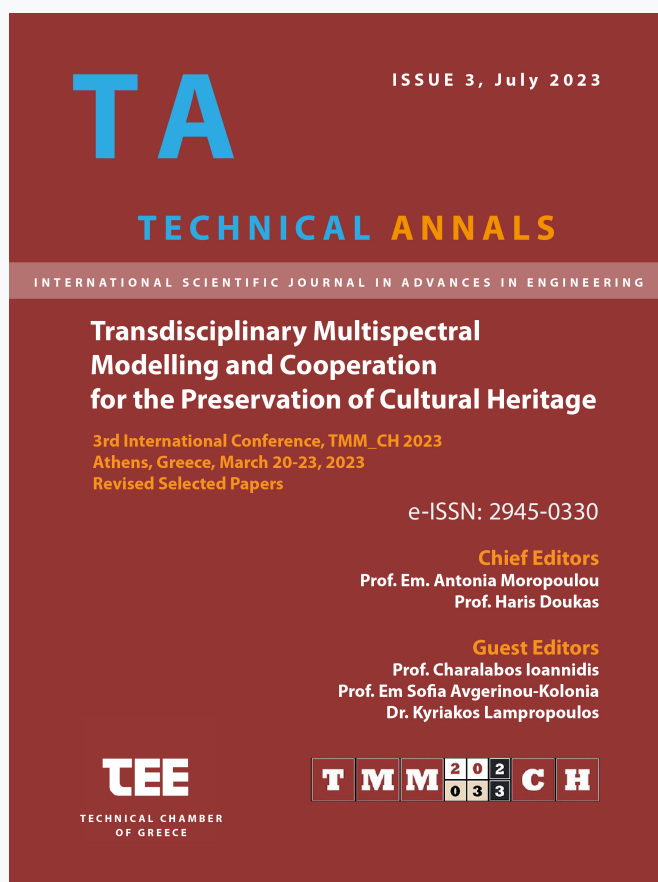


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# Aspects of Significance in the “Dark Heritage” of Thessaloniki, Greece<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Located in the north of Greece and boasting an uninterrupted history of over 2.300 years, Thessaloniki has a wide array of architectural monuments to display. Hellenistic residences, Roman administrative centers, Byzantine churches, and Ottoman communal buildings have shaped for decades the city’s historical profile, leaving limited space for a nonetheless widely acknowledged architectural grouping, namely its “dark heritage”.

Comprising buildings and sites that have over the years been related by the local community to rare phenomena and curious events, Thessaloniki’s “heritage of darkness” fascinates the imagination of its residents, in addition to providing a frequent subject for the writings of local journalists and researchers, and a focal point in the work of the services and bodies involved in monument protection. The above players evidently evaluate its constituents in different manners, thus leading to the emergence of multiple aspects of significance in the appraisal of the city’s “dark heritage”.

Entering a hitherto untouched -on a scholarly basis- domain, this paper aims to identify these aspects and determine their interrelation and impact on the preservation of the buildings and sites involved. To this end, based on bibliographical research and on-site examination, it begins with a comprehensive overview of the dreaded built assets, followed by the identification of the players involved in their treatment and their respective attitudes. From there on, a discussion of the interaction of these attitudes is pursued, culminating in original conclusions as to the consequences of this interaction for the safeguarding of the tangible and intangible qualities of the city’s “heritage of the dark”.

**Keywords:** Significance, Dark Heritage, Players, Attitudes, Interaction.

## 1 Introduction

In the whole of Greece, one can identify few cities with an uninterrupted history as long as that of Thessaloniki. Founded in 315 BC, next to the sea and on the intersection of major transport routes, it became seat of government in late Roman times, rose to

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<sup>1</sup>Complete, extended, and updated version of paper presented at the International Conference “The Thrill of the Dark: Heritages of Fear, Fascination and Fantasy”, Birmingham, 25 - 27 April 2019 (without publication of proceedings).

the status of most prominent city after Constantinople in the Byzantine era, ranked among the busiest civic centers of the Ottoman period, and since the early 20th century, evolved into the second largest city of modern Greece.

Each of the major periods of the city's history is nowadays reflected in archaeological remains and architectural works scattered, primarily, in the twenty-four centuries-old historic center, and secondly, in its late 19th century extensions. Among these landmarks, local residents have come to identify over the years a group of buildings and sites whose relation to rare phenomena and curious events has deemed them the city's "dark heritage".

Next to providing a focal point for public imagination, the latter has set into action a remarkable array of separate players, namely journalists, tour operators, and researchers. At the same time, being composed of individual properties with cultural heritage status, it has inevitably attracted initiatives by the respective owners, public bodies, and non-governmental societies. The different approach of each of the above parties reflects the identification of respectively varying values or aspects of significance in the local "heritage of the dark". In the following pages, an original overview of these attitudes will be pursued, in addition to an equally genuine appraisal of their interaction and final impact on the special character of the monuments involved.

## **2 "Dark Heritage" in the Eyes of the Public**

A relative novelty in contemporary conservation matters, "dark cultural heritage" has been skilfully defined as the segment of cultural heritage "that is associated with real and commodified sites of atrocity, death, disaster, human depravity, tragedy, human suffering, and sites of barbarism and genocide" [1]. In the case of Thessaloniki, a poll among merely a dozen of its residents would quickly confirm five buildings and sites as the basic constituents of the city's "dark heritage". Partly believed to be haunted and partly related to curses and supernatural forces by the locals, the five components can be briefly outlined as follows, on the basis of the local narrations presented in the media:

### **2.1 "Haunted House"**

The so-called "Haunted House" is located in the east extension of the city, namely on 263, Vasilissis Olgas Avenue (see Fig. 1). It is undoubtedly the most famous of the five landmarks, having gained a notorious reputation earlier than all the others, not to mention even beyond Thessaloniki. Little is known as to its time of construction and initial owner. Nonetheless, the development of the wider area and its own architectural characteristics point to an early 20th-century mansion [2], which underwent in later times extensive repair, fell more recently into neglect, and is nowadays isolated in the premises of a firm supplying construction materials.

The imposing derelict building is said to be haunted by the souls of two Jewish brothers who owned it before World War II and used it as a hiding place for the valuables of fellow Jews, when the Nazi terror was unleashed upon them. It is also believed to have served as a torture site of Jews during the German occupation, thus

becoming a shelter for their innocent souls in present times. Moreover, a curse has been acknowledged in the aftermath of the fate of two contractors who undertook to demolish it in the 1980s - both died the very same day they signed the respective contracts. Even more recently, a photographer who attempted to take pictures of the interior is said to have instantly suffered health problems, in addition to his camera being smashed, while strange lights and sounds at night are frequently reported by neighbors and strollers[3, 4].



**Fig. 1.** The “Haunted House”, main front.

## **2.2 “Chatzigogos Residence”**

The “Chatzigogos Residence” is situated at the outskirts of the east extension of the city, namely on the intersection of Erythraias and Thetidos Streets (see Fig. 2). A fortress-like edifice, it resembles the “Haunted House” in more ways than one. Also built in the early 20th century, to be more precise in 1930[5], it displays a front very much similar in terms of outline and decorative features to its more celebrated counterpart. Most importantly though, since its abandonment in the 1980s, rumor has deemed it similarly haunted, with the consequently generated fear leading neighbors to place pictures of the Virgin Mary, flowers, and packs of garlic on the doors and windows, in an attempt to keep away evil spirits. Which is more, people who have taken pictures of the house are said to have identified strange silhouettes in their shots [6].



**Fig. 2.** The “Chatzigogos Residence”, main front.

### 2.3 “Villa Hirs”

The “Villa Hirs” is located in the east extension of the city, on 144, Vasilissis Olgas Avenue (see Fig. 3). Built in 1911, as the imposing private residence of one of Thessaloniki’s wealthiest Jewish families, it resembles the picturesque early 20th-century rural mansions of central Europe, particularly those of Switzerland, in a clear manifestation of the prominence and international profile of its initial owner [2, 7]. Equally distinctive, though, is the fact that, after the departure of the latter at the outbreak of World War II, it was occupied by an infamous duo, namely the Gestapo and the Nazi Security Police. In the hard years that followed, numerous people were imprisoned and tortured in its lower rooms, mainly members of the local resistance, whose pain and agony are believed to have been entrapped in the interior, thus rendering the presently abandoned mansion a haunted place. In full relevance, strange sounds at night are occasionally reported by neighbors, not to mention identified with the screams of the innocent wartime victims[8].



Fig. 3. The “Villa Hirs”, main front.

### 2.4 “Pasha Gardens”

The so-called “Pasha Gardens” lie on the sloppy terrain that stretches along the east end of the city’s historic center, just above the Greek-Orthodox Cemetery and the Municipal Hospital. Established in 1904, shortly after the construction of the latter, they were intended to serve as a park for relaxation and enjoyment of the ravishing views opening to the sea and the city. To this end, they were filled with pine trees, while a number of separate structures, among them a fountain, a tunnel, a water tank, and a sitting place, were dispersed in between (see Fig. 4), altogether culminating in a unique manifestation of the “fantastic architecture” promoted primarily by Antoni Gaudi [2, 9, 10]. Yet apart from their functional and architectural distinction, the gardens have also come to stand out in recent years as a presumed meeting place of Ottoman Freemasons

and a spot of notorious ceremonies, involving human sacrifice, in the early 20th century. Moreover, the followers of “sacred geography” rank them among the important locations of the region, supposedly as a major junction of geomagnetic fields, while widespread rumor has deemed them the starting point of a dead-end street that appears every three days, at midnight, and then vanishes [11].



**Fig. 4.** The “Pasha Gardens”, view of the upper plateau.

## **2.5 “Longos Mansion”**

The “Longos Mansion”, widely known as the “Red House”, due to the distinctive brick-like plaster of the exterior, lies on 31, Aghias Sofias Street, in the heart of the historic center (see Fig. 5). Built between 1926 and 1928, by a wealthy industrialist from the nearby town of Naoussa [5, 12], it stands on the intersection of two of the city’s most important avenues, just opposite the celebrated byzantine church of Aghia Sofia, a present-day UNESCO World Heritage monument. Next to its consequent urban and architectural pre-eminence, the imposing edifice has lately come to assume a less admirable quality. Various misfortunes that are said to have come upon those who have been engaged in its management have fostered the idea of a cursed building, starting with the events related to its contractor and initial owner. The former, a major construction company of the interwar period, is reported to have gone bankrupt shortly after building works were completed, while the latter witnessed his factory being destroyed by fire just a few years later. In recent times, the subsequent owners repeatedly failed to properly maintain the entire structure, while in 2018, in the course of extensive restoration works, a fatal accident occurred [13].



**Fig. 5.** The “Longos Mansion”, main front, prior to restoration.

### **3 The Separate Players in “Dark Heritage” Management**

As much as they intrigue and fascinate the general public, to the extent of generating numerous discussion forums on the Internet, the above buildings and sites prove an unmatched field of action for a number of separate players, who can be broadly separated into two groups: professionals with a specialized interest in “the heritage of the dark”, and individuals or bodies with conventional relations to the heritage properties involved.

The first group comprises, primarily, **journalists**, for whom the history and notorious reputation of the five assets stand out as popular subjects, hence a frequent point of focus, through articles published mainly on the Internet and secondly in the few regional printed papers. The writings presented so far in both fields amount to a sizeable bulk of work [indicatively: 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13], with a particular tendency to increase every time a curious event or tragic misfortune occurs in the five landmarks. The more recent resurgence of interest in the “Chatzigogos Residence”, after the partial collapse of its main front, with rubble covering a nearby parked car, and the aforementioned fatal accident during the conservation works in the “Longos Mansion” [13] bear fresh testimony to this remark.

Most noteworthy, though, is the fact that, in sharp contrast to their large number, the articles published so far display limited originality; each reporter tends to repeat -often literally- the information already provided by other colleagues, with a mere update in terms of reference to more recent events and inclusion of contemporary photographs [indicatively: 3, 4]. Documentation and critical acknowledgment of the rumors and stories circulated up to that point prove by no means a goal, hence limiting the

contribution of the produced writings merely to the arousal and maintenance of public interest in the city’s “dark heritage”. Moreover, further action for a more constructive engagement with the latter, for instance, judging from the international experience [14, 15], the establishment of digital platforms on the Internet for a proper -and not purely recreational-acquaintance with the special values of the related buildings and sites, including their “dark” side, remains to be undertaken.

Moving in very much the same direction, a number of local **tour operators** have begun over the last years to organize guided walks in various locations of the city, with intermediate stops at certain of its “dark heritage” assets. To be more precise, while aiming to acquaint their populous audiences with considerably broader groups of points of interest, namely celebrated buildings and sites connected with infamous events, particularly crimes, the tour operators in question have come to reserve attention for two of the five landmarks involved; the “Haunted House” has been highlighted in the framework of nocturnal tours in the eastern extension of the city [16], whereas the “Pasha Gardens” have been visited in the course of “mystery walks” along the east border of the historic center [17].

Considering the growing popularity of Thessaloniki’s “dark heritage” among both local residents and tourists, the above initiatives, which similarly to the work of journalists contribute exclusively to the arousal and maintenance of public interest, prove unexpectedly limited. Most importantly, amidst the overall infancy of the concept of guided walks in Thessaloniki and of “dark tourism” on the whole in relation to the international context [18, 19], a tour focusing exclusively on the city’s “heritage of the dark” is yet to be anticipated. An additional explanation for this delay may lie in the fact that the buildings and sites in question are not located in close proximity to each other (see Fig. 6), hence a visit on foot is easily ruled out. The use of specially adjusted vehicles could provide an alternative solution, which remains though to be implemented.

Next to the work of journalists and tour operators, one would normally expect a certain mobilization of **researchers**, initially in pursuit of the association of the “dark” side of the related buildings and sites with their overall cultural essence. Nonetheless, the hitherto writings prove indifferent to this prospect [indicatively: 2, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12], despite its already acknowledged importance [20]. Secondly, an attempt to counterbalance the evident lack of a rational approach in the initiatives of the journalists and tour operators could be anticipated. Yet in the case of the “dark heritage” of Thessaloniki, such action also remains to be undertaken, with only one exception noted so far.

As previously mentioned, with respect to the “Haunted House”, a photographer boldly entered the derelict mansion and attempted to take pictures of the interior. Taking a further step in order to evaluate the rumors circulating about the house, he then recorded on tape the sounds heard in its rooms. Rumor has it that upon playing the tape, he identified a seven-second gap in the noise produced from the nearby street and from a barking dog. Which is more, upon hearing more carefully, he identified sounds that resembled the heavy steps of someone approaching, together with words in whisper, which could not be understood [4].





**Fig. 6.** Map showing the location of the buildings and sites of Thessaloniki's "dark heritage".

The initiatives of professionals with a specialized interest described so far are coupled with the actions of the already mentioned second group of separate players in "dark heritage" management, namely the individuals and bodies with conventional relations with the assets involved. Among these, one distinguishes, first of all, the **owners** of the separate buildings and sites. All four structures constitute private properties, whereas the remaining place belongs to the local municipal authority. Remarkably, both the private parties and the public body have so far shown little or no interest at all in promoting the "dark heritage" status of their distinguished possessions.

With the conservation of historic buildings receiving minimal support from the state, the owners of the "Haunted House", the "Chatzigogos Residence" and the "Villa Hirs" have actually shown total disregard for any kind of maintenance and beneficial use of their properties. For them, the prospect of a change in ownership proves the primary goal in the years to come. Interestingly enough, though, the consequent continuation of the dereliction of their properties ends up strengthening their notorious profile.

By contrast, in the case of the "Pasha Gardens", the municipal authority has initiated plans to conduct repair works and improve lighting conditions, whereas the "Longos Mansion" was recently restored (see Fig. 7) and currently houses its new owner, as already mentioned.<sup>2</sup>These initiatives evidently erase the prolonged neglect that has

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<sup>2</sup>In the case of the "Pasha Gardens", the Technical Service of the Municipality of Thessaloniki drafted a preliminary conservation project, which was forwarded for approval to the respective regional services of the Ministry of Culture and Sports on 28 August 2018. As concerns the

marked the recent history of the two assets, thus depriving them of a major contributor to their “dark” reputation, with no follow-up, such as a discreet photo exhibition or information sign, which could add to their historical and architectural importance.



**Fig. 7.** The “Longos Mansion”, main front, under restoration.

After the owners, one needs to note the involvement of **public bodies**. According to the relevant Greek legislation [21-24], as segments of the city’s built environment, the buildings and sites in question need to be maintained in sound condition, with no direct or indirect threat being posed to the health and safety of neighbors and strollers. In addition, since four of the five assets are listed monuments (“Chatzigogos Residence”, “Villa Hirs”, “Pasha Gardens”, and “Longos Mansion”), their proper maintenance and use need to be even more attentively secured, with the respective owners being in both cases fully responsible.

With private initiatives for architectural heritage enhancement proving scarce in modern Greece, public bodies, namely the respective local authorities (Municipality of Thessaloniki, Region of Central Macedonia) and the governmental bodies responsible for monument protection (Ministry of Culture and Sports, Ministry of the Interior) are required to perform periodic inspections, advise on necessary measures, oversee repairs and, in case of inadequate action on the part of the owners, carry out urgently required works, with the option of charging their cost to the latter[22-25].

Being obviously obliged to enforce the law, the employees of the bodies in question have no alternative but to assume the prescribed courses of action, in defiance of rumors about ghosts, curses, and supernatural forces. A vivid portrayal of this “compulsory indifference” is observed in the case of the “Villa Hirs” and the “Chatzigogos Residence”. Being in a bad state, with no repairs conducted by the respective owners for over three decades, the two listed monuments were examined by specialized

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“Longos Mansion”, it was restored on the basis of a conservation project approved by the Ministry of Culture and Sports on 26 September 2016.

committees of the Ministry of Culture and Sports.<sup>3</sup>Each committee was required to record existing structural problems and outline immediate measures for their alleviation [26]. To this end, their members surveyed and photographed the two mansions, both from the outside and inside, with no room available for concern over the fear-generating stories circulating about them. On the whole, it is worth noting that such work, along with all the aforementioned courses of action, aims to ensure a state of preservation and use far from the abandonment and dereliction that is most characteristic of haunted places and plays a vital role in their public acknowledgment as “dark heritage” assets.

Lastly, one ought to discuss the involvement of **non-governmental societies**. In this particular field, a comparatively limited amount of action has been so far witnessed, namely the annual festivities of local associations in the “Pasha Gardens”. To be more precise, since 2015, the civic non-profit company “Sfendamos” has been organizing a “Monument Running Race” in the wider area, with runners passing through various places of historic interest, including the gardens. On the other hand, as of 2016, the Branch of the Hellenic Society for the Environment and Culture and the Branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) have been celebrating World Environment Day in the unique context of the latter.<sup>4</sup> The events in question have come to attract strong support from the local authorities and other collective bodies, with the sole purpose of arousing public awareness and enhancing the use of the site as an invaluable green space and ideal place for relaxation and recreation. To this end, rumors about rare phenomena and curious events have been put aside, not to mention fully undervalued, in an attempt to avert the generation of fear and consequent avoidance of the gardens by the public.

#### **4 Interacting “Aspects of Significance” and Final Outcome on “Dark” Identity**

The preceding review of the separate players involved in the management of Thessaloniki’s “dark heritage” and their respective attitudes highlights a remarkable conflict of values in the overall perception and treatment of the latter. On one hand, journalists, tour operators, and researchers acknowledge the notorious reputation of the buildings and sites involved, and further on, promote public fascination with them, worth remembering on the grounds, not only of a specialized interest, but also of a necessary income. On the other hand, the respective owners, associated public bodies, and related non-governmental societies show total disregard for the rumors circulating in each case, opting for action on the basis of individual priorities (owners), legal obligations (public bodies), and fixed aims (non-governmental societies), with a

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<sup>3</sup>The two committees were established on 6 July 2016 (for the “Villa Hirs”) and 11 October 2018 (for the “Chatzigogos Residence”).

<sup>4</sup>For additional information on the two events, see the announcements posted on the Internet by the respective organizers: <https://www.facebook.com/YediKuleConquest> (for the “Monuments Running Race”, last accessed 2022/11/07), and <https://www.facebook.com/events/441827186260877> (for the celebration of World Environment Day, last accessed: 2022/11/07).

subsequent common contribution almost entirely to the removal of “dark heritage” status.

The final outcome of this conflict is determined primarily by the course of action selected by the owners. If the latter opt for complete neglect of their property, with minimal intervention from there on by public bodies and non-governmental societies, the assets involved are certain to preserve in full their fearful reputation, in a combined effect of their derelict image and notorious past. Such is the case of the “Haunted House”, the “Chatzigogos Residence”, and the “Villa Hirs”. All three will most likely continue to provide a highly attractive subject for journalists, tour operators, and researchers and a hence unrivaled field of fascination for the public in the years to come.

On the other hand, if the owners select to pursue the proper maintenance and beneficial use of their property, possibly in conjunction with initiatives of non-governmental societies aiming to arouse public interest in them, the latter will be evidently deprived of a most significant -if not the most important- segment of their intriguing character. Consequently, their special identity will diminish, but not necessarily evaporate, depending on the pursuit of discreet references to the “dark” aspect and on the extent to which journalists, tour operators, and researchers will continue to address related events and rumors in their works. This is the case of the “Pasha Gardens” and the “Longos Mansion”. Their latest enhancement has allowed little, but not necessarily no room at all for maintaining a certain fearful reputation, dependent, exclusively, on the circulation of past stories and future news; news of every strange event or unexpected misfortune that may occur in their interior or to the people related to them henceforth.

## **5 Conclusions**

The “dark heritage” of Thessaloniki constitutes an undeniable segment of the city’s cultural heritage, whose perception and treatment as such is nonetheless endorsed by merely half of the parties playing a role in its management. Journalists, tour operators, and researchers acknowledge its intriguing character and provide significant contributions to the arousal and maintenance of related public interest, while the respective owners, associated public bodies, and non-governmental societies opt for actions that reflect disregard, in favor of varied priorities.

This sharp contrast in the aspects of significance currently identified in the city’s “heritage of the dark”, coupled with the overall precedence of the purely incidental initiatives of the owners, leaves considerable room for a future diminishment of the fearful reputation of the buildings and sites involved. On the whole, though, it does not also foreshadow a complete extinction. A certain notorious profile will definitely persist in each case, with an equally certain prospect of a more solid appreciation of the concept of “dark heritage” by the city’s residents and visitors, on one hand, should the professionals with specialized interest assume additional courses of action for its promotion. Such courses could include the establishment of digital platforms on the Internet for the constructive -and not purely recreational- acquaintance of the public with the special values of the related buildings and sites, including their “dark” side,

the acknowledgment of the latter in associated historical and architectural research as a significant contributor to the buildings' and sites' cultural essence, and the development of guided tours, with specially adjusted vehicles.

On the other hand, the respective owners and non-governmental societies could opt for a subtle acknowledgment and projection of the intriguing past of the dreaded assets. Next to necessary maintenance and restoration works, which will ensure their preservation and capacity to accommodate original or compatible modern uses, discreet references, in the form of photo exhibitions or information signs, could be reserved for the "dark" aspect, as means of adding value to the buildings' and sites' historical and architectural importance.

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