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The self-promoted housing solutions in post-war Athens

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Abstract

This paper is an overview of self-promotion in Athens as a means of integrating the rural population into the rapidly expanding urban society of the early post-war period by providing cheap housing in conditions of a poorly developed welfare state. The development of self-promotion and self-construction are linked to features of the South European context, where urbanization has been predominantly housing led rather than led by an expanding labour market.

Key words: self-promotion, self-construction, housing, urbanization, Athens

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Introduction

Massive self-promotion and self-construction as housing solutions in conditions of rapid urbanization refer mainly to Third World situations. Population flows towards booming urban centres reach overwhelming proportions under the pressure of very poor living conditions in rural areas, and cannot be regulated in terms of housing and other essential needs through the usually unorganized and resourceless public services. Self-organized solutions as survival and integration strategies to urban societies, shape forms of social reproduction that cannot be easily accommodated in a modern social reproduction system, as the latter was generated in the context of industrial development.

Greece, as well as other countries and regions of the European South, although more distant from the Third World than from the industrial core in the early post-war period, have occupied a peripheral position in terms of European industrial development, and their social reproduction systems have been affected accordingly. This type of in-between position has received rather reduced attention both as a development model and as a system of social reproduction[1].

The main attribute of social reproduction systems in this type of in-between South European situation, has been the accommodation of traditional structures and practices in modernising contexts, eventually affecting both sides of the relationship. Retrospectively we can easily acknowledge that these traditional structures and practices are progressively losing their grip over the processes of social reproduction, with European unification playing an important role in this direction.

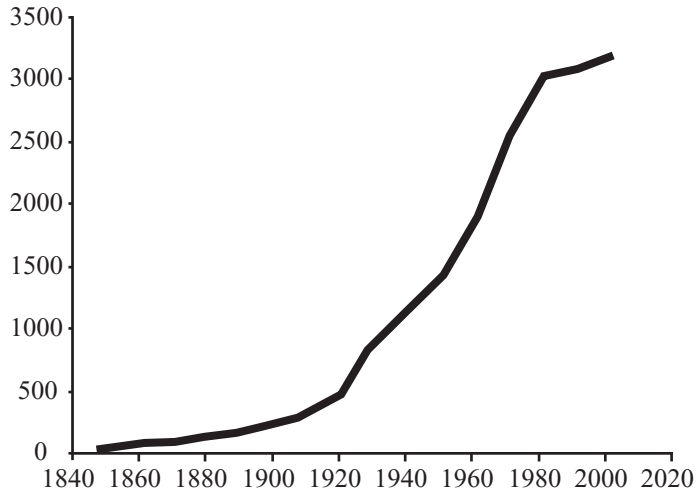
Housing was one of the major realms where important changes and traditional structures and practices have met during the post-war years in Southern Europe. The object of this paper is to illustrate the social logic of this meeting in post-war Athens through the analysis of self-promoted housing solutions that have been the principal response to needs produced by the urbanization wave.

1. The discussion on semi-peripherality and industrial development (for example Mouzelis, 1986 comparing parliamentary and industrial structures in the Balkans and in Latin America) has remained of rather reduced importance in international bibliography, probably because it was not dealing with powerful models and systems but with weaker similarities progressively obliterated under the important geopolitical changes and globalisation. The social reproduction systems developed in these semi-peripheral conditions have also attracted reduced attention. For example, familism and traditional welfare patterns are only related to West European corporatism in Esping-Andersen's worlds of welfare capitalism, and South European situations needed Mingione's discussion (1996) to be accommodated in these worlds. On the other hand, the discussion of dual economic structures, partly related to semi-peripherality, attracted broader attention, but this happened only when informality was rediscovered in the urban areas of the advanced capitalist world.

Athenian urbanization

Athens has experienced a very important urbanization wave (figure 1) after the 2nd world war and during and after the civil war (1946-49). From 1,1 million inhabitants in 1940, it climbed to 3 million in 1981 after three decades of intense population accumulation (Kotzamanis, 1997: 5). The city had already experienced during the inter-war period an important incoming wave from Turkey after the flee of the Greek population, following the failed expedition of the Greek army in Asia Minor (1920-1922). Although Athens had been through this important first wave of urbanization in the inter-war period, post-war population increase was without precedent and in 1961 only one in four of its residents was born in the city (Kotzamanis, 1997: 10-11).

Fig. 1: The population of Athens 1848 - 2001



Source: Kotzamanis, 1997 for 1848 - 1991 and NSSG, 2001 for 2001

Urbanization in post-war Greece was not linked to industrialization, in the sense that the industrial labour market did not act as the principal attraction factor of urban areas. It was linked more to political repression during and following the civil war, with the big cities offering more protection through anonymity against political discrimination and more possibilities compared to the exacerbated perpetual crisis of the rural economy. During the first two post-war decades only the two major cities of the country (Athens and Salonica) were gaining population, and their gains amounted to less than the losses of the rest of Greek regions. Emigration to Western Europe-and mainly to West Germany-and urbanization absorbed more or less equal numbers of people fleeing from the rural or the rest of urban and semi-urban areas. The size of emigration is yet another indication that the urbanization of Athens at that period was less the effect of its attraction and more that of other factors driving masses of Greeks away of their regions.

The urbanization of Athens, and its position as primate city in the Greek urban network, are more due to historical conjuncture in the 20th century-following its equally circumstantial proclamation as the country's capital a few years after the independence of the modern Greek state in the previous century-than to its leading role in industrial or general economic development.

The increasing trend in Athenian urbanization of the early post-war period started slowing down in the '70s, when mid-sized cities began recovering, and almost stopped in the '80s when a regional population equilibrium seems to be attained (Allison, 2000: 16-19). In the '90s the upward trend for Athens is slowly restarting, with almost all population gains going to the city's

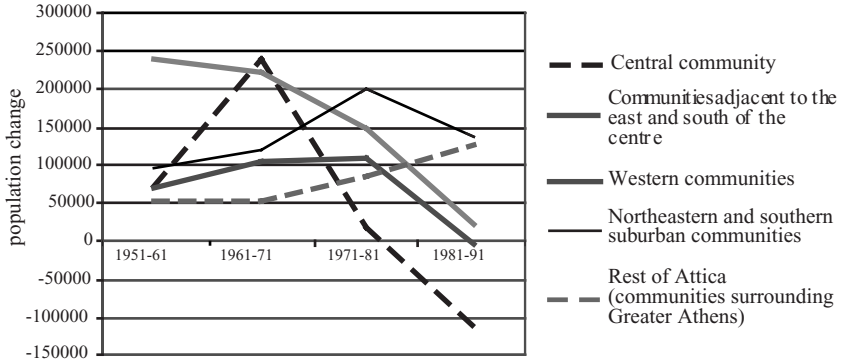
periphery. Both the ‘80s and ‘90s are a period of relatively reduced population growth for the Greek capital, but at the same time they are a period of intense internal redistribution marked by a powerful suburbanization[2].

Self-promotion and illegal housing

The period between the end of the civil war to the mid ‘70s was when self-promotion in housing thrived in Athens. During that period the population of Athens increased by some 1,5 million or 110%. This important and rapid population growth induced housing needs that could never be covered through the meager public housing production, unless the latter was substantially increased. Such an increase, however, was not in the spirit of the dominant development policy, which favoured the effort for accelerated economic growth including (a belated) industrial development by driving public funds to that direction and saving on other items including all kinds of social services[3].

The private sector has produced an impressive number of houses during these first post-war decades[4], covering the increased need and at the same time ameliorating the poor housing standards[5]. The rate of improvement was higher for working class groups (Emmanuel, 1977: 57) an indication of very low initial standards[6] but at the same time of considerable change.

Fig. 2: Spatially differentiated population increase in Athens 1951-1991



Source: Maloutas, Karadimitriou, 2001: 712.

2. Between 1981 and 1991 the Greater Athens Area presented 1,1% of population increase compared to 36% for its surrounding region (Rest of Attica). Between 1991 and 2001 these figures were respectively 2,9% and 29,1% (NSSG, 1997: 43 and NSSG, 2001).

3. The relation between public funding and industrial versus housing growth was more complicated. The origin of private funding for housing was much less revenue from salaries than revenue generated from small property capital. Keeping large public and private (bank) investment out of the thriving housing sector was in fact protecting and favouring the profitability of this small and socially very diffused capital (Economou, 1988).

4. More than 320.000 buildings were erected in the Greater Athens Area during the first three post-war decades (Maloutas, Karadimitriou, 2001: 710, Leontidou, 1990: 143). Public sector participation in this activity was minimal with just 10% of average participation in fixed capital formation for housing during the ‘50s, a percentage that dropped between 1% and 2% for the ‘60s and ‘70s (Economou, 1987: 124-125).

5. From 2,5 persons per room in 1940 housing density fell to 1,03 in 1976 (KEPE, 1966 and 1976, Maloutas, 1990: 15-16).

6. In the early ‘20s, 3/4 of the city’s population were living in single room dwellings (Jenks, 1957) although households were usually large extended families.

Most of the housing produced in the '50s and early '60s was individual[7], located at the periphery of the city and especially on its western?working class?part. Figure 2 shows the western part of the city attracting most of the population increase in the first two post-war decades, with the spatial delimitation of this increase coinciding with its rather homogeneous social character. This part of the city has been the par excellence residential location for rural immigrants of low means arriving in Athens and being reconverted to urban manual labourers. It is during this period that most of the illegally built housing stock has been produced[8].

The decline in terms of population attraction of the western part of the city since the '70s (Figure 2) marks the end of massive and socially diffused self-promotion of individual housing in Athens, often linked to illegal building practice. Self-promotion does not end altogether with this decline. Individual housing continues to be self-promoted, but the social character of the practice changes radically with individual housing becoming a feasible option only for the more privileged[9]. Popular self-promotion as the dominant process of housing production was progressively replaced by a system where promotion is co-exercised by small landowners and small construction firms in ad hoc joint ventures to produce small condominiums. The new dominant system was more interesting for both investing parties in the areas around the city centre, where it became solidly implanted leading to the replacement of the old and low-rise stock by densly packed condominiums. The acute rise of the population in the centre during the '60s and in adjacent communities during the '60s and '70s (figure 2) was a spatial consequence of this change in the features of the dominant system of housing production[10].

The change between dominant housing provision systems in the '70s can be illustrated by the very important change in the ways of accessing homeownership, since the Athenian housing context is heavily dominated by owner occupation. A housing survey in the mid '80s, carried out by the National centre for Social Research, showed that those who became homeowners before 1970 were, first of all, self-promoters (47%), had inherited or otherwise received the property of their house from their family (22%) or had bought their house in a rather reduced proportion (23%). The situation changed radically for those who became homeowners after 1970, with the buyers increasing to 51%, the self-promoters declining to 20% and the other categories remaining relatively unchanged (Maloutas, 1995: 102).

7. 80% of new buildings in the Greater Athens Area in 1961 had a single storey. This percentage fell to 20% for new buildings in 1984 (Leontidou, 1990: 144).

8. A large part of the popular small individual housing of the first post-war decades was built without legal authorisation through processes that will be discussed later. Leontidou refers to a total of 140.000 houses built in such conditions between 1940 and 1970 and estimates that a total of 570.000 people were housed in that way, a figure equal to 35% of the city's population growth during that period (1990: 149). Previous estimates refer to 320 - 380.000 people (Romanos, 1970) but Leontidou, based on unpublished information from the Ministry of Public Works, claims that these lower estimates are probably due to an underestimation of illegal housing production during and immediately after the Civil War.

9. This change, increasingly observed since the '70s, found corroborating evidence in a large housing survey carried out in 1986 (Maloutas, 1990: 194-197).

10. For a more detailed reference to this housing production system and its consequences, see Prevelakis (2000) and Maloutas and Deffner (2002).

The practice and the product

Self-promoted housing can denote a range of practices related to different development and/or social contexts. Popular self-promotion in the context of post-war Athens needed a number of ingredients in order to take its specific form and become the dominant process of housing production. First of all, it had to be affordable. Then it had to be technically and organizationally accessible to the wide incoming rural population. Both these basic conditions were met during the early post-war years.

Affordability was determined by two fundamental parametres: low construction cost and access to urban land. Construction cost was reduced anyway in a branch with a very low concentration of capital and an artisanal and petty commodity production structure. Moreover, popular self-promotion consisted, to a large extent, of self-construction, the latter representing a substitution of monetary cost by personal labour investment. This substitution was feasible since the incoming rural population was already skilled in individual housing self-construction, the dominant housing process in rural areas. And the organization of self-promotion in the urban context was not a totally new task since they also had management skills from their small family exploitations, which represented the quasi totality of agrarian economic activity.

Regarding construction cost reduction the emphasis was on reducing monetary cost. In a context where money resources were scarce but time and manual labour abundant (i.e. redundant labour force and massive emigration), the investment of personal labour and family help was the norm for popular self-promotion[11]. Family and wider network help in housing construction has been a widespread practice, with the beneficiary reciprocating the offer when the helper or his relatives were in similar need. Self-promotion was invested with a variable proportion of substitution of monetary cost by personal investment and family help. The higher this proportion, the lower the social status of the household performing the process would presumably be[12].

Several other practices have also contributed in construction cost reduction. Building materials that could be appropriated as free public natural capital (for example sand in seashores and river banks), the informal type of working conditions for most building workers, the lack of control on safety regulations regarding construction works etc. were part of the cost reduction elements of the house building process.

The most important element supporting affordability, however, was low cost access to urban land. Contrary to many Third World situations, land for construction in the periphery of Athens was not squatted but legally purchased by the new homeowners to be. Large landed properties in the area, designated as rural (either agricultural, pasture or forest land) were converted to urban land through a peculiar process: the large properties were subdivided by the landowners into very small parcels called “agro-lots” and sold as such to prospective self-promoters. The latter would de facto convert these properties to urban land through illegal construction on legally purchased non-urban land, the illegality consisting of the absence of the required construction permit, which could not be issued for that type of land. This de facto conversion of rural to urban land was tol-

11. In 61% of self-promotion cases in a 1986 housing survey, self-construction was part of the production process (Maloutas, 1990: 241).

12. Although self-promotion was a socially diffused way of accessing homeownership, it was more developed in working-class millieux. For homeowners that belonged to occupational categories such as professionals or office employees, self-promotion was used in a proportion of 17% - 20% whereas for those belonging to the working-class the proportion was over 36% (data from the aforementioned 1986 housing survey reported in Maloutas, 1990: 256).

erated under the social pressure represented by the large numbers of rural immigrants and their immediate housing need for which no other option was available[13]. Toleration for this conversion has created a vicious circle with the large landowners being vividly interested in the process. Their selling prices were certainly lower compared to urban lots, but at the same time of a much higher value compared to their initial non-urban status[14].

The process of self-promotion and self-construction in Greek urban areas was not a novelty of the post-war period. It originated as a solution to the housing problem of the Asia Minor refugees in the inter-war years, when the state initially opted for an organized public response, but gradually relegated this responsibility to the settlers themselves. The required funds did not follow this relegation and the settlers were only given free access (property rights) to the land they were provisionally occupying or to some other small landed property where they could build on[15] (Leontidou, 1990).

Housing resulting from such a production process was of low quality, resembling the rural individual houses that the new settlers were accustomed to building and living in. Basic amenities were often lacking (such as plumbing and electricity) but the buildings were generally solid constructions that were bound to house several generations through progressive improvement and the construction of additional housing space.

The role of the state

At first site, it seems that in the process of housing provision in post-war Athens there is an early retirement of the state from a social service that was generally organized and provided by the state throughout most of post-war Europe. However, in the Greek case there is no such retirement since the state had never taken serious responsibility in housing provision as well as in many other areas of social reproduction. On the other hand, in spite of the absence of the state from the processes of direct provision of housing and other social services, the way this provision was shaped was not the sole doing of civil society and individual citizens, implicated in some kind of self-regulation; on the contrary, it was heavily influenced by the state.

The state's influence on housing provision was inscribed in the generally weak development of the welfare state whose services were "replaced" by other forms of provision and mainly by family care. State policies related to or affecting housing reveal that the objectives pursued were never immediately related to housing, but were either aiming at ensuring political support or at using house building as a catalyst for monitoring economic activity[16]. The absence of policies with concrete objectives for housing, except for the very first post-war years when important damages had to be faced, illustrates the lack of state interest for housing per se. The fact that housing seemed a problem that could find an inexpensive solution by the initiative of the settlers themselves was definitely perceived as something to be encouraged, since public funds were preferentially canalised to other purposes. Moreover, this type of arrangement seemed to guarantee political support and promote some form of social cohesion, after a period of intense political division that ended up in civil war.

13. Leontidou is referring to these settlers as "semi-squatters" (1990), a denomination which is probably inappropriate since the squatter element was almost non-existent.

14. For a recent description of this process, see Prevelakis (2000).

15. This happened in several refugee provisional settlements (barracks) that were supposed to be replaced by public housing and ended with the transfer of the property rights of the small lots on which the provisional barracks were standing on to the settlers, as well as of any responsibility for their housing conditions thereafter.

16. Economou has shown that in the Greek land and housing system during the post-war it was housing that led industrial development in its fluctuation rather than the opposite, since the former had a relative autonomy from salaried revenue as a source of investment and a very important impact on the latter which was principally focused on the production of goods for final consumption (1988: 69-72).

The mechanisms of ensuring political support were inscribed in more or less well known models of populism and clientelism. The state's encouragement of self-promotion and self-construction as the answer to pressing housing need in the '50s and the '60s was materialized in an attitude inter-playing between tolerance and intolerance of illegality, concomitant with most processes of self-construction through the system of land acquisition described above. Tolerance was implied rather than explicit, through the discriminatory control and policing of irregular building sites (effectively enforcing political docility) and leading to some kind of fait accompli: it became politically much harder to decide the demolition of illegal houses already built and occupied than it would have been to stop irregular building works. The interplay between tolerance and intolerance was not a burden that the parties in power were anxious to get over with. On the contrary, it became very suitable for maximizing political profit out of clientelist practices: tolerance was customary to characterize the authorities' attitude in pre-electoral periods and the vote for the party in power became the way to legalize the current state of affairs. Every legalisation was supposed to be the last one and every time it was proclaimed that illegality would not be tolerated thereafter, while future offenders were threatened with severe consequences. Progressively this scenario became an established pattern enabling clientelist practice both at the national level where it fuelled populist policies and at the local level where housing became one of the important items in the bargaining for electoral support between local MPs and extended families or other area based groups of voters.

Legalisation of unauthorized housing, meaning among other things that properties could be sold, inherited etc., was in fact a huge transfer of value (social capital) to the settlers who bought the land at prices slightly higher than average rural land and ended up with urban properties, the state assuming the provision of the required infrastructure using public funds.

Tolerance towards illegal housing construction was therefore a way of securing political support in the context of the dominant political system (the opposition was obliged to behave on the same line, sometimes by overbidding) while the acute housing problem in urban areas, and particularly in Athens, was progressively appeased. Tolerance was important for housing provision through the system of self-promotion not only because it withdrew the legal barriers to accessing urbanizable land, but mainly because it lowered considerably the cost of this access-with the settlers saving on part of the value increase from the changing land use and from the ex post produced infrastructure-as well as the construction cost.

So, although the state was not directly present in housing provision, which seemed to be self-regulated during the early post-war period, it had a very important role in shaping the housing situation through policies and procedures that were not necessarily related to housing or, even when related to it, were not instigated with the housing situation in mind.

Housing led versus job led urbanization or contextualising self-promotion in Southern European conditions

There are important differences in the characteristics of social reproduction processes between European North and South. The industrialized North, where urbanization has followed industrialization, has organized social reproduction around industrial development needs in terms of the required skills of the work force (education, training), its location (housing and transport), its condition (health care, housing quality, nutrition etc.). The welfare state in such conditions reflected the need to plan and organize the city and society on the basis of the driving force (industry) of urban development. In a context dominated by industrial development, the core element for social integration is salaried work and this is the prerequisite for anyone wishing to move to the industrial-urban core. Housing and the rest of social amenities follow this prerequisite and are normally secured by the state and/or the employers, the family's prerogative being reduced to simple everyday tasks.

In the belatedly and rather weakly industrialized South[17], urbanization has not been led by industrial development, but from the progressive disarticulation of the rural economy and the political situation (civil wars and dictatorships) that pushed large masses towards the protective anonymity of urban living and the diverse opportunities that the city could offer. South European urbanization after the war has therefore been more propelled by the depletion of rural areas rather than by the meager attraction of the unorganized urban labour market. The important immigration from South to Northern Europe at that time is a very solid substantiation of this claim. Instead of a labour market structured by industrial jobs, job opportunities in many South European cities were mostly created under the effect of the cities' own growth, in construction and personal services and secondarily in public administration.

Thus the urban labour market offered insufficient and often precarious jobs and, at the same time, the need to invest for the reproduction of the labour force was reduced, since there was much more of that force than could be locally used, while quality requirements were not very high. On the other hand, the rather dualistic welfare state (Padovani, 1984 and 1996)-with guaranteed support for public sector and full time workers, and very poor protection for peripheral workers in irregular jobs in construction and personal services-offered no guarantee to the new urban population landing in the least protecting part of the welfare state. In such a context, securing a job was not the cornerstone for being integrated to urban society, since even if one had a job, it was usually not sufficient to guarantee a family's living requirements for a reasonably long period of time. Thus, since amenities were not guaranteed by the job, one should preferably start from securing a house and use it as a solid basis permitting the search for odd and eventually less odd jobs. Moreover, securing a house in these conditions would preferably mean a dwelling that created no regular cost (such as rent), since jobs could not have a matching regularity, i.e. a low standard owner occupied dwelling, self built or otherwise acquired[18].

The abundance of redundant work force for the post-war economies of the area has not only led to immigration towards Western and Northern Europe, but has also reduced the effort of South European governments to provide adequate housing in the form of rented housing or in any other form of public housing provision. South European families being left alone to cater for their housing need, the right to housing became synonymous to the right to home ownership, since this represented the only feasible way to access housing. Under this light, illegality in housing construction was not perceived as a selfish, immoral and antisocial activity. The policies of "condono" in Italy (Padovani, 1988), and similar policies in Greece, giving absolution and legalizing the illegally constructed houses against a fine, promoted the individualist / familist mentality, while the state had to be understanding and tolerant, since it did not provide any other substantial reasons (i.e. organized social services) that could legitimate a severe observation of legality.

17. This crude North - South divide does not take account of internal differences in the two poles. Thus what is ascribed to the South will not reflect the situation of Northern Italy or parts of Spain that have experienced industrial development more or less at the same time as most of the rest of industrial Europe.

18. Thus, home ownership has been very high in Southern Europe among the low income groups, even before public support (Cremaschi, 1998). Homeownership in Athens in 1991 is much stronger outside the area around the city centre, and especially at the western-working class-part of the city (Maloutas, 2000: 66).

The pivotal role of housing for setting foot and surviving in urban areas became a family affair, since it was generally very difficult to face the acquisition process individually and since immigration to the city was also a family affair implemented progressively through family strategies, in which housing was one of the most important objects. The increased importance of housing, in respect to employment, as a ticket for integration to urban society in Southern Europe did not only make of the house a primordial objective of family strategies, but made it the locus of deploying new survival or social mobility strategies for urban living. Odd and precarious jobs would never induce an increased residential mobility for the work force, since the same kind of jobs could be found in almost all parts of the cities. The house therefore could remain a stable spatial reference and kinship networks could be formed without substantial pressure from the labour market and under the stabilizing effect of the wide social diffusion of home ownership.

Conclusion

Self-construction ended in Athens during the ‘70s and self-promotion gradually changed from a socially diffused practice in the early post-war period to a socially exclusive one in the late ‘80s and the ‘90s. Popular access to home ownership was first channeled to a more commodified form, where the products of innumerable joint ventures between small landowners and small constructor firms inundated the housing market with rather affordable condominium apartments. Commodification, however, introduced barriers to home ownership for certain groups, and eventually intensified segregation. During the ‘80s housing production declined substantially and the access to home ownership became increasingly socially delimited. Since the mid ‘90s the declining interest rates have triggered a new social diffusion of this access, which is taking place however in a much more socially and spatially segmented housing market.

What is left then of self-construction and self-promotion in Athens? In parallel to what is claimed about large public housing estates in Western Europe, self-promoted housing had responded to pressing housing needs created by war destruction and mainly by the important urbanization wave of the first post-war period, but produced at the same time other important problems for the medium and long-term. The low quality standards, and mainly the unplanned and poorly equipped urban environment with lacking infrastructure and social services, and the fact that an important part of this housing production has never been replaced or seriously renovated, made of the areas of self-construction the locus of stagnation, relative and sometimes absolute degradation and increased distance from the city’s improving average housing conditions. Today, the areas built mainly through illegal self-construction in the city’s periphery represent one of the two major types of areas in difficulty in Athens, the other being the areas around the centre overbuilt with low standard condominiums.

Self-promotion and self-construction are historically over in Athens for quite some time. Their legacy, however, has left its imprint on the building stock and the urban environment quality and in their increasingly unequal social and spatial distribution. The low quality housing stock of socially diffused owner occupation and the poor urban environment that resulted from massive and uncontrolled self-promotion are undergoing selective upgrading within a major wave of suburbanization. The cards are recast in a process of progressive but already advanced replacement of traditional modes of access to urban land and homeownership by housing market mechanisms. This relacement, however, takes place in conditions of quasi absent regulation of the social impact of market mechanisms leading to the increase of socio-spatial inequality reflected in the increasing social segmentation of the city’s housing market.

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