THEATRUM MUNDI

Learning from Athens

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Author Ioanna Theocharapoulou
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Athenians will be the first to tell you that their city is a disaster compared to other European metropolises. Characterized by sprawling, monotonous, aging, buildings, overwhelmed by traffic and pollution, the city is almost completely lacking in the symbolic order of other European capitals, so prized by architects and planners. Although not a "shantytown", Athens is in large part "informal", an example of "urban non-planning" as Noo Saro-Wiwa wrote recently of Lagos.[1] The many and ongoing failed attempts at formal planning, are still part of Athenians' daily conversations, whose city, the prime example of these failings, is generally considered chaotic and debased, a sorry testament to the inability of the Modern Greek state to regulate all things, not least construction. To add to that, the (European) fantasy of Athens as the "cradle" of Western civilization, rarely fails to elicit unfavorable comparisons between the contemporary city and the majesty of the classical ruins.

In truth, in its brief and turbulent modern history, (Greek Independence from the Ottoman Empire began in 1821, the State was founded in 1834), Athens experienced successive bursts of rapid expansion and "informal" design, alongside key political and economic events. The earliest of these informal settlements was founded by the builders of the nineteenth century urban monuments, (the National Library, the University, the Old Parliament, etc.), who came to Athens from the Aegean islands, bringing with them knowledge of working with marble. Their little makeshift houses, right in the foothills of the Acropolis, resist demolition to this day. There was massive and rapid expansion again in the early 1920s when the city flooded with refugees following the war and population exchanges with Turkey, and again in the early post-World War II decades.

Why should the example of Athens be important or interesting at this moment? Because as we have shifted to being predominantly urban rather than rural, "informality" is the dominant trend in cities all over the world. In fact according to the U.N., by 2030, one in three people will live in informal settlements. This does not mean that the world will look like Athens, but that by studying the

history of the “informal” in specific geographical and cultural contexts, we can achieve a richer understanding that will help us see both its limitations and potentials. For instance, it is becoming clearer to us that unlike the planned paradigmatic European cities of the nineteenth century which we know so well, as my research on postwar Athens suggests, cities today mostly grow in rapid and very often unplanned ways. Yet we have few “tools” with which to explore this different “chaotic” informal development beyond the stereotypical “favela” images we see repeated again and again.

The Athenian polykatoikia, from oikos = house, dwelling + poly = multiple, i.e. multi-story apartment block, can be such a tool for us today. The most innovative and least understood of the bursts of informal urbanism in the context of 20th century Greece, polykatoikia urbanism emerged in the early post World War II decades in response to the need for domestic space following war and civil war that had destroyed much of the Greek countryside as well as most of the country’s vital infrastructure. A small-scale apartment block, never taller than six or seven stories, it is a version of simplified modern architecture that existed more-or-less before the war, and that has interesting links to both the rural “vernacular” tradition, and to the European avant-guard.

Via the facilitation of a special financial arrangement, in Greek called antiparochì[2], that favored small scale development without the help of mortgages and banks, the ubiquitous polykatoikia scaled up and multiplied to create a fully-formed modern city. Postwar Athens was built by a multitude of teams of builders and small-scale developers; the success of the polykatoikia enabled the rural migrants who poured into the city to become urban citizens. Even as there was lack of innovation in a formal sense, which meant that the building type and the city it generated was –and is—unloved by architects and other intellectuals, on a level of design, it was not without intelligence. In my analysis I identified a series of practices, ways of managing knowledge, consisting of an aggregate of small gestures, that were dependent on incremental, often marginally legal or even illegal practices particular to this specific historical and geographical context.

These include metis, an ancient sense of resourcefulness as well as economy of means; simplification; addition; repetition; accumulation. Most of all I found a performative element that I believe has to do with how knowledge is transferred in non-literate groups: through memorization and repetition of certain themes with few variations each time. I relate the processes I found at work in postwar Athens to the prevalence of oral rather than textual culture in late 19th and early 20th century Greek society, particularly in literature and in popular theater, that resulted in a specific kind of built improvisation, local to place and time, where certain things or themes stayed the same, and others were improvised and negotiated each time.

The episodic, repetitive, accumulative, structure of oral literature

might correspond conceptually to processes of addition, repetition and accumulation, evidenced in postwar urbanism. As in oral literature, elements of the polykatoikia gradually became reduced to a group of “essential ideas” or “fixed expressions” [3] that were then combined as if to create a simplified pattern rather than a typical professional plan. Standardised, formulaic themes appeared: the reinforced concrete frame, the horizontal flat façade, the flat roof, a pilotis of sorts. I see this not so much about the “vernacular” as it is usually understood by architects, but rather more akin to the age-old processes of song, oral narration and popular art.

Although not democratic in any conventional sense since they also involved small scale speculation and opportunism, these processes can equally or paradoxically be thought of as a form of civics. [4] Invented or developed at a moment of rapid social change, they collectively allowed the built environment to absorb change as well as political instability. Furthermore, due to the aftermath of the Civil War (1946-1949), you could not get a government job if you had a record of belonging to the Left, but you could make a decent living as a builder, and no one cared about your political affiliations. Most of all, postwar Athenian development was instrumental in the transformation of rural migrants to citizens, and in this sense was productively and creatively civic, despite being architecturally uninteresting. The small scale repetitive gestures and processes by the many small builders and developers who created the postwar city, invented or collectively developed a building type that was rich enough and flexible enough to enable the transition from rural to urban, thus making a significant social contribution.

In my current research, I have started to see interesting overlaps between the historical example of Athens and the work of certain architects and designers today. [5] I wish to end this short piece by suggesting that the most interesting and innovative current design practices who see themselves taking an activist role and want to engage with the dynamic of citizenship, are starting to learn from informal practices. Professional designers, architects –and historians and critics– are self-consciously looking at urban informality and coming up with educated and technically superior processes for many of the challenges we are faced with today. These often embrace low-tech Innovation, resilience, adaptability, all qualities that were there in postwar Athens, but are now updated for the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that beyond a one-way relationship with history, we can use the insights gained by studying specific histories of cities that grew informally, not only in Latin America and the Indian subcontinent where our focus has been up to now, but also in places such as Southern Europe and the Middle East, as well as Africa, to produce new, critical re-conceptulizations of how we view the ever-expanding cities of

today, in terms of design, planning, and sustainability.

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1. Noo Saro-Wiwa, Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria, Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2012, 10.
2. The term antiparochè, translated as “part-exchange” in English, worked by trading an existing one-family urban home and the land on which it stood, for a polykatoikia, with the promise of one or more apartments to be given to the land owner. It favored small-scale developers because there was no need for vast sums of money to change hands. Even though antiparochè as a concept is not exclusive to Greece, the particular conditions of the real estate market especially in cities in the first postwar decades, characterized by extensive fragmentation of ownership, unclear titles, no public land registry, high interest rates, and absence of secondary mortgage markets, rendered the scale of application of this concept wholly pervasive and unprecedented at that time. Since everyone profited, the builders, the owners, and the state, in my analysis the antiparochè worked to render the polykatoikia a mechanism for creating and sharing wealth. It is noteworthy that the antiparochè has persisted in Greece to this day.
3. This phrase is from the work of classical scholar Milman Parry (1902-1935), whose work on epic poetry and oral literature revolutionized Homeric Studies, as quoted in Walter Ong’s Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, London and New York, Routledge, 1982. Ong writes: “The greatest awakening to the contrast between oral modes of thought and expression and written modes took place not in linguistics, descriptive or cultural, but in literary studies, beginning clearly with the work of Milman Parry on the text of the Iliad and the Odyssey.” (6)

1. I am thinking in particular of the work of sociologist Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) who is also considered a founder of the discipline of Planning. Geddes used the term “civics” in a variety of ways, one of which was a kind of social activism in relation to cities, that I feel is again apt today.
2. I have been writing about this topic in forthcoming publications; I have also been involved in curating public events that have featured some of this new work, particularly in the Ecogram Conferences at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, which are all available online at: www.events.gsapp.org

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