car and public transport from all over the metropolitan area of Athens. New metro stations have been constructed to meet the transport requirements for tens of thousands of people visiting the various Olympic venues. Extended indoor and

outdoor parking space has been provided adjacent to the various sport halls and service buildings. A new ring road was the spine line of the system connecting all basic sub areas.

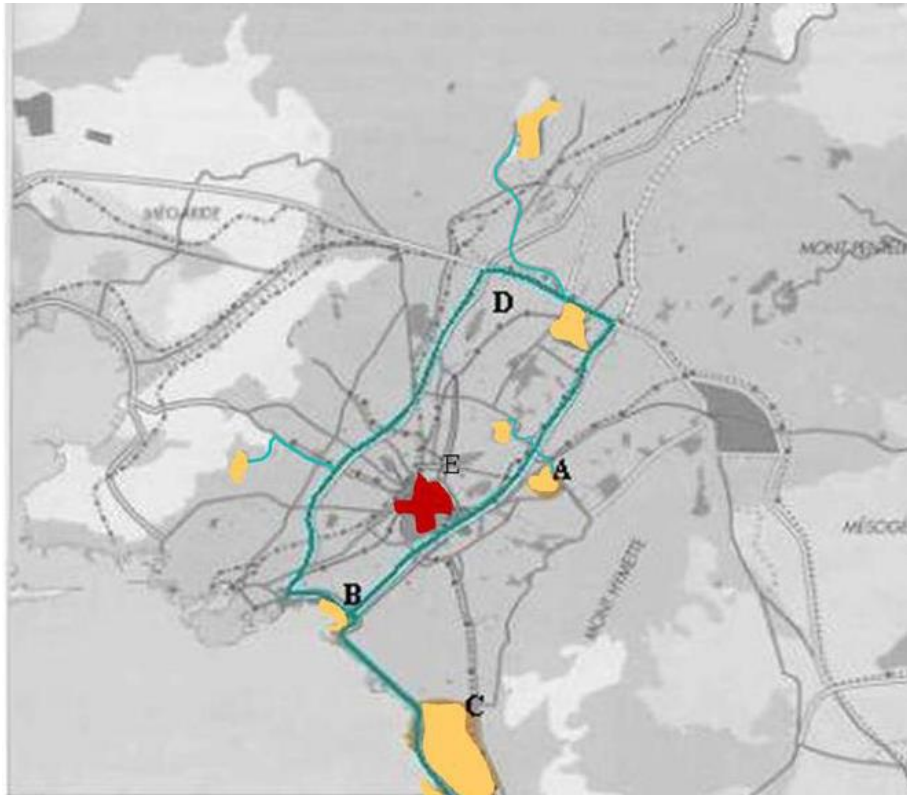


FIG 1: The Olympic ring road system and the main locations of the Olympic venues. (Source: Sivignon et al, Atlas de la Grece, 2000, modified by the author.

In 2005, a new legislative framework has been established to define the post Olympic use of the various Olympic sites. The law 3342/2005 aimed at the sustainable development and integration of the Olympic infrastructure within the economic and social activities of the metropolis. The law intended to set up a framework which would attract private investors. Subsequently it defined the Olympic installations as places of metropolitan significance which would house mainly commercial activities, services and entertainment.

Shopping malls need to have certain spatial features which are essential components of their proper development. The first refers to the size. Mall buildings should be of a large size to accommodate a high number of facilities and shops. The second refers to the location. Malls should be accessible by the highest possible number of visitors. Accessibility of the suburban type of shopping mall is basically based on car transportation while the urban shopping mall is based both on car and public transport accessibility (Gillette, 1985). As described above both the physical characteristics of the Olympic sites and the post Olympic legislative framework favored the creation of shopping complexes. The social context was supportive as well. Social feeling had been high after the 2004 Olympic Games success, political and economic conditions seemed to be stable.

The legislative framework and the spatial features created the perfect context for a shopping mall “invasion” into the city. The first new shopping centre “The Athens Mall” opened its doors in 2005 in the building which had accommodated the Olympic Press Centre (Fig.2). The Golden Hall was inaugurated in 2008 in the building of International Broadcasting Centre (Fig.3).



Fig.2: The Olympic Press center (left) has transformed to The Mall Athens (right). (Sources: left: www.ekathimerini.com, right: author)



FIG.3: The International Broadcasting Center center (left) has transformed to The Golden Hall (right). (Source: www.ekathimerini.com)

A third facility, the Galatsi sports centre, was also scheduled for a 38.000 sqm shopping mall. Its completion was estimated in 2008 but it was never realized mainly due to strong objections from the local community. Enthusiastic discussions have been held for other sites as well (Sailing centre in A. Kosmas, Hellinikon complex at the ex airport area etc) with no success.

The kick off of the reuse of the Olympic infrastructure has been the beginning of an “explosion” of new shopping malls in the years to follow. In 2010 the mean shopping mall floor area per 1000 inhabitants in Greece had been rocketed up to 58sqm, more than double the 2004 respective figure. Avenue shopping mall had been inaugurated in 2007, Athens Heart in 2008, Athens Metro Mall in 2010, River West in 2011 and Discount Village MacArthurGlen in 2011 (Table 1).

Table 1: Shopping Malls located in the metropolitan area of Athens

	OPENING DATE	NAME	AREA (sqm)	SHOPS	COFFEE SHOPS RESTAURANTS	CINEMAS	FUN PARKS	PARKING CAPABILITY (no of cars)
1	2003	Escape Center Ilion	8.700	6	4	8	2	500
2	2005	The Athens Mall	58.000	200	25	15	2	2000
3	2007	Avenue	6.500	55	5	-	1	2000
4	2008	The Golden Hall	41.000	116	15	-	-	1400
5	2008	Athens Heart	20.000	36	9	-	1	750
6	2010	Athens Metro Mall	21.500	90	18	5	1	1200
7	2011	River West	20.000	43	9	-	1	2500
8	2011	MacArthur Glen Village and Smart Park	21.100	113	12	-	1	

3. The social geography of shopping malls

Mapping the locations of the shopping malls and relating them with available social data produces some very interesting results.

Malls are not in the city centre but they are not located in the suburbs as well. They are scattered almost evenly along the south north spine line of the metropolitan area. This seems extremely interesting if we relate the malls' distribution to the socio-professional and education categories of inhabitants (Maloutas, 2000). Fig 4 background map presents various socio professional categories in a color range varying from blue for those employed in the service sectors to light red for those employed in the construction sector and in the industry (data is presented as mean per neighborhood). Fig 5 background map presents the levels of education in a color range from blue (for the neighborhoods with a majority of inhabitants with university education) to brown (for the neighborhoods with a majority of citizens with primary education).

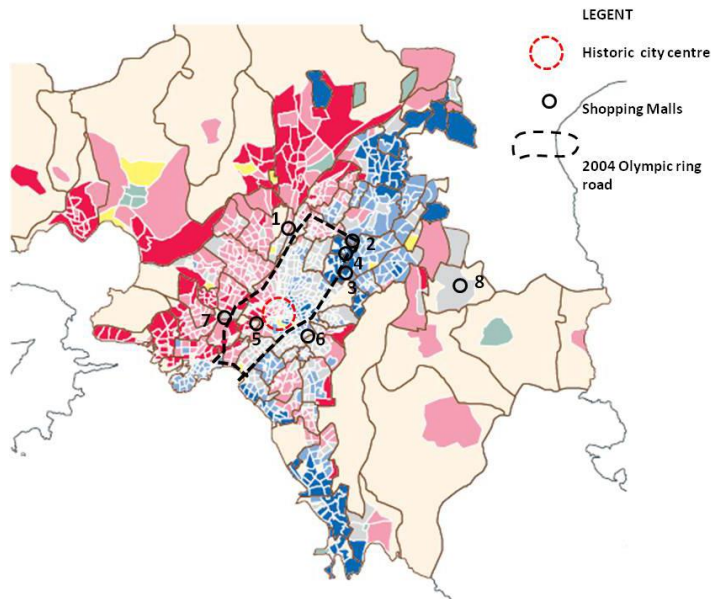


FIG 4: Locations of Shopping Malls with respect to the distribution of socio-professional categories. (Source: Maloutas, 2000, modified by the author)

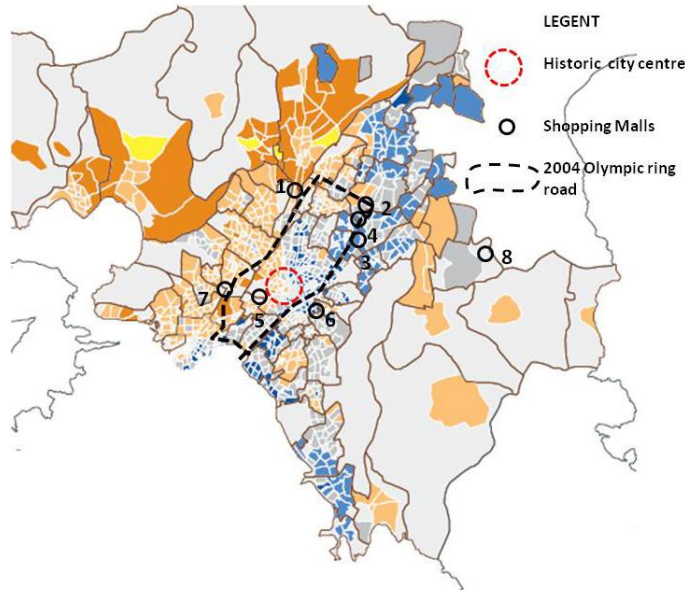


FIG 5: Locations of Shopping Malls with respect to the distribution of levels of education. (Source: Maloutas, 2000, modified by the author)

It's obvious from the different colors of the maps that the metropolitan area of Athens is characterized by a certain social division of population. Eastern part of the metropolitan area is mainly inhabited by middle and upper class population while the western part of the city is been inhabited by working class people.

Shopping malls are located in the middle zone between east and west offering their services to the whole social spectrum (Fig. 4, 5). In this sense the shopping malls claim to provide a new "neutral" space open to all through a similarly liberal vision of consumption. It's a kind of public space based on credit-card citizenship (Zukin 1990) which allows people to share identities and social styles, experiences and information, without principles of exclusion based on urban location criteria, thus overcoming the traditional class division between the east and west neighborhoods of Athens.

Two of the newest shopping malls are located just at the edge of city centre. Their accessibility is largely depending on the public transport system.

4. The urban typology

The versions of shopping malls whose programs combine entertainment with conventional retail are known as ERCs an abbreviation for Entertainment-Retail Centers (Zukin, 1998, Beyard, 2001). This type of mall aims to boost sales from both entertainment and retail markets by offering a convenient and diverse shopping 'experience', which seeks to 'amuse as well as sell' (Russell, 1997). ERCs treat entertainment and retail uses as compatible services rather than separate land uses, and build on their complementary nature. They are a complex socio-economic phenomenon because of the issues of location, access, design, and consumption patterns associated with them (Irazábal & Chakravarty, 2007). In the 'network' view of cities (Castells, 2000; Sassen, 2000) this type of mall plays an important role as node of concentration of global capital and cultural production.

Shopping malls in Athens belong to the ERC type. They are meant to comprise shopping, and entertainment, leisure and various services. Table 1 presents the diversity of activities that the various malls accommodate. It is important to notice that shopping malls are hosting museum exhibitions as well. In 2011 Athens Mall presented the exhibition "Dino Jaws" borrowed from Natural History Museum in London. The River West complex includes a small car museum. Victor Gruen the pioneer designer of shopping malls argued in the 60ies that the malls he designed were actual "shopping towns" which would be not only pleasant places to shop, but also centers of cultural enrichment, education, and relaxation (Gruen and Smith 1960). At that time his vision aimed to create substitutes of urbanity in the deserted and isolated suburbs. Nowadays we observe the same idea embedded within the metropolitan urban grid. New urban nodes are being created in a milieu which has definitely an urban character.

Location preferences (as described above) and multifunctional content affect the spatial form of the shopping malls in Athens thus presenting a new typology. Shopping malls are still based on the big box idea which has two basic features, a big space box like, artificially lighted, air conditioned, with no openings, surrounded by vast parking spaces. The further one goes from the city centre, the higher the dependency on individual car accessibility, the more parking space is needed. The closer one goes to the centre, the higher the cost of land to use for parking space the higher the possibility of access by public transport systems. Parking spaces are built underground and free parking period may be limited.

Shopping malls present themselves as a substitute of the city. Vast spaces named plazas or squares provide benches and plants in pots to assimilate the urban

equivalent. The interiors contain pedestrian walkways, fountains and statuary that refer reassuringly to the traditional urbanism (Cruen 1973, Rowe 1991). At the same time it includes a notion of grandeur and luxury constructed through specific spatial features such as the high ceilings, the glass domes, the escalators, the artificial lights, and the colorful interiors (Fig.6). Goss (1993) has addressed the issues of the organization of space within the mall, and its architectonics explaining how design mediates the cognitive relationship between consumers and commodities.



FIG.6: The Athens Metro Mall interior. (Photo courtesy of V. Tzani)

Shopping malls offer a substitute of the urban environment which has to be distinct and separated from the city. The usual spatial model of the enclosed space within blind walls is being repeated even in those cases where the Big Box is located within the urban grid. Distinction has to be manifested in all possible ways. The buildings or complexes are of a large scale compared with that of the surrounding buildings (Fig.7).



FIG.7: The Athens Metro Mall embedded in the surrounding city. (Source:<http://giabit.blogspot.com>)

In some cases technological innovations become an additional attraction. The West River mall and the Avenue Mall have a sliding roof which can be opened during the summer time.

The form of the main entrance facade is irregular, thus indicating the “the gate” through which the visitor enters a differentiate world (Fig.8).



FIG 8: The entrance and the main façade of Athens Metro Mall (Photo courtesy of V. Tzani)

Finally one of the most unique characteristic of the Greek shopping mall is probably the provision for a top view. All the malls in Athens have acquired a restaurant or coffee shop on the upper level which provides an extended view to the outside world. Most of the official Mall sites advertise the views to the various landmarks (i.e. Olympic Stadium or the Parthenon). The city can be enjoyed from far away, as an image (Fig.9).



FIG 9: The sunset from the top of the Mall Athens. The roof of the Olympic stadium is clearly visible. (Photo courtesy of M. Ieroni)

The majority of the shopping malls have incorporated the name of Athens in their official designation (the Athens Mall, the Athens Metro Mall, the Athens Heart) or names referring to local urban features. The West River Mall attempts to identify itself as an urban node for the west neighborhoods of Athens. Malls claim to enable the visitors participate to the real essence of the city with none of the disadvantage of the real urban context. Most of the newspaper articles referring to various shopping malls declare this notion. D. Rigopoulos one of the renowned Greek journalists on urban issues claims that "...the wonderful view to the Olympic stadium, sunset is a must and that ... from the Mall, Athens seems to be an attractive capital..." (Rigopoulos, 2005)

5. Discussion

There is no accurate data concerning the number of visits to the malls as there is no independent body which can provide it (such as the national census surveys). We have only data provided by the corporations themselves in annual reports or through the daily press. Even if the data provided is not accurate, the number of visitors has been extremely high. During the first year of its operation the Athens Mall has been visited by 10 million people. Escape Center Ilion claims that it has 3,3 million visitors per year while 7 million people visit the Golden Hall every year.

Shopping malls seem to resist the recent years' crisis. According to Lamda Development's annual report, in 2010 the Athens Mall had a 6% loss in the number of visitors in comparison to 2009. On the contrary the Golden Hall (the mall with mainly expensive shops) appeared to have a 15% increase in number of visitors and a 2.5% increase in revenue respectively (Rousanoglou 2010).

Shopping malls have been subject to severe critique as far as their contribution to urban life is concerned. It is a strongly bounded or purified social space (Sibley 1988) that excludes a significant minority of the population and so protects patrons from the moral confusion that a confrontation with social difference might provoke. There are no beggars or homeless people, or street vendors. A certain part of the population never enters this "city".

The view that entertainment retail centers have substantively compromised democratic public space is shared by a number of scholars (Jackson, 1996, Kohn, 2004, Mitchell, 2003). Goss (1993) calls the modern mall a 'pseudoplace' where developers disguise the identity and rootedness of the shopping center in the contemporary capitalist social order creating illusions that a social life than mere shopping is going on.

Despite the various critiques the shopping malls in Athens seem to be popular. The traditional street markets of the city are active and alive but these new nodes of enclosed activities claim a large number of consumers as well.

To understand the phenomenon we have to consider not only the qualities, properties or other features of the shopping malls but the social context of the real city as well.

After 1990 Athens has changed rapidly. The political changes in East Europe created a first flux of immigrants from the Balkan countries. The period up to 2004 Olympic games was the period of the building industry boom. Immigrants could find work and could be easily integrated into the society. After the Olympics the situation gradually changed until in 2009 construction came to an alt.

Meanwhile Greece had become a major entry point for illegal immigrants seeking refuge or work in European Union coming from Asia and Africa through the Turkish borders. By 2004 the number of immigrants in Greece was approximately 1 million people (10% of the total population of the country) the majority of whom was living in Athens. For most of these people the centre of the city has been the locus of their social life. The centrifugal transportation system enabled them to meet each other at the centre of the city, to consume there and to share information about work opportunities.

The loss of employment after the 2004 Olympics and the financial crisis after 2009 created a new social and financial context. Construction workers and domestic servants have been out of job. The centre of the city became the place of loitering instead the place of opportunities. The absence of any investment on public space contributed to the spatial degradation of downtown Athens. People reacted to the financial and political crisis after 2009 with daily protests and demonstrations in the centre of the city. The centre became an unstable place where protesters, tourists and passersby could be attacked by the police at any time.

The parts of the centre which are still thriving are those near the archaeological landmarks populated by tourists. In these areas the city has become a theme park dedicated to the representation of the past.

The financial crisis has hit certain parts of the population more than others. In 2011 31.4% of the total population had to live in an income below the 60% of the national median disposable income. At the same time 27.3% of the total population was at risk of poverty. During the recent years people in extreme need are found all over the city. Municipalities are in strict budgets therefore cultural activities, recreational programs are scarcely offered to the inhabitants.

Within this context shopping malls seem to thrive as the replacement of the city. Visitors are invited to enter a clean and secured environment, to walk in corridors resembling pedestrian streets where one can find coffee shops, kids' playgrounds, shops and home stores. Events such as happenings and performances, music concerts, various kinds of exhibitions are part of the malls' daily routine. Such activities are understood to replace whatever events the Municipality of Athens used to organize for its citizens.

Finally control seems to be a key issue in shopping malls. Gillette (1985) argues that the mall is perceived as attractive, safe, and comfortable because it has one management that controls the environment. Yet the millions of visitors are willing to suspend the privileges of public urban space, they are willing to overlook the fact that the shopping center is a contrived, dominated space that seeks only to resemble a

spontaneous, social space. Are the visitors ignorant of the extent of surveillance and control inside the malls? No, they are not. There are constant reminders of surveillance in the sweep of the cameras and the patrols of security personnel, in the behavior of the guards who do not allow visitors to use their cameras for souvenir pictures.

But then again nowadays public urban space is also under video-surveillance and police control. According to 2007 research 61% of Greek people consider the public space video surveillance as necessary and 57% believe that CCTVs (Closed Circuit Television) protect the civil rights (Panousis, 2010). It seems that the traditional distinction between the controlled area of shopping malls and the democratic urban space of the city has disappeared long ago.

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