

Areas of concern

The Saving of Plaka, Athens, Part I

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FIG. 1. The construction of the new pavements in the pedestrian area around Saint Katherine's Square.

Location, extent and importance of Plaka

The Plaka area, the oldest and best known Athenian quarter, now forms what could be described as the inner core of the capital's historic centre. It is, in any case, a district very closely associated with the history of Athens since it has never ceased to be inhabited from neolithic times to the present day and, in the darkest moments of the city's history, the area known today as Plaka constituted Athens itself.

The Plaka area embraces the northern and the eastern sides of the rock of the Acropolis in a semi-circular belt approximately one kilometre long by an average breadth of 350 metres. To the north and to the east its boundaries touch the commercial and administrative centre of Athens while, to the west, it stretches as far as the limits of the site of the ancient Athenian Agora, an area which also formed part of the historic centre of Athens but was sacrificed for the sake of excavations undertaken there from the year 1931 onwards by the American School of Classical Studies. The Plaka district, by reason of the particular position it occupies in the Athens area, obviously forms an extensive monumental record of the civilization and history of the people who lived there during each historical period. It therefore presents exceptional monumental interest because one can find in it monuments reflecting all epochs in Greek history. Indeed, it is in Plaka that the form and the scale of the traditional urban pattern has been preserved. These are factors directly related to the topography of the district and are consequently capable, on their own, of giving the area its peculiar atmosphere of an historic core and of justifying its major importance. Besides, it has been ascertained that the present streets of Plaka such as Adrianou Street and Tripodon Street, are located exactly on the tracings of the ancient streets.¹

Finally, it has to be stressed that all this occurs in a district which continues to be inhabited and forms a lively and much frequented section of modern Athens, a district much beloved of all Athenians and which has become a symbol or a term of reference.

The problem of Plaka

Plaka developed and assumed its present form (*Fig. 2*) during the century which intervened between the time when Athens was proclaimed as the capital of the modern Greek State and the eve of the outbreak of World War II. The slow growth rate of those years and the resulting gradual assimilation of the new elements helped to produce an ekistic entity which was fairly uniform and homogeneous, especially as regards the townplanning form and the architectural scale. On the other hand, survival of traditional elements in the house types, such as the inner courtyard and the glazed corridors as well as the presence of stylistic elements of Neo-classical architecture, blended with the monuments of



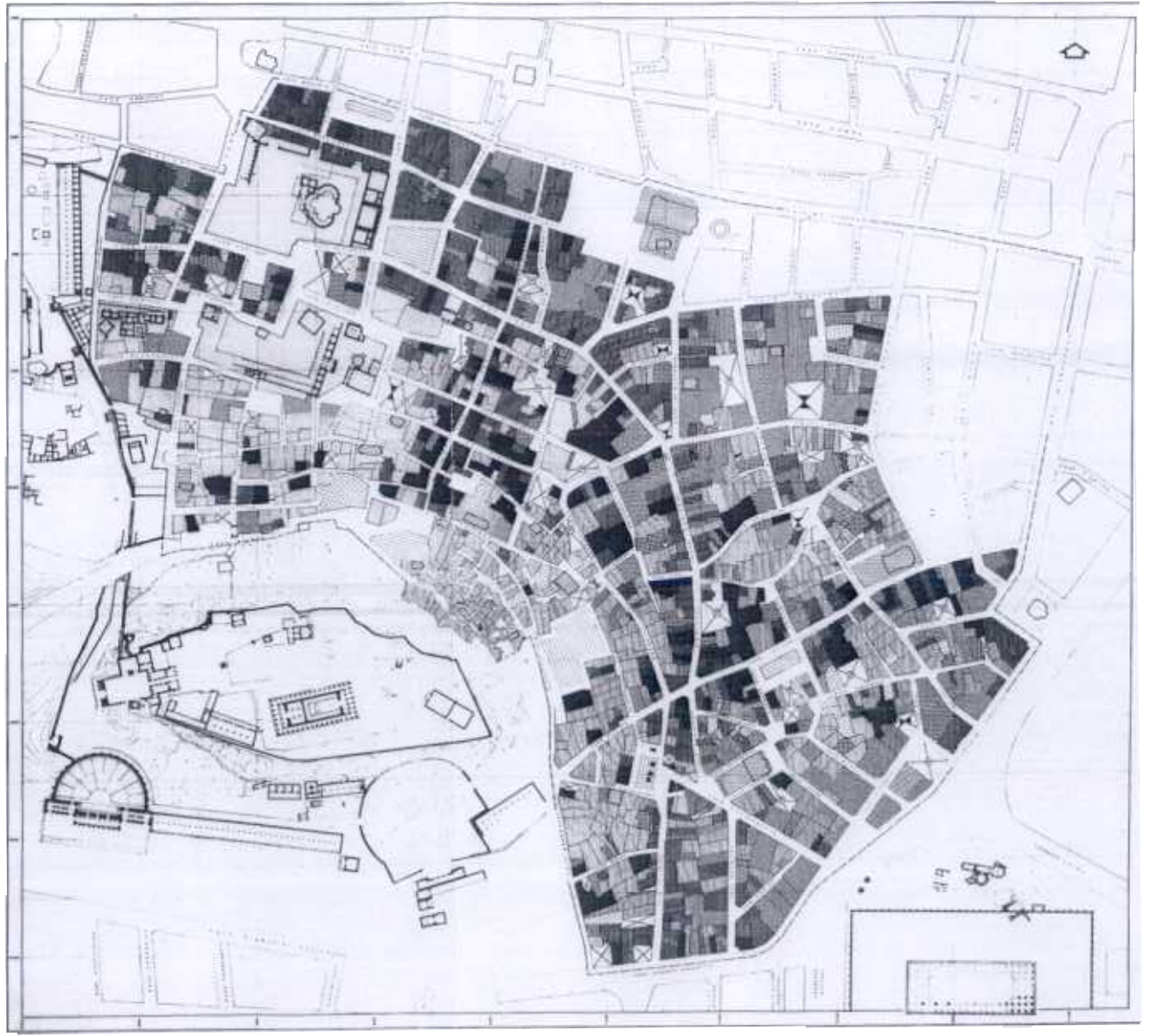
FIG. 2. Map of Plaka showing the network of pedestrian ways. The continuous red line indicates the limits of Plaka and the dotted red line indicates the area controlled by the Archaeological Service.

(Facing page 4)

¹ Travlos, J., *Townplanning Evolution of Athens*, 1f, 71. Athens: J. Travlos, 1960.



Continuous red line indicates the



various periods which remained embodied in this newer ekistic entity. All this endowed Plaka with its unique atmosphere and character of an historic core of Athens and of a distinctive central residential and light industrial area, coupled with handicrafts and the traditional form of entertainment in its small taverns.

The first serious pressures from without appeared after 1950 and these were due mainly to:

1. The building boom in Athens which came as the result of a sharp increase in the population of the capital.
2. The increasing needs of the commercial and administrative centre of Athens which touches on the boundaries of Plaka, in combination with the post-war building boom.
3. The sharp increase in the number of motor cars and the resulting intensification of traffic.
4. The equally brisk increase in tourism and in the number of visitors for whom Plaka is in itself one of the main attractions of Athens and also a quarter which offers pedestrian access to the Acropolis.

Under these combined pressures, Plaka gradually began to be transformed in three main ways.

1. Functional transformation. The home, the artisan's workshop, handicrafts and the traditional form of entertainment began to give way to mass, organized tourist entertainment, trade in tourist gift shops and services (*Fig. 3*). These new conditions forced a large proportion of the residents to move out and this resulted in the dissolution of the social structure of the district. Suffice it to mention that, of the 17,000 inhabitants of Plaka in 1961, only 4500 remained in 1974 while, by contrast, 200 places of entertainment had been opened and were functioning with a capacity for entertaining 20,000 customers at a time! During the same period, 7800 persons had employment in the Plaka². Thus, the old historic quarter lost its traditional and functional composition and the individuality which stemmed from it; and it was transformed into a section of the centre of Athens which came to life only at night while remaining almost dead in the daytime.

2. Townplanning transformation. Plaka's urban pattern, adapted to the particular natural surroundings through the processes already described and destined mainly to serve the needs of pedestrians, was forced under the new conditions to accept the traffic caused by thousands of motor vehicles and to provide parking space for many of them. This means that pedestrians in the area are now handicapped while, at the same time, noise and atmospheric pollution increase. These factors downgrade the environment and increase the tendency of the inhabitants to move out.

² For additional data, refer to Zivas, D.A., 'The Future of the Old Sector of the City of Athens' in *The Conservation of European Cities* (ed. Appleyard, D.), Boston: MIT Press, 1980.

On the other hand, the need for additional parking spaces has accelerated the demolition of old houses whose sites are now used as open-air car parks, and it has also caused any other available spaces to serve as lawful or unlawful parking lots. What is even worse, motor cars require the nature of the streets to be changed in order to render their movement easier.

3. *Architectural transformation.* Changes in the functions of the Plaka district, the modest and sometimes poor quality of the buildings themselves, natural wear and tear through ageing and lack of proper maintenance and also the fact of their having been put to uses incompatible with their original layout and scale, have been the principal factors in the transformation of the architectural form of Plaka. To these factors must be added the replacement of a considerable number of buildings during the years between World Wars I and II and even more so during the post-war building boom throughout Greece but especially in Athens. Infiltration into the architectural form of Plaka is markedly evident in the section which gives on to the commercial and administrative centre of Athens which, as stated above, is the one that feels the greatest need for expansion and exerts the greatest pressure on Plaka.

These conditions, which developed through a process of evolution starting in the mid-1950s and attained their climax in the mid-1970s, ended up by creating new strong financial interests on the one hand and, on the other, by provoking an ever increasing consciousness of the growing extent of the destruction of Plaka. This feeling manifested itself in a rising wave of public reaction. The inhabitants, various learned institutions, the daily press and periodicals have all expressed frequent and strong protests over a number of years concerning the fate of Plaka and have called for measures on the part of the Government to put an end to the evil and to save it.

The study of the 'Old City of Athens'

The first serious discussions concerning the problem of Plaka took place in the Athens Municipality in 1964. It was a period when another danger was threatening Plaka. This was a proposal that the entire area should be expropriated and demolished to make way for the completion of excavations aimed at bringing to light the ruins of ancient Athens; the entire site was to be turned into an archaeological park. This, of course, was not a novel threat but it re-appeared at that time, supported by noteworthy personalities who regarded it as a duty owed by modern to ancient Greece. It seems almost certain that this was averted thanks only to the lack of funds for such an immense undertaking and also because of the sharp reaction on the part of many members of professions and the inhabitants of Plaka themselves.

Some years later, towards the end of 1972, the Ministry of Public Works, at that time responsible for area planning in Athens, decided to entrust a group of professionals, under the direction of the author, with the task of compiling a study of this overall problem which became known as the 'study of the Old City of Athens'. This took two and a half years to complete and formed the first comprehensive analysis of the various problems besetting the district. Its ultimate object was to set forth proposals for effective protection and preservation of the quarter.³

This main objective caused the study group to lay down certain basic principles which can be summarized as follows.

1. As a fundamental requirement, it was agreed that there should be protection and preservation of the whole of Plaka, as it was regarded as a uniform and indivisible entity. The idea of preserving certain sections only or, worse still, isolated buildings, was ruled out because it was held that anything of this nature did not conform with the essence of the meaning of protection for this historic entity.
2. It was also laid down that Plaka should be maintained as a living city quarter; all thought of preserving it as a 'museum piece' or a 'monument' deprived of the presence of modern life was ruled out. For Greece, this was a very important point because for a great many years the idea of protection was closely associated, very naturally, with ancient monuments. Besides, it is clear that the new dimensions and scope given to the meaning of a 'monument'⁴ also offer totally new possibilities for coping with the protection and preservation of monuments and make it necessary to re-introduce them—and of course historic city centres also—into modern life.
3. It was established that the meaning of area protection should be made to include, without any doubt whatever, protection of its functional structure while recognizing the need to introduce the conveniences of modern living.
4. It was also established that protection and conservation of the district would have to take place within the framework of existing Greek legislation and, in addition, there was the prerequisite that existing property ownership would not be compelled to change. That is to say, any idea of mass expropriation of the area by the State was ruled out.

These basic principles which, in any case, conform with the most up-to-date and internationally acknowledged principles for conservation and protection,⁵ together with the general conclusions reached in the study, formed the foundations for the next stage. This came later, after a period of stagnation between 1975–1978, when the Ministry of Housing which had by then become the competent authority to deal with the matter, decided on a batch of measures designed to protect and conserve Plaka.

³ The study group included Dr J. Travlos architect-archaeologist, Dr (Mrs) J. Lambiri-Dimaki sociologist, Mrs A. Tzika-Hatzopulu lawyer, Mr P. Mandikas economist, Mr P. Pappas economist-statistician, the architects J. Virirakis, M. Grafakou and E. Maïstrou, and the archaeologists E. Spathari and A. Kokkou.

⁴ See the introduction to Appleyard, D. (ed), *Urban Conservation in Europe and America*, (Conference Proceedings, Rome 1975), Rome 1977, 3ff.

⁵ See Parent, M., 'Doctrine for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites', *Nessun futuro senza passato*, Report of Sixth General Assembly (ICOMOS), Rome, 1981, i, 58.



FIG. 4a. An open space in Plaka, near the Roman Agora, before pedestrianization.

It should be mentioned at this point that the 1975–1978 period which was marked by inertia on the part of the State, gave rise to a fresh wave of protests on the part of Plaka residents and public opinion generally. There were even protests from abroad about growing tourist commercialization of the district, its progressive disfiguration and vulgarization and the more frequent occurrence of anti-social incidents within its boundaries. Thus it came about that, towards the end of 1978, the Ministry of Housing entrusted the study of measures to protect and conserve the area to a group of professionals, under the author's direction. The group, in co-operation with competent departments at the Ministry undertook to study the entire problem.⁶

Study on the means of implementation and strategy of intervention

The study group's job then became one of determining the necessary measures for the most effective conservation of the area and, on the other hand, of proposing how and when they should be implemented. In other words it was a case of proposing a specific strategy which would aim at two targets.

⁶ The group, which assumed its final form in early 1979, was composed of: Dr J. Michael architect-town planner, K. Ioannou-Gartzou, M. Grafakou, E. Mäistrou, A. Paraskevopoulou, E. Methenitou architects, P. Kremezis civil engineer and G. Kontoroupis mechanical engineer. Advisers on traffic were Professor G. Yannopoulos and K. Zekos.

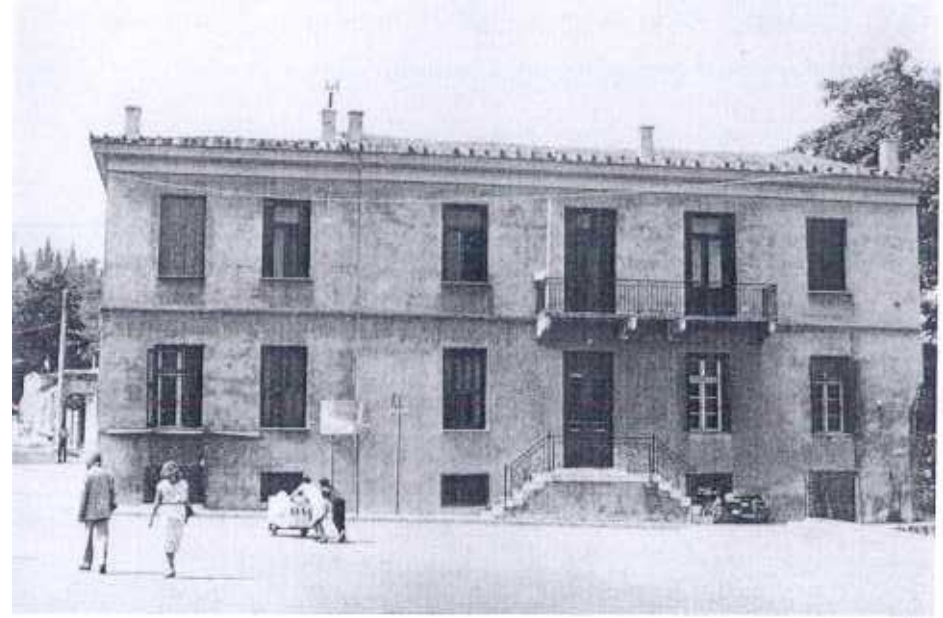
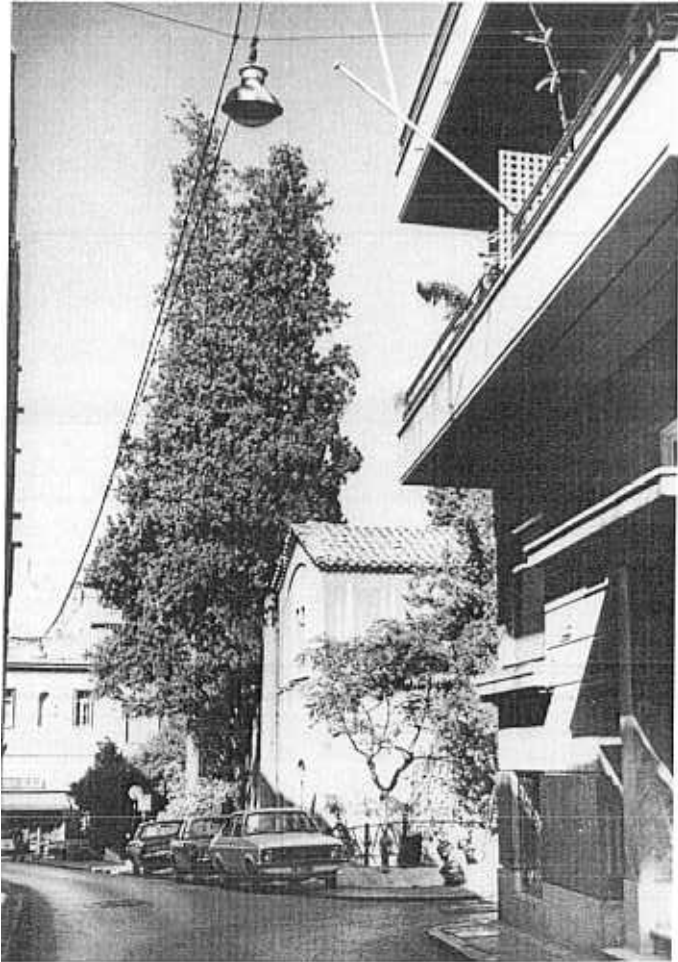


FIG. 4b. An open space in Plaka, near the Roman Agora after pedestrianization.

1. To ensure the broadest possible consensus for the measures and to minimize possible reaction to them.
2. To provide possibilities for the adoption of general measures of immediate effect while also making possible intervention by stages which, through a longer-term programme, could lead to the desired final result.

At this point it should be stressed that twenty years of disfiguration of Plaka resulting in the state into which it had deteriorated caused, among other things, a mentality whose main feature was perhaps mistrust, if not complete doubt as to the ability or even the will on the part of competent authorities to react to the situation which had been created and to study and implement a constant policy. This meant that from the outset the specific strategy to be chosen would have to take into account that conditions would have to be created which were capable of breaking this mistrust. If it were allowed to continue, it could be detrimental to the entire effort. Therefore, basic essentials were: consensus on the measures and on intervention on the part of public opinion; provocation of the least possible resistance to them; and minimum disruption of life in such a

FIG. 5a. A part of Kydathinaion Street before pedestrianization.



central part of Athens. Under these preconditions, which obviously created considerable contradictions among themselves, a system of intervention was adopted whereby it was exercised on several levels simultaneously with measures both of global as well as of gradual implementation.

The first problem to solve was that of the exact boundaries of today's Plaka. This was necessary because, since 1969, the Archaeological Service had included Adrianou Street as the boundary of the area over which it claimed jurisdiction (*see Fig. 2*).



Obviously, however, judged on the criteria of townplanning, architectural aspects, functional homogeneity and scale, Plaka covers a much wider area, irrespective of the transformation or disfiguration of the parts nearest central Athens. It is, therefore, clear that Adrianou Street was chosen as a boundary for other reasons, principally to ensure a regard for matters of archaeological interest.

Apart from the practical problems which this fixing of Adrianou Street as a boundary created, it also had positive effects in the first stage of the protection of the area. There is little doubt that acceptance of a broader

FIG. 5b. A part of Kydathinaion Street after pedestrianization and the construction of new pavements (hanging lights are not yet removed).

FIG. 6a. Another part of Kydathinaion Street before pedestrianization.



area for Plaka as a uniform district constituted the first important step in the direction of its protection and conservation.

A second very important step was the legal coverage of the existing pattern of the streets of Plaka which protects the district from any future alterations and preserves its urban form as it has been handed down to us. As for the sort and extent of intervention thought necessary, the first to be studied and implemented was the pedestrianization of a large number of Plaka streets in order to restrict motor traffic only to that essential in servicing the district's needs. The success of this measure was of a critical nature. Today, approximately half of Plaka's streets have been pedestrianized (*Figs 4-7*). This means that its narrow and irregular streets have regained their original functional purpose, their use by motor vehicles has been drastically cut, and so have noise and pollution. The district's urban pattern which, indeed, forms a 'monument to be conserved', can once again function properly to its full capacity and can give the inhabitant and the pedestrian a genuine picture of the space and scale of Plaka. Special regulations lay down the hours during which shops and residences can receive supplies, and the exceptions for emergencies and



FIG. 6b. Another part of Kydathinaion Street after pedestrianization.

car parking at appointed locations by special permits for the area's inhabitants.

It should be noted that pedestrianization and, in general, regulation of traffic of pedestrians and vehicles on such an extensive scale, have here been attempted for the first time in Greece. Obviously, therefore, no matter how much useful information could be obtained from international experience in similar cases, many organizational, administrative and other problems arose. Despite all this, thanks to timely publicising what was being done by all available media, disruption caused by the implementation of this measure was minimal; pedestrianization was soon accepted and so a new reality has emerged.

It was thought necessary to complement the fundamental functional change brought about to Plaka streets by pedestrianization with a series of works which, on the one hand, would emphasize this change while, on the other, would restore the streets' earlier appearance. Everyone would thus become aware in the most direct manner of the determination of the competent authorities and of the extent of their intervention. Of course, these works have been planned and will be executed by stages. They

FIG. 7a. Kodrou Street before pedestrianization and the construction of the pavements.



include construction, replacement or improvement of the underground service networks as well as resurfacing streets and pavements (*Fig. 1*). In this connection, it has to be stated that in many parts of Plaka the services are very old or even non-existent. Therefore, there is renovation of water supply, drainage, electricity, town gas and telephones. With particular reference to town gas, it is stressed that, as soon as the network has been completed, it will become possible to replace central heating oil burners with gas and thus reduce even further the atmospheric pollution in the immediate vicinity of the Acropolis. Finally, arrangements are being made for the laying of an underground TV central antenna cable so that, in future, it may become possible to abolish the forest of antennae protruding from rooftops and terraces. As for the surfaces of streets, pavements and small squares, use is being made of natural stone slabs such as we know were always used for this purpose in Plaka—samples of



FIG. 7b. Kodrou Street after pedestrianization.

this older form of paving have survived to this day in certain parts of Plaka. All street lighting standards are also being replaced with exact replicas of the old lamps that used to exist there. The final aim is the removal of all overhead electric lighting wiring. Naturally, the ultimate object is to restore the character and quality of Plaka by using elements historically connected with it and not to invent new ones. Our group believes it will thus be conducting itself in a more honest manner.

We set about what we call the strategy of intervention by general adjustments—such as pedestrianization—but also by intervention which has occurred by stages, without causing any major disruption. At the same time, each of these kinds of interventions have been allocated to various levels. The townplanning level—such as the fixing of the area's boundaries, legalization of the townplan and pedestrianization; the technical level—such as replacement of the entire urban infrastructure; and the architectural level—by replacing road surfaces, street lighting, etc.

The measures and interventions which have been described are, of course, of a decisive nature in the drive to restore to the area its historic character and to prevent any further disfigurements; but they are

insufficient. The study group therefore went ahead with the drafting of a series of legislative measures aiming at further improvement and control of the image of the district and at defining the general framework within which it might evolve in future. The basic preconditions that Plaka should continue as a living quarter in the city's life always remain. These legislative measures, some of which are already in effect and others awaiting final approval, refer to the following subjects.

1. An inventory of all Plaka buildings considered eligible for conservation, and determination of the terms under which they should be restored to their original form while at the same time being able to satisfy modern functional needs. This inventory finally included 42% of the buildings.
2. The establishment of control over all kinds of commercial signboards, inscriptions and advertisements which disfigure the facades of buildings and alter the nature of the district.
3. Control over new constructions through the introduction of new building regulations.



FIG. 8. Recently restored building, of the early twentieth century, in Philomousou Etairias Square.



FIG. 9. Another recently restored building, of the mid-nineteenth century, and a small open space in Angelou Geronda Street.

4. Control over existing functions or those to be installed in the future in Plaka, through a new set of regulations concerning the use of land.

At the same time, certain financial measures in the form of incentives were approved and have already gone into effect. These have become an important factor in the overall effort. They consist mainly of loans at special low interest rates, which are granted by the National Mortgage Bank to Plaka landlords, and also certain free grants made through the Ministry of Culture and Sciences. This Ministry has made a noteworthy contribution to the whole effort by effecting repairs to a number of buildings which it happens to own in the district, as described by Dr J. Dimacopoulos in the second part of this article which will be published in a later number of *Monumentum*.

Obviously, any programme involving the conservation of Plaka but, at the same time, ensuring its balanced functional evolution and its re-establishment in the life of Athens as a whole—from which the mass operation of tourist entertainment had almost cut it off—had to be a complicated and ever-adjustable programme. Studies of the implementation of various works often have to be revised in practice when, for

example, digging for the construction of underground services brings to light important archaeological finds, such as occurred with work being carried out in St Katherine's Square. Such finds have to be investigated. The same occurred in the nearby Square of Lysicrates. It is equally obvious that there will be a lapse of time before the definite results of these measures can become apparent. It would be naïve to expect the situation to change from one day to the other, especially when the measures described in this paper are being implemented after a delay of several years; strong financial interests are also involved, and each measure probably treads on the toes of such vested interests, even if only in small degree and, perhaps, for a limited period of time only. These vested interests are, after all, a part of the reality of the area, even if they constitute one of the main obstacles to our work.

However, today, four years after the programme for the protection and conservation of Plaka began to be implemented, a great many changes have been brought about. Plaka streets are quieter beyond all comparison, more beautiful and enjoyable for the pedestrians who can stroll their length free of the constant fear of motor cars. Allowing for the peculiar conditions encountered in the area, reconstruction of the underground services is going ahead at a satisfactory pace. We even went to the length of constructing a central, underground channel capable of accommodating all the services and of such dimensions as to make inspection feasible at all times. It is the first time that this has been attempted in a built-up area in Greece. Laying the special paving stones along the streets reserved for pedestrians is also going ahead, and the same can be said for common spaces and the installation of lighting facilities and equipment of the streets in general. Many private houses have already been repaired (*Figs 8 and 9*) and others are now under repair. The trend towards a return to the quarter's old character is now quite strongly evident, although the loudspeakers of numerous places of entertainment still create a noise problem which provokes complaints.

Active participation by the inhabitants in this conservation project is an important result. Their various associations keep a close eye on the progress of the work, and they offer advice and criticism which is constructive in helping us make decisions.

There are no illusions as to existing difficulties and problems awaiting solution before the work which has been undertaken can be brought to a successful conclusion. However, such indications as so far exist are sufficient to convince anyone that the effort which was undertaken in January 1979 is on the right track.

Résumé

Plaka, le plus ancien et le plus célèbre quartier d'Athènes forme maintenant ce que nous pouvons appeler le noyau du centre historique de la capitale. Il englobe les parois est et nord du rocher de l'Acropole et va jusqu'au centre commercial et administratif d'Athènes. A l'ouest, il s'étend jusqu'au bord de l'ancienne agora. Plaka forme un district architectural particulièrement intéressant car on y trouve des bâtiments qui reflètent les différentes époques de l'histoire grecque. Le quartier se développa, tel qu'il est aujourd'hui, au cours du siècle qui vit le choix d'Athènes comme capitale de la Grèce moderne et le déclenchement de la seconde guerre mondiale. La croissance ralentit au cours de ces années, la survivance de maisons de types traditionnels et la présence de monuments d'époques diverses ont fait de Plaka le centre historique d'Athènes et lui ont donné son atmosphère et son caractère uniques.

Les premières difficultés, qui apparurent à partir de 1950, furent la conséquence du développement du tourisme et des nombreux spectacles, l'extension du centre commercial d'Athènes et l'invasion par les automobiles. Petit à petit, au cours des vingt dernières années, Plaka fut abîmé et ses habitants émigrèrent ailleurs, tant les conditions de la vie quotidienne y étaient devenues insupportables. Aussi le vieux quartier perdit-il sa composition traditionnelle et fonctionnelle pour ne devenir qu'une simple partie du centre d'Athènes où seule la vie nocturne restait animée; en conséquence, le caractère urbain, architectural et social de Plaka se dégrada.

Après une analyse détaillée des éléments du problème qui fut faite entre 1972 et 1975, une équipe de travail entreprit à la fin de 1978 de préciser les mesures les plus aptes à sauvegarder le quartier ainsi que la meilleure manière et le meilleur moment de les mettre en pratique; une stratégie détaillée fut mise au point et l'intervention commença en janvier 1979.

L'objectif principal en était la conservation du caractère urbain, architectural et fonctionnel du quartier afin d'en arrêter la dégradation et de permettre une évolution équilibrée de Plaka comme tissu urbain vivant. Le conserver comme un musée ou un monument du passé était hors de question. Aussi, les mesures prises à ce jour sont.

1. Nouveau système de circulation et création de nombreuses voies piétonnières (environ la moitié de la longueur totale des rues).
2. Reconstruction graduelle de l'infrastructure domestique (conduites d'eau, de gaz, égouts, électricité, etc.).

3. Pavement des voies piétonnières et remplacement du mobilier urbain en harmonie avec le caractère du quartier.
4. Ratification légale du plan de conservation.
5. Classification des bâtiments à sauvegarder et formulation des standards à respecter pour la restauration de leur aspect original; cet inventaire touche finalement 42% des bâtiments.
6. Contrôle des enseignes commerciales, des inscriptions et de la publicité en général.
7. Contrôle des constructions nouvelles.
8. Contrôle de l'usage actuel ou futur du terrain grâce à un nouvel ensemble de règlements.

Ces deux dernières mesures sont, à l'heure actuelle, en cours d'examen pour approbation finale.

En même temps, des mesures financières ont été décidées pour encourager la participation publique et elles sont déjà en pratique. Ces mesures consistent pour la plupart en prêts à des taux d'intérêt particulièrement bas, fournis par la Banque Nationale Hypothécaire aux propriétaires de Plaka. L'introduction du réseau de rues piétonnières et les nouvelles constructions à Plaka ont soulevé des protestations surtout de la part des marchands qui craignaient une réduction de leur clientèle. La même réaction apparut chez les propriétaires d'établissements touristiques et, en général, parmi tous ceux dont les intérêts économiques et les gains dépendent de la situation actuelle. Les habitants, au contraire, soutiennent vivement ces mesures et apportent une aide considérable. Il y a aussi des problèmes d'administration et de bureaucratie, aussi bien qu'un manque de temps et certaines contradictions. Néanmoins, à l'heure actuelle, c'est-à-dire deux ans et demi après le début du programme, il s'est produit beaucoup de changements.

Les rues de Plaka sont incomparablement plus tranquilles, plus belles et plus agréables pour les piétons. La reconstruction des réseaux de services communs souterrains se poursuit à une cadence satisfaisante, tout comme la pose de pavés et l'installation de l'éclairage et de l'équipement des rues. Beaucoup de maisons particulières ont déjà été réparées, et pour d'autres, les réparations sont en cours. Un résultat qui est très important est l'appui apporté par les associations de résidents, qui regardent de près les progrès des travaux et qui offrent leur conseil et leur critique tout en participant aux décisions.

Mais on ne se fait pas d'illusions quant aux difficultés qui existent, ni aux problèmes qu'il faudra résoudre avant de pouvoir amener ce travail à une issue heureuse. Cependamment, les réalisations accomplies jusqu'à présent devraient suffire à prouver que

L'effort commencé en janvier 1979 se poursuit sur la bonne voie.

Resumen

Plaka, el barrio más famoso y más antiguo de Atenas, forma ahora lo que podríamos describir como el corazón del centro histórico de la capital. Comprende la parte septentrional y oriental del peñón de la Acrópolis, y sus límites tocan el centro comercial y administrativo de Atenas. Por el oeste, se extiende hasta los límites del antiguo Agora ateniense. Plaka tiene un interés monumental de excepción porque en su interior pueden hallarse monumentos que reflejan todas las épocas de la historia de Grecia. Se desarrolló y adquirió su forma actual durante el siglo que va desde que Atenas fue proclamada capital de la Grecia moderna y el estallido de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. El lento crecimiento de aquellos años, la supervivencia de elementos tradicionales en los tipos de casas y la presencia de monumentos de varios períodos hizo de Plaka un lugar de ambiente y características únicas como corazón histórico de Atenas.

Las primeras presiones serias aparecieron después de 1950, debidas especialmente al turismo y acondicionamiento de masas, a la creciente necesidad de expansión del centro comercial de Atenas y a la invasión del tráfico motorizado. Durante los últimos veinte años, paso a paso, Plaka se ha ido desfigurando y sus habitantes la abandonaron al no poder vivir allí en las nuevas condiciones. El antiguo barrio histórico perdió su composición tradicional y funcional, y se transformó en una sección del centro de Atenas vivo sólo durante la noche y muerto casi en su totalidad durante el día. La forma y estructura urbana, arquitectónica y social de Plaka se vieron así en un proceso de degradación.

Después de haberse hecho un detallado análisis del problema durante 1972-75, un equipo de estudio empezó, a fines de 1978, a determinar las medidas necesarias para la conservación más eficaz de la zona. Se consideró también cuándo y de qué modo deberían verse a efecto dichas medidas, y se propuso un programa específico de intervención que empezó en enero de 1979.

Como objeto principal, esta intervención se dirigía a conservación de la forma urbana, arquitectónica y funcional del barrio, a fin de evitar mayor degradación y controlar una evolución futura equilibrada de Plaka como entidad viva. Se descartó conservarla como museo o monumento privado de vida moderna. Las medidas adoptadas hasta el momento son:

1. La implementación de un nuevo sistema de circulación y la habilitación para peatones de un considerable número de calles (aproximadamente la mitad de la longitud total de las calles de Plaka).
2. La reconstrucción progresiva de la infraestructura (agua y gas, alcantarillado, electricidad, etc).
3. Reparación del firme de las zonas peatonales y renovación del equipamiento callejero de acuerdo con el carácter del distrito.
4. Ratificación legal de la planificación urbana existente.
5. Clasificación de los edificios que deben ser protegidos y determinación de las condiciones bajo las cuales deben ser restaurados a su forma original; este inventario acabó incluyendo el 42% de los edificios.
6. Establecimiento de control sobre todo tipo de rótulo comercial, inscripciones y anuncios.
7. Control sobre nuevas construcciones por medio de la introducción de un nuevo conjunto de reglamentos.
8. Control sobre usos presentes o futuros por medio de un nuevo conjunto de reglamentos acerca del empleo del suelo.

Las dos últimas de estas medidas se hallan actualmente en la etapa de aprobación final.

Al mismo tiempo, se aprobaron ciertas medidas financieras en forma de incentivos, que ya se han llevado a cabo. Consisten principalmente en préstamos con bajas tasas especiales de interés, concedidas por el Banco Nacional Hipotecario a los propietarios de Plaka. Las zonas de peatones y las nuevas edificaciones de Plaka provocaron algunas reacciones, especialmente por parte de los tenderos, que temían una reducción de la clientela. Lo mismo ocurre en el caso de los establecimientos dedicados al turismo y, en general, de todo aquel que tiene fuertes intereses económicos y que se beneficia con las actuales condiciones. Los moradores, por el contrario, apoyan fuertemente las proposiciones y ofrecen valiosa ayuda. Existen también problemas administrativos y burocráticos, así como falta de tiempo e inconsistencias diversas. Con todo, hoy, dos años y medio después de la puesta en efecto del programa, se han llevado a cabo muchísimos cambios. Las calles de Plaka resultan incomparablemente más silenciosas, más bellas y agradables para el peatón. La reconstrucción de la red de servicios subterráneos avanza satisfactoriamente, así como la pavimentación y la instalación de alumbrado y equipamiento callejero. Se han restaurado ya muchas viviendas particulares y se están restaurando otras. Un resultado muy importante es el apoyo prestado por las diversas asociaciones de residentes,

que vigilan constantemente el avance de las obras y aconsejan y critican, al par que ayudan a tomar decisiones.

Nadie se hace ilusiones respecto a las dificultades existentes y a los problemas que aguardan solución

antes de que pueda finalizarse felizmente todo el trabajo. Sin embargo, los indicadores existentes hasta el momento bastan para convencer a cualquiera de que el esfuerzo emprendido en enero de 1979 avanza por el buen camino.