

Case study ID

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NAVARINOU PARK PROJECT

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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NAVARINOU PARK PROJECT

Case Study at a Glance

The **Parko Navarinou** in Exarcheia, central Athens, represents a paradigmatic case of urban commons and self-managed green space. Established in **2009** through the collective action of local residents and grassroots initiatives, the park was created on the site of the former Geroulaneion/Sbarounis Clinic, later owned by the Technical Chamber of Greece and used as a private parking lot for several decades.

When plans for constructing an underground parking facility resurfaced after the lease expired in late 2008, residents and local collectives occupied the space and transformed it into a public park.

Through collective planting, the creation of a playground and community garden, cultural events, open-air cinema screenings, and neighborhood assemblies, the park developed into a vibrant hub of **social interaction, environmental regeneration, and civic participation**. Governed by an open General Assembly, it operates on principles of **self-management, horizontality, and anti-commodification**, while fostering inclusivity and solidarity among residents and visitors.

Today, Parko Navarinou remains a living example of **participatory urbanism** and a critical case of urban resilience. It demonstrates how citizens can reclaim underutilized land, resist privatization pressures, and create a sustainable public space that addresses the pressing need for greenery, recreation, and collective life in one of Athens' most densely populated neighborhoods.

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Case Study Profile

Topic

- ☒ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☐ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☐ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☐ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☐ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☐ Metropolitan / city region
- ☒ City scale
- ☒ Neighbourhood scale
- ☐ Block scale
- ☐ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☒ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☒ social & cultural resilience
- ☐ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☐ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☒ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☒ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☐ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☒ Local government
- ☒ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☐ Private sector
- ☒ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☒ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☒ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☒ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☒ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☒ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☐ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☒ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☒ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☐ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☒ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☐ Empowerment
- ☐ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

As part of the Navarinou Park Project, developed by local residents and grassroots initiatives, a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary network of activists, students, neighborhood residents, cultural actors, and academic institutions was formed to reclaim, introduce greenery to, and actively manage an underutilized, abandoned urban space in the Exarcheia neighborhood of central Athens. Historically associated with political activism and high-density urban living, the district faces severe spatial challenges, including narrow streets, heavy traffic congestion, and an extreme scarcity of public green spaces per resident.

The project combined direct civic mobilization, collective physical labor, participatory planning, and diverse cultural programming to resist privatization and commercial development pressures, transforming a former private parking lot into a multifunctional public commons aimed at supporting both social and ecological resilience. A key defining feature of the initiative was the sustained activation of local residents and civic actors through horizontal governance structures, decentralized thematic working groups, regular volunteer maintenance workdays, and an open General Assembly that operates on principles of self-management, horizontality, and anti-commodification.

Although the project was entirely initiated and managed from the bottom up by grassroots neighborhood collectives, it involved a wide range of external stakeholders over its fifteen years of operation, including university researchers who studied the site as a model of urban commoning, independent artists, and cultural actors. Throughout this trajectory, the community had to navigate complex urban governance dynamics and ongoing tensions with institutional actors—namely the Technical Chamber of Greece (the property's owner) and the Municipality of Athens—whose top-down redevelopment agendas directly conflicted with the community's vision. Despite these challenges, the initiative produced highly valuable, transferable methods for bottom-up urban regeneration, demonstrating how community-led spatial adaptation, artistic interventions, and sustainable practices can foster resilient urban communities.

As part of the case study, we conducted one interview with an initiator and long-term representative of the grassroots neighborhood initiative. The interview focused on the historical conception, organizational methodology, and long-term implementation challenges of the self-managed park. Particular attention was given to the initial public mobilization and physical occupation of the site in March 2009, during which citizens collectively demolished concrete surfaces and cleared debris to establish a green area rather than permitting the construction of a planned underground parking facility.

The discussion explored the operational mechanics of the open General Assembly and its decentralized working groups (covering gardening, cultural events, and children's activities), highlighting how horizontal decision-making fosters a deep sense of ownership and collective responsibility among participants. Furthermore, the interview detailed the park's pioneering ecological practices, such as the

adoption of the Fukuoka natural farming method in the community vegetable garden and plans for a self-managed composting unit.

Finally, the dialogue emphasized the project's inherent fragility—manifested through recurrent vandalism, lack of institutional recognition, and reliance on voluntary labor—as well as its remarkable adaptive capacity. A prime example of this resilience was the community's collective decision to completely redesign the space into an expanded, inclusive playground to counteract gentrification pressures and directly accommodate the evolving needs of families and changing neighborhood demographics.

Compendious summary

Introduction

The case of **Parko Navarinou** in Exarcheia, central Athens, illustrates a pioneering example of grassroots urban intervention and self-managed public space. The initiative emerged in **March 2009**, in the aftermath of the December 2008 social uprising, when residents and local collectives mobilized to reclaim an abandoned lot threatened by commercial development.

The lot, formerly occupied by the Geroulaneion (later Sbarounis) Clinic and subsequently leased as a private parking area, was slated to be converted into an underground parking facility by the Technical Chamber of Greece (TEE), the property's owner. In opposition to this plan, citizens transformed the space into a community-managed green area, asserting their “**right to the city**” and prioritizing ecological sustainability and collective well-being over commodification.

Over time, the park has developed into a **multifunctional commons** that accommodates diverse activities: gardening, children's play, cultural events, workshops, and open-air cinema screenings. Governed by an **open assembly** and organized through self-management principles, Parko Navarinou has become a symbol of participatory urbanism, social solidarity, and environmental resilience in one of Athens' most densely populated districts.

Neighborhood challenge

Exarcheia, situated in the center of Athens, is historically associated with political activism, cultural diversity, and high-density urban living. The neighborhood is characterized by narrow streets, limited public green areas, and significant traffic congestion. According to spatial studies, the available green space per resident in central Athens is among the lowest in Europe, creating pressing needs for accessible open areas that can improve environmental and social conditions.

The site of Parko Navarinou reflects the broader challenges of the neighborhood. Originally housing a private clinic (1907–1972), later demolished by TEE in the 1980s, the lot remained vacant and was leased as a parking facility for almost two decades. By 2008, the expiration of the lease revived proposals for an underground parking construction. Residents feared this development would further intensify air pollution, reduce already scarce open space, and reinforce the dominance of private vehicles over pedestrian and communal uses.

In addition to environmental concerns, Exarcheia faced **social challenges** linked to demographic change, marginalization, and increasing gentrification pressures. The absence of institutional planning for accessible public spaces contributed to a sense of neglect and exclusion, while tensions around urban development projects often exacerbated conflicts between authorities and residents.

Response to the challenge

The transformation of the Navarinou lot into a park was a **direct response to the imminent risk of losing one of the few potential open spaces in the neighborhood**. On **7 March 2009**, the Exarcheia Residents' Initiative, together with local grassroots groups such as "*We, Here and Now for All of Us*," organized a public gathering that culminated in the occupation of the site. Citizens collectively demolished remaining concrete surfaces, cleared debris, and began planting trees and shrubs. This act of symbolic and practical reclamation marked the birth of the park.

Rather than waiting for municipal or institutional intervention, the community itself established the organizational framework for the park's operation. The decision to operate under principles of **self-management, horizontality, and anti-commodification** distinguished the project from conventional top-down urban planning. The park was conceived not only as an ecological intervention but also as a **social and cultural hub** open to all residents regardless of age, origin, or social status.

In subsequent years, the park became a **site of ongoing experimentation**. Residents expanded the playground, developed a vegetable garden based on natural farming techniques, and introduced cultural programming such as concerts, lectures, and open-air cinema. In 2017, an Italian artist painted a large mural on the park's wall, reinforcing its role as a space of symbolic resistance and artistic expression. In 2018, facing new social challenges and gentrification pressures, the community collectively decided to redesign the park into a larger, inclusive playground, emphasizing the importance of family-oriented spaces and the need to counteract the displacement of local residents.

Methods of citizen engagement:

The success of Parko Navarinou is rooted in its **participatory structures** and the variety of methods used to ensure active community involvement:

- **Open General Assemblies:** The central decision-making body, open to all residents and visitors, where rules of operation, future plans, and responses to challenges are collectively discussed and agreed upon.
- **Working groups:** The assembly delegates tasks to thematic groups, such as gardening, children's activities, cultural events, cinema, and design/programming, ensuring a decentralized and participatory distribution of responsibilities.
- **Volunteer workdays:** Regular collective actions where residents clean, maintain, and improve the park by planting trees, repairing infrastructure, or creating new spaces.
- **Cultural and educational activities:** Concerts, theatre performances, film screenings, lectures, and workshops provide opportunities for social interaction, intergenerational learning, and cultural exchange.
- **Ecological practices:** The park's garden follows the **Fukuoka method** of natural farming, promoting biodiversity and sustainability without chemicals. Plans for a self-managed composting unit highlight the community's effort to integrate circular practices into everyday urban life.

Through these methods, Parko Navarinou not only provided a green and recreational space but also fostered a **sense of ownership, collective responsibility, and solidarity** among participants, thereby enhancing the neighborhood's social and ecological resilience.

Stakeholders

The development and operation of Parko Navarinou involved a diverse range of stakeholders:

- **Local residents and neighborhood collectives:** The principal initiators and ongoing managers of the park, responsible for its creation, maintenance, and governance through open assemblies.
- **Grassroots groups and volunteers:** Numerous activists, students, and neighbors who contributed to the daily operation, ecological projects, and cultural programming of the park.
- **Cultural actors and artists:** Individuals and collectives who enriched the park with artistic interventions, such as murals, performances, and festivals, enhancing its role as a cultural hub.
- **Academic and research institutions:** Universities and independent researchers who studied the park as a model of urban commons and participatory urbanism, thereby disseminating its lessons more broadly.
- **Municipality of Athens and the Technical Chamber of Greece (TEE):** Institutional actors with formal ownership or jurisdiction over the site. Their development plans often conflicted with the community's vision, generating tensions but also framing the park within a broader urban governance debate.

The interplay between grassroots actors and institutional stakeholders reveals the complex dynamics of urban resilience. Parko Navarinou illustrates how **local communities can challenge dominant development agendas** and create alternative models of urban space management, even in contexts marked by institutional resistance and socio-spatial pressures.

Case study findings and lessons learned

The **Parko Navarinou project** has demonstrated that grassroots mobilization can successfully reclaim neglected urban land and convert it into a socially and environmentally valuable commons. Over more than fifteen years of operation, the park has become a **reference point for community-based urban resilience**, offering a number of significant findings and lessons.

First, the initiative highlights the **capacity of local communities to resist top-down development pressures**. By mobilizing against the construction of a private parking facility, residents articulated an alternative vision of urban development, one that privileges **public green space, collective use, and social inclusion** over profit-driven urban policies. This demonstrates the potential of bottom-up interventions to alter urban planning trajectories in contexts where institutional mechanisms fail to safeguard community interests.

Second, the park has contributed to **environmental resilience** in one of Athens' most densely built neighborhoods. The transformation of a concrete lot into a green and recreational area mitigated the

scarcity of open space, improved the microclimate, and promoted ecological awareness through sustainable practices such as the adoption of the **Fukuoka natural farming method** and the development of a community garden. Future plans for composting further reflect the project's commitment to circular and environmentally responsible urban practices.

Third, the park has proven to be a **catalyst for social cohesion and cultural participation**. Through open-air cinemas, concerts, workshops, and storytelling initiatives, it has fostered intergenerational and intercultural exchange, providing a platform where residents, families, and visitors can interact on equal terms. These activities have generated new forms of social capital by cultivating both **bonding ties** among neighborhood residents and **bridging networks** across diverse groups, including migrants, artists, and academics.

At the same time, the initiative has faced **significant challenges**. Recurrent vandalism, misuse of the space, and the lack of institutional support have placed a heavy burden on the volunteer-based community structure. The persistence of these challenges underlines the **fragility of self-managed commons** in the absence of formal recognition or sustained resources. Furthermore, tensions with the Technical Chamber of Greece and the Municipality of Athens over the property's future illustrate the difficulties of negotiating with institutional actors who prioritize redevelopment projects over community-led initiatives.

Finally, the park's **redesign into a larger playground in 2019** offers an important lesson in adaptability. By reconfiguring the space in response to changing neighborhood demographics and the needs of families, the community reaffirmed its commitment to inclusivity and long-term resilience. This adaptive capacity demonstrates how self-managed projects can remain relevant and sustainable, provided they continue to respond to evolving local challenges.

In sum, the Parko Navarinou project reveals that **artistic interventions, ecological practices, and horizontal forms of civic engagement can together foster resilient urban communities**. It provides a transferable model for other cities seeking to reclaim underutilized land, strengthen social cohesion, and promote ecological sustainability through participatory urbanism.

Conclusions

The case of **Parko Navarinou** has contributed to urban resilience in significant yet multifaceted ways. Firstly, the project has **demonstrated the power of grassroots mobilization** to reclaim urban land and resist the pressures of privatization and commodification. What began as an act of protest against the construction of a parking facility evolved into a long-term experiment in participatory urbanism and self-management.

Secondly, the park has **enhanced environmental resilience** by introducing greenery, sustainable gardening practices, and ecological awareness into one of the most densely built neighborhoods of Athens. In doing so, it has improved local environmental conditions while offering a tangible response

to the chronic shortage of public green space in the city center. Thirdly, Parko Navarinou has **strengthened social resilience** by providing an inclusive space for collective activities, cultural events, and intergenerational encounters. The park has functioned as a platform for building community solidarity, generating social capital, and cultivating democratic practices through open assemblies and horizontal decision-making.

At the same time, the project's trajectory underscores the **challenges and vulnerabilities of self-managed commons**. Acts of vandalism, the absence of institutional recognition, and recurring tensions with public authorities highlight the limitations of grassroots initiatives operating without stable support structures. Nevertheless, the park's capacity to adapt—exemplified by its redesign into a larger playground in 2019—demonstrates that self-managed projects can endure by evolving in response to shifting social and spatial contexts.

Overall, Parko Navarinou stands as an emblematic case of **urban resilience through civic engagement**, offering valuable lessons for urban planning, policy-making, and community activism. It illustrates how the collective imagination and commitment of local residents can produce sustainable alternatives to conventional development, reaffirming the potential of bottom-up initiatives to shape more inclusive and resilient urban futures.

Recommendations for future civic engagement and replicability

The case of **Parko Navarinou** demonstrates that grassroots initiatives can reclaim and sustain public space in ways that enhance both environmental and social resilience. Its trajectory suggests several key recommendations for future civic engagement:

1. **Institutional recognition of urban commons**
Municipalities and public institutions should formally acknowledge self-managed spaces as legitimate forms of urban governance. Legal and policy frameworks can secure their continuity, reduce conflicts over land use, and facilitate synergies between bottom-up initiatives and formal planning processes.
2. **Support for community-based ecological practices**
The adoption of sustainable farming methods, ecological gardening, and composting initiatives in Parko Navarinou illustrates the potential of small-scale urban ecological projects to contribute to environmental resilience. Future policies should promote and fund such practices, enabling communities to integrate circular economy principles into everyday urban life.
3. **Strengthening participatory governance**
The open assemblies of Parko Navarinou highlight the importance of horizontal and transparent decision-making. Urban policies could institutionalize neighborhood assemblies or advisory boards, ensuring that residents participate actively in shaping urban development and public space management.
4. **Capacity building and resource support**

Grassroots projects often face sustainability challenges due to the lack of funding, technical expertise, or long-term institutional support. Establishing funding mechanisms—such as small grants, participatory budgeting, or community partnerships—can help secure the viability of civic initiatives and reduce reliance on voluntary labor alone.

5. **Adaptive strategies for resilience**

The transformation of Parko Navarinou into an expanded playground illustrates the importance of flexibility and responsiveness to changing community needs. Replicable models of urban commons must incorporate adaptive strategies that allow projects to evolve in line with demographic, social, and spatial transformations.

Replicability

The experience of Parko Navarinou can be transferred to other urban contexts, provided that local conditions are carefully considered. Its success lies not in a fixed design, but in its **process of collective reclamation, participatory governance, and ecological practice**. For other neighborhoods, especially those facing pressures of densification, lack of green space, or commercial exploitation of land, the case suggests that:

- **Grassroots mobilization can initiate transformative change** when institutional planning fails to provide adequate public space.
- **Self-management and horizontality** foster a sense of ownership and long-term commitment, ensuring that urban commons remain responsive to community needs.
- **Cultural and ecological activities** are crucial to sustaining participation, building social capital, and embedding resilience in everyday practices.
- **Cross-sector collaborations** with academics, artists, and NGOs can expand the impact and visibility of such initiatives, connecting local struggles with broader urban and international networks.

In conclusion, Parko Navarinou provides a replicable model of **bottom-up urban resilience**, showing how communities can reclaim underutilized land and transform it into sustainable, inclusive, and socially vibrant public spaces. Its lessons are relevant not only for Athens but also for other cities seeking to cultivate more equitable and resilient urban futures.

Attachments

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Photos







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