



Reconsidering urban development: the role of local self-organized groups in urban open green space upgrade.

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Abstract

In the city of Thessaloniki, the co-creation of ‘*an inclusive city*’, which will ‘*empower citizens and community-led projects... and enable co-creation in open and public spaces*’, appears as one of the four main goals of the Resilience Strategy of the city, ‘Thessaloniki 2030’, published in 2017. Within this frame, and in conjunction with the need of open green spaces that Thessaloniki has, this paper is an attempt to identify and highlight the contribution of design self-organized groups to the upgrade of the urban environment of the city of Thessaloniki. This study focuses on the design team of Ev Zin (Ευ Ζην), an initiative of a group of students from the School of Spatial Planning and Development, Faculty of Engineering, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. Aristotle’s University main campus occupies a large area within the city of Thessaloniki. This campus, particularly its various open spaces appear to be in a general degraded state, frequently used for delinquent activities. A group of students decided to act and to focus on the upgrade of the open green spaces of the campus, starting from a specific green space, situated at a focal point/crossroads within the campus. These students formed the Ev Zin group. This paper will be, hence, discussing the conditions that led to the degradation of the campus and the area around it, the formation of this team and its development, but more importantly the efforts of the Ev Zin group towards the upgrading of the campus, as well as the mobilization that these efforts have created, particularly concerning the principal formal stakeholders, mainly the Aristotle University’s authorities and the Attiko Metro authorities, the company constructing the underground stations at the university.

Keywords: self-organized groups; participatory spatial planning and design; urban design; urban upgrade; open green spaces; resilience; Ev Zin; university campus.

1. Introduction

Participatory urban planning and design throughout the last decades has produced results much discussed particularly in terms of social innovation and integration, and urban upgrade. In addition, it is perceived to be an integral part of planning and designing for Resilient Cities, as it is more than often noted that ‘*planning for resilient cities requires urban planners to go through a participatory process in plan making, plan adoption, plan*

implementation and governance' (Perera and bin Khailani, 2017, p. 201). In accordance, Thessaloniki's Resilience Strategy, 'Thessaloniki 2030', specifically notes as one of its objectives the '*co-creation of inclusive open spaces*' (Resilient Thessaloniki, 2017, p 59). Thessaloniki's Resilient Strategy also notes that the city has '*limited resources for urban regeneration investments, as well as a history of vandalism of public spaces*' (Resilient Thessaloniki, 2017, p 80) maintaining that '*community involvement in the planning and maintaining of public spaces is vital to ensure they are sustainable and fit for purpose*' (Resilient Thessaloniki, 2017, p 80). Among the open spaces that seem to be in dire need of an upgrade are the ones, mainly open green spaces, of the main campus of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, placed right at the heart of the city of Thessaloniki, covering an area of approximately 33.4 hectares (Facilities, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki). Occupying an area of significant size and located within the city, the campus appears to act simultaneously as an isolated island cutting the city in half, as well as a space that anyone may have access to, due to the limited confinement means used in combination with existing Greek laws. This results in the frequent use of the campus for delinquent activities and in the open green spaces being left in a degraded state. The City of Thessaloniki does not have an official jurisdiction to act on the problem, even though it is directly affected by this situation, and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki has limited means.

Participatory design processes, in which students were invited to participate, have been used before in terms of transforming and upgrading university campus spaces (Ching-Fen, 2005; Georgi et al., 2010), however not as many examples seem to exist where the students themselves initiated such design processes. In particular, concerning the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, a group of students from the School of Spatial Planning and Development, Faculty of Engineering, being the everyday users of the open green spaces of the campus, decided themselves to act against the continuous degradation of these spaces. They formed the self-organized group named Ev Zin (Eu Zην, meaning in Greek 'wellbeing'). This group decided to begin its actions by redesigning a specific open green space adjacent to the Faculty of Engineering. This paper will be making a short note on what caused the degraded state of the campus, the efforts and actions of the Ev Zin group, and how these actions have triggered the mobilization of both the Aristotle University Authorities and the Attiko Metro company currently constructing a metro station at the campus.

2. The main campus of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki within the turbulences of history

The history of the Modern Greek State seems to be a complicated one, full of ups and downs and convoluted eras. One of them that defined the future laws and ideologies concerning how to deal with access to the Greek state universities occurred in 1973, when the then junta regime (fallen in 1974) broke in with a tank through the entrance of a building of the National Technical University of Athens, which had been taken over by students in protest of the junta regime. The aftereffects of this event led later on in 1982 in the changing of the law concerning access to state universities' spaces. In this law in Chapter 2 and paragraph 4 it is noted that 'In order to ensure academic freedom, free scientific search and free movement of ideas, the University Asylum is recognized' (Government Gazette, 1982, p 677). Next, paragraph 5 explains what exactly this University Asylum entails 'The University Asylum covers all the premises of the Universities and consists of the prohibition of the intervention of public power in these areas without an invitation or permission by the responsible/relating body of the University'(Government Gazette, 1982, p 677). Paragraph 6, divided into 3 other sections, explains how this body, a committee, is formed. Although paragraph 7 essential notes that the police ('public power') is only allowed access without permission by the above said body if 'caught-committing felonies or caught-committing crimes against life' (Government Gazette, 1982, p 677) are seen taking place, in practice a certain obscurity prevailed concerning the subject, pertaining mainly to both political and accountability issues. There has been much

discussion on the matter and changes to this law have taken place only within the past approximately 11 years, but the ideologies pertaining to the University Asylum still prevail. Along with the University Asylum issues, are added ideologies concerning the openness to all, of the state universities, which in combination with the limited economic means of the universities, which the Greek Crisis accentuated significantly, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki main campus has been left in a degraded state for decades. The situation appears almost critical. In 2017 approximately 500 students send a letter to the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and the Rector of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, noting, among other, that *'delinquency, theft, drugs, prostitution and violence are now everyday life for those who spend most of their day in these places, especially in the area of the Faculty of Engineering'*, and that also *'from the simplest incidents - such as the constant presence of a large number of drug users in the premises of the University, such as at the faculty's cafeteria - to the serious ones, namely illicit trafficking of narcotics at the University's premises, and to the even more critical, such as the death of people within the University, all create a permanent sense of insecurity and fear among the entire academic community throughout the day'* (Lakasas, 2017; St. T., 2017).

All the above have resulted in the creation of a degraded space both security wise and spatially, right at the heart of the city of Thessaloniki, effecting, though, the whole city. Limited interventions have been implemented so far in order to tackle this issue. As such, a group of students from the School of Spatial Planning and Development, Faculty of Engineering, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, decided to act.

3. The Ev Zin (Eu Ζην) group and its actions

The formation of the Ev Zin group was initiated by students from the School of Spatial Planning and Development, Faculty of Engineering, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, with an interest in carrying out urban interventions and design initiatives in order to upgrade both the natural and built environment of the city, while working in a collaborative and interdisciplinary context, using a bottom-up approach in design. Part of this group is also Professor Eleni Papadopoulou, who initially encouraged and continuously supports the group, and postdoctoral researcher and architect Athena Christina Syrakoy, who acts both as a consultant and as an active member of the group, as well as a number of students from other schools of the university on a rather part time basis. This group was formed from scratch, and therefore great effort was also given to its organization as a team in order to effectively work towards implementing design initiatives and actions.

Considering the problems that the main campus of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki faces, as explained above in summary, the group decided to act in an attempt to eventually transform the campus into an environmentally friendlier, safer and more usable space. The group decided to focus on a specific rather neglected central area, an open green space adjacent to the Faculty of Engineering and just below the AHEPA Hospital within the campus. This space rests on a central location in the university campus, and has a strong physical character due to its large number of trees, which could be used as an advantage for the design of the area, particularly in terms of environmental concerns.

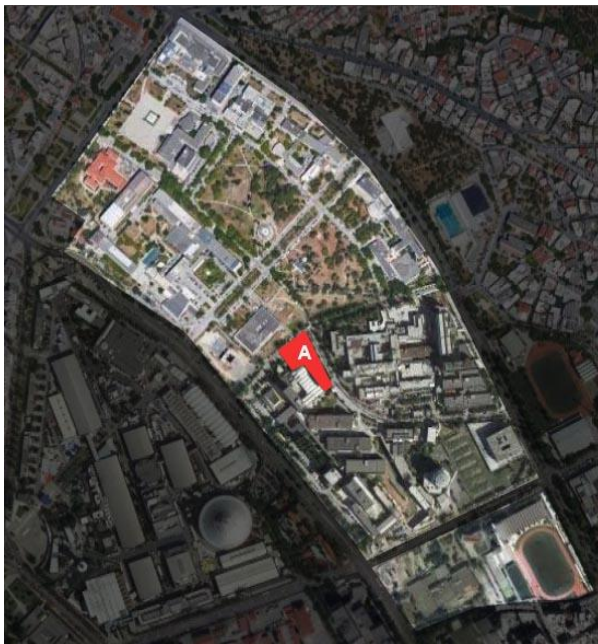


Figure 1. The main campus of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Marked with red colour and the letter A is the open green space that the Ev Zin Group decided to focus on.

The team focused on transforming this space so that students, teachers and professors, visitors of the campus and the hospital, and any other social group, could use it. Hence, the functions on the site will vary from relaxation, to creative dialogues and exchange of ideas, studying, a number of leisure activities (such as festivals, events, and cinema nights), etc. Equally important was the connection of the site to other points of attraction within and outside the university campus: the Central University Library, the AHEPA hospital, the Aristotle University's Sports Center, the National Swimming Pool and Thessaloniki's International Fair. By connecting the site with all these places of attraction in and around the main campus, as well as by providing viable and sustainable opportunities for the use of the site by different groups, this main university campus can finally start to take its place within the city of Thessaloniki as an integral part of it.

Due to the dense vegetation of the site in addition to its degraded state, delinquent activities have been recorded on a regular basis. Attempts are made to transform it from a dark and neglected site into a brighter space that will be available and safe for use at any time during the day and night. A successful installation of a light system appears imperative, in addition to the designing of spaces where a number of events can take place while triggering opportunities for various uses, to the creation of infrastructure for people with special needs, and to the suitable use of vegetation that will not block views of the site; all these could potentially transform the site into a vibrant and safe urban space.

The Ev Zin group begun with the analysis of the site and was divided initially into four subgroups who worked on different aspects of the project, namely on the vegetation, the land uses, the landscape space-making and the mobility related issues. Different maps and drawings were created as a result of this work, such as vegetation maps, mobility maps, analysis drawings, diagrams, and also 3D images depicting the site. All these were taken into account and resulted in a preliminary proposal concerning the site.

By having a preliminary proposal on hand, the Ev Zin group begun to search for related stakeholders in order to initiate a dialogue on the matter and assist with the implementation of the design. The authorities of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki were certainly one of them, of course, but interestingly another stakeholder also showed its support. The Attiko Metro has been responsible for the construction of the subway in Thessaloniki since 2003, while construction begun in 2006 [History (of Thessaloniki Metro)]. Following considerable delays, Thessaloniki's metro is still under construction today. The Thessaloniki Metro passes through the main campus and also one of its stations will be at the campus [History (of Thessaloniki Metro)]. That means that the campus has been affected by the construction of the metro all those years, and also that the metro would potentially benefit from an upgrade of the campus. As expected, the Attiko Metro was more than willing to welcome and discuss with the Ev Zin group the preliminary design proposal of the site. In fact, Attiko Metro seemed keen on financing it in order to be constructed. Hence, next stop for the Ev Zin group was to work with the technical department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in order for the design to be finalized and the drawings ready for construction. This has been a considerable learning experience for the students, getting to know what drawings are expected in order to construct such a design, what are the required procedures, etc, which has resulted in the creation of several draft drawings during the different stages reaching to the finalized proposal (such as the preliminary proposal drawing presented as part of a poster introducing the Ev Zin project at the 2017 ACMASS conference, in Osaka, Japan). The employees at the technical department seem also more than willing to help implement this project.

At this moment the Ev Zin group is finalizing the proposal and its drawings, with the help of the technical department of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in order to present them at the Attiko Metro and continue with its implementation. Hopefully, by the time of the presentation of this paper at the RELAND conference in September 2018, more good news concerning the implementation of this project could be presented.

Despite, though, the above mentioned attempts of reaching out to these two major stakeholders concerning the main campus of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and collaborating with them, the Ev Zin group has also made efforts to approach the main body of users of the site, meaning the students. One example of such approach is the participation of the Ev Zin group to the 'Student Week' (Φοιτητική Εβδομάδα) of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, for which the Ev Zin group organized an event for students, inviting them to '*come so that we can give you a tour*' of the site, inviting them also to '*suggest ideas and solutions, and to learn to design all together*' (Student Week Programme, 2018, p 10).

In addition to giving opportunities to students to get involved, the Ev Zin group also took part in another university event called 'AUTH on Sundays', which opens up to the whole of the city, an open invite for all that want to take part to specific events organized by the different schools of the university and specific professors (Programme AUTH on Sundays, 2018, p 23). Professor Eleni Papadopoulou and the rest of the Ev Zin group organized the event, choosing a more child-friendly open green area at the Faculty of Engineering for families to come and get acquainted with the vegetation of the campus while providing the opportunity to plant some specific plants at given locations. This event was part of the participatory design process that the Ev Zin group has been practicing concerning the open green areas around the Faculty of Engineering. In this way, people outside the academic life, were given the opportunity to start to get acquainted with the campus and to actively participate to this process, and hence slowly but steadily the Ev Zin group re-introduces the campus to the city.

All the above actions of the Ev Zin group have attracted attention. The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki invites and includes the Ev Zin group to its events concerning efforts to open up to the city, as it did, for example, at the event 'AUTH in the city' in 2017, which took place at the most prominent plaza of Thessaloniki, Aristotelous Square (AUTH in the city 2017). Furthermore, the Ev Zin group has also attracted the attention of the local and nation-wide

media such as ERT 3, a nation-wide tv channel based in Thessaloniki where the group and its pilot actions were presented (ERT 3 - ERT webtv, 2017, video time starting from: 1:10:35).

4. Conclusion

The main campus of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki right at the center of the city of Thessaloniki, particularly its open green spaces seem to be in need of an upgrade. Their degraded state appears to be a result of decades of convoluted circumstances that have left them in a dire situation, as attested by the students themselves. Delinquent activities are recorded as part of everyday life at the campus and the state in which the open spaces are, all create a rather dim picture. Attempts to upgrade university campuses particularly while using participatory design processes regarding open green areas are not uncommon in Greek universities mainly as part of educational practices. One such attempt was made at a Democritus University campus in Komotini, which is, however, situated outside the city among fields and therefore might not have similar issues as a university campus placed at a city center might have, such as the main campus of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. In addition, as it is noted '*the School of Landscape Architecture (TEI Kavala, Greece) decided to have students design a landscape for the campus of the Democritus University in Komotini*' (Georgi et al., 2010, p 868), which indicates a more top-down design approach. In contrast and in an act of a bottom-up approach towards resiliency, a self-organized group formed by students from the School of Spatial Planning and Development, Faculty of Engineering, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki decided to act towards the upgrade of their own university's main campus.

The Ev Zin group has managed to bring together most of the stakeholders involved, meaning mainly the students, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki's authorities, the Attiko Metro authorities, and has additionally attempted to open up to the general population of the city of Thessaloniki. Hence, a small self-organized group formed by students, has taken great steps towards a resilience approach to re-designing and eventually transforming the main campus of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, hence also influencing the rest of the city of Thessaloniki. It has been so far an arduous journey, but the Ev Zin group persistently continues. The following years will be crucial in determining whether the Ev Zin group efforts will evolve and develop in such a way that will in essence leave a definite mark to the rest of the city of Thessaloniki.

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