



HELLENIKON METROPOLITAN PARK - A new model of urban resilience for the city of Athens, Greece.

David Serero

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INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN



51 2005

Prospective Landscapes

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David Serero

HELLENIKON METROPOLITAN PARK, ATHENS, GREECE

International Competition: 2004

First Prize: Iterae, New York

Office of Landscape Morphology, Paris

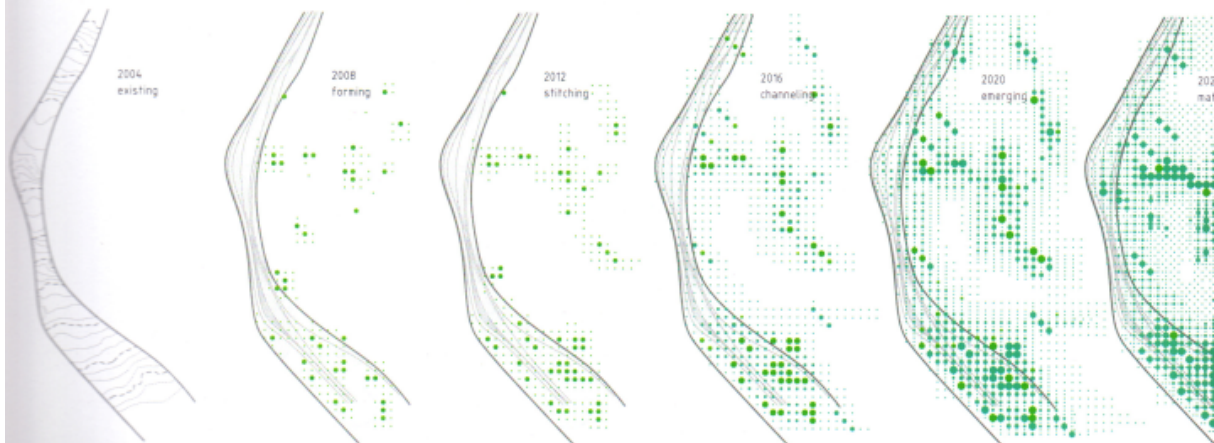
Client: Greek Ministry of Environment

Size: 550 hectares

Costs: 700 million Euros

HELLENIKON METROPOLITAN PARK

During the 2004 Olympic Summer Games in Athens, former Hellenikon Airport was the site of Olympic venues and is now to be converted into an urban park. The winning proposal suggests green corridors linking the city to the coast.



The implementation strategy and the topographic modifications are based on corridors (or softscapes) that are to be created to evolve along the channels of former creeks. The illustrations on page 29 show the programme, the runways, the edges and the softscapes.

HELLENIKON METROPOLITAN PARK

A new model of urban resilience for the city of Athens, Greece.

David Serero

During the 2004 Olympic Summer Games in Athens, former Hellenikon Airport was the site of Olympic venues and is now to be converted into an urban park. The winning proposal suggests green corridors linking the city to the coast.

Hellinikon Airport, which is located 20 kilometers away from Athens along the Mediterranean Sea coast, was closed in 2001 and later on became the site of Olympic venues for the 2004 Summer Games. In 2003, the Greek Minister for the Environment sponsored an open international competition *"to select a project for the realization of a 21st century urban park of exceptional scale and remarkable design"*. The program was to make provision for housing, offices and social services as well as a park with *"green areas and cultural, sports and leisure facilities"* on a 530 hectares site. The brief also required the new urban development to generate enough income to finance the park, and called for the restoration of the landmark airport terminal designed by american architect Eero Saarinen in 1960.

The competition results were announced in April 2004, and the team led by David Serero with OLM (The Office of Landscape Morphology) was proclaimed first prize winner. The team received the commission to transform the airport site into an urban park, possibly the *"biggest park in Europe"*, as stated by the Minister of Environment, Giorgos Soufias, on February 4, 2005.

The winning proposal involved a design process and a time sequence strategy based on rainwater collection and topographic modifications. A series of six corridors 200 to 300 meters wide are to be established to link Athens to the coast sixty meters below. These corridors or so-called "softscapes" will integrate a new drainage system as well as a road network, bicycle paths and walkways. The proposal focuses on the construction of new "ground" in both a formal and a theoretical way. The goal is to create Hellenikon Park by means of discrete topographic modifications based on the channels of creeks that were destroyed when the airport was built in 1950. The modified topography is to act both as a membrane to create soil and as a structure to organize the new urban program. The proposal suggests placing housing between each corridor as a catalyst for further housing as well as commercial and leisure development. The geometry ranges from horizontal to oblique, and the materials from hard to soft. The design strategy concentrates the effort of transforming the former airport at specific points along spines and perimeters.

SOFTSCAPES - Shaped topographic corridors to harvest water

The channels of the creeks, referred in the project, as "softscapes", consist of integrated walkways articulated around three main components: ground, water and plantings. Outdoor activities, cultural events and mixed-use urban development along these channels are the structure of the 530 hectares site.

The softscapes are links between the city of Athens and the park and combine several park usage and water management systems, whereby water is to be channelled and temporarily stored in these softscapes in times of heavy rain. A series of retaining walls, embankments and terraces will form the new ground surface of these corridors. Rather than projecting an artificial landscape onto the site, this approach will establish the basis of a natural ecosystem and use existing ground conditions to channel and distribute water throughout the park and reduce its maintenance. The northern softscape integrates the new highway and involves a set of berms and trees for acoustical protection and visual filter purposes.

HARDSCAPES - Unbuildable airport runways

The proposal regards the huge runways and the remaining airport facilities and concrete navigation devices as “objets trouvés” linking the park's main visual and circulation axis, as in the case of Le Nôtre's “grande perspective” in Versailles. Of the three main runways, the central one is planned to be kept as a pedestrian boulevard to link different areas, such as Glyfada and Alimos, and connect residential areas on the higher ground to middle-class zones.

The east-west runway, now partially covered by the Olympic village, is to be extended towards the sea, bridging over the highway to create a direct connection to the shore and the Agios Kosmas sport facility. The concrete runways will be preserved as pedestrian boulevard, and the lawns between the former runways are to become park spaces for lounging, playing and contemplation.

PHASING STRATEGIES - A 40 years plan for Hellenikon park

The scale of the site and the complexity of the programme mean that the project will have to be realized in successive phases. The topographic transformations will be the first part of the project to emerge, acting as spines across the park. Once they are established, vegetation, circulation and the cultural program will make them broader and wider over the years.

The planting strategy is based on strict use of collected rainwater and a limited number of species. Pioneer garigue-type plants will be planted first to colonize the site and prepare the ground for mature pine, olive and oak trees; these essences are to be planted in wet and dry areas according to their ecological type to create new habitats. This process will provide the softscapes with controlled diversity and underscore the scale of the runways.

The Hellenikon Metropolitan park design does not seek to predict every aspect of the 530 hectares but aims to create a set of conditions and devices (topographic transformations, water systems, and planting strategies) to enable the park to adapt to changing conditions over a forty-year period.

PARK AND CITY EDGES - Design of the perimeter of the park

Maximizing the frontage of the city in relationship to the park will increase their interaction and thus the real estate value of the development measures. This is to be achieved by inserting large and small undulations in the perimeters of the park, similar to the sinuous banks of a river delta, thus increasing the perimeter to maximise contact between the city edge and open space.

NEW URBAN DEVELOPMENT - Extension of collateral cities

The programme includes 120 hectares of mixed-use urban development along the highways curving through the park to the airport. This approach does not extend the city to the site but rather regards the development as an artificial growth within the park. As such, it entails development based on the park's undulating perimeters, and a great many open terraces. This process will generate a new topography, an elevated park or « jardin en hauteur », in a duplication and extension of Hellenikon Park. This process of inversion aims to dovetail the park environment with the new urban fabric in what can be called a **state of deep intricacy**.

PARK ACTIVATION - Multiplying parks usage

The existing Hellenikon site contains many incoherent structures, such as two churches, an airport hospital, a fire station, a control tower, the Saarinen terminal, five concrete runways, a baseball stadium, a fencing alley, an antique temple, a waste treatment plant, an Olympic square, a saltwater kayaking arena, and natural flora. Unlike Parc de la Villette, the result is a surface punctuated by disparate and incoherent elements that trigger unexpected encounters in a kind of "cadavre exquis".

The proposal forgoes the creation of an abstract grid of points for future events and activities but rather seeks to keep existing activities alive. At the same time, it is also plans to reclaim points of resistance to the topographic manipulation, such as hangars and abandoned facilities, and convert them into museums, theatres, and commercial centres. The morphing of the ground will generate undercuts, points of differentiation and support for interventions such as kiosks, picnic areas, shading booths, and newsstands, etc. The locations of these elements are not set down in the master plan but are to evolve in the existing grounds to enable maximum exchange between these activities and the open space. We envision these elements as "programmatic noise" punctuating the hardscapes and softscapes at arbitrary points.

CIRCUITS AND EXPERIENCE - Thousand kilometers of path and walkway

The main peripheral circuit path is twenty kilometres long (the equivalent of half a marathon race) and is to structure the different entrances to the park as well as links to several smaller circuits set up in the hardscape system for biking, rollerblades, jogging or pushing a baby stroller. The curves, surfacing and length of the paths will determine their uses. Other circuits will use shading devices and misting systems to adapt local climate of parts of the park for everyday uses, and will enable multiple and rich experiences of the park.

ART INSTALLATIONS - Ambiantal artworks by Olafur Eliasson , Erwin Redl and Thomas Saraceno

The airport's lighting typology is to be converted into a guide system for visitors. Some of the open areas next to the former runways will become pools of light, thus enabling a unique experience of the landscape. The light points will be a cluster of high-brightness LEDs set in colour-coded grids to indicate whether an area is given over to entertainment, sports, museums or just plain resting.

In conclusion, the overall strategy of the project's design will be implemented in three main phases. The first phase is concerned with **transforming the ground to create the**

topographic corridors that will structure the site and act as runoff retention areas. The second concerns **the realization of an intensive planting typology** capable of colonizing most of the softscapes. After this has taken place, slower extensive planting is to be carried out between each corridor. The third and final phase is programmed to take several years and is to result in **the mature aspect of the park at about the time when the park has been in existence for 40 years.**

Overall, **the project is not about projecting a new geography onto an existing geometry** or realizing an idealistic idea of nature, but **it seeks to use existing and specific on-site circumstances to create a park.** As such, the intention is as much concerned **with constructing a system capable of capturing local dynamics as it is with designing the actual park elements.** This design and time strategy involves the use of local resources to achieve the interaction and integration of artificial and natural landscape systems.

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