

UNIVERSITÄT GRAZ

Centrum für Jüdische Studien



# Mapping (out) the city and its histories:

## The Jewish presence in Thessaloniki as an “invisible parenthesis”



**Dr. Garyfallia Katsavounidou**

Associate Professor, School of  
Spatial Planning and Development,  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki



Der Vortrag findet  
im Rahmen des FWF  
Projekts Entanglements  
between Jews and non-  
Jews in Private Spaces  
(FWF ESP120) statt.

**23. Mai  
2024  
17:15 Uhr**

UR 108.01 Bibliothek des  
Centrums für Jüdische Studien

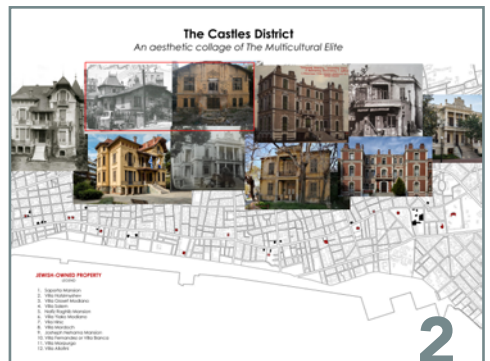
# Abstract

This talk is based on my thesis (and later book, in Greek) entitled "Invisible Parentheses: Mapping (out) the city and its histories" (MIT Department of Architecture, 2000). My main argument is that, in the case of Thessaloniki, local architectural and urban history has systematically been avoiding critical discussion about issues of heritage and memory of other cultures (Jewish, Ottoman) ignoring the fact that this complex, multicultural history is intertwined with the city's identity and what really makes the city unique and full of potential. I will focus specifically on the pre-Holocaust Jewish presence in Thessaloniki and the post-Holocaust apparent "disappearance" of Jewish physical traces in its urban fabric.

Once nicknamed "Jerusalem of the Balkans," from the 15th century onwards Thessaloniki had the largest Sephardic Jewish community in Greece, numbering more than 50,000 people in 1941, at the time Germans entered the city. The community maintained many schools, synagogues and smaller chapels, institutions for the needy and the sick, libraries that contained thousands of volumes, several Jewish newspapers, Zionist organizations and above all, a cemetery where some 500,000 were buried. In the Holocaust, the Sephardic community of Thessaloniki was annihilated by the Nazis in an unprecedented way: Thessalonikian Jews had a 96% death rate, the highest among all European countries. Nonetheless, the buildings, artifacts, memories of the annihilated community survived: what happened to the private houses and shops, the plethora of public and religious buildings of their community, to the names of streets and neighborhoods that fifty thousand people lived in? In the city itself, the resounding absence of tangible Jewish traces indicates the extent of systematic and deliberate obliteration in the Nazi period, as in the case of the destruction of the Jewish cemetery, but also of the effacement of Jewish memory afterwards.

Alongside the theoretical framework, I will show a presentation of Thessaloniki's "unfamiliar" past in the M-city exhibition held in Kunsthaus Graz in 2005 (Fig. 1) and will conclude with the presentation of a recent attempt to map the "hidden" Jewish heritage (Fig. 2) via a student Virtual Exchange workshop in collaboration with the University of Graz.

**Dr. Garyfallia (Fyllio) Katsavounidou** is an Associate Professor of Urban Design and Planning in the School of Spatial Planning and Development at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH). She holds a diploma of Architect Engineer (AUTH), an SMArchS in Architecture and Urbanism (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and a PhD in Architecture (University of Thessaly). She has written the books: *Child, City and Design: The Spielraum* (Kritiki 2023), *The City at Human Scale* (Kallipos Hellenic Academic Open Textbooks, 2023), and *Invisible Parentheses: 27 cities in Thessaloniki* (Patakis, 2004). She has translated and edited (with P. Tarani), Jan Gehl's classic book *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space* (University Press of Thessaly, 2013). Her research and teaching focuses on human-centered urbanism, social and psychological approaches of Architecture and space, urban history, child-friendly cities, and bioclimatic design of open spaces.



1  
**OSSERVATORIO NOMADE**  
The unfamiliar city,  
Kunsthaus Graz, 2005.

2  
**MAPPING JEWISH HOUSES**  
in the Castles district  
of Thessaloniki, Greece,  
Students' work, 2023.