

Landscape design and planning of historic centers in contemporary Greek cities

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Abstract

Within the rapidly changing urban space of contemporary cities, historic centers, monumental complexes or isolated monuments are undergoing radical transformations in reference to their environmental context. The impacts of these changes relate to the location of the historic elements in the urban tissue, economic growth and prosperity, the use of space - indoor and outdoor -, scale and landscape character, environmental issues, as well as to the way they are perceived by the everyday users and tourists.

Through various examples of urban heritage, with emphasis on Greek city centers, the paper discusses these transformations, focusing on urban open space where major alterations, conflicts and contradictions are most visible. In contrast to the absolute preservation approaches and methods that have been applied in several cases during the last decades, often producing ‘sterilized’ spaces by implementing a museum-like strategy in their management, planning and landscape design, it is argued that the emergent conflicts would be best managed if seen as opportunities for creating new and contemporary urban environments, flexible enough to absorb the current or future changes generated by the modern way of living. In this context, flexibility, reversibility and innovation in landscape design and planning are crucial, as they affect not only the historic centers and monuments themselves, but the quality of urban space and everyday living within it as well.

Keywords: urban heritage, change, landscape design, flexibility, innovation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term “cultural landscape” was first mentioned by the cultural geographer C.O. Sauer with the statement that “culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium and the cultural landscape is the result”. The term was not used to describe a certain type of landscape but to define a new way of perception which would put significance at the interaction of the human factor and the natural element through time [1]. Cultural landscapes recount the history of man, events and places over time and comprise a visible manifestation of culture and history on the contemporary space and in present time. It's the background for the daily social activity and also a symbolic framework, a substructure for the imaginary [2]; it's the composite result of natural and human processes, which is being perceived and interpreted through conscious and spontaneous procedures [3].

Monuments and historic complexes found in environments where humans prevail over nature witness, with an obvious and comprehensible way, the historicity, sociability, uniqueness, dynamics and symbolism of urban cultural landscapes. As cultural heritage possesses an incontrovertible value, - whereas questioned for the contemporary urban landscape - a dominating tendency in planning and landscape design of urban monuments appears, which is indicated through the absolute protection of antiquities and the disunion of the contemporary surrounding space. The

design and planning issues concerning the urban cultural landscape emerge through the re-negotiation of the contradictory co-existence of the old (past) and new (present/future), the static and the changing, conservation and innovation [4].

Within the rapidly changing urban space of contemporary cities, historic centers, monumental complexes or isolated monuments are undergoing radical transformations in reference to their environmental context. The paper studies the impacts of urban transformation upon cultural heritage in order to approach the main issues of friction and conflict between them. As the 'new' cannot be adopted by the 'old' and the latter cannot be absorbed into the contemporary, which is continually transformed and changing, alternative ways are proposed in order to deal with the emergent conflicts, enhance both monuments and landscape and create original historic urban places, able to host the contemporary way of living.

2. LANDSCAPE IMPACTS OF URBAN HERITAGE

2.1 Location of historic elements in the urban fabric

Due to the rapid growth of contemporary cities since the beginning of 20th century, the traditional location of cultural monuments within the urban fabric has been completely altered. Phenomena such as the urban sprawl which causes the expansion of cities towards its periphery, often leads to their "relocation" within the city web, as well as to the fragmentation of the historic monumental complexes. Today, historic centers are not necessarily found in their prime location, such as the center of cities where they might have been first constructed; at the same time they may be fragmented into various smaller complexes or isolated monuments, scattered among the contemporary building infrastructure. Sometimes it is difficult to even locate them, as they are hidden between the high volumes of multi-storey buildings, in leftover spaces, or sunken in relation to their surroundings. Despite the recent efforts of scientific communities and the Greek municipalities during the last decades, to unify the urban historic monuments of the Greek cities, by creating the so-called Archaeological Walks in Athens and Thessaloniki, there is still a lot to be done until all urban monuments, not only the most popular ones, may be perceived in relation to their natural ensemble.

The expansion of cities is followed by the construction of all necessary infrastructures for a city to function, such as roads and highways, parking lots, bridges, subways etc. Large new constructions are being built in places where there was no provision beforehand, very often adjacent, underneath or above the urban antiquities. The works for the Metro construction through historical urban centers is a typical example. Although in many cases the issue has been dealt with success by incorporating the historic findings into the modern design of at least the Metro stations by integrating the old with the new, there are, even nowadays, certain interests that manage to block the opportunity of such integration. An example, for which extensive discussion is still in progress, is the recent Roman findings along Venizelou Street in Thessaloniki city center, which were revealed during the construction works for the Metro Station. It is of major importance that these antiquities are kept in place, as their character will be severely altered if relocated to a different place in the city. The relation between a monument and its landscape is always unique, as the latter is an integral part of the former [5], even if the surroundings have been transformed in time. Moreover, the fact that there are numerous other antiquities of the same period scattered around the same area, is a proof that the specific findings were and should remain part of their ensemble, in order to be fully comprehended by the visitors. In other words, a monument loses a lot of its value if seen detached from its surrounding landscape and the rest of its entity.

This fragmentation or "relocation" causes a number of impacts to the monuments and their surrounding open space, related to the use, scale, identity and landscape character, as well as to the perception of the urban monuments and the overall historic landscape.

2.2 Use of space

The main environmental impact on cultural heritage originates from the confrontation of the uses and functions of urban space which, depending on their expansion and intensity, might create new urban places, often unconnected, alienated or even degenerative to the historicity and particularity of the cultural landscape.

The enhancement of the historic monuments usually functions competitively to the modern uses of urban centers due to the considerable shortage of open spaces and the necessity to cover diverse requirements in addition to the exploitation of the available urban space (residence, trade, services, recreation, transportation and communication networks and, tourism). If the historic monuments and complexes are not integrated into a modern process of re-use then, they automatically enter into a situation of conflict with the everyday urban functions and neglect on behalf of the public, leading to the shrinkage of their vital area.

Often, modern human practices are implemented indifferent and ignorant to the cultural heritage. A typical example is the management of monuments as tourism products and the performance of tourist commercial activities in the cultural environment of urban centers on popular Greek islands and cities. Noisy recreation areas and blatant mercantile stores located one next to the other, under no preconditions of function in accordance to the historic character of the landscape, disorientate the visitors and, by downgrading the visiting experience, deprive them of the opportunity to perceive and appreciate the culture and uniqueness of the place. This unpleasant situation comprises a common picture on the popular islands of Crete and Rhodes as well as in the historic center of Athens.

Besides, the re-use of historic or listed buildings is a common practice the recent years in most European countries. Apart from the apparent changes on the facade of the building and indoors, the proposed uses affect the function, form and character of the surrounding open space. In some cases though, it is the prevailing use of open space that determines the new use of building, for example for buildings in the heart of historic centers which function primarily as high tourist destinations, attracting commerce, recreation and amusement. In both cases incompatible or extreme uses may occur.

The planning of monuments and historic complexes of the contemporary urban landscape ought to serve both the multi-usability and culturalism of the urban space, in order to preserve its vitality, together with provision of safety during the longest time possible. These cannot be achieved if the monuments are handled as discontinuities or voids in the urban fabric but could be tried out by applying procedures of active participation in the urban landscape. The urgency, the exuberance and the alterability of the urban practices are the main factors that differentiate the intensity of pressure exercised in the cultural environment and, therefore, determine the necessity for an integrated and sustainable planning of the urban cultural landscape.

2.3 Scale and landscape character

Most of the cultural heritage monuments within the urban centers were originally created in environments that, even at those historic periods, did not possess the characteristics of an urban landscape. This comprises a default condition of conflict between the physiognomy of the cultural monument and the temperament of the urban landscape.

Besides, both monuments and historic ensembles within the contemporary cities were created as integral and active members of an entirely different cultural context (urban, regional, agricultural, ritual landscape etc.) compared with the modern urban landscape in terms of morphology, scale, identity, characteristics, practices and function. The issue of landscape design and planning of historic centers in contemporary cities comprises an essential particularity in relation to other design and planning issues of public open spaces, because it deals with the coexistence and juxtaposition of two contradictory elements: the monument and the urban landscape [5].

The evolution of the contemporary capitals took place invasively by absorbing adjacent settlements,

agricultural and forest areas, as well as intensively by exploiting every available free urban space and applying vertical densification. This fact caused great impacts to the monuments and their surrounding open space as it radically altered the landscape character and scale of the urban environment. In the Greek city centers we usually find a plethora of historic sites and monuments that are alienated and marginalized within their contemporary environment due to the vast difference of scale and dimension and to the high building factors that apply to the new constructions.

Densely built urban environments have caused severe decrease of the open space proportion. As the open space that surrounds the urban cultural heritage is minimized, the scale of the monuments is dramatically changed. Their magnitude as well as their identity is downgraded when they neighbor compact building volumes that do not allow the user of the contemporary place to perceive and interpret the historicity and timelessness of the cultural landscape. Therefore, single monuments stay on unseen and indifferent to the users. Especially in the case of cultural ensembles, historic axes and monuments with a triumphant, monumental or testimonial character, the embrace and disruption by the contemporary densification deducts them from their historic and cultural identity.

2.4 Perception of the urban monuments and landscape design

As a consequence of all the above mentioned, the overall perception of the urban monuments, historic complexes or the surrounding landscape is under continuous transformation. Apart from the scale proportions in height, volume or land area between built and unbuilt as well as old and new structures, a basic characteristic of the contemporary urban landscape, that of mobility, affects the way passersby perceive historic features and their context altogether. The increased mobility, both in speed and frequency within contemporary urban centers, compels the study of the image in motion [6]. Thus, in the typical perceptual analysis, that precedes every landscape design proposal, it is necessary to include, together with the most advantageous view points, the views in motion along the most popular routes across a historic area, or approaches towards a historic place.

Moreover, the visual height and the moving velocity produce different images in sequence for the viewers. It is thus important to carry out a detailed perceptual analysis (visual, audial etc), in order to record the way the place of interest is perceived in motion through the eyes of a pedestrian, a man on a bicycle or from inside a vehicle or a bus. The exact location of a monument within the urban fabric is therefore crucial. It needs to be studied whether it stands in isolation - for example in the heart of a large green space such as a park, approached only by pedestrians - or in vicinity to highways, motorways, bus lanes and pedestrian paths, or to busy places of social activity and plazas, where static views are more common.

Another issue affecting a monument's perception is memory, either collective or subjective. Collective memory is shaped equally through the interaction of the monument and the urban landscape, as the historic, instructive role and diachronic value of the former counterbalance the contemporary urban landscape's ability to evolve as a means of multiple dynamics, shaping social practice [5]. What is most important though when dealing with memory in landscape design projects, is the fact that it is not static. On the contrary, it changes through time in a spiral way, as it is transformed every time it is being revealed, since it is coated with different views and meanings according to the viewer's personal experiences and aesthetics [6]. This means that individuals may perceive the historic place or monument in several ways, since forms, colors, symbols etc may be of different importance and have various meanings for individuals of different cultures and age. Therefore, in order to allow personal interpretations and perceptions at present or in the future, landscape interventions, similarly to architectural interventions, should ensure the optical differentiation between the existing and the new [3].

At the same time, modern societies of contemporary cities demand flexible places to live in, in

order to absorb their ever-changing present and future needs. Thus flexibility and reversibility in design are vital [3] while nostalgic imitations of past images, which produce sterilized spaces through a museum-like approach in their management, planning and design, should be avoided [7] [8], as they seem obsolete and incapable to host the contemporary way of living.

2.5 Economic growth and prosperity of historic ensembles

The economic growth and prosperity of historic centers is an issue which engages scientists and experts ever since the urban regeneration programs were conceived. For decades now, in the context of sustainability, the economic aspect has gained the attention of most parties involved in the development plans and is usually a guiding factor in policy decision making.

In general, the cultural and historic character of cities attracts tourism and recreational amenities. As a result, the enhancement and management of the monuments and their historic landscape are usually dictated by tourist demands. Urban heritage is then downgraded to a product for consumption out of which, economic benefit is the primary goal in management and planning strategies.

Among the consequences of mass tourism is the selective promotion and symbolization of certain features of a cultural landscape. As a result, certain places or specific monuments are projected on the basis of their «representativeness», authenticity, the «imperishable», the «genuine identity» etc. [9]. Within the context of relative management strategies and design methods, this targeted selection causes the idealization of certain cultural landscape features, while at the same time sets aside, and even relegates less popular aspects of heritage, such as memories, narratives, associations and practices, which are vital in the formation of an integrated image of the cultural landscape,. Diversity and variety of the urban cultural landscape are then minimized and sometimes completely lost.

Moreover, urban heritage attracts a certain type of visitors wishing to acquaint with the local history and perceive the particular sense of place within a very short time. If seen primarily as economic resources, the historic monuments are usually restricted to their embellishment, and managed as exhibits in a museum’s window case, failing to become part of the daily routine of city life. They are then rejected by the locals and sometimes even ignored.

In this context, historic centers are turned to single-use urban environments, where sightseeing, recreation, commerce and tourist activities are the most prominent, if not the only use of space. There are several examples of this type of urban heritage management and planning around the world. The examples of the historic Center of Rhodes and the “Ladadika” historic neighborhood in



Figure1. Restaurants, bars and tavernas are the main uses of both indoor and outdoor space.

Thessaloniki are typical.

Particularly in "Ladadika", the prevailing use is that of amusement, with restaurants, taverns, coffee shops and bars occupying the majority of the open space by placing benches, chairs and tables everywhere (Figure 1). Limited area is then left available for alternative outdoor activities to develop.

Moreover, the area is rather deserted during the day, whereas in the evening and night hours there is an increased clamor coming of adjacent shops imposed all over the area. As a consequence, in its present form the neighborhood serves solely as an indoor amusement destination, attracting certain ages and types of visitors, with priority to tourists, leaving open space potentialities, plazas and pedestrian networks underdeveloped for long periods during the day and week.

In any case, mixed uses within historic centers are promoted in the last decades in order to avoid single use of space, indoor and outdoor, which degrades and dooms open space to seasonal use with often short periods of intensive over-use followed by long periods of desertification. Apart from the promotion of mixed uses, landscape design could have a great input to the development of historic areas, such as the "Ladadika". The regeneration of the urban landscape through innovative and flexible design ideas, combined with the enhancement of the historic identity, would serve a double goal: first, the creation of vibrant and pleasant contemporary places for living, capable to absorb future challenges of the urban environment and, second, the support of prosperity and economic growth of the area by attracting open air social and cultural activities of the local society as well as the local economy. In other words, it would be actually transformed into a sustainable urban space, a historic place for a modern society.

2.6 Environmental issues: urban ecology and biodiversity

Monumental complexes and, mainly, archaeological sites and historic places create micro-environments with rare ecological dynamics as they occupy available urban open spaces, often completely undisturbed of any human activity of the urban daily routine. Archaeological sites in the contemporary urban centers turn out into islets, true arks of the biodiversity, as in their quiet environment the flora and the fauna of the region find shelter [10]. They comprise a Microcosm that lives in the splendor of its solitude, under its own arbitrary and constrained rules, where all human actions aim at the preservation of the building relics against the indigenous plants and animals that are confronted as enemies and all the necessary measures are taken in order to be dislodged and destroyed [11].

The surrounding area of the urban cultural heritage are less tailored than parks and gardens, man-made landscapes which comprise green spaces with a high rate of biodiversity, supporting the richness of the plants communities as well as the micro and avifauna of the region. They could be habitats of self-grown indigenous flora as well as shelters of planted native and endemic species. It is understood that these professional disciplines and administrative services that have the duty to protect and preserve the integrity of the archaeological remains, deal with the vegetation of the archaeological sites with skepticism and inevitably separate the plant species in harmful and useful. Apart from the obvious duty to protect the historic monuments from the enemies of their natural environment, this biotic environment comprises an integral part of the cultural landscape as it greatly contributes to its meaning and perceptual integration. Results of Greek and foreign research studies have indicated that the presence of every single species of the native flora reveals facts of historic events, economic and cultural activities of the inhabitants in the contemporary urban centers [12].

In the Greek cities, where the shortage of open spaces and the predominance of the hard surfaces have ostracized the biodiversity, various scientific studies and research programs have temporally recorded the abundant flora of archaeological sites and areas, evidence that sets cultural monuments as rare resources of ecological balance within the urban landscape. A similar role, to the increase of urban biodiversity, play the historic fortification Walls. Due to their extensive linear size and the

free zones that surround them as well as their age, the construction of the masonry and the low human impact, the Walls are covered by well developed vegetation [13], as it happens in the cases of the Roman-Byzantine Walls of Thessaloniki and the Arabic-Venetian Walls of the city of Iraklion.

In addition, the urban archeological sites on account of the implemented plantings could evolve in capable green sites that would participate in the overall network of the urban public open spaces (Figure 2).

Noteworthy, both in terms of an ecological aspect and the significant trust that they created for the development of Athens historic center, are the first systematic, large scale, projects of planning and designing archaeological areas, by using vegetation as a main tool. These are the project of planting in the Ancient Agora with a reproduction of the Classical years flora by the American School of Classical Studies, and the regeneration project for the hill of Acropolis and the surrounding hills of the Museum and the Nymphs, with the use of indigenous Mediterranean vegetation species in the mid of the 1950's, implemented by the architect Dimitris Pikionis [14].



Figure 2. Planting design could transform urban archaeological district into capable green sites (Grand Promenade Unifications of Athens Archaeological Sites)

3. CONCLUSIONS

In the times of a growing economic and cultural globalization of the international community and the loss of identity of the contemporary cities [15], the enhancement of urban heritage is of major importance. Existing historic monuments, as well as those which will possibly be revealed in the future, should be seriously taken into consideration in any landscape planning and design project. Therefore the role of management and planning of the urban landscape is crucial for the integration of urban heritage in the continuously changing urban landscape.

The absolute conservation of historic monuments, either single or large complexes, followed by the safeguarding of their boundaries for austere control even by excluding public access in certain cases, create solid, rigid masses within the urban environment, sometimes perceived as voids of the

urban landscape, completely alien to their surroundings. It seems that such areas are difficult to incorporate into the urban organism, both functionally and perceptually. Protection and respect of the historic character are mainly the motives for their isolation. It is suggested though, that these two absolutely basic and legitimate goals may easily be achieved if monuments and historic complexes are seen as integral parts of the city’s environment and the everyday city life, while the emergent conflicts from their co-existence with the urban changing environment would be best managed if seen as opportunities for creating new and creative contemporary urban environments.

To begin with, new landscape interventions need to ensure a balanced relation between the two, but in a way that their optical differentiation is distinct. In the context of creating sustainable urban environments, reversibility in space arrangement around the spatial traces of history could provide a certain degree of flexibility, enough to absorb the current or future transformations of the landscape, generated by the modern way of living. Besides, it is an imperative need to allow future generations to come into contact with their past, the freedom to give their own interpretations to history, and create their own places for living according to their needs and aspirations.

Moreover, innovation in construction methods and lighting, as well as the use of modern surfacing materials, combined with imaginative and creative design solutions around and within historic complexes would ensure their integration with the contemporary urban context, add to the value of the sights and increase their visiting rate, and therefore their economic growth and prosperity, and most of all, they would turn these traces of history more familiar and friendly to the contemporary citizens of the world.

In this context, creativity and innovation [7] [15] need to be included in landscape design, while the authentic properties and landscape character of the surroundings should be projected, together with the qualities of the historic elements [16]. Besides, landscape design proposals should aim equally to the enhancement of both the urban heritage and its surroundings, as all landscape projects are considered as projects of art and culture [17], as projects made by the society for the society itself [18].

In other words, it is suggested that the success of new design interventions is hidden in the development of a creative communication between modern man (present) and history (past) by avoiding imitation and by producing new and creative public open spaces designed for a contemporary society.

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