

More life in Vardaris

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Abstract

This chapter analyzes the quality of public space in the case study of Vardaris, a district in Thessaloniki, Greece. Children are an important indicator of the quality of life and living conditions, which is why they are particularly taken into account in the analysis of public space (Daboline 2019).

The analysis of Vardaris shows that there are possibilities for improvement in the design of children's facilities such as schools and kindergartens to enhance the quality of living conditions. Drawing inspiration from the program „Mais Vida nos Morros“ (More life in the Hills) in Recife, Brazil.

In summary, this chapter discusses the comparison of challenges faced by Vardaris and Recife, introduces a public policy program focused on urban innovation and resilience with citizen participation, and proposes specific ideas for improving the Vardaris area, including colorful aesthetics and the creation of a green pathway.

1. Social Structure in Vardaris

According to the United Nations (UN), about 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas - and this number is expected to reach up to 70% by 2050 (Aristotele University 2023). Cities are places of culture and coexistence, of income and knowledge generation, of life and dreams. However, their growth brings ever greater challenges, such as the growing demand for adequate infrastructure. Public spaces in urban areas with insufficient infrastructure often discourage meetings, cultural events and exchanges between residents. (CDC Harvard University 2023). These circumstances demonstrate the need for the creation of public policies to address these challenges with urban interventions and social participation initiatives that transform the relationship of children and adults with urban spaces.

This chapter provides a socio-spatial analysis of Vardaris and proposes the creation of a public policy of urban intervention based on a good practice example in the city of Recife, Brazil. A Program called "Mais Vida nos Morros" (More life in the hills) that has been accumulating a series of national and international recognitions. It won the 2019 Alumni Meeting Award, promoted by the Science for Childhood Center, in recognition of its work on behalf of early childhood. It was also recognized as a national reference for innovation in public policies by The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), by the Dutch foundation Bernard van Leer, and by Child in The City, an independent institution whose main objective is to promote sustainable cities for children (SEIURB 2020: 41).

2. Analysis - Visibility, Characteristics and Typologies

This subchapter analyses Vardaris, a neighborhood in Thessaloniki, in terms of challenges, social structure, urban management, and community participation. This analysis was developed during an intensive summer school week (from 30.05.2023 to 03.06.2023) at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – AUTH (Faculty of Engineering School of Architecture). During the site visit on 30.05.23 the social infrastructure of the study area was identified and mapped (see Fig. 1). There, schools, kindergartens (purple), social housing (orange), sports facilities (blue), associations (red), playgrounds/parks (green) were identified. In order to visualize the social dimension and the environment in Vardaris, the map shows photos for buildings with mixed uses (dark blue).

Schools, kindergartens (purple)

When looking at the map created (see Fig. 1), many facilities such as schools

and kindergartens can be identified. This was surprising because no children were seen in the afternoons after school hours during the walk-throughs of the area. Quoting the Italian pedagogue Francesco Tonucci, „Children are like fireflies in the city“, sensitive to unfavorable environmental conditions (Recife 2020). In 1996, the Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) was launched by UNICEF and UN-Habitat to adhere to the resolutions of the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II).



Fig. 1: Map of the study area with social infrastructure facilities. (OWN ILLUSTRATION on the basis of OPENSTREETMAP, 2023)

The well-being of children is established as the ultimate indicator for a healthy living environment, a democratic society, and good governance. Urban planning, design, and management decisions have significant impacts on child development, especially considering new stressors like urbanization and climate change. City planning holds the responsibility for a healthy and positive future for our children, thus, for the entire society as well. As Bogotá's mayor, Enrique Peñalosa, stated „a city that is good for children is good for everyone.“ A child-friendly city is a sustainable, prosperous, and healthy city – one with high quality of life for all (Dabonline 2019). The implementation of quality public spaces in urban centers can strengthen the sense of collectivity and ensure healthy spaces for child development, especially for children in early childhood (0 to 6 years old) (CDC 2023). In Thessaloniki 41% of the population age is between 0 - 34 years (Municipality of Thessaloniki 2011). When looking at the playgrounds, it is noticeable that there are locked playgrounds in Vardaris. During the analysis, it was questioned whether a fenced playground promotes the quality of stay and the feeling of safety if fences are contrary to this. There are the fol-

lowing advantages and disadvantages for fencing playgrounds:

Advantages:

- safety from traffic, dogs, intruders
- privacy
- easier to lock off in the event of a defect (Park and Play design n.d)

Disadvantages:

- only one escape route in case of emergency
- playground feels less approachable
- playground seems less vulnerable, so parents are less likely to keep an eye on their children (Playgroundguardian n.d)

After this research on fenced playgrounds, it became clear that this measure makes perfect sense. However, one suggested solution would be that these fences could be lower in order to make the quality of stay in the neighbourhood more friendly. More detailed solutions are proposed in chapter 3 “Solutions and Measures for more life in Vardaris”.

Fenced playground in Vardaris



Fig. 2: Fenced Playground in Vardaris (Own depiction)

Proposition for a fenced playground



Fig. 3: Proposition for a fenced playground (Own depiction)

In summary, it becomes clear that the lack of quality in public spaces is one crucial aspect that needs attention in the study area. These spaces play a pivotal role in promoting social interaction, cultural expression, and community cohesion. Inadequate public spaces discourage residents from gathering, engaging in cultural activities, and exchanging ideas. Additionally, the authors suspect, that this hinders the development of a collective identity and impedes healthy spaces for child development, especially for children in their early years.

Social housing (orange)

As a further aspect of analysis, the authors looked at social housing. They are located on the eastern edge of the study area and are one of the tallest buildings in the area. Apart from their height, they do not differ from the non-social housing and fit well into the surrounding landscape. They also have good accessibility to green spaces and schools.

Sport facilities (blue)

There is one sports facility in Vardaris, which is a skate park. The authors find this positive because it is an offer for older children and young people. Nevertheless, the sports offer in Vardaris could be expanded. For example, basketball or football fields could be added. It is desirable if there are as many (sports) facilities for young people in the neighbourhood as there are playgrounds for small children. Of course, adults can also use and benefit from these other sport facilities.

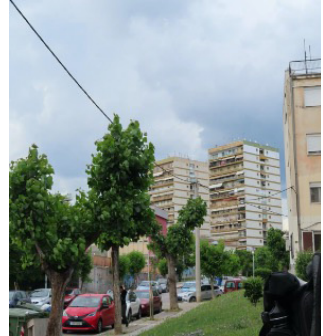


Fig. 4.: Social housing in Vardaris (own depiction)

Associations (red)

Another example of the social profile of the neighborhood that was presented during the on-site visit, was the existence of the “Self-Help Association” indicated in red on the map (see Fig. 1). The “Self-Help Association” is a social program founded in 2001 in Thessaloniki, financed by the Greek Ministry of Health and implemented by the Department of Psychology of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki operating with the cooperation of OKANA - Organization Against Drugs (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki - Department of Psychology 2023), attempts to support and promote self-help/mutual aid philosophy in addressing addiction and other psychosocial problems, as well as health problems by reintegrating individuals into society through art projects, learning professions, etc. The interview with two staff members from the Self-help association confirmed the impression of the analysis that Vardaris, like many urban areas, is struggling with problems related to inadequate infrastructure and the need to foster a sense of community and collective involvement. When looking at the map, it is also noticeable that social housing (orange) accounts for a higher proportion than in the rest of Thessaloniki. In total, there are 4% social housing units in the whole city (Municipality of Thessaloniki 2022).

3. Unveiling Strategies and Actions for Enhanced Quality of Life

Based on the analysis results, it is concluded that the topic “Citizen Engagement” would be the most appropriate focus for an intervention proposal. Accord-

ding to the Institute of Development Studies:

“Citizen engagement is a form of interaction between citizens and their governments. It can happen at any stage of the development or implementation of government policy and the delivery of public services, or be triggered by events in local areas. It can lead to a range of outcomes, including more effective services and more responsive and accountable states.” (Institute of Development Studies n.d.).

Therefore, a successful good practice from the city of Recife in Brazil was used as a comparative to the study area. First, the case study will be briefly introduced, followed by the intervention proposal for the study area.

3.1 The good practice - Program: Mais Vida nos Morros - Recife, Brazil

Created in 2016, “Mais vida nos Morros” (More Life in the Hills) is a public policy program of urban innovation and resilience that reinvents the city and fights socio-spatial inequality by promoting sustainable development, citizen involvement, and the creation of an urban space for children in the 545 communities of social interest in Recife, Brazil (SEIURB 2020: 5), as an example, they use vacant spaces to build playgrounds and other gathering areas.

By October 2020, the program had already served 53 social interest communities, directly benefiting more than 54 thousand inhabitants (SEIURB 2020: 6). To host „Mais Vida nos Morros“ and to stimulate other public policies that provide innovative solutions to urban problems, the city of Recife created a subdivision called „Executive Secretariat for Urban Innovation“ as part of the municipal Secretariat for Infrastructure and Urban Services (SEIURB 2020: 7).

To understand the municipality’s motivation for working on this kind of policy, it is important to acknowledge that in the city of Recife, around 500,000 people, equivalent to a third of the city’s population, live in these areas of social interest, which make up more than 60% of its territory. Most of the urban structures in these areas were formed spontaneously and in a disorderly manner. In addition to this, the lack of quality public spaces discourages meetings, cultural events and exchanges between residents to strengthen a sense of collectivity and guarantee healthy spaces for children’s development, especially for children in early childhood (aged 0 to 6) (SEIURB 2020: 7).

According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, the more adversities a child faces in the first three years of life, the greater the

chances of delayed development. The effect is cumulative. Children exposed to six or seven risk factors, such as poverty or abuse, have a 90% to 100% chance of experiencing one or more delays in their cognitive, language, or emotional development (FAO 2019: 19-30). Evidence like this was fundamental for “Mais Vida nos Morros” to focus on designing child-friendly public spaces for early childhood (0 to 6 years old).

Basically, the implementation of the program consists of 3 phases: Citizen Engagement, action and celebration. In the first phase (Citizen Engagement), the territory analysis and plan the actions are made together with the community through co-creation workshops. In the second phase (action), the intervention works are executed in cooperation between the technical responsables of the municipality, the volunteers from the community and an external sponsor (for example, a building materials company). In the third phase, a big celebration is held to announce the transformation of the place (SEIURB 2020: 38)

With the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, children have been brought to the main focus of the program. In both theory and practice, children are invited to contribute their ideas and imagination during the co-creation workshops that take place during the planning phase. And then they are also welcome to participate during the action phase, helping the adults to plant flowers or playing at painting the streets of the community (SEIURB 2020: 9).

After the implementation of the new urban spaces that invite the children to play near or in front of their houses, the family starts to accompany them. The Executive Secretariat for Urban Innovation of Recife, Brazil, states that prioritizing the creation of quality urban spaces for children is a strategy to improve community coexistence and a reverse strategy for public safety (SEIURB 2020: 13).

In conclusion, improvements indicators can be already identified in surveys carried out in the communities of Recife. In the community of Burity - Recife, for example, the number of children who use the public space as an area to play increased by 64.3 percent. It went from 11.4% to 75.7%, after the interventions, in 2019 (SEIURB 2020: 12).

3.2 Creating more life for Vardaris:

Comparing the study area in Vardaris with the case study in Recife is possible to identify similarities between the challenges faced by the two places. Two notable challenges were socio-spatial inequality and the low number of children playing on the streets. The socio-spatial inequality mentioned here refers to the

uneven distribution of resources, opportunities, and services within a geographic area (Kühn 2015: 368). In the context of Thessaloniki (Vardaris) and Recife (Communities of social interest), it implies that certain parts of these places might have better access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, while other areas experience relative deprivation. The low number of children playing on the streets suggests that in both Vardaris and Recife, there might be a lack of outdoor playgrounds and recreational activities for children. This might be due to various reasons such as safety concerns, lack of suitable spaces, or changing social dynamics.

Therefore, the public policy program of urban innovation and resilience through citizen participation in the case study in Recife presented positive results. In this context, the Program “Mais vida nos morros” (More life in the hills) aimed to introduce new ideas, processes, and strategies to improve the quality of life and address challenges in urban areas in Recife. Furthermore, it is realized by involving the local residents in the decision-making processes related to urban development and bringing the children to the main focus by involving them in the whole process. Engaging citizens, of all ages, can lead to more inclusive and effective solutions since they understand their own needs and concerns better than external entities (Huttunen et al 2022: 8).

The intent of this subchapter is to inspire stakeholders in Vardaris to consider implementing a similar public policy program, highlighting the given example. The urban design proposal for Vardaris consists of two main components: Colorful House Walls and Playgrounds as well as a green axis (See Fig. 5).

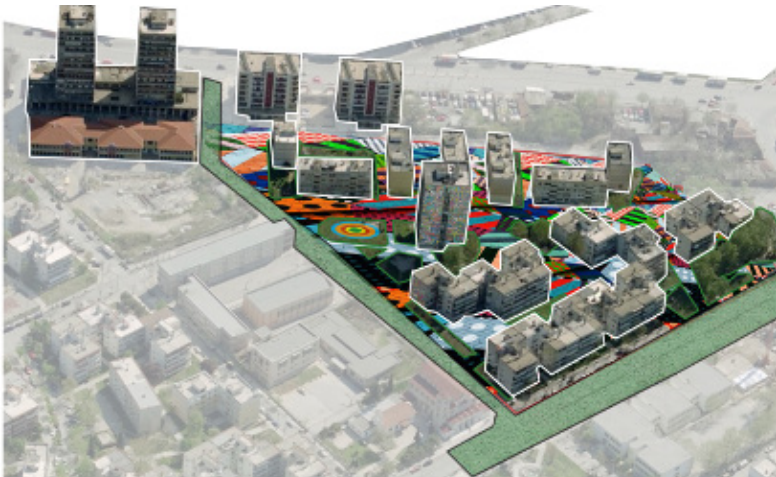


Fig.5 : Proposed Intervention area in Vardaris, Thessaloniki (own illustration on the basis of Triantis 2023)

The suggestion would be to paint the walls of houses and playgrounds in vibrant and appealing colors. This can have multiple benefits, including making the area visually attractive, fostering a sense of community pride, and potentially making the environment more inviting for children and families.

In addition, creating a linear pathway or corridor with greenery leading from the main train station into the Vardaris neighborhood. The intention is to establish an inviting and visually appealing connection that could attract visitors to explore the area. Green spaces can have positive effects on mental well-being, and an appealing pathway might encourage people to spend more time outdoors (Wood et al 2017: 65).

To transform the urban environment of Vardaris through the implementation of a public policy program inspired by the example of Recife, the suggestion is the implementation of it in four phases: Program Creation and Funding, Citizen Engagement, Transformation and Celebration.

To create the program, the municipality should take the lead in establishing a comprehensive program aimed at improving the designated area. In this phase the municipality explores potential sources of funding or seeks private partners or investors to support the initiative. The focus area for this program is selected; for instance, let's consider the neighborhood of Vardaris (SEIURB 2020: 18).

In the Citizen Engagement phase the municipality initiates communication with the residents, of all ages, of the chosen neighborhood (Vardaris). They inform the community about the program's objectives, benefits, and the upcoming engagement process. This step ensures that residents are well-informed and prepared for their active involvement. After the communication, workshops are organized to encourage residents, including both adults and children, to actively participate in shaping the transformation of their neighborhood. During these workshops, attendees share their ideas, suggestions, and contributions. These could involve a variety of initiatives such as revitalizing a plaza, establishing a community garden, removing waste collection points, creating a new playground, etc. (SEIURB 2020: 19).

In sequence, a plan should be developed for the day(s) of transformation. This includes identifying the volunteers who will be participating, determining the necessary preparations that need to be completed beforehand (such as repairs or safety measures), and ensuring all resources are in place. Then the community comes together on the designated day(s) to actively engage in transformation activities. This can include tasks like painting buildings and streets to add vi-

brancy, cleaning up the area to enhance cleanliness, and planting greenery to improve aesthetics and environmental quality (SEIURB 2020: 22).

Following the successful completion of the transformation efforts, a celebration event is organized within the community. This event serves as a moment of joy and pride, highlighting the collective achievements of the residents. It acknowledges their hard work and dedication in making their neighborhood a better place to live. The celebration event fosters a sense of unity and accomplishment among community members (SEIURB 2020: 24).

In summary, this four-phase approach outlines a systematic process for community-driven urban improvement:

- 1. Program Creation and Funding:** The municipality establishes the program and seeks financial support.
- 2. Engagement:** Residents are informed, engaged, and contribute ideas through co-creation workshops.
- 3. Transformation:** Planning and execution of transformation actions, with active participation from volunteers.
- 4. Celebration:** An event is held to celebrate the achievements and efforts of the community.

Through this process, the neighborhood could experience positive changes, enhanced community spirit, and improved quality of life, while fostering a sense of ownership and pride among the residents.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter underscores the critical necessity for the formulation of public policies that tackle not only the structural and managerial aspects of urban areas like Vardaris but also emphasize community involvement. By effectively executing proven models of urban intervention and nurturing active citizen participation, the potential emerges to craft urban spaces that are not only more dynamic and all-encompassing but notably advantageous for the holistic development of children and the overall welfare of the community.

The challenges linked to social structure, urban management, and participation within the context of Vardaris, Thessaloniki, demand a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Drawing inspiration from successful models, such as the „Mais Vida nos Morros“ program, and tailoring interventions to align with the neighborhood’s distinct requirements can be highly effective. As a result, the program can engender a transformation that directly benefits children.

By revitalizing public spaces, creating safer environments, and encouraging community engagement, the program facilitates a shift towards more child-friendly settings. Colorful and lively public spaces, such as renovated plazas and vibrant playgrounds, offer inviting areas for children to explore, interact, and engage in recreational activities. Cleaner and greener surroundings created through volunteer efforts can instill a sense of pride and ownership among children, promoting positive behaviors and attitudes toward their environment. Furthermore, the program's participatory nature allows children and their families to actively contribute ideas, ensuring that their needs and preferences are considered in the planning and execution of urban improvements. This inclusive approach empowers children to have a voice in shaping their surroundings, fostering a sense of belonging and community integration from an early age.

In essence, the program's multi-phased strategy not only addresses structural and managerial challenges but also places children at the forefront of urban transformation. Through targeted interventions, active community engagement, and the cultivation of child-friendly spaces, the program endeavors to create an environment that supports the wholesome growth and well-being of children, while simultaneously enhancing the overall vitality of the community in Vardaris, Thessaloniki.

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Fig. 2: Fenced Playground in Vardaris. Own picture.

Fig. 3: Proposition for a fenced playground. Own Picture of a playground in Plovdiv in Bulgaria, 09.09.2023.: Do I need a playground fence? Retrieved on 19.08.2023, <https://playgroundguardian.com/news-articles/playground-fence/>

Fig. 4.: Social housing in Vardaris. Own picture.

Fig.5: Proposed Intervention area in Vardaris, Thessaloniki. Own illustration on the basis of Triantis, L., 2023: Spatial planning and development trends in Greece. current concepts and challenges (unpublished)