

Austerity Infrastructure, Gentrification, and Spatial Violence: A Ceaseless Battle over Urban Space in Exarcheia Neighbourhood

Elia Apostolopoulou 

*Centre for Environmental Policy, Imperial College London, London, UK,
e.apostolopoulou@imperial.ac.uk*

Danai Liodaki

*Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig, Germany & Leipzig University, Leipzig,
Germany, d_liodaki@leibniz-ifl.de*

Abstract: In this paper, we aim to understand how long-term state neglect of public infrastructure coexists with a renewed emphasis on profit-driven infrastructure development in urban contexts. We focus on Exarcheia, an Athens neighbourhood known for its radical character, where a lack of public infrastructure investment aligns with plans for new transport infrastructure and urban regeneration. Using a participatory action research approach and engaging in collective discussions with grassroots organisations opposing these plans, we argue that prolonged austerity following the 2008 economic crisis has redefined state-funded public infrastructures, aligning them more closely with the speculative interests of real estate, commercial, and infrastructure capital. The interplay of austerity infrastructure, gentrification, and spatial violence manifests as a form of slow urbicide, paving the way for revanchist urban regeneration that prioritises the commercial exploitation of urban space at the expense of the historical, political, and cultural identities of affected neighbourhoods.

Περίληψη: Σε αυτή την εργασία επιδιώκουμε να κατανοήσουμε πως η μακροχρόνια κρατική παραμέληση των δημόσιων υποδομών συνυπάρχει με την εκ νέου έμφαση στην ανάπτυξη υποδομών με γνώμονα το κέρδος σε αστικά περιβάλλοντα. Επικεντρωνόμαστε στα Εξάρχεια, μια γειτονιά της Αθήνας γνωστή για τον ριζοσπαστικό της χαρακτήρα, όπου η έλλειψη επενδύσεων σε δημόσιες υποδομές ευθυγραμμίζεται με τα σχέδια για νέες υποδομές μεταφορών και αστική ανάπτυξη. Χρησιμοποιώντας μια συμμετοχική ερευνητική προσέγγιση δράσης και συμμετέχοντας σε συλλογικές συζητήσεις με οργανώσεις βάσης που αντιτίθενται σε αυτά τα σχέδια, υποστηρίζουμε ότι η παρατεταμένη λιτότητα μετά την οικονομική κρίση του 2008 έχει επαναπροσδιορίσει τις δημόσιες υποδομές που χρηματοδοτούνται από το κράτος, ευθυγραμμίζοντάς τις ακόμα περισσότερο με τα κερδοσκοπικά συμφέροντα του κτηματομεσιτικού, εμπορικού κεφαλαίου και του κεφαλαίου υποδομών. Η αλληλεπίδραση των υποδομών λιτότητας, του εξευγενισμού και της χωρικής βίας εκδηλώνεται ως μια μορφή αργής «αστικοκτονίας», ανοίγοντας το δρόμο για μία ρεβανσιστική αστική αναγέννηση που δίνει προτεραιότητα στην εμπορική εκμετάλλευση του αστικού χώρου εις βάρος των ιστορικών, πολιτικών και πολιτιστικών ταυτοτήτων των πληττόμενων γειτονιών.

Keywords: infrastructure, regeneration, touristification, gentrification, austerity urbanism, urbicide

Introduction

I suggest that the “life” one has to lead is always a social life, implicating us in a larger social, economic, and infrastructural world. (Butler 2015:22–23)

The new urban frontier motif encodes not only the physical transformation of the built environment and the reinscription of urban space in terms of class and race, but also a larger semiotics. Frontier is a style as much as a place, and the 1980s saw the fad-dishness of Tex-Mex restaurants, the ubiquity of desert decor, and a rage for cowboy chic, all woven into the same urban landscapes of consumption. (Smith 1996:14)

In May 2022, a severe incident occurred in a playground in Exarcheia, Athens, where a five-year-old child was injured by a falling metal door, necessitating hospitalisation. This event served as a stark reminder of the persistent neglect of public playgrounds and recreational spaces in Athens and the deplorable state of public infrastructures across the country.¹ Greece’s grim experiences throughout 2023, including the disastrous floods in Thessaly in September,² the bridge collapse in Patras in July,³ and most emblematically, the tragic train collision in Tempi in February,⁴ underscore the severe repercussions of systemic dereliction. Collectively, these events, along with numerous others provide compelling evidence that, 15 years after the global financial crisis of 2008, Greece remains ensnared in a vicious cycle of deepening neoliberal policies, unrelenting austerity measures, and a persistent state of disinvestment crisis (Apostolopoulou and Kot-sila 2022; Arampatzis 2017; Kapsali 2023). The compounding effect has been a pronounced deficiency in the country’s public infrastructures, as evidenced by the widening infrastructure gap (Dalakoglou 2016; Petrova and Prodromidou 2019) that now reverberates throughout every facet of daily life, leading many people across the country to argue “in Greece we live by lack”.⁵

While the severity of the above is pronounced in Greece, it is by no means unique to the country. Austerity policies have caused radical transformations in public infrastructures globally, affecting communities unevenly and exacerbating territorial injustices (Bear 2020; Brenner et al. 2012; Donald et al. 2014; Gray and Barford 2018). The acute lack of essential public infrastructures is a prevalent topic also in the global discourse on economic development and growth, even though it is interpreted rather differently. Multilateral development banks, the United Nations, the World Economic Forum, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and various governments, investors, construction companies, and consultancies are increasingly using the term infrastructure gap to primarily refer to spending related to economic infrastructure, either overlooking critical aspects of social and public infrastructure, such as education, health, welfare, and environmental protection (McKinsey Global Institute 2013, 2016), or emphasising the need to turn such infrastructures into profit-generating asset classes (Sol 2019; Whiteside 2016). The infrastructure gap has been used to justify the urgent need for infrastructure investment and private sector involvement as the primary drivers of economic growth (Dimitriou and Field 2019) and, despite some slowdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has fuelled a relentless “infrastructure rush” (Hildyard and Sol 2017). Massive infrastructure mega-projects

have been proliferating on a global scale, extracting wealth from communities, and reshaping their territories in the name of capital accumulation (Sol 2019), with expectations that this infrastructure boom will double by 2030 (Mercer and IDB 2017). This is becoming apparent in Greece as well, exemplified by initiatives such as the Hellenikon regeneration project and Piraeus port expansion (Apostolopoulou *forthcoming*).

Starting from the above observations, in this paper we aim to understand the paradox of long-term state neglect of public infrastructures coexisting with a renewed emphasis on infrastructure provision, particularly in urban contexts. To achieve this, we engage with literature on austerity urbanism (Peck 2012), austerity infrastructure (Whiteside 2016), and austerity gentrification (Annunziata and Lees 2016), alongside geographical research on urban spatial violence (Coward 2007; Shaw 2019). Our contribution is twofold. First, we seek to elucidate the complex relationship between austerity infrastructure and broader urban regeneration and gentrification strategies in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis. This involves dissecting the multifaceted dynamics of public infrastructure provision, gentrification, and the securitisation of urban space (Mendes 2018; Mitchell 1995; Zuk et al. 2018). Second, we aim to expose the increasingly contentious and contradictory (Graham and McFarlane 2015) roles of otherwise essential public infrastructure, such as metro lines and anti-flooding measures. We examine the incentives behind their implementation and how these projects disrupt everyday urban life, exacerbate social, spatial, and environmental injustices, and provoke grassroots opposition. Our analysis advances the scholarship on austerity gentrification and austerity infrastructure by arguing that the simultaneous state neglect of essential infrastructures and emphasis on profit-driven infrastructure projects has fundamentally transformed state-funded public infrastructure, aligning them more closely than ever with the speculative interests of real estate, commercial, and infrastructure capital. We assert that this phenomenon constitutes a form of urbicide, mirroring a revanchist urban revitalisation strategy that prioritises gentrification, beautification, and touristification at the expense of critical public infrastructures necessary for social reproduction eroding the historical, political, and cultural identities of affected neighbourhoods. By highlighting this dual process, we contend that contemporary urban transformation is deeply influenced by these conflicting trends as indicated by our research in different places across the South and North in the last decade (Apostolopoulou 2021; Apostolopoulou and Liodaki 2021).

We explore these issues by focusing on Exarcheia, a prominent neighbourhood in Athens known for its unique cultural, political, and social character where a persistent lack of public infrastructure investment coincides with plans for a new metro station in the neighbourhood's central square and a regeneration plan for Strefi Hill, one of the city's few remaining green open spaces. While these developments are not unique to Exarcheia, our focus on this neighbourhood is significant due to its historical role as a hub for radical social counter-hegemonic movements in Greece. These projects—if materialised—are anticipated to significantly transform the neighbourhood and have sparked considerable opposition from residents, who have organised into grassroots collectives to prevent their

implementation. In empirical terms, our research aims to amplify the voices of Exarcheia residents who collectively challenge the transformation of their neighbourhood in line with corporate interests. To achieve this, we conducted several interviews, informal talks, and group discussions from January 2021 to December 2023 with several members of two grassroots organisations, the “No Metro in Exarcheia Square” assembly and the “Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill”, as well as residents actively involved in the public struggle against the metro station and the regeneration of the Hill. The empirical research was conducted during the continuation of these struggles. While these two organisations may differ in their practices and public discourse, they share a common objective of safeguarding public spaces, green areas, and infrastructures in Exarcheia. Both movements have garnered support from grassroots organisations and citizens, including scientists, lawyers, and artists, from across Athens, showcasing a broader solidarity for the events unfolding in Exarcheia. Our research utilised a range of methods, including visual methods such as photography, analysis of key policy documents, and participatory action research. It also entailed long-term autoethnography, involving living, working, socialising, and actively engaging in political activism within the neighbourhood for over a decade. All quotes mentioned in the text come from members of the aforementioned organisations or residents actively involved in the social struggle in the area. Amid ongoing legal battles in the area, we intentionally refrain from providing further details about the interviewees’ identities to protect their anonymity. It is important to point out that our approach does not imply that the interests among Exarcheia residents are homogenous. We acknowledge that some advocate for increased police action against certain activities, others aim to minimise police presence whereas some have economic interests in short-term rentals and tourism. However, our paper deliberately focuses on mobilised residents and activists engaged in collective struggles against the regeneration of the Exarcheia area. This is in line with our participatory action research approach (Kindon et al. 2007), which is politically engaged rather than neutral and aims to actively involve communities, especially those whose voices have been silenced, or excluded, in the research process, to address spatial, social, economic, and environmental challenges within specific geographical contexts.

Infrastructure, Gentrification, and Spatial Violence in an Era of Persisting Austerity Urbanism

Following the 2008 financial crash, the crisis evolved from a banking sector issue into a fiscal crisis affecting state finances, prompting fundamental changes across government levels and policy sectors in several countries. This transformation was particularly evident in Southern European economies. Bailout packages from the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were grounded in a neoliberal ideology that emphasised fiscal responsibility as a means to address and prevent crises (Lapavistas et al. 2010). Despite initial debates, EU governments enforced stringent austerity and retrenchment strategies (Cahill 2011; Calvário et al. 2017; Harvey 2011). The economic crisis has evolved into an urban crisis with significant social, spatial, economic, and environmental impacts on urban residents

(Peck 2012; Theodore et al. 2011). Austerity urbanism emerged as a term to emphasise how austerity's effects are felt most intensely at the urban level (Di Felicianantonio 2016; Kim and Warner 2022; Tonkiss 2013). Peck (2012:631) defines austerity urbanism as a socially regressive form of scalar politics that shifts costs and risks from central governments to low-income urban areas vulnerable to budget cuts. While urban movements against austerity and fiscal revanchism have arisen, turning cities into hubs for radical counter-hegemonic politics (Davies and Blanco 2017; Harvey 2012), prolonged austerity has ushered in a revanchist urban development phase aligned with neoliberal and often authoritarian urbanism (Apostolopoulou and Liadaki 2021; Bruff 2014; Tansel 2019). Austerity measures have paved the way for phenomena like austerity gentrification (Annunziata and Lees 2016) and aggressive touristification of urban public spaces (Pettas et al. 2022), echoing the neoliberal idea that private investment and commercialisation drive prosperity in strained economies. Class, gendered, sexual, and racial inequalities have long been inherent in capitalism (Derickson 2017; McKittrick 2011), rooted in historical geographies shaped by European colonialism (McIntyre and Nast 2011; Pulido 2017). Austerity, as a political project akin to neoliberalism (Harvey 2005), intensifies such inequalities almost by definition (Gillespie et al. 2021; Peck 2012; Shaw 2019) alongside urban precarity and marginalisation as evidenced in declining incomes and rising capital gains (Piketty 2014). In Greece, this has been accompanied by state abandonment (Peck 2012), privatisations, and cuts to public investment and social welfare, including education, healthcare, wages, pensions, and environmental protection (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015). Austerity has gradually become normalised in many countries, including Greece, fostering a pervasive sense of financial melancholia (Montgomerie 2019).

The erosion of the public sphere through outsourcing, marketisation, and privatisation of public services and social support systems (Peck 2012) has been accompanied by investments in infrastructure and regeneration projects whose benefits for the social majority are dubious. Whiteside's (2016) analysis on austerity infrastructure is pertinent here, shedding light on the motivations and consequences of such endeavours. Indeed, austerity now coincides with attempts to spur economic growth through investment in public infrastructure, endorsed by organisations like the OECD, the IMF, G7 nations, and private consultants, promoting public works as a remedy for economic stagnation and strained public finances (*ibid.*). Many of these initiatives extend the public–private partnership model, aligning with neoliberal tendencies favouring privatisation in response to financial constraints. The funding and spending sources for public projects are thus undergoing a shift as private financing increasingly covers the costs of public infrastructure. The elevation of public infrastructure as an investment class or new asset (Sol 2019) has reshaped it significantly: infrastructure, which typically requires long-term (urban) planning and financing, is now subject to short-term financial logics, resulting in global infrastructure decay (Muehlebach 2016). In this context, financially constrained municipal governments are more reliant on public–private partnerships facing a significant weakening of their negotiating power.

In the era of austerity, urban planning has thus become increasingly intertwined with corporate interests, leading to a greater influence of private entities and capital interests in shaping and managing urban public spaces. This influence has resulted in the commercialisation and privatisation of urban areas, often creating hybrid private–public spaces (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki 2021). Public–private partnerships are touted as effective for securing urban space (Raco 2016) but driving profit-oriented urban regeneration, blurring the lines between public and private space. As Bodnar (2015) argues, the fusion of private management, public ownership, and public access has become the norm in public space revitalisation, with privately owned public spaces becoming predominant (see also Németh 2009; Staeheli and Mitchell 2016). In this context, vital public urban infrastructure is increasingly designed more to stimulate gentrification and touristification rather than addressing residents' needs. This conforms to the prevailing narrative that both processes are remedies for the economic development of struggling cities (Estevens et al. 2023; Mendes 2018; Panton and Walters 2019).

Crucially, the formation of austere societies is intricately linked to the uneven development of urban space (Lefebvre 1991), resulting in a distinctive manifestation of spatial violence perpetuated and exacerbated by gentrification (Annunziata and Lees 2016), profit-driven regeneration, and austerity infrastructures. Contrary to mainstream narratives, gentrification has a historical track record of displacing low-income residents and reshaping neighbourhoods (Albet and Benach 2017), both physically and in terms of people's subjective experience of loss of place (Atkinson 2015; Gillespie et al. 2021; Slater 2004). Furthermore, infrastructures embody various forms of injustice (Apostolopoulou 2023) and violence (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012) that affect the urban experience (Graham and McFarlane 2015). Under austerity urbanism and austerity gentrification, communities across Europe have witnessed not just the abandonment of their homes, hospitals, parks, libraries, nurseries, and schools, but also a profound alteration of their neighbourhoods, as gentrification entails a "larger semiotics" (Smith 1996:14). The consequences of this gradual transformation become deeply ingrained in society, eroding foundational elements for human (co)existence, leading scholars to talk about a form of uricide,⁶ namely city-killing, as a spatial framework for understanding "the worldly damage of austerity" (Shaw 2019:977) and revanchist urban regeneration and gentrification (see Carrión Mena and Cepeda Pico 2023). This has sparked urban struggles and social-environmental movements across Europe (Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez 2018; Mendes 2018; Pecile 2022; Tulumello and Allegretti 2021) that increasingly unite various demands related to housing, access to public space, green areas, and social reproduction, weaving together social, spatial, and environmental injustices (Apostolopoulou 2022). Here we explore one such movement that seeks to disrupt these processes at their outset by openly challenging two infrastructure projects aimed at transforming the radical character of the Exarcheia neighbourhood and displacing its current residents, both physically and psychologically (Stenning 2020).

Unveiling Exarcheia Neighbourhood: Where a Place Embodies Radicalism

Exarcheia has long been a favoured destination among young people, boasting a unique identity shaped by its rich history. This distinctiveness has earned widespread recognition from the media, as well as from Athens' residents and scholars (e.g. Dalakoglou and Vradis 2011; Karlin 2022). Exarcheia is renowned as a vibrant hub of political activism, social movements, and cultural events, eliciting diverse and contrasting narratives over time. Conservative governments and mainstream media have consistently expressed dissatisfaction with Exarcheia's radical character, often portraying it as an "abaton"—a place inaccessible to those deemed unwelcome—and seeking to lay blame on anarchist and leftist groups for instances of violence, drug-related activities, and property destruction. Through this narrative, Exarcheia is presented as a perilous area lacking law enforcement, where violence thrives, resembling a segregated space from which certain social groups are excluded (Vradis 2012). On the other hand, more progressive social groups present the neighbourhood as a liveable centre of solidarity, symbolising community, self-organisation, and grassroots mobilisation.

The current identity of the Exarcheia neighbourhood can be traced back to the events of 1973 (Karlin 2022). At that time, the historic building of the National Technical University of Athens became a focal point of resistance against the dictatorship imposed in Greece in 1967. The university was occupied by students, leading to a violent uprising that is credited with contributing to the downfall of the dictatorship a year later in 1974. Since then, the neighbourhood has played a vital role in countercultural movements during the 1970s and 1980s, witnessing the emergence and flourishing of squats and social, political, and cultural spaces. However, the history of the neighbourhood has also been marred by severe incidents of police brutality, reflecting a recurring pattern of excessive state-driven spatial violence in the area. Notable examples include the violent suppression of the occupation of the National Technical University of Athens in 1973, as well as the killings of the teenagers Michalis Kaltezas and Alexandros Grigoropoulos by the police in 1985 and 2008, respectively. The latter incident sparked one of the most significant uprisings in Greece since 1973, playing a pivotal role in shaping not only the political landscape of Exarcheia but also the entire country in the subsequent years (Petropoulou 2010). Following this political uprising, the neighbourhood evolved into a hub for political collectives, grassroots initiatives, and the emergence of new alternative political spaces and urban commons. This vibrant character began to attract tourists, solidarians, researchers, and digital nomads interested in experiencing life in a "radical" neighbourhood. Consequently, Exarcheia's radicalism became a tourist attraction in-itself, with Airbnb experiences offering alternative tours of politically significant spots in the neighbourhood (see Pettas et al. 2022), and gentrifiers attracted by the alterity of the place (see also Schlichtman and Patch 2014). Meanwhile, mainstream media continued to portray Exarcheia negatively, emphasising the need for "regenerating", "sanitising", and "policing" the neighbourhood (Vradis 2012).

What is Changing in Exarcheia: Insights from Two Contested Projects

In recent years, Exarcheia has undergone a complex economic and social transformation. Rising rent prices have led to the gradual exclusion of economically vulnerable residents, creating political pressure to reshape the neighbourhood's character (Balampanidis et al. 2021; Pettas et al. 2022). This has been accompanied by the right-wing New Democracy government's strategic attempt to evacuate occupied spaces many of which have been actively supporting the urban poor, including refugees and homeless people. Two significant steps in the area's transformation have been the construction of the new metro station on Exarcheia Square and the regeneration of Strefi Hill. Both have been instrumental in contributing to the ongoing process of touristification and gentrification of Athens' city centre over the past decade (Alexandri 2015), with Exarcheia often mentioned in international media as an emblematic example of the latter.⁷

The metro station is financed by Elliniko Metro S.A. established in 1991 as a legal entity of private law in the form of a "société anonyme" with the Greek state being its sole shareholder. Importantly, up to 49% of the shares are transferable to natural or legal entities of the private sector and can be introduced in the Athens Stock Exchange.⁸ Its story traces back to 2009 when the Regulatory Plan for Athens already earmarked Exarcheia Square as the designated site for a future metro station. However, at that time, priority was given to connecting the airport to the city, thereby delaying the development plans for Exarcheia for eight years. Only in 2017 did the construction of the metro station resurface, commencing a largely flawed consultation process that failed to engage the residents. In April 2019, urban planners from the National Technical University of Athens participated in an independent committee that concluded that the best location for the new metro station would be near the Square but not directly on it. This alternative could have preserved the Square's public character and offered more favourable technical conditions while avoiding the complexities of constructing a curved station. Yet, this proposal was ultimately disregarded. Equally, a proposal from the Municipality of Athens Engineers Committee, aimed at redesigning the station's entrance to safeguard the Square's trees was also ignored. In 2021, construction plans once again resurfaced, and by August 2022, the entire Square had been cordoned off with imposing metal barricades to prevent resistance movements from disrupting the construction work (Figure 1).

Regarding the redevelopment of Strefi Hill, this is led and supported by PRO-DEA, the leading private real estate investment company in Greece, listed on the Athens Stock Exchange with total assets exceeding €3.0 bn.⁹ Importantly, the project is based on a collaboration with the municipality of Athens and was accepted in 2021 as part of the municipality's "Adopt Your City" programme, aiming to facilitate private–public collaborations in urban planning. The regeneration study was offered as a "donation" by PRODEA which was also willing to partly fund its implementation.¹⁰ It encompasses various landscape architecture interventions, such as cementing the Hill's upper part, constructing a cafeteria, and creating a concrete balcony "for city viewing" primarily targeting tourists. It also involves electromechanical installations, and geotechnical and environmental



Figure 1: The entrance to the metro station construction site at Exarcheia Square (photo by Elia Apostolopoulou)

interventions that include removing trees and vegetation from the hilltops and slopes as well as preparing a topographical plan, and various security measures like the installation of security cameras. The Municipality of Athens has been contributing to the funding with a budget that remained undisclosed and has been granting the necessary work permits. From the outset, PRODEA's involvement has triggered concerns among residents, notably exemplified by the previous Municipality's commitment to "safeguard" the project by keeping residents away from the Hill to prevent disruptions to construction. In this context, residents viewed security cameras as instruments for monitoring political activities. In response, the

Municipality and mainstream media¹¹ have put forth a narrative centred on “returning the hill to the people of Athens”.

As research participants have pointed out, these projects lack widespread acceptance in the neighbourhood. The participatory process for the metro station was poorly organised, and residents were not adequately informed or able to participate. In the redevelopment of Strefi Hill, no participatory process was followed at all. Notably, the recent local elections saw New Democracy lose its majority in Athens’ municipality to a PASOK-supported candidate. The incoming mayor, taking office in 2024, responded to ongoing protests by halting work on Strefi Hill. Acknowledging the widespread discontent and lack of democratic legitimacy, the new administration pledged to collaborate with residents on future redevelopment initiatives. Whether this will lead to substantial changes remains to be seen in the coming period.

Austere Worlds

Exarcheia, akin to numerous other neighbourhoods in Athens, has been profoundly affected by the austerity measures imposed as part of the Economic Adjustment Programme for Greece (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015). This has been translated into diminished budgets for both the state and municipalities, culminating in the abandonment or deterioration of vital community services, such as municipal health clinics, public schools, and urban green space, manifested, *inter alia*, in the loss of thousands of trees within a short period. The dearth of staffing and financial resources has given rise to myriad challenges, rendering everyday life arduous for residents. Public spaces suffer from neglect, lacking maintenance, repairs, adequate security, lighting, cleanliness, and proper care for the vegetation. As two members of the local collectives told us:

The neighbourhood is deteriorating and neglected overall. Schools are underfunded, pavements are crumbling, efforts to stop tree-cutting services are ongoing, and adequate lighting is lacking. Some time ago, a pipe broke and despite multiple calls from residents, authorities took three weeks to respond. Consequently, the entire street had a foul odour for nearly a month.

State abandonment is palpable on all fronts. An illustrative example is the recent tragic incident at the so-called “certified” playground on Strefi Hill. Rather than taking responsibility for the lack of adequately maintained playgrounds, the municipality shifted blame onto the mother, alleging negligence in caring for her kid.

In a context of a significant lack of green spaces, parks, and adequate public infrastructure for children’s play, Strefi Hill has become emblematic of the broader disregard for public spaces. A telling example is the persistent problem of flooding affecting the school located beneath the hill, a direct consequence of the municipality’s neglect in maintaining the drainage systems. As shared by members of the “Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill” during our discussions:

The hill was essentially abandoned ... There were no lights, so it was very dark in the evening, it lacked proper watering, and was strewn with obstacles, raising concerns

about fire hazards in summer and flooding risks in winter. Moreover, due to land corrosion, accidents occurred frequently.

Despite the municipality's assertions that the plan would establish essential infrastructure, like anti-flood and anti-fire measures, the regeneration plan for Strefi Hill was never intended to tackle the longstanding issues faced by the area and its residents. As residents told us:

The regeneration plan proposes to install lights primarily illuminating the forested section of the hill, raising environmental concerns about the impact on local fauna and avian species ... Our group, comprising engineers and ecologists, has recommended gentler approaches and small-scale interventions to address issues like hill erosion. However, PRODEA's proposal is overly aggressive, advocating for placing one ton of rocks along the hill's ridge. This approach not only contradicts the local landscape and ecosystems but also poses potential dangers. To execute this plan, they have already felled trees, including towering 30-metre eucalyptus that have served as natural safeguards against hill flooding for years.

The concerns voiced by activists and residents regarding the disconnect between the regeneration goals and the actual issues impacting ecosystems and communities mirror the sentiments shared by members of the "No Metro in Exarcheia Square" assembly who point to the contradiction between the government's insistence on constructing a new station and its neglect of the Square's ongoing deterioration:

In 2019, there was a noticeable rise in drug dealing and criminal activities around Exarcheia Square and throughout the neighbourhood. Strangely, despite a heavy police presence no action was taken. This pattern led us to suspect a deliberate effort to degrade the neighbourhood. This situation persists with the metro station project, as the police seem solely focused on safeguarding construction and show minimal concern for other community issues.

Indeed, the construction of the new metro station has further aggravated the challenges experienced by the neighbourhood, intensifying residents' sense of abandonment by the state:

It is apparent that the primary objective of this plan is not to address the genuine public transportation needs of the community. The state of public transportation infrastructure in Exarcheia has remained stagnant, if not worsened, over the past two decades. We see this plan as a reflection of the area's ongoing gentrification rather than a response to our problems and concerns.

During our recent ethnographic research in December 2023, the severe neglect of public infrastructure in the neighbourhood became strikingly evident. Through photographic documentation, we observed extensive deterioration, including damaged roads, broken pavements, scattered open pipes on streets, litter in yards and lanes, mould, derelict lots, and buildings posing safety hazards for pedestrians (Figures 2, 3 and 4). These conditions make it nearly impossible for any citizen, especially older individuals, those in need, or caregivers with young children, to navigate the neighbourhood safely. The level of neglect is particularly



Figure 2, 3 and 4: Austere worlds—Exarcheia neighbourhood, December 2023 (photos by Elia Apostolopoulou)

concerning, especially when juxtaposed with the rising rents and tourist presence in every street, whereas the heavy police presence in the Square and ongoing construction work provide a stark contrast to the deteriorating state of public infrastructure.

Austerity Infrastructure and Austerity Gentrification: What is the Real Plan for Exarcheia?

As mentioned earlier, both the new metro station and the regeneration of Strefi Hill were initiated without consulting residents, disregarding principles of democracy and transparency. They bypassed provisions for public architectural competitions and environmental interventions, instead complying with conditions set by the donor company, in the case of the Hill, or the government's agenda. Significant opposition to the regeneration plans emerged not only from residents, but also from the Architects' Association, the Diplomatic Mechanics' Association of the Municipality of Athens, and other key stakeholders. The primary concern was not only the flawed decision-making process but also the very purpose and objectives of these plans. As research participants explained to us, it became evident to them almost from the beginning that both plans were part of the broader gentrification and touristification process that is altering Exarcheia's character,¹² impacting public access to urban space and nature, and worsening housing precarity:

We immediately rejected the intrusion of private interests into the public space of Strefi ... Initially, PRODEA claimed that they had no real estate interests. This was clearly a falsehood. We were aware of their sale of large buildings in the neighbourhood, but then we discovered they were marketing residencies as well. This led us to believe that they aim to transform the neighbourhood to align with their real estate objectives. After all, why would a real estate company involve themselves in the design of a public space if not for their own interests?

In parallel with state disinterest for public infrastructures, the rents are going higher, people are leaving, and we now have the problems in the Square and the Hill. They tell us that they are going to "beautify" the neighbourhood; in essence, they send a clear message that the neighbourhood will not be the same anymore.

Indeed, austerity policies and reduced public disinvestment have been succeeded by a period of intense touristification (see also Ojeda and Kieffer 2020; Sequera and Nofre 2018), with Exarcheia ranking high on Airbnb's list of desirable neighbourhoods¹³ and recently gaining recognition as one of the "coolest" neighbourhoods globally (Time Out 2023). This is part of a much broader trend: only within three years (from 2015 to 2018), Airbnb listings in Athens experienced a 475% growth (Balampanidis et al. 2021). People who have been living in Exarcheia for years cannot afford the rising cost of living in a neighbourhood that is attracting international tourists and digital nomads (Pettas et al. 2022):

There are more and more people living in Exarcheia with income from abroad. There is an antagonism, we cannot peacefully coexist, because we are not in the same social class. You are in Athens getting 6,000 euros per month and I am in the next apartment getting 800 euros.

Moreover, and relatedly, the persistence of the right-wing New Democracy government in siting the new metro station at the heart of Exarcheia Square cannot be fully comprehended without considering its deliberate attempt to reshape the neighbourhood's radical identity. Exarcheia has long been regarded as a "free" space where collective activities, solidarity networks, occupations, and political

activism can thrive, and the Square, despite its significant deterioration over the last decade, has remained a symbol of the area. As urban activists told us it is precisely this sense of collective belonging that the new plans are targeting to facilitate the area's transformation:

In this neighbourhood, we have become accustomed to more humane relationships and a fairer way of coexisting. They have a clear intention to undermine the ideological and political character of the neighbourhood, to showcase to their right-wing audience that they have "cleaned", "sanitised", and "depoliticised" Exarcheia. This is primarily a political performance.

The Hill is more than just a park or a wooded area; it holds political and social significance, which they intend to suppress. Recently, we've seen an influx of people from Northern countries who aren't just tourists but closer to what we might refer to as digital nomads. Along with the serviced apartments now found everywhere, the social geography of the area is also changing. The profile of politically engaged residents we would encounter on the streets is no longer as prevalent, and the possibility for young people and less wealthy families to find a decent flat in the area is diminishing.

There is a crucial point that deserves emphasis. Based on our long-term ethnographic research and discussions with activists and residents, the Square is not merely a construction area but can be likened to a battleground, primarily due to the presence of metal barriers and the continuous police presence in the neighbourhood's core. As a resident of Athens since my childhood, it was the first time that I felt intimidated by the police for just taking pictures of the Square in December 2023. This contrast is immediately felt in the stark difference between the construction in Exarcheia Square to that in Kolonaki Square, a nearby upscale Athenian neighbourhood just a few minutes away on foot. As one of our research participants expressed:

The overall appearance of the construction site is distressing; children are particularly affected by it. The decision to construct the metro in the Square entails the removal of all trees and the encircling of the entire area with sheet metal possibly for up to a decade. Can you imagine such a prolonged disruption? It feels as if they are forcing us to vacate the area so that others can take our place. Properties surrounding the Square have already started being sold to investment funds, exacerbating the sense of displacement and upheaval.

Similarly, the so-called regeneration interventions in Strefi Hill have been accompanied by parked patrol cars on footpaths, scattered rubble and ditches, damaged cobblestones and trees, destruction of bushes, displacement of animals, and cutting down of trees. There has also been daily monitoring of residents' access to the Strefi theatre, continuous 24-hour police surveillance, and prohibition of collective political activities. Research participants shared with us several incidents of police intimidation, including threats directed even at children who gathered on the Hill:

The presence of the police is constant, and they actively prevent us, as an assembly, from organising any collective activities. Interestingly, Erasmus students who arrange meetings on the Hill on Saturday mornings are allowed to gather there. When we

asked them why we were not granted the same permission, we were told that we “cannot enter the Hill in this way”. Essentially, this meant that we were not permitted to visit the Hill for political activities.

As mentioned earlier, excluding residents has been a common practice throughout the decision-making process, confirming concerns that the whole plan for Exarcheia was crafted to cater to profit-oriented urban development agendas, overlooking various alternative plans with technical aspects that could more effectively enhance the community’s use of public space. PRODEA’s role in the regeneration underscores this, as highlighted by research participants:

Our fundamental argument about Strefi Hill is that when public space is entrusted to the design of a private company, it effectively excludes the people. The process bypasses the municipality, which is meant to be a body close to the community. Ideally, we should have control over its decisions or, at the very least, the power—in principle—to exert influence. However, when a private company is given authority, as citizens, we have no means to participate in the decisions regarding the use of public space.

As members of the community collective opposing the Hill’s regeneration explained to us, their demands centre around preserving the Hill as an unbounded, unfettered, liberated urban area that encourages social interaction, creativity, and solidarity surpassing the confines imposed by neoliberal urbanism. They argue that the government’s hypocrisy is evident in the destruction of the Hill’s ecosystems under the guise of regeneration coupled and the area’s gradual degradation over the years due to state neglect:

This government has a clear agenda to turn Exarcheia into a tourist destination. And this is already happening—during the summer, you walk on the neglected streets with broken and dirty pavements, and you see tourists, strolling around, and taking pictures of the graffiti ... Exarcheia serves as a gateway to connect the wider area of Athens to the already heavily touristified part of it.

What drives the transformation of Exarcheia is a political plan that envisions city residents no longer residing in the city centres. Cities will become transit points, catering to consumers, while those who seek to reclaim public spaces will be excluded, as they are perceived as obstacles to the realisation of these plans.

The residents of Exarcheia have long resisted the area’s privatisation, gentrification, and touristification by opposing specific development plans and policies while reclaiming public space and creating communal infrastructures, with the emblematic example the self-organised Navarinou Park (Figure 5) which was established in 2009 following the police killing of Alexandros Grigoropoulos (Kallianos and Fumanti 2021). The collectives against the metro and Hill regeneration emerged as responses to specific projects but have evolved to address broader issues about public urban space, sociomaterialities, and infrastructures through demonstrations, talks, cultural events, and legal actions. In 2022, 50 residents appealed to the Council of State to halt metro construction, leading to a temporary pause in tree cutting.¹⁴ As research participants explained in one of our group discussions:



Figure 5: Self-organised Navarinou Park; the protest banner reads “Regeneration should happen from the bottom. No to the destruction of Exarcheia.” (photo by Elia Apostolopoulou)

We believe that the reason they’ve temporarily halted the tree-cutting is due to our appeal to the Council of State, as this would cause permanent harm to the local environment. We might lose the trial, but it’s a lengthy process, and it might slow down the construction. They can’t proceed because if we win the case, and they’ve already cut down the trees, they’ll have to compensate the residents.

In parallel, the residents around the Strefi Hill also tried to stop the construction by questioning its legality. As they say:

We had to take this step because the challenges were becoming overwhelming for us. The entities we are up against are much more powerful than us; they have a massively

larger budget and significant influence. But our victories in some of these battles convinced the neighbourhood that the actions taking place on the Hill are indeed illegal.

As research participants explained to us, they are not only critiquing the two projects but also envisioning alternative urban futures. Their goal is to create a distinct atmosphere that stands apart from the effects of state neglect and the abandonment of the area. To achieve this, they emphasise the importance of establishing urban planning boundaries, implementing regulations on rental rates and Airbnb usage, and initiating a collaborative dialogue on public spaces, green areas, and infrastructures. Despite government attempts to divert the public discourse, they remain committed to shaping a positive transformation in their neighbourhood.

Conclusion: A Revanchist Austere City in Its (Un)making

The end of the city, the dislocation of what was the finest work and dwelling place of man, gives us notice to create new works [*oeuvres*]. (Lefebvre 2016:112)

A historically radical neighbourhood, Exarcheia is becoming more and more of a tourist hotspot—but its character of resistance is not yet lost. (Time Out 2023)

Exarcheia serves as a lens through which we can understand the broader changes Athens has undergone in the post-2008 era. The construction of the new metro station and the Hill's regeneration are part of a larger trend including projects like the "Megalo Peripato" ("Long Walk") plan, the privatised regeneration of Omonia Square, the restoration of the Gini building at Athens Polytechnic, the redevelopment of the Archaeological Museum, and the sale of buildings along Patision Avenue and the broader Exarcheia area for hotel complexes and short-term accommodation. These developments, alongside persistent austerity and state abandonment, reveal an ongoing battle in crisis-ridden Athens regarding its current development and future trajectory (Massey 1994). This embodies two crucial dimensions. Firstly, there is a growing contradiction between state abandonment and disinterest in essential public infrastructures for social reproduction and the increasing emphasis on infrastructures that primarily serve profit-driven urban growth agendas. This creates a stark contrast: while there is now a surge in construction activities after the stagnation that followed the 2008 crisis, critical public infrastructure still remains neglected. This shift, manifested in diverse forms and across various spatiotemporal contexts, has been observed and theorised by several scholars as a reflection of a global departure from the spatial Keynesianism of the 20th century (see e.g. Apostolopoulou 2021; Brenner 2004; Hildyard and Sol 2017; Whiteside 2016). In Exarcheia, it is emphatically illustrated in the ongoing interventions in Strefi that primarily aim to enhance the neighbourhood's tourist and aesthetic appeal, as evident in the city viewing balcony, lighting installations, security cameras, and the clearance of the Hill's vegetation, while public infrastructure in the neighbourhood deteriorates. Secondly, and closely related to this escalating contradiction, the sources of funding and expenditure for public

infrastructure and the management of urban public space are being massively reconfigured by the advance of public–private partnerships and the heightened role of private investment. In Greece, the origins of this transformation can be traced back to the quasi-privatisation reform of 1999, which opened-up public urban infrastructure to speculation and capital accumulation (Karaliotas 2017). This transition consolidates and deepens the shift from managerial to entrepreneurial city paradigms (see Harvey 1989), emphasising economic growth, public–private partnerships (PPPs), and the creation of a business-friendly environment. This has led to a situation where various forms of public infrastructure now serve the political agendas of gentrification and tourism rather than prioritising urban residents' needs. Increased private investment comes at a price: it entails higher costs, reduced public control, and a focus on projects that prioritise commercial viability, prompting a restructuring of public infrastructure with a primary focus on revenue-generating projects (Whiteside 2016).

Here we argue that, under prolonged austerity, a crucial third dimension must be added to the above. In particular, we increasingly observe that even state-funded public infrastructure projects with no immediate private involvement, such as the metro station in Exarcheia Square, which could potentially alleviate longstanding urban traffic issues, are repurposed to drive neighbourhood transformation in alignment with the speculative interests of real estate companies and investors. The combination of these three dimensions has led to the design of essential public urban infrastructures in highly contentious ways that not only fail to improve urban life but also cause infrastructural violence (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012), disrupt everyday lives in the city, and worsen environmental and sociospatial injustices. This shift embodies a core aspect of Athens' broader transformation into a *revanchist austere city*, a place where not only "nature and humanity habitually take vicious revenge on a degenerate and profligate populace" (Smith 1996:208), but also highlights the contradictory nature of state intervention. After years of disinvestment and abandonment, the state's belated "care" is now directed against its citizens, mirroring a punitive rather than supportive role. This transformation exemplifies the complete redefinition of "public" interest, as seen in the conversion of central Exarcheia Square into a heavily securitised construction site. By highlighting these dynamics, we contribute to a deeper understanding of the dual function of public infrastructure under austerity: while ostensibly addressing urban issues, these projects are co-opted to serve speculative interests, further entrenching social inequities.

All the above transform urban areas into battle zones, almost inevitably prioritising public space management through control and policing strategies leading to eviction and displacement under the guise of urban revitalisation (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018), "purifying" urban spaces from "undesirable" individuals or groups. Historically linked with the privatisation and commercialisation of space (Lefebvre 1991), control and policing strategies are used to exclude certain social groups based on class, gender, and culture (De Backer et al. 2019; Mele 2016; Sandercock 2000) creating unwelcoming environments for the urban poor, as well as for immigrants, local ethnic communities, and culturally diverse populations (Low et al. 2009) and homogenising urban space to fit only the "desirable"

dominant subjects (Liodaki et al. 2024). In Exarcheia, this purification targets not only vulnerable and marginalised groups, but also long-term residents based on their ideological and political identity as evident in the criminalisation of grassroots movements and the policing of collective activities. The goal is to “neutralise” a radical neighbourhood to make it more appealing to investors while at the same time selling its radicalism as a tourist product. Interestingly, the neighbourhood’s crumbling infrastructure serves a very specific purpose in this context as it is used by the advocates of these interventions to label the area as abandoned and as an “abaton” that requires immediate state intervention. In essence, this rhetoric aims to justify gentrification portraying the metro and regeneration projects as benevolent efforts to modernise and rejuvenate the area sending a message for a broader transformation of the city. It is not coincidental that Exarcheia became a focal point for the current prime minister before the latest national elections, depicting it as a haven for “new generation terrorists” that he pledged to “cleanse” upon taking office (Karakoulaki 2019). Following New Democracy’s election victory and transition from the Syriza government, attacks on squats increased across the neighbourhood, portraying them as centres of criminality and disobedience. These actions aimed to dismantle solidarity spaces and have intensified enormously during the COVID-19 pandemic (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki 2021), symbolising an “urban cleansing” orchestrated by the privileged white middle class, deeply rooted in gentrification (Smith 1996:30). Conservative governments often view this as a display of state sovereignty and power,¹⁵ enforced through constant police surveillance and metal barricades as needed.

Crucially, as the case of Exarcheia shows, this intricate interplay of austerity infrastructure, gentrification, and securitisation can lead to a “slow urbicide” in the sense that spatial violence against the built environment (Coward 2007) and public infrastructures will ultimately affect people’s well-being. As Shaw (2019:979) argues, “slow urbicide is a violence against the material conditions of our coexistence: the buildings and social infrastructures by which the human condition flourishes or falls”. This gradual decay is evident in Exarcheia post-2008, with a steady erosion of public infrastructures, cultural history, and collective rights (see also Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019). If the proposed new projects materialise, they could redefine Exarcheia and, over time, the city of Athens, aligning with a neoliberal vision that not only is indifferent for existing everyday spaces and ecologies (Hitchen and Shaw 2019) but also prioritises tourism and consumerism while marginalising those who advocate for an alternative, communal use of public space or making them an attraction by urging tourists to visit Exarcheia now if they wish “a taste of Greece’s anarchic underground culture”.¹⁶ The convergence of austerity’s spatial violence with revanchist urban regeneration mirrors a logic of “letting die” for vulnerable or unwanted residents (Gillespie et al. 2021; Shaw 2019). It echoes Friedrich Engels’ concept of “social murder”, originally used to describe the deplorable living conditions of the working class in industrial England (Shaw 2019). We argue that in contemporary contexts, austere governments abdicate and relinquish their responsibility to nurture life by simultaneously abandoning and commercialising urban spaces. Previously diverse and vibrant areas are thus transforming into inhospitable “dead public spaces” (Mitchell 1995;

Sennett 1992) which despite remaining tourist attractions or gentrified “cool” places. This disconnection serves as a central motivation for governmental policies, which are centred around a new city vision that negates the existing urban fabric. This approach can be seen as a form of city-killing, leading to the gradual erosion of the city’s essence and identity to facilitate its transformation. This serves a quite central political purpose: to make these areas gradually disconnected from the communities that once thrived there so that they lack the collective will to resist against their exploitation.

Exarcheia, with its symbolic and political value rooted in its undisciplined character, holds a unique significance in this context. It serves as a stark reminder that



Figure 6: Book fair at Exarcheia Square organised by the residents; on the sheet metal, it’s written “Trees will remain in the square.” (photo by Elia Apostolopoulou)

if such changes can be imposed on a neighbourhood with a history of radicalism and community activism, seen as a stronghold against the gentrification and touristification of Athens, then no place is immune. Yet residents remain hopeful about reversing these trends, believing that the fight for urban space is not futile (Figure 6). Facing increasing authoritarianism, they persist in resisting, collaborating, and striving within social movements and legal battles, envisioning a more democratic and egalitarian urban future for their neighbourhood. This sentiment was evident in their recent “anti-gentrification” demonstration in the summer of 2023. As they passionately conveyed to us:

There is still a strong sense of community in Exarcheia. Despite being a small neighbourhood, we are tightly knit. We have group chats, and when something comes up, 30 people can gather in no time, with just one message. In our collective, we may get weary or stressed, but ultimately, we genuinely care for one another. Exarcheia offers intimacy. It's a place where diverse individuals can coexist harmoniously. That sense of belonging fuels our drive to fight for a radically different city.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ See: <https://www.902.gr/eidisi/gynaika/296867/hronia-i-egkatalipsis-paidikon-haron-kai-elytheron-horon> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

² See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/09/hundreds-of-people-rescued-from-flooded-villages-in-greece> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

³ See: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2023/07/23/breaking-bridge-collapses-near-the-city-of-patras-mega-tv-reports-two-dead/> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

⁴ See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64813367> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

⁵ See: https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/398108_apo-tyhi-zoyme-se-ayti-ti-hora; <https://www.provocateur.gr/prisma/23634/apo-tyxh-zoyme/>; and <https://www.ethnos.gr/greece/article/282391/zoymeapotyxhegklobismenosexoriotoyphlioy350anthropoiperpatoy10xlmgianerokaifaghto> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

⁶ While “urbicide” has also been used to refer to the effects of war (for a discussion of different definitions of urbicide, see Shaw 2019), we use it here to highlight the spatial violence of austerity, gentrification, and neoliberal urban restructuring. We are not thus drawing direct parallels to war zones but rather emphasising the intensity and violence of Exarcheia’s transformation. This clarification is important within the current historical context.

⁷ See for example: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/07/20/how-gentrification-is-taking-over-athens-city-center_6059968_4.html; and <https://www.ft.com/content/17343bd2-c8ab-444d-b356-4b9a46b0dd29> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

⁸ See: https://www.emetro.gr/?page_id=3978&lang=en (last accessed 17 September 2024).

⁹ See: <https://prodea.gr/en/the-company/> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

¹⁰ See: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561988846/lofos-strefi-pedio-egkatalipsis/> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

¹¹ See for example: <https://www.capital.gr/epixeiriseis/3520533/dimos-athinaion-kai-prodea-o-lofos-tou-strefi-epistrefei-xana-stous-katoikous-tis-athinas/>; and <https://www.>

iefimerida.gr/ellada/lofos-strefi-shedio-anaplasis-dimoy-athinaion (last accessed 17 September 2024).

¹² See also: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/17/residents-of-athens-lawless-exarchia-square-resist-metro-station-plan> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

¹³ See: <https://aestheticsofcrisis.org/2020/anti-airbnb-graffiti-in-athens/> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

¹⁴ 50 is the maximum allowed limit.

¹⁵ See also <https://www.archetype.gr/blog/arthro/o-kiklos-tis-omonias-epilegontas-to-schima-tou-parelthontos> (last accessed 17 September 2024).

¹⁶ See: https://www.emetro.gr/?page_id=3978&lang=en (last accessed 17 September 2024).

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