

DEVELOPMENT OF THE HISTORIC CENTRE OF AGIOS ATHANASIOS

Since 1997 the Municipality of Agios Athanasios has followed a policy of improving the area's town planning so as to better serve the growing residential development and to enhance the services provided to its citizens. The latest development aimed at the regeneration and landscaping of the historic centre of Agios Athanasios and the town's central square. The area was redesigned to accommodate new infrastructure, cultural, sporting and commercial needs, which resulted from the transformation of a rural settlement to a suburb of the Limassol urban area. Part of the strategy was the regeneration of the town's historic centre – an area that embraces its entire history that unfortunately had suffered in the past from various interventions not normally associated with sustainable development. In this effort, buildings of exceptional vernacular architecture were listed and protected. Interested owners were supported to carry out restoration work using financial incentives from national programmes, while the Municipality redesigned and landscaped the space around the historic core so as to create conditions for sustainable coexistence and development.

The project for the reconstruction and regeneration of town's central square aimed to upgrade the central area of Agios Athanasios, and more precisely the area adjacent to the Town Hall. This part of the project started in 2006 and included a series of measures for the improvement of citizens' life. "Designing for today with yesterday in mind" was the motto which architects were called to adopt. In an urban environment this could only be possible by responding to the forces exerted by the surrounding context, and the social and economic aspects. The aims of the project were to create areas for social interaction, to improve the road network by reducing the risks from vehicles passing in front of the main entrance of the Town Hall and to improve the citizens' life in general. Moreover, the creation of an easily accessible square and a safe play area was a need for Agios Athanasios citizens and visitors. Finally, the project included the landscaping of the site and the restoration of buildings surrounding the Town Hall, in order to enhance the traditional style. The project was co-financed by the Cyprus Ministry of the Interior and the Municipality, at a total cost of about €6.000.000, and was completed in three phases.

The first phase started in 2006 and was completed in 2008; it involved the diversion of the main road from the front of the Town Hall to its rear and east side. It also included the construction of a sports activities area (tennis/ basketball courts) numerous parking spaces and an open space for cultural events. The main objective of this phase was the construction of a new road that would run along the east side of the Town Hall, and the creation of new functions related to the square, the municipality and the traditional centre of Agios Athanasios. The new main road was a result of an attempt to connect the Agios Athanasios settlement area with the central square with a secure road for motor vehicles, as the old main road was valued as dangerous. The construction of the new main road eliminated the traffic from the front of the Town Hall and the space became a car free zone area. These actions created the suitable conditions for the creation of a square, a valuable asset in the lives of the citizens and the surrounding area. At the same time, these changes reinforced the relationship between the Town Hall and the traditional centre as they allowed the transition from the micro scale of the traditional centre to the contemporary scale of the modernist Town Hall.

The second phase started in 2009 and was completed in 2010, and included the construction of the new square, which provides safe access to the Town Hall. Close to the periphery of the square a kiosk was constructed, a small children's play area, a limited number of short stay parking spaces and surrounding areas were redesigned and landscaped. It is also important to mention that the surface of the public square was covered with traditional paving stones and local plant species were used. Special attention was given to the upgrading of the north side of the degraded traditional neighbourhood, so as to avoid having any elements that would be foreign to the architectural concept, style and historic character. Open spaces were landscaped in a way that protects, maintains and preserves the natural environment. The square is now used as a place of recreation and relaxation, for entertainment, social and cultural gatherings and outdoor activities. It also encourages the development of trade as well as reinforcing the identity and importance of the historic centre.

The third phase started in 2013 and was completed in 2014. This phase included the restoration of existing old buildings in close proximity to the central square. The old buildings facing the square were renovated and they now house a variety of uses such as the Municipal Public Library and a study centre, a cafeteria/restaurant, a small shop and a youth centre. For the last 18 months the youth centre is used as a learning centre of Greek as a foreign language for migrants. It also accommodates computer classes. Both programmes are offered free of charge for third-countries nationals – non EU citizens – on behalf of the immigrant integration programme of the Limassol urban area local authorities titled “Limassol: One city, the whole world.” Agios Athanasios Municipality participates as a partner in this programme since 2014. The programme is addressed to migrants who live and work permanently in Cyprus and persons with refugee status or subsidiary protection, asylum seekers etc. Apart from the learning programmes, other activities are included, related to social support and cultural exchange and interaction between immigrants and the local community, while attention is paid to the implementation of actions relating to the exchange of views, best practices and know-how and development actions of a sense of acceptance and understanding of citizens of all ages and diversity.

An event to celebrate Europe Day was organised in May 2015 as an activity for the project “Limassol: One city, the whole world,” in which all the schools of the area participated at the central square to promote the message against racism and for diversity. It is also important to mention that all the restored buildings were used for the organisation of different workshops related to Europe Day. A similar event to celebrate Children’s Day will be organised in June 2016. The implementation of such projects undoubtedly contributes to the development of a sustainable strategy providing fair access to services, offering equal opportunities to all citizens on learning, education and recreation in a positive environment with both learning experiences and social contacts. In this respect, a long term goal to provide high quality urban space for civic interaction, integration, education and social contact has been fulfilled, while the special character of the particular area has been safeguarded.

Another important project supporting the above is the creation, establishment and operation of a Folklore Museum, which exhibits the continuity of local history. A great effort was made to renovate and transform the old buildings because the purpose was to blend them in with their environment by using traditional local materials to cover some of their external walls. The Folklore Museum is housed in a restored historic building, just a few steps away from the Town Hall square. The entire complex consists of several buildings and a courtyard. Besides the spacious premises available for exhibits, the building itself bears remarkable traditional elements, illustrating the traditional way of life of a wealthy peasant family. This project was completed in 2015. Its operation contributes to regional development and preservation of cultural heritage.

The above-mentioned projects had been designed and structured having as a main goal the improvement of the living standard of the citizens, the improvement of the image of the city and the regeneration of the town’s historic core.

The completion of the three phases of the project had proved that a long-term goal has been fulfilled. This main goal was to provide high quality urban space for civic interaction and social contact while the special character of the particular area has been safeguarded. The new main square of Agios Athanasios Municipality is a quiet, safe and pleasant place for the gathering of children, youth and the elderly. Furthermore, spaces emitting negative image have been exploited through landscaping. This landscaping composes traditional characteristic features such as stone pavement, stone dressing, water ponds and planting of local species of trees that had improved the aesthetics of the whole area.

The most historic area of the Municipality has been exempt from uncontrolled vehicle movement, safeguarding safe access to the centre, the Town Hall, Church and the Folklore Museum. The square with its areas and open public spaces became the focal point of Agios Athanasios, creating a new urban landscape with elements from local tradition and local flora. Moreover, the area is actively used on a daily basis for recreation and gatherings and the municipality offers additional programmes to its citizens such as festivals, musicals and theatrical events.

Future planned projects include the development of cycling paths starting from Town Hall square and leading to the seafront and the urban centre of Limassol, providing a safe route for cyclists. The aim is to provide citizens with an extremely efficient mode of transportation with numerous benefits compared to motor vehicles, including the opportunity for physical exercise, an alternative to the use of fossil fuels, the reduction of air and noise pollution, the reduction of traffic congestion etc.

To conclude, on behalf of the Mayor of Agios Athanasios, the City Council and Citizens I would like to thank warmly the Council of Europe for organising this special meeting for the European Landscape Convention. Moreover, this opportunity that we were given to present the project of the regeneration of the historic centre of Agios Athanasios constitutes a great opportunity to present this effort and make it known at an international level.

Marianna Christou
Municipal Officer
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