

Good in a crisis

Amid the riots and fears of bankruptcy, the Greek crisis is also bringing out the creative side in Athenians

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In the searing midday sun on 1 July, less than 48 hours after fierce riots rocked Athens' Syntagma Square, property developer, entrepreneur and urban activist Iasson Tsakonas walks down Kerameikos Street, a couple of neighbourhoods away. Here is a world of contrasts. Seemingly half the buildings stand abandoned and decrepit alongside new-builds and restored historical houses. One side street reveals hip cafés and shops; yet the next shows junkies shooting up in broad daylight.

A hotbed of crime, drugs and prostitution due to years of neglect, a lack of city planning, a disenfranchised immigrant population and an extraordinarily bloated state apparatus, this is the inner city neighbourhood of Kerameikos/Metaxourgeio, or "KM" – one of Athens' many problems. But since Tsakonas, 39, moved here in 2001, he has worked hard to make it one of the solutions. Bit by bit he has purchased 65 properties in the area to realise visions far beyond property development.

The approach of his firm, Oliaros, is multi-pronged: alongside KM Properties is KM Prototipi Geitonia, a non-profit subsidiary with a mission to revitalise the area. His KM Public Murals project, meanwhile, will decorate building façades with works by international artists and the ReMap KM project invites local and foreign galleries to "squat" the area's spaces for a major art exhibition every two years. He's also collaborating with 20 architects on 45 buildings to create new models of living. "Forty-six per cent of the area is empty," he says. "Here we stand in a city in crisis and we're here to come up with a new formula."

Tsakonas is just one example of a positive energy bubbling up in the Greek capital. "There are a lot of negative things here, some of them justified. But that's just one side of the story," says Christos Carras, executive director of the Onassis Cultural Centre. "An awful lot is happening in Athens. People are doing creative things despite the crisis." Seen another way, the crisis has been a call to action, making creative people more imaginative than they would be in more comfortable times.

Take Dimitris Rigopoulos, a journalist so frustrated after May 2010's violence that he founded Atenistas, a volunteer group that cleans empty lots, plants gardens and generally improves neglected parts of Athens. Or curator Marina Fokidis who founded Kunsthalle Athena art centre a year ago with no budget. Or Nikos Katsaounis and Nina-Maria Paschalidou, who launched their project, *The Prism GR2010*, last autumn, enlisting 14 photojournalists to film over the winter of 2010-2011 issues affecting Greece. Elsewhere, fashion designer Elena Troulakis just launched her womenswear label; and conceptual architect Andreas Angelidakis created a quirky restaurant for renowned gallery *The Breeder* last autumn.

These are rays of light in an environment still charged with fear and anger. In June's riots, protesters shattered the marble stairs of Syntagma Square's luxury hotels and used the rubble as weapons (miraculously, the Campana brothers-designed *New Hotel*, just off the square, went ahead with its 1 July opening).

"Some people are angry because they wanted to do new things, but couldn't, because of the system. Those are the people who say we [the government] are not changing things fast enough," explains Pavlos Yeroulanos, minister of culture and tourism. "But there's also an anger from people losing benefits they had in the past. They say we're changing things too fast."

Athens' issues are not going to be solved overnight. Opinions are mixed about the city's future. Many see the crisis as a golden opportunity for long-overdue change, but are still concerned about what the immediate future holds. "We haven't hit bottom yet. It's going to get much worse before it gets better," says *Prism GR2010*'s Katsaounis. "If you watch too much TV news, you want to kill yourself," says Nadia Gerazouni, director of *The Breeder* gallery. There's a sense of anticipation in the air and just about everybody talks about unrest as if it's become something normal.

Optimism for long-term results is tempered by the current reality. "We can only come out of this crisis if we support the young generation," says Yeroulanos. "If we lose this generation, if they go abroad, the power to change the situation will evaporate. We have to make sure they're not fighting against an overgrown state, corruption and favouritism to the older generation." This is an astoundingly honest admission in the face of the most radical cutbacks in Greece's history. The government's fat-trimming, however, goes beyond saving money. At best, it could result in sustainable social change, a shift in mentality. No more kickbacks, bribes, tax evasion or functionaries getting paid for not coming to work. "When we talked to the unions about assessing work performance, they asked how," says Yeroulanos. "We said it was simple. We'd see who came to work and who didn't."

How to move forward after such an extreme wake-up call? Tsakonas, for one, thinks that more innovative citizens will take things into their own hands as they gain confidence. "The private sector and foundations are, and will, be playing an increasing role in forming the new Athens," he says.

It's already becoming easier for them to do so, in tandem with some smart new municipal measures. The government is pouring support into the Athens Festival and a new initiative for tourism called Athens Every Week, while an old Olympic building is being primed as a new convention centre. The tourism industry – about 18 per cent of Greek GDP – can now do business at a lowered 6.5 per cent VAT rate. And a recent law allows the film industry new tax breaks for shooting in Greece – good news for domestic filmmakers and outside production companies. Foundations, too, are increasingly active. In late June, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation revealed its €500m plan to support a comprehensive revamp of the Athens waterfront with a new national library and opera house, all designed by architect Renzo Piano.

Kunsthalle Athena's Marina Fokidis walks along Persefonis Street in the Gazi neighbourhood, an area packed with revellers eating, drinking and laughing outside in the balmy air. The atmosphere is upbeat, but not completely carefree. Fokidis says it's so busy because people can't afford to go to the islands these days. But despite economic problems and bureaucratic hoops to jump through, her project has survived, even though it's tough. But then she smiles, "There's such a satisfaction in being a screwdriver and not just a screw." — (M)



Rebuilding Athens: five key players

Marina Fokidis Curator/founder of Kunsthalle Athena

Fokidis has long been a leading figure in Athens' contemporary art world. But in summer 2010, she took things to a new level. She occupied an empty building in Kerameikos (supplied by Iasson Tsakonas) and transformed it into an edgy art centre, on almost no budget. Everyone involved, from the artists to the administrators, donates their time to make it happen. And the audience, which can number 5,000 at exhibition openings, became a large part of the project. "We shared every step with our audience, which became our ally," she says. "We hijacked cultural politics, in a healthy way." kunsthalleathens.org

Andreas Angelidakis Architect and writer

Straddling the worlds of art and architecture, Angelidakis works on exhibition design, art installations and conceptual projects. His interior design for the Breeder Feeder restaurant mixes elements from both folkloric and European Greek traditions. angelidakis.com

Iasson Tsakonas Property developer, civic instigator, art collector

In 2001, Tsakonas bought a building in Kerameikos, a neighbourhood in Athens' rundown inner city. Since then, he's been at the forefront of improving this area, spearheading projects ranging from recycling initiatives to art events and architecture competitions. "We need a paradigm shift. We need to get a new perspective, get out there and work again," he says.

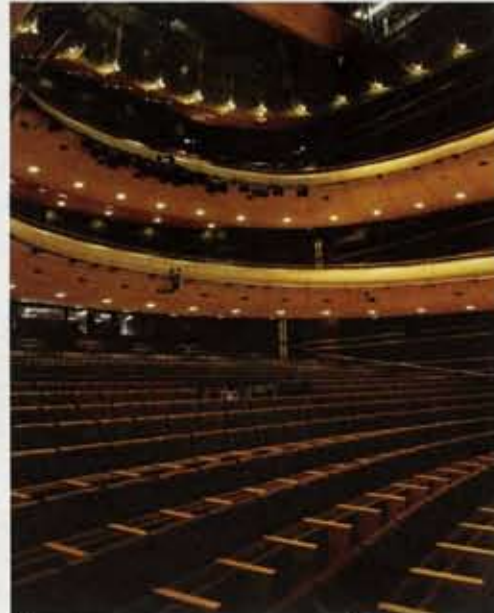
Elena Troulakis Fashion designer

Troulakis has been based in Athens for the past 18 months after time in the US, London and Paris. Her new women's collections combine sleek silhouettes with Greek-inspired drapes and pleats. "We came back to 'by Greece', and while I'm saddened by the situation here, there's a wonderful scene if you dig just below the surface," she says. Designing her own striking graphic prints and producing her garments locally, Troulakis appreciates what the city has to offer. "In Athens you have the space and time to create. The rawness is inspiring." elenatroulakis.com

Nina-Maria Paschalidou and Nikos Katsaounis Executive producers, *The Prism GR2010*

After years abroad, Paschalidou and Katsaounis returned to Athens to make sense of the chaos in their native country – and *The Prism GR2010* was born. Entirely financed by the founders, the project equipped 14 photojournalists with digital cameras and asked them to produce film footage and still photography. The result: 27 short films on Greek issues, recently posted on their website, plus a forthcoming feature documentary. "We will tell the story of the crisis," says Paschalidou. thep Prism.tv

66 The crisis has made creative types more imaginative than they would be in more comfortable times



01 Guards march in front of parliament, Syntagma Square, passing protest banners
02 Nikos Katsaounis from *The Prism GR2010*
03 Iasson Tsakonas in his office
04 Construction work outside Tsakonas's office
05 Looking out on to Faliro beach
06 Staff at Onassis Cultural Centre
07 Elena Troulakis in her home/design studio
08 Room interior at *New Hotel*
09 Main stage at Onassis Cultural Centre
10 Pavlos Yeroulanos, Greece's minister for culture and tourism