

PRESERVATION OF URBAN HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN THESSALONIKI

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses some key themes in the preservation of urban heritage, tourism and planning in the city of Thessaloniki, Greece. It outlines the city's multilayered heritage as the product of successive cultures each one leaving its particular imprint on the urban landscape; it highlights the relationship of heritage with modernisation and urban planning, and documents the recent shift towards the protection of memory in the enhancement of the city's historic physiognomy; it commends on the effects of tourism on urban heritage and the quality of life; finally, it unfolds the current attempt for integrating heritage enhancement in new directions in planning for an improvement in the quality of life.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is meant to be informative to an international readership and to offer some reflections on the ways preservation of urban heritage and tourism interact in the case of Thessaloniki, Greece. It outlines some key themes in the preservation of urban heritage, tourism and planning for an improvement in the quality of life in the city. It recounts the city's historic centre as the locus of successive cultures that have endowed it with its particular heritage and its composite physiognomy. It then discusses the relationship among heritage, modernity and urban planning, and documents the recent shift towards the protection of memory

in the enhancement of the city. It comments on the effects of tourism on urban heritage and the quality of life. It also unfolds the current attempt to integrate heritage enhancement in new directions in planning. The paper concludes that Thessaloniki still stands a considerable chance to resume from the negative effects of tourism by means of a combined policy of cultural heritage protection and improvement of life for its citizens in a sustainable development perspective.

1. THE HISTORIC CENTRE AS THE LOCUS OF SUCCESSIVE CULTURES

Located upon the major terrestrial and maritime routes linking Europe with the Orient, Thessaloniki has had a continuous presence for over 23 centuries. During its long history the urban landscape has been enriched with a unique heritage representing many eras and successive cultures. Founded around 315 BC by Cassander king of Macedonia, it is celebrated as «the greatest achievement of Hellenistic town-planning in Europe» (according to P. Lavedan). In the following centuries the city rose into an economic and cultural centre of great civilizations, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman, each one leaving its particular imprint on the city's architecture and urbanism. A large community of Spanish Jews was established in the city at the end of the fifteenth century, further enriching its cosmopolitan character (*Fig. 1*).

Second city of Greece since 1912 at the end of the Balkan wars, with two large universities, an extended industrial sector, an active port, and a population of more than one million, greater Thessaloniki covers today 13.000 hectares, spread out along its shore for more than 35 kilometres. In spite of natural disasters (fires), war devastations, and an extensive urban modernisation during the last 100 years, the city preserves a significant part of its centuries-old heritage, which could be mobilized in order to reinforce its contemporary physiognomy.

The historic centre remains always the major component of the cultural identity of Thessaloniki and the place *par excellence* of historic stratification which was shaped by the city's confinement within its walls for 22 consecutive centuries.

- Foundation of Thessaloniki 315 BC
- Hellenistic period 315 - 148 BC
- Roman period 148 BC - 313

- Byzantine period 313 - 1430
- Ottoman period 1430 - 1912
- Greek period 1912 onward



Thessaloniki, Hellenistic-Roman era
**Economic capital of Macedonia
 and political seat of the Roman Tetrarchy**



Thessaloniki, Byzantine era (14th c.)
**Second city of the
 Byzantine Empire**



Thessaloniki, Ottoman era (1882)
**Major port-city of the
 Ottoman Empire**

Fig. 1
 Historic evolution, stages and transformations of Thessaloniki's historic centre.

It is clearly discernable, being delimited by the ancient ramparts, and covers a surface area of 330 hectares, which concentrates the most emblematic features of urban heritage. Yet, it is henceforth obvious that the physiognomy of the city cannot be identified only with its historic core, but should include all the historic elements scattered in the metropolitan region.

2. HISTORIC HERITAGE, MODERNITY AND URBAN PLANNING

Today, it is generally acknowledged that Thessaloniki, especially its historic centre, represents a supreme model of historic stratification –that is of simultaneous presence of several interrupted *formae urbis* in a single recognisable form– characteristic of the old Mediterranean cities, such as Rome, Athens, Izmir or Beirut (Fig. 2).

However, the recognition and appreciation of those exceptional qualities and their safeguard were by no means obvious. The anarchic growth of the city in the post-war period engulfed its monuments in an extremely dense building mass, resulting from the disproportionate rise of building coefficients and the feverish construction activity that ensued. From the several rescue digs conducted by the archaeological service in the centre only few discoveries saw the light, the rule for most findings being to be buried underground in order to allow for the construction of blocks of flats. At the same time, the large wave of internal migration in the 1960s increased the population and the size of the city, creating squatter housing districts especially in the western periphery. This line of development was disastrous for the urban and peri-urban heritage which was dramatically reduced.

The taking into account of historic heritage as a factor to improve urban space as well as a tool for shaping the desirable identity of the city appeared for the first time on the occasion of the new Urban Plan drawn up after the fire of the central area in 1917.

The plan by Ernest Hébrard, with its radical modernisation of the intramural area inaugurated the selective and instrumental use of heritage.



Roma, Fori Imperiali

*Fig. 2
Unique historic stratification
of Mediterranean cities.*



Athens, Roman Forum



Izmir, Roman Forum



Beirut, Roman Baths

The nationalization of the multicultural city was not sought in the continuity of the inherited urban forms. Preservation was limited to the prominent monuments – Ancient, Byzantine, Ottoman – which were properly arranged in open spaces after being deprived of their adjacent structures, in a typical Beaux-Arts manner. The conservation of the picturesque Upper Town (a surface area of 57 ha) spared by the fire, remained an exception, and on no other occasion there were proposals to safeguard the inherited fabric and architecture, despite the fact that the 2/3 of the traditional city were undamaged by the fire.

This operation and its strong stance towards modernity were crucial for the perception of urban change and the management of the city's heritage in the years to come. In spite of the recurrent rhetoric for Thessaloniki's centuries-old history, the scornful attitude of local authorities, social elites and citizens vis-à-vis urban heritage in the 1960s and the 1970s, caused the loss of a great part of the historic aspect and resources of the city inside and outside the central area (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3
The «engulfment» of monuments in 1960's - 70's building mass.

3. THE ENHANCEMENT OF THE CITY'S HERITAGE: THE COURSE TOWARDS MEMORY

The first substantive attempt to control urban development and enhance the physiognomy of the city was manifested in the Thessaloniki Master Plan, approved in 1985. Its aims included highlighting the city's historical profile and enhancing the historic centre. It introduced measures to protect the archaeological and historic sites and at the same time made possible the adoption of additional special regulations, regarding land uses and traffic circulation. It also proposed the linking and upgrading of major historic sites and layouts of special significance integrated in a number of archaeological walks. Finally, the plan proposed the qualitative improvement and revitalisation of the city's traditional districts, including the Upper Town, the old commercial centre, etc.

This course of action towards historic memory tried to counterbalance the constant trend for modernity and foster the city's centuries-old identity. Besides the urgent need to protect the environment, improve public spaces, and promote the sector of services (initiated mainly with the country's adherence to the E.U.), an effort was undertaken to restore into the present-day urban fabric the fragments of past eras and reactivate the architectural heritage; and for the first time, a concurrent policy of conservation was applied, listing all of the city's Ottoman monuments. Various efforts to protect the city's recent architectural heritage and enhance its rich historic stratification started hesitantly in the 1970s (*Fig. 4*).

Since 1978, the traditional quarter of the Upper Town became the site for the implementation of a controversial preservation and redevelopment project, where the ancient city-walls together with a limited number of original buildings acted as picturesque scenery for the new dwellings of the middle-class (*Fig. 5*).

On the urban scale, the historic identity of the city was further enriched by three major archaeological discoveries. In 1962, excavations for the implementation of Hébrard's civic square uncovered the magnificent Roman Forum, administrative and financial centre of ancient Thessaloniki in the Imperial Roman Age. (*Fig. 6*).

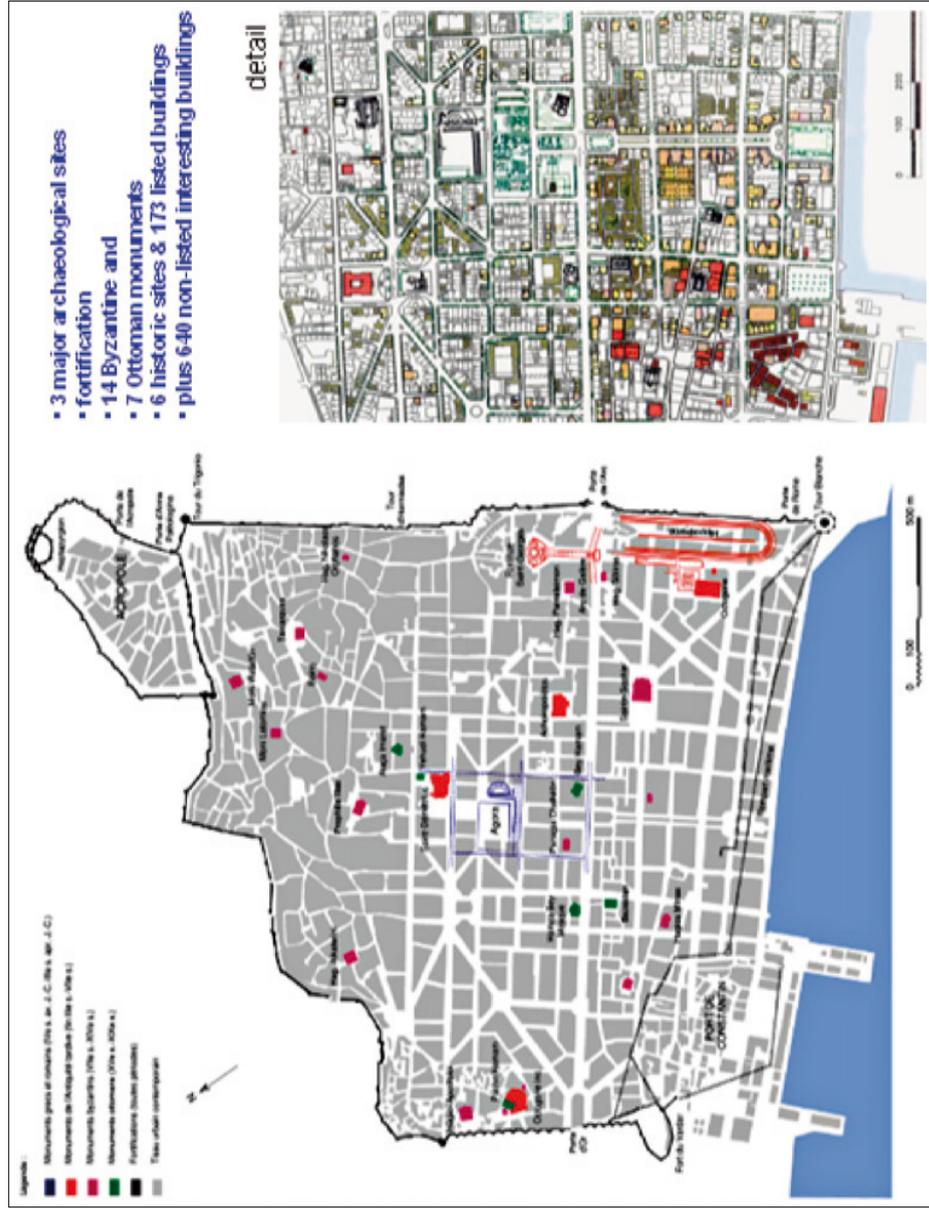


Fig. 4
The urban palimpsest of the historic centre of Thessaloniki.

Recent façade development



Organic urban tissue (57 ha)



Original street facade

**New houses
in “neo-traditional” style**



*Fig. 5
The refashioning of Upper Town of Thessaloniki.*



Odeon

Cryptoporticus & commercial street



Fig. 6

The Roman Forum (2nd c. AD), administrative & financial centre of Thessaloniki in the Imperial Roman age unearthed from 1962 onward.

In its immediate surroundings a considerable number of Byzantine and Ottoman monuments are located. To the eastern part of the historic centre, where a marketplace had been provided by the same plan, ongoing excavations since 1948 brought to the light the Palace and other parts of the remarkable Galerius Maximianus complex. Administrative and religious centre of the city during the Roman Tetrarchy, it covers today a surface area of ca 18 hectares. Finally, at the north-west part of the centre, excavations that started in 1995 on the occasion of an intended underground parking space, unearthed a third major archaeological site comprising a large part of the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine city fabric and several edifices of public interest.

Since 1985 new efforts were put forward that linked the enhancement of urban heritage with more practical targets – such as hosting international cultural events and promoting the city's physiognomy to attract urban tourism and increase the attendance of visitors (only 622,000 in 1996). The venues to host the *Biennale of new artists in the European Mediterranean* in 1986 shed spotlights in exceptional yet abandoned heritage buildings and sites (the old port, Yeni Cami, Alaca Imaret, the former royal theatre). A few years later in 1993 the *Mediterranean cross-roads* cultural events were set in widely unknown or inaccessible historic niches of the city (the roman forum, the old port market, Yfanet disused industrial complex, the surroundings of the *Seven-Tower-Fortress*). These ephemeral settings helped mature specific ideas of heritage integration in the contemporary cultural life of the city.

From 1992 to 1994, sponsored by the European Union (16th Directorate) a pilot project for the revival of the city's historic commercial centre was undertaken, which helped to upgrade and enhance the city's old markets, such as the old harbour market (*Ladadika*) and the bazaars, and funded also the restoration of the Roman forum. In 1994, a large part of the intramural city, coinciding more or less with the area destroyed by the fire in 1917, was listed as Historic Site.

The most opportune occasion for increasing cultural tourism had been Thessaloniki's designation as the Cultural Capital of Europe for 1997. Within this context numerous urban and architectural projects were advanced: pedestrianised areas, renovations, and archaeological excavations and restorations. The most prominent project of apparent

metropolitan relevance has been the integration of the old harbour into the city's life as a major cultural pole. Completion of restoration works in the *Galerius complex*, and the *Roman Forum complex* was also undertaken. These magnificent open-air museums hosted (and still do) various cultural events, such as concerts, theatrical performances, exhibitions, and educational programs. Other important projects concerned restoration and landscaping works of the Byzantine heritage: the powerful *Seven-Tower-Fortress* (Fig. 7) and other parts of the fortifications, the discrete Vlatadon Monastery, together with 7 other churches and a bath.

Restoration works were also implemented on Ottoman monuments (Fig. 8), such as the Bedesten, the Aladja Imaret, the Yeni Cami, the Bey Hammam and the Pazar Hammam; while an important number of the surviving building stock dating from the late Ottoman period in the Upper-Town were renovated and assigned for new uses.

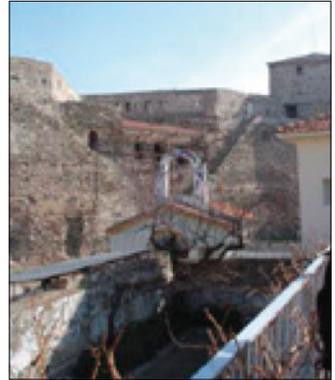
Finally, the recovery of the *fin-de-siècle* cosmopolitan physiognomy of the city was achieved with the renovation of more than 30 buildings – such as private mansions, public buildings, early industrial sites, manufacturing premises and religious buildings – to host new uses in and around the historic centre (Fig. 9).

The *Unknown city* project comprised ten small-scale architectural competitions on sensitive sites of the Upper Town, to incorporate small scale archaeological sites (a cistern, basilica remnants, a bath etc.) into the city fabric. Equally so, five national urban design competitions faced the problem of the city's communication with its past, the renovation of the aging building stock and the presence of ancient monuments. They transposed the emphasis on public space and the image of the city, seeking solutions which, while preserving the *genius loci*, improved the residents' life and environment. All these attempts are not to be regarded as mere conservation-oriented actions, but as efforts to re-inscribe the monuments in the contemporary – present and future – spatial and symbolic order of the city.

At the same time, set up by public and private initiatives, a new generation of museum buildings was added to existing ones that were remodelled. These amount today to a total of 30 thematic museums, some of them of international reputation, highlighting various periods and aspects of the city's history and culture, such as the Archaeological



*Fig. 7
The Byzantine
Seven-Tower-Fortress
of Thessaloniki.*



*Fig. 8
Renovation
of the Bedesten
covered market.*



**Mehmet Kapancı house, late 19th c.
(today public services)**



**Osman Ali house, 1896
(today Centre for Byzantine Research)**



**Yeni (donme) Cami,
architect V. Pozeli 1902
(today exhibition centre)**

The Lazarists' convent, 1886 (today Art Centre)



**Y.Modiano house
(today Folklore museum)**



*Fig. 9
Reuse interventions in 19th c. buildings.*



Fig. 10
 The cultural route Bus in the historic centre of Thessaloniki.

and Byzantine museums, the Jewish museum, the State Museum of Contemporary Art, etc. Yet, a thematic museum of the Ottoman era when Thessaloniki was ranked as a major Balkan port is still missing.

Last, but not least in terms of heritage conceptualization and enhancement, it was only very recently (Sept. 2009) that a «cultural» bus line was put in effect by the local urban transport organization (*Fig. 10*). The bus stops at significant points of interest in order to take tourists and citizens around the main historic sites and monuments in the historic centre and is complemented by extended suggested walking routes. Despite the fact that the area covered is limited to the eastern part of the historic centre, the line goes around numerous points of interest that include not only the most important monuments, sites and museums, but also picturesque neighbourhoods in the Upper Town, unintelligible historic public spaces and contemporary cultural premises in order to highlight Thessaloniki as a historic multicultural and multiethnic city.

4. THE EFFECTS OF TOURISM ON URBAN HERITAGE AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

Still, with some 800,000 visitors yearly and less than 2 overnight stays per person, the city is rather a transit stop of the large tourist flow to and from summer resorts (Chalkidiki and islands in the north of the Aegean Sea) than a destination in itself. There is also a discernible trend of overseas (cultural) tourists to combine a short visit in Thessaloniki on their way to Mount Athos or Istanbul due to existing nodes of transport (airport, highways, railways, cabotage). In short, Thessaloniki does not have to handle a big wave of cultural tourism; this is proven also by the fact that the recent cultural bus line is mainly used by school pupils. However, the city has to be prepared in order to avert beforehand negative repercussions of prospective mass tourism and learn from the experience of other cities.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Thessaloniki intends to redefine its role within the new European and Balkan context and improve its physiognomy and international image in order to confront the world-

wide competition and attract a growing portion of business activities and cultural tourism. For such purposes, its cultural assets represent a valuable fortune that can be used. However, the enhancement of heritage does not simply constitute a powerful tool to achieve these goals, but above all also the debt of the city toward its citizens for the undeserved treatment of its long history until now.

Today the city centre is far from being an urban museum, and in spite of the undeniable increase in the number of listed and renovated buildings and sites, the incorporation of heritage as an essential component of urban life remains limited though surprisingly delightful. With its central core abandoned to traffic congestion and public space banalised by excessive occupation of seats-and-tables (as *cafés-terrace*), the city suffers from symptoms similar to those of intense tourist degradation, without however hosting considerable tourism nor enjoying its financial benefits. It is indicative that the archaeological site of the Galerian complex whose restoration was in 2008 awarded a prize by *Europa Nostra*, is treated like an ordinary square, suffocating under the invading presence of the surrounding taverns and cafeterias – as do all the squares in the centre. The regeneration cases of the old harbour market (*Ladadika*) and the historic harbour pier constitute noteworthy examples:

The first one refers to the final outcome of the so-called «model» renovation of the old harbour-market in the 1990s. The small ottoman market (*Istira* and *Misir çarci*) that had not been incinerated in 1917 was preserved thanks to its being excluded from the application of the alignment plan on this spot. The old buildings were renovated by private funding under the supervision of the Town Planning Office while no land use control was enforced. This fact allowed its rapid transformation into an exclusive recreation district. Very fashionable in the beginning, attracting visitors from all-over the country and promoted as a financial success, this tourist-orientated project ended up 10 years later in a decaying condition (*Fig. 11*).

The second case concerns the renovation project of the first pier in the old harbour, an area equal to 5% of the urban core, which was to meet the demands in the new central facilities. The project was of metropolitan relevance and the leading effort to rehabilitate a historic harbour in Greece (*Fig. 12*).

renovation project, 1992-2000

Renovation of 60 buildings by private individuals under the supervision of the Town Planning Office

total budget: 11,730,200 Euro

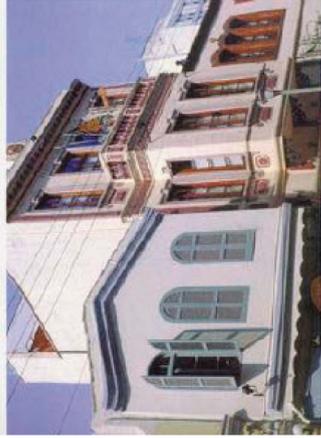


Fig. 11
«Model» renovation of the old harbour-market «Ladadika».

Warehouse A: Cinema & Photo Museums



Warehouse B, Art gallery & Coffee-bar



Warehouse D, concert-theatre-dance hall



Warehouse C, exhibition hall



*Fig. 12
New central facilities in the old port first pier.*

The renovation and remodelling of the 5 warehouses to host cultural activities – such as new museums (Cinema and Photography), conferences and exhibitions, music and movie theatres – funded entirely by public money and technically very successful, proved to be problematic as to its integration into city life; the area remains under the property and management of Port Authority (now converted into an Anonymous Company). The effects of this tendency for privatisation are obvious in the way this area is run mainly during major annual events, such as the annual International Film Festival.

Yet, at the same time, a recent proliferation and mobilisation of citizens' associations (more than 15) and critics in the Press to safeguard urban heritage and stop the abuse of public spaces is very encouraging, especially as far as archaeological monuments or historic sites are concerned (*Fig. 13*).

5. HERITAGE ENHANCEMENT REFLECTED IN NEW DIRECTIONS IN PLANNING

Until recently, the official practice of urban planning identified the physiognomy of a city with the enhancement of its historic centre. Since the '90s this approach appears to have changed. The first strategic plan drawn for the metropolitan area (1995) pointed out areas of heritage interest in the urban periphery, which were integrated into wider regeneration axes – the so called «western and eastern arch» – and initiated several relevant though fragmented projects. Today, a favourable legislative framework amplifies the notion of the city's cultural identity to the entire metropolitan region, and urges for the incorporation of heritage enhancement in urban planning as a necessary condition for the city's sustainable growth.

The revision of Thessaloniki's Master Plan, which is about to be approved, provides for the much-expected opportunity for the city to advance in that direction. During the analysis stage a complete index of heritage premises – listed or not – was established, and their dispersion both in the urban centre and on the metropolitan regional scale was mapped (*Fig. 14*).

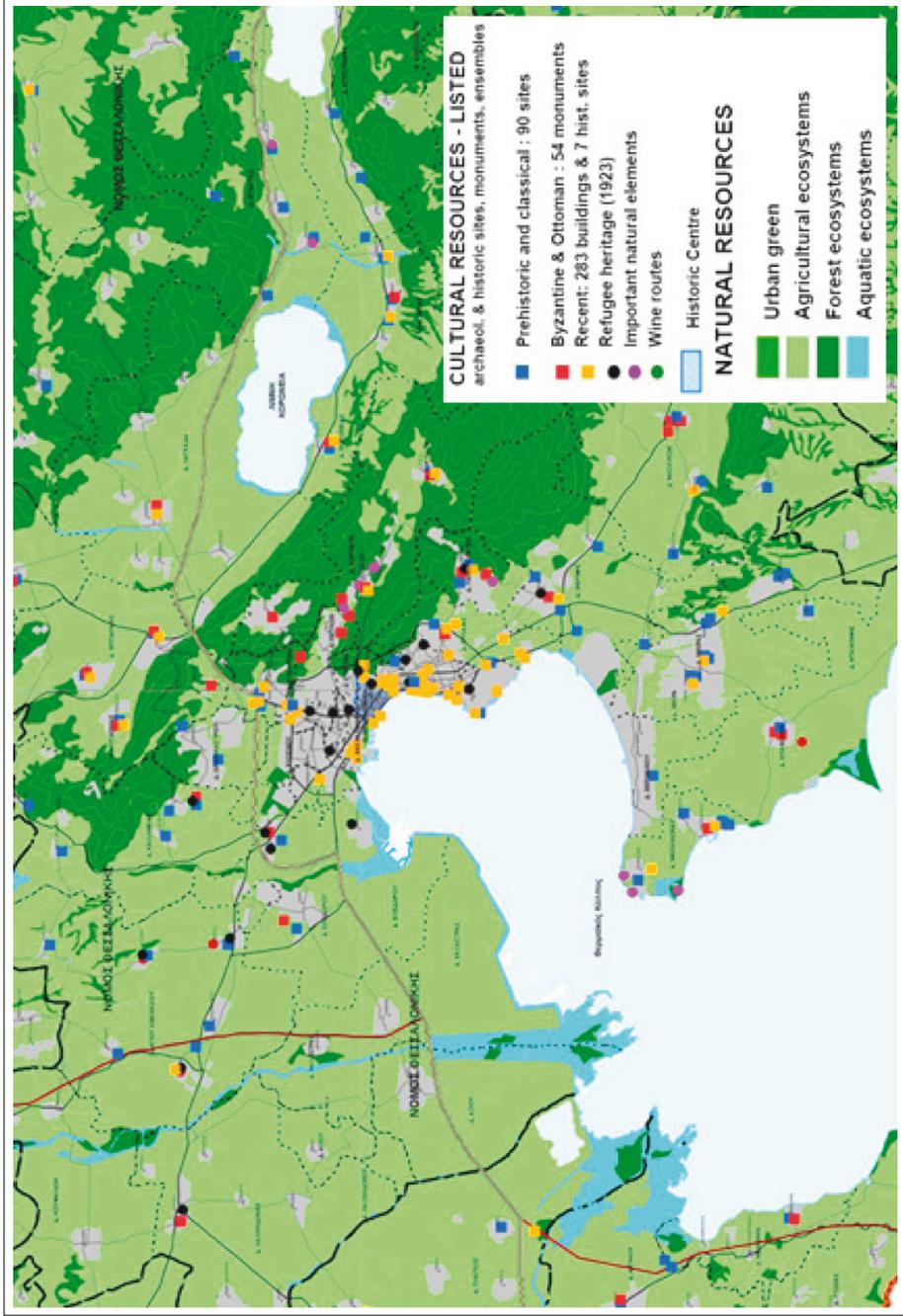


Fig. 14
Heritage in the metropolitan area of Thessaloniki (Revision of Thessaloniki's Master Plan 2009).

This map presents the geographical location of the cultural resources and adjacent natural ones, each colour corresponding to a distinct historic circle in the city's evolution. The number of archaeological sites is impressive – 90 in total out of which 7 within the city and 69 prehistoric or classical habitation sites. The historic centre remains the major cultural feature of Thessaloniki and the place that concentrates a dense and multi-layered heritage. In spite of the intentional or accidental elimination of urban heritage throughout the 20th century, the study revealed an important number of archaeological sites, monuments and historic buildings in and around the city centre. The proposed plan not only identifies protected monuments and sites but goes one step further to integrate them in their unique broader man-made landscape where these have survived to the present. Their valorisation is currently coming upon unfavourable conditions: over-dense urban fabric, heavy vehicular traffic, ineffective control of land uses, insufficient public spaces, lack of overall heritage management plans etc. For this reason, heritage is to be enhanced and integrated in contemporary life by means of restoration works as well as by being included in extensive schemes of cultural routes and thematic networks that link sites, monuments, eco-museums and cultural landscapes to local development. New centralities are put together in the peripheral districts, conferring an identity on amorphous urban and peri-urban settings and fostering an active participation of the citizens in heritage values. Thus, the proposal seeks to claim a double difficult and challenging target: to ameliorate the spatial context in which heritage is located and at the same time improve the quality of life by reactivating the history of the city and its surroundings in the prospect of a sustainable development.

To illustrate this point, the special case of «west arc» can be referred to, which had also been the object of the EUROPLAN competition for the year 1997. The case concerns the activation of cultural heritage resources available in the Western districts of the city in order to improve urban living conditions. The defined area contains multiple heritage layers (mostly not classified) dating from various eras, such as prehistoric sites, old cemeteries, French convents, large barracks of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several 1960s disused tobacco warehouses, torrents and plantations, remains of railways etc., in a deplorable state of abandonment (*Fig. 15*).

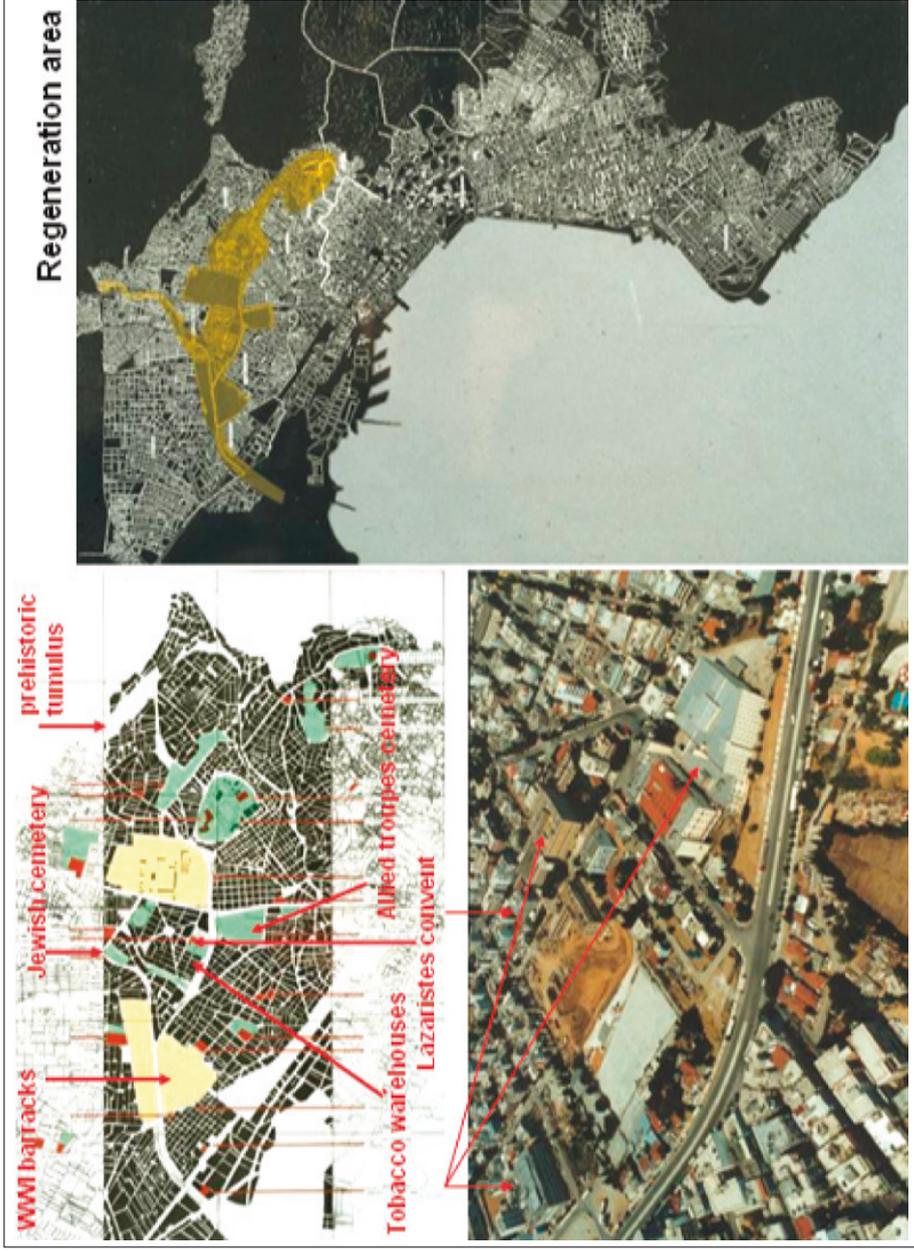


Fig. 15
 Heritage and rehabilitation of western urban quarters.

The means to enhance and concurrently develop and regenerate this area are multiple: e.g. creating strong points of identity in the amorphous urban landscape of the Western districts; endowing it with necessary public spaces; providing the missing cultural and social equipment. These objectives when implemented in a physical space could counterbalance the mono-centrality of the historic nucleus of Thessaloniki and contribute to an improved functioning of the urban agglomeration as a whole.

In conclusion, Thessaloniki, a city of long history, was unfortunate enough to see its heritage swept off in the 20th century due to natural disasters and above all to an uncritical post-war stance favouring the modern planning options. Since 1990 the city has attempted to attract a greater number of tourists by promoting its cultural resources and taking over the organization of a series of international events. Yet today tourists are still sparse in the city. Learning from the experience of other cities Thessaloniki goes one step further to be prepared to welcome a bigger tourist wave. It seems that there is a considerable chance of resuming from the negative effects of tourism by fostering a combined policy of heritage enhancement and improvement of life for its citizens in a sustainable development perspective.

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RIASSUNTO

Questa relazione tratta di alcuni temi chiave che riguardano la tutela del patrimonio urbano, il turismo e la pianificazione della città di Salonicco in Grecia. Viene delineato il patrimonio di una città in cui le stratificazioni culturali riflettono le diverse civiltà succedutesi, ognuna delle quali ha lasciato il suo segno particolare sul paesaggio urbano; viene messo in evidenza il rapporto tra il patrimonio culturale e il volto moderno della città nonché la sua pianificazione urbana, e viene documentata la recente svolta verso la salvaguardia della memoria nel rafforzare la fisionomia storica della città; vengono esposti gli effetti positivi del turismo sul patrimonio culturale e sulla qualità della vita; infine, viene illustrato il tentativo attuale di integrare il rafforzamento del patrimonio nei nuovi orientamenti della pianificazione per migliorare la qualità della vita.

