

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GRADUAL TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN ESTABLISHING THESSALONIKI AS A MAJOR REGIONAL CENTER

A 15-YEAR PLAN FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CITY PRELIMINARY DRAFT SUMMARY

Christopher Alexander
Professor Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley
Chairman, PatternLanguage.com

This document reflects the views of a group of architects, writers, and urbanists in Thessaloniki and Athens. It is presented for the use of the municipality and the Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace as a proposal to stimulate and possibly guide a new wave of development and enrichment in the urban center of the city.

The most important thing to recognize, is the following. Many of the necessary solutions are already found in Thessaloniki today. Although there are many damaged areas, scattered here and there, there are also many, many inspirations and observations in Thessaloniki today which can form the basis of a new model of urban structure. These observations – reflecting old traditions of Macedonia – can provide 21st century solutions of a more intimate human scale, a more intelligent approach to resources, and a more inspiring view of the modern city which can be achieved. The city of the future should not be, as some may think, a fabric to be modernized by stripping out and enlargement of structure, and by destruction. Instead, careful observation, street by street, wall by wall, of the very subtle things which work now, and which make people deeply comfortable, can provide a new kind of solution more in keeping with the humanity of our new century, more in keeping with the promise of the 21st century as the century of biology -- that is, a century which may now be dominated by small scale intimacy, by complexity arrived at by working complexity created by sometimes tiny human structures cooperating to form more complex streets, and spaces, and foci, and opportunities for human life.

This is what can create a highly modern city of economic strength, where people of the region genuinely want to be, and to which they will come in search of their regional focus. The city of Thessaloniki may show a new wave of intelligent humanity, preserving the values of Greek civilization and daily life, and entirely different from the neotechnic and too-commercial fantasies of such places as Frankfurt, the suburbs of Paris, or Bilbao.

This true and human future of the city, is the path through which the city can achieve its regional leadership, and through which it might one day be recognized as a landmark in modern European history.

The following points represent a first sketch of a process intended to reach these ends.

1. THE SHAPE OF PUBLIC URBAN SPACE

- ◆ Urban spaces – streets and squares – are the living rooms of society.
- ◆ Well being of people depends on the urban space.
- ◆ Since arrival of the car, urban space of major cities has not functioned as a living room.
- ◆ The most urgent problem, for the regeneration of the modern city, and for the city of Thessaloniki, is to create a comprehensive system of space in which human meeting, interaction, engagement, and above all true belonging, can occur.

2. THE VITAL INTERPLAY OF PEDESTRIANS AND CARS

- ◆ The crux is the interface of cars and pedestrians
- ◆ Pedestrianization is now recognized and is being accomplished.
- ◆ But urban life in modern times depends on the meeting of cars and pedestrians
- ◆ New forms of interaction must be defined and implemented.

3. THE 300 BLOCKS FORMING THE CENTRAL CITY OF THESSALONIKI

- ◆ From Niki to Agiou Dimitriou, and from the White Tower to Vardari Square, this is the core of the city, and represents about 300 blocks, or 600 one-block street-segments.
- ◆ Thus it contains about 600 distinct urban spaces.

4. A 15-YEAR PROGRAM OF REFORM AND RESHAPING OF 600 STREET SEGMENTS BY COORDINATED PIECEMEAL ACTION

- ◆ Total cost about \$100 million
- ◆ Financed by combination of public works, European funds and loans, and private investment.
- ◆ Spend about \$6 million per year for fifteen years
- ◆ Each year about 25 blocks will have improvements made, completing the work of 400 blocks in about 15 years.

5. DIAGNOSIS OF URBAN STREET SPACE AND ITS LIVING QUALITY AS THE GUIDING TOOL FOR ACTION

- ◆ These 600 street segments can be judged according to the condition they are in today
- ◆ Some are very good; some are adequate; some are poor.
- ◆ On the whole there may be about 100 that are good or somewhat good
- ◆ There are perhaps 400 that are not good
- ◆ Each block can be diagnosed in more detail, to identify what it is that makes it fall short of being good as urban space.

6. THE PROCESS OF DIAGNOSIS IS TO BE PEOPLE-BASED, USING THE INTERNET TO GAIN HELP AND OPINIONS OF THE PEOPLE LIVING IN THESSALONIKI, AS ONE OF THE MAJOR TOOLS OF COMMUNICATION

- ◆ Internet access is growing rapidly
- ◆ Tools for making diagnosis can be simply explained
- ◆ Evidence shows that people make coherent and roughly similar judgements of quality of public space
- ◆ The Internet can – and will – involve people in a growing collective consciousness to supplement their intense individuality, but in an available modern form.
- ◆ Internet methods will be supplemented by non-internet methods to provide opinions and involvement of all people regardless of computer access.
- ◆ It is estimated that within ten years extensive access and use of Internet in the city is likely.

7. A SYSTEM OF TRANSFORMATIONS TO IMPROVE STREETS.

- ◆ For blocks whose space is not good, broad kinds of transformations may be applied:
- ◆ Examples of typically useful transformations include (1) methods which change pedestrian-car ratio, (2) which create pure pedestrian streets in some blocks (3) in some cases wider sidewalks, (4) more asymmetries between sidewalks and cars (5) which create crossing movement of pedestrians and cars (6) which create half blocks, (7) which create pedestrian streets in the middle flanked by automobile traffic (8) which create small streets where both pedestrians and cars are comfortable; (9) which create zones where cars and pedestrians freely mix without danger (10) which create small loops of car movement entering into pedestrian intense zones. (11) innovative use of small taxis, and small buses in new configurations. All these examples exist as successful items in the present urban structure of the 600 blocks, but the good cases are vastly outweighed by the bad cases.
- ◆ These ideal transformations need to be defined more carefully, in a way that is particular to Thessaloniki and Northern Greek culture, by observation of quality in Thessaloniki as it is today.

8. THE OVERALL WHOLE IS TO BE GENERATED NOT BY A SINGLE MASTER PLAN BUT BY SUCH A SYSTEM OF TRANSFORMATIONS APPLIED TO INDIVIDUAL BLOCKS ONE AT A TIME.

- ◆ The primary form of decision about timing on different blocks, will be based on the diagnosis and on the urgency of action on the different streets.
- ◆ Also the role played by each street, and the extent of its contribution to the whole, may be a major factor in deciding in what order actions are to be taken.
- ◆ In certain cases large structures will be defined, that may guide the overall coherence of the small street-by-street actions, to encourage emergence of defined and necessary larger structures.
- ◆ In some cases the action may occur, not only on one street at a time, but two or three streets, as necessary for instance, to create adequate and coherent focus on the ancient monuments of the city as major focal points.

9. ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATION OF THE ENTIRE PROCESS IS TO BE PROVIDED BY A JOINT EFFORT OF THE CENTRAL MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING & PUBLIC WORKS, THE MINISTRY OF MACEDONIA AND THRACE, AND THE MUNICIPALITY OF THESSALONIKI.

10.. PEOPLE, COOPERATING WITH AGENCIES (BUSINESS-PEOPLE, INDIVIDUALS, LOCAL PEOPLE, MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN) WILL BE INVITED TO HELP SHOW HOW AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ON THE BLOCK THAT IS "THEIRS".

- ◆ Once again helped by tools given on the Internet, and supplied by public agencies of the city and local government, people can help to decide how these transformations may be applied best, to each block.
- ◆ The quality of transformation done on different blocks, by discussion with people, will become part of the instrument used to decide priority and timing of the work on different streets.

11. THE SUCCESSFUL VISION AND INVOLVED COOPERATION OF PEOPLE, COUPLED WITH THE INTERNET-DISTRIBUTED SYSTEM OF TRANSFORMATIONS THAT ARE DEFINED BY THE PUBLIC AGENCIES OF THE CITY, IS TO CREATE THE WHOLE.

- ◆ It is a major feature of this proposal that urban space is not only made better, not only made coherent and beautiful, and connected, but that it also contains the desires and will and thought of many, many individual people – so that people of Thessaloniki, together, feel and experience the ownership of the space which becomes and invitation to all people in the region.

12. THE END RESULT CAN BE A CITY, IN WHICH PUBLIC SPACE ONCE AGAIN BELONGS TO PEOPLE, IN WHICH PLEASANTNESS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IS THE GUIDING FEATURE, AND PEOPLE FEEL A TRUE OWNERSHIP OF THE CITY.

- ◆ Deep pleasantness of the city has been identified by several economists as a major pre-requisite for success in the city's evolution as a regional center.
- ◆ Under the program described and – we believe – only under this kind of program, the pleasantness that is activated will be sufficient to create sustained regional development for the region as a whole.

13. THESSALONIKI, IN IMPLEMENTING THIS PLAN, HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME A LEADER AMONG EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN CITIES.

- ◆ Such a renewal of public space has not yet been accomplished in the cities of modern times.
- ◆ By doing it, Thessaloniki, in one stroke, may establish itself as a European leader, and as a major regional center.

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