

SNAPSHOT - ATHENS: STAVROS NIARCHOS CULTURAL CENTRE



KEY POINTS

- Technically sophisticated NBS projects excel with sustainability indicators surrounding construction, but do not guarantee successful socio-cultural functions
- Innovative models of Public-Private Partnerships need to consider the financial viability of all public organisations involved
- Public NBS that are privately financed risk becoming spaces of limited civil participation and ownership

ABOUT THE PROJECT

NATure-based URban innovATION is a 4-year project involving 14 institutions across Europe in the fields of urban development, geography, innovation studies and economics. We are creating a step-change in how we understand and use nature-based solutions for sustainable urbanisation.





Sustainability challenges and opportunities

Air pollution and the heat island effect constitute persisting challenges for Athens, which has the lowest per capita green space in the EU and with crisis worsening the availability of resources for urban greening.

Athens' spur and dense urbanisation has been rather recent, rapid, and disorderly. ***“Centralising governance and concentrating all high-level institutions in Athens contributed to its “hydrocephalus” development and its environmental problems. Whereas the first urban planning attempt (1985) stressed the need to withhold further sprawl and protect natural areas, this later changed.”***¹ The geomorphology of Athens causes a temperature inversion phenomenon, partly responsible for air pollution problems of two types: high concentrations of particles and photochemical smog. The intense use of automobiles, poor public transportation services, weak cycling network, and lack of green space throughout the city contribute to frequently unsafe air quality levels. This combined with a lack of ventilation in Athens enhances the urban heat island effect, noticed especially during the summer. As part of the 100 Resilient Cities network, Athens has embraced a strategy focusing on being “Open, Green, Proactive, and Vibrant.” NBS in Athens are however still scarce and consist mostly of parks, urban gardens, mostly private green roofs, and a few conservation and restoration projects of mostly blue, coastal natural ecosystems.

Solution story and key actors

The SNFCC emerges as a long-awaited provision of both infrastructural renewals for two of the main public culture and education organisations and for ecosystem services for the wider Athenian public, albeit through the donation and under the terms of a private foundation.

The SNFCC complex (2009-2017) was funded entirely by the SNF foundation (a private, international philanthropic organisation, founded by the Greek ship-owner Stavros Niarchos), constructed on previously derelict public land, and passed on to the Greek State after its completion. It included the construction and outfitting of new facilities for the National Library of Greece (NLG) and the Greek National Opera (GNO), as well as the creation of a 210,000 m² park. It is a unique landmark project situated at the bay of Faliro, marked by efforts to restore Greece's image (tourism, job creation, boosting the economy) and become a global role model of environmental sustainability. ***“SNFCC is supra-local and not in the centre of Athens, but without satisfactory connection via public transport. Nevertheless, it is designed for collective recreation and it is open to everyone; it has become a pole of attraction.”***² The project also addressed long-lived concerns of neighbouring municipalities for its regeneration and greening. Some sustainability measures include a 17,000 m² green roof, thermal and noise insulation, drought tolerant vegetation, drainage systems for rainwater capture, compost generation and use, and light pollution reduction techniques.



Governance strategies

Safeguarding the integrity of public assets while agreeing on the conditions of the procurement process is a challenging aspect of public governance in public-private partnerships.

In March 2009, the Greek State agreed that SNF will assume the total cost of the SNFCC construction and, upon completion, will donate to the Greek State, which in turn will undertake its full control and operation, managing it through a public company (SNFCC SA) overseen by the Greek Ministry of Finance. The public-private partnership (PPP) of the SNFCC was proposed by the SNF ***“as a scheme where the state provides the land, the private entity makes the construction, and the state then manages its functioning.”***³ The legal agreement grants the donor the right to withdraw the donation if terms and conditions are not fulfilled. The National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera are part of this agreement maintaining their institutional autonomy, but endorsing new financial responsibilities and giving up decision power on issues connected to the new building facility. This also applies to the management of the Park which, although is “open to the public,” is being serviced privately (gardening, composting, waste collection, security), unlike public green areas in the city that are managed by municipalities.



Business models

Public-private partnerships of NBS projects with high maintenance costs need to consider future means for financial viability, especially regarding public organisations and entities.

The realisation of the SNFCC depended mainly on the availability of private funding from a wealthy charitable foundation. However, its viability and sustainable future is dependent on how it will be managed by the Greek state, within the newly agreed legal framework around SNFCC’s function. In a context of economic crisis and austerity, this necessitates good planning for generating revenues, that needs to be able to adapt to potential economic fluctuations in the national market. So far, ***“there is no business plan that does not include external support from the SNF, but until now the project is viable from the parking lot and the renting of cafes and restaurants, and of other spaces for events.”***³ However, a great part of income is coming from fees paid to the SNFCC SA by the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera, of which only the GNO is a profit-making organisation. The centre has also launched a membership program to enhance revenue collection. The role of private sector driven activities appears crucial in providing the means to cover the costs of management for SNFCC.



Citizen engagement

Public participation and citizen engagement for transparency and promotion of the public interest are hard to achieve in privately initiated NBS and are not to be conflated with information and education activities.

The Park and other open, free facilities and events organised in the SNFCC have been very popular, with hundreds of visitors weekly. A visitor centre was established in 2013, giving visitors the opportunity to view the construction site and learn about the SNFCC scope, organization, and future plans. However, the public was not well informed on the relative costs, benefits, and risks of this PPP. Whereas there was a consultation phase with stakeholders of local and high-level government prior to the project's realisation, there has been no active consultation and engagement involving end-users in defining the project and subsequently monitoring service quality. The urban agricultural garden of the SNFCC Park, for example, is not assigned to a collective or civil society group to cultivate, but managed by the same gardening company as the rest of the Park. Despite the present public ownership of the SNFCC, there is a lingering sense of private management, ***“a ‘polished’ character that is not permissible to bottom-up or self-managed activities”²*** and a widespread false opinion that the SNF continues to fund all activities in the complex.



Innovation pathways

The innovative potential of NBS can be traced beyond their infrastructural elements, in their ability to foster socio-cultural and knowledge exchange.

The way the SNFCC project was financed and the governance scheme under which it has been functioning are an innovative form of public-private partnership. The main prerequisite of this is the provision of generous funds from a private actor, including the design and construction of its mostly innovative technical characteristics (photovoltaic canopy, water recycling, artificial hill into a green roof, etc.). This prerequisite is however not easily replicated in other projects. Perhaps most important is the innovation that the centre can foster through its facilities and the new dynamism it brings to the area. Representatives opine that the SNFCC's design supports experimentation from societal actors that can foster unexpected innovations ***“in a space that will transform depending on the needs.”²*** Neighbouring municipalities have started to explore ways of capitalising on the new project to attract development funding. Activities organised in the complex, including the opening of new facilities of the NLG, combine elements of technology, urban sustainability and health, social integration, and innovation.

¹ Urban planner, Member of the “Struggle Committee for the Metropolitan Park in Hellenikon”, 2018; ² Social anthropologist, SNFCC management board, 2018; ³ SNFCC chief executive officer, 2018. Photo credit: ©SNF-Yiorgis-Yerolymbos