

Opportunities and Challenges from a Planning Practice Perspective

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Exchanging ideas on urban issues is always very helpful in the difficult process of having to re-direct a dense and highly populated urban area towards a more resilient and sustainable future. The experience becomes even more exciting when young people are involved, who pose questions in such a clear and direct way that brings to light the pure essence of urban planning and design.

In this context, discussing about Hanover and Thessaloniki as two European cities of comparable size that have to resist or even reverse climate change, offered a great opportunity to develop the way we think and design about the future and to formulate an organized and target-oriented strategy.

As a small contribution to the research exchange program “Centers of the future”, I was invited to present the strategy of the Municipality of Thessaloniki regarding climate change from the perspective of urban planning.

Thessaloniki is the second largest city of Greece. The urban complex hosts 800.000 inhabitants and includes 7 Municipalities, with Thessaloniki representing the historic inner city and having the 40% of the population.

After a 10-year period of recession followed by the Covid19 pandemic, the city is now entering a new phase of development by becoming an attractive touristic destination and by attracting international interest for investments. The city at the same time faces considerable environmental issues, having one of the highest percentages of PM10 concentration, in combination with a dense urban fabric and a very low percentage of green areas per inhabitant.

Transforming the inner city and its historic center towards a sustainable and resilient future demands strategies in many levels of administration and in many sectors of action. Given that local administration in Greece has limited jurisdiction and autonomy, in the field of urban planning the effort was oriented towards proposals that would be realistic, widely acceptable and capable of reviving large areas, in order to make a difference.

In such a context, the Revision of the Municipality's "General Urban Plan" adheres to the concept of a compact city and maintains the existing building coefficients, since there are very few remaining plots that are not already built-up. Nevertheless, the Plan on the other hand proposes an extensive network of non-mechanical circulation in the city center, which aims to significantly reduce CO2 emissions, in combination with the imminent opening of the first METRO line for the city. Concerning the increase of green areas, the Plan focuses on four large brownfield areas, whose development potential is proposed to be combined with the creation of extensive parks with high green of metropolitan scale. There is also debate about developing few of the remaining unbuilt plots with high-rise buildings in order to decrease coverage for the creation of open areas.

Finally, there is the proposal to create a narrow but extensive green network along the trace of historic water-streams that no longer exist, as they were redirected to what is called as the "Peripheral Canal", in order to environmentally revive a large and very densely populated area within the southeastern sector of the Municipality, helping also by re-introducing air corridors within the city. Apart from the large scale of urban planning, other strategies to deal with climate change include action plans for energy consumption in municipal buildings and open public spaces, the creation of a "Municipal Plan for reducing CO2 emissions", the refurbishment of existing green areas, the increase in the use of cold materials, outdoor cooling interventions in order to reverse the urban heat island effect, information systems for very high or low temperatures and many more.

Finally, the Municipality of Thessaloniki, being one of the 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) Strategy Partners, shaped a Resilience Strategy based on eight city values (social cohesion, local identity and heritage, environmental management, health and wellbeing, youth empowerment, multi-stakeholder engagement, technology adaptation, economic prosperity), which represent Thessaloniki's identity and will guide how the city will plan for the future.

Hoping that Thessaloniki's approach contributes to the international discussion on mitigating climate change, we look forward to receiving more input from successful academic research programs like "Centers of the future".

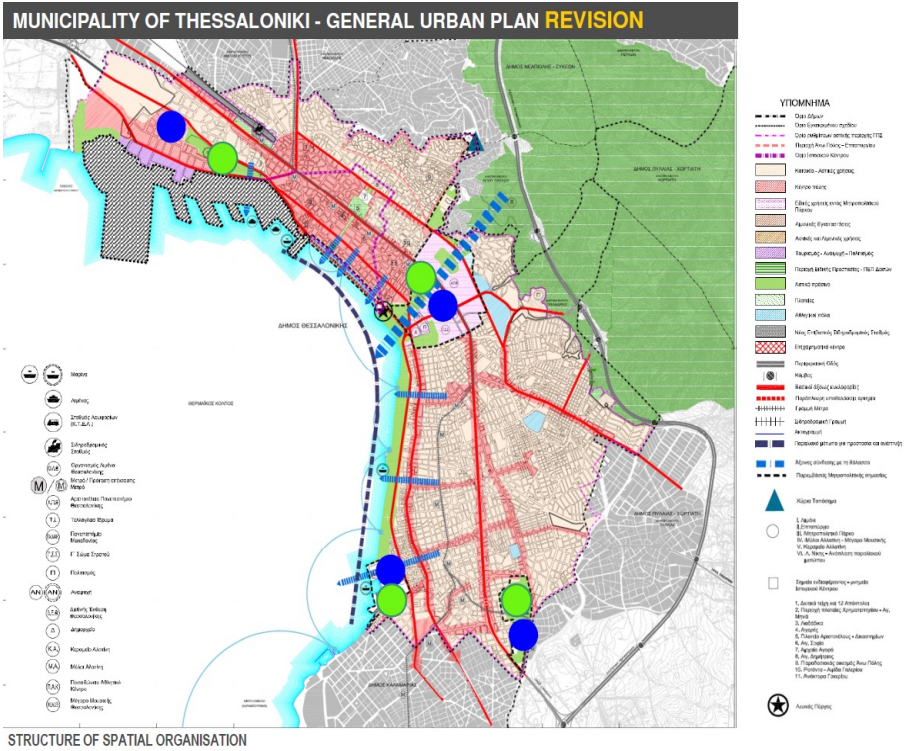


Fig. 1: Municipality of Thessaloniki, Revision of General Urban Plan 2011 – 2023

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