City Centre of Thessaloniki. Source: Lena Greinke.

Urban Transformation through Public Participation

A Comparative Study of Thessaloniki (Greece) and Hanover (Germany)

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Abstract

Public participation in urban development has a rich tradition in Europe, particularly in Greece and Germany. Especially in (inner) city development, public participation is becoming increasingly important. This paper compares participation processes in Hanover and Thessaloniki through a review of the literature, observations, and interviews, examining the extent to which the cities can learn from each other regarding their public participation culture. Both cities have experienced growth, focusing on sustainable planning. While Hanover has an established culture of participation, Thessaloniki is in the process of developing one. Citizen–led initiatives are thriving in both cities, and establishing a local culture of dialogue is crucial for future progress. Thessaloniki can learn from Hanover, and Hanover in turn could benefit from embracing international perspectives.

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Public participation in urban development

The participation of civil society and the local population in urban planning and development processes has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention since the middle of the 20th century, with the aim of developing and strengthening the city centres of the future.

> Cooperative and communicative planning approaches are becoming more significant than ever (Anders and Stoltenberg 2022: 46).

As the *loci of urban society*, the transformation of city centres thus becomes a challenge for urban society as a whole (Willinger 2022: 42); genuine transformation requires a collective effort (Klemme 2022: 12; Renner 2022: 23). Intensive participation processes, for example those involved in generating (inner) city development strategies, entail identifying the challenges, outlining guiding principles, elaborating practical solutions and the means to implement them. The participation of various actors from local government, the municipal administration, civil society, local businesses, and the real estate sector is essential (Anders and Stoltenberg 2022: 45). While urban development is a central task of local authorities, it is also ultimately a collective one (Klemme 2022: 12).

Before the Covid–19 pandemic, German city centres were already facing major transformations and continue to experience increasing challenges today (Deutscher Städtetag 2021; Klemme 2022: 5; Rieper and Schote 2022: 43). These include changing shopping habits due to the increase in online retail, the abandonment of stores in the stationary retail sector due to a lack of consumer buying, rising rents, an increase in chain stores, and, in some cases, strict building and historical preservation regulations that make changes more difficult. The pandemic has exacerbated a number of these challenges (BearingPoint GmbH 2015; Bundesstiftung Baukultur et al. 2020; BMI 2021; Deutscher Städtetag 2021; Handelsverband Bayern e. V. 2021; Klemme 2022: 6), intensifying structural upheavals and impacting various sectors, such as health, retail, labour, and mobility (Hesse and Lange 2023: 19).

In Greek cities, the constricting impact of the Covid–19 pandemic was preceded by that of the financial crisis, the effects of which continue to be felt. Furthermore, developments in the tourism sector, such as Airbnb and an increase in hotels, have triggered changes in urban development. In addition, rising rents in many cities are leading to further population loss in core centres (cf. Eisfeld and Just 2021) via the displacement of lower–income populations or gentrification processes. Such changes not only affect cities as a built environment, but also their inhabitants, visitors, and tourists.

The aim of this paper is to analyse and compare participation processes in Hanover and Thessaloniki against the background of current discourses on public participation, with the following questions in focus: To what extent can these cities learn from each other regarding their public participation culture? What are the potentials and limits of public participation in these cases? Here, the terms (public) participation and involvement

are used synonymously to refer to the opportunity and possibility to actively engage in development and design processes. The paper first provides a general introduction to public participation in Germany and Greece from different perspectives. It goes on to a more detailed discussion of participation in the context of inner–city development, firstly in Germany and secondly in Greece, with Hanover and Thessaloniki as case studies. The methodology used is then elaborated, followed by a discussion of the insights gained. The paper concludes with some final thoughts about the participation culture of the two cities and provides an outlook for future prospects.

Public participation in Germany and Greece

Public participation in urban development has a long history (Selle 2013: 113). The post–war reconstruction of German cities appeared to be proceeding smoothly until the mid–1960s, when the first signs of discontent emerged among the population in regard to these development processes. At that point, members of civil society ceased to simply passively agree to the changes that were taking place (Selle 2013: 121). In parallel with the social developments of the late 1960s, conflicts occurred more frequently; these included squats, some of which ended violently and were therefore particularly media–effective (Evers 1982 in Selle 2013: 122). In the interest of strengthening the role of democratic states and ensuring sustainable development, the international guiding principle of sustainable development was established at the Agenda 21 Conference of Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It was noted several times that decision–making processes should be improved through increased public participation; that new forms of participation should be developed with more effective dialogue between local government, the population, and institutions; and that Agenda 21 processes should be set up in municipalities (Zillessen 2002: 41).

> Urban development is a highly political and politicised process; in a democratic state, those impacted by it should therefore have the opportunity to be involved in the planning process, so that their views are taken into account in the decisions and directions.

Moreover, the "on the ground" knowledge of local people can enhance the potentially more removed perspectives of the planning professionals (Coffey 2002: 104–105). Society has become increasingly interested, informed, aesthetically responsive, critical, efficiency–driven, and market–oriented in many places, leading to a demand on the part of civil society to be more involved in planning processes. People want their views to be heard, taken seriously and reflected in the decisions made; when they are not, the impression often arises that participation is a politically necessary but meaningless ritual which is dismissive of the public's views, and thus seems pointless to them (Kähler 2014: 46–48).

Participation in urban development has hitherto mostly referred to Arnstein's ladder of participation (Anders and Stoltenberg 2022: 44). In today's world, however, participation means not only disseminating information and undertaking consultation activities vis–à–vis the public, but enabling the public to take a deeper, more active part in the decision–making process itself. There are myriad forms of public participation in planning processes in modern democracies. One reason for this is that participation now goes beyond a mere box–ticking exercise and has become embedded in planning processes at a much deeper level (Pohl and Massing 2014: 5). Cities are created and develop through the actions of many actors (Klemme and Selle 2022: 113). A modern state can no longer operate without such participation, because participation optimises and legitimises decisions, secures acceptance, and forms the basis for citizenship and the public spirit on which a democratic state depends (Hennis 1962 in Zillessen 2002: 38–40). In inner city development, participation processes take place on different scales (e.g. in the neighborhood or at a city–wide level) and deal with different fields of action (e.g. neighborhood or urban development). Consequently, stakeholders from different spheres, (planning) levels, professions and fields of action must be brought together in participation processes and actively involved in an exchange. The diversity of stakeholders and topics is also reflected in the complex processes: participation formats differ, must be selected in a targeted manner and enable "respectable" participation. It is essential that all participants develop a common understanding of the objectives and jointly develop a communication strategy (Thissen 2022: 60–61).

In urban development, the importance of collective co–design by diverse actors is growing (Fischer and Radinger–Peer 2015: 25, Willinger 2022: 46). The aim is to establish bridges between actors who otherwise act separately and according to different "logics", to resolve blockages, to identify and promote forces that can be mobilized, to test forms of interaction and cooperation between actors and, above all, to stimulate and promote learning processes (Klemme and Selle 2022: 114–115). In many places, the existing urban planning instruments are no longer sufficient to implement sustainable urban development (Willinger 2022: 46). In inner cities, conflicting interests have to be harmonised (Renner 2022: 20). In addition, the mix of uses in such shared spaces requires transparent planning and implementation as well as communication, cooperation, and co–production (Renner 2022: 20). Urban development has always been characterised by interventions and new ideas (Anders and Stoltenberg 2022: 51). However, the call for experimentation, new forms of participation, and temporary uses by different actors is becoming louder (Anders and Stoltenberg 2022: 42). In German cities, forms of participation such as living labs are therefore frequently tested as a possibility for exploratory collaborations (Anders and Stoltenberg 2022: 41). Participation processes in urban development are often criticized and are not always effectively. It is therefore important to critically reflect on them and change them in the future. Selle (2013: 413) sets out ten guidelines to ensure that communication processes in the city must be anchored in everyday political life (1 more everyday) and without being tied to departmental or procedural boundaries (2 closer to everyday life). In addition, by stabilizing communication, project–related communication can be reduced and specified (3 less) and open–ended processes can be initiated (4 more open). Furthermore, urban communication must focus on substantive issues and not be for the masses (5 more serious). Communication should be examined in a

reflective manner by academics and practitioners (6 more reflective) and roles in the process should be presented transparently (7 clearer). Subsequently, the communication processes must not be too abstract and their aspirations must be realistic (8 more realistic). In future, Selle calls for clear co–decision rights for society (9 more binding) and reliable implementation of the developed aspects of the communication processes (10 more reliable) (Selle 2013: 413–414).

Public participation in urban development has evolved historically in both Germany and Greece. It is in a state of constant flux as the demands and criteria imposed upon it change, new forms and dimensions of participation are created, its rationale and aims are further elaborated, and new actors enter the arena. In this context, the relationship of urban society to actors in urban development and policymaking is fundamental, and can be complicated, opaque, and tense (Author 2016: 42–49). That the urban population is increasingly engaged with development issues is manifest in the self–organisation of initiatives and collective actions in public areas, which can contribute to shaping and supporting urban development projects (Höffken and Streich 2015: 38–39). The active participation of civil society and other actors is increasingly called for (Fischer and Peer 2015: 25; Selle 2013: 11–12), not least because a multitude of interests, issues, and stakeholders must be considered in urban development projects (Bischoff et al. 2005: 16). Urban development processes rely on society itself as an actor (Selle 2013: 13). However, increasing the public awareness of the opportunities to participate demands new forms of participation and a *local culture of dialogue* in many cities (Willinger 2022: 43).

Case study: Hanover

Hanover is an important city for globally active businesses and forms a central transport hub in the middle of Germany. The city is located in the transition area between the North German lowlands and the mountainous region of Lower Saxony. The river Leine flows through the city, but other natural areas, such as Lake Maschsee or the Eilenriede, Hanover's city forest, which is almost twice the size of Central Park, also characterise the cityscape. Hanover is the capital of Lower Saxony, one of the largest German states (LHH 2023d). Today, the city is divided into 51 districts. The Mitte district includes the city centre (figure 1).

In Hanover, the general public has participated in new projects at the municipal level outside of official policymaking and administrative spheres for more than three decades (LHH 2023b), a phenomenon that has continued to develop (LHH 2014b: 72). The state capital describes itself both externally and internally as a participation–oriented service provider. Public participation therefore plays an important role, and has been and continues to be tested in various forms, including in initiatives at local, regional, supraregional, national, and international levels (LHH 2014b: 72–74).

In Germany, a distinction can be made between formal participation, i.e. in legally mandatory processes, and informal or voluntary participation (Selle 2013: 24). Formal forms of participation include public consultations (according to §3 of the German Federal Building Code) or petitions. Voluntary forms include citizens' initiatives, roundtables, or workshops (Selle 2013: 62). Nevertheless, new research shows that the separation into formal and

informal participation seems to be confusing as, for example, there are designations within the legal framework that sound similar but mean something different. Therefore, it suits better to speak of legally binding participation and to avoid the distinction formal and informal (Decker and Selle 2023: 16–17). A distinction can also be made between top–down and bottom–up participation. While top–down pathways often describe the collaboration between governments and citizens (e.g. consultation, citizen participation and co–production) where governmental actors take over a dominant role by involving citizens in policy making. Whereas, in contrast, in bottom–up pathways citizens taking the leadership and self–organizing role to generate community goods (Van Meerkerk 2019: 150). In legally binding participation, the city of Hanover is obliged to involve the public in urban development planning processes at an early stage. The relevant documents are usually published online and participation is limited to the submission of comments on the draft plan by stakeholders and the public (LHH 2023c).
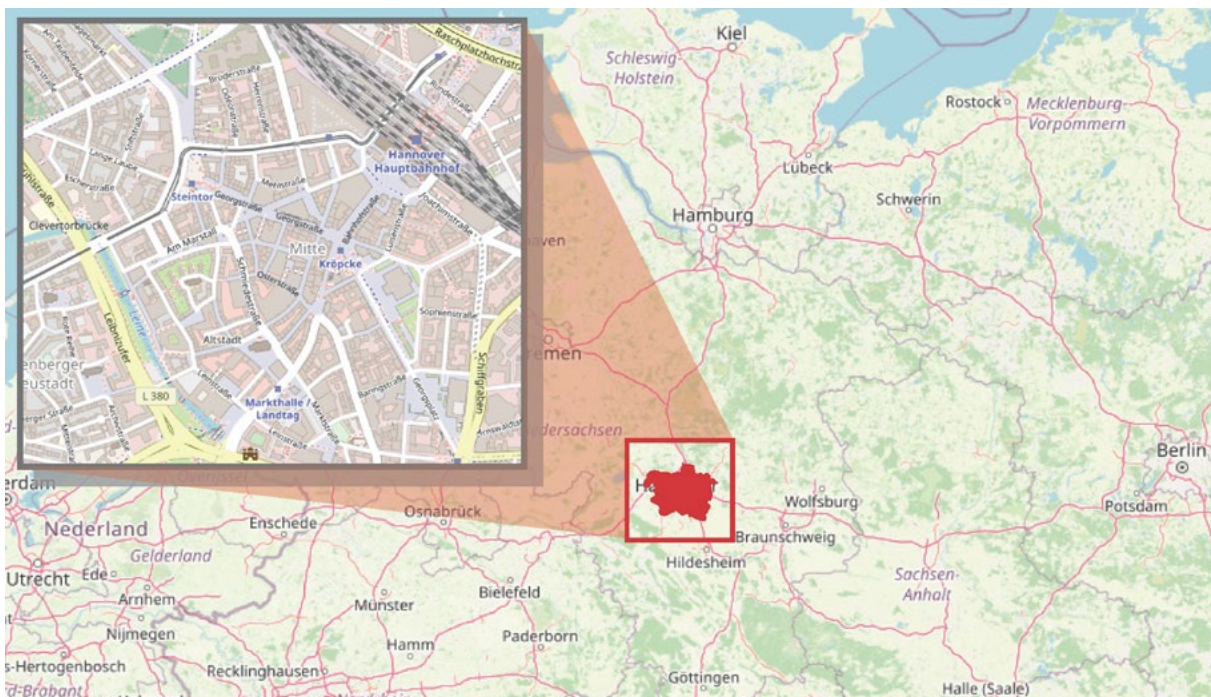

Figure 1: Map of the city centre of Hanover. Source: Authors, based on OpenStreetMap.

Voluntary participation is not regulated by law in Germany, but can complement legally binding participation. In Hanover, voluntary participation processes in urban development have included Hannover City 2020+, a strategy for the city centre which was initiated as a pilot project in 2006 and has identified important guidelines for the development of the inner city. The strategy was elaborated through a public dialogue process supported by three external mentors before being approved by the council. The process got underway with preliminary talks with stakeholders from the retail, media, real estate, housing, and cultural sectors as well as with church representatives, and four kick–off events were held with presentations to inform the public. Outline plans were then developed in workshops and discussed in public and online forums as well as in various interdisciplinary

administrative, and expert panels. These then flowed into a two–phase international urban planning ideas competition, from which the ultimate strategy emerged (LHH, Fachbereich Planen und Stadtentwicklung 2011: 4–5).

In parallel with this, the urban development scheme *Hannover plusZehn – Working for a young and innovative city* was introduced by the city administration in 2005. Based on an analysis of the demographic, economic, and social challenges, goals and key action points were developed (LHH 2011: 5), and within the framework of this initiative, a competition to elaborate the new strategy was held with the participation of children's and youth groups as well as school classes. A total of 35 proposals in the form of photos, collages, films, etc. were submitted, which were incorporated into the Hannover plusZehn scheme and were to be implemented with the support of the local government and administration (LHH 2005: 14).

Subsequently, the integrated, sustainable urban development strategy My Hannover 2030 was developed in a participatory manner to define goals, measures, and projects for the city between 2014 and 2016 (LHH 2014b: 6, 75). On the basis of five fields of action with overarching themes and guiding questions, a status quo report with an analysis of existing strengths and weaknesses was compiled, and quality standards and guidelines for the participation processes were then developed (LHH 2014b: 74). This was followed by the participation phase itself, in which four initial events were held to inform stakeholders, after which all stakeholders ranging from policymakers, the local administration, and members of civil society had the opportunity to independently hold in–person events of any kind (for example, workshops, theme evenings, bus tours, panel discussions) (LHH 2022). Online participation was also enabled via a platform set up for this purpose (LHH 2015; LHH 2014a: 9). The views put forward in these events were then evaluated and the draft plan was elaborated. In mid–2016, the city council approved the plan, which has since been in the implementation phase. Fifty projects were identified in a work programme, which is continuously updated (LHH 2022).

As a final example, in 2021, a public consultation process was held under the umbrella *Hannover MIT(TE) gestalten* (*Shaping Hanover Mitte together*) to develop a strategy for the city centre. For this purpose, a number of experimental spaces with various themes were temporarily developed in the city centre to engage the public in the planning process. In addition, a survey was conducted and neighbourhood workshops were set up to provide a forum for residents to discuss the situation in their local area (LHH 2023a).

Case study: Thessaloniki

The city of Thessaloniki forms the second largest urban centre in Greece after Athens by population (about 800,000 across the Thessaloniki Urban Agglomeration) (Giannaros and Melas 2012: 105; Anastasiou et al. 2022: 22). Thessaloniki, which is much larger than Hanover in terms of population, is known as the vibrant *Queen of the North* on the sea, and is the most important metropolis and port in northern Greece, with spillover to parts of the Balkans (Konstania et al. 2021: 1). The city is located on the northeast coast of the Thermaikos Gulf (Giannaros and Melas 2012: 105) between the coast and the mountainous regions of Hortiati, which shape its characteristic urban form (Anastasiou et al. 2022: 22).

The approximately 5 km long urban waterfront and the suburban forest on the mountains of Seich–Sou to the north and northeast of the city are strong landmarks (Anastasiou et al. 2022: 22, figure 2).

Figure 2: Map of the city centre of Thessaloniki. Source: Authors, based on OpenStreetMap.

As is the case in Germany, the Greek planning system draws a distinction between formal and informal forms of participation (Papageorgiou 2017; Mouratiadoua and Moran 2007). In Thessaloniki, for example, legally binding participation takes place within the transport planning process. "The transportation planning process is changing from being the exclusive domain of transportation engineers to an interdisciplinary planning process that integrates urban/land use planning, environmental concerns, and social needs. In addition, experts and other key stakeholders are now actively involved in the planning process" (Perra et al. 2017: 330).

Voluntary forms of participation have thus far been less numerous in Thessaloniki and have been more often self–organised rather than mainly initiated by the local authority as a larger process, such as in Hanover. For example, a co–creation workshop was held in Thessaloniki in 2016 as part of the EU Horizon 2020 CIPTEC (Collective Innovation for Public Transport in European Cities) research project. In the workshop, innovative ideas were developed for both services and products that could build on public transport and contribute to its attractiveness and market share (Genitsaris et al. 2017). Furthermore, in 2017, the Svolou Initiative, a citizen–led, grassroots urban intervention initiative, created a self–organised and community–run neighbourhood park in Thessaloniki. In addition to constructing the neighbourhood park, the grassroots initiative has organised a

neighbourhood cultural event of communal dining, the Spring Dinner, held annually since 2014 (Kapsali 2022). Moreover, since 2018 a local Citizens' Panel on Sustainable Mobility has been set up in Thessaloniki within the PE4Trans/Interreg Europe research project. The Citizens' Panel comprises a small group of people representative of different socio–demographic backgrounds, which can serve as a managerial and planning *instrument*; they have thus far organised three physical meetings and social media actions (Amprasi et al. 2020).

Voluntary public participation formed part of the development in 2016 of Thessaloniki's Sustainable Urban Development (SUD) Strategy (Konstania et al. 2021: 1), which focuses on economic, social, demographic, and environmental challenges. The strategy provided for the establishment of a *Sustainable Urban Observatory* (a Monitoring Committee for Sustainable Urban Development), which since 2020 has developed a monitoring programme with four main strands (spatial and economic development, sustainable urban mobility, the (urban) environment, and social affairs) and 58 indicators, which were published in 2021 (Konstania et al. 2021: 2). "The main objectives of the Committee are: the initiation of dialogue and broad engagement of the local authorities; the separation of duties; metropolitan planning and implementation" (Interreg Europe 2018). In this context, a public consultation process was carried out with various participatory events and public meetings to ensure that all stakeholders were adequately informed and had the opportunity to make their views known (Interreg Europe 2018).

As a final example of legally binding participation, Thessaloniki is a member of the Resilient Cities Network (Metaxas and Psarropoulou 2021: 5), which consists of cities that implement resilient urban development. In this context, the Thessaloniki Resilience Strategy for 2030 was developed in 2020 through a participatory process consisting of various workshops with different stakeholders and members of civil society (Resilient Cities Network 2022). "The Thessaloniki Resilience Strategy is an effort that engaged dedicated people, initiatives, and organisations in the city from across the whole spectrum of modern urban life" (Thessaloniki et al. 2017: 144). According to the strategy, Thessaloniki's status is "emergent", as building resilience is an ongoing process in which the strategy is used as a roadmap to lay the foundations for resilient cooperation (Metaxas and Psarropoulou 2021: 12). The strategy's goal is to "continue the dialogue on resilience both within the city and with external stakeholders and communities through seminars, workshops, and open discussions" (Thessaloniki et al. 2017: 131). In addition, partnerships, such as with 100 additional Resilient Cities Platform partners, are to be expanded and a monitoring scheme involving all relevant stakeholders is to be established (Thessaloniki et al. 2017: 131).

Literature analysis, observations, and interviews

In order to analyse the culture of participation in urban development in Hanover and Thessaloniki and the challenges and opportunities the two cities face, the authors undertook an analysis of the literature combined with participant observation and problem–centred interviews with experts.

Literature analysis

The starting point was a literature analysis (according to Brink 2013: 46–48). The main topics of the research are participation in urban and inner–city development and the study areas are Thessaloniki and Hanover. The terms participation, involvement, inner–city and inner–city development were entered as titles via Scopus. This search yielded 2,419 hits for participation, 8,498 for involvement, 1,859 for inner–city, and 28,450 for inner–city development. The titles and abstracts were read and papers selected for further analysis. Further approaches to the topic are exploratory.

Participant observation and documentation

With the help of participant observation methods (according to Bachmann 2009), the authors intend to conduct further observations and to review the documentation associated with the public participation processes in Thessaloniki and Hanover city centres in spring 2023. Observation is a systematic and standardised or non–standardised procedure in which what is of interest – in this study, public participation in inner urban development – is recorded and logged (Van Meurs et al. 2022: 19–22). For this purpose, participation processes in the inner city are identified and located, and photographs are taken. In addition, general observations are noted, for example, on user groups or qualitative issues.

Qualitative problem–centred, guided interviews

In 2022 and 2023 qualitative interviews (according to Helfferich 2011; Meuser and Nagel 2002; Mayer 2013) were conducted with experts on public participation and urban development in Thessaloniki and Hanover in German and English. The sample of experts was selected using a snowball method. Initially, urban stakeholders were contacted, who then recommended other (civil society) stakeholders. Guidelines were created to structure the dialogic interviews (Helfferich 2011: 36; Liebold and Trinczek 2009: 35–39). In addition, the interviews, which were about 45–60 minutes long, were documented using protocols (Helfferich 2011: 193), recorded and transcribed by the interviewers in accordance with the appropriate standards (Meuser and Nagel 2002: 83), and subsequently analysed by means of a qualitative content analysis (according to Mayring 2010) using MAXQDA software. The data was coded and indexed in order to condense the results (Liebold and Trinczek 2009: 40–42; Mayring 2010: 1). The independent views were condensed, weighed up, compared and thus included in the analysis.

Empirical findings on public participation in Hanover and Thessaloniki

Public participation in city centres is a topic of growing importance as cities around the world face multiple challenges in the field of urbanization and urban development. City centres are the heart of every city and are at the centre of social, economic and cultural life. The way city centres are designed and managed influences the quality of life of residents, the attractiveness for visitors and the sustainability of urban development.

Public participation offers an important opportunity to include the interests and needs of residents and stakeholders in the planning and development of city centres.

Inner–city development has taken place at a lively tempo in both Hanover and Thessaloniki, which in turn has impacted public participation in these processes. Both cities have grown in recent decades against the backdrop of their specific histories and have continued to develop the range of functions provided by their city centres. In both cities, there is a clear sustainability–oriented urban planning and development policy (Greinke an Mehnen 2023), but against the background of very different planning systems, planning powers, financial situations, and opportunities for action at the local level (cf. Serraos et al. 2005; Münter and Reimer 2022). Both cities and countries distinguish between legally binding participation, and voluntary participation. Voluntary participation is not regulated by law in either country, but can complement legally binding participation processes. In both cities, clear efforts can be seen to implement voluntary participation. However, research partners or institutions usually take the lead here. The city administrations are rather reserved. There are many reasons for this, for example a lack of financial resources, but also a lack of interest in the topics. In future, the city administration should therefore also assume a proactive role.

The participation culture has developed differently in Thessaloniki and Hanover, particularly with regard to voluntary forms. A culture of public participation in urban development has existed in Hanover for over three decades (LHH 2023b). It has become a key aspect of planning activities and political decisions at local, regional, supraregional, national, and international levels (LHH 2014b: 72–74). The inner city strategy *Hannover City 2020+*, the urban development scheme *Hannover plusZehn – Working for a Young and Innovative City,* the urban development strategy *My Hannover 2030*, and the inner city dialogue process *Hannover MIT(TE) gestalten* have all involved voluntary participatory processes. The forms that such processes take, make it clear that the active participation of the population has deepened. Whereas Hannover City 2020+ still involved rather limited participation via workshops, an increase in participation can be observed in *Hannover MIT(TE) gestalten.* Hanover's participation culture is becoming increasingly dialogic and is no longer seen as a mere legal obligation, which can also be observed in the new smart city project *HANNovativ* (figure 3). In Thessaloniki, voluntary participation has not yet become deeply embedded and is regarded as a rather new phenomenon, and a general culture of participation has yet to take root in the city. While voluntary participation was initially triggered by research projects or other funding sources – such as the co–creation workshop held as part of the EU Horizon 2020 project CIPTEC or participation in the Sustainable Urban Development Strategy – other forms of participation are now being established in isolated cases, such as in the context of the Thessaloniki Resilience Strategy for 2030.

However, urban society in Thessaloniki is also demanding opportunities for active participation against a backdrop of increasing forms of voluntary participation. The Heinrich Böll Foundation Thessaloniki, for example, has taken up the public debate on urban greening in Thessaloniki in order to make accurate, transparent information available for

local people (Heinrich–Böll–Stiftung e.V. 2023). The stimulus here was an outcry against the felling of trees in Aristotle Square in the city centre (figure 4) without sufficient public communication or consultation. According to an interviewee, the felling of 41 trees by the Municipality of Thessaloniki took place at night to the surprise of local people, who were moved to protest the following day (13 March 2023) at the Roman Agora. In the process, 14 people, including the Thessaloniki City Councilor from the Ecology Solidarity party and former Ecological Greens MEP Michalis Tremopoulos, were arrested by police for *illegal violence.* The incident triggered a massive public outcry, particularly since tree felling and pruning has repeatedly been the subject of discussions among the city's residents in recent years. In particular, the method of felling and by whom has been questioned. There was no public discourse or consultation on the decisions, resulting in an information vacuum. The Heinrich Böll Foundation Thessaloniki thus took the initiative to collect information and conduct a short survey of the population in order to initiate a public dialogue with all stakeholders (Heinrich–Böll–Stiftung e.V. 2023).

Figure 3: Members of the public gathering to participate in the Smart City initiative in Hanover.
Source: Authors.

Although Hanover has a more intensive culture of voluntary participation, the city has also seen protests against tree felling. For example, an alliance by the name of Leinemasch BLEIBT has formed to oppose the planned tree felling for a widening of the Südschnell-weg, a central road in Hanover. Various protests have taken place in the form of occupations, human chains, and vigils as well as roundtable events with experts and the general public (Leinemasch BLEIBT 2023). The intended felling had been publicised as part of the mandatory consultation process when planning permission was sought. However, the mandatory consultation seems to have been insufficient in this case.

> This demonstrates that the established structures for public consultation and participation may no longer be adequate in a time of heightened public engagement, resulting in public protests which could perhaps be avoided with more robust participatory structures.

On the other hand, the civil society in this process can also be criticized. There was a planning approval process in which everyone would have had the opportunity to get involved and did not do so. This shows that participation structures in Hanover and Thessaloniki – and presumably also in other (international) cities – are still not sufficiently developed. The (information)–gap between practice and civil society in planning processes and the aim of participation processes must therefore be communicated even more clearly by the city administration and planners. But civil society also has a duty to get involved in future developments.

Figure 4: Tree felling in Aristotle Square in Thessaloniki. Source: Authors.

What Thessaloniki and Hanover have in common is that they are both home to distinctive citizen–led and grassroots initiatives (figure 5). In Thessaloniki, for example, the Svolou initiative established a self–organised neighbourhood park in 2017. In the city of Hanover, there are numerous similar citizen–led initiatives. For example, Transition Town Hanover e. V. is committed to sustainable, resilient development in various projects in the city, including community gardens and urban gardening (TTH 2023). The PLATZprojekt e. V. tests experimental urban development actions through alternative uses of space, sources of funding, and forms of dialogue (PLATZprojekt e. V. 2023).

These grassroots initiatives are strongly anchored in the urban development of the two cities and are intensively involved in various projects. As a result, the population in both cities is similarly active in voluntary forms of participation to shape urban development, despite their different participation cultures. However, participation cultures can develop to varying extents. Those who are interested, however, always find a way to be involved. City administrations and planners should therefore consider the interests of the population from the very beginning and not wait until interested parties *shout out* or protest. A crucial element is also to use different measures to involve different groups such as the youth or families. These can for example be personal video–interviews, walk–along interviews or open events with new formats so–called *Freiraumtest*, installations in public spaces. But these need time, financial and human resources and know–how.
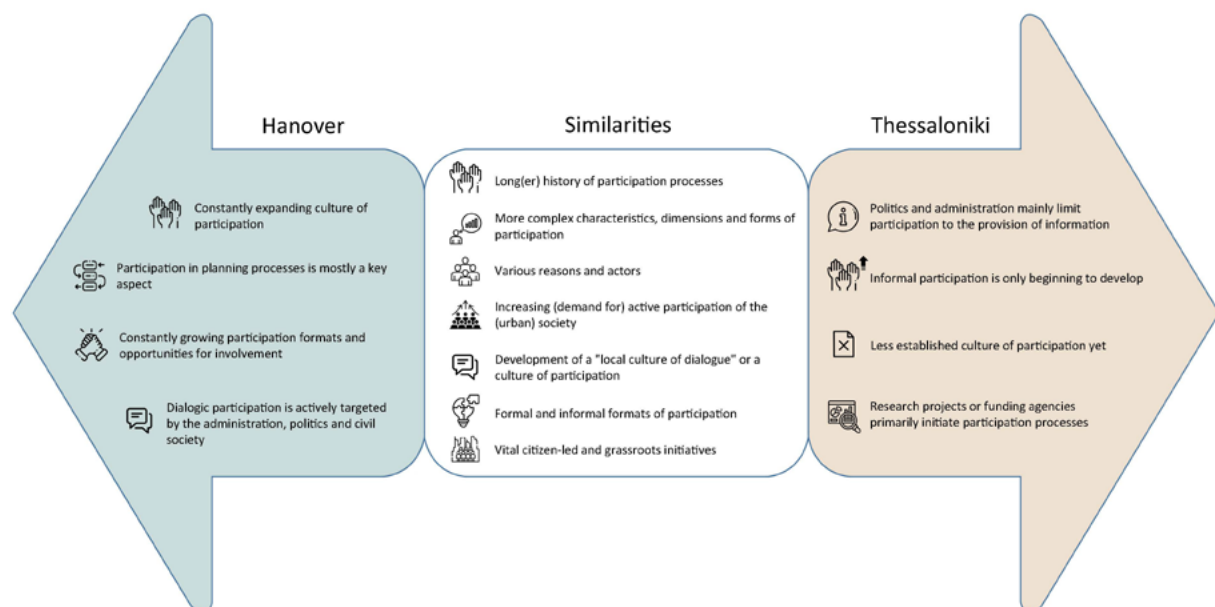

Figure 5: A comparative view of public participation in Thessaloniki and Hanover. Source: Authors.

Public participation in urban development as a present and future challenge

Public participation in urban development processes in Hanover and Thessaloniki has grown over time and continues to grow in both cities. While both cities face the shared challenge of shaping sustainable and vibrant city centres, the paths they have taken and the cultures they have developed regarding public participation are distinct. Voluntary forms of participation are gaining particular importance in both cities. However, while Hanover already has a fairly well–established culture of participation among policymakers, the local government and stakeholders from civil society. The programs, such as *Hannover MIT(TE) gestalten*, showcase a growing commitment to meaningful public involvement, emphasizing that participation is no longer solely a legal requirement but a fundamental aspect of Hanover´s city strategy. On the other hand, Thessaloniki is still in the process of strengthening its culture of participation. However, the city's civil society is increasingly vocal in demanding active involvement in shaping urban development, and grassroots initiatives like the Svolou initiative have taken root. The voices in Thessaloniki, though louder, reveal the urgency to integrate public participation into the fabric of urban development. Through the Thessaloniki Resilience Strategy for 2030 the resilience office has become a permanent structure in the administration of the municipality. This hardly happens in Germany, where structures introduced and funded through project become institutionalized. However, civil society is increasingly demanding active participation in many cities in Germany and Greece, and is self–organising citizen–led, grassroots initiatives, of which there are numerous examples in both cities.

The two cities are also facing similar issues, such as urban gardening or tree felling by the authorities. Protests and dissenting voices in urban development projects are thus present in both cities. However, it seems that the voices in Thessaloniki are somewhat louder (e.g. the intense protests, riots, and arrests following the tree felling), perhaps because robust structures of public participation have yet to be embedded in urban development processes, but also because of the different planning systems, planning powers, financial situations, and opportunities for action at the local level in Greece (see Serraos et al. 2005; Münter and Reimer 2022). Nevertheless, there are similar basic requirements for legally mandatory participation in both countries, as well as instances of voluntary participation. Mere information events have long been insufficient for the population of both cities. In many places, therefore, research bodies and funding agencies are also taking up the issue of participation in urban development and are increasingly promoting participatory schemes and events. A comprehensive "local culture of dialogue" (Willinger 2022: 43) must be established and expanded in both cities in the future. Thessaloniki can learn from Hanover in this respect, but Hanover in turn needs to incorporate international perspectives.

The aim of this paper was to analyse and compare public participation processes and cultures in urban development in Hanover and Thessaloniki. The focus was on the questions: to what extent can the cities learn from each other regarding their public participation culture? What are the potentials and limits of public participation in these cases? Achieving sustainable city centres remains a challenge, but can also present an opportunity: it is an ongoing, future–oriented task (Wildermann et al. 2020: 461). In an era where the

sustainability and vitality of city centres remain an ongoing challenge, public participation is not just an opportunity but a necessity. The path forward for sustainable inner city development requires breaking through barriers, fostering new forms of cooperation, and embracing transformation. The courage to experiment and adapt to changing dynamics is vital. Public participation in urban development is a central aspect of this: after all, sustainable inner–city development cannot succeed without such participation (Winsky 2022: 158). Strategies and development processes for inner cities must bring together old and new groups of actors, break through blockades and stimulate new forms of cooperation (Willinger 2022: 42). This requires the courage to experiment in order to shape transformation (Willinger 2022: 45). Ultimately, public participation will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of our cities and ensuring their sustainable and vibrant development. In order to achieve these goals, it is crucial that all stakeholders in urban development communicate and cooperate in order to identify and negotiate conflicts at an earliest stage.

In the future, the public participation processes and cultures in Greece and Germany should be studied in greater depth, perhaps focusing on what the countries can learn from each other. International perspectives could further enrich and contextualise this picture.

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