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## Enhance Accessibility in Traditional Districts A case study of the “Upper Town” of Thessaloniki

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### Abstract

The object of this research was the planning and organisation of a sustainable urban transport system in the "Upper Town" of Thessaloniki. In this article the main findings of a household travel survey held before and after the operation of a new bus line in the area will be discussed. Then what will be presented are the specific measures and interventions aiming at the safeguard, maintenance and enhancement of the special characteristics of this residential area, adopting a “green” mobility approach. The Upper Town is a historic district situated in the north-east part of the *intra muros* city with traditional architecture and organic urban tissue. Steep slopes, a complex network of narrow paved streets, dead-ends, small glades and picturesque squares compose the road system. These characteristics cause unfavorable travel conditions for pedestrians, bicycles and vehicles. The findings of the research show that the improvement of infrastructure for pedestrians, the development of a dense public transport network connecting the district with the city centre, the improvement of the urban landscape and the preservation and enhancement of its spatial features are the main priorities. The operation of the new bus line has to meet the expectations of the residents and serve the mobility needs of the area. The participation of the citizens constitutes an important tool for the development, acceptance and implementation of an integrated and sustainable public transport system.

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*Keywords:* traditional district; urban public transport; accessibility; sustainable mobility plan; citizens' participation

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## **1. Introduction**

The organization and management of sustainable urban transport and traffic systems in the traditional-historical districts of European cities constitute an important factor for the protection, preservation and enhancement of the urban environment. However, the topography and the morphological characteristics of the urban tissue of traditional entities engender certain constraints that hinder the implementation of efficient public transportation services and alternative transport modes. In most cases these districts are characterized by high densities and the road network by narrow streets, steep slopes and dead-ends that make the traffic conditions problematic and harmful for the environment. Many European cities are implementing innovative policies and actions in order to turn the traditional districts into sustainable and environmentally upgraded urban areas, well integrated in the city transport network. This article compares the urban mobility practices implemented in traditional districts of four European cities: in the Upper Town of Thessaloniki (Greece), in Alfama of Lisbon (Portugal), in Panagia of Kavala (Greece) and in the historic centre of Freiburg (Germany).

Special consideration is given to the case of the traditional district of the Upper Town of Thessaloniki (which is translated as “Ano Poli” in the Greek language) with the aim of identifying and evaluating the quality of the transport system and the level of accessibility. The analysis of the current situation, the use of the findings of the origin-destination household surveys held in the study area and the consideration of the European experience form the basis for the elaboration of a sustainable urban mobility plan. The main objectives of the household surveys are:

- the comprehension of the trips distribution and the modal split
- the residents’ assessment of the quality of the transport services and the traffic conditions in the area
- the evaluation of the willingness to use of a new bus line operated by the Urban Transport Organization of Thessaloniki
- the formulation of several recommendations by the residents in order to improve the accessibility to Upper Town, to regain public space and to upgrade the quality of life in the area.

Focusing on the Upper Town of Thessaloniki, this research attempts to outline a set of transport policy guidelines and actions to be taken in order to address the accessibility and mobility problems of traditional districts. The proposed interventions are based on the following four pillars which aim at reclaiming public realm: 1) Accessibility, 2) Architecture, 3) Environment and 4) Citizens’ participation.

## **2. Sustainable mobility in European traditional districts**

There is a growing awareness that the positive effects of urban mobility are offset by negative externalities such as environmental pollution, traffic congestion, lack of accessibility, and high accident rates. Current trends indicate that major changes are necessary on transport policy and planning to ensure the development of sustainable urban transport systems (Dejeammes, 2009). According to Friedl and Steininger (2002), a sustainable transport system should be one that allows basic mobility and accessibility needs of individuals, companies and societies to be met safely and in a manner consistent with human and ecosystem health. The urban transport system should also promote equity within and between generations and it should be affordable, operating efficiently, and limiting emissions, waste, and noise.

Historical European cities have implemented successful transportation systems instilling optimism for the future transportation and environmental protection. Relevant policies, measures and actions aim to the development of historic centers in view of sustainable mobility. Most of the historic districts in European cities operate under strict legislation allowing limited or no change to their environment. Traditional districts address their transportation needs by coordinating factors like culture, aesthetics and an

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