

# Introduction

## Sustainable planning perspective approaches in Thessaloniki

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Like most Greek urban centres, Thessaloniki has been severely affected by the economic crisis of the 2010s. Over the last fifteen years, the city has gone through significant transformations. Urban development trends included inner-city decline and urban sprawl in the periphery, privatization trends, new real estate development projects and infrastructure developments, an ageing building stock and mobility challenges, while a series of plans, and urban strategies have tried to deal with urban challenges in times of crisis and climate change (Athanassiou and Christodoulou 2019). Recent evolutions like the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the increasing pressure of tourism activities on housing affordability (Hatziprokopiou, Karagianni and Kapsali 2021) also influence the city's development.

Therefore, this year's summer school deals with the future of central urban areas of Thessaloniki. The aim is to get an integrated perspective on a specific central neighbourhood of the city to formulate solutions addressing the current challenges. This requires an understanding of the historical development and an analysis of the current situation. Based on this evidence, it is possible to develop steering methods, governance proposals and design solutions to contribute to Thessaloniki's attractive, resilient and sustainable future.

This year's study area is the neighbourhood of Vardaris-Xirokrini (Central Train Station), a key characteristics district in the Northeast of the inner city (see Fig. 1).

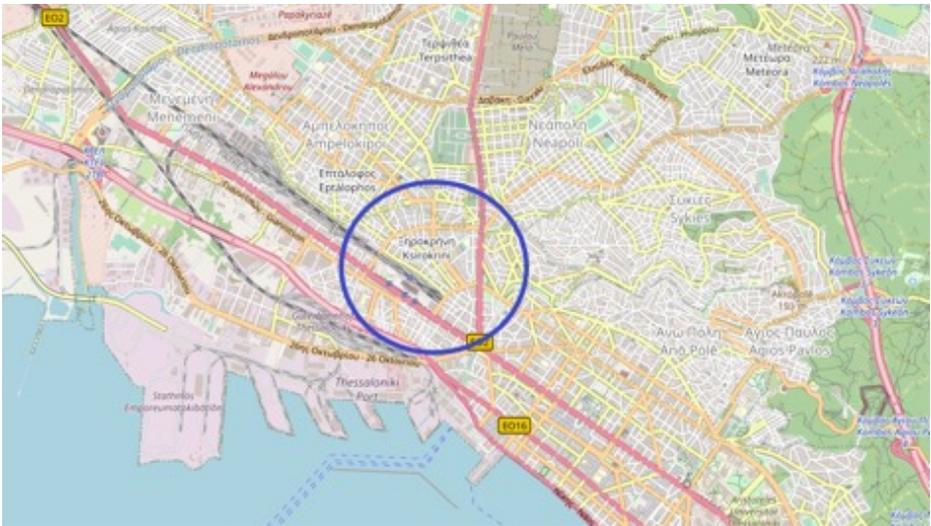


Fig. 1: The study area: the neighbourhood of Vardaris-Xirokrini (Central Train Station)  
Source: OpenStreetMap, Open Data Commons Open Database License (ODbL)

Within the university partnership “Centres of the Future – Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Development” (FutureCentres, <https://future-centres.eu/>) between the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (School of Architecture) and the Leibniz University Hanover (Institute of Environmental Planning) funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) from 2023 till 2025 the Summer Schools aim to analyze different challenges of inner cities and develop solutions. During the Summer Schools, the participants (see Fig. 2) are brought into exchange in interdisciplinary teams to work on specific topics. The framework program of the Summer Schools consists of thematic excursions, interdisciplinary workshops, group work and presentations.

From 30th May to 3rd June 2023, the Thessaloniki Summer School 2023 on „The future of central urban areas of Thessaloniki“ took place. In five small groups, the students analyzed different topics in the neighbourhood of Vardaris-Xirokrini. All the groups, together with tutors and staff, visited the area, walked around and observed the field, while enriching their analyses with notes, photographs, and sketches. They shared experiences with one another and also had the opportunity to discuss the area’s current transformations and challenges with a local NGO dealing with social integration issues. Questions arose like, how did the study area develop? How does the social structure and participation look like in the neighbourhood? What is the local traffic and infrastructure like? What is the quality of public and green spaces? What are the challenges for the

built environment, housing, retail and productive activities? How do planners deal with the challenges? What participation formats are there? Which concepts need to be developed? What kind of (planning) strategies or approaches might improve the local conditions?



Fig. 2: Group photo (own depiction)

Before starting the task, the students were provided with useful materials, such as maps of the district, and topic-related literature to prepare themselves and support their knowledge with valuable information. During a workshop by Jonas Lamberg, the participants gained an insight into the impact of 20th-century urban planning concepts on today's urban life. Afterwards, the small groups worked together on selected chapters from the book „Cities for People“ by Jan Gehl and then presented their proposed solutions for a more humane and environmentally friendly city with the help of posters. The results formed a „Wall of Solutions“ (see Fig. 3).

Furthermore, thematic keynotes were held during the Summer School to broaden the knowledge of the students on sustainable urban development. Katerina Danadiadou from the Municipality of Thessaloniki presented the history and challenges of urban development in Thessaloniki as



Fig. 3: Wall of Solutions (own depiction)

well as future strategies and projects of the city. In addition, Garyfallia Katsavounidou from the School of Spatial Planning and Development, Faculty of Engineering at the AUTH explained the impact of car-oriented planning on cities and stressed the importance of looking at cities not only from an overarching perspective, but also from a human dimension. In addition, Ass. Prof. Loukas Triantis spoke about the current trends and challenges of the Greek planning system and Prof. Dr. Axel Priebis gave a lecture on inner cities in Germany and devoted himself in particular to a detailed look at Hanover.

On the last day of the Summer School, the students presented their ideas, strategies and planning approaches, which are included in the five following papers:

### Modern history and past development of Thessaloniki

This first paper examines the changes in the urban structure of the city of Thessaloniki over time and analyses the impact of events such as fires, population changes, and reforms on the city. By taking a comprehensive look at historical events and developments, a better understanding of urban development and the significance of Thessaloniki as a cultural and historical centre is achieved. Thessaloniki's rich history spans millennia, showing its evolution from ruins to a resilient modern metropolis. Diverse architectural styles shape the city, from Hellenistic to Byzantine to Ottoman. Centuries of migration have created a multicultural base with potential for future integration. The paper concludes that Thessaloniki's fascinating history and complex social fabric highlight its significance by linking the past and present, providing essential insights for future solutions. The paper emphasises the importance of preserving Thessaloniki's assets for future generations facing new challenges.

### More life in Vardaris

The second paper focuses on social structure, demography, urban management and participation by analysing the quality of public space in the case study of Vardaris. Also, insights from the program „Mais Vida nos Morros“ (More life in the Hills) in Recife, Brazil are presented as inspiration. The group introduced a public policy program, that focuses on urban innovation and resilience with citizen participation, and proposes specific ideas for improving the Vardaris area, including colourful aesthetics and the creation of a green pathway.

## EquiCity: Creating a Livable Future for All

The paper analyses the economic and housing situation in Thessaloniki, particularly focusing on the Vardaris and Xyrokrini districts. It discusses the relationship between urban development, economic resources, and resident housing. The article mentions the role of private investors in shaping gentrification processes and advocates for a balance between economic growth and preserving the neighborhood's character. Thessaloniki's economic landscape, driven by tourism, port activities, industry, and education, sets the backdrop for the discussion. The Vardaris and Xyrokrini districts, despite their central location, face economic challenges, manifested in dilapidated infrastructure and high unemployment rates. The article highlights the need for interventions to enhance living conditions, such as improving security and regulating Airbnb usage. Finally, the study proposes regulations to strike a balance between economic growth and housing affordability while fostering a sustainable future for these neighborhoods.

## Exploring Thessaloniki: The Evolution and Impact of Urban Public Spaces and Green Areas

The overarching topic of the following paper is public and green spaces and their role in resilience in the context of climate change. The paper presents an analysis of urban public spaces and green areas regarding their evolution and impact. Thessaloniki is a city with limited public and green spaces amidst its dense urban fabric. Compared to European standards, Thessaloniki has one of the lowest ratios of green space per resident. After analysing the current situation, group 4 proposes several approaches for solutions and measures, such as prioritising the expansion and improvement of public and green spaces, incorporating more natural elements, ensuring proper water management infrastructure, adopting inclusive and people-centred design principles, allocating sufficient resources for maintenance.

## Revitalizing Public Spaces and Promoting Social Cohesion through a Sustainable Urban Design: Case Study in the Xirokrini-Vardaris Area of Thessaloniki

The last paper, by group 5, presents a comprehensive site analysis of the Xirokrini-Vardaris area with a focus on urban design and built environment, transport and infrastructure. Challenges such as isolation from an abandoned train station, car-centric dominance of parking, underutilized green spaces, and lack

of vibrant social areas were identified. To address these challenges, sustainable interventions that aim to transform the area into a vibrant and sustainable urban environment are proposed. One proposal is for example enhancing social housing with vegetation green walls for microclimate regulation.

Some of the results of the summer school are presented on Uuurble (<https://uurble.de/>). Uuurble is an Internet-based platform dedicated to researching and describing cities and urban neighborhoods and enabling their virtual exploration. Social, geographical, historical, ecological and urban planning aspects are central to this. Political, economic and cultural structures are also of research interest. Uuurble is aimed at teachers, students and researchers, who can write their own contributions and publish them on the platform. It can be used in several ways: as a research tool and knowledge platform, as a teaching tool for schools and universities, or simply as a constantly growing collection of extraordinary places.

### List of participants

- Aikaterini Mitsioni (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
- Amirhossein Zarei (Leibniz University Hanover)
- Anne Widowsky (Leibniz University Hanover)
- Christina Fytilli (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
- Duygu Cavlak (Leibniz University Hanover)
- Eleni Zikopoulou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
- Eugenia Mamai (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
- Gabriela Dienne Figueredo Duarte (Leibniz University Hanover)
- Georgai Gkousiou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
- Jelle Schacht (Leibniz University Hanover)
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- Ka Lok Lam (Leibniz University Hanover)
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- Vasiliki Vardaki (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
- Zoi Pitsou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
- Zongze Li (Leibniz University Hanover)

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