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The Arts Bloom in Greece's Second City



Eirini Vourloumis for The New York Times

The Biennale of Contemporary Art at Alatza Imaret, a 15th-century Ottoman mosque and hospice. [More Photos »](#)

By CHARLY WILDER

Published: November 4, 2011

IT was early August, and clouds of tear gas drifted through much of [Athens](#), the remnants of protests against austerity measures. But the country's [financial woes](#) seemed far from the minds of the smartly disheveled young Greeks packed onto the roof terrace of the newly opened Fragile bar in Salonika, about 320 miles north of the capital. T-shirt-clad art students shouted over a mix of vintage doo-wop and '90s alt-rock, or ducked into the covered bar area, which evoked a vaguely postal theme, its corkboard-lined walls cross-hatched with packing tape.

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Salonika's Art Scene

"We wanted something simple, and we did all this alone — everything, there was nothing here," said Mirsini Linou, 24, as she drummed on the raw wood bar. In July, Ms. Linou opened the space in the up-and-coming Valaoritou area, hiring friends as bartenders and D.J.'s. Fragile is one of several creative, no-frills night spots that have opened in Salonika in the past few months, joining a bevy of recently launched cultural sites and creative projects in [Greece's](#) second city. Even as their country teeters on the brink of default and struggles with debt, Salonika's youth are embracing a do-it-yourself ethos resulting in a wave of arts and night-life venues that they hope will hold up in tough times.

The youth movement is building on rich historical foundations. Salonika, which lies on the northern edge of the Thermaic Gulf, is the capital of the Greek region of Macedonia (not to be confused with the [Republic of](#)

[Macedonia](#)). Punctuated by palm trees and relics of antiquity, mazelike city streets open to century-old marketplaces, where ripe produce, freshly dismembered livestock and an extravagance of spices still form the city's commercial heart.

Historically one of [Europe's](#) oldest and most multiethnic cities, Salonika (called [Thessaloniki](#) in Greek) is home to architectural marvels that testify to its centrality in Byzantine, Ottoman and Sephardic Jewish history. The city is anchored by Aristotelous Square, where curved, columned facades open to the waterfront in one direction and frame views of the historic Ano Poli (Upper City) in the other.

Though it has only about one million people, compared with Athens's five million, Salonika is widely considered the cultural capital of Greece. Festivals abound, most notably the [International Film Festival](#), which draws hoards of film buffs to the city each November (this year Nov. 4 to 13). It has also produced many of the country's most acclaimed bands, visual artists and designers. Yet despite Salonika's vibrant cultural output and young population — students number around 150,000 — over the past few decades, its municipal leadership grew increasingly conservative, withholding support from projects that veered from its entrenched brand of Macedonian monoculturalism.

Last year, though, Yiannis Boutaris, a tattooed, quick-witted former winemaker who turns 70 in January, [won the mayoral election](#) by about 350 votes, making him the city's first Socialist-backed mayor in 24 years. Mr. Boutaris quickly shook up the stagnant government, appointing a young staff that set to work opening up and re-examining the city's multicultural legacy.

"I think people were looking to be liberated from something that's so restrictive and narrow-minded," said Marina Fokidis, a curator of the city's third [Biennale of Contemporary Art](#), which opened in September and runs through Dec. 18. "Somehow we have to understand our hybrid tradition if we want to have a future."

For the biennale, exhibitions have been installed in long-ignored Ottoman and Jewish landmarks. Contemporary works that address the modern Mediterranean's mesh of cultures are on display at Yeni Djami, a former mosque built for a community of converted Jews; the Bey Hamam, an Ottoman-era bathhouse; and [Alatza Imaret](#), a 15th-century Ottoman mosque and hospice once famed for its colorful minaret. (Most of Salonika's more



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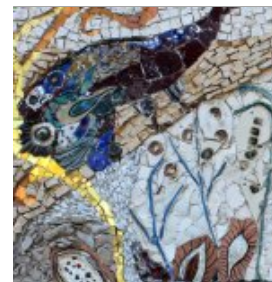


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than 40 minarets were demolished during the Balkan Wars in the first part of the 20th century or collapsed during the fire that destroyed much of the city in 1917.) The biennale also extends to Salonika's five major museums, including the State Museum of Contemporary Art, which houses the Costakis Collection, one of the world's best assemblages of Russian avant-garde art.

The newest wave of culture makers in Salonika includes Sfina, a self-appointed "urban prankster network" that instigates flash mobs in public spaces. One performance stunt by the group, who were inspired by the French Marxist Guy Debord, involved forming long lineups behind random, unsuspecting people. A more conventional approach is taken by the eco-conscious design firm 157 + 173, which, since making its debut in summer 2010, has garnered attention for its offbeat minimalist housewares (lamps, clothes hangers) that are equal parts Bauhaus and Miró.

Then there's the nonprofit Dynamo Project Space, which opened in 2009 in an old warehouse, with the intent of giving a platform to emerging local artists, architects and designers. The group is one of the engines behind the reinvigoration of the Valaoritou district. Once a manufacturing hub, Valaoritou has recently seen large-scale gentrification, and part of Dynamo's mission is to offer working space to struggling artists priced out of the area. Its almost 2,600 square feet includes rooms for exhibitions and seminars, studios, a library, an open archive of artist portfolios and an art shop.

"Salonika was in a process of decline and introversion long before the crisis," said Apostolos Kalfopoulos, the director of Dynamo. "To overrun this, bottom-up, D.I.Y. initiatives had already emerged in the city, and now they are blossoming."

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A version of this article appeared in print on November 6, 2011, on page TR4 of the New York edition with the headline: The Arts Bloom in Greece's Second City.

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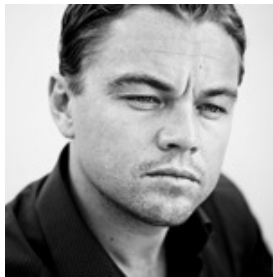
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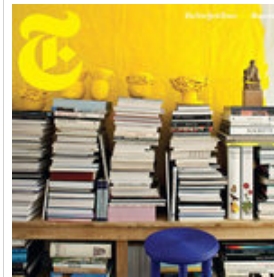
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