

The Stadium as Generator of Urban Form. The Case of the Panthessaliko Stadium in Volos

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Abstract

The Panthessaliko Stadium was built in Volos, a city 325 km North of Athens, to host some events for the 2004 Olympic Games. It is settled in the neighborhood of Xirokampos, on the northern fringe of the city. The area is defined by a variety of typologies and scales that represents very well the urban development of the Greek city since 1970s that has driven to the final loss of any urban morphological coherency. The objective of this paper is to investigate the urban form of Xirokampos with the scope to reframe the typology of the stadium - a special building at a very large scale - as a civic building that may play a crucial role in the city. To understand the impact of this typology on the urban environment is relevant in order to reframe its cultural, social, and formal meaning, both in reference to underused existing sport infrastructure as well as to new planned developments. The paper will investigate, at first, the historical evolution of the urban form of the examined area of Volos in order to understand the relationships among the various parts - characterized by different typologies, forms, and spaces - that compose the neighbourhood, and it will conclude with the presentation of the results of some studies conducted at the Department of Architecture at the University of Thessaly, where students had to analyze and challenge the impact of the stadium by re-designing the surrounding city.

Keyword: Stadium, Sprawl, Suburb, Scale, Urban Renovation

Introduction

The construction of new sport stadia is a global phenomenon related with the organization of major international events, like the Olympic Games, but also linked to local urbanization processes like, for example, the construction of single-sport stadia that can be public or privately owned. In both cases, such large investments required for the construction of buildings of massive dimensions need to be supported by urban strategies that aim to foresee long-term viability. When a process like this is implemented, a stadium can be understood as a tool for urban regeneration and city branding (Sheard, 2005).

Since Ancient Greece, stadia have played a fundamental role on building the icon of a city (Sheard, 2005; Frank et al., 2015) and on shaping the urban environment. Notwithstanding, today they are often view with suspect: on the one hand, because of their immediate disuse and quick aging often caused by their monofunctional use – like the ruination of many Olympic facilities around the world – and, on the other hand, because they have become tools to capitalize huge private interests and global financial flows (Harvey, 1973). In both cases, these interventions have not taken into consideration spatial matters neither their impact of city life.

Although this scepticism, stadia can be still seen as tools for urban regeneration and they can play a central role in the organization of the city, like ancient stadia did, by developing technological and mixed-use building strategies (Melis, 2019) and, at the same time, by implementing a better integration into urban contexts.

Eschewing investigating technological and functional updates, this paper will focus on the morphological analysis of the residential neighbourhood of Xirokampos, in the Norther sector of the city of Volos, in Greece, where the Panthessaliko Stadium was built in occasion of the 2004 Olympic Games to host the Olympic soccer competition. In the first section, it will be presented the framework of the research introducing the importance of stadia into large urban design projects - in opposition to free-standing objects detached from urban context - as a strategy to have positive social and economic outcomes. The second section will describe the neighbourhood of Xirokampos analysing its urban structure in order to understand the context that surrounds the Panthessaliko Stadium. Scope of this analysis is to highlight the missing relationship between the stadium and the city and to delineate the field of intervention of the architectural project. The third section will present some topics that emerged during the Urban Design Studio conducted at the Department of Architecture of the University of Thessaly that was focused on the urban regeneration of the area around the Panthessaliko Stadium. In the conclusions, I will try to advance the idea that isolated existing stadia can be re-interpreted as reference landmarks to reframe the urban project by focusing on the development of the adjacent undetermined and vacant areas.



Figure 1. The Panthessaliko Stadium and the Athletes' Hostels view from the abandoned plot at the North side of the area. Photo @Fabiano Micocci.

Background

Stadia are often presented like investments with collective benefits. Although, it looks that neither major sport events nor the construction of new stadia have appreciable or beneficial outcomes at the municipal scale for what concerns the impact on unemployment and economy. Moreover, they rarely present long-term positive effects related to architectural quality and urban design. Indeed, large-space monolith placed in no-man lands have no charisma in the absence of a city setting while, on the contrary, they can drive positive spill-over effects only in the case of their adaptation to certain conditions (Ahlfeldt et al., 2010). Therefore, re-thinking stadia on the basis of their impact on urban space should be considered as the prerequisite for the economic development of cities (Gospodini, 2002).

A stadium is a special building that does not share the same characteristics with the surrounding environment and its uniqueness arises from its typological comparison with the buildings on its surrounding (Caniggia et al., 2001, 105). The morphological analysis can be useful to understand the stadium not only as a type but in relation to the urban fabric analysing its location, hierarchy and scale (Maffei et al., 2010). This analysis should be seen as a useful tool to evaluate the spatial and visual impact of these special buildings on urban space.

But when a special building misses its historical role of urban landmark that organizes and shapes the city around it, the question of what possible role it may play emerges. This condition is endemic of suburban areas where urban blocks does not constitute anymore the basic unit of the urban structure and urban form looks stretched and fragmented (Panerai et. al., 1980, pp.121-131). In a city dominated by dis-orientation and indifference, the juxtaposition of building forms that does not follow any precise urban principles provokes an experience of the urban space that looks like a *collage* (Lynch, 1972; Benjamin, 1990; Sennet, 2018). The metaphor of *collage* helps to understand the city like a catalogue of built forms that live together in the indeterminacy, incompleteness and absence of planning. A city built in this way looks like an organism in permanent construction and transformation that leave space for actions inside its frequent gaps.

The Urban Organization of Xirokampos

In the following section, the morphological and spatial relations that exist between the Panthessaliko Stadium and the fragmented and incomplete urban structure of Xirokampos will be investigate. The neighborhood of Xirokampos extends on the North-Est side of Nea Ionia, an independent administrative unit part of the municipality of Volos. It develops between the ring-road, that signs the edge of the city towards the mountains, and the urban axis of Stadiou street, a two-km road that connects the historical city center of Nea Ionia with the Panthessaliko Stadiou. This urban axis is particularly significant because it organizes all the main public buildings and public spaces in a very clear configuration. At first, the axis starts and ends with two sports facilities: at North, the Panthessaliko stadium emerges like a massive territorial *landmark* positioned at the crossroad between the Ring road and Stadium street while, at South, the football field 'Pantelis Magoulis' – built in 1924 to host the football team Nikis Volos, a team originally constituted by Greek

refugees –, is a simple concrete structure with an interesting inclination of the South tribune. Together with the ‘Pantelis Magoulis’ Stadium, the Old Municipal Cemetery of Nea Ionia, located on the other side of Stadiou street, builds an urban gate towards Volos city center. This urban gate separates the old settlement of Nea Ionia – a refugee camp built on orthogonal grids in 1924 to host Greek refugees from Asia Minor – from Xirokampos, a less compact and more diffuse urban fabric mainly characterized by two-floor single-family building. Along Stadiou street, a large park hosts the building to the Municipal Cultural Centre of Nea Ionia and it reaffirms the public aspiration of this axis.

In the North area, Stadiou street intersect another important axis, Doridos-Agios Dionisos, along which are aligned some important buildings that frame the area of the Panthessaliko Stadium: the Tennis Centre, the Indoor Municipal Swimming Pool and Gym, the 2nd High School of Nea Ionia – 6 parallel buildings connected by a transversal corridor -, and two social housing interventions.



Figure 2. The social housing of Xirokampos. Photo @Fabiano Micocci.

Particularly relevant are the two social housing complexes because they represent a block typology largely diffuse in Greece although occasionally implemented. The buildings are organized on a grid scheme and they frame generous in-between pedestrian spaces with a good ratio between built and empty surfaces (Trova et al., 1997). The first complex was realized in the 1970s: it is composed by mid-rise buildings with vertical circulation or external corridors on the façade and it is characterized by the visible concrete structure of slabs and columns – an architectural style largely repeated in Greece. The second intervention was realized in 1992, with more common architectural features, like large balconies, pinched tiled roofs and white plaster. These urban blocks are the only elements that present a coherent spatial logic in the area. Notwithstanding,

the two complexes do not present any continuity – morphological or spatial – with the rest of the city, and they look isolated. The quality and the morphology of the open spaces are still today an unfulfilled paradigm for the design of residential neighbourhoods.

The buildings aligned along Dorigo-Agio Dionisos street build a sort of edge of the city. At its outer side, the sparse fabric of single-family houses is mixed with the large undeveloped open surfaces that surround the Panthessaliko Stadium. The program of the Stadium includes also the park and a parking space on the other side of Stadiou street and the Panthessaliko Hostel that is used to host athletes. The stadium was built for the 2004 Olympic Games to host Football Games on the place of another soccer field and then it became the headquarter of the Olympiacos Volos (but it was also used by the team of Nikis Volos). The Stadium, designed by the Athenian architectural office Xasapi-Sargentis and Associated, presents a two-level structure that allows to look inside the field. The main access is on the second floor that is accessible by a large ramp that starts from the parking and it offers a pleasant elevated view of the city and the mountains.

The focus in the neighbourhood of Xirokampos resides not only on its morphological configuration and on the fact that it is the only suburban area of Volos that encounters significant buildings of public interests, but also in its social structure. It was included in the Local Action Plan (LAP) of the European Network URBAMECO together with other neighbourhood of Nea Ionia which results were published in 2009. In particular, Xirokampos registers the presence of immigrants from Balkan countries and ex-URSS and a diffuse unemployment. Moreover, the Strategic Plan for Sustainable Urban Development (BBA) of Volos Municipality, that includes the areas of Volos city centre and Nea Ionia and that was published in its second edition in 2017, reports that Xirokampos is characterised also by a high level of school drops after First Degree Schools, the absence of social public structures to support poor and disable people, delinquency and chronic unemployment.

The area around the stadium presents two main characteristics: one is related to the variety of buildings types and the second to the inadequacy of the stadium to play a primary urban role. Concerning the first aspect, it is evident that public buildings, social housing and single-family houses are organized without any coherency. The juxtaposition of large special buildings or large-scale infrastructure over the existing tiny urban fabric was a chronic feature of many interventions implemented since the 2004 Olympic Games that has generated a *landscape collage* (Gospodini et al., XXX). In consideration to the second aspect, the area around the stadium presents some adjacent undeveloped plots, areas occupied by illegal buildings, low frequented by pedestrian but also by car, and a large cultivate area mainly with fruit and olive trees. Moreover, the urban tissue, made by single-family-houses organized on irregular patterns, presents many gaps, undeveloped plots and lacks of public spaces. Therefore, re-thinking the area around the Panthessaliko Stadium means to intervene in the spatial gaps create between this assortment of urban forms.

Results and Discussions

The Norther sector of Xirokampos that includes the Panthessaliko Stadium was the subject of two Design Studios as the Department of Architecture of the University of Thessaly (2016-2017 and 2020-2021). The objective of the design studio was to transform the Panthessaliko Stadium from a free-standing isolated object placed among undeveloped and low-density areas into an urban element that can organize the surrounding context bringing a new identity.

Having acknowledged the architectural quality of the stadium and its actual use, the scope was to develop the surrounding areas with a mix program that was including social housing, commercial and cultural facilities. A strategy that develops the city around its main buildings has the scope to re-used them both for their multi-functional offer but also for their symbolic and civic meaning. Re-assembling urban elements at different scales means to create new relationships that may link vision to space (Cullen, 1961; Carmona et al., 2003).

The studio had investigated the possible future role of the Panthessaliko Stadium from a status of a building-in-space, that accordingly to Leon Krier is an object standing in an amorphous space without streets and squares (Carmona et al., 2003), to a primary urban role through the densification of the voids between the stadium and the fragmented urban tissue. The acknowledging of the diffuse horizontal expansion caused by the sprawl helps to re-define the field of intervention of the urban project with a focus on spatial justice, power and social relations (Vigano et al., 2018). A strategy of this kind inverses the tendency of previous decades that has seen cities condemned to an unrelented urban sprawl towards a boundless urban territory (Ingersoll, 2006).

The proposals were grounded on the transformation of the spatial relationships between three categories of urban elements: the large-scale infrastructure system, that includes the stadium, sports facilities and main street axis; the intermediate scale of the large urban blocks of the social housing complexes that provided a also precedent where housing is mixed with a variety of public buildings and spaces; the tiny and sparse fabric of the single-family houses. The acknowledging of the scalar gaps between these elements sets the fields of architectural intervention between these different spaces in order to manage the spatial complexity through the mediation of the project (Durbiano et al., 2020).

The complexity and variety of scale and forms has allowed students to question many urban issues like the role of public buildings and their relationship to public spaces and the use of open spaces for multiple uses like leisure, work, play. Moreover, the complexity of the urban configuration has allowed students to question also ecological issues like the impact of large roads on residential neighbourhoods, microclimate conditions, urban agriculture and shadowing. Finally, in relation to the social and health issue that have been arise during the Covid-19 pandemic, the attention was addressed also on investigating the relationship between interior and exterior to foresee the possibility of extending the private realm outside the house and

to provide intermediate common spaces as well as outdoor open spaces to build an autonomous and sustainable community as an attempt to answer to the many questions of urban living under the pandemic.

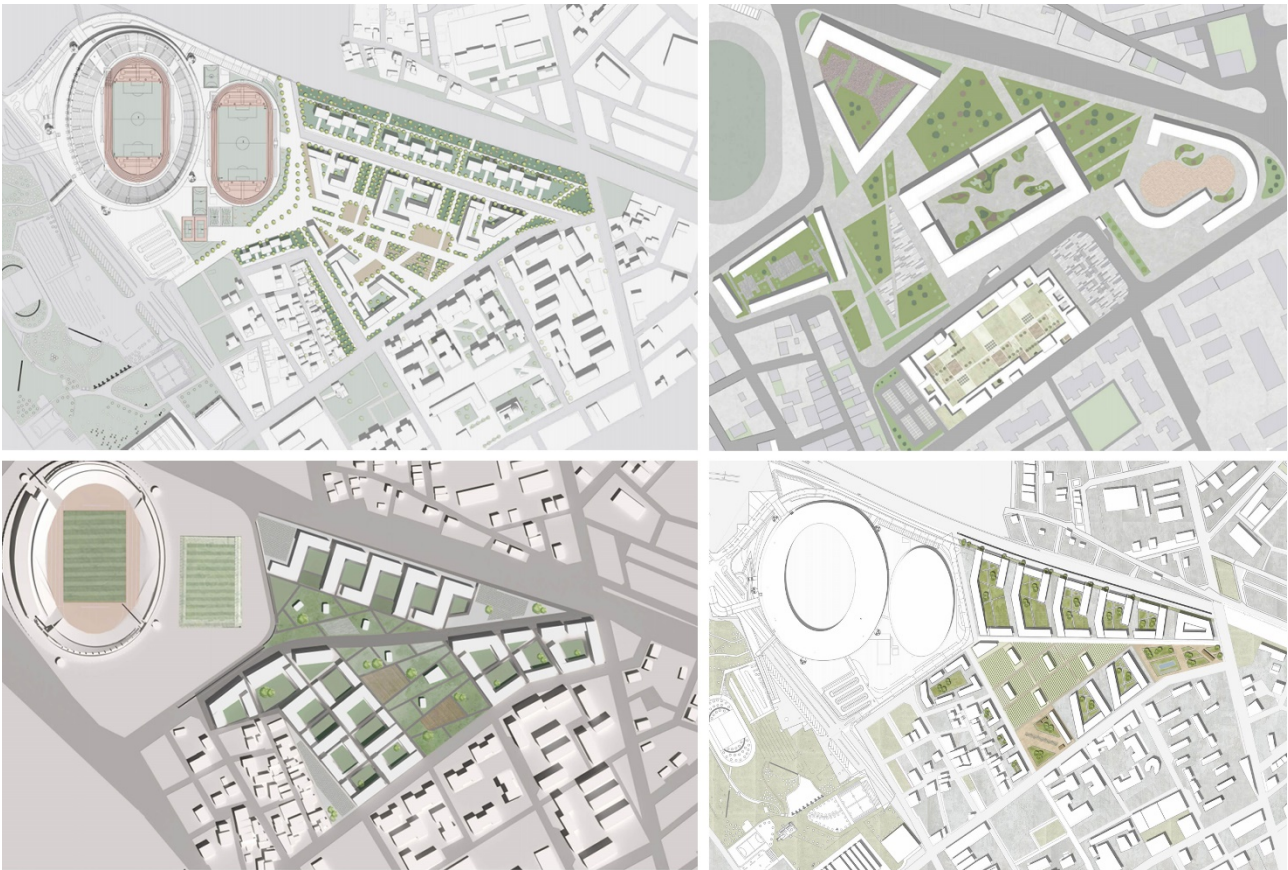


Figure 3. A) Eleni Kalikiopoulou: the masterplan is organized along three radial axes centered on the stadium and in continuity with the street pattern of the social housing complexes; B) Fotini Thomopoulou, Petrina Kirikou: five autonomous buildings build an archipelago of islands at an intermediate scale between the social housing complexes and the stadium; C) Eugenia Kiskini, Paraskevi Tsiggistra, Ioannis Manolakis: a green corridor unifies the social housing to the stadium framed by regular urban blocks with large public courtyard; D) Aggeliki Stergiopoulou, Fotini Ratzela: A green community with a central public space dedicated to urban agriculture couples the scale of the stadium creating a two-poles system. Academic Year: 2020-2021.

Conclusions

The case-study of the Panthessaliko Stadium witnesses the destiny of many sports infrastructure that have lost their ability to define cities by shaping urban spaces. Notwithstanding, the large shape of the Stadium is an indelible presence and a significant resource for the city of Volos for its preminent functions but also for its civic charisma. While implementing a mixed and multi-functional program of the building looks to be a prerequisite to exploit it as a useful resource for the city and the region, this paper aims to advance the possibility that re-framing the stadium into the urban context by intervening at its edge is a strategy that may bring development and growth at the municipal scale and with the benefit of the local community. Therefore, an urban design project should aim to re-interpret the civic role of the stadium by constructing new spatial synergies and dynamics around it by improving visual relations, accessibility, functional continuity and local

identity. In a vision that suggest how contemporary cities can be re-cycled and re-used, stadia may play a crucial role on addressing the morphological re-organization of suburban areas.

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