

Participation as a Global Urban Strategy Towards Resilience. A Case of ‘Benevolent Urbanism’

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Abstract

A recurring theme in urban planning and urban design, citizen participation has been adopted by international organisations (UNECE, 1998; UN, 2016; OECD, 2022) and, has recently, been reinstated in different conceptualizations, planning scales and political meanings, both through formal processes incorporated into legal planning frameworks or led by the local authorities and through citizen-led initiatives with varying degrees of interaction and conflict with formal urban policies (Cornwall, 2009; Mirafteb, 2004; Kapsali 2023).

The paper discusses the way participation in public space production is conceptualised in prominent urban strategies towards resilience as triggered, formulated and promoted globally by the Rockefeller Foundation Initiative “100 Resilient Cities”.

First, the emergence of philanthropic foundations as new social actors of urban development in Greece, is understood as part of a new governance regime formulated in the context of austerity politics. A brief examination of prominent projects of public space creation that were funded by foundations during the crisis illuminates specific hegemonic discourses endorsed through the foundations’ granting initiatives for public space. Subsequently, the paper focuses on the initiative of the Rockefeller Foundation and embarks on a critique of the way participation is conceptualized within the initiative and in the “Resilience strategies” of Athens and Thessaloniki. Notwithstanding their inclusive rhetoric, participation is instigated by an international benevolent foundation, facilitated by global consultants acting in parallel and not from within locally instituted planning processes. It is argued that within the framework of this global initiative, participation becomes a matter of techno-managerial “know-how” and its potential to unsettle unjust socio-environmental processes and act towards justice and democracy is questioned.

Keywords: participation, resilience, philanthropic foundations, public space

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Introduction

Participation in planning process is, as Day stated in 1997, ‘an essentially contested concept’. Arnstein (1969, p. 216) suggested that it is ‘the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set...In short, the means by which [the have-nots] can induce significant social reform which enables them to share the benefits of an affluent society’. She adds “participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process. It allows the powerholders to claim that all sides have been considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit’ (ibid). Participation therefore, according to Arnstein, entails some kind of social change. Otherwise, it reproduces existing power structures and becomes a process of legitimization of the choices of those holding power. During the last two decades, in the context of a perceived shift to open governance schemes in urban politics, it has become common understanding that citizen participation in the production of public space opens up urban space to a wide range of agents and points at the direction of democratic management and justice. However, as participation becomes part of new modes of, what Swyngedow (2005) calls “governance-beyond-the state” it is important to examine its different conceptualizations, and its role in relation to hegemonic urban policies.

A recurring theme in urban planning and urban design, citizen participation has been adopted by international organisations (UNECE, 1998; UN, 2016; OECD, 2022) and, has recently been reinstated in different conceptualizations, planning scales, methodologies and political meanings, both through formal processes incorporated into legal planning frameworks or led by the local authorities and through citizen-led initiatives with varying degrees of interaction and conflict with formal urban policies (Cornwall, 2009; MirafTAB, 2004; Kapsali 2023). Institutional changes and insurgent appropriations of public spaces (Hou, 2010, Kapsali, 2023) delineate a spectrum of agents that “invite” or “invent” (MirafTAB, 2004) participation of different forms in the production of public space. This paper draws attention on a different agent that has recently acquired prominence as a formulator of public urban space, an initiator of participation and a promoter of inclusive public spaces, namely philanthropic foundations. Philanthropic foundations of various sizes become actively involved through their granting actions in shaping urban space, thus promoting specific goals and objectives, principles and rationales of urban planning and design.

First, the paper outlines the socio-political framework of urban development within which this “benevolent urbanism” has risen in Greece. Subsequently, it discusses the way participation in public space production is framed in prominent urban strategies towards resilience as triggered, formulated and promoted globally by the Rockefeller Foundation initiative, ‘100 Resilient Cities’. The paper concludes questioning the instrumentality of participation, as conceptualised and promoted by the initiative, towards advancing democratic governance.

From state planning to “benevolent urbanism”

Big philanthropic foundations have a significant global presence not only by funding cultural and social projects but also by influencing the policy agenda of international

organisations on issues of development, health, education and poverty alleviation in the global South (Martens and Seitz 2015). Moreover, they have been actively involved in actually “shaping the agenda” of UN policies in the post-2015 period i.e. in the period after the 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 were declared. As stated in the UN website, “philanthropic organisations are increasingly active in working for international development. Although it is difficult to quantify their contribution, philanthropic organizations clearly have the capacity to risk more to test and introduce innovative approaches to specific sustainable development challenges” (UN ECOSOC 2013). Large charitable foundations, most of which were established in the US, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, are globally active with a strong influence on development orientations, while at the same time enjoying special tax benefits which are in effect subsidised by tax-payers (Reich 2018). Their “capacity to risk” lies on their lack of accountability and transparency as they do not have the mechanisms to “generate honest feedback from their grantees” (ibid. p. 146). This is related to a democratic deficit on the way decisions are made and money is granted (ibid.). Finally, big foundations of the 21st century have their “mantras” (Barkan, 2013, p. 639), their own policy preferences, promoting public-private partnerships, social entrepreneurship, market-driven, high technology projects with quantifiable outcomes. Big philanthropy governed like businesses, are called “venture philanthropies” (ibid p. 639). Despite their ethical missions and generosity, philanthropic foundations through their funding choices exercise power in a way that is characterised by great flexibility and operates alongside the mechanisms of democratic governance of the state (Barkan 2013; Reich 2018).

During the last decades, the increased interest of philanthropic foundations in cities and urban planning has contributed to the tendency for policy mobility and the global traveling of “best practices” (Montero, 2020). Just like in its other fields of activity, philanthropy has its own “mantras” in urban planning too, particularly when transferring models and ideas regarding urban sustainability and the adaptation to climate change. In general, it favours “quick fixes”, i.e solutions that can produce quantifiable outcomes, rather than policies that target structural problems that produce environmental degradation and climate change (ibid.)

In Greece, local and global philanthropic activity on urban policies and projects has risen greatly during the economic crisis that started in 2010. In the context of the debt crisis and successive structural adjustment programmes imposed by the ‘troika’ of the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission, the entire set of elsewhere practiced neoliberal policies has been tested on a new terrain and employed in a context-specific way (Harvey, 2006, Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Privatisation of public land, infrastructures, natural resources and services, abolition of labour laws and shrinkage of the public sector and public expenditure (Hadjimichalis, 2014; Karaliotas, 2017) formed the core of successive “memoranda” aimed at raising revenue for paying the national debt and creating a favourable ‘business environment’ (European Commission, 2012, p. 155) to attract investment in the country. Shrinkage of ‘the public’ in general is a prevailing theme that runs through multiple scales and policies.

Reform of the planning system was among the country’s obligations stemming from the second Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2012 (ibid.). This MoU stated that the planning system should be reformed with a view to ‘ensuring more flexibility in land

development for private investment and the simplification and acceleration of land-use plans'. There have been two new framework planning laws issued since then. The first Law was issued in 2014, and the second, which amended the first, in 2016. The two laws dismantled the existing planning system and introduced new ideas, and tools aiming at increased flexibility in land development. Most notable among the newly introduced tools are the Special Urban Plans, which aim at facilitating strategic investment, surpassing development and environmental restrictions as well as fixed land use designations stemming from local development plans. There is no provision in the law for participation or even public consultation at any stage of planning. The Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment is the only stage that is open to public consultation. It should be noted, however, that participation used to be part of earlier planning laws and had been introduced into Greek planning legislation as early as 1983.

The two *Organisations for Regulatory Plan and the Protection of the Environment*, for Athens and for Thessaloniki, which were the authorities overseeing and coordinating urban development at the two cities at a metropolitan level, since 1985, were abolished in June 2014 with a view to cutting down on public expenditure. Moreover, the update of *Thessaloniki's Regulatory Plan* that was commissioned, prepared and presented for public consultation in 2011, was never ratified. Hence, Thessaloniki has no authority overseeing its development at a metropolitan level and the same outdated *Regulatory Plan*, since 1985.

At the same time, private investment has shrunk during the crisis. Shrinkage of the construction sector, which had already been reported in the beginning of the crisis in 2010, came into a virtual standstill in the following years. The Hellenic Statistical Authority (2019) has been reporting decrease in both private and public building activity in Greece between 2009 and 2017.

In this limbo state of urban planning and development in Greece, new actors have acquired prominence in the production of urban space. They replace or complement local authorities and other public actors seeking to cover the ground left vacant by the shrinkage of public expenditure and the transitional vagueness of the national planning framework. The corporate sector, represented by big companies like Cosmote and multinational Lidl, inaugurated its new role as a guarantor of the safe and vivid function of public squares and streets, through donating equipment and sponsoring events, taking over maintenance, security and refurbishment, through their social responsibility programs (Athanassiou, 2017). At the same time, many researchers have documented an explosion in citizen-led initiatives in Greece during the years of crisis asserting a role in shaping urban space (Vaiou & Kalandides, 2016; Athanassiou, 2017).

Within this hybrid landscape, philanthropic foundations are new actors asserting a significant role in the way cities are shaped during the past decade. They have become very active in Greece during the years of the debt crisis, which started in Greece in 2010, expanding their granting activity into a totally new terrain, from mainly social and cultural projects, to grants aimed at big projects of urban regeneration, and smaller scale projects of refurbishment of public spaces.

There have been two prominent cases of this kind of «benevolent urbanism»: a) an architectural competition for the regeneration of central Athens, launched by the Onassis Foundation b) a large complex of cultural uses comprising a park open to the public, in Athens funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

The first prominent case was Onassis Foundation, whose mission is “[to] create the conditions, explore the ideas and trigger bold discussions that shape and shake society” (Onassis online). In 2012, the foundation launched an international competition for the regeneration of central Athens, centred on the pedestrianisation of Panepistimiou street. The foundation’s involvement in urban development was vindicated on financial grounds. As Tournikiotis (2015) put it, “[g]iven the financial crisis, but considering the necessity of the project, the State turned to Onassis foundation, who took over organizing the competition, under specific terms and conditions, as well as funding all necessary schemes under the supervision of the relevant state authorities”. The project, which was first proposed in *Athens Regulatory Plan* of 1985 (Triantis, 2017), was presented in the public discourse, as an urgent cure for the city’s ailing centre as well as an opportunity to improve its image to the world. Its aim, as stated in the project’s official site, was “to offer Athens a competitive edge against all other European and international metropolises as a city with a quality, optimistic and people friendly profile” (*Rethink Athens online*). A rich environmental agenda helped vindicate the project and granted to it a technical legitimacy. “Rethink Athens”, as the project was titled, sparked a heated debate mostly regarding its necessity and its repercussions on the character and use of the city centre. The main critique focused on the danger of gentrification as well as on the flow of economic resources to showcase projects for tourists rather than to projects for the city’s residents (Voourekas, 2014). “Rethink Athens” was finally abandoned, as the European Commission did not approve its inclusion into the National Framework Strategic Reference (NSRF), as originally expected.

Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), the second case, develops its granting activities with a global reach and, as stated in its website, has funded projects in 134 countries. It funds “organizations and projects, worldwide, that aim to achieve a broad, lasting and positive impact for society at large, and exhibit strong leadership and sound management. The Foundation also supports projects that facilitate the formation of public-private partnerships as an effective means for serving public welfare.” (SNF online) The foundation’s biggest donation so far is the flagship Stavros Niarchos Cultural Centre in Athens, hosting the Greek National Opera House and the National Library, along with exhibition galleries, a restaurant and a cafe. The complex was designed by world famous star architect Renzo Piano. It features large expanses of a carefully designed park, open to the public from 6:00 in the morning till 10:00 on weekdays and till midnight on weekends. The park has a detailed set of rules regulating its public use. Stavros Niarchos Park has been warmly embraced by the neighbourhood and is expected to have a positive impact in its surrounding area. Although discussions started earlier, the agreement between the state and the foundation was ratified with a Law 3785 in 2009 (Government Gazette, 138-A-7 August 2009), a year before the crisis started in Greece. The cultural complex has a lot in common with large scale urban development projects of late 1990s and 2000s in Europe (Brenner & Theodor, 2002), in terms of the promoted model of urban governance, its lax relation to local formal plan and planning institutions, its iconic architectural design created by an internationally famous architect, its emphasis on public space. This iconic project is to be completed and enhanced by the extensive refashioning of the sea front, also designed by Renzo Piano and funded by the foundation.

The Foundation has recently extended its activities in urban public space to fund smaller scale projects at a less prominent terrain. In 2017, the Municipality of Thessaloniki

(online) applied to the SNF and received a donation of 10 million Euros “for the alleviation of the effects of the ongoing financial and social crisis on the city”. Almost half of this donation, 5,8 million Euros, was allocated to urban projects of varying scales, most of which were projects of refurbishment and redesign of public spaces. These included, improvement of the surrounding areas of historic monuments, systems of electronic management of pedestrianised streets, extension of a central pedestrianised axis towards the seafront, and a new tourist route linking historic monuments (Municipality of Thessaloniki online). In addition, the SNF is co-funding the new Holocaust Museum which is planned to be built on a site leased by GAIAOSE to the west of the city centre.

Upscaling philanthropic action

Notwithstanding their prominence in Greece and their international outreach, neither Onassis nor Stavros Niarchos Foundation are included among the world’s largest philanthropic foundations. A third case of philanthropic action related to urban space in Greece is pursued by the Rockefeller Foundation, which ranks 26th on the list of foundations, by the size of their endowment or assets (Martens and Seitz, 2015). Such cases of “big philanthropy” in most cases originate from the US. The Rockefeller Foundation’s benevolent mission, as stated in its website, “unchanged since 1913 – is to promote the well-being of humanity throughout the world. Today, the Foundation advances new frontiers of science, data, policy, and innovation to solve global challenges related to health, food, power, and economic mobility” (Rockefeller Foundation online 2019). Since its first years of action, the foundation has developed international activities promoting, through its granting priorities, a specific approach characterised by a market logic and an emphasis on technological innovation (Martens and Seitz 2015). Along with Ford and Carnegie, the Rockefeller, has focused in increasing American foreign influence and thus, has played a key role in establishing American global power (Parmar, 2015). Parmar suggests that these “big 3” philanthropic foundations, among other strategies employed to promote American influence abroad, sought to create “an integrated global elite from the 1950s to the 1970s who could serve as conduits for American interests within the institutions of each nation” (ibid. p. 676).

In 2013, the Rockefeller Foundation launched the ‘100 Resilient Cities’ initiative to celebrate 100 years since its creation in 1913 by billionaire John D. Rockefeller. According to its website, the main concern that triggered the initiative is the crisis that many cities around the world face today due to the combined effects of climate change, globalisation and rapid urbanization. Its main purpose is to assist cities in planning in advance for these challenges and building their resilience (100resilientcities online). To this end, the Rockefeller Foundation has established collaboration with “the platform” of about one hundred international partners. These are global corporate actors, public and academic organisations and NGOs, like Microsoft, Siemens and Swiss Re, the World Bank, WWF, who are eager to offer their technical expertise in issues like, for example, waste management and web crowdsourcing, and advise on issues of governance, management and communication. The foundation offers one million US dollars to each one of the participating cities. However, Leitner et al (2018) suggest that it is not clear whether this funding is directly granted to the cities’ municipalities or it is received through paid services by the platform partners.

'100 Resilient Cities' initiative has played a key role in disseminating resilience as the new buzzword of urban planning, but also in infusing it into local authorities' operational plans and administrative structures, in cities as diverse as Pittsburgh, Ramallah and Thessaloniki. However, resilience remains a rather blur concept and as Weichselgartner and Kelman suggest 'there is an inherent danger [that it] becomes an empty signifier that can easily be filled with any meaning to justify any specific goal' (Weichselgartner, & Kelman, 2015). An academic discussion has developed around both its conceptualization and its transformative potential (Davoudi, 2017), and the politics of its mainstream expressions in practice (Slater, 2014; Kaika, 2017). Nevertheless, international organizations, like the UNISDR (2012) the UN (2017), OECD (www.oecd.org) and national governments have endorsed the new buzzword and developed their policy frameworks towards urban resilience.

The Foundation offers funding for hiring a Chief Resilience Officer and support for the creation of a strategy towards resilience to each participating city. All cities' strategies are produced following the guidelines of the City Resilience Framework (CRF) which was created, especially for the initiative, by ARUP, an engineering consulting company with global reach. The CRF sets the concepts and their definitions, as well as the basic structure of the cities' strategies. Although it leaves room for local difference, it works as a global template within which some issues are foregrounded and others become marginalised or hidden altogether. The CRF understands vulnerability to environmental and social risks as an intrinsic attribute of contemporary cities, north and south and not as a geographically and socially variegated issue, constantly produced by socio-natural processes. From the outset, the initiative appears indifferent to issues of uneven development between rich and poor cities and suggests a common framework of action valid for every city regardless of its position in the global hierarchy, its size, its social and cultural characteristics, its institutional frameworks of planning and governance. Depoliticising urban processes and sidelining difference, cities employ the same concepts and tools and illustrate their strategy with the same graphics, provided in the CRF. The initiative, thus, employs a post-political, strictly techno-managerial approach to urban socio-environmental problems (Swyngedouw, 1996) and remains blind to multi-scalar actors and processes that produce and reproduce the "shocks and risks" identified for each city.

Strategies produced within the Rockefeller network have an all-encompassing character. They set objectives and goals and outline specific programmes for their fulfilment. Although produced within, or rather in conjunction to, the institutional framework of one municipality they have a metropolitan scope. They depart from project-based urban regeneration, that characterized processes of neo liberalization of cities in the 1990s and 2000s, and assume the role of comprehensive strategies. They, thus, mark a shift from place-based projects to target-based strategies, as well as an upscaling of the activities of philanthropic foundations.

Both Athens and Thessaloniki, cities experiencing multiple repercussions of the financial crisis since 2010 and in the midst of a transitional vagueness in terms of the national spatial planning framework, were included in the initiative's global network, as part of the second wave of cities in 2014. It was a highly competitive entry process, as 331 cities from across the globe applied and only 35 were accepted. Cities were assessed by expert judges who looked for "innovative mayors, a recent catalyst for change, a history

of building partnerships and an ability to work with a wide range of stakeholders” (100 Resilient Cities on line).

Athens and Thessaloniki have both conducted a preliminary process of identifying their “stresses and shocks” (Resilient Thessaloniki 2016, Resilient Athens 2016) and subsequently publicized their strategies towards resilience. Seen as an opportunity to internationalise an attractive image to the world, both Athens and Thessaloniki illustrate their strategies with photos of their most visible and attractive parts, often animated with people engaged in leisure or participating in common activities and workshops. There is little sight of underprivileged and derelict areas, or of marginalized and vulnerable groups. With regard to public space, Chalastanis (2019, pp. 83-84) comments on the way political demonstrations that took place on squares and streets of Athens during the crisis, mostly expressing dissent against austerity politics, are presented in the Athens Preliminary Resilience Report. They are grouped as “riots and civil unrest” and reported among the “stresses” that have to be faced, thus neglecting their cause and political meaning and foregrounding a depoliticized idea of public space. In a similar vein, citizen initiatives and spontaneous survival strategies developed during the crisis, are “usurped” and presented as part of formal policies nurtured by the Municipality (ibid.) Employing a rhetoric of fear, and without offering any reason whatsoever, both cities are reported as vulnerable to “terrorist attack”, in their Preliminary Resilience Assessments.

The Rockefeller Foundation’s initiative is the first philanthropic action in Greece to fund strategic urban planning, rather than specific urban development projects. Sidelining differences between cities and socio-environmental inequalities within cities, it creates and promotes a global urban agenda based on the common imperative to act pre-emptively against a variety of risks. Through its funding, it achieved not only wide penetration of the concept of resilience to local authorities as the central objective of urban policies, but also specific policy priorities towards it. Technological innovation, the role of the private sector and stakeholders’ participation can be identified as key policy dimensions of resilience as promoted by the foundation. The opening up of local urban development to a wide range of stakeholders of global outreach, through the “platform of partners”, is promoted as an advantage offered to cities by the foundation and a key feature in the implementation of the strategies.

Participation in the ‘100 Resilient Cities’ initiative

Participation of ‘stakeholders’ in urban governance is foregrounded as one of the dimensions of urban resilience. According to the CRF, resilient systems need to be among other things: ‘inclusive and integrated which relate[s] to the processes of good governance and effective leadership that ensure investments and actions are appropriate, address the needs of the most vulnerable and collectively create a resilient city – for everyone. Inclusive processes emphasise the need for broad consultation and ‘many seats at the table’ to create a sense of shared ownership or a joint vision to build city resilience.’ Towards this end, the strategies ‘empower of broad range of stakeholders’ (The Rockefeller Foundation & ARUP, 2015, p. 4).

Following the CRF, the Athens Resilience Strategy (Resilient Athens, 2017), was “created in collaboration with 140 organizations and 900 citizens which participated in 40 workshops, conferences or public events. In the Athens Strategy, one of the four

“pillars” towards resilience is the idea of an “open city”. When assessed for its “resilience value” this pillar is hoped “to develop synergies with city stakeholders and enhance participation”. It is interesting to highlight the partners involved in fulfilling this goal, as mentioned in the strategy. Featuring among local authorities and Greek service providers, the National Center of Social Research and public utility companies is Citymart. This is an international consultancy with the mission to empower ‘city officials to better serve their communities through access to data, insights, and peers’ (Citymart online). Also mentioned, as a partner is the Transatlantic Policy Lab (TAPL), which, as stated in its website, is ‘a global leader in Smart City solutions, city diplomacy and collaboration advancing sustainability and resilient city strategies and technologies’ (Bertelsmann Foundation, online). In effect, TAPLab is a consultancy backed by the Washington Branch of the German Bertelsmann Foundation. The TAPLab was founded in 2008 by Bertelsmann one of the world’s biggest mass media companies.

Another agent featuring in Athens Strategy is Bloomberg Philanthropies and Bloomberg Associates both founded by Michael Bloomberg, American businessman in global financial services, mass media, and software as well as mayor of New York for three consecutive terms between 2002 and 2013. Bloomberg Philanthropies promotes a ‘data-driven approach to global change’. Bloomberg Associates that were founded as a philanthropic venture, acts as a consultancy to “advise and help city governments to successfully tackle complex and difficult challenges to positively impact the quality of life of their citizens’ (Bloomberg Associates online).

Another “pillar” of the Athens Strategy is to make Athens a “green city”. Towards this end, the strategy sets the goal to “co-create public spaces” (Resilient Athens, 2017, p. 100). Activities declared as bringing this goal into materialisation are ‘public space rejuvenation initiatives’ and ‘public space co-development framework’ (ibid. pp. 107-109). The former refers to organizing ‘cultural events and small-scale cultural interventions supported by digital technologies’ (ibid). This is hoped to cultivate ‘a new approach for Athens public space and to enforce the productive collaborations between the municipal government and city’s cultural organizations’ (ibid.). The latter refers to the development of a framework that will combine several TAPL proposals along with two EU funding proposals (Urban Innovative Action and ICT-11-2017 ‘Collective awareness platform for sustainability and social innovation’) in order “to foster collaborations around public space maintenance and co-creation, and to catalyse participatory activities in the city” (ibid.). TAPL proposals for social equity, were created by a group of experts from the US and Europe, who participated in a four-day workshop in Athens, in collaboration with the local Resilience office. The aim of the workshop was to produce proposals to feed into the Athens Strategy. The report produced out of this lab identified public space and placemaking as catalysts for change and suggested the “tactics” that can activate public space, through engaging and empowering citizens. In order to promote “clean, green and safe” public spaces, the report employed the “broken windows” theory (Wilson and Kelling. 1982) and proposed citizens’ participation in their maintenance, through adoption agreements with the municipality (TAPL, 2016).

Thessaloniki also foregrounds citizen participation in shaping public space as a central axis of its strategy towards resilience, as produced within the Rockefeller initiative. Citizens have participated in shaping the strategy itself. As stated in Thessaloniki’s strategy ‘over a period of 12 months, more than 2000 people and 40 organizations

contributed in the shaping of Thessaloniki's strategy' (Resilient Thessaloniki, 2017, p. 9). This was achieved through various events, workshops, round-table discussions and public consultations organized by the municipality's specially created Resilience office. One of the strategy's four main goals is to 'co-create the inclusive city' (ibid.) which is elaborated as follows:

“Invest in human talent, including skills, leadership and entrepreneurship; align education and training to career paths; expand the role of boroughs as social labs; empower citizens and community-led projects; make the city welcoming to new residents; and enable co-creation in open and public spaces”
(ibid.)

Elaborating this goal are 9 objectives one of which is “Co-creation of inclusive open spaces” (ibid. p.80). This objective in turn will be realised through the following three actions: 1) adopt of public space co-creation policy which refers to a “streamlined activation and stewardship policy” aiming at social cohesion through ‘stewardship models’ and programming of public spaces; 2) deliver a public space pilot project, which will be designed to build social cohesion and test the co-creation policy for any shortcoming; 3) launch the open schools pilot project, which aims at increasing the amount of open public space in the city's neighbourhoods (ibid. pp. 80-82).

The partners mentioned as participating in realizing the first two actions are the Municipality of Thessaloniki, Tactical Urbanism and local grassroots initiatives. Tactical Urbanism refers to Street Plans Collaborative, the American “urban planning, urban design research and advocacy firm” (Street Plans, online), which popularised the term tactical urbanism. The term groups together a variety of temporary low-budget and small-scale interventions in public spaces, usually involving citizens in their planning and/or implementation. This variegated spectrum of short-term experiments, apparently triggering a process of change to the benefit of the people, is often discussed as an antidote to neoliberal urbanization. However, it does not anticipate any long-term change, and does not affect the large scale of complex urban problems beyond the premises of the specific park or square where the experiments take place. Moreover, it can also be interpreted as fully entrenched to processes of neo liberalization, covering the ground left vacant by shrunk public services and legitimizing hegemonic policies through citizen participation (Brenner, 2015). The firm, that is based in Miami, New York and San Francisco, promotes this trend of contemporary urban design and has played a key role in disseminating it and transforming it into a dominant approach to urban design (StreetPlans online). Thus, apart from the global framework of ARUP, global experts from the “platform of partners”, are invited to test their techniques in a new urban context. Through them, urban design prototypes are promoted as transferrable. A project of tactical urbanism, designed by Street Plans, in Burlington New Jersey USA illustrates the strategy of Thessaloniki, presumably suggesting its appropriateness for the Greek context.

Drawing evidence from the CRF and the strategies developed by the two Greek cities that participate in the 100 Resilient Cities network, it becomes evident that the initiative endorses inclusiveness, empowerment, openness and stakeholder participation. Thus, through the actions of a big philanthropic foundation, participation becomes a global strategy towards resilience and penetrates into local structures of urban governance.

Notwithstanding its inclusive rhetoric, participation in public space production is instigated by an abstract benevolent foundation with global reach, acting in parallel to locally instituted planning processes. It is not a locally instituted process, initiated within local planning agents and levels of governance and institutions, hence, it does not activate or enhance mechanisms of democratic decision-making, accountability and transparency. Thus, participation becomes an isolated experiment, that lasts as long as funding from the foundation is secured, initiated by a global agent, imbued by globally agreed normative principles created by global consultants, and performed by global planning experts. Workshops of “public space co-creation” for the redesign of a particular park were performed in Thessaloniki in 2017, as part of the *Strategy*, with the technical support of Street Plans (Kapsali, 2019, pp. 279-290). However, residents’ participation was limited and as mentioned earlier, it is not institutionalized and hence it is still rarely performed.

Through participation, and other definitive dimensions of resilience, the Rockefeller initiative actively promotes global networking between cities, technology companies and consultancies. In the context of the Rockefeller initiative, participation is understood as the opening of various urban development processes, to a variety of agents, covering the variegated spectrum between citizens and global development players. The idea of «more seats around the table”, as mentioned by the CRF, illustrates a model of “governance-beyond-the-state” through which new social actors acquire voice and perform their specific agendas. Citizen participation is facilitated through activities, which are invited by the municipality and orchestrated by global consultants, specializing in urban governance and digital technologies. Through the “platform of partners”, global consultancies gained access into local processes of public space creation. Thus, “benevolent urbanism” becomes a powerful vehicle through which global agents are effectively connected to local politics, transfer their quick-fix solutions and their market-driven agendas and increase their non-contextualised, dispersed outreach to new geographies.

Indeed, as presented above, partners, consultants, planners and advocacy experts are invited to facilitate projects of citizen participation. They are actively involved in developing and using the right ‘techniques’ to orchestrate an efficient process of participation. This ‘techniques-based approach to participation”, as Cleaver puts it (1999, 600), “fails to adequately address issues of power, control of information and other resources and provides an inadequate framework for developing a critical reflective understanding of the deeper determinants of technical and social change”.

Participation, as conceptualized and proposed within the initiative, becomes a matter of techno-managerial “know-how”, designed and delivered by global elite of experts and incorporated in diversified urban contexts as a de-politicised dimension of urban resilience. Combined to monitoring and smart technologies (Kaika, 2017), participation is transferred as an urban policy model and becomes part of a global urban strategy towards resilience. Commonly perceived within planning as a democratising and potentially transformative process, citizen participation is thus co-opted by hegemonic politics, as constituted in a multi-scalar way, and reduced to a transferrable technique based on scientific consensus, what Montero (2020) calls urban “solutionism”. Thus, it loses its potential to function as a self-instituted agonistic process, unsettling unjust socio-environmental processes and acting towards justice and democracy (Mouffe, 2005).

Finally, participation as promoted in Athens and Thessaloniki is linked to particular hegemonic agendas for public space. The theory of “broken windows” is employed to explain degradation and, subsequently to vindicate suggested strategies towards “cleaner and safer” public spaces, thereby e.g. criminalizing spatial appropriation strategies of youth groups and legitimizing more policing and citizen patrols. Placemaking and tactical urbanism are adopted as effective tools towards improving public space. The dominant imaginary of public space as an attractive, orderly, clean and safe place (Mitchell and Staeheli, 2006) is embraced and promoted through “tactical” temporary interventions as well as through stewardship and adoption schemes. Responsibility for public space is thus transferred from the traditional public manager - the state or the municipality – to different kinds of citizens’ associations in order to safeguard streets and squares from “undesirable” users and uses (ibid.) and promote their vitality through consumption, recreation and cultural activities. Citizen participation, introduced through “benevolent urbanism”, is stripped from its democratic function and is transformed into a vehicle of legitimation of the various agents participating in globalized urban governance regimes, their dispersed power and their hegemonic agendas for public space. To return to Arnheim’s precondition of participation, i.e. “redistribution of power”, not only there is no challenge of hegemonic power structures, but there is support to the project of neo liberalisation to new geographical contexts. As Purcell (2009, p. 141) puts it, as neoliberal urban policies produce democratic deficits, they “coopt democratic rhetoric to legitimate neoliberalism”.

Concluding remarks

The role of major philanthropic foundations is increasingly important in global urban development issues through their granting priorities and the development approach those promote. In Greece, in conditions of economic shrinkage and planning transition, philanthropic foundations have extended their granting activities to urban development projects of varying scales, from small-scale interventions to strategic planning. Complementing or even replacing the traditional roles of a shrunk state and a reluctant private sector, this kind of ‘benevolent’ urbanism is fragmentary and, often, disconnected from local planning institutions, existing public planning procedures, regulations and processes. The foundations generally defined benevolent missions are materialized in projects that employ specific hegemonic discourses and urban development paradigms and promote specific imaginaries of public space. “Benevolent urbanism” constitutes part of a new governance regime in Greece, that bloomed in the midst of austerity politics, substituting a state-centred planning regime for flexible processes of urban development open to multiple global stakeholders.

The 100 Resilient Cities initiative of Rockefeller Foundation, differs from previous examples of “benevolent urbanism” in Greece, in that it is not a place-based project but a target-based strategy. It targets urban resilience and utilizes a global template towards it, transferring a contested and blurry idea to 100 different cities around the world. Both Athens and Thessaloniki prepared their strategies towards resilience, not within the national planning framework and institutions, but within the ‘100 Resilient Cities’ network and according to the global template of the CRF.

Participation in public space production is central to the foundation’s conceptualization

of urban resilience. It is, however, a de-politicised technique-based enterprise, defined and orchestrated by global experts. Ensuring “more seats around the table” the benevolent foundation acted as a “conduit” between this global elite of consultants and local institutions. It is, also, a process that is legitimated through scientific consensus and aims at consensus. Dissent and conflict are not in the picture. Participation in public space production, inflicted by a distant benevolent foundation, performed by global experts employing globally accepted scientific techniques cannot be understood as a process unsettling unjust socio-environmental processes and promoting justice and democracy. Entrenched in techno-managerial, consensual politics, participation loses its potential to unsettle hegemonic policies of neo liberalisation, as materialised in different urban contexts. On the contrary, it becomes an effective tool for their legitimation and their expansion in new geographies.

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