Creating Places

NEW YORK FINAL PHASE OF THE HIGH LINE, GOVERNORS ISLAND PARK
TORONTO SUGAR BEACH
ZURICH RENEWAL OF SECHSELAUTEN SQUARE
COPENHAGEN RENOVATION OF THE PEDESTRIAN AREA KØBMAGERGADE
RIBE, DANMARK CATHEDRAL SQUARE
MÄNTTÄ, FINLAND COSTA’S PAVILION
THESSALONIKI, GREECE GREEN ROOMS FOR THE WATERFRONT
PÓVOA DE SANTA IRIA, PORTUGAL TAGUS LINEAR PARK
PAMPLONA, SPAIN ARANZADI PARK
TOPOS AWARD 2014 LOLA LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS: A NEW ROMANTIC REVOLUTION
ALONG THE NEW WATERFRONT OF THESSALONIKI

The redesign of the seaport in the Greek city gives citizens the opportunity to enjoy the life-sustaining resources of water, sun and vegetation. A sequence of 13 thematic parks, or "green rooms", interpret the local context.

People walking, people biking, families having fun, kids running, dogs playing, teenagers skating, friends talking, young people jogging, couples sitting on the grass... Is this a new kind of scenery inspired by other European countries that have embraced outdoor public spaces, or just human needs triggered by the new design of the city’s seaport?

Thessaloniki is the second largest metropolitan area in Greece and the presence of the sea has always been an integral part in the city’s history, morphology, commerce and public life. Over a period of almost a decade the seaport that was built during the 1960s has been redesigned by architects Proedromos Nikiforidis and Bernard Caemmer, the winners of an architectural competition which the Municipality of Thessaloniki had announced in 2000.

The reconstruction of the seaport represented a singular opportunity for reintroducing "green life" in the urban environment and enabling the citizens to expose themselves much more to the natural elements, be it water, the sun or vegetation; a lack of green spaces at the seaport had been one of the city’s deficiencies for a very long time. Walking along the sea, feeling sprinkles of spray, absorbing the sunlight, touching the grass, reposing in the shade of trees – those are the kinds of enjoyment and activities a waterfront may offer depending on the time of day and conditions of weather. The basic concept of the redesign was to revitalize those kinds of experiences. The designers highlighted the linear route of the 3.5 kilometer waterfront by creating parallel zones, such as the sea edge, promenade, bicycle lane, tree lane, sitting/reading points and green parks, without any vertical extensions into the sea. According to Proedromos Nikiforidis, "the interaction between city and sea, the separation of solid ground and water and the emergence of the void" were among the crucial principles of the design. The proposal suggested a sequence of 13 thematic parks, also described as "green rooms", that are demarcated from each other by various water features. The theme of each park, according to the architects, was the result of different interpretations of the landscape, location and history.

Although each “green room” was designed with a different concept in mind, they all share the same construction materials, such as combinations of marble blocks, wood, gravel and stabilized earth floor used along the parks’ pavement, creating different surfaces and allowing water to drain. Pebble grounds, another permeable material, were used along the seaside as an efficient, low-cost solution. The dockside was reinforced since it was originally built on rubble. As part of these measures to increase sustainability, the ground was lowered at specific drainage points in order to allow runoff to flow from the city into the sea and prevent floods in case of heavy precipitation. Finally, metal grids, treated as vertical walls, were installed to allow the water to flow but also to serve as sound-absorbing fences. Various vertical connections and openings to the city make access to the seaport easier and more attractive, while allowing the air to circulate from the sea to the urban grid.
The GARDEN OF MUSIC (1) is the first theme park, starting from the eastern part of the city, where the Thessaloniki Concert Hall is located. It is followed by the GARDEN OF WATER (2), a serene place with rain gardens and flower plantings that evoke scenes of wild nature. The pleasant intermittent frog noises fade as visitors arrive at the GARDEN OF MEMORY, inspired by the late-nineteenth-century mansion located across the street, while the GARDEN OF ROSES (3) was inspired by the front and back yards of the old houses in the neighborhood. There is a strong connection with the city through a large opening marked by rows of trees on both sides. Nearby, one can find tennis and basketball courts, a small dog park and even an observation deck created around an existing water utility building. Approximately in the middle of the route, one meets the GARDEN OF SOUND, an incomplete park, as the plants required to produce the intended rustling sound effect have not yet grown to the desired size. Until then, visitors can enjoy water channels surrounding high-trunk trees planted on a square grid. Additionally, three metallic structures, grid pergolas covered by climbing plants, are used as "shadowy rooms". The GARDEN OF SCULPTURE (4) offers a vision of an outdoor public museum. Unfortunately, the realization of this plan has not yet been completed due to the rather limited collection of art objects on display so far. Time will probably play a critical role in the design. Time is also likely to be an important factor in the further development of the dense and diverse vegetation in the GARDEN OF THE MEDITERRANEAN, which reminds users of a scene of pure nature. Existing trees and plantings were maintained and enhanced through additional citrus trees and low-growth vegetation sporting Mediterranean flora. The GARDEN OF ODYSSEAS FORAS is the extension of a pre-existing playground park that is full of swings, see-saws, slides and other children’s playground devices. The GARDEN OF THE SEASONS (5) is another tree-growing landscape with a great variety of seasonal plants. Among curved paths, one can traverse and experience a meadow typical of Greek nature. The GARDEN OF SHADOWS consists of a long paved strip with seating on both sides, but it has not yet been completed. One of the architects’ intentions for this garden is a play of shadows, silhouettes and figures during different hours of the day or the changing seasons. A renovated park for traffic education and a large playground built on sand, constitute the principal elements of the GARDEN OF SAND, a place devoted entirely to children’s activities. The sunset is irresistibly a glorious moment for those who walk the promenade. This is when pedestrians can best appreciate the GARDEN OF THE AFTERNOON SUN (6), as they watch the sun set above the sea from an elevated hill. At the same time, this new artificial hill “degrades” the existing tall, virtually out-of-scale building of the Macedonia Palace Hotel, which has been a major presence on the waterfront since the late 1970s. Just a short distance from the city center, the GARDEN OF ALEXANDER (7) (the Greek) has been designed as a monumental place around the statue honouring this towering figure in Greek history. A grid of 72 water springs—an interactive, playful and open space—further enhances the presence of the statue.
The reconstruction also introduced new furniture, new lighting, tennis and basketball courts, water basins, planting, fencing, and secondary constructions such as kiosks for exhibitions and cafes.

As there was no specific green strategy to the plan, the architects created natural landscapes that follow the seasons and display changing scenarios. An alley of pines functions as a transition zone between the paved strips and the green zone; it holds the different parks together, creating a uniform "facade" from the sea to the city. Additionally, the continuous line of trees along the promenade highlights (and enhances) the linearity, establishing a protected zone along the way.

Green spaces should also penetrate partially along the way, instead of only being parallel to the direction of walking. In that way, pedestrians and bikers would cross various landscapes and scenarios as they move along. If we were to imagine a section plan, we would see the biker or pedestrian under trees, next to the grass, on soft surfaces and so on. The lack of covered areas—the parks offer no protection in case of rain—has been the designers' conscious choice in order to avoid future closed constructions. Public sports facilities could also be included in the design according to the planner. Of course, nothing is ever perfect, especially when multiple public authorities co-operate. Presumably, not all of the decisions made during the construction were the architects' choices. Therefore, if sometimes the bike lane is so close to an existing building that pedestrians flinch as bikers pass, or if pedestrians are unexpectedly stopped short in their lane by a water basin, it is not always clear who would have to be blamed.

It needs to be acknowledged that the architects of this major urban project have been open to public debates and have actively participated in them. In fact, publications, events and discussions that are open to the public usually take place with their support and, in some instances, under their guidance. This is a good example of what should happen after the design phase has been completed; furthermore, what could be the designer's role after the completion of a project.

Since its inauguration, the new seashore has been attracting a growing number of Thessalonians. They have begun to appreciate the qualities of the space, evidenced in new materials, enhanced lighting and a much improved access to the sea. Among the numerous expressions of public life, whether spontaneous or planned, are photo exhibitions, art installations, performances of street musicians and even wedding photo shoots. These kinds of activities suggest not only a new sense of ownership, but also indicate that the users feel secure and therefore continue their promenades, runs and bike tours even in late hours. The architects agree with the estimation that the new design has awakened desires and needs on the part of the citizens which had been buried or hidden for a very long time. Thus, thanks to this redevelopment project, one of the country's largest in recent decades, a new era of urban life has been launched in Thessaloniki—an era which has widened the spectrum of urban life styles and encourages continued inventiveness and experimentation.

With the renewed seashore, Thessaloniki has seized the chance to establish public and green spaces in the city centre. The promenade is well-visited during daytime as well as at night.

SEAFRONT, THESSALONIKI, GREECE

Client: Municipality of Thessaloniki
Architect: Provenzis Nikiforidis – Bernard Castro Architects
Specialist collaborators: Atelier K. Castro – S. Derioulis, Panagiotis Taras
First part (garden 9 – 13): 76,000 square meters; construction: 2006 – 2008
Second part (gardens 1 – 8): 165,000 square meters; construction: 2011 – 2014

Thirteen so-called "green rooms" were arranged along the waterfront. The Garden of Alexander with fountains in front of the statue of Alexander the Great is one of them.
Creating places may be seen as the follow-up to the previous issue of Topos about "The Narrative". Storytelling, designing places, adding something special to a site, ideally resilience and giving enjoyment to users. Showcasing: stone plazas in Zurich, Copenhagen and Ribe, the sequel to the High Line and the progress of a park on Governors Island in New York; Thessaloniki now faces the sea, Toronto provides a beach for its residents. In addition, we are presenting the winning team of the Topos Landscape Award 2014. Lost Landscapes LOLA from the Netherlands. Their work is the fusion of urban and natural landscapes and the integration of innovative spatial phenomena.