

Uncontrolled Urbanization, Tourism Development and Landscape Transformation in Greece

1. Introduction

The recent rapid socio-economic growth in Greece (income increase, rural exodus, uncontrolled urbanization, second homes and tourism development) and the modernization in all fields of activities (mainly in agriculture, transport networks and infrastructures) have brought radical changes in Greek landscapes. Traditional urban and rural areas have been radically transformed by thousands of legal or illegal building constructions. Public works and transport infrastructures as well other kinds /types of constructions (e.g. large advertising billboards) have a great impact on natural environment creating an endless rural- urban continuum and a countryside 'cluttered' with unnecessary 'objects' and 'furniture'. These changes pose new challenges that must be faced in an appropriate way in accordance with the European Landscape Convention (CoE 2000).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a critical approach of the problems that Greek landscapes are facing today by unplanned urban growth as well as of the possible solutions for their preservation and wise management since they constitute an integral part of the natural and cultural heritage of Greece. In fact, due to its long history the country has a rich diversity of cultural landscapes, which is the result of the various traditional patterns of land use and land management. Through the example of the coastal zone in western Greece, the paper is attempting to establish a typology of landscapes according to old and new urbanization patterns, mainly due to tourism and dispersed second homes development.

Furthermore the paper is investigating the existing tools and mechanisms as well as the lessons learned by urban policies implemented (or not) at local and national levels in order to examine the possibility for the formulation of a new national strategy of livable urban development facing successfully the problems related to sprawl.

2. Recent spatial developments and landscape transformation

In the Mediterranean, and particularly in Greece, a country known for the importance of its immense historic heritage and the fragility of its natural and built-up environment and ecosystems, landscape assumes even greater significance. Perhaps it is not accidental that Greek and Mediterranean landscapes have been extolled by foreign visitors, travelers, and sojourners in the 18th and 19th centuries (Tomkinson 2002), have been painted and otherwise immortalized by artists and have been extensively photographed and praised, chiefly in the 20th century, by renowned Greek and foreign photographers and writers. One such is the French writer Jacques Lacarriere, who, for many years, has traveled widely in Greece and the Mediterranean and has spoken at length of the exquisite landscapes (*paysages exquis*) of the Greek islands (Lacarriere 1998)

Recent change and transformation in Greek landscape, which is the easiest to understand, has ever been linked with the prevailing way that social groupings (through their values, means of production, and technologies) have organized and managed the space around them. The weight of such change lies chiefly in the quality of the outcome, and can be judged in the light of how harmonious it is ecologically, and what sort of balance it strikes between economic and esthetic considerations, along with the degree to which it is attuned to prevalent social values. What we usually call landscape deterioration, abuse, even destruction, expresses transmutation towards an imbalance that may result from rapid changes which fail to provide the necessary leeway for the ecosystem or geo-system to adapt adequately. The post war era in the Mediterranean and Greece may be regarded as such a time of precipitous change and consequent imbalance of the overall spatial – ecological system. The result is visible especially in the rural landscape, where

contrasts become more glaring: unregulated quarrying and mining, slapdash rural and forest road constructions, denudation, incendiary fires etc. are the main types of intervention which cause ecological, functional and esthetic problems to Greek landscape. It is not accidental that this situation is often referred to as an 'indecent assault' or 'rape' perpetrated on Greek nature.

On the other hand, spontaneous building constructions -legal or illegal- and the consequent landscape alteration and downgrading, constitute a major problem for the functioning of the whole socio-economic and spatial system in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. Equally disturbing are advertising constructions which form large unified 'fronts' or 'thickets' (actual 'billboard habitats') alongside motorways and major automobile routes (corridors) which 'clutter' the Greek countryside with undesirable 'furniture' and useless 'objects'. Let it be noted -and this is true all over the world -(CPRE 1996) that it is not always major assaults or interventions of large scale projects that prove harmful. The slow, but steady, accretion of smaller alterations on coasts, plains and mountains may ultimately bring about greater damage and spoilage, having an unexpected impact on the character of roads, traditional settlements or generally extensive rural areas. This is a more 'subversive' and 'imperceptible' deterioration of the environment and landscape.

In conclusion, the renewal of the built environment and the urbanization, the exploitation of the landscape as a means for economic growth, as well as the modification of rural and agricultural practices or even the development of communications infrastructure, led and are still leading to changes in the landscape in a large scale. In most towns and villages, the built environment was renewed with the use of reinforced concrete and does not represent any longer the traditional Greek way and approach to building and housing. Rural regions have lost a great degree of their authenticity and historic character and we need to find new ways of narration in order to describe correctly the landscape of modern Greece. (Beriatos, E.- Balesta, J. 2007)

3. Urbanization and land use patterns, tourism development and landscape typology. The case of Western Greece and Ionian islands

Throughout the post war era, there is a manifest trend of ongoing tourist growth in Greece, which is however accompanied by great spatial inequalities and marked temporal variances. During the same period, in Western Greece and the Ionian Islands tourist flow is on an upward trend, albeit with some fluctuations. It should be noted that Corfu, which has for a long time been a major tourist pole of attraction for Greece causes a great intra-regional imbalance in the spatial distribution of tourist flow. Regarding tourist infrastructure- i.e. tourist supply (services and products) that will satisfy the demand resulting from the tourist flow previously mentioned- the situation is different for every island or prefecture in the region. (Beriatos 2003).

However the growth tourist infrastructure is anarchic and uncontrolled (in terms of both quantity and quality) and the situation soon becomes untenable: It is not only that the said infrastructure proved to be insufficient to deal with the importance of the tourist flow, providing totally inadequate services, but there will also be an extremely adverse impact on fundamental tourist resources that are very difficult to replace (i.e. the environment) due to overexploitation, deterioration, and depletion (Cocossis, H.- Tsartas P. 2001, EU 2001).

On the other hand, immense harm to the environment and to the vulnerable island landscape is caused in particular by building along the roads and along the coastline. Such locations sustain the greatest pressures from tourism. On the coastal zones, linear development imposes too heavy a burden on the ecosystem, which is, after all, the main tourist resource of the islands but we cannot emphasize enough the fact that it has a limited carrying capacity. There are many places on the coastal zones that display symptoms of saturation and over-development.

The environment and tourism are in the nucleus of the issues raised about the sustainable development of the Greek landscape. The reason for this is the close and organic relation as well

the interaction between the environment (natural and man-made) and tourism supporting activities. The natural and cultural environments are tourist resources which constitute the necessary conditions for the development of tourism in Mediterranean (Melandri 2006) Any action that downgrades or destroys these resources, undermines the wise and rational tourism development, which after all, is based on the above conditions been in a favorable state. As it is already pointed out, tourism, and relevant activities on islands, is “feeding on its own flesh”, that is to say, it destroys those elements of the environment from which it sustains its life.

3.1. Spatial elements shaping landscape

In order to have a whole and factual picture of the alterations of the landscape, it is necessary to define those elements that exert on it the most influence. For this, we examined carefully six categories of spatial elements which we deem as important. These categories are the following:

1. Relief (geomorphologic characteristics, sloping surfaces etc)
2. Vegetation (low, medium, high, turf, grassland, brushwood, bush, forest)
3. Building Construction (compact, dispersed, scattered, sprawl)
4. Networks of Technical Infrastructure (transport, telecommunications, energy)
5. Mining –Embankments (mines, quarries, embankments, earth and land fills)
6. Giant Billboard advertisements

From the above categories of elements, the most important are: Relief, Vegetation and Building Construction. Simultaneously we examined tourist activity, as is recorded through the appearance of tourist installations and accommodation at various regions of western Greece- either in continental Greece (coastal zone of Peloponnesos and Epirus) or in the islands (Ionian islands). Special attention is given at the zones outside town and village boundaries, where there is dispersed population and consequently scattered buildings and structures for tourism. As a result of the above parameters in western Greece, we find the following three (or five) types of landscapes (see Map 1 and Photos 1, 2, 3, 4)

3.2. Landscape typology (settlement and land use patterns)

1a Plains (flat terrains) with intensive cultivations and rural settlements, agritourism activities under development.

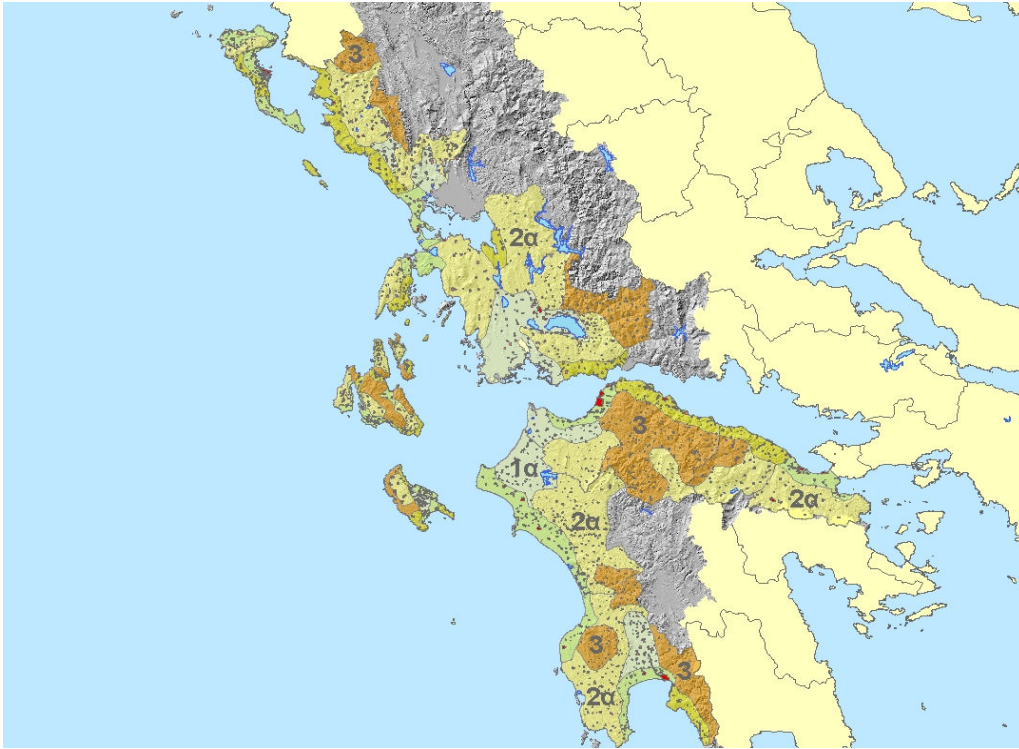
1b. Flat areas with linear urban development-especially along the sea front- having scattered building constructions (illegal or not). Dominant land uses: secondary residence and tourist accommodation

2a Rough terrains. Land cover: pastures, maquis vegetation, bush land, Traditional cultivations in terraces, rural settlements, agritourism activity under development.

2b Rough areas with linear urban development-especially along the sea front- having scattered building constructions (illegal or not). Dominant land uses: secondary residence and tourist accommodation

3. Mountainous areas covered by forest vegetation or maquis, rough terrain, rocky coasts, low population density or empty, no human settlements, mountain tourism activities and isolated tourist installations (refuges, ski centers etc)

An empirical application of the above typology was attempted at western Greece, by the University of Thessaly and KEPMEP- Med Regio, which was the coordinating agency of the Greek Consortium in the transnational project ‘Urbacost’ “coastal urbanization and rural zones..” elaborated in the framework of the community initiative INTERREG (see map 1).



Map 1. Study area of Western Greece and Ionian Islands: Landscape Typology



Photo 1. Zakynthos / Ionian Islands, landscape type 1b (personal archive)



Photo 2. Kalamata / Peloponnese, landscape type 2b (Personal archive)

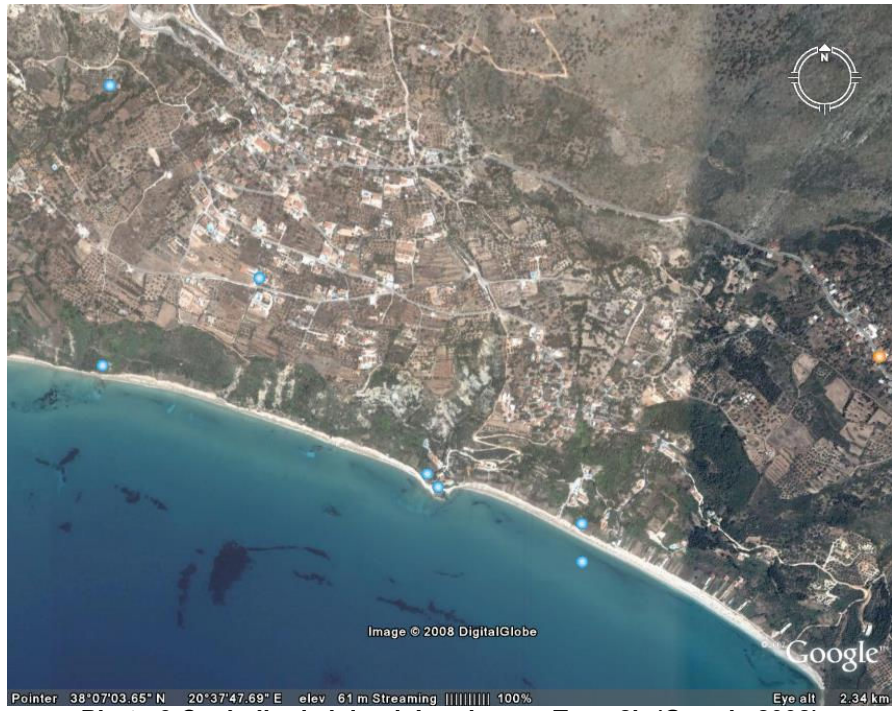


Photo 3 Cephallonia island. Landscape Type 2b (Google 2008)



Photo 4. Attika- Marathon tomb place. Landscape type 2b (Google 2008)

4. Unplanned urbanization and the failure of Greek urban policy (in post war period)

The above mentioned uncontrolled urbanization and the building constructions in areas “outside city plans”, creating thus built-up formations on the periphery of cities, is the main and most visible factor of environmental degradation. The dispersed building construction resulted in the rising prices of infrastructure and had a negative impact on natural resources, since valuable arable land is consumed. But the repercussions are most prominent in the natural and cultural landscapes.

In Greece, sprawl has been developed, after the end of the WW II, for various reasons, which characterize the peculiarity of this country and – in a great part- explain the existing situation in our-days. The most important reason is the rising number of secondary residence and the growth of tourism (due to socio-economic progress), factors that exerted the strongest pressure on rural areas and regions with natural beauty, and constituted the first necessary condition of sprawl.

The framework in which the ownership status was developed in Greece (smaller lots in relation to the rest of Europe) and the tendency of modern Greeks to transgress the laws, had –and still has- great influence on the matter. Today it is estimated that there are hundreds of thousands of illicit buildings used both as main habitations and/or as second homes, but also there is a great number of buildings used for industrial and handicraft purposes. Another form of transgression of the law is the non-observance of the parameters of the building permit, i. e. people are constructing more square meters than allowed by the permit (the 50%-70% of transgressions are cases of non-observance of the parameters of the building permits). Also, an important factor is land speculation and the lack of basic ‘immaterial’ infrastructure, as the tragic delay in the establishment of a land registry (the existing registry covers only 7%-10% of the national territory).

The above existing situation, has its roots in the political (clientele) system and the political cost, both of which, in order to maximize financial gains, sacrifice the basic principles of social justice and the protection of the environment. In Greece, the uncontrolled sprawl was caused by the transgression of the laws and arbitrariness, as well as by the generalized complicity of the ruling political elite, and the political system in general, with the middle and lower social classes. On the other hand, there was a lack of an appropriate spatial planning and environmental policy, a factor that made possible the development on a large scale- of sprawl. In fact the existing situation in Greece can be described and explained by several factors, as follows:

A) There never was a consistent and systematic housing policy, from the very crucial decades after the end of WW II –‘50s, ‘60s,‘70s- until today, for the reception and settlement of internal immigrants, resulting in the unplanned urban development at the periphery of the large urban centers.

B) The lack, of measures for the protection of the countryside. Rural regions, and particularly cultivated areas (representing approximately 25% of the national territory) are not protected from “disturbing” activities (nuisances) that have as consequence the construction of buildings to be used for other purposes, e.g. industry, tourism etc. A relevant matter is the existing vagueness in the definition of forest areas (due to the lack of forest maps). These forest areas, theoretically, are protected by law but in reality they are trespassed and built-up.

C) There was not sufficient use of certain legislative means and mechanisms for urban development, as was the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) or the possibility of legal urban development (in terrains larger than 15 hectares) by private interests- something which was provided from the Urban Development Legislature. In the contrary there were infringements of other legislative tools, as the Urban Development Control Zone- UDCZ, which was introduced by Law No.1337/1983, forbidding the building on small properties in order to limit sprawling and unplanned extension of cities in the surrounding rural area. In particular in the Athens – Attica

region, which is considered, in its entirety, a UDC zone, it is forbidden to build on terrains under 2,0 hectares (outside city plans).

Particularly, on the use of the Urban Development Control Zone, we must mention that Law provided for fundamental regulations for limiting the urbanization, as is the designation of limits for partitioning properties, the increase of the surface of terrains to be built, the right of preemption by the State for buying or selling terrains in order to create a land bank, the forbidding of tree cutting without previous permission, the forbidding of land filling, etc.) The UDCZ was designated simultaneously with the elaboration and approval of the general urban development plan of every city, in order to fend off sprawl to the surrounding area, as well as for sensitive natural areas, so that they would be protected from illegal building. Never-the-less, there were strong opposition to the enactment of UDCZ and even transgressions to its implementation mainly through the delay of elaboration of the relevant studies. This resulted in the speeding up of the construction of buildings – in the particular areas- by their owners, so that they may finish before the new and more strict building regulations come into power. The result was the building expansion and urbanization around cities and other sensitive areas, as were the coasts or places of natural beauty attracting secondary residence and tourist activities. Such an example is the development of the coastal zone where, due to the lack of policies and programs of spatial development, we see that a huge wall of concrete is created along the seashore of the Greek coastline.

D) The unsuitability of building regulations in rural areas and the construction of roads in the countryside out of the formal town plans and legally built up areas and generally the lack of a cohesive land policy.)

Based on the existing bibliography a brief history of the evolution of building regulations in countryside, i.e. in areas “outside city plans”, is cited below:

- During the period 1923-1928, the Law states that in a zone of 500 meters from the boundary of the approved city plan, building construction is allowed only for activities that are not allowed to take place inside the city or should be outside the city plan (that is, industrial buildings, storehouses for agricultural products, stables, hospitals and charitable institutions or educational establishments). Building construction, at the beginning, was possible in terrains having a size between 0,2 -0,8 hectares, depending on their use, but gradually it is established at a lower level (0,2 hectares). Beyond the zone of 500 meters, the possibility of building is allowed in terrains of 0,4 hectares for any category of land use.

-In 1952, housing is allowed outside the city plan but only as a supplemental use to rural and stock –farm buildings.

- In 1955, the speedy recognition of municipal roads is promoted. Along these roads habitations are allowed to be built and as a consequence illegal roads began to be constructed in the countryside.

- In 1955, in Attica, with the passing of the law “forbidding the expansion of city plans in the basin of Athens and building regulations in the basin of Athens” there is a new restriction: terrains must have at least a size of 0,4 hectares (building allowance) on all areas, even for those that are along roads. In addition the opening of new municipal roads is under strict inspection and control.

-In 1960, there is no more difference in building regulations “inside and outside of the zone of 500 meters” since it is allowed to build houses, offices and stores (all kind of land uses .

-In 1962, the permission of building in terrains of 0,2 hectares (2000 M²) is generalized, and exceptionally, in some particular cases, building is allowed in terrains of 1200 M² or 750 M² - when they are along public roads.

-In 1967, with the Royal Degree “On buildings for summer vacation” it is allowed to construct pre-fabricated houses at terrains of 0,2 hectares.

-In 1968, the dictatorial regime of that time, increases of the number of floors as well as the built-up surface of buildings. There is also an increase of the built-up surface for special uses (45% for industries and 30% for agricultural storehouses).

-In 1978, with Presidential Degree the various Laws and Regulations are codified and the building of houses in rural areas is restricted

-In 1992, Law No 2052, provides the possibility of splitting-up the volume of buildings creating new problems (e.g. Instead of having one building we have now two or more separate –smaller- constructions in the same terrain).

We notice that during the 85 years of Greek urban policy, the institutional framework is becoming with the passing of each year more flexible and loose with only some exceptions of strict regulations against sprawl that never-the less prove the rule.

5. Suggestions towards an anti-sprawl urban policy

Using as a rule the above findings we may specify the main directions of action that target to the limiting of sprawl and the uncontrolled urbanization and contribute to the rational housing projects in areas suited to that purpose, in combination with the adoption of environmentally friendly mechanisms, that in their turn will contribute to the integration of the environmental cost of these projects. As a consequence, the proposed set of measures and actions should include:

-Administrative type measures, as it is the modernization of the public sector and the increase of controls to check illegal building constructions

-Interventions in real estate market with more rational tax regulations, as is the adjustment of surplus value tax, the “green” tax and VAT with the aim to equally distribute profits and losses of land owners from urban development.

-Offering of sufficient housing programs or appropriately urbanized land.

-Appropriate use of the redistribution mechanisms (Transfer of Development Rights).

-Limiting zoning which has a binding and regulatory character (leading to the selectively unequal rise of land prices) and the designation of large areas of rather mixed uses.

- Establishment of an explicit and transparent procedure of development project selection (on a basis of certain criteria) so that real investments will be subsidized and not the land speculation.

-Strict controls on the construction of roads in the countryside through comprehensive spatial plans (at local or regional levels).

-Introduction of ‘partial’ land development, especially for the zones of special use and activities, something that is provided by law since many years but was never implemented

- Actions of landscape restoration I in selected places at local level, as landscape is the unifying element of the environmental and spatial components in a specific geographical entity (Gurrieri F Van Riel S.- Sembrini M 2005, Clementi A 2002)

6. Epilogue

In Greece there is always the dilemma: Either to have a general and flexible legislature that it is very easy to be transgressed by everybody, or –and more common- to have rigid, unbending and highly detailed legislature that it cannot be implemented. In both cases there are problems arising. For this reason, the above proposed actions try to combine flexibility with effectiveness; to give a positive answer to the need for productive investments, to support the rule of right that governs every law abiding country and at the same time to protect the natural and cultural environment of Greece. This depends and is directly related, not with the managerial capabilities of the system of spatial planning, but to the political and ideological beliefs of those that take the decisions on matters of planning and at the same time on the social culture that defines the behavior and the attitudes of the citizens.

In the framework of globalization and its economic and cultural repercussions the phenomenon of sprawling is spreading to all countries. For this reason it is not by chance that at least the official policies of the European Union are aiming to confront it by promoting the policy of the compact city. Especially in an era that the effect of climate changes make necessary the control of the urban expansion of sprawling in terms of quality and quantity.

In Greece the uncontrolled building in every corner of the Greek territory and the creation of an amorphous space, proves that until now there is not a consistent policy on the matter and even though there are a lot of declarations and proclamations, the environment and the landscape is constantly degraded. For this reason there is an earnest need to take decisive actions along the cluster of proposals mentioned above so that we may plan and implement a new strategy of spatial development.

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