

# Reflections<sup>of</sup> Identity in the City

## Belonging<sup>and</sup> Nationhood<sup>in</sup> Nineteenth Century Athens

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Nineteenth century Modern Greek culture is a mixture of an appeal to ancient authority and contemporary religious beliefs and ideals. At the one end we have the ancient Greek culture which is packaged and put into shape for political aspirations and economic ends and on the other Christian Orthodox beliefs with strong cultural elements from the Middle East and the co-existence of Greeks and Turkish in Asia Minor. In this paper I would like to address the creation of Modern Greek identity through the idea of belonging to an idealised classical past.

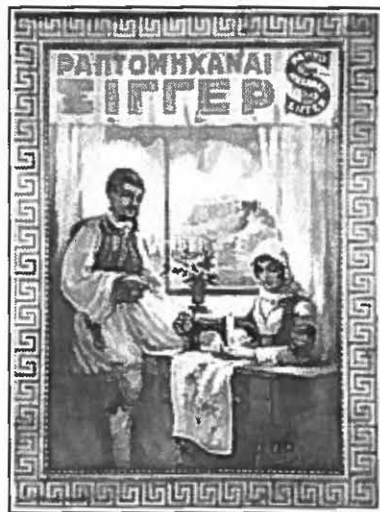


Fig. 1: Advert for Singer Sewing Machines. Note how contemporary national costumes of the man in white and the woman sewing with a view of the Acropolis are employed to depict "ideal scenes". More emphasis to classical times is given through the classical decorative features surrounding the image. Source: www.elia.org.gr



Fig. 2: The Academy of Athens. Note the classical features of the building, the Ionic columns, the capital with themes from the antiquity, the golden colour on the friezes and the statue of Plato and Aristotle on the left corner of the picture. Source: Personal collection of the author

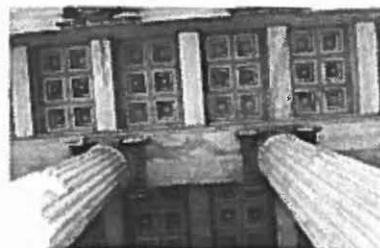


Fig. 3: The Academy of Athens. Detail of the ceiling. Source: Personal collection of the author.



Fig. 4: The University of Athens. Detail of the decorative frieze in the inside of the building. The theme derives from the myth of the revival of the arts and sciences in Athens. The coloured theme is believed to be an accurate copy of the original. Source: Personal collection of the author.

Authenticity and heritage, in 1830s Greece, when the Modern Greek State was created, could be said to co-exist. Imaginative reconstruction was employed to make concrete more abstract elements of culture.<sup>1</sup> As such there was an increasing attractiveness, often the assembly of authentic materials to create settings and scenes appropriate to different needs.

We could say that the notion of authenticity surfaces in between exploitation and imaginative reconstruction. Reconstruction needs authenticity to appear, as culturally significant, often as a historical fact, and on the other hand existing forms of culture, need authenticity in order to create new forms of cultural production. Any change to a building or townscape regains value as its historical authenticity is "repositioned".

Hence we could say that the search for authenticity stems from the crisis in human-environment relationship. This comes not only from what Dovey calls "the absence of a place to dwell", but also from the advances in technology, industrialisation and way of life, which ultimately leads us into perceiving, experiencing material culture differently than in the past.

Supported by the fact of being rooted in a place, Modern Greeks had come to identify themselves with their place and their history, as they felt that it was their home and the home of their ancestors. Therefore, it is important to determine Greece's relationship with tradition. Was Greece's role one of imitation of the architectural styles of European Neo-classicism only, or has it contributed drastically to the creation of such models?

We could say that the answer lies in between those two. Greece is a country with a particular ancient civilisation and culture that was admired by many different civilisations around the world. Classical Greek philosophical principles<sup>2</sup> and architectural styles have been adopted by different nations for reasons different to those of Greece but which still developed within the spectrum of a relationship with the past; With a past that seems not to be strictly Greek but of an international nature.

Tradition in Greece, as in elsewhere, was and is reflected in architecture. With that symbolic expression, Greeks showed and still do their relationship with the past. "Borrowed" classical elements form tradition either for practical usage, or as symbolic references, in a historical period that was so "fragile" for reasons of national identity; "this reference to the national past of the Greeks, in the 1830-1862, was made through the adoption of architectural forms that were connected with the past. For instance in an architectural creation, the idea of Hellenism, can be presented through the capitals, and decorative sculptures of buildings, like the statues of Athena and Apollo in the Academy, which are historically determined elements, and through the use of traditional building materials and constructions, like for example the big white marble blocks form mount Penteli, or the Peraiko".<sup>3</sup> These features in principle show a relation with their previous models, in order to emphasise the "Hellenism" of the creation. To which extent such phenomena are presented and used in history cannot be stated a priori. However such specific "choices" reveal the idiosyncratic trends, the ideology of the time and the society they represent.

### THE PROJECTION OF THE PAST AS NOSTALGIA

A monument has multiple interpretations when it comes to its perception and meaning. Nostalgia which could be considered as an admiration of the aesthetics of a previous time plays an important role in the interpretation of the monument. Nostalgia is an attitude in which the past is idealised, and admired for its way of life that has been lost. The past appears more attractive to live in than the present, which leads to imitation of past ways of life and production, and the invention of ancient traditions. It has been argued (Fisher 1980<sup>4</sup>, Lowenthal 1985<sup>5</sup>) that nostalgia often appears during an identity crisis or weakness of confidence in the present, which is compensated by turning to an idealised past. David Lowenthal remarks in this context;

Significantly, one thing absent from this imagined past is nostalgia- no one then looked back in yearning or for succour... What we are nostalgic for is not the past as it was or even as we wish it were; but for the condition of *having been*, with a concomitant integration and completeness lacking in any present<sup>6</sup>

In this vein, ancient monuments, and in particular the classical monuments of fifth century Greece, become valued not despite but because of their artistic values. With the travellers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such nostalgia became integral to neo-Greek culture. Nostalgia for the idealised fifth century past became the driving force behind the production of neoclassical

monuments that would imitate classical aesthetics and styles. For example the Panathinaiko Stadium, in the centre of Greece, which hosted the first Olympic Games was redesigned and preserved in its original form. Mpiris notes on this, "that even the original level of seats was found and redesigned to add to its authentic aesthetic value".

Volker Fisher (1980) argued that the category of nostalgia can be understood as a metahistorical way of appropriating the past, which is shaped by the distinctive conditions of particular cultural contexts. It can therefore, be applied to different historical periods.<sup>7</sup> There are three sets of requirements under which nostalgia develops<sup>8</sup>;

First of all when we are nostalgic we view time as linear and with an underdetermined future. This process is typical in many Western societies where elder civilians are longing an idealised past, the lack of which, makes them feel uncertain for their future.

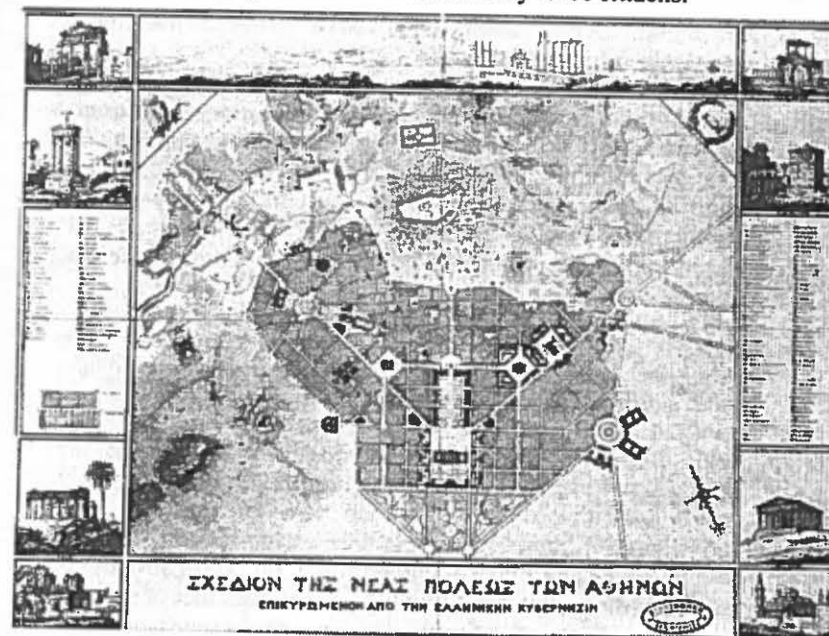
Secondly there is a sense that the present is deficient, applicable to societies and cultures as wholes or to particular groups or indeed individuals within a society; "in yesterday we find what we miss today"<sup>9</sup>, as the undesirable state of the present and its compensation by a turn towards the past;

Thirdly this longing for the past involves objects, buildings, or images that must be available in order to become appropriated nostalgically. The Greeks of the nineteenth century were experiencing a nostalgic mood not only in mainland Greece but abroad. This feeling of nostalgia for the classical past was evident all over the world where Greeks lived and prospered.

Further examples can be found in Egypt, where a very strong Greek community lived in Alexandria at the time of the creation of Modern Athens; Ancient heritage was not perceived as a foreign element of the new state architecture but as integral part of their own architecture. Certain traditions, like the teaching of ancient Greek and the Orthodox belief, were still continued and ancient objects gained new meaning as museum exhibits. Through the reuse of ancient monuments the neoclassical buildings, which were clear imitations, became legitimised and delivered the whole ideology and cultural packages of the past. The very sense of national pride became the national identity and the aura of authenticity imposed respect.

### THE IDEALISED CLASSICAL PAST

The nostalgia for the classical past and the idealised notion of classical Athens began with the German debate of 'In Which Style Should We Build?' and found its most profound application in the creation of nineteenth century Athens. The Germanic plan for the design of New Athens both respected the past and anticipated the future. The plan was designed for a city of 35.000 to 40.000 inhabitants even though in 1833 Athens had only 4.000 citizens.



The Athens Plan of 1833 by Kleanthis and Schaubert followed three criteria that had been articulated. First, that the city and palace would be appropriate for a European monarch. The emphasis here is on European, in opposition to eastern or Turkish. The new independence of Greece created a strong desire to become a part of Western Europe and to establish a Greek



Fig. 9: Panathinaiko Stadium in the first Olympic Games. Source: National Historical Archives, Photographic Collection (Sept. 2001).



Fig. 10: Greek Aristocrat in Asia Minor, Turkey, 1577. On wood, 13x20 cm. Source: De Nicolay N., *Les navigations, pérégrinations et voyages, faits en la Turquie*, 1577: 207. Finopoulou, Eugeniou Collection, Athens.



Fig. 11: Greek Academy in Alexandria, Egypt. Source: Benaki Museum Photographic Collection.

Fig. 12: Kleanthis and Schaubert Plan for the City of Athens. Note how important the identification of the existing antiquities and Byzantine Churches were for the architects. Source: Mpiris, K. *Ai Athinaí apo tou 19ou ws tou 20ou Aiona*, (Athens from 19<sup>th</sup> until the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), Melissa, 1992(ed.)



identity separate from the Turks and the east. The building of the new capital was symbolically and actually an expression of this.

The second criterion was that the plan was supposed to respect the past. Thus the public buildings were to be neoclassical in design, a respectful nod to the glory of ancient Greece and the Western European community. It is interesting that to create a capital Greece turned to Europe and neo-classicism rather than turning to itself, the proclaimed "authority" on classicism. By choosing neo-classicism over classicism, Greece demonstrated the strength of their desire to be European. Neo-classicism had a major impact on Greece as the young country struggled to establish itself as a democratic nation with its European counterparts. Once again, the calm, cool appearance of Roman forms reflected the virtues of nineteenth century Greece and its effort to appear as a democratic state of governance. The architects of Athens and the Greeks had embraced this idea so thoroughly that the Athens Plan is often compared to Versailles whereby they have a similar style of architecture, public square, and system of radial roads. The Versailles and Athens plans are also similar as Greek neo-classicism, as we saw in the neo-classicism chapter, has been partly influenced by the Baroque, which in turn has been influenced by classicism.

The planners thought that Athens should be expanded to the north and east of the Acropolis to preserve archaeological sites. The planners wrote, "it offers the added advantage that the ground over the ancient cities of Theseion and Hadrian remains untouched and there is room left for later excavations. Even if the present situation of Greece does not allow for the excavations to be undertaken immediately, nevertheless, a future generation could accuse the present one of lacking foresight if this issue is not considered right away".<sup>12</sup> In addition the professionalism of the planners was evident; they understood the desires of the Greeks as well as their financial situation and did not want to create conflicts by using all public funds for the construction of public ministries.

The third criterion was that the existing structures of Athens were to be accommodated. This was to be accomplished through the development of the palace grounds and capital functions outside existing Athens, minimising the intrusion of the plan on the residents and personal property.

Overall the design idea was to make Athens, a small town of 4,000, into the symbolic centre of Greece, worthy of its capital status and part of Europe. Neo-classicism straddled both goals well; it was Greek enough for the Greeks and European or civilised enough for the Europeans. Developing a Greek identity based in Europe was especially important because of the newness of Greek independence. The country's cultural and intellectual orientation was expressed as a yearning for acceptance in the family of modern European countries and a desire for political and cultural unity and national definition expressed through public architecture and a strong connection if not identification with the classical past.

People's resistance to urban change was evident in Greece in the criticism of the official rhetoric and by refusal to alter their pattern of everyday life and work. The building and planning of Athens mediated between the opposing forces of forging a national identity and becoming European. Nineteenth century Greece was a country that embraced the contrasts between the upper class and the poor social conditions and embodied the unity of the Greek culture. In 1884 the municipal council in Athens named 250 roads. In 1892 following these actions, Gaston Deschamps notes that

"the Greek wants to adapt to the European customs while simultaneously the originality peculiar to his race. His pride urges him to imitate the Western manners and modes. At the same time however, he preserves an old fund of tenderness for the local traditions, from which he would part with difficulty. Among cultivated Greeks this sort of duality is striking".<sup>13</sup>

Despite the Greeks' effort to accommodate the new order of things, they still respected traditional values of family, religion and local attachments. This striking whole had incorporated cultural and historical contrasts, deriving its strength and unique character from them. The modern Greeks were proud of their ancestors but equally aware of contemporary European developments. A Greek historian of the time summarises the Modern Greek idea of nationhood in his call "not to run to Europe thirsting for a *Master*...nor can one ignore the country's history and cultural foundations".<sup>14</sup>

The rhetoric of the modern at the time in Greece was the aspiration of joining the West and articulating a national voice and identity. These aspirations however were contradictions in themselves, for the Greeks still saw religion as a major part of their identity and they strongly admired the significance of religion

in the building of the nation. On the other hand though, for the Europeans involved in the building of new Athens, Greek identity was about appreciation and imitation of classical art and way of life disconnected from their immediate past of the Ottoman Empire. Their primary preoccupation with academic institutions, ministries and theatres were to act as symbolic objects of progress. Modern Athenians, through the press, actively debated the significance of institutions as having been adopted from foreign political and cultural building programs with no consideration for local needs. The specific need and symbolism of each institution was addressed in detail and was questioned in the press with often-fierce criticism. *Do we really need a theatre? What about the need for a central market?*<sup>15</sup> While architectural styles and details were also topics for discussion, most of the criticism was focused on the meanings and symbolism re-sented by the buildings, as well as the appropriateness of some buildings in light of the country's socio-economic conditions. The response of the government to these criticisms was the fabrication of elaborate ceremonies to mark the beginning of new structures with the Church as a main guest and state representatives. These building ceremonies were intended to forge the idea of a unified Greek nation and to reinforce the political and cultural authority of the government. New Athens therefore, was a complex matter of politics and architecture for the local population and their government. The new image of Athens was shaped by the introduction of major boulevards, notably the Athenas and University Streets, the widening of existing ones and the design of major structures like the Athenian trilogy and the cathedral.<sup>16</sup> This image was to replace the existing earlier Byzantine - Ottoman city. For the Greeks though, this mixture of the Old with the New was the very basis of their national identity. The unified Greek nation with one language, one culture, one religion and shared historical consciousness was created upon the values of the past and the present. The cultivation of national identity was oriented towards its citizens and towards the Greeks who lived abroad. Language, history and religion were all examined anew and seen now as the foundations of a unifying state culture and ideology. This process of nation building was, for the Greeks, more of a process of finding themselves in Europe and discovering their past. This was patriotism, rather than nationalism as the Greeks were trying to find an identity while responding to the external stimuli of modern Europe. Surely, more than everyone who was involved in their rebuilding, the Greeks had identified the true nature of their national character; their roots in the past that encompassed both pasts, Classical Greece and the Byzantium.

## NOTES

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