Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment
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TU DELFT

# P4 Reflection Paper

on the thesis project: "Re-constructing Spatial Narratives: the case of Agrinio"

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**Thesis introduction**

Motivation for this project is the multifaceted national crisis of Greece that has led to an increase in the dimensions of intense spatial and social problems, but not only in the big urban centres but also in smaller regional cities. Despite the existing framework of urban planning policies and the multiple interventions of the European Programs and Community Initiatives concerning the growth of small and medium-sized cities of the country, the spatial and social problems are not being tackled but, on contrary, they are being continuously intensified. Agrinio, is a typical example of such cities which apart from the crisis-related trends and problematics that the country, as a whole, is experiencing (increased unemployment and illiteracy rates, poverty, brain drain, population migration, social exclusion, spatial and environmental degradation) is also demonstrating a few more, depicting the urgency of interfering.

Despite being an important city of the Western Region of Greece, it remains unknown not only for people outside the country but also for the inhabitants of the country itself. Its recognition can not be compared to its former glory of the 19th and 20th centuries. During that period, it was experiencing a huge production and occupation since the biggest tobacco industry was there. Its inhabitants were also highly involved in cultural events and national games. Over the years, along with the economic crisis, these qualities started to retreat. High levels of unemployment, shrinkage of the population, informal settlements, inadequate infrastructure, traffic congestion, urban sprawl that undermines the local quality, environmental problems and marginalization of the city, in general, are the basic characteristics, to name a few, of the city.

What is clearly characterising the city now, is the lack of an economic and spatial strategy, not only for the city itself but for the whole region. A strategy that will bring it again to the front line of the competitive cities of the country by giving it a strong identity, generating economy, improving the social and spatial quality of the environment. Thus, with this project, a well thought agenda for economy and infrastructure is developed as a framework and key strategic direction for redefine the role of the municipality and its position in the context of Greece. The implementation of an integrated and multi-level approach, primarily focusing on the intermediate scale and using public space as a vehicle for re-designing and urban regeneration serves the principles of a smart, sustainable and inclusive development which can convert the city into an attractive place to live, work, visit and invest. Not only for the young, productive and creative population, but also for elderly people encouraging them to remain independent, equal and active members of the society.

**The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject/case study chosen within this framework (location/object)**

This thesis is conducted under the Urban Fabrics graduation studio. This studio is focusing not only on transforming physical and tangible environments (elements, materialisation, form, scales, density, networks) but also on non-visible structures (psychological, socio-cultural, managerial, economical). Such structures can be translated as people's mentalities, behaviors, relations, way of thinking, thus their interaction with their surroundings (space).

This project can be considered as an interesting example of the studio since it is aiming to alter the identity of a big, yet unknown city of Greece, Agrinio, by using public space as a trigger in order to awake citizens towards exploiting the numerous qualities provided by the natural, cultural and historical resources. Space is present but is currently being highly misused or even under-used. People are found trapped in problematic conditions, mostly deriving by the economic crisis that is infesting the whole country, they are being driven by apathy and ignorance towards the possibilities offered by the city itself.

As an attempt to gain better understanding of the city's urban fabric, a sequence of certain trends and norms that led to the existing structures along with their repercussions is researched and analysed. Only after realising the "why" it is possible to proceed with developing design processes and testing them on site before the final implementation. This approach is compatible with the research studio, since it is a design-prespective driven one and promotes evidence-informed design methods.

In addition, the studio follows a multi-scalar approach, running across different scales, developing strategies for each one of them separately but testing their repercussions on all of them at the same time. Since Agrinio is closely related to its surroundings (hills, lake, river, airport) and can benefit from their presence, strategies are also developed for the regional scale, apart from the city scale and the local one (public space). The ultimate urban design is the outcome of collaborative design processes in all scales, supported by several stakeholders and by applying both bottom-up and top-down actions.

Last aspect of the studio, but not least, is that within it, the urban fabric is perceived as a system of systems, a complexity, combining elements from the social scene, geography and urban planning, For this project, especially since multi-scalarity is attempted, the selection of the second mentor was made from the Complex Cities studio, giving valuable insights regarding the planning design processes, preventing the mono—dimensional aspect (concentration of the public space) of the project. As a result, in this multi-actor project, strategical visions are risen in order to support and drive the design process, achieving to convert desirable future images and ideas into concrete design interventions.

**The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen in this framework AND the relationship between research and design**

As mentioned before, the studio is design driven and is merely based on a specific kind of methodology, where design research and research by design go hand in hand. These two methods constitute a coherent approach for urbanism projects, especially when smaller scales are involved, ultimately ensuring a systematic analysis framework and a knowledge-based design proposal.

Research by design is an interesting method of understanding a sequence of design decisions taken by professionals at various scales in the wider physical, behavioural, economic, aesthetic, social and cultural context given. Such is the case of the project. Before proceeding with any design scenario or even intervention, a detailed analysis is carried out through the lenses of historical processes. Analysing spatially historical maps from the municipality's archive and reviewing the urban planning policies of the city and of the whole country for the same periods, enabling certain comparisons and evaluations, proved to be of vital importance in order to acquire knowledge for the city's form. Tracing, mapping and interpretations of data and figures into maps also help with comprehending facts and trends of the society manifested into the urban environment and the forces that keep driving its development. Taking into consideration the current trends and problematics of the city, both in regional and national level, converting them into relations between people and space, it is possible to conclude on the way that the city keeps expanding and evolving and to define the problem. In other words, this method set the necessary information base on which later design decisions were made.

On the other hand, research by design is the method where scenarios are developed implemented, tested on site and evaluated. It goes without saying that the context in which the design is generated derives from the design research. As part of this stage comes the experimental design, where composition elements of other case studies with similar problematics are investigated, transformed and applied into the current project. In this way, by critically studying the effects of various designs regarding public spaces and transformation of areas into magnets of attraction, certain principles are generated that in their turn, help to generate the final composition and design. Principles and types of interventions become specific for the project and become suitable to the intended new functions and programs. In a few words, it is the stage where study emerges from the design and sets the foundations for a knowledge-based final design composition.

Unfortunately, though there is a big shade laying above the whole project. Greece is still undergoing the prolonged phase of decline, the recession is continuing and the future lurks unknown, without knowing whether tomorrow will be another "European day" for the country or not. This is the reason why acting in all the three scales (region, city, local) is a key feature for the project. Its main objective it to benefit from the existing touristic movement and flows in the country and to profiteer from the qualitative values that the region has to offer. By taking advantage of the tourist economy, Agrinio can generate economy and find the financial resources to start realising its projects and bringing its citizens out from the static situation that have been involved.

**The relationship between the project and the wider social context**

Space is an integral part of the socio-economic processes, since all the social and economic phenomena are reflected into it. More precisely, it acts as the key element which influences these phenomena in a dialectic relationship of interdependence and inter-definition. Since the recent-present crisis has affected human life (in all possible domains), it is undoubtedly implied then that it has affected the space as well, to such an extent that each single design, in all fields and sectors, is largely taking into account the crisis, its consequences and how it can manage to overcome them.

However, it should become clear that there is not a specific model describing "a city in crisis", but different combinations of policies, mechanisms and pre-existing urban structures that define the relationship between fundamental socio-economic transformations and the urban space. The spatial dimension of the crisis and the extent in which the economic and social aspects of the crisis are represented, are closely linked to the peculiarities of the cities themselves and the wider geographic context in which they occur, the understanding of which can be an essential step for the detection of the necessary policies and tools to address them.

The different historical evolutions of the cities, their geographic location, the distinct urban policies and the conditions related to the interaction of the local with the global elements, create strong urban differentiation and heterogeneity towards the way that modern European cities experience the crisis and its repercussions. The disparate trends and unequal geographic transformations lead in their turn to different ways of development and adaptation against the various changes brought up due to the crisis.

In any case though, the crisis is causing significant changes in any aspects of the cities, related to their economic, social, environmental and cultural structure, and their urban functions. Consequently, in a societal point of view, it can be argued that the research and the products done through this graduation project can be inextricably linked to the urgent issues of the society, not only the Greek one. The methodology followed in the project can open the way for further research upon cities that are suffering from crisis, degrading the urban environment. Developing and testing design processes deriving from a multi-scalar strategic approaches can be proved beneficial for a whole region, for a whole city. Therefore, it's high time to see urban space as an opportunity for social and spatial change. As a challenge to review a deadlock mentality and behavior and to promote a healthy collective consciousness towards regeneration and progress.