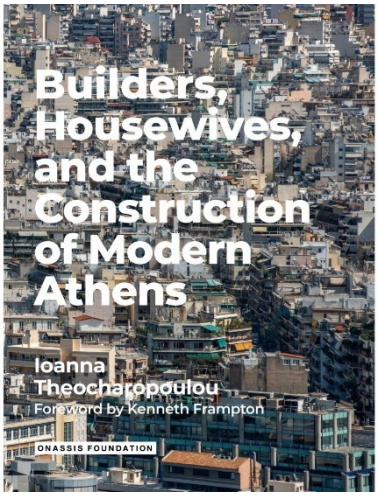

Builders, Housewives, and the Construction of Modern Athens

By Ioanna Theocharopoulou. Foreword by Kenneth Frampton. Published by the Onassis Foundation Athens, Greece: 3rd (revised) edition 2022, 205 Pages.

Interest in the Greek city and Athenian *polykatoikia* or multi-story apartment blocks has recently started to transcend Greek borders. Between the Summer Olympics in 2004, and the important international art exhibition *Documenta* in 2017, both of which took place in Athens, several schools of architecture from Europe and the United States have started to pay a great deal of attention to the city's built environment. At the same time, the number of Greek architects and historians working on Greek architecture from outside of Greece has also grown. Currently, more and more research on Greek cities, and in modern Greek studies generally, is being written in English and published in foreign academic journals. So much so that it is increasingly hard to find research materials in Greek libraries and bookshops. Ioanna Theocharopoulou's book, *Builders, Housewives, and the Construction of Modern Athens* (2022) is an example of such this trend.[1]

The book tells the story of Athens and the modernization of Greek society by exploring the shift from the "old Athenian houses"[2] to the postwar *polykatoikia*. The study is not articulated from a point of view that would impose a an academic theory "from above," but tries to understand postwar Athenian urbanism "from below" by crafting a language that explores the phenomenon in terms that would be accessible to a wider audience. Theocharopoulou analyzes behaviors, traditions and attitudes towards architecture and building as they were formed within the specific context of the historical and cultural conditions of modern Greece.[3]

The book emphasizes the role of the protagonists of the "repressed history" of modern Athens: those who have been consistently blamed, by both architectural historians and by the general public, for producing "ugly" buildings and for being the reason for all urban ills. These protagonists were none other than the working people described by Theocharopoulou as "builders" and "housewives." The "builders" include wily developers among others who, following almost a decade of war[4], rushed from the destroyed countryside to the city looking for a better life. The "housewives" were the young women who left the countryside eager for a modern way of life that would provide basic household amenities, such as indoor heating and bathrooms, as well as modern appliances, all of which were unavailable in the rural context and in the older Athenian house. As Kenneth Frampton notes in his "Forward" to this book, "the *polykatoikia* is a unique modern manifestation of urban development that came from the spontaneous evolution of society and not from planned intervention."[5] To discuss the particularities of this urban phenomenon, Theocharopoulou introduces new conceptual tools sourced from architecture and planning histories, as well as from social history, anthropology, gender studies, language studies, and the study of the popular shadow puppet theater.[6]

One important element of this history is the financial system or process of *antiparochi.* This was an exchange agreement between an owner of an urban plot of land which also usually included an old house, and a developer who wished to use the land to construct a new *polykatoikia*.

The developer did not pay the landowner but would instead agree to provide them with at least one apartment (but usually more than one) in the new building. Both sides benefitted because the landowner or an owner of an old building yearned for updated infrastructure and amenities, while the developer could avoid having to borrow money or take out loans to begin the building.

Prior to the publication of this book, most interpretations of the Athenian postwar *polykatoikia* took the Corbusian Dom-Ino to be the inspiration for this particular building-type. However, Theocharopoulou questions the feasibility of using a modernist prototype to research the origins of a specifically local and informal system of urban development. Instead, she looks for different kinds of evidence for her interpretation. Her reading proposes a series of what she calls "social infrastructures and imaginaries" that apply equally to the culture of postwar urbanism and the ways in which it worked, as well as to the conceptual framework at play in the *Karagiozis* shadow puppet theater. Theocharopoulou suggests that there were similarities between the character of *Karagiozis,*[7] a poor anti-hero struggling to survive by his wits, and the ways of working utilized by the builders of postwar Athens. She observes that in both the financial system of *antiparochi* and the *Karagiozis* shadow puppet theater, there is an effort to trick the authorities—the Ottoman rulers of pre-Independence Athens in *Karagiozis* theater— and the planning authorities in postwar Greece. In both of these cases, we might detect a quality which, according to scholars, has been a long-standing characteristic of Greek culture, the Homeric *métis.*[8]

The book helps us imagine the atmosphere of late 19th century Athens: a time when by day the "official" planners and architects built neoclassical monuments in an attempt to fit in with Western Europeans' expectations, but by night, they were still entranced by the sounds, memories, and connections with the East. The author identifies some fundamental dichotomies of modern Greece in her interpretation of the infrastructure that brought about *polykatoikia* urbanism. Most importantly, she discovers a chasm that had to be bridged between an earlier pre-Independence [Ottoman] Eastern popular culture, which had faded by the end of the 19th century, and a more modern way of life that needed to aspire to 20th century European ways of life.

Theocharopoulou describes the difficulty of architects and other elites in appreciating the needs and aspirations of ordinary people, who they also idealized and often misrepresented. This was due to the failure of architects and elites to understand the complexities of ordinary people's transformation from rural to urban citizens. The dominance of a non-literary, centuries-old, oral tradition which was at odds with elite culture, also influenced the creation of urban space in various fascinating ways. It played a key role in the ways in which the financial system of *antiparochi* evolved, as it prescribed structural possibilities, and ultimately minimized the importance of architectural design, which, by definition, necessitated an educated elite.

Theocharopoulou problematizes the progression of empirical knowledge about building and the ways in which it had been transferred by apprenticeship in pre-industrial, rural Greece, and how this knowledge came to the city. She looks specifically to the role played by the interwar "practical engineers," and the "sub-engineers" who succeeded them in the postwar period.[9] The empirical dissemination of building knowledge based, as it was, on an oral culture brought over from the countryside, played a role in the virtual or perceived exclusion of architects, engineers and planners from the main mechanisms of production. Theocharopoulou's approach leads to particularly interesting conclusions that are not necessarily limited to postwar *polykatoikia*. The history of the "builders" and "housewives" thus helps the reader to better understand both the reasons for the dysfunctional planning processes in postwar Athens and a number of critical moments in 20th century Greek history.

Fig.1: Builders working for the construction of *polykatoikia* buildings, Athens, ca. 1950s. (Source: Megaloconomou Archives, Benaki Museum).

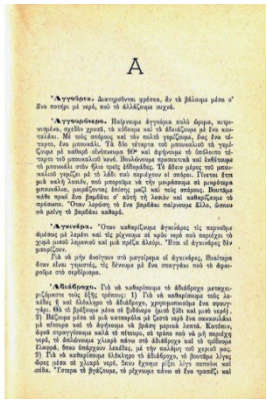

Fig.2: Book cover and sample page from *The Dictionary of Modern Housekeeping* (1958), by Anna Kasfiki, professor of Home Economics.

Theocharopoulou's book suggests that the main advantage of the postwar *polykatoikia* was their ability to absorb and manage the contradictions of postwar Greek society. The microcosm of a *polykatoikia* building block had characteristics of modern architecture, such as white undecorated facades, flat roofs, and large areas of glass, but was a simplified version of modern architecture without the latter's social and political agenda. At the same time, it presents an example of informal architecture built largely within prescribed planning rules and regulations which left few possibilities for improvisation. In managing these contradictions, the *polykatoikia* evolved into a kind of "local language" that allowed the coexistence of

different forces in postwar Greece. Theocharopoulou meticulously studies the creation of a broader middle class due to the success of this urban development that was capable of appeasing social, ideological, and cultural differences during the interwar period, as well as essentially facilitating the healing of some of the traumas of the Civil War.

Theocharopoulou's book insists on the significant role played by Constantinos Doxiadis during wartime Greece. In terms of his official duties in the Ministry of Reconstruction; it argues that the war profoundly shaped his own thinking and practice in the postwar period. Doxiadis devised the term ekistics as the "science of human settlements," while he struggled to develop comprehensive approaches to the reconstruction of the ruined villages he witnessed while returning on foot from fighting the Italians at the Albanian Front in 1941. Theocharopoulou incorporated through her archival work, the virtually unknown history of Doxiadis' wartime activities, the publications that emerged, and the spectacularly produced large-format book, *The Sacrifices of Greece during the Second World War* (1946), demonstrating in her history of Athens that even though there were no new buildings, wartime was a highly productive moment for architectural discourse in Greece. Doxiadis' role, as a member of the first postwar governments in the critical period preceding the great development of Athens, appears to have been even more important than previously thought. Theocharopoulou thus uncovers an aspect yet to be fully elucidated by historical research. It is interesting to note that younger scholars, such as Konstantina Kalfa, attribute to Doxiadis the KH Resolution, which, through a package of favorable measures, helped pave the way for the private reconstruction of Athens and other Greek cities through *antiparochi*.[10]

By placing *polykatoikia* in relation to Greece's social and political histories, the book enables readers to innovatively reconsider the role of *polykatoikia* as an urban phenomenon.[11] Theocharopoulou's narrative traces the conditions of this urbanism that emerged due to the financial process of *antiparochi*, and the formation of new subjectivities without, however paying as much attention to the petit-bourgeois apartments in the following decades. It would have been interesting for the reader to see the evolution of these histories up to the 1990s, viewed through similar lenses; that is, from the perspective of her protagonists, the "builders" and the "housewives." This point has in fact began to be addressed thanks to an award-winning documentary based on Theocharopoulou's book, of the same title. This film by Tassos Langis and Yannis Gaitanidis (Onassis Foundation, 2021) expanded her research and brought the book to life through interviews with "builders" and "housewives" from the postwar period in Athens. As Langis says, the book and the film together construct "symbiotic narratives" that examine new aspects of postwar urban histories. Some of the ideas reinforced in the film through the directors' own research are the vital role played by social cohesion for the expansion of the city, as well as the importance of oral transmission in building knowledge, and the importance of negotiation. The directors achieve this in a particularly sensitive, spirited, and inspired maner.

Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that many of the infrastructural and ecological problems faced by Athens today stem from the early postwar period and are due to inadequate planning in particular. In addition, the Greek cinema of that era, which was free from censorship, displayed the alienation felt by many, as well as other difficulties in the everyday lives of the new middle class.[12]

It would have also been interesting to learn more about how *métis* fared in the new urban landscape where, with the passage of time, the increase of the standard of living, and the passage towards mass consumerism, inevitably and dramatically changed many oral traditions and ways of thinking. Lastly, the continuation of the research in this book would allow us to evaluate whether the foundations laid by *polykatoikia* urbanism provided for the modernization of Greek society, as presented by the author, were successful. Unfortunately, to a great extent, the answer is negative.

In the book's postscript, Theocharopoulou attempts to make a connection between the histories of the early postwar and Athens today, while also presenting the current scholarship and reflection on anonymous architecture and informal urbanism. The book may not reveal to the reader the fate of *métis*, but it suggests some interesting directions for new research on cunning, resourceful thinking. Firstly, Theocharopoulou refers to some of the numerous improvised interventions and phenomena of social solidarity in Athens, especially since 2008. In particular, the need to integrate—once again—new migrants, who, with minimal help from the state, have displayed their own resourcefulness and vigilance.

The history of Athens, as told in this book, might also be used as a reference point for other rapidly urbanizing world cities today where modern ideas in urban planning are often at odds with weak institutions and societies with a vibrant oral culture. Perhaps the most interesting direction, in terms of assimilating lessons learned from Athenian postwar urbanism, has to do with research into novel architectural strategies. Theocharopoulou aptly refers to efforts by current architects, such as the work of Alejandro Aravena, to draw from and refer to anonymous architecture in their design work, especially when making proposals for vulnerable social groups.

In contrast, there are few examples of Greek architects drawing from the tradition of anonymous architecture; from the traditional additive processes - whereby rural families add rooms to an initial building as they grow - for example. In the future, we might expect a greater emphasis on such directions as design research. We might also expect the evolution of a design ethos capable of mediating between "official" architecture and a range of improvised urban structures. In any case, the originality of Theocharopoulou's approach to postwar Athenian history shows us that the study of the *polykatoikia* and of the system of *antiparochi* can offer us a great deal more than what its original builders might have imagined, or what its many critics have blamed it for since. It seems that there is still a great deal we might learn from the neglected, unloved twentieth century Athens.

Builders, Housewives and the Construction of Modern Athens. Avaialble at: https://actar.com/product/builders-housewives-and-the-construction-of-modern-athens/

Notes

1. This updated edition of *Builders, Housewives and the Construction of Modern Athens,* Athens: Onassis Foundation, 2022, is based on Theocharopoulou's doctoral dissertation defended at Columbia University in 2007. The first edition of this book was published by Artifice, London: 2017.
2. This is a reference to a book of this title by the architect Aris Konstantinidis, *The Old Athenian Houses,* first published in Athens, 1950.
3. The history of Modern Greece is generally less well-known especially to non-Greek audiences, than that of Ancient or Classical Greece.
4. World War II and the German Occupation lasted from 1940 to 1945; followed by a Civil War from 1946—1949, the effects of which were felt much more in rural areas. Those who came to the city often worked in extended family groups, or with others from their respective places of origin. As soon as they could, they would form their own small-scale businesses, as developers of urban apartment blocks.
5. Frampton also recalls his first and particularly critical reference to the Athenian apartment building in the Greek translation of his *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1980) published in Greek as *Modern Architecture: History and Criticism,* Athens: Themelio Publications, 1987.
6. Theocharopoulou's humanistic approach to Athenian urbanism recalls some early texts by Dimitris Philippidis, such as his "The Doormen of Kolonaki Apartment buildings," published in the journal *Architecture in Greece* 12 (1978), pp. 161-167.
7. The shadow-puppet popular theater figure of Karagiozis is poor and uneducated, relying on his ready wit to make a meager living in the city. Originally introduced to Greece by the Ottomans in early 19th century, and close to the Ottoman Karagöz, this figure was reinvented in 19th century Greece, to satirize the Ottoman authorities and over time to also make fun of local prominent figures, elite professions and any current issue that was of interest to the audience.
8. In Classical Athens, *Métis* was a deity of wisdom and thought, but her name originally connoted "magical cunning" as the Greek word métis meant a quality that combined wisdom and cunning […] she had the ability of changing her shape at will. *(*https://en.wikipedia.org/) In her analysis, Theocharopoulou uses Michel de Certeau's use of the term Métis. See Michel de Certeau, (1974) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press. (First translated in English in 1980).
9. There is no direct translation of these terms in English because there are no such equivalent professionals in English-speaking countries. The "practical engineers" *(πρακτικοί μηχανικοί)* and the "sub-engineers" *(υπομηχανικοί)* multiplied after 1923 and the Population Exchange following the Greco-Turkish war, that had as a result an enormous population increase almost overnight. Called the "Asia Minor Catastrophe" in Greece, it resulted in the rapid growth of urban centers, particularly Athens and Thessaloniki. To cope with the housing crisis, the Venizelos government made the already existing "sub" professionals official, in founding new schools to train them in a shorter time than the more elite schools of architecture and engineering. These new professionals were allowed to build up to a certain height and needed to work with a trained architect or civil engineer for planning permission.
10. See Konstantina Kalfa, *Self-Sheltering, Now! The Invisible Side of the American Aid to Greece, [in Greek] Athens*: Futura, 2019.
11. The role of building activity in the economic and political integration during the post-civil war era, is analyzed in Dimitris Charalampis, *Clientelism and Populism,* [in Greek], Athens: Exantas, 1989, pp.184-200. The transformations of petit-bourgeois districts are vividly recorded in Alexandros Christofellis, "The petit-bourgeois epic of Modern Architecture", [in Greek]", in *Design + Art in Greece* 10 (1979), pp. 41-42. See also the Marxist analysis of the transformations of working class and refugee neighborhoods in George Sarigiannis, "The petit-bourgeois city," *Diaplous* 26 (June-July 2008).
12. See for example, the cinematic representation of the suffocating petit-bourgeois everyday life in Pavlos Tassios' films *Ναι μεν, αλλά* ("Yes, but") from 1972, and *Το βαρύ πεπόνι* ("The Tough Cookie"), from 1977

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