

# ATHENS OPEN SCHOOLS

CITY OF ATHENS  
GREECE



## CATEGORIES

- S** Community spaces where diverse people meet
- A** Connecting activities & community events

## PRESENTER

Maria Iliopoulou, Former Deputy Mayor in the Municipality of Athens

## DESCRIPTION

Athens Open Schools is an innovative program, initiated by the Municipality of Athens in 2015, which opened up school premises during afternoon hours and on weekends for the benefit of the neighbourhood.

## MOTIVATION

Athens Open Schools aimed to address the lack of public spaces in the city of Athens and the need of decentralized life-long learning structures in local communities. In the early months of 2016 the schools were established as community centres. The aim was to create new inclusive "meeting points" for the neighbourhoods. Crucially, the schools would be opened to all, for free.

## MORE DETAILS

Athens Open Schools programme was based on the idea of using empty school buildings during afternoon hours. The aim was to open the schools for everybody - all ages and social groups - and offer free activities through an engaging and participatory methodology, which would transform the schools into dynamic parts of the neighbourhood. The schools would become community centres and safe zones within the area; the courtyards would be used as meeting points and spaces for organised games; the classrooms would host recreational, cultural, educational and sports activities. In a city like Athens, where urban planning has not taken into consideration the need for open and public spaces, the protected schoolyard could be used for the benefit of children and teenagers under the supervision of parents/adults. After an open call, organisations or individuals would propose activities for the open schools. The selected activities would be offered and co-organized by the municipality. The list of activities is regularly updated in order to meet the interests and needs of each community.

## OUTCOMES

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Best Practice Example: municipalities can use Athens Open Schools as an example of how to use public buildings that would otherwise be closed. Improving existing school buildings to accommodate these activities usually still yields savings, especially because it also reduces the requirement for additional infrastructure. Due to the fact that schools in Athens are old and often have substandard facilities this has often meant that the schools were painted them, libraries were created etc. Athens Open Schools not only influenced positively what Athenians think of the municipality, but also highlighted how municipalities can share know-how for the benefit of its citizens. Moreover, Athens Open Schools have been funded mainly by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and have been an example for cooperation between municipalities and private donors.

Improving the quality of life in the local community: 20.000 square meters of public space were added in the densely populated city of Athens. A More than 30.000 individuals have participated in more than 480 activities since the inception of Athens Open Schools. The programme changed lives in more than 25 neighbourhoods; families found a safe place to spend their afternoons, children learned how to ride a bike. Marginalised communities were provided activities suited to their needs. People of all ages tried new hobbies and expanded their knowledge with a great variety of activities without any cost to them.

Contribution to cultural and educational identity of Athens: small organisations, businesses, and associations found a new audience and cultivated their activities in new neighbourhoods. Established Cultural and Educational Institutes reached out to neighbourhoods, not only to offer educational activities, but also to begin "a dialogue with Athenians". Furthermore, the project has attracted academics and students who asked to interview project team members and organisations offering activities in order to study the project as a best practice example in the fields of architectural and social studies. Also, the programme attracted new stakeholders to cooperate with, e.g. Choosito XPRIZE.

## LESSONS LEARNED

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- People need open spaces, specifically open yards for activities, such as playing, moving, and expressing themselves.
- One main challenge was that the programme would not interfere with the regular school proceedings in the morning.
- Participatory planning: in order to succeed it was mandatory to cooperate with all stakeholders from the schools and local communities. Also, since each school area has different needs it was important to establish communication lines with the schools and local communities.
- It is important to gain the trust of the many stakeholders of the initiative.
- A detailed evaluation system is needed in order to avoid unwelcome activities and repeat success stories.