‘Best Practice’ Partnership for Sustainable Urban Tourism

Detailed Study Case/SUT-Governance Project

‘Pilot Project for the Renewal of the Historical and Commercial Centre’, Thessaloniki, Greece

Best practice

Categories:

Urban and Regional Planning:
- urban renewal
- comprehensive planning

Sustainable Urban Management:
- protection of the city’s cultural heritage
- pedestrian network

Economic Revival:
- upgrading traditional economic activities

Level of activity: Urban (City of Thessaloniki)
Key dates:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>June 1991</td>
<td>Established as a <em>formal and combined service</em> partnership in the city of Thessaloniki, aimed at the preservation and enhancement of the city’s historical and cultural heritage, headed by the Region of Central Macedonia at first and the Organisation of Thessaloniki in later years, under a package of experimental Pilot Projects for urban areas that were financed by the European Community.</td>
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<td>Intended life span</td>
<td>3 years</td>
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<td>March 1996</td>
<td>The activity was completed; Most of the objectives were achieved. There is no community body that oversees the initiative any longer. No on-going effort exists at the moment. Certain follow-up initiatives were undertaken by the separate partners.</td>
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Summary: The “Pilot Project for the Renewal and Development of the Historical and Commercial Centre of Thessaloniki” (PRD) is a partnership formed in 1991 to plan, coordinate and implement an urban renewal project. Its main purpose was to revive the historic commercial centre of Thessaloniki by mobilising all public agencies involved in urban renewal and by bringing together technical experts from different actors.

1. General Framework Conditions

The PRD belongs to a package of experimental projects for 32 urban areas that were financed by ERDF, DG XVI, at the beginnings of the 1990s. The project undertaken by the partnership was essentially an urban renewal one. Nevertheless, it affected the basic infrastructure of the city’s tourist assets, i.e. the historical and the old commercial centre. In Greece tourism is an important economic sector and accounts for about 6% of the total GDP. In Thessaloniki tourism development is also an important activity, but not among the dominant topics of urban development. The operational framework of the project was urban renewal policy, whereas the local economic trends of the time played a key role. In
Thessaloniki (as indeed all over Greece) urban renewal operations are the jurisdiction of various public agencies from the city administration to archaeological authorities and government planning agencies. All these agents had to be combined and co-ordinated in order to promote a comprehensive renewal intervention, which could not be implemented by acting alone. The concept of sustainability (not well developed at the time internationally) is implicitly incorporated in the project and mainly as concerns the physical aspects, such as the preservation and re-use of the old building stock.

2. Partnership Objectives and Cooperation

The main goal of the PRD was to revive the comprehensive character of the historic commercial centre through two main target activities: renewal of monuments and other important old buildings and an extensive pedestrianisation in the old markets. The idea of the partnership was to a large extent an individual initiative. Four partners, the Region of Central Macedonia, the Organisation of the Master Plan of Thessaloniki, the Municipality of Thessaloniki, and the Ministry of Culture, founded the partnership. On the whole, eleven partners took part in the partnership, seven public agencies, one private bank and three NGO's. The partnership offered competence of participants and ability to deal with a clearly identifiable need in a joint effort in which they would reduce institutional complexities and overlaps. Budget enlargement through European funding was a good incentive for joining the partnership. The Region of Central Macedonia was initially the leading partner, a role that was later undertaken by the Organization of Thessaloniki. The Project included three main strategies: a) legislative regulations b) studies, surveys and preparation of architectural competitions, and c) implementation of specific restoration and pedestrianisation projects.

Coordination and monitor was shared between three main actors, the Region of Central Macedonia, the Organization of Thessaloniki and the Municipality of Thessaloniki (the city administration). The Organization of Thessaloniki was the general manager of the PRD. Implementation of specific sub-projects was undertaken by four main actors, two
government bodies (Ministry of Culture and a public construction agency), the city administration and a private bank. The Technical Chamber of Greece and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki undertook the technical support and evaluation, whereas another professional body, the Chamber of Commerce, represented the users of the old buildings.

The PRD falls mainly in the combined service model, as the partners remained distinct in strategy making. Each of them eventually had their own strategy and a different service to deliver. However, from an organizational point of view, there was an integrated body whose actual role was the coordination of the different actors and the monitoring of the activity process; thus, at this level, the partnership could be characterised as a formal one. The format of partnership agreements was specific contracts signed between the Organization of Thessaloniki and each separate partner. Responsibilities of each partner were clearly defined as they concerned the implementation of specific sub-projects. Participation and public legitimacy was achieved through the involvement of the two Chambers, which represented the architects and engineers and the local businesses respectively.

3. **Partnership Activity and Stakeholder Participation**

The main activities of the PRD were: implementation specific sub-projects, on-going evaluation of the project’s progress, experience exchange and promotion of the project, documentation of results and public outreach activities. The implementation of specific sub-projects was classified into two categories of actions: a) pedestrianization (technical studies, construction of pedestrian zones, road surfacing and participatory procedures with the affected shopkeepers), and b) renewal of old markets/districts/monuments (designation of buildings, study of urban equipment elements, road surfacing, improvement of technical infrastructure networks, restoration of facades, architectural competitions, restoration and enhancement of monuments and their surrounding area, redesign and restoration of shops, legislation to abolish uses incompatible with the monuments’ character, continuation of excavations). A system of “feed-back mechanism” was incorporated into the on-going evaluation of the project, which proved to be an important mechanism to
sort out a number of managerial and organizational problems. Outreach presentation was realised with numerous publications in the local press, debates in the local radio and television, about 3 major scientific meetings, special information leaflets and information signs erected in the areas affected. Other documentation included a book publication of the renewal works in one of the old markets as well as other article publications of specific restoration projects. A special questionnaire was addressed to the users of the area affected by the PRD. Communication with the affected groups, who were initially very reluctant towards the project, was achieved to a considerable extent in the actual implementation stage and proved to be effective especially in specific sub-projects where the various works were planned in agreement with the affected groups or implemented taking into account their needs.

4. Impacts on Sustainability

(1) *Sustainability of the tourism sector:* The PRD was indirectly related to tourism sector as it affected important tourist assets of the city. Certain buildings were re-used with activities of the tourist sector, mainly entertainment and cultural activities. The partnership was directed mainly towards the architectural and construction aspects of the project and so sustainability of the product was mainly concerned with aspects such as the type of restoration needed in the monuments or the old buildings or the type of intervention in their surrounding environment. A bigger focus on the tourism product would guarantee in a better way other aspects of sustainability, such as the final use of the buildings for a soft entertainment sector (rather than that finally developed in the areas concerned), more long-term economic viability of the sector, responsible visitors of the areas concerned and a community responsible local entertainment sector.

(2) *Integrated urban sustainability:* Although the objectives of the PRD were not explicitly based on the concept of sustainability, there were sustainability goals, which are connected principally to urban ecology. The main results achieved were the preservation of a number of historical buildings and the pedestrianisation of a number of central streets of-
fering more open space to the public. The project can be considered successful in respect to the objective "preservation of historical buildings", as an important number of buildings and monuments was preserved and restored with a new use and a number of small streets within the market areas were pedestrianised.

The PRD is related to SUT because it protected tourism resources with vital historic value and offered sustainable community centred gains. Problems of the present quality of the urban environment in the areas affected can be largely attributed to the lack of a follow-up policy clearly oriented to sustainability rather than the achievements of the project itself.

**Impacts:**

- **Ecological Sustainability:**
  - Preservation of historical monuments
  - Creation of open space
  - Creation of a pedestrian network

- **Economic Viability:**
  - New business forms
  - Improved locally based economy
  - Development of urban businesses

- **Social Progress:**
  - Improved quality of life
  - Elimination of inappropriate uses of urban space

- **Long-term Community Progress and Sustainable Region:**
  - Historic preservation and integrity
  - Long-term community benefit by acquiring international funds

- **Effective Urban Governance:**
  - Implementation of an innovative pilot project
5. **Factors of Success**

The main factors of success were individual leadership and a professional commitment to the project especially on behalf of certain actors; the initial political support which contributed to a commonly agreed project and an effective preparation of a proposal for acquiring funds; a clearly defined need which had both professional and public support; the available funds for a comprehensive project; a need to deal with real complex problems requiring common solutions; the eventual involvement of the private sector (through a bank), which played a crucial role not only in terms of an effective absorption of funds but also in providing important cultural and tourism assets of sustainable nature in the areas concerned; a clear division of responsibilities which allowed for individual excellence in own core area of activity; and, finally, a successful on-going evaluation of the implementation process.

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<th>Factors of Success:</th>
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<td><strong>Pertaining to National and Regional/Local Framework Conditions:</strong></td>
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<td>- Availability of tourist attractions (cultural and historic heritage)</td>
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<td>- Financial opportunities offered by external funds</td>
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<td>- Motivating personal relationships between diverse actors</td>
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<td><strong>Pertaining to the Partnership and the Cooperation Process:</strong></td>
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<td>- Shared strategy for action</td>
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<td>- Decisive role of public sector in decision-making</td>
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<td>- Identifying the right target area offering best problem solutions</td>
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<td>- Clear division of roles and responsibilities</td>
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<td>- Actors with individual excellence in own core area of activity</td>
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<td>- External expertise for quality assurance</td>
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**Pertaining to the Activity and its Resolution:**
- Decisive role of public sector in activity implementation
- Effective on-going assessment
- Shared strategy for action
- Public outreach activities

**Pertaining to Implications for Sustainability:**
- New public management: project oriented administration

**New developments:** The PRD was terminated in 1996. A number of activities related to the project’s goals, to a large extent of sustainability nature, followed in later years and were undertaken by the separate actors. Such activities were the listing of about 100 buildings in the old markets, the restoration of old buildings and the designation of land-use plans in order to protect the traditional commercial character of the markets.

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Bibliography:

Interviews:

Tsiakiris St., Former Coordinator of Regional Policies and Plans of the Region of Central Macedonia, Member of the Coordination Action and Monitoring Committee.

Tzikas G., Former Vice-president of the Organization of Thessaloniki (1994-98), Member of the Coordination, Action and Monitoring Committee

Gavra E., Coordinator of the Planning Team

Kourakis A., Former President of the Technical Chamber of Greece-Department of Central Macedonia, Member of the Coordination, Action and Monitoring Committee

Vlaxogiannis M., Member of the Boarding Committee of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, non-permanent member of the Coordination, Action and Monitoring Committee

Aivazoglou E., member of the Planning Team

Astreinidou P., Head of the Bezesteni restoration works

Latsou V., Member of the Special Team of the Municipality of Thessaloniki for the PRD

Mamasis, K. Former Head of the Technical Department of Macedonia and Thrace Bank

Other sources:


Kafkalas, Gr. & Spiridonidis, Nt., Institutions for Intervention if the City Centres, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Department of Architecture, Thessaloniki 1994. Technical Chamber of Greece-Department of Central Macedonia (Research Team: Gero-lympou, A., at.al.), Typology Analysis of the Historical Centre, Thessaloniki 1995.