

Less aesthetics, even less ethics : Athens and its unusual modernity

Autor(en): **Paschou, Anastasia**

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Less Aesthetics, Even Less Ethics

Athens and its Unusual Modernity

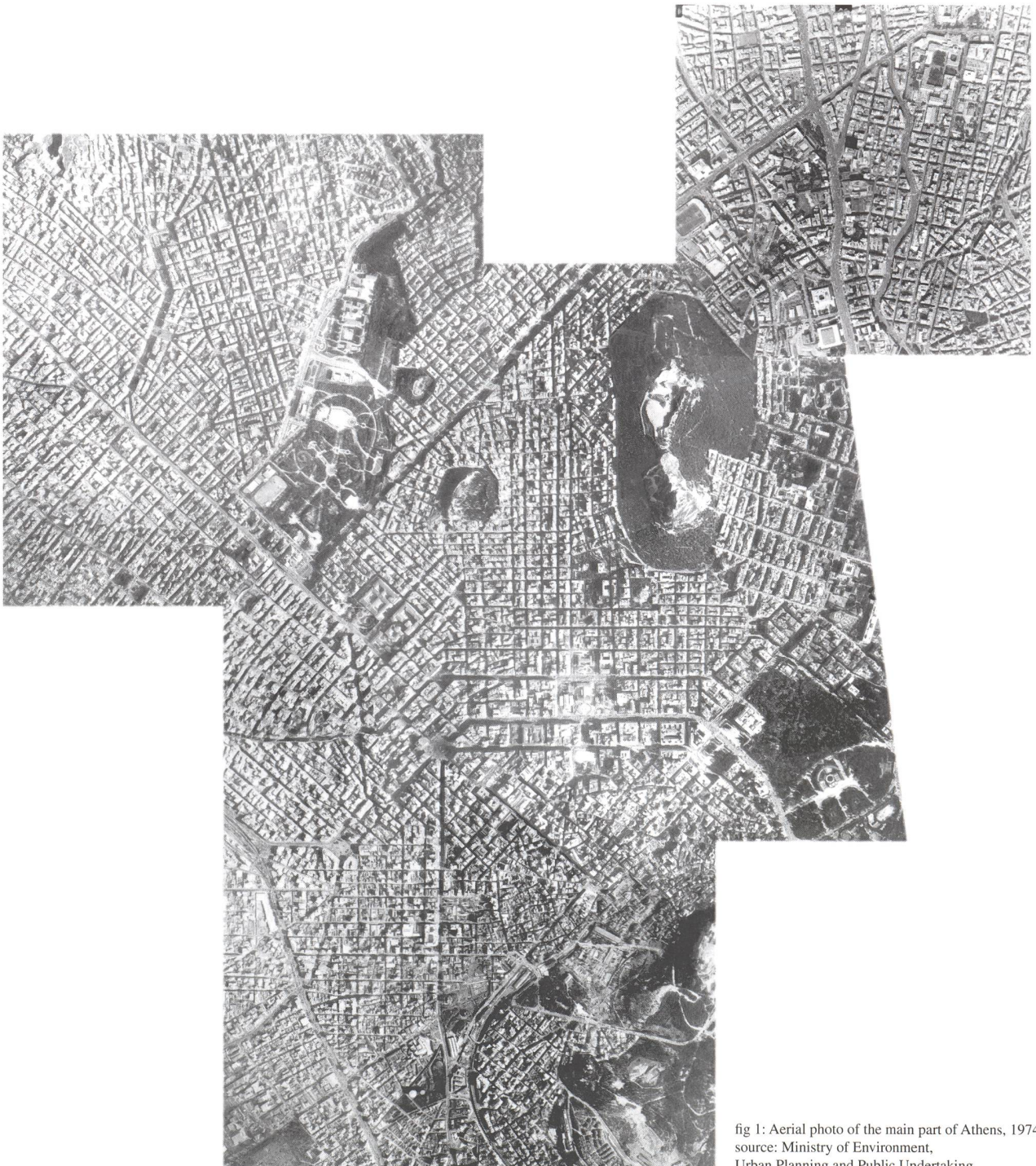


fig 1: Aerial photo of the main part of Athens, 1974, source: Ministry of Environment, Urban Planning and Public Undertaking



fig 2

Seen from an aerial view Athens would not surprise its visitors: both the order of a grid that one notices from that distance as well as the regular succession of main and secondary streets, which one would expect to find in a European city, are still there (fig 1). It is rather a closer view from the top of the surrounding hills which reveals the unusual picture of this city: an infinite disorderly shaped mass of almost identical concrete particles, a restless landscape dominated by one single building type, the "polykatoikia" (apartment building). In its essence this is what the identity of Athens consists of. This mosaic of unusually shaped volumes, mostly characterised by their uniform balconies, their one, two or even three upper floor setbacks, their narrow light wells cut out from the main building volume and their secondary but nevertheless important accessories, such as their sun blinds and solar water heaters on the roofs, set altogether an "organic" urban image whose mechanism of production is worthy of being explored.



fig 2,3: Views of Athens from the hill of Strefi, 2000

The birth of a 19th century city

In 1830, after 400 years of occupation by the Ottoman Empire, Athens was selected to be the capital of the newborn Greek state. At that time there was nothing more around the Acropolis than a small village with a few hundred inhabitants. It was the monument of the Parthenon and the grandeur of ancient Athens which determined this selection. Arcadian scenes of shepherds surrounded by their animals, sitting on ancient columns thrown here and there, often featured in the engravings of that time and fascinated the European travellers.

A Bavarian king was submitted to rule Greece in accordance with an agreement by England, France and Germany, the countries that had helped the Greek uprising against the Ottomans and then taken over ever since the role of "protectors". This king brought officers and engineers with him to contribute to the development of this retarded country. A Greek architect who studied in Berlin, S. Kleanthis and his colleague E. Schaubert, were assigned to work out

1 "The news about Athens being selected as capital of Greece motivated the wealthy citizens of the countryside and the Greek colonies to buy Turkish landed properties at very low prices and establish themselves there. In reality this decision was disastrous for the development of Athens. It was possible for the king to place the new city not on the site of the ancient one, but nearby, so that later extensions would not interrupt any thing. From a financial point of view this was also more reasonable for expropriating. But the owners of the old city and the new land buyers were exactly the ones who drove the regency to the given solution, because they were interested in increasing the value of their property." "Athens", K. Mpiris, 1966, p.26 (translated from Greek)

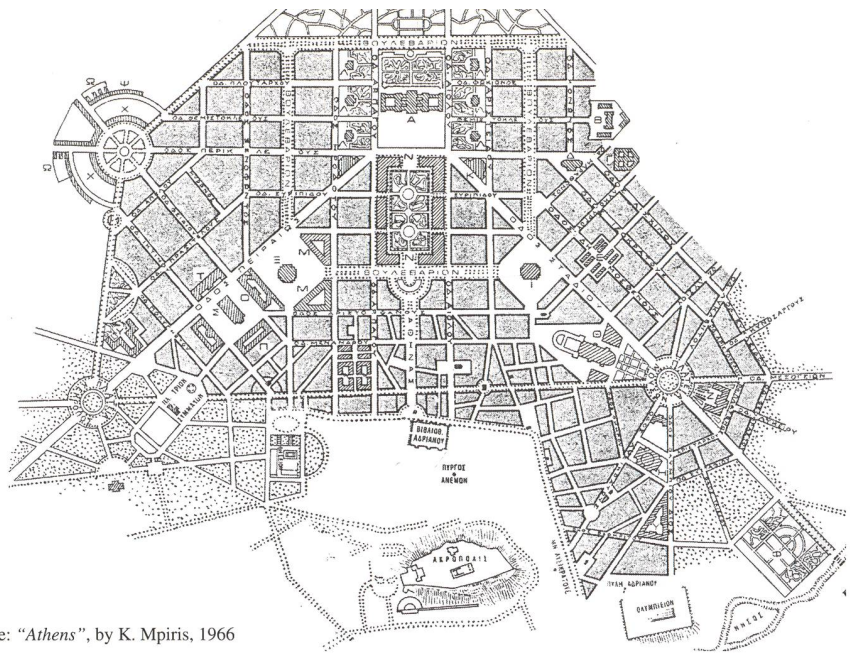


fig 4: The original plan of Kleanthis and Schaubert, source: "Athens", by K. Mpiris, 1966



fig 5: Building from 1926 for housing. Type not yet formed to express its multi-use in modern terms.

the first town-plan of Athens, which was presented in 1834 (fig 4). According to it the centre of the city would be enclosed in a triangle of boulevards with important public buildings along its sides and the most highlighted squares at its vertex. The sides of this triangle would also generate the basic direction of future grids, among which different potentials could already be anticipated: an expansion towards the north would meet the natural obstacle of the rock of the Acropolis, while southwards the boulevard bisecting the triangle could, and finally did lead to a promising expansion.

This original plan was only partly realised, either because the state could not afford to fulfill all expectations in the first place or because a number of issues were not given the proper attention.

- The placement of the new town was so close to the old one that the discovery of ancient ruins often postponed a lot of contemporary projects - even today these "intermissions" of past memories remind us of isolated islands in the rest of the tissue.
- The already existing "village" north of the Acropolis, long lasting and prospering, was not cleaned up for the sake of the ambitious new plans, and today one can fortunately feel this contrast of the old irregular and narrow urban tissue "implanted" in the rest of the triangle.
- The old Byzantine churches, originally intended to be torn down, were afterwards to be preserved as monuments and remained accidental leftovers, irregularly positioned within the rest of the tissue.
- The interests of the landowners and their influence in a family-established political system, combined with the weakness of the state to satisfy their financial demands every time an expropriation should take place, led to a constant derogation of the original plans, and a decisive pressure for private profit was imposed upon the urban space and determined its future.

As examples of this conflict between private and public interest, one could mention the following:

- The previously described inconvenient placement of the new city close to the old one was not the original intention but it was chosen to satisfy those who already owned properties there and were anticipating a rise in their value.¹
- Almost all the public spaces that the initial plan proposed were reduced with regard to size - the width of the streets and the area or number of squares - after protests by the plot owners who themselves had the most to gain by preserving the greatest possible urban space instead of selling it to the state.²
- The irrational expansion of the city in the following years was not based on a need for space or a plan preparing this expansion, but on an anticipated increase of plot-values once they were included in the new city's boundaries.³

Despite all this the city-centre had developed a European elegance by the beginning of the 20th century with classical and neoclassical public buildings

2 "When the necessary area for expropriation was counted and it was decided to pay only 0.2 drachmas per "pithis" while the prices on the free market had already reached 2 or 3 drachmas per "pithis", the group of owners reacted strongly. They proceeded to an assembly and asked the regency to reduce the area of the expropriation. [...] The regency agreed to this solution, which would also reduce the state expenses. Indeed, a lot of changes to the original plan then took place, reducing the width of streets and the size of squares. Even the size of the plots of the future public buildings was also reduced." "Athens", K. Mpiris, 1966, (translated from Greek)

3 "The surface of the city, which was 956, 505 sq.m. before 1834 and was expected to be 2,211,125 sq.m. according to the L. Klenze plan, is estimated today to 2,050,352 sq.m." *Essay for a new plan of Athens*, under P. Kalligas, 1919.

"The existing additions and alterations (to the original plan) are approved by plans consisting of small urban parts or single streets. The number of the decrees, through which the additions and alterations are approved, is more than 500. These approvals for expanding the city were not imposed by urban needs, but to satisfy the interests of the landowners at the periphery of Athens." *Essay for a new plan of Athens*, 1924.

and residences, often smaller and poorer than their architects' vanity, but still decent. The public spaces, obviously less luxuriously equipped than their equivalents in other European cities and reduced in size because of private interests, as explained, still expressed the anticipations of the 19th century urban qualities. At that time the main town was mostly inhabited by rich Greek families, people serving the court, officers from Bavaria and their families, traders and the rest were of the lower classes serving the previous ones or living off workshops. The wealthier inhabitants either owned houses or rented rooms in multi-unit houses that were designed in such a way, that they looked like villas owned by one person rather than apartment buildings inhabited by many.⁴ (fig 5)

The differentiation of the Greek urban reality

The big gap between the potential development of this in European terms "provincial" capital and the development that really took place is related to the domestic political events and the resultant financial pressure, combined with the lack of an infrastructure, that determined the urban development in the rest of Europe.

Before explaining more about these political events and their effects, one should become aware of the significance of this missing infrastructure: there was no industrial revolution in Greece (but 400 years of living off agriculture or animals under the Ottomans) and as a result of this there was no bourgeoisie. The state of social welfare, social housing and questions about forming an effective industrial city did not really exist, since the economy was based on family enterprises, trade and handicrafts. Actually the basis of the industrial society and its social extensions had once and for all passed by Greece: one can still observe today, in the global post modern or post industrial culture in which this country wants so eagerly to take part in, that attitudes, trends or financial mechanisms are experienced "second hand", imported and mutated, but never originally developed from the start. The other important detail, or even the counteraction to this absence of state, was a strong individualised society, which produced its urban environment in such a direct way, as we will see, that the rest of Europe thanks to or because of its strong programmatic policy never experienced. The visualization of this social and economic distinctiveness was best realized in the development of polykatoikia.

The political events related to this development are concentrated in two moments of the New Greek history: the late 20s and the two decades following the middle 50s. The connection between them, is that what really happened in the 20s was the preface of the incidents that took place in the 50s and 60s, when the contemporary landscape of Athens and the mechanism of its production were established.

The birth of the flat and the polykatoikia in the 20s is definitely related to the sudden and extraordinary growth of population in Athens from 1920 (453,000 inhabitants) to 1928 (800,000 inhabitants). However, this should not be compared to similar events in European cities: the incoming Greek refugees from Asia Minor were mostly responsible for this increase rather than a gradual migration of the rural population to a developing city. Furthermore these refugees settled within a range of some kilometres ("safety distance") from the city limits. The city itself did not directly feel the impact of this event. The urban land did not become more scarce or expensive. However, this national insecurity that started with the loss of Asia Minor, soon brought the repatriation of all the Greek families from the former Hellenic colonies of east, and their small to medium budgets. Real estate seemed to be a still unexploited field and the only way out of investing these budgets, given that the instability of the international market and the lack of any other profitable enterprise in Greece discouraged other experimentation.⁵ Besides, there was already an inconvenient expansion of Athens due to the vested interests of the landowners pre-



fig 6: Early polykatoikias between 1930 and 1940

4 „The existence of a single owner of a building was expressed by facade compositions, where the principle of the "whole" dominated the design signified by the articulation of the basis, body, and ridge of the house, as well as the use of some decorative elements extending over the entire façade.
"The urban polykatoikia between the two wars in Athens", E. Marmaras, 1985.

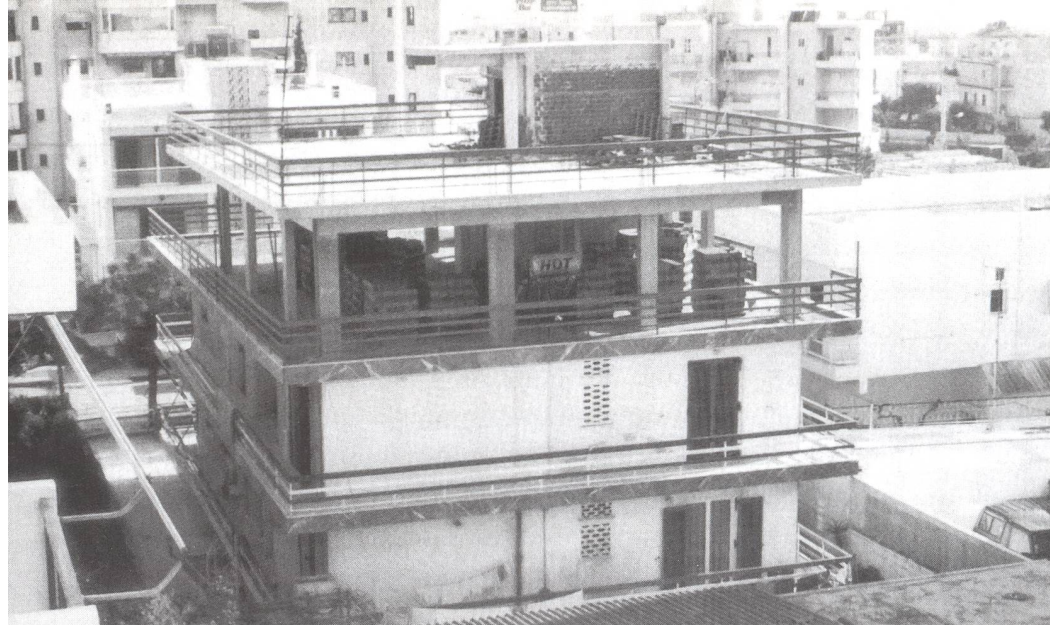


fig 7: A half-finished polykatoikia and its construction system, source: "The contemporary Greek city", metapolis 2001, photo by Panos Kokkinias

viously described. The insufficient network of streets and means of public transportation was not enough to serve such an expansion and concentrating the density of the city seemed to be a solution. Finally the upper-middle class (mostly government employees) sought residence of modern standards. The time for the apartment building had come. The new building type of polykatoikia was expected to introduce a modern tidy picture of a 20th century city (fig. 6).

Soon the financial prospects of the investment „polykatoikia“ became obvious: although the product „flat“ itself was luxurious and affordable only by a minority, it proved to be a very safe and profitable investment.⁶ Even the majority of the (few) industrial or ship ownership capitals were used for these types of buildings. Up to the second world war 85 % of them were built and owned by one single person, who could afford to hire an architect and cared about the result. Nevertheless the selectiveness of users did not cause such big changes in the structure of Athens as was hoped. It was only thirty years later that flats and polykatoikias became a theme, or better an enterprise, concerning everyone and dominating the picture of the city.

An uncommon process of modernization

This time the massive process of modernization that started in the 50s derived from an immigration of the rural population to the promising city. The realization of this procedure took place in the biggest Greek cities and mostly in Athens after a boom in the Greek economy. Polykatoikia was the instrument of this modernization, the ultimate modern cell: a concrete frame where the unit flat was inserted, a version of the Corbusian domino system, where the placement of the staircase-elevator and the light wells for bathrooms and kitchens is all that determines the floor plan. (fig 7)

The distinctive point of this modernization was the absence - once more - of the state and its replacement by small contractors. The proper legal framework was set by the state - with its blessings, explanations follow - in order to facilitate this mechanism: the law of „antiparohi“ allowed a small construction company with hardly any budget to build on a plot without paying for it, but offering in exchange part of the resulted space. A direct exchange of services between plot owner and contractor was established. Both of these two factors considered quantity more important than quality, or to put it more precisely their quality anticipations were restricted to the interior of the flat itself and not to the articulation of the building or its position in the city. Architects were hardly involved in this procedure. One should also not forget that the mass of the population accommodated in these houses did not have any experience of living in big cities and an urban attitude of collectiveness or a need to express

5 „Already from the beginning of the 20s the most successful way to invest the incoming capitals from the returning Greeks was the construction of buildings for renting out. This was supposed to be the best investment, since the profits from the rents were bigger than the bank rates. The alternatives for these people were limited: their money was not that much, their knowledge of the Greek market was small and the domestic stock market did not promise the proper stability.“
„The urban polykatoikia between the two wars in Athens“, E. Marmaras, 1985

6 The following text describes the reaction of the public to the first big and organized floor plan according to the modern standards polykatoikia in Athens in 1932:
„The demand for renting the new residences was remarkable. Even before the completion of the building the renting out of flats had already started. In the first three months all 40 residences were rented out, while a lot of them were still not finished.“

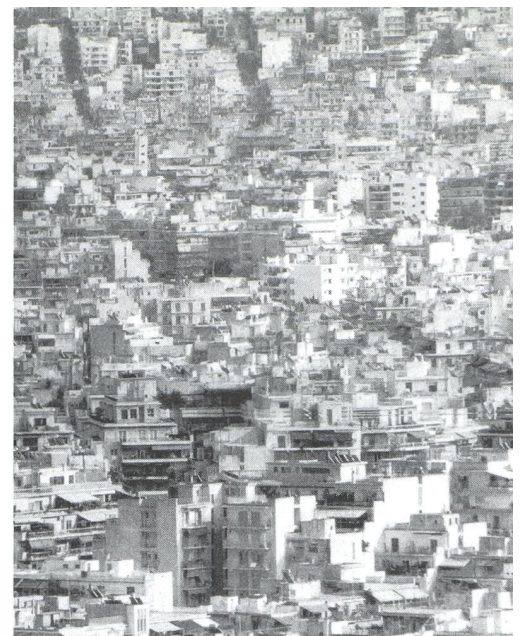


fig 9: The new sizes after the 50s: a lot of concrete.

such a thing was not observed. Running hot water and central heating were already enough to satisfy them.

This „business“ was accessible to a vast middle or even low class population: the next generation of these refugees who occupied or bought small plots at the periphery of Athens in the 20s were the ones who suddenly had the chance not only to own a new flat for their accommodation, instead of self-built miserable old houses, but also several square meters to rent out, depending on the size of the polykatoikia.(fig 8) Therefore the maximum building height, the maximum covered ground and the minimum cost became a common interest, a reason to fight for, to present false plans to the town-planning office, to make a small „present“ to the proper public servant, to use the family connections among people with political influence, who would justify an „exception“.

Yet buying flats was, and still remains, the most favored investment for every household. Their purchase has always been considered as the safest investment of the small budget of a family and the income obtained from renting out the rest is always substantial. Between 1960-69 9,5% of the gross national product came from the housing sector. At the same time the savings of every family financed the construction of housing without any cost in terms of money and organization for the state. On the contrary the taxes collected from these properties „fed“ the national budget.⁷ Even some weeks ago the front page of a popular Greek newspaper focussed on the rising prices for small flats in Athens.

Involving the mass of the population in this system also meant a new political status, which favored the state: the unexpected income from rents satisfied and relieved a lot of potential voters, who would normally fight for more social security benefits. The exploitation of the city supplemented the insufficient pensions, provided the unmarried daughters with a substantial dowry, offered the luxury of a car and a trip abroad, covered the expenses of the children's studies. Moreover this rising class suddenly experienced the mental strain of small ownership and its reaction was easy to predict or even to direct. When the drachma was in danger of devaluation twice in one year (July 1976 and January 1977) the government spread false rumours about future laws constraining the maximum possible built area, so that building activities were stimulated and absorbed the stored funds of the households. This sudden mobility of the drachma saved its value.⁸

The effects on the city

The mass production of polykatoikia defined the contemporary structure of the city and its size: where family houses with gardens once stood, now 6-floor volumes were popping up. (fig 9) The urban tissue and the plot sizes were overloaded. The streets and their pavements soon proved to be disproportionately



fig 8: A left over that survived antiparohi, perhaps self-built: no wonder the exchange was so successful.

⁷ Source: "Housing as a developmental factor for the Greek economy", *technika xronika*, June 1972, by K. Triantafyllidis

⁸ Source: "Contemporary urban building legislation. The standing of housing in the production progress", *architectonica themata*, 1978, by G. Sarigiannis.



fig 11: Back space of polykatoikias.

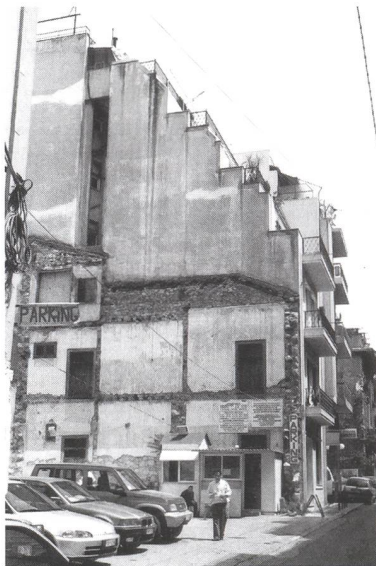


fig 10: Parking lots in the center of Athens, where neo-classical houses once stood.

9 "In order to satisfy the wealthier people that wanted to live in the city, a successfully applied combination was found: the last two floors of a polykatoikia were turned into penthouses, so that its inhabitants would still live in the centre without being disturbed by the noise and the dust and could enjoy the view from a big terrace. *"Tensions of modern architecture"*, by K. Kitsikis

10 At first glance, one could view Athens as the paradoxical place of modernism in the so-called post-modern era; because there is, perhaps, no other capital in the world where one can find such a wide acceptance of modern architecture, both as a functional programme for a formal language. Athens is for certain the modern city par excellence, in the sense that the model neo-classical city of the 19th century was gradually replaced and expanded, from the early 50s onwards, by an equally determined modern typology, a typology, which continues to be produced today with nearly the same shapes as in the 1930s.

From "Introduction to the Greek Edition", *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1985)

small, and the squares and the parks not large enough. The architectural identity was also altered: the ornamental neo-classical houses, poor or not, were almost eliminated and today their sad leftovers are pressed against the common walls of the neighboring polykatoikia. The parking lots in the centre best bear witness to the contrast of these different eras with their representative houses. These empty lots reveal also the „back view“ of the city with a random setback of walls and balconies as well as a neglected inside space of the block. (fig 10,11)

Regarding the functional potentials of polykatoikia everything has been embraced: residence, office space, public office, shop, supermarket, cinema, theatre, coffee shop, bar, workshop, car park. (fig 12) The urban benefit of this multifunctional model is a continuous and vivid public space which is primarily accommodated on the ground floor (usually 5 meters high) but also busts out to the street diffusing the limits of indoors and outdoors. This concentration of activities was not planned but occurred due to the lack of other building types and the absence of zoning. One could say that polykatoikia is „attacked“ by functions; others could argue that its ground floor flexibility - or lack of identity (!) - attracts them. In both cases the result remains the same.

The social mixture in these buildings is also worthy of attention: The lower floors accommodate less wealthy inhabitants than the upper ones, and the penthouses are occupied by people who can afford even more.⁹ The different quarters may keep their own status and have different prices for the same spaces, but almost all the classes are welcomed to most parts of this city. This healthy social distribution has created such psychological bounds to the neighborhood, that often the change of income may be directly connected to the change of residence, but not to the change of quarter or even building. One should exclude though the most central quarters of the town: The feeling of suffocation in this concrete mass partly explains the domestic transfer of the wealthiest population to the more spacious suburbs in the last twenty years. The wave of foreign immigrants from the former east block and Asia in the 90s and their establishment in some of the most central and cheap quarters of Athens explains this segregation even better.

In the suburbs the same building type keeps performing its leading role: The construction, the details, the sizes of the flats and the public spaces are more generous, but the pattern remains the same. (fig 13) In case of a more generous investment the attempts at improving these houses only extends to embellishing the facade (colors, patterns of plaster, expensive window frames, delicate bars at balconies) and impressing the potential customers.

The morphological result of the mass of polykatoikias may be uniform in its general articulation but remains compatible with private interaction on a smaller scale: roofs turn out to be private gardens; balconies are occasionally



fig 13: Ano Patisia: one of the quarters developed in the 70s (at that time considered to be an escape from the tight center). The sizes are more generous, but still the same building pattern.



fig 12: The ground floor and its possibilities. From left to right: a cinema, whose name is labeling part of the side view, a shop replacing a house and destroying the original symmetry of the facade and an arcade with shop.

11 "As far as public space is concerned, I am thinking of Rem Koolhaas's concepts, in "Bigness" and "Generic City", when he states that the city has become a system of interiors which are connected by traffic systems... I think that the Greek city is maybe a very beautiful example of what you call a "Generic City". But I think public space in Greece is the street; there are some streets, of course, which are developed in western terms, but if you go to the periphery you see that the streets are filled with life (cafes, restaurants, bars...). Perhaps it is also worth studying that particular way of organization which defines a more linear and generic sense of public space." From a discussion between Kees Christiaanse and Yorgos Simeoforidis in Berlin, published at "The Contemporary Greek City", metropolis 2001.

The author wishes to thank Michelle Stanley, Barbara Behrens and Nils Kemper for revising the text.

converted into loggias with glazing; door or window frames express the color tastes of their users. This democratic frame in which everyone is allowed to participate (not always completely legal, but commonly accepted) is both the blessing and the curse of this environment: a painful freedom that promotes individual action but does not help to perform bigger gestures; the lost trust to the state and a personal fight for one's own interests. In the past few years Athens has been experiencing the unknown scale of "big projects" related to the Olympic Games of 2004. Either the lack of experience or the lack of vision or even private interests have prevented both the metro and the new airport (two of these big projects) from taking on an architectural identity.

A strange combination of continuity and non-continuity in Athens is also a result of this morphological uniformity. On the one hand the whole mass of concrete looks identical, and spreads like a sea of repeated volumes, but a more experienced eye would locate differences of scale in the buildings, quality of materials and construction, more or less decorated shops at the ground floor and several kinds of accessories for the streets. The city is indeed generated throughout by the same pattern, but the identities of areas are printed inconspicuously through the differentiations of the same building type. The whole and the parts are strongly bounded or even overlap each other.

Today the system of "antiparohi" goes on in all the Greek cities. The same patterns are being repeated; the small contractors are doing the same job once more (sometimes they hire architects for a decorative facade or for a computer aided visualization); the people are still not that discriminating about an urban collectiveness, their expectations go no further than the limits of their properties, and they are strongly concerned only when a new street or park would influence the objective value of their houses. Perhaps this behavior is dictated by the liveliness of the Greek cities: As long as the street and the ground floor, so directly connected to each other, shelter successfully all the necessary activities of a community, and through this way directly express an unconstrained collectiveness, no one confronts himself with the need of an architecturally articulated city.

Kenneth Frampton calls Athens "the modern city par excellence"¹⁰ and Kees Christiaanse considers it "a very beautiful example of the "Generic City" of Rem Koolhaas".¹¹ Nevertheless this city is proof that human activity is stronger than the attempts to plan it, its organic disorder can generate such a vivid result, that design cannot always guarantee or sometimes even spoils, and that "beauty" goes beyond "elegance" and finds a new meaning among autonomous, unexpected actions born within a flexible framework.

Anastasia Paschou graduated from Polytechnion Athens and is presently doing her postgraduate studies at ETH Zurich.