

Improving access to the Acropolis and the historical centre of Athens. Impacts on tourism and quality of life

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Situation: Until the beginning of the 21st century, the citizens of Athens and visitors faced many difficulties moving around the city and visiting its historical and cultural sites. The City of Athens has made great improvements to the accessibility of its historic, cultural centre in the past ten years. This development was largely prompted by the need to make the city accessible the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2004. This paper presents key improvements in the following areas: access in public transport, with renovated and new train, tram and metro lines connecting the outlying areas to the historical city centre; accessibility of public spaces, including the "unification" or joining of the archaeological sites by a 4 km. accessible pedestrian route; access to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Acropolis and other cultural sites and museums including the ancient Irodion Theatre which hosts the annual Athens Festival.

Approach: The major project was to create a pedestrian zone known as the "Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens". The term "unification" refers to the creation of a continuous fabric of public spaces, parks, and facilities for culture and recreation, to incorporate and link all the significant cultural landmarks and archaeological sites of Athens, including the Acropolis. The unification programme, which began in 2001, aimed to restore the historic continuity of the city, and to create poles of attraction for its residents, also providing a better quality of life in an overall space, highlighting the historic face of Athens. The new Metro, train and tram lines, all of which are fully accessible, and the pedestrian routes linking the cultural sites have given wider benefits to the tourism economy by stimulating greater use of the sites and the central area of the city by both tourists and locals alike.

Outcomes: Pedestrianisation has been shown to have many benefits for the quality of urban living. The pedestrian route in Athens has contributed to increased and more varied activity in the form of social life, walking, exercising and casual meetings, street markets, buskers, entertainers and others. The combination of pedestrian routes and accessibility measures brings together two powerful elements for creating a more sustainable environment, enhancing the quality of life in the historical centre of Athens. In addition, this development has also contributed to tourism, stimulating new low-impact, sustainable business such as cycle tours, which are enjoyed by many visitors, including people with disabilities.