

Areas of concern

The saving of Plaka, Athens. Part II

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Neoclassical
Tripod Street
after restoration



In 1949 Greece was finally beginning to recover from a disastrous ten-year period of war (1940–49) which, for the rest of Europe, had ended in 1945. To make up for this delay the nation was urged to match or rather surpass a pre-war economic development and rapidly increase the national income. To achieve this would necessarily mean turning a fundamentally agricultural country into an industrialized one as quickly as possible. Obviously, such a decision would bring in its train hasty solutions to housing problems arising both from war damage and a rapid industrialization.

All this resulted in a prolonged emigration. Many inhabitants of small villages in the mountainous mainland or on the rocky islands abandoned their homes to settle in towns, principally Athens, Salonica, Piraeus, Patras and Volos, the largest urban centres in Greece. This trend soon brought about an ever-increasing shortage of land to meet an equally growing expansion of Athens and Salonica, a phenomenon which eventually proved beyond control. To demolish any pre-war, old and stone-built structures and then replace them with anonymous, far higher concrete buildings (a profitable occupation for many of the least qualified contractors) was found to be the simplest and most economic way to solve housing problems. If one adds to this a customary speculation in land as well as the failure of any general town-planning programme in contemporary Greece, it is only too easy to realize the inevitability of an accelerated degradation of the post-1830 Greek architecture—a heritage which had not been put under the provisions of the 1932 law N.5351 'On antiquities'.

Nevertheless, in anticipation of these threats and in an attempt to save as many of the post-1830 historic structures in towns or the countryside from demolition or the effect of unsympathetic infill, a relevant law N.1469 was passed as early as 1950 because of pressure from a few far-seeing scholars and architects.¹ Apart from the protection of post-1830 Neoclassical, eclectic or vernacular Greek architecture, the new law introduced the concept of a 'conservation area' for the first time in Greece. Indeed, in Articles 1 and 5 the law provides that any structure found within the boundaries of a site designated an area of 'exceptional natural beauty' or an 'historic place' is put under special control as regards both demolition and any work done to it by the owner.² Yet, one should remember that the only alternative provided by the law to avoid demolition or neglect is compulsory acquisition, and it was soon realized that this law N.1469 alone could not offer a decisive means for the realistic protection of this heritage. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that it constitutes a landmark in the integrated conservation movement in Greece.³

The weak legislation and lack of any serious financial aid to enhance and stimulate maintenance on the owner's part, complemented by the government's failure to establish an up-to-date administration to carry

¹ Among them were the late Professors D.Pikionis, P.Michelis and A.Orlandos, who used to teach at the School of Architecture of Athens Technical University for many years and thus educated generations of Greek architects. Some of these leading figures became members of the committee of experts on the listing of the post-1830 historic structures, the designation of an area of 'exceptional natural beauty', etc. as provided in Article 2 of the law.

² According to Article 1 no such work is allowed without the consent of the previously mentioned committee of experts (see note 1) whose members must be informed about the matter by the Director of Anastilosis. The law provides various penalties including imprisonment for three months. From 1961 to 1977 this committee was replaced by the Archaeological Council, an analogous committee consisting mainly of senior archaeologists from the staff of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Anastilosis. Since 1978 these powers have been transferred to the members of either a new committee, the Central Council of post-1830 Monuments, or six new Councils on Monuments established in Athens and five other civic centres.

FIG. 2. (Facing page) The upper zone of Plaka, south and south-east of Hadrian's Street. The diagonally hatched areas indicate Plakiot houses with disfigured street facades which have been restored. The black areas indicate earthquake-damaged houses which have been restored.

out the work of conservation,⁴ can be seen in what happened in Plaka. Although a considerable part of the old town of Athens identified with the upper zone of Plaka as included between the eastern and northern slopes of the Acropolis on one side and Hadrian's Street on the other (Fig. 2) was placed under Articles 1 and 5, law N.1469 early enough,⁵ by 1979 Plaka was in a lamentable state of repair. This has been dramatically but accurately portrayed by Mrs Lydia Carras⁶ and in the preceding article by Professor Zivas (*Monumentum*, vol 26, pp. 3–22 March 1983). The Directorate General of Antiquities and Anastilosis, Ministry of Culture and Science, though retaining exclusive responsibility for the protection of Plaka until 1978, had failed completely in preserving the protected area. It was only Dr George Dontas, Director of the Acropolis Museum and at the same time Head of the Department of Classical Antiquities, together with a few devoted colleagues on his staff, who fought a daily but losing battle to save Plaka or at least the Plakiote buildings.

Compulsory acquisition on the grounds of archaeological excavations necessary to reveal Classical Athens was preferred to the idea of integrated area conservation, and this added to the growing exodus of the remaining Plakiote families who rightly feared they might be next on the Ministry's list. Ironically, but fortunately, the majority of the acquired buildings were not pulled down because there was a lack of funds for digging. Yet, although many of these Plakiote structures were ultimately saved, together with those that still remained in private ownership, they became empty decaying shells or were rented to house bars and shops, or given free to custodians and other civil servants as temporary residences which were soon regarded as permanent. Among the more than one hundred Plakiote houses belonging to the Directorate General of Antiquities and Anastilosis, only a few were finally restored to house two private collections and four or five offices for members of the Antiquities service; most of these were along the two sides of Polygnotus' Street in the vicinity of the Athenian Agora.

On the other hand, Plakiote houses were not particularly sound structures in themselves. Indeed, the majority belonged to lower or middle class families, and though they had been built more than a century ago they had only rarely been repaired during that time. These were primarily two-storeyed buildings with plastered external walls constructed of poor rubble masonry, timber floors and tiled roofs. With the exception of the decorative terra-cotta Corinthian or Ionic capitals and keystones, all the other architectural features such as pilasters, cornices and mouldings on the street fronts of the Neoclassical (or seemingly Neoclassical but genuinely vernacular) houses of Plaka were made from a thick (5–12 cm) but poor mixture of lime and earth. In time, this usually crumbles and falls, leaving the exterior in a semi-ruinous state which only a few lovers of Plaka regarded as contributing to the picturesqueness of the neighbourhood.

In general, all the Plakiote houses suffered from neglect combined with decay and degradation, and the condition of those already turned into shops, discos and bars was worse. On the street fronts doorways had been bricked up, while others had been disfigured with large windows and shopfronts that were completely out of scale. Cast-iron framed balconies projecting from the first floor and supported on beautifully carved marble brackets were totally concealed under neon lights and huge advertisement boards, and sheets of aluminium or coloured plastic were often set against the external wall surface to hide decayed fronts.

It was in May 1980, a few days after he had been moved to the post of Director of Anastilosis for the post-1830 historic structures, that the author was officially asked if he could suggest any drastic measures that could be legally taken for the rescue of the Plakiote buildings without the expenditure of any public money. The proposed scheme had to be confined within the limits of the protected area of Plaka, referring exclusively to the privately owned buildings. Classical antiquities, Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches, and houses owned by the State would naturally remain in the care of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Anastilosis.

The author's reply came some days later when, to his great surprise, he discovered that what had been done to alter and disfigure the Plakiote buildings was quite illegal. To execute any sort of work on these structures one had to apply for the consent of the Archaeological Council,⁷ according to Article 1, law N.1469. Needless to say, investigation showed that the members of this Council had never been consulted about any of the changes—an oversight that had not been noticed by the Directorate General of Antiquities and Anastilosis. If the law had been upheld, what had happened during the 1960s and 70s in Plaka could have been halted in time.⁸ What had been discovered could be regarded as Plaka's Achilles heel, which might provide a key to the problem, and it encouraged the author to set to work.

The aim was firstly to restore the disfigured shop or bar fronts to their previous state, and secondly to organize the consolidation and restoration of a number of decayed, but still inhabited Plakiote houses. As no funds were available for the first aim, a way had to be found legally to compel those responsible to restore the street fronts of the tavernas, bars and shops at their own expense. The task would have been easier if they could have been provided with detailed drawings showing exactly what had to be done; but the Directorate included only twelve architects appointed to their posts a few months previously. All had been trained in Greece or Italy, and none had had relevant experience in such work. However, a team was made up of five enthusiastic architects and one engineer.⁹

By the end of May 1980 'Enterprise Plaka' was initiated under the author's personal supervision. Recording was the first task. This was not as straightforward as it might have been, because as well as recording

⁷ See note 2. The President of this Council from late April 1967 to early 1974 was the late Professor Sp. Marinatos. This was the period that coincides with the peak of Plaka's degradation and disfigurement.

⁸ According to regulations regarding the function of this Council, it was within the jurisdiction of the President to arrange items on the agenda. As Plaka was not a remote area, it may seem strange that the matter was not put to him for discussion, and one can only assume an official indifference.

⁹ These were architects M. Felintra, M. Stavrinou, J. Spyroglou, M. Dania, M. Chrysoulaki and engineer C. Papadopoulos.

³ Certainly this has been a promising change in a country generally thought of only as a land of rocky mountains and barren sea shores, or of islands superbly furnished with classical marbles. This romantic view of Greece, which originated and flourished in England and the other northern European countries in the eighteenth century, was nevertheless strong in modern Greece. It affected the judgment of the cultured Greeks and successive governments, so that until recently the general attitude to post-Byzantine and modern Greek domestic architecture varied from indifference to neglect.

⁴ See Dimacopoulos, J. and Filippopoulou, E., 'Greece: legislation, organization, finance, participation', *Protection and Cultural Animation of Monuments, Sites and Historic Towns in Europe*, Bonn 1980, 9ff.

⁵ This came about in 1967 after the publication of a ministerial decree based on a relevant resolution reached by the Archaeological Council (see note 2). The decree was published in the government's official gazette, N.606, issued 13 October 1967. It should be noted that although the decree (1967) roughly coincides with the beginning of the seven year regime imposed by the Greek Junta (1967–74), the latter omitted to take any steps to save Plaka.

⁶ *Protection and Cultural Animation of Monuments, Sites and Historic Towns in Europe*, cit., 207ff.

obvious alterations it was necessary to discover what might be hidden under any coverings or fixtures on the exterior. In doing this work, it was possible to make use of a series of drawings showing the street fronts only of the Plakiot houses as they had been in the early 1960s.¹⁰

Two months later recording was completed and work began in the drawing office. This lasted from early August to mid-September 1980. A number of basic principles were then agreed so that restoration of the Plakiot facades should harmonize the appearance of all the domestic structures of Plaka, even though the interiors might have been adapted to new uses. In effect, this meant for example that although the owner could be asked to remove neon lighting from the exterior, some form of lighting had to be permitted. Likewise, since it was only reasonable that the owner should display a sign, this was allowed if it were made of timber, decorated in the traditional manner¹¹ and set in a suitable position, such as over the door lintel.

Eventually, 123 buildings were dealt with; all were in the protected area of Plaka, all were privately owned, and all had been wholly or partly turned into tavernas, shops, bars and discos by no fewer than 132 different firms. This meant that 132 separate files had to be made, each referring to the whole or a part only of these disfigured buildings. Each contained record material, various documents, sketch measured drawings, photographs, etc. together with a restored elevation of the street front and a brief account of the proposed restoration work. Each file was attached to a state document addressed to the members of the Council on the Monuments of Central Greece and the Islands,¹² drawing their attention to the fact that they were requested to be consulted according to law N.1469. The author personally presented all 132 files to the Council on 17 September 1980, and the whole project was unanimously approved by the members.

On 22 October 1980, 132 state documents signed by the Minister of Culture and Science were issued simultaneously. Each was addressed to one of the 132 firms, stating that the present condition of the building in which it was housed was regarded as the result of illegal works that had not been approved by the Ministry. Each owner was required, according to the relevant law, to restore his building to its previous appearance at his own expense, under the supervision of the Directorate of Anastilosis of post-1830 structures. A drawing showing the restored facade of the building was attached to each of these Ministerial letters, and the latter included a detailed description of the restoration work, which had to be executed by the end of January 1981. Otherwise, defaulters would be prosecuted according to the law. Tenants and owners were also told that in case of non-compliance the Ministry of Housing would be instructed to regard every alteration of the street front contrary (as it was) to building regulations, and to prosecute in accordance with the law regarding building activities.

¹⁰ These were made by a team of architects in the Department of Housing. A selection was published in *Architecture in Greece*, No.1 (1967), 62ff.

¹¹ Considerable assistance was provided by a book produced by three artists, G. Bakitzes, P. Gravvalos and C. Tziomoules, which was published in 1974. It includes many photographs showing old advertisements and signs in Athens and other parts of Greece.

¹² See note 2.

¹³ This happened on 11 October 1980.

¹⁴ This was published in the official gazette, N.616, issued on 8 November 1980.

¹⁵ Despite much effort and goodwill by both interested parties for more than three years, this has not yet been solved.

¹⁶ It is likely that the bar and disco owners tried to approach both Ministers and only exacerbated the misunderstanding. However, their efforts were unsuccessful, at any rate as far as the Minister of Culture and Science was concerned.

¹⁷ In late January the Court communicated these appeals to the Directorate, asking to be informed what the other side had to say. The main appeal was based on the argument that the Directorate's interference was illegal. It was also claimed that what the owners had been asked to do at their own expense would make the exteriors of the tavernas and bars less attractive to tourists and so less profitable.

A few days previously, a paragraph appeared in every Athenian newspaper, announcing the project and drawing attention to what it was intended to accomplish in Plaka.¹³ This was followed a few days later by a Presidential decree aimed at the control of new advertisements in Plaka; this was issued on the initiative of the Minister of Housing.¹⁴ Although this might seem a valuable contribution in restoring the disfigured street fronts, it was only partly successful because of confusion caused by the lack of coordination between the two Ministries (Housing, and Culture and Science). Each regarded itself as legally responsible for the protection of Plaka as well as other conservation areas.¹⁵ This confusion caused delay in implementing the programme, and was not unwelcome to the bar and disco owners.¹⁶

A dead period followed, lasting almost three months. Then the defaulters acted as one man. In mid-January 1981 a letter signed by them all reached the Minister of Culture and Science, requesting government subsidies to pay for the work. They also asked for an extension of time until the end of 1981. The Minister's reply allowed an extension until April 1981 but pointed out that State money was not available for correcting what had been done illegally. Restoration work began in late January; walls were painted, neon lighting removed, doors or windows re-opened, and appropriate advertisements and signs were fixed under the constant supervision of the Plaka team. A few examples of the work

¹⁸ The Court reached a decision in mid-April 1981. Appeals were finally rejected on the ground that the Ministry's right to intervene was clearly deduced from Article 1, law N.1469, in which a reasonable use of advertisements is permitted provided that it harmonizes with the architectural setting of Plaka, as shown on the drawings with which the keepers and owners had been served in October 1980. Other similar appeals were rejected in December 1981 and January 1982.



FIG. 3a. Lysias Street in late 1979.



FIG. 3b. Lysias Street in August 1982.



FIG. 4. A two-storeyed Neoclassical house with ground-floor shops at the corner of Thespi and Tripod Streets before (*above*) and after (*below*) restoration.



FIG. 5. A two-storeyed vernacular house in which the ground floor has been turned into a taverna, at the corner of Lysias and Tripod Streets, before (*above*) and after (*below*) restoration.



²⁰ Among them were bricklayers, carpenters, plasterers, painters, building surveyors, and their assistants: it took more than a month to overcome bureaucratic regulations and employ them legally. After these works in Plaka were completed, most of the tradesmen were employed by the Department on the restoration of the old Parliament House, Stadium Street, in the centre of Athens.

²¹ These were architects D.Zamenopoulos and N.Sifonakis.

²² They all belonged to the Directorate General of Antiquities and Anastilosis and included empty houses at the corner of Thrasylus and Musaeus Streets, 2 Musaeus Street, the corner of Vrysakion and Kladou Streets, behind the Stoa of Attalus, at the corner of Thrasylus, Andocides and Clepsydra Streets, and 9 Prytaneum Street. Also included are the Turkish Baths of Cyrristus Street, in the vicinity of the Tower of the Winds and the Roman Agora.

²³ The entire Directorate's staff were engaged as well as three architects temporarily employed by the Minister, Mrs Melina Mercouri, to help in the project; these were A.Karadologiou, L.Roma and P.Kalabalike. The estimated cost of this programme is 37 500 000 drachmas, or roughly 500 000 US dollars.

Neoclassical houses, probably late nineteenth-century in date with the exception of the first which might have been built earlier. All three houses were inhabited by the owner's family until they had to be abandoned following the earthquake. The owners were willing to contribute to the necessary expense, and this was taken into account by the team. Thirty skilled masons and labourers were employed,²⁰ supervisors were appointed,²¹ and in early April restoration of these three houses began according to the studies that had been prepared. 3 Cyrristus Street presented special problems, as a part of the upper floor had collapsed immediately after the earthquake. To remedy this, as well as the numerous cracks that had appeared in the external walls, it was necessary to excavate five metres deep to consolidate the foundation walls, and to insert carefully concealed concrete in the masonry.

The whole programme was completed in September 1981, at a cost of more than 3 000 000 drachmas, or approximately 50 000 US dollars. It was so successful that a new programme was announced in early May 1982 on the initiative of Mrs Melina Mercouri, Minister of Culture and



FIG. 9. A view of Tripod Street with restored houses flanking a decayed example.



FIG. 10. A view of the Roman Agora and the so-called Tower of the Winds, surrounded by restored houses.

Science since the previous October. Its aim is the restoration and rehabilitation of six other Plakiote buildings compulsorily acquired by the State many years ago.²² When they were investigated by members of the Directorate's staff, most were found to be in such a dilapidated state that their restoration seemed doubtful initially. Yet, following this first assessment, detailed restoration studies have been carried out with a more hopeful result.²³ Work started again in late 1982 on this latest contribution to the rescue of this historic area of Athens which, one might say, is being reborn out of its ashes.

Résumé

En 1967, la partie supérieure de Plaka, c'est à dire tout le quartier situé entre l'Acropole et la rue Hadrien (Fig. 2), fut déclarée site protégé selon l'article I de la loi N.1469 de 1950 qui permet de sauvegarder les lieux 'de beauté naturelle exceptionnelle', etc. Pourtant ce fut justement aux environs de 1970 que la déprédation de Plaka s'accéléra.

Un grand nombre des maisons néo-classiques ou traditionnelles du XIXème ou du début du XXème siècle furent soit abandonnées à l'état de coquilles vides de plus en plus dégradées soit vendues à de nouveaux venus qui les transformèrent en boutiques, restaurants, bars ou discothèques. D'autres encore furent achetées par l'Etat dans l'intention de les

démolir pour faire des fouilles et dégager de nouveaux vestiges de l'Athènes classique. Finalement, ces maisons ne furent pas démolies mais le Département de l'Archéologie, qui était responsable de la sauvegarde de Plaka, jusqu'au début de 1978, négligea d'interdire aux nouveaux propriétaires de défigurer les façades des bâtiments. Aussi, pour remédier à cet état de choses, un programme de restaurations fut-il établi en mai 1980 par la nouvelle Direction des Bâtiments Historiques post-1830. Ce programme fut mis en chantier avec le concours d'une équipe de six architectes et ingénieurs sous la direction de l'auteur de cet article et prit fin dans les derniers mois de 1981: environ 123 façades qui avaient été saccagées par de la publicité sur les murs, des enseignes, des lumières de néon et des revêtements en plastique ainsi que par le percement de nouvelles ouvertures ou le remplissage grossier d'ouvertures anciennes (*Figs 3, 4, 5, 6*) ont été restaurées; les propriétaires de bars et de boutiques reçurent des dessins montrant l'aspect des façades à retrouver et ils furent obligés par la loi de faire les travaux nécessaires, à leurs frais. En même temps des conseils (ainsi que des prêts) furent donnés pour une vingtaine de maisons encore habitées. De plus, trois maisons néo-classiques endommagées par le tremblement de terre du 24 février 1981 furent totalement restaurées par la Direction qui employa une trentaine d'artisans spécialisés (*Figs 1, 7a-b, 8a-b*) pour un coût de US \$ 50.000.

Le projet le plus récent, qui a commencé en mai 1982, concerne la restauration de six autres bâtiments. Le Département de l'Archéologie en est propriétaire et ils seront utilisés à des fins culturelles afin de contribuer à la revitalisation du quartier; le budget prévu pour cette opération est de US \$ 500.000.

Resumen

En 1967, la parte alta de Plaka, que comprende la zona entre la Acrópolis y la Calle de Adriano (*Fig. 2*), fue designada como emplazamiento protegido, según el artículo 1, ley N.1469 de 1950, que suministraba el marco legal para la protección de lugares de 'belleza natural excepcional', etc. Sin embargo, fue precisamente a fines de los años sesenta y durante la década de

los setenta que tuvo lugar la degradación acelerada de Plaka.

Muchas de las casas neoclásicas o de tipo autóctono levantadas durante el siglo diecinueve y a principios del veinte fueron abandonadas, para irse convirtiendo gradualmente en cáscaras ruinosas, o dadas por sus dueños a nuevos moradores que las convirtieron en tiendas, tabernas, bares y discotecas. Otras fueron adquiridas por el Estado con intención de demolerlas en nuevas excavaciones que habrían de revelar nuevos aspectos de la Atenas clásica. Por fin, las casas no fueron demolidas y el Servicio Griego de Arqueología, la autoridad responsable de la protección de Plaka hasta principios de 1978, no consiguió evitar que los nuevos moradores desfigurasen las fachadas de los edificios. Para hacer frente a esta situación, se inició en mayo de 1980, por el nuevo Directorado de Anastilosis de Estructuras Históricas post-1830, un programa a largo plazo para la restauración de las casas de Plaka. Este programa se llevó a cabo por un equipo de seis arquitectos e ingenieros, dirigidos por el autor.

El programa se completó a fines de 1981 y resultó finalmente en la restauración de los exteriores de aproximadamente 123 casas que habían quedado gravemente desfiguradas por anuncios, señales, luces de neón y láminas de plástico en las fachadas, así como nuevas aberturas o el tosco cubrimiento de las viejas (*Figs 3a-b, 4a-b, 5a-b, 6a-b*). Los propietarios de bares y tiendas recibieron dibujos que ilustraban el modo de restaurar las fachadas, y la ley requirió que ejecutasen el trabajo pagándolo de su propio bolsillo. Al mismo tiempo, se facilitó orientación arquitectónica (junto con un préstamo para la restauración) respecto a otras veinte casas de Plaka todavía habitadas. Por último, tres casas neoclásicas dañadas por el terremoto del 24 de febrero de 1981 fueron completamente restauradas por el mismo Directorado, después de emplear a treinta comerciantes especializados (*Figs 1, 7a-b, 8a-b*). Esto le costó al Estado griego aproximadamente 50.000 dólares USA.

El proyecto más reciente de Plaka es un plan para la restauración de seis edificios; éste se efectuó por el mismo Directorado a partir de mayo de 1982, y los edificios (que han sido adquiridos por el Servicio Arqueológico) serán aprobados para nuevos usos destinados a promover la revitalización cultural del distrito. Se calcula que el nuevo programa costará 500.000 dólares USA.