

Everyday Environmental Politics Along the Coast of Thessaloniki

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Abstract

This paper explores urban waterfronts as sites where competing «ecological imaginaries» (Gandy, 2007) unfold and collide. Formal planning discourses, aligned with global mandates of urban competitiveness, sustainable development, and climate resilience, often conceptualise the coast as a purely natural asset, devoid of social meaning or everyday use value for local residents poised to realise its development potential and thereby contribute to urban resilience. In contrast, resident-led movements are grounded in different ecological imaginaries – ones that view the coast as a common good and as a hybrid socio-natural terrain rich with embedded meanings and material qualities. Adopting this understanding of the waterfront as a contested terrain – where dominant imaginaries of 'ecological modernisation' coexist and collide with diverse, lived ecological imaginaries of the everyday – the paper examines the case of Thessaloniki's waterfront. The case study focuses on environmental politics as they manifest along the Eastern, less developed part of the city's coastline.

Questo articolo guarda ai waterfront urbani come luoghi in cui si sviluppano e si scontrano «immaginari ecologici» in competizione tra loro (Gandy, 2007). I discorsi ufficiali della pianificazione, allineati ai mandati globali di competitività urbana, sviluppo sostenibile e resilienza climatica, spesso concettualizzano la costa come un bene puramente naturale, privo di significato sociale o di valore d'uso quotidiano per i residenti, pronti a realizzare il suo potenziale di sviluppo e quindi a contribuire alla resilienza urbana. Al contrario, i movimenti locali di abitanti affermano immaginari ecologici diversi, che vedono la costa come un bene comune e come un terreno ibrido socio-naturale ricco di significati e qualità materiali. Adottando questa concezione del lungomare come terreno conteso – dove gli immaginari dominanti di 'modernizzazione ecologica' coesistono e si scontrano con diversi immaginari ecologici vissuti nel quotidiano – il saggio esamina il caso del lungomare di Salonicco per il quale è interessante osservare le politiche ambientali poste in essere lungo la parte orientale e meno sviluppata della costa della città.

Keywords: urban waterfronts; environmental politics; urban nature; Thessaloniki.

Parole chiave: waterfront urbani; politiche ambientali; natura urbana; Salonicco.

Introduction

This paper examines urban waterfronts as contested terrains of urban environmental politics. Beyond the age-old conflict



between economic development and environmental protection, varying and often conflicting 'ecological imaginaries', are studied, stemming from different conceptualisations of nature. 'Ecological imaginary' a concept introduced by Matthew Gandy (2007), refers to the changing ways urban nature is perceived in urban planning and design. Different imaginaries are embedded in projects of formal planning, as well as in struggles staged against them. They are also lived through individual bodies in their everyday routines, memories, and sensorial experiences.

Adopting this understanding of the waterfront as a terrain where dominant imaginaries of 'ecological modernisation' coexist and collide with varied, lived 'ecological imaginaries' of the everyday, the paper examines the case of the waterfront of the city of Thessaloniki. It aims to identify how various actors involved in the production of the coast perceive it, in a context of urban restructuring and climate crisis. Questions guiding this research can be summarised as follows: What is the conceptualisation of nature underpinning the visions of top-down policies and local initiatives? How is the coast framed in formal plans and frameworks for resilience and climate adaptation? How is it perceived in local initiatives articulated against specific development plans? The paper examines these questions within the context of Thessaloniki, a coastal city in the European South.

Ubiquitous processes of urban restructuring involving shrinkage of anything public, widespread privatisation, and entrepreneurial management of urban space – as discussed in various contributions from a variety of contexts (Tarazona, 2017) – are in force in Thessaloniki and affect the way its coastal zone is framed and planned. However, there is no textbook neoliberal ideology (Castree, 2008), and each city presents its own local mix of policies, actors, and outcomes, produced in the dialectic encounter of global forces and ubiquitous development mandates and local specificities. In that sense, Thessaloniki's case contributes a South European perspective of the production of urban waterfronts.

In a period where urban development and environmental protection are inextricably connected, it is important to identify the new aberrations of the 'ecological imaginary'. Adopting an

urban political ecological perspective (Heynen *et al.*, 2006), this paper studies the coast as a 'socio-natural' entity, in constant change produced not just by global discourses of urban competitiveness and green orthodoxy, but also by local collective claims underpinned by lived experiences of urban nature. The study employs qualitative methods, drawing on document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Local policy and planning documents from urban and regional levels of governance, brochures and social media by local initiatives, as well as local press reports, are reviewed to trace visions and discourses about the waterfront and the underlying conceptions of nature and the coast. Two semi-structured interviews with members of local coastal groups in the Municipality of Kalamaria complement document analysis by revealing how residents frame their struggles along the coast. The paper opens with a short overview of prevailing discourses around urban waterfronts shaped by global mandates for urban competitiveness, environmental protection, and climate adaptation. It then situates developments along the waterfront of Thessaloniki within broader political and economic changes. These changes are related to austerity politics and economic restructuring performed in the country during the years of economic crisis. In the next sections, regional frameworks and urban plans drafted over approximately the last ten years are analysed for their visions of the coast, followed by a discussion of local initiatives formed around a specific stretch of the urban waterfront. Thessaloniki's waterfront is unveiled as a contested terrain framed as a dormant asset of untapped potential in formal discourses and as a natural common good fraught with embedded meanings and material qualities in informal conceptualisations.

Dominant 'ecological imaginaries' of urban waterfronts

Cities, striving to secure a place in the world, have turned to large-scale urban regeneration projects to reshape their image and promote it as an attractive place to visit, live, and, most importantly, invest (Brenner and Theodore, 2007). In this struggle, urban waterfronts have become a prominent arena of urban interventions, steadily transformed from varied landscapes of productive infrastructures – ports

and industries – interspersed with natural beaches, rocks, and wetlands to globalised landscapes of culture, leisure, and upmarket residences (Laidley, 2007; Wakefield, 2007). Tourism is increasingly becoming a major driver of coastal transformation – whether in pristine beach areas, small fishing villages, or booming metropolitan regions – often sparking opposition from local environmental groups and NGOs, typically framed as a conflict between environmental protection and development (Kousis, 2004).

Large-scale projects of urban waterfront regeneration, typically engaging both private and public actors in new schemes of entrepreneurial urban governance (Doucet, 20213), are 'property-led' (Tasan-Kok, 2010), and in many cases have been criticized for aiming primarily at facilitating real estate development, excluding people's needs and public participation (Wakefield, 2007). Hence, urban waterfronts are often discussed as «sites where urban restructuring processes are doing battle» (Bunce and Desfor, 2007: 251) or, as Knierbein and Christodoulou (2025: 101) put it, as a «(new) terrain for the neoliberal project's acts of depoliticization».

In the context of climate change and the prospect of increasing flood events and rising sea level, urban coastlines are also recognised as vulnerable coastal and marine ecosystems, which serve as critical zones for implementing climate adaptation and urban resilience strategies (United Nations, 2017; European Environment Agency, 2020; Major and Juhola, 2021; Ocean & Climate Platform, 2022). Their vulnerability arises from the interaction between physical geography and the socio-spatial dynamics of urbanisation. Although each coastal city faces a unique combination of hazards, they are collectively regarded as «hot spots of disaster and climate risks» (Wanneitz *et al.*, 2024: 610).

Urban waterfronts, having lost their productive industrial character, are often projected in planning terms either as dormant opportunities for cities' overall image and their competitiveness in the world economy or as vulnerable zones of ecological importance that need to be protected. However, as global environmental awareness rises, urban development and environmental mandates are increasingly understood as inextricably linked in the context of sustainable

urban development, urban resilience, and strategies for cities' adaptation to climate change. Hence, the 'ecological imaginary', framed within the current orthodoxies of planning and environmentalism, is not seen as contradictory to development. Quite the contrary, it is typically employed to legitimate spatial policies facilitating privatization and land grabbing, reproducing inequalities and foreclosing people's voices and everyday experiences.

The Greek coast in a changing context

Amidst the full spectrum of austerity politics that were performed in Greece during the economic crisis, spatial policies acquired a prominent position. The years of the crisis have been rich in the production of laws and regulations, reforming the legal framework of urban planning and land development. Notwithstanding the environmental rationale of many tools introduced, the dominant imperative of this period was to accelerate the implementation of land use plans, facilitate land development, and «improve the business environment» (European Commission, 2012: 154) in the country.

Special Urban Plans (SUPs) were first introduced in the midst of the crisis, in 2014, originally as Special Spatial Plans (SSP), in the context of the so-called 'urban planning reform', and their scope and framework of implementation were specified by successive pieces of legislation. SUPs «may modify previous Local Spatial Plans and any general and specific planning regulations applicable to the area of the project, in particular as regards permitted landuses and building codes and restrictions» (Article 8, Government Gazette, 2014: 4460). Thus, they legitimate exceptions to existing plans for projects of «supra-local scale or strategic significance» (*Ibidem*), including programmes of urban regeneration or environmental protection or plans dealing with the consequences of natural disasters and when there is the «need for rapid completion of first-level urban planning by the state» (Government Gazette, 2020: 11678). Indeed, the 2020 Law, which finalised the specifications of SUPs, was aimed, among other things, at «simplification, acceleration and efficiency improvement of the spatial planning system» (*Ivi*, 11665). In Thessaloniki, in particular, more than 10 such plans are currently being

discussed, are at different stages of maturity, or have already been approved, most of which are located in the central municipality and are initiated by private actors. One of them seeks to unify the full length of Thessaloniki's coastline into one comprehensive plan, while two more are located within the same metropolitan coastal zone. Through this selective 'acceleration' of planning processes, the possibility of integrated planning and regulation of urban space is undermined, or even substituted, and exceptions, public or private developments framed appropriately as strategic, environmental, or urgent, become the rule.

Another development that plays a significant role in the development of the coastal zone of Thessaloniki is the creation of the *Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund* (HRADF). It was founded in 2011, with a mission to «leverage the State's private property», i.e. to cede or develop public land, infrastructure, and other assets of the Greek state. The creation of HRADF, during the economic crisis that sparked in 2008, was a core component of the restructuring measures imposed by the *troika* of the International Monetary Fund, the European Bank, and the European Commission. The HRADF, which in 2016 became a subsidiary of the so-called *Growthfund*, comprises in its portfolio almost every asset of the Greek state. Framed within a modernizing narrative, it functions as the primary vehicle for an unprecedented process of privatization of public land and infrastructure (Hadjimichalis, 2014; 2015). At the same time, it appears to promote a strong environmental agenda, stating that «in pursuing its purpose [...] particular care shall be taken to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the European Green Deal and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations» (HRADF, online).

Several properties along the coast of the Thessaloniki metropolitan area are part of HRADF's portfolio. The HRADF is responsible for outlining a 'development concept' and managing the process of concession or transfer of public land to private companies. The following cases reflect the Fund's agenda for the coast, which focuses on a blend of tourism, recreation, innovation, and commerce, all framed within a narrative of modernization and environmental protection.

The public property where ThessINTEC, a '4th generation science and technology park', is to be developed was added to the HRADF's portfolio in 2013. It was subsequently transferred to a public entity called the Alexandreia Innovation Zone, which then ceded it – at practically no cost and for 99 years – to a mixed-economy company combining public and private funds of both Greek and foreign origin. A Special Urban Plan (SUP) has already been approved for the purposes of this project, which lies within the study area of the aforementioned Strategic Spatial Plan (SSP), aiming to unify the waterfront. The development includes laboratories, office spaces, recreational facilities, and a hotel. ThessINTEC aspires to attract researchers and high-tech companies from both the region and around the world. A number of 'green characteristics' are highlighted in its promotional materials, including commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), incorporation of green and blue spaces, and the use of 'nearly zero-energy buildings'. However, the project is situated on a coastal marshland that serves as a habitat for rare bird species and has been identified as crucial for flood protection in the wider area (Wetlands of Greece, online).

The existing marina of Kalamaria – its infrastructure and terrestrial zone – was also ceded to HRADF in 2012. The submitted plan aims, apart from modernizing the marina and its services, to upgrade 'the aesthetics of its land area, with the aim of creating a modern and high-quality pole of tourism, recreation and cultural activities' (HRADF, 2023). In the 77 hectares of land belonging to the marina, the plan designates offices, commercial uses, restaurants, cafes, and a condo hotel. The plan was approved in 2023 but has been stopped by public reactions. The municipality of Kalamaria has appealed to the Constitutional Court against this project twice. The decision is pending.

Two large public properties are in the real estate portfolio of HRADF for 2024-2025. The 'development concept' for Agia Triada camping property is 'Tourism-Leisure, Tourist resort village' and is among the properties for 'immediate exploitation'. Another coastal property, bordering Thessaloniki's airport, is mentioned among «properties in Legal and Technical Maturation Process» and «could include business centers, retail and outlet parks,

science and technology parks, marinas, hotels and residential uses» (HRADF online).

Finally, the shrinkage of public expenditure has curtailed resources available to local authorities. This has severely affected their power to pursue urban policies and to implement spatial plans. Municipalities have outsourced a large share of their services to private companies. In combination with the legitimization of planning exceptions through SUPs and the privatization of land through HRADF, municipalities have been effectively deprived of their planning powers. This dire situation creates a fertile ground for privatisation processes to unfold and new actors - private companies, real estate developers, local and global philanthropic foundations - to claim their part in urban planning and governance.

Awakening the sleeping beauty: ecological imaginaries of Thessaloniki's coast in formal planning

Thessaloniki lies on the coast of Thermaikos Bay. Until the 1960s, it featured an undulating shoreline interspersed with parks and promenades of leisure, mansions, sandy beaches lined with pines, where people used to swim, industries with their smokestacks, and private access to the sea and the port. Today, stretching along the densely built part of the city, the urban waterfront comprises the port, a long landfilled since the '60s and recently refashioned promenade, disconnected stretches of natural, often degraded, beaches, and cliff formations. In the fragmented urban landscape of the city's outskirts, beyond the densely built fabric, the coastal zone consists of a great variety of landscapes. To the west, beyond the city's port, lie logistics sheds and oil storage tanks, rice farms and the wetlands at the delta of three rivers, protected by the Ramsar Convention. To the south, industrial remnants and diffused commercial uses, marshlands, tourist sandy beaches, cliffs, and the city's airport (Christodoulou and Gemenetzi, 2023).

During the last decade, the Thessaloniki waterfront has been the object of numerous planning frameworks, plans, and projects. These have different scales of spatial reference, different delineations of the coast, and a variety of initiating agents and stakeholders. However, common threads can be identified in the conceptualisation of the coast as an untapped development

asset, a sleeping beauty that awaits to be awakened.

The waterfront was first given a prominent role in the resilience strategy of the city's central Municipality. The strategy was the outcome of the Municipality's participation in the '100 Resilient Cities' initiative of the Rockefeller Foundation (Resilient Thessaloniki, 2017). As the Chief Resilience Officers states in her introductory note to the strategy, the basis of their approach was «robust participation and collaboration» (Ivi, 7). One of the four main goals of the strategy is to «re-discover the city's relationship with the sea: Integrate economic and urban development of Thermaikos Bay by investing in the cultural and natural capital of the Bay for improved city life, restoring the ecosystem, monitoring environmental resilience, and designing a new governance system for managing these activities» (Ivi: 15). Thermaikos Bay as whole is identified as the city's «most important natural resource... offering unique opportunities for sustainable urban development» (Ivi, 20). The waterfront is seen as «the most popular public space in the city and the number one tourist attraction». However, the Strategy recognizes that «the full potential of the waterfront and the Bay remains underutilized in economic, environmental and leisure terms». One of the suggested actions to address this problem is to create a 'Land use investment Framework' that will «unlock the real estate potential along the waterfront by delivering diverse development opportunities, on-shore and off-shore» (Ivi, 116). Following the publication of the strategy, a special study was released in 2018 under the same initiative of the Rockefeller Foundation. The study, titled *Framework for the Redevelopment of Thessaloniki's Waterfront*, was presented publicly at the city's Town Hall. It was funded by the World Bank and produced by Deloitte – one of the world's largest professional services networks – without any public consultation or citizen participation. Both Deloitte and the World Bank were mentioned, along with a host of other companies, NGOs, and universities, as partners at the "100 Resilient Cities" initiative, offering their advice and services to a hundred cities from all continents to become resilient. The *Framework* recommended urban regeneration projects and governance mechanisms for activating land development. As suggested in the Framework, «The Municipality should make use of financial instruments

beyond the scope of normal business transactions. ... [It] can also have access to funds and financing through land-based financing mechanisms (the so-called 'Land Value Capture')» (Deloitte *et al.*, 2018: 7).

As expected, the waterfront is a central focus in spatial planning frameworks regulating development and environmental protection in the Region of Central Macedonia, where Thessaloniki is located. This is especially evident in the *Regional Plan for adaptation to climate change of Central Macedonia* (Regional Authority of Central Macedonia, 2021). In the *Environmental Assessment*, the coastal zone is described as «environmentally critical because of its importance for biodiversity, quality of life and support for the economic life of the region» (Regional Authority of Central Macedonia, 2021: 117). The study identifies «strong pressures from the expansion of urban uses, holiday homes and the intensity of its transport infrastructure». It also assesses the coastal zone as «particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, as it experiences extensive erosion and faces threats from desertification and flooding» (Ivi, 7).

The *Regional Plan* identifies some of its objectives as particularly relevant to the coastal zone. Namely, 'decoupling of tourism from the international context and focusing on high quality demand, linking new forms of tourism with the dominant model, mitigating seasonality and connecting [tourism] to culture and environmental resources, ensuring efficiency in the use of resources and preventing risks from climate change'. The coastal zone is therefore on the one hand assessed as 'particularly vulnerable' and on the other, identified as a fertile ground for development, and more specifically for tourism. In both cases, the coastal zone is understood in abstract terms as a natural terrain on which planetary environmental risks and economic forces unfold. Their effects need to be mitigated in the former case and effectively accommodated in the latter.

The *Special Spatial Plan for the Waterfront of Thessaloniki* (SSP-WfTh) is an ambitious plan, specifically created with a view to unify and regulate the coastal zone along the urban agglomeration of Thessaloniki. The *Plan* runs along forty km and seven municipalities and has a varying depth inland. It was commissioned by the Regional Authority of Central Macedonia in 2019, publicly presented and open to public consultation in 2021.

The Regional Authority proposed a Special Spatial Plan, i.e., the aforementioned planning tool that was introduced during the crisis and allows for development plans to bypass planning directions and restrictions that are in force in the area. SSP-WfTh aimed to overcome obstacles arising from the differing jurisdictions of governmental bodies, agencies, and property owners, creating a framework to activate land development and accelerate planning processes and implementation on the ground. Nevertheless, things have not proceeded as anticipated. Although final approval from the central government was expected by the end of 2022, the plan has still not been ratified. This delay reflects tensions between the visions of different municipalities regarding the coastline, as well as between other stakeholders involved, such as the HDADF. The SSP-WfTh was opened for digital public consultation twice, each time for a limited number of days, and only after the plan was fully developed and its Strategic Environmental Assessment Impact Report had been published.

The objective of the SSP-WfTh is «the promotion of the big picture, which will include at the same time the enhancement of mobility, the upgrading of the environment and culture and economic development, giving a new, regulated urban, public space to the residents and visitors of Thessaloniki's urban agglomeration» (Regional Authority of Central Macedonia, 2019: 3). Later in the plan's technical report, the plan's objective is further elaborated as follows: «the creation of a waterfront, which will become a pole of development and economic activity and the upgrading of the citizens' living standard, [...], with proposals for an evenly distributed development, which will highlight and enhance the uniqueness of their location and will confirm the metropolitan character of the waterfront» (Ivi, 4). The expected outcomes of the plan, are «the consolidation and enhancement of the metropolitan character of the urban waterfront, the promotion of its uniqueness, the possibility of eliminating the spatial discontinuity observed at present, the restoration of accessibility to places that are currently inaccessible to the public, the upgrading of the standard of living of citizens, the strengthening of the sought-after new brand name of Thessaloniki» (Ivi, 36). During the plan's presentation to the leaders of the local authorities of the metropolitan area,

the deputy regional governor referred to the coastal zone as 'a raw diamond' implying its untapped development potential (Ypodomes, online). The SSP-WfTh delineates the coastal zone in a fragmentary manner, in some cases expanding to incorporate properties that do not actually border the coastline, while in others reducing its width to the size of a cycle path. Apparently, this delineation responds to ownership status and development potential, rather than to functional, environmental, and social criteria.

Formal environmental politics perceive the coast as unique but rough and unrefined, prestigious but vulnerable to human-induced global risks. Enhancing its uniqueness to improve the city's competitiveness in the global economy is the main goal. This overarching goal is combined with the city's adaptation to climate change. This perception of the environment stems from and is related to dominant discourses of environmentalism, those of sustainable development, and its more recent mutations. These discourses dominating environmental politics since the early '90s, embrace 'ecological modernisation' (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000), which advocates that there is no conflict between economic development and environmental protection. Quite the contrary, the two can be reconciled and be mutually beneficial.

Moreover, this imaginary of the coastline sees its development as the prerequisite for its protection and its adaptation to the risks of climate change. Green-washed in this way, planned developments typically promote a specific array of land uses, i.e., tourism and leisure activities, business and technological parks, aiming to promote innovation. Different plans and frameworks promote a common planning agenda that foregrounds the coast as an untapped development asset for the city, a unique, unpolished and vulnerable strip of natural land that needs to be activated for the sake of the city's economic and environmental resilience.

«It is paradise! Leave it as it is!». Ecological imaginaries of the everyday along the coast of Kalamaria

A number of grassroots movements have emerged in parallel to or in response to the above developments along the coast, often with the support of municipalities. Public reactions have

been expressed against specific projects, through a variety of activities which range from legal actions, research, and lobbying to municipal authorities and other actors, to marches, protests, and activities *in situ*.

Focusing on the part of the waterfront that runs along the municipality of Kalamaria, a number of local groups have been mobilized against different developments on the coast, foregrounding its publicness and its value as a 'part of nature' in a highly urbanized environment. Most have been created as neighborhood initiatives, such as the *Movement of Active Citizens of Kalamaria*, the *Association of Residents of Nea Krini, Poseidon*, and others. The *Association of citizens of Kellarios Ormos 'Mikro Emvolo'* was created in 2022. It has a legal status and an administrative board and makes decisions through regular assemblies. The Association comprises around a hundred members – mostly women – who aim to protect a particular part of the waterfront of Kalamaria, namely Kellarios Bay, from development and to assert its status as a publicly accessible common space.

There are currently three contested coastal plots of land on this part of the coast. There is the Kodra ex-military camp, part of which was ceded to the Municipality in 2018, and part contains properties of individual proprietors and the army. Another property belongs to the National Bank of Greece, and the third belongs to private owners. All three have been designated as parks and outdoor sports facilities at the General Urban Plan of Kalamaria, in force since 2015. All three are also designated as 'spaces of refuge' in case of earthquake or other emergency by the municipal Office of Civil Protection. However, the municipality is unable to compensate the owners due to its reduced funding from the central state. Hence, the National Bank has appealed to the Constitutional Court and regained its development rights in 2022. On the other plot, construction has already begun, legitimised by a planning permission issued before the plot was designated as a park.

Notwithstanding its overarching character, the SSP-WfTh does not present a detailed proposal for this part of the coast. More specifically, for the ex-military camp, the plan only mentions that another SUP is *imminent*. As regards the other two properties along the coast, it bypasses both of them and designates only a

cycle path parallel to the street. The Association emphasises in its brochure that 'the lack of representation of residents through a formal body allowed for the degradation of an area that is among the most beautiful and least accessible to the wider public of the urban agglomeration'. They see themselves as *the voice of the area*. The group has researched and communicated legal and planning developments related to Kellarios Ormos and has lobbied local authorities and MPs to protect this specific part of the coastline and the unbuilt properties.

They have marched along Kellarios Bay to protest the development of the contested plots and have hung banners with their demands on the properties' fences (see Figures 1 and 2). A number of activities have been organized both on-site and at the local elementary school. They planted trees on the National Bank's plot (see Figure 3), hosted a Christmas celebration with a live jazz band from the municipal conservatory, organized a children's workshop and an exhibition titled "Our Park Through the Eyes of Kids", cleaned a nearby beach, screened films, and more.



Fig. 1 'Unbuilt waterfront. Green for all'. Banner on the fences of the contested property of the National Bank.
Source: Author's photo (2023).



Fig. 2 'The coastal zone of Kalamaria is sending out an SOS. Redevelopment of the coastal front with funding from the state budget. No concessions to business interests'. Banner on the fences of a contested property.
Source: Author's photo (2024).



Fig. 3 Tree planting during one of the Association's activities on the coast.
Source: Author's photo (2023).

The Association has also teamed up with seven other residents' associations of Kalamaria, creating the *Network of cultural associations for the protection of the waterfront of Kalamaria* to coordinate their actions. Its members are often members of other initiatives that do not centre their action on the coast or on other local issues of Kalamaria, but constitute city-wide concerns, like the protection of trees across the city and the fight against the 'regeneration' of the expo site at the city centre. Hence, although very localised the Association cannot be identified as NIMBY environmentalism. Moreover, residents of upmarket flats with unobstructed sea view, which would be affected by the developments on the waterfront, have very limited participation in the initiative (Interviewee #2), although specifically invited by the group.

The Municipality supported – and at times co-organized – events with the group, and it also strives to prevent development and to promote the public character of the camp and the two plots. In May 2024, the municipality along with Mamagea, a local NGO, launched another initiative, entitled *Kodra Park Community*, that was defined as 'a group of citizens, people of all ages, that care about Kodra, this unique space of urban green in the centre of Kalamaria' (from a poster advertising actions of the Community). The Community aimed at activating the ex-military camp and thus claiming it as a public green park, organizing cultural and educational events and workshops of participatory design. The approximately 260 participants communicated through a group chat hosted on Viber and live meetings held in municipal spaces and in the camp when the weather was good. However, this was a short-lived endeavour with occasional tensions between subgroups and individuals. Comments on social media criticized the Community as lacking 'autonomy' as it was a hybrid initiative, involving both grassroots movements and the municipality.

In terms of use, although not public, not designed, and not properly equipped, all three properties are used as public open spaces by residents of the area and the city at large. Bordering the one-hectare property of the National Bank is a narrow tree-lined sandy beach, called Plage Dauville (see Figure 4), with minimal and neglected facilities. The beach is only accessible through the contested plot. Illegal structures

obstruct its connection to the rest of the coastline. Plage Dauville and the property adjacent to it are used for walking, sitting, playing, watching the sunset, and swimming during the summer. Interviewee #2 told me that she swims there in the summer and stressed the fact that the water is very safe and clear. Since the sewage treatment plant of the city became fully functional, phenomena of eutrophication, she told me, have significantly subsided, and all sorts of species have returned to the Bay: «Octopuses, crabs, shell, dolphins know where they go ... The water is really clear, there is a stream coming from the Aegean that cleans the water...We have 200 meters of natural beach. It would be a pity to lose it. Thessaloniki, a city of a million residents, deserves an urban beach. People come every day from all over the city to swim here. There are people who swim all through the year». Remaining unbuilt parts of the waterfront are perceived both as public spaces and as a rare and precious opportunity for urbanites to be exposed to 'nature'. «It is people's *pafsilipo* (sandness relief). It is the city's breath». Natural features of the beach, as mentioned in the interviews, are the trees, the unpaved soil, the flora and fauna, but also the water, the sea breeze, and the sunset. Interviewee #2 recalled her own childhood memories of tree climbing and playing on the streets before the area was developed. What is perceived as natural is, in fact, a fragmented coastline dotted with illegal structures, landfilled parts, wooden and concrete piers, adjacent unbuilt properties partly green and partly covered in asphalt, fences and remnants of previous uses like the weathered remains of an abandoned mini-golf course on the property of the National Bank (see Figure 5). In other words, it is an 'urban nature' produced through the metabolic processes of urbanisation, in which it is very difficult to identify what is natural and what is social (Heynen *et al.*, 2007).



Fig. 4 Plage Dauville, a narrow strip of sand beach with unmaintained facilities.
Source: Author's photo (2023).



Fig. 5 The property of the National Bank of Greece, with remnants of the 'mini-golf'.
Source: Author's photo (2025).

An intertwined understanding of 'urban naturalness' and publicness, and the emphasis on the use value of the coast for the people, is evident in the group's visions for its future. «We want to save it for us and for our children». Referring to a secluded, and rather 'virgin' – in her words – part of the coast, interviewee 1 said: «There! It is paradise! Leave it as it is! There are only a few cats. You can't hear the cars, just the birds». Asked what could be improved in the future, the same interviewee referred to accessibility for everyone, people, and bikes, preserving the natural ground. Also, she stressed that «the coast needs to be designed having in mind the common good and not private benefit. We need to unify it and not divide it. Even if the SSP-WfTh talks about unification, everyone gives their own meaning to this term. The coast is about nature, about the power of nature, which can be beautiful and dangerous. We need to respect it».

The significance of this coastal area for the residents became more apparent during the pandemic. In a city with limited green spaces, the open, albeit private, spaces along that part of the coast were full of people on a daily basis. Individual bodies, in a condition of collective stress, occupied all parts of the coast, terraces of – then closed – restaurants (see Figure 6), fenced off parking lots (see Figure 7), and the abandoned military camp, walking, siting, meeting with friends, playing, exercising, thus unveiling the public nature of the coast. Through these «shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people» (Bayat, 2010: 14), the coast was temporarily appropriated and reclaimed as public space.

The conceptualization of nature, as expressed above by the everyday practices and collective actions, differs from the abstract, planetary, socially and politically disconnected 'imaginary' of formal plans and frameworks. It is local, dense with sensorial experiences, memories, and the use value of the coast. These affective understandings of the coast, underpinned by lived everyday experiences of individual bodies articulated collectively, open up a space of transformative politics that challenge hegemonic narratives of formal planning (Viderman and Knierbein, 2019). The coast is seen as both a natural entity and a common good. The two attributes, publicness and naturalness, are inextricably linked and inseparable. The

coast is not conceived as isolated from social and political processes, a natural asset, with its own rules and principles, that needs to be protected from human interventions and human-induced climatic risks. It is understood as urban nature constantly produced by social and political processes, as well as by people's everyday presence and collective praxis. It is this conceptualisation of the coast as lived, material and common that also unveils it as political.



Fig. 6 People at the terrace of the beach tavern, closed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Source: Author's photo (2021).



Fig. 7 People at the fenced off parking lot of a restaurant, closed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Source: Author's photo (2021).

Contesting the Coast: Competing ecological imaginaries in Thessaloniki's waterfront planning

Urban waterfronts have become focal points of urban restructuring and environmental planning. It is at the intersection of these processes that the 'post-political beach' (Knierbein and Christodoulou, 2025) emerges as a privileged site of economic development – crucial for reshaping the image of coastal cities and enhancing their position in the global hierarchy: unique, natural, yet increasingly vulnerable to human-induced climatic risks.

This new 'aberration of the ecological imaginary' (Gandy, 2007) reproduces the enduring dichotomy between nature and society, foreclosing the social and political dimensions of environmental planning, and instrumentalising global environmental concerns as a legitimizing rhetoric for various forms of green grabbing. Framed within the discourse of 'ecological modernisation', the prevailing ecological imaginary of climate adaptation and resilience not only reconciles

development with environmental protection but also generates value *by* protecting the environment, mitigating climate impacts, and adapting to climate risks. In Greece, austerity politics during the economic crisis created a fertile ground for such politics to unfold. Shrunk public expenditure, a new planning framework aiming at accelerating planning processes and promoting investment, and the management of public land by the HRADF created a favourable context for rapid processes of neoliberalisation of space. The widespread land grabbing that ensued is exemplified in coastal zones, where economic restructuring is justified by a development-oriented 'ecological imaginary' of global environmental commitment, at the expense of the coast's public character.

Formal plans, concerning different levels of planning, from a regional strategy to a localized framework for the waterfront of the central municipality, conceptualize the coast as an unrefined and vulnerable natural asset, devoid of social meaning or everyday use value for local residents – a natural asset awaiting to fulfil its development potential and, in doing so, contribute to the city's resilience. They unanimously embrace the pervasive planning agenda of neoliberal urbanism, which is dominated by tourism, recreation, commerce, and innovative technology and green-washed by 'green and blue spaces' and resilience.

In doing so, formal plans commit to global environmental mandates of climate adaptation and energy transition and the indisputable goal of economic competitiveness. At the same time, despite rhetorical commitments to participatory approaches, they remain largely insulated from the everyday lives, present needs, and future aspirations of local communities, pointing instead toward increasingly undemocratic forms of governance.

However, environmental politics along the coast are not determined by hegemonic environmental imperatives, but are constantly performed by assemblages of actors. Local resident-led initiatives, as seen in Kalamaria, challenge top-down development narratives by asserting alternative 'ecological imaginaries' rooted in everyday practices, sensory experiences, and collective claims to public space. Urban nature, in this imaginary, is a hybrid, both natural and social, constantly produced by environmental and social processes

and power dynamics. Thus, grassroots initiatives unveil the political nature of the urban coast and claim it as a common good. They also underscore the need for a more democratic and inclusive planning process and actively open up varied spaces of participation. The dividing line between formal and informal politics is blurring, in the case study, as the municipality opposes plans of a higher level of governance and supports local struggles. Tensions between competing future visions, underpinned by competing “ecological imaginaries”, illustrate the fluid and dynamic nature of urban waterfronts and reassert their political nature.

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