

The Long-Ignored Athens Waterfront Is Being Revived

By Pavlos Zafiropoulos

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George Dimopoulos, 72, remembers when the sea was a lot closer to the site of his car dealership. But that was before Athens's coastal highway was constructed, a raised six-lane artery carrying traffic between Athens and the port of Piraeus, cutting off access to the water and leaving a large expanse of fallow terrain on the other side, barren and collecting litter.

Now, however, much of that expanse has become a building site, one that promises to transform the adjacent run-down apartment blocks into desirable properties ripe for renovation and fronting a seaside park designed by the architect Renzo Piano.

Financed entirely by the Region of Attica and expected to be completed in 2022, the \$240 million Faliro Bay Restoration Project, as it is called, will reshape a section of Athens's coastline just five miles from the city center.

Yet the construction underway here is just a harbinger of even more ambitious projects to follow along the city's waterfront, the largest of which is to be the long-delayed redevelopment of the old airport in the area of Hellinikon. Together, these promise to fundamentally redefine the city's relationship with the sea.

In Faliro, the regeneration project will sweep in adjacent facilities created for the 2004 Olympic Games: the 2,500-seat Faliro Olympic Beach Volleyball Center and a nearby row of auxiliary buildings with a total floor area of about 120,000 square feet.

These have sat mostly unused for 15 years. The stadium will become a performance venue, and there will be cafes, bars, restaurants and shops.

"People will now have contact with the sea; they will be able to walk by it and smell it, be wet by it. There is nothing greater than that," said Christos Kapatais, who was overseeing the project as vice regional governor of Attica until local elections in June brought a change of administration. "We are trying to recover what can be recovered, and what can be recovered is truly great."



One of the two private villas available for rent at Island, an upscale restaurant, nightclub and event space in Varkiza on Athens' southeastern edge. Myrto Papadopoulos for The New York Times

At its eastern end, the park will connect to the manicured grounds of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, which has become a cherished Athenian landmark since it opened in 2016. That was always the idea; the foundation funded the development of the original master plan with a donation of 4 million euros, or \$4.4 million, hoping to revitalize the area.

Already there are signs that the local real estate market has changed drastically, Mr. Kapatais said. “Before this, the whole area was for sale. From the moment the first bulldozers moved in, the ‘for sale’ signs disappeared.”

This stretch of coast was once a genteel district of aristocratic homes, wooden piers and the Hotel Palace Aktaion, a graceful example of neoclassical architecture with domes and soaring arches.

“It was one of the most beautiful buildings. We would go there and eat ice cream as kids,” Mr. Dimopoulos said.

The Aktaion was ultimately demolished under Greece’s military dictatorship in the late 1960s and early ’70s, as were countless small homes throughout the city, replaced with apartment blocks and other modern buildings.

Much of the resulting rubble was dumped into Faliro Bay, pushing the coastline back.

Surrounding areas became a densely populated expanse for which the sea became a distant backdrop, rather than a defining feature.

A large modern hospital occupies the Aktaion site; adjacent to Mr. Dimopoulos's business, a hotel lures customers with low half-day rates.

Few tourists stop here.

Completed recently, a new stretch of coastal highway now passes invisibly through two sections of tunnel. The older highway has been torn up, and flood prevention works are being built to manage the two rivers that meet the sea here. Once they are complete, the 50-acre seaside park will be created, allowing unfettered pedestrian access to a revitalized waterfront.



Chrysanthos Panas, the entrepreneur who runs the Island complex, was one of the first to promote the “Athens Riviera” concept abroad.

Myrto Papadopoulos for The New York Times

Even before the Faliro Bay project broke ground, demand for homes on Athens's southern coast — a roughly 15-mile stretch between Piraeus and the southeastern suburbs of Vouliagmeni and Varkiza — was on the rise. Savills Greece, a real estate agency, said in a statement that prices for homes in the coastal areas nearest the center (such as Alimos and Faliro) are between €280 and €370 per square foot, up 30 percent since 2014.

This price increase has been driven to a large extent by foreign buyers seeking first and second homes that combine sea views with the benefits of living in the capital. Many also aim to make use of Greece's Golden Visa program, through which a five-year renewable

visa can be secured by spending €250,000 or more on a property. But institutional buyers are also circling, searching for investment opportunities.

George Eliades, a managing partner of Algean Property, a real estate company that caters largely to international buyers, said the market had matured since prices hit bottom around 2012.

“Big names are now swimming in our waters,” he said. “It’s no longer the first flipper, the quick trader. They are more serious. And the flippers are now selling their properties, and they are being bought by long-term buyers.”

For many, this attention has been a long time coming, with the so-called Athens Riviera taking its place alongside the city’s famous monuments as among its key assets.

The name Athens Riviera itself reflects a shift in mentality. Traditionally among city’s residents, the shoreline has simply been referred to as the “coastal area,” one associated with hodgepodge development driven by narrow local interests.

“Riviera means an organized coastline. It’s like with women’s jewelry, where you take precious stones and string them together, which is called a rivi re,” Chrysanthos Panas said recently, at one of the two private villas that he rents to high-paying guests.

Since the late ’90s, Mr. Panas has run Island, a restaurant, nightclub and event space in the southeastern part of the city. He was one of the first to promote the Athens Riviera concept abroad; at the time, he said, few believed that Athens’s seafront could attract an international clientele.



The site of the Falirio Bay Restoration Project, with a covered highway in the rear. The \$240 million effort, which is to incorporate housing, shopping, dining and cultural space and a seaside park designed by the architect Renzo Piano, is expected to be completed in 2022. Myrto Papadopoulos for The New York Times

Some gems of the Athens Riviera have already been renovated and are attracting foreign visitors, such as the Astir Palace resort in Vouliagmeni, which under its previous ownership hosted world figures such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Barack Obama. Following its sale and extensive overhaul, it opened in March as the Four Seasons Astir Palace Hotel.

A major overhaul is also underway of the Asteria resort in nearby Glyfada, another onetime haunt of the Athens elite, while the marina of Alimos was recently sold to a developer who plans to invest roughly €50 million to make it an attractive stop for yacht owners.

Most of these properties have been sold or leased through the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund, which was established to implement an extensive privatization program after Greece's fiscal crisis.

But all pale in size and importance in comparison with the project to redevelop the site of the former airport.

“The comparison that has been made frequently is with Monaco. Monaco is about the

same size and is an incredible concentration of recreational and luxury activities,” said Louis Wassenhoven, a professor emeritus of the National Technical University of Athens who was involved in efforts to redevelop the site for more than 15 years, starting in 1995, and has written a book about them.

During that period, several plans to turn the site into a metropolitan park were developed, formally announced and then abandoned, victims of local and national political clashes. The stadiums and facilities for the 2004 Olympics quickly fell into ruin.

“The Hellinikon, in a way, mirrors all of the upheavals of this period, and it has acquired a symbolic importance because it expresses all of the pathologies of the Greek state,” Mr. Wassenhofen said.

With the onset of the economic crisis, a different approach from the earlier publicly funded models was adopted — to effectively privatize the site and the adjacent waterfront area. Selling Hellinikon was among the conditions set by Greece’s international lenders to receive bailout loans.



A rugby team training on the beach at Faliro Bay in Athens. Myrto Papadopoulos for The New York Times

In 2014, the consortium Lamda Development was selected as the buyer of Hellinikon S.A., the state-held company that controls the site, for €915 million.

According to Lamda's plans, which have been approved by the government, over the coming years the 2.4-square-mile site will be transformed into a new town within the city, with 25,000 residents and 20,000 workers and visitors per day, the biggest urban project of its kind in Europe.

In its heart will be a 500-acre park, surrounded by integrated developments with residences, hotels, shopping centers, museums and cultural venues, health and wellness centers, sports facilities, a business park and educational and research hubs.

Along the seafront, a revamped marina will be adjacent to a public beach. Towering above, a flagship skyscraper will become the first tall building on the Athens coastal skyline and house a luxury hotel, apartments and casino. As at Faliro Bay, the coastal road will be underground.

The planned development is not without critics, including those who fear a glut of new properties exceeding demand.

But Savills Greece, which advised Lamda, stated, "Our research shows that the complete project will generate the necessary interest in the international markets to put Athens on the world map as what we call a Global City. The overall attractiveness of the project and its unique waterfront location, will create new demand both in the local and the international markets."

Officials of Hellinikon S.A. argue that tremendous progress has been made. Nana Spyropoulou, the company's president and chief executive, pointed out that for years the site was used as a catchall space. Thus over a hundred different organizations had to be relocated.

"Within 2019 I believe that we will manage to have completed all of the processes, as we are in the home stretch," she said.

That would mean that the ground would most likely be broken sometime in 2020 for construction that will reshape not only the Athens waterfront, but probably the entire city.