



# Institutions and Culture in Thessaloniki and the Role of Local Government: From Dimitria to Labattoir

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## ABSTRACT

*The cultural activity of the Municipality of Thessaloniki begins in the first post-war years and especially in the 50's and later, in order to cover the inability of the Greek state to finance cultural activities outside the capital. This weakness is based on the fact that Greece came out devastated by the German occupation, but also by the civil war, which was the painful result of national division. On the other hand, it was considered a symptom of the Cold War. Consequently, the Municipality of Thessaloniki with its meager forces undertook the task of promoting and familiarizing its citizens with forms of contemporary culture and modern art, as the cultural heritage of the ancient Greek world was in the hands of the central administration. Along the way, the Municipality of Thessaloniki and its departments take up the organization of art exhibitions, mainly of artists who came both from the city and from the Macedonian hinterland. The first concern of the Municipality was the creation of a gallery with works by contemporary artists and then it implemented a cultural activity, which was to become one of the most important cultural institutions in the country: Dimitria Festival, in the honor of the patron saint of Agios Dimitrios. During the Political Changeover, the Municipality of Thessaloniki increased its activities in the field of Culture as the economic situation of Greece significantly improved being a permanent member of the European Union since 1981. Thus, sponsorships were made by its citizens for the creation of new cultural infrastructure (Vafopouleio Cultural Center, History Center); the architectural wealth of the once prosperous Jewish community was used for cultural purposes, and also the Ottoman buildings, which are scattered throughout the city, were preserved.*

**KEYWORDS:** Municipality of Thessaloniki, Cultural Institutions, Dimitria Festival, Jewish Community, Ottoman Buildings, Gallery of the Municipality of Thessaloniki, Labattoir, Vafopouleio Cultural Center, History Center.

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## INTRODUCTION

The 1950s began on favorable terms as the Marshall Plan helped Greece's economic recovery, but the legacy of the Civil War (1946-1949) and the Nazi occupation (1941-1944) was unbearable in many areas of public life (Kontis, 2000). Regional cities, such as Thessaloniki, received less government funds than Athens and Culture was the area mainly affected by these negative consequences. Center and periphery existed in unequal terms – a situation continuing to this day, however on different terms. The local government had to fill this gap and that is why large municipalities, such as Thessaloniki, took important initiatives to create institutions for modern culture. The course that the Municipality of Thessaloniki has followed over time is memorable as within a few decades it managed to multiply the cultural institutions and to collaborate with the capital of the Greek state, Athens and with cities abroad.

The first artistic event that took place in Thessaloniki on the initiative of the municipal authority is the 1956 exhibition entitled "First Group Exhibition of Fine Arts" in the hall of the Library of the Municipality (YMCA building), which operated there since 1939. In this exhibition 40 artists, painters and sculptors presented their works (see the 1st Group Exhibition of Fine Arts, 1956).

The municipal authority of that time, realizing the extent of the lack of museums and galleries with works of modern and contemporary art, decided to establish a Gallery of the Municipality, which would fulfill this purpose. The decision for the establishment of this institution was taken in 1966 and was initially hosted on the premises of the Library of YMCA. In 1978 Thessaloniki felt the dramatic consequences of the great earthquake that struck the city resulting in long delays in the creation of new institutions as the restoration of the damaged ones, especially of its ancient and preservable monuments, was paramount. The Gallery of the Municipality acquired a "permanent home" in 1986 in Villa Mordoch (named by one of its owners, who was one of the wealthy Jewish merchants of the city), whose restoration had just been completed. Then, in 2013, he was transferred to Casa Bianca, in the mansion of another big Jew from Thessaloniki, whose name it bears.

Almost simultaneously, the institution of "Dimitria Festival" was founded, initially by the Hellenic Tourism Organization and then under the responsibility of the Municipality of Thessaloniki, with the main purpose of creating a cultural festival with various content that would promote Greek culture. This institution grew and gained international recognition.



During the “Metapolitefsi” – Political Changeover (it is the period that followed the military dictatorship, ie 1974 onwards), the institutions of culture increased in number as the Municipality of Thessaloniki was granted the preserved monuments of the city by the state, monuments such as the Yeni Mosque (historic mosque for religious of the Muslims of Jewish descent), as well as Alatza Imaret (one of the oldest Ottoman buildings, which functioned as a mosque), to be used exclusively as exhibition spaces for contemporary artists.

Along with the use of the historical monuments of the city by the Municipality of Thessaloniki for historical purposes during “Metapolitefsi” more cultural facilities were created by sponsors, such as the Vafopouleio Cultural Center (donated by the poet Georgios Vafopoulos and his wife Anastasia) and the History Center of the city (donated by the couple Billi, Anastasios and Ioulia), built on the ruins of the fallen apartment building during the earthquakes of 1978. Both buildings have multiple functions with art and culture being the main axes.

The last monument to be restored with funds from European programs and operated with the sponsorship of the Niarchos Foundation is the area of the old municipal slaughterhouses in the west of the city, which bears the official name of the French word “Labattoir” and functions as a multi-cultural center.

A long time has passed from that first exhibition of the Municipality in the 50’s and Thessaloniki grew not only in population, but also culturally so much that today it competes with the capital and assisted by state institutions to claim a decent position in the international art scene.

### **“Dimitria Festival”: The First Cultural Institution of Modern Thessaloniki**

As already noted, in 1966 “Dimitria Festival” was founded on the initiative of the Hellenic Tourism Organization, which then (in 1973) took full responsibility of the Municipality of Thessaloniki. It is one of the most prominent institutions in the city, it is held annually in October and its program covers the whole spectrum of culture: music, dance, opera, theater, art, speech events, sports. The opening of the events has a festive character with the wide participation of the residents, with open-air concerts, with poster competitions, leaving a great legacy in this field (see Poster Report, 1989) with daily events of all kinds and with the participation of cultural associations of the city, but also government agencies.

The history of “Dimitria Festival” (as a pagan ritual) is lost in the depths of the centuries as it was associated from antiquity with the worship of Thermaeus Dionysus. Later, Philip II of Macedonia turned it into a cult of the Kaveri, a religious and sacramental ritual brought from Samothrace. With the predominance of Christianity, this cult was replaced by the festivities, now under the name “Dimitria”, which took place in the city and evolved

in honor of St. Demetrius, patron saint of the city, who martyred at the Hippodrome in 306 AD, the period of the Roman emperor Maximian Galerius (Papagiannopoulos, 1982; Dimitria 20 years, 1985).

During the Byzantine years, “Dimitria” was named “Panathenaea of medieval Athens” and was dedicated to the patron saint and had a commercial and cultural character. This glorious celebration dates back to the 12th century, as evidenced by written sources. “Dimitria is a holiday, like Panathinaia in Athens and Panionia in Milesia. It becomes even more significant to Macedonians, it is the greatest of the festivals. Not only locals and natives flock to it, but people from all over Greece” according to a medieval code of the Vatican. (see Dimitria 20 years, 1985, p.7).

According to the organizers, “the festival guidelines remain the promotion and revitalization of the city’s monuments, the revival of customs and traditions, the promotion of traditional professions, the promotion and distinction of works dedicated to Thessaloniki and even events related to modern life, to the problems and prospects of the city. High quality artistic events from the whole range of Art, music, theater, dance and visual arts, events of education, with social reflection, science, quality of life and sports, revival and restoration events with folklore elements, as they have evolved up to now» (Dimitria 20 years, 1985, p.15).

To this day, Dimitria Festival takes place in the city of Thessaloniki, almost throughout the month of October and includes activities from the full range of arts and have now developed into an institution crucial to the cultural life of the city. The events are hosted in all cultural venues managed by the Municipality of Thessaloniki, but also in others, such as the Concert Hall. The events of the Dimitria Festival are of a wide range and their promotion aimed to the restoration of the real image of the cultural landscape of Thessaloniki (Papanikolaou, 2002; Lydakis, 1976).

Indicatively, one can mention large exhibitions of Greek and foreign artists, such as the retrospective exhibition of Konstantinos Parthenis or the exhibition “Imagine Peace” by Yoko Ono in 2016 (fig.1). From time to time, famous European bands and theatrical groups have been invited.

Dimitria Festival is the first cultural institution of Thessaloniki of this scale, created in a period of complete absence of museums, collections and institutions on the subject of modern and contemporary art. But also on a national level it is the only institution with such great cultural pluralism, with its major impact and with the undoubted prestige that it acquired in the more than 50 years since its foundation.

### **The Labattoir and other cultural activities of the Municipality of Thessaloniki**

One of the last “acquisitions” of the Municipality of Thessaloniki in the field of culture is the preserved building of the Old Slaughterhouses of the city with its history lost during the years of Ottoman rule (built in the late 19th century, probably in 1896-1897). After its restoration due to the damage it suffered in the great earthquake in 1978, today it functions as a “Cultural Center” (ie with events of music, dance, theater, art exhibitions, etc.) and officially bears the French name Labattoir, the translation of its first use (fig.2). Labattoir was founded according to one of the basic principles of urban revival which is the construction of large cultural works of high visibility and emblematic buildings of prestige such as theaters, museums, concert halls and exhibition centers, etc. in former industrial centers (Landry et al. 1996).

The incorporation of this space in the cultural web of the city since 2014 gave a new impetus to the cultural events of the city and according to the people in charge of space Labattoir “[.] It is a socially interactive machine for the production of culture, a laboratory of applied creativity that responds to the needs and problems of society, proposing and implementing solutions and alternative strategies for the future, with the active contribution of the artist as a catalyst and the citizen as a co-producer .. [.] ”. (*Cityportal.gr & Thessaloniki.gr*).

As already mentioned, the oldest collection of works of art in the modern history of art in Thessaloniki is the Gallery of the Municipality of Thessaloniki, which immediately after its founding in 1966, began to collect paintings, sculptures and engravings, preferably by artists of the city and the Macedonian hinterland. Later, it collected works by artists from the rest of Greece as well as foreign artists. Today the gallery’s collection numbers about three thousand works. One of the highlights is without a doubt a series of works (oil paintings and drawings) of the great artist and main representative of the School of Munich, Nikolaos Gyzis, which was acquired through a donation. Also extremely important and interesting is the collection of post-Byzantine icons from churches and houses (see Municipal Gallery of Thessaloniki, 1986).

The Gallery of the Municipality of Thessaloniki was connected with two emblematic buildings of Thessaloniki, Villa Mordoch (built in 1905 from the designs of the Greek architect Xenophon Paionidis) and Casa Bianca (built in 1911-1913 from the designs of the Italian architect Pietro Arrigoni), which today houses the gallery’s associations. Both buildings are associated with the history of the Jewish community of the city because the first was owned by Samuel Mordoch, a Jewish wealthy merchant from Thessaloniki, and the second by the Italian-Jewish industrialist Dino Fernandez Diaz. Both buildings represent architectural eclecticism and along with many others scattered throughout the city, they testify the great contribution of the

Jewish community to the economy and culture of Thessaloniki, enhancing its cosmopolitanism in many forms of the daily life of its inhabitants. (Moutsopoulos, 1998 & Kolonas, 2016).

Two other buildings connected to the Gallery of the Municipality of Thessaloniki as exhibition places are the Yeni Mosque (fig.3) (Old Archaeological Museum) and the Alatza Imaret , in the Upper City. They are two examples of Ottoman architecture and were built for religious purposes. The first was a place of worship for the Islamized Jews of Thessaloniki and its construction dates back to 1902 and was designed by the Italian architect Vitaliano Pozzelli in an eclectic style mixed with Eastern - Muslim elements (Kolonas & Matthaiki, 1980).

Alatza Imaret, on the other hand, is one of the oldest Muslim buildings in Thessaloniki that functioned as a mosque, but also as a poorhouse and dates back to the 15th century. After being restored from the damage caused by the earthquakes in 1978, the monument is used exclusively for cultural events. (Michalopoulou, 2006)

Vafopouleio Cultural Center is one of the newest buildings belonging to the Municipality of Thessaloniki used exclusively for cultural events. It is a multi-cultural place with a library, two floors for art exhibitions, a lecture hall, a theater and a collection of works of art. It is a donation of the Vafopoulos couple and consists of two consecutive buildings that were built in 1981 (the first) and in 1989 (the second).

In the period since their completion, numerous exhibitions of Greek and foreign artists have taken place. Through its activity it has acquired a remarkable collection of works of art that is permanently exhibited on its premises (Papanikolaou, 1985).

The History Center has a specific orientation, to collect and study archival sources regarding the history of Thessaloniki and the wider area of Macedonia. However, it also has an exhibition space mainly of photographic, visual and historical interest, as well as a lecture hall. The History Center has existed as part of the Municipality since 1983, but the current three-story building is a donation of the couple Billis and was built in 1995 in the city center, on the site of the apartment building that was demolished during the 1978 earthquakes.

It is a fact that the above spaces expanded the cultural landscape of the city and formed new perspectives for the future of Thessaloniki, which despite its regional character is called to play a more active and catalytic role in the field of culture not only for its inhabitants and Greeks in general, but also for the international public, if one takes into account that Thessaloniki is adjacent to Mount Athos, it has a large number of Byzantine, Ottoman and modern monuments, which betray its pluralistic culture and cosmopolitanism (Mazauer, 2006 & Hasiotis , 1997).

## CONCLUSION

The cultural image of Thessaloniki several decades after its liberation (1912) was bleak as the two world wars and the civil war prevented its modernization in matters of culture. After the war, only the archeological museum and the museum of Byzantine culture functioned as institutions in the area of museums and galleries, while there was no consideration for modern culture. The Municipality of Thessaloniki realized this from the 50s and 60s and undertook the organization of art exhibitions for the first time, as well as the creation of an art festival, Dimitria Festival, and the establishment of the Gallery of the Municipality of Thessaloniki. Over time these two institutions became gigantic, acquired a national and international character, prevailed as a strong point of culture not only of Thessaloniki, but of the whole country. Thessaloniki increased its cultural power during the “Metapolitefsi” (1974 onwards), acquiring new spaces, granted to the local administration by the state, including especially historic buildings of the 19th and early 20th century, excellent examples of European and Muslim architecture, as well as evidence of the economic prosperity of the Greek and Jewish communities. Also, Greek citizens and great benefactors of the city (the Vafopoulos couple and the Billi couple) created new multi-storey spaces for the preservation, promotion and study of the history and culture of Thessaloniki. Today the infrastructure for culture is profound and is the basis for further development.

## Figures



Yoko Ono, *Ex-It, “Imagine Peace”*, 51<sup>th</sup> Dimitria Festival, 2016



Labattoir, 1896-1897, Thessaloniki



Yeni Mosque, 1902, Thessaloniki

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