

# Re-visiting Elaionas

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## A. Introduction

Since the format of this studio is such that it allows us to create the topic that we will immerse ourselves in, I will focus on the area of Elaionas<sup>1</sup>, in the city of Athens. As it will be presented further in depth below, this area, which is adjacent to the center of the Greek capital, presents a vast number of problems that have often concerned the administration of the country and the residents of Athens (Sapountzaki and Wassenhoven 2004, 7-9), while dealing with this area is envisioning the future of the city itself.

### Motivation

The motivation for choosing this particular area for my work as a thesis project stems from three honest reasons; My cultural upbringing and experiences in Greece which has undergone rapid economic, political and cultural changes in the last two decades. My general interest through the previous and recent years of my education, both in Greece and here in the Netherlands, that has to do with architectural and cultural heritage and the concepts of self-sufficiency and democracy on an urban scale. Finally, my most recent reflections on the role of the architect in general and my role as one specifically have pushed me to seek my potential in a diverse and multifaceted subject.

## B. Background

Elaionas is an area in the west of the city center of Athens, this area was, from ancient times, the olive tree forest of the city, and remained as such until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century [Image 1]. It is stated that it was not only impressive for its size but for it was the single closest “green area” to the city (Mpofilias 2007, 83-86). Yet, this impressive district of perennial olive trees is no more; the only place that reminds of the importance of the area is the Geoponic University and an uncovered part of Cephissus river. Today's image of the once verdant “park” is the result of a rapid and unorganized urban expansion, the private sector under this general urbanization of the area of the last century paralyzed any attempt of the administration to prevent the swift destruction of the area. Soon industries covered the area, as the river was the perfect waste disposal stream (Mpofilias 2007, 86).

Today, a complete unorganized network of roads has led most of the industries away (Panayotopoulos-Tsiros 2016, 9) leaving the area covered mainly by warehouses, car-repair and used-car shops and voids, while the exception is the already mentioned Geoponic University, the Athens central bus station and the first state-owned mosque, while the ancient road Iera Odos (trans. Sacred Way) is still a major avenue that passes through the district [Image 2]. To add the list of problems that the area has is that of the administrative division; the area is part of five different municipalities (Sapountzaki and Wassenhoven 2004, 7) creating a discord between administrative bodies on the future of the area. On a bigger administrative scale, during the past 20

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<sup>1</sup> Elaionas: [Etymology]: from Koine Greek ἐλαιών (elaion) < ancient Greek ἐλαία. + -ώνας  
[Meaning]: area of land on which olives are cultivated

years many preliminary designs have been issued by the central state for the redevelopment of Elaionas, yet none passed this preliminary state (Mpofilas 2007, 87).

### C. Problem Statement

The city of Athens, faces a lot of problems, both economical as well as societal, and this translates to the architectural development of the past and of today. The city is lacking areas of greenery, with the main ones being around the historical hills of the Attica region. To add to this problem the only development projects that are in motion have to do with the touristic sector of the economy, a development that continuously ostracizes the long-time residents from their houses, as the AirBnB trend and huge tourist influx of the past years have more than doubled the rental prices (Bateman 2019). Furthermore, this focus on tourism on many areas will see many neighborhoods becoming “tourist attractions”, alienating the city dweller with the city’s public space. Elaionas is one, if not the most, vulnerable districts to global investments in Athens due to its current form of low value private sector in high value land and as Sapountzaki and Wassenhoven argue on their paper, “Elaionas may be caught between, on one hand, a prospect of dereliction and marginalization [...] and, on the other, a prospect of total transformation, [...] and extinction of its erstwhile local identity” (2004, 10).

In order to frame better the extent of my research and analysis, I will focus in the area of *Votanikos*, part of the Elaionas region, that meets all of the abovementioned problems, as well as it is the greater region’s focal point. Part of the uncovered Cephissus river, Iera Odos Ave. and the Geoponical University of Athens are situated in *Votanikos* [Image 3].

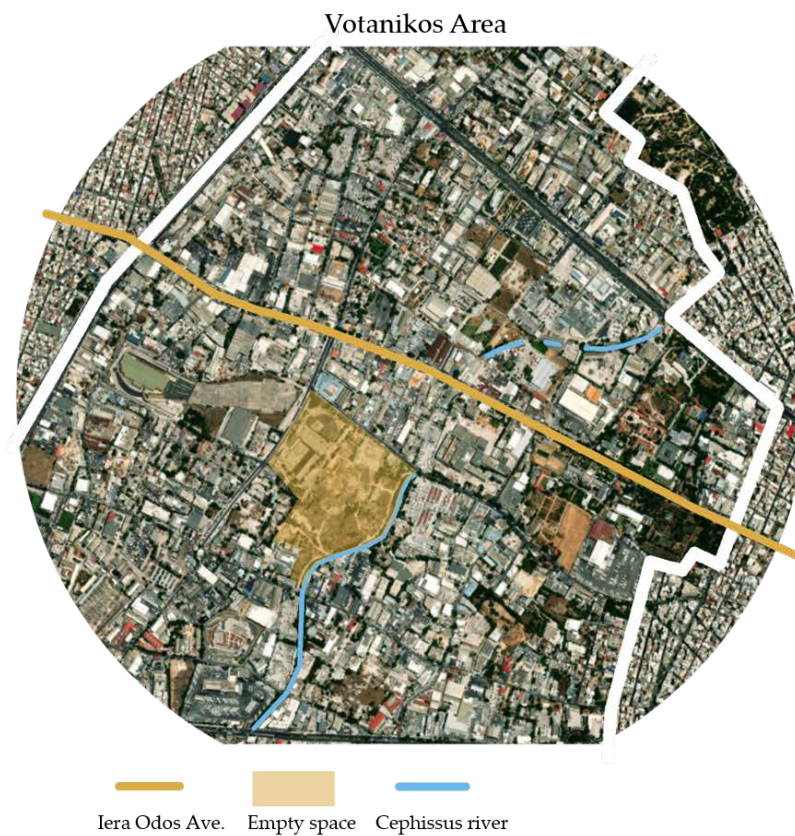


**Image 1.** August Ferdinand Stademann. *Panorama von Athen, 1840*, As can be seen from Stademann’s drawing, the only forest in sight from Philopappou hill westwards is that of Elaionas, Source: <https://el.travelogues.gr/item.php?view=38880>





**Image 2.** Elaionas area from a satellite image, Source: Bing Maps



**Image 3.** Votanikos area within the greater Elaionas region, from a satellite image, Source: Bing Maps

## **D. Research Question**

As a peculiar district that divides the west suburbs of Athens with the historic city center with its post-industrial landscape and infrastructure, and its future is uncertain, what architectural intervention is to be envisioned and designed so that Elaionas can be re-integrated to the city, and remolded from a barrier to a connector?

### **Sub-Questions**

In order to answer this main question, I present some inquiries that will enhance the meaning of the first one:

### **Theoretical and Analytical Relevance**

- What is the actual state of today's Elaionas and its spatial relation to its neighboring districts?
- How is this area unique from the rest of the Athenian Urban tissue?

### **Methodological and Design Approach**

- What are the parameters that would contextualize and drive the strategies for a design approach?

## **E. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical Framework is the basis for any future methodological analysis and design intervention that I intend to formulate, yet it is the chance to explore different theories and takes on modern and future cities' development. For this reason, I have drafted it in such a way that one step compliments the next while also be accessible for self-feedback from both my own research as well as the methodological framework.

### **Historical Analysis**

The first part of the research is the historical analysis of the area. However, since the ancient history of the area is recorded, yet the current picture is tremendously different (Mpofilias 2007, 83-86), it makes more sense to study the evolution of the spatial development of the area over the last hundred years. Nevertheless, this study will be divided into two parts; the history of the development of the area, and the history of the failed attempts at change. Today's image is surely the intersection of the two histories, as one is newer than the other.

Many scientists and analysts of the previous decades who have dealt with the problems of the area mainly refer to the set of factors that led to this vast and anarchic semi-built environment. In parallel, however, there were texts, such as that of Mrs Sapountzaki and Mr Wassenhoven (2004) and later that of younger researchers such as Mr Panayotopoulos' paper (2016) who began to analyze in a time frame - historically - all the government decisions that failed and the reasons for these shortcomings; mainly macroeconomic circumstances (economic crisis of 2008) but also microeconomic interests (various actors' unwillingness to cooperate due to fight of interests). The main reason for this turn of focus in the administrative side of the problem is that the area of Elaionas incorporated into the official city plan as late as 1995 by presidential decree, however, it was never fully implemented (Pagonis 2006, 79).

### **The state and Future of city planning**

Through this search for the failures of the past governments, local factors and the established building environment, an interest arose for the search on the status and position of a contemporary urban planning strategy. For this reason, the search for texts related to urban planning as well as contemporary economics began. Regarding urban planning itself and the parameters that one must manage, I noticed through the study of Philip Allmendinger's (2002), Louis Wassenhoven's (2004) and Athanasios Aravantinos' (2007) texts, that the 21st century is the point where there is no complete agreement on a singular "truth". In stark contrast to the linear evolution of design theories up until the end of modernism, there is a large portion of the academic and professional community of architectural science that sought the total deconstruction of the concept of urban planning in its entirety (Koolhaas 1995).

Even though there are a lot of different theoretical approaches regarding planning for cities nevertheless there exists a certain stalemate on development of new planning typologies (Allmendinger 2002). Yet, two thematic ideas in particular strike to me as a source of inspiration, both in the theoretical framework as well as the methodological one.

### **The creative city and the 5km/h scale<sup>2</sup>**

Athens is one of the examples that Jaap Modder and Jeroen Saris in their paper (2005, 1) as one of the capital cities with a high cultural level. However, the “creative city”, the city of the future is the one that will develop its cultural dimension, the technological-economic level as well as its urban organization. The cities that will include all these elements will be the ones that will prevail in the competition between the other metropolises in the era of globalization. As mentioned above, Elaionas is an area that lags behind both in the organization of the space and in the technological and economical initiative, while even at the cultural level it remains an area that is marginalized. Therefore, a key search of my plan is the degree to which the area will be revitalized.

As for the design approach, a huge motivation was Jan Gehl’s 5km/h scale (Cities for People 2010). The author argues, through various paradigms, such as the Brazilia Syndrome<sup>3</sup>, on the importance of incorporating on a city scale the human scale aspect of design. This sounds contradictory to both the older “masterplan approaches” as well as the sheer difference of scales. This view puts again the human-centric perspective of city planning, not only as a collective mass as seen from above (modernist urban planning) but as the individual’s perception of public and city space. It is important as architects, visionaries and planners to create a holistic view when designing a part of a city for its people.

In total this framework consists of essential literature on confronting the Elaionas’ historical, cultural and urban problems without getting unnecessarily off track on the overall study. Yet, what is important in this type of problem analysis and research is that this theoretical part will be in constant interaction with the methodologies that will follow, one cannot be complete without the other.

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<sup>2</sup> 5km per hour; referring to the average speed of a pedestrian, the human scale (Gehl 2010, 117)

<sup>3</sup> Brazilia Syndrome; referring to the Brazilian capital and its manifestation as a well-thought design when seen from above, while completely neglecting the human experience in street level. (Gehl 2010, 195-197)

## F. Methodological Framework

As stated in the previous part, interconnection is key on materializing a solid scope on this subject. Through the historical analysis of the area so far, and with the help of literature sources such as that of Philip Black's and Taki Eddin Sobi's "The Urban design Process" (2019) and their methodological approach of urban re-planning, I came to the following conclusions: Regarding the overall approach through the historical analysis of spatial expansion in Elaionas, the ideal way for the visualization of the present is through analysis of morphology, both for built and physical environment. Correspondingly, the Black's and Sobi's book is referring and propose as a better methodological study of urban planning the following four stages; analysis, pre-design, design, and post-design, incorporating the human scale, (as in the case of Jan Gehl (2010) that was mentioned in the theoretical framework). To add to this, I draw inspiration on an interdisciplinary conference that analyzed many redevelopment projects in the city of Athens (Avdelidi, et al. 2017). Although many elements of this survey can be included in my own analysis and design process, large part of their sight examinations referring to finished works, something impossible for a thesis project work.

Consequently, the method of preliminary analysis and planning of the area will be as follows:

- Mapping of land uses and infrastructure in place; external and internal connections (roads/railway), utilities and systems (water supply, power supply)
- Morphological Mapping of both built and unbuilt environment of *Votanikos* area and its relationship (contrast or/and similarities) with its neighboring districts through axonometric drawings

To expand the relationship between methodology and theoretical research, I return to "Cities for People" (Gehl 2010) as well as "for space" (Massey 2005), literature that inspired me through its theories: human scale on city scale; the pedestrian's relationship with what he sees on his own level in contrast to what the architect envisions from the position of an aircraft. I add, therefore, to the methodological direction through design, the survey both through photography as well as sketching a route in the area of Elaionas.

The aforementioned design methodological approach will both lead to a greater understanding of the area and the situation as well as provide inspiration for the first design proposals on reconnecting the area of interest in the urban fabric of Athens.



## G. Relevance & Preliminary Conclusions

As the City of the Future studio offers the freedom to choose the subject, the historical and current analysis of the area of interest was the first step in this research. However, the considerations began to expand in my search for a proper design approach, and what gave inspiration is the design analysis of the area in a balancing relationship between the city level and the pedestrian level. There is a clear view of the situation of Votanikos area in Elaionas, an area with a number of problems yet with a huge potential for change; both at the urban level and the “thinner” architectural level. I envision that through the above-mentioned design strategies design proposals will blossom steadily.

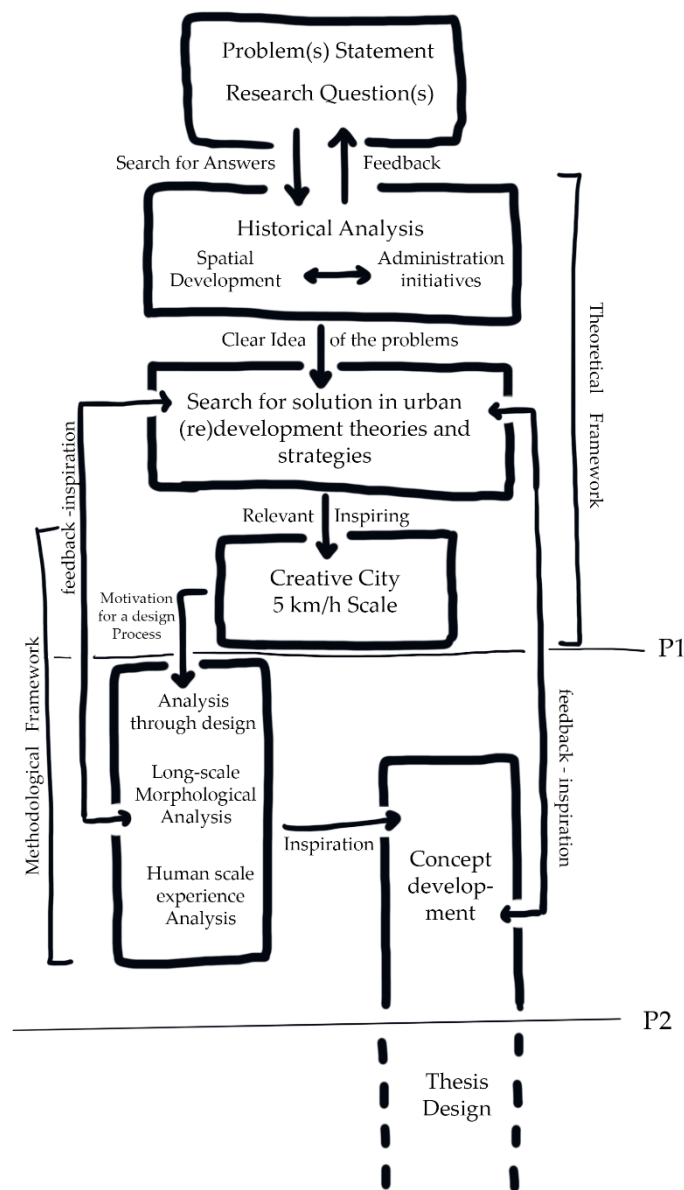


Image 4. Research Plan diagram

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