

# Practice and theory in Greek urban design

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**ABSTRACT:** The phenomenon that has intensively been recorded in contemporary Greek urban reality is the observed deviation between built urban environment and the process of teaching urban planning in universities. The particularities of local architecture, products of the effort of adapting the peculiar urban landscape combined with the existing climatic conditions, are often ignored in order to create impressive elements (most times copies of international corresponding) aiming at superficial impressions than to function and duration. "*Impression of the moment*" often restricts urban formations to smoothly integrate within existing urban terrain and prohibits project to adequately adjust the existing environmental conditions. As soon as young students from architectural schools begin their profession as licensed architects, they realise the amount of legislative restrictions they have to face in order to adjust their practices to contemporary Greek urban status. Consequently, they are "trapped" between inspiration and reality. Our paper aims to reveal the way traditional urban design, as developed through years of adaptive function, operates in local urban tissues (Greek islands, town centres etc.) and how new projects have failed to adjust its qualities, neglecting to take into active consideration the existing reality. In light of the research, a few important conclusions have been reached as to propose ways of connecting theory with practice in Greek urban reality.

Conference theme: Urban design studies

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is written as a result of ongoing research on the relationship between "education" and "practice" in contemporary Greek urban design. Below we discuss the most recent large-scale urban redevelopment at the waterfront of Faliron (Athens) for the demands of the Olympic Games 2004 set against a more exhaustive in terms of *topos*' attributes acknowledgment within design process example from Ermoupoli. In what follows, we will suggest that contemporary urban design practice is often governed as strongly by restrictions from the contemporary planning legislation as it is by impositions from market-driven forces in shake of projects' economic feasibility; and that the conceptual approach most often disseminated within planning schools usually restricts young urban designers to employ a self-legitimized, concrete and consistent to local attributes design practice. In the current paper, we critically evaluate the impact that recent approaches in teaching urban design and students' subjective position may have at the formulation of design attitudes and strategies when *topos-making* and *topos-shaping* actions are seen as supplementary dualities in the context of Greek urban terrain. The selected projects for the comparative study manifest the most recent practices and are employed to answer the question on the relationship between

"education" and "practice" in the light of the major studio-courses for undergraduate student at the Architectural and Planning Faculty of the University of Thessaly, Greece. In light of the case studies, a few important conclusions have been reached as to the value and contribution of enhancing students' subjective position to actively acknowledge the particularities of Greek architecture, its needs and qualities to the "topos-making" and "topos-shaping" process by means of a more realistic design attitude.

It is possible to initially address the question of 'bridging theory with practice' raised by the above thoughts through a systematic theoretical inquiry; but our understanding of the issues involved may not be comprehensive enough to make that a viable option. Instead, it is seemed safer to address the question through an exploratory, diagnostic comparative case study that outlines two real-setting situations of contemporary urban waterfronts which can help to identify the essential characteristics of the on-study phenomenon. This will keep matters concrete; help bring to light unsuspected issues; and, above all, use the empirical data of the investigation process (notes from discussions with students, remarks on published researches etc.) to formulate the main theoretical concepts in order to keep the structure of the general arguments expositive enough. This is a "ground-up" approach to theory building, defined by Strauss and

Corbin as “qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:24)

## 1. THE URBAN WATERFRONT AS DISBOUNDED “SHOWCASE”: AN URBAN DESIGN STUDY

### 1.1. Selecting the case study

Figure 1 shows the regenerated image of the urban terrain at the coastal space of Faleron as developed for the demands of Olympic Games in Athens 2004. The project was based on the urban study carried out by architects “Th.Papayiannis and Associates” dealing with the regeneration of 80 hectares on the waterfront of Athens. Since the traditional and natural opening of Athens to the sea at Faleron Bay was violently disrupted in recent decades by wrong political decisions and impacts of mass urbanization, the Olympic Games put pressure for its regeneration. In the case of the new coastal reality, effort was made for a dramatic shift: urban practices during 1970’s and 1980’s resulted in an extensive no-man’s land and certainly an undefined relation between city and sea (both functionally and aesthetically) which was called to change into a new, more flexible and privileged metropolitan public area and an attraction pole of metropolitan significance, allowing the reopening of the city to the sea.



**Figure 1:** Faleron Bay and its urban context. Source: (Google maps)

This prospect allows us some important insights into the final achievement of project’s initial purposes mostly at the post-Olympic era. The paper takes as a premise the observation that “Faleron waterside reality” is rather epitomized by the word “complexity”: a variety of components and interaction relations construct the study premises of this paper. These components include among others:

- the technical dimension of Faleron urban waterfront (utilitarian features related to the waterside environment of the Olympic phase like athletic facilities or coastal promenades)
- the environmental dimension (the degree to which urban design acknowledges the adaptation of climatic and ecologic parameters as design guidelines or how natural and climatic changes influence the rest components)
- the social dimension (the ramifications of people’s interaction with other groups at the location or with the environment as well)
- the symbolic dimension (urban Faleron Bay has always played the role of accommodating transcendental water-related beliefs with its utilitarian features)

Even within the “New Waterfront” era proper, starting with London Docklands during 1980’s, there has been a tradition of recognizing the significance of complexity’s aspects in designing the urban forehead upon water – a tradition that includes scholars as diverse as Ann Breen and Dick Rigby, authors of the inaugurative book “The New Waterfront, A Worldwide Urban Success Story” (1996) who brought a collective study from major built waterfront large-scale redevelopments to urban design process, and Kenneth Powell, who, inspired by contemporary pragmatism in building the Edge, argued for a “City Transformed” (2000) by market-driven processes relatively autonomous rather than as by-product of an applicable “societal” urban design theory.

Indeed, the “field site” of any waterfront-related research effort should acknowledge the complexity of the issue and include its constituted dimensions. However, this effort, adds to them another, even promising, premise that “New Waterfront” era seems to deliberately exclude: coastal formations can also employ micro-climatic aspects to their structure. That is, incorporation of ecologic elements that make up their form not as parts merely circumstantially brought together under the pressure of commercial urbanization, but as entities existing under reciprocal influences with their environmental settings.

In the current study, the premises of Faleron’s forehead include both structure and location. The current site is selected on the basis of the richness of seaside environmental data, and/or site’s unfamiliarity and suitability (Neuman, 2003:371). The Faleron coastal area, identified as the specific are of study, is located in the main waterfront area of Athen’s forehead upon water. The particular site is characteristic, due to its significance to citizens’ everyday life, as well as its plethora of sub-areas of athletic and recreational functions; and is, therefore, selected primarily on the bases of the richness of its data. The priority that government ascribed to the redevelopment of the area for the purposes of Olympic Games manifests the high degree of significance that city ascribes to this vital zone.

## 1.2. Contemporary practice and disregarding variables

The design attitude of incorporating local and environmental aspects as "initial decisions" is often predicated on several issues vital to each project's success as a quite thriving public space. The on-study waterfront redevelopment should have been conceptualized not just as an athletic district but as a community's "living room" which could possibly support at least three basic types of socializing:

- people who approach the Faleron in groups for the purpose of, for example, recreation, eating or entertainment
- people who approach the area alone and hope to meet others which may belong to the same group and are expected to be found there
- and people who pass-by the area every day or several times per day and tend to develop routines relations with others of the same group.

However, the total disregard for a general waterfront spatial identity, smoothly applied and strongly interwoven with backstage urban reality brings to the fore the importance of transitional, interpenetrated areas between water and city and alerts us to the greater necessity of a kind of spatial mixture (in terms of environmental aspects first, and afterwards uses or functions) as determinant of re-defining image's structural relation. In fact, we can say that for Faleron Bay, the sense of a transitional zone (or sub-places) between urban core and waterfront area was lost and been replaced by the concept of "self-building": structures unconnected to the city and alien to the sense of topos (figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Master plan of the post-Olympic phase.  
Source: (Faleron Bay Brochure, 2004)

If we try to categorize the above-mentioned parameters of local, social and ecologic variables which seem to intervene to such a large-scale redevelopment, we can sketch out the weak points that the project failed to acknowledge during its "initial decisions" phase:

- It seems to disregard the creation of object(s) of high aesthetic quality specially designed to serve orientation purposes in order to challenge human behavior towards them. For this reason "surprising" and "meaningful activities" are not found inside or around Faleron (activity patterns addressed not only

to athletes but for as much of social groups possible)

- There is a failure to incorporate a variety of design attitudes and spatial layouts for docks-like "extensions" which can afford different degrees of formality of interpersonal interaction: from intimate ones (cafes located on city/water edge that could facilitate warm conversations) to more formal (like social events- temporary expositions, concerts, festivals- held around the Faleron Bay area)
- It doesn't connect the new reality with the existing urban fabric, restricting its fragmented zone by means of a high-speed motorway which cuts into two pieces the whole area
- Its buildings are designed without clear semantic and/or symbolic meaning to be communicated along user groups. Moreover, they are not consistent to human-scale design in order to assure their successful, meaningful and smooth operation. For this, desolation and abandoned, dead spaces along Faleron are to be found.
- It lacks the programming stage which pre-determines what sort of "in-water extensions" will be needed and assure that these are located in meaningful points (well orientated, close to entrances of the area, near the liquid element that promotes poetic views, near important buildings, near natural qualities etc.) Therefore the area has been cut down by a linear monotonous track which makes the whole area to be avoided and neglected by passersby.

The prevailed prospect is that of an absolute commercialization at the name of a "new athletic complex" in the heart of Faleron and by the new enormous heights allowed by planning regulations on the coasts of city, aspects that promote the aesthetic, olfactory and microclimatic blocking of sea. The Faleron lost its forehead, and was transformed into a complicated hypertopic circulatory hub that excludes people - instead of welcoming the citizens. In the place of the old Athenian poetic forehead, enormous stadiums and buildings of offices were raised, following certain postmodern incoherent aesthetic writings, allowing the complete "exploitation" of Faleron area (picture 3).

Urban design has always had an ambivalent attitude towards theory and practice of designing city's edge on water but never before had been so influenced by the commercial paraphernalia of our days. And this because the resulting design proposal with a circulation network which embraces and suffocates the sensitive area of the coastline usually leaves aside the question of human-centered design and adopts images of "cityness" to obscure the relation of the intellectual and practical parts; the juxtaposition of the architectural thought for expanding the city into the sea and the final built result is immediate and tragic. By that, we do not necessarily imply a deficiency of the first or that the current waterfront projects is spiritually bankrupt; but rather an "incompatibility" between these two, which prevents a well expressed result to be established. This

incompatibility has as starting point the policy of convenience which trivializes architectural totality in favor of – economical, most times – merits and produces gestures which do not justify their existence, while they fail to gain an understanding of the image of the place.



**Figure 3:** The redeveloped area cuts the city from its access to the sea. (Faleron Bay Brochure, 2004)

## 2. TRADITIONAL GREEK ISLAND WATERFRONT: A STORY OF SUCCESS

As case study we have chosen Ermoupoli the waterfront of Syros Island, a place that is close to Athens and has the same climate characteristics, and has initially been designed as Greece's capital in the early creation of Greece. Ermoupoli was built between 1821 and 1835 by Greek refugees with the traditional elements of Greek architecture adjusted in the particularities of the island (figure 4).

Ermoupoli's waterfront is an area designed for a country's capital where commercial, administrative and recreation land uses exist and is mainly used by its residents during winter added by many tourists during summer. It's main characteristic, is that its today status has been created by constant adding changes during the effort to adjust to social, climatic and many other parameters.

The land uses that exist are mixed as shops co-exist with hotels, small manufactures, boat facilities e.t.c. allocated in buildings that follow "the constant building system" (a system where buildings are next to each other creating a continuous front) which is applied in building squares that are close to the sea in order to avoid the "urban canyon" phenomenon that is faced with the combination of strong winds and small open spaces between high buildings.

The main orientation of the building squares is south north with a small rotation that adjusts the buildings main "sight" towards the sea. The buildings that initially were houses and administrative buildings had two floors, tile roofs and many symmetrical windows at both sides of the buildings (smaller at the south side) in order to renew the air inside the house. The widths of the roads were regarding to the buildings heights proper for the best city's airing.



**Figure 4:** Ermoupoli, the capital of Syros Island. Source: (Google maps)

As for urban planning, the base of city's design was the creation of the central square, where all central activities were allocated (figure 5). Road axes connected the central square with the rest, mainly residence areas that also had their own bigger squares covered with trees for the best possible shading. The environmental parameter, the climatic conditions (strong winds, intense sunlight, humidity, lack of rain) have resulted the creation of ecological urban design that could solve the problems that are created by the above mentioned conditions.



**Figure 5:** Central square and rest open and green areas. Source: (Google maps)

The exterior areas that face intense solar radiation are shaded by manufactures that

- are parts of the buildings, (figure 6) . (The constructions position is according to the wind's direction, internal courtyards are created and shading constructions are built, etc.)
- cover and protect these areas (figure 7). (Mobile covers from timber or canes, vegetation, shutters, ledges above the windows, etc).

All these features are built with local "cheap" materials as stone, wood, marble that at the same time ensure the buildings best climatic adjustment (cool during summer, warm during winter).



**Figure 6:** Spaces protected from the intense solar radiation with manufactures that are parts of the buildings. Source: (author, 2000)

The buildings are made of stone in order to maintain the internal building's temperature. Trees are helping to reduce the temperature of the air that comes in the houses during summer, and that is why they consisted (although they are reduced due to continuous touristic constructions) a major part of the city's total.

We must report at this point, that today's status is different from the initial, and planning principles have been ignored as market forces have led to the intensive land exploitation and that Architecture and urban design as today function in Greece have very few similarities with the corresponding traditional, as far as environmental factors are concerned.



**Figure 7:** Spaces protected from the intense solar radiation with external elements. Source: (author, 2000)

### **3. THEORY AND PRACTICE DESCREPANCY IN ARCHITECTURAL STUDIES: THE NEED FOR AN EDUCATIONAL RESTRUCTURING**

#### **3.1. Preliminary reflections on modeling project studios**

The main characteristic of Greek architectural and spatial studies is that every project, as presented to students for further study, has no restrictions, neither legislative nor economic. This results from the initial intention of university teachers to often leave students unconstrained in the belief that such an attitude will foster their inspiration and imagination for the best possible experimental design outcome. This phenomenon is observed in most design courses: from industrial and architectural to spatial and urban design, producing impressive but unrealistic works.

The real problem initially appears when students finish their studies and become licensed professionals. From this moment, they have to deal with new, strict and unknown conditions. Unfortunately, and this is mainly observed with public constructions, the economic factor is often raised as the basic design "tool". Suddenly many restrictions -concerning for example material prices, existing legislation, salaries etc. - appear, limiting if not the initial idea of the final design product.

In fact, state's "General Building Regulation" is the core for any architectural and spatial development in Greece, defining several restrictions that all constructions should obey. All architects face similar restrictions during design process regarding aspects like the maximum allowed height, surface, distances from other buildings, and many other parameters. This set of hundreds of regulations must apply in every construction since 1985; and until today its punctual application is the necessary condition for every building creation and function. These restrictions remain unknown to young professionals due to their limited education; so many times they have to work with more experienced professionals in order to acquire methods

of adjusting their practice to the current conditions and learn all the “new” design parameters.

The paper proposes a shift in educational practice, though it does not take all the steps towards it itself. From kinds of merely thinking in interpreting topo’s needs and qualities during urban design courses to kinds of thinking that pursues how urban formations and relations are established, coordinated and maintained in contemporary Greek cities. From our experience in architecture profession and education at the same time, we believe that restrictions, both economic and legislative, must also be taught in architectural schools during the main studies. We believe that all new architects must be prepared to enter the construction market with adequate knowledge to prove their skills. So we propose “on-situ” workshops: the entrance of “real time” conditions in all projects in order to prepare new professionals with the best way possible. We believe that every project should address a certain area *with* its building restrictions, with a certain budget, and students should encouraged to investigate ways of adjusting their work at current contemporary conditions, as if it is a real market project. Finally, we have observed that inspiration and imagination, not only are not under any threat, but instead are developed as more flexible under the framework of building restrictions, being a greater challenge to develop feasible designs than purely utopian.

### 3.2. Conclusions and course’s guidelines

The goal of this study, within the framework of applicability in urban design practice, is to generate adequate knowledge leading to the development of guidelines for the restructuring of urban design studios within architectural schools. Before prescribing the proposed framework, it is necessary to systematically analyze the above mentioned deficiencies and explain the conditions that contribute the necessity of their improvement. The systematic analysis and explanation of these “educational gaps” guides us to a rather formulative model for organizing future design studios. The model should be realistic; able to grasp the essential characteristics of project’s on-study site within contemporary urban environment: its limitations, allowances and objective handling.

In the previous section of the comparative case study, the crucial questions necessary to investigate the development of such a course-framework in the context of real-given waterfront design are put forward. Here we outline the criteria that determine what will constitute satisfactory solutions to the gaps identified so far. These criteria can be considered as “preliminary reflections” on the development of a formulative model for urban design studios addressed to third and fourth year students of architectural schools.

The preliminary reflections on a formulative model for course’s framework are:

- Given that students tend to handle the urban environment with an attitude of poetic realism, the model should identify the conditions that render a

site prone to, on one hand, sense-creation and suitable to generate, on the other, design results that can actually be built. The model should investigate students’ attitudes to local conditions, both as a situation in relation to other locations without building restrictions, and in terms of its unique internal characteristics addressing minimally three scales: territory, legislation and logical form.

- Given that the project’s site is better to be selected for urban regeneration processes and is often called to accommodate essential urbanistic activities for its future users, the model should rigorously investigate both the spatial and market-driven processes related to the location. If a number of user groups are about to accommodate their everyday lives in this site, the model should define the experiential patterns to be investigated by the students and distinguish the different urban formations that result from the (even loose) application of the “General Building Regulation”. The model should distinguish between those spatial patterns that occur only on the specific site and those that can occur in various urban locations.
- Given that students are called to deal with the whole set of location’s spatial and environmental recourses, the model should register all restrictions categories for the specific site. The model should correlate building activity and nature’s adaptation and therefore identify how urban spaces and formations can better be integrated within existing conditions in focus. The model should identify what makes urban spaces and formations experienced appropriate for prescribed spatial relationships by the “General Building Regulation” to occur.
- Given that students participating in the courses have no prior experience of the complexity of the urban scale, the model should be dynamic and incorporate city’s real demands and needs, market’s tendencies and past successful spatial patterns as variables. It should identify both long-term and short-term changes for the site. Finally, course’s model should promote the evolution of a realistic design strategy for the location instead of messed experiential and utopian scenarios that result mostly to superficial “*impressions of the moment*”.

This first instant of a new framework for restructuring design studios in architectural schools was investigated in real setting situations employing field research techniques such as noted discussions and inquiries from both inside and outside academia. The preliminary observations have been presented as an ideographic course model and provided the grounds to read the failure of Faliron development in contrast with the adaptive traditional urban design practice of Ermoupoli. Finally, the questions that the ideographic model intends to answer leading to the definition of model’s preliminary reflections on “bridging the gap” have been pronounced and can provide guidelines for structuring future cohesive urban design studios.

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