

A Project Diary as a Strategy for Urban Apprehension

The Case Study of Thessaloniki

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This contribution presents a reading of the urban fabric of Thessaloniki through a project diary composed of sketches, photographs and local research concerning the urban evolution of the city. It was produced during the months of January and February 2022, with the objective to support urban planning proposals for the Sustainable Open Solutions (SOS) of the European Urban Waterfronts Programme, directed by Professor Pedro Resano Garcia. The programme aims to study and propose solutions for urban problems resulting from climate change in waterfront areas. It focuses on solutions for sea level rise, greenhouse effects, degradation of green areas and loss of heritage, and aims to produce resilient cities.¹ The working method of this research – ‘in action investigation’ – produced important results that de-rationalize the planning process and stimulate discussions with local experts, combined with traditional methods of thinking about the contemporary city and its representations.

In times of globalization and the virtualization of the living world, it no longer makes sense to speak of cultural colonization when a foreign architect works in an environment far removed from their own. It becomes important to work with an epistemological vision that is external to the place, such as the 'South to North' epistemological view – a view that Santos (2019) places against the modern 'North to South' position, that is deeply present in Western criticism.² To understand a foreign, urban fabric, already established practices such as hand drawing and photography can be used. My work can be described as that of a Brazilian architect in Thessaloniki, Greece, who works individually with the use of a project diary (drawings and photographs) to bring architecture closer to anthropological thought. As Darwin already stated in 1831:

The journey is the moment of insatiable collection, in which the discovery of the world reverts to the discovery of one's own experience of alienation to which only the misunderstanding of the unknown and the consequent effort of abstraction gives access.³

This contribution will focus on the process of understanding the urban fabric, not on the proposals resulting from that analysis. It started from the preparation of a project diary by the researcher as someone from outside the local Greek culture who seeks to 'abandon the pretensions of universality, unity, and identity, of a unique discourse, of an autonomous work'.⁴ The first step was to record all situations, interventions, research and discussions with the objective of capturing how the city developed and how it behaves today.

First Week: Initial Conflict

Arrival at the city's airport at 11:00 pm. A new infrastructure, without a jet bridge, but with contemporary and generic architecture. On the way to the hotel, I enjoy the city, full of bars, people and even ordinary Christmas decorations. The city has a regular layout, orderly, with good walkways.



Fig. 1. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

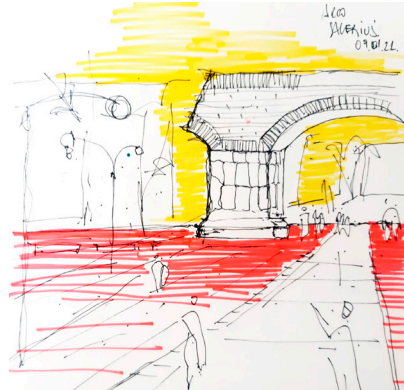
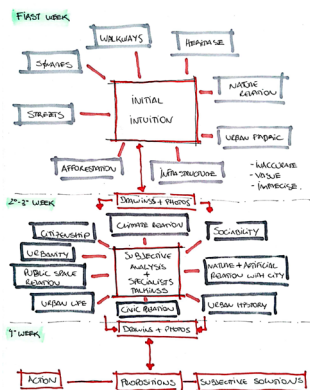


Fig. 2+3. Sketch Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.



Fig. 4. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

It feels like an Eastern city that tries to compete in terms of quality with major European cities, but still suffers from poorly finished buildings, damaged signs, visible electricity wires and other urban problems. The city is exceptionally clean and the buildings, in general, are six to eight floors, with retail and office functions on the ground level, resulting in a continuous fabric of mixed-use spaces. Most buildings have continuous terraces with solar protection devices. The summer is hot and with plenty of heat waves coming in from the Mediterranean Sea to the south. It is noticeable that the winter is usually harsh and heavy snowfall a frequent occurrence.

On Sunday morning, looking for a café and a market, it is possible to explore several city streets, boardwalks and shops, which show a very lively and active city with very pleasant public spaces. The waterfront is very narrow and has a limited infrastructure of urban furniture. These impressions concern the waterfront near the most historical part of the city – the original part of the city, which has been continuously redesigned – that is situated between the sea and the buildings.

After a breakfast that turned into lunch (as a result of my adaptation to the time zone), it was possible to visit the Roman Odeon of which traces still exist today as a set of lines on the ground and some ruins in the middle of a green area. The vestiges of the glorious past that confront the city reveal several historical marks, like a living calendar. The ruins reveal an imposing building complex, that is still geometrically perfect. A double colonnade or peristyle (of which some columns have been reconstructed in concrete, making it possible to perceive the differentiation in scale and time) reveals the symmetry of the entire composition, directed towards the discovered theatre. The foundations are impressive, with thick walls made of stone and bricks to support the construction of the Roman amphitheatre. The buildings reveal how the Romans aimed to change nature so that it would serve human purposes. A thought that is highly questioned by the Greeks, and which in the current world is not logical anymore. The goal is to reconcile



Fig. 5. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

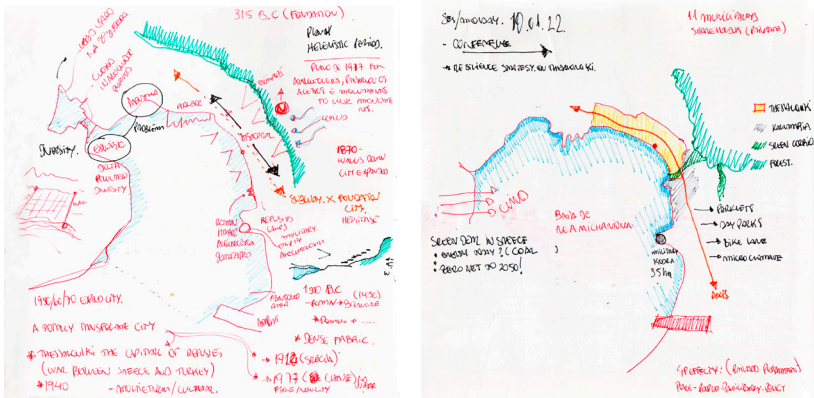


Fig. 6+7. Sketch Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello



Fig. 8. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

civilization with nature, to live together, as in Kengo Kuma's advertising phrases, written on the walls of a building under construction in the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon: 'We are in the age of nature, not architecture'.⁵

At the church of Saint Demetrius it is possible to recognize the reconstruction with Roman techniques, especially the wooden trusses and beams that support the floors. In the remaining, heavy stone walls, stucco and brickwork make up the main nave and secondary wings, always with plenty of granite and limestone coatings. Interestingly, the whole church has a tapestry covering the entire floor. It also has several guardrails with Moresque *muxarabis* and a clear byzantine influence.

Finally, the imposing Arch of Galerius and the Roman Rotunda, both built in the fourth century, with the same construction technique of Roman arches and domes (a perfect arch without apparent keystone). Access to the Rotunda is made possible through a beautiful metal bridge that floats above them. The solution is one of not touching the ruin but making the new intervention visible, which is an attitude clearly applied to several of these heritage sites.

The city is structured by a series of interconnected architectural artifacts that function as autonomous objects. In Pier Vittorio Aureli's view, the city of Thessaloniki has been arranged according to a radical autonomy in relation to the forces that shape its own urbanization.⁶ They are objects that have inflected the urban design according to the city's needs.

Founded in 315 BC by the son of Alexander the Great, Thessaloniki was a place of passage on the way to Persia. It was built following the typical Roman layout of a *Cardo* – a major north-south oriented street – and a *Decumanus* – a major east-west oriented street, which is here the most extensive horizontal axis to follow the waterfront. To the southwest of the bay, Mount Olympus protects the city from the winds from the west.



Fig. 9. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

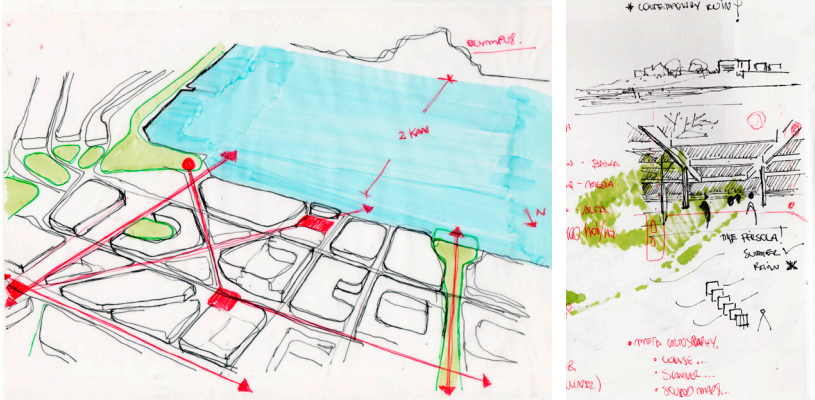


Fig. 10+11. Sketch Notebook, ©Photo: André Prevedello.



Fig. 12. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

It surprises and improves my temporal reference when discovering that the city, since the Romans, has been rebuilt several times and that the visible layers of ancient buildings are only a part of this rich, archaeological site. The historical buildings (the Forum, the Rotunda, the Arch of Galerius) are just the tip of the iceberg underneath the floor of the city.

The current urban situation includes the estuaries of several rivers that flow into the sea, the industrial area, the port area, the urban area of the original city with its walls, and the new areas of development, such as the seafronts and parks. Like multiple Brazilian cities, Thessaloniki has several master plans under development that seek to recover public space and green areas. Similarly, there are enormous difficulties in implementing these plans, to provide solutions for the improvement of urban mobility (which is quite chaotic in the city) while recovering green areas. The city had a major fire in 1917 that allowed for a restructuring of the urban fabric based on an orthogonal mesh, cut by diagonals that connected the archaeological constructions. From the drawings, it is possible to conclude that we are not talking about a single city, but about a cluster of several cities around the Gulf of Salonika.

Through the drawings, it is also possible to perceive that the city can be understood in two ways. First, the drawings highlight features of the evolution of the urban fabric, which help to understand a scheme of horizontal and vertical layers of historical periods acting together. Second, the drawings bring to the fore contemporary needs concerning environmental problems, mobility, land use and urban conflicts. This enables a possible discussion of and reflection on urban conceptions and ideas, shaped by the process of interpreting all the material collected and developed here.

Second Week: Attempts to Approach

The seafront is a kind of linear park in a completely urban area. The park contains large public areas with lawns, afforestation and sculptures in



Fig. 13. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.



Fig. 14. Sketch Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello



Fig. 15. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

contact with the sea. It is continuously connected with Thessaloniki's ancient tower and landmark: the White Tower. This fifteenth-century element dates back to the Byzantine dominance of the area and acts today as a point of reference in the city's landscape. Thus, this sector of the city, by chance of history,⁷ opposes the contemporary urban tendency towards a 'dissolution of plural and complex memory and simple and manipulated conceptions of the social'.⁸

The bus ride to the municipality of Kalamaria allows one to calmly appreciate the public areas (above the average of Brazilian cities), traffic, noise and visual pollution (Greek cities, in general, have a lot of visual communication). Camp Kodra Park is a large old military camp in the centre of Kalamaria and the coastline that connects the land to the sea. To the west, it is possible to walk along the entire coastline. Today, we find here a linear park, somehow abandoned. The slope creates a terrain on two levels, with beautiful views. Off the land, there are several marinas in deteriorating conditions, along with a lot of other human constructions in the sea. However, what is striking is that in several places it becomes difficult to differentiate between what is human and what is natural. After walking along the narrow strip of sand and stones, it is possible to climb to the Kyberneío, or the Government House, which is locally known as the Palataki, or Little Palace. Today, it is without use, but it still impresses, since the location and the architecture of the building are of great richness. I think of what kind of society we are becoming that builds a city of questionable qualities, but leaves a building like a palace to be eroded by time.

The drawings provoke some thoughts. They enable me to see the urban solutions and strategies based on positive actions, following lines of thought applicable to the local reality. In this urban context, the importance of the entire front of Kodra Park becomes clear as an area that supports intervention, as well as the interrelationship of the park with the waterfront. It is important to work with an integrated system that establishes physi-



Fig. 16. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

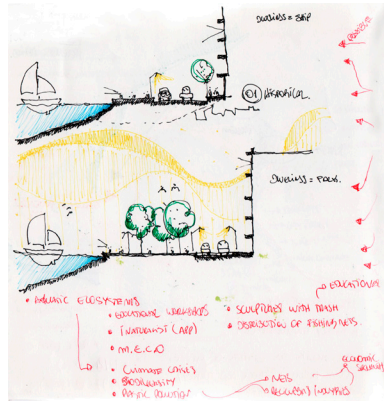


Fig. 17+18. Sketch Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello



Fig. 19. Photography Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

cal and conceptual connections between water and vegetation. The slope works as a linear park, with vegetation that accommodates the downhill slope in a completely different section when compared with the city section.

Third Week: Return to the City

The strategy this week was to get to know the west and north sides of the city, especially the public pier that today has restaurants, coffee bars and a photography museum. It is disappointing to witness the poor urban quality of the pier with its enclosed spaces, and the lack of urban furniture and vegetation.

To the north, there is the steep topography of the Acropolis and the old city wall, which amuses with its grandiosity and conservation. In the lower part of the city, there is the municipal market, composed of several open blocks. There is no closed, public building, as is common in various places around the world, such as London and São Paulo. The market is integrated with the city, which makes it very much alive. Cafés use electric heating devices in winter as well as glass panels to stop the icy wind from the sea. The prevailing wind comes from the west, transforming streets, such as an avenue called Egnatia, the city's main artery, into intense wind tunnels. Diagonal streets, which connect archaeological buildings, are good alternatives to escape the icy wind.

Walking along an avenue called Tsimiski, an interior gallery draws attention. It leads to an interior square inside of a building, characterized by a high-tech language. It is a large, multipurpose block with shops and offices that acts as a complement to the old buildings. The ground floor is fluid and open, leading to a central square with remarkable views of the built atrium.

Walking towards Aristotle Square, a large public space with variations of scale, surrounded by buildings of Arab and Byzantine influence (*muxarabis* and red colouring), which were built around the same time and have a

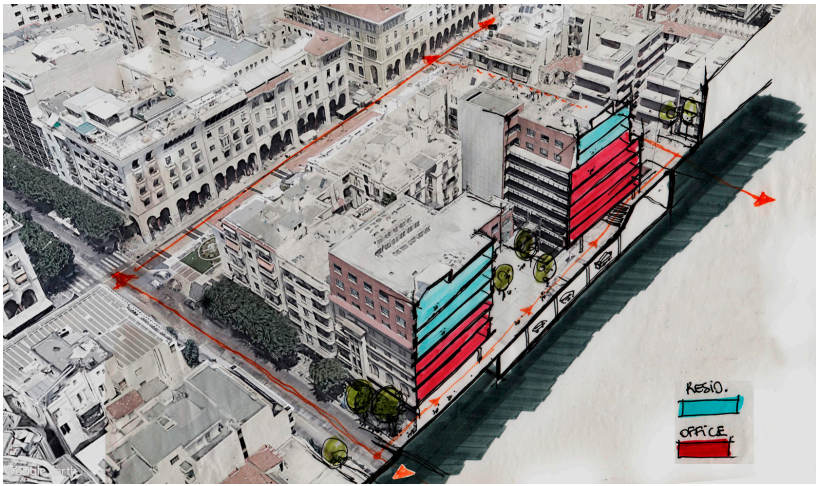


Fig. 20+21. Sketch Notebook, Photo: André Prevedello.

continuous colonnade on the ground floor that enlarges the public space and generates a covered area, I could notice a close similarity to the 'Mass Plan' of Curitiba in Brazil.⁹ From the square, you can see the topography of the landscape to the north with its hillside buildings and the Mediterranean Sea to the south.

Something interesting in Thessaloniki is the lack of zoning regulations, and thus the urban fabric behaves as a mixed-use environment, both residential and commercial. This is related to the basis of Greek society that starts from the family unit and not from the community or the city-state. This, historically, also facilitated the domination of the Greeks by the Romans and the Ottomans.

Fourth Week: Conclusion

The SOS conference discussions with architects, artists and administrators, along with the methodology of active city apprehension, showed that there is a need to promote the connection between cities, green areas and the waterfront. It is also necessary that the architecture acts as a connecting infrastructure of buildings, spaces, green areas and streets, dynamically and simply connected with the natural environment. As part of the Greeks' own history, architecture cannot be thought of as isolated and closed objects. On the contrary, buildings must position themselves as open objects towards the city.

Visits to the sparsely urbanized waterfront induce questions on the dialectic between the natural and the artificial, and demand integrated solutions combining architectural gestures and everyday use, public and open spaces, inviting accesses, ramps, stairs and commercial spaces. It is essential for the city to connect parks with uses related to cinema, school, labour and cultural spaces as well as with the waterfront and structures such as floating pools, open cinemas, water sports, etcetera. It is important to note that the dualistic thinking of man versus nature no longer applies. We are in

an era in which we no longer distinguish between what is artificial and what is natural. We have become hybrid, with actions that generate hybrid results in what is the current landscape. This era is easily visible on the large scale: when you have a large ship and Mount Olympus in the background. But it is on a small scale that this intervention is perversely recorded.

An intervention in the city of Thessaloniki needs to celebrate the value of connecting private and public spaces with the natural environment and the sea. It could be thought of as sculptural and symbolic architecture, incorporating landscape, infrastructure and architecture that activates the landscape with paths and cross-connections with distinct types of functions and uses. Such an intervention must also redefine the perception of the city from the Guld of Salonika and the huge urban void that is Kodra Park, which divides the urban fabric between the Kyberneio-Palataki and the sea. It should promote the rehabilitation of existing buildings, such as the old military camps of Kodra, and promote profitable spaces with new functions such as vegetable market space, creative recycling spaces, new materials and other things.

While these photographs and sketches from a foreigner's point of view may function as mental maps of a certain naivety, during this process they showed an important way to apprehend the urban culture of the place and understand its evolution and current use, offering a high potential for the search for creative solutions to the city of Thessaloniki with all its diversity.¹⁰ After all, in the face of unbridled globalization, how many languages can coexist in a single house?

- 1 The program supports multidisciplinary teams that include architects, urban designers, artists and administrators, among others. At this conference, researchers were present from Portugal, Greece, Sweden and Italy.
- 2 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 3 Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle: Charles Darwin's Journal of Researches* (London: Penguin Books, 1989).
- 4 Josep Maria Montaner and Zaida Muxí, *Architecture and Politics: Rehearsals for Alternate Worlds* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2011), 211.
- 5 This statement was painted on the protective walls of the restoration work of an existing building located on the site of the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon. The ideas behind this statement can be seen in the video *Conferência Edifícios e Jardim Gulbenkian – Passado, Presente e Futuro*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHYZKidqDuQ>, accessed 28 October 2022.
- 6 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
- 7 A great fire occurred in 1917.
- 8 Montaner and Muxí, op. cit. (note 4), 159.
- 9 Curitiba's 'Mass Plan' is composed of a central avenue for public transport, two slow-traffic streets for vehicles, and a covered public gallery with commercial functions on the ground floor of the buildings.
- 10 All photographs and sketches were produced during the conference period, which took place from 8 January to 6 February 2022.