

6

The urban social movement of Open Spaces in Athens, Greece

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INTRODUCTION

The open spaces social movement in Athens grew along with the growth of the Greek Capital. Until the decade of the '80s, various scattered and localized citizen demands on public spaces were growing¹. The vast majority of the urban and suburban space was considered as an opportunity to settle and there was no concern about the quality of life. There was no master plan of any kind for the expansion of the Athens area. A general building code (Genikos Oikodomikos Kanonismos) was the primary legislation and the city was left to a private interest driven growth. In the urban core areas certain urban social movements appeared. They were mostly short term, quite subjective, and mostly localized to the mid-class and rich urban neighborhoods.

In the '70s, industry and pollution producing activities were gradually driven to West Attica or outside the prefecture of Attica. Certain industrial zones were instituted in Attica with no organization and waste precautions.

In the '80s the Capital had already reached to a mature state. Services were well established in the city center and new linear centers started to grow along certain main streets (Kifissias, Sygrou, Mesogeion). The evolving Public transportation did not manage to cease the increase of private cars. The atmospheric pollution reached unprecedented levels. The city center was fully and heavily built, according to very poor post-war urban standards (see Figure 1).

At that period, a turning point was observed in State policies. Specific measures were set for combating air pollution. The first master plan of Athens became a law in 1985. New urban plans appeared in the municipalities of the Athens basin.

The "Indicative" planning of these plans was inadequate in controlling the urban sprawl and the production of urban space by market forces. Incremental planning² started to drive the urban shape. The authoritarian state showed its limits. The urban public spaces, the open spaces, the parks, the open coastline zone of the Saronic Gulf, many historical and archeological sites were left with no adequate protection. Public awareness grew as the citizens felt that the quality of life was degrading. Local urban social movements grew along with the perception of the deterioration of the urban environment.

Perhaps, the best indicator about the quality of life is air-pollution. A comparison about the perception of air pollution in the European Capital Cities, rank Athens in the worst place (see Figure 2).

A comparison about the proportion of urban green per capita in various cities, also rank Athens in the worst place (see Table 1).

THE COORDINATION COMMITTEE OF OPEN SPACES³

The decade of the '90s saw the gradual adoption of neoliberal policies by the Greek Governments. Deregulation policies appeared in various social and economic fields. The welfare state started to shrink. The early Greek proposal for undertaking the Centennial Olympiad of 1996, was not successful, however it geared the reorganization

of the economic domain of construction/real-estate.

At that point, the citizens' movements felt the need of a better coordination. An open Coordination Committee of delegates of about 16 local open space movements was founded for the central area of the Athens conurbation. Soon, the mutual benefit of solidarity became apparent and produced a common social thread for the perception of problems, methods and effective resistance to real estate pressures. Policy proposals followed. The number of participating local movements almost doubled. Fourteen years after, this Coordination Committee became distinctive and consisted of an exceptional case for the Greek reality until the beginning of the crisis in 2010, when the participation of the members to the Committee fell drastically leading to the silent cease of the Committee to operate. In 2013 a new formation, the Environmental Network of Athens was created, based on the legacy of the Committee.

The long term existence of the Coordination Committee of Open Spaces (1996-2010) brought up a collective experience which today is a valuable legacy for urban social movements. A valuable deposit of experience, awareness on various existing means of struggle, and plenty of solidarity were achieved step by step, year after year. Various social movements, not only in Athens, were addressing to the Coordination Committee of Open Spaces for advice and help. The Committee encouraged open space movements of other areas to get organized in a similar way, in order to form a coalition. However, in the Athens Basin, where there is room for the creation of at least three additional Coordination Committees-South, West and North- the only coordinating formation was achieved in South but not in a constant basis.

In several other cases, apart for Open Spaces, local movements started to coordinate. The example of the ecological and environmental movements of Crete-the ecocrete network-is a very promising one. A similar, occasional however, multi-municipal coordination of various collectivities and local authorities has been achieved in Ymittos Mt, in order protect it and to oppose the construction of 61 km of toll highway on the mountain.

AN INSIGHT TO THE STRUCTURE AND MODE OF OPERATION OF THE COORDINATION COMMITTEE OF OPEN SPACE

The Coordination Committee was a body of delegates from local social movements. This body assembled at least 7 to 10 times a year. The local delegates were members of a local open space movement or a “quality of life” movement (bikers, pedestrians, the movements against radiation pollution, etc.). There is no exception in accepting as member any committee or association of citizens, provided that no violence, racist or social differentiation is promoted. Any collectivity of citizens can be represented. The participation was voluntary, and no member fee existed.

However, there was a crucial exception: No political or municipal parties could participate as members -they were welcomed as observers. During the 14 years of the operation of the Committee their presence was minimal. The reason for this non-participation of parties as members was that they could not take under control the Committee and preferred to express their policies through other mechanisms. This was an innovative organizational prerequisite, which prohibited any organized political power to obtain majority and consequently to use the coordination committee for political interests of any kind. The local open space problems were in focus instead of the political preferences of the delegates. The Coordination Committee is perhaps the only Greek volunteer body in which citizens-delegates of almost all the political stratum coexist and have common action despite their political differences. We must note that 14 years of common voluntary action is an outstanding record, at least for the case of Greece.

The decisions of the Coordination Committee should be acceptable by all members. Therefore, all decisions for action were taken unanimously by the delegates. There was no majority-minority relation, nor imposition of decisions. This led to a direct democracy function which protected the interests of all local open space movements. Otherwise, the complexity of urban problems could easily drive to internal conflicts. The conflicts were resolved by extensive discussion before taking any decision. The basis of this principle lied in the fact that there are so many common

interests and common fields of action which outnumber the different points of view. This principle substantiates a high level responsibility and generates creative ideas and proposals for promoting the common goal, i.e. the promotion of the protection of open spaces and the quality of life.

The Coordination Committee elected three members as Secretariat. The Secretariat's task was to mobilize or inform the members, to organize the meetings of the Committee, to publish the press release of each meeting. There were no specific roles for the members of the Secretariat i.e. president, secretary etc. Two members of the Secretariat changed every six months. One member was appointed for another six months in order to safeguard the continuity of the body. No second consecutive mandate was given. This function led to a circular participation of practically everybody and proved to be educational as well as a means to avoid any personal promotion ambitions.

Last but not least, the Coordination Committee was not a second-level representative body, but a means for the coordination of the members. The Committee had no legal form.

As it is understood, the participation in the Coordination Committee and in the Secretariat meant a lot of voluntary work based on shared responsibility. There was no room left for personal promotion, an attitude very keen to the politicians of the representative democracy. All the functions were collective.

This organizational style is familiar to those who understand the direct democracy principles. In fact, it is a derivative, a "child" of the inheritance of the French May, 1968.

An activity report:

In 14 years the Coordination Committee of Open Spaces had managed to:

- Meet regularly (7-10 times per year) consecutively for 14 years and issue a press release after each meeting, about the current situation, threats and successes in various open spaces and in the aspects of urban quality of life.
- Organize or co-organize about 9 successful day conferences in various topics, such as natural disasters and open spaces, parking needs and open spaces, metropolitan parks etc.

- Publish regularly a magazine named “Open Spaces”, since 1999 (23 issues), promoting the activities of the members and the decisions of the Committee. This magazine was disposed with a very low cost to many collectivities, far beyond the power of the Committee, and to any interested citizen in various public events.
- Participate in activist events, such as the environment day (June, 5), or the climatic change day (December, 9).
- Formulate central urban policy proposals.
- Organize numerous press conferences in several occasions.
- Participate in campaigns, such as against privatization legislation in several cases, against two attempts of Constitutional amendments (2002, 2006), and against the legislation of the post Olympiad use of the buildings and surrounding open spaces.
- Organize a questionnaire addressed to the parties of the municipal elections of 2006, and communicate the results in a press conference.
- Support numerous activities of the members, such as court support, marches, planting of trees, etc.
- Publish a collective book about Open Spaces in Athens (2008).
- Meet with the President of the State three times (2000, 2003, 2008), in order to endorse him a file of demands.

THE ADDED VALUE OF THE COORDINATION COMMITTEE OF OPEN SPACES

The early years, 1996-2000, the Committee managed to bring to surface the urban fact that Open Spaces in Athens were in danger. During that period flourished a new perception. The Open Space issue is not a neighborhood issue, a local issue, but an urban issue which relates directly with freedom, civil rights and free time.

In 2000-2005, the Committee had to deal with the massive attack to open spaces due to (a) the immense E.U. funding of various projects, (b) the Constitutional Amendment of 2002, (c) the real estate orientation of the public and private sector, (d) the Olympiad of 2004 and (e) the post Olympiad real estate treatment of the build-

ings and areas. This was the worst period of all, because of the immense pressure of state policies, the massive advertisement of various projects in the media and a press embargo against activities of various social movements (Figure 3). During this period the Coordination Committee of Open Spaces had extensive common action and cooperation with other social entities and social movements.

In 2006-2008, the Committee succeeded in promoting the issue of open spaces to the central political scene. It is characteristic that during the municipal elections of 2006, all local parties in most of the municipalities, including the municipality of Athens, had the issue of open spaces first in their political agenda. In 2007, The mega-fire of Mt Parnitha was an important turning point in the public awareness, as well as the mega-fire of Peloponese. During this period, the Coordination Committee formulated a concrete frame of urban policies.

In this period, a parallel Network of Urban Social Movements was created in Attica, comprising local citizens' groups and alternative press (24 members, 40%), municipal parties from various municipalities (28%) and active citizens (32%). The affiliation of this network to the left political party was obvious, but not direct. The 50% of the citizens' groups of this network were also members of the Coordination Committee. However, the Coordination Committee decided not to participate in this network as a whole, because of the presence of municipal parties. This Network of Urban Social Movements soon was derailed from its scope, was degenerated and ceased to operate.

In 2008-2009, the number of social movements for open spaces continued to grow (Figure 4). In addition, there was a boom in the intensity and importance of local social movements both urban and regional. An unprecedented attack is geared by the Municipality of Athens in several small parks and other places which were planned as green areas (Elaionas, Alsos Pangratiou, Park of Patisision and Kyprou, Vila Drakopoulou). A similar attack occurred in other surrounding Municipalities, such as Zografou and Vironas against open spaces, parks, green areas etc. The Coordination Committee of Open Spaces found itself in an environment of an expanding local citizen resistance. Particularly after December 2008, and the youth radicalization⁴, new phenomena appear in the interior of the urban social movements. In some open spaces there appear two or three citizen's movements, usually collaborating. The Committee

tried to adjust to this new period by detailing the frame of policy proposals, in order to create a common ground of perceptions⁵. The National elections of October 4, 2009 gave the Committee an opportunity to address an open letter to the national political parties, calling for specific policies for the viability of the Capital.

FROM SOCIAL TO POLITICAL

The political role of the Coordination Committee of Open Spaces was increasing. Ten days before the national elections of October 4, 2009, the Committee addressed a two page open letter to the national political parties⁶. This letter was a result of an unanimous resolution of the members.

The first part of this letter analyses the situation in the Athens conurbation and proposes the need for other networks apart from the private car street network, namely:

- A network of public transport.
- Networks of alternative mobility.
- A network of bikeways.
- A pedestrian network.
- A network of green and open spaces, in combination with archaeological sites, currents, hills and peripheral mountains.
- Networks of civil protection to natural disasters (earthquakes, high temperature incidents, floods), in which the network of open spaces can play a primary role.

The Coordination Committee asked for the withdrawal of the proposal for a new master plan of Attica, and the consideration of the real demands of Attica in sustainability.

The second part of the open letter to the political parties described a coherent set of policies for a network of green and open spaces. In brief, these policies called for:

- Adopting a goal in rising the existing proportion of green spaces from 2.5 sq. m./inhabitant to 7-10 sq. m./inhabitant.
- Fully protecting all existing green and open spaces.
- Creating a Green Fund for obtaining urban land for creating new green spaces.
- Planning a network of green spaces, by connecting green areas with green corridors.

- Apply in all the buildings (old and new) the legislation which commands the existence of green in a plot; stop the conversion of green to parking places.
- Prohibiting the construction of parking places under green areas and guiding the construction of these parking places under the road network.
- Creating an efficient Metropolitan Planning Organism, a new administrative rearrangement of the municipalities.
- Instituting a Ministry of Environment apart from public works.

This open letter was also submitted after the elections to the new leadership of the Ministry of Environment which was instituted by the newly elected government. The Green Fund was instituted, green corridors were a prevention of the new master plan of Attica and new parking places were prohibited under parks. After 2010 which was the last year of the operation of the Committee and the first year of the Memorandum era everything became worse. The Green Fund degenerated in serving the National debt, the green corridors never became a reality, the Metropolitan Organization was disestablished and the Ministry of Environment became subordinate to other ministries. The footprint of the Greek crisis also affected the building activities and relieved pressure in open spaces.

In conclusion, the urban social movements in Athens seemed to be well established. In many cases they succeed in cancelling state, municipal and private plans. No local authority could neglect or underestimate them. Conflict and opposition was the attitude of state and municipal power with no cooperation and public participation.

The urban social movements were well founded on the ground of the deficit of sustainability. They were greatly helped by E.U. documents, policies and legislation. They also were helped by the Constitution of 1975.

The central issue of confrontation often is between public aspirations and private plans, promoted, in several cases, by municipalities and ministries. In the public perception it seems that public interest is served by urban social movements and not by authorities.

The political role of urban social movements was increasing until 2010 and the role of the Committee was very important.

An open question rises about their future role in city policy making. The newly established Environmental Network of Athens (2014) attempts to continue the legacy of the Committee, a role which must be proven in the new era of crisis.

THE MEMORANDUM ERA

Since 2010 there have been signed three Memorandums between Greece and the European Institutions (2010, 2012, 2015). The economic crisis affected drastically the open space movements as follows.

After 2010, new politics triggered new urban movements, of thematic and horizontal character, such as:

- the movement of Place open assemblies (the movement of “Plateia”),
- direct exchange of goods between producers and consumers (the movement of potato),
- the movement of “no pay” (Den plirono),
- collective cuisines,
- social pharmacies,
- social groceries,
- antiracist movement.

These new movements did not necessarily derive from the existing localities of the past decade. Many new urban localities emerged to host these new activities. In parallel, many collectives, dealing with Open Spaces, were also absorbed by these new horizontal activities. This affected the members of the Coordinating Committee of Athens. Citizens, who were previously involved in the Open Space movement, had undertaken new duties and there was no time left for the movement of Open Spaces. Priorities have changed. In 2010 there were several unsuccessful calls for the monthly assembly of the Committee. In 2011, the Athens Coordinating Committee for Open Spaces is practically inactive. The activities concerning Open Spaces started to decline, as shown by the records kept in the calendar of the Observatory of Open Spaces movements. This decline is shown in Figure 5. A threshold drop was observed year after year. In 2008 there were organized at least 234 activities, in 2009 they dropped to 220, in 2010 to 150 and in 2011 to 127.

Several neighborhood and local movements continued to struggle against the increased pressure on the deprivation of the public character of open spaces⁷.

New issues appeared such as the derailment of the Green Fund, the speeding up of the demolition of forest legislation and forest protection, the rising propaganda

for a new constitutional reform and the amendment of the article 24 of the Constitution, the legalization of illegal constructions in buildings and illegal housing all over Greece for money gathering. However, these issues remained out of focus and with no severe and systematic social reactions.

PERSPECTIVES

The prolonged economic crisis has changed the profile of the social movements shifting their focus to rather horizontal social activities than local urban ones. Nowadays many of these horizontal social movements declined. However, there is no recovery in the urban Open Space movements. The precious heritage obtained by earlier urban movements is threatened.

A discussion must open among city movements about the strategy needed in this new environment. The intellectuals involved in urban movements should play a crucial role.

First, political instability, social disintegration, the impact of a prolonged crisis, all these obviously lead to a fall of the viability of the city. It is raised the issue of what is “public interest” and how it is served.

Second, local urban movements use networking, apply the principles of Governance and frequently adopt direct democracy. On the other hand participatory democracy i.e. the democracy of been represented by delegates, depends on the political orientation of the local, regional and national governments and is not as versatile and flexible as are the direct democracy movements. The quality of democracy becomes a main issue as the economic crisis issue is used as a neoliberal tool of consciousness assimilation and social automatism.

Third, the voluntary depart of many youngsters from the city environment to the countryside or abroad has not been assessed yet. First estimations refer to an urban exit of several hundreds of thousands of urban population. New social dynamic conditions emerge in the countryside. New opportunities seem to be created between generations, between social strata, between the city and the periphery.

New networks are needed (a) between the urban movements in a city, (b) between urban movements of various cities in a country, and (c) between urban movements in various countries.

NOTES

1. Important social movements grew in the post war decades of '60s and '70s, in the urban fringe of Athens and Salonika, mainly from squatters, demanding the legalization. All of these areas were legalized. After succeeding legalization, these movements died and did not evolve, although the production of urban space in these areas resulted in unacceptable and substandard conditions.
2. Planning by disjointed urban design improvements (disjointed incrementalism) (L. Vassenhoven, 2007).
3. The full name is "Coordination Committee of associations and local committees for Open Spaces and Quality of Life in Athens".
4. The murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos, aged 16 years, by a policeman in Exarchia - a central neighborhood of Athens, triggered massive demonstrations and radicalized a large number of youngsters. In the next months many young groups were oriented in dealing with open spaces as a field of confrontation with the state power.
5. In March 2009, a congress was organized by the Coordination Committee of Open Spaces and the Observatory of Open Spaces. The title was "Parking areas and Open Spaces".
6. The Open Letter to the National Political Parties exists in the following site of the Observatory of Open Spaces of Athens-Attica: <http://www.asda.gr/elxoroi/DTsynton4.htm#ΔΤ25ΣΕΠΤ09ανοιχτή> (in Greek)
7. The Elliniko case became worse as it was expanded to the privatization of all the Saronic Gulf. In addition three new football fields are planned as a pretext for huge shopping centers close to the centers of Athens, Pireus and Northern Athens. New antennas for mobile phones are installed in neighborhoods.

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212 The movement of Open Spaces in Athens

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PICTURES-TABLES-DIAGRAMMS

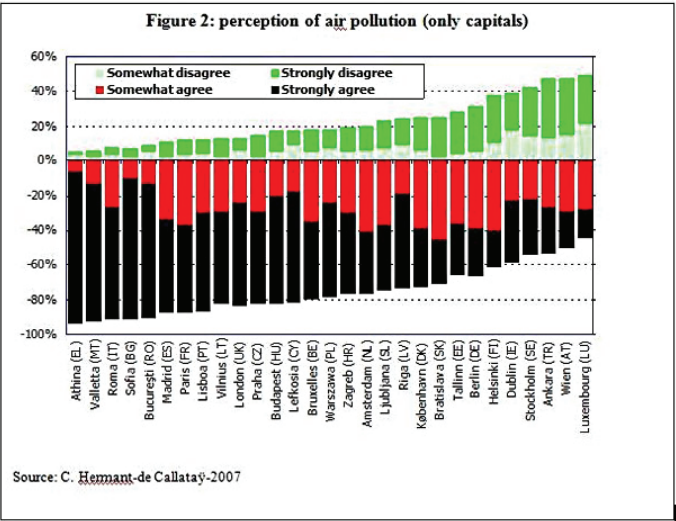
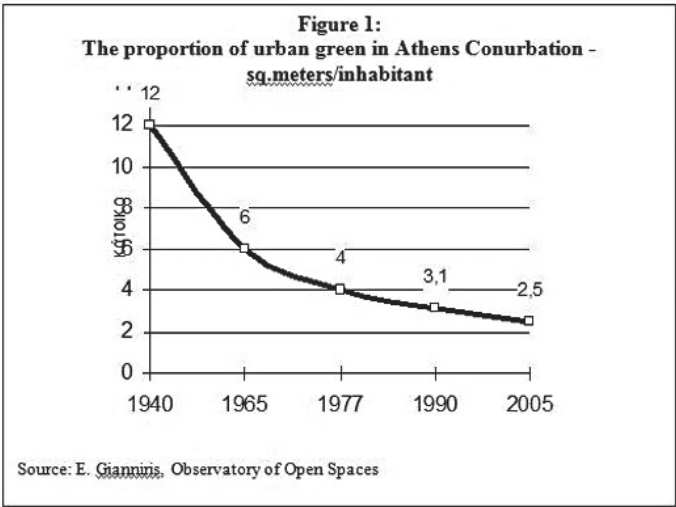
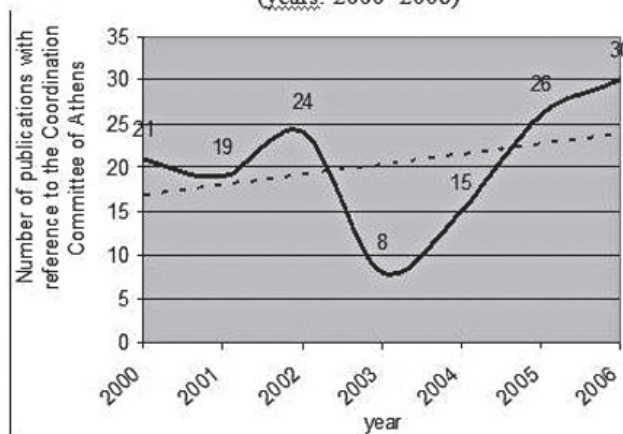


Table 1.
Green space to which the public has access
(m² per capita)

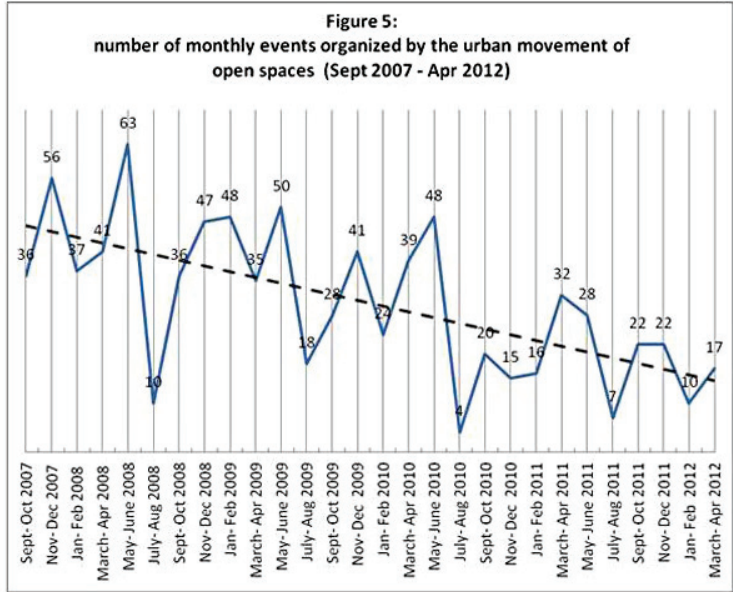
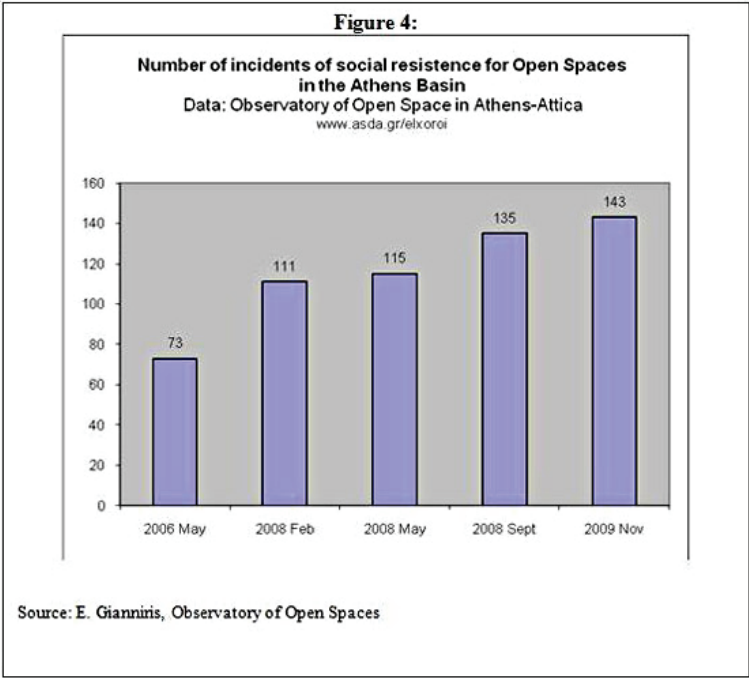
Rank	City	Score
1	Bratislava (SK)	227.70
2	Helsinki (FI)	145.66
3	Stockholm (SE)	96.23
4	Kopenhagen (DK)	52.15
5	Amsterdam (NL)	35.31
6	Berlin (DE)	27.39
7	Warszawa (PL)	22.14
8	Riga (LV)	15.75
9	Roma (IT)	15.08
10	Bruxelles / Brussel (BE)	12.97
11	Ljubljana (SI)	7.81
12	Vilnius (LT)	0.29
13	Bucuresti (RO)	0.25
14	Athina (GR)	0.06

source: <http://www.urbanaudit.org>

Figure 3:
Diffusion of Press Releases of the Coordination Committee of
Open Spaces
(years: 2000-2006)



Source: E. Gianninis, Observatory of Open Spaces



Source: E. Gianniris, Observatory of Open Spaces