

The function of urban public spaces in medium size cities in Greece. First evaluation for Chalkida, Greece

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Abstract

Urban spaces consist of necessary types of spaces for a city. Their value is timeless and many researches have studied this topic. This research paper focused on people's perception about urban spaces in medium size cities in Greece. The research questions aimed to be answered were: How people use the urban spaces in medium size cities in Greece and why? How can people contribute in improving their cities? Larisa was chosen as case studies. Using qualitative data collection methods, it was concluded that there is a strong relation between public space morphology, people's perception and social life in the cities. These conclusions could be useful in implementing successful planning interventions, in the context of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs).

Keywords: urban spaces, medium size cities, sustainable mobility, regeneration projects, people engagement.

1 Introduction: City, public space and public dialog

Going back to the historic course of cities, the key role of public space is observed (Rubenstein, 1992; McCann, 1999; Madanipour, 2004; Akkar, 2005; Moeckli, 2016). This role was more obvious to democratic societies because it acts as a rich ideological background (Mitchell, 1995) which relies on its function as a field where public life develops (Carr, et.al., 1992). Indeed, although nowadays there are opinions that support the decline of public space (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998; Sarigiannis, 1999), many are those who support the importance of urban coefficients (*fatti urbani*) as spaces of public expression with equal

importance as in the past (Whyte, 1980; Kelbaugh, 1997 in Carmona, 2003; Ghel and Gemzoe, 2003; Vlastos, 2016; Kyriakidis, 2016). Despite the fact that the latter opinion seems to prevail since a series of design application focus on the improvement of shape and function of public spaces, public dialog is not a first priority, at least in Greece. Indeed, there are few cases where consultations develop in typical level because that is how legislation treats them (Athanasopoulos and Vlastos, 2012) or participants are too few. Such procedures are far from typologies of active participatory planning and even from cases of passive participation (i.e. participation in information giving) (see in Stratigea, 2015). Thus, it is noted that citizens not only do not express an opinion for the interventions that are scheduled to be implemented in their city but also do not support their needs and do not express their daily problems. They continue to live in areas where do not have an interest for social participation, since they do not believe that scheduled interventions from local authorities can satisfy their needs (Lowndes, et.al., 2006).

As it is, in order to achieve successful designs –and especially at the urban design level- it is necessary to explore the needs and demands of residents from existing urban spaces. In this level, the understanding of needs is necessary for the investigation of the function of public spaces and social life. In this context, it is noted the special importance of the specific scientific subject which is quite widespread from the 1980's in foreign countries (Whyte, 1980; Mehta, 2009; Gehl, 2010; Gehl and Svarre, 2013; Sepe, 2017). In Greece, however, researches for the function of public spaces are a subject less widespread.

Based on the above, this specific research paper focuses on the identification of the needs of citizens in midium-sized cities. Especially, taking into consideration the case study of Chalkida, for which the Sustainable Mobility Unit (SMU) of the NTUA, Athens had conducted a research concerning the improvement of urban space and accessibility in the city, an effort to answer the below research questions is attempted. These questions are: (a) How public spaces of the city are used? (b) Based on the satisfactory degree of the needs of citizens, do suggestions of redesign of the public space of the city arise?

2 How do public spaces in Chalkida function?

2.1 Aims-Objectives

The current paper targets in understanding of the way public spaces in Chalkida function. The research questions concern the way citizens and visitors express themselves as well as the degree in which their needs are satisfied. Given the previous designing experience of the SMU in Chalkida, this specific paper focuses on the production of conclusions on how much do recent urban and mobility interventions that were suggested by the SMU contributed to the satisfaction of the citizens' needs. Furthermore, through this research process it is possible to

understand the deeper desires of the public, since it targets to an in depth understanding of people's perceptions about the city.

2.2 Methodology

The research investigation of the subject focuses on the case study of Chalkida which is a typical medium-sized Greek city (city population: 59,125 citizens, municipality population: 102,420 citizens/2011). The research was conducted in two stages. During the first stage an on-line questionnaire survey occurred, from late August to mid-September 2018. Even though many researchers choose interviews over a questionnaire (Lynch, 1960; Whyte, 1980; Mehta, 2009; Mehta, 2013; Kyriakidis, 2016), in international literature there are many researches (Takano, et.al., 2002; Chiesura, 2004; Brownson, et.al., 2004; Jim and Chen, 2006; Duzenli, et.al., 2010; Chithralega, 2013; Chen, et.al., 2014) where questionnaires for the research of motives that lead citizens to a specific behavior in space are used. In this specific research, the target is, primarily, to understand the motives of the citizens' needs and, later, to evaluate the public space. Therefore, the information collected should be from a wider selection of people in order to formulate a general claim (Driscoll, 2011). Thus, the use of questionnaire is preferred over the conduction of interviews.

The questionnaire is divided in three stages: (a) Personal information (b) Relationship of the respondent with Chalkida and (c) His/her opinion for the public spaces in the city. In total, it included 31 questions of multiple choice as well as the Likert scale, limiting open-type questions, which often are not answered by the respondents (Bakogiannis and Kyriakidis, 2018; Zhou, et.al., 2017; De Bruijne and Wijnant, 2014). The average time of completing the questionnaire was calculated in 6 minutes. The target was to avoid a lengthy questionnaire in order for the respondents to not get bored. Additionally, most questions did not offer too many choices so that the respondents do not get confused, as Jim and Chen (2006) direct. As far as the sample collection is concerned, social media were used, since the questionnaire got public in webpages relevant to the city and was sent via the internet through personal messages in a specific social network platform. 196 people responded to the call. Their profile is described as follows: (a) 56.9% of them are women and 43.1% are men. (b) The majority of the respondents is between 18 and 25 years old (54.1%), while all the other age groups (26-35, 36-45, 46-55 and 56-65) participated by approximately 14% each. None of the participants are of age under 18 years old or above 66. (c) The main fields of professional activity or education are those of humanities and social sciences (24.5%) and sciences of engineering (19.6%).

Next, drive-by and walk-by observations were conducted in order to record the way in which citizens use public spaces. The observation took place during September 2018, so that weather conditions favored the pedestrians to stay in outside spaces. Every space was observed during morning hours, noon and evening so that the degree of its use is noted, during the day.

2.3. Findings

2.3.1. The use of public spaces

Map 1 depicts all public spaces in Chalkida. The beach of the city is the one space with most visitors, on a daily basis. Other spaces in which a high degree of activities was recorded, during the entire day, are the St. Nicholas Sq., the Market (Agora) Sq. and Faros Park. The observations confirm the results of the questionnaire research, since the urban waterfront is the most popular public space.



Map. 1: Public spaces in Chalkida.

The social activities are mostly developed in the public spaces of the city. Meetings and conversations were the most often activities, based on the answers of the respondents. Fewer respondents acted on their own, by either reading a book or a newspaper or other activities. Almost the same were the results that came up from the questionnaire research since 62.2% of the respondents noted that the main reason for visiting any public space is the meeting with acquaintances, either randomly (10.2%) or after previous communication (52%). However, in the latter case, the activity took place in a café or in a restaurant close by. Although that space is an outdoor space and typically consists a section of public space, what actually is applied is that the space is rented to the owner of each store. Thus, it is noted that most activities take place in quasi-public spaces, a phenomenon that is observed intensely in the Greek cities (see in Kyriakidis, 2016).

The above observation is related to the duration of visitors' stay at public spaces. The results of the questionnaire research lead to the majority of the respondents (32.2%) remaining in public spaces for 2 hours on average, while significant is the number of the respondents (25.4%) that declare they remain longer. However, through observation it is noted that activities that take place in purely public spaces last less than 2 hours.



As far as the time footprint of visitors' activities in public spaces is concerned, noon is the most popular time of the day (53.1%), noted as the time citizens remain more in public spaces. Morning hours were only chosen from 12.4% of the respondents to visit the public areas of the city. However, it is noted that an important number of pedestrians pass by. Nevertheless, the number of static activities was smaller, a fact that allows a correlation between desire for use of public space on behalf of the citizens and the observed static activities are preferred to be used as indicators of liveability of public spaces (Mehta, 2009; Mehta, 2013). In any case, this observation inclines towards the Andrakakou, et.al. (2018) opinion that supports the intense correlation between function of public spaces and of neighboring land uses.

2.3.2. Assessment of public spaces

The assessment of public spaces in Chalkida was conducted through five questions of the questionnaires concerning the quantitative satisfaction of the citizens by public spaces, the assessment of their quality, their location in the urban fabric and the frequency of their visit. In general, citizens are not very satisfied by the current spaces. Characteristic is the fact that 49.7% of the respondents think that public spaces are of medium quality, while 28.7% characterise them as inadequate. This opinion concerns their surface and location but mostly their quality. Only 16.9% of the citizens think that the public spaces of the city are equally distributed. The majority (43.1%) appear to have the opposite opinion, while large portion of the sample (40%) maintains neutral attitude. The above percentages are according to the answers in the question: "Do you believe that the organization of the public spaces in the city is adequate in order to function as public space network?". 44.6% reply negatively, while quite a few (24.9%) remain neutral. Positive is the opinion of only 30.6% of the respondents.

Regarding the quality of space, the disapproval of citizens is linked with the fact that the quality of space expected to greatly affect the public's activities (benches, shaded spaces, trees, lighting fixtures, fountains, etc) functioning as positive environmental affordances (Kyriakidis and Bakogiannis, 2018; Hadavi, et.al., 2015; Chen, et.al., 2014; Duzenli, et.al., 2010), seem to operate less positive in Chalkida or at least that is how users of public space comprehend it. According to findings of the field research, the influence of land uses is more important since the gathering of recreational activities consists the main reason for visiting public spaces. Residents comprehend public spaces as a benchmark but not as a remaining point, since the private space of squares and the beach rented to owners of cafes or restaurants is their main area of gathering.

2.3.3. Suggestion for redesigning public spaces in Chalkida

The majority of the respondents are in favour of regeneration of current public spaces since at the moment these spaces do not service people's needs. 81.5% of the respondents think that

redesigning these areas will improve their quality. Depending on the type of public space, different suggestions are more important. Table 1 shows the main suggestions of those who participated in the research. It is obvious that in the case of streets, participants underlined the narrow pavements, like in most Greek cities, do not fulfill the conditions set by the Ministerial Decision 52907 (OGG 2621 / 31-12-2009), according to which the pavements in the cities must have a minimum width of 1.5 m, which will be used as a free pedestrian space, ie without the presence of urban equipment. This suggestion is similar to the one that the SMU had suggested when designing a combined traffic and urban design for Chalkida city (Bakogiannis, et.al., 2015). Some main proposals were: (a) widening the sidewalks of the streets at the city center, (b) converting roads into streets of low traffic like Neofitou Street, (c) altering roads or sections of them, like Avanton and Aggelatou Street, to promote commercial activity. Map 2 presents the interventions suggested during the specific design.

An equally important action was the planting of trees along road axes. This specific intervention is considered the most important for also improving squares. At the same time, the degree of their sociability has improved, since shaded surfaces have increased in number, something that is necessary, as underlined by the questionnaire research. One more need that citizens feel dissatisfied with, is the safety of their children while playing. For that reason, the development of new fenced playgrounds is proposed in order for the children to play in safely guarded spaces inside the squares and not in the central space of squares guarded by their parents as it happens today. This way, squares do not change their functionality, instead this functionality is further reinforced.

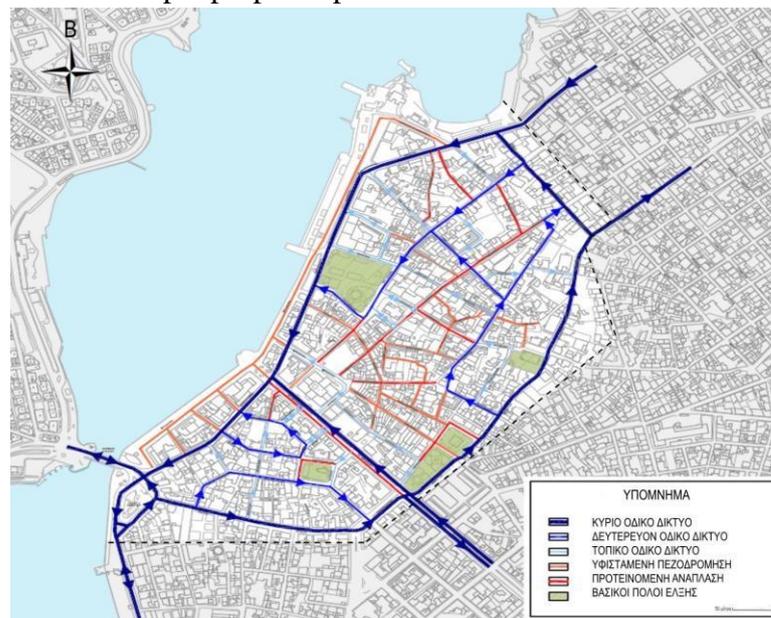
As far as the parks are concerned, the citizens' demands are related to the increase of green surfaces. The paradox is that the two most important parks (Vourkos Park and People's Park) present extensive green surfaces and were also recently regenerated (2014 and 2011, respectively). On the opposite side, Faros Park and the castle in Kanithos present an image like a forest with great vegetation but without grass. Thus, the above citizens' suggestion can be interpreted as a demand for increase of number of trees at these two most popular parks. As depicted in Table 1, the necessity for the development of activities is another important action for the attraction of pedestrians in parks.

Laos Park which, is operating also as a Traffic Education Centre, can be an exemplar for some other places to have also multiple character, oriented in specific activities. In total, the plant of trees was the subject that gathered the most demands (290 answers), followed by the creation of playgrounds (151 answers) and the placing of sitting benches (136 answers).

Proposals for streets	Proposals for squares	Proposals for parks
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1.	Widening the sidewalks	101	Planting of trees	104	Increasing green surfaces	101
2.	Planting of trees	101	Creating playgrounds	83	Developing activities	89
3.	Altering roads or sections of them	60	Increasing shaded surfaces	74	Planting of trees	85
4.	Improving the urban lighting	49	Placing of sitting benches	49	Creating playgrounds	68
5.	Placing of sitting benches	41	Increasing water surfaces	43	Increasing water surfaces	51
6.	Reducing the height of sidewalks	13	Cafes and restaurants	40	Placing of sitting benches	46

Table. 1: People propose specific interventions about their city.



Map. 2: Proposals to be implemented in Chalkida.

A number of proposals are also expressed for the creation of new public spaces. More specifically, 44.6% of the respondents believe that public spaces of the city do not function as a unified network. In order to solve this problem, two things are suggested: (a) the use of urban gaps for the creation of new public spaces and (b) the connection of squares and parks via a route network (for pedestrians and bicycles). The importance that citizens give to the creation of pavements, probably is based on the previously success of Avanton St., that started 6 years ago. This action changed the profile of the city's centre and, as Zempilis (2018) characteristically mentions, that street was the beginning of creating an extended network which transforms the image of the city. In this context, through such interventions, citizens believe that their quality of life will be improved (44.3%) and the local economy will recover

with more tourists visiting the wider area, since Chalkida can have a specific identity based on environmental and socially viable interventions.

3 Discussion

The combination of observation and questionnaire survey contributes to answers on the research questions, regarding the way that city's public spaces operate today and to what extent do they fill the needs of residents. This survey provides us with strong evidence that public spaces of Chalkida operate on an analogy with other Greek cities (see in Kyriakidis, 2016; Bakogiannis, et.al., 2018), since a considerable number of the respondents underline the importance of the public spaces and their need to visit them frequently, with a view to meet their social needs. However, the outcome of the survey highlight the fact that the majority of the inhabitants tend to wander around the nearby stores than to enjoy a stay in the public spaces.

This contradiction triggered the cause for detecting similar ones amongst the answers of survey's respondents. And, indeed, certain findings emerged, that rise valid questions to what extent citizens understand the matters of urban planning. Specifically, although the majority of the respondents (34.2%) consider the squares being as the most crucial public space for any city, the urban waterfront of Chalkida has been pointed up as such one by 192 answers. When the participants were asked to classify the urban waterfront into a category of public space, the majority of them (68.4%) named it as pedestrian street, whereas only 9.8% labeled it as square. At the same time, even though the most of the activities are taking place in venues of recreation, most of the respondents attribute their visit to the urban waterfront to its central location, with all the other positive affordances of it, such as view, natural characteristics etc. to be of minor importance.

These findings constitute a clear evidence that the participation in the questionnaires cannot be considered as a best practice, since it does not offer any knowledge to the participants, let alone an active role in the framework of an interactive process with the designers and the decision makers. According to Stratigea (2015), many researchers do not recognize this specific method as a participatory one for designing, although it is used in certain cases for data collection. A mixing of methodological tools could lead to more satisfactory results, by making the best of each tool, so as to both achieve different goals and confirm data collected. The experience of implementing the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs) in Greece demonstrated this matter, by using the traditional method of questionnaires, combined with one of opinions collection in a web-platform, along with the active participation of the crowd into the analysis of its cities (crowdsensing and crowdsourcing) (Bakogiannis, et.al., 2018 b). The up to now pilot implementation of said method in some areas (Drama, Kozani, Kalithea, Zografos, Rethimno) pointed out that people awareness is achieved in a satisfactory level, something that was verified during the public consultations.



Thus, even though, in our case, this research helped us to comprehend the residents' of Chalkida needs towards their city's public spaces, the activation of an innovative tool in the future, which will allow people to evaluate regularly the public spaces, could increase the consultative democracy and the collective consciousness. After all, it is necessary that the feedback be received and evaluated on a regular basis, since the inhabitants' perspective is that additional works in public spaces may improve their image and functionality, no matter how recently they had been redeveloped.

Finally, another issue arose is the importance that the residents attribute to the cycling infrastructure, since they perceive the bicycle lanes as a mean of strengthening the city's identity and the development of public spaces network (96 out of 196 answers). Obviously, this importance is directly related with the absence of satisfactory cycling infrastructure in the city. Based on the Sustainable Mobility Unit's data (2017), only 0.6 km of bike lanes provided safety to the cyclists. This highlighted necessity of developing a network of bike lanes, offers fertile ground for the implementation of all the interventions that Sustainable Mobility Unit had proposed during the last years (Bakogiannis, etc, 2015).

4 Conclusions

This research paper aims at the evaluation of public spaces in Chalkida, a medium size city of Greece. The importance for investigating this particular issue arose from the necessity of the following: (a) the residents' opinion for their city's situation to be eavesdropped and (b) to locate problematic spots that must be ironed out under a framework of a combined traffic and urban planning, now that many Greek cities are implementing SUMP. The ascertainment of residents' necessity was carried out by a survey questionnaire. In parallel, the observation of specific public spaces helped a lot not only to understand the way that public spaces operate but to triangulate the answers of the respondents as well.

The survey revealed the significance which the inhabitants ascribe to their city's public spaces, with the urban waterfront to be the most popular, as every day you may find there a lot of people, displaying mainly social activities. The St. Nikolas square along with the Market square, are two public spaces that attract a considerable number of visitors, especially during the week-ends, when their number is multiplied. Main reasoning for this fact is the adjacency of Chalkida to Athens metropolitan area.

Nevertheless, the users of the public spaces are not satisfied with the current situation and underline the necessity not only to redevelop them but to create new ones as well. In addition, it is recommended that the new public spaces be pedestrian zone or small linear street segments, which will be used either by roamers for their comfortable movement or by cyclists for a safer bike ride or by everyone for social activities. The inherent substance of the above mentioned

suggestions is the necessity for reconstructing the civil road network, which, although it is not recognized as a significant public space, is the key for the city's upgrading.

Another interesting finding of this particular survey was the evidence of a very common phenomenon as far as the public consultative on the urban planning is concerned, especially in Greece. The mismatch between the proposed interventions by the citizens and their views. This observation stems as an outcome, due to the fact that citizens are not familiar with the city's urban planning, something that might create problems in case the citizen's opinions be followed blindly. The appliance of mixed methodologies, consisting of traditional and modern tools, following by various steps of realization, may secure not only the training of the citizens but also their active cooperation and consent to proposals, regarding the upgrading of the civil environment. This is a way of promoting the consultative democracy in cities and facilitating the observation of the urban planning results.

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