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An urban complex for welfare services in Thessaloniki

Abstract

The article is a report of an interview conducted by Sahar Taheri with Fiore Architects studio, the author of a project for an urban complex for welfare services in Thessaloniki. Embracing various public functions and green spaces, the project aims to serve as a landmark and meeting place, bridging the gap between the historical past of Toumba and the modern urban identity. The complex, the result of a collaborative workshop, hosts various facilities, prioritizing spatial autonomy and flexibility. A central pathway connects eight independent units, fostering interaction and serving as a dynamic public thoroughfare. The complex meets inclusion requirements, providing cultural and social assistance facilities and positioning itself as a community center.

Keywords

Community Service Center — Co-design — Welfare Architecture

How was the project area chosen?

The project area was identified by the Municipality of Thessaloniki as the property is owned by the municipality and currently houses a small 19th-century building. In recent years, the local authorities have planned the reconstruction of the site in order to create a building complex that would functionally and aesthetically meet the needs of the residents while also providing a “Public Green Space.”

What other service structures in the urban context were considered?

The main objective in designing this proposal was for the building complex to adopt a model for organizing various public functions in such a way that they engage in open dialogue with the city. Therefore, creating a landmark, a public project that becomes the meeting point between the historical past of the Toumba neighborhood and its modern identity as a lively urban neighborhood. Last but not least, the concept that inspired this project was that of an “urban neighborhood,” where the various units are placed in such a way that they can work together while remaining independent, thus contributing to mutual benefits for the residents.

What factors and forms of the urban area in which the project is located influenced the design choices?

The concept of the final synthesis was to design a small urban community, where eight independent building units, in addition to the nursery, coexist harmoniously, while passages between them allow free circulation and direct access to them. The central pathway, which runs longitudinally through the plot, serves as the unified basis of the entire architectural layout. Although the eight building units serve different public needs, they



Fig. 1

FIORE Architects, Urban complex for welfare services in Thessaloniki, 2019. Insertion into the urban context.

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were designed with the same architectural vocabulary. In this regard, the main objective of the proposal was to both elevate the urban landscape to a good aesthetic level and to provide a concrete contribution to the creation of necessary green space.

Were citizens involved during the planning phase? How?

In March 2015, the Municipality of Thessaloniki, the 4th municipal district (Toumba neighborhood), and the School of Architecture of AUTH (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) organized a workshop entitled “A courtyard for the neighborhood.” Together with the residents of Toumba, they aimed to reintroduce the values of the place and to promote the integration of asylum seekers into the social system.

What was the contribution of health and social workers during the design phase? (doctors, nurses, social workers, etc.)

During the planning phase, various meetings were organized in collaboration with the Municipality of Thessaloniki, with associations and presidents of social service administrations, such as the community health center, the municipal gymnasium, etc., in order to outline a strategy according to the needs of each service. Subsequently, in the design process, a meeting was held on space characteristics and function allocation.

How was the functional program defined?

The building complex has the potential to include various public welfare uses in such a way that they engage in open dialogue with the city and the people they serve. In this framework, the needs of residents of a larger area are met, bringing them together for common activities and aggregative occasions. Specifically, the intervention includes: a nursery, housing for asylum seekers, an indoor gym, a multipurpose hall for social events, an outdoor cinema, a memorial museum space for Toumba refugees, community municipal offices, a community health center, a day center for the elderly, a playground, and a small neighborhood park. The total land area is 3800 sqm, and the final building area is approximately 4500 sqm.

What typological and formal criteria were considered?

The exterior cladding in bricks was chosen as the base material for all building facades. It is a material that automatically refers to the long tradition of tile usage in the construction of the city of Thessaloniki and, more

**Fig. 2-4**

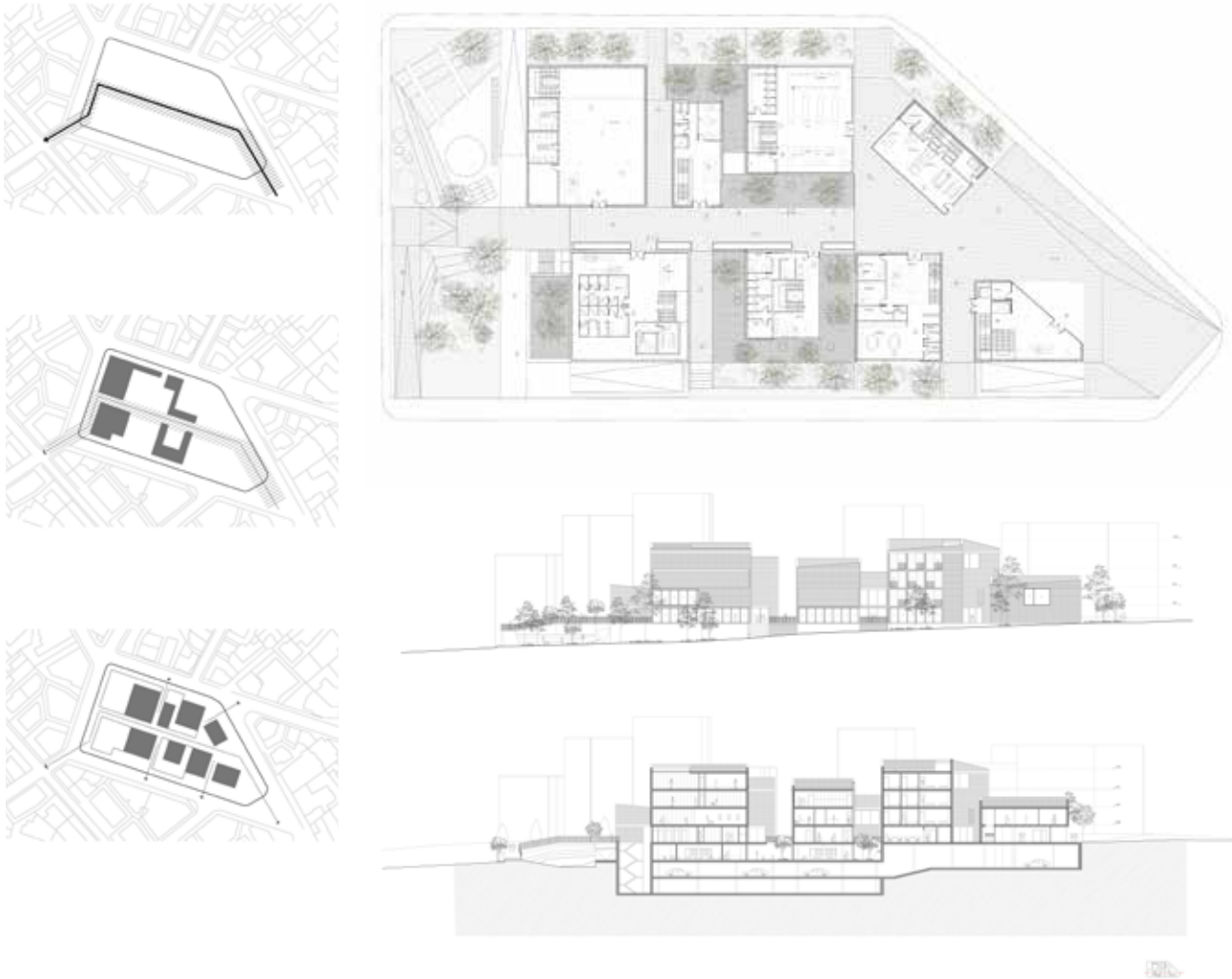
FIORE Architects, Urban complex for welfare services in Thessaloniki, 2019. Functional diagrams; General planimetry; View of the complex from above (render).

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specifically, to a material that is indissolubly linked to the early light constructions for refugees in the Toumba neighborhood. These constructions were the reference for the cluster technique, which was translated in the present proposal as a morphological element of the building facades in building blocks.

What are the main features of space articulation?

Placing the function of educational services as a starting point for the composition of the complex conceptually emphasizes its crucial role as the individual's first point of contact with public life. At the same time, on the design level, this planar organization of the interior spaces also allows direct contact with the natural environment. The entrance is located to the west of the plot, from the shared pedestrian passage on the side of the playground. For the rest of the complex's kinesiology, the main entrance to the functions is from the east side of the ground to avoid interference between all users and those of the nursery. Therefore, the buildings on this side (the

**Fig. 5-7**

FIORE Architects, Urban complex for welfare services in Thessaloniki, 2019. Diagrams; Ground level plan; Elevation and section.

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nursery, for the elderly, the information point, and offices) are arranged parallel to the directed form of the plot. Among them, a common passageway is determined, which essentially “welcomes” the visitor and directs them towards the longitudinal axis that structures the overall layout.

What role does the concept of hospitality play in the project?

One of the main reasons for the proposal was to design in exemplary terms a complex that could “invite” visitors and the local community to meet and perceive public space as a space of vital importance.

What criteria and technologies were used in the project to address the issue of climate change?

First and foremost, through correct positioning and orientation of the building on the ground. Moreover, the design included necessary openings to ensure adequate external lighting, good natural ventilation, and solar protection during the summer period. Therefore, the arrangement of the real estate units, on both sides of the public pathway, took into account the needs for better ventilation and solar radiation of the entire building complex. In this regard, we modeled the surrounding area to improve overall microclimatic conditions. We also plan to plant 26 trees on-site, and 2/3 (about 1500 sqm) of the free space of the land is allocated to “Public Green Space.”

What is expected in the future regarding the architectural design of healthcare centers?

The needs of modern society are constantly increasing, especially in the

**Figg. 8-11**

FIORE Architects, Urban complex for welfare services in Thessaloniki, 2019. Internal and external views.

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most populous cities. Therefore, it will become increasingly necessary for designers to be aware of providing spaces that truly meet the needs of inhabitants.

What are the key factors in designing a healthcare building?

The key factor in designing a healthcare building is to aim for an open building complex that invites residents and makes spaces more intimate. Healthcare and social buildings should be designed to incorporate the fundamental dimension of inclusion and a sense of belonging, creating an aesthetically characterized building ensemble that positively predisposes visitors and familiarizes them with the entire surrounding environment.

Is there a unified model for addressing this issue?

Each project is unique because it addresses different societies. In every project, many factors must be taken seriously into consideration, and every answer lies hidden in the needs of society.

Can design and architecture contribute to patient healing?

We believe that patient healing can be sought beyond medical contribution. When a space is designed to be freely used by city residents, so that they can be mentally and physically cared for through various activities, then therapy is not one-sided, and therefore yes, spaces created by architecture can be extremely useful for all types of patients.

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Florian Giannis Liakos, Irene Helen Marcantonatou and Alexis Visvinis founded the architecture team FIORE Architects in 2015. They studied Architecture at the National Technical University of Athens. The team was initially created to participate in international architectural competitions, where it obtained numerous awards and mentions. Subsequently, they have carried out small-scale residential projects and small-scale renovations both in Greece and in Saranda, Albania. FIORE Architects have also collaborated with Greek architecture firms on large-scale projects.