The urban history of Thessaloniki
from early inhabitance until today
Unrolling the thread of time

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‘Thessaloniki deserves nothing but the ship
You ought not to look at it from land, not ever’.

Nikos Kavvadias, Thessaloniki II

For the tutors

The material you are holding is an overview of the urban history of Thessaloniki. Its aim is to look back on the transformations that took place in the urban landscape of the city over the centuries, from its foundation by Cassander through to the formation of the megalopolis of today, in a simple and comprehensible manner.

The urban ‘eras’ of Thessaloniki are ‘unfolded’ with the aid of maps illustrating the changing form of the city during the various periods, which are marked on the ‘timeline’ accordingly. Furthermore, tables with key facts (‘did you know that’) and documentary sources cast light over unexplored aspects of life in the city.

Foreward

Thessaloniki is a multifaceted city that bears the mark of history; a dominant port, a stronghold, a mosaic of peoples, the metropolis of Macedonia. The vicissitudes, the twists, the conquerors and the inhabitants are the building materials that ‘made up’ this unrivaled multicultural city of the Thermaic Bay. The cement mortar holding them together is time that –who knows how many more developments and changes– has still to bring forth.
The region of Thermaic Bay before the foundation of Thessaloniki

Neolithic Age (circa 5800-3000 B.C.) and Bronze Age (3000-1100 B.C.)

Secret stories from the mists of time

The land that enfolds the Thermaic Gulf was inhabited thousands of years prior to the foundation of Thessaloniki. Archaeologists have unearthed finds of ancient settlements, which have their roots in Neolithic times. The first inhabitants settled in the area on the site of the Thessaloniki International Exhibition Centre where the remains of their houses were discovered. Another significant settlement was that of Stavroupolis. It was not a coincidence that the region of the Thermaic Bay was inhabited so early; it was a unique haven where four rivers flowed into the sea, thereby forming the best sheltered anchorage in North Aegean. To the north-east the heights of Mount Chortiatis provided protection against bad weather while the plains were fertile enough. The sea was a source of food and a communication channel, whereas the forests abounded in game and timber. In the eyes of prehistoric people this must have looked like true heaven on earth. They set up their households in scattered villages that, ‘like a wreath, surrounded the Thermaic Gulf for centuries’.

In the Bronze Age these settlements reached their peak. As buildings were made of perishable materials –such as wood, straw, reeds, leather, mud-bricks– their proof is scarce. Nevertheless, they are the only evidence that guide us through our exploration of the distant prehistoric times due to the absence of any documentary sources. Quite often, prehistoric remains are found within small mounds of earth and debris, which the archaeologists have named ‘toumbae’, created as a result of the incessant human inhabitance in the region. These peculiar islands made of soil, scattered all over the region, are reminiscences of the ancient origins of the city.
Iron Age (1100-700 B.C.), Archaic period (700-480 B.C.) and Classical period (480-316/15 B.C.)

The cities ‘prior to the city’
Life in the region of the Thermaic Bay continued unremittingly. The dispersed villages in the mainland and along the bay had not changed since prehistoric times. Very rarely do their remains survive through to this day. Every now and again excavations unearth the ruins of some notable buildings, marble architectural members or sculptures. They are indications that some of these enigmatic settlements evolved into cities with orderly public spaces. One of these cities was located in today’s Toumba. Quite possibly Thermi was distinguished from the rest of its neighbouring settlements for it was greater in size. It dominated the harbour, as it was built in the centre of the bay, which was eventually named after the village. The glorious city of Cassander was later born out of these ‘communities’.

Did you know that?
For many centuries, the mysterious ‘toumbae’ configurations in the region of the Thermaic Bay remained unexplored. They were first recorded by travelers during the Ottoman period by their Turkish names. In the First World War they served as military camps or shelters used by the Allies. The excavations reveal their ancient secrets through to this day!
From the sparsely inhabited villages to the great imperial city

Hellenistic Thessaloniki (316/15-168 B.C.)

By the year 316/15 the place was unrecognizable compared to its past times. A new city overlooking the Thermaic Gulf dominated the region. It was built by Cassander, who named the new city Thessaloniki after his wife who was half-sister of Alexander the Great, following the unification of 26 ancient villages. The old settlements were deserted since the new neighbourhoods became a magnet for the noblest inhabitants. Many more soon followed; Macedonians, Thracians, Thessalians, Athenians, Ionian Greeks, merchants and craftsmen who brought a cosmopolitan flair.

Early on, and because of its strategic location, the dynamics of the city became evident. Cassander was perceptive enough to establish his dominion over the port, which was the principal gate of Macedonia to the sea.

Being the crossroads between the Balkans and the countryside, the spot was also ideal for commerce by land. To the south and all the way down to the sea, lay plane areas suitable for building. To the north-east, the fortified acropolis, unassailable like an eagle’s nest, was a barrier that repelled invaders and a refuge for the locals.

Time was harsh to the Hellenistic city, as the uninterrupted rebuilding practically erased its traces from the map. Its remains are sparse –some green stones from the defensive wall, ruined masonry and foundations here and there– seem like scattered fragments of a mosaic long lost. Archaeologists still try to detect the boundaries of the inhabited areas, since the wall that would serve as indication has been razed to the ground. The building of the city went on during the 3rd and the 2nd centuries B.C. until its neighbourhoods reached the seafront. These districts were deferential to the Hippodamian plan and consisted in streets perpendicular to each other forming rectangular blocks that stretched a little farther than Egnatia Street. Thereafter, and as the orientation of the land changed from south-eastwards to north-westwards, the blocks in the
vicinity of the seafront differentiated. There were also open spaces like the Campos where Galerius built his palace during the Roman rule.

To the west was the site of the sanctuaries, where the Serapeum was located. It was a temple dedicated to the Egyptian deities. This outlandish religion traveled through sea trade routes and found fertile ground in the cosmopolitan Thessaloniki. The seat of administration was situated further eastwards, in the locality of today’s Kyprion Agoniston Square, where the lavish palace of the royal family and the seat of the royal governor should have been located. Not far away, the ancient Agora was situated where the remains of the Roman Forum are. Only the ruins of a balneary, which up to now is the oldest evident public edifice, has survived from the Hellenistic period. The port was possibly to the south of today’s Navarinou Square and nearby there should have been a market along the seafront. However, according to recent studies it was very likely that the port was located to the west, on the site of today’s Dimokratias Square (Vardariou Square). Traffic in this busy anchorage never ceased; people and cargo moved relentlessly night and day.

Did you know that;
In the past the Thermaic Bay was much wider than today. It was gradually made narrower because of silt deposited at the cove of the bay after being carried by the flowing water of rivers. Maps clearly indicate entire areas of the modern city being covered in the past by sea.

Did you know that;
Historians believe that there were political aspirations behind the founding of Thessaloniki. Following the death of Alexander the Great, it is regarded as a strategic movement within the context of the ‘game of power’ the Successors engaged in. By creating a strong city in the heart of Macedonia Cassander wanted to consolidate his authority over the entire region.

‘After the Axius, at a distance of twenty stadia, is the Echedorus; then, forty stadia farther on, Thessaloniceia, founded by Gassander, and also the Egnatian Road. Cassander named the city after his wife Thessalonice, daughter of Philip son of Amyntas, after he had razed to the ground the towns in Crusis and those on the Thermaean Gulf, about twenty-six in number, and had
settled all the inhabitants together in one city; and this city is the metropolis of what is now
Macedonia. Among those included in the settlement were Apollonia, Chalastra, Therma,
Garessus, Aenea, and Cissus [...]

free rendition

Strabo, ‘Geographica’ 1, 21, 5
‘Mother of all Macedonia’

Roman Thessaloniki (168 B.C. - 330 A.D.)

After the Macedonians were defeated by the Roman legions at Pydna in 168 B.C., Perseus – the last king of Macedon – fled to Thessaloniki and set the fleet on fire in a vain hope that it would not fall to the enemy. The city was eventually conquered by the Romans and soon ‘spearheaded’ land and sea trade. The extent to which the city’s strategic location was appraised by the Romans is best illustrated by the fact that when they planned Egnatia Street that linked the East with the West they made certain that it would pass near the walls of the city.

During the early years of the Roman dominion the urban face of the city hardly underwent significant changes. For a long time there was no need for new fortifications as the ‘Roman peace’ (Pax Romana) entailed serenity. In the lowlands the city retained its orthogonal layout. In the course of time, habitation thickened in the heights overlooking the sea. Because of the gradient of the terrain these districts resembled a labyrinth consisting of chaotic alleys and haphazard building. The city experienced remarkable urbanization. New inhabitants migrated from South Greece, Thrace and Italy, as well as Jews and people from Asia Minor. Amongst them were seamen and tradesmen who dominated world trade.

The multicultural Thessaloniki became ‘crowded’, the largest commercial, economic and military centre in the Balkans. The wealthy lived in villas of unprecedented opulence. The Romans widened and paved the streets. They also devised a drainage system. The number of streets increased and stretched like net from one end of the city to the other. The monumental Via Regia (Royal Street) crossed the city horizontally and linked the Golden and the Kassandreotic gates of the walls. This vibrant and buzzing city had a 16 meter wide carriageway flanked by marble colonnades. Administration buildings that contained the seat of the Roman praetor were initially situated on the Kyprion Agoniston Square site. In the 1st century A.D. they were relocated eastwards to the new imposing Forum. As the population and its needs increased, the size of the Forum reached 20 stremma and amassed all administrative, religious and commercial activity (mid-2nd c. A.D.). This monumental complex contained the courts, the mint,
the city archives, as well as the odeon, shrines and shops that revolved around a paved peristyle quadrangle. The citizens walked through its shady sculpted arcades and courtyard to resolve their affairs, but also to talk, attend to orators and philosophers or pass their time enjoyably.

The sunset of the ancient world turned into the golden age of the city. When Caesar Galerius took control of the eastern part of the empire he relocated the seat of government and his residence. From being a provincial town Thessaloniki rose into a major administrative centre. The glorious palace complex that was built in the Campos area (end of 3rd – beginning of 4th c. A.D.) transformed completely the urban landscape. It was a majestic ‘city within the city’ covering a vast expanse that spanned the area from the Rotunda through to the sea and from the eastern wall to Navarinou Square. The Hippodrome, which was gigantic considering the size of the city, was immediately adjacent to the eastern wall. There, the tetrarch attended the spectacles and appeared in front of his subjects in a special box.

A few years after Galerius’ death, Constantine the Great sealed the fate of the city by endowing it with the ‘burrowed harbour’, an outstanding technical work in its time (322 A.D.) that was created in the Ladadika district after extensive embankments.

Did you know that?
The wealthy houses of the Roman metropolis were large and imposing. They had spacious apartments to accommodate large families, rooms for the slaves and areas intended for banquets and feasts. The elegant mosaic floor depicting Ariadne and god Dionysus, which is on display at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki is a powerful demonstration of the sumptuous decoration of Roman villas.

Did you know that?
To the south of the Roman Forum there was a two-storey arcade, whose name was forgotten in the course of time that contained beautiful female statues carved in relief. Legend has it that these figures were the king of Thrace, his entourage and also his wife who had fallen in love with Alexander the Great, all turned to stone. They were called ‘Idols’ and ‘Enchanted’ (or ‘Incantandas’, according to the Sephardic vernacular). Up until 1864 a large part of the arcade
survived in the courtyard of a Jewish house. The statues were later transferred to the Louvre Museum.
The first after the first

Byzantine Thessaloniki (330-1430)

When Constantine the Great relocated the heart of the empire to Constantinople, a new era was initiated for Thessaloniki, which became one of the most significant cities of the Byzantine Empire. The sermon delivered by Paul the Apostle was fertile and Thessalonians formed one of the earliest Christian communities in Europe. Still, the ancient urban tissue did not change much during the early Christian years.

The first alterations were instigated at the city’s periphery as the Byzantine emperors were interested in fortification. Progressively the city was shielded with a strong and solid defensive wall whose perimeter was approximately 8 kilometers long. It was built in stages by several emperors including Constantine the Great, Julian, Theodosius the Great and Heraclius. Nowadays archaeologists can discern the age of the walls based on their building materials, the inscriptions, the ‘embroidered’ patterns and the fashion in which these structures have been built. As a rule, the Byzantine fortifications ‘embraced’ their Roman predecessors. In the vulnerable lowlands triangular defensive projections incorporated the Roman towers, whereas in the highlands rectangular structures were mainly built. The gates, either small or large, locked at night for safety reasons, secured communication with the mainland and the harbour.

By the mid- 7th century Thessaloniki was almost unconquerable by land; it is said that only the walls of Constantinople surpassed the enclosure of Thessaloniki in terms of size and magnificence. Still, the seafront with its low walls was the city’s weakest point. This was eventually the breach from where the Saracens penetrated in 904 causing havoc all over the city.

Thessaloniki continued to live ‘enclosed’ for centuries; the coastal fortifications were only demolished in the 19th century. Little by little, those public places which were reminiscent of pagan idolatry deteriorated; the Roman Forum declined, its splendid buildings were deserted and the site turned into a quarry for the extraction of clay. People removed building materials undisturbed, and of the nearly 200 marble columns that enfolded the quadrangle only one
survives in its original height! At the beginning of the 7th century powerful earthquakes finished off the city. From the 13th through to the 14th century, however, some shops continued to operate within the ruins. The nearby area was arbitrarily built with humble structures and irregular streets. The Rotunda was converted into a Christian church adorned with spectacular mosaics and the Hippodrome kept on until the beginning of the 7th century.

From the 5th century onwards the first monumental basilicas transformed the city. Together with their auxiliary buildings they formed massive complexes that disfigured the Roman urban tissue: public edifices were thus either replaced or subsumed partly into the new structures, which occasionally occupied old streets. The functions of the city also changed radically, thereby creating new hubs away from the Forum. One of these was the new market of Hagios Menas near the new harbour. Byzantine documentary sources also make reference to the ‘Sthlavomese’ market and a street with specialty shops. The Byzantine Thessaloniki sustained its traditional commercial character.

As time went by the city abounded with churches and monasteries; domes and belfries was all you could see. The richly decorated churches were laced with ceramic embellishments on their walls. An evocative feeling emanated from the monasteries – oases of tranquility that were harmoniously integrated into the neighbourhoods. To a large extent modern Thessaloniki owes its unique character to its Byzantine monuments and fortifications that make it look like an open-air museum of Byzantine art and architecture.

In contrast, residential areas have hardly left any traces. Only the names of some neighbourhoods have survived, Katafyghi, Omphalos, Asomaton, Acheiropoietos. They were probably located amongst seven parallel main streets, some of which terminated in the city’s ancient gates. The Royal Street continued its journey through time renamed as ‘Leoforos’ and ‘Mese’. It was the place where the city’s inhabitants and merchants coming from all parts of the known world flowed. As the author John Kaminiates confirms, it was much easier to count the grains of the sand than the people thronged into the place.
What was indeed striking about Byzantine Thessaloniki was the high quality of the city’s infrastructures. A complex water supply system that consisted of conduits carried spring water through cisterns to the city’s fountains, its wealthy houses and public baths. Despite the fact that the use of bath houses did not conform to the Christian canons it is said that in the 14th century the number of bath houses in the city exceeded the needs of its dwellers.

After the downfall of the Byzantine Empire by the knights of the IV Crusade, the city was under Latin rule, thereby becoming the capital of the Latin Kingdom of Thessaloniki (1204-1224). In the 14th century the city was thrown into turmoil by the ‘rise of the Zealots’ when for a short period people who articulated democratic views revolted against the official imperial authority. Nonetheless, this century was also the ‘golden’ age in culture, painting and architecture. A little later, in 1430, the city was besieged and eventually conquered by the Ottomans.

**Did you know that?**

In the 6th century Thessaloniki was seriously threatened by the Slavs who besieged the city by land and sea. The invaders were abundant while the city’s defenders were only a few. Even though all facts indicated that the city would be captured by the barbarians, Saint Dimitrios intervened and in the end rescued the city. The account of the intervention can be found in ‘The Miracles of Saint Dimitrios’, a collection of Hagiological texts that date back to the 6th and 7th centuries.

‘Thessaloniki is my homeland, my friend. This I will advise you of first. It is she who has taught me much of what I failed to observe. I have known you for a short while and I fulfill the obligations that derive from this acquaintance by speaking of this great city, the capital of Macedonia that is celebrated for all such things that make it glorious and unequalled with no serious contender. And yet, it is even more renowned for her piety to God, which persists even today.’

*Ioannis Kaminiates, ‘The Capture of Thessaloniki’, Athens, 2010*
Did you know that?

The Vlatadon Monastery played a key role in the city’s water supply system. Closed and open conduits passing through the monastery carried clean water from the springs of Mount Chortiatis to the city. Three cisterns that collected water survive today.
‘Selânik’ a multinational metropolis

Ottoman Thessaloniki (1430-1912)

The Ottomans took measures to strengthen the decimated population of Thessaloniki but it took some time before the city managed to recover. As war techniques had become more sophisticated, the reinforcement of the walls became imperative. The city was shielded with remarkable fortifications spearheaded by their towers and fortresses. The acropolis became the seat of the Turkish governor, thus remaining the core of the city’s defense. The Christians had named this restricted zone ‘Upper Castle’ and stayed away from its high walls uphill.

In the 19th century administration moved to Konak, where the Government House is now, while the Heptapyrgion fortress to the north-east of the acropolis was converted to an infamous prison, known as Yedi Kule. A century after the Ottomans seized the city, Muslims and Christians shared the same neighbourhoods. At first and as the great Byzantine churches were converted into mosques, no new places of worship were needed. The Christians were content with some modest churches with no belfries, secreted in courtyards or amidst houses so as not to incite the religious sentiment of the conquerors.

From 1492 and for the next century 15,000 Jews were expelled from Spain, Italy and central Europe in droves, settled in Thessaloniki and induced radical demographic changes. Already by 1519 Thessaloniki had become a metropolis with a population of 30,000. Nonetheless, people still used the old markets and the various neighbourhoods while the parish churches preserved their Byzantines names.

Everything changed in 1620 when a fire burned the city to the ground. New dwellings rose from the ashes in districts that were renamed and segregated based on religion and nationality. The Turkish population moved to the dominant Upper Town where the climate was mild. This pleasant neighbourhood, the sunny ‘Bairi’ (hillside), was noted for its high buildings with courtyards and gardens, its open spaces with trees and fountains and also a panoramic view of the sea.
The plain was shared mainly by Greeks and Jews. The Jewish districts stretched from the ‘Wide Street’ as the Greeks used to name the Leoforos through to the maritime wall. They comprised of family communities (‘kahal’) packed together around modest synagogues, living in small suffocating dwellings with no court, tightly built in narrow grimy streets. No other place in the city was as filthy as these neighbourhoods; even the sea breeze would not suffice to clear up the air. Those Jews who had converted to Islam (‘dönmeh’) lived in better conditions near the ancient Agora. The Greek districts were dispersed around the Wide Street, the Arch of Galerius, the Hippodrome and the east walls. The ‘Frankish Quarter’ (‘Malta’) where all foreigners lived as early as in the Byzantine period extended around today’s Fragkon Street and had beautiful stone-built houses with captivating qualities.

Up until the outset of the 20th century people were circumscribed within their ‘imaginary barriers’ living in their own microcosms and intermingled only within the context of administration and commercial undertakings. The neighbourhoods obliterated the regular urban blocks. Only the ancient monuments, the religious buildings and the markets with the wooden or canvas awnings that had become the landmarks of the Ottoman city could be discerned. The sole square of the city was the arena of the Hippodrome (‘Podromi’) that was overgrown with plane trees stirring up the admiration of travelers.

The largest commercial area occupied the alleys that stretched from today’s Egnatia Street through to Hagios Menas and Panagia Chalkeon churches. The area also contained the ‘Flour Market’ (‘Un Kapan’), the enclosed textile market (Bezesteni) and the great Caravanserai.

On a strip of land by the seafront, outside the city’s walls, beyond the Yalos gate, there was an area intended exclusively for trade; it was the Egyptian Market that included the tanneries and traded exotic goods, wheat, and oil, and from the 16th century it was possibly also a slave market. The Ottomans built mosques, hamams, covered markets and inns. They also engaged in the city’s water supply system, yet clean water was a luxury for just a few; in most Jewish districts there was not even a single public fountain. The Ottoman buildings left their mark on the fabric of the city. Travelers from the sea gazed in amazement at a forest of minarets behind the
battlements and above the rooftops. The image was idyllic and indeed one of the most beautiful settings in the Eastern Mediterranean, but as soon as travelers set foot on land and faced the grimy neighbourhoods, the initial impression instantly faded away. The city lacked basic infrastructure, dock area, street network, squares and public edifices. In 1859 Sultan Abdül Mecid I received his guests in a tent by the sea as there was no public building for the occasion!

The great transformations in the city’s urban planning took place from the mid-19th century onwards as a result of the fact that the Ottoman Empire had wholeheartedly entered into the spirit of reform (Tanzimat: reorganization). Thessaloniki had obtained a dominant position in economy and commerce. The city’s port was one of the most important in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the new railway lines put Thessaloniki in Europe’s transportation map. The Greeks, the Ottomans and the Jewish built imposing buildings for their charities in various architectural styles that reflected their taste. The city abounded in magnificent edifices, banks, hotels, theatres, schools and hospitals.

In 1870 the reformist Sabri Pasha demolished the maritime wall ‘for the sake of increment of land and the construction of the quay’. For that purpose the ruins were buried deep down so that the first quay could be made. The southern parts of the east and west walls had the same fate. This intervention signaled the modern era of the city. Thessaloniki sprawled eastwards to the Hamidiye quarter (Pyrgoi) with houses for the rich who were unmindful of the barriers imposed by religion, and also northwestwards to settlements inhabited by the working class. Contrary to the old city with the wooden dwellings and the alleys, the suburbs had well-ordered street planning. To the west, in particular, modern factories were built whereas the port was modernized with a breakwater, docks, the Customs House and warehouses. The main entrance to the city by sea was the Pier which was the first unrestricted open space planned in centuries.

After the 1890 fire, the district around the church of Hagia Sophia was reconstructed based on systematic planning. By 1905 the population was doubled within thirty years, thereby reaching 150,000. The daily life of the city dwellers was comforted by tramways, bus lines and coasters. Moreover, the maritime Nikis Street and the ‘Hamidiye’ thoroughfare (Ethnikis Amynis) were
planned, Sabri Pasha Street (Venizelou) was widened and Egnatia was aligned. The 20th century would discover in the Thermaic Bay a city reborn, looking across to Europe.

Did you know that?
The Ottomans were to be expected to convert Byzantine churches into mosques, thereby changing their names to meet the needs of their faith. The same applied to Thessaloniki, which, it was said, had as many churches as the days of the calendar year! Therefore, we know the original names of only ten of the Byzantine churches that live on today.

Did you know that?
The demolition of the city’s fortifications was done in festive spirit. Sabri Pasha, the city’s Wāli (governor) perched on a mound of debris on the west corner of the coastal walls, gave the signal with a silver hammer. The Ottomans pulled down the Tower of the Dock and renamed the Fort of Vardar Top Hane. The quay that was formed was narrow and as it flooded every so often the sea water could sweep away even the tables from the cafés.

‘This beautiful fortress rests on nine hills and rocky heights. It has eight gates on its three sides and is divided into six towers that nonetheless form one precinct. The order of the six parts of the fortress is as follows: the fortress of the city, the fortress of Vardar, the fort of Kalamaria, the Yedi Kule, the Kusakli Kule and the Top Hane Kule. There is one gate for each section; only Yedi Kule has two more on the side that goes down to the city. All gates are single, but very high and well protected. Inside and outside the sections there are no moats because the terrain is too rocky and hard to dig. It is therefore equally difficult for the enemy to form tunnels. In the main, it is a fine edifice and indeed a kind of structure that cannot be easily built again. (God guard it from all mischief!).’

Evliya Çelebi, Travel to Greece

‘...the houses bounce at a slant with hayat, balconies, sachnisi; all kinds of embellishment that crest the walls, hang from the rooftops, sticking up from the terraces, eating away at the neighbour’s space within a picturesque miscellany beyond words’.

From the Liberation to the modern-day megalopolis

Modern Thessaloniki (1912 - today)

On October 26th 1912, on the feast day of the city’s patron saint, Saint Dimitrios, the Turkish General Tahsin Pasha signed at the Government House the surrender protocol of Thessaloniki to the Greek Army. The next day the Evzones triumphantly raised the Greek flag at the Government House.

Only five years after the Liberation an accident determined the urban character of the city for the years to come. On August 5th 1917 a dwelling behind the Government House caught fire, which soon spread because of the Vardaris wind that blew strong. For thirty two consecutive hours the ‘Great Fire’, as it was called, burned down wildly the historic centre of the city. It was only put out when it reached the sea. Nearly the entire old city went up in flames. It was an unprecedented catastrophe, but at the same time it was an opportunity for a profound urban renewal. The Greek government responded with determination and assigned the colossal undertaking to the ‘International Committee for the New Plan of Thessaloniki’ under the direction of Ernest Hébrard, French archaeologist, urban planner and architect, who at the time was in the services of the Macedonian Front with the troops of the East.

In no time, the burned areas were drawn on topographical maps and properties were recorded in the first land registry. Hébrard envisioned a pioneering urban plan that would modernize Thessaloniki without depriving it of its historical character. The labyrinthine neighbourhoods that were crammed full of houses, public buildings, stores and workshops, were replaced by well-ordered urban fabric. Everything was meticulously planned in blocks that ran parallel to the sea. The commercial, political, administrative and judicial functions of the city were segregated; the proposed layout resembled that of European cities with monumental boulevards and squares; the compulsory relocation of industries away from the city centre was instituted; emphasis was placed on the Byzantine heritage and the ‘picturesque neighbourhoods’ of the city; green and recreation areas were thoroughly considered. As it was almost certain that new residents would be attracted to the city they made provisions for an expansion plan further than the burned area.
They even designed patent apartment buildings. Economic reasons and pettiness imposed changes and simplifications. Furthermore, they averted the implementation of the scheme in its entirety, which was thus circumscribed within the city centre only. The twist of fate also played its role; as a case in point, the building of the Court House was called off because, when builders began digging out to lay the foundations of the structure, the ancient Agora came to light. Even so, the rise of a great city from the ashes was a unique accomplishment that is considered one of the great urban planning projects of the 20th century.

When the reconstruction work quieted down the debris had been replaced by multi-storey buildings that combined elements from different architectural styles. The monumental Aristotelous Square overlooking Mount Olympus, which was planned according to the original design, is a vivid manifestation of the exemplary city Hébrard had envisaged. Another insightful choice was the expansion of the port facilities westwards, which enabled the historic centre to develop along the coastline. The original plan entailed the creation of a green belt that would enfold the city. Hence, the Seich Sou forest national park, the garden surrounding the White Tower, the University Campus and the International Fair site were formed. After the Great Fire the tradition of segregated habitation depending on religious identity was also ‘extinguished’.

From 1923 onwards a huge wave of refugees from Asia Minor and East Thrace changed the balances dramatically. Thessaloniki turned into the ‘Refugee capital’ as their settlements stretched out over the Upper Town and mainly on the outskirts eastwards and westwards. The city’s industrial zone was also relocated by their neighbourhoods. The Muslim population of the city took the opposite direction and thus the traditional multicultural character of the city faded away. The momentous changes that came about on the population map culminated in the extinction of the Jewish community during the Second World War.

In the post-war years a large number of internal migrants, mostly from Macedonia, moved to the city. The demanding issue of their habitation resulted in unhindered building, thereby forming new districts off the city centre in order to house them. For two decades, the practicing of valuable consideration of land was a one-way answer, which, even though it soon weakened, caused irreversible damage to the city’s urban tissue. This disorderly building left an indelible
mark on the city; the urban fabric congested and the city centre was encumbered. But at the same time, new, intriguing architectural complexes were designed: the University Campus and the Thessaloniki International Exhibition Centre reflected modern architecture, while the ‘museum district’ comprised a modern urban nucleus. The seafront was radically transformed with the aid of embankment fills that resulted in the ‘Nea Paralia’ esplanade to the east of the White Tower. The Upper Town, which escaped the Great Fire, had a different fate. In 1979 it was designated as a listed traditional settlement. There, it seems as if time has stood still. Old houses with courts and sachnisi coexist harmoniously with contemporary structures that respect local tradition.

The 1978 earthquake has given the opportunity for extensive interventions in the historic city centre. New public buildings were erected in deference to eclecticism. Then followed the great projects of the 1980s and the 1990s: hospitals and sports centres were built, the industrial zone was expanded, historic sites were regenerated, the city’s monumental thoroughfares were highlighted and a commercial zone was created near the airport.

Over the last few years Thessaloniki has been funneling once again economic migrants that changed the city’s functions. In 1997 it became European Capital of Culture. This was a window of opportunity to restore public edifices intended for cultural purposes mostly. The recent regeneration of the coastal front has revived the city and reinstated its relationship with the sea.

Embraced by its enchanting past looking over to the future, Thessaloniki lives, breathes and matures day after day. It is up to us to come closer to the city by walking along intimate routes, already known, or others, unmapped. Or, why not, take our very own personal course that will look like no other.

‘That the city has soul, I will be the last to deny. Yet, it is not the soul that will come to you. Unless you seek for it yourself you may never know it is out there. If you wish to know about the psyche of the city you have to search deep down persistently. Never give up the idea of wondering what lay here ages ago and who came before us. Question what you see for the sake of the unseen. Go past those who speak for the sake of those who have neither voice nor body. Signs are secreted in documents and old pictures. But without you, they are worth nothing.’
Did you know that?
During excavation work that was carried out for the construction of the Thessaloniki subway system—a project of paramount importance for the city dwellers—an unexpected find was unearthed at the Venizelou Street station: the intersection of the marble-paved Mese with a principal stone-paved axis. This was one of the busiest sections of Byzantine Thessaloniki. After so many centuries, the majestic tetrapylon, the roofed pavements even the marks of the passing of carriages that etched the surface came back to light.
Timeline
‘Time flowed like water in Thessaloniki’
23 centuries of history at a single glance

5800-5400 B.C.
The first inhabitants settle on the Thermaic Bay
They build their settlement on the site of the International Fair.

316/5 B.C.
A new city is born
Cassander founds Thessaloniki after the unification of 26 ancient settlements. He names the city after his wife who was the sister of Alexander the Great.

168 B.C.
The city under the Roman dominion
Thessaloniki becomes the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia.

146-120 B.C.
A thoroughfare for the legions
The Romans construct the Via Egnatia, which passes by the city’s walls.

50 A.D.
Word of God
Paul the Apostle taught at the Synagogue and writes the ‘Epistles to the Thessalonians’.

293-305 A.D.
A capital for Galerius
Thessaloniki becomes the capital of Eastern Illyricum prefecture and is embellished with the glorious palace complex.
303 A.D.
Martyrdom Hours
The young Christian Dimitrios was executed during the horrendous persecutions of Diocletian.

322 A.D.
The emperor’s anchorage
Constantine the Great builds a colossal artificial harbour.

380 A.D.
A fortress-city
Emperor Theodosius constructs soaring walls to shield the city against the Goths.

412-413 A.D.
An edifice worthy of the Myrrh-Streamer
The Eparch Leontios dedicates a magnificent basilica to Saint Dimitrios.

620 A.D.
At the mercy of earthquake
A terrible earthquake leaves the buildings of the Roman Forum in ruins and causes devastation.

904 A.D.
Disaster over the city
The Saracens plunder Thessaloniki and its inhabitants are held captive.

1204-1224
The Latin capture
Thessaloniki becomes capital of the ‘Frankish Kingdom of Thessaloniki’.

14th century
The ‘golden age’ of Thessaloniki
The city plays a leading role in the arts and culture.
1342-1349
Upheaval ‘from within’
Violence strikes the city as the rise of the ‘Zealots’ who wanted to take over power breaks out.

March 29, 1430
The last Capture
The second capital city in the hands of the Sultan.

1492 - end of 16th century
New populace, new eras
Thousands of outcast Jews from Spain, Italy and central Europe find a new home in Thessaloniki.

1620 onwards
A new era in the city’s ashes
After a great fire, Greeks, Muslims and Jews rebuild their houses in separate districts.

1866-1889
Looking over to the sea
The maritime and eastern walls are demolished; the quay and the coastal thoroughfare are constructed.

1888, 1893
New age, new transportations
Thessaloniki is connected by rail with Europe. The first horse-drawn trams run on the city’s streets.

1912
A blessed surrender
The Ottomans relinquish the city to the Greek Army peacefully.
1917-1933
From the ‘Fire of the century’ to the worksite-city
The old Thessaloniki is on fire and a new city rises from the ashes based on the vision of the great urban planner Ernest Hébrard.

1922-1926
‘Refugee Capital’
The city becomes shelter for thousands of displaced Greeks from Asia Minor.

1926
Looking across to the future
The University is established and the first International Fair is held where the heart of commerce and development beats.

1957
New itineraries
The new seafront is planned and expanded; trams are replaced by buses.

1978
The ‘great earthquake’
Once again the city recounts its losses.

1985
The birthday of a queen
Thessaloniki celebrates 2,300 years of history.

1997
Culture on the focus of attention
The city becomes European Capital of Culture; a great number of public buildings intended for cultural events are restored.
2006

**Subterranean routes**

Construction work for the city’s subway railway system is instigated.

2012

**A century of modern life**

Thessaloniki joyously celebrates the centenary of the Liberation.
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