

Article

Socio-Spatial Inequalities, and Local Struggles for the Right to the City and to Nature—Cases of Urban Green Parks in Athens

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Abstract: In this paper we hypothesize that the practices that prevailed during the pandemic period in relation to the right to parks were related to traditional urban discriminatory policies that need to be changed. We also argue that, in some cases, the residents themselves treated the parks as common living spaces by protecting them from neoliberal grabbing policies that deprive residents of greenery and infringe on the right to the city and to nature. With this in mind, we proceeded with research on the city of Athens. We investigated two urban green parks, the first was “Lofos Philopappou”, which is one of the most important parks in the city, as it is one of the largest green spaces in the city center and includes some of the most important ancient monuments. The second park was “Antonis Tritsis”, which is the largest park in Athens Metropolitan Area and one of the few high green spaces in the western suburbs. In the framework of this study, we investigated the attitudes and the actions of visitors and groups regarding these parks, the urban social movements, and local struggles and initiatives that are active in the public green parks, together with participation through the commons. We also investigated management policies and attempts to privatize them. The research methods that were used were participant observation in the studied parks, semi-structured interviews with people or groups that used the public urban green parks on a regular basis, noting the narratives they produced, and questionnaires given to visitors who actively used the urban parks. In conclusion, policies implemented within public parks were found to prevent the integration of public green spaces in the daily lives of residents and the active participation of residents in decisions concerning the green extensions of their neighborhoods. In this way, a part of society is deprived of the ability to maintain continuous contact with nature and green parks.

Keywords: urban commons; urban green parks; socio-spatial inequalities; green gentrification; urban political ecology; urban movements



Citation: Sotiriou, G.; Petropoulou, C. Socio-Spatial Inequalities, and Local Struggles for the Right to the City and to Nature—Cases of Urban Green Parks in Athens. *Land* **2022**, *11*, 1899. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land11111899>

Academic Editor: Zhonghua Gou

Received: 17 September 2022

Accepted: 21 October 2022

Published: 26 October 2022

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1. Introduction and Theoretical Context

Modern European cities are increasingly adopting green policy interventions aimed at enhancing their ability to adapt to climate and environmental conditions. Such plans and interventions mark the emergence of a new type of climate planning, so-called “green resilience”. However, we believe that resilience policies aimed at protecting urban greening, and the associated practices of these policies, do not target the causes of the problems and actually increase socio-spatial inequalities [1]. In today's cities, low-income and recent immigrant communities face serious forms of social exclusion and injustice that are not only social, but also environmental. At the same time, the few new green spaces that are created are related to the attempt to increase the commercial value of the surrounding properties, the change of land uses and, finally, the displacement of the poorer populations that live in the areas. Thus, in addition to classic urban gentrification, so-called green gentrification is also observed [1]. Another form of environmental gentrification is related to climate policies, among others. Many studies show that, low income populations migrating to cities (from regions of the so-called Big South) have contributed least to climate change, have

the least access to environmental amenities, such as green spaces, are the most exposed to climate risks and impacts, and have the least access to resources. Under these conditions, in political terms, there has been a return to the colonial era, and green “climate gentrification” threatens poor and vulnerable populations [2,3].

Even in economic terms, the new green values cannot be assessed unless we consider the conditions under which land values, that are directly related to processes such as accumulation by dispossession and displacement of socially vulnerablised groups, are formed. It is a fact that racial or ethnic minorities, and people with low socio-economic status, are vulnerable, having significantly lower life expectancy, and a greater incidence of chronic diseases, than less vulnerablised urban residents [4].

However, most research focuses on the effects of green gentrification in city centers without investigating its effects on the peripheries of cities and, especially, in the areas characterized by concentration of low income districts. The present research attempts to shed light on this aspect.

In modern metropolises, socio-spatial and ecological inequalities intensify under the pressure of transformation and specific capital investment. This transformation is not, however, limited to the gentrified centers of cities [5]. Transformation of extensive urban areas without green spaces, and far from open forest spaces, and others having low vegetation inhabited by low-income families, impoverished migrants, the unemployed and other vulnerable groups, facing social and racial exclusion, intensifies the exposure of these vulnerable groups to unhealthy and degraded living conditions [6,7].

On the other hand, green space is mainly limited to private homes with gardens in areas with increased income and pocket gardens in the central areas in place of “locally unwanted land uses (LULUs)”. In combination with the unequal policies of urban planning, work, health, education, recreation and mobility, air pollution and the degraded environment, in general, have created an ideal “ground” for the spread of pandemics [8]. In conclusion, the right to the city [9,10] and the right to nature [11] have been systematically violated.

During the pandemic (COVID-19) period, the role of public green parks was crucial in the way citizens adapted to pandemic control measures. In many parts of the world, the number of visitors to parks increased. In others, however, entry was banned, which provoked reactions, especially in densely populated areas where there was a great need. Less privileged low-income residents were at a much higher risk of infection, since they live in crowded areas with inadequate infrastructure, with no access to green spaces and with limited access to health care [4].

In the context of this research, we investigated two urban green parks: The first was “Philopappou Hill” in Athens, which is one of the most important parks in the city, as it is one of the largest green spaces in its center. that includes some of the most important ancient monuments; The second was “Antonis Tritsis”, which is the largest park in the metropolitan area of Athens and one of the few high green spaces in the western suburbs.

The main purpose of the research was to investigate socio-spatial inequalities, politics and the processes of commoning, and local struggles for the right to the city and to nature, through typical cases of urban green parks in Athens.

Specifically, we investigated the attitudes and actions of park visitors and groups, urban social movements, and local struggles and initiatives active in public green parks, in terms of views held on the possible fencing and commercialization of the parks and the effects of gentrification on green public parks. Finally, the possible participation of the park visitors in the commons was also researched.

2. Socio-Spatial Inequalities, Commons and Justice in the Use of Urban Parks

A very important theoretical approach that has explored the connection of commons with public urban green parks comes from “Urban political ecology” and “critical geography”, which focus on highlighting the political dimensions of urban environmental processes. According to this approach, the park is a field of eco-political action, ideal for

commoning, which refers to the active popular participation in commons by residents and by social movements or collectives.

Regarding the debate on commons, this research perceived parks as commons through a perspective that sees the city as a common.

According to some approaches, “commons” are social practices of shared stewardship solving real problems, trying to meet people’s needs, and providing effective self-governance for a resource or space shared by a community or network [12]. The final goal of these approaches is to claim and produce not only sustainable, but also fair and directly democratic, cities for the citizens who inhabit them [13].

Nevertheless, what about residents who are not considered citizens? What happens when the commons are closed? In this work, we used the concept of commons in the sense of an open common that is not a thing but a potential process.

The common is not “a particular kind of thing” but “an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood” [10].

The relationship between the social group and the environment should not be threatened by a common, should be achieved collectively and should not be commoditized. There should be a process that aims to move away from the logic of exchanges and overvalued market values [10].

This relationship can be created beyond state mechanisms and large private interests that aim to produce surplus value. In this case, we are talking about the city as common. As Stavrides says: “Urban commoning, thus, is strongly connected to practices that not only produce goods or services but also values and criteria of choices. Urban commoning treats (or, rather, establishes) urban space as a medium through which institutions of commoning take shape” [14]. Most research on urban commons has not addressed the issues of environmental segregation and environmental health, which is part of the concern of this paper.

In recent years, environmental health, which is directly linked to people’s daily living conditions, has been investigated. More specifically, this includes the built environment, the man-made structures where people live, and work and which they regularly use [15]. Key elements of the built environment, such as housing, public transportation, and parks and green spaces, are essential to creating healthier communities, reducing daily stress, promoting social resources, and preventing chronic diseases. This is especially important when more than half of the world’s population today lives in cities, and urban populations continue to grow in size [16,17].

Research in Europe, the USA and China has shown that, due to different factors, immigrant or low-income communities have less access to urban green spaces in their areas. This phenomenon is usually due to either a lack of greenery in the types of areas these communities inhabit or to problematic conditions in the green spaces that prevent accessibility. However, we would add that the main cause of these issues is the chronic policies of abandoning suburbs inhabited by poor population strata, race discriminated people and “others”.

Inequality, especially in urban greenery, can depend on many factors, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, and all of the above and in combination with the effect of space. Below, we discuss a few cases of socio-spatial inequalities and limited accessibility to urban parks and green spaces around the world, together with the criteria that urban planners must take into account in order to avoid such phenomena.

Research into the distribution of access to parks among residents of Birmingham, England, found inequalities in low socioeconomic neighborhoods [18].

Researchers [19,20] also found that communities with Latino, nonwhite, or low-income groups had less access to US parks. Based on studies of environmental justice in Tampa, Florida, it was also found that the spatial distribution of green spaces was uneven in terms of race and ethnicity, income, and tenure [21].

In the city of Yokohama, Japan, new parks are located in more affluent areas [22]. A study of park accessibility in the cities of Pueblo, Colorado and Macon, Georgia, showed that ethnic minorities were more likely to live in areas with lower levels of park access [23]. Finally, regarding poverty in the Ankara region, access to parks and recreational facilities in the city depends mainly on the individual's income level [24].

European studies have identified that cultural background influences the way urban green spaces are used. For example, a Dutch study [25] and a German study [26] showed that, for Turkish visitors to many parks in Berlin, group activities, such as barbecues and meeting friends and relatives, played a more important role than for the local residents.

It was found that immigrants in Berlin prefer places and communication zones for picnics, while Berlin's Tempelhof Park is one of the most important parks in the city, visited daily by a large part of its population. According to research carried out there [17], the current park design prioritizes large open spaces for active sports exercises, while there is less sufficient space for barbecuing, resting or playing.

The concept of "green gentrification" started to be used under a similar name by Dooling (2009:630) [27]. As Dooling referred to it, "Ecological gentrification is a provocative term that highlights the contradictions that emerge between an ecological rationality and its associated environmental ethics, and the production of injustices for politically and economically vulnerable people". Then, a second definition of "green gentrification" by Checker followed, presented as "environmental gentrification (2011) [3], which argued that the term describes the convergence of ecologically-minded initiatives, urban redevelopment and environmental justice activism in a capitalist society. Environmental gentrification builds on the discursive and material successes of the urban environmental justice movement, under a seemingly apolitical rubric of sustainability, appropriating them to serve high-end redevelopment that displaces low-income residents [3]. As Gould and Lewis (2012) [28] argue, an increase in environmental inequality is caused by the restoration or creation of an environmental good, as the amenities provided increase property values. In this way, members of society at the lower end of the socio-economic class are displaced by members at the higher end, unable to bear the benefits of environmental goods. Therefore, environmental justice is reduced and racial and class inequality increases, a process referred to as "green gentrification". According to Anguelovski (2016:28) [1], "in other words, the redevelopment of contaminated areas and the planning of neighborhood greening and green amenities by public agencies and private investors do not seem to benefit people originally exposed to toxics—but rather newcomers moving to the neighborhood". She goes on to argue that the whole process of green gentrification must be taken seriously, as it allows local activists, movements and environmental justice organizations to claim affordable housing and place identity against new green amenities at any price.

The above knowledge and experience should have been included in the Urban Agenda III, agreed in 2016. More specifically, the "Sustainable Development Goal 11" or "SDG 11" or Global Goal 11" (Urban Agenda III—SDG11) sets the following goals:

- Inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries
- Reduction of the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management
- Provision of access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces.

After all, a serious criticism we could make of the Urban Agenda is that it aims to equate urban inequalities and social exclusion without considering the structural and historic causes of these inequalities. In addition, the Urban Agenda also tries to balance capital investment in a city with the elimination of socio-spatial inequalities, which is an oxymoron, since large capital investments in specific parts of the city create socio-spatial inequalities to such an extent that many authors [29] refer to the process of urban extractivism. This means that the capital behaves in an opportunistic and exploitative way, as in the colonial mining tradition that promoted unequal development. Furthermore, an issue that was not addressed in Urban Agenda III, but is of concern in more recent research,

is the issue of social inequalities in relation to access to health and sanitation in the city, which becomes particularly visible in times of pandemics.

3. Methodology

In this article we hypothesized that the dominant practices of green management are related to traditional policies of urban discrimination that must change. We also argued that, in some cases, residents themselves treat parks as shared living spaces [6] that produce common goods [5,30,31], protecting them from neoliberal policies of appropriation that deprive residents of access to green spaces and violate their rights to the city and to nature. The public production processes seem to take place in different ways in each park and to have intersectional characteristics that link class, ethnocultural characteristics, and issues of gender and age [32].

Figure 1 below depicts a workflow schema with steps for data sources, data processing, data analysis and research methodology (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Workflow schema of the research study (Step 3.2 is depicted via Figure 2 below).

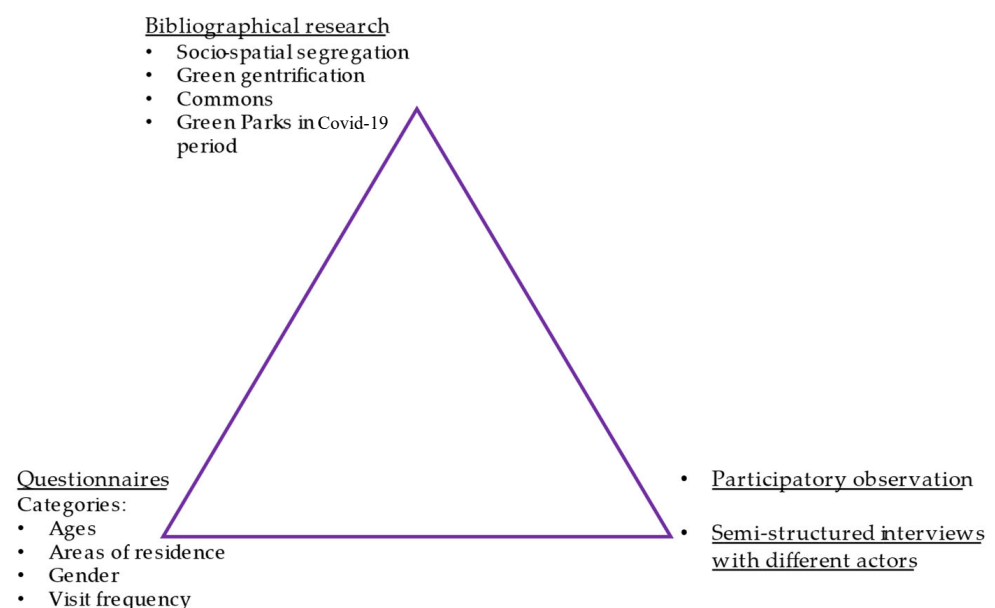


Figure 2. Method of "triangulation".

Two urban green parks of the urban planning complex of Athens were investigated, which were located on the same geographical meridian but in two different areas. The “Phlopappou Hill” park is in the center of Athens and the “Antonis Tritsis” park is in the north-western suburbs of Athens, as depicted on the map below. The first is a hyperlocal park located in the center of Athens and visited by a large number of people every day coming from the city center but also from all the areas of the broader city of Athens, as well as tourists. The second park which is in the largest metropolitan area of Athens, also has a lot of visitors, but mainly coming from the local districts of the western suburbs, and, therefore, it depicts a hyperlocal character in terms of the population of the western suburbs.

In this study, the actions and attitudes of groups and visitors, local competitions and initiatives and urban social movements active in the public green parks, as well as their participation in public affairs, were investigated in order to identify various policies implemented in green parks inside the cities before and during the pandemic. A combination of a study of existing literature and an analysis of findings was carried out. The investigative methods used in this research were participatory observation, interviews and questionnaires.

Initially, the first qualitative method used was “participatory observation”. Daily visits were made to the “Antonis Tritsis” park by one researcher (Σωτηρίου 2022) [33] at different times (day, night) and on different days (weekdays, public holidays, public celebrations) before, during and after the pandemic. Phlopappou Park was visited daily by both researchers. Observation of the social behaviors, social interaction, social communication, and social processes in the park, and recording of social contexts within the study areas were also carried out. In addition, as the action of social movements or collectives in the park areas were studied, regular participation in the meetings of the aforementioned groups took place.

The next qualitative research method applied consisted of semi-structured interviews. The aim was to contact people or groups who used the public urban green parks on a regular basis to acquire the narratives they produced, so as to investigate the nature of their actions, their perceptions of the parks and the challenges they face. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in such a way that the interviewee developed his or her thoughts and opinions freely and in depth. Very important elements concerning the objectives of the interviews of the present study were the production and collection of as rich data as possible about experiences, opinions, attitudes and representations of participants.

The last method of investigation, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, was the questionnaires, which were given to visitors who were actively using the studied urban green parks. The questionnaires became an occasion to develop the discussion. In this method, there were closed-ended questions regarding demographics, and key positions on some central issues of the spaces related to the parks. There were also open questions engaging the participants in freer discussion on specific topics related to the parks. The questions were targeted to identify the opinions of the respondents regarding participation in the commons, the need to use the parks and the challenges they faced.

Finally, data and maps, using remote sensing and GIS of previous research, were used [31,34] as they had the potential to reveal more information about the studied phenomena. They were also important tools of socio-spatial mapping.

Initially, based on previous research about the socio-spatial segregations and differentiations in metropolitan Athens (obtained by means of statistical analysis and cartographic visualization, using GIS), we identified the parks that were adjacent to residents of different social profiles (predominantly low or high levels of education, work position and occupation, and social types of residential areas). We used previous research by Maloutas and Spyrelis [34], with data from the 2011 census. To identify the most characteristic subcategories of urban territories, the urban eco-landscape analysis conducted by Petropoulou [6] was also used, which was done using remote sensing and GIS. According to this research, characteristics of urban eco-landscapes can be extracted based on percentages and types of vegetation, urban tissue, urban density, typology of buildings and different politics of

urbanization. Two parks were thus selected: a central one adjacent to urban planning areas, inhabited mainly by middle-class and bourgeois socio-economic classes, and one on the periphery of the city adjacent to densely built areas inhabited by middle-class and low incomes socio-economic classes.

The three different research approaches presented, in combination with the bibliographic research, contributed to a clearer analysis of the topic under study. Thus, with the method of “triangulation”, which concerns the connection of quantitative research, qualitative research and scientific literature, more substantiated conclusions were provided through the intersection of findings. Below is a brief overview of the history and geography of each park separately and the role of different actors in their protection, that emerged based on the above methodology.

At this point, data from the research we conducted with groups and visitors active in the two parks under study is presented.

The semi-structured interviews with groups active in “Philopappou Hill” park were conducted from 27 July 2020, to 7 August 2020. Semi-structured interviews with active groups in “Antonis Tritsis” park were initially conducted from 29 December 2016, to 8 January 2017, in earlier research [35], and then further conducted from 20 July 2020, to 26 July 2020.

The sample of respondents used for the questionnaire research consisted of 60 respondents from Antonis Tritsis Park and 45 respondents from Philopappou Hill Park. In both cases, the samples were structured by gender (male, female, other) and age, while the age groups were divided into three categories of 16–29, 30–49, 50+. More specifically, 30 women and 30 men, split as 20 people from each age group, were given questionnaires in Antonis Tritsis Park. For Philopappou Park, 23 women and 22 men, split as 15 people from each age group, were given questionnaires. Personal interviews of people who happened to visit the park at that time, based on the above criteria, were applied to reach the respondents, i.e., the “typical case” research methodology was followed. The data collection process, through questionnaires and structured interviews, was carried out for Philopappou Park on 23–26 July 2020. For Antonis Tritsis Park, data collection was initially carried out from 20–22 December, 2016, in a previous survey [35], and then 23–26 July 2020.

During the pandemic period, the snowball method was also used as a supplementary method for distributing questionnaires via the internet.

The questions were structured based on Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire structure for visitors to the parks.

A. Accessibility and Frequency of Visit
How often did you visit the park during the restrictive measures in the midst of the pandemic in the period from 16 March to 4 May?
Do you notice a difference in the frequency of your visits to the park before and after the pandemic restrictive measures?
What number of visitors did you observe in the park during the pandemic restrictive measures in the period from 16 March to 4 May?
What number of visitors do you observe in the park today?
How often do you visit the park?
How long do you usually stay in the park?
By what transport do you access the park?

Table 1. Cont.

B. Participation in commons and actions
For what activities do you visit the park?
Do you meet collectively for activities in the park (farming, collective cooking, sports, etc.)?
How do you get information about any activities in the park?
Have you participated in actions to protect/enhance the park?
Have you participated in assemblies on issues concerning the park?
Would you be interested in participating in actions to care for the park?
What is your position with regard to a fence around the entire park area?
Do you agree with 24-h operation of the park?
Do you consider charging a fee to enter the park to be a deterrent to visiting the park?
C. Current state of the park
List words that encourage you to visit the park.
Mention words that discourage you from visiting the park
Are you satisfied with the management of the park?
What discourages you from visiting the park?
Have you identified any problems that need to be fixed/improved in the park (inadequate and/or dangerous infrastructure, non-environmental activities, crime, etc.)?

Below is a brief overview of the history and geography of each park individually and the role of the different actors in their protection that emerged, based on the above methodology. The Figure 3 shows the cases of the two parks in the wider metropolitan area of Athens.

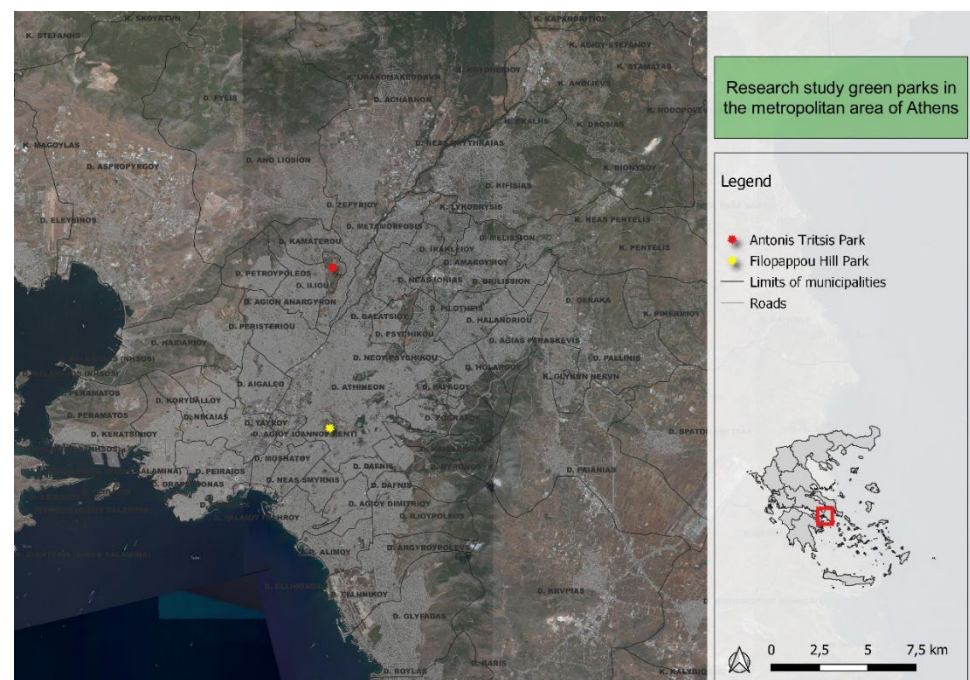


Figure 3. Study parks in relation to the wider metropolitan area of Athens.

4. Research Results and Management Policies for the Study Parks

4.1. Philopappou Hill Park

“Philopappou Hill” or “Muses Hill” (Figure 4) is a hill of Athens located opposite and southwest of the Acropolis and connected to the adjacent hills of the Observatory (Nymphs Hill) and the Pnyx. The term “Philopappou Hill” park refers to all three hills. The discovery

of the hills and the archaeological finds and the excavations by archaeologists, suggest the existence of ancient habitation in the area. The Park is located in the center of the districts of Makrigianni, Koukaki, Petralona and Thiseio and is a unified archaeological site covering a total area of 70 hectares (173 acres) [36]. On the southern side of the park there is also the Dora Stratou Theatre.

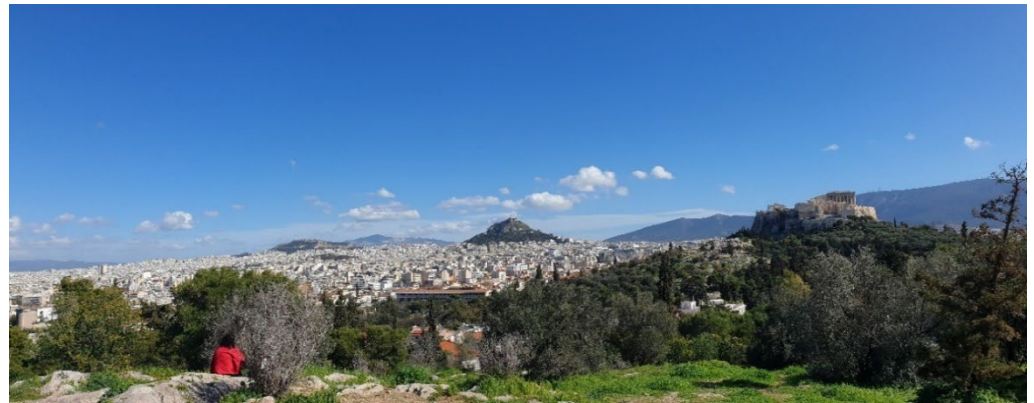


Figure 4. Park “Philopappou Hill” (Source: Giannis Sotiriou’s personal archive).

The site of the Pnyx was first identified as an ancient assembly site by the scholar of antiquities, Richard Chandler, in 1765. This hill is a symbolic site, as it was where the Athenian democratic assembly for important political issues was held from the end of the 6th century until the 4th century BC. It was a place where some of the most important political orators of the time, such as Demosthenes and Pericles, were present, together with free (male) citizens, who made crucial decisions concerning important matters that later became historical events [36]. The most decisive period in the modern history of Philopappou Hill was the architectural interventions of the architect Dimitris Pikionis (1954–1958). More specifically, the interventions included promenade paths, emphasizing their consistent with the area’s antiquities but through a smooth transition with the natural elements (Figures 5 and 6). In addition, they included “viewing terraces” and rest areas, the restoration of the Byzantine church at the foot of the hill and the connection of the hill to the Acropolis. Over the years, however, many inappropriate interventions have been made and, combined with poor maintenance of the paths, buildings and the wider area, many problems are present today.



Figure 5. Photo taken from inside Philopappou Hill (Source: G.S. Archive).

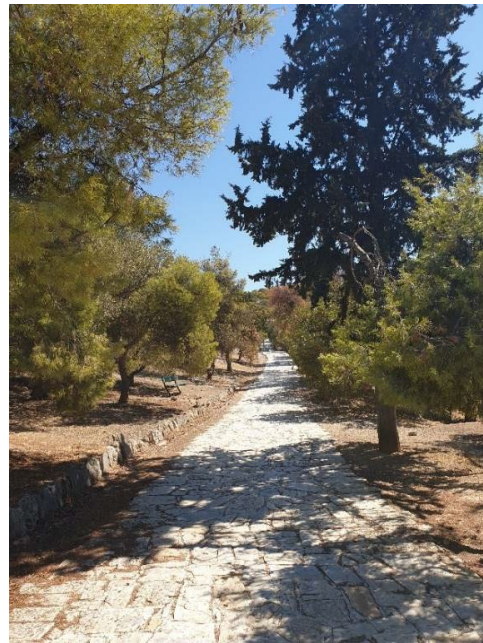


Figure 6. Path of architectural interventions by Dimitrios Pikionis (Source: G. S. Archive).

Today the vegetation of the hill consists mainly of pine trees, cypresses and olive trees, while the clearings are dominated by trees medick. The climatic and soil conditions are particularly unfavorable for the growth of tree and bush vegetation as the winter is mild and the summer is hot and dry [37]. An important element of the hill is the birdlife, as there is a large number and a great variety of birds, about 60 species, including the owl. In addition, tortoises and lizards are observed.

Of decisive importance for the history and development of the Philopappou Hill Park were the mobilizations that took place on 3 November 2002, against the fencing (Figure 7) of the park and which have since continued until today. Information about them was drawn from discussions with two groups active on the Hill. More specifically, they are the “Open Assembly of Residents of Petralona, Thiseion, Koukaki” and the group “Philopappou”. More specifically, until the first mobilization the Hill was a free public space. Then, the Athens Consolidation Company for Archaeological Sites (EAXA A.E.), the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Athens decided to fence off the entire area with railings and impose a ticket, having already trespassed the area of the Hill, with the construction of the “Dionysus” restaurant decades ago. The operation was set up with the expropriation and encroachment of 1.23 acres (0.5 ha) of the 3.21 acres (1.3 ha) that had been expropriated by the municipality of Athens and designated as “grove and square”. The aim was to privatize the area and to boost commercial activity in it with activities such as open-air sculpture exhibitions, refreshment bars, theatres and souvenir shops. All these events took place at a time when Greece was preparing to host the 2004 Olympic Games. Thus, since 2002, huge gatherings and mobilizations of residents and people from different municipalities have been taking place. People’s Assemblies were organized on a regular basis in order to block the fencing efforts by the competent bodies and to keep the Hill accessible for all.

More than 400 citizens demonstrated and demolished parts of the fence, which continued for about 6 years when the Ministry declared the Hill an “organized archaeological site”. The citizens took the case to the Council of State. In 2015 the Council declared the Hill an archaeological site and a public walk and recreation area. All parts of the Hill remained accessible around the clock without any charge. Over the years residents, through meetings, protests, debates, discussions, marches, workshops, court battles, tree planting, watering and maintaining plants and protection from fires, have managed to keep the Hill

accessible 24 h, protecting the Hill from privatization and asserting, as they continue to do, fire protection, irrigation and respect for biodiversity.

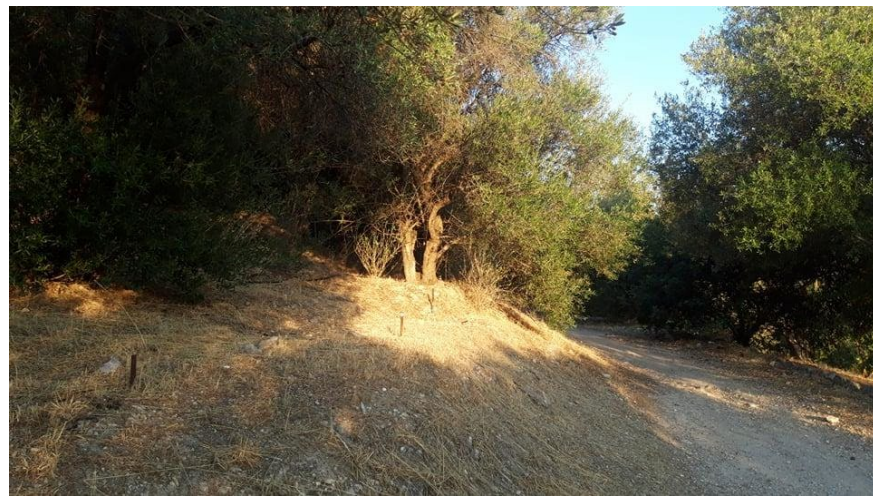


Figure 7. Marking posts that were placed in order to construct the fence rails (Source: G.S. Archive).

However, the efforts of decision-makers to interfere with and privatize parts of the park continued. Thus, in 2017, an effort was made to include 3.21 acres (1.3 ha) in the “Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund” (TAIIEΔ). Again, through the struggle of the residents, the plans did not proceed. In 2018, the homicide of a 25-year-old, who fell from a height of 20 m, resulted in the plans being resumed and fencing and interventions by the archaeological service and the municipality occurring. As a result of this, an attempt was made to fence the Pnyx, which once again did not take place thanks to the resistance of the residents who managed to prevent the fencing.

In 2020, an amendment was passed by law (article 100 of Law 4674/2020, Government Gazette ΦΕΚ Α53/11-3-2020) by the Ministry of Interior, which gives the Municipality of Athens the right to take over the management of the Philopappou Hill and the National Garden (with the possibility of including other areas in the future). This body will operate on the basis of the rules of private enterprise. Many collectives, movements and residents have expressed their opposition to this decision. Thus, informative actions and assemblies in the park or other public spaces, and practical actions of vigilance against the fencing, have been organized.

The “Open Assembly of Residents of Petralona, Thiseion, Koukaki” states in a message distributed on the 15 March 2020:

“... the care of open spaces is also our responsibility. For which we do not only have the right to access the hill, but also a great obligation to preserve and protect it.” Philopappou Park, the National Garden and every public space “is not a commodity, it is an oasis in the stifling atmosphere of the concrete city, as is amply demonstrated in the midst of pandemic and lockdown. We must defend the public nature and free access for all to the hills, parks and squares and oppose collective management for their care and protection...”.

According to the interviews with members of the collective who are active in the “Open Assembly of Residents of Petralona-Thiseio-Koukaki”, the group operates as a collective with participatory action where, through various popular assemblies in the neighborhoods, collective interventions and demands in opposition to the following are included: Fencing and commercialization of Philopappou Hill, surveillance cameras, controlled parking in the neighborhood of Thiseio, which implies a controlled life, increase in public transport tickets, demanding free movement instead, and the closure of the Sisser-Palco factory.

Some additional activities of the group are, initially, the self-organized structure of solidarity and collection–supply of essentials, “The Cupboard”. The aim is to cover basic needs and cultivate solidarity in the neighborhoods, through actions of collecting essentials and food and offering them to those in need. Thus, a space was created, inside the former

PIKPA squat in which the assembly is housed, where the collection–offer is carried out on a more stable basis, along with actions and events to collect and offer items and food, in central points of the neighborhoods. The space is open once a week (and, in the midst of the pandemic, it was open two days a week) so that anyone can offer or take what is needed. The main objective of the group through this process is to gradually create a structure of solidarity and empowerment of the neighborhood, so that its members can get to know each other, communicate and exchange views and ideas. Finally, the “Closet” has been helping 15 families steadily, while in the midst of strict confinement measures the number of families reached 40.

In addition, the collective has carried out and is still carrying out tree planting activities on Philopappou Hill and has occasionally carried out patrols to protect the area from fire. The members of the collective are residents of the nearby municipalities of Koukaki, Petralona and Thiseio. They also host some activities for young children.

The position of the group about Philopappou Hill is that it is a promenade, an urban ecosystem, a historical and archaeological site. It is an open, living and free space, one of the few green spaces in the cement city. In addition, members indicated that, for them, the space is vitally important, as it is a place where they have lain and played since they were young children, a place where they experienced their first loves and a place that has been associated with childhood and teenage memories, progressing to the need to visit after exhausting working hours when older.

Many artistic groups (choirs, dance groups, Tai Chi groups) were also active in the area of Philopappou Park during the pandemic, as well as the Open Orchestra that was created during the pandemic after the occupation of the National Theatre as a reaction to the restriction of artistic activities and the repression of musicians, actors and the art world in general. The open orchestra currently includes over 120 musicians who regularly rehearse in Philopappou Park near the old demolished theatre of Dora Stratou. The participation of the people during rehearsals creates a sense of community-building in the park which seems to be still under construction.

4.2. Antonis Tritsis Park

The second case of a park investigated in this study is “Antonis Tritsis” (Figure 8), located in the western part of the city of Athens where the area is also known as “The queen’s tower”. The name was given since the area, in 1848, belonged to Queen Amalia and the main park area was a center of agricultural and livestock production. The park officially opened in 2001 and it is the largest urban park in Athens. It is located within the boundaries of the municipality of Ilion and adjoins the municipality of Agioi Anargyroi–Kamatero to the north-east. Its area is 913.236 m² or 91.32 ha or 225.66 acres (Law No. 4414, Government Gazette ΦΕΚ 149 Α9-8-1016, Article 53) and it is located between the avenues of Democracy and Hasias, to the east and west, respectively. The park is approximately 600 m from the Kifissos River and even less distance from the Liosia stream, where it meets the Kifissos River in the area of Three Bridges.

The main elements of the park are the six artificial lakes, called Korykia, Kifissis, Naiada, Asopyada, Acheloida and Melia, which have almost dried up nowadays. The lakes are connected by an artificial channel through which the flow and recycling of water between the lakes is achieved. In addition, within the park area there are different networks of pedestrian walkways for internal traffic, bridges, large and small, public toilets, a park administration building, which additionally hosts an office of the Ornithological Society, and an office of the volunteer group “Friends of the Park”, parking slots, visiting train tracks that have never been put into operation, three open-air theatres, two chapels, in one of which services are held regularly and both of which are offered for wedding and baptismal mysteries, a playground, a reptile center, an ecological bookshop, a lending library with books on the environment, a café, cafeterias, facilities of the Greek Scouts, the Municipal Gymnasium of the Municipality of Agioi Anargyroi, which is used on payment of a subscription, and the Sports Centre of the Municipality of Ilion, which includes a

football pitch with a track, stands, changing rooms and a warm-up area. In addition, there is an abandoned building in the park which was recovered and occupied by the group “Agros”, that has been active in the area for years.



Figure 8. Antonis Tritsis Park (Source: Giannis Sotiriou’s personal archive).

The main activities and services offered in the park are the following: sports, such as hiking, walking, running, and cycling; gymnastics in the municipal gym; sports in the stadium; picnics; games in the open spaces and the playground; environmental education; theatre performances and events in the open-air theatres, mainly in summer; catering services; the lending library; meeting friends in the public areas of the park; events and seminars. Groups active in the park area organize pro-environmental activities, environmental education programs, political and cultural events and, finally, collective activities, such as cultivation, flora care, tree fruit picking, kitchen, self-education workshops, etc.

For the requirements of the research, interviews and discussions were held with three groups/collectives active in the park area. More specifically, with the “Hellenic Ornithological Society”, the “Friends of the Park” and “Agros”. Initially, a common characteristic of all three groups was the concern for the maintenance of the park. To specify, “Agros” and “the Friends of the Park” organize actions to take care of the existing trees in the park, such as watering and pruning. Furthermore, “the Friends of the Park” and “Agros” carry out tree planting of seedlings to enhance the density of the greenery. The “Ornithological Society” and “the Friends of the Park” perform litter collection activities. The main difference between “Agros” and the other groups is its involvement with the community, during which it does not focus exclusively on park issues. Within the park area, it uses the land for growing horticultural crops and also as a space for conducting collective kitchen and self-education workshops. The central idea of the workshops is the autonomous creation of basic products. Autonomy is the basis of the cultivation and collective kitchen.

From the interviews and discussions there was found to be relative agreement of views between the groups “Agros” and “Friends of the Park” regarding the privatization and commercialization of the park area. According to “Agros”, buildings would deprive the right of free use of the park, as it would make the park dependent on economic profit. The president of the park association and a member of the body, noted “It should have mild commercial use, very mild. We don’t want it to be a shopping mall, there should be two or three shops...”. On the other hand, it is worth noting the difference of the opinion between the Agros and the Friends in terms of security and fencing of the park. More specifically, according to Agros, fencing creates an exclusion of the community from the park. The effect would be even more pronounced if closure of the park during evening hours was implemented, depriving people of their right to free use of this public land. Regarding the

security issues of the park, they feel that the protection if fences is not needed, since the crime that develops in the park area is equivalent to any external area. On the other hand, the Friends argue that “when a place is not guarded, anyone can do whatever they want”. They go on to argue that the number of disasters that have occurred in the past in the absence of guarding is so costly that it makes economic sense to employ staff to guard it.

At the moment, the Park’s Management Body is the Region of Attica which has assigned the “guarding” of the area to a private security company and, at the same time, an electronic surveillance system was installed through cameras throughout the park. This fact has caused reaction from “Agros”, which claims (as stated on the website that it manages):

“The rhetoric about the “protection” of the park attempts to elicit social consensus and to distract from the well-known role of its managers, who at times are plotting its abandonment in order to hand it over to business interests and at other times are squandering its funding in kickbacks and direct commissions.

The operator’s choice to strengthen the surveillance regime in the park by installing cameras is perfectly aligned with the central political management of the last 2 years, which, under the pretext of the emergence of the COVID-19 infection, is being shaped solely on the basis of the “Law & Order” doctrine. “Emergency” legislation legitimizes and perpetuates totalitarian practices, (fines, exclusions, bans, imposition of compulsory medical procedures.”

They go on to link the policies with those implemented in pandemic restrictive measures. In particular, they say that under the pretext of state declarations to protect public health from the pandemic, an ideal ground was being created for the implementation of new ways of controlling society. Ways which confront people with a regime of technological totalitarianism. The technological means controlled by the agents of power are aimed at assimilation, on the part of social subjects, by the new digitalized and sterilized normality.

During the pandemic until today the Agros collective has not stopped carrying out actions (Figure 9). More specifically, tree plantings, collective kitchens, screenings, lectures and self-education workshops continue to be held. Based on how they experienced the new conditions with the emergence of COVID-19, the people involved in the collective report:



Figure 9. Event for the 13 years of occupation of Agros (Source: archive of Giannis Sotiriou).

“The imposition of a new “emergency condition” on the basis of threatened illness has set new conditions in the organization of daily life.... At the same time that factories and other workplaces with large numbers of workers continue to operate.... On the other hand, parks, groves, woodlands, beaches and even mountains are being sealed under the pretext of “protecting public health...”. These places are places of gathering and meeting, where one can walk, run, play, be under the sun, communicate with other people, away from the monotonously repetitive daily life of the city of cement, commodities and cars.”

Regarding the Antonis Tritsis Park, they argue that it is an area of vital importance for the residents of the lower social strata of the western suburbs of Athens. Its area has been occupied and shrunk repeatedly over the years by large commercial enterprises to the east and by the businesses of the municipal authorities of the surrounding areas to the south. They also report that those management bodies that have taken over to date have aimed to maintain a controlled abandonment. Establishing a regime of legalizing the development of the park on commercial terms, fencing, removing its character as open space and not allowing free access to it.

Finally, they comment on the way the park was managed during the implementation of the first measures and its closure.

Locked gates, controlled entry, and police, disciplining the bans, its control and commercialization regime, suppression of social resistance are all concerns for Agros.

“With the legitimizing alibi of avoiding illness, we are invited by the state to discipline the loss of an important element of our lives.... Our needs and desires shrink homogenized to the “necessity” of state directives, reduced to papers of exceptional travel, with destinations chosen according to the needs of the dominant system.”

4.3. Results of Qualitative Research with Questionnaires

The following is part of the results of the research work that we carried out at Philopappou Hill and Tritsis Park. In the context of the study, a series of interviews and discussions were conducted with the interviewees face to face. The overall comparative results based on the responses are presented below.

In both parks, respondents responded that they consistently visited the park with high frequency for 30 min to 1 h and 1 to 2 h, while there were very few respondents who responded that they visited little or not at all. However, there were more than a few who stayed in the park for more than 2 h. More specifically, during an interview with a visitor who had also taken the dog for a walk, he mentioned the following:

“Can’t wait for the time, when I get back after 10 h of work, to come to the park to relax for 3 and 4 h.”

By the biggest majority, most of the respondents walked to the park, as they were also residents of the nearby areas. A few of them responded that they used public transport to reach the park, and even fewer drove to the park. Finally, despite both parks being hyper-local, the predominant daily use was by neighbors; only at some organized events was there a mass presence of residents from other areas. However, there were several occasions when people came from far away and visited the park on a regular basis.

Of the respondents who visited the park, most of them answered that, over the period from 16 March to 4 May 2020, when the public parks in Greece were closed, they visited the park with great frequency, while others visited it much less frequently. However, many said they did not visit the park at all during the restrictive measures due to the pandemic, as the general direction from the government was that public open spaces should not be used by residents. Considering that Philopappou Park was open (since there is no fence), while Tritsis Park was closed (it has a fence), some people responded that they did not go to the park, but eventually it emerged from the discussion that they did go without revealing the fact, since it was against the law.

Most of the respondents noticed a difference in the frequency of visits compared to before the pandemic’s restrictive measures. It appeared that people had the need to visit the park more regularly during the week. The ban on access to Tritsis Park generated

several reactions but these were not expressed collectively. What we observed, however, was that the residents moved from the level of assertion to the level of creative resistance: they organized themselves into groups that entered the park through the barbed wire. “A family cannot live in such a heat in 30 m². For us, the park is part of our lives.”

It is important to mention that many people did not observe a large number of visitors during the period of 16 March to 4 May 2020, while others noticed the opposite. Based on their words, we concluded that it depended a lot on which areas of the park each person visited. On the other hand, the majority responded that the day that the access to the park was lifted a significantly higher number of people visited the park compared to before the measures.

The majority also responded that they chose the park for walking and meeting friends in its public areas. Several used it for sports, walking the children or the dog.

To summarize, based on the results of the interviews and discussions, it appeared that the participation of people visiting the park in commons was very low. A very low percentage of people meeting collectively for activities in the park was observed, as about half of the interviewees noted that they did not meet collectively at all. The percentage who indicated that they participated in assemblies was low (26% in Philopappou’s and 15.25% in Antonis Tritsis), as the vast majority never participated. A few people reported meeting sometimes. This response contrasted with discussions with younger people who said they organized via the internet.

Although the vast majority said that they were informed about any pro-environmental activities in the area within the park, 72% of the participants had never participated in them in Antonis Tritsis Park and 73.3% in Philopappou Hill. In contrast, positive intentions to participate in future stewardship actions scored 79–80% in both parks. As many interviewees mentioned, this fact either reflected the absence of actions in the area or the lack of information or calls to the people. About half of the interviewees said they were informed about the actions through social media, while fewer said they were informed through friends and acquaintances and wall posters. Of the respondents, 4% said that they were not informed at all about Antonis Tritsis Park, while for Philopappou Hill Park the percentage that were not informed at all was 42.2%.

Most of the visitors (90%) were opposed to the possible fencing of the entire area of the park, and some of them had participated in the citizens’ struggle to prevent the fencing that had been attempted in Philopappou and Ilion in various parts of the area.

Almost all of them responded that they agreed with the 24-h operation of the park, as many of them perceived it as an extension of their neighborhood and used it on a daily basis.

Most visitors responded that they were not in favor of a possible implementation of ticket payment. The majority of visitors live close to the park or live in proximity (<2000 m) to it, so they could not conceive of paying to enter the site. A smaller proportion responded that they were not totally against the existence of a ticket, mainly for reasons of fear in the evening hours and better cleanliness.

The majority considered that charging a fee to enter the park was an impediment to visiting the park, as presented in the Table 2 below.

Most respondents answered either that they were satisfied with the management of Philopappou Park and had not identified any major problems in the parts of the park they used, or that they had identified some shortcomings in various parts of the area. A few expressed that they were not satisfied at all with the management. There were contrasting results for Tritsis Park, where most respondents said that they were not satisfied with the management of the park by the state and that it faced the same problems of neglect as the surrounding neighborhoods.

Table 3 below shows the respondents’ answers for both parks to the question asked them for three words that encouraged them and three that discouraged them from visiting the park.

Table 2. Arguments of visitors for the imposition of a fee for the entrance to the park.

Arguments of visitors for the imposition of a fee for the entrance to the park
The park is a public space
Archaeological site and public , therefore free to all (Philopappou)
Free good
Public good
It should be accessible to all people, if a fee is put in directly it becomes inaccessible to low income people, also I don't think it makes sense to have a fee for my entrance to a hill.
It is a public space, and by charging a fee several groups in society lose the ability to visit it.
We're going in through the holes.
It's a public good, we already pay taxes.
Ensuring security.
Difficult economic situation .
It should stop being public .
It's a public space. It should be for everyone.
There should be revenue for maintenance.
Daily visits would cost money .
Cultural goods and history should not be a commodity. They belong to everyone.
It is an inalienable right to move around my city freely and without financial burden .
There should be no dependence on the financial ability of the person concerned.
The park is not a luxury. It is necessary for a balanced life of a person in the city. Anything that restricts our access to it compromises our quality of life.

Table 3. Answers to the question of which words encourage and discourage a visit to the park.

	Philopappou Hill Park	Antonis Tritsis Park
Words that encourage respondents to visit the park		
Nature	25/45	24/60
Calm/Relaxation	12/45	8/60
Entertainment	-	8/60
Lake	-	5/60
Large area	-	5/60
View	11/45	-
Fresh air/Air	11/45	-
Walk	6/45	3/60
Words that discourage respondents to visit the park		
Waste/Garbage	5/45	16/60
Abandonment	-	19/60
Lack of light/Darkness	5/45	6/60
Fear	2/45	4/60
Criminality	15/45	-
Insecurity	6/45	-
No word/reason	6/45	1/60

When participants were asked to write down three words that encouraged them to visit the park, they all wrote down elements of nature. Whereas, in the next question, where participants noted items discouraging them from visiting the park, almost all of them noted

words describing litter (Tritsis Park). Many also noted words describing abandonment in the park (30%). In contrast, in the central park of the city, the words ‘insecurity’ and ‘criminality’ seemed to predominate, but not in a large proportion (30%).

In both parks very few people reported fearing for their personal safety. Several reported that litter discouraged them from visiting the park, particularly for Tritsis Park it seemed that this was the main problem in discouraging visitation. In Philopappou Park the word abandonment did not figure in the words discouraging visitation. It should be noted that many people reported that nothing discouraged them. It was particularly interesting that in Tritsis Park there was no response related to criminality, or insecurity, while these were the arguments that were systematically used to discredit it by many government newspapers, in order to impose its enclosure.

In the last question, in Philopappou Park, 21 people reported that they had identified problems that needed to be repaired in the park. Some of the issues mentioned were inadequate lighting, unauthorized building extensions within the park, poor maintenance of the plants and infrastructure, and litter. On the other hand, 12 people reported that they had not identified any problems. Fewer had identified problems and solved them through participation in a group or on their own. For the corresponding question in the Antonis Tritsis Park, 45 out of 60 people reported that they had identified problems in the park and 9 reported that they identified problems but had solved them, by informing someone in charge or by taking their own initiative. Finally, 5 people had not identified any problems within the park.

Finally, in both parks we observed different groups of actors (Figure 10). The management of the park seemed to be taken into account by only a few of the actors, shown in gray in Figure 10. There were many groups that were partly involved with the park, but few that saw it, practically, as a common.

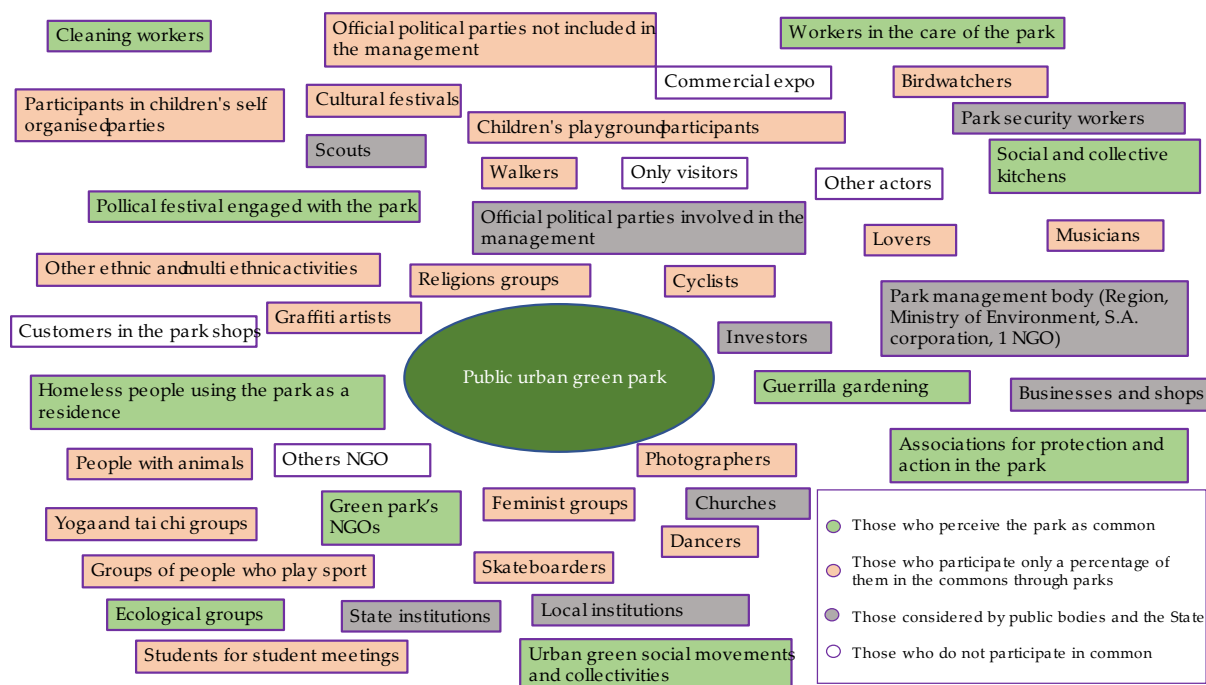


Figure 10. Park actors.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In Athens, in the western, and north-western suburbs of the city, where most of the low incomes districts are concentrated, free public green spaces are systematically abandoned by the state, and the same for the surrounding urban areas. Historically, in the areas of “self-constructed popular neighborhoods” [6,7], where residents in the period

1960–1980 organized and claimed spaces for their transformation into green spaces (such as Keratsini, Peristeri, Kaisariani in the East, etc.) these spaces seemed to be more carefully maintained. This was due, however, more to the action of the residents themselves than by commons actions (assemblies etc.) and, more recently, due to ecological, leftist, autonomous organizations, groups, and collectives that participate in them, than to central planning by the state, which has often sought their expropriation.

At the same time, the open green spaces adjacent to the wealthier central districts of the city (until recently socially mixed) or in the northern suburbs of the wealthier districts are more well cared for, as are these areas themselves. The difference is that in the city center, as in Philopappou Forest, people come from all over the city regardless of their social status and cultural backgrounds. The central green areas are under constant challenge by the dominant policies with the aim of turning them into a commodity which would lead to social exclusion for many of the park users. The fact that there are several collectives acting within the parks aiming to protect them has so far prevented them from being turned into a commodity. However, the majority of park users, despite having the intention to participate in collective actions or in “commons”, in the end, and for different reasons, did not participate. It seemed, however, from conversations, that they were participating but without being conscious that they were doing so. On the contrary, several groups (music, dance, theatre, sports, etc.), the majority of which are multi-ethnic, seem to formulate commonalities and claim the space as freely accessible to all.

Based on the results of the questionnaires for the two parks, some points worthy of further discussion emerged. In particular, the need to use urban parks and their great importance for residents was observed. During the restrictive measures of the pandemic, in the period from 16 March to 4 May, the largest percentage of respondents reported visiting the site with great frequency. There was also a high number of people visiting the park more after the pandemic than before. This suggests that with the new data that emerged with the emergence of the pandemic, regular visits to green spaces and parks have become established in the perception of many people. In addition, we concluded that there is an important role for urban green spaces, to which the public has access, as evidenced in the way people adapted to pandemic restrictive measures. Accessible large open green spaces, combined with social distance in the population, mitigated negative health effects amidst physical mobility restrictions, while reducing the risk of disease transmission. In addition, it facilitated adherence to spacing that was consistent with guidelines for social spacing and even for self-isolation [38].

From the actions and struggles of the urban social movements and collectives analyzed in this research, a direct correlation with the concepts of urban commons and urban political ecology emerged. More specifically, the collectives “Agros” and “Open Assembly” of Petralona-Thiseio-Koukaki Residents”, in the two parks of Athens, show some similarities in the actions they carry out and in the way they make their decisions. First, it should be mentioned that both collectives are housed in spaces occupied by themselves, spaces that were abandoned before their occupation. The positions of both collectives are against fencing, policing and control and the commercialization of public open spaces. Both are actively involved in socio-political mobilizations that have arisen from time to time to claim and demand better and fairer conditions for all. Another similarity between the two groups is the realization of self-education, self-organization, and autonomous actions. More specifically, the “Open Assembly of Residents of Petralona-Thiseio-Koukaki” organizes collection and supply of essentials to those in need in order to cover basic needs and cultivate solidarity in the neighborhoods. “Agros” in the “Antonis Tritsis” park carries out collective kitchen activities, free to all. Both groups carry out children’s workshops on self-education, cultivation, and tree planting. Finally, both collectives hold open assemblies, when circumstances require it, on issues concerning their green spaces.

The urban social movements that are active on issues related to urban parks, and which have been our concern in this study, have been, and continue to be, opposed to interventions aimed at investment and privatization within the park lands. Policies with

privatization and ticketing as the main implementation tools, aim at attracting people who bring profit, and exclude most of society. Therefore, it follows that movements perceive parks as ‘commons’ [12], as they claim and solve problems that arise by providing effective self-governance for a resource or space that is shared between users. They are also in line with urban political ecology which attempts to highlight the political dimensions of urban environmental processes by presenting the city as a field of ‘eco-political action’ [30]. The ultimate goal is to move towards the production of not only sustainable, but also fair and democratic, cities for the very citizens who inhabit them [13].

It is important to note that in the area of the north-western suburbs, where the Antonis Tritsis Park is located, there is very little green space, resulting in the phenomenon of spatial exclusion, which, in the face of the unprecedented conditions caused by the pandemic, endangers those people who are cut off from nature and greenery. This process, combined with all the problems they face due to their economic situation, most importantly the almost non-existent access to health structures and services, makes their daily living very difficult. In addition, it is worth noting that in the midst of the measures taken to tackle the Coronavirus pandemic, spatial discrimination was intense, especially in the Antonis Tritsis Park. As mentioned earlier, this park is one of the few green public areas in the west of the city, but, nevertheless, access to it was prohibited. In this way, it was concluded that the needs of people for contact with greenery was not considered by those responsible, as their policies intensified the phenomenon of social–spatial exclusion.

At this point, we offer some suggestions below to management bodies, policymakers and urban planners, on how to improve urban parks:

- Encourage the active participation of users and visitors in decisions concerning parks.
- Open meetings of the management body to the public.
- Call for joint assemblies with all groups using the parks.
- Provide transparency in decision-making.
- Create a freer climate without digital control inside the park
- Guard the park, which should be done in cooperation with the users of the park and it should be discreet, without fences.
- Provide signage to encourage people to visit many points of interest.
- Conservation of water bodies with respect to biodiversity.
- Restrict or prohibit car passage.
- Protect wildlife by avoiding frequent large events and the use of loud speakers.
- Provide easy accessibility for all without cars.
- Encourage people to participate in commons.
- Ban the use of the park by businesses that want economic profit.
- Allow only the existence of necessary small municipal enterprises with low prices and that have low nuisance potential.
- Avoid many roads because it fragments ecosystems and destroys biodiversity.

The following shows the existence of two opposing ideological visions of the nature and purpose of public space. On the one hand, social movements, collectives, activists, a large part of the inhabitants and the homeless who use urban parks, wish to promote the vision of a space characterized by free interaction and the absence of coercion by powerful institutions. For them, public space is an unrestricted space in which social movements can organize and expand more broadly. In contrast, the vision of state or municipal representatives is quite different. Public spaces for them are a controlled and organized retreat where a well-behaved public can experience the spectacle of the city. The main tool for implementing the first vision is the commons, while the second is commercialization. In fact, both tools are two interrelated concepts that reflect social antagonisms and imply the participation or exclusion of societies and communities from accessing, using, recovering, and managing resources and means of production and reproduction, which are processes that also make it difficult to achieve the goals set by the United Nations through Urban Agenda III. Urbanization and environmental impacts must be reduced, air quality upgraded and free access to green public spaces provided to all people. The problem is that the Urban

Agenda promotes green development for a few people and social equity at the same time, and that is an oxymoron. In addition, it ignores the actors and, especially, the groups with intercultural characteristics that can create process of commons in the parks, because only the state and the private sector with official ONGs are considered.

As we have seen above, cultural background influences the way urban green spaces are used. In Antonis Tritsis Park, daily meetings of immigrants from different Asian countries (Pakistan, India) playing local games are very typical, and meetings of families from different ethnicities for barbecues are also very typical. In Philopappou Park there are intercultural meetings for Tai Chi, artists, choirs, and orchestras (see Open Orchestra). While the most typical intercultural meetings, like the process of commoning (social production of commons), take place de facto in the places where children play and where crops or trees are planted together.

At the time of writing this article, in the summer of 2022, the commoners of at least three parks in Athens (Villa Drakopoulou in Ano Patisia, Strefi Hill in Exarchia, Plato Academia Park in Kolonos) were fighting against fencing, privatization and the destruction of many trees and wetlands in the midst of a process of “Urban extractivism” and gentrification of Athens.

Lastly, new data, established with the emergence of the pandemic and the intense conditions of containment and alienation that characterized it, showed that, in such difficult times, people and movements manage to work together and join forces for a common purpose. In a city like Athens with unsustainable green rates per capita and basic shortages of public urban green space, residents and initiatives organized and rallied in defense of parks in their neighborhoods and living areas in a period when, from what was observed, the state and municipal agencies responsible for managing urban greening sought to implement plans and interventions for the benefit of the few or for private interests. In doing so, they took advantage of the pandemic conditions, as it would be more difficult for people to react. In the end, however, they were proved wrong, as COVID-19 did not stand in the way of mobilizations and demands for free green spaces and parks for all.

Finally, many local struggles for the right to the city and to nature are creating by intercultural groups with a long experience in production of commons in the parks or in other spaces.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: C.P. and G.S.; Methodology, investigation, writing—original draft preparation: G.S.; Writing—review and editing, supervision, C.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank the visitors and the groups at the parks for the time they devoted to the research. More specifically, they thank the following collectives and groups: Agros, Hellenic Ornithological Society, Friends of the Park, Open Assembly of Residents of Petralona, Thiseion, Koukaki and the group “Philopappou”.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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