

ATHENS FROM 1920 TO 1940

A true and just account of how history was enveloped
by a modern city and the place became an event

To Leon Krier



58 b The Panathenaic Stadium from inside

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Preface

Definitively, Athens transgressed the short boundaries set by a twenty-year period of development (1920-1940), defying the Braudelian *longue durée* of the previous Ottoman and 19th-century periods. The cataclysmic series of political events which took place during the few inter-war years rub shoulders with the meteoric social metamorphoses that occurred during the same period. Hardly can someone refer to any other capital city so radically transformed over such a short period of time. For instance, it is not just that the population increased by almost 50%, it is that, a) such an increase of several hundreds of thousand people took place within a *few days* only, and b) the new-comers were desperate refugees from the other side of the Aegean sea, who, although of the same nationality and although they professed the same religion, were treated as ‘foreigners’. The ensuing ‘settlement pattern’ was inscribed within an alien context, considering that the native population was very much in favour of implementing a strong social segregation policy. Only to stress how deep such metamorphoses were, it should be emphasized that although the Greek immigrants from Anatolia represented a cheap labour force, in its own way this factor strengthening the local industrial and agricultural production at a time of deepening universal economic crisis, it was that the same social group, which introduced an advanced cultural pattern on the mainland, in the long run overthrew the myopic, one-sided nineteenth-century cultural affiliations: although short-lived, 1930s’ cultural movement known as ‘returning to the roots (of Tradition)’, although restricted to a small intellectual minority, left its imprint for future generations to follow. Indeed, it was the first time in Greece that eastern/Oriental and western/Occidental life-styles were viewed as an integrated, monolithic cultural approach.

The epitome of the refugee settlement in the Athens/Piraeus area was the implementation of a huge housing programme which relied heavily on economic support, amply provided by European countries (although the blame for the Smyrna catastrophe should be laid at some of these countries’ doors). Economic support was granted mainly through loans, and, in this case, a sophisticated international banking system was put in action, whereupon the United

States of America had the final word. In fact, the specific financial involvement of the United States came at a time when this country also initiated her interest in two other sectors of Greek affairs, one on entrepreneurial and the other on ideological grounds. Supposedly, Athens benefited from both. On the entrepreneurial level, the paramount event was the construction by Ulen & Co of the Marathon Dam, close to Athens, which provided the capital city of Greece with valuable fresh drinking water, of which she was in urgent need considering the recent steep population increase. On the cultural level, it seems that the American School of Classical Studies at Athens declared such a fervent desire to undertake archaeological excavations in the area of the ancient agora that an air of fierce determination on the behalf of the School soon blew all around Athens and beyond. In this sense any obstacles that might prevent American archaeologists from unearthing the precious relics of the past had to be removed at all costs. ‘At all costs’? An affirmative answer on this issue illustrates what really happened. On one side, a synoptic procedure curtailed all objections raised by the few thousand souls who lived atop the area of the ancient agora, and their ‘squalid’ houses were expropriated and hastily demolished; and on the other side, strong political intervention was ushered in by the Greek prime minister and the required decree was issued by parliament under a fast-track procedure. It has been claimed that as it was at exactly that time that the American banking system was about to give its approval for a loan to Greece, intended to serve the refugee settlement process, Prime Minister Venizelos had to be informed accordingly.

After 1931, as excavations were well in advance, Athens acquired a world-wide reputation. Just as during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to paraphrase Grabar, Athens had become a playground for visual and other sensory experiences for people weaned on Romanticism, seeking aesthetic excitement, only this time civilized souls were in search of a different wealth: of the Heliaia, the seat of the most famous law-court of the ancient city; of the Tholos, where ‘those members of the council (Βουλή) acting as chairmen (πρυτάνεις) eat together’, as Aristotle wrote; of the Enneakrounos – the many-spouted fountain erected by Peisistratos and mentioned

by Pausanias; of the Sanctuary of the Twelve Gods and of the Giants and the Tritons... Yet, during the 1930s Athens had one more chance (this time almost unexpectedly) of becoming the focus of intellectual interest. The capital city of Greece hosted the 4th International Congress of Modern Architecture. The city gained in reputation, not through the event itself but by the proceedings published later, supposedly concluding the results of the meeting, under the title 'The Charter of Athens' – and what intrinsically linked her with the avant-garde architectural theory and practice of the time. Although it is commonly held that the International Congress previously referred to, and the *Charte d'Athènes*, the latter attributed to Le Corbusier, are both cornerstones of the inter-war modern movement in architecture and urban planning, I stand in opposition to such a view. To make a long story short, I believe that the 4th CIAM meeting commemorates not the modernist formats echoed by star architects, who generated the greatest possible publicity in expectation of being assigned the maximum number of world-wide architectural/planning projects, but, rather, the participation of Otto Neurath. Even today, at least in my country, most architects and planners ignore the contribution of this prominent sociologist, philosopher and political activist involved at the Athens meeting. The beliefs of this exponent of Logical Empiricism and the inventor of ISOTYPE, who, as David Hollinger argues, 'combined a robust embrace of uncertainty and historicity with an old Enlightenment belief in the liberating potential of science', not only deeply affected the way planning information was codified in the panels representing the plans of 33 cities discussed during the Athens Congress, but, as well, opened up new means of forging political consciousness, the masses becoming socially aware of the process of built-space production. Indeed, that was something much farther ahead an ill-defined or impoverished concept of a functional city, as the 4th CIAM decided its main object of research to be.

Between the Wars, architectural discourse in Athens had a twofold character. On one side, architectural practitioners in the capital city of Greece did not hang to the view that architecture and urbanism might have any vital role in reforming social systems so as to make

a better society, just as their counterparts in central Europe enthusiastically believed at the time. Yet, a good many architectural paradigms *were* built in this city, but success should be measured on the basis of the architects' competence in, simply, understanding the vocabulary of modern architectural language. On the other side, the interwar modernist architectural rhetoric was counter-balanced by a supposedly more persuasive format for cultural development based on a re-definition of 'Tradition'. A small elitist group of intellectuals, among whom architects held pride of place, adhered to a 'Return-to-the-Roots' (of Tradition) fresh view of understanding the Past. Context and cultural continuity were now supposed to be the means of breaking through the nationalist view of the ruling class of producing History solely through the 'Ancient Ancestors'. It seems that the call for such a cultural re-appraisal must be attributed to the myriads of the 1922 immigrants from Asia Minor. Though socially despised by the native Athenians and physically segregated in the map of the capital city, the refugees did manage to play a vital role as a catalyst in the newly emerging urban cultural environment. Yet, even in the case of a 'traditionalist' outlook it was a stylistic approach that Greek architects, in Athens in particular, were primarily concerned of. Just as it was the case with Modernism, Tradition was in vogue in Athenian architecture only in so far as it was a *style* that was marketed. No unbridgeable chasm existed between the avant-garde/modernist- and tradition-affiliated architects. On the contrary, there were plenty of common denominators uniting the two, such as their clients' demands. Chapter Three of this book is the place where the emblematic 4th C.I.A.M. Congress held in Athens in 1933 is critically examined against both a Greek version of architectural modernism and the sort of 'Modern Movement' effected in central-European countries. The term 'Modern Movement' started to gain currency following Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design*, in 1936.

By the end of the Great War Athens had concluded its role as the symbolic core of national palingenesis. The city was now ready to strengthen its position in the hierarchy of Greek urban centres and effect modernism along its own terms and conditions. From the 1919 'Replanning of

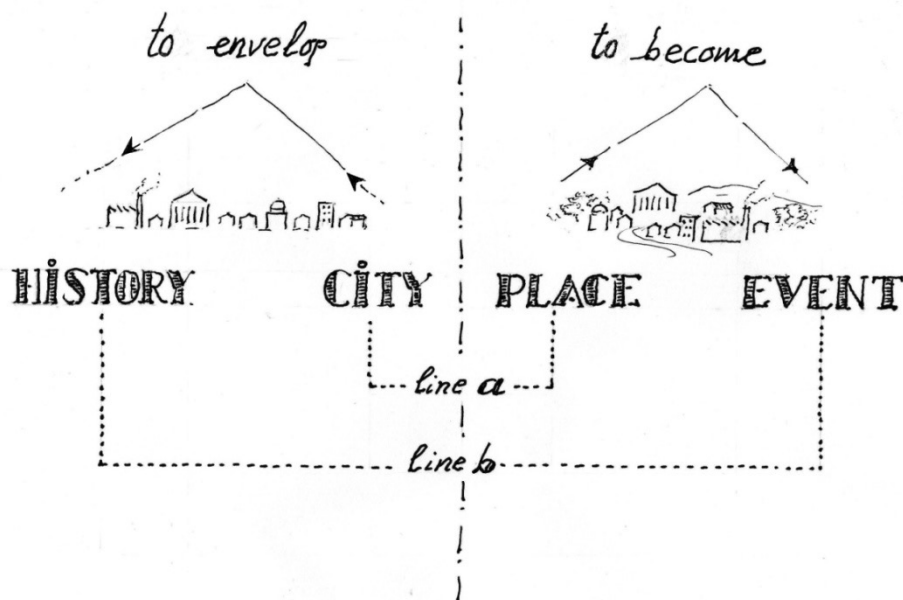
Athens' by Thomas Hayton Mawson to the covering of the Ilissus River in 1940 by the dictatorial Greek government, both discussed in Chapters Two and Five respectively, the capital city of Greece concluded one full circle in the process of urban emancipation. The march forward started with the aesthetic prescriptions of a 'Garden-City' Arcadia where, oddly enough, space was left only for an ersatz nostalgia of the Past, and moved to a down-to-earth technical prescription initiated by government intervention. In between these two 'events' stands a fully-fledged urban realm triggered by differentiation of class situations and advancement of industrial production, both motivated by the settlement of the 1922 refugees. It may have been that during the 1920s and 1930s Athens did not experience any chaotic urban growth so as to initiate ambitious and large-scale urban programmes. Yet, the discourse on the city was continuous, although devoid of an urban pandemonium characteristic attributed to most large metropolitan centres of the time. The need to ameliorate infrastructure in deprived areas and to rework the city pattern for providing proper public and civic space, particularly where housing conditions were very poor, were part of the municipal agenda in urban intervention. The private sector, and landowners in particular, were occasionally strongly supported in their speculative intentions. This becomes clear, for instance, with the enactment of the 1929 'horizontal law' which legalized apartment ownership, later on backed by a building heights decree. But the public sector did not take it lying down. Yet, even if the 'good intentions' of the state/governmental interference in the production of the built environment were detected in cases such as the blessed opening of new roads and the paternalistic care in ameliorating sanitary conditions, the interesting subtext of a strong relation among private interests and state/governmental control should not be overlooked. Both, the water-supply venture by 'Ulen & Co' and the electricity plants financed by 'Power and Traction', of which we spoke previously, are deeply embedded in Athens' own prototype of interwar capitalist development.

All in all, during the 1930s the capital city of Greece could still be considered as a beautiful town, plainly

understood as a finite physical entity. At that time, the 'violet-crowned' city must have felt love and intimate sympathy for its natural surroundings: the succession of peaks of the encircling mountains, each peak commanding its own interest, the sea to the south, and the rivers running across the Athenian plain. Most of the streets were lined with trees, whose branches interlaced overhead, though dust might have been a serious problem in several roads. People could sit out on the sidewalks and savory odors from shops were there to greet the passer-by. The cries of the venders and the clatter of hoofs on the pavements were also part of a lively atmosphere evoking a sense of neighbourhood. Most of the houses, either those of poor families living in a very simple and frugal manner or the two-storey stone-built houses of the well-to-do living in accordance with European (mainly French) styles, possessed a courtyard where a tree was planted mitigating against the strength of the sun in summer.

*

Usually the subtitles on a book's front cover are of much greater significance than the titles themselves – the former are lengthy expressions unfolding the author's inner thoughts, the latter are short, market- or media-oriented statements. My previous book, published last year, under the title *Athens from 1456 to 1920* and subtitled *The town under Ottoman rule and the 19th century capital city* is indicative of the case in point. The short title simply indicates place and time. But the subtitle is a vast reservoir of discursive phenomena: it juxtaposes a 'town' and a 'city' (not least a 'capital city'); it evokes a conceptualized political transformation (Ottoman régime/national independence); it puts under one heading the debris of a long historical evolution; it is provocative in so far as the metaphors and the anomalies implied by the diegesis of a 'Tale of Two Cities' are invited to share in a politically correct exposé. A year later, this present book embarks upon a similar path. The title is once again short – only to give a clear message that the writer is back in the Athenian historiography (as if he were expected to



do so!), although he makes only a small step further in time (eventually making a caricature of himself, as if the labyrinth of almost five centuries can be transgressed by a short trajectory of a two-decade jump). So it seems that, again, it remains for the subtitle to clear up the situation: 'A true and just account of how History was enveloped by a Modern city and the Place became an Event'. Perhaps it is worth commenting on the issue.

'Line b' in the figure above reveals dialectics of historical analysis and 'line a' dialectics of spatial analysis. In both cases 'dialectics' implies that movement along these lines is not tied in the sense of Newtonian mechanics. According to the latter, any one particle uniformly moves at a fixed speed 'v' from point A to point B, covering a distance 's', at a time 't' and according to $s = v \cdot t$. If conditions do not change the same body is expected to move back from B to A under the same principle, what implies that time can be reversed. But in our case time is understood in the Bergsonian sense: it implies

evolution and change, so that no reverse movement can be accepted. In 'line b' mythical and fragmented 'tesserae' are transformed to well-shaped and recognizable forms. In 'line a' a cartographic entity acquires its own identity. The *modus operandi* in this process is implied by two verbs: the energetic 'envelop' while the passive 'become'. In the first instance, under the group 'City-Envelop-History' a deliberate and well-programmed act (to envelop) grammatically demands a subject (City), whereas the outcome of a process (the transformation) has to be understood in terms of a direct object (History) affected by the action of the verb. Accordingly, the same grammatical order holds true under the second group: 'Place-Become-Event'. But in fact, in our figure there is something more than conventional grammatical remarks. The City cannot be conceptualized in the sense of an Hegelian *subject*, which *acts* in a certain way. The City is rather understood in the sense of a (back-stage) *mechanism*, representing a polymorphous interplay of synergies. And in this sense,

the outcome of a non-reversible process is the ‘event’, in this way giving meaning to ‘line b’. In the same way the ‘city’, a complex set of relationships among people and the space they occupy, is irreversibly transformed to ‘place’, which gives meaning to ‘line a’. ‘Event’ presupposes that communication and exchange have been activated, whereas ‘place’ indicates that a specific area has been completely transformed to what it really is: *itself*.

In my view, the previous mosaic of subjects discussed in the context of Athenian inter-war life embodies the process of ‘history’ being enveloped by a modern ‘city’ and the place becoming an ‘event’. It remains for the reader to decide whether the *exposé* has been ‘a true and just account’ as the writer claims it was, or a paradigm of a linear, one-dimensional diegesis, which he would strongly object to.

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D.N.K.
Athens, Autumn 2015