

URBAN PLANNING PROJECTS AND REGENERATION STUDIES: AN EXAMPLE OF A GREEK CITY: LARISSA (1974-2008)

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ABSTRACT

The city of Larissa in Greece has an important role in national and regional level. For the past 3 decades, the image of the city has considerably altered. A series of proposals concerning the regulation of urban space and the realisation of their objectives contributed to this. These proposals are made either through studies on urban level or through specialised studies with special arrangements during 1974 – 2002.

The Master Plan of Larissa (1972-74), the General Development Plan (1982-86), the Study on the regeneration of the historic centre of the city and the wider region of the river Pinios (1988-91), the Traffic and Transportation Study (1989-91) are considered to be the most significant studies that have taken place. Specifically the study on the reformation of the historic centre has led to the creation of an extensive pedestrian network in the centre of the city and as a result came a particular function of the centre, concerning the mode of transportation and the configuration of land uses in the city centre.

The presentation is about the main spots of these studies and their relationship. Through bibliographical research and discussions with leaders of the studies and people who have contributed to or affected by their implementation it is concluded that there were conflicting views but the need for urban planning with a social character and the completion of the objectives through sustainable development seemed urgent.

The implementation of the proposals has upgraded the quality of life of residents. Several needs and problems aroused trying to reverse this progress. The road to the future creates different data, which must be addressed with proper planning and proper implementation of the proposals. Larissa is a typical Greek city through which are projected the main stages of urban planning in the Greek state after the dictatorship (1970s), outlining deficiencies and breakthroughs when the need for alteration is urgent.

1. Introduction: Larissa: Basic characteristics – History – Settlement evolution

The city of Larissa is the capital of the prefecture of Larissa, in the centre of Greece. It is the fifth largest urban centre in the country with a population of 131,095 inhabitants and an area of 16,000 acres and one of the most dynamic urban, industrial, transportation and agricultural centres in Greece. The city is located on the highway that links Athens to Thessaloniki, in the centre of the eastern part of the fertile plain of Thessaly, near river Pinios. Larissa is a flat city with a very low hill with the old castle.

The history of the city counts more than four millennia. Built in succession in the same position, Larissa played a strategic role due to its geographical position. There are findings that reveal the presence of humans in the Paleolithic era around the beds of Pinios. The hill is originally populated in 3,000 BC and Larissa is in its heyday in the Hellenistic period, which is testified by the majority of monuments and the large perimeter of the city. In 1423 the Ottomans conquered the city and during the Ottoman domination Larissa was renamed “Yeni Shehir” (“New City”) and becomes a powerful military and administrative centre. During this period the city is widely reconstructed. Dozens of mosques and public buildings are erected. Larissa is characterized as a typical Turkish city of the 17th century, wide in coverage and vital in motion.¹

The first city plan is drawn in 1882, after the liberation and a major fire which destroyed the centre. This plan regulates the development of Larissa of 20,000 residents.² The same plan was applied for the coming expansion of the population to 60.000, 70.000 and 80.000 residents with the installation of thousands of refugees from Pontos and Asia Minor in the early 1920's. Larissa is constantly expanding. The German Occupation and the Civil War (1940-1951) hamper this expansion, which resumed stronger during the 1950s, with illegal, unauthorized building. These extensions led to more than double the area of the city, which until the 1970s grew into the perimeter dyke.

The high population growth of Larissa during the next decades (1961: 56010, 1981: 102426) led to further extensions of the city performed in the absence of any urban planning until the 1970s and especially the 1980s. It is characteristic that in the mid-80s, 60% of built area came from illegal construction, which was included in the city plan in 1989.

Larissa shall be organized in urban and regional planning in 1974 with the drafting of the first Master Plan for the city. Since then a series of proposals through approved urban

regeneration projects and specialized studies introduced Larissa in the 21st century with a completely different image.

2. Projects of Urban Planning Organisation and Regeneration of the Historic Centre of Larissa

2.1. Master Plan and Urban Plan of Larissa / 1972-74

During the dictatorship, a so-called “second generation” of regulatory plans was implemented. This followed the “first generation” of regional and regulatory studies, which started in 1963 and included planning studies of a substantial part of Greece. The “second generation” master plans took place after 1970 for 15 Greek cities. In this generation occurs the first Master Plan of Larissa.

In 1971 Larissa had a population of 72,760 residents and was projected as a city of potential because of its strategic position, its role as urban-industrial centre and its then transformation into a powerful commercial centre. At that time the population of the city started to increase due to the combination of natural increase of population and the immigration trends.

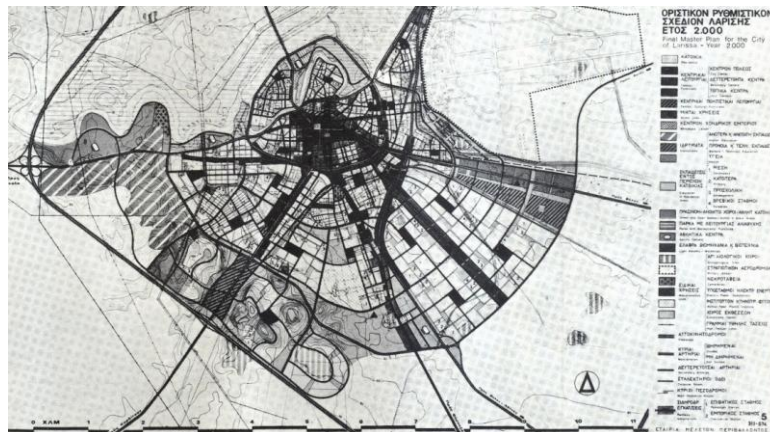


Image 1: Master Plan and Urban Plan of Larissa for the year 2000

The problems were due to complete lack of preparation to accept the influx of domestic migrants resulting in uncontrolled and unplanned expansion and to the fact that strong barriers, such as the river, inhibited the development of the city. The problems focused on the fact that postwar extension of the city was illegal. It is characteristic that in 1973 1200 hectares covered the main town and only 480 hectares of them corresponded to the approved urban plan since 1947. The remaining areas, especially areas that developed radially around the initial city of 1947, were developed out of the city plan with all the consequences

associated with such a development. Additionally, technical and social infrastructure were inadequate, meaning that the transportation and drainage network served only the centre of the city and even led directly to the river Pinios. Furthermore, green spaces and sports centres accounted for just 1.10m² per person; there was lack of school facilities, cultural, health and welfare institutions. Industrial units caused problems of various kinds (waste disposal, air pollution, sound pollution). Finally, the wide floodplain of the river to the north, the airport to the northeast, the railway to the southeast and military camps to the southwest were regarded as barriers to the extension and operation of the city. The main objectives of this study were to transform Larissa into a major regional centre, to get rid of the aforementioned “barriers” of development and to create a hierarchical network of local centres.

The key proposals were the distribution of industries in the area of the dipole Larissa - Volos creating three industrial districts, the organization of a network of major highways through the creation of two rings around the city of Larissa, the realignment of the railway line Athens - Thessaloniki bypassing the city eastward to follow the new highway Athens - Thessaloniki and the main axes of extension of the settlements, primarily to the south and secondarily to the southwest, through which the city could be divided into three major areas of 80,000 inhabitants each.³

The Master Plan of Larissa was the first to be promoted in Greece but the relative law was not finally signed. The most likely reason back then in 1975 was the new consideration of the administration in regulatory projects, namely that they should not be institutionalized in order not to cause commitments, but to remain an advisory body to the state. After almost a decade a new plan organizing and regulating the urban space of Larissa was drafted and implemented.

2.2 General Development Plan of Larissa – Operation “Urban Reconstruction”/ 1982-86

During the 1980s the issues of the Greek residential area were sharper compared to those of other European countries. The Minister of Housing, Planning and Environment Antonis Tritsis identified this serious developmental problem that had emerged in the country and introduced the Operation “Urban Reconstruction”. The OUR became the starting point and foundation for the emergence of small, medium and larger cities, and local urban networks at a provincial and prefecture level. The role of this venture was very important because before that no Greek city held an institutionalized General Development Plan, 50% of the residential

areas of cities were illegal and by 1983 there was no city for which the total residential web was reflected in an overall map - topographical chart.

The city of Larissa was introduced in the OUR with the implementation of the first General Development Plan and the subsequent Urban Study of Extension and Revision of the city plan. The studies were delivered in 1986 and 1989 respectively and became a key tool for the development of the city. The study of the GDP was carried out by the same company that was responsible for the Master Plan of the city in 1972.

Larissa at the time was a typical Greek urban - industrial centre developed without specific urban regulations. While redesigning the settlement, the GDP - which was realised between 1982 and 1984 - identified certain problems and made proposals for the wider urban area. The main issues of the settlement were spatial – operational, transportation and environmental.

The core of the settlement in the southeast region of the castle held the characteristics of central functions of high density and linear centres along the street arteries that did not meet the needs of the residential area. Industrial facilities were located on main roads and were scattered in the urban network. The wholesale and the vegetable market were situated in the historic centre while four military camps were found in the densely built web of the city. The transportation problems included the railway line that crossed the village, forming a continuous barrier, and the highway linking Athens to Thessaloniki, the two major urban centres of the country causing similar problems. Also, the management of transportation network within the city was poor resulting to intense traffic problems. As for environmental issues, there was found that river Pinios was detached from the city and the functioning of the military airport, highway and railway caused considerable noise.

The basic organization of the city's proposed Preliminary Development Plan (urban units, major centre and local centres, road network, etc.) slightly differed from the proposals of the Master Plan of 1974. The difference was due to the fact that the Preliminary Development Plan referred to the next five years and thus had to accept that some parts of the city that created serious commitments to the organization (rail facilities, military camps, etc.) could not be transferred during the next decade.

Thus, it was considered necessary to complete the arterial road network and the network of collector roads so as to link harmoniously the neighborhoods to each other and to the centre. The arterial road network and collector roads would serve the districts and the neighborhoods respectively, so that traffic could be confined to the boundaries and not cross the urban modules.

The realized GDP attempted to reorganize the spatial – functional structure of the settlement. A system of three sectors was arranged: the central sector, defined by an inner ring on the perimeter dyke; the southern sector, defined by boundaries of roads to Farsala, Trikala and the region around river Pinios; and the eastern sector, defined by the highway and Parapinio. Additionally for the first time in Greek urban planning, a subsystem of urban planning modules was proposed to be connected organically with a pedestrian network with certain activities (commercial, social, cultural, etc.).

In relation to the major problems of the city, the GDP got some key positions. It proposed the gradual transfer or change of use of the military facilities. The city would be bypassed from the east with a new railway line and a highway connecting Athens and Thessaloniki. At the same time a new wholesale centre and vegetable market were proposed, outside the boundaries of the contemporary settlement. Regarding the environmental upgrade, the GDP suggested the organic integration of Pinios in the settlement, the assurance of a steady flow on the old riverbank and the regeneration along the riverside that faces the city through a special study. Emphasis was placed on projects for cultural upgrade of the historic centre, with the regeneration of the area of the historic castle, the enhancement of cultural heritage, the integration and unification of green space and the removal of incompatible uses in the area. Finally, with regard to the transportation system and parking issues, the GDP proposed a special study.⁴

2.2. Urban Study of Extension and Revision of City Plan / 1983-89

The Urban Study of Extension and Revision of City Plan also set the following objectives: the abolition of the dichotomy between the urban centre and its regional space, the abolition and reform of specialised parts of the settlement and the maintenance of the historic centre in a specific form. To achieve the above objectives, a series of interventions were proposed in characteristic places so as to create four multifunctional interward knots. These were placed along a multifunctional axis in its largest segment, parallel to the railway. This axis would eliminate the dichotomy between the urban centre and its regional space. The interward centres would loosen the functionally saturated centre of the city while they would cover uses or district-level functions.

For the urban centre of the city the USERCP proposed increase in housing, reorganisation and re-assessment of land uses, elimination of traffic and enhancement of public transportation and creation of pedestrian zones. On the area of the historic castle, the USERCP proposed the removal of the wholesale and vegetable market and the integration of

the region into the current shopping centre. It was also featured as a special area of study and as an area of social activities, thus giving new developmental opportunities.

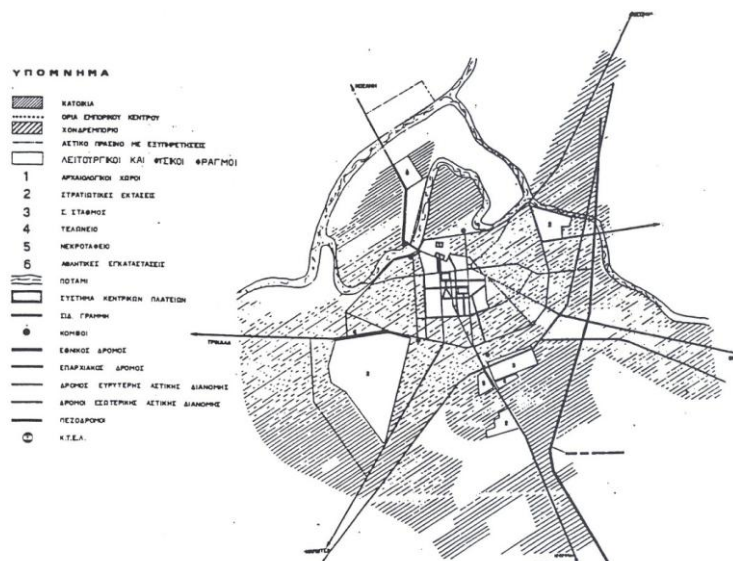


Image 2: General Development Plan of Larissa and Urban Study of Extension and Revision of City Plan

The most interesting part regarding the USERCP was the climate in which it was dealt and its main objective which was social. Back then there was no special expertise in urban planning studies in Greece and the logic of most urban studies were numerical, with no social direction. The General Development Plan, which was carried out by a different team than that of the USERCP was sent for approval. USERCP's proposals were different from the requirements of the GDP and were crystallized in the interward centres and the organization of the centre of the city. After several oppositions, the Urban Study was approved by the Ministry and the GDP was adjusted based on the USERCP while the reverse procedure was the proper one.

The fact that this study projected and promoted a specific vision of spatial organization contrary to the trivial urban planning methods of Greek cities and especially the fact that it was finally applied was considered important. It also laid the foundations and foreshadowed the development of specialised studies of urban design for Larissa and their subsequent implementation resulting in the reorganisation and upgrade of the city.

2.3. Regeneration of the Historic Centre of Larissa and the Wider Area of the river Pinios / 1988-91

The urban study “Regeneration of the Historic Centre of Larissa and the Wider Area of the river Pinios” was required from the final GDP to reorganise the city centre and to comply with the standards of the GDP. The study was commissioned to the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 1988 as a research project to redesign the historic heart of the city. A primary objective was the reconstruction of the lost historical character and the restoration of collective historical memory for the spatial identity of the entire urban area. This was pursued because in Larissa there had been gradual removal of housing in the past from the centre of the city which turned into a degraded area of office, warehouses, etc., also dragging the region to a quality downhill. Consequently, one of the measures that should be taken was to bring back housing in the centre so as to improve the standard of living.⁵

The general urban plan adopted had set specific targets which would be implemented through 3 interventions in certain areas of the city. These objectives included the following: definition of the historic core of the city, functional rehabilitation and emergence of the historic core of the city, registration, evaluation and assessment of the historic buildings, traffic improvement of the historic core, reorganization of the region near river Pinios and consolidation of network infrastructure in the historic heart of the city.

The first intervention in the region of the old castle included the removal of the vegetable market and the reorganisation of space, the development of the archaeological site and its integration in the urban network in conjunction with a park maintaining housing as a primary use and introducing new uses, particularly cultural and social. In parallel, the circulatory system was regulated and a pedestrian network was suggested. This network aimed at the regeneration of the built environment, linking residential areas with large green open space.

The pedestrian zone proposed for the centre was to connect the two main poles of development of the settlement; culture and trade. The selection of roads to form the pedestrian zone came as a result from a special study and the cooperation with the group of transportation study. At the same time, specific objectives linked harmoniously with the purpose of the intervention, such as analysis of the existing road network, definition of the prioritization and traffic management in connection with the proposed pedestrian zone, reduction of traffic congestion and environmental pollution in the centre of the settlement, discouragement of car usage downtown and partial implementation of the pedestrianisation program.

The third proposed intervention referred to the area around river Pinios. The design proposals on the riverbank give life to a neglected area and try to connect this region with the historic centre. The proposals mark out the natural element, regulate the water flow and the

riverbanks are converted into parks including recreational activities. At the same time, a network of green spaces was designed to link different areas of the city passing by parks, squares and pedestrian streets.⁶

2.4. General Transportation and Traffic Study of Larissa / 1989-91

Along with the urban research of the Aristotle University, in 1988 the Ministry of Housing, Planning and Environment commissioned the “General Transportation and Traffic Study of Larissa”. The simultaneous elaboration of the studies and the collaboration of the teams turned out to be effective for Larissa since they had the common intention to improve the quality of life, to reorganise the central region and the whole city and to reconstitute the elements that designate the city’s figure. The purpose of this study was the organisation and the proper hierarchy of road network to tackle traffic issues and to improve public transport routes and parking conditions.

The studies’ proposals encountered traffic issues of the city giving way to the lack of public communal spaces in the central region. Road network was organised in a hierarchy of major arteries, secondary arteries, collector roads and local streets. Also, the pedestrian network was studied in accordance with the findings and recommendations from the study of Aristotle University to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution in the wider central region and to encourage free pedestrian movement. There were specific suggestions for possible ways of parking and creation of new parking spaces. Furthermore it was necessary to promote urban public transport in order to improve services and create new lines to serve areas with no bus access. There was also a study for cycle paths because of the suitable flat land area. Larissa had a tradition of cycling in past times. Survey showed that only 4.5% of total daily movements were made by bicycle, while 60% of respondents said that they would use it if easy and safe circulation was ensured.⁷ The central pedestrian area was already the basis of an adequate network of cycle paths.

3. Implementation

In the 1980s Larissa was facing a variety of problems. Among them were the intense traffic congestion in the central area, the lack of reference to the historic city centre and the poor quality of life. The main problems were encountered by the analysis of the elaborated plans through which solutions were proposed to reorganise the city. In response to the existing specialised studies in 1989 the construction of the first parts of the pedestrian zone around the city of Larissa began. The initial intention had been to encounter the severe traffic problems

before even the traffic study was delivered. It was the first time a central area of this size was pedestrianised in Greece in context of a comprehensive pedestrian study together with the attempt to solve the traffic problem and restore the identity of the centre. Along with the construction of the first pedestrian streets, parking places were created within the limits of the central area to meet augmented parking needs by the conversion of roads into pedestrian streets.

This concluded to the pedestrianisation of the centre, an area of around 200 acres, comprising 25 blocks and three central squares. The area is crossed by a single road, back then not facing serious traffic problems. Particularly positive were the effects from the pedestrianisation around a central square (Ethnarxou Makariou) which established itself as the most vibrant in the city and perhaps in Greece, due to the numerous cafes. At the same time in neighborhoods with little traffic a network of cycle paths began to implement.

The early results were positive. Residents on the pedestrian streets were satisfied because of the elimination of noise and air pollution and the insurance of communal space. Shopkeepers were also pleased because of the sharp turnover increase and improved working conditions. Citizens and visitors circulated in the city centre on foot in an elegant environment. Traffic was channeled into fewer arteries. Eventually drivers' habits changed choosing alternative routes, possibly longer but shorter in time, since driving was easier after the pedestrianisation. Moreover, many chose to move on foot for short distances in the centre of the city.

However, problems and malfunctions arose. Because of the growth in ownership of private cars and the increase in illegal parking which is still a problematic issue, there was not a regular flow of car traffic on major arteries, especially during peak hours. The demand for off-road parking space was excessive. Additionally the land value rose sharply in the pedestrian zone. One of the most serious problems was the creation of numerous leisure stores, such as cafés, bars, fast-food, which altered the desired image and mix of uses in the central area. The tendency to over-exploit the supplied area in pedestrian streets for placing tables and chairs for the cafés was and still remains a commonplace.

In the following years until 2005 the majority of the urban research proposals for the centre's regeneration were implemented. These included: complete radical reform of the central squares; restoration of the historic hill with the castle along with the removal of the Vegetable Market, pedestrianisation of the area, restoration of historic buildings, emergence of the historical identity of the region, revelation of the largest Ancient Theatre from the Hellenistic period; regeneration of the Square Laou while constructing an underground

parking space and revealing parts of the eastern ancient walls of the city; construction of the necessary parking lots; implementation of the new transportation network; development of the river Pinios environmentally improved and integrated in the city; completion of the pedestrian zone as proposed in the urban program resulting in pedestrian streets of total length around 10km. This renders Larissa the first city in Greece with such a lengthy pedestrian zone.



Image 3: Pedestrian street Venizelou

4. Evaluation

Since 1974 Larissa has been supplied with a series of proposals regulating urban space. These studies suggested a specific residential structure adopted by individual special studies. Specific studies and especially the study for the “Regeneration of the Historic Centre of Larissa and the Wider Area of the river Pinios” proposed a city which until then has not existed in Greece. Larissa’s territory was appropriate for the implementation of the proposals and municipal authorities were willing and determined to implement the proposed measures.

Pedestrianisation of the historic centre which was completed by 95%, regeneration and integration of the central squares in the pedestrian zone, adjustment of the transportation network in the new regime, creation of parking lots and the role of architecture in the design, definition and formation of pedestrian streets enhanced the quality of life, strengthened the commercial, historic, social nature of the centre and discouraged car usage. Nowadays the city holds strong character, presenting its historic figure in a vibrant, modern city.

Problems are not absent. The establishment of a multitude of leisure stores such as restaurants or entertainment stores cause noise pollution and occupy public space. This altered the pursued image of the city centre. Land uses are incompatible with the historic character of

specific areas and phenomena such as car circulation on pedestrian streets and the intensity of traffic in recent years are becoming more frequent.

Larissa entered the 21st century with a radical image. The centre was reorganized, the quality of life was upgraded and the effort for sustainable methods of circulation was achieved. The result was positive in spite of the arousing problems. The city of Larissa is a pilot example for developing a sustainable city with certain characteristics in the city centre in Greece.

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NOTES

¹ Nakos & Ploupas, 2003

² Karadimou – Gerolimπου, 2003

³ Company of Environmental Studies, 1973

⁴ Company of Environment Studies and cooperators, 1985

⁵ Stathakopoulos, 1993

⁶ Stathakopoulos, 1993

⁷ Denco Company – Consultant Engineers, 1990