

# HELLINIKON: Tactics of Capital Urbanization and the Collective Superstructure

“The effort to reclaim the city is the struggle of democracy itself”

~Michael Sorkin

## INTRODUCTION

The Eurozone crisis of 2008, has bequeathed many European cities with a degraded social and urban fabric. While central governments are seeking ways to transcend economic recession, they often demote urban space as a mere vehicle for economic growth. This is when the capitalistic model of production of space is set in motion. Privatization, deregulation and withdrawal of the state from the provision of social services are the first line of defense of defaulted economies.

Ten kilometers south of downtown Athens lays Hellinikon, the old international airport of Athens that ceased its operation in 2001. After thirteen years of grand visions and fault promises, its 626 Ha remain abandoned and largely unexploited, but, not entirely. Despite the ongoing crisis and the desperate attempts of the Greek government to privatize the former airport, a handful of people have activated Hellinikon in ways that remind us how public urban land can be utilized to bring about social prosperity. But are those spontaneous and small-scale interventions bold enough to address a city-wide problem?

While those initiatives address urgent social needs, they fall short to articulate a holistic answer to the urban crisis that Athens is faced upon. The present project aspires to offer a design approach towards the conception, and spatial investigation of an alternative urban strategy that embraces bottom-up practices and rejects the dominance of capitalistic development. The ‘Collective Superstructure’ is a design vision for a new urban model within Hellinikon based upon the scaling up of the existing initiatives that are currently active within the former airport, and aims towards an autonomous, self-instituted, and sustainable social model.

## TACTICS OF CAPITAL URBANIZATION

The ‘theme park city’ that Michael Sorkin described twenty years ago (Sorkin

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1992, xiv) has now evolved into the 'tactics of capital urbanization'; a set of guidelines that impose the image of capitalism upon the urban space. Through a critical examination of the patterns of capital urbanization, and with a special focus on Athens, this chapter attempts to reveal a number of axioms that are blindly followed disregarding their social and environmental impact.

Nowadays, urban development becomes more and more indistinguishable across different countries and cultures. Architecture and urban design do not follow type or morphology anymore but rather the order of capital accumulation (Lee 2012). That is particularly apparent in cities that face economic crisis. The urban space is repeatedly utilized as means for stimulating the economy and achieving growth. However this usually happens in a top-down fashion through national or even global decision-making centers. This way, the spatial impact of urban development is largely disconnected with the actual needs and interests of the local communities.

Capitalistic urbanization tactics tailor the urban space in favor of high-end urban development aiming to create a veneer of economic prosperity (even if that is not there), and to promote further capital accumulation. That includes the relocation of undesired population (like the poor, and the homeless), and overpriced real-estate, and public amenities, transforming urbanization into a process of social exclusion. During a recent operation in downtown Athens<sup>1</sup>, undesired minorities were moved into detention centers in order to stimulate the downtown's retail and business sector (Panagiotidis 2012).

Urban growth is the established norm in making cities profitable. The size and form of urban developments are decided upon the maximization of profits; so does rezoning and most of our urban regulations. However, the lack of limits to growth either eliminates open and green spaces as non-profitable entities, or exploits them by turning them into commodities. Waterfront re-developments are typical examples of how formal development can claim the otherwise public right of access to the water.

New developments also tend to neglect the embedded value of existing infrastructure and building stock, and would rather turn towards luxurious and often overpriced new constructions, resulting in a non-sustainable approach to the built environment.

Finally, we live in an era that both private property and capital investment are religiously favored by the law and the formal state, often against the interest of the local community. Public funds that have been traditionally channeled toward social services and the public space are now redirected to the protection of private investments. This past year in Greece, major cuts in the state budget resulted in the collapse of major public social services. At the same time, tax-payers' money were allocated for the armed protection of future private investments, that directly deprived local communities of their rights to the appropriation of space<sup>2</sup>(Bekatoros 2013) (Oikonomides 2013, 55).

In Greece, those tactics appeared before the 2004 Olympic Games and intensified under the pretext of the financial crisis (Delladetsima 2006). After the crisis hit in 2008, the production and transformation of urban space changed drastically and as a result there was an unprecedented push towards privatization of public land and assets, including Hellinikon, the former International Airport of Athens.

## ATHENS IS CRISIS AND THE CASE OF HELLINIKON

The selection of Hellinikon, as point of intervention is crucial on a symbolic and an urban/regional level. On the one hand, the site has been described as one of the most valuable properties in Europe, therefore loaded with high investment expectations. On the other hand, the location and importance of the site for the metropolitan area of Athens, renders Hellinikon too valuable to be sacrificed to the altar of economic growth<sup>3</sup> (Belavilas Nikos et al. 2011).

The former airport spans 3.5 km along the Aegean Sea and is located ten km south of Athens downtown. Covering a total area of 626 Ha Hellinikon has twice the size of Central Park. Serving both as the Athens International Airport and a major Venue for the 2004 Olympics, Hellinikon has inherited an important infrastructural stock, including terminals, hangars and the remnants of the Olympic Games sporting facilities.

The airport was inaugurated in 1932 and was increasing in size and cycle of operations ever since. In the early 90s, Hellinikon reached a critical capacity and in 2001 the airport was relocated to East Attica and Hellinikon shut down permanently. Since its closure, Hellinikon had never opened to the public except during the Olympic Games of 2004 when it was transformed into the largest Olympic Venue in Athens.

Long before its closure however, a debate about its future had already been raised. In the following decade numerous studies and an International Architectural Competition proposed several alternatives, most popularly the idea of a large Metropolitan Park. However, all prospective plans were put on hold when the economic crisis hit in 2008, and Hellinikon was subsequently included first and foremost in Athens' list of public assets to be privatized.

The private development tender, for the exploitation of Hellinikon has already entered its final phase with three major international development companies competing for the ownership of Hellinikon. The shortlisted participants have been pushing the government to grant the winner of the tender with maximum development flexibility and permissions to build and operate casinos, luxurious resorts and the like.

The redevelopment of Hellinikon comes at an awkward moment for Athens. Along with the economic crisis, projections show that Greece and Europe at large seem to enter a period of demographic decline that will last for the next 50-100 years, a fact that questions even further the role of urban developments in the near and distant future.

Alongside, unemployment in Greece has reached a historical high of 30% which translates to 900,000 unemployed people in Athens alone. Moreover, 11,000 homeless people are officially estimated to live in Athens (Vlantoni et al. 2006) while its downtown increases in vacancy. Examined together, these striking statistics indicate that what is responsible for the urban crisis in Athens is not simply the financial or demographic shrinkage but the fact that the real estate market and formal urban development is unable and unwilling to address the country's current social and urban disparities.

As a reaction to the erosion of public services and the urban space caused by the financial crisis, grassroots initiatives have increased during the past five years. Local collectives are also manifesting within the boundaries of Hellinikon. Aiming both to soothe the disparities of the urban crisis as well as to object to

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## ENDNOTES

1. The police operation was assigned the ironic name "Xenios Dias", which means "Hospitable Zeus"
2. Two times in the past three years, the Greek government has violently attempted to allot natural settlements for development of private investments. From January 2011, and for several months, citizens in the small village of Keratea, outside of Athens clashed daily with anti-riot police forces to stop contractors from building a new waste-center, whose construction was decided under opaque and speculative circumstances. In March of 2013, similar events followed the decision of the Greek government to bestow part of the Skouries forest in Halkidiki to a Canadian-Greek mining venture-joint.
3. The Organization for Planning and Environmental Protection of Athens, had designated since 1980 that Hellinikon, together with the realized Antonis Tritsis Park and a remaining large open space in Goudi are to become the three Metropolitan Parks of Athens, in order for an acceptable level of 8m<sup>2</sup> /per capita to be achieved. Today, Athens provides just 2-2.5m<sup>2</sup> per capita, while 1.23m<sup>2</sup> alone were lost after the construction of the 2004 Olympics infrastructure.

the government's plans for privatization, local communities have activated the old airport in ways that show how public land can serve its people in a direct and fair way. Four initiatives stand out for their originality and impact to the local and metropolitan area:

#### **1. SELF-MANAGED URBAN FARM**

The 'Initiative for a self-managed farm in Hellinikon' is a citizen's collective that was formed in 2011 advocating for new productive uses within the urban space and aiming at the organization of an urban eco-farm. The collective initiated the project as a reaction to the privatization plans of the government. Today, the farm is spanning across 5400 sq. ft. of land and hosts a wide range of fruits and vegetables (Prentou 2012).

#### **2. METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CLINIC**

The Metropolitan Community Clinic at Hellinikon provides free medical assistance to the unemployed and poor civilians with no social security or with very little income<sup>19</sup>. The clinic was founded in December 2011 and is established in one of the abandoned buildings of the former military base at the North sector of Hellinikon ("Metropolitan Community Clinic at Helliniko" 2013).

#### **3. CIVIL AVIATION MUSEUM**

In 2011 the Cultural Association of the former national Greek air-carrier (POLKEOA) founded the first and only Civil Aviation Museum in Greece. The Museum is located in the former West terminal building and houses rare exhibits from the operation days of the former airport, including four decommissioned aircrafts (POL.K.E.O.A. 2013).

#### **4. VOLUNTARY TREE-PLANTING**

In March 2012, citizens from across Athens gathered in Hellinikon and planted over 1,000 olive trees. One year later, dozens of volunteers revisited the space to revitalize the newly-planted olive grove, manifest their objection to the privatization plans, and celebrate their collective action (Prentou 2012, 8)

Not surprisingly, those four grassroots initiatives seem to encompass values that surpass the limits of Hellinikon, and express the hopes of an entire city that struggles under the pressure of a humanitarian crisis; self-institution, social provision, public green space, and culture.

#### **THE COLLECTIVE SUPERSTRUCTURE**

Given the social, financial and spatial forces previously described, this paper argues that the people of Athens needs to resist the bestowment of public land, to the dictates of urban capital, and instead promote a new model of urban life that will respect its citizens and the environment. The hypothesis is that a scaling-up of the existing bottom-up practices could transform Hellinikon into an autonomous community that denounces economic growth and relies on its own resources and its self-institution; a 'Collective Superstructure'. This seemingly ambiguous and contradicting name expresses two notions. On the one hand, the need for autonomous, local-based, collective activism, and on the other hand, the necessity for a larger civic structure, that will ensure the survival, and uninterrupted function, of the autonomous communities. This chapter elaborates on how this urban scenario could be established, structured and spatially evolved.



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### EVOLUTION OF THE COLLECTIVE SUPERSTRUCTURE

The evolution of the community is a result of incremental growth and is based both on collective and individual activities. Every person that settles in Hellinikon is given an individual allotment and is held responsible for building and cultivating the land according to basic rules and restrictions. Citizens can build individually or collectively by joining parcels.

During the first phase settlers occupy abandoned buildings and open spaces within Hellinikon. However, the existing urban fabric will prove inadequate to achieve the social and spatial agenda of the new autonomous community. Therefore, during the second phase of urbanization squadrons migrate into the interior of the site and organize in dense urban entities able to control growth and make productive yet respectful use of the land (Figure 4).

### DESIGN STRATEGIES OF THE COLLECTIVE SUPERSTRUCTURE

This urban scenario cannot happen randomly or entirely unplanned; otherwise the goal of self-sufficiency and self-regulation will fail. There needs to be a plan that can predict and dictate the urban capacity of the given land. The Collective Superstructure draws inspiration from the grassroots initiatives that currently operate on site and is based on four design strategies: Urban Autonomy, Social Infrastructure, Environmental Infrastructure, and Re-use Strategy all of which are put in effect through their respective design elements:

#### 1. URBAN AUTONOMY

The Self-managed Urban Farm that currently operates at the site started as a manifestation against the privatization plans of the government. However, the idea behind it is that local communities can become self-sufficient and self-managed through food production. With this as a starting point, this project pushes the idea of the small urban farm to the concept of a new community whose size

Figure 1: The Collective Superstructure, *perspective view looking west, and diagrammatic representation of the agricultural belt and the urban patches*

and shape is based not on profit and growth, but upon the capacity of the given land. The design elements towards the achievement of Urban Autonomy are the Agricultural Belt and the Urban Patch.

### **1.i Agricultural Belt**

The agricultural production is the driving force and the symbol behind the autonomous character of the Collective Superstructure. While in the first phase of the development agriculture is managed individually, when density reaches maximum capacity agriculture production is centralized along the Agricultural Belt. Built alongside the main runway of the former airport, the Agricultural Belt takes advantage of the vast empty land and the pre-existing runway networks to establish a complete agricultural production system (Figures 1,3).

### **1.ii Urban Patch**

The urban patch is the urbanization vehicle of the Collective Superstructure. The urban patches are city sectors defined in size and shape, and are developed in order to control growth, and achieve the overall self-sufficiency of the community. The urban patches establish a balance between the urbanized land and the agricultural production. This proposal suggests the deployment of three patches sized and programmed according to the capacity of the agricultural belt. The specific configuration allows for a community of 7,000 people to be entirely self-sufficient on fruits and vegetables. (Figures 1,2,3)

## **2. SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

The Metropolitan Community Clinic proved that even during crisis, a city can be inclusive, against the dictates of traditional urban re-development. Crucial social services that the state seems incapable of providing can be delivered through voluntary, collective work. With this as a starting point this project envisions an expansion of this voluntary social model at an urban scale where the have-nots obtain access to not only medical care but also housing, social services, and a safe urban environment. The Community Centers, the Water Management System, the Water Towers and the Defensive Mechanisms are the design pillars of the Social Infrastructure

### **2.i Community Centers**

The Community Centers are the hearts of the urban patches. The community centers are linear structures, perpendicular to the direction of growth, that are built collectively by the community. Their role is to provide incoming settlers with basic amenities like health care, markets, and schools. The Community Centers operate as control growth devices by outlining the successive borders of the community and defining the amount of growth through a water management system. (Figures 2,3,5)

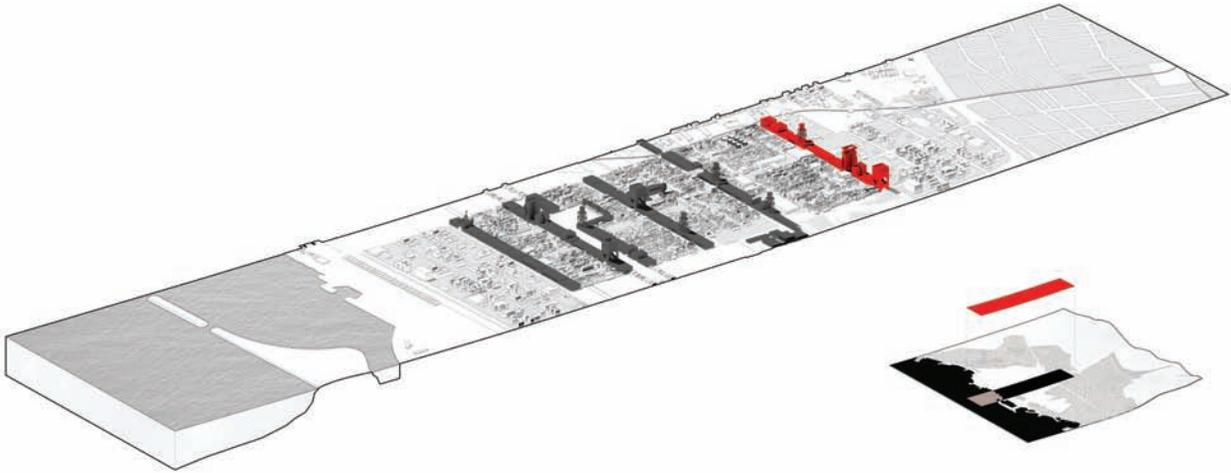
### **2.ii Water management System**

The Community Centers control the growth of the urban patches by restricting the access to water resources along predefined channels that grow perpendicular from their linear structures. The foundations of the community Centers are used as underground cisterns that capture and store surface water runoff. The rooftops of the built fabric operate as an interconnected aqueduct system that also drives water towards the cisterns before it is eventually pumped into the water towers. (Figure 2)

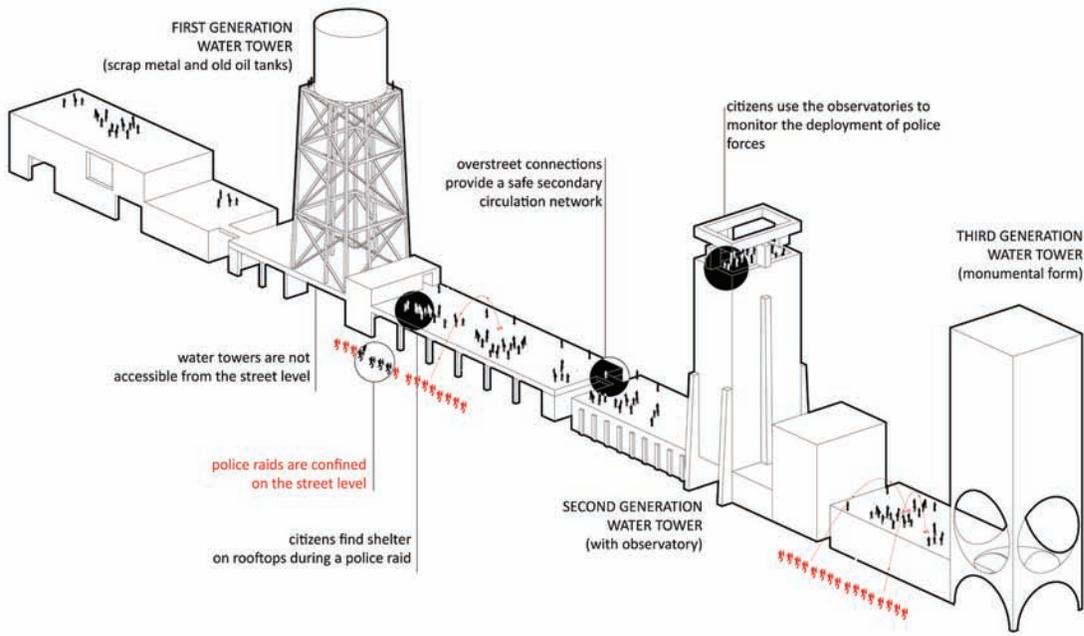
### **2.iii Water Towers**

The water towers reside along the linear structures of the community centers

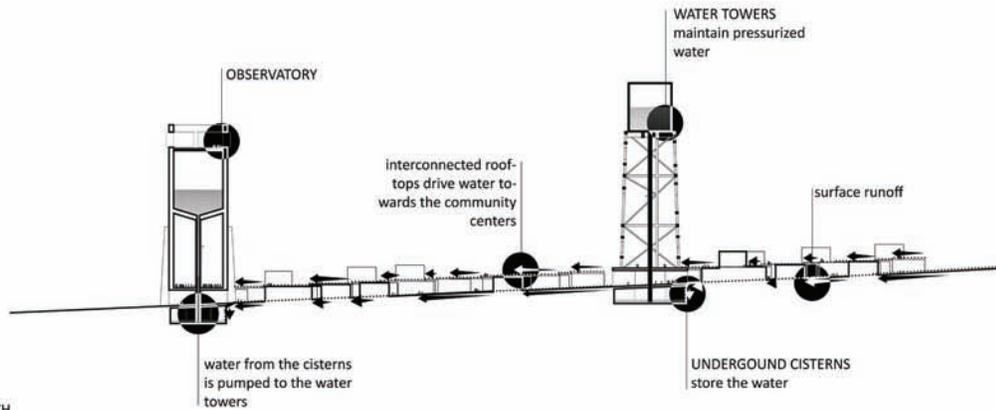
Figure 2: From top to bottom: urban patch, community center, and the water management system.



URBAN PATCH AND THE COMMUNITY CENTER



ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY CENTERS'S DEFENSIVE MECHANISMS



WATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM SECTION ALONG THE URBAN PATCH

and maintain pressurized water for distribution across the community. They are the administrative and morphological pinnacle of each community center. The amount of water each community center can host defines the size of the community, which is successively decided by the availability in agricultural production. Moreover, their morphological types evolve together with the expansion of the community. Starting as a reassembly of old oil tanks and scrap metal, they evolve into vertical monuments with unique forms and building techniques. The quality and quantity of water towers represent size and culture of the community. (Figures 2,5)

#### **2.iv Defensive Mechanisms**

As we saw earlier, capital investments are heavily protected by the formal state. By obstructing the privatization plans of the government, the new community will receive immense pressure from current and prospective stakeholders that in Greece translates into regular raids by the police. The structure of the Community Centers together with the maze-like street network of the built fabric, provide a line of defense for the squadrons. Interconnected rooftops offer a secondary pedestrian network that isolate any incoming threats to the street level, while water towers can also be used as observatories. (Figure 2)

### **3. ENVIRONMENTAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

The on-going voluntary tree planting together with the self-managed urban farm expresses the public demand for more open green space. This project argues that the long-anticipated Metropolitan Park in the space of the former airport can be realized through a coordinated continuation of these efforts.

The main landscape gesture of the proposal is the re-connection of the mountain to the waterfront. The landscape strategy has a dual goal: provide the community with the natural resources for its self-sufficiency, and give back to the city a metropolitan-scale park and waterfront, open to the public. The overall scheme results from the incremental deployment of the agricultural belt, the ongoing voluntary tree-planting, and the proposed new waterfront. The design elements of the Environmental Infrastructure strategy are the Green Corridors, the Blue Infrastructure, and the Waterfront

#### **3.i Green Corridors**

The scheme is based on the winning proposal of the 2004 architectural competition for the development of Hellinikon by Serrero-Fernandez and their concept of reconstructing the old streams that used to run across the site. The Green Corridors begin as threads from mount Ymittos and after penetrating the urban fabric, they formulate three large parks that frame the urban patches before they reconnect along the waterfront. (Figure 3)

#### **3.ii Blue Infrastructure**

Due to the dry climate and the excessive impervious surfaces of the runways, a network of channels and water reservoirs is essential for sustaining the surface water, filter it and use it for irrigation and human consumption. The water infrastructure is deployed along the green corridors and follows a consecutive series of water management elements. Urban streams on the north of the site collect water from the mountain hills and direct it towards the site. Linear water traps and irrigation channels along the main streets and the runways capture and distribute water for agricultural use. Water reservoirs located along the streams are used for storage and recreation zones. Wetlands along the shore filter water before it ends up in the sea, and finally, the coastal ponds along the waterfront



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establish a protected zone against the pollution of open waters. (Figure 3)

### 3.iii Waterfront Park

The new waterfront park grows along with the new community, and is created with the incremental extraction and disposition of removed material from the old airport. Its purpose is to create a coastal ecology that serves two goals; secure natural resources for the community, like clean water, fishery and salt, and offer the people of Athens open access to the water. (Figure 3)

As mentioned in the first chapter, the coast of Hellinikon might be the last chance for Athens to open up to the water, since the larger part of its coast is occupied by gated urban developments, illegal entertainment facilities and the like. Therefore, the new extended waterfront collectively created by the new community constitutes a manifestation against the typical high-end development usually

Figure 3: Overall masterplan on the Collective Superstructure

found along urban coasts. (Figure 3)

#### **4. RE-USE STRATEGY**

Due to its limited resources, the community needs to take advantage of the existing facilities and infrastructure on site. Through the Aviation Museum, the former employees of Olympic Airways paved the way for a fertile re-use of the former airport's decommissioned facilities.

##### **4.i Re-use of Olympic venues and airport facilities**

The rich building stock that Hellinikon inherited from its operation as the Athens International Airport and an important Olympic venue is re-appropriated into civic buildings to serve the needs of the new community and the metropolitan Athens area. More specifically:

- The former Baseball Court of the Olympic Games of 2004 is retrofitted to house the General Assembly, a core institution of the Collective Superstructure.
- The former softball stadium is reused for the purposes of the community's High Court.
- The former East Terminal of the Athens International Airport, designed by Finish-American architect Eero Saarinen re-opens to the public, as 'Metropolitan Cultural and Exhibition Center' which constitutes a unanimous demand across all past proposals for the exploitation of Hellinikon
- The old Technical Hangar of Olympic Airways is completely transformed and given to the public as the largest indoor Arts & Sports venue in Athens.
- Finally, the old Air-Traffic Control Building is transformed into the Administration Centre of the community. The control tower is re-used as a Safety Control Center to intercept possible dangers or threats to the community.

##### **4.ii Re-Use of extracted materials**

The concrete surfaces of the former airport that are gradually being removed as the community grows are relocated to the waterfront to form a system of protected ponds, transforming the coast into a safe place for swimming, fishing and recreation. (Figure 4)

##### **4.iii Re-use of old runway**

The old runway is reused for the construction of the central transportation spine. This axis runs along the agricultural belt and intersects with all three urban patches. At the points of intersection, large open spaces are created, establishing a domestic transportation and trading network. (Figure 5)

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Looking back to the axioms of capital urbanization tactics presented in the first chapter, the Collective Superstructure advocates for a new urban model that responds:

- to top-down ,profit-driven development, with bottom-up, voluntary-based communities.
- to relocation of unwanted population, with occupation by social forces
- to unlimited growth, with sustainable capacity
- to safeguarding of capital investment, with defending the right to the city
- to encroachment of nature, with respectful use of natural resources
- and to disposal of the old fabric, with new creative re-use.

Capitalistic urbanization confronts all places as accounted commercial assets with stereotypical features that lead to the production of generic and

Figure 4: Incremental growth of the Collective Superstructure.



**2013**

Current state on the site with red indicating the active buildings and areas, including the urban farm, the social clinic, the aviation museum, the air-traffic control tower, some sporting facilities, the tram's terminal station and some scarce administrative buildings.



**2020**

In the next phase squadrons occupy inactive buildings on the north sector of the site and establish the first community, creating scarce agricultural plots and forming the landscape corridors to capture water coming down the mountain



**2025**

The existing building stock depletes. The squadrons settle to the interior of the site establishing the first community centers of the urban patches. The tram line extends to the metro stations, and the waterfront is being formulated.



**2035**

The urban patches expand, building up successive rows of new community centers. Squadrons occupy existing olympic venues and airport facilities and transform them into the civic buildings. The tram line reaches the third patch, and the waterfront continues to evolve.



**2045**

When urban patches reach a critical density urban agriculture shifts over their boundaries and form the agricultural belt along the traces of the old runway. The tramline connects the patches with one another and the landscape reaches the coastal road.



**2050**

The community reaches its maximum capacity, the waterfront park is completed, and the Collective Superstructure enters its final steady-state phase.

unresponsive urban spaces. The present design investigation pushes the idea that places should be defined by their physical and social identity. Contrary to most ideal cities, the Collective Superstructure adopts an urban form that is contextual to the rich Athenian landscape and its bold social dynamics.

Most urban utopias, especially those seeking alternatives to the capitalistic model, choose to shift away from urban centers to avoid conflict between the traditional and the utopian city. This is pointless. It is not enough to develop a new way to build our cities. We also have to make sure that the old models dissolve. This is why the present proposal insists on the deployment of the Collective Superstructure within the city of Athens, and onto Hellinikon, a property with excessive capitalistic value.

This project focused only on the urban design parameters that are necessary for such a community to be established and spatially evolved. The scaling-up of the grassroots initiatives, may pose unknown risks, and further study is required. In order for the vision of the Collective Superstructure to be tested and properly evaluated, there needs to be a thorough investigation of the administrative and economic system that can support the proposed model.

The contribution of this paper is the spatial and visual representation of how bottom-up practices can be translated into urban forms. The Hellinikon case should



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remain central in our global debates, for its future will largely pave a route for other cities undergoing similar urban crises. The Collective Superstructure may sound like a utopian scenario but it may as well resemble a not so distant future. It is based both on facts and fiction. The intention of this paper was to state that the use of prime urban land as an investment to generate profit can no longer constitute our primary objective. The post-crisis era should signify a holistic turn on how we perceive urban space and spatial justice.

Figure 5: Perspective aspect of the community center and the large urban space at the intersection of the old runway with the central urban patch.

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