Monumental urban space and national identity: the early twentieth century new plan of Thessaloniki

Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos

Department of Urban and Regional Planning and Development, School of Architecture, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 54 124 Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

This paper is a contribution to the study of the ideological production of urban space through the analysis of the meaningful structure of the early-20th-century new plan of the city of Thessaloniki, Greece, and an examination of the ideological function of the plan for its producers as well as for the Greek public. The plan was prepared by a team led by the French architect Ernest Hébrard working in close connection with Greek government officials. It was partially implemented, and has been considered the first major urban intervention in Europe after World War I. The paper combines a historical geographical perspective with insights from the theory and methodology of semiotics. Through a holistic and meticulous analysis of the plan, its urban, aesthetic, nationalist and orientalist aspects are retraced and compared to the identity notions of the Greek politicians and the public.

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Introduction

My aim in this paper is to examine the ideological and planning discourse of Ernest Hébrard and its expression in his plan for the Northern Greek city of Thessaloniki (today the second largest city in Greece, with a population of about 750,000), a plan which was partly implemented. Hébrard, a French architect, was commissioned to prepare a new plan for Thessaloniki after a fire in 1917 destroyed most of the central part of the city. In addition to Hébrard’s views, the paper examines more briefly the discourses of key government officials that affected the production of the plan, as well as the reception of the plan by the Greek public.

I focus on the specific modes of the articulation of Hébrard’s discourse with the organization and form of the city, a perspective that, as I shall argue, is underemphasized in historical geography. For this analysis, I draw on current historical geographical approaches, but also use certain theoretical
and methodological tools from the domain of semiotics. The analysis of the discourse of an urban planner is not common in historical geography and may serve to enlarge the interests of the field. As in other cases, it allows us to follow the dialectics between the ideas of particular individuals and the general cultural discourses surrounding them. Finally, the discovery of the meaningful structure of the plan leads us to a discussion of a crucial ideological function of the city plan in the eyes of both its producers and the public, which is its contribution to the formation of Greek national consciousness and identity.

Detailed analysis of the ideological discourses underlying the production of space and their specific impact on land uses and spatial form, which is the focus of the present paper, has not been at the centre of interest in either human geography generally or historical geography more particularly. This holds true for all trends of human geography that see space as a vehicle for meaning. Behavioural geography has focused almost exclusively on the mental maps of already existing spaces, that is, on the reception (or perception, ‘consumption’), not the production, of space. Within the phenomenological context of humanistic geography, the mainstream approach has been the study of the meaning of space in general, informed in the last analysis by the perception of actual space, though there have of course also been studies oriented toward the production side and the biography of the urban landscape.

In historical geography, the influence of the postmodern paradigm has led to an interest in both the production and the reception of spatial meaning. On the reception side, studies are accumulating concerning the perception of space, the ideological discourses embodied in maps and painting, the identity of communities and discourses on the ‘other’, even the ideology guiding geographical thought itself. On the production side, several studies focus on the discourses and actions leading to the production of space, whether rural, urban, regional or national, but only a few studies follow closely the ‘translation’ of such discourses into spatial organization and form. Among these, I would include studies such as that by Hans-Jürgen Nitz, who shows the relation between the use of traditional cosmological models for the patterning of settlement space and the power strategy of a medieval king of South India; Dietrich Denecke, who studies the impact of ideology in different periods of German history on the pattern of rural and urban space; and, more recently, Donald B. Freeman, who turns our attention to the influence of the diverging views of two British high functionaries on the land uses and development of the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia, and Karen Schmelzkopf, who follows the imprint of ideology on the selection of the site, administration and form of the Methodist community of Ocean Grove, New Jersey, and the survival of this ideology in recent times. We can compare these studies with work of an historical orientation that appeared in the ‘new cultural geography’, such as that by Denis E. Cosgrove on the Western European landscape since the Renaissance, which contains much material on the ideological production of space, and that by James S. Duncan on the politico-religious discourses that shaped the royal capital of Sri Lanka, Kandy.

The historical development of the city of Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki was founded during the early Hellenistic period, in 316 BC, when King Kassandros of Macedonia, following a practice current in classical times, gathered together in one place the people and institutions of 26 surrounding towns and villages and named the new city Thessaloniki in honour of his spouse, the half-sister of Alexander the Great. The plan of this first phase of Thessaloniki is directly comparable to the Macedonian cities of the Hellenistic east and typical of the early Hellenistic city. It is a grid plan with a number of streets oriented NW–SE, among which are two long streets corresponding to
today’s Egnatia Street (the main street, which runs lengthwise through the middle of the city) and St Demetrius Street (to the north of the former), and a set of perpendicular streets, including today’s Venizelou Street (west of the central area and running directly to the sea) and St Sofia Street (east of this area and also running directly to the sea; Fig. 1). The central area of the city was occupied by the agora and other important constructions, and there was probably a second agora near the harbour. The city was surrounded by walls on three sides (the fourth side, the seafront, was not walled), and was provided with an acropolis including a fort.10 We might note that the grid plan was associated in classical Greece with Hippodamus of Miletus. Hippodamus, though not the inventor of this plan, seems to have applied it as part of a wider world view, strongly influenced by Pythagorean philosophy, where arithmology, cosmology and aesthetics all play a prominent part.11 This set of symbolic ideas also accompanied Hellenistic city plans.

In 168 BC, all the cities of mainland Northern Greece, including Thessaloniki, passed under Roman domination. The Roman city was from the fourth century BC also a grid city. As with the Greek city, the Roman grid referred to cosmological symbolism.12 In about 305 AD, a palace complex was built in the southeastern part of Thessaloniki by Galerius Valerius Maximianus, Caesar and later Augustus of the Eastern Roman Empire. This complex, for which the city wall was expanded and which became the new centre of administrative and religious life, included the Arch of Galerius, built on Egnatia Street a few years earlier; north of this and near the middle of the eastern wall was the Rotunda, a circular building of
unknown use which was converted in the fifth century into a church of St George; and south of Egnatia Street a palace and a hippodrome.\textsuperscript{13}

Already in antiquity, Greco-Roman culture was considered by both the Greeks and the Romans\textsuperscript{14} as the culture, and its urban model, the grid plan that we also find in Thessaloniki, as the model for a city. With the great expansion of the Greek colonies and the later comparable expansion of the Roman empire, and because of the economic, political and cultural domination of the Greeks and the Romans over the indigenous populations with which they came into contact, this is how the grid plan would have been presented to the vast number of these populations, and to the extent that they were assimilated into Greco-Roman culture, it is how they would have perceived it. It is certainly true that this view of the grid plan as the model \textit{par excellence} for a civilized city was revived in the Renaissance, to pass to and mark modern times.

The adoption of Christianity introduced a new socio-religious organisation in the city, namely organisation in relatively small urban units, parishes, each centred on a nucleus, its church. It is not surprising that this new multi-nuclear and introverted urban organisation would have an impact on the geometrical pattern of a city, which initially had been focused on a single central area. Thus, with the spread of Christianity a gradual transformation of the street pattern began, possibly accelerated from the 14th century, which contributed to a progressive ‘orientalisation’ of Thessaloniki, further accentuated when the city passed under Ottoman rule in 1430\textsuperscript{15}—see Figs. 1 and 2. However, the initial geometrical

Fig. 2. Thessaloniki in 1700. Lithograph by Dapper.
pattern can be detected in the background of the altered city plan, even towards the end of the 19th century.

From very early times Thessaloniki was a multi-ethnic city. In 1519, half of the 29,000 inhabitants were Jewish. At the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th, the spatial distribution of the inhabitants according to their ethnicity and religion stabilized. In the beginning of the 19th century, the ethnic composition of the population of the city, amounting to about 60,000 inhabitants, was about 30,000 Turks, 16,000 Greeks, 12,000 Jews and 2000 Western Europeans. The spatial segregation of the inhabitants is clear in the same period. In 1906, the Turkish population was located in the Upper City, the steep northern part of Thessaloniki, a relatively new quarter of the city dating from the 19th century; the Jewish population lived in the central area of the southern part of the city and in part of the south-western area, both located close to the sea; part of the central area and the south-eastern area were occupied by the Greeks; and the south-western part of the city, near the port, was inhabited by Western Europeans, mainly French. In 1913, 1 year after the liberation from Ottoman rule, of the city’s 157,889 inhabitants, 61,439 were Jewish, 45,867 Turkish, 39,956 Greek, 6263 Bulgarian and 4364 belonged to other ethnic groups.16

Hébrard and the new plan of Thessaloniki

In August 5, 1917, 5 years after the integration of Thessaloniki into the modern Greek state, a disastrous fire levelled more than 100 ha in the central and southeastern areas of the city, destroying about 9500 dwellings and rendering homeless about 70,000 inhabitants. The reaction of the Greek government was instantaneous. A commission of specialists, both Greek and French, started working immediately, joined by the well-known British architect Thomas Mawson, who stayed for about 2 months, gave useful advise and in January 1918 drew up a first plan for both the city intra-muros and its very sizeable extensions. After Mawson’s departure, in May of the same year, the commission prepared a new plan for the whole city that formed the basis for the plan, which was eventually adopted.17

The main author of the plan of May was the French architect Ernest Hébrard (1881–1933). Hébrard had won the Grand Prix de Rome, a famous architectural award and scholarship, and as a resident of the Villa Medici in Rome, where he arrived in 1899, had met with other French architects, winners of the same award, who later became famous (as did Hébrard himself). This group conceived a new professional profile, the architect-urban planner, and elaborated an urban theory, which in their opinion should be used by the new professionals, a theory that became the cornerstone of modern French planning. Their theory was doubly political: in that they were fully aware that only a powerful political authority would allow them to implement their ideas and proposals, and because it was elaborated in parallel with the French colonial(ist) experience. This modern planning believed in the protection of indigenous cultures, though not for reasons of the equality of cultures, since it aimed at exactly the opposite: to demonstrate to the indigenous populations, and to the French themselves, the superiority of the French. Also, the group believed that they had succeeded in unifying art, science and the French civilizing mission into a coherent whole, based on universal principles of order.

While in Rome, Hébrard collaborated with the American sculptor Henrik Christian Anderson on an ambitious and monumental project, a model ‘World City’. For its two authors, their city represents the culmination of social and architectural evolution and offers the place where science, religion and the arts could play their universal regulatory social role. This project, first published in 1912, just 6 years before
the plan for Thessaloniki, represents a synthesis between the neo-classical eclecticist, monumental architecture of the Beaux-Arts school and the emerging principles of modern planning.

Major emphasis is given to the morphology of the plan, the arrangement of the street network and the traffic, the segregation of the working class by locating it outside the central area, the use of trees along the main avenues and the distribution of green spaces in urban space, and to the satisfaction of what Hébrard conceived of as the universal needs for clean air, sun and light, as well as recreation (Fig. 3).

In 1917, Hébrard was already living in Thessaloniki as head of the Archaeological Service of the French Army of the Orient and had shown serious interest in the topography of the Byzantine city. He was able to reconstitute the Galerian complex, notably to show that the Rotunda and the Arch of Galerius had originally been united by an urban axis continuing south of the arch towards the sea. When in 1923 his fame brought him to the colony of Indochina as head of the Service of Urban Planning, his plans for the urban reorganisation and extension of cities in the colony show the same sensitivity to the local culture and architecture, and to those of other countries of south and south-east Asia, as he had shown in Thessaloniki.

Hébrard’s plans are characterised by the emerging principle of zoning. He distinguishes four types of zones: the administrative centre (his principal interest), the industrial areas, the leisure area and the dwelling quarters. It was the city of Thessaloniki that offered Hébrard his first occasion to apply his ideas in reality, since many of his major proposals for the city were implemented. Indeed, according to the great French historian of urban planning Pierre Lavedan, the reconstruction of Thessaloniki holds an eminent position in the history of urban planning, because it represents the first major urban intervention in Europe after World War I.¹⁸

Hébrard’s codes in the production of the plan

My discussion of Hébrard’s plan will mainly focus on the city intra-muros, which corresponds to the central area of today’s Thessaloniki. This area has the form of an irregular square with a surface of about 300 ha; the side of the square along the seafront is of about 2 km, and the perpendicular sides are 1.5 km to the west and 2 km to the east (Fig. 4).

The aim of my approach is to identify the codes Hébrard used in conceiving and drawing the plan and the design details of the city. By ‘codes’ I mean different meaningful structures, each one of which serves to articulate a micro-discourse on the world. In the case of the city, each code represents a different perspective on urban space. Discourse about space, as every discourse, can be seen to have a double purpose: it can refer either to practical states and processes occurring in space, or to the ‘meaning’ of its different attributes and features. We shall refer to the former kind of discourse and its codes as ‘practical’. But discourse can also express or assign meaning to urban space; in this case, its codes can be either ‘denotative’, referring to the direct, literal meanings of urban phenomena, or ‘connotative’, triggering a symbolic meaning anchored in the direct meaning.¹⁹ The terms denotative, connotative and practical should be thought of as different aspects or uses of a code; any code may appear in any of these three categories, depending on how it is being used in discourse.²⁰

There are two difficulties with analysis of the codes of Hébrard’s plan. First, Hébrard himself did not leave any written texts on the plan of Thessaloniki; we have only a very brief summary of his views from an indirect source. However, we have a presentation of the plan by Lavedan, who was close both culturally and in professional mentality to Hébrard. Also, we may understand the ideas that guided
the plan of Thessaloniki by comparison with Hébrard’s views in other cases, such as the World City and Indochina.

Second, it could be argued that the plan of Thessaloniki was the product of teamwork and, because of this, that it is difficult to discern Hébrard’s contribution. It is true that the producer of the plan was
a collective set of ‘actors’, only one of whom was Hébrard himself. It is possible that he was influenced by other participants on certain ideological issues or details of the plan, although if that was the case, these influences became part of his own thinking as well. It is also not impossible that certain ideas foreign to his own were expressed in the plan. But the data that we have indicate that the plan of Thessaloniki is in fact an Hébrard plan, and Lavedan is correct when he asserts that the plan was truly his work.  

The main codes operating in Hébrard’s plan, on the basis of the data at our disposal, are the economic code, the topographical code, the ecological code, the hygienic code, the functional code, the traffic code, the social code, the aesthetic code, the cultural code and the code of urban morphology. They will be discussed immediately below.

The principal element of the economic code when used as a practical code is the port, considered as the historical reason for the creation of the city and as the gateway to the Balkan Peninsula. In combination with the railroad, the port enhances commercial activity. In addition, industry is seen as crucial to the future of the city. We may assume that these elements, when seen semiotically, had for Hébrard the connotations of ‘modern city’ and ‘important city’.  

The topographical code appears in two different aspects. Used as a practical code, the emphasis is on the thesis that the city must be adapted to the natural conditions of its site. Simultaneously, when it functions as a denotative code, this landscape is viewed as offering a scenic setting for the city, so that the topographical code also activates a connotative aesthetic code.
The ecological code as a practical code refers to the adaptation of the city to orientation and the climate. The green spaces of Hébrard’s plan are related to this code, and to the practical code of leisure, an assumed universal need. Related to the ecological code as cause to effect is the practical hygienic code. We already saw that Hébrard believed in the universal need for air, sun and light. The hygienic code refers to the creation of a city healthy for its inhabitants.

The spatial form of the urban proposal is related to another set of practical codes. We may distinguish among them two major codes, the functional code and the code of traffic. The functional principle of zoning, dear to Hébrard, was used for the plan of Thessaloniki in a manner closely akin to his four-zone prototype. The central city intra-muros becomes the administrative centre, combined with luxury and everyday commerce, leisure spaces and upper-middle-class housing. In this manner, Thessaloniki is transformed into a bourgeois city, a city designed to accommodate the urban upper middle class. The western part of the city includes the extension of the port, the warehouses of wholesale commerce, industry and the working-class living areas. To the east, adjacent to the centre, there are gardens in which a university is located, and further away are upper-middle-class suburbs.

The code of traffic is another major practical code of the plan. According to Hébrard, there must be wide avenues, allowing for fast and safe movement of traffic. The street system secures the decongestion of the city centre and direct communication between the different locations of the city.

We saw that in the World City the working class is segregated outside the central area of the city. We also saw that the same principle was used in Thessaloniki, since the working class was located to the west of the central area. In Hébrard’s plan, the practical social code, with the single exception of the Turkish quarter in the Upper City (the northern part of Figs. 1 and 4), supports social segregation while eliminating ethnic segregation. Writing about the cities of Indochina, Hébrard comments that every European community needs an indigenous settlement in order to live. In the Western cities, this colonialist viewpoint is transformed into class separation and hierarchy, the working class taking the place of the colonized population. We see once more that the plan of Thessaloniki is adjusted to the needs of the bourgeois urban class. We may conclude that for Hébrard, the meaning of this socio-spatial composition of the plan had the cultural connotation of ‘Europeanness’, a connotation giving a specific identity to the city.

We have already encountered the aesthetic code, which is a connotative code, in the case of the landscape as a scenic setting for the city. But urban space itself is also treated as such a setting in the case of the Upper City. Undoubtedly, the view, mentioned by Lavedan, of the French historian Charles Diehl about its colourful houses as a painting framed by the circle of the dark hills, is very close to that of Hébrard—and of Lavedan, who also refers to the charm of the Upper City.

The cultural code, like the aesthetic a major connotative code, includes two principal poles: a pole of modernism and an historical cultural pole. The first notion lies behind the denotative aspect of various elements of the plan (for example, zoning, the provision of sunlight or the street pattern) as well as the plan as a whole; these denotations have the connotation of ‘modern city’, thus conferring this symbolic identity on Thessaloniki. This is also the essence of the World City. In respect to the historical cultural pole, I already referred to Hébrard’s sensitivity toward local cultures and architecture. He was critical of the transposition to the colonies of French provincial prototypes, and he wanted to adapt his architecture to the local tradition and climate. In Thessaloniki his historical cultural pole is mainly composed of two subpoles: antiquity and Byzantium. Hébrard reconstituted the Hellenistic grid system and used it as a basis for the new plan, so that the new street system was, as Lavedan writes, ‘dictated by the past’. He was equally cautious with the Byzantine monuments. Hébrard’s plan displays the Byzantine churches,
by clearing the space around them, relating them to especially designed axes and making them nodal points of his plan, both aesthetically and from the point of view of the street pattern. However, with this operation the introverted Christian parish organisation was transformed: the churches became spatially extroverted and open to the whole central area of Thessaloniki.

Undoubtedly, Hébrard wanted his plan to connote the two symbolic identity notions of ‘Classical city’ (‘Greek antiquity’, ‘Greco-Roman civilization’) and ‘Byzantine city’, but there is probably also another significant connotation, ‘Oriental city’, which we can retrace through Lavedan’s views. For Lavedan, the internal space of Thessaloniki ‘was, in fact, one of the most chaotic, as well as one of the most picturesque to be seen in the Orient’ (my italics). The city offered ‘wonders which seem to have escaped from A Thousand and One Nights’. The two main shopping streets, the new Alexander the Great Street—today’s Aristotelous Street—and Venizelou Street, are not very wide, so that ‘the pedestrians would be able to wander freely and especially move easily from the one sidewalk to the other’, an activity that we should understand in the context of the Orient, given that here ‘the slightest purchase can be the object of quite long discussions and that time has no value at all’. Lavedan labels the Upper City ‘exotic’, and writes that Hébrard decided to ‘totally respect its appeal to the imagination’.

It is not difficult to recognize in the above the discourse of orientalism, to use the term coined by Edward Said, this Western manner of thinking, linked to colonial and imperialist interests, that presents an ideologically constructed image of the Orient as the other. Lavedan’s Western viewpoint on the Orient combines a condescending attitude with an atmosphere of fairy-tale, fantasy, exotism and charm. Such elements, all relating to the general connotation of ‘Orientalness’, were probably also for Hébrard connotations of the space and life of the actual city of Thessaloniki. In his plan, they would be limited to the Upper City, but they would also colour the symbolic identity of the whole central area. Thus, his view of the plan balances precariously between East and West.

The cultural and the aesthetic codes are closely linked, and the relation between them is general and systematic. In respect to the pole of modernism, for Hébrard the modern city is functional, but also beautiful. As for the historical cultural pole, his plan represents a major break with the past urban plan of Thessaloniki with the creation of a centre of the centre: Alexander the Great Street, a monumental urban axis and the central axis of Hébrard’s plan, running through the middle of the city perpendicular to the seashore and surrounded by porticoes with luxury shops. This axis is still today the ‘centre of the centre’ of the city. The southern end of this axis, on the seashore, is a large square; the axis continues north of Egnatia Street with the civic centre, and its northern end is marked by the basilica of St Demetrius, the patron saint of the city.

The square on the seashore, in Lavedan’s words, ‘offers one of the most beautiful views in the world’. He explains that the orientation given to this axis is such that the view from it is beyond monumentality—beyond, that is, the human dimension—because it is almost supernatural: it is ‘Mount Olympus itself, the dwelling of the Gods’. This also happens with Venizelou Street, which like Alexander the Great Street is lined with porticoes and shops. This view of Mount Olympus from the monumental axis thus links the aesthetic and the cultural, as does the monumental axis itself, in which the cultural is represented through an abridged recapitulation of the history of the city (Mount Olympus—basilica of St Demetrius—modern urban design, connoting Greek antiquity, Byzantium and the modern period). Byzantium is represented on this axis not only by the church of St Demetrius, but also by the connotative cultural code of the buildings on its southern half below Egnatia Street, which include byzantinizing elements.
By the *urban morphological* code I mean a non-aesthetic code (though it is frequently accompanied by an aesthetic dimension), which in its denotative aspect includes as a major element the street pattern, which contributes to the generation of the guiding lines of the city plan. In the new plan of Thessaloniki, two different patterns are combined: the radial and the grid pattern.

Urban composition in Hébrard’s plan is carried largely by the radial pattern. It is the first time in the history of Thessaloniki that this pattern appears; unlike the grid, it has no roots in Greco-Roman culture. A Greco-Roman origin had, however, been ascribed to the radial pattern since the Renaissance, through a certain interpretation—actually a misinterpretation which started with Alberti—of the view of Vitruvius on the proper orientation of the streets of a city. It is not by chance that this interpretation occurred, given the fixation of the Renaissance on perspective, which gives to the spectator the illusion of order and control. The will to control space, as well as its rationalization and objectification, that are linked to perspective went hand in hand with the profanisation of space. Thus, the religious and cosmological symbolism of space has decreased gradually since the Renaissance, to disappear entirely in the modern period.

The Renaissance interest in perspective, common to geometers, painters and architects, was expressed in a multitude of visual systems, including that attached to urban space. Soon, the monumental perspective offered by an architectural element at the end of a rectilinear street was integrated within a full radial pattern surrounding that element. For the early classicism of the Renaissance, the combination of the grid with the radial pattern guided many Renaissance proposals for ideal cities and led to urban intertexts assumed to represent the essence of the Greco-Roman city.

The urban ideal of the grid combined with and serving the radial pattern had a long life: more than four centuries. From Renaissance classicism it passed to the neo-classicism of the second half of the 18th and almost all of the 19th century. It became part of the Beaux-Arts conception of the city, the tradition in which Hébrard was trained. The central idea of neo-classicism is that ancient Greece is the source of civilization, and this Western ‘Hellenism’ was marked by ‘philhellenism’, an emotional attachment and positive attitude to Greece. We find the neoclassical urban ideal not only in Europe, but also in the US, where the grid pattern, with its classical aura and practical advantages, was adopted as early as the 17th century, proliferated in the next century, and became an integral part of the local culture, used not only for city plans but also, aligned with the cardinal points, for the division of agricultural land. But when the monumentality of the city was at issue, an issue involving the aesthetic code, the grid-radial model was used, as for example in the neoclassical plan of Washington, DC prepared by Pierre L’Enfant in 1789.

The preceding discussion leads to the conclusion that the spatial identity of the plan for Thessaloniki was founded for Hébrard on the assumed Greco-Roman grid-radial model, as well as on the port, the adaptation of the city to its site, and zoning. Its symbolic identity, on the other hand, was supported by the notions of ‘modern city’ and ‘Europeanness’, as well as ‘Classical city’ and ‘Byzantine city’. However, imbricated among them is the connotation ‘Orientalness’.

A double and contradictory view of modern Greece thus arises: it is the heir of ancient Greece, conceived as the cradle of European civilization, but it is also classified together with the ‘backward’ Orient. This latter conception brings Greece close to colonial status, a status in harmony with the ‘protective’ role in Greek politics of the Great Powers, one of which was France.

The French ideology on the relations between the great civilisations of the past, their ‘Oriental’ heirs, and the French nation is apparent in the work *Description de l’Egypte*, based on material gathered during the conquest of that country by Napoleon I. Studying the maps of the *Description*, Anne Godlewska...
observes that they show a close affinity to both key Enlightenment ideas and the imperial conquest. She reminds us that for the Enlightenment the world can be rationally ordered and controlled provided it is rightly represented, and the exact representation is the one that captures the immutable and eternal within the flux of things. She argues that the (concepts of the) immutable and eternal mark both the scientific mode of cartographic representation and what is represented, i.e. the monuments of Egypt. Godlewska also refers to another idea of the Enlightenment, that of the continuous progress of civilisation, the culmination of which was claimed by the Western Europeans. Clearly, there is a close relation between the will to control and the location of the French nation at the summit of the hierarchy of civilisations, and between both of these and the colonialist ideology. According to Godlewska, the aim of the Description was to create a bridge between France and the cradle of civilization, Egypt, passing through the Greco-Romans. The maps of the Description emphasize the superiority of France relative to ancient Egypt, as well as that of the latter relative to the contemporary inhabitants of the country. In the maps, the local inhabitants are depreciated to the point of being used as ‘graphic devices’.  

Thus, the place of France vis-à-vis ancient Egypt was conceived as comparable to its place with reference to the Greco-Roman world. We may assume that in Hébrard’s times France was still considered by the French as the superior heir of Greco-Roman civilisation. Simultaneously, the French attitude towards contemporary Egypt may be transposed to contemporary Greece, which was actually in a quasi-colonial situation.

This supposed French superiority could not but leave its mark on Hébrard’s plan, introducing a nationalist code revolving around the connotation ‘superiority of French culture’. Such superiority is expressed in the French colonies: to take an example, in the urban plans (and the architecture) of the Moroccan cities, dating from the same period as the plan of Thessaloniki and bearing a great resemblance to it. ‘Frenchness’, in its Haussmannian nature, is also connoted by the two semi-circular buildings that form the back of the southern square of the Thessaloniki monumental axis. French superiority goes hand in hand with the idea of the French civilising mission, successfully undertaken in Thessaloniki by Hébrard according to Lavedan, who refers to the triumph of ‘his [Hébrard’s] person, the cause of urban planning, and that of France’.  

The Greek codes in the production and reception of the plan

The codes of production: the discourse of the government officials

As I already observed, Hébrard was the major actor among the professional planners who worked on the new plan for Thessaloniki. The production of the plan, however, involved not only professionals, but also government officials. I will continue my discussion of the codes operative in the production of the plan by turning to the views of the latter, and will conclude with a study of the reception of the plan on the part of the Greek public.

Mawson writes that the elaboration of the plan followed the ideals of Eleftherios Venizelos, the eminent liberal prime minister of Greece. Venizelos conceived of a renewed Thessaloniki that would be the port and the economic and cultural centre of its wider Balkan hinterland, and declared at one point that ‘if I am proud of the conduct of my foreign policy, I am no less proud of this work’. The Minister of Transport, Alexandros Papanastasiou, also felt that Thessaloniki was a city ‘of exceptional interest to
Greece’. Both men, thus, make combined use of a national and a political code. Venizelos’ economic code is also found in Papanastasiou, who writes that for the Government the economic future of the city is bright. Papanastasiou is also concerned about the lack of hygienic conditions in the eastern part of the city and wants to free the city from epidemics (hygienic code). Venizelos assures us that the new city ‘may be one of the most beautiful cities of the Mediterranean’ (aesthetic and cultural codes) and Papanastasiou refers to Thessaloniki as an ‘historical city’ ‘endowed with a multitude of wonderful monuments’ (historical cultural pole of the cultural code). 31

These codes of the key officials involved in the preparation of the plan can be enriched if we take into account the building legislation and the wider context of urban practice in nineteenth-century Greece (which did not yet include Thessaloniki). From the very beginnings, the urban design of the new Greek state (established after the 1821 revolution against the Turks) as a rule followed the grid pattern, even before this became the exclusive model. Already in 1835, the grid had been legally adopted in a law issued during the reign of Otto, the first Bavarian king of Greece. In the relation established by the law of 1835 between the grid plan and ecological concerns and traffic, we recognize the modernist attitude towards the grid.

However, the adoption of the grid by 19th-century Greeks was not due only to the power of its modernity. We have already referred to the gradual ‘orientalisation’ of Thessaloniki, the transformation of a general and neat orthogonal geometry into a free pattern of small-scale curvilinear and broken streets, which had appeared already during the Byzantine period. This was for many centuries the pattern of the oriental city and also the pattern of all Greek cities under Ottoman rule. For the Greeks, this oriental plan came to be connected with submission to Ottoman rule—while no connection was made with Byzantium. For this reason, the oriental pattern was rejected. Simultaneously, the search of the young nation for its roots would naturally bring the ancestral grid pattern to its attention, even more so since the grid pattern dominated modern planning. We may conclude that the above morphological, ecological and traffic codes, as well as the national, political, economic, hygienic and aesthetic codes and different aspects of the cultural code, were part of the approach to urban space not only by the Greek government officials, but also by the professionals of the commission. 32

If we now compare these codes and their content with the codes of Hébrard himself, we observe an impressive convergence. The discourse and ideology of Venizelos and Papanastasiou agree perfectly with Hébrard in ascribing to the new Thessaloniki a symbolic identity through the connotations of ‘eminent city’, ‘modern city’, ‘Europeanness’ (in comparison with other Mediterranean cities) and ‘historical city’. Impressive convergence, but also an equally impressive divergence: in the discourse of the politicians, ‘Orientalness’ is rejected and ‘Frenchness’ de-emphasised. Instead, ‘Greekness’ is projected through the national, political and historical cultural codes. This multiple symbolic identity of urban space in turn offers itself for a triple identification on the part of the city’s inhabitants, because it appeals to three different forms of social identity: local urban identity for the Thessalonikians through the connotation of ‘eminent city’, and for them as for all Greeks national (‘Greekness’ in the historical sense) and European (as part of ‘Greekness’ in the modern sense) identity.

The codes of reception: the discourse of the public

Was this virtual symbolic identity involved in the production of the plan also successfully realised in its reception? Before discussing the attitude of the public towards the new plan, we need to refer briefly to the ideology of the Greeks in respect to their national identity. According to Artemis Leontis,
the neoclassical wave of Western Hellenism was reworked on its arrival in Greece into ‘Neohellenism’, which constructed an imaginary community, rooted in an equally imaginary territory, a place felt to be a prerequisite for the existence of the nation and its fulfilment.33

Neohellenism was not a unified ideological complex. Michael Herzfeld has given us a careful analysis of its two major aspects. The first, the ‘Hellenist’ ideology, was outward-directed, resulting from the assimilation of the imported idealizing and antiquarian ideology of Western Hellenism. This neoclassicist ideology is founded on the idea of a direct continuity of modern with ancient Greece. The second, the ‘Romeic’ ideology, represents an inward-directed, reflexive adaptation of Western Hellenism to the actual Greek experience. It is founded on experiential continuity and has recourse to the more familiar Orthodox tradition and Byzantine culture with their oriental influences.

However, in spite of their opposition, the Hellenist and the Romeic model converge on some crucial points. They both aim at the construction of national identity. They are both based on the principle of historical and cultural continuity. They both value high Hellenism. Finally, they both—and this is where the geographical code enters the scene—delimit a desired territory, based on the principle of continuity, which is the homeland of the Greek nation and one of its cornerstones. The actual territory of the new state was very limited, and, inevitably, the dream of the acquisition of the much wider ‘place’ which it was felt that the nation deserved involved irredentist aspirations, hence, the slide from a national to a nationalist ideology.34

With its integration into the Greek state in 1912, Thessaloniki inevitably was seen as a nodal point in the once desired, and now to a certain degree acquired, ‘place’ of the nation. It is thus reasonable that the semiotics of the new plan would incorporate for its Greek producers the attributes of the ideal Greek place, and in fact this hypothesis is corroborated by the connotations attached to the future city and its plan in the discourse of the government officials. However, these attributes of the Greek place were not only part of government ideology, but of the ideology of the Greeks in general, as we can see from the convergence of the Hellenist and the Romeic model. The ‘reader’ of the city, whether its inhabitant or not, would have ideological expectations from the proposal identical with the values incorporated in its production, and, since the plan was in harmony with the general Greek ideology, he/she could find his/her expectations fulfilled.

Hébrard thus produced a complex intertext, combining as far as possible Greek Neohellenism with Western Hellenism, but also leaving a space for Greek irredentism and French imperialism. His intertext brings together into a unified composition a reinterpretation of antiquity and Byzantium, thus reconciling the conflicting Hellenist and Romeic models and appealing simultaneously to the supporters of both models. The codes of his plan and their articulation, hierarchies and internal structure were such that the plan would almost inevitably be unanimously accepted by all Greeks. This almost universal appeal to the Greeks is corroborated by the historical data concerning the reception of the plan. Apart from matters concerning land ownership, all the critical reactions to the plan were limited to details, and there were no general counter-proposals to a plan that in many respects represented a radical break with the previous state of the city. On the contrary, the plan was in fact unanimously accepted and no professional questioned its principles.35

The plan of Thessaloniki is not the only neoclassical plan in Greece. The first plan combining the grid with the radial pattern was that for the new capital of Athens, prepared as early as 1833. In the context of the neoclassicism of the 19th century, a multitude of plans for Greek cities and towns were prepared by both Greeks and foreigners. The pattern generally used, as we saw above, was the grid. These plans were not implemented in their entirety, not even gradually. However, through their spirit, their piecemeal
realizations and continuous adjustments, they dictated the development of urban space in modern Greece. As was the case in Thessaloniki, the plans and their implementation fulfilled an ideological function, which presents two aspects: one positional and one oppositional. The oppositional aspect is the rejection of the Ottoman city; the positional involves the affirmation of both the continuity with ancient Greece and the bonds with European culture. In this manner, the urban plans of the 19th century, as the plan of Thessaloniki, became the vehicle of a common and major ideological locus, a locus that was, and still is, a major focus of all forms of discourse in Greece, political, scientific, everyday, literary and artistic. This focus is the issue of national identity. These plans gave their own answer to this issue: the modern Greek is first the heir of ancient Greece and then a modern European. The symbolic identity imprinted on urban space could not but reinforce the ideas and feelings of national identity of its receivers. This is the dialectics of space: social space is undoubtedly a social product, but it is not a passive one and exerts a return influence on the society that produced it.

Notes

1. See, for example R.G. Golledge, R.J. Stimson, Analytical Behavioural Geography, London 1987
12. See, for example W. Müller, Die heilige Stadt: Roma quadrata, himmlisches Jerusalem und die Mythe von Weltnabel, Stuttgart, 1961, 9–51.
15. G.P. Lavvas, The urban planning of the saints in Byzantium: the notion of space in theory and practice, in: G. Lavvas et al. (Eds.), The City in the Kaleidoscope: Texts on the History of the City and Urban Planning, Athens 2001 (in Greek) 83–113;


20. We find a close parallel to this categorisation in behavioural geography. In this case, the components of mental maps are classified as: a descriptive ‘designative’ component, referring to locational (‘whereness’) and non-locational (‘whatness’) information (cf. the denotative codes); an ‘appraisive’ component, revealing values, preferences and feelings (cf. the connotative codes); and a ‘prescriptive’ component, including inferences and predictions (cf. the practical codes). On these components, see D.C.D. Pocock, *The nature of environmental perception*, Department of Geography, University of Durham, 1974, N.S. 6, 1, 6–7.


28. See also P. Lavedan, Un problème d’urbanisme: la reconstruction de Salonique, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 64 (5) (1921) 248.


31. This discussion is based on A. Karadimou-Yerolympou, *The Reconstruction of Thessaloniki after the Fire of 1917: A Landmark in the History of the City and the Development of Greek Urban Planning*, Thessaloniki, 1995, 81–82, 94.

